

5 "Water, water all around..." the 1947 floods



This chapter gives a brief and inadequate account of the great Crowland floods of 1947. Much of it is taken from eyewitness accounts and personal photographs given by people who were there. Everyone has a story to tell; unfortunately there are too many to include here. Some names are mentioned, no doubt many that should be are not, and some are unknown. One thing is certain - all who were in Crowland then will never forget that Spring.

The winter of 1947 was one of the severest on record. During the first few weeks of the year there were blizzards, rainstorms, gales, and freezing temperatures. There was a build up of water and ice in the local rivers which were eventually unable to cope with the flow.

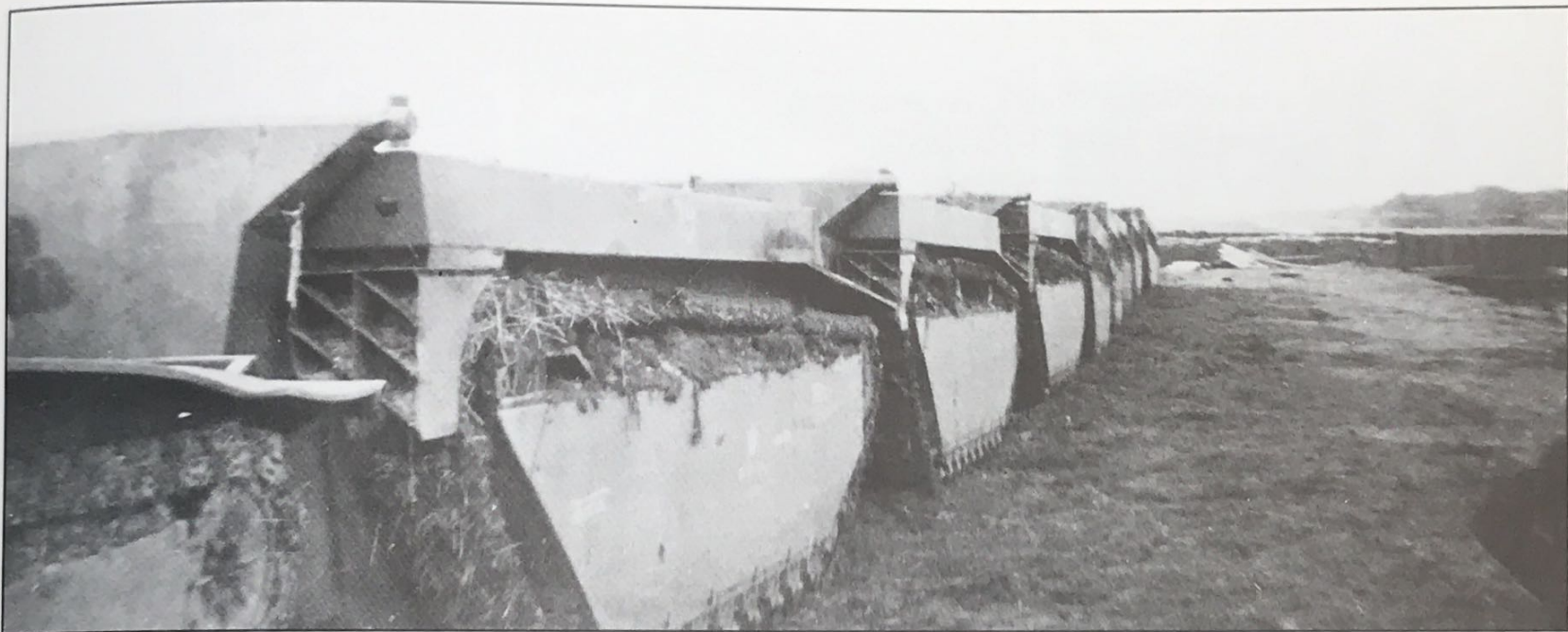
Ice at Spalding was preventing the river from flowing through. A vast quantity of water was therefore held up in the washlands and a gale on Sunday, 15 March whipped it up into heavy waves which flung the lumps of ice against the tops of the banks. On the Crowland North Barrier Bank there were continual patrols and sandbag filling went on round the clock. Payment was 3/- (15p) an hour. Arthur Holland was the day timekeeper and Sam

Adams the night man. Mr George Strickland, the Town Crier, was busier than he had ever been, being called out at all hours to muster assistance on the Bank. But in spite of all the effort and ceaseless watching, about midday on Friday, 21 March the North Level barrier bank of the River Welland at Crowland subsided and water began to come through at the bottom. Upon seeing this, Walter Lyon, who was working nearby, ran along the Bank shouting "She's gone, she's gone", and ran on to Dr Drake's house (the nearest telephone) from where he 'phoned the Welland Catchment Board.

It was already too late for farmer Ralph Searle, whose farm stood in the direct line of the breach. The family just had time to leave before it was all completely washed away.

The breach was some 60 yards wide, allowing a torrent of some six million tons of water to flood 20,000 acres of Great Postland and scour a deep hole in the fen. Flood waters rose and spread rapidly and, as a warning to local people, the danger bell at the Abbey was tolled for the first time since 1880. The town was virtually cut off, with parts of it being under water. Farmsteads were isolated and people had to be rescued by boats, which were also used to take fodder to marooned livestock.

