Introduction to the text

The Ely Coucher Book (ECB) was drawn up for the bishop of Ely in 1249-50 to record information about ‘the advowson of churches, demesnes, meadows, pastures, woods, marshes and fisheries, and regarding knights’ fees. Also regarding the assized rents of freemen and others, and regarding the works and customs of those owing labour services’. The manuscript offers a detailed record of demesne and other holdings, tenants, services, rents and further income from the bishop of Ely’s estates in 1249-50, and allows inferences to be drawn from that information: about medieval demography and social structure, for example, or the balance between arable crops and pastoral husbandry, patterns of settlement and field organisation, land management, and the relics of archaic obligations, to list but a few. Some of these are described in more detail below.

The particular importance of the fenland extents of the ECB in supporting medieval scholarship is only partly based on the geographical location of these episcopal manors. As importantly, most were co-terminous with the vills in which they lay. They record the character of landscape, its organisation and the status and obligations of its inhabitants within a substantial, cohesive area that extends over most of Cambridgeshire’s peat and silt fens, including large tracts of the island of Ely. Because the same questions were asked on each manor, and the work of collection, recording and analysis was undertaken in a single phase, to similar standards, within a consistent framework, by a centrally coordinated team and within a relatively brief period of time, the results allow aggregation and comparison of data across a wide area. Together they offer us an opportunity to step into the physical, social and economic landscape of a large region in the middle of the thirteenth century.

The medieval fenland

The fen basin extends over 4,000 km², providing a vast delta for the major river systems that drain the east Midlands (the Nene, Ouse, and Welland), and for those flowing from the south and east: the Cam (Granta), Lark, Little Ouse, Wissey and Nar.¹ The uplands that border the fens slope gently down towards the basin’s floor which generally lies somewhere between a few metres above or below sea level. Ground within the basin that rises higher than the level reached by the greatest floods (usually between about three or four metres above sea-level) creates islands above the surrounding wetlands. Some are large - like those on which Ely, Chatteris, Whittlesey and March now stand – and others smaller, like Quanea, Norney, or Shippea.² Quantities of fresh water pouring into the fenland along the rivers could be compounded by high levels of ground water, by the risk of heavy and/or persistent rain or snow, and by marine flooding. The barely sloping basin floor inhibited the rate at which natural watercourses could drain into the Wash and considerable volumes of water were regularly backed up within the basin, encouraging the growth of raised peat bogs which had reached a depth of nearly 15 feet (4.5m) across much of southern and central fenland by about 1000 AD.³ A large band of silt laid down over millennia along the line of the Wash, sufficiently high above sea-level by the eighth century AD to be habitable, formed a further barrier to natural drainage.

¹ Hall 1992: 3-6.
² All place-names are in Cambridgeshire unless otherwise noted.

The cohesive geography of the region was reflected in consistency in arable layouts and, to an extent, in settlement morphology. Medieval arable described in the ECB appears to have been divided into a multiplicity of irregular subdivisions, in common with open fields elsewhere in East Anglia: the demesne at Doddington, for example, was made up of ten fields of varying acreages with names like Byrswrong, Estcroft and Akermansland. In only four of the Bishop’s fenland estates were arable fields arranged in the regular two or three divisions of the Midland system: Little Downham, Linden (Haddenham), Wilburton, and Littleport. Wheat, barley, oats and rye were grown on the rich soils of the clay-topped fen islands, which, in some places, also supported stands of managed woodland producing underwood, palings and thorn.\(^4\) The bishop’s tenants at Somersham, for instance, were required to take a bundle of thorn to his brew-houses whenever he was expected there, to assist in catching game for his hunting parties three times a year and to gather nuts in his woods in the autumn. While it is true that most settlement was nucleated, that headline statement hides a more complex picture (see below): many nucleations were polyfocal, some vills contained more than one nucleation, and smaller hamlets and farmsteads lay more widely dispersed around them.

Medieval peasants with access to pasture and other fen produce tended to be significantly better off than their upland counterparts.\(^5\) A man with little arable land but with a right of common in fen grazing and other products could live very well, often better than an upland peasant with thirty acres of arable land. At Waterbeach in 1340, for example, even ‘men with little or no land could support themselves through their rights over the extensive common pastures and fens’.\(^6\) Part of the reason could be found in the profits from dairying. Free and customary tenants were as keen cottlemen as their manorial lords; at an average of about 4.5 cows per taxpayer, peasant cattle herds in the Liberty of the abbey of Ramsey in 1291 were twice the size of those of their upland contemporaries, while almost every thirteenth-century Ramsey tenant owned at least one cow.\(^7\) The profits from dairying were augmented by other income directly or indirectly produced through the exercise of rights of common in fishing, fowling, turbery, reeds, sedge, osiers and so on.

