

Fenland Facts and Fancies

Poems by Michael Delanoy
Illustrations: Ann Biggs



INTRODUCTION

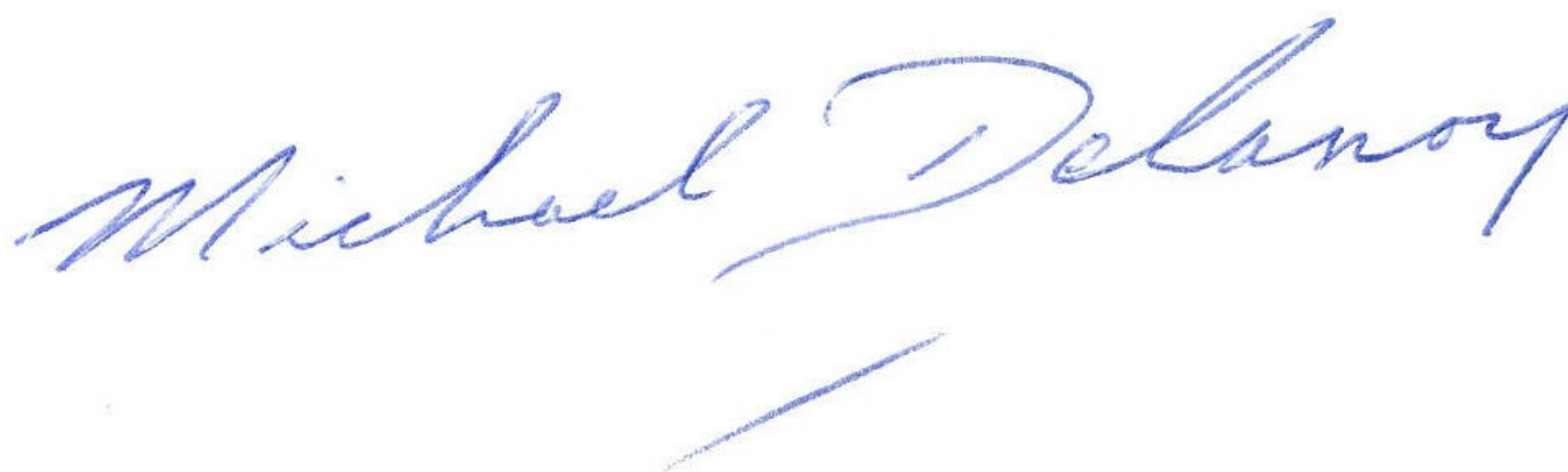
Ann and I have worked together with the Farmland Museum for the past twenty-eight years.

Apart from the museum, we have other interests in common, including a love of the Fens and its wildlife. When Ann heard I had been writing some “verses” on these subjects, she suggested that we should, for fun, publish them in a book form and she would illustrate it.

We hope you, the reader, will get pleasure from our efforts.

Michael Delaney MBE

Mepal, Cambs. 2003



Reprints 2012, 2015, **2018**

Printed by David J. Richards Ltd., Chatteris.

DIGGING THE RIVERS

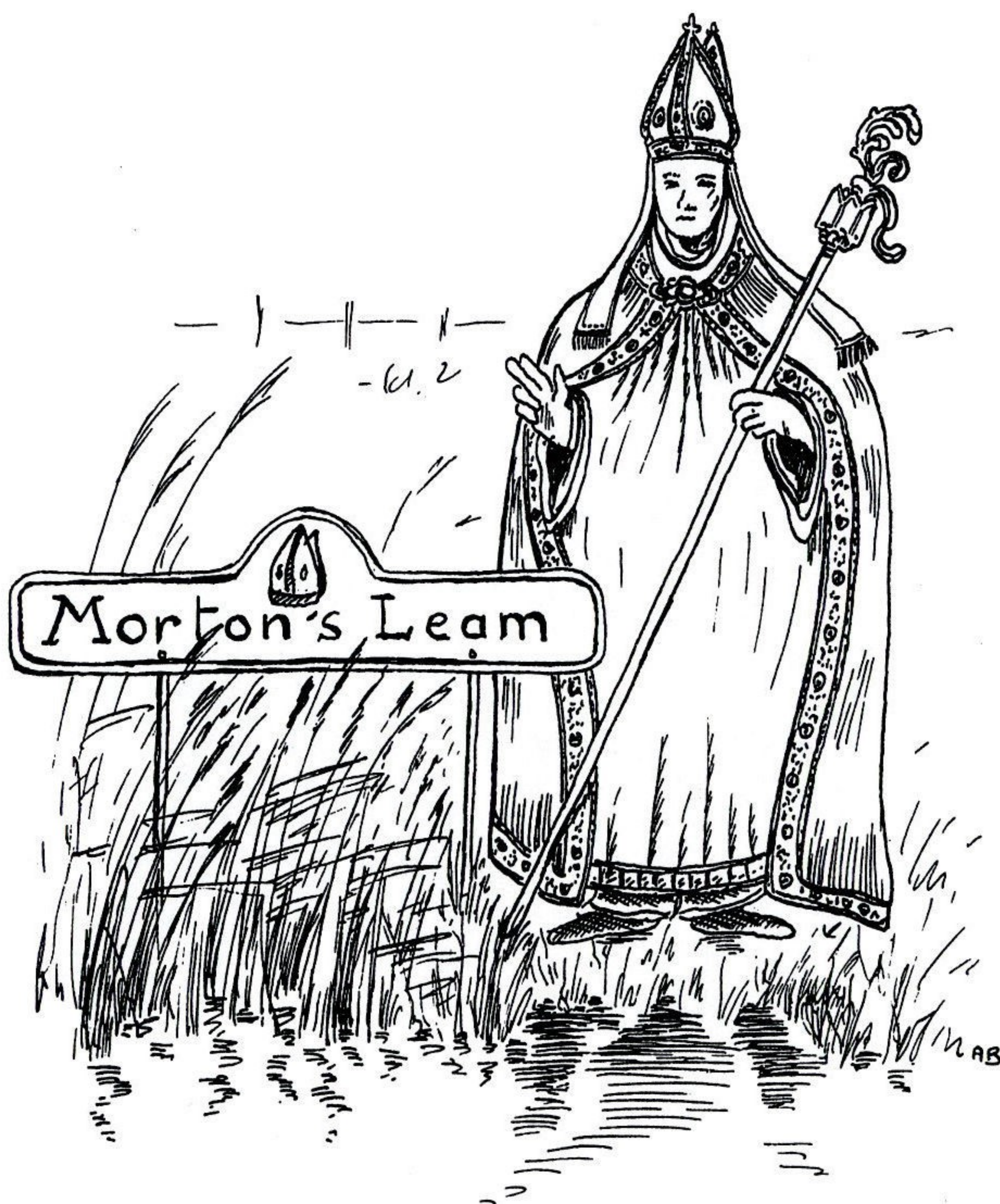
The Yellow Bellies had no wellies
When they dug the rivers.
All they had were barrows and spades,
Sweat, wet feet and the Shivers!
They dug them straight so it would seem,
Without the help of a laser beam.
Cornelius showed them how it was done,
But digging rivers was never much fun.

(Yellow bellies – name for a fen dweller; Shivers – the ague;
Cornelius - Vermuyden)



FEN WATERWAY NAMES

The rivers have strange names you know –
Take for example, POPHAM'S EAU,
After a Bishop it would seem;
There is one called MORTON'S LEAM,
BEDFORD NEW and BEDFORD OLD
Named after the Duke so I am told.
The Rivers OUSE both LITTLE and GREAT,
These two the Drainers did not create!
The WELL CREEK, WISSEY, LARK and NENE
(The latter pronounced to rhyme with "when")
Of unusual names we have a great wealth -
The FORTY and SIXTEEN FEETS, a few LODS and the DELPH.
But I love one above all the rest,
The slow, meandering RIVER OLD WEST.



PUMPING WATER

Controlling flood water is now “high tec”,
But it hasn't always been so;
No computers, telemetry or electric pumps
Three hundred years ago.

On early paintings of the Fens
Windmill-like structures abound.
They're wind pumps, powering scoop wheels:
The first method the draining men found.

They worked fairly well, that is,
Until the wind ceased to blow,
And then what to do with the water,
The authorities didn't really know.

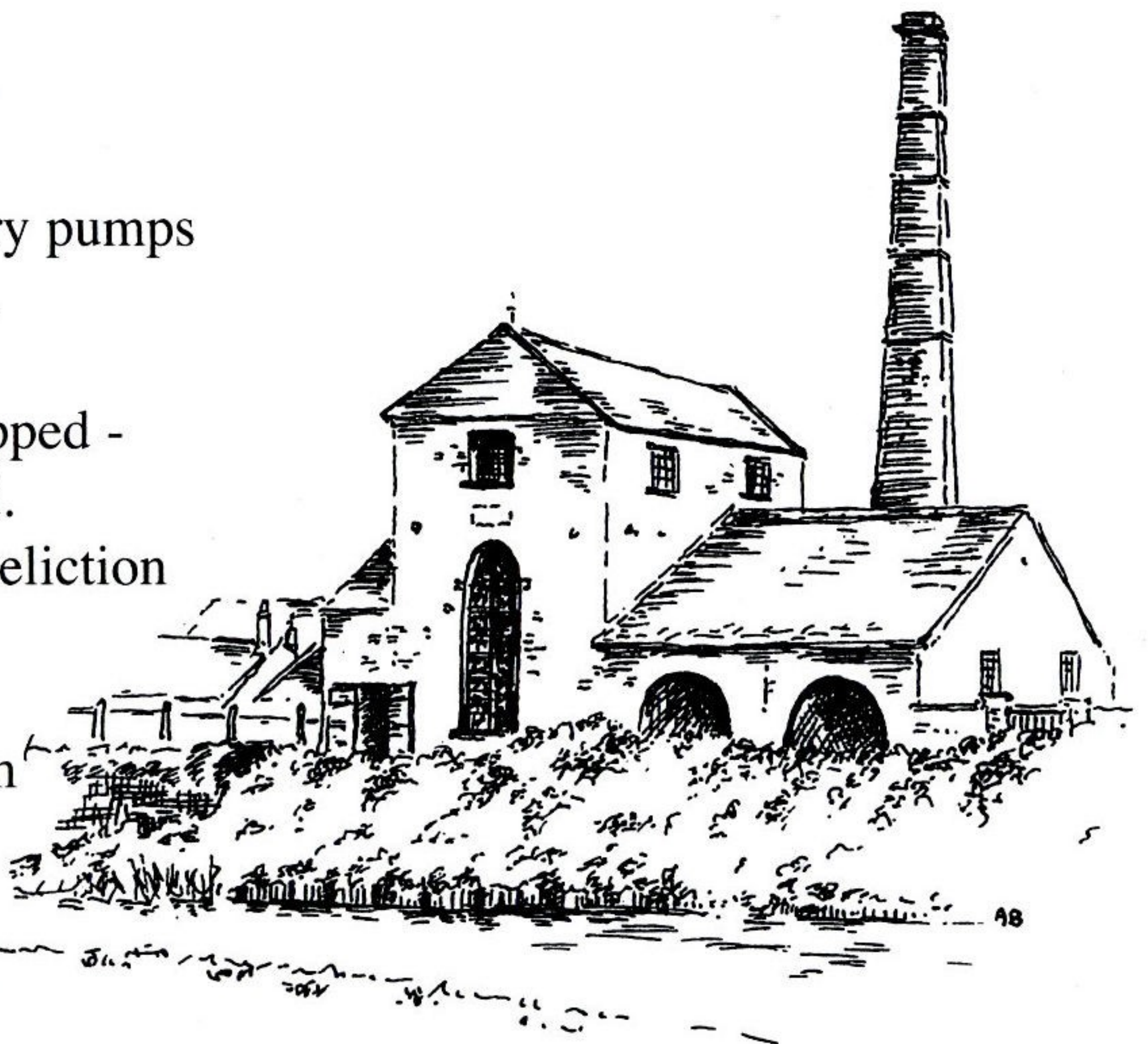
Then the whole picture quickly changed
To an entirely different scene.
Not wind pumps, but engine-houses they built,
Heralding the arrival of steam.

