CHAPTER I

COUNTRY BACKGROUND

In the political geography of the sixteenth century Lincolnshire was the most north-easterly county directly governed from London, for the shires beyond the Humber were administered from York by the Council of the North. The area between Humber and Wash was not only remote, it was and is vast, for it is as far from Stamford on its southern tip to Barton-on-Humber as it is to London. It was isolated too, and more so than a small-scale map would suggest. To the north-west were the dreary wastes of Thorne and Hatfield, which in wintertime became an inland sea. To the west was the wide and unbanked river Trent. Geologists credit the flood waters of the Trent basin with having cut the gap in the limestone ridge in which Lincoln stands, and in times of flood they still seek to resume their ancient course across the sandy level between the modern river Trent and the Lincoln gap, and so to flood the lower city and cut it off from the west. Even when it was not in flood the Trent was a physical and psychological barrier. It had no bridge below Newark until Gainsborough bridge was built in 1790. There were only ferries, as at Gainsborough, Dunham, Littleborough and Stockwith. No main roads led to them. The county of Lincoln was virtually a peninsula, whose neck to the south was narrowed by the fens.

The coast was lonely and long, guarded to the landward by

> Wide and wild the waste enormous marsh

of Tennyson. It was opened to the seaward by small creeks, sixteen in number, in which landings could be made unobserved or cargoes smuggled in or out. Throckmorton, the plotter against Elizabeth, had a plan of 'the havens and places easily to land in', which Sir Edward Dymoke asked to have, as an aid to the view of the sea coast in the Marsh and Holland.[1]

The county lay on the eastern flank of the north road. It was a long and dreary way from London, generally taking three days on horseback,[2] through Waltham, Ware, Royston and Huntingdon; the old north road had not yet been supplanted by the present road through Baldock and Stevenage. The miry clay lands of Bedfordshire all too often broke the spirit of the traveller on horse or foot. Walsingham's secretary told Lord

[1] *H.M.C. Rutland*, I, 176.

[2] During the Civil War messengers made the journey in two days. See, for example, *C.J.* II, 606.

Rutland that the ways to Grantham were foul and long;[1] and more than a century later Defoe reported to Harley from Leicester that the country was very deep and wet, and that he hoped to make more haste when he got over the Trent, the ground being harder.[2] If Defoe had gone to Huntingdon he might have found that the waters were out, and that he could not get through. The traveller who succeeded had then a choice of routes to Lincoln. He could keep on the north road to Newark, skirt the Trent there, and reach Lincoln by the Roman Fosse Way. He could turn right at Stilton to Peterborough, Crowland and Spalding and so to Boston, and reach Lincoln through Heckington and Sleaford, though if the season were late or early part of the road would almost certainly be drowned.[3] More likely he would go through Peterborough to Market Deeping, cross the Welland and enter Lincolnshire there, and keep the fenland on his right through Bourne and Sleaford. The decayed bridge at West Deeping and the Lincoln–London road were reported to be very foul and dangerous in 1621,[4] and the inhabitants of the towns along the road petitioned for repair of the Lolham bridges in the parish of Maxey by which the Ermine Street crossed the Welland, the decay whereof was causing great danger and damage.[5] Other ways there were for the adventurous traveller. He might go from Bourne along the Nordyke causeway between the East and West fens. Although it was the duty of the abbot of Revesby and his lay successors to maintain the causeway people were drowned there every year; and it was small comfort to know that in default of repair the abbey lands might be seized by the sheriff.

The other roads of the county were no better, and may have been worse. Bridge Dyke, the causeway from Kesteven to Boston, was the liability of Sempringham priory. It was complained in 1575 that no repairs had been carried out since the dissolution of the religious houses, as the lands charged with repair had come into the possession of Henry VIII. Money had been appropriated for repair, but not enough, and the inhabitants asked that lands should be granted for its maintenance.[6] The road from Fiskerton to Horncastle was a very cruel ill way, and from the west end of Langworth lane to Wragby town was a high passage and not passable by reason of the

[1] *H.M.C. Rutland*, I, 192.
[2] *H.M.C. Portland*, IV, 332.
[3] John Ogilby noted that Crowland was 'seated very low, and amongst deep fens, almost after the manner of Venice, its three streets being separated from each other by water-courses, the banks whereof are preserved by piles; the lowness of its situation admits of no carriages to come at it' (*Britannia* (1675), p. 72).
[4] *H.M.C. Rutland*, IV, 217.
[5] *A.P.C. 1623–25*, p. 65.
[6] *H.M.C. Salisbury*, XIII, 128.

