

THE TOWN PATH

In the last issue (No 28) I started at the Harnham end and stopped after describing the structures at the mid point. En route I observed that by the time the piece was published restoration work on Sluices 8 and 20 might have started. In the event it was very nearly finished but I hope some of you had a chance to see work in progress. The picture below was taken in August 2005 and I have used it as the frontispiece in *Wiltshire Water Meadows* (Hobnob Press 2005): it seems to represent three important aspects of the meadows - their history, a period of dereliction, and now restoration. Part of the caption reads

'...when complete the wooden frame will house two large wooden hatch boards (or paddles), raised and lowered by two steel racks and pinion devices to control the flow of water. Damage to the stone walls of the watercourse has been stabilized with cement. Part of the floor cleared of mud and rubble reveals stone blocks laid longitudinally across the carriage and secured laterally by iron cramps, sealed with lead to prevent the iron rusting and damaging the stone. They appear to have done this successfully for some three centuries as the stone is judged to have come from the Hurdcott quarry some six miles west of Salisbury, geologically Upper Greensand, in the late seventeenth or early eighteenth century'. (I am grateful to Tim Tatton-Brown for this identification)'



Sluice 20 - photo by M Cowan

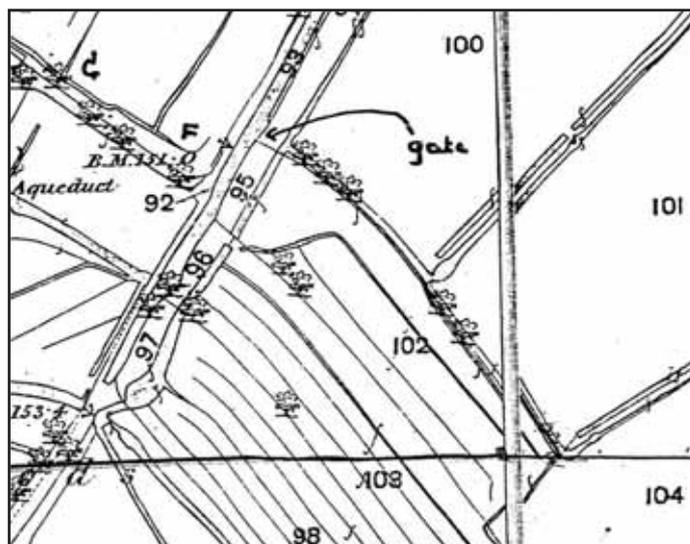
The re-building of Sluices 8 and 20 means that, in conjunction with the carriage from Sluice 18 at the centre reservoir, the way is open to being able eventually to drown (or irrigate) some half of the Eastern Meadows.

Coming back to the Path at the centre point there is the spillway provided by Sluice 14 which initiates the flow that from here runs alongside the causeway. There are then no further water control structures between here and Long Bridge but some interesting points about both access and irrigation to be noted. On Great Mead (North) to the left, carriages (taking water from the river), carriers along the top of the ridges, the interlocking drains and pipe drains have mostly been dug out in recent years. Given a useful river level, this area and

Sammel's Acre beyond could be drowned relatively easily. Sammel's Acre, fed by the iron aqueduct, has its corrugations at right angles to the Path making it easy to see how the water drains through the roots of the grass down the sides (or panes) of the ridges.

The area west of Sammel's Acre, now defined by Rotary Copse, is part of Ivy Mead, linked by a narrow neck to the further main mead. This was originally in separate ownership and there was a right of access which can be seen along the northern edge of Sammel's Acre. Looking west from the Path there is a tail drain, flanked on either side by ragged, overgrown bush and tree lines, running under the Path to join the 'river road'. In the sale document when the Fisherton Mill estate was sold in 1931 access to Lot 3, Ivy Mead (12 acres, 2 roods, 27 poles) was approached 'from the historical old water road from Salisbury to West Harnham, and by the road marked F-G on plan', points at the east and west ends of Sammel's Acre. Hay wagons had to reach Ivy Mead from either ford, turning to cross what is now the causeway at point F. The odd shape of the path here, a slight dip and the unusual diagonal course of the tail drain underneath might suggest that a more modern construction has replaced an earlier plank bridge.

Slightly further on they had an easier turn to the right. This was similarly a 'river road' giving access to some of the eastern meadows. It can be seen in a photograph of perhaps c1906 published in the *Salisbury Journal* (*Journal Scrapbook* with Peter Daniels 3 March 2005) picturing 'a sunny afternoon a century ago with walkers dressed in their Sunday best enjoying a peaceful stroll across the meadows'. To us the interest is the water road beside the causeway which at this point branches through a field gate to the right. No trace remains but the point along the Path can be identified fairly accurately by measurement as it must have been at the property boundary shown on early maps. The small part of the 1881 Ordnance Survey map (1/2500, sheet LXVI.11) illustrated shows this boundary with pollards between the three east-west strip meads (with their land parcels numbers, Parsonage 98, Hussey's 103, Rowlas 102) and Longbridge Mead (100) and Deanery Mead (101).



These five parcels are now one field with virtually no evidence of former irrigation, a consequence presumably of the walling up the north aperture of the central reservoir. The Ordnance Survey shows this open in 1937 but closed by 1957, giving some credence to the school of thought that the area was ploughed during World War II. Our well known air photomosaic based on 1949 aerial photography is inconclusive: the irrigation lines can be seen but less prominently than in other areas. The tale of the county War Agricultural Executive Committees is, fictionally, told by AG Street in *Shameful Harvest*, (Faber 1952) describing their draconian powers but to have ordered ploughing of meadows for food crops in such a flood prone area seems unlikely and a possible explanation is that they were simply used as pasture to replace that lost elsewhere. Records of the committees only survive for the north of Wiltshire!

Writing in 1982 I took at face value from an elderly neighbour who had farmed in the area all his adult life, that it had been ploughed some years before when a large pipe had been laid to the newly developing Churchfields Industrial Estate. I wonder now if his recollection was only recalling the general upheaval of pipelaying with the implication that these meadows had not otherwise been disturbed. My own feeling now is that the most likely, simple, explanation is that they had stopped being drowned so long ago that the natural flattening effect of grazing and haymaking has taken its course.

In strong contrast the corrugations on the meadows to the left, or west, of the Path are strongly defined, parallel to the Path and irrigating successively four strips: Parker's Mead, Two Acres, Four Acres, and then Nail's Mead beyond the straggling tree line. Originally these were fed from the north, probably rather inefficiently, and a mid nineteenth century arrangement between the Pembroke and Radnor Estates created the present system, watered from the south. A description of this and the related search for a 'lost hatch' is for another occasion.

Finally, to Longbridge. One of many crossings of Salisbury's five rivers, it is the first shown on a map by Naish in 1716 while Constable included part of a very rickety looking structure in his 'rainbow' painting in 1829. From the age of photography there are several well known images. A good one from 1907 shows a group of boys apparently just leaning on the waist high railing watching the river (Salisbury, a second collection Peter Daniels 1988, p136). Seventy eight years after Constable the flat wooden bridge on four piers was much more substantial. Today it is still, happily, wooden - a long, shallow arch with a concrete pier towards each end. Small boys still gather, often spreading their fishing gear over the footway and helpfully forcing cyclists to dismount - as they should but usually don't. Health and safety has raised the sides above small boy level so they stand on one of the lower railings. The boy in the picture hooked his fish from the bridge but needed help from his friends to get round to the bank and land it.

