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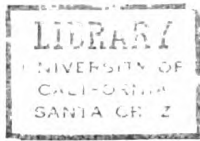
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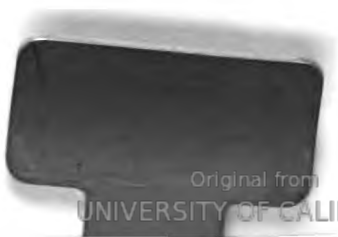
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FENLAND FARMING IN THE 16TH CENTURY  
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DEPARTMENT OF ENGLISH LOCAL HISTORY  
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Fenland Farming  
in the sixteenth century.

by

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WITH AN INTRODUCTION BY

Professor R. H. TAWNEY



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## INTRODUCTION

**E**NGLAND is a country in which an unusual diversity of soils and land configuration are packed into a small compass. Her agriculture and the societies based upon it have been equally diverse. Provincial specialization, between not only the predominantly cereal and pastoral regions, but the areas noted for breeding cattle, fattening store beasts, dairying, and sheep-farming was, by the accession of James I, and doubtless much earlier, an old story. These regional peculiarities were important, as they are today; but the characteristic feature of the age before cheap land communications and scientific technologies had made their levelling influence felt was less the division of labour between East and West or North and South than the varieties of rural pattern to be encountered within a short distance of each other. So abrupt were the environmental transitions that communities little more than a day's walk apart might be marked by dissimilar farming systems and distinctive styles of social life.

Partly for these physical reasons, partly through differences in the original form of settlement, and sometimes, it seems, in race, English agrarian history, at least down to the mid-seventeenth century, resembles less a river than a series of dispersed, though connected, streams. The rivulets wind their devious ways through varying landscapes at unequal speeds. Each has its own story, placid or turbulent, fortunate or tragic. We must not be deceived by charts whose illusory comprehensiveness blurs the distinctive traits of the separate channels. There is not one agrarian economy, but a score. There is no single product of exclusive importance, like the rye which made Poland and Prussia the granary of Europe. In most regions, though by no means in all, cereals of one kind or another ruled the roost, but our ancestors did not live by bread and beer alone; nor, without some skill in the management of grass, the weakest link, could they for long have commanded either. The generalized peasant is equally a myth. Side by side with the corn-and-cattle peasants, of whom our book tells us most, there are forest, fen, and moorland peasants, each with their own special interests and problems; peasants in the Midlands who rebel against sheep, and peasants in Wiltshire to whom their downland flocks are vital as a source, not only of wool, but, still more, of the manure required by their holdings in the vales; dairy-farmers supplying the capital with butter and cheese from as far off as the north-western corner of Wiltshire, as well as from Essex. At one extreme, market-gardeners on the outskirts of London produce, by the intensive cultivation of a few roods, vegetables of the size and quality which startled the cynics of the Venetian Embassy into edifying their Govern-

ment with, for once, an enthusiastic report. At the other, the Abrahams and Lots of North Wales practise, amid their flocks and herds, extensive farming in regions where, save as an imported luxury, grain is rarely seen.

A conspectus which fits together the different pieces of the pattern is, of course, to be desired; but before a synthesis can be attempted, the materials to be combined in it must be brought to light. Only local studies can provide them. Such studies, of which early examples are offered by the score or so of works on different counties published in the half-century following the appearance in 1576 of Lambard's *Perambulation of Kent*, have in this country a great tradition behind them; but it is only in the last decade that, thanks to the initiative of the University College of Leicester and of the two successive heads, Dr W. G. Hoskins and Mr H. P. R. Finberg, of the Department of English Local History established by it, that subject has won the place among academic disciplines which it deserves. The contribution to our comprehension of the economic and social life of a forgotten, though not distant, past which the intensive exploration of a particular locality can make is admirably illustrated in the present work. In the careful and thorough research upon which it is based, as well as in its imaginative insight in interpreting the evidence collected, Dr Thirsk's paper is a model revealing what, in the hands of a competent scholar, Local History can be.

The corner of a vast field selected by her is one which geographers, in particular Professor Darby, have in recent years done more than historians to illumine. In the lightly populated England of the Tudors and early Stuarts the victory of man over an untamed nature was still to win. Considerable water-logged areas, like unsettled moors and extensive, though rapidly contracting, woodlands, were a characteristic feature of the semi-colonial conditions continuing to be found in parts of it. The East Anglian fenland, with one portion of which, the Holland division of Lincolnshire, the following pages are concerned, was unique, therefore, less in kind than in scale, and in the complexity of the organization evolved by centuries of experience for grappling with the problems presented by it. Struck by the enigma of economic arrangements and a manner of existence unintelligible to civilized men, not a few observers reacted to the unfamiliar spectacle with repulsion, pity, or contempt. They depicted the fens as a swamp, useful only when, through drainage, it should have ceased to exist, and their inhabitants as a population sub-human in its lawlessness, poverty, and squalor. Piety and profits demanded, it was felt, the reclamation of both.

That attitude—the attitude of the white settler to the agricultural crudities and social irregularities of an African tribe—need cause no surprise. In a period when rising grain prices promised the cereal farmer handsome returns,

it was natural that enlightened opinion should look askance at impediments to the extension of the acreage under corn. The fen-men, on their side, were tenacious of their customary rights. They were apt to be rough with foreigners, and, strong in local solidarity, continued to stage small revolts at a time when rural mass movements had elsewhere had their day. The retort of a well-informed contemporary to conventional indictments of the methods of land utilization favoured by them is cited below; and the documentary evidence analysed by Dr Thirsk lends colour to the picture painted by him. The truth would seem to be that, given the ecological peculiarities of the district, its agricultural economy was not the wasteful anachronism that to outside eyes it appeared, but a system reasonably well adapted to take advantage of them. A fen was not the "mere morass" deplored by improving critics, but good grass-land subject to seasonal inundation. The problem, as she shows, was to turn to the best account both it and the rest of the local resources, and to do so, not at one season alone, but throughout the year. It was solved partly by making animal husbandry the basis of fenland life, with grain grown primarily—though some barley may have found its way to London breweries—as a fodder crop and for household use; partly by communal regulations designed to ensure a careful dovetailing in the use of land of different kinds. The marsh, largely reclaimed from the sea, was good feed for horses and sheep. Cattle, grazed in summer on the rich grass of the open fen, were moved in winter into dry closes. The area then under water was not idle, but provided a subsidiary income of fish and fowl, analogous to that elsewhere derived from domestic industries. It was a question, when large-scale drainage schemes were the order of the day, whether, by exchanging those profitable bye-employments for a close of thin winter grass, the ordinary householder would gain or lose.

The sensitive point of these arrangements was a weakness not peculiar to them. It was the necessity for reserves of land sufficient, as population grew, to meet its needs. Till the crown, by asserting under James its title to land won from the sea, and improving landlords compressed from both ends at once the area available for colonization, the traditional economy, judged by results, appears to have had more to be said for it than has commonly been allowed. Not the least instructive passages in Dr Thirsk's illuminating paper are those in which she submits impressionist, and usually depreciatory, accounts of the fens and their inhabitants to the test of facts. Verdicts must, no doubt, be provisional; but density of population, taxation returns, stock kept per family, and property left at death, not to mention the surplus exported to other regions, point, it seems, in one direction. The conclusion suggested by them is that, so far from stagnating in poverty-stricken misery, the fenland, particularly Holland, was a more than ordinarily prosperous region, and that, if a

high degree of equality in the distribution of land be any guide, the prosperity was widely shared. Her portrait recalls the remark made, a century and a half later, by Arthur Young when, in writing of the peasants in another part of Lincolnshire, the Isle of Axholme, he described them as "very poor in respect of money, and very rich in respect of happiness." There are, perhaps, worse conditions than that depicted by him.

R. H. TAWNEY

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# FENLAND FARMING IN THE SIXTEENTH CENTURY

## INTRODUCTION

**U**NTIL the nineteenth century, the fenland of Lincolnshire had two faces. To strangers, struck by the differences between fen and upland, it was a region of meres and pools, of noxious mists and a permanently moisture-laden atmosphere; its population were hardy amphibions brutalized by the struggle to maintain life against the opposition of river and sea.<sup>1</sup> To its inhabitants it was a region of abundant grazing lands and small but fertile arable fields, a land, moreover, richly endowed with fish and fowl, reed and sedge for thatch and fuel, and saltmarsh for sheep. Its natives, far from being a race apart, were mostly ordinary farmers, possessing two special qualities only: a hardy constitution rendered immune from the dampness of the climate by generations of living in the fens, and a persistence in watching and guarding against the encroachments of sea and river flood.<sup>2</sup>

These opposing views of the fenland persisted side by side until the drainage of the fens was completed in the nineteenth century, when the characteristic vegetation and wild life of the fen retreated. Then for the first time the traveller's attention was diverted from the unusual features of fen life to the routine and the normal. The two views of the fenland became one.

Legends which portray the fen as a watery morass given over to fishing and fowling die hard. Their strength derives from the fact that most accounts of the fen before the late eighteenth century were written in this vein. Usually they were literary works written by onlookers. Native champions of the fen were few, and their accounts so much at variance with the rest that they were either ignored or dismissed as exaggerations. Yet it is the native view of the fen which is fully confirmed by the administrative and legal records of the sixteenth century. Travellers were the deceivers and the deceived. They fixed their attention upon the unusual features of the fen and deplored them.

<sup>1</sup> Descriptions in this vein are brought together in H. C. Darby, 'The human geography of the fenland before the drainage', *The Geographical Journal*, LXXX, 1932, pp. 431-2.

<sup>2</sup> The ague to which the inhabitants of the fen were subject is frequently mentioned in travellers' descriptions. A contemporary impression of the climate was given by Walter Graves in a letter to Cromwell in 1535. He had been "nearly two years teaching youth at Crowland where the climate is so unwholesome that he would rather die than pass a third summer there."—*Letters & Papers, Hen. VIII*, IX, p. 380. Natives acquired a certain immunity as Defoe admitted. "The people, especially those that are used to it, live unconcerned, and as healthy as other folks, except now and then an ague, which they make light of, and there are great numbers of very ancient people among them."—*Fenland Notes and Queries*, I, 1889-91, p. 19.



Recognizing that the scenery was strikingly different from other parts of England, that the land was differently employed, that the seasons brought changes unfamiliar in the uplands, they failed to see that the fenlander had exploited these differences, that he had transformed tidal mud and river marsh into good grazing land. In the sixteenth century, as well as in the fourteenth, the fenland was one of the richest agricultural regions of Lincolnshire.<sup>1</sup>

The following account is based for the most part on evidence derived from the parishes of Holland. The fenland was a more extensive region than this: it spread across the eastern fringe of Kesteven and the south-eastern portion of Lindsey, and penetrated along the Witham valley as far as Lincoln. It also included the Isle of Axholme in the north-west of the county, and the middle and lower Trent valley. General conclusions as to the prosperity of the fen and the character of its farming apply to the whole fenland area. But until a close study is made of the field systems, in Axholme, for example, and in the Kesteven parishes which straggled across clay as well as fen, generalizations on the layout of fields will be hazardous. Those ventured here relate to Holland, whence the illustrations are exclusively drawn.

#### THE DISTRIBUTION OF POPULATION

A modern map of Lincolnshire shows the most important centres of population in Holland closely grouped along a silt belt running roughly parallel with the coastline. In the early days of settlement, the choice of sites was limited, for there were few dry places suitable for habitation off this main ridge. The distribution of villages, therefore, was linear, except in Kirton where a widening of the silt belt enabled settlements to be more widely dispersed. On the extreme southern edge of the county, in Elloe wapentake, patches of higher ground afforded sites for a line of villages between Market Deeping and Tydd St Mary, which were of later growth, and which, by the mid-sixteenth century, were half the size of their northern neighbours. Daughter hamlets appeared in the twelfth and thirteenth centuries on the coastal marsh and on the fringe of the fen and further disturbed the original simple pattern of village distribution. But in 1563 only twelve and a half per cent of Holland's population lived away from the main silt belt. Inundated fen remained a barrier to settlement on the extreme northern and western boundaries.<sup>2</sup>

To men who sought a dwelling-place secure from river-flood, sea, and in-

<sup>1</sup> For the wealth of the fen in 1332, see H. C. Darby, *The Medieval Fenland*, 1940, pp. 136-41.

