

Thomas Fleetwood and the draining of Martin Mere

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Today, Martin Mere, some six miles north of Ormskirk in west Lancashire, is best known as a reserve of the Wildfowl and Wetlands Trust, but the area was formerly the site of one of the largest expanses of fresh water in the county, described by Leland in the mid-sixteenth century as the 'Greatest meare of Lancastreshire'.¹ Its dimensions probably changed seasonally, as the shallows dried up in summer, but it was evidently about four miles long by two miles wide at its furthest extremities, with a perimeter about fourteen miles in length and with a probable surface area between five and six square miles. The Mere apparently had two outfalls: at the east end into the River Douglas, and during times of flood, at the north-west, towards the sea.

Five townships, Tarleton, Rufford, Burscough, Scarisbrick and North Meols, shared the shoreline between them. In the seventeenth century the economic use consisted of fishing (each township having its own separate fisheries); wildfowling and egg collecting; supplying reeds for thatching; summer grazing on the islands for both horses and cattle; and the use of peat and 'moss wood' (tree stocks found within the peat), as a source of heat and light.² Nowadays the area covered by the former Martin Mere is high quality farming land due to a series of initiatives going back over three hundred years; only the area of the wildfowl reserve is now covered by water due to the creation of a number of ponds when the reserve was established in

¹ Lucy Toulmin Smith, ed., *The itinerary of John Leland in or about 1535–1543* (5 vols, London, 1907–10), v, p. 43.

² Audrey Coney, 'Fish, fowl and fen: Landscape and economy on seventeenth-century Martin Mere', *Landscape History*, XIV (1992), pp. 51–64.

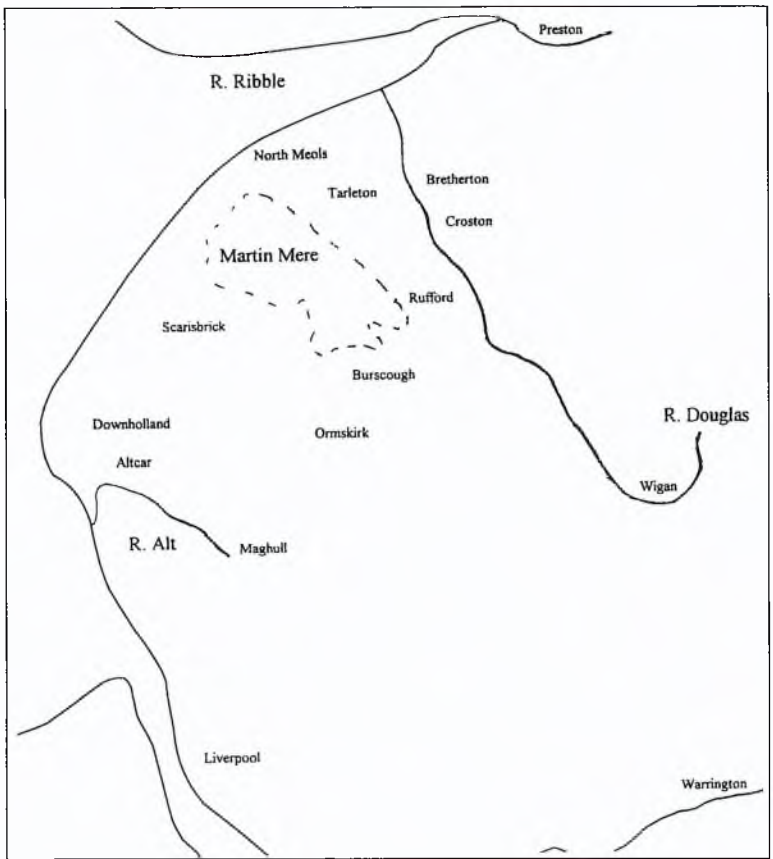


FIGURE 1 *Sketch map of south Lancashire places mentioned in the text.*

the 1970s. However, this situation is only maintained by continuous pumping at the pumping station at Crossens. If the pumps were switched off the waters would soon return.

The first serious attempt to drain the Mere was made by Thomas Fleetwood in the last years of the seventeenth century, but credit for draining the water and turning the Mere into dry land is usually given to Thomas Eccleston, of Scarisbrick Hall.³ This is probably

³ H. C. Collins, *Lancashire plain and seaboard* (London, 1953), pp. 55–67; *Victoria County History (VCH) Lancashire* (London, 1906–14), vol. 3, p. 269; Harold Brodrick, 'Martin Mere', Presidential address to Southport Society of

because Eccleston, who was a large landowner in south-west Lancashire and a notable agricultural improver in the area, was awarded the gold medal of the Society for the Encouragement of Arts, Manufactures and Commerce in 1786 for his work on draining Martin Mere.⁴ Eccleston came to Scarisbrick in 1778, and as the largest landowner on the Mere was soon in negotiation with the others concerning his proposed scheme and to acquire leases. At this time parts of the Mere were constantly under water, and other parts were said to be very boggy, following the breakdown of Fleetwood's efforts.⁵ Eccleston carried out deepening and widening of the sluices which had been constructed by Fleetwood, cut over a hundred miles of new ditches, and installed new flood gates. In 1784 some crops were grown successfully, and Eccleston wrote an account of the drainage of the Mere, in which he acknowledged the background and problems of Fleetwood's work, but was not shy to promote his own, and his account has frequently been reprinted verbatim.⁶ In retrospect, his success was short-lived, there being floods in 1786 and 1787.⁷ The purpose of this paper is to re-assess the earlier and pioneering efforts of Thomas Fleetwood in this undertaking.

Wetland reclamation in early modern England

The early seventeenth century saw an increasing interest throughout Britain in the possibility of draining and reclaiming the lowlands around the coast. This was part of a general trend towards agricultural improvement, and in places such as the Fens of East Anglia and the Somerset Levels was also stimulated by the involve-

Natural Science, 23 Oct. 1902; David Brazendale, *Lancashire's historic halls* (Preston, 1994), pp. 242–56.

⁴ Angela M. Turton, 'Thomas Eccleston 1754–1809: An eighteenth century agricultural improver' (MA, Univ. of Liverpool, 1995).

⁵ Lancashire Record Office (Lancs. RO), DDP 92/1, Lancashire Evening Post collection.

