



# Stockbridge Water Meadows

On behalf of the Save Our Stockbridge Committee

By Alex Lawrence

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## Introduction

The purpose of this report is an initial investigation of the Stockbridge water meadows system which Stockbridge Local History Society recognises as an important local heritage asset, and one that will require further study, and recognition in order to gain a better understanding, and give it greater protection. The study has been predominantly a desk based study, with some site visits to parts of the original water meadows system where access is possible, although much of the land is currently privately owned and mostly belongs to neighbouring farms. Some of the system is undeveloped gardens and meadows belonging to properties on, or close to the High Street. The focus has not been on establishing the full condition of the system, or indeed recommendations as to how it should be preserved going forward because this should form part of more detailed future research and should include the study of county records as well as involving the assistance of professional individuals and bodies.

The focus has been on sharing these initial findings with the community of Stockbridge in order to help us all understand what an important heritage asset we have surrounding our small settlement, which to a large extent is overlooked due to lack of knowledge, and in particular first-hand experience of managing water meadows has almost been lost through time. Without this understanding it is easy to lose sections of the system to development (such as new building's, or garden landscaping), by overlooking the significance of the land, and it's the view of Stockbridge Local History Society that understanding the water meadows in greater depth is crucial before any decisions that affect the future of this land is made. We now have the opportunity to reverse this decline in understanding, and offer greater appreciation and protection for this important heritage asset.

It is estimated that this water meadows system covers around 100 hectares, and covers the parishes of Stockbridge, Longstock and Houghton. Overall, it would appear that the remaining system is remarkably intact and has not been subject to destruction or development, and this is due mostly to the boggy ground conditions of the valley base which is both unsuitable for ploughing and subsequent crop growing, and structural development would be made very expensive due to the need for engineered piling. Parts of the system have recently come under threat from modern unsuitable development and unless we act now to acknowledge the system's importance, we face losing parts of it which would reduce its overall significance as a heritage asset. This loss would surely be an injustice to future generations, particularly at a time when water meadows have been significantly lost elsewhere in Southern England

Hampshire was the heartland of water meadows, and were, and continue to be, an important feature of Hampshire's historic landscape. Since the decline in agriculture at the end of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, and particularly through post war development, many systems have been lost across the county and further afield. Water meadows were generally abandoned between 1918 and 1960, and due to intensification of farming practices, drainage, and development on water meadows, many have been lost at an alarming rate. According to a report by Hampshire County Council (likely to have been published soon after 2002) entitled *The Conservation of Water Meadows Structures*, 'Hampshire contains nearly half of all water meadows found in England which makes them of nation significance'. The report goes on to say 'only 4% of water meadows in



Hampshire are classified as ‘well preserved’ and ‘between 1970 and 1996 the condition of over a third of Hampshire’s water meadows has deteriorated’.



*Image 1. 1841 Stockbridge Tithe Map showing the many man-made channels and ditches to the North and South of the High Street, most of which still exist today*

In almost twenty years since the Hampshire County Council report was written, the condition, and indeed the existence of Hampshire water meadows has no doubt further deteriorated. But we now have a golden opportunity to understand the Stockbridge water meadows and take steps to protect them, which will in turn recognise one of England's greatest man made agricultural achievements.



*Image 2. A modern view of Stockbridge, 2021, largely unchanged in 180 years*

## Stockbridge, a brief history

Stockbridge means, literally, a bridge over the river. Stockbridge is a linear settlement built on a causeway of compressed chalk (now the High Street A30) laid down long ago, and sits in the base of a valley. The causeway is understood to have been laid by the Roman's, and although it has not been dated yet with certainty, it was already ancient at the time of the Norman Conquest in 1066. A Roman posting station and villa remains have been found locally which further supports the causeway's date. There were settlements on Stockbridge Down from at least the second millennium BC; and a short distance away are the impressive earthworks of Danebury, Meon Hill and Woolbury. Two ancient roads meet and cross at Stockbridge, one running east to west between London and Winchester and Old Sarum, later Salisbury, and the other running north to south along the valley of the Test. The prosperity of Stockbridge has stemmed largely from the roads that pass through it.

