

# Abbotsbury Swannery

Don Moxom

Chesil Bank and the Fleet Nature Reserve



The Swannery today comprises 120-150 breeding pairs of Mute Swans, occupying a managed, colonial nesting site at Abbotsbury. Egg laying takes place from late March until early June. It is early autumn before the cygnets leave for their winter quarters on the Fleet still in the protection of their parents. Sub adults (mute swans don't breed until at least their third summer), failed breeders and swans from local rivers also move to feed on the abundant sea-grasses.

## An Ancient Swannery

The earliest record of the Swannery's existence is of Abbot Walter de Stoke selling swans and 'nestling swans' in 1354.



## So when was Abbotsbury Swannery created?

It is a popular belief that the Mute Swan was introduced into Britain by the Romans, but.....

There is 6,000 year old sub-fossil Mute Swan bone evidence found in peat in East Anglia. Mute Swans may well have been able to access England overland before rising flood waters cut us off from mainland Europe at the end of the last Ice Age.

Indeed Mute Swans may have been poised to visit the post glacial Fleet Lagoon as soon as the sea grass became established probably around 5,000-7,000BP.

## Domestication

Ever since plant-grazing and seed-eating birds came into contact with early farmers through birds raiding the crops, the process of the domestication of birds has developed. In Asia there is evidence of domestication taking place in 5,000. There was a tame goose in England when the Romans arrived, and the English Grey Goose was important for food in Saxon times.



## This one does not roll over though!

However, the mute swan is naturally a territorial breeding bird and therefore aggressive. Whilst it will readily take food throughout the year and flock in the winter, it would not normally accept the presence of other swans whilst nesting.

## And therefore a little longer time needed

The development of the Swannery therefore would have required more time, particularly if selective breeding (for example the removal of many generations of the most aggressive males) took place. The very specific skills required of the swan keepers today to protect eggs and cygnets not only from other swans but also a range of predators has not been acquired overnight. Protection from two-legged predators would also have been required!



## So, when?

During the thousand years between the arrival of the Romans in Dorset and 1354, lowland Britain had made significant progress in agriculture, and society became more stable and there was more continuity. The need for meat was huge and this would have led to a range of initiatives to harvest wild as well as domesticated bird products. During the 12th and 13th centuries swans were becoming owned and strays were pronounced to be the property of the Crown. Swans were a status symbol dead or alive, and no medieval feast was complete without roast swan!

*The Swannery in 1912*



*The unique development at Abbotsbury would have required specific understanding of the swans and their relationship with the Fleet, and decades of support from a benefactor. Further research into the development of land management locally may well identify the most likely period of time in which the Swannery came into being.*

## References:-

*Man and Wifowl Janet Kear T & AD Poyser  
A History of the English People Paul Johnson Weidenfeld Paperbacks*