<sup>2</sup> For a map of village distribution in Holland at the time of Domesday, see *The Lincolnshire Domesday and the Lindsey Survey*, ed. C. W. Foster, Lincoln Record Society, xix, 1924, map 1. The silt ridge does not show up clearly on the modern map. The road running through the centre is about twelve feet above sea level, but some reclaimed marsh near the coast is higher than this. The same was true

clement weather, the fenland posed problems more formidable than those encountered elsewhere in Lincolnshire. At the same time, the resources of Holland in the sixteenth century enabled it to support as great a population as any other part of the county. Indeed, the density of population in Kirton and Skirbeck, two of the three wapentakes of Holland, was higher than that obtaining on clay, wold, or heath. Calceworth wapentake in Lindsey, which lies for the most part on rich coastal marsh and clayland, but which has some chalk wold parishes on its western edge, had a density of eighteen families per 1,000 acres in 1563. Walshcroft, in the clay vale which runs through the centre of Lindsey, had a density of 15·6 families, and Boothby Graffoe, on the limestone and clay south of Lincoln, a density of 10·7 families. Skirbeck, on the other hand, had a population of 18·7 and Kirton 19·6 families per 1,000 acres. The only districts which surpassed these in density were those lying partly in the fenland of Kesteven and Lindsey, namely the soke of Horncastle, which, besides its market town, included the populous parish of Coningsby on the edge of Wildmore fen; Ness wapentake, with its market town of Stamford, and a row of five parishes commoning in the neighbourhood of Deeping fen; and Aveland wapentake with a market centre at Bourne, and its largest parishes abutting on the fenland boundary of Kirton wapentake. Elloe wapentake, comprising the southern portion of Holland, had a larger share than the rest of fen and marsh, and so had a low density of eight families per 1,000 acres.<sup>1</sup>

Since natural conditions prohibited any wide choice in the location of sites, the villages in all three wapentakes of Holland were few and large—larger than any but the market towns in Lindsey and Kesteven. Whereas in 1563 more than seventy per cent of the villages in the rest of Lincolnshire housed at most forty families apiece, in Holland three villages out of every four had more than forty families, and a half had more than seventy.

The port and market of Boston was the capital of Holland, and still its largest

in the sixteenth century. In Elloe in 1584 the "high ground of the towns" (i.e. the townlands) was said to lie two feet lower than the marsh, and the fen three feet lower than the townlands.—British Museum (=BM) MS. Lansdowne 41, f.200v. For further discussion, see p. 15 *infra*.

<sup>1</sup> These density figures are calculated from the archdeacon's returns showing the number of families in each parish in 1563, and from the area of the wapentakes given in White's directory of Lincolnshire (1872). The figures are a rough guide only, since the 1563 figures are based on the ecclesiastical parish divisions, and the acreages of the wapentakes on the nineteenth-century civil parish areas. The figures for the archdeaconry of Stowe in the north-western portion of Lindsey are missing, but there are figures of the number of communicants in each parish in 1603. These are printed in *The State of the Church*, ed. C. W. Foster, Lincoln Record Society, xxiii, 1926, pp. 299–353. For the 1563 returns, see BM MS. Harleian 618. Holland had the highest population density in England in 1377.—*An Historical Geography of England before A.D. 1800*, ed. H. C. Darby, 1936, pp. 231–2.

town. But although it ranked second among the outports of the kingdom in Henry VII's reign, and third in the reign of Henry VIII, its importance as a centre for trade was slowly diminishing owing to the decline of the wool trade. The trend continued in the sixteenth century with the deterioration of the Witham navigation and the silting up of the channel.<sup>1</sup> In the past Boston had been a great commercial entrepôt, shipping Lincolnshire produce out of the county, and bringing in goods destined for the Midlands. Its fair had been of international importance. The river Witham provided a waterway from Boston as far as Lincoln, and until the end of the thirteenth century, when the silting-up of the canal made transport difficult, goods were carried on the Fosdyke from Lincoln to the Trent at Torksey.<sup>2</sup> Holland, however, did not depend on Boston alone for the marketing of its produce. Goods were shipped at a number of creeks and landing places along the Wash. Rapid silting-up of the havens made access to some of them difficult, but coal and other cargo were being discharged in the 'seventies at Kirton, Frampton, and Fleet, and in the same decade, Wainfleet, Leake, Fishtoft, and Fosdyke were officially listed among the sixteen ports, creeks, and landing places of Lincolnshire.<sup>3</sup>

The copious rivers of the fen added to these harbour facilities a system of inland communications, which was in many ways superior to that of the hills, where roads were poor, and frequently impassable. For this reason, it is probable that Boston's port and market were more important for supplying Lindsey, Kesteven, and the counties inland, than the towns of Holland. Boston's position was not particularly convenient for serving the wapentakes of Kirton and Elloe. If coal from Newcastle was sent via Boston, it had to be re-shipped to Spalding and Fleethaven, and thus cost more. Yet attempts in Elizabeth's reign to by-pass the port and send cargoes direct to Fleethaven and Fosdyke evoked complaints from Boston.<sup>4</sup> For the wapentake of Elloe, King's Lynn was the most convenient large port. Travellers journeying into Norfolk were obliged to assemble at Long Sutton to make the journey across the fen, for the route was hazardous, and was barred to all strangers except those who took the regular guides. But to the natives the fen was no barrier to intercourse. There were men of Walpole St Andrews and Terrington in Norfolk who were as familiar with the grasses and fishing grounds of Long Sutton marsh as were its own townfolk.<sup>5</sup>

<sup>1</sup> Georg Schanz, *Englische Handelspolitik gegen Ende des Mittelalters*, 1881, pp. 37-59; Winifred I. Haward, 'The trade of Boston in the fifteenth century', *Reports and Papers of the Architectural and Archaeological Societies of the cos. of Lincoln and Northampton*, XL, 1933, pp. 169-78.

<sup>2</sup> J. W. F. Hill, *Medieval Lincoln*, 1948, pp. 307-13.

<sup>3</sup> Public Record Office (=PRO), E134, 22 & 23 Eliz., Mich. 14; E178, 4086; SP12, 96, ff.423-4.

<sup>4</sup> PRO E134, 22 & 23 Eliz., Mich. 14.

<sup>5</sup> PRO SC12, 30, 33; E134, 15 Jas. I, Easter 12.

Problems of internal marketing were small in a region so richly furnished with large towns. A good-sized market town in Lincolnshire in the mid-sixteenth century accommodated 150 families and more. In Holland there were six towns of this size besides Boston, and a seventh at Deeping St James over the border in Kesteven.<sup>1</sup> To serve their large populations all must have had markets of importance. Yet there were another twelve places with eighty families and more where market days were probably busy enough to arouse more than merely local interest.

The distribution of Holland's large towns suggests a concentration of wealth in one portion of the division. Both the second and third largest towns in 1563 lay in Kirton wapentake. The town of Kirton had 228 families, and was about half the size of Boston; Swineshead had 209 families. Pinchbeck with 200 families, and Spalding with 154, were the two largest centres of population in Elloe, and both lay near the boundaries of Kirton. It is probable that the district lying between the mouth of the river Witham, on which Boston stands, and the outlet of the Welland at Spalding—a district which includes the whole of Kirton wapentake, and the fringe of Skirbeck and Elloe—comprised the land best conditioned in Holland at that time to support a large population. Seven out of Holland's twelve biggest towns were situated there.

#### THE VILLAGE LANDS

There is no evidence to suggest that the original lay-out of the fields in the fenland differed fundamentally from that prevailing in the uplands. On the silt belt on which the first villages were established there was land dry enough for the growing of crops. On these 'townlands', as they were called, the arable fields were laid out. Colonization proceeded gradually across the coastal marshland on the one side and the low-lying river-flooded plain on the other. Here was plentiful pasture and some meadow. When finally drawn, the parish boundaries enclosed an elongated rectangle of land, which differed from the upland parishes principally in the abundance of the grazing lands which they contained, and the limited area of arable.

The surveys of fenland manors<sup>2</sup> in the sixteenth century preserved traces of the old two-field system—the names of the two fields and some of the scattered

<sup>1</sup> These were Holbeach with 147 families, Spalding 154, Pinchbeck 200, Swineshead 209, Kirton 228, Frieston 147, and Deeping St James 157. They may be compared with five of the larger market towns in Lindsey and Kesteven: Stamford with 213 families, Grantham 132, Bourne 174, Horn-castle 164, and Grimsby 145.

<sup>2</sup> The fenland manor did not usually coincide in extent with the township or the parish. For agricultural purposes the village was the important unit. In Skirbeck and Kirton the village boundaries usually coincided with those of the parish.

strips. At the same time a newer field pattern lay side by side with the old, indicating the direction in which the parish frontiers had been extended, and some of the land put to new uses. Fen and saltmarsh had been embanked and turned into grazing land, the arable area had been extended by intakes from the older pasture. Between the eleventh and the sixteenth centuries the population made steadily increasing demands on the resources of the fenland, but the action of the sea on the coast, and the efforts of man in draining the fen continually offered opportunities for fresh expansion. Under this twofold pressure, the old two-field system was gradually modified as it was in the rest of the open-field Midlands. Differences of detail in the fen were due to the special circumstances of soil and climate, which from the outset made it a region more suited to pasture than arable farming.

Questions prompted by the population map are answered in part by the sixteenth-century surveyors. How, the historian asks, was the land divided and utilized to support this large population? How much land, asked the surveyors and commissioners of the crown, has been reclaimed from the fen and marsh, and absorbed into the parish within the memory of its oldest inhabitants? The answers they received were circumstantial, and from them a picture in outline can be drawn of land use and farming practice in the sixteenth-century fen.

#### I. THE SALTMARSH

Most of the parishes of Holland were of one shape. They had a comparatively narrow sea frontage, and a hinterland of great depth. Belts of soil of differing quality and age stretched narrow-wise across the parish, parallel with the coast. The land farthest inland was fenland subject to inundation by the drainage waters of the Midlands. A seabank erected on the coast, on the farthest edge of the firm land, protected each village from the sea. Outside the wall lay saltmarsh, which was liable to be drowned at every spring tide. Deposits from the sea gradually accumulated on the marsh until it was left high and dry and ready to be enclosed. In course of time, the enclosures grew in number, saltmarsh became fresh marsh after about ten years, and the grass grew more tender. The fresh marsh was amalgamated with the village lands by the building of a new sea bank, and the old bank fell into decay.<sup>1</sup>

On the coast of Elloe accretions of saltmarsh were comparatively rapid, and the seabanks were constantly being pushed outwards. Many inhabitants of Elloe in James I's reign dug two or three feet deep on the landward side of the seabanks, and found cockle shells in a sandy soil. In Skirbeck and Candleshoe

<sup>1</sup> PRO E178, 4036; E134, 15 Jas. I, Easter 12. This paragraph and the remaining description of the marsh is based entirely on statements from the depositions and special commissions in the Court of Exchequer.

there were losses of marsh as well as gains. An inquiry of 1615 revealed that the three parishes of Wainfleet, Friskney, and Wrangle, had no defence against the sea other than a rise in ground formed by the salt hills.<sup>1</sup> It is possible that the old sea banks had been washed away, since at Bennington a similar process of erosion was under way at the same time. The old sea wall was visible but in decay, while a new one had been built a furlong nearer the town. A piece of saltmarsh between the old and the new banks was described as manor land "gained from the town by the sea."<sup>2</sup>

The amount of saltmarsh belonging to each village depended on the width of the sea frontage, and on whether a new sea bank had recently been built to absorb some of the marsh. Leverton and Surfleet each had two banks visible in James's reign and 230–300 acres of marsh outside. At Leake there was but one sea wall, and thirty acres of marsh beyond. Variations between the townships, however, did not conceal the fact that saltmarsh accumulated more rapidly on the southern edge of the Wash than on the north. No village in Skirbeck in 1615 had more than 400 acres of saltmarsh, whereas at Moulton in Elloe there were 2,554 acres, and at Gedney 2,000 acres.<sup>3</sup>

Every township distinguished in value between its 'high' and 'low' marsh. The low marsh, whence the sea was still in process of retreat, lay immediately behind the sandy shore. When the ground was left dry, crab grass, and later samphire and cotton lavender, began to grow. The marsh became covered with a sward of coarse tufted grass which was worth at most a penny an acre, often only a halfpenny. The high marshes behind were usually worth two-pence an acre, but there were some of better quality at Kirton and Frampton which were worth sixpence and a shilling, and at Long Sutton two shillings an acre. The low valuation took account of the risks of unexpected flooding, but not of the quality of the grass. The inhabitants declared the high marsh to be as good as any of the pasture grounds within the parishes proper. It had had longer to mature than the low marsh, and, because it lay immediately below the sea wall, was less vulnerable to the tides.<sup>4</sup>

To a stranger the marsh appeared all of a piece, and all of one level. Its inhabitants knew the different qualities of the grass on the high and the low marsh, and the "divers ridges, ditches, banks, shelves, fallings and risings of ground" which marked out the stages of land reclamation. The most obvious

<sup>1</sup> Wainfleet St Mary's had a sea bank in 1608, which had been built forty years before at the cost of the Queen to protect the East Fen. The fen was common for the soke of Bolingbroke, which belonged to the Duchy of Lancaster estates.—PRO E178, 4036.

