

# Armchair Adventurers

Have been exploring the Somerset Levels...here are a few snippets...



A warm shallow sea covered the area some 2 thousand years after the last ice age with mud and clays on the seabed. Added to this the now slower moving rivers washed soils down from the hills which was then exposed to the air as sea levels reduced a little.

Plant life colonised the area and near to the sea a ridge of silt and clay formed, becoming higher than the land behind it. The land then began to flood with fresh water, the sea infringing during storms and high tides. Marshes and pools of water were thus created ideal for the growth of reeds and sedge. As these compacted, they formed peat, the land becoming firmer to allow the growth of other plant species. Over centuries fen vegetation developed with a prevalence of raised bog (vegetation formed in shallow valleys where drainage is poor and a constant flow of water or flooding causes waterlogging. It is a transitional habitat that would, over time, develop into wet woodland or, if the growth of peat is enough to isolate the vegetation from the groundwater, into raised bog).

The area has been managed by man since neolithic times when farming of cereal crops and the use of pasture to feed animals necessitated the clearance of wild woods. They developed ways to cross peat bogs. Prior to this the lifestyle of hunter gatherers of the Mesolithic period and before would have left minimal imprint on the landscape.

The Polden Hills extend for 10 miles through the Somerset Levels, separating them into two parts. Since man first set foot in this land this thin line of hills provided the only dry route across the marshlands of the Somerset Levels, and consequently it is an ancient route. The modern-day road follows a Roman road, which would have lain over a more ancient trackway still.

The Parrett along with its connected waterways and network of drains supports an ecosystem that includes several rare species of flora and fauna. The river and its tributaries drain an area of 660 square miles (1,700 km<sup>2</sup>) – about 50 per cent of Somerset's land area.

The area contains a complex system of man-made water courses which has developed over time for agricultural and residential purposes. The rivers, drains and ditches not only provide drainage channels, but they also provide irrigation water and act as stock-proof barriers. Flooding is generally the result of high rainfall from the surrounding uplands. The resulting river flow has to cross a very flat lowland with the added complication of tidelock. This occurs when the high tides of the Bristol Channel prevent the rivers discharging to the sea. The Moors themselves are actually a low rainfall area. A consequence of successful drainage means that sluices are needed to stop all the water draining away and there would be no 'wet fencing' or cattle watering in the summer.

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### WILLOW

The deep, damp soils along the rhyes (drainage ditches) are ideal for growing willow that is suitable for basket making. Most willow used is the product of a single year's growth. The whole plant is cut to the ground or sometimes grown as a pollard (on a short trunk) so that each year many rods spring from the same place, each plant producing roughly 30 rods. Willow is usually cut during November and March which is the dormant season when the sap is down and once the leaves have fallen.



### The Islands

The 'islands' of the levels are situated on a mass of glacial sand and gravel that rise out of the marshes at Calcott Burtle giving it the name of 'Burtle Marine sands'. In the Middle Ages the Zoy (Middlezoy, Chedzoy Westernzoyland) islands shared with Othery the responsibility for maintenance of Greylake Fosse, drainage and supervision of Lake wall.

Most of the levels were owned by the abbeys of Wells, Muchelney and Glastonbury. Those making a living from the land had to maintain the numerous drainage ditches as part of

their tenancy until the dissolution in 1593 when land ownership came to the tenants, but the soil was owned by the crown.

### The Battle of Sedgemoor

The Battle of Sedgemoor was the last and decisive engagement between the Kingdom of England and rebels led by the Duke of Monmouth during the Monmouth rebellion. It was fought on the 6th of July 1685, and took place at Westonzoyland. It resulted in a victory for the English army.

The king sent Lord Chief Justice Jeffreys to round up the Duke's supporters throughout the south-west and try them in the Bloody Assizes at Taunton Castle and elsewhere. About 1,300 people were found guilty, many being transported abroad, while some were executed by drawing and quartering. Daniel Defoe, who would later write the novel Robinson Crusoe, had taken part in the uprising and battle. He was heavily fined by Jeffreys, losing much of his land and wealth.



**James Scott, Duke of Monmouth**

Some of the many items and places of interest we looked at ...



**Burrow Mump**



**Muchelney Abbey**



**Left: King Johns Hunting Lodge**

**Right: The history of peat extraction**

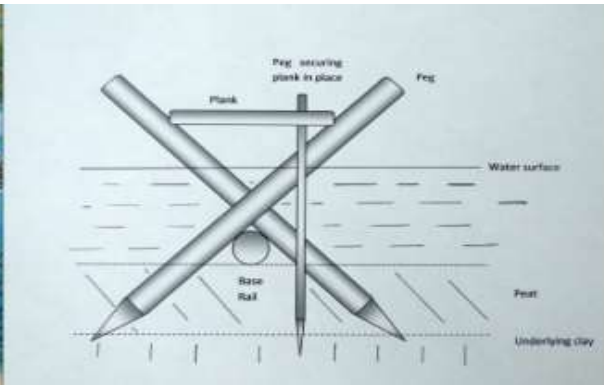




**King Alfred Monument**



**The Alfred Jewel (Ashmolean Museum)**



**Above: The Sweet Track  
Below: Restoration of wetlands and wild life  
Right: The Cyder clock (history of cider)**



If you would like to know more about the Somerset Levels please contact me and I will be happy to email it out to you...especially if you are planning a trip...the work is full of useful information.