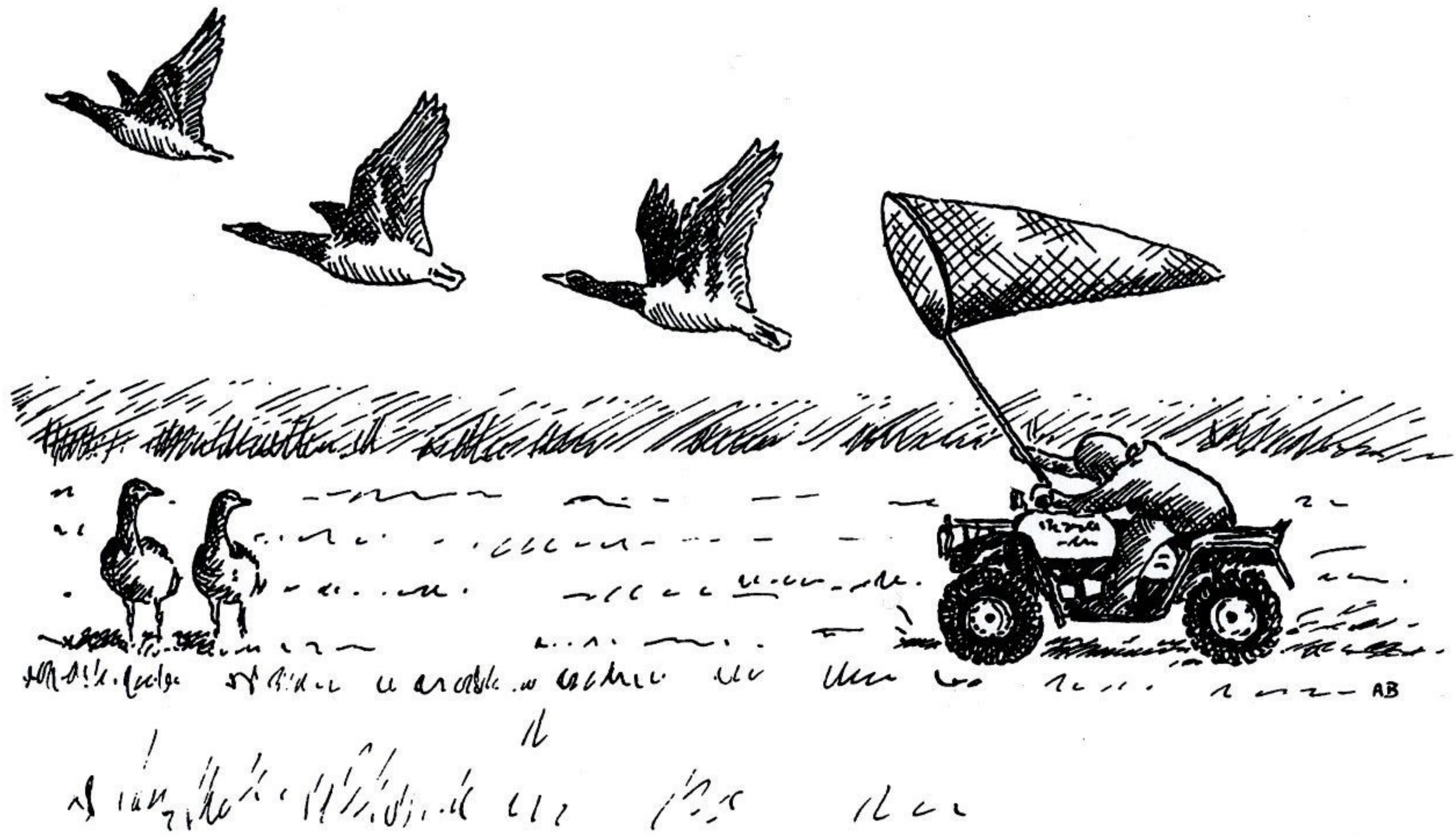
Beam engines, not sails, were used for power
Which improved the situation a lot.
For now they could pump both day and night
No worry if the wind blew, or not!

The steam engine successfully did its job
For a hundred years or so,
But the arrival of diesel engines and rotary pumps
Meant the steam engines, alas, had to go.

Fortunately not all the engines were scrapped -
As “museum pieces” some have survived.
Like the one at Stretham, which from dereliction
The electrical apprentices revived.

Diesel engines as in Prickwillow Museum
Eventually became obsolete.
Now electric motors power the pumps
Electronically-controlled while we sleep.





THE OUSE (or HUNDRED FOOT) WASHES

For three hundred years the Washes have been there
 Safe in the graziers' and wildfowlers' care.
 The wigeon would come, fifty thousand some seasons.
 Now only a third of them; what are the reasons?

It's a Ramsar site, an SPA and also an SSSI.
 The birds are well protected, RSPB's standing by.
 All Winter by the WWT each day the birds are fed
 Spectacular, but unnatural, I feel it could be said.

There were studies done on disturbance of birds
 But that didn't include Quad-bikes, shepherding herds.
 In nearby rivers one hundred thousand fish are dead -
 Someone from Environment Agency should be losing their head!

Among the dead fish were bream, rudd and roach,
 And even that most rare of fish, the little spined loach.
 So as more care and protection is organised each year
 The whole situation is just worsening I fear.

Perhaps the real answer is to turn back the clock
 And let the water be controlled by the keeper of the lock,
 And seek the opinions of those who remember when
 The decisions were made by those who understood the Fen.

BEAUTY & HISTORY

The distant horizon blends into the sky
No beauty here to the stranger's eye.
They all find it very hard to see
The beauty of a gnarled willow tree.
They say that it all looks very fine
But there is no beauty in a straight line.
There are no mountains, no woods, no lakes
But to realise the beauty – more time it takes.
Fenland Sunsets just can't be bettered:
Our vision by mountains never fettered.
On the Eastern horizon we can watch the sun rise
"Til behind Western horizons it disappears from our eyes.
No glacial action, volcano or fault;
A landscape created with banks made of gault.
The view that you see looking over the Fen
Was created entirely by the Drainage Men.
The Duke of Bedford and his Adventurer Friends
To drain these lands went to limitless ends.
The Fenman with fish and fowl scraped a living
And with these Drainers they were unforgiving
They realised that when all the land was dry
There would be nowhere to fish, no duck in the sky.
The lock gates were broken, the banks destroyed.
Beware the Fen Tiger when he gets annoyed.
But alas, their efforts were to no avail
Never again on the meres would they be able to sail,
For the meres dried up, and the reed beds died -
At last the Adventurers were satisfied.
The Fenmen, they had to admit defeat,
All is now potatoes and sugar beet

BUT.....

The story does not quite end here;

The Fenmen made a prophecy I fear -

“That Captain Flood will have the last say

And the farms and villages will be washed away”.



