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Five swans over Littleport: fenland folklore and popular memory, c. 1810-1978

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Forthcoming in J. Arnold and M. Hilton (eds), After Hobsbawm
(Oxford University Press, 2017)

I am grateful to John Arnold for reading this chapter at very short notice, and to the thoughtful comments of the anonymous reader for Oxford University Press.

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This chapter engages with two marginalized fields of historical inquiry: folklore and local history. Its empirical basis comprises a blend of folkloric studies and memory texts. In particular I draw on interviews conducted with old fenmen and women in the postwar period by the great folklorist Enid Porter.¹ Often in their eighties at the time at which they spoke with Porter, they discussed tales told by grandparents, so carrying us back by up to a century and a half.

I ought to say straight away that my aim is not to use these memories in an attempt empirically to reconstruct ‘how things really were’ (although I believe that some can be used to that purpose) so much as to engage with what popular memory tell us about the condition and subversion of the category of the subaltern. As historians, we may want to dismiss ‘myths’ and stories about the past that seem to us to have no connection to the ‘real’ past. But this is to miss their significance; the verifiable truth or otherwise is less important in this context than the authority that these beliefs about the past are given.² Moreover, folklore is far from a stable category: as Dell Hymes has suggested, ‘intact tradition is not so much a matter of preservation, as it is a matter of re-creation, by successive persons and generations, and in individual performances’.³ In its protean richness, then, folklore can be seen as paradigmatic, offering us privileged access into the culture that generated and sustained them.

The pasts constructed in the folkloric imagination were not the top-down impositions on which Eric Hobsbawm and Terence Ranger focussed, but were instead generated from within the culture of the subaltern classes.⁴ The Hobsbawm and Ranger volume has been hugely influential, and for its time represented an important intervention in understanding the ways

¹ For Enid Porter’s *magnum opus*, see her Cambridgeshire customs and folklore (London, 1969).

² Moses Finley’s early discussion of the subject remains highly perceptive. See M.I. Finley, ‘Myth, memory and history’, History and Theory, 4, 3 (1964-5), 297-302.

³ D. Hymes, ‘Folklore’s nature and the sun’s myth’, The Journal of American Folklore, 88, 350 (1975), 354-55. See also J.E. Limon, ‘Western Marxism and folklore: a critical introduction’, Journal of American Folklore, 96, 379 (1983), 39.

⁴ E.J. Hobsbawm and T. Ranger (eds), The invention of tradition (Cambridge, 1992).

in which histories are constructed. But, arguably, the pieces in the collection gave too much significance to state- or elite-sponsored constructions of history and paid little attention either to the reception by subalterns of those histories or to the capacity of subordinates to articulate their own histories. This chapter tries to set that story straight.

The chapter's claim to originality therefore lies not so much in its empirical base so much as the integration of that material into an argument that engages with subalternity.⁵ In particular, this chapter challenges modernizing accounts of social and cultural change which present oral tradition as in decline during the nineteenth and twentieth centuries.⁶ It is an exercise in what Malcolm Gaskill has called 'history from within' – that is, it tries to get at the history of mentalities, worldviews and senses of place.⁷ In particular the chapter seeks to establish the nature of social subordination in the fens, with the ways in which that subordination was negotiated and confronted over the period 1810-1978, and with the extent to which folklore and popular memory proved enabling forces in the culture of the working people of the region.

The area of fenland with which we are concerned lies on the western edge of Norfolk and Suffolk and the eastern half of Cambridgeshire.⁸ They are easily ignored, remaining as marginal as the sources on which this essay depends. The fens are passed through on the traveller's way to somewhere else - a cruciform of major arteries take the driver from Cambridge to Norwich, or from London to the North. It is a scruffy region, neither entirely solid land nor fluid water. As the oral historian Mary Chamberlain has observed, 'Poverty and isolation are synonymous with the fens'.⁹ The history of the fens has been in part that of the struggle against the sea and the tides. Yet it has its own still beauty. In some ways, despite its contemporary integration into capitalist agribusiness and the presence of a great university on its doorstep, it remains the epitome of the local.

The people with whom this essay is concerned are 'ordinary' – but the stories they tell are extraordinary.¹⁰ For a long time they have been known as 'Fen Tigers'. Enid Porter believed that they acquired the name way back in the 1640s and 1650s, during the anti-enclosure struggles against fen drainage led by the Dutch engineer Cornelius Vermuyden.¹¹ In 1966, the 65-year-old Arthur Randall recalled for Enid Porter how

⁵ On western Marxism and the subaltern, see M. Green, 'Gramsci cannot speak: presentations and interpretations of Gramsci's concept of the subaltern', *Rethinking Marxism*, 14, 3 (2002), 1-24. On subaltern resistance and local culture, see R. Maddox, *El Castillo: the politics of tradition in an Andalusian town* (Urbana: ILL, 1993), 9, 11; Crehan, *Gramsci, culture and anthropology* (London, 2002), 104.

⁶ For which, see D. Vincent 'The decline of the oral tradition in popular culture' in R.D. Storch (ed), *Popular culture and custom in nineteenth century England* (London, 1982), 20-47. Patrick Joyce has observed the continuing vitality of oral culture in Victorian industrial Lancashire. See his *Industrial England and the question of class, c.1848-1914* (Cambridge, 1993).

⁷ M. Gaskill, *Crime and mentalities in early modern England* (Cambridge, 2000).

⁸ For a useful introduction to its landscape history, see J. Ravensdale, and R. Muir, *East Anglian landscapes: past and present* (London, 1984), 177-203.

⁹ M. Chamberlain, *Fenwomen: a portrait of women in an English village* (London, 1975), 19.

¹⁰ For ordinariness and working-class culture, see M. Savage, G. Bagnall and B. Longhurst, 'Ordinary, ambivalent and defensive: class identities in the Northwest of England', 34, 4, *Sociology* (2001), 875-892

¹¹ See A. R. Randall, *Sixty years a fenman*, (London, 1966), 2. For those struggles, see K. Lindley, *Fenland riots and the English revolution* (London, 1982). Of Cornelius Vermuyden's fate, Ernie James recalls that 'It is said that such was his enthusiasm for the project that he invested much of his own money in the [drainage] scheme and as a result died almost penniless'. A. James, *Memoirs of a fen tiger: the story of Ernie James of Welney as told to Audrey James* (Newton Abbott, 1986), 11.

