

# THE TOWN PATH

When describing the route across our meadows I tend, for no particular reason to start at the Fisherton end but for this piece I have chosen to start from the south at West Harnham. Almost outside my front door, at the junction of Lower and Middle Streets, there is an unequivocal street name plate, Town Path. On the map accompanying the inclosure document of 1787 this valley crossing is shown as Longbridge Lane, a name which I believe (but cannot now trace a source) survived until within living memory. It is one of the dozens of crossings that join settlements on either side of all the chalk valleys, usually not much more than a mile or so apart. Locally the next crossing upstream on the Nadder is the Broken Bridges footpath and downstream on the Avon at East Harnham the original ford or "wade" was replaced by the medieval Ayleswade Bridge.

Town Path has characteristics of both, side by side and now definitively registered as a footpath and bridleway (early OS maps uses "bridleroad"). The first hundred yards or so is a normal road before dividing. The footpath to the left is wide enough in front of the former early nineteenth century warehouse to accommodate a cart under the loading hoist. It continues between the early sixteenth century mill and Island Cottage then crosses to the north bank above the weir. To the right, the cartway (a generic term used here to indicate any way for wagons on the meadows) takes a wide sweep through the ford past the mill and up a long ramp to the north bank, in the process climbing from below the mill to above it. Both cartway and footpath bridge a substantial main carriage and if you only stop once, do it here at the start of the floated (or irrigated) meadows.

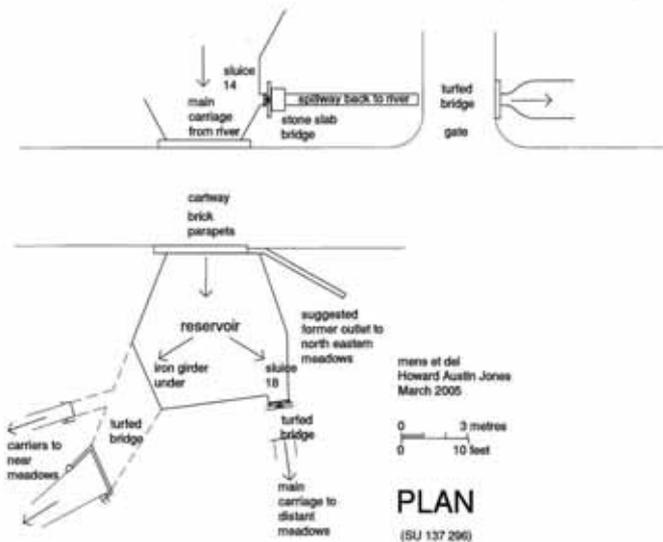
Looking back is our recent acquisition, Rose Cottage, which has had more than enough written about it for the time being. The wide watercourse through the cottage garden from (restored) Sluice 9 (called Martin's Mead hatch) and under the footpath is the main carriage providing water to irrigate about half of the eastern meadows. Below this, the "three level structure" is completed by a stone arch allowing a tail drain to return water from some of the western meadows, back to the lower point in the river. To the best of my knowledge this is unique among the engineering involved in creating floated systems. And if anyone can suggest a better short sharp and accurate name for it I would be greatly obliged!

Nearby the main carriage can be seen to curve to the right and break into five outlets rather like the fingers of a spread hand. The present decayed and ruinous complex is next in line for restoration, including Sluices 8 and 20; by the time this piece appears it is likely that work will have started. This is probably the best opportunity since the restoration programme started in 1989 to see the process at relatively close quarters.

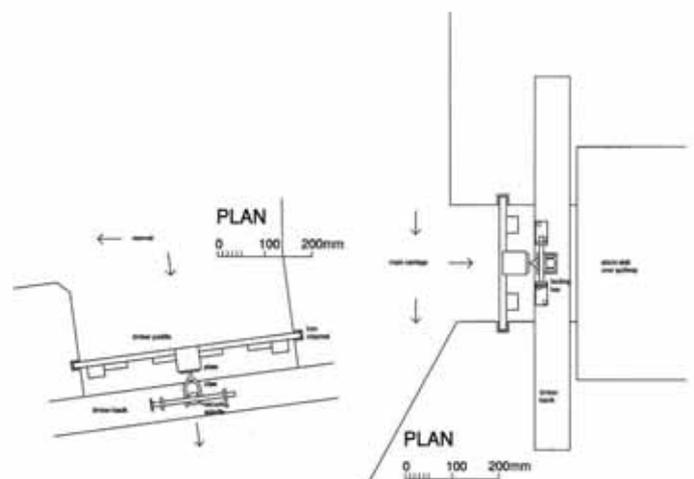
Town Path continues, a combination of the footpath on its brick and stone faced causeway, raised some two feet above the adjoining sunken lane. In 1787 the two were not shown separately until beyond the mid point when the watercourse draining from the western meadows appears - described in 1931 as "the old river road". This is a not uncommon combination of road and watercourse (at least for that limited part of the year when the irrigation system was operating). There can be some debate about how, when and why the footpath was raised onto its causeway which I have recently outlined elsewhere. Our persuasive view is that its complete length is of eighteenth century origin. I have suggested that the traffic generated from the tiny hamlet of West Harnham would not have justified such a structure until modern times. On reflection this probably underrated the importance of the wider population to the south west of Salisbury who would find this the shortest route to and from the city. Similarly there will have been pedestrian and wheeled traffic to and from the mills - corn and barley to Fisherton; raw materials to Harnham for, successively over the centuries, cloth, paper, bone meal and tallow.

At the central point of the path the basin on the right was christened "the whirlpool" by the volunteers who dug out the accumulated mud to restore the flow along this second main carriage feeding the eastern meadows. Perhaps "reservoir" better reflects its purpose to act as a control area for two (formerly three) outlets. The major irrigation channel here, as at Rose Cottage, is crossed by an arched brick bridge. At either end of the path a ford was adequate for wagons but the sides of main carriages on which operation of the whole system depended could not be damaged. To a casual glance the basin seems to be square; it is in fact an irregular hexagon, obvious in the recent measured drawing (illustrated). Town Path continues to provide intriguing aspects of its story further along - but for next time.

Michael Cowan



Mid point reservoir and spillway



Enlarged detail of Sluice 18 (left) and Sluice 14