Heavy rain and the onset of a thaw meant there was no let up in the flow of water and the floods continued to rise and spread. Local people toiled alongside soldiers and prisoners-of-war to build temporary sandbag walls to try to prevent the floods from spreading. Sgt. Star was awarded the British Empire Medal for his efforts in co-ordinating the operation and former village policeman, Sgt. John Thomas (Nellie Jane's husband) recalled from Spalding to help, received a special commendation.



200-300 yards along Crowland North Bank to left of breach. Some workers were prisoners-of-war.

There was much damage to property and the land, which was about to be prepared for the Spring planting, and there was considerable loss of livestock due to drowning. At a time when the country was struggling to overcome the after effects of war, the loss of such a large amount of prime agricultural land was a potential national disaster.

The Royal Engineers, supported by other service units, were called in to seal the breach using amphibious tanks. A stone causeway and light railway track were laid to transport materials to the breach. John Slater remembers fetching some of the rails from a Mr Butcher at French Drove as well as sand and baled straw to build up the bank. On Saturday, 29 March the last of the 16 Buffalo tanks had been placed in position around the breach and the task of filling the gaps between tanks with sand bags supported by wire mesh had begun.



The scene at Butcher's Farm, French Drove



*Rescuing the potato rocker at Butcher's Farm.
Right: Bill Wright (foreman); 2nd left: Harry Mackey*

There was still a high pressure of water in the river and on Friday, 13 April the peat sub-strata under the "tank-wall" suddenly gave way. Three tanks were washed away and the partly drained farm land again became inundated. This second breach did not turn out to be as serious as the first. The Royal Engineers were recalled and, with the use of pile driving equipment and eight more tanks, the gap was quickly sealed.



An aerial view of the Crowland North Barrier Bank breach.

Fen Bridge and Gravel Causeway, always places for local floods, disappeared completely under the great expanse of water. About 20 square miles of the Fens between Crowland, Thorney, Eye, Newborough and West Deeping had become a vast lake, with nothing but water as far as the eye could see in all directions.

Gravel Causeway (right) from Fen Bridge. The end of the North Barrier Bank may just be distinguished in the background at the extreme left of the picture. The breach in the Bank was about a quarter to half a mile from the left-hand side of the photograph.

Crowland Abbey stands out in the distance, reminiscent of earlier days when it looked out from its island over the miles of undrained Fens.



The River Welland above Fen Bridge (Deeping High Bank).



Gravel Causeway again, West Bank end. Compare this photograph with the second (early 1900s) picture of the water-carrier's cart on page 2. They were both taken from approximately the same spot.



The scene on Speechley's Drove, Newborough, a few days after the flooding. Note the retaining wall of sand bags on the right, built to hold back the water so that the road could be kept open to traffic. Guns Farm can be seen in the distance.

Two views (below) on the Peterborough Road near Crowland give a good impression of the extent of the floods and some of the damage caused. A lot of mud and debris had been washed on to the road and the verges damaged by the flood water flowing across.



Peterborough Road from Mason's Bridge end.



On the Thorney-Peakirk Road, near the corner of Speechley's Drove.



There was no shortage of volunteers when it came to rescuing livestock. This boatload (right) at Moors Farm on Peterborough Road, Crowland, included Mr Bancroft (in the trilby hat), Albert Limming, Fred Steels (wearing glasses), Clem Fox (a reporter from the *Peterborough Citizen & Advertiser*) with the oars, Jerry Love with the rope used to pull swimming cattle to safety, Ted Leeton of Moors Farm, two police officers and an RSPCA man with a rescued kitten. Up to his knees in water and wearing waders is the owner of the boat, Mr S.O.G. Willson, a well-known agricultural businessman and local personality.

Below, at Pepperlake Farm on the Peterborough Road the chickens survived on a floating raft of straw and dung in the crewyard. Fred Steels, George White and Fred's father, Charlie, were on their way by boat to feed them when this picture was taken.





The flood scene at Brotherhouse Bar, left. The building on the left was *The Boat* public house, the one on the right the sometime *Brotherhouse Bar* pub and former Toll House, where farm workers used to have barefist boxing fights on Sunday mornings. Demolished in the 1950s, it was supposed to have associations with Oliver Cromwell; certainly one of the earth forts dug to defend the town against the Parliamentary forces is known to have been near St Guthlac's Cross. However, no trace of either fort or Toll House now remains, and the Cross itself has been moved from its original site.



Left, repairing the bank near Peak Hill, Cowbit Road. *The Bull* public house is on the far left. The whole aspect of Brotherhouse Bar was completely changed in the 1950s and early 1960s when the road was widened. Most of the buildings were demolished and St Guthlac's Cross moved, so it is now very difficult to visualise the layout as it was in 1947 when these photographs were taken.



The breach in the North Bank was finally sealed and permanent rebuilding work could begin. Above, a working party on the Bank. The first man on the left is Walter Lyon, who ran along the bank to give the alarm when the water broke through.

Slater's lorries had previously brought stones and a light railway track for transport of materials to the breach. Now the Bedford lorry, with John as driver, brought generators for use with big pumps that were necessary to suck the water off the land. There was far too much for ordinary Fen drainage pumps, some of which were themselves under water. Pumps were therefore brought to the Fens from all over the country and even from Holland for some places. Once they all got going, the water was sucked out quite quickly. Within about a month the land was clear again and the farmers could begin to get back to their animals and sort out what was left of their homes. At Marcus Hardy's farm at Cloot Drove a stack had floated across the road and was thrashed on the road side in the midst of the floodwater.

Amazingly, it was possible to re-sow the crops and, although late, there was a harvest that year.



Two more groups of repair workers on the North Bank