

# DRAINING THE COASTAL MARSHES IN NORTH WEST NORFOLK

## The Le Stranges at Hunstanton, 1604-1724

**Title Slide:** Holme Dunes, North Norfolk coast

**Slide 2** showing the extent of marsh and fen in East Anglia in the 17<sup>th</sup> century.

Wetland reclamation in early modern Norfolk is invariably associated with the Fens and the large drainage projects initiated by King James I in the mid 1620s. In these schemes, syndicates of great landowners 'ventured' their capital in risky projects in return for grants of Crown land. The organisation, execution and consequences of this process have shaped the debate ever since H. C. Darby started his ground breaking work on the Fenland in the 1940s.<sup>1</sup> In the 1990s, Tom Williamson corrected the balance with his equally significant work on The Norfolk Broads and Halvergate Marshes.<sup>2</sup>

However, none of the specialized literature mentions the marshes of the North Norfolk coast, the subject of this paper. This is somewhat surprising given the geographical credentials of the area and its status as one of the most heavily researched coastal sites in Europe. The drainage undertaken was certainly modest by comparison and the technical aspects of no great complexity, but the lack of any consideration remains odd.

A problem appears to be that the historical evidence is fragmented and embedded in individual estate archives. Historians stumble on material while researching other aspects, as I did on my work on the Le Strange family of Hunstanton. It is only when someone like Piet engages you in casual conversation that you begin to understand the significance of your findings. I would like to thank him for asking me to give this paper, but I need to stress I am no expert on drainage.

Mercifully, I found J. A. Steers 'Notes on the North Norfolk Coast from Hunstanton to Brancaster' which provides a geographical analysis supported by a wide range of historical references.<sup>3</sup> Other useful sources include Keith Allison's thesis on early modern sheep farming and wool production in Norfolk, and Angus Winchester's recent paper on the Commons of nearby Brancaster and Thornham; all confirm the significance of the area and the role played by the coastal marshes.<sup>4</sup>

My focus is on 245 acres of coastal marshes at Heacham, Hunstanton and Holme in northwest Norfolk, drained by Sir Nicholas Le Strange with his father, Sir Hamon

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<sup>1</sup> H. C. Darby, *The Medieval Fenland* (Cambridge, 1940); *The Draining of the Fens* (Cambridge, 1956)

<sup>2</sup> T. Williamson, *The Norfolk Broads: a landscape history* (Manchester, 1997); with H. Cook, *Water Management in the English Landscape: field, marsh and fen* (Edinburgh, 1999); with Anne Reeve 'Marshes' in J. Thirsk, *The English Rural Landscape* (Oxford, 2000).

<sup>3</sup> J. A. Steers, 'Some Notes on the North Norfolk Coast from Hunstanton to Brancaster', *The Geographical Journal*, 87: 1 (1936); see also <http://www.jncc.defra.gov.uk> to access range of geographical studies.

<sup>4</sup> K. J. Allison, 'The Wool Supply and Worstead Cloth Industry in Norfolk in the 16<sup>th</sup> and 17<sup>th</sup> Centuries', unpublished Ph.D. thesis, 1955; A. Winchester and E. Straughton, *Brancaster and Thornham Commons, Norfolk: Historical Briefing Paper* (2010).

between 1633 and 1653. These were not new men with big money; the Le Stranges were an ancient gentry family who had lived on the Hunstanton Estate since the 12<sup>th</sup> century. By the early 1600s, when Sir Hamon inherited the estate he faced severe financial problems, having to pay off debts incurred by the Trustees and rebuild the estate 'out of the ground', as his wife, Lady Alice noted sharply. **Slide 3** shows how they reversed their fortunes within a generation. Marsh drainage was part of their strategy to improve the estate and raise their income. It was undertaken by Sir Nicholas as a separate venture soon after his marriage in 1631. <sup>5</sup>

As a record of his work, Sir Nicholas left 8 pocket sized notebooks which are of extraordinary detail and quality. <sup>6</sup> No one as far as I can tell has used these notebooks. Clearly, Nicholas had been trained well by his parents, combining his father's interest in science, mathematics and engineering with his mother's aptitude for accounting. These notebooks record every aspect of the drainage process, from the layout of drains to establishment of new farmsteads, but most significantly, they were designed as manuals for later generations. Like his parents, he understood the need to create and hand down knowledge about the estate. We know this strategy worked, as his grandson in the 1680s, updated his schemes, maintained the drains and introduced new initiatives, carefully noting his progress and likewise transferring knowledge to his successors. So, not only do we find out what happened at the outset, but begin to understand why the Le Stranges were successful over the long run. Not for them the debacle of Hatfield Chase or the reverses experienced in the Fens in the late 17<sup>th</sup> century and beyond.

