

## 3 The Twentieth Century

### 3.1 The Breach of the Horsey Embankments, 1910

#### 3.1.1 The Storm

In December 1910, high tides combined with a south-westerly gale wreaked devastation along much of the North Devon coast. A report from the North Devon Journal Herald describes an estimated damage of over £5,000 was caused to the Braunton Marshes. Linhays and stone walls were destroyed, and large quantities of sand, gravel and debris were distributed over lands adjacent to the banks<sup>1</sup>. Most of the livestock in the pastures affected by flooding were drowned, along with hundreds of partridges and rabbits<sup>1</sup> (Box 3).

“Visiting the scene on Saturday morning a labourer was surprised to find a number of live rabbits up a tree – a striking instance of animal sagacity. With the exception of the rabbits, three sheep, which miraculously escaped drowning in some totally inexplicable way in a linhay were the only living things left in the neighbourhood.”

**BOX. 3 EXTRACT FROM A NORTH DEVON JOURNAL HERALD REPORT SHORTLY AFTER THE 1910 STORM<sup>1</sup>**

The North Devon Journal Herald article describes the ground on either side of the newly - straightened Braunton Pill as being flooded on every tide. The water was reported to extend from the railway line at Wrafton, across to Velator, and into the marsh pastures, posing a great risk of flooding to the houses nearby<sup>1</sup> (Box 4). The local newspaper article goes on to describe a large vessel being drawn through a breach in one of the embankments on the rush of the tide, whilst coming into Velator Quay, and exiting the Marshes when the tide turned<sup>1</sup>. These descriptions suggest that the flooding of the Braunton Marsh was quite significant. However local legend and remaining photographic evidence from the time are focused upon what was presumably the worst damage, at Horsey Island. A breach in the embankment of the newly-straightened channel is also confirmed in a 1913 report of the repairs<sup>2</sup> but, unfortunately, provides few details about the scale or repercussions of the breach, or of the repair works required.

“Owing to the enormous breaches in the bank, the whole of the Marshes – which are some miles in length – are flooded at every tide, and houses in the neighbourhood are in constant danger of being flooded.”

**BOX. 4 EXTRACT FROM A NORTH DEVON JOURNAL HERALD REPORT SHORTLY AFTER THE 1910 STORM<sup>1</sup>**

1 - Article, North Devon Journal and Herald, issue; 22.12.1910

2 - W. J. Douglas, 1813; Précis of the disaster and repairs to Horsey Embankment, River Taw, Devon. B170 add/123-131

3 - Original photograph held at Braunton Museum

4 - Original photograph held at Ilfracombe Museum



'BRAUNTON MARSH AFTER THE GALE - (DROWNED SHEEP)<sup>4</sup>



'BRAUNTON MARSH AFTER THE GALE - (DAMAGED BANK)<sup>3</sup>

## 3.1.2 Horsey Island Repair Work

Regardless of the truth or exaggeration in the North Devon Journal Herald editorial, it is certainly true that the 1910 storm caused extensive damage. Under the conditions set out by the Marsh Inspectors at the time of the second stage of reclamation in the 1850s, the Estate of the late Sir William Williams was now liable for the costs of the repair work, both along the straightened section of the Braunton Pill, and at the Horsey Embankment, where the worst of the breaches appear to have occurred. Three detailed records of the construction and of the schedule of repair works remain; the contract for repairs<sup>1</sup>, the financial statement of repair work<sup>2</sup>, and a final report produced by the engineer in charge, Mr W. T. Douglass<sup>3</sup>. The latter of these reports suggests that the breaching of the Horsey Embankments may have been owed partly to the activities of burrowing rats<sup>3</sup>, which had undermined parts of the banks. Plans indicate the exact size and position of 5 breaches on the Horsey Embankment that were subject to the repair work<sup>4</sup>. The widest and deepest of these breaches was Breach No.1, a gap of 254ft. in length, positioned closest to the White House, with shorter and/or shallower breaches of 160ft., 335ft., 140ft. and 66ft. in length<sup>3,4</sup>. As might be expected, the repair work, which began in the summer of 1911, was not a straightforward affair. The expensive task of repairing the breaches was compounded by the difficulties of tidal scour, which frequently set back the work by further eroding the damaged sections of embankment. The innovative decision to sink derelict barges into some of the breaches was taken, yet reports seem to suggest that this served only to amplify the scouring action of the sea, as it poured around the gaps between the embankment and the barge. Two months after the seven months estimated to complete repairs, the original contractor resigned from the job, and subsequently work was completed under the administration of the Williams' Estate Trustees. The final cost of repairs eventually totalled £19,602<sup>3</sup> (calculated as equivalent to £1,284,715.08 against the 2005 Retail Price Index<sup>5</sup>), with evidence that the final stages of work were still being conducted as late as February 1913<sup>3</sup>. Details of the repair works and the events of the time are provided in Appendix 7.