⁶ Lancs. RO, DDSc 78/3 (7), Scarisbrick Papers; Thomas Eccleston, 'The improvement of Martin Mear', *Transactions of the Society for the Encouragement of Arts, Manufactures and Commerce*, VII (1789), pp. 50–74; Thomas Eccleston, 'Improvement of a bog', *Annals of agriculture and other useful arts*, VI (London, 1786), pp. 1–10; J. Aiken, *A description of the country from 30 to 40 miles round Manchester* (1795, repr. Newton Abbot, 1968), pp. 317–24; F. A. Bailey, *A history of Southport* (Southport, 1995), pp. 10–11.

⁷ Eccleston, 'Improvement of a bog'.

ment of the Crown.⁸ The Fens, although some distance from London, had a tradition of supplying the city with foodstuffs. The pressures of increasing demand for food, with increasing grain prices after the mid-sixteenth century, were cited as part of the need for land reclamation and the drainage of the Fens.⁹ This argument applied equally to south west Lancashire at the end of the seventeenth century, with the growth of Liverpool.

The historiography of wetland reclamation in England is concerned mainly with the Fens and the Somerset Levels.¹⁰ This is not surprising since these are the two largest areas in the country of land of this type. Reclamation was a long process, and in these two areas can be considered to have proceeded in a number of phases. During the middle ages reclamation was piecemeal, with responsibility for maintenance at the local community level.¹¹ The monasteries, as important land owners, played an important role, and following their dissolution there is evidence of neglect and confusion.¹² From the mid-thirteenth century, the overall responsibility for land drainage and dealing with in-roads of the sea had been devolved upon local Commissions of Sewers, whose role was to enforce established customs and practices with regard to preventing incursions of the sea, maintenance of water courses and navigations, banks, bridges and causeways. They were empowered to hold courts, raise taxes and levy fines.¹³

Between 1600 and 1640 a number of ambitious drainage schemes were carried out in the Fens with Crown sponsorship, and employing the skills of the Dutch engineer, Cornelius Vermuyden. This activity was brought to a halt by the Civil Wars, but resumed again between 1649 and 1653.¹⁴ These schemes were expensive and required outside investment. The only security that could be offered was a portion of the reclaimed land. During this same period draining took place in Somerset on the peat moors, and, to a

⁸ H. C. Darby, *The changing fenland* (Cambridge, 1983), p. 57; M. Williams, *The draining of the Somerset Levels* (Cambridge, 1970), pp. 86–87.

⁹ D. Summers, *The Great Level: A history of drainage and land reclamation in the Fens* (Newton Abbot, 1976), pp. 55–56.

¹⁰ H. C. Darby, *The changing fenland*; D. Summers, *The Great Level*; M. Williams, *Draining the Somerset Levels*.

¹¹ Summers, *The Great Level*, p. 46.

¹² Darby, *The changing fenland*, pp. 43–44.

¹³ Summers, *The Great Level*, pp. 46–48.

¹⁴ Darby, *The changing fenland*, pp. 52–91.

lesser extent, on the Levels.¹⁵ Thereafter, there was near stagnation in drainage activity on the Somerset Levels until after 1770, and in the Fens the drains were deteriorating into a poor condition at the end of the seventeenth and early eighteenth centuries.¹⁶ Drainage had not been as successful as had been hoped. There were unanticipated problems with lowering of the peat surface due to shrinkage as the peat dried out, leading to consequent loss of fall in the rivers and reduction of carrying capacity and scouring action.¹⁷ In both areas too, drainage schemes caused discontent amongst the fenland dwellers and cottagers due to loss of traditional ways of making a living based on grazing, wild fowling, fishing, reeds and turbaries.¹⁸

The lowlands of the south west Lancashire coastal plain had much in common with the Fens and Somerset Levels, although the Lancashire mosslands were but a fraction of the area of the other two regions. All three regions were low-lying areas of badly-drained land, subject to prolonged winter flooding and with some areas permanently under water; all were subject to flooding both by the sea and from land water; and all had extensive areas of peat. South west Lancashire provides evidence of similar initiatives in the control of flooding to those practised in the Fens and Somerset. The court records of the townships adjoining low-lying lands of the River Alt between Maghull and Altcar contain details of localised maintenance of drainage. The first co-ordinated attempt to consider controlling flooding of the area, especially as a result of the sea breaking into the river basin, was made through the setting up of a commission in 1589, although there is no direct mention of any construction being undertaken. The first known sewer commission for the Alt was authorised in 1608, to be followed by several more until 1779 when the Alt Drainage Act came into being.¹⁹

Small-scale localised land reclamation of the mosslands took place in the seventeenth century. Downholland Moss was enclosed in 1612, and in the second half of the seventeenth century about 1,300

¹⁵ Williams, *Draining the Somerset levels*, p. 95.

¹⁶ Williams, *Draining the Somerset levels*, p. 110; Summers, *The Great Level*, pp. 110–11.

¹⁷ Summers, *The Great Level*, pp. 95–99.

¹⁸ Summers, *The Great Level*, pp. 104–8; Williams, *Draining the Somerset levels*, pp. 88–89.

¹⁹ This section is based upon Alison Maddock, 'Watercourse management and flood prevention in the Alt Level, Lancashire, 1589–1779', *Transactions of the Historic Society of Lancashire & Cheshire (THSLC)* 148 (1999), pp. 59–94.

statute acres of mossland was enclosed in several townships on the Molyneux Estate through a large number of agreements for small acreages with various tenants.²⁰ An early reference to the reclamation of waste near Martin Mere is made in a deed of 1303, and limited control of drainage in that area is evidenced by numerous references to ditches as boundaries in the Burscough Priory cartulary.²¹ This work was certainly undertaken by the early twelfth century and may have begun much earlier. It was claimed that there were several attempts to protect the large tract of land around Martin Mere from flooding by the sea and to drain it during the seventeenth century, but no details have been found.²²

Draining Martin Mere

It was against this background that Thomas Fleetwood began the drainage of Martin Mere in the 1690s. His was the first large-scale drainage project in Lancashire, which he commenced without outside financial backing. It was also significant on a national scale because Martin Mere was probably the largest area of permanent water that any one had attempted to drain up to that time, far exceeding Meare Pool in Somerset. There is only limited information on the draining of Meare Pool, the drainage of which was first attempted about 1630, and which according to Leland was 'at high waters in winter a 4 miles in cumpace, and when it is lest a 2 miles and a half and most communely 3 miles'.²³

Fleetwood, born in 1661, was the eldest son of Sir Richard Fleetwood, Bart. of Calwich, Staffordshire and his wife Ann, née Golding, of Colston, Nottinghamshire, although the Fleetwood family had its origins in Lancashire. Fleetwood married Ann Bannister at Penwortham on 19 November 1683, the marriage probably being arranged through his Lancashire connections.²⁴ She was the daughter and only child of Christopher Bannister and

²⁰ A. J. Gritt, 'Aspects of agrarian change in South West Lancashire c.1650-1850' (PhD, Univ. of Central Lancashire, 2000), pp. 163-67.

