Aspects of Inter-Regional Land Use
and Agriculture in Lincolnshire,
1600-1850

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A characteristic of landholding and agriculture in eastern Lincolnshire for over two hundred years after 1600 was the occupation of marsh grassland by tenants and owner-occupiers from outside the coastal lowlands. The rich pasture of the best silt-clay soils found all along the coast from Grimsby to Long Sutton, but especially between Saltfleet and Boston, was the most effective means of fattening livestock before rotational grasses and turnips were cultivated. In a modified form it has remained popular even in recent times. According to Arthur Young grassland was the glory of Lincolnshire, and observers from at least the time of Christopher Merrett, through Defoe, John Smith and Young, to the agricultural writers of the nineteenth century were in general agreement. Their opinions were not always justified, but the marsh and fenlands remained important as pasture in the agricultural economy of Lincolnshire throughout the period. What happened in Lincolnshire was broadly similar to the developing practice, at the national level, of feeding Scotch, Welsh or north country livestock in readiness for the London market in the pastures of Essex, East Anglia and the Midlands.

At the end of the seventeenth century nearly all the coastal parishes and many in the Boulder clays of the inner marsh, possessed a number of landholders described as "foreigners", "outeners" or "outfarmers", by contrast with the inhabitants. Most of these so-called strangers were in fact residents of adjacent or nearby villages in the marsh whose farms happened to run into more than one parish. There is no reason to suppose that the occupation of land in different parishes, on a purely local basis, was ever restricted, since some of the wealthier medieval flock-masters in the marsh had interests in more than one manor or village. The encroachment by graziers from the Wolds or inland clays added a new dimension to Lincolnshire agriculture during the next two centuries.

The presence of substantial inland landholders in the marshes was first noticed by Mrs. Thirk as a new phenomenon of the early seventeenth century. Robert Millington of Minting, in the central clay vale, who died in 1630 with a holding at Ingoldmells, is the earliest so far encountered in the inventories, although an exhaustive survey of the probate inventories would certainly put the date back somewhat, perhaps beyond 1600. Nevertheless there were very few before the Restoration period. Sixteenth and early seventeenth century manorial surveys give no indication of tenements occupied by genuine "outfarmers", but the earliest leases of Croft marsh after its purchase by Lady Elizabeth Hatton in 1608-10, reveal the presence of inland graziers occupying part of the land. These marshes consisted almost entirely of land
newly reclaimed after 1570 by the Brownes of Croft, which Lady Elizabeth finally imbanked and divided. The lessees included Sir William Monson of South Carlton, bequeathed as a tenant by his kinsmen the Brownes, and before 1615 there were also three from Alford, Edward Hutchinson, John Hopkinson and William Tulley, one who probably lived in Horncastle, Richard Freeston, a member of the widespread Skipwith family, Philip Neave of Belchford and also Sir John Read of Wrangle.²

When freshened and inclosed, saltmarsh provided first-rate grazing, so that the great spate of reclamation which culminated in about 1610 along the coastline perhaps supplied the necessary opportunity for interlopers to acquire marsh grassland. Lady Hatton apparently bore the costs of inclosure herself, but some of her lessees continued the good work, and later in the century saltmarsh tenants on the same estate as on others nearby bore the costs of taking in and sweetening new marshes. Holdings in the outer marshes were generally large in the seventeenth century, no doubt inevitably since the technique involved in reclamation was chiefly to deploy large flocks all the year round. Tenants hoping to improve saltings required ample capital both to furnish the necessary livestock and to take the risks of loss which were considerable. In the great storm of December 1763, for instance, 3,000 sheep were reported drowned in the saltmarshes between Ingoldmells and Boston. Many marsh graziers naturally found the resources to occupy such land in the period as they always had done, but although they were not ousted, they were increasingly supplemented or reinforced by inland flockmasters, who were so eager for marsh pastures that they are found holding all types of grassland from the very best to the merely indifferent in quality by 1700.³

Most of the outsiders were substantial farmers in their own right. Many came from the minor gentry, whose income in eastern Lincolnshire was largely made up of agricultural profits, and in the period before the greater gentry had become rentiers many leading proprietors also owned or rented marsh grazing. For example, Sir Drayner Massingberd of South Ormsby employed the demesne of his manor of Ingoldmells to summer flocks of his best sheep and he also occupied land in Huttoft, Parlethorpe and Wainfleet for a similar purpose. Most of his neighbours and contemporaries did the same. Some like Monson, Thomas Bilcliffe of Usselby and Thomas Weslyd of Hemingby came from further inland. A list of names, drawn up to illustrate this development contains nearly all the substantial gentlemen, farmer-graziers and even the leading mercers and so forth, of the day.⁴

