

## THE FENLAND.

### OPENING ADDRESS OF THE HISTORICAL SECTION AT THE CAMBRIDGE MEETING.<sup>1</sup>

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Some years ago when it was my privilege to address the members of the Institute, at Newcastle-on-Tyne, I attempted to put before them a brief sketch of the historical facts which had determined the archæological and architectural features of the district which they were about to explore. It seemed to me that, when you met once again in a district which possessed strongly marked features of its own, it was worth while to attempt a similar task and show the conditions which determined the character of the county which now lies before you. Nor is the task a hard one in its main lines, for the determining causes are neither remote nor complicated. The features of Eastern England depended on its geographical conditions. It was a land of fens and marshes.

It is difficult, however, as we look over the broad expanse of corn land and meadow which meets our eye to-day, to think ourselves back to the original aspect of the country, when Lincoln, Peterborough and Cambridge had almost as good a right to be reckoned as seaside towns as has Lynn to-day. This is, of course, somewhat an exaggeration, for the waste of waters which spread on the east of these towns was not sea water, nor was the flow continuous. In the summer months the floods gave place to a tract of land which was covered with coarse grass, and supplied many necessaries of life to the dwellers on its banks. The character of the district may best be judged from the words of those who saw it. Hugh the

<sup>1</sup> Delivered August 10th, 1892.

White, a monk of Peterborough, who wrote about 1150, thus describes the district in which he dwelt :

“From the flooding of the rivers, or from their overflow, the water, standing on unlevel ground, makes a deep marsh and so renders the land uninhabitable, save on some raised spots of ground, which I think that God set up for the special purpose that they should be the habitations of His servants who have chosen to dwell there. For within this marshland there live in such spots the monks of Ramsey, of Thorney, of Crowland and many other places, which can be approached in no other way than by water, save Ramsey where on one side a road has been laboriously constructed. Ely is an island in the same district, seven miles long and as many broad, containing twenty-two vills : it is surrounded on all sides by marsh and water, but is distinguished by the possession of three bridges. Burgh (*i.e.*, Peterborough) is founded in the land of the Gwaras, where is the beginning of the same marsh on its eastern side, extending for sixty miles or more. This marsh, however, is very necessary for men ; for there are found wood and twigs for fires, hay for the fodder of cattle, thatch for covering houses, and many other useful things. It is, moreover, productive of birds and fishes. For there are there various rivers, and very many waters and ponds abounding in fish. In all these things the district is most fertile. Further, Burgh is built in an excellent situation ; for on one side it enjoys the marsh, and excellent water ; on the other side it enjoys fields, woods, meadows and pastures in abundance. It is beautiful on all sides, and accessible by land, save on the eastern coast whither you cannot come save by boat. On the south side the Nen flows past the monastery ; after crossing it you may go straight on whither you will. When the first founders saw this site, so excellent, so eminent, so pleasant, so suitable, most fertile and most jocund, abounding in everything and most beautiful, as it were an earthly Paradise offered them by God, they founded their monastery there.”

This careful picture shows us the chief features of the Fenland ; a broad expanse of water, where on the islands and along the banks dwelt a hardy race who supported themselves chiefly by chasing wild fowl and catching

fishes. They traversed the marshes in canoes, and lived in thatched huts above the waters. In summer time they gathered rushes and fire wood, and turned their cattle, where possible, to eat the rank grass which grew on the dried up mud. Nor did their main characteristics of life in the Fenlands rapidly change. The description given by Drayton in his poetical topography of England, the "Polyolbion," published in 1622, agrees substantially with that of the monk Hugo nearly five hundred years before. Drayton sings of the multitude of wild fowl which haunt the fens :

The duck and mallard first in every mere abound  
That you would think they sat upon the very ground,  
Their numbers be so great, the water covering quite,  
That raised, the spacious air is darkened with their flight.

He goes on to enumerate as denizens of the Fens, the teal, the gossander, the widgeon, the goldeneye, the smeath, the coot, the waterhen, the waterwoosell, the dabchick, the swan, the crane, the heron, the redshank, the bittern, and the wild goose, besides sea birds, amongst which are the cormorant and the osprey. Nor is his list of fishes less copious. His general picture of Fenland life is one of manifold industry :

The toiling fisher here is tewing of his net ;  
The fowler is employed his limed twigs to set :  
One underneath his horse to get a shoot doth stalk ;  
Another over dykes upon his stilts doth walk :  
There other with their spades the peats are squaring out,  
And others from their cars are busily about  
To draw out sedge and reed for thatch and stover fit :  
That whosoever would a landskip rightly hit,  
Beholding but my Fens shall with more shapes be stored  
Than Germany or France or Thuscan can afford.