<sup>2</sup> PRO E178, 4086. Bennington's lost land was reckoned by one inhabitant at 100 acres, by another at forty acres. The Exchequer commissioners in their summing up estimated 100 acres.

<sup>3</sup> PRO E178, 4036; 4086; E134, 15 Jas. I, Easter 12.

<sup>4</sup> PRO E134, 15 Jas. I, Easter 12; E178, 4036; 4086.

contours on the marsh were exactly the reverse of those implied in the names 'high' and 'low' marsh. The highest marsh, physically speaking, was next to the sea, and was soonest drained after spring tides. Silt deposits continually built up the level, while the old or 'high' marsh shrank and fell because the sea flooded it less often.<sup>1</sup>

Change was continuous, and every generation of inhabitants saw the boundaries of the parishes and the quality of the soil undergoing alteration. Farmers and fishermen of Kirton in James I's reign attributed the recent gains of salt-marsh to a change in the course of the channel, which had occurred once in or about 1592 and once since then. Thomas Grane's explanation was that the wind had forced the sea from its old course near the sea bank (which was now silted up into firm ground), and diverted it to a deep which ran about a mile nearer the sea.<sup>2</sup> The change was to him something new and unprecedented. Its consequences, however, can only have accelerated a silting process that had gone on for generations.

Creeks and inlets, which had intersected the marsh, and once afforded channels deep and wide enough for small ships to pass, ceased to be navigable in the 1570's. Old men of Frampton in 1615 could remember a time forty years before when ships sailed up the creek to discharge their cargo within two "bow shutts" of the old sea bank. Now they could not get within a mile of it. Henry Mell of Kirton had seen the low-water mark shift in his lifetime from a place a quarter of a mile from the sea bank to a mile distant. John Orden of Holbeach had heard it said that a creek of the sea at Whaplode once ran so near the old sea bank that "the wives of fishermen could stand thereupon and call their husbands home to dinner." The creeks now yielded only small quantities of sea fish called butts. The inhabitants of Whaplode who had regarded the bank as the seaward limit of the parish now perambulated the boundaries a mile further out of the marsh. At Frampton, however, they still kept to the sea bank. "Not any went on the marshes except some boyes in Sporte ranne downe the said banke."<sup>3</sup>

The tide was unpredictable. It silted up Frampton's navigable creek, but saltmarsh, which it had abandoned once, had been devoured and abandoned again. In all the parishes of Holland, the spring tides were expected to flood

<sup>1</sup> PRO E134, 15 Jas. I, Easter 12; E178, 4086.

<sup>2</sup> PRO E178, 4086. The date 1592 was approximate only. The answer of one deponent suggests that it may have been as early as 1587.

<sup>3</sup> PRO E178, 4086. At Long Sutton the inhabitants listed Hubb creek, Andell creek, and Shipbecker creek in the enclosed marshes as being sanded up. George Richards, labourer, had caught fish in Westmere creek which was also sanded up. George Gibson, labourer, had dragged out horses that had been stalled in some of the creeks about a mile inland, where now there was dry land.—PRO E134, 15 Jas. I, Easter 12.

the saltmarsh as far as the sea wall. But it might happen only once in a month, more than once, or not at all. Whaplode and Holbeach had seen violent tides in 1611, which covered the saltmarsh with two or three feet of water. But this was unusual, and four years later the inhabitants had not forgotten it.<sup>1</sup>

When once the spring tides drained off the marsh, the farmers waited for several showers of rain to wash the sand and some of the strength of the salt away. After that it made excellent pasture for sheep and horses.<sup>2</sup> Its low value was due to the risks of pasturing animals where at any time they might be overtaken by the tide. The jurors of Gedney explained in 1607 how "the numbringe of the acres is a verie uncertaine thinge for us to doe for there wilbe some tymes a hundrethe acres of marshe ground: and within three howers space the best of it wilbe overflowed with the sea above six foote deepe."<sup>3</sup> Experienced shepherds knew when the strong tides threatened, and, if the examples of Holbeach and Weston were typical, there were shepherds' houses situated at the upper end of the saltmarsh where watch could be kept. Only the inhabitants of Long Sutton complained to the Exchequer commissioners of serious sheep losses by drowning.<sup>4</sup>

Rights, titles, and obligations in the marsh were confused, and no two parishes disposed of their increments of marsh in the same way. Always, however, there was a common saltmarsh for the whole village where grazing rights were unstinted. The demesne lords usually had separate enclosures "bounded out with marke stones and doles very apparant."<sup>5</sup> In James's reign the crown asserted a claim by virtue of the royal prerogative to all coastal land abandoned by the sea, and a close investigation was begun into the extent of the regained saltmarsh in Holland. It is clear from the arguments set out by the lawyer, Sir John Maynard, in defence of the royal title, that no previous sovereign had asserted this claim. But gains of land which had once been deemed of little importance (*de minimis non curat rex*) had grown into something substantial and valuable. James proceeded to dispose of them in a number of private grants, the largest of which gave rise to minor disturbances, litigation, and fresh inquiries, but the rights of the crown to alienate the marsh were not challenged. The commoners confined themselves to complaining of the hardships caused by the diminution in their grazing land.<sup>6</sup>

<sup>1</sup> PRO E178, 4086.

<sup>2</sup> PRO E134, 15 Jas. I, Easter 12. Saltmarsh was said to preserve the sheep from rot. J. Spratt, 'Agrarian conditions in Norfolk and Suffolk, 1600-1650' (London University M.A. thesis, 1935), p. 223.

<sup>3</sup> PRO LR2, 256, f.210.

<sup>4</sup> PRO E178, 4036; 4063; E134, 15 Jas. I, Easter 12.

<sup>5</sup> PRO DL42, 119, f.381.

<sup>6</sup> Lincoln's Inn Library, MSS. of Sir John Maynard, vol. 59, no. 3. I am indebted to the Masters of the Bench of Lincoln's Inn for permission to see this MS. PRO E178, 4086; C66, 2077, 24. Seven



The royal grants gave to the patentees rights over all later gains of saltmarsh. They were not, however, free gifts. At Gedney and Sutton, where the saltmarsh was sold in James's reign to Sir Henry Wotton and Sir Edward Dymock, a certain amount of common was reserved to the inhabitants, while the crown kept one-fifth of the residue. Royal commissioners selected the crown's fifth part in the best portion of the marsh, and left the patentees to embank and enclose it at their own cost. The allotment of common marsh, which the grantees were also obliged to enclose, was 200 acres for Gedney, and 400 acres for Sutton. The allowance would have seemed generous enough in an upland parish, but it was niggardly by fen standards. Wigtoft, which saw its saltmarsh alienated in another private grant, received an allotment of 120 acres of common where it had previously enjoyed 412 acres.<sup>1</sup>

The Exchequer commissioners, who investigated inhabitants' complaints, found that customs respecting the marsh differed widely between villages. In Sutton the commoners claimed their 2,000 acres of marsh as part of the appurtenances of their cottages and land, allowed to them in compensation for their arduous labour in maintaining and repairing the sea bank.<sup>2</sup> At Surfleet they claimed the whole marsh, except a few small enclosures each measuring no more than an acre or two, as a gift in perpetuity from Philip of Rye.<sup>3</sup> In two parishes in Candleshoe, ownership of the saltmarsh was associated with ownership of the salthills; at Friskney and Wainfleet St Mary, the owners of the salt-cotes, or saltmakers' cottages, had a proportionate claim to the adjoining marsh. Tenancy of both huts and marsh raised the value of the land at Friskney to ten shillings an acre.<sup>4</sup>

There were few parishes without some enclosures of marsh carried out by demesne lords or tenants. Some were delimited by existing ditches; four hundred acres of marsh, belonging to one of the lords of Gedney, were separated from the common marsh by a creek, and were not, therefore, protected from the sea. Usually, however, enclosures were deliberate efforts to improve the quality and value of the marsh, and they could only succeed if banks were built to protect the newly won land from tidal floods. It was the policy of the crown com-

thousand acres of common marsh in Long Sutton were sold to nine of the more substantial gentlemen and yeomen of the parish, 441 acres of marsh north and east of Bicker Haven were sold to Thomas Stolyon of Warbleton, Sussex; 2,282 acres of fresh and saltmarsh in Holbeach were sold to John Freeman of Billing Magna, Northants. PRO C66, 2000, 7 & 8; 2006, 4.

<sup>1</sup> PRO E178, 4086; C66, 2035, 2; 2077, 24.

<sup>2</sup> PRO DL42, 119, ff.380, 381; E134, 15 Jas. I, Easter 12. In 1609 the cost of reinforcing the banks, scouring dykes, and building drains and bridges in Long Sutton was said to be £150-£200 p.a. A general levy known as acre silver was collected. At Algarkirk, Fosdyke, and Frampton, on the other hand, the banks were repaired by direct labour, and the portion of the bank for which each tenant was responsible was marked out with stakes.—PRO E178, 4086.

<sup>3</sup> PRO E178, 4036; E134, 6. Jas. I, Easter 34.

<sup>4</sup> PRO E178, 4036; 4086.

missioners to encourage such enclosures, and few interrogations of witnesses in the fen ended without a question, sometimes irrelevant to the main issue, intended to drive home the financial benefits of enclosure to the crown, and the practical advantage to the inhabitants.<sup>1</sup>

By the end of the sixteenth century in some parishes all the so-called high marsh was enclosed. At Algarkirk and Fosdyke it had been sold off to individuals. At Sutterton and Wyberton part was reserved as common marsh, but the rest was distributed among purchasers. At Kirton all the high marshes were held in severalty in parcels of forty acres, ten acres, six, five, four, two, and one acre, leaving only four acres as common. At Moulton the crown's claims were made the more acceptable to the village because individuals were allowed to buy 724 acres for themselves. In most places manorial lords were augmenting their revenues by selling off pieces of the high marsh. Ownership became concentrated in a few hands, but since sub-letting was universal, grazing on the better marshland continued to be enjoyed by many.<sup>2</sup>

## 2. ARABLE AND PASTURE

Behind the sea wall lay new and old pasture. In the early nineteenth century, before the wholesale conversion of grass to tillage, this land was described as tolerably good for fattening cattle, but best suited for fattening horses. Sheep which fed there were large and produced heavy fleeces. Parts of the former marshland, then being ploughed, possessed such fertility that crops of corn could be taken year after year without a fallow.<sup>3</sup> In the sixteenth century also some of the former marshland lay under the plough. Indeed, the surveys show that, except in the fenland proper, there was no neat separation between arable and pasture grounds. Piecemeal enclosure of the open fields, and conversions of arable to pasture were as familiar as they were in the uplands. In addition, some grazing land was converted to tillage—a practice which in upland parishes was unusual, and was discouraged by landlords under penalties. The double process of conversion is illustrated in a survey of Sutton Gannock manor

<sup>1</sup> PRO E134, 15 Jas. I, Easter 12; E178, 4036; E134, 1 Jas. I, Mich. 4; C66, 2000, 4. For examples of private enterprise in Weston in embanking marshland from the sea, see E178, 4063. The undertaking was costly, and might in the end prove fruitless. A seabank built about 1593 by two gentry was afterwards "overthrown by the rage of the sea."

<sup>2</sup> PRO E178, 4086; C66, 2000, 4. The crown surveyor of Fleet manor in Elizabeth's reign, judging the marshlands between Fleet and the sea "to a great quantity recoverable," assumed that they would be sold off in parcels. He suggested an inquiry "whether there be probability of good sale of this land either in the whole or by parcels."—PRO SC12, 30, 33.

<sup>3</sup> The description was applied to Skirbeck wapentake but the same conditions obtained in the rest of Holland.—P. Thompson, *Collections for a Topographical and Historical Account of Boston*, 1820, p. 373.

taken in 1607. Edmund Thomson had a close of three acres of arable in *Dicigate* (Dykegate?) where others had pasture closes, and a close of four acres of arable in *Sedigate West* (Seadykegate) where others had pasture. Ann Cock had ten acres of pasture "in the common fields" where others had enclosed arable, while Thomas Clarke had a seven acre close of arable in *Saltfield*, evidently in former marsh land.<sup>1</sup> In Surfleet in 1607 there were two cornfields lying between the old and the new seabanks in former saltmarsh: *Long Newlands* contained thirty-five acres, and *Short Newlands* twenty acres.<sup>2</sup> In Gedney Sir William Welby had one acre of arable in *Saltrent* and Richard Putterell one acre next *Marshditch*, both situated in places which by their names suggest that they had once formed part of the marshland.<sup>3</sup> John Rumforth, a farmer of Frieston, had seven acres of arable in *Seafeld Dyke*, while Anne Wilson had both pasture and arable there.<sup>4</sup> At Sealathes Angle, in the parish of Moulton, inhabitants testified in 1621 that within the previous fifty years one hundred acres of arable had been turned into pasture, and some fifteen acres of pasture converted to arable.<sup>5</sup>

The surveyor of Epworth manor in the Isle of Axholme shed some light on the adaptability of these marsh lands in 1633, when he explained his failure to distinguish in a survey between arable, pasture, and meadow. "Those lands are all inclosed," he explained, "and at noe tyme used in common and in one entire Close the Tennant useth to mowe parte, feede parte, and plough other parte, as is most advantagious for him, nor doth he constantly use any one parte of the Close for meadowe, pasture, or Tillage, but that parte which nowe is pasture, may the nexte yeare be plowed upp for Tillage, and that parte which nowe is arrable the nexte yeare laid downe for pasture as he shall thinke moste convenient for him. *But I conceive all the inclosures were anciently used for pasture, or meadowe*, and soe ought to be by the Tennants, for the nature of theise grounds (being a stiffe Clay) the ploughing them up will in a short tyme much impoverish them."<sup>6</sup>

The surveys of Holland indicate that here too most, if not all, the old pasture was enclosed and convertible.<sup>7</sup> But although it was not unusual for parcels of pasture to be ploughed out to increase the meagre allotment of arable, there is

<sup>1</sup> PRO LR2, 211, ff.63, 79, 77, 71.

