

PARK PRACTICE

The Broadland Conservation Centre

Nearly 2,000 years ago, when the Romans occupied Britain, much of what is now East Norfolk and Suffolk formed a great river estuary. The Romans' defensive forts still stand but the estuary has long since disappeared with the falling sea level, natural accretion and colonisation of the land, and man's drainage of the land for farming. During the Middle Ages the naturally formed peat was ruthlessly exploited for fuel, more than 2½ million cubic metres being extracted over 500 years. Subsequent flooding of these peat workings and their further colonization by marshland vegetation created the unique wetland habitat known as "The Broads".

Today the 23,500 ha of alluvial land, including 3,250 ha of unreclaimed fen and 700 ha of open water, display a remarkable diversity of habitat with great variety of flora and fauna. The area also suffers increasing pressures from many sources. Agricultural fertilizers and sewage effluent drain into the slow flowing rivers; over 100,000 anglers and 250,000 visitors annually use nearly 10,000 boats on the 200 kilometres of navigable waterways. On the one hand aquatic life is being "suffocated" by nutrient enrichment and increased turbidity of the water; on the other hand riparian accretion has diminished the area of open water by over 40 percent in the last 100 years. Man

and nature made the Broads. Man and nature are in danger of destroying them!

Realizing this, the Countryside Commission is currently seeking the views of interested parties on whether the Broads should be added to the 10 National Parks so far designated in England and Wales. Already 899 ha of Broadland are protected as National Nature Reserves and another 11 areas are safeguarded as local reserves.

One such area is Ranworth Broad where the Norfolk Naturalists' Trust has created a centre to interpret to visitors the problems now facing Broadland and possible ways of solving them.

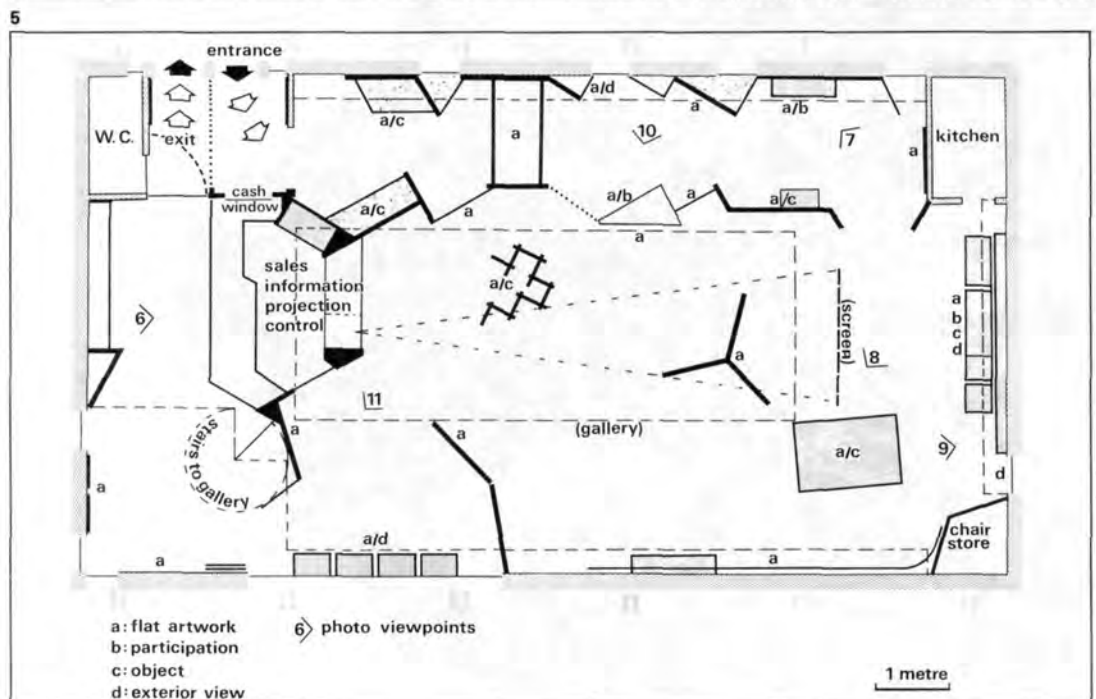


**The Broadland Conservation Centre,
Location, Design and Construction**

The site selected for the Centre lay within the Bure Marshes National Nature Reserve on a spit of marshland separating a busy public waterway from the secluded nature reserve. This provides a sharp contrast between public and private Broads and emphasises the need for conservation. Land access to the site is by a 450 m boardwalk through the Reserve. Visitors arriving by boat are able to moor at the specially constructed landing stage (Photo 1).

Unstable ground conditions made a conventional building impractical so the architects, Feilden & Mawson of Norwich, decided to float the Centre on pontoons. This protects it against flooding, prevents damage to the Reserve and allows the Centre to be moved if circumstances, weather conditions or maintenance require it.

The pontoons were constructed of maintenance-free "Seacrete", a concrete material being increasingly used for boat hulls, and floated to an accessible site where the superstructure, with a floor area of 74 square m was added. In order to make it harmonize with its surroundings a traditional building style (reminiscent of the Visitor Centre at Varirata National Park, Papua New Guinea, illustrated in PARKS Vol. 1, No. 2) was adopted but used in a modern way. The





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roof structure was supported on external timber columns which ensured total flexibility of infill panels and windows—a great asset to the exhibition designer.

