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(incorporating the Cambs and Hunts Archaeological Society)

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Who Were the Fen People?

Polly Hill

In the fenland area which I denote 'the East Cambridgeshire peat fens'¹ the very great majority of those who cultivated the drained fenland, before the grand agricultural revolution of very recent times, did not live *right in the fen* but in a village situated on a fen 'island' or 'upland' such as Isleham, Burwell or Haddenham. Accordingly, the population of 'ordinary fenlanders', whose livelihood was derived directly from toiling on the land, whether as farm labourers or smallholders² or both, was intermingled with the general population of traders, artisans, building workers, publicans and many others who were to be found in all East Anglian villages where farming and farm labouring were formerly the primary occupations. As this was so, is it to be presumed that the 'ordinary fenlander's' way of life resembled that of the 'ordinary rural East Anglian'? Or were fenlanders 'peculiar people', as is so often supposed?³

It was the impossibility of building secure habitations on a foundation of peat, not a craving for village life, which meant that most of those who cultivated this peat fenland were detached from the land. With hardly an exception the fen uplands supported ancient

villages, with Gothic churches, many of them very large,⁴ which were earnestly inspected by Pevsner. Even before the advent of the railway these villages were not nearly as isolated as is commonly supposed, partly because many of them were linked by artificial waterways to the fen river network. People flowed in and out of the villages and most of the parishes in this section of fenland had population densities in 1801 which were of the same order as that for Cambridgeshire generally.

The small proportion of the population in the eastern peat fens which was not in the uplands⁵ occupied habitations which were on small hills, on the hard beds of certain extinct waterways, on the hard edges of heavily embanked rivers, or (to some small extent) on the banks of other waterways. The scientific

¹ See Fig. 1. I am not, of course, claiming that this area typifies the East Anglian fens, whether they be situated in Cambridgeshire, Suffolk or Norfolk; in particular the silt fens must be distinguished from the peat fens. However, constant reiteration that this article is mainly concerned with a specific section of the Cambridgeshire peat fens has been avoided as far as reasonable.

² Smallholders, as distinct from farmers, are usually defined, by fen dwellers and others alike, as those who depend on family labour only — except, perhaps, at harvest time. See Appendix 1.

³ This was certainly the general impression given by several speakers at the 1991 conference of the Cambridge Antiquarian Society — 'Living off the Fen'.

⁴ Burwell church, for instance, might have had a congregation as large as 500.

⁵ It is perhaps appropriately mentioned here that the 'upland' of Wicken, despite its Gothic church, was quite unusual within the context of the Cambridgeshire peat fens, for its maximum altitude was only eight metres, compared to 36 metres at Haddenham, and the habitations in the parish are considerably dispersed, not only at Upware, on the river Cam, but also at Dimmocks Cottage, Padney, High Fen Farm, Fenside Road, Thorn Hall and elsewhere — all on the 1:50,000 O.S. map. Indeed, in 1851 only ten of the total of 27 farmers in the parish lived in the central village; however, one of them at Hall Farm, by the church, farmed the largest acreage revealed by an analysis of detailed census material covering 11 villages in the peat fens in 1851 — on his 1600 acres (rounded figure) he was recorded as employing 36 men, 21 boys and 22 girls. It is no wonder that the famous Wicken Sedge Fen, owned by the National Trust, should lie so close to the centre of the village, but it is wrong to believe that it had never been threatened with drainage. There were about 14 dwellings situated at the end of Wicken Lode, the oldest to be identified dating from 1772. (Information from Sylvia Ballard of the National Trust.)

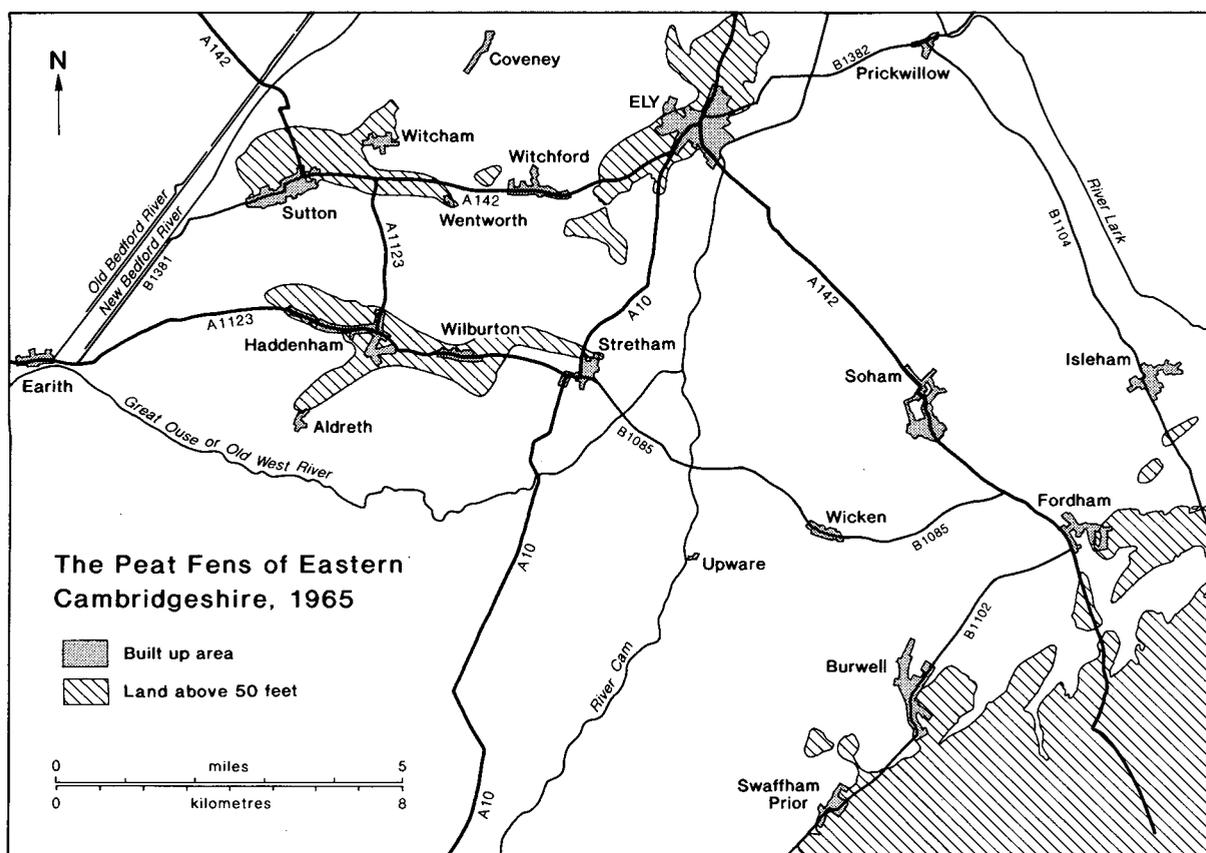


Figure 1. The peat fens of eastern Cambridgeshire, 1965.

community was unaware of the significance of the extinct waterways until 1932 (despite a mention of them by the excellent J.A. Clarke⁶ as long ago as 1852), when an amateur investigator, Major Gordon Fowler, first studied and mapped them;⁷ the original

⁶ *Fen Sketches: Being a Description of the Alluvial District Known as the Great Level of the Fens with a Brief History of the Progressive Improvement in Drainage and Agriculture* (London 1852).

⁷ Although Fowler distinguished more than two types of extinct waterway — see, for example, his 'The extinct waterways of the Fens', *The Geographical Journal* 83 (1934) pp.30-9 — it is nowadays usual to refer only to roddons (known as rodhams in the fen) and slades. Roddons are formed of silt which had been deposited by tidal action; slades occur on the edges of the fens (such as at Isleham Fen, which is near chalk uplands), where tidal influence was negligible or non-existent, so that shell marl was the base. The beds of slades are so hard and compacted that they have often been mistaken for Roman roads, such as those in Isleham parish. See A.K. Astbury, *The Black Fens* 2nd ed. (Wakefield 1970) for the relationship between slades and Roman roads and canals in Isleham fen; and also for his hypothesis that the straight section of the Lark river shown in Fig.2 is artificial (p.33). See, also, C. Taylor *The Cambridgeshire Landscape* (London

publication of his work, which caused a sensation, coincided with the creation of the Fenland Research Committee (1932-40), which was essentially an academic archaeological body.

None of the extinct waterways or small hills was able to support a population of any size and it so happens that a community known as Isleham Fen (see Fig.2), which was strung out for some two miles behind the huge western embankment of the river Lark, was much the most populous lowland 'settlement' in the peat fens. By studying the nineteenth-century history of that Fen community I hope to show that fenlanders would not have been 'peculiar people' even had it happened that they had usually lived on or near their land; in particular I shall stress that they were mobile people, not eccentrics locked up in ignorance of the ways of the wider world.

1973) p.204. I am grateful to Mr S.C.A. Holmes, who was formerly the District Geologist for East Anglia and S.E. England, for valuable information on the extinct waterways — which deserve to be the subject of a research thesis.

