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978-0-521-08284-6 - Liable to Floods: Village Landscape on the Edge of the Fens, A D 450-1850

J. R. Ravensdale

Excerpt

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## INTRODUCTION

The area chosen for this study is on the southern margin of the fen, the fen first described by St Guthlac's Anglo-Saxon biographer:

There is in Britain a fen of immense size, which begins from the River Granta not far from the city which is named Grantchester. There are immense marshes, now a black pool of water, now foul running streams, and also many islands, and reeds, and hillocks, and thickets, and with manifold windings wide and long it continues to the North Sea.<sup>1</sup>

This fen can now only be found imprisoned and artificially maintained as a tiny remnant at Wicken; the rest of the landscape is tamed.

The general process of this change has long been set out in two vivid sketches by Professor H. C. Darby, but the detail and its particular effects on any community remain to be worked out.<sup>2</sup> Enough was known to suggest that social and economic evolution in this area and its consequences on the landscape were very complex, and many questions remained unanswered. The purpose of this study was to examine an area small enough for thorough investigation of the topography and documents, and wide enough for some effective comparisons. The fen margin, as distinct from the deep fen, offered a very delicate and sensitive indicator, since a change of a few inches in the water-table can result in invasion or retreat by the fen waters for miles.

It soon became clear that the quantity of documents was far too great for the whole area of North Cambridgeshire between the Ouse and the Cam to be included. Landbeach was particularly attractive as a centre because the pattern of the village, the housing and the earthworks, suggested that survivals of older landscapes were here available to an unusual degree in what was still a very small village, and these could be studied with the aid of a considerable quantity of relevant documents in the archives of Corpus Christi College, Cambridge, and in the parish chest. The College historian and rector of Landbeach, Robert Masters, had done sound antiquarian work at the end of the eighteenth century in collecting and copying. Some of this material had been published, written up by a later rector, W. K. Clay, in 1861.<sup>3</sup> More collection and arrangement had been done by a later

<sup>1</sup> C. W. Goodwin, *The Anglo-Saxon Life of St. Guthlac* (1848), p. 21. St Guthlac was the founder of Crowland Abbey in Lincolnshire, and the city of Grantchester is Cambridge; quoted by H. E. Hallam, *The New Lands of Elloe*, Department of English Local History, University of Leicester, Occasional Papers no. 6 (1954).

<sup>2</sup> *Draining* (reference is to the 1968 reprint throughout); *idem*, *The Medieval Fenland* (Cambridge, 1940).

<sup>3</sup> *Landbeach*.

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rector, the Rev. Bryan Walker, but the greater part of the medieval documents had remained unread since Mathew Parker, as Master and rector, worked on them in the reign of Edward VI. His minute scholarly hand has left a trail of useful references in marginal notes and endorsements, and his paginations in red chalk testify to the quantity of detailed topographical work he managed to leave for us on the village as it was in his time.

Landbeach's western neighbour, Cottenham, again posed similar questions in the pattern of its village and the history of its fields. The documentation here, too, was considerable, but some aspects had been explored by that pioneer of English economic history, Archdeacon William Cunningham,<sup>1</sup> and much detailed work on the administration of the Manor of Crowlands in the Middle Ages was incorporated by Miss Page in her major study.<sup>2</sup> From the few specimen rolls published it was clear that there was a great deal of material awaiting exploitation for topographical purposes.

Landbeach's eastern neighbour takes us more deeply into the fen. Waterbeach offers immediately a great contrast in pattern, with discrete settlements of some considerable age, and the main village around a large straggling green. But if the documents are not in quite the same profusion as in the other two villages, they are far more plentiful than in most. As the study was designed to conclude with the landscape after the parliamentary enclosures, we were most fortunate in having the views of a small peasant who lived through this process preserved in both Waterbeach and Cottenham.<sup>3</sup> Robert Masters also collected historical materials for Waterbeach, publishing them privately (only twenty-five copies printed) in 1795.<sup>4</sup> Masters' son-in-law, Burroughes, added to these, and Clay later wrote them up for a fresh publication, but this work was very inferior to his work on Landbeach.<sup>5</sup>

Although good enclosure award maps exist for each of these villages, there are no strip maps available for either Landbeach or Waterbeach. Cottenham, however, has a remarkably detailed first draft map, and there are terriers of two estates to go with it. In addition there is, in the CRO an early nineteenth-century strip map for the Pratt estate.<sup>6</sup>

One aspect of the documentary information has proved particularly fortunate: the period richest in sources for purposes of comparison over the three villages has turned out to be the fourteenth century, which now seems to have been the most critical historical period for our fenmen to come to terms with the fen.

