THE CHANGING LANDSCAPE AND ECONOMY OF WISBECH HUNDRED

1250 – 1550

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ABSTRACT

The Changing Landscape and Economy of Wisbech Hundred 1250-1550

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There is the ever-present danger that the study of local history can be seen as parochial and of limited value in understanding the forces that shape the society and economy of a country. This thesis demonstrates the value of local research as a means of challenging established national social, demographic and economic models. By developing an understanding of regional variation it is possible to enhance our comprehension of the central themes in medieval English history.

The thesis uses a wetland region, Wisbech Hundred in Cambridgeshire, as a case study to illustrate the response to environmental and socio-economic change and to compare this with national behaviour. It is in part a study of the historic landscape of the region and in the tradition of landscape study it fundamentally explores the transformational interaction between people and their environment.

The study of wetland regions is particularly informative as they exemplify the struggle between humanity and the landscape to establish viable settlements. These liminal communities living at the extremity of the region had many potential economic advantages that were attractive to the settler but this had to be balanced against the continuous threat of disaster. The case study shows how it was possible for the medieval inhabitants to progressively manage, modify and transform the region

This was achieved in the period 1250-1550 against the backdrop of great upheaval and profound change in the structure of society and economy in England. It covers the closing stages of the great period of high medieval growth followed by demographic crisis and finally stagnation in the recovery of both population and the economy. This study shows the complex nature of local behaviour that can be easily overlooked by the application of broad concepts that attempt to provide an all embracing explanation of the medieval world.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

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I would also like to record the considerable assistance provided by Richard Gilbert with palaeography, translation and proof reading. His help with the translation of wills, manorial records and the record of the Commission of Sewers of 1438 greatly accelerated the process of collating and analysing critical documents. I am also grateful for the support of Dr Matthew Tompkins of the University of Leicester for assistance with palaeography and translation.

I would like to thank all the staff of the Wisbech and Fenland Museum and in particular Richard Bell (Assistant Curator) for helping to identify and make available the records of the Trinity Guild and Bishop Alcock's Terrier. I would also like to thank the staff of the Cambridgeshire Archive for their assistance with the gathering of wills and tithe maps. Similarly, I would like to acknowledge the assistance of the staff at Cambridge University Library and the Institute of Historical Research.

Finally, I would like to thank Julie Wagg for her considerable assistance with the style and layout of the thesis.

CONTENTS

LIST OF FIGURES

LIST OF TABLES

ABBREVIATIONS

BAT	Wisbech and Fenland Museum, *Terrier of the Lands of John Alcock, Bishop of Ely, dated 1492.*
C.R.O	Cambridgeshire Records Office.
C.U.L	Cambridge University Library.
ECB	F. Willmoth and S. Oosthuizen (eds), *The Ely Coucher Book, 1249-50: The Bishop of Ely's Manors in the Cambridgeshire Fenland* (Cambridge, 2015).
HER(C)	Historic Environment Records, Cambridgeshire.
HER(N)	Historic Environment Records, Norfolk.
HER(L)	Historic Environment Records, Lincolnshire.
Newton	S. Tymms (trans), 'Compotus of the Manor of Newton 1395', in S. Tymms (ed), *The East Anglian*, Volume 4 (Ipswich, 1885).
TGR	Wisbech and Fenland Museum, *Wisbech Corporation Records Volume 1, the Register of the Holy Trinity Guild 1379-1547.*
VCH(IoE)	R. Pugh (ed), *The Victoria History of the County of Cambridgeshire and the Isle of Ely*, Volume 4 (London, 1953).
VCH(Hunt)	W. Page (ed), *The Victoria History of the County of Huntingdonshire*, Volume 3 (London, 1936).
VCH(Norf)	W. Page (ed), *The Victoria County History of the Counties of England: a History of the County of Norfolk*, Volume 2 (London, 1906)

INTRODUCTION

General Background

The period 1250 to 1550 experienced major demographic and economic change that transformed English society. It was a period of prolonged growth followed by catastrophic collapse and stagnation before signs of sustained recovery were seen in the early sixteenth century. A focus in popular media on the political history of the period emphasising conflict and royal intrigue has left the misconception that it was a time of upheaval and disruption. The prevailing picture is that portrayed in Hobbes' *Leviathan* of a life 'nasty, brutish and short' whereas much of the country for most of the period was relatively peaceful. The focus for the majority of the population was ensuring the survival and prosperity of their immediate family and the greatest challenges were natural and not manmade.

The development of national models of economic and social change enable significant features to be readily identified and understood. However, this can mask the diversity and complexity of economic and social behaviour. The study of different regions focussing on the relationship between landscape and settlement can help to challenge or to validate more general national models. An example of this (discussed in the thesis) is the work of David Stone on Wisbech Barton Manor.[1] His analysis of the structure and management of farming on the Cambridgeshire silt marsh assists the understanding of farming in other different regions. Similarly this case study of changing socio-economic behaviour in response to a changing environment can be compared with other wetland regions as well as the national picture.

English social and economic history at this time can conveniently be divided into three distinct phases. Prior to the fourteenth century there was a prolonged period of demographic and economic expansion. The population of England increased from over one and a half million in 1086 to in excess of five million by 1400.[2] To meet the needs of this rapidly growing population there was an associated growth in the economy with

[1] D. Stone, *Decision-Making in Medieval Agriculture* (Oxford, 2005).
[2] R. Smith, 'Plagues and peoples: the long demographic cycle, 1250-1670', in P. Slack and R. Ward (eds), *The Peopling of Britain, the Shaping of a Human Landscape* (Oxford, 2002), p. 180.

new lands being brought into production to feed the people.[3] The importance of sheep farming grew exponentially with wool becoming the dominant element of foreign trade driving both economic growth and the creation and development of ports such as Hull and Boston on the east coast.[4] It has been argued by economic historians such as Postan that such a high rate of growth, facilitated by climatic and political stability was ultimately unsustainable: 'society was paying for its growing numbers by moving ever nearer to the margin of subsistence'.[5]

The second phase was the crisis of the fourteenth century that saw the population of England halved by the start of the fifteenth century (Postan's Malthusian check). There was a series of calamitous events that prevented any sustained recovery. Between 1315 and 1317 there were crop failures following exceptionally cold winters and wet summers. This was combined with the widespread loss of sheep and other animals through disease. It has been estimated that up to 10% of the population died during the resulting famines.[6] In 1348 the Black Death that had already devastated Europe arrived in a defenceless England and approaching half of the population was destroyed.[7] During the remainder of the century a series of local and national plague outbreaks (primarily 1361-2 and 1369) continued the demographic decline.[8] With such a dramatic demographic change the restructuring of the economy and of society was inevitable. The temptation is to see the fourteenth century as an unmitigated disaster. This was not necessarily the case for the survivors who had the opportunity to benefit from higher wages, lower prices and the increased availability of good quality farmland. For many the profound structural changes laid the foundation of subsequent wealth, the Paston family of Norfolk being an excellent example.[9]

The fifteenth century can be seen as the final phase of the long medieval social and economic cycle. Opinion regarding recovery is generally pessimistic with arguments

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[3] C. Dyer, 'The retreat from marginal land: the growth and decline of medieval rural settlements', in M.Aston, D. Austin and C. Dyer. (eds), *The Rural Settlements of Medieval England (*Oxford, 1989), p. 46.
[4] R. Van de Noort, *The Humber Wetlands: the Archaeology of a Dynamic Landscape* (Cambridge, 2004), p. 145.
[5] M. Postan, *The Medieval Economy and Society* (London, 1972), p. 37.
[6] C. Dyer, *Making a Living in the Middle Ages: the People of Britain 850-1520* (London, 2002), p. 232.
[7] Dyer, *Making a Living*, p. 272.
[8] J. Hatcher, *Plague, Population and the English Economy* (London, 1977), p. 25.
[9] R. Virgoe, *Illustrated Letters of the Paston Family* (London, 1989), pp. 19-20.

being made for continued decline or at the very best only a slow recovery in population. The explanations for stagnation are varied including the ongoing impact of disease outbreaks (such as the sweating sicknesses at the end of the century), late marriage and smaller family size. Economically the bullion famine restricted transactions and the lingering effect of the Hundred Years War and conflict with the Hanseatic League restricted trade.[10] It is unlikely that a single factor was dominant in prolonging the period of depression and delaying recovery and that stagnation was the consequence of a combination of many factors. Although the timing is debated there is general agreement that a steady demographic and economic recovery was established by the mid-sixteenth century.[11] In the second half of the fifteenth century the wars that had constrained trade were over and cloth exports were increasing to replace wool.

These phases had a visible impact on the landscape. During the period of growth woodland was cleared and marshland drained to provide additional farmland. New settlements appeared and increasingly marginal land was brought into production. Farming extended into increasingly unsuitable regions such as the Brecklands on the Norfolk and Suffolk borders and on Dartmoor.[12] With the collapse in the population the demand for food declined and marginal lands were the first to be abandoned. Settlements were scaled down with towns and villages declining in size or where they were no longer viable disappearing completely.[13] Demesne farming was no longer profitable and increasingly difficult to resource from the depleted population. By the early fifteenth century most demesne lands had been leased out.[14] New patterns of landholding appeared and with it the emergence of the 'yeoman farmer' benefiting from the availability of reasonably priced land to build sizeable farms.[15] The landscape was being transformed with the increase in enclosure and the move from agricultural to pastoral farming. This overview of the general social and economic model for the period masks the importance of local variation. There were significant structural differences between regions that shaped their development and ability to weather

[10] Dyer, *Making a Living*, p. 302.
[11] Smith, 'Plagues and peoples', p. 183.
[12] M. Bailey, 'The concept of the margin in the medieval English economy', *Economic History Review*, 49 (1989), pp. 1-2; Dyer, 'Marginal land' p. 47.
[13] R. Jones, 'Contrasting patterns of village and hamlet desertion in England', in C. Dyer and R. Jones. (eds), *Deserted Villages Revisited* (Hatfield, 2010), p. 9, Figure 2.1.
[14] J. Hare, 'The demesne lessees of fifteenth century Wiltshire', *Agricultural History Review*, 29 (1981), p. 1.
[15] C. Dyer, *An Age of Transition? Economy and Society in the Later Middle Ages* (Oxford, 2005), p. 4.

change. There were significant variations in population and wealth between regions influenced by a range of factors such as the quality of the farmland, diversity of the local economy and access to markets and trade routes to sell surplus produce. To understand these issues at the local level helps to challenge or validate the more general national model. This thesis looks at the evolution of wetland regions through an analysis of the largest such area in England, the Fenlands surrounding the Wash (here the term Fenland is used to describe the coastal salt marsh, silt marsh, peat fen and the inhabited islands). Specifically, it concentrates on the changes in the predominantly silt marsh landscape of Wisbech Hundred of Cambridgeshire between the thirteenth and sixteenth centuries.

The thesis seeks to link the timescales for these demographic and economic changes with the longer timescales associated with the environmental changes that shaped both the landscape and settlement patterns. It looks at how the inhabitants were able to respond and to adapt to changing circumstances as well as the nature of their response.

Regional Background

Wisbech Hundred was a unique landscape combining coastal marsh, fertile silt soils and the inland marshes of the peat fen (see Figure 0.1). It was part of the vast marshlands behind the Wash on the east coast of England that stretched across three counties (Lincolnshire, Cambridgeshire and Norfolk). It was a region that by the fifteenth century was a largely manmade landscape and the interplay between people and the environment was central to its existence. The Fenlands were created when the Wash cut through the chalk escarpment to form a large bay that enabled the rivers from the Midlands (Welland, Nene and Ouse) to drain into the North Sea forming behind the Wash the largest single area of marsh and fen in the country. In its natural state, prior to general settlement, the fens were a flooded wasteland with a scattering of islands of higher ground (such as Ely, derived from the Old English *ael-ge* or *el-ge* meaning 'eel district') surrounded by reeds and waterways.[16] The description given by St Guthlac from his island settlement at Crowland was of a 'wide wilderness'.[17] An eighth-century monk, also of Crowland, expanded on this description to include 'a waste untilled and

[16] P. Reaney, *The Place-Names of Cambridgeshre and the Isle of Ely* (Cambridge, 1943), p. 214.
[17] B. Thorpe (ed), *Codex Exoniensis* (London, 1842), p. 115.

devoid of settlement' and 'misty marshes in perpetual darkness'.[18] This is the modern perception of the fens as it would have been until after the great drainage of the Cambridgeshire levels in the seventeenth century. It is picture that oversimplifies what was a complex landscape.

In Cambridgeshire there were three distinct regions. Closest to the sea was the silt marsh where repeated tidal flooding had deposited a rich silt soil in a long slightly elevated band running from Boston in Lincolnshire through to Lynn in Norfolk. This stretched between five and ten miles inland and behind that was the peat fen. This was composed of organic material deposited by the slow moving rivers flowing through the region. Beyond the peat fens were the uplands around Cambridge and Huntingdon marking the boundary of the wetlands. There were comparable wetland regions in England and a number of these are discussed in the thesis (Somerset Levels, Humber Wetlands and Romney Marsh). However, these regions could not match the wetlands surrounding the Wash and crossing three counties in size or scale.

Wisbech Hundred was in the northernmost corner of the county and sat largely on the silt marsh close to the Wash with the Witchford Hundred immediately behind on the peat fen. It covered an area of approximately 200 square kilometres and was bounded by waterways with the Wash and the Shire Drain in the north and the Fendyke in the West. To the south and east the area was marked by the old course of the River Nene and the Welle Stream with the Hundred bisected by the Wisbeck Stream running down into the Wash. These waterways were to play a critical part in the development and the exploitation of the area forming part of the drainage network and providing safe and easy transport for people and goods. Within the Hundred there were variations in the nature of the landscape that influenced land use; close to the estuary the silt soil was lighter and easier to work becoming heavier and mixed with clay further inland. Nearer to the peat fen on the western edge of the Hundred the ground was marshier with meres and wetlands subject to regular flooding. Crossing the region there were low banks or roddons' formed when soil had gathered along the banks of creeks to form the areas of higher ground that were to become important in early settlement.[19]

[18] B. Colgrave (ed), *Felix's Life of St Guthlac* (Cambridge, 1956), p. 2.
[19] D. Hall and J. Coles, *Fenland Survey: An Essay in Landscape and Persistence* (London, 1994), p. 19.

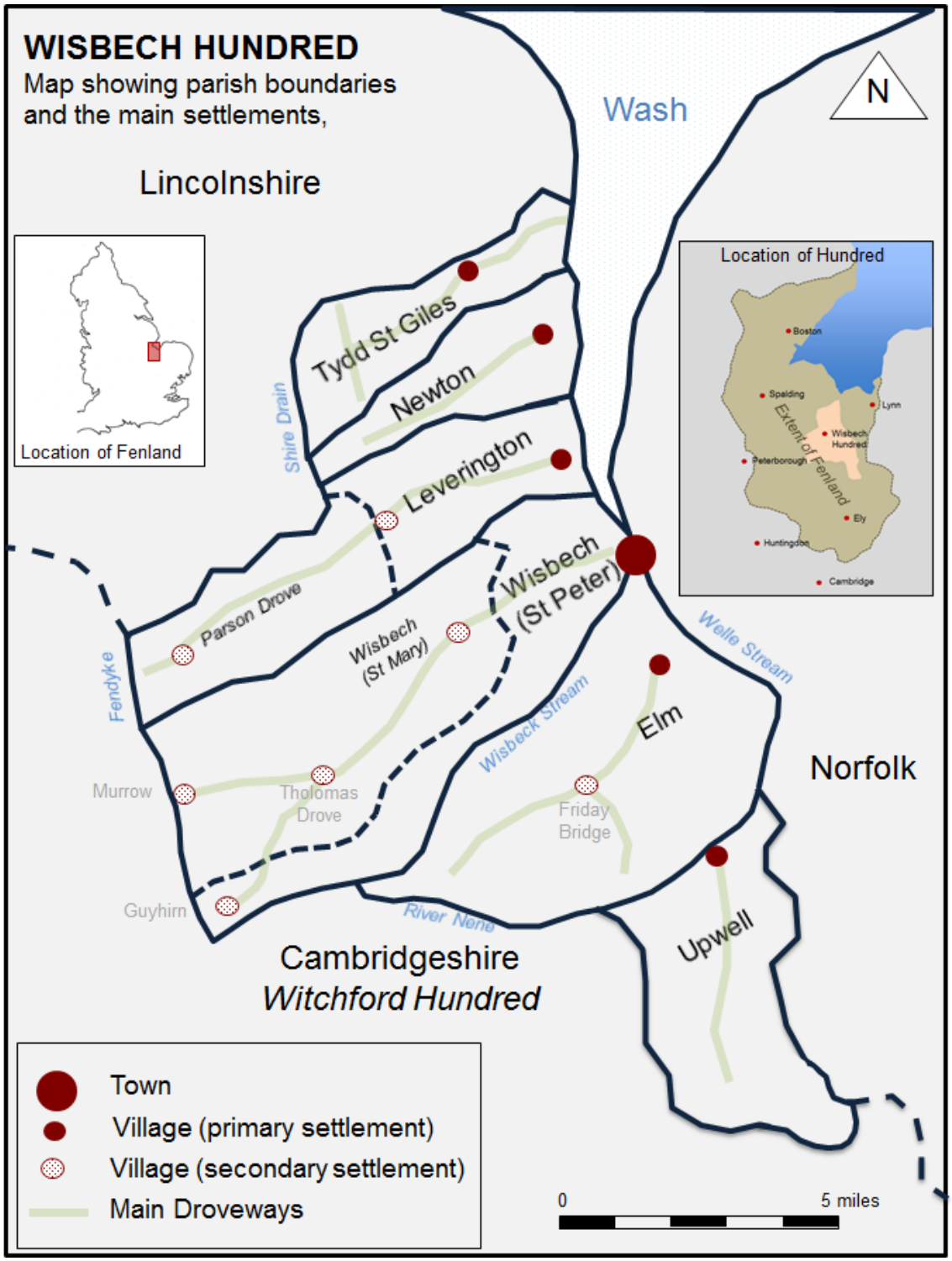

Figure 0.1 - Map of the Wisbech Hundred in the late medieval period.[20]

[20] Based on Cassini Historical Map Old Series (1824), 131 Boston and Spalding and 143 Ely and Wisbech; D. Hall, *The Fenland Project, Number 10: Cambridgeshire Survey, Isle of Ely and Wisbech* (Cambridge, 1996), p. 165; H. Darby, *The Medieval Fenland* (Cambridge, 1940), p. 5.

Thesis Questions

Wisbech Hundred is a region that is attractive to the landscape historian as well as the social and economic historian. The impact of settlement on the region was profound affecting a permanent transformation of the landscape. It could be regarded as marginal land that through the process of drainage and flood protection became an established valuable agricultural and pastoral region. This thesis seeks to understand how the unique environment of the Hundred evolved and how this transformation compared with the national socio-economic model. Although there have been many studies of the medieval Fenland and economy (notably Darby, Hallam and Thirsk) these are dated and specific work on the Hundred, with the exception of David Stone's excellent study of the manorial records for Wisbech Barton, have been limited.[21] This thesis aims to fill that gap with an assessment of the social and economic history of the region during this critical period of major demographic change.

The key question that the thesis asks is whether the evidence for the Hundred follows the national pattern of growth, collapse and stagnation or did the singular nature of the landscape lead to different outcomes? This leads to a number of secondary questions: if the Hundred did demonstrate an alternative pattern of development what were the features of the region that enabled it to do so? Furthermore, was this behaviour common to all wetland regions in the country or was the Fenland unique even amongst comparable landscapes? Ultimately, the thesis will explore the relationship between landscape and settlement looking at the how the landscape shaped settlement patterns and how in turn the inhabitants permanently transformed the landscape. It will consider how this ongoing process resulted in the Fenland society and economy seen in the Hundred at the end of the fifteenth century.

To answer these questions the thesis considers a number of themes starting with an understanding of the changing landscape and the nature of settlement development. It investigates the process of drainage and flood-protection essential for the transformation of the region. Consideration is given to the changing patterns of population and wealth compared with the national model. The structure of the Fenland economy is reviewed

[21] J. Thirsk, *English Peasant Farming* (London, 1957); Stone, *Decision-Making*.

focussing in particular on changes in land ownership and the final theme is the pivotal role played by the regional market town, Wisbech, lying at the centre of the Hundred.

Structure and Historiography

The starting point for any review of the Fenland must be the work of H C Darby that, although dated, provides a coherent overview of the region from Domesday to the sixteenth century.[22] It is supported by H E Hallam's detailed analysis of the development of the Wapentake of Elloe in the neighbouring Lincolnshire marshlands, a region that provides many useful parallels with the Hundred.[23] Hall and Coles provide a more modern overview of landscape and settlement across the Norfolk, Cambridgeshire and Lincolnshire Fenlands based on archaeological evidence. This is supported by Hall's work from 1996 on the Isle of Ely and Wisbech as part of the Fenland Project.[24] However, although the analysis is excellent the geographical coverage is not complete. The work of Susan Oosthuizen and of J R Ravensdale looks primarily at the adjoining inland peat fen but helps to understand the relationship between the neighbouring landscapes and provides insights into trade within the region.[25] Missing from the debate is a detailed assessment of the development of this distinct landscape, the Cambridgeshire silt marsh, across this period of demographic and economic change. Stone's work on the manor of Wisbech Barton provides an understanding of agrarian practice for part of the region for part of the period but does not provide a complete picture.

Although the analysis in the thesis has mainly been based on the review of primary source material, being in part a landscape study extensive use has been made of modern and historical maps as well as archaeological evidence. This has been supported by site visits and walking surveys of important landscape features and the capture of photographic evidence that could be cross referenced against contemporary documents.

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[22] H. Darby, *The Medieval Fenland* (Cambridge, 1940); H. Darby, *The Draining of the Fens* (Cambridge, 1956).

[23] H. Hallam, *Settlement and Society: A Study of the Early Agrarian History of South Lincolnshire* (Cambridge, 1965).

[24] Hall, *Isle of Ely and Wisbech*, pp. 164-191.

[25] S. Oosthuizen, 'Cambridgeshire and the Peat Fen: Medieval Rural Settlement and Commerce c. 900-1300', in N. Christie and P. Stamper (eds), *Medieval Rural Settlement: Britain and Ireland AD 800-1600* (Oxford, 2012); J. Ravendale, *Liable to Floods: Village Landscape on the Edge of the Fens A.D. 450-1850* (Cambridge, 1974).

In the first chapter the key features of the medieval landscape are described as well as the development of settlement. This enables a picture of the Hundred as it would have appeared at the end of the fifteenth century to be constructed. An important source for this chapter is the Wisbech Map. Although this was a sixteenth-century map its origins can be traced back to the later fifteenth century with the presence of Morton's Leam dating it to some time after 1480.[26] Use is also made of the Cambridgeshire and Norfolk HER records to provide archaeological evidence of settlement and land use. The chapter as a whole serves to set the background for the rest of the thesis.

Rippon provides a general model for the development of wetland regions against which the evidence from the Hundred can be compared.[27] He also gives a comparison with other regions that helps to highlight the unique features of the silt marsh. Hall and Coles' examination of the development of settlement tends to focus on the Roman and early medieval periods rather than the later middle ages. In attempting to understand the nature of Fenland settlement Jones and Page provide an appreciation of medieval settlement development based on the evidence from Northamptonshire villages.[28] This is supported by the work of Lewis, Mitchell-Fox and Dyer on settlement also in central England providing a hierarchy and timeline for the evolution of villages.[29] However, the focus of these works is on the midlands and although they provide a framework for comparison they do not cover the Fenlands with its distinctive settlement patterns.

The second chapter looks at two of the key activities for the region, drainage and flood protection, and how an essentially manmade landscape was created from a marshy wasteland. Drainage was central to the inhabitants as it secured their livelihoods and protected against destruction. The main source document for the chapter is the record of the Commission of Sewers held in Wisbech in 1438. It gives a detailed description of the structure of the drainage network and shows how the management of this critical infrastructure was organised. This is supported by evidence included in the manorial records for the end of the fifteenth century. Hallam gives a description of drainage and

[26] H. Wallis (ed), *Royal Historical Society Guides and Handbooks 18: Historians Guide to Early British Maps* (London, 1994), page. 147.
[27] S. Rippon, *The Transformation of Coastal Wetlands: Exploitation and Management of Marshland Landscapes in North West Europe during the Roman and Medieval Periods* (Oxford, 2000).
[28] R. Jones and M. Page, *Medieval Villages in an English Landscape: Beginnings and Ends* (Macclesfield, 2006).
[29] C. Lewis, P. Mitchell-Fox and C. Dyer, *Village, Hamlet and Field: Changing Medieval Settlements in Central England* (Manchester, 1997).

land reclamation in South Lincolnshire primarily in the twelfth and thirteenth centuries. Although dated it can be compared with the evidence from the Cambridgeshire silt marsh. Silvester carried out a similar, but more recent, analysis for the individual settlements on the adjoining Norfolk marshlands.[30] However, underpinning the study of wetland transformation is Rippon's work on drainage methods that provides a comparison between English wetland regions and northern Europe. A broader picture of the importance of water management is given by Cook and Williamson.[31]

In Chapter Three there is an analysis of population and wealth. The demographics of the Hundred are modelled and compared with regional and national trends. The source documents for this chapter are the lay subsidy records for 1327 and 1524-5 supplemented with the limited available information from the 1377 poll tax. The information is also used to assess how the per-capita wealth of the Hundred changed across the period. It is reinforced by information on personal wealth contained in a collection of wills from the region from the fifteenth century.

Population and wealth have long been core elements in medieval history and there has been an enormous amount of research into these areas with a diversity of opinion on techniques and results. The starting point for the modern study of population is Russell.[32] Although he provides a structured approach to population assessment many of the findings have been overturned by later work. His estimates of the English population between the twelfth and fourteenth centuries have been shown to be consistently low. A more contemporary study is that of Hatcher on population and economy between 1349 and 1530. Although brief it links the main themes and provides a more realistic view of population changes. Broadberry and colleagues advanced the study by combining time series and cross sectional data (i.e. tax information and manorial records) to attempt to reduce the inherent inaccuracies with population modelling.[33] This approach has been adopted for the assessment of population in the thesis.

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[30] R. Silvester, *The Norfolk Project Number 3: Marshland and the Nar Valley*, Norfolk (Dereham, 1988).

[31] H. Cook and T. Williamson (eds), *Water Management in the English Landscape: Field, Marsh and Meadow* (Edinburgh, 1999).

[32] J. Russell, *British Medieval Population* (Albuquerque, 1948).

[33] S. Broadberry, B. Campbell, and B. van Leeuwan, 'English medieval population: reconciling time series and cross sectional evidence', *in Reconstructing the National Income of Britain and*

In the fourth chapter the nature of the Fenland economy and changing landownership is analysed looking at the supply of, and demand for, produce from the Hundred and how surpluses were traded through the local and regional markets. A range of sources are used to support the discussion including a comparison between the survey of 1250-1 and Bishop Alcock's Terrier of 1492 that shows the changes in land ownership in and around Wisbech. This is supported by fifteenth-century manorial court records and wills that give an understanding of land transactions.

The focus of the discussion on the Fenland economy is on its changing structure. This is demonstrated by the changing patterns of land ownership shown in surveys and terriers across the period. It also considers the importance of the 'family-land' bond in land transactions. Here the extensive work of Dyer on the rural medieval economy and Whittle on the development of agrarian capitalism provides a framework for the analysis.[34] The demand for Fenland produce is considered and the relative importance of internal markets and foreign trade compared. This builds on the work of Lee who looked at the role of Cambridge as a centre for demand in the region.[35] Economic development was facilitated by access to the complex network of waterways that enabled the easy and cheap movement of goods. James Edwards' thesis on medieval transport systems in England and Wales gives a useful description of the waterways of the region.[36]

In the final chapter the role of the town of Wisbech as a regional hub and the centre of economic activity for the Hundred is assessed. It looks at the role of the town in supporting the surrounding communities and acting as a focus for trade as well as how it was governed by a small ruling elite operating through the dominant Trinity Guild and working in conjunction with the Bishop of Ely's local administration. There are a number of sources that shed light on life in the town at the end of the fifteenth century including the Terrier noted above and the extensive records of the Trinity Guild dating from its establishment in 1379 to its dissolution and metamorphosis into the town corporation in 1547.

Holland, c. 1270/1500 to 1850 (Leverhulme Trust Reference Number F/00215AR, 2011).

[34] J. Whittle, *The Development of Agrarian Capitalism: Land and Labour in Norfolk 1440-1580* (Oxford, 2000).

[35] J. Lee, *Cambridge and its Economic Region 1450-1560* (Hatfield, 2005).

[36] J. Edwards, 'The Transport Systems of Medieval England – A Geographic Synthesis', (unpub p.h.d thesis, university of Salford, 1987).

The chapter looks at the development of the town and the diversity of trades to determine if it was a thriving community. This would have gone against the grain of urban history in the late medieval period where towns were stagnating or in decline (see the work of Alan Dyer and Heather Swanson).[37] The importance of the urban elite and the complex relationship between the fraternities and town government that were essential to the running of the town are considered. These are discussed in Virginia Bainbridge's study of medieval countryside gilds and Ken Farnhill's related work that have assisted with the understanding of the Trinity Guild and its role in Wisbech.[38]

Of the comparative wetland regions the principal guide for information on the Somerset Levels and the other wetlands along the Severn estuary is Stephen Rippon. Robert Van de Noort has reviewed the development of the various wetland regions along the Humber estuary. These wetlands were the closest geographically to the Fenlands and bordered the North Sea with trading routes to the Low Countries, Germany and the Baltic. The other wetland region used for comparison is Romney Marsh and the main source here is the work of Jill Eddison.[39] The study of wetland regions tends to focus on the evolution of the landscape touching on aspects such as population and the local economy.

[37] A. Dyer, *Decline and growth in English towns 1400-1540* (Cambridge, 1991); H. Swanson, *Medieval British Towns* (London, 1999).
[38] V. Bainbridge, *Gilds in the Medieval Countryside* (Woodbridge, 1996); K. Farnhill, *Guilds and the Parish Community in Late Medieval East Anglia* c. 1470-1550 (York, 2001).
[39] J. Eddison. (ed), *Romney Marsh: The Debatable Ground* (Oxford, 1995); J Eddison and C. Green. (eds), *Romney Marsh: Evolution, Occupation, Reclamation* (Oxford, 1988).

Chapter One – Landscape and Settlement

INTRODUCTION

An understanding of landscape and settlement forms an essential background to the discussions of social and economic structures that follow. Wisbech Hundred lies on the silt marsh bordering the Wash (see Figure 1.1). It is largely man made and from the earliest pre-Roman settlements there has been conflict between settlement and the forces of nature that created the region and sought to reclaim the land for marsh. This balance between nature and the human desire to exploit the extensive resources of the region shaped the settlement patterns. There are other wetland regions in England with similar features but, as noted in the introduction, the scale of the silt marsh and the extent of the manmade transformation of the landscape make it unusual and worthy of study.

The starting point for the review is the underlying geology that initially shaped the region and defined the landscape features. This leads into a description of the landscape of the Hundred as it would have appeared at the end of the fifteenth century. The timeline for the evolution of settlement is considered through case studies for Tydd St Giles and Elm. There is a wide range of source material available to support the discussion with the most accessible being the Wisbech Map showing the geography and main features of the Hundred.[40] Although the map was redrawn in the seventeenth century its roots can be traced back the end of the fifteenth century. It provides an insight into how the region was perceived by its people emphasising features felt to be important. The map is supported by documentary evidence in manorial records and wills as well as archaeological finds (the Cambridgeshire and Norfolk HER databases have been particularly useful). The finds can be used to show the date, location and type of settlement as well as land use. Field- and place-names also provide an appreciation of how the inhabitants interpreted their environment. The nature of Mudcroft in Newton is obvious even to the modern observer.

[40] T.N.A., P.R.O., MPCC/17.

This chapter will seek to fill a gap in the analysis of the region by focussing on the silt marsh landscape and settlements of the Wisbech Hundred. The question posed is how the unique nature of this wetland landscape shaped the settlement of the region and how in turn the settlement helped to shape the landscape and if a credible timeline for the development of the settlement pattern seen at the end of the fifteenth century can be defined?

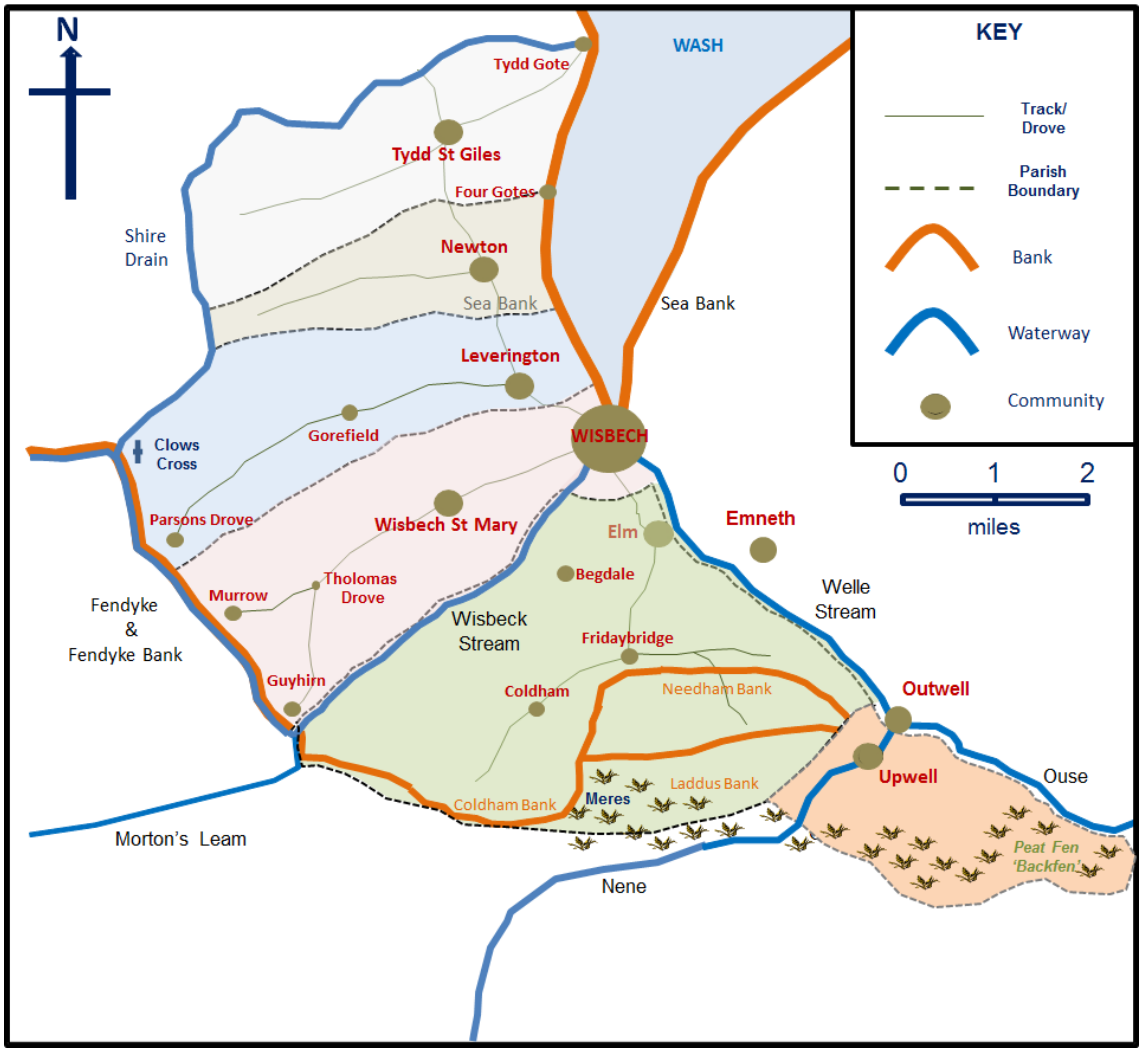

Figure 1.1 – Map of Wisbech Hundred showing parish boundaries and key landscape features at the end of the fifteenth century.

Relative Sea-Levels

A dominant factor in the development of the landscape and settlement in the Fenlands was the effect of changing relative water levels. There were periods of prolonged flooding with an increase in the area under water and periods of sustained drying with a decrease in the area of land under water from the end of the last Ice Age, see Figure 1.2 which is based on changes in relative sea-levels in north-west Europe.[41] With increased relative sea-levels there was a period of flooding around 1300BC and much of the region was underwater with habitation limited to the fen edge, such as the Flag Fen and Must Farm settlements on the outskirts of Peterborough.[42] This was followed by falling flood water levels and exploitation beginning to extend into the silt marsh during the early Iron Age before the region was again inundated.[43] The period from approximately 200BC to 300AD was one of prolonged drying of the land and coincided with a reoccupation of the region by Romano-British populations with settlement initially extending into the fen along natural raised banks or roddons.[44] This combined with a period of climatic stability during the expansion of the empire described as the 'Roman Optimum' that aided settlement growth.[45] There is extensive evidence of settlement in this period in what was to become Wisbech Hundred (discussed later in the chapter). The period from approximately 400AD to 600AD was again one of transgression and depopulation, attested by the lack of archaeological finds attributable to this period.[46] As Crowson et al note there was a 'near complete absence of settlement in the great sweep of silt across the mouth of the Wash basin'.[47] This was followed by a sustained period of regression up to the fifteenth century coinciding with the colonisation and transformation of the silt marsh that is the main theme of this study.

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[41] S. Rippon, *The Transformation of Coastal Wetlands* (Oxford, 2000) p.22.

[42] F. Pryor, *Flag Fen: Life and Death of a Prehistoric Landscape* (Michigan, 2005); D. Hall and J. Coles, *Fenland Survey: an Essay in Landscape and Persistence* (London, 1994), p. 77; www.mustfarm.com.

[43] Hall and Coles, *Fenland Survey*, p. 92.

[44] Hall and Coles, *Fenland Survey*, p. 19; R. Silvester and D. Hall, 'Roddons or rodhams?', *Fenland Research* 2, pp. 66-7.

[45] M. McCormick, U. Büntgen, M. Cane, E. Cook, K. Harper, P. Huybers, T. Litt, S. Manning. P. Mayewski, A More, K. Nicolussi and W. Tegel, 'Climate change during and after the Roman Empire: Reconstructing the Past from Scientific and Historical Evidence, *Journal of Interdisciplinary History* (2012), p. 174.

[46] Rippon, *Transformation*, p. 35.

[47] A. Crowson, T. Lane, K. Penn and D. Trimble, *Anglo-Saxon Settlement on the Siltland of Eastern England* (Lincolnshire Archaeology and Heritage Reports Series, No 7, 2005), p. xii.

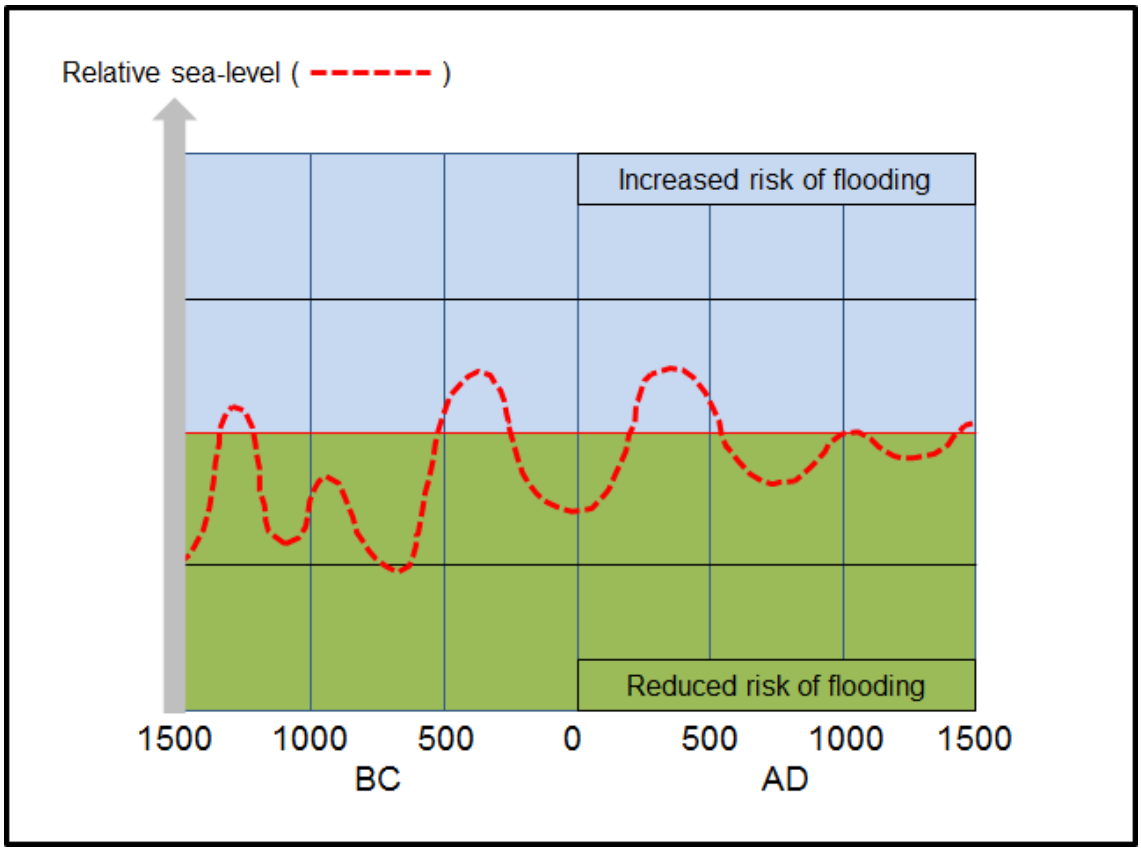

Figure 1.2 – Diagram showing changes in relative sea-level in the North Sea from 1500BC to 1500AD.[48]

Chronology

Before commencing the analysis of the available evidence it is helpful to provide a framework and a model for landscape and settlement development. Rippon describes a model and chronology for the evolution of coastal wetlands that defines three distinct phases; namely exploitation, modification and transformation (see Figure 1.3).[49] Cook describes a similar three-phase model for wetland reclamation.[50] The exploitation phase describes the use of existing resources but without attempting to change the landscape. The modification phase covers the changes made to bring more land into production through the construction of banks and ditches. The transformation phase describes the completion of the reclamation process and the final stage of establishing control over the environment.

[48] Rippon, *Tranformation*, p. 23.
[49] Rippon, *Tranformation*, p. 152.
[50] H. Cook, 'Hydrological Management in Reclaimed Wetlands', in H. Cook and T. Williamson (eds), *Water Management in the English Landscape: Field, Marsh and Meadow* (Edinburgh, 1999), p. 86.

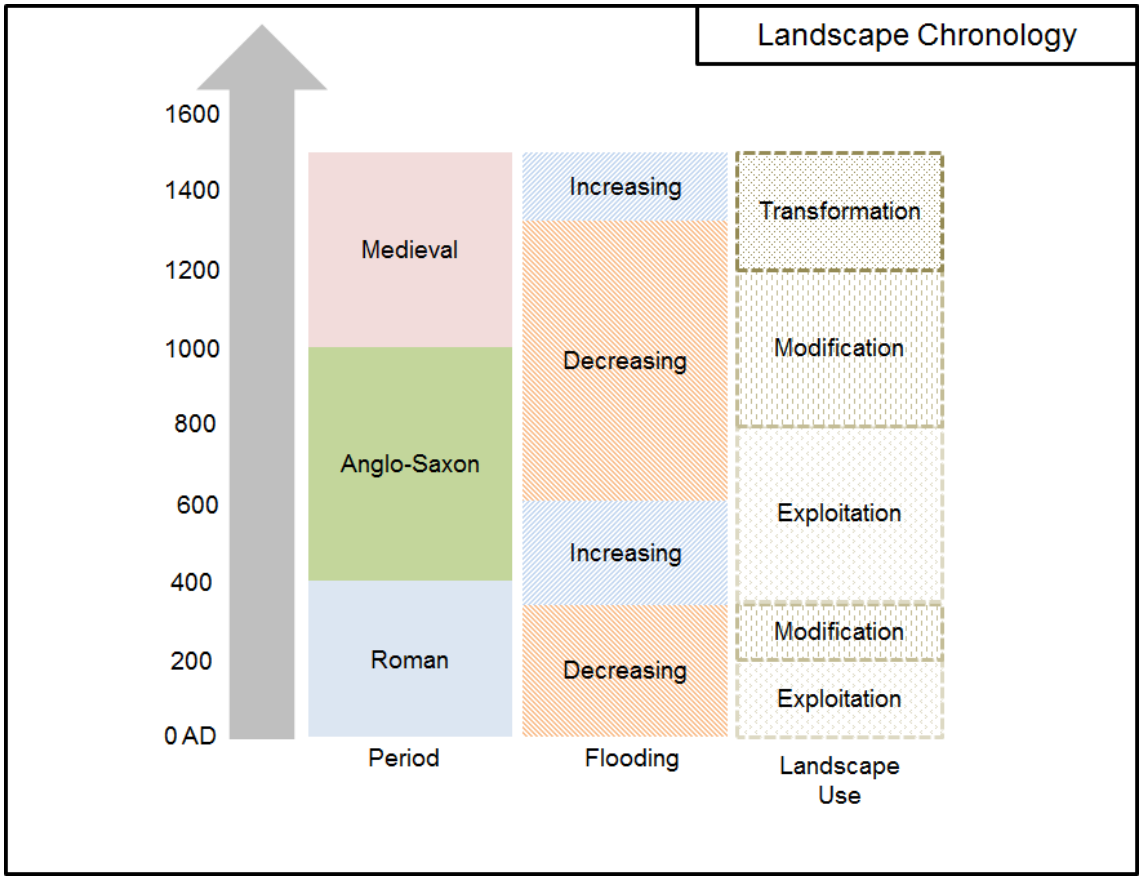

Figure 1.3 – Landscape development chronology based on the Rippon model.[51]

This process is evident in the Fenlands with the earliest settlements exploiting the existing resources without seeking to change the environment (exploitation). The Romano-British sought not only to exploit the landscape but began a process of modification with the construction of enclosed fields, drainage and waterways (such as the Carr Dyke) allowing permanent occupation.[52] This process was derailed by the increased flooding from the fourth century and was not resumed until the late Anglo-Saxon period with the construction of the sea banks and other flood defenses. Arguably the early to mid Anglo-Saxons had reverted back to exploitation settling only on areas of higher ground with limited development of the landscape. It was from the eleventh to the fourteenth centuries that the widespread modification and ultimately transformation of the region was completed with the construction of the enduring system of drainage. The improved defenses combined with the highly productive silt soils meant that settlement did not retreat and land was not abandoned in response to changes in relative

[51] Rippon, *Transformation*, p. 152.
[52] T. Potter, C. Johns, D. Hall, M. Hassall and D. Shotter, 'The Roman occupation of the central Fenland', *Britannia* 12 (1981), pp. 127-8; Rippon, *Transformation*, p.69.

sea levels or to the demographic crisis of the fourteenth century, unlike other regions.[53] By the fifteenth century there was an established pattern of settlement that had a major transforming impact on the landscape. An organised programme of drainage and flood protection controlled through the manorial courts and the Commissions of Sewers had extended it into the land adjoining the peat fen increasingly bringing seasonal pasture into agricultural production (see Chapter Two).

GEOLOGY

The simplified geological structure of the region is shown in Figure 1.4. The Fenland is bordered in the north by a layer of chalk bedrock, in the west by a layer of limestone and to the south and east by a continuation of the layer of chalk. Beneath the Fenland is a layer of Jurassic clay covering the entire region. The layer of chalk originally ran in a continuous geological band along the east coast and this band of rock was breached by a concentration of inland waters, at the end of the last Ice Age, to form the flooded depression that is the Wash.[54]

[53] C. Dyer, 'Villages in crisis: social dislocation and desertion 1370 – 1520', in C. Dyer and R. Jones (eds), *Deserted Villages Revisited* (Hatfield, 2010), p. 44; M. Bailey, 'The concept of the margin in the medieval English economy', *Economic History Review* 42 (1989), pp. 1-2.
[54] Hall and Coles, *Fenland Survey*, p. 13.

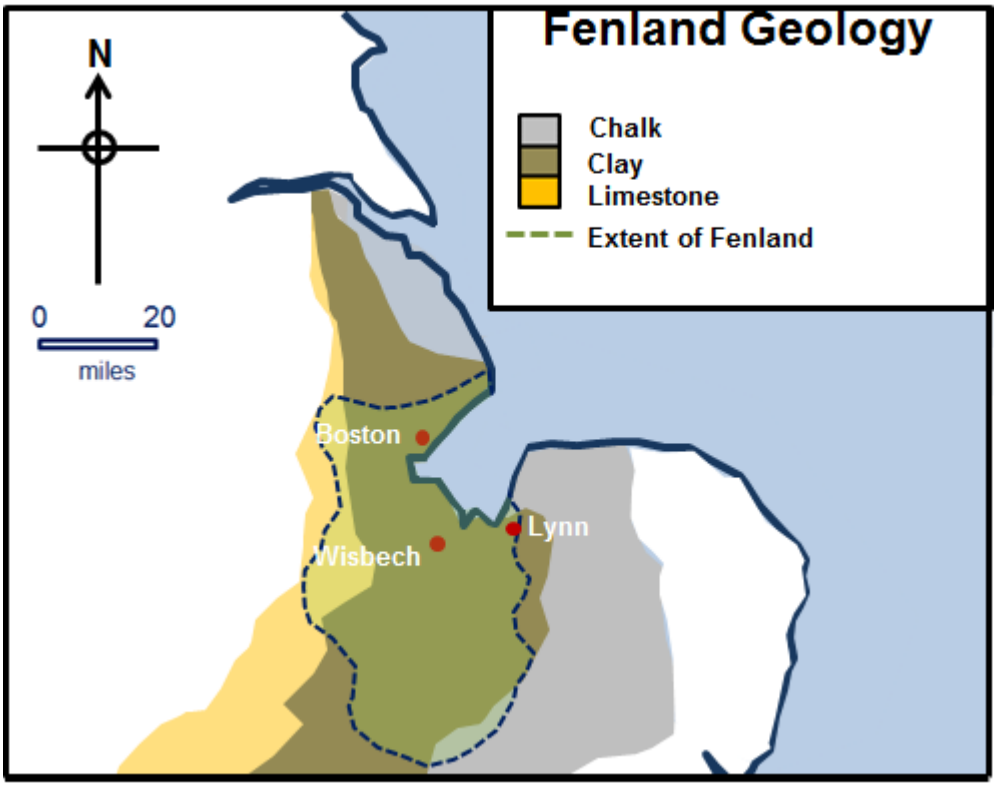

Figure 1.4 – Map showing the key features of underlying Fenland geology in relation to the extent of the Fenland region.[55]

The inland water escaping into the Wash through the breach covered existing vegetation leaving a layer of peat to accumulate across the region over the Jurassic clay.[56] The medieval peat fen was more extensive than the modern peat fen. Modern drainage and agriculture has reduced the thickness of the peat layer (shrinkage) and its extent. As the relative sea levels increased as the ice sheets melted the prevailing direction of flow changed with sea water flooding the Wash and its immediate hinterland. This deposited a layer of marine silt soil bordering the coastline. As this process was repeated over many centuries the typical Fenland structure developed with a base layer of clay covered by a layer of peat tapering out as it approached the estuary. In the east of the region a layer of silt, as shown in Figure 1.5 below, covered the peat. Although this is a simplified view of the process that created the Fenlands it is typical of other saltmarsh regions in England and Wales such as the Gwent Levels.[57]

[55] H. Darby, *The Medieval Fenland* (Cambridge, 1940), p. 3.
[56] P. Keddy, *Wetland Ecology: Principles and Conservation* (Cambridge, 2010), pp.323-5; Rippon, *Transformation*, p. 24.
[57] Rippon, *Transformation*, pp. 15-6.

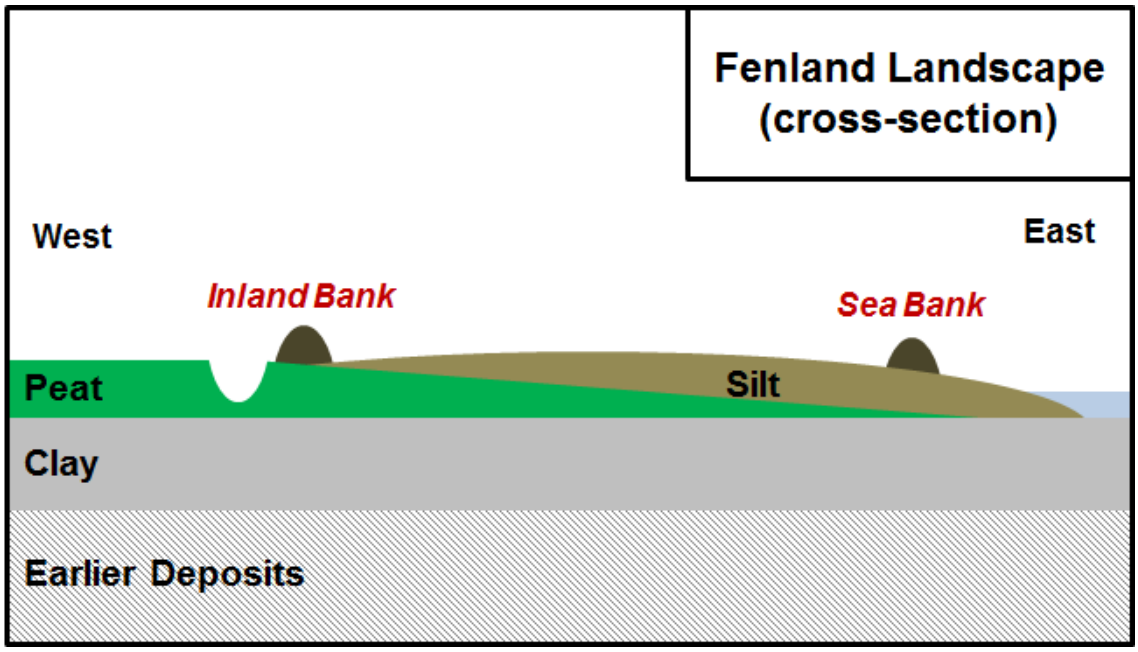

Figure 1.5 – Diagram showing a cross section of Fenland soil strata (based on Silvester).[58]

The division between silt and peat soil types shown in Figure 1.6 is an over simplification and there was a wide variation across the area. Closest to the Wash the soils were light silt that were easy to work and were particularly good for arable farming. Moving further inland the silt soils became heavier and increasingly mixed with clay.[59] Although more difficult to work they were still very productive and used for the cultivation of grain and legumes.[60] At the boundary between the silt and peat soils there was a transition. This land was less well drained and tended to be used more for pasture. At the boundary were meres and areas of marshy ground, such as Crowmere and Livermere lying between Elm and Upwell. These were used for fisheries as well as for wildfowling and the gathering of reeds. The pastures were accessed by droves (such as those at Tydd St Giles, Leverington and Elm) running out from the villages. A similar pattern was seen in the bordering Elloe Wapentake in Lincolnshire and the Marshland Hundred in Norfolk.[61]

[58] R. Silvester, *The Fenland Project; Norfolk Survey, Marshland and the Nar Valley* (Dereham, 1988), p.6.
[59] D. Stone, *Decision-Making in Medieval Agriculture* (Oxford, 2005), p. 36.
[60] Stone, *Decision-Making*, pp. 36-8; H. Hallam, *Settlement and Society: A Study of Early Agrarian History in South Lincolnshire* (Cambridge, 1965), p. 3.
[61] Hall and Coles, *Fenland Survey*, p. 142.

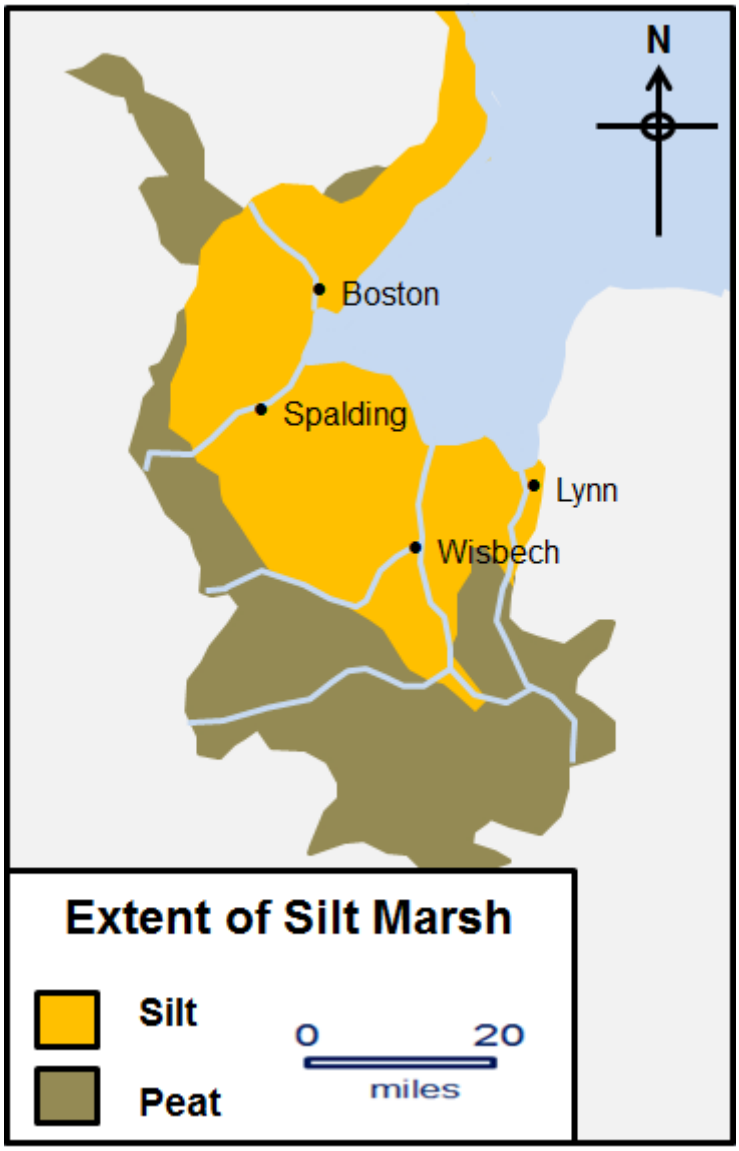

Figure 1.6 – Map showing the extent of the silt marsh in relation to the peat fen behind the Wash.[62]

[62] Darby, *Medieval Fenland*, p. 5.

LANDSCAPE

It is possible to describe in some detail the Fenland landscape as it stood at the end of the fifteenth century which provides a starting point for understanding the development of settlement patterns. The main source of information is the Wisbech Map that can be combined with documentary source material and modern OS maps to give a composite picture of the landscape.

Wisbech Map

The Wisbech Map, redrawn by Thomas Watts in the seventeenth century, was a copy of a 1597 map which in turn was a copy of a map dating back to the end of the fifteenth century.[63] The name of the medieval mapmaker is unknown but the medieval origins of the map are supported by the layout and depiction of key features such as the then newly constructed Morton's Leam and the Bishop of Ely's observation tower at Rings End.[64] It highlights locations that can be cross-referenced against Bishop Alcock's Terrier of 1492. The map shows an impression of the geography of the Hundred and gives the relative position of major landscape features including rivers, drainage channels, banks and some evidence of land usage. All the main settlements in the Hundred are shown on the map as well as individual manors, churches and chapels. Their general location and approximate physical relationship is shown but typical of the maps of the period it does not provide an understanding of actual geographical relationships, rather it shows features considered to be important.[65] The relative significance of each settlement is reflected in the size of the representation on the map. It gives the names of key features that can be validated against other documentary sources, such as Clowes Cross at the junction of the Fendyke on the western border of the Hundred and the Shire Drain on the northern border which appears on the map and regularly in the Commission of Sewers of 1438.[66] The complete Wisbech Map (with the exception of the village of Upwell) is shown in Figure 1.7.

[63] G. Woodgate, *The Hundred Map of Wisbech in 1597* (Wisbech, 1934), p. 1.
[64] Darby, *Medieval Fenland*, p. 168.
[65] N. Millea, *The Gough Map: The Earliest Road Map of Great Britain?* (Oxford, 2007), *p. 45/6.*
[66] Darby, *Medieval Fenland*, p. 180.

A comparable map (in age and location) is the Pinchbeck Fen Map drawn around 1450.[67] It covers the area between Spalding, Crowland and Deeping in the Wapentake of Elloe in Lincolnshire that borders on the Wisbech Hundred. The purpose of the Pinchbeck Fen Map was for disputes regarding access to common land. It was produced for the local lord, the Abbot of Spalding.[68] The aim of the Wisbech Map is less clear but is likely to have had a similar purpose as it shows the location of the Bishop of Ely's possessions pointing to the involvement of the church in its production.[69]

If the maps were placed in a continuum then the Pinchbeck Fen Map has more features in common with earlier maps such as the 'Gough Map' from around 1360.[70] The Wisbech Map has more features in common with sixteenth-century maps such as the Saxton county maps from the 1570s.[71] This is to be expected as the Wisbech Map was redrawn at this period and the compiler would have used the prevailing style. In comparison, the value of the modern OS maps is that they provide an accurate reference frame for the physical relationship between landscape features and settlements. The contemporary maps, such as the Wisbech and Pinchbeck Maps, provide an understanding of how people of the time saw and interpreted their environment. The two elements have to be taken together to obtain a complete picture of the structure of the Hundred.

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[67] R. Mitchell and D. Crook, 'The Pinchbeck Fen Map: a fifteenth century map of the Lincolnshire Fenland', *Imago Mundi, 51* (1999), p. 41.
[68] Mitchell and Crook, 'Pinchbeck Fen Map', p. 48.
[69] P. Harvey, 'Medieval maps to 1500', in H. Wallis (ed.), *Royal Historical Society Guides and Handbooks, 18*: *Historian's guide to early British maps* (London, 1994), p. 14.
[70] B. Hindle, *Maps for Local History* (London,1988), p. 14.
[71] Hindle, *Map*, p. 18.

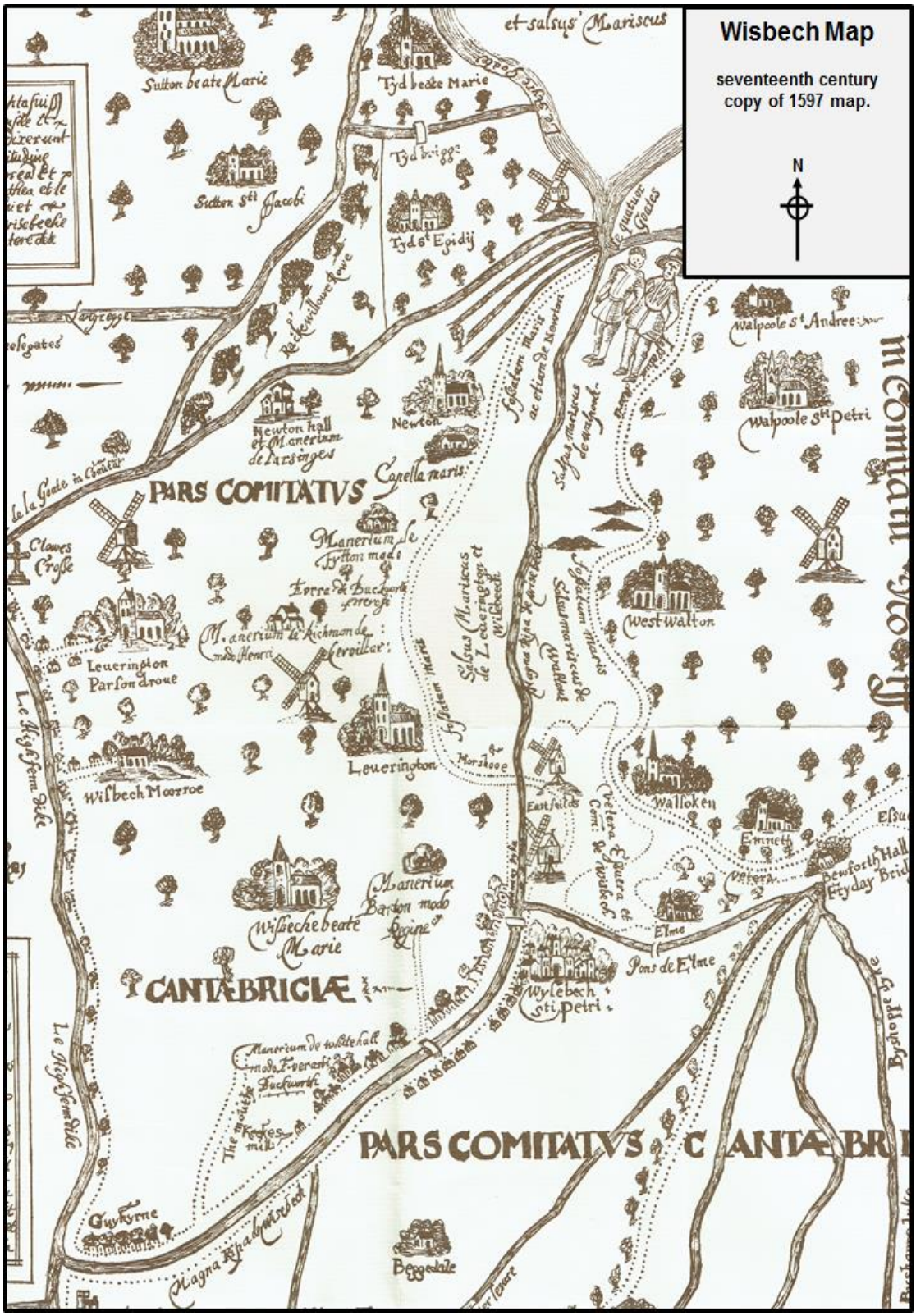

Figure 1.7 – Wisbech Map of 1597 showing the town, surrounding settlements and landscape features.[72]

[72] Wisbech and Fenland Museum, *Wisbech Hundred Map*.

Overview

A traveller passing through the Hundred at the end of the fifteenth century would not have seen a single flat homogeneous landscape typical of the modern Fenlands but would have experienced a variety of landscapes. At the boundary with the Wash there were salt marshes that were undrained and flooded at high tide. Separating the salt marsh from the managed fen was a wide and tall seabank with sluices to allow inland water to escape but preventing the ingress of sea water. Moving into the fen from the seabank there was a gradual but visible change in the nature of the landscape from light silts to heavy peat changing the colour and the consistency of the land. On the western and southern boundaries of the Hundred were peat soils deposited by the many waterways passing through the region.

A distinct feature of the late medieval landscape was the numerous waterways that crossed the region with the largest channels such as the Nene, Welle Stream, Shire Drain and Fendyke marking the boundaries of the Hundred. Larger drains such as the Shoffendyke and the Goredike marked parish and field boundaries with individual field strips being bordered by small ditches typically three feet in depth.[73] It was not a universally flat landscape being dissected by both natural and man made banks. The natural banks or roddons followed the course of old waterways and provided a platform for the early settlement of the region. There were large man made structures such as the Needham Bank and the Coldham Bank protecting the newly drained land in Elm from freshwater flooding. Along field boundaries and even within fields were smaller banks, typically two to three feet in height, protecting against localised flooding. In the modern landscape many of these features have disappeared to accommodate industrial farming techniques.

On the southern and western boundaries of the Hundred adjacent to the peat fen the transition in the landscape was more abrupt. Beyond the banks that protected the silt marsh the land was largely uninhabited, apart from the islands of higher ground, and poorly drained. For part of the year it was dry enough to use as summer pasture but in the winter reverted to marsh and was persistently flooded. There were large areas of open water such as The Mouthe at Guyhirn and the meres near to Upwell that drained

[73] Hall and Coles, *Fenland Survey*, p. 146.

into the Wisbeck Stream and the Nene. The meres were surrounded by extensive reed beds typical of a marsh landscape. It was a diverse landscape that supported a variety of activities primarily farming but also fishing and the exploitation of marsh produce. This in turn gave rise to the diverse settlement patterns discussed here that evolved to make best use of the landscape.

The Northern Parishes

Looking in more detail, the landscape of the Hundred can be divided for convenience into three sections. In the north were the parishes of Tydd St Giles and Newton (and here the parish is used as a convenient method of describing a geographical area), in the centre were Leverington and Wisbech and in the south were Elm and Upwell. For each parish two maps have been prepared for comparison. The first is an extract of the Wisbech Map showing an interpretation of the parish at the end of the fifteenth century. The second is based on modern OS maps and uses documentary evidence from wills and manorial records to highlight medieval landscape features. Tydd St Giles and Newton lay on the raised band of marine silt running around the Wash coastline. Tydd St Giles was 7km in length and 3km in width typical of the long narrow parishes on the silt marsh of Lincolnshire, Cambridgeshire and Norfolk.[74] The extract of the Wisbech Map (see Figure 1.8) shows the physical boundaries with the Wash '*La Wash et Salsus Mariscum*' to the east where the Wisbeck Stream opened into the estuary at Four Gotes '*Le Quatuor Goates*'. To the north and west was the Shire Drain marking the border with Lincolnshire. Tydd Bridge '*Tyddbrigge*' (also known as Tretton Bridge) is identified marking the land route from Lincolnshire to Wisbech via the neighbouring village of Tydd St Mary '*Tyd beate Marie*'. To the south was the Shoffendyke marking the boundary with the parish of Newton running from the sea-bank in the east to the Shire Drain in the west. It was the largest of the 'Four Gotes' draining the land between Tydd St Giles and Newton. Newton was similar to Tydd St Giles in that it was long and narrow (6km by 3km) and dominated by a single settlement. The extract of the Wisbech Map (see Figure 1.9) shows the boundaries of the parish; the Shoffendyke and the sea-bank '*fossatum maris*'. The southern boundary with the parish of Leverington was the Goredike running inland from an area of marshy ground close to the sea-bank to the

[74] R. Silvester, *The Fenland Project Number 3: Marshland and the Nar Valley, Norfolk* (Dereham, 1988), p. 3; Hallam, *Settlement and Society*, p. 3; Hall and Coles, *Fenland Survey*, p. 147, Figure 91.

Shire Drain by 'Clowes Cross'.[75] The map also shows the other three channels of the 'Four Gotes' ending before the village and draining the aptly named fields of Newlands and Mudcroft. During the twentieth century these were filled and deep ploughing has obscured their route to the Wash.

In both parishes close to the sea-bank were light silt soils becoming heavier and mixed with clay moving further inland. Around the villages there were a number of open fields growing grain and legumes, as shown in the inventory of the will of Thomas Hamunde from Tydd St Giles in 1467.[76] Close to the village of Tydd St Giles was Summer Lezure, a large field given over to meadow. Moving out to the west along Broad Drove and Newton Drove the land was less well drained and increasingly given over to common pasture. At the Shire Drain the Wisbech Map shows a row of trees 'Rackwillow Row' on the western side of Tydd St Giles, a common feature used to stabilise the earth banks. Surrounding the village of Newton were a series of small fields (Mud Croft, Karrow Field and Home Field), typically between 40 and 60 acres in size. Away from the village there were larger fields of 100 acres used for crops (West Field) and for grazing (Meadow Field). There were fisheries and reed cutting mentioned in the accounts of the Manor of Newton from 1395.[77] Between Leverington and Newton was an area of marshland, the Gull.

The value of place-name analysis has been illustrated by the recent work carried out by the 'Flood and Flow' project to identify regions with an historical risk of flooding.[78] Although the focus has been on inland wetlands it is still helpful when looking at the Hundred. The insights from place-names point mostly to the wetland origins of the area. To the north of the village of Tydd St Giles Bladderwick Field came from the bladderwort plant common in wetland locations such as that close to the Shire Drain. In the centre of the parish Ryland Field and Quaney Field indicate the marshy nature of the ground before drainage. Ryland Field derives from the Middle English (ME) *atter eyland* or 'at the low-lying ground' and Quaney Field derives from the Old English (OE) for 'quaking bog'. Further to the west are Eauleet Field and Eaugate Field meaning 'by the river' and road to the river', in this case the Shire Drain bordering the

[75] VCH(IoE), p. 188.
[76] C.R.O., VC 2:58.
[77] Newton, pp. 76-7.
[78] www.waternames.wordpress.com

parish.[79] In Newton, Mudcroft was the field prone to flooding between the village and the sea-bank. North of that was Newlands being land recently reclaimed from the salt marsh. On the border with Leverington was Fitton Croft coming from the Old Norse ON) *fit* or 'meadowland by the river', in this case being the Goredike linking the Wash and the Shire Drain.[80]

[79] P. Reaney, *The Place-Names of Cambridgeshire and the Isle of Ely: English Place-Name Society Volume XIX* (Cambridge, 1943), pp. 220 and 286.
[80] Reaney, *Place-Names*, p. 273.

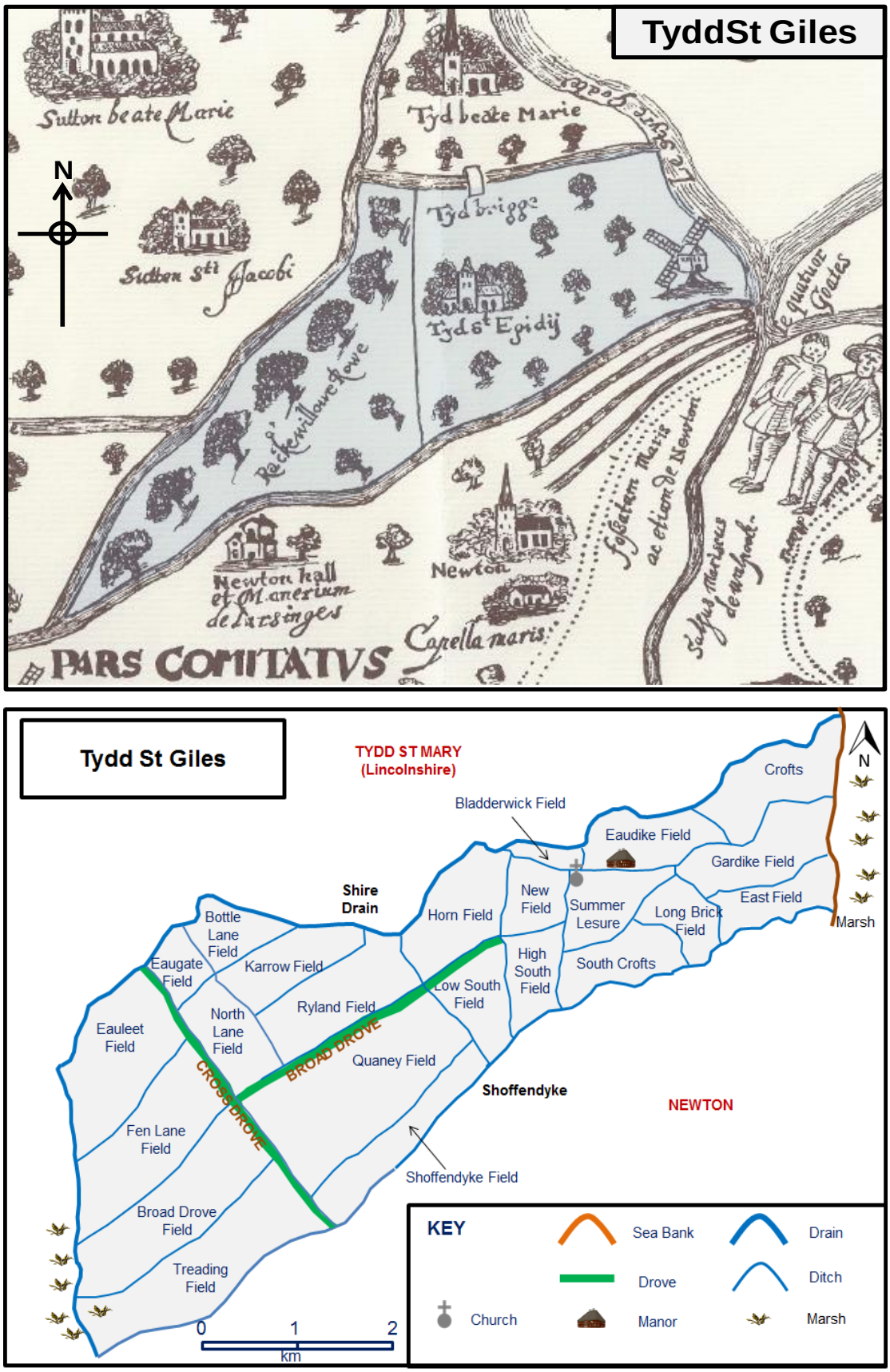

Figure 1.8 – Tydd St Giles: extract of the Wisbech Map and landscape features of the late fifteenth century.

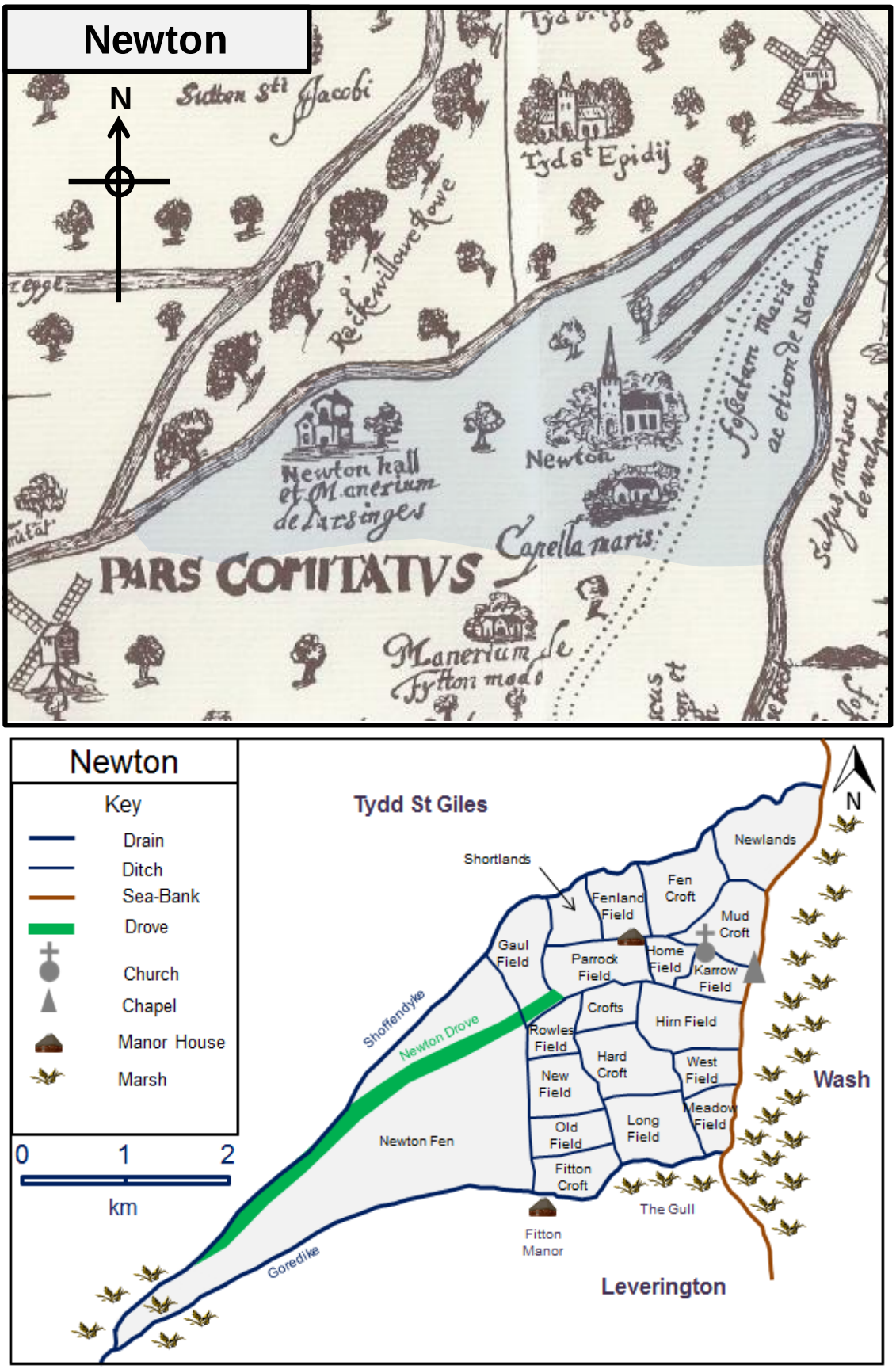

Figure 1.9 – Newton: extract of the Wisbech Map and landscape features of the late fifteenth century.

