

IN A LONELY LAND

By J. WENTWORTH DAY

THERE is no road to Berney Arms. There is no shop, no school, no church, no inn, not even a footpath. Yet you can go to Liverpool Street Station and buy a ticket to Berney Arms, for it possesses both a railway station and a post-office.

If you were to ask me the whereabouts of Berney Arms, I should reply that it lies on the ancient bed of the sea. And that would be the truth. For this remote marshland settlement of scattered, thatched farm-houses and lonely marshmen's cottages, nearly all of them half a mile or more apart, lies stranded in a green ocean of cattle marshes which were once the bed of that mighty estuary with five sea-mouths which the Romans called *Gariensis*.

To-day, what was once a great, glimmering, salt-water lake on which the triremes rode, shield-hung, their banked oars thrashing, is a green sea of glimmering grass marshes stretching almost as far as eye can see. To the south lie the grey ruins of Burgh Castle on its tree-crowned scarp above the shining mudflats and hurrying tides of Breydon Water, which lies eastward of the marshes, a salt-water barrier between their loneliness and the smoking chimneys and clustered masts of Yarmouth, a cloudy blur low on the eastern horizon of the sea.

To the south and west again lie, more distantly, the fir-crowned Herringfleet Hills and the low uplands of Reedham, where Saxon kings had their palace and rode forth to cast their falcons at herons in the ancient heronry of oak and ash which still stands with its gnarled roots stepping down into the peaty-brown waters of the marsh.

If you look to the north, you will see another low line of upland where, in a fold, stands the ruined moated tower of Caister Castle, where once dwelt that bold, white-headed knight Sir John Fastolf, who fought with great glory and honour at Harfleur and Honfleur, Agincourt and Verneuil. There he lived in great state until 1459, when he died and was buried in a chapel of St. Benet's Abbey on Cowholm Marshes. To-day the cattle tread amid the ruins above his dusty bones.

Far in the west is that spur of upland, almost an island, on which stands Acle, the small and windy market town of these cold East Norfolk marshlands. And from Acle to Yarmouth, straight as a sword, runs the Nine Mile Road, laid like a Roman causeway across the green bosom of this land of grazing bullocks



BREYDON WATER AND MARSHES, NEAR YARMOUTH. FROM THE HIGH-MILL AT BERNEY ARMS

and white gulls, of stealing rivers and high skies. But the road does not go to Berney Arms.

So when I set out in the fickle month of July to go by car to Berney Arms, they said: "You'll never get there. You'll ditch the car. But when you've walked as far as the station send us a wire and we'll send a team of horses down to get the car out."

We went, a friend and I, in his marsh-creeping car which has poked its bonnet into the bowels of half the reed-thickets, sandhills, and saltings of East and North Norfolk, through Wickhampton, a tiny straggling village of flint-built cottages with thatched roofs and a mighty church with a crocketed tower which looks majestically across the marsh from the foot of the Halvergate uplands, where little woods of oak, willow, and poplar crouch like bastions on the green lip of the marsh. The road is narrow

and dusty, a road of the cornfield which slips suddenly down by dyke and willow to the marsh. And there, for a mile or two, it proceeds, sinuous as a snake, rutted and full of holes, twisting between bordering dyke where reeds bend in the wind and water-beetles scuttle in arrowy haste.

Once you are out on the marsh you are like a ship at sea, dipping now into a grassy trough, lurching next over a billow of sun-baked mud, then veering perilously in a sideways broaching-to on the lip of a dyke that would swallow a bull. And for that matter bulls are in plenty. For this is cattle country. Up to ten thousand head of cattle—Shorthorns, Herefords, Angus and crossbreds, Irish stores and Canadian imports—roam these great prairies of dyke-ruled marshes which cover nearly thirty square miles of East Norfolk.

Here and there a marshman's cottage stands up like an island, a few stunted trees or wind-twisted bushes guarding its forlorn walls. They seem to crouch with dumb defiance as though with an invisible arm raised to guard their faces from the pounding buffets of winter gales off the sea. And beside them stand the tall, gaunt windmills, pointing to Heaven. They are the lighthouses of the marsh. By their stark simplicity its vastness is enhanced.

There must be close on thirty of them, for once, when a boy, I seem to remember counting a score or more, all turning their sails madly in a fresh March gale. To-day no sail turns in the rushing wind, and only the kestrel and the starling, the peregrine on passage and the swallow with her chattering brood inhabit their lonely hoods.

In the old days the marshmen controlled not only the great herds of cattle which move from back-marsh to front-marsh by regular stages, as feed dictates, but also the mills and the water, which they pour in foaming torrents into the main drain. Any millman could tell and control the level of water on all that vast plain to within an inch or two. They had their own wireless telegraphy of signalling by setting the sails of their mills at different angles. Thus they could talk to each other across the silent miles. It was said—and who shall disbelieve?—that when a cargo of smuggled goods was run ashore at Hemsby or Winterton to the north, at Corton or Hopton to the south, the word would pass inland across the marshes in a matter of minutes by telegraphy of the mill sails.

