



# Turning tide for ferry

**Greg Chapman** takes the Lynn Ferry and talks to the operators.

It is half past one on a blustery Tuesday afternoon in West Lynn. Across the water one of Lynn's two weekly markets is in full swing. In consequence, one of the town's most popular car parks, the Tuesday Market Place, cannot be used.

Regular users of the Lynn Ferry, Anita and Peter Cawthorne know this and have taken advantage of the free parking in West Lynn.

While waiting for the ferry boat to return across the Great Ouse, they sit in the pleasant heated waiting room and explain, "We live in West Walton, just outside Wisbech, and often use the ferry." On arriving this time they had found a notice warning passengers of an increase in fare from 50p each way to 60p, the first price rise in 10 years.

Even so, Anita explained: "It can work out

cheaper than using a car park in town, though the ferry has been getting more popular all the time and on Tuesdays it is becoming more difficult to find a space over here for the car."

Round the walls of the waiting room are reprints of old notices and newspaper articles that explain some of the history of ferry and the port of Lynn. One wall is filled with a display case, with photographs showing some of the old ferrymen.

Anita points out a picture of Reg Hare, whom she remembered, and who first acted as ferrymen in 1947, finally retiring in April 1986.

The Ferry Pavilion building, which houses the waiting room, was built in 2000 as part of a £750,000 scheme that improved West Lynn's waterfront, echoing the work done on the opposite bank and intended to boost tourism in

the town. It is a pleasing mix of modern and traditional. Capped with an old-style clock tower, sporting cast iron supports to its canopy, and adorned with hanging baskets, it has modern teak-framed doors and windows and stands at the northern end of a 400-yard boardwalk that offers superb views of Lynn's reinvigorated waterfront.

It's low tide, the ferry boat arrives at the very end of the West Lynn jetty and the Cawthornes make their way down the steps to get on board.

I have arranged to talk about the ferry with Steve and Gail Kingston and follow them into their office. This is at one end of the pavilion. At the other end are public toilets, useful both for ferry passengers and for those finishing their trek up the Fen Rivers Way, the long-



**FACT FILE**

The Ferry is operated by  
 SN Kingston Marine Services  
 The Pavilion  
 Ferry Square  
 West Lynn  
 PE34 3JQ  
 TEL: 07974 260639  
 FAX: 01553 766029  
 It runs between the jetties at  
 Ferry Lane, Lynn, and Ferry  
 Square, West Lynn.

**FARES:**  
 Adults: 60p Children: 40p  
 Pushchairs and Bikes Free

**TIMETABLE:**  
 (West Lynn Departure Times)  
 Monday-Saturday, 7am-6pm  
 20 minutes to the hour  
 On the hour  
 20 minutes past the hour  
 Continuous service between  
 7.40-9am and 5-6pm

“It’s never the same journey twice . . . not only does wind and tide affect the route taken but there are constantly changing sandbanks, too.”



**WALK THIS WAY:**  
 The steps down to the ferry service, which have to be cleaned every morning of silt for safety. Above: The ferry approaches ferry lane and, right, in mid journey. Below left: New operators Gail and Steve Kingston. Below right: Passengers and ferry fans Anita and Peter Cawthorne.



distance footpath that follows the Cam and Great Ouse from Cambridge.  
 Steve and Gail, who took over running the ferry in 2000, have a few minutes in which to grab a mug of coffee before they set off across the river again. “Who’s the boss?” I ask. “Who should I speak to?” With a wave of his hand,

