

I

WICKEN FEN

January

*Kelching: raining hard*

Midnight rains

Make drowned fens.

LINCOLNSHIRE PROVERB



It is the end of January 2014, and I feel as though it has been raining for weeks. Large parts of the South London park where we walk our dog are under water, and it barely seems worth towelling the mud from her fur between one walk and the next. With a blocked gutter and an extremely dilatory landlady we lie awake and listen to water spilling down our bedroom window night after night; eventually, part of the exterior wall becomes saturated and I have to move all my clothes out of the cupboard as mildew begins to take hold.

It's far worse elsewhere. The Somerset Levels have flooded, drained, and flooded again, the Eastern fen country is full of water, and right across the country rivers roil high and brown, burst their banks or are in spate. Farmers lose crops and see their grassland die; friends are washed out of their homes; tragically, people drown. The rain continues regardless, with the stubborn, set-in quality of a child who cries without expectation of help.

In December 2013 parts of the country had double their usual amount of precipitation, and the TV tells us we're having the wettest January for 250 years. Blame America, say the weathermen; their severe winter

## RAIN

weather (or ‘polar vortex’, as the media has dubbed it) created too much of a contrast between its bitter, freezing air and the warmer climate to the south. That’s strengthened the jet stream and, in turn, the stormy depressions that run east along it towards Britain – and the mild, Atlantic air it’s brought tends to hold more water. The larger truth is, it’s unlikely to be a one-off; we may all need to get used to more extreme weather conditions, more often, as the long hangover from the excesses of our industrial revolution begins to bite.

I decide to visit the place where Britain first learned how to live in partnership with water – because, like many hard-won lessons, it’s something we may be in danger of forgetting. The Fens were in large part drained, but have never quite been conquered; today, in fact, we are restoring some areas converted to agriculture to their original role, and returning other parts to the sea.

The Fens are a low-lying area consisting mainly of peat (vegetable matter laid down by decaying plants) and silt (fine mineral matter deposited by water) around the Wash, on the border of Norfolk and Lincolnshire. Once a vast, waterlogged marsh, now only 0.1 per cent of the original Great Fen Basin remains as true wild fen, in four tiny fragments: Wicken Fen, Holme Fen, Woodwalton and Chippenham. The rest, for the most part, is farmed.

*Wicken Fen, January*

Into the fen country four major rivers and a number of tributaries drain rainfall collected from four million acres of higher ground in several counties. The rain that collects there has been managed for centuries in different ways, from Roman dykes to modern pumping stations, and from Dutchman Cornelius Vermuyden's seventeenth-century drainage work to the Victorians' system of windmills and today's hydroelectric pumps. Yet 1,500 years of such ingenuity is more than matched by the tough Fenlanders themselves, who once used everything from boats to stilts and jumping poles to traverse the waterlogged landscape, and made their living, before the fen country was drained and farmed, from wildfowling, fishing, and turf- and sedge-cutting. Now one of the country's most fertile and productive agricultural areas, containing about half of the top-quality growing soil in the whole of England, the spirit of the original 'fen tigers' lives on in the fierce independence and no-nonsense practicality of the Lincolnshire, Cambridgeshire, Suffolk and Norfolk natives who still populate this watery place. Here, the fens' power, and their value, has long been clearly understood – not only in modern terms of biodiversity conservation or regional hydromorphology, but with a deeper respect: a sense, now proving true, that this marshy landscape exists here for a reason.

Oddly enough the flat, wet area between Cambridge

## RAIN

and the Wash is one of the driest in Britain in terms of rainfall, partly because it gets little or no orographic precipitation, or rainfall sparked by clouds drifting over high ground – one of the reasons mountainous areas such as Wales, Cumbria and Dartmoor experience such a lot of wet weather. But on a mild, dull day in late January what blankets both my home, in South London, and my destination, the area just north-east of Cambridge, is stratiform precipitation falling from nimbostratus: rain caused by warm air rising gently and slowly over a cold front and condensing into water droplets. It's that grey, unchanging kind of wet weather that can spread over vast areas and doesn't go anywhere fast.