1 - Contract for the works of repair to Horsey Embankment, River Taw, Devon, 1811; B170 add/128-131

2 - W. J. Douglass, 1813; Financial Statement for the works of repair to Horsey Embankment, River Taw, Devon. B170 add/123-131

3 - W. J. Douglass, 1813; Précis of the disaster and repairs to Horsey Embankment, River Taw, Devon. B170 add/123-131

4 - W. J. Douglass, 1811; Plans and longitudinal sections of the breaches to the Horsey Embankment. B170 add/123-131

5 - Officer. L. H., 2006; Purchasing Power of British Pounds from 1264 to 2005. MeasuringWorth.com

## 3.2 Early Twentieth Century Agriculture

Agricultural life on the Marshes in the early Twentieth Century is unlikely to have differed much from that of the preceding fifty or one hundred years, with a continuation of traditional farming practices, and an ethos of pragmatism and self-sufficiency. The labour demands of the agricultural industry were high, and the numerous small farms employed many people to work on the land. With little technology, what machinery there was, was pulled by horses, with much work being done by hand. With respect to the Braunton Marsh itself, however, the labour requirements of this prime cattle-grazing land were comparatively low relative to the requirements of arable farming such as that conducted on the neighbouring Great Field. Over a typical year, a familiar pattern of activities was



A HERD CONTAINING 'DEVON REDS', A BREED LIKELY TO HAVE BEEN TRADITIONALLY FARMED ON THE BRAUNTON MARSH BOTH BEFORE, AND AFTER ITS' ENCLOSURE.

followed. Cattle were taken in over the winter months and reintroduced to the Marshes in the spring, the weed was cut and hedges were made towards the end of the summer and there was even time to maintain field drainage by cutting narrow channels across the pastures where necessary<sup>1</sup>.

Traditionally, very little hay was ever cut on the Marshes. Relatively little improvement of the Marsh soils was needed, although some farmers occasionally spread a little potash or slag on their land to sweeten the grass<sup>2</sup>. Similarly, on the embankments rented out by the Marsh Inspectors for sheep grazing, lime was occasionally also spread, perhaps once a decade, as indicated by a few rare entries within the Marsh Inspectors' records. Only sheep grazed the embankments, for fear of the damage that the cattle might cause to the banks. On the marshes themselves, sheep could not be grazed all year round owing to their increased susceptibility to contract Fascioliasis, or 'liver rot' caused by the parasite (*Fasciola hepatica*), also known as liver fluke. The marshes make a prime site for this condition, as the complicated lifecycle of the liver fluke is completed by association with freshwater snail *Lymnaea truncatula*, which live in marshy areas. Braunton Marsh was therefore traditionally used for grazing cattle, which fattened quickly on the rich pastures and were less affected by liver fluke. Historically, sheep only ever grazed the marshes during the autumn and winter months; a time when cattle had been taken off the marshes and liver fluke was less virulent<sup>3</sup>.



