

OUSEFLEET

First Revolve: your step, suspended...

There is no *prospect* here: looking forward the same as backward or sideways.

The broad floodplains of major navigable rivers draining to the Humber estuary...

Flat, featureless, low-lying, of very open character...

Imposing in its scale and linear layout, uniformity and openness...

All the more uniform for being flat... They say.

The 'emptiest place in Britain' does not easily reveal itself.

The map is drawn blank – a vacant white rectangle – at one scale at least...

No monuments, no verticals to punctuate the horizontal, to draw and arrest the eye; few land *marks*, except that is for the odd pylon.

Design classic: confidently striding; strung out, connected, power-full...

It is Dutch *landschap*: the horizon broad, drawn back...become the landscape itself...

It is dizzying arc: cloudscape – cumulus, cirrus, stratus, nimbus...

Skyscape – Orion, Ursa Major, Virgo...

It is man-made: a land of works – of banks and dykes and ditches and 'new' rivers...

A world under tension, precariously balanced...

Of shifting and conflicting rhythms and time scales – above your head, at your feet:
scudding cloud, swaying reed, slow shrinkage of the land...

Ever needing something, an event, to pull it into focus, into shape: a skittering snipe, a running hare, a skein of honking pink-feet, a gang of roistering women, the odd rural riot.

Needing a tower to get a look at it...

Second revolve: shuffling your feet...

How then to get purchase?

Prone, down on your belly, it becomes Edwin Abbott's 'Flatland', a world of two-dimensions: *Nothing is visible except straight lines; nothing has thickness*. Needing some patchy fog to get it into perspective.

On your back, an azimuth – needing star, horizon, compass – might fix you...

Standing erect, exposed, become figure in the landscape, triangulation must surely help. On request of 'the gentlemen of that county' all this was mapped early, 'out of turn'; on account of *'the number of changes occasioned by inclosures, drainages etc'*...

'A material public object and a most important Local Benefit would be at once obtained, at a great saving of Time, Labour and Expense.'

The fourth baseline of verification – 26,342 feet long – they laid out in 1801, down in Misterton Carrs, using Ramsden's two 100-foot chains: its ends marked by blocks of oak with square holes on their upper surfaces, filled with lead *'filed off even with the surface of the wood'* and with diagonals drawn that *'indicated the precise ends of the base.'*

X marks the spot.

And so begin the triangles: ever diminishing, to encompass the detail, the grain and texture.

Few here apparently: nothing worthy, of note; nothing either natural or strategic or otherwise at 1:50000 in SE830220 on Landranger Sheet 112.

Only the blue lines of the National Grid appear, sole orientation: to follow them would lead you on a perimeter path, forever.

And best beware: they might equally be courses of drainage, for the lie of *this* land is that it is deeply scored, already gridded; dangerous impediments hidden in its flatness.

Stepping out here, land-ranging, where would you go; towards what; to do what...

'There is no tradition of visiting the area' they say *'...very few pedestrians in the open countryside.'*

For safety's sake perhaps better then just to revolve, slowly, on the spot: as in a Victorian panorama or a cinematic panning shot: *with sweeping views over long distances to a skyline of dark bands of moor-land trees, riverbanks, power stations and power lines:* picturing processes long-term, occurrences abrupt.

Third revolve: scoring the surface...

In its origins: influx, outflow, stagnation, influx; land/water, water/land...Always finding an accommodation, a level...

On the surface map – beige alluvium, grey peat. Two domains, adjacent: fertile wetlands for hunting, gathering, agriculture; and a wilderness – inaccessible and often dangerous; a

treacherous world of fens and bogs and standing waters. But both exploited energetically, equally, by the commoners. Any distinction, of course, a matter of perception: particularly if you have neither boat nor stilts nor webbed feet.

As John Leland reported to Henry VIII:

'From the west point of Bikers Dike up along to the great mere, the soyle by the water be fenny, and morische, and full of carrs'; but also 'Full of good fish and fowl'.

Maps show Fenny and Morische Soyle; the Marshlande; the Don, Torne and Idle coiling and twisting in interlaced courses across the waste; with its meres and countless feryes. Isolated tract; ideal place of refuge, if you needed to lose yourself for a while...

Together, let's call it water-world: 60,000 acres flooding regularly; great sheets of water surrounding the island havens; the rivers deltaic, complex, shifting...

Inhabited; abandoned; inhabited:

Call it fish-world: pike, perch, roach, burbot, eels and lampreys.