A key factor was that the Le Stranges were embedded in the culture, society and geography of the area; they understood the risks involved and devised strategies to deal with them, but most importantly they were committed for the long run.

They also understood the risks of adventuring on the Fens. Sir Hamon lost £600 on Boston Fen; this may explain why his son concentrated on the local marshes which he knew and where he exercised more control, but he was not averse to using Dutchmen as consultants. The creation of the notebooks and the handing down of knowledge was a vital part of his risk management strategy – for him and for future generations.

**Slide 4 Faden's Map of Norfolk, 1797** – the marshes we are going to examine actually lay in two distinctive areas. Heacham belongs to the marshes bordering The Wash – really an extension of the Fens - which run up from Kings Lynn, through the Sandringham and Snettisham estates, to the chalk outcrop at Hunstanton.

The marshes from that point occupy a different formation running eastwards along the north Norfolk coast. Significantly, the marshes at Heacham accounted for 177 acres of the total 245 acres drained ie 72%. They were a more commercial venture and were

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<sup>5</sup> E. M. Griffiths, 'A Country Life': Sir Hamon Le Strange of Hunstanton in Norfolk, 1583-1564' in R. W. Hoyle, *Custom, Improvement and the Landscape in Early Modern Britain* (Farnham, 2011), pp. 224-6.

<sup>6</sup> The notebooks NRO, LEST/KA6; KA9; KA10 and KA24 for Hunstanton, Holme and Sedgeford survive, while those for Heacham LEST/KA4-8 are missing.

tackled slightly later. Unfortunately, the 4 note books relating to Heacham have been lost, so we have only the summaries of cost and profit which appear in the survey and accounts. However, we do know that Sir Nicholas incurred heavy losses and had to be bailed out by his father. Nevertheless, by the late 1630s, the marshes at Heacham were producing significant quantities of marsh barley and by 1650 the rental values had almost doubled.<sup>7</sup>

I could say much more about Heacham, but for this paper, I will concentrate on the 67 ½ acres drained at Hunstanton and Holme, for which we have detailed records, and relate it to the wider activity on the North Norfolk Coast.

**Slide 5** shows the geography at Hunstanton, where the tides erode the chalk outcrop and carry the debris eastward depositing it along the North Norfolk coast, creating sand dunes, lagoons, islands and spits. At the same time tidal activity westwards brings more deposits from the eastern cliffs at Sheringham adding to the silting up of the river estuaries and the creation of the vast sandy beaches and marshland. This is a coastline of accretion rather than the erosion that affects the east coast of Norfolk from Happisburgh to Yarmouth.

**Slide 6** shows the full length from Hunstanton to Sheringham. Note the old eroded cliffline with its foreshore of marshland and sandy beaches - and the area around Holkham, between Burnham Overy and Wells.

**Slide 7 OS Map** this area provides by far the best example of drainage activity along the coast – thousands of acres rather than a few hundred. It used to be thought that this venture as initiated by Coke of Holkham as part of his revolutionary improvement in the 1780s, but we now know that much was achieved by his uncle in the 1720s, including the old sea wall built between 1720-22.

In fact, Keith Allison points out that embanking and drainage at Holkham pre-dated the Cokes. Using the evidence from Holkham, with material from the Le Stranges of Hunstanton, the Cobbes of Sandringham, and the Bacons of Stiffkey, Allison explained how the marshes in this region played an integral part in the Norfolk foldcourse system and the development of Sheep-Corn Husbandry.<sup>8</sup>

**Slide 8** shows a map of a Holkham foldcourse of 1590 incorporating marshes – as well as the heathland or lyng - in its grazing regime. The foldcourse system involved sheep and cattle being folded on the upland arable fields in the winter where they fertilized the light sandy soils. In spring when the crops were planted they had to be moved to summer grazing; the brecks or heathland provided succour, but marshes were vastly superior. Their presence and quality meant that landowners could increase their stocking regimes and bring more light land into cultivation. In this way, marshes were a

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<sup>7</sup> Griffiths, 'A Country Life', pp. 226-8.