deep miry way; and similarly from Dunholme to Faldingworth on the way from Lincoln to Market Rasen, which led through Caistor to Grimsby.[1]

A few notable travellers can be followed as they journey through the county. In 1541 Henry VIII entered it at Stamford, and went to Grimsthorpe as guest of his brother-in-law Charles Brandon, duke of Suffolk; thence to Sleaford and Lincoln, and so to Gainsborough, where he crossed the Trent by ferry. On his return from York he crossed the Humber from Hull to Barrow, and went south to Caenby and South Carlton, where he stayed with Sir John Monson. He must have passed through Lincoln to Nocton, and on to Sleaford and Grimsthorpe.[2] His servant John Leland also came in by Stamford, Bourne and Sleaford to Lincoln and out by Gainsborough ferry.[3] During the rising of the northern earls in 1569 munitions for the royal forces were sent to Barton-on-Humber for despatch by boat to Hull, whilst Sir Ralph Sadler went to York by way of Burton Stather. One of the rebels passed south over the Humber to Barton, and Lord Rutland had to wait for the tide there.[4] James I went from Grantham to Lincoln and returned by Newark; no Humber crossing or even Trent ferry for him.

In August 1634 three 'voluntary members of the noble military company' in Norwich marched to King's Lynn, and thinking it not fit to pass the Washes, which were neither firm nor safe for travellers, especially because of the new-made sluices and devices for turning the natural course of the waters, they chose to go by Wisbech, and thence over Tydd sluice and the rich fat level of ground of Spalding. The next day they went through Threekingham. From there to Sleaford they found the way for the most part 'pleasant, healthy and champion [champion land is uninclosed], a good sociable way for travellers, but such as notably deceive them that be weary. For when we first espied the high towers of the cathedral, we thought it near, but it proved to our pains and patience a full jury of miles, in the passing whereof we lost the sight of those high-topped colossuses at least 16 times.'[5] After their inspection of the city they intended to see Hull and Beverley, 'but that neither the day nor way over Humber would neither seasonably nor safely admit'. They therefore made for Newark.

[1] *H.M.C. Rutland*, IV, 217. Even outside the fen area the carriers and other travellers were often held up by water. See W. A. Massingberd, *History of Ormsby* (n.d.), p. 178.

[2] *Proceedings of the Archaeological Institute, 1848*, pp. 145–56.

[3] *Itinerary*, ed. L. Toulmin Smith (1907), I, 23–33.

[4] *C.S.P.D. Add. 1566–79*, pp. 123–5, 231.

[5] *A Relation of a Short Survey of Twenty-six Counties*, ed. L. G. Wickham Legg (1904), pp. 1–11, quoted in J. Simmons, *Journeys in England* (1951), pp. 104–5, 107. The old road over the heath probably followed the same route as the present, which gives the same impression.

In 1640 Sir Henry Slingsby and his family crossed the Humber to be farther from the Scots army which had taken Newcastle. They went from Hull to Barton (a six-mile journey) in a passage-boat, in a cross-wind and rough water; and after having trouble in getting clear of the boats in Hull harbour, they ran foul of another ship coming in, which bore them under her, and broke a little of the forepart of their boat.[1]

John Evelyn also crossed the Humber in bad weather and reached the north road by Lincoln and Grantham;[2] and John Loveday crossed it southwards and out by Newark.[3] Defoe had unpleasant memories of an ill-favoured dangerous passage by ferry in an open boat carrying about fifteen horses, ten or twelve cows and seventeen or eighteen passengers called Christians, from Barton to Hull, lasting four hours, and 'whether I was seasick or not is not worth notice, but that we were all sick of the passage anyone may well suppose', and on the return journey he preferred to go round by York.[4] Travellers from London to Hull had little choice, however, without a wide detour, and a judge going there had to inquire what time the tide would serve him from Barton, and ask for an officer to guide him from Lincoln.[5]

