IN TIME

Ely U3A History Group Members' Newsletter

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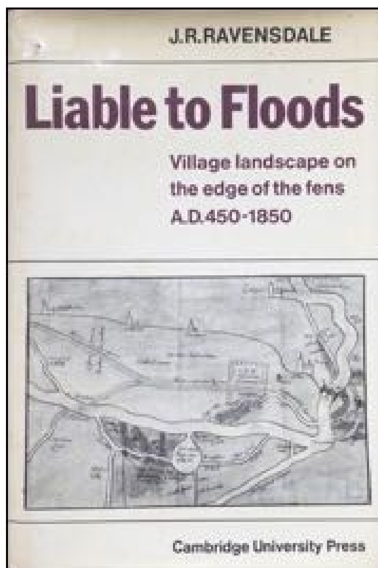
Welcome to edition 25 of IN TIME. This week we take a look at a landscape always at the mercy of the elements, we learn of a Victorian scandal in Fen Ditton, are taken on a journey to a remarkable Suffolk village and find out more about 'The Mad Hatter's Tea Party'

I am starting to get short of your articles again so please do send some to me if you have the time to put pen to paper. It will be much appreciated both by myself and our readers

Send your articles to Maggie Haverson (email address supplied in the email containing this newsletter).

Liable to Floods – Peter Lee



I purchased this book shortly after it was published in 1974, when Maureen and I were living in Histon. It tells the story of the three parishes of Waterbeach, Landbeach and Cottenham. The illustration on the cover shows a 1618 map of the Ouse flowing along what is now the Old West River and then turning north past Ely and Littleport.

Landbeach and Cottenham were settled along spurs lying above the 20-foot (now 5-metre) contour, whilst Waterbeach was during wetter periods, an island or small archipelago that included Denney and Elmeney. Ravensdale analyses the evidence that includes the removal of the Benedictine cell from Elmeney to Denney in the century after the Conquest (1st wetter period), several references to deteriorating conditions in the 14th century (2nd period) and again in the early 17th century (3rd period). Denney also became a refuge for the Poor Clares, whence they moved from Waterbeach Abbey in 1339 (in the 2nd wetter period).

We can see Denney Abbey from the present day A10, on a low rise that in these wetter periods would have been an island, but where was Elmeney? The likely position is the low rise about 0.5 mile east of Chittering, at the northern extremity of Waterbeach's fields in the pre-drainage era. The normal rotation here would have wheat-barley-fallow but the Rev William Cole complained in 1770 '*this is the third time within six years that my estate has been drowned*', so cropping was precarious.

Sedge, willow, alder and clay for building, plus turf for fuel, could be obtained from the fen, where some of the 'hards' were also available to commoners for grazing, but not during the wettest years, when fishing and fowling was the only source of food. Maslin (a mixture of two crops) and particularly 'dredge' (usually oats and barley) were sown if the fields did not dry out early enough to get a full grain crop, and fed to animals to get the family through the winter.

Among the more interesting products of the fields was teasel, used in cloth finishing. Ravensdale discovered a trespass case in 1349, in which Robert Spier complained that after he had harvested teasels from the hay on his common, William Goldying entered with a cart and carried them off. But Goldyng was cleared by the jury of taking any but his own! Teasels still sow themselves in damper spots (including my garden).

Penance & Pandemonium in 1840's Fen Ditton (not for the faint hearted)

- A Story of Scandal - Clinton Tweed

In the 1840's the village of Fen Ditton was described by the Cambridge Independent Press newspaper as "a village of beggars, from the silvery haired man down to the lisping child".

On 28th February, 1847 the body of a baby girl "in so mutilated a condition as almost to defy surgical examination" was found close to the rear of the rectory at Fen Ditton.The head and part of a shoulder were found by one Edward Smith who, at the time, was described as the parish Sexton, a fiddler and a gardener to the Rector of Fen Ditton the Reverend William Brown. Other parts of the body were found later.

An inquest was held and a verdict of "found dead in a mutilated state" was returned.The village constable offered a £10 reward on conviction of any one concerned with the death but to no avail.

At the time the Reverend Brown was unmarried and his unmarried cook, was one Martha James. By early 1848 the Reverend Brown and Martha James were married and according to local gossip at some time before their marriage Martha James had been ill for about a month "and only her master tended her".