The Marsh linyays are intrinsically associated with the traditional cattle farming of the area. The construction of the numerous linyays on the marshes is believed to have started almost immediately after the initial enclosure was completed. Almost all linyays appear to have been built by the time of the 1842 tithe map of Braunton Parish. Linyays are two-storey, open-sided cattle shelters, with a talet which was used to store feed. Such buildings are found predominantly in the South West, and provided essential shade and shelter for cattle, giving relief from flies in summer and shelter from the cold in the spring and the autumn. Some Marsh farmers may also have used their Linyays to over-winter their cattle.

Throughout the first part of the century, farmers remained, as ever, responsible for the various boundaries and drains laid out when the Marsh was enclosed. The Marsh Inspectors continued to manage the drains under their jurisdiction, paid for by the drainage rates. As occurred during the previous century, the occupant of the Inspectors' House (section 3,4) was often employed for the purpose of drain clearance, and provided these services in return for free accommodation. The occupant of the Inspectors' House would also have been paid by most farmers to check and feed cattle as required. However farmers with milking cows would have needed to visit their animals twice a day, with most using the direct route of the 'milking path' from Braunton Village, which cut across the Great Field<sup>4</sup>.

1 - Reginald Ashdon, personal communication, 2006

2 - John Avery, personal communication, 2006

3 - Richard Dyer, personal communication, 2006

4 - Owen Slade, personal communication, 2006

## 3.3 Twentieth Century Changes in the Marsh

### 3.3.1 Creation of the Drainage Board 1943

The golden age of land drainage had peaked in the 1850s. With long-term agricultural decline, and with an increase in material and labour costs by the end of the First World War, land drainage was no longer economically viable<sup>1</sup>. Disinvestment in existing drainage systems meant that agricultural productivity was falling despite the Government's aims to pursue optimal agricultural output. Following the recommendation of a Royal Commission in 1927, the Land Drainage Act of 1930 set about consolidating the 'complex, archaic and chaotic' drainage administrations across the UK into a uniform system<sup>2</sup>. The proposals aimed to create central drainage authorities, responsible for river catchments. The central drainage authorities would then supervise elected internal drainage authorities, who were responsible for smaller drainage areas<sup>2</sup>. It was anticipated that landowners would be unlikely to favour the disruption caused by the re-organisation without perceiving any personal advantages. To counter any resistance from landowners, the changes were also advocated on the grounds of increased employment, the partial shifting of the financial burden to general tax payers through grants and loans, and the expansion of traditional drainage areas to encompass more rate-paying landowners<sup>1</sup>. Dictating the establishment of a more standardised system of management bodies for water catchment and drainage areas, in association with Local Authorities, the nationwide restructuring was to change the management structure of the Braunton Marshes forever.

In 1943, a proposal by the Ministry of Agriculture for a new drainage board appears in the



Marsh Inspectors' minutes<sup>1</sup>. By this time, many other internal drainage boards (IDB), had already been established around the country. Spurred on by the food production campaign of the Second World War, the three Marsh Inspectors, together with four other marsh landowners, were invited by the Ministry of Agriculture to follow the lead of existing IDBs, and become the first board members of a new Braunton and District Drainage Board<sup>2</sup> (now referred to as the Braunton IDB). After the first year, members would then be elected from amongst the landowners. The Board was also to include representation from the District Council, a clerk, and an engineer. The proposals, however, were met with the suspicion of several marsh owners, concerned that existing rights and privileges for autonomous management of marsh drainage might be taken away. On October 1st 1944, the Marsh Inspectors' powers of drainage were officially transferred to the new Board, however animosity between some landowners continued for several years. The Board brought about an advance in technology with the initial introduction of a Priestman Cub Excavator (an early predecessor of a modern swing shovel) to help clean out the drains<sup>3</sup>. However, during the 1960s and early 70s it appears that the drains were once again cleaned by hand under the direction of the IDB.

