



A HISTORY OF NORFOLK.

NORFOLK is a county of varied ancestry. The nuclei of its present villages and towns date back at least to Saxon times, while, beneath some of its fields, aerial photography reveals the outline of Roman as well as medieval cultivation.

It was however, by the New Stone Age that Norfolk had assumed something like its modern shape and it was during this period, in about 2000 BC that mining for high quality flint began at Grimes Graves near Brandon. Flint was the chief raw material for tools and weapons. This site included shafts cut through sand and chalk to a depth of 30 feet, with radiating galleries linking one with another, and English Heritage still keeps open two of these shafts for public viewing.

Norfolk as well as having these flat seams suitable for quarrying, also contains innumerable stones of flint, which have been picked off the arable land for centuries and not surprisingly, this has become a widespread building material. Flint tools were never entirely superseded during the later Bronze Age and it was only by degrees that flint and bronze were replaced by iron. It was an iron-using tribe called "Iceni" who inhabited Norfolk when the Romans began their conquest with the Claudian invasion of AD 43. People at this time were still firmly rooted in their old prehistoric centres, and at Cockley Cley, southwest of Swaffham, an Iceni village has been constructed on the site of an original encampment.

The imposition of the Roman Way of life on the old tribal system brought about significant changes and although there was an attempt to resist this occupation by Boudicca, queen of the Iceni, her revolt was harshly repressed. The pace of Romanisation began to quicken at the turn of the century, examples of which can be seen at Caister-by-Yarmouth, where a new town and port was founded providing the shortest sea crossing to the mouth of the Rhine, and at Caistor St Edmund where a regional capital was built. Roads were also constructed, some still surviving as green tracks, hedges and parish boundaries - the straight alignment from Holkham to Toftrees being a good example. The most interesting of their roads, and well worth visiting, was that

later called the "Peddars Way", which was probably military in origin and may have been constructed after Boudicca's rebellion in AD 61 to assist in the subjugation of the area. It has also been suggested that it was originally laid out as an approach to a Roman Ferry across the Wash. It is now a long-distance footpath cleaving a straight line across the high ground of west Norfolk for more than 35 miles.

Towards the end of Roman rule a new threat was posed. The Norfolk coast was particularly exposed to raids from Saxons, who inhabited north-western Germany. Along the south-eastern coast of England from the Wash to the Isle of Wight forts were built and put under the command of a general called the "Count of Saxon Shore". The remains of one of these forts can be seen at Burgh Castle, a reminder of the Roman attempt to stem the tide of crumbling fortunes. It was to no avail. By AD 500, Norfolk was under Anglo-Saxon control.

There was now a steady rise of population over the next century and a half, and the whole region was brought under the political sway of a single dynasty with East Anglia remaining a separate kingdom. Its monarchs, however, were politically subject to the more powerful states which evolved during this period and they came, in turn, under the suzerainty of Northumbria, of Mercia and finally of Wessex. It was during this period that there also took place the conversion of the area to Christianity. It is ironic that not far from the major pagan burial ground of Spong Hill, a Saxon site, there are at the highest point of the village of North Elmham the stone ruins of an interesting and unusual building lying on the site of the earlier Anglo-Saxon cathedral, which became an ecclesiastical centre for the region.

Then, in the middle of the 9th century, the East Anglian coast was raided again this time by the Vikings. In 869 a large Viking army wintered at Thetford. The East Anglian King, Edmund, was killed in 870, possibly at Hellesdon, and later honoured as a saint and martyr for refusing to deny his Christian faith. The invasion of East Anglia by Danes spanned the late Saxon age. Towns, villages and farms were pillaged, churches and monasteries obliterated. It would, however, be misleading to suggest that this period of Viking invasion was dominated by destruction. Behind the dull statistics of the later Domesday survey we must envisage not only the arrival of a few thousand Danes, but a significant expansion of the Anglo-Saxon population so that, by the time of the Norman invasion in 1066, East Anglia had become one of the most densely peopled regions in Britain.

One important result of this expansion of pre-Conquest Norfolk, when the

ports of Yarmouth and King's Lynn were established, was the exploitation of the richer soils in mid and east Norfolk following tree clearance and the movement of the economic centre eastwards from the Breckland area, in which it had been located since Neolithic times, to the Norwich area. Indeed, the wealth of Norwich in late Saxon times was intrinsically linked to the presence of Danes within the town and to the dense settlement of their kinsmen in the districts to the east and south, for whom it provided the obvious market.

The importance of Thetford had also emerged by the 10th century and this seemed confirmed when in 1072, the Bishop of East Anglia moved there from North Elmham. Strangely, though by the time of the Domesday Survey in 1086, its greatest days were over and as if to acknowledge Thetford's decline, Bishop Losinga moved his See to the larger town of Norwich in 1096 when the foundation stone was laid at the east end of what was to become a magnificent Cathedral church. The building of the church alone took 50 years, some of the stone having to be brought by water from Normandy, for although flint was used in the thickness of the walls and pillars, there was no suitable local stone for the surface work.

It is from the Conquest onwards that the architectural legacy becomes more important and, not surprisingly, the emphasis to begin with was on military control by a centralised Norman regime. There are traces of 30 early medieval castles in Norfolk, but the best preserved of these are the stone keeps at Norwich and Castle Rising, and the wonderful motte and bailey fortress of the Warenes at Castle Acre, controlling the Peddars Way and the Nar Valley.

