

MEDIEVAL PROSPERITY

The villages of the southern fenland, most of which were established in Anglo-Saxon times, grew wealthy in the Middle Ages exporting salt, cattle and wool, often through the port of Boston. New lands reclaimed in the fen between the Conquest and the end of the 13th Century enabled villages such as Surfleet and Pinchbeck to grow grain and flax as well as providing large commons which were often shared with neighbouring parishes. These commons could pasture large flocks of sheep and herds of cattle, as did the reclaimed saltmarsh beyond the seawall. Pinchbeck became one of the largest villages in the southern fenland; a survey taken in 1563 showed it with a population of 200, compared with Spalding's 154; the fine perpendicular church of St. Mary's bears witness to the prosperity of the time.

Prosperity in the fenland however depended on well maintained sea and river defences; at the end of the 16th Century, following a prolonged period of labour shortages and very wet weather, Pinchbeck and Spalding petitioned Queen Elizabeth I saying they were in "a miserable plight, three parts of the latter being depopulated and foresaken through the state of the fen, there being a decay of watercourses".

The failure of the community to deal with drainage and the absence of formal ownership of the peat fens began to attract the attention of speculators, "The Adventurers".

Many ambitious schemes were undertaken in the Bedford Levels as well as Deeping Fen, most of which was drained in the early 17th Century by Thomas Lovell, who was offered one-third of the reclaimed fen in return for his investment. Having spent his entire fortune of £12,000 Lovell saw his work undermined by neglect and "disturbances of lewd persons". This was a predictable reaction from villagers.

It was one thing to have the land properly drained, but not at the expense of the villagers' traditional rights to pasture, commons, fishing and wildfowling in the fens.

In 1632 the Earl of Bedford with other Adventurers was granted a further concession to drain Deeping Fen; in 1637 it was declared drained. It soon however became obvious that the success of the schemes would also be their downfall and gravity alone would not suffice. More and more farmers found they had to resort to artificial means of drainage

In Deeping Fen the first steam engines were installed at Pode Hole in 1824; of 60 and 80 horsepower they were capable of draining 32,000 acres.