In 1190 Stockbridge was granted the right to hold a sheep market and this continued until 1932, by which time the market had declined due to the modern methods of sheep trading. Therefore Stockbridge was associated with sheep marketing for over 700 years, and this rich tradition is still remembered in the name of the Market Room at the Grosvenor Hotel.

*Image 3. The Grosvenor Hotel c.1910, with the Hursley Hunt gathered and showing the projected room above the entrance, home to the Houghton Fishing Club. The Market Room is to the right (out of view)*



In 1563, Stockbridge was granted the right by Queen Elizabeth I to be represented by two

members of parliament. This right was retained until the Reform Act of 1832 when Stockbridge was considered a 'rotten' borough due to incidents of corruption over the preceding years. Some of these members of parliament are remembered in Stockbridge today with the 'Barham' and 'Porter' rooms of the Town Hall, built in 1810, and the Grosvenor Hotel, named after Lord Grosvenor. Another important association for Stockbridge was the Stockbridge Racecourse which opened in 1839, although racing here can be traced back to at least 1775. The course is perhaps best known for being visited by King Edward VII whilst still Prince of Wales, and his mistress Lillie Langtry who lived in the High Street. Other notable names were John Day, the eminent trainer, and Tom Cannon the famous Derby winner jockey who maintained stables at Chattis Hill just to the west of Stockbridge. The course was forced to close in 1898 when it was inherited by two sisters who strongly disapproved of gambling and refused to extend the lease.



Image 4. *The Stockbridge Racecourse c.1880*

Stockbridge Parish runs alongside the world famous River Test on the west. To the south of the High Street is the Common Marsh which is now owned by the National Trust, and to the north of the High Street is Stockbridge Fen. To the east of Stockbridge is the Stockbridge Down owned by the National Trust.

All of these sites including the River Test are designated as SSSIs - Sites of Special Scientific Interest, and Stockbridge along with its water meadows is nestled in the middle of four of these on each side, making the whole of Stockbridge a very environmentally sensitive place. Stockbridge is also home to the ancient and world famous Houghton Fishing Club which own many miles of the River Test and its tributaries, and their home is the room over the Grosvenor Hotel entrance which projects out into the High Street.



Image 5. *Map showing three of the four SSSI's surrounding Stockbridge - Stockbridge Fen, Stockbridge Common Marsh and the River Test - Stockbridge Down is to the east (out of view)*



## Water Meadows

Water meadows were man made irrigation systems that borrowed water from nearby major rivers, which were dammed by weirs, and fed through a system of artificial channels, and allowed a continuous moving thin sheet of water to run over the meadows which was removed via a network of drains. Moving water was a crucial part of the process because stagnant water is oxygen deficient and it would therefore damage the grass. Water meadows were therefore carefully, and deliberately flooded, and they should not be confused with natural flood plains and grazing marshes. Operating water meadows was known as 'floating' or 'drowning' and involved highly skilled management which was often carried out by men known as 'drowners', 'meadmen' or 'watermen'.

From the 15<sup>th</sup> Century it was realised that by diverting water from main rivers through precisely engineered channels, and using wood, stone and other barriers, meadows could be deliberately flooded for set periods of time, and at prescribed times of the year. The water deposited nutrient rich silt which provided rich grazing for sheep flocks, and improved the hay crop, often with at least two crops a year. A good crop was essential to farmers to ensure the survival of their livestock throughout the winter months. Ewes in particular required sufficient nutrients to ensure that lambs survived and were born healthy. In an age without the use of artificial nutrients and veterinary care as we know it today this was hugely important to the shepherd and ensured the health and survival of his flock.

In addition to improving the grazing, the water reduced the effects of frost and warmed the soil allowing the grass to grow earlier which gave the sheep flocks an 'early bite' of grass by bringing forward the growth of spring grass by a number of weeks. Each evening the sheep were taken back to the less productive and poorer quality higher ground of the valley sides, which the sheep then fertilised with rich manure from the meadow grass.