William III came in by Grantham to Lincoln, and thence by Dunham ferry to Welbeck.[6] Celia Fiennes elected to enter from the north road by Grantham to Lincoln, and retired by Belton to Newark.[7] Southey entered the county by Dunham ferry and went out by Newark.[8] They did not go north or east of Lincoln. Indeed, the wilder and remoter parts beyond the city were seldom penetrated save by those who went because they must. John Woodward, geologist and physician, was an exception. When about 1680–90 he visited his friend the incumbent of Nettleton near Caistor, he wrote that from Lincoln he had 15 such solitary miles, an Arabia Deserta, through wild fields and moors, as he had never ridden before. Below the town, which stands on the side of the Wolds, he saw the Nettleton sands, a mile by half a mile, which puzzled him. But the townsmen told him that aged people there had known it as excellent meadow, until a gentleman, rather than abate his rents, turned it into a warren; where the rabbits finding such easy delving threw out great heaps of sand

[1] *Diary of Sir Henry Slingsby*, ed. D. Parsons (1836), pp. 58–9.
[2] Diary, 19 August 1654.
[3] *Diary of a Tour in 1732*, ed. J. E. T. Loveday (Roxburghe Club, 1890), pp. 203, 210.
[4] *Tour*, ed. G. D. H. Cole (Everyman ed. 1927), II, 94.
[5] *Calendar of Ancient Deeds and Charters, Hull* (1951), L744.
[6] *C.S.P.D. 1695*, p. 91.
[7] *Journeys of Celia Fiennes*, ed. C. Morris (1947), pp. 70, 71.
[8] *Letters from England*, ed. J. Simmons (1951), pp. 265–8. He noted that the Trent was the largest fresh-water river he had seen in England.

which the wind blew away, and the wind getting into the rabbit holes tore them up also and so made the waste. Six houses had been destroyed by the sand, and it would encroach farther but that the beck carried it away as fast as the wind brought it. 'So much of Arabia Araenosa.' The townsmen had eight-score cows and 1600 sheep, and there were three-score houses in the parish. The town was all thatch and mud and stud, except that the rectory had brick and tile in part. They had good turnips, and he was persuading them to sow turnips first and then clover on their sandy heath in order to swerd it, but they were not forward to any point of improvement that was new. He was quite angry to see them 'keep a dingy fire with turves, when they might have seacoal for 16*s*. a chaldron, and fetch them but 7 miles off'.

Woodward's attempt to record the dialect of the natives shows that it has not much changed with the years. 'I have allmost learnt', he wrote, 'to speake to them in their own language, for instance, if any should ask me the way to Lincoln I could say, Yaw mun een goo thruft yon Beck, then yaw'st com to a new Yate, then turr off to th' raight, o're a Brig that lays o're a hoy Doyke, and than Yaw'st not hove ore a maile to th' next Tawn.'[1]

All roads had their perils, and the heath between Lincoln and Sleaford, whose undulations so misled the Norwich volunteers, was typical of the many expanses of gorse and rabbit warrens in which it was all too easy for the traveller to lose his way. Charities for the tolling of the church bell in the evening for the guidance of wayfarers were endowed at Blankney and Potterhanworth by folk who had themselves been rescued; and the Leasingham parish register records the burial of passing strangers. Within four miles of Lincoln, Dunston pillar was to stand in the eighteenth century, the only land lighthouse in the country. Highwaymen provided an added peril. Tradition said that Leasingham mill house was once the rendezvous of a desperate band of robbers who were connected with Dick Turpin, and that they were aided by the sons of respectable farmers in the neighbourhood. Dunsby hill on the same heath was so notorious a haunt of robbers that in effecting insurances the 'accidents of Dunsby heath' were specially excepted.[2]

Then, as now, the traveller on the north road generally did not diverge from the main route at all. A tourist in the early eighteenth century describes his journey from Stamford to Grantham and Newark and so to

[1] Lindsey County Council B.R.A. 866. Abraham de la Pryme made the same Arabian comparison of the sandy commons in the north-west of the county, with poor barren land worth from 2*s*. to 4*s*. an acre (*Diary*, ed. C. Jackson (Surtees Society, 1870), pp. 58–9).

[2] G. Oliver, *Holy Trinity Guild at Sleaford* (1837), p. 8n.; E. Trollope, *Sleaford* (1872), p. 3.

