Mablethorpe St. Peter's and the Sea

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In 1946 appeared the first edition of what has become a standard work, J. A. Steers' The Coastline of England and Wales. My disappointment, on reading this, at finding in it so little historical (as opposed to physical) information about East Lincolnshire stimulated me to put together, in an article entitled "Coastal Erosion in East Lincolnshire", all I could discover about losses of land to the sea between the Humber and the Wash in historical times.1 Though these proved less extensive than the losses chronicled in T. Sheppard's study of erosion in Holderness, The Lost Towns of the Yorkshire Coast (1912), I found that five medieval churches had been lost to the sea since the beginning of the thirteenth century. Of the places affected, four - Trusthorpe, Sutton, Chapel St. Leonard's and Skegness - had retained their identity, though the medieval village sites were now under the waves; the fifth, Mablethorpe St. Peter's, could quite properly be called a 'lost town'. At that time (1952) I knew of several retrospective references to the sixteenth-century destruction of St. Peter's church, but only the approximate date; and of its earlier destruction all I knew was the brief entry under the year 1287 in the Louth Park chronicle. But enough further evidence has since come to my notice to make the fate of Mablethorpe St. Peter's seem worth re-telling now in more detail than was originally possible.

In the early Middle Ages this part of Lincolnshire is known to have extended further seawards than today. How much further can only be guessed, but around the year 1200 - that is, before marine flooding had yet become a serious problem - the sea bank at Mablethorpe may have been as much as a mile to the east of the present coastline, and the high-water mark even further east, to judge from extensive grants of pasture rights on the seaward side of that bank in Mablethorpe and its neighbours to the south throughout the thirteenth century.2 The first sea floods recorded anywhere on the Lincolnshire coast took place in Holland in the 1170s. As the first mention of sea banks in Lindsey occurs in the same decade, such floods must have been a recognized danger here also;3 but the first actually recorded in Lindsey seems to be that of 10 October 1253 mentioned in the Louth Park chronicle: 'a great flood in the parts of Holland, Lindsey and Holderness which came up as far as Alvingham'.4

The 1287 flood is recorded by the Louth chronicler in these words: 'the church of St. Peter of Mablethorpe was torn apart (disrupta) by the waves of the sea'. He gives no precise date. But we know from other chroniclers that it took place on the night of 31 December 1286/1 January 1287, and that it also affected Boston and other parts of the Fens, and low-lying areas of the east coast as far south as Essex.5 Now from the Hagnaby Abbey chronicle, which has never been printed, fresh details can be given of what happened at Mablethorpe on that New Year's Eve and subsequently.6

'At Circumcision (1 January) the sea on the east crossed its bounds and caused great damage in Holland and Lind-}

1 As if this was not enough, the same chronicle tells of how the destruction was completed in the following winter.7

8 On that day (the morrow of St. Blaise, 1288, i.e. 4 February) there was a flood of the sea throughout all maritime England, and it reached as far as Malby field and totally destroyed the church of St. Peter of Mablethorpe (et transit usque ad campum de Malby et destructit ecclesiam sancti Petri de Malbertorp), and that day perished many men, uncounted sheep, and an unknown number of cattle . . . Also on the eve of the Assumption (14 August) the sea caused very great damage in the territory of Mablethorpe.8

Little time was lost in putting things to rights. On 22 May 1290 Oliver Sutton, bishop of Lincoln, instructed the archdeacon of Lincoln to allow Robert of Waddingham, chaplain, to collect the tithes and offerings from the parishioners of St. Peter's and use the money for the rebuilding (reediificationem) of the church, 'which an inundation or whirlpool of the sea (vorticor marina) had lately swarmed or consumed absolutely'. Orders to the same effect were sent directly to the said Robert a week later.9 No record of damage to Mablethorpe St. Mary's church at the same time has been found. Nevertheless, on 25 November 1300 Robert de Monte Alto was licensed to alienate in mortmain to Hervey, parson of St. Mary's, 1 1/2 acres of pasture in Mablethorpe on which to build a church for the parish.10 We can probably deduce from this that St. Mary's church on its old site had become dangerously exposed to the sea, and that a 'strategic withdrawal' to a site further inland, almost certainly the present one, was considered necessary. The continuing danger may be judged from the fact that in August 1335 the sea again broke through the banks at Mablethorpe and along the coast nearby, causing a flood which drowned sheep and crops and lasted two days or more.11

We hear no more of threats to St. Peter's church until the sixteenth century, but Mablethorpe as a whole remained under pressure from the sea. The first half of the fifteenth century was a particularly testing time. In 1425, when the Hagnaby chronicle is once more our informant, on the day before the feast of Purification (1 February) the sea banks at Mablethorpe were torn apart by the flood tide (disrupta erant cum flumine) and a great part of the town was submerged'. Then in the same year 'on All Saints' Eve (31 October) almost the whole of Mablethorpe was submerged, though by the protecting grace of God and men (word illegible) did not perish, and much damage was done along the sea coast in several places'.12 In 1430 the parson of St. Mary's had to render account of money and goods received or procured by him for repair of the sea wall of the parish.13 In 1443 Thomas Fitzwilliam, as lord of the manor of Mablethorpe, was exempted for life from sundry public duties and from being compelled to accept the honour of knighthood, by all of which he would have been out of pocket, in consideration of his loss of land there 'through the irruption of the sea' and of his costs in repairing the defences.14 Mablethorpe, it should be added, was
not alone in its sufferings at this time. Erosion was taking a similar toll at Ingoldmells and Skegness in the first decades of the century, while in the Netherlands the disastrous St. Elizabeth's Day flood of 1421 is thought to have destroyed 20 villages and caused some 10,000 deaths.

