

The Stone Sifters of Lakenheath.

In 1863 The Elveden Estate was purchased by HM Government for Prince Duleep Singh who had fled from his lands in India. Later he acquired land rights on Lakenheath Warren and began to exploit the sand and gravel found there in great quantities. Local people had taken sand and gravel from the Maidscross area of the warren for many years, this providing them with winter work. Many of the excavations are visible today. The gravel was carted down what is now Broom Road and along High Street to the quay. A walk up to the top of Broom Road gives a good idea of what the road looked like.

Wikipedia

'The Warrens of Breckland', The Breckland Society. 2010.

Roy Silverlock in Lakenheath History Vol III.



Looking down Broom Road from the Warren.

Duleep Singh extended and improved the quays in the village which ended roughly at the house off the High Street named 'Key End'.

"He employed fifty to sixty men at the pits, (on Maid's Cross Hill, Lakenheath,) two men to a sieve. One man would be shovelling, the other sieving and throwing the stones into a barrow which was emptied onto a heap. There was a separate heap for each pair and at the end of the day it would be measured as payment was 'piece work'".

The stones were then carted by local farmers to the quay on the Lode opposite the church. Five loads a day were a day's work and for this the farmer was paid 7/6 or 7.5 p per load. (Values from 1997). For this he had to provide a cart, a pair of horses and a man. (Robert Harding, aged 100 in Dec. 1961, recalled having carted thousands of loads.)

At the Quayside the stones were tipped in heaps for loading onto barges which would carry 25-30 tons. One horse pulled three barges. The barges came twice a week from Wisbech, Ramsey, Upwell, Littleport, Ely, etc. They entered Lakenheath Lode from the Little Ouse river at Crosswater staunch. It was then four miles to the quay. The old guide posts along the Lode-to keep laden barges in the deeper central channel-could still be seen in the 1960's. Two of the men who worked at this task were John Flack, (80 in 1961,) and George Fincham, (90 in 1961)."

The above is an extract taken from Roy Silverlock's Lakenheath History Vol. III and was based on an article by M G RUTTERFORD published in the East Anglian Magazine, Vol 21, (1961/2, p. 581.)

***NOTE.** Payment by 'piecework' work was common in many jobs. Workers were paid only for what they produced regardless of the time taken.

It seems likely that the gravel from Maidscross provided building material for many roads and buildings in the eastern fens to the financial benefit of Duleep Singh who, despite the profit from this enterprise, died a bankrupt in Paris in 1893.



Stone sifters on the Warren.



A stone sifting site on the Warren today.