

Lakenheath and Fen Drainage.

In 1630 a group of investors known as the Gentlemen Adventurers was formed by the Duke of Bedford to finance the reclamation of the fenland. Ely Abbey's lands had been returned by Charles II and it owned large parts of the Fens.

The Great Drainage Act of 1663 accelerated the work throughout the Fens and the Bedford Level was dug.

The repeated flooding of large areas of fenland had always been a major problem and several attempts had been made over a number of years to cure this. The Adventurers called on experienced Dutch engineers and Cornelius Vermuyden was hired to drain fenland using a mixture of drainage ditches, sluices and wind powered pumps. Lakenheath Fen had been surveyed in 1636 but work was halted in the Civil War because the Great Fen hindered Parliamentary troop movements. The breaking up of dykes and sluice gates was ordered. Local protestors probably enjoyed the work!

After the Civil War the draining of the Fen resumed, effectively reducing common land. The creation of more farm land by drainage deprived fen dwellers of wildfowl, fish, reed cutting and peat and their ancient way of life was threatened.

Not surprisingly opposition was bitter and in a number of places resistance was often violent.

Sluices and drainage ditches were wrecked and reed beds burned.

The protestors became known as 'Fen tigers' and also 'Yellow bellies'.

Lakenheath Fen drainage was completed in 1665 but much more work was to be needed later.

Wikipedia

J Wentworth Day