

Draining the coastal marshes of north-west Norfolk: the contribution of the Le Stranges at Hunstanton, 1605 to 1724*

by Elizabeth Griffiths

Abstract

Wetland reclamation in early modern England is generally associated with the Fens and the large drainage projects initiated by James I in the 1620s. In these schemes, syndicates of landowners ventured their capital in risky projects in return for grants of land. Vast fortunes were made and huge losses incurred while local inhabitants struggled to protect their rights. These 'adventures' have dominated the drainage literature since H. C. Darby's pioneering work on the Fenland in the 1940s, but little attention has been paid to the piecemeal reclamation of the coastal marshes of north and north-west Norfolk undertaken mostly by the local gentry throughout this period. Using the memoranda and farming notebooks kept by four generations of the Le Strange family of Hunstanton from 1605 to 1724, this article casts light on their drainage projects and assesses what distinguishes them from the more spectacular and familiar schemes elsewhere.

This article is about the reclamation of the coastal marshes in north and north-west Norfolk in the early modern period, an area almost entirely neglected by historians writing on drainage.¹ To be fair their oversight is understandable. Compared to what happened on the Fens, the Norfolk Broads and the Halvergate Marshes, the drainage undertaken on this coastline was small in scale and of no great complexity; nevertheless, capital still had to be raised, risks assessed and the work organized, which sometimes even merited the specialist services of a Dutchman.² And this was only the start. Once completed, sea walls had to be maintained, drains scoured, new cuts made and farmsteads built. In contrast to the Fens, these piecemeal ventures are not associated with armed struggle and social dislocation, but rights and titles still had to be defined and disputes settled, not only between commoners and landowners, but

* My thanks to Richard Hoyle, Jane Whittle and the referees.

¹ For discussions of drainage elsewhere, see the classic works of H. C. Darby, *The Medieval Fenland* (1940) and *The draining of the Fens* (1956); for more recent work, T. Williamson, *The Norfolk Broads: a landscape history* (1997); H. Cook and T. Williamson (eds), *Water management in the English landscape: field, marsh and fen* (1999); A. Reeves and T. Williamson, 'Marshes', in J. Thirsk, *The English rural landscape*

(2000). Piet van Cruyningen has recently published a valuable overview of drainage in England, France and the Netherlands: 'Dealing with drainage: state regulation of drainage projects in the Dutch Republic, France and England during the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries', *EcHR* 68 (2015), pp. 420–40.

² Jan van Hasdonck for whom see below, pp. 229, 232, 236–7.

landowners of different size and status. Resolving their differences and managing this fragile landscape was the everyday burden of the coastal villages bordering the marshes from Kings Lynn to Hunstanton and across the north Norfolk coast to Weybourne; this was true of all rural societies situated along the North Sea coast, as Piet van Cruyningen and Tim Soens have described, but we seem to have lost sight of their plight in our focus on the Fens.³ Part of the interest in the north Norfolk coast lies in the fact that it is now one of the most heavily protected coastal sites in Europe, renowned for its birds, flora and coastal formations, with villages sustained by agriculture and fishing, and more particularly today by environmental tourism.⁴ These sustainable outcomes indicate a long-term awareness of the requirements of managing a vulnerable landscape that includes not only the marshes, which are at the mercy of the sea, but the light sandy uplands rising up behind the villages, which are susceptible to overgrazing and erosion. These local communities seem to have got it more or less right and for that reason alone it is worth exploring how they went about it.

I

As landlords, the Le Stranges of Hunstanton were very much part of this landscape. They were not new men with big money but an ancient gentry family who had lived at Hunstanton Hall on the coast of north-west Norfolk since the twelfth century. Their huge archive shows that from the earliest times they were embedded in the culture and geography of the area and wholly committed to the locality.⁵ This distinguishes them fundamentally from their compatriots speculating in the Fens – and indeed Romney Marsh – who were noted for their absentee landlordism.⁶ In 1604 when Sir Hamon Le Strange inherited his estate, he abandoned a promising career at court to tackle the accumulated problems that faced him at home. After half a century of lenient management by his forebears, the family was in financial difficulties, having to pay off debts incurred by the trustees, complete the hall and rebuild decayed farmhouses ‘out of the ground’, as his wife, Alice noted.⁷ Within a generation they had reversed

³ Bas van Bavel and Erik Thoen (eds), *Rural societies and environments at risk: ecology, property rights and social organisation in fragile areas (middle ages–twenty-first century)* (2013), pp. 15–45; see also, in the same volume, T. Soens, ‘The social distribution of land and flood risk along the North Sea coast: Flanders, Holland and Romney Marsh compared, c.1200–1700’, pp. 147–180, and P. van Cruyningen, ‘State, property rights and sustainability of drained areas along the North Sea coast, sixteenth–eighteenth centuries’, pp. 181–208.

⁴ J. A. Steers, ‘Scolt Head Island’ *Geographical J.* 83 (1934), pp. 479–94; ‘Some notes on the north Norfolk Coast from Hunstanton to Brancaster’, *Geographical J.* 87 (1936), pp. 35–46; *The coastline of England and Wales* (1946).

⁵ The Le Strange archive (LEST) is held at the Norfolk Records Office. For a genealogy of the family, Burke’s *Landed gentry* (18th edn, 1972), which supersedes

F. Blomefield and C. Parkin, *An essay towards a topographical history of the county of Norfolk* (sec. edn, 11 vols, 1805–10), X, pp. 313–27. See also J. C. Whittle and E. M. Griffiths, *Consumption and gender in the early seventeenth-century household: the world of Alice Le Strange* (2012), pp. 18–20.

⁶ Romney Marsh was also noted for its absentee landowners who leased their marshes to graziers; by the mid-seventeenth century only 16% of the marshes were owner-occupied, Soens, ‘Social distribution of land’, pp. 158–9.

⁷ The trustees, all closely related to Sir Hamon, included Sir John Peyton (1554–1630) the Elizabethan soldier and administrator; Sir Henry Hobart (1560–1625) of Intwood, later of Blickling, who rose to be Lord Chief Justice of the Court of Common Pleas; Sir Henry Spelman of Congham, the antiquarian and bibliophile and the family lawyer, Richard Stubbe of Sedgford,

their fortunes. In 1616 Sir Hamon estimated his revenue at £1247, which included rents from Hunstanton and Holme by the Sea, Great and Little Ringstead, Heacham and Gressenhall.⁸ In 1620 Alice inherited an estate at nearby Sedgeford from her father, Richard Stubbe, raising their rental income to £1700 a year. From that date, with sales of sheep, wool and corn, receipts rose rapidly to £2000 a year, rising to a peak of £2640 in 1641, before their heavy losses of corn and sheep in the Civil War at the hands of the Parliamentary forces.⁹ Draining marshes was part of their strategy to improve the estate and raise their revenues; it was undertaken principally by their eldest son, Sir Nicholas (1604–55) soon after his marriage in 1631.¹⁰ By the early 1640s they were selling significant quantities of marsh barley and wheat, principally from Heacham, which greatly assisted their recovery after their losses in 1643.¹¹

As a record of his work, Sir Nicholas left several pocket-sized notebooks of extraordinary detail and quality. In his knowledge and approach, he owed much to his parents, combining his father's interest in science, mathematics and engineering with his mother's aptitude for accounting.¹² These notebooks, four of which survive, provide a record of the drainage process, from the layout and construction of drains to the establishment of new farmsteads, with the costs and profits involved.¹³ Most significantly, Sir Nicholas designed them as manuals of instruction and advice for his successors, following the example of his parents. We know this strategy worked, as his grandson, another Sir Nicholas (1661–1724) maintained the drains and introduced new initiatives, noting his progress in one of Sir Hamon's old memoranda books, which he updated by adding indices, tables, a system of cross-referencing and his own commentary.¹⁴ So, not only do we find out what happened, but we begin to understand why the family avoided catastrophe. With their knowledge of the locality the Le Stranges knew the risks involved and were able to devise appropriate strategies to deal with them. They also understood the risks of adventuring on the Fens. Sir Hamon lost an investment of £500 in the drainage of Boston Fen in the 1630s; this may explain why his son concentrated on the local marshes

Note 7 continued

the father of Alice Le Strange. See *Oxford Dictionary of National Biography* for the first three; also, E. M. Griffiths, 'A country life': Sir Hamon Le Strange of Hunstanton in Norfolk, 1583–1654', in R. W. Hoyle (ed.), *Custom, improvement and the landscape in early modern Britain* (2011), pp. 203–34; ead., 'Improving landlords or villains of the piece?', in J. C. Whittle (ed.), *Landlords and tenants in Britain, 1440–1660: Tawney's Agrarian Problem revisited* (2013), pp. 166–82.

⁸ Griffiths, 'A country life', p. 210. Little Ringstead, lying south of Hunstanton Park is more commonly known as Barrett Ringstead.

⁹ Ibid., pp. 226–34. See also R. W. Ketton-Cremer, 'Sir Hamon Le Strange and his sons', in *A Norfolk Gallery* (1948), pp. 56–94; *Norfolk in the Civil War* (sec. edn, 1985) pp. 20–18. Sir Hamon, his wife Alice and their three sons, Nicholas, Hamon and Roger all merit separate entries in the *Oxford Dictionary of National Biography*.

¹⁰ Sir Nicholas Le Strange, 1604–55, first baronet,

married Anne, daughter of Sir Edward Lewkenor (1587–1618) of Denham, Suffolk, www.historyofparliamentonline.org.

¹¹ Griffiths, 'A country life', pp. 224–6.

¹² Whittle and Griffiths, *Consumption and gender*, pp. 28–36; Griffiths, 'A country life', pp. 203–5; E. M. Griffiths (ed.), *Her price is above pearls: Farming and farming records of Alice Le Strange, 1617–56* (Norfolk Record Soc., 79, 2015).

¹³ LEST/KA6; KA9; KA10 and KA24 survive, four others, LEST/KA4, KA5, KA7 and KA8 are listed in the catalogue, but were not deposited. They almost certainly relate to the drainage at Heacham summarized in LEST/KA24, where entries refer to 'Heacham Marsh 4th booke'. A simple paper book, relating to costs and profits, has recently been found in a supplementary list, LEST/suppl. 25ii/xvi.

