Romney Marsh: Coastal and Landscape Change through the Ages
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6. Romney Marsh: Evolution of the Historic Landscape and its Wider Significance

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Romney Marsh is one of the largest coastal wetlands in Britain, and has seen a long history of archaeological, documentary and geomorphological research. Recently, this has been complemented by interdisciplinary work of the Romney Marsh Research Trust's members, and we now have an extensive body of data relating to this remarkable landscape. In the first monograph produced by the Romney Marsh Research Trust, Christopher Green attempted a broad palaeogeographical reconstruction of how the Marsh may have evolved over the past 2,000 years, and this paper is an attempt to expand upon the model put forward. Some aspects of the wider significance of the history of Romney Marsh are then considered, including the importance of breaches in coastal barriers in affecting human utilisation of marshland landscapes, the significance of the associated estuaries for integrating coastal and inland economies, and the role of marshland within complex medieval estate structures.

Introduction

Romney Marsh is the third largest coastal wetland in Britain, and during the 19th and 20th centuries it saw a remarkably long history of archaeological, documentary and geomorphological/palaeoenvironmental research (e.g. Holloway 1849; Lewin 1862; Furley 1874; Teichman Derville 1936; Smith 1943; Ward 1952; Green 1968; Eddison and Green 1988; Eddison *et al.* 1998; Eddison 1995; 2000). Several attempts have previously been made to reconstruct its palaeogeography, and this paper endeavours to weave together a wide range of data to take this mapping further, in order to develop a hypothetical model for the Marsh's evolution that may provide a stimulus for further research. As a non-Romney Marsher, an attempt will also be made to reflect on the significance of both the Marsh itself, and the research that has been carried out there.

For those readers who are not familiar with wetland research it may be useful to place the work on Romney Marsh in a wider context. Since the 1970s the significance of wetland landscapes as records of environmental change and human endeavour has become widely recognised following John and Bryony Coles' pioneering work in the Somerset Levels (Coles and Coles 1986; Coles 1989). English Heritage followed up the 'Somerset Levels Project' with major programmes of survey and limited excavation in Fenland (Hall and Coles 1994; Crowson *et al.* 2000), North West England (e.g. Hodgkinson *et al.* 2000), and around the Humber Estuary (e.g. Ellis *et al.* 2001). Other areas saw more local initiatives focussing upon intertidal areas, such as the 'Hullbridge Survey' in Essex (Wilkinson and Murphy 1995), Goldcliff in the former county of Gwent (Bell *et al.* 2000), the Isle of Wight (Tomalin 2000) and Langstone Harbour in Hampshire (Allen and Gardiner 2000). Further work is also now proposed around the Thames Estuary (Williams and Brown 1999). These mostly state-funded projects have done much to improve our understanding of those dynamic coastal zones, but all too often their scope has been understandably limited to specific wetland environments that are under threat from drainage or erosion. They have also concentrated on archaeological and palaeoenvironmental investigation, resulting in a tendency for the medieval period, documentary sources, and the historic landscape itself to be rather neglected (though with notable exceptions: e.g. Silvester 1988; Hall 1996; Hodgkinson *et al.* 2000).

Two areas – Romney Marsh and the Severn Estuary – have seen a different approach, with the absence of a large-scale state-funded survey encouraging a series of imaginative and collaborative programmes of research. Around the Severn, the *Severn Estuary Levels Research Committee* has acted as a forum for debate, co-operation, and a means for establishing projects that have seen the close collaboration of archaeologists, sedimentologists, palaeoenvironmentalists and historians (see the annual reports of the Committee *Archaeology in the Severn Estuary*, and Rippon 2001a).

A very similar approach has emerged through the *Romney Marsh Research Trust*, and this is now the fourth in their series of monographs (Eddison and Green 1988; Eddison 1995; Eddison *et al.* 1998). In the early volumes (and indeed a series of other academic papers), the emphasis was on publishing the results of individual research projects, though Eddison (2000) has recently produced a much needed overview of the area's history.

There have been several attempts to reconstruct the sequence of reclamation, mostly in the eastern part of Walland Marsh (Furley 1874; Lewin 1862; Tatton-Brown 1988; Allen 1996; 1999; Eddison and Draper 1997), along with a number of attempts at broader palaeogeographical mapping of the whole Romney/Walland Marsh landscape. Notable examples include Holloway's (1849), Homan's (1938) and Ward's (1952) somewhat schematic reconstructions based upon documentary material, Green's (1988) sequence of three maps covering the Roman to medieval period (being based partly on the results of Green's (1968) soil survey), Spencer *et al.*'s (1998a; and see Spencer 1996; Spencer *et al.* 1998b) work on the buried Wainway palaeochannel, and Long *et al.*'s (1998) mapping of the start and end of peat formation. With the exception of the latter and Green's (1988) maps, however, each of these earlier palaeogeographical reconstructions only consider the landscape at one period, and even Green's (1988) study only mapped the changing course of the river Rother and contained little reference to the development of the cultural landscape (as has since been studied by Allen, Draper, Eddison and Tatton-Brown: see above). This paper therefore presents an attempt to integrate the results of all this research into both the natural and cultural landscape in order to improve upon these early attempts at palaeogeographical mapping.

A Wealth of Opportunities

The dynamic environment that is a coastal wetland offers human communities a range of potential resource-utilisation strategies (Rippon 2000). The rich ecological mosaics contain an abundance of natural resources that could be *exploited* by human communities. These resources would have included fishing, wildfowling, the grazing of livestock and the opportunity for producing salt by boiling sea water, and could be exploited without significantly changing the natural environment. Experiments on modern marshes, along with palaeoenvironmental evidence from both Britain and the continent, have shown that it is possible to grow a limited range of crops on a high intertidal marsh, though such environments are not ideally suited to agriculture due to the risk of flooding (Van Zeist 1974; Van Zeist *et al.* 1976; Bottema *et al.* 1980; Behre and Jacomet 1991; Rhoades *et al.* 1992; Crowson *et al.* 2000). One solution to the problem of flooding is to *modify* the landscape, for example through the construction of low embankments to protect crops from the occasional summer inundations but without the intention of providing year-round flood defence (Bazelmans *et al.* 1999; Rippon 2001c). While such 'summer dikes' will provide some protection, they existed in what remained an intertidal environment. In order to realise the full agricultural potential of coastal wetlands the landscape needed to be *transformed* through reclamation, by which the construction of a sea wall to keep the tides permanently at bay leads to an intertidal environment becoming wholly freshwater and with a managed water table. This reclamation could occur in an unsystematic, piecemeal fashion with individual parcels of land being enclosed as required, or as part of a systematic programme of drainage in which a large area was dealt with simultaneously.

Although a logical development, reclamation is a *high cost* undertaking in terms of the initial capital outlay, the recurrent cost of maintenance, and the loss of the rich natural resources of coastal wetlands. Reclamation is also a *high risk* undertaking, with the threat of flooding ever present. Considering these high costs and high risks, one might ask why anyone bothered to reclaim wetlands: the answer is that they offered a *high return* on that investment in terms of increased agricultural productivity. It is in this context, of a high cost, high risk, but high return strategy, that the decision taken by landowners and communities reclaim, or not to reclaim, their coastal marshes, can be seen (and see Rippon 2001d).

High Risk, High Investment, High Return

As described above, reclamation entails the investment of considerable resources in an area that remained at risk of flooding. The scale of expenditure was remarkable: in 1293/4, for example, Canterbury Cathedral Priory ran up a bill for £128 14s. 9d. for drainage and flood defence on its manor of Appledore, compared to an income of just £74 3s. 0d. (Smith 1943, 173). The motivation behind this huge investment of resources was clearly agricultural improvement. In the Pevensey Levels, for example, upland ground within Battle Abbey's Barnhorne estate was valued at between 3–6 pence per acre, whereas reclaimed marshland was worth 12 pence; unreclaimed marsh was valued at 4 pence rising to 10 pence if properly drained (Dulley 1966, 37).