In the spring of 1848 Edward Smith had been over indulging in the Plough at Fen Ditton when "in a reproachful and insidious manner" he made allegations of adultery against the Rector's wife. At the time adultery was a crime, so this was a serious allegation. When Mrs Brown became aware of the remarks she issued a writ for defamation against Smith in the Ecclesiastical Court, the Court of Arches. Smith did not appear, the case against him was found and he was ordered to perform "the usual penance" in the Parish Church on 6th May, 1849 and to pay costs of £49.7s.6d. In the week before 6th May, Smith was to be seen in Cambridge daily relishing in his new found celebrity. On occasions he announced to his admirers that he would ignore the order and on other occasions he said that he would appear but that he would black his face so as to display the whiteness of the sheet to better advantage.

The Plough , Fen Ditton

On 5th May the Cambridge Independent Press remarked on the fact "that a person condemned to perform so fantastic a trick as standing in a parish church in a white sheet will assuredly draw a good audience". They considered that the parish church "is to be made the arena of a piece of contemptible tom foolery" and that a village church "is a beautiful sight" to inspire "a feeling of respect and admiration for an edifice reared as God's temple, for simple minded villagers to offer up their aspirations to their Maker for his great mercies to them………but tomorrow that church is to be converted into an exhibition room, where a scene is to be enacted more attractive and more laughable than will be seen at the coming fair….."

6th May dawned a chilly but fair day and the roads were crammed with “as motley groups as can be imagined”. “Carriages, flies, four wheels, dog carts, gigs, and more humble vehicles were dashing along for Ditton…. the pedestrians comprised students of the University, reputable tradesmen, artisans, bargees, navvies, coal-heavers, shoeless vagabonds and limping beggars”.

Early that morning the Churchwardens “anticipating the coming storm” called on the Rector’s wife asking her “to forego the public demonstration of penitence” but she refused to change her mind.

The service was due to start at eleven but by ten o’clock the churchyard was packed with people and when the door was eventually opened the crush of people flooded in to the church so that in a short time it was impossible to sit or stand. Many of those present were described as “labourers from Barnwell” and “lightermen from the river barges”. The screen was covered “by men of the poorer order”, the capitals of the pillars “had each it’s human occupant”, “the window nooks were taken” and even the pulpit was filled with spectators There was a dog fight in the porch, while in the church two men were fighting, others were smoking their pipes and the kneelers were being thrown around in the chancel. It was estimated that some 1,400 people were in the church with many hundreds more outside all there in the hope of seeing Smith wrapped in the traditional white sheet of the penitent, described by one newspaper as “one of the last monkish institutions of popery”.

The service was to be taken by the Reverend Small of Emmanuel College and as he entered the church at 11.00 some bargees started to toll the bells, somebody threw a broom at him and others who had broken pieces off the screen used them as missiles. With the air “impregnated with the fumes of tobacco” the Reverend Small tried to conduct the service against the background noise of shouts such as “speak up old feller”, “I want a drop of ale”, and “where’s Smith” plus coughing, the shuffling of feet and the beating on the floor and pews with sticks. He tried to preach a sermon on the text of “Judge not, lest ye be judged” but after a few minutes there were shouts of “he is here” and at 12.30 Smith, not wearing a white sheet, struggled through the crowd and made his way in to the church.

As he made his way to the pulpit there was applause, shouts and cheers and the crush was such that pews were broken. Reverend Small gestured to Smith to proceed but although his lips were seen to be moving, presumably reciting the words of the penitent, but because of the commotion and chaos nobody heard a word that he said.

The pantomime ended with Smith, to loud applause, being carried out of the church on the shoulders of two men to the Plough as his supporters pushed forward anxious to shake him by the hand. On the other hand the Rector and his wife left the church to the sound of hooting, hisses and groans which continued all the way to their house and in the affray outside some windows to the Rectory were broken.

The allegations made by Smith were believed by many people but never proved. Smith never paid the costs awarded against him and so in July 1849 he was imprisoned for five months before being discharged as an insolvent debtor.

Cherished Memories - Julia Jones

I remember being taken by a friend to Thorpeness in the 1980's for the day and had a few short holidays there years later. Thorpeness is a seaside village in East Suffolk next to Aldeburgh. It is unlike any seaside resort I've known mostly because of its timewharp feel from around 100 years ago, fantastical in its conception.

The village, originally a small fishing village hamlet from the late 19th century, may have been a route for smugglers into East Anglia. In 1910, Glencairn Stuart Ogilvie, a Scottish barrister who had become fabulously wealthy from building railways worldwide, bought land between Aldeburgh and beyond Sizewell and inland to Aldringham and Leiston. Most was used as farmland and the rest became the new resort of Thorpeness, built over several years.

