

# Arterial drainage in inter-war England: the legislative perspective\*

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## Abstract

The Land Drainage Act of 1930 became the benchmark of twentieth-century agricultural-drainage legislation. Its purpose was to simplify and update drainage legislation enacted since the sixteenth century and to reorganize the maintenance and improvement of arterial drainage on a catchment-wide basis. The paper reconstructs the five stages by which such a fundamental overhaul was perceived to be necessary and implemented. The bitter controversy as to the funding of the major improvements to the estuary and tidal length of the River Great Ouse had a considerable bearing on the timing and content of the Bill. The immediate and longer-term significance of the Act is discussed, both in respect of the wider management of watercourses and the potential for agricultural improvement of the adjacent lands.

In an earlier paper published in the *Review*, John Bowers highlighted the endeavours of the inter-war Ministry of Agriculture to instigate improvements to arterial drainage.<sup>1</sup> Such schemes were a prerequisite to the under-drainage and ditching works intended to raise the productivity of individual estates and holdings. But whilst holding that those benefiting most directly from any local improvement should provide the necessary investment, the Ministry believed the State might contribute technical expertise and Exchequer aid in carrying out arterial works. Not only might this stimulate the leading agriculturalists of the affected localities into planning and organising such an infrastructure, but the requisite Drainage Orders invariably required much explanation and advocacy among the other interests likely to be affected within the river catchment and local authority. As the authors of a guide to the Land Drainage Act of 1930 conceded, there were few issues of such national importance that left 'the general mass of the public so unmoved as that of land drainage'.<sup>2</sup>

The present paper focuses on the controversies that caused ministers and officials, and their 'expert' advisers, to accord such priority to arterial drainage, as both to capitalize upon parliamentary and sectoral support, and to overcome the opposition encountered from those quarters. Although national in its scale and purpose, such advocacy on the part of the Ministry was informed and considerably modified by the insights and experience gained from such

\* The author is grateful for the guidance of the anonymous referees, and for the assistance given by the Cambridge University Library, Public Record Office and the Bedfordshire and Cambridgeshire Record Offices. The figure was prepared by Julie Gaunt.

<sup>1</sup> J. Bowers, 'Inter-war land drainage and policy in England and Wales', *AgHR* 46 (1998), pp. 64–80.

<sup>2</sup> A. Dobson and H. Hull, *The Land Drainage Act* 1930 (1931). Dobson was an Assistant Secretary, and Hull a Junior Counsel, to the Ministry of Agriculture and Fisheries.

individual river catchments as that of the Great Ouse. The paper reconstructs the circumstances in which the failure of a piecemeal approach to securing the requisite administrative framework forced a considerably more comprehensive approach to be adopted in what became the Land Drainage Act of 1930. Rather than being allowed to develop organically, the Ministry itself was called upon to define and impose, as an integral part of the Act, a catchment-wide basis for the execution of such works across the whole country. However inauspicious the times, in terms of political and economic turmoil, a handbook published in 1936 boasted a new beginning. Those parts of the existing drainage law, as remained applicable to modern conditions, had been both strengthened and extended.<sup>3</sup>

## I

An estimated 4.4 million acres of English farmland depended for their fertility on arterial drainage, of which 1.8 million acres were in pressing need of drainage works. No single land-owner could achieve the full potential of such works: there had to be corporate effort.<sup>4</sup> The General Sewers Act of 1531, the first of some 16 public statutes, had provided the framework for the oldest of the three forms of surviving drainage authority, the Commission of Sewers. By 1930, there were 49 such bodies. A further 198 authorities had been established by Private Acts, of which the earliest and most famous was the Bedford Level Corporation in the East Anglian Fens. The third group of drainage authorities comprised 114 elective boards created under Enclosure Awards and, since the Land Drainage Act of 1861 (24 & 25 Victoria, c. 133), by the Board of Agriculture.<sup>5</sup>

The establishment of further elective boards had been severely curtailed by the depressed state of arable farming from the late 1870s onwards, and by 'the somewhat cumbersome proceedings that had to be followed'. The consent of the owners of two-thirds of the land was required before a Provisional Order, drawn up by the President of the Board of Agriculture on behalf of the petitioning bodies, could be confirmed by parliament. A Select Committee of the House of Lords had called, in 1877, for unified bodies to manage the drainage of entire catchments. A Rivers Conservancy Bill of 1879 had sought to implement such a concept, with the lowland, midland and upland parts being rated according to the degree of benefit derived from the protective works. The Bill and later measures failed, largely because of the opposition of the 'midlanders' who, next to the 'lowlanders' would have paid the highest rates.<sup>6</sup>

The urgent need to raise food production during the Great War highlighted the decayed state of many drains. A sudden influx of prisoners of war, shortly before the Armistice, provided outstanding opportunity to repair the neglect. Some 400,000 acres of farmland in England and Wales obtained some benefit. Yet even where full advantage was taken, the Food Production Department and county War Agricultural Executive Committees were appalled at the lack of permanent machinery to maintain, let alone advance, such improvements. Following a wartime

<sup>3</sup> Ministry of Agriculture and Fisheries, *The Land Drainage Act 1930. Handbook* (1936).

<sup>4</sup> F. L. C. Floud, *The Ministry of Agriculture and Fisheries* (1927), pp. 255-61.

<sup>5</sup> Parliamentary Papers (PP), 1927, VI, *Report of the*

*Royal Commission on Land Drainage in England and Wales*, (1927), pp. 7-14.

<sup>6</sup> PP, 1877, X, House of Lords Select Committee, *Commissioners of Sewers and Conservancy Drainage and River Navigation Boards*.

measure of November 1914 (5 George V, c. 4), a Land Drainage Act of 1918 (8 and 9 George V, c. 12) enabled the Board of Agriculture, or a county council (or county borough council), to apply for powers to form, merge or alter the boundaries of an elective drainage body. Most importantly, a Provisional Order might be confirmed if not more than one-third of landowners objected.<sup>7</sup>

A first substantial advance had been made. Some 50 new drainage districts were established, and 652 schemes promoted, in the first 10 years after the 1918 Act. The watercourses were cleared of growing and dead timbers and other obstructions. Cesses, shoals, bends and weed accumulations were removed. The earthen walls of sea defences might be raised and strengthened, stone and concrete pitching repaired, and timber and fagot groynes provided. A further precedent was set in 1921, when grant aid was awarded for peacetime schemes. First under a series of Unemployment Relief Programmes, and then entirely under the aegis of the Ministry, grants were made to drainage boards and the agricultural committees of county councils.<sup>8</sup>

Key figures emerged, both locally and within the Ministry, who sought to both codify and extend such powers as had been gained. Alban T. A. Dobson was a principal figure, both in such networking and negotiation with the Treasury. He had joined the Board of Agriculture in 1908 and had fought on the Western Front at Ypres, before becoming Assistant Director of Agricultural Production at GHQ France in 1918, his services being mentioned in despatches. Now an Assistant Secretary in the Ministry, his administrative responsibilities included those of land drainage. A further Act of 1926 (16 & 17 George V, c. 24) sought to enhance the role of the county councils by transferring to them the powers held by the Ministry under the 1918 Act, namely its default powers and those to initiate small schemes in areas where there was otherwise no drainage body. They might additionally require drains to be put in proper order, where such impediment to the flow of water had a detrimental affect on the neighbouring land.<sup>9</sup>

