

The History of Abbotsbury Swannery and the West Fleet

Charlie Wheeler

Topics to be covered:

Chesil Bank

Fleet Lagoon

Abbotsbury Swannery

Duck Decoy

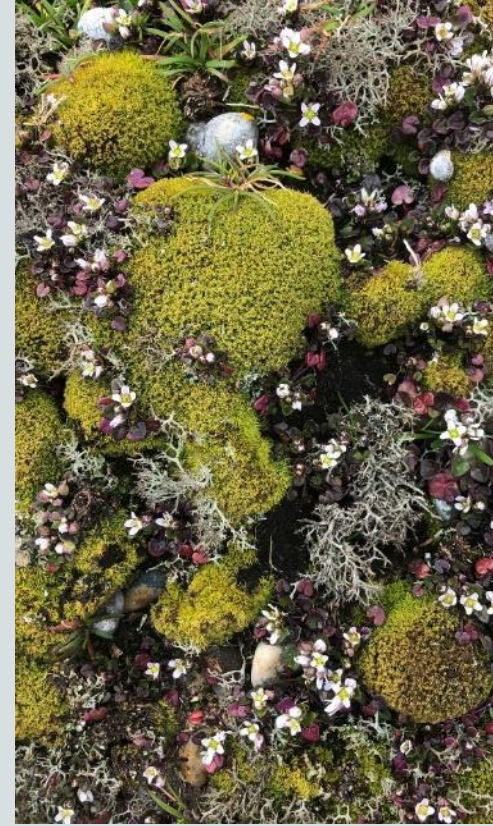
The Tank Teeth

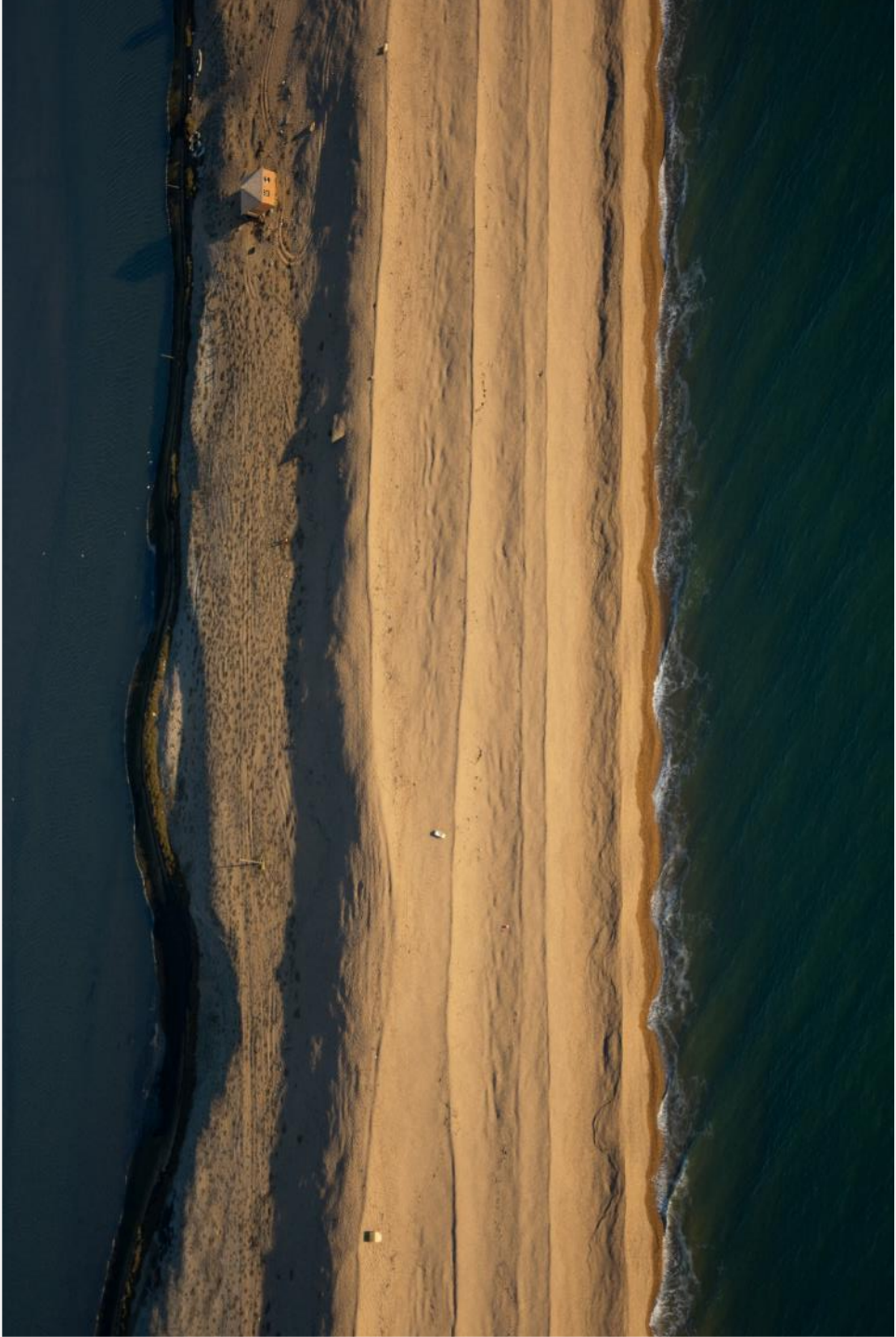
The 'Monk's Wall'



