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Fen draining: detection in the archives

N James

The great engineering works of the mid 17th century did not complete the draining of the Black Fens. By the end of the following century chronic floods seemed to be claiming much of the landscape back (Darby 1956). A recent matching of documents has produced telling evidence of responses to this agricultural emergency in the Haddenham Level.

The Haddenham Level comprises about 7750 acres (3135 ha.) around the southwestern corner of the Isle of Ely, lying between the Hundred Foot (New Bedford) River and the Old West River (Ely Ouse). Conditions here were already difficult for farming by 1720, and land owners obtained an Act of Parliament in 1727 (13 Geo. I c. 18) which allowed them to form a commission for managing drainage more or less independently of the regional authority, the Bedford Level Corporation. This Act was then widely emulated elsewhere in the Fens. Unfortunately, practically all of the Haddenham Level Commission's archive has been lost (Finney *et al.* 1997). Of great interest, then, is the 'Map of Haddenham Level in the Isle of Ely', at the Cambridge Record Office (CRO; ref. 515/P); but neither its purpose nor its date are known for sure (Fig. 1).

The map was deposited at the CRO by Bidwells, the surveyors, on closing their office in Ely in 1969–70; but it does not seem to relate to the other documents deposited with it. Made of two sheets of parchment of unequal size glued together, it measures about 1230 x 950mm (slightly more than 4' x 3'). The scale is about 6.½ inches (160mm) to the mile (1:1000). It bears a scale in furlongs, an arrow for north, and a vignette of an early 17th century map maker with a rustic muse in a 'landskip'. It is painted in colour. It is unsigned. The map is rolled and, to judge by damage to the border, it had been stored with the bottom protruding. The parchment had become brittle, creased and somewhat grimy but the border has now been treated and the whole map cleaned (the right sheet more successfully than the left).

On accession, the Record Office suggested that the map was of the late 18th century. That is plausible on grounds of the painting and lettering if not the quaint vignette (Fig. 2). As such, it the only map with details of the Level known from that century. It records the

Hundred Foot River and the Hermitage bridge and sluice at the western margin of the Level, several features along the Old West River at the south, and the foot of Aldreth High Street. Within the Level, details are shown of the fields, replete with parcel or lot numbers and acreages; it marks droves; and it picks out the Haddenham Leam, the Adventurers' Drain and the Division Drain. It gives the names of several fens, fields and drains. It also shows windmills and their drains around the edges of the Level (Finney *et al.* 1997). There is a hint of negative evidence for suggesting that the map related to the Haddenham Level Commission, for it provides no details of the Upper Delphs, along the river between the Hermitage and Ewell Fen, which were excluded from the Commission's jurisdiction by its founding statute (penultimate paragraph). Whatever its original purpose, the map is systematically annotated in pencil in a hand of the 19th or earlier 20th century. Some of the names marked correspond to families and individuals recorded in the census of 1851 and in the Hardwicke estate records (CRO. R92/41) of the same decade.

In 1978–80, Rae & Saunders (n.d.) found mention of a "Ref. book to the map of Haddenham level" at Peterborough Museum. The book was traced in the library there in 1997 and, when the Museum courteously lent it to the CRO, many correspondences were found with details on the map. The book is a ruled octavo note book, with a dark leather cover and paper in good condition. The cover is embossed 'Haddenham Level 1798' and the fly leaf states that it is "A Reference Book to the Map ... by Will^m Custance of Cambridge". Bound in at the front, on stamped paper, is his oath, that, "having been employed by the Commissioners of Haddenham Level ... to make a Survey and a Map", he did the work accurately. This book must be the definitive or perhaps only copy of his calculations. Written in a simple, clear hand, it comprises lists of the parcels of land, grouped fen by fen and parish by parish (Stretham and [Little] Thetford, Wilburton, Haddenham, Sutton, and Wentworth), and identified by number, proprietor and acreage (not covering the Upper Delphs, of course).