Many a mill held its passing cargo of



THE STATION-MASTER AT BERNEY ARMS WITH HIS ASSISTANTS, HIS MOTHER AND DAUGHTER

brandy and French wine, of tobacco and silk, and what likelier hiding place for a night and a day than Lockgate Mill or the High Mill or Tucks Mill, which all stand within rifle-shot of Berney Arms?

And, if so, what should Squire Berney know of it away in his hall amid the snug uplands, or the Straceys in their park at Rackheath, or any other of the Norfolk squires who gave their names to different levels of these marshes when first they were divided up among the original "adventurers" who had sunk their money in the expensive gamble of reclaiming them?

They built the mills, most of them, about two hundred years ago, and when the mills arose, round, solid and towering in all their pride of tapered brickwork, the marsh families struck their first roots—Stones and Muttons and Hewitts. The last Stone left the marsh a year or two ago, but Fred Mutton still dwells in Mutton's Mill, quietly proud that his is the only mill on all the marsh which was fortified during

and as the car bucketed into the dusty hollow made by the immemorial hooves of generations of horned cattle half a dozen Suffolk Punches which probably saw only one man in a week and always the same man galloped madly to the far end of the marsh.

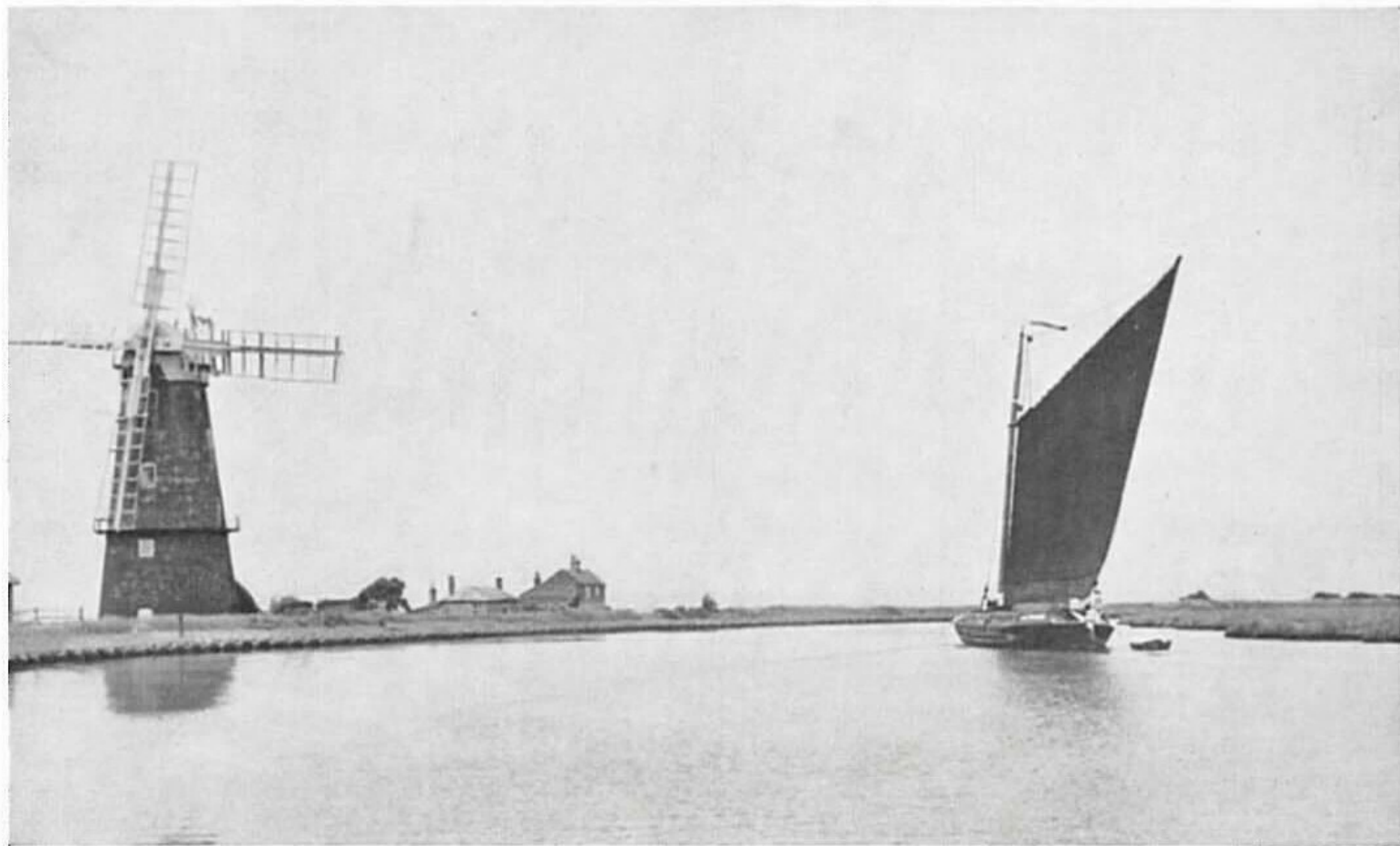
And so by gateway after gateway, through staring bullocks and pounding horses, we came at last to Berney Arms—one square brick house standing, treeless and alone, by the side of a straight and shining railway track that crossed the marsh in double lines of silver. There Albert Hewitt is station-master, porter, and ticket collector and his daughter, Violet, is postmistress, gatekeeper, and railway clerk, and old Mrs. Mary Hewitt, who is eighty and as lively as a cricket, looks after the hens and the ducks.