¹⁴ Sir Nicholas Le Strange, 4th Bt., 1661–1724. Sir Hamon's memoranda books, LEST/Q34; Q36, Q37 and Q38, include a vast range of information appertaining to the family and estate.

which he knew and where he exercised more control.¹⁵ The creation of the notebooks, a prime example of information management, was a vital part of Sir Nicholas's risk management strategy for him and for future generations. Not for them the debacle of Hatfield Chase, South Yorkshire in 1626, studied by Piet van Cruyningen, or the reverses experienced in the Fens in the late seventeenth century and beyond.¹⁶

In the final notebook, Sir Nicholas provides a summary of the drainage work undertaken, with 50 pages of his 'observations'; a reference to 'Heacham Marsh 4th booke', suggests that there are in addition four missing notebooks relating to Heacham. Overall, it appears that 245 acres of marshes at Heacham, Hunstanton and Holme by the Sea were drained between 1633 and 1653 with the marshes at Heacham accounting for 177 acres.¹⁷ However, as responsibility for this enterprise was shared with his father, and Alice included his payments in her books of disbursements, we have a good idea of the scale and the problems associated with this venture. She also recorded the receipts for corn in her household books. The earliest notebook dates from 1633–42 and covers the drainage of marshes at Hunstanton and Holme: this amounted to only 67¾ acres, but the notebook includes the most minute detail of the processes involved, showing Sir Nicholas's grasp of the technicalities, organization of the workforce and management of the finances.¹⁸ The second book follows on from 1643 to 1653, covering the next phase of ploughing and sowing the newly drained marshes.¹⁹ Another book deals almost exclusively with building work on the marshes and elsewhere on the estate, creating new farmsteads and housing for tenants and specialist labourers.²⁰

The marshes in question lie in two distinct areas and can be seen most clearly on William Faden's map of Norfolk of 1797 (Map 1).²¹ Those at Heacham belong to the marshes bordering the Wash, technically an extension of the silt Fens, which stretch from Kings Lynn to the chalk outcrop at Hunstanton. These marshes are not so exposed to storms and tidal surges and provide more opportunity for sustainable drainage projects. Faden's map shows an 'embankment' starting tentatively at Heacham and then running firmly southwards through the large estates at Snettisham, Sandringham, and Castle Rising to 'Lynn Regis'; this embankment still survives, but lies well inland as marshes have continued to be reclaimed from the Wash. Today, this area supports an intensive agriculture growing vast crops of corn and sugar beet, a stark contrast to the gentle livestock grazing along the north Norfolk coast. From Hunstanton, the marshes occupy a different formation, as the tides erode the chalk and carstone outcrop of Hunstanton cliffs and carry the debris eastwards to Weybourne depositing it along the coast and creating sand dunes, lagoons, islands and spits.²² At the same time, tidal activity westwards brings more deposits from the eastern cliffs at Sheringham adding to the silting-up of the river estuaries

¹⁵ This 'loss' appears under 'The losses in my husbands estate' at the end of Alice's summary of the family finances, 1633 to 1653, LEST/P10. However, in 1636 she records expenditure at Boston Fen, which is remarkably close to £500; it is possible that the 'loss' is not quite what it seems, see below, p. 239.

¹⁶ Cruyningen, 'State, property rights and sustainability of drained areas along the North Sea coast', pp. 192–202.

¹⁷ LEST/KA24.

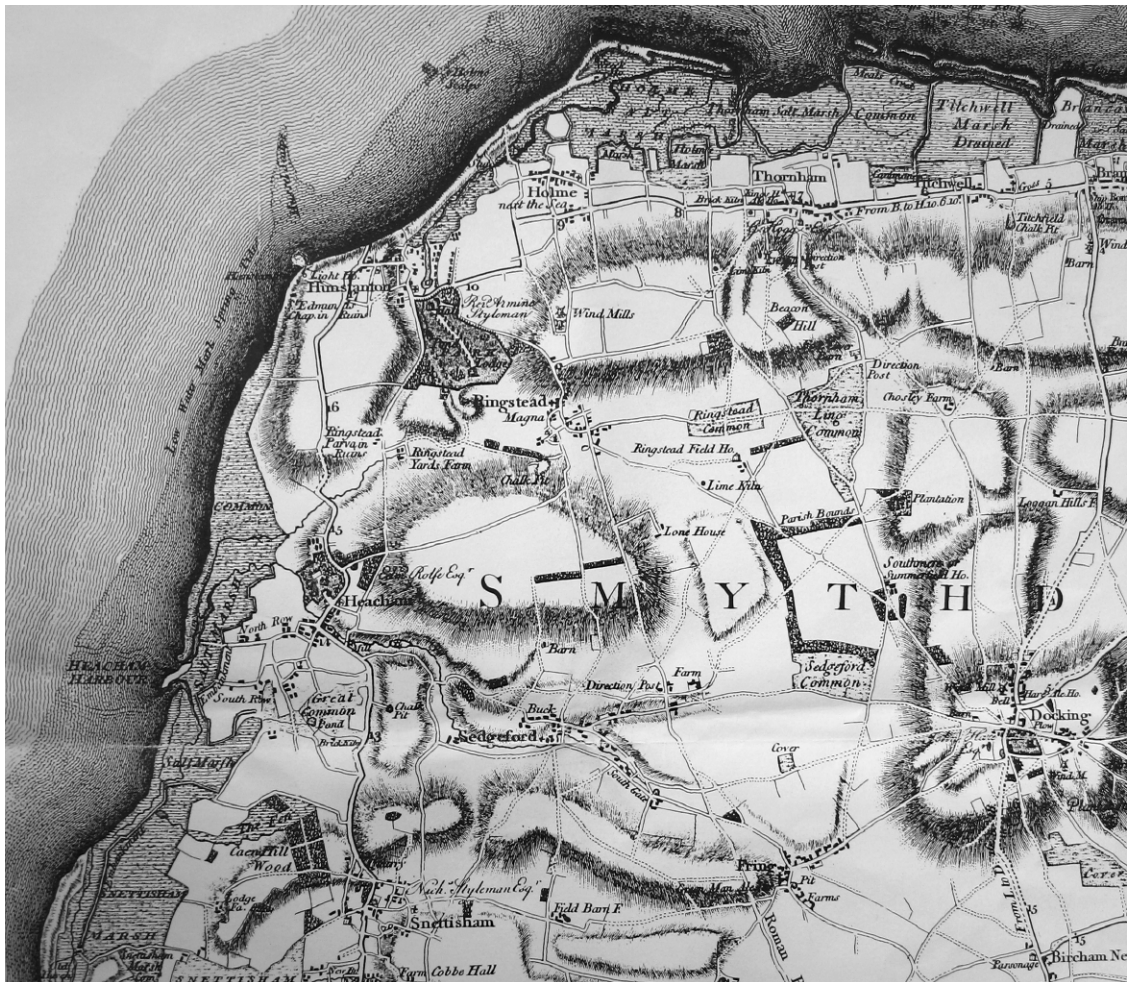
¹⁸ LEST/KA6.

¹⁹ LEST/KA9.

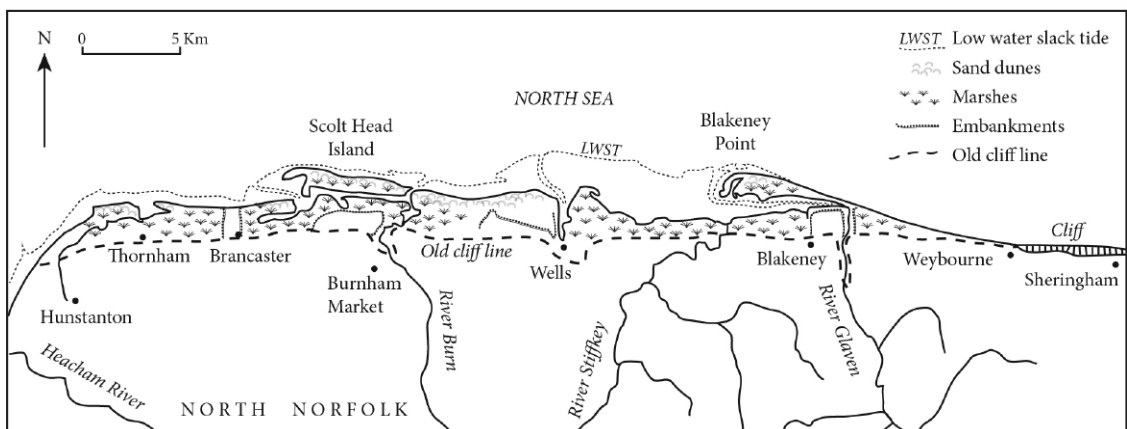
²⁰ LEST/KA10.

²¹ A. Macnair and T. Williamson, *William Faden and Norfolk's eighteenth-century landscape* (2010). Although the maps date from 1797, the authors note much of the detail on commons, marsh and fen relates to what existed in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries.

²² Steers, 'Scolt Head Island'; 'Notes from Hunstanton to Brancaster'; www.jncc.defra.gov.uk.



MAP 1: William Faden's Map of Norfolk, 1797, from Snettisham to Brancaster.