The Central Parishes

At the centre of the Hundred were the parishes of Leverington and Wisbech (see Figures 1.10 and 1.11). They were bordered by the Goredike in the north and the Wisbeck Stream in the south. The Wisbeck Stream ran from the town inland to Guyhirn where it joined the Fendyke. The eastern boundary was the sea-bank and beyond that salt marshes and the Wash estuary. In the west was the manmade Fendyke with a wide drain and earth bank lined with trees similar to 'Rackwillow Row' at Tydd St Giles. Beyond that was the peat fen; poorly drained, marshy in winter and providing a constant threat of fresh water flooding such as that in 1439 and 1467.[81] The parishes were divided by Leverington Common, a droveway running from the vill of Leverington out towards the hamlet of Murrow.

As with the northern parishes the fields closer to the main settlement were smaller and their lighter fertile silt soils were suitable for arable.[82] Around Leverington were Sea Field, Paps Field, Fencroft and Newoutlands. Around Wisbech Barton Manor close to the town were Harecroft, Sybaldesholm and Gilberdesdole. As you moved further away from the main settlements the soils became heavier and increasingly used for pasture.[83] At the end of the fifteenth century manors were still important administrative centres and were shown on the Wisbech Map, such as '*Manerium de Fytton*' on the Goredike and '*Manerium de Richmonde*' in Leverington and '*Manerium Barton*' and '*Manerium de Whitehall*' on the Wisbeck Stream upstream from Wisbech.[84]

There are similar references to wetland origins in Leverington place-names, the most obvious being Sea Field to the north of the village against the sea-bank. The adjoining Ivesdike Field or Eydike derived from *ēg* for 'marshland'. Gore Field in Richmond Manor, that later gave its name to the modern village, comes from the OE *gor* meaning 'mud' or 'marsh'. The extent of reclamation is shown with the large North Inham and South Inham fields by Parson Drove meaning 'land taken into cultivation'.[85] In Wisbech Parish there is the hamlet of Murrow by the Fendyke meaning 'marsh row'. Place-names also give an indication of land use and ownership. Nymandole in Wisbech

[81] Darby, *Medieval Fenland*, pp. 55-56.
[82] Hall and Coles, *Fenland Survey*, p. 147.
[83] Stone, *Decision-Making*, p. 28.
[84] J. Whittle, *The Development of Agrarian Capitalism: Land and Labour in Norfolk 1440-1580* (Oxford, 2000), p. 47.
[85] Reaney, *Place-Names*, pp. 272 and 278.

Barton is a field shared/ploughed by nine men and Wheatmath indicating the primarily arable use. Between Wisbech St Mary and Richmond Manor is Pock Field from 'puck' or 'goblin' a folk tradition for which no explanation is obvious.[86]

[86] Reaney, *Place-Names*, pp. 294 and 297.

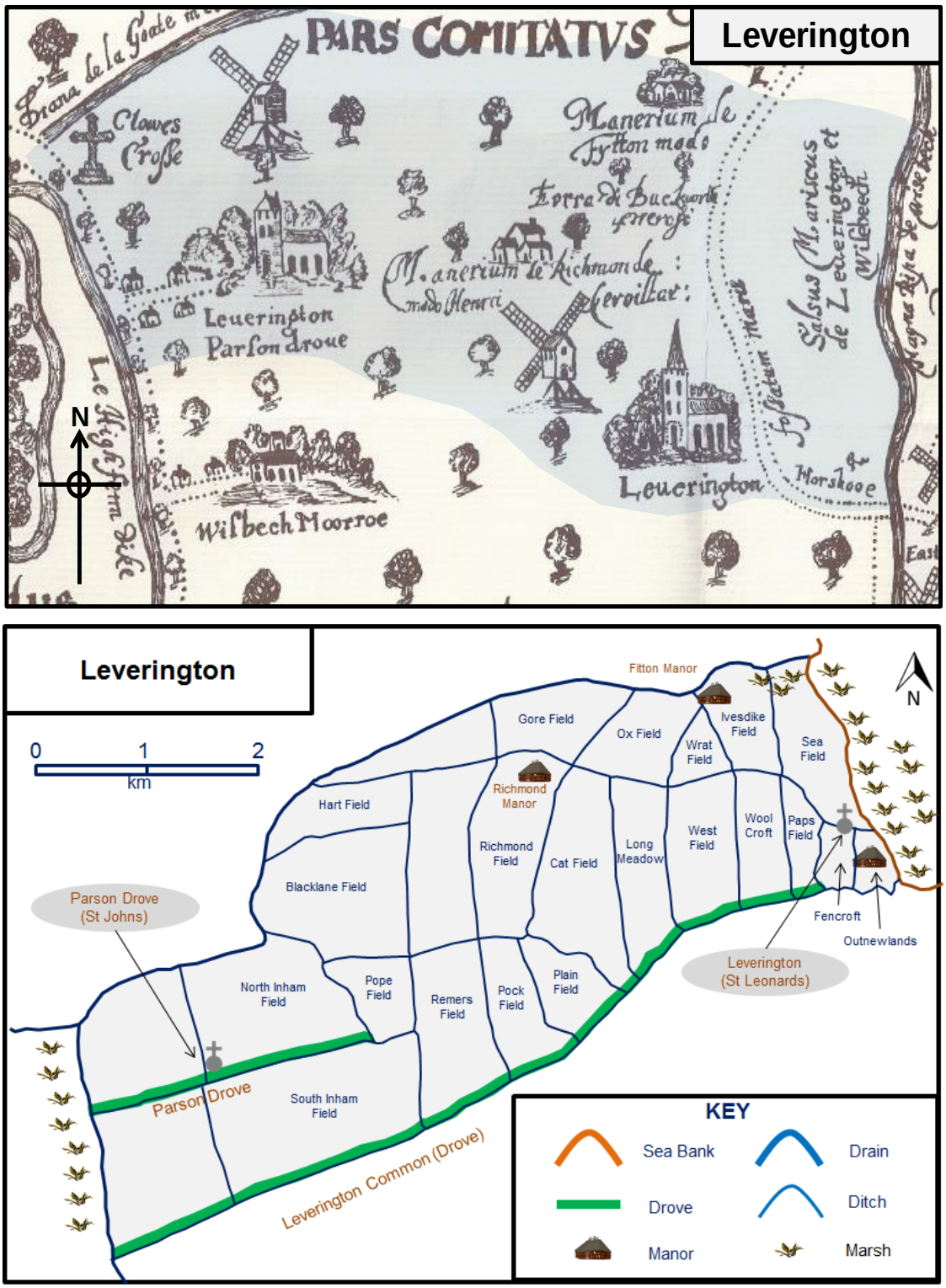

Figure 1.10 – Leverington: extract of the Wisbech Map and landscape features of the late fifteenth century.

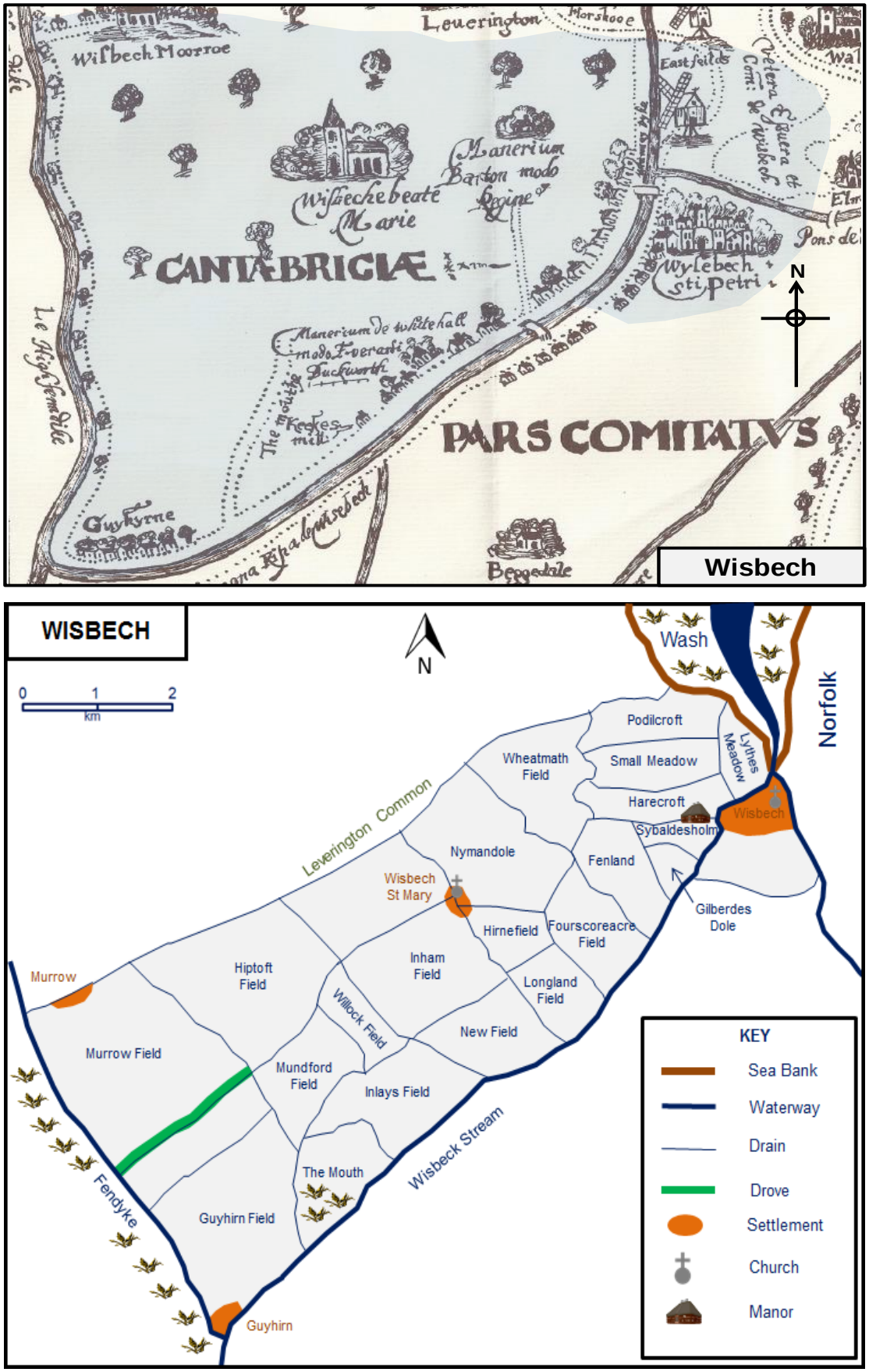

Figure 1.11 – Wisbech: extract of the Wisbech Map and landscape features of the late fifteenth century.

The Southern Parishes

The southern portion of the Hundred incorporating the parishes of Elm and Upwell (see Figures 1.12 and 1.13) presented another variation on the fen landscape. Elm differed from the long narrow northern parishes being triangular and bordered by navigable waterways. To the west was the Wisbeck Stream and to the east was the Welle Stream that provided communications with Peterborough via the River Nene and with Lynn and Ely via the River Ouse.[87] The southern border with the Witchford Hundred was the old course of the River Nene. In the north Elm sat on silt soils but moving to the south this again became heavier before giving out into the peat fen with an expanse of marsh and meres between Elm and Upwell. The Wisbech Map shows four meres ('Cromemare, Brandemare, Currymare and Livermare') fed from a single stream off the Nene. There was a further area of wetland close to the Wisbeck Stream at Waldersey that provided good summer pasture. It was accessed by a droveway running from Elm down to the manor at Coldham. The village of Upwell sat entirely on the peat fen and was confined by waterways and marsh. Droves ran from the north of the parish down to Coldham to access the lands bordering the peat fen. Here the fields were larger and given over to pasture. The fields around Upwell were small and beyond was the unreclaimed peat fen.

In Elm the most direct reference to the original wetlands is Redmoor Field or 'reed mere' to the south of the village. In the west is Waldersey where the *ey* element implies 'marshland'.[88] Halfpenny Field to the north of the village comes from the charge of ½d on tenants for the repair and maintenance of the dyke protecting the field.[89] Place-names help to confirm the location of Upwell 'upstream on the Welle Stream'. Thurlands Drove to the north of the village comes from the OE for 'piercing/hole in the fen dyke'. The nearby Turflot Drove derives from the digging of peat and Euximoor to the south of Upwell refers to the 'marsh by the stream'.[90]

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[87] S. Oosthuizen, 'Cambridgeshire and the peat fen: medieval rural settlement and commerce c. 900-1300', in N. Christie and P. Stamper (eds), *Medieval Rural Settlement: Britain and Ireland AD 800-1600* (Oxford, 2012), p. 208.
[88] Reaney, *Place-Names*, p. 270
[89] Reaney, *Place-Names*, p.268.
[90] Reaney, *Place-Names*, pp. 288 and 291.

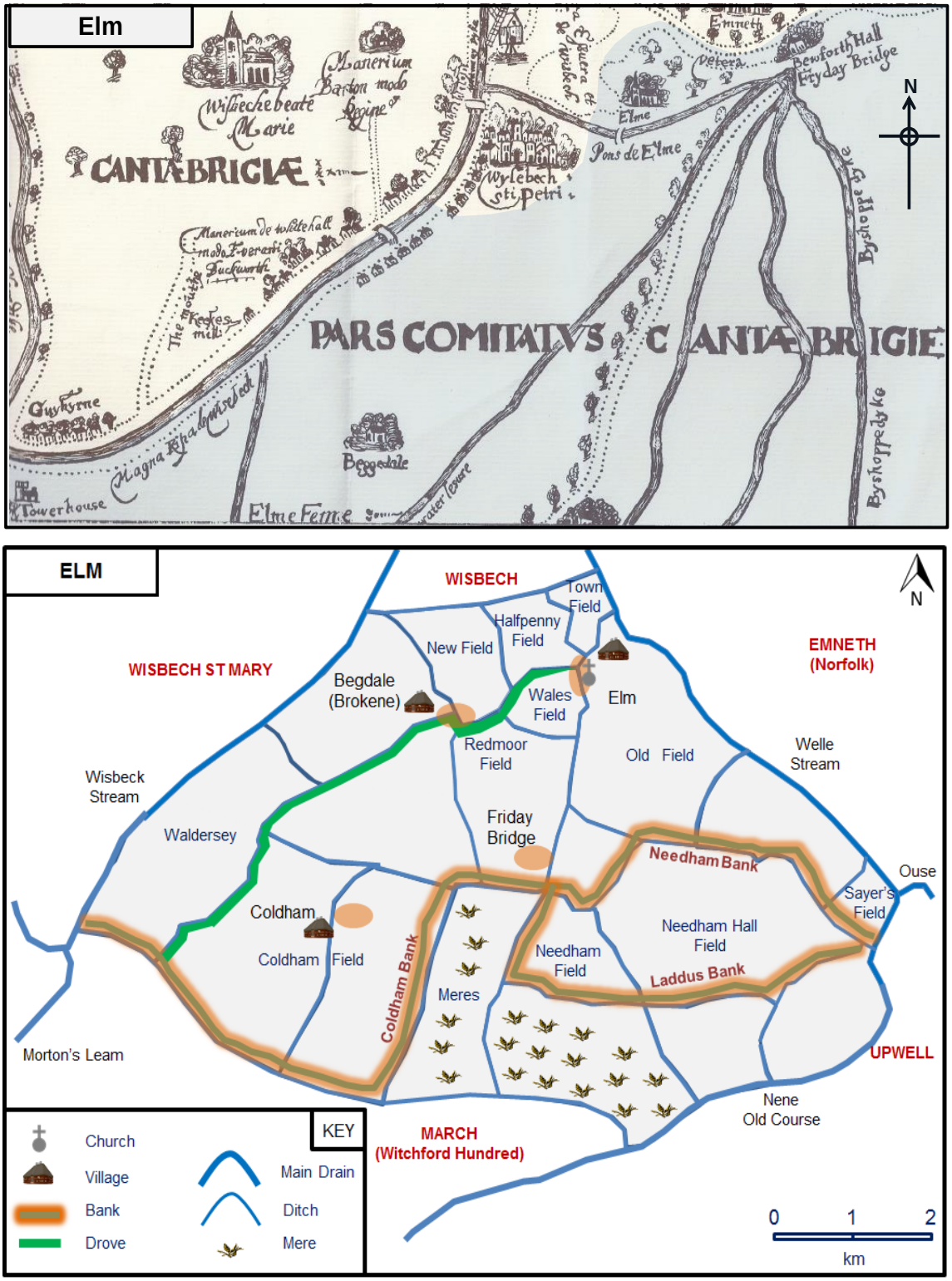

Figure 1.12 – Elm: extract of the Wisbech Map and landscape features of the late fifteenth century

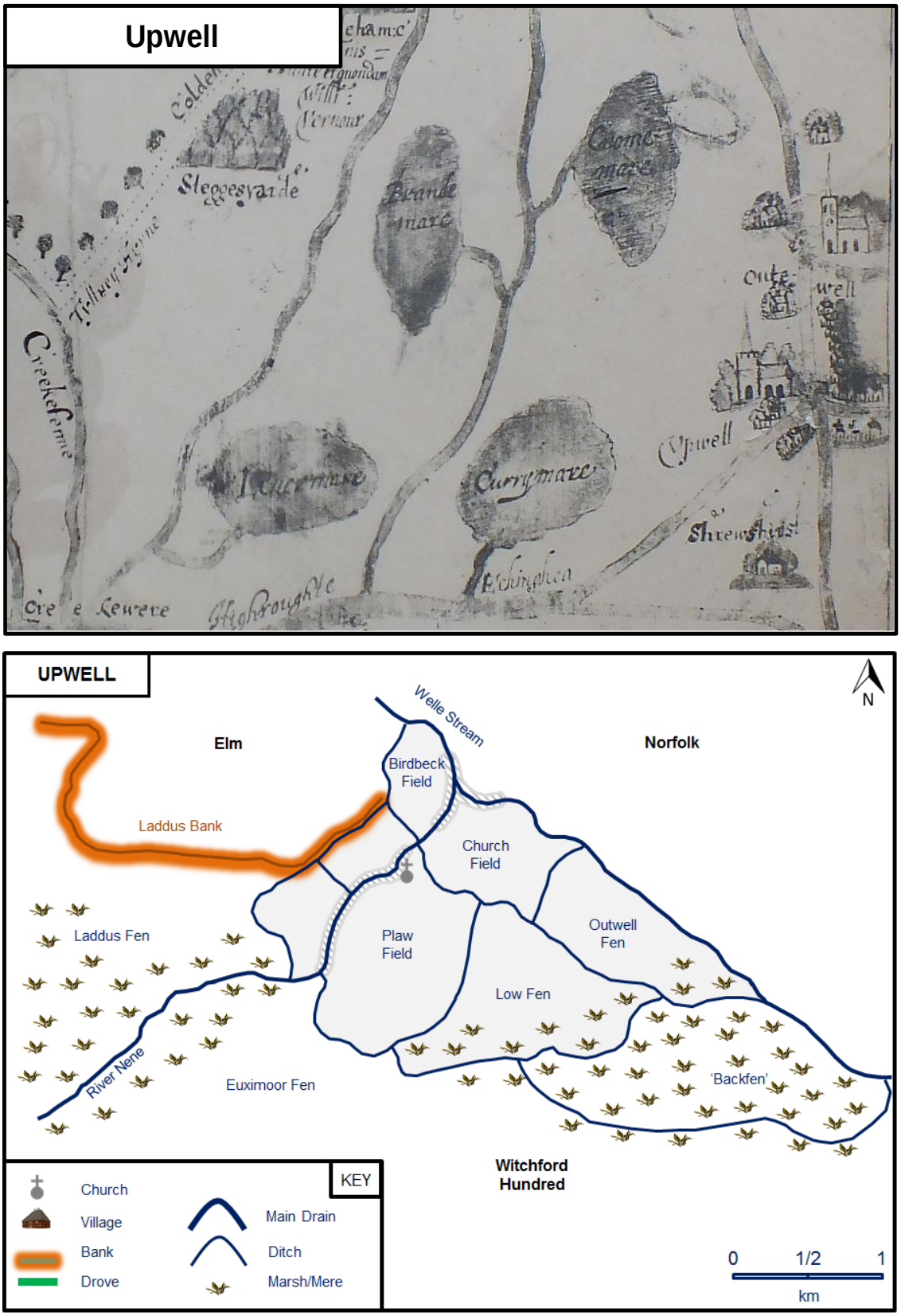

Figure 1.13 – Upwell: extract of the Wisbech Map and landscape features of the late fifteenth century.

SETTLEMENT

Overview

This section provides an overview of settlement in the Hundred followed by detailed case studies for Tydd St Giles and Elm. There was little Romano-British settlement in the northern parishes of the Hundred compared with the central and southern parts of the region. It was more distant from communications routes and the land was less well drained. To the west of Tydd St Giles and close to the Shire Drain was a saltern (R1 on Figure 1.14).[91] In Newton there were pottery finds in West Field and Long Field indicating a small community, given the proximity to the salt marshes, primarily engaged in salt production (R2, R3 and R4).[92] These settlements disappeared with the late Roman marine flooding and early to mid Anglo-Saxon communities re-emerged by the seventh century. This is supported by the early Anglo-Saxon handmade pottery finds to the north-east of Tydd St Giles close to the Shire Drain (S1).[93] Similar Anglo-Saxon settlements were emerging along the Wash coastline with the largest being at Terrington St Clements in the Marshland Hundred of Norfolk where over 1000 pottery fines were made.[94] Tydd St Giles continued to grow with mid-Anglo-Saxon and late Saxon thrown pottery finds extending along the Shire Drain and around what was to become Eaudike Field (S2 and S3).[95]

The medieval settlements in the northern parishes evolved from the Anglo-Saxon communities. As the population grew and new people settled in the region additional lands were drained and taken into production. Both Tydd St Giles and Newton formed around a central field, respectively New Field and Karrow Field. At the heart of the villages were the churches of St Giles and St James both dating back to the twelfth century.[96] Individual and groups of farmsteads extended out from the centre of the villages. In Tydd St Giles there was settlement to the east of the village close to the seventeenth-century Hannath Hall (M1).[97] In South Field (M2 and M3) pottery and

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[91] Hall and Coles, *Fenland Survey*, p. 118.
[92] HER(C) 03968; HER(C) 10922; HER(C) 10923.
[93] HER(C) 10919.
[94] P. Wade-Martins, 'The archaeology of medieval rural settlement in East Anglia', in M. Aston, D. Austin and C. Dyer. (eds), *The Rural Settlements of Medieval England: Studies Dedicated to Maurice Beresford and John Hurst* (Oxford, 1989), p. 161.
[95] Cambridgeshire HER 09918 and 09014.
[96] VCH(IoE), pp. 204 and 229.
[97] HER(C) 10920.

other medieval remains have been found marking the progressive expansion of the village.[98] Further finds have included evidence of twelfth-century buildings along Broadgate (or Broad Drove) (M4).[99] A similar pattern was seen in Newton with pottery finds and a possible saltern to the west of the village along Newton Drove (M5).[100] The settlements continued to see strong growth until the fourteenth century when depopulation halted the expansion.

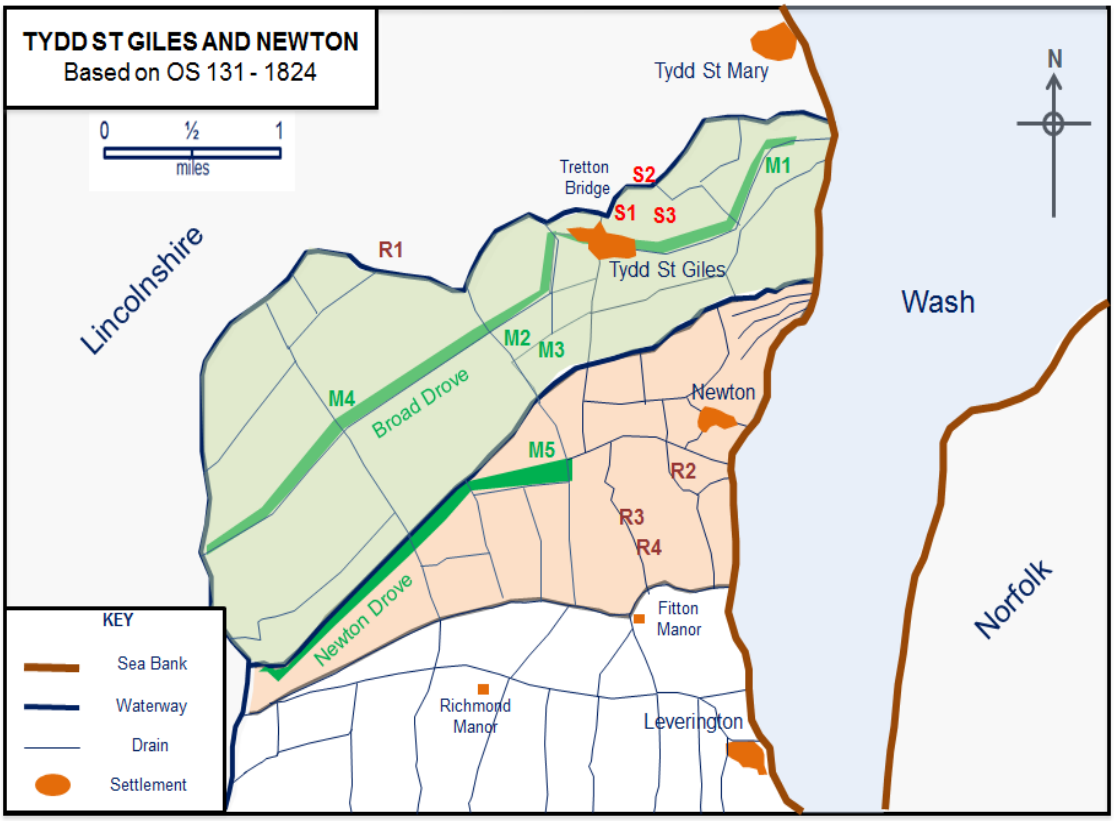

Figure 1.14 – Archaeological finds in the northern parishes of Wisbech Hundred based on HER records.

Romano-British settlement was more widespread in the central parishes of the Hundred. There have been Romano-British era finds across the region with a concentration in the west abutting the peat fen. The nature of the finds would indicate small-scale farming and salt production as the main activities.[101] Close to Leverington by the sea-bank there is evidence of a Romano-British saltern (R1 on Figure 1.15).[102] Around the modern

[98] HER(C) 11166; HER(C) 10917.
[99] HER(C) 08436.
[100] HER(C) 03966.
[101] Hall and Coles, *Fenland Survey*, pp. 115 and 119.
[102] HER(C) 04003.

Gorefield (Richmond Manor) pottery and coins from the third and fourth centuries have been found indicating a small Romano-British settlement (R2, R3 and R4).[103] The main concentration of finds have been around Parson Drove and Murrow in the west with pottery and field enclosures. A similar pattern of finds is seen in Wisbech with Romano-British artefacts at Wisbech St Mary and Guyhirn. To the east of Murrow there is evidence of a saltern and of field systems (R5 and R6).[104] Access to tidal waterways for salt production and transport would have made the west of the region attractive to the Romano-British inhabitants. From 350AD to 600AD settlement largely disappeared from the area to the north of the Wisbeck Stream although there may have been some small communities surviving on the banks around Wisbech. The view is certainly supported by Oosthuizen who argues that 'archaeological evidence indicates little post-Roman abandonment of the Fenland'.[105] Anglo-Saxon settlement when it did return was limited to the margins of the fen. There have been mid Anglo-Saxon finds by Leverington and Walsoken to the north-east of Wisbech (S1 and S2).[106] There were late Saxon finds close to Guyhirn indicating a small settlement exploiting the local marshlands and peat fen (S3).

As with the northern parishes the Anglo-Saxon communities provided the basis for the development of the later medieval settlements. The size of the parishes (nearly 10km from east to west) resulted in a different pattern of colonisation with the establishment of secondary settlements. The medieval village of Leverington was located immediately behind the sea-bank dates from the eleventh century and this is supported by pottery finds from the period (M1 and M2).[107] Secondary settlement formed around the manors of Richmond and Fitton dating from the thirteenth century.[108] This dating is supported by pottery and coin finds as well as landscape evidence, the moat around Richmond manor (M3 and M4).[109] Further to the west and inland from the Fendyke was Parson Drove with pottery finds dating it to the twelfth century (M5 and M6).[110] Parson Drove provided access to the rich summer pastures close to the peat fen and developed from

[103] HER(C) 03999; HER(C) 04000; HER(C) 10925.
[104] HER (C) 07915; HER(C) 10932.
[105] S. Oosthuizen, 'Culture and identity in the early medieval landscape', *Landscape History* Volume 37 (2016), p. 21.
[106] HER(C) 03960; HER(C) MCB 19599.
[107] HER(C) MCB19488; HER(C) MCB20237.
[108] VCH(IoE), pp. 187-8.
[109] HER(C) MCB16161; HER(C) 01185.
[110] HER(C) MCB19337; HER(C) MCB20021.

temporary settlements (shielings). In Wisbech the main manor of the Hundred, Wisbech Barton, lay to the west of Wisbech between the town and the secondary settlement of Wisbech St Mary and dated from the twelfth century.[111] This dating is supported by archaeological evidence with numerous pottery and coin finds around the village (M7 and M8).[112] From Wisbech St Mary a track ran west to the hamlet of Tholomas Drove that acted as a staging post to the settlements at Murrow and Guyhirn close to the Fendyke. These smaller settlements were established in the thirteenth century supported by the dating of finds (M9, M10 and M11) and from documentary evidence.[113]

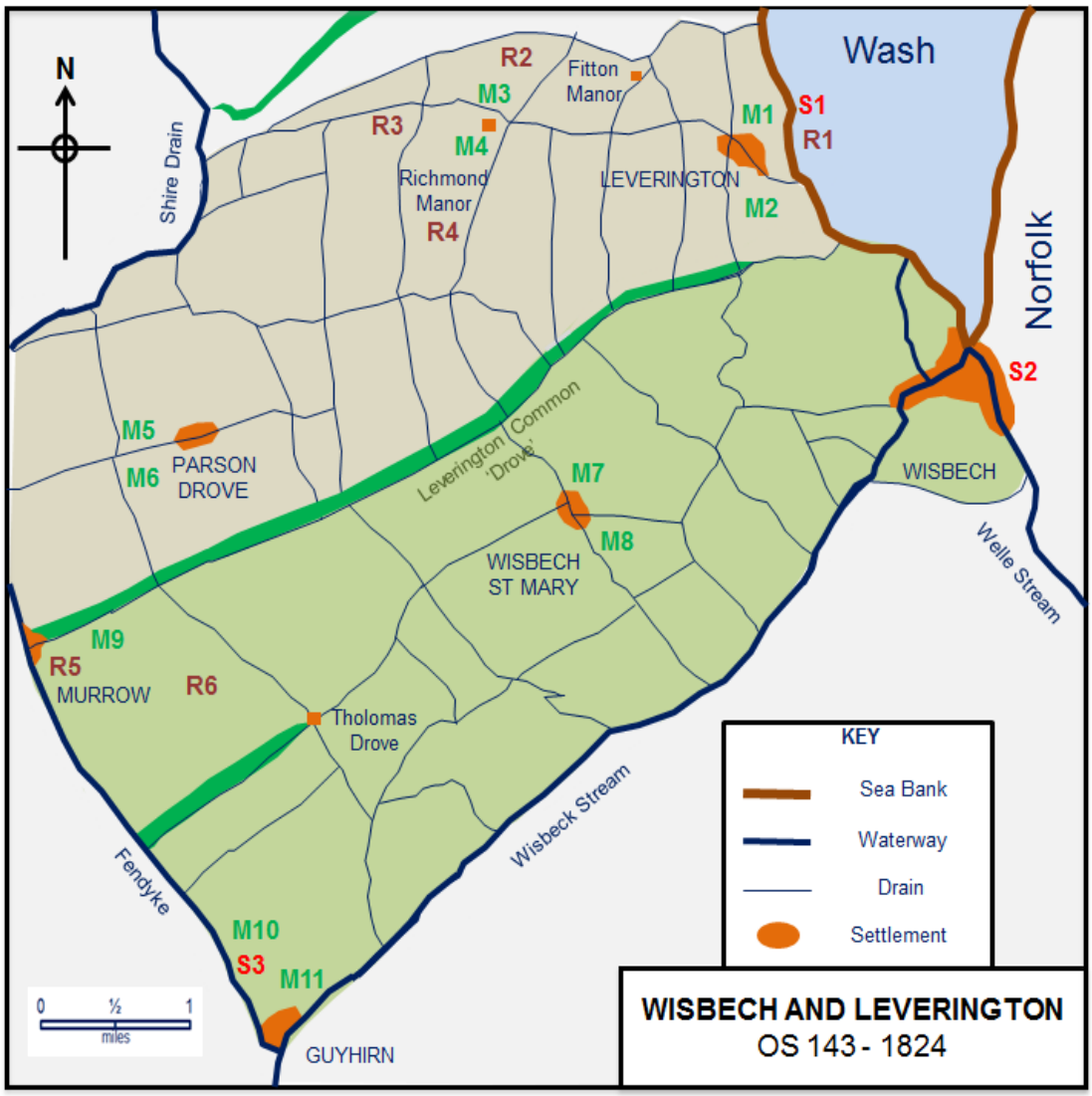

Figure 1.15 – Archaeological finds in the central parishes of Wisbech Hundred based on HER records.

[111] VCH(IoE), p. 232.
[112] HER(C) MCB18262; HER(C) MCB18252.
[113] HER(C) 07888; HER(C) CB14878; HER(C) MCB 19319; VCH(IoE), pp. 233 and 243.

South of Wisbech was silt soil but close to the River Nene this gave out to peat fen and was dominated by marsh and mere and subject to flooding. At the start of the first millennium water levels were low and there was extensive Romano-British settlement at Begdale, Coldham and Upwell.[114] The evidence included coins, pottery and landscape features such as field enclosures and salterns (R1, R2, R3 and R4 on Figure 1.16).[115] These were well established communities providing grain and salt to the inland settlements and to the army.[116] These communities retreated with the rising water levels and the low lying settlements were abandoned. Although there is little direct evidence it is probable that small groups continued to inhabit areas of slightly raised ground exploiting the produce of the marshlands.[117] This continuity is suggested by the early Anglo-Saxon finds to the north of Elm indicating an established community (S1).[118] Pottery and metalwork finds in Upwell show an early Anglo-Saxon settlement that continued to grow throughout the mid-Anglo-Saxon period (S2 and S3).[119]

As water levels fell from the seventh century onwards and populations grew then settlement moved out from the higher ground and back into the low-lying silt marsh. Elm was established in the tenth century.[120] As with the villages to the north it was nucleated and centered around the church but with settlement extending out towards Begdale and Friday Bridge. To the south-west of Friday Bridge was the hamlet of Coldham. Both Begdale (Brokene) and Coldham were associated with established manors.[121] The evidence from finds supports the dating of settlement in the southern parishes. Pottery and metalwork finds around Elm cover the entire period from the eleventh to the fifteenth centuries (M1, M2 and M3).[122] A similar range of finds is seen in Upwell demonstrating the ongoing nature of the settlement (M4 and M5).[123] The finds from Begdale, Friday Bridge and Coldham are from the thirteenth and fourteenth centuries indicating the later expansion of settlement to the south (M6, M7 and M8).[124]

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[114] Hall and Coles, *Fenland Survey*, pp. 110-2.
[115] HER(C) 08481a; HER(C) 04200; HER(C) 10933; HER(N) 41358.
[116] Potter et al, 'Roman Occupation', p. 130.
[117] Rippon, *Transformation*, p. 172.
[118] HER(C) MCB17390.
[119] HER(N) 40128; HER(N) 41358.
[120] VCH(IoE), p. 184.
[121] VCH(IoE), p. 181.
[122] HER(C) 08487; HER(C) MCB19424; HER(C) CB14804.
[123] HER(N) 31387; HER(N) 41358.
[124] HER(C) 08480; HER(C) 09871; HER(C) MCB19236.

This would have coincided with the construction of protecting banks and the extension of drainage.

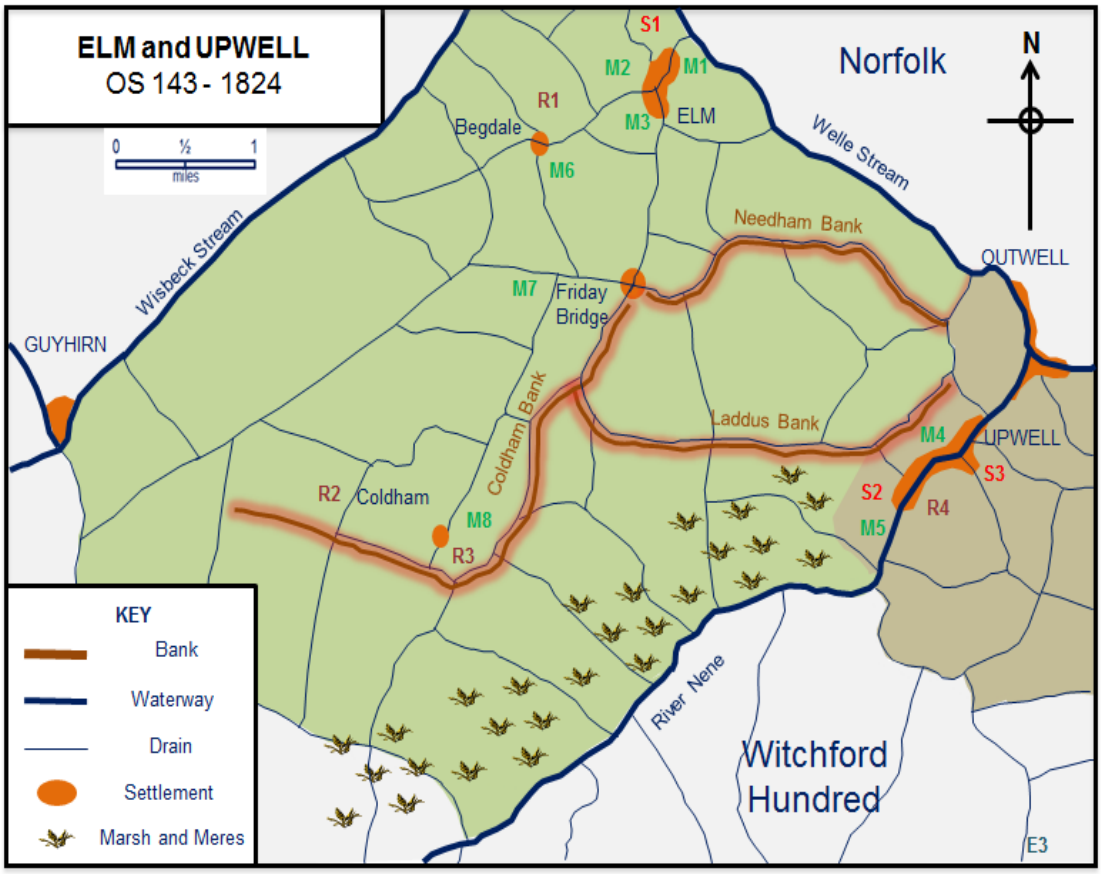

Figure 1.16 – Archaeological finds in the southern parishes of Wisbech Hundred based on HER records.

Settlement Case Study – Tydd St Giles

There was some limited Romano-British settlement around Tydd St Giles confirmed by a possible saltern at Bottle Lane along the line of the creek that would become Shire Drain to the West of the village.[125] However, the north of the Hundred did not have any major Romano-British communities compared with the west and the south.

With rising relative sea levels flooding much of the silt marsh settlement was abandoned and people did not return to the region until the sixth or the seventh century. The higher ground along roddons was reoccupied and in the case of Tydd St Giles there is clear evidence of early to mid Anglo-Saxon settlement along the line of the Shire

[125] Hall and Coles, *Fenland Survey*, p. 118.

Drain (see Figure 1.17 below).[126] Finds at Tretton Bridge of handmade pottery and animal bones (indicating a mixed economy) confirm the early to middle Anglo-Saxon dating.[127] The community survived on the produce from the Wash estuary and the adjoining salt marsh. Given the location of the finds it is probable that some farming was taking place in what was to become Eaudike Field beside the creek. There were little or no flood defenses or drainage and the settlement, although permanent, would have been vulnerable to inundation.

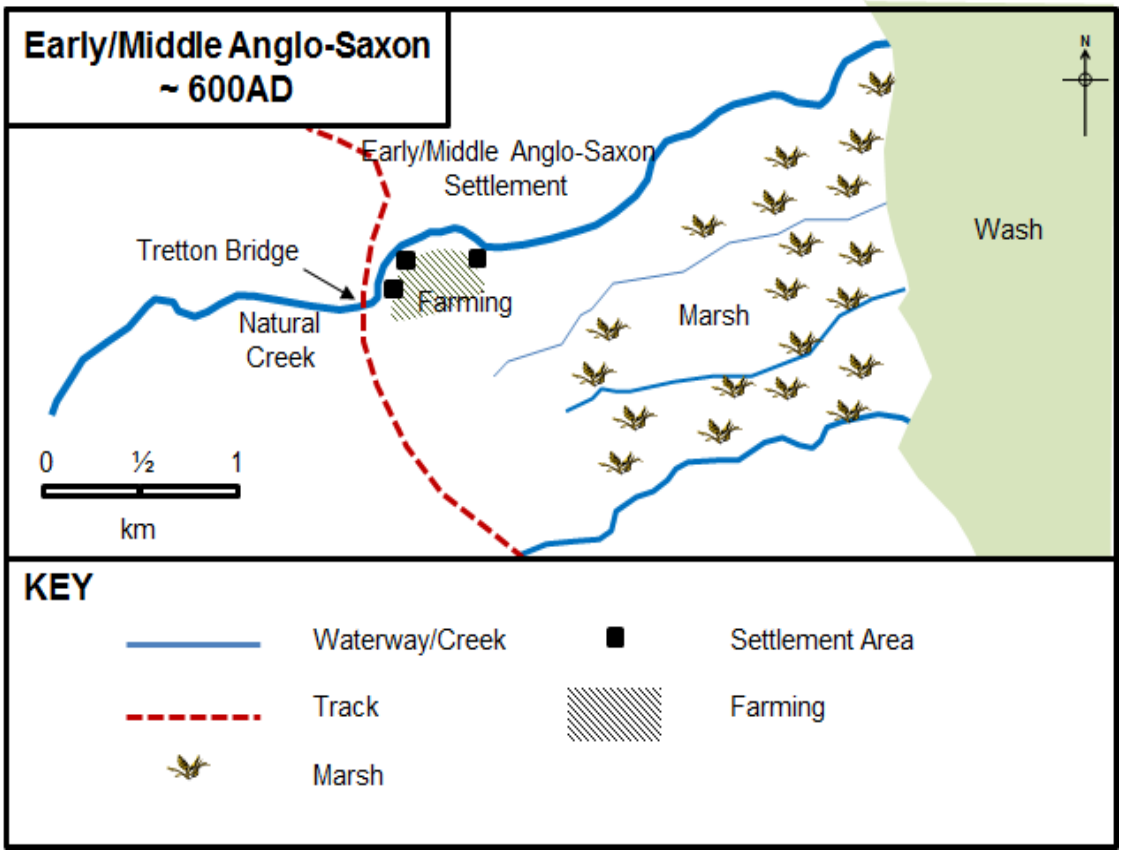

Figure 1.17 – Early to mid Anglo-Saxon settlement in Tydd St Giles showing key landscape features.

As the community grew the opportunity was taken as water levels continued to fall to establish a more permanent settlement through the draining of slightly higher ground for farming.[128] In the case of Tydd St Giles this was in Bladderwick Field and New Field located below the creek flowing through the area (see Figure 1.18 below). A ditch was

[126] Hall and Coles, *Fenland Survey*, p. 124.
[127] HER(C) 09014; HER(C) and 09918.
[128] C. Taylor, *The Cambridgeshire Landscape: Cambridgeshire and the Southern Fens* (London, 1973), p. 91.

dug around the field and the spoil used to construct a small bank, no more than three feet in height. This slight elevation is still visible when viewing New Field from the north along the road from Tretton Bridge. Some efforts were made to enlarge the creek to improve drainage starting the process of creating the Shire Drain.[129] The growing settlement was concentrated in the north-east corner of New Field, with late-Saxon finds of wheelmade pottery at Tretton Bridge and along what is now Kirkgate. At this stage work would have commenced on the sea-bank to protect the emerging community from sea flooding.[130]

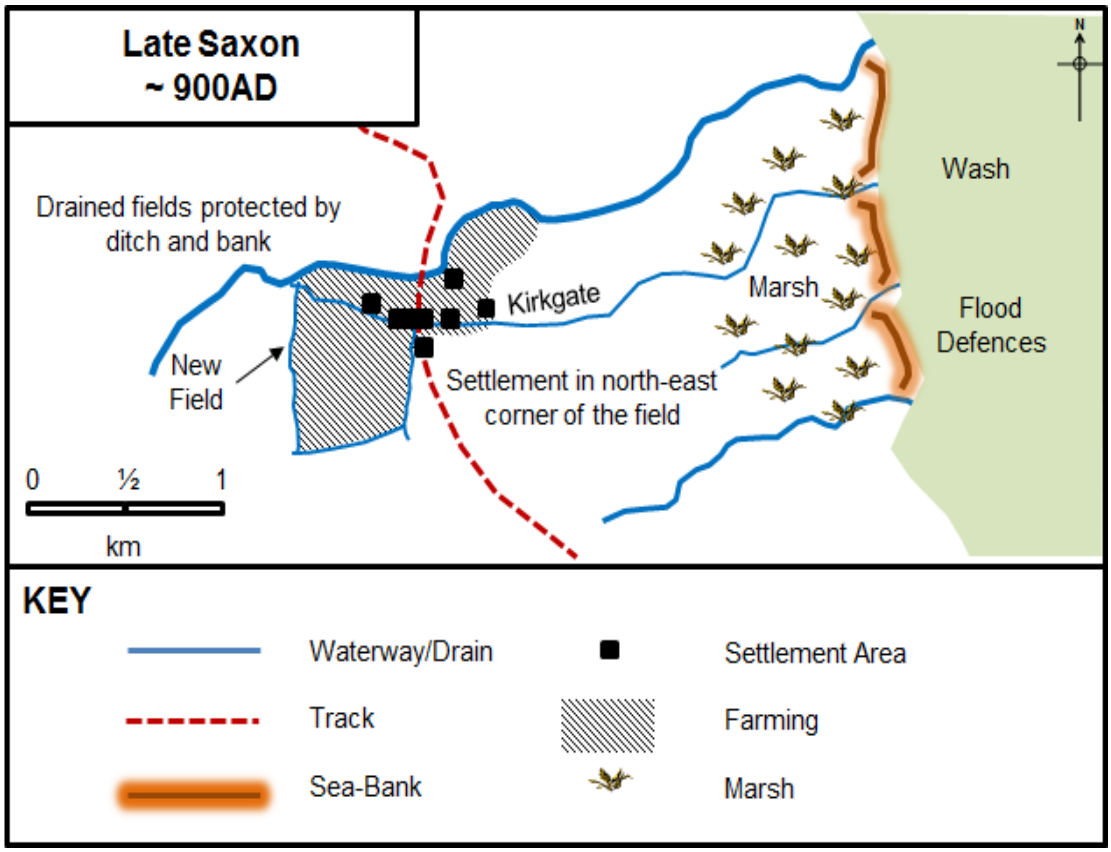

Figure 1.18 – Late Saxon Settlement in Tydd St Giles showing key landscape features.

The silt soil was fertile and provided an incentive to drain further land as the population continued to grow. A similar process of banking and draining the land around the settlement to create additional fields required a more permanent approach to drainage and flood protection. At some time around 1000AD the Shire Drain was dug along with other channels such as the Shoffendyke to the south.[131] These ditches not only drained

[129] Hall and Coles, *Fenland Survey*, p.136.
[130] Hall and Coles, *Fenland Survey*, p. 127; Rippon, *Transformation*, p. 175.
[131] Rippon, *Transformation*, pp. 208-9.

the new farm land but helped to protect against fresh water flooding by channeling the waters from the peat fen into the Wash. These new fields are noted in the survey of 1250.[132] The sections of the sea bank were linked to provide a continuous line of flood defense from Wisbech and into Lincolnshire.[133] This required a coordinated effort as each community sought to protect their land from sea flooding, such as that seen in Holbeach in Lincolnshire.[134] As the population grew and more land became available settlement began to spread away from the centre of the nucleated village, see Figure 1.19. As the capacity to expand to the east was limited by the sea-bank much of the reclamation was towards the west. The linear expansion is supported by twelfth century and later pottery finds along Kirkgate and by the evidence of a saltern in Summer Lesure Field to the south.[135]

[132] ECB, p. 157.
[133] Rippon, *Transformation*, p. 175; Hallam, *Settlement and Society*, p. 7.
[134] R. Silvester, 'Medieval reclamation of marsh and fen', in H. Cook and T. Williamson (eds), *Water Management in the English Landscape* (Edinburgh, 1999), p. 130.
[135] HER(C) 11166.

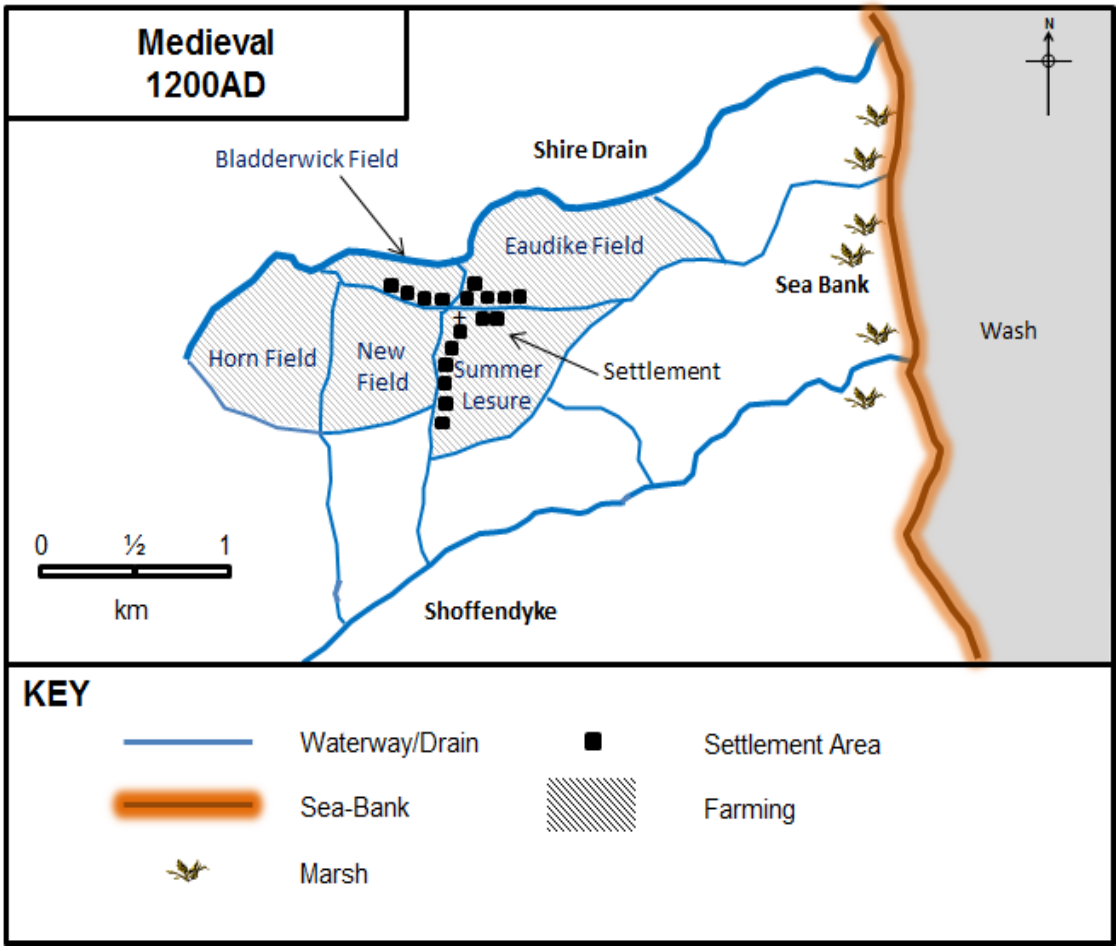

Figure 1.19 – Thirteenth-Century settlement in Tydd St Giles showing key landscape features.

The final phase was the completion of the flood defenses and the drainage system (discussed in the following chapter).[136] The sea-bank was progressively enlarged and further banks built out into the Wash to act as breakwaters.[137] There is evidence of breakwaters to protect the sea bank further south at Newton.[138] At the same time the Fendyke with its ditch and bank was extended to protect against fresh water flooding along the border of the peat fen. The two were linked by an interlocking system of drainage to enable more of the silt fen to be brought into production. The evidence would indicate that the focus for reclamation continued to be towards the 'backfen'.[139] Figure 1.20 shows the key features of the parish that were established by 1500.

[136] Hall and Coles, *Fenland Survey*, p. 132.
[137] Rippon, *Transformation*, p. 47.
[138] HER(C) MCB16155.
[139] Hallam, *Settlement and Society*, P. 3, Figure 1.

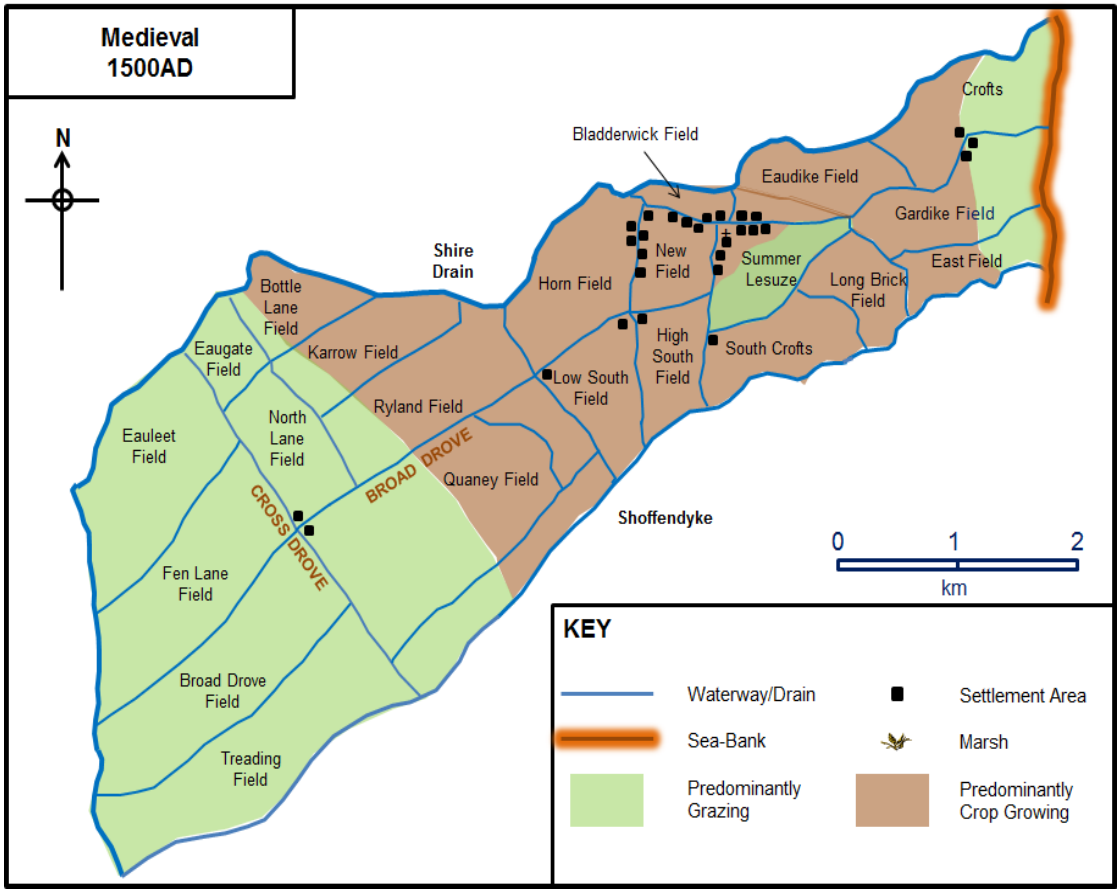

Figure 1.20 – Late fifteenth-century settlement in Tydd St Giles showing key landscape features and land use.

Although the core of the village with the parish church was by New Field, settlement had extended out from the village along the main communications routes. To the east there is evidence of farmsteads towards the sea bank in the will of Thomas Fuller from 1452 referring to a messuage in Crofts Field.[140] Similarly there is evidence of messuages to the south of the village. The fields immediately around the village were primarily arable, with the exception of Summer Lesure which was retained as pasture. The fields out to the west were larger and mainly used for meadows. There is evidence of settlement in this area in the will of Robert Odam from 1464 referring to land and buildings in Quaney Field, although it did not develop sufficient momentum to become an independent community.[141] By 1300 the transformation of the silt marsh was largely complete. The demographic crisis of the fourteenth century and its consequences (the population of Tydd St Giles fell from approximately 800 in 1327 to 550 in 1524), see

[140] C.R.O., VC 1:24.
[141] C.R.O., VC 2:100.

Chapter Three, meant that there would be no further construction of major landscape features but rather the later medieval period would be devoted to enhancing and maintaining the structure of the drainage and flood protection systems to protect the ground already recovered.

Settlement Case Study – Elm

Figure 1.21 shows the distribution of Romano-British settlement, based on archaeological finds, across the parish. Romano-British settlements were concentrated in the south close to the River Nene shown by the numerous pottery finds as well as evidence of at least four salterns.[142] The salterns were all of a common design.[143] There are also signs of small enclosed fields indicating that farming was taking place, although not to the later extent. The major settlement in the area was at Coldham and although it is difficult to estimate the population it may have had more than 200 inhabitants (based on the number of field enclosures). There were other smaller settlements at Begdale and Needham. The absence of finds dated after approximately 350AD would indicate that rising water levels forced the retreat of the settlements. The decline may also have been exacerbated by the collapse of the Romano-British economy and falling demand for fen produce.[144]

[142] Potter et al, 'Roman Occupation', p. 109.
[143] Potter et al, 'Roman Occupation', p. 108.
[144] Potter et al, 'Roman Occupation', pp. 132-3; Rippon, *Transformation*, p. 143.

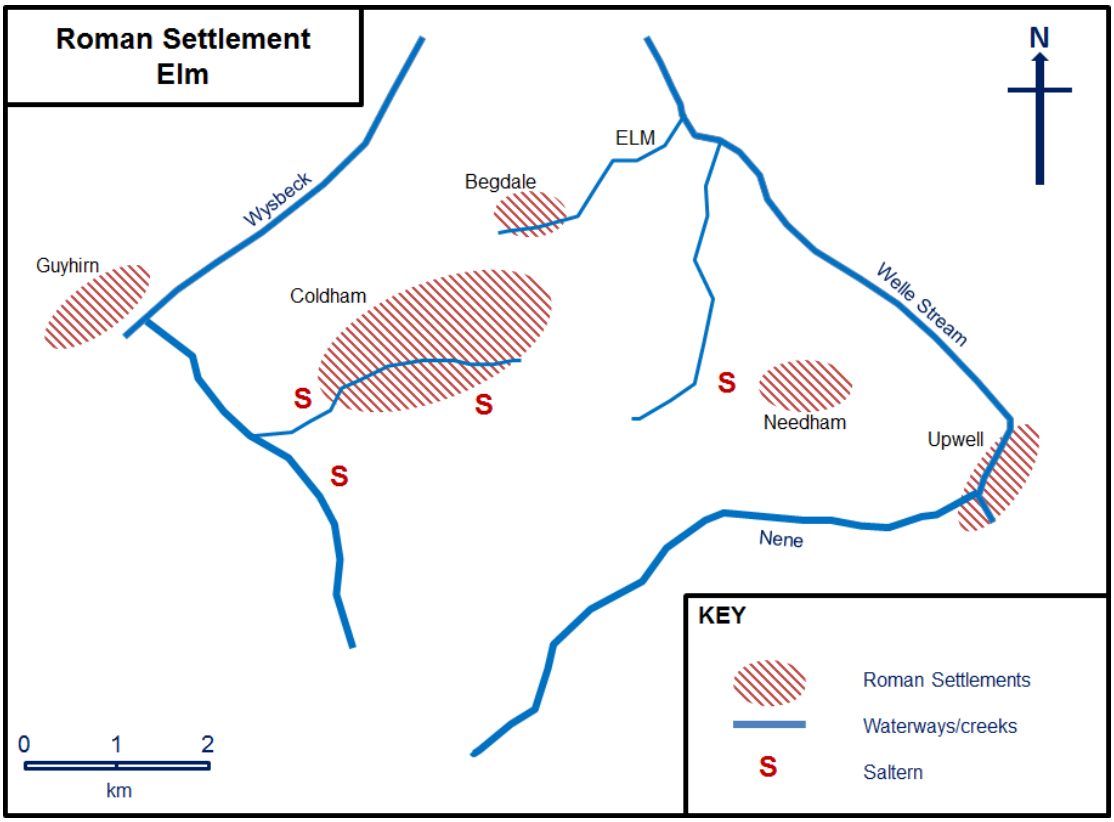

Figure 1.21 – Roman settlement in Elm (43 to 409AD).[145]

The archaeological evidence points to a relatively early resettlement of the area (probably from the sixth century). This is consistent with Crowson et al who note that 'although the possibility existed that the silt fens had been virtually abandoned by the end of the Roman period some continuity appeared a possibility'.[146] The finds indicate a settlement close to the current village of Elm and a second settlement along the Welle Stream towards Upwell (see Figure 1.22). The evidence from the immediate north of the village of Elm shows there was an early Anglo-Saxon cemetery on the site with multiple finds indicating an established community.[147] The grave goods also indicate that, like the nearby cemetery at Oakington, it was a relatively prosperous settlement.[148] There is a record in the *Liber Eliensis* of a late Anglo-Saxon community at 'Wellen' providing payment to the Ely Abbey around 950. This is supported by the numerous pottery and other finds along the River Nene at Upwell indicating an established

[145] Hall and Coles, *Fenland Survey*, p. 106.
[146] Crowson et al, *Siltland*, p. 18.
[147] HER(C) MCB17390.
[148] D. Sayer, R. Mortimer and F. Simpson, 'Oakington: life and death in the East Anglian fens', *Current Archaeology* 261 (June, 2012).

village.[149] These began as individual farmsteads in a dispersed settlement pattern typical of the early and middle Anglo-Saxon period.[150] The change in the nature of the pottery finds would indicate the beginnings of nucleation at Elm and Upwell from the ninth century. This was consistent with the chronology for the development of villages in other regions.[151]

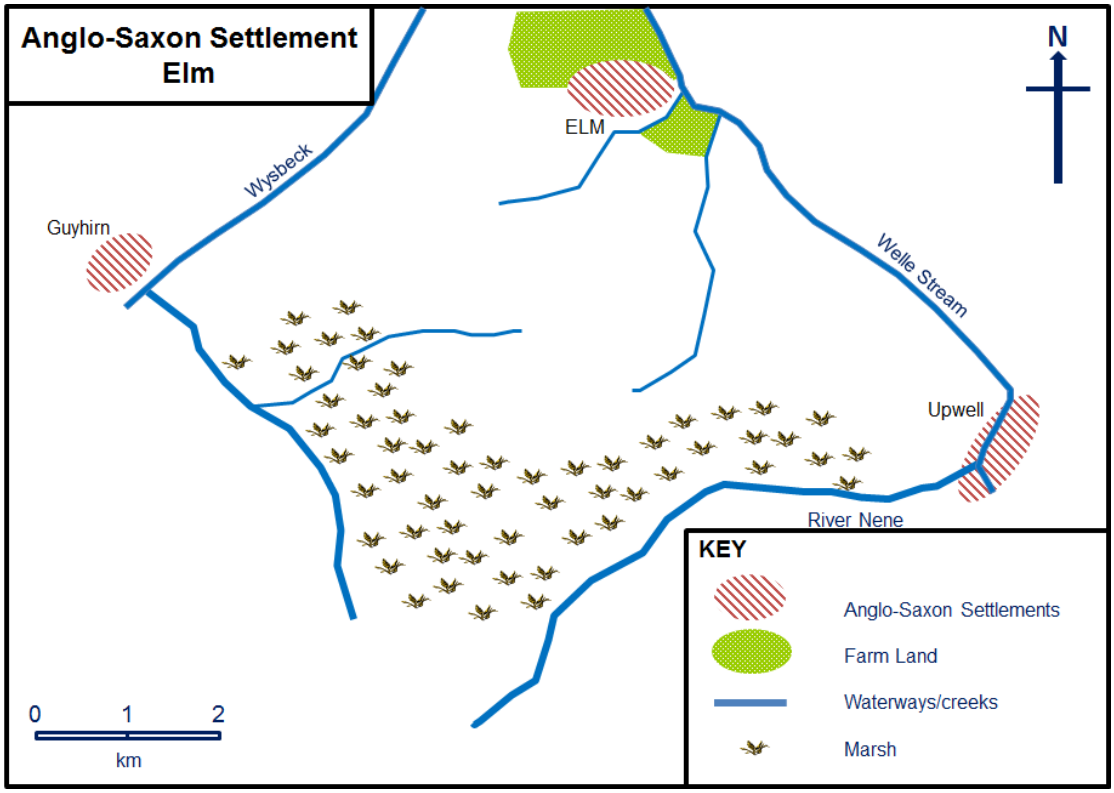

Figure 1.22 – Mid- and Late Anglo-Saxon settlement in Elm.

By the twelfth century the small banks and ditches protecting the fields were linked into a network draining into the main waterways and the open fields around the village were established. The evidence for the rapid expansion of productive land is given in the record of the Bishop's survey of 1250. In Elm, Walter of Vernon (Vernon's Manor) held 40 acres of 'new' land for 10s as a free tenant and Robert of Kyrkeham held 120 acres of 'new' land also for 10s.[152] Assuming a similar pattern of development to the northern parishes then along the Wisbeck and Welle Stream more substantial banks were constructed to protect the land from sea flooding at high tides or from storm

[149] HER(N) 40128; HER(N) 41358.
[150] R. Jones and M. Page, *Medieval Villages in an English Landscape* (Macclesfield, 2006), p. 85.
[151] Jones and Page, *Medieval Villages*, p. 101.
[152] ECB, p. 166; VCH(IoE), p. 182.

surges. The banks and drains running along the south of the parish linking the two main waterways and providing protection against freshwater flooding from the peat fen were constructed (Coldham Bank and Needham Bank), see Figure 1.23, enabling more land to be brought into production in the south of the parish.[153] A similar pattern of moving banks forward to capture more land is seen in other wetland regions such as the Tofts in Lincolnshire.[154] The droves leading to the pasture land in the south of the parish supported temporary settlements before ultimately evolving into the communities at Friday Bridge and Coldham Manor that dated back to 1299 when it was held by the Bishop of Ely.[155]

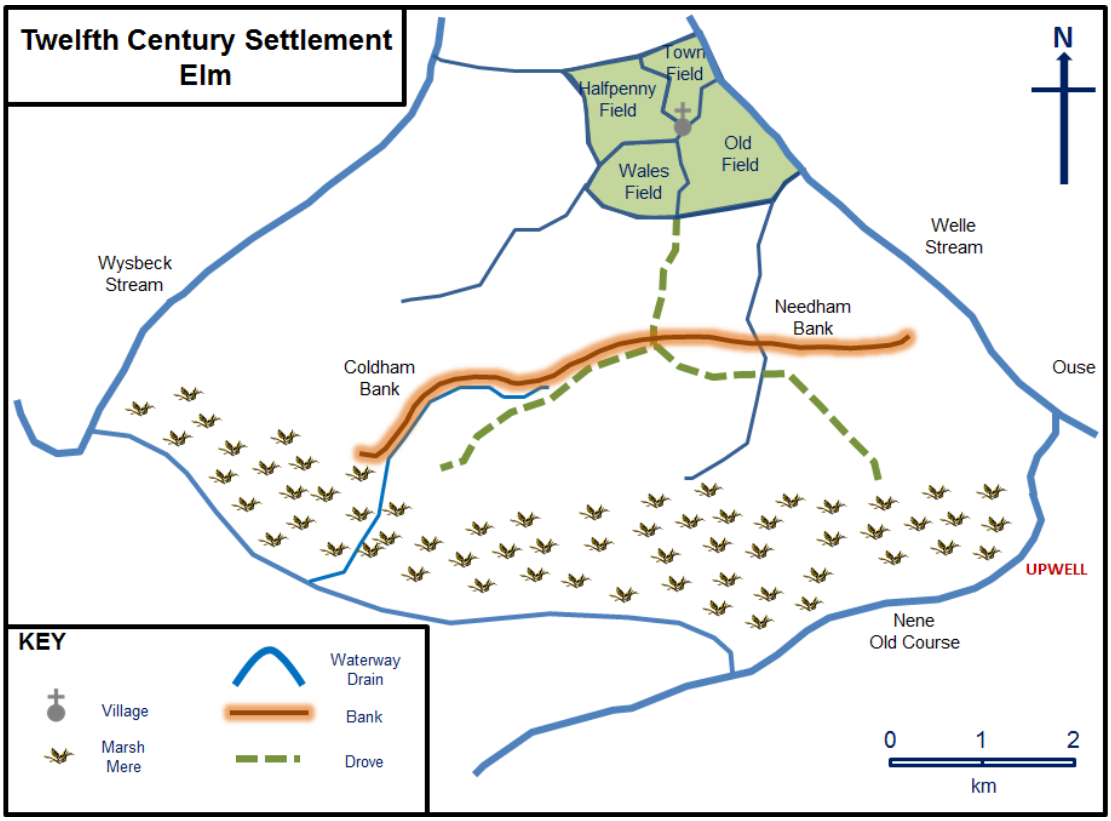

Figure 1.23 – Twelfth-century settlement in Elm showing key landscape features.

By the fifteenth century the drainage network was complete although, as noted for Tydd St Giles, work did continue to extend protection out towards the peat fen. The most obvious being the construction of Laddus Bank close to Upwell capturing a large swath of new land in the south of the parish. Between Elm and Upwell the meres and marshes

[153] Rippon, *Transformation*, p. 256; Stone, *Decision-Making*, pp. 26-7.
[154] I.G. Simmons, 'Rural Landscapes between the East Fen and the Tofts in South-East Lincolnshire 1100-1550', *Landscape History*, *34* (2013), p. 82.
[155] VCH(IoE), p 181

of the peat lands along the River Nene were not drained. Regardless of the technological challenges this was probably of benefit to the local inhabitants at it would provide access to peat fen produce for food and for building as well as the valuable fisheries noted earlier.[156] The land to the west of the parish at Waldersey by the Wisbeck Stream was also relatively poorly drained and primarily used for pasture. Stone notes that sheep were transported across the river to the Bishop's land at Beaudesert (near Begdale) for summer grazing.[157] This final stage of development is shown in Figure 1.24. The settlement pattern for Elm shows some similarities to Tydd St Giles in that there was the gradual extension of a core settlement out into the silt marsh to accommodate a growing population. The main difference is that Elm established smaller subsidiary settlements at Begdale, Friday Bridge and at Coldham Manor similar to the settlement pattern for Leverington and Wisbech noted in the overview.

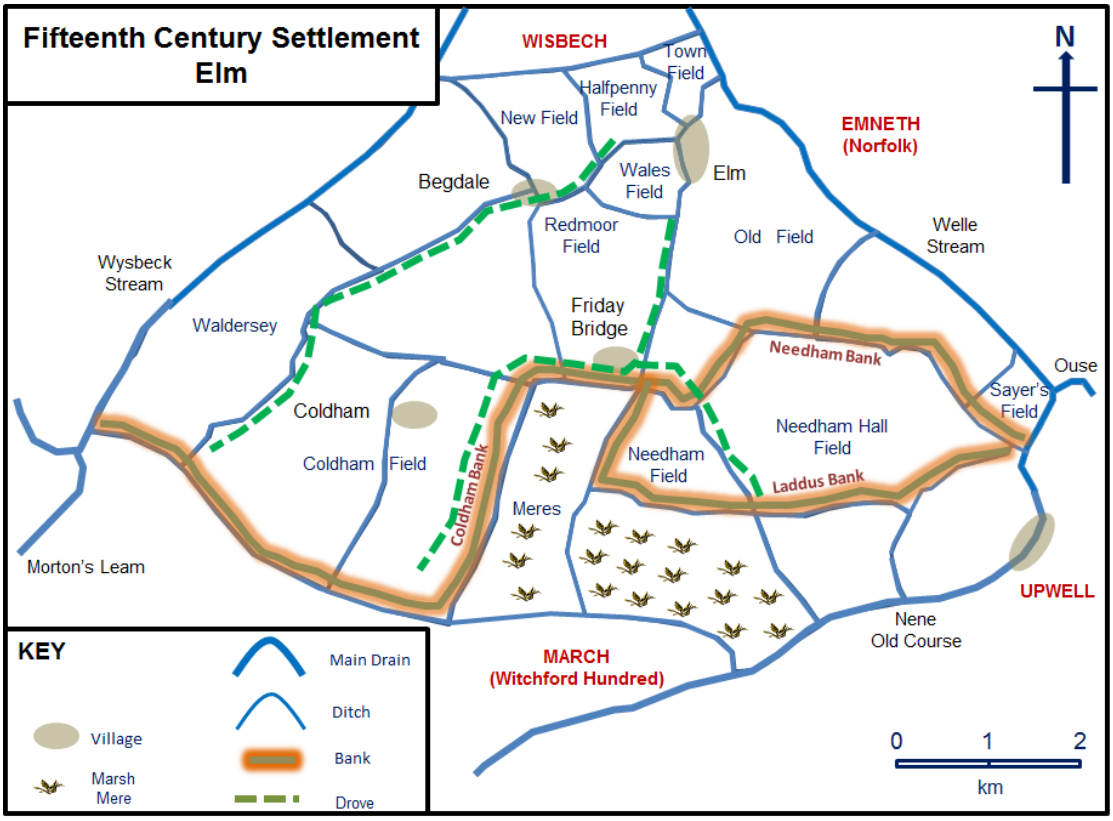

Figure 1.24 – Fifteenth-century settlement in Elm showing key landscape features.

[156] Silvester, *Norfolk Survey*, p. 163.
[157] Stone, *Decision-Making*, p. 33.

Settlement Timeline

Although this discussion focusses on the later middle ages an understanding of Romano-British settlement of the region is important as it was the first organised effort to change the landscape and as such provides a benchmark for later settlement. Archaeology shows that prehistoric settlements were limited to islands and the fen borders such as Crowland where there is evidence of pre Iron Age communities.[158] As the sea waters began to retreat pre-Roman and Romano-British settlement developed into the Fenland along areas of higher ground. As water levels continued to fall this settlement spread across what was to become the Hundred concentrated in the west and the south. The water levels were particularly low as the settlements extended beyond the elevated band of silt land into the low lying peat fen. As noted by Hall and Coles, the Romano-British period was the first widespread exploitation of the silt marsh.[159]

The inhabitants of the region were engaged in salt production supported by small-scale farming similar to that seen in the Romano-British communities in the midlands.[160] It was a pattern of occupation common to other wetland regions particularly Romney Marsh and the Severn Estuary.[161] Settlement was scattered with individual farmsteads or small groups of dwelling clustered around a saltern. The exception being the community at Coldham consisting of a hub of small enclosures and farmsteads around central buildings forming a relatively large village. It was matched by similar nearby villages at Grandford and Stonea around modern March.[162] The Coldham settlement dates from the reign of Emperor Hadrian (circa 125AD).[163] From the fourth century the Romano-British settlements in the fens disappeared.[164]

From Romano-British to Anglo-Saxon settlement there appeared to be a discontinuity. The lack of finds would suggest that from the departure of the Romans there was a period of some three hundred years with little or no habitation before the silt marsh was extensively reoccupied. This seems unlikely and a more plausible explanation is that the

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[158] P. Cope-Faulkner, H. Healey and T. Lane, *Wide Horizons: A History of South Holland's Landscape and People* (Spalding, 2010), p. 9.
[159] Hall and Coles, *Fenland Survey*, p. 105.
[160] C. Lewis, P. Mitchell-Fox and C. Dyer, Village, *Hamlet and Field: Changing medieval settlement in Central England* (Manchester, 1997), p. 79.
[161] Rippon, *Transformation*, p. 96.
[162] Potter et al, 'Roman Occupation', p. 86.
[163] Rippon, *Transformation*, p. 127.
[164] Rippon, *Transformation*, p. 138; Potter et al, 'Roman Occupation', pp. 132-3.

low lying settlements, such as Coldham, were flooded and the population migrated to the uplands bordering the region. However, a 'rump' of settlers remained on the areas of higher ground along the roddons within the fen as there would have been continuing value in exploiting the marsh produce.[165] The region was able to support settlement albeit at a much reduced level. Although tenuous there was a degree of continuity between the Romano-British and Anglo-Saxon communities within the Fenlands.

When more extensive settlement returned to the region it was concentrated in the north and east of the Hundred. It was on the higher ground close to the main waterways. Similar patterns of Anglo-Saxon resettlement were seen in the Norfolk and Lincolnshire marshlands, such as that at Gosberton in south Lincolnshire where communities were located on raised creek banks.[166] The evidence from finds indicates that reoccupation began as early as the sixth century with early to mid Anglo-Saxon communities at Tydd St Giles, Elm and Upwell. The limited nature of this recolonisation would indicate that much of the land was still heavily flooded. As the water levels continued to fall it was possible to extend settlement from the roddons into the silt marsh. There is evidence of late Saxon settlements at Wisbech and Guyhirn as well as the expansion of the communities at Tydd St Giles, Elm and Upwell. From this period the main flood defenses were developed with the construction of the sea banks bordering the Wash and the Fendyke between Guyhirn and Parson Drove.