## II

The Great Ouse Drainage Board was the first and by far the largest of the new districts to be formed, accounting for almost half the land area to be affected by the 1918 Act (Map 1). The river, which rose in Buckinghamshire and had its outfall in the Wash, had the fourth largest catchment in England of 2 million acres. Some 380,000 acres, or 18 per cent of the catchment were fenland in the sense of being below the tidal limit that extended to Earith on an ordinary tide. Lord De Ramsey, a long-standing protagonist of drainage improvement, claimed that a statutory framework had been provided for finally completing the scheme begun by the Dutchman, Cornelius De Vermuyden, in the seventeenth century.<sup>10</sup>

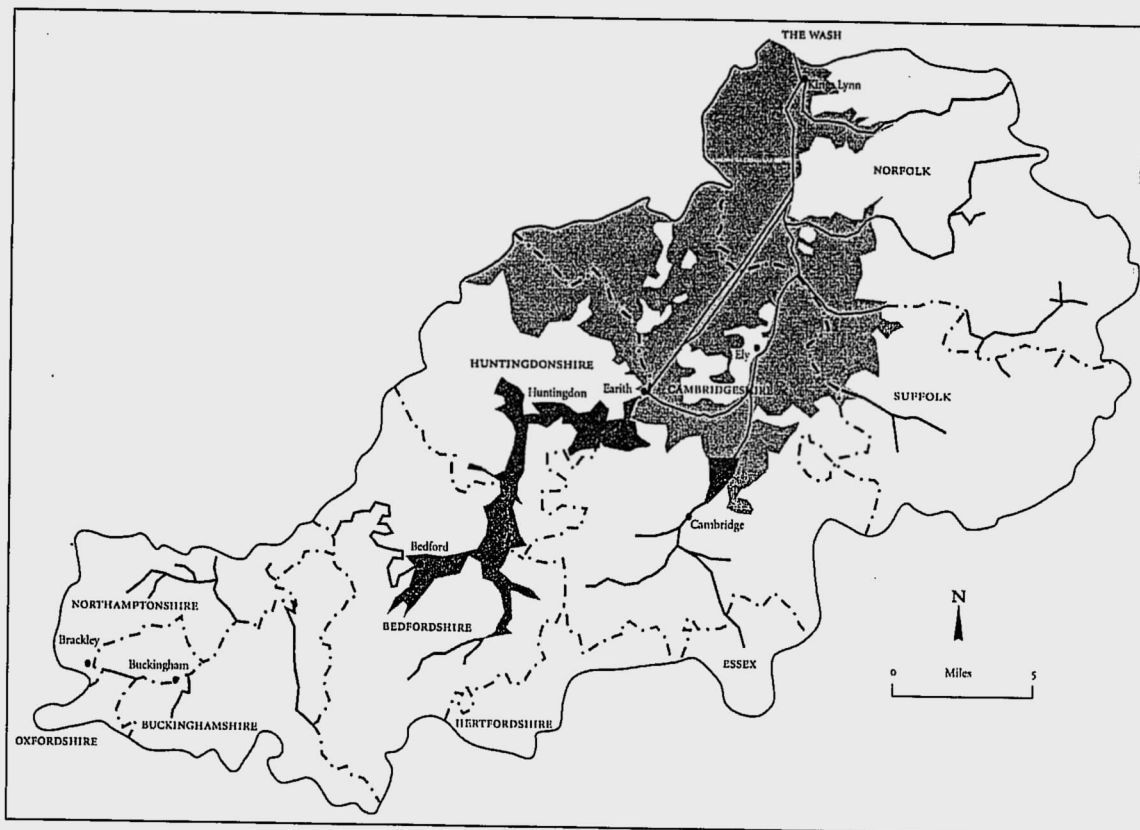
<sup>7</sup> *Parliamentary Debates (PD), Commons*, 105, 1491–1506; J. Sheail, 'Yorkshire's "Sloughs of Despond": an inter-war perspective on resource development in Britain', *Environment and History* 6 (2000), pp. 379–98.

<sup>8</sup> Anonymous, 'Land drainage', *J. Ministry of Agriculture* 26 (1920), pp. 1088–92, and 27 (1920), pp. 764–8; Anonymous, 'Land drainage works for the relief of unemployment', *J. Ministry of Agriculture* 30 (1923),

pp. 519–25; J. C. Roseveare, 'Land drainage in England and Wales', *Trans. Institute of Water Engineers* 37 (1932), pp. 178–207.

<sup>9</sup> *The Times*, 21 May 1962; Public Record Office (PRO), MAF 49/764; PD, *Lords*, 63, 367–80.

<sup>10</sup> R. F. Grantham, 'The present condition of arterial drainage in some English rivers', *Procs. Institution of Civil Engineers* 202 (1916), pp. 269–70.



MAP 1. The River Ouse Watershed

After a map of the River Ouse catchment by Richard F. Grantham, 1922 (Cambridge Record Office, City Records/Miscellaneous papers. Drainage of Ouse, 1920-22). The Fens (area of lighter shading) and fenland rivers are distinguished from the upland valleys (darker shading) and rivers (bolder lines) that were also made liable to the payment of rates.

The extensive flooding caused by heavy summer rains in 1912 had emphasized the urgency of improvement works in the East Anglian Fens. The priority for the Board of Agriculture was to educate opinion as to the nature of the remedy. Advantage was taken of the newly-established Development Fund to appoint two Special Commissioners (both leading land-agents) to report on the arterial-drainage problems of eastern England. Their report of August 1914 was widely circulated. A paper given to the Institution of Civil Engineers, in April 1916, afforded further opportunity to publicize its findings. As a discussant, Lord De Ramsey complained of both the carelessness and ignorance of the drainage bodies, but claimed 'the greatest curse of the river' was the number of separate drainage interests. The report described how there were over 80 separate drainage bodies, but no single authority empowered to keep order on the main artery, the 40-mile length of the tidal Ouse. Confronted by so many interests, the authors of the report had found it impossible to affix responsibility for undertaking the remedial works so urgently required in the estuary and lower reaches of the tidal river.<sup>11</sup>

<sup>11</sup> *Ibid.*, 244-90; PRO, MAF 49/311.

