

An Incomplete Victory: The Enclosed Fens to 1939

With the draining of Whittlesey Mere it seemed that the fight for the Fens was over. The small areas of remnant marsh were being rapidly reclaimed by the resurgent steam engine whose power seemed to have no limits. Why then did the area of wetland actually expand in the Fens between 1870 and 1939?

To understand this paradox, it is first necessary to consider the fundamental one underpinning it: the more efficient any drainage scheme in the Fens was, the more it increased the problem to be solved. The main reason for this is that peat decomposes when exposed to air, which meant drained land got lower over time. Further peat loss from compression, the erosion of bare soil (which came to be called ‘fen blow’), the removal of soil on root crops, and the deliberate and accidental burning of dry peat exacerbated subsidence. Because

the wetlands were only marginally higher than sea level in the first place, their drainage was always a work in progress, requiring ever-stronger pumps just to maintain the status quo. As land succumbed, not only did the movement of water slow down but higher levels of sediment were deposited, further inhibiting the release of water to the sea. Fenland rivers, which had never found an easy path into the strongly tidal and sediment-heavy Wash, needed continual dredging to keep flowing at all. Moreover, as water courses sat ever higher above the adjacent land, the pressure on their artificial banks grew and floods became more likely when they broke.¹ In 1813, W. Gooch observed that most of the fen banks were made of ‘fen-moor and other light materials’, meaning that ‘a great part of the water soaks back again’ and under sufficient pressure, banks could burst altogether.² The end result was that every improvement in technology increased the drainage challenge for the next generation.

The forces of nature worked against the gravity-dependent Dutch drainage schemes from the start. In 1695, Celia Fiennes had recorded that in the supposedly drained Great Level, the ‘ffens are full of water and mudd’; the causeway to Ely was flooded, and the inhabitants ‘have no way but boates to pass in’.³ And in 1713, the Denver sluice, the key to Vermuyden’s system, was washed out to sea. A partial solution was provided through employing windmills. Large wooden wheels were fitted with paddles or ladles which scooped water a few feet at a time out of lower drains to higher ones.⁴ Windmill efficacy was assisted by developments in under drainage, with

clay pipes put below the surface to get water out of the fields. However, windmills were not only expensive to construct but labour-intensive to operate (one benefit being that many dispossessed Fennish got relatively autonomous work maintaining and running them).⁵

It was the limits of wind technology that ensured the partial protection of 'drained' fenland for centuries after enclosure. Some areas were allowed to return to marsh to act as a reservoir to hold winter waters and were only used for summer grazing. In the early nineteenth century, Arthur Young found that much former agricultural country had returned to 'sedge and rushes, frogs and bitterns!'. The largest example of this was the 20,000 acres between Wisbech and Downham Market, which was in 'so wild a state' that its only product was 'sedge and turf'.⁶

During the eighteenth century, large areas of drained land also had to be periodically flooded to allow the restoration of the soil. Peat, made from rotting plant matter, builds up quickly when vegetation is flooded, so a rotation system came to be widely employed in the Fens. By the end of the century, it was common for only a third of a farm to be cultivated at once, with the rest seasonally inundated. Drained land was farmed for four to six years before it became too low for windmills to keep dry, at which point the water was returned until the peat was sufficiently restored for the pumps to do their work.⁷ This form of land use provided a refuge for diverse wetland species and facilitated Fennish hunting and fishing, giving space for people to adapt and survive.

The system of land management meant that in 1800, while the enclosed country was very different from the medieval fen, it was still more akin to it than the modern one. Moreover, the drained regions were becoming wetter, not drier. Even the most generous rotation did not allow peat to build up as quickly as it decomposed, meaning that the long-term trend was for a decline in the quantity of agricultural land. Diminishing returns meant that the region was in turn less attractive to investors whose capital was needed for any large-scale drainage scheme. Young suggested in the early nineteenth century that with ‘two or three more floods ... 300,000 acres of the richest land in Great Britain will revert to their ancient occupiers, the frogs, coots, and wild ducks of the region’. He believed that ‘the Fens are now in a moment of balancing their fate; should a great flood happen within two or three years, for want of an improved outfall, the whole country, fertile as it naturally is, will be abandoned’.⁸

