

# Whittlesey Mere

*by Enid Porter*

In 1851, the last of the great inland lakes — Whittlesey Mere between Ramsey and Peterborough — vanished from the fenland scene. Stretching 2½ miles from east to west, and 1½ miles from north to south, the reed-fringed Mere was formed 2,000 years ago, when, with a fall in level between the fens and the sea, the water could not completely drain away. As a result of the extensive drainage works begun in the 16th century, the Mere had gradually diminished in extent and depth — in 1851 its waters were from 2 to 7 feet deep — and once, in 1826, it had temporarily disappeared. In the hot dry summer of that year, the area of water contracted to a hundred acres, and when a high wind came up it blew what remained into the deep cracks which had formed in the sun-baked bed of the Mere. But, with the coming of the winter rains, things were soon restored to normal.

The danger of having so large an expanse of water which, in the event of a bank breaking, could flood the surrounding countryside, had become obvious by the 1840's, following the improved drainage of the Middle Level. Prime mover in the campaign to drain the Mere was Mr. William Wells, owner of the Holme Estate which included Holme Fen in which Whittlesey Mere was situated.

In 1851 a cut was made through the surrounding bank, at Foleaster Point at the north-east corner of the Mere, and the water flowed out for several days. It was clear, however, that some form of pumping was necessary, and it was decided to instal the centrifugal Appold pump which had attracted so much interest at the Great Exhibition of 1851. This, driven by a 25 horse-power beam engine, could discharge 16,000 gallons of water a minute into the Old Nene.

This final stage of draining the Mere, under the supervision of the engineer, John Lawrence, was celebrated by a luncheon given by William Wells in the pump-house engine room at Johnson's Point, which was decorated for the occasion with flowers, evergreens and banners. Crowds of people came to watch the operation,

the majority of them bringing baskets, sacks and even carts in which to collect the fish left floundering in the mud as the Mere waters subsided. Tons of pike, perch and eels were lifted in nets by men wearing boards strapped to their feet to prevent them sinking in the slimy mud of the Mere bed, but many thousands of bream, chub and roach were left to rot.

Fish, however, were not the only treasures lifted from the Mere. In the mud was discovered a silver censer and an incense boat decorated with ram's heads which showed that it had once belonged to Ramsey Abbey. William Wells gave the youth who found the censer £25, a small sum compared with the £1,100 which it fetched at the sale held after the owner's death.

Once the waters had subsided, the Mere bed was carefully examined. The uppermost surface consisted of fresh-water shells below which was a stratum of peat in which were found the skulls of a wolf and of a wild boar. Twelve feet farther down came a layer of sea shells from which the fossilised skeleton of a grampus was lifted, while lower still was a deposit of compacted leaves and a quantity of nuts.

## SET-BACK

Throughout the summer of 1852, work proceeded on making the bed of Whittlesey Mere fit for cultivation, on laying out drains and roads and on planning new farms. But in the autumn of that year there was much heavy rainfall. On November 2nd the banks burst and within a few hours, about a thousand acres were covered with water to a depth of over two feet. The new pump was made to work continuously for three weeks until the Mere was dry again. The banks were strengthened and the main drainage dyke—the Holme Fen Engine Drain from Holme Lode Farm to the Pumping station—was completed. Clay was spread on the Mere bed to prevent

the dry peat top-soil from blowing away and by the summer of 1853, crops of coleseed and Italian rye grass were growing where once had been a vast sheet of water. The financial advantage of drainage soon became apparent, for the average value of the crops grown was £12,350 compared with the £1,160 which, earlier, had been derived from the cutting of reed and sedge which had fringed the Mere.

William Wells, in 1848, drove into Holme Fen three wooden posts so that their tops were level with the soil. His intention was to show by how much the peat would sink once drainage of Whittlesey Mere had begun. These posts showed that, immediately after drainage, shrinkage began at the rate of 9 inches a year. In 1851, when the waters had finally left the Mere, a cast iron post, removed from the Crystal Palace when it was dismantled at the end of the Great Exhibition, was driven into Denton Fen, west of Holme Fen, so that its top was level with the surface of the ground. Today, this column stands nearly 13 feet above ground level.

## MIXED FEELINGS

Although the advantages of draining Whittlesey Mere were obvious, and there was little opposition to carrying it out, there must have been many 19th century sportsmen who regretted the passing of the great lake. For centuries it had been a paradise for wildfowling who, for sport or to gain a living, shot bittern, geese, swans and the many species of wild duck which frequented its waters.

In severe winters, when the fenland waters froze and boats could no longer pass through them, the fowling mounted their long muzzle-loading punt guns on to sledges which had four marrow bones fixed to their bases. The fowling, lying behind a screen of reeds, propelled themselves over the Mere by means of two iron-shod sticks.

The frozen Mere attracted, too, crowds of skaters and was the scene of many skating contests. A contemporary fenland landowner, J. M. Heathcote of Conington in Huntingdonshire, wrote enthusiastically of pleasant winter days spent skating on the Mere where the ice varied much from year to year and often, it seems, changed in texture and appearance