<sup>8</sup> Allison, Ph. D. thesis; 'The Sheep Corn Husbandry of Norfolk in the Sixteenth and Seventeenth Century, *AgHR*, 5, (1957).

huge asset to these coastal estates. Forget the Norfolk 4 course rotation - marshes were the answer at Holkham.

**Slide 9** – This map from further down the coast at Stiffkey and Blakeney illustrates the picture vividly – note the villages on the old cliffline, with the arable uplands behind, and the fresh and salt marshes towards the sea. This is a tracing from a map of 1586 from the Bacon archive. Sir Nathaniel Bacon had great plans to build a port at Stiffkey ‘which was deeper and safer than Blakeney or Cley’. Reflecting the rising price of corn, economic activity along this coast was gaining momentum by the 1580s, but new initiatives by these gentry landowners did not pass unchallenged.

The heightened activity and involvement of the Cokes and Bacons from the 1580s was cited by Richard Tawney in *The Agrarian Problem in the Sixteenth Century*.<sup>9</sup> He was particularly interested in the corporate action taken by the ‘yeomen, commoners and freeholders of the town’ of Burnham Overy against Robert Bacon and Thomas Coke when they purchased marshes there in 1588. In return for walling, embanking and draining the marsh and making it suitable for pasture and tillage, the commoners agreed to sacrifice their grazing rights over 3 parts of the whole. In other words, they were prepared to surrender rights for a *quid pro quo*. Tawney was impressed by their willingness to act as a single body, ‘they buy land and they sell land and they can leave it to their heirs. Certain persons in the township act on their behalf, much as directors might act for a body of shareholders. Is it possible to speak of such arrangements simply in terms of individual rights? Are we not driven to think of the township as almost a landholding corporation?’ Certainly all the evidence suggests that the townships, as well as individual tenants, were a force to be reckoned with and that they could - and did - influence the development of the marshes.

**Slide 10 - Faden close up.** As we move to the Hunstanton estate in the 17<sup>th</sup> century, we find all these features and issues writ large. From the close up we can see the light soil uplands of Ringstead, Sedgford and Heacham fringed by the marshes. See also the patches of heathland – Thornham Lyng, Sedgford and Ringstead Commons.

The interdependence of Holme and Ringstead was such that the Abbey of Ramsey, Lords of the manor of Great Ringstead, had held extensive lands and grazing rights in Holme. The Le Stranges, granted this manor at the dissolution, inherited all the complexities of that relationship.

Although Allison did not use Sir Nicholas’s notebooks, he quoted from a lease, cited in a legal case between various landowners and the inhabitants of Holme in 1635, which explains precisely how these grazing regimes worked and the ever present potential for dispute.<sup>10</sup> The lease, for 21 years, included a foldcourse for 4C sheep in the marshes, commons and shackle of Holme. The inhabitants of the town, who claimed the right to

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<sup>9</sup> R. H. Tawney, *The Agrarian Problem in the Sixteenth Century* (1912), p. 245, fn. 1.

<sup>10</sup> NRO, LEST/FQ1

feed 300 sheep on the common marshes, brought a case against the lessees who they accused of 'so surcharging the common salt marsh' that they had 'no benefit' from it.

The Le Stranges were not directly affected by this case and the resolution is unclear. However, Sir Hamon was involved in another case between Sir Nathaniel Bacon and William Holly of Holme in 1608, where the latter was charged 'to have entered and fed with sheep upon Georges Marsh, North Holmes and West Marsh'.<sup>11</sup> Significantly, the jury found for Holly 'as the marshes and meeles north of the sd 3 parcels were comon and so fed by the inhabitants'. The case confirmed that Sir Hamon as Lord of the Manor of Great Ringstead was lord of the Commons of Holme'. This item was carefully copied into Sir Hamon's memoranda book alongside other items, which his great grandson noted, 'could be understood and rectified according to the law'.<sup>12</sup>