<sup>2</sup> PRO E178, 4036; E134, 6 Jas. I, Easter 34.

<sup>3</sup> PRO LR2, 256, ff.242, 253.

<sup>4</sup> PRO SC12, 10, 47, ff.25, 28.

<sup>5</sup> PRO E178, 4083. An inquisition taken at Frieston in 1343 referred to land which was "worth to let in pasture, because in severalty, 2d. and not more, because it is often diverted by the plow."—P. Thompson, *History and Antiquities of Boston*, 1856, p. 499.

<sup>6</sup> The italics are mine. I am indebted to Professor R. H. Tawney for lending me his copy of the survey (PRO E315, 390, f.37v.).

<sup>7</sup> Enclosure boundaries often consisted of ditches planted with "weeches" (witch elms or witch hazels?) and willows.—PRO E134, 40 & 41 Eliz., Mich. 25.

no certain evidence that land use changed as rapidly as in Axholme, nor anything pointing to a regular system of ley farming.

How much of the arable land lay in the old open fields and how much in later enclosures on the marsh is a matter on which the surveys shed no light. But there is ample evidence of the survival of the open fields into the sixteenth century. In a survey of Spalding manor in Elizabeth's reign, the strips were carefully described owner by owner, while the names of the tenants showed that farmers had consolidated their holdings for day-to-day farming needs by granting leases of strips to one another.<sup>1</sup> In other villages, the framework of the old open-field system was barely recognizable by this period,<sup>2</sup> so heavily was it overlaid by later changes, by the consolidation of strips, by enclosures, and, most important of all, by the incorporation of new land.

The gradual extension of the parish lands by reclamation assisted the disruption of the old field system, for private, as well as co-operative, village effort accounted for the gains, and marshland reclaimed by individuals was usually held from the beginning in severalty. Land recovered by the village was incorporated as a new furlong in one of the old fields, or, since much reclaimed land was bounded by distinctive dykes and rivers, was given the name of a new field, and distributed among the tenants. New field names were liberally bestowed at Frieston, which had eleven fields (including *Seafield* and *Newdykefield*), but more sparingly at Whaplode, which had two or at most four.<sup>3</sup>

The complex history of land reclamation was illustrated in a survey of Long Sutton in 1609, where evidence from the past lived on in the names given to eleven categories of village land. Some was 'free burgage land' given to the tenants for the site of the village; some was 'work land', because tenants had once been obliged to plough, sow, and reap the lord's demesne; some was 'golving land', because tenants had been bound to stack corn and hay; some was 'conquest land', because it was "won and gotten by labour and industry from the water which did overflow it"; some was 'dearbought land' because of the continual floods which made it good for nothing but fishing and fowling; 'free-increase land' spoke for itself. Many tenants had small amounts of each kind of land, and paid rent at a different rate for each.<sup>4</sup>

The apparent confusion of open-field strips and compact holdings of arable in individual ownership in the fenland villages was, in fact, a logical pattern resulting in the main from the slow and costly process of colonization. In the long period of time which elapsed before marshland became dry pasture, and

<sup>1</sup> PRO SC12, 11, 1.

<sup>2</sup> Lincoln Record Office (=LRO), Glebe terriers of the sixteenth century.

<sup>3</sup> PRO SC12, 22, 30; SC12, 10, 47; SC12, 3, 10.

<sup>4</sup> PRO DL42, 119, ff.379v-380; SC12, 30, 33.

pasture became suitable for ploughing, tenant rights were established, which modified the course of field development found in expanding upland parishes. Moreover, individuals who undertook the reclamation of marshland were compensated with holdings which were never absorbed into the old field system. To look for field arrangements by the sixteenth century on the classic Midland model is unrewarding. The fenland had a separate history, which requires more detailed study if the broad outlines are to be filled in with precision.<sup>1</sup>

Problems created by the shortage of arable were solved in the uplands by the common action of the villagers. In the fen they could best be solved by individual peasants ploughing up a pasture close as the need arose. Of the meagreness of the arable there is plentiful evidence at the beginning of the seventeenth century. In two manors in Skirbeck wapentake the arable amounted to between forty and forty-two per cent of the manor lands, excluding the common. In Elloe the proportion varied between four per cent and twenty-five per cent. Nowhere did it approach the sixty-six to seventy-five per cent which was normal, for example, in Leicestershire.<sup>2</sup> It is not surprising that the average farmer's holding of arable was extremely small, and that some farmers who were far from poor had none at all.

### 3. MEADOW

Meadow was not plentiful in Holland as it was in the fen villages on the banks of the Witham.<sup>3</sup> A ridge of ground between the villages and the fen in Skirbeck and Kirton yielded suitable meadow land, since it was protected from the swollen rivers which poured down from the Midlands but still benefited from occasional watering. The position of the ridge can be gauged from the 'ings' and 'holmes' marked on the modern map.<sup>4</sup> But Table I shows that the meadows in the sixteenth century were not yet as clearly differentiated from the pasture as they became in the nineteenth century.

<sup>1</sup> The field system of the fenland parishes is discussed in J. Spratt, *op. cit.*; D. C. Douglas, *The Social Structure of Medieval East Anglia*, Oxford Studies in Social and Legal History, ix, 1927; H. L. Gray, *English Field Systems*, 1915. In none of these works are the fenland parishes considered apart from those in the rest of East Anglia.

<sup>2</sup> W. G. Hoskins, *Essays in Leicestershire History*, 1950, p. 145. I have treated Leicestershire as a typical Midland county. To aid comparison between the farming practice of Leicestershire and Holland, the tables are constructed, where possible, on the same basis as those of Dr Hoskins in the above cited work.

<sup>3</sup> The demesne lands of Bardney abbey on the Lindsey side of the Witham totalled 1,360 acres, of which 442 acres (32·5 per cent) were pasture, and 240 acres (17·6 per cent) were meadow.—PRO E315, 399, ff. 183-4.

<sup>4</sup> It was the custom at Sibsey to pay tithe of twopence an acre for 'low ground' and threepence an acre for 'high meadow ground'.—PRO E134, 31 & 32 Eliz., Mich. 12.

TABLE I  
 LAND USE ON EIGHT FENLAND MANORS AT THE BEGINNING OF THE SEVENTEENTH CENTURY  
 Manors are listed in geographical sequence beginning on the north-east coast.<sup>1</sup>

Place	Skirbeck wapentake		Elloe wapentake					Sutton Gannock
	Wrangle	Frieston	Moulton Harrington	Whaplode	Whaplode Kirk Fee	Holbeach	Gedney	
Date	1609	1607	1607	1633	1607	1633	1607	1607
Scope of survey*	manor	manor	customary tenants	manor (but no freeholders?)	manor	copyhold lands only	manor	manor
Closes	5a = .4% 490a 2r = 40.4%	13a 2r = 3.3% 170a 2r = 41.7%	7a 3r = 1.8% 45a = 10.9%	2a = .3% 24a 1r = 3.8% 61a 2r = 9.6%	7a 2½r = .9% 61a 2½r = 7.3% 19a 2r = 2.3%	3r = .3% 51a 1r = 24.8% 19a 2r = 6.5%	—	50a 3r = 5.7% 160a 1r = 18.2% 191a 3r = 21.8%
Arable	—	—	—	—	—	—	—	—
Arable and pasture	10a = .8% 361a = 29.7%	18a 3r = 4.6% 176a = 43%	104a 2r = 25.3% 199a 1r = 48.3%	61a 2r = 9.6% 38a 3r = 6.1% 305a 2r = 47.9%	19a 2r = 2.3% 752a = 88.4% —	104a 2r = 50.7% —	—	450a 1r = 51.3% —
Pasture and meadow	22a = 1.8% 4a 3r = .3%	8a 2r = 2% 21a = 5.1%	—	—	—	—	—	—
Meadow	—	—	2a 2r = .6% —	—	—	—	—	14a = 1.6% —
Marsh and fen	321a 2r = 26.5% —	—	—	61a 3r = 9.6% 144a = 22.6%	9a 2r = 1.1% —	20a = 9.7% 16a 2r½ = 8%	—	—
Miscellaneous and un-specified land	—	—	53a† = 12.8% —	—	—	—	49a = 8.8% —	11a 3r§ = 1.3% —
Total	1214a 3r = 99.9%	409a = 99.7%	412a = 99.7%	637a 3r = 99.9%	850a 1r = 100%	206a 2r = 100%	555a 2r = 99.9%	878a 3r = 100%

\* all common excluded.  
 † including 3a of hempland.  
 ‡ including 14a 2r of arable, pasture, and fen.  
 § including 11a of marsh and pasture and 37p. of hempland.  
<sup>1</sup> I am indebted to Professor R. H. Tawney for transcripts and analyses of some of these surveys.

## 4. FENLAND

In the fenland proper, which lay behind the townlands, and was distinct from the marsh adjoining the coast, every village had rights of grazing without stint. Parts of the fen lay within the parish boundaries; the rest was not known to belong in any parish, but was divided into large units where groups of villages commoned together. Holland Fen, also known as Swineshead Fen, or Eight Hundred Fen, belonged to eleven villages in Kirton and Skirbeck, and in 1636 measured 21,463 acres. No strangers' cattle were permitted there except those belonging to the farmers of Dogdyke and Hale, who lived on the Kesteven side of the fen, and paid a special rent to the lord for the privilege.<sup>1</sup> Villagers of Skirbeck, and the soles of Bolingbroke and Horncastle, grazed their stock in East, West, and Wildmore Fens; Spalding, Pinchbeck, and Cowbit in the North and South Fens of Pinchbeck; the villages of Elloe in separate parcels of fenland which were incorporated in their parishes.<sup>2</sup> Moulton, Whaplode, and Holbeach alone had 10,895 acres of 'wet land' between them. By Charles I's reign a large proportion of this was let out on lease by the crown, the land being divided into furlongs by banks and dykes, and further subdivided into smaller parcels. Enclosures amounting to 9,295 acres were parcelled out among a hundred people. The common fen reserved for Whaplode and Holbeach lay southward, and measured 1,600 acres by the statute perch.<sup>3</sup>

Every year suitable fenland was reserved for meadow and enclosed until hay harvest. An inquiry into grazing rights in Holland Fen elicited statements that the demesne lords and freeholders had special allotments which reverted to commons after harvest. Other villagers were in the habit of mowing a portion of the fen without seeking formal authority to do so. John Lockton, esquire, explained that in the first year that he came to Holland he straightway followed the example of others, and got his servants to mow some grass for hay. It was "so usuall a thinge" that neither he nor any other of the farmers who were interrogated had taken any notice of the exact places, but in one year John Pearson had known 200 loads of hay carried away.<sup>4</sup>

The condition of the fen was not as carefully described by contemporaries as was the marsh. It is usual to think of it as a watery waste on which little effort was spent in drainage and improvement until the seventeenth century. In fact, the burden of maintaining drains, dykes, and bridges, in order to keep the

<sup>1</sup> PRO E134, 25 & 26 Eliz., Mich. 20; E178, 5427; E134, 23 & 24 Eliz., Mich. 15.

<sup>2</sup> For a history of pasture rights in Holland, see N. Neilson, *A Terrier of Fleet*, Records of the Social and Economic History of England and Wales, IV, 1920, Intro. *passim*. Wildmore Fen measured 12,000 acres in 1636 (PRO E178, 5427). For rights in Pinchbeck's North and South Fens, see PRO E178, 4041; E315, 380.

<sup>3</sup> PRO LR2, 211, ff. 21-50.