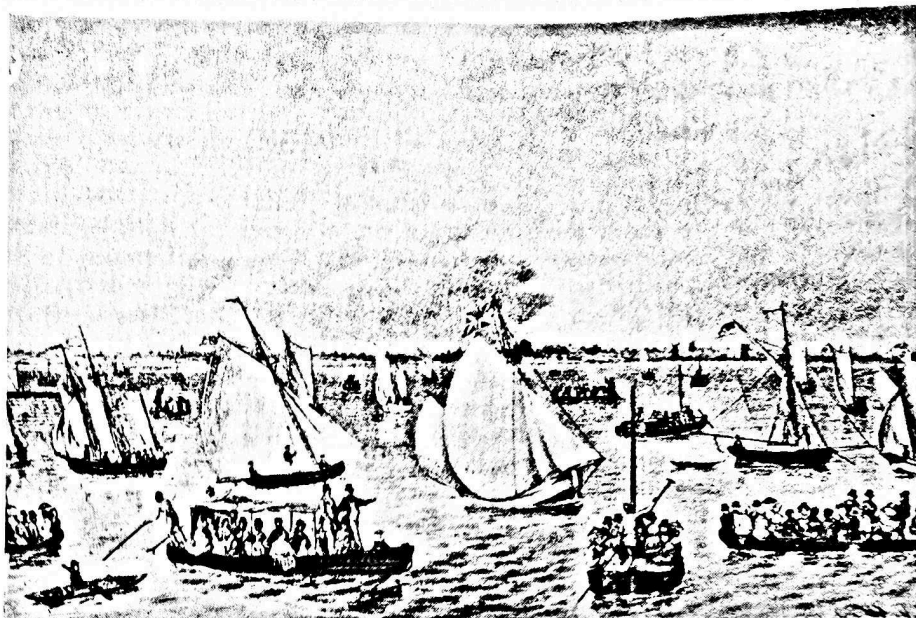
during a single frost.

*There was the hard, black smooth ice which, by a little skimming of snow with slight thaw and subsequent frost, would be made of white. A gentle breeze during the time of freezing made knotted ice. There was also the anchor ice, so called when it froze under the surface and on it at the same cold temperature. Sometimes a high wind would roll up water and mud, and the surface became very rough. There was the bright ice which, when hard and slippery, was called glib. The cracking of the ice was a curious incident, making a loud noise which was heard a long distance at night.*

The Mere not only attracted many country gentry by the excellent fishing, wildfowling and skating that it afforded, but it was also a great place for water picnics and regattas. Several local landowners had boat houses on its shores; the Shark and the Surprise Yacht Houses, for example, at the north-west, and Whittlesea Yacht House at Port Sandwich on the south-west shore. In 1669, William Pierrepont of Orton Longueville, near Peterborough, entertained the Bishop of Peterborough and other clergy to a banquet near Frog Hall, a reed-thatched hut on the north-east bank of the Mere. Melons, venison pasties, beef, mutton, poultry, salted tongues, roast apples, tarts and cakes were served at the feast, with quantities of wine and cider, and the whole entertainment was described in a long Latin poem, published in 1676, which J. M. Heathcote later translated. "There is a special interest for me," he wrote in his introduction, "who having so often joined in parties and picnics among the reed-shoals, have great pleasure in finding that we were only following the example of our ancestors 200 years ago."

In July, 1777, the third Earl of Orford set sail, with a fleet of nine ships, on a remarkable journey through "the narrow seas of Cambridgeshire, Lincolnshire, Northamptonshire, Huntingdonshire and Norfolk and Suffolk." His adventure was minutely described in his *Journal*, in which he referred to the nine pleasure craft as "the Fleet" and to himself as the Admiral and Commander-in-Chief.

The Fleet sailed several times on to Whittlesey Mere for the fishing, anchoring in Sandwich Bay, and Lord Orford wrote of the sudden storms



*Throughout the centuries Whittlesey Mere has been a popular rendezvous for water picnics and regattas. This picture of one such event in 1842 could so easily be a 20th century fancy dress water carnival on Grafham Water.*

which so often arose in the lake, where the waters were "in constant agitation" being "exposed to and raffled by the wind from whatever corner it blows." Indeed, on July 26th, the wind blew so hard that "part of the crew imagined we were driven from our anchors and were striking against some hidden rock", while "Charlotte and the cook were both frightened and sea-sick and sat up all night."

## HIGH AND DRY

In 1805, a Norwich clergyman, Mr. Preston, who spent most summers cruising East Anglian waters, arrived on the Mere in his small cutter, the *Bure*, which had sleeping berths, a galley and a cabin in which eight people could dine. He intended leaving on the following day but was persuaded to stay so that he could watch a regatta to be held in a few days' time. The Mere waters, however, subsided soon after the *Bure's* arrival so that Mr. Preston, unable to get away, offered his craft for sale. It was bought, jointly, by Lord Sandwich and J. M. Heathcote for £120 and was, for many years, used for sailing and fishing parties.

The outlines of Whittlesey Mere and of the smaller Trundle Mere, also drained in the last century, which lay to the west of it, are still visible, today,

from the air, while large pieces of masonry, marked on an 18th century map of the Mere, stand in front of Engine Farm with similar ones near the pumping station and the Old Nene. Quarried at Barnack, near Peterborough, the stones, by tradition, are said to have been on their way to Ramsey Abbey when the boat which was carrying them across the Mere, grounded. They remained on the Mere bed, after drainage, until they were finally moved to their present resting places.

Acres of flat fields of potatoes, sugar beet and wheat, intersected by long drains, now occupy the site of the old freshwater lake where wild birds, fish and large copper butterflies once abounded, and where J. M. Heathcote painted and drew pictures of wild-fowlers and skaters. Not even the bitter winter of 1835-6 kept him away from his beloved Mere. Clad in a "green baize dress lined with flannel," of his own devising, he sat painting under a shelter of reeds, even though the water with which he mixed his paints crystallised on the paper. For him, as for many others, the Mere certainly lived up to the reputation ascribed to it in the old rhyme:

Yaxley stone mill,  
Glatton's round hill,  
And Whittlesey Mere  
Are the three wonders of Huntingdonshire.