In 1500 a survey for the commissioners of sewers included Mablethorpe among coastal places 'in very great danger of the sea', and in 1529 a case was brought in the Duchy of Lancaster courts against George Fitzwilliam for rents withheld in respect of lands allegedly 'overflowed by the sea' at Mablethorpe. What happened some ten years later can be reconstructed from subsequent evidence. According to an account written in 1602, 'both church and chancel' of St. Peter's were swallowed by the sea 'above 50 or 60 years past, since which time there was never any church there builded, through the poverty which the inhabitants were driven into by loss of goods by that inundation'. On the basis of this, I estimated in my original article that the catastrophe had happened in the early 1540s. A document in which I was then unaware shows this estimate to have been close to the mark. Thomas Kirkman of Stain, in his will made on 12 March 1540, bequeathed £6 13s 4d 'to the building of Saint Peter church in Mablethorpe, when they begin to build the same, and if they build it not, then will I the said money be employed upon covering of Stain church with lead'. This implies that St. Peter's church had been destroyed within the previous few years, since the decision whether or not to rebuild was evidently not yet taken, but also that already there was an element of doubt as to whether rebuilding was likely. An inventory of the church's property in 1548/9 gave the only items as a chalice, a brass cross, and a blue satin vestment and cope, total value £3 0s 6d — a meagre list compared with other local parishes at the same date, and perhaps representing all that survived the disaster.

In the early nineteenth century it was believed that Mablethorpe St. Peter's church had stood about a mile north-east of St. Mary's. White's county directory of 1856 states that the greater part of St. Peter's parish was carried away along with the church. This seems unlikely to have happened all at once, since in 1603 there were still 67 communicants in St. Peter's. But over a longer period the directory's statement may well be near the truth. The minutes of the commissioners of sewers show that in the 1630s the sea bank at Mablethorpe North End was in a weak state, and by 1641 was 'very ruinous and much lacerated by the rage and violence of the sea, so that the said town and country is in great danger of being surrounded thereby'; a new bank was accordingly ordered to be built behind the old one. In the circumstances it is no surprise to learn that the glebe land of St. Peter's, which from 1668 onwards is described as abutting on the sea bank, had diminished in extent by 1671, and ten in 1671. In 1737 'the parish church of Mablethorpe St. Peter's with a part of the glebe land (having been) many years since demolished and took by the violence of the sea and the tides of too small value to maintain one minister', it was decided to 'unite and consolidate' the rectorcy with that of Theddlethorpe St. Helen's. It is equally no surprise to learn of a steady decline in population. While this affected both Mablethorpe parishes, St. Peter's suffered most, and the effects were more lasting. In 1603 St. Mary's had 90 communicants, St. Peter's 67, but by 1676 numbers had fallen to 51 and 20 respectively and in the 1720s St. Mary's contained 19 families, St. Peter's only 4. Nineteenth-century census returns show the population of St. Mary's rising from 180 in 1811 to 414 in 1871. That of St. Peter's, however, was a mere 24 in 1811, rising slowly to 82 in 1861 but then falling back to 38 in 1871. After that date the parishes were enumerated together; county directories continued to dignify St. Peter's with a separate entry, but by that time it had clearly ceased, for practical purposes, to exist as a distinct community.

Notes


2. Cf. A.E.B. Owen, 'Hafedic: a Lindsey name and its implications', Jnl. of the English Place-Name Soc. 7 (1975), especially pp. 51, 53 n. 9, and for a conjectural map of the thirteenth-century coastline, p. 48; an alternative mapping of this is offered by D.N. Robinson, The Book of the Lincolnshire Seaside (Buckingham, 1981), 18. In the latter part of my 1975 article I suggested that Mablethorpe and other villages on this coast began as settlements on or in the shelter of the dunes, but now I believe them all to have been founded on higher ground. A.E.B. Owen, 'Salt, sea banks and medieval settlement on the Lincoln coast', A Prospect of Lincolnshire ed. N. Field and A. White (Lincoln, 1984), 46-9.

3. Owen, Salt, sea banks... 47.

4. In the version edited by E. Venables, Chronicon Abbaticum de Parochia Ludie (Hornsea, 1891), 16, it is called a 'very great' flood (alitium maximum), but in an older manuscript of this chronicle, recently identified at Cambridge, it is merely called 'great' (magnum): A.E.B. Owen, 'An early version of Theloup Park chronicle', Gesta fasc. 2-4 (1979), 272-5.


8. Ibid., f. 32v.


18. Duxetiana, Pars Tertia: Calendar to Pleadings, Depositions, etc. (Record Commission, London, 1827), 35.


22. T. Allen, History of the County of Lincoln vol. 2 (Leeds, 1830), 153. Note that in the text the dedications are confused.


24. L.A.O., Glebe Terriers, Mablethorpe St. Peter's.

25. Ibid., Theddlethorpe St. Helen's, 18 July 1822.

26. State of the Church... 305.