²¹ A. N. Webb, 'An edition of the cartulary of Burscough Priory', *Cheetham Society*, 3rd series, 23 (1970), pp. 64, 6.

²² John Beetham, 'A report on the drainage of Martin Mere' for the Earl of Derby and Lord Lilford, 17 June 1893, in Southport Public Library.

²³ Williams, *Draining the Somerset levels*, pp. 105-8.

²⁴ James Croston, ed., Edward Baines, *The history of the County Palatine and Duchy of Lancaster* (Manchester, 1891) vol. IX, p. 133.

his wife Mary of Bank Hall, Bretherton, Lancashire. Through this marriage Fleetwood acquired the Bank Estate and lands in Cuerden, Lancashire, and other neighbouring areas, including land adjacent to Martin Mere. Thomas and Ann Fleetwood's only child, a daughter Henrietta Maria, was born on 30 September 1684. Following his first wife's death, Fleetwood married as his second wife Letitia (Lettice) Bankes, widow of William Bankes of Winstanley, Lancashire. She was the sister of Peter Legh the Elder of Lyme Park in Cheshire. By his second marriage Fleetwood thus became related to this well-known Cheshire family, who were to play a part in the later history of Martin Mere. A second, and unusual, link with this family was forged when Henrietta Maria, Fleetwood's only daughter by his first marriage, became the wife of Thomas Legh, Peter Legh the Elder's younger brother.

The principal landowners with lands adjacent to the Mere and with interests in it were the Earl of Derby, Robert Scarisbrick of Scarisbrick, Thomas Hesketh of Rufford, the Bolds of North Meols and Fleetwood himself. Fleetwood first proposed a scheme to the proprietors of the land in about 1692, and after negotiation a lease was signed between him and the Lords of the Manors adjoining the Mere on 22 August 1694.²⁵ The agreement was ratified by an Act of Parliament in 1695.²⁶ Although the passage of the Bill through Parliament appears to have gone quite smoothly, with no petitions raised against it, there must have been some opposition since a division was necessary before it was finally passed. The nature of such opposition is not evident.²⁷

Fleetwood's main objective, as stated in the original lease, was to turn the Mere into arable land as had been the intention in the Lincolnshire fenland. This was an ambitious project, and although his motivation is not stated, it seems reasonable to believe that he appreciated that the growth of Liverpool, which was already well underway, and population increase with economic development in south Lancashire generally, would open up new opportunities for markets for food, which could best be supplied locally. Fleetwood was in a good position to recognise these developments, having good connections with Liverpool, where he was appointed a

²⁵ Lancs. RO, DDSc 143/23.

²⁶ 1694 6 & 7 Wm. 3 c.15.

²⁷ *Journal of the House of Lords*, XV, pp. 495, 496, 502, 503, 525, 562; *Journal of the House of Commons*, XI, pp. 242, 253, 256, 259, 282.

freeman in 1699.²⁸ He was also involved in at least one business venture in the town, with shares in a rape seed mill and a storehouse in Liverpool, and a stock of rape oil at the mill valued at £400.²⁹ His appointment as a Liverpool freeman was 'gratis', that is to say not by inheritance, apprenticeship or purchase, but by the Corporation as someone they considered would be of advantage to the town.³⁰ In addition to being a country gentleman, he obviously had a strong entrepreneurial side to his character. The seeking of an Act of Parliament for the draining of Martin Mere was in keeping with a number of other local initiatives at that time, stimulated by demographic and economic change, especially in Lancashire, but also to a degree, by changes in the workings of Parliament.³¹

Fleetwood's original lease of the Mere was for two lives (not three as often stated) and an additional 31 years after the death of the second life. The lives named were those of Fleetwood himself, and his daughter Henrietta Maria. Fleetwood died in 1717, and his daughter in 1722, so that the lease ultimately expired in 1753, but this was obviously not known to the parties at the time. Work started at Martin Mere soon after the Act was obtained, a channel or sluice being cut to the Ribble estuary, and a pair of flood gates erected near the sea end to prevent the sea flooding back into the Mere, which lies below sea level at spring tides. These gates closed when the sea rose higher than the water in the sluice, and opened again when the sea level fell. There are few details of how Fleetwood managed the work: there are suggestions that Dutch drainage engineers or men from the Fens may have been employed, but there is no evidence to back this up.³²

Before 1700 there were said to be sometimes up to 2,000 men employed on the project. If this figure is to be believed, then this was a

²⁸ R. W. B. (R. W. Buss of South Norwood, London), *The Fleetwood family of Calwich, County Stafford with a pedigree* (privately printed, 1908).

²⁹ John Rylands University Library Manchester (JRULM), Leigh of Lyme Munitments Box R. E., no. 3, Mr Fleetwood's settlement of his estate for payment of his debts, 18 July 1705.

³⁰ Thomas Fleetwood Esq., of Banke adm. gratis, 30 Sept. 1699, in Liverpool Record Office, 352 MIN/COU 1, 4 (Liverpool Town Books). I am grateful to Dr M. J. Power for this information.

³¹ S. Handley, 'Local legislative initiatives for economic and social development in Lancashire, 1689-1731', *Parliamentary History*, IX (1990), pp. 14-37.

³² Brazendale, *Historic halls*, p. 247.

massive undertaking requiring considerable management skills and provision of facilities. Problems would have included the arrangement of temporary accommodation, the recruitment of labour from outside the area, and the coping with the domestic, social and organisational requirements of a population equivalent to a moderately large town of the time. This was recognised by his contemporaries, if in rather fanciful language, when Charles Leigh wrote in 1700 that 'to surmount all the natural and artificial oppositions of the work there was highly needful a person of so generous and piercing a spirit and so extraordinary a temper as the worthy and successful undertaker'.³³ Unfortunately, the sources to tell us how this was achieved do not appear to have survived.