By the early eighteenth century this pattern of landholding was firmly established. The out-farmers were few in number but they occupied some of the best and most extensive grazing lands in the marshes. In the land tax for Candleshoe Wapentake in 1695 it is possible to identify 139 different landholders in the Outer Marsh parishes for which data have survived, of whom 30 may reasonably be considered as outsiders occupying in all 28% of the land rated to the tax. Estate records indicate that the Croft marsh estate continued to be dominated by large absentee lessees until 1690, when the property was parcelled out differently, but of 32 tenants in 1706, 9 were evidently from inland parishes. Much the same appears to be true of all the townships and marsh estates for which records have survived. In 1722-3 40% of the 5,160 acres of tithable land in Burgh and Winthorpe was occupied by 92 tenants, technically called “outfarmers”, of whom between one-third and two-fifths, usually the more substantial, resided in the Wolds, inland clays or the Lincoln Cliff, and the demand for feeding land was certainly no less powerful in Skirbeck Hundred and in the Saltfleet-Tetney area, if not elsewhere. Moreover, the existence of dispersed estates, consisting partly of upland or clay property and partly of marshland, assisted the spread of non-resident land-holding, since the leading tenants of such estates often enjoyed the privilege of occupying their masters’ marsh holdings as an adjunct to the headquarters farm.⁵

There is no direct evidence to account for the developing interest in marshland in the seventeenth century, but since the beginnings of the system are almost certainly to be found in
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and around 1600, the practice is best seen in the context of the so called "forage crisis" which afflicted traditional mixed farming in the later sixteenth and early seventeenth centuries. It therefore belongs in the same category as the sowing of leys with grass seeds (the "ley-crop") mentioned in various inventories from that of John Andrew of Stainton-le-Hole (1591) to that of Richard Coxon of Thwaite in Welton (1705), which represented a widespread but far from commonplace or customary means of improving upland fallows. New crops or new techniques of agriculture involved in the convertible system or fallow-crop rotations came widely into use in midland and southern England before the end of the seventeenth century, although the evidence for their adoption in Lincolnshire is meagre.

The evidence of fodder shortage, indeed of inadequate yields generally, is quite considerable for early seventeenth century Lincolnshire. There was much inclosure for grass, which although not infrequently designed simply to provide for more sheep by wealthy flockmasters and condemned as such in Star Chamber, was sometimes defended on the grounds of waning arable fertility. Since in part of the Wolds at least the arable was so poor by 1630-50 that extended falling was necessary in the more barren areas of the open fields, such claims were probably justified. Two-course systems were widespread, especially in the uplands, and the pattern of inclosure in the century, followed more or less promptly by ploughing in the walks, also supports the hypothesis of declining fertility. In spite of apparently large areas of commons or rough grazing in the county, the great fens and carrs, the high walks and the parish "holmes", animal feed was certainly insufficient for the needs of all landholders. Some of the common fens were deteriorating, especially after 1650; others had been inclosed and divided. Common walks had long been subjected to encroachment by landlords and wealthy farmers, and the warrens, erected in a majority of upland, and in several lowland, parishes in the 130 years after 1500 occupied land once primarily devoted to grazing. The most congested upland area, which apparently suffered most from lack of animal forage, was the Southern Wolds, where even the extensive commons, called the East and West Fens, in which many parishes participated, were inadequate by the mid-seventeenth century. It is therefore probably significant that the marsh district in which inland graziers are earliest found was the nearby territory around Skegness and Wainfleet.

The larger farmers benefited most from the structural changes in seventeenth century agriculture, such as inclosure, the convertible system and the opening up of new markets, and to judge from the evidence of estate surveys and the like they were conspicuously more successful than smallholders or cottagers in Lincolnshire in the later seventeenth and early eighteenth centuries. Mrs. Thirk has convincingly demonstrated that the period was one of crisis for peasant farmers in the county. Pressure upon existing resources of land by inclosure and consolidation and by the more diffuse problem of providing sufficiently for their livestock, led to a reduction in the flocks and herds of the lesser peasantry all over Lincolnshire. Their richer contemporaries, although they did not always prosper, suffered no similar decline. The median quantum of livestock owned by forty testators from inland parishes (30 from the Wolds, 10 from the clays), none of whom had marsh grazing, in the period 1590-1610, whose personal estate exceeded £80, was very like that of twenty-two farmers with marshland (15 wold, 6 clay, 1 from Cliff) whose assets were comparable, from the period 1645-80. But if the more substantial farmers obtained the greatest advantage from internal changes within their own parishes, it is not obvious why they should have gone elsewhere for land. The most probable explanation is that they were increasingly influenced by the desire for high-grade pasture, not readily available in the inland regions. With the secular decline in wool prices after 1620, it is not unlikely that a significant but hardly large-scale shift in emphasis from the fleece to the carcass took place. The Smithfield trade from Lincolnshire was apparently pioneered in 1671-73 by Sir Drayner Massingham of South Ormsby, but by the 1690s when droving was fairly well established it was largely centred upon the coastal marshes.

