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THE STORY OF CAMBRIDGESHIRE

I

PREHISTORIC TIMES—THE FENS

WHEN Mr. Austin Keen was kind enough to invite me to give this course of lectures, I felt some hesitation about complying. For, as I know little of school work, and the difficulties you have to face, I was very doubtful whether I could say anything that would be a practical help to you. It occurred to me, however, that the work of all teachers is so far similar that, if I simply tried to draw on my own experience, you might perhaps find something for yourselves that seemed likely to be of service.

The chief difficulty I have found in teaching in the University has been to awaken the interest of my class. If they are interested, they will be very attentive, and be ready to take in what is said; and if they are not interested, the whole work drags and becomes wearisome alike to teacher and taught. And it was my experience that very few people are much interested in the history of the past: they live

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in the present, and are inclined to let bygones be bygones and leave them alone. The stories we hear of people long ago are apt to make us feel that they were rather ignorant and very queer, and quite unlike ourselves in every way. But I have observed that the interest of students is roused when they recognise that, in spite of all the differences, the people long ago were very like ourselves, and when they begin to find links that connect them with ourselves.

The most obvious link of connection is given by places; each of the Cambridge colleges recalls, once a year, the names of the men who, centuries ago, provided the buildings and possessions which the fellows and scholars of that college enjoy to-day. There is a very real link between the present and the past in each college; and I found that many students were ready to take an interest in the bygone days of the place where they lived themselves, and in the doings of the people who used to live there long ago.

It is from this point of view that I wish to speak a little about Cambridgeshire; it is an interesting part of the country, because it is closely connected with many things of which we read in books. This is true, more or less, of every part of England, and makes it much more interesting to travel here than in some other countries. In new countries you may find a great deal that is wonderful and beautiful: the Falls of Niagara, and the Golden Gate at San Francisco; but there seem to be many places that have no associations with the past; they may have great

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expectations, but they have not the special charm which comes from old associations. Cambridgeshire, however, is associated with much of what we read: with the struggles of S. Edmund and the victory of the Danes at Bartlow, with the final efforts of William of Normandy to conquer the Isle of Ely. We have all heard of Henry VII's great financier, Morton, who invented the dilemma known as Morton's Fork; but he becomes more interesting to us when we think of him as a man who found time, among all the cares of State, to try to improve the harbour at Wisbech, and to dig the channel, called Morton's Leam, between Peterborough and Wisbech. He was the great engineer who first took in hand the draining of the Fen systematically, and Vermüyden and the Duke of Bedford adopted his schemes and followed out his plans. Then we can get ample detail about Queen Elizabeth and her royal progresses, when we read of her visit here and the entertainment she received; or of Charles I as a prisoner at Childerley, or of Cromwell's camp on Triplow Heath. There are numberless associations with political events in the past which give a romantic interest to things and places that are familiar, and keep them from being commonplace.

We may go a little further. However great the interest may be of local associations with events of which we read, there is still greater interest in *trying to make out what features tell us themselves*. Such marked features as the Devil's Dyke at Newmarket and the Fleam Dyke at Fulbourn are prehistoric; we have no historical records about them, and they have

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no historical *association*, but they tell us something about themselves, and if we have skill to spell out what they mean, we learn a good deal. They are enormous earthworks, and they seem to have been made by the people in the Eastern Counties to defend themselves against raids from the southern Midlands. There is reason to believe that they were made before the Romans invaded Britain, and they are works which imply a great organisation of labour. If the men had only very simple tools, such as the horns of animals, to dig in the chalk, and baskets to carry the earth from the bottom of the ditch to the top of the dyke, the task would take a long time, and this seems likely enough; there must have been the means of feeding a multitude of labourers for many months. When we begin to think about these great undertakings, we see that the monuments which remain themselves tell us something about the men who made them.

There is great difficulty in spelling out these remains so as to read them aright; there has been much hasty guessing at the meaning of archaeological remains, which has been discredited by later and careful research. There is most danger of going far wrong when we have no histories to help us, as is the case with prehistoric remains; but when we can take historical records and local remains together, and fit them in with one another, we find that they supplement one another. The historical record is sometimes very bald and bare, and yet becomes instinct with life when we can supplement it by what

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relics and remains tell us about the people who lived and worked in bygone times.

History becomes more interesting the more we realise that the men and women of whom we read were real people, and very like ourselves; and we get this impression most vividly when we pay attention to the evidence of what they did. As long as we only think of them as people in a book, and talk about them, they seem unreal, like any one else in a story-book or a fairy tale, but when we pay attention to what they *did* and what they left behind them, we feel that they were not merely in a story-book, but that they have a connection with ourselves and our own lives. And so it seems to me worth while to put the story of the past and the relics of the past together; the relics help to clothe the dry bones of names and dates, and to make them more vivid; and I shall try to call your attention to some of the illustrations we find ready to hand in Cambridgeshire.

To give a single instance of what I mean. We all know that William the Conqueror won a great victory at Hastings, and that, as Harold was killed, there was no one to rally the defeated troops or to organise general resistance. The country lay before William undefended; but he did not find it at all easy to establish his royal authority everywhere; there was local resistance here and there, and in no place was the resistance more protracted than in the Isle of Ely, where Hereward continued to defy the Conqueror. William had to make Cambridge the base

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of his operations against the "last of the English," to quote Kingley's phrase; and he erected a castle. There was no stone to be got close by, but he made a great mound of earth on the slope of the hill, and on the top he put a wooden "block-house," as we learned to call them in the South African War, from which he could survey the country that lay between him and Ely. He had to clear away houses in the town¹ to find what he thought a suitable site for his castle, and the ground on which it stands came directly under the authority of himself and his officials; the Castle Hill and the buildings on it are still outside the borough, and not under the jurisdiction of the Mayor, but of the County. The whole story of William's army of occupation and of his efforts to establish his authority becomes more vivid to me when I go up the Castle Hill, and trace the parts of the old town which he cleared away, and look across the open country to the great church at Ely, as he did from his wooden block-house.