1 - Bower, J., 1998; Inter-war land drainage and policy in England and Wales. *Agricultural History Review* 46(1); 64-80

2 - Marsh Inspectors' Minute Book 1

3 - Braunton and District Drainage Board Minute Book 2

## 3.4 The Changing Role of the Marsh Inspectors' House

The 'Inspectors' House' appears in the Marsh Inspectors' records of 1839, when the property was first rented for the sum of £6 per annum<sup>1</sup>. For the remainder of the century, rental income from the property appears intermittently throughout the Marsh Inspectors' accounts, and it often provided free accommodation for employees of the Inspectors<sup>1</sup>. The duties of the employees involved a variety of tasks, such as destroying rats and moles in the banks, checking and controlling water levels, cutting weed, cleaning drains, and impounding escaped stock. The ideal position of the property meant that the resident of the Inspectors' House was commonly paid by farmers to tend livestock on the Marshes<sup>1,3</sup>, hence the records also occasionally refer to the house as both the 'Herdsmans' and 'Shepherd's Cottage'. To help the herdsman negotiate the many acres of Braunton Marsh, timbers were positioned across the drains and ditches, along with stones or metal pins set at various points within the enclosure walls, creating a network of paths which cut directly over the Marshes<sup>2</sup>.

Towards the end of the Nineteenth Century, the records demonstrate more clearly that a person called William Clarke was the long-standing resident and herdsman at the Inspectors' House<sup>4</sup>. Mr Clarke is quite probably the inspiration behind the so-called Clarks' Road, part of the private, internal roads within the centre of the Braunton Marshes, lying less than a mile away. The enduring name of the road is perhaps testament to the affection held for Mr Clarke as a long-established local figure. William was succeeded by Fred Williams in 1908, a man who remained at the property until 1931<sup>4</sup>.

Since the first reclamation, tolls had been charged for the use of the toll road by anyone who was not a marsh owner, including those accessing the area for fishing and using the ferry when it remained in operation (see section 3.5). Nonetheless, the revenue from these tolls was traditionally small and relatively infrequent. References in the Marsh Inspectors' minutes of 1926 record the need to give notice for the removal of huts, which had been erected 'adjacent to the Ferry House', suggesting that the area was becoming increasingly appreciated for its recreational value<sup>4</sup>. By 1929, it appears that the advent of the internal combustion engine had already begun to change the traditional role of the occupants of the Inspectors' House. Owing to the increased costs of keeping the bank road in repair, a new schedule of toll prices was agreed, and tickets were issued, possibly for the first time<sup>4</sup>. It was agreed that the toll collector should receive three pence for each toll collected, and that no 'motor-lorries' were allowed to use the road without special permission from the Inspectors<sup>4</sup>. Occasional agreements were made for regular users, with five shillings a year being paid by the two keepers of the Crow-Point lighthouse, for access along the road with their motorbike and sidecar<sup>4</sup>.

From 1931, the role of herdsman fell to Mr F Bowen and, during the war years, records indicate that the house continued to be let, free of charge, to a Mr Cecil Summerfield in return for the services he provided to clean out and maintain the drains<sup>5</sup>. During the war, it appears this task was also assisted by Prisoners of War from Germany and Italy<sup>5,6</sup>. Although the Inspectors' House does not appear to have been requisitioned, war damage contributions were paid out for the property over the three years following the war, until 1948. These payments may possibly have been warranted as a result of damage caused from the considerable increase in the volume of traffic past the Inspectors' House. The RAF and US army vehicles also caused damage to the toll road and to the boundary bank between the Marsh Inspectors' and Christie Estate land<sup>4,7</sup>. However, the most noticeable difference on the marshes during the war would have been the sound of live firing echoing across from Braunton Burrows during the day, and by night, the illumination of the Braunton Marsh dummy aerodrome, which aimed to divert attention from the real airfield at Chivenor.



