April 2018

Karen Anderson
andersonkaren@btinternet.com

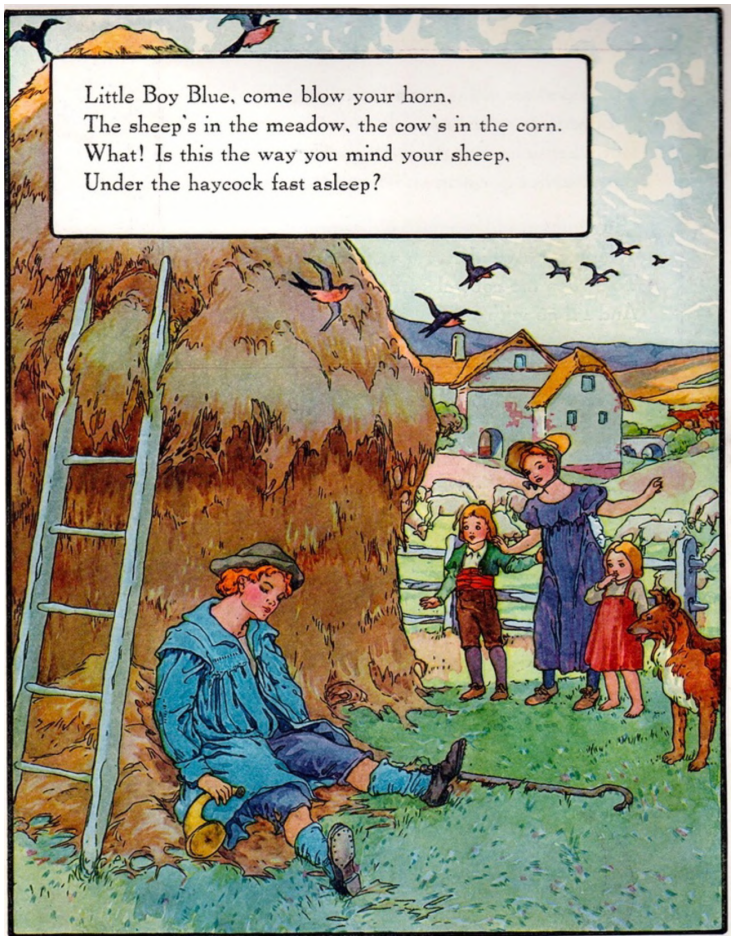
The Fishlake and Fishlake Meadows: A Managed Medieval Landscape

Fishlake Meadows has recently become a Nature Reserve under the management of the Hampshire and Isle of Wight Wildlife Trust. This is very good news. The development of the site for some other use, a golf course was one suggestion, would have represented a considerable loss to Romsey's heritage. The reserve will now provide a wetland habitat for a large variety of birds, mammals, insects and plants. Crowds of people lined Fishlake Meadows Road to watch the murmurations of starlings converging on the winter landscape. Romsey has gained a valuable resource for now and for generations to come.

The announcement of the new reserve in the Trust magazine headlined it as ‘the reserve that time forgot’. The article observed: ‘It looks and sounds as though it has always been there; an area of wildness, uncommon in our chalk river valleys. In fact, it is possibly the best glimpse of how the Test Valley would have looked over 2000 years ago… a shifting swathe of ponds, lakes, reed bed, willow scrub and fen grassland.’

Appearances can be deceptive. Fishlake Meadows and the stream bordering it, the Fishlake, are far from natural. They are part of an artificial, man-made landscape that was constructed and carefully managed for a thousand years. The management of the Test and its floodplain provided a variety of valuable resources that were crucial to the development of Romsey and its surrounding villages. The unique configuration of the Test valley north of Romsey made possible an engineering project that transformed the area and enabled Romsey to develop into a thriving market town.

Today's residents of Romsey probably give little thought to the source or the means of production of the products required in daily life. Shops provide food and clothing, water comes out of the tap, heat and light are available at the flick of a switch. However, I'm sure everyone appreciates that life in the past was much more difficult. Indeed, the folk memory of our essential link to our environment is deeply embedded in our culture. The importance of vigilance in managing the landscape must be taught to children from an early age.



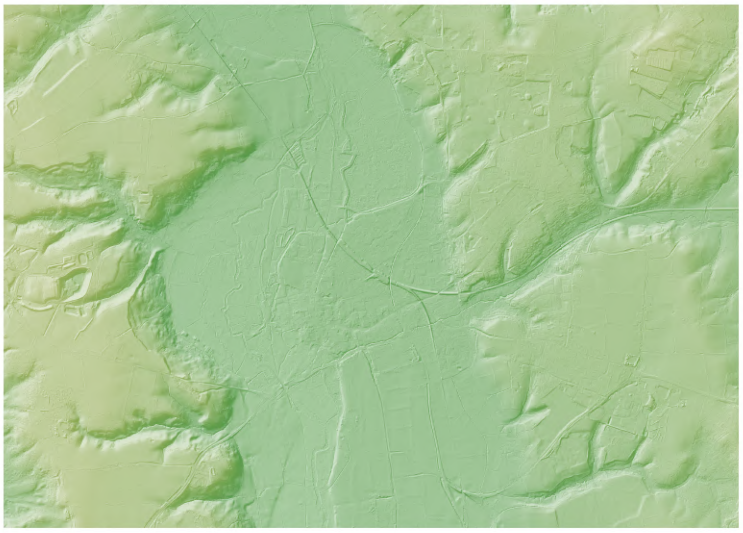
This situation has the potential for disaster, hardly a suitable bedtime rhyme. I think that little boy is going to be in a whole lot of trouble. Clearly there is a problem with the cow getting into the corn field, less wheat for the family's daily bread. But what is the cause of alarm over the peacefully grazing sheep? If you don't know the answer to this question, your nursery education on the case of Little Boy Blue has failed.

Understanding the importance of this childhood lesson lies in distinguishing between two forms of grassland management, pasture and meadow. The grazing of meadow land was controlled. Animals were removed in the summer in order to grow hay for winter fodder. A farming community needed to ensure that draught animals, oxen to pull the ploughs, and breeding stock could be fed through the winter. It is clear from looking at historic maps that Fishlake Meadows was a valuable resource for the local area.

Before I can go into any detail about the Fishlake landscape, I am going to have to cover a subject that is a bit more challenging than Little Boy Blue. It is impossible to appreciate the planning and management that has been undertaken for the past thousand years without having an understanding of the geology of the area. Let's start with a Google Earth view of Romsey.

