Welney Washes, 1967

PETER SCOTT

The Place (Plate XI *a* and *b*, facing p. 124)

The Welney Washes lie across the map of the Great Fens like a ruler, stretching from Earith in Cambridgeshire north-eastwards for 21 miles to Denver Sluice in west Norfolk. They are an amazing feat of engineering laid out at the beginning of the 19th century, designed as a short cut for the winding River Great Ouse and also as a safety valve when the river system is already full and more rain falls. Water from the Great Ouse basin is diverted so as to spread out over the grass fields of the Washes and confined by 20 foot high barrier banks which run, half a mile apart, dead straight for mile after mile across the fens.

The water in the bordering Old and New Bedford Rivers and on the flooded meadows is far above the level of the surrounding country which was always low and has sunk further as a result of drainage. All this country is now under the plough, and the only grassland in the fens is the water meadows of the Washes, which are relatively dry in summer and grazed by cattle. The present ornithological interest of the area is entirely based on the summer grazing regime. In winter the floods may begin in October, or even earlier, but in dry years there may be no flooding until after Christmas.

The flat landscape may not appear beautiful to every eye, but it has a peculiar fascination. The brown fields, divided by ditches, stretch away into the distance, the roads run straight with sharp angular bends to conform with the drainage channels. Away to the east the tower and lantern of Ely cathedral break the horizon where the land rises almost imperceptibly to form 'the isle of Ely'. Between the vast green retaining banks the grass fields are open, broken only by occasional willow or thorn trees, a few carefully nurtured osier beds (their produce essential to the engineering and maintenance of the drainage) and the gates and gateposts on the droves which give access to the cattle in summer. When the floods are out fingers of dry land stretch into the shallow water along the sides of the ditches where a hundred and fifty years of cleaning them out has raised a low bank on either side.

There is a small number of shepherds who are key men in the economy and management of the Washes. Each deals with a stretch of some six or seven miles. The shepherd has in the past been given the shooting rights (which let at about £1 per acre) by the landowner in return for work on maintenance of the ditches. In addition he receives payment which may be £1 per acre from the farmer who rents the grazing (nowadays at £2-£2 10s. per acre though formerly up to £9 per acre) in exchange for care of the cattle using the grazing.

Thirty years ago it was widely but erroneously believed that the tidal nature of the New Bedford River conferred public shooting rights on the whole area of the Washes. Recently this has been shown not to be so, and the shooting rights have been let, on some land at £1 per acre. The difficulty of getting within shot of birds in an area with a variable shore line and very little natural cover has meant small bags; the birds flight

over the open water and at enormous height. General disturbance has come from large numbers of small areas being under separate ownership with widely varying degrees of keepering, and extensive poaching. The situation had become completely out of hand and resulted in a few syndicates being formed to try to take over the rights on larger blocks of land. Gradually opinion mounted, among wildfowlers as well as naturalists, that some form of refuge should be available in the Washes.

The Welney Washes are included in Category A of the MAR list of European Wetlands drawn up by the International Wildfowl Research Bureau in collaboration with the International Union for Conservation of Nature and the International Council for Bird Preservation. They were also included as a possible Nature Reserve in H.M. Government's Command Paper 7122 of 1947.

The Birds

My notes on the bird life of the Washes go back to 1927, but it was not till 1950-51 that regular wildfowl counts were established there. Monthly figures are therefore available for 17 winters, and these show striking fluctuations, as would be expected with an area so intimately influenced by floodwaters.

Wigeon are the most numerous species with a high count of 19,300 in 1954-55; the highest figure for Mallard is 4,880. The 1954-55 season also produced the highest peak of Teal (4,200) and Pintail (5,000). Over 2,200 Pochard have been present during recent winters, and over the years no less than 26 species of Anatidae have been recorded—including Garganey, Gadwall, Shoveler, Scaup, Tufted Duck, Goldeneye, Velvet and Common Scoter, Red-breasted Merganser, Goosander, Smew, Shelduck, Greylag, White-front, Bean, Pinkfoot, Brent and Canada Geese, Mute, Whooper and Bewick's Swans. The Bewick's in particular have shown a striking pattern of increase, though with many fluctuations, from 17 in 1950-51, and 7 in 1951-52 to 855 in 1966-67.

In all, during the 1966-67 winter the flooded Washes carried, at peak, 24,000 wildfowl. The Bewick's Swans and Pintail were by far the largest concentrations of these species in the country.