Where good estate records survive, it appears at first sight that arable dominated the agricultural regimes, and there were indeed profits to be made from the sale of cereals (e.g. Udimore in the Brede Valley: Gardiner 1995, 133). However, a closer examination reveals that in certain areas a significant proportion of arable was sown with legumes, notably beans. At Agney, for example, around a third of the demesne arable was put down to leguminous crops (Smith 1943, 140; Gross and Butcher 1995, 109). This figure is in keeping with other coastal wetlands, such as Glastonbury Abbey's Brent estate on the Somerset Levels, where *c.* AD 1300 around 84% of the demesne was arable (Keil 1964, table 4), of which 43% was sown with beans. In contrast, Overton and Campbell (1999, table 7.4) estimate that nationally, in AD 1300 4.9% of arable was sown with legumes (all pulses). So what does the extent of bean cultivation on reclaimed coastal marshlands mean? Gross and Butcher (1995, 109) suggest that it was part of a wider strategy towards improving soil that also included the application of lime and marl, though evidence from other medieval estates suggests that the cultivation of beans was part of the animal husbandry economy, notably the rearing of pigs, cattle and possibly horses (e.g. Battle Abbey, Sussex: Searle and Ross 1967, 44; Chalvington in Sussex: Mate 1991, 82; Glastonbury Abbey: Keil 1964, 79, 81, 125; Forncett in Norfolk: Davenport 1967, 31; Milton in Essex: Nichols 1932, 122–3, 149; and see Rippon forthcoming a).

From the discussion above, it appears that reclaimed marshland was highly valued as agricultural land, but that although large areas are recorded as arable, when detailed data on cropping is available beans were a major crop, forming part of a livestock-based economy. Medieval estate managers were clearly making careful choices as to how they could most effectively utilise these distinctive environments, and the perception of landlords was that the high, particular pastoral, productivity of their marshland estates justified the costs and risks of maintaining flood defences.

The Wealth of Evidence

Romney Marsh is fortunate in having a wealth of evidence for palaeogeographical reconstruction, in terms of geomorphological, sedimentological and paleoenvironmental studies, documentary research, and to a lesser extent archaeological investigations. The palaeoenvironmental work initially focussed on the coastal barrier (Eddison 1983), then the valleys that join the Marsh from the west (e.g. Waller *et al.* 1988), and latterly in Walland Marsh (Spencer *et al.* 1998a; 1998b) and Romney Marsh proper (Long *et al.* 1998). This work concentrated on establishing the major phases of wetland development, and is now being extended to specific issues concerning the evolution of the cultural landscape, such as the development of the Wainway Channel, and the nature/extent of late 13th/14th century flooding (see below; and other papers in this volume).

One key piece of research was Green's (1968) soil survey which remains an important resource in any attempt at palaeogeographical reconstruction of the recent landscape (Fig. 6.1). Its value is that variations in soil character can be linked to features within the historic landscape (such as sea walls), that in turn can be dated through the careful analysis of historical records. Romney Marsh is fortunate in having historical sources of exceptional quality, notably a series of early medieval charters, many referring to a series of landscape features in the boundaries of those estates, such as rivers (Fig. 6.2; Brooks 1988). Most of these charters relate to grants of land to various ecclesiastical institutions, and the survival of extensive records relating to the subsequent management of these estates in the post-Conquest period has allowed a very detailed picture to be painted of medieval agriculture on the Marsh (e.g. Smith 1943; Gardiner 1995; 1998; Gross and Butcher 1995; Draper 1998). The records of the major port towns also survive (e.g. Riley 1874a; 1874b; 1876a; 1876b; 1876c), which along with the calendars of state papers, contain a wealth of information about the rapidly evolving estuaries and coast.

There have also been a number of important archaeological investigations, including fieldwalking (Gardiner 1994; Reeves 1995; Allen 1999) and excavations (Barber 1998), though there is a desperate need for more such work. Until recent agricultural intensification Romney Marsh also had a remarkable set of earthworks, notably sea walls, relating to abandoned phases of reclamation, partly plotted by Green (1968) and since studied through early air photographs and the surviving field evidence (Fig. 6.3; Tatton-Brown 1988; Vollans 1988; Allen 1996; 1999; Eddison and Draper 1997; Rippon 2000). A key aspect of these earthworks is their potential for being linked with documented features (e.g. sea walls) and areas of reclamation, as has been attempted for the eastern part of Walland Marsh (Lewin 1862; Furley 1874; Tatton-Brown 1988; Vollans 1988; Allen 1996; Eddison and Draper 1997) and the Broomhill area (Gardiner 1988). Allen (1996; 1999) has also shown how the elevation differences that develop either side of an active sea wall can be used to locate embankments that have long been demolished. Some analysis has also been made of field boundary patterns (e.g. Eddison and Draper 1997; Tatton-Brown 1988), though the historic landscape of the Romney/Walland Marsh area *as a whole* – that is the overall pattern of roads, fields and settlements – has not been studied in any great depth. Work in other reclaimed wetland landscapes has shown the enormous potential for historic landscape analysis in establishing the history of reclamation (e.g. Silvester 1988; Hall 1996; Rippon 1996;

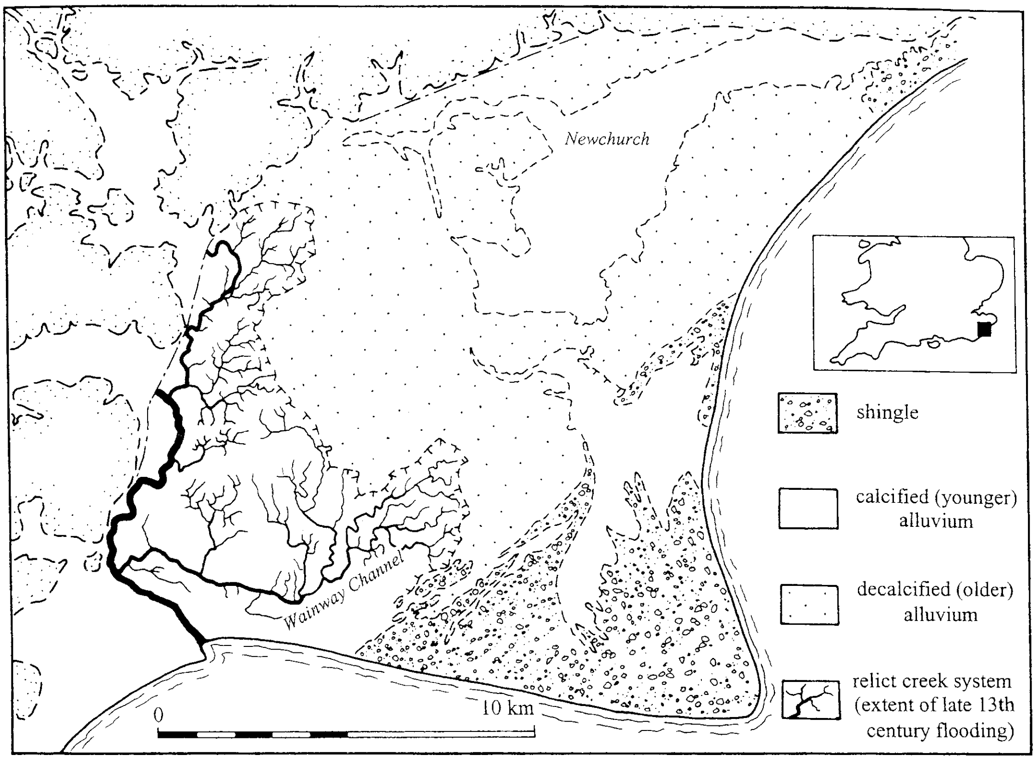

Fig. 6.1. Simplified soils map, distinguishing older 'decalcified' and younger 'calcified' alluvium, and the surviving shingle ridges (after Green 1968).