MAP 2: North Norfolk Coast showing the old cliff line from Hunstanton to Weybourne (V. J. May, 'North Norfolk Coast', from the *Geological Conservation Rev.*, www.jncc.defra.gov.uk).

and the creation of the extensive beaches and marshland at Salthouse, Cley, Blakeney and Holkham. Map 2 identifies the old cliffline, where the villages are situated, with its foreshore of accumulated marshland and sandy beaches. Faden's map also shows the light sandy uplands of Great Ringstead rising from the marshes at Holme with patches of common land and ling (heathland) clearly marked; these parishes lie near Thornham and Brancaster, studied by Angus Winchester and Eleanor Straughton in their work on lowland commons.²³ The whole landscape was part of a complex farming system, with regulated grazing rights on the common marshes and upland brecks, existing on either side of open-field arable, enclosed pasture and marshes.²⁴

In his work on wool supply and the worsted cloth industry in sixteenth- and seventeenth-century Norfolk, Keith Allison explained how these marshes were developed to meet the rising demand for wool and corn. Landowners like the Howards of Castle Rising, the Cobbes of Sandringham, the Cokes of Holkham, the Bacons of Stiffkey, as well as the Le Stranges of Hunstanton drained and improved their marshes in order to raise the quality and quantity of their summer grazing.²⁵ In this area, marshes formed an integral part of the foldcourse system, the foundation of sheep-corn husbandry in Norfolk: this involved sheep and cattle being folded in the winter on the upland arable fields, where they fertilized the light sandy soils, preparing the ground for sowing. In the spring, when the crops were planted, the sheep had to be moved to summer grazing; brecks, commons and heathland normally provided succour, but marshes, especially when they had been drained, were vastly superior. The presence of these marshes meant that landowners could increase their stocking regimes and bring more light land into cultivation. Allison's map of Holkham from 1590 shows two foldcourses which included large areas of salt marsh; this was a common feature in all the villages along the north Norfolk coast.²⁶ An earlier map of 1586, from the Bacon archive, of the coast at Stiffkey and Blakeney, illustrates this formation more graphically with the villages along the old cliffline, the arable uplands behind, and the fresh and salt marshes towards the sea (Map 3).²⁷ Sir Nicholas Bacon, the Lord Keeper, had purchased an estate in Stiffkey in 1571. Soon after, his son Nathaniel was constructing a sea wall and reporting to his father on its success; he also commented on the rising price of corn, especially wheat.²⁸ Later, in 1572, he told him of his plans to build a port at Stiffkey which was deeper and safer than Blakeney or Cley, and set out his specifications for a granary.²⁹ This economic activity gained momentum as prices rose from the 1580s; by the 1630s, as we have seen at Heacham, corn was being grown on the drained marshes. However, landowners did not get it all their own way. These commercially driven initiatives by gentry

²³ C. P. Rodgers, E. A. Straughton, A. J. L. Winchester and M. Pieraccini, *Contested common land: environmental governance past and present* (2011), pp. 163–88.

²⁴ Brecks were the outfields in the 'infield-outfield system', cultivated intermittently, while the fertile infields were in permanent cultivation. H. C. Darby and J. Saltmarsh, 'The infield-outfield system of a Norfolk manor', *EcHR* 3 (1935), pp. 30–44. The aim of improving landlords was to draw these outfields into permanent cultivation.

²⁵ K. J. Allison, 'The wool supply and worsted cloth industry in Norfolk in the sixteenth and seventeenth

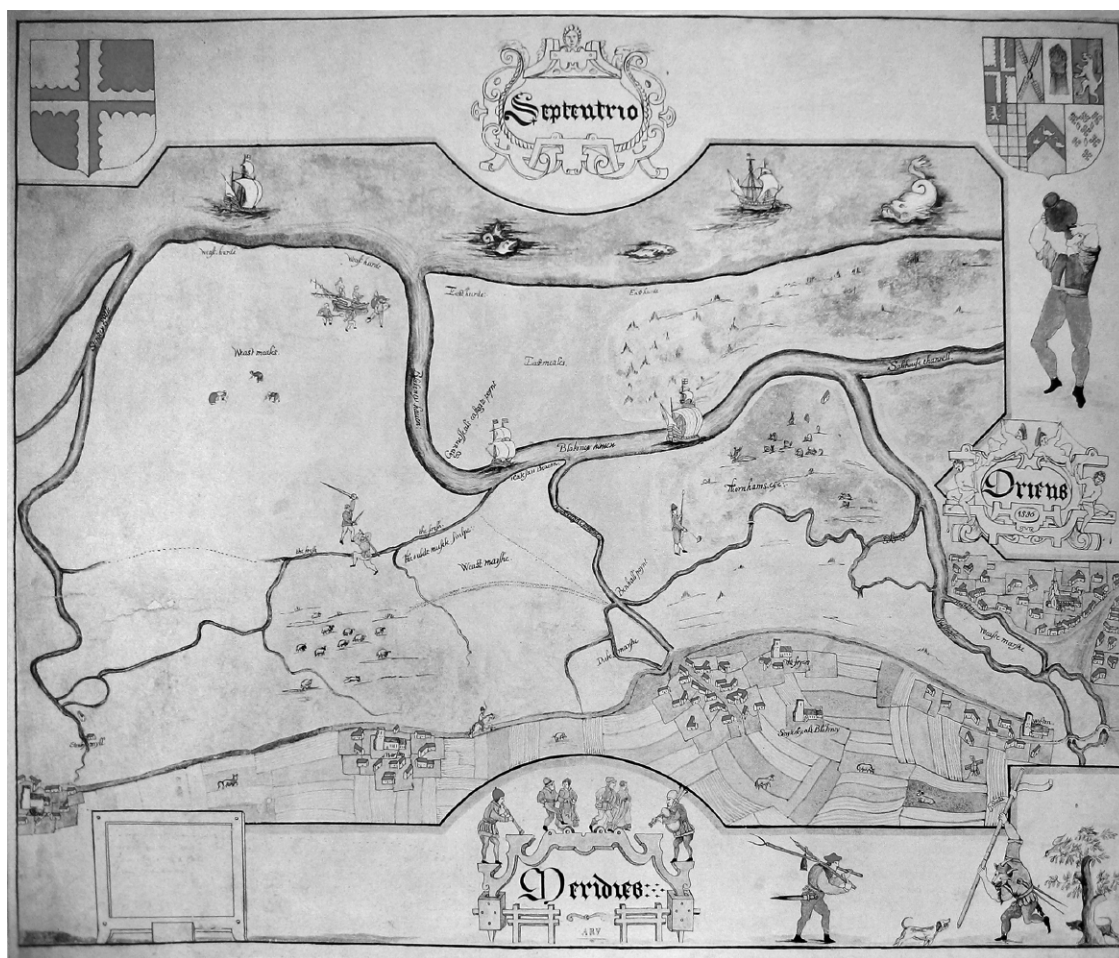
centuries' (unpubl. PhD thesis, University of Leeds, 1955); id., 'The sheep corn husbandry of Norfolk in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries', *AgHR* 5 (1957), pp. 12–30.

²⁶ Ibid., p. 17.

²⁷ The map appears on the cover of V. Morgan, E. Rutledge and B. Taylor (eds), *The Papers of Nathaniel Bacon of Stiffkey, V, 1603–1607* (Norfolk Record Soc. 74, 2010).

²⁸ A. Hassell Smith, G. M. Baker and R. W. Kenny (eds), *The papers of Nathaniel Bacon of Stiffkey, I, 1556–1577* (Norfolk Record Soc. 46, 1978–9), p. 32.

²⁹ Ibid., pp. 41, 43.



MAP 3: Blakeney Haven and the Port of Cley showing the marshes and villages at Stiffkey, Morston, Blakeney, Wiveton and Cley. A nineteenth century facsimile of a 1586 original, thought to have been surveyed by John Darby, NRO, MC 2443/3.

landowners were often firmly resisted by villagers determined to protect their own rights and interests; if they were to survive as functioning communities they needed to find a way of reconciling their differences.

II

One of the controversies generated by this heightened activity was cited by R. H. Tawney.³⁰ He was particularly interested in the corporate action taken by the yeomen, commoners and freeholders of the town of Burnham Overy against Robert Bacon³¹ and Thomas Coke when

³⁰ R. H. Tawney, *The agrarian problem in the sixteenth century* (1912), p. 245, n. 1.

³¹ Robert Bacon was the son of the Lord Keeper's brother Thomas, and first cousin of Nathaniel.

they purchased marshes there in 1588. In return for Bacon and Coke walling, embanking and draining the marsh and making it suitable for pasture and tillage, the commoners agreed to sacrifice their grazing rights over three parts of the whole. In other words, they were prepared to surrender (property) rights for a *quid pro quo*. Tawney was impressed by their willingness to act as a single body:

[T]hey buy land and they sell land and they can leave it to their heirs. Certain persons in the township act on their behalf, much as directors might act for a body of shareholders. Is it possible to speak of such arrangements simply in terms of individual rights? Are we not driven to think of the township as almost a landholding corporation?

Here Tawney gets to the heart of the issue: the distribution of property rights, the negotiated settlements and the common interests of these local communities. Disputes were frequent and hard-fought, but ultimately all parties had to resolve their differences. In the Fens, adventurers could rely on the protection of the Crown, but these coastal communities, more reliant on their own resources, needed to collaborate, form a 'good neighbourhood' and create a system of 'sustainable governance' as Winchester explained in his work on Thornham and Brancaster.³² For resident landowners, anxious to secure the future of the family, it was essential to find sustainable as well as profitable outcomes. They needed to work with their communities to find a way forward, but at the same time they had to protect their property rights.

Tawney's example is significant as the Bacons and Cokes were relatively new to this part of Norfolk and possibly less familiar with the culture. In contrast, the Le Stranges, resident at the principal manor at Hunstanton since 1310, had long enjoyed a settled relationship with their tenantry. In the late fifteenth century, they acquired two further manors, Mustrells and Lovells, leaving just the tiny manor of Snettertons which they had absorbed by the time Sir Hamon inherited his estate.³³ Thus the family enjoyed unity of possession alongside their longevity and understanding of the area and its ways. From their records, it is evident that Sir Hamon and Alice worked closely and seemingly in harmony with their manorial tenants at Hunstanton.³⁴ However, elsewhere on their estates, where relationships were not so deep, they often found themselves fending off challenges and defending their rights.

The Le Strange archive is full of legal cases fought in defence of their property rights, particularly those relating to the marshes.³⁵ From a collection of legal papers on 'foldcourses

³² A. J. L. Winchester, 'Property rights, "good neighbourhood" and sustainability: the management of common land in England and Wales, 1235–1965', in van Bavel and Thoen (eds), *Rural societies*, pp. 309–29.