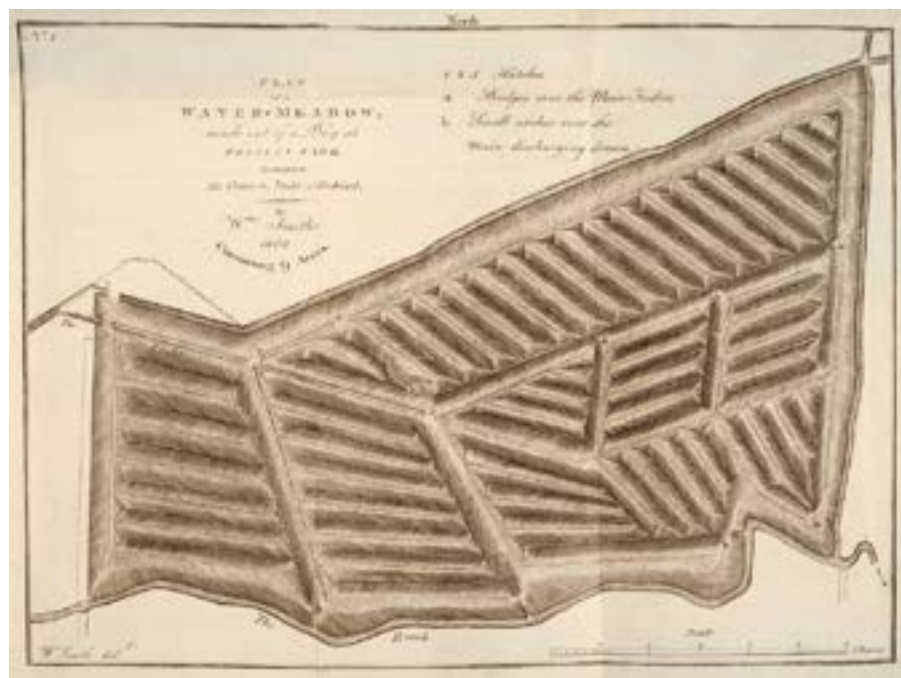


*Image 6. A drowner at work on a hatch weir near Salisbury, 1954*



*Image 7. The evening 'procession' of sheep being moved from the water meadows by the River Kennett, near Marlborough*

There were two basic types of water meadows; the first called the 'Catchworks' systems which were relatively simple systems, and cheap to construct, relying on natural gradients and slopes of hill and valley sides to irrigate meadows. The second system called the 'Bedworks' system is a riverside water meadow system and was designed to improve relatively flat land.



*Image 8. A map of Prisely Farm water meadows in Bedfordshire, showing how the land was transformed into bedwork water meadows by using precisely engineered channels, and controlling the flow of river water*

## Stockbridge water meadows

Stockbridge adopted the Bedwork system and many of these features still remain in the form of carriers, ditches, earthworks and structures. This complex system of carriers and channels can still be seen all around Stockbridge today, and particularly well from modern aerial images.

Image 9. *Meadows to the south of Stockbridge High Street showing a complex pattern of channels which were dug so as to permit careful and deliberate flooding*



Sheep became the principal provider of food and wool in Stockbridge and the pastures were therefore crucial to

the inhabitants of Stockbridge and without doubt the success of the water meadows system contributed greatly to Stockbridge as we see it today. Dr Hadrian Cook and Dr Kathy Stearne who are both experts in water meadows were consulted as part of the research for this report and in their opinion, the Stockbridge water meadows likely date from the 17th century.

Furthermore, they believe that the water meadows at Stockbridge would have been in constant use from the 17th century, right up to the 20th century when agricultural practices changed.

In the 17<sup>th</sup> and 18<sup>th</sup> centuries Stockbridge was on the main route from Gloucester and South Wales to Portsmouth, with drovers selling their sheep which provided food to the Royal Navy. Stockbridge provided accommodation to the drovers, and pasture to the sheep. This important past is still evident today on the thatched Drovers House on the Houghton Road, which still contains writing on the front of the building and the Welsh reads: GWAIR-TYM-HERUS-PORFA-FLASUS-CWRW-DA-A-GWAL-CYCURUS which translates to 'Season's Hay, Rich Grass, Good Ale and Sound Sleep'.