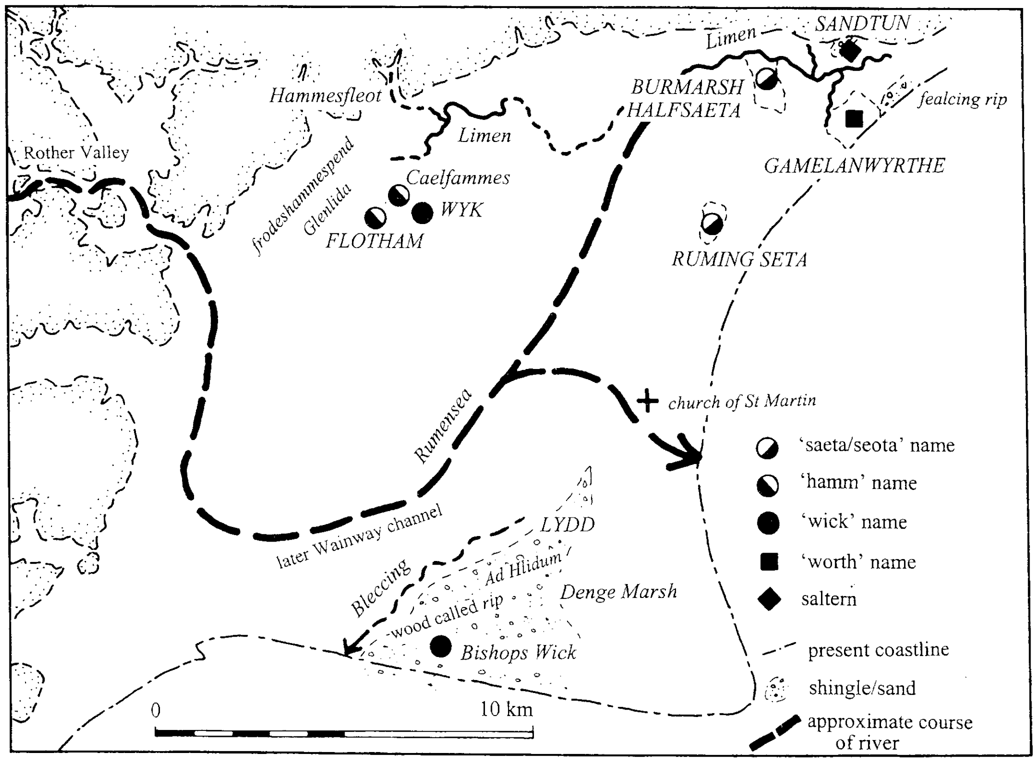

Fig. 6.2. Evidence contained within the boundary clauses of early medieval charters, including the possible early course of the Limen *via an estuary by* Sandtun, *and its later diversion through a breach in the shingle barrier by the church of St Martin (Romney). The names of estates are in capitals, and places mentioned in the boundary clauses in lower case (after Brooks 1988; Rippon 2000).*

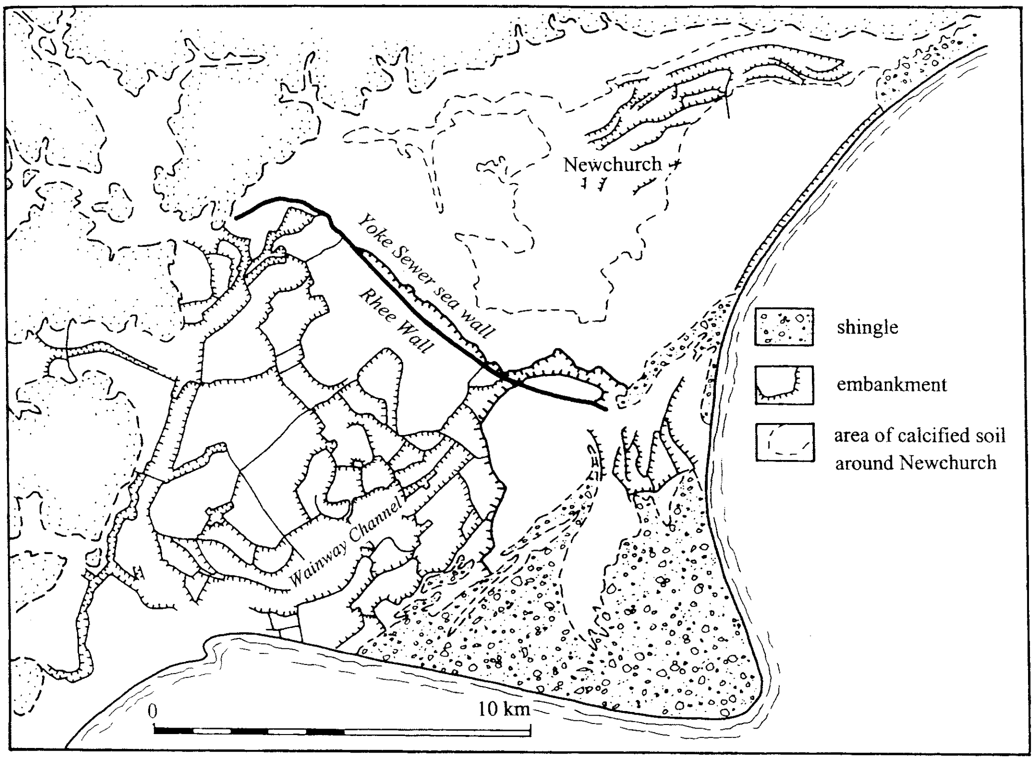

Fig. 6.3. Relict sea walls and flood banks (both extant and from early air photographs), including the former course of the Rother via the Wainway Channel, the sea wall along Yoke Sewer, and the later Rhee Wall (from Ordnance Survey 1st edition Ordnance Survey Six Inch map, and air photographs in the National Monuments Record).

Williamson 1997) and this paper is an attempt to make some progress in Romney Marsh.

The Historic Landscape: The Richest of all Historic Records?

It was probably W.G. Hoskins (1955) who first recognised the value of interrogating the historic landscape for it contains within it a wealth of information regarding how that landscape came into being (e.g. Fig. 6.4). This is perhaps particularly so within a reclaimed wetland, for once a field boundary is created it performs a vital drainage function which makes it less expendable than equivalent boundaries in dryland landscapes. The lines of sea walls that are no longer needed due to further reclamation, are still preserved as they had become field, and often estate, boundaries. The layout of fields and roads will also reflect the process of reclamation. For example, saltmarshes are naturally drained by a network of meandering creeks, and following embanking, if such a marsh is enclosed in a gradual and piecemeal fashion (perhaps by numerous individual tenants within a community), these creeks will often be exploited as field boundaries. In this way, the broad loops of meandering creeks come to be fossilised within the post-reclamation pattern of fields (e.g. Fig. 6.4: Snave and Ivychurch to the north east of the 'Yoke Sewer' sea wall). In contrast, if the process of enclosure and drainage following reclamation was carried out in a single episode (perhaps under the control of a single individual), then these creeks might be ignored, as a geometrically-arranged system of fields is imposed over a very large area (e.g. Fig. 6.4: Brookland). Landuse might also affect the pattern of fields: arable fields, for example, tend to be smaller than those created for pasture (particularly sheep pasture; e.g. Fig. 6.4: the area south east of Brookland).

The pattern of parish boundaries can also be informative. Romney Marsh proper, to the north east of an early sea wall along the line of Yoke Sewer (marked with arrows on Fig. 6.4; Allen's (1996; 1999) 'Rumenesea Wall'), was the earliest area to be colonised in the medieval period, and the parishes there tend to be compact, though with very irregular boundaries (e.g. Newchurch and Snave: Fig. 6.5). Some areas of the Marsh were part of estates centred on the fen-edge (the upland/wetland interface) or even further inland, and detached parcels of the latter sometimes became detached parts of the parishes (e.g. parcels of Ebony, Appledore, Kenardington, and Bilsington). When Walland Marsh came to be reclaimed the existing parishes were often simply extended across the old sea wall along Yoke Sewer (e.g. Brenzett and Ivychurch: Fig. 6.5). In other cases, these newly reclaimed areas came to support their own communities and became parishes in their own right (e.g. Brookland and Fairfield). In both cases, the

