The role of the Ilchester Estates

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The title to my contribution sounds rather grand, since in relationship to FSG and related Fleet Management Committee the Estate acts as co-ordinator and secretariat. However it is interesting this year, in which we celebrate not only the 50th meeting of the Study Group but also the 600th Anniversary of the Swannery, to reflect on the relationship of the Estate with the Fleet and Chesil Bank.

Many of you will have taken part in some of our 600th celebrations and will have seen or heard of the historical records which remain. I would prefer to reflect a moment on the more personal nature of these anniversaries - the direct link between John Fair, the current Swanherd and the unfortunate man who got into trouble 600 years ago, giving rise to our first written record of the Swannery[1] - always fascinates me. I am convinced that it is this personal link both of employees and owners which has contributed to the preservation of the area.

Clearly the Fleet and Chesil Bank must have been regarded as a valuable resource since there is considerable evidence of the steps which were taken to protect the Estate's interest. The principal value must have been in the fish, but how they actually got it to a market is not clear. In days gone by the main access to Abbotsbury appears to have been along the Beach and those of you who have tried it know what hard work it is. Over the last hundred years it must have been mainly pride of ownership and to a limited extent the sporting value which has motivated the Estate.

The gradual change in the perception of this area by the owners of the Estate and their employees over the last 20 years is also a marvellous example of the change in attitudes towards conservation. I came here, with some agricultural background, regarding conservation, at the best, as an unwelcome intrusion. Others of you will remember earlier that the Estate actively discouraged research.

Almost exactly 20 years ago in November 1973 a working party was set up involving the Estate, the then Dorset Naturalists' Trust and Nature Conservancy Council, and the County Council from which acorn the present role of the Study Group and Management Committee developed. It is important to remember that at that time there was little or none of the information, which is set out around this room or about which you are to hear, available.

I was fortunate to arrive here after the ground work had been carried out and so have been able to sit and listen, mostly very out of my depth - I'm still not sure what an ostracod is (and I certainly can't spell it) - but I am sure why you will realise, by the end of the day, the Estate so much appreciates the enthusiasm and hard work which members of the Study Group commit, unrewarded, to the increasing knowledge of the Beach and Fleet.

[1] *The East Tithing presents that William Squilor Keeper of the Swans stirred up the water under the bridge "de la Flete" with "Les Hacches" so that the water overflowed in "Le Flete" and was so high that it washed against the nests of the Swans of the Lord and moved and destroyed the eggs of the Swans. . ."*

(Court roll of 1393)