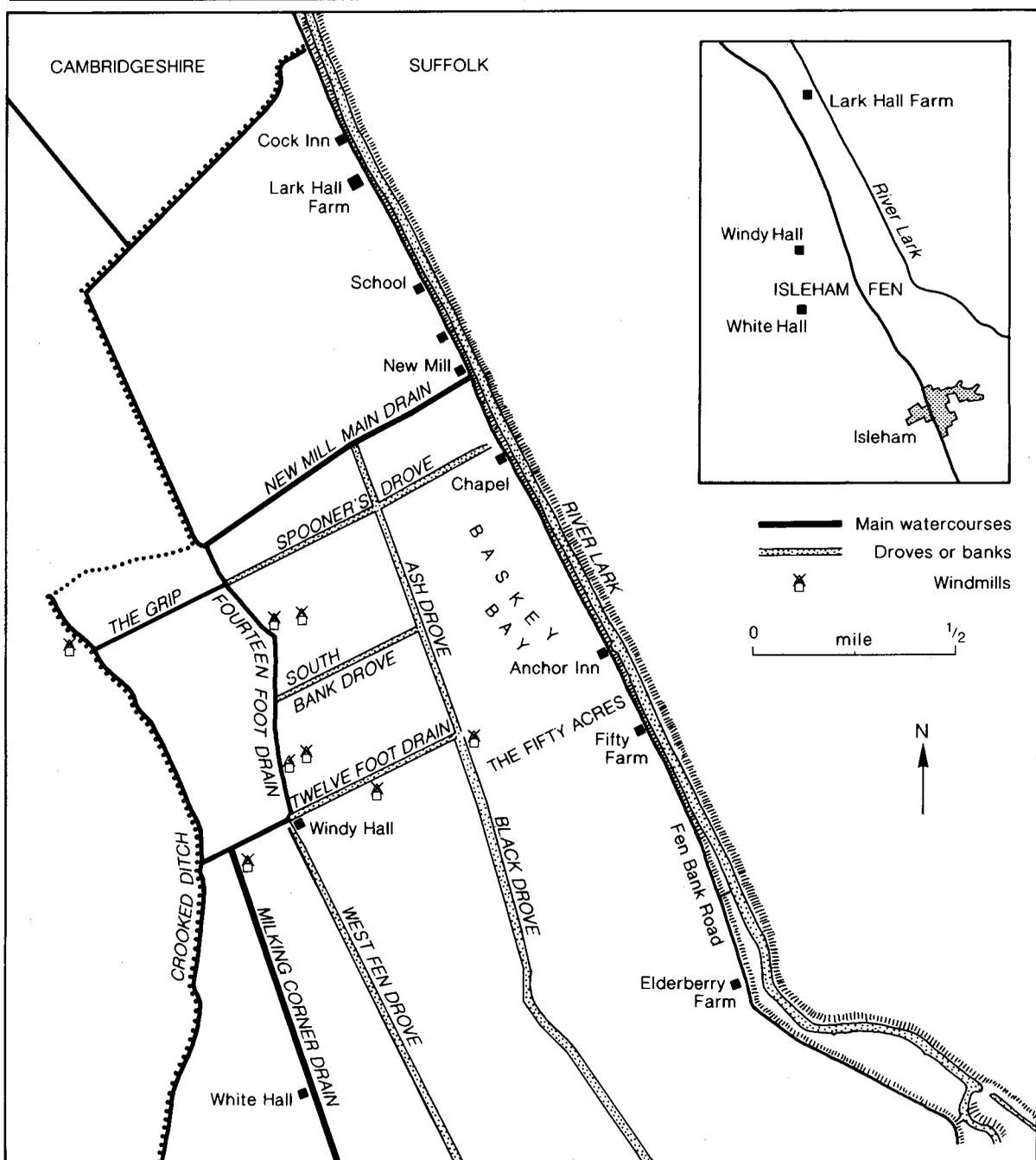


Figure 2. Map of Isleham Fen in 1900.

Life in the fen uplands in modern historical times has been little studied, the notable historians having been, with few exceptions, medievalists or others who stopped short of the nineteenth century. Of course the renowned historical geographer the late H.C. (Sir Clifford) Darby followed up his first book *The Medieval Fenland*⁸ with many publications on later fenland drainage;

⁸ Oxford 1940.

but as a sociological approach has been generally lacking, the glamorous history of the drains has ousted the mundane history of the people.

There is also the fact that, as Joan Thirsk has put it,⁹ rural historians of the nineteenth century have found it so 'much easier to

⁹ In J. Thirsk and J. Imray (eds), *Suffolk Farming in the Nineteenth Century* (Ipswich: Suffolk Records Society 1958) p.17.

generalise than to particularise'. Because farming was so depressed for nearly two-thirds of that century a great proportion of the literature on it sprang from anxiety about the future.

In consequence, surviving records consist to a large extent of summary conclusions, generalisations and recipes for salvation ... *The strong sense of localism which emerges from the study of husbandry in earlier centuries tends to be submerged in the nineteenth century by the weight of information illustrating national trends.* [My italics.]

More recently, the objective study of English country life has been much neglected and our view of it has become 'obscured by a sentimental or romantic outlook which is a peculiar characteristic of the English'¹⁰ — how otherwise can the extraordinary popularity and respectability of *Akenfield*¹¹ be explained? False notions of life in the fens as a peculiar type of rural idyll have been reflected in the great popularity of the novel *Waterland*¹² by Graham Swift who has hardly any personal experience of the fen background.

My great difficulty in discussing the fens in ordinary Cambridge circles has been that the stereotypical notion of 'rural idyll', touched as it is with benign eccentricity, is heavily qualified by dogged derogatory attitudes. Any mention that one is 'working on the fens' is almost bound to provoke immediate reflexes on such matters as incest, wide-spread drug-taking, consanguineal marriage and over-large families. I doubt if any of these beliefs is properly justified by present evidence and I tentatively suggest that they satisfy an emotional need for an exotic hinterland, which relieves the boredom of living in a city which is not in the fens, though close to sea level.

Of course nowadays, at least in the eastern Cambridgeshire peat fens, the term 'fenlander' has little meaning. Despite the astonishing post-war agricultural revolution the fen *land* still exists, for even though much of it has come to resemble a prairie, it will always continue to require heavy and

intricate drainage. But relatively very few of those who live in the ancient uplands now derive their livelihood from the land. In 1989 I was told that there were only two farm workers living in Isleham village, compared to over 200 in 1851.¹³ The farm workers who are employed by the great agribusinesses which now cultivate much land in Isleham and Soham parishes are all mobile in the double sense that they sit all day on heavy agricultural machinery and travel to work by car, often from some distance away.

Before examining the history of the defunct community known as Isleham Fen, I touch on the nineteenth-century background in the eastern Cambridgeshire fens, with special reference to demography. As already noted, the fen parishes were well populated in 1801, despite the concentration of populations in the uplands. The acreage per head of population for Staploe Hundred,¹⁴ in which nine parishes, including Isleham, Burwell and Wicken, were grouped, was 6.2, a figure equal to that for Cambridgeshire as a whole; and within that Hundred the fen parishes had the highest population densities. The corresponding area per head for Staine Hundred, which included the Swaffhams, was 7.4 acres; and for the individual parishes of Haddenham, Stretham, Sutton and Wilburton, all in Witchford South Hundred, the figures varied only between 6.8 and 8.2 acres. Considering the differing circumstances of each parish, including the varying proportions of each area which consisted of hard upland or of fen arable and grazing grounds, as well as the differing occupational compositions of the village populations, which is revealed by the censuses, it is evident that fenlanders were quite mobile.

Between 1801 and 1851 the population of each fen parish expanded greatly and regularly. Some parishes, notably Soham and Fordham, whose populations increased by as much as 135% and 126% in this period, had presumably attracted an influx of farm workers from neighbouring parishes.

Between 1851 and 1861 something extraordinary happened in Cambridgeshire: the population after rising very steadily since 1801, suddenly fell by 5% — i.e. from

¹⁰ W.M. Williams, 'The social study of family farming', in D.R. Mills (ed.), *English Rural Communities* (London 1973) p.116.

¹¹ R. Blyth, *Akenfield: Portrait of an English Village* (Harmondsworth: Penguin 1972).

¹² (London 1963). The book jacket describes Swift's fenland, with its fictional geography and place names, as 'not just a superb evocation of place but also a vision of England and the strange, stubborn English temperament'. 'This Fenland, this palpable earth raised out of the flood by centuries of toil ... is a magical a miraculous land.'

¹³ The exact figure is unknown. As many as 182 householders were recorded in the census as being farm labourers, but the occupations of unmarried sons were not always recorded.

¹⁴ Unfortunately the projected volume of the *Victoria County History* which relates to this area has not yet been published.

185,000 to 176,000. There was no other English county which suffered a larger decrease and there were only three other counties whose populations did not increase. While this remarkable change (remarkable within the whole English context) affected Cambridgeshire generally, for a majority of parishes showed some population decline, it was particularly consistent and marked in the parishes within the areas of the peat fens, both east and west of the Bedford rivers.

The authorities¹⁵ are agreed that outward migration (probably mainly to northern cities), together with some migration overseas, were the main causes of this sudden population decrease and certainly changes in underlying vital statistics (birth and death rates) would be unlikely to have varied so much as between neighbouring parishes, despite occasional localised cholera epidemics, as to account for the large variations in population decline. So it seems that many fenlanders, far from being embedded in ignorant isolation in the fens, were alert to the possibilities offered by removal.