This pattern of using existing natural creeks as the basis for later drains was adopted across the Hundred. It would have been an easier task to use natural features rather than excavating completely new channels. In the early to mid Anglo-Saxon period exploitation of marsh produce and fisheries were the main occupations and there is limited evidence of salt production and farming from this time. By the late Saxon period farming was beginning to play a greater role as more land was drained. Early Anglo-Saxon settlement was in the form of individual farmsteads or small groupings of families such as those around Tretton Bridge close to Tydd St Giles. By the late Saxon period the main villages of the Hundred at Tydd St Giles, Leverington, Wisbech (on the west bank of the Wisbeck Stream on what was to become the Old Market of the town), Elm and Upwell had formed. This is consistent with the view that development of the

[165] Hall and Coles, *Fenland Survey*, p. 128; Crowson et al, *Siltland*, p. 291.
[166] Rippon, *Transformation*, p.172.

nucleated village was related to the changes in agriculture required to feed the growing population and with the formation of open fields.[167] Jones and Page describe this process for the village of Whittlewood as 'the fusion of a number of initially dispersed settlements to form a single centre'.[168]

From the conquest to the fourteenth century the Hundred saw a period of sustained growth. In the fens this was only marred by the regular episodes of sea or freshwater flooding. Although damaging these events tended to have a short term impact and did not prevent continued growth.[169] The villages established during the late Saxon period continued to expand from the nucleated centres along the droves as more land was drained and brought into production.[170] New secondary settlements were established such as those at Wisbech St Mary and Parson Drove dating from twelfth and thirteenth centuries respectively.[171] Smaller settlements gathered around manors in the fen such as that at Richmond, Begdale and Fitton that was established by 1254.[172] This was the high period for expansion with large areas of land being banked and drained. The majority of the land reclaimed was in the west and the south towards the peat fen rather than from the salt marsh.

The population of the Hundred peaked at the start of the fourteenth century before the impact of famine and plague. In the fourteenth century all the settlements in the Hundred declined as the population fell. Parson Drove continued to exist but by the end of the fifteenth century had declined to a hamlet with the focus of the settlement moving further west (the modern location of the village). The small community located around the manor at Fitton between Newton and Leverington disappeared. The loss of smaller communities was seen in other location on the silt marsh such as the late Saxon community at Bristoe Field near Walpole in the neighbouring Marshland Hundred in Norfolk that also disappeared.[173] The existing villages were reduced in area as was the town of Wisbech where the depopulation was seen in abandoned building plots (see Chapter Five). By the fifteenth century with falling demand land was increasingly given

[167] S. Oosthuizen, 'Medieval field systems and settlement nucleation: common or separate origins?', in, N. Higham (ed), *The Landscapes of Anglo-Saxon England* (Woodbridge, 2010), p. 112.
[168] Jones and Page, *Medieval Villages*, p. 101.
[169] Hallam, *Settlement and Society*, p. 127.
[170] Hall and Coles, *Fenland Survey*, pp. 140-1.
[171] VCH(IoE), pp. 199 and 232.
[172] Taylor, *Cambridgeshire Landscape*, p. 91.
[173] Silvester, *Norfolk Survey*, p. 160.

over to pasture particularly on the fringes of the Hundred. The crisis of the fourteenth century brought to an end the prolonged period of reclamation and settlement expansion. Depopulation meant that resources were no longer available to complete large drainage schemes and more importantly the demand for new land had temporarily been halted. By the time of the Wisbech Map the focus had clearly moved from expansion to maintenance. The inherent value of the region was demonstrated by the fact that despite the fall in population land there is no significant evidence of land being abandoned. Rippon notes that there appeared to be some adjustment to the sea walls near to Newton and by Walpole St Andrew in Marshland but these were small compared with the area of reclaimed lands.[174]

The settlement timeline is summarised in Figure 1.25 that shows the timing of settlement development against other key factors such as changes in sea-levels, the expansion of drainage and the changing economy.

[174] S. Rippon, 'Adaption to a changing environment: the response of marshland communities to the late medieval 'crisis'', *Journal of Wetland Archaeology* 1 (2001), pp 20-2.

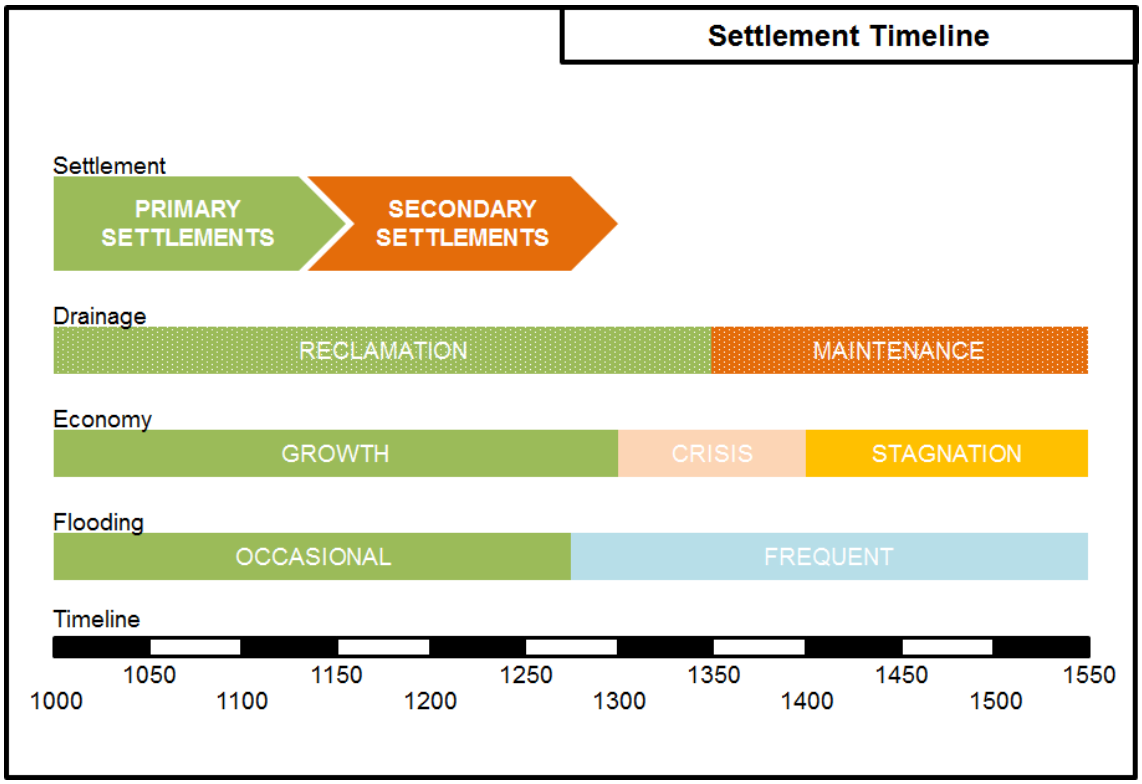

Figure 1.25 – Timeline for settlement development in relation to other factors including drainage, economy and flooding (relative sea-levels).

Settlement Form

Although there is much debate over precise definitions of settlement (noted by Williamson) Lewis, Mitchell-Fox and Dyer in their study *Village, Hamlet and Field* provide a hierarchy for rural settlement ranging from the village though hamlet and individual farmstead to shieling or temporary accommodation.[175] This model can be applied to the Hundred and illustrates the relationship between the primary and the secondary settlements, see Table 1.1 below.

[175] Lewis et al, *Village, Hamlet and Field*, p. 7; T. Williamson, R. Liddiard and T. Partida, *Champion: the Making and Unmaking of the English Midland Landscape* (Liverpool, 2013), p. 76.

Name	Settlement Size	Settlement Type	Date
Wisbech	Town	Nucleated	Late Saxon
Tydd St Giles	Large Village	Nucleated	Late Saxon
Elm	Large Village	Nucleated	Late Saxon
Newton	Large Village	Nucleated	Late Saxon
Leverington	Large Village	Nucleated	Late Saxon
Upwell	Small Village	Linear	Late Saxon
Parson Drove	Small Village	Linear	High Medieval
Wisbech St Mary	Small Village	Nucleated	High Medieval
Fitton	Hamlet	Manor	High Medieval
Tholomas Drove	Hamlet	Secondary	High Medieval
Murrow	Hamlet	Secondary	High Medieval
Guyhirn	Hamlet	Secondary	High Medieval
Begdale	Hamlet	Secondary	High Medieval
Friday Bridge	Hamlet	Secondary	High Medieval
Coldham	Hamlet	Manor	High Medieval
Richmond	Hamlet	Manor	High Medieval
Farmstead	Individual farmsteads (messuages) increasingly appeared as more land was drained and brought into production enabling tenants to be close to the fields they worked.		
Shieling	Temporary buildings have existed on the edge of the fen, at the end of droves, for those tending sheep and cattle on the summer pastures bordering the peat fen.		

Table 1.1 – Categorisation of Wisbech Hundred settlements into settlement types based on the 'Lewis et al' model.

The villages evolved from the original Anglo-Saxon settlements in the tenth and eleventh centuries. The secondary villages and hamlets emerged as settlement expanded out along droves to the edge of the Hundred. They enabled people to be located closer to the reclaimed land they were working.

Figure 1.26 gives the schematic layout of six of the villages of the Hundred at the end of the fifteenth century to help illustrate the different settlement types. Tydd St Giles had a nucleated core based on the church and was located in the north-eastern corner of New Field. It had linear settlement extending out from the centre of the village along Kirkgate and the road to Newton. There were individual or small groups of farmsteads physically distant but forming part of the village (and mentioned in contemporary documentation) showing a progressive dilution in the density of settlement away from the village core. Similar patterns were seen in Newton and Leverington but here the nucleus of the village was constrained by the proximity to a defining landscape feature, the sea-bank. In Newton settlement extended out from the village along tracks and droves out to Newton Fen in the west and the meadows by Goredike in the south petering out into individual dwellings. A similar pattern of settlement was seen in the silt marsh Hundred of Marshland in Norfolk.[176] In Leverington small groups of dwellings formed along the roads leading out to Richmond Manor (and ultimately Parson Drove) and to Wisbech.

Elm had a nucleated core centred on a fork in the road passing through the village with one track running west to the hamlet of Begdale and the other running south towards Friday Bridge. It is the only village in the Hundred that had anything resembling a conventional village green similar to those seen in the adjacent Marshland Hundred.[177] Linear settlement again extended out towards the secondary settlements. Upwell and Parson Drove were examples of entirely linear settlements. Upwell extended along both banks of the River Nene with the layout being largely dictated by the location on the limited area of dry ground within the peat fen. The neighbouring Outwell in Norfolk had a similar layout and could be considered an extension of Upwell. Parson Drove was another linear community running through pastures out to the Fendyke bordering the peat fen. Its layout was dictated by the surrounding low lying fields that were flooded in the winter until drainage ditches were constructed. The village church was located 1km inland from the Fendyke and there was a separate cluster of dwellings close to the Fendyke on the site of the modern village of Parson Drove, for better access to the peat fen. It is difficult and an oversimplification to divide Fenland settlements into clear categories such as nucleated, linear or dispersed as they were in fact hybrid

[176] Silvester, *Norfolk Survey*, p. 161.
[177] Silvester, *Norfolk Survey*, p. 162.

communities mixing different patterns of settlement to meet their specific requirements. They reflected the organic nature of their evolution as well as the constraints imposed by the landscape. They developed in response to the requirements of making a living, such as the establishment of secondary settlements in Leverington, Wisbech and Elm to provide easier access to the land being worked.

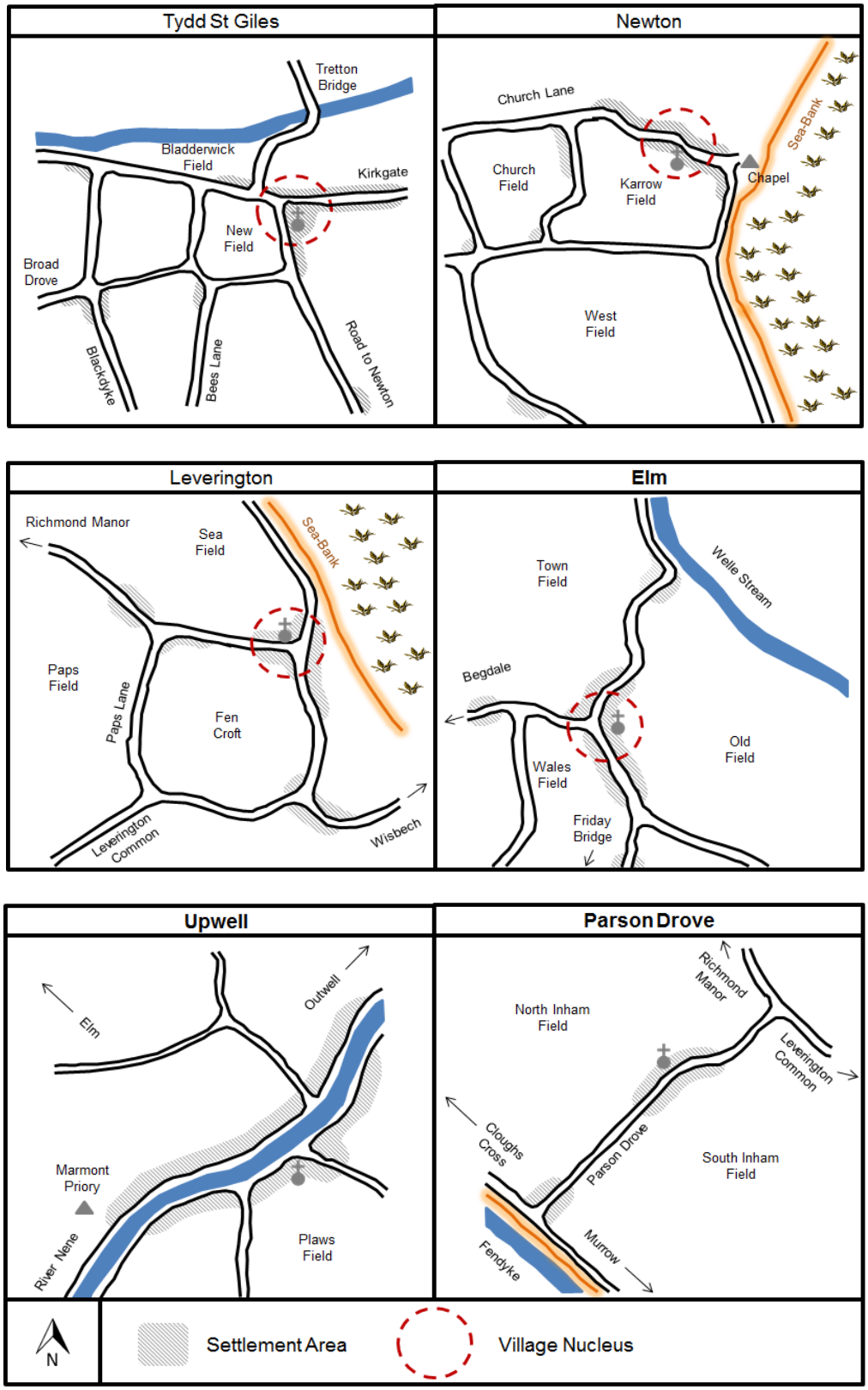

Figure 1.26 – Schematic layouts showing late fifteenth-century settlement patterns for Wisbech Hundred (drawn by the author).

Lewis et al suggest a number of factors influencing settlement form in the central midlands including the relationship with the evolving market economy.[178] Growth in demand for Fenland produce provided a strong incentive for the expansion of existing and the creation of new settlements. The Bishops of Ely influenced the pattern of settlement and had an important role in shaping the region.[179] One of the main tasks of the Bishop's estates in the Hundred was to provide food for the Bishop's extended household.[180] They directly influenced the structure of the town of Wisbech and indirectly the villages through the manorial courts as well as encouraging, and, in the case of Morton's Leam, funding major drainage schemes. However, the role of individual communities in shaping their own destiny and in particular their own settlements cannot be overlooked.[181] This is evident in the post-fourteenth-century Fenland with the establishment of individual farmsteads (seen in wills from the period) close to newly acquired land helping to fragment the existing nucleated villages already suffering depopulation. These factors were all significant in helping to define the form of settlement in Wisbech Hundred but the dominant factor was always the constraints of the landscape and environment. As Rippon notes 'individual communities were choosing to utilise broadly similar types of environment (wetlands) in ways that suited their local circumstances'.[182]

Comparison with Settlement Patterns in other Wetland Regions

The settlement pattern in the silt marsh can be compared with other wetland regions. In Romney Marsh Romano-British settlement was mainly restricted to the higher ground surrounding the region but with some evidence of smaller settlements on the marsh from the first and second centuries indicating a reduction in sea-levels and with it the risk of flooding. By the fifth century much of this low-lying settlement had been abandoned including Lympne shore fort.[183] Resettlement of the marsh did not take place until the tenth century with evidence of early field systems and a late Saxon church at Newchurch. Population and settlement reached a peak on the marsh by 1250 and then declined consistently across the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries. The decline was

[178] Lewis et al, *Village, Hamlet and Field*, p. 218.
[179] Lewis et al, *Village, Hamlet and Field*, p. 205.
[180] E. Miller, *The Abbey and Bishopric of Ely* (Cambridge, 1951), p. 78.
[181] Lewis et al, *Village, Hamlet and Field*, p. 210.
[182] Rippon, *Transformation*, p. 269.
[183] A. Reeves, 'Romney Marsh: The field-walking evidence', in J. Eddison (ed.), *Romney Marsh: The Debatable Ground* (Oxford, 1995), p. 86.

driven by the series of plague outbreaks in the fourteenth century but was reinforced by the declining prosperity of the region. Trade at the local port of Romney has severely disrupted by the wars of the fifteenth century.[184] The impact of these factors was such that by the late fifteenth century a number of settlements, such as Old Wincheslea, had disappeared (largely through coastal erosion) and others, such as Broomhill, had been much reduced.[185] This can be compared with Wisbech which did not experience such a dramatic and sustained economic decline. The resilience of the Fenland economy helped to maintain the population of the Hundred. As will be discussed in Chapter Five it also reflected the importance of inland markets to the town rather than the predominant dependence on foreign trade as in the case of Romney.

On the Somerset Levels there is again strong evidence of Romano-British settlement, initially on the higher ground but also extending into the peat filled river valleys and later the coastal marshes.[186] By the fourth century there was a retreat back to the higher ground in response to increasing relative sea-levels and the valleys were largely without permanent settlement until the tenth century. Archaeology carried out in and around the village of Puxton provides evidence of strong population growth from the eleventh century.[187] However, by the fifteenth century Puxton was in decline with empty plots and buildings typical of the region.[188] A similar pattern is seen in Humber wetlands along the valleys leading into the Humber estuary. There was Romano-British settlement dating between 100 AD and 370AD with roads, villas, estates and military sites. Archaeological evidence from this period show signs of farming and exploitation of the wetlands around Hull and Adlingfleet similar to the Romano-British settlements at Coldham and Parson Drove.[189] The rising relative sea-levels in the fourth and fifth centuries covered much of the low-lying settlement of the Romano-British period and permanent settlement did not recover again until the late tenth century. There is evidence of grazing, wildfowling and fishing from bone fragments found in the valleys of the Ouse, Trent and Humber indicating permanent settlement in the late Saxon

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[184] Reeves, 'Romney Marsh', p. 87.
[185] M. Gardiner, 'Medieval settlement and society in the Broomhill area', in J. Eddison and C. Green (eds), *Romney Marsh: Evolution, Occupation, Reclamation* (Oxford, 1988), p. 125.
[186] S. Rippon, *Landscape, Community and Colonisation: The North Somerset Levels during the 1st to 2nd millennia AD* (York, 2006), p. 66.
[187] Rippon, *Landscape, Community and Colonisation*, p. 187.
[188] Rippon, *Landscape, Community and Colonisation*, p. 275.
[189] R. Van de Noort, *The Humber Wetlands: The Archaeology of a Dynamic Landscape* (Macclesfield, 2004), p. 118

period.[190] Population growth led to the creation of new towns and villages including Hedon, Selby and Hull in the twelfth and thirteenth centuries. These settlements were similar to those in the fen generally being large and nucleated (although the riverbank settlements could be linear similar to Upwell) with much of the development being encouraged by the local religious houses.[191] The Humber wetlands saw a decline in population and prosperity throughout the later medieval period and, unlike the Fenlands, a loss of land as flood defenses and drainage fell into disrepair. By the end of the fifteenth century settlement was in retreat across the Humber wetlands in response to population reduction and a changing local economy.

Being shaped by the same climatic conditions it is inevitable that the wetland regions of England displayed similar patterns of settlement development.[192] However, within this general model there was variation. The Anglo-Saxon resettlement of the wetlands was earlier in the fens with settlements at Tydd St Giles, Elm and Upwell appearing at least 100 years before the other regions. It is even possible that occupation did not completely disappear at the end of the Romano-British period but continued, at a much reduced level, on areas of higher ground relatively safe from flooding. This was a reflection of the value of the fens as well as the access to extensive linked river communications that provided a route from the sea to the midlands. Being on the east coast it was readily accessible to settlers arriving from Scandinavia and North Germany and was certainly a route taken by invading Viking fleets.[193] The fourteenth-century decline was followed by stagnation and in many case by further reductions in population and the abandonment of marginal settlements.[194] In the Wisbech Hundred population appears to have stabilised and even to show some signs of recovery by the end of the fifteenth century (see Chapter Three). The period between the poll tax return for 1377 and the lay subsidy return for 1524-5 shows a small increase in population. The 1438 Commission of Sewers made reference to some new drainage works indicating an ongoing demand for new land. The reclaimed marsh in the Wisbech Hundred was no longer marginal land and despite the reduction in population the flood

[190] Van de Noort, *The Humber Wetlands*, p. 130.
[191] Van de Noort, *The Humber Wetlands*, pps. 135 and 137; R. Silvester, 'Medieval reclamation', p. 134.
[192] A. Reeves and T. Williamson, 'Marshes', in J. Thirsk (ed), *Rural England: An Illustrated History of the Landscape* (Oxford, 2000), p. 153.
[193] M. Swanton (trans), *The Anglo-Saxon Chronicles* (London, 2000), p. 205.
[194] S. Rippon, 'Adaption to a changing environment: the response of marshland communities to the late medieval crisis', *Journal of Wetland Archaeology*, 1 (2001), p.17.

defenses and drainage was maintained and no land was lost to the surrounding marshes. In other wetland regions this did not occur and land was lost to the sea. An explanation of this apparent difference is provided by Bailey who argues that post Black Death with increasing costs and diminishing returns marginal wetlands became uneconomic and were abandoned.[195] However, the productivity of the silt lands of the Hundred was such that they were still financially viable and could accommodate the changing economy. Although all wetland regions complied with a general model of settlement there were significant differences that were a reflection of the unique local geography and economies.

SUMMARY

The question posed at the start of this chapter was; how did the landscape shape settlement and how in turn did settlement change the landscape? The landscape and the nature of settlement are intertwined. This was particularly the case in the fens where the landscape, or rather the environment, could readily and unpredictably overwhelm and destroy settlements. The relationship between landscape and settlement was complex and the development organic. The temptation is to simplify and to attempt to categorise the relationship to ease understanding. This approach, although necessary, has the risk of overlooking some of the more subtle interactions. A dominant factor would have been how the people living in the region would have viewed their surroundings. It was a frightening and dangerous landscape and the folk tales of floods with their associated loss of life and livelihoods would have been numerous.[196] The most memorable incident in popular memory being the alleged loss of King John's treasure in the Wash in 1216 where 'the ground was opened up in the midst of the waves and bottomless whirlpools engulfed everything'.[197] Another example being the sea flooding of the thirteenth century that killed hundreds of people and survived in the collective memory. The fear of flooding was alive throughout the Commission of Sewers of 1438.[198] To balance this there would have been a deep understanding of the potential wealth of the region with its good arable land and pastures as well as access to communications. As Rippon

[195] M. Bailey, 'The Concept of the Margin in the Medieval Economy', *The Economic History Review*, Volume 42 (1989), p. 9.
[196] Hall and Coles, *Fenland Survey*, p. 3.
[197] M. James, *Cambridgeshire Folk Tales* (Stroud, 2014), p. 173.
[198] Darby, *Medieval Fenland*, pp. 177-94.

describes it living in coastal wetlands was a 'high cost and high risk but high return endeavour'.[199] The threat of inundation would have been ever present but the threat of other calamities such as famine, (for example that in 1315 to1317), would have been significantly lower because of the diverse nature of the local economy. On balance it would have been a beneficial place to live with the prospect of access to good quality reclaimed land attracting settlers some from great distances. However, it would have been understood that it was a land that would require respect and management to minimise the risk and to maximise the potential.

There has been little discussion of the people who inhabited and transformed this landscape. The uninformed picture is of a race apart; isolated, independent, distrusting outsiders and eking out a living from the marshlands. Typified by the nineteenth-century description of the 'fen slodger'.[200] It sits well with the understanding of the region as 'immense marshes, foul running streams and many islands with reeds, hillocks and thickets' a land dominated by 'the loneliness of the wild wilderness'.[201] It is a romantic, albeit grim, picture of life in the undrained backfen of the peat marsh but by the start of the fourteenth century could not be applied to Wisbech Hundred. The inhabitants of the area had transformed the silt marsh through collective effort. Mere and marsh survived at the fringes of the region but the majority of the land was now arable and pasture. The 1327 lay subsidy showed that it was a region that had grown wealthy not on isolation but through supplying produce to both inland markets and to the port of Lynn through the extensive waterway network. Although a unique region it was integrated into the national economy. The wills of men such as Thomas Fuller of Tydd St Giles, John Hammond of Elm and John Masse of Wisbech, from the mid fifteenth century show confident land owners and merchants with contacts across and outside the Hundred.[202] This late medieval breed of fenman was a far cry from the fictional 'fen slodger'.

The early settlers had initially to accept their environment and live within its constraints and this resulted in an existence based predominantly on exploitation of natural resources. A realisation of the value of the region drove a progressive modification of

[199] Rippon, *Transformation*, p. 6.
[200] Hall and Coles, *Fenland Survey*, p. 155.
[201] Darby, *Medieval Fenland*, p. 8; Rippon, *Transformation*, p. 169.
[202] C.R.O., VC 1:24; C.R.O., VC 1:30; T.N.A., P.R.O., PROB/11/5.

the landscape to enable better use to be made to feed and accommodate a growing population. Landscape and the environment dominated early settlement forcing it to retreat during times of flooding but by the fourteenth century the transformation of the region was complete. From this point it could be argued that the inhabitants dominated the landscape (albeit then, as now, there was always in the background the threat of natural disaster). With the construction and maintenance of a sophisticated network of drainage and flood protection, as well as a desire to make use of the valuable silt lands, settlement would not again be permanently forced out of the fen back to higher ground. What made the region unique was the scale of the transformation.[203] Although there were similar activities taking place in other wetland environments there was nothing comparable in England in either scope or achievement to the medieval reclamation of the Lincolnshire, Norfolk and Cambridgeshire silt marsh.

[203] Silvester, 'Medieval reclamation', pp. 123-4.

Chapter Two - Drainage and Flood Protection

INTRODUCTION

Wisbech Hundred was under continual threat of flooding throughout the medieval period and this issue dominated the management of the landscape. The threat came from the sea and from inland waters. During exceptionally high tides, and in particular when driven in from the Wash by storms, the risk of the sea banks being breached by the storm surge and flooding taking place was high. In the thirteenth century the sea bank between Tydd St Giles and Wisbech was breached causing extensive loss of life in the town and the surrounding communities.[204] The risk from inland flooding was also considerable and caused by heavy rains in the Midlands feeding the rivers Welland, Nene and Ouse flowing through the fens. When the rivers could no longer cope with the volume of water then the inland banks were breached and the farm land flooded. Although flooding of the peat fen was common in the winter the silt land could also experience damaging fresh water floods. As will be described later in the chapter, in 1439 the Fendyke Bank by Guyhirn failed through lack of repair and 13400 acres of land behind the bank were flooded affecting the parishes of Leverington, Newton and Tydd St Giles.[205] This example serves to illustrate the damage in terms of loss of life as well as disruption to economic activity. Winter crops would be lost, animals drowned and the farmland would be out of production until the land was dry and in the case of sea flooding until the salt had leached from the soil.

The protection against flooding was a series of banks with the sea bank running from Wisbech to Spalding and on to Boston on the west and to Lynn in the east protecting against high tides and storm surges. Along the waterways and on the border with the peat fen were a series of inland banks designed to prevent freshwater flooding. The silt marsh was drained by a grid of small ditches along field boundaries (and within larger fields) emptying into larger drains, such as the Shoffendyke, that in turn emptied either into the rivers or directly into the Wash. The flow of water through the banks was controlled by sluices that allowed water to drain from the land but prevented the ingress of flood water.

[204] VCH(IoE), p. 243.
[205] VCH(IoE), p. 197.

The importance of a managed and integrated drainage and flood protection system was well understood by all of the inhabitants of the Hundred. The defences were only as strong as the weakest link. If the defences of one parish were well maintained but those of an adjoining parish were in disrepair the consequent risk from flooding was still great. Throughout the twelfth and thirteenth centuries more land was drained and brought into production with both the sea banks and the inland banks being pushed back. As more land was being recovered then the drainage system became increasingly complex and a structured response to integrated flood protection was essential. This was carried out through the manorial courts and the Commissions of Sewers. The first recorded Commission of Sewers was in 1258 when the Patent Rolls noted that Henry de Bathe was directed to investigate the 'recent inundation of the sea and marsh in parts of Holland (Lincolnshire)'.[206] The commission had powers to investigate, to direct works and to fine those failing to carry out their responsibilities for flood protection. The Commission of Sewers became a regular, although ad hoc, mechanism for the management of flood protection before it was formalised with the Statute of Sewers in 1531.[207]

This chapter will describe the key features of the drainage system for the Wisbech Hundred and show how they directly impacted the landscape. Through the source material, primarily the record of the Commission of Sewers and the manorial court records, it will be seen how the silt marsh communities collectively managed the response to the threat of sea and freshwater inundation. After the expansion in drainage between the eleventh and fourteenth centuries it is argued that the fifteenth century was a period of retrenchment with the focus on the maintenance of flood defences and the protection of the recovered land. With the population depleted by plague and famine it was not possible to do anything more.[208] Although this interpretation is in part supported by the source material there is also clear evidence of significant new drainage works taking place. Perhaps the most substantial was the construction in the 1480s of Morton's Leam between Peterborough and Guyhirn named after its sponsor Bishop Morton of Ely.[209] That it was not effective, and only moved the flood risk further

[206] H. Darby, *The Medieval Fenland* (Cambridge, 1940), p. 155; Patent Rolls, Henry III, 7th February 1258.
[207] H. Darby, *The Draining of the Fens* (Cambridge, 1956), p. 3.
[208] J. Hatcher, *Plague, Population and the English Economy* (London, 1977), p. 39.
[209] Darby, *Medieval Fenland*, p. 168.

downstream, was a reflection on the prevailing understanding of drainage engineering rather than a lack of determination to put in place major drainage schemes. It will be shown in the following chapter on population and wealth that the silt land of Wisbech Hundred was one of the wealthiest regions in England and that it warranted the large investment in resources and money required for the development of new drainage infrastructure.

Source Material

There is a wealth of source material available on the drainage of the Wisbech Hundred. Key for this chapter is the record of the Haltoft Commission of Sewers of 1438 held at Wisbech.[210] It contains much detailed information starting with the governance arrangements for the commission and the scope of the enquiry which was defined as all 'walls, ditches, gutters, sewers, bridges, causeways and sluices through the coast of the sea throughout the Counties of Lincoln, Northampton, Huntingdon and Cambridge'.[211] It details the Commissioners, the local dignitaries and the representatives from the Fenland communities. The document was a record of a meeting, or a series of meetings, to examine the defences of the Wisbech Hundred and to order remedial and new works. A continual reference point throughout the document was the 'Customs of Romney' and it is clear that all present were expected to 'have seen and understood' their requirements. The 'Laws and Customs of Romney' were a long established code that governed the management of drainage and flood defences in a wetland region and will be discussed in detail later in the chapter.[212] Their significance was that they were the basis of the governance arrangements for all wetland regions in England ultimately being incorporated in the Statute of 1531.

The historical value of the record of the Haltoft Commission is that it gave a detailed description of all banks and drains as well as the associated infrastructure of sluices, dams and bridges with place names. By cross referencing this with other contemporary records and modern maps enables a detailed diagram of the drainage and flood protection infrastructure at the time to be prepared. Detailed analysis has been carried out for two of the parishes of the Hundred, Tydd St Giles and Elm. Moreover, it names

[210] Darby, *Medieval Fenland*, pp. 177-94.
[211] Darby, *Medieval Fenland*, p. 177.
[207] M. Tooley, 'Romney Marsh: the debatable ground', in J. Eddison (ed), *Romney Marsh: The Debatable Ground* (Oxford, 1995), p. 2.

some of the landowners in the particular parishes responsible for specific sections of the flood protection and this can be linked to landownership information such as that from wills giving an indication of the status of the individuals. The document provides some indication of the value of the drainage works in terms of the fines made against individuals for failure to honour their requirements to maintain banks and ditches.[213] The record of the Commission additionally provides some insights into the technical aspects of drainage and flood protection. It defines the strength of the flood defences by specifying the width and height of banks and the capacity of the drainage by specifying the width and depth of ditches.

The Haltoft Commission is supported by other contemporary documentation, most notably the manorial records. The manorial court records for the parishes of Tydd St Giles and Elm for the late fifteenth and early sixteenth centuries yield useful information on the management of the process. In both parishes responsibility was placed on landowners of specific fields to ensure that drains were clean and were repaired with a standard penalty of 3s 4d for 'delinquents'.[214] There were also references to the maintenance of the sea bank and ditches with the process being managed by a number of 'Dyke Reeves' appointed for the vill by the Court. The relationship between the work of the ad hoc Commissions of Sewers and the routine work of the manorial court is not clearly defined but was effective. The extent and variety of the source material enable many of the assumptions with regard to drainage and flood protection to be validated and a complete picture not only of the structure of the defences but also of their management to be developed.

Commission of Sewers

The commission of Henry de Bathe in 1258 was the start of a regular series of commissions across the wetlands of England with a further commission for Holland taking place in 1266. The following Table 2.1 details the commissions held in and around the Fenlands in the 150 years from 1310 to 1460.

[213] Darby, *Medieval Fenland*, p. 179.
[214] C.U.L., EDR/C7/1-24, Manorial Court Roll, Tydd St Giles, 1496-97.

Year	Location	County	Comment
1319	Wiggenhall	Norfolk	Ingaldesthorp Commission
1327	Freebridge Hundred	Norfolk	
1337	Tilney	Norfolk	
1366	Spalding	Lincolnshire	
1391	Holland & Kesteven	Lincolnshire	
1433	Peterborough	Huntingdonshire	
1438	Wisbech Hundred	Cambridgeshire	Haltoft Commission
1443	Marshland	Norfolk	Scales Commission
1455	Sutton (Holland)	Lincolnshire	

Table 2.1 – Examples of Commissions of Sewers held in the Fenlands.

From the commencement of the fourteenth century commissions of sewers were regular events in the Cambridgeshire Fenlands. They were normally triggered by flooding events and the increasing frequency indicates increasingly unsettled climatic conditions. There were records of 'inquisitions taken before the justices for the drains, dykes and sewers' in Cambridgeshire in the reigns of Edward III and Richard II as well as the Haltoft Commission from the reign of Henry VI.[215] The commissioner was normally a royal official; Henry de Bathe was a judge and Gilbert Haltoft was a Baron of the Exchequer although he did have some direct connections with the region being born in Outwell sometime before 1410.[216] The commissioners were required to work through the local hierarchy; for Henry de Bathe in Holland this was the Sheriff of Lincolnshire and for Gilbert Haltoft in the Wisbech Hundred this was the representatives of the absentee landlord Lewis of Luxembourg, Archbishop of Rouen and holder of the see of Ely.[217] The record of the Haltoft Commission describes the scope of the enquiry but it does not explain what caused the commission to be called. It is possible that it was a belated response to the sea floods of November 1421 when a storm surge caused extensive damage around the North Sea coastline.[218] The sea bank at Sutton in the adjoining Wapentake of Elloe in Lincolnshire was breached although Wisbech Hundred was not seriously impacted by this event. Alternatively, it could have been a response to more recent excessive freshwater flooding during the winter periods.

[215] A. Gibbons (ed), *Ely Episcopal Records* (Lincoln, 1891), p. 18.
[216] S. Wells, *History of the Drainage of the Great Level of the Fens called Bedford Level* (London, 1828), p. 68.
[217] Darby, *Medieval Fenland*, p. 177.
[218] S. Rippon, *The Transformation of Coastal Wetlands* (Oxford, 2000), p. 50.

The membership of the Commission of Sewers held at Wisbech in 1438 was clearly stated. It was held 'in the presence of Sir John Colvyle (a prominent local landowner and Constable of Wisbech Castle), Gilbert Haltoft (the Commissioner) and their associates the justiciars of the lord King'. On his death Colvyle was recorded as holding manors in Walsoken (Norfolk), Elm and Newton.[219] There were eighteen jurors recorded in the document and these are shown in the following Table 2.2.[220] This is unusual as there were normally twelve jurors although in this case it could just have been a practical reflection of the size of the Hundred, the complexity of the drainage system and the number of parishes.

Juror	From
John Bytham	Not Known
John Howsold	Tydd St Giles
John Masse	Wisbech
John Thryston	Wisbech
Richard Lamb	Not Known
William Halman	Wisbech
Martin Thomson	Newton
Richard Algood	Not Known
William Gibb	Not Known
John Derby	Newton
John Manning (snr)	Elm
John Drew	Not Known
William Rushforth	Not Known
John Barker	Elm
John Edward	Wisbech
John Green	Wisbech
Nicholas Bateman	Not Known
Geoffrey Reynald	Not Known

Table 2.2 – List of Jurors from the record of the 1438 Commission of Sewers held in Wisbech.

[219] Gibbons, *Ely Episcopal Records*, p. 433.
[220] Darby, *Medieval Fenland*, p. 177.

These have been cross referenced against information from the analysis of fifteenth-century wills to determine the location and status of the individual where possible. Those identified can be seen to be to have been important members of their communities and wealthy land owners in their own right with a vested interest in the working of the commission. John Manning (senior) from Elm left 57½ acres of land in various fields in his will of 1458 as well as buildings and a small wood. He was obviously an extensive land owner and a prominent person in the parish.[221] Similarly, John Green in his will of 1453 was shown to hold land and property in Wisbech and in Elm.[222] His name also appeared as an official of the Trinity Guild in Wisbech. There was a reference in the Bailiff's Roll for Wisbech from the reign of Edward IV to another juror noting a payment of 20s 'from shops in Wisbech Market by reason of the minority of John Masse son and heir of John Masse'.[223] His son was later to become the Alderman of the Trinity Guild and a prominent figure in the town, see Chapter Five. They were keen to ensure the protection of their land and property against flooding but also to minimise their exposure to the costs of drainage. They were acting on behalf of their communities combining social status with local knowledge. This is evident from the level of detail included in the report of the commission. The jurors knew each other through everyday transactions, through the fraternities or through meetings of bodies such as the leet court. They formed a network of individuals with a common understanding and similar objectives.

The exact role of the individuals is not explained in the report and although they were representing their communities it is not obvious in what capacity. The document is not clear on the proceeding of the commission and even on detail such as where it was held. It is not obvious if the document was an account of a single hearing or a summary of a series of hearings (this is more likely given the quantity of information) and, unlike the record of the Wiggenhall commission in Norfolk a century earlier, is not supported by other information relating to its establishment and on-going activities. However, it is possible to make some observations; the level of detail makes it likely that prior to the hearing there was a period of inspection and of gathering information from the local communities, most probably from the appointed dyke reeves. It is also apparent that it

[221] C.R.O., VC 1:55.
[222] C.R.O., VC 1:26.
[223] Gibbons, *Ely Episcopal Records*, p. 433.

was a body that had recognised and established authority and could issue directions to those attending to carry out works with the expectation of that work being completed.

The remit of the Haltoft Commission was extensive (covering three counties) and the commissioner could not be expected to have detailed knowledge of the entire region. The process for carrying out the commission was for the appointed commissioner to visit the region in conjunction with senior officials to hold hearings with local people to receive information on the condition of the drainage and flood protection. At these hearings individual land owners or tenants were able to make representations. The banks and ditches may even have been inspected in person, although there was no direct reference to this in the record.

The analysis covered all parts of all of the parishes of the Hundred starting with the major sea banks and drains though to the smaller field banks and ditches. There are numerous examples of detailed direction being given for the improvement of drainage and flood protection throughout the document and these are discussed in detail in the section on drainage and the landscape. The directions were specific with regard to the task to be carried out and the responsibility for completing the task. It recorded that the jurors say on oath that 'the sea ditch beginning at Tydd St Giles next to the County of Lincoln up to Bevis Cross in the said Wisbech is maintained at a width of fifty feet and a depth of six feet'.[224] At the other end of the scale it recorded that 'another sewer should be built in Long Field in Newton at a width of six feet and a depth of three feet next to the land of John Derby (one of the jurors) called Barrowdyke from Mill Lane to Meadow Lane'.[225] The instructions for repairs, maintenance and new works to be carried out were supported by writ if necessary. There is evidence from the Wiggenhall commission in 1322 of the king issuing direction directly to Blowere and Payn, Dyke Reeves in Wiggenhall, to 'put into effect the decisions and decrees' of the Ingaldesthorp Commission of 1319.[226]

[224] Darby, *Medieval Fenland*, p. 177.
[225] Darby, *Medieval Fenland*, p. 189.
[226] A. Owen (ed), *The Records of a Commission of Sewers for Wiggenhall 1319-1324*, Norfolk Record Society 48 (Norwich, 1981), p. 41.

There were some differences between this commission and the earlier inquest at Wiggenhall in Norfolk. This could relate to local differences in the application of the process or more probably the development of the process over the nearly 120 years between the two commissions. In particular, at Wiggenhall the commission had the responsibility for appointing the dyke reeves for the area whereas in the Wisbech Hundred they are appointed through the manorial courts.[227] The earlier document was explicit on the mechanisms for managing flood protection with the role of collectors and dyke reeves being made clear; the collectors gathered the money due for the defences and the dyke reeves used the money for carrying out the repairs and maintenance.[228] In the Haltoft Commission the mechanism for funding drainage was not described, however, it was partly through the fines and penalties imposed by the commission and partly through sums raised through the manorial courts. There were similarities between the two commissions including the emphasis on the application of the 'Laws and Customs of Rumney' which supplied the model for the management of wetland flood defences. In the record of the 1438 commission in Wisbech there are numerous references to Romney throughout the document.

It is helpful to look in more detail at the Laws and Customs of Romney as they provide the framework for the governance of complex medieval drainage systems. They date back to the twelfth century and detail the arrangements for the management of flood protection for Romney Marsh.[229] The laws and customs were based on a number of relatively simple principles; that there was a collective responsibility for the flood protection and that all landowners and tenants should contribute to the defences in proportion to the land owned and protected.[230] Those that would most benefit from the protection had the greatest responsibility for payment and providing labour to maintain the defences. This is seen in the Haltoft Commission where the record 'presents that a sewer ought to be built in Fenland Field in Newton at a width of six feet and a depth of three feet between the land of Martin Thomson (a juror) and the land of John Mendham

[227] Owen, *Commission of Sewers for Wiggenhall*, p. 14.
[228] Owen, *Commission of Sewers for Wiggenhall*, p. 21.
[229] H. Richardson, 'The Early history of the Commission of Sewers', English Historical Review, 34 (1919), pp. 389-90.
[230] Tooley, *Romney Marsh*, p. 2.

at the cost and expense of all who profit from lands and tenements there'.[231] This is a clear demonstration the application of the principle that those who benefit should pay.

On Romney Marsh the management of the flood protection was the responsibility of bailiffs to inspect the condition of the defences and to arrange repairs where necessary. The bailiffs reported to 'committees' of jurats who oversaw their work and dealt with any disputes. They also ensured that the work of the bailiffs was coordinated and commissioned any new flood protection. This is reflected in the Haltoft Commission where the responsibility for ensuring 'defects are heard and brought to an end' were assigned on oath to the eighteen jurors.[232] The Laws and Customs of Romney were adopted by Henry de Bathe as a model for the management of flood protection and were used in the first Commission of Sewers in Lincolnshire. They were subsequently used in most Commissions and even referred to directly in the royal writ.[233] The account of the Commission of Sewers in Wisbech of 1438 not only makes regular reference to the Laws and Customs but also to the application of their basic principles. The record notes that 'the tenants of the lands and tenements in Leverington are used, since a time before which the memory of man does not exist, to repairing, maintaining and building anew a certain ditch in Leverington from Piggesdrove Cross to the Clouse'.[234] This form of words appears throughout the document referring to the collective nature of the works in the Hundred.

The account of the Haltoft Commission was a clearly structured document and following the initial outline of the purpose of the commission and the introduction of the jurors described the drainage and flood protection in each of the parishes assigning responsibilities to the communities and specific landowners. The report started on the west bank of the Wash estuary in Wisbech and rotated through Guyhirn, Leverington, Newton, Tydd St Giles before returning to Wisbech and transferring the enquiry to the east bank of the river and the parishes of Elm and Upwell. The record for each parish began with a general requirement for the inhabitants of the vill to maintain the drainage and flood protection; 'and all the tenants of lands and tenements beneath the vill of Elm should have a duty for building, repairing, deepening, and maintaining each and every

[231] Darby, *Medieval Fenland*, p. 189.
[232] Darby, *Medieval Fenland*, p. 177.
[233] Owen, *Commission of Sewers for Wiggenhall*, p. 20.
[234] Darby, *Medieval Fenland*, p. 179.

one (of the ditches and banks) each according to the size of his tenure wherever it is necessary'.[235] The document continued with a detailed survey of the drains and banks within and around the vill, assigning responsibility to specific landowners for maintenance. The guidance was precise detailing the depth and width of ditches, the height of banks and the location of sluice gates and pipes. For example to avoid the fields in Coldham being flooded by the main sewer then 'all those with any small ditch (*fovea*) abutting on the said sewer of Coldham ought to stop it up with a gate and the said gate should be twelve feet in width and equal in height to the surrounding headland'.[236] This would imply a high level of understanding of the operation of the drainage system as well as access to detailed local knowledge.

The level of detail included in the account of the commission can be shown in the following table (Table 2.3) which gives the number of entries by parish and the entries by task.

Location References in Haltoft Commission		**Activity References in Haltoft Commission**	
Location	Number of Entries	Activity	Number of Entries
Hundred	7	Banks	24
Tydd St Giles	26	Drains/Ditches	49
Newton	14	Sluices	8
Leverington	11	Bridges	5
Wisbech St Mary	6	Pipes	3
Wisbech	14	Other	7[237]
Elm	11		
Upwell	7		

Table 2.3 – 1438 Commission of Sewers entries by parish and activity.

The record of the commission provides a detailed picture of the drainage and flood protection for the region. All major drains and banks are described with information on their routes and the responsibility for their maintenance. It also includes details of many of the minor drains and banks enabling a picture of the complex nature of the network to be developed. The record, in conjunction with the comments in manorial court rolls, enables an understanding of the prevailing technology to be gained. The size of major

[235] Darby, *Medieval Fenland*, p. 186.
[236] Darby, *Medieval Fenland*, p. 187.
[237] The 'other' category includes clearing of obstructions and maintenance of headlands.

and minor drainage infrastructure is explicitly described as are the structure of pipes and sluices. Although the relationship between the commission and the local management structures was not explicit in the document much can be inferred from the membership. Sir John Colvyle would have acted as the Bishop's representative on the commission and, being a landowner in a number of parishes of the Hundred, would have been known to the jurors. This would have supplied the direct link between the working of the commission and the manorial courts ensuring that the directions of the commission were consistently implemented.

DRAINAGE AND THE LANDSCAPE

There was a complete transformation of Wisbech Hundred and other wetland regions across the middle ages.[238] By the fifteenth century an integrated and well-managed system of flood defences and drainage had permanently changed the landscape with, it is estimated (based on a comparison of OS maps with contemporary information on land use), more that 60% of the region now being cultivated or given over to pasture.[239] With the accelerating reclamation and a rapidly growing population came an expansion in the number of settlements. This section describes how the drainage system developed and looks in detail at the main components of the network.

There was extensive Romano-British activity on the western and southern edges of the Hundred, particularly around the largest settlements such as that at Coldham.[240] There is evidence of the construction of banks and ditches around a series of fields and enclosures at Parson Drove and Murrow.[241] Drainage channels were dug to supply salt water to the numerous salterns, an important economic activity during the Romano-British period.[242] These early efforts at drainage and manipulation of the landscape ceased in the late fourth century with rising water levels flooding much of the region and the accompanying collapse of the Roman economy. [243]

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[238] R. Silvester, 'Medieval reclamation of marsh and fen', in H. Cook and T. Williamson (eds), *Water Management in the English Landscape: Field, Marsh and Meadow* (Edinburgh, 1999), p. 122.
[239] D. Hall, *The Fenland Project, Number 10: Cambridgeshire Survey, Isle of Ely and Wisbech* (Cambridge, 1996), p. 184.
[240] D. Hall and J. Coles, *Fenland Survey: An Essay in Landscape and Persistence* (London, 1994), p. 116.
[241] HER(C) 09418; HER(C) 03806.
[242] Hall and Coles, *Fenland Survey*, p. 101; Rippon, *Transformation*, pp. 96-7.
[243] R. Bradley, K. Briffa, J. Cole, M. Hughes, T. Osborn, 'The climate of the last millenium', in K.

The Anglo-Saxon communities constructed sea banks to protect their settlements against flooding. These were substantial earthworks up to eight feet in height and 12 feet in width to protect against high tides and storm surges. As it became evident that the protection of individual communities was not effective these were progressively linked and enlarged to form a continuous sea wall.[244] The sea wall, termed locally the 'Roman Bank', extends from Wisbech along the Northern side of the Wash estuary to Spalding. The bank was extended inland through Elm along the banks of the Wisbeck Stream and the Welle Stream.[245] At the same time there is evidence of associated major drainage works with the excavation of the Shire Drain running for some 10 miles from the Wash at Tydd St Giles to Parson Drove. This is still a substantial construction being in places more than twenty feet wide and ten feet deep and marking the boundary between the counties of Cambridgeshire and Lincolnshire.[246] The purpose of the drain was twofold: to channel harmful flood waters from the inland peat fen into the Wash; and to help drain the farm lands between the villages of Tydd St Giles and Tydd St Mary. It was built with banks to enhance the protection.

The twelfth to the early fourteenth centuries were a period of exceptional population growth and with it economic expansion. This expansion was replicated in the Fenland region where there were examples in the Lincolnshire Fenland of a six-fold growth in the population of Spalding, an eleven-fold growth in Pinchbeck and a more than sixty-fold growth at Fleet in the eleventh and twelfth centuries.[247] To support this level of population increase it was necessary to bring additional land into production. This included what had generally been regarded as unprofitable and even marginal land such as marshland, forests and moors. This process was reflected in the fens where the strip of silt land exposed by falling relative sea-levels running through Lincolnshire, Cambridgeshire and Norfolk was expanded by drainage. The drainage extended into the salt marsh adjoining the Wash and into the inland marshes. It is estimated that in the Wapentake of Elloe in Lincolnshire, adjoining the Wisbech Hundred, some fifty square miles of land were reclaimed between 1170 and 1240 with in excess of one hundred

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Alverston, R. Bradlet, T. Pedersen (eds), *Paleoclimate, Global Change and the Future* (Berlin, 2003), p.1.

[244] Hallam, *Settlement and Society*, p. 7.

[245] Hall and Coles, *Fenland Survey*, p. 127.

[246] Ordnance Survey, Explorer Map 235 Wisbech and Peterborough North 1:25000, Ref 428168.

[247] Hallam, *Settlement and Society*, p. 200.

square miles of land being reclaimed across the region.[248] Similar levels of reclamation were experienced in the adjoining Cambridgeshire and Norfolk marshlands. Although there was some reclamation on the coastal side of the sea wall the majority of the reclamation was from the inland marshes. As the population grew beyond that which could be supported by the fields immediately surrounding the vill then it became necessary to extend cultivation into the surrounding marshland. New fields were banked and drainage ditches constructed and it is the maintenance of these ditches that was referred to in the Haltoft Commission.

The dominance of inland drainage was a reflection of the effort required to bring land into production. The inland marshes bordering on the peat fen would already have been used for summer grazing and connected to the villages by long droves. Inland drainage would have yielded larger areas of land for less effort. It would also have been less exposed to damage from storms and high tides. It is at this period (the twelfth century) that the Fendyke from Guyhirn to Crowland was constructed protecting the Wisbech Hundred and the Wapentake of Elloe from freshwater flooding.

The Fenland drainage system operated at different levels to form an integrated network where all the components were required to be maintained and to work together. It had evolved over many centuries predominantly through a process of trial and error and as such although effective, lacked an overarching single plan. At the highest level of the drainage network were the large rivers flowing through the region. The inland waters from the East Midlands were channelled through the fens primarily by the rivers Welland, Nene and the Ouse. The flatness of the region from Peterborough through to the Wash meant that the rivers were slow moving and were vulnerable to being breached or being blocked and changes in course were not unusual.[249] The rivers were particularly at risk of failure during the winter when heavy rainfall or thawing snow could swell the flows down into the Wash. High tides could also restrict the discharge into the sea causing the water levels to rise and overflow the river banks. This was seen in 1285 when combined sea and inland flooding occurred causing extensive damage to much of the Wisbech Hundred including the vills of Upwell and Elm.[250] There were

[248] Hallam, *Settlement and Society*, p. 39.
[249] Hall and Coles, *Fenland Survey*, p. 3.
[250] Darby, *Medieval Fenland*, p. 151.

other smaller rivers such as the Wisbeck Stream, which joined the Fendyke at Guyhirn and ran to Wisbech, and the Welle Stream from Upwell into the town. The rivers at this time were not canalised, as are their modern equivalents, and would have adopted a natural path through the landscape. The main waterways and banks are shown in the following map, Figure 2.1.

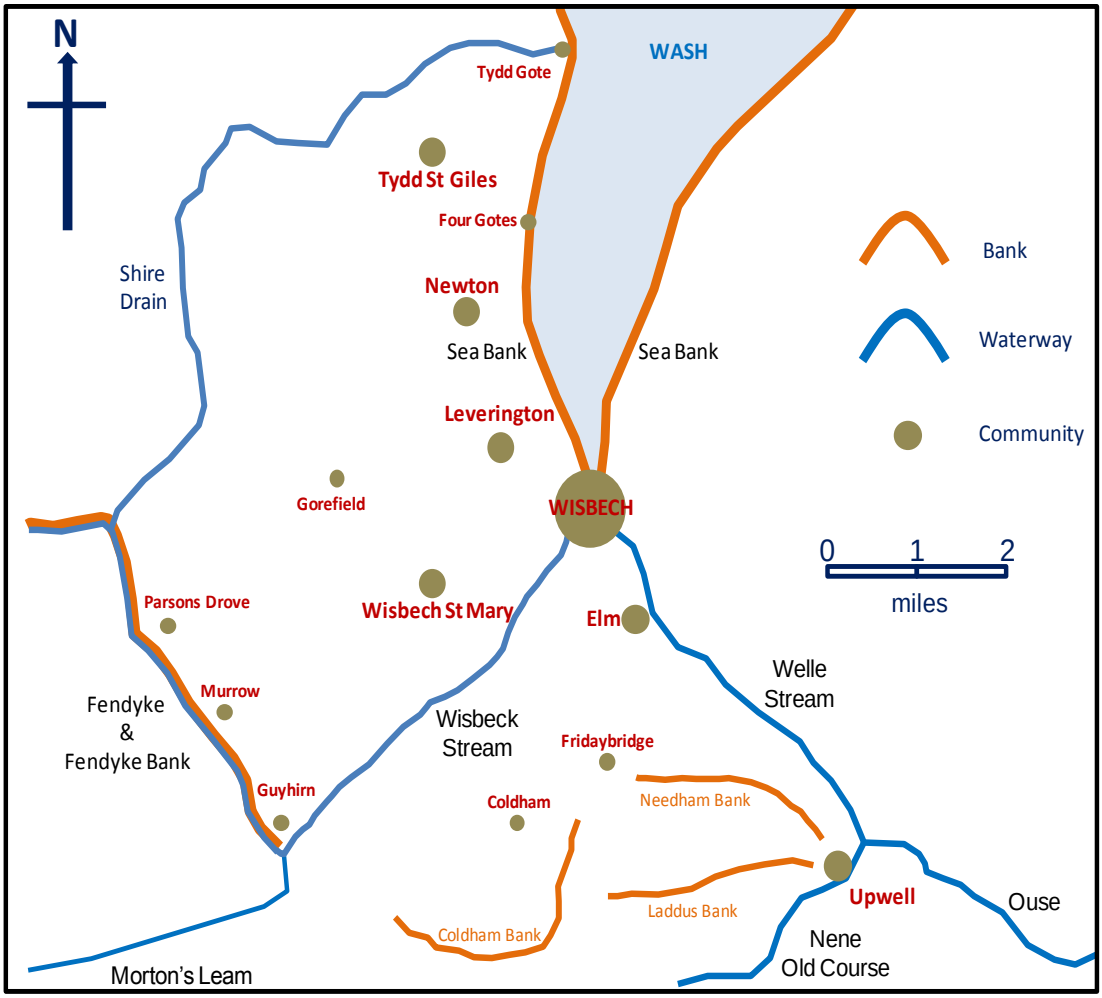

Figure 2.1 - Map of the major waterways and banks in the Wisbech Hundred at the end of the fifteenth century.

The River Welland flowed to the north-east from the Midlands running through Stamford and Spalding before joining the Wash near Fossdyke in Lincolnshire. The River Nene ran through Peterborough before swinging in a wide arc through March and Upwell and joining the Welle Stream and discharging into the Wash at Wisbech. The River Ouse took water from the Southern Midlands and ran through Ely and Littleport before eventually flowing into the Wash near Lynn, see Figure 2.2 for a map of the region showing major waterways. After the 1236 sea floods the discharge of the Nene

via the Welle Stream into the Wash was blocked by silt and a new channel was made joining the Welle Stream to the Ouse to enable navigation through to the estuary.[251] This allowed water to be discharged into the Wash and trading to be continued out of Wisbech via the Ouse to Lynn although the new route was considerably longer. Despite repeated efforts navigation through Wisbech into the Wash was not restored until later in the fifteenth century.[252] The silting up of the original channel increased the risk of freshwater flooding in the Hundred.

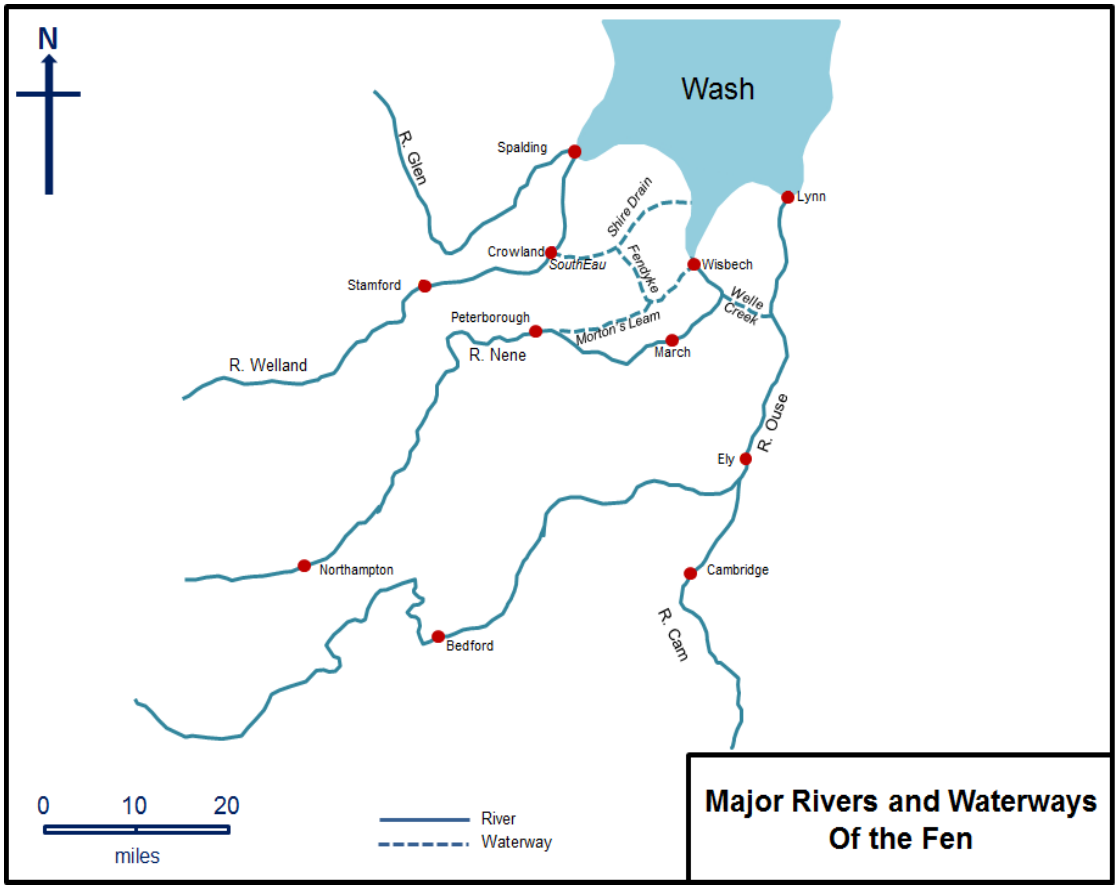

Figure 2.2 – Map of the Fenland region showing the major rivers and waterways at the end of the fifteenth century.

Beneath the rivers were the main drains which evacuated water from the heart of the silt marsh and the peat fen discharging into the rivers. Many of these drains were substantial works of civil engineering, as shown by the dimensions of the Shire Drain noted earlier. The main feature of the dykes when compared to rivers is that they were manmade and not a natural product of the geography of the region. However, it is

[251] VCH(Hunt), p. 250.
[252] VCH(IoE), p. 263.

probable that they in part followed the route of older features such as creeks. In the northern parishes of the Hundred there were two main drains; the Shire Drain and the Fendyke. The Fendyke ran along the Western boundary of the Hundred from Guyhirn up to Clows Cross at Parson Drove where it joined with the Shire Drain through a sluice gate. Here the Fendyke turned inland and ran through to Crowland in Lincolnshire. At Guyhirn it joined the Wisbeck Stream and at the end of the fifteenth century it was connected to the newly constructed channel, Morton's Leam, which brought water directly down from the River Nene at Peterborough draining the land around Whittlesey.[253] The purpose of the Fendyke was twofold; its bank provided some protection against inland flooding across the peat fen and the drain linked with the Shire Drain through the sluice at Clows Cross to take water from the silt marsh. In the southern parishes the main channels were the Wisbeck Stream on the west and the Welle Stream on the east but linking them was a series of ditches and banks running from near Guyhirn cross to Upwell. These again had the same intent as the Fendyke in draining the southern fields of the parish and helping to protect against fresh water inundation. The waterways also provided the basis of an effective internal communications network.

These main drains were fed with water from smaller ditches or field drains that ran along the headlands of the fields. Looking firstly at Tydd St Giles parish, the following map (Figure 2.3) shows the field layout and the associated drainage. The parish is bounded by the Shire Drain to the north and west and the Shoffendyke to the south each marking the border with adjoining parishes. The Shire Drain took water from the northern fields (Hornfield, Bladderwick, Eaudyke and Crofts) via the smaller drains and discharged directly into the Wash Estuary through a sluice at Tydd Gote. The Fendyke took water from the western fields and pastures and drained into the Wisbech Stream at Guyhirn which then found its way into the estuary via the town. The Shoffendyke took water from the southern fields in Tydd St Giles (South Field, South Crofts and East Field) as well as water from the northern fields of Newton parish and discharged into the Wash through one of the four sluices at Four Gotes. The main drains were linked by a grid of smaller ditches running along the fields and the Commission of Sewers gives

[253] VCH(Hunt), p. 150.

various dimensions for these channels but they were typically 12 feet wide and six to eight feet deep.[254]

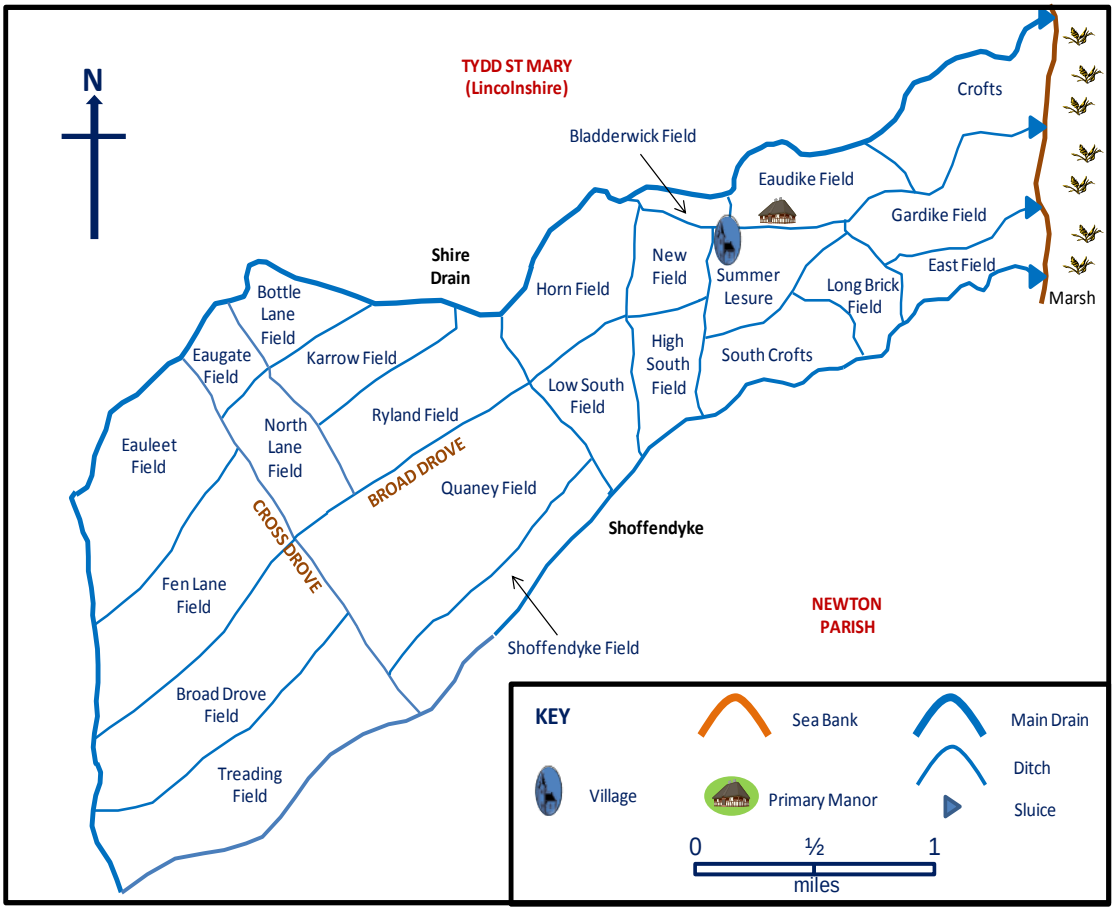

Figure 2.3 - Map of the late medieval drainage system in the parish of Tydd St Giles (based on the Haltoft Commission).

In the case of East Field and Gardike Field the field drains also discharged directly into the Wash Estuary through the remaining sluice gates at Four Gotes. The Commission of Sewers then records a series of smaller ditches running across the fields, typically no more than eight feet wide and four feet deep running into the field drains and hence out to sea via the larger drains. This network if properly maintained provided a robust drainage system protecting the fields from flooding as well as providing a basis for further drainage to bring additional land into production. The dimensions of the various drains, based on the report of the commission is summarised in the following Table 2.4.

[254] Darby, *Medieval Fenland*, p. 185.

Type of Drain	Width x Depth (feet)	Purpose
Waterway	Not specified	Natural waterway/river running through the region carrying inland waters to the sea and draining the Hundred.
Main Drain	50ft x 6ft	Man made waterway linking the field drains to the major rivers or the estuary and draining the parish.
Field Drain	12ft x 6ft	Man made waterway running along the field boundaries and linking the ditches to the main drains and draining the fields.
Ditch	8ft x 4ft	Man made waterway running within the field joining the field drains intended to improve drainage within the field.

Table 2.4 – Drain and ditch dimensions from the Haltoft Commission of 1438.

A similar pattern can be seen in the southern parish of Elm, see Figure 2.4, where the field drains formed a grid linking the main waterways of the Wisbeck Stream and the Welle Stream emptying into the Wash at Wisbech. This was supported by a web of smaller ditches crossing the fields referred to in the record of the Commission of Sewers. There were multiple references in the document to these drainage channels; the tenants of Redmore Field and Wales Field to the south west of the village were required to maintain and deepen the ditch called Redmoredyke, lying on the boundary between the fields. The tenants of Needham Field and Oldfield to the south east of the village were required to carry out similar works to Nedhamdyche.[255] As with Tydd St Giles, there were references to the repair of sluices connecting the larger drains into the main waterways but in the case of Elm there were also references to the use of pipes to connect the smaller field ditches into the larger drains; for example, the tenants of Redmore Field were required to maintain the 'Lordyspype' between their field and Waldersey.[256] Although there is no surviving archaeological evidence it is likely that these were stone culverts or hollowed out logs rather than fired pipes.[257]

[255] Darby, *Medieval Fenland*, p. 185.
[256] Darby, *Medieval Fenland*, p. 186.
[257] Silvester, 'Medieval Reclamation', p. 125.

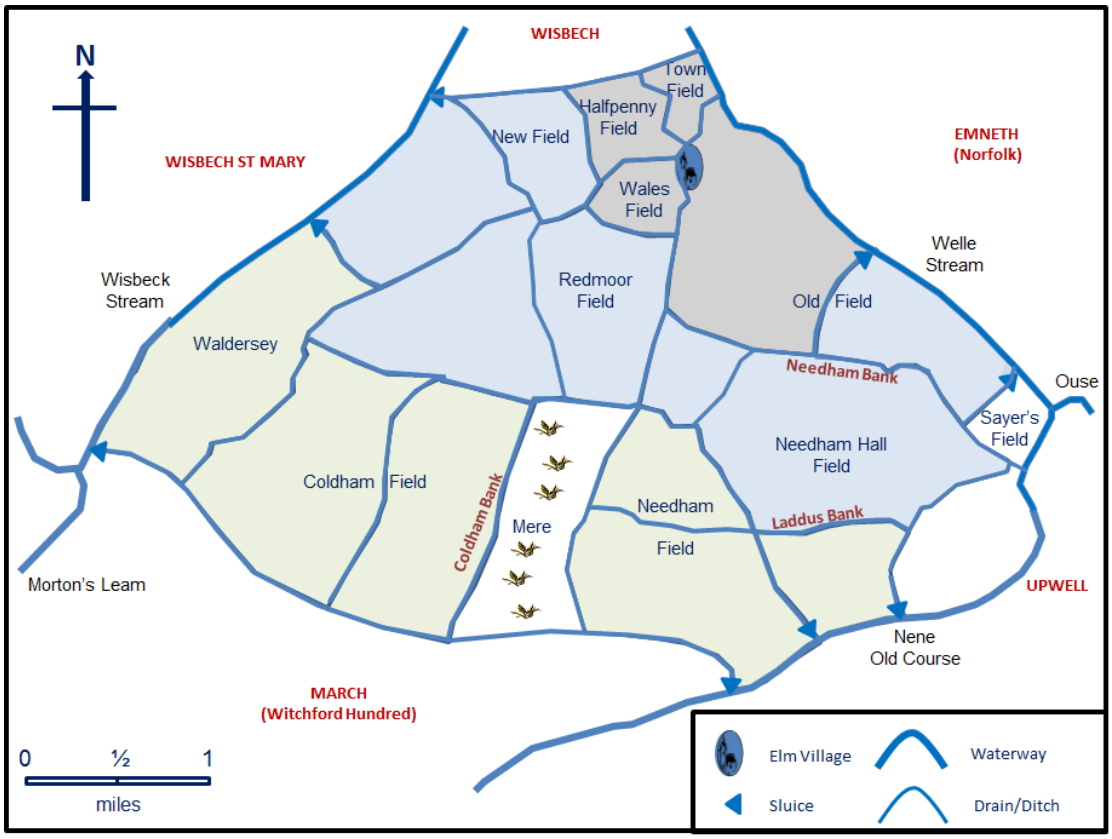

Figure 2.4 - Map of the late medieval drainage system in the parish of Elm (based on the Haltoft Commission).

The following pictures (Figure 2.5) show examples of surviving medieval drains and ditches in use in the silt fen. In chronological order the Shire Drain around Tydd St Giles was constructed in the late Saxon period and is still a substantial watercourse integrated into the modern drainage system. The Shoffendyke between Tydd St Giles and Newton parishes was constructed during the pre-fourteenth century expansion. The last picture shows Morton's Leam, a major watercourse constructed between Peterborough and Guyhirn.

Figure 2.5 – Examples of waterways in Wisbech Hundred (author's photographs).

The region was protected from flooding by a series of interlinked banks. It was as complex as the network of drainage and similarly depended on continuous maintenance to ensure its integrity and to effectively protect the valuable silt farmland. The northern parishes in the Hundred were protected from flooding by sea water from the Wash by a continuous bank that ran along the northern side of the estuary from Wisbech to Tydd St Giles. The bank extended around the Lincolnshire coast via Sutton, Holbeach and Spalding to provide a single main line of defence against the sea. There was a similar sea bank on the southern side of the Wash estuary running from Wisbech to Lynn providing protection to the Norfolk silt lands of Marshland Hundred.[258] Protection against freshwater flooding was provided by inland banks that separated the peat fens from the silt marsh. The most significant for the protection of the northern parishes was the Fendyke from Guyhirn down to Parsons Drove. The southern parishes were

[258] J. Barringer (ed), *Faden's Map of Norfolk* (Hunstanton, 1989), Sheet 12; R. Silvester, *Norfolk Survey, Marshland and Nar Valley* (Dereham, 1988), pp. 10-1.

protected by a series of banks running from Guyhirn to Upwell although, unlike the Fendyke Bank, little of this has survived and the precise route is difficult to determine. The banks were constructed with an associated drain or ditch and there were numerous smaller banks, no more than 3 feet high, protecting individual fields. For example, the record of the Haltoft Commission refers to the repair of a bank from Marriottsbridge to Tholomas Drove next to the common sewer.[259]

Evidence of banks in the Fenland landscape was lost with the intensification of farming and the movement towards ever larger fields and the use of heavy machinery. Such examples that have survived tend to have been extended and now carry roads between the villages. However, as can be seen in the following pictures (Figure 2.6) the original banks are visible primarily in the northern parishes. The first picture shows the Fendyke Bank at Clowes Cross near Parson Drove at the point where it swings to the west and enters Lincolnshire at the hamlet of Throkenholt. At this point the bank is approaching 12 feet in height and the peat fen side is noticeably higher than the silt fen side indicating the impact of depositions from historic freshwater flooding. The Sea Bank at Newton is also clearly visible. Its purpose was different in that it was, as the name implies, intended to hold back the sea from the Wash Estuary whereas the Fendyke Bank was to stop freshwater flooding. At the point shown in this picture there would have been a sluice to allow the Goredyke to drain water from between the villages of Newton and Leverington into the sea. The remains of a wooden sluice was located near this point in the 1970s.[260] The final picture is that of the repair to the Fendyke Bank at Guyhirn the bank failed in 1439 and allowed freshwater from the peat fenland to cause extensive flooding of the northern parishes.[261] The scouring effect of the flood water opened a breach nearly 100 metres in length and it was repaired with a semi-circular bastion built out into the flood to provide strength. The repair is still visible today and carries the roadway between the villages of Guyhirn and Murrow.

[259] Darby, *Medieval Fenland*, p. 181.
[260] HER(C) 04416.
[261]VCH(IoE), p. 197.

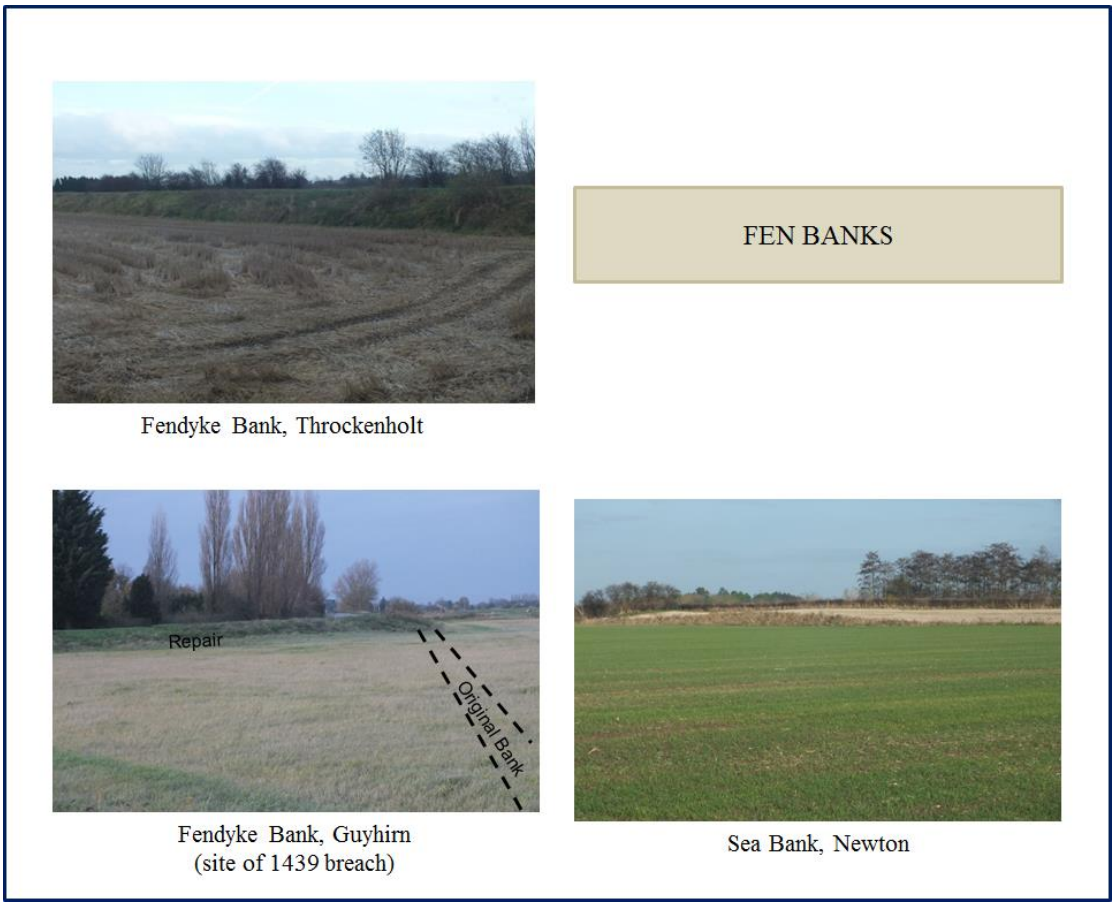

Figure 2.6 – Examples of banks in Wisbech Hundred (author's photographs).