After 1200 the emphasis in Norfolk swung from military control to economic development and in this, the church made a significant contribution as the area of cultivated land was increased. Numerous monasteries and parish churches were built in the late 11th and 12th centuries and the remains of the Priory again at Castle Acre, give some idea of the scale of these new monasteries. Nearly all the known religious orders were represented in the Benedictines, one of whose centres was at Binham - a cell of St. Albans whose history, like the other cell of St. Albans, Wymondham Abbey, was one of constant bickering with its mother abbey. A lot of these monastic buildings were pulled down at the time of the Reformation. Norfolk also attracted pilgrims from England and abroad and here Walsingham was pre-eminent, its shrine of Our Lady second only to Becket's tomb as a centre of pilgrimage. Every King from Richard 1 to Henry VIII made this pilgrimage, the latter walking barefooted, as many pilgrims do today, from Barsham Manor.

Among the towns, Norwich remained pre-eminent and by 1150, it was probably the sixth largest town in England, having outstripped its old rival Thetford for the wealth of Norwich grew with the agricultural development of eastern East Anglian trade with the continent is also well illustrated by the development of King's Lynn from a small settlement in the late Saxon period to the status by 1200 of the fifth largest port in England.

Intensive farming and huge flocks of sheep became the basis of the area's economy and from the 14th century the manufacture of cloth, particularly Worsted, seems to have developed in the Norfolk villages before it became important in Norwich. The cloth which took its name from Worstead, was made from the long coarse wool of the sheep of west Norfolk. Worstead itself was known for cloth before Edward III brought his Flemings over to "exercise their mysteries" but its importance dwindled with the passing of the woolen trades to the north of England, although there are still weavers houses to be seen there with tall ceilings to take the looms and cellars to store the wool.

The later Middle Ages The later Middle Ages witnessed a time of economic decline. The Black Death of 1349 ushered in a period when the population fell dramatically, and a remarkably high number of medieval settlements shrank or were abandoned. Sometimes an isolated church is a clue to a deserted village site, a good example of which is at Pudding Norton near Fakenham, and more than 100 Norfolk villages mentioned in the Domesday Book of 1086 had disappeared by 1500. Part of the church at Cley on the north Norfolk coast, was never completed and it has been suggested that this also was because of the plague. Cley church, however, still reflects the prosperity of the 14th century, when most of the church was rebuilt and when Cley itself, before the silting up of the Glaven estuary, was a thriving port exporting wool. The immigration of Flemish weavers signaled the decline of this trade and this perhaps, as much as the plague, contributed to Cley's declining prosperity.

Another major factor leading to shrinkage and depopulation was the farming policy of landlords which often led to a clash of interests between lords and tenants. Persistent complaints about the overstocking and enclosure of commons, for example, contributed in 1549 to Kett's rebellion. Robert Kett raised a force of 16,000 men and captured Norwich, but seven weeks later when they were driven out by the King's troops, a large number were slaughtered, and Kett himself was hanged from the castle keep.

By the 17th century, one port that was still thriving was King's Lynn. Its nearness to the Netherlands, to where large quantities of corn were shipped, brought it great prosperity. It was in Lynn that the only serious Royalist

outbreak in Norfolk took place during the Civil War, but the county as a whole became a stronghold of the Parliamentary cause and, on 19th September 1643, King's Lynn was reoccupied by the Parliamentary forces.

The 17th century was also a time when some magnificent country houses were built in Norfolk.. Raynham Hall started in 1621, could easily be mistaken for a house of the second half of the 17th century, and it is difficult to believe that it was almost contemporary with Blickling Hall, now in the care of the National Trust, which was the culmination of the Tudor style in Norfolk, providing an astonishing contrast with Raynham. The supreme Norfolk example of a house designed upon classical lines is Holkham Hall, built 1734-61. It was at Holkham that the agricultural innovator, Thomas Coke, adopted the new ways of farming, as did Viscount Townsend when he improved his estates at Raynham and was given the name of "Turnip" because of his interest in the new crop which arrived from the Netherlands, along with other ideas which were to revolutionise Norfolk agriculture. Different systems of crop rotation brought about the change from open to enclosed field farming.

Changes such as these, along with the economic depressions during the 19th century, led to a decline in the rural population of Norfolk, although once a railway system was established in the county, local enterprise saw the beginnings of tourism with coastal resort and the fragile environment of the Broads being 'discovered'. Environmentally, however, it was World War II that proved the important watershed, not only because some 30 airfields were laid out, but because it dramatically revived local farming. Newcomers are still coming into the area, the population is rising, and the county is still evolving. The challenge for the future is that this balance of modern change should enhance, rather than erode, the county's character.

History of Norfolk reproduced by kind permission of John Barwell.

Further Information

A History of Norfolk by Susanna Wade Martins ISBN No. 0 85033 540 X
East Anglia - Essex, Suffolk and Norfolk by Peter Sagar ISBN No. 1 873429
57 6

Domesday Book: Norfolk by John Morris

A History of Lincolnshire by Alan Rogers

A History of Cambridgeshire by Bruce Galloway

A History of Suffolk by D. Dymond and P. Northeast

A History of the Lophams by M.F. Serpell

Hatchments in Britain Vol. 2 Norfolk and Suffolk by P. Summers