In the old days the people who lived on the other side of the Ouse river were called High Norfolk folk; those on the other side where my parents were born were called Fen Tigers. The ways and customs and speech of the Fen Tigers, even the work they did on the land, were quite different from those of the High Norfolk people who were always referred to as “Foreigners” by the Tigers.

William Edwards, speaking to his daughter in the early twentieth century, observed that

I don't claim to 'av no ancestors, but I did 'ave some forebears, on'y they were really tigers – fen tigers. I don't know why old fenmen were allus called tigers, unless it were because they used to act so wild and shy, not being used to seeing many folks, or whether the strangers thought they looked a bit fierce.¹²

In particular, we are concerned with the ways in which popular memory was inflected by a sense of the local, and how that sense connected to the condition of subalternity.¹³ Writing about the fenmen and women represents a methodological challenge. As Keith Snell puts it, ‘We are dealing with one of the most illiterate, subdued, silent, maligned and shadowy classes in nineteenth-century society’.¹⁴ Yet the challenge is there: and its fruits take us far from the world of educated elites, states and governors. They take us instead into a rich, complex culture that has thus far attracted little attention from professional historians.¹⁵

Our story begins in the Cambridgeshire village of Littleport in on the 28th June 1816, when five swans were seen in flight overhead. They landed in the nearby Great Ouse river, where they nested for some years. At the same time as the swans landed in the village, five men from Littleport were hanged at the nearby county town of Ely. The story was confirmed by the fenman Jack Barrett in his conversations with his aged neighbour Chafer Legge, who spoke to Jack about his grandfather's stories. In Chafer's memories, ‘When grandfather got back [from witnessing the executions at Ely], he was told that, just about the time those men were hung, five swans flew over Littleport and came down on the river and, what's more, when he crossed the bridge on his way home he saw them still there, and he said they stayed on the river for years.’¹⁶ The unstated inference was clear: these were the souls of the five men, returned to their home.

The five Littleport men who were hanged on 28th June 1816 were named William Beamiss, George Crow, John Dennis, Isaac Harley and Thomas South. Along with many others from across the fenlands, the Breckland and the city of Norwich, they had taken part in large-scale rioting that was intended to lower food prices. The slogan of the rioters had been ‘Bread or

¹² S. Marshall, Fenland chronicle (Cambridge, 1967), 8.

¹³ Social memory is therefore seen as a potential resource for subaltern agency. For a Norfolk example of the consequences of communal forgetting, see L. Rider Haggard (ed.), I walked by night: being the life & history of the King of the Norfolk poachers, written by himself (Ipswich, 1935), 110-11. For an excellent survey, see J. Fentress and C. Wickham, Social memory (Oxford, 1992).

¹⁴ K.D.M. Snell, ‘Deferential bitterness: the social outlook of the rural proletariat in eighteenth- and nineteenth-century England and Wales’, in M.L. Bush (ed.), Social orders and social classes in Europe since 1500: studies in social stratification (Harlow, 1992), 162.

¹⁵ Geoff Eley and Keith Nield have put this well, arguing that ‘the life of a subaltern class encompass[s] something fuller, richer, and more complex than simply the reflexes of its subordination’. See G. Eley and K. Nield, The future of class in history: what's left of the social? (Michigan, 2007), 144.

¹⁶ W.H. Barrett and E. Porter, Tales from the fens (London, 1966), 98. Familial memory is also important: an old man aged 85 in 1901 noted that he had been born in 1816, ‘two days after my father was hung at Ely for the part he took in the Littleport riots’. W.H. Barrett and R.P. Garrod, East Anglian folklore and other tales (London, 1976), 3. Chafer felt a close bond between the fens and his kin: he ‘used to boast that his ancestors were living on the isle of Southery when Norman soldiers were afraid to venture there.’ Jack Barrett describes him as ‘the last of the real old Fen tigers’. Barrett and Porter, Tales, x.

Blood'.¹⁷ At that time, in the aftermath of the Napoleonic Wars, England was gripped by a fatal combination of economic depression, unemployment and high food prices. Dragoons and Hanoverian infantry were dispatched to the Fens and Brecks to quell the protest, leading to severe repression and the execution of the five men at a Special Assizes presided over in full pomp by the Bishop of Ely. The repression was scorched into local memory. Many years later, a fenland vicar later reported how 'Local tradition' had it that a body of Hanoverian troops (probably from the King's German Legion) mistook a thatcher's cries to his assistant as an insult to them and so shot him dead. His body fell from the roof of the barn on which he was working to its great folding door and 'there it hung, dripping with blood for over three days, the officer swearing that anyone who dared to remove it should share the same fate, as an example to all to behave with due respect to their oppressors'.¹⁸

Chafer Legge went on: 'I want to tell you bor [that is, Jack Barrett], don't you believe it when people tell you that those men stood on the scaffold snivelling and praying, because Grandfather said they didn't, they died like Fenmen are expected to'.¹⁹ Prior to their execution, the condemned men signed a confession in which they 'acknowledge[d] and confess[ed] our sins in general, and we most sincerely beg of God to pardon our sins: fervently hoping and trusting that God Almighty will, for the sake of the all-atoning merits of the Redeemer, receive our precious and immortal souls into his favour'. A different tone was struck by William Beamiss at his execution, who started to forgive one Mr Tansley for bearing false evidence against him; the drop cut off the rest of Beamiss's words.²⁰ After the event, the bodies were laid out for public exhibition. Chafer Legge mentioned one particular moment:

Five other old chaps from the fen went in with Grandfather and Robert Norman, who was over ninety, made them swear over the coffins that they'd tell their children, generation after generation, about what the Bishop and the gentry had done to those Fenmen ... Then old Norman cut a bit of rope off one of the bodies and cut it into pieces and gave one to each of them, and if you're round my back door any time, go in and ask my old woman to show you Grandfather's bit of rope stuck behind the glass of that picture over the hearth.²¹

In the end, despite the strikes, incendiarism and campaign of terror against the farmers and gentry, the Fen Tigers had to accept defeat: 'they had to tell themselves that, for the first time since the Fens were made, those living in them were beaten'.²² Yet, remembrance imposed duties:

Now, bor, I want you to remember this story just as I've told it to you and, what's more, perhaps, when you're older, you'll write it down so that, when I've thrown my

¹⁷ A.J. Peacock, Bread or blood: a study of the agrarian riots in East Anglia in 1816 (London, 1965), 80, 88, 103, 116.