Chesil Bank

- Chesil is an 18-mile shingle beach stretching from Portland to West Bay.
- Chesil Bank is the section bordered by the Fleet Lagoon and Lyme Bay.
- The mid and western end of Chesil Bank has less footfall due to seasonal closures.
- Allows for vegetation and wildlife to thrive.
- The 'Tank/Dragon's Teeth' WWII anti-tank defences.





Fleet Lagoon

- The Fleet is a shallow, 8-mile brackish water lagoon.
- The mid-Fleet has extensive eelgrass beds.
- The salinity of the lagoon varies.



- The western end of the Fleet showcases some unique features and historic management.
 - Abbotsbury Swannery, home to the only managed colony of Mute Swans in the world.
 - The Duck Decoy
 - The 'Monk's Wall'.



Abbotsbury Swannery

The Nesting Colony - why are they there?



Abbotsbury Swannery

The Benedictine Monks

- The Benedictine Monastery of St Peter was founded at Abbotsbury in the 11th century (around 1040).
- After Orc and his wife Thola died, they left the abbey to the church.
- Self-sufficient - crops were grown, fish were caught, and the monks also farmed the swans.
- The earliest written record of a Swanherd dates back to 1393.



“William Squillor ‘Keeper of the Swans’ stirred up the water under the bridge ‘de la Flete’ with ‘les hacches so’ that the water overflowed ‘le Flete’ and is so high that it washed against the nests of the Swans of the Lord and moved and destroyed the eggs of the swans. By default of the same William, therefore he is in mercy.”

Quote taken from the court rolls of the manor of Abbotsbury, 1393.

Abbotsbury Swannery

Dissolution of the monasteries

- In the 1530's Henry VIII undertook the forcible Dissolution of the Monasteries. As a result, Abbotsbury Abbey was dissolved in 1539.
- Sir Giles Strangways, a commissioner of Henry VIII, dissolved the monastery and later bought all the monastic land including The Swannery in the early 1540's.
- It has remained in the ownership of the Strangways family through fifteen generations.



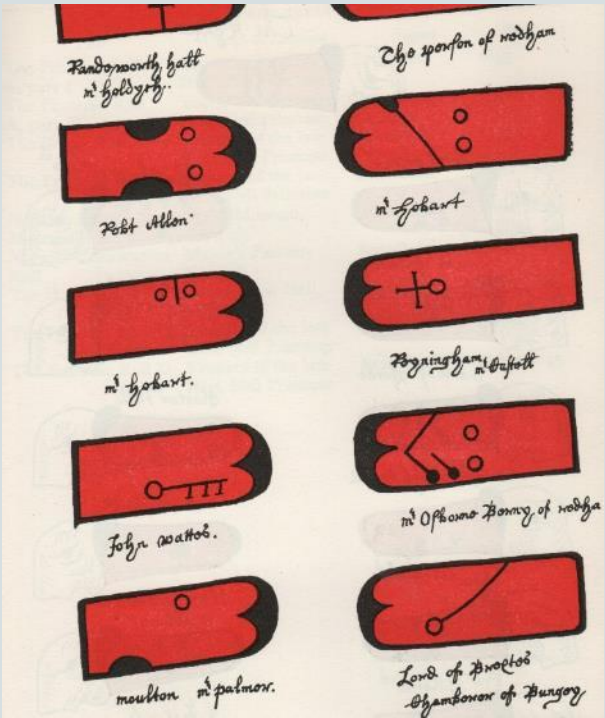
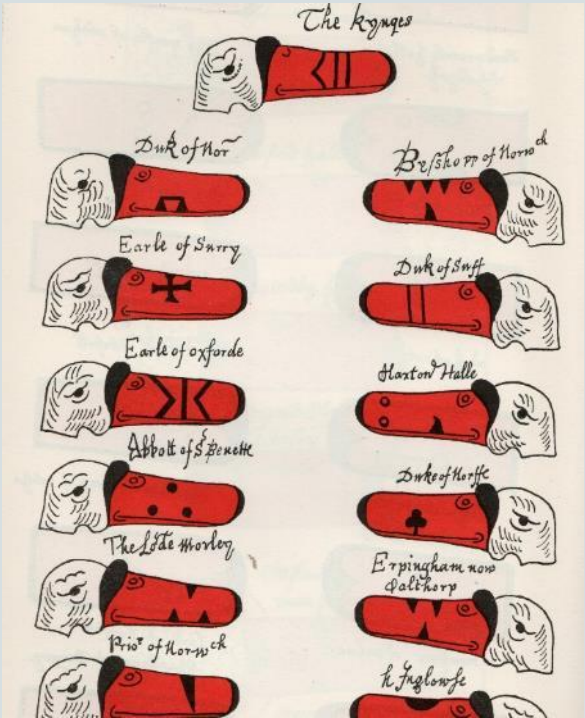
Sir Giles Strangways