The drop in population in 1851–61 heralded a sustained long term decline. In most parishes, in the eastern peat fens, populations fell steadily in each decade after 1851 until the end of the century and in several of them for much longer — thus the population of Isleham parish fell in each decade between 1851 and 1961. However, people moved into as well as out of the fen parishes, high mobility having been encouraged by railway development. In a few parishes, notably Burwell, Haddenham and Wicken, the population decline was temporarily stemmed, if it was not stopped, in 1861–71, owing to the influx of workers for coprolite digging.¹⁶

As many as 21 people left Isleham parish for America in March 1852, complaining that 'free trade had produced no work and no money'¹⁷ — they alluded, of course, to the agricultural depression which followed the

1846 repeal of the corn laws. Earlier, in April 1851 it was reported¹⁸ that as many as 150 people were similarly due to leave Soham — 'some in debt from bad crops and bad prices'.

Turning to railway development, Ely was linked by rail to Cambridge and London as early as 1845 and in 1846 the line from Ely to March and Peterborough was opened — it was no wonder that the horizons of fenlanders were widened in the 1850s. Most interestingly, the intricate rail network in the eastern Cambridgeshire peat fenland was carefully designed to ensure that *nearly all the uplands of any importance were within a mile or two of a station* and in due course this did much to promote market gardening and horticulture — not activities which readily spring to mind as flourishing particularly in the fens in the last century.

As the *Sixth Report of the Children's Employment Commission, 1867*, provides a vivid, unrivalled and detailed account of the miserable employment conditions which prevailed in the eastern peat fens, it is the subject of Appendix 2 below. The Commission was concerned to examine the notorious gang system which had involved groups of children, some as young as seven, together with women (few of whom were married) in working on farms under a man called a ganger; it may have existed unfettered in the fens for some half a century until, following the Commission's report, the Gangs Act of 1869 was passed.¹⁹

It has sometimes been supposed that these gangs travelled from place to place and involved married women in abandoning their households. But this is a myth for it is clear from the evidence presented to the Commission that the fenland gangs were essentially devices for escorting children and young people *by day* from their homes on the hard uplands to their work on farms up to three or four miles away. One witness noted that the fenland population was located for the most part in large towns or villages 'a few cottages only being distributed about the fen'.²⁰ While he regarded the want of a proper distribution of cottages over the lands on which labourers were employed as a 'manifest evil', neither he

¹⁵ Including H.C. Darby, 'The movement of population to and from Cambridgeshire between 1851 and 1861', *The Geographical Journal* 110 (1943) pp.118–25. See also R. Butlin, 'Small-scale urban and industrial development in northeast Cambridgeshire in the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries', in U. Sporrang (ed.), *The Transformation of Rural Society, Economy and Landscape* (Stockholm 1990) pp.217–26.

¹⁶ Coprolites were phosphatic nodules, which were found beneath the peat, on top of gault clay, in certain Cambridgeshire parishes, which were extracted for use as fertilisers; quite large numbers of labourers were briefly employed at wages much higher than those of farm workers.

¹⁷ *Cambridge Chronicle* (20 March 1852).

¹⁸ *Ibid.* (10 April 1851).

¹⁹ Which controlled the public, though not the private gangs — the latter having been recruited by an employer of the farmer for whom the gang worked.

²⁰ F.D. Longe, *Children's Employment Commission HMSO 3796* (London 1867) p.12 (see Appendix 2).

nor anyone else noted the impossibility of building lines of cottages on peat!²¹

The general expansion in the scale of fenland farming away from the hard uplands, consequent upon improved drainage and farming techniques, was an adequate explanation for the persistence of this disgracefully exploitative system. Besides, many farmers were attracted by its cheapness,²² despite the fact that by 1851, as the detailed population censuses show, very few 'agricultural servants', i.e. unmarried men who lodged with their masters, continued to be employed, so that many labourers had become essentially casual workers, whose work was irregular and seasonal and whose mobility was pronounced.

The question of female employment in the fens in the last century is fraught with difficulty, not only because, as we shall see, census enumerators in rural areas ignored women's occupations, but also because it is possible that women became marginalised as time went by owing to the introduction of new agricultural tools and equipment, including mowing and reaping machines in the 1850s and 1860s — the male occupation of 'claying' had become well established as early as 1830.²³ However, it seems that in the 1860s it was not uncommon for farmers to employ their labourers' wives and maybe some of their children.²⁴

Wheat and barley were the predominant crops in the peat fens; owing to claying they flourished luxuriantly — as did the weeds which were conveniently and cheaply cleared by the gangs. There were numerous other crops, notably cole seed, resembling the pre-

sent day oilseed rape. Probably it was only with the development of horticulture, towards the end of the century, that married women had proper employment, though smallholders' wives had always had many duties on the land and in the care of livestock.

Darby regarded the cutting and drying of turf (or peat) as one of the characteristic male occupations of the medieval fenland;²⁵ it was still very important in the last century when much peat was sent by water to Cambridge, though serious statistical obstacles prevent its proper study.²⁶ However, as will be seen, turf digging, despite its marked seasonality, was much the most dependable type of occupation in Isleham Fen in mid-century, presumably because it was more remunerative than farm-labouring. From the angle of the census enumerator the fact that most turf cutters were also farm labourers made it difficult to decide on the main occupation — which was usually the only one to be recorded. And those turf cutters who worked on land that they owned, or more probably rented, were effectively smallholders.

Fortunately both Godwin²⁷ and Marshall²⁸ provide us with excellent descriptions of turbarry. Marshall is especially strong on the elaborate and ingenious drying process, in which women and children often participated.

The occupation of 'windmill operator' is missing from the nineteenth-century censuses for the very good reason that most windmills were small devices owned by individual smallholders-cum-labourers, which were operated intermittently. Perhaps one day archaeologists may find it possible to make proper estimates of the numbers of drainage windpumps that once stood in the peat fens and elsewhere, for even in these days of agribusiness the farmland must still be drained by drains and dykes on which most of the old mills stood;²⁹ meanwhile it is impossible to assess the reliability of R.G. Baker's well-known map of Cambridgeshire, 1821, on which more than 200 windpumps are shown. Most of these devices were pre-

²¹ See Appendix 2. J. Kitteringham, 'Country work girls in nineteenth-century England', in R. Samuel (ed.), *Village Life and Labour* (London 1975) p.98, wrongly explained that this was because 'there were many "closed" parishes, where cottages had been pulled down by their owners to avoid liability for poor rates, while their tenants moved away to "open" parishes where they could find places to live'.

²² Farm wages were notably low in East Anglia, but as piece rates were often paid there are no reliable statistics. (Workers at Exning, near Newmarket, just south of the fens, who actually struck for a rise in weekly wages from 13s to 14s, were defeated by a lockout of 1874.)

²³ The clay from beneath the peat was disinterred by cutting trenches and was spread over the land, the block soil being returned to the trench. See D. Summers, *The Great Level: A History of Drainage and Land Reclamation in the Fens* (Newton Abbot 1976) p.194.

²⁴ *Children's Employment Commission*. See also Kitteringham, *op. cit.*, for the general suggestion that employers preferred labourers with working families.

²⁵ *The Medieval Fenland* pp.82 *et seq.*

²⁶ The published, summarised census statistics never mentioned this occupation which must have been subsumed under some other heading such as farm labourer, as there was no category of 'other'.

²⁷ Sir Harry Godwin, *Fenland: Its Ancient Past and Uncertain Future* (Cambridge 1978).

²⁸ Sibyl Marshall, *Fenland Chronicle* (Cambridge 1967).

²⁹ Drains, which are fed by dykes, are the main channels; they cannot feed into the elevated rivers unless the water is lifted.

sumably small wooden tarred structures, owned by individuals, which were later sometimes known as 'outliers' or 'skeleton mills'.³⁰ With their flapping cloth 'common sails', which some say were usually white or black, but which might sometimes have been red, such mills were analogous to the farm tools and equipment used by smallholders and farm workers; especially in summer, there was usually insufficient wind for their operation.

I hope readers will agree that the important matter of the post-Vermuyden public drainage systems, which were based successively on steam, diesel and electricity, which has received so much distinguished attention, may suitably be neglected here — taking for granted that that good servant steam transformed the lives of many fenlanders. The first Cambridgeshire steam engine was erected at Littleport and Downham where 80 windpumps were supplemented by a 30 h.p. steam engine at Fen Mile Bank in 1819–20; the second was at Upware (Fig. 1). The famous Stretham engine, which is well preserved today, was erected in 1831. Although by 1850 there were at least 15 steam engines in Cambridgeshire, as late as 1888 about a third of all the drainage mills in the peat fens were still wind engines.³¹

In the Cambridgeshire peat fens the shrinkage and wastage of the peat, which had followed the Vermuyden drainage, became much more pronounced as steam replaced wind; however, the outflows were much improved and floods were far less alarming than in earlier times. The famous Holme post, which is depicted in so many books, was set up near Whittlesey Mere in 1848, when steam had reached its full development; the post showed that by 1932 the total thickness of peat had diminished from 24 to ten feet.

The History of Isleham Fen

To the north-northwest of the ancient village of Isleham³² lies the land of Isleham fen. To the east is the river Lark which, like all rivers in the Cambridgeshire peat fens, resembles an elevated aqueduct, for it flows high above the level of the surrounding peat fenland,³³ which has sunk over the centuries owing to drainage. Known at one time as the Mildenhall river, the Lark here marks the boundary between Cambridgeshire and Suffolk; it is a tributary of the Great Ouse and comes from Bury St Edmunds.