At least 10 species of Anatidae have definitely bred in the Washes, as well as Great Crested Grebe and a number of waders including some very rare ones.

Because of the disturbance during the shooting season the best views of the wildfowl have been after the end of the season on 1st February. With a refuge of adequate size it should be possible to observe them all through the season, with a corresponding addition to ornithological knowledge and bird watchers' enjoyment.

The fact that the axis of the Washes lies virtually parallel with the migration routes of so many European birds, undoubtedly makes it a landmark which they follow regularly both in autumn and spring, and there is little doubt that a constant watch on this route will produce very interesting results.

The Refuge

When, therefore, an anonymous donor presented the Wildfowl Trust with 102 acres of the Washes north of Welney in February 1967, Council had little hesitation in deciding what course to follow. By establishing an effective refuge the Wildfowl Trust would be making its most important single contribution to conservation. In the fields of research and education too the area has great possibilities arising from the Trust's special knowledge and experience of showing wild birds to people at close range without disturbing the birds. The educational advantages of such facilities are obvious. From a scientific point of view there are two particular studies of importance to the Trust. One is the Bewick's Swan study which requires opportunity to see the birds at close enough range to identify individuals. The other is a long cherished plan to study the effects of controlled flooding on grassland with a view to attracting water birds at times when floods are few and far between.

The first hundred acres was clearly much too small an area to be an effective refuge. The Trust therefore embarked on a vigorous campaign to acquire land on either side. It was essential that there should be a solid block of land free from shooting. Owners of potential enclaves not unnaturally concluded that the market value of their land had suddenly increased. A great deal of money was required, but friends rose nobly to the occasion. Arthur Guinness, Son & Co. (Park Royal) Ltd. made a most generous interest-free loan of £24,000 for the period of a year. This enabled us to press ahead with acquisitions while seeking to gather donations sufficient to repay the loan. The World Wildlife Fund proved a tower of strength. Through its American National Appeal a substantial grant was promised if it could be matched by the

British National Appeal. And it was, despite incidental difficulties such as devaluation. Through many people's generosity we are now in full possession of 400 acres and have acquired the shooting rights on an adjacent 100 acres. Our rights extend to the high barrier banks belonging to the Great Ouse River Authority. Shooting on the land outside, and below, these banks is muffled to birds on the Washes, so we have now an effective Refuge, on whose central portion the wildfowl should be free from disturbance. The cost of this achievement was £33,000.

The Future

Before the Wildfowl Trust came on the scene, the Royal Society for the Protection of Birds and the Cambridgeshire and Isle of Ely Naturalists' Trust had been acquiring land on the Washes further upstream and mostly beyond the railway viaduct. As they were primarily concerned with protecting summer breeding areas, they were able to purchase piecemeal at normal prices. But over several years their purchases had aggregated into substantial blocks. Together with the Trust's purchase, the naturalists' bodies have become the largest landowners in the Washes, holding over a fifth of the total area. This fact played an important part in averting one major threat, a proposal to improve the drainage of the Washes and convert them to arable farming. Hardly had the drainage proposal sunk from sight when the reverse threat emerged, to convert the Washes into a freshwater reservoir. From an agricultural point of view it makes more sense to drown low-grade grassland rather than good agricultural land. And it requires some effort to convince the planners that twenty miles of deep permanent water is no substitute, as far as wildfowl are concerned, for great areas of temporary shallow floods. A feasibility study is being made and a report is expected shortly. Fortunately the indications are that the engineering requirements will be prohibitive, and that we shall be able to breathe again.

However, we have not been wholly successful on all fronts. As if to demonstrate how modern technology is continually throwing up new threats against our few remaining wild places, the National Research Development Council now propose to set up an experimental hover-train monorail track along the length of the Washes! Again from their point of view this is an ideal site on which to test their vehicles up to 300 m.p.h. — twenty miles in a straight line with relatively few road crossings. It would be absolutely disastrous if the track were to run on the Washes themselves. But, fortunately, the idea is to build it on the outside of the NW. barrier bank between the Old Bedford River and the River Delph. The three naturalists' organisations, together with representatives of the Nature Conservancy, have co-ordinated their actions through an *ad hoc* committee, and have pressed for the experimental vehicle to be kept out of sight of the birds on the Washes during its whole run. We feel that if this is done the noise of its progress (even though it may be equivalent to a Comet jet at take off!) will not be unduly disturbing to the birds. Indeed, as a small crumb of comfort, the existence of the test track may effectively seal off one boundary of the Washes and so increase their security.