It was estimated that an experienced canal navy could shift twelve cubic yards of earth in a day.³⁴ Fleetwood's initial sluice was eight yards wide, probably involved about eight miles of main ditching, and assuming it was at least three feet deep, then it would require about 10,000 man days of intensive digging. But for 2,000 men that would only amount to one week's work. The employment of large numbers of men would ensure that the work was completed in a short time, but such an achievement is not realistic. The work rate outlined above was for an experienced navy at the end of the eighteenth century, and Fleetwood's labour force, being inexperienced, would not match such figures. In view of the logistical problems, it also seems unlikely that as many as 2,000 men were employed. Even if there were that many men on site it was unlikely that they were all digging and some may have been involved in supplying support services. Some reservations must be held about the number of men employed, although the work was undoubtedly completed in a short time.

Fleetwood seems to have been a competent engineer, and in 1697 he, together with two other gentlemen, Edward Booth and John Liddell, submitted a petition claiming to have invented a new engine for draining water by means of ladles, drivers or forcers, turning circularly about their axes, which drove the water progressively through a trough or channel to the desired height or place. This application was submitted on 9 March 1697, and the patent was

³³ Charles Leigh, *The natural history of Lancashire and Cheshire and the Peak in Derbyshire* (Oxford, 1700), p. 19.

³⁴ A. Burton, *The canal builders* (Newton Abbot, 1981), p. 158 quoting W. Tatham, *The political economy of inland navigation* (1799).

finally published as patent no. 359 on 1 December 1698.³⁵ It seems clear that the Thomas Fleetwood of the patent is Thomas Fleetwood of Bank, but unfortunately there are no addresses or other identifying information given in the patent, and Booth and Liddell have not been identified further.

The location of the main drainage sluice seems to have been well considered and dug in the best place. At a court case in 1714, Peter Rimmer, who worked on the drainage of the Mere and was employed in sounding the depths of the water, gave evidence that the deepest part was where the great sluice was made, the greatest depth being about seven feet. His evidence was corroborated by Thomas Ball, who had also been employed on the drainage.³⁶

Although Celia Fiennes went out of her way to avoid passing by Martin Mere during her travels through the area in 1698 because she was apprehensive of the dangers of the district, she was well aware that drainage working was taking place there. Her words give a concise contemporary commentary recognising both the expense, the objective, the necessary endeavour and the potential reward:

Some part of the Mer one Mr Fleetwood had been at the expense to draine so as to be able to use the ground for tillage, having by trenches and floodgates with banks shutt out the waters that still kept it a marsh and moorish ground, but it was a very great charge; however it shews by industry and some expense if gentlemen would set about it most of the waste ground that is now a fenny moor and mostly water, might be rendered useful and in a few yeares answeere the first great charge on it.³⁷

The work must have been initially successful, because Fleetwood leased land on what was virtually the centre of the former mere to Thomas Berry, Henry Low and William Wiggins amongst others, who soon erected dwelling houses and outbuildings on their holdings.³⁸ The land leased to Berry was forty-nine customary acres (approximately ninety statute acres) and to Wiggins eight customary acres.³⁹ It was estimated that Fleetwood was entitled to

³⁵ *Calendar of State Papers, Domestic (CSPD)*, 9 Mar. 1697, p. 53, 22 Apr. 1697, pp. 121–22; Bennet Woodcroft, *Alphabetical index of patentees of inventions 1617–1852* (3rd edn, New York, 1969), British Patent no. 359 (1698).

³⁶ Lancs. RO, DDSc 143/23.

³⁷ C. Morris, ed., *The illustrated journeys of Celia Fiennes 1685–1715* (London, 1982), p. 161.

³⁸ Lancs. RO, DDHe 58/33 (Hesketh of Rufford Papers)

³⁹ Lancs. RO, DDHe 58/41.

sums totalling about £800 for fines and contracts for leases on the Mere.⁴⁰ Additional evidence of early success is also provided by Thomas Fleetwood's application in March 1700 for a grant for a fair to be held three times a year on Martin Mere over two days in April, June and September. Fleetwood claimed that he made this application in response to demands from the local inhabitants who wished to sell their cattle and other goods more easily.⁴¹ A warrant to hold the fair was granted the following month.⁴²

Yet further indication of the success of the drainage is suggested by the bringing of a court case in 1714 between Lord Derby and Robert Scarisbrick on the one hand and Fleetwood and the other land owners of the townships adjoining the Mere on the other, concerning the boundaries of the lands within the drained area which were formerly occupied by the waters of the Mere. This case may be considered, at least in part, a testament to the relative success of Thomas Fleetwood in draining the Mere since the adjacent landowners were apparently keen to lay claim to the land within it.⁴³ Robert Scarisbrick was desirous of having boundary stones set up on the land.⁴⁴ Nicholas Blundell, the diarist, makes passing reference to events at this time: 'Mr Scarisbrick went out after dinner upon Business about martin meer'.⁴⁵

The case hinged to a great degree on the rights which the various owners of land adjacent to the Mere had over the Mere when it was covered with water, and in particular the fishing rights. Fleetwood, in his evidence to the court, claimed ignorance of both the boundaries and whether the owners knew the bounds of their own shares. Because of the expenses of the work he had mortgaged the Mere to Benjamin Bathurst of Middlesex, to whom he had passed the deeds, and so was unable to consult their contents.⁴⁶ He also stated that he did not know what means there were to distinguish each party's interests when the area was covered with water. The outcome of the case was summarised in minutes of the proceedings as 'the boundaries of the fishery as the plaintiffs

⁴⁰ JRULM, Legh Muniments, Box R. E., no. 3.

⁴¹ CSPD, 11 Mar. 1700.

⁴³ Lancs. RO, DDSc 143/23.

⁴² CSPD, 8 Apr. 1700.

⁴⁴ Lancs. RO, DDHe 58/36-7

⁴⁵ F. Tyrer, ed., *The Great Diurnal of Nicholas Blundell, of Little Crosby, Lancashire 1702-1728* (3 vols, Record Society of Lancashire & Cheshire (RSLC), 1968-72), I, pp. 97-98.