³³ C. Oestmann, *Lordship and community: the Le Strange family and the village of Hunstanton, Norfolk in the first half of the sixteenth century* (1994), pp. 29–30. Sir Hamon's field book of 1623, Norfolk Record Office, LEST/BH1, makes no reference to Snettertons, although there is a later insertion in the margin; Alice's field book of 1648, NRO, LEST/BH2, refers to these holdings 'as formerly Snittertons'.

³⁴ Griffiths, 'Improving landlords', pp. 174–81.

³⁵ Complex rights extended over the foreshore and the sea, which the Le Stranges have fiercely defended over the centuries. The most recent example is a successful case brought by John Loose, the tenant of the fishing rights owned by the Hunstanton Estate, against Kings Lynn Shellfish, a group of cockle fishermen, for infringing those rights. See [2013] EWHC 901 (Ch) for the judge's ruling and a history of the legal cases relating to the Fishery. However, their research did not extend to Sir Hamon's memoranda books, which include much information on the management of the shore and sea, LEST/Q37.

and marshes of Holme by the Sea', a lease, cited in a case between various inhabitants of Holme in 1635, shows how these grazing regimes worked and the ever-present potential for dispute.³⁶ The lease, for 21 years, included a foldcourse for 480 sheep in the marshes, commons and shack of Holme.³⁷ The lessee, John Bass, brought a case against the tenants and farmers of William Taylor, lord of the manor of Holkham and Berrys, claiming they were 'so surcharging the common salt marsh' that he had 'no benefit from it'.³⁸ The principal farmer, William Holly, disputed his claim to any such foldcourse and asserted the rights of the inhabitants who 'beyond memory had liberty of fouldcourse in all the Common Saltmarshes of Holme'.³⁹ The Common Marshes in Holme amounted to 408 acres.⁴⁰

This case was simply the latest installment of a long-running dispute over these grazing rights dating back to 1558, when an award specified the rights of William Aslack, then lord of Holkham and Berrys, and the inhabitants of the town.⁴¹ In 1594, his descendant, Aslack Lany let the estate to Giles Godfrey; a copy of the lease restates the contents of the award.⁴² In 1607, the new lessee, Sir Nathaniel Bacon, armed with a similar lease, brought a case against the above-mentioned William Holly, whom he similarly charged 'to have entered and fed with sheep upon Georges Marsh, North Holmes and West Marsh'.⁴³ The jury found for Holly 'as the marshes and meeles north of the said 3 parcels were comon and so fed by the inhabitants'. At about the same time, Sir Hamon Le Strange brought a case against Aslack Lany himself, challenging the rights he claimed in the lease to Nathaniel Bacon.⁴⁴ These rights, he asserted, were due to the Manor of Ringstead cum Holme, in the possession of his father, Sir Nicholas Le Strange (1562–92) on his death in 1592; this was proved by the fact that 'all offences of marshes and meeles (in Holme) have been punishable in the Courts of the said Manor'.⁴⁵ Lany, he claimed, had contrived to secure the freehold and inheritance of these marshes during Sir Hamon's minority. The court found in favour of Sir Hamon, confirming his position as lord of the Manor of Ringstead cum Holme and his rights to the soil of the marshes and meeles of Holme.⁴⁶

³⁶ LEST/FQ1. The Norfolk RO catalogue lists 21 separate documents and bundles in this box relating to disputes over the marshes and foldcourses at Holme but some appear to be missing.

³⁷ '4C' means a 'long hundred', i.e. 120 sheep. 'Shack', in this context, means the right of pasturage by the lord's sheep over the tenants' fields during the winter months; more generally, it meant the tenants' right of winter pasturage over the common fields, see D. Yaxley, *A researcher's glossary of words found in historical documents in East Anglia* (2003).

³⁸ LEST/FQ1. Surcharging means overstocking the marsh.

³⁹ LEST/FQ1. The resolution of this case is not entirely clear, but it appears that the lessee, John Bass, exchanged his holding in Snettisham with Robert Riches, one of Taylor's farmers, for lands in Holme, with the stipulation that if William Taylor 'did not agree in time', the lessee would 'sowe the Holme lands to halves with Riches'.

⁴⁰ LEST/FQ1.

⁴¹ Blomefield and Parkin, *Norfolk X*, pp. 328–30.

⁴² LEST/FQ2. Lany sold the manor of Holkham and Berrys to William Taylor in 1614, LEST/FQ4, document listed in the Record Office catalogue, which cannot be found.

⁴³ LEST/FQ1. In 1606, Martin Spinke was paid £1 'for the small survey plot of the marshes and commons at Holme', LEST/P6. Sir Nicholas (1661–1724) later noted in LEST/Q37, that Holme had been surveyed in 1605, but the map has not survived. However, excellent Field Maps of Ringstead and Holme survive for c.1680, LEST/EH8. See also, below, p. 232, n. 65, for Hasdonck's plot of Holme Marshes.

⁴⁴ LEST/FQ3.

⁴⁵ Listed under 'Searches and proofs of antient court rolls that Sir Hamon Le Strange is lord and owner of the comons in Holme and of the wrecks of the sea and groundage there' in LEST/Q37. 'Meeles' are sand dunes.

⁴⁶ LEST/FQ3.

A summary of this verdict was carefully copied down in a memoranda book by Sir Nicholas (d. 1724), Sir Hamon's great grandson, alongside other items, which he noted could be understood and rectified according to the law.⁴⁷

The survival of these legal documents and the later notes made by Sir Nicholas Le Strange (d. 1724) indicate a central plank of the Le Stranges' management policy: the assiduous research of their ancient documents to clarify their rights and titles to their property, and the meticulous keeping of accounts and records. Deeds, charters, depositions and judgements with annotations and notes, fill the pages of Sir Hamon's memoranda books. With this knowledge, he and his successors were able to beat off several challenges. For example, in 1698 Sir Nicholas was able to refute the claim of Thomas Rogers, who had recently purchased William Taylor's estate at Holme, for the right of warren upon the mees, 'I showed [him] the decree in the Court of Wards and Depositions in that suit w[hi]ch are recited in the foregoing lease, upon w[hi]ch he ceased further prosecution thereof'.⁴⁸ Sir Hamon's painstaking approach owed much to the advice he received from his uncle and guardian, Sir Henry Spelman, the antiquarian and jurist, who lived at Holme from 1594 and specialized in the documentation of ecclesiastical estates.⁴⁹ The memoranda books include several references to documents borrowed from Spelman indicating that he was closely involved with the researches into the Manor of Ringstead cum Holme, formerly part of the estates of the Abbey of Ramsey.⁵⁰ Sir Hamon's acquisition of the manor of Heacham Lewes in 1609 further tested their skills; the disputes in Heacham also centred on the marshes.

Heacham was particularly prone to disputes over property rights. With its extensive marshes and upland sheep courses, and access to the sea through Heacham Harbour, it was a highly desirable asset for a landowner looking to expand, but fraught with the possibility of a legal challenge. The Le Stranges first acquired a foothold in Heacham in 1520, when Sir Thomas Le Strange (1490–1545) purchased the smaller manor of Calys Hall, the lands of which lay mainly south of the river Heacham. The great manor of Lewes Priory, centred north of the river, was granted to the Duke of Norfolk at the dissolution; it was then leased to various local landowners, including the Le Stranges and finally sold to them by the Earl of Arundel in 1609.⁵¹ This gave Sir Hamon the opportunity to consolidate his holding and effect radical improvements. However, by this time, benefiting from the absenteeism of the church and the Howard family, the tenantry had learnt to assert itself, vigorously challenging the status of their holdings and their grazing rights over the marshes. Sir Nicholas's (d. 1724) notes in the memoranda book include references to early disputes over Caly foldcourse, whose liberty extended across 'Old Field, Little Marsh, Great Marsh, Mayer Marsh and the Common Fenn and upon all the marshes and shackable lands on the south side of the river'.⁵² With entries in the margin clarifying the stocking rate, he added for future reference:

⁴⁷ LEST/Q37.

⁴⁸ LEST/Q37.

⁴⁹ Sir Henry Spelman, 1564–1641. In 1594 he purchased leases of Blackborough and Wormegay Abbeys from the Crown, which resulted in lengthy, expensive and eventually unsuccessful litigation. The case led Spelman to research the charters and title deeds relating to Norfolk and Suffolk monasteries; his *Tract of the*

Rights and Respect due unto Churches was published in 1613. ODNB, 'Sir Henry Spelman'.

⁵⁰ LEST/Q37.

⁵¹ Blomefield and Parkin, *Norfolk* X, p. 309. Sir Hamon sold their estate at Fring for £4400 to pay for Heacham Lewes, *ibid.*, p. 304.

⁵² LEST/Q37.

The rate for the sheep to be layd upon Caly Foldcourse made Nov. 13, 1610 by the power and persuasion of such as misinformed and misled Sir Hamon in the writing down of the same (and when his own knowledge in these matters of Hecham Town was raw and imperfect) is fit to be enquired into, altered and reformed in such manner as (upon full conference and deliberate consultation among the inhabitants) may be thought reasonable.⁵³

The language is unequivocal: landlords needed to be on their guard and know their facts, but also to be prepared to consult, negotiate and reach reasonable agreements with their tenants, however difficult and fractious they may be. This experience may have prompted Sir Hamon to commission a new survey of Heacham and encourage his wife Alice to check the rentals and field books.⁵⁴ Predictably, her initiative provoked a challenge from one of the principal manorial tenants. In 1638 Robert Cremer launched a petition at the Norwich Assizes accusing Sir Hamon, 'Dame Alice' and their steward of altering the court rolls for their own benefit.⁵⁵ The land in question concerned parcels which were required to complete the construction of a sea wall linking Heacham and Snettisham; as we have seen, the embankment is clearly marked on Faden's map and survives as a significant feature in the landscape. An earlier case had been brought against Sir Nicholas (d. 1655) when he started to build the bank. A meeting had been held between the parties at Heacham Marsh to resolve their differences, with Cremer, supported by his uncle Robert Stileman of Snettisham, threatening to petition if Sir Hamon did not meet their demands.⁵⁶ Matters reached such a pitch that Sir Hamon sued for libel in the Court of Chivalry, winning his case in June 1640; Cremer responded with a bill in Star Chamber.⁵⁷ The dissolution of these bodies in 1640 left the parties without a settlement. Cremer revived the case in Chancery in 1647, but after lengthy submissions and interrogations of witnesses, with much firepower aimed at Dame Alice, the matter was settled out of court and finally agreed in Sir Hamon's favour after Cremer's death in 1651, but it was a long-drawn-out, expensive and close-run thing.⁵⁸

These cases at Holme and Heacham show that the Le Stranges were vigilant and determined, even aggressive, in defence of their property rights, but as Winchester says this was very much a contested landscape.⁵⁹ The real risks faced by landowners were not so much the inundations of the sea, as unforeseen challenges to their property and capital investment. Even Tawney acknowledged as much, drawing attention to the organized toughness of the manorial tenants. Sorting out the property rights was a prerequisite to any expensive drainage scheme on the marshes. No wonder Sir Nicholas (d. 1655) started carefully with the marshes at Hunstanton and Holme over which he had control, or where the tenants were less likely to launch a

⁵³ Ibid.