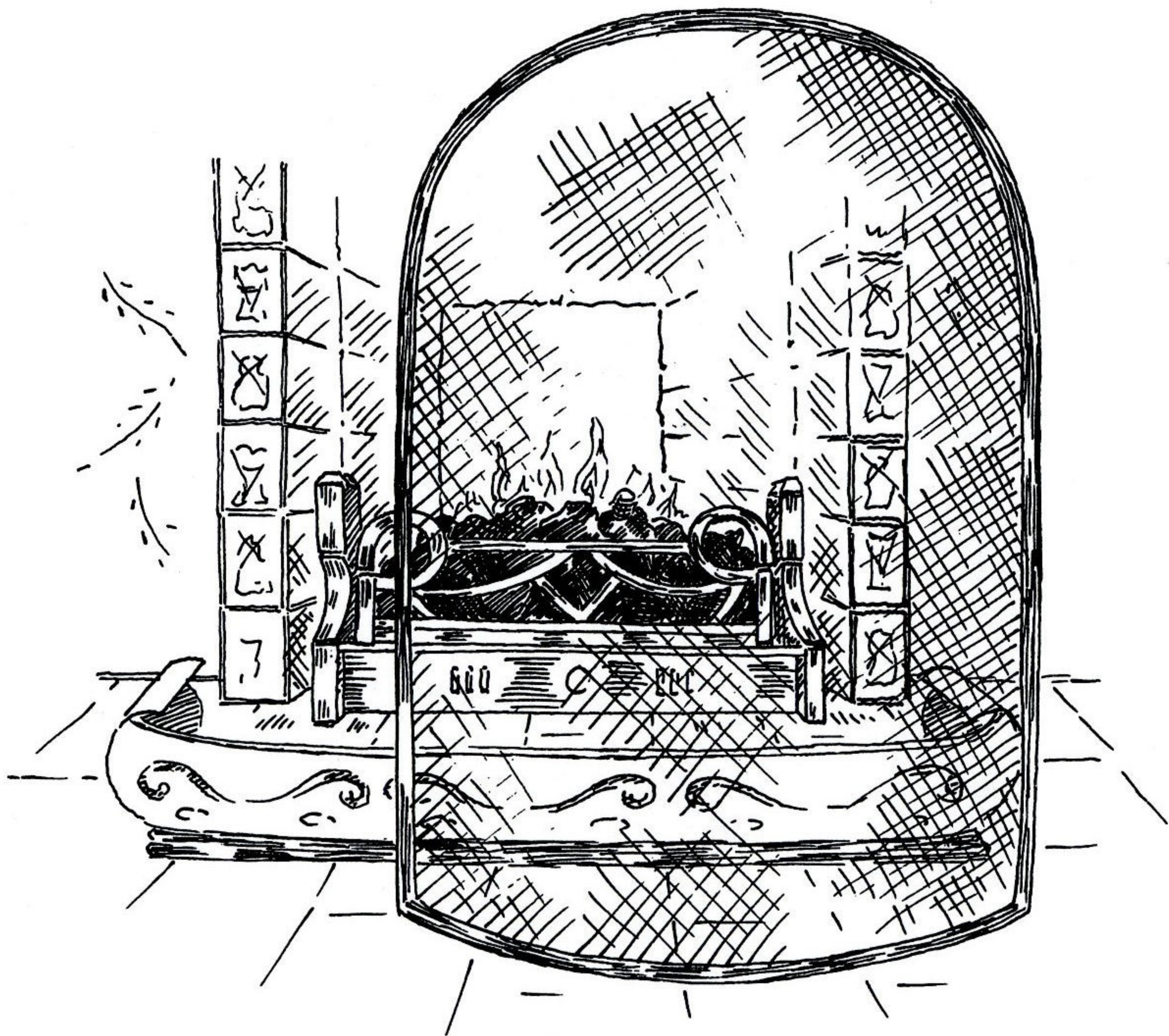
BOG OAKS

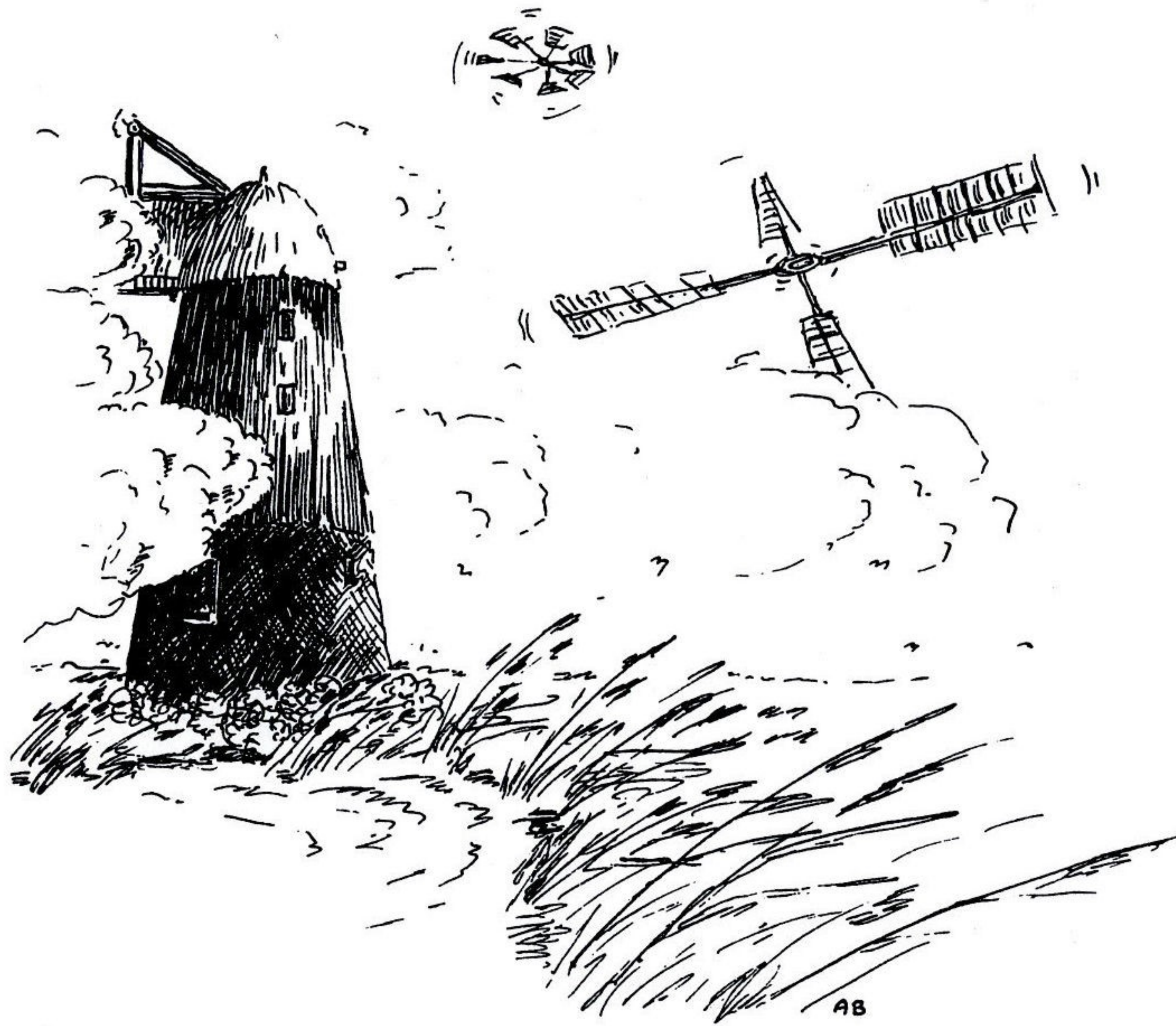
They call them “bog oaks”, but it’s not always true -
Sometimes they’re ash, or fir, or yew.
But one thing is fact, so it now appears,
They’ve lain buried there for four thousand years.

As the Fens were drained, so they dried out.
They began to shrink and to blow about,
Exposing these great trunks of wet black wood –
They didn’t, by the way, do the ploughs much good!

So when from the fields they had to go,
Blown up by explosives-expert Joe.
To the roadside verge they were then dragged away
To dry out, where many remain to this day.

If you cut them up wet, then leave them till drier,
They make a good fuel for the open fire.
They burn long and well because they’re so hard
But they “spit,” so remember to use a spark guard!



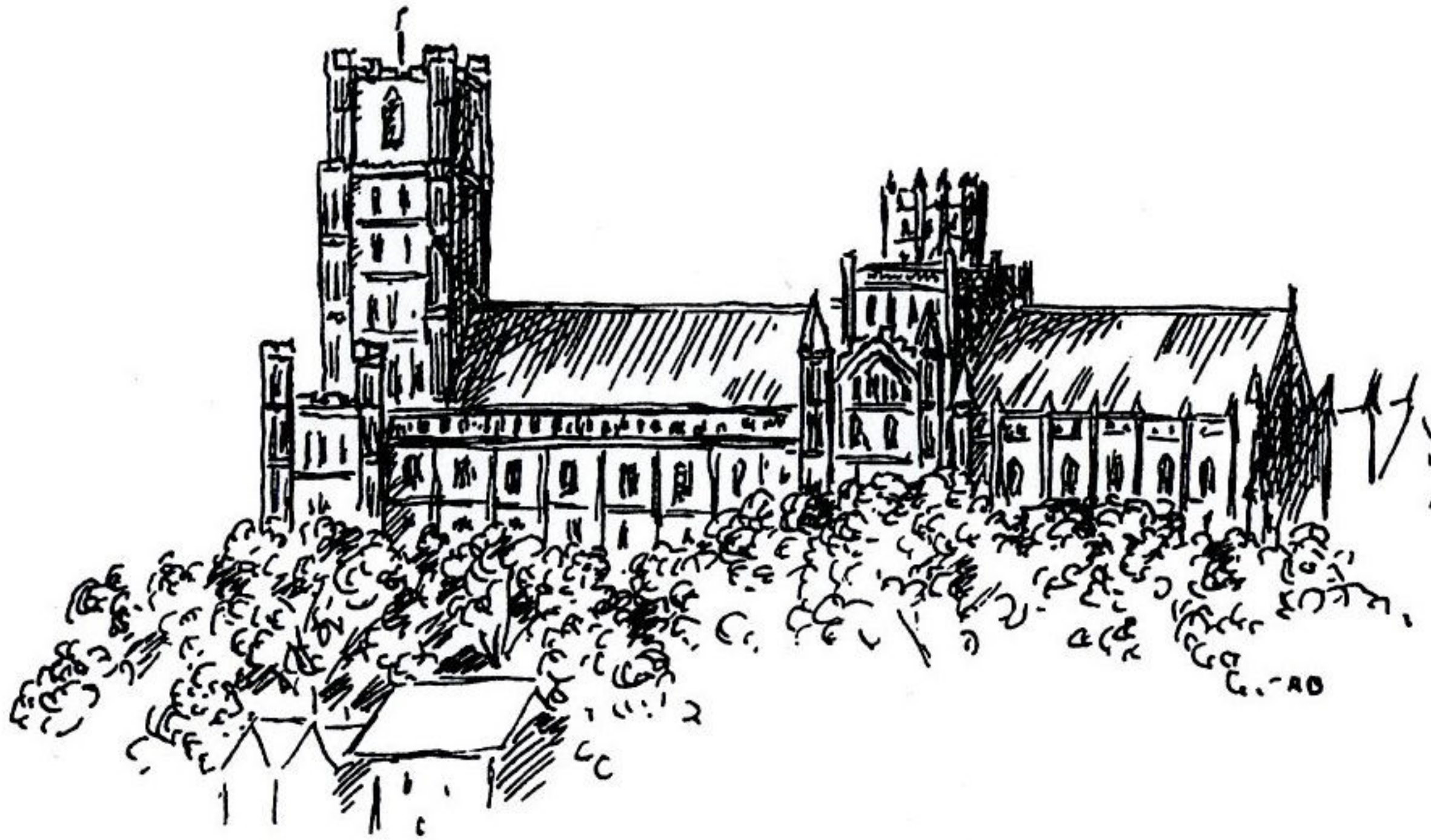


FEN BLOWS (in dialect)

If yew're out in the fen and the wind be ablowin,
There's sumthin yew oughta be aknowin.
Cos if that blow roight hard yew know
Yew're goin ter see wot we calls a "fen blow".