The reason that nature did not triumph in the nineteenth century was solely because of the power of steam. The new drainage era that opened in 1819–20 with the installation of a steam pump near Littleport seemed to offer a permanent solution to an intractable problem. The technology developed so fast that within 50 years the force that drove the Industrial Revolution seemed to have finally achieved the sustainable drainage of the Fens. The invention of a machine to cheaply manufacture the pipes laid underneath tilled country sealed the engineer’s apparent victory.⁹ While not even the full force

of the Industrial Revolution could change the contradiction inherent to fen drainage – the more water extracted, the faster the land subsides – the consequences of this were overcome by employing ever more powerful pumps: steam, diesel and ultimately electric.

A problem delayed is not, however, a problem solved. This truth was revealed when agricultural prices collapsed in the 1870s, making the economics of ever more intensive drainage an increasingly marginal proposition.

The price of grain fell because of the low cost of production in North America and the availability of cheap steam-powered transport to bring it to market. While growing demand meant that the impact of the mid-Victorian abolition of the ‘Corn Laws’ (which had imposed a tariff on imports) had not been immediately apparent, by the turn of the century New World grain was replacing the home-grown commodity. The area of cultivated land in England declined from 1893 until the start of the Second World War as pasture expanded and the area of ‘waste’ land increased.¹⁰

The collapse in agricultural prices meant that the most ambitious scheme for fen drainage ever conceived was not fulfilled. An Act of Parliament was obtained for draining much of the Wash to create 150,000 acres of land to be called the Victoria Level, but cheap American imports ensured that the scheme was put on permanent hold. Indeed, no further significant marsh reclamation at all was undertaken after 1875 as big investors looked abroad for more profitable agricultural investments.¹¹

A further benefit of the agricultural recession for the survival of Fennish culture came from the fact that the cheap imported food did not threaten smallholders. While grains could be transported cheaply from abroad, this was not true of most vegetables and fruit, which still needed to be grown closer to the point of consumption. The fertile soils of the Fens enabled small farmers to quickly switch production from grain and find a profitable niche selling a broad range of produce to urban consumers benefiting from cheap bread and higher wages. The ability of smallholders to change crops every season according to market demand meant that even farms of five acres or less could be viable. As late as 1937, 55 per cent of holdings in the Holland district were fewer than twenty acres in size.¹² Rich soil, a mild climate and a skilled and entrepreneurial smallholder tradition meant that, almost uniquely in England, the token acreages conferred to commoners on enclosure could potentially provide economic independence. With the undrained or partially drained country still rich in fish, game, reeds and fuel, thousands of Fennish farmers were able to support their families, supplement incomes and sustain community life.

Such was the resilience of the Fennish that they became the object of national attention for reformers lamenting the decline of farming. As Joan Thirsk has concluded, 'By the close of the nineteenth century, agricultural writers dwelt less upon the misfortunes of the smallholder than upon his resilience. It was agreed that he of all the farmers of Lincolnshire had suffered least' from the importing of cheap food.¹³ In the

early twentieth century, H. Rider Haggard reported that the Isle of Axholme 'is one of the few places in England which may be called truly prosperous'.¹⁴

During the late nineteenth century, the idea of the common was also revived. In 1887, Thomas Scrutton, Professor of Constitutional Law at Kings College London, was awarded the Yorke Prize by the University of Cambridge for his research on *The History and Policy of the Laws Relating to Commons and Enclosures in England*. Scrutton's thesis was that 'The ownership of the legal rights of an individual over land stand on a different footing from any other class of property', because while 'landlords may own' land, 'the English people have to live on it'. Mainstream liberal thought increasingly agreed with Scrutton that it was essential to 'keep the land of England from becoming closed to the people of England'.¹⁵ For the first time in over 200 years, part of the political class sought to protect what was left of the common.

The Commons, Footpaths and Open-Spaces Preservation Society, founded in 1865, was a leader in the movement that led to a series of laws passed to protect 'open space' (including the 74 commons of former villages within fifteen miles of the centre of London that became parklands) and to maintain footpaths and access to the countryside.¹⁶ One organisation that grew out of this concern for conservation, the National Trust, purchased over 600 acres of Wicken Fen in 1899. This reserve was so well studied by academics from nearby Cambridge University that it became critical to the development of ecology as a science.¹⁷

The priority of late nineteenth-century commons defenders was the preservation of open space and natural beauty rather than the commoners' way of life. But there was some concern for the traditional small farmers, and gains for the dispossessed in improving public access to the countryside.