Picture by courtesy of Miriam Coleman-Cooke



Picture by courtesy of Miriam Colemam-Cooke



Picture by courtesy of Miriam Colemam-Cooke

Another side effect of the war was the development of further buildings, which prior to WWII, only consisted of the two Marsh Inspector properties, the linhays, and, just beyond the boundary drain, the Christie Estate's farm at South Burrow. During the Second World War, several huts were built on Marsh Inspector land close to the White House<sup>4</sup>. These were reported to have been manned around the clock during the war, with supplies being delivered by a local farmer with his horse and cart<sup>5</sup>. After the war, most of these buildings were removed, but the buildings of a radar station on a marsh called Willowfield can still be seen today, and are now used for holiday accommodation.

After the war, the dual role of Marsh Inspector employee and Herdsman appears to have returned to its familiar pattern once again. From 1949 to 1959, the house was occupied by Mr Fred Smith, along with his wife and two sons<sup>6</sup>. At this point, toll collection remained a minor function of the resident of the Inspectors' house, who would have been more than occupied with his responsibilities to maintain the drains, and to care for up to 1000 head of cattle, along with his own animals<sup>8</sup>. The Inspectors' House had long since included a cart-shed, a pig-house and various other outbuildings, including a salting house and a potato house. Along with a relatively self-sufficient smallholding, it is highly likely that it was a long-established practice for many Inspectors' house occupants to rent and farm some Marshes themselves. This was certainly true in the case of the Smith family, who kept sheep, chickens, cows, and a cart-horse, and had a milking parlour at the side of the house<sup>6</sup>. Fred Smith, one of the sons, explained how the family came to live there, taking over from his uncle and aunt. He describes a childhood, spent with his brother and other friends, fishing for eels, rafting and even swimming in the dykes around the house. As the children grew up, they also helped their father clean the drains manually, and cut the weed and banks with scythes and staff hooks<sup>6,9</sup>. At this time, even as late as the 1950s, the existence at the Inspectors' House was still very basic. Without a supply of drinking water, water was still collected daily in a 4-gallon churn from a well at Marstage Farm, and clothes were washed in water from the dyke<sup>6</sup>.

Even as the Smith family left the Inspectors' House in 1959, it seems unlikely they would have realised how much the role of those living in the Inspectors' house would change over the next few decades. With more modern technology employed by the new Board, the traditional task of manual drain clearance, diminished. Changes in agriculture and an increase in recreational interests, also found the inhabitants of the Inspectors' House moving away from the role of herdsman and smallholder, to one of toll collector. This enhanced source of income from tolls was fortuitously timed, as the Marsh Inspectors' rights to collect drainage rates from marsh owners were lost after the formation of the new Drainage Board in 1943. Although the Marsh Inspectors still retained the trusteeship of the grazing banks, two-thirds of the income, after omission of various maintenance expenses, was now promised to the new Board.

In 1961, the full-time role of toll keeper was taken on by Dorothy Squires, who remained at the property for the following 21 years. During this time, the increased recreational interest also enabled diversification, and an area was enclosed for the storage of sailing boats, close to the White House. Indeed, since the 1960s, the number of tolls taken has increased many times over, with tolls rising from 10p in 1973, to £1.50 in 2006. Some things never change, however, and for as long as there have been tolls, there have been attempts to avoid paying<sup>10,11</sup>. It is also a common misunderstanding that the tolls are charged for commercial gain. Ironically, the proceeds continue to help manage and maintain the quality of, and access to, an area enjoyed by the very people that complain. The increase in recreational visitors has created other issues for the Marsh Inspectors, including the death of several sheep, caused by vehicles speeding along the toll road. This led to the installation of speed humps around 20 years ago<sup>2</sup>. Unsympathetic visitors to the Marshes have also made life difficult for farmers moving livestock, and there is concern that visitors' dogs often need to be kept under closer control. These issues highlight the fact that, although recreational interest in the area is important and positive, access must be handled sensitively in order that the landowners can continue to manage the land. Without visitor management, the very qualities that attract people to the area could inadvertently be destroyed.