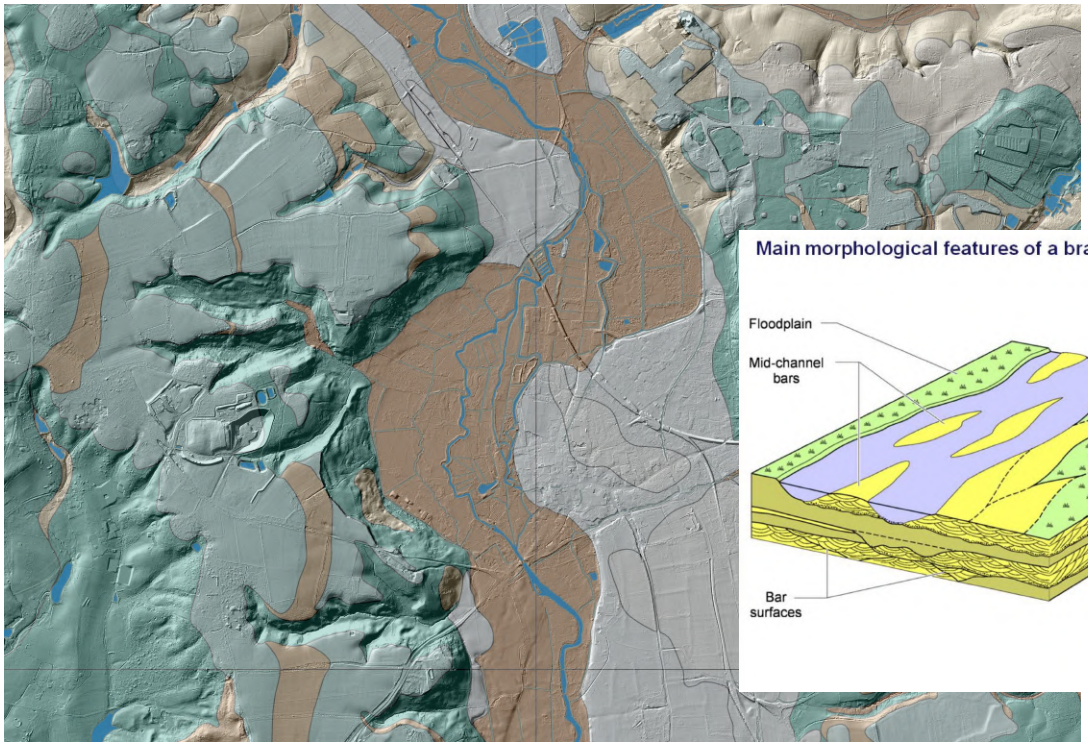
The overhead view gives a good indication of how Romsey fits into its surroundings. The built-up areas of housing and industrial estates are spilling across the fields to the east of the Test. This urban spread contrasts sharply with the rural, agrarian landscape to the west. Fields bordering the river are a lush green. Looking south across Fishlake Meadows, the Fishlake stream and Greatbridge Road provide a link between the river valley and the town.

Google Earth images are fascinating. The views of Romsey suggest that the natural environment has had a great influence on the development of our area. Why did Romsey grow into an important market town? In order to understand that process we need to look deeper. Fortunately, it is possible to strip away the buildings and vegetation in order to examine the topography of our part of the Test valley.

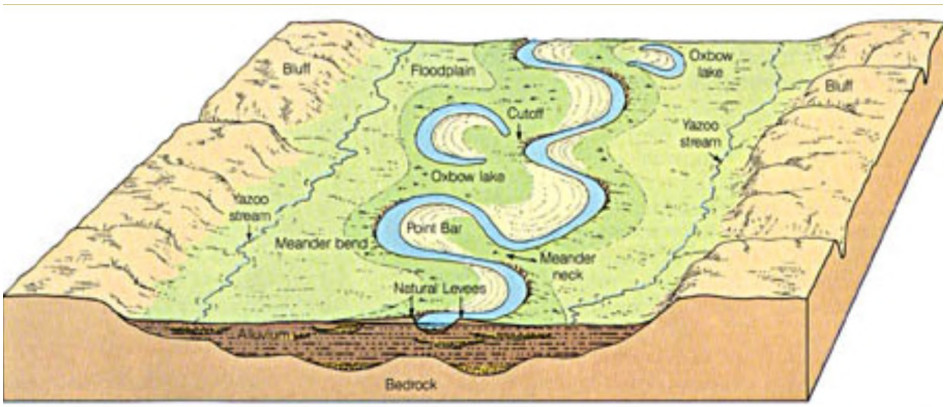


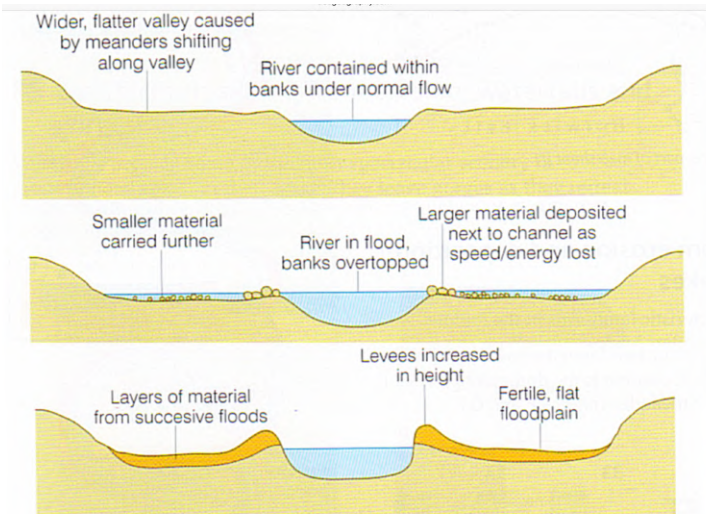
A LiDAR image shows a 3D view of the surface of the land. The image is produced by processing the data, the heights of individual points on the ground, to indicate slopes by the use of shadows or highlights. This view shows the valley of the Test bounded by higher ground to the east and west. The steeply sloping land edging the valley on the west is depicted in deep shadow. The west facing scarp on the other side of the valley is lit up by the virtual light source. This perception of depth shows the dendritic patterns cut into the land by water erosion. The Tadburn stream has cut a valley through the plateau as it flows west towards the Test along the southern edge of Romsey. The railway, running for much of its length on an embankment, crosses the valley and continues east alongside the Tadburn. The topographic feature of prime importance to Romsey is barely visible on the LiDAR, its edge marked by a highlight.

The LiDAR gives us a feel for the topography of our area, for the ups and downs, the hills and valleys. However, in order to really understand the landscape, we need to add some more information to the map. We need to look at the geology. Draping the surface geology over the 3D image transforms the appearance of the Test valley. All I want you to look at is the geology of the valley floor. Here the broad brown ribbon represents the alluvium of the floodplain. The area coloured grey alongside is river terrace. Understanding the difference between these two features is the key to understanding the management of the land and water resources in our part of the Test valley.