<sup>4</sup> PRO E134, 23 & 24 Eliz., Mich. 15.

fen as productive as possible, was as heavy as it was in the marsh, and the commissioners of sewers kept constant guard against defaulters. The commoners in Holland Fen, for example, maintained a bank which was some twenty miles in circumference.<sup>1</sup>

In reconciling apparently contradictory descriptions of the fen at this period, some allowance must be made for a change in conditions in the course of the century. Dugdale spoke of a deterioration in the drainage system following the dissolution of the monasteries, when the responsibilities previously borne in large measure by the religious houses were not shouldered by lay landlords.<sup>2</sup> A complaint to the Queen in 1575 because Brigdyke, the causeway between Boston and Kesteven, was in disrepair, independently illustrates his argument. The maintenance of the highway had been charged on the lands of the dissolved priory of Sempringham. When these passed into the hands of Henry VIII, no allowance was given for the repair of the road until protests were made, and even then the grant proved inadequate and occasioned fresh complaints.<sup>3</sup>

Since a number of religious houses were situated on the left bank of the Witham, the seizure of monastic land dealt a sudden and concentrated blow at a vital point in the drainage network. Not all contemporary references to deterioration, therefore, can be dismissed as propaganda on behalf of the 'undertakers'. On the other hand, there is evidence that the numbers of stock maintained in Holland during the summer increased steadily during the sixteenth century—a fact which is incompatible with any theory of widespread and continuous inundation.

While seasonal conditions varied between the fens, the arrangements for commoning were much the same everywhere. In winter when large tracts were inundated, fishing and fowling came into its own, and the graziers removed their cattle to enclosed pastures in the drier parts of the parish. Holland Fen, perhaps because of the bank which encircled it, was dry enough for some of the farmers who kept a large stock of animals to put their cattle and sheep out in January, February, and March. The practice was condemned by the smaller peasants, since little grass was to be had at that season, and the treading of the animals delayed the spring crop.<sup>4</sup> In summer large areas of the fen were dry, and were heavily grazed by cattle, horses, sheep, pigs, and geese. Those which remained permanent pools of water did not interest the surveyors, and were not measured. The only reference found in contemporary surveys to fenland in agricultural use which was inundated all the year round was at Sutton St James and Sutton St Edmund, which lay in the most exposed portion of Hol-

<sup>1</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>2</sup> W. Dugdale, *The History of Imbanking and Draining*, 1662, p. 375.

<sup>3</sup> Hist. MSS. Com., *Salisbury (Cecil)*, xiii, p. 128.

<sup>4</sup> BM MS. Lansdowne 110, f. 53.



land on the edge of the Bedford Level. Here in wet years the arable and pasture were liable to be overflowed for most of the summer.<sup>1</sup>

Fishing and fowling were valuable perquisites of the fenland villages, particularly during the winter months. In Holland Fen, and probably in the others as well, certain parks where turf could be cut and drains where fish were caught were reserved for the use of the manorial lords, while the commoners had free liberty to fish, fowl, and dig turves elsewhere.<sup>2</sup> It was one of the mistakes of the drainage undertakers to think of these facilities as a poor substitute for the dry winter grazing which they promised the commoners. The inhabitants of Cowbit, in the parish of Spalding, paid most of their taxes out of the profits of fishing, fowling, and hay cutting. How, they asked, could they pay their way when most of their fen was granted to Thomas Lovell in return for a promise to drain the area? They mustered only three subsidy men from among a population of 160 adults in 1603;<sup>3</sup> they got their living from 400 acres of mostly low marsh ground. Yet they were expected to contribute one quarter of Spalding's charges for common armour, one quarter of the fifteenths and tenths, and an annual rate of thirty shillings (recently raised from three shillings and fourpence) for the provision of the King's household.<sup>4</sup>

#### THE FENLAND ECONOMY

Fenland farming, as the preceding survey has shown, was pasture farming in which crops played an important but subsidiary part.<sup>5</sup> Some winter fodder had to be grown, as well as wheat and barley for domestic consumption, but the amount of land suitable for crops was small, and some of the food necessary to feed the large population was probably brought in from other districts. Graziers engaged in rearing and fattening animals for the meat and hide markets were in the majority. Fishing and fowling was the full-time occupation of a few who lived on the fringe of the fens. References to boats and fishing tackle occur in the sixteenth-century probate inventories mainly in connection with people living in three distinct areas of Holland: on the southern border of Elloe between Deeping Fen and Long Sutton, on the edge of the Bedford Level; in Skirbeck where the towns had the fenland on their doorstep; and in the parishes flanking the Witham between Lincoln and Boston. Kirton, which it

<sup>1</sup> PRO DL42, 119, f.374.

<sup>2</sup> PRO E134, 23 & 24 Eliz., Mich. 15.

<sup>3</sup> The commissioners asked for this information as a guide to the wealth of the village, even though evasions of the subsidy were numerous.

<sup>4</sup> PRO E178, 4041.

<sup>5</sup> For a description of similar farm conditions in the fen in the thirteenth and fourteenth centuries, see Mildred Wretts-Smith, 'Organization of farming at Crowland Abbey, 1257-1321', *Journal of Econ. and Business History*, IV, 1931-2, pp. 168-92. For some general remarks on the importance of pasture rights see H. C. Darby, *op. cit.*, p. 67.

has already been suggested was the richest of the three wapentakes, was also apparently the driest.<sup>1</sup>

Fishing was a subsidiary occupation to farming, except perhaps among the poorest, who fall outside the scope of the inventories. Harry Mayne of Whaplode Drove, who was described as a fisherman at his death in November 1564, had eight dairy cattle, two horses, a pig, and three geese. At Sibsey, on the gravel promontory between East and West Fens, Edmund Bushey, labourer, had four dairy cattle, one mare, three swine, and poultry, besides his boat and fishing gear. John Knockes of Stickney was perhaps more dependent on his fishing, for although he had five horses, his only other animals were two kine.<sup>2</sup>

Holland's fish and fowl were its best advertised exports to the markets of London and elsewhere. But while the gourmet knew the fenland simply because it was the most abundant source of supply of these two luxuries, Holland's staple contribution to the national food supply was its meat and dairy produce. Rare fowl and some of the freshwater fish were expensive delicacies at most tables.<sup>3</sup>

In the course of the seventeenth-century drainage controversy, the inhabitants of the fen attempted to counter the weight of propaganda from the opposing side by giving their own picture of the fenland economy. "The Undertakers," wrote the 'Anti-Projector' in the mid-1640's, "have alwaies vilified the Fens, and have mis-informed many Parliament men, that all the Fens is a meer quagmire, and that it is a level hurtfully surrounded, and of little or no value: but those which live in the Fens, and are neighbours to it, know the contrary.

"For the first the Fens breed infinite number of serviceable horses, mares, and colts, which till our land, and furnish our neighbours.

"Secondly we breed and feed great store of young cattle, and we keep great dayeries, which afford great store of butter and cheese to victual the Navy, and multitudes of heifers, and Scots and Irish cattle have been fatted on the Fens, which afford hides, and tallow.

"Thirdly, we mow off our Fens fodder, which feeds our coves in winter,

<sup>1</sup> These conclusions are based on the evidence of 230 inventories of the sixteenth century.

<sup>2</sup> LRO Probate inventories, 44, 40 & 214; 44, 59.

<sup>3</sup> Fish and fowl were suitable gifts to the crown and ministers of state paying official visits to Lincolnshire. The corporation of Lincoln presented the Lord Treasurer with a dozen godwits, five dozen knots, and a dozen pewitts. But the victuallers of the royal household and the navy regarded Lincolnshire as a storehouse of meat supplies. In 1314 Lincolnshire supplied 100 beeves, 500 sheep, and 300 swine to the royal household and to Parliament. Norfolk and Suffolk supplied the fish, and the Home Counties the bulk of the grain. In 1513-14 the navy victualler was buying 253 fat winter-fed oxen in Lincs. and Holland (killed and salted at Saltfleet), 322 oxen at Wisbech in the Cambridgeshire fen, and 164 at Stamford and Peterborough.—*Fenland N. & Q.*, III, 1895-7, p. 96; P. Thompson, *op. cit.*, p. 48; *L. & P. Hen. VIII*, I, pt. 2, p. 1118.

which being housed, we gather such quantities of compost and dung, that it enriches our pastures and corn ground, half-in-half, whereby we have the richest and certainest corn land in *England*, especially for wheat and barley, wherewith by Sea we do, and can (if our navigable rivers be not made unserviceable by the undertakers pernicious new ditches) abundantly furnish *London* and the Northern parts in their necessities. All which fore-recited commodities make our Fens far more profitable to the owners, lying as they are for grass, then if they were sown with corn, rape, or coleseed.

“Fourthly, we keep great flocks of sheep upon the Fens.

“Fifthly, our Fens are a great relief, not onely to our neighbors the uplanders, but to remote Countries, which otherwise som years thousands of catle would want food.

“Sixtly, we have great store of Osier, Reed, and Sedge, which are such necessaries as the Countries cannot [but] want them for many uses, and sets many poor on work.

“Lastly, we have many thousand Cottagers, which live on our Fens, which otherwise must go a begging. So that if the undertakers take from us a third part of our Fens, they destroy not onely our pastures and corn ground, but also our poor, and utterly disable us to relieve them.

“What is Cole-seed and Rape, they are but Dutch commodities, and but trash and trumpery, and pills land, in respect of the fore-recited commodities, which are the rich Oare of the Common-wealth.”<sup>1</sup>

This was propaganda to combat the arguments of the drainage undertakers. But the truth of the description was vouched for by Christopher Merret, surveyor of the port of Boston, who, without any bias of the kind, set out to record nearly fifty years later, in 1696, “several observables in Lincolnshire not noticed by Camden or any other author.” He defined the portion of the fenland in which fish and fowl abounded as the East Fen, between Wainfleet and Sibsey. For the rest, “the fens abound no less with Quadrupeds, as beasts, sheep especially (which will grow fat) and horses.” The show piece of the drainage undertakers was Deeping Fen, between Spalding and Crowland, where “very great crops of oats and also large quantities of Rapsum Sylv. (called Coleseed) whereof they make oil” were growing. But a century of change had done little to alter the economy of the fen from that depicted in 1598, when it was said to stand “chiefly upon breeding and grazing of cattle.”<sup>2</sup>

<sup>1</sup> *The Anti-Projector; or the history of the fen project* (1646?). A second pamphlet which contains much the same information and is couched in some of the same words, *The Picklock of the Old Fenus Project* (1650), was written by the eminent lawyer, Sir John Maynard. It is quoted in *Fenland N. & Q.*, vii, 1907-9, p. 314 et seq.

<sup>2</sup> *Ibid.*, iv, p. 176; Hist. MSS. Com. *Salisbury (Cecil)*, viii, p. 243.

## LIVESTOCK 1530-40

For confirmation of the contemporary accounts of fenland farming, we must turn to the probate inventories. Here is evidence in plenty of the kind of stock in which the fenland peasant invested his capital and his labour. Here are listed the animals which were his principal asset, and which represented the bulk of his wealth. Many a farmer in the fen had no arable at all, and depended on buying his feeding stuffs, his malt, and breadcorn, at the market, but there was not a single farmer among seventy represented in a sample of inventories for the 1530's who possessed no cattle, sheep, or horses.<sup>1</sup>

One of the clues to a man's place in the economic scale was the number of his cattle. Their importance in the fenland economy can be gauged from the fact that, whereas in Leicestershire between 1500 and 1531 the average herd was six, in the fen in the 1530's it was ten. Moreover, twenty out of every hundred Leicestershire farmers in the first thirty years of the century had no cattle, whereas throughout the century there were not four in a hundred without cattle in the Lincolnshire fen. The average herd was ten, and a very large herd in the 'thirties numbered forty. The wealthiest farmer in our sample was William Somerby of Horbling in the Kesteven fen, who had twenty-five head of cattle. John Hickson of Frampton in Skirbeck wapentake, who was less than half as well off as Somerby, had thirty-nine. The farmer of average fortune had anything between five and seventeen animals, and the bulk of these were dairy cattle. Hickson's herd comprised eighteen kine, ten young neats, and eleven burlings (yearling heifers). The average-sized herd was either composed of cows and calves alone, or included with these a couple of oxen or steers.<sup>2</sup>

Dairying was of primary importance on the farm. It made the buttery a necessary annexe to the house of the better-off farmer, and milk vessels, a cheese press, and cheese vats essential equipment in every household. At his death, a farmer might have considerable quantities of cheese and butter waiting to be sold. John Hood of Sutterton, who in 1537 left four times the average farmer's fortune, had ten stones of cheese and two stones of butter in the house. Thomas Markham of Kirton had fifteen stones of cheese and five stones of butter from his herd of twenty-two cattle. Even the poorer peasant, such as Henry Wythington of Tydd St Mary, who in 1537 possessed property valued at £4 10s. 4d. (after debts had been deducted), had ten stones of cheese in store.<sup>3</sup> That Holland was recognized by Tudor statesmen as a dairying district as well as a meat-producing one is evident from a proposal among the papers of Lord

<sup>1</sup> In the 'sixties there was only one farmer out of eighty, and in the 'nineties one out of seventy-six without cattle, sheep, or horses.