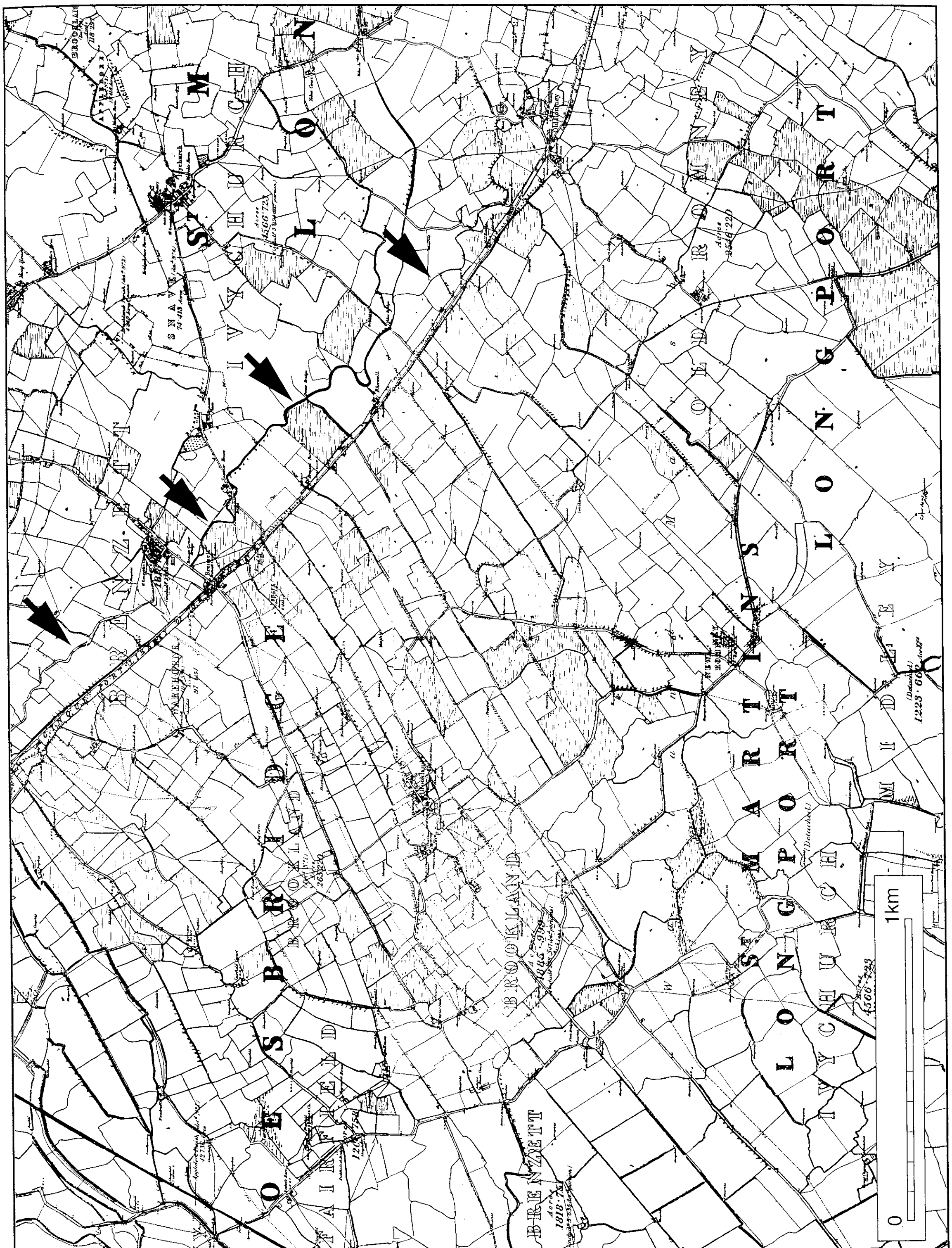

Fig. 6.4. The historic landscape in Ivychurch and Brookland (extract of the 1st edition Ordnance Survey Six Inch map). The line of the early sea wall along Yoke Sewer is marked with arrows. The highly irregular pattern of fields in that part of Ivychurch north east of the Yoke Sewer was created through piecemeal enclosure and drainage, incorporating the lines of naturally meandering former saltmarsh creeks. In contrast, the carefully planned landscape in Brookland reflects a more systematic approach to reclamation.

Walland Marsh parishes/parish-extensions were long, thin and relatively straight sided, reflecting the creation of landscape features on a larger scale, and on a more planned fashion, than was the case in Romney Marsh proper.

Figure 6.4 shows the complexity of the historic landscape in one small part of Romney Marsh. As described above, the various patterns of fields, roads and settlements reflect the history of drainage, enclosure and landuse, and on the Severn Estuary wetlands, for example, a detailed characterisation of the historic landscape demonstrates that surprisingly fine levels of detail can be achieved in writing a landscape history of that area (e.g. Rippon 1996, figs. 29, 33–4; 2001b). Such detailed work is yet to be attempted for Romney Marsh, though a very basic characterisation is shown in Figure 6.6. Nine broad character areas can be provisionally identified, based upon the Ordnance Survey First Edition Six Inch maps, chosen as they represent the earliest accurate field-scale mapping of this entire landscape (other than the Tithe maps that inherently only cover individual parishes). It should be stressed that this is, therefore, a characterisation of the 19th century landscape, and that there will have been many important changes since the medieval period, for example in the extent of settlement (there having been considerable settlement desertion in certain areas: e.g. Gardiner 1994; 1998; Reeves 1995; Allen 1999).

1. Romney Marsh proper is broadly of a similar character with mainly small, irregular shaped fields, highly sinuous roads, and a dispersed settlement pattern. Some of the gently curving field boundaries appear to incorporate the lines of naturally meandering creeks. This landscape appears to have been created around the 9th to 11th century, as the extensive area of marsh protected from flooding by the Yoke Sewer sea wall was gradually enclosed and drained. There are, however, significant variations, such as areas of more regularly arranged fields between Burmarsh and Newchurch that suggest a somewhat different process of landscape evolution. Further, more detailed characterisation is required.
2. The 12th century innings in the east of Walland Marsh have a very different character, with a greater degree of planning evident in the series of parallel boundaries laid out from the Yoke Sewer sea wall (Fig. 6.4). A series of discrete reclamations can in fact be identified in the area (Fig. 6.9). Some settlement is more nucleated, whilst there is also a scatter of isolated farms.
3. The Broomhill-Old Romney area comprises a series of discrete reclamations that further work could disentangle. Regularity in the fields once again suggests some degree of planning, associated with a dispersed settlement pattern.
4. Denge Marsh has a highly distinctive field boundary pattern, though whether the regularity is due to deliberate planning or simply constraints imposed by the roughly parallel beach ridges, is unclear. This ill-drained area was without settlement in the 19th century (though this has not always been the case: Gardiner 1998).
5. Area of large fields on Walland Marsh, created in the late medieval period probably as sheep pastures. Not settled.
6. East Guldeford: a relatively discrete series of reclamations, with some coherence in the core area. One loosely nucleated settlement created in the late 15th century.
7. A very diverse character area relating to successive innings in the Rother Valley and along its former course to New Romney (the Wainway Channel).
8. Recent reclamation of the estuary at New Romney.
9. Shingle ridges.

It must be stressed that this is a very basic characterisation, and there is certainly scope for far more detailed work, integrating information contained within the historic landscape, archaeological and sedimentological investigations, and documentary research.

A Model for the Reclamation of Romney Marsh

What follows is a hypothetical model for the reclamation of Romney Marsh, based upon the integration of the diverse sources of data introduced above (and see Rippon 2000). It should not be regarded as a definitive statement, for there remain many gaps in our knowledge and it has not been possible to check all the evidence on the ground. In fact, what follows will hopefully illustrate *an* approach to understanding this complex landscape, and present a set of hypotheses which others can then pursue through further research.

There has been much debate over the broad phases in the evolution of Romney Marsh, notably the former course of the River Rother, and the River *Limen* recorded in the bounds of several early medieval charters (Brooks 1988; Wass 1995; Rippon 2000, 160–1, 191–5). Ward (1952) showed two rivers leaving the Rother Valley at Appledore, one flowing directly east towards Hythe, the other flowing south towards Rye and then turning north east to an estuary at New Romney. The northern, minor, course has been equated with an area of calcified alluvium mapped by Green (1968, figs. 14, 16; and see Homan 1938; Brooks 1988, 95–6), and interpreted as a palaeochannel. It is referred to in several charter bounds as the *Limen*, but *west of Newchurch* was shown by Wass (1995) to be a sheltered arm of a tidal creek without significant freshwater input; this northern *Limen* was not a course of the Rother.

So where did the Rother flow? Brooks (1988) argues that it flowed out of the Rother Valley south eastwards down a palaeochannel identified by Green (1968, fig. 16), and later followed by the Yoke Sewer. Brooks (1988) and Allen (1996; 1999) argued that this was the river *Rumenesea* documented in a charter of 920. This minor channel cannot, however, have taken all the waters of the Rother, and Allen (1996; 1999) followed Ward (1952) in arguing that the main course of the Rother flowed south from Appledore towards Old Winchelsea where it was deflected north east as far as Old Romney, then turning abruptly east to discharge its water into an estuary at New Romney. Green (1988), however, had proposed that the Rother originally flowed north-east past Old Romney to an estuary at Hythe (also identified by Cunliffe 1988 in the Roman period). This route has been explicitly rejected by Allen (1996; 1999) and Long *et al.* (1998), but it is the contention here is that Green (1988) was correct.

Palaeoenvironmental investigations on Walland Marsh 'neither confirm nor refute this hypothesis' that the Rother originally flowed into an estuary at Hythe (Spencer 1996, 336; and see Spencer *et al.* 1998a, 26), and although work by Long *et al.* (1998, 57) failed to locate a discrete palaeochannel south of Newchurch, the distribution, depth and composition of sediments in several boreholes are suggestive of a 'wide intertidal sandflat and mudflat'. The presence of an estuary at Hythe is supported by the extensive area of calcified alluvium (Fig. 6.1; Green 1968), and the possible lines of flood banks preserved as earthworks and in the line of field boundaries (Fig. 6.3). The location of the Roman fortress at Stutfall also strongly implies a substantial tidal inlet, as was the case with other forts of the 'Saxon Shore' (e.g. Bradwell in Essex: Wilkinson and Murphy 1995, fig. 119). Had the Hythe inlet not had a major river flowing into it, washing out the tidally deposited silts, it would not have remained open (as was the problem with the estuary at New Romney: Vollans 1988; and see Allen 1985). It is therefore argued here that Green (1988) was correct in suggesting that the Rother originally flowed south towards Rye where it was deflected by the shingle barrier north east all the way to Hythe. This is referred to here as the 'proto-Rother' on Figure 6.7.