The fenland population had been as substantial as that of the wealthier uplands of south Cambridgeshire since at least the later eleventh century.\(^8\) A large part of the reason for this may lie in the fact that ‘in no part of England were common rights more important’.\(^9\) The centrality of common rights to the peasant economy may also account for the survival of public obligations (archaic by the mid-thirteenth century) that had their origins in ancient free holdings to which they were once attached.\(^10\) Common rights were a perquisite of ‘ancient’ arable holdings held by Anglo-Saxon free men, members of the clan grouping (the ‘folk’) to whom early territories belonged. Folkland gradually disappeared from the seventh century onwards, its administrative structures metamorphosing into those of the hundreds (introduced into Cambridgeshire in the early tenth century), the remainder gradually absorbed into manorial structures after 1066. Yet the bishop’s tenants in Wisbech still paid ferthing in 1249-50, a public levy whose origins predated the hundred to which it was now owed: John Uncle of Wisbech, for example, held ‘a message and half of Ninemannedale for 16d. each year, [and] 2½d. for ferding at the Annunciation of the Blessed Mary’. Many Wisbech tenants also owed a custom called govelaker, a similarly ancient public obligation.

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\(^5\) Darby 1940: 22-38; Thirsk 1953: 40-45.
\(^6\) Wright and Lewis 1989: 250.
\(^7\) Postan 1973: 230, 245.
\(^8\) Oosthuizen, in preparation; see also Darby 1971: 284-90.
\(^9\) Darby 1940: 68.
\(^10\) Darby 1940: 68; Neilson 1920: xxxiv-xliii.
of ploughing royal land.

Further south, in Wilburton and the soke\textsuperscript{11} of Lynden and Doddington, ECB recorded fairly large numbers of \textit{hundredors} and \textit{molmen}, descendants of Anglo-Saxon free peasants, who held their land from the hundred rather than from the bishop. The ancient public obligations they were expected to fulfill in return for their lands included attendance at the hundred court, and payments to the hundred (not the bishop) of \textit{sextithepeni} (a charge of 60d. on the hide) and \textit{wardpeni} (a commutation of the ancient public obligation of fortification and guard); they either worked on Aldreth causeway or paid an amount in lieu, the maintenance of public bridges being another of the ‘common burdens’ owed from free holdings on \textit{folkland}. Robert at the chapel and Geoffrey \textit{le sokeman} (both \textit{hundredors} at Haddenham), for instance, owed ⅓d. and ⅔d. \textit{sextithepeni} respectively, paid 1d. \textit{wardpeni} each, and each did ‘his share of work’ on Aldreth causeway, although their holdings were quite different in size: 5 and 12½ acres respectively. In yet other manors, free and customary land included \textit{ware} acres, another relic of Anglo-Saxon military levies owed from \textit{folkland}.\textsuperscript{12} The free status of these tenants depended on ancient obligations attached to the holding rather than obligations attached to an individual. The holders tended to owe the same customs of \textit{sextithepeni} and \textit{wardpeni} as the \textit{hundredors}. In 1249-50 \textit{ware} acres could be found in Ely, Wilburton, Lindon (Haddenham, Hill Row and Linden End), Littleport, and Stretham. Nicolas son of Elias and William \textit{of le hale}, who jointly held 18 \textit{ware} acres in Ely, for instance, were expected to undertake the role of coroner, if required, in addition to attending the hundred courts and assisting the bailiff in enforcing public order in the Isle. Similarly, Robert of Sproutun held 10 \textit{ware} acres in Stretham, ‘paying 1d. for \textit{sextithepeni} and 1d. for \textit{wardeselver}’; Philip de Lisle held 16 \textit{ware} acres in Wilburton, owing ‘suit to the court of Ely, Wilburton court and to each hundred (court) throughout the year. He owes \textit{sextithepeni} and \textit{wardpeni}’. Although the whole ‘package’ of early and middle Anglo-Saxon public obligations that signified free status (and its concomitant common rights in the fen) did not survive intact anywhere in 1249-50, enough was preserved in different places and in sufficiently similar forms across the fen basin to suggest ‘that their origins lie before the time when they had been embodied into the manorial structure, to which they were already deeply committed by Domesday times’.\textsuperscript{13} What remains to be understood is the extent to which medieval economic and ecological management of non-arable resources in the fen basin, of which they were an inextricable facet, may have had equally old origins.

