

The king who cared: a story revealed

In the first of a series of articles marking the 70th anniversary of the eviction of hundreds of Norfolk villagers in order to establish an army training ground, **Steve Snelling** reveals the truth about the King's intervention in the controversial 'land-grab' saga.

The King was troubled. Humiliating defeat in the Far East was being followed by humiliating retreat in North Africa. In an empire where the sun famously never set, the shadows were everywhere lengthening. Singapore had fallen, Burma was lost, Egypt and the Suez canal were endangered and India, the jewel in the imperial crown, lay exposed to invasion.

But in the midst of a perfect storm of military disasters there was another issue much closer to home that was vexing Britain's monarch in that grim summer of 1942.

As Rommel's much-vaunted Afrika Korps marched on Cairo and the Japanese whirlwind blew ever-nearer to Australia, King George VI's attention was diverted by another army of occupation and an altogether different territorial dispute involving 18,000 acres of countryside earmarked as a new battle training ground.

In the third week of June, he announced his "personal interest" with the first in a series of letters to the War Office that signalled the beginning of a royal intervention that has long been shrouded in mystery.

For 70 years, the role of the King in the most controversial Norfolk 'land grab' since the Norman conquest has been the subject of rumour and speculation.

But now, at last, fresh light has been shed on his involvement in the forcible expulsion of more than 1,000 people from their homes and farms in Breckland. Papers in the National Archives reveal his concern for the plight of families who had been turned into refugees by their own government and his persistent efforts to seek assurances for their future.

Most significantly, they make plain that in a heartbreaking saga littered with allegations of betrayal and broken promises the King was under the same illusion as the villagers who thought they would be able to return to their homes and resume their old way of life at the end of the war.

The official documents, contained in a War Office file relating to the "compulsory evacuation of civilians", also show that the people of Langford, Stanford, Tottington and West Tofts were deliberately kept "in

the dark" until the last moment.

At the height of the dispute, a senior official admitted that the scheme to establish nine new training areas - roughly one six-mile square stretch of countryside per army corps - had originally been treated as "secret", under the direction of the army's commander-in-chief. But he added: "We genuinely did not know that these areas would be approved until a few days before we let it out, and it seemed to us better not to reveal the scheme until we knew it was going to be operated."

War Office papers show that the army regarded the creation of training grounds where units could carry out "realistic formation battle practice" as vital to the nation's struggle against Germany.

"The most serious disadvantage which our army at Home suffers in comparison with the enemy is that, when called upon to operate, it will pass over-night from conditions of peacetime training to the stresses and nerve-strain of war," insisted one report. "The enemy is more fortunately placed; he can season his formations by giving them their turn in battle. It is essential to reduce this handicap, even if heavy sacrifices are involved."

By April 1942, following a covert reconnaissance to find suitable sites, the army had identified where those "heavy sacrifices" would have to be made. Two of them were in East Anglia, one on 26,000 acres of "poor arable land, heathland and salt marshes" near Orford and the other on ground north-east of Thetford, consisting mostly of "heath and woodlands".

When announced in the late spring the decision came as a bombshell to the unsuspecting villagers who found themselves liable for eviction. Billeting and compensation arrangements were made on much the same basis as if the people had been blitzed out of their homes by enemy air attack.

Local politicians were appalled. One described the likely "destruction" of their homes as "the very fate from which the young men of these villages... are trying to preserve for [their] country".

The man who stood to lose most was Lord Walsingham. Not only was he said to have "put a lot of money into the land", reports stated that he derived most of his income from rents and game shooting rights. "He will be nearly ruined," wrote

“The King could feel satisfied that assurances had been given, hardships alleviated and promises made over their future. Only after the war had been won would he discover that the assurances counted for nothing.”



one senior general. But Walsingham was not about to go down without a fight. He suggested alternative sites, all of which were rejected as unsuitable. According to Lt Gen Kenneth Anderson, commander-in-chief Eastern Command, Walsingham "fought to the utmost against the expulsion, by all legal means".

After that, he, like so many of his tenants, displayed a rare selflessness in support of a plan that would destroy their way of life. Anderson, along with senior government officials, were struck by their demeanour. "I was amazed at the loyalty and understanding with which they received the bitter news," wrote Anderson. "It was quite splendid and made a thoroughly distasteful task much easier. I promised and will fulfil that promise to do all I can to help them."