Custance was becoming a leading surveyor (Bendall 1992). His well known map of Cambridge



Figure 1. The 'Map of Haddenham Level in the Isle of Ely' after cleaning

was published in the same year (RCHME 1959). We know about his survey in Haddenham from advertisements in the *Cambridge Chronicle* (1798 a, b), explaining that it was commissioned in connection with the Haddenham Level Act, which had been passed a year earlier (37 Geo. III c. xcvi, 1797), and that the map would be published in order to cover expenses. For Section 18 of the Act authorised a survey and map "in order to ascertain the Quantity of Land ... and how much belongs to ... particular Persons"; and Section 38 obliged the Commissioners to make a priority of repaying costs with moneys raised under the provisions of the statute. They announced that the Earl of Hardwicke was to be patron of the publication; and that it was to serve as a specimen for an atlas of the whole of the Fens. "The ... amiable and venerable Earl[s] ... alacrity and anxiety in the service of the Fens" sprang from his interest in agricultural 'improvement' in general (Wells 1830; Darby 1956: 133; Murphy 1977); and he was regarded as the principal proponent of the new Act (*Cambridge Chronicle* 1796).

The Commissioners declared that Custance was expected to finish in the August, but the oath in the lot book states that he only delivered his results in October. The Commission (in turn) was slow to pay,

Custance grumbled in a letter to Lord Hardwicke seven months later (CRO. R92/41). The latter's general correspondence on Cambridgeshire confirms that Custance had dealings in Haddenham, and it traces some of the negotiations leading to the Act, but it does not mention the survey (Hardwicke 1797–1807). There is no documentation on these matters in the archives at Parliament.

How, then, does the book correspond to the map? The entries in the one and the labels on the other are



Figure 2. The vignette

in different hands; and there are some slight variances in the spelling of place names. However, comparison of about 10% of the acreages entered for the lots numbered in the respective documents showed almost exact correspondence. There are a couple of anomalies at the eastern border of the Level; but, on the other hand, the documents share certain peculiarities in the numbering of the lots. Again, certain lots are distinguished on the map with a green wash, and the book shows that (with one exception – or error of transposition) these were each Hardwicke's.

Such correspondences could be explained were there a common list of references in the Commission's lost archive; so – although the Act's clause about ascertaining the quantities of property suggests that there was no such list – the internal evidence for identifying the documents as a pair remains inconclusive. On the other hand, both documents correspond to details in the advertisements: the map's emphasis of Hardwicke's lots may have been intended as acknowledgment of his patronage – no doubt, connoting progressive farming, by implication; and the Arcadian vignette may be a reference to the 'Golden Age' scheme of draining the whole of the Fens, in anticipation of the atlas.

It is not known whether the map was published, and nor was anything more heard of the atlas. Comparison with manuscript maps of Custance's in the collection at the Cambridge University Library did not help to identify the map at the CRO. A couple of the maps in the Library share stylistic conventions not found on the Record Office's map; but the maps in the library are not uniform and they reveal several different hands at work. However, there is some more external evidence for associating the map at the CRO with the lot book.

First, other newspaper advertisements imply that while, up to 1797, the Commission ran five wind pumps, by 1798 it had decommissioned the one by Stretham Ferry; and that then, in 1801, it probably had five again. The map shows four, marking them at pump sites of the Commission's known from another record of the 18th century; and it marks no pump by the Ferry. It follows that the map was made between 1797 and 1801 (Finney *et al.* 1997). Second, a pair of places labelled on the map near Sutton – Holts and Holbrooks (Fig. 3) – are specified in the new Act (s. 31). No other such peripheral places are distinguished but the statute did specify that the Level was to be extended here. Perhaps in the same connection, the Act authorised construction of a new drain for the fields between Sutton and Mepal (s. 9); and this proposal may also be the context for another map, 'A Plan of Sutton and Mepal Fields. 1795', now at the Cambridge University Library (Ms.Plans.156). It covers the land between the two villages and the Hundred Foot River, which was not part of the Sutton & Mepal Level but does include Holts and Holbrooks. The map was collected by Marshall Fisher (Cambridge University Library n.d.; cf. Holman 1992). It is anonymous but, from the same collection, there is a map of the Littleport fens, also dated 1795,

which shares several features of style and is marked as the work of John Turpin (Cambridge University Library Ms.Plans.149).