⁴⁶ Lancs. RO, DDHe 58/35.

evidence describes give no right to the soil now drained', so that in this sense Fleetwood won the case, although the victory was of little value to him.⁴⁷

Costs and benefits

The main source of information for the pre-drainage economy of Martin Mere comes from the depositions of witnesses called to the court case of 1714.⁴⁸ Witnesses were asked whether they knew the Mere and places around it, did they live nearby and for how long, what did they know of the boundaries within the Mere and of the extent of the fisheries.⁴⁹ Witness included old men such as Hugh Walthew, who was 83, and had known the Mere since childhood and was employed as a workmen in the draining of the Mere. He gave evidence on the boundaries as did Thomas Forshaw. Thomas Titherington and John Summer gave evidence of grazing cattle on the Mere, whilst Henry Halsall and James Worthington attested to the taking of wildfowl and eggs. The landlords, at the time Fleetwood's lease was granted, had considered the Mere to be of little or no use or profit except for fishing.⁵⁰ Other uses to which the lake was put included the gathering of reeds for thatching, and the summer grazing of horses and cattle.⁵¹ Cattle were grazed on the Mere not only by local residents, but by people from further afield, presumably on payment of a fee. After William Finch of Mawdesley died in 1701, his widow had to pay for someone to go to Martin Mere, where he had cattle, to collect them and take them to market in Ormskirk.⁵²

Drainage of the Mere brought more land into agricultural production, but adversely affected the small number of people who had been dependant upon its pre-drainage condition for their livelihood. In this respect it was analogous to the enclosure of former open or common land. At nearby Croston, the enclosure of the Finney had led to opposition from the commoners who had depended on it, and has been seen as a major factor in changing the social make up of the township from a place with a large population of independent small-holding cottager farmers to a village with a

⁴⁷ Lancs. RO, DDHe 58/40.

⁴⁸ Coney, 'Fish, fowl and hen', p. 51.

⁴⁹ Lancs. RO, DDHe 58/36.

⁵⁰ Lancs. RO, DDSc 143/23.

⁵¹ Coney, 'Fish, fowl and hen', pp. 59-60.

⁵² Lancs. RO, WCW William Finch, Mawdesley, 1701.

large underclass of landless agricultural labourers.⁵³ This was not the case at Martin Mere, however, where the area reclaimed was largely water and the land holders affected were the relatively small number with holdings adjacent to the Mere: in this respect Martin Mere was typical fenland.⁵⁴ Whereas in both the Somerset levels and the Fens the commoners were opposed to drainage, there is no information on any adverse response in south west Lancashire.⁵⁵

An interesting measure of the increased availability of land as the result of drainage is the emergence of Martin Mere as a distinct locality in the Croston parish registers.⁵⁶ Between 1696 and 1714 there is no mention of Martin Mere. From 1715 to 1727 there were 44 baptisms and 24 burials of individuals identifies as 'of Martin Mere'. All but two of these events took place at Rufford, the exceptions being baptisms at Tarleton. Rufford and Tarleton were townships with land on the Mere and with chapels within Croston parish. This is clearly indicative of a population being established on the recently-drained Mere, and the excess of baptisms over burials suggests that such a population had a bias to younger people which is to be expected of an immigrant area.

Despite the initial technical success of Fleetwood's work, within a few years of the work being completed the sands of the Ribble estuary had drifted into the outfall, and this, together with mud which built up against the flood gates in spring tides, made the scheme less effective. By 1714 it was decided to raise the sill at the floodgate by twenty inches, which together with some other measures, cured this last problem. But the loss of fall made the drainage less satisfactory, and part of the land which had been used for arable now became flooded again in winter, so that it could only be used for summer pasture.⁵⁷ Some time after Fleetwood's death his successors erected a new pair of floodgates nearer to the outfall which improved the situation again, but as time for the lease to expire approached maintenance was neglected, and with

⁵³ G. Rogers, 'Enclosure and social change in west Lancashire', *Agricultural History Review*, 41 (1993), pp. 137–54.

⁵⁴ A. Reeves & T. Williamson, 'Marshes' in J. Thirsk, ed., *The English rural landscape* (Oxford, 2000), p. 150.

⁵⁵ Williams, *Draining the Somerset levels*, p. 89; Summers, *The Great Level*, pp. 105–7.

⁵⁶ H. Fishwick, ed., *The registers of the Parish Church of Croston* (2 vols, Preston, 1900–4).

⁵⁷ Lancs. RO, DDSc 78/3 (7).

the expiry of the lease the land reverted from one leaseholder to several land owners, who could not usually agree as to what should be done and how it should be paid for. In 1754 an unusually high tide washed away the gates, and the landowners met and directed Rev. John Armetriding, who dwelt nearby, to carry out the rebuilding.⁵⁸

Thereafter the management of the drainage appears to have been even more neglected and unsatisfactory, until a report was made on the 'State and condition of Martin Mere' in October 1760.⁵⁹ Proposals were put forward to obtain an Act of Parliament for a Commission of Sewers for the maintenance of the Mere, the Commissioners to meet in March and organise the work to be carried out the following summer, but only a small amount of work was done in a half-hearted way. The situation continued to deteriorate until Thomas Eccleston took over the Scarisbrick estate in 1778, and as the largest landowner on the Mere began to take an interest in the problem.⁶⁰ Although he won a gold medal from the Society for the Encouragement of Arts Manufactures and Commerce in 1786 for his work on draining Martin Mere, Eccleston's achievement was equally as short lived as Fleetwood's, and within a few years much of the Mere was again flooded.

The costs of Fleetwood's drainage works were clearly considerable, and he had to bear the costs alone: this is in marked contrast to the drainage schemes in the Lincolnshire Fens during the 1630s and 1640s, when the landowners and the Crown devised a scheme whereby the undertakers were paid for their work by receiving part of the land that was drained, thus avoiding expense to the other parties.⁶¹ As early as 25 August 1698 Fleetwood assigned the lease to Sir Benjamin Bathurst of Middlesex in exchange for £4,000, and to secure payment he delivered the deeds to him.⁶² In another undated letter, but presumably fairly early in the operation, he added as a footnote 'God speed Martin Mere in whose waters is already spent above £1,500'. He appears to have been a man of some

⁵⁸ Eccleston says 'in about 1755', Lancs. RO, DDSc 78/3 (7); but Armetriding's account for the work states that the rebuilding was finished on 30 Aug. 1754, Lancs. RO, DDX 900/26.

⁵⁹ Lancs. RO, DDX 900/27.

⁶⁰ Lancs. RO, DDSc 78/3 (7).