All the air that dew turn roight brown
Like them smogs they uster hev up Lunnon town,
Cos when th'ole fen droies that goo reel foine
An the soil, thet fills the ditches in next tu no toime.

There aint nuthin to stop the wind a roarin
An up in the skoie the peat dust asoarin,
They've gotta plannt more trees 'n 'edges
Dew the middle o' the fields'll be all round the edges!



ELY CATHEDRAL

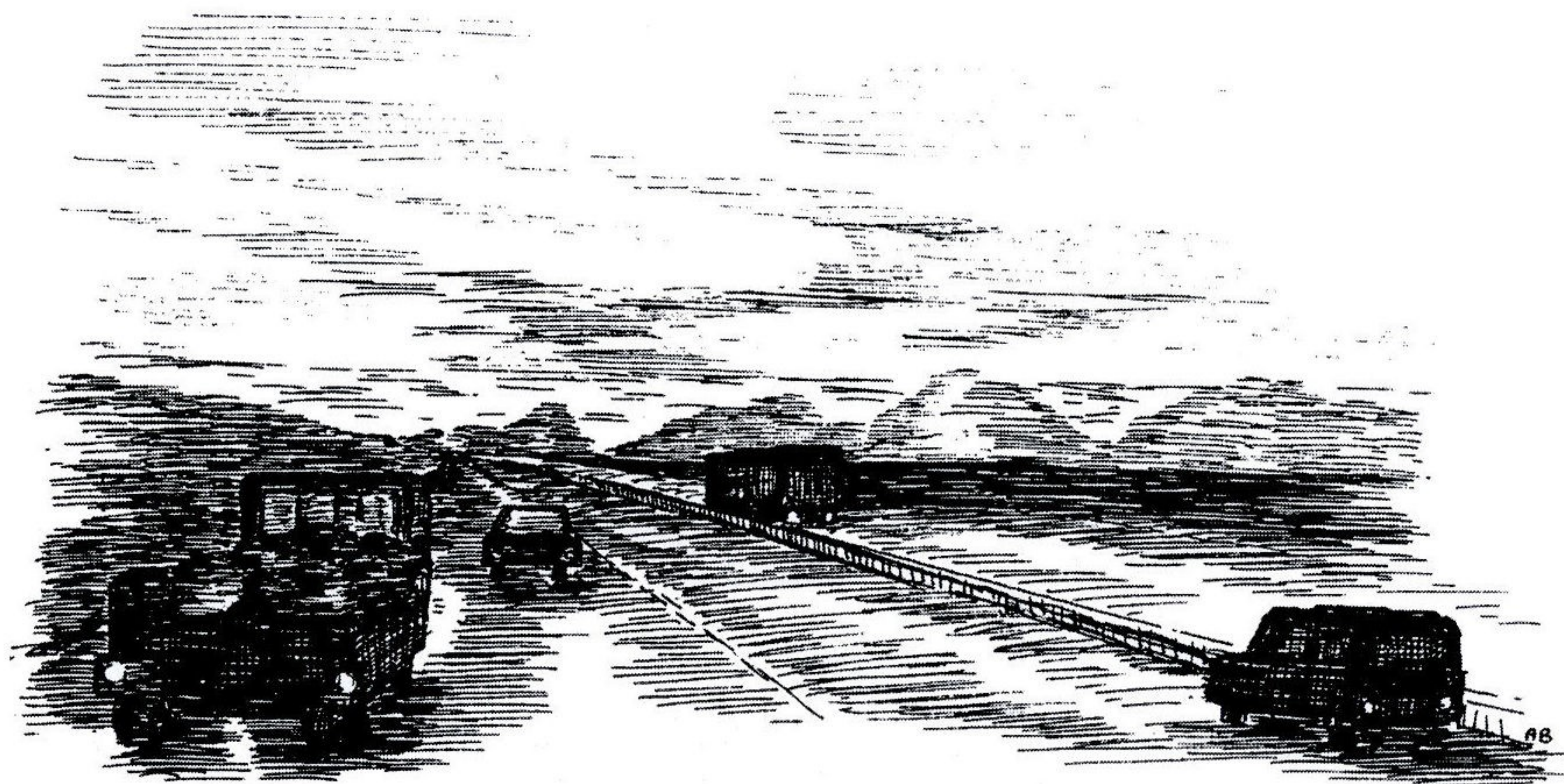
We all know of St. Paul's and Sir Christopher Wren -
But there were others, unknown, who were just as great men.
They built Ely Cathedral, seven hundred years ago,
Just how they did it we will never know!

How long did it take? How many men died
In order that their God should be glorified?
Their names aren't engraved, no stone effigy,
The cathedral their monument for us all to see.

The Lady Chapel, an architectural delight
With its lofty ceiling and so full of light.
The geometry, triangulation: imagine if you could
Building the lantern tower, almost entirely of wood!

But in spite of the years, storm, rain and gale,
The "Ship of the Fens" continues to sail.
For that is the name by which it is known -
That glorious monument hewn out of stone.

To the lonely traveller in the night
Midst the yellow sodiums, stands out a white light;
It's the lantern tower shining out over the fen
To join as was intended, God and men.



FEN SKIES

A young lad from London visited the Fens -
He must have had a discerning eye!
His comment when he stepped from the car:
“Cor, int you got a lotta sky!”

He had spotted in that brief moment
One of the great features of the Fen -
To depict the sunrises and sunsets
With brush or words, defies men.

Even the camera can't truly capture
Those brilliant multi-coloured skies.
The effect of the light on the landscape
Can hardly be accepted by ones eyes.

But there are those who scurry on,
Never taking time to look so far...
Sunset, alas, only means to them
It's time to put the lights on in the car!

MEPAL BRIDGE

Often on Mepal's Old Bridge "I stand
And stare" out over the rivers and land.
Birdwatchers, fishermen and shooters meet there;
All kindred spirits, in Nature we share.

Along the banks booted walkers go,
Map on chest, swinging to and fro –
They go in groups, stragglers at the back;
Normally those with the largest back-pack.

Here is the chance to feast your eyes
On the broad and ever-changing skies.
I go to the bridge for many reasons –
Not least of all, to observe the Seasons.

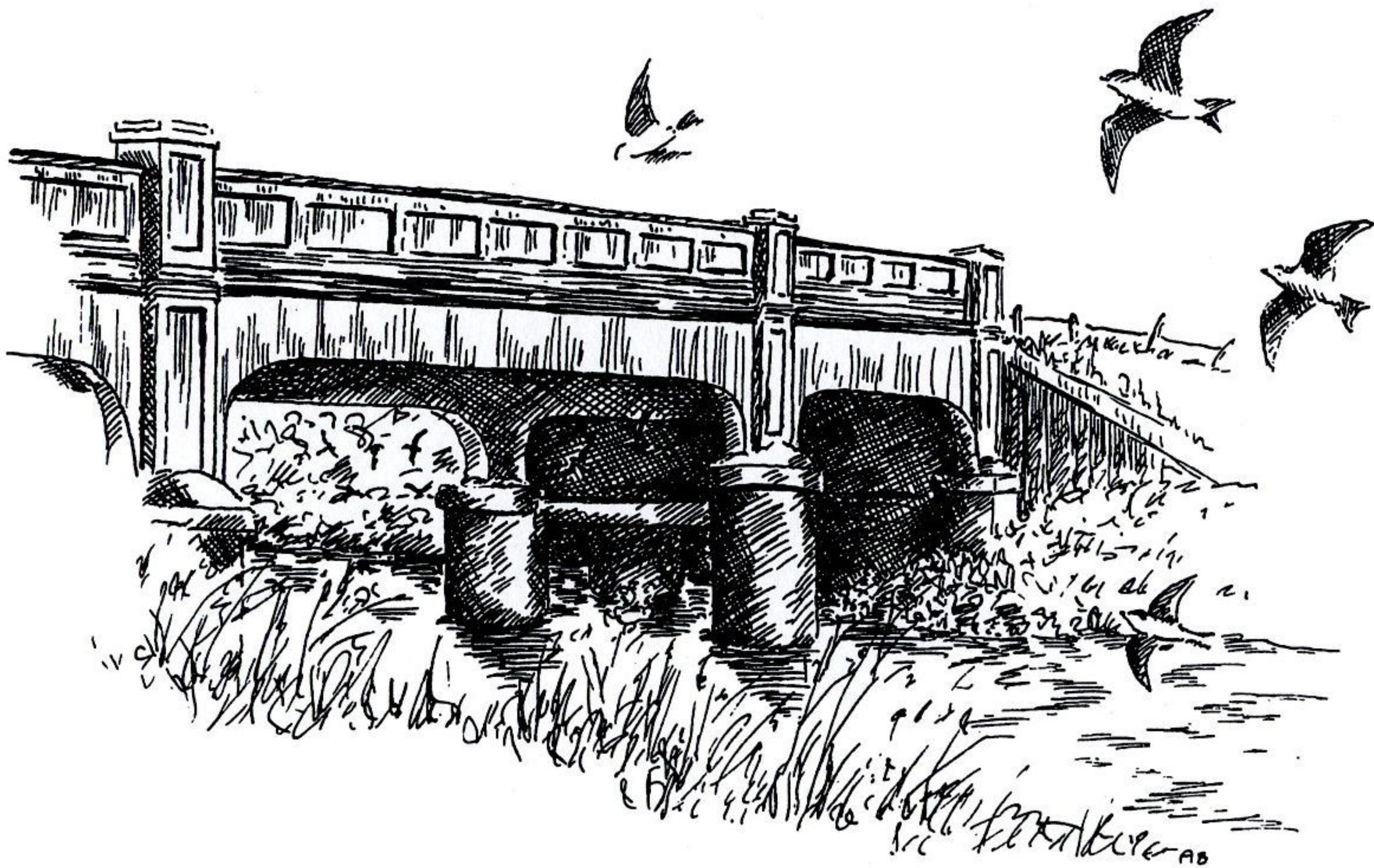
Spring; and on the Washes, water's often still there,
And the nesting waders, they begin to pair:
And there appears each day a changing scene
As the once-brown landscape slowly turns to green.