<sup>1</sup> *Common Rights*.<sup>2</sup> *ECA*.<sup>3</sup> J. Denson, *A Peasant's Voice to Landowners* (Cambridge, 1830); and Notebook.<sup>4</sup> *Short Account*.<sup>5</sup> *Waterbeach*.<sup>6</sup> CRO 152/P9, 1842; CRO R/61/5/1.

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The general point of departure for the study was that previous work had hinted that the peculiarities of the evolution of the Cambridgeshire landscape were due to its being agriculturally a region of transition between the 'Midlands System'<sup>1</sup> and the 'East Anglian System'.<sup>2</sup> In both the management of arable and of sheep, the complexities of Cambridgeshire were felt to be probably due in great part to the hybridisation of agricultural 'systems' from either side of the county. The view<sup>3</sup> which stressed instead the peculiarities of the northern fens had been neglected in the discussions of Cambridgeshire. But whatever causes were suggested, there remained something of a paradox in that the evidence of agrarian non-conformity pointed also to its going hand in hand with an archaic orthodoxy which delayed general enclosure until well into the nineteenth century.

<sup>1</sup> M. R. Postgate, 'The Open Fields of Cambridgeshire' (unpublished Ph.D. dissertation 1964, CUL).

<sup>2</sup> K. J. Allison, 'The Sheep-Corn Husbandry of Norfolk in the Sixteenth and Seventeenth Centuries', *AgHR* V (1957), 12, and Alan Simpson, 'The East Anglian Foldcourse: Some Queries', *AgHR* VI (1958), 86.

<sup>3</sup> N. Neilson (ed.), *A Terrier of Fleet, Lincolnshire, from a Manuscript in the British Museum*, British Academy Records of Social and Economic History of England and Wales (1920). Joan Thirsk, *Fenland Farming in the Sixteenth Century*, Department of English Local History, University of Leicester, Occasional Papers, no. 3 (1953).

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## I

## THE SETTING

## THE SITES

The three parishes under examination, Waterbeach, Landbeach and Cottenham, lie in the angle formed by the junction of the Old West River and the Cam (see Fig. 1, p. xii). The Old West forms the northern boundary of Cottenham parish, except where the banking and straightening of the river at Queenholme<sup>1</sup> has left the boundary on the far side of the Washes on the north. The Cam forms much of the eastern boundary of Waterbeach. In the flat lands around the confluence, the rivers made their ways uncertainly before fen drainage: prolonged floods could end with shifted courses, and Stretham Mere and Harrimere<sup>2</sup> once marked old beds as silting took the junction northwards, downstream. On joining the Cam, the Old West dropped silt in the uncertain area of changing courses: 'a bed of gravel and sand, which the river of Ouse, at his meeting with Grant strongly casteth up, and the river of Grant, being the weaker stream feebly resisteth'.<sup>3</sup> Here, among the marshes, was an area of inter-common on both sides of the Cam, and from this the final division of parishes left a large portion of Stretham between the rivers, stretching from the south bank of the Old West to Chittering and the Waterbeach boundary.<sup>4</sup> From the end of Roman times, right through the great drainage schemes of the seventeenth century, until the nineteenth century, a large part of these parishes has been fen, subject to winter flooding, and more has been in danger from any extraordinary flood.

The margin between fen and upland has shifted in historical times according to changes in sea-level, climate, and the success or failure, vigour or neglect, of man's attempts at drainage. The twenty-foot contour (see Fig. 1, p. xii) marks off ground that seems to have been safe even from the great floods in the history of the area, and in general the critical height seems to have been rather below this, although sometimes flood-waters stand higher towards the Ouse than the Cam, any banks that hold making for relief towards the east. This was apparent again in the last general inundation of 1947.

Relief differentiates the nature of the three villages, and their situation in relation to the twenty-foot contour shows this very clearly. In Water-

<sup>1</sup> Queenholme, TL 430725.

<sup>2</sup> Stretham Mere, TL 525730; Harrimere, TL 535745.

<sup>3</sup> S. Wells, *The History of the Drainage of the Great Level of the Fens*, vol. II (1830), pp. 93-4.

<sup>4</sup> For the late inter-common see *Liber Eliensis*, p. 192.

