

THE MIDDLE AGES.

The conquest of England by the Normans in 1066 dispossessed the ancient landlords, and William distributed the Fenlands amongst his favourite knights, locally, Ivo Taillebois. The new hierarchy set up new judicial and divisional courts to control the inhabitants and there was increasing interest in the fenland economy.

The Domesday Book of 1086, commissioned by William as a record of taxes to be paid, gives a glimpse into the early medieval period, but lists only land which actually attracted tax and indications of population are only a rough guide.

In the 12th and 13th Centuries, the fenland became prosperous and populous with very important national and international trading centres. This demanded more land and in the 150 years post Conquest, half the available fens and marshes, mostly on the silts and clays, were embanked and drained.

It was during this period that the magnificent parish churches were built and manorial estates established.

The land and the infrastructure was becoming too important to rely on individuals to maintain the flood defences, and a period of frequent sea flooding gave rise to royal intervention. On 19th November 1253 the first writ was issued to the Sheriff of Lincolnshire to distrain for the repair of sea banks. The Commissions of Sewers had begun and provided the firm base upon which Henry VIII established the permanent Courts of Sewers in 1531, the forerunners of today's Internal Drainage Boards.

During the later Middle Ages in the 14th and 15th Centuries English agriculture underwent considerable recession, and Reclamation and drainage stagnated.

The dissolution of the Monasteries in 1539 removed most of the conscientious authority that had been maintaining the drainage and it was then a tale of floods caused by neglect, confusion and lack of co-operation among landowners.

Out of this chaos rose new authority and regulations with the drawing up of Fen Byelaws.

Organised control was gaining ground and with the upturn in the economy this spirit of planning was leading to far greater changes. The appearance of dereliction and the lack of formal ownership was attracting the attention of speculators, Adventurers, and the 17th Century saw efforts to embank and drain nearly all the remaining wetlands.