In the Roman period, therefore, Romney Marsh appears to have been an extensive saltmarsh protected by a shingle barrier running from Fairlight, past Lydd, to Dymchurch, with a tidal inlet below the Roman fortress at Stutfall Castle near Hythe (Fig. 6.7). The marshes were certainly used for salt production and presumably seasonal grazing, though there is no evidence that the natural environment was in anyway modified through reclamation.

During the late/early-post Roman period the Marsh was flooded, probably due to a rise in relative sea level seen all around North West Europe (Rippon 2000, 138–51), and which buried the Romano-British landscape under variable amounts of alluvium. Early medieval charters, Domesday, and a series of probably related documents (the *Domesday Monachorum* and *Excerpta*: Neilson 1932; Morgan 1983) indicate that by the 11th century Romney Marsh proper (north east of the Yoke Sewer sea wall) was extensively occupied, while the existence of three 10th century administrative units ('Hundreds') wholly located on the Marsh suggests that this was a stable, well-settled landscape by that date (Fig. 6.8). References in the boundary descriptions of the charters, including indicators of arable cultivation, a complex pattern of land-holding, and possible artificial drainage features, imply that reclamation was well underway by the 9th century. What may have made this possible was a breach in the shingle barrier at New Romney, some 10 km south of the 'proto-Rother's' old estuary near Hythe. This left Romney Marsh proper relatively flood-free, there being few substantial freshwater streams flowing off the uplands to the north (Fig. 6.6), and the coast largely protected by a shingle barrier (Rippon 2000, 157–67).

As population and the profits from agriculture increased, so did the demand for more land, and by the mid 12th century there were a series of reclamations to the south west of the Yoke Sewer sea wall, on what become known as Walland Marsh (e.g. Turcoples Land, More Court/St Thomas' Inning, Miselham/Brookland, and Fairfield: Fig. 6.9). Following Elliott (in Lewin 1862), these innings have been erroneously equated with the work of a series of archbishops, though in practice it was probably the work of groups of tenants encouraged to improve large areas of the lords' waste with low rents. Possibly as early as the 11th century another breach in the shingle barrier occurred at what was to become (Old) Winchelsea, and over time the Rother took this shorter route into the English Channel (Fig. 6.9; Eddison 1998). This resulted in the silting-up of the old estuary at New Romney which by that date had become a major port. Since there was no longer sufficient freshwater discharge from the Rother to keep the estuary clear of silt, the port authorities constructed a major artificial watercourse, the Rhee Wall, to takes water from the Rother at Appledore, straight across the new innings on Walland Marsh, to Old Romney Bridge (Fig. 6.10; Vollans 1988). Meanwhile, the old course of the Rother was abandoned and reclaimed, becoming the estate of Agney.

The Late Medieval Period: Responses to Crisis

The full extent of reclamation on Walland Marsh is unclear for in the late 13th and 14th centuries a series of storms led to extensive flooding, the extent of which can be gauged through the deposition of relatively recent 'calcified' alluvium (Fig. 6.11). Initially the response of estate owners was to invest considerable sums in restoring flood defences (Smith 1943; Gross and Butcher 1995; Rippon forthcoming b), though an unknown area of formerly reclaimed land was lost. Some areas were recovered during the 14th century, though the recolonisation of Walland Marsh was largely achieved in the late 15th century in an area which came to be known as the Guldeford Level (Fig. 6.12). In 1478 the Abbot of Robertsbridge granted Richard Guldeford 1,300 acres of saltmarsh in the parishes of Playden, Iden and Broomhill in Sussex. In 1497, Guldeford

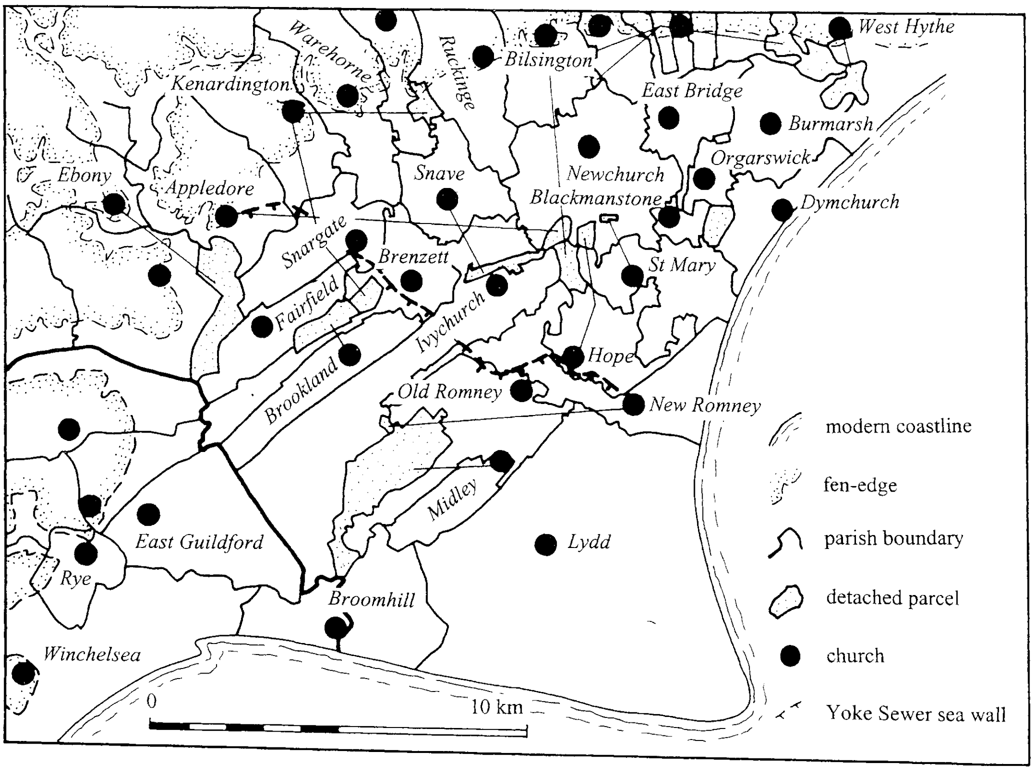

Fig. 6.5. Parish boundaries on Romney Marsh, with larger detached parcels (based on Tithe Maps, after Brooks 1988).