Having obtained the support of the relevant drainage-bodies, the Board of Agriculture drafted a Provisional Order under the wartime measure of 1914. A Lower Ouse Drainage Board was appointed with powers to execute specified works and raise the funds required directly from the area deemed to have benefited. The existing bodies would continue to play a crucial part as internal drainage authorities. In evidence to the statutory public inquiry of April 1915, witnesses for those bodies recognized the need for greater co-ordination, but stressed the continuing value of local control. Those farming the immediate area were most aware of what was needed. They could respond quickest to an emergency. The Legal Adviser to the Board of Agriculture, acting as Inspector to the Inquiry, was anxious both to stress the impartiality of the Board and the need to avoid the Provisional Order being too ambitious. And indeed, whilst the Provisional Order Confirmation Bill received the Royal Assent in July 1915 (5 & 6 George V, c. LXXXVII), it proved impossible to implement. Although a further Inquiry of 1917 found the Drainage Board's proposals technically sound, there was no agreement as to how the necessary costs might be met. They far exceeded anything the rateable area could afford. Although the President of the Board of Agriculture did not discount Exchequer support, 'a proper proportion' of the costs had to be borne by those who would benefit.<sup>12</sup>

Such an impasse marked a second stage, namely that of emphasising the benefits of organising drainage on a catchment basis. At the instigation of the county War Agricultural Executive Committees, seven of the nine county councils petitioned for what proved to be the first Provisional Order under the 1918 Act, namely for a single Ouse Drainage Board. As a note published in the *Journal of the Ministry of Agriculture* emphasized, the object was not to lay down some general policy or scheme of works, but rather to establish a broad view of all the problems and interests as might be addressed within a rating area large enough to avoid any unfair burden being imposed on part of the land to benefit. Of a Board of 42 members, most were to be elected by the various areas into which the catchment was divided, the remainder being appointed by the county councils, the Kings Lynn Conservancy Board, and the Minister. The Board was to categorize its expenditure, each category being apportioned according to the benefit to be derived from the different areas and sub-areas.<sup>13</sup>

Although the principle of an Ouse Drainage Board was welcomed, the rating provisions were so fiercely contested, even by some of the petitioning counties, that the Confirmation Bill was debated in both Houses of Parliament. Ever since the General Sewers Act of 1531, it had been assumed that drainage rates could only be levied on the properties which directly benefited from such works. On the principle of 'no benefit – no rates', there was no requirement, on the part of properties above the flood level, to contribute to the cost of maintaining the water-courses. They stood outside the jurisdiction of the drainage authorities. Some leeway had been allowed. The Somerset Drainage Commissioners Act of 1877 adopted a limit of 2 feet above the highest recorded flood level. The Thames Valley Drainage Commissioners Act of 1871 had settled for 5 feet, the Ordnance Survey being employed to survey and produce maps showing the contour. The Land Drainage Act of 1918 adopted a limit of 8 feet. The effect on the Ouse

<sup>12</sup> PRO, MAF 49/312–3.

<sup>13</sup> PRO, MAF 49/316, 325; Anonymous, 'Land drainage of the Great Ouse', *J. Board of Agriculture* 26 (1919),

pp. 729–31; Anonymous, 'The Ministry and the River Ouse Drainage Scheme', *J. Ministry of Agriculture* 26 (1920), pp. 1172–3.

catchment was to include not only the 'lowland' fens, but a further 125,000 acres of 'upland' valley, making a total of 485,000 acres, or one-fifth of the catchment, liable to rates.<sup>14</sup>

At the Second Reading of the Confirmation Bill, the Members of Parliament for Bedford and Buckingham attacked it for reversing the principle that the water of the 'highlands' was taken 'by the men of the lowlands down to the sea at their own expense'. It was unfair to require those living some 70 miles upriver to contribute to the costs arising from the tidal river and outfall. Such upland valleys should be administered separately from the 'great fine rolling fenlands full of money'. In so far as it could be shown that the cost of the works on the lower Ouse outstripped the resources of those who would directly benefit, such investments should be regarded in the same light as the road system of the country. Both were of such national importance as to merit Exchequer grant-aid. In his reply to the Second Reading debate, the Parliamentary Secretary, Sir Arthur Boscawen, indicated (in what became 'a much quoted pronouncement') that there was no change in principle. The liability for each area and sub-area would be strictly proportionate to the benefit each was considered to enjoy. The 'upland' valleys should take some responsibility for the discharge of their waters to the sea.<sup>15</sup> Although fiercely contested, the Select Committees of both Houses of Parliament approved the adoption of the 8 feet contour. The Land Drainage (Ouse) Provisional Order Confirmation Act (10 & 11 George V, c. CXXII) came into force in October 1920.

'An acute financial situation' arose as passive resistance to the payment of the rates spread from the 'uplands' to other parts. It was an 'extremely onerous, expensive and lengthy business' to prepare rate-books for some 40,000 occupiers of property. Many professed to being unaware of the existence of the Ouse Drainage Board, let alone their liability. There were claims of its causing sales of some of the best 'feeding land' in Bedfordshire to fall through. 'Upland' members of the Board rejected all items of expenditure until such liability was withdrawn. Citing Boscawen's words, they insisted each county above the tidal limit at Earith should be left to deal with its own section of the river and its tributaries. Although magistrates upheld the test-cases brought by the Board for the non-payment of rates, there was, by the end of 1923, a shortage of moneys for even essential works. The Minister, Sir Robert Sanders, offered to draft an amending Order. It envisaged the 'upland' valleys being placed under a separate Committee of the Board. The 'lowlanders' fiercely contested such special treatment. The only point of agreement was the belief that little would be achieved without substantial Exchequer support.<sup>16</sup>

Alarmed by the prospect of large areas of fenland being lost to 'proper cultivation', the Minister was authorized by a Cabinet Committee, in July 1924, to propose 'a measure of Government assistance'.<sup>17</sup> The Ministry offered to meet the full costs of the works, estimated at up to £1.5 million over 10 years, provided the Board agreed to repay two-thirds over a period of 30 years. A further deputation, in January 1925, rejected the offer on the grounds that the banks had already refused any increase in the Board's overdraft. The Minister in turn rejected the demand for an outright grant to cover the entire cost of the works. He made instead a three-part proposal. A special Commission should be appointed to investigate the whole

<sup>14</sup> Grantham, *Proceedings*, pp. 263-5.

<sup>15</sup> *PD, Commons*, 127, 1929-51.

<sup>16</sup> PRO, MAF 49/325.

<sup>17</sup> *Ibid.*

problem of the river Ouse. Although initially resisting such a move, the Drainage Board agreed to petition for an amending Order suspending the rating provisions and, therefore the execution of any works, in the 'upland' valleys. The Treasury undertook to provide such financial assistance as required by the Board to function.<sup>18</sup> A Provisional Order Confirmation Bill was passed in July 1925 (15 & 16 George V, c. LXXII), and another in August 1926, that extended the suspensory period until January 1928.