Inasmuch as the quality of pasture is fairly represented by its rent, the differences are
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clearly marked. The average of six parishes in the coastal clays and silts in the 1640s and 1650s was just over 12s. an acre for permanent marsh grazing (excluding open saltmarsh and the ings), whereas in three parishes of the central clay vale, 350 acres of permanent grass let for 5s. 9d. an acre, and the average for such grassland in inland parishes in the seventeenth century generally was certainly less. Although the rent of sheep walks varied considerably from sixpence to four shillings an acre at most, the average was probably under two shillings. Except for a few ancient commons and ings, the grassland of the marsh and fens was all inclosed. Grass closes did not serve merely as adjuncts to a still vital open-field system of tillage but were the mainspring of local agriculture. Without written testimonies one can never know for certain, but the attractions of marsh grazing seem positive enough in a period of forage deficiency when the alternatives being explored elsewhere in England seem to have impinged little upon Lincolnshire. In the two cases where we know that sainfoin was effectively cultivated before 1700, both George Langton of Langton and the Massingberds of South Ormsby continued to occupy grassland in the marshes on a fairly extensive scale. Quite apart from any other consideration, the local species of transhumance had become fashionable by the early eighteenth century. No sufficiently large Wold farmer could afford to be without his “marsh”, and more than three quarters of all testators with agricultural assets above £150 from the Southern Wolds, whose inventories have been examined by the writer, are recorded in possession of marsh closes during the forty years after 1690.

It has been suggested that a significant change occurred in the 1720s. The Croft marsh estate entered a period of crisis after 1723 and the London agent sent to know the reason why so many tenants were quitting. One of the reasons given in the memorandum which he drew up about 1726 has often been quoted, but still deserves repetition:

“Till of late years all persons who had Estates in the Wod Country made their rents and profitts of their Estates by breeding of sheep or some Cattel and were under a sort of necessity of takeing a quantity of marshlands to feed ‘em with before they sold ‘em (for their own lands were too poore to fatt ‘em) - but now of late since the practice of improving lands with turnops is set up, they either take that way of so improving lands and feeding ye sheep Themselves, Or can now sell ‘em (tho leane) into those Countrys where they do practice the turnup improvement”.

How much the local graziers made of the second alternative it is impossible to gauge. Local accounts, such as those of the Massingberds of Ormsby or those of the duke of Ancaster’s steward at Eresby, reveal no obvious changes in the pattern of selling young stock and stores in the early eighteenth century, but with the growth of jobbing in the livestock trade, the destination of stock sold by the producer is obscure. There can be little doubt that turnip cultivation in the light soils of Lindsey was still very much in an experimental stage and still extremely localized in 1726. The writer has found no reference to the crop before 1720 and it was still uncommon in the 1750s and 1760s.12 Moreover an examination of the Croft marsh rentals after 1725 indicate that any such abandonment of marshland by “rich and substantial persons from the Wold Country” was temporary. The impulse to quit was influenced partly by the fall in wool prices after 1723 and partly by the former agent’s sedulous rack-renting policies in 1717-21. So popular had such land become by 1720 that he had an applicant from Great Creston, Northants. Some of the most substantial of the Wold tenants, such as the very wealthy William Booth of Aswardby, continued to hold their marsh pastures throughout the critical period. In 1710 five tenants from inland parishes occupied 427 acres, whereas in 1727 there were also five with 417 acres. Elsewhere the story repeats itself. The tithe accounts of Burgh and Winthorpe for 1750 and 1791 indicate a steady increase in the number of all “out-farmers” since 1722, but with very much the same mixture of real outsiders as before.
The earliest land tax returns for Wapentakes other than Candleshoe, 1759 and 1772, although less explicit, give the same impression for places like Tetney and Marshchapel, the Theddlethorpes, Huttoft and Mumby. There may indeed have been an expansion, not a contraction, in the occupation of marsh by inland graziers. In the 1790 land tax nearly all the notable farming gentry and graziers from the Wolds had marsh holdings, some like those of John Codd of Ranby, John Bourne of Dalby, Philip Wright of Spilsby, John Parkinson of Asgarby and John Grant of Oxcombe, being very extensive. The writer has identified more than eighty landholders who had marshland attached to their inland farms in the Outer Marsh of Calcethorpe Hundred, Candleshoe Wapentake and Bolingbroke Soke in 1790, and this is naturally a minimum figure concentrated heavily upon notables. In 1799 Arthur Young was told by John Parkinson that "the rich marshes were better managed, and in better order twenty years ago than they are at present; the Wold farmers had not then got such possession of them, and they were in the hands of resident graziers" who tended them more skilfully. 13