Traditional reed thatch, harvested from the Reserve, was used for the roof. Exposed to view from the inside, the roof itself interprets one aspect of broadland management and one of the crops that the area has yielded for generations (*photo 2*). Along the outside ridge of the roof runs a sparge pipe which can sprinkle water, pumped from the Broad, down both faces of the thatch in case of fire. Electricity is supplied to the Centre by an under-water cable from the nearby village.

The 450 m boardwalk consists of timber loading pallets staked to the ground and tied with wire netting which aids stability and reduces the slipping hazard (*photo 3*).

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In winter, when the Centre is closed, one section of the walk across a dyke is removed to create a "security draw-bridge" (*photo 4*).

Interpretation

Although the Broads are a wetland habitat of international renown they are also a playground for hundreds of thousands of visitors. The Centre therefore sets out to tell the story of Broadland and explain the threats to the unique environment from man and even nature itself.

The boardwalk approach, along which most visitors come, fortuitously passes through the six stages of natural colonization from open water to oakwood. Each stage is explained by wayside signs, so that on arrival at the Centre visitors are already

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acquainted with the principal Broadland habitats (*photo 3*). The signs are photocopies mounted on painted marine plywood. They are so cheap that there is no problem over amendment or replacement due to weathering or vandalism.

The site signage and display in the Centre were designed by John Allwood, of Ightham, Kent, with advice from the Norfolk Naturalists' Trust and the Countryside Commission. It sets out to stimulate, involve, and interest visitors in Broadland and its many problems. Although designed as a permanent exhibition, the Centre display was made flexible enough to be updated or changed. When the building is needed for lectures or audio-visual programs the large windows can be blacked out by hinging some of the display panels (*photo 11*). The free-standing central displays can be moved aside to create an auditorium. The screen unrolls from the gallery beams and chairs are stacked on a single trolley behind a display panel (*photo 5*).

A number of basic principles were adopted in the design of the interior. In the first part of the display, visitor circulation is controlled and basic information provided at highest density when visitors' interest is highest. Thereafter there is a choice of routes and a correspondingly flexible story-line. Visitors are then channelled once more to pass the thought-provoking displays on Broadland's future and the information/sales point (*photo 5*).

The interior was laid out so that it is possible for one assistant to see the entire display area; control access to the Centre and the gallery above; receive admission charges; dispense information, publications and sale items; and if necessary, control the projection equipment (*photo 6*).

A wide range of media and techniques is used to appeal to visitors of all ages and interests. In addition to conventional photo-enlargements and texts there are three dimensional objects, some of which can be handled (such as blocks of Broad-



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land peat and a tank of Broadland water containing algae). Visitors can reproduce the effect of turbidity caused by boat propellers by activating a kitchen whisk suspended in a container of water and sediment. An analogy is then drawn with London smog to emphasize the effect of this turbidity on aquatic life (photo 7).

Naturalists are catered for with three-dimensional displays that portray typical food-webs and how they might be distorted by man's actions (photo 8). Children enjoy an enlarged "happy families" card house which demonstrates the inter-relatedness and fragility of the various interests in Broadland (background of photo 6).

Everyone likes pressing buttons and everyone likes a reward. A quiz-board, with nine questions about Broadland conservation and three alternative answers to each, displays further information on each topic when the correct button is pressed (photo 9). Further visitor participation is encouraged in a display which simulates the transformation of open water into oak woodland. When visitors turn a handle a printed screen unrolls, revealing the succession (photo 10).

Being located in the heart of the environment which it interprets the display in the Centre is linked wherever possible to the landscape outside. For example one ques-

tion on the quiz-board relates to the view from an adjacent window (photo 9) and a picture window overlooks the nature reserve (photo 11). Visitors may view the Broad at their leisure from the opening windows in the mezzanine gallery (photo 12).

Cost

The Centre was opened by Her Majesty Queen Elizabeth on November 25, 1976, as part of the Norfolk Naturalists' Trust's Golden Jubilee Celebrations. In total the project cost about £50,000. Of this £25,000 was donated by the Countryside Commission and £17,500 by other outside bodies. The building itself cost about £32,000 (£432 per sq m) and the exhibition about £6,000 (£82 per sq m). Design and construction of the exterior information and interpretive signs cost about £2,000.

Visitors are charged 25 pence admission (children 10 pence). This is justified on the grounds that any profits are used to manage the Trust's reserves in Broadland which many of the visitors also enjoy.

The Centre is managed by a warden who is employed throughout the open season (April 1–October 31). He is responsible for the Centre, the private moorings and the



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approach walk and is assisted in peak times by volunteer members of the Trust.

Conclusions

Whatever the outcome of the Countryside Commission's deliberations on the future of Broadland as a National Park the problems of the area will remain. But if the Centre engenders a greater awareness among visitors, and a commitment to action in protection of this unique habitat, the project will have achieved the aims of its sponsors.

Ray Taylor, the author of this article, is an interpretive planner in the Visitor Services Branch of the Countryside Commission (for England and Wales).

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Punched dripholes save paint