Taking as a case study the flood defence in Tydd St Giles the main feature was the great sea bank to the immediate east of the parish. This was a significant structure and the land owners and tenants were responsible for the maintenance of the bank between Tydd Gote on the Lincolnshire border down to the parish of Newton. They were also responsible for the repair and maintenance of the sluice gates at Tydd Gote and Four Gotes where the drains discharged directly into the Wash estuary. In the case of Newton the requirement to maintain a sluice gate was specified down to the individual land owner; 'John Symondson of Newton for the whole of the said time ought and is accustomed to build and guard a dam at the eastern end of his land in New Field'.[262] There were further banks lying alongside the main drains on the inland borders of the parish. This is still visible at the Shoffendyke where the land on the Tydd St Giles (northern) side of the drain is clearly higher than that on the Newton (southern) side indicating the presence of a bank. There are also references to the maintenance of these banks and those running across the fields in the Haltoft Commission report. The report

[262] Darby, *Medieval Fenland*, p. 189.

notes that; 'the tenants of land in South Field abutting on Broadgate should build, repair and heighten a bank next to the common sewer at a height of four feet and a width of eight feet'.[263] Similarly, there are references to the maintenance of banks within fields which, together with the associated ditches, protected against flooding from other parts of the field or adjoining fields. There is a reference in the document to the tenants of Horn Field, to the west of the vill, being required to heighten a bank to four feet and a width of ten feet. No explanation is given as to why the greater width of bank is required but the location is very specific being; 'from Martens Fendyke to the corner where William Hoberd now lives'.[264] Further to the west the efforts were different and aimed at improving the drainage and reclaiming further land, essentially new works. The tenants of Fendyke Field and Northlane Field to the west of the village were required to maintain banks four feet high by eight feet wide along the field boundaries adjacent to Black Lane.[265]

Looking at the other case study, the parish of Elm, a similar pattern of flood defence can be seen. The parish is bounded on the West by the Wisbeck Stream and on the east by the Welle Stream. Both of these waterways were, and in the case of the Wisbeck Stream (now the River Nene) still are, banked to protect the parish from flooding should the river overflow either from high tides or from inland waters. As was the case with Tydd St Giles these banks were penetrated by sluice gates that enabled water from the field drains and ditches to discharge into the sea. Again, the responsibilities for the repair and maintenance of these banks were defined in the Haltoft Commission report. For example, there was a reference to the maintenance (where necessary) of the bank of Wisbech between Guyhirn and the sea by the tenants of lands each according to the size of his tenure.[266] There is also reference to a requirement for the tenants of the adjoining village of Upwell to maintain the 'Great Bank of Welle' at Greendyke on the border with the parish of Elm.[267]

Running along the southern edge of the parish was not a single bank but a series of banks providing protection against flooding from inland waters off the peat fen. The

[263] Darby, *Medieval Fenland*, p. 191.
[264] Darby, *Medieval Fenland*, p. 192.
[265] Darby, *Medieval Fenland*, p. 183.
[266] Darby, *Medieval Fenland*, p. 184.
[267] Darby, *Medieval Fenland*, p. 185.

Laddus Bank ran along the south eastern border from Upwell (replacing the earlier Needham Bank) and linked with the Coldham Bank that ran along the south western border towards Guyhirn. A similar pattern of development to Tydd St Giles can be seen with the defences initially protecting the smaller fields immediately surrounding the heart of the village; Town Field, Halfpenny Field, Wales Field and the northern part of Old Field.[268] As the demand for land increased as the population grew then new banks and drains were constructed enclosing larger fields more distant from the village; New Field, Redmore Field and Needham Field. With this expansion can be seen the same pattern of construction of smaller banks within the field to protect from flooding from neighbouring land. The defences for Tydd St Giles differed from those for Elm as the former were primarily concerned with protecting against devastating sea floods and secondarily against flooding from inland waters whereas those at Elm focussed mainly on protecting against inland flooding. However, they both demonstrated an ongoing process of reclaiming more distant poorly drained pasture land and protecting that against further flooding. This demonstrated an ongoing demand for new farm land post the fourteenth century crisis.[269]

[268] Ordnance Survey, Explorer Map 235 Wisbech and Peterborough North 1:25000, Ref 4607,4608, 4707 and 4708.
[269] Rippon, *Transformation*, p. 231.

The following Table 2.5 summarises the structure and purpose of the different banks noted in the Haltoft Commission.

Type of Bank	Height x Width (feet)	Purpose
Sea Bank	10ft x 20ft	To protect the Hundred from sea flooding. Example: Sea Bank from Wisbech through to Lincolnshire.
Main Drain Bank	8-10ft x 12-20ft	To protect the Hundred from inland flooding. Example: Fendyke Bank from Guyhirn to Parsons Drove.
Field Bank	3-4ft x 6-8ft	To protect individual fields from flooding. Example: Gordyke Bank between Newton and Leverington.

Table 2.5 –Bank dimensions from the Haltoft Commission of 1438.

It is helpful to include some comparisons with the drainage systems in other contemporary English wetland regions. The Humber Wetlands, although a more scattered landscape, showed some similarities with the silt marshes of the Wash. Firstly, much of the drainage was instigated by religious houses to protect and enhance their lands. In the Wisbech Hundred the Bishops of Ely played a prominent role right up to the construction of Morton's Leam at the end of the fifteenth century and in Humberside Selby Abbey played a leading role in the drainage of the Northern Levels.[270] The region also experienced severe sea flooding in the thirteenth century prompting a commission of sewers in 1285 to review the defences. In this case, the scale of the Humber Wetlands and the discontinuous nature of the landscape resulted in the abandonment of some of the coastal farm land. In the fifteenth century the region saw a further decline in population that Van de Noort believes resulted from a combination of the Black Death and a change in the use of the land from arable to pasture.[271]

There were a number of similarities between Romney Marsh and the silt marshes of the Wash in that they both provided high quality farm land for arable and for pasture. The similarities in terms of management, through the model of the Customs of Romney,

[270] Van de Noort, *Humber Wetlands*, p. 155.
[271] Van de Noort, *Humber Wetlands*, pp. 156-7.

have already been discussed. The main differences were in the nature of the field systems resulting from the drainage patterns. The silt marsh fields, particularly away from the village centres, tended to be open with long strips of cultivated ground. The Romney Marsh fields tended to be small, irregular and enclosed by banks and ditches. Graeme White notes that this indicated 'individual rather than collective enterprise' with the land reclaimed by families rather than communities.[272] The other major difference was the size of Romney Marsh which at approximately 24000 acres was considerably smaller than the East Anglian fens.

TECHNOLOGY AND DRAINAGE

To construct such an elaborate system of flood defences and drainage required the ongoing commitment of time and resources by much of the local population. Unlike the later drainage schemes of the seventeenth century there is no evidence of external labour being brought in to carry out the works.[273] Another difference from the later drainage schemes was that this network was constructed over centuries making a meaningful assessment of the numbers of people employed difficult. Account must also be taken of the tools that would have been available for excavation and for moving and compacting the soil. The workers would have been limited to heavy iron-tipped wooden spades and basic mattocks. For earth moving they had wooden wheelbarrows for smaller loads and ox or horse drawn carts for larger loads.[274] Such simple technology would have made the building of the defences a slow task. The following diagram (Figure 2.7) shows a cross-section of one of the larger drains with an associated earth bank. Looking at the ditch the cross-section is approximately 140 sqft and so to excavate 100 yards would have required moving some 1550 cubic yards of earth or, assuming one cubic yard weighs approximately one ton, 1550 tons of material. It was estimated that the 'navvy' of the industrial revolution could move 10 cubic yards of earth in a day but this was with the benefit of better equipment, such as steel spades and pickaxes, so it is reasonable to assume that the medieval labourer could not have been as efficient and a figure of five cubic yards in a day would seem reasonable. So, to

[272] G. White, *The Medieval English Landscape 1000-1540* (London, 2012), p. 30.
[273] Darby, *Draining of the Fens*, pp. 76-7.
[274] L. Saltzman, *Building in England* (Oxford, 1952), p. 330.

construct the 100 yards of drain it would have taken a team of 10 men a month to complete.[275]

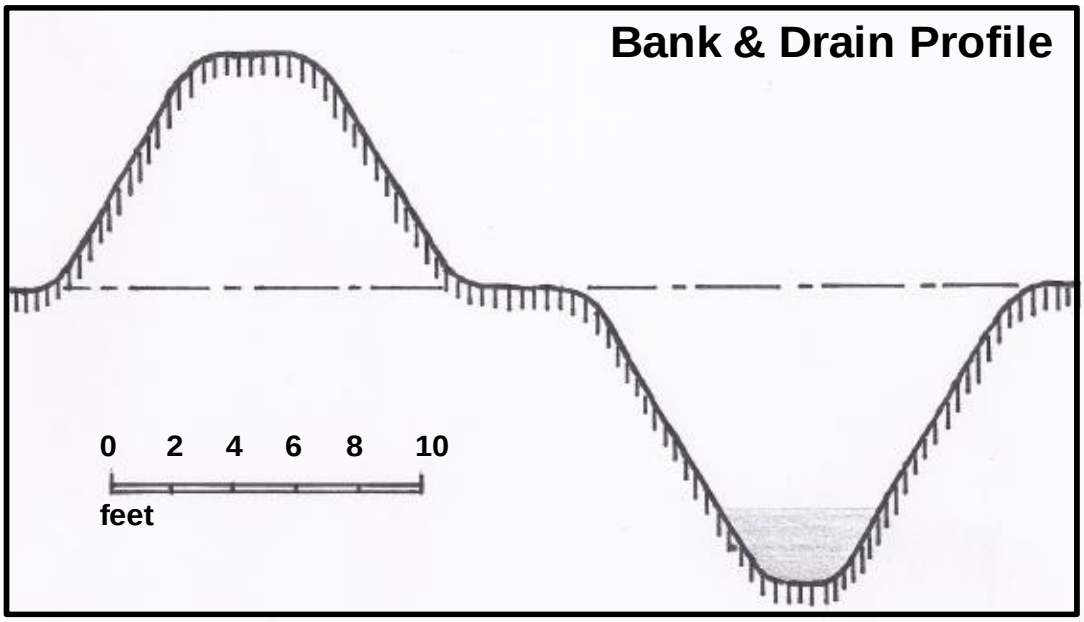

Figure 2.7 – Bank and drain profile based on the Fendyke at Parson Drove (drawn by the author).

Looking at the construction of the bank it is assumed that the earth excavated from the ditch would be used in the bank. The dimensions of the bank are smaller than the ditch with a height of eight feet and a width of 10 feet such that the 100 yard length would have a capacity of approximately 900 cubic yards. This is compatible with the report of the Haltoft Commission where the banks were normally smaller than the associated drain. For example, the Goredyke, between Leverington and Newton, had a depth of six feet and a width of 12 feet whereas the associated bank had a height of four feet and a width of eight feet.[276] However, for the bank to be effective it would need to be compacted in order to withstand the pressure of the flood water and this increased the density by some 50%. Hence, one cubic yard of bank would not weigh one ton but would weight 1½ ton so the material required for the construction of the bank would weight a total of 1350 tons. So, although the hypothetical team of 10 labourers could deposit the earth excavated from the ditch in a month additional time and effort would be required to compact the material to form the bank, probably an additional two weeks. Thus the construction of the 100 yards of ditch and bank would probably take between

[275] T. Love, *Construction Manual: Concrete and Formwork* (Carlsbad,2001) Table 4-2
[276] Darby, *Medieval Fenland*, p. 188.

six weeks and two months without allowing for the building of bridges, pipes or sluices to connect with other channels. Pipes and sluices were built by hired skilled labour in the form of carpenters with the excavation work being carried out by local labour. If this work was carried out by workers who had other duties, such as tending either their own lands or the demesne lands, the timescales would have been considerably increased.

Sluice gates or dams to control the flow of water between field ditches and main drains and between these and the rivers or estuary were essential. They enabled the fields to be drained and also protected against flood waters. There are numerous references to the maintenance of existing gates or the construction of new gates in the report. For example, to the construction of a new sluice gate between Elm and Outwell for the 'holding back of water of Outwell in winter' in order to protect the southern fields of the parish of Elm from flooding.[277] The diagram below (Figure 2.8) shows the structure of a sluice gate for controlling flows along a ditch based on the evidence from Barrowburn Mill. It is difficult to determine the actual structure as, being of a timber construction, little archaeological evidence has been discovered.

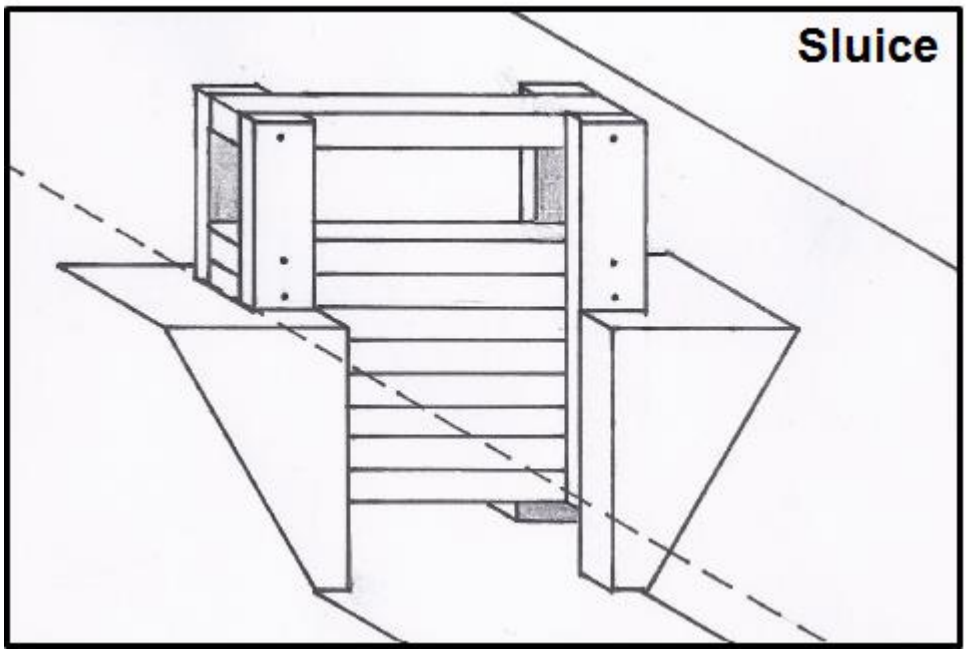

Figure 2.8 – Ditch sluice for controlling water flow in smaller drains (drawn by the author).

[277] Darby, *Medieval Fenland*, p. 186.

The sluice gate would have been a substantial structure capable of withstanding the pressure of water during periods of persistent wet weather. It is likely that the gate would have been of wooden construction, possibly embedded in a wood or stone frame, and would have been lifted in runners to allow the flow of water. For smaller sluice gates, such as those between fields, they would have been lifted by hand (examples of such smaller gates survived into the twentieth century) but for larger constructions there may have been a mechanism to assist with the lifting of the gate. It is probable that the floor of the sluice would have been stone to prevent scouring away of the base undermining the gate. An example of such a gate has been found in Northumberland and may provide a model for similar Fenland gates.[278]

For ditches draining through the sea bank and into rivers a more complex mechanism using hinged gates was installed. An example of this type of sluice was discovered in Newton and consisted of three hollow tree trunks approximately 10 yards in length with a one yard diameter and held in place with a framework of wooden posts (see Figure 2.9).[279] On the seaward end of the pipes were hinged wooden flaps that acted as simple non-return valves. If the water level in the ditch was high this forced the flap open and allowed the water from the fields to drain into the Wash. If the relative sea-level was high this forced the flap closed and prevented sea water flooding the fields. Although the sluice at Newton dates back to the eleventh or twelfth century the technology can be traced back to the Roman period. An example being the Vlaardingen 'duiker' found in the western Netherlands and dating back to the first century AD.[280] The construction of major projects such as the Fendyke would have required a large-scale coordination of effort and resources but this was not the case with smaller works. As Dyer notes 'much of the drainage work did not require great reserves of capital or political power and could be accomplished by individuals or by peasant communities.[281]

[278] www.coquetdalearchaeology.org/publications, CCA Report – Barrowburn Mill Excavations (2013).
[279] Hall and Cole, *Fenland Survey*, pp. 145-6.
[280] Rippon, *Transformation*, p. 88-9.
[281] C. Dyer, 'The material world of English peasants, 1200-1540: archaeological perspectives on rural economy and welfare', *Agricultural History Review*,62 (2014), p. 5.

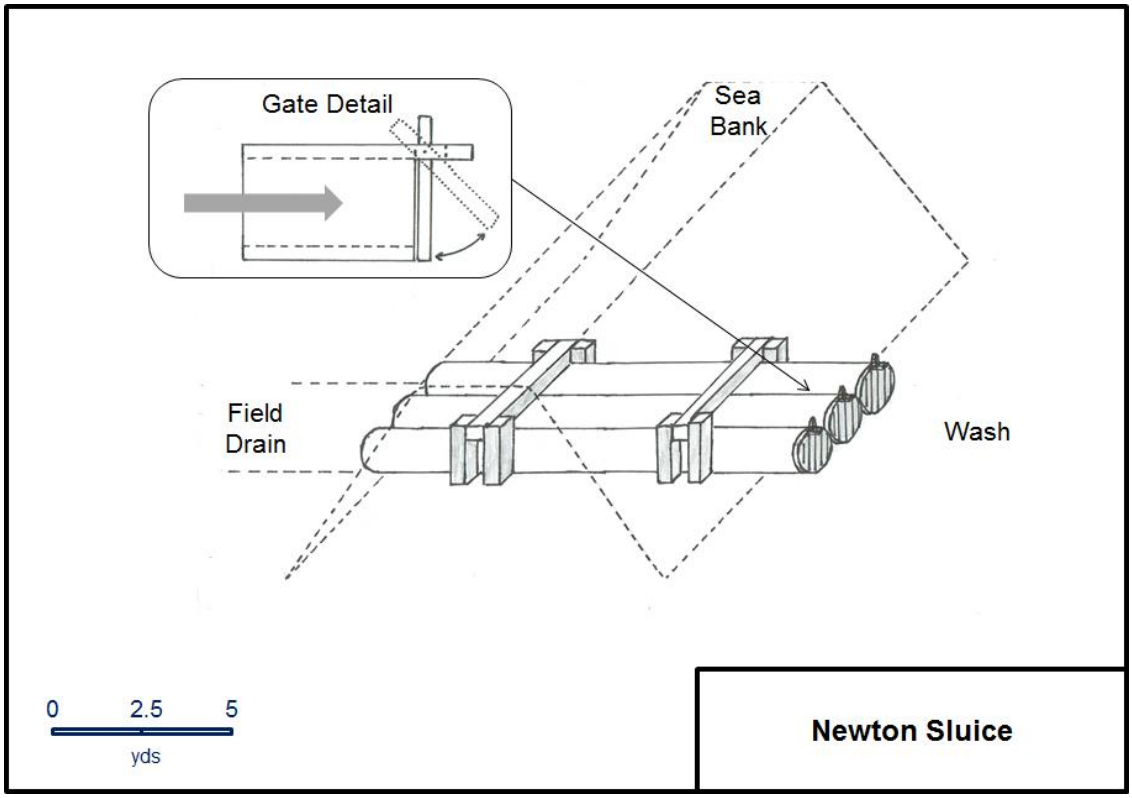

Figure 2.9 – Non-return valve in sea bank sluice based on that found in Newton (drawn by the author).

As noted earlier, there are references to pipes providing connections between fields, for example Massyngham's Pype and Redmore Pype in Elm, but the Commission of Sewers does not provide any details of materials or the method of construction. There is archaeological evidence, primarily from towns, of different types of pipework being used in the middle ages. Examples of lead, earthenware, stone and wooden pipes have been found but these were mainly used for drinking water.[282] However, it is unlikely that such expensive technology was used in the fens and it is more likely that the pipes referred to in the document were of the hollowed out tree trunks type similar to the Newton sluice. Although they could have been made either of wood or stone the limited surviving evidence would indicate that a wooded construction was more likely and that the original 'pipes' decayed with time and were replaced in the post-medieval period with modern materials.

[282] R. Magnusson, *Water Technology in the Middle Ages: Cities, Monasteries and Waterworks after the Roman Empire* (Baltimore, 2001), p. 72; M. Palmer and I. West, *Technology in the Country House* (Swindon, 2016), p. 47, Figure 3.1.

The flood defences and drainage were not static systems and there were regular references in the Commission of Sewer to new works. In part, the aim of the thesis is to show that Wisbech Hundred did not follow the economic model of the middle ages and in particular that during the fifteenth century the silt fen continued to be developed (see Chapter Three). A measure of this would be the approach taken to drainage. If there was evidence of significant new works taking place, and not just a focus on maintenance, then it would indicate continuing economic expansion. In the Commission of Sewers there were 96 separate references to works to be undertaken on the flood defences and the drainage. Although the majority of these were for repair and maintenance there were 11 references (12% of the total) to new works. Of these three were for the construction of bridges across ditches; for example at the Shoffendyke and Beeslane in Tydd St Giles for carts to cross.[283] Two were for the construction of new sluices or gates, such as the gate or dam on the Sewer of Coldham in Elm required to 'block up small drains and to prevent the sewer overflowing'.[284]

Finally, there were six references to the construction of new ditches including four requiring the construction of ditches in Fenland Field and Long Field in the parish of Newton. The exact location of the ditches is specified; between the land of Martin Thompson (a juror) and John Mendham, between the land of John Rogerson and Alice Pope and finally between the land of Sir John Colvyle (a member of the Commission) and John Godeknape.[285] It also noted that the fourth 'sewer' was to be constructed at the expense of all tenants. The purpose of the new ditches was not explained in the document but a study of maps for the area provides a possible explanation.[286] Fenland Field, to the north of the village, lies against the Shoffendyke on the border with Tydd St Giles and the new ditches would have improved the drainage of that field. Long Field, to the south of the village, adjoins an area of very marshy ground called The Gull, between the manors of Newton and Fitton, which remains largely un-drained to this day. The new ditches in this field were to improve the drainage and to reclaim more arable land from the marsh. In the 1490s there was some reclamation of tidal marshland in Tydd St Giles and Wisbech.[287] These references clearly demonstrate a determination

[283] Darby, *Medieval Fenland*, p. 194.
[284] Darby, *Medieval Fenland*, p. 187.
[285] Darby, *Medieval Fenland*, p. 189.
[286] Ordnance Survey, Explorer Map 235 Wisbech and Peterborough North 1:25000, Ref 4315.
[287] P. Charnley, *Old Dykes I Have Known* (Lincoln, 1996), p. 30.

not only to maintain the existing defences but also a desire to improve the drainage and to bring more land into production. This would indicate that there was an underlying demand from population growth, or possibly from new market opportunities, for additional workable land. In Tydd St Giles there was a reference to the construction of a new ditch, ten feet wide, from west to east with the expressed aim of draining Fendyke Field, Horn Field and Ryland Field, all to the poorly drained west of the village.

Towards the end of the fifteenth century a major drainage scheme was undertaken namely the construction of Morton's Leam. In its scale it was not to be matched until the draining of the peat fen undertaken in the seventeenth century. Indeed, the long straight channel of the Leam provided a model for later drainage. The scheme was devised and carried out under the direction of Bishop Morton of Ely, in the 1480s with the purpose of improving the drainage of the Fenland between Peterborough and Wisbech. As noted earlier, the River Nene took a long and circuitous route to the sea from Peterborough via March and Outwell before joining the River Ouse below Downham Market and ultimately discharging into the sea near Lynn or via the Welle Stream through Wisbech. This meant that with heavy flows from the Midlands the peat fen was vulnerable to flooding and Morton believed that driving a channel directly from Stanground in Peterborough to Guyhirn would enable the waters of the Nene to discharge into the sea by the more direct route down the Wisbech Stream (see Figure 2.10). It was a large undertaking requiring the construction of a channel 12 miles long, 40 feet wide and four feet deep which would have involved moving some 365000 tons of earth.[288] Although the number of people working on the Leam is not known, with a team of 100 men it would have taken at least three years to complete. Unfortunately, it was largely unsuccessful in its aim as all it managed to achieve was moving the water by a direct route down into the Wisbeck Stream which was too small, although the additional flow may have helped to scour the channel and to at least reopen the Wash to shipping from Wisbech.[289] However, it demonstrated an intent to bring more land into production and to improve the drainage of the entire region rather than a single parish.

[288] VCH(Hunt), p. 266.
[289] VCH(IoE), p. 263-4.

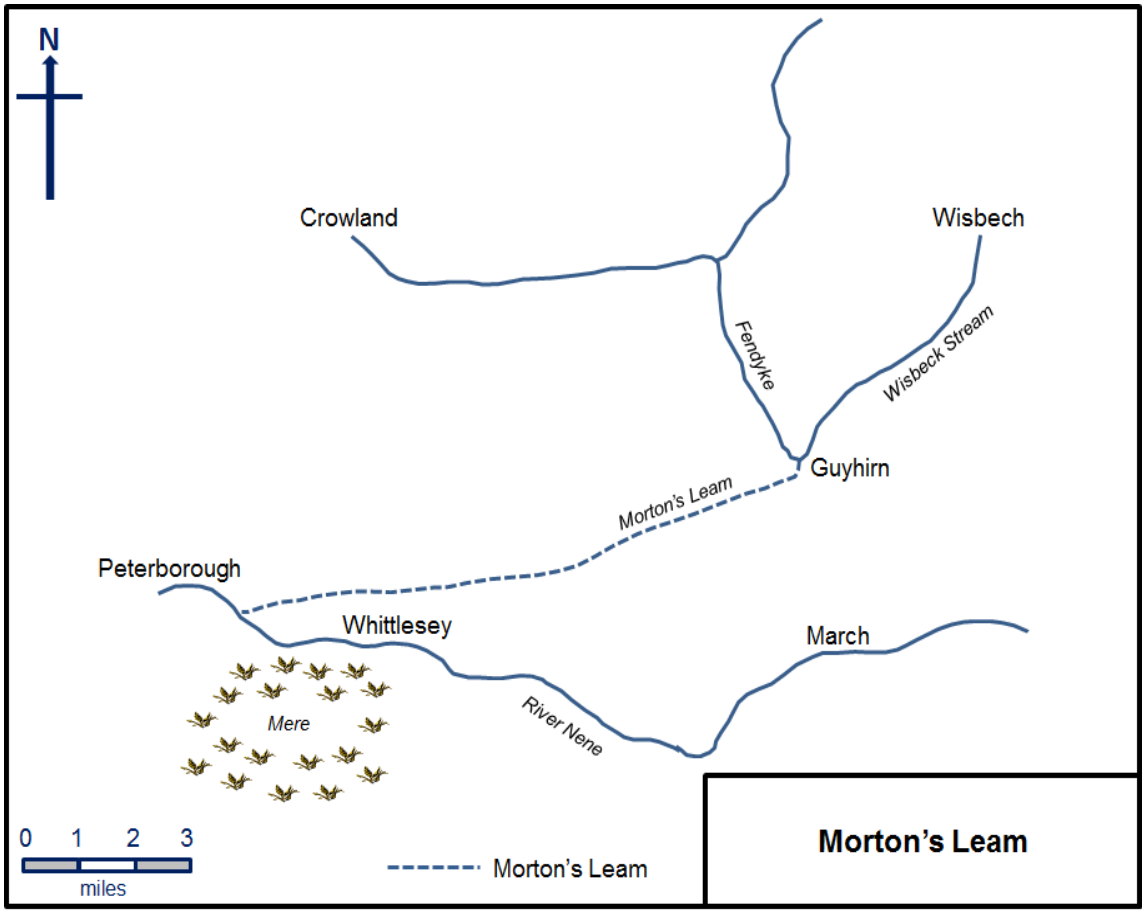

Figure 2.10 – Map showing the route of Morton's Leam between Peterborough and Guyhirn.[290]

THREAT OF FLOODING

The conditions that made the silt marsh a highly valuable landscape worth exploitation also threaten its destruction. The region was, and continues to be, under threat of flooding from the sea and from the rivers and the floods could be exceptionally damaging. Despite the extensive maintained flood defences they were never sufficient to completely eliminate the threat, and throughout the period there were regular damaging inundations. It is helpful to look in more detail at two such events, the sea floods of 1236 and the inland floods of 1439, as they show the reality of the danger for the inhabitants and why the management of the defences was such a critical activity. Much of the information on the impact of flooding is derived from chronicles and as such is by nature partial and depended on the viewpoint of the writer. They were

[290] Ordnance Survey, Explorer Map 235, *Wisbech, Peterborough North, Market Deeping and Crowland* 1:25000 (2006).

inconsistent in recording events paying particular attention to those impacting on their region of interest but omitting more significant occurrences in other areas.

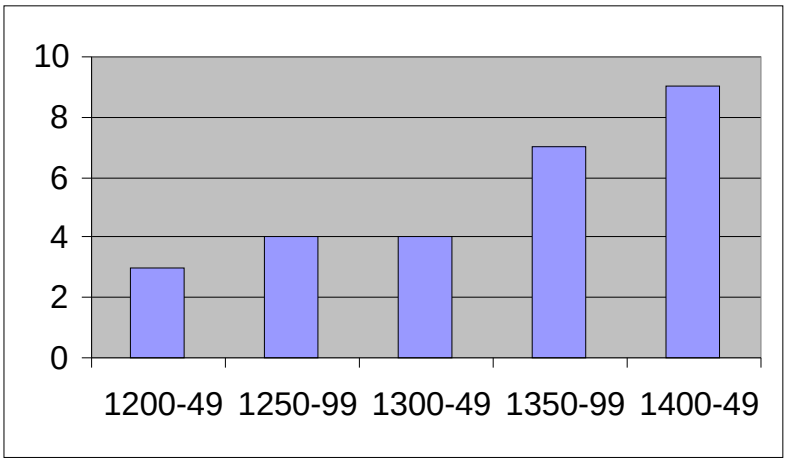

Figure 2.11 – Number of North Sea storm surges between 1200 and 1450.[291]

The early medieval period was typified by relatively warm conditions in northern Europe but by the fourteenth century the climate was beginning to experience change. Average temperatures were falling, as a pre-cursor to what has been termed the 'Little Ice Age', and with this came increasingly stormy conditions in northern Europe and the North Sea.[292] If the storms coincided with high tides and strong north-eastern winds then the resulting 'storm surge' could overwhelm the flood defences and cause extensive damage. The graph above (Figure 2.11) shows the incidences of storm surges in the North Sea between 1200 and 1450 with the most significant events being in 1236, 1286-88, 1334, 1375, 1404 and 1421.[293] Not all areas were impacted to the same extent and there was much local variation as a result of the nature of the storm conditions and regional geography. Hence the Lincolnshire coastline was flooded in 1421 but the adjoining Wisbech Hundred largely escaped serious damage. Although this data was compiled for the Netherlands the effects were also felt in southern and eastern England with chronicles recording flooding and damage to the low lying lands in Kent, Essex, around the East Anglian coast and the Wash.

[291] Hallam, *Settlement and Society*, pp. 119-36.
[292] J. Galloway and S. Potts, 'Marine Flooding in the Thames Estuary and Tidal River c.1250-1450: Impact and Response', *Royal Geographical Society* 39 (2007), p 370.
[293] E. Gottshalk, *Stormvloeden en Rivieroverstromingen in Nederlands* (Assen, 1971).

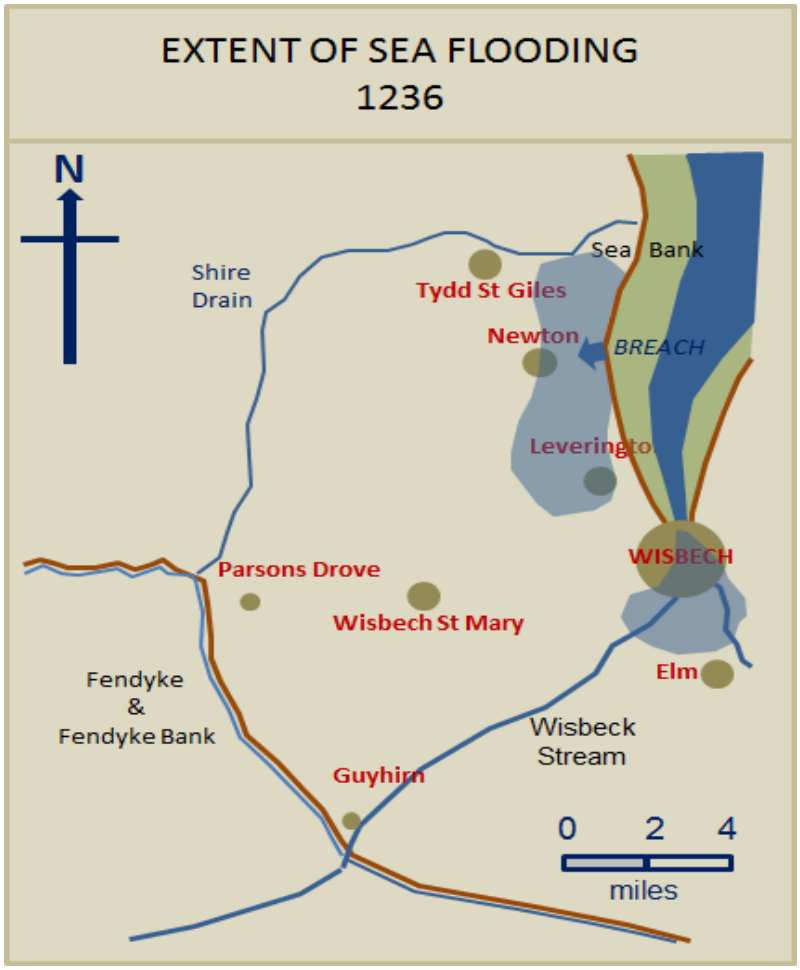

Figure 2.12 – Map showing the extent of sea flooding in 1236.[294]

In November 1236 a high tide combined with a storm surge running down the Wash caused breaches in the sea banks leading into Wisbech. Accurate information is unavailable but from the extent of the reported damage it is likely that the sea bank on the western side of the estuary was breached possibly in two or three places as Wisbech, Newton and Tydd St Giles were flooded (see Figure 2.12). There was also at least one breach on the Eastern sea bank with the Norfolk marshland being inundated. Matthew Paris in the *Chronica Majora* records that 'on the day after the feast of St Martin great inundations of the sea suddenly broke forth by night' and that it 'drowned great numbers of people, destroyed flocks of sheep and herds of cattle'.[295] Wisbech is specifically mentioned where at 'Wisbeach and the neighbouring villages and along the coast an endless number of human beings perished' and that 'in one town and that not a populous one about a hundred bodies were consigned to the tomb in one day'. In the

[294] Darby, *Medieval Fenland*, pp. 57-8.
[295] M. Paris, *Chronica Majora* (London 1889), p. 42.

town of Wisbech as well as the loss of life there were numerous messuages in the New Market recorded as being destroyed by the flood.[296]

The consequences of such a catastrophic event although not terminal were profound and long lasting. Resources would have to be found from the depleted population to repair the breaches to the sea banks and to repair or rebuild housing. The loss of sheep and cattle as well as stored grain presented an immediate threat of starvation but more worrying would have been the damage caused by the flooding of valuable farm land by sea water. Winter crops would have been lost and the land would have been of very limited use until the salt had leached from the ground, a process that could take up to two years, depending on rainfall.[297] The disruption to the economy of Wisbech would have been significant. In addition to the damage to the town's infrastructure the demand for services from the surrounding communities would have been reduced as would the supply of produce for trading. Perhaps most damaging to the traders of Wisbech was the silting up of the river link to the Wash. This forced trade down the Welle Stream and the River Ouse to the much larger regional port of Lynn. The consequences of the flooding could still be seen in the Ely Coucher Book of 1249-50 where the number of tenants in Newton were very low compared with other nearby manors.[298] Unfortunately, the sea flooding of 1236 although severe was not unique and would be repeated at regular intervals throughout the period. This would have been sufficient to keep alive the memory of the fear of flooding and to reinforce the importance of flood protection. The jurors arriving for the Haltoft Commission of 1438 may have had in their minds more recent events such as the St Elisabeth floods of 1421 that devastated so much of the North Sea coastline drowning up to 10000 people in Zeeland.[299]

Sea flooding was not the only threat to the inhabitants of the Wisbech Hundred, as heavy precipitation in the Midlands could swell the rivers flowing through the fens causing them to burst and for water to build up against the inland banks (such as the Fendyke Bank) that protected the silt marsh from the flooded peat fen. This was a regular winter occurrence when much of the peat lands would be flooded with only the communities on the islands being protected. If the waters built up against a weak part of

[296] VCH(IoE), p. 243.
[297] G. Cardon, J. Davis, T. Bauder and R. Waskom, *Managing Saline Soils* (Fort Collins, 2007)
[298] ECB, p. 155.
[299] Darby, *Medieval Fenland*, p. 59.

the inland bank it could be breached causing extensive freshwater flooding. Such events following prolonged wet winters were recorded in 1233, 1283, 1316 and 1439.[300] Further floods occurred in 1270 and 1382 but these were the result of the spring thaw following severe winters. The changing climatic conditions were increasing the risk of flooding and were a contributor to the famine and resulting population decline at the start of the fourteenth century.[301] The threat of freshwater flooding was well understood in the region as seen in the final records of the Wisbech Trinity Guild from 1548 where it was noted; 'the high Fendyke at this present day is so greatly charged with the fresh waters coming down from the shires of Huntingdon, Bedford, Northampton and Lesster, and the waters of the Welland, so that there stands so great a head of fresh water yearly against the said high Fendyke which is the defence and preservation of the towne of Wisbech'.[302]

There is a footnote at the end of the Haltoft Commission report that on 'the Monday of the Feast of St Wulfstan Bishop' (19th January 1439) a portion of bank was 'ruptured and breached' at Guyhirn.[303] The extent of the flooding is shown in the diagram (Figure 2.13). The map is based on the details of the extent of land flooded and that there were no reports of deaths indicating that it occurred in the thinly populated west of the Hundred. It was noted that as a result some 4400 acres in Wisbech (presumably Wisbech St Mary), 4600 acres in Leverington, 1400 acres in Newton and 2000 acres in Tydd St Giles were flooded. Although it does not mention any deaths the economic disruption of such widespread flooding would have been serious, inundating the valuable pastures on the west of the Hundred drowning sheep and other animals. There is some debate regarding the date of the flooding with the Victoria County History claiming it took place in 1437 and other sources dating it to 1439. For example, in the Parliament Roll for November 1439 it is recorded that 'the lay people of the poor towns of Wisbech, Leverington, Newton and Tydd St Giles shall not be forced to contribute to the payment [of the lay subsidy]' illustrating the poverty of the region following the flooding.[304] The precise date of the event is not significant and here it is assumed that the later date is more likely. In the Haltoft Commission for the previous year it mentions

[300] Hallam, *Settlement and Society*, pp. 120-1.
[301] B. Campbell, *English Seigniorial Agriculture 1250-1450*(Cambridge, 2000), p. 22-3.
[302] W. Watson, *An Historical Account of the Ancient Town and Port of Wisbech in the Isle* (Wisbech, 1827), p. 166.
[303] Darby, *Medieval Fenland*, p. 194.
[304] Given Wilson, *The Parliament Rolls: November 1439*, p. 5.

that Thomas Floore 'ought to repair the marsh ditch (and associated bank) called Wisbech Fendyke'. This he refused to do and the weight of the winter floodwater was sufficient to cause the weakened bank to fail. The subsequent fate of Thomas Floore is not recorded.

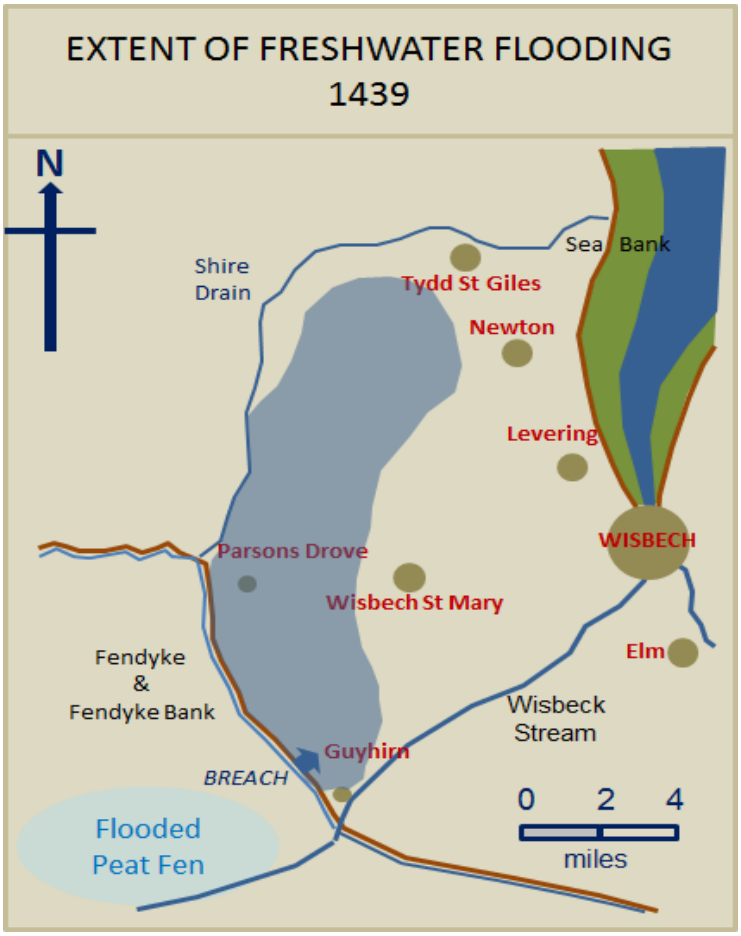

Figure 2.13 – Extent of freshwater flooding in 1439.[305]

MANAGEMENT OF THE DRAINAGE

In the earlier section on drainage and the landscape a detailed description was given of the structure of the flood defences and drainage and this touched upon some of the activities of the Commission of Sewers and the manorial courts for Tydd St Giles and Elm. However, it did not look in detail at the management of the drainage system and the interactions between the ad hoc commissions and the regular manorial courts. This section will consider how these institutions worked together to ensure that the defences

[305] R. Silvester, 'Medieval reclamation of marsh and fen', in H. Cook and T. Williamson (eds), *Water, Management in the English Landscape: Field, Marsh and Meadow* (Edinburgh, 1999), p. 139.

were effective. It will again be based on two case studies; the parish of Tydd St Giles and the parish of Elm. It will look at the type of activities initiated by the different bodies and then consider how they worked together.

The Commission of Sewers provided a very detailed description of the responsibilities for drainage and flood protection within the hundred. For Tydd St Giles parish alone there were 26 separate entries referring to drainage works describing the tasks and detailing those responsible for their completion. There were essentially three different levels of responsibility for drainage described in the commission report; at the highest level were duties placed on the entire parish, below this were duties placed on the tenants of a particular field and finally there were duties placed on named individuals. At the level of the parish there were a number of general tasks where the responsibility was placed on all tenants. The Shoffendyke, which marked the southern boundary of the parish, from Treading Field 'Tydthredyng' in the West to the Sea Bank in the east was to be maintained by all tenants.[306] Similarly the village was to appoint a guard to watch over the sluice gates (Gotes) that drained into the Wash estuary, the cost to be shared between the villages of Newton and Leverington as well as Wisbech.[307] The purpose of the placing of the guard was to ensure that these essential elements of the infrastructure were maintained and could be operated when required. Alternatively, it could also possibly point to one of the underlying tensions in the region, between those who primarily derived a living from the farm land and those who primarily derived a living from the surrounding marshes. Those deriving a living from the marsh would be less concerned with the maintenance of robust defences and Darby points to an example of deliberate damage in the adjoining parish of Marshland in Norfolk where 'evil-disposed persons, of their perverse and evil disposition, maliciously, at divers and sundry times' damaged sections of the Podike'.[308]

As well as the obligations placed on all tenant of the parish there were duties placed on the tenants of specific fields. For example, the tenants of New Field and South Field were required to maintain a bank that ran from north to south between the Shire Drain and the Shoffendyke along Bees Lane and shown on the Wisbech Map discussed in the

[306] Darby, *Medieval Fenland*, p. 181.
[307] Darby, *Medieval Fenland*, p. 183.
[308] Darby, *Draining the Fens*, p. 2.

previous chapter.[309] The tenants of South Field were also required to maintain a similar bank running from west to east along Broad Gate (or Broad Drove). It is not explained in the document how the tenants were to arrange this work but it is likely that it would have been organised under the guidance of the manorial court and the appointed dyke reeves. At the level of the individual there were references in the account of the commission to responsibilities being placed either on single land owners or on a small group of land owners. For example, Thomas Hyptoft of Wisbech St Mary was required to maintain a bank along a road called Rat Row to Tholomas Drove.[310] In Newton, as noted previously, individual tenants in Fenland Field were named (Martin Thompson, John Mendham, John Rogerson and Alice Pope) and required to construct a new sewer.

Looking at the references for Tydd St Giles in the manorial records, primarily from the end of the fifteenth century, in 1496-7 they record the election of John Fysher and the appropriately named Nicholas Fendyk to the office of preservers (dyke-reeves) of the sea-bank and marshes for the coming year.[311] The scale of the task and the complexity of the flood defences and drainage were such that two dyke-reeves were required for a single parish. The court roll does not describe how these responsibilities were divided or what specific powers they had under the manorial court. In the same court roll there was an order that all inhabitants shall; 'well and sufficiently maintain the Sea Dyke each for their own land in all places where it is defective by the coming feast of St Martin Bishop' at a penalty of 3s 4d for the dyke and the same for the ditch. This reference serves to illustrate two points; firstly the application of the Customs of Romney at the level of the manor with responsibility being linked directly to adjacent land ownership. Secondly, that many of the terms are interchangeable and that a reference to a bank (dyke) also included the associated drain or ditch. Finally, there is a reference in the court roll for 1502 that 'no person will take reeds in the sewer called New Fendyke at the place called Broad Drove' at a penalty of 21d.[312] The reason for this was not given but it was probably to prevent damage to the drain as well as conserving a valuable resource (see Chapter Four). The court rolls show the same structure and allocation of duties as those in the commission report with tasks being assigned to groups of tenants

[309] Derby, *Medieval Fenland*, p. 191.
[310] Derby, *Medieval Fenland*, p. 182.
[311] C.U.L., EDR/C7/1-24, Manorial Court Roll, Tydd St Giles, 1496/97
[312] C.U.L., EDR/C7/1-24, Manorial Court Roll, Tydd St Giles, 1502

and to individuals. The manorial courts tended to focus on the routine maintenance of local drainage and flood protection rather than the larger schemes and new works.

The evidence for the parish of Elm from the account of the Haltoft Commission shows a similar three tier structure as that for Tydd St Giles with an initial assignment of duty to all the tenants of the village. In this case the villagers were required to construct a sluice (dam) to hold back the waters from the neighbouring Outwell parish in Norfolk.[313] This would have protected all the fields in the south of the parish from flooding and hence was seen as a responsibility of the entire village. The tenants of specific fields were then given their tasks. The tenants of Redmore Field and Wales Field were to repair Waldersey Bank (and associated ditch) running along the boundary of their fields.[314] There are no references to individual responsibility in the commission for Elm but there was a duty placed on the Abbot of Bury for the maintenance of a ditch on lands he held in the adjoining Upwell.[315]

The manorial records for Elm provided more detail than those for Tydd St Giles on the management of the defences. The record from 1398, prior to the Haltoft Commission, focussed mainly on fines for damage to the drainage network. For example, Thomas Coldham was fined 12d for breaking 'a ditch called Redmore Field Ditch to the grave damage of the Lord and the whole village'. Similarly, John Crickmere was fined the same amount for damaging 'a causeway called Fridaybridge'.[316] This might again point to the tensions between those earning a living from farming and those earning a living from the surrounding marshes noted by Darby. The same court roll also records the appointment of no less than six dyke-reeves; four for the Western part of the village and two for the Eastern part of the village. This seems a large number for a single manor but no guidance is provided in the document on their individual responsibilities. A possible explanation is that these were all part-time posts and the individuals still had to work their own lands and to make a living. A large number of dyke-reeves would ensure that there were always some available to carry out the duties. The later court rolls concentrated on maintenance works such as the order from 1503 that; 'all the villagers of Elm shall well and sufficiently clean and purify the New Bank from Fridaybridge by

[313] Darby, *Medieval Fenland*, p. 186.
[314] Darby, *Medieval Fenland*, p. 187.
[315] Darby, *Medieval Fenland*, p. 184.
[316] C.U.L., EDR/C7/1-24, Manorial Court Roll, Elm, 1398

the coming feast of St John the Baptist' at a penalty of 3s 4d to the dyke-reeve.[317] In this court roll the tenants of Redmore Field were required to 'well and sufficiently clean and purify (scour) their headland (the ditches at the head of the field) by the coming feast of St John the Baptist'. This would ensure the ditches were cleared in the summer when water levels were low ready for rains of the autumn and winter. The roll for the following year placed an obligation on all the inhabitants of the village that they 'should well and sufficiently build and repair the headlands in all places where it is deficient'.[318] In this roll the responsibility for drainage maintenance works was also placed directly on the dyke-reeves and they were required to 'maintain and purify the drains in the field called Old Field from Corners Lane in the coming year'.

An important part of the management of the drainage was coercion and both the Commission of Sewers and the manorial court rolls included penalties for those failing to meet their obligations for maintaining the defences. As well as the peer pressure that would inevitably have been placed on the individuals they were subject to potentially large payments for defaulting, see Table 2.6.

Penalty	Document	Offence
100s	Commission	Obstruction of waterway.
40s	manorial court roll	Breaking a causeway.
20s	Commission	Placing dungheap/midden on a bank.
20s	Commission	Failing to repair banks and drains.
6s	manorial court roll	Constructing gutter without permission.
3s 4d	manorial court roll	Failing to repair field drain (headland).
3s 4d	manorial court roll	Failing to repair bank.
3s 4d	manorial court roll	Taking fish and reeds.
2s	manorial court roll	Obstructing a ditch.
21d	manorial court roll	Taking reeds.
12d	manorial court roll	Breaking a ditch.
3d	manorial court roll	Obstructing a ditch.

Table 2.6 – Fines for damage to drainage recorded in the Commission of Sewers of 1438 and in local manorial court rolls.

[317] C.U.L., EDR/C7/1-24, Manorial Court Roll, Elm, 1503
[318] C.U.L., EDR/C7/1-24, Manorial Court Roll, Elm, 1504

It is noticeable that the penalties imposed by the commission were generally higher than those imposed by the manorial courts. There were also different rates for the same offence, such as obstructing a ditch, and this reflected the importance of the offence. The larger the ditch then the greater would be the penalty imposed. The penalties are generally substantial and would have been a strong incentive to ensure tenants and landowners maintained the drainage network properly.

The defences required continuous attention to ensure that they operated effectively. This was not only a process of maintenance but also of new works to improve the drainage and to reclaim land remote from the heart of the villages. To maintain, and even extend the defences, required the controlled application of people and resources and it was necessary to develop a structure to manage these activities. The primary mechanism for the day-to-day management of the drainage network was the manorial court which appointed officials (dyke-reeves) to inspect the condition of the drainage and organise and control maintenance works. The manorial court (hall moot) could enforce individual obligations by directing specific tasks to be completed and by punishing defaulters. At this level the focus was on the defences of that particular manor. The advantage of the hall moot was that it met on a regular basis and could respond promptly to problems but its disadvantage was that it was only responsible for the flood defences and drainage at that location. A failure in an adjoining manor outside of its control, as seen in the case of the 1439 breach of the Fendyke, could result in widespread flooding. Above the hall moot was the leet court which met less frequently but had representation from across the Hundred which meant that it could address disputes between manors and provide a level of oversight of the drainage. However, it could not address the failing of an adjoining Hundred. In this case the only approach was to appeal to the main land owners, the Bishop of Ely, or even to the King.

The highest level of oversight was the Commission of Sewers appointed by the King and carrying royal authority. The commission generally had a broad geographical remit, in the case of the Haltoft Commission covering three counties. The powers of the commissioner to investigate and to order works were also extensive being backed by royal warrant. However, the commissioner had to work within the local hierarchy and was dependent on local knowledge to carry out the obligations of the commission. Thus, Sir John Colvyle had a prominent role in the Haltoft Commission. Many of the

jurors present, as noted earlier, were also significant local land owners and influential people as evidenced by their wills showing them to be prominent members of their own communities. Inevitably they would seek to protect their own interests as well as those of their family and friends so their impartiality could be questioned. Despite these disadvantages and the fact that such reviews were ad hoc the Commission of Sewers had many advantages. It had the ability to look at the complete defences beyond the limits of the manor and hundred boundaries. It also had the time to undertake detailed investigations and the power to require the implementation of remedial works.

The commission provided an opportunity to audit the work of the manorial courts with an external commissioner inspecting the detailed working of the local organisations. The commission could direct works that the manorial court structure might feel unable to initiate either through local vested interest or through lack of funding. Hence, although the commission generally referred to maintenance activities there were also many directions to carry out new works with responsibilities placed on individuals, groups of tenants or even whole communities. The Haltoft Commission had the authority and the independence to direct drainage activities but these could only be delivered through the management structures on the ground, namely the dyke reeves and the manorial courts. The jurors and local officials participating in the commission were there not only to provide local knowledge but to own the decisions that were taken and to ensure continuity in their delivery after the commission had moved on.

In Wisbech there was a further body that contributed to the maintenance of the drainage infrastructure. The Trinity Guild was the dominant fraternity in the town and by the end of the fifteenth century had acquired wealth through gifts and bequests in wills. It was a major land owner with in excess of 800 acres in and around the town as well as numerous properties by the start of the sixteenth century (see Chapter Five). It had a vested interest in the maintenance of flood protection and some of the jurors to the Haltoft Commission were also officials in the fraternity. The Trinity Guild also invested directly as shown in the final accounts for 1548 where it is noted that the guild maintained banks ‘against the rage of the sea’ spending £10 14s 4d for ‘the repair of shores and banks’.[319]

[319] Watson, *Port of Wisbech*, pp. 168-70.

However, the 1438 commission has to be seen in the context of the times, coming shortly after the crisis of the fourteenth century. There had been a dramatic reduction in population and combined with that changes in the nature of land ownership. The consequence of the decline in population would have been to seriously reduce the people available to maintain the existing flood defences and drainage. The effectiveness of the management of drainage was even more critical in order to ensure that efforts were directed to where they were most needed, such as maintaining the sea bank to protect against damaging storm surge flooding. It is likely that some of the drainage in the outlying fields (such as those in the west of Tydd St Giles parish) fell into disrepair with some of the land reverting to summer pasture or even to marsh. There is evidence of this in the accounts of Newton manor from 1395 where it was recorded that 19½ acres of land were 'submerged at no profit', although the clerk helpfully added 'whence no profit issues except fish'.[320] This view is supported by the evidence from the commission that shows a high level of work being directed for the parish in the western fields. Secondly, the change in land ownership patterns from close manorial control towards individual land ownership would have increased the challenges of managing drainage works. The manorial courts would need to coordinate the efforts of multiple land owners directing (and possibly enforcing) actions through the appointed dyke reeves. Ongoing management of drainage through the manorial courts was critical to the maintenance of the defences but the audit role of the ad hoc commission of sewers combined with the extensive powers of that body was essential to ensuring a consistent approach to defences across manor, parish, hundred and even county boundaries.

SUMMARY

The reliability of drainage and flood protection was critical not only to the safety of the inhabitants of the region but also to its economic viability. Before the twelfth century the silt marshes of Wisbech Hundred could be regarded as marginal land to be exploited when the growth in population created adequate demand. By the fifteenth century the reclaimed silt lands had been transformed into well-established and profitable arable land and pasture integrated into the rural economy. The failure of the flood defences could result in serious and immediate loss of life with major economic disruption

[320] Newton, p. 77.

resulting from the loss of productive land and crops as well as animals to inundation.[321] However, the highly productive nature of the farm lands made this a risk worth taking if it could be properly managed. The inhabitants could exploit both the valuable arable lands and the surrounding marshes and fens with the extensive river communications providing access to trade routes to dispose of surplus produce.

A complex and integrated network of drainage and flood protection developed from the twelfth century based on earlier works and along with this a sophisticated system of administration to ensure it was maintained. The primary focus for the management of the flood protection was the manorial court that appointed the dyke reeves and collected the payments for the defences. The dyke reeves inspected the defences and reported back on their condition to the manorial courts so that remedial action could be approved. The main disadvantage of the role of the manorial courts in flood protection was that its jurisdiction was limited to the manor. It has been seen that a failure in one manor could result in flooding across a number of vills. However, the situation in the Wisbech Hundred was assisted by the fact that all the main manors were under the control of the Bishop of Ely which meant a degree of coordination could be achieved through the leet court.

An equally important contributor to the management of the drainage and flood protection from the thirteenth century was the Commission of Sewers. Although these were ad hoc until the Statute of 1531 they were sufficiently regular to ensure an effective oversight of the defences. The Commissions had extensive powers to inspect, to order repairs and to fine for negligence. It can be seen from the 1438 Haltoft Commission at Wisbech that these were detailed studies taking evidence from the representatives of the local communities. The Commission was backed by royal power and took as its model the 'Laws and Customs of Romney' which placed the responsibility for the defences on those who benefited from them. There was a clearly defined responsibility to ensure that the protection was well maintained and where necessary new defences were constructed.

[321] Stone, *Decision-Making*, p. 151.

This chapter aims to challenge the idea that the silt lands of the Wisbech Hundred were marginal lands and that during the economic stagnation of the long fifteenth century previously reclaimed land was lost back to the sea and freshwater marshes for want of resources to ensure their maintenance.[322] There is evidence of large areas of land being drained and brought into production during the twelfth and thirteenth centuries but there is no direct evidence of large areas of this land subsequently being abandoned in the following centuries.[323] The depletion of the population following the famines and plagues of the fourteenth century did impact on the region and did result it a switch to maintenance rather than further drainage but by the fifteenth century evidence of new works can still be seen. At the end of the century there is the construction of a major new drainage project; Bishop Morton's Leam. The conclusion that can be reached is that the silt land were of such value that it was worthwhile not only to protect it from sea and river flooding but that it would be worthwhile to further extend the defences and to construct new banks and drains to bring more land into production. This at a time when other wetland regions such as Romney Marsh and the Humber Wetlands saw previously drained land and settlements permanently abandoned.[324]

[322] M. Postan, *The Medieval Economy and Society* (London, 1972), p. 27.
[323] Rippon, *Landscape, Community and Colonisation*, p.275. Evidence of fourteenth and fifteenth century contraction on the Somerset Levels.
[324] Van de Noort, *Humber Wetlands*, p. 157.

Chapter Three - Population and Wealth

INTRODUCTION

This chapter explores changes in population and wealth between the thirteenth and the sixteenth centuries. These dates have been selected as there is comprehensive lay subsidy data available for Cambridgeshire that enables a detailed analysis to be undertaken. With the available source material it is possible to look with some confidence down to the level of the individual parish where there is detail of the number of taxpayers and the amounts paid. This can be compared with the analysis of population and wealth carried out for the country as a whole. The background to the analysis is the model of demographic and economic trends for the middle ages outlined in the introduction to the thesis. Here we will look at how the region compared with the national model and ask if the nature of this unique environment enabled it to diverge from the model?

The starting point for the analysis is Postan's population/resource model.[325] The basis of the argument is that there was an equilibrium between population and the available land in pre-industrial societies. As the population expanded more land was brought into production which in turn promoted further population growth. Eventually, all the readily available land for cultivation was farmed and the growing population brought poorer quality 'marginal' land into use to support the large numbers of people. This was seen on the sandy brecklands of Suffolk and on the uplands of Devon.[326] Postan argued that the process was not sustainable and would eventually lead to an economic and demographic collapse as the population exceeded the available resources. This was exacerbated by climatic change and by soil exhaustion resulting from over farming.[327] In the fourteenth century the 'Malthusian check' was triggered by famine and the widespread loss of animals seen after 1315.[328] This followed a series of wet summers

[325] M. Postan, *The Medieval Economy and Society* (London, 1972), p. 29
[326] M. Bailey, 'The concept of the margin in the medieval English economy', *Economic History Review* 42 (1989), p. 2; H. Fox, 'Devon and Cornwall', in E. Miller (ed), *The Agrarian History of England and Wales:* Volume III 1348-1500 (Cambridge, 1991), p. 152.
[327] G. Clark, 'The economics of exhaustion, the Postan thesis and agriculture', *The Journal of Economic History* 52 (1992), p. 77
[328] P. Slavin, 'The great bovine pestilence and its economic and environmental consequences for England and Wales, 1318 – 1350', *Economic History Review* (2012), p. 1239

possibly associated with the early stages of the 'little ice age'.[329] After a brief respite this was followed by a series of plagues across Europe, the most severe being that of 1349. There are many estimates of population but a reasonable assumption would be that the number of people in England fell from around five and a half million in 1348 to below three million in 1450.[330] This crisis was followed by the stagnation of the 'long fifteenth century' where the population was very slow to recover and the economy to grow. It is against this model that the expansion and contraction of population and wealth of the Fenland region will be compared.

Postan's population-resource model provides a possible explanation of economic (and social) behaviour that appears to fit the available evidence. However, the model has been challenged by medievalists such as Clark, Bailey and Dyer. As noted above, Clark argues that soil exhaustion and famine resulting from over production of grain and the extension of farming into increasingly poor quality marginal land is not supported by the evidence on grain yields.[331] Bailey takes a similar view arguing that although land could initially be described as marginal it did not necessarily imply it was of a poor quality.[332] This is seen in the Fenland where reclaimed marshland was highly valued and incorporated into the stock of farmland. Dyer also challenges Postan's position on the fifteenth century as being overly pessimistic.[333]

SOURCES

There are numerous sources that can be used for the analysis of population and wealth in the period. Campbell uses Inquisitions *Post Mortem* data to assess contrasting levels of relative land value, land use and population in England before the Black Death.[334] For the assessment of population this study starts with the survey of the Bishop of Ely's manors in the Cambridgeshire Fenlands from 1249-50 included in the *Ely Coucher*

[329] B. Fagan, *The Little Ice Age: How Climate made History 1300-1850* (New York, 2000), p. 32
[330] J. Hatcher, *Plague, Population and the English Economy* (London, 1977), p. 68
[331] Clark, 'Economics of exhaustion', pp. 71-5.
[332] Bailey, 'Concept of the margin', p. 4.
[333] Dyer, 'England's economy in the fifteenth century', in L. Clark (ed), *The Fifteenth Century 13, Exploring the Evidence: Commemoration, Administration and the Economy* (Woodbridge, 2014), p. 201.
[334] B. Campbell and K. Bartley, *England on the Eve of the Black Death: An Atlas of Lay Lordship, Land and Wealth 1300-1349* (Manchester, 2006), p. 14.

Book.[335] It contains details of free and customary tenants from which an estimate of the local population at the height of the period of economic growth can be made. This can be compared with the information on land ownership and rents included in Bishop Alcock's Terrier of 1492. The records of the lay subsidy of 1327 provide an insight into the pre-Black Death population. They contain the complete details of all tax payers and the tax paid.[336] The records of the poll tax of 1377 enables an estimate to be made of the post-plague population.[337] It provides information from Cambridgeshire in the form of total sum paid from which the number of taxpayers can be calculated. The lay subsidy of 1524-5 gives an indication of the population of the individual settlements within the county based on those listed as taxpayers.[338] The surname information from the 1249-50 survey and the 1327 lay subsidy has been used to assess the level of immigration into the region. The assessment of relative wealth makes use of the 1327 and 1524-5 lay subsidies as they enable a per capita calculation of tax payment to be made. The level of per capita wealth can be estimated and compared with the county and national figures. An indication of individual wealth in the late fifteenth and early sixteenth centuries can be obtained from the wills for the Hundred. They provide the detail of money, land, buildings and valued possessions not available from the surviving subsidy returns. The primary sources used in the chapter are summarised in the following Table 3.1.

Date	Source	Content	Application
1249-50	Ely Coucher Book (printed source)	Names of tenants on Bishop of Ely's manors.	Population assessment.
1327	Lay Subsidy (printed source)	Individual tax payers and the tax assessment.	Population assessment. Wealth assessment.
1377	Poll Tax (printed source)	Total number of tax payers and assessment for hundred	Population assessment.
1492	Terrier (manuscript)	Names of tenants and rents paid.	Population assessment.
1450-1525	Wills (manuscript)	Individual wealth and its distribution.	Wealth assessment.
1524/25	Lay Subsidy (manuscript)	Individual tax payers and the tax assessment.	Population assessment. Wealth assessment.

Table 3.1 – Primary source evidence used for the assessment of population and wealth for Wisbech Hundred.

[335] ECB, pp. 127-80.
[336] J. Muskett (ed), *Cambridgeshire and the Isle of Ely: Lay Subsidy for the Year 1327* (London, 1900).
[337] C. Fenwick (ed), *The Poll Taxes of 1377, 1379 and 1381* (Oxford, 1998).
[338] J. Sheail, *Regional Distribution of Wealth: As Indicated in the 1524/25 Lay Subsidy. List and Index Society Special Series Volume 29* (London, 1998), p. 28; T.N.A., P.R.O., E179/81/143/1.

POPULATION

Before entering into a discussion of the changing patterns of population in the region across the period 1250 to 1550 it is necessary to describe the methodology used to analyse the available data. A similar approach has been taken to that adopted by Broadberry, Campbell and van Leeuwen.[339] This advocates cross-sectional analysis of the population at specific points where detailed information is available (such as from lay subsidy records). This is then combined with time-series data, such as that from manorial records (surveys and terriers), to help infill between the key points. The time-series data can be used to validate the cross-sectional data and to provide a more complete picture of population change. An alternative approach is offered by Houston who suggest the use of 'family reconstruction'. This uses available information on a large number of individual families to identify factors that could be applied to develop a picture of the population, similar to the time-series approached discussed above.[340]

Multipliers are applied to the data from these cross-sectional key points in order to derive the estimate of the population. This converts the number of taxpayers at a location into a population figure taking into account issues such as family size, the level of evasion and those excluded through poverty. In the case of 1086 the multiplier is applied to the number of rural households detailed in the Domesday Book in order to derive the population figure.[341] Different factors have a different degree of importance at different times; with the poll taxes of 1377 to 1380 evasion was an increasingly dominant issue reducing the reliability for population assessment.[342] In this analysis the key points used for the cross sectional analysis are the lay subsidies of 1327 and 1524-5 as well as the poll tax of 1377 supported by information from the 1249-50 Survey and the 1492 Terrier. From this a population model can be prepared for each of the vills within Wisbech Hundred as well as for the Hundred as a whole. This has been compared with the national population model to determine if the changing population of the Hundred displayed any marked differences from the national population trend.

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[339] S. Broadberry, B. Campbell, B van Leeuwan, 'English medieval population: reconciling time series and cross-sectional evidence', Leverhulme Trust Reference F/00215AR (2011), pp. 1-27.
[340] R. Houston, 'The population history of Britain and Ireland, 1500-1750', in M. Anderson. (ed), *British Population History from the Black Death to the present day* (Cambridge, 1996), pp. 111-3.
[341] Broadberry et al, *English Medieval Population*, p. 4.
[342] Broadberry et al, *English Medieval Population*, p. 5; J. Ravensdale, *Liable to Floods* (Cambridge, 1974), p. 157.

In carrying out the analysis a number of assumptions have been made. First, that the mortality and replacement rates were the same for all the vills in Wisbech Hundred and that these rates were consistent across the county and the country as a whole. Although this is unlikely, and there would have been some variations between communities, adopting this approach provides a consistent structure for the analysis. Secondly, that the multipliers that are applied to the raw lay subsidy data were the same across the different locations to again provide a common platform for analysis.

National Population Model

It is helpful to establish a baseline for the national population against which to compare the information for Wisbech Hundred. The debate on population assessment in the medieval period is extensive with a broad range of population figures at various key points being proposed. Figure 3.1 shows the range of opinion on the English population in the period 1080 to 1550. The two solid lines show upper and lower cases with the dotted line showing the model used in this analysis based on a synthesis of the alternative population assessments discussed below.

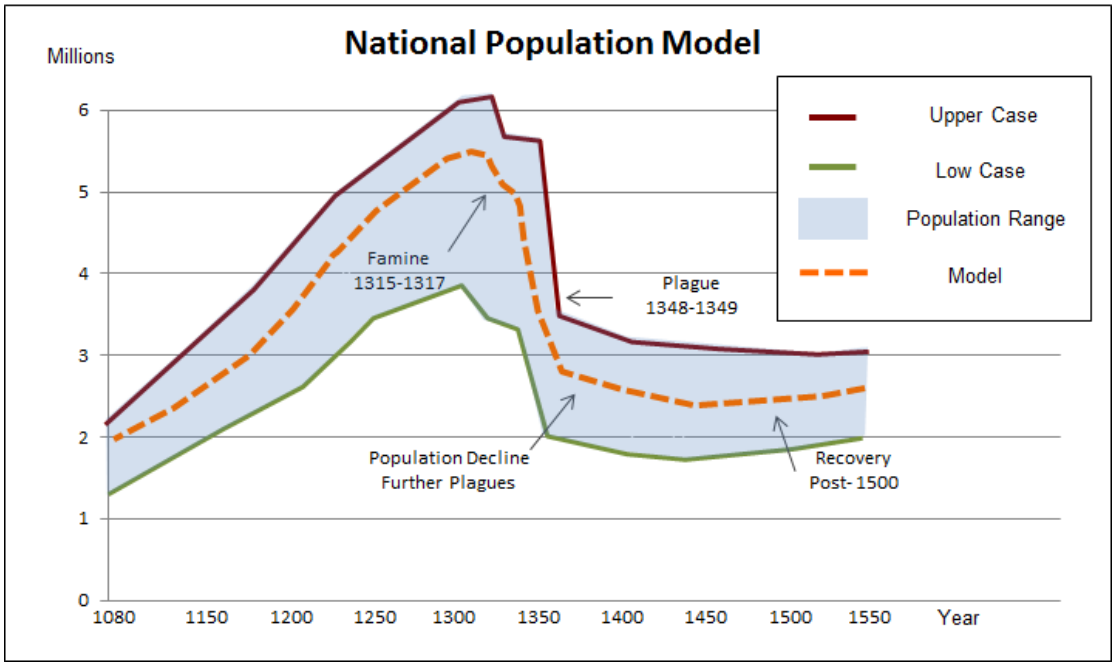

Figure 3.1 – Range of population estimates for England between 1086 and 1550 showing the national population model used in this analysis.[343]

[343] J. Russell, *British Medieval Population* (Albuquerque, 1948), pp. 246-81; Hatcher, *Plague, Population and the English Economy*, pp. 68-73.

The low case is based on the early work of Russell and shows a starting population of approximately 1.1 million at Domesday rising to a peak of just less than four million by 1300 before falling to a low of less than two million by the middle of the fifteenth century with a steady recovery into the sixteenth century.[344] The high case is based on the more optimistic assessment of Hatcher that has a starting population in excess of two million rising to over six million at the start of the fourteenth century before falling back to below three million and stagnating until the sixteenth century.[345] Broadberry, Campbell and van Leeuven provide a mid case that gives a starting point at Domesday of around 1.7million rising to approaching five million at the start of the fourteenth century before falling back to around two million by 1450 and making a sustained recovery into the sixteenth century.[346]

To understand the basis of the model it is necessary to discuss the causes of population change across the period. The model assumes as a starting point a population in 1086 of two million. This is a reasonable assumption as the Russell analysis has been shown to be consistently low.[347] The work of Hatcher and Broadberry appear to offer a more realistic starting point.[348] The twelfth and thirteenth centuries were a period of sustained economic expansion and with it population growth. The country as a whole experienced a degree of political and social stability (with the exception of 'the anarchy' of the twelfth century) combined with favourable climatic conditions. This enabled increasingly marginal land to be brought under cultivation to support the growing population.[349] The population reached a peak of somewhere between four million and six million by 1300 with Broadberry et al giving a figure of 4.7 million immediately before the famine of 1315. They argue that it would not have been possible for the prevailing state of farming to produce enough food to feed a population much in excess of five million, a view not generally shared.[350] The Broadberry et al position would seem to be overly pessimistic whereas estimates in excess of six million although plausible would imply a very high rate of population growth. The model has used a

[344] J. Russell, *British Medieval Population* (Albuquerque, 1948), p. 280
[345] Hatcher, *Plague, Population and the English Economy*, p. 71
[346] Broadberry et al, *English Medieval Population*, p. 10.
[347] L. Poos, J. Oeppen and R. Smith, 'Re-assessing Josiah Russell's measurement of late medieval mortality using the Inquisitions Post Mortem' in M. Hicks (ed), *The Fifteenth Century Inquisition Post Mortem: A Companion* (Woodbridge, 2012), p. 162
[348] Hatcher, *Plague, Population and the English Economy*, p. 68.
[349] Bailey, 'Concept of the margin, p. 1.
[350] Broadberry et al, *English Medieval Population*, p. 2

figure of 5.5 million for the peak population as a more realistic position and one shared by a number of historians.[351]

Between 1315 and 1317 there were a series of cold winters combined with wet summers that devastated arable production. This was combined with sickness that decimated the sheep flocks and cattle herds weakening both the wool trade but also impacting on an important source of food supply.[352] As argued by Postan, with a large population exploiting overstretched farm land a population check was inevitable. It has been estimated that the population of England fell by some 10% over the series of famines between 1315 and 1320.[353] Broadberry shows the population declining by a higher rate of 12% falling to 4.12 million by 1325. He then shows a recovery in the population between 1325 and 1348 up to a medieval peak of 4.81 million. This interpretation with a post famine recovery is strongly challenged. Dyer takes the view that the peak population was achieved before 1315 and that recovery and growth, albeit slow, did not take place until towards the end of the fifteenth century.[354] There may have been some small recovery in the population after the famine but not to the extent proposed by Broadberry. By the late 1340s the population of England had plateaued and may have already been in decline. The model takes the view that the population fell by at least 10% between 1315 and 1325 but did not recover before the onset of the plague. The impacts of the prolonged famine were such that there was a steady decline to a population level for England of below five million.

However, the most decisive impact on population in the century was the series of plagues that struck the country, starting with the Black Death of 1348-9. The epidemic hit all parts of the country and all classes to a greater or lesser extent. Some communities were all but wiped out whilst others were spared the worst impacts of disease.[355] Across the entire country as well as across Europe this particular outbreak killed more than a third of the population with estimates as high as 50%.[356] Wisbech

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[351] R. Smith, 'The long demographic cycle, 1260-1670', in P. Slack and R. Ward (eds), *The Peopling of Britain* (Oxford, 2002), p. 180
[352] P. Slavin, 'Bovine pestilence', p. 1242.
[353] C. Dyer, *Making a Living in the Middle Ages* (London, 2009), p. 232
[354] C. Dyer, 'The retreat from marginal land' in M. Aston, D. Austin and C. Dyer (eds), *The Rural Settlements of Medieval England* (Oxford, 1989), p. 45
[355] J. Hatcher, *The Black Death: An Intimate Story of a Village in Crisis, 1345-1350* (London, 2009), pp. 164-79.
[356] Dyer, *Making a Living*, p. 233

Hundred was impacted by the disease with transmission not only from the surrounding country but also via the trading ports along the Wash. Norfolk villages were particularly hard hit by the plague shown to have entered by Yarmouth, Lowestoft as well as other smaller ports.[357] Unfortunately, there is little information on the impacts of the plagues in the Hundred apart from peripheral references in the records of Wisbech Barton manor showing a sharp decrease in the land leased (for want of tenants) between 1349 and 1351.[358] Hatcher notes a range of death rates for the plague years for different categories of people; the lowest was 18% for bishops (probably able to avoid centres of pestilence) rising up to 45% for monks across a sample of twelve monasteries. An analysis of manorial records gives a range of mortality between 33% and 60%.[359] It is not possible to determine an absolute figure and perhaps it is not overly important to be precise. A decline in population of 40% as a minimum is probably a sufficiently accurate assumption to assess the social and economic consequences. There were further major plague outbreaks in the 1360s including that of 1361-2 (although not as devastating in overall terms as that of 1348-9 seems to have hit the young disproportionally) and 1369. Hatcher notes a death rate of 25% for the heirs and heiresses of wealthy landowners in 1361-2 and this would have equated to a higher rate for the children of the poor.[360] The final major epidemic of the fourteenth century was that of 1375 and was again not as intense as the first outbreak. Although there were numerous other outbreaks into the fifteenth century these were more localised and not as severe. The outbreaks were sufficiently regular to impede a sustained demographic recovery and depopulation continued albeit at a slower rate. The overall population reduction across the second half of the fourteenth century, even allowing for a degree of recovery between outbreaks, could well have been in excess of 50%. In Figure 3.1, the high and low cases range between two million and three million with the model taking a mid position of 2.5 million for the number of survivors. This represents a reduction in population across the fourteenth century of in excess of 50% consistent with current opinion.

[357] A. Baker, 'Changes in the later middle ages', in H. Darby. (ed), *A New Geography of England before 1600* (Cambridge, 1976), p. 189.
[358] D. Stone, *Decision-Making in Medieval Agriculture* (Oxford, 2005), p. 30.
[359] Hatcher, *Plague, Population and the English Economy*, p. 22
[360] Hatcher, *Plague, Population and the English Economy*, p. 23

The final period covered by the timeline is the 'long fifteenth century' from 1377 to 1525 where there are again differences of opinion on population change.[361] The pessimistic viewpoint is that the population continued to contract slowly for the first half of the fifteenth century and stagnated for the rest of the century before commencing a slow recovery in the early sixteenth century.[362] This viewpoint is generally accepted with the population recovery not really building strength until after the 1520s. A more positive outlook, such as that proposed by Broadberry, would hold that the population stagnated until about 1450 before beginning a period of slow growth into the sixteenth century. The quality of the source material makes the assessment of the merits of the two positions difficult. A number of reasons have been suggested for the stagnation and subsequent slow growth in population. Hatcher shows that male replacement rates (the ratio of male births to male deaths) between 1340 and 1440 were consistently less than one indicating a declining male population.[363] Bailey discusses the impact of later marriages and smaller family size on population growth. [364] An alternative view was that with high wages and the ready availability of land post-Black Death early marriage in the fifteenth century was the norm. The resulting stagnation in population growth was therefore due to high mortality rates resulting from the repeated smaller plague outbreaks.[365] Another view is that with more women entering work (the shortage of men creating more employment opportunities) marriage was postponed and consequentially the birth rate lower. With this approach demographic stagnation was a result of lower fertility rather than higher mortality. It is probable that the explanation of the slow rate of population growth was a combination of these factors. The improving male replacement rates later in the fifteenth century combined with a better economic position and a more stable political framework would point to the second, more positive, approach being reasonable. In the model it is assumed that the population stagnated at or below 2.5 million for much of the fifteenth century before a noticeable growth in the early sixteenth century with the population perhaps reaching 2.7 million by 1550.