¹⁸ Ibid., 109.

¹⁹ Barrett and Porter, Tales, 97.

²⁰ Peacock, Bread or blood, 128-9.

²¹ Ibid., 98. There is a memory of martyrdom at work in the story about the Littleport executions. The tradition might be related to that noted by the Hammonds in 1911 that snow never settled on the grave of a young ploughboy called Henry Cook, executed in 1831 for his participation in the Swing Riots. See J.L. and B. Hammond, The village labourer, 1760-1832 (London, 1911), 284-6. See also the stories communicated by both print and speech to Dave Douglass in the 1970s concerning the public exhibition of the tarred body of an executed coal miner in the 1830s. See D. Douglass, "'Worms of the earth": the miners' own story', in R. Samuel (ed), People's history and socialist theory (London, 1981), 64.

²² Barrett and Porter, Tales, 96.

last clay hole out [i.e., to finish his labours], there'll still be people to remember the terrible thing that was done to those innocent men all that time ago²³

Chafer Legge followed his account of the events of 1816 with a grim description of the long hunger that followed. The way that Chafer told things, the experience of defeat changed things amongst the Fen Tigers.²⁴ In the 1840s, a pair of outside radicals arrived in the area. The fenland folk, feeling that 'they weren't having people like them coming into the fen and telling them to do things that would make them a sight worse', responded by tarring and feathering the interlopers. Shortly after, the magistracy arrived in the village. At first, the Justices behaved as though they intended to punish those responsible for the tarring and feathering. Yet the fenmen stuck together, saying that they were all responsible. On hearing this answer, the gentry explained that they had been hunting the radicals across the area, and that it was therefore their duty to treat all of those present to a series of rounds of beer in the village pub. An old man named Turfy Rowell then stood forth. Turfy expressed his dislike at the idea of rick-burning and class war, adding that

the only thing he and his pals ever did that the squires might not see eye to eye with was a bit of poaching, and there were a few chaps in the room who'd spent a week or two in Norwich [gaol] because of it. That made the gents laugh.

The old man then told the squires about the hunger in the fens

and how he knew some old people who'd starved to death. He was scared, he said, that some of the things those two men [that is, the outside agitators] had talked about [may happen], and then there'd be more hangings like there had been forty years ago²⁵

Chafer Legge's narrative, in which local people humiliate outside agitators, might be read as an acceptance of an organic social order, contemptuous of literate, modern radicalism and hostile to any larger vision of the world.²⁶ At least in this fenland village, it seems that localism triumphed over class. But there is more at work in his story. Chafer's story also addressed local solidarity (the whole village refused to disclose the identity of those responsible for the tarring-and-feathering) and plebeian articulacy (Turfy Rowell's effective account of village suffering). Most importantly, a deep memory of 1816 ran through Chafer's memories. Chafer had been told by his grandfather that he needed to hold hard to a memory of the executions of that year. In mid-Victorian Littleport, this memory had been turned into a story that confirmed the futility of popular agency: what Chafer feared above everything else was that 'there'd be more hangings like there had been forty years ago'. Richard Hoggart's words apply here:

When people feel that they cannot do much about the main elements in their situation, feel it not necessarily with despair or disappointment or resentment but simply as a fact of life, they adopt attitudes towards that situation which allow them to have a liveable life under its shadow, a life without a constant and pressing sense of the larger situation.²⁷

²³ *ibid.*, 98.

²⁴ A.J. Peacock notes the quietude of the areas affected by the 1816 riots during the agrarian troubles of the 1820s-40s. See Peacock, *Bread or blood*, 133.

²⁵ *ibid.*, 107-110.

²⁶ For more, see K.D.M. Snell, 'The culture of local xenophobia', *Social History*, 28, 1 (2003), 1-20. See also E.P. Thompson's comments in his 'Folklore, anthropology and social history', *Indian Historical Review*, 3 (1978), 265.

²⁷ R. Hoggart, *The uses of literacy: aspects of working-class life with special reference to publications and entertainments* (London, 1957), 92.

Fenpeople were painfully conscious of their lack of education and apparent lack of intellectual capacity. In conversation with his daughter in the early twentieth century, William Edwards worried that ‘...our lives were so simple and we were so ignorant that we talked and listened to each other so much, but I’m often wondered if other folks used to go away laughing at me an’ at what I’d said.’ He put this down to a long history of isolation. Looking back on the nineteenth century, Edwards suggested that ‘A lot on [the fenmen and women] cou’n’t read and di’n’t want to, and a few on ‘em were so isolated where they lived that they were frit [i.e., frightened] to be in company.’²⁸ Fenpeople were aware that their body language and seeming taciturnity confirmed in outsiders’ minds the cultural inferiority of the Fen Tigers. In 1978, the local journalist Eric Fowler had this to say: ‘The weather has a bit to do with it all – it’s responsible for the way we mutter, talk with our mouths shut because we don’t want to let this east wind in. another thing is frugality, a product of 19th century poverty’.²⁹ This taciturnity in the presence of outsiders was picked up on by other fenpeople. In his semi-autobiographical novel Bicker’s Broad Alan Bloom points to the taciturnity of fenpeople when around outsiders: ‘The habit of using as few words as possible and keeping most of his thoughts to himself was already part of his own make-up’.³⁰ Anne Barrett, writing in the mid-twentieth century wrote that ‘...the cream of the fens was the farm worker. He knew all there was to know about his job. To strangers he appeared sullen. It was not so. It was reserve, and once this was broken and you received an invitation to enter his home and try a glass of his home-made mead, you were treated as a brother.’³¹