1 - Marsh Inspectors' Minute Book 1

2 - Owen Slade and Rowland Dibble, personal communication, 2006.

3 - An agreement between the Wraughton Commoners, George Newcombe and the tenants of Braunton Marsh Sea Banks, 1844, Braunton Museum, Box 16

4 - Marsh Inspectors Minute Book 2

5 - Braunton and District Drainage Board Minute Book 1

6 - Fred Smith, personal communication, 2006.

7 - Insurance documents for the Marsh Inspectors properties, 1923

8 - Rowland Dibble, personal communication, 2006

9 - Invoice from Fred Smith for weed cutting, 1950 (from the records of the Marsh Inspectors')

10 - Letter from Dorothy Squire to the Marsh Inspectors, 1970 (from the records of the Marsh Inspectors')

11 - Article, Western Morning News; 09. 12. 1960; Strange and sombre attraction of Braunton Marsh, by A. J. Butcher

12- John Hartnoll and Owen Slade, personal communication, 2006.



Picture by courtesy of Maranda Coleman-Cooke



Picture by courtesy of Maranda Coleman-Cooke



Picture by courtesy of Maranda Coleman-Cooke



Picture by courtesy of Maranda Coleman-Cooke

## 3.5 The White House

Evidence from the maps of Joannes Janssen of Amsterdam (c1700) and J. Oligby (1760) indicate that a long-established ferry route existed between a position at Bench Hill (the elevated area upon which the White House now stands) to destinations in Appledore and Instow<sup>1</sup>. A number of well-used routes, such as that leading from Croyde over Saunton Down, converged on a path to the ferry, following a similar path to the current Yankee Road. Bench Hill was ideally positioned at the mouth of the original Braunton Pill, as it was always accessible, regardless of the tides. On higher tides, it is believed that the ferry might also have been boarded at sites closer to Braunton, accessed via the major tidal guts now known as Flats and St. Arthur's Pill<sup>1</sup>. Nonetheless, there is a distinct possibility that a ferry house at Bench Hill existed long prior to the creation of the Great Bank in around 1813, although no records exist to corroborate this idea.



The White House at Bench Hill (then referred to as Oatway's House) came into the possession of the Marsh Inspectors in 1843. From this point, unfortunately, very few details about this property or the lifestyle of the occupants remain. It does appear that the ferry may have continued running until at least 1861<sup>7</sup>, however, the opening of the railway in 1874, would have almost undoubtedly spelt the end of any remaining ferry trade. As with the Inspectors' House, the inhabitants of the White House had facilities for smallholding, and may possibly have rented land on the marshes, or been associated with the gamekeeping of the numerous rabbits on the Braunton Burrows.

In 1942, the White House was requisitioned on behalf of the war department<sup>2,3</sup>. Anecdotal evidence suggests that it may have been used for ammunition and other military storage, including landmines placed on the beach at Saunton and around the estuary<sup>4</sup>. After the war, the house was apparently in a poor state of repair, and received war damage compensation. In 1952, however, it was once again damaged, this time from an unexplained explosion from across the estuary. Since 1957, the property has enjoyed a more stable existence, under almost 50 years of residency by the Coleman-Cooke family. From this location, members of the family have been witness to many subtle environmental and cultural changes, and are amongst the few who remember the tradition of Williams' Estate tenants, required to devote one day a year to replace stones on the neighbouring Horsey Embankments<sup>5,6</sup>. This activity is reported to have occurred around Easter-time, in a spirit much like that of Pot Wallowing, which is still practised today, across the estuary at Westward Ho.

1 - Notes of Commander Gammon, various locations, Braunton Museum

2 - Schedule of condition of the Ferry House, Oliver and Sons, 1942

3 - Marsh Inspector accounts 1946-1948

4 - Reginald Ashdon, personal communication, 2006.