### III

A third critical stage had been reached in which attention was focused on deciding the apportionment of liability for meeting the costs of improvement schemes. The 'special and expert' Commission met under the Chairmanship of Sir Horace Monro, the former Permanent Secretary of the Local Government Board and an expert on rating. The other three members were the distinguished engineer, W. J. Binnie, Sir John Oakley (later President of the Surveyors' Institution), and Leopold Harvey, a Spalding solicitor and Clerk to the Welland Drainage Board and eleven other drainage bodies. In drafting the short-list of proposed members, Dobson had written of how Harvey, knowing 'the difficulties from A to Z', was unlikely to 'be taken in by any specious evidence that might be offered in the various areas of the Ouse district'. The Commission's unanimous report of December 1925 warned of how, without large-scale engineering, inundation was inevitable. There was a real danger of the whole district 'returning to its original condition of swamp'. Whilst it might be argued the 'uplanders' had an immemorial right to discharge their surplus water into its natural channels, witnesses to the inquiry described how the increased under-drainage of farmland meant the rainfall was 'voided more rapidly into the lower reaches of the river'.<sup>19</sup>

Whatever the validity of these various claims, the Commission emphasized how the necessary works to remove the upland floodwater, prevent the accumulation of silt in the tidal channel, and to stabilize the banks were so intimately connected that nothing less than the entire scheme would suffice. There had to be a considerable widening of the taxation base. In a matter such as land drainage, the whole catchment had to act as if 'a single community which cannot be artificially divided'. As the Commission observed, local authority rates were apportioned not in terms of benefit, but by ability to pay, as gauged by the annual value of the property occupied. It had also become the practice to spread that liability beyond the parish to encompass the county, with substantial Exchequer grants to help equalize the local burden. Drawing on such precedent, the Commission came to 'the definite conclusion' that the Ouse Drainage Board should cover the entire catchment and have direct responsibility for all the major channels, banks and other structures in the 'lowlands'. The existing drainage bodies would continue to manage the extensive network of minor drains, as well as provide and maintain pumping, subject to the Drainage Board having a power of veto over any operation deemed to be prejudicial to the interests of the catchment as a whole.

The Commission recommended that the capital costs, and revenue expenditure, of the Ouse

<sup>18</sup> PRO, MAF 49/320, 324.

<sup>19</sup> PRO, MAF 49/325; PP, 1926, V, Ministry of Agriculture,

*Report of the Commission appointed in connection with the Ouse Drainage Board.*

Drainage Board should be met equally by the catchment and the Exchequer. The greater part of the contribution from the catchment should be met by those parts where there was a 'need to drain as well as get rid of floodwater'. Rather than the Board itself collecting the moneys, it should precept the greater part from the catchment through the internal drainage bodies. As a new principle, the remainder should be raised on the local authorities. Those county councils, and county borough councils, with lands within the 'lowland' area should contribute 6*d.* per acre per annum as an 'insurance charge' against what might otherwise be the heavy damage to public health and property, and loss of rateable value, caused by extensive flooding. The charge should be imposed on ratepayers of the entire administrative area. The remaining income to the Board should be raised as 'a wayleave charge' on the remainder of the catchment. It should be left to the relevant county council, or county borough council, to decide whether the charge of 2*d.* per acre per annum was confined to those ratepayers within the Ouse catchment, or spread over the entire administrative area. Although there was no exact precedent to such taxing of local government, the Commission pointed out how a local act had made the whole of the county of Middlesex liable to drainage rates. The Lancashire, Surrey and West Riding of Yorkshire county councils were empowered to charge any costs incurred by their respective drainage acts to county funds.

The Commission believed the other half of the Board's costs should be paid by the Exchequer. Although 'a very drastic precedent', such 'a liberal measure' of Government assistance was 'strongly justified'. An extensive area of fertile farmland was otherwise threatened with catastrophic loss. The improvement of the outfall was exceptionally difficult. With its other burdens, the drainage area was unable to meet so large a charge. The drainage works would materially assist the port of Kings Lynn, and their construction help to alleviate local unemployment.

The Minister, Walter Guinness, obtained the Cabinet's approval, in March 1927, for a bill closely based on the Commission's recommendations. It was however given such low priority in the parliamentary timetable that Guinness returned to the Cabinet, in May, warning that, unless the bill was passed, the district would return to 'the state of passive resistance'. Attention was drawn to the devastating floods recently experienced on the river Mississippi in America. The Prime Minister, Stanley Baldwin, spoke of his 'strong desire to press on with the bill'.<sup>20</sup>

It was a hybrid bill, in the sense that it was a government measure that anticipated expenditure of Exchequer moneys, yet dealt so closely with private interests as to require scrutiny in the manner of a local or private bill. In moving the second reading in June 1927, Walter Guinness described its purpose as to implement the 'very careful researches' of the Commission. The fens lived under the shadow of what was in effect a great reservoir of tidal water. Whilst it could easily be emptied of water pumped from the fen, considerable improvements were required to cope with the upland waters. There had been enormous development of land drainage in the 'uplands' since the time of Vermuyden. Macadam roads, housing estates and new towns had combined to send more water more rapidly down to the tidal channel.<sup>21</sup>

Such general observation carried little weight with Members whose constituency interests were affected. A Norfolk Member, Major Alan McLean, pointed to 'the very remarkable fact'

<sup>20</sup> PRO, CAB 23/54-5, CAB 24/187, and CAB 26/9; P. Daniel, *Deep'n as it come; The 1927 Mississippi flood* (1977).

<sup>21</sup> PD, *Commons*, 207, 1209-86.

that the Bill had united in opposition the ratepayers of the 'lowlands', the 'uplands' and those of the other catchments of counties that included part of the Ouse watershed within their borders. Norfolk was particularly affected. The Member for South Norfolk protested at how his constituents would gain nothing directly from the improvement works on the Ouse. The Member for East Norfolk claimed his constituents already had expense enough in protecting themselves from flooding caused by the rivers Bure, Yare and Wensum. Such local criticism highlighted a more general grievance. Whilst the 'expert' Commission had acknowledged the much wider implications of its 'very drastic recommendations', the Government had accepted them for only the Ouse catchment. It had appointed a Royal Commission on Land Drainage to go into the wider question. The Bill's critics argued, therefore, that the more prudent course was to wait until the Royal Commission had reported. Guinness emphasized, however, the uniqueness of the circumstances that gave rise to the Ouse Drainage Bill. The Government had no intention of offering the same level of Exchequer aid to other catchments. The Bill's rejection would mean those in the Ouse catchment would have to meet a much larger proportion, if not the full cost, of any future scheme.

The effect of the bill's being given a second reading, by a majority of 143 to 45 votes, was for it to be referred to a joint committee of both Houses of Parliament. 'Upland' interests spared no effort in pressing, through legal counsel, their opposition. As the Clerk to the Hertfordshire Council expressed it, any extension of the liability for meeting the cost of downriver drainage-works would be 'a very serious thing' for his county. Hertfordshire was 'so entirely an upland county' as to form part of 'several very large rivers'. The Joint Committee resolved, in November 1927, by a majority of 5 to 3 members that the Bill should not proceed. Although the Lord Chairman followed the custom of not giving reasons, it was assumed the majority thought such a far-reaching decision must await the findings of the Royal Commission.<sup>22</sup> By a further Provisional Order Confirmation Act (18 & 19 George V, c. XXIII), the suspensory period was again extended until 'a day to be decided by the Minister'.<sup>23</sup>

#### IV

A fourth stage had been reached. Parliament had rejected a catchment-by-catchment approach for one that established a statutory framework for the whole country. The Ministry was well prepared, in the sense that concurrently with the promotion of the Ouse Bill, it had set in train a review of the arterial-drainage needs of the whole country. In moving the Second Reading of 'the small County Councils Drainage Bill' of 1926, the Parliamentary Secretary, Lord Bledisloe, had announced the Government's intention of introducing a Bill for 'the wholesale amendment of the existing law relating to land drainage', based on the findings of the Ouse Commission.<sup>24</sup>

A large landowner and Unionist Member of Parliament, Lord Bledisloe had acted as the House of Commons' spokesman for the Food Controller during the Great War, and thereafter Chairman of the Lawes Agricultural Trust.<sup>25</sup> As he wrote to the Minister, in December 1924,

<sup>22</sup> Bedfordshire RO, GPD 6; PP, 1927 VI, *Report of the Joint Select Committee, Ouse Drainage Bill*; Roseveare, *Transactions*, p. 181.