*'Make Hay While The Sun Shines'*

Until artificial feeds became available, hay was the principal feed for animals in winter, and without it animals would not survive or be kept in good condition until the spring. Securing an adequate supply of hay was therefore the principal summer task of the farmer.



Hay was produced in many types of fields, but the best grass was that grown in carefully managed water meadows for the reasons detailed above. Hay making was quite an event and it employed a huge labour force locally in order to cut the grass by hand, before mechanisation, and dry the hay before the rain came. The longer the grass took to dry, the poorer it was nutritionally, and after the grass was cut, woman and children would rake and fluff the grass to help accelerate the drying process. To access the various meadows which were divided by carrier streams, wide bridges were built over the carriers and many are still in existence today. Once the hay was dry, typically within a couple of days of good weather, horse drawn haywains transported it to barns and hay lofts. The rest of the hay was made into hayricks with pitched tops and once the hay had settled they were thatched to keep them dry and they resembled little cottages.



*Image 10. A wide Victorian concrete cart bridge linking two water meadows still in*

During winter, a large bladed knife was used to cut sections of the compressed hay which was used to feed livestock. Hayricks were a common site across the landscape and indeed were a sight still within living memory, but sadly today hayricks are no more than a memory.



*Image 11. A hayrick can be seen near the top of this 1930's aerial photograph of Stockbridge, behind the frontages of the High*

*Image 12. A late 19th century photograph of the High Street looking West. Two haywains with their large sides can be seen in the distance*

### *Stockbridge Horses*

As the improved pasture on the water meadows usually produced two crops of hay a year, it not only ensured feed for the farmers wintering animals, but in the 18<sup>th</sup> and 19<sup>th</sup> centuries it supplied the horse trade.

Horse racing in Stockbridge can be dated back to the 18<sup>th</sup> century and the Stockbridge Racecourse was opened at Danebury in 1839. Stockbridge was an important coaching stop with a large number of coaching inns, and

attached stables, and in the 19<sup>th</sup> century with the development of the railway and the 'Sprat and Winkle' line, the Stockbridge Racecourse was opened connecting London, Andover, Southampton and Portsmouth. Many people would use the railway to travel to Stockbridge Racecourse which became very fashionable with The Prince of Wales being a regular visitor, and his mistress Lillie Langtry owned a house in Stockbridge. John Day and his family were famous trainers for many generations from the late 18<sup>th</sup> century and they trained their horses in Stockbridge. Tom Cannon who was a Derby winner jockey, married into the Day family and he had stables at Chattis Hill between Stockbridge and Danebury racecourse and these horses of course required hay, and the water meadows allowed local farmers to fulfil this need. During the Great War horses were sent to Southampton docks by train from Stockbridge; all of which also relied on being fed on local hay. The railway line was finally closed in 1966 under the Beeching Cuts.

Stockbridge is historically a sheep area as cows being bigger and heavier do not mix easily with the peat meadows and so they did not graze the water meadows. Horses were purely utilitarian in the early days, but owing to the decline in agriculture and the import of artificial fertilisers in the 19<sup>th</sup> century, Stockbridge began to rely heavily on horses stabled at the coaching inns and the race course and stables. This transformation although different to the drovers trade would arguably not have been possible, or at least made very difficult, without the productive water meadows supplying an improved number of hay crops.



## Burgage Plots

Stockbridge retains much of the land that contained the mediaeval burgage plots, and the outline of these plots occupying undeveloped countryside can still be seen today. The plots were long thin strips of land directly behind the narrow High Street buildings. Beyond these plots is the water meadow system. Due to the transition from burgage plots to water meadows it's entirely possible that the water meadows and burgage plots will have overlapped in places, when parts of burgage plots became redundant. In the eleventh century there is a reference to nine burgage plots in the Manor of Kings Somborne which are believed to be those of Stockbridge. By 1264 there were 64 burgage plots in Stockbridge, and by 1283 this has grown to 97 plots.