Call it bird-world: *In addition to that most graceful of all birds the swan, which graced these meres with their presence, there were cranes, storks, bitterns, herons, and several of the falcon tribe; curlews, juddcocks, snipes, ruffs, and godwits; redshank, plover, water-crakes, water-hens and coots; various species both of wild geese and wild ducks, widgeons, and teal* recalls William Stonehouse.

Landscape of bridges, fords, doggy-paddling stock...

Domain of independent people...

Always somehow at sea: adrift, without footings, or foundation, without bed rock...

A life-world – difficult to discern, to get with...

To distinguish anything of value...

It was a mighty rude place before the drainage, the people being little better than heathens, professes Pryme.

Time then, to go Dutch...

Fourth revolve: drilling down...

'From time immemorial this large tract of country had been overflowed with water' is the pretext.

The recovery of innings and drowned and surrounded grounds and the drainage dry of watery marshes, fens, bogs, moors and other ground of like nature is the intention of the 1600 Act.

Charles 1 it is who needs the money, the ready cash, by realising national assets:

'...out of his royal and princely care for the publick good, in regaining so great a proportion of surrounded land; which, at the best yielded little or no profit to the common wealth, but contrariwise nourished beggars and idle persons...

On 24 May 1626, Cornelius Vermuyden agrees that he will *'at his own chardge drain and lay the same dry'*; *'and finish it with all expedition'*; make it useful, *'fit for tillage and pasture.'* British courtiers and Dutch investors – the fifty-seven Participants of his operating company – provide the finance. Crown, Participants and the local commoners each receive one third. Become a centre of speculation, of European investment.

This is a *capital* project: to intercept the main rivers, alter their courses and divert and straighten them; to build new outlets where continuous discharge is expected.

The participants – who naturally claim the best land to defray their outlay – expect quick return; the main work is completed in eighteen months.

It is flawed and inadequate: the channels are insufficient and high water levels prevent the sluice gates opening; formerly dry land floods. Vermuyden's error is in draining into the Trent rather than north to the Don below Adlingfleet. It is a disaster.

The Dutchies and their delvings make conditions worse for many: substituting a new economy – arable for pastoral; the growing of rape for grazing.

'What is coleseed and rape; they are but Dutch commodities and but trash and trumpery' writes Sir John Maynard angrily in 1646.

Fifth revolve: already knee deep...

Thus have strayngers prevailed to destroy our inheritance, and to convert that waste ground to their profit and our subversion, which our ancestors left for a synke and receptacle of inundant waters for our future safetie.

And so it begins: unrest, resistance, conflict...resort to law quickly followed by resort to violence: *He found himself mightly annoyed by the gnats and flies: that is, the common sort of the inhabitants that set upon him when he should rest...*

...in great numbers they burnt his carts, and barrows, and working instruments, in great heaps by night.

Rioters and bank wreckers – in female garb or under the guise of playing football – spoil and sabotage his schemes and attack his workers – who are abused, stoned, beaten and thrown into rivers – *and kept under water with long poles.*

And they harass the new immigrants and settlers – Dutch, Flemish, French...

They rose in tumults, brake down the fences and inclosures of four thousand acres, destroyed all the corn growing, and demolished the houses built thereupon.

Sixth revolve: feeling out of your depth...

The Dutch works are no protection from the real and present threat, as so much of the Levels – let's call them that – lie below the tidal reach of Trent and Ouse.

Always the tension between map and experience: knowing the river is there but unable to see it for the embankment...

Abraham de la Pryme, 1687: *Towards the end of this year there happened a great inundation in the Levels by means of the much rains that fell, and the high tides, which increased the waters so that they broke the banks and drowned the country for a vast many miles around.*

...it is my belief that one time it will come to its ancient state again, which will be the ruin of all those that have land therein.

It will take another hundred years and steam pumping to make this landscape as it is.

And something else: *letting* it back in; warping – Anglo-Saxon, *weorpan*, to turn aside.

Seventh revolve: at risk of inundation...

The process of warping is easily explained. The waters of the Trent being strongly impregnated with the earthly particles termed warp, would, as it constantly overflowed

the adjoining lands, deposit this sediment in large beds along its shores...The suggestion would easily present itself to the mind of an intelligent observer, that, if the sediment which the tide so copious deposited every day, could by any means be brought on to the low moorish grounds which were so much below the level of high water, it would have the same fertilising effect as it had on those places on which it had been left by the natural operation of the stream writes William Stonehouse in 1838.

