

Hurst Water Meadow Trust – Dorchester on Thames

Notes for Secondary Schools – History

The Hurst¹ is an ancient flood meadow² that has been part of the Overy Mill complex since about the 8th century, when there were three mills in Dorchester, milling locally grown corn to make bread for the village using a natural source of energy. It was part of the extensive estates of the Bishop of Dorchester, whose see extended at one time to the Humber. Between 1072 and 1086, as the importance and population of Dorchester had waned, the bishop moved his headquarters to Lincoln, about 150 miles away. He took most of the old records with him, so there is not much record of the old mills and the Hurst. It was mentioned in a document as 'Le Hurst' in the 14th century. It appears on the 1840 tithe map. See www.hurst-water-meadow.co.uk.

With the dissolution of the monasteries in 1536 the Abbey estates passed into private ownership. In 1577 it was owned by the Cherrill family, some descendants of whom are still in the village. A distinguished resident was 'Cherrill of the Yard' who introduced fingerprinting into the criminal justice system³.

The meadow itself and the adjacent sluice, mill-race and millstream, demonstrate the way the mill was powered. There are more details in the accompanying Geography notes. The old drain near the access gate represents a former river stream. Not much will have changed in the last twelve centuries, with its views of the Abbey and Wittenham Clumps. There was probably a ford, where the long bridge is now, to link the hamlet of Overy with the main village.

Dorchester Abbey, the new Cloister Gallery and the Museum are all nearby and a joint visit can be arranged with their Education Officer, Sue Dixon. They make a small charge for guided tours. The history of the Abbey is well documented in a new book published for the Dorchester Abbey Preservation Trust⁴. In 635 Birinus converted Cynegils the King of Wessex to Christianity and baptized him in the River Thame, probably by the Hurst. He granted land at Dorchester for the establishment of a bishopric.

The buildings in the High Street are nearly all listed and there are many features of interest, in particular the two coaching Inns, the George, the White Hart and the Fleur de Lys dating back to when the road was an important coach route and the coaches had to stop to change horses and refresh the passengers. Two other inns, The Bull and the Crown are now private houses, but their carriage entrances remain. A good summary of the history of the village, the Abbey and its surroundings⁵ is available from the Museum (£4) and a copy can be posted.

The Dyke Hills dating from the iron age are a short walk away, beyond which is Day's Lock and the river Thames. Over the Thames is Little Wittenham church with the tomb of Mrs Oliver Cromwell. Wittenham clumps dominate the landscape, and the fort on Castle Hill dates back to the iron age. It is part of a 300 hectare nature reserve owned and managed by the Northmoor Trust (www.northmoortrust.co.uk). They also own Hill Farm, nearby, which houses the new and exciting Timescape Project (www.projecttimescape.co.uk). This uses virtual reality to demonstrate the impact of history and agricultural management on the landscape. Separate or combined visits can be arranged.

¹ The OED refers to a hurst as a hillock, sandy bank or a ford on gravel.

² A flood meadow relies on nature to flood in winter, rather than using dams and sluices.

³ Cherrill of the Yard. Autobiography of Ex-Chief Superintendent Fred Cherrill of the Fingerprint Bureau, New Scotland Yard. Harrap, 1954.

⁴ Kate Tiller (editor) Dorchester Abbey: Church and people 635–2005. Witney, Stonesfield Press, 2005. ISBN 0 9527126 4 4.

⁵ Jean Cook, Trevor Rowley (editors). Dorchester through the ages. Oxford University Department of External Studies. 1985. ISBN 0 903736 18 7.