⁶¹ J. Thirsk, *English peasant farming: The history of Lincolnshire from Tudor to recent times* (London, 1957).

⁶² Lancs. RO, DDHe 58/35.

humour, since he signs himself in this same letter as 'Your affectionate servant (at this time as poor as a church mous)'.⁶³

The vast expense of draining Martin Mere put Fleetwood into considerable debt. In June 1705 he stated his debts at about £15,000, and proposed that he would settle all his lands in Staffordshire and Martin Mere on his son-in-law and his wife, if the son-in-law would settle all his debts.⁶⁴ In July his debts were considered to be about £16,000 or thereabouts, although this figure seems low, since debts were listed exceeding £20,000.⁶⁵ Debts were grouped as mortgages and real securities, totalling £14,600 (but apparently excluding most of the accrued interest), bonds and other securities, amounting to over £5,100, and £627 in book debts. The book debts were bills for current expenditure outstanding to relatively local individuals and ranged from 'about £3 10s.' owed to Mr Seed of Preston to £173 due to Mr Swarbrick of Liverpool. With the exception of Mr Nash of Covent Garden, those owed book debts all came from several places within the triangle bounded by Manchester, Liverpool and Preston. The occupation of some of the creditors is given, probably indicating what the debt was for, as in the case of 'Mr Turner of Liverpool, wood merchant £28 13s.'. In only one instance is the specific reason for the debt given, however: 'Mr Egton of Shaw for a horse £23 13s.'. This was a considerable amount to pay for a horse, suggesting that even in straitened circumstances, Fleetwood did not stint himself.

The list of debts provides interesting information on the sources of capital which Fleetwood called upon to finance his venture. The main debt was to Jane Francis Bathurst, executrix of Benjamin Bathurst for £12,000 borrowed at 6% interest per annum. This seems a fairly high rate, but was typical of those operating at this time.⁶⁶ There was another mortgage of £1,850, again at 6%, on Stanton, one of the Staffordshire properties held by Fleetwood, and a second mortgage on the same estate had raised a further £500. Sir William Pennington of Muncaster in Cumberland had loaned

⁶³ An undated letter to Robert Scarisbrick, beginning 'Dear Landlord', in Lancs. RO, DDSc 143/23.

⁶⁴ Fleetwood to an unknown correspondent, 23 June 1705, in JRULM, Miscellaneous correspondence 1687-1744 (Legh of Lyme Muniments).

⁶⁵ JRULM, Legh Muniments, Box R. E. Fleetwood's settlement, see appendix.

⁶⁶ K. J. Weiller & P. Mirowski, 'Rates of interest in eighteenth century England', *Explorations in Economic History*, 27 (1990), pp. 1-28.

£1,500. Smaller amounts had been raised by bonds from numerous other people, many of whom were local to south west Lancashire, although one was from Bath, and two others were from Ludgate Hill and Covent Garden, presumably in London, respectively. Amongst Fleetwood's debts was one to 'Mr Blundell for a bill of sale £145'. It is not known whether this was Nicholas Blundell the diarist or not. Certainly, as one would expect, they were acquainted, since Nicholas Blundell dined at Bank with Fleetwood and his wife on 12 January 1706 on his way home from Preston Fair.⁶⁷ Another interesting debt was for £250 to 'Mrs Bannister for arrears of annuity'. Presumably this was money owed to his mother-in-law by his first marriage.

Fleetwood had therefore attempted to cover the cost of his scheme by mortgaging the project itself and some of his ancestral lands in Staffordshire, and had raised smaller amounts through bonds taken out with mainly local people, but some who came from further afield. How these mortgages and bonds were organised is not known, but one can speculate that they were probably arranged through a local attorney. At this time the banking system had not developed in the north west, and the legal profession assumed a prominent role as both money lenders and brokers in Lancashire in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, using their contacts and local knowledge to act as intermediaries in arranging and negotiating secured loans.⁶⁸ Fleetwood had also failed to pay his day-to-day bills, some of which, from the descriptions given, were owed to local tradesmen. Of Fleetwood's local creditors, the largest number, seven, came from Ormskirk, four were from Preston and three from Liverpool. Others came from Croston, Wigan, Meols, Bretherton, Warrington, Manchester and Rufford. Many of their surnames are those of local families, generally of the yeoman or tradesmen class, but there is insufficient information to establish their precise identities with any degree of confidence.⁶⁹

In July 1705, Peter Legh the Elder, of Lyme (Fleetwood's brother-in-law), Thomas Ashurst of Ashurst in Dalton, Lancashire, John

⁶⁷ *Great Diurnal of Nicholas Blundell*, I, p. 101.

⁶⁸ B. L. Anderson, 'The attorney and the early capital market in Lancashire', in J. R. Harris, ed., *Liverpool and Merseyside: Essays in the economic and social history of the port and its hinterland* (London, 1969), pp. 50–77.

⁶⁹ Local surnames can be readily identified from the index to probate records. See J. P. Earwaker, ed., *An index to the wills and inventories now preserved in the Court of Probate at Chester 1701–1720* (RSLC, 20, 1889).

Ward of Capesthorpe, Cheshire and Thomas Winkle of Preston were in agreement to take over Fleetwood's debts.⁷⁰ By this arrangement, Fleetwood was to vest in these trustees all lands which he held, except those which he held through his late wife Anne or in right of his present wife Letitia, and which had not formerly been covered with or surrounded by the waters of Martin Mere. The reclaimed land was to be vested in the trustees who could sell, dispose of, or apply it to the payment of his debts. Up to this point Fleetwood had not provided a marriage portion for his daughter Henrietta Maria, and any excess arising from this arrangement was to go to Thomas Legh as a dowry. Fleetwood agreed to hand over his lands as detailed in the agreement to the trustees for the nominal sum of five shillings.

This document gives some idea of Fleetwood's assets at the time. In addition to the already-mentioned interest in a rape seed mill in Liverpool, and the Lancashire lands he had acquired through marriage, he also had extensive interests in other land in Staffordshire in Stanton, Ellaston, Northwood, Wootton, Prestwood, Torr in the Dale, and Ramshorn, as well as the tithes and advowson of Ellaston, from which an annual income was obtained. His assets, as already mentioned, included about £800 he was entitled to for contracts for leases of various parcels of land reclaimed from the drainage of the Mere, and his miscellaneous assets included the entitlement to the fairs he had instituted in 1700.