⁵⁴ Waterman's map of Heacham 1623 is in two halves, LEST/OB1 north of the river, LEST/OB2 to the south.

⁵⁵ In the documents, Alice is known as Lady Alice Le Strange, Lady L'Estrange and Dame Alice. Strictly speaking, she should be known as Lady Le Strange or Alice Le Strange, but I refer to her simply as Alice.

⁵⁶ Robert Cremer was an absentee landlord; it is quite clear that Stileman of Snettisham made the running.

⁵⁷ R. P. Cust and A. J. Hopper (eds), *Cases in the High Court of Chivalry, 1634–1640* (Harleian Society,

new ser. 18, 2006); for the full record, www.court-of-chivalry.bham.ac.uk/index.htm. The case was revived in the Court of Chancery in 1647: TNA, C 2/Chas1/C29/63; C 22/49/20 and for the out of court settlement in 1648, LEST/DN1; see also Griffiths, "A country life", p. 230; ead., 'Improving landlords', pp. 179–80.

⁵⁸ Notes on Cremer's settlement follow those on Caly Foldcourse in LEST/Q37; see also LEST/DN1.

⁵⁹ Winchester and Straughton, *Contested Common Land*, pp. 163–88.

challenge. The notebooks, recording the drainage process and making salient observations, served as a further precaution for himself and his heirs; they also provide us with a detailed insight into how these schemes were organized, managed and sustained in relative harmony.

III

The information in the earliest notebook, as we have seen, relates to the drainage undertaken at Hunstanton and Holme, which Sir Nicholas started in 1633. It concentrates on the closes and marshes along the valley of the River Hun, which runs northward through Hunstanton Park and then north-eastwards to the sea at Holme (Maps 1 and 2).⁶⁰ Hunstanton Hall itself was built in a hollow facing towards Holme and Great Ringstead village, creating its own geographical unit, separate from the village and West Field of Hunstanton, which lay on higher ground stretching westward to Hunstanton cliffs. Faden's map shows the north-south route neatly dividing the parish of Hunstanton. More precisely, Thomas Waterman's survey of 1615 (Map 4) shows West Field dominated by the strips of the manorial tenants, and East Field where the demesne strips were being enclosed, with further closes of pasture created to the north, and the marshes leading out to the sea.⁶¹

The marshes drained in this area amounted to just 67¾ acres, with Hunstanton Marsh, Clottons Marsh with 'Osyer Island', a 'peece next Hunstanton Common' and the 'Hopp Ground Osyer Island' comprising 24 acres, the Bogge 15¼ acres, the Meeles Walled Close 8 acres and the Whin Pasture 7¼ acres, leaving just over 13 acres in Holme.⁶² These acreages are significantly less than those shown on the Hunstanton map of 1615, but clearly the marshes were not drained in their entirety. Also, some of the names of the marshes have been changed. For example, the Whin Pasture does not appear on the map but as 'The Whinne Pasture New Close 1637' it is most likely the northern part of the Clamp Close. The relevant field map of Holme of c.1680 refers to 'Clamp Close or The Whin Pasture' over the parish border in Hunstanton.⁶³ Likewise, the Meeles Walled Close, to the north of the Whin Pasture on the sand dunes, was new. Earlier modifications were also made by Sir Hamon in the 1620s.⁶⁴ For example, Marsh Close was renamed Brimble Close, and Bushey Close, south of Clamp Close became Normans Close to distinguish it from Bushey Close, south of Clottons Marsh. This whole area on the east side of Hunstanton, almost exclusively demesne land, was subject to ongoing rationalization and improvement; draining the marshes was simply part of that process.

The few acres in Holme, consisting mainly of two closes, Futters Close and Holme Marsh Close lay adjacent to the north east of the Whin Pasture on the east side of 'Sir Nic. Stranges' banke'. This bank is marked on 'The Plotts of Holm Marshes' drawn by Jan van Hasdonck in about 1633; the bank is well established and almost certainly refers to the one mentioned in the award of 1558.⁶⁵ In the notebooks, it is called 'the Procession Bank'.⁶⁶ The small amount

⁶⁰ LEST/KA6.

⁶¹ LEST/AO1; Griffiths, "A country life", pp. 218–26.

⁶² LEST/KA24.

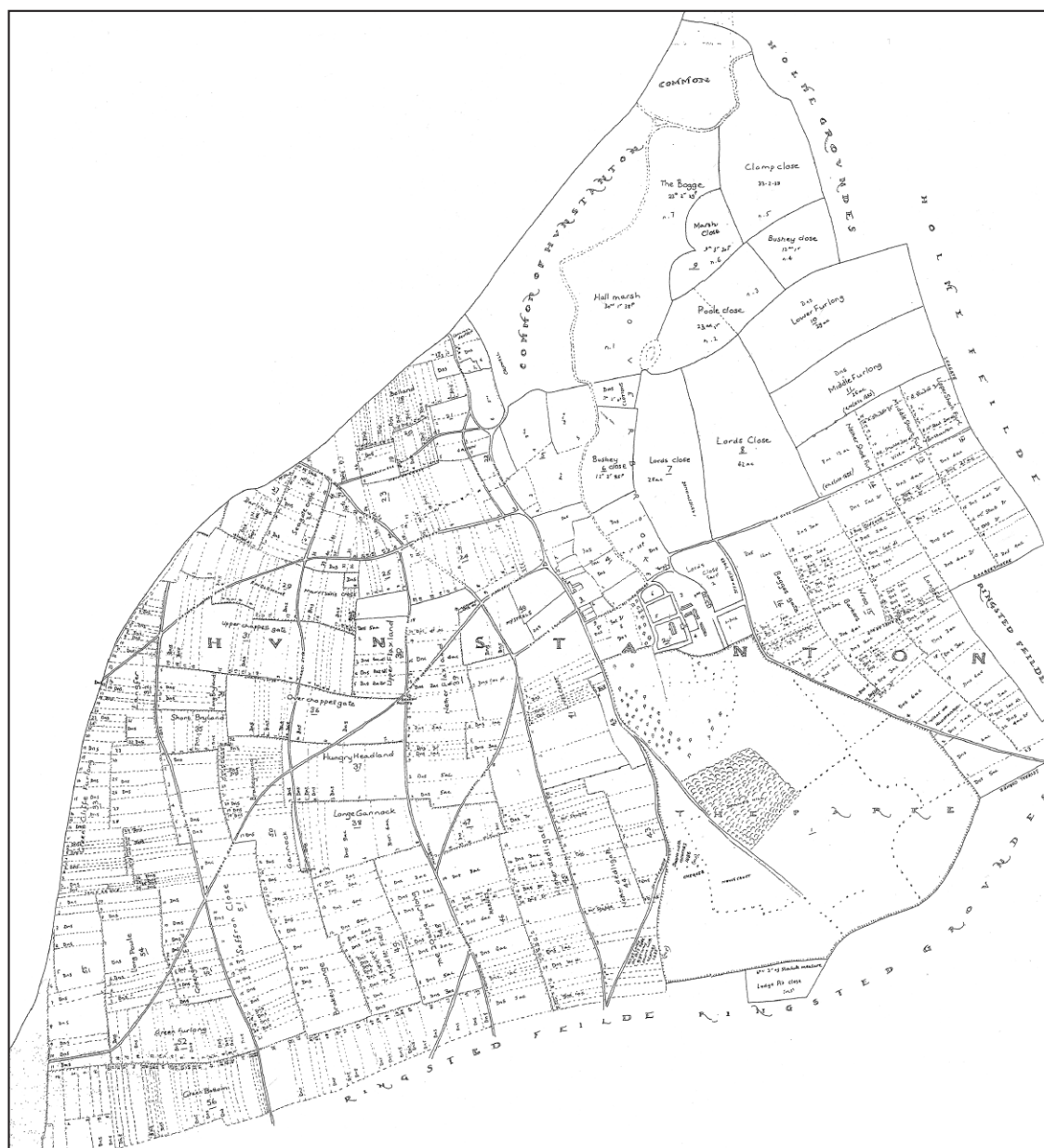
⁶³ LEST/EH8.

⁶⁴ Griffiths, "A country life", pp. 218–21.

⁶⁵ LEST/FQ18 for Hasdonck's plots of Holm marshes;

LEST/FQ12 and FQ13 include papers relating to an 'Inquisition into Hansdonck's claims 1633–34 for reclaimed lands'. Both documents are missing, but it shows that Hasdonck was involved at Holme at this time.

⁶⁶ LEST/KA6.



MAP 4: Thomas Waterman's Map of Hunstanton, 1615, NRO, LEST/AO1.

drained in Holme may come as a surprise, but there was in fact little scope in Holme, because although the Le Stranges owned the grazing rights to the common marsh, they held very little demesne land. Holme was dominated by large manorial tenants, who initiated their own drainage schemes and farmed much of the demesne lands in Hunstanton.