Be that as it may, it is quite obvious that it is going to become increasingly difficult to keep any large area of land in southern England in a wild state, just for the birds and a fortunate few. We believe that the only hope for the long-term future is to develop our area discreetly, so that large numbers of people can experience for themselves the thrill of seeing masses of wildfowl at close quarters. With our experience at Slimbridge we know that this can be done without spoiling the essential wildness of the scene. Then the Washes will have the status of a recreational amenity as well as a wildfowl refuge and it will be much easier to withstand pressure from other kinds of land-use development. Many people shudder at the thought of interfering with the natural scene—though the Washes were wholly artificial in their origin. In an attempt to reassure such people, and to indicate how the development might take shape, I wrote a letter purporting to be from one enthusiastic naturalist to another in 1975, seven years after the initial land purchase, when I hope all our plans will be realised. This was circulated in support of our campaign for funds, and it is appended herewith (slightly shortened and modified where events have already caught up with the prophet).

Letter to a friend

15th January 1975

Dear George,

I thought you might be interested to hear of a rather fabulous day we spent yesterday at the Wildfowl Trust's place

at Welney. We checked in at one of the local inns the night before and got out to the Washes just at first light. The Head Warden, a splendid marshman who's lived all his life on and around the Washes, met us where we left the car at the foot of the steep barrier bank of the New Bedford River. A pilot light at the top of the bank lit us up a ramp to the footbridge high over the river. It's screened on the Venetian blind principle so that people crossing can't be seen by the birds out in front—the first example of the fantastic attention to detail in the planning of this Observatory. As we got to the far side of the bridge we heard a burst of calling from the wild swans—Bewick's, which, as you know, are a special feature of the place.

The only exit from the bridge is into a building which is in part Wardens' house and in part a Members' Room. A great picture window looks out over the marsh, with a pool almost in front of it, covered with ducks, just visible in the half light, and more arriving all the time —mostly Mallard and Shoveler. I think Mary would have liked to stay in the warmth of the Members' Room, which, incidentally, being 10 or 15 feet above the marsh, had a wonderful view right across it. The floods were out on the far side of the Washes—which are about half a mile wide here, and we could just see the water stretching across in front. But we weren't allowed to stay indoors. We were to be taken up the Washes to look at the geese, and we'd have to hurry if we wanted to see them flight in. Down a flight of steps and we were on a path running along behind a 7 foot bank and parallel with the river. It took about 10 minutes to walk to the hide, and every now and again we heard the geese calling over on the far side of the Washes.

After a while the path turned sharp right and we walked with a ditch immediately on our left and high banks on both sides of us. We passed at least three observation huts and eventually we went very quietly up some steps into the fourth hut. It was a characteristic Slimbridge-type hide capable of holding about a dozen people, but we had it to ourselves. From the shuttered slits the view was fantastically beautiful. In front of us was a shallow flash of water in a grass field. We were looking out north-eastwards and the water came round on our right to reflect a most gorgeous orange dawn sky. Silhouetted against the reflection were a mass of Wigeon whose calls we had been hearing as we approached and now the volume of sound was astonishing.

I suppose we'd been perched on the seats in the hide for about ten minutes, by which time it was getting pretty light, when we suddenly heard geese—White-fronts—above the noise of the Wigeon. There were eight geese in the first bunch, flying very low and almost at once they landed about 100 yards away at the edge of the shallow water. Immediately they began to feed. Then six more came, then a dozen, and following them a continuous flight. Most of them were crossing close in front, and you felt you could almost reach out and touch them as they passed. One bunch of about 30, probably Pink-feet, passed over gaining height and went on out towards Littleport.

I was doing a count when I noticed a single Barnacle amongst them. There were 418 Whitefronts and the Barnacle. They were all feeding and walking to the left and slightly towards us, and suddenly I noticed a very prominent high white front. And there was a beautiful adult Lesser Whitefront, the first recorded on the Washes.