It is likely that the community of Isleham Fen (here denoted the Fen) first came into existence in the last quarter of the eighteenth century. Just after the rebuilding of Denver sluice in 1748–50, an Act of Parliament of 1754–8 had established a Drainage Commission for the Soham and Middle Fen Drainage District, an area of some 16,000 acres, in which the Fen was situated, which, according to the Act's preamble, had 'for divers years' been 'annoyed with waters' to the 'great loss and impoverishment' of its inhabitants. Among the powers of the Commissioners, who were mainly large landowners, were to erect large windmills to improve the drains, including one which ran from near Isleham village through the Fen, and to strengthen the banks of rivers including the Lark. The drainage tax, which was to be levied only on lands subject to inundation, was to be, initially, at the heavy rate of two shillings per acre annually. Included among the 'common grounds', which were to be taxed at half the normal rate, was the Fifty Acre Farm of Isleham Fen which then, as now, was owned by a charity. It was ominously stated that those convicted of cutting down or destroying banks, mills, etc., might be transported.

The Middle Fen Commissioners (this was their usual title) were soon overwhelmed by

³⁰ Possibly somewhat similar to that at the National Trust property at Wicken Fen, which came from the neighbouring Burwell Fen; the inner workings of this mill probably date from 1886, but the outer structure was made in 1908 — the earliest mills of this type at Burwell Fen were erected in 1841. Presumably it had been by the erection of even more rudimentary windpumps that private farmers, showing great enterprise and initiative, had avoided the total calamity that would otherwise have resulted from the shrinkage and wastage of the peat which had followed Vermuyden's drainage — a disaster which had culminated in the collapse of Denver sluice in 1715. (For the detailed drainage of Swaffham and Burwell Fens see C. Taylor, *op. cit.* pp.210–21.)

³¹ H.C. Darby, *The Changing Fenland* (Cambridge 1963) Fig.100.

³² Pronounced Izleham — it was Gisleham in the Domesday Book.

³³ Nowadays the Fenbank road stands at exactly sea level; the lowest point in Isleham parish away from the river has an altitude of minus two metres — it is at the junction of the Twelve and Fourteen Foot Drains (Fig.2).

financial problems³⁴ as well as by floods.³⁵ In 1777 a great tract of Middle Fen which had been given up and abandoned could be seen half a mile from Ely: 'there you see the ruins of Windmills, the last efforts of an industrious people'.³⁶ Again, in 1799 there were deep floods between Ely and Soham, which must have affected Isleham Fen.

Is the significance of the agricultural revolution which occurred in the fens in the first half of the last century sufficiently appreciated? This is the period when 'the gunning-boat and fish-net were relinquished for the plough and spade', the 'improving farms' soon bringing 'ample remuneration to the masters and a more comfortable subsistence to the men'³⁷ — the period when the increased demand for employed farm labourers accounted for the growth of Isleham Fen. In 1852 Clarke wrote that '... under-draining, bone-manuring, guano, ridge-culture, four-course-system, two-handled ploughs, drills, cake-breakers, corn-crushers, horse-shoes, thrashing-machines, Leicester rams, improved short-horns, &c...' had all been mainly invented or brought into play since 1800.³⁸ However, he was certainly wrong when he insisted that around the turn of the eighteenth century most grazing land had been converted into tillage owing to improved drainage and enclosure, for in many areas summer grazing lands persisted well into this century.

The Cock Inn, which was situated to the extreme north of the Fen, was licensed as early as 1771; it survived for about a couple of centuries. Though it may have been established primarily for the benefit of watermen on the Lark, two other nearby public houses,

the Anchor (licensed in 1812) and the Horse and Groom (1817) had surely been mainly intended for the Fen community.

In 1841 the total population of Fenbank was 268.³⁹ Such a considerable population, mainly consisting of cottagers who were farm labourers and/or peat cutters, must have built up slowly over a period. The earliest map which is on a scale large enough to indicate individual dwellings was R.G. Baker's aforementioned publication of 1821, which marked the Fenbank road behind the Lark embankment, various habitations and at least eight windpumps close to the river. The earliest documentary reference⁴⁰ to the existence of a farm at the Fen would suggest that the farmstead was not an isolated residence, for Lark Hall Farm⁴¹ was a large mature holding of some 300 acres with yards, gardens and plantations. Finally, the erection of an isolated hut in 1816, about a mile west of the river, on a five-foot high hard land which was part of a larger slade, was evidence for the existence of a community closer than Isleham village; the settlement on this slade came to be known as Windy Hall (see Fig.3), the interesting and long history of which is briefly related below.

The unpublished⁴² detailed census statistics by household, which were first collected in 1841 (and which, owing to the operation of a hundred-year secrecy rule, are available only until 1891) provide the basis of this history. Although this material is much consulted by numerous members of the public in pursuit of their family histories, not much use of it has been made so far by historians of the Cambridgeshire fens.

For each individual household the names of all members, including children, were recorded, as well as the relationship to the household head, age and birthplace; while the 'main occupation' (see below) of the male household head was nearly always recorded (there were few female householders), female occupations were hardly ever recorded.⁴³ Although in 1841 and for some decades to

³⁴ In 1787 arrears of taxes were as high as £3089. But the Commissioners continued to call meetings, for otherwise the whole Middle Fen would have become inundated (from detailed documents kindly made available by Archer & Archer of Ely, the lawyers who later took over the collection of the Middle Fen drainage rates). The trouble with the private millers was that they tended to throw water at each other.

³⁵ As in Burnt Fen, north of Prickwillow. See the excellent pamphlet by the late J. Beckett, *The Urgent Hour: The Drainage of the Burnt Fen District in the South Level of the Fens 1760-1981* (Ely: Local History Publications Board 1974). (High opportunities of undertaking similar work on other Drainage Commissions await the eager historian interested in post-Vermuyden drainage; the first such Commission to be created was that for the Haddenham etc. Level in 1727.)

³⁶ According to a report cited in H.C. Darby, *The Draining of the Fens* (Cambridge 1956) p.130.

³⁷ J.A. Clarke, *op. cit.* p.146. (This perspicacious, lively author realised that many cottagers continued, after the general drainage, to live in the uplands — which he denoted the 'hards' or islands.)

³⁸ *Ibid.* p.140.

³⁹ As the four previous censuses related to Isleham Parish as a whole, individual households not being distinguished, the earlier population of the Fen is unascertainable.

⁴⁰ *Cambridge Chronicle* (3 March 1815).

⁴¹ In about 1833 the holding was at least 304 acres in extent, in two distinct portions, each extending back a mile or so from the river.

⁴² Available on microfiche in the Cambridgeshire Record Office.

⁴³ Even in villages proper, it was only when a woman had an unusual non-farming occupation, such as publican or school teacher, that it might have been recorded.

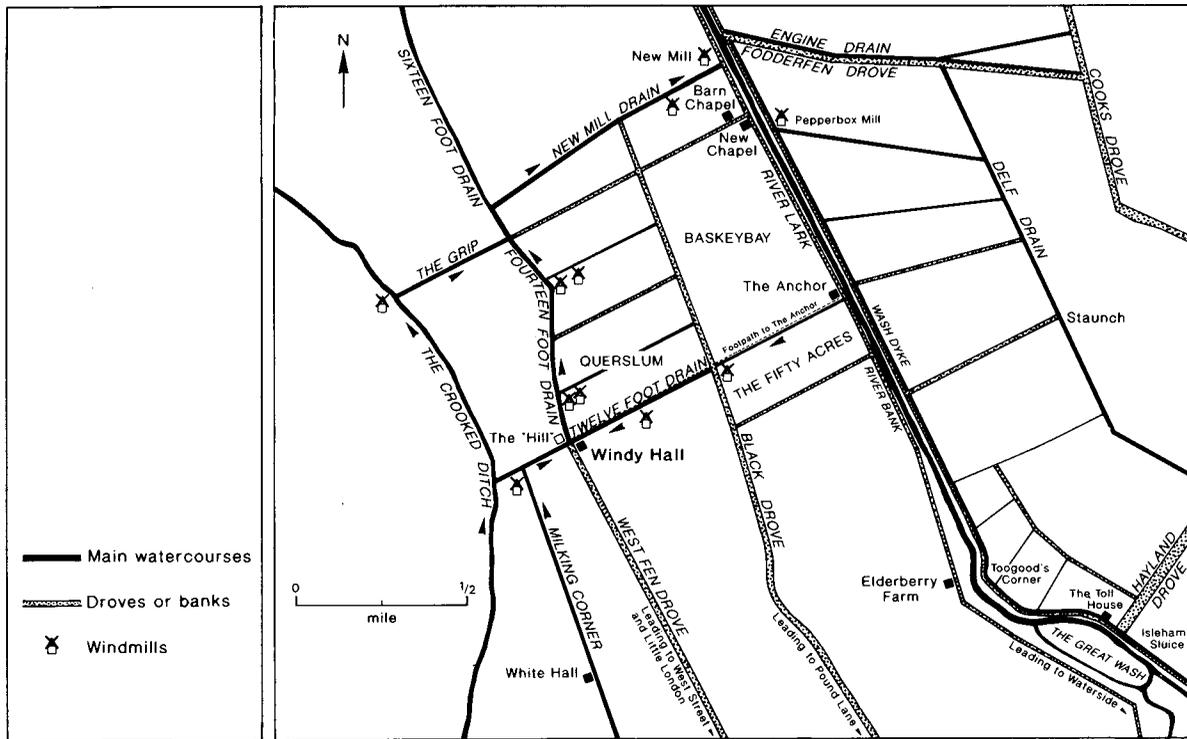


Figure 3. This map of Windy Hall and its environs is reproduced, with permission, from the genealogical project of Edward and Thomas Wells.
(The Isleham to Prickwillow road (B1104 in Fig.1) was not completed until 1940.)