Even if the 'Map of Haddenham Level' is Custance's, it is not the version that was advertised for sale, for the first notice offered a map of 24" by 18" (60 x 45cm), showing the Level at 3½ inches to the mile – half the size of the map in the CRO. Moreover, publication would have been on paper, of course, not parchment, and surely not painted. In ink on the back of the map in the CRO is written "Haddenham Level 10", in a hand of the later 18th or earlier 19th century. Perhaps this document is one of a set of fair copies for the Commissioners – among which one or some may have been intended as a specimen or specimens for prospective purchasers of the proposed publication.

In sum, there are substantial but not quite conclusive grounds for associating the map at the CRO with Custance's lot book. The historical implications are significant. The new Act expresses determination to overcome the problems that farmers in the Haddenham Level had in common with so much of the Fens at the time. The most remarkable proposal was for constructing the catchwater around the Level that we now call the New Cut. Details on the map help to show both how the scheme must have been conceived at the outset and how, afterward, the Commissioners recognised the scope for altering the original design by draining parts of the New Cut alongside the Aldreth Causeway, through the great earthwork that we now know as the Catchwater Drain (Fig. 4). The Act belies the stolid caution sometimes attributed to the Fen farmers of that time (Summers 1976). If the map is, indeed, connected with the statute, it helps to confirm a sanguine outlook on the opportunities of the day (Chambers & Mingay 1966).

Of course, there was another side to it all. Among labourers, old hostility to draining was re-emerging (Ravensdale 1974); and the Act (s. 25) increased the penalties for interference set out in the first statute. Although neither the map nor Custance's book betray any sign of the problems, they do show that no open fen remained and scarcely any common fen – and even that was consigned for inclusion in the Level by the Act (s. 31).

Together, then, the map in the Record Office and Custance's book provide comprehensive details of private, common and charitable ownership. They also yield some information on land uses. The map, moreover, documents several chapters of development, from medieval fields in Wentworth and Sutton (Fig. 3) to the many enclosures made around the Adventurers' allotments soon after they were set out in the 17th century (explained in a forthcoming paper elsewhere). By recording efforts at the end of the following century, the map and the book together help to show how critical was that time for the development of the southern Fens.