It must be noticed, however, that this eulogy is put into the mouth of the nymph who presides over the Fens, and is not allowed to pass without comment by her sister who rules the mainland. She exclaims :

O how I hate  
Thus of her foggy Fens to hear rude Holland prate,  
That with her fish and fowl here keepeth such a coil,  
As her unwholesome air, and more unwholesome soil,  
For these of which she boasts the more might suffered be,

She objects that the birds are so rank of taste as to be uneatable; the fish so muddy of flavour that they are scarce preferable to starvation :

Besides, what is she else, but a foul wrong marsh,  
And that she calls her grass, so blady is and harsh  
As cuts the cattle's mouths constrained therein to feed."

Thus it is clear that in the beginning of the seventeenth century there were two opposite opinions concerning the delights of the Fenland. A century later we find that the unfavourable opinion had won its way to general acceptance. Defoe, in his "Tour through Great Britain," gives his impressions of a visit to Ely in 1722 :

"As these Fens appear covered with water, so I observed, too, that they generally at this latter part of the year appear also covered with fogs; so that when the downs and higher grounds of the adjacent country were gilded with the beams of the sun, the Isle of Ely looked as if wrapped up in blankets, and nothing to be seen but now and then the lantern or cupola of Ely Minster. One could hardly see this from the hills and not pity the many thousands of families that were bound to be confined in those fogs, and had no other breath to draw than what must be mixed with these vapours and that steam which so universally overspreads the country. But, notwithstanding this, the people, especially those that are used to it, live unconcerned, and as healthy as other folks, except now and then an ague, which they make light of; and there are great numbers of very ancient people among them."

The Fenland itself had changed little, but opinion about it had changed a good deal. The Peterburgh monk regarded it as "an earthly Paradise." Defoe pitied the poor wretches who were condemned to inhabit it. At one period of civilisation men rejoice in the manifoldness of natural advantages; at another period men long for the removal of every natural disadvantage. Defoe is but the exponent of the spirit of our own day.

Such were the main features of the Fenland. I turn to consider their influence on its history.

(1). It is obvious that the most important point connected with the Fenland is its reduction by means of a system of drainage to its present condition. The process

has been gradual and continuous. Already in the time of the Roman occupation, a bank was raised to serve as a barrier against the incursions of the sea ; and the names of Walsoken, Walton and Walpole derive their origin from the Roman wall or earthwork near which the early settlements of the English were made. But besides the sea there were other dangers to be faced—the excessive local rainfall, and the drainage of the upland district which all discharged itself upon the Fenland and could not find an outlet. To provide for the latter purpose the Romans constructed a catchwater drain, a portion of which still exists under the name of Car Dyke, which ran just below the uplands probably from Cambridge to Lincoln. The former danger was met by a system of interior drainage. It would be tedious to tell of the various works undertaken at different times for the protection of the country. It is enough to say that during the Middle Ages the object was to provide against inundations, not to reclaim the Fens. Water in the winter and grass in the summer, on a secure and accountable system, was the general desire. Drayton indicates the rise of a notion that the Fenland was not worth keeping ; and the age of the Stuarts produced schemes for making “summer and winter ground” of considerable tracts. I will not discuss the enterprise of the Dutch engineer Vermuyden further than to say that it was not entirely successful, and had to be supplemented by windmills, which still in some parts form picturesque additions to the landscape. The end of last century and the beginning of this saw a continuation of the process till the whole district has been converted into agricultural land. Whittlesea Mere, the last great remnant of the Fenland, was drained in 1852 ; and a small portion of Wicken Fen is now all that is left to recall a faint image of the past.

(2). Now that this change has been fully wrought, we tend to forget the effect produced on the land which rose clear of the waters by its original position as a sort of coast line. Yet it was the guardianship of the coast which called into existence the Roman Camboritum, the Cambridge of to-day. The protection of the shores of the Wash against predatory incursions was, in the early days of the Roman occupation, an object of importance ; the

Ermin Street which ran from London to Lincoln skirted the northern part of the estuary and protected it by its stations. But the Ermin Street struck the line of estuary at Durolipons, the modern Godmanchester, close to Huntingdon. The south-eastern side of the estuary was outside its care. It would seem that Camboritum was occupied as a supporting station, connected with Durolipons by the Via Devana which was continued southwards to Colchester. The Roman system of coast defence was thus tolerably complete, and determined the situation of most of the towns within the district. When the Roman occupation ended, the immigrants from over sea found little difficulty in making their settlements. But it is not my purpose to trace the early history of the Gwaras, which was not of great importance. It was natural that the men of the Fenland should lead a life of isolation and should consequently be slow to recognise accomplished facts. The great event in the history of the district is its stubborn resistance to William the Norman. The outlaw Hereward gathered the disaffected round him in the Isle of Ely and exercised all William's engineering skill before he could be dislodged from his marshy fastness. The exceptional position of the Fenland was recognised by Henry II., who raised Ely to be the seat of a bishop, on whom was conferred palatinate jurisdiction, so that he might exercise on the Eastern marshes the same authority as his brother of Durham exercised in the north. Though this jurisdiction disappeared in 1837, the Isle of Ely still retains its peculiar position as a shire within a shire. One result of this episcopal rule, taken together with the number of monasteries and the general character of the country, is the absence of great families from the Fenland and its borders. You will see no ruined castles, no picturesque manor houses, in the neighbourhood of the Fens. Cambridgeshire has been called "the least gentlemanly of all the English counties."