come, the censuses were the only source of official published sequences of statistics relating to numbers of farmers and their acreages in Britain generally, examination of sequences of unpublished detailed figures, which were of course always bulked in published census reports, suggests that they were quite inaccurate and defective.⁴⁴ Acreages, which sometimes went unreported, were apt to be guessed or rounded, especially when the holding consisted of a number of separate farms, numbers of labourers were often not reported (as they should have been) and enumerators were often hard put to it to determine whether farming was the main occupation. Enumerators occasionally overcame the latter problem by listing two or more occupations; but they did this unsystematically so that, for example, the farmer/publicans, who were important people in the Fen, might have happened to have been given either occupation. But the research worker cannot but be thankful for

⁴⁴ There were many difficulties. Thus, for example, the holdings of larger farmers (proper) often consisted of several or even many separate 'plots' or farms and smallholders did not necessarily think in terms of acreages at all. See Appendix 1.

such detailed material, and strive to make the best use of it, warts and all.⁴⁵

In all the fen uplands, without exception, the main recorded male occupation was 'agricultural labourer' (sometimes denoted 'labourer'); but, as already noted, considerable proportions of all male householders had other primary occupations.⁴⁶ However, the

⁴⁵ One has to sympathise with the enumerators whose task was made very difficult by urban bias over the classification of occupations, and false assumptions about the degree of literacy, such that each respondent was supposed to fill in his own census schedule. It is interesting to reflect that as most of the men were out all day, many of the respondents must have been women, which perhaps accounts for the apparent accuracy of most age-reporting, of children in particular.

⁴⁶ In 1851 about a half (48%) of the 379 male householders in Isleham village were agricultural (or general) labourers or turfmen; as, in addition, 11% of householders were farmers, nearly two-thirds of the householders gained their livelihood directly from the land. A great diversity of other occupations supported the remaining 110 householders. Among them were 41 artisans, builders, etc. (including blacksmiths and wheelwrights); 16 watermen and bargees (indicating the importance of water transport to the village); 15 traders, shopkeepers etc. (including four grocer/drapers and three butchers); and eight shoemakers. At that time the village had a large number of public houses or beerhouses;

Fen was different: there the very great majority of all male householders were agricultural labourers, smallholders or peat diggers, sometimes (to the confusion of enumerators) pursuing two or all of these occupations. Also the Fen dwellers were better able to pursue subsistence activities (see below).

In 1841, as in later years, the great bulk of the Fen population consisted of nuclear families, living in tiny cottages, which were straggled out for about two miles (like beads on a chain, from which some beads were missing), behind the huge Lark embankment, over which domestic water supplies were drawn. The only other buildings were one large farmstead, four public houses (the newest being the Spade and Beckett) and a Baptist chapel erected in 1841. The employed agricultural labourers would have worked on Lark Hall or the Fifty Acre farms, or with farmers resident in Isleham village or in other nearby parishes in Cambridgeshire or Suffolk.

From the run of six censuses, 1841–91, it is clear that most men, as well as women, married in their early or mid-twenties and that then, as in this century, the Fen knew no old maids and few widowers. Except, for some unknown reason, in 1851⁴⁷ the very great majority of households consisted only of a husband and wife, or a widowed person, with or without unmarried children; grandparents were very rare. It was only in unusual circumstances, such as where widowed mothers were in charge of farms or a public house, that sons remained at home, or returned home, after marriage, a rule which was perhaps not wholly explicable in terms of the small size of most cottages, for the youngest son might, at least temporarily, have occupied the second bedroom. Then, as in this century, if a prospective bridegroom were unable to find an empty cottage on Fenbank, he would necessarily have removed. So mobile was the population that it may be that some sons preferred, in any case, to remove on marriage to start a new life,

many of the publicans must have had other important occupations, such as farmer, for the recorded number of four in the census was absurdly low. (The non-farming population was particularly mobile: thus in 1851 about a third of it had been born outside Isleham parish.)

⁴⁷ In that year as many as 12 of the 59 households included 'visitors' or 'lodgers', many of whom were also found in Isleham village; seven of the 24 outsiders were children. There were only four uninhabited cottages in the Fen, so even if they were not tied and were in good repair they could not have accommodated all the outsiders.

especially as their wives were often not Fen women.

In 1841 about a quarter of all male householders (29%) and of their wives (23%) had been born outside Cambridgeshire; judging from later censuses,⁴⁸ they had probably mostly come from Suffolk parishes just over the river, notably Mildenhall. Of course there is no means of judging the degree to which the Fen population had originated in Isleham village.

Turning to the male householders' occupations that were recorded for the Fen in 1841, it seems best to group together 'labourers' (20 of them) and 'agricultural labourers' (numbering eight) on the supposition that many of them would have been employed on both drainage and agricultural work, in which case nearly a half of these 60 men would have been categorised as 'farm workers' in this century. Otherwise there were ten turf diggers (who presumably also had other occupations), six turfmen (who were presumably turf traders), four publicans, two watermen, and a carter, a gamekeeper, a wheelwright, a gardener and a carpenter. For various reasons no reliability attaches to the figure of five 'farmers'.⁴⁹

The 1841 census, like all subsequent ones, is silent on the occupations, if any, of women and children — probably some of them were gang workers? Elderly Fen women who had been employed farm workers in the 1930s had no opinion as to whether they were following in their grandmothers' footsteps;⁵⁰ but we may take it for granted that Fen women had always been interested in the rearing of small livestock and that wives of smallholders worked hard on their husband's farms.

Turning to 1851 when the Fen population (including Windy Hall) reached its peak of 293 (in 59 households, three of them headed by women), the most striking change since 1841 was the degree to which individual agricultural labouring families had moved out to be replaced by others. Only seven of the total number of 27 agricultural labourers in 1851 had been there in 1841 and of the 20 new

⁴⁸ The 1841 census was inferior in a number of ways, one of which was its failure to record the actual birthplace, which was given as either Cambridgeshire or elsewhere. (The 1991 census relapsed in a somewhat similar way.)

⁴⁹ Thus no publicans were recorded as being farmers as they were in subsequent censuses. The very word 'farmer' was probably apt to be found too awe-inspiring by those who regarded themselves as smallholders.

⁵⁰ So mobile were Fen people that few of their grandparents had lived in the Fen, their names usually being unknown.

names none (with the possible exception of a few called Brown) could possibly have been sons who had been living with their fathers in 1841. So the turnover of labourers had involved the recruitment of new men.⁵¹ However, it was interesting to find that the turf cutters were a much more stable element in the population: of the 16 men so occupied in 1851, as many as nine had been there in 1841, and two of them were the sons of former turf cutters.

In 1851 only 64% of the male householders in the Fen, and 49% of the wives and widows, had been born in Isleham parish. As nearly all of those from other parishes had come from localities within, say, ten miles of the Fen, one should imagine labourers as having been constantly walking about in search of work.

The census figures for farmers in 1851 are again quite suspect: there were supposed to have been only three of them, one at Lark Hall Farm, one a son of the late publican at the Cock Inn (30 acres) and one smallholder (seven acres). But as was the case until the 1930s, it is safe to say that most Fen labourers were employed by farmers living elsewhere.

Between 1851 and 1861 there was possibly little long-distance removal from the Fen, the population having fallen by only eight persons to 285. But however this may have been, the composition of the population continued to change all the time, and only three of the 33 new household heads in 1861 were sons of men who had been there in 1851. As many as five of the seven householders who were classified as farmers were connected with the beer trade; two were publicans, one was an ex-publican and there were a widow and a son of a former publican. The two actual publicans were a newcomer from Hertfordshire and one William Aves, who was probably the only Fen man (apart from those at Windy Hall) whose descendants were still in the Fen in the 1930s.

It is as unnecessary, as it would be tedious, to relate more than a few of the detailed census figures for 1871 to 1891, as the trends that had already established themselves were later sustained, the composition of the declining population continuing to undergo great change. In 1891, when the population (217) was only 74% of its peak in 1851, the number of households was no smaller, average household size

having fallen from 5.0 to 3.6 persons. In 1881 as many as six households were headed by widows and as the censuses are, in general, so neglectful of the occupations of women, it is interesting to identify them. Three of these widows had taken over their husband's farms. They were Susan Watson, publican of the Horse and Groom, Mary Ann Human who employed three men on her farm of 43 acres, and Sarah Brown who employed two men on her farm of 54 acres, although she had two unmarried sons living with her. The other three widows were a nurse and the widows of a fisherman and a labourer.

In the 1891 census 11 farmers and one farm bailiff were enumerated — acreages went unrecorded, but four of them were for once denoted 'small farmers'. Apart from one bargeman, all the working male householders were denoted 'agricultural labourers' though presumably some of them might have derived more income from peat digging, which was still flourishing; a Church of England school having been established in 1879 there was also a teacher. (A new Baptist chapel had been built in 1872.)