We might call this body language and taciturnity – this way of holding oneself – composure. It excluded the outsider and enabled the maintenance of a defensive local working-class culture. It was, then, about survival. Generated from the memory of generations of malnutrition, poor housing, lack of education, unemployment and low pay, composure allowed the fenman and fenwoman to hold onto her or his identity and values by shutting them off from the ears and eyes of the outsider. As the historian Alun Howkins observes, ‘The rural poor seemed to many to be completely alienated from their “betters”, a separate, secret people, impervious to change and influence.’³²

Yet the fenpeople’s composure had its active, creative side. Story-telling underwrote composure. Jack Barrett remembers old men in the pub, spinning their yarns: ‘The faces of these men, as they sat in the glow of the fire, looked as if they were carved from bronze. Slow in speech they were often thought, by strangers, to be dull-witted, but this was far from true’.³³ As the historian Penny Summerfield suggests, ‘The starting point of the cultural approach to oral history is to accept that people do not simply remember what happened to them, but make sense of the subject matter they recall by interpreting it.’³⁴ Story-telling allowed fenpeople to contextualize their lives, generating a sense of the past that was rooted in the land, in a memory of suffering and survival, and in a rich tradition that was endlessly intelligent. In all of these respects, story-telling contested the view of fenfolk as taciturn and slow: rather, in story-telling, we find a liveliness and protean creativity.

²⁸ Marshall, Fenland chronicle, 137. For the wider context, see Snell, ‘Deferential bitterness’, 163-5; B. Reay, Rural England: labouring lives in the nineteenth century (Basingstoke, 2004), 145.

²⁹ M. Watkins, This other breed: East Anglians (Ipswich, 1978), 55.

³⁰ A. Bloom, Bicker’s Broad (Thetford, 1974), 17.

³¹ Barrett and Garrod, East Anglian folklore, 127.

³² A.J. Howkins, Reshaping rural England: a social history, 1850-1925 (London, 1991), 65.

³³ Barrett and Porter, Tales, xii.

³⁴ P. Summerfield, ‘Culture and composure: creating narratives of the gendered self in oral history: interviews’, Cultural and Social History 1 (2004), 67.

Story-telling formed a way of understanding and reconciling oneself to what outsiders saw as the bleak environment of the fens. Ernie James recalled that ‘Most Saturdays I visited Will Kent, my father’s old friend; he fascinated me and I listened for hours to the stories he had to tell about the old Fen characters he knew when he was a lad. It was Will who first encouraged me to appreciate the beauty and solitude of the Fens’.³⁵ For Jack Barrett, speaking of his youth in the late nineteenth century, story-telling was a way of overcoming the deadening loneliness of the fens. Barrett was aged eleven when he left school; in the early years of his working life, he found himself out in the fenland emptiness, employed at crow-scaring and tending to sheep. ‘I eased the loneliness by memorizing the tales I had heard the old men tell of Fenland’s past.’ The old men

were past masters in the art of story-telling. Untutored and unread, they had been reared in an age long before the Education Act of 1870 was passed. Each one was a storehouse of folk-lore stories, many of which had been handed down from generation to generation, told and re-told in the days when listeners sat enthralled by what was, more or less, their only means of recreation.

‘Old Pegleg’, for example, told the young Jack Barrett many a tale. He spoke of the impact of parliamentary enclosure, the Game Laws, his father’s poaching adventures on the squire’s estates and subsequent transportation to Australia, along with Old Pegleg’s experiences in the Crimean War, in the course of which he had lost a leg. Jack Barrett says of Old Pegleg that ‘He was getting an old man when I first met him, and for a period he was my tutor of early eighteenth century social history and its folklore.’

One centre of story-telling was the male world of the pub: Jack Barrett said that “The cream of the stories which I heard were told on Saturday nights at the Ship Inn near my home in Brandon Creek. Here one adept in the art of entertaining his fellow men would be sure of free beer, with an ounce of shag thrown in.”³⁶ Ernie James remembered how

When Georgie Butcher and I were old enough, we often met in the pub after a day’s work. It was a social centre of the village as far as the men were concerned, and we used to sit in a corner listening to the old men telling yarns and reminiscing about their younger days. Georgie’s father, Joey, was a master story-teller, and once he started he could entertain the other customers in the tap room all night. He had a fund of wonderful tales because he had a vivid imagination and was into everything.³⁷

One unnamed old fenman with whom Jack Barrett spoke in 1902 reflected on earlier riots. The man was employed on parish relief, spending his time breaking stones. Citing the local proverb ‘It’s the poor that helps the poor’ (folk wisdom similar to Evans Pritchard’s observation that ‘It is scarcity not sufficiency that makes people generous’), Jack Barrett explained that he had brought the old man a jug of hot tea.³⁸ They fell to talking: the old man was born in 1820 and had begun his working life at the age of seven. Sipping the tea, he reflected on the poverty of his upbringing, and of days when his meals consisted of boiled turnips or cabbage soup. In particular he remembered machine-breaking riots. One year, when the harvest season began, the workers were ready to elect their harvest lord (an honoured labourer who oversaw the harvest) but found that they had ben replaced by reaping and threshing machines. Migrant Irish workers began the agitation that ended with

³⁵ A. James, *Memoirs of a fen tiger: the story of Ernie James of Welney as told to Audrey James* (Newton Abbott, 1986), 22.

³⁶ Barrett and Garrod, *East Anglian folklore*, ix, xii, 51.

³⁷ James, *Memoirs*, 45.

³⁸ M. Fafchamps, ‘Solidarity networks in preindustrial societies: rational peasants with a moral economy’, *Economic Development and Cultural Change*, 41, 1 (1992), 149.

Gangs [roaming] the countryside during the nights ... harvest operations came to an abrupt halt; came the period when the night sky was all aglow with burning fields of ripe corn. Dragoons were sent from Norwich to knock a bit of sense into Silly Suffolks' heads.

