

## **Lakenheath Floods, March 1947.**

The freak weather of the winter of 1947 is well known in meteorological history. From January to March, there were almost continuous snow falls, freezing the ground solid. It has been said that icebergs could be seen off the Norfolk coast. When the thaw eventually came it was accompanied by storm force winds (98 mph was recorded) and heavy rain.

**16<sup>th</sup>/ 17<sup>th</sup> March.**

### **In the Fen.**

The rapid thaw and drenching rain had caused a tidal surge on the Little Ouse and high water powered by violent winds burst through the main Denver sluice gate near Downham Market. A little later the staunch, a water gate at the junction of the Lakenheath Lode and Little Ouse near the site of the old Green Dragon Inn burst and the river bank there was undermined by the pressure of the flood water. The river bank at Wilton Bridge was also breached. Lakenheath Fen was rapidly inundated when flood banks on the fen were then totally overwhelmed and water broke through, sweeping across Station Road threatening northern and eastern parts of the village.

By the 18<sup>th</sup> March there had been further breaches and the land was completely flooded covering 3,000 acres of fenland. All that was visible of the railway was a black streak across the landscape.



*The Green Dragon was a popular riverside pub on the Little Ouse.*

### **The Disaster of the Floods. Bliss Farm on Lakenheath Fen.**

Bliss farm was the home of the family of Mr. William Finlayson, Head Forester of the extensive Bryant and May experimental timber plantation on the southern bank of the Little Ouse which amongst other things provided wood for matchsticks. His wife and three children lived at Bliss Farm on the plantation on Shepherds' Fen.

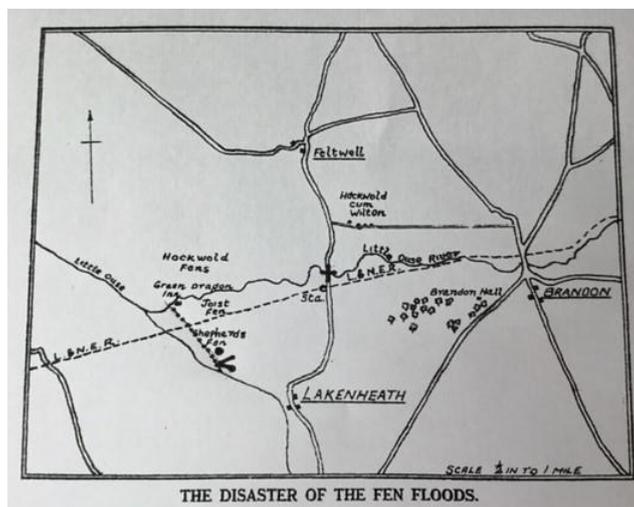
The force of the overflow at the Green Dragon had created a hole at the foot of the river bank which then collapsed and the breach widened to 35 yards. By Tuesday morning the land was completely flooded: then another gap occurred not far away from the first. The water level rose by 12 inches in 24 hours and this continued for 7 days with the water reaching a depth of 6 feet.

In the summer of 1947 Mr. Finlayson was asked by the Bryant and May Magazine to write an account of the flood.

## The Brymay Magazine. Summer 1947.

“Bryant & May Ltd. own an extensive area of fenland in the Lakenheath area, which borders on the southern bank of the Little Ouse. The land is used in connection with experimental work on timber growing and is of course, like all fenland, low-lying. On the 17<sup>th</sup> March the river rose rapidly at the Green Dragon Inn. Warnings were at once issued to the inhabitants of the \*immediate neighbourhood to evacuate”.

\*Probably the Sedge Fen area. A newspaper report from the time quoted a villager suggesting that no warning of what was to come had reached the village.



Approximate positions of Bliss Farm ●, Wilton Bridge †, Lakenheath Old Lode ◀.

Map from The BRYMAY Magazine.

This map was provided by the magazine to illustrate the general flood area. It allows a rough idea of the route taken by Mr. Finlayson and the rescuers of his family from Bliss Farm to the village. Clearly roads are missing and the Lakenheath Lode is shown but not identified neither does it show the 'Old Lode' which I have added. Wangford Road was not built until the 1950's.