"Everything goes by rail here," said Albert proudly. "We've only got thirty-seven inhabitants on the marsh but believe me, we have a thousand travellers a year through the station! That's because the kids go to school by train and

Then one o' the kids died so she up and had another one. That made twenty-one twice!

"Granddad couldn't read or write, but he was a master-man for all that—wheelwright, millwright, millman, and cattleman. When he put in an estimate to rebuild the top of Langley Mill he was only half-a-crown out of the estimate from a man who was a scholar. Granddad had his own shorthand that he invented—noughts and crosses and dots, but he knew what it all meant.

"Sport? We get some sport down here. Wild geese by the hundred in winter. They come in like starlings. My man, Bert Tungate, crawled up to a great flock of 'em a few winters back, sheltering behind his big old dog. He got within thirty yards, using the old dog as a stalking horse, fired his gun over the dog's back and killed three geese with the first shot. Then we course hares and sometimes the bulls course us! Some of those old bulls will make a man jump pretty quick!



THE WHERRY *ALBION*, THE ONLY TRADING WHERRY NOW UNDER SAIL IN NORFOLK, PASSING BERNEY ARMS

the recent war as a strong-point. Not only fortified, but he and his mill alike were machine-gunned by a German 'plane which dived on them with everything blazing at low level. The bullet marks still pock the brickwork.

But the Hewitt clan is still mighty in the land. There was never a Norfolk marsh yet without a Hewitt hidden somewhere in the middle of it nor a Broad without a Hewitt sailing upon its waters.

So when we came to a great, ugly, crossbred Hereford-Ayrshire bull glowering at us through the wooden bars of a marsh gateway my friend remarked casually: "That's one of the Hewitt bulls. Better not get out of the car." I reflected realistically that if the bull chose to splinter the gate he could turn the car over into the dyke.

Two gateways farther on the "road" petered out at a group of haystacks, blown slantwise by the wind. A dozen carrion crows rose in a ghoul-like flapping of wings from a dead sheep, like ravens surprised at a feast left by the longships. And the marsh gate to the right bore proudly a board whose faded paint said: "To Berney Arms Station." But there was no road; merely a glimmering track in the grass where lorry wheels had beaten the blades flat and crushed mushrooms to pulp. I opened the gate

the women do their shopping by train. Even my drinking water comes in kegs by trains, but Fred Hewitt, who lives a mile off, has to drink the water off his roof. Most of 'em do on the marsh. But that don't stop 'em living mostly to round about ninety.

"The cattle go away in floats or in droves but, Lor' bless you! there've been winters when we've been cut right off by snow and floods. Couldn't move for weeks. In that hard winter a few years back Fred Hewitt and the rest were shut off in the snow like Eskimos."

I went on to see Harry Hewitt, who is wise and merry and full of wit and lives in great, ancient, rambling Ash Tree Farm hard under the sea-wall of Breydon Water. Harry farmssixty-six acres of land and is king of that end of the marsh.

"We Hewitts have been here close on a couple of hundred years," he said. "My old granddad got married here when he was fourteen years and eight months and my grandmother was fourteen and ten months. When she had a kid the three on 'em made thirty years between 'em. That wasn't a bad start, was it?"

"Then my grandmother had twenty-one kids twice after that!"

"Twice!"

"Yes, twice! They had twenty-one kids fust,

"Years ago, before the electric pumps ran most of the water off the marshes, we had better grazing and more wild duck—Ah! and thousands and thousands of peewits. Now a lot of the grass is going coarse and poor because the marsh is too dry.

"We've had some rum pups down here! One man was loading hay on to a wherry on Breydon with the tide running fast when a truss of hay falls in the water with the chap's fourteen-year-old daughter on it. Another man dives in after her.

"Leave the blessed girl! yells out the old man. 'She can swim! Save my hay!'

"In the old days that old house down there on the sea-wall was a pub—the Berney Arms. I've seen a score of trading wherries tied up there, with their great black sails glistening in the sun. Now there's only one wherry in all Norfolk under sail, the old *Albion*. And the pub's shut up. So we have to go anything up to eight miles for a drink.

"Lonely? What! With all these cattle and birds about and nobody to fight with but your own relations. We're never lonely! There's an advertisement in Albert's ticket-office that says: 'Come to Bermuda for a Sunny Holiday.' I'd sooner stop at Berney Arms."