Assiduous research and careful record keeping characterized the Le Stranges' management policy. Deeds, charters, depositions and judgements with annotations and notes, fill the pages of Sir Hamon's memoranda books. With this knowledge, he and his successors were able to beat off several challenges, most notably in Heacham over part of the marsh bank in 1647, and in 1698, over the rights of warren on Holme Meeles, claimed by the new owner of a minor manor in Holme with a large holding on the marshes.<sup>13</sup>

The Le Stranges were certainly vigilant and possibly aggressive in defence of their rights, but as Angus Winchester has described in his work on the neighbouring Commons at Brancaster and Thornham, this coastline was very much a 'Contested Landscape'. The Le Stranges needed to be tough with tenants seeking to erode their assets, and yet all the parties understood the benefits of co-operation. With the Le Stranges providing the leadership, management skills and capital investment, resources were expanded and communities sustained. The Ringstead and Holme field books show that the number of holdings in Ringstead increased from 62 in 1620 to 72 in 1700.<sup>14</sup> This growing activity is reflected in Sir Nicholas's notebooks.

The first notebook,<sup>15</sup> which he started in 1633, concentrates on a specific area – the closes and common marshes running northward from Hunstanton Park to the sea at Holme. This river valley formed a geographical unit, while the west of Hunstanton, dominated by the village and its openfields was more or less left to its own devices.

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<sup>11</sup> NRO, LEST/Q37

<sup>12</sup> NRO, LEST/Q37

<sup>13</sup> For the Heacham case, R. P. Cust and A. J. Hopper, eds., *Cases in the High Court of Chivalry, 1634-1640* (Harleian Society, new ser. 18, 2006); for the full record, <http://www.court-ofchivalry.bham.ac.uk/index.htm>. The case was revived in the Court of Chancery in 1647; C2/CHAS 1/C29/63; C22/49/20 and for the out of court settlement in 1648, NRO, LEST/DN1. For Holme Meeles, NRO, LEST/Q37 as fn. 12.

<sup>14</sup> NRO, LEST/Q36; NRO, LEST/EH4; EH6 and EH7.

<sup>15</sup> NRO, LEST/KA6.

We can see this more clearly on the Hunstanton Map of 1615<sup>16</sup> > **Slide 11**. This shows the demense lands on the east of the parish, where the family concentrated their energies, leading to the marshes at Holme which very much served as a playground for the menfolk.

**Slide 12** The early Holme Map has not survived, but one - made in the 1680s – shows the corner of the new marsh by Holm bridge. In fact, an award of 1558 noted that an earlier Sir Nicholas had already erected a bank at this point. The blue line shows the old cliffline separating the arable from the marshes

**Slide 13** – list of marshes drained – note only a few acres in Holme. There was in fact little scope in Holme, because although the family owned the grazing rights to the common marsh, they held very little demense land. Holme was dominated by large manorial tenants, who initiated their own drainage schemes – and farmed much of the demense in Hunstanton.

**SLIDE 14** – It will come as no surprise that Sir Nicholas's earliest efforts were directed at improving the area for fishing, fowling and hawking.<sup>17</sup> He and his father, both passionate sportsmen, wanted to make places 'handsome to gunn and hawke in; they created havens and pitts for 'handsome flying', breast works and blinds 'to gaine shootes at the fowls' and constructed 'handsome' riding passages along 'my new drains'. Note the word 'handsome' and the desire for an attractive amenity they could enjoy with their friends. This reminds us of the enduring association between field sports and natural landscapes enhanced by hedges, treeplanting and water. These cultural considerations were an early priority and helped to shape the look and feel of these marshes.

Despite his seemingly frivolous motives, Sir Nicholas managed 'the home marshes' with precision and commitment. He showed a genuine grasp of engineering and revelled in the minutest calculations > **Slide 15**. Soon he drew up a table of Rates and Wages, followed by a description of the length and layout of 13 drains numbered from A-K.

**Slide 16** indicates the army of labourers he employed to fill old drainages, level low places, erect posts and rails and build sluices. For this arduous task he offered his wet workmen a 'largesse' for working irregular hours. Like his father he also made agreements with specialist workers for the more technical tasks.