Many of the carriers of the water meadows formed the boundaries to the burgage plots which still exist today, especially on the north side of the High Street. An archaeological assessment document of Stockbridge undertaken by Hampshire County Council, and initiated by English Heritage suggests that many water meadow systems were constructed locally in the seventeenth century, and this is supported by the view of Dr Hadrian Cook and Dr Kathy Stearne. Further study of the Stockbridge burgage plots and the water meadow system may allow a much better understanding of the development, and subsequent transition between both systems.



*Image 13. Stockbridge in the 1930's, taken from the south and showing the long carriers dividing meadows and former burgage plots. An image still familiar today, despite almost 100 years passing*





*Image 14. A reconstruction of burgage plots by Birmingham Museums. Over time and owing to an increase in population and demand, these plots would be subdivided further*

## **Stockbridge Conservation Area**

Stockbridge was first designated as a Conservation Area in 1971 and at this time the Conservation Area boundary was drawn around the rear of the High Street properties. The boundary was extended in 1992 to encompass a much wider area to include the surrounding countryside. A Conservation Area is defined as ‘An area of special architectural or historic interest, the character or appearance of which it is desirable to preserve or enhance’ - Planning (Listed Buildings and Conservation Areas) Act 1990. Test Valley Borough Council are responsible for designating and reviewing Conservation Areas because it has a duty to ensure that the character of these areas is preserved or enhanced when considering applications for development.

The Stockbridge Conservation Area appraisal details the boundary that the designation covers, listed buildings and listed walls, as well as important trees and hedgerows amongst other things. It also includes ‘focal points’ and ‘important views’ which cover the views into and out of the High Street, as well as views from the Recreation Ground towards Stockbridge Fen, and the views from the wooden bridge of the marsh path which overlook the surrounding water meadows and the Marsh.

## **Stockbridge water meadows today**

Stockbridge today owes much of its success to the very long and rich history of the sheep and horse trade, both of which relied on the water meadows. The water meadows, the River Test and its carriers, and the surrounding countryside makes Stockbridge a charming place set in beautiful countryside and it attracts visitors and anglers from all over the world. The meadows are now home to many species of wildlife including the water vole and otter, birds that rely on wetland such as egrets, cettis warblers, herons and cormorants, as well as orchids and the yellow flag iris. The water meadows are just as important for Stockbridge today despite their uses having changed through the centuries - from prime agricultural hay production, to the important and sensitive habitats we see today. They enhance the sensitive ecological environment, and help generate the local important tourism economy. But they are more than that. The water meadows are largely responsible for the history and success of Stockbridge, and at the same time represent one of the greatest agricultural achievements in English history. They are a hugely important part of our heritage, and without properly understanding and appreciating them, their significance risks being lost forever. On a local level it can truly be said that the water meadows have kept Stockbridge a thriving and prosperous community, for while it no longer relies on the sheep trade or horse trades, it is now the countryside immediately surrounding Stockbridge which attracts tourists from far and wide. Stockbridge is rightly known both as 'the heart of the Test Valley' and 'the jewel in the crown of the Test Valley'.

The existing water meadow system in Stockbridge is by all accounts remarkably well preserved. This is not to say that they could easily be put back into water meadow use without any work (and nor is a full restoration and subsequent management being suggested at this stage), but more important is that the majority of the system exists and the land hasn't been developed. Many of the original carrier streams still remain today and the numerous carriers running under the High Street are visible when they reappear close to the pavements and are one of the distinctive features of Stockbridge. There are various structures still in existence including cart bridges, foot bridges and sluices, and no doubt future research will unearth many more.