\textit{The fen ecology and economy}

The real economic potential of the undrained peat fenland becomes plain in the zone between the level of the winter floodline and the basin floor. Apparently minor variations in waterlogging created a multi-patterned, shifting mosaic of ecological possibilities, depending on whether a location was permanently under water (the meres), flooded in winter and permanently damp (raised peat bog interspersed by reeds, rushes and sedge), or flooded in winter and dry in summer (pastures and meadow). The degree of waterlogging was further influenced by underlying surface geology, whether clay, gravel or peat, and by whether a site stood on a river’s bank, in its floodplain, or at a distance; and it depended on seasonal variation and climatic change over time.

The ebb and flow of water across the landscape and the extent and timing of floods were thus crucial to the exploitation of non-arable produce. It is not surprising, then, that the ECB

\textsuperscript{11} For the compilers of the ECB, the soke was the entire area within which each vill had common rights, often extending considerably beyond the manor (cf. Miller 1951: 80).

\textsuperscript{12} Faith 1997: 115.

\textsuperscript{13} Miller 1951: 117.
describes a landscape in which the movement of water was already carefully managed. A multiplicity of lodes (canals) was listed in each manor, far more than was required for purposes of travel or transport - the fens around Doddington alone, for example, were crossed by Sumershamlode, Wilberwykelode, Traveslode, Hymelode, Cokeslode, and Danelode, while Edyvelode, Wertelode and Alderhelode lay across the marshland between the southern uplands and the Isle of Ely at Wilburton. And in every manor dams, weirs, traps and jetties for fishing, hythes and sluices were mentioned in passing: Robert son of Everard lived ‘at the bar’ in Ely; fishing weirs at Wilmingston included Strawere, Echenwere and Ewere; the bishop was entitled to ‘a dam and a fishtrap’ in Upstavene in Wisbech; six tenants in Linden held jetties ‘for fishing in the fen’; there were two hythes at Little Downham, one just west of the main settlement at Dunhamhythe and another further out in the fen at Godrichesheth; John le Clowere lived at Willingham (a clow was ‘a clapgate fixed to a lock in such a way that water could flow through it only in one direction’).  

The sophisticated range of strategies by which medieval fen-dwellers exploited such environmental opportunities is illustrated in the complex variety of rents and customs of the bishop’s tenants in 1249-50. The ECB records grazing, mowing and digging in the peat fen; cutting and carriage of large bundles of reeds for thatching, sedge, rushes for flooring and brewing, and turf for fuel; mowing, raising and stacking fen hay; and catching eels and other fish in nets and from boats in fisheries in the meres, rivers and lodes (canals). Fishing was let out in meres like Suthmere in Doddington, sometimes in fractions of a mere or by the day on which fishing was allowed to a tenant, and produced vast numbers of eels each year: in Ely itself, Upware had once rendered over 3,000 eels annually to the bishop, and two further fisheries had provided over 17,000 more. The bishop also rented out reedbeds like those at Littleport and Benwick. Even the midday meal provided during ploughing, harvesting and mowing services was derived from the fen: tenants could expect, inter alia, ‘best cheeses, and two lots of rolled butter as it is found in the churn’, together with ale and bread.

Pasture

The descriptions in the ECB of the boundaries of fen available to each vill reveal a strikingly wide area of grazing, most of which was subject to rights of common or intercommon. The straits between the southern slopes of the Isle of Ely and the edge of the south Cambridgeshire uplands were intercommoned by Wilburton, Haddenham, Cottenham, Rampton and Willingham. The bishop’s manors had rights of intercommon in 1249-50 across the entire area of fen between Ely and the Abbotsdelph (later the Bishop’s Delph) whose meandering direction – almost certainly in part following a natural watercourse – formed the boundary with the abbey at Bury St Edmunds, Suffolk, and can still be traced on the modern map. The men of the abbey or bishop at Sutton, Mepal, Manea, Witcham, Coveney and Little Downham intercommoned in the fens to the west of the Isle, with those of Doddington and Chatteris. The soke of Somersham (including Bluntisham, Earith, Colne, Pidley and Fenton) intercommoned in the area between the southern fen-edge and the old course of the River Nene with vill of the abbey of Ramsey (Wistow, Warboys, Raveley, Upwood) as well as with the Whittlesey tenants of the abbeys of Thorney and Ely. The men of Doddington, Wilmingston, March and Benwick had rights of intercommon across a vast area between their own islands in the east and the Catswater in the west (running along the western edge of the fen from Peterborough to Crowland), and bounded in the south by the old course of the Nene and in the north by the Old South Ea, for centuries the county boundary between Cambridgeshire and Lincolnshire. They intercommoned with the men of Whittlesey and Thorney in the south of this great expanse, with the men of Crowland in the

