

The Hurst Water Meadow story

24 March 2007

The distant past

The meadow has probably been a feature of the Overy Mill water management system since the 8th Century when the mill was built. There may even have been a mill there in Roman times. Overy Mill was mentioned in the Domesday Book.



In the 11th Century it became part of the extensive estates of the Bishop of Dorchester, who granted 'a pasture called Le Hurst' to the canons of Dorchester Abbey in the 14th Century. When the monasteries were dissolved in 1536, it passed into private hands – Sir Edmund Ashfield and the Fettiplace family. A record in 1577 showed that the Cherrill family

farmed and milled at Overy and they continued to be leading farmers in the village for more than 300 years. Overy Manor was owned by the Davey family from the 16th century until 1901 and they had a reputation for the excellence of their farming. They bought the Hurst in 1808. However, some of the Overy fields remained as unenclosed common land until well into the nineteenth century.

The importance of the water mill

The mill ground corn, grown locally, to produce flour from which local people made bread and cakes. The energy to drive the mill came from the flow of the river Thame diverted into the mill-race at a higher level than the main river. This can be observed at Buck Pool sluice where there is a considerable head of water between the river above the sluice and the pool.



In earlier times, the sluice was probably further upstream, but Buck Pool dates back to the days when catching eels was important – the Bishop even accepted eels in payment of tax. A 'buck' is an eel trap like a basket, made from willow and attached to the sluice.



The meadow was useful as a reservoir for water when the flow was too high for the requirements of the mill. A gate could be opened in the sluice to allow water to flow down the main river channel, so less went into the mill-race. In times of flood, the meadow could contain a very large volume of water. When the flood water subsided, the grass and wild flowers grew well and this made for good grazing (the 'spring flush') for horses who were the main

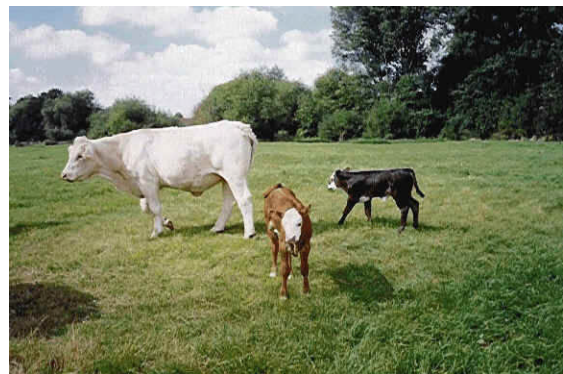
source of transport and working the fields, and cattle for milk and meat. The whole system was an excellent example of local sustainability, without the use of fossil

fuels. It was essential for survival in hard times. People had to work hard for very long hours and many died young. Millers had to work in a dusty atmosphere and suffered from 'Miller's lung' which is now known as a 'hypersensitivity pneumonitis' due to the granary weevil *Sitophilus granarius*. Houses were damp, cold and smoky, though a thatched roof was cool in summer and warm in winter. It was made from straw – a by-product of the cornfield. The walls mostly had an oak frame, filled by willow wattle and daub (clay) – all local materials. Some still exist today in the village.

The mill ceased grinding corn in the 1920s and has not functioned as a mill since then, though it could be restored and generate electricity. The cost would be high, but it would result in less carbon emission. It would have the advantage over wind power of being much more constant, and would produce more energy in the winter when demand was highest. Sonning Mill has been converted to generate electricity, so it is possible.

The meadow as food for livestock

In summer, cattle would graze on the meadow, and they were important for the ecology. They kept the grass short, so coarse grasses did not flourish, and their hooves trod in the wild flower seeds, which gave them a mixed diet of grasses and many wild flowers and herbs. Their droppings helped to fertilize the soil and many insects laid their eggs in these warm 'cowpats'. The eggs hatched into grubs which were very popular with birds, and



when they became flying insects, swallows and house martins would catch them in flight. It was a very successful balanced ecosystem which has stood the test of time. The grubs were also popular as a bait for fishing in the river. People needed fish to eat. Now coarse fishing is more a sport, and very popular on the Hurst, where residents of the village can fish for free, as they have done within living memory. The cattle could be moved to allow the grass and wild flowers to grow and seed, for cutting as hay in late summer. The cut hay was 'turned' to spread the seeds and then collected for storing as haystacks for feeding livestock in winter. Before the days of tractors and modern machinery this was all done by hand and needed a lot of labour. Everyone turned out to help, including school children.

Ownership of the meadow and surroundings



More recently, the meadow was owned by the Hawken family who lived at Queenford Mill and they used it for grazing cattle and hay. There was a public footpath across the meadow, linking Dorchester to Overy, and the public had free access to the whole meadow at all times. Buck Pool was known as the 'boys' bathing place'. The girls' bathing place was opposite the garden of the Manor House! The next owner of the Hurst was the late Dick Whittle who also

used the meadow for cattle grazing and hay, and cut a small area near the footpath for turf.