<sup>23</sup> PD, *Lords*, 71, 457-8.

<sup>24</sup> PD, *Lords*, 63, 368-9.

<sup>25</sup> E. J. Russell, 'Obituary', *JRASE* 119 (1958), pp. 57-9.

soon after his appointment as Parliamentary Secretary, land drainage had become the most important problem awaiting Ministry intervention. A Bill enacted by a Conservative Government would be far less contentious than one introduced by 'any Government of a different political complexion'.<sup>26</sup> And in a further commentary of September 1925, Bledisloe emphasized how it would be easier to justify financial assistance to arterial drainage than for any other 'direct benefit to British agriculture'. Where minor schemes might be seen as subsidising certain landowners, and field drainage was entirely a matter for landlords and tenants, a bill to expedite arterial drainage could be represented as enforcing the 'neighbourliness' required of every landowner in the execution of such large-scale improvement-works.<sup>27</sup>

As drafted under Dobson's supervision, the bill envisaged the drainage bodies being given much greater permissive powers. They might seek, through Provisional Order procedures, a wider definition of the 'area to benefit' and, therefore, a larger rateable-income. And secondly, such revenue would be more simply collected through the appropriate local authority. The Ministry's Legal Adviser, C. H. Stocks, protested that such permissive powers, whilst obviously desirable, hardly amounted to 'a real attempt to deal with a long felt need'. Dobson agreed, but hesitated to recommend any compulsory extension of rating provision until it was known whether ministers were prepared to launch into 'a bill of first-class magnitude'. As Stocks himself conceded, there was no legislative subject better calculated to produce 'opposition and criticism from every available quarter of those who own or are interested in land'. The draft Bill might well have been shelved, but for the pressure Lord Bledisloe continued to apply.<sup>28</sup>

The report of the Ouse Commission both confirmed the need for a general bill and yet demanded something more by way of evidence. As Stocks minuted, it was very doubtful whether such an enquiry would carry sufficient weight, dealing only with 'one small quarter of England' – albeit one that loomed so large in drainage minds. The backing of 'a really strong' Royal Commission was needed. The Permanent Secretary, Sir Francis Floud, agreed that a Royal Commission would be the most effective method of creating the public opinion needed for such drastic reform. Whilst not dissenting, Dobson warned of how the Bill would be even more delayed. Lord Bledisloe disagreed. With the Ouse Commission's report to hand, its investigations should soon be completed. Walter Guinness persuaded the Prime Minister, Stanley Baldwin, of the need for a Commission.<sup>29</sup>

The Cabinet approved its appointment in February 1927, with Lord Bledisloe as Chairman. Members were otherwise chosen not so much to reflect drainage interests as to include 'a sprinkling of really prominent men, who will give confidence to the public mind'. Dobson felt 'very strongly' that the choice should be so framed as to ensure a verdict favourable to 'the watershed principle'. Leopold Harvey was a member of both the Ouse Commission and the new body, giving evidence to the latter in a personal capacity. The twelve members otherwise included Sir George Courthope, a leading agriculturalist and Unionist MP, Rowland R. Robbins, a past-President of the National Farmers' Union, and Walter R. Smith, the Parliamentary Secretary to the Ministry of Agriculture in the Labour Government of 1924. Lord Clinton was

<sup>26</sup> PRO, MAF 49/764.

<sup>28</sup> PRO, MAF 49/817.

<sup>27</sup> Cambridge University Library (hereafter CUL), Baldwin MSS, 25.

<sup>29</sup> PRO, MAF 49/817.

Chairman of the Forestry Commission. Sir George H. Etherton was Clerk to the Lancashire County Council and of the Lancashire Rivers Board, and Sir Joseph Priestley was a member of the Hertfordshire County Council. John W. Hills, the Unionist MP and Financial Secretary to the Treasury in 1922–23, had recently published a book on government finance.<sup>30</sup>

The Royal Commission worked with 'thoroughness and despatch', taking nine months to produce its report. As anticipated, it painted 'a vivid picture' of a tangle of no fewer than 361 different authorities, with antiquated powers and inadequate resources. One-seventh of lowland England and Wales was inadequately drained, or waterlogged. It recommended that the whole of each river basin should be brought under 'a supreme authority', a new Catchment Area Authority composed mainly of representatives of the county and country borough councils. The income provided by those councils would be raised as part of the general county rate – the 'uplands' paying a lower rate. The Catchment Authority would have direct charge of the main channels and banks, and general oversight of the existing internal drainage authorities, which should continue to function on the principle of benefit and escapement from danger.<sup>31</sup>

The Minister, Walter Guinness, applied, as was 'the usual custom', for Treasury approval for the circulation of a Cabinet paper, recommending the drafting of a Land Drainage Bill based on the Commission's findings. Although acknowledging they must be examined, Treasury officials minuted how such proposals came at 'an awkward moment'. Not only did they seek to establish new authorities and extend rating provision, at a time of major upheaval in local government, but opponents would certainly demand the whole, or a large part, of the burden being placed on the Exchequer. Although the Treasury must continue to put up 'a stiff fight', its position had been much weakened by the grant aid provided under the unemployment-relief schemes. The £1 million agricultural-drainage fund had further whetted the appetites of local drainage boards. Its justification, on the grounds that 'the cost of the necessary works is greater than the land can bear', had set a very dangerous precedent. Whilst approving the costs of the preparatory survey work for any bill, the Chancellor of the Exchequer, Winston Churchill, insisted (and Guinness conceded), in June 1928, that there must be further 'very careful consideration before the Government commit themselves even in principle to any such far reaching scheme'.<sup>32</sup>

Although Lord Bledisloe resigned office in February 1928 (to become founder-Chairman of the Imperial Grassland Association), he continued, as a constructive critic, to sustain the political momentum. In moving an adjournment debate a year later, in February 1929, he focused particularly on the wastage of investment in the 'patchy, sporadic and isolated attempts to improve drainage conditions' (usually as part of unemployment relief schemes), without the State having first prepared the way with arterial schemes. As the Earl De la Warr (the Opposition Spokesman) expressed it, only the State could provide the requisite funds and 'directing intelligence', whereby the solution of one problem helped resolve another. Not only might unemployed miners and others be given work, but their skills were so highly suited to such arterial-drainage schemes. The brief debate (there were only three speakers) provided the most public platform for the Parliamentary Secretary, the Earl of Stradbroke, to refute any suggestion

<sup>30</sup> J. W. Hills, *The Finance of Government* (1925).