Driving towards East Anglia the sky gradually gets bigger; even on a day like today, grey and dim, it becomes enormous, taking up a good three quarters of the view. Eventually we find ourselves in flat, arable land with rich black earth and roads as straight as rulers: fen country. I gaze out through the car's passenger window on which droplets of water shiver and break backwards; beyond the glass the wet fields unfurl to the unforgiving line of the horizon. In the boot the dog is hunkered down and probably car-sick, enduring the journey for the sake of the dream-rabbits at its end.

Slowly the GPS homes us in on our destination: the little village of Wicken and the National Trust's oldest

*Wicken Fen, January*

nature reserve, Wicken Fen. Incredibly species-rich, like ancient woodland or true wild-flower meadows, this fragment of wild fen is also an excellent place to see how man and nature together can work with, rather than against, water.

The villages in this part of the country – the cities too, like Ely with its heart-stopping cathedral – are usually built on ‘fen islands’: firmer areas of greensand or boulder clay which support their foundations better than the treacherous peat. In one village a bungalow boasts a front garden full of dripping gnomes and knick-knacks; next door its neighbour’s leafless apple tree has dropped its yellow fruit all over the sodden lawn. Everywhere, collared doves crouch on the telephone wires, puffed up against the damp.

In Wicken village the verges are starred with early primroses, and one we pass is stalked by two green woodpeckers sporting red military caps. Still known in many parts of the country as yaffles, they are looking for ants, using their beaks to disturb underground chambers and extracting them with their long, sticky tongues. In autumn, wood ants retreat to their thermo-regulated anthills, but common ants move to chambers deep below the frost line and enter ‘diapause’, a state of semi-hibernation, until spring; these, fooled by the mild temperatures brought by the Gulf Stream, must have woken early. Ants are well attuned to the weather: many

## RAIN

people believe even now that their movements predict rain, and certainly the little mounds of earth they construct around their burrow entrances do an excellent job of stopping rainwater running into them.

‘You’re keen,’ says the man in the Trust’s information centre, cocking an eye at the weather: apart from a couple of diehard birders with their gaiters and monopods it looks as though we’ll have the place to ourselves. Today, he tells us, the fen is full of water, so much of the reserve is a no-go area. The dog quivers with expectation as we talk, keen to get on with the walk now that we’re here: not for her the information boards or gift shop. As for the rain, she couldn’t care less.

The fact that large parts of Wicken Fen are waterlogged is just as it should be, the peat, sedge and reed beds holding on to today’s rainfall rather than letting it pour away to cause flooding elsewhere. But we can walk along the raised banks of Wicken Lode, which was dug in Roman times to drain this part of the fen and take water from it into the River Cam and thence to the Great Ouse and out to sea, and was used to transport peat and sedge until about 1940. It’s shallow, navigable only by small boats; much of it is now permitted to be used only by the local Fenlanders, in recognition of their ancient right. It passes as slow and silver as mercury between stands of pale golden *Phragmites* reed shot through here and there with blood-red bramble

*Wicken Fen, January*

stolons. The rain falling all around us is almost silent as it dimples the surface of the lode, but the reeds' feathery pennants whisper and susurrate to themselves as we pass. Deeper and more distant than the reeds' speech, though, is the rushing-water sound of a breeze we can't yet feel as it hits the faraway alder and buckthorn carrs. The dog trots ahead of us, alert and keyed up: while heavy rain can wash scent from the ground, moisture makes some airborne smells more volatile, so the world she moves through today may well be denser with information.

The earth of the levee on which we walk is pitch-dark peat marbled with paler Gault clay and silt slubbed out from the lode each year. Twin desire paths, made by pairs of people walking, are worn through the dull winter grass like parallel wheel ruts; here and there they merge in a mire of sticky, 'loving' mud that cakes our boots and leaves an ashen cast on the trodden-down grass beyond. Here and there are little black mounds; one has a freshwater mussel shell in it, dug out from somewhere deep on the bank, while others are fibrous with fragments of *Phragmites* root. While severe flooding and intense cold sends moles deep underground, wet weather can result in an increase in molehills. Shallow, damp, less compacted soil is easier for them to work, and this reduction in energy expenditure, along with abundant food sources, leads to better health and lower

## RAIN

mortality – and increased breeding compared to that in prolonged dry spells.