<sup>2</sup> W. G. Hoskins, *op. cit.*, p. 176; LRO Probate inventories, 6, 142; 3, 85.

<sup>3</sup> LRO Probate inventories, 6, 172; 2, 9; 6, 166.

Burghley. In the hopes of improving the yield of the customs by imposing a duty of 1s. 6d. a barrel on butter, it was argued that butter could be sold "without any miss or note thereof from Suffolk, Essex, Somerset, Gloucestershire, the parts of Lincolnshire bordering upon Lynn, and South Wales lying upon Severn."<sup>1</sup>

Horses were found on at least nine out of ten fenland farms in the 1530's. In Leicestershire, where there was far more arable land, nearly three-quarters of the farms had none, and the farm work was done by oxen. The arable land in Holland was not sufficient to employ the six horses of the average farmer, and they were undoubtedly bred for an outside market. John Hynde of Algarkirk, who had twenty-two in all (eight horses, five foals, six mares, and three fillies), had almost as many horses as cattle. Richard Robinson of Kirkby-on-Bain, on the fen margin of Lindsey, who had a herd of five dairy cattle and but two sheep, had twelve horses. Both were clearly breeders.<sup>2</sup>

Pigs, in a region almost completely lacking in woodland, were of small numerical importance. The most that anyone had was fifteen and nearly one in five farmers had none at all. The average was four per farm—a little less than that found in Leicestershire at the same period.<sup>3</sup>

Sheep ranked next in importance to cattle in the fenland economy, although the wool of Holland was rated among the least fine of the English wools, and fetched only a little more than that of Norfolk which was the cheapest of all.<sup>4</sup> Sheepskins were another marketable commodity, for was not a "fenman's dowry three score geese and a pelt?"<sup>5</sup> The size of a flock varied greatly, and was not much of a guide to the scale of their owner's living. The wealthiest farmers had the largest flocks, and those with more than sixty sheep were at least twice as well off as the average. But a quarter of all farmers had none at all, and these included some of the well-to-do as well as the poorer peasants. The largest flock in the inventories for the 1530's numbered 120 sheep and belonged to Thomas Thornton of Tydd St Mary on the southern border of the county.<sup>6</sup> It was less than half the size of the biggest flocks in Leicestershire—a fact which points to a significant difference between the two regions. It is true that the provincial inventories do not tell the full story of the largest stock holdings, since the wills of the gentry were proved in London and not in the local court, and their inventories are not available to us. Contemporaries spoke of men who had flocks of a thousand sheep in the fen whose existence one would

<sup>1</sup> BM MS. Lansdowne 110, f.196.

<sup>2</sup> W. G. Hoskins, *op. cit.*, p. 177; LRO Probate inventories, 6, 88 & 42.

<sup>3</sup> W. G. Hoskins, *op. cit.*, p. 177.

<sup>4</sup> The wool of Holland was valued in 1536 at 4s. 8d. a tod. Lindsey and Kesteven wool was worth 5s. a tod, and Cotswold wool, the best of all, 14s. and more.—*L. & P. Hen. VIII*, x, p. 90.

<sup>5</sup> *Fenland N. & Q.*, vii, p. 335.

<sup>6</sup> LRO Probate inventories, 6, 297.

never suspect from the inventories at Lincoln.<sup>1</sup> But even though there were in the fen flocks as large as the largest in Leicestershire, there is little doubt that the average flock was smaller. Only a quarter of the sheep owners in Leicestershire had fewer than twenty sheep, whereas half the flocks in the fen were of this small size.<sup>2</sup> The large numbers of sheep which contemporaries described in the fen were in fact made up of a multitude of small flocks. Some of their owners were represented in the inventories, but there were many more of the poorer sort who were not, who kept some sheep and a cow or two, and fed them on the commons.<sup>3</sup>

TABLE II  
STOCK IN THE FENLAND, 1530-1600

Number of animals	OWNERS OF CATTLE			OWNERS OF HORSES		
	1530's	1560's	1590's	1530's	1560's	1590's
1-5	15 = 21.4%	24 = 30%	21 = 27.6%	28 = 40%	36 = 45%	27 = 35.5%
6-10	23 = 32.8%	15 = 18.8%	17 = 22.3%	24 = 34.2%	23 = 28.7%	23 = 30%
11-20	19 = 27.2%	25 = 31.2%	18 = 23.6%	9 = 12.8%	10 = 12.5%	11 = 14.4%
21-30	10 = 14.3%	12 = 15%	10 = 13.2%	1 = 1.4%	—	4 = 5.2%
31-40	1 = 1.4%	1 = 1.2%	1 = 1.3%	—	1 = 1.2%	—
41-50	—	—	2 = 2.6%	—	—	—
51-80	—	1 = 1.2%	3 = 3.9%	—	—	—
Unspecified number	—	—	—	2 = 2.8%	2 = 2.5%	1 = 1.3%
None	2 = 2.8%	2 = 2.5%	4 = 5.2%	6 = 8.5%	8 = 10%	10 = 13.2%
TOTAL	70	80	76	70	80	76
MEDIAN	10	10-11	9-10	6	5	7
Median in Leicestershire	6 (1500-31)		9 (1588)			5 (1588)

<sup>1</sup> BM MS. Lansdowne 110, f.53.

<sup>2</sup> W. G. Hoskins, *op. cit.*, p. 174.

<sup>3</sup> Several townsmen testified in depositions to the large number of persons (they were never more precise than this) who depended for a living on the commons alone.—PRO E134, 15 Jan. I, Easter 12.

Number of Animals	OWNERS OF PIGS		
	1530's	1560's	1590's
1-5	38 =54%	32 =40%	28 =36.7%
6-10	9 =12.8%	13 =16.2%	13 =17.1%
11-20	7 =10%	11 =13.8%	5 =6.6%
21-30	—	—	1 =1.3%
Unspecified number	3 =4.3%	6 =7.5%	6 =7.8%
None	13 =18.6%	18 =22.4%	23 =30%
TOTAL	70	80	76
MEDIAN	4	3-4	4-5
Median in Leicestershire	6		

Number of Poultry	OWNERS OF POULTRY		
	1530's	1560's	1590's
Unspecified number	27 =38.5%	42 =52.5%	40 =52.6%
None	43 =61%	38 =47.5%	36 =47.4%
TOTAL	70	80	76
AVERAGE	Approx. 2 in 5 had poultry	1 in 2	1 in 2

Number of Animals	OWNERS OF SHEEP		
	1530's	1560's	1590's
1-5	13 =18.6%	10 =12.5%	5 =6.5%
6-10	7 =10%	6 =7.5%	8 =10.5%
11-20	9 =12.8%	12 =15%	5 =6.5%
21-30	2 =2.8%	7 =8.7%	8 =10.5%
31-40	7 =10%	1 =1.2%	4 =5.2%
41-50	5 =7.1%	2 =2.5%	2 =2.6%
51-80	5 =7.1%	3 =3.7%	3 =3.9%
81-100	3 =4.3%	5 =6.2%	2 =2.6%
101-150	1 =1.4%	4 =5%	4 =5.2%
151+	—	—	1 =1.3%
Unspecified number	—	1 =1.2%	1 =1.3%
None	18 =25.7%	29 =36.2%	33 =43.4%
TOTAL	70	80	76
MEDIAN	17	20	25-26
Median in Leicestershire	34 (1500-31)	—	30 (1588)

## LIVESTOCK 1530-1600

No significant change took place in the numbers of stock held by the average farmer between 1530 and the end of the century. An ordinary farm carried some ten cattle, six horses, four pigs, and about twenty sheep. A typical farmer of medium wealth was Roger May of Swineshead, who died in 1536 or 1537, and possessed seven cattle (three kine and four calves), six mares, three swine, and twenty sheep. His personal property was valued at £11 18s. 9d. Nearly

thirty years later, when Thomas Tyckett of Leverton died, he owned five kine and two calves, two mares, and three foals, one pig, fourteen ewes, and six lambs. He also had ten hens and a cock. One in every two inventories in the 1560's and 1590's referred to "pullen," meaning geese, hens, ducks, and, more rarely, capons. The fact that only two in five people had poultry in the 'thirties strengthens the view that the poorer peasants were not as well represented then as later. In 1591 the typical farmer was John Baker, the elder, of Friskney. He had six kine, one quy, four calves, and four burlings. His fifteen cattle were all dairy animals. In addition he had five pigs and twenty-three sheep, but only two horses. His personal property, when £5 of debts had been deducted, was valued at £45.<sup>1</sup>

The principal change reflected in the three selected sets of inventories between 1530 and 1600 was an increase in the numbers of those with large herds and flocks. In the 1530's thirty-nine cattle made up the largest herd in the fen. In the 1560's this was still a large herd, but Thomas Rootes of Fenhouses, in the parish of Swineshead, could count sixty-four animals in his pastures, all of them dairy cattle. He was surpassed in the 1590's by Thomas Harrys of the same parish, who in November 1591, when the winter had already set in and he had probably killed off a few of his animals, had a herd of sixty-six cattle.<sup>2</sup> In the 'thirties, there were six people out of seventy (8·6 per cent) with more than twenty-three cattle; in the 'nineties there were fifteen out of seventy-six (19·7 per cent). The wealth of Kirton wapentake is again exemplified in these figures, for fourteen of the twenty-nine farmers having more than twenty-three cattle in this sixteenth-century sample lived in the wapentake of Kirton; another three lived on its eastern boundary at Skirbeck and Fishtoft.

Figures for the whole century reinforce the statement made earlier that the sheep population was extremely variable. The size of a man's flock, more often than not, bore no relation to his means. Neither Thomas Harrys of Swineshead, who had the largest herd of cattle in the 'nineties, nor John Gebens of Sibsey, yeoman, who at his death in January, 1591, left twenty-four cattle, had any sheep at all. Yet there were other well-to-do farmers who had a large herd and a substantial flock as well. Richard Bretherton of Bennington, yeoman, had fifty-nine cattle in September 1591 and a flock of ninety sheep. Henry Handley of Kirton Holme had forty-three cattle and 111 sheep. Yet, another substantial farmer of the 'nineties, Thomas Sowter of Sutton St Edmund, with a herd three times the size of the average, had no more than twenty-three sheep.<sup>3</sup> In the course of the century, the average flock increased in size from seventeen sheep in the 1530's to twenty in the 1560's, and to twenty-five or twenty-six in

<sup>1</sup> LRO Probate inventories 6, 144; 44, 39; 80, 98. 'Quy' is a term used to describe a young cow before it has had a calf.      <sup>2</sup> *Ibid.* 44, 146; 81, 618.      <sup>3</sup> *Ibid.* 81, 728 & 364; 80, 69 & 74.



the 1590's. It still did not attain the level of sheep flocks in Leicestershire. But large flocks grew more numerous among the yeomen. In the 'thirties and 'sixties, no one outside the ranks of the gentry had more than 150 sheep, and in the 'nineties only one man with 230 sheep had more. But flocks of seventy sheep, which were large by the standards of the yeoman, increased from 8·5 per cent of the whole to 11·8 per cent in the course of two generations. Kirton wapentake, which was the home of the largest herds, was also the home of the largest flocks. Eleven out of the total twenty-five belonged here; the remainder came from the Wainfleet district on the fringe of the marsh, and the Witham valley in the neighbourhood of Coningsby.

#### PROBLEMS OF THE FENLAND VILLAGE

In focusing attention on the fenland in the sixteenth century, there is a risk of investing developments at this period with a novelty they did not possess. What was peculiar was not the kind of changes under way, but the pace. It was this which brought to the surface in Holland one of the problems already familiar in the Midlands: that of finding adequate pasture and commons. Financial stringency explains the sudden interest of the crown at the beginning of the seventeenth century in the gains of saltmarsh which were being made everywhere along the coast.<sup>1</sup> It had the result that the villages of Holland were deprived of a considerable part of their saltmarsh commons. At the same time the condition of some parts of the fenland deteriorated, owing to the neglect of the drains, while enclosures gnawed at the edges of the remainder.<sup>2</sup> The shortage of grazing was in no sense as serious as that which existed in Leicestershire, and in the more densely settled parishes at the foot of the Lincolnshire wolds, where the villages had no reserves of waste to draw upon. But the population of the fen was large; many poor people depended entirely on their common rights for a livelihood; the profits awaiting the large grazier who increased his stock of animals were attractive. The mere sufficiency of pasture imposed irk-

<sup>1</sup> The grant of the saltmarsh of four parishes in Elloe wapentake to the Earl of Argyll in 1615 spoke of the crown's concern for the "recovery, including, and defending" of the marsh, "as well for the augmentation of the revenue of our crown of England as for the common good and profit of our commonwealth."—PRO C66, 2077, 24. A petition from John West, groom of the Privy Chamber, drew the attention of the crown in 1606 to the marshland accretions on the coast of Lindsey.—Hist. MSS. Com., *Salisbury (Cecil)*, xviii, p. 417.