When the bypass was planned in the early 1980s, he sold the Hurst, the Demesne Field (between the village and the bypass) and the land around Buck Pool, including

the weir and sluice, to Ameys. He also sold the strip of land along the mill-race between the weir and Overy Mill to the owner of the mill. Ameys' successor Hanson Properties sold it on to Dorchester Fisheries, a commercial fishing firm, along with the Abingdon Road lakes.

Dorchester Fisheries tried to exclude the public, but were persuaded by the Parish Council that the public had right of access dating back many decades. Dorchester Fisheries completely neglected the meadow, and had cars driving all along the river. There was virtually no grazing, apart from some rough horses that damaged the river banks. They sold the five acres at the west end of the meadow to the owners of the house across the river in 1993. In 1995, Dorchester Fisheries dumped a lot of concrete into the sailing lake and this had not been checked for toxicity, so the County Council ordered them to remove it. Their response was to go into receivership.



Buying the meadow for the village



The Parish Council saw this as an opportunity for the village, and Maurice Day called a meeting of interested parties, including the Sailing Club. It was resolved to launch an appeal to the public to buy the Hurst Meadow, and the Sailing Club did the same for the lakes. A Charitable Trust (registered 30 October 1995) was set up with ten local trustees who appealed to all the residents for pledges to be called in if the purchase was

successful. Residents, trustees and the Parish Council responded generously and £34,000 was raised. This total was put in as a sealed bid for the meadow (including fishing rights on both sides of the Thames and on the 5-acre western plot). This was an anxious time, as the receivers wanted the maximum price and the trustees could not compete with pop stars who wanted the meadow for raves. The District Council came to the rescue with the suggestion that they set up a compulsory purchase order, but would only activate it if the Trust's bid failed. This caused the receiver great fury, as it deterred the people with funny money, and the trustees' bid was successful. In the event, the Dorchester Fisheries' legal documents were in such a bad state, that the Trust's surveyor Julian Sayers and solicitor Stuart Capel had the price reduced by £3,000 to £31,000 and the contracts were signed on 17th May 1996. They were both very experienced in this area and gave excellent support throughout. Gift Aid came as a bonus which added about one quarter to the donations from taxpayers. There was much work to be done such as fixing a new gate, a stile and a notice board, mostly done by volunteers, of whom the late Leo Hill, also a trustee, was outstanding.

Near disaster

It was not long before disaster struck, when in 1997 the timber supports for the main access bridge (the Long Bridge) collapsed and the concrete deck sagged alarmingly. The Trust was fortunate in that the Chairman was the County Councillor and one trustee was a civil engineer with good contacts with people who built bridges. Ameys Engineering (who had built the bypass bridges) produced and donated an excellent set of plans. As it carried a public footpath, the County Council contributed four

massive Corton (corrosion-resistant) steel girders worth £1,500 each and their chief bridge engineer Peter Brown gave much good advice. The works division of the Environment Agency, led by Jeff Kingswood, quoted favourably for the work, which they carried out most efficiently and completed in 1998 on time and within budget. The Landfill Tax Credit Scheme had just started and they provided £20,000 and the Parish Council £5,000. The Trust won the first Landfill tax grant in the County, beating the Northmoor Trust to it by a day!



Buck Pool spinney

The land east of Buck Pool should have been transferred to the Highways Agency for building the bypass in 1981-2, but it never happened! When the old A329 was 'de-trunked' to become the A4074 owned and managed by the County Council, the Highways Agency was prepared to spend £95,000 on a new weir and sluice and let the Trust have Buck Pool Spinney for £1. Their lawyers discovered at the last moment that they did not own it, so it reverted to ownership of Amey's successors Hanson Properties. They became City and St James Properties, and they sold many pieces of 'severed land' around the bypass to O and H Properties a very large property firm whose agent, Matthew Carter was always very helpful. Nobody seemed to have realized that the Buck Pool weir and sluice were included, which carried the liability for their maintenance.



The Trustees negotiated a licence on 31 March 2001 for access and management which specifically excluded responsibility for the weir and sluice. Much work was needed and it was difficult to raise funds with such short security of tenure, but a new footbridge was built over the flood drain to give access to the north part of the site and the bridge over the weir was widened. Volunteers erected railings on the sluice bridge.

Access was improved and the weir was repaired where it had been badly eroded. The new site was opened by Hugo Brunner, the Lord Lieutenant for Oxfordshire on 10 April 2002.

The weir and sluice were in a bad state of repair and this worsened with each flood. O and H properties were not prepared to spend such large sums of money on a 'valueless' piece of land and sold it at auction in 2005. Once the new owners had read all the legal details, they wanted to resell it, and people seemed willing to buy it. In February 2007 it was sold (for the fourth time) for £35,000. The new owner will be under pressure to repair the sluice as it is in a bad way. The trustees intend to help the new owner by managing the site. If, however, the trustees' licence is not renewed, we can sell or remove the footbridge.