The Stockbridge Tithe Map of 1841 illustrates the main carriers and some of the secondary water courses. Comparison of this map to a modern day map indicates how many of the original carriers remain today. On further investigation it can be seen that many of the carriers that make up the original system and don't currently flow have not been filled in or built over, but they clearly remain as deep ditches and field boundaries, and no longer flow as the water supply has been stopped at certain points. In times of heavy rain and risk of flooding however, these ditches often fill with water and some even flow. This further indicates that most of the original water meadows system remains.

## **Modern Development**

It has been fortunate that over the centuries almost all development in Stockbridge has been contained along the High Street itself, or in the back land directly behind the High Street frontage. This is due to the productive burgage plots surrounding the High Street being previously used for food production and livestock, and the water meadows beyond the chalk causeway being



*Image 15. View of a water meadow on the south side of the High Street, with a carrier running past. This photograph was taken of a temporary car park to illustrate how a developer proposed permanent 114 space car park would look, alongside a proposed development of 59 new homes further south, on the land in the distance*

unsuitable for building. Test Valley Borough Council's Local Plan recognises the important and sensitive areas of countryside surrounding Stockbridge. The Settlement Boundary (which prescribes where development can and cannot take place) is tightly drawn around the existing buildings of Stockbridge, but it allows for small areas of open space to be developed in future, should local housing needs be established without compromising the sensitive, historic and ecologically important water meadows and the surrounding countryside.

In the early 1970s a housing estate was built behind the High Street at the east end on the south side. Although this development was damaging to the historic linear settlement, the development is contained. More importantly from the point of view of the water meadows, this development appears to have been constructed on grazing meadows directly behind High Street properties which do not appear to have been part of the water meadows system.

### **Nutrient Neutrality**

Natural England in their June 2019 report entitled 'Advice on achieving nutrient neutrality for new development in the Solent region' advised that due to excessive levels of nutrients (predominantly nitrogen and phosphates) in the Solent caused by effluent increase from new housing developments, all new developments in the region must not add to existing nutrient burdens and must be 'nutrient neutral'. The issue is an immediate and critical one due to the effect on water quality and the adverse impact on the habitats, and species, within the European nature conservation designated sites in and around the Solent and including the River Test. Our water meadows however respond to this latest threat as they act as a natural nitrogen 'sink' which helps remove nitrogen from rivers and streams caused by wastewater from existing development. The water meadows, although not their intended purpose, also act as part of the defence against flooding because of their natural infiltration and in an ironic way, the meadows despite being designed to be purpose flooded, have evolved to become a natural flood defence,



which is an increasingly important defence due to the catastrophic effects of global warming and the resulting increase in flooding in many parts of the country.

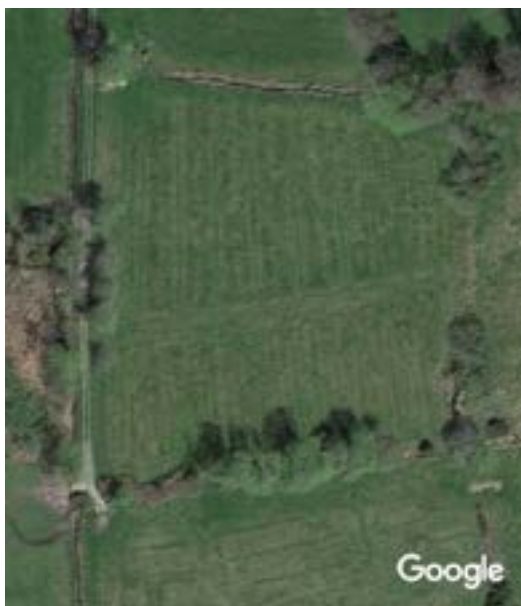
### **Stockbridge Tithe Map - 1841**

Tithe Maps and their accompanying schedules detailed all plots of land, the land's use, and their owners and tenants within a parish for the purpose of paying the tithe to the church. It's an extremely interesting document and I won't detail too much of it in this report because my current focus is on the Stockbridge water meadows, and the Tithe Map would make a very interesting future publication in its own right.