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beach, only the settled area stands above this level. Cottenham is built towards the end of a long spur of greensand and gravel reaching out into the fens. Around it once lay the arable of its open fields, whose outer boundary ran astonishingly close to the twenty-foot contour all the way. Between Cottenham and Rampton on the west there penetrates a long tongue of low ground, Little North Fen and The Holme, once Holmere.

On the eastern side of Cottenham there is a similar but smaller penetration of low ground between the villages along the line of the Beach Ditch. At the end of this, too, was a mere<sup>1</sup> ('Tossolmere', 'the mere' or 'Histon mere', in the field book and court rolls), in the region where Landbeach meets Histon near the Cottenham border.<sup>2</sup> Here, too, were the old moors of Histon, Landbeach and Cottenham, which were never ploughed up on the Cottenham side until after the parliamentary enclosure of the nineteenth century.

Landbeach village is settled along the line of the twenty-foot contour, again on a spur, but this one is shorter and more broad based. The village is not on the watershed, but low down on the eastern side, where the gault clay gives way to gravel. Both Landbeach and Cottenham are fen-edge villages, favoured by dry sites which combine the advantages of connection with the upland, with access to as much fen as possible.

The siting of Waterbeach village is different; in the wetter historical periods it was a true fen island, surrounded on all sides by land below the flood line, and cut off from the upland. If one adds the other parts of the parish settled at different times in the Middle Ages, Denney and Elmeney (as their names imply, also islands), we find medieval Waterbeach parish to have been a small fen archipelago. Its constituent islands were more isolated from each other than were the villages just to the north strung out along the Haddenham–Stretham ridge. Each of its elevated sites was a low deposit of gravel, just sufficient to give a drier surface than the surrounding fen. Causeways were necessary to join them.

Each of the three islands in Waterbeach provided a site for a monastery. Earthworks still remain even at the short-lived site of Elmeney; more complete earthworks at Waterbeach itself; and at Denney, as well as these, buildings from every period of use. These islands must have in one way been particularly suitable for early monasteries, in that they were then cut off from the world by the black waters of the fen. The eremitical tradition could fulfil itself in isolation in small communities: the hagiographer's description of St Guthlac's settlement at Crowland in the demon-tormented fens could well have been written of any of them.<sup>3</sup> The only other monastic site along this fen edge between the Ouse and the Cam was

<sup>1</sup> This mere was in the region of TL 455650.

<sup>2</sup> LPC, Field Book; CCCC, XXXV, 121–125, 170.

<sup>3</sup> See above, p. 1: H. T. Riley (ed.), *Ingulph's Chronicle of the Abbey of Croyland* (1854), pp. 8, 454.

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at Swavesey, on a similar cramped fen island, again linked to the village of that time by a causeway only.

But the austerity imposed by such sites suited the zeal of the early reformed monasteries, rather than more sophisticated later Benedictine life, and it is significant that Swavesey later went to the Carthusians, and only the Poor Clares at Denney survived in our villages to the Dissolution. Elmeney is frankly described as an island in the charter of Robert, chamberlain of the Count of Brittany, in making the original grant to Ely. Some of the difficulties of life there, due to its topography, emerge clearly from the later charter of Aubrey Picot arranging for the transfer to Denney:

Having heard the frequent complaints of Reginald, monk, and of the brothers of Elmeney, namely that they are wont to be too much harassed in that isle by the waters and hindered in the service of God...let them transfer their house to the island which is called Denney namely in a higher place on account of the flood-waters, and to one more suitable to construct their church and buildings and to make gardens and orchards; from the island that is, as is said, unsuitable on account of the waters, to this more commodious island; the aforesaid island, namely Elmeney, still remaining to their use.<sup>1</sup>

The reason given for the transfer of the Poor Clares from Waterbeach to Denney in 1339 is similar. The date is one when we might well from other evidence expect the flooding to be near its worst:

the house of the Abbess and Minoresses of Waterbeche is situated in a place narrow, low and decayed, and otherwise inadequate for their residence.<sup>2</sup>

The RAF air photo taken in 1952 in time of flood, but not the worst of recent years, shows the earthworks of the abbey with the waters which filled The Hollow and The Little Hollow lapping against them.<sup>3</sup>

## CHRONOLOGY OF THE WATER-TABLE

In this area the physical environment is subject to change, from variations in the water-table, the deposition of silt, and the formation or shrinkage of peat. There is evidence, often fragmentary, indirect, and inconclusive, which suggests three possible periods of a rising water-table in post-Roman times. The removal of the Benedictine cell from Elmeney to Denney because of the rising waters indicates a possible deterioration in the century after the Conquest; fourteenth-century documents are full of hints of still more serious and prolonged flooding; and the controversies

<sup>1</sup> *Liber Eliensis*, pp. 389–90, charter 141 (1133×1169); see Appendix B.