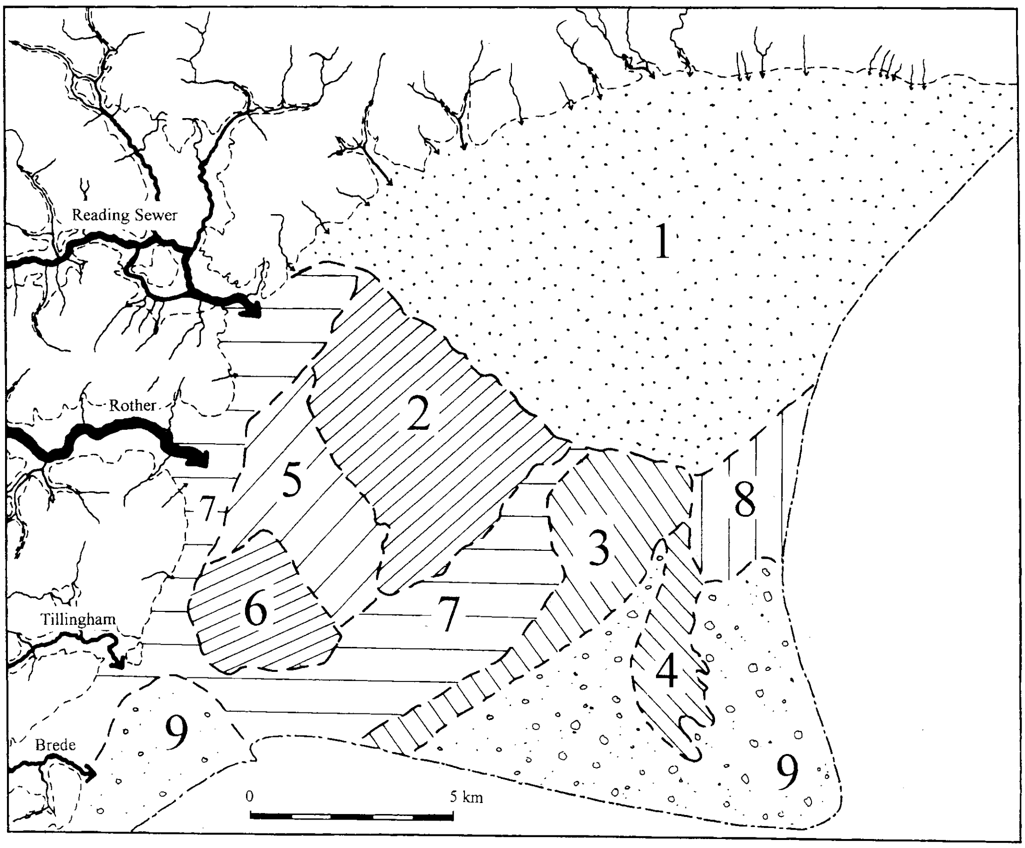

Fig. 6.6. A basic characterisation of the historic landscape of Romney Marsh. 1: highly irregular landscape created through piecemeal enclosure and drainage on Romney Marsh proper; 2–4: systematic reclamation, characterised by a degree of overall planning on Walland and Denge Marshes; 5: area of larger fields created for sheep pasture in Walland Marsh; 6: Guldeford Level, partly reclaimed during the late medieval period; 7: reclamation of the Rother Estuaries; 8: late reclamation south of New Romney; 9: shingle ridges. The scale of rivers flowing in the Marsh is shown schematically.

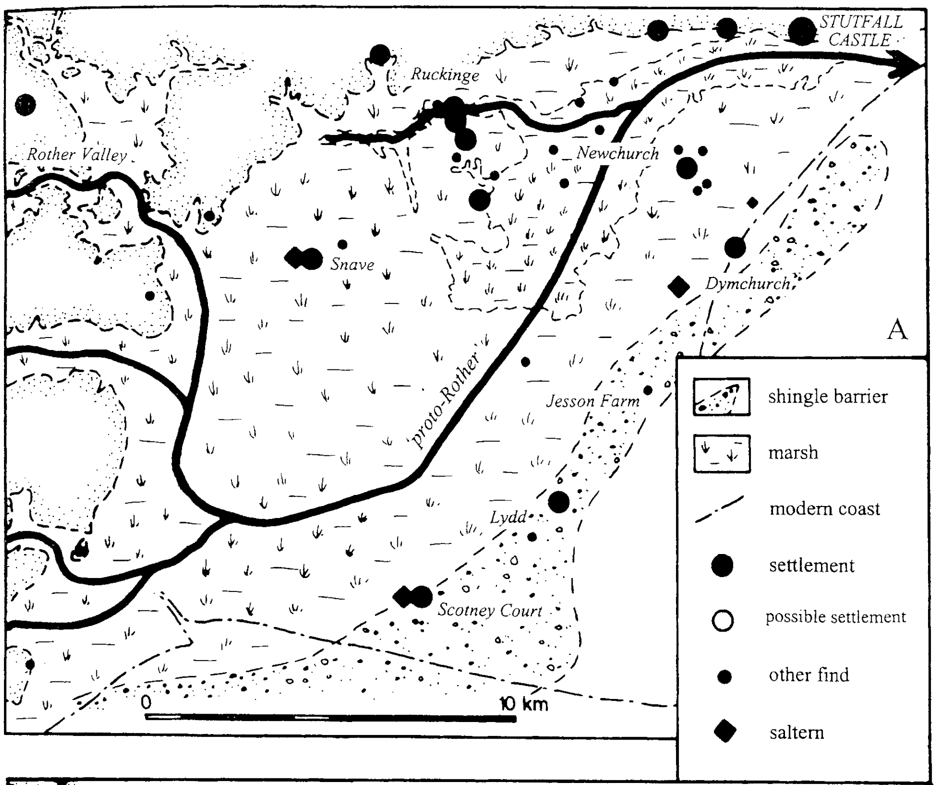

Fig. 6.7. The earlier Romano-British period (1st to 3rd centuries): the whole of Romney Marsh appears to have been an intertidal wetland, exploited for its rich natural resources, including the production of salt. The Roman fortress of the 'Saxon Shore' at Stutfall Castle overlooked the estuary of the 'proto-Rother'.

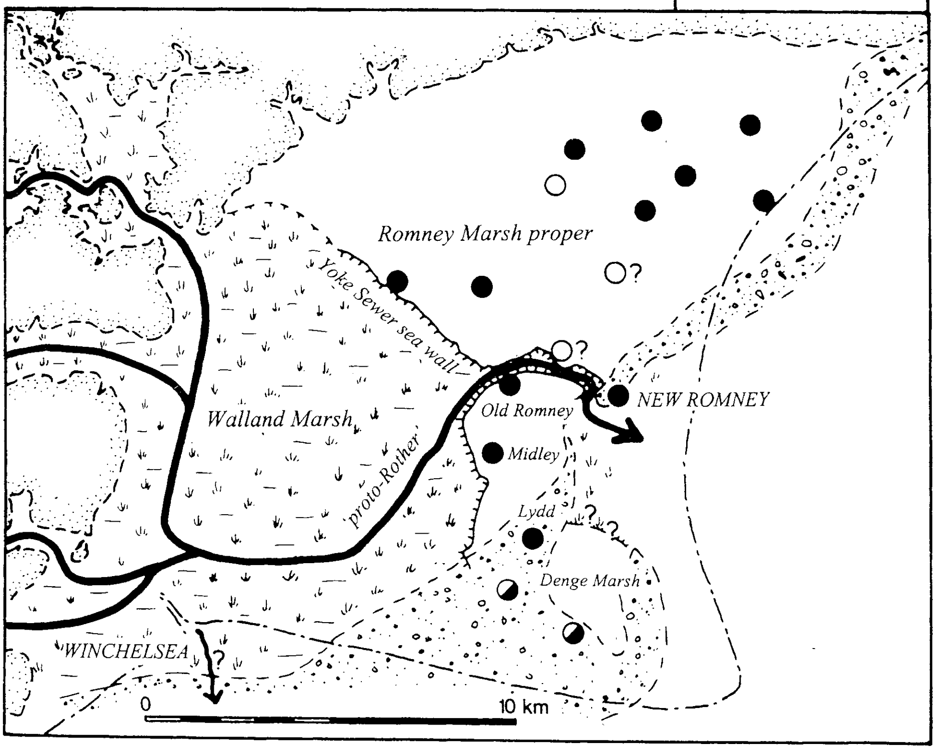

Fig. 6.8. c.11th century: Romney Marsh proper had been abandoned by the 'proto-Rother' as it now flowed into its new estuary at New Romney. A sea wall along the line of the modern Yoke Sewer protected the reclaimed and settled area from tidal inundation. Domesday and the Domesday Monachorum *suggest it was extensively settled. A new breach in the natural shingle barrier at Winchelsea may have occurred by this time (after Brooks 1988; Eddison 1998; Allen 1999).*

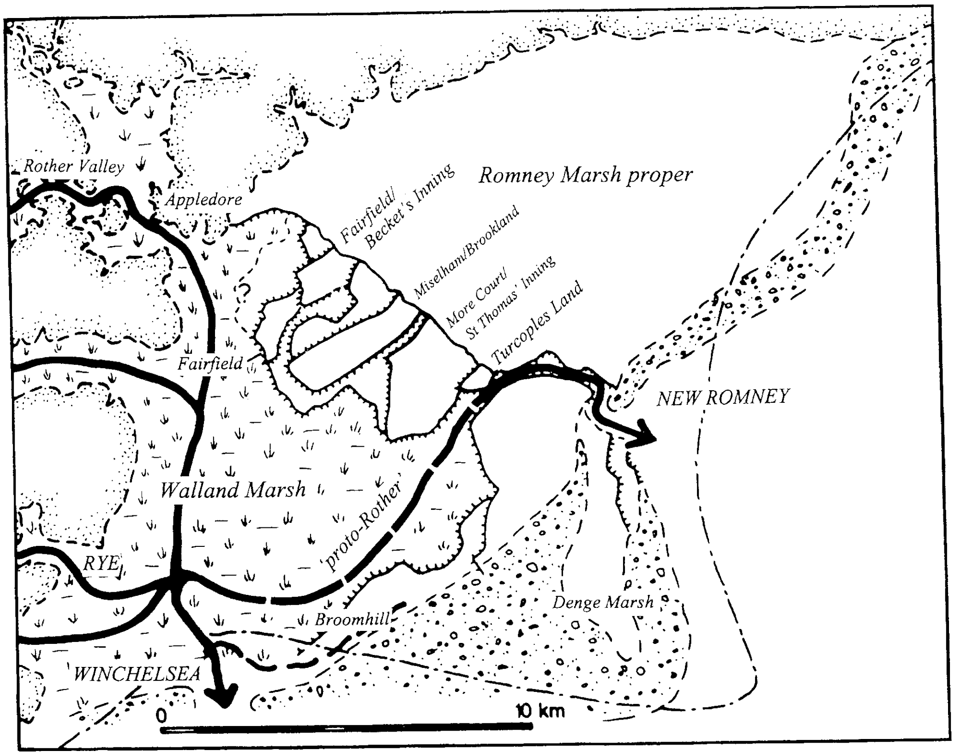

Fig. 6.9. Twelth century inning in Walland Marsh, rooted on the Yoke Sewer sea wall. Some waters of the 'proto-Rother' still flowed into the estuary at New Romney, though they were increasingly being diverted to the new inlet at Winchelsea (after Gardiner 1988; Tatton-Brown 1988; Eddison and Draper 1997).