The custom of taking marsh grazing by upland farmers continued until well into the nineteenth century. Indeed many of the wealthier farmers purchased pieces of marshland for the purpose of fattening livestock since the control over marshland by the great territorial magnates was less effective than in the uplands in which their estates had largely been consolidated by 1750. The Lindsey poll books, for instance, indicate that many electors resident on upland farms claimed the franchise for estates situate in the marsh country in the nineteenth century. Nevertheless, there were several changes afoot after the mid-eighteenth century which modified the system.

Chief among these changes was the steady conversion of much good grassland to the plough. Marsh landlords had long been resolute against ploughing up ancient turf for fear that their rents would inevitably suffer, and some of the more old-fashioned, like the Trubets of Croft marsh, persisted in the attitude till near the end of the century despite contrary advice from their agents. It was already apparent in 1726 that much marsh grass was of poor quality and steadily deteriorating. As early as 1738 a tenant of Croft marsh petitioned for the right to plough part of his marsh holding and brought evidence to show that elsewhere former permanent pasture had already been converted. On the lighter silt soils by the 1780s farmers like Thomas Reckitt of Wainfleet were already cropping their land regularly for oats, wheat, and mustard seed, and by the early nineteenth century, even the farmers on Croft marsh practised tillage regularly in a four or five-course rotation very like that followed in the uplands. By the 1830s the dominant occupiers of the silts were once again resident farmers although in 1867 permanent grass still took up the largest area of the coastal parishes of the county. Ploughing in the heavier lands necessarily followed, and in certain areas, notably around Saltfleet and south of Friskney, the rage for arable after 1800 was so furious and the cropping, exploitive as in the new fens, so unsympathetic that much land was damaged quite seriously. In this context, the Outer Marsh was rather more diversified, if not improved, during the eighty to one hundred years before 1870 and the great absentee farmers, like the great absentee proprietors, lost ground. In the Wolds, of course, the period witnessed a profound transformation towards a much more intensive cultivation, especially in the difficult period after 1820 when the profitability of exploitive agriculture was severely reduced and landlords found it necessary to rationalize their tenanted activities. Neither the so called "second agricultural revolution", which in Lincolnshire in fact appears as the prime mover of development, nor the modifications to marshland agriculture effectively stopped the demand for "feeding grounds". 14

The long-term consequences of this intercommunication between marshland and inland Lincolnshire are open to debate. It is not improbable that the relatively easy access to good pasture held up the process of agricultural development in the uplands, not least because the impulse towards convertible or alternate systems based on new crops and/or new techniques was largely derived from a deficiency of animal forage, which in Lincolnshire was partly or
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wholly met by marshland grazing as far as the leading farmers were concerned. Moreover the outward manifestations of the old regime in the uplands, especially the rabbit warsrens, remained virtually intact before the Revolutionary and Napoleonic Wars. Sainfoin is first found in the 1670s but was hardly commonplace before the 1750s and 1760s. It is rarely mentioned in surviving probate inventories of the eighteenth century, and they are the most satisfactory index of the “common” farmers’ activities. And a similar lag occurred in the adoption of clover and turnips even on the larger farms, so that in the 1790s Stone and Young described conditions in which these crops were still uncertainly understood by many landlords and farmers alike.

The backwardness of the Lincolnshire farmer, of course, did not depend upon his excessive reliance upon marsh grassland. The most which can be said is that such reliance contributed to his unwilling or slovenly reception of new ideas, in the same way perhaps as his traditional attachment to sheep and wool in the eighteenth century also held up his progress.

