

Drainage Works — The District a complete waste of Flood and Fen — The first Commission in 1303 — Origin of “ King ” Sedgmoor — Legislation without improvement — The Somerset Drainage Commissioners to-day.

THE “*plague of waters*” fell very heavily upon Bridgwater and the neighbourhood at an early period of its history, and agues, fevers, and other diseases arising from the miasma of the marshes, were very common. Indeed, residence in some of the low marshy situations was almost out of the question, and there was scarcely any portion but what the surroundings were prejudicial to the health of the inhabitants. The water covered thousands of acres, communicating with the sea by means of the Parret, and so rose and fell with the tide when the latter was high; while in low tides much of the country remained as bogs or marshy swamps, covered with brushwood, alders, &c. From this wild waste rose Middlezoy, or Zoyland (“*the island*”), Westonzoyland (“*Weston on the island*”) and Chedzoy. The privations and the inconveniences suffered by the inhabitants appear to have been early represented to Royalty, and in 1303 a Commission was appointed to go into the matter with the view of providing some remedy by the reparation of the banks, ditches, gutters and sewers. No good appears to have been done by this Commission, for several other Acts followed.

King Sedgmoor is the name given to a large tract of lowland extending east from Bridgwater and containing over thirteen thousand acres. In 1610 King James laid a claim to the soil of the moor, and projected a scheme for improving it, by complete drainage. The owners of the surrounding property, who commoned their cattle on much of the land, except in the time of flood, were much averse to the scheme, but as they could not show a good title to the right of pasturing their cattle by usage they proposed to allow the King 4,000 acres in lieu of his claim, and to divide the residue, being 9,522 acres, among the different lords claiming right therein. James died before the conclusion of the agreement, but Charles I. accepted the 4,000 acres of land in lieu of the Royal claim, and the remaining 9,522 acres were allotted to different lords of the manors and their tenants. The King’s land was afterwards purchased by Cornelius Vermuyden, a Zealander, for £12,000 and a fee farm rent to the

Crown of £100 yearly.

In the reign of William III. another Act was obtained for draining the land, but its operation was frustrated. A similar result happened with regard to a scheme projected by Mr. Allen, M.P. for Bridgwater, in 1775 ; but in 1791 an Act was passed “*for draining allotments*” (30 in number), and forthwith acted upon. According to Billingsby’s “*Survey of Somersetshire*” the expense of this undertaking was £31,624 4s. 8d.

A better and more comprehensive Act, dealing with all the moors, eleven in number, was passed in 1833, giving a body of Commissioners of Sewers power to make new cuts, remove impediments, &c., and report to the Quarter Sessions held at Bridgwater, Wells, Wincanton, Langport, Axbridge and Wrington, in rotation. The moors were secured from inundation by strong banks called sea-walls, the mouths of the rivers were secured by sluices and flood-gates, and one or two important new cuts were made. The morasses rapidly disappeared, and luxuriant meadows and pastures covered the former barren and pestilential wastes, and the neighbourhood soon enjoyed the character of being remarkably healthy.

As years passed it was found that the powers conferred by the Act were not equal to modern requirements, and a Bill (principally the work of Mr. G. D. Warry) was promoted for the appointment of the present Somerset Drainage Commissioners. The Act came into force in 1880, since which time a vast amount of money has been spent in dredging the river and improving the waterway, repairing the sea walls, sluices, &c. The Act operates not only over the lands suffering in times of flood, but the Commissioners are empowered to levy rates on the owners or occupiers of the lands on which the waters are collected. The higher levels are, therefore, made to pay their quota towards the burden of the lower levels. It would be too much to say that the Act is universally a satisfactory one, or that the body it has called into existence has so far met with no opposition but it may be laid down in a general way that the Act is by far the most useful and workable of the many that have been passed. The Commissioners under it are also a thoroughly representative body, being composed of Boards elected by vote in the various towns and parishes. Much of the routine work is done by these district Boards, who have certain pow-

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ers conferred upon them, but have to report progress to the Central Board, the members of which meet every month at Bridgwater.

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