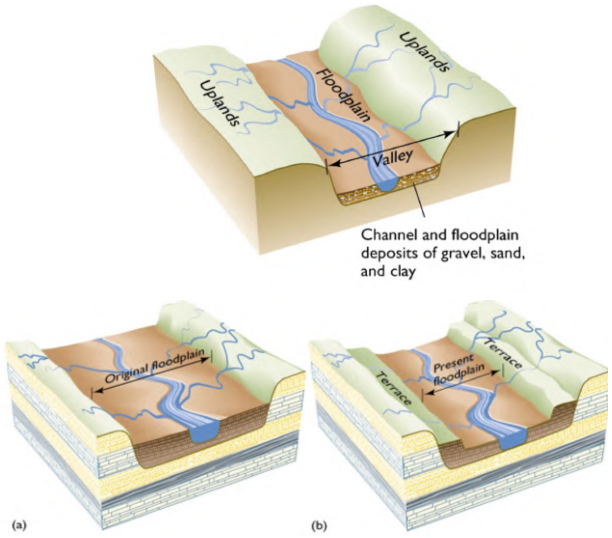


Alluvium is material deposited by a river. The extent of the floodplain is indicated by the alluvial deposits of silt, clay, sand and gravel. The brown area on the map has flooded in the past and is liable to flood in the future. The area is relatively flat, hence a plain, but not entirely featureless. When a river floods coarser gravels will be deposited near the banks and form natural levees. A meandering river will leave behind ox bow lakes as it shifts course.

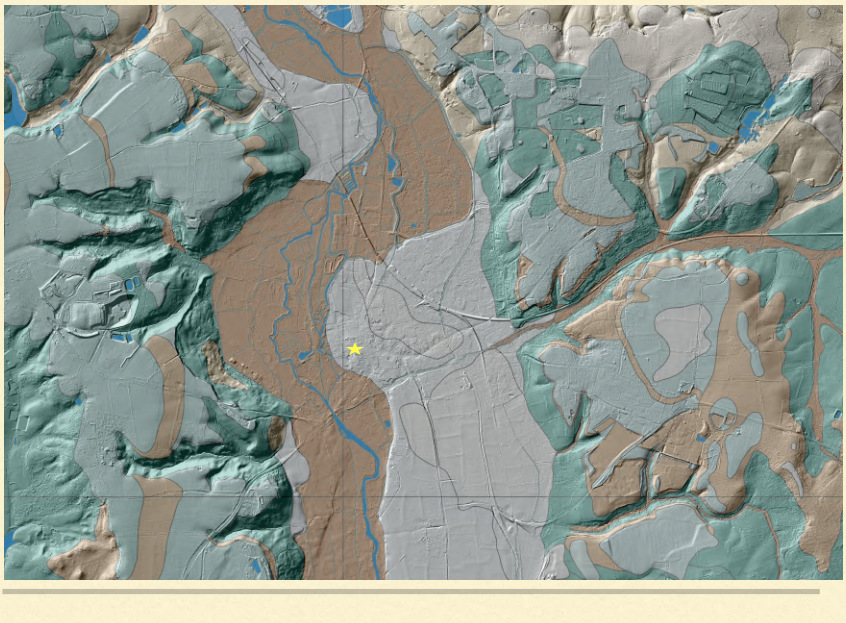




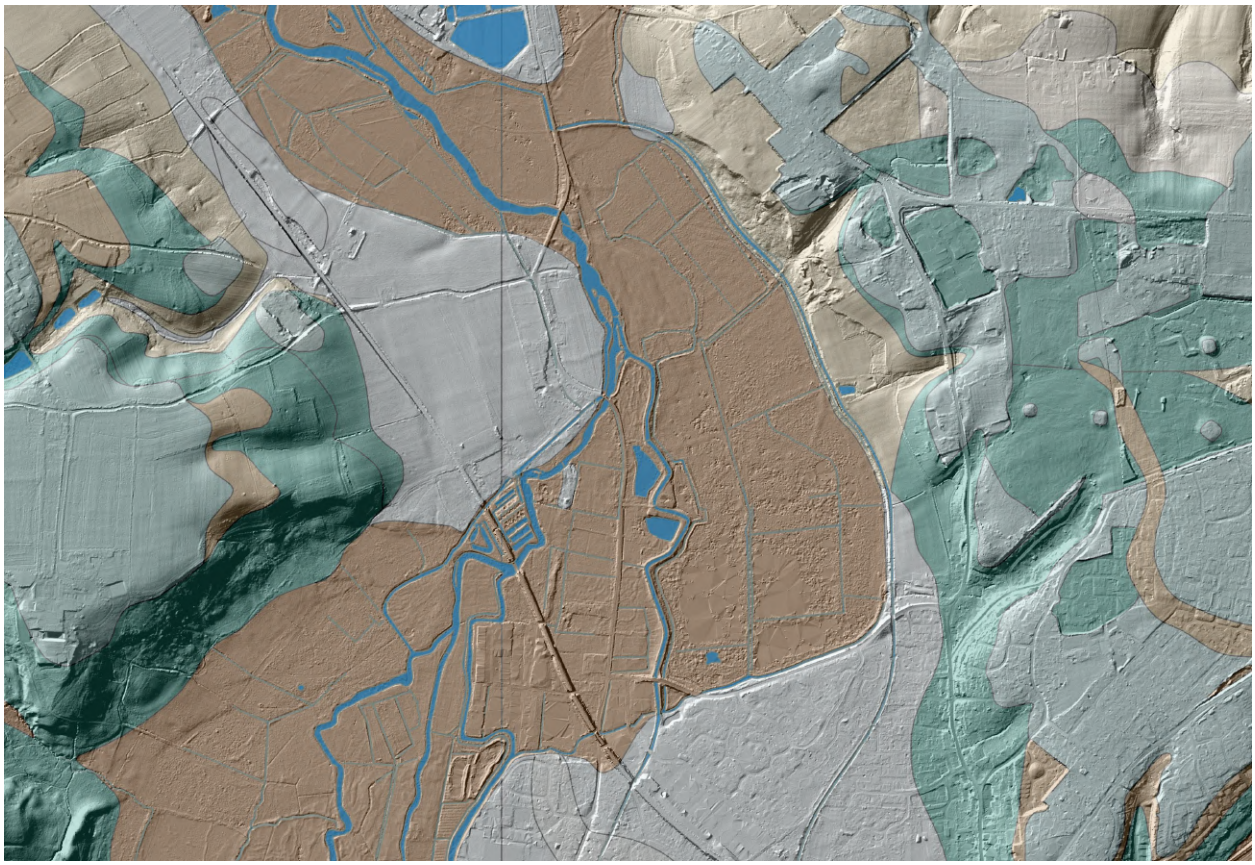
During the Ice Age seasonal melt water would have carried large quantities of earth and frost-fractured rock into the river valleys. The sediment would have choked the valleys and produced highly braided rivers. These braids would shift position as individual channels were blocked and then infilled with sediment. The ancient, silt-filled channels that are preserved in floodplain deposits are known as paleochannels.



