

BYGONE HARVESTS

Carson Ritchie takes an historic and nostalgic look back at the time of an abundant fenland and explains just how it came to be drained.



THE RUMBLE of the steam-driven pump heralded the drainage of the last strongholds of fenny Lincolnshire. The East and West Fens were to disappear irrevocably and those who knew them began to look back wistfully on a way of life as unique as it had been picturesque; on a natural habitat which had been one of rare beauty. Charles Kingsley wrote nostalgically:

'How grand the fen country was when backed by the patches of primeval forest, while dark green alders, and pale green reeds, stretched for miles round the broad lagoon, where the coot clanked, and the bittern boomed, and the sedge bird, not content with its own sweet song, mocked the notes of all the birds around, while high overhead hung motionless, hawk beyond hawk, buzzard beyond buzzard, kite beyond kite, as far as the eye could see.'

Far off, upon the silver mere, would rise a puff of smoke from a punt, invisible from its flatness and white paint. Then down the wind came the

boom of the great stanchion gun, and overhead rushed and whirled the skein of terrified wild fowl, screaming, piping, clacking, croaking, filling the air with the hoarse rattle of their wings, while clear above all sounded the wild whistle of the curlew, and the trumpet note of the great wild swan...'

Fen reclamation was not a new idea in Kingsley's day. The Romans had made the first serious attempt to drain the fens and then embank them against flooding by high tides. The great 'Roman Banks', sea walls that extend along the old sea frontier of the fens, stretch for 150 miles and took eleven million tons of filling to build. They were more than twice the length of Hadrian's Wall and a good deal more useful.

After the Roman improvers came the Normans. Richard de Rulos, Chamberlain to William the Conqueror 'drained bogs, enclosed commons, and, after building the significantly named town of Deeping, changed the banks of the Welland from quagmires to gardens and orchards.'

Every improvement dealt a blow to the livelihood of the fenlanders. Lord Torrington, on his tour to Lincolnshire in 1791, noted that he was travelling over 'a country now drained and enclosed, which has destroyed the breeding and coming of all the Fen birds - though of the greatest advantage to the country and the landholder.'

Fenland Industries

Innumerable industries were carried out by the fenmen and this made a big contribution to the economy of England as a whole at that time. High on the list of fenland products were wildfowl. Some of these were brought in by the 'punt gunner', whose punt gun was the biggest shotgun ever devised. Prostrate in the bottom of the punt, the gunner was swathed in clothes to keep out the cold. He wore a flannel shirt, and drawers, an extra shirt and waistcoat, thick yarn stockings and over them special knitted woollen stockings called 'wads' that came up to the waist, waterproof boots and a fur cap. It was so cold on the fens that punt gunners had to ply their



trade alone (it was even too cold for a dog to accompany them).

When he was within range, the gunner would rattle his feet against the boards of the punt to raise the birds; then fire. A lucky shot might bring down hundreds of birds yet as the fowler now had to get out of the punt (wearing mud patterns - square pieces of board tied to the feet) and look for his catch on the mud in the pitch dark, he probably never harvested all he shot.

The Fen Slodgers



Camouflage played a large part in the stealthy approach of the punt gunner. His punt, as Kingsley remarks, was painted white to blend with the winter background of snow and ice. When the network of canals was frozen hard, fenmen would have recourse to the 'stalking sledge' - a hurdle on runners which was also equipped with a punt gun.

The flat wooden patterns could also be used as skates on the ice and so it was possible for a fowler to travel quite rapidly in a hard frost if he needed to. One friend of a fenland vicar who borrowed his white surplice as camouflage and then skated silently across the mere created a minor panic by convincing local people they had seen a ghost!

Decoys

Half a million wildfowl were taken each year ('before the railways scared them away') without a shot being fired in the numerous decoys which dotted the fens. Wildfowl were persuaded to enter these by scattered ground-bait and the ingenious antics of a trained dog which danced about beside the tiny canals up which the birds swam. 'Decoy ducks' or tame wildfowl would also placidly swim up the 'pipe'; leading the wild birds into a tunnel net where the ducks would be disposed of by the decoy man.

The Goose

Yet in spite of the innumerable wildfowl procured in these two ways the most important fen bird was probably the goose, especially at a time when the bird outstripped the turkey in popularity for the Christmas dinner. A single goose farmer might possess a thousand mature geese, each of which was reckoned to rear seven goslings. When ready for the London market, flocks from two to nine thousand in number were sent off, travelling slowly from three in the morning till nine at night during which time they covered an average of about eight or ten miles.

An eccentric fenland nobleman, Lord Orford, turned his knowledge of geese to good account. He won a bet with the Duke of Beaufort about which flock would arrive in the capital first - geese or turkeys. Orford knew that turkeys flew up to perch in trees at the end of a day's march. Geese on the other hand stayed on the ground and so when the day started, they were already 'on their marks'.

Peat, Willows and Reeds

There was nothing that the industrious fenman could not turn to his profit, or so it seemed. The peat that lay beneath the clay was quickly cut out by a peat spade into oblong pieces like bricks, before being hawked about at prices around twelve shillings a thousand. It would burn for hours, and its aromatic embers could easily be made up with a

few sticks into a fire sufficiently bright to boil the kettle for tea.

The innumerable pollarded willows provided charcoal, as well as the osier twigs which were the principal packaging material of the time when made up into baskets.

For a quarter of a mile round the meres stood a belt of reeds, golden yellow in summer, called the 'Reed Shore.' Here the fenmen came to cut their reeds. Once cut, reeds made admirable thatch (which could last from fifty to seventy years), and were the most important source of the fenman's revenue. When cut and sorted just two of these reed stacks were worth £1,300. The reed harvest began after Christmas and lasted until April.

Reeds were also used for fence making, brickmaking, for plastered ceilings and as an 'underlay' for stone floors (historically, reeds had taken the place of carpets on floors). Also sought for and stored were the reed flowers, or catkins, which were used for stuffing mattresses.

A colourful crop

The most attractive of all the products of the fen were the local butterflies: swallow tails, purple emperors, and coppers. Gypsies would camp on the bank of the meres to catch the butterflies and sell them to collectors. Entomologists came from London and other parts of England for the same reason.

Changed forever

The change in the landscape from fen to drained land was a striking one. Most of the abundant life of the fen disappeared; the great grey shrikes, bitterns, crested grebes, didappers, bearded titmice, buzzards, hawks and kites - the water lilies, which had once grown so thickly as to hinder navigation. Instead, bright forget-me-nots filled the dry lodes. Only farm buildings, tall poplars and long armed willows broke the level landscape while the chief sign of life seemed to be the constant whirling of the numerous gaunt windmills that were helping to draw out even more of the brown, peaty water that had been the region's lifeblood.

The Punt Gunner