Down the steps again and out along the central path beside a wider ditch, navigable but still between high banks, towards the main Observatory building which spans the waterway; a boathouse with rooms above. As we approached we could hear the calling of the Bewick's Swans and again the sound of Wigeon, Teal, Pintail and Mallard. You walk into one side of the boathouse and then up a flight of stairs into the living rooms, which is also kitchen and dining room. At the other end of the building is the observation room, with mounted telescopes and telephoto lenses, which Peter Scott also uses as a studio when he comes here for a week or so two or three times a year. Between these two large rooms are three quite small double bedrooms, each with a shower and a loo. All the windows are landscape-shaped—longer than they are high, and leaning outward, to protect them from bird droppings and rain.

The view was best from the observation room with the morning sun behind us and a perfectly fabulous array of birds all around. Within 100 yards there were probably 2,000 birds and they stretched away along the edge of the flood-water as far as the eye could reach—perhaps 20,000 ducks. The foreground was dominated by about 300 swans—a quarter of them Mutes, the rest mostly Bewick's, but one family of Whoopers with four cygnets. Some were feeding almost

directly below the windows—on wheat thrown for them by an ingenious scattering hopper.

The banks, which hid our approach, continue on either side of the waterway (which is about 15 feet wide) until they gradually disappear into the flood. This double promontory was densely covered with Wigeon and Pintail all sleeping in the sun. Then at right angles to the right and to the left the edge of the flood stretched away — black with birds — including a great many Teal. Out in the deeper water were rafts of Tufted and Pochard, and masses of Coot and gulls. Through the binocular telescope we looked at an immature Long-tailed Duck and, far out in the deeper water, a dozen Goldeneye, 7 Goosander, 2 brown-headed Smew and one beautiful white drake.

Most astonishing was the tameness of the Wigeon, Shoveler, Teal and swans. We were in full view through the window above them, but provided we did not move suddenly the birds paid no attention to us. For an hour or more we took photographs of this incredible assembly. Then far away to the south we saw the ducks rising in clouds from the edge of the floodwater. Soon we saw the cause —a Marsh Harrier was flying along the shore looking, no doubt, for disabled birds. Gradually he worked his way towards us. The Teal would lift like mosquitos and flush out on to deeper water. Some would circle back and land behind the Harrier. Surprising to find him still here in mid-winter. Of course the season has been very mild until these last few days. And even now there's scarcely any ice except just at the edges.

We were shown the swan portrait books and the data processing techniques which Peter Scott and his daughter have been working on, and which allows all the details to be stored in a computer at Cambridge. His wife has built up an amazing collection of photographic portraits of the individual swans, which is the basis of a long-term behaviour study. It was all begun at Slimbridge of course, but the Bewick's families pass through the Welney Refuge on their way there and a surprising amount of movement takes place between the two places even in mid-winter. Some of the birds first appeared at Slimbridge 12 years ago. We actually saw Bill and Catherine and Master and Mary, long known at Slimbridge, and Porgy and Bess who had been at Slimbridge this season for ten days in December, and then returned here. Kon and Tiki come here each spring on their way back to the Russian Arctic, and can confidently be expected again this March as they've been at Slimbridge since October. It has evidently been a very good breeding year for Bewick's as there were plenty of grey cygnets. Many were carrying large coloured plastic rings with easily readable numbers.

I suppose with the flood level right—as it was yesterday—the view from the observation room at Welney must be the most impressive bird spectacle to be seen anywhere in Britain. In the context of birds it is certainly reminiscent of the African National Parks, an 'avian Serengeti'. Members can spend the night out at the Central Observatory among all these floodlit birds; we didn't know this, but we plan to do so next time we come. We feel this will be a supreme thrill comparable in some ways to 'Tree Tops'.

As we left we were shown the hinged poles which swing flight nets up behind the floodlights for catching swans in certain wind directions. About 800 have been ringed in this way.

Back in the Members' Room near what is called the Cradge Bank, we collected sandwiches and with the Assistant Warden embarked in a Norfolk punt which he poled along the ditch to the NE. We were on our way to a special mudflat which the Trust maintains for waders by an elaborate system of flooding and draining so as to make artificial tides. The banks were lower in this area, so that the observation huts at this state of the flood could only be approached unseen by boat. The ditch we followed passed right *under* the hides. We did not stop at the first two, but at the third we disembarked on steps which led up up through the floor of the hide. In front was what looked for all the world like a couple of acres of tidal mudflats. The water, reinforced with manure and fertilizer, is run over the area at dusk and run off again at dawn. There were quite a lot of Teal and a few Mallard, but the most surprising thing was a party of 20 Bar-tailed Godwit, and 3 Little Stint. There was also a pretty fruity pong from the manure, especially with the east wind. There were two wader traps which this morning had caught four Redshank, one of them ringed here two years ago. Just as we were leaving a Short-eared Owl came flopping by and then glided along one of the nearly submerged banks looking for flooded-out voles.