With their fancy uniforms, the Dragoons were doubly resented for their success with the local girls. The old man went on: 'The winter that followed was one of the bitterest in memory'. When steam engines came to power the new farming technology, 'The men, who always found work in the winter threshing corn with a flail, said that the engine was nothing less than the handiwork of the devil'. Winter unemployment deepened social conflicts: 'in those perilous times, no well-to-do farmer lived at his farm; he went into the towns, leaving a foreman in charge.' On the night of the threshing machine's arrival, the whole farmhouse and cornfields went up in flames. 'There was hell to pay when the horse soldiers arrived. I was dragged out of bed, kicked and clouted; then with several others was driven like sheep to Thetford.' They were taken before a magistrate, who sent the men to gaol in Norwich Castle. The old man was given three years' hard labour: 'Here I had time to think. Why did I move out of Silly Suffolk into cruel Norfolk, where it seemed to me that just a few folks held reign, who believed God is on my side, and, bugger the lower classes'. Jack Barrett went on: 'After expressing his thanks for hot tea, he added: "God is up above, so all is well with the world." My answer to that was: "How do you make that out, existing as you do, on near starvation poor law parish relief?"' Barrett did not record the old Fen Tiger's answer.³⁹

Other than the pub, memories were communicated in the less gendered environment of the home. Arthur Randall remembered how, in the years before the First World War, the children would sit around the fire of an evening

as our parents talked of a variety of things but nearly always of events or people they could remember or had heard of long ago. You couldn't say that they were all complete or connected stories that we heard, more often it was a casual reference to an almost-forgotten bit of village history which had been called to mind, perhaps because of some more recent happening.⁴⁰

Clearly, then, both mother and father had their role in forming the social memory of the home and the village. The only woman whom Jack Barrett mentions as a spinner of local tales was 'Granny Hall, who, when she was over ninety, could make one's flesh creep with tales of ghouls, witches and ghosts.'⁴¹ But it was assumed that the first training in the history and folklore of the fens would come from the mother: like his informant Chafer Legge, Barrett assumed that the male story-tellers 'had learned the history of the Fens at their mothers' knees.'⁴²

Mary Chamberlain concluded from her conversations in the early 1970s with the women of Gislea that they

have little confidence in their skill at story-telling. They see this as a man's prerogative and are silent when their men are around, leaving the talking to the "professionals".

Few people hear a woman's tale, remembering instead the old rustic character who entertained them so well around a pint, for pub going is not a women's tradition.

Chamberlain went on, however, to observe that 'gangs of women working on the land and mothers' stories to their children provide as great a creative field for story-telling as the old

³⁹ Barrett and Garrod, *East Anglian folklore*, 74-77.

⁴⁰ Randall, *Sixty years*, 72, 79.

⁴¹ For a remarkable account of the endurance of magical beliefs, see K. Bell, *The magical imagination: magic and modernity in urban England, 1780-1914* (Cambridge, 2012).

⁴² Barrett and Porter, *Tales*, xi, xii, 85.

boy in the pub.’⁴³ The 86 year-old Mary Coe, for instance, told Chamberlain that ‘Gleaning we used to go, at harvest, after they got the corn in ... we was on holiday then from school. That was our summer holiday... we’d be sitting with the older women till the Church bell went [signifying the start of gleaning for the day], and I was sometimes sorry to start gleaning, because the best part was before, listening to the older women’s stories’.⁴⁴ Chamberlain tells us that ‘One very old lady remembers her grandmother telling her that when the women went on the land’ “the men used to stand over them with whips”.⁴⁵ My rough guess, assuming that the story was collected around 1974, that the ‘very old lady’ was then aged around 80, that her grandmother was also aged 80 - so this story takes us back to the 1820s – about a century and a half. There are, then, long-term women’s memories that remained alive in the post-war period, that told of a patriarchal order that could be violently oppressive. But, just amongst their menfolk, fenwomen’s memories could provide an assertive sense of rights and entitlement. In the 1930s, one old fenwomen remembered her childhood days back in the 1850s: ‘when the corn was cut the whole families [of the labourers] would go gleaning the corn left in the fields, this being, of course the gleaners own property. A great many families gleaned sufficient to keep them in bread for the whole of the winter’.⁴⁶

It is significant that the wealthy farmers tended to live in the larger villages or the market towns. Especially in the aftermath of 1816, the suffocating darkness of the night-time fenland could be a dangerous place to be. Chafer Legge had many a story to tell to that effect. In one, a farmer who handed a man over to the magistracy for stealing a sheep, the man was hanged, his wife went insane and killed herself and their three children and the farmer was found tied to the water-wheel of the village mill, his drowned body cycling round and round. A variation on such stories concerned the enemies of the Fen Tigers vanishing, their bodies some time later to be found in fen drains.⁴⁷ One story commands our attention. During the 1816 riots, Bob Dewey and a friend had been repairing the banks of Wellmere Fen, which had sprung a leak the previous winter. Dewey invited his mate home where they discovered a shocking scene. Dewey’s newly-married bride was naked and unconscious on the floor, while her rapists, two soldiers, were sleeping off the effects of the hard drink they had consumed. Dewey took his wife up to their bedroom; she recovered, and told him

what those soldiers had done to her and she said all she wanted to do was die. Dewey said she wasn’t going to do that; if there was any dying to be done it wouldn’t be her that did it ... What happened after that is anyone’s guess. Forty years afterwards, that bank [of Wellmere Fen] was leaking again and when they opened the trench again and got almost to the bottom, they found two skeletons, right where the leak was, as the clay hadn’t been puddled over them. Nobody could do anything about it as Dewey and his wife and his mate were all dead by then, and the officers had thought that those two soldiers had deserted.⁴⁸

Yet other memories spoke of social relations being less antagonistic. Every year, there was a moment when the labourers’ had the capacity to assert themselves over the farmers when, before the harvest came in, a process of collective bargaining began between worker and

⁴³ M. Chamberlain, *Fenwomen: a portrait of women in an English village* (London, 1975), 12.

⁴⁴ *ibid.*, 29.