Another consequence of some significance was the gradual change wrought in the quality and type of livestock in Lincolnshire, which cannot definitively be attributed to the intermixture of marsh and upland grazing, although it was almost certainly a contributory factor. Sheep, which were infinitely the most important of local livestock, perhaps changed most of all. Lincolnshire sheep in the seventeenth century were defined by types according to soil conditions and the methods of flock management, whether, for instance, they were kept in closes, sheepwalks or fallows or on heavy or light soil. A distinctive breed in the sense employed in formulating the flock-books of the later nineteenth century naturally did not exist. The wool which made Lincolnshire sheep famous from medieval times was not the long wool characteristic of the nineteenth century. The best wool in the seventeenth century came from the fine-stapled fleeces of upland sheep. Long wool only became equally popular with the expansion of worsted production in the eighteenth century. The fine short wools depended upon the characteristically thin, aromatic pastures of the Wolds and Heath lands and there is some evidence that the wool was already being coarsened before 1700. Complaints of declining fleece quality increased in the eighteenth century. Sir Drayner Massingberd’s and Burrell Massingberd’s sheep from the Wolds in 1650-1720 produced about 3-3½ lb. of wool apiece, which was already an increase over medieval yields, but by 1790-1820, most upland sheep bore fleeces between 5 lb. and 6 lb. even on farms where intensive feeding with oilcake or turnips was not practised, and 7-8 lb. on the best conducted farms. In the marshes sheep already produced heavier fleeces in the late seventeenth century, perhaps averaging 7-8 lb. each and this was increased to 9-11 lb., by 1800. Carcase weights are difficult to compare for lack of evidence before the 1790s but there can be little doubt that some improvement took place independently, even before Backwell produced his New Leicester. There are various indications that several Lincolnshire graziers actively improved their flocks by selective breeding before Bakwell, and this takes no account of the changes wrought by the modified feeding methods of Wold sheep in the marsh or on sainfoin, clover and turnips.

Much the same must also be true of the cattle found in Lincolnshire. The short-horn was originally a fen and marsh breed and it is likely that the upland breeds were originally lighter and required less feeding to get them fat. But the short-horn had found its way into the uplands by 1700. Burrell Massingberd in 1719 “sent into Holderness for a bull”, which is suggestive of his interest in breeding, and by the 1790s cattle all over Lincolnshire were basically either the older short-horn variety or the Bakwell-derived long-horn — or at least resembled one or other of them. The cattle fattened by Wold farmers on the marshes or bought in an upland fair by marsh graziers “to feed” were probably a mixture of heavy and light varieties, as in the case of sheep, which the steady interconnexion between the two regions caused eventually to be fused together in one breed.

However, as Luccock’s estimates of wool production and the revealing comments on the livestock of the poorer farmers and smallholders in both Stone and Young indicate, there still remained numerous examples of the mis-shapen, unimproved stock of the fallows and commons
scattered about the county. Since the poor took no part in the changes described above, this was only to be expected. The direct influence of this interregional land use on livestock changes is difficult to assess, because Lincolnshire sheep and cattle were improved through a combination of changes in animal feeding and breeding methods. The timing, which sets the beginning of improvement well before 1750, before new techniques and new crops had been widely adopted, may here be significant. Besides, although comparatively few individuals actually enjoyed marsh pastures for themselves, the trade in leanstock which inevitably developed between the upland breeding grounds and the marsh fattening grounds was so well established by the later eighteenth century that the interrelationship of land use ramified extensively in the county to comprehend the larger and medium-sized farmers and graziers if not the poor.
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Footnotes:

1. It is still common around Lady Day for auctioneers to let summer grazing in eastern Lincolnshire to local farmers, the term running from April to the end of October.


4. L.A.O. MM VI/4/5 passim; Mass 28, George Langton’s Almanacks 1690-1725; LIND. DEP 35/2, Land tax, Coddsholme, 1695-1747; INV. 177/146 (Thomas Wesley). Among many others, see INV. 197/355, 176/54, 164/69, 180/28, 197/144, 172/56 (Sir Martin Lister of Burwell), 197/74, 182/20, 204/170, 204/75, 203/241, 175/430, 194/142 for a cross-section.

5. L.A.O. LIND DEP 35/2; TYR II/3/1-20; MON 8/4/9/12; MON 10/3c/1-16.

6. L.A.O. INNV 80/326; 198/103.


9. The median value of inventories considered in 1590-1610 was £90-6:5; the median numbers of horses, cattle and sheep were 6, 17 and 66 respectively, whereas in 1675-80, on a median estate of £92-17:1 the figures were 6, 15 and 79, or allowing for the reduction in cattle nearly equivalent.

10. L.A.O. MM VI/1/5; C. Merrett, “Some Observables in Lincolnshire not noticed by Camden or any other author, “Fenland Notes and Queries, IV, p.176; ibid in British Museum Add. MS 34141 f.46 et seq.


19. John Luceock’s estimates of wool production in Lincs. in 1800 are summarized in Bischoff, op. cit. II, Appendix I. He thought there were still 123,000 short-wool sheep; T. Stone, General View, p.62; Young, p.303.