<sup>2</sup> *Cal. Pat.* Ed. III, vol. IV, 1338–40 (1898), p. 242, quoted in *Waterbeach*, p. 102; see Appendix B.

<sup>3</sup> RP: CPE/UK/1952 3095.

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over drainage schemes in the early years of the seventeenth century may well indicate a third period of major deterioration.

It will be argued later that the deterioration in the fourteenth century and subsequent recovery played a dominant role in the evolution of the medieval open fields in Landbeach. But the source of much recent discussion of the water-table in this period, the 'Inquisitiones Nonarum', is singularly unhelpful for our three parishes.<sup>1</sup> Their representatives seem to have used what was virtually a common formula, blaming the shortfall in income on taxation, royal and ecclesiastical. Yet the neighbouring parish, Impington, reported 200 acres flooded, and the total area which suffered in this way in the county seems to have been very considerable. Perhaps flooding was by that time too much a normal seasonal expectation in our parishes to have been considered a plausible excuse.

There is further early fourteenth-century evidence from surveys of nearby manors. In 1325 Swavesey had floods over five acres of the glebes.<sup>2</sup> In the 1340 Survey of Swavesey three acres are again flooded, and the prior gets nothing for meadow in Fen Drayton because it is under water. In the 1358 Ely Survey of their manor of Willingham, fifteen acres of mowing meadow appear to be deteriorating because of repeated flooding, and thirty acres of fen meadow are then permanently under water.<sup>3</sup> This was not an entirely new problem there in the fourteenth century, but the situation appeared to be getting worse. The Ely Old Coucher Book in 1251 mentioned an extra four acres that could be mown, and beasts that could be pastured, only in time of drought. The earlier Survey of 1222 mentions thirteen arable acres which could not be ploughed, and which were in meadow and pasture because of too much rain.<sup>4</sup> By the thirteenth century cultivation would seem to have been pressing against the frontier with the fen. When the evidence is fragmentary and incidental, and its authors expect flooding as part of the order of things, it is difficult to assess the scale of the deterioration, but there cannot be much doubt that the early fourteenth century was a particularly difficult period on the fen edge from this cause.

The Court Roll of the Manor of Chamberlains in Landbeach for 1328 is unfortunately damaged towards the foot, but enough remains to suggest that this had been a peculiarly bad year.<sup>5</sup> Instead of the normal phrase for reporting damage due to stopped ditches, '*ad nocumentum vicinorum*' (with or without minor qualification), much more detail is given. Hugo le

<sup>1</sup> A. H. R. Baker, 'Evidence in the "Nonarum Inquisitiones" of Contracting Arable Lands in England During the Early Fourteenth Century', *EconHR* 2nd series, XIX (1966).

<sup>2</sup> BM Add. MS. 6164, p. 228; quoted by W. M. Palmer and C. E. Parsons, 'Swavesey Priory', *TCHAS*, I (1904).

<sup>3</sup> PRO E/143/9/2: cf. Chapter 3.

<sup>4</sup> BM Cotton Tiberius, B II, 118d.

<sup>5</sup> CCCC, XXXV, 121. It was also the year of a great sea flood.

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Bray's ditch at Claystrate<sup>1</sup> (now Spalding's Lane) had overflowed, making a lake three perches by four. Another of his ditches next to the croft of the prior of Barnwell (Priors Close) had not been mended, 'through which the highway was submerged to the great injury of travellers' (*'per quod via regia submersa est ad magnum gravamen transseuntium'* [sic]).<sup>2</sup> If this is indeed Priors Close, as would appear, the ditch and road still being there in later years, then the trouble was occurring even in that part of the village most likely, because of the relief, to have escaped it. It may well have been due to excess rain and water-logging of the clay rendering the ditches inadequate. In the Survey of 1316 a new place-name emerges, 'le slo', the slough. It occurs in the Court Rolls in 1328 and 1338. The last appearance noted is in 1401–2. Stopped watercourses become one of the main concerns of the fourteenth-century Court Rolls in Landbeach, and this is so for both manors. There are, for example, fifteen reported at the Chamberlains Michaelmas Court of 1327, and fifteen more at Michaelmas 1375. Many intervening courts have still more.<sup>3</sup>