5 - Maranda Coleman-Cooke, personal communication, 2006

6 - John Hartnoll and Owen Slade, personal communication, 2006

7 - Plans; 'Heanton Punchardon & Chivenor Marsh - Property of William Williams' 1861, North Devon Records Office, B170/78

## 3.6 Implications of Post-War Agricultural Politics, and Scientific and Technological Advances

Following war-time food shortages, the 1947 Agriculture Act laid down a number of measures to boost the productivity and efficiency of the UK agricultural industry. Grants and subsidies were offered, helping to stabilise prices, and encourage the adoption of new technologies<sup>1</sup>. The post-war ethos led to the tractor becoming a tool central to modern farming techniques. New technology radically decreased the labour demands of traditional farming practices, while advances in veterinary science had further implications for modern animal husbandry. These new innovations were to play an increasingly significant role in both the drainage and the agriculture of the Braunton Marshes.

### 3.6.1 Marsh Cultivation

The most immediate and noticeable change resulting from post-war governmental policy, was the cultivation of pasture on Horsey Island. This was a significant event, as the pasture of Braunton Marsh was traditionally never ploughed, partly for fear of disrupting areas of the marsh where the alluvial soils provided only a thin cover over unproductive sand. The tell-tale sign of previously cultivated pastures can easily be recognised on the marsh, revealed by an absence of relict tidal guts. Anecdotal evidence, and the fact that the overwhelming majority of land retains these characteristic tidal channels, suggests that cultivation remained restricted to parts of Horsey Island.

### 3.6.2 Use of Vehicles

The post-war era saw far more agricultural vehicles travelling along the Toll Road, including livestock hauliers for cattle that would have once had to walk all the way to market at Barnstaple. Increased recreational demand, and the traditional role of the tenant of the Inspectors' House as Herdsman, was replaced by the task of toll collection at the end of the 1950s, and the house was increasingly referred to as the Toll House. Livestock were now tended by their owners, who could visit the area far more quickly and easily in modern farm vehicles than in the days of horses and carts. Linhay talets were no longer needed to store feed. Greater use of insect-repelling treatments for cattle also reduced the value of linhays for summer shelter. Combined with increased maintenance costs, the linhays began their slow decline. In 1982, the County Council commissioned a Countryside Study. Following this, a survey of many of the linhays on the Marsh was conducted, and the Braunton Conservation Project was established. The project secured funding which included the production of self-guided walk leaflets covering Horsey Island, the Braunton Great Field and the Marshes. The project included the restoration of some 270m of stone wall across parts of the Christie Estate's land on the Marshes and several linhays, including the eye-catching round linhay, an iconic feature of the Marshes. Several landowners also took it upon themselves to repair and restore several key linhays, still used for agriculture, which were ineligible for grants. Many of the linhays are listed buildings, alongside several of the stiles and the Great Sluice. Sadly, without continued efforts, many of the linhays have continued to decline and will ultimately disappear.



Picture by courtesy of Miranda Coleman-Cooke

EVEN DURING THE COURSE OF THIS STUDY, MARSH LINHAYS HAVE CONTINUED TO DETERIORATE



Picture by courtesy of Miranda Coleman-Cooke

THIS WALL IS NOW ALL THAT REMAINS OF ONE MARSH LINHAY



Picture by courtesy of Miranda Coleman-Cooke

### 3.6.3 Changing Livestock Farming Practice

Over the five decades following World War II, technological advances resulted in a greatly-reduced number of labourers employed in agricultural work. On the Marshes, traditional cattle grazing continued, albeit in a slightly modified form. In the post-war spirit of increased productivity, UK agriculture typically saw the increased use of artificial fertilisers, enabling lands to be more heavily stocked<sup>1</sup>. This national pattern of intensification appears to have been reflected, to a limited extent, across the Braunton Marshes. Anecdotal evidence suggests that many Marshes and the surrounding area have been stocked with greater numbers of animals during the post-war decades, although the precise extent of this is impossible to quantify. Nonetheless, many pastures are today identified as potential Devon County Wildlife sites, together with the existence of two SSSIs on the outskirts of the Marsh. The area is not