The view, of course, is very different from what he saw: the distant Abbey buildings in his time were insignificant; to-day there is a wide stretch of cultivated land, whereas in his time very little of the land was under cultivation, and there were great stretches of marsh and waste. And this leads me to another point which I wish to make in this introductory lecture. The *people* in the past were more like the people we know than we are ready to think, but the *things*, and the conditions in which they lived,

¹ Domesday Book, I.

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were extraordinarily different from those with which we are familiar. Much of the soil of the great level of the Fens is very rich, but it is liable to be flooded by the rivers which come from the Midlands or from Suffolk; and for centuries there has been a struggle to keep it free from water; and even now there is occasional trouble, if vigilance is relaxed, as was recently the case at Suthery. The final efforts at controlling these floods were made by a Dutchman named Vermüyden, whose house, with a Dutch inscription, can be seen at Fen Drayton; they are well marked in the map of Cambridgeshire by the Bedford rivers which carry the water of the Ouse from Earith to Denver. But the Fens have a long history, before the attempts to free them from flood. In Roman times the danger was not from the rivers, but from the sea, and the great level of the Fens consisted of salt marshes like those on the Essex coast. The Romans set themselves to reclaim these marshes from the sea by raising a great *Vallum*, or bank, which runs, by Walton and Walsoken and Walpole, from Wisbech to Lynn. They were successful in keeping out the sea, but their great engineering work had, incidentally, another result that they had not foreseen. The channel at Wisbech began to silt up, so that the water from the Midlands could not get out to the sea, but began to make a new way for itself to Lynn, and the flooding of the Fens with river water began to be serious. There were local efforts to deal with the evil here and there, like the grand banks at Over, but even if these were not designed with the

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deliberate intention of keeping the floods away from Over, and turning them on to Swavesey instead, they were mere palliatives, and it was not till Bishop Morton took the matter in hand that attempts to reclaim the drowned lands were systematically made, and that men recognised that spasmodic efforts in one parish or another were useless. There were great differences between what the Fens were in the Conqueror's time and what they are in ours.

The map was entirely different, because the Ouse and the Cam did not go into the sea at Lynn; they doubled back at Upware and Cottenham and Earith, and flowed into the sea at Wisbech, before the outlet there silted up. After the next lecture I shall be better able to explain the arguments which have convinced me that in the thirteenth century the course of the Ouse and Cam was deliberately altered, so as to flow past Ely, and to make an improved channel for traffic between Huntingdonshire and the seaport of Lynn.

But although the Fens were uncultivated in William the Conqueror's time, we must not think of them as quite useless and unproductive. Thomas of Ely enumerates the rich resources of the Fens, and shows that William would have had great difficulty in starving out the heroic little garrison there. A Norman knight who had lived in the Isle as a prisoner gives this account to William of the way in which he fared. "I tell you, sire, I have seen wild-fowl alone in that island enough to feed them all the year round. I was there in the moulting time, and saw them take—

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one day one hundred, one two hundred; and once, as I am a belted knight, a thousand duck out of one single mere. There is a wood there, with herons sprawling about the tree-tops—I did not think there were so many in the world; otters and weasels, ermines and pole-cats, for fur robes; and fish for Lent and Fridays in every puddle and leat—pike and perch, roach and eels, on every old wife's table; while the knights think scorn of anything worse than smelt and burbot. . . . The island is half of it a garden—richer land, they say, is none in these realms, and I believe it: but, besides that, there is a deer-park there with a thousand head in it, red and fallow, beside hares; and plenty of swine and goats in woods, and sheep, and cattle: and if they fail there are plenty more to be got, they know where. . . . Out of every little island in their fens, for forty miles on end. There are the herds fattening themselves on the richest pastures in the land, and no man needing to herd them, for they are all safe among dykes and meres.”¹

The fens no longer abound with the resources which were plentiful nine hundred years ago; and we have interesting evidence as to the climate, which shows us how recent these changes have been. Defoe was a shrewd observer, and in making the tour of England, he rode along the high road from the Gogs to Cambridge. He writes: “As we descended Westward, we saw the *Fenn* Country on our Right, almost all cover'd with Water, like a Sea, the *Michaelmas* Rains,

¹ Kingsley, *Hereward the Wake*, II. 126.

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having been very great that Year, they had sent down great Floods of Water from the Upland Countries, and these Fens being, as may be very properly said, the Sink of no less than thirteen Counties . . . they are often thus overflow'd. . . . As these Fens appear cover'd with Water, so I observ'd too, that they generally at this latter part of the Year appear also cover'd with Foggs, so that when the Downs and higher Grounds of the adjacent Country were gilded with the Beams of the Sun, the Isle of *Ely* look'd wrapp'd up in Blankets, and nothing to be seen but now and then, the Lanthorn Cupola of *Ely Minster*.

“One could hardly see this from the Hills and not pity the many thousands of Families that were bound to or confin'd in those Foggs, and had no other Breath to draw than what must be mix'd with those Vapours, and that Steam which so universally overspread the Country: But notwithstanding this, the People, especially those that are used to it, live . . . as Healthy as other Folks, except now and then an Ague, which they make light of, and there are great Numbers of very antient People among them.”¹

The ague appears to be entirely a thing of the past, and March, which lies in the very centre of the Fens, seems to be very free from fog, and to enjoy its place in the sun.

¹ Defoe, *Tour* (1724), I. 119. Richardson reprints this passage as if it was still applicable in 1742.