William Finlayson's account:

### “THE STORY OF ONE MAN'S FLOOD”

“I have been asked to write a description of the Fen floods as they affected me. Not being a journalist, I find this very difficult to do and at the same time give a modest account of what happened during that tragic weekend. Here is my story without any colouring.

It begins on the Sunday night of March the 16<sup>th</sup> when a terrific gale raged over the Fens for several hours, leaving a trail of destruction in its wake: no one dared sleep until finally it blew itself out in the early hours of the morning.

Monday morning broke fine and sunny, giving promise of better weather and raising spirits, but alas! This was quickly dispelled by the news of a break in the riverbank about one mile from my house at Shepherds' Fen; even at that distance we could distinctly hear the roar of the water as it rushed madly through the break.

By mid-day the water was getting very close to my house on the west side, but still I could not see it putting me out of my home. By late afternoon, when the water was stretched in a semi-circle around the house I really began to feel anxious, and as a first step at evacuation I found accommodation in Lakenheath Village for two of my young children. (Mary and her sister Elizabeth stayed in the house of a family friend in Anchor Lane).

I still had hopes that my house would remain high and dry, and was loth to leave it. Inside it that Monday night was an atmosphere of death: the wireless remained silent; even my domestic animals sensed the tragedy.

Until about midnight the building was still dry, although the water by this time had surrounded it; but now my worst fears began to materialise as the flood water began to filter in from the north side; this was to be another sleepless night.

By early Tuesday morning the water was deep in parts of the house and was rising rapidly. At this stage of my story I must admit the folly of any remaining hopes I had of staying on in my home.

Fortunately, my 'phone line remained intact despite the gale of the previous night and now I made full use of it. Firstly, I sought the aid of our local constable to arrange for our evacuation and then contacted Mr. Brown\* at Ballochyle who was very anxious about our welfare.

\*A senior manager at the Ballochyle plantation, Scotland.

As the hours of that Tuesday forenoon dragged slowly on and the water rose ever higher, I now wanted to get away as quickly as possible. It was with great relief, when, about mid-day, I received a telephone call from \*Constable Taylor saying he would be with us very soon.

\*The Lakenheath policeman.

Shortly afterwards I could discern a small boat with two occupants picking its way cautiously through the field, avoiding obstacles, such as wire fencing and floating debris.

At last the boat arrived at the front door. The first operation was to get my pony out of the yard and ready for its journey through the flood waters. To carry out this job we had to wade waist deep in the icy water. We accomplished this job without mishap.

We then made ready for the journey by boat. I carried my wife and boy out of the flooded house into the boat and now all was ready for the final stage of our ordeal.

I took charge of my pony and set off through one mile of flood water, which by this time was really deep. Progress was slow for me, as it was impossible to keep to the hard road, and about half-way through I had doubts of ever reaching the end without assistance, but eventually I reached dry land, completely exhausted.

After changing into dry clothes, a hot drink and a few hours in bed I felt somewhat refreshed, but for many days I felt the strain of that short but strenuous journey through the flooded Fen.

This is the end of my personal experience; no doubt by the time this appears in print the floods will be but a memory for most people, and, like stories of the war, told years later, will be apt to lose its significance; but for me the memory will last for ever."

The children: William aged 14, Elizabeth (Betty) 12, Mary 10.



*Bliss Farm after the floods. The white area on the walls shows the depth of the flood.*

*Photograph by courtesy of Mrs. Mary Crane*

High winds and waves had made rescue attempts hazardous. The isolated Bliss Farm was flooded to a height of 5-6 ft of mud and water. Many poplar trees on the Bryant and May plantation were destroyed. It was three months before the children and their mother could return to the farm.



*William Finlayson in the flooded plantation showing the height reached by the flood water.  
Photograph by courtesy of Mrs. Mary Crane.*

Mr. Brown visited Lakenheath at the end of April. After five weeks there was still four feet of water lying over the fen. He considered that it would take two further weeks of favourable weather before the river would be at a normal level leaving just two feet of water on the fen when the gaps in the banks of the Little Ouse could be closed and the remaining water pumped out. His estimation was that Lakenheath Fen should be clear of water by the end of May or Early June.