Biodiversity and Stewardship

Soon after the trustees bought the meadow, ecologists at the Northmoor Trust made a detailed survey and site management plan, which helped Dr John Metcalfe to have the site accepted under the MAFF Countryside Stewardship Scheme. This brought in regular grants, which have helped the Trust to keep going without repeated appeals to the public. Defra (now Natural England) have replaced it with the Environmental Stewardship Scheme (ESS) and the Trust has been awarded 'higher level' status from 1st August 2006 for ten years, with much better grants.



However, the wild flowers on the meadow are not up to their standard, and must be improved. This was largely due to past neglect of the meadow and the difficulty of getting grazing herds since the Foot and Mouth epidemic of 2001. The ESS criteria are very strict, and in order to meet them, 3 hectares of the 7-hectare (18-acre) meadow have been 'overseeded' with wild

flowers. This is not easy as the coarse grasses inhibit the wild flowers. To overcome this, the first year's seed mix in 2006 was 75% yellow rattle, which is a parasite on grass and inhibits its growth. This, and a spring cut, give the wild flower seed a better chance of becoming established. The process will be repeated in 2007, with 25% yellow rattle and 75% a mix of wild flower seeds. The first year's work was paid for entirely by generous donations from individual trustees. The second year is being funded by Landfill Tax money from Waste Recycling Environmental (WREN) of Sutton Courtenay.

Two other projects to increase biodiversity have been undertaken, both funded by Landfill Tax money. One is Dr Metcalfe's four-year experimental project on the meadow west of the public footpath to see which method of land preparation is best for growth of wild flowers. The second was the digging of a new 'scrape' (or pond) and planting it with 400 wild flower plants in pots. This was done on 23rd May 2006 by the senior form of the Dorchester Primary School, under the watchful eyes of Helen Clark, the headteacher and Charles Flower the expert wild flower seedsman. This project won a first prize in the Oxfordshire Sustainability and Conservation Awards (OSCA) consisting of a cheque for £500 (from Didcot Power Station) which the trustees shared with the school to help them establish their allotment. This was the Trust's third OSCA, the previous ones being in 1999 for the conservation of the meadow and in 2002 for the website – entirely the work of Hon. Treasurer Andrew Clements. All the meadow is now in the Overy Conservation Area.



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The Trust has three overall aims

1. to preserve, conserve and protect the meadow, its wildlife (plants and animals) and their habitats, for the benefit of the public;
2. to advance public education in and understanding of the ecology of the meadow;
3. to provide for the safe enjoyment and recreational use of the meadow by the public.

Recreation

So far this account has mainly covered conservation. The site is extremely popular with dog walkers, mostly but not all from the village, by walkers from the Thames Path National Trail, by joggers and families picnicking or just enjoying the fresh air and lovely views. Anglers are many in season. The gate counter has recorded over 130 closures a day (over half that number of visitors) and over 50,000 in a year. This results in much wear and tear of the mown footpaths, particularly in wet weather. This is helped by volunteers spreading chippings left by the tree surgeon on the muddy patches.



Education



School groups, mainly from Dorchester Primary School, have long visited the meadow, and the aim is to encourage this. Education is becoming a high priority for the trustees with a current focus on Geography students from secondary schools (jointly with the Northmoor Trust Timescape project, and assisted by the Environment Agency, the Centre for Ecology and Hydrology and the British Geological Survey); and History students (jointly with Dorchester Abbey and Museum and the Timescape Project). Andrew Clements has produced extensive learning resource material on the website which is attracting favourable attention. An open-air classroom of ancient oak boughs has been placed near the gate and notice board.

Partnership

Cooperation with other bodies for education is an example of the benefit the Trust has received by working harmoniously with other people and organizations, both statutory and voluntary. The Parish, District and County Councils and the Environment Agency have given constant support. Funding bodies such as the Trust for Oxfordshire's Environment (the channel for Landfill Tax grants) have been very supportive, as have the Defra (now Natural England) advisers. Oxfordshire is fortunate in having the country's leading Nature Conservation Forum (ONCF), based at Northmoor Trust, which links all the local conservation organizations in a very creative network. Informal, mutually supportive networks are the powerhouse for conservation, and the trustees are grateful to ONCF and to the Northmoor Trust for their support and inspiration. Last, but not least, are the many local volunteers who come to working parties, collect litter, act as fishing bailiffs and many other tasks that are essential for the maintenance of the meadow.



Future plans

The trustees hope to be able to conserve the meadow as it has been for centuries and increase its biodiversity by encouraging wild flowers and wildlife in general. This has to be balanced against use of the meadow by the public and their dogs, which does not help wildlife. The hope is, that by encouraging children to learn about the



balance of nature, the future of the meadow will be assured as a peaceful and beautiful open space which all can enjoy for their health and well-being.

From the viewpoint of wildlife conservation, the meadow is very small and the trustees hope to extend their land holding in the future by purchase or leasing. This could include the development of a new community woodland between the village and the bypass which would protect the village from bypass noise and pollution, as well as extending the recreational area. This would also take pressure off the Hurst meadow and be a great asset to the village. It would be costly, but draft plans have been prepared for this eventuality.

Thanks to Mary Tame for some of the data and checking the text.

Peter Pritchard, hon. secretary, Hurst Water Meadow Trust