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[361] C. Dyer, 'England's economy in the fifteenth century', in, L. Clark (ed), *The Fifteenth Century 13, Exploring the Evidence: Commemoration, Administration and the Economy* (Woodbridge, 2014), p. 202.
[362] P. Goldberg, *Medieval England: A Social History 1250–1550* (London, 2004), p. 75
[363] Hatcher, *Plague, Population & the English Economy*, p. 27
[364] M. Bailey, 'Demographic decline in late medieval England: some thoughts on recent research', *Economic History Review* 49 (1996), pp. 2-3.
[365] Hatcher, *Plague, Population and the English Economy*, p. 57.

Population Assessment (determining multipliers)

Having developed a national population model it is necessary to determine local population figures to compare with the model. It is important to establish reasonable multipliers to apply to the raw taxpayer data in order to derive sensible estimates of the population. The survey of the Bishop of Ely's manors for 1249-50 included in the *Ely Coucher Book* details all of the Bishop's possessions in the Hundred as well as the customary and free tenants.[366] In determining a multiplier to apply to the number of tenants it is necessary to take into account family size and those not covered by the survey. For example, Wisbech Murrow was held by the convent and would not have appeared on the survey.[367] Assuming a family size of five and a factor of three for those not covered by the survey as they were not on manors belonging to the Bishop of Ely then a multiplier of eight would seem to be a reasonable basis for the calculation. This multiplier has been used to determine Wisbech Hundred population in 1250.

The lay subsidy of 1327 made an individual assessment of wealth (incorporating land as well as personal property) and all those with movables valued at more than 10s were required to pay the 1/20th.[368] Christopher Dyer provides a methodology for determining the multiplier for this subsidy to convert taxpayers into population figures. It is assumed that 50% of all households are exempt through poverty or evasion and that each family contains on average five people giving a multiplier of ten.[369] This multiplier has been used to determine the population in 1327.

The simplest tax was the poll tax that operated from 1377 to 1381 in that it placed a single charge of 4d on every man and woman over the age of fourteen years.[370] Although simple it was deeply unfair and protests grew against its collection ultimately culminating in the Peasants Revolt of 1381 after which it was withdrawn. However, the poll tax of 1377 was probably the most accurate of the poll taxes for population assessment with relatively low levels of evasion. As resistance grew to subsequent assessments the level of evasion increased and the data becomes increasingly unreliable. For the poll tax there is a wide range of opinion on the multiplier for the number of

[366] ECB, p. 7.
[367] VCH(IoE), p. 243.
[368] M. Beresford, *Lay Subsidies and Poll Taxes* (Canterbury, 1963), p. 1.
[369] C. Dyer, *A Country Merchant 1495-1520* (Oxford, 2012), p. 133.
[370] Fenwick, *The Poll Taxes*, p. xiv.

taxpayers. Alan Dyer applies a multiplier of 1.9 to take into account the impact of children, evasion and poverty.[371] Bailey also employs 1.9, as a consensus figure, in his work on Medieval Suffolk.[372] Rigby uses a range of 1.5 to 2.2 noting that although a multiplier of 1.9 is reasonable an argument can be made for both the higher and lower figures.[373] Ravensdale advocates a lower multiplier of 1.3 although even at this level he notes that population figures for Cambridgeshire are unrealistically high. The unreliability of the poll tax data for Cambridgeshire makes it difficult to determine an appropriate multiplier. A multiplier of 1.2 (broadly consistent with Ravensdale who has worked on the Cambridgeshire data) has been assumed for this analysis as it gives population figures for the Hundred that are consistent with the national population model. The uncertainties associated with the data means that the poll tax of 1377 for Cambridgeshire can at best only provide a very rough indication of the population.

The lay subsidy of 1524-5 was essentially based on the same methodology as the 1327 lay subsidy although the payments levied were more complex ranging between 1/20th and 1/60th of taxable wealth.[374] Those with movables worth less than £1 were excluded from the subsidy. Here again there is a wide range of opinion on the multiplier to be used from 4.0, used by Bailey, and 4.75 used by Falvey in her assessment of the population of Whittlesey in the peat fen near Peterborough.[375] Generally a higher multiplier is used with Alan Dyer applying a figure of 6.5 and Stephen Rigby a range of 6.0 to 7.4.[376] In this analysis a multiplier of 7.0 has been applied for the 1524-5 lay subsidy consistent with current higher estimates.

Wisbech Hundred

The assessment of national population using surviving lay subsidy and poll tax data is difficult and there is much debate around the best methodology.[377] The size of the sample can help to absorb some of the errors generated by local variations in the quality

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[371] A. Dyer, *Decline & Growth in English Towns 1400-1640* (Cambridge, 1995), p. 31.
[372] M. Bailey, *Medieval Suffolk: An Economic & Social History 1200-1500* (Woodbridge, 2007), p. 183.
[373] S. Rigby, 'Urban population in late medieval England: the evidence of the lay subsidies', *Economic History Review* 63 (2010), p. 399.
[374] Sheail, *Regional Distribution of Wealth*, pp. 6-14.
[375] H. Falvey, 'Assessing an early modern fenland population: Whittlesey (Cambridgeshire)', *Local Population Studies* 92 (2014), p. 10.
[376] S. Rigby, 'Urban population', pp. 399-400.
[377] Russell, *Medieval Population*, p. 18.
Hatcher, *Plague, Population and the English Eco*nomy, p. 21.

of the information. When looking at a smaller sample, such as an individual hundred, these challenges can be increased. Missing data and factors peculiar to the location can concentrate errors and distort the population assessment. It is here that the approach adopted by Broadberry et al combining time series and cross sectional evidence can help to manage the risks.[378] With that warning the following Table 3.2 summarises the population estimate at key points for the parishes of Wisbech Hundred.

Location	1249/50		1327		1377		1524-5	
	Multiplier: 8.0		Multiplier: 10.0		Multiplier: 1.2		Multiplier: 7.0	
	Tenants	Pop	Tax Payers	Pop	Tax Payers	Pop	Tax Payers	Pop
Tydd St Giles	104	832	81	810	-	-	78	546
Newton	9	72	71	710	-	-	63	441
Leverington	80	640	138	1380	-	-	109	763
Wisbech	274	2192	172	1720	-	-	252	1764
Elm	117	936	58	580	-	-	62	434
Upwell	21	168	22	220	-	-	48	336
TOTALS	605	4840	542	5420	3480	4176	612	4284

Table 3.2 – Wisbech Hundred estimated population (1250 to 1525).

The 1249-50 data gives a total population for the Hundred of 4840 and is consistent with the growing population in the national model. Looking at the figures for the individual parishes the assessment for Leverington and in particular for Newton seem very low and those for Tydd St Giles, Wisbech and Elm are high. The explanation for this apparent anomaly could be flooding. The major flood of 1236 had devastated the villages of Newton and Leverington resulting in severe loss of life and valuable farm land.[379] The land would have been unusable for a number of years and the surviving inhabitants would have been forced to move away. This would account for the increased population in the surrounding parishes.

[378] Broadberry et al, 'English medieval population', p. 8.
[379] Hallam, *Settlement and Society*, pp. 126-7; VCH(IoE), p. 243.

The lay subsidy record for 1327 was complete for the Hundred and provides a detailed breakdown of the number of tax payers enabling a good assessment to be made of the population by parish. The largest population was that of Wisbech and as this would have included the secondary settlements of Wisbech St Mary, Murrow and Guyhirn the actual population of the town would have been in the range 1200 to 1500. This would have made Wisbech one of the larger small towns at the start of the fourteenth century.[380] The populations of Leverington and Newton had recovered from the sharp fall in 1249-50 as the land dried and reoccupation was possible. The data showed a decline in the population of Elm, again most likely caused by local flooding, the parish being particularly vulnerable to fresh water flooding from the peat fen in the south. The estimated population of the Hundred in 1327 of 5420 was close to but not the peak. The population would have continued to grow after 1250 reaching an estimated maximum of around 6000 before falling back during the famine of 1315-17 towards the level seen in 1327. The data does not enable an assessment to be made of the impact of the famine of the previous decade or of any changes up to the Black Death.

The data from the first poll tax of 1377 is limited but it does enable an estimate of the population of the Hundred to be made but not of the individual parishes. With the series of plague outbreaks during the fourteenth century a sharp fall in population was inevitable and between 1327 and 1377 the population of the Hundred fell by at least 23%. This figure was low compared with the national decline of in excess of 40%.[381] There are a number of possible explanations: the region was not as heavily impacted which is unlikely; that there was a degree of reoccupation with people moving into the region to take the available land; or the data is not sufficiently robust to make an accurate assessment of the population. The data from the 1524-5 lay subsidy is complete and enables a reasonable estimation of population to be made. It shows a small increase of 2½% from 1377 but an overall decline of 24% from the peak at the start of the fourteenth century.

Looking in more detail at the population information for the Hundred Figure 3.2 shows the percentage change in population between 1327 and 1524-5. Figure 3.3 then compares these figures with the county and national population reduction.

[380] Dyer, *Decline and Gro*wth, p. 65.
[381] Dyer, *Making a Living*, p. 233.

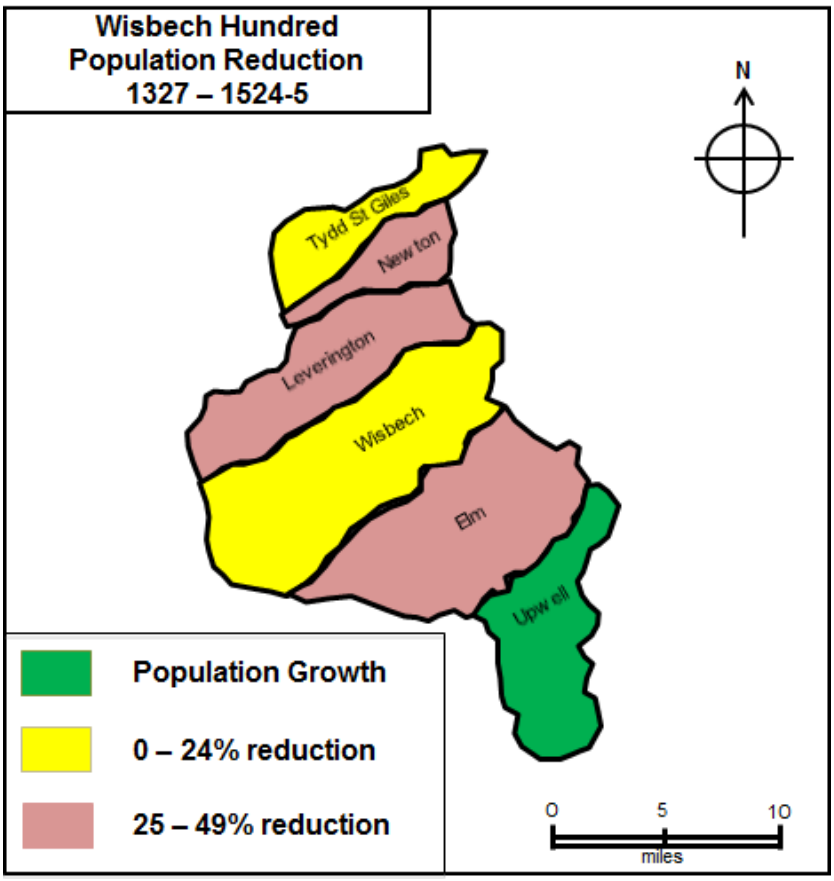

Figure 3.2 – Population change in Wisbech Hundred between 1327 and 1524-5.

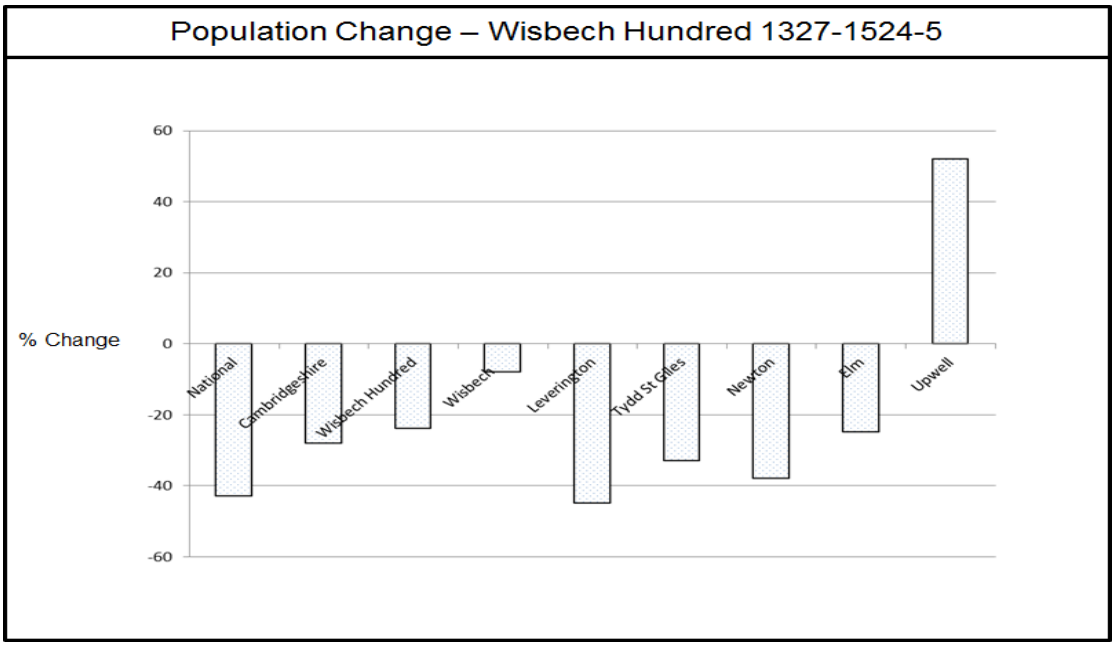

Figure 3.3 – Comparison of population change in Wisbech Hundred between 1327 and 1524-5 with Cambridgeshire and national estimates.

The figures indicate that Wisbech Hundred experienced a much lower population reduction than the national average. Within the Hundred the population reduction in Wisbech at 8% was significantly lower than the other parishes. The population reduction in the villages surrounding Wisbech seems to be more consistent with the national experience and with the figures for Cambridgeshire as a whole. The apparent increase in population at Upwell is an anomaly and inconsistent with the rest of the Hundred. With Upwell there are a number of factors that could be considered. It could reflect a genuine increase in population across the period. However, such an increase in population (in excess of 50%) against the trend for the rest of the Hundred would be difficult to explain in terms of a highly localised increase in economic activity. A more convincing explanation is the close proximity with the adjoining village of Outwell in Norfolk. Confusion resulting from the changing boundaries makes it possible that taxpayers in Outwell in 1524-5 could have been assessed as being in Upwell artificially increasing the population.[382]

The relatively small reduction in the population of Wisbech town went against the trend for towns in England that saw a significant decline.[383] Alan Dyer in his analysis shows Wisbech entering the list of the top 50 towns by population in England in 1524-5.[384] It is likely that it reflected a fundamental change in the structure of the local economy with a switch from a primarily arable economy at the start of the fourteenth century, requiring a large population in the villages, to a more pastoral economy by the end of the fifteenth century, requiring smaller populations in the villages.[385] This would have resulted in a movement of people from the surrounding villages into the town that would have provided employment. The extent of the service industry was illustrated by the sweep of more than forty workshops recorded in Bishop Alcock's Terrier of 1492 around the Castle Dyke.[386] The town supported three separate markets (the Old Market, the New Market and the Timber Market) which with the reopening of the port to the sea made it a strong local trading centre supplying produce back into the midlands

[382] Sheail, *Regional Distribution of Wealth*, p. 34
[383] Rigby, 'Urban Population', p. 393
[384] Dyer, *Decline and Growth*, p. 65
[385] Stone, *Decision-Making*, pp. 160-1.
[386] BAT, pp. 155-71.

hinterland. An example being the trade in animals and other goods from Wisbech to Cambridge (see Chapter Four).[387]

This analysis can be extended to look at the changing population across the county, see Figure 3.4 and Figure 3.5 showing the population changes for the individual Hundreds in Cambridgeshire. This shows that Wisbech Hundred was one of the more resilient areas in the county being in the upper half of the Hundreds with relatively low levels of population loss. Wisbech Hundred experienced a reduction in population across the period of 24% compared with an average of 26% for Cambridgeshire. Caution needs to be applied as given the quality of the information and the assumptions made for the multipliers this could be well within the margin of error for the data. There were three distinct environments in Cambridgeshire; the silt marsh to the north, the peat fen in the centre and the higher lands to the south of Cambridge. Although there was population growth across all three environments in the period preceding the fourteenth century population growth was particularly high in the silt marsh as more land was drained and brought into production enabling a larger number of people to be supported.[388] However, the change in population from 1327 to 1524-5 shows growth in the peat fen Hundreds; Witchford Hundred shows the population across the period more than doubling from 4430 to 9079 and the Isle of Ely shows a similarly large increase. The smaller Whittlesford Hundred on the higher ground to the south of Cambridge also shows an increase over the period. In the case of Witchford, and to a lesser extent Ely, it is in part explained by the economic impact of improved drainage bringing more peat land into production. With the silt marsh having been extensively reclaimed Bishop Morton had made efforts to improve the drainage of the peat fen with projects such as the construction of Morton's Leam to drain land around Whittlesey.[389] It is also in part explained by changes in the boundary of the Hundred increasing the population and the economy coming out of prolonged stagnation.[390]

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387 J. Lee, *Cambridge and its Economic Region* (Hatfield, 2005), pp. 126 and 134.
388 E. Miller and J. Hatcher, *Medieval England: Rural Society & Economic Change 1086–1348* (Harlow, 1978), p. 31
389 VCH(Hunt), pp. 249-90.
390 Hatcher, *Plague, Population and the English Economy*, p. 35

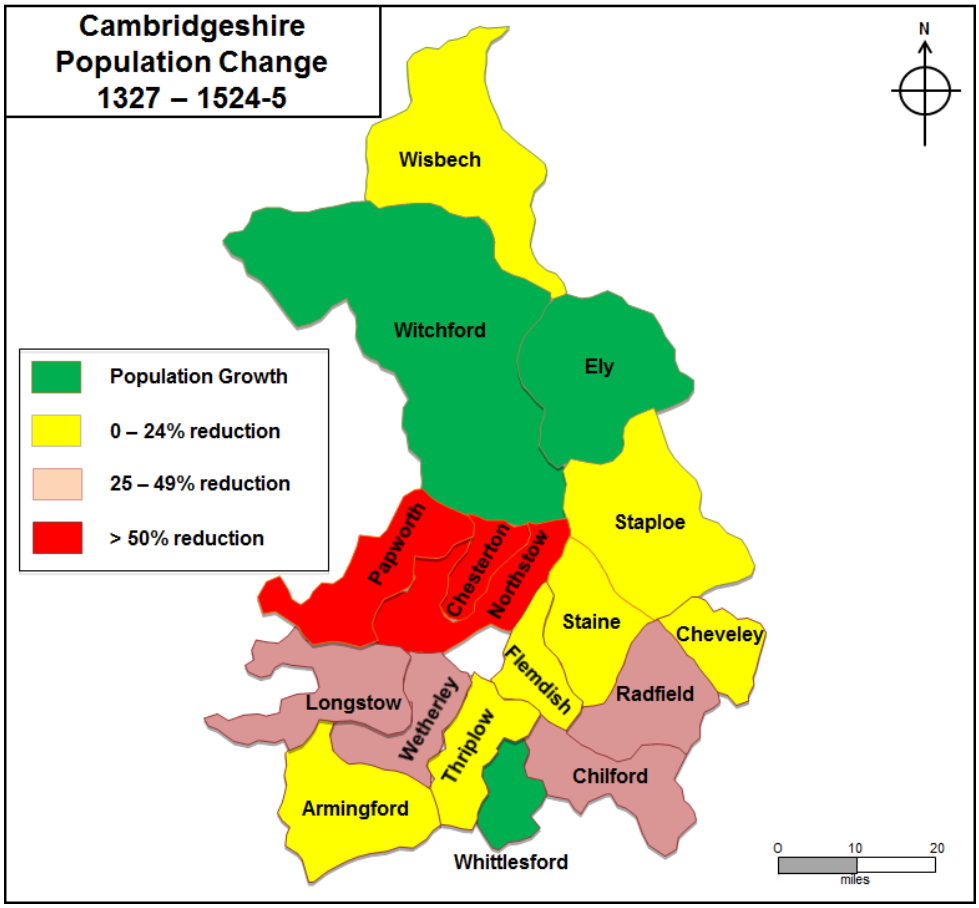


Figure 3.4 – Population change in Cambridgeshire between 1327 and 1524-5.

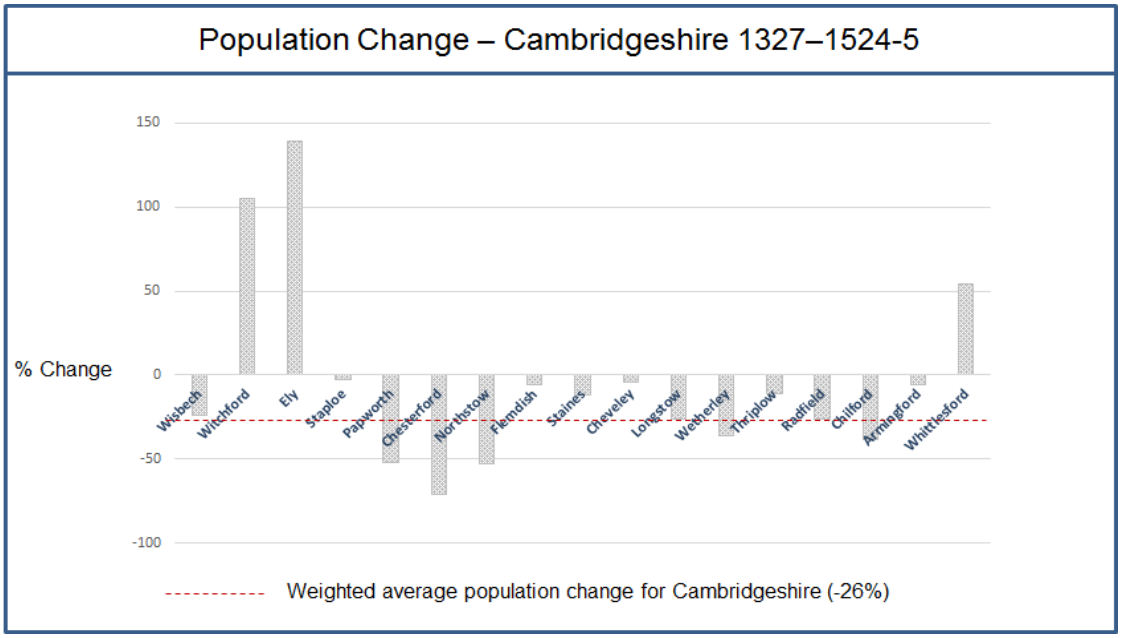


Figure 3.5 – Comparison of population change across Cambridgeshire between 1327 and 1524-5.

Immigration

It has been assumed that a contributory factor in the rapid growth of the Fenland population was immigration into the region. The attraction would have been the opportunity to acquire newly reclaimed fertile land. The family names (indicating a place of origin outside the parish) in the 1249-50 survey of the Bishop of Ely's manors in the Hundred and in the 1327 lay subsidy records enable this assumption to be tested. The following Table 3.3 summarises the number of immigrants and where they came from for the two dates.

From	**Date**	
	1249-50	1327
Within the Hundred	12	9
Cambridgeshire	3	15
Lincolnshire	3	12
Norfolk	31	21
Suffolk	3	3
Huntingdonshire	2	0
Leicestershire	0	1
Essex	1	0
London	0	1
Hampshire	0	1
Wiltshire	1	2
Kent	1	0
Derbyshire	1	1
Yorkshire	0	3
Scotland	0	1
Wales	0	2
Ireland	0	1
France	1	6
TOTAL (family names)	59	79
TOTAL (assuming family size of 5)	236	395
Hundred – estimated population	4840	5420
Percentage of immigrants	5%	7¼%

Table 3.3 – Number of immigrants to the Hundred in 1250 and 1327.[391]

The number of people with names from outside their home parish for 1249-50 account for 5% of the total and for 1327 account for 7¼% of the total. In the thirteenth century survey the majority (52%) were people moving into the region from Norfolk, approximately half from the neighbouring Hundred of Marshland and half from across

[391] ECB, pp. 127-80.

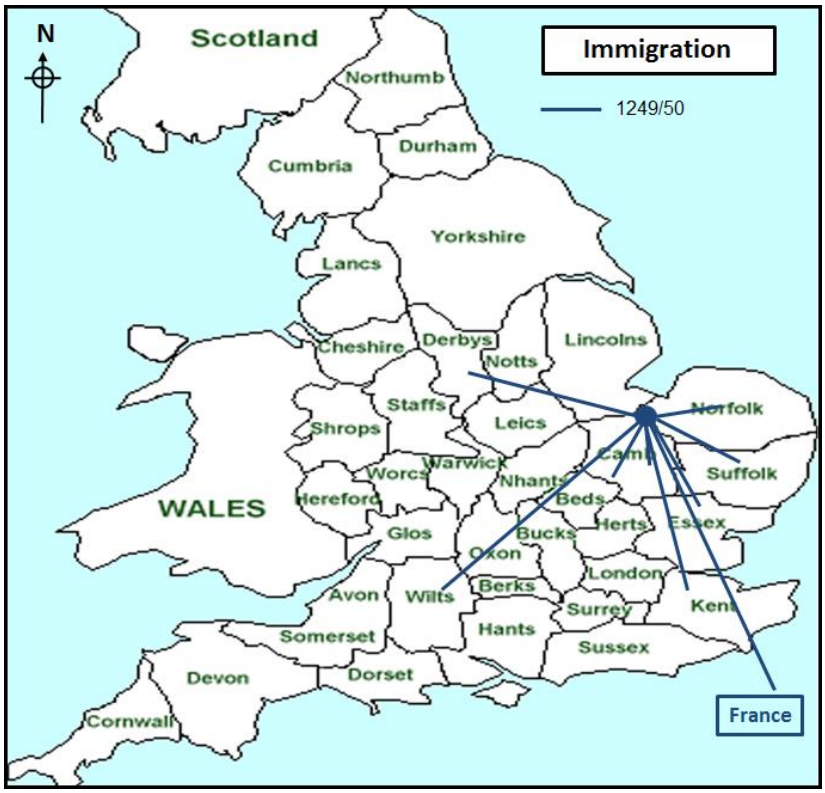
the rest of the county. There was movement within Wisbech Hundred with twelve families coming from different parishes to the one they were living in but only a few from other parts of Cambridgeshire or nearby Lincolnshire.

In the 1327 lay subsidy there is a direct relationship between the number of immigrants and the distance from the Hundred. 28% moved no more than 10 miles from Norfolk, Lincolnshire and the Cambridgeshire peat fen. A further 24% travelled no further than 30 miles to find a new home. 8% travelled from counties over 100 miles distant with ten families coming from Wales, Scotland, Ireland and France. The distances travelled by immigrants were unusually long compared with other regions. This can be compared with the neighbouring Witchford Hundred on the peat fen where in 1327 1% of the population were incomers of which only two moved across from Wisbech Hundred. Figure 3.6 below shows where the immigrants to the Hundred came from in 1249-50 and 1327. In 1327 immigrants came from a greater number of more distant locations indicating a degree of repopulation after the early fourteenth century famine.

It is also helpful to see where they settled within the Hundred. Over half went to Wisbech and the surrounding parishes of Leverington and Elm at the centre of the hundred. Relatively few went to the northern parishes of Tydd St Giles and Newton or to Upwell in the south. A number of possible explanations can be put forward for this; large areas of inland marsh were being drained in Wisbech and Elm (such as the reclaimed land between the Needham Bank and the Laddus Bank in Elm) making these parishes particularly attractive. These parishes were readily accessible from the network of waterways and were convenient for Wisbech. The town was attractive to people moving into the region providing the opportunity to trade in local produce and to service the local communities. The figures indicate that although immigration prior to the Black Death was important it was not a dominant factor.

After the Black Death with large quantities of good quality land becoming available and a weakening of manorial control the region would have become more attractive to immigrants and numbers would have increased.[392] Immigration continued into the fifteenth century shown by the evidence of foreigners in the Hundred (see Chapter Five).

[392] Stone, *Decision-Making*, p. 122; M. Bailey, *Medieval Suffolk: an Economic and Social History 1200-1500* (Woodbridge, 2007), p. 181.



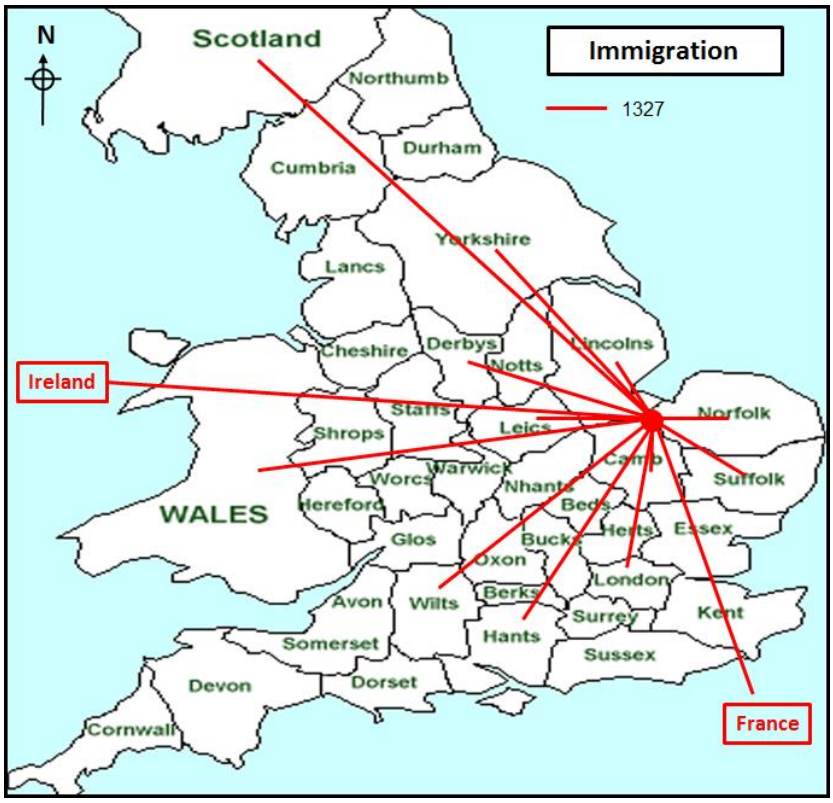


Figure 3.6 –Maps showing the origins of immigrants into Wisbech Hundred in 1250 and 1327 based on family names in the Ely Coucher book and the 1327 lay subsidy records.

Discussion

The evidence for the changing population would point to a degree of consistency with the national model at the start and the end of the period. The prolonged period of population growth in the twelfth and thirteenth centuries was replicated in the Hundred. Similarly, the demographic stagnation of the long fifteenth century was also duplicated. The evidence points to a divergence from the model during the fourteenth century where the drop in population although sharp was significantly less that the national picture. However, these general statements hide a variety of small-scale variations and the growth of population and pattern of immigration depended on specific local issues.

Devastating but localised flooding had a greater impact on some communities and had the effect of distorting the population figures, as seen in the limited number of tenants in Newton in 1249-50.[393] The effect of flooding on population is also seen in the neighbouring county of Lincolnshire where the population of Spalding and Pinchbeck stagnated between 1259 and 1287 following repeated flooding.[394] The absence of records showing the effect of plague on the Hundred and the unreliability of the poll tax information for Cambridgeshire makes population assessment for Wisbech between 1327 and 1377 challenging. However, looking at the longer period between 1327 and 1524-5 it can be seen that the 24% drop in population was not uniform across the Hundred. Setting aside the apparent anomaly of the population growth in Upwell, most of the population decline was experienced by the outlying parishes (e.g. 56% in Tydd St Giles). Wisbech saw only a small drop in population reflecting the continued strength of the local economy. The labour intensive manors with large demesne lands and associated numerous customary and free tenants with relatively small holdings (see Chapter Four) had disappeared. They had been replaced by a smaller number of land-holders and tenants with larger holdings and an increased focus on pasture over arable. Wisbech continued to retain its pivotal role as the trading centre of the region and with that retained its population.

Comparing the demographic experience of the hundred with other wetland regions, they all saw a period of prolonged population growth in the twelfth and thirteenth centuries. Van de Noort notes the factors that supported the increase in settlement as a favourable

[393] ECB, p. 155.
[394] Hallam, *Settlement and Society*, p. 134.

combination of 'political stability, economic prosperity and marine regression'.[395] This was seen in the Humber Wetlands with the establishment of many new villages (Blacktoft, Faxfleet and Bloomfleet in the twelfth century and Bennetland, Gilberdike and Scalby in the thirteenth).[396] On the east and south coasts population growth was held back by a series of sea-floods in the thirteenth century which affected Newton, Wisbech, Pinchbeck and Spalding in the Fenlands. On Romney Marsh, Old Winchelsea was repeatedly flooded (1250, 1252, 1271 and 1288) by storm surges in the English Channel.[397] The storms caused a permanent breach in the great shingle barrier and a retreat of settlement to higher ground.[398] Similar flooding on the east coast, particularly in 1253 and 1265, contributed to a temporary depopulation in the Humber estuary.[399] The populations of all wetland regions were depleted during the crisis of the fourteenth century but, unlike Wisbech Hundred, the depopulation continued through the fifteenth century. Romney Marsh was hit by a sharp economic decline following the silting-up of harbours and disruption to trade by war making the region less attractive. In the Humber Wetlands depopulation was accelerated by enclosure and conversion of land to pasture, particularly in the Ancholme Valley.[400] On the Severn estuary and the Somerset Levels increased drainage of the backfen and an intensification of arable farming led to a growth in settlement and population in the high middle-ages.[401] In the fourteenth century this growth was reversed with the decline continuing into the fifteenth century. This is supported by the evidence of shrinking settlements (such as the village of Puxton).[402]

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[395] R. van de Noort, The *Humber Wetlands: the Archaeology of a Dynamic Landscape* (Macclesfield, 2004), p. 133.
[396] Van de Noort, *Humber Wetlands*, p. 135.
[397] J. Eddison, 'Catastrophic change: a multidisciplinary study of the evolution of the barrier beaches of Rye Bay', in J. Eddision (ed), *Romney Marsh: Environmental Change and Human Occupation in a Coastal Lowland* (Oxford, 1998), p. 70.
[398] M. Tooley, 'Romney Marsh: the debatable ground', in J. Eddison (ed), *Romney Marsh: the Debatable Ground* (Oxford, 1995), p. 4.
[399] Van de Noort, *Humber Wetlands*, p. 156.
[400] Van de Noort, *Humber Wetlands*, p. 156.
[401] S. Rippon, *The Transformation of Coastal Wetlands* (Oxford, 2000), p. 187.
[402] S. Rippon, *Landscape, Community and Colonisation: the North Somerset Levels during the 1st and 2nd millennia AD* (York, 2006), p. 275.

WEALTH

The dramatic changes in population caused equally dramatic changes in society and the economy. This can be seen in the shifting patterns of prosperity. In analysing the comparative wealth of the Hundred use is again made of a number of sources. The 1327 lay subsidy provides a benchmark for Cambridgeshire as it enables a per capita assessment to be made for each community within the Hundred and from that a ranking of the relative wealth of the vills. At the end of the period the 1524-5 lay subsidy can be used to carry out a similar per capita assessment. It should be noted that the two lay subsidies were slightly different in structure and it is difficult to make a direct per capita comparison but it is possible to compare changes in the relative rankings of communities.[403] Further valuable sources of information on the wealth of individuals are the wills from the fifteenth and early sixteenth centuries. Although they are of limited value in the analysis of comparative wealth they provide insights into aspects of individual wealth. They show that wealth could be measured not only in terms of land and capital but also through valued possessions and the prestige these attracted.

National Economy

Prior to the fourteenth century the English economy experienced rapid growth fuelled by increasing internal demand driven by a growing population coupled with external demand, primarily for high-quality English wool to feed the cloth industry of northern Europe.[404] New land was brought into production to meet the increased demand for farmland and the growing economy led to falling wages and rising prices (as shown in the following graph (Figure 3.7) which uses a rolling average based on the work of Campbell and Hatcher). Postan argues that it led to an unstable and unsustainable situation.[405] Land was being divided into increasingly small parcels which, combined with the doubtful quality of some of the marginal land, increased the vulnerability to poor weather and hence to famine and disease.[406] As noted earlier this was seen in the prolonged famine of 1315 to 1317 that was accompanied by the widespread death of

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[403] Sheail, *The Regional Distribution of Wealth in England*, p. 15

[404] M. Stephenson, Wool yields in the medieval economy', *Economic History Review* 41, Number 3 (1988), p. 368.

[405] Hatcher, *Plague, Population and the English Economy*, pp. 49 and 51; B. Campbell, *English Seigniorial Agriculture 1250-1450* (Cambridge, 2000), p. 5

[406] Miller and Hatcher, *Medieval England*, p. 45.

livestock.[407] Before the economy could begin to recover it was further devastated by the impacts of the plague of 1348-9. The demographic changes resulted in a pronounced shift in the relationship between wages and prices. The falling population led to a shortage of labour and a significant rise in wages and increasing mobility for the surviving labour force. The 1351 Statute of Labourers that sought, unsuccessfully, to control wages and mobility was a kneejerk response in the immediate aftermath of the Black Death. [408]

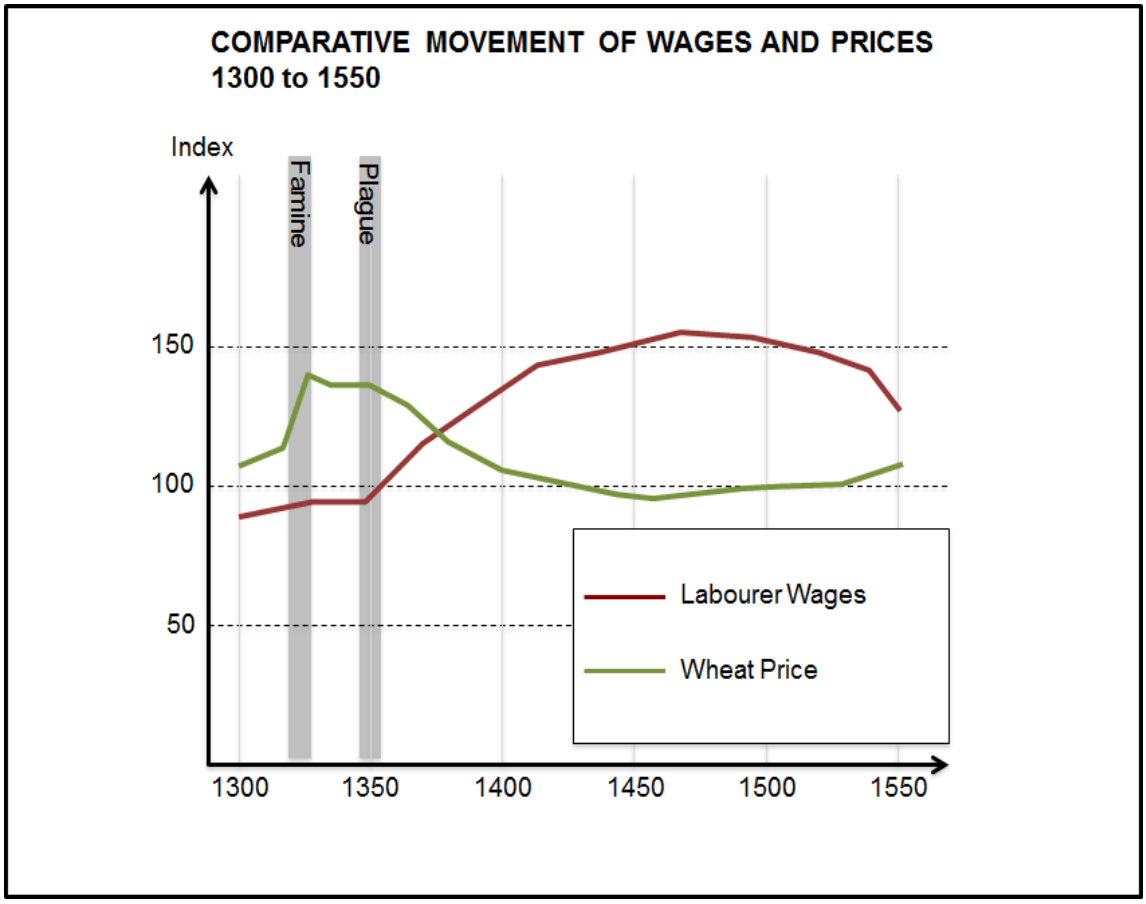

Figure 3.7 – Comparative movement of national wages and wheat prices between 1300 and 1550.[409]

[407] P. Goldberg, *Medieval England: A Social History 1250-1550* (London, 2004), p. 159.
[408] P. Coss, 'The age of deference', in R. Horrox and M. Ormrod (eds), *A Social History of England 1200–1500* (Cambridge, 2006), p. 61.
[409] Campbell, *Seignorial Agriculture*, pp. 4-5.

The depleted population led to a reduction in demand for agricultural and other produce resulting in falling prices. The poor harvests of 1350 and 1351 kept grain prices artificially high protecting farmers from the immediate economic consequences of the Black Death.[410] The combination of falling prices and increasing labour costs saw a dramatic decline in profitability resulting in changing economic behaviour.[411] This is seen in the move by lords to rent out demesne land rather than trying to maintain the existing feudal structures and labour services with a reduced population. This was a process that had begun in the fourteenth century but which accelerated in the fifteenth century. The last of the Bishop of Ely's demesne land in the Hundred at Wisbech Barton was leased out in 1429.[412] The nobility and clergy were increasingly becoming rent collectors rather than estate managers.[413] The process was gradual but inexorable and they did continue to exert influence through the manorial courts that were a useful vehicle for raising revenue. The positive side of increasing wages and falling prices was that survivors had more disposable income, a better standard of living and the ability to increase their land holdings. The process of 'engrossment' began with some of the surviving peasants acquiring land abandoned through the death of family or neighbours. The extra wealth enabled them to invest and acquire more land. This process was aided by the falling value of land that was now in surplus.[414] By the fifteenth century this trend was well established and is clearly visible in the wills from the Wisbech Hundred, discussed in Chapter Four, showing the amassing of large individual landholdings. There was evidence of a response to the changing demographic and economic situation in the wool industry. The margins on wool were falling leading to a drop in production and in exports to mainland Europe. This was being replaced by cloth production in England where greater profit could be made through adding value. The following Table 3.4 shows the changing levels of wool and cloth exports (in sacks) across the period.[415]

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[410] J. Hatcher, *The Black Death: an Intimate Story of a Village in Crisis 1345-1350 (St Ives, 2008)*, p. 318.
[411] Campbell, *Seigniorial Agriculture*, pp. 421 and 430.
[412] Stone, *Decision-Making*, p. 156.
[413] Dyer, *Making a Living*, p. 242
[414] Campbell, *Seigniorial Agriculture*, p. 234
[415] N. Ramsey, 'Introduction', in J. Blair and B. Ramsey, *English Medieval Industries: Craftsmen, Techniques and Products* (London, 2001), p. xxxi

Year	1340	1400	1440
Wool Exports	35000	12000	5000
Cloth Exports	2000	40000	60000

Table 3.4 – English wool and cloth exports between 1340 and 1440.

Although the structure was changing the economy was stagnating for much of the fifteenth century. There were a number of factors constraining economic performance in England. The most important was the stubbornly low population levels failing to stimulate demand and growth. There was also the impact of war on the economy; the final phase of the Hundred Years War with France as well as disputes with the Hanseatic League and Flanders had a negative impact on exports to Europe.[416] The bullion crisis of the first half of the fifteenth century (largely resulting from the export of coin to pay for foreign wars), when silver currency in circulation fell as low as an estimated £0.45 million by 1470 from £1.1 million in 1311 impeded commercial transactions further constraining economic growth.[417]

The precise timings of changes in the economy are as much debated as changes in the population. However, by the end of the fifteenth century the economy was beginning to show some indications of recovery and growth. The forces driving the recovery were the opposite of those that had triggered decline and stagnation. The early signs of possible population recovery and the increasing availability of coinage were leading to growing domestic demand. This was combined with a period of internal and external political stability following the end of the War of the Roses and a recovery in trade following the end of the Hundred Years War.[418] With the economic recovery in the first half of the sixteenth century prices began to increase and wages began to plateau. High prices coupled to low wages constrained relative prosperity. During the late fourteenth and early fifteenth centuries the situation had been reversed with survivors generally seeing increased wages and for many the holdings of land, livestock and other possessions increasing. By the end of the period prosperity would have begun to plateau

[416] Goldberg, *Medieval England*, p.210
[417] M. Allen, 'The volume of the English currency 1158-1470', *Economic History Review* 54 (2001), p. 607
[418] J. Hatcher, 'The great slump of the mid-fifteenth century', in R. Britnell and J. Hatcher (eds), *Progress and Problems in Medieval England* (Cambridge, 1996), pp. 270-1

for the majority but the new class of yeomen and merchants, although relatively small in number, would have continued to prosper.[419]

Wisbech Hundred

The number of tax payers and the per capita payment by vill has been analysed for the 1327 lay subsidy and is illustrated in Figure 3.8 below. It can be seen that the highest per capita wealth is in Elm at 3s followed by Leverington at 2s 6d and then Newton and Wisbech at 2s 5d and 2s 4d respectively. The lowest per capita rates are in Tydd St Giles at 1s 11d and in Upwell at 1s. The relative poverty of Tydd St Giles indicates the lingering impacts on agricultural production of localised flooding disrupting production. The relatively poor performance of Wisbech can be explained by the silting up of the harbour in the thirteenth century leading to an initial reduction in trade and again the impact of flooding. There is a record of flooding causing damage to Wisbech Castle in 1236 and 1251 (where holdings in the town were 'entirely perished through inundation of the sea').[420] The poverty of Upwell can be explained, as it was the only vill in the Hundred that sat predominantly in the peat fen. As such its ability to pay tax is probably more closely linked to the adjoining peat fen Witchford Hundred than to the other vills of the Wisbech Hundred that lay mainly on the more productive silt marsh. This is reflected in both the smaller population and the smaller tax return.

[419] C. Dyer, *Country Merchant*, p. 21.
[420] Stone, *Decision-Making*, p. 26.

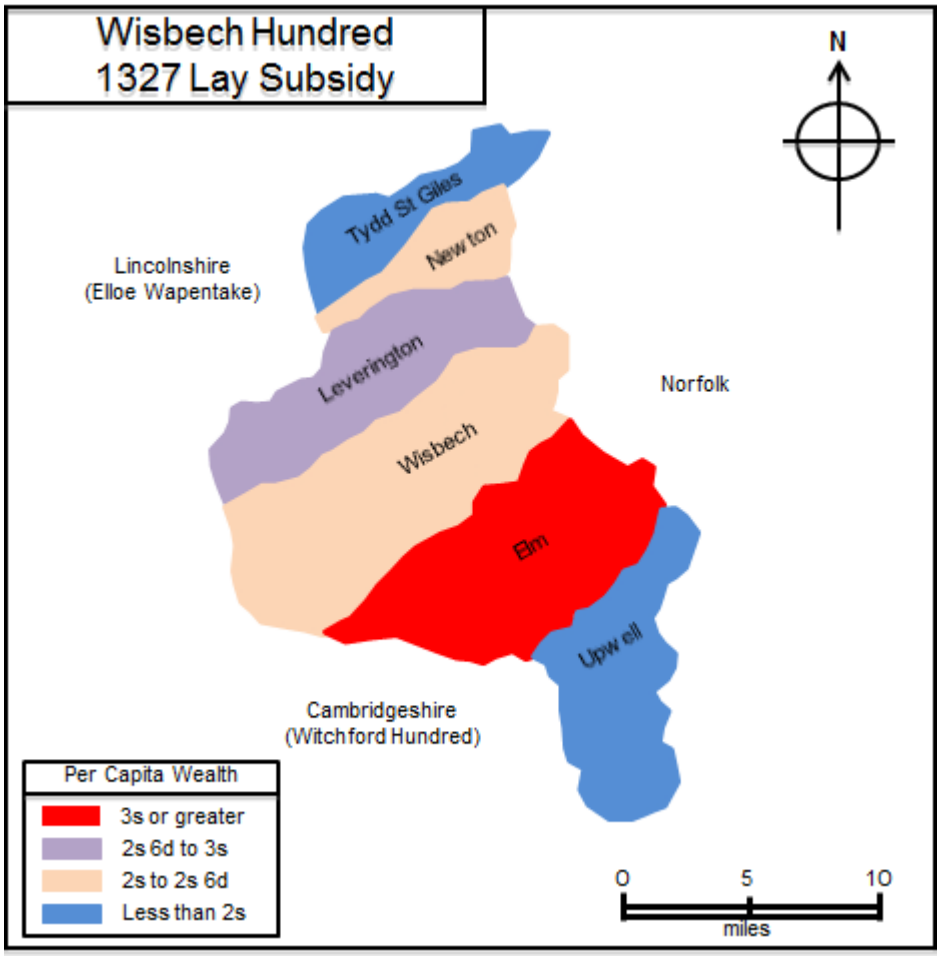

Figure 3.8 – Per capita wealth in Wisbech Hundred based on the 1327 lay subsidy.

Looking at the information for the Wisbech Hundred from the 1524-5 lay subsidy two points are obvious. Firstly, that the absolute value of the per capita wealth, as indicated by the payment had increased, however, it should be noted that the change in the method of assessment would have had an effect on the figures. Secondly, that the relative wealth between the vills of the Hundred had shifted as shown in Figure 3.9 below.[421]

[421] Sheail, *Regional Distribution of Wealth*, pp. 28-35.

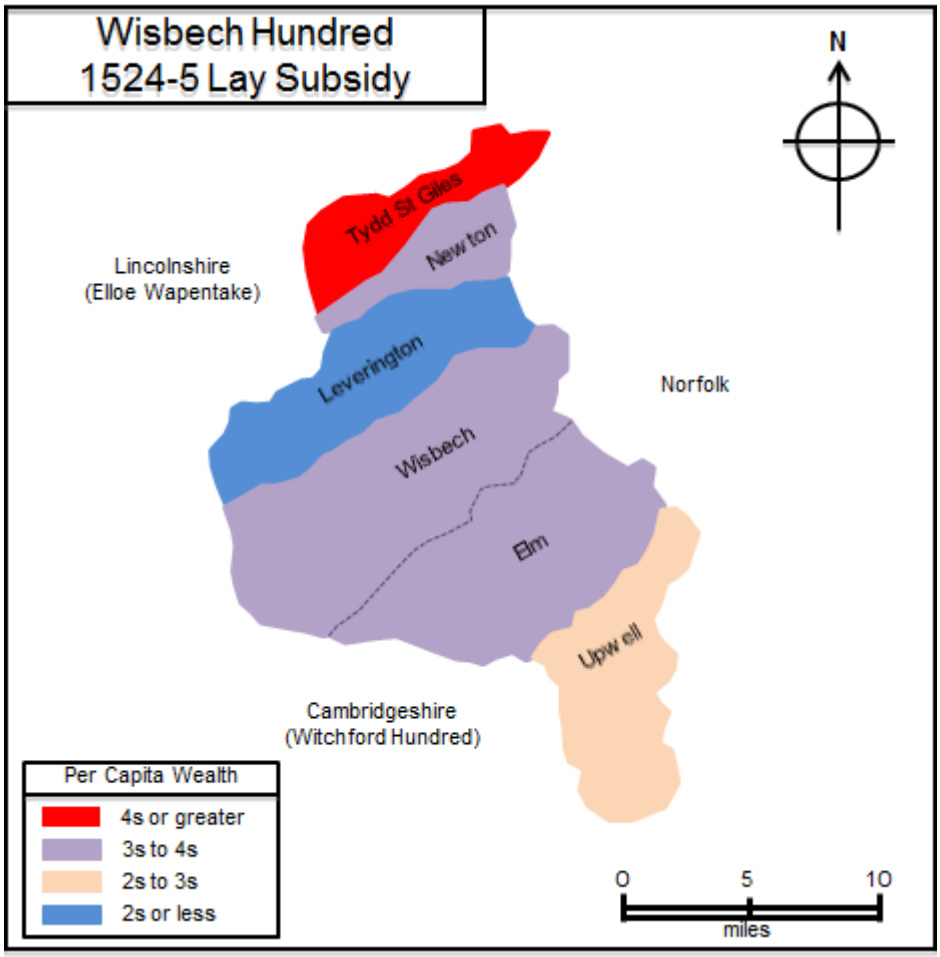

Figure 3.9 – Per capita wealth in Wisbech Hundred based on the 1524-5 Lay subsidy.

Tydd St Giles is now the wealthiest vill with a per capita rate of 4s. Leverington has declined dramatically falling to a per capita rate of 2s. In comparison, Newton and Wisbech on either side of the vill display a higher level of prosperity. The Wisbech economy was boosted by a growth in trade through the port that was reopened to the Wash at the end of the fifteenth century.[422] The relative wealth of Upwell also seems to have improved with the community paying six times the subsidy in 1524-5 compared with 1327. The following Table 3.5 summarises the per capita information for the Hundred.

[422] VCH(IoE), p. 263

Parish	1327			1524-5		
	Taxpayers	Total	/capita	Taxpayers	Total	/capita
Tydd St Giles	81	£7 16s 6d	1s 11d	74	£14 15s 6d	4s 0d
Newton	71	£8 13s 9d	2s 5d	63	£12 7s 8d	3s 11d
Leverington	138	£17 2s 0d	2s 6d	109	£10 16s 6d	2s 0d
Wisbech	172	£20 2s 11d	2s 4d	252	£44 3s 3d	3s 6d
Elm	58	£8 15s 11d	3s 0d	49	£8 10s 6d	3s 6d
Upwell	22	£1 1s 3d	1s 0d	46	£6 10s 10d	2s 10d
TOTAL	542	£64 3s 4d	2s 6d	593	£97 4s 3d	3s 3d

Table 3.5 – Comparison of 1327 and 1524-5 lay subsidies for the parishes of Wisbech Hundred.

Cambridgeshire

The apparent prosperity of Wisbech Hundred can be compared with that of the other Hundreds of Cambridgeshire. A similar approach has been taken with the per capita wealth for 1327 and 1524-5 being assessed and the relative rankings compared. The following Figure 3.10 shows a comparison of the per capita wealth for each Hundred.

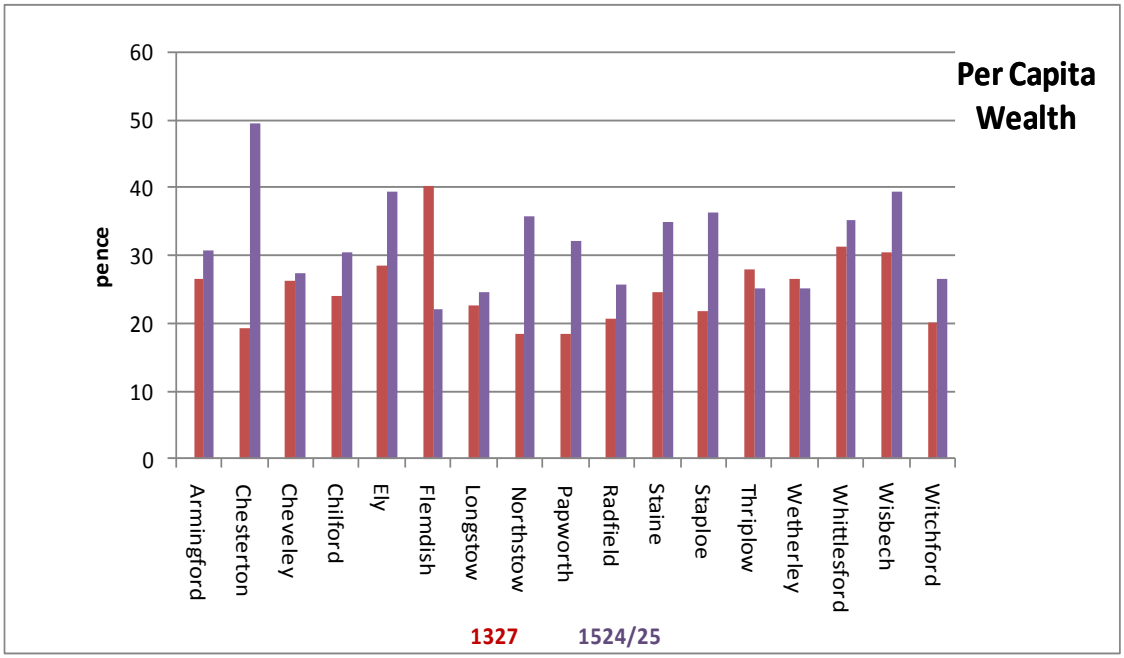

Figure 3.10 – Comparison of per capita wealth for the Hundreds of Cambridgeshire based on the1327 and 1524-5 lay subsidies.

Wisbech Hundred is consistently ranked above the average for the county as a whole at the start and end of the assessment period. The contrast with the adjoining peat fen Hundred of Witchford is clear with the difference increasing between the two subsidies. The increase in per capita wealth for the Witchford Hundred does not match the apparent increase in population demonstrating that population and prosperity were not necessarily linked. The growing peat fen population could not wring much additional value from the landscape. The peat fen Hundred of Ely is more robust but here the role as a religious centre helped in sustaining the local economy taking produce from the Bishop's manors.[423] There are some anomalies that are more difficult to explain; specifically the Hundreds of Chesterton and Flemdish on the Fenland border that show apparently violent changes in wealth across the period. Chesterton goes from fifteenth position in 1327 up to first place in 1524-5 with Flemdish displaying the opposite trend falling from first place to seventeenth across the period. Comparing this with population, Chesterton saw a fall in population of 71% across the period and Flemdish saw a fall of 6%. A falling population, such as that seen at Chesterton, did not signify poverty and a changing local economy through engrossment and a move towards sheep farming could lead to an increased per capita wealth.

The following Table 3.6 shows the comparative rankings of the per capita wealth of the Hundred between 1327 and 1524-5.

[423] E. Miller, *The Abbey and Bishopric of Ely* (Cambridge, 1951), p. 79.

Hundred	Ranking 1327	Ranking 1524-5
Flemdish	1	17
Whittlesford	2	6
Wisbech	3	2=
Ely	4	2=
Thriplow	5	15
Armingford	6=	10
Wetherley	6=	14
Cheveley	8	11
Staine	9	7
Chilford	10	9
Longstow	11	10
Staploe	12	4
Radfield	13	13
Witchford	14	12
Chesterton	15	1
Northstow	16=	5
Papworth	16=	8

Table 3.6 – Change in the per capita ranking of the Hundreds of Cambridgeshire between 1327 and 1524-5.

Noticeable is the resilience of Wisbech Hundred where it retained its position as one of the wealthiest Hundreds in Cambridge only being exceeded by Chesterton and Cambridge town itself (not shown). It retained a degree of economic strength through the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries, a period of crisis and stagnation, not seen in other communities. This related to the resilience of its mixed economy with agriculture, livestock, fisheries and marsh produce as well as inland trade contributing to its prosperity, discussed in more detail in Chapter Four.[424] Ely also seems to have maintained a strong performance across the period benefiting from passing trade along the Ouse and the demand from the great household that was the Bishop's establishment.[425]

The information for Wisbech Hundred can be compared with the surrounding counties of Lincolnshire and Norfolk that also had silt marsh and peat fen Hundreds and Wapentakes. In the following Figure 3.11, a comparison is made of the per capita wealth based on the 1524-5 lay subsidies between the Cambridgeshire Hundreds of Wisbech, Ely and Witchford with the Norfolk Hundreds of Marshland, Lynn and

[424] Darby, *Medieval Fenland*, pp. 32-7
[425] Stone, *Decision-Making*, pp. 28 and 33; C. Woolgar, *The Great Household in Late Medieval England* (London, 1999), p. 111.

Clackhouse and the Lincolnshire Wapentakes of Elloe, Kirton and Skirbeck. If the arguments regarding the resilience of Fenland communities are robust then these Hundreds should display similar results. In Norfolk, the Marshland Hundred is the wealthiest with a per capita tax payment of 3s 8d compared with 3s 3½d for Wisbech. Two of the three Fenland Hundreds in Lincolnshire are wealthier than Wisbech and they all have a larger population. The Hundred of Skirbeck with a per capita figure of 5s is more prosperous than all of the Hundreds in Cambridgeshire. The Hundred of Elloe has a per capita wealth of 3s 2½d which is similar to the adjoining Wisbech Hundred.[426] As expected, we see a similar level of per capita wealth from similar landscapes benefiting from similar economic advantages.

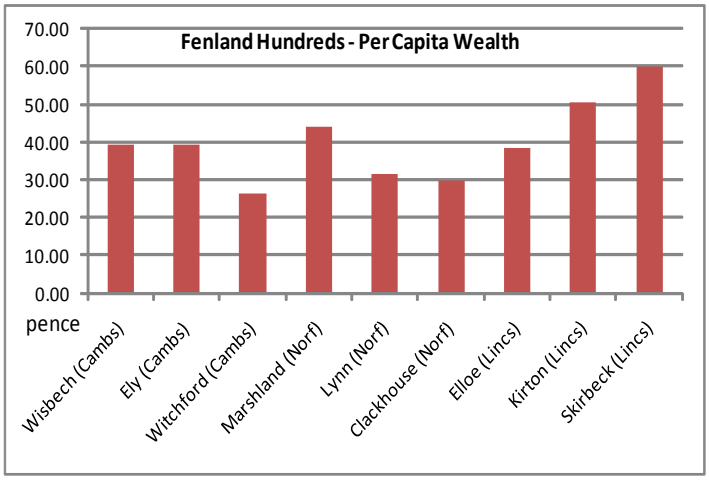

Figure 3.11 – Comparison of the per-capita wealth of Wisbech Hundred with other Cambridgeshire, Lincolnshire and Norfolk Hundreds based on the 1524-5 lay subsidy.

National

These figures should be seen in a national context. In this analysis the two datum points of 1327 and of 1524-5 have again been taken. The available national data allows the total amount of tax collected to be determined with reasonable accuracy.[427] However, it is more difficult to assess the exact number of taxpayers and here the population estimates discussed earlier in the chapter are used. In the case of 1327 a population range of 4.5 million to 5.5 million is used and divided by the multiplier of 10 to derive the number of taxpayers. Similarly, a population range of 2.25 million to 2.75 million has been used for 1524-5 and divided by the multiplier of 7 to determine the number of

[426] Sheail, *Regional Distribution of Wealth*, pp 28-35, 181-203 and 213-35
[427] Willard, *Taxes upon Movables of the Reign of Edward III*, p. 72

taxpayers. These generate a range of per capita national wealth (for taxpayers) that is within a generally acceptable population range. In the following Table 3.7, these ranges have been compared with the per capita figures for Wisbech Hundred.

	National Tax Payment	National Population	National Tax Payers	National Per Capita Payment	Hundred Per Capita Payment
1327	£25628	4.50M 5.50M	450000 550000	1s 1½d 11d	2s 6d
1524/5	£64180	2.25M 2.75M	321428 392857	3s 11½d 3s 3d	3s 3¼d

Table 3.7 – Comparison of the per capita wealth of Wisbech Hundred with the national per capita wealth based on the 1327 and 1524-5 lay subsidies.

Wisbech Hundred had a per capita wealth considerably greater that the national average in 1327 and although this had declined somewhat by 1524-5 it was still equal to or slightly better than the national average, depending on the population assessment. It points to the Hundred, although still relatively wealthy, beginning to be overtaken by other regions.

Individual Wealth

Fifteenth- and sixteenth-century wills from the Hundred provide a useful indication of individual wealth and bring life to the statistical data of the per capita analysis. In total 65 wills from the period have been analysed for the Hundred and the distribution by location and date is shown in the following Table 3.8.

Distribution of Wills (location)		
Parish	**Number of Wills**	**Period**
Tydd St Giles	21	1452 - 1524
Newton	5	1453 – 1525
Leverington	1	1519
Wisbech	24	1452 – 1526
Elm	14	1451 - 1498
TOTAL	**65**	**1451 - 1526**
Distribution of Wills (date)		
Period	**Number of Wills**	
1450 – 1459	28	
1460 – 1469	14	
1470 – 1479	7	
1480 – 1489	0	
1490 – 1499	12	
1500 – 1509	0	
1510 – 1519	1	
1520 – 1529	3	
TOTAL	**65**	

Table 3.8 – Distribution of fifteenth and sixteenth century wills in Wisbech Hundred used in the analysis.

Although the period covers 75 years the majority of the wills (64%) are from the 1450s and 1460s and inevitably the analysis is biased towards the mid-fifteenth century rather than the early sixteenth. However, there are sufficient documents from the later years to make a meaningful comparison. The two peaks (1450-1469 and 1490-1499) indicate an increase in mortality coinciding with the series of localised plague outbreaks between 1442 and 1454 and the start of the 'sweating sickness' in 1485.[428] The wills are not a complete measure of wealth as they do not necessarily contain full details of money, land or possessions. Land being transferred to the eldest son and natural heir may not appear in the will. Similarly, not all possessions are listed or adequately described. In many cases they appear as 'the rest I give and leave to my wife Alice' without detailing the specific goods.[429] However, they are sufficiently complete to enable a qualitative assessment to be carried out.

The average wealth shown in the wills by parish is detailed in Table 3.9. This is based on the total money and land mentioned in the will but excludes personal possessions

[428] G. Thwaites, M. Taviner and V. Gent, 'The English sweating sickness: 1485-1551', *New England Journal of Medicine* (1998), pp. 580-2.
[429] C.R.O., VC 2:108.

such as clothing and furniture. For each location in the 'money' column there are three figures. The top figure is the total money recorded in all the wills for that parish, the middle figure is the maximum individual sum shown in the wills and the bottom figure the average sum for all the wills. Similarly, the figures in the 'land' column are the total land-holdings for all wills, the maximum individual land-holding and the average for all wills. The 'range' column shows the maximum and minimum sum for all the wills at that location.

Location	**Money (£)** **Parish Total** **Maximum Individual** **Average**	**Land (acres)** **Parish Total** **Maximum Individual** **Average**	**Range (£)**
Tydd St Giles	£32 13s 7½d £6 13s 4d £1 11s 1½d	208¾ 46½ 10½	1s 0d to £6 13s 4d
Newton & Leverington	£15 15s 3d £9 3s 4d £2 12s 6½d	84¼ 54 21	1s 7d to £9 3s 4d
Wisbech	£206 6s 4d £89 19s 8d £8 11s 11¼d	366¾ 142½ 16	4d to £89 19s 8d
Elm	£68 3s 3½d £60 8s 8d £4 17s 4½d	303 61½ 21½	1s 3d to £60 8s 8d

Table 3.9 – Individual wealth by parish as shown in the wills of 1450 to 1529.

Care has to be taken in using this material, as it is not a statistically robust sample, particularly for the five wills covering Newton and Leverington, but it is still indicative of a number of trends. There is clearly a wide variation in identified wealth ranging from 4d for Robert Coke of Wisbech up to in excess of £89 for William Reynold.[430] In general, the wills with relatively small amounts of money and land tend to be for women and tend to consist of small bequests to the church for candles and gifts to family and friends. The wealth of the family was held either by the husband (if surviving) or the eldest son.[431] An exception to this is Margaret Barowe of Tydd St Giles with money to the value of £3 2s 2d and 10¾ acres of land being declared in the will.[432]

[430] C.R.O., VC 1:31; C.R.O., VC 2:52.
[431] M. Mate, *Women in Medieval Society* (Cambridge, 1999), p. 87.
[432] C.R.O., VC 1:45.

The wills show a number of groups that appear to have prospered during the period and who hold considerable wealth compared with their fellows. They included merchants, craftsmen, clergy and landowners (yeomen) and there are examples in all these categories. Looking firstly at merchants, William White of Wisbech states in his will from 1466 that he was a mercer.[433] His wealth was primarily in money and possessions and although he had some land it was not detailed in his will. He left £1 7s 2d to the church with the majority 'to be given to the paupers in the vill of Wisbech' and the remainder for the fabric of the church, for candles and for the Guild of St Mary (one of the smaller guilds in the town).[434] He also stated that 'out of my remaining goods a suitable chaplain shall celebrate for a whole year in the said church of St Peter at the altar of St Mary for my soul…' This demonstration of the medieval concern for the immortal soul was replicated in many of the wills for the period. The bulk of the declared money, in excess of £12, he left to his son Richard. In addition to his house he left numerous possessions to family and friends including clothing, pots, plate and candlesticks as well as a valuable 'prussian chest' which was a clear indication of his status as one of the 'better-off' in the town as well as a merchant. It is not possible to accurately assess his full wealth but William White (although not in the same league as wool merchants such as John Heritage from Gloucestershire) was reasonably well off and he appears to have prospered as a merchant in the town.[435]

Within Wisbech there were a number of individuals who described themselves as craftsmen, although the nature of their trade is difficult to determine from the description in the wills. Two that fit this category are Hamo Parfay from 1459 and William Byard from 1496.[436] Hamo Parfay, although not particularly wealthy in comparison with others, did leave £1 3s 7d to the church. This was in part for the lights (candles) in the church and a payment of 2s to the Guild of the Holy Trinity but the major element was a payment of 20s to the church in Hunstanton, Norfolk, some 30 miles away. This indicated that Hamo was a relatively recent immigrant to the town. He also left to his wife, Alice, a smallholding of ¾ acre in nearby Walsoken and a garden. This was probably something similar to the modern allotment and intended to meet their

[433] C.R.O., VC 2:109.
[434] H. Westlake, *The Parish Gilds of Medieval England* (London, 1919), p. 148.
[435] Dyer, *Country Merchant*, p. 222.
[436] C.R.O., VC 2:29; C.R.O., VC 4:3.

personal needs rather than grow produce for sale.[437] What marked him out as a craftsman was the reference to leaving to a friend 'all the instruments from my workshop except for the wheels…' implying he was either a carpenter or wheelwright. This can be compared with the will of William Byard who left a smaller sum to the church (8s 6d) but left the possessions of his trade to his family. In addition to his dwelling house, which he left to his wife Margery, he also left her 'his shop in Barton Lane with all the pertinences' and to his son Thomas 'my shop on the Castle Dyke with all the implements and necessaries touching upon my craft'. Clearly, Thomas was to follow in his father's trade, whatever it was. These wills together with other examples such as that for Thomas Myller from 1476, who held a number of workshops in the town including one in the New Market, indicate a prosperous, active and hence wealthy local economy with tradesmen supporting the town and its hinterland and having sufficient possessions to require a will to settle their affairs.[438]

The clergy were a group that demonstrated a relatively high level of wealth with two wills being particularly noticeable; Thomas Reynold rector of Elm and William Thornbrough priest in Newton.[439] The will for Thomas Reynold dates from 1455 and he was clearly one of the wealthiest inhabitants in the village. In addition to over £60 left in the will he also had 38 acres of land and a sizeable property. These would have been personal possessions and did not belong to the church. The majority of the money (£39) was unsurprisingly left to the church with £11 for the upkeep of All Saints Church in Elm and for the chapels in Emneth and Walsoken. He left to 'Master Peter Grebe, a Carmelite brother, and Nicholas, chaplain of Emneth, 16 marks to be shared equally for celebrating masses for my soul and the souls of my benefactors for a whole year after my death'. His land and the remainder of his money were divided amongst family and friends. Most of the land (23 acres) went to William Reynold, his brother, who was also one of the executors of the will. There was reference to possessions beyond the 'hall' and the 'fruit from the field' but as the will was incomplete this could not be determined.

[437] C. Dyer, *Everyday Life in Medieval England* (London, 1994), p. 124.
[438] C.R.O., VC 2:80.
[439] C.R.O., VC 1:11; A. Gibbons (ed.), *Ely Episcopal Records* (Lincoln, 1891), p. 218

The will for William Thornbrough was from 1525 and he was described as 'Master of the Chapel of St Mary of the Sea'. Although the will started in Latin after the opening comments it changed into English reflecting a move away from Latin at this later period. In his will he left £9 3s 4d to the church including 20s for a mass to be held for his soul in the Abbey at Thorney and 10s for a similar mass at Chatteris. He paid 10s to two priests, Robert and Henry, to arrange his burial and a further 20s to 'buy a canopy above the high altar in Newton church'. All his remaining possessions including the contents of the hall, kitchen, brewhouse and an unspecified acreage of land were left to the church and for use by his successor. The buildings would have been part of the benefice but, as noted above, the land would have been held personally. In Wisbech town William Mareys, priest, and John Thurston, chaplain (of the Trinity Guild), displayed similar levels of wealth in terms of money and possessions.[440] William Mareys in his will of 1452 included a 'big book called Chaucer' that was to be 'sold after his death for the best price and the money used in the execution of this will'. The wealth of the clergy was in part a reflection of the wealth of their community as well as their personal wealth.

The final category was that of significant landowners (a more detailed discussion of the changing nature of land ownership is given in Chapter Four). There is evidence of wealthy landowners in all the parishes of Wisbech Hundred. In his will of 1493, Thomas Barowe of Tydd St Giles left 46½ acres of land held across a number of fields in the village.[441] He also left grain and sheep as well as the normal household utensils (not specified). His most valuable possession seems to have been silver spoons that he left to his family. He left £6 13s 4d in money, again mostly to his immediate family, with only 2s 6d being left for the lights in the church at Tydd St Giles. In Newton, John Drew left 62 acres of land spread across a number of fields surrounding the village in 1453.[442] The land was primarily left to his wife and son with smaller gifts for other family members. His wife, Christiana, also received the main messuage on the condition that 'she well and sufficiently sustain and repair the said messuage and that she will stay in the same'. He left £1 10s to the church as payment for maintaining the church in Newton and for lights but also as payment for 'tythes forgotten' and for guild

[440] C.R.O., VC 1:23; C.R.O., VC 4:10.
[441] T.N.A., P.R.O., PROB 11/10.
[442] C.R.O., VC 1:25.

payments. A similar sum of money was shared amongst his family members and for the settling of debts. He owned at least two properties but the will does not record any personal possessions. These were passed directly onto his wife along with the main messuage.

In Elm, John Manning left 61½ acres of land including a small wood and a building plot in his will of 1458.[443] Again, the majority of the land was left to his wife, Joan, with smaller parcels going directly to the children. The land was located in all the main fields of the village; nine acres in Halfpenny Field, seven acres in Town Field, two acres in Wales Field, and two acres in Redmoor Field which were all the original fields surrounding and close to the centre of the original manor. The quantity of land provides a clear example of engrossment with an individual benefiting from the contraction in the population of the fourteenth century to acquire discrete plots of land to add to his own holdings in these fields. It was a constantly shifting land market and large holdings could be broken up on death to be recombined into new holdings (see the discussion on the family-land bond in the following chapter).[444] He left to his wife the main dwelling with all the household utensils and a small garden. The only reference to money is 2s 6d left to the church of which 1s is for the fabric of the building and the rest for lights. The size of the holdings must have given him a sizeable income, but he chose not to mention it in his will.

The final landowner considered, and the largest, was Hamlet Norbury of Wisbech and in his will of 1496 he left 142½ acres of land.[445] It was primarily located in the farmland surrounding the town including the Wisbech Barton manor and noted in Bishop Alcock's Terrier. There was also reference within the will to land being held in the adjoining parish of Leverington. Of the total acreage; 122½ acres and his main messuage were left to his wife Matilda, a further six acres were left to his only surviving daughter and her husband Thomas Lightfoot of Leverington and the remaining 14 acres and a second messuage to be sold to pay 'debts and legacies'. The bulk of the land and the main messuage were to pass to Elizabeth the daughter on the death of her mother and if the daughter was to die without heir then 'the said messuage

[443] C.R.O., VC 1:55.
[444] Dyer, *Making a Living*, p. 358.
[445] C.R.O., VC 4:26.

and land [are] to be sold by my executors and the money received disposed in the church of St Peter in Wisbech for my soul and the souls of my benefactors'. He left a total of £11 13s 8d in the will with £1 13s 8d to the church and the remainder to the family. This included 20s to the dominant Trinity Guild, of which he was a member, and 10s to his brother George Norbury. The utensils from the house along with his grain and cattle also passed directly to his wife for her use. The executors of the will were his wife Matilda, his son-in-law Thomas Lightfoot and Thomas Rand (clerk). He seems to have acquired lands across a number of fields indicating an opportunistic approach to obtaining cheap land as it became available. The will indicated the potential vulnerability of such relatively large landholdings. With only a married daughter as the surviving child the land would effectively pass to the son-in-law and if that family had no heir it would be broken up and sold off with the proceeds going to the church.

Discussion

Care has to be taken when looking at per-capita figures based on lay subsidy data. Apart from the issues of statistical accuracy the analysis is based on a very limited sample of the population, those able to pay the tax. By definition the majority of the population is excluded from the assessment (most women, children and the poor). However, despite these reservations the per-capita information clearly shows that the relative wealth of the Hundred was high compared with the national figure. Such a large difference places beyond reasonable doubt that the Fenland was a prosperous region. By the end of the period the per-capita figure placed the Hundred at best in the mid-range of the estimate of the national per-capita wealth. Although the figures are close enough to question their reliability what cannot be challenged is that the ranking of Wisbech Hundred had declined in comparison to other areas. This does not mean that the region was poor, as can be seen by the apparent wealth of individuals shown in their wills. The evidence would point to an increased concentration of land, property and possessions in the hands of a small group of increasingly prosperous people. The same group appearing in the records of bodies such as the Trinity Guild as part of the ruling elite of the town and the Hundred (see Chapter Five).

Other wetland regions were equally wealthy at the start of the fourteenth century. An approach taken by Campbell and Bartley to the classification of regional wealth was to combine wealth per taxpayer, wealth per square mile and the number of taxpayers per

square mile into a single measure.[446] This shows that the major wetland regions (Fenland, Humber Wetlands, Romney Marsh and the Somerset Levels) all fall into the high or very high wealth category. Within this simplified range the Lincolnshire Fenlands is at the top and Romney Marsh at the lower end. The Lincolnshire Fenlands were benefitting from the valuable wool trade through the port of Boston and Romney Marsh was still recovering from the repeated sea-floods in the second half of the thirteenth century. Van de Noort notes that this series of storm related floods was an incentive for principal landowners on the Humber wetlands to enclose and convert vulnerable arable land into pasture.[447] This was seen in a reduction in population, mentioned earlier, but also an increase in per-capita wealth. The Somerset Levels although relatively prosperous, like all wetland regions, at the start of the fourteenth century was significantly less wealthy than the Fenlands. Bridgewater had an assessment of £260 in the 1334 lay subsidy compared with £360 for Leverington, £410 for Wisbech and a very high £630 for the nearby Spalding in Lincolnshire.[448] By the start of the sixteenth century the difference had narrowed and both regions recorded a wealth of less than 39s per square mile in the 1524-5 lay subsidy.[449]

[446] B. Campbell and K. Bartley, *England on the Eve of the Black Death: An Atlas of Lay Lordship, Land and Wealth 1300-49* (Manchester, 2006), Map 18.16.
[447] Van de Noort, *Humber Wetlands*, p. 157.
[448] R. Glasscock, 'England circa 1334', in, H. Darby (ed), *A New Historical Geography of England before 1600* (Cambridge, 1973), pp. 181-2.
[449] A. Baker, 'Changes in the later middle ages', p. 196.