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14 Kirkus 1959: lxxxv.
north-west, and with right-holders from the silt-land parishes around Wisbech in the north-east.

It is unsurprising, then, that fenland pastures and meadows – on which cattle fed in such numbers that they were conventionally described as grazing ‘horn under horn’ – were extolled by medieval chroniclers. The marshes at Thorney ‘abound in trees, whose smooth height stretches towards the stars. The plain there is as level as the sea; which with its grass flourishing delights the eye, and which is so smooth that there is nothing to hinder him that runs through it’; and at Ramsey there were ‘rich pastures, shady groves, and rich meadows’.

The reason lay in the rich ‘whiteseed’ grass (‘fen hay’) produced on fen pastures each year, which could produce two or more hay crops. The productivity and quality of the pastures were underpinned by winter flooding, which created natural water meadows provided that the water did not linger too long. The necessity to ensure that water in the higher parts of the fen was carefully managed to support pasture meant that ditch-digging was a regular service for customary tenants: a day’s work each year for the men of Littleport, for example, included cleaning out two perches of existing ditches, or digging new ones five feet wide and five feet deep. A further duty was that of ‘hassocking’, which the ECB shows was already being undertaken in the mid-thirteenth century. It involved a day’s work for each tenant in removing thistles, nettles and tufts of coarse grass and rushes from the pastures before the cattle entered for grazing. The ECB recorded that the recently assarted meadow at Stonea was ‘newly hassocked’, that there were six acres of meadow at Little Downham which ‘it is possible to hassock’, and that customary tenants at Willingham should ‘hassock if required’. Such labour was worth expending: a two- or three-fold increase in the acreage of meadowland since the mid-eleventh century was repaid by the thirteenth century by the rental value of an acre of fen meadow, or the lactage from a single cow grazing upon it, which could bring in three or more times the income from an acre of arable land.

The bishop had a vaccary in most of his peatland vills, including four at Doddington: one at Doddington itself and three more at subordinate vaccaries at Bereford, Estiwoch and Westreya. Together they held at least 100 cows and 5 bulls in 1249-50, adding significance to the customary duty of the men of March to take a ‘boatload of cheese’ to Bishop’s (now King’s) Lynn each year.

Assarts

There is, however, little evidence in the ECB for widespread drainage or reclamation for arable cultivation. There was some work of this kind in the silt fens – as in the lands of Elloe in Lincolnshire – where land was reclaimed within ditches to create arable furlongs (often called dales), like Ninemandale in Elm, in which arable strips were more often divided by ditches than by furrows. One of the customs of the men of Elm, for instance, was to ‘find a man for drying the fields for half a day’ during the ploughing season. The risk of flooding could make such labour precarious, to the extent that the bishop’s tenants at Tydd St Giles could ‘take in land towards the sea and fen without any increase of rent’ although their rents were still payable if their customary holdings were flooded. Further south, in the peat fens, there was some evidence of reclamation – the bishop’s arable demesne at Doddington included just over 85 acres of new assarts and there were considerable assarts along the Somersham fen-edge at Pidley, Bluntisham and Colne.

There were only very limited opportunities for assarts for arable even in the shallowest parts of the peat fen. By 1249-50 the bishop had had to compensate tenants at Cuniwode in