<sup>2</sup> Enclosure and conversion was not a serious problem in Holland. The returns for 1517-18 relate to Lindsey only. The 1607 returns do not report any large-scale enclosures. There had been no 'great depopulations', and only 560 acres had been converted from arable to pasture. Apart from two cases involving sixty acres and 116 acres, the rest concerned conversions of small parcels varying between four acres and thirty acres.—J. D. Gould, 'The Inquisition of Depopulation of 1607 in Lincolnshire', *English Historical Review*, LXVII, 1952, pp. 392-6.

some restraints on the large farmers, and was instrumental in recruiting from their ranks the few native supporters of the drainage schemes. The bulk of the commoners resisted the proposals for the reasons explained by Thomas Fuller. "Grant them drained, and so continuing; as now the great fishes therein prey on the less, so then wealthy men would devour the poorer sort of people. Injurious partage would follow upon the enclosures, and rich men, to make room for themselves, would jostle the poor people out of their commons."<sup>1</sup>

In the populous villages of Kirton wapentake complaints of the shortage of commons found vent in a number of suits in the Court of Exchequer for curbing abuses by landlords of their common rights in Holland Fen. There was no stint of cattle in the fen, but ambitious landlords had begun the practice of bringing in cattle for fattening from other parts of the country. Smaller men were suspected of doing the same surreptitiously. At the beginning of Elizabeth's reign, John Awford, a farmer from Bitchfield on the clay land of Kes-teen south of Grantham, handed over two hundred sheep to William Wesnam of Boston, lessee of the grazing rights of the manor of Swineshead. For the feeding of the flock for an unspecified period, Awford paid 6s. 8d. a hundred. He knew of other farmers in Bitchfield who in 1572 had made similar arrangements for the pasturing of horses through George Groby, a husbandman of Swineshead, and had paid 1s. 6d. a horse. Adam Gill, who in 1570 sent forty head of cattle to Holland Fen, paid 1s. a beast. According to the commoners, the custom of bringing in cattle from outside originated about 1548, and had no precedent. "A kind of public proclamation for all men and from all places to bring in cattle" came to be issued, and the numbers of cattle introduced into the fen grew tenfold. In 1575 John Chetham, the farmer of Frampton manor, who had agreed to graze two hundred 'northern cattle' in the fen for five years running, withdrew them after protests by the commoners. Five years later, two newly appointed fen-graves drove out 160 sheep belonging to Thomas Cholmeley of Burton Coggles. Their action was supported by the commoners who complained that their stock was exposed to infection through contact with the cattle of strangers, and that their milch kine had dried up for want of grass, and had had to be removed from the fen.<sup>2</sup>

In constructive proposals put forward to settle the disturbances in Holland Fen abuses were enumerated which were not mentioned in the Exchequer depositions. Large farmers, who had pastures on which to feed their sheep in winter, overcharged the commons with them in summer. Some men kept a thousand sheep, whereas, it was argued, if they were compelled to accept a

<sup>1</sup> T. Fuller, *The History of the University of Cambridge* . . . , 1840, pp. 107-8.

<sup>2</sup> PRO E134, 25 & 26 Eliz., Mich. 30; E134, 23 & 24 Eliz., Mich. 15; E178, 4039. The surname Chetham is suggestive. Burton Coggles (Burton in the document) is immediately south of Bitchfield.

stint of two hundred sheep, and the children and servants of commoners were deprived of their common rights, the problem of grazing shortage would be solved overnight. Men who kept a thousand geese were a further source of discontent, for now that the fen was comparatively dry, the geese soiled the ground and deprived the cattle and horses of the sweetest grass. Sixty geese were suggested as the allowance for each commoner.<sup>1</sup>

The judgment which put an end to these disputes does not appear. But to settle the complaints against Herbert Pelham, lord of Swineshead, for surcharging Holland Fen with his own and strangers' animals, the Exchequer Court made him an allotment of 480 acres (measured by the eighteen-foot perch) in Dogdyke Hurne, for which he surrendered all his rights in other parts of the fen. Here was a case of fenland enclosure deliberately encouraged by the servants of the crown.<sup>2</sup>

#### CROPS, 1530-1600

References to crops in the inventories are neither numerous nor exact enough to reflect changes which may have taken place in the course of the century in the relative importance of each. Crop growing was not the foundation of fenland agriculture; many farmers had no arable at all, while others had tiny plots which they devoted entirely to spring corn. The reserves of wheat, barley, and beans in the store-chamber show that the balance was redressed by the purchase of considerable supplies of fodder and domestic cereals. Indeed, the buying and selling of grain and cattle food came next in importance to rents as items of farming expenditure listed among testators' debts.<sup>3</sup>

On farms where the arable was divided between spring and winter corn, wheat, barley, beans, and peas occupied the bulk of the land, as they did in Leicestershire. But of these four crops, barley was by far the most important. It occupied on an average fifty-four per cent of the sown area, and in the inventories for the 'thirties as much as sixty-one per cent. At the same period in Leicestershire, barley was grown on 37·6 per cent of the sown area.<sup>4</sup> Its importance in Lincolnshire was further underlined in the inventories by the amounts of barley recorded in store, and the frequency with which malt querns, brewing vats, and similar utensils were listed with the kitchen equipment. Between thirty-five and forty per cent of all farmers had barley in the chamber, whether or not they had crops in the field. The quantity, moreover, exceeded

<sup>1</sup> BM MS. Lansdowne 110, f. 53.

<sup>2</sup> PRO E178, 4039. The judgment is mentioned in 1608, but it had been given some time before.

<sup>3</sup> Debts listed in the inventories for 1530-1600 include sixteen for rents of houses and farmlands, eight for cereals (barley, beans, peas, seed wheat, and malt), seven for the rent of pastures, six for hemp and hempseed, and five for stock.

<sup>4</sup> W. G. Hoskins, *op. cit.*, p. 161.

TABLE III  
CROPS IN THE FENLAND, 1530-1600

Name	Place	Date	Wheat	Rye	Barley	Beans	Peas	Oats	Hemp	Total acres sown
Richard Bacon	Bourne	July 1537	a 1	a 1	a 1	a 1	a 1	a 1	a 1	a 1
Richard Monn	W. Deeping	n/d 1536	2 2	—	12	—	7	—	—	21 2
Robert Bryans	Swaton	April 1536 or 7	1 1	2	5 2	—	4	—	—	21 2
Richard Knapton	Gedney	May 1537	2	—	6	3	—	—	—	11 1
William Mason	Deeping	Sept. 1562	1	—	2	—	2	2	2	3 1
Robert Bawdwyyn	St James	Mar. 1562	1	1	2	—	—	—	—	3 1
John More	Horbling	Tyld St Mary	2	—	—	1	—	—	—	3
Gregory Jackson	Frieston	May 1562	—	—	—	1	—	—	—	3
Chris. Braysteit	Frieston	May 1565	—	—	—	1	—	—	—	1
Richard Sharp	Wyberton	May 1565	—	—	—	1	—	—	—	1
Nicholas Wolmer	Swineshead	June 1567	—	—	1	—	—	—	2	3
Simon South	Fishtoft	May 1590	1	—	9 2	4	—	—	—	14 2
Robert Sumpters	Frieston	May 1591	—	—	7	4	—	—	—	11
Beatrice Watson	Deeping	May 1591	1 2	1	3 3	—	4 2	—	4 1	15
William Clay	Market	May 1591	—	1	4	—	3	—	—	8
Thomas Simson	Deeping	July 1591	2	—	15	7	—	—	—	22 2
George Beale	East Keale	May 1591	2 2	1 2	4	3	—	2	—	11 2
Thomas Bootes	Swineshead	July 1591	1 1	—	2	—	—	—	1	3 1 1/2
Ralph Pulleys	Friskney	Nov. 1591	—	—	7	4	—	—	—	11
	Swineshead	Aug. 1591	—	—	3	2	—	—	2 3	7 3
TOTAL for the fenland: 1530-1600			16a 1/2 =8.8%	4a 1r =2.3%	98a 2r =54%	27a 3r =15.2%	24a 2r =13.4%	2r =.2%	11a =6%	182a 2 1/2 =99.9%
Comparable Leicestershire percentages			13.8% 8.6% 8.5%	5% 8.6% 4%	37.6% 35.8% 38.5%	43.3% 38.5% 46%	.4% 8.5% 3%			

that of all other crops. Since corn from Lincolnshire was supplied to the ale brewers of London in 1573 and 1574, it is probable that the Londoners' beer owed something to the barley growers of the fen.<sup>1</sup>

Beans and peas regularly went with barley, and ranked second in importance to it. They occupied 28½ per cent of the sown area, while beans gradually displaced peas as the more important of the two crops. The amount of land devoted to these fodder crops was less than that found in Leicestershire. The balance was almost, though not completely, made up with barley. Roughly speaking, the Leicestershire farmer grew equal quantities of peas and barley; the fenland farmer planted three barley lands to every one of beans and peas. The reason, no doubt, was that hay was the principal mainstay of the Holland grazier in winter, and in the fen it grew abundantly. Beans, peas, and perhaps some barley also, supplemented this winter diet.<sup>2</sup>

Wheat ranked third in importance to barley and beans, and yielded a good harvest on the silt lands. It was not an essential crop on the farm, for bread made from wheat was a luxury, but in the mid-seventeenth century, if the 'Anti-Projector' is to be believed, some was even exported to London and the north of England.<sup>3</sup> Rather more than six out of ten farmers who had arable land grew some wheat, which occupied on an average nine per cent of the sown area. Those without wheat were not obliged to buy, for among the poorer peasants particularly, barley or rye bread was more familiar than wheaten bread. Only two out of ten fenland farmers in the 'thirties had any wheat in store; farmers with less than £8 of personal property had none at all.

Oats were an exceptional crop, and appeared only once in these inventories. Rye was slightly more important. It was grown by a quarter of the farmers, and occupied 2·3 per cent of the sown area. Hemp was a speciality of the fenland, and occupied as much as 14·6 per cent of the sown area in a sample of inventories for the 'sixties. It was not grown by every one—though one in three inventories mentions the crop—but the working of hemp and flax (which was also grown in a few places) was a subsidiary occupation to agriculture in most households. Hemp, flax, linseed, yarn, and a linen wheel were regularly listed among the farmers' personal property.

<sup>1</sup> N. S. B. Gras, *The Evolution of the English Corn Market*, Harvard Economic Studies, XIII, 1926, p. 106.

<sup>2</sup> W. G. Hoskins, *op. cit.*, pp. 161, 168, 171.

<sup>3</sup> Gras dismisses the Lincolnshire fenland as a comparatively unimportant corn-exporting district (*op. cit.*, p. 51).

## SIZE AND TENURE OF HOLDINGS

The small size of most fenland farms drew comment from Arthur Young at the end of the eighteenth century.<sup>1</sup> The following table shows the size of individual holdings on five Holland manors at the beginning of the seventeenth century. Since none of these manors was coterminous with the parish, the table is inadequate except as a rough guide, for it is likely that many tenants held land of other manors. Moreover, there is no way of reckoning the effect which the widespread practice of sub-letting had on the size of the average holding. Table IV, however, together with Table V, which shows the sown area on a selected group of fifty-six farms during the century, establishes orders of magnitude, which can be compared with results in other counties. Table IV exaggerates the number of tiny holdings, just as Table V exaggerates the importance of the larger ones. Yet both combine to portray a region of small farming units. Sixty per cent of all the holdings listed in Table IV were of five acres and less. The median holding was about four acres. Even if these farms had been two or three times as large, they would still have been only one-third the size of the average Leicestershire farm.

The imprint of Danish settlement, which was heavy and enduring in certain parts of Lincolnshire, was less pronounced in Holland. Holland was already occupied by the English before the Scandinavian invasions, and although later settlements by the Danes were extensive, particularly in Kirton and Skirbeck, it is in the minor place-names of Holland, and not in the names of its villages and parishes, that Danish influences are found. Danish forms of land tenure are imprinted on the Domesday survey of Skirbeck and Kirton, where 46·8 and 41·9 per cent of the tenants respectively were sokemen. The proportion was less than that obtaining in ten wapentakes of Lindsey and Kesteven, where the sokemen represented over sixty per cent of the tenants. But it was large enough to indicate an important difference between the early history of settlement in Skirbeck and Kirton, and in Elloe where the sokemen accounted for only 19·9 per cent of all tenants.<sup>2</sup> In the early seventeenth century, the distinction was still visible in the tenure of holdings on five manors in Holland. Freeholders in Wrangle and Frieston in Skirbeck wapentake comprised 53 per cent and 31·4 per cent of all tenants. In three manors in Elloe, the largest group were copyholders, and represented between 46·5 per cent and 92 per cent of all the tenants.