It is clear from the censuses that every male householder regarded himself as having a formal main occupation (however intermittent that may have been) and that most of the farm workers were employed by farmers resident elsewhere (see Appendix 1). But most ordinary Fen farm workers in the last century would presumably have resembled those in the 1930s⁵² in having supplemented their wages by means of such occupations as the rearing of animals (pigs, horses, cattle and fowls), the cultivation of their garden plots or allotments (growing vegetables, notably potatoes, for household consumption and possibly flowers for sale), fishing⁵³ (notably for eels), the catching of wild fowl and moles (for skins) — all these and other subsidiary occupations, which are popularly regarded as having been those on which fenlanders were

⁵¹ Judging from the Isleham Burial Register very few labourers had died since 1841. (Incidentally, corpses cannot be buried in peat.)

⁵² My enquiries relating to the 1930s were based on conversations with former Fen dwellers; most of whom were then resident in Isleham village for the Fen community had completely collapsed, though very slowly, over a period of about 25 years after 1945. (Unfortunately my brief article 'The rise and fall of a fen community', *Cambridge Anthropology* 12 [1987] [actually 1989] pp.67-75, has been superseded by my later work and my privately printed booklet *The History of Isleham Fen in the 1930s* [1990] is out of print.)

⁵³ The Anglian Water Authority finally killed off all the fish in the river Lark by discharging excess effluent from its sewage works at Mildenhall, for which act it was convicted in July 1988, receiving a small fine.

primarily dependent,⁵⁴ are well described by Elijah Wells,⁵⁵ who was born in Isleham in 1896.

Although the male occupants of the remote Windy Hall would have had special opportunities to pursue such 'subsistence activities', until 1881 they were always denoted as labourers or peat cutters in the censuses. Thanks to the magisterial genealogical work of two of the great grandsons of a son of the founder of Windy Hall⁵⁶ — in which many hundreds of their forebear's descendants are identified, and where much valuable material relating to the rather mundane history of Fenbank is also provided — the slowly changing fortunes of this small branch of the well-known and very large Wells family is documented. Descendants of the original Thomas Wells (1817-99) — he was the third son of the founder Joseph Wells (1773-1858) — were at Windy Hall until 1945.

There were many drains and dykes near Windy Hall, which was close to the Crooked Ditch which carried spring water from the chalk hills to the south (Fig.3). Dozens of different people held land in the area, which was known as Querslum (i.e. Quarrelsome); it abounded with windpumps and at one stage Thomas Wells operated at least one of them himself.

When a member of the Wells family married he was allotted land on the slade on

which to build a new dwelling, of which there were five in 1841; very few Wells families removed to Fenbank, though several (at least) migrated in mid-century to northern cities to work in cotton or woollen mills. A few years ago the Wells genealogists identified some 400 descendants of the original Thomas;⁵⁷ they were very widely dispersed.

In the 1851 census seven out of ten of Joseph's grandchildren were denoted 'scholars' in the census, because they were attending the Sunday School⁵⁸ at the Barn Chapel on Fenbank; like many other Fen dwellers, members of the Wells family were ardent dissenters. In 1881 Thomas Wells was at last recorded as cultivating 23 acres. It is hard to believe that he and the other Windy Hall residents had all abstained from cultivation on their own account until then, especially as, in earlier times (though perhaps not at Querslum?), it had still sometimes been possible to 'appropriate land' by the mere act of cultivating it.⁵⁹

In the 1930s there were only three other families, two of whom were connected with the beer trade, whose forebears could be traced back (say) half a century; a member of the Aves family (p. 107 above) was then remembered as having grown the new crop, sugar beet, before the beet factory was opened at Queen Adelaide, near Ely, in 1925. Throughout the nineteenth century, the publicans were the undoubted 'aristocrats' of the Fen,⁶⁰ and their families intermarried. A widow would usually have succeeded her husband both as licensee and smallholder, being in turn succeeded, if only in the former position, by a son. For men, but not for women, the public houses would have been the community's social centres. Otherwise

⁵⁴ J.A. Clarke, *op. cit.* p.141, supposed that outside the fen uplands there was 'a wilder race of fishermen and fowlers — rude amphibious men, wading through plashes on stilts, trapping waterfowl in nets, skimming the broad and ready acres in boats, stalking over morasses with leather breeches, leggings, and jack-boots, and journeying annually to Sturbeach [Sturbridge] Fair, at Cambridge, to purchase the requisite clothing for their families.' It is one of the main contentions of this article that from the early nineteenth century onwards such men would usually have been ordinary fenlanders, who derived their main livelihood from farm labouring, and/or peat digging — work which was apt to be intermittent. Clarke noted (p.262) that while the demand for labourers had increased consequent upon drainage and enclosure, the real income of agricultural labourers had not risen; and, owing to the increased population, 'fishing and fowling' would not 'suffice' as it had done at one time (p.263).

⁵⁵ *Fenland Boyhood: A Fenman Remembers the Pastimes, Skills and Landscapes of a Lost Paradise* (Mildenhall: Museum Publications 1983).

⁵⁶ See Edward and Thomas Wells, *Thomas Wells of Windy Hall* (photostat 1989) p.69. See, also, the same authors' *The House of Elijah Wells* (photostat, published by Edward Wells, 5 Riverside Way, Mildenhall, Suffolk, and by his brother 1990) p.118. The original Thomas and Elijah were respectively the son and grandson of Joseph, the original settler at Windy Hall.

⁵⁷ I am grateful to the Wells brothers for this and other information.

⁵⁸ See *ibid.* (1990) p.23, for statistics of attendances at that Sunday School for each alternate year from 1862 to 1900.

⁵⁹ When the 'Soham Estate', which included Lark Hall Farm on Fenbank, was auctioned in December 1876, having been owned by the late J. Dobede of Soham, the advertisement stated that the 'ancient fences or boundaries were in many cases removed' so that in some cases it was impossible to identify with any certainty the descriptions contained in the conveyance. (Cambridge University Library Map Room, PSQ.18.307.)

⁶⁰ There was a lack of social distinction between smallholders and farm workers who often belonged to the same household. The unmarried sons of smallholders, who lived with their fathers, were usually employed by others as farm workers; and very few sons took over their father's land when he died, perhaps mainly because it was usually rented on an annual basis.

there was only the Baptist Chapel and, from 1879, the Church of England School, which also served as a church.⁶¹

Almost everyone, except for the publicans, the occupants of the school house, and the small number of farmers proper, would have lived in a mean cottage on Fenbank.⁶² These cottages were presumably inferior to those in the 1930s when living conditions were so appalling that, particularly during winter, ordinary daily life must have been harsher than in much of the rural tropical world today where it is so often lived on verandas or in the open air — though it must be added that everyone recollected the food as having been rather good. Family life would have been lived in the kitchen, which was the only warm room, as front rooms were hardly ever used; all the washing up and bathing would have been done in the kitchen using water from the river. Presumably there was also usually a wash-house or back-house. The privy stood at the end of the garden, the contents of its bucket being buried in a hole in the ground. The parents' bedroom, over the front room, would have been reached by a steep staircase, or maybe only a ladder; as for the children's sleeping space, this would have been an ill-ventilated landing or loft at the head of the stairs or steps. To my mind the greatest hardship suffered in the Fen was not the hard (though often intermittent) work on the land, with its poor wages and conditions, nor the isolation, the muddy road, the need to haul water over the high embankment — but the miserable housing which smallholders, as well as prestigious horsekeepers, so often had to endure, as well as ordinary labourers.⁶³

⁶¹ There was no shop. The likelihood is that in the last century, as in the 1930s, the Fen was mainly provisioned by itinerant traders, from farther away than Isleham village, some of them with horses and carts.

⁶² Unfortunately, I can find no information on who owned these cottages, which in the 1930s were sometimes 'tied' and in pairs.

⁶³ Whether labourers' living conditions in the uplands were equally poor is not known, but tradesmen presumably built some decent habitations. Isleham village would have benefited from cheap supplies of the locally quarried building material — clunch. An interesting article by an author who lived in Chatteris, west of the Bedford rivers, who actually noted that both farmers and labourers often lived in villages or towns not on their land, condemned the cottage accommodation available there as 'miserable wretched hovels' — which were, of course, 'hot-beds of immorality'. A.S. Ruston, 'The fen country', *Journal of the Farmers' Club* (November 1970) p.49.

Demographic Misbeliefs

As I am only too well aware, from prolonged field experience in West Africa, of the dangers, even the absurdity, of amateur demographic analysis, and as I appreciate the justification for the generally contemptuous attitude of the professionals towards the amateurs, it is with great temerity that I approach the question of family size in the Fen in 1851–81. The question is whether the census statistics confirm the widely held belief, of present-day fenlanders and others alike, that 'Fen families used to be very large'?

After a long and somewhat painful search, I have come to the surprising, and still tentative, conclusion that there seem to be no published statistics on 'family size' in the mid-nineteenth century for English rural communities or localities with which the Fen statistics might appropriately be compared. My first instinct was to play safe by dropping the whole matter, but I then reflected that as the belief in 'large families' is itself vague, so the question could be approached in a very general way by enquiring whether the census statistics seem to indicate 'surprisingly large families'. I say at once that I think that they do not.