⁴⁵ *Ibid.*, 91.

⁴⁶ M. Llewellyn Davies (ed.), *Life as we have known it: by co-operative working women* (London, 1931), 112.

⁴⁷ Barrett and Porter, *Tales*, 86, 87, see also 96.

⁴⁸ Barrett and Porter, *Tales*, 91-2.

employer. All of a sudden, for a period of weeks, their labour had a special value. Arthur Randall had a clear recollection of being involved in the forging of a harvest contract:

It was quite a business when the harvest men met the farmer each year to fix the price per acre for tying, shocking and carting ... Often they would argue for as much as half a day but in the end they always came to some agreement and then the farmer would send for some beer to seal the bargain and a start could be made on the work.⁴⁹

Randall gives an account of the feasts laid on for harvest workers after the harvest had been brought in:

rows of trestle tables ... plenty of beer ... huge joints of beef and pork ... when the meal was over “our” farmer and the others who were giving the feast with him, each made a little speech thanking everyone for all the work that had been done ... there would be loud shouts of “For he’s a jolly good fellow, and so say all of us”.

Randall adds the threatening note that ‘probably only the day before some of the workers had been calling [the farmer] anything but a good fellow’.⁵⁰

For some, looking back on stories they had been told about the small change of everyday social relations, the gentry seemed not to be so bad. Eric Fowler was presented by positive stories about the squirearchy, which he summarized in 1978:

There was paternalism among employers, a willingness to look after their people, to take an interest in their families, but it didn’t include paying them any money that still exists... [then in the next breath] ... Feudalism? If you like, but those old squires were a darned sight more liberal and fair-minded in their administration than the new generation of bureaucrats dominated by people I would call commuters – they’re more harshly Tory than the old squire was.⁵¹

This rose-tinted view elides the massively unequal power relations between the Fen Tigers and those whom they called the ‘mighty men’.⁵² Farmers, the gentry and the Anglican clergy all expected ritual displays of deference – the women had to curtsy and the men to touch their caps.⁵³

The expectation of deference from the Anglian clergy may have been especially galling to a people whose own confessional identity was that of the Baptist or Primitive Methodist (locally known as ‘Ranters’). In a penetrating piece of analysis, Alun Howkins shows the ways in which, in rural England after 1850, there was a conscious ideological offensive waged by the Anglian clergy to win back flocks who, during the vicious conflicts of the first half of the nineteenth century, had been lost to the Established Church. This offensive was stitched into a wider set of claims on the part of the gentry to represent a paternalist, benevolent social force. Closer analysis of the effects of this offensive in the fens in the mid- and later Victorian period would be very valuable. For now, we might fall back on the memories of Chafer Legge who in discussing the riots of 1816 added that

⁴⁹ Randall, *Sixty years*, 23. For more, see D.H. Morgan, ‘The place of harvesters in nineteenth-century village life’, in R. Samuel (ed.), *Village life and labour* (London, 1975), 27-72.

⁵⁰ Arthur Randall, *Fenland memories* (London, 1969), 17. On harvest celebrations, see also W.B. Gerish, ‘An East Anglian harvest custom, known locally as “Hallering Largees”’, *Folklore*, 5, 2 (1894), 167-9; J. Glyde, *A dyshe of Norfolk dumplings* (London, 1898), 102-3; J. Hooper, ‘Horkeys, or harvest frolics’, in W. Andrews (ed.), *Bygone Norfolk* (London, 1898), 196-209.

⁵¹ Watkins, *This other breed*, 55.

⁵² Marshall, *Fenland chronicle*, 103.

⁵³ *ibid.*, 93. For the apparently passive acceptance of deference, see Norfolk Federation of Women’s Institutes, *Within living memory: a collection of Norfolk reminiscences* (King’s Lynn, 1972), 77. For a counter-example, see Snell, ‘Deferential bitterness’, 164-5.

The parsons were as bad [as the farmers], if they weren't worse. They wanted to keep people in with the gentry so they used to tell the people to put up with their miseries and not grumble, then, when they got up top [to heaven] they'd be ever so happy listening to the sound of harps; but those who grumbled and tried to alter things would just be stoking up fires in Hell.⁵⁴

In this respect, Primitive Methodism represented a counter-hegemonic force, mentally freeing workers from an ideological compact known in Norfolk as the 'parsonocracy'. Jack Barrett, for example, recalled a sermon given by the Methodist lay preacher Rhiny Fletcher at the Steam Engine Primitive Methodist Chapel around 1900:

Who was Job? Well, I'll tell you. He was a fenman. You want to know how I know that? It's in the book he wrote, thousands of years ago, where he says "Behemoth lieth in covert of reed and fen". I don't know who [the Biblical monster] Behemoth was, he might have been a gamekeeper or something like that, but what I do know is, that there's reed and there's fen, and if Job hadn't lived in the Fens, how would he have known about reeds and fen?⁵⁵

The preacher's sermon naturalized a radical reading of the Old Testament within the fenland landscape in which Behemoth became the hated gamekeeper and the Prophet Job was transformed into a Fen Tiger.

But in many fenland villages, outward disrespect could be a dangerous luxury. Lily Levitt was 83 when she was interviewed by Mary Chamberlain around 1974. She remembered being in service at the Coatsworths' household - a big farming family in Meachem - in her teens. She recalled that

Everyone in that village was subservient to them. They got to be. They were old-fashioned farmers. They were the owners of the village, really, they owned all the land. I suppose they thought they were good in their way. People used to sometimes go to them if they was in trouble, and they gave them perhaps a shilling, if they went to Church, and thought they were doing wonderful things.⁵⁶

Shivers of fear reverberated into the present. Margaret Gott, the wife of the Baptist minister in Gislea, was in her thirties when Mary Chamberlain interviewed her. She suggested that women in the village

have a tremendous inferiority complex. They very quickly feel inferior when we have speakers from Cambridge, you know, ladies with huge hats who all talk down, I curl up because I can feel the barrier coming up then. I suppose it's from the days when there was land workers and the gentry and you got the separation of the classes.⁵⁷

All of this represented the political background to the post-1870 trade unionism and radicalism manifested amongst East Anglian rural workers. But there is an important caveat to what might seem like a triumphalist (and ultimately tragic) story of poor labouring men struggling for rights, resources and freedom. Mary Chamberlain reminds us that 'while the men were agitating for a living wage, the women were continuing their unsung battle to keep a home together and starvation at bay: as well as, in most cases, working on the land'.⁵⁸ Rather like the Peruvian peasants studied by the anthropologist Gavin Smith, what was really

⁵⁴ Barrett and Porter, *Tales*, 88.