contributed to a current increase in sheep grazing. Post-war agricultural science has facilitated this non-traditional practice, following the introduction of drugs to treat liver fluke. Sheep numbers on the marsh have increased particularly dramatically in the wake of the Foot and Mouth crisis of 2001. Although the crisis resulted in the decimation of both cattle and sheep populations, the shorter generation time of sheep had immediate advantages for the purposes of restocking. Since then, the overall sheep population has been higher, although it remains to be seen whether this trend will continue in the long-term. It is important to note that variation in grazing regimes, and stocking intensity, have been linked to changes in the types and abundance of plant species<sup>2</sup>.



Picture by courtesy of Miriamda Coleman-Cooke



Picture by courtesy of Miriamda Coleman-Cooke

AN EXAMPLE OF THE SMALL ENCLOSURES WHICH WERE ONCE MORE COMMON ACROSS THE MARSHES

suitable to intense agriculture, and landowners farming the Marsh and the surrounding area have resisted the full force of economic pressure to adopt farming practices that would have resulted in a widespread and severe loss of biodiversity.

Over the last fifty years, the trend of increased pasture size across the Braunton Marshes has continued. Small pastures of approximately two acres, which might once have contained a few milking cows visited twice daily by their owners, declined and have been replaced by larger herds of milking and beef cattle over greater areas. The extensive length of walls and hedges, which once divided the marsh into tiny pastures, continued to decay alongside the marsh linchays, as the Braunton Marshes were farmed in increasingly large units. The loss of hedgerows seems likely to have been exacerbated by the loss of mature elm trees on the marsh through Dutch elm disease during the 1970s. Throughout the changing landscape of agricultural economics, as the profitability of milking herds decreased, milk production on the Marshes gradually disappeared entirely. Suckler herds of traditional breeds such as Devon Reds or hand-reared heifers became the typical cattle seen in the area<sup>4</sup>. However, today, with continued pressure on British agriculture, mixed continental breeds have largely replaced traditional British varieties.

More recently, livestock numbers have once again declined in line with the demand for British beef. The previously-flourishing market was devastated by BSE during the mid 1990s, and exacerbated further by the Foot and Mouth epidemic of 2001. British farmers, faced with the pressure from supermarkets to compete with cheap imports, have found it increasingly uneconomic to continue beef production, and this has

Falling market prices for both sheep and cattle, together with CAP reforms decoupling farm subsidies from a 'per-animal' basis to a single payment, meant that, last year, parts of the Braunton Marshes were not grazed at all. Partly due to economics, and partly due to the late spring of 2006, pasture which was famed for cattle fattening over two centuries, was therefore simply cut for hay and left un-stocked. Hay production has not traditionally been a wide-spread practice across the Marshes, with preference for continual grazing. Additionally, it is difficult to cut grass on the undulating surface of the pastures, or to dry the hay sufficiently with a water-table so close to the land surface<sup>3</sup>. The wildlife of the Marsh is intrinsically linked to the agricultural practices decided in response to external economic pressure. With the current challenges facing UK agriculture, and some of the most significant departures from historic practices occurring in recent years, perhaps the greatest divergence from traditional farming on the Braunton Marshes is yet to be seen.

- 1 - McNerney, J., 2002; The production of food; from quantity to quality. Proceedings of the Nutrition Society 61; 273-279
- 2 - Stewart, G.B. and Pullin, A.S. (2006). Does sheep-grazing degrade unimproved neutral grasslands managed as pasture in lowland Britain? Systematic Review No. 15. Centre for Evidence-Based Conservation, Birmingham, UK.
- 3 - Richard Dyer, personal communication, 2006
- 4 - John Hartnoll, personal communication, 2006