In summer, through the shimmering haze
A "Constable" scene where the cattle graze;
Beneath the bridge many house-martins nest
Flying dawn 'til dusk, seeming never to rest!

As Summer turns to Autumn, over every reed bed
Swallows catch "insect energy" for the journey ahead.
The flora now changes from green to brown –
The time is approaching for the Winter's Drown.

It's time now to get the cattle away.
From the Washes that were cut, they've carted the hay.
We've picked the blackberries and altered the clock,
At Earith the flood-water starts to come through the lock.

The Bewicks, the Whoopers and the wigeon arrive;
Suddenly the Washes all come alive.
Water bank to bank, no sign of any land,
And so, once again, on Mepal Bridge I'll stand.



THE FARMLAND MUSEUM

It was in the summer of sixty-nine,
The land was being levelled for a lawn.
A small boy picked up some pottery
And the Farmland Museum was born.

His “museum” was housed in his bedroom
Where friends came to view his wares,
Which was fine, till a local farmer
Gave a plough - that wouldn't go up the stairs!

So the collection was moved to a garden shed
Where the exhibits grew rapidly.
He charged his visitors to raise some money
For “boys and girls who couldn't walk or see”.

Agricultural exhibits continued to arrive -
To build a cart lodge we thought would be wise,
But before the building was only half finished
We needed one of twice the size!

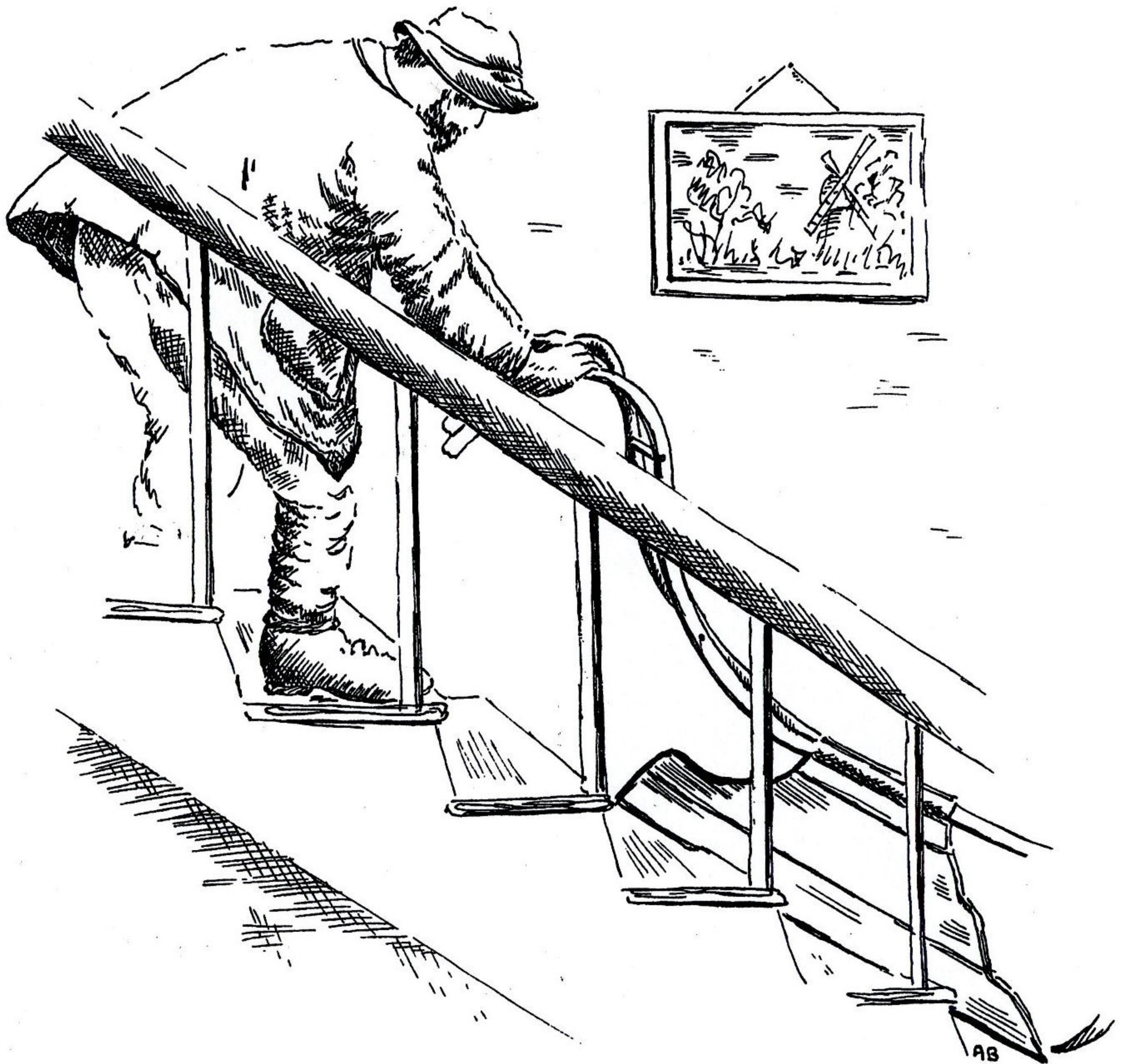
A display by a local blacksmith
Involved heaving an anvil about.
There was only one answer to this problem,
We needed a smithy – without any doubt.

Volunteer helpers sprang into action:
Tiles were given and a house pulled down
Which provided the materials we needed
For the smithy – the jewel in our crown.

Later we erected a Bygones Building
Where domestic exhibits were housed,
And with the dairy and saddler's shop
The Media's interest was aroused.

But on this site after twenty three years
It was all to come to an end.
Eighty-eight thousand visitors had been:
Children's Charities £13,000 to spend.

But that was not the end of the Farmland Museum.
Thanks to South Cambs. and others, it lives on,
Resting peacefully in the shadow of Denny Abbey
To remind us of Times now gone.



MEPAL REMEMBERS

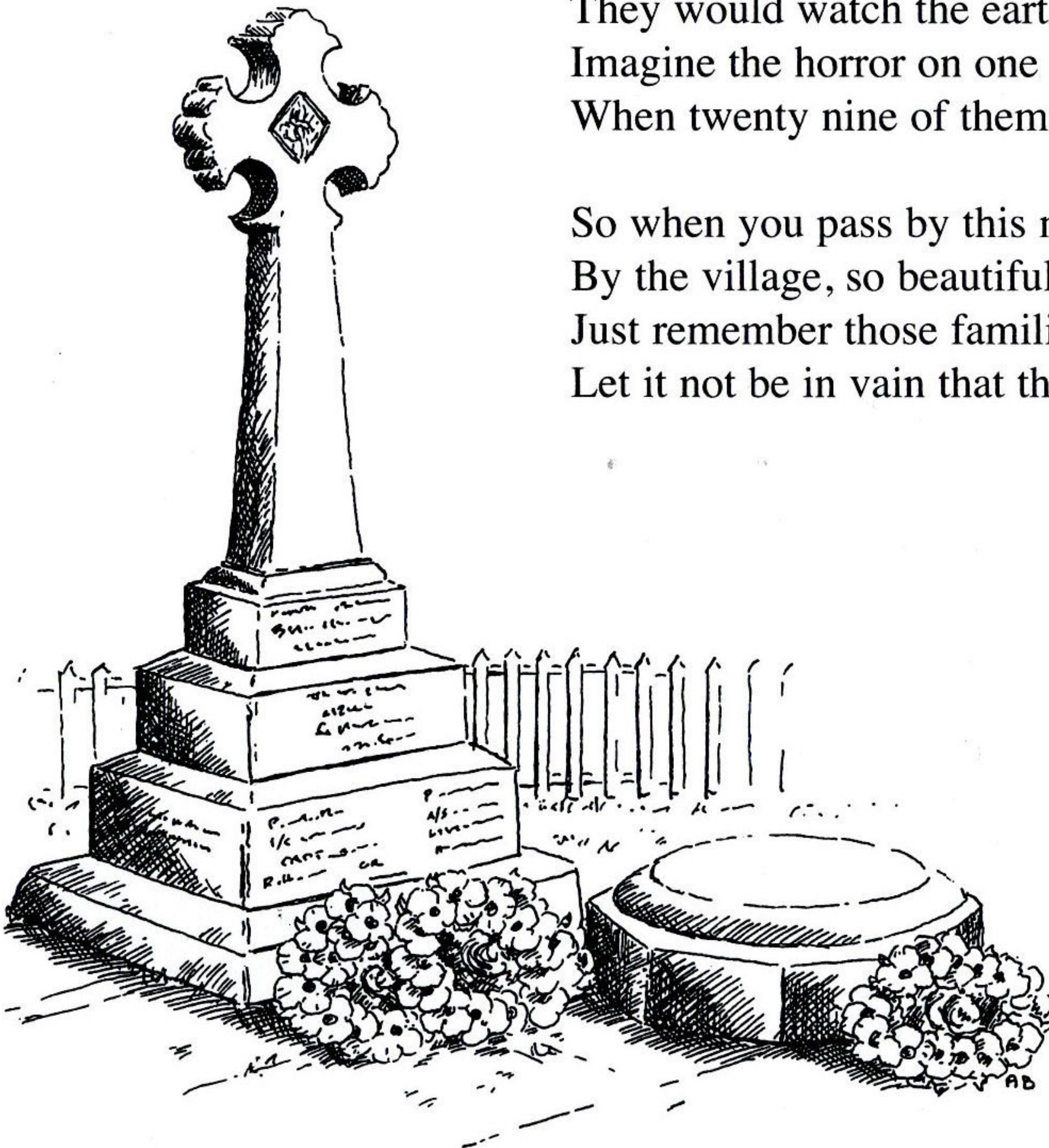
Many villages have a war memorial
In memory of those brave men who
Gave their young lives for us to be free -
But the village of Mepal has two!

