

## **The Lakenheath Fen Commissioners. 1768.**

Years of serious flooding had reduced the usefulness and value of the reclaimed land to almost nothing, seriously threatening the investments of local landowners.

The Drainage Act of 1768 put in place Commissioners, giving them wide ranging powers to control all aspects of the management of the Fen.

There were permanent Commissioners who were the existing 'Lords of the Manor'. They were:

- Sir Simeon Stuart.MP. He probably lived at his Hampshire seat as he was MP there.
- Mary Stuart, spinster. She probably lived at Lakenheath Hall.
- William Burch Esq.
- Randyll Peek Esq. who acted as a trustee for William Burch.

Thomas Evans, Esq. Rev. John Barnes, and John Hanslip, Gent. were deputed to represent Mr. Burch if necessary. They were also land holders here.

Elected Commissioners who met twice a year, were subject to annual re-election and were responsible for the maintenance and development of all aspects of the Fen. They could levy taxes to pay for necessary work, were empowered to borrow large sums of money to enable future developments and they could employ Overseers to supervise works and collect taxes. They were also empowered to distrain property in the event of non-payment of taxes. Interestingly in view of the development of local charities, they could lease out land for the benefit of the poor.

The elected Commissioners are referred to as 'Gentlemen' in the Parliamentary Act, a sure sign that they have attained considerable social status beyond the village. Amongst their number are JOHN EVANS, ROBERT KITCHENER, JOHN KITCHENER.

Those elected held their first meeting at the house of ROBERT HARDING known as the BELL in the High Street opposite St. Mary's. It was later described as a cottage. In the late 20<sup>th</sup> C it was converted into apartments. It's by now sad looking wrought iron sign frame is still there. The Bell Inn or Hotel has been an important place in Lakenheath for many years, under several different names.

*'An Act For Draining and Preserving certain Fen Lands and Low Grounds in the Parishes of Lakenheath and Brandon, in the County of Suffolk'. 1768*

It was declared illegal to:

- Dump rubbish in a drain or sluice or staunch.
- Cause criminal damage to banks, dykes, mills, and wind pumps or tunnels.

The maximum penalty for criminal damage, probably influenced by the activities of the Fen Tigers in the late 17<sup>th</sup>C, was seven years transportation.

The Origin of Turnpikes in the Fens.

The Commissioners were also authorised to construct Turnpike roads and gates to protect areas of fenland from damage by horses and horse-drawn transport and to improve access to farm land. Toll charges could be levied to maintain the roads and dyke banks damaged by horses and carts. They probably created the road which is now Station Road which was described as a 'private road' at the time.

Many local roads originated as fen droves and some were named after the farmer, for example Cowles' Drove on the way to Lakenheath Station. Turnpike droves often formed the basis of today's modern routes, ultimately connecting villages together. The Lakenheath turnpike gate was near the Station level crossing at Hiss Farm and was known as Hiss Gate. Prior to the Second World War many of these roads were unsurfaced and the road to Ely across the Fen did not exist in a modern sense.

However, there was no road to Ely as we understand it today. A journey to Ely was made by boat along the Lakenheath Lode to the Ouse.