For each of the four census years 1851 to 1881, it seemed best to note the family size for each of the mothers aged between 35 to 40, for as girls then married considerably later than they do today, few of their daughters would have been old enough to have left such households and hardly any of their sons — for bachelors were never householders. Although, of course, some of the families of mothers of this age were still incomplete, a high proportion of all the children who would ultimately be born to such mothers would already have been born. As in Isleham Fen there were only 27 mothers in the five censuses 1841 to 1881 which fell into this age group, the statistics were supplemented by similar figures relating to 56 mothers in Isleham village in 1851 — the latter mothers had 59 sons and 62 daughters living with them, which suggests that few of their daughters had made early marriages or gone into domestic service.

Table 1 shows that, especially in Isleham village in 1851, large families with seven or more children were quite rare — the largest having no more than nine children. In

Table 1. Numbers of Children Living with Mothers aged 35 to 40 Years.

No. of children in family	Isleham Fen, 1841-81		Isleham Village, 1851	
		%*		%*
Nil	—	—	5	9
1	2	30	6	50
2	2		9	
3	4		13	
4	7	26	9	16
5	4	15	10	18
6	4	15	1	neg.
7	1	15	1	5
8	1		2	
9	2		—	
	27	100	56	100

* Rounded figures

Isleham Fen in the five census years 1841 to 1881 over half (56%) of the families of wives in the 35 to 40 age group had no more than four children, the corresponding percentage for Isleham village in 1851, where there were five childless women in this age group, having been as high as 75%.

Ignoring considerations of high infant mortality, do these figures indicate a notable degree of philoprogenitiveness in those high Victorian days, when large families were commonplace among the upper classes, given that it is well known that agricultural workers generally had higher fertility rates than most other manual workers? I think not. I also think that it was the existence of a few very large families in (say) the two decades prior to 1914, such as did not exist in the Fen in the 1930s, which might have accounted for the ex-Fen dwellers' belief that their forebears were so fertile.

As for the incidence of consanguineal marriage, the fact that the composition of the Fen population underwent constant change, makes it appear quite unlikely (as does the evidence of former Fen-dwellers themselves) that marriage between close kin was preferred.⁶⁴ This mobility meant that the Fen was the antithesis of the stereotypical closed

fen community. Only four householders, two of them at Windy Hall, were there (as householders) in each of the five census years 1841 to 1881; the total number of male householders recorded in these censuses was 190, of whom as many as 106 had been householders in one census only; there was no significant core of 'permanent residents' except at Windy Hall. But even if there had been a high incidence of 'in-breeding' in the peat fens, I have been told, on the highest medical authority that, for genetic reasons, this would not have accounted for the marked incidence of the dread illness Huntington's chorea in some localities, as is sometimes suggested.

The other common demographic misbelief relates to the incidence of incest. I am told⁶⁵ that it was because it was so commonly believed that fen dwellers were particularly incestuous that the Cambridgeshire social services made special enquiries there which were said to have confirmed this belief. But as we have learnt more recently, the *general* incidence of incest (involving particularly fathers and daughters) is far higher than had hitherto been realised. It yet remains to be proved that there was a higher incidence of incest in such a village as Isleham as in a comparable non-fen Cambridgeshire community.

Finally on the matter of derogatory misbeliefs, I turn to consider the interesting question of opium in the fens in the nineteenth century; I do this with special reference to three emotional and repetitive publications by

⁶⁴ Of course the real question, which cannot be answered, is whether there was more 'in-breeding' in the fen uplands than in Cambridgeshire villages generally; this would seem unlikely given the high degree of mobility revealed by the detailed censuses and their excellent (even superior) communications with the wider world. Mr Thomas Wells, see n.57 above, has told me that he thinks he has found relatively few cases of cousin marriage among the hundreds of descendants of Thomas Wells (1817-99).

⁶⁵ Personal communication.

Virginia Berridge,⁶⁶ but with no reference to fen poppy-growing, the extent of which is inestimable. The main argument in favour of there having been heavy opium consumption in the middle of the last century is that bad health⁶⁷ and poverty necessitated this.⁶⁸ In the 1850s opium could be bought in any shop — it was obtainable in Cambridge on market day as related by Charles Kingsley,⁶⁹ but the 1868 Pharmacy Act restricted sale by unqualified vendors, legislators having become fearful of misuse of the drug by the industrial working class.

Berridge states (1981 p.39) that, according to an analysis in 1862 of which no particulars are given, 'more opium was sold in Cambridgeshire, Lincolnshire and Manchester than in other parts of the country'. She also unconvincingly claims (1981 p.40) that the area where opium eating was common 'can be delineated fairly clearly'; this area is supposed to have included Boston and Louth in the north and St Ives and Huntingdon to the southwest, and was said to be especially concentrated on the Isle of Ely. Finally, it is stated, no reference being given, that in 1867 the British Medical Association considered that Norfolk and Lincolnshire consumed half of British opium imports. On the basis of such inadequate evidence we are assured (1979 p.313) that 'opium use was as normal for the people of the Fens as it was for Coleridge and de Quincy' — 'their colourless lives are temporarily brightened by the passing dreamland afforded them by the baneful poppy'.⁷⁰

Conclusion

Apart from the sophisticated work of Godwin⁷¹ and Marshall,⁷² the literature on the East Anglian fenland has little to say that is reliable about the humdrum day-to-day working life of the ordinary fenlander who worked on the newly-drained fenland in modern historical times before the recent agricultural revolution; it has certainly not been emphasised that in some large sections of fenland, such as the peat land of eastern Cambridgeshire, the ordinary fenlander was usually an employed farm labourer, who was sometimes also a peat cutter, who commonly lived in an ancient village on an upland, with the butcher, the baker and the candlestick maker as his neighbours. Nor has the contribution of the women and children who worked in gangs been generally understood.

In the absence of reliable information, oral beliefs based on a curious mixture of sentimental and derogatory attitudes (see p.100 above) have *spontaneously* filled the vacuum — for it is difficult to believe that the curious views of such an author as the Burwell physician, Charles Lucas,⁷³ have had much influence. These general beliefs amount to an oral tradition or myth, being invulnerable to rational argument. By studying the history of that open community Isleham Fen, I hope I have done a little to stimulate new thinking.

I suggest that the compulsion to denigrate fenlanders is so deep-seated that it goes back to Vermuyden's time, when Cambridge University was strongly opposed to the fen drainage. The University felt that its river Cam was threatened; they needed their lovely flowing water, their long-distance navigation, their peat for the college kitchens — all of which was about to be destroyed in the interests of certain wild men.

While Oxford often wrongly believes that Cambridge is 'in the fens', it is a curious fact that the University and the city have never been well integrated with that hinterland, until quite recently. Most Cambridge colleges showed little interest in acquiring significant

⁶⁶ 'Fenland opium eating in the nineteenth century', *British Journal of Addiction* 72 (1977) pp.275-84; 'Opium in the fens in nineteenth-century England', *Journal of the History of Medicine and Allied Sciences* 34 (1979) pp.293-313; V. Berridge and G. Edwards, *Opium and the People: Opiate Use in Nineteenth-Century England* (London 1981).

⁶⁷ While only a few cases of ague (malaria) were reported from the fens after mid-century, rheumatism was often said to be particularly prevalent there. But were the fen villages on the uplands any more unhealthy than other Cambridgeshire villages?

⁶⁸ In Berridge *et al.* (1981) p.44, it was wrongly reported that under the gang system women were away from home for long periods so that they neglected their households.

⁶⁹ *Alton Locke* (1850).

⁷⁰ A citation from a writer on Lincolnshire — see Berridge *et al.* (1981) p.45.

⁷¹ *Op. cit.*

⁷² *Op. cit.* The author records the oral memoirs of her father who lived in an immense windmill in the Huntingdon fens. I need hardly emphasise that residents of such windmills were very unusual people.

⁷³ Who quoted with approval the views of a Londoner who had written to him in 1862 that the people in Grunty Fen, near Ely, were 'amphibian', the girls having 'yellow and spotted bellies and webbed feet'. *The Fenman's World: Memories of a Fenland Physician* (Norwich 1930) p.52.

acreages of newly drained farmland. Nowadays it is consistent with tradition that Oxford tourist coaches should explore the lovely surrounding countryside, including Blenheim Palace and Stratford-upon-Avon, whereas the Cambridge coaches very seldom get as far as Ely cathedral.

It is surely because the landscape around Cambridge is so mundane⁷⁴ — so unexotic — that there was an unconscious need to postulate the existence of a hinterland inhabited by strange people; so it was that exotic, even idyllic, features accreted, modifying the original derogatory myth. This modified myth persists even though so many commuters to Cambridge now live on the fen islands and promontories.

I conclude by citing the unbiased testimony of Daniel Defoe,⁷⁵ whose journey began in 1722 soon after the collapse of Denver sluice:

As these Fens appear cover'd with Water, so I observed too, that they generally at this latter part of the Year appear also cover'd with Foggs ... One could hardly see [Ely Cathedral] from the Hills and not pity the many thousands of Families that were bound or confin'd in those Foggs, and had no other Breath to draw than what must be mix'd with those Vapours, and that Steam which so universally overspread the Country: But notwithstanding this, *the People, especially those that are used to it, live unconcern'd, and as healthy as other Folks, except now and then an Ague, which they make light of, and there are great Numbers of very antient People among them.* [My italics.]