**Slide 17** With the basic drainage work complete, the next step was ploughing up and sowing the marsh – with all the equipment and work that involved. In 1635 he reaped his first crop of coleseed. The transition to growing crops was a risky business and soon Sir Nicholas was taking steps to support his new tenants.

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<sup>16</sup> NRO, LEST/AO1

<sup>17</sup> NRO, LEST/KA6

**Slide 18** - When it came to ploughing up The Bogge and Whin Pasture he resorted to a system of ploughing to halves with the tenants, Murton and Woodrow and Richard Gyles; these agreements shared the risk and costs of improvement with both parties providing labour and equipment. In other words, the landowner contributed working capital to the venture. Note, the supply of his own horses and labour, and the purchase of a Dutch plough with specialists, Charles Sands of Wisbech and **Mr Hasdoncke** who worked for 5 days and 'instructed how to use her'. The plough, supplied by Thomas Gardner with all its furniture, had to be collected from Sutton Marsh in the Fens.<sup>18</sup>

This level of collaboration shows Sir Nicholas more or less underwriting tenants during this difficult phase; at the same time he embarked on a building programme providing tenants with new farmsteads > **Slide 19**

**Slide 20** Sir Nicholas also entered into similar agreements with his father at Holme New Marsh where they shared the costs and the losses.<sup>19</sup> They clearly accepted the notion of heavy capital expenditure at the outset, the prospect of losses before they turned a profit in the long run. Note the agreement is set out by Mr Hasdoncke.

This kind of commitment by landowners did not always happen. Steers quoted Sir Nicholas Le Strange's description of the inundation of the fresh marshes at Titchwell in the 1680s, where the mees were flattened and sea reduced the area to saltmarshes. 'The property being in the hands of Magdalen College, and the Fellows contenting themselves with the old rent – neither the principal tenant or his under servants will care to contribute towards the charge of Imbanking them afresh. Brancaster Bank being by this means exposed to the strong west winds suffers very much and t'will be great expense to keep them in repair'.<sup>20</sup>

This point illustrates graphically the benefit of having a resident landowner committed to the locality, rather than an absentee or institutional landowner with an eye to short term profit.

Steers and Winchester also refer to Mr Hasdonck; in fact he was a familiar figure along the coast, engaged in all sorts of enterprises at Thornham, Brancaster, Wiveton and further to the east at Salthouse. I mentioned him to Piet and apparently, Dutchmen working in this way, offering their services to individual landowners were not uncommon. I recently found a paper book containing Hasdoncke's plans for Holme Marshes<sup>21</sup>; they also involved Mr Taylor of North Holmes > **Slide 22**

Finally, how much did all this cost Sir Nicholas in the 1630s?

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<sup>18</sup> NRO, LEST/KA6

<sup>19</sup> NRO, LEST/KA9

<sup>20</sup> Steers, 'NoteS', p.44. fn.2; Winchester and Straughton, *Thornham and Brancaster*; p. 5

<sup>21</sup> NRO, LEST/FQ1

**Slide 23** shows simple disbursements from 1638-early 1640s; and over page in **Slide 24** disbursements from 1633-38; **Slide 25** – an attempt to assess the cost, allowing for 8% interest on his capital.<sup>22</sup>

**Slide 26** shows how he calculates the figures, using Ponds Almanacke.<sup>23</sup> Notice the gap between expenditure and profit in 1638 – still a long way to go before these marshes show a profit. I need to do more work on the finances and I would welcome comments on this aspect.

What I think is significant, is the family's long term commitment to the project; the two men, father and son did not expect to make a profit at this early stage and accepted losses as part of the process. They were patient and careful, kept meticulous records for their successors, employed experts and experimented quietly with new technology. They also collaborated with their tenants offering support and sharing risks. Yes, they were certainly vigilant about protecting their rights, but so was any self respecting landowner determined to guard their assets.

Above all, the Le Stranges were totally embedded in the locality and confident of their own future within it; there was nothing speculative or short-term in their approach. This helped them achieve enduring outcomes and avoid the disasters that afflicted the largescale speculative ventures on the Fens.

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<sup>22</sup> NRO, LEST/KA6

<sup>23</sup> NRO, LEST/KA6