Abbotsbury Swannery

Swan Ownership

- The Strangways family gained ownership of all the swans that hatched at Abbotsbury.
- Traditionally they were given the 'Hive of Ilchester' mark on the web of the foot to prove ownership.
- There used to be hundreds of owners of swans apart from the Crown, but nowadays only owned by The Honourable Mrs Charlotte Townshend (on The Fleet Lagoon), The Worshipful Companies of the Vintners and Dyers (on the River Thames) and the Mayor of Maidstone (on the River Medway).



Abbotsbury Swannery

The Swannery as a tourist attraction

- Believed The Swannery first opened its gates to the public in the late 1800's.
- In the 1920's, one of its most distinguished visitors was the ballerina, Anna Pavlova.
- She came to The Swannery with her troupe whilst preparing for her production of Swan Lake.
- The Swannery remains a very popular tourist attraction attracting thousands of visitors every year including notable names such as King Charles III, David Attenborough and a host of other famous names.



Abbotsbury Swannery

The Swannery as a tourist attraction



Abbotsbury Swannery – past Swanherds

1393 ~ William Squillor (keeper of swans) was charged for flooding the nest site and causing the eggs to be washed away ~ he was 'in mercy'.

1501 ~ A reference to the Swannery but no name recorded.

1591 ~ No name recorded. A bailiff representing the crown claimed unmarked swans at Abbotsbury.

1724 ~ Three names -William Pond, Thomas Carter, & Nicholas Bayley.

1742 ~ Robert Pitman.

1746 ~ Corbet Pitman (Son of Robert).

1785 ~ Robert Pitman (Son of Corbet).

1787 ~ George Summers and son-in-law Thomas Green.

1809 ~ Robert Hunt and C. Bartlett.

1858 ~ Mark Hopson.

1870 ~ Mr Bartlett.

1879 ~ Gregory Gill.

1922 ~ Joe Gill (Son of Gregory).

1926 ~ Frank Grovenor.

1950 ~ Fred Lexster (Nephew of Joe Gill).

1975 ~ John Fair.

1995 ~ 'Dick' Dalley.

2001 ~ Dave Wheeler.

2017 ~ Steve Groves.

Abbotsbury Swannery

The current Swanherd -
Steve Groves



Earliest mention of swans at Abbotsbury 1354.
Abbot Walter de Stoke was charged for selling swans and receiving one mark (13s, 4p) for every nesting bird sold. He was also accused of selling juvenile swans and receiving one mark for every four birds.



Abbotsbury Swannery

The Swannery in the 1800's



Abbotsbury Swannery

The Swannery in the 1800's



ABBOTSBURY SWANNERY 25

Gregory Gill - 1879

Abbotsbury Swannery

Duck Decoy Pond

- Constructed in 1655.
- Dutch method of catching ducks for the table.
- Ancient monument.
- Used now as a part of a monitoring and ringing scheme.



Abbotsbury Swannery

Duck Decoy House

- Decoyman's house.
- Original was destroyed in 1824 storm.
- Recorded height of 6.9m (22'8").



Chesil Bank

WWII anti-tank defenses - Tank Teeth/Dragon's Teeth

- The WWII anti-tank defences on Chesil.
- Constructed during July 1940.
- Area defended by the 6th Battalion Durham Light Infantry.



Chesil Bank

WWII anti-tank defenses - Tank Teeth/Dragon's Teeth

- The WWII anti-tank defences on Chesil.
- Constructed during July 1940.
- Area defended by the 6th Battalion Durham Light Infantry.



RAF air photograph of tank teeth - 5th Augst 1940 – image from 'Beaches, fields, streets, and hills . . . the anti-invasion landscapes of England, 1940' by William Foot

Chesil Bank

WWII anti-tank defenses - Tank Teeth/Dragon's Teeth

- Extended to seaward side.
- Pillboxes - one on either side of Chesil.
- Well camouflaged, pebble dashed with shingle.



Fleet Lagoon The Monks Wall / Causeway



Fleet Lagoon



Fleet Lagoon

The Monks Wall is a man-made causeway across the Fleet just south of the Swannery



Fleet Lagoon

It can be seen whenever the tide is very low. It is believed that it allowed horse and cart access to the Beach



Fleet Lagoon



Fleet Lagoon

Exceptionally low tide in the West Fleet



Fleet Lagoon



Fleet Lagoon



The Fleet & Swannery Trust

The trust was created in 1994 to support the employment of the wardening staff and to help with the conservation of the Fleet Lagoon, its unique herd of Mute Swans and its rare and threatened marine life.