Doncaster and York; and later he refers to a journey from Boston 'over the Down of Lincoln' where they hunt the bustard, 'a bird as big as a turkey, and known no where else but here'. He adds that it lies in a cheap country 'which I would not give you a description of in my way through Stamford, it being a great way off my road, and therefore I take the opportunity of mentioning it here'.[1]

Travellers from Glasgow to London in 1739 found no turnpike road until they reached Grantham. Up to that point they travelled on a narrow causeway, with an unmade soft road on each side. They met strings of packhorses, thirty or forty in a gang; they had to leave the causeway to make way, and plunge into the side road from which they sometimes found it difficult to get back.[2]

His knowledge of the north road enabled Sir Walter Scott to place part of his story *The Heart of Midlothian* between Newark and Grantham. At York Jeanie Deans was warned to 'have a care o' Gunnerby Hill. Robin Hood's dead and gone, but there be takers yet in the Vale of Bever.' Her adventures in the village to which Scott gave the Lincolnshire name of Willingham (usually identified with Syston) show how familiar he was with the district.[3] Yet there is no sign that Scott ever left the north road to penetrate the county farther. When, after some years of making the journey from Scotland by sea, he returned (1828) to the road he found it, as it still is, the dullest in the world. 'Nothing seems to have altered in this twenty or thirty years, save the noses of the landlords, which have bloomed and given place to another set of proboscises as germane as the old were to the *very welcome—please to light—'Orses forward* and *ready out*. The skeleton at Barnby Moor has deserted his gibbet, and that is the only change I recollect.'[4]

The isolation of Lincolnshire, and the ignorance of the outer world about it, partly account for the fact that it has often been held in low repute. Henry VIII referred to it as 'one of the most brute and beastly' in the realm; but as he had been held in defiance by it he was a prejudiced witness.[5] Better evidence of common repute comes from the plea of a prisoner to the Lord Admiral in 1592: 'If I am grievous in your honour's hearing or sight let

[1] *A Journey through England in Familiar Letters from a Gentleman here to his Friend abroad* (2nd ed. 1724), II, 212, 262–3.

[2] Oliver, op. cit. p. 46n.

[3] He describes in the rectory parlour prints of Sir William Monson, James Yorke the blacksmith and (in full armour) Peregrine, Lord Willoughby de Eresby, all Lincolnshire worthies, which he must have seen or at least heard of and remembered. See G. G. Walker's paper on 'Sir Walter Scott and Lincolnshire' in his *Tales of a Lincolnshire Antiquary* (1940).

[4] *Journal of Sir Walter Scott*, Preface by D. Douglas (1890), II, 195, and see ibid. I, 272.

[5] Below, p. 45 n.

me be banished in the Brill, Flushing, Lincolnshire, or in the worst place of her Majesty's dominions, or to some vile war without pay, so I am not left in this cage of misery....'[1] Thomas Cromwell was told by the future Lord Williams of Thame that he had seen nowhere 'such a sight of asses so unlike gentlemen as the most part of the gentlemen of Lincolnshire'.[2] Thomas Wilson, himself hailing from a remote part of the county, and rising to be Secretary of State, treats his countrymen as the very type of rustic: 'It is much better to be born in Paris than in Picardie: in London than in Lincoln for that both the ayre is better, people more civill, and the wealth much greater, and the men for the most part more wise';[3] and the typical bucolic appears in the saying 'fowls of the choicest kinds are to be had there [in Northumberland] enough to make a Lincolnshire man sick at the second course....'[4] He is also thought gullible:

> From olde famous Lincolne that's seated so hye,
> Well mounted and furnisht, with gold did I flye,
> To London's fam'd Citie some wit for to buy,
> Which cost me so deare, makes me sigh, sob and crye,
> For this is the cheating Age,
> For this is the cheating Age.