A river terrace is a remnant of an ancient floodplain. At the end of the Ice Age sea levels rose as the ice melted. The height of the land also changed as the weight of the ice was reduced. As a result of these changes, rivers cut through their former floodplains to flow at a lower level. The river terrace on which Romsey was built started to develop at the end of the last glaciation about 11,000 years ago.



Let's take another look at the 3D geology map. Romsey is positioned on the western side of the broad river terrace overlooking the Test floodplain. A river terrace would have been a very attractive location for early settlers. The area is flat; the soil is fertile and is well drained owing to the underlying gravel. The nearby floodplain would have provided both water and pasture for livestock. Excavations in Romsey have uncovered evidence of occupation in the Bronze Age, Iron Age and the Roman period, probably representing small farmsteads. There was, however, one thing missing from this attractive location. There was no running water.



The Fishlake has often been described as a braid of the Test, a channel of the river that flows through Romsey. Let's take a closer look at the Fishlake. It is doing something very peculiar, something a river shouldn't ought to do. It flows out of the floodplain and onto the river terrace. If you look at the LiDAR you can see that it is contained within two banks. Also look at its course. It doesn't meander, it zigzags across the width of the floodplain. Once it reaches the edge of the terrace, it continues in a straight line into Romsey. The Fishlake is not a braid of the Test; it is a totally man-made watercourse.

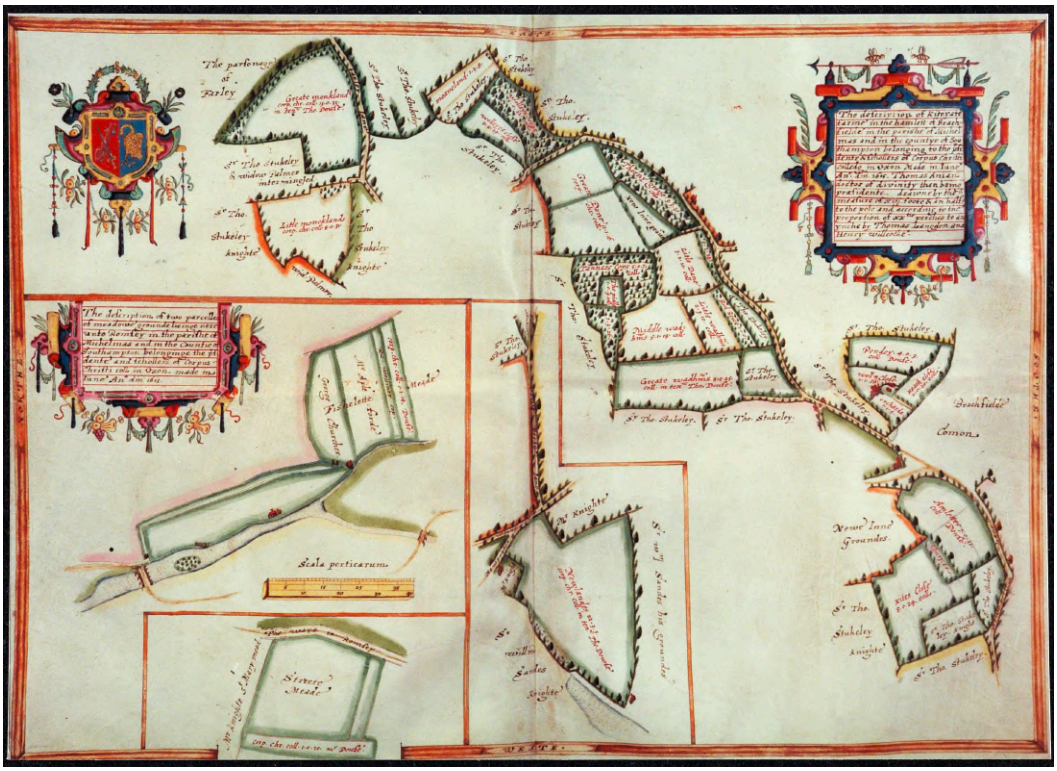
The image of the area north of Romsey is an illustration of water management in the landscape. Water power was essential for running mills. Waterways served as transport routes, but also presented a barrier to transportation. A river was a source of food and of water for agriculture. It also represented the threat of damage by flooding. Management involved balancing the various demands for this valuable resource.

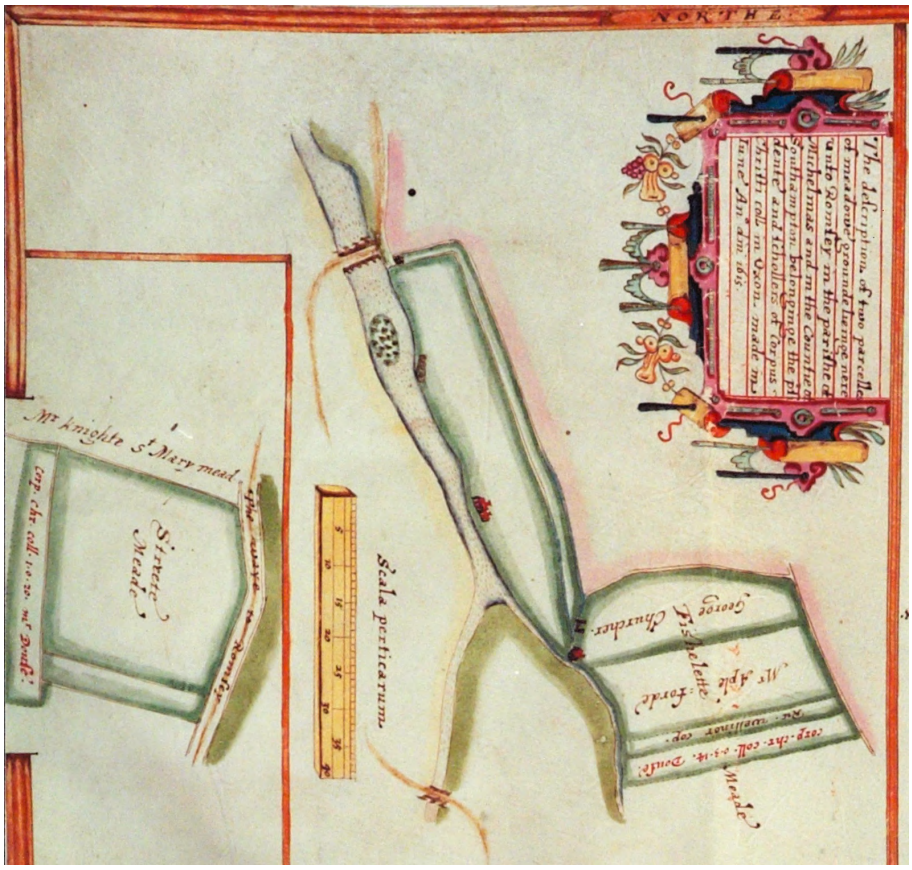
Let's look at some other features on the map. The 18th century barge canal leaves the floodplain and runs along edge of the river terrace. It was constructed by cutting into the slope on its eastern edge and using the material to form a bank on the western side, leaving the canal perched above the edge of the floodplain. It continues towards Romsey in a cutting, looking very much like the lower Fishlake.