Rain on soil also brings moles' food source, worms, to the surface, as every bait fisherman, foot-stamping gull and worm-charming child knows. It used to be thought that they were trying to escape drowning, but new studies have suggested this may not be the case; it takes far more than a few showers to render soil uninhabitable for most invertebrates. As with moles, damp surface soil is easier for worms to move through – and it may be that they are taking the opportunity, when it rains, to strike out for new and less crowded ground. Some species, like the floodplain earthworm (*Octolasion tyrtaeum*), cope particularly well in waterlogged soil, and parts of the country that flood regularly tend to contain greater numbers of these types of invertebrate. Areas unused to regular flooding are usually home to more such creatures per square metre of soil, but are left with far fewer after a serious flood because the species are not adapted to inundation. It can take many years to build invertebrate numbers back up again after a big loss, with knock-on effects on the fertility and drainage of the soil.

To the left of the levee banks of brambles form massy humps, crabbed and tangled as though concealing something troubling within. There are a few bare hawthorns hung with silver drops, while on the other side of the lode young silver birches have been recently cleared and

*Wicken Fen, January*

the trunks piled up to decay naturally; longhorn cattle and rare konik ponies brought in by the National Trust help keep down the rest of the scrub that is threatening to make woodland of the precious grazing marsh. Here and there hazels have produced their yellow catkins; there are hips bright as blood, too, and beside the path a straggle of field mustard, most likely a farmland escapee, blooms yellow and incongruous against the grey January sky: I crush a little between my fingers for its peppery smell and wonder whether spring may not be so far away after all.

Wet days like today seemed interminable when I was a child. Being stuck indoors was the most terrible punishment: outside was where everything exciting happened. Apart from *Blue Peter*, *Jackanory* and *Noel Edmonds' Multi-coloured Swap Shop* there was rarely anything good on TV, and although I remember my Dad bringing home a Sinclair ZX81 when I was six, it was only my brother who, following after hours of laborious programming, could cause it to display primitive and largely inexplicable games on our old, wood-panelled TV. The best thing about our house – big enough for six children, full of books, but hopelessly shabby – was the garden with its three ancient cooking-apple trees that were excellent for climbing; a monolithic, impregnable weeping willow, home to woodpeckers, treecreepers and nuthatches; a frog-busy pond made from an old bath;

## RAIN

tangly areas excellent for making camps, and an old air-raid shelter at the far end upon whose sloping roof, in summer, my four elder sisters sometimes sunbathed. It was this little kingdom that wet weather denied us.

And there was more. On fine days we had the run of the local woods (now a paintballing centre and fenced off); we rode our bikes or rollerskated around the village, and the next village a couple of miles away; we explored the fields between the house and our primary school and only went home when we were hungry. A really wet day – Mum, at her typewriter, would shoo us outdoors if it was just a little drizzly – meant the reduction of that vast territory to the smaller, duller enclave of the house itself, and we chafed at it. Yet that circumscribed world is now all that's available to many modern kids: studies suggest that since the 1970s, when I was born, children's 'radius of activity' – the area around their home in which they are allowed to play unsupervised – has declined by almost 90 per cent. Perhaps every day – not just when it rains – is an indoor day for children now.

A watery sun breaks briefly through the cloud and dazzles off the lode as a kingfisher unzips the air above the water. A blue dart, understood only in the inarticulate half-second after it passes, it almost takes the heart from my chest. Briefly, the day feels illuminated – but just a

*Wicken Fen, January*

few steps on we find a dead shrew on the path, sodden but unmarked; they're not good swimmers, and with water levels high and large parts of the fen currently underwater it's likely it was washed out of its burrow and drowned. This can happen with water voles too, who become an easy meal, if forced onto dry land, for mink and birds of prey.