(3). I go back again to the description of the Fenland given by Hugh the White, who was delighted by the islands which "God had raised for the special purpose that they should be the habitations of His servants." He certainly expresses the use to which the Fenland had been turned in his own day. It was natural that this tract of

country should suggest monastic settlements. It was secluded, wild, offering an opportunity for missionary zeal and for monastic labour, needing organisation, yet hard to touch by ordinary means. A mixture of devotion and policy influenced the first Christian King of Mercia, Peada, to follow the advice of his Northumbrian brother Oswin, and lay in 655 the foundations of a Church at Medeshampstead, where a meadow, supplied with a well of good water, rose between the Fen and the scrub which covered the uplands. The new foundation flourished; and its first Abbot sent out a colony to the isle of Ancarig or Thorney, so called from the thorns with which it was covered. In 673 Etheldred, wife of the Northumbrian Egfrid, fled from the discharge of her wifely duties, and sought refuge from her husband's pursuit in the dower lands which she had received from her first husband, King of the Southern Fenlanders. There, on the island, which took its name from the quantities of eels which were caught in its surrounding marshes, she founded a monastery after the type of her northern refuge at Coldingham. Before the century was closed a young Mercian noble, weary of war and conflict, and unsatisfied with the seclusion of the monastery of Repton, roamed through the Fens till he found at Crudland, or Mudland, a spot sufficiently disconsolate for the needs of his asceticism. There Guthlac lived amid the birds and fishes, who came at his call and ate from his hand; for he found that "all things were at one with him who was at one with God." Men honoured him and flocked to him for his advice. After his death a monastery arose on the spot, which was hallowed by the memory of his sanctity.

Thus motives of policy, asceticism, and personal convenience combined to mark out the Fenland as especially the home of monks. The example once set was contagious. In the monastic revival of the tenth century a new monastery was founded on the verge of the Fens at Ramsey, so called from a solitary ram which was found by the first occupants of the island. The monks were the chief land owners within this district. All that was done for civilisation was done by them.

There are two abiding records of their influence to which I would call your attention. In no part of England, I might say nowhere in the world, are there so many mighty

buildings to be found in the same space as in the Fenland and its borders. This is entirely due to the impulse given to Church building by the monasteries and the example which they set. It was, of course, natural that the monks should use the offerings made by pilgrims for the purpose of adorning their Churches. But good intentions and lofty aspirations are not everywhere easy of fulfilment. Near to Peterborough there lay a bed of peculiarly hard limestone, famous in architectural history as Barnack rag. The quarry had been worked by the Romans, and its value was at once appreciated by the monks. The stone could be wrought with ease; it was capable of delicate mouldings; and its durability has enabled it to withstand even the onslaughts of our northern climate. A ramble amongst the turrets and pinnacles of the Cathedral Churches of Ely, Peterborough, or Lincoln, enables anyone to see at a glance how much the architecture owes to the material in which its ornaments were wrought. Besides the possession of this valuable stone, the Fenlands also enjoyed an easy means of transport. The conveyance of heavy loads along the imperfect roads of early days was difficult; but flat-bottomed boats could easily traverse the Fens in winter and deposit their burden just where it was wanted. The size and character of mediæval buildings was determined more by the command of suitable material than by the dictates of immediate utility. Churches grew, not to correspond to the needs of the population, but because they could be easily built. Monasteries received their rents largely in labour. It was natural that the labour should be directed toward Church building. A little local enterprise met with ready help. There was no hurry to finish, just because there was no large population to provide for. The artistic side was allowed to be dominant chiefly because there was no utilitarian pressure.

In this way we can trace the limits of the old Fenland by its great buildings. When water carriage failed the churches dwindled. Along the valley of the Nen, and on the Fenland islands, rose the stately churches which are most characteristic of English architecture, as may be seen in the neighbourhood round Wisbech and Lynn. If you turn westward from Cambridge to the district which formed the upland in early days, the architectural decline

becomes at once apparent. The soft clunch of Cambridge-shire, admirable as it was for internal decoration, was not sufficiently durable when exposed to the weather to afford material for soaring designs.