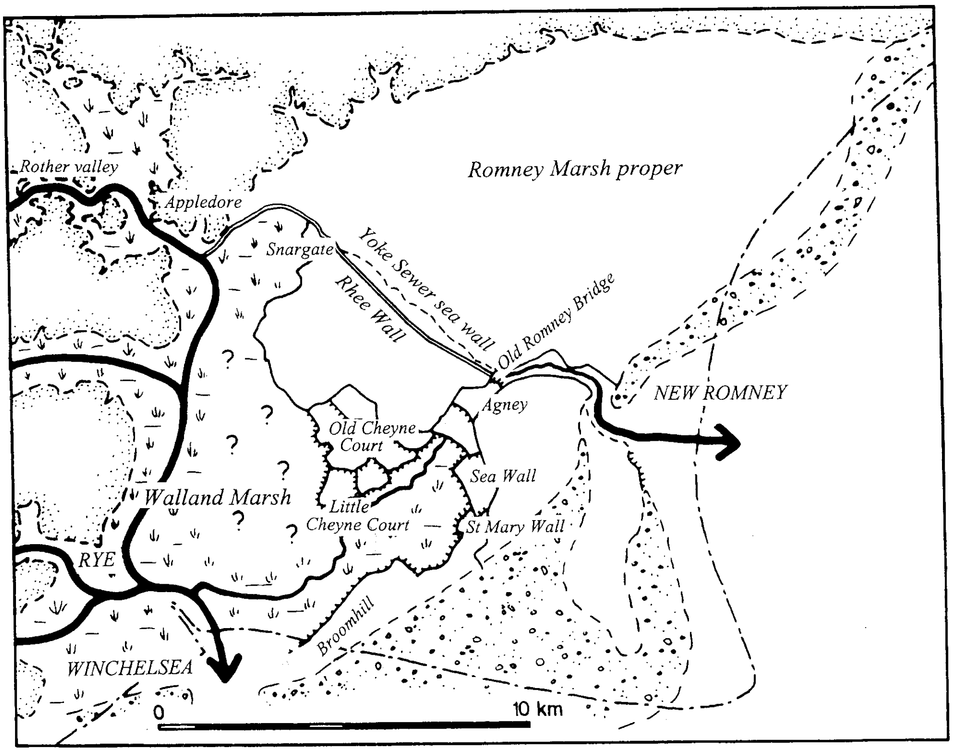

Fig. 6.10. Thirteenth century: further reclamation on Walland Marsh, notably along the now abandoned line of the 'proto-Rother' at Agney. The full extent of reclamation is unknown due to later flooding. The Rhee Wall was constructed across the earlier innings to try and flush out the harbour at New Romney (after Vollans 1988; Allen 1996; Eddison and Draper 1997).

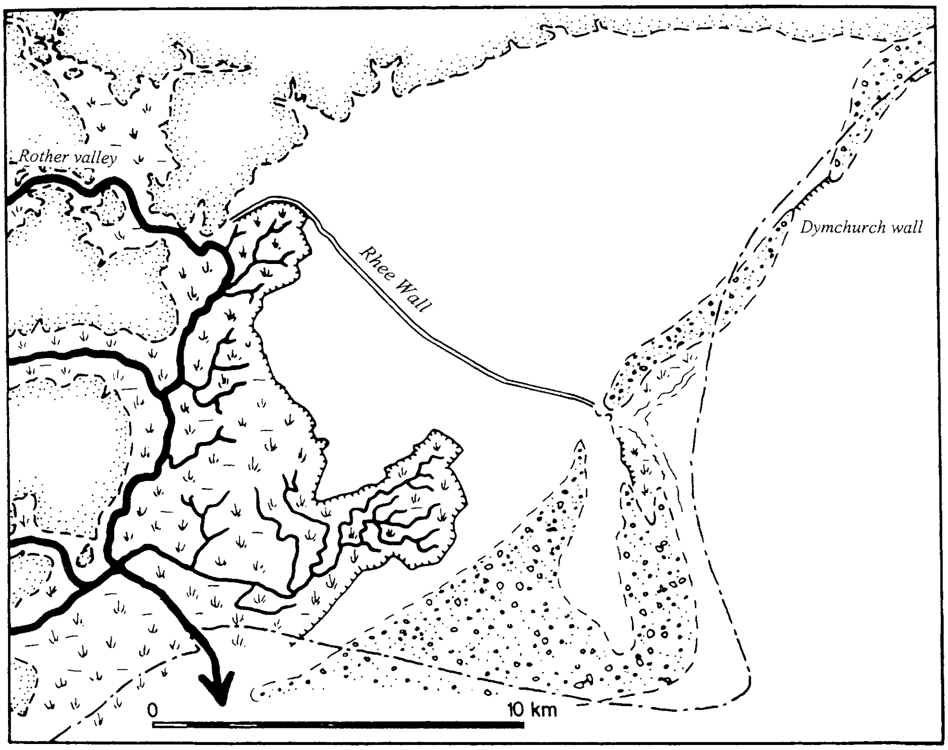

Fig. 6.11. The approximate extent of late 13th/14th century flooding (based on Green's 1968 soil survey).

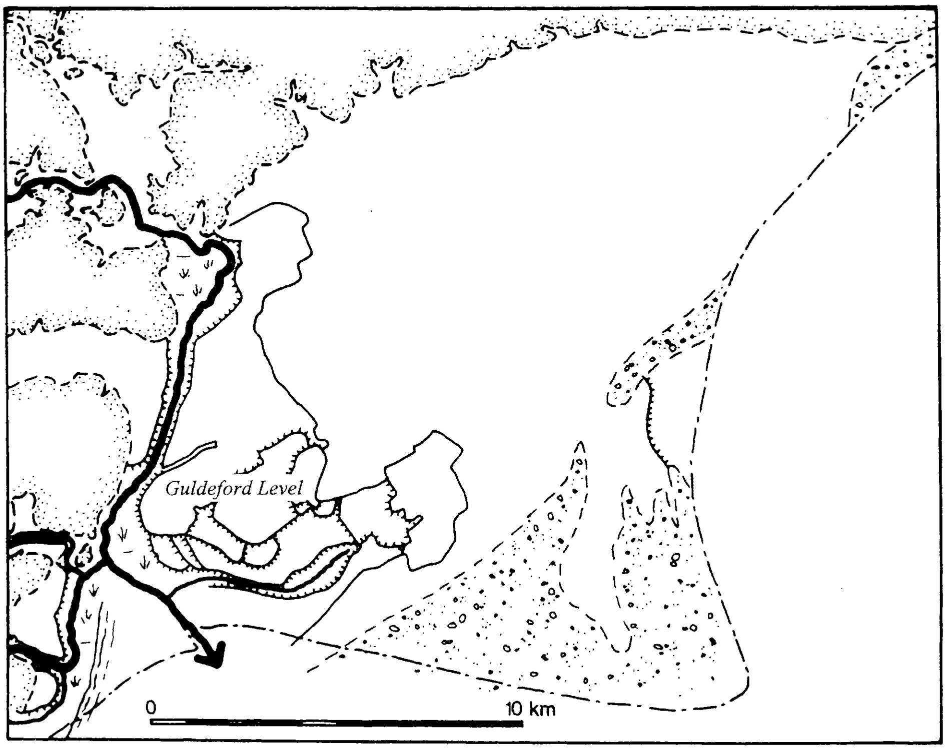

Fig. 6.12. Late 15th century and subsequent reclamation of the Guldeford Level.

acquired further land, and in 1499 he was given permission to build a church in 'Guylforde Innynge, formerly Brunchings, which had been submerged for 300 years and lately recovered by him at great expense'. By his death in 1506 this area had become the parish of 'New Guldeford', with six messuages, a church, and a mill (Salzman 1937, 151). The motivation for reclamation now, at a time of relatively low population and grain prices, was clearly the raising of sheep, reflected in the large size of the fields that were created at this time (and see Gardiner 1998).