SUMMARY

Wetland regions in medieval England were different in nature to other regions of the country. As discussed in Chapter One this resulted in a unique approach to settlement development. The question posed in this thesis is; did the Wisbech Hundred, as an example of a major wetland region, follow the economic and demographic trends of the rest of the country during the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries or did the unique features of the region cause it to deviate from the national model? In terms of population it is clear that the Hundred experienced considerable growth before the fourteenth century and this was consistent with the national picture during the period of sustained economic expansion. It is also clear that the region was impacted by the traumas of the fourteenth century with famine being followed by a series of plague outbreaks devastating the population. However, here the data starts to present a different picture from the national model with the population of the Hundred falling by only 25% between 1327 and 1377 compared with 47% for the country as a whole. The region was either less heavily impacted by the plague or it recovered more quickly through an influx of people seeking to exploit the valuable resources of the silt marsh. In the following 150 years to 1525 the population stagnated, again in line with the national trend. The Hundred saw an increase in population of 1% between 1377 and 1524-5 comparable with the national figure. However, it was outstripped by much of the rest of Cambridgeshire that seemed to have experienced a significantly higher rate of population growth in the same period as the exploitation of the peat fen increased. Wisbech Hundred was not in demographic decline but rather other regions were growing more rapidly.

In terms of wealth, the data shows that Wisbech Hundred was a prosperous area when compared with the average for the country as a whole. This is supported by the work of Nightingale on the distribution of wealth prior to 1349.[450] It is also shown in the work of Campbell and Bartley, using Inquisitions *Post Mortem* data, where Wisbech and Leverington appeared in the list of the top sixty taxpaying vills in England.[451] There was a decline over the following two centuries with the per capita wealth of the

[450] P. Nightingale, 'The lay subsidies and the distribution of wealth in medieval England, 1275-1334, *Economic History Review* 57 (2004), p. 21
[451] Campbell and Bartley, *Eve of the Black Death*, pp. 244-45.

Hundred in 1524-5 placing it just above the lower limit for the national average. The wealth of the region had been impacted by the changing structure of the local economy seen in the patterns of land ownership and the nature of the economy.

The early wealth of the Hundred is illustrated by the sources of the Bishop of Ely's income in 1299, see Table 3.10.

Bishop of Ely's Income – 1299		
Source	**%**	**£**
Demesne Lands	40	~1350
Other Income	60	~2000
TOTAL	100	~3350
Breakdown of 'Other Income'		
Source	**%**	**£**
Contractual Rents	40	~800
Customary Rents	30	~600
Courts/Markets/Feudal Dues	20	~400
Sale of Labour Services	10	~200
TOTAL	100	~2000

Table 3.10 – Bishop of Ely's income from demesne lands and other sources in 1299.[452]

The majority of the Bishop's sizeable income came from rents and from sources other than the demesne lands. This proportion would significantly increase after the Black Death and the leasing out of the remaining demesne lands. However, of the estimated total of approximately £3350 collected in the year much of this would have been from the Bishop's land and other possessions in the Cambridgeshire Fenland of which the most profitable was the highly productive silt marsh. These figures also do not include the produce supplied directly from the demesne lands on the manors to the Bishop's household.

Although the relative wealth of the region had declined it was still a prosperous area. For many there may have been a degree of prosperity but for a few (men such as the merchant William White and the yeoman Hamlet Norbury) the gains had been considerable. They were the beneficiaries of the fourteenth century being able to amass land and property. The decline in population had been concentrated in the outlying

[452] Miller, *Abbey and Bishopric*, p. 93.

parishes of the Hundred with Tydd St Giles and Newton seeing a sharp fall in numbers in the fifteenth century. However, the wealth of Tydd St Giles increased as the population fell showing the growing disconnect between population and prosperity. There was an increasing concentration of wealth in the town of Wisbech. This is shown by the individual and corporate (Trinity Guild) investment in the church and in the town's infrastructure (see Chapter Five). In summary, the evidence shows that the Hundred had peaked in population and wealth at the start of the fourteenth century and by the start of the sixteenth century although still thriving had reached a plateau and was being overtaken, such as by the towns of the new cloth industry. This erosion of the comparative wealth of the region continued through the sixteenth- and seventeenth-centuries.

Chapter Four – Fenland Economy and Land Ownership

INTRODUCTION

The many marshlands and fens of England had a distinct wetland economy exploiting their natural resources.[453] The wetland economy combined fishing, wildfowling, reed collection and salt production with the growing of conventional crops and the keeping of animals.[454] As noted in Chapter One, the silt marsh of the Wisbech Hundred was a unique environment significantly different in nature from inland regions but also from other wetland areas. This shaped settlement patterns and land usage and in turn created a highly localised economy. In this chapter the structure of the economy of the Wisbech Hundred will be explored and interactions between the economy and the landscape considered. A key aspect of the analysis will be the changing nature of land ownership. The question asked in this chapter is how did the nature of the Fenland economy differentiate it from other comparable regions?

Economies can be described through the three elements of production, demand and distribution (see Figure 4.1). The chapter will show that production in the Hundred was primarily based on arable and sheep farming. This was supplemented by fisheries on the Wash and the extensive network of waterways and meres in the south of the Hundred. The surrounding salt marshes and peat fens provided other valuable produce that included wildfowl and building materials such as reeds and rushes as well as peat for fuel.[455] In the southern part of the Hundred, in Elm and Upwell, where the silt land gave out to peat there were turbaries with evidence of peat being used as a fuel for salterns.[456] Salt production was an important element of the local economy from the Romano-British period with archaeological evidence for at least 11 salterns along the tidal waterways of the Hundred.[457]

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[453] R. van de Noort, *The Humber Wetlands: the Archaeology of a Dynamic Landscape* (Macclesfield, 2004), p. 133.
[454] S. Rippon, *The Transformation of Coastal Wetlands* (Oxford, 2000), p. 220.
[455] H. Darby, *The Medieval Fenland* (Cambridge, 1940), p. 32.
[456] Darby, *Medieval Fenland*, p. 40.
[457] Darby, *Medieval Fenland*, p. 37; D. Hall and J. Coles, *Fenland Survey: an Essay in Landscape and Persistence* (London, 1994), p. 118.

Demand could be divided into three elements: produce required to support the local population, produce traded locally and produce for trading outside the region. The town of Wisbech was the main trading hub (see Chapter Five) being centrally located with all of the Hundred lying in its natural hinterland. It also stood at the centre of the network of waterways that enabled the trade in goods inland to the midlands and out to the coastal ports of the Wash, most importantly Lynn. Wisbech in the eleventh and twelfth centuries was a minor port in its own right although goods were also shipped to the larger port of Lynn, where there were strong links to foreign markets for onward export.[458] In the thirteenth century the shipping channels were closed to all but the smallest trading vessels.[459] This inhibited trade but it did not stop it and there is evidence for merchants continuing to operate from Wisbech in the second half of the fifteenth century, men such as John Masse.[460]

In Wisbech there was an established mechanism for the exchange and distribution of goods with craftsmen, tradesmen and merchants engaging with the farming communities of the Hundred. In terms of physical infrastructure, road transport and droves would have been adequate to meet local demand for the transportation of goods with routes joining all the main settlements. There were also road links into Lincolnshire, Norfolk and across the Cambridgeshire peat fen. The most reliable and efficient form of communications were via the extensive network of waterways with staithes or landing points linking the communities.[461]

There is good primary source material available to help understand the Fenland economy. The Ely Coucher Book details the Bishop's manor in the hundred in 1249-50 and can be contrasted with the details of land ownership in Bishop Alcock's terrier of 1492.[462] The collection of wills from the fifteenth and early sixteenth centuries give information on changing land ownership, crops, animals, farm equipment and trades. This is supported by manorial records and Stone's detailed study of the Bishop of Ely's manor of Wisbech Barton in the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries providing a model

[458] E. Carus-Wilson, 'The medieval trade in the ports of the Wash', *Medieval Archaeology* 6 (1962), p. 185.
[459] M. Hinman, *Deeply Stratified Medieval and Post-Medieval Remains at Market Mews, Wisbech* (Cambridge, 2002), pp. 4-5.
[460] T.N.A., P.R.O., PROB 11/5/255.
[461] J. Edwards, 'The transport systems of medieval England – a geographic synthesis', (unpub. Ph.D. thesis, University of Salford, 1987), p. 232.
[462] ECB, pp. 127-80.

for agrarian activity in the Hundred.[463] Lee's work on the economy of Cambridge and the surrounding area provides insights into regional demand and distribution.[464]

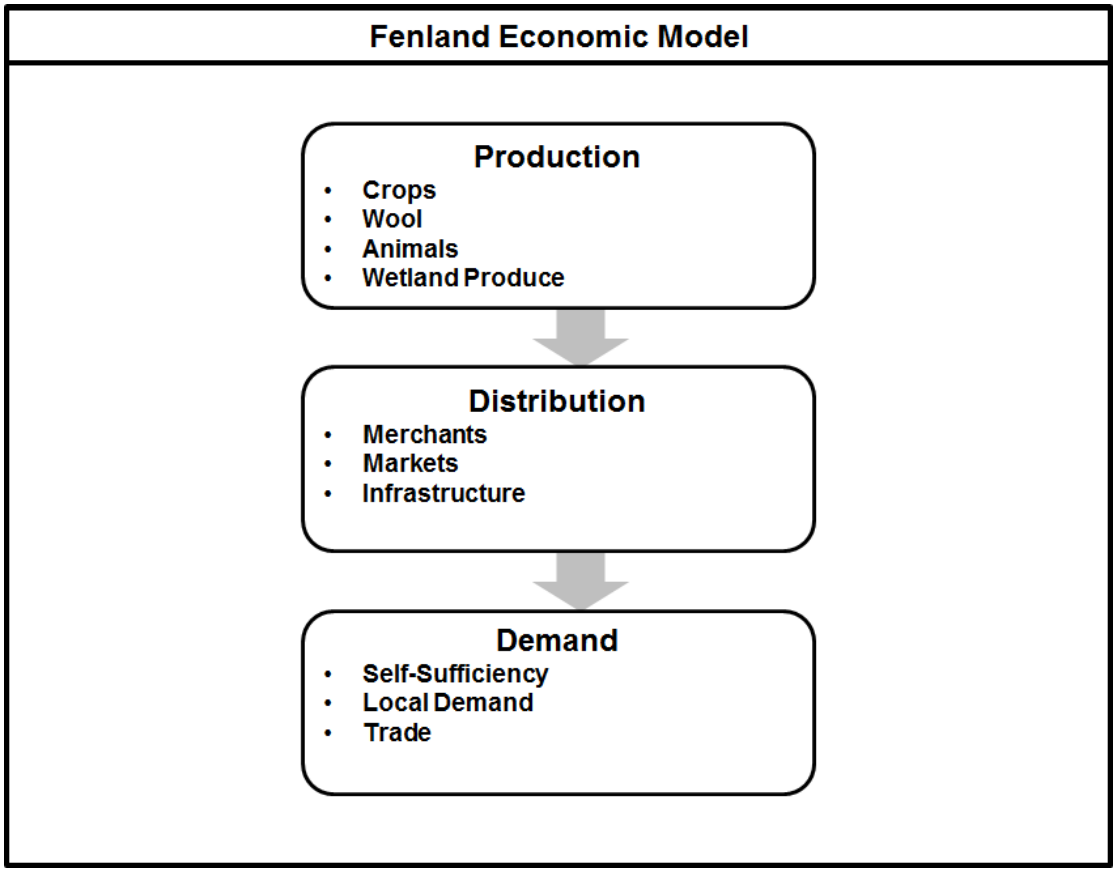

Figure 4.1 – A model of Fenland economic activity.

[463] D. Stone, *Decision-Making in Medieval Agriculture* (Oxford, 2005), pp. 45-186.
[464] J. Lee, *Cambridge and its Economic Region 1450-1560* (Hatfield, 2005), pp. 85-113.

PRODUCTION

Farming

To understand the significance of agriculture to the local economy it is necessary to look at what was produced and how it was organised. Although there was a degree of continuity both of these factors changed between the thirteenth and sixteenth centuries in response to the decline in population. The shifting nature of Fenland farming has been considered by a number of historians. Hallam looked at the Wapentake of Elloe primarily in the thirteenth century; Stone (as noted earlier) analysed the manor of Wisbech Barton in the fourteenth and early fifteenth centuries and; Thirsk looked at Lincolnshire in the sixteenth century and beyond.[465]

Crops

Although the proportions varied across the period the type of crops grown were the same consisting of various cereals and legumes. The cereals consisted of winter sown wheat and spring sown oats in single or mixed crops (see Table 4.1).

Cereal	Mix	Sown
Wheat	N/A	Winter
Mixtill	Wheat and Barley	Winter
Bere	Winter Barley	Winter
Oats	N/A	Spring
Dredge	Oats and Spring Barley	Spring

Table 4.1 – Cereal crops grown in Wisbech Hundred in the fourteenth century.[466]

The evidence from manorial records for Wisbech Barton, Tydd St Giles, Newton and Elm in the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries show a high degree of consistency in the crops grown (see Table 4.2).

[465] H. Hallam, *Settlement and Society: A Study of the Early Agrarian History of South Lincolnshire* (Cambridge, 1965), pp. 3-39; Stone, *Decision-Making*, pp. 22-42; J. Thirsk, *English Peasant Farming: the Agrarian History of Lincolnshire from Tudor to Recent Times* (London, 1957), pp. 6-78.

[466] Stone, *Decision-Making*, pp. 37-8.

Crop	Wisbech Barton Fourteenth Century	Newton 1395	Wills Fifteenth Century
Wheat	**X**	**X**	**X**
Mixtill	**X**	**X**	**X**
Bere	**X**		**X**
Oats	**X**	**X**	
Dredge	**X**	**X**	
Legumes	**X**	**X**	**X**

Table 4.2 – Crops grown in Tydd St Giles, Newton, Wisbech Barton and Elm in the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries (X shows where there is direct documentary evidence).[467]

The majority of the wheat and barley was sold or in the case of Wisbech Barton transported from the manorial staithe on the Wisbeck Stream to the Bishop of Ely's households further inland.[468] The oats were consumed either on the manor or were sold locally. Legumes (peas and beans) were important crops that had two roles.[469] They formed an important part of the peasant diet and helped to fertilize the fields reintroducing nitrogen into the soil.[470] The agricultural benefits of growing legumes, (if not the science of nitrogen enrichment), was well understood by the reeves responsible for planning crop planting.[471]

Animals

The keeping of animals played an important part in Fenland farming providing both food and a source of income. Large flocks of sheep provided wool for export through the port of Lynn.[472] Demand for wool continued through the fifteenth century to supply the growing English cloth industry. Pigs were kept for food and cows for food and dairy produce. Oxen and horses were kept for transport and to provide the motive power on the farms. The extensive meadows and pastures of the Fenland enabled large numbers of animals to be supported in summer and with hay through the winter. The number of animals on the Bishop of Ely's manor at Wisbech Barton in the fourteenth and early fifteenth century is shown in Table 4.3 below.

[467] Newton, pp. 69-80, C.U.L., EDR/C7/1-24; T.N.A., P.R.O., PROB 11/10; Cambridgeshire C.R.O., VC 2:58; C.R.O., 2:52; C.R.O., VC 1:53.
[468] Stone, *Decision-Ma*king, p. 47.
[469] B. Campbell, *English Seigniorial Agriculture 1250-1450* (Cambridge, 2000), p. 228.
[470] H. La Poutré, 'The contribution of legumes to the diet of English peasants and farm servants, c. 1300', *Agricultural History Review* 63 (2015), p. 19.
[471] Stone, *Decision-Making*, p. 62.
[472] Carus-Wilson, 'Ports of the Wash', p. 185.

Period	Horses	Oxen	Cows	Pigs	Sheep
Up to 1392	8	32			
Post 1392	16	32			
1326-34			57		
1413-26			45		
Up to 1370				55-65	
Post 1370				30-40	
1350-1425					500-600

Table 4.3 – Animals on Wisbech Barton manor in the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries.[473]

In comparison Table 4.4 show the animals recorded in the account of Newton Manor in 1395 and in the wills of Adam Burton of Wisbech (1466) and Simon Adam of Tydd St Giles (1496).

Source	Horses	Oxen	Cows	Pigs	Sheep
1395 Newton Manor	7	Not Specified	18	28	Not Specified
1466 Will Adam Burton Wisbech	2		12		8
1496 Will Simon Adam Tydd St Giles			1		28

Table 4.4 – Animals on Newton Manor (1395) and in the wills of Adam Burton (1466) and Simon Adam (1496).[474]

The sheep flocks were the most important element of pastoral farming in Wisbech Hundred. The quality of the grassland meant that fleece weights were higher than the national average being in excess of 2lbs (although these could fall as low as 1½lbs) and were able to attract a premium price.[475] These can be compared with, for example, sheep raised on the poorer soils of the Suffolk breckland where fleece weights were consistently less than 2lb.[476] The reeve at Wisbech Barton aimed to maintain a flock of between 500 and 600 sheep but this was difficult to achieve and a figure of around 450 was more realistic. The size of the flock at Newton (not specified in the accounts),

[473] Stone, *Decision-Making*, p. 40.
[474] *Newton*, pp. 69-80; C.R.O., VC 2:55; T.N.A., P.R.O., PROB 11/11.
[475] Stone, *Decision-Making*, p. 74.
[476] M. Bailey, *Medieval Suffolk: an Economic and Social History 1200-1500* (Woodbridge, 2007), p. 86.

being a smaller manor would have been around 200. Disease and flooding were the main restraining factors on flock size. In addition to the murrain of 1315-17 there were regular outbreaks of disease that depleted the flocks as well as killing other animals (as shown in Table 4.3 covering the period immediately after the Black Death).

Period	Animals	% loss
1326-7	Sheep	15%
1332-3	Cattle	12%
1333-4	Cattle	17%
1343-4	Pigs	50%

Table 4.5 – Examples of the percentage of animals lost to disease and flooding in the Hundred in the fourteenth century.[477]

The risk of flooding is illustrated by the winter of 1398-9 when nearly half the flock was drowned and it was necessary to go to market to restock.[478]

Land Use

It is tempting to try and define the proportions of land used for different purposes. However, crop planting was influenced by many local and short-term factors as well as longer-term regional or national issues. At best it is only possible to identify general trends in farming across the period. This is illustrated by the impact of the price of wheat on the acreage planted on the demesne lands at Wisbech Barton shortly after the Black Death (see Table 4.6). Clearly the reeve was trying to optimise the production to match demand during those turbulent times.

Year	Wheat Price	Acres Planted
1350	5s 5d	40
1352	11s 7d	63
1353	4s 0d	38
1354	> increasing	58

Table 4.6 – Relationship between wheat prices and acreage planted at Wisbech Barton in the fifteenth century.[479]

[477] Stone, *Decision-Making*, p. 72.
[478] Stone, *Decision-Making*, p. 151.
[479] Stone, *Decision-Making*, p. 90.

The weather impacted on planting with localised winter flooding resulting in an increased proportion of spring sown plants such as oats and legumes. Flooding in Gilberdesdole Field in 1338 resulting in the loss of winter barley (bere) and in 1339 it was resown with oats and with 24 acres of legumes.[480] In 1395 Newton Manor lost 19¼ acres of land to flooding which was more than the total acreage planted with legumes.[481] Soil quality played a part in the decision-making process with legumes being sown on exhausted fields to improve productivity.[482] As Stone notes, there is evidence of legumes being planted in fields at Wisbech Barton immediately before winter crops such as wheat or mixtill to improve yields.[483]

Land use was split between arable, meadow and pasture with Hallam providing a breakdown for Tydd St Mary in the Wapentake of Elloe for the second half of the thirteenth century (see Table 4.7). Tydd St Mary provides a useful model for Wisbech Hundred being located on the Lincolnshire silt marsh and adjacent to the northern parish of Tydd St Giles. The table shows the use of land between the sea wall and the inland banks. The data does not provide information on the use of the intertidal saltmarsh that was a valuable asset for the local community. Hallam notes that there was more arable in the siltland than in the fen edge manors that specialised in meadow.[484]

Year	**Arable**	**Meadow**	**Pasture**
1249	88% (70 acres)	12% (9.5 acres)	0% (0acres)
1273	54% (158 acres)	7% (20 acres)	39% (95 acres)
1293	84% (126 acres)	5% (8 acres)	11% (16 acres)
1303	62% (180 acres)	5% (15 acres)	33% (96 acres)
Comparison with the Wapentake of Elloe			
1250-1300	66% 2615 acres	8% 311 acres	26% 1015 acres

Table 4.7 – Land usage in Tydd St Mary in the Wapentake of Elloe.[485]

[480] Stone, *Decision-Making*, p. 56.
[481] *Newton*, pp 72-7.
[482] Campbell, *English Seigniorial Agriculture*, p. 229.
[483] Stone, *Decision-Making*, pp. 62-23.
[484] Hallam, *Settlement and Society*, p. 195.
[485] Hallam, *Settlement and Society*, pp. 176 and 195.

Putting aside the data for 1249 when no pasture was recorded (related to localised flooding) the split between arable and meadow/pasture was typically around 60:40. Tydd St Mary like Tydd St Giles benefited from fertile silt soils suitable for arable with summer pasture and meadows out towards the marsh and the peat fen. The data does not give an indication of the percentage of land given over to cereals and legumes.

The evidence for land usage in Newton in 1395 is given in Table 4.8.

Land Use	Acreage
Wheat	58
Oats	38
Other Grain	30
Legumes	14¼
Pasture	109½
Fallow	38¼
Flooded	19¼
TOTAL	307

Table 4.8 – Land use from the Newton Manor accounts for 1395.

The evidence for land usage on the manor of Newton can be compared with Wisbech Barton in the fourteenth and early fifteenth centuries is shown in Table 4.9.

Wisbech Barton					
Year	**Wheat**	**Mixtill**	**Bere**	**Oats**	**Legumes**
1315	25%	15%	10%	40%	10%
1335	10%	30%	10%	50%	0%
1350	15%	30%	5%	40%	10%
1370	15%	25%	10%	40%	10%
1407-9	25%	20%	5%	Unknown	Unknown
Newton					
Year	**Wheat**	**Mixtill**	**Bere**	**Oats**	**Legumes**
1395	41%	14%	7%	27%	11%

Table 4.9 – Land usage at Newton and Wisbech Barton.[486]

In Wisbech Barton the proportion of crops was reasonably consistent across the century with an approximate split of 40% winter sown cereals, 50% spring sown cereals and

[486] Stone, *Decision-Making*, pp. 51-52, 89-90 and 128.

10% legumes. This is consistent with the percentages given by Campbell for arable sown in the region between 1300 and 1349.[487] After the Black Death the proportion of wheat sown reduced being balanced by an increase in the percentage of mixtill. In Newton the pattern of planting was similar with 55% winter cereals, 34% spring cereals and 11% legumes. The comparable figures for Wisbech Barton for 1370 were 50% winter cereals, 40% spring cereals and 10% legumes. At Newton 35% of the recorded land was pasture with 27% fallow. In Newton there was nearly 20 acres of land out of production through flooding. This land was predominantly located on the border with Leverington along the Goredike and the Gull, areas poorly drained and vulnerable to inundation.

Although the percentages did not change greatly the amount of land in production fell dramatically in response to reduced demand from a depleted population. At Wisbech Barton the acreage of demesne land farmed fell in the immediate aftermath of the plague but then recovered before falling again later in the century.[488] By the start of the fifteenth century the proportion of direct wheat production had recovered. With the demise of demesne farming the decline in arable farming continued into the sixteenth century balanced by an increase in pastoral farming. Thirsk notes that in the Wapentake of Elloe arable had fallen by 50% by the sixteenth century and pasture had increased by 25%.[489] This was reflected in the changing demographics of the Hundred (see Chapter Three) where the population of outlying parishes such as Tydd St Giles fell sharply but Wisbech saw a small increase. There was a reducing demand for resources needed for pastoral farming in the village but an increasing need for labour in the town.

Field Systems

Much of the medieval English landscape was dominated by the open-field system around a nucleated village (see Chapter One) and with the management under the control of a manorial court.[490] The dominant form was the common field or midland system that ran in a central band from the south-west to the north-east and could be

[487] B. Campbell and K. Bartley, *England on the Eve of the Black Death: an atlas of Lay Lordship, Land and Wealth 1300-1349* (Manchester, 2006), p. 135, Map 9.3.
[488] Stone, *Decision-Making*, p. 84.
[489] J. Thirsk, *English Peasant Farming* (London, 1957), pp. 22-5.
[490] C. Taylor, *Fields in the English Landscape* (London, 1975), p. 71.

recognised by the regularity of field size, layout and usage.[491] What Williamson et al would describe as a 'planned' as opposed to an 'ancient' countryside.[492] Although there has been considerable debate regarding the development of the open-field system and the relationship with settlement it is now generally accepted that open fields and nucleated settlements evolved in the late saxon period.[493] With the emergence of this new structure the older individual farmsteads and small fields largely disappeared. The process was accelerated by changing agrarian practices and an increase in arable farming required to feed the growing population.[494]

The Fenlands were outside the common-field region and along with most of East Anglia had adopted the less rigorous open-field system.[495] The settlements were surrounded by a varying number of irregular fields predominantly given over to arable.[496] The fields were open in the sense that there were no barriers between individual holdings although they were separated from other fields by drainage ditches.[497] The individual holdings within the fields, referred to as 'selions' or 'pecia' were typically ½ acre in size and were separated by small ditches and banks. On the Cambridgeshire silt marsh the strips within fields were called 'derlands' and could be much larger than those seen in the common field system.[498] It is difficult to identify clear evidence of strips in Fenland open fields as all signs of ridge and furrow have been destroyed by intensive farming.[499] In the midlands there were between two and four fields but in the Fenland there were numerous irregular fields with more being added at new lands were drained. In East Anglia 10 to 12 fields were not unusual but there could be considerably more.[500]

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[491] S. Oosthuizen, 'Medieval field systems and settlement nucleation: common or separate origins?', in N. Higham (ed), *The Landscapes of Anglo-Saxon England* (Woodbridge, 2010), pp. 107 and 110.
[492] T. Williamson, R. Liddiard and T. Partida, *Champion: the Making and Unmaking of the English Midland Landscape* (Liverpool, 2013), p. 10, Figure 3; D. Hall, *The Open Fields of England* (Oxford, 2014), p. 3.
[493] R. Jones and M. Page, *Medieval Villages in an English Landscape: Beginnings and Ends* (Trowbridge, 2006), p. 82; Oosthuizen, 'Medieval field systems', p. 112.
[494] Taylor, *Fields in the English Landscape*, p. 73.
[495] Bailey, *Medieval Suffolk*, p. 102.
[496] Oosthuizen,'Medieval field systems', p.117.
[497] Hall, *Open Fields*, pp. 73-4.
[498] Hall and Coles, *Fenland Survey*, p. 146.
[499] Hall, 'The draining of arable land in medieval England', p. 39.
[500] Bailey, *Medieval Suffolk*, pp. 102-3.

The older fields close to the original village settlements were smaller and mainly given over to arable rotation with the larger newly drained fields on the extremities of the parish being used for pasture.[501] Individuals held strips within different fields (as illustrated by the will of Robert Fisher from 1458 who held strips totaling 6½ acres in three fields to the west of Tydd St Giles) generally of a common width but varying in length depending on the size of the field.[502] Unlike other regions at this period there did not appear to be orders for communal cropping although inevitably there would have been a degree of coordination.[503]

The nature of the open-field system within the Hundred is illustrated by two examples, Tydd St Giles and Elm. The field structures for these parishes are shown in Figure 4.2 and Figure 4.3.

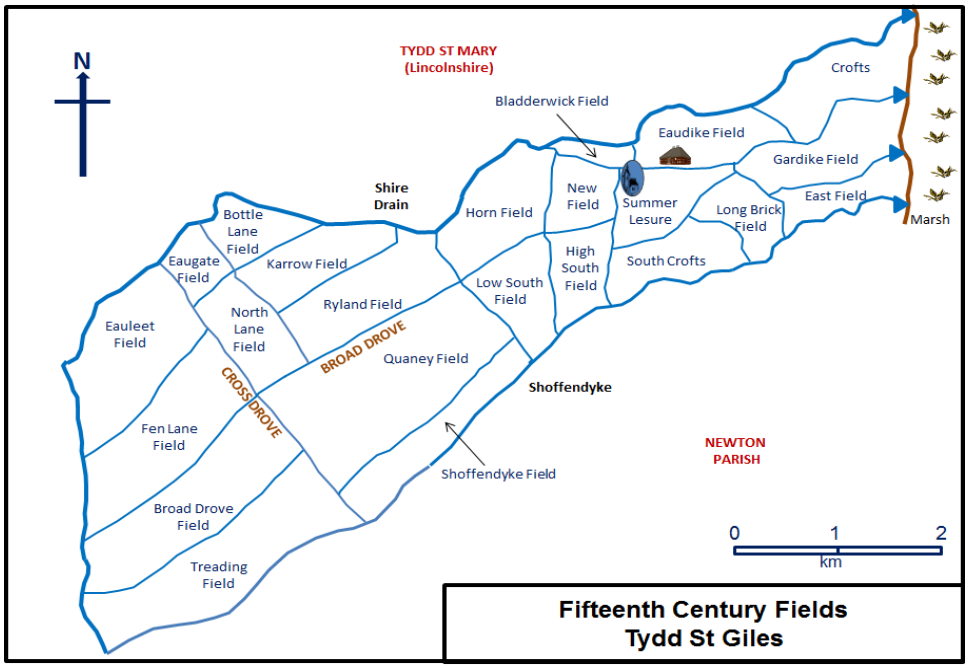

Figure 4.2 – Tydd St Giles field system in the fifteenth century.

Tydd St Giles is a nucleated settlement with linear extensions along field boundaries and communications routes. It is surrounded by four fields; Bladderwick Field, Eaudike Field, New Field and Summer Lesure. The fields are relatively small, irregular and the first three used for arable with the less well-drained Summer Lesure being pasture. They

[501] Hall, *Open Fields*, pp. 74-5.
[502] C.R.O., VC 1:62.
[503] Hall, *Open Fields*, p. 77.

are open-fields with multiple tenants farming plots of varying sizes. As discussed in Chapter One these fields developed in parallel with the village during the late saxon period and this is supported by pottery finds in the area.[504] As the village grew and the demand for produce increased more land was drained during the high medieval period. The fields to the east between Tydd St Giles and the marsh were also irregular but larger than the original open fields. The fields to the west between the village and the border with Lincolnshire were large but more regular. The fields here although draining into the Shire Drain and the Shoffendyke were heavier and of a poorer quality and used mainly for pasture. In total there were 23 fields in the parish.

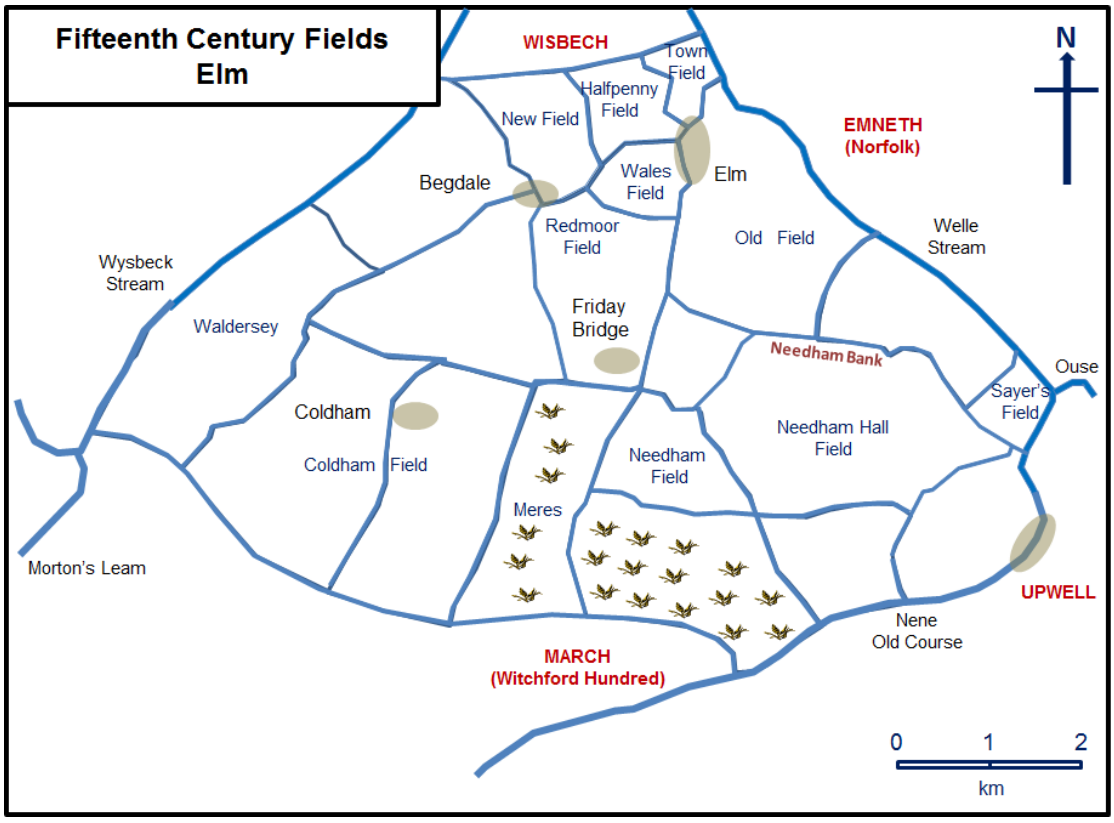

Figure 4.3 – Elm field system in the fifteenth century.

Although it was an inland parish the field system of Elm bears many similarities with Tydd St Giles. Around the village there were four small irregular open-fields (Town Field, Halfpenny Field, Wales Field and Old Field). The largest was Old Field and it lay between Elm and the Welle Stream. These fields dated to the late saxon origins of the village and were primarily arable. Between Begdale and Friday Bridge were two further

[504] HER(C) CB15604; HER(C) 09014.

open fields (New Field and Redmoor Field) again mainly arable. To the south of the parish were extensive meres and marshes bordering the peat fen and, being valuable fisheries and reed beds, were not drained. To the north of these wetlands were a number of large fields protected by banks constructed in the twelfth and thirteenth centuries (Coldham Bank, Needham Bank and Laddus Bank). These irregular fields were less well drained and used primarily for pasture. Similarly, the land to the west of the parish between Begdale and the Wisbeck Stream (Waldersey Field) was given over to pasture. In total there were 16 fields in Elm.

There is a clear distinction between field systems on the silt and peat soils. In Wisbech Hundred the early fields were small and irregular. On the transition between silt and peat the field were larger and more regular being drained later in the medieval period. In the peat fen there was a small number of fields close to the settlement (such as those around Upwell) and beyond that gave out to pasture and marsh.[505] Their shape was governed by the incursion of the marshes of the peat fen. The open-field systems in the Hundred were associated with the settlement rather than the parish. For example, in a parish with multiple settlements such as Leverington then separate field systems evolved to meet the needs of the local community.

Land Ownership

The nature of land ownership changed between the thirteenth and sixteenth centuries reflecting demographic and social changes. At the start of the period it was based around the manor of which there were 21 recorded in the 1249-50 survey. Four were farmed directly by the Bishop of Ely, two were held by the Prior of Ely and the remainder were sub-manors (see Table 4.10). The manors varied greatly in size and only in one case, Stephen de Marisco who held land in Tydd St Giles and Newton, did an individual control more than one manor

In the thirteenth and fourteenth centuries landownership was primarily concentrated in the hands of a limited number of individuals who, through their officials, controlled the estate.[506] Much of the demesne production would have been used to feed the immediate household or would have been consumed locally with any surplus being sold. The

[505] Hall and Coles, *Fenland Survey*, pp. 146-8.
[506] E. Miller, *Abbey and Bishopric of Ely* (Cambridge, 1951), p. 253.

Bishop of Ely's manor of Wisbech Barton in 1363 sent oats and wheat to Wisbech Castle, Ely, the other manors directly managed by the Bishop and even as far as his residence in Holborn.[507] In the manorial accounts for Newton in 1395 land was 'in the lord's hands' (Sir John Colville) with the produce supplying the estate.[508] Inevitably the proportion of agricultural production traded at this period was less than at the end of the fifteenth century. After the demesne land had been leased the great households were required to meet their needs through the market causing an increase in the trade in grain and other goods.[509]

[507] Stone, *Decision-Making*, p. 33.
[508] Newton, p. 69.
[509] C. Woolgar, *The Great Household in Late Medieval England* (London, 1999), pp. 111-12.

Location	Name	Type	Held By	Description
Tydd St Giles	Tydd St Giles	Main Manor	Bishop of Ely	44 acres demesne and saltern
Tydd St Giles	Hockholds	Sub Manor	Stephen de Marisco	112 acres
Tydd St Giles	Rickards	Sub Manor	William de Weston	256 acres
Newton	Newton	Sub Manor	Stephen de Marisco	240 acres
Leverington	Leverington	Main Manor	Bishop of Ely	44½ acres demense
Leverington	Richmond	Sub Manor	Unknown	160 acres
Leverington	Fitton	Sub Manor	Elias de Fitton	144 acres and 120 acres 'new lands'
Leverington	Graces	Main Manor	Prior of Ely	216 acres
Wisbech	Wisbech Murrow	Main Manor	Prior of Ely	Unknown
Wisbech	Wisbech Barton	Main Manor	Bishop of Ely	719¼ acres demesne, 3 mills and 4 fisheries
Wisbech	Unknown	Sub Manor	William de Longechamp	280 acres
Wisbech	Unknown	Sub Manor	Osebert de Walepol	200 acres
Wisbech	Unknown	Sub Manor	John de Lytelbury	80 acres
Elm	Needham	Sub Manor	Giles de Wechesham	1592 acres
Elm	Unknown	Sub Manor	John de Marisco	220 acres
Elm	Haustede	Sub Manor	Robert de Haustede	94 acres
Elm	Coldham	Sub Manor	Simon de Melkesham	500 acres
Elm	Beauford (Beaudessert)	Sub Manor	Philip de Lisle	440 acres
Elm	Vernun	Sub Manor	Joceus Vernun	1/6th knights fee and 80 acres
Upwell	Hallcroft	Main Manor	Bishop of Ely	8 acres demesne and 7 fisheries
Upwell	Marmont	Sub Manor	Priory of Marmont	100 acres

Table 4.10 – Manor of Wisbech Hundred 1250.[510]

[510] ECB, pp. 127-80.

Using the 1249-50 survey, in addition to the Bishop's manor and the two sub manors with 256 acres and 112 acres respectively there were seven free tenants and 73 customary tenants in Tydd St Giles. The seven free tenants held on average 25 acres each with the customary tenants holding on average seven acres. The size of the free tenant holdings varied between three acres and 80 acres (a virgate being 32 acres). The size of the customary tenant holdings varied from a single messuage up to a maximum of 64 acres.[511]

This information can be compared with that for the fifteenth and early sixteenth centuries. The analysis of landownership here is based on the data held in Bishop Alcock's Terrier of 1492 and the data for Tydd St Giles contained in manorial records and wills. The parish is typical in structure to the other settlements and provides a model for the Hundred. There is a near complete run of manorial records for the period 1495 to 1506 containing a total of 29 land transactions. There are a total of 21 wills for the village that cover the period 1452 to 1524 and these include a further 67 land transactions. Some caution has to be exercised as the wills may not include all the land farmed by the family. The detail of the land transactions given in the wills and the manorial records are shown in Appendix 1 at the end of the chapter.

With the 29 transactions noted in the manorial court records the fieldnames can be identified in 27 cases with only two where the fieldname was not given or was illegible. The 27 entries refer to 11 different fields in the parish with the majority in the older fields such as New Field and Summer Lesure. The transactions vary in size from ½ acre up to a maximum of six acres with an average transaction of two acres. Out of the total of 29 only nine were between family members; five from father to son (as in the case of John Chyrche to his son Robert in 1504), two from husband to wife (for example John Ingham transferring land in New Field to his wife Joan in 1503) and two where the family relationship was not clear.[512] This would imply that the bulk of the land transactions, approximately two thirds, were either through sale of the land or through plots being reassigned by the lord of the manor on the death of the tenant without heirs. This was not uncommon and can be seen in the records for Redgrave in Suffolk for the

[511]ECB, pp. 157-62.
[512] C.U.L., EDR/C7/1-24, Manorial Court Roll, Tydd St Giles, 1503-4.

earlier period of 1260 to 1319 where less than 20% of the transfers were between family members.[513]

Table 4.11 shows a sample of the land-holdings in the fields around Wisbech from Bishop Alcock's Terrier of 1492 selected to show the broad range of acreages held by individuals.

Name	Land (acres)	Fields
Trinity Guild	164½	9
Reginald Giles	88¾	4
John Lawrence	42½	3
John Merys	42	2
John Burwell	39¼	4
Robert Digby	33	4
Thomas Ketyll	32	4
Thomas Ruddale	30¼	4
John Lambert	23	3
William Drake	22	1
William Gatesend	12½	2

Table 4.11 – A sample of land-holdings from Bishop Alcock's Terrier of 1492.[514]

There were some substantial land holding with the largest, excluding the Trinity Guild, being that of Reginald Giles with 88¾ acres in four fields. John Lawrence and John Merys each held in excess of 40 acres in three and two fields respectively. Robert Digby held 33 acres but from his will he was known to hold land and property in other parishes. The wealth of individual families was enhanced by other members holding land in the fields. The relatives of John Burwell held a further 21 acres and those of William Drake a further 37¼ acres. The Trinity Guild held a total of 164½ acres in all nine fields acquired through gifts and bequests from members. The Guild did not farm the land directly but rented it out with the process being managed by the Bailiff (see Chapter Five). The Trinity Guild leases for 1532 are shown in Table 4.12 below giving an indication of the size of the Guild's holdings and their value. It reinforces the evidence for the general increase in the size of landholdings. From the Terrier, the average land-holding was in excess of 18 acres. This was more than twice as large as

[513] Bailey, *Medieval Suffolk*, p. 55; C. Dyer, *An Age of Transition* (Oxford, 2005), p. 48.
[514] BAT, pp. 9-95.

the average holding in 1249-50 illustrating the changing nature of landholding post the Black Death. There is also evidence of landowners attempting to concentrate their holdings into a smaller number of fields to make them easier to work. The changing patterns of land-holding were accompanied by changes to the conditions of ownership. Through the late fourteenth and fifteenth centuries customary tenures were increasingly moving to a 'rent package' incorporating a cash element derived from labour services (that had largely ceased) in the assize rent.[515] The manor continued to be an important feature of medieval land holding but by the end of the fifteenth century there was a clear shift in focus from the manor to the tenant.

[515] M. Bailey, 'The transformation of customary tenures in southern England, c. 1350-1500', *Agricultural History Review* 62 (2014), p. 227.

Name	Field	Acres	Rent
John Holden	Sayer Field	12	10s
Thomas Horner	Halfpenny Field	18	20s
Thomas Freeman	Redmoor Field	7	6s
William Dryver	North Inham Field	14	10s
Robert Stele	New Field	2	6s
William Sadler	Nymandole/Hern Field	Unknown	53s 4d
John Balam	Colnest Field	9	8s
William Austen	Unknown	13	16s
Thomas Drabbe (shoemaker)	Colnest/Flakmoor	11	13s
Richard Stele	Brigg Field	14	7s
William Crownsbury	Colnest Field	10	15s
John Johnson	Unknown	7	14s
John Edward	Unknown	34	30s
John Holden	Colnest Field	15	14s
Robert Draper	Unknown	11	20s
Thomas Begle (butcher)	Unknown	12	24s
John Beanes	Colnest Field	1	3s 3d
John Shawe	Longland Field	14	14s 4d
William Marten	Unknown	40	60s
Robert Fryng	Unknown	24	36s
TOTALS		268	£18 19s 11d

Table 4.12 – A sample of Trinity Guild land leases from 1532.[516]

Family-Land Bond

A factor that should be considered in the relationship between landholding and the family is the family-land bond. It is an approach that has been used to analyse peasant land holding before and after the Black Death. It was one of the influences on the decisions made by families to retain land or to put it to the market.[517] Before the fourteenth century the link between a peasant family and the land required for subsistence was strong. *Post-mortem* land transfer through inheritance was dominant

[516]TGR, p. 51.

[517] J. Whittle, *The Development of Agrarian Capitalism: Land and Labour in Norfolk 1440-1580* (Oxford, 2000), p. 87.

and closely controlled through the manorial system. *Inter-vivos* land transfer did occur but it was limited.[518]

After the Black Death the fall in population meant that more land was available and the price fell dramatically. The link between the family and specific land holdings was weakened and it increasingly began to be seen as a commodity that could be bought and sold like other goods. This process was accelerated by the decline in demesne farming that made more land available. Individuals were able to increase their holdings and to buy or sell strips of land to create more manageable farms. By the end of the fifteenth century the family-land bond had been eroded and *inter-vivos* transfer through an established land market was the norm, as Dyer comments 'the sale and purchase of land were relatively commonplace actions'.[519]

It is possible to compare the land transfers shown in the manorial records for Tydd St Giles between 1398 and 1496, see Table 4.13. Although the sample is small it indicates a weakening in the relationship between the family and specific land-holdings. In the 1398 manorial record there were four transactions with two between family members (father to son) and two with no direct family connection. In the 1496 record there were seven transactions with none between family members. There is evidence of a possible rationalisation of land-holdings with Lawrence Tyesdale relinquishing one plot of ½ acre but acquiring two other plots totaling 1½ acres from Robert Dorward. With a diminished population combined with more land being available self-sufficiency was less of a challenge and there were greater opportunities to produce goods for sale. As the link between family and land was weakening land was increasingly being regarded as another tradable commodity. As Schofield notes 'where lordship was relatively weak … an extremely active land market … thrived'.[520]

[518] P. Schofield, *Peasant and Community in Medieval England 1200-1500* (Basingstoke, 2003), p. 53.
[519] Dyer, *Age of Transition*, p. 121.
[520] Schofields, *Peasant and Community*', p. 134.

1398			
From	**To**	**Family Relationship**	**Size**
John Clere	Matilda Goode	No	1 acre
John Clere	Nicholas Clere	Son	½ acre
Stephen Lake	Peter Lake	Son	1¼ acre
John Hammond	Peter Delly	No	½ acre
1496			
Margaret Langham	Thomas Brydon	No	2 acres
William Swayne	Richard Towte	No	½ acre
John Wynter	Philip Odeham	No	Unknown
Lawrence Tyesdale	Robert Hunston	No	½ acre
Robert Dorward	John Tyesdale	No	1 acre
Robert Dorward	Lawrence Tyesdale	No	1 acre
Robert Dorward	Lawrence Tyesdale	No	½ acre

Table 4.13 – Comparison of land transactions in Tydd St Giles in 1398 and 1496.[521]

Farmers

Although the term farmer strictly applies to those individuals who rented demesne land here it is used to describe those who held sizeable acreages of farm land.[522] In order to understand farming as part of the Fenland economy it is helpful to understand the scale of the individual farms that collectively made up that economy. The wills from the 1450s to the 1520s provide a useful tool to look at the resources available to the individual farmers and how these were organised. They contain details of landholdings, farm buildings, equipment and animals. They also provide evidence for the type and scale of the crops grown. In this post-demesne period farming activity ranged from individual families with a few acres of land and little in the way of equipment or animals through to large landowners with in excess of 100 acres spread across a number of parishes and with extensive buildings, equipment and animals. Although it is arbitrary to categorise the size of farming activity, to facilitate the analysis three groups are considered; small-scale farmers with less than 20 acres, medium-scale farmers with less than 100 acres and large-scale farmers with more than 100 acres. It is worth noting that Fenland farmers with a holding of less than 20 acres would still be regarded as

[521] C.U.L., EDR/C7/1-24, Manorial Court Roll, Tydd St Giles, 1398; C.U.L., EDR/C7/1-24 Manorial Court Roll, Tydd St Giles, 1496.
[522] Dyer, *Making a Living*, p. 346.

relatively large landowners by the standards of parts of the midlands; in the woodlands around Coventry only 13% of tenants had more than 30 acres of land.[523] Wills from this period often did not include small holders and inevitably this sample of wills is slanted towards the wealthier farmers but it is still indicative of the different categories.

Looking at the characteristics of a small-scale farmer, these typically held land in a series of holdings in different fields in the same parish. They had a single messuage (farmstead) combining dwelling house with a barn for the storage of equipment and produce and sometimes for animals. They had little in the way of equipment and genrally did not own their own plough, given the high cost of purchase, but would have shared with neighbours.[524] Below the small-scale farmer were those with only a few acres of land. It was considered that ¼ virgate (less than 10 acres) was the minimum required to support a peasant family and below that level they would need other sources of income usually in the form of providing labour services.[525] William Brice of Elm stands as an example of the small-scale farmer. In his will from 1454 he had 15 acres of land.[526] This was in Oldfield (three acres), Wales Field (four acres), Halfpenny Field (one acre) and Somerfield (seven acres). These were the original fields surrounding the village and it is reasonable to assume that the Brice family had survived the disasters of the fourteenth century and managed to build on their original field strips through purchase or inheritance. He had a single messuage that was left to his wife Joan who also inherited all the 'household utensils'. There is reference to lambs indicating the existence of a flock of sheep although there is no indication of its size.

Another example of a small-scale farmer was Thomas Hamunde from Tydd St Giles who left 18 acres and three roods of land in his will dated 1467.[527] The largest holdings were in East Field (7½ acres) and Eaudike Field (five acres one rood). His land stretched across the parish and included two acres on Eauleet (Elete) field in the less well-drained land to the west. The messuage was to be inherited by his wife Matilda and after her death to be passed to their son Robert. The will was dated from June, before the harvest, and reference is made to crops in the field. He left to his wife one acre three

[523] C. Dyer, 'Tenant farming and farmers, West Midlands' in E. Miller (ed), *The Agrarian History of England and Wales 1348-1500 Volume III* (Cambridge, 1991), pp 636-7.
[524] Campbell, *Seigniorial Agriculture*, p.358; Williamson et al, *Champion*, pp. 11-2.
[525] Schofield, *Peasant and Community*, p. 132.
[526] C.R.O., VC 1:32.
[527] C.R.O., VC 2:58.

roods of wheat in East Field, 1½ acre of beans in the same field and one acre of barley but with no location. A further two acres of wheat and rye (mixtill) and 1½ acre of beans were to be sold.[528]

This gives an indication to the proportions of agricultural production on the silt lands of the Hundred. Thomas also had sheep and cattle as well as at least two horses. He may also have had farm equipment covered by the reference to 'necessities' left to his wife. Richard Barker of Elm left at least 14 acres of land in his will of 1453.[529] Seven acres and a messuage on land adjoining that of his brother Edmund Barker was left to his wife Marion with a further messuage and seven acres in Redmoor Field close to the village. There was reference to 'all my other lands' being sold to pay off debts although the amount and location of this land is not specified. There was no reference in the will to any farming equipment or to animals. For small and medium-scale farmers the immediate family (*famuli*) would have played an important role in providing labour, as they had done previously on demesne land.[530]

In the next category were medium-scale farmers with in excess of 20 acres of land located within a single parish. In addition to the principal messuage they had other buildings including a barn for the storage of grain. Some had a second messuage rented out or used by other members of the extended family. The medium-scale farmer was more likely to have large numbers of sheep and cattle as well as owning their own farm equipment. William Reynolds of Wisbech left 23½ acres of land in his will of 1464.[531] The largest single land holding was seven acres off Barton Lane and his main messuage was in Sheep Lane in the town and was left to his wife Isabel and after her to be divided between his two married daughters, Katherine and Elizabeth. It was a sizeable farmstead and there were buildings for animals and equipment including a plough and cart with 'all necessary tackle'. The will also records sheep and horses being left to his wife.

[528] Stone, *Decision-Making*, p. 37.
[529] C.R.O., VC 1:34
[530] J. Claridge and J. Langdon, 'The composition of *famuli* labour on English demesnes, c. 1300', *Agricultural History Review* 63 (2015), p. 187.
[531] C.R.O., VC 2:106.

In Tydd St Giles the will of Simon Adam from 1496 had a total of 29 acres and three roods of land.[532] Most of the farmland was located in the north and west of the parish with crops in the north and pasture in the west. It is likely that he had a large flock of sheep, of which 26 were recorded as gifts to family members. There is reference within the will to cattle. The will was from November, after the harvest, and noted that he had quantities of grain and wool in store. A final example of a medium-scale farmer is John Drew (see Chapter Three) from Newton. In his will of 1453 he left 62 acres of land in and around the village.[533] Most of the land was on the northern side of the parish between Newton and Tydd St Giles. In the east the land was by the sea bank and to the west the land was in Crofts, Fenland Field and in Gaul Field. This would have been prime arable land being light and well-drained silt soils. The land was close to that of John Derby a farmer with 21 acres who left in his later will of 1457 a plough, a cart and cattle.[534] John Drew also had two messuages; the principal messuage was in the Crofts close to the church but the location of the second messuage is not given.

The final category is the large-scale farmer with in excess of 100 acres of land across a number of parishes. They had several messuages and other buildings as well as extensive flocks of sheep. They were involved in other economic activities. William Drake from Wisbech (father of the William Drake mentioned in the 1492 terrier) left 125 acres of land in Wisbech and Leverington in his will of 1477.[535] The land was held in a series of plots dispersed across the two vills. The land holdings were so extensive that they were generally not specified in detail being referred to only as 31½ acres across Wisbech (although some specific references were made such as five acres in Nymandole near Wisbech St Mary, eight acres in Pap's Field in Leverington and ½ acre in East Field across the Welle Stream). He also held three selions of 'empty' land on the New Market in Wisbech. He had two messuages, both left to his son John. The first was near to the New Market next to the Castle Dyke but the location of the second, named Bekeswell, was not given. The ownership of property in the town demonstrated a diversity of economic interests. A proportion of the land was to be sold off by his executors in part for the payment of debts but mainly for payment to the churches at Wisbech St Mary, Walsoken, Walton and the Chapel of Corpus Christi in Murrow (£16

[532] T.N.A., P.R.O., PROB 11/11.
[533] C.R.O., VC 1:29.
[534] C.R.O., VC 1:54.
[535] C.R.O., VC 2:94.

7s 4d) for the salvation of his soul. He had property outside the county as there was a reference to the ownership of two messuages in Hitchin, Hertfordshire. The will also contained references to farm equipment and animals.

William Drake's will includes mention of his brother-in-law, Thomas Edward, another substantial landowner with 81 acres one rood noted in his will of 1496.[536] There is no record of buildings but he did have a herd of cattle, horses and plough-oxen. He presumably owned a plough but this was not mentioned in the will. He left to his wife Margaret, sister of William Drake, goods held in store including four quarters of wheat, five of oats, three of barley and two of beans. A final example of a large scale farmer was Hamlet Norbury again from Wisbech (see the more detailed description in Chapter Three). In his will of 1496 much of the land (65 acres) was in the manor of Wisbech Barton in the fields of Sybaldsholm, Fenland Field and Hirn Field with the principal messuage, in Crofts opposite Sybaldsholm with 10 acres of land. A second messuage, in Leverington, called Turffyn Place was to be sold by his executors for the payment of debts and legacies. His wife Matilda was also to have 'all the utensils and necessaries within and without my house and the grain it contains for the use of her inn'. The family were involved in activities other than farming with Matilda being a brewer and inn-keeper. There was no specific reference to other buildings or farm equipment in the relatively short will other than a mention of 'all other goods' left to his wife and to grain in store. The will made reference to cattle and horses but there is no direct mention of sheep although it is likely that such a sizeable landowner would have had a large flock, particularly given that some of the land was described as meadow or pasture.

[536] T.N.A., P.R.O., PROB 11/11/285.

Fishing

The ready access to both sea and freshwater fisheries helped to attract early settlers to the region. Fishing was a significant contributor to the Fenland economy throughout the period and Darby describes the structure of the industry in some detail based on the information available from the Domesday Book where there are six separate entries for Wisbech relating to fisheries.[537] The majority of these referred to eel fishing (the eel being prolific in the Fenland waterways). At Welle (Outwell/Upwell) it was recorded that as early as the tenth century 20 fishermen took sixty thousand eels from the rivers and meres.[538] They were so plentiful that they played an important role in the late saxon economy being used as a form of payment (primarily for rent) and referred to as *fishsilver* or *denarius ad piscem*.[539]

This data from the early period can be compared with the information on fisheries recorded in the survey of 1249-50 and in Bishop Alcock's Terrier of 1492. In the 1249-50 survey of the Hundred two fisheries were noted for Wisbech with an income to the Bishop of 43s. The larger being Upstavene was 'at farm' for 40s and Bechewerefen was 'at farm' for 3s.[540] The most important area for fisheries was the border between Elm and Welle. Here seven fisheries generated a total income of £14 9s 4d.[541] The largest were Wellehe generating 48s 8d and Hadebech generating 40s 16d. In the manorial accounts for Newton from 1395 there was reference to John Stokil and Roger Temere paying 28s 4d for the right to take fish from the marshes.[542]

In 1492 it was noted that the fisheries belonging to the Bishop of Ely generated an annual income of £13 4s 8d as well as providing fish for the household. The entry was relatively brief but does value the fisheries. Thomas Ketyll held a fishery called Lakebury in Elm that returned 6s per annum. Edward Arthur held another, more valuable, fishery called Braunchmere (see Chapter One, Figure 1.13) also in Elm that returned 12s. William Andrew held a number of fisheries at The Mouth, Plantweir and Newcote in Guyhirn on the west side of the Wisbeck Stream for a payment of 60s.[543]

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[537] Darby, *Medieval Fenland*, p. 22.
[538] VCH(IoE), p. 208.
[539] Darby, *Medieval Fenland*, p 31.
[540] ECB, p. 129.
[541] ECB, p. 180.
[542] Newton, p. 80.
[543] BAT, p.5.

The record in the Terrier also noted that the Bishop held various fisheries in Welle and Wellen Ee (Wellenhe in 1250) that were put out to William Wright for a payment of £8 per annum. The Terrier shows that these men also held land in Elm and Guyhirn and that the fisheries formed part of their livelihood but were not their sole means of employment.

There was a concentration of fisheries in and around Elm and Upwell where there was a confluence of waterways with the Nene, Welle Stream and a branch of the Ouse coming together. There was an area of marshland with large meres on the border between the silt marsh and the peat fen and these were abundant fisheries, being ideal habitat for eels.[544] They would have helped to support the settlements at Upwell and Outwell that had limited access to good farmland. The villages were conveniently situated on the main trading routes out of the Hundred that allowed easy disposal of any surpluses to Wisbech and the inland towns such as Ely and St Ives where the fair was described in 1534 as 'being the most notable fair within the realm for provisions of fish'.[545] There was a similar concentration of fisheries around Guyhirn where the Fendyke running from Crowland and the Wisbeck Stream running down to Wisbech town came together, see Figure 4.4 below showing the location of the key waterways and fisheries.

Wisbech and the northern parishes of the Hundred benefitted from access to the Wash and sea fishing. Although the eel was the most important catch there was a diversity of fish available with the *Liber Eliensis* noting that large numbers of pike, perch, roach, burbots and lampreys were also regularly caught.[546] Fishing met a local demand for food supplies to supplement the diet of the population, particularly during the winter, and provided a source of income. The fisheries went the way of demesne land and by the end of the fifteenth century were largely rented out by the Bishop. Sea and freshwater fish from wetland regions were purchased and consumed far inland indicating the existence of processing.[547] Fishing was important in all wetland regions, for example in the Humber Wetlands there were meres and tidal fisheries.[548] In these

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[544] A. Ibbotson, 'Colonisation of freshwater habitats by the European eel', *Freshwater Biology* 47, (2002), p. 1696.
[545] Lee, *Cambridge*, p. 130.
[546] J. Fairweather (trans), *Liber Eliensis* (Woodbridge, 2005), p. 213
[547] Rippon, *Transformation*, p. 224; C. Woolgar, 'Food and the middle ages', *Journal of Medieval History* 36 (2009), p. 7.
[548] Van de Noort, *Humber Wetlands*, p. 151.

regions fishing was the sole employment of many compared with Wisbech Hundred where in the late medieval period it was primarily a fringe activity.

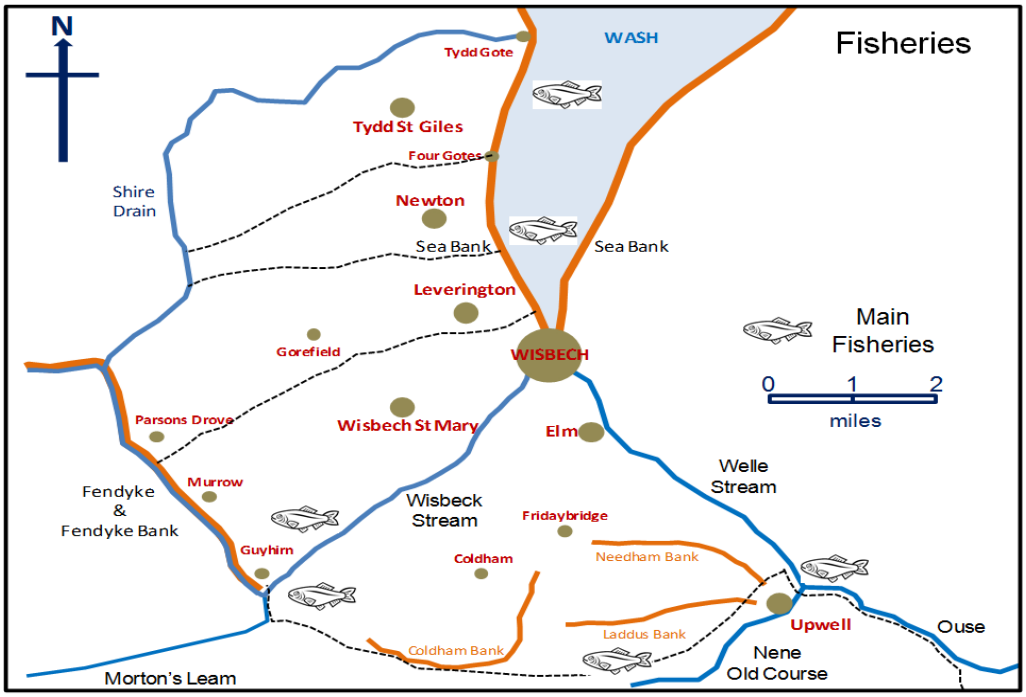

Figure 4.4 - Map showing the main fisheries in the Hundred 1250-1492.[549]

Wildfowling

In the middle-ages the silt marsh was abundant in wildfowl especially in the winter when large flocks of geese and ducks would return to the region.[550] Although it was not a significant part of the local economy wildfowling supplemented the diet and provide some additional income. The huge numbers and diversity of bird life was such that it warranted specific mention in contemporary chronicles.[551] The normal method of capture was by snare or by netting that could take many birds at a time (a method that continued to be used well into the twentieth century).[552] Written evidence is limited but wildfowling was a part-time activity mainly carried out in winter when other work was slack. The wildfowl would predominantly have been used by the hunter and family but there is evidence to support the existence of a trade in surplus birds. Large numbers of geese and other birds were a regular part of the annual Trinity Guild feast in Wisbech

[549] Darby, *Medieval Fenland*, pp. 22-32.
[550] A. Reeves and T. Williamson, 'Marshes', in J. Thirsk. (ed), *Rural England: An Illustrated History of the Landscape* (Oxford, 2000), p. 163.
[551] Fairweather, *Liber Eliensis*, p. 214.
[552] Rippon, *Transformation*, p. 42.

(for example 24 geese were purchased in 1465 for 3s 8d and again in 1485 for 4s 8d).[553] Local demand was supplemented by that from Ely and Cambridge that pulled in produce from the surrounding fenlands.[554]

Marsh Produce (Reeds, Rushes, Sedge and Peat)

With a large population there was a demand for building materials in the Hundred. The peasant dwelling houses and associated farm building were of a simple design with a wood frame, wattle and daub infill and a thatched roof.[555] The main dwelling would typically have been of three bays approximately 6m in width and 15m in length.[556] Based on the estimated population at the start of the sixteenth century there would have been approximately 1000 dwelling houses and numerous other buildings in the Hundred. Such buildings, although robust, in the harsh Fenland environment would have required regular repair and maintenance creating a steady requirement for materials.[557] The majority of the building materials were sourced locally with only stone (normally Barnack Stone from the east midlands), and more substantial timbers, being imported through Wisbech. The marshlands surrounding the hundred supplied the other requirements in the form of reeds (for thatch), rushes and smaller trees.[558] Reeds from the fens were highly valued and were supplied as far as Cambridge.[559] The main locations for the collection of reeds were along the banks of the extensive waterways and the meres to the south of the Hundred (as shown in the following Figure 4.5) but they would also have been collected along the drainage ditches and areas of marsh within the parishes.

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[553] TGR, pp. 32, 35 and 50.
[554] Lee, *Cambridge*, p. 6.
[555] C. Dyer, *Everyday Life in Medieval England* (Cambridge, 2000), p. 142.
[556] C. Dyer, 'Living in a peasant house in late medieval England', *Vernacular Architecture* 44 (2013), p. 19.
[557] H. Le Patourel, 'Rural building in England and Wales', in E. Miller (ed), *The Agrarian History of England and Wales 1348-1500 Volume III* (Cambridge, 1991), p. 844; J. Scholfield and G. Stell, 'The built environment 1300-1540', in D. Palliser (ed), *The Cambridge Urban History of Britain Volume 1 600-1540* (Cambridge, 2000), pp. 389-91.
[558] Darby, *Medieval Fenland*, p. 32.
[559] Lee, *Cambridge*, p. 186.

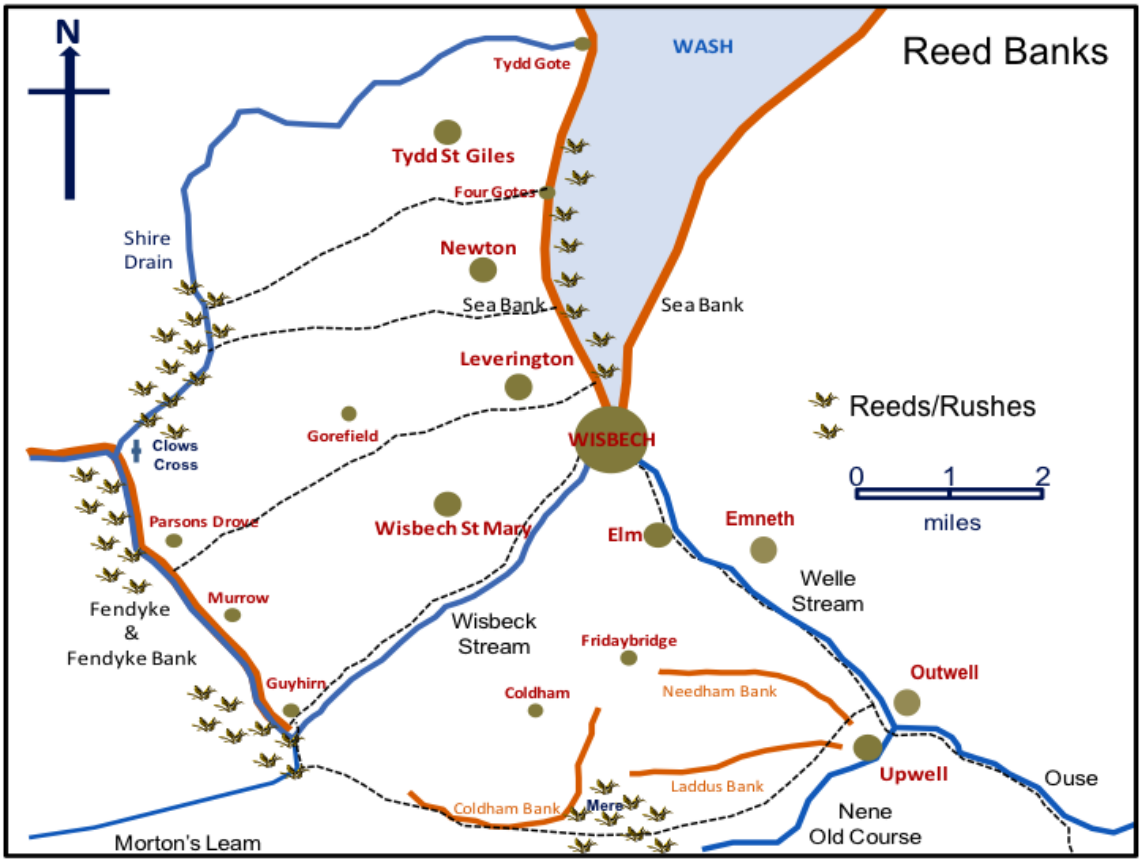


Figure 4.5 – Map showing the main locations for collecting reed and rushes.[560]

In the fens the collection and transportation of reeds was a customary service but it could be commuted by a cash payment, referred to as *seggesilver*.[561] Manorial records show that reeds were a valuable commodity and cropping was tightly controlled. In the Newton accounts for 1395 there was reference to payment to the lord (John Colville) 'for 700 reeds collected upon the lord's land by Isabell Goscelin'.[562] There were fines for taking reeds and other material without the approval of the lord and the rights were closely guarded. In the manorial court roll for Tydd St Giles in 1502 it was noted that 'no person will take reeds in the water called Newfendyke at the place called Broaddrove'.[563] In the manorial court roll for Elm in May 1503 it was noted that the inhabitants of March will not fish and gather reeds within the Hundred of Wisbech under a penalty for each delinquent of 3s 4d' to protect local use of the commodity.[564]

[560] Hall and Coles, *Fenland Survey*, p. 138.
[561] Darby, *Medieval Fenland*, p. 33.
[562] Newton, p. 94.
[563] C.U.L., EDR/C7/1-24, Manorial Court Roll, Tydd St Giles, 1502.
[564] C.U.L., EDR/C7/1-24, Manorial Court Roll, Elm, 1503.

The other marsh produce that would have been significant, particularly to the people of Elm and Upwell in the south of the Hundred, was peat (indicated by place-names such as Turflot). The silt marsh gave out to the low-lying and less well-drained peat land adjoining the Witchford Hundred and there is evidence of turbaries in the area.[565] There were also substantial areas of peat within the silt marsh that could be exploited. The Newton account makes reference to payments for cartloads of turves dug by Robert Cok and Richard Reynald.[566] The peat would have been dried and used locally for fuel and, as mentioned earlier, for salt production.

Salt

The ready access to the resources needed for salt production in the hundred ensured an adequate supply of salt to meet local demand and provided a surplus for trading. Although the Hundred did not have access to the extensive coastlines of Norfolk and Lincolnshire it did have access to the tidal waters of the Wash. These waters were channelled well inland via the many natural creeks and manmade waterways. There is archaeological evidence for extensive salt production during the Roman period that continued throughout the middle ages. This was particularly evident along the Wash and major waterways such as the Shire Drain.[567]

Early salt production was carried out by channelling the salt water into clay-lined tanks. Here the salinity of the water was allowed to increase by evaporation. The concentrate was then channelled into briquetage troughs and heated to drive off the last of the water. The raw salt was then shaped into cakes for transportation.[568] The process evolved and by the later medieval period use was being made of saturated sands and mud from the coastline or from the banks of the creeks. There is a reference in the Newton accounts for 1395 of payment for the carting of sand to the lord's salt pits.[569] This was cut and then allowed to dry to further concentrate the salt before being placed on straw or rush filters and flushed with more water. This extracted the salt from the sand or mud and the

[565] Hall and Coles, *Fenland Survey*, p.117.
[566] Newton, p. 94.
[567] HER(C) 04003; HER (C) 08481a.
[568] Rippon, *Transformation*, p. 44.
[569] Newton, p. 87.

strongly saline water was heated in vats or pans to evaporate the water leaving behind the salt to be cut into cakes.[570]

An analysis of the Cambridgeshire and Norfolk HER records has identified 26 potential sites for salterns in the Hundred (many of them clustered together making 11 main centres for salt production); of these seven appear to be Romano-British and the remainder medieval (see the following Figure 4.6). This does not necessarily indicate a greater level of activity in the early period but rather the survival of more archaeological material from the time.[571] Evidence from the briquetage troughs of the earlier period is likely to have survived whereas the metal vats used to heat the salt water in the later period are likely to have been removed and reused. The salterns at Newton and Leverington were located on the Sea Bank and used the muds from the Salt March and the waters from the Wash.[572] There was a concentration of salt production in the south of the parish of Elm along the Coldham Bank. Here they had access to the tidal waters of the meres and marshland adjoining the peat fen fed by seawater from the Welle Stream. Salt production was controlled and the lord could claim a toll on all salt produced and sold.[573] Production continued to the fifteenth century but by the end of the period was progressively being replaced by regional production and imports.[574] Salt production was becoming an industry in Cheshire and the West Midlands (denoted by the 'wich' element in place-names such as Northwich, Middlewich and Droitwich). It was also being imported from France (Biscay salt) through the south coast ports.[575]

[570] Rippon, *Transformation*, p. 229.
[571] Rippon, *Transformation*, p. 45.
[572] Hall and Coles, *Fenland Survey*, p. 144.
[573] Darby, *Medieval Fenland*, p. 41.
[574] Rippon, *Transformation*, p.46.
[575] J. Thompson, *The Transformation of Medieval England: 1370-1529* (Harlow, 1983), pps. 58 and 61; Dyer, *Making a Living*, p. 199.

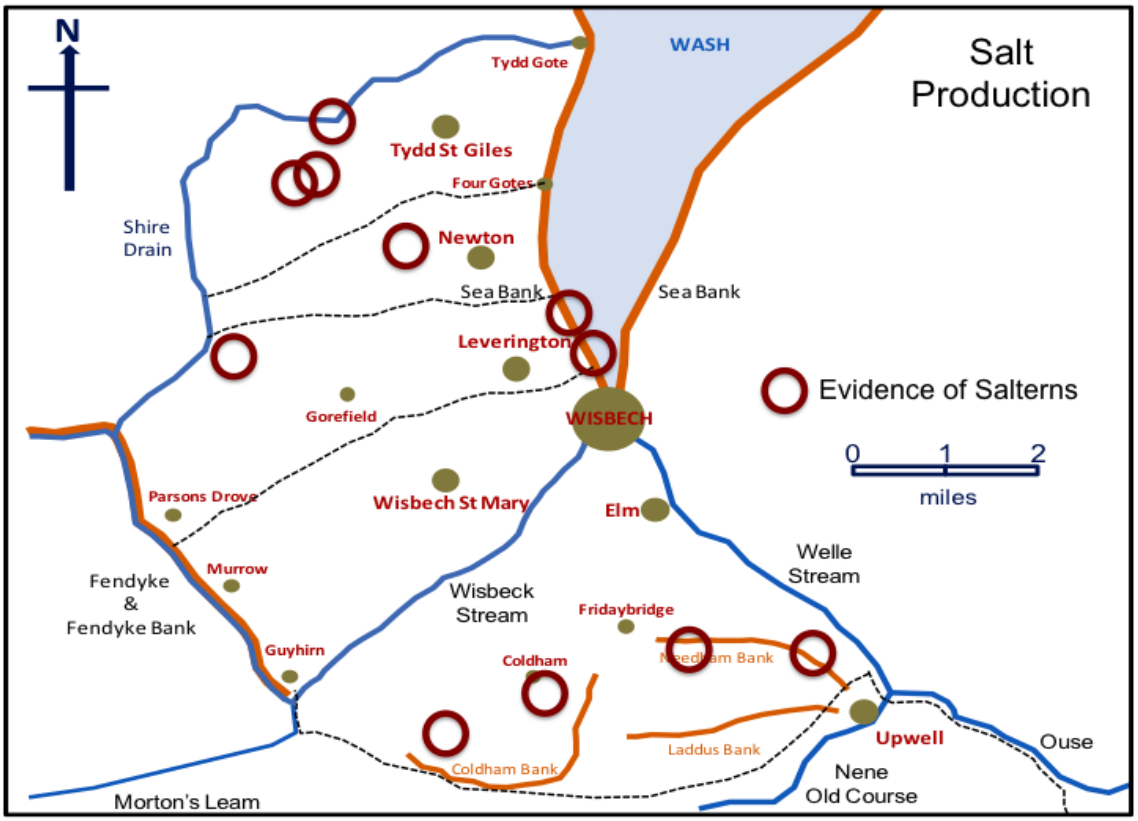


Figure 4.6 – Map showing sites of medieval salt production based on HER records.[576]

DEMAND

In the vills the population fed their families from crops grown on their own fields, from their own animals or from fish and birds caught on the nearby marshes. Foodstuffs purchased locally would have been limited to bread and ale apart from the wealthier families that purchased more exotic foodstuffs (such as the spices referred to in the Trinity Guild feasts, see Chapter Five) that came in through the port of Lynn or from major trading centres such as London.[577] They supplied much of their own building materials apart from stone brought in from the midlands and timber that would have come from inland forests or increasingly from the Baltic through the ports of the Wash.[578] However, they would have been dependent on the traders and craftsmen in the town for materials and goods not locally available. The evidence for tradesmen in Bishop Alcock's Terrier would indicate that at least a portion of clothing and metal goods were purchased in Wisbech along with heavier farming equipment such as carts,

[576] HER(C) 11166; HER(C) 03970; HER(C) 03960; HER(C) 04188; HER(N) 36784.
[577] Dyer, *Everyday Life*, p.276.
[578] Carus-Wilson, 'Ports of the Wash', p. 191.

ploughs and handtools manufactured in the many workshops along the Castle Dyke, such as that of Hamo Parfey the wheelwright.[579]

The relatively large population of Wisbech (around 1750 by 1525, see Chapter Three) was dependent on external supplies of food and other goods to meet their needs. Being close to the countryside and with good communications many of the inhabitants of the town owned farmland or gardens to help support their needs, for example John Goring left a garden in the town in his will of 1453.[580] This was typical of many towns of the period where the ravages of the fourteenth century had left many abandoned plots that were converted into gardens by the town's people and used for food production or for pleasure.[581] It was insufficient to fully meet the requirements of the inhabitants and it was necessary to purchase food supplies from the traders in the town to supplement their own production. They in turn were dependent on supplies from the surrounding area for the raw materials of their business. The numerous butchers, such as Nicholas Smyth with shops on the New Market and on the Timber Market of Wisbech at the start of the sixteenth century, relied on animals supplied from the hinterland. [582] Nicholas Smyth also held land recorded in the 1492 Terrier and was probably able to meet some of his requirements for his butcher's shops from his own farm. The baker John Burke with premises on the Old Market required grain from the country.

The merchants operating in the town acquired the surplus produce from the countryside for export including grain, wool, livestock and other local produce such as salt and reeds. There is evidence of all these goods being transported through the network of waterways for use outside the Hundred.[583] In return they would have imported material and goods not available locally.[584] In 1503-04 accounts show the wide range of more expensive good imported through Lynn including furs, leather, furniture, lamps, copper kettles, carpets and even spectacles.[585] Many of these would have found their way inland to towns such as Wisbech. There was a high degree of self-sufficiency in the

[579] C.R.O., VC 2:29.
[580] C.R.O., VV 1:29.
[581] Dyer, *Making a Living*, p.300.
[582] T.N.A., P.R.O., PROB 11/15/652.
[583] Miller, *Abbey and Bishopric of Ely*, p. 83.
[584] Dyer, *Making a Living*, p. 310.
[585] P. Richards, 'Town and harbour: the hinterland and overseas trade of Kings Lynn 1205-1537', in K. Friedland and P. Richards (eds), *Essays in Hanseatic History: the Kings Lynn Symposium 1998* (Fakenham, 2005), p. 17.