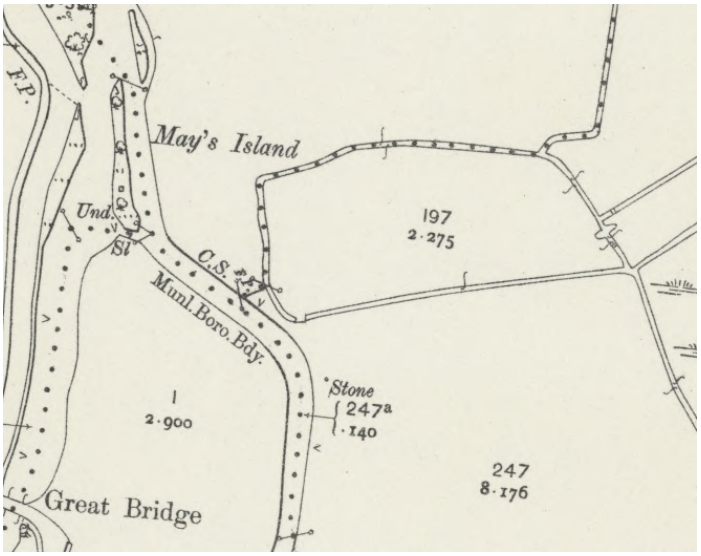
Zooming in on the area north of Greatbridge we can see other instances of water management. A straight channel cuts across the southern edge of the western river terrace. This is a leat providing water to Greatbridge mill. It rejoins the Test near a present-day fish farm. Another artificial channel leaves the Test further north and crosses the terrace. I think this probably fed an earlier mill. Where water flows out of the floodplain onto a river terrace, the watercourse is man-made.

The Greatbridge mill leat runs for some distance along the edge of the terrace and parallel to the Test, separated from it by a narrow bank. By the time it reaches the bridge it is flowing at a noticeably higher level and at a slower rate than the river. The photo looks east from the bridge with the Test to the right. On the other side of the bridge the channel crosses the river terrace to the mill. The earliest reference to the mill is in a lease of 1691. It doesn't appear on a map drawn in 1615, so it must have been built between the two dates.

The 1615 map shows land in the parish of Michelmersh that was owned by Corpus Christi College in Oxford. One section of the map depicts the Test from Timsbury bridge to Greatbridge. The more southerly bridge is the smaller of the two. The mill leat had not yet been built, so only a single channel needed to be crossed at this point. The Fishlake flows out of the Test on its way to Romsey. The narrow fields adjacent to it are labelled with the names of their owners or tenants. Written across them is Fishlette Meade, an earlier name for our Fishlake Meadows. Another section of the map shows a piece of land west of Greatbridge road labelled Street Meade.

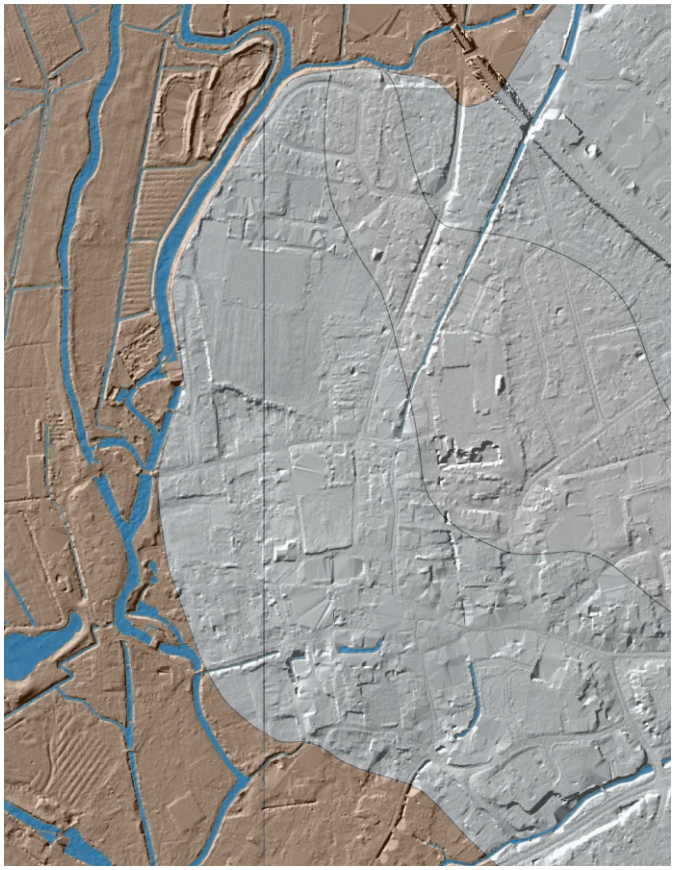




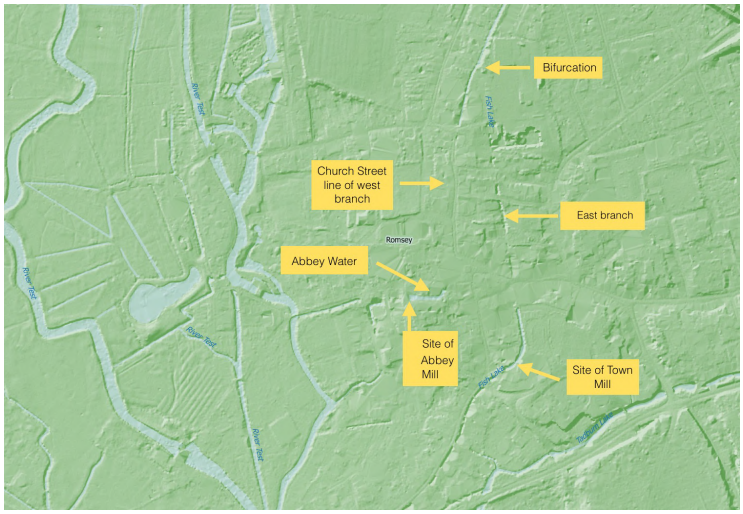


Early 20th century OS maps mark the location of a boundary stone near the Fishlake. One records that it is engraved with the initials NC for New College.

