

LOOKING BACK

By MIKE PETTY

Wall painting set to be preserved

» **FROM THE NEWS 1989**
ANCIENT wall painting at Kingston Parish Church under threat from damp may be saved. Conservationists will paste silk over a 15th-century painting of a devil, then remove it from its plaster home. The wall itself will then be made good and the painting replaced. One single design can cost more than £10,000 to restore and preserve for future generations.

Good thatchers earning £2,000

» **FROM THE NEWS 1964**
THATCHING in Cambridgeshire is a flourishing industry with more than enough work to be done. Just after the war there was a serious shortage of professional thatchers and some very bad work was undertaken by amateurs and 'jumpers' or stack thatchers. Now the Rural Industries Bureau has formed an association to guarantee their work. Good thatchers like the five Dodson brothers of Abbots Ripton can earn up to £2,000 a year.

Water supplies are 'inadequate'

» **FROM THE NEWS 1939**
SHEPRETH and Meldreth ratepayers objected to the new water extension scheme. Everybody would pay an extra rate, whether they used the water or not. But there were 39 artesian springs in Meldreth that could all be made to run to a small pump. Water supplies in Orwell were inadequate and unsafe, being favourable to an outbreak of typhoid. The Government evacuation scheme made a pure supply a necessity for children coming from London: they would not be used to earn water.

Road experiment 'perfect disgrace'

» **FROM THE NEWS 1914**
SIR – the County Council made up the road between Cambridge cross-roads and Pampisford station using slag, as an experiment. It has failed utterly. The road has ground up and is a perfect disgrace. Both horse and mechanically-driven vehicles have been held up by its pulpy and broken condition. Had it not been for the very dry season the road would have been impassable. Ratepayers' money should be spent on proper material: granite would have lasted for years. – Thomas Nesbitt, Abington Grange.

When troops fought to reclaim fen from floods

Memories

By MIKE PETTY



THE news that troops have been sent in to assist with the flooding in the Somerset Levels prompts reflections of similar activities in Cambridgeshire following the flooding of February and March of 1947.

It had followed an exceptionally cold frost and snow that seemed it would never stop. Then came a quick thaw and heavy rain which filled the streams that flowed into fenland rivers. But there was nowhere for that water to go since a high tide in the Wash prevented its discharge to the sea.

The melted snow that had laid white on the black fen soil could not sink into ground that was still frozen as hard as concrete. Nor could the ditches drain it away as they were full of ice. And anyway there was nowhere for it to be pumped to: the fenland rivers were already filled from high flood bank to high flood bank.

Then came the gale that brought down chimneypots, sent trees crashing and halted the men who'd been patrolling the banks looking for danger spots. Inevitably some banks gave way or were overtopped and acres went under water. Despite all their struggle the fenmen were beaten.

On March 18, 1947, floods devastated the area. Next day the military was sent in, choosing Bedford House in St Mary's Street, Ely, as their command headquarters.

One priority was to prevent further devastation. Scores of troops were deployed alongside river board workers attempting to keep the banks intact. But they could not stop a burst on the River Wissey near Hilgay. As water flooded towards Southery, soldiers sandbagged the edge of the main Ely to King's Lynn Road, hoping to use it as the base of a dam. Their sandbag walls held but a culvert carrying a drain under the road collapsed and the pressure of water rushing through the



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confined space blew the road apart.

The hole in the road was filled by army sappers who were based at the camp on West Fen Road, Ely. They were equipped with Bailey bridges and transport including 'Ducks' – amphibious craft that could both drive on roads and float on water. These were to prove essential in ferrying men and equipment around the flooded areas and gave many local residents the opportunity to take a voyage to view their flooded homes.

The most serious burst was in the banks of the Great Ouse opposite Bluntisham church where water was thundering through a 90-foot gap. The breach had been stabilised with the help of German soldiers – now prisoners of war – but it needed to be filled. Sandbags, tarpaulins and men could be got to the battlefield but they were powerless against the strongest force of all – nature. Reinforcements

came in the form of nine 20-ton amphibious track vehicles known as Neptunes that were used to form a metal box around the hole, checking the pressure of water and allowing repairs to be made up again.

Then, as now, the use of military might to help civilians made headline news and proved an excellent excuse for a Royal visit.

Pressmen arrived with their cameras to record the scene, the pictures were duly published and for the soldiers this operation came to an end. They moved on to other assignments, leaving their Neptunes to be scrapped once the banks were built behind them. Perhaps the Ministry of Defence will sanction similar sacrifices of expensive equipment should rain continue to fall in Somerset.

Meanwhile the Duke and Duchess of Gloucester had headed north to offer encouragement to those troops and fennmen labouring to fill the breaches nearer Denver. They took a Duck along the Wissey but the engine of their craft cut out and they were swept towards the gap in the bank. Soldiers jumped into the freezing water to attach a rope and pull the stricken vessel to safety. This was however not a story that the army wanted to get out, everybody involved was sworn to secrecy. But one

picture survives.

It was taken by Walter Martin Lane, an Ely shop manager, who had talked his way into becoming the unofficial army photographer and joined the soldiers on several of their expeditions. He'd been invited to cover 'Operation Neptune' and seen at first-hand how the Naafi had provided much-needed refreshment for the soldiers deployed (though it was not a facility he was entitled to use). He'd also waited late into the night to photograph drivers who'd driven long hours bringing pumps from the coalfields to suck water off the fields and push it back into the rivers – just like the recent TV pictures from Somerset. Sadly once he developed his negative he discovered it was slightly out of focus. Like the drivers he'd been so cold he could hardly stop shivering.

Without Lane's pictures, now preserved in the Cambridgeshire Collection, much of the story of the 1947 fenland floods would have been forgotten. Today there is extensive video to ensure the devastation in Somerset is remembered, giving less excuse to forget.

But were you one of the troops deployed in 1947 or do you remember the troops who fought to reclaim the fen?



AT WORK: Soldiers being briefed before 'Operation Neptune'; military vehicles at the Ferry Boat on the A10 near Southery; amphibious craft were used