

An Introduction to the Fens



Where are the Fens?

The Fens make up a marshy region in the east of England. The Fens start just north of Cambridge, and go as far north as Lincoln, as far east as Bishop's Lynn, and as far west as Peterborough. Some of the other interesting towns there today are Ely, Boston Whittlesey, and Wisbech. The fens also border a low-lying coastal area called 'The Wash'.

What are the Fens?

A Fen is a term originally used in the East of England to describe an area of Marshland. Therefore, 'The Fens' are made up of lots of separate marshy areas.

They have existed since the end of the ice age, about 10,000 years ago. Britain was once connected to Europe, but became separated after glaciers melted and flooded the ridge that connected us to the continent. This melted water flooded part of the east of England, bringing with it rich clay soil and silt. Areas like this are called **silt fens**.



A silt fen used for farming

In other areas, the build-up of sea sediment at the coast had the effect of slowing the flow of water to the sea. They would therefore flood, making the land boggy, and causing the formation of peat, an important soil-like substance made up of partially decayed plant matter. These areas are called **black fens**.



An area of 'black' fenland, now used for farming, with characteristically dark soil. Spot Ely Cathedral in the background!

Most of the Fens are within a few metres of sea-level. In most places they are below 10m above sea-level and include the lowest point in the United Kingdom, Holme Fen, which is 2.75m below sea-level. As a result, some areas of the fens were once permanently flooded, making lakes or *meres*.

The Fens also contain slightly higher areas known as 'islands'. They are called this because they temporarily became dry islands if the rest of the fens flooded. The largest of these 'islands' is Kimmeridge Clay island, which is home to the city and cathedral of Ely.

The Fens have hosted human settlement from at least the bronze age, around 3,500 years ago. However, some of the Fens have been left in their natural state, and have changed little over the centuries. A good example of a fen that hasn't been changed by human settlement is Wicken Fen.

The Fens have had an important role in Britain's history. The marshy areas may have provided shelter to the Iceni, the tribe once ruled by Boudicca, when the Anglo-Saxons invaded Britain.

Comprehension questions

- 1) What is the name of the town mentioned as being on the west edge of the Fens?
- 2) When was the end of the ice age, and what impact did this have on the Fens?
- 3) In your own words, summarise how the **black fens** were formed.
- 4) What is the lowest part of land in the UK called, and how far is it below sea level?
- 5) What do you think is meant by the word 'mere'?
- 6) The first people to live in the Fens were the anglo-saxons. True or false?