The Greatbridge leat and the Fishlake share basic features in their design. Both consist of a section carrying water across the floodplain to the edge of a river terrace. In the case of the Fishlake the water is contained within two artificial banks. The Greatbridge leat uses the terrace as one side of the waterway. In both systems the water continues through a cut channel before eventually returning to the Test. The Fishlake is on a larger scale and is more complex with its long, embanked water carrier. When was it built?

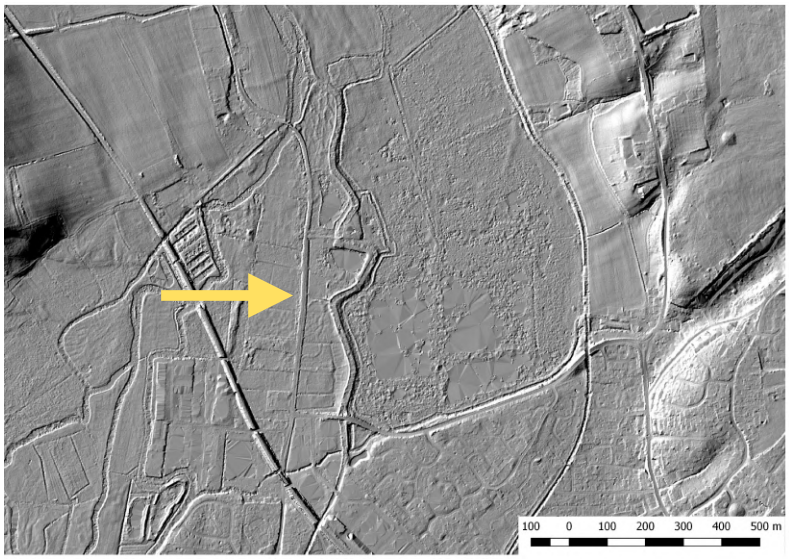


A local legend says that the Fishlake was built by Cromwell to provide water for his horses. There is a problem with this theory. We have already seen the Fishlake on a map of 1615. Even at that date it was very old. The east branch of the Fishlake formed the boundary of Romsey Infra by 1300. This branch runs at an angle to the main channel and away from the abbey. It appears to me to be a later addition to the Fishlake.

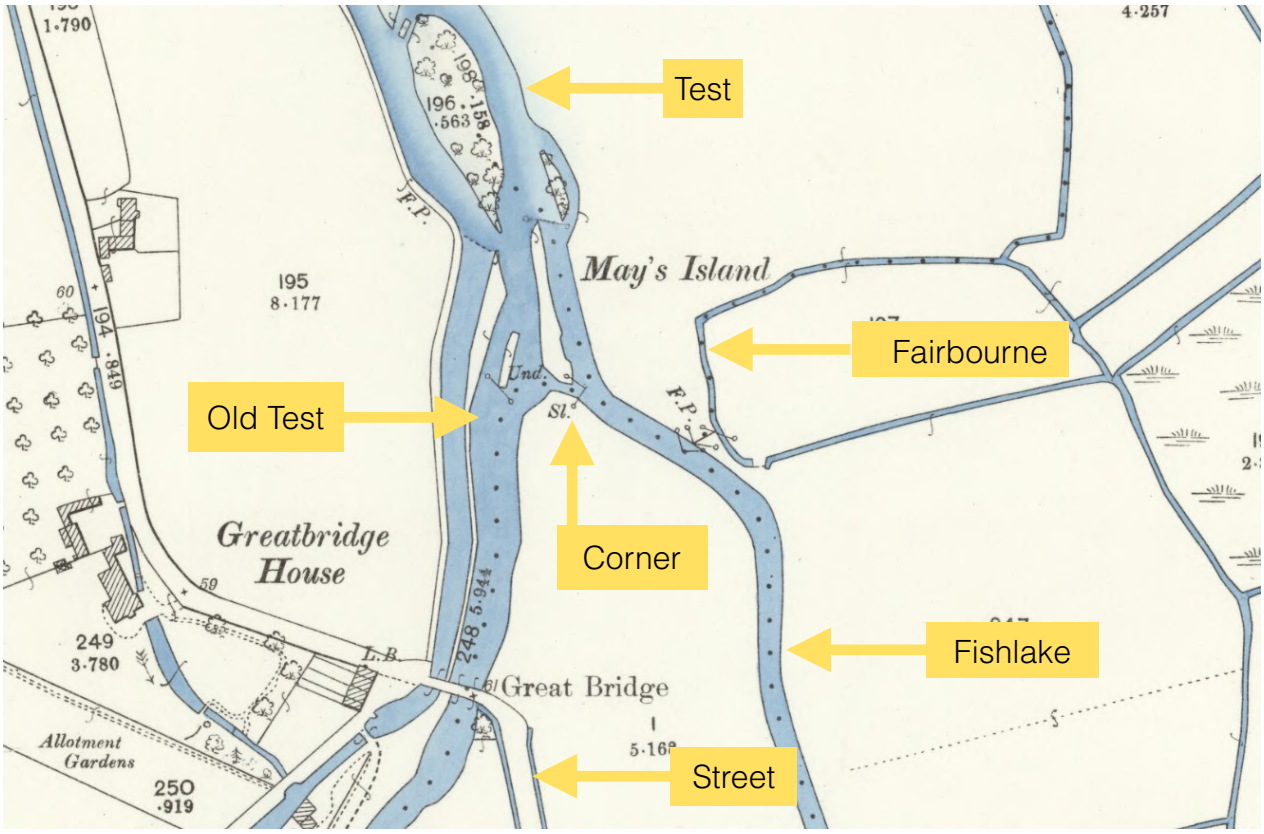


I think that the Fishlake was built much earlier than 1300. I think it is referred to in the Anglo-Saxon charter of c970 in which King Edgar granted land to Romsey Abbey. The opening line of the boundary clause has puzzled local historians over the past century. Grundy translated it as ‘along the street where the Test runs’. He placed the starting point at Middlebridge to the south of Romsey. I think he was heading in the wrong direction.