What the land is, intended to be warped, is not of the smallest consequence; a bog, clay, sand, or a barn floor enthuses Arthur Young

Dyking, banking, sluicing: difficult, expensive, requiring skill and patience: *The strength and power of the drain will injure even the land itself, and will tear it up and sweep it away instead of warping it.*

An opaque blanket; burying the peat; raising the land; shrouding history...

But transforming: of fertility, value, run off – preventing further flooding and water-logging.

And they are such enthusiastic warpers: between 1800 and 1860, all lands within three miles of the Trent are warped.

Land as level as standing water; two metres above sea level...

New landscape; free scope: right angles and straight lines...

By 1851 it is *an immense plain...dark arable fields, intersected by long lines of drains, and exhibiting bright shining places where distant warping works are in progress: it has been flooded repeatedly by the tidal water of the river until several feet of a silty deposit have been accumulated, and this forms eminently suitable potato soil.*

Eighth revolve: at eye-level...

All that appears now deserted, empty, silent...imagine it peopled – with seasonal Irish labourers; with women; and with children.

The Children's Employment Commission, 1862: *The potatoes give plenty of work all the winter, and in the spring the children and women are again wanted to plant them.*

Report of the Royal Commission on the Employment of Children, Young Persons and Women in Agriculture 1867: The Warp and Carr District

In potato harvest time I employ about 60 women and grown-up boys. Each woman has a furrow to herself in the potato field, and brings a child with her to help, or if very young, two. Then behind the line of women I put a man to keep them in order. They are all close together in one long line. I employ my regular children all the year, but in December, January and February they only work whenever it is not too cold to hurt the potatoes.

I think the worst employment for children is over 'potato pies' in winter. The pie is a large heap of potatoes covered up with straw. When the farmer wants to deliver some, he gets a lot of children, old and young, who kneel down round the pie quite close together and sort them. The talk is dreadful then.

It is a disagreeable thing to go among a company of women at work: the overlookers don't like it, but the women won't have their tongues tied. They are worse than the men at any kind of ribald discourse.'

In the photographs of 1910 the women are well-upholstered, white bonnets, shawls, sacking aprons against wind and rain: on their knees, sorting the piled potatoes with wooden shovels and baskets.

Ninth revolve: finding your feet...

My father was a fieldsman for the Potato Marketing Board, post-war attempt to prevent either glut or want: opening the pies of forty-acre farmers – 'out in the wilds somewhere' he'd say – sniffing for the telltale odour of rot, plunging his boot into the morass, thigh deep. On a 1:10,000 map, fields are outlined, the names of growers and acreages for 1983 noted in pencil in his small neat hand: F. Ball and Sons; A. Smith; Equity and Law. Most go for crisps: Riley's of Scunthorpe – *'For that crisp sort of performance in every sport'*

Become: *Rich high quality land that is intensively farmed and includes substantial areas of warp land; very large open fields divided by dykes with relatively few hedgerows or field trees. Widespread evidence of drainage history in rivers, old river courses, ditches, dykes and canals. They say...*

Landscape of small victories and long reverses: flood, drain, warp, pump, surrender...

Always a matter of 'winning' and 'letting go': given the energy and the will...

At The Island Sand, Bosomcross, Marsh Furlong, Adlingfleet Ings, Swath Ends, Horsegroves Drain, Between Dykes; Warp Crofts; Waterton...

And south of Sand Hill and Fockerby Station, is a place on the map called 'Purgatory'.

Tenth revolve: contemplating a swift exit...

'We have never understood the interest in a piece of agricultural land – which it is, nothing more. So what if there is nothing in it, on it, or whatever?

We do not give our permission for you to walk round 'the field'; please do not come – save your bus fares.

We did not instigate the interest in 'the field'; that was some blithering idiot with nothing better to do.

We are sick and fed up with it all.

Do not come, you will not be welcome.'

She writes.

Plain speaking.

Independent people.

Eleventh revolve: casting around, kicking the traces...moving off...

What finally then are *you* looking at here, in this emptiest of places?

– in long shot: a landscape drawn blank in the cause of monoculture...

– in close up, a place artifactual – intimately inscribed by hoof, tyre, harrow...

Where hidden habitats cling to the dyke banks...

What questions would *you* ask here, off the beaten track, in this flatness?

Given the chance, let loose, footloose, how would *you* go on here?

And – after all – what stories would you tell *of* this place?

Deep map: to be read from...

Or *tabula rasa*: to be read onto...

Man-made; and likely surrendered too...

Warplands...