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15 Darby 1940: 53-4.
16 Darby 1940: 67; Campbell 2000: 146.
17 Hallam 1954.
Doddington ‘on account of the poor quality’ of the assarted arable they rented from him there. Although the wealthier free tenants were able to invest more capital in reclamation, it is notable that their mid-thirteenth century activities appear to have been restricted to the fen-edge and the higher parts of the fen - Robert of Oviton reclaimed 90 acres at Somersham in partnership with his wife, brother- and sister-in-law, and Sir Giles de Argentun held ‘100 acres of new assart’ at Pidley – and even there, since ECB refers to these lands as ‘assart’ rather than ‘arable land’, it is possible that these assarts were for meadow rather than arable cultivation. Most intakes were aimed at investing in or extending acreages of meadow already held in severity and such improvement could sometimes be extensive. There was ‘newly assarted meadow below Stoneye’ on the bishop’s demesne in Doddington and small tongues of non-arable assart (languettae) in the fen at Colne. ‘Newly enfeoffed’ tenants at Benwick were renting ‘parcels of meadow’, while forty-seven ‘newly-enfeoffed’ tenants had improved nearly 750 acres of fen at Waldensey in Elm for pasture and meadow; just under 60 tenants held about 550 acres of similar intakes at Apsedon on the boundary between Little Downham and Littleport. While these were undoubtedly substantial acreages, they pale by comparison with the areas of the watery landscapes within which they were set: the combined fens of Littleport and Little Downham extended over 24,000 acres in 1636, for example, putting improvements at Apsedon in the shade.

The opportunity to exploit new or additional rights of common across extensive fenland pastures, or to gain access to small areas of several pasture, seems to have been very attractive to the free and customary peasantry already established within the bishop’s estate. By far the largest number of tenants with family surnames in Mercereford and Apsedon in 1249-50 were either individuals with other landholdings in their vill or were representatives of extended families which had collective property interests across the manor. Of the latter, many men with no other holdings on the estate, but whose siblings and parents lived elsewhere in the vill, may have been the younger sons ‘of a prosperous peasantry’ who might otherwise have struggled to make a living. Thomas, son of Adam, to take one example, held a messuage in Mercereford, while his brothers held three fisheries on the estate, some hundredal acres in Doddington and Wimblington, a rent-paying messuage at Doddington, a full villein holding at Wimblington and a part-share in another, and a number of small plots of rent-paying land in Cuniwode and Wimblington. They were almost certainly the sons of Denise, widow of Adam, who held a censural messuage at Doddington and a few assarted acres in Cuniwode and Wimblington. These men were not defined by the status of the land they held: they were clearly as happy to hold freely as to take on land with full customary services. This is not to say that there were no incomers into the medieval fenland – there was an extensive family of Irish tenants in Wimblington in 1249-50, for example – just that the numbers may be rather fewer than was previously believed and that population growth may have been fuelled as much by internal growth as by migration from other vills. Local or new, their primary focus appears to have been the creation of a combination of landholdings and rights of common to rich fenland resources which together maximised access to a wide range of economic opportunities.

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18 Oosthuizen, 2014, Table 1. Although it is impossible to know the precise correlation between the area of the fens in 1636, when they were first accurately surveyed, and the extent of fenland in the mid-thirteenth century, the stability of the floodline in the fen basin from the eighth century AD onwards suggests that differences were likely to fall within a predictable range rather than to differ substantially.

19 Miller 1951: 98; Oosthuizen 2013: 68-70.
Settlement and the wider economy

Although most fenland settlement appears to have been nucleated, the larger vills often contained more than one nucleation, and the pattern may have been ancient: the soke of Doddington included nucleations at Doddington, Wimblington, March, and Benwick – the first three recorded well before the Norman Conquest. The settlement pattern was complex. Many settlements were polyfocal, sometimes of old: the three major components of Haddenham – Linden End, Hill Row and Haddenham – were all mentioned in Domesday Book. By the thirteenth century March was made up of focuses at Knight’s End, Hatchwood, and Town End, and Wimblington included satellite settlements at Coneywood and Eastwood End. Most of the larger settlements preserve some evidence of medieval settlement planning, characterised by properties of uniform area arranged into blocks with common front and back boundaries. In some cases, planned components appear to have been laid out, and augmented, from the eleventh century onwards.\(^{20}\)

Smaller informal settlements with little indications of planning have survived less successfully into the modern period and may always have been more transient. Nonetheless, it is clear from the ECB that even in vills where settlement was focused on large nucleations there was considerable dispersed settlement in cottages, farms and hamlets precariously perched wherever the risk of flooding lessened – especially on river banks and higher spots in the fens. In the bishop’s soke of Doddington, where there were already nucleations at Doddington, Wimblington, March, Mercheforde and Benwick, there were further settlements at Westry, at Estiwith, at Cotes (de kote), and at Southwood, while other tenants lived ‘at the corner’ (in angelo), at the wood (ad boscum), at the brook (ate brone), at the barn (ate berne), at the stile (ad scalarium), by the ditch (del delf), on an assart (ote breche), along the old course of the Nene (de hidele), at Weremere (in the fens along the Nene to the west of March), at a hythe (wythethe), and perhaps at Copalder (colakre) which can still be seen on modern Ordnance Survey maps, on the eastern bank of the Nene.