The evidence of Danish settlement in Holland may explain the unequal dis-

<sup>1</sup> Arthur Young, *General View of the Agriculture of the County of Lincoln*, 1799, pp. 37, 38.

<sup>2</sup> F. M. Stenton, 'The Free Peasantry of the Northern Danelaw', *Bulletin de la Société des Lettres de Lund*, 1925-6, pp. 77-8; *An Historical Geography of England before A.D. 1800*, p. 144.

## FENLAND FARMING

TABLE IV  
 HOLDINGS ON FIVE HOLLAND MANORS, 1607-9  
 (based on surveys)

Place Date	Skirbeck wapentake		Elloe wapentake			Total
	Wrangle 1609	Frieston 1607	Moulton Harrington 1607	Whaplode Kirk Fee 1607	Gedney 1607	
1a and below	14 = 18·8%	7 = 12%	4 = 6·5%	14 = 50%	17 = 16·6%	56 = 17·4%
1a-3a	17 = 23%	18 = 31%	20 = 32·7%	6 = 21·4%	29 = 28·4%	90 = 27·9%
3a-5a	4 = 5·4%	14 = 24%	16 = 26·2%	2 = 7·1%	17 = 16·6%	53 = 16·4%
5a-10a	11 = 14·8%	10 = 17·2%	9 = 14·8%	1 = 3·5%	21 = 20·5%	52 = 16·1%
10a-20a	12 = 16·2%	5 = 8·6%	7 = 11·4%	—	12 = 11·7%	36 = 11·1%
20a-30a	5 = 6·7%	2 = 3·4%	4 = 6·5%	—	2 = 1·9%	13 = 4%
30a-60a	6 = 8·1%	1 = 1·7%	1 = 1·6%	—	3 = 2·9%	11 = 3·4%
60a-100a	3 = 4%	1 = 1·7%	—	3 = 10·7%	—	7 = 2·1%
100a-200a	1 = 1·3%	—	—	1 = 3·5%	1 = 98%	3 = 9%
More than 200a	1 = 1·3%	—	—	1 = 3·5%	—	2 = 6%
Total number of tenants	74	58	61	28	102	323 = 99·9%

tribution of freehold and copyhold lands between the three wapentakes, but it does not account for the prevalence of small holdings throughout the division in the sixteenth century. In other parts of Lincolnshire, and in Leicestershire also, the independent peasantry of Danish ancestry had fed a flourishing land market in the Middle Ages.<sup>1</sup> Large farms had grown out of many small. This had not happened so noticeably in Holland, nor was there any substantial difference in the sixteenth century between the size of holdings in the two wapentakes where Danish influence prevailed, and in Elloe where there was

<sup>1</sup> F. M. Stenton, *op. cit.*, *passim*; W. G. Hoskins, *op. cit.*, p. 128.

TABLE V  
ARABLE LAND IN THE FENLAND, 1530-1600  
(based on probate inventories)

Size of arable	1530-40	1560-70	1590-1600	Total	%
Under 1 acre	—	1	—	1	1.9
1a—under 3a	—	4	3	7	13.2
3a—under 5a	1	2	3	6	11.3
5a—under 10a	5	8	4	17	32
10a—under 20a	4	1	12	17	32
20a—under 30a	2	2	—	4	7.5
30a—under 40a	1	—	—	1	1.9
TOTAL number of farms	13	18	22	53	99.8
Recorded arable area of median farms*	11a	5½-6a	11a	Median group 7-10a	
Comparable figures from Leicestershire	24a (1500-31)	19½a (1550-72)	20¾a (1588)		

\* It cannot be assumed that this area represents two-thirds, or a half, of the arable on the farm, since some of the most fertile land was cropped continuously, or irregularly fallowed.

little or none. It is necessary to look for other factors which were conducive to the preservation of small holdings.

While none can be established with certainty, two tentative suggestions can be put forward. In the first place, small dispersed holdings were not the handicap they were under an arable economy. The incentive to enlarge a farm was blunted so long as the common lands were extensive and common rights unstinted, for grazing was most profitable to all when organized in common. For a long time the colonization of marsh and fen added as much to the pasture resources as was taken away by the need for extra corn land. In the second place, the fertility of the soil permitted a more intensive husbandry than was possible in the uplands. Even today, Holland is a district of small farms; 55 per cent of its holdings are twenty acres and less.<sup>1</sup>

#### THE WEALTH OF THE FENLAND

A thickly settled region of small peasants is not necessarily a rich and prosperous one. Nevertheless, in the sixteenth century, when there was still waste

<sup>1</sup> G. I. Smith, *Lincolnshire (Parts of Holland)*, in *The Land of Britain*, ed. L. D. Stamp, part 69, 1937, p. 63.



## FENLAND FARMING

TABLE VI  
LAND TENURE ON FIVE FENLAND MANORS, 1607-9

Tenure	Skirbeck		Elloe			
	Wrangle	Frieston	Number of tenants in			
			Whaplode	Kirk Fee	Gedney	Sutton Gannock
Freehold	45 = 53%	22 = 31.4%	8 = 26.6%	4 = 3.9%	6 = 7.4%	
Leasehold	23 = 27%	42 = 60%	6 = 20%	—	4 = 4.9%	
Copyhold	5 = 5.8%	—	14 = 46.6%	94 = 92%	66 = 81.5%	
Copy and Leasehold	—	—	1 = 3.3%	—	1 = 1.2%	
Free and Leasehold	12 = 14.1%	6 = 8.5%	—	—	—	
Free, Copy and Leasehold	—	—	1 = 3.3%	—	—	
Copy and Freehold	—	—	—	4 = 3.9%	4 = 4.9%	
TOTAL No. of tenants	85	70	30	102	81	

land in many parts of England awaiting exploitation, and when people did not cling tenaciously to a livelihood in their native district, it was probably unusual to find large numbers of people persisting for long in eking out a living from unremunerative soil. That the fenland was far from being a poverty-stricken region is already evident from the stocks of cattle, sheep, and horses which it maintained. Nor was its prosperity of recent growth. In 1334 its tax assessment per acre was the fourth highest in the kingdom.<sup>1</sup>

Judging by the wealth of individuals in the sixteenth century, the fenland differed from Leicestershire in the distribution of its wealth, rather than in its total resources. The fenland had a higher proportion of small farmers and a lower proportion of very wealthy ones,<sup>2</sup> as the following table suggests. But in 1524 there was little difference between the subsidy assessments per acre of the two regions.

Holland was richer than either Lindsey or Kesteven. According to the tax apportionment between the three parts of Lincolnshire in 1334, Lindsey paid

<sup>1</sup> W. G. Hoskins and H. P. R. Finberg, *Devonshire Studies*, 1952, p. 217.

<sup>2</sup> Dr Hoskins excluded from his Leicestershire sample the very poorest peasants, who are included in the Holland sample. This accounts in part for the higher proportion of small peasants in Holland.

TABLE VII  
COMPARISON BETWEEN THE PERSONAL WEALTH OF FENLAND  
AND LEICESTERSHIRE FARMERS<sup>1</sup>  
1500-1600

Amount of personal estate	1500-31		1530-40		1588		1590-91	
	Leicestershire		Fenland		Leicestershire		Fenland	
	No. of farmers	%	No. of farmers	%	No. of farmers	%	No. of farmers	%
Less than £10	12	20.7	31	45	1	.9	7	9.3
£10-£20	25	43.1	20	28.7	17	15.6	11	14.6
£20-£30	8	13.8	9	13	15	13.7	6	8
£30-£40	5	8.6	5	7.2	12	11	11	14.6
£40-£50	4	6.9	2	2.9	13	11.9	7	9.3
£50-£60	1	1.7	1	1.4	13	11.9	3	4
£60-£80	1	1.7	1	1.4	13	11.9	11	14.6
£80-£100	2	3.4	—	—	12	11	15	20
More than £100	—	—	—	—	13	11.9	4	5.3
Total number of inventories	58	99.9	69	99.6	109	99.8	75	99.7
Median	£14 7s. 11d.		£10 16s. 10d.		£46 16s. 8d.		£41 12s. 0d.	

48½ per cent, Kesteven 30½ per cent, and Holland 21 per cent. Taking into account the relative size of the three parts, Holland bore the heaviest share, for it represented 17.8 per cent of the area of the county.<sup>2</sup> In 1524, when the tax was apportioned afresh, Holland paid 22.1 per cent, which was slightly more than before; Lindsey, which represented 56.4 per cent of the area of the county, paid 55.2 per cent; Kesteven, representing 25.7 per cent of the county, paid a much smaller proportion than before of 22.6 per cent.<sup>3</sup>

The parish assessments of 1524 have not survived for the whole county, but the existing fragments serve to illustrate the comparative wealth of the different regions of Lincolnshire, including two of the three wapentakes of Holland, Kirton, and Elloe.<sup>4</sup> In six of the wapentakes of Lindsey and Kesteven, the subsidy-paying inhabitants who were assessed at the lowest valuation of taxable property—at twenty shillings worth of goods or wages—and who represented the bulk of the wage labourers among the population, constituted not less than 35 per cent and usually not more than 46 per cent of all taxpayers. In Elloe, on

<sup>1</sup> W. G. Hoskins, *op. cit.*, p. 135.

<sup>2</sup> W. G. Hoskins and H. P. R. Finberg, *op. cit.*, p. 215.

<sup>3</sup> PRO E359, 41.

<sup>4</sup> PRO E179, 136, 306-34.

the other hand, the poorest taxpayers were a smaller group, amounting to 32 per cent, and in Kirton only 22·5 per cent of the total. The wealthy, whose land or goods were valued at £20 and more, represented as little as 1·4 and never more than 3·5 per cent of the taxpayers of Lindsey and Kesteven. In Kirton and Elloe the rich were relatively, as well as absolutely, more numerous and amounted to 7·3 per cent of the taxpayers in Kirton, and 4·1 per cent in Elloe.

The two wealthiest taxpayers in these eight wapentakes of Lincolnshire were Sir John Hussey, who lived at Old Sleaford on the outer edge of the fenland, and was assessed at £500 worth of lands, and Thomas Ellis, who dwelt at Bassingthorpe on the clayland south of Grantham and was assessed at £333 6s. 8d. worth of goods. The first was three times, the second twice as rich as the richest taxpayer that rural Leicestershire could muster.<sup>1</sup> Neither of them, it will be noticed, came from Holland. But of the dozen standing at the head of the subsidy list who paid on £80 and more of property, four came from Holland, and three from the fen parishes of Kesteven. The five who belonged to other parts of the county were the squires of small villages. One village had a population of only five families; none had more than twenty-six in 1563. The wealth of their squires in all but one case was fifteen to twenty times as great as that of the next biggest taxpayer in their villages. In Holland there was no such gulf between the richest man and the rest; instead, a series of regular gradations from the top downwards. The richest taxpayer in Kirton and Elloe in 1524 was rated at not more than £120 in goods; at his heels followed a procession of substantial men, assessed at £80, £70, £66 13s. 4d., £60, £50, and so on down the scale. Kirton and Elloe together accounted for thirteen out of the sixteen middling-rich taxpayers, who were assessed on property worth £50-£80.

The subsidy assessment for Holland bespeaks a society in which wealth was more widely distributed at the top than it was in other parts of Lincolnshire. Differences at the bottom were less noticeable, for every village had an indeterminate but seemingly large population of poor commoners. The number of labouring poor listed in the subsidy for Kirton was unusually small, but Elloe had the same percentage as was average in Leicestershire. The typical village in the Midlands was one in which the ranks of society were built up from a broad base of poor wage workers with little or no land to the squire at the top. The fenland village was differentiated more at the summit than at the foundation. Its aristocracy was not a single squire and his family, but a substantial group of middling-rich yeomen. "The want of gentlemen here to inhabit" was a fact lamented by the officials of Holland in the muster returns of 1580.<sup>2</sup> A

<sup>1</sup> W. G. Hoskins, *op. cit.*, p. 128.

<sup>2</sup> PRO SP12, 138, f.8.

modern map of Lincolnshire, showing the distribution of parks and gentlemen's seats, preserves the remnants of this distinction between the fenland and the rest of the county. There are no gentlemen's seats in Elloe and Skirbeck and none of any size in Kirton. There are few on the fen margins of Kesteven, in the Isle of Axholme, and in the western half of Gainsborough wapentake. But they are evenly scattered throughout the rest of Lincolnshire, and they are numerous in the Steeping valley, a region of densely populated villages in the sixteenth century, which were more akin to the Midland type than any found in the fen.

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