A significant aspect of these marshes is their proximity to Hunstanton Hall and their function as a playground for the menfolk. Sir Nicholas's earliest efforts were directed to improving the

area for fishing, fowling and hawking.⁶⁷ He and his father, both passionate sportsmen, wanted to make places ‘handsome to gunn and hawke in’; they created havens and pitts for ‘handsome flying’, breast works and blinds ‘to gaine shootes at the fowls’ and ‘handsome’ riding passages along ‘my new drains’. Note the word ‘handsome’ and the desire for an attractive amenity they could enjoy with their friends. This reminds us of the enduring association between field sports and natural landscapes enhanced by hedges, tree-planting and water. These cultural considerations, widely shared across the social divide, were clearly a priority and helped to shape the look and feel of these marshes; they also reinforced the common interests and purpose of the local communities. Despite his seemingly frivolous motives, Sir Nicholas managed ‘the home marshes’ with precision and commitment.

IV

From the outset, Sir Nicholas’s notebooks are laid out methodically and designed to inform and explain. Written in a large and legible hand, each topic is named and dated with additional references; individual entries are itemized, costed and dated. In the first notebook, the expenditure is seldom totalled, but relates to complex tables at the end of the book. The format suggests that Sir Nicholas assembled the notebooks at a later date, from concurrent notes, as a reference work.⁶⁸ He clearly understood the basic principle of information management, that knowledge, to be beneficial, has to be presented in a way that can be understood and shared with others.⁶⁹ Similarly, the content demonstrates Sir Nicholas’s genuine business sense, rational economic planning, technical knowledge and judicious management of labour; attributes not commonly associated with the gentry on the eve of the Civil War. As this information is relatively rare, the following account offers a detailed description of aspects of his approach, particularly his understanding of the processes involved and his sensitive treatment of his tenants and workforce.

From the first folios of the first notebook, we find Sir Nicholas thinking carefully. The project, the making of three osier islands in Hunstanton Marsh Poole might seem trivial, but he painstakingly listed the labourers hired, the days they worked and the amount they were paid over six weeks from July to mid-August in 1633. Significantly, he noted they were paid a higher rate in the second week, as the work was ‘very bad’, and given a ‘largesse’ at the end; this acknowledgement of working conditions forms a central part of his remuneration policy.⁷⁰ Cross references to further entries reveal the names of suppliers of the osiers, including Goodman Cave of Ely, who spent two days dressing and setting plants, and ‘instructing Kempe how to order them afterwards’. The idea of instruction – and passing on knowledge – runs through the text.

After the entry on osier management, Sir Nicholas sought to clarify the situation over wages by instigating a system that reflected different working conditions and ensured his labourers

⁶⁷ LEST/KA6.

⁶⁸ We now know this was to be the case as a recently found subsidiary account was copied neatly into Sir Nicholas’s final notebook, LEST/suppl. 25ii/xvi; LEST/KA24.

⁶⁹ Websites on knowledge management abound,

often quoting Francis Bacon’s maxim ‘Knowledge is power’. Several of Bacon’s books are listed in the Le Strange’s library catalogue, LEST/NE1.

⁷⁰ Osiers, or willows, were used to make a wide range of products, but planted in this context principally to stabilize the newly raised banks and ‘sconces’.

received a fair day's pay. In his 'Rates and wages in draining', he specifies the 'rates which I allowed my workmen and at such proportions as they made good and competent earnings'. The calculations were based on the breadth and depth of the drain, the nature of the soil and the type of work, assessed at so much per rod, measured at 21 feet. For example, for a drain two foot broad and two foot deep, categorized as 'soyle and good scavel work' 2*d.* per rod. At the other end of the scale, for a drain twelve foot wide and three foot deep, 'scavell work 11*d.*, but if spade and mattock [with] clay and gravel 15*d.*'. In the notes that follow, Sir Nicholas defined the nature of good scavell work, ordinary scavell work and 'spade and mattock' work; for day wages, he specified the different rates for 'wett-work both summer and winter' at 12*d.* per day and dry work at 10*d.*; and finally, he set out the terms for labourers who provided horses, 'old Greenrod for 2 horses, 6*s.* a week (but I had to find him grasse) to tumbrell earth in the marsh and to himself 3*s.* a week to follow the cart, in all 9*s.* per weeke'. In similar fashion, under the 'Rates in Digging', he allowed 10*s.* per rod for 'digging the rushy and toughest part of my marsh (which comes to 40*s.* per acre) but for ground that was clean and easier I allowed 7*s.* 6*d.*, 30*s.* per acre'. He based his calculations on Standard Measures: every rod was 220 yards or paces in length and 5½ yards wide which made 4 rods to the acre.

In the notebook, where Sir Nicholas summarized his strategy, 'rates and prices' are provided for every activity: bank work, wet and dry dikes, levelling with tumbrells and barrowing, digging and measuring, fencing, ploughing and harrowing, coleseed reaping, wheat, barley and oats, carriage of corn, and thrashing and dressing. He notes, 'In all these severall kinds of worke, being taken at the proportions and prices afore mentioned, they made very good wages, and I dare say, better cheape to me, then if I had used and employed them but at 6*d.* per day'.⁷¹ In this way, he encouraged his workforce, improved their skills and secured better work at less cost to himself. For setting the rates and conditions he sought professional advice, 'I am experimentally assured that there will accrue to them [labourers] competent and faire earnings though these cautions and provisions following be members of the contract'.⁷² Repeatedly, in his asides, he confirms his understanding of the need to establish good relations with his workforce; a concern unlikely to be found amongst the absentee landlords on the Fens.⁷³

Returning to the first notebook, after setting out the wage rates, Sir Nicholas describes what had been achieved on Hunstanton Marsh between October 1633 and March 1634. For this purpose, he listed thirteen drains, dividing the area they served into 'Quarters', lettered A to K. From this point, Sir Nicholas displays his virtuosity with the technicalities of draining: 'carrying stones and shingle to spring heads and their draines', 'stoning the spring heads', 'claying them in', making gutters and covering the gutters with planks. For carting the materials he constructed '2 raild cart passages'. He also started engaging specialists and groups of men under contract to perform specified tasks, such as constructing banks and sluices. For example, Scott, Awdly and Thomasin were engaged to build the Fence Bank, while Edward Goverson took responsibility for the sluices.⁷⁴ Sir Nicholas set out all the specifications,

⁷¹ LEST/KA24.

⁷² LEST/KA24.

⁷³ Or on Romney Marsh in Kent. Soens, 'Social

distribution of land', pp. 158–9. See also n. 6 above.

⁷⁴ LEST/Q38. Goverson also entered into agreements to build the park wall at Hunstanton Hall.

ending with the provision, 'A largesse given to my wett-workmen upon Bargaines or working at unreasonable hours, in cases of necessity, for taking up dames and the like'. Extras also included the provision of drink to labourers.

In 1635, attention turned to 'ploughing and sowing at Hunstanton Marsh' with references to wheelwrights and blacksmiths mending equipment, seed merchants bringing coleseed and 'instruct[ing] my man how to sow it', and named individuals 'intending the work' of 'all other ploughmen'. Labourers were employed for 'sowing, harrowing, raking all the oates within my marsh', keeping vermin from the 'cole and oates', watergrubbing, fencing, 'sheering and mowing and fitting all in the cart' and finally 'threshing and dressing these oates'.⁷⁵ As a specialist crop, the cultivation of coleseed received much attention. Sir Nicholas thanked Thomas Walker for his 'care and helpe about the sowing and reaping of cole', which required particular skills and equipment. In the final notebook, he provides a sample agreement for the work, which was by then contracted out, rather like growing potatoes is today. Alongside this activity, work started on the infrastructure. Ship planks were bought to construct cartbridges, cattlebridges, footbridges, gates and styles, post and rails. As before, Sir Nicholas provided the specifications and costings for each activity. The entries continue with detail on the Marsh Wall, the Common, Clottons, Cawkwell and Bushy Close, all around Hunstanton or Hall Marsh (see Map 4), before moving on to the Meeles, Bogge and Whin Pasture.

The Meeles, the Bogge and the Whin Pasture (as part of Clamp Close) were treated rather differently to the area around Hunstanton Marsh. Before 1632, all the marshes had been leased to tenants; in 1636 Sir Nicholas took over the tenancy of Hunstanton Marsh himself but continued to let the Bogge and Meeles to Woodrow and Murton until the 1650s, and Clamp Close, with the Whin Pasture, for the entire period to Richard Giles. These arrangements had a significant effect on their management. Sir Nicholas started the draining process in 1635, with 'tumbrelling, barrowing and levelling' the Meeles and rebuilding the banks following 'sea breaches by the old haven'; typically he took the opportunity to dig new pitts, drains and havens 'for Flying'.⁷⁶ Similarly, at the Bogge, essential work was combined with making a 'handsome riding passage along Murton's bogge by my draines'. However, when it came to cultivating the Bogge in 1637, Sir Nicholas resorted to 'ploughing to halves' with the Murton and Woodrow. This was a system whereby the landowner and tenant halved the costs of cultivation, each providing labour, seed and equipment, and halved the profit.⁷⁷ In other words, Sir Nicholas provided working capital at the early risky stages of the venture to help the tenant get established; instead of raising the rent to cover his own costs, he shared the risk by halving the crop. He also contributed to the venture a new Dutch plough, with the vendor Charles Sands of Wisbech, who 'wrought' with Mr Hasdonck, ploughing for five days in the Bogge and instructing Write how to use her'.⁷⁸ This is the earliest mention in the notebooks of

Note 74 *continued*

These arrangements are similar to those found at Stiffkey. A. Hassell Smith, 'Labourers in late sixteenth-century England: a case study from north Norfolk [Part I]', *Continuity and Change* 4 (1989), pp. 19–28.

⁷⁵ 'Watergrubbing' means cutting ditches and drains, see also Yaxley, *Glossary*, p. 94, sub 'grup(p)'.

⁷⁶ 'Flying' refers to the wildfowl they wished to attract for sport.

⁷⁷ E. M. Griffiths and M. Overton, *Farming to halves: the hidden history of sharefarming in England from medieval to modern times* (2009), pp. 60–2.

⁷⁸ 'Wrought' in this context means they created the plough together, see *OED* online edition.