A heron flaps effortfully over our heads, making for the mere where crowds of wigeon drift and whistle. 'Nice weather for ducks,' we say, ruefully – and with some reason: waterbirds' feathers have an oily coating, renewed by preening, that makes them waterproof and helps them trap air to keep them warm and buoyant. Weather like this really is water off a duck's back: a recent study found that farm ducks actively enjoyed a light shower, although many waterfowl will take shelter from particularly heavy rain simply to conserve heat and energy.

After twenty minutes or so we strike away from the lode into flat farmland. Some of the fields have recently been ploughed and it's good to see the rich, dark furrows; some are baized with young crops, but others have been left as stubble over winter, a return to pre-war practices that benefits birds, insects and wild flowers enormously. At the faraway field margins the hedges appear khaki: the long, wet winter has encouraged algae to colonise the bark. Closer at hand I find a single, tiny

## RAIN

speedwell in flower, its blueness covered in to itself; like the daisy, its petals close in wet weather to prevent its pollen being washed away. The coal-coloured field beyond looks as though it's been recently drilled, perhaps for winter wheat or barley. Until it comes up there's no way to know.

Arable country is much less decipherable to outsiders than it once was. Modern cropping has become more varied, more scientific and perhaps more opaque, and we laymen have largely lost interest in where our food comes from beyond what's written reassuringly on the packet; there's a disconnect now that my lovely old Ladybird books, with their watercolour illustrations of tractors and gulls and talk of sowing and ploughing and harvest time, didn't seem to assume. Once they've properly broken ground I can recognise wheat, barley, oats and maize, and everyone can do rapeseed these days when it's in flower, but I can't identify many of the vegetables or legumes as they grow, or distinguish the cover crops; I'm not sure whether those are scattered swedes or sugar beets in a field we pass, and I don't know why they haven't been gathered up. I see the tractors out on the land, and it gives me a warm feeling, something primordial and bucolic to do with things being as they should be – but for the most part I can't guess what they're doing. It is a loss.

Here and there the huge, dried umbellifers of hog-

*Wicken Fen, January*

weed are silhouetted against a sky smudged white and lemon at the horizon, which seems very far away. The muddy farm track we walk is pitted with the tiny, precise slots of muntjac deer, and where water stands in the tractor ruts it reflects the dull January skies in lozenges of rain-dimpled steel. Deep in the hedge, among the new spears of arum breaking ground, are some fly-tipped engine-oil bottles, newspapers and sodden carpet, while moss is turning the damp edges of the shadier rides emerald-green.

A grid of narrow dykes here collects rain from the fields and feeds it into the watercourses, and because of this the rainwater levels are high and are likely to remain so through spring. In a month or two the dykes will be full of frogspawn and, when the warm weather comes, grass snakes, but for now they're home to fish, from pike to roach to little sticklebacks, fierce-fanged dragonfly larvae that will decimate the tadpoles when they hatch, sluggish frogs hibernating in the mud and leaf litter at the bottom, and – far fewer these days, but there nonetheless – overwintering eels as long as a man's arm.

As we walk, the muffled thud of guns reaches our ears over the constant patter of rain on our waterproof hoods: someone indifferent to the weather is out shooting pigeons, which feed in flocks at this time of year and make for easy targets. The guns aren't the only ones

## RAIN

after them, either; a pile of wet feathers, still bloody at the root, betrays a sparrowhawk's plucking post somewhere in the branches above us. The hawk herself – a female; the males, or 'muskets', aren't large enough to take a pigeon – is hunched in a leafless ash tree two fields away. Well fed, she can wait out the weather, merely shaking the silver beads every so often from her smooth, grey back and barred breast – though if it lasts too long she will be forced to hunt regardless. I tramp on through the mud, compulsively reciting to myself the opening lines of Alison Brackenbury's lovely poem, 'Brockhampton':

*The land was too wet for ploughing; yet it is done.  
Even the stones of the ridges lie sulky and brown.  
The roads are a slide of mud. The wet sky  
Is blank as the chink of the hawk's perfect eye . . .*  
*from 'Brockhampton', 1995*

As the sun sinks lower, and the temperature falls, the pattering rain slows imperceptibly and stops – and within moments we are rioted around by goldfinches with their end-of-school chatter; there are sudden greenfinches in the hedges, too, and great tits calling, and the silvery notes of a robin trickle like water from somewhere in the carr. They've been waiting out the rain and now's their last chance to feed before darkness falls, so they

*Wicken Fen, January*

must make the most of it: it is as though the landscape has shaken birds from its hedges and thickets as my dog shakes water from her fur.