The payment of one tenth of local produce to the church can be traced back to Anglo-Saxon times, and following the Tithe Commutation Act 1836, tithe payment could be paid in cash rather than in goods. These maps were very detailed (as can be seen on the front cover), and often being the earliest surviving maps of most parishes, they offer invaluable resource to the historian.

The Stockbridge Tithe Map details all the public house, private houses, gardens, arable land, and pasture; and also the water meadows. There were 47 water meadows recorded on the Tithe Map and some had really good old fashioned names such as 'Rott Gates', 'Sprats Four Acres', 'Wiggs Meadow' and 'Golden Haws', and I can't help thinking how wonderful it would be to re-attribute some of these names to those parcels of land that are now sadly nameless... The accompanying schedule to the Map that records the information of each plot, helpfully details the 'state of cultivation' of each. It is because of this that we can say with accuracy that the water meadows detailed on the 1841 Map were working and productive water meadows in 1841, and were not historic names attached to groups of redundant agricultural land as is often associated with the term today.

### **Satellite Images**



*Image 16. North of Stockbridge High Street*



*Image 17. North of Stockbridge High Street, with the River Test to the west*



*Image 18. Modern aerial view showing the remains of channels next to the River Test, south east of the High Street*



*Image 19. The same view of image 18 taken from the 1841 Tithe Map*



*Image 20. North of Stockbridge High Street*



*Image 21. South of Stockbridge High Street*





*Image 22. North of Stockbridge High Street*



*Image 23. South of Stockbridge High Street*



## **What next?**

The purpose of this report is to share these findings with the community of Stockbridge in order that we recognise the important heritage asset that surrounds us, one that many of us can easily overlook as being nothing more than old farmland without understanding the local and national historical importance of water meadow systems.

It is hoped that by sharing these initial findings more people will become aware of what we have surrounding Stockbridge. Many people are simply unaware of what water meadow practices were and innocently believe that the term 'water meadow' refers simply, to a meadow that floods. A number of planning professionals I spoke to during my research were unaware of the true meaning of water meadows, and as a result, how can we expect their significance to be appreciated if Local Planning Authorities who make planning decisions don't understand what they are? This isn't a criticism of Local Planning Authorities because it has become clear throughout my research that the true meaning of the term 'water meadows' is not widely known nowadays. The water meadows do currently have a level of protection in so far as they are located outside of the settlement boundary in countryside, but they are not treated any differently as would agricultural land, or a garden.

No firm recommendations as to how we proceed are being made at this stage other than two cautionary, and preliminary approaches. The first is to recommend further study of the land so a better understanding can be gained. An in-depth assessment making use of all available resources, and specialists will be required which will allow us to understand the development of the countryside surrounding Stockbridge, from burgage plots to water meadows, through to the sensitive habitats they are today. One thing that is clear at this stage is that a better understanding of the Stockbridge water meadows will help shape future decisions that affect them. The second approach is that any future development (including ancillary and agricultural buildings) should be determined with consideration given to the water meadows being an important heritage asset. A cautious approach to any disturbance of this land will allow for the time required to conduct a more thorough investigation.

Water meadows have been lost at an alarming rate in recent years, and this threat has been even more severe in the last 50 years according to the Hampshire County Council 2002 report. It is estimated that over one million hectares of water meadows have been lost since the Second World War through ploughing and house building. Such a drastic decline of water meadows, particularly in the Hampshire heartland of water meadows must be stopped before it's too late.

Remaining water meadows are not just redundant features in the landscape, they are a direct link to our heritage and should be a link to our future. Let us take this opportunity to learn about, and acknowledge the Stockbridge water meadows before it's too late.

## **Acknowledgements**

### **Images**

Front cover: 1841 Stockbridge Tithe Map, Hampshire Archives, Hampshire County Council Records Office

Image 1 and 19: Hampshire Archives, Hampshire County Council Records Office

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Image 5: Department for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs

Images 6, 7 and 8: Museum of English Rural Life, Reading University

Images 11 and 13: Britain from Above [britainfromabove.org.uk](http://britainfromabove.org.uk)

Image 14: Birmingham Museums

Image 15: Bruce Williams