Imagine a group of people gathering together before settling out to traverse the boundary. There would have been representatives of the King and of the Abbey along with local inhabitants with an intimate knowledge of the landscape. The obvious meeting point would have been the Abbey. ‘First up along the street.’ Up means inland, upstream or uphill - the group is heading north. The word street in charters usually referred to a Roman road, but there is no evidence of a Roman road in our part of the Test valley. Here the street must have been a paved roadway running north out of Romsey and over the causeway which crosses the floodplain to Greatbridge. Meadow land west of the causeway was referred to as Street Meade since at least the 16th century. The present causeway is clearly visible on the LiDAR west of the Fishlake.

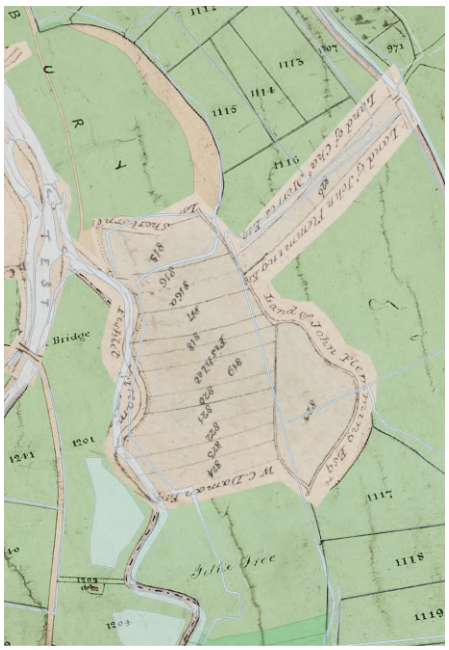


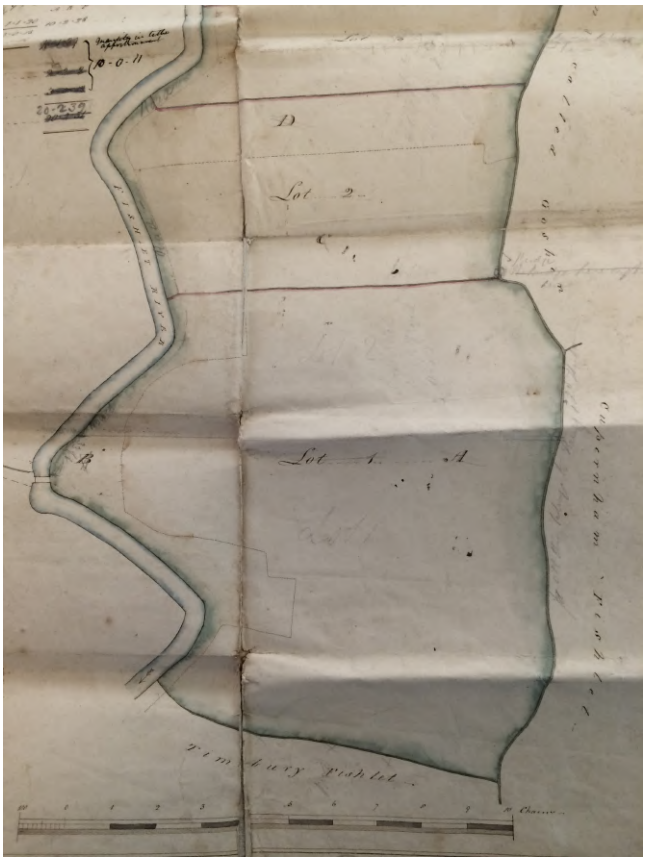
A charter boundary clause is a description of a circuit of a boundary. It usually proceeds in a clockwise direction and returns to its starting point. The Romsey charter could simply have started where the street meets the Test, but it doesn't. ‘First up along the street to where the Test’ does something. The word ‘seit’ or ‘scit’ has been translated as ‘runs’. It doesn't mean that. Why specify that the river is running? It is unlikely to have been doing anything else. I think the word means ‘corners’, forming a corner with something. I think the corner refers to the Fishlake.



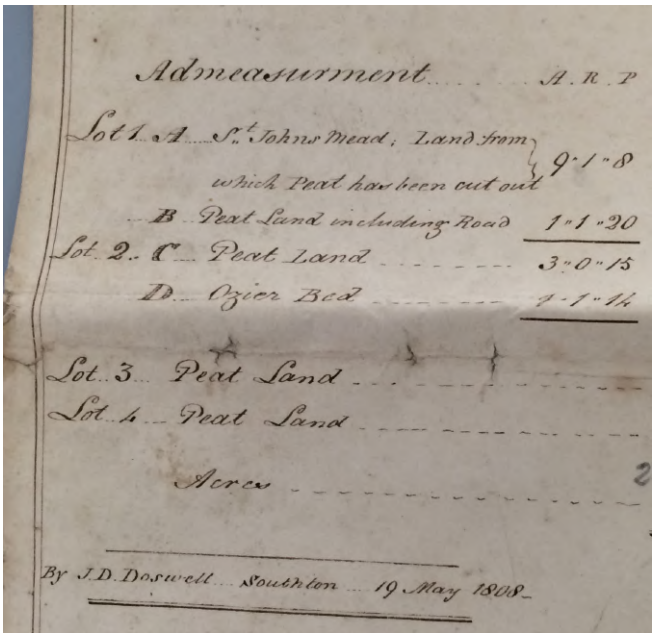
A water management scheme does not take place in isolation. The Fishlake formed part of a managed landscape. The land adjacent to the Fishlake and causeway was fertile meadow. It was divided up between several parishes. 19th century maps show it further divided into narrow strips. Control of the Test made this part of the floodplain a valuable resource.

This map shows a composite of the mid 19th century tithe maps of Romsey, Michelmersh and Timsbury with the modern surface water in blue. The land belonging to each parish was divided into small fields, a clear indication of the value of the meadow land. The Michelmersh section included a broad drove road. This still exists, now forming the main entrance into and across the meadows.