One, on the High Street, remembers men of the village;
Where on Remembrance Day banners are unfurled.
The other memorial, further down the street,
Is for those from the far side of the world

Those men of 75 (New Zealand) Squadron,
Died twelve thousand miles from home.
Away from their families and the land they loved -
They were stationed on Mepal Aerodrome.

Each night on their bombing missions
They would watch the earth below them burn.
Imagine the horror on one eventful night
When twenty nine of them failed to return.

So when you pass by this memorial
By the village, so beautifully kept -
Just remember those families in New Zealand.
Let it not be in vain that they wept.





A MEPAL WALK

Every one of the Mepal Walks I like
Especially by the Pickerels (a name for young pike).
It goes through a cluster of ancient elm trees
Resistant, thankfully, to Dutch elm disease.
It's to these trees scores of rooks come
Black-silhouetted against the evening sun
Back to their nests in every tree top
The height forecasting whether gales or not.
Beneath the elms many rabbits you see:
Alas, myxomatosis their destiny!
As you emerge from the elms, the church appears
St. Mary's has been there for eight hundred years.
On Sundays you hear the single bell's note.
It hangs, on the west wall, in a double bell cote.
In the graveyard opposite, find if you can,
The gravestone of Mister Waters, Mepal's last ferryman.
Across "earthworked" meadows, a Victorian farm.
Mepal's a village just so full of charm.



DESTROYING OUR HISTORY

We used to live in the Isle of Ely -
A name of which we were proud.
But in '74 the Boundaries Commission
Said the name was no longer allowed.

Huntingdonshire, that nearby county,
Also had to go that year,
Together with the Soke of Peterborough
To make the enlarged Cambridgeshire.

When tourism and history matter so much
It makes one question when
A handful of faceless bureaucrats
Change it all with the stroke of the pen.

Would our hero Hereward
Take all this lying down?
No! he'd be fighting for our cause
While all we do is frown!

So what does this mean to us living here -
Do we benefit from the change?
Big isn't always beautiful
And to many, County Hall's "out of range".

The County of Rutland was treated the same
And so lost its identity.
But they fought, and eventually got it back -
Is that a lesson for you and me?

GRUNTY FEN

“Grunty Fen” – why was it so named?
They had their reasons I suppose
But basically as to when or why
I don’t think anyone knows.

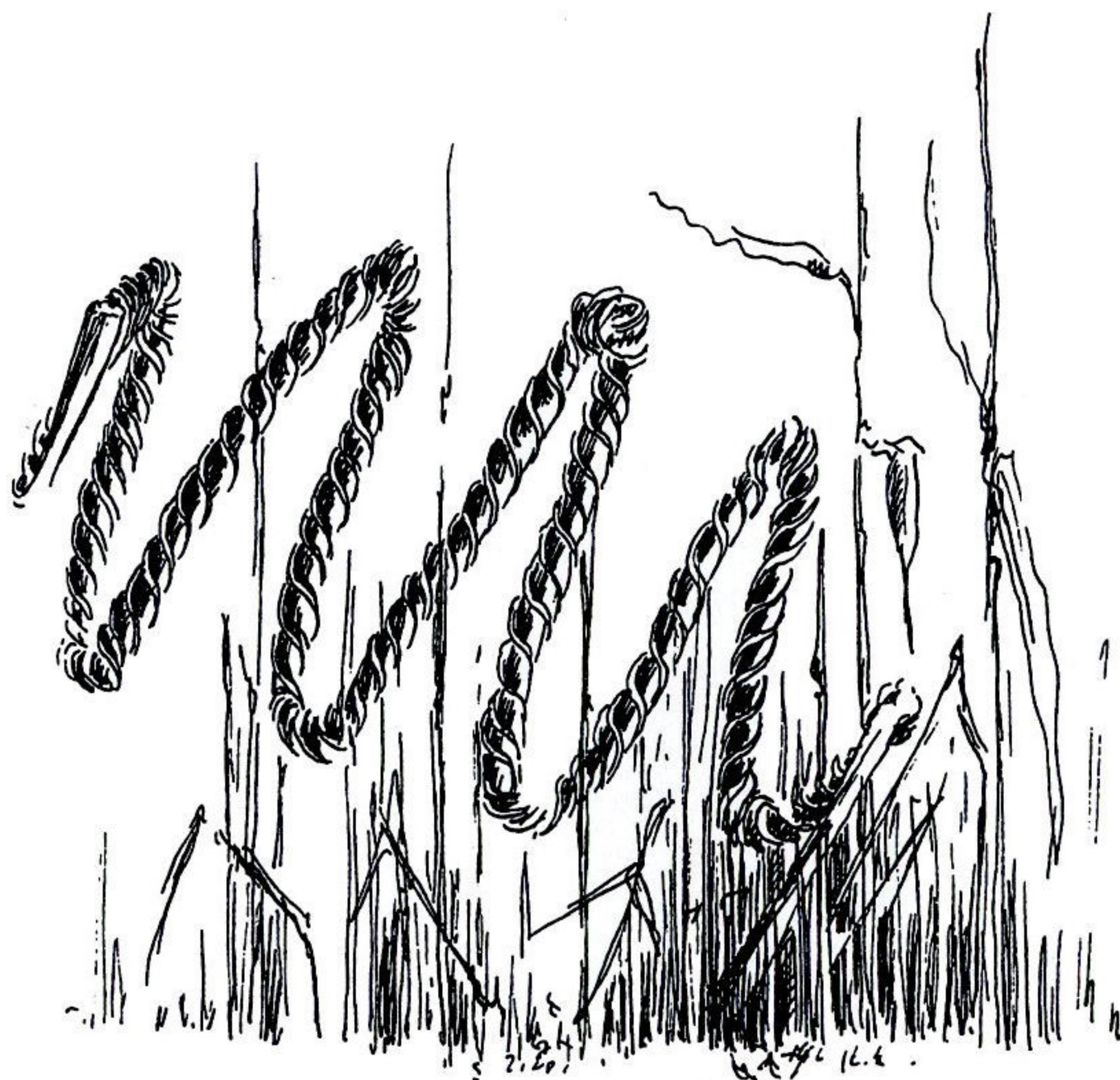
It was one of the last meres to be drained
Between Wilburton and Witchford it lies,
Interlaced with very narrow roads
Along which the traffic flies.

Unlike other fen soils, very poor,
But it will always grow oilseed rape.
It has a remarkable history
So a closer look we should take.

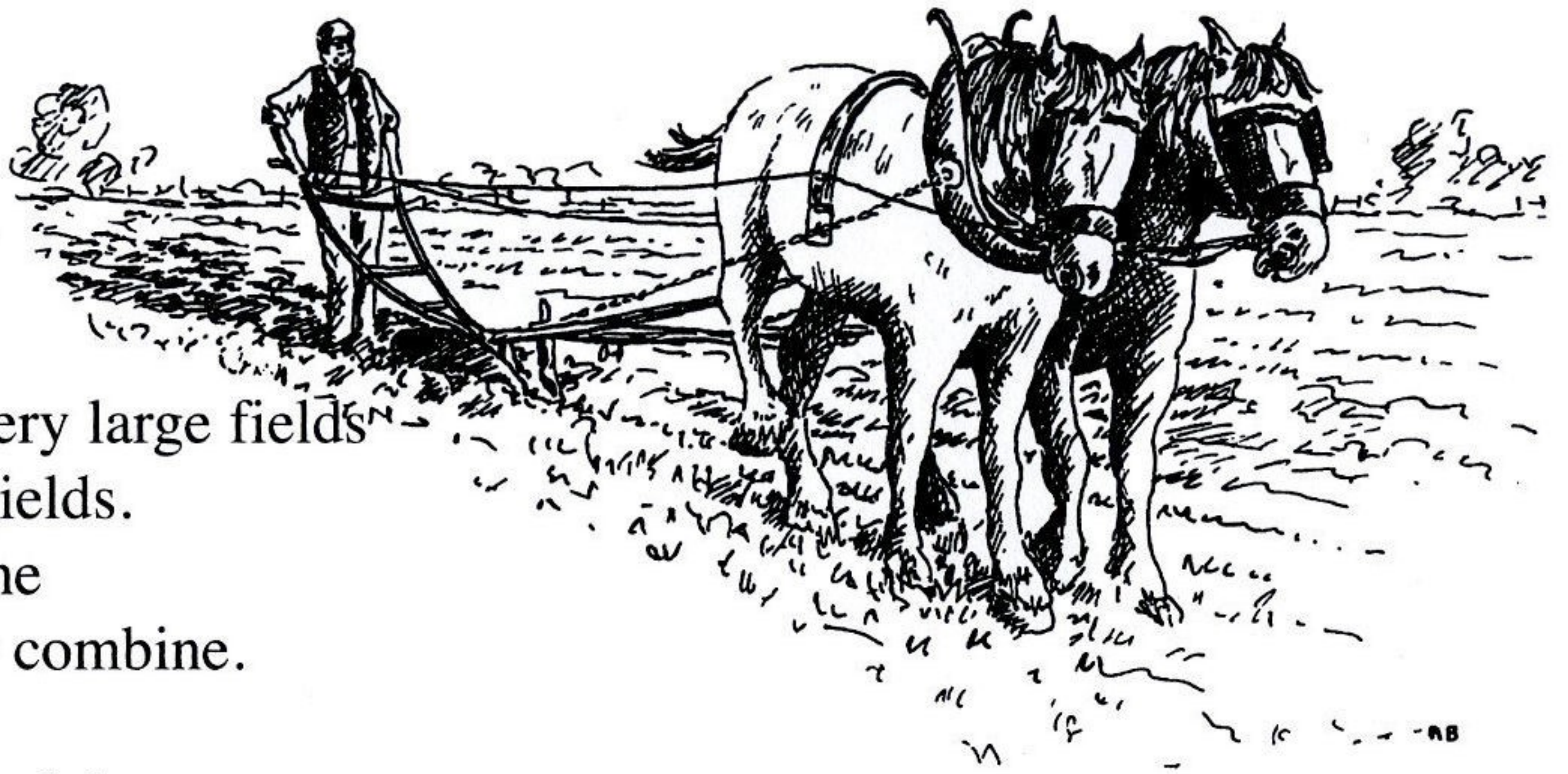
A beautiful gold Bronze-Age torc
In 1844 was found there.
It is now on display in a Cambridge museum
So its beauty we all can share.