Walsingham was, no doubt, gratified by such assurances, but he hadn't quite exhausted his efforts on behalf of his tenants. While local MPs appealed in vain to Churchill to investigate the case in the hope that "these poor people's homes are spared", he turned to a fellow Norfolk landowner and near neighbour for help - King George VI. In the 70 years since

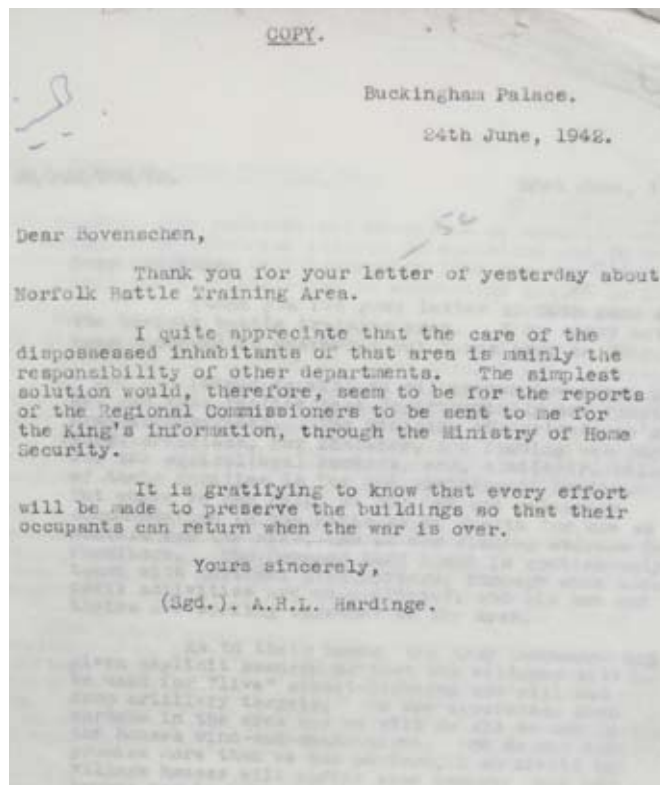
the most contentious of all wartime land requisitions, Walsingham's petition to the King has been a source of dispute. Some villagers claim never to have heard of any petition. Others have doubted its existence. Meanwhile, Lucilla Reeve, Walsingham's land agent who certainly did know about it, "hated the idea" of appealing to the King.

She wrote: "If it was necessary for winning the war to take over our homes we should not have asked his Majesty to interfere... He didn't of course."

The documents in the War Office file, however, not only confirm that there was a petition, but they also reveal that the King did "interfere" rather a lot - and over the course of several weeks during the turbulent summer of 1942.

The first indication of a royal intervention is contained in a letter dated June 19 from Sir Frederick Bovenschen, permanent under secretary of state for war, to the King's private secretary, Sir Alexander Hardinge, in which the government's case was set out and the arrangements for compensating and rehousing the villagers explained.

Once again, the conduct of the people



Battle Area correspondence from the National Archives. On the left, the King's private secretary Sir Alexander Hardinge wrote to Sir Frederick Bovenschen, permanent under secretary of state for war, on June 24 1942. Right: Later that year, Sir Alexander thanked the Sir Frederick for helping secure a grant to aid the evicted villagers.



be able to return to their homes when the war is over?"

The question was a critical one and, while the War Office did not provide a direct answer, Bovenschen was careful not to disabuse the King of his assumption and what he had to say was evidently enough to convince him that there was no intention for the occupation to continue after the war - although quite what would remain of the farms and villages was not at all clear.

Writing on June 23, Bovenschen stated that the army commander had given "explicit assurances" that the villages "will not be used for 'live' street-fighting and will not form artillery targets". Land wardens were being appointed and a promise was made to do "all we can to keep the houses wind-and-water-tight".

However, Bovenschen added the proviso: "We do not want to promise more than we can perform. I am afraid that the village houses will suffer some damage; and isolated houses may be badly knocked about. We hope to take special steps to safeguard the churches and, perhaps, one or two buildings of special aesthetic or historic value; but you will understand that every area put out of bounds introduces an unrealistic factor into the exercises."