Daily life was focused on water-borne transport and communication. In every modern fenland village vestiges can be found of public hythes – sometimes several in a single settlement – and of private cuts leading into individual properties. They are visible along the fen-edge at Wicken, Isleham, Burwell, Reach, Horningsea and Fen Ditton as well as at Willingham, Aldreth, Littleport, Welney and Outwell. In addition to their own needs, the bishop’s tenants in 1249-50 were required to transport him (and his household) by water from one manor to another, as well as the agricultural produce of his manors and his goods going to and from market. The ECB lists cheese, building timber, underwood and firewood, grain, hay, sheaves of reeds, wood and underwood, mill stones, livestock and other local products carried by water by the bishop’s tenants both between his manors and between his manors and the ports. The men of Stretham, the ECB explained, ‘should carry the bishop, his baggage and household accompanying him by water to Ely, Ditton, Somersham, Willingham and like places’; those from his manor at Doddington had to take his goods across an area bounded by Cambridge, St Ives and Ramsey (both Hunts.), and Peterborough (Northants.); while those from Wilburton additionally went to Bishop’s (now King’s) Lynn and Brandon (Suffolk).

Participation in relatively small-scale local or regional trade, either by selling fen products or by undertaking some craft specialisation based on them, seems to have been so common as to be unremarkable across the fen basin and such informal trade could be as vibrant and complex as that in places with a market grant. There were no markets on the bishop’s fenland estate in 1249-50 beyond that at Wisbech, yet John mercator lived at Stretham,

John *le Chapman* in Doddington, Vincent *mercator* at Littleport, and Peter *chapman* in *Mercheforde*. Many men may have had diversified occupations, depending on the season, like the potters recorded by the ECB at Pidley who were allowed to dig for clay there and to collect wood for firing their kilns. They remind us not only that Anglo-Saxon Ipswich, St Neots and Thetford wares were found across the fen basin but also that itinerant producers and sellers were so common there that in 1070 Hereward ‘the Wake’ was able to gain entry to the Conqueror’s camp disguised in the torn and dirty clothes he had ‘borrowed’ from a potter he had met, from whom he had also ‘borrowed’ his small boat and his stock of pots.  

Yet relatively few men outside Ely and Wisbech had craft names in 1249-50. There were some, like William the weaver at Leverington, Robert *le felter* at Wilburton, or the un-named threadmaker at *Waltershe* in Elm, and there is a little evidence of specialists in transport in men like Roger *le maryner* at Hill Row in Haddenham, Richard *le flotiere* at Benwick, and the carters at Somersham, March and Fen Ditton. The larger proportion of tenants listed in the ECB, however, had no surnames, and even those with occupational surnames simply recorded the conventional specialisms of any village, whether fen or upland: William the shepherd and Adam *le vacher* of Littleport, Gilbert *le cuverer* (*roofers*) of *Mercheforde* or Oky *le plumer* of Elm. It is difficult to see in these men anything more the rural diversity of occupation which characterized incomes for peasant families well into the nineteenth century, augmenting a living from the land by part-time and/or seasonal craft activities of one kind or another.

The extents of the bishop’s manors in the Cambridgeshire peat fens describe a medieval landscape dominated by vast tracts either permanently wet or seasonally damp, interspersed by islands of higher ground, its varied topography offering a rich mosaic of ecological opportunities. Together they create the portrait of a specialised region in the mid-thirteenth century, whose exploitation by peasants and lords was undertaken through sophisticated strategies aimed at economic profit and ecological sustainability, and concerning which there remain untold opportunities for further exploration.

**Conclusion**

The ECB has been consulted by the great scholars of medieval England for over a century, from Frederick Maitland, Paul Vinogradoff, Nellie Neilson, David Douglas and Clifford Darby to Edward Miller himself. Yet the details of the manuscript are not widely known. Its three known copies were cloistered in the Ely archives and private collections for many centuries and, later, secluded in the British Library, the University of Cambridge Library, and the archives of Gonville and Caius College, Cambridge. Not just the record of a number of places, but the portrait of a region, it has survived for over 750 years and it is a pleasure now to be able to bring Professor Miller’s translations of the Fenland portions of the document to a wider audience.

\(^{21}\) Fairweather 2005: 106.