And in the Past all kinds of things
Have been sited in Grunty Fen...
Even an Isolation Hospital,
And allotments for Haddenham men!

The name “Grunty Fen” was given
To a race horse by a local MP;
But nowadays the Recycling Centres
Are all that’s left to see.



FEN FARMING TODAY



Fen Farming today consists of very large fields
With nitrate-assisted very high yields.
And alas the hedges are in decline
To make more room for the new combine.

The fields are sprayed to get rid of the pests,
And trees are referred to as “unpaying guests”;
Subsidy-availability dictates the crop -
The farmer’s is not a happy lot!

Sugar beet to a quota is now sown
Which is reduced by Europe when it’s half grown.
The cattle markets are forced to close -
Someone makes these decisions I suppose?

And what is more, it beggars belief,
The problems that came to those farming beef.
Mad cow, foot and mouth – no wonder they say
Cattle farming just can’t pay its way.

And after all the efforts to drain this land
It makes it very hard to understand
Why the small fen farmer has such a struggle:
He has the best land.....is it government –muddle?

But there is worse to come I fear
That if it’s true, the rumours I hear.
The farmers don’t need to grow food anymore
They won’t talk of crops, but what birds they saw.

And after all the efforts to get rid of reed beds,
Nowadays we’re going to plant them instead:
So in which direction will farming go
I don’t think even the “experts” know!

Gone forever are the days when
The fifty-acre farmer went to plough the fen
His work was hard, his profits small
But at least he had control over all.

MEMORIES OF WICKEN FEN

I first went to Wicken Fen
Over fifty years ago.
Pedalling on my bike from Ely,
Arriving with cheeks aglow.

I reported to the Keeper's House,
Mrs. Barnes would greet me with a smile;
An ice-cold drink from the old hand pump
Which required pumping for quite a while!

Then to the Fen by the low-roofed cottages,
At the hand-gates would stand old men
Enveloped in a cloud of tobacco smoke
Reminiscing of times when...

There was no building for Doctor Thorpe
And I didn't realise then
It was he who wrote the encouraging letter
With my permit to collect in the Fen!

As a boy, and in my early teens
I was very proud of my permit,
And with the enthusiasm of youth
I vowed to be a "Naturalist Hermit".

There was the decaying remains of a reed boat –
Not unlike the modern one now there.
Many years previous it had carried its last load,
Now a home for bugs and beetles to share!

The wildfowl arrived and took up residence
On the New Mere which had reached completion.
Nowadays, alas, many cormorants come -
Coastal birds intent on fish-depletion.

But in many ways the Fen is unchanged,
And we should be thankful it is there
For future generations to enjoy,
Safe in the National Trust's care



FEN CHARACTERS (in dialect)

There are characters old and sum on um new
So I thought I'd wroite a line or tew
To tell yer a bit about sum o' these blokes
Cos us Fen Tigers are proud o' our folks!

The fust I wanna mention's 'ereward the Wake -
Thas a run'ole name for goodness sake,
But 'e was the 'ero who made the last stand
When the French decided to invade our land.

One o' th'ole monks from Ely they say
Went and told th'ole Froggies the way -
Now 'ereward, he dint agree with such deeds
So 'e burned 'em aloive when he set loight to the reeds!

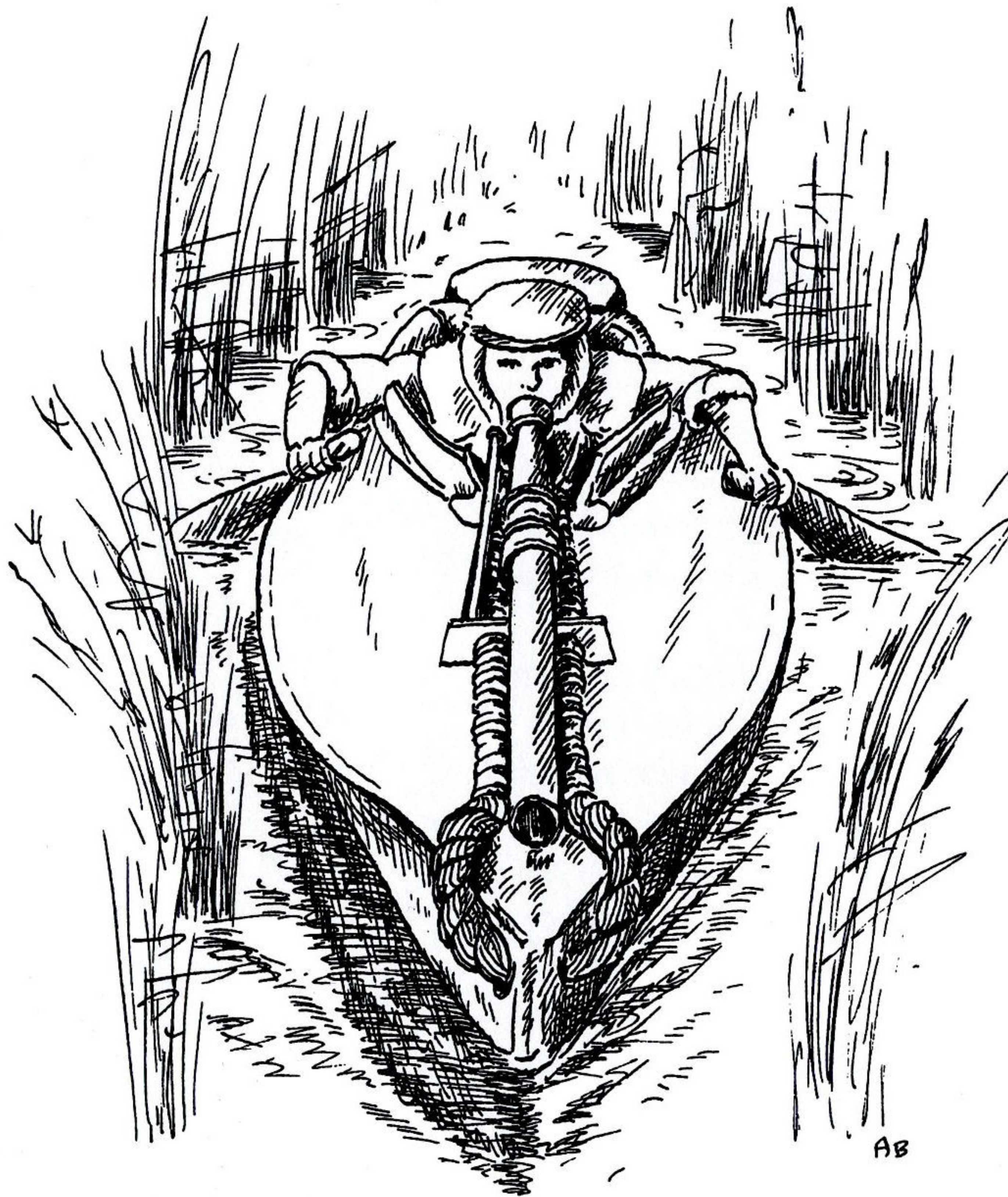
Then there's Oliver Cromwell, you can often see
Programmes about 'im on local TV.
"Roundhead" they call 'im, but I fancy that
They dint reelly know, cos he wore a big 'at.

Tew modern characters who wornt known world-wide
Lived in the same village, nye on side by side,
They lived in Welney when toimes were 'arsh
And got their living from orf the marsh.

Ernie James, a truer Fenman I've never met -
He can make a basket or knit a net.
He used both o' these his eels to catch:
In country ways he was 'ard to match...

Unless one considered 'is ole mate Josh Scott,
With who he would argue whether or not
Each was the last one to use a Punt Gun -
Tho' they got roight heated, in was all in good fun!

A-shepherdin' the cattle grazin' on the Wash
That's wot he did in Summer, my ole mate Josh.
And I think I'm lucky 'cos both these men I knowed
An' I can still apicture 'em as on the Wash they rowed!



THE EARITH GHOST (a true story)

The apparition appeared without any warning,
I remember it well, that cold foggy morning.
I arrived at Earith before it was light
And went onto the Washes for morning flight.

For that's what it's called when the duck begin to fly -
As the first light appears in the Eastern sky.
I stood there motionless, enveloped in fog:
Not a sound, save the bark of a distant farm dog.

The silence was shattered by a call close behind -
A pheasant prowling to see what he could find.
It startled me: I turned and what did I see?
A figure standing there, ten yards from me.

No, it can't be - that's quite absurd...
Its approach through water I would have heard;
It appeared to be a figure with a hood and cloak,
But what was more terrifying, it exuded smoke!

Close by is an earthwork, the bulwark its name;
I wondered if this figure from that site came.
The hair on my neck, it stood out quite straight.
Do I stay rooted to the spot? Or make a dash for the gate?

Just then the sun broke through the cloud;
I stared and stared then laughed aloud!
Because what had appeared in the mist to me
Was the smouldering trunk of a burned willow tree!



THE KINGFISHER (LUCK OR JUDGEMENT?)

