

THE 'DAMPENING OF DORSET' – 'WA-TER'WONDER OF AGRICULTURAL ENGINEERING

By 'peasant' poet and countryside chronicler James Crowden

One of the great innovations in the west country must surely be the water meadows of Dorset. These unsung heroes of the chalk streams were marvels of agricultural engineering and one of the great improvers of landscape economy. And yet today they are often regarded as an oddity. In their 'hey day' they were as sophisticated and efficient as any irrigation system in the world and very fine tuned, ecologically. In short they were a marvel.

In 1793 John Claridge, in his 'Dorset Agriculture' had this to say about them. 'The early vegetation produced by flooding, is of such consequence to the Dorsetshire farmer, that without it, their present system of managing sheep would be almost annihilated.'

But water meadows have an ancient history. Early accounts relate to 'improvements on the Piddle', which is nothing to do with the farmer's prostate problem! Court Rolls in Affpuddle from 1608 refer to water meadows. In 1629 they appointed a 'waterman' to control the watering of the common meadows. His wages were collected from the tenants.

Rights to water were as important as ownership of land. To construct a water meadow required a degree of investment, foresight and engineering. Weirs dammed the main river and hatches were installed as well as levelling off the meadow. Long irrigation ridges were then constructed along which the water was led and its gradual, even spillage was the key to the operation. This required skill in construction and management.

The sides of the ridges were called 'panes' and the thin flow of water must have looked like glass from a distance. The water was then cleverly led back to the river by drains.

The 'waterman' or 'drowner' as he was sometimes called was an important and revered occupation. The idea of water meadows spread rapidly along the Piddle and then into the valleys of the Frome, Cerne, Tarrant and Gussage. In short half of all central Dorset. And it did not stop there, the ideas had spread to the Wylde valley in Wiltshire by 1635, Marlborough and Hungerford by 1646 and by 1700 were well established in Hampshire on the Test and Itchen as well as on the Avon south of Salisbury.

What is intriguing about water meadows is that they were used as part of an integrated agricultural system. In spring the chalk streams brought down lime and nutrients, which fed the fields, the water temperature was constant and when deliberately flooded in winter, the water prevented the ground beneath from freezing. This meant that there was always an early bite of grass which gave the Dorset lambs as much as six weeks advantage and ensured they were ready for Easter. This combined with autumn lambing of Dorset Horns was vital. Water meadows provided rich pasture when the hay had run out. But the benefits did not stop there.

The meadows were given another burst of water after the lambs, and then locked up for a rich crop of hay, four times that of an un-irrigated meadow.

After that they were left open for the cattle while the sheep were on the downs.

And herein lay the third part of the equation. The more sheep you had, the more dung from folding, the greater the corn crop. The golden hoof indeed! Some said the sheep dung was more valuable than the wool. Daniel Defoe remarked in 1723 that 'They who would make any practical guess at the number of sheep usually fed on these downs, may take it from a calculation, as I was told at Dorchester, that there were 600,000 sheep fed within six miles of that town'.

A slight exaggeration maybe, but all this without artificial fertiliser, quad bikes, electric netting, mobile phones or sheep subsidies!

Today water meadows have been restored at Arne, Maiden Newton and Dorchester.

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