⁵⁵ *ibid.*, 53.

⁵⁶ Chamberlain, *Fenwomen*, 99. For a brilliant discussion of household service in the early twentieth century, see S. Todd, 'Domestic service and class relations in Britain 1900-1950', *Past and Present*, 203, 1 (2009), 181-204.

⁵⁷ Chamberlain, *Fenwomen*, 124.

⁵⁸ *ibid.*, 16.

important in the fenwomen's retelling of their survival was not so much their tales of celebrated moments of outright rebellion, but that of

another element, a far more important element ... that of sheer endurance: from week to week, year to year, decade to decade, through years of oppression to the capturing of the advantage of a correctly judged conjuncture, when the centre did not hold.⁵⁹

The defence of the working-class home as an autonomous space, just as much as the forging of a new tradition of rural radicalism, represented a major achievement: one mostly won by women.⁶⁰

Landscape archaeologists, anthropologists and social historians have recently emphasized the ways in which the material environment conditions mentalities and how rural people might read the world around them as much more than a repository of material resources.⁶¹ This phenomenological, sensory understanding of the landscape comes through strongly in the fenland material. Young Fen Tigers were taught to respect what could be a dangerous landscape: many of the memoirs and oral interviews utilized in this piece mentioned the dangers of the fens, of children falling into sinkholes or being dragged into deep streams. Ernie James remembered that 'Fortunately it was very rare that a child drowned in Welney, because we were all taught by our parents from a very early age to respect the rivers and be aware of their potential dangers'.⁶² When he went out to catch birds, fish or eels, James always listened to what was told him by older men: 'They had a rich and fascinating store of knowledge about the Fens and the creatures who inhabit them, handed down by their forefathers.'⁶³ This sense of landscape and memory extended to discussions of the fossilized remains of long-dead forests and to prehistoric trackways.⁶⁴ Fenmen and women had a close attachment to the land, which they saw as the bearer of their historical culture and the basis of their livings. A petition signed in 1810 by 174 men and women with an interest in the fens in Littleport and Downham Market to the governors of Bedford level emphasized these factors: they explained that 'From time immemorial', their lands had drained into Grunty Fen; the drainage of that fen would have the effect of excluding them from 'their just and to them most valuable Right'.⁶⁵

Stories were grafted into the land. Jack Barrett remembers how 'Old John Dewey, of Dutch extraction, could ... spin a fine yarn; his stories told how Fen folks reacted during floods and disasters'.⁶⁶ In 1974, Mary Chamberlain noted that although the people of Gislea were not given over to superstition, the older villagers told with pride the story of one particular landscape feature: 'Lying a few miles out of the village, and supposed to be that of a young boy who was hung for stealing a sheep, the "Grave" has been mysteriously and defiantly

⁵⁹ G. Smith, 'Pandora's history: Central Peruvian peasants and the re-covering of the past', in G. Sider and G. Smith (eds.), Between history and histories: the making of silences and commemorations (Toronto, 1997), 86.

⁶⁰ For a much more pessimistic assessment see W. Johnson, 'On agency', Journal of Social History, 37, 1 (2003), 113-24.

⁶¹ N. Whyte, Inhabiting the landscape: place, custom and memory, 1500-1800 (Oxford, 2009); A. Wood, The memory of the people: custom and popular senses of the past in early modern England (Cambridge, 2013); D. Massey, Space, place and gender (Cambridge, 1994); R. Bradley, The past in prehistoric societies (London, 2002); J. Thomas, 'Archaeologies of place and landscape', in I. Hodder (ed.), Archaeological theory today (Cambridge, 2001); C. Tilley, A phenomenology of landscape: places, paths and monuments (Oxford, 1994);

⁶² James, Memoirs, 24.

⁶³ ibid., 13.

⁶⁴ See for instance Marshall, Fenland chronicle, 108-15; Bloom, Bicker's Broad, 35.

⁶⁵ Cambridgeshire Archives, S/B/SP889

⁶⁶ Barrett and Porter, Tales, xi.

maintained ever since.’⁶⁷ Stories were bearers of truths – in this case, the harshness of property laws of the past, and the cruelty of farmers and magistrates.

One story passed around the fenmen and women, first recorded in the 1898, was the story of John Leaford who lived in Oxloode in later Stuart times. Like all fenmen and women, he worked hard on his flood defences. But over five years of good weather there were no floods; Leaford neglected the flood defences and grew rich, expanded his landholdings and built a fine mansion. He came to be hated by everyone and was widely known by the name ‘The Rich Fool’. The next time that there was a flood, all of Leaford’s achievements were washed away. The landscape attested to the story: ‘you can still see at Oxloode, the great Hundred-Foot Bank standing as a memorial to the patience of the fen-men, who began all over again and rebuilt that rampart so that it rests upon a secure foundation, nor will there ever be another flood so disastrous, provided the necessary repairs are not neglected’.⁶⁸ The story is a commentary on those who give themselves airs and graces. All stories do things. In this case, the story of the rich fool did two things: it acted as a warning to the socially aspirant not to forget where they had come from and it emphasized the importance of collectively guarding against the waters by maintaining flood defences. The waters also affected the reading interests of the Fen Tigers. In her sketch of the fenman, Anne Barrett observes that

Not having had much schooling, books were not of great interest. He possessed two: a bible, his knowledge of which was obvious to all he came into contact with, and Old Moore’s Almanack which gave him the phases of the noon and timetable of high water at King’s Lynn, vital information to one living in constant fear of burst banks and flooded fen. A staunch liberal, in his view Cromwell was the greatest man in history and Gladstone was his prophet.⁶⁹