Steve indicates Gail. I start by asking how life running the ferry works.  
 “Steve is up every day at five o’clock. He has to sweep the silt from the steps to make it safe for passengers before the first official crossing at seven,” she says. Steve adds: “Several regulars start work at seven, and we normally

manage an early trip to make sure they get to work on time, before the first scheduled trip.”  
 The couple live only a few minutes’ walk from the jetty. Even so it won’t be till after seven at night that Steve will be home from work, and it’s a six-day-a-week job.  
 Although, initially, reluctant to talk, Steve is now into his stride. “It’s never the same journey twice,” he says. “Not only does wind and tide affect the route taken but there are constantly changing sandbanks too.” I was surprised at this, as I had assumed that this powerful river, with its 27 foot tidal range, would have scoured an adequate channel for itself.  
 Steve explained: “Before we ran the ferry, the Washport Bunkering Service had the licence. They used two different boats for the service. One of these was bought especially to counter the problems of grounding at low water.” Later I was shown press cuttings which showed that, once, passengers had been forced to paddle ashore, or been given a piggy-back, when the boat had grounded. On another occasion planks had to be laid across the tops of beer crates, to get passengers to the jetty at an exceptionally low tide.  
 “We spent two or three years experimenting,” said Steve, explaining how they had

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endeavoured to overcome this problem. "At one time, we had two ex-Army assault craft coupled together. We wanted to get the right design, that offered stability and comfort for the passengers, and could cope with both low and high water conditions. Last year we spent £30,000 on the purpose-built aluminium boat built that we use now."

This boat is powered by twin 30hp Yamaha engines. These have independent controls so that one can be made to run forward while the other goes astern, allowing the boat to spin virtually in its own length. It offers better seating than earlier boats and protection from the worst of the weather, with roll-down plastic screens. The new boat even has fluorescent lighting to make boarding and disembarking safer on winter evening crossings.

It certainly wasn't like that in days gone by. Records show that there was a Lynn Ferry already working before the end of the 13th century.

Until the building of the new Freebridge in 1821, travellers wanting to cross the river would have had to travel to Wiggshall St Germans and cross the bridge there, if the ferry was out of service. Some would have thought that the new bridge would put an end to the ferry, but using that route still entailed a four-mile journey from West Lynn to the centre of town.

As recently as the 1920s the ferry was still rowed. It was then that fares were doubled to one (old) penny, when a petrol engined boat was introduced. There were near riots and a policeman had to be stationed at the jetty steps in Ferry Lane.

By the 14th century, the rights to provide the ferry service was in the hands of the powerful Trinity Guild of local merchants. It wasn't until 1649 that the corporation took over the rights. In 1973 the rights were passed to Norfolk County Council. The council paid for the upkeep and maintenance of the ferry boats and subsidised the fares. An operator paid for the petrol, but was struggling to maintain a service.

By 1989, the council sought either a Private Members Bill to enable closure, or an independent commercial operator to run a full



**AND WE'RE THERE:** Passengers disembark as the ferry lands at West Lynn. Left: On board, where there is better seating than on previous models and roll-down plastic screens to help keep out the elements.

success down to it being their own business.

"We have been determined to make the service reliable", said Gail. "This was difficult with the boats we inherited. We like to feel that people have come to rely on us to get them across whatever the weather or state of the tide. That didn't always happen in the past."

My last question was about the future. The town's NORA (Nar Ouse Regeneration Area) scheme, and other millennium projects, had meant a great deal of money was being spent on the town, including the waterfront. There is even talk of a new footbridge to be built to West Lynn. Did they see that as a threat to the ferry? How did they see the future? "Have you read those reports?"

The bridge is pie in the sky," said Steve. "It was obviously dreamed up by someone who doesn't understand the river and how it would affect the new marina."

And it was clear that they saw a continuing need for the service they provide for many years to come.

commercial service.

At this point the Washports Bunkering Service took over. They introduced Sunday tourist trips for the first time, in an effort to make the service viable. (Bunkering services is the term for liquid supplies to ships, eg water and oil, as distinct from victualling services, the supply of food). However, by 2000, they too had decided not to re-apply when the licence came up for renewal.

That's when the Kingstons made their bid. Since they took over they have seen passenger numbers grow from 24,000 in their first year to 80,000 in 2005. They are proud of what they have achieved and put part of the

**ROOM FOR IMPROVEMENT:** One of the old ferry boats, suitable only for use at high tides, is still held in reserve. In the background (right) is the old Victorian Conservancy Board and Pilot's offices. Below: Steve Kingston still needed to jump overboard and push the old boat ashore.

