

The role of the Fleet Study Group

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The Fleet Study Group was founded in 1975 during the decade when the Natural Environment Research Council (NERC) set up working parties on many important estuaries such as the Severn, the Clyde and Liverpool Bay. Our founder, the late Dr Elsie Burrows (a world algal authority), was a member of the Liverpool Bay Group. Their aim was to study the impact of all users on the ecology of these areas.

From the outset, however, the objectives of the Fleet Study Group (FSG) were rather different, being:

- the collection and collation of scientific, historical and other relevant information about the Fleet and Chesil Beach;
- the identification of gaps in our knowledge and the suggestion of future research;
- the consideration of environmental effects of natural and, especially, man-made change.

Although founded to “collate information and encourage research on the Fleet lagoon and Chesil Beach”, it is interesting to recall that when Dr Head of NERC addressed the inaugural meeting in 1975, he felt that the boundary of the study area should not be too rigidly defined and that it might be necessary to bear in mind the larger area of Portland Harbour and even Weymouth Bay. This advice is even more needed today because of the Royal Navy’s proposed departure from Portland and the numerous plans for Portland Harbour that will inevitable follow. [From January 1994 the FSG agreed that Portland Harbour should formally be included in its study area].

At any one time there are 15 - 20 members of the FSG, drawn from a wide range of backgrounds - including the Ilchester Estates, local and national conservation bodies, local councils and scientists. The Group still meets three times a year. Originally, the venue was Weymouth College, now there are several meeting places in the area underlining our varied make-up. It must be stressed, however, that it is essentially a voluntary, non-political group, inspired solely by its members’ interest in this unique coastal feature. Over the years we have been fortunate in attracting a number of dedicated specialists and six of the founder members are still with us. Their reports and other published and unpublished material, included in the considerable Archive now held in the reference library of Weymouth College, bear witness to the success of the FSG and work that has been carried out over the years.

Of our activities, several highlights come to mind. In 1978, six members of the Oceanography Department of Southampton University visited the Fleet. The main result of this was that Dr Ian Robinson constructed, with the help of the then recently released Central Electricity Generating Board data (for the proposed Tidmoor Nuclear Power Station), a tidal and salinity model of the Fleet waterbody. This gave us an important baseline for future studies by 1983.

In 1981, the alien alga *Sargassum* arrived in the Fleet and greatly concerned the Group for several years. The Fleet became one of the main areas of scientific research into the spread and control of this invasive weed. Fortunately, it never colonised West Fleet and the problem seems to be diminishing. This is just one of the many things that are reported to us and constantly monitored.

Work has now started on drilling a series of boreholes into the sediments of the lagoon. From the ensuing multidisciplinary research it is hoped that a better picture will ultimately emerge into the origin and evolution of the Fleet since its inception *circa* 5000 - 6000 years ago.

Our input (through consultation) into many local planning schemes has also been noteworthy. These include: the Sewage Disposal Scheme for Weymouth and Portland in the 1980s; the proposed CEB Nuclear Power Station at Tidmoor (1980 - 1982), which was never built; the construction of the monsoon ditch and gabion mattresses for flood alleviation at Portland (1979 - 1985); the construction of the New Ferry Bridge (the third bridge on the site) and the problems of the new channel (1982 - 1984); and now in the 1990s, the proposed Relief Road from Portland to Weymouth, and schemes for several marinas in Portland Harbour.

Thanks in the main to the efforts of the Fleet Study Group we are now in no doubt of the tremendous scientific importance, both physical and biological, of the Chesil Beach and the Fleet lagoon. It was first made a Site of Special Scientific Interest (SSSI) in 1951 and since then five more categories have been added. There are several species endemic to the study area or with a very restricted distribution; one example is the rare charophyte (stonewort), *Lamprothamnium papulosum*, found only in six sites in the British Isles. I could go on.

In conclusion, the FSG would like to thank the Ilchester Estates for their continuing and helpful support during the seventeen years of our existence (and during which I have been the sole Secretary). Coincidentally, this Symposium is also the 50th meeting of the Group.