Another point which was determined by the nature of the country and its surroundings was the choice of Cambridge as a site for a University. It is often asked by visitors to Cambridge, Why was this spot selected for such a purpose? And it must be admitted that at the present day we cannot point to any very conspicuous natural advantages. To answer the question we must consider the conditions under which the English Universities seem to have come into being. This is a difficult subject to speak of with certainty, and I would not be understood to put forward more than a few suggestions which seem to me to have some probability. The first step in any investigation is to clear the ground of misconceptions and make it clear what we are considering. Now a University, properly speaking, means a Corporation of Scholars possessing a constitution, and the right of conferring degrees, or licenses to teach, which were everywhere recognised. It was, indeed, a gild of scholars, which came slowly into existence by asserting customary rights.

The question therefore to be determined is, Why did the schools of certain places become strong enough to form associations which asserted their rights, and by gaining for themselves a constitution, rose into another class from ordinary schools? There can be no doubt that the model of such associations was brought into England from Paris in the twelfth century, with the result of quickening into organised life schools which already existed. In earlier times the schools of Ireland and England had been foremost in maintaining learning; but the call of Alcuin from York by Charles the Great marked the transference of intellectual primacy to Gaul. There the schools of various monasteries and Cathedral churches became famous as they possessed eminent teachers, till the renown of Abelard established the prestige of Paris. We cannot trace a corresponding process in England. It was not the presence of eminent teachers which first brought our Universities into existence, but motives of convenience combined with an impulse from outside. The schools of Oxford gathered,

it is true, round the monastery of St. Frideswide, but local conditions seems to have given them their superiority. Oxford was conveniently situated in the centre of England, on the great waterway of the Thames. It was free from danger of incursions, and was not a place of arms. Under Henry I. it was a favourite residence of the king in times of leisure; and the neighbourhood of the royal palace of Beaumont gave hopes of patronage which are said to be always attractive to scholars. It had been recognised for some time as a convenient meeting-place of scholars when it received that impulse by a migration from Paris which developed it into a University.

Cambridge had not the same advantages of position as Oxford enjoyed, and we cannot trace a corresponding growth of general literary resort. But we must remember that the dividing line of England in the middle ages, for commercial and literary intercourse, was drawn between east and west, not between north and south. The northern counties were so unsettled that there was little security for a learned corporation north of the Humber and the hills of Peakland. In 1250 the Bishop of Carlisle found it necessary to buy the manor of Horncastle in Lincolnshire, and the Pope granted him the parish church for his use, when his own diocese was impossible. A northern centre of learning was not required; but it was natural that the east should seek a centre of its own. It is probable that Cambridge grew by conscious rivalry to Oxford, which it resembled in many respects. The priory of Barnwell gave it a monastic centre; castle and old parish churches were there as at Oxford; its situation secured quiet, and it was easy of access by land or water. But the neighbourhood of the great Fenland monasteries must have been the chief cause of its prosperity. It was a neutral ground to which their students might resort. There also a meeting-place of scholars developed into a University, owing to migrations from Paris and Oxford, of which we find records in 1229 and 1231.

It is worthy of notice that this process of propagation tended to continue. In 1239 a migration was made from Oxford to Northampton; and in 1261 Cambridge also attempted to found a colony in the same place. Doubtless that town was chosen because it fulfilled the necessary

conditions for an academic residence, and was as far north as it was prudent to go. In 1333 a more determined effort was made by a body of Oxford malcontents to establish a University at Stamford, as a convenient spot for intercepting northern students. These schemes were checked by the resistance of Oxford and Cambridge, which was supported by the power of the Crown. It seems as if English common-sense first recognised, in University matters, the principle which afterwards developed its system of party politics. Two Universities were enough to promote honourable rivalry and obtain the advantages of competition on different lines. When two had come into existence the multiplication of centres was not allowed to go further, that force should not be wasted, and too many centres of opinion be formed. The ingenious speculator of to-day might trace a connexion between the increase of Universities and the disintegration of the old political parties.

But I return to the position of Cambridge as a site for a University. It is obvious that motives of local convenience out-weighed considerations of fitness. Ease of access, accommodation, associations, quietness, and a good supply of food—these were the primary requisites. It has been observed as an argument against the solar theory of explaining mythology that it represents primitive man as “eternally prosing about the weather.” This, indeed, is a very modern habit. Our ancestors lived and laboured where their lot was cast; and Cambridge scholars doubtless found the Fenland full of interest. To recall that interest we must revive the picture of the waters which flowed as near as Waterbeach, and of the Cam expending its sluggish stream round Fen Ditton. If we complete our picture of imagining a touch of ague among the inhabitants, we may still consider if ague were worse than the maladies engendered by modern modes of life. It is tolerably certain that its position on the borders of the Fens called Cambridge into being as a town, and afterwards made it the seat of a University. Academic patriotism can claim the consent of antiquity in regarding it as “an earthly Paradise.”