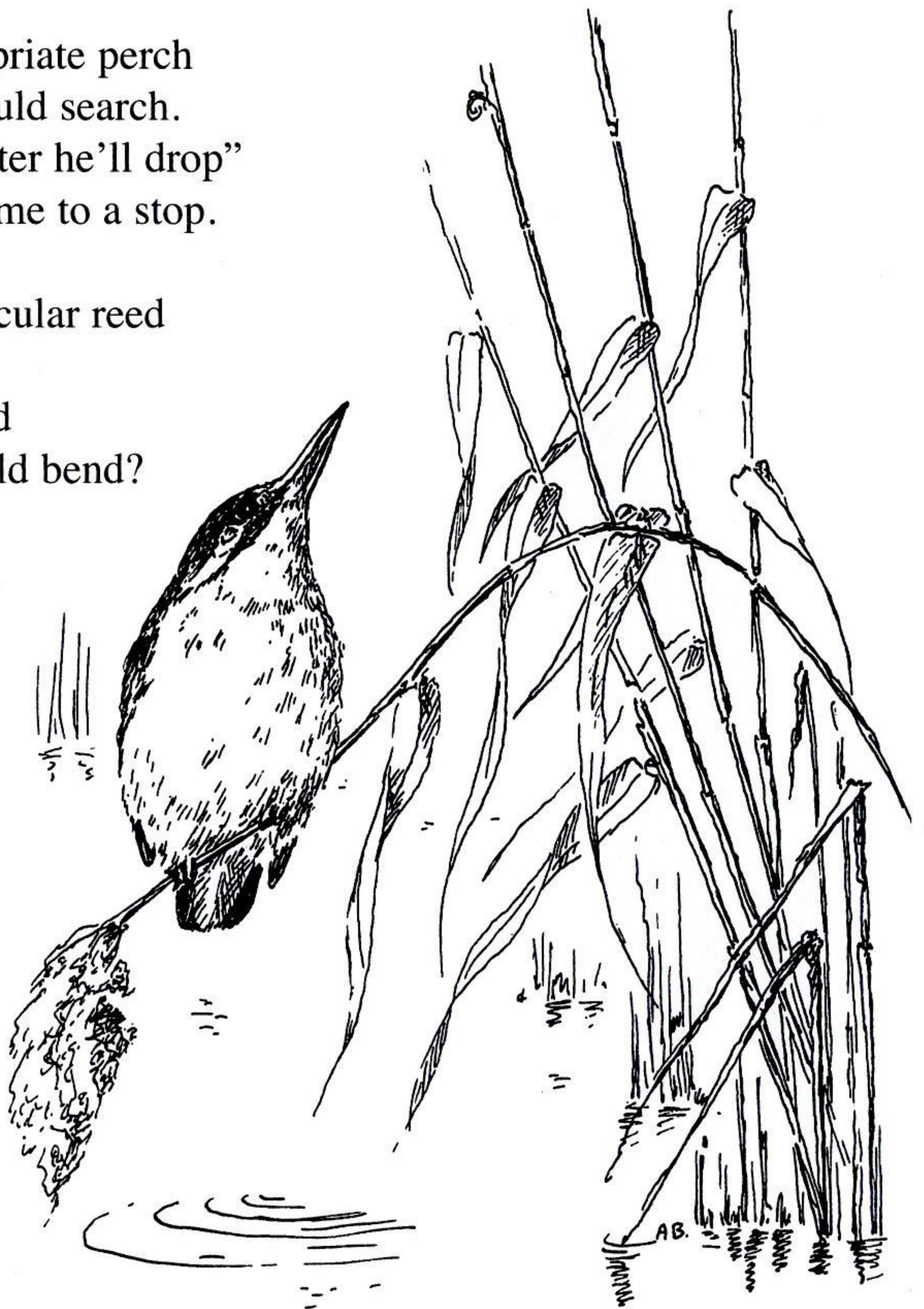
The Wildfowler's reward, and with this I agree,
Is not duck in the bag, it's what you hear and see.
Concealed in the reeds, I sat awaiting the duck
As is so often the case, I was out of luck!

When suddenly from the corner of my eye
I saw a kingfisher flashing by:
With back of iridescent blue
And orange breast of tropical hue.

He returned, and much to my delight,
On a nearby reed decided to alight.
I watched this reed start slowly to bend
And the kingfisher with it slowly descend.

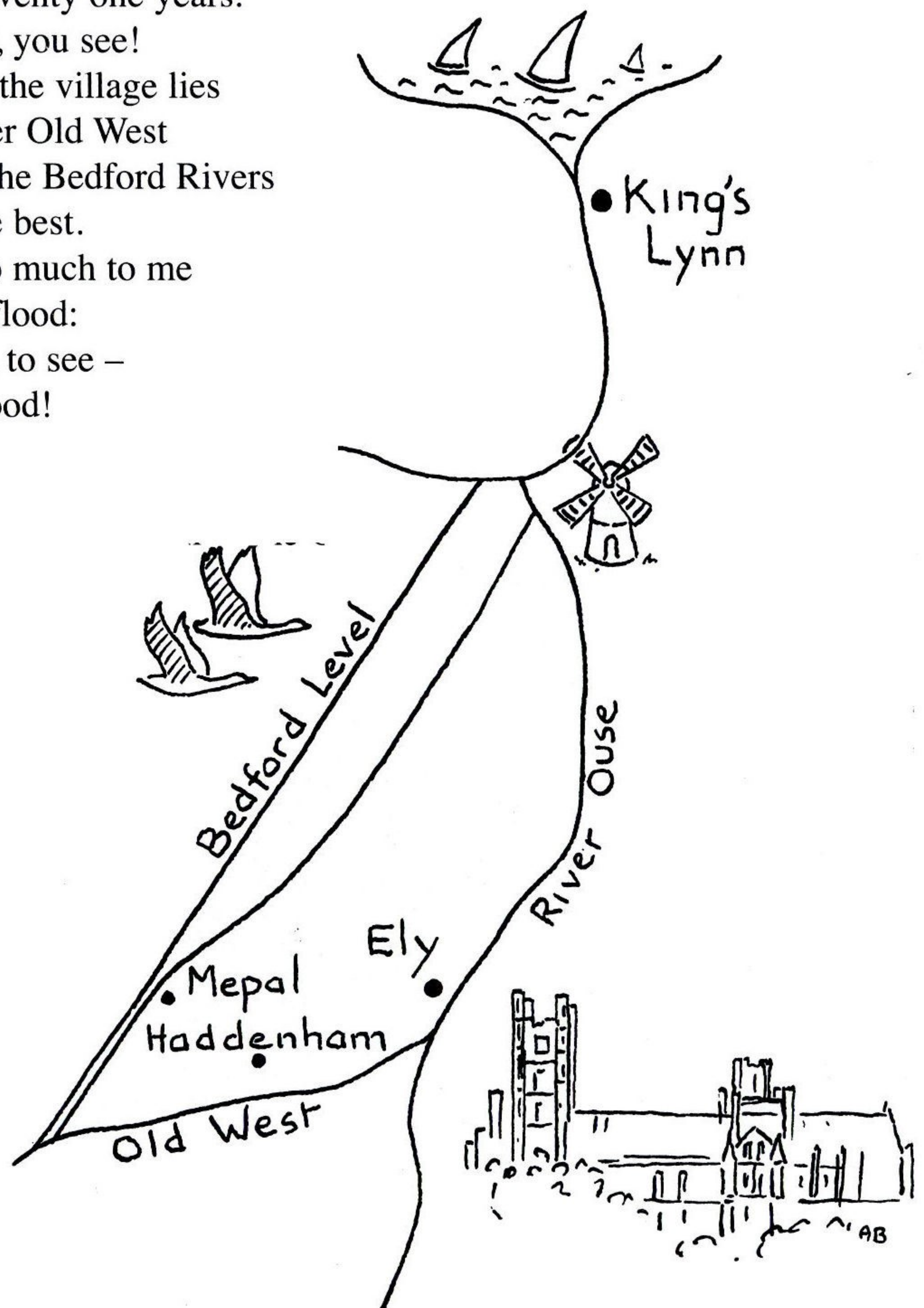
He had chosen this reed as the appropriate perch
From where, for his next meal, he could search.
I thought: "It must break, into the water he'll drop"
But no! an inch above the water it came to a stop.

What made the bird choose that particular reed
That so precisely fulfilled his need?
Was it just luck or did he comprehend
With his weight on it, how far it would bend?



A TRUE FENMAN (MD)

I think that I'm a true Fenman –
For most of the criteria I meet:
With the exception of one that is,
In that I haven't got webbed feet!
In order to come here with Vermuyden,
Great (times eight) Grandad left home.
He and his brother helped Cornelius
Drain the lovely Isle of Axeholme.
I was born at King's Lynn, at the mouth of the Ouse,
And lived there until I was three –
Then moved to Ely for twenty one years:
I couldn't leave the river, you see!
Haddenham next, where the village lies
Just a mile from the River Old West
And now, right close to the Bedford Rivers
In Mepal, the place I like best.
And so the Fens mean so much to me
In Summer, or Winter's flood:
I think the reason's plain to see –
I've got rivers in my blood!



ARTIST (AB)

Ann was born in Cambridge
And educated at "The Perse",
But decided it wasn't for her
A life in business or commerce.
To develop further her obvious skills
It was on to the Cambridge School of Art
Where she studied her favourite subject
Which in her life plays a major part.
And still she paints and teaches others
How to work with brush or pen;
Her love of birds, inspired by her parents
Taking her bird watching in Wicken Fen.
In 1975 with husband Andy,
She became a museum volunteer
And has, over the years, devoted so much time
She has hardly time for her career!



STRANGE WORDS

We have some strange words in the Fens -
Lunch is DOCKEY or GRUB.
And when the land gets over-wet,
We say it's gone to SLUB.

Small potatoes are known as CHATS.
Others are SPUDS or TATERS;
And when conditions are very wet,
We wear LALLYGAGS, not gaiters!

Wildlife does not escape strange words -
A HODMEDOD is the name for a snail;
And that little friendly creature
The frog, is the FEN NIGHTINGALE.

And if something belongs to you
We would say it is YOURN.
SHOCK doesn't only mean trauma,
It may be sheaves of corn.

And if something is very small
We would say it was DODDY.
There must be others I don't know -
I'd like to hear from anybody!



A WARTIME CHILDHOOD

From my mother a protective hug,
Overhead the rumble of a “doodlebug”;
On her face, fear when the engine stopped.
I can’t even recall now where it dropped.

From the RAF Hospital, in bandages swathed
Came airmen, the results of bombing raids braved.
The clanking train as it went over the river
Pulling truck-loads of bombs for more airmen to deliver.

Over the fields by the stickleback stream
Were men behind barbed wire – prisoners it would seem.
“B” for banana in my alphabet book;
I was ten when my first bite I took.

Another thing, I thought it was funny,
That “coupons” appeared more important than money...
“When the war is over, Daddy will come home” –
... But he didn’t.

These verses, describing the author’s childhood in Ely, have been added to the 2015 print to commemorate the end of World War Two.