Hundred to be expected in a pre-industrial society. However, the demand that it was not possible to meet, either because the goods were not available locally or there was insufficient resource, had to be fulfilled by other means. It was this exchange of goods and services that kept the 41 'work'shops on the New Market in Wisbech and recorded in Bishop Alcock's Terrier of 1492 in business. [586] The sources of supply to meet the demands of the hundred are shown in the following Figure 4.7.

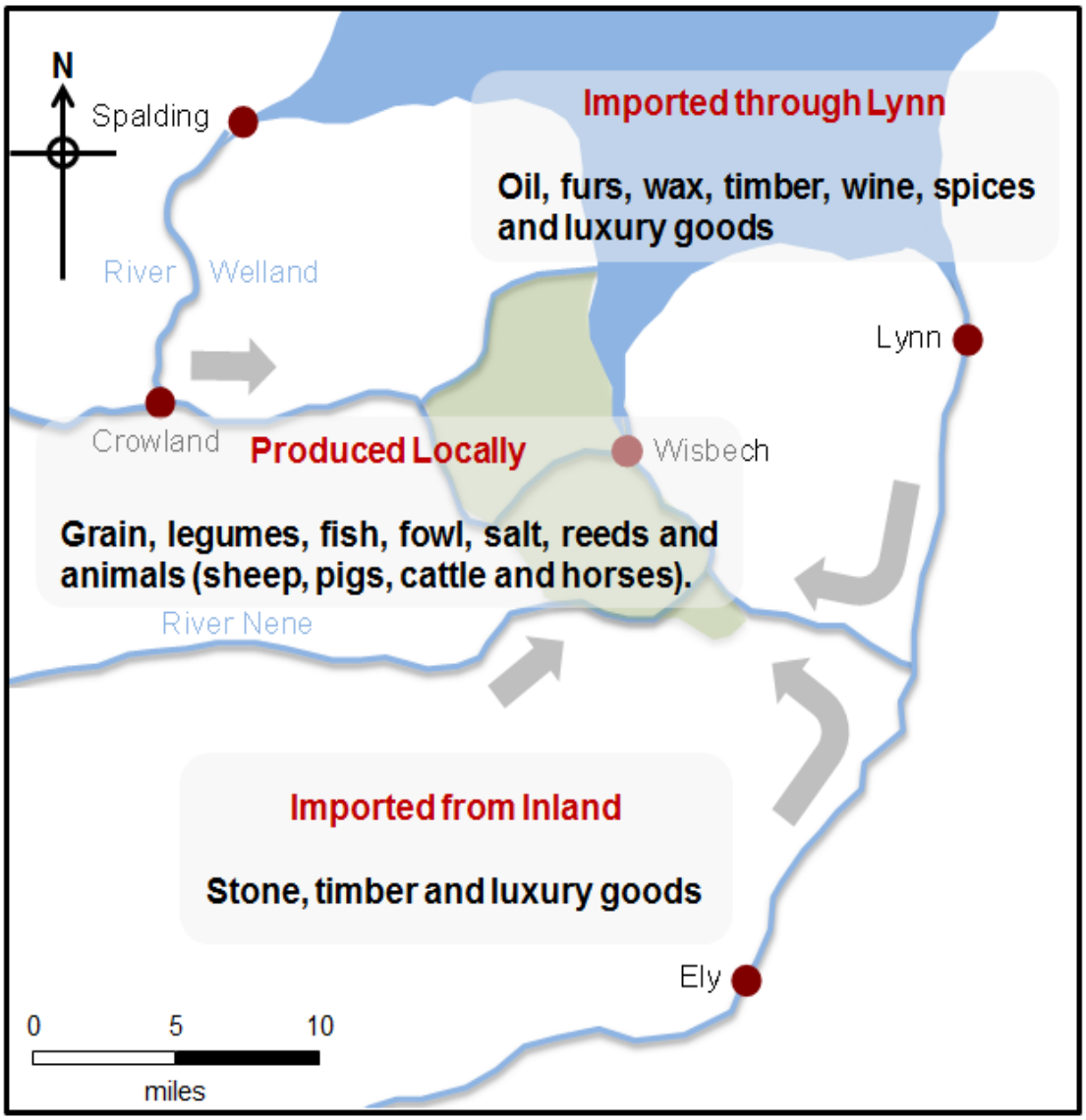


Figure 4.7 – Map showing goods produced locally and goods imported into Wisbech Hundred.[587]

[586] BAT, p.170.
[587] Carus-Wilson, 'Ports of the Wash', Figure 68.

DISTRIBUTION

Central to the prosperity of the region was the ability to sell the surplus produce from the land. This depended on communications and on the ability to transport goods safely and quickly. It also depended on having ready access to markets to exchange the goods for money or other produce. Ultimately, the export of goods depended on the local merchants to facilitate the exchange.

Communications

Effective communications were essential to the operation of the local economy providing trade links to the inland markets and to the ports. Goods were also brought into the region from the coastal ports and inland.[588] This is seen from the evidence of late medieval Dutch yellow brickwork (in Emneth church tower) possibly imported as ballast in ships trading through Lynn and along the Ouse and Welle Stream into Wisbech, see Figure 8. There were two elements to the communications network, road and waterway, and the main routes are shown in the following map, Figure 4.9.

Figure 4.8 – Emneth Church showing late medieval 'Dutch' brickwork in the tower (author's photograph).

[588] Edwards, 'Transport system', p.214.

Road transport in the Hundred provided communications between the settlements on the silt marsh. This allowed the transport of smaller loads where ready access to waterways was not available. There were roads running out of the Hundred; for example, from Wisbech to Lynn and from Wisbech into Lincolnshire. There was a road running to Peterborough through Thorney and Whittlesey in the peat fen but this land route would have been vulnerable to freshwater flooding from inland rivers and marshes, particularly during the winter. The vulnerability of the roads crossing the peat fen is shown by the entry in Bishop Alcock's Register for 1487 noting an 'indulgence for the repair of the causeway between March and Wysebech'.[589] Causeways were roads built on banks above the marshlands and the most obvious is the Fen Causeway built from Peterborough to Ely in the early medieval period.[590] The road from Lynn to Lincoln would have been difficult as it had to cross the Wash estuary and this would only have been possible at low tides. It would have required skilled guides with a detailed knowledge of the route and of the movement of the tides.[591] All farmers had access to a cart or at least a pack animal to transport produce to market and to return with goods from the town.[592] Road transport was of limited value apart from within the Hundred. For the transport of large quantities of goods outside the region then the use of boats would have been more efficient.

[589]Gibbons, *Ely Episcopal Records*, p.413.
[590] Hall and Coles, *Fenland Survey*, pp. 107-8.
[591] P. Hindle, *Medieval Roads and Tracks* (Oxford, 2009), pp. 26-7.
[592] Dyer, *Everyday Life in Medieval England*, p.276.

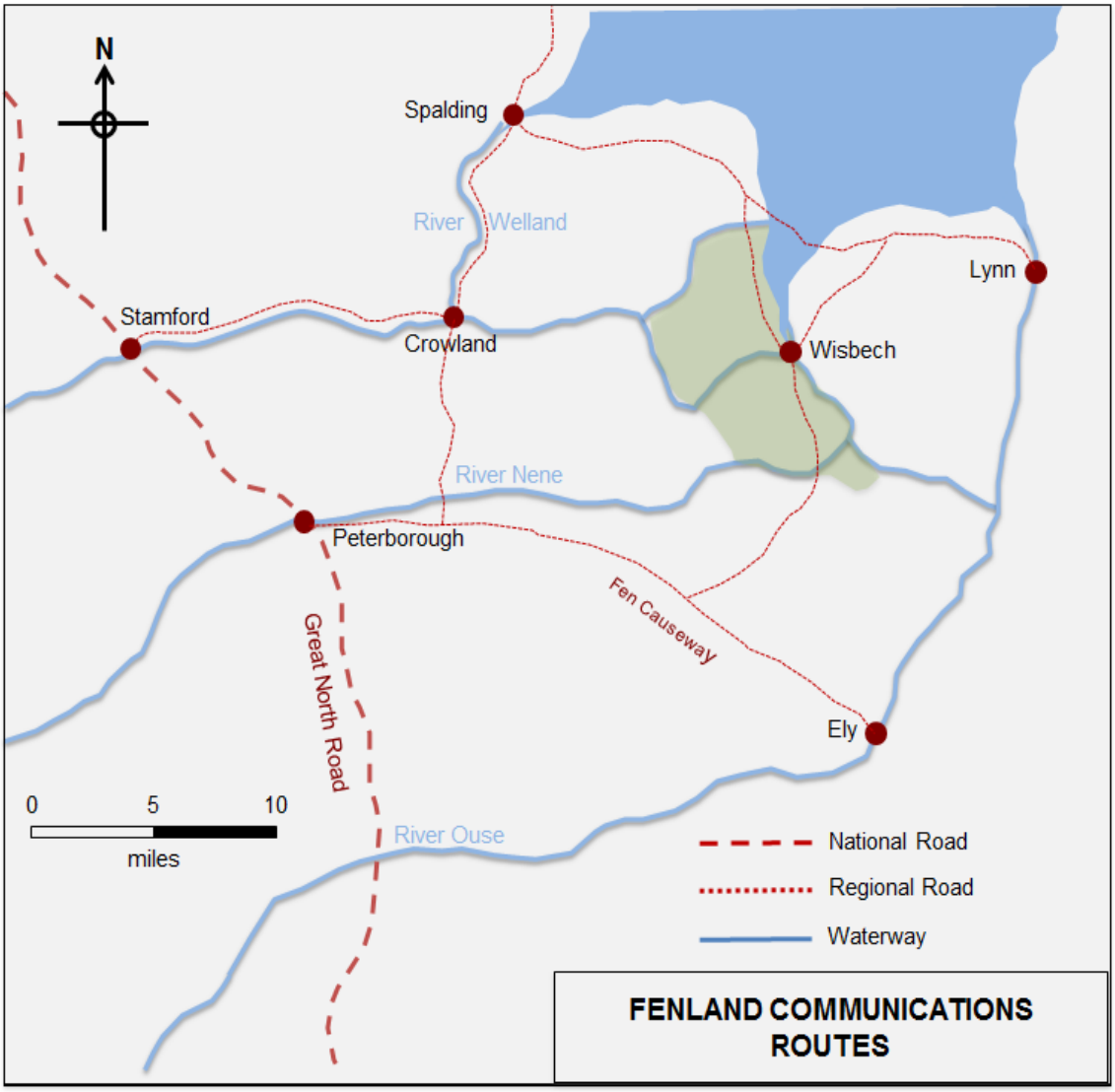


Figure 4.9 – Map showing major medieval Fenland communication routes.[593]

The most important method of land communication within the fens were not roads but the droves. These were broad grassy tracks intended to enable the easy movement of large numbers of sheep and cattle between the villages and the good pastures by the Wash and the inland peat fen. These were typically at least 10m in width (such as Broad Drove in Tydd St Giles) and could run for many miles. Leverington Common ran east-west from the village for over five miles out to the hamlet of Murrow by the Fendyke. The best preserved examples of Fenland droves can be found at Terrington St Clements and Tilney St Lawrence in the adjoining Marshland Hundred that gave access to the inland pastures at Marshland Smeeth.[594] In the northern parishes of Wisbech Hundred

[593] Edwards, 'Transport system', p. 439.
[594] Hall and Coles, *Fenland Survey*, pp. 141-2.

the droves generally ran east-west out of Tydd St Giles and Newton as well as from Wisbech St Mary out to Guyhirn via Tholomas Drove. In Elm the droves ran north-south out of the village to Coldham and Needham via Friday Bridge (see Figure 4.10). As in other parts of the country the droves were well-established tracks providing excellent routes for the movement of people and goods as well as for livestock.[595]

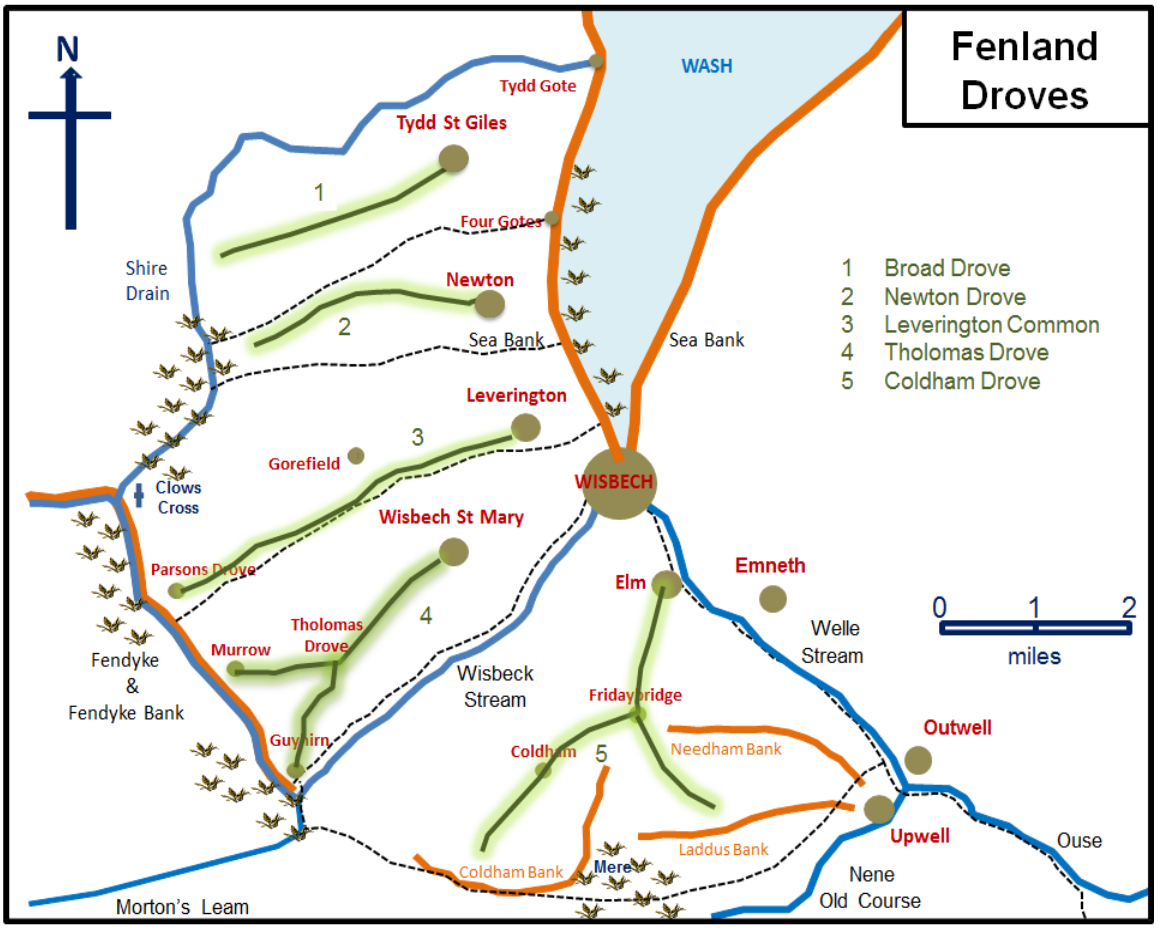


Figure 4.10 – Map showing medieval droveways in the Hundred.[596]

The region benefitted from an extensive interlinked network of waterways that joined most of the settlements. The main waterways (Wisbeck Stream, Welle Stream, Nene and Ouse) were capable of taking relatively large vessels of 10 to 50 tons.[597] Boats as large as 15 tons were able to navigate the Ouse as far as Bedford.[598] Beneath the major waterways there were a series of large drains and ditches and many of these (such as the

[595] Hindle, *Medieval Roads*, p.14.
[596] Hall and Cole, *Fenland Survey*, p. 141, Fig. 85.
[597] J. Wheatley and S. Howarth, *Historic Sail* (London, 2000), plates 2 and 13; G. Hutchinson, *Medieval Ships and Shipping* (Madison, 1994), p. 119.
[598] Richards, 'Town and harbour', p. 13.

Shoffendyke between Tydd St Giles and Newton) were navigable for small craft (*naviculae* or narrow barges) capable of moving a few tons of goods and certainly more than a cart or pack animal.[599] These vessels were of a plank construction and only a few metres in length, similar to that found in Caldecotte near to Milton Keynes.[600] All the villages on the Wash or on the main waterways had a staithe for boats to be loaded, the 'innumerable landing places' noted by Oosthuizen.[601] Wisbech was a port able to take large sea-going ships prior to the thirteenth century and after the fifteenth century. Even after the access had silted up small boats would still have been able to use the port from the Wash. There was an alternative route to the port of Lynn via Upwell and the River Ouse capable of taking larger sea-going vessels. Evidence of boat ownership in Wisbech is seen in the wills of the fifteenth century, such as that of Morris Byrde in his will of 1526.[602]

The major trading routes along the waterways out of Wisbech were well established and allowed access not only to the coastal ports but also to the major inland centres of demand. From Wisbech it was possible to take goods along the Welle Stream to Upwell. Here there was a link that had been built to join the Nene and the Welle Stream to the Ouse. [603] Once on the Ouse goods could be taken inland to Ely and beyond to the southern midlands. Goods could also be taken downstream to Lynn for export to Europe. From Upwell and Outwell vessels were able to join what is now the old course of the River Nene running through March inland to Peterborough and beyond that into Northamptonshire. From Wisbech the Wisbeck Stream ran inland to Guyhirn where it joined the Fendyke that ran across the peat fen via Throckenholt to Crowland. Here it joined the River Welland running upstream to the prosperous town of Stamford. It also ran downstream to the port of Spalding providing another route out to the Wash and the North Sea. Although this route was navigable the channels were smaller that the main rivers (Nene and Ouse) and would not have taken the larger sea-going craft.[604] Once at Peterborough and Stamford there was access to the trading route along the Great North

[599] Ravensdale, *Liable to Floods*, p. 32.
[600] Hutchinson, *Medieval Ships and Shipping*, pp. 126-7.
[601] Oosthuizen, 'Cambridgeshire and the Peat Fen', p. 215.
[602] Gibbons, *Ely Episcopal Records*, p.221.
[603] VCH(Hunt), p.255.
[604] Edwards, *Transport System*, p.230.

Road.[605] Goods arriving at the port of Lynn, with its links to the Hanseatic League, had access to the markets in the Low Countries, North Germany and the Baltic.

Waterways played a central role in the daily economic life of the region with a range of products being transported by water between the various manors as well as between Ely and the ports. These included timber, grain, hay, cheese, reeds, mill-stones and livestock.[606] The manorial records for the Bishops' manor of Wisbech Barton for the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries show regular movements of grain and other produce to Ely.[607] The manor being conveniently located on the banks of the Wisbeck Stream allowed the waterways to be used for routine tasks such as the transfer of sheep to the manor of Beaudesert in the parish of Elm to make use of the better pasture.[608] The goods passing out of Lynn were the produce of the Fenlands and in return the port received spices, wine and luxury goods.[609] This is illustrated by the 'prussian chest' noted earlier, a luxury item imported from the Baltic for the merchant William White.[610] The superiority of water transport over road transport is evident in terms of the quantity of goods that could safely be carried but also in cost. Road transport was typical five times more expensive than water transport.[611]

Markets and Merchants (Commercial Transactions)

As Dyer noted 'by the thirteenth century all sections of society participated in a complex commercial network'.[612] It was an increasingly monetary economy with lords generating revenue from rents and the sale of surplus produce from demesne land. This can be seen in 1331-2 with the Wisbech Barton manor generating an income of £159 as well as supplying the Bishop of Ely's household with food.[613] Peasants required money to pay rents and to purchase goods such as tools that they could not make themselves. Exchange took many forms and was carried out at different location and not just at the local market in the town. Goods might be bought and sold in the village directly

[605] Hindle, *Medieval Roads*, p. 59.
[606] C.U.L., EDR/G3/27
[607] Stone, *Decision-Making*, p. 48.
[608] Stone, *Decision-Making*, p. 50.
[609] S. Oosthuizen, 'Cambridgeshire and the Peat Fen: Medieval Settlement and Commerce, c. AD 900-1300', in N. Christie and P. Stamper (eds), *Medieval Rural Settlement: Britain and Ireland, AD 800-1600* (Oxford, 2012), p. 208; S. Oosthuizen, 'A 'truth universally acknowledged'?: morphology as an indicator of planned market towns', *Landscape History* 34 (2013), p. 53.
[610] C.R.O, VC 2:109.
[611] Dyer, *Everyday Life*, p. 262.
[612] C. Dyer, 'The consumer and the market in the later middle-ages', *Economic History Review* 42 (1989), p. 305.
[613] Stone, *Decision-Making*, p. 33.

between peasants. This is evidenced by the frequent references to bread and ale being 'sold contrary to the assise' in the manorial records.[614] The surplus produce of the peasant farmers might also be exchanged by agreement between individuals (over-the-counter in modern parlance) or they might be sold at market. Selling larger quantities of goods or the purchase of specialist products (such as metalwork or farm equipment) would take place in Wisbech through the 'work'shops or at the market.

The role of Wisbech as an economic centre is discussed in detail in the following chapter. Oosthuizen describes it as one of the major markets in the region along with Ely.[615] Dyer notes that although there was some retreat from the market after the Black Death by the fifteenth century it was established as a vital link in the economic chain.[616] The town had the necessary infrastructure to manage the local commercial activity. Figure 4.11 shows the town's hinterland and trading links. The natural hinterland included parts of Norfolk such as Walsoken and Emneth where Wisbech was the nearest town. The hinterland has been based on the documentary evidence of commercial transactions, such as those with Cambridge noted by Lee.[617] It had merchants with established links to inland centres of demand and to the ports, men such as William White and John Masse. It had tradesmen that created a demand for local produce and provided goods and services to the region; men such as William Ryches (draper), Thomas Myller (blacksmith) and William Clerk (brewer).[618] It also had ready access to the communications network with the quays and wharfs in the basin formed by the Wisbeck and Welle Streams. There was a regular market in the town, held on the Saturday, and an annual fair (Trinity Fair) granted by the Bishop of Ely in 1327.[619] There was a further annual fair held at Wisbech Barton. The market also had an important social element enabling the people from the surrounding villages to meet and interact sharing information and ideas.[620]

[614] C.U.L., EDR/C7/1-24, Manorial Court Roll, Tydd St Giles, 1496.
[615] Oosthuizen, 'Cambridgeshire and the peat fen', p. 211.
[616] Dyer, *Transition*, pp. 176-177.
[617] Lee, *Cambridge*, p. 126.
[618] T.N.A., P.R.O., PROB 11/18/386; C.R.O., VC 2:80; C.R.O., VC 2:84.
[619] VCH, p. 262.
[620] Dyer, 'Consumer and the market', p. 324.

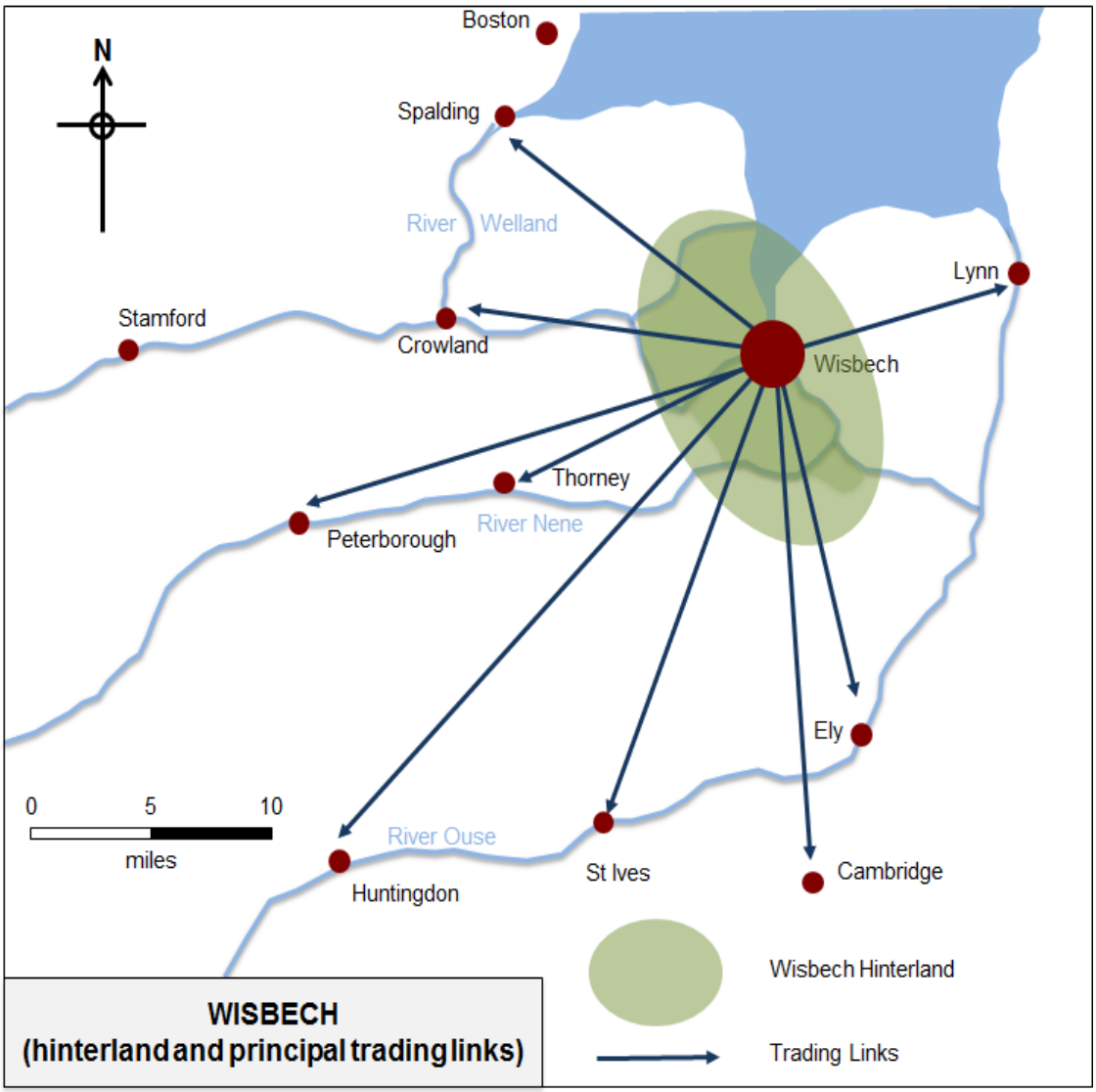


Figure 4.11 – Map showing Wisbech hinterland and trading links based on commercial transactions.

SUMMARY

There were two questions asked at the start of the chapter; how did the interaction with the landscape shape the structure of the local economy and did the economy of the Hundred display the features of a 'wetland economy'? The Fenland economy was diverse and this gave it great strength and resilience to disruption. This in turn made the region attractive to settlement and exploitation helping to maintain the population after the shocks of the fourteenth century. Although there were many components to the local economy it was inevitably dominated by farming which produced a surplus for trade and export. It was a changing local economy and this was reflected in the new patterns of ownership seen across the period.[621] By the early fifteenth century demesne farming had largely ceased to exist with the land being rented out to a new class of 'yeoman' farmer with holdings ranging from a few acres to well in excess of 100 acres.[622] The acquisition of demesne land was an element in the growth of the yeoman farmer but the main driver was the availability of plentiful cheap land following the depopulation of the fourteenth century. The changing nature of landholding was also seen in the evidence for the weakening of the family-land bond and the development of a thriving land market.

Three landscape features directly influenced the economy; the fertility of the silt soils suitable for arable and pastoral farming, the location of Wisbech as the trading hub at the centre of the Hundred and the positioning of the town on a network of waterways providing access to the coastal ports and the inland markets. The Hundred was able to reliably produce surpluses of grain and other crops. All parishes had ample pasture either on the salt marshes or the lands bordering the peat fen and accessed by the long droves running from the villages. This meant that both arable and sheep farming was able to grow rapidly in the twelfth and thirteenth centuries with the flocks producing heavier fleece weights. The water communications of the Hundred meant that the bulk movement of goods was safe and cheap, with access to external markets and trading hubs such as the port of Lynn easy.

[621] Lee, *Cambridge*, p. 12.
[622] Thirsk, *English Peasant Farming*, pp.35-6.

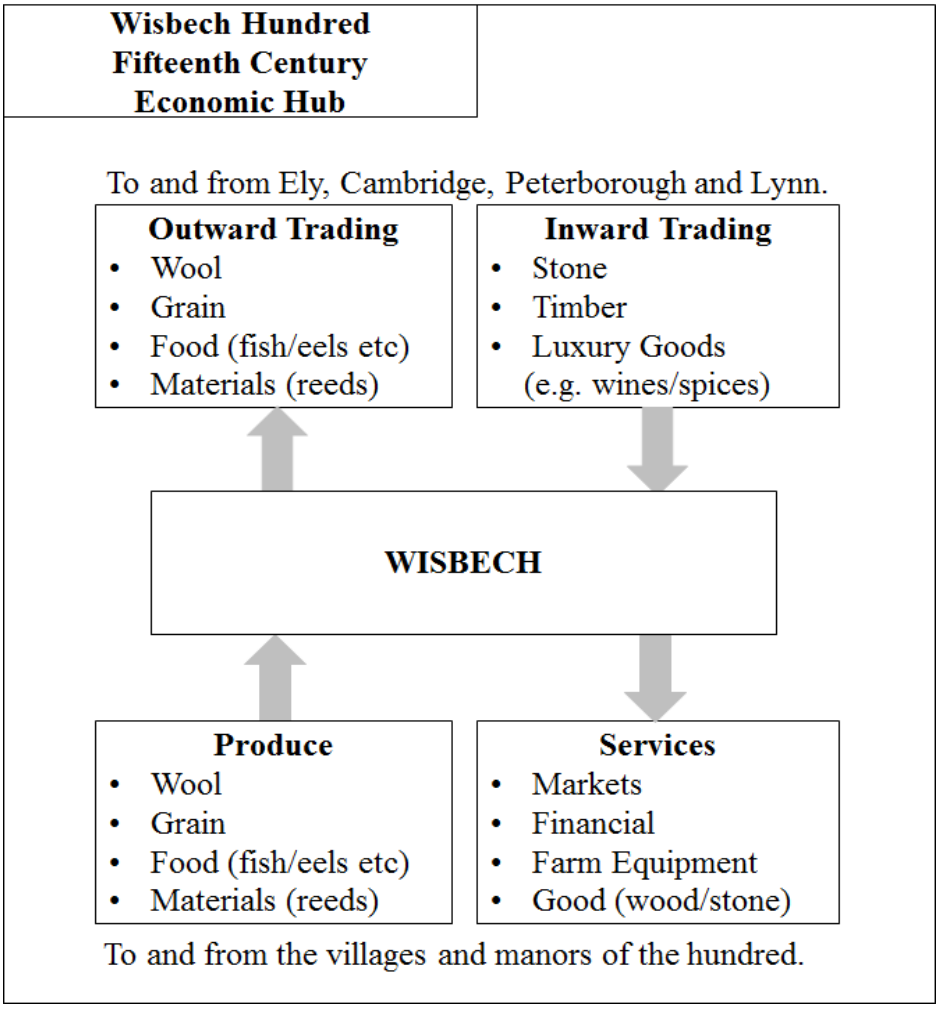


Figure 4.12. Diagram showing the role of Wisbech as an economic hub in the late medieval Fenland.

The English economy as a whole was changing and this transformation can be seen in the Hundred. By the end of the fifteenth century the capitalist structure for the exchange of goods was well developed although it was still operating within the confines of the traditional social framework such as the manorial court system and in the case of Wisbech through bodies such as the Trinity Guild acting as a proxy for the lord (the Bishop of Ely).[623] A model for the economy of the Hundred and the role of Wisbech is shown in Figure 4.12.

The Hundred had all the characteristics of a wetland economy in that it combined agriculture with fishing, fowling, salt production and the exploitation of marsh produce such as reeds, rushes and peat. It is difficult to assess the value of marsh produce as

[623] Dyer, *Making a Living*, p.327.

much would have been used locally and there is little documentary evidence of trade in these materials. However, it would have been small in comparison to agriculture. Where it different from other wetland regions was in the proportions of these activities and this in turn was a reflection of the different landscapes. The wetlands on the banks of the Severn, Humber and Thames tended to be geographically spread and located around the many waterways running through the regions. Romney Marsh, although concentrated around a single location was smaller than the other wetlands. These regions had a balance between the different elements of a wetland economy whereas the silt marsh of the Wash was a large geographically concentrated region of highly fertile ground where inevitably agriculture was going to dominate the other wetland activities. So, although it had characteristics similar to other wetland regions its size and location gave it a unique structure.

Appendix 1 – Fifteenth Century Land Transactions, Tydd St Giles.

Year	Date	Field	Land	From	To	Payment	Type
1495	Unknown	Halbradest	2 acres	Simon Howsald (chaplain)	Richard Cade	4s	Fine
1495	Unknown	South Croft	0.5 acre	Thomas Watford	John Watford (son)	1s	Fine
1496	April	Eaudike Field	5 acres	John Howsald	Thomas Howsald (son)	9s 4d	Relief
1496	5th August	Unknown	1 acre	Lawrence Tyesdale	John Tyesdale	Unknown	Unknown
1496	5th August	Eaudike Field	1 acre 1 rood	Philip Chambleyn (deceased)	William Whyteratt	3s	Fine
1496	5th August	Summer Lesure	1 acre	Philip Chambleyn (deceased)	William Whyteratt	2s	Fine
1496	5th August	Bradest	0.5 acre	William Hargson & wife Joan	John Aleyn	1s	Fine
1496	5th August	Karrow Field	5 acres	Alice Snetysham (widow)	Richard Cowte	Unknown	Unknown
1497	10th May	Bolhedd	0.5 acre	Robert Dorward	Thomas Hunston	Unknown	Unknown
1497	10th May	Bolhedd	0.5 acre	Lawrence Tyesdale	Richard Cade	Unknown	Unknown
1497	13th December	Summer Lesure	2 acres	Margaret Langham	Thomas Burdon	Unknown	Unknown
1497	13th December	Crow Field	0.5 acre	William Swayne	Richard Cowte	Unknown	Unknown
1497	13th December	Unknown	1 acre	Robert Dorward	John Tyesdale	Unknown	Unknown
1497	13th December	Laysoken	1 acre	Robert Dorward	Lawrence Tyesdale	Unknown	Unknown
1502	29th April	Karrow Field	6 acres	Simon Whyteratt	Robert Whyteratt (son)	Unknown	Unknown
1502	November	Eaudike Field	1 acre	Robert Pyklynas	Robert Chyrche	2s	Fine
1502	November	Summer Lesure	3 roods	Henry Smyth	Richard Black	1s 6d	Fine
1503	26th April	New Field	2 acres	Alice Pastall (widow)	Thomas Rutter	Unknown	Unknown
1503	26th April	South Field	2 acres	William Thakker	William Baxtor	Unknown	Unknown
1503	9th October	New Field	2 acres 3 roods	John Ingham	Joan Ingham (wife)	Unknown	Unknown
1503	9th October	New Field	2 acres	John Ingham	Joan Ingham (wife)	Unknown	Unknown
1503	22nd December	New Field	1 acre	John Ingham	Richard Ferror	Unknown	Unknown
1503	22nd December	New Field	2 acres	John Ingham	Richard Ferror	Unknown	Unknown
1504	Unknown	New Field	1 acre 3 roods	Agnes Avery	Richard Clark	3s 6d	Fine
1504	Unknown	Summer Lesure	3 acres 1 rood	John Sweyn	Richard Black	6s 6d	Fine
1504	Unknown	Eaudike Field	3 acres	John Chyrche	Robert Chyrche (son)	21.5d	Relief
1504	Unknown	Bradest	1 acre	John Chyrche	Robert Chyrche (son)	7.5d	Relief
1505	23rd June	Eaudike Field	1 acre 3 roods	Richard Barrow (clerk)	William Adam Jnr	Unknown	Unknown
1505	23rd June	Horn Field	5 acres	John Fysher (deceased)	Simon Fysher	Unknown	Unknown

Manorial Records Land Transactions, Tydd St Giles

Year	Field	Size	From	To	Relationship	Buildings	Comment
1467	Fengate	6a	John Angewyn	Executors	N/A	1x dwelling house	Celebrate Mass and for the poor
1467	Sutton St James	1.5a	John Angewyn	Executors	N/A		Sold
1454	Cokelay Lane	2a	Margaret Barowe	Executors	N/A		Sold
1454	Cokelay Lane	2a	Margaret Barowe	Margaret & William	Daughter & Son	Buildings	
1454	Cokelay Lane	1a 1r	Margaret Barowe	Margaret	Daughter		On payment of 20s to Executors
1454	Cokelay Lane	2a	Margaret Barowe	Katherine	Daughter		
1454	Fendyke Field	2.5a	Margaret Barowe	Thomas	Son		On payment of 40s to Executors
1454	Karrow Field	1a	Margaret Barowe	Thomas	Son		
1458	New Field	2.5a	Robert Fysher	Unknown	Wife		If she dies to Simon & Thomas (sons)
1458	Horn Field	2a	Robert Fysher	John & Margaret	Son & Daughter		
1458	Unknown	2a	Robert Fysher	Unknown	Wife		
1452	Gegate	10a	Thomas Fuller	Margaret	Daughter		After lease expires
1452	Gegate	3a	Thomas Fuller	Matilda	Daughter		After lease expires
1452	Croft	5a	Thomas Fuller	Joan	Wife	1x messuage	
1452	Raylane Field	1a 3r	Thomas Fuller	Joan	Wife		
1452	Kirk Field	1a 1r	Thomas Fuller	Joan	Wife		
1452	North Lane Field	4a	Thomas Fuller	Joan	Wife		Until Agnes (daughter) comes of age
1452	North Lane Field	2a	Thomas Fuller	Matilda	Daughter		
1452	Elete Field	2a	Thomas Fuller	Agnes	Daughter		
1452	Kirk Field	3a	Thomas Fuller	Executors	N/A		Sold
1452	Kirk Field	1a 1r	Thomas Fuller	Executors	N/A		Sold
1524	Unknown	5a	Elizabeth Fysher	John Brown	Son	1x dwelling house	
1467	Unknown	N/A	Thomas Hamunde	Matilda	Wife	1x messuage	
1467	Unknown	1a 1r	Thomas Hamunde	Matilda	Wife		To provide for marriage of Katherine (daughter)
1467	Unknown (near Mill Hill)	1.5a	Thomas Hamunde	Executors	N/A		Sold
1467	Eaudike Field	1.5a	Thomas Hamunde	Richard	Son		
1467	Eaudike Field	1a	Thomas Hamunde	Richard	Son	Buildings	
1467	Bradest (pasture)	2a	Thomas Hamunde	Richard	Son		
1467	Elete Field	2a	Thomas Hamunde	Richard & Robert	Sons		

Will Land Transactions, Tydd St Giles

1467	Blackdyke	1a 1r	Thomas Hamunde	Richard	Son		
1467	Bradest	2a 3r	Thomas Hamunde	Isobel	Daughter		
1467	Eaudike Field	1.5a	Thomas Hamunde	Executors	N/A		Sold
1467	Unknown	1.5a	Thomas Hamunde	Executors	N/A		Sold
1467	Elete Field (pasture)	3a	Thomas Hamunde	Executors	N/A		Sold
1453	South Ingham Field	16a	Catherine Hawsold	Robert	Son		Land in Parsons Drove
1470	Unknown	Unknown	John Kegyll	Executors	N/A		Sold
1452	Unknown	N/A	William Monke	Katherine	Wife	1x messuage	
1465	Unknown	1r	Adam Odam	Katherine	Wife		
1465	Unknown	N/A	Adam Odam	Richard	Son	1x messuage	
1465	Hallcroft	1a	Adam Odam	Katherine	Wife		
1465	Unknown	N/A	Adam Odam	Katherine & Richard	Wife & Son	1x barn	
1465	Hallcroft	1a	Adam Odam	Agnes	Daughter		
1465	Hallcroft	1a	Adam Odam	John	Son		
1465	Horn Field	1a	Adam Odam	Executors	N/A		Salvation of soul & benefit of the poor
1465	Unknown	1a	Adam Odam	Executors	N/A		Salvation of soul & benefit of the poor
1465	Summer Lesure	1a 3r	Adam Odam	Executors	N/A	1x messuage	Salvation of soul & benefit of the poor
1464	Ryland Field	1a	Robert Odam	Agnes	Wife		Provided pays 5 marks pa to Guild of St Mary
1464	Quaney Field	1a 1r	Robert Odam	Agnes	Wife	Buildings	Provided pays 5 marks pa to Guild of St Mary
1464	Marsh	5a	Robert Odam	Simon	Son		
1495	Unknown	N/A	Thomas Odeham	Elizabeth	Wife	1x messuage	Provided pays for masses of soul
1495	Unknown	0.5a	Thomas Odeham	Alice Croft	Unknown		
1495	Hascroftland Field	2a 1r	Thomas Odeham	Executors	N/A		Sold
1464	Horn Field	4a	Richard Smyth	Joan	Wife		
1458	Layselyn	3r	William Warner	Emma	Daughter		
1458	Hallcroft	3a	William Warner	Executors	N/A		Sold
1476	Unknown	5.5a	William Whytrett	Simon	Son	1x messuage	
1476	Unknown	N/A	William Whytrett	Alice	Wife	1x dwelling house	
1476	Eaudike Field	3.5a	William Whytrett	Simon	Son		
1476	Eaudike Field	3a	William Whytrett	John & Thomas	Sons		
1493	Elete Field	5a	Thomas Berowe	Executors	N/A		Sold to pay debts
1493	Unknown	2a 1r	Thomas Berowe	Executors	N/A		Sold to pay debts
1493	Unknown	4a 1r	Thomas Berowe	Executors	N/A		Sold to pay debts
1493	Elete Field	34a	Thomas Berowe	Unknown	Son	1x messuage	
1493	Sutton St James	2a	Thomas Berowe	Matilda	Daughter		
1496	Tydde Brugge	20a	Simon Adam	William	Son	1x messuage	
1496	Brodest	5a	Simon Adam	Joan	Daughter		
1496	Unknown	3.5a	Simon Adam	Alice	Daughter		
1496	Speteholme	1a 3r	Simon Adam	Margatet	Daughter		

Will Land Transactions, Tydd St Giles (continued)

Chapter Five - Wisbech

INTRODUCTION

Accepted opinion is that in the fifteenth century English towns were in decline although the extent of the decline has been much debated. From the preamble to a Tudor Act of Parliament (describing a number of English towns including Nottingham, Shrewsbury, Ludlow, Bridgenorth, Northampton and Gloucester), '… moche of dyvers and many howses, mesuages and tenementis of habitacions … are and of a long tyme been in great ruyne and decaye … in the chief stretes … desolate and void groundys, with pittys, sellers and vaultes lying open and uncovereyed'.[624] This chapter tests that outlook against the reality of the evidence from the town of Wisbech.

There is debate over the definition and role of the English medieval town. The town had a role in society; at the end of the thirteenth-century Archbishop Pecham described the town as a 'place for the inculcation of manners and learning and the right practice of Christianity'.[625] It also had a more tangible economic and political role acting as a centre for trade and administration. They were multi-functional entities forming part of and supporting the surrounding network of smaller communities.[626] A town with a population of 5000 would have been regarded as large and one with a population of 500 being small. Wisbech with a population of around 1500 at the start of the fourteenth century (see Chapter Three) would have been substantial but still towards the smaller end. It is not possible to consider the development of the Fenland region without looking at the role of Wisbech. The town was central to the political, economic and social life of the Hundred. It had its origins in a middle Anglo-Saxon settlement on the west bank of the Wisbeck Stream. With the construction of the castle after the Norman Conquest the focus of the town switched to the east bank with the development of the New Market from the twelfth century. As the population grew more land was required and the town extended north into the bend in the river and south along the Welle Stream to form the Timber Market in the thirteenth century. It played a number of different roles including that of administrative centre of the region. The town was under the

[624] R. Dobson, 'Urban decline in late medieval England', in R. Holt and G. Rosser. (eds), *The English Medieval Town: A Reader in English Urban History 1200-1540* (London, 1990), pp. 265-6.
[625] H. Swanson, *Medieval British Towns* (Basingstoke, 1999), p. 1.
[626] D. Palliser, 'Introduction', in D. Palliser (ed), *The Cambridge Urban History of Britain: Volume 1 600-1540* (Cambridge, 2000), p. 5.

jurisdiction of the Bishop of Ely exerting control through his officials based at the castle. It acted as the local trading centre and provided commercial support for the surrounding vills. The town benefitted from its location at the centre of the region making the entire Hundred the natural hinterland for the trade from the surrounding manors and farms. As seen with other towns, Wisbech would have helped to shape the local economy influencing production.[627]

By the end of the fifteenth century the leading citizens through the Trinity Guild were carrying out much of the day-to-day management of the town in conjunction with the Bishop's administration. The strength of the Guild was such that on dissolution of the religious guilds in the sixteenth century it seamlessly evolved into the town corporation. The town was the obvious market for local produce and had the further advantage of sitting on a robust communications hub. The Wisbeck Stream, Welle Stream and the supporting network of drainage waterways provided a safe, efficient and economic means of transporting goods. Waterways provided access to the coastal port of Lynn and to a lesser extent Spalding as well as the inland centres of demand at the fen edge (Ely, Cambridge, Peterborough, Stamford and even as far as Bedford).[628] At the time of Bishop Alcock's Terrier in 1492 the town had three marketplaces and numerous craftsmen and merchants that profited from the surrounding settlements. The question that this chapter seeks to answer is; what was the role of the town within the Hundred? It also asks; how did the town's fortunes change given the perceived urban decline of the fifteenth century and was there a necessary link between declining population and prosperity?[629]

To support the analysis there are a number of contemporary sources. The records of the Trinity Guild exist from 1379 through to dissolution in 1547. After the initial detailed entry for 1379 that described the organisation of the Guild the records are missing until 1423 but thereafter are mostly complete. The records cover the religious and charitable roles of the Guild in support of the church. The growing economic strength of the Guild as land and property was acquired enabled it to contribute to the infrastructure of the

[627] R. Smith, 'Plague and peoples: the long demographic cycle 1250 – 1670' in P. Slack (ed), *The Peopling of Britain* (Oxford, 2001), p. 190.
[628] J. Lee, *Cambridge and its Economic Region 1450-1560* (Hatfield, 2005), p. 126.
[629] R. Dobson, 'Urban decline', p. 266; R. Dobson, 'General survey 1300-1540', in D. Palliser (ed), *The Cambridge Urban History of Britain, Volume 1, 600-1540* (Cambridge, 2000), p. 277.

town. The records show the role of the Alderman and the other senior officials of the Guild. From this can be seen the nature of and the relationships between the ruling elite of the town and the general population. The records can be compared with the data from surviving wills and evidence of landholdings. Bishop Alcock's Terrier from 1492 provides a cross-reference to the Trinity Guild records. It lists all the holders of property on the town's three markets with the chief rents paid. Here the term 'market' is used to describe a topographical feature of the town comparable to ends or tithings. The detail included in the Terrier describing the location of the individual plots helps to provide an understanding of the layout of the town and the position of many of the key features such as the castle, the church, guildhalls, inns and shops. This information has been used to develop an overview and to build a series of maps of the town, as it would have looked at the end of the fifteenth century.

LAYOUT OF THE TOWN

The layout of the town at the time of Bishop Alcock's Terrier is shown in Figure 5.1 and is based on the work of Hinman.

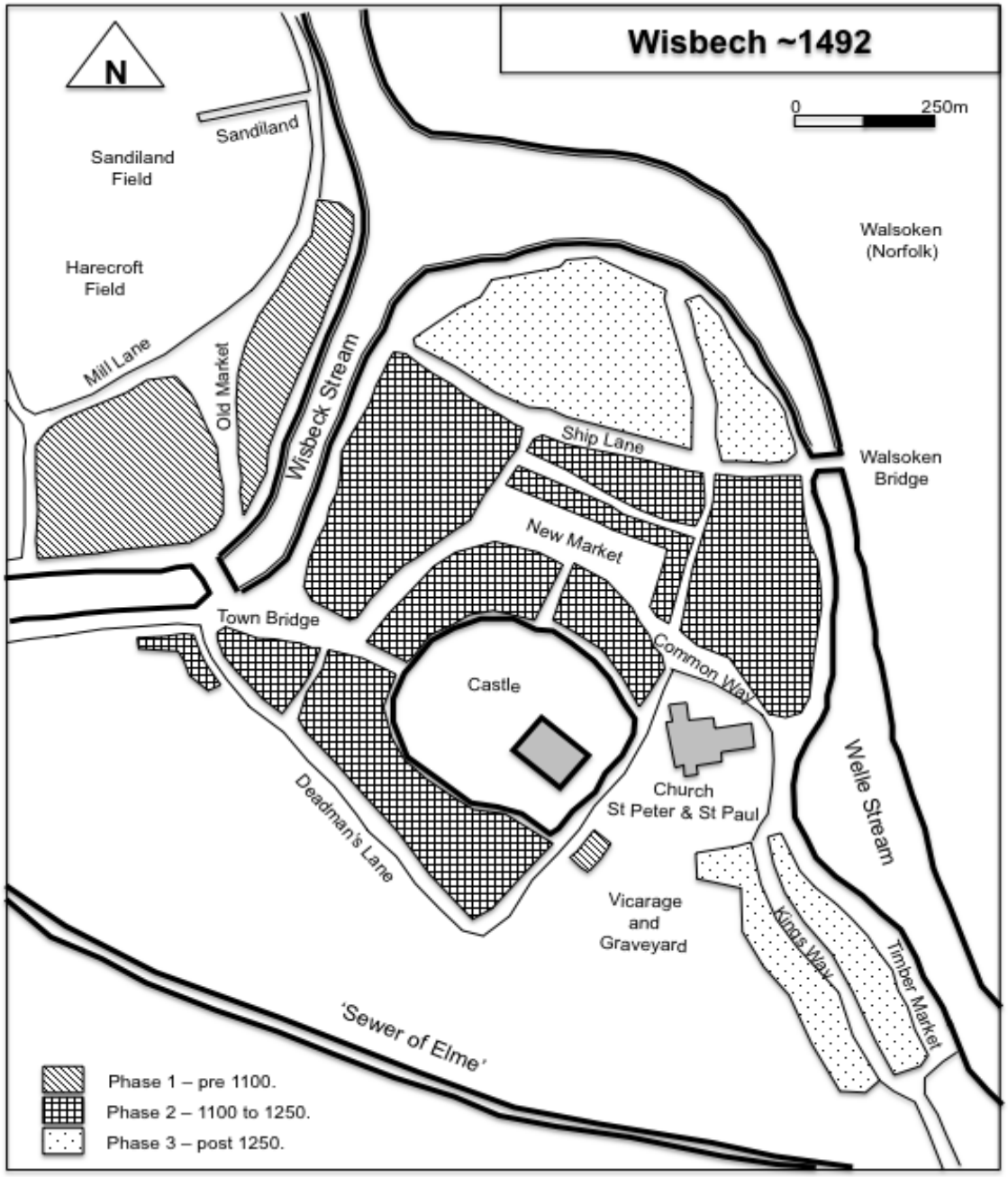


Figure 5.1 – Map of Wisbech in 1492 showing the phases of development.[630]

[630] M. Hinman, *Deeply Stratified Medieval and Post-Medieval Remains at Market Mews, Wisbech* (Cambridge, 2002), p. 8.

The dating of the phases of the development of the town are discussed later in the chapter. A traveller entering the town in 1492 from the northern parishes of the Hundred would have passed along the road from Leverington by the sea-wall where it curved sharply towards the town giving it the name 'The Horseshoe'.[631] On the right just before entering the town at the Old Market was Sandiland Lane leading down to Sandiland Field with messuages on either side of the track. On the left was the outfall of the rivers into the Wash with the basin for shipping. There were buildings on the western and eastern sides of the market but the northern side of the market was open overlooking Harecroft Field. Bishop Alcock's Terrier records 31 properties with 29 paying rent to the Bishop of Ely and the first being that of John Bucke (a baker) in the north-eastern corner of the market.[632] Leading out of the market on the north side was Mill Lane and the most easterly fields of the Bishop's Wisbech Barton manor. The land was no longer farmed by the Bishop and had been rented out. Proceeding through the market the traveller would come to the town bridge over the Wisbeck Stream leading into the new part of the town on the east bank and containing the main buildings. Off to the right and along the northern bank of the river was another road leading out towards Wisbech St Mary and the settlements in the north-east corner of the Hundred bordering the peat fen.

Crossing over the town bridge led to an open area with the west gate of the castle immediately in front. In the area before the castle there were other notable buildings including the Brewerne Inn at the top of Deadman's Lane on the western side. On the right-hand side of the open area was a passageway linking with Deadman's Lane and on this corner, by the entrance to the New Market, was the Bishop's Mote Hall (see the map of the New Market, Figure 5.6).[633] It was here that the Hundred meetings were held when the castle was unavailable during regular periods of repair and rebuilding.[634] By the 1490s the Bishop rarely resided in the town preferring to stay on one of the nearby more comfortable manors on the infrequent visits to the Hundred.[635] Deadman's Lane ran to the south-east before turning to the north-east and proceeding up to the Church of St Peter and St Paul. On the bend in the lane was a large property called Punfold House belonging to William Gatesend, a major landowner and an Alderman of the Trinity

[631] H. Darby, *The Medieval Fenland* (Cambridge, 1940), p. 180.
[632] BAT, p. 151.
[633] BAT, p. 155.
[634] T. Fletcher, *Wisbech Castle Defences and Georgian Cellars: Archaeological Investigations at Wisbech Library 2008-2009*, Oxford Archaeology East Report 1091 (Cambridge, 2009), p. 10.
[635] D. Stone, *Decision-Making in Medieval Agriculture* (Oxford, 2005), p. 23.

Guild. There were buildings along the length of Deadman's Lane, on the northern side. On the southern side were open fields and pasture with a drain 'the Sewer of Elme' that ran from the Wisbeck Stream to the Welle Stream draining the adjacent farmland. As Deadman's Lane went behind the castle to the church, along the route of what is now Love Lane, the vicarage and the graveyard were on the right.

By the town bridge was the road leading on to the marketplace, now called the High Street. On the west of the High Street was a row of properties and gardens with the market on one side and the Wisbeck Stream on the other side. On the opposite side of the road was the start of the sweep of shops against the Castle Dyke. Moving into the New Market there was a row of inns on the left side starting with the Swanne and followed by the Horne, the Hart and the Bull. Between these buildings were passageways running full length from the marketplace to the wharfs on the Wisbeck Stream. At least two of these still survive and show some evidence of late medieval buildings (see photographs, Figure 5.2). They would have been used to move goods to and from the ships on the river to the marketplace and the shops along Castle Dyke. Along the northern side of the market place was a row of buildings, with the Lawe Inn at the northwest corner. There was a larger passageway running for the length of the marketplace behind these buildings called Back Lane. Between this passageway and Ship Lane were buildings facing Ship Lane to the north. Along the eastern side of the marketplace was a smaller block of buildings, including the Market House, with another passageway called Bullwer Row immediately behind. The most significant feature of the New Market were the shops along Castle Dyke that ran in a great arc from the church in the east to the open area in front of the town bridge on the west. In the Terrier the plots are generally referred to as shops (*opellae*) and they would have consisted of a workshop or storage space at the rear producing or holding the goods to be sold in the shop at the front and with living accommodation above.[636] Around the market place, and in other parts of the town, were abandoned plots many of which had been converted into gardens. An example was that of John Clement between Ship Lane and Back Lane, who held a relatively small plot that attracted a chief rent of 3d.[637] As the population collapsed in the fourteenth century buildings were abandoned to decay and were finally

[636] BAT, p. 170; G. White, *The Medieval English Landscape 1000-1540* (London, 2012), p. 131.
[637] BAT, p. 163.

demolished with the unused sites being turned over to gardens and cultivation enabling the residents to achieve a degree of self-sufficiency.[638]

The Wisbeck Stream and the Welle Stream joined to the immediate north of the town with a joint outfall into the Wash, although for much of the period this outfall was silted-up. By the 1490s access was improving as the flow of water from Peterborough along the recently completed Morton's Leam through the Wisbeck Stream was starting to flush the channel and reopen the route to the Wash.[639] At the confluence of the two waterways the Welle Stream opened into a large pool and it was in this dock area that much of the unloading and loading of craft would have taken place. There is reference in the Trinity Guild records to payments for the repair and maintenance of wharfs.[640] This area again included passageways running down to the river and the wharfs from the marketplace. There is little surviving physical evidence as much of this part of the town was destroyed in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries and is now mostly covered by modern retail development. However, along Ship Lane (now Hill Street) some medieval features are still visible including the passageway at the west end of the lane (Scrimshaw's Passage) running to the river. The site of the Trinity Guildhall, much altered, can still be seen on Ship Lane close to the northern entrance to New Market. Although the exterior has changed some medieval features have survived in the interior of the building.[641] It was also the home of the town school established by the Guild. The Terrier notes that the Trinity Guild paid no rent to Ely for the property.[642] A further block of buildings ran along the eastern side of the town bordered by the Welle Stream on one side and The Common Way on the other.

[638] C. Dyer, *Making a Living in the Middle Ages* (London, 2009), p. 299.
[639] VCH(IoE), p. 263.
[640] TGR, p. 72.
[641] N. Pevsner, *The Buildings of England: Cambridgeshire* (London, 1954), p. 498.
[642] BAT, p. 162.

Site of the Trinity Guildhall on Ship Street (now Hill Street).

Passageway from the New Market to the Wisbeck Stream showing evidence of late medieval brickwork.

Figure 5.2 – Trinity Guildhall and medieval passageway in Wisbech (author's photographs).

Site of Wisbech Castle looking west from the church, the eighteenth-century house shows the position of the keep.

The interior of the Church of St Peter and St Paul showing the double nave and aisles.

Figure 5.3 – Wisbech castle and the church of St Peter and St Paul (author's photographs).

The triangular shaped area bordered by Deadman's Lane on the west, the Common Way to the east and the open farmland to the south was the religious centre of the town. At the top (and closest to the centre of the town) was the Church of St Peter and St Paul. There was an exit on the east side of the castle (now Museum Square) allowing residents easy access to the church and its grounds. Immediately below the church was the town graveyard and to the south of that the vicarage. The first record of a vicarage dates back to Bishop Northwold in 1252 and 240 years later Bishop Alcock's Terrier shows the plot was still held by the 'Vicar of Wisbech'.[643]

In the southeastern corner of the town was the third marketplace, the Timber Market located between the Welle Stream and the extension of The Common Way where it ran out into the King's Way. There was a bridge across the Welle Stream to Walsoken in Norfolk in this area. There are no surviving details on the nature of the Timber Market but as the name implies it was for importing wood and other building materials into the town and on into the Hundred. As Stone notes, 'with the exception of a few willows planted to stabilise the numerous banks and ditches this was a treeless landscape'.[644] It is no coincidence that the church was located on this side of the town close to the market and the Welle Stream where it would have been relatively easy to transport building material from the river to the church. As noted earlier the stone would have come from the midlands by way of Peterborough (Barnack stone was the principal material used in the construction of the church) with the timber from the forests of the midlands but supplemented by imports from Scandinavia through Lynn.[645] There were 32 plots on the Timber Market and the traveller passing through would have noticed a number that were empty and others that had been converted into gardens. Despite this the market still seemed to be reasonably buoyant with merchants and craftsmen operating from the area including butchers, tailors and at least one shoemaker. One of the minor religious guilds, the Guild of St Thomas the Martyr, had its guildhall on the Timber Market.[646] In comparison with the Trinity guild it was one of the smaller guilds of the town lacking the wealth and power of its larger brother. Leaving the town along the King's Way the traveller would have crossed the Sewer of Elme after which there

[643] VCH(IoE), p. 247.
[644] Stone, *Decision-Making*, p. 34.
[645] E. Carus-Wilson, 'The medieval trade of the ports of the Wash', *Medieval Archaeology* 6 (1962), p.191.
[646] Westlake, *Parish Guilds*, p. 148.

were open fields leading south through the Lord's Marsh to the parish of Elm. There was settlement on the eastern side of the Welle Stream in Norfolk but the neighbouring vill of Walsoken was not under the control of the town although the Bishop did hold land in the area.[647] The Wisbech Map (discussed in Chapter One) showed ribbon settlement extending down both banks of the main waterways, particularly along the Wisbeck Stream where settlement ran down by the smaller manor of Whitehall towards Guyhirn.

The church dates back to the twelfth century and it was started shortly after the completion of the castle. It was rebuilt and progressively enlarged from the thirteenth to the sixteenth centuries, as shown in the following plan.[648] In the early fourteenth century the chancel and the chapel were rebuilt. Later in that century a new south aisle was added with a clerestory and a south porch. Much of the main expansion of the original church was complete by the end of the century. The expenditure on the church points to a population with sufficient wealth to pay for the works. In the fifteenth century the south chapel was extended and new windows were added. In the early sixteenth century new aisle windows were installed, the buttresses rebuilt and the tower partially rebuilt (partly for adornment and partly following a collapse of the structure). The quality of this later workmanship is evident in the fine stone decoration around the windows. Although there are many large churches in the fen built on the wealth of the region (for example, St Leonards in Leverington and All Saints in Elm) the size of St Peter and St Pauls is unusual and the layout is unique. It has a double nave with an aisle and clerestory on both sides and the chancel is split to form a south chapel, the location of the Trinity Guild altar. This was done to accommodate the congregation (there being no other churches) and reflected the prosperity of the town. The confines of the site (close to the castle and the New Market) meant that the tower was built against the wall of the north aisle rather than against the west wall. The overall effect of the piecemeal development and the limitations of the site make for a church that in Pevsner's opinion 'is not as impressive as the size would make one expect'.[649]

[647] E. Miller, *The Abbey and Bishopric of Ely* (Cambridge, 1951), p. 77.
[648] VCH(IoE), p.248.
[649] Pevsner, *Buildings of England: Cambridgeshire*, p. 494.

The church benefited from the period of economic growth with money flowing into the town and contributing to its development. Much of this work was financed by the local religious guilds and in particular the dominant Trinity Guild. In 1530 the Guild paid £4 as a contribution to the repair of the steeple noted above.[650] They also paid for the work on the south chapel.[651] The Guild contributed to an ornate wooden rood screen that was unfortunately destroyed in a modern renovation of the church. In the fifteenth century much of the work was decorative but in the sixteenth century the work was more structural in nature following the collapse of the tower. This would have been expensive requiring contribution from the church and the town as well as the guilds. The extent and the quality of the workmanship shows the town had available funds to invest in this important symbol of the community.

[650] TGR, p. 49.
[651] VCH(IoE), pp. 248-9.

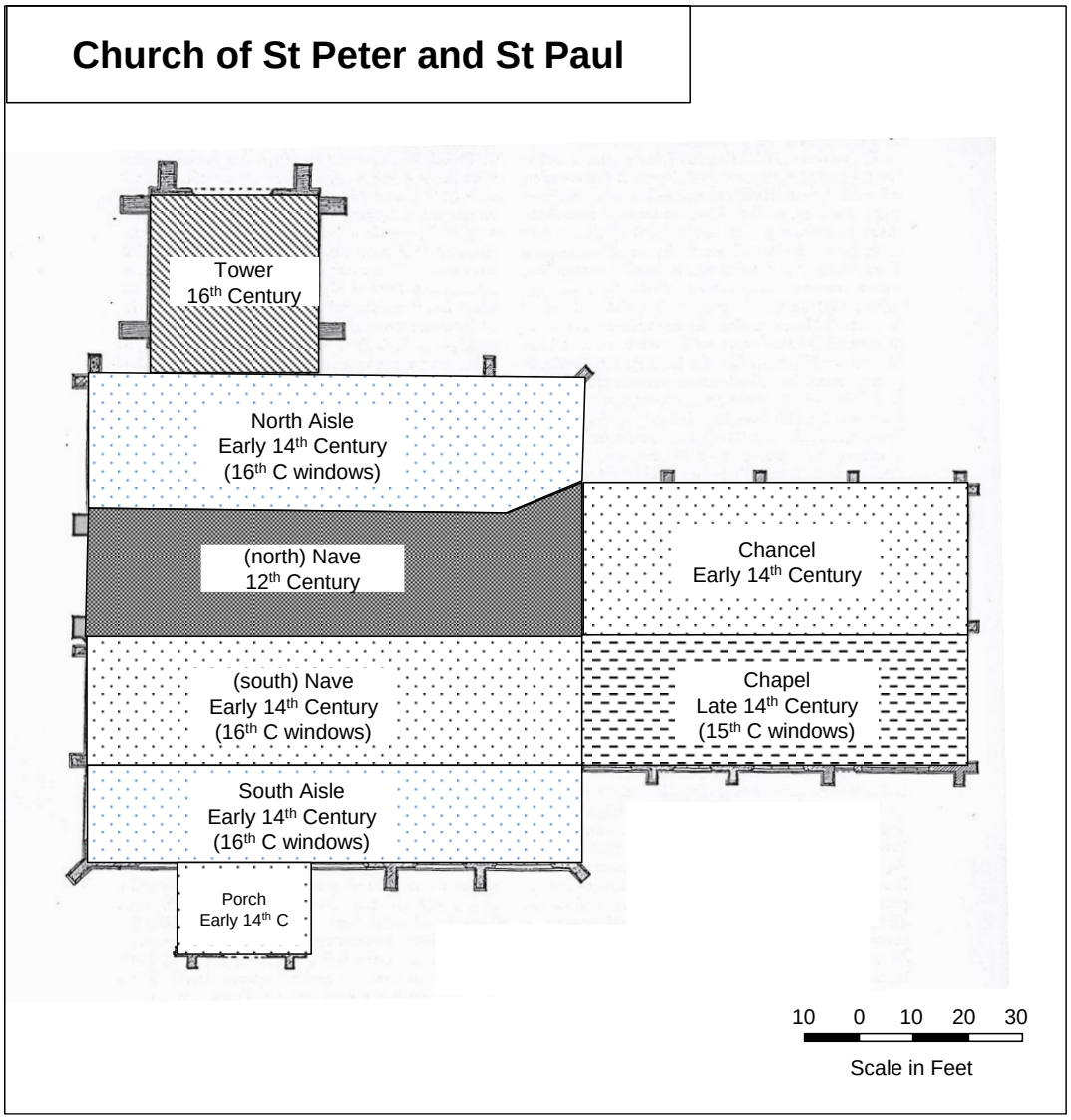


Figure 5.4 – Plan of the Church of St Peter and St Paul in Wisbech.[652]

The origins of Wisbech castle are uncertain but it seems likely that the first defenses were erected in the 1070s following the Ely rebellion against King William.[653] A fortification controlling access to the inland waterways from the Wash was a sensible precaution. At some point the original wooden defenses were replaced with stone, and the jurisdiction passed to the Bishop of Ely from the foundation of the bishopric in 1107.[654] The castle covered over four acres in the centre of the town with the main gate on the west overlooking the open area before the town bridge and the keep on the east side close to the church. The castle was surrounded by ditch and bank (the Castle Dyke) and the outline can still be seen in the layout of the eighteenth-century crescent. It was

[652] VCH(IoE), p. 248.
[653] A. Williams, *The English and Norman Conquest* (London, 1995), p. 36.
[654] VCH(IoE), p. 252.

on the main communications route along the east coast linking Norfolk and Lincolnshire and there were a number of royal visits in the thirteenth century. With its location on the periphery of the political world the castle appears to have quickly lost its importance as a military stronghold and reverted to being used as the centre of the Bishop of Ely's administration of the Hundred. The castle was also at various times a residence, a meeting place (the Commission of Sewers in 1438 was held in the castle) and finally a prison.[655] The surviving bailiff's account rolls for the castle refer to its role in the collection of rents and to income from fisheries, mills, markets and court fines.[656] In the fifteenth century the castle was generating an income of £100 per annum for the Bishop.[657] Much of this income collection was 'farmed' out to bodies such as the Trinity Guild in the fifteenth century as the Bishop moved away from direct management of his possessions. When in a reasonable state of repair it was used for Hundred Court meetings under the constable of the castle. The Constable, as the Bishop's representative in the Hundred received a number of benefits and these included a hall and chambers at the castle gates as well as a salary of 20 marks. He was allowed access to kitchen and stabling along with turves, straw, hay and oats.[658] The castle and the town were vulnerable to flooding from its establishment on the east bank of the Wisbeck Stream in the twelfth century.[659] This was largely caused by the meeting of tidal water from the Wash with freshwater from the midlands causing the Wisbeck Stream and the Welle Stream to overflow. The great flood of 1236 caused serious damage to the castle and it was abandoned for a long period before being rebuilt.[660] The castle then again fell into disrepair during the fourteenth and the early fifteenth century before being rebuilt by Bishop Morton between 1478 and 1483.[661]

There are a number of features apparent from the description of the town as it stood at the end of the fifteenth century. It was a complex settlement incorporating domestic and commercial buildings in an apparently unplanned way. This was a reflection of the evolution of the town to meet the requirements of the growing population in the thirteenth century and the needs of the surrounding area. The town was densely

[655] VCH(IoE), pp. 252-3.
[656] CUL, EDR, D7/1/1-15.
[657] VCH(IoE), p. 252.
[658] VCH(IoE), p. 252.
[659] Fletcher, *Wisbech Castle*, p. 10.
[660] Hinman, *Market Mews*, p. 6.
[661] Stone, p. 25; *VCH*, p. 252; W. Watson, *An Historical Account of the Ancient Town and Port of Wisbech, in the Isles* (Wisbech, 1827), pp. 126-7.

populated with a large number of buildings on relatively small plots, such as those surrounding the New Market and on the Timber Market. What is also apparent is that despite a number of gardens and empty plots (9% of the total number of plots recorded in the Terrier) within the town, showing the impacts of disease and flood, it was not falling into decline.

DEVELOPMENT OF THE TOWN

There is uncertainty with regard to the source of the name of the town with the most likely explanation that it came from the name of the river running through the settlement being derived from 'Ousebece' or 'Wyssbeck' an outfall of the River Ouse that ran through the town.[662] The settlement pre-dated the Norman conquest with the early site being on the west bank of the river in the location of the current Old Market.[663] The land on the east bank in the bend formed by the Wisbeck and Welle Streams was marshy, at risk from flooding and largely uninhabitable. Sometime after the rebellion in Ely in the 1070s the decision was made to drain this land and build a castle on the east bank of the Wisbeck Stream in the bend of the waterways.[664] At this time settlement was established around the castle forming the New Market.[665] Wisbech was already a long-established settlement and trading centre for the produce of the region.[666] The construction of the castle and the shift of the heart of the town to the east bank of the river provided an incentive for further growth. As seen from the evidence of the lay subsidies of 1327 and 1334 (see Chapter Three) the town benefitted from the prolonged economic boom of the twelfth and thirteenth centuries and the settlement expanded into the bend of the rivers and southeast along the Welle Stream to form the area around the Timber Market.[667]

The port of Wisbech was developed at the time of the original 'Old Market' settlement providing a route for trading and fishing vessels to and from the Wash and into the

[662] P. Reaney, *The Place-Names of Cambridgeshire and the Isle of Ely* (Cambridge, 1943), pp. 291-2.
[663] VCH(IoE), p. 240.
[664] Fletcher, *Wisbech Castle*, p. 9.
[665] Hinman, *Market Mews*, p. 9; M. Swanton (ed), *The Anglo-Saxon Chronicles* (London, 2000), p. 208.
[666] Darby, p. 23.
[667] B. Campbell and K. Bartley, *England on the Eve of the Black Death: an Atlas of Lay Lordship, Land and Wealth 1300-1349* (Manchester, 2006), Map 18.5.

network of inland waterways.[668] It is known that a Viking fleet passed through the region showing that it was accessible at that time to sea going vessels and it is likely that traders were already established on the site of the town with Anglo-Saxon pottery being found.[669] Produce from the silt marsh was traded inland through the network of waterways and out through the Wash. As a smaller port on the Wash the goods would have been moved to and from the town on smaller vessels to the larger ports such as Lynn acting as a trading hub for the region.[670] The silting of the river had an adverse impact on trade but it seems to have been short-lived indicating that the town's main customers were already inland towns such as Ely and Cambridge.[671] This situation continued until the end of the fifteenth century when the channel was reopened but by this time trade was generally in decline on the North Sea ports and increasingly migrating to London. The town did not seem to benefit significantly from the re-opening of the seaway having already found alternative markets.

The location of the town in the centre of the Hundred and on a hub of river communications had considerable advantages but it also carried with it some serious risks. With the onset of increasingly stormy weather conditions there were a devastating series of floods that caused severe damage to the town and loss of life in the surrounding villages.[672] The archaeological investigation carried out to the east of the New Market identified at least five separate flood events between 1250 and 1350 through the layers of silt deposits.[673] With the exception of the castle and the church the buildings would have had a timber frame construction and would have been seriously damaged by the floods. The Market Mews archaeological investigation indicated that a number of such buildings were abandoned with new houses being built on the site.[674] Despite the precarious nature of living in the north of the town the economic advantages were such that they outweighed the risks and the population level was maintained. The fact that parts of the town were not abandoned but were reoccupied and rebuilt demonstrates not only a confidence in the viability of the town but also a high level of resilience. The main cause of depopulation was not flooding but the series of plagues of

[668] Darby, *Medieval Fenland*, p. 23.
[669] HER(N), 18964.
[670] Carus-Wilson, 'Ports of the Wash', p. 189.
[671] Lee, *Cambridge*, p. 6.
[672] B. Fagan, *The Little Ice Age: How Climate made History 1300-1850* (New York, 2000), p. 65.
[673] Hinman, *Market Mews*, p. 23.
[674] Hinman, *Market Mews*, p. 28.

the fourteenth century and the town's population fell by around 30% between 1327 and 1377 (see the following graph, Figure 5.5). As discussed in Chapter Three this population graph is based on an analysis of the data from the *Ely Coucher Book* of 1250 and the lay subsidies of 1327 and 1524-5. Given the plague of 1349 alone had a mortality of typically 40% this would imply either the town was not as badly impacted by disease, which is unlikely, or more realistically there was repopulation of the town from surrounding areas.[675] With many small towns in decline across the fifteenth century Wisbech went against the general trend with a modest population growth of 8% up to 1524-5. This was not unique and there were examples of towns seeing substantial growth, such as those in Suffolk (e.g. Lavenham) benefitting from the expanding cloth industry in England.[676] The layout of the town evolved between the eleventh and the fourteenth centuries with the development of the castle, the New Market and the Timber Market. From the start of the fifteenth to the mid-sixteenth century there was little change in the layout of the town until the renewed population growth associated with the Tudor recovery led to further expansion beyond the established town boundaries.

[675] J. Hatcher, *Plague, Population and the English Economy* (London, 1977), p. 22.
[676] M. Bailey, *Medieval Suffolk: an Economic and Social History 1200-1500* (Woodbridge, 2007), p. 272.

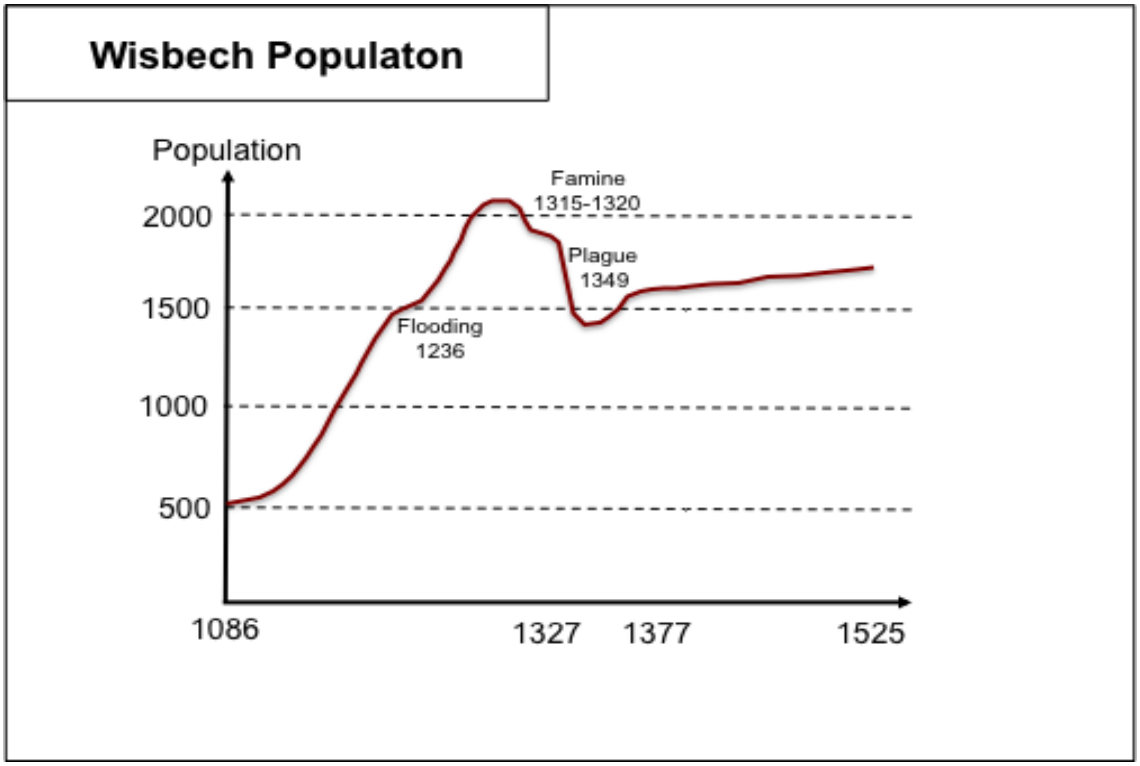


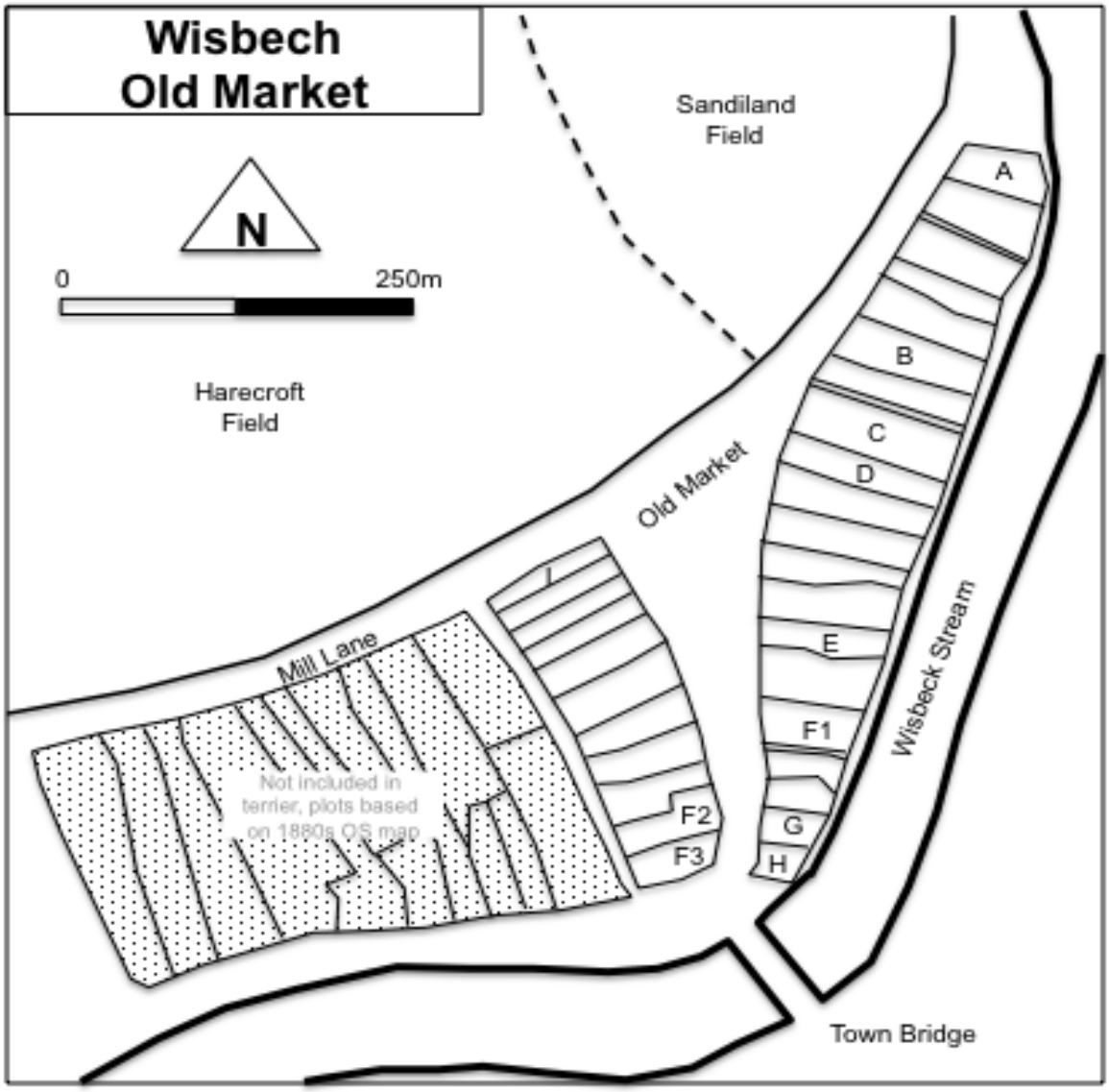
Figure 5.5 – Estimation of the population of Wisbech 1086 to 1525 (see population analysis in Chapter Three).

