

## The Fens

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'Fen' is an Old English word for the low-lying, waterlogged parts of eastern England, especially those which drain into the Wash and the Humber. The Fens have been occupied since prehistoric times with several important pre-historic sites in the Fens including Flag Fen, Must Farm, and Stonea Camp. They were inhabited during the early medieval period with evidence of attempts to drain the Fens by the Anglo-Saxons. They were, however, very lowly populated at the time of the Norman Conquest.<sup>1</sup> In this early period high dykes and sea walls were in use. This process of drainage was irregular and often unsuccessful, usually attempted on just a small scale, except for the activities of some great monastic landowners.

The fall in population because of the Black Death in the mid-fourteenth century removed for a time the pressure to reclaim land. As the number of people eventually neared the same levels there were renewed efforts for reclamation. In the 1630s one scheme was initiated on 190,000 acres of the Bedford Level between Cambridge, Peterborough, and Wisbech. The project was led by Cornelius Vermuyden and carried out by Dutch and Flemish workers. Large tracts of reclaimed land were allotted to 'adventurers' who funded the scheme.



Mike Todd, *Ship of the Fens* ([CC BY-SA 2.0](#))

Various problems arose with this process. The shrinking of the peat as it dried out caused the ground level to continue to reduce and therefore fill again with water. This was overcome by water pumps operated first by windmills and later by steam and electricity. In some places reclaimed fenland is now several feet below surrounding land. Economically,

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<sup>1</sup> W.G. Hoskins, *The Making of the English Landscape* (1985), 76-7.

Fen parishes were large, populous, and designed around rearing livestock, especially cattle, instead of corn-growing. Vast commons helped support many families, few of whom were rich but who generally enjoyed a comfortable standard of living. Across the Fens local smallholders who had been able to earn a living before drainage were now confronted with the loss of valuable rights on the commons. In some places there was rioting and destruction of the engineering works.

Almost all fenland has now been reclaimed, particularly due to the engineering schemes of the seventeenth and nineteenth centuries. Many small farmers were still able to make a living on the fens during the nineteenth century when the huge production of corn in the area led it to be termed the 'bread basket of England'.<sup>2</sup> It has long remained a distinct part of the country,

*The Fens have always been a unique part of England: few places today retain an individual character but Fenland certainly does. For many hundreds of years, they were regularly under water for a great part of the year: they were therefore mainly pastoral economies, supplemented by fishing and fowling. However, where arable land was available it was often extremely fertile.*<sup>3</sup>

Distinctive historic features of the Fens include the popularity of ice skating on the easily flooded meadows. Bone skates dating back to the medieval period have been found. The sport of Bandy was popular in the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. The area is also notable for churches and cathedrals such as Crowland, Ely, Peterborough, Ramsey, and Thorney.

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<sup>2</sup> Frank Meeres, [A short history of the Fens](#).

<sup>3</sup> Frank Meeres, [A short history of the Fens](#).



John Sutton, *Bends in the Cam below Fen Ditton* ([CC BY-SA 2.0](#))

A rare surviving example of an original fenland is Wicken Fen in Cambridgeshire, a reserve managed by the National Trust. They were, and are, environments of significant merit to nature, home to a wide variety of plant, insect, and animal life. In the present day, the Great Fen is a habitat restoration project being undertaken in Cambridgeshire aiming to create a 3,700-hectare wetland.

#### **Further References and Resources:**

Information for this post was taken from the excellent David Hey (ed.), *The Oxford Companion to Local and Family History* (1996), 178-9.

Researchers are directed to local experts, the [Fenland Family History Society](http://fenlandfhs.org.uk) ([fenlandfhs.org.uk](http://fenlandfhs.org.uk))

Joan Thirsk (ed.), *The Agrarian History of England and Wales, iv. 1500-1640* (1967)

Adrian Hall, *Fenland Worker-Peasants: The Economy of Smallholders at Rippingale, Lincolnshire, 1791-1871* (1992)

Keith Lindley, *Fenland Riots and the English Revolution* (1982)

James Boyce, *Imperial Mud: The Fight for the Fens* (2020)

Frank Meeres, *The Story of the Fens* (2019)