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GLOOMY BEAUTY: Storm clouds at Oulton Broad are captured by Paul Macro, from Norwich. If you would like to submit a picture for this feature, visit our website www.edp24.co.uk and click on the Contact Us tab for details.

The Broads are a real treasure to cherish

On a flight home to Norwich from Aberdeen the other day, I had a bird's eye view of the Broads as they stretch from Wroxham. From this new perspective I was amazed to see quite how vast the area is, a huge interlinked web of lagoons, rivers, marshland and reed beds as exciting as the Florida Everglades and famous for being Britain's largest wetland area.

At 220 square miles, with over 140 miles of waterways, it is easy to understand how The Broads have seeped into our culture inspiring novels from some of Arthur Ransome's nostalgic "Swallows and Amazons" series, to the thrillingly sinister "Armada" by Wilkie Collins. Painters like Edward Seago lived on the Broads and painted the vast skies and feathering reed beds, the haunting mills etched against sky lines that are both dramatic and beguiling.

Human beings have short memories, and somehow in the general muddle of things after the Middle Ages, we forgot what the Broads were.

Thus they were thought to be a natural area until the 1960s, when Dr Joyce Lambert proved otherwise.

They are, in fact, the result of peat digging, which began with the Romans and continued through medieval times when the peat was sold as fuel in Norwich and Great Yarmouth.

I don't know if it makes it more or less exciting that the Broads are man's creation, but it is exciting that we have never stopped using this wetland area, though they are now used for leisure pursuits more than

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anything else. This was not always the case. The Norfolk wherries were beautiful black hulled boats built for the Broads, which took cargo from the ports at Great Yarmouth and Lowestoft throughout the area.

The Albion, still in the water today, though it is over 100 years old, made its maiden voyage as a trading wherry from Lowestoft to Bungay with a cargo of coal. 36 tonnes were shipped at a shilling a ton.

Now the same boat sails with human cargo, and is available to hire by the day or more.

With its distinctive black sails and impressive scale, it is an arresting sight in the water, and always makes me think of Theseus.

He, returning to Troy after his run in with the Minotaur, forgot to change his sails to white.

His father, Aegaeus, waiting on the cliffs of Troy for him, saw the black sails, and read them as a message that his son was dead

and, in his grief, threw himself into the sea.

Fortunately, there are no cliffs around Ludham, where the Albion sails now, and if we were to start using the wherries again to transport goods, the black sails would become common place and lose their atmospheric rarity. And in a way, it is the emptiness of the Broads that creates their unique atmosphere. Rare bird and animal life abounds here, and even when there are houses, they are not like houses anywhere else in Norfolk.

We come across them from the rivers and the Broads they are built on to, and it is notable that houses have an expansive feel when approached from the water that is entirely different from driving up to them. Many of the Broads houses are built above boat houses or even on stilts, and this combined with huge picture windows and lawns sloping towards the water complete with preening ducks, all creates a welcome.

This is a wonderful place to learn to sail – no tides, no current, just hours of capsizing and raft building in the green haven of Filby Broad or Bredon water.

In "Coot Club" Arthur Ransome's hero Tom Dudgeon has to teach his friends, Dick and Dorothea, to sail in order for them to help him with his conservationist mission on the Broads.

Even in the 1930s when this books was set, the effects of tourism on the wildlife was an issue. We should take care now not to over stretch a treasure we cannot replace.