

THE GREAT BEDFORD LEVEL.

While the western side of the island of Great Britain is remarkable for its generally rocky and mountainous character, the eastern side is for the most part equally distinguished by its alluvial plains and soft sylvan scenery; the truth seeming to be, that the eastern coast is composed to a large extent of the washings of mud and sand from the higher regions of the west. In some places, the beach on the eastern shore consists of wide tracts of pure sand laid bare at the recess of the tides, and at others it is of the character of a marsh, in which water and vegetation carry on a contest for mastery. We propose to give a short account of the largest of these marshes, usually called 'the great level of the fens,' or 'the Great Bedford Level.'

The district comprised in this term, about seventy miles long, and from twenty to forty wide, containing nearly 700,000 acres, is bounded by the high lands of six counties—Norfolk, Suffolk, Cambridge, Huntingdon, Northampton, and Lincoln. The waters of nine counties are carried through it by eight rivers, four of which—the Witham, Welland, Nene, and Ouse—discharging their contents into the great estuary of the Wash, form the natural outfalls for that portion of the country. For a long period, extending farther back than our oldest historical records, this district has been an immense swamp, dreary and pestilential. The quantity of water pouring down from the uplands was greater than, from the levelness of the surface and choked condition of the outlets, could find a ready passage to the sea; besides which, the tides from the German Ocean rushing up the streams caused periodical inundations, and the whole region became a succession of shoals, stagnant lakes or marshes, with intervening spaces of slimy bog, and a few elevated spots resembling islands. Such a wilderness as this must have been a paradise for wild-fowl, noxious reptiles, and barbarian freebooters. We have no knowledge of any attempts at reclamation prior to those of the Romans; remains of forts, mounds, and gravel dikes made by these enterprising invaders being yet visible. One of their dikes, commencing on the Nene at Peterborough, may be traced to Lincoln, and according to the late Mr. Rennie, as far as the Trent. From what we know of the Romans, we may believe that their works were maintained by powerful industry; they compelled the natives to cut down trees and raise banks; but on their departure in the fifth century, the barriers and drains were neglected and destroyed, and the fens relapsed into their original condition. During the Saxon rule several monasteries were built on some of the higher grounds, the immediate precincts of which were doubtless protected and improved by the monks; but beyond this nothing was done in the way of general improvement. Readers of history will remember the use made of the fens in the Danish and Norman invasions; the woods and Marshes became strongholds for fugitives, and a camp of refuge was held for many years in defiance of the enemy. It is probable that the condition of the district may have been sometimes better than at others; for Henry of Huntingdon and William of Malmesbury speak of it in glowing terms, describing the beauties of the level surface, the rich grass, vines, and apple-trees. Most likely this description was applied to the elevated sites cultivated by monks or other proprietors, as sudden floods occasionally devastated the rest of the country. Obscure

traditions tell of inundations in far remote times: Dugdale records an irruption of the sea which took place in 1236, and destroyed men, ships, land cattle. A similar deluge occurred in 1613, and again in later times, so that the level kept up the character given of it, as having been 'for the space of many ages a vast and deep fen, affording little benefit to the realm other than fish or fowl, with overmuch harbour to a rude and almost barbarous sort of lazy and beggarly people.' Down even to within a very recent period, much of the surface consisted of dismal sloughs, overgrown with acres of reeds, a fountain of ague on a large scale. The inhabitants lived in a state of isolation from one another, and travelling was so difficult, that boards were affixed to the horses' shoes to prevent them from sinking into the soft soil.

The task of reclaiming such a morass must have appeared hopeless, yet adventurers have not been wanting. From the era of William the Conqueror to the reign of Elizabeth, various bold efforts were made to reclaim at least a portion of the fens. James I, also regarded the subject with much interest: successful drainage would give him new lands to distribute among his followers; and he is reported to have said that he 'would not suffer any longer the land to be abandoned to the use of the waters.' In his reign the first local act for draining was obtained, but not without great opposition. To insure success, the king invited from Holland Cornelius Vermuyden, an eminent Zealander, whose knowledge and abilities were presumed equal to the task. The undertaking was further supported by several Dutch capitalists, who, by what appeared to be a prudent investment, secured a home in the new country to which to flee in case of emergency. Vermuyden was knighted by James: the remuneration for his services was to be 95,000 acres of the fen. Though an able man, he originated many fatal errors, particularly that of relying too much on artificial cutting, and neglecting the natural outfalls. His efforts in many instances were but temporarily successful. In addition to natural obstacles, he had to encounter those opposed to him by the inhabitants, who were exasperated at the 'invasion,' as they termed it, of their common lands. Their hostility was directed not only against 'the foreigners,' but against draining altogether. For the gratification of a few petty interests, it was thought better that a large tract of country should remain a pestilential waste than become productive. So great was the discontent, that when, in the reign of Charles I, a tax of six shillings per acre was laid on the whole fen land, to provide a drainage fund, not a single penny could be collected. An estate of 35,000 acres, which the Earl of Lindsay had obtained and cultivated under the authority of the king, was reduced to its former condition by a mischievous assemblage of the 'lazy and beggarly people,' who broke down the banks and destroyed the drains. Rather than tolerate the presence of the hated foreigners, the farmers petitioned the Earl of Bedford, who held large estates near Ely, to undertake the work. He did so: large cuttings were effected; the principal being the 'Old Bedford river,' twenty-one miles long; but in the end the work was again stopped, in consequence of the opposition to the Dutch labourers who were employed. The son and successor of the earl, some years afterwards, in company with other adventurers, resumed operations under authority of an act of the Long Parliament, and now the 'New Bedford river' was cut, and other useful drainages effected. Scottish prisoners, captured by