After various misadventures in the metropolis,

> Now Leonard of Lincolne with griefe bids adiew:
> My journey to London long time I shall rue:
> I ne're in my life met with villaines so vilde,
> To send a man home like the Prodigall Childe.
> For this is the cheating Age,
> For this is the cheating Age.[5]

The inhabitants at large were no doubt unaware of all this prejudice and ignorance, and had they known they would not have been much concerned to dispel it. Foreigners were not highly thought of: the natives' first inclination was to throw a stone at them; and they were only accepted and absorbed into the community after a lengthy probation. It was the magnates who were conscious of the isolation of the county and found it irksome. That they did so is indicated by the way in which they settled in

[1] *H.M.C. Salisbury*, IV, 221.
[2] *L. & P. Henry VIII*, XI, no. 888.
[3] *Arte of Rhetorique* (1560), f. 7.
[4] *H.M.C. Var. Coll.* VII, 432. Dr Birkbeck is supposed to have said that Lincoln was only remarkable for its fat cattle, and the difference between men and cattle was just the difference between bipeds and quadrupeds. Ross Collection, *Scrap Books*, *Lincoln*, I (L.P.L.).
[5] 'The Cheating Age: Leonard of Lincoln's Journey to London to buy Wit' (printed before 1626). See *A Pepysian Garland*, ed. H. E. Rollins (1922), p. 244.

the south and especially in the south-west. The earls of Rutland, with their seat at Belvoir, established themselves also at Newark, and, halfway from there to Lincoln, at Eagle; another of the family, Roger Manners, lived at Uffington near Bourne. Lord Burghley had his mother's property near Stamford. Lord Clinton secured seats at Tattershall and Sempringham. The Willoughby de Eresbys deserted their ancestral home at Spilsby in favour of Grimsthorpe. The relation of most of these seats to the north road is obvious. At Stamford, Grantham and Newark were the points of contact between Lincolnshire and the outer world. Here were seen the messengers who travelled between London and York, Berwick and Edinburgh, and who could tell the news of the Court and the wars with the French and the Scots, or the threat of invasion from Spain. Great men were entertained in the mansions of the district as they passed north or south on state affairs. The duchess of Suffolk was bidden receive Mary Queen of Scots at her house at Stamford in 1551.[1] The child of Lord Seymour and Queen Katharine Parr was with her at Grimsthorpe in 1549.[2] The Protector Northumberland was expected at the house of Cecil's father in June 1552,[3] and he and others wrote to the privy council from Lord Clinton's house at Sempringham on 21 June.[4] The advent of Sir Francis Walsingham was announced on his way to Scotland by the postmaster of Grantham to Rutland, and after being the guest of Roger Manners at Uffington Walsingham reported upon the honourable entertainment given by Manners to all passengers of quality who travelled northwards.[5]

When they could, the gentry followed the nobility in settling in the south-west. The Custs moved from Pinchbeck to Stamford. Welby built at Denton, Brownlow at Belton, Thorold at Marston and Syston, all near Grantham. The countryside is dotted with manor houses and parks, though their inhabitants have often in these days departed.

By contrast there are few great houses in Holland. The lack of gentry there was a serious matter to deputy lieutenants concerned with the musters. 'The want of gentlemen here to inhabit', they noted in 1580.[6] The reason is not difficult to guess. Here were the fens, a district not likely to appeal to those who knew conditions elsewhere and could make comparisons.

[1] *A.P.C. 1550–52*, p. 406.
[2] *C.S.P.D. 1547–80*, p. 21.
[3] Ibid. p. 41.
[4] *H.M.C. Salisbury*, I, 96.
[5] *H.M.C. Rutland*, I, 152, 163. Manners had a house in Lincoln also (ibid. p. 180).
[6] Joan Thirsk, *Fenland Farming in the Sixteenth Century* (1953), p. 44, quoting P.R.O. SP 12, 138, f. 8. For the fenland gentry see W. Moore, 'On the Great Level of the Fens', *A.A.S.R.* I, (1851), 335.

Nevertheless there was a case for the fens. Professor Darby has pointed out that the ill-name of the fenland derives in part from the descriptions in various itineraries, written by travellers with an eye for the unusual and without sufficient knowledge of the facts. He distinguishes between the marsh itself, the intermediate zone of grazing, flooded for part of the year, and the arable lands permanently above the water-level.[1] The arable fields raised large crops of barley, beans and peas in the sixteenth century, and later, it seems, of oats and coleseed (the latter for oil); and on the pasture grounds oxen and sheep were bred for the London markets. From the water came wildfowl, principally duck, mallard and teal, decoyed and sent to London; fish, especially pike, and goose feathers and quills, the birds being plucked four, five or six times a year for feathers, and three for quills, and some men having 1000 birds or more, kept at little or no charge, except in snowy weather when they were fed with corn. The soil was rich and the farmers prosperous; since drainage they are still more so. The drier parts of Holland supported a larger population.[2]

But water—fresh or salt—was an enemy as well as a friend.[3] The perils, the hardship and discomfort of flood and tempest were real enough, and the ague and malaria which attacked strangers did not always spare the natives. There was heavy mortality among sheep, which often died of the rot in great numbers. From the national point of view the produce of the undrained fen bore no comparison to that of the fenland after drainage; it was the national need during the Napoleonic Wars that accelerated the drainage in Lincolnshire.