Mr Hasdonck, although he was involved at Holme from 1633.⁷⁹ He seems to have performed the role of a modern farming consultant, providing specialist knowledge and access to new technology.⁸⁰

Similar agreements were made with Richard Giles at Whin Pasture New Close, and between Sir Nicholas and his father for Holme New Marsh Close, both in 1637. In 1643, Hasdonck measured Holme Marsh Close and divided it between Sir Nicholas and his father. 'This ground set out by Mr Hasdonck as part of my father's proportion due to him upon the imbanking of Holme Marshes & used by my Fa[ther] and Me in a partible way of charge and profit'.⁸¹ On the same page, Sir Nicholas noted the destruction of the first crop of winter corn by the rebels of Holme in 1643. This was part of the plunder inflicted by the parliamentary forces in the summer of 1643; it appears they had accomplices in Holme: 'all this croppe was sequester'd and reap'd by some of the rebells of Holme (S. O. and R. C. [Simon Overman and Robert Crispe]) by vertue of a pretended ordinance of Parliament groun[d]ed upon a most false and clamorous petition'.⁸²

The difficulties encountered by Sir Hamon and his sons in the Civil War may explain why these agreements with the tenants were terminated and why no further drainage projects were undertaken.⁸³ As with the adventurers on the Fens, war was not a risk they had anticipated, but with their management strategy in place, the Le Stranges were better prepared to meet the consequences.⁸⁴

The payments and receipts for Sir Hamon's share for Holme Marsh Close were recorded by Alice in her books of disbursements and receipts.⁸⁵ As it happens, they also reveal another share farming agreement at Heacham between father and son.⁸⁶ In her receipt book, Alice recorded for April 1641, 'rec[eive]d of my sonne Strange for the halfe of the Rushes and Whins and the fearme of the grasse of Heacham £10 8s. 8d. ... Received of Sherringham for our halfe of the coleseed besides £70 before received and £106 os. 7d. payd to my sonne Strange for his halfe – £36 os. 7½d.'. ⁸⁷ From this entry it appears that the agreement dated from 1639 after the completion of the sea bank at Heacham in 1638. In her disbursement book, Alice recorded for Jun 1643: 'Layd as appeareth by Heacham Marsh Reckoning the halfe of the charge for Bearne Farme stacks remooving, thrashing, looking at the cattle wintered there and the halfe of 2 earths ploughing

⁷⁹ See above, p. 232; n. 65.

⁸⁰ Steers and Winchester also refer to Mr Hasdonck; it appears he was a familiar figure along the coast, engaged in all sorts of enterprises at Thornham, Brancaster, Wiveton and Salhouse. Dutchmen working in this way, offering their services to individual land-owners, were not uncommon. My thanks to Piet van Cruyningen for this point.

⁸¹ LEST/KA9.

⁸² LEST/KA9, fol. 98. A further reference in LEST/suppl. 25ii/xvi gives name of the 'rebels' as Overman and Crispe.

⁸³ In July 1643, the family lost 1693 sheep, almost their entire flock, besides corn, wool and horses, LEST/P10; Griffiths (ed.), *Her price is above pearls*, pp. 3, 17–8,

32–4, 75, 83–4, 152. The sharefarming agreements for the Bogge and Whin Pasture ceased in 1642; the agreement for Holme Marsh Close was renewed in 1643, but no further reference is made to it after 1644.

⁸⁴ LEST/P10. The flocks were restocked with cullett sheep from relatives and neighbours, see also Griffiths (ed.), *Her price is above pearls*, pp. 152–76.

⁸⁵ For Alice's disbursements from 1613–45, LEST/P7; Household books with estate receipts, from 1613–21, LEST/P6; from 1621–33 in LEST/P8; from 1633–42 in LEST/P9. There is a gap from 1642 to 1649, followed by a household book with estate receipts for 1650–53 in LEST/P11.

⁸⁶ LEST/KA9.

⁸⁷ LEST/P9.

21ac 2r and 22 [combs] of seed beanes at 6s. 8d.: £20 14s. 7d'.⁸⁸ The receipt book also includes a corn account which records the loss of the corn plundered by Captains Poe and Thorner between 1641 and 1643: 190 combs from Heacham, 51 combs from Sedgeford and 101 combs from Hunstanton. Despite these reverses, father and son continued to spend money on the marshes, paying 'for the mending of Heacham Marsh Bankes which were faulty', and in 1644, 'for mending the Marshe Bankes [at Holme] after the Great Rage'.⁸⁹ Entries for expenditure on the marshes cease in 1645 when a new more simplified book of disbursements was created, but references continue to be made to other subsidiary books of disbursements which are now lost.

V

Although the records are patchy after 1642, it is possible to estimate the cost of the venture and how the Le Stranges managed their finances, before and after the crisis of 1643. In the tables at the end of first notebook Sir Nicholas attempts a calculation for the period up to 1642.⁹⁰ In the first two tables he set out the 'disbursements upon every particular ground' from 1633 to 1638 and from March 1638 to 1642. He then arranged the disbursements in tables to show 'The principall and uses calculated of the moneys which I have disbursed in Draining and improving Hunstanton Marish and other places ... at 8 p. centum'. In columns, he records the year, the ground, the principal [cost], the uses [interest] for one year, the uses for the whole term [of years] and the halfe uses of the whole term. Apparently, he is trying to assess the real cost of the draining by making a calculation of the interest foregone on his capital; he adds a note 'I wrought all the uses by the table of interest in *Ponds Almanacke* for 1638'.⁹¹ Finally, he tries to balance 'The principall and use monyes which I disburst, and the profits which I received of all the grounds'. Interestingly, he only includes the 'halfe uses of the principal', which suggests that the cost of the entire drainage operation was shared between father and son. At the end he provides 'Another way of calculation of principal and uses (differing from the former) from 1633 until 1643 with their totals'. This table shows that £1004 3s. 11d. was spent on drainage, which included £9 12s. 6d. at Ringstead Yards and Heacham Common, and £168 16s. 5d. on building, mostly at Sedgeford, with further calculations for the interest lost on the principal.⁹² In this table, he also includes a column recording half the principal, as well as half the uses, which seems to confirm that father and son were working in partnership; this may have been the purpose of these rather strange accounts. To avoid disputes, sharefarming agreements need to be completely transparent.⁹³

The tables above make no mention of the cost of draining Heacham Marsh, but on closer examination of Alice's accounts, it is possible to arrive at an estimate. In her summary of family finances, she records spending £372 'on imbanking Heacham Marsh' in 1638 and in

⁸⁸ LEST/P10. This entry follows an earlier one, for December 1641, on the cost of cultivating coleseed, winter corn, barley and oats at £122 18s. 2d., but there is no reference to the cost being halved, just that it was 'payd as appeareth by my sonne Stranges Book of Reckonings for Heacham Marsh'.

⁸⁹ LEST/P10.

⁹⁰ LEST/KA6.

⁹¹ My thanks to John Barney for helping me with these tables.

⁹² The building costs date from 1638 to 1642 and mostly include expenditure at Sedgeford.

⁹³ Griffiths and Overton, *Farming to halves*, pp. 56–110.

1640 a further £400. In her disbursements for 1641, she also entered a sum of £122 18s. 2d. for the cost of cultivating Heacham Marsh, which is not halved with Sir Nicholas; this makes a total of about £900. Working on the principle that father and son were in some kind of partnership, and that Sir Nicholas's share of expenditure would be recorded in his Heacham notebooks, the total sum would be about £2000.⁹⁴ This figure is not unreasonable given the costs at Hunstanton and Holme. However, a problem with this calculation is the 'loss' recorded by Alice at the end of her summary of the family finances, 'Lost by Heacham Marsh £600', under 'Losses in My Husbands Estate'. As we have seen with Boston Fen this loss might not be quite what it seems; she might just be rounding up the expenditure on the marsh on her son's behalf. Alternately, she might be referring to the losses they incurred at Heacham during the Civil War, or the cost of the long legal case against Cremer and Stileman, although she recorded a 'loss' of £385 against Stileman 'in an unjust suite'.⁹⁵

Returning to Sir Nicholas's tables in the first notebook, the downside of the format was the difficulty of accommodating receipts; the amounts listed look woefully inadequate. The answer was found in the subsidiary account, which sets out the profits against the charge (costs) for every ground from 1633 to 1644.⁹⁶ Most particularly, it shows the progress made by 1641, when receipts for corn peaked, followed by the slump in receipts during the war. For example, for Hunstanton Marsh from 1633 to 1638, the charges amounted to £368 5s. 0d. with profits (in reality receipts) of £129 2s. 3d. from the sale of coleseed, oats and hay. From 1639 to 1642, charges amounted to £99 4s. 4d., while 'profits' rose to £156 17s. 8d. from wheat, barley, oats, meslin, osiers and grazing; so a promising start. However, between 1643 and 1644 receipts dropped to just £9 8s. 0d. with sales restricted to grazing, hay and osiers. At the Bogge, for the whole period, charges amounted to £144 7s. 10½d. against profits of £85 17s. 4d. from the sale of coleseed, oats, meslin, barley and wheat; this was bad enough, but then in 1643 the wheat crop valued at £9 3s. 0d. was seized by Captains Thorner and Poe. Similarly, for the Whin Pasture total charges amounted £60 12s. 6d. against income of £39 10s. 5d., and then from 1643 'it was deserted and layde down to pasture as before'. At Holme Marsh Close, income of £49 6s. 7d. just exceeded charges of £48 2s. 4d., which was promising, but in 1643 Poe and Thorner also stole the crop of wheat valued at £7 5s. 0d. The Meeles and Bank Fenne were the worst performers. Charges at the Meeles amounted to £65 10s. 9d. between 1640 and 1642 with receipts of just £20 4s. 0d. Similarly, at Bank Fenne charges amounted £51 8s. 11d. with profits of £14 15s. 9d.; a small crop of wheat was stolen in 1643 and like the Whin Pasture it was left deserted and laid to grass. The entries for Heacham Marsh do not mention charges, but include the receipts from 1640 to 1642: £138 15s. 9d. from the sale of coleseed and oats in 1640 followed by £133 4s. 3d. from coleseed, wheat and meslin in 1641.⁹⁷ These figures help to explain the

⁹⁴ The costs per acre based on 177 acres draining in Heacham would be £11 6s. 8d.