<sup>32</sup> PRO, T 161/483

<sup>31</sup> See n. 6 above.

of the Commission's findings being pigeon-holed. They were being actively developed. Preliminary and highly-specialist work was proceeding in delimiting the catchment areas. Where the Commission had identified a hundred catchments, the Ministry believed some twenty of the most major and 'urgent' areas must be surveyed and identified as part of the legislation.<sup>33</sup>

Perhaps most decisively, there was strong party-political support. 'No species of work' was perceived as 'more valuable for the countryside'. The Unionist's Agricultural Committee urged the Prime Minister, in March 1929, to combine land drainage, land settlement and unemployment as 'a really big item in a policy which would appeal to the towns as well as the country'. The extreme unpopularity of an 'uplands' rate could be avoided if each catchment received an Exchequer grant. Not only would that be justified, if the whole country were administered on the basis of catchment areas, but the Boards would be better able to plan, without waiting for the collection of contentious rates.<sup>34</sup> The Conservative Manifesto, for the General Election of May 1929, promised that, if re-elected, a Bill would be introduced.

## V

In the event, it was Noel Buxton, as the Minister of Agriculture in the new Labour Government, who impressed upon the Cabinet, in July 1929, 'the utmost importance of a bill', both on agricultural and political grounds. The waterlogged conditions of much of the countryside were a serious handicap to efficient farming. Drainage work provided the chief agricultural contribution to the relief of unemployment. The Royal Commission had emphasized how a drastic revision of the law must precede further drainage development.<sup>35</sup> The Earl De La Warr moved the Second Reading in the House of Lords in April 1930, describing it as an enabling measure – a 'Bill of machinery and of preparation for work to come'.<sup>36</sup>

The Bill provided initially for 47 Catchment Boards, including what became known as the Bedfordshire Ouse Catchment Board. Each was to comprise up to 31 members, of whom two-thirds would represent the relevant county councils and county borough councils. Besides one member representing himself, the Minister was to appoint the remainder as representatives of the lands that would directly benefit from the drainage works. The individual Boards would be responsible for the works required on the 'main rivers'. As well as general oversight of the schemes undertaken by other parties, the Catchment Boards would have powers to grant aid, 'modernise' and establish new internal drainage boards so as to cover in time the whole of the 'lowland' areas.<sup>37</sup>

Complication arose from the decision made by the previous Government, under the Local Government Act of 1929, to exempt agricultural land and farm buildings from the payment of local-authority rates. The effect was to create, under the Royal Commission's proposals, the anomalous situation whereby farming, the principal beneficiary of improved drainage, escaped any liability for its costs. At Buxton's suggestion, the Cabinet sought the advice of an *ad hoc* committee of officials from the Treasury, Ministry of Health and his own department. It concluded that no difference in principle existed between other local government 'service' rates

<sup>33</sup> PD, Lords, 72, 881–904.

<sup>34</sup> CUL, Baldwin MSS, 25.

<sup>35</sup> PRO, CAB 24/205 and CAB 23/61.

<sup>36</sup> PD, Lords, 77, 67–106.

<sup>37</sup> PRO, CAB 26/13 and CAB 23/63.

and the general drainage charge that was to be imposed by the Catchment Boards on the local authorities of the whole catchment area. So as to secure some agricultural contribution, the inter-departmental committee recommended that a precept should be raised additionally on the internal drainage boards (IDBs) as a 'benefit' rate of such lowland areas. The Cabinet approved such a compromise.<sup>38</sup>

The Treasury had recognized the whole notion of grant aid would have to be reconsidered. With 'no stable and normal basis of Catchment Area control' previous arrangements had been necessarily *ad hoc*. Officials refused however to indicate the scale and nature of any future Treasury support. The Ministry accepted such vagueness as an inevitable condition of its approval for the Bill. A deputation from the County Councils Association, in March 1930, warned however that its support depended on such expenditure as raised from local authorities being counted as a new service under the Local Government Act, and therefore qualifying for grant aid. Dobson reported how the Minister, having read all the papers on the subject, was convinced the Bill must explicitly offer such financial assistance. As Treasury officials acknowledged, the Association might easily defeat such a contentious measure.<sup>39</sup>

The Chancellor of the Exchequer, Philip Snowden, agreed to the general principle that 'the State was prepared to contribute to the capital cost of getting the land drainage system of the country into decent order', but he emphasized it was no part of the State's business, once achieved, to support its upkeep and repair any more than to provide grant aid for other such local services as the drainage of urban areas. Approval was given for the Earl De La Warr to give 'a cautiously worded promise' during the Lords' Second Reading. Treasury officials were furious however when he departed from their brief, under close questioning, and virtually committed the Government to tabling a finance clause in the Lords. Not only did this show singular disregard for the House of Commons' privileges, but it gave critics ample time to prepare for the Financial Resolution in the Commons. There was however no mistaking the hostility of both Houses of Parliament to the 'great powers being given to Ministers' and the imposition of 'serious liabilities on landowners and ratepayers'.<sup>40</sup>

Without an explicit commitment in the Bill to the Government meeting a large part of the costs of carrying out the intended drainage-works, there was a real possibility of its being defeated on its Third Reading in the Lords. A Lords' Motion applied further pressure, demanding publication of the details of the Exchequer grant-aid, before the Lords' Committee Stage. Whilst Snowden protested that 'Exchequer money spent on drainage is a sheer gift to the landowners', the Cabinet saw no alternative but for the Lord De La Warr reading out the text of the financial clause which would be moved during its passage through the Commons. It indicated the minister might,

out of moneys provided by Parliament, make grants towards expenditure incurred by Catchment Boards under the Act, in the improvement of existing works or the construction of new works of such amounts as the Treasury may from time to time sanction.

Dobson regarded the inclusion of 'the improvement of existing works' as a signal achievement

<sup>38</sup> PRO, CAB 24/207 and CAB 23/62.

<sup>39</sup> PRO, T 161/483.

<sup>40</sup> PRO, T 161/483; *PD, Lords*, 77, 82-3.

in the Ministry's negotiation with the Treasury. More immediately, the clause proved sufficient to satisfy critics, yet elastic enough for account to be taken of the volume of work and rateable income of the individual Catchment Board in deciding the level of aid the minister might award.<sup>41</sup>

Christopher Addison (who had succeeded Buxton as Minister of Agriculture) moved the Second Reading of the Bill in the House of Commons in June 1930. Almost every contributor to the debate remarked on how it was one of those very rare occasions, when the frontbench spokesmen of all three political parties supported a major Bill. As Guinness noted ruefully, the Labour Opposition to his earlier Ouse Drainage Bill had argued that such large-scale Exchequer support should only be given where the land was taken into public ownership. That pre-requisite was now forgotten as those the very same persons also strove to transfer the 'crushing burden', carried by a comparatively few ratepayers, to the 'broader shoulders' of the whole catchment and the State. But if land nationalisation was quietly 'buried', a small number of backbench Conservative Members showed their 'outright hostility' to the bill. Captain R. C. Bourne, the member for Oxford, moved a 'wrecking' Motion, arguing that farming was simply not worth the £30-40 million of public expenditure, which the Royal Commission estimated would be ultimately necessary for drainage improvement. In so far as the Government had money to spare for agriculture, it should be invested in making farming profitable on the inherently better soils.<sup>42</sup>