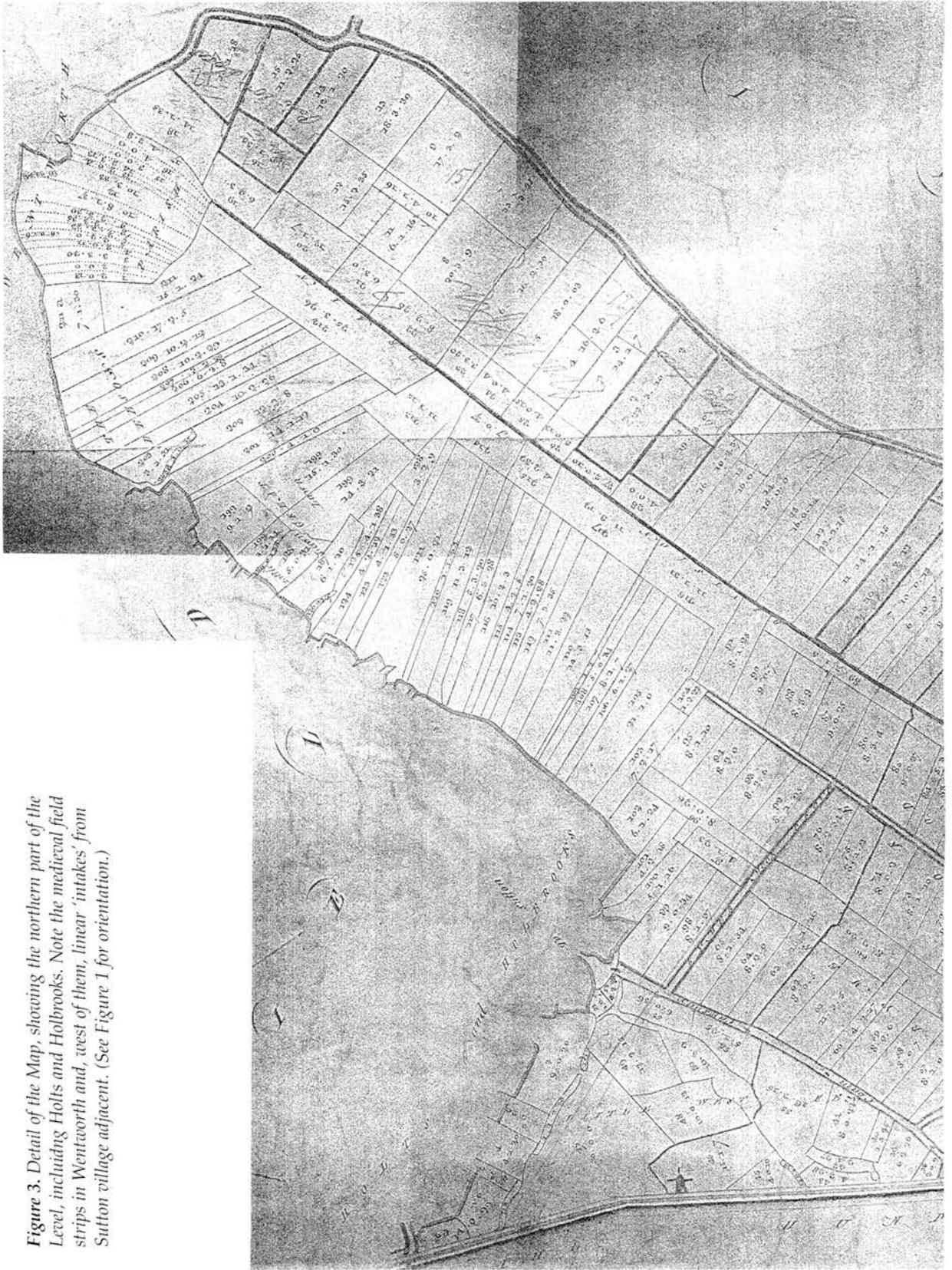


Figure 3. Detail of the Map, showing the northern part of the Level, including Holts and Holbrooks. Note the medieval field strips in Wentworth and, west of them, linear 'intakes' from Sutton village adjacent. (See Figure 1 for orientation.)



Figure 4. Detail of the Map, showing Ewell Fen, the foot of Aldreth High Street, Aldreth Causeway and Dam Bank

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Mrs. E St. Hill Davies, at Peterborough Museum, arranged to lend the lot book to the CRO, cooperation which greatly aided the research reported here. Thanks are due too to Dr. P Saunders and his staff at the CRO; and, for help with the other documents and sources, to the staff of the Cambridge University Library Map Room, the Cambridgeshire Collection (Cambridge Central Library), the Manuscripts Dept. of the British Library, and the House of Lords Record Office. I am most grateful to Dr. Saunders for his remarks on the 'Map of Haddenham Level' and his comments on a draft of the present note (not all of which have been used here). I also benefited from the remarks of Alison Taylor; and her imaginative suggestions about the Figures have enhanced this paper. The map is reproduced with the courteous permission and generous aid of the County Council archives service.

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