⁹⁵ LEST/P10.

⁹⁶ LEST/suppl. 25ii/xvi. The charge corresponds to the figures for 'disbursements' and the 'principal' entered in Sir Nicholas's neat books, LEST/KA6 and KA24. In other words, the 'charge' represents, in modern terms, his costs or expenses. The titles of the pages, on the RH

side of the subsidiary book, actually refer to 'Expenses and Profitts', but to add to the confusion, the sums he listed as profits are in fact receipts. In this way, Sir Nicholas experimented with the concept of profit but seems not to have fully understood the principle.

⁹⁷ In 1644, Sir Nicholas sold the 1642 crop of Heacham barley to Mr Toll of Kings Lynn for £38 6s. 6d., almost certainly part of a fine payable after the collapse of the

sudden increase of income from the sale of corn recorded by Alice, from £426 in 1640 to £864 in 1641.⁹⁸ With no receipt books from 1642 to 1649 it is not possible to calculate the depth of the crisis or how long it lasted. However, by 1650 corn receipts were £619, followed by £566 in 1651, so we can conclude that the recovery was slow, but total disaster had been averted.

VI

The seeds of the steady recovery can be found in the second and third notebooks, which record expenditure from 1643 to 1653, principally on cultivating crops and building farmsteads, but also on the maintenance and improvement of drains. In the second notebook, crop-growing schedules are neatly specified. For example on Hunstanton Marsh, in April 1646, 14 acres of coleseed (having been eaten by doves in the hard winter) were ploughed in and barley was sown. This was harvested in August together with three acres of wheat; the following March seven acres were ploughed for oats; in most years beans, peas and vetches also featured in the rotation.⁹⁹ Under 'miscellaneous charges' payments were made for 'easing and cleansing draines, planting trees and hedges, trimming the arbour and island and watergrupping'. There was no charge for mowing grass as it was usually sold 'standing on the ground'. Substantial work was done on the Mill River, cutting new drains and bank mending; a task which involved building a horse bridge at the Bogge. The Procession Bank and the Great Sluice also received more attention. For the osier management, Sir Nicholas agreed in 1646, to bear 'halfe the charge of cutting and bunching wherein my share came to 5s. 6d.'; this agreement continued until 1652. At the Meeles, the problem was drifting sand, so he planted hundreds of whins on the sea side.¹⁰⁰ As ever, several entries relate to his passion for fishing and shooting; in fact the overall impression was that it was business as usual.

Sir Nicholas's farm building programme also underlines his continuing commitment to the drainage project. In 1648 he started work at Hunstanton with the Marsh Wall House, the Meeles Close House, houses at Calkwell and Lawes House, even at Holme he built a Meeles House.¹⁰¹ Each building merits up to 50 pages with Sir Nicholas specifying every part of the process: foundations, carriage of materials, measuring up, masons' work, carpenters' work, ironwork, thatching, colouring and laying out the garden with fruit trees. For the Calkwell project, he drew up a 'Prolegomena Calkweliana' [introduction to Calkwell], outlining the rates paid to different named craftsmen. For 'ordinarie labourers' he never paid more than 10d. a day, but as with the drainage work, good work, difficult conditions and unreasonable hours 'were motives to me to augment their wages'.¹⁰² The entries are in no particular order,

Note 97 *continued*

Royalist uprising in 1643. LEST/suppl. 25ii/xvi, a copy of which can be found in LEST/KA24.

⁹⁸ Griffiths, "A country life", appendix, also p. 223, n. 11 above.

⁹⁹ LEST/KA9.

¹⁰⁰ 'Whins' was the collective term for gorse, furze and broom. It was used for a variety of purposes, in this instance it was planted to stabilize sand dunes; see also Yaxley, *Glossary*, p. 235.

¹⁰¹ LEST/KA9 for Lawes House, everything else is listed in, LEST/ KA10.

¹⁰² 'Without an archaeological survey, these lesser buildings are difficult to locate, however, the Magazine in Sedgford, also built by Sir Nicholas, survives as a holiday cottage, until recently let by the Vivat Trust, see LEST/KA6 fols 192–210. A more elaborate building, it was used to store military equipment, see also LEST/Q38, fols. 85–9.

indicating once again that they were written up later, where space allowed. The latest entries date from 1653, which suggested there was a time lapse before they were written up neatly in the little books.

Sir Nicholas's death in 1655, a few months after his father in 1654 – and a year or so before his mother and his eldest son, Sir Hamon, in 1656 – was potentially far more damaging to the drainage project than the Civil War.¹⁰³ Sir Nicholas's second son, Nicholas, inherited at aged 22 but died in 1669, leaving a small child, yet another Nicholas (d. 1724), in the hands of trustees until 1682.¹⁰⁴ While the principal trustee, Sir Christopher Calthorpe, managed his affairs conscientiously, kept good accounts and carried out minor repairs, by the time Sir Nicholas achieved his majority, the drains – and the farm buildings – were in a woeful condition.¹⁰⁵

Sir Nicholas (d. 1724) was the author of new field books and maps covering every part of the estate from the late 1680s to the 1700s, but the most telling information comes from his work on one of Sir Hamon's memoranda books which contains the extraordinary detail of his building programme carried out between 1619 and 1652.¹⁰⁶ Sir Nicholas noted:

This book I found in ye old Evidence House w[i]th a decayed and wormeaten cover thrown by and neglected. But upon perusals, meeting w[i]th several things relating to buildings & every material & likely to prove of use, I put an index or table to that part of it writt by Sir Hamon & proceeded to putt down in writing at this part of ye Booke, such other observations as might possibly prove of service & convience to refer to upon occasion.

His notes mostly relate to buildings, by then in much need of repair, but they also include references to the marshes and drains from 1693 to 1720.

The strange aspect of these references is that Sir Nicholas only refers to Sir Hamon's work; he makes no mention of his grandfather, Sir Nicholas (d. 1655) nor his drainage notebooks.¹⁰⁷ However, his notes indicate a familiarity with his grandfather's style and practice of making observations, which suggests the existence of subsidiary notes and accounts. As we have seen, the family increasingly adopted this approach after the crisis of 1643. Significantly, in 1693, his first entry in the memoranda book notes that 'the draines were very foul and overgrown'. In 1698, he cleaned the New river, 'that was so overgrown with sallowes and willow roots that the old passage was stopt and was become a stronghold for otters w[hi]ch haunted all my waters'. The ditches between Whin Pasture and Holme Grounds, cleaned at 8*d.* and 6*d.* per rod 'had been for a long time grown up and by that meanes very much injured both those pieces of ground'. This area also suffered from 'the extremity of storms' and 'great tides', first in 1714 when the river was choked with sand and then in 1720 when large breaches were made over the mees, filling up passages and flattening the river to the sluices; this required him to make new cuts, raise banks and replace sluices built by Sir Hamon. Compared to the notebooks, these entries do not amount to much, but the likelihood is that routine information existed elsewhere. Of Sir Nicolas's understanding of the problems associated with drainage and the

¹⁰³ Sir Hamon Le Strange, 2nd Bt., 1631–56.

¹⁰⁴ Sir Nicholas Le Strange 3rd Bt., 1632–69; Sir Nicholas Le Strange, 4th Bt., 1661–1724.

¹⁰⁵ LEST/KA11. Sir Christopher Calthorpe (c.1645–1718), www.historyofparliamentonline.org.

¹⁰⁶ LEST/Q38.

¹⁰⁷ In his table of building work, Sir Nicholas (d. 1724) makes no mention of the houses built by his grandfather, Sir Nicholas (d. 1655) either; it seems fair to conclude that he had no knowledge of the notebooks.

need for constant maintenance there can be little doubt. Steers quoted his description of the inundation of the fresh marshes at Titchwell in the 1680s, where the mees were flattened with the sea reducing the area to saltmarshes,

The property being in the hands of Magdalen College, and the Fellows contenting themselves with the old rent, neither the principal tenant or his under servants will care to contribute towards the charge of Imbanking them afresh. Brancaster Bank being by this means exposed to the strong west winds suffers very much and t'will be a great expense to keep them in repair.¹⁰⁸

These comments illustrate vividly the benefit of having a resident landowner, rather than an absentee or institutional owner indifferent to local concerns and reluctant to waste their money on such risky ventures. So, now we have arrived at the heart of the matter.

VII

What conclusions can be drawn from the piecemeal drainage projects undertaken in north-west and north Norfolk in the early modern period? How did they compare with the more familiar large-scale schemes of the Fens and elsewhere? Manorial lords, provided they could secure the cooperation of neighbours and tenants by negotiation, could undertake drainage at moments of their choosing. Drainage in the fens was increasingly driven by external undertakers and the crown: both were less sensitive (and perhaps even indifferent) to local feelings. Of course drainage on the Norfolk coast was largely drainage within a manor, whereas fen drainage was drainage across a whole range of jurisdictions and the property of a range of landholders. The key difference then seems to be the presence of resident gentry landowners prepared to work with local communities as they faced the challenges of a more commercial environment rather than against them. This was particularly important on the marshes on the north Norfolk coast, which were notoriously susceptible to tidal surges and expensive to maintain and repair. Their value to large landowners lay in the sport they offered, and the summer grazing they provided for cattle and sheep, which released the brecks on the sandy uplands for corn production; after reclamation, it seems corn was grown on the reclaimed marshes. From the profits of these crops, landowners, notably the Cokes of Holkham, could afford to build and maintain sea banks extending the grazing marshes out into the North Sea. But beyond Holkham, on estates and in areas with fewer resources, the situation was patchier. Even the Le Stranges, resident at Hunstanton since the early fourteenth century and hugely committed to their estate and locality, neglected their marshes after the disruption of the Civil War. Without the efforts of Sir Nicholas Le Strange, from the 1690s to the 1720s, the reclaimed marshes at Hunstanton and Holme might well have suffered the fate of Titchwell and Brancaster. Both economically and socially, the defining feature of these marshes was the leadership, capital and commitment provided by these gentry landowners over many centuries.

¹⁰⁸ Steers, 'Some notes on the north Norfolk Coast', p. 44, n. 2.