The struggle of the Fen Tiger has been in part the struggle against water. This makes her or his attachment to the land especially poignant. Their struggle against the waters reached far back in the distant past and defined their local culture.⁷⁰ When further fen drainage and enclosure came in the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries, much more than an ancient landscape was disrupted: so was a way of being. In 1904, the Cottenham man Jacob Sanderson wrote a powerful comment of the cultural impact of enclosure:

Now a great change came over Cottenham, the Enclosure. Old times were to pass away and all things to become new. No more stocking of the Commons on Old May Day, not Dye Feast, or Officers chosen, nor Auditermakers Days. Nearly all the old landmarks were removed and a fresh order of things substituted in their place. Three old watermills taken down, Undertaker, Chare Fen and Setchell, and two steam engines in their place. Smithe Fen and Chare Fen. New drains were dug or made, and fresh roads made through the Fens and Fields, everyone knowing his own allotment. There is not one now in all the Town but what has changed hands since then, both in the Town Fields and on the Fen. In my time one generation passeth away and another cometh.⁷¹

⁶⁷ Chamberlain, Fenwomen, 17.

⁶⁸ C. Marlowe, Legends of the fenland people (London, 1926), 133-7.

⁶⁹ Barrett and Garrod, East Anglian folklore, 127.

⁷⁰ Cambridge University Library, EDR.A/8/1.

⁷¹ J.R. Ravensdale, Liable to floods: village landscape on the edge of the fens, AD 450-1850 (Cambridge, 1974), 34.

What is described here is the generation of a kind of anomie – a sense that has been seen as characteristic of the experience of urban modernity.⁷² All of this was so different to the world before large-scale enclosure and drainage.

Yet there remained parts of the fens that were never drained. Throughout the texts on which this essay has depended is a profound sense of attachment to the land, a way of reading the landscape as much more than a set of resources: rather, the fenland landscape was read, felt, experienced. Labour upon the land generated what archaeologists have called a taskscape, a sense of place that was built around the experience of work and movement, a way of being in the land.⁷³ Alan Bickers' semi-autobiographical novel gives some sense of this attachment:

The soft black earth, the livestock and the horses, the routine of cultivation, sowing and harvesting, these were things to be in love with. They held a challenge and in accepting it [the fenman] became so absorbed that he could not help but give all that he had. But this was not all. He could feel part of this landscape, on which his forebears – especially old Amos Bickers, had left their mark. He had been a pioneer in these fens, and Uncle Albert had told him much more of the family history, how the Bickers had originated from the Fenland village with that name. At least that was the family legend and Cyril was the only one left in the Fens to carry on the name.⁷⁴

So, to what wider issues do the stories told in this piece speak? What great issues of historiography, or grand theory are illuminated by the women of Gislea, or Chafer Legge, or Jack Barrett? Where do the grandiose priorities of 'Big History' fit in these emphatically local, working-class stories?⁷⁵ First of all, let us acknowledge that marginality runs through this whole piece. The fens are marginal: on the edge of East Anglia, they are a farming region worked for generations by wage labourers bonded to the land and now by migrants from the poverty-stricken edges of Eastern Europe. They are also culturally marginal. Graham Swift's bleak novel Waterland attests to this marginality, to the ghosts of the past that hover over the fens, and to the constant struggle against flood and hunger. Finally, the sources on which this essay has depended have been selected at least in part because of their historiographical marginality: these are not the state papers of the great, not the estate records of the gentleman or the careful accounts of the prosperous farmer. There is no 'Big History' here. They are sources that academic historians are trained to disdain, turning up their noses at the nostalgia, the gossip, the local worlds to which my sources have spoken.⁷⁶ It is significant, I think, that much of the material I have deployed was printed in local publishing houses.

If there is a larger meaning to be taken from the memories and stories recorded here, it is that of the importance of the historian keeping her or his ear open to voices from the margins, of attending to small places – small places about which large questions might be asked, but which might remain marginal. Much of the time, this is where subaltern history happens. In their study of the Captain Swing protests of the 1830s, Eric Hobsbawm and George Rude

⁷² For placelessness and memory see T. Judt, 'The past is another country: myth and memory in postwar Europe', Daedalus, 21, 4 (1992), 83-118.

⁷³ T. Ingold, 'The Temporality of the landscape', World Archaeology, 25, 2 (1993), 152-174. For the application of the concept in historical analysis, see K. Navickas, 'Luddism, incendiarism and the defence of rural "taskscape" in 1812', Northern History, 48, 1 (2011), 59-73; S. Sandall, 'Industry and community in the Forest of Dean', Family and Community, 16, 2 (2013), 87-99.

⁷⁴ Bloom, Bicker's Broad, 25.

⁷⁵ J. Guldi and D. Armitage, The history manifesto (Cambridge, 2014), <http://historymanifesto.cambridge.org>. Accessed 15 July 2015.

⁷⁶ For nostalgia as agency, see B. Jones 'The uses of nostalgia: autobiography, community publishing and working-class neighbourhoods in post-war England', Cultural and Social History, 7, 4 (2010), 355-74.

wrote of rural labourers' worldviews as merely 'the usual luggage of the pre-political poor'.⁷⁷ For all that Hobsbawm and Rude shared membership of the Communist Party Historians' Group with Edward Thompson, it is hard not to contrast this assessment with Thompson's desire for a history of the worlds that workers made.⁷⁸ The tension here is partly that of different versions of Marxism; but it is more than that. It is a contrast between different ways of understanding the past.

In the end, we are left with the five swans over Littleport. On that summer's day in 1816, the birds carried with them the burden of loss. Nesting in the river, they fostered a fierce urge to survive that subsequently defined the cultural and material worlds of generations of Fen Tigers. This is a story that has its own validity and which deserves to be read in its own terms.

⁷⁷ E. Hobsbawm and G. Rude, *Captain Swing* (Harmondsworth, 1973).

⁷⁸ For a passionate restatement of this tradition, see S. Todd, *The people: the rise and fall of the working class* (London 2014).