The granting of small allotments of land to the poor also became increasingly common after the General Enclosure Act of 1845, with enclosures through legislation ceasing altogether in 1870 (although 'voluntary' enclosure continued).¹⁸ Related action was also taken to increase access to already enclosed land. Local authorities purchased about 1,600 acres of the former Holland Fen between 1887 and 1894 to divide into one-acre allotments to be let to labourers. In addition, a benevolent aristocrat, Lord Carrington, released 658 acres to be divided into allotments of one to four acres among 200 tenants. New societies and cooperatives were formed, including the Spalding Cooperative Small Holdings Society and the South Lincolnshire Small Holdings Association. These bodies rented more land from the enlightened Lord to sublet, started a co-op bank, and sought to purchase equipment and sell produce on a collective basis.¹⁹

These concessions pointed to the fact that at the local level the *memory* of loss remained a potent force for change. Marx believed that 'memory of the connexion between the agricultural labourer and the communal property had ... vanished' during the nineteenth century, but the evidence suggests otherwise.²⁰ Chippenham commoners reclaimed their

fen common near Soham in the 1830s, more than a generation after parliamentary enclosure and 200 years after their ancestors had first resisted drainage.²¹ In the Isle of Axholme, awareness of history played a major part in the protection of the remaining open fields. Well into the twentieth century, the prevalence of poaching in the Fens rested on the recollection of the greater theft that created the crime.

E.P. Thompson documented how through the nineteenth century, ‘the ground-swell of rural grievance came back always to access to the *land*’.²² J.M. Neeson has shown how ‘the sense of loss, the sense of *robbery*’ that persisted ‘as the bitter inheritance of the rural poor’ continued to be captured in village poetry including the many manifestations of the widely cited ditty: ‘The fault is great in man or woman,/Who steals a goose from off a common;/But what can plead that man’s excuse,/Who steals a common from a goose?’²³

The power of memory was also probably evident in the imperial settler’s longing for land. The millions of descendants of dispossessed commoners who chose lives of hardship in the back blocks of the United States, Canada, Australia and New Zealand suggests a need that cannot be explained by rational self-interest alone. Even the freed convicts of Van Diemen’s Land, so many of them urban folk with no direct experience of farming or hunting, ‘went bush’ in the notorious island colony to find freedom from imperial magistrates and masters.²⁴ As the dispossessed became dispossessors, the tragic inter-generational impacts of English enclosure stretched around the globe.

Twentieth-century technology brought new pressures on the Fens environment and Fennish culture. As the impact of industrialisation spread into the remotest regions of England, the value of some of the products of the marsh declined, which in turn influenced land management. E.A.R. Ennion recalled that in his region of Cambridgeshire, ‘up to 1900 the fen had been yielding its natural resources, turf, litter and reeds to generations of local villagers’, with simple sluices still used to ‘control’ the water rather than ‘banish it’. Through their management of the wetland, the villagers had preserved the peat as a sustainable energy source. However, the adoption of coal-fired iron stoves and fireplaces, combined with the move from thatch to slate roofing, meant that by 1910 ‘the demand for natural products had almost ceased’, and fires ‘which hadn’t been out for years’ in open hearths went cold, ‘the reedbeds stood unwanted in the fen’ and ‘no one cut the sedge’.²⁵ But Ennion documents that ‘nature started to reassert herself’ when agricultural prices once again collapsed in the early 1920s, and ‘held unbridled sway’ until the renewed demand created by the Second World War.²⁶

The survival of Fennish culture was also facilitated by the ongoing isolation of much of the region. Away from the railway, the drained land was nearly as remote as the old fen. Holbeach in Lincolnshire became the largest parish in England after its surrounding marsh was drained, with some people living twelve miles from their parish church. In the Cambridgeshire fen village of Isleham, many folk had never been to Cambridge, let alone London or the sea; and