Topographical evidence from in and around this area is highly suggestive of a major rise in the water-table sometime in the Middle Ages, and some of it can be related to fourteenth-century documents. William Cole in his notes has preserved a record of a Tithe Dispute of 1315 from the now vanished Oldfield Register.<sup>4</sup> In this The Holme<sup>5</sup> in Cottenham appears as Holmere, and is the termination of the Oakington Brook. At this period The Holme had become a wet low fen, where it was reckoned normally as a hard, and from the spread of alluvium it would appear probable that this deterioration also caused the lower part of Oakington to be removed uphill; for the alluvium continues in a band on either side of the Oakington Brook, over the deserted ridge and furrow, croft and toft and house platforms, south of Water Lane. The name itself is suggestive, for it was obviously the main village street in the earlier Middle Ages. The clarity of some of the house platforms, where sub-divisions of buildings can be discerned, suggests that they were abandoned without time to rob the materials. Scarcely any more residential building took place on these deserted sites until the twentieth century. Several of the nearby manor houses have moved uphill: Westwick Hall, Crowlands at Cottenham, and Histon Manor: this general shift may well be associated with the same rise in the water-table.

The area of Landbeach immediately east and south of the cross-roads is low-lying and especially sensitive to such changes. In the Field Book of 1549 the first selion in Banworth's second furlong, next to the first tenement by the cross-roads, is noted as 'flud acre'. This appears as 'le

<sup>1</sup> See Fig. 10, p. 127.<sup>2</sup> CCCC, XXXV, 121.<sup>3</sup> CCCC, XXXV, 121, 2 Ed. III and 12 Ed. III; 124, 3 Hen. IV; 121, 1 Ed. III and 44 Ed. III.<sup>4</sup> BM Add. MS. 5887, fol. 25f.<sup>5</sup> TL 426670; for changes of site, see Fig. 2.



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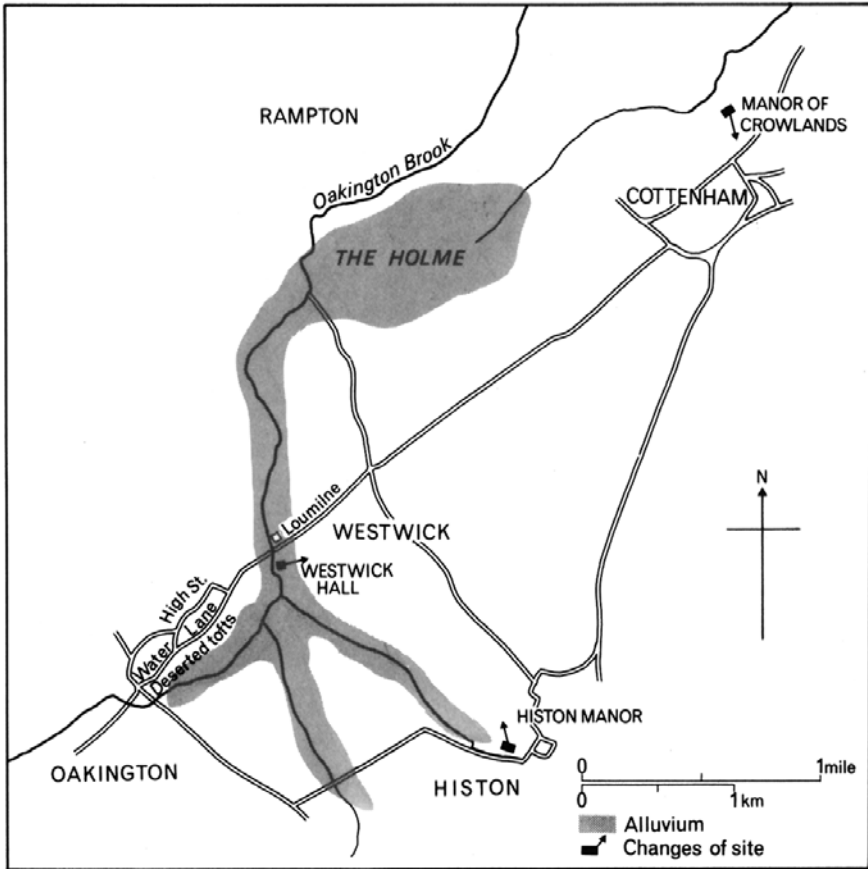


Fig. 2. Changes of site around Oakington: the uphill shift of both manor houses and peasant houses in this area seems to be associated with a great flood, especially of the Oakington Brook and its tributaries. Our only evidence of a flood on this scale is from the early fourteenth century.