The air is soft and clear but the day's rain continues to sink silently into the fields and fens. The land here is so flat it will hold on to the water for a long time before it drains north-east towards the Wash; but drain it will: first into the peat, then by degrees into the field drains and lodes, and to the tributaries, passing through pumping stations and locks and sluices as it goes, then into the River Witham, the Welland, the Nene or the Great Ouse, and eventually into the chill North Sea. As it flows, the dykes and watercourses will be lined with another layer of fine silt; the course of old, lost rivers can still be seen across arable land in the Fens, raised up, counter-intuitively, above the surrounding land by layers of sediment, and known as roddons.

The peat here began forming 4,500 years ago, and as long as it's kept wet it can lock up thirty times more carbon than if the same area was forested: a precious natural resource. Once it was cut and dried for fuel, and nowadays its rain-retentive properties have led it to be prized by gardeners – though awareness is growing of the devastating effects of peat extraction, in terms of habitat loss, carbon release and flood defence. Over-drainage, to create farmland, also damages peat bogs and fens; unlike a bathroom sponge, when peat has

## RAIN

dried out it shrinks and never swells again, which is why large parts of the Fens now lie well below sea level. At Holme Fen an iron post was sunk right down into the peat in the middle years of the nineteenth century; its top now stands four metres above ground level.

During that time the ability of these areas to absorb water, and defend us against floods, has been greatly reduced, so that when meltwater and heavy rains combine to overwhelm the Fenland rivers – as happened, devastatingly, in 1947 – or the sea walls necessary to protect the drained land are breached – as in 1953, with the loss of 307 lives – there's precious little left to contain the floods. That's why these days, low-lying East Anglia needs artificial drainage and vast coastal defences to keep it from being overwhelmed – yet even so, in December 2013 thousands of homes across three counties here had to be evacuated as huge surges demolished sea walls. Seaside towns were flooded, seven cliff-top homes collapsed, farms, wildlife and businesses were destroyed, and two people lost their lives. Afterwards, Norman Lamb, the MP for North Norfolk, described the area as 'like a war zone'. But here's the thing about water: the more it is denied the more powerful its incursions become. No wonder many people now believe that with sea levels rising, the Fens, with their protective, buffering function developed over thousands of years, should be restored, and swathes of agricultural

*Wicken Fen, January*

land – some of it reclaimed from the sea as recently as the 1970s – finally relinquished.

We turn back towards the village. Around us crows and jackdaws are beginning to assemble for the night; they wheel and parry over a stubble field near the mere, calling, calling, while a hundred garrulous starlings gather in an ash. Soon they'll seek more flocks until they join up in a vast murmuration and sweep down on the reed beds to roost. I'm glad of my binoculars then, as we see, across the mere, a tall, stag-headed oak decorated with what I suddenly realise are cormorants: heraldic, prehistoric, facing in every direction as though gathering in the last of the light.

In a sudden, late dazzle of low evening sun our three shadows track us on the reeds across the lode, and a single, heavy bullrush nods to us as though in investiture as we pass it by for the second time. The light is low and clear and turns the reed beds red; it lingers longest on the topmost feathers, gilding them rich copper, but the still, undimpled water they are rooted in is turning deep blue now, not silver, reflecting the darkening sky above.

In the village pub everyone knows each other: teenage girls in short skirts, sixty-something farmers, local tradespeople, village wives and old Fenlanders alike. Warm and convivial, loud with gossip underflowed by the tintinnabulation of the slots, it offers chips, chips, chips with everything. And crocodile steaks.

## RAIN

But around the pub the village sprawls silent and almost pitch-dark, apart from a lit red phone box with no telephone in it. In the darkness, the rain – which this winter seems never to stop for very long – begins to patter invisibly once more on its blistered roof and streak its ancient, cloudy panes.