Romney Marsh in Context

The hypothetical palaeogeographical reconstruction outlined above is an attempt to draw back from the wealth of detailed research that has been achieved over recent decades in an attempt to see the wider picture. We can in fact pull back even further and see how Romney Marsh fits in with the development of comparable wetland landscapes. Several themes will be briefly considered here: the significance of coastal barriers in the evolution of wetland landscapes, the importance of tidal estuaries as long-term foci for human activity, the early medieval expansion of settlement into such physically difficult environments, and the role of marshland within large-scale estates.

A large number of extensive coastal marshlands are, like Romney Marsh, sheltered behind a natural barrier of sand and shingle (e.g. the Somerset Levels, North Somerset Levels, Pevensey Levels, the Halvergate Marshes in Norfolk, and parts of the Lincolnshire Marshes in Britain, and Holland in the Netherlands). These barriers provide protection from tidal flooding, and in certain cases their creation, or migration, may have allowed the adjacent marshes to dry out, making them more amenable to human exploitation and even settlement (e.g. the Halvergate Marshes in the early medieval period: Williamson 1997, 12–14). These barriers, however, can also disrupt the discharge of freshwater if there are insufficient breaches through which rivers draining the hinterland can flow. In Holland, for example, it was only when the coastal sand dunes were breached in several places during the 10th century that drainage improved, making it possible for human communities to colonise the wetlands behind (Besteman 1990, 93–6). In Romney Marsh, it has been shown how successive breaches, first at New Romney and later at Old Winchelsea, led to the progressive shift westwards of the Rother which may have been a major factor in encouraging and then shaping the reclamation of first Romney Marsh proper and then Walland Marsh. Whilst old deterministic views that human behaviour is dictated by the natural environment have rightly been rejected, it is important to remember that coastal wetlands are landscapes whose character is more at the whim of nature than most.

The breaches in these natural barriers through which freshwater rivers discharged their waters inevitably became important long-term foci for human activity. On Romney Marsh, for example, the northernmost inlet was overlooked by the Roman fortress of the 'Saxon Shore' at Stutfall Castle (*Portus Lemanis*), and the early medieval trading settlement at 'Sandtun'. The inlet at New Romney, initially the site of a small fishing settlement, later became the site of a port engaged in international trade, as was the case at Wincheslsea. It was no doubt through these ports that much of the produce of Romney Marsh, and indeed its wider hinterland was shipped, so articulating the economy of this area with the wider region. The same may well have been true in the Roman period, as *Portus Lemanis* appears to have been linked with the exploitation of Wealden iron, where many iron-producing sites lay within easy reach of the rivers that flowed eastwards into Romney Marsh (Cunliffe 1988). Indeed, Allen and Fulford (1996; 1999) have shown that from the 2nd century there was increased navigation around the British coast, for example in stone, pottery and possibly grain, and the substantial tidal inlet on Romney Marsh was probably another element in this system of supply.

The same can be seen in other coastal wetlands. At Magor Pill, on the Gwent Levels, for example, occupation dates back to the Iron Age, and by the Romano-British period there was a substantial settlement probably engaging in coastal trade around the Severn Estuary (Allen 1998). During the medieval period it was similarly the site of small port or landing place, while a little upstream there was a watermill (Allen and Rippon 1997; Nayling 1998). The Severn Estuary as a whole was a focus for communications, not a barrier, being used for example in the shipping of Black Burnished Ware pottery from South East Dorset to the military establishment in South East Wales and on to the northern frontier (Allen and Fulford 1996). Other key rivers included the Axe, which may have been used to ship Mendip lead, and the Congresbury Yeo, beside which lay the kilns of the 'Congresbury Ware' pottery industry (Rippon 1997). During the Roman period it would appear that the existing network of rivers around the Severn was sufficient for this trade, though in Fenland it was necessary to improve communication through the construction of canals (Hall and Coles 1994, 105–9; Rippon 2000, 65–79). This must have entailed a huge investment of resources, and although the canals were built to allow goods to pass *through* the wetlands they still made these areas focal within the regional landscape. With its diversity of resources, it is not surprising that Fenland is ringed by small towns and a high density of fen-edge settlement, whilst the agricultural productivity of the marshes themselves is demonstrated by the remarkable density of settlement and the substantial estate centre at Stonea. Though physically a difficult (or even 'marginal') environment (Fenland was never reclaimed in the Roman period), locationally it was very central to the local economy. Romney Marsh, in contrast, although lying in South East Britain, was in fact locationally marginal and its hinterland lacked major centres of consumption or villa-based estates. Whilst relatively little is known of its use in the Roman period (apart from the presence of salt production) we probably should not expect such extensive settlement as seen in Fenland or the Severn wetlands.

The recolonisation of Romney Marsh appears to have been well underway by the 9th century, as was the case in the North Kent Marshes (Rippon 2000, 152–85). Compared to other coastal wetlands, this is relatively early, suggesting that it had now become a valued area. In the Norfolk Marshland, for example, whilst there was settlement of the coastal marshes by the 7th to 9th century these sites lay in an intertidal, as opposed to a reclaimed landscape (Crowson *et al.* 2000, 213–25). It was only around the 10th century that the area appears to have been embanked (Crowson *et al.* 2000, 225–30; Rippon 2000, 175). In areas such as South East Wales, the Pevensey Levels, Essex, the Havergate Marsh in Norfolk, along stretches of the Lincolnshire coast and around the Humber Estuary, reclamation was even later (Rippon 2000). The relatively early date of reclamation on Romney Marsh can be attributed to a number of factors. The early establishment of the Christian church led to the endowment of a series of wealthy monasteries in Kent, which had the inclination and resources to increase the productivity of their estates, especially on areas of underdeveloped land ripe for improvement. The marshland holdings of those monasteries were part of a complex estate structure that included land in the fertile agricultural 'core' regions of Kent, and the woodland of the Weald (e.g. Smith 1943; Everitt 1986). The holdings in Romney Marsh, in the very south of Kent, were physically remote and in an unreclaimed state that may be regarded as physically 'marginal'. In practice, however, they were to become a highly valued asset because of the diversity they brought to these medieval estates, initially as seasonal pasture, and later through the opportunity they provided for raising new revenue through improvement (reclamation). Far from being 'marginal', their proximity to a series of port towns, and the huge investment in reclamation, suggests that this was regarded as a valued region within the pattern of Kentish monastic estates.

Conclusions

Romney Marsh is fortunate in having a wide range of evidence that has been generated from its long history of academic research. This palaeoenvironmental, archaeological and documentary evidence has been integrated in the tentative model for how the historic landscape evolved that is outlined above. Perhaps the one resource that has yet to be exploited to its full is information locked within the historic landscape itself, though hopefully this paper will have shown its potential. It must be stressed that this palaeogeographical reconstruction is highly speculative, but it will hopefully provide a stimulus for further research. In particular, this paper has supported Green's model of the Rother originally discharging its water via a tidal estuary at Hythe. This hypothesis needs to be tested through a carefully targeted programme of palaeoenvironmental work focussed on the potential line of this palaeochannel.

The history of human exploitation of Romney Marsh shares many features in common with other coastal wetlands in Britain. The historic landscape evolved as human communities changed from simply exploiting the rich natural resources (as was the case in the Roman period), to transforming it through reclamation. This was a high cost strategy in terms of the initial investment of resources, and a high risk strategy as the shown by the widespread flooding during the late 13th and 14th centuries. Coastal wetlands are particularly dynamic landscapes, and as such are particularly prone to environmental changes, in this case the evolution of, and breaches in, the natural shingle barrier. Though constantly at risk from flooding, and with a high annual cost in terms of maintaining flood defences, the perception of estate owners and marshland communities was clearly that the returns from agriculture made that investment worthwhile. This high agricultural productivity, and proximity to nodal points in the coastal navigation network, made land on coastal levels and marshes highly desirable: far from being in any sense 'marginal', these were core regions for much of their recent history.

Acknowledgements

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