General Acknowledgments

I wish to acknowledge the great help I have received from the Cambridge county and city archivists and from the Cambridge University Library. In 1987–9 I benefited greatly from conversations with many former residents of Isleham Fen, particularly with Mrs Direna (Rene) Turner, who was born in the Cock Inn; I am most grateful to them all.

⁷⁴ This is not prejudice. C. Taylor is an enthusiast for the Cambridgeshire landscape, yet admits that none of the great names in English literature who attended the University, not even Wordsworth, left any writing of merit on the county landscape, *op. cit.* p.21.

⁷⁵ *A Tour Through the Whole Island of Great Britain* (London 1968, first published 1724–6) p.80.

Appendix 1

Who Were the Fen Farmers?

This article has made little reference to fen farmers proper (as distinct from smallholders) — to those who were responsible for employing the great proportion of all the men who derived their livelihood directly from the land. The names of most of these farmers, unless they were absentees,⁷⁶ were re-corded in the detailed censuses but, unfortunately, the census enumerators quite often failed to record acreages and numbers of labourers, so that smallholders with small acreages who employed family labour only, cannot necessarily be distinguished.

Who were the farmers in the peat fens in the nineteenth century? I present the hypotheses that relatively small proportions of them were former smallholders whose scale of operation had expanded; that land was commonly rented; and that farmers were apt to be mobile, moving between the parishes.

A detailed analysis of the census statistics for a number of villages in the peat fens shows that the identity of farmers (including smallholders) underwent constant change — a fact which was necessarily concealed by 'the mask of the aggregates' presented by the published census figures. Moreover, there was a remarkably low propensity for sons to take over from their fathers. In the case of Isleham village only 19 of the 44 farmers recorded in the 1851 census were resident farmers in 1861, the corresponding intercensal figures for 1861–71 and 1871–81 having been only 14 out of 28 and 17 out of 46. In Haddenham parish only 22 of the 59 farmers in 1851 were still there as farmers in 1861; it is interesting that the 'non-stayers' were on the average larger farmers than the 'stayers', and were more likely to have been born outside Haddenham. The statistics for Sutton were similar. The numbers of farmers who featured (themselves or their sons) in each of the three censuses in 1851 to 1871 were only eight in both Isleham and Haddenham and four in Sutton. Had many of the farmers been former smallholders they would surely have been more securely rooted in their villages?

⁷⁶ Very occasionally the detailed censuses relating to the villages recorded the existence of farm bailiffs; but other men, such as foremen, who were in charge of the farms of absentee farmers, were never enumerated as such.

A unique enquiry into land ownership, which was undertaken in 1873,⁷⁷ showed that there were few large landowners resident in the villages in the Cambridgeshire peat fens; only 21 owners of 500 acres or more were resident there, of whom as many as eight were in Ely, including the cathedral authorities. The total area owned by the other 13 large landowners was only 9319 acres, of which 1578 acres were owned by C.P. Allix of Swaffham Prior, and 983 acres by O.C. Pell of Wilburton. It would seem that many village farmers must have rented some or all of their land.

As few of the village farmers were able to live on their land (as did the farmer at Lark Hall Farm in Isleham Fen), so they might have lacked attachment to it. Of course there were exceptions, such as the Robins family of Isleham village, which employed 48 men and 18 boys on (a rounded) 1300 acres in 1861, and who probably flourished for as long as a century; as well as being farmers, they were timber, coal and general merchants and lime burners. But in general little continuity emerges from the census figures.

Probably a fair proportion of the drained farmland in the 1850s was still mainly pasture, having received little fixed investment. The mobile farmers, such as the series which occupied Lark Hall Farm in the years after 1815, would have found it easy to sell or remove their livestock.

Material relating to farm auctions towards the end of the century⁷⁸ shows that the ordinary large farm holding consisted of many dispersed or separate portions or 'farms' — which justifies a sceptical attitude towards the accuracy of the total acreage figures in the census.⁷⁹ Much of the tenanted land in the 28 auction cases which were examined was on an annual basis, and there was little evidence of long leases.

Finally, it is interesting to note that in the 1870s Cambridgeshire (including the Isle of Ely) had a smaller proportion of large estates over 1000 acres than any other English

county with the exception of Cumberland, Middlesex and Northumberland.⁸⁰

Appendix 2

Notes on the Sixth Report of the Children's Employment Commissioners 1867 (HMSO 3796)

Men's Wages

While it was reported by many witnesses that male labourers' wages were commonly 10s a week (1s 8d daily), it was also emphasised that piece work was common and popular with both parties. Piece workers might have received 13s to 15s weekly, more than the prestigious 'horsemen' (ploughmen who cared for the horses) who might have got 11s or 12s. Harvest wages, however, were higher — maybe 18s weekly for a month. It was generally reckoned that a man got 2s an acre for hoeing. Scattered throughout the report are references to unemployment and irregular employment; sometimes the children's gang work might have been a family's sole means of support.

Women's Wages

For women who worked independently, not in gangs, daily wages of 10d were commonly mentioned. In Isleham, where labour was regarded as 'very plentiful', women were said to have got as little as 8d or 9d daily.

Children's Wages

Whether they worked in gangs or not, children's wages were age-related, starting perhaps at 6d daily, at the age of seven. But public gangers may have pocketed part of the wages themselves.

Cost of Gang Work

It was generally reckoned that the gang work, which was mainly on distant farms, cost less than the work of independent labourers — say 1s 8d per acre for hoeing, when a man would get 2s.

⁷⁷ The enquiry was based on valuation lists for rating in each parish, and included building land as well as farmland. The Cambridgeshire figures are in Vol. I of *Return of Owners of Land 1873* (London 1875).

⁷⁸ A collection of printed material relating to advertised auctions of farm property is held by the Map Room of the Cambridge University Library.

⁷⁹ As constantly reiterated here, economic historians are much given to uncritical acceptance of the published census statistics of the sizes of farm holdings.

⁸⁰ See P. Jenkins 'Cambridgeshire and the gentry: the origins of a myth', *Journal of Regional and Local Studies* 4 (1984) p.13.

Attitude to Gang Work

Many farmers and others were opposed to gang work mainly on moral grounds because the sexes were mixed — many sanctimonious views were expressed. One farmer with (a rounded) 1000 acres said that there was an increased demand for child labour owing to greater production of root crops — potatoes, carrots and mangolds. 'It is frequently the case now that able-bodied labourers are remaining idle, when the children and women are sorting potatoes' (p.54).

Importance of Gangs

An elderly Soham man said that nearly half the land in the parish was cleared by gangs (p.60).

Geographical Distribution

Gangs were particularly common in the Isle of Ely and in those parishes, including Isleham and Soham, which lay between the Isle and Newmarket.

Types of Gang Work

Evidence relating to the types of gang work in Chatteris, west of the Bedford river, is cited here as it gives an idea of the multiplicity of tasks that might have been performed. Members of the gang 'are employed in different kinds of agricultural work, such as picking couch grass, commonly called "twitch" and in planting potatoes, and afterwards weeding and cleaning the crops till they become too high, and haymaking ... and then gang work nearly ceases till harvest ... And after harvest is all over, then comes on digging up and picking up potatoes, and carrots, and mangold wurzels, and cutting off the tops and tails or roots of the carrots and mangolds, and separating the small ones from the large, for London markets, or for putting down in ... pits, covering them with straw, and then earth to preserve them through the winter ... The potato and other land is then cleaned by picking out the "twitch" etc., to prepare it for wheat, and after that the gangs lie idle till about the end of February or the beginning of March ...' (p.52).

Appendix 3

A Brief Note on Land Purchase in Isleham Parish

So little has been recorded about changes in land tenure in the fens consequent upon improved drainage that I append the following brief note.

It is clear from two detailed maps of the farmland, which were both probably issued between 1844 and 1848,⁸¹ that at some stage the fenland in Isleham parish, like that in many other similar areas,⁸² had attracted a host of outside land purchasers, many of whom had acquired small acreages, most of whom must have rented out their land.⁸³ Assuming that the land had been severely flooded before the drainage effected by the 1754-8 Act, these maps presumably record the changes in land tenure which had resulted from that drainage, modified by subsequent developments.

As is well known, Soham parish was most exceptional in never having had a parliamentary Act of enclosure, and it now appears that the same applied to the fenland in Isleham parish north of Isleham village, which borders Soham parish, for the only Isleham Enclosure Map (1854) covers only the land south of the village.

⁸¹ The first of these was based on a survey of 1833 (or somewhat earlier), being a small portion of a very large 'Plan of Part of the Bedford Level and Lands adjacent subject to the Eau Brink Tax', which was a tax to finance the Eau Brink Cut in the Great Ouse tideway; this plan was not issued until 1844, the date of an accompanying book of the same title by the surveyor J.G. Lenny, which merely listed the names of all the so-called 'proprietors' (either owner/occupiers or tenants) and their acreages. The land was mapped again, possibly in 1844, in connection with the commutation of tithes into cash payments. (Both maps are in the Cambridgeshire Record Office.)

⁸² See Summers, *op. cit.* p.167.

⁸³ The total number of farm holdings of an acre or more in the fen north of Isleham village was about 90 — far more than the number of farmers or smallholders in Isleham parish. So who were the purchasers? See reference to Querslum on p. 108 above.

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