The holiday homes were built in the Jacobean and Tudor Revival style consisting of large houses, bungalows and arms houses. A railway line was built before the outbreak of WW1 though only survived until 1966 as was little used later on. Early visitors would disembark at the village with their entourage of servants ready to relax for the whole of the summer holidays. Thorpeness was well equipped for the holiday maker with sports facilities for the children, a Golf Course and Club. An inspiration was the Mere, a large boating lake, the design which came from J.M. Barrie (Peter Pan), a friend of the Ogilvies. Several of the channels, landings and islands were marked with names from the book such as 'pirates lair' and Wendy's House. Of note is the House in the Clouds, originally a water tower for the village and then converted to self catering accommodation many years ago.

Sadly Ogilvy died before he saw Thorpeness's completion yet today it still survives and enjoyed by many who want something 'different

No tea party for the Mad Hatter - Maggie Haverson

We must all be familiar with the images of the Mad Hatter's tea party in Lewis Caroll's '*Alice's Adventures in Wonderland',* published in 1865, but why was the hatter mad, and where does the phrase 'mad as a hatter' come from?

The phrase is linked to the hat making industry and mercury poisoning. In the 18th and 19th centuries, industrial workers used a toxic substance, mercury nitrate, as part of the process of turning the fur of small animals, such as rabbits, into felt for hats. Historically hats had been made from beaver fur, but when the beaver became extinct in Europe due to over hunting for its fur, new sources of material had to be found for hat making such as rabbit and hare fur. These furs were not so easy to felt as beaver fur, but

it was found that mercury nitrate greatly enhanced the felt making process. During this process often called carroting (due to the orange colour of the mercury nitrate), the fur was separated from the skin and matted together with the mercury. The resulting felt was then repeatedly shaped into large cones, shrunk in boiling water and dried many times before final shaping, smoothing, and finishing. In these treated felts, a slow reaction also released volatile free mercury into the air.

Mercury is one of the most dangerous substances affecting human health and it can be easily absorbed through the lungs and skin causing a variety of physical and mental ailments, including tremors (often called hatter's shakes), speech problems, emotional instability and hallucinations.

Although its noxious effects were known, using mercury was the cheapest and most effective way to turn the low grade fur into malleable felt suitable for the making of hats. Workplace safety standards were lax and hat makers were exposed to the mercury vapours which over a period of time caused the dreadful effects of mercury poisoning. The industrial revolution in the mid 1800s enabled more mechanisation within the hat making industry, but mercury was still used for felting. Even in 1902 a UK report showed that mortality levels were still high in the hat making industry and many hatters died in their forties.

The phrase 'mad as a hatter' pre-dates Lewis Caroll's 'Alice in Wonderland' but if you look carefully you will see that the term "mad hatter" is never actually used by Caroll. The Hatter and the March Hare are referred to as 'both mad' by the Cheshire cat but in fact the tea party which is described in chapter 7 is entitled – 'A Mad Tea-Party – not the mad hatter's tea party. Here is the introduction to the party– *'There was a table set out under a tree in front of the house, and the March Hare and the Hatter were having tea at it: a Dormouse was sitting between them, fast asleep and the other two were using it as a cushion, resting their elbows on it, and talking over its head. '*

Caroll grew up in Stockport where hat making was the main trade and it may be that he based his hatter's behaviour on the hatters he had seen.

So it is us dear readers who use the term 'the mad hatters tea party' and we are amused by the hatter's behaviour and antics at the tea table. Sadly in real life being 'mad as a hatter' was the lot of hundreds of unfortunate workers in the hat industry.

Petty’s Pick of the Week

Every day Mike Petty posts on his Facebook group ‘’Fenland History on Facebook” a number of newspaper clips from his massive archive of local events reported ‘’on this day”

Lost peat -** Cambridgeshire Daily News **September 14th 1934

In 1918 there were more than 40 peat cutters in Swaffham Fen. Now there are two. Mr B. Bailey and another man who is not whole-time

Mr Bailey has been a peat cutter for nearly 40 years but doesn't expect there will be anyone to follow him. As the old workers dropped out nobody took their place. Yet there is still a demand for peat; it is used by the people in surrounding villages and the heating rims of cartwheels

6It is rough work in a bleak district though the season is only from March to the end of September. In winter the cutting stops as the peat will not dry. The work is then the disposal of the season's cuttings. Big loads are taken by water to the village of Wicken where it is stored in sheds.

Mr Bailey and others did great business during the last coal strike when everybody wanted peat, they just could not cut and dry it quickly enough.

Years ago many women helped in the industry but they have now given it up. The real reason is that the peat diggings are miles from anywhere and in March winds only the very hardy can stand the work. 34 09 14(6)ES

This story appeared in the Ely Standard newspaper on this date.

Cambridgeshire Scrapbook 1897-1990 has thousands more with links to the actual articles