It was not for nothing that the fenland proper had a bad name, and that the inhabitants were believed to walk on stilts.[4] Dugdale, a sober observer, gives a vivid picture of conditions in the fenland:

> in the winter-time, when the ice is strong enough to hinder the passage of boats . . . and yet not able to beare a man; the Inhabitants upon the Hards and Banks within the Fenns can have no help of food, nor comfort for body or soul; . . .

[1] H. C. Darby, 'The human geography of the Fenland before the drainage', *Geographical Journal*, LXXX (1932), 420–35.

[2] See Mrs Thirsk, op. cit.; and for the description of the fens in 1696 by Christopher Merrett, Surveyor to the Port of Boston, *Fenland Notes and Queries*, IV (1898–1900), 176–8.

[3] Cf. *C.S.P.D. 1603–10*, p. 521.

[4] The fens had a special use when stiltmen were required for service in the Low Countries under Leicester: twelve or sixteen of the most expert that could be found, with each two pairs of the highest stilts and the longest poles that might be used with them, were sent for in 1586 (*A.P.C. 1586–7*, p. 75). When Christopher Wordsworth became bishop of Lincoln he gained his first impression of his see from Camden, who represented the natives as obliged to walk on stilts; and the Rev. T. Mozley sent him a sketch of a Lincolnshire landscape consisting of a horizontal line with the motto *nil nisi pontus et aër*. (J. H. Overton and E. Wordsworth, *Christopher Wordsworth, Bishop of Lincoln* (1888), p. 206.)

And what expectation of health can there be to the bodies of men when there is no element of good, the air being for the most part cloudy, gross and full of rotten Harrs, the water putrid and muddy, yea, full of loathsome vermin, the earth spungy and boggy, the Fire noysome by the stink of smoaky Hassocks?

And while he notes the results of drainage works in the crops in the Isle of Ely and Whittlesey, in corn and grass at Thorney, he finds Deeping Fen under water, and in the Lincolnshire fen his descriptions of improvements cease.[1]

In the early years of the eighteenth century a rhymer living in Gainsborough wrote to a friend in Wolverhampton a humorous description of conditions in the Trent valley which might have been written of the fens:

Sir, Happy are you that breathe the 'Hampton Air,
And drink of rapid streams, as Chrystal clear!
While wretched WE, the baleful influence mourn
Of cold *Aquarius*, and his weeping Urn.
Eternal Mists that droping course distil,
And drizzly Vapours all the Ditches fill;
The swampy Lands a Bog! the Fields are Seas!
And too much Moisture is the Grand Disease.
Here e'ery Eye with brackish Rheum o'erflows,
And a fresh Drop still hangs at e'ery Nose.
Here the Winds rule with uncontested Right,
The wanton Gods at pleasure take their Flight.
No shelt'ring Hedge! no Tree! or spreading Bough
Obstruct their Course, but unconfin'd they blow!
... ...
All Dogs here take Water, and we find
No Creature but of an amphibious Kind;
Rabbits with Ducks, and Geese here sail with Hens,
And all for Food must paddle in the Fens,
Nay when provision fails, the hungry Mouse,
Will fear no Pool to reach a neighb'ring House:
The good old Dam clucks boldly thro' the Stream,
And Chickens newly hatch'd assay to Swim;
All have a Moorish taste, Cow, Sheep and Swine,
Savour of Fens, and still on Frogs you dine:
Bread is your only Sauce, a Barley Cake,
Hard as your Cheese, and as the D-l black.
Our choicest Drink (and that's the greatest Curse)
Is but bad water made by brewing worse.

He thought housing conditions desperately bad:

And soon the Waves possess'd their old Domain;
They scorn'd the Shore, and o'er the Marshes round

[1] *History of Imbanking* (1662), Introduction; H. C. Darby, *Historical Geography of England* (1936), p. 454.