Buxton had warned the Cabinet of fierce criticism to the rating provisions. The Royal Commission had insisted the ambitious improvement to the main channels could only proceed if the entire catchment was assumed to benefit.<sup>43</sup> But as the Agricultural Committee of the Bedfordshire County Council emphasized it was also the very principle upon which the 'upland' counties had defeated the Ouse Drainage Bill. The Clerk to the Hertfordshire County Council was confident that they 'could again win in any Committee Room'. But as he also noted, the principle of the Land Drainage Bill, as an explicitly Government-measure, would be debated and decided in 'the body of the House'. Ranged against the Government Whips, the 'upland' counties were bound to lose. The Clerk to the Bedfordshire County Council accordingly pressed for a compromise, whereby each county would remain 'the responsible Drainage Authority', but with 'the Ministry of Agriculture being clothed with suitable default powers'.<sup>44</sup> It was a compromise developed by the Member for Bedford, in seconding the hostile motion. As the drainage authorities responsible for their respective administrative areas, the county councils should be encouraged to form groupings to address the needs of the individual catchments.<sup>45</sup>

As anticipated, the Government obtained the Commons' approval for the principle of the bill. The backbench motion was outmanoeuvred. As one Member put it, the bill had both an agricultural and social aspect. It promised to provide employment through drainage works for many of his constituents thrown out of 'blast-furnace work'. Although a former Conservative minister, Col. G. R. Lane Fox, complained of how the Liberal Party had, through David Lloyd George, especially 'blown up' the employment opportunities, the Bill was essentially what the previous Conservative Government would have promoted. It had placated the existing drainage

<sup>41</sup> PRO, T 161/483; PD, *Lords*, 77, 330-6, *Commons*, 240, 999-1000 and 1515-48.

<sup>42</sup> *Ibid.*, 240, 993-1034.

<sup>43</sup> PRO, CAB 26/13; CAB 23/63.

<sup>44</sup> Bedfordshire RO, GPD 6.

<sup>45</sup> PD, *Commons*, 240, 1034-9.

boards by integrating them into the larger scheme of things.<sup>46</sup> Indeed, some of the most relevant and powerful argument in favour of the Bill came from Opposition Spokesmen. Sir George Courthope had been a member of the Royal Commission. He spoke of how, in the same way as the householder expected to contribute to the costs of the sewers that carried away the scullery waste and bathwater, so every part of a river catchment should accept some liability for arterial drainage.

There was, as Alan Wilt has observed in a wider context, recognition of how 'the country landscape' was changing unmistakably.<sup>47</sup> In winding up for the Opposition, Viscount Wolmer attacked the backbench motion of Members of his own Party for ignoring the urban impact on the countryside. The Motion had failed to recognize how drainage costs arose not so much from farming needs as from the physical consequences of 'our great towns'. Although the concept of 'a natural prescriptive right' might still pertain, say to the drainage of an upland moor, the discharge from a comparable area of buildings and waterproof streets had a very different effect. Not only was it considerably accelerated, but the transfer of millions of gallons of water from such catchments as those of Wales and the Lake District meant the volume of some of the rivers draining the cities and towns had increased by as much as five to six times.<sup>48</sup> Where it might seem most equitable for the payment of drainage rates to be based on acreage, so as to reflect the volume of rainfall, Courthope believed the Royal Commission had correctly pressed for the annual value of property, as a better guide to the enormous influence now exerted by such built-up areas on the discharge to the rivers.<sup>49</sup> The Bill was given a Second Reading without division.

## VI

The Bill received the Royal Assent in August 1930 (20 & 21 George V, c. 44). With that fifth stage in the drainage-reform process, farmers had moved from a position where those directly to benefit from a scheme met the full cost, to one where the industry bore only a small proportion of the investment in arterial drainage. Over the first five years, 1931–35, local authorities provided some three-quarters of the income of the Catchment Boards. The internal drainage districts contributed 16 per cent and the Exchequer most of the remainder.<sup>50</sup>

Such an imbalance made re-organisation and extension of the drainage districts even more pressing. A much-cited case was that of the Witham and Steeping rivers catchment area of Lincolnshire. Forty-seven existing bodies covering 238,893 acres were replaced by 7 internal drainage boards that together had jurisdiction over an additional 93,572 acres. The Medway Catchment Board of Kent most famously sought, at a 3-day Public Inquiry in March 1933, to include every acre of land that could conceivably be brought within an internal drainage district. It included both urban and rural land up to 8 feet above the highest known flood-level in both non-tidal and tidal areas. Officials obtained the personal authority of the Minister for both drafting and widely-publicising what became known as 'the Medway Letter', that explained why

<sup>46</sup> *Ibid.*, 240, 1039–45.

<sup>47</sup> A. Wilt, *Food for war. Agriculture and rearmament in Britain before the Second World War* (2001), pp. 156–7.

<sup>48</sup> *PD, Commons*, 240, 1003–10 and 1092–7.

<sup>49</sup> *Ibid.*, 240, 1008 and 1092–7.

<sup>50</sup> Ministry of Agriculture, *Report of operations and proceedings under the Land Drainage Act 1930 to 31 March 1937* (1937).

the guidelines adopted since the 1918 Act must be followed. The limit to rating by internal drainage boards in urban areas should be the highest-known flood, or spring tide, level. In rural areas, it was 8 feet above the highest non-tidal flood, and 5 feet above the ordinary spring tide – the difference reflecting the slighter impact of tidal flooding on the rooting-systems of farm crops. Whilst the Catchment Board had rightly pointed to the benefits of protecting underground electricity and other utilities, the 'Letter' described how this was 'a community service' for which the Catchment Board already precepted through the local-authority rates. Field trials carried out by the Rothamsted Experimental Station subsequently demonstrated how the prescribed agricultural limits were 'fair and reasonable'.<sup>51</sup>

As the international situation deteriorated, and the strategic importance of home-grown foodstocks was again recognized, opposition to such ministerial intervention further weakened. The drainage provisions of the Agriculture Act of 1937 (1 Edward VIII & 1 George VI, c. 70) marked perhaps a sixth stage of improvement. Grant aid could be paid to both internal drainage boards and county councils for improvements to the lesser streams, drains and watercourses. Although pressed during the Second Reading debate to include the 'overhauling and relaying' of field-drains and ditching-work on individual farms, the Parliamentary Secretary argued it would be premature until such 'middle schemes' were functional.<sup>52</sup> Whilst Members suspected the 'niggardliness' of the Treasury, officials of the Ministry's Land Drainage Branch became increasingly concerned at the poor response to the grant aid already offered, namely of 33 per cent for 'the ordinary work of drainage' and 50 per cent for such constructional works as a pumping station, sluice gates or sea walls. The 213 schemes undertaken in the first operative year of the Act, at an aggregate cost of £194,636, made a pitifully small impact. Only 63, costing as little as £8,929, were promoted by the county councils. As one frustrated Ministry official protested, in October 1938, the Government was entitled, when grants were offered, 'to expect the co-operation of local authorities in seeing that the facilities offered are taken advantage of'.<sup>53</sup>