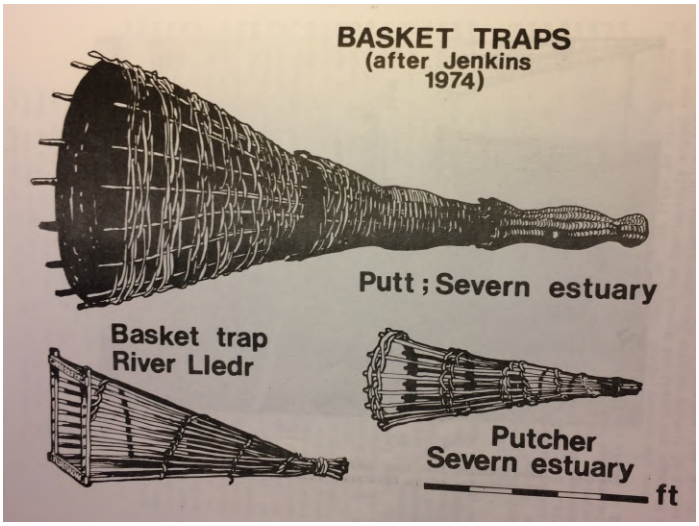


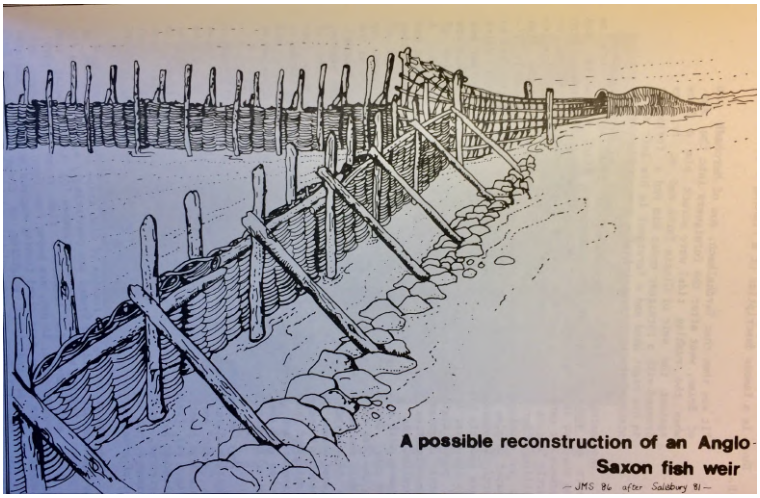
Another interesting map shows land in Fishlake Meadows in 1808. The key describes some of the land as peat land. A pencil line in lot A marks the edge of the area where peat has already been dug. The lower, flooded areas in Fishlake Meadows are probably peat diggings.



Land east of Lot D is labelled Land called Goshen. The name is a biblical reference to an area in the Nile Delta that was considered to be the best land in Egypt. The use of the name here might, of course, be ironic. South of Goshen is Cupernham Fishlet. Lot D is an osier bed. Osier is a species of willow that grows in wet habitats. It is pollarded to collect the withies for basketwork. The Old English word for a basket, specifically a basket for catching fish, is cype. The word survives as a dialect name for a fish trap. These traps were made from hazel and withies. Were the Saxon inhabitants of Cupernham weaving baskets with withies grown in Fishlake Meadows?

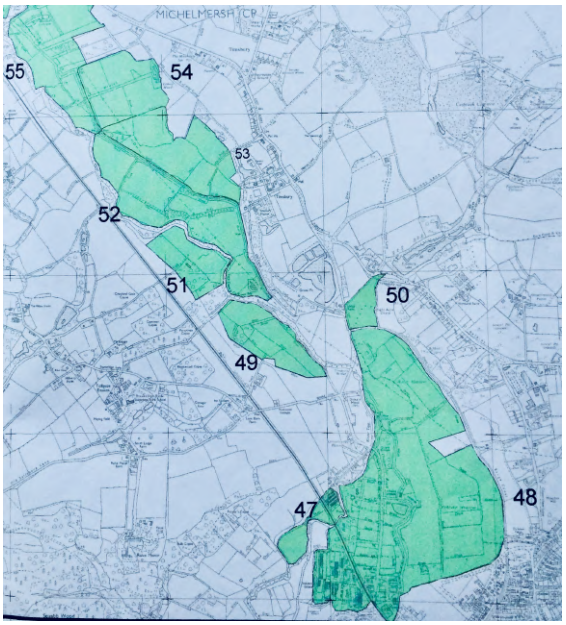
Old osier bed on Chiswick Eyot





Meadow land required careful management. A floodplain is liable to flood. This would be a problem if you were living on a floodplain, but is actually an advantage for land used as meadow. Flood water would deposit silt containing nutrients that would maintain the productivity of the land. Complex systems of water meadow management were developed from the early 17th century. During the winter water was channeled through a network of ditches, flooding individual fields with a controlled depth of flowing water. The water supplied oxygen and nitrogen to the growing grass and prevented the ground from freezing. As a result, spring grass was available as pasture in a floated meadow several weeks earlier than on dry land. Farmers with access to the meadows would have been able to maintain more animals over the winter since their store of winter fodder would not be required to last into early spring.

Fishlake Meadows is included in a survey of water meadows in Hampshire published in 2000. The system here is relatively simple. Ditches defining rectangular fields served as head mains carrying water used to flood the fields and also acted as drains. The map of the survey shows water meadows extending along the east side of the Test from Romsey to Mottisfont. The land would have been managed as meadow prior to its development as water meadow. Since meadow land lies adjacent to Michelmersh and Timsbury, why were they holding land in Fishlake Meadows? I think that this arrangement is an indication that the floodplain bordering the Fishlake was under controlled management at an early date. The first documentary mentions of the Fishlute, Fishflood or Fishlet dating back to the early 13th century, refer to land rather than the watercourse. Controlling flooding on the meadows was another aspect of the engineering project that provided Romsey with a supply of running water. The damp conditions of the floodplain would have ensured a crop of hay even in a dry summer.



The composite tithe map shows a number of interesting features in the landscape. I have already mentioned the causeway that runs alongside the Fishlake. The word causeway comes from the Norman French word causie, meaning a bank, plus ‘way’, a path or routeway. Today we still separate the two components - we say that Greatbridge Road runs along Greatbridge causeway. The road is referred to in the Romsey Anglo-Saxon charter as the street. The Old English equivalent of causie was ‘bridge’. The banks of the Fishlake would have been built of chalk or clay. The bridge, what we now call the causeway, did not have to retain water so it would have been built of gravel. The gravel could have been quarried from the nearby river terrace. The Old English word for gravel is ‘greot’. The causeway was likely to have been referred to as greot bridge. It extended up to the Test which would have been crossed by either a ford or a bridge - in the modern sense of the word. Now, of course, the road crosses the river via Greatbridge. Is it really such a great bridge?

The Environment Agency has been working on the improvement of local flood defences. As part of this process they ran computer models of previous flood events. They determined that the flooding of Greatbridge Road was the result of water overflowing out of the Fishlake. They plan to build a water control device at the entrance to the Fishlake to prevent future flooding. When the Fishlake was built and while it was in operation as Romsey’s water supply, water flowing into the system would have been managed, so overflow flooding would not have been a problem. The banks of the Fishlake are higher than the causeway. Water flooding Fishlake Meadows would not flood the causeway. The causeway and its road or street would have been a year-round route leading north out of Romsey, across the Test and then west along Old Salisbury Lane. I think that the causeway and the Fishlake were built at the same time in a major 10th century engineering project. Water management on the floodplain enabled the meadow land to be utilised as an important resource in the local economy. The causeway, the Fishlake and Fishlake Meadows can all be seen as components of a managed medieval landscape.