Mr. Brown: "The people here have had a terrible experience in being driven from their homes, in having their means of livelihood and existence cut off and of seeing the good work of years destroyed in a few days. When the floods do recede and the fens are again under control, there will be months of hard work clearing the area and preparing the land to yield again its valuable produce. There can be no planting at Lakenheath this year."

*Source: The BRYMAY Magazine. Vol. XX. No. 5. Summer 1947. We are grateful to Mrs. Mary Crane, née Finlayson for the loan of the article.*

### **In the Village.**

Villagers rushed to move potatoes stored in 'clamps' to higher ground, just avoiding the rapidly flooding water as it covered Station Road. Local farmer Harry Palmer lost all his cattle feed for the coming year when his hay fields were flooded, ruining the year's supply, and Land Army girls were sent out on to the fen to prevent a hay stack at Christmas Hill Farm being washed away. Power was lost. Rising water trapped hares and rabbits drowning them: some managed to scramble into trees or were trapped by barbed wire fences. It's said that some were 'harvested' by enterprising young men with a boat. (Meat was still rationed). It has only recently come to light that two of the young men were Johnny Brown and Eric Morley. Another two climbed the trees to kill the rabbits which were dropped into the boat. Such was the quantity of rabbits harvested like this that Eric feared that the weight would capsize the boat- he couldn't swim! Roads and railway lines were under water.

**Photos of flooding are available on the Historic Photographs of the web site.**

### [Events](#)

0012E- *The High Bridge on the former Lakenheath Lode.*

0014E- *Flood at Mutford Green.*

0015E- *Sharpes Corner.*

0016E- *Back of Anchor Lane?*

### [Places](#)

0075PL- *Cross-water Staunch 1976.*

0100PL- *The Lode junction with the Little Ouse shows normal water level.*

The following two extracts are from St. Edmundsbury Chronicle 2000, by kind permission of David Addy.

“The Womens Land Army was still in operation, and the Lakenheath Hostel, being situated at a low point at the north end of the High Street was flooded-including the dormitories, the water being right across the road. The dressing tables from the cubicles were moved out before the water level rose but the bunks and wardrobes had to be left in. The W.L.A. girls were evacuated to a large house at Risby and elsewhere until the floods receded”.

And

“RAF Mildenhall was mobilised to help rescue the flood victims. \*The worst day was 16<sup>th</sup> March, when 110 flood victims were collected by RAF Mildenhall transport and given temporary accommodation on the base. Mobile searchlights were deployed along with wood tracking to lay on sodden earth, and teams sent out to known danger spots\*\*. On 21<sup>st</sup> March the base used an Auster aeroplane to view the flood situation from the air. Some 44 NCO's and men were then deployed to Lakenheath Lode on 22<sup>nd</sup> March to help with heavy flood relief work. On 23<sup>rd</sup> March, another party of 28 volunteers and 36 former POW's went to help at Southery Pumping Station.

Flooding was less bad during April, but RAF Mildenhall continued to supply lighting equipment to allow night working to help restore the damage.”

\*Lakenheath Fen flooded a day later. \*\* This probably refers to very low fenland such as Sedge Fen which historically was liable to flood.

You can read about the Womens' Land Army in Lakenheath in 'A collection of Stories' at 1937-39 in this part of the Timeline.

### **The village survives.**

The attempts made by soldiers, POW's and villagers to prevent the destruction of the banks of the Lakenheath Lode had been unsuccessful. The Land Army hostel at Mutford Green was evacuated and then badly flooded together with the rest of the Mutford Green area.

Away from the village the River Lark burst its banks, flooding part of Bury St Edmunds and flooding was widespread along the fen edge. (Littleport, West Row, Mildenhall, Hockwold and Southery). The fens as far as Ely were almost completely submerged. Nevertheless, most parts of Lakenheath village escaped the flood because they were far enough above sea level but flooding had been the bane of local farmers for generations.