In framing his reply to Buckingham Palace, Bovenschen almost certainly drew on a report prepared four days earlier by the comptroller of lands at the War Office, C L Bayne.

The language was almost word for word the same, although Bovenschen chose not to repeat his official's assurances about going "easy" with shell-fire until crops had been "salvaged", nor his observations on the likely duration of the army's occupation.

"How long we hold the land depends, of course, on the progress of the war," wrote Bayne. "We might relinquish it if we could get room for training on the continent..."

Mollified by the War Office's apparent assurances, Hardinge replied on behalf of the King: "It is gratifying to know that every effort will be made to preserve the buildings so that their occupants can return when the war is over."

With the struggles in the Middle East and the Far East at such a critical juncture, the King might have been forgiven for thinking he had spent enough time on the fate of a few hundred villagers and a few thousands acres of Norfolk countryside, but papers in the War Office file show that he continued to monitor the government's

Land-grab saga: Tottington Church in the heart of the Stanta training area (main picture) and right, George VI, who took a personal interest in the consequences of the decision to create a battle training area. The extent of his intervention can now be revealed.

handling of the situation. Following reports of people facing financial hardship, the King instructed his private secretary to write again to Bovenschen, urging him to ensure that such cases were treated with "generosity and, more important still, without undue delay". Hardinge concluded his letter of July 8 with the telling comment: "It would, in His Majesty's opinion, be very regrettable if the impression were created that they had not been liberally treated from a financial point of view."

Bovenschen insisted that claims were being dealt with "promptly" and "as generously as we possibly can". He also revealed that efforts were being made to set up a further fund in order to provide assistance in cases of "extreme hardship" that were not covered by the terms of the compensation act.

This was a reference to overtures made to the charitable Pilgrim Trust which, "after much discussion and hesitation", agreed in September 1942 to make a one-off grant of £1,000 to be shared between the Norfolk War Charities Committee and the Suffolk Lord Lieutenant's Fund.

The money, which was in lieu of the extra aid people who had been bombed out of their homes might have received from local funds, was specifically intended to "meet cases of hardship among civil evacuees from the battle training areas".

Details of the support were sent to Buckingham Palace on September 22 with an additional note, stating that the trust had "particularly asked that the source of the grant should not be given undue publicity".

It prompted a reply, two days later, from Sir Alexander Hardinge, praising the War Office's sensitive handling of the heart-breaking evictions:

"The upheaval seems to have been extraordinarily well controlled, and no complaints have reached us, as might well have been

expected. "The grant from the Pilgrim Trust should be most helpful; and it is evident that all Departments co-operated very well with a view to reducing hardships as far as possible."

Intended as a response to a "final note" on the battle area saga, the letter appears to have represented Buckingham Palace's last word on the subject during that fateful summer of 1942.

As villagers returned briefly to gather in their crops with help from local schoolchildren and soldiers taking a break from their training, the King could feel satisfied that assurances had been given, hardships alleviated and promises made over their future.

Only after the war had been won would he discover that the assurances and promises counted for nothing in the final reckoning for Norfolk's 'lost' villages and their betrayed citizens.

Our series continues on Monday in the EDP with a look at how the evictions were reported - and debated.



was praised as being "magnificent in the face of what must be a disaster for them". Bovenschen told Hardinge that they had even "applauded" the officials who were effectively evicting them from their homes. "It is spirit like this which makes one so sure that there can only be one end to the war," he added.

The response from Buckingham Palace was swift. Hardinge replied on June 20 that "while feeling the deepest sympathy for the individuals affected", the King appreciated the need to establish an area where troops could train in realistic battle conditions. Lord Walsingham, he added, would be informed accordingly.

But that was not the end of the matter. Crucially to the events that were to follow, the King sought further assurances about the villagers' future and their property.

Hardinge wrote: "The King feels sure that the War Office will leave nothing undone to assist the people who are being unavoidably evicted, and will be glad if you will send me in due course a note as to how they are being provided for. His Majesty assumes that it will not be necessary to knock down all the buildings in the area, and that the inhabitants will