

THE CLERK'S COLUMN

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WATER, WATER EVERYWHERE

The word “sustainability” may only have been buzzing round the bonnets of the Powers that Be for a year or two, but the idea behind economical and responsible use of existing resources is as old as the human race. If there’s one resource we all need more than anything else, it’s water; and its availability has always been the main reason for the location of any settlement from hamlet to city. Apart from the obvious uses for staying alive and reasonably clean, two important historic functions of rivers and streams have been for transport (remember King Canute parking his sea-going navy at Longstock) and power, for driving mills – once there were three mills in Abbotts Ann and two in Little Ann. But Hampshire in general, and our little bit of it in particular, should be famous for another use of its river valleys, namely the creation of water-meadows, since our County contains nearly half of all the water meadows in England.

Most people think that these are just useful areas for containing the overflow from brooks whose digestion has been overwhelmed by too much rainfall. Fair enough; this year’s weather has proved their effectiveness at this job, as well as showing the wisdom of the people who built the dwellings in this and other villages just above the historic high water mark. Some people further upstream were taken aback by amounts of standing water on their meadows which they had never seen before; drainage into the sea via the Anton and the Test had been hindered by extra heavy weed growth, but it also turned out that an ex-Abbotts Ann householder had dammed the main stream of the Pillhill Brook just outside Monxton and diverted it along the bottom of his garden, where admittedly it did look very pretty. I could not possibly comment on whether it was this, or the wettest Spring since Noah launched his Ark, that had contributed to the unusual squishiness of the meadows upstream, but all sorts of statutory and voluntary agencies were made aware that Monxton was wet and wrathful. The Enforcement Officer from TVBC’s Planning Service is currently asking awkward questions as to why the work was done without planning permission.

Life by a riverside is not all *Wind in the Willows*. If you own the bank you also own half of the river-bed; in that case it’s your job to clear the weeds at specified times. The Environment Agency owns the water; you can’t build anything like a bridge without planning permission. The Test and Itchen people are interested in the fish; all sorts of officials who have never seen one in their lives order you not to upset the water-voles; don’t mess with an angry swan – folklore says they can break your leg. Oh, and remember that any exposed skin is a happy hunting ground for bloodthirsty insects like horseflies, and, nastiest of all, ticks. It’s not simple.

Anyway, water meadows were not set up to be simple sponges. Representing some pretty sophisticated technology dating from at least 350 years ago, they come well before the traditional 18th Century date for the beginning of the so-called Agrarian Revolution with its heroic inventors like Jethro Tull nicking spare parts from a church organ to make his sowing machine (aka seed-drill), or “Farmer George” (III) too busy crossing English with Spanish sheep to notice that he was losing the American colonies. A good century earlier work on the meadow in Little Ann was more likely to have been interrupted by columns of Cromwell’s troops marching down Green Lane and lining up to prevent the Cavaliers from crossing the Pill Hill Brook. That was in 1644.

The anonymous hydraulic engineers divided the meadows into parallel shallow ridges. They then constructed a series of dams, sluices hatches and conduits which fed river water into shallow channels running along the tops of the ridges, from where it would trickle down to a lower drainage channel leading back to the river. The aim was to maintain a steady flow to the grass-roots, not much more than an inch down. This brought nutrients from the river and kept the ground damp to the end of summer. When the grass is short and the sun is low, you can still see some of these ridges, and it’s not difficult to bump, or fall, into substantial remains of channels and hatches. What was achieved was early grazing and/or double the crop of hay you’d get from an ordinary hay-field.

The man in charge was the Drowner; his word was law and there were no holidays even at the end of harvest-tide. Everything had to be cleared, repaired and put in working order in time for the first “floating” in late winter, and then there were the dozens of hatches requiring constant attention. One enterprising agricultural college tried to run a working water meadow a few years ago, but found that this left the students with no time to study anything else.

Why am I going on about this? Well, I suppose it’s partly because it was July before I could put away my wellies and start humming *One man went to mow...* again. It’s also because I’m certain that you can’t understand the present, let alone plan the future, unless you know about your past. History casts a long shadow hereabouts and that word *Heritage* is loaded with significance. Now that we are really trying, as a community, to think hard about the present and future of Abbotts Ann, we ignore the past at our peril. If we don’t know where we came from, how can we be sure about where we’re at, or where we’re going?

Adrian Stokes, Clerk