

Dutch turned tide to claim fen from water

SOUTH Lincolnshire was half its present size in the year 1000. The estuaries of the Welland and Nene bit deeply into the land mass and the sea coast ran west to east, where the A151 runs today.

The settlements of Pinchbeck, Spalding, Moulton, Whaplode, Holbeach and Gedney lay along a silt ridge ending with Long Sutton and Lutton on the west bank of the Nene estuary, between the sea to the north and the freshwater fen to the south.

Because the fens form a basin which many rivers empty into, for much of the year this fen was under water and Crowland and Thorney became islands in winter.

It looked horrible to strangers. St Guthlac described the waterland around Crowland when he arrived in the 8th Century as "a hideous fen of huge bigness".

But the ridge was a good place to live, close to such a rich source of fish, fowl, fuel, building materials and summer grazing.

And as the river estuaries silted up, salt deposits enabled villagers along the shoreline to extract salt from the marsh and export it to Northern Europe through Boston.

The good living on the silt ridge with its fertile soil caused the population to grow and, as it did, villagers began building banks outwards, into the sea to the north starting with Roman Bank in 1100 and to a much greater extent into the freshwater fen to the south.

These medieval sea and inland banks were higgledy piggledy affairs as each village built its own and threw out satellite settlements as it did so.

After 1000, for example, Holobech (Saxon for "deep stream") gradually spawned, through reclaiming a huge area of inland fen to the south,

Holbeach St Johns and Holbeach Drove, many miles south of Holbeach itself.

To the north Holbeach Clough and Holbeach Bank were the first "new towns" on the first sea banks, to be followed hundreds of years later by Holbeach St Marks and Holbeach St Matthew as the parish pushed out into the salt marshes.

The same pattern was repeated by Holbeach's neighbours.

Land reclamation paid dividends and people grew fat on the profits of wool and grain through the lush farmland they had uncovered.

John Honnor, general manager of Welland and Deepings Internal Drainage Board, takes up the story: "The Black Death hit the area hard and in about 1350 activities stopped for 200 years or so.

"Then in the 17th century speculators from London brought in Dutch drainage engineers who cut channels north to south across the silt ridge to let the freshwater fen drain into the sea.

"They trained and embanked the rivers and set the Welland on its present course.

"But the peat soil shrank as it dried out, the fenland sank below sea level and it flooded again and again.

"By 1800 more than 700 wind engines were being used alongside drains and rivers to lift the water out of the low land and get it out to sea.

"The windmills were an unreliable power source and steam power was seized on when it came in the 1830s. More and more powerful pumps have continued to be needed up to the present day - now we use electricity.

"The famous Pinchbeck steam engine's scoop wheel had to lift water in the channel by four feet. Today's electric engine has to do quadruple that."

● **RIGHT:** A map of South Holland in 1000, showing the original coastline and the settlements before each village extended to north and south as it reclaimed salt marsh and freshwater fen. Today's coastline, with its band of marshes, is shown too.

● **BELOW:** Wooden wind engines lined Spalding's South Drove Drain in 1828, when this watercolour sketch was made by local artist Hilkie Burgess.