The mudflat area was not very far out from the Cradge Bank and the Warden explained that this side of the Washes are a good deal higher (and therefore less liable to floods) and the Trust had built up here a system of ditches and dams (locally called slackers) which enabled almost every field to be flooded and drained at will—except of course that they can't be drained if the flood is up to their level. This deliberate flooding, for variable periods, has led to one of the Trust's most important researches, dealing with the agricultural and conservational effects of all kinds of flooding, with corresponding blue-prints to produce the desired effects both for pasture and for wildlife.

I must say I've been a bit suspicious of the Wildfowl Trust, building its empire, new branches, Parkinsoning itself up, and getting progressively more institutionalised and impersonal, but I'm bound to say the whole of this Welney thing has been so superbly well done that I've felt like doing a little word-eating since yesterday. It really is a striking achievement.

On the way back we passed some pens in which a few pinioned wildfowl were kept. Originally the Trust hadn't intended to keep any here, but almost at once they had been required to provide a home for pricked birds picked up on the Washes, and this has led to a rather nice small collection of purely British species. They also have a row of pens with all the world's swans—swans being a speciality because of the Bewick's.

Later we set off again from the Members' Room past the turning to the hide where we had been at first light in the morning. Ahead of us was a patch of alder carr and willows and we turned off into a narrow path leading to a hide which overlooked the three-pipe duck decoy, the only new one to be built in Britain in this century. It is extremely cunningly laid out so that wherever the wind is, one of two rather high observation huts is accessible and from them there is a view into all three pipes. Two of the pipes serve the SW. wind and one the NE. The Warden said he'd taken 28 ducks (including 10 Teal) in the east pipe in the morning. There must have been about 600 ducks on the 1½ acres of the pool. The problem has been to get Teal, Wigeon and Pintail into it, rather than Mallard. (Teal are specially important because of the continued decline of the western European stocks.) There was little to attract the smaller ducks away from the floodwaters so nearby. However, experiments with millet seed—expensive though it is—have produced promising results. We had a very good view of a Water Rail in the west pipe just in front of us, feeding at the edge of a group of Moorhen. I reckon it's rather unusual to see the two together.

The decoy looks rather new, the great cry being to have materials which don't need maintenance. So the screens are of

concrete panelling, the hoops of metal and the nets of plastic. The landings are coated with rough concrete to avoid erosion. The catch looks like being about 2,000 in this first season. They've been operating six or seven duck traps here fairly successfully for several years, and also catching ducks from a boat with a hand-net, a flare and a gong, in the Persian style, so that some useful data have been amassed during the last seven years.

The light was beginning to go as we left the decoy. We headed south-westward, towards the sunset, and had nearly reached another observation hide when there was a burst of distant shots. Evidently they were up beyond the Causeway across the Washes, outside the Refuge, but we heard at once that they had put the geese up. We nipped quickly up into the hide in time to see the whole skein stretched across the sunset coming down the Washes. It was a memorable sight, for the sky was humming with ducks too, which had risen far up beyond the road and were moving into the sanctuary. The geese planed down to land very much where they must have been before they flighted in in the morning; evidently their standard roosting area.

As dusk fell there was a good deal of shooting at both ends of the Refuge, but it was surprising how little notice the birds seemed to take of it. Soon the air was full of Wigeon, quantities of them pouring down into the field directly in front of the hide we were in. There was something very romantic and stirring about these Wigeon whistling and churring and sweeping round, and suddenly dropping down to land with a swish and a splash within 20 yards of us.

As we withdrew from the hide, leaving the birds totally unaware of our presence and therefore totally undisturbed, I was conscious of a tremendous feeling of satisfaction. For a day we had been in amongst the birds, yet few of them had seen us. We had watched them intimately for long hours without harming them or even frightening them. Somehow this was a proper relationship between man and animal, and the way in which this refuge has been planned and laid out to maintain and foster this relationship seemed infinitely imaginative and splendid.

There was tea in the Members' Room with the glow of the floodlights far out in front and a white line of swans lit by them. Mallard quacked overhead as we returned across the 100 foot river and down the steep bank to the car. It had really been a superlative day — you absolutely *must* go there.

Yours,

Bill.