Inhabitants of the Town

The basis for the discussion of the inhabitants of the town in the late fifteenth century is the information contained in the Terrier. It provides details of property ownership and in some cases of employment. For the Old Market it mentions 26 inhabitants paying chief rents of between ½d and 2s for 29 plots. Of these, 20 of the plots were on the block on the east side of the Old Market beside the Wisbeck Stream running north from the town bridge to the junction of the Wisbeck Stream and the Welle Stream. The remaining 9 plots were in the block defined by the market place in the east, Mill Lane in the north and the Wisbeck Stream to the south (there were a further two plots that did not pay rent to the Bishop). The plots were primarily freehold but six were 'native' or servile. The servile plots attracted a lower chief rent but as the labour element had been replaced by a payment the effective rents were comparable. On the eastern side of the market John Aleyn, John Lambert and Thomas Cowper held servile plots valued at 8d of which 4d was for works. These were the chief rents paid to the Bishop and were set as early as the twelfth century based on the size and location of the plots. The actual rents paid by tenants were significantly higher. This can be seen in the Trinity Guild records for 1505 where Agnes Bonying and her son John as sub-tenants were paying 10s per annum for 9 acres in Fenlond whereas the entire field of at least 300 acres had a chief rent of 10s 6d.

This gave a ‘market rent’ at least 30 times greater than the chief rent. However, the chief rents are useful in that they provide an indication of the relative value of the plots in the town. The layout of the Old Market and the ownership of the plots are shown in the following map, Figure 5.6.[677] The layout of the markets have been compiled by taking the properties identified in the Terrier and comparing these with the plot boundaries shown on the 1880 Ordnance Survey map. This does not give a perfect correlation but does give a useful indication of the layout of the town at the end of the fifteenth century. [678]

[677] Ordnance Survey, Wisbech, 1:1250 (1880).
[678] T. Slater, ‘The analysis of burgage patterns in medieval towns’, *Area* 13 (1981), p. 212.



Ref	Name	Rent	Comment
A	John Bucke	6d	Baker
B	John Aleyn	4d	
C	Richard Buckworth	9d	Treasurer
D	John Laurence	4d	
E	John Lambert	8d	Marshall
F1 F2 F3	Edward Arter	½ d 1s 2d 2s	Bailiff
G	John Burwell	2d	Alderman
H	Thomas Carter	4d	
I	John Meris	Unknown	

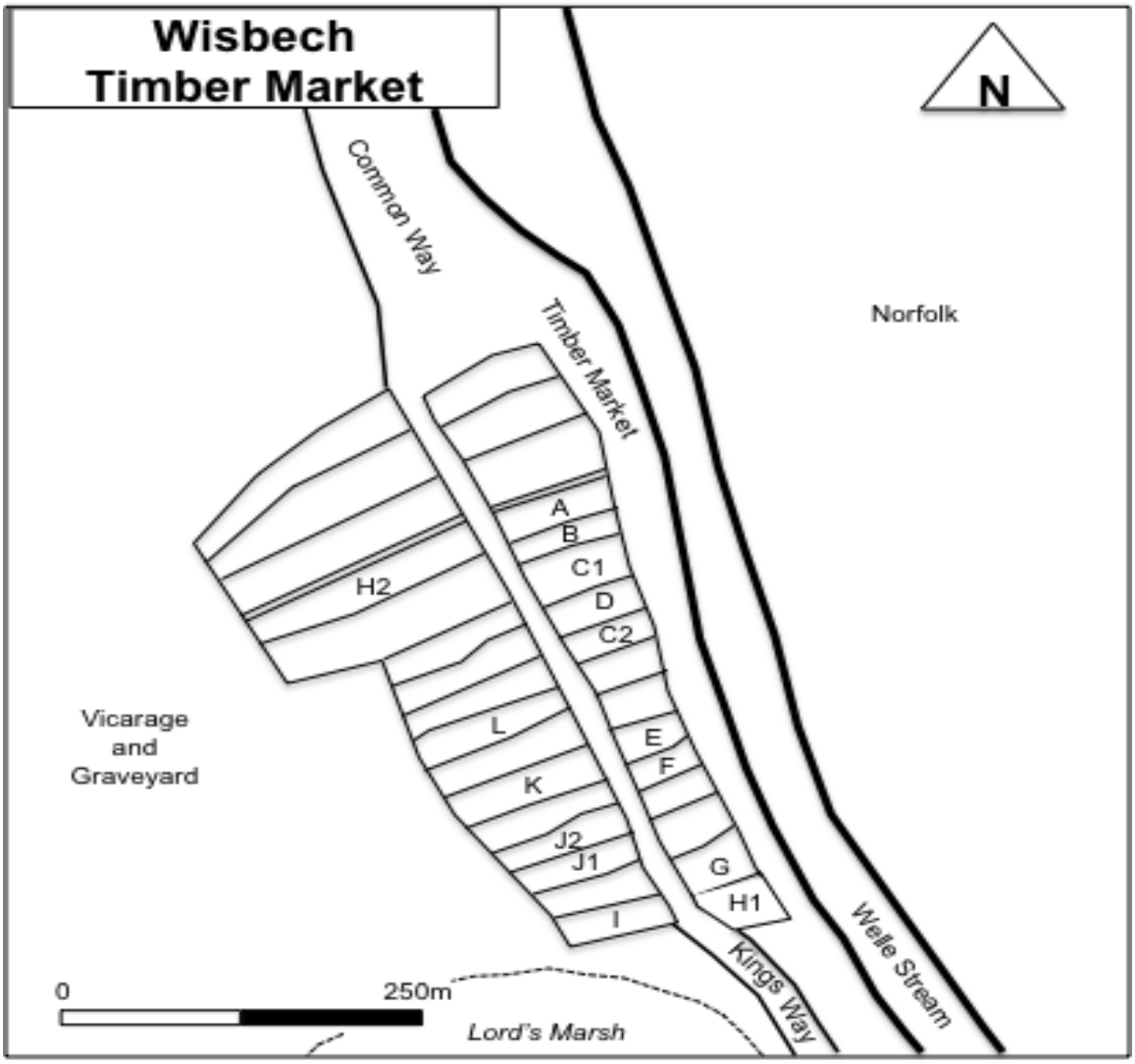
Figure 5.6 - Map of the Old Market in Wisbech including individual plots from the 1492 Terrier mentioned in the text.[679]

[679] Plan based on Bishop Alcock's Terrier of 1492 and the 1880 OS map of the town.

Members of the Trinity Guild held a significant proportion of the land around the market. Edward Arthur, who was recorded as the 'bailiff of the lands' and responsible for all the property owned by the Guild, in 1485 held three freehold messuages (one on the eastern side and two on the west facing the market place).[680] Richard Buckworth, a tailor, was an official of the Guild between 1485 and 1488 and held one messuage on the Old Market. In 1488 Richard Buckworth was recorded as receiving £8 from the Guild Treasurer for the provision of hoods for the brethren for the coming year. John Lawrence, who was a Marshall of the hall for the Guild in 1488 held one messuage as did John Burwell who was to be Alderman in 1495 and 1502.[681] A further plot was held by John Meris esquire. There is limited evidence in the Terrier of occupations or the existence of workshops on the Old Market indicating that the centre for commerce had moved across the town bridge and onto the New Market.

The Timber Market was on the eastern side of the town and to the southeast of the church. It lay on either side of the Common Way between that road and the 'River of Elme' or the Welle Stream. As the name implies it was primarily for the supply of building material with timber arriving from inland forests in East Anglia and the midlands (such as that used for building projects in Cambridge noted by Lee) or from the Baltic via Lynn.[682] In the terrier there were 32 plots recorded consisting of 27 messuages, three gardens and two empty plots (that were formerly held by John Awbry 'now waste and in the lord's hands').[683] 24 individuals held 30 of the plots with one plot jointly held by Nicholas Smyth and John Bocher (butchers) and the last plot held by the Guild of St Thomas the Martyr. The messuages were predominantly held by men with only two held by women, Joan Ely and Marion Fydge. A further plot had been held by the wealthy widow, Elizabeth Drake, but in 1492 was in the hands of her executors. Two of the plots had formally been held by the Trinity Guild but had been sold on to Nicholas Smyth and John Bocher (both brethren of the Guild) and to John Dowsyng (another tailor providing garments to the Guild). The layout of the Timber Market and the ownership of the plots are shown in the following map, Figure 5.7.

[680] TGR, p. 27.
[681] TGR, p. 30.
[682] Lee, *Cambridge*, p. 189; Carus-Wilson, 'Ports of the Wash', Figure 68.
[683] BAT, p. 173.



Ref	Name	Rent	Comment
A	William Merkaunt	1s	Merchant
B	Nicholas Smyth and John Bocher	7½d	Butchers
C1 C2	John Dowsyng	7½d 9d	Tailor
D	John Burwell	1s	Alderman
E	Robert Bateman	5s	Clerk
F	William Ladde	6s	Goldsmith
G	Guild of St Thomas Martyr	6d	
H1 H2	Robert Digby	1s 8d 8d	Alderman
I	Christopher Pate (garden)	3d	
J1 J2	William Gibb (empty plot)	4d 1s 4d	Vicar
K	John Esmond	1s 4d	Carpenter
L	Robert Edryche	1s 2d	Server

Figure 5.7 - Map of Timber Market in Wisbech including individual plots from the 1492 Terrier mentioned in the text.[684]

[684] Plan based on Bishop Alcock's Terrier of 1492 and 1880 OS map of the town.

Economically the Timber Market was more active than the Old Market with evidence of a number of trades taking place in the area. The easy access to the Welle Stream meant that it was an ideal location for merchants who could trade with the southern part of the Hundred, from the farms and manors surrounding Elm, as well as from the lands on the Norfolk bank of the waterway. William Merkaunt (merchant) had premises 'abutting the River of Elme facing East and the Common Way facing west'. Nicholas Smyth and John Bocher had premises on the New Market as well as a joint messuage on the Timber Market. Their neighbour John Dowsyng was a shoemaker and held two messuages on the market paying a total chief rent of 1s 4½d. John Esmond was a carpenter who held a messuage that formerly belonged to William Fydge (the late husband of Marion Fydge mentioned earlier) lying between Common Way and Kings Way. William Gibb, the vicar of St Peter and St Paul, held two plots in the Timber Market. One was a messuage between the Common Way and Kings Way and the other was an empty plot conveniently located by the Common Way and abutting the vicarage at the northern end of the market. The main centre for economic activity in the town was the New Market but the Timber Market continued to play an important role and generated a chief rent of 27s 4d for the Bishop of Ely.

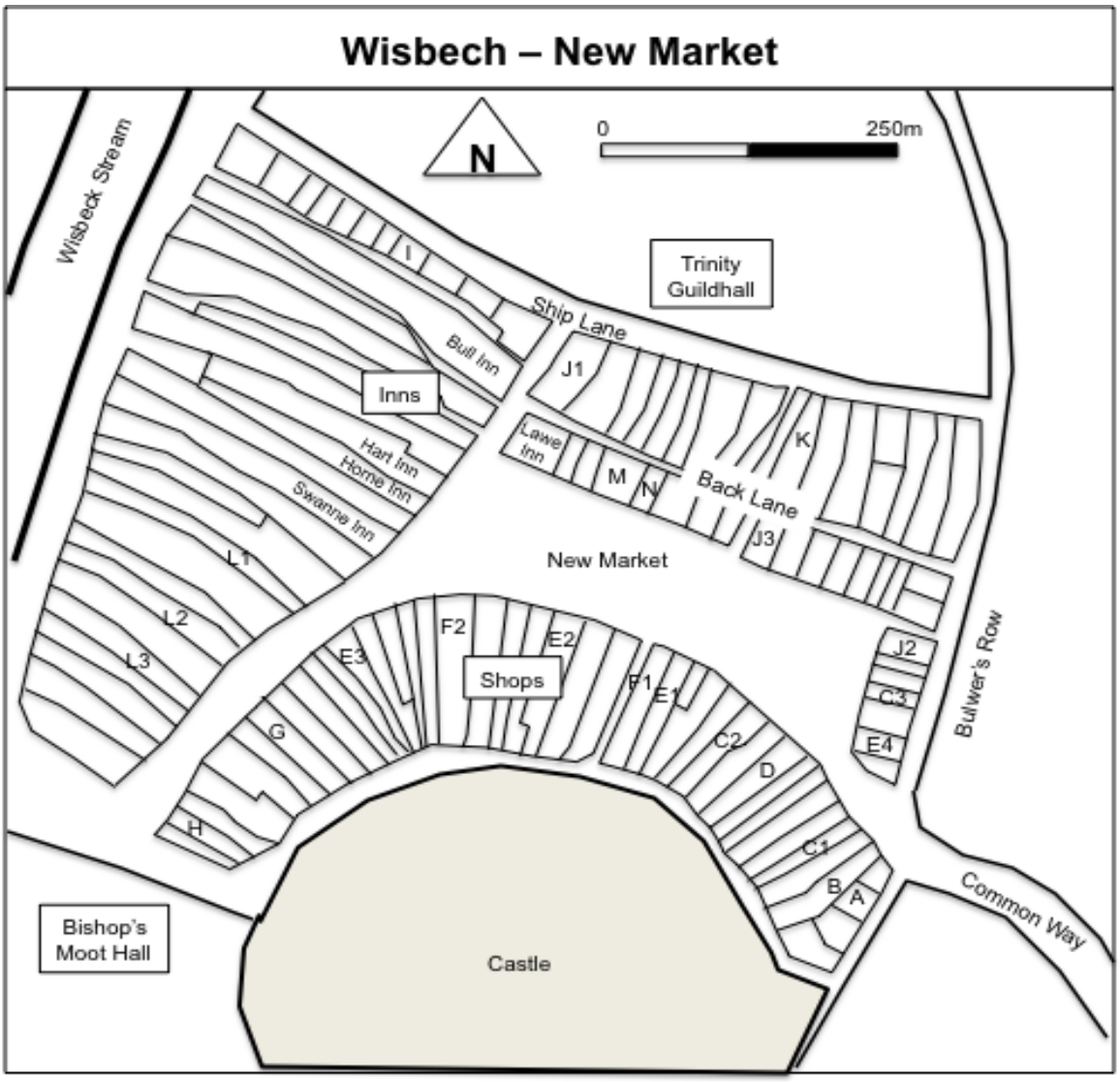
Members of the Trinity Guild, including two Aldermen, held property on the market. Robert Digby, who was Alderman between 1479 and 1489, held two plots; a messuage on Common Way and a garden on the Kings Way opposite. John Burwell, Alderman in 1502, held a sizeable property by the Welle Stream formerly owned by John Aleyn which attracted a chief rent of 12d.[685] Robert Bateman and William Ladde held neigbouring plots by the Walsoken Bridge over the Welle Stream. Robert Bateman was Clerk to the Guild in 1488 and had purchased his plot from John Lawrence, who served as Marshall of the Guild at the same time. William Ladde (goldsmith) was an official of the Guild in 1503, probably one of the 'clerks of the market' responsible for collecting rents. Robert Edryche held a messuage on Kings Way and in 1485 had been one of the Servers of the Guild. Other plots on the market, if not held by officials of the Guild, were held by brethren. Membership of the Trinity Guild did not ensure access to property but it gave assisted entry to a restricted market. Of the 32 plots on the Timber Market 28 were shown as freehold, three are unknown and only one is shown as being

[685] BAT, p. 174.

copyhold, similar to a servile holding. This was a messuage and garden held by Christopher Pate and was on the southern end of the market on the edge of the town facing 'the Lord's Marsh'.[686]

The New Market was both the physical and economic heart of the town of Wisbech. The market and surrounding streets made up the largest part of the settlement with 87 messuages, 47 shops, eight gardens and empty plots and three other buildings. Of the 142 plots noted in the Terrier they were held by 69 individuals, a greater concentration of multiple ownership than on the other markets. The Bishop of Ely held the 'Mote Hall' close to the western entrance to the castle with the Trinity Guild holding a number of messuages as well as a large plot containing the guildhall on Ship Lane. John Thurston, Chaplain to the Trinity Guild in 1488, held three shops, a messuage and a garden on the market in his own right. Men again held the majority of the plots with 13 women holding a total of 19 plots, Margaret Marshall being the largest property owner holding three messuages. They are generally recorded as widows otherwise the land was held by their husbands, such as John Boteler (brewer) who held three adjoining messuages between New Market and Bullwer Row 'held in law of his wife' (i.e. by marriage).[687] The following map (Figure 5.8) shows the distribution of plots on and around the New Market.[688]

[686] BAT, p. 175.
[687] BAT, p. 171.
[688] Ordnance Survey, Wisbech, 1:1250 (1880).



Ref	Name	Rent	Comment
Bull	John Podych	9d	
Hart	Robert Digby	6d	Alderman
Horne	Elizabeth Sorrell	9d	
Swanne	Elizabeth Ruddle	4d	
Lawe	John Podych	4d	
A	St Peter's Church (three shops)	1s	
B	John Boteler (one shop)	3d	
C1	John Thurston (one shop)	9d	Priest
C2	(three shops)	11¼d	
C3	(garden and messuage)	4d	
D	Nicholas Smyth and John Bocher	7d	Butchers
E1	John Burwell (one shop)	7d	Alderman
E2	(two shops)	1s 8½d	
E3	(one shop)	8d	
E4	(two messuages)	5d	

Ref	Name		Rent	Comment
F1 F2	William Gatesend	(one shop) (six shops)	7d 2s 7d	Alderman
G	Richard Buckworth	(three shops)	3s	Treasurer
H1 H2	William Bayerd	(one shop) (one empty plot)	1s 4d	
I	John Cleycroft	(six messuages)	3s 4d	
J1 J2 J3	Robert Digby	(one messuage) (one garden) (one messuage)	4d 2d 4d	Alderman
K	John Clement	(one garden)	3d	
L1 L2 L3	John Drake	(one messuage) (one garden) (three messuages)	Unknown	Rents paid to the Prior of Ely
M	Elizabeth Sorrell		1s 10d	
N	William Ladde		4d	Clerk
Guildhall	Trinity Guildhall		Unknown	
Moothall	Bishop's Moothall		14s 4d	

Figure 5.8 – Map of the New Market including individual plots from the 1492 Terrier mentioned in the text.[689]

The role of the New Market as the economic hub of the town with its workshops and numerous inns is evident. It sat at the centre of the community with passageways leading to the wharfs and jetties that gave easy access for the movement of goods. The ownership of the shops can be identified from the Terrier and this combined with information from wills helps to determine some of the occupations. Against the church, on the eastern end of the row were three plots recorded as being held by the church with, two plots down, the two shops held by John Thurston. The will of John Thurston from 1497 showed him to be a wealthy individual leaving £9 4s 4d as well as land and valuable goods such as amber cups and silver spoons.[690] In the middle of the row facing the centre of the market were the shops of the butchers Nicolas Smyth with John Bocher on the right and Richard Smyth on the left, separated by the shop of the brewer John Boteler. He had purchased the site from William Clerk who had also been a brewer indicating that the site had been used for this purpose for a number of years. On the west side of the row close to the road out of the marketplace were six shops held by William Gatesend, future Alderman. They had been acquired from John Masse (a former long serving Alderman who had died in 1466).[691] In his will of 1459 Hamo Parfey, wheelwright and carpenter left a shop on the Castle Dyke as well as a messuage

[689] Plan based on Bishop Alcock's Terrier of 1492 and the 1880 OS map of the town.
[690] C.R.O., VC 4:10
[691] T.N.A., P.R.O., PROB 11/5/255.

on Ship Lane to the north of the market.[692] At the western end of the row were two shops held by William Bayerd.[693] He also had a shop in Barton Lane, to the south of the Old Market on the west bank of the Wisbeck Stream. The shops on the market would have enabled the farmers in the outlying communities to sell their produce and to purchase any necessities that they could not provide for themselves or could not be sourced locally. The shops would also have supported the population of the town.

On the western side of the marketplace, against the Wisbeck Stream, was a row of inns between the entrance to the market in the south and Ship Lane in the north. The Swanne Inn stood at the entrance to the marketplace and was held by Margaret Ruddele and two plots to the north was the Horne Inn (held by Isobell Sorell) and the Harte (held by the former Alderman Robert Digby). In the fifteenth century it was common for women to be involved in brewing as well as running inns.[694] On the road linking the market and Ship Lane was the Bull Inn (held by John Powdych) and on the opposite side of the road was the Lawe Inn (also held by John Powdych). These inns, including the Brewarne (held by Thomas Ruddele) would have been adequate to meet the needs of the town and the visitors. The numerous aleshouses around the Castle Dyke and the Long Malthouse off Ship Lane (held by John Kendall and purchased from Robert Digby) could have supported a healthy trade in ale with the surrounding communities.[695] The brewing and sale of ale is also shown in the court records for the town that regularly note fines for the selling of ale 'contrary to the assize'. A typical record was the fining of 1d each for five people in May 1503 providing a useful and regular source of income for the Bishop.[696]

As part of the study of the New Market it is valuable to look at the links to the ruling Trinity Guild. Identified officials of the Guild owned a total of 34 plots in and around the market and brethren would have held many others. This included 21 plots held by former, current or future aldermen of the guild. Robert Digby held a messuage on the west side of the market and another on the junction with Ship Lane as well as a 'garden once built on' by the east side of the market. He also held a further messuage on the

[692] C.R.O., VC 2:29.
[693] C.R.O., VC 4:3.
[694] M. Mate, *Women in Medieval English Society* (Cambridge, 1999), pp. 40-1.
[695] Lee, *Cambridge*, p. 33.
[696] C.U.L., EDR, C/7/1-24, Court Roll, Wisbech, 1503.

north side between the marketplace and Back Lane. John Burwell, who was Alderman in 1502, held five shops on the Castle Dyke and two messuages on the west side of the market. His successor, William Gatesend held a further seven shops letting them out to sub-tenants. In this concentration of property and wealth within the ruling clique of the town we can see the triumph of oligarchy described by Rigby and Ewan.[697]

Some information can be obtained from the Terrier on the comparative value of property within the town. In Table 5.1 the average chief rents paid on the three markets is shown.

Location	Number of Plots	Average Rent
Old Market	29	7½d
Timber Market	32	10½d
New Market	113	10¼d
Total	174	9¾d

Table 5.1 – Chief rents for market plots in Wisbech from the 1492 Terrier.

The lowest rents were paid on the Old Market and the rents on the New Market and the Timber Market were approximately the same. If a similar exercise is carried out for the 47 shops on the south side of the New Market the average rent was only 6¼d. The lower rents on the Old Market are to be expected and in part relate to the earlier development of the area. They also reflect the fact that the commercial centre of the town had moved across the river to the New Market. These later and higher rents would have been set during the period of economic growth. The higher rents for the New Market and the Timber Market related to the larger average size of the plots as well as the location, being better situated commercially. The row of shops lying under the Castle Dyke was densely packed and the resulting plot sizes were small which accounts in part for the lower rental values. The rents recorded in the Terrier were those charged by the lord (the Bishop of Ely) and it does not give any indication of the rents for sub-letting which would have more closely reflected the market value but, as noted earlier, it does provide a basis for comparison.[698]

[697] S. Rigby and E. Ewan, 'Government, power and authority 1300 to 1540' in D. Palliser (ed), *The Cambridge Urban History of Britain, Volume I 600-1540* (Cambridge, 2000), p. 309.
[698] H. Swanson, *Medieval British Towns* (Basingstoke, 1999), p. 70.

There were a number of factors that influenced the 'market rent' (as opposed to the chief rent shown in the Terrier) charged for plots in Wisbech. Generally, plots were one or two perches (16½ to 33 feet) width and occasionally combined into larger sites.[699] Elizabeth Sorrell held a property between New Market and Back Lane paying more than her neighbour William Ladde (goldsmith) who had a smaller property. Gardens and empty sites attracting a lower rent than those that had been developed. On the Timber Market Christopher Pate and William Gibb held gardens for rents of 2s. Location also attracted a premium with the properties in Ship Lane having the highest rents. Those in the square outside the castle and on either side of the town bridge were also more expensive. Here smaller properties in a good location could be more valuable than larger sites.

Another factor for the 'market rent' was the state of repair of the properties although there is no evidence in the Terrier on the condition of the plots. It is an explanation for why adjoining plots of a similar size attracted significantly different rents. The Horne Inn had a rent twice that of the nearby, and apparently larger, Swanne. What is also apparent was the increasing concentration of plots in the hands of a small number of people, many of them closely linked to the Trinity Guild and the ruling elite of Wisbech, typical of other towns in this period.[700] There was an 'engrossing' of properties in the town as well as land in the surrounding fields. This can be seen in the four messuages and one garden held by John Drake on the west side of the New Market and the four shops and two messuages held by John Burwell. A number of individuals, such as Richard Buckworth, also held property across the town.

The town had a high density of housing combined with a low percentage of empty plots. The number of empty plots was evenly divided between the New Market and the Timber Market with none being recorded on the Old Market. The size of the town was maintained throughout the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries showing a level of resilience as a social and economic entity. Where plots were abandoned new tenants had come in to occupy the sites.

[699] Swanson, *Medieval British Towns*, pp. 108-9.
[700] Swanson, *Medieval British Towns*, p. 121.

An assessment of the inhabitants of the town would not be complete without looking at the role of aliens and immigration. There was nothing new about foreigners settling in the region and by the end of the fifteenth century this had become a normal pattern.[701] There were strong trading links between northern Europe and the ports of the Wash.[702] Traders from Flanders and the Hanseatic towns frequently settled in the region, in the middle of the fifteenth century there were 209 foreigners recorded as resident in Lynn, many concentrated around the Hanseatic warehouses of the Steelyard.[703] For settlers from Holland and Zeeland the Fenlands bordering the Wash would have been a landscape they recognised and understood. It is likely that their skills and knowledge of textiles, brickmaking and brewing as well as wetland farming would have been valued. A further attraction was the changing nature of the local economy; the move from exporting wool to exporting the more valuable cloth would have attracted skilled Flemish weavers to the region. This was reinforced by the European wars of the fifteenth century that disrupted the cloth trade in the Netherlands.[704] Human nature does not change and then as now there was inevitably resentment with aliens being seen as taking work from locals. The concerns with resident aliens were seen in 1436 with the requirement to swear an oath of fealty and then in 1440 with the subsidy on foreigners.[705] This information has enabled a database of aliens to be developed and Table 5.2 shows the details of foreigners recorded as resident in the Wisbech area.

[701] Lee, *Cambridge*, p. 78.
[702] Carus-Wilson, 'Ports of the Wash', p. 186.
[703] www.englandsimmigrants.com, Kings Lynn.
[704] J. Thompson, *The Transformation of Medieval England 1370-1529* (Harlow, 1983), p. 56.
[705] J. Bolton, *The Alien Communities of London in the Fifteenth Century: the Subsidy Rolls of 1440 and 1483-4* (London, 1998), p. 45.

Year	Name	Nationality	Location	Householder	Trade
1440	Guillermus Frenssh	France	Wisbech	Yes	Unknown
1436	John Jamesson	Holland	Wisbech	Unknown	Unknown
1440	John Mace	Unknown	Wisbech	No	Weaver
1440	Giles Servaunt	Unknown	Wisbech	No	Servant
1436	John Stone	Brabant	Wisbech	Unknown	Unknown
1440	Bartholomew Taillour	Unknown	Elm	Yes	Tailor
1440	Henry Thakker	Unknown	Tydd	Yes	Thatcher
1440	John – servant to Thomas Lytster	Unknown	Wisbech	No	Servant
1440	John – servant to Richard Mannynge	Unknown	Wisbech	No	Servant
1440	John – servant to John Cleycroft	Unknown	Wisbech	No	Servant
1440	John – servant to Simon Thomson	Unknown	Newton	No	Servant
Aliens resident in Wisbech (% of population)					1%
Aliens resident in Lynn (% of population)					5%
Aliens resident in Boston (% of population)					8%

Table 5.2 – Details of aliens in Wisbech based on the records of the 1436 Oath of Fealty and the 1440 subsidy on foreigners.[706]

The database shows that the number of aliens resident in Wisbech (eight in the town and three in surrounding villages) was small when compared with the ports of Lynn and Boston (with 348 foreigners). The large numbers for the two major ports reflects the level of trade with Europe, both having strong links with the Hanseatic League. In the case of Lynn this was formalised with the peace of 1474 that granted land to the Hanseatic merchants in the town.[707] The record for Wisbech is limited and in many cases the country of origin is not given but of the three where it is shown two were from Flanders and one was from France. Five of the eleven were employed as servants and of the remaining three one was a weaver, one a tailor and one a thatcher. Although the information on aliens for Wisbech is brief some conclusions can be drawn. Few aliens had made their way to settle in the Wisbech Hundred and many of these were in the low status and possibly temporary position of servant. They had limited impact on the local economy. The focus of the local economy was on internal trade and local craftsmen were meeting the local demand so there was little or no opportunity for outsiders.

[706] www.englandsimmigrants.com, Wisbech

[707] P. Richards, 'The Hinterland and Overseas Trade of Kings Lynn 1205-1537: an introduction', in K.Friedland and P. Richards (eds), *Essays in Hanseatic History: the Kings Lynn Symposium 1998* (Dereham, 2005), p. 18.

THE TRINITY GUILD

In 1388 parliament required that the masters of all guilds should provide details of their foundation, structure and customs. This is referred to as the Return of 1389.[708] Although the purpose of the Return was not stated in the writ, as it was to include details of property and goods it was probably to assess their wealth. Given the need to finance the ongoing wars it seems likely that a subsidy on the guilds was being considered. There was also a concern in the immediate aftermath of the Peasant's Revolt about any organisation that grew out of popular movements (as was the case with the guilds) that could potentially be a threat to the established social and religious order. Another concern may have been the growing power of the guilds within towns at the expense of the local lords. The return recorded six guilds in Wisbech with a further five in the rest of the Hundred, see Table 5.3.

Location	Guild	Foundation
Wisbech	Corpus Christi	Not Given
Wisbech	St John Baptist	1384
Wisbech	St Peter	1387/8
Wisbech	St Thomas the Martyr	Not Given
Wisbech	Holy Trinity	1379
Wisbech (St Mary)	St Mary	1387
Tydd St Giles	Holy Cross	1385/6
Tydd St Giles	St Giles	1386/7
Tydd St Giles	St Mary	1349
Leverington	Blessed Virgin Mary	1386
Elm	St Katherine	'time without memory'

Table 5.3 - Parish Guilds in Wisbech Hundred from the return of 1389.[709]

The role of the guilds was originally to support the Church through the promotion of good religious practice included paying for their own priests, for the maintenance of church buildings and for the Guild altar within the parish church.[710] The religious role went as far as organising processions on holy days (particularly the Guild holy day), the purchase of hoods for members and wax for altar candles. The records for 1465, 1470 and 1485 for the Trinity Guild in Wisbech gives a detailed breakdown of the

[708] Westlake, *Parish Guilds*, p. 36.
[709] Westlake, *Parish Guilds*, p. 138-48.
[710] K. Farnhill, *Guilds and the Parish Community in Late Medieval East Anglia c. 1470-1550* (York, 2001), p. 114.

expenditure on the holy day feast as shown in Table 5.4.[711] The feast was an important event for the Guild bringing together the brethren in celebration and providing a visible demonstration of their wealth.[712] Through the feast and its ongoing activities the Guild was a significant contributor to the local economy creating demand for local and imported goods. A secondary role of the guild was to act as a charity. The funds of the Guild were used to ensure that deceased members were given a decent burial with a priest to say prayers for their souls. Financial support was also given to the widow and families of the late brother or sister.[713] In this capacity the Guild acted as a benevolent society caring and protecting its own but also, in many cases to a limited extent, providing alms to the poor of the town.[714]

[711] TGR, p.52.
[712] G. Rosser, 'Going to the fraternity feast: commensality and social relations in late medieval England', *Journal of British Studies* 33 (1994), p.431.
[713] Farnhill, *Guilds*, p. 60.
[714] Bainbridge, *Gilds*, p. 99.

1465			
Item	**Cost**	**Item**	**Cost**
Grain (8 bushels)	2s 8d	Eggs	11d
Calf	2s 4d	Butter	Unknown
Lambs (3)	3s 5d	Fish	8d
Piglets	Unknown	Salt	Unknown
Chickens (54)	3s 4d	Onions	Unknown
Geese (24)	3s 8d	Vinegar	Unknown
Birds	2s 1d	Honey	3d
Beer	3d	Various spices	2s 2½d
There were also payments for the cook (1s 4d), entertainers (4s) and servants. The total expenditure on the feast was £2 4s 8½d			
1470			
Item	**Cost**	**Item**	**Cost**
Grain	5s 4d	Eggs (9 score)	2d
Shellfish (6 dozen)	9s	Butter	2d
Calves (2)	4s	Fish	1s 6d
Sheep (2)	5s	Salt	1d
Lambs (2)	2s	Onions	1d
Birds (2 dozen)	4s	Vinegar	3d
Chickens (4 dozen)	3s 6d	Honey	3d
Milk and cream	10d	Various spices	1s 7½ d
There were also payments for wine (not specified) and for cooks and entertainers who received 1s 6d each. The total expenditure on the feast was £2 7s ½d at a time when the guild had 39 full members.			
1485			
Item	**Cost**	**Item**	**Cost**
Grain	4s 9d	Eggs (100)	7½ d
Calves (2)	5s	Butter	6d
Piglets (5)	2s 5d	Fish	1s 9d
Chickens (5 dozen)	5s	Salt and pepper	5d
Geese	4s 8d	Oatmeal	Unknown
Milk and cream	1s 2½d		
Sweet wine	Unknown		
There were also payments for cooks (2s), entertainers (6s 8d) and servants (1s). The total expenditure on the feast was £3 5s 5½d.			

Table 5.4 – Expenditure on feast days by the Trinity Guild in Wisbech in 1465, 1470 and 1485.

The records of the Trinity Guild from 1379 to abolition in 1547 (along with all other religious fraternities) provide a wealth of information on the evolving role of the Guild within the town.[715] Although the structure of the records was generally consistent throughout the period the shifting emphasis on different aspects of the Guild's activities

[715] P. Clark and P. Slack, *English Towns in Transition 1500-1700* (Oxford, 1976), p. 59.

illustrated this changing role. At the start of each record the number and names of the 'council' of brethren present was given. The 'council' then elected the Alderman and the other Guild officials for the coming year. The records went on to note the religious and social activities of the Guild before moving on to the financial and civic responsibilities. In the initial section the arrangements for processions and feasts were noted. This included the requirement for 'brothers and sisters' to attend and how they should be dressed. This can be seen in the reference in the entry for 1477 that 'the Dean should have delivered to him certain ornaments for the altar of the Holy Trinity so that the altar be prepared for the principal feast'.[716]

In the record for 1469 (this would have been in the middle of the War of the Roses and the rebellion of the Earl of Warwick against Edward IV) it stated that 'the Chaplain [was] to pray for the good estate, tranquility and peace of all the realm [as well as] for the souls of John Masse and William Belman and their wives and for the good estate of all the brothers and sisters of the Guild'.[717] Reference was made to the charitable role of the Guild; for example, in 1508 and 1509 the record noted 'the order for seeing the poor people served according to ordinances made in times past', perhaps implying that the charitable duties of the Guild had been neglected in recent years. Where necessary the records went on to discuss matters of discipline (such as failing to attend meetings and ceremonies) and orders for the completion of specific tasks. An example of this was the order in 1513 that 'the Clerk of the Guild do translate all the first statutes and ordinances out of the Latin into English and so to publish and declare the said statutes in the hall at the feast of the Holy Trinity'.[718] This was consistent with the move towards the increased use of English for official documents as seen in the wills for the early sixteenth century and was an effort to make the Guild more inclusive. From the mid-fifteenth century much of the annual record was given over to financial matters and the report of the Bailiff. Such was the value of the Trinity Guild's possessions in property and land as well as money and jewels that there was much discussion of the arrangements for auditing the accounts and supervising the work of the responsible officials. In 1531 the record noted the details of 187½ acres of land to be leased out and the final accounts at the dissolution in 1547-8 noted approaching 800 acres. This part of

[716] TGR, p. 24.
[717] C. Ross, *The Wars of the Roses* (London, 1976), p. 66.
[718] TGR, p. 36.

the report included the detailed instructions for the management of specific property and lands. In the record for 1489 it noted that 'by consent Richard Warden to have a messuage called Tokes Place for £20'. The record ended by recording the number of new admissions, up to a maximum of ten in a year.

The structure of the Guild as well as its responsibilities evolved with time as its duties extended beyond the religious and charitable into estate management. This development was driven by the complexity of controlling lands and property bequeathed to the Guild. The Guild delivered its private and public functions through a well-established structure that was defined in the initial record of 1379. At the head of the Guild was the Alderman who was elected on an annual basis and acted as the executive officer of the organisation. The Alderman had two roles: to act as the figurehead of the Guild for its religious duties; and to make decisions on behalf of the brethren. The Alderman answered to the 'council' of the brethren on at least an annual basis for re-election.[719]

The Alderman was supported by a small group of elected officials with specific responsibilities: Deputy Alderman, Marshall, Clerk, Dean, Chaplain and Bailiff. Beyond that there was a wider group of other officials including Chamberlain (Housekeeper), Servers, Storekeeper, Treasurers and 'Clerks of the Market'.[720] The Marshall of the Hall, also referred to as the Steward, was responsible for the guildhall and all events that took place in the hall. This was a senior post within the Guild and a usual step for members aspiring to become Alderman. This was the case for William Gatesend who was admitted to the Guild in 1477 and was Marshall in 1496 and then Deputy Alderman before moving on to Alderman in 1504-5. The Clerk was responsible for maintaining the records of the Guild including the annual reports and was another senior official in the organisation. It was undertaken by Robert Bateman (admitted in 1465) between 1483 and 1486 who was an extensive landowner in and around the town. The Dean and the Chaplain were responsible for the religious aspects of the Guild including arranging funerals, celebration of holy days and the maintenance of the Guild altar in the town church and the Guild chapel in Walsoken.[721] The Chaplain employed priests to offer prayers for the salvation of the souls of deceased brethren and their

[719] Bainbridge, *Gilds*, p. 140.
[720] Farnhill, *Guilds*, p. 51.
[721] VCH(Norf), p. 452.

families. The importance of the role of the Bailiff grew as the Guild acquired more land and property through gifts and bequests from members and by the end of the fifteenth century had the largest portfolio of property in the Hundred apart from the Bishop of Ely. The Bailiff was responsible for arranging leases, maintaining properties, collecting rents and was required to submit a report to the Alderman and 'council' every year. Although members of the Guild undertook the role it would have been a near fulltime job requiring support from other officials. Reflecting the onerous nature of the duties it was a position that had a salary. The other roles in the Guild appear to have been to support the Marshall in the smooth running of the Guild acting as officials at the feasts and on holy days. The structure and hierarchy of the Guild is shown in Figure 5.9.[722]

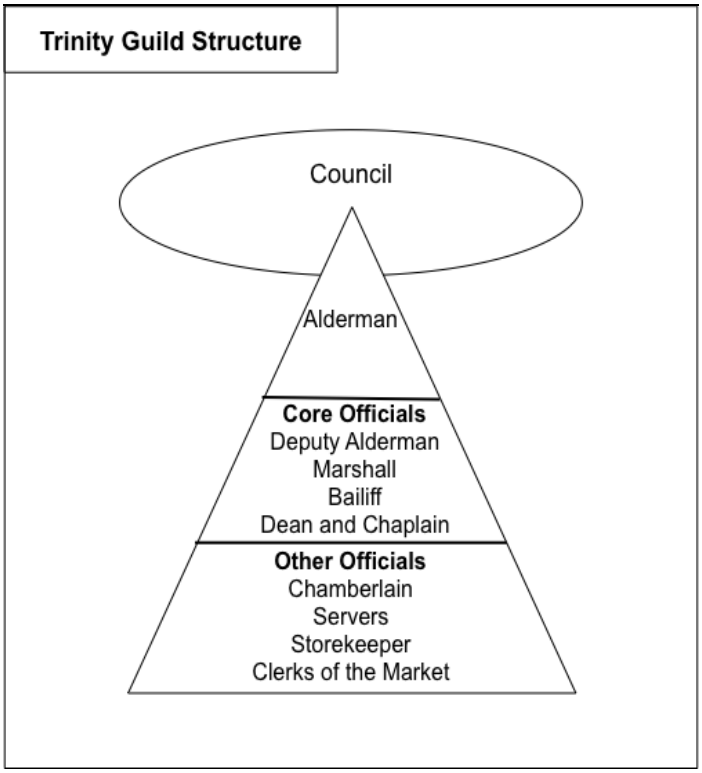


Figure 5.9 – Diagram showing the hierarchy of the Trinity Guild in Wisbech in the fifteenth century.

[722] Dyer, *Making a Living*, p. 317; VCH(IoE), p. 255; Bainbridge, *Gilds*, p. 138.

These roles were consistent with those seen in other towns; the Purification Guild in Cambridge had a similar structure.[723] The Holy Cross Guild in Stratford upon Avon was based on this model with officials appointed through annual election.[724] The structure remained unchanged across the period as shown in the appointments for the Trinity Guild in 1484 and in 1547 in Table 5.5 below.

1484		**1547**	
Role	**Name**	**Role**	**Name**
Alderman	Robert Digby	Alderman	John Procter
Deputy Alderman	John Burwell	Deputy Alderman	John Knight
Clerk	Robert Bateman	Clerk	Edward Wilkes
Marshall	Christopher Pate	Marshall	John Baxter
Bailiff	Edward Arthur	Bailiff	Thomas Scorted
Dean	Stephen Seman	Dean	(not recorded)
Chamberlain	Thurstan Childers	Chamberlain	Henry Johnson William Day
Server	Thomas Bennett	Server	George More
Storekeeper Cupbearer	(not recorded)	Storekeeper Cupbearer	John Wilson Richard Spencer
Treasurer	(not recorded)	Treasurer	William Andrew John Austyn
Clerk to the Market	John Fysher Robert Bloom	Clerk to the Market	(not recorded)

Table 5.5 – Officials of the Trinity Guild in 1484 and 1547 named in the records.

Not all the junior roles appear in the annual records, although it is likely that these positions were filled, as the obligations of the Guild did not change significantly year on year. If there was not a change in the person filling the junior role it was probably not deemed worth recording. The role that seems to have been unique to Wisbech was that of 'Clerk to the Market'. There were normally two officials filling this position and they seem to have supported the Bailiff in the collection of rents and dues for Guild property and lands in and around the town. The Holy Cross Guild had similar responsibilities for rent collection in Stratford-upon-Avon.[725]

[723] Bainbridge, *Gilds*, p. 139.
[724] C. Carpenter, 'Town and country: the Stratford guild and political networks of fifteenth-century Warwickshire', in R. Bearman. (ed), *The History of an English Borough: Stratford-upon-Avon 1196-1996* (Stroud, 1997), p. 64.
[725] C. Dyer, 'Medieval Stratford: a successful small town', in R. Bearman (ed), *The History of an English Borough: Stratford-upon-Avon 1196-1996* (Stroud, 1997), p. 51.

Looking in more detail at the Aldermen of Wisbech they came from a clique of wealthy landowners, tradesmen and merchants but were essentially townsmen who could afford to contribute to the Guild and to fund good works in the town.[726] Their wealth would have enabled them to gather support from the brethren that made up the 'council' and in turn the position would have provided opportunities to expand their personal business activities and wealth through access to land, property and influential people in the town. Apart from the status of the post there would have been potential financial rewards that would have made the role attractive and the effort and time required to rise through the ranks worthwhile. The list of the Aldermen from 1423 (when the annual records were restored) to dissolution in 1547-8 is shown in Table 5.6.

Date	Alderman	Time in Office
1423 – 1431	John Lambe	9 years
1432 – 1435	Unknown	
1436 – 1442	'Alderman' Sutton	6 years
1443 – 1444	Unknown	
1445 – 1465	John Masse	20 years
1466 – 1467	Unknown	
1468 – 1478	John Calowe*	9 years
1479 – 1489	Robert Digby	10 years
1490 – 1494	Unknown	
1495 – 1502	John Burwell	7 years
1503	Unknown	
1504 – 1505	William Gatesend	2 years
1506 -1511	Richard Wyatt (vicar)	6 years
1512 – 1520	Thomas Wythe	8 years
1521	Richard Rede	1 year
1522 – 1530	Unknown	
1531 – 1540	Alexander Balam (gent)	10 years
1541 – 1546	Unknown	
1547	John Procter	1 year
* In 1475 Martin Andrew (formerly Bailiff) was the Alderman for one year before returning to his original role on the return of John Calowe.		

Table 5.6 – Trinity Guild Aldermen between 1423 and 1547.[727]

[726] Bainbridge, *Gilds*, p. 137.
[727] TGR 1423 to 1547, pp. 4-76.

The Aldermen held the position for periods of between five and ten years and in the case of John Masse the exceptionally long period of twenty years. They were normally continuous appointments and with John Masse probably up to the point where ill health prevented him continuing, he died in 1466.[728] In the case of John Calowe his nine-year term was interrupted in 1475 when Martin Andrew (Bailiff) filled the role for one year. A similar situation was seen with the other roles in the Guild where a position was held for several years before the individual was either promoted or disappeared from the records.[729] The evidence from wills supports the Terrier and confirms the status of the Aldermen. The exception was Robert Wyatt who was recorded as being the Vicar of Wisbech.

The will from 1466 for John Masse has survived and paints a picture of a leading figure in the town.[730] He left nearly £120 in money with the majority going to the local churches and to the Trinity Guild. This included £40 for the Church of St Peter and St Paul in the town and £10 to pay for a 'suitable' priest to make a pilgrimage to Rome for 'celebrating for my soul and the souls of all my benefactors'. The will does not give details of land holdings but he had extensive possessions of both arable and pasture around Wisbech and in Leverington. This was primarily left to family members but the Trinity Guild received 'all my arable and pasture lands lying in the northern part of the Bank of Wisbech and Leverington'. He owned a number of buildings in the town including four messuages (two on the Old Market called 'Goodsouls' and 'Pekesplace'). He held five houses (one on the Old Market called 'Boole') that he left to his wife Agnes. On the New Market by the Castle Dyke he held workshops, although not specified in the will these would have generated rents in excess of £5 per annum.

Masse's wealth came from a number of sources including farming his extensive landholdings. The reference to pasture would imply that he kept sheep and possibly cattle. He was also a merchant and there was a reference to owning two boats (one was a keel and the other was not specified) as well as salt being held in store.[731] He was typical of the breed of wealthy merchants emerging in the fifteenth century. Others further afield include Thomas Burton from Loughborough who died in 1496, a wool

[728] Bainbridge, *Gilds*, pp. 139-40.
[729] Farnhill, *Guilds*, pp. 52-3.
[730] T.N.A., P.R.O., PROB 11/5/255.
[731] Hutchinson, *Medieval Ships and Shipping*, p. 5.

merchant who endowed schools in the town and left money for 'bridges and common ways in the parish'.[732] Richard Smith from Reading, another wealthy cloth merchant, who died in 1516 and was an MP for the town between 1497 and 1512.[733] In his will he left money for the repair of all three churches in the town and three houses 'to the mass of Jesus'. A further example was William Wyggeston of Leicester who was another Tudor wool merchant who gave money for a hospital and almshouses.[734] John Masse left money and property to the Guild and the Guild contributed to the growth of the town. In his will he left 6s 8d each to William Edward and Simon Aleyn, his apprentices, and a further 3s 4d to Elena and Matilda, his servants, implying a relatively large household.

The pattern of a wealthy clique ruling the town is reinforced by the will of Richard Reede from 1540, one of the last Aldermen who held the post in the 1520s.[735] By the time of his will his wife was already dead but he was survived by two sons (Thomas and John) and a daughter (Katherine). He left land and property to his children across the region in Wisbech, Elm, Emneth, Leverington, Tydd St Giles and Walpole. Although the amount of land is not specified he was a very substantial landholder. The will referred to land held in 'fee simple' and to servile land held from neighbouring lords. He was able to leave sizeable sums of money to the Church including nine marks for an 'honest and discrete' priest to pray for his soul for a year and 7s 6d for a 'learned man to preach a sermon on the day of my burial'. The source of his wealth is not specified although much of it came from farming his extensive lands. The will makes reference to other prominent members of the local society. He left 5s to his cousin Elizabeth, the wife of John Proctour, who was to be the last Alderman of the guild. He left £10 to Thomas Buckworth who was his son-in-law. The Buckworths held property in and around the town and were officials of the Guild filling many of the most important roles. [736] John Proctour, Thomas Bateley, Richard Hunt and John Griesburye were all wealthy landowners, Guild members and officials who witnessed the will. Throughout its existence the Trinity Guild was managed by a small group of individuals related by marriage or business and with a common set of objectives.

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[732] T.N.A., P.R.O., PROB 11/11/42.
[733] www.historyofparliamentonline.org/volume/1509-1558/member/smith-richard-i-1453-1516
[734] www.swannington-heritage.co.uk/wyggeston-hospital
[735] T.N.A., P.R.O., PROB 11/28.
[736] TGR, pp. 28-9.

Looking beyond the individual members, the Guild had a role broader than that given in the original charter and it was a role that evolved.[737] The Trinity Guild had started as one of several Guilds operating within the town but had risen to pre-eminence. By 1462 the Guild records show that they were allowing 'inferior' guilds to use the guildhall for meetings.[738] The Trinity Guild was not in competition with the other Guilds and from the evidence from the gifts in the wills wealthy individuals were members of more than one fraternity. The rise of the Trinity Guild was a reflection of the prosperity of the members who left money, property and land on their deaths. In the record for 1518 it is noted that John Burwell (former alderman) had left 17 acres of pasture and 10 marks to the Trinity Guild. The Guild had been successful in attracting wealthy families and in turn the greater prosperity of the Guild seen in the sumptuousness of their ceremonies, celebrations and feasts attracting others to the fraternity.

Guilds were the expression of a popular movement within local communities and they helped to bring them together with a common purpose and a shared identity. It has been argued that the Guilds were a mechanism for managing conflict.[739] They arose from within the community and were not imposed but helped to give coherence to society that had been devastated by the repeated traumas of the fourteenth century, they were a product of that period of crisis. As well as their practical benefits they provided the Guilds were a spiritual response to the uncertainties of the time, as Bainbridge describes it 'groups of men and women joining together for communal purposes and bound to each other by common ties of loyalty'.[740] Given the differences in the origins of the Guilds they varied considerably in structure across the country and the Trinity Guild could be described as a 'town' guild in that its membership lived in the town and it did not seem to be open to those from outside. However, many of the more wealthy members of the Guild had interests across the Hundred. This compares with the Holy Cross Guild in Stratford-upon-Avon that could be described as a 'town and country' guild in that it had both rural and urban members.[741] A similar situation is seen with the Guild of St George in Norwich where the local government was dominated by a clique

[737] Bainbridge, *Gilds*, p. 123.
[738] TGR, p. 16.
[739] Farnhill, *Guilds*, p. 19.
[740] Bainbridge, *Gilds*, p. 19.
[741] C. Carpenter, 'Town and country', p. 62.

of wealthy merchants and the gentry.[742] The ruling group within the Trinity Guild was made up of 'commoners made good' whereas the Holy Cross included members of the local gentry essentially maintaining the status quo. In addition to the religious and charitable duties the wealth of the Trinity Guild enabled it to play an important part in the physical development of the town. The records note that contributions were made to the construction and maintenance of drainage and flood protection. This is mentioned in the record of the Commission of Sewers for 1438.[743] The Guild also funded the building (rebuilding) of the town bridge and wharfs as well as improvements to the church and the maintenance of a school within the guildhall. This again was consistent with the activities of other comparable guilds.[744] The relationship between the Trinity Guild and the lord of the town could best be described as symbiotic in that both parties gained from working together. The Trinity Guild were able to profit from their role in the town and the Bishop of Ely was relieved of some of the administrative burden.

SUMMARY

In the medieval period towns fulfilled many roles and helped to shape the structure of the surrounding region. They were in turn shaped by their hinterland that governed, for example, the nature of trade and services provided in this pre-industrial society. This can be seen in Wisbech that acted as the administrative centre for the extensive estates of the Bishop of Ely in the Hundred centred on the castle and the Hundred Courts held in the town. During the fifteenth century the members of the Trinity Guild increasingly played a role in the town's administration and in maintaining local infrastructure. For the town the transition was not significant as the leading figures in the Guild would already have been prominent on the Hundred Courts and in the Bishop's administration working with the Constable and Bailiff. The transition was more one of convenience rather than revolution as the lord moved away from direct estate management. Land and property in the town was in the hands of a limited number of individuals, a prosperous and confident oligarchy, who exerted control over the town helping to protect and reinforce their power and wealth.

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[742] R. Hilton, 'Status and class in the medieval town', in T.Slater and G.Rosser. (eds), *The Church in the Medieval Town* (Aldershot, 1998), p.15.
[743] Darby, *Medieval Fenland*, p. 180.
[744] Swanson, *Medieval British Towns*, p. 129.

An important role of the town was to act as the economic hub for the Hundred lying at the heart of the region and benefitting from the river communications that provided cheap and effective transport. This enabled the town to process and trade goods (primarily grain and wool but also other produce such as meat, fish and salt) produced on the surround farmland and waterways. As noted in Chapter Four the majority of the produce was either consumed locally or went inland to meet the demand from the nearby towns of Ely, Cambridge and Peterborough but even beyond into the midlands.[745] The wealth generated through trade was reflected in the investment in infrastructure and most obviously in the town church. This apparent wealth was contrary to the more typical pattern of urban decline for many towns in England across the fifteenth century.[746] A pessimistic view of urban fortunes that was supported by the recent article by Stephen Rigby.[747]

Wisbech can be compared with Stratford-upon-Avon as both towns were relatively prosperous, of a similar size and both had a dominant Guild involved in the running of the town. The disasters of the fourteenth century impacted on both towns but they exhibited signs of recovery growing slowly across the fifteenth century despite periods of setback.[748] The role of the Trinity Guild in Wisbech was matched by that of the Holy Cross in Stratford. The structure as well as the religious and charitable roles were similar and both were dominated by the local elite.[749] They both took on wider duties managing their own extensive lands, collecting rents and contributing to local amenities. Both religious Guilds were increasingly playing a 'corporate' role within the administrative structure of the towns.[750] The Guilds in Stratford and Wisbech were a ruling elite closely guarding their rights and privileges.[751] The membership of the Guilds was tightly regulated with the governing body of officials coming from the limited circle of the more wealthy and influential members of the local society. If Stratford could be described as a successful small town in the fifteenth century then the same description could be applied to Wisbech.

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[745] Lee, *Cambridge*, pp. 104, 126 and 134.
[746] Dyer, *Decline and Growth*, p. 17.
[747] S. Rigby, 'Urban population in late medieval England: the evidence of the lay subsidies', *Economic History Review* 63 (2010), p. 409.
[748] Dyer, 'Successful Small Town', p. 57.
[749] Carpenter, 'Town and Country', p. 64.
[750] White, *Medieval English Landscape*, pp. 116-7.
[751] Carpenter, 'Town and Country', p.60.

This picture of prosperity is reinforced when comparing Wisbech with other nearby towns. Table 5.7 shows the relative changes in wealth, based on a comparison of the 1377 poll tax and the 1524-5 lay subsidy. Wisbech fell into a smaller group of growing towns compared with those in decline.[752] The other towns showing signs of growth were Huntingdon (an increasingly important regional centre) and Wymondham that was benefitting from the growing cloth trade.

Town	1524/5 Taxpayers	Position 1377 (top 50 towns)	Position 1525 (top 50 towns)	Change
Wisbech	252	>50	50	+ve
Ely	382	21	39	-ve
Lynn	199	Not Known	Not Known	-ve
Boston	345	9	32	-ve
Stamford	247	30	36	-ve
Huntingdon	433	38	27	+ve
Cambridge	524	Not Known	Not Known	-ve
Peterborough	212	Not Known	Not Known	-ve
Wymondham	287	>50	43	+ve
Leicester	427	16	28	-ve
Nottingham	295	28	41	-ve

Table 5.7 – Comparison of the changing fortunes of selected towns in eastern England and the midlands as shown by the number of taxpayers in 1524-5 and the change in population between 1377 and 1524-5.

The growth in population and wealth of the town was evident from the lay subsidy information. In 1334 the hundred was one of the richest regions in the country.[753] The sharp drop in population between 1327 and 1377 was consistent with that of the rest of the country although even here the reduction in population of approximately 30% was less than that seen in other towns. It is in the fifteenth century that variation is seen illustrating the influence of local factors, to quote Alan Dyer the destiny 'of towns is inextricably bound up with the fate of the economies in which they lie'.[754] The town showed some evidence of limited recovery with an 8% increase in population up to

[752] Dyer, *Decline and Growth*, pp. 58-9; Rigby,'Urban Population', pp. 415-7.
[753] Campbell and Bartley, *Eve of the Black Death*, Map 18.6.
[754] A. Dyer, 'Urban decline in England 1377 to 1524', in T. Slater (ed), *Towns in Decline 100-1600* (Aldershot, 2000), p. 282.

1524-5. Relative wealth is harder to assess but there is strong circumstantial evidence. There was a wide range of trades practised in the town with butchers, leather workers, carpenters, wheelwrights, ship builders, goldsmiths, inn-keepers and merchants profitably working to satisfy demand in the surrounding settlements indicating the diversity and strength of the local economy. The evidence from the wills shows a high level of individual wealth. The Trinity Guild records shows the confidence of the ruling group demonstrating their civic pride through investment in the infrastructure of the town as well as the church. Overall it presents a picture of a resilient town that had survived the setbacks of the fourteenth century and was still growing both in population and wealth albeit at a much reduced rate compared with the period before the great plague.

Conclusions

This thesis has investigated the role of a wetland region in the late medieval period focussing on the evolution of Wisbech Hundred in Cambridgeshire. It was a unique wetland landscape located between the Wash and the inland peat fen. There were two reasons for studying this region: first the special relationship between the landscape and the people that settled there; and second, it is a region that has not recently been studied in detail in this period. The Hundred was located on the band of fertile silt soil that ran from Boston in Lincolnshire around to Lynn in Norfolk. It was vulnerable to inundation both from the sea and from inland waters. The struggle to control and shape the landscape determined the nature of the local economy and society.

It has sought to answer a number of questions taking the established national demographic and economic model as the starting point. This can be simplified into three distinct stages; demographic and economic growth (before the fourteenth century), crisis and depopulation (fourteenth century) and stagnation (post fourteenth century). The central question asked by the thesis was: did the Hundred follow the established national model or did the unique nature of the landscape give the region advantages that enabled it to diverge from this model? This fundamental question spawned a number of related points. If the region did go against the trend then what were the features that allowed this to happen? Was this a behaviour that was common to all wetland regions or did the Hundred display features differentiating it from areas such as the Somerset Levels, the Humber Wetlands and Romney Marsh? At its core the thesis examines the relationship between landscape and people. How did the landscape and the wetland environment shape the behaviour of the inhabitants and how in turn did they effect a permanent transformation of the landscape?

It has also sought to explore the relationship between the differing timescales associated with environmental and socio-economic change and the response of the local communities. This can be illustrated by a number of examples; towards the end of the Roman era the response to increasing relative sea levels was a retreat of settlement to higher ground. Similarly, when another increase in relative sea levels began in the high medieval period the response was not retreat but better defenses to protect the valuable

reclaimed land. Finally, the response to the demographic crisis of the fourteenth century was retrenchment and a move to maintenance rather than extension of the productive land. The response of the people of the region to these changes (both gradual and cataclysmic) was organic and reflected the social value of the landscape.

The initial focus of the thesis was to establish an understanding of the relationship between landscape and settlement and how the development of drainage and flood protection transformed this relationship. How this in turn influenced population, comparative wealth, the local economy and landownership was then analysed. In the final section attention was given to the role of the town of Wisbech as the economic and administrative centre of the Hundred. The Hundred could be described as liminal in the physical sense of being located at the extremity of Cambridgeshire bordering the Wash. It was separated from the inland settlements by the sparsely populated peat fen. It was also liminal in the political sense being remote from centres of power and largely undisturbed by rulers or armies. The relative isolation helped to shape the nature of the inhabitants of the region. They were drawn together by the common aims of protecting their communities against flooding and profitably improving and exploiting the land through drainage.

The approach taken has been based on the analysis of a range of primary sources covering the major themes of the thesis. The Wisbech Map provided an understanding of the geography of the region and the features considered of importance to the late medieval mind. The Ely Coucher Book of 1250 and Bishop Alcock's terrier of 1492 provided evidence of the changing nature of landownership across the period and its impact on the Fenland economy. The complete records of the lay subsidies of 1327 and 1524-5 enabled a systematic assessment of relative population and wealth. The record of the Commission of Sewers held in Wisbech in 1438 gave a detailed picture of the drainage infrastructure and the response to the threat of flooding, critical for the survivability of a vulnerable wetland landscape. The record of the Trinity Guild from 1379 to 1547 provided insights into the social fabric of Wisbech and its role not only as a religious fraternity but, through its wealthy members, as a centre of power and influence within the town. These sources were supported by wills and manorial records from the late fifteenth and early sixteenth centuries. The wills helped to illustrate the nature of personal wealth and the manorial records the post-feudal management of the

landscape. The strength of this material was that it has been possible to link these diverse sources to gain a more complete understanding not only of the structure of the Fenland society and economy but also of some of the relationships between the principal actors. For example, John Masse could be seen in his will of 1466 but he could also be seen in his progression through the ranks to become Alderman in the records of the Trinity Guild and his name appeared in Bishop Alcock's Terrier as having owned a number of properties in the New Market of Wisbech passed on to his descendants. As well as the use of primary source material the study has been supported by a series of archaeological reports and evidence from the Cambridgeshire, Lincolnshire and Norfolk HER databases.

From the eleventh to the fourteenth century was a period of well documented growth across England with the population increasing threefold and vast areas of new land being brought into production. The Fenland was no exception with new lands being reclaimed from salt and freshwater marshes to provide arable land and pasture for the booming local population. Between 1086 and 1327 it is estimated that the population of the Hundred increased from less than 2000 to more than 5000. This was not unique and was being experienced across other wetland regions and the country as a whole. What was different was the permanent nature of the transformation of the landscape with the 'marginal' lands that had been drained being retained during the prolonged crisis of the fourteenth century. With the much reduced local population it was a major problem to mobilise the resources required to maintain defences and to avoid the loss of previously reclaimed land. That this was achieved indicated the value of the land to the surviving inhabitants. Another feature was the apparent wealth of the Hundred, at the start of the fourteenth century it was one of the most prosperous regions in the country. This prosperity was driven by a fortunate combination of factors relating to the landscape. The most obvious was the fertility of the rich silt soils that produced high yields of good quality grain combined with excellent summer grazing on the less well drained but still valuable western and southern edges of the Hundred. The strength of the local economy was enhanced by access to the produce of the surrounding marshland and waterways supplying fish, wildfowl, salt, reeds and in the south peat. This diversity gave the region a degree of resilience to damaging events such as the famine at the start of the fourteenth century. The final benefit in this seemingly fortunate region was the extensive network of natural and manmade navigable waterways that enabled the ready

movement of goods for inland trade or export from the port of Lynn to the markets of northern Europe. It is debatable if this optimistic view of the region was universally shared by the inhabitants. A significant adverse factor was the continuous vulnerability to both sea and fresh water flooding. Although relatively infrequent when they did occur the impacts were devastating for the local population and lingered in popular memory. This was particularly evident in the thirteenth century when the changing climate periodically devastated the North Sea basin with a series of storm surges

The repeated disasters of the fourteenth century depleted the population having profound impacts on the economy and society. Wisbech Hundred was not exempt from the crisis and although detailed information is limited the population fell to around 3000 by 1377. A more robust assessment is difficult given the quality of the poll tax information. Unlike other regions such Warwickshire and Worcestershire in the midlands where there was a high-level of village abandonment and marginal land allowed to revert to its natural state the picture for the Hundred was different.[755] Settlements shrunk but apart from very small communities, such as that around Fitton Manor, did not disappear. The flood defences and drainage were maintained and the land reclaimed with great effort over the previous three hundred years was not abandoned. In fact, the Commission of Sewers of 1438 shows that although the main focus had moved to repair and maintenance there was still new drainage work taking place indicating that there was a continuing demand for new lands. This returns to one of the central question of the thesis: what were the features of this particular wetland landscape that allowed it to apparently continue to prosper in adversity? They were the same factors that has driven the sustained period of growth; economic diversity, fertile soil, good pasture and access to trade routes. What had changed as a result of the crisis was the nature of the economy and the social structure. There was a shift away from arable towards less labour intensive sheep farming and there was a shift away from large manors (the Bishop of Ely's manor at Wisbech Barton was finally leased out in 1429) towards more diverse landholding. The evidence indicates a weakening of the traditional family-land bond across the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries and the development of an active land market. This was the start of the growth in importance of the independent 'yeoman' farmer with landholding typically in excess of 40 acres and

[755] C. Dyer, 'Villages in crisis: social dislocation and desertion, 1370-1520, in C.Dyer and R. Jones (eds), *Deserted Villages Revisited* (Hatfield, 2010), p. 33.

was accompanied by a new social structure. In Wisbech the government of the town was increasingly dominated by wealthy commoners acting through agencies such as the Trinity Guild and working in partnership with the Bishop's administration at the castle. This ruling elite of merchants, tradesmen and landowners played a critical role in the management of the town and used their wealth and that of the Guild for the common good by improving infrastructure (a new town bridge, flood defences, extensions to the church and establishing a school). More importantly they helped to give the town its own unique identity and sense of place. This new breed was typified by Robert Digby who was alderman of the town for the ten years from 1479 to 1489.

The final phase of the long medieval economic cycle was the stagnation of the fifteenth century. Nationally population growth was weak (and it has been argued even continued to decline) and the economy flat. Population was constrained by the continuing series of disease outbreaks, late marriages and small families. The economy was disrupted by poor demand, the currency crisis (silver famine) as well as the cost and dislocation caused by war in Europe and civil war at home. Even the Bishop of Ely was impacted with references in the Ely Episcopal Records to ransom payments made for captured sailors. However, the Hundred did not appear to have been as heavily hit as other wetland regions. The 1524-5 lay subsidies showed that the wealth of the Hundred had been maintained and although other parts of Cambridgeshire were growing rapidly (for example the neighbouring Witchford Hundred) Wisbech was not in decline. The wills from the late fifteenth century and the Guild records from the period demonstrate a high level of personal and corporate wealth and give the appearance of a region that was still prospering. The overall impression is one of confidence and continuing growth rather than decay and collapse. The most tangible surviving evidence of wealth being the Fenland churches (in particular St Leonards in Leverington, All Saints in Elm and St Peter and St Paul in Wisbech) that show signs of significant investment into the sixteenth century. The Hundred had been able to grow, albeit at a slower pace, throughout the fifteenth century because there was a continuing demand for its produce. The town faced primarily towards the inland markets of Ely, Cambridge and beyond that it could readily supply through the excellent network of waterways. With a lower proportion of goods being sent to Lynn for export the Hundred was less exposed to disruption in foreign trade. There had been change within the Hundred with a shift in

population towards the town by the start of the sixteenth century. The population of parishes such as Tydd St Giles had fallen and that of Wisbech increased.

The evidence paints a picture of a thriving region with a sense of purpose and identity centred on the town of Wisbech. It acted as a market for the produce of the new class of independent farmer in the villages that had supplanted the large estates and manors. Men such as Thomas Barowe in Tydd St Giles and John Mannying in Elm with large landholdings and several farmsteads located across the parishes. Other regions were growing in population and wealth more rapidly (the prime example being the boom towns of the cloth trade in Suffolk) but the Hundred was maintaining its prosperity in comparison with other wetland regions such as Romney Marsh that were in sharp decline. That Wisbech Hundred was able to grow quickly prior to 1300, spawning new settlements and bringing expanses of new land into production, reflected the ability of the inhabitants to manage their environment and to transform the landscape. That it was able to survive the demographic and economic upheavals from that time reflected the underlying value of the region and the ability of the population to adapt to the changing circumstances.

In the opening chapter on landscape and settlement Rippon's model of wetland transformation was applied to the Fenland with the three phases of exploitation, modification and ultimately transformation. The Romano-British period began with the exploitation of natural resources (salt) followed by the commencement of a process of modification with the construction of waterways and enclosed fields protected from flooding. The clock was effectively reset with the post-Roman flooding and the collapse of the economy. Although there may have been a degree of continuity with some small settlements surviving on higher ground (supported by the HER evidence for Tydd St Giles and Elm) it was not until the mid-Anglo-Saxon period that a recovery in population began as water levels again started to fall. It was predominantly an existence based on exploitation of the existing resources. It was in the late Saxon period that the process of modification of the landscape was resumed with the construction of the sea-bank from Wisbech around to Spalding on the northern side of the Wash. At the same time the main drainage channels such as the Shire Drain and Fendyke were being dug and natural creeks and waterways enlarged. This process of modification through drainage and the extension of the farm land continued at an intense rate with an

estimated 5000 acres of marsh being reclaimed by the fourteenth century. Land towards the Wash and the peat fen was captured and protected by a complex grid of waterways and ditches draining through sluices into the sea. The process of landscape transformation was largely complete before the disasters of the fourteenth century and the rest of the medieval period was primarily one of maintenance.

It was a transformation in the broadest sense, there was a physical transformation of the landscape but there was also an associated transformation of social and economic structures in the region. The disparate communities were bound together through a shared knowledge of the threat posed to their lives and livelihoods by the environment. There would have been a collective memory of the devastation caused by earlier floods (seen in the Commission of Sewers for 1438). The development of the region had been led by the Bishops of Ely through their manors in the Hundred. The aims of the Bishops and other large landowners were not altruistic but intended to protect their assets. It is easy to focus on the efforts of Bishops and wealthy landowners made visible by surviving records. However, they could not effect such a profound transformation of the landscape on their own. It was made possible by the concerted efforts of all the people of the region most of whom left little or no record of their activities apart from a minor mention in a manorial record. Existence for all in the Hundred living on the edge of the Wash was a challenge; it carried with it cost (of drainage) and risk (of flooding) which had to be set against the obvious benefits. The implicit understanding of the implications of this balance between risk and reward gave the people of the region a common identity that survived long after the medieval period.

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Cambridgeshire Records Office

(1) Wills

C.R.O., VC 2:52	John Angewyn	Tydd St Giles	1467
C.R.O., VC 1:45	Margaret Barowe	Tydd St Giles	1454
C.R.O., VC 1:62	Robert Fisher	Tydd St Giles	1458
C.R.O., VC 1:24	Thomas Fuller	Tydd St Giles	1452
C.R.O., VC 2:81	Marion Fyne	Tydd St Giles	1473
C.R.O., VC 2:32	Alice Gilbert	Tydd St Giles	1467
C.R.O., VC 2:58	Thomas Hamunde	Tydd St Giles	1467
C.R.O., VC 2:105	Catherine Hankyn	Tydd St Giles	1464
C.R.O., VC 1:26	Catherine Hawsold	Tydd St Giles	1453
C.R.O., VC 2:60	John Howsold	Tydd St Giles	1469
C.R.O., VC2:63	John Kegyll	Tydd St Giles	1470
C.R.O., VC 1:23	William Monke	Tydd St Giles	1452
C.R.O., VC 2:105	Adam Odam	Tydd St Giles	1465
C.R.O., VC 2:100	Robert Odam	Tydd St Giles	1464
C.R.O., VC 4:26	Thomas Odeham	Tydd St Giles	1495
C.R.O., VC 2:108	Richard Smyth	Tydd St Giles	1464
C.R.O., VC 2:89	William Warner	Tydd St Giles	1458
C.R.O., VC 2:83	William Whytrett	Tydd St Giles	1476
C.R.O., VC 1:54	John Derby	Newton	1458
C.R.O., VC 1:25	John Drewe	Newton	1453
C.R.O., VC 1:58	Katherine Pullam	Newton	1458
C.R.O., VC 4:34	John Sawyer	Newton	1497
C.R.O., VC 4:9	John Bekk	Wisbech	1496
C.R.O., VC 2:55	Adam Burton	Wisbech	1466
C.R.O., VC 4:3	William Byard	Wisbech	1496

C.R.O., VC 1:19	Agnes Clements	Wisbech	1456
C.R.O., VC 2:84	William Clerk	Wisbech	1478
C.R.O., VC 1:31	Robert Coke	Wisbech	1453
C.R.O., VC 2:94	William Drake	Wisbech	1477
C.R.O., VC 1:29	John Goring	Wisbech	1453
C.R.O., VC 2:84	Alan Granger	Wisbech	1479
C.R.O., VC 1:30	Joan Grene	Wisbech	1452
C.R.O., VC 1:30	John Grene	Wisbech	1453
C.R.O., VC 2:108	William Halman	Wisbech	1465
C.R.O., VC 1:23	William Mareys	Wisbech	1452
C.R.O., VC 2:80	Thomas Myller	Wisbech	1479
C.R.O., VC 4:26	Hamlet Norbury	Wisbech	1496
C.R.O., VC 2:29	Hamo Parfay	Wisbech	1459
C.R.O., VC 1:20	John Pigge	Wisbech	1454
C.R.O., VC 2:52	William Reynold	Wisbech	1464
C.R.O., VC 4:10	John Richardson	Wisbech	1497
C.R.O., VC 1:23	Walter Rokelonde	Wisbech	1453
C.R.O., VC 4:10	John Thurston	Wisbech	1497
C.R.O., VC 2:109	William White	Wisbech	1466
C.R.O., VC 1:107	Geoffrey Whyte	Wisbech	1465
C.R.O., VC 1:53	William Adams	Elm	1457
C.R.O., VC 1:20	Thomas Aleyn	Elm	1451
C.R.O., VC 2:24	Thomas Atwod	Elm	1495
C.R.O., VC 2:58	Edmund Barker	Elm	1467
C.R.O., VC 1:34	Richard Barker	Elm	1453
C.R.O., VC 1:32	William Brice	Elm	1454
C.R.O., VC 1:59	Johanna Brice	Elm	1458
C.R.O., VC 1:28	William Eyland	Elm	1453
C.R.O., VC 1:30	John Hamond	Elm	1452
C.R.O., VC 4:30	Thomas Hervy	Elm	1496
C.R.O., VC 1:55	John Mannyng	Elm	1458
C.R.O., VC 1:58	Richard Obey	Elm	1458
C.R.O., VC 4:14	John Perche	Elm	1498

(2) Tithe Maps

4/27	Elm and part of Outwell	1840
4/44	Leverington	1843
4/55	Newton in the Isle	1838
4/56	Outwell	1841
4/76	Tydd St Giles	1844
4/89	Wisbech St Mary	1838
4/90	Wisbech St Peter	1842
Watte's Survey	Leverington and Parson Drove	1792

Cambridge University Library

(1) Manorial Court Rolls

C.U.L., EDR/C7/1-24

Tydd St Giles	1398, 1495, 1496-7, 1501, 1502, 1503-4, 1504 and 1505.
Elm	1398, 1402, 1503 and 1504.

C.U.L., EDR/D/5/15-16

Tydd St Giles	1530-1543
Wisbech	1530-1543

Ely Episcopal Records

(1) Wills

Bishop Alcock's Register	Richard Kynge	Wisbech	1500
Bishop West's Register	Elizabeth Fysher	Tydd St Giles	1524
Bishop West's Register	William Thornbrowgh	Newton	1525
Bishop West's Register	Walter Shress	Leverington	1519
Bishop West's Register	Maurice Byrde	Wisbech	1526

The National Archives

(1) Wills

T.N.A., P.R.O., PROB 11/11	Simon Adam	Tydd St Giles	1496
T.N.A., P.R.O., PROB 11/10	Thomas Barowe	Tydd St Giles	1493
T.N.A., P.R.O., PROB 11/11/285	Thomas Edward	Wisbech	1496
T.N.A., P.R.O., PROB 11/6/3	Robert Elyett	Wisbech	1469
T.N.A., P.R.O., PROB 11/8/16	William Hall	Wisbech	1486
T.N.A., P.R.O., PROB 11/5/255	John Masse	Wisbech	1466
T.N.A., P.R.O., PROB 11/28/439	Peter Palmer	Wisbech	1422
T.N.A., P.R.O., PROB 11/16/530	John Powdich	Wisbech	1509
T.N.A., P.R.O., PROB 11/28	Richard Reede	Wisbech	1540
T.N.A., P.R.O., PROB 11/18/386	William Ryches	Wisbech	1513
T.N.A., P.R.O., PROB 11/15/652	Nicholas Smyth	Wisbech	1507
T.N.A., P.R.O., PROB 11/11/42	Thomas Burton	Loughborough	1496

(2) Guild Records

T.N.A., P.R.O., C47/38/38-43	Guild Certificates

(3) Maps

T.N.A., P.R.O., MPCC 7	Pinchbeck Fen Map

(4) Tax and Subsidy Returns

T.N.A., P.R.O., E179/81/131	1524-5 lay subsidy returns for Wisbech Hundred.

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