More fundamentally, such a shortfall in activity highlighted an anxiety voiced in the parliamentary debates, namely that the 'cart' was being put before the 'horse'. The farming industry was too impoverished to take advantage of such administrative and financial aid. The Land Drainage Branch had argued, during the drafting of the 1937 Bill, that land drainage, as 'the primary service' in many districts, should take priority in its labour requirements over 'normal agricultural operations'. The Ministry's Labour Branch was, however, so anxious as to the competition for labour, as would come from the higher wages paid for drainage work, that it succeeded in confining grant aid to 'the winter interregnum', when such work might help tide over those seasonally stood down on the farms. The grant aid paid, say in sugar-beet districts, was delayed until Christmas, the worst possible time of the year for drainage-work. The compromise, as eventually approved by the Minister in November 1938, was to limit such restrictions to manual digging. A skilled excavator driver and his mate, or those employed on structural work, were hardly agricultural labourers.<sup>54</sup>

<sup>51</sup> Ministry of Agriculture, *Ibid.*, pp. 69–72; PRO, MAF 49, 182; B. A. Keen, 'Land drainage: the area of benefit', *J. Ministry of Agriculture* 43 (1936), pp. 521–6.

<sup>52</sup> *PD, Lords*, 106, 677–736.

<sup>53</sup> PRO, MAF 49/836.

<sup>54</sup> PRO, MAF 49/836–7.

## VII

A specialist sub-committee of the Central Water Advisory Council (CWAC) claimed, from a post second world war perspective, that no step in the long history of drainage legislation had been more important than the establishment of unified control of every catchment, under substantial bodies armed with effective powers.<sup>55</sup> As this paper has related, the Land Drainage Act of 1930 was itself the culmination of a five-stage process which, with hindsight, had begun with the greater facility granted under the 1918 Act to appoint elective drainage bodies. Whilst the establishment of the Ouse Drainage Board had represented a second stage, in the sense of further demonstrating the merits of a whole-catchment approach, the hostility encountered to its rating provisions necessitated a third stage, namely the resolution of how the costs of arterial drainage should be apportioned. A fourth stage was required, when the rejection of the Ouse Drainage Bill confirmed the need for national guidelines as to how such co-ordination of drainage benefit and payment was to be achieved. Principal actors may be identified. Lord Bledisloe had succeeded in obtaining the fifth stage, the Land Drainage Bill, by the time of his appointment as governor-general of New Zealand. A sixth stage, the drainage provisions of the Agriculture Act of 1937, had been accomplished by the promotion of Alban Dobson to Fisheries Secretary in 1938.<sup>56</sup>

Where much might be made of the hostility of sectoral interests and miserliness of the Treasury, perhaps the most remarkable aspect of the Act of 1930 was the priority accorded to agricultural interests at a time of such economic and social turmoil. From his position as Parliamentary Private Secretary, Tom Williams paid especial tribute in his autobiography to the courage and patience of Christopher Addison in securing the Bill in such a delicately-balanced parliament.<sup>57</sup> Addison capitalized on the widely-held belief, which Williams himself held as a Member of Parliament for a colliery district, that, by advancing the drainage infrastructure so as to enable agriculturalists to help themselves, there would also be some alleviation of unemployment generally. By the late 1930s, perceptions as to the utility of farming had widened further, as concern increased as to food production in the event of war. By the Agriculture (Miscellaneous War Provisions) Act of 1940, grants of 50 per cent were offered for under-drainage and ditching, where approved by the County War Agricultural Committees.

In the longer term, the inter-war measures considerably enhanced the standing of land-drainage interests in the wider counsels of watercourse management. Walter Guinness had wondered, at the time of the Royal Commission in January 1926, whether its terms of reference should encompass the fisheries dimension and, therefore, the control of pollution. Dobson warned of how such a broadening of the Commission's terms of reference might extend opposition to an eventual Bill. A locus would be provided for other government departments, and most obviously the Ministry of Health, to intervene.<sup>58</sup> The Act of 1930 went no further than to enable the Minister of Health to designate a Catchment Board as a sanitary authority, where

<sup>55</sup> Central Water Advisory Council, *Report of the Land Drainage Legislation Sub-Committee* (1951).

<sup>56</sup> *The Times*, 21 May 1962. Shortly after his retirement as Under Secretary in 1946, Dobson was appointed Secretary of the International Whaling Commission.

<sup>57</sup> Thomas Williams (Lord Williams of Barnburgh), *Digging for Britain* (1965), pp. 115–6. Williams (1888–1967) was a Parliamentary Secretary to the Ministry between 1940 and 1945 and Minister 1945–51.

<sup>58</sup> PRO, MAF 49/817.

this was required to prevent pollution. It was the experience of managing the whole country on a catchment-basis that caused the Boards to become an exemplar of what could be achieved more generally. By the River Boards Act of 1948, the Catchment Boards, Fisheries Boards, and powers possessed by local authorities to regulate pollution, were subsumed within the newly-appointed River Boards.<sup>59</sup> By that time, Ministry had approved catchment-board schemes costing over £23 million. A further £8.75 million had been given for schemes undertaken by the internal drainage boards and county councils.

Less positively, other premonitions voiced in the inter-war drainage debates also became apparent, as agriculture became more prosperous and better able to take advantage of such investment and advances in drainage technology. There was a resonance of the earlier controversies as to land reform and taxation during the brief Commons' Third Reading debate of July 1930,<sup>60</sup> when the Labour Member, Josiah Wedgwood, attacked the Bill for using rates and taxes to increase the value of land from, say, £5 per acre to perhaps as much as £1,000 per acre. As Philip Snowden before him, Wedgwood warned of how landowners were being handed 'a gigantic present'.<sup>61</sup> Wedgwood had in mind 'up-riverside residences'. The greater dilemma for conservation bodies after the second world war were the profits to be made from the drainage and agricultural 'improvement' of 'traditional' alluvial grasslands. Opponents of the Ouse Drainage Bill had themselves emphasized the importance of winter flooding for the husbandry of such meadows. Walter Guinness had confessed there were so many diverse and conflicting interests, that it was humanly impossible to accommodate them all.<sup>62</sup> As the powers and structures of the Land Drainage Act of 1930 came fully to be realized, such dichotomies as identified within agriculture itself became the subject of increasing acrimony between the farming industry and the burgeoning demands of the amenity and wildlife-conservation interests.<sup>63</sup>

<sup>59</sup> J. Sheail, 'Pollution and the management of water-courses in postwar Britain', *J. Contemporary History* 33 (1998), pp. 117–33.

<sup>60</sup> I. Packer, *Lloyd George, Liberalism and the Land. The Land Issue and Party Politics in England, 1906–1914* (2001).

<sup>61</sup> PD, *Commons*, 242, 218–26.

<sup>62</sup> PD, *Commons*, 207, 1209–17.

<sup>63</sup> J. Purseglove, *Taming the flood. A history and natural history of rivers and wetlands* (1989); H. Cook and T. Williamson (eds), *Water management in the English landscape. Field, marsh and meadow* (1999), pp. 210–43.