Approximate heights above sea level:-

Wilton Bridge over the Little Ouse.	2-3 mtrs.
Lakenheath Station.	4 mtrs.
Site of future Wangford Road area.	7 mtrs.
Lakenheath Staunch-Little Ouse.	0 mtrs.
Highbridge Gravel Drove.	1 mtr.
Bliss Farm.	1 mtr. partially surrounded by land at 0 mtrs.
Sharps Corner.	6 mtrs.
Mutford Green.	6 mtrs.
Land rear of Anchor Lane.	7-3 mtrs.
Wings Rd. junction with High St.	11mtrs.
Junction of Wings Rd. and Mill Rd.	21 mtrs.
Junction of Mill Road and High St.	10 mtrs.
Undley Road and Eriswell Rd. junction.	9 mtrs.
Maids Cross Hill.	28 mtrs.

*Sea level data from en-gb.topographic-map.com*

### **Cleaning up.**

Some statistics for the Lakenheath Fen, Mildenhall and the River Lark area in Bury St. Edmunds.

“126 barges towed by six tugs brought 11,000 tonnes of clay which was used to rebuild existing flood defences. 700 lorries which were commandeered from Ipswich, Norwich and Chelmsford to transfer clay and other materials to repair damaged flood defence sites. At the height of the flood 550,000 sandbags were filled and on Tuesday 18<sup>th</sup> March 100,000 were issued.

One Catchment Area issued 430 lanterns and 500 shovels and 800 tarpaulins. 200 pumps (17 from Holland) were used to pump out flooded areas.”

*Source: Bury Free Press. Friday, March 14th 1997. A retrospective article by Lesley Anslow.*

### **And later in the House of Commons. 28<sup>th</sup> July, 1947.**

Mr. Thomas Williams, Minister of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food, replying to Lt-Col. Clifton Brown's parliamentary question concerning speed of response to the disaster.

Lt-Col G Clifton-Brown:

“.....what progress has been made in repairing the damage to the Fen banks during the past two months and when will the repair work begin in the Lakenheath Great Fen area?”

Mr. Thomas Williams:

“The Catchment Board has let contracts amounting to over £150,000 for the restoration, and in some cases, improvements of damaged embankments. In addition, they are employing directly some 500 men, 40 dragline excavators and ancillary plant on other rehabilitation works. The assembly of plant began in Lakenheath last month, and rehabilitation work began early this month.in June.”

*Hansard 28<sup>th</sup> July 1947. Vol 441 cc20-1*

**Postscript-** The Development Plan for Lakenheath Fen.

There had been periodic problems with flooding in the fens since they were drained in the 17<sup>th</sup> century. These floods reduced agricultural output and damaged the quality of the soil. Bad flooding in the 1930's caused the Government to commission an investigation into fen drainage problems and the resultant flooding.\*

The McDonald Report was published in 1940, too late to be acted on until after WW2 and the 1947 floods when it was revisited. The result was that:-

In 1952 the Report of the Agricultural Commission Investigation into Lakenheath Fen clearly identified the necessity of a scheme to improve the drainage of the Fen by lowering the water table so that agricultural production could be improved. Alongside this The Lakenheath Relief Channel scheme proposed the creation of a flood channel to the north and west of the village. Preparatory work began in 1954 and the channel was completed by 1964. The Relief Channel links the River Lark to the Little Ouse at the Denver Sluice near Downham Market and when required also takes water from the river Wissey. When necessary the water flow can be reversed to carry water from the River Great Ouse underground to two reservoirs in Essex. There has been no flooding in the village since the construction of the Flood Relief Channel.

*\*'Ouse Washes: The Heart of the Fens'. Howard Jones. 2013. ousewasheslps.wordpress.com*

As William Finlayson said,

**“.....no doubt by the time this appears in print the floods will be but a memory for most people, and, like stories of the war, told years later, will be apt to lose its significance; but for me the memory will last for ever.”**

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