The arrangement to take over Fleetwood's debts seems to have gone ahead, since it is referred to in an indenture of 7 January 1706 whereby Fleetwood was to use part of his late wife's estate to pay off some of his debts.⁷¹ In a letter believed to be to Peter Legh, Fleetwood refers to him as a trustee, and begs for money arising from his lands in Stanton to be applied to some pressing debts.⁷² However, the arrangement did not go well and certainly did not end Fleetwood's financial problems, possibly because the interest due does not seem to have been included amongst the original list of debts.

⁷⁰ JRULM, Legh Muniments, Box R. E. Fleetwood's settlement.

⁷¹ JRULM, Legh Muniments, Box R. E. no. 4, Indenture . . . between Thomas Fleetwood Esq. of Bank and his son in law Thomas Legh Esq. and others for settling the estate at Bank and other parts of the estate late of Mr Banastre, 7 Jan. 1706.

⁷² JRULM, Legh of Lyme Correspondence. Thomas Fleetwood to Peter Legh the Elder. This undated letter, one of three assigned to the period 1697–1700, from internal evidence would appear to date to after 1705.

From this time onwards Fleetwood was never free of financial problems. In 1706 he was trying to raise money to pay off the interest on £1,500 due to William Pennington of Muncaster, Cumberland.⁷³ By May 1713 Letitia Fleetwood was in poor health; furthermore the Fleetwoods still had their financial problems, with creditors threatening, and the possibility of being taken to court at Lancaster.⁷⁴ It seems that after this Peter Legh had offered to lend his sister £100, since she accepted it to pay for wages and debts that were again pressing. In the same letter she begged her brother to write to Mr Ward to prevail upon Lady Bathurst to stop the lawsuit which she had begun against the Fleetwoods.⁷⁵ She claimed that it would be their ultimate ruin and that Lady Bathurst would not benefit, presumably because all their creditors would then sue and they could only pay a small percentage in the pound. This entreaty does not seem to have been successful, since on 13 February 1715 Fleetwood failed to pay and the equity of redemption was foreclosed, the Mere sold to a man named Gibson, and afterwards vested in Allen, Lord Bathurst. Lord Bathurst then made an agreement with Sir Thomas Hesketh and several others and assigned to them the interest for the remainder of the lease.⁷⁶ The Fleetwoods thus seem to have been living under considerable financial pressures and staggering from crisis to crisis, whilst at the same time continuing to enjoy a comfortable lifestyle at Bank Hall.

Conclusion

Fleetwood died on 22 April 1717.⁷⁷ He was buried at North Meols on 26 April.⁷⁸ Surprisingly, he had not made a will, and letters of Administration were granted to John Heyes of Ormskirk, described as principal creditor.⁷⁹ A memorial, in Latin, was erected in St. Cuthbert's Church, North Meols, which in translation reads

⁷³ JRULM, Legh Muniments, Box R. E. no. 4, Indenture of Covenant 1706.

⁷⁴ JRULM, Legh Correspondence, Lettice Bankes (Fleetwood) to Peter Legh the Elder, 16 May 1713.

⁷⁵ JRULM, Legh Correspondence, Lettice Bankes (Fleetwood) to Peter Legh the Elder, 19 Jan. [1714?].

⁷⁶ Lancs. RO DDSc 143/23.

⁷⁷ See his entry in the *Dictionary of National Biography*.

⁷⁸ H. Brierley, ed., *The Parish Registers of North Meols, 1594–1731* (Lancashire Parish Register Society, Preston, 1929).

⁷⁹ Lancs. RO, WCW, Thomas Fleetwood, Bretherton (1717).

. . . having carried a sluice to the sea hard by, he converted the immense mere of Martin into firm dry land, a deed which older generations dared not attempt and the future will scarce believe . . .⁸⁰

His wife Letitia lived a further two years and was buried alongside him on 27 December 1719.⁸¹ She was aged 50 when she died, and old beyond her years, worn down by incessant money troubles and ill-health.⁸² Her simple will, made some two months before her death, makes reference to money still owing to John Heyes, gentleman, of Ormskirk.⁸³ This was for money advanced by Heyes to John Thornton esq. of Preston, to discharge Fleetwood's bond to Mrs Blundell. After payment of this debt to Heyes she directed that all debts contracted by her late husband since the deed of 1706 shall be paid. Her step-daughter Henrietta Maria Legh was left some china, and the residue of her personal estate (if any) was left to her brother Richard Legh. The financial problems of the family do not appear to have ended with the death of Fleetwood and his wife. Their eldest grandson inherited land in several townships in South Lancashire from his mother who died in 1722 including Bank Hall, but they were charged with various debts amounting to £13,000 principal besides interest. Whether this was due to long-term debts arising from his grandfather, or his own wayward ways, or a combination of both, is not entirely clear.⁸⁴

In retrospect, Fleetwood's efforts deserve much more credit than they have hitherto received. Although his success was relatively short-lived, it bears comparison with the later work of Thomas Eccleston, which received much wider public acclaim, probably because of Eccleston's ability as a self-publicist. Eccleston's task was made easier because he was able to see what Fleetwood did, how he did it, and what problems he had encountered. Furthermore, Eccleston undertook his project nearly a hundred years later than Fleetwood, and was able to draw on expertise gained in the meantime. As a member of the Board of Agriculture, he had a much wider range of contacts than Fleetwood, and used as a consultant John Gilbert, who had been heavily involved in the

⁸⁰ Peter Aughton, *North Meols and Southport* (Preston, 1988), p. 74.

⁸¹ Brierley, *Parish Registers of North Meols*.

⁸² Lady Newton, *Lyme Letters 1660-1760* (London, 1925).

⁸³ Lancs. RO, WCW, Letitia Fleetwood, Bretherton (1719/20).

