

THE FLEET AND CHESIL BEACH

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There is much to be said about the Fleet and Chesil Beach, and even more to be found out, but one fact that tends to be forgotten in the discussions about their origins and their flora and fauna is that the ownership of the Fleet and a substantial part of Chesil Bank has remained with one family since the Reformation and the Dissolution of the Monasteries.

The protection given by this continuity of interest has preserved the area in the past and, in more recent years, contributed to the increased scientific interest in many of its unique features.

The Fox-Strangways family acquired the Abbotsbury Estate and consequently the rights to the Fleet and part of the Bank when the Abbey of St Peter was dissolved in 1539.

The establishment of a Monastery at Abbotsbury in the time of King Canute has meant that there are records for the area stretching back nearly a millenium, although many of the Abbey records were destroyed as a result of the seige of the old monastic buildings by Cromwellian troops during the Civil War. However other commentators have been drawn to the area, John Leland in 1546, Camden: Coker in 1635 remarked "Abbotsbury towne is but poore, the chiefest trade consists in fishing . . .". Indeed fishing has always attracted comment; Defoe on his tour of England wrote in 1724 that he saw "all the way on the seashore . . . shops fishing for mackerel" and that the catches were "so much that the men could hardly draw them on shore . . . the mackerel the finest and largest I ever saw were sold at the seaside for a hundred for a penny".

A feature of the Bank is still the 'crews' of local men fishing off the beach with seine nets at Langton and Abbotsbury, although, perhaps, things have improved since 1752 when the London Journal maintained that "all the people of Abbotsbury, including the vicar, are thieves, smugglers and plunderers of wrecks".

It is doubtful whether anything can ever have such an impact on the area as the creation of Portland Harbour, but it is certain that since the middle of the last century the pressure from development has grown with

every year. In 1980 alone there have been proposals for a nuclear power station at Langton Herring, a new roadbridge connecting Weymouth and Portland, and a new caravan site at Chickerell. The advent of the harbour works, the railway line to Portland and the roadbridge closing the narrows at Smallmouth completely altered the natural features of the East Fleet whilst the spreading urban sprawl through Wyke Regis and Chickerell, reaching out towards Langton Herring has altered the former rural communities causing social friction and further social pressure on the area.

It is therefore pleasurable to report that at the western end of the Fleet the creation of a nature reserve based around the Swannery at Abbotsbury has enabled the Swanherd to perform many of the same tasks about which the monks reported in 1393.

It is undoubtedly, only this continuity and the joint commitment of the owners and those interested, both local and distant, professional, scientific or laymen, which will continue to protect the many fascinating features of the Fleet and Chesil Beach.