

The five ages of fens

In this second article, Mike Harding explains some of the landscape and social history of the Fens

The valley fens we see today have been developing for thousands of years. Their history can be divided into five episodes, each leaving its mark on the nature of our fens.

Deep history

Around 400,000 years ago (and let's not quibble about a few millennia), the Anglian Glaciation created the great plain of East Anglia. Huge ice sheets ground down the underlying geology to a flattish surface. This included chalk rock. Valleys and other features were gouged out.

The last of the glaciers retreated around 10,000 years ago. As they drew back, they smeared ground-up rock over the deeper geology. This was a mixture of clays and sands and gravels. Some were left by the ice, other deposits were washed out by huge rivers issuing from the melting glaciers.

East Anglia was then a frigid place of deep and permanent frosts. Deep freezing of the chalk and subsequent thawing and solution sometimes created hollows in the chalk. As the climate warmed, meres formed in these and other hollows created by erosion or deposition of glacial material.

The meres and hollows infilled with sediment – chalky marl, silt and peat. The structure of the land was laid down, creating wonderful conditions for chalk, groundwater-fed fens. The geological materials were variable in their chemistry, and this produces a wide range of soil conditions, ideal as an environment for the development of the fens. East Anglia's unique glacial history and its unusual geology explains why we have such a density of valley fens.

Early use of the fens

Since the first human occupation of the new land in Palaeolithic times, the landscape has been progressively cleared and increasingly intensively used. At first, the sandy valley sides and heath areas would have been cleared for grazing and later for settled cropping. The heavy wet clay of the plateau top, and the spongy, sodden, intractable peat of the valleys, would have been difficult for early settlers to clear and use. These stayed wild.

As the population grew, the need for resources expanded, and so did technological development. Gradually, the marginal lands came into production. The peat valleys, with their undrainable (at that time) groundwater-fed soils and their low fertility, would have been exploited for natural products – fen hay, sedge, wood and peat. Local communities would have gathered wildfowl and other natural foods. The margins may have been grazed, together with adjacent, drier land. None of this changed the fens much, but regular management kept them open and free from scrub and trees.

The great land grab

In the eighteenth and particularly the nineteenth centuries, the Great Land Grab took place. The big landowners started to enclose land that was formerly open and for the use of the community. Highly profitable crops were grown on this new land. The great heaths and grasslands fared worst, with many fine tracts of habitat disappearing. The fens were saved by the infertile peat and the high level of groundwater which made them impossible to 'improve'.

As part of the enclosure process, land was set aside for the use of the poor and landless, to eke out a living. Some areas are the now familiar commons. Usually, it was the worst land that was set aside, all the good land having been grabbed. Most of the valley fens were given to the parishes to manage. Small



Local people digging peat for conservation reasons in 2012: how different from peat-digging 200 years ago?



Webbs Fen is now wonderfully re-wetted

charities were set up to administer the fens – often called Poors Trusts. They allotted rights to graze, cut peat or wood, or to take hay. Any income was given out to the poor of the village. This was the first organised administration of the fens, and the first formal ‘community’ management. By their nature, the village charities were conservative, and made little change on the fens, which remained an important resource for local people.

Abandonment

Social and economic changes began to erode the importance of fens as a resource. Railways brought cheap coal to rural areas. It burned hotter and didn’t need to be dug and dried. Peat digging declined.

Demand for fen crops such as hay also declined, especially when the number of horses in the rural and urban economy reduced.

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Rural wealth increased, so that people were less dependent on collecting natural products and foods from the fens. People found better paid jobs elsewhere. They were less willing to spend days standing in bogs doing very arduous manual labour for little reward.

Gradually, fens fell out of the rural economy. By the First World War, their use for key resources such as peat and marsh hay had strongly declined, although thatching materials were still cut. Between the Wars, the abandonment of the fens was virtually complete with only thatchers keeping patches of sedge mown. With

abandonment came trees – the fens were progressively lost to scrub and wet woodland.

Modern times: new conservation

In the 1960s the Suffolk Wildlife Trust became established, mainly as a response to local naturalists being worried about the decline of one of the most important valley fens in the UK – Redgrave and Lopham.

Because fens were no longer important for local communities, their care increasingly fell to new conservationists – people who valued them for their wildlife and spent time and money maintaining them.

This effort was matched by government policy. The post-war agricultural revolution, together with development and other rural land use changes, saw the loss of much of our wildlife habitat. Government responded by designating habitats including fens as Sites of Special Scientific Interest, and then in the 1980s and after, providing significant funding for their management.

Action by government and by conservation charities became stronger and more effective as the work became better funded and involved more people. The European Union helped with new laws protecting wetlands, and by providing special grants and funding through agriculture. It was a new era for fens. The neglect of the previous decades was rolled back as sites were restored and managed.

At first, the new conservationists were slow to involve local communities. They simply ‘got on with it’, liaising with parishes only when they needed access to the land or sought help from volunteers. But in the last 20 years, conservation organisations have a better understanding of the importance of local communities in sustaining our fens. They work much more closely than ever before, although there is always scope for more co-operation.

The formation of the Little Ouse Headwaters Project is a good example of communities taking on responsibility for their local fens. LOHP is run by local people who live in the parishes of the project area. Most of the volunteers are also drawn from the local area, as are the contractors and graziers who help manage the fens. More and more communities are now taking direct charge of managing fens that at one time were used by their parish.

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