⁸⁴ G. Simm, *The life and times of Peter Legh the Younger 1707-1792* (Newton le Willows, 1996), p. 10.

construction of the Bridgewater Canal. He also visited the Lincolnshire Fens early in 1787, and hired workmen and brought equipment from there.⁸⁵

From the perspective of today, and the present-day knowledge of the work which was carried out in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries to keep the area of the former Martin Mere dry, the problems that Fleetwood confronted and the relative success he achieved in combating them can be appreciated. He was the pioneer in this area, although earlier work had been carried out in both the Fens and the Somerset Levels. The Lincolnshire Fens bear some similarities with the area around Martin Mere, and their history is worthy of comparison. The problems of Fenland drainage at the time that Fleetwood was working have been described as 'less political than legal, administrative, and financial, and above all technical'.⁸⁶

Fleetwood's experience would fit this description. He was technically competent, and must have had considerable administrative ability to carry out the project within a short time, the project being completed in about two years.⁸⁷ His short-term success led to legal problems, whilst his ambitions on the Mere soon got him into financial difficulties. As a sophisticated man with London connections he would no doubt have been well-aware of what had gone on elsewhere, and may have even employed drainage engineers from other areas, although evidence for this is lacking. Through his Liverpool connections, Fleetwood would certainly have observed the major changes that had taken place in Liverpool in the last two decades of the seventeenth century. It thus seems likely that, inspired by the achievements of the Fenland drainage engineers, and motivated by the potential market for food in the nearby growing town, he embarked on his undertaking. In many respects the long-term history of drainage on Martin Mere parallels that in the Fens, with early success followed by problems caused by silting up and shrinkage of the peat as it dried out causing the land surface to drop, both factors leading to a reduction of drainage capability and

⁸⁵ P. Lead, *Agents of revolution: John and Thomas Gilbert* (Keele, 1989), pp. 35–38; Gilbert's correspondence with Eccleston is in Lancs. RO, DDSc 143/23; Eccleston, 'Improvement of Martin Mear', p. 68.

⁸⁶ J. Thirsk, 'Agricultural policy, public debate and legislation', in J. Thirsk, ed., *The agrarian history of England and Wales, vol. 5* (Cambridge, 1985), p. 372.

⁸⁷ Lancs. RO, DDX 900/27.

subsequent re-flooding, but the significance of which were not appreciated at the time of Fleetwood's work.

Although the area of Martin Mere was tiny in comparison to the Fens and Somerset Levels, Fleetwood had undertaken the drainage as an individual, without any other financial backing or involvement of the Crown, which had been the case in the other areas. His personal financial resources were clearly far too small, and he does not seem to have made any provision for financing the project until he was in debt. His debts were to be a millstone around his neck for the rest of his life. He was a pioneer and had taken all the risks, in taking out a lease on the Mere, getting the Act and financing the engineering. The land he had recovered was of value, at least in the short term, and its perceived value was almost certainly the cause of the court case in 1714 between the Lords of the adjoining Manors to establish their boundaries within the area of the former Mere. His work no doubt provided encouragement for Thomas Eccleston to attempt to build upon his foundations.

Fleetwood was clearly a man of vision, who foresaw the coming market for agricultural produce on his doorstep with the growth of Liverpool, and was a risk-taker prepared to take risks of the highest order. He deserves credit for his technical achievements. What is much more questionable is his financial acumen.

Acknowledgements

I would like to acknowledge the assistance of the staffs of the Lancashire Record Office, Preston; the John Rylands University Library, Manchester; Southport Public Library; and the Staffordshire Record Office and William Salt Library, Stafford, for assistance in providing documents. I would also like to thank Dr M. J. Power for his encouragement and constructive criticism of the draft of this paper, which has also been improved by the comments of an anonymous referee.

APPENDIX
LIST OF THE DEBTS, MORTGAGES AND SECURITIES
OF THOMAS FLEETWOOD, 1705

	£	s	d
Mortgages and Real Securities			
Jane Francis Bathurst executrix. of Benjamin Bathurst @ 6%	12,000		
Mr Corbin by mortgage of Stanton @ 6%	1,850		
Sir Nathaniell Curzon by a second mortgage @ 6%	500		
Mrs Bannister arrears of annuity	250		
subtotal	14,600		
Debts on Bonds			
John Belling of Ormskirk principal and interest	12	4	
Mr Hesketh of Meoles	21	4	
Mrs Farrington of Ormskirk principal and interest	21	6	
Mrs Berray of Ormskirk	25	16	
Barnaby Breakhall of Meols about	25		
Mrs Joynson beside interest	50		
Mr Gibson a bond	50		
Mr Cheynor apothecary	60		
Mr Hinley £40 bond and £25 interest	65		
Mr Ollerhead of Ormskirk bond and interest	73		
Mr Rowland Fleetwood of Staffs besides interest	100		
Mr Baldwyn a French Merchant in Colemans Street, bond	127	8	
Mr Berkford merchant a bond	143		
Mr Blundell bill of sale	145		
Mr Sanson of Bath	154	5	
Mr Thornton of Preston about	100		
Mr Robert Farrer of Bretherton about	30		
Mr Brown Merchant in Mark Lane bond and interest	179	2	
Mr Peter Ashton Ormskirk	190		
interest due	22	16	
Sir Edward Goldin	289		
Exors of Serjt Bretland	500		
Sir William Pennington	1,500		
Mr King a bond	15		
Mr Barns Taylor bond	20	9	6
Mr Tatlock Laceman on Ludgate Hill bond	65		
Mr Rigby in Suffolk Street bond	143	12	
Mr Jarvine a bond	113	15	
Mr Jarvine a bill about	62		
Mr Ubanks of Griffin a bond, book, interest, a bill	210	17	
Mr Phillips, Silkman in Henrietta Street, bond	220	5	

	£	s	d
Mr Warner goldsmith, bond	370		
subtotal	5,104	19	6
Book debts			
Mr Seed of Preston about	3	10	
Robert Pennington of Croston	6	12	
James Barnes, Brasier, of Wigan about	6		
Peter Rainford of Liverpool	9		
James Ford, of Wigan, Bedder about	9		
Mr Bouker of Manchester	10	12	
Mr Fletcher of Ormskirk about	10		
William Grantham of Warrington, Joyner about	11		
Colonel John Ashton of Ormskirk	12		
Mr Whittane of Preston	12		
Mr Sheilds of Liverpool	16		
Mr Nash of Covent garden	20		
Mr Swabrick of Liverpool	173	8	
Mr Thomson of Manchester	21		
Mr Egeton of Shaw for a horse	23	13	
Mr Turner of Liverpool, wood merchant	28	13	
Mr Bellingham of Rufford	32	9	
Mr Hurst of Liverpool	55	6	
Mr Berrey of Croston	77	9	
Mr Wimbley of Preston under	100		
subtotal	627	10	
Grand total	20,322	9	6

Summarised from JRULM, Leigh of Lyme Muniments Box RE no 3.