Flodacre' in a Court Roll of 1362.<sup>1</sup> Matthew Parker's endorsement of the College copy of the Field Book dates it as a gift made by the lords of the village on 10 March 1313. Although there were Atte Flods in the Hundred Rolls the first mention of the tenement itself by name, 'le Flood', occurs in a Charter of 1317.

In 1404–5 there is reference to a tenement lying 'apud le Flood' which has no right of common.<sup>2</sup> There would appear to have been some building here on the lords' waste by this date; apparently the waters had receded somewhat.

<sup>1</sup> See Fig. 10, p. 127.

<sup>2</sup> LPC, Field Book; CCCC, XXXV, 121, 36 Ed. III, Court Roll; CCCC, XXXV, 19, Charter; CCCC, XXXV, 124, 6 Hen. IV, Brays Court Roll.

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There is much less evidence on later changes. In 1518 a jury of old men claimed that the lode<sup>1</sup> was dug in the past for drainage, 'for at that time were more wetter and moist years than are now at this time'.<sup>2</sup> But the lode was there in 1325 already, and the very name suggests that drainage was not its principal purpose.<sup>3</sup> If it is impossible to refer this wetter period to any specific dates there is at least the survival of a folk memory of climatic improvement.

One might expect some reference to the general deterioration which seems to have been experienced towards the end of the sixteenth century, for which Shakespeare himself has provided much evidence. The nameless balke of the earlier field books, which is now the Waterbeach road, appears as 'Flood Lane'<sup>4</sup> in the Dukman Book's list of tenements, but this is probably as late as 1727. The great quantity of evidence dealing with drainage from the beginning of the seventeenth century is all from interested or hostile parties in the flurry of promotion of profit-seeking schemes.

In 1604 Richard Atkyns of Outwell surveyed the fens, and blamed any flooding in this area on defective drains, while at the same time he thought the banking and draining of Cottenham better than any other nearby fen town.<sup>5</sup> In the Survey of 1618, Cottenham and Landbeach fens are suffering from water shortage in summer time 'by reason of their banking and draining of them of late time...'<sup>6</sup> By Hayward's Survey of 1635-6 the situation appears to have worsened rapidly.<sup>7</sup> Wherever direct comparison of the area of a fen is possible at two of the survey dates, it is much enlarged in the later one. For instance, Joist Fen<sup>8</sup> in Waterbeach is 1,200 acres in 1618 and 2,200 in 1635. This could well be due to the failure to keep up normal drainage works during the anticipation of the new schemes being projected by Sir Miles Sandys, the Cromwell family, the Cutts and others.<sup>9</sup> As much was suggested in 1620 when a petition was made: 'the undertakers may now be compelled to perform their part, or else abandon the project, since, in the expectation of it, the drainage has been neglected for years'.<sup>10</sup> Atkyns had seen an engine, presumably a windmill in action, draining at Over in 1604.<sup>11</sup> There is the impression that a good deal of successful minor draining and embanking had taken place just before the documentation begins to become plentiful, but that its effects had been very short-lived. Probably provoked by wetter times, as so often in the fens where drainage produces peat shrinkage and so

<sup>1</sup> See Fig. 4, p. 20.

<sup>2</sup> CCCC, XXXV, 167; see also Dukman Book in LPC.

<sup>3</sup> Wr. Pk. Ch., fol. 248d. Lode in this area seems always to refer to a canal used for barge traffic.

<sup>4</sup> LPC; see Fig. 10, p. 127.

<sup>5</sup> BM Harleian 5011, and CUL, EDR A/1/8.

<sup>6</sup> BM Add. MS. 33466.

<sup>7</sup> Wells, *History of the Drainage*, vol. II, p. 177.

<sup>8</sup> See Fig. 6, p. 87.

<sup>9</sup> For examples see: BM Harleian 5011, fol. 14r.; Add, Ch. 33086; Add. MS. 33466, fol. 26.

<sup>10</sup> CSPD 1619-23, vol. CXVI, no. 113.

<sup>11</sup> BM Harleian 5011, fol. 41; cf. *Drainage*, p. 114n.