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'TROUBLE AT MILL AND MEADOW': WICKHAM'S LOST WATER MEADOWS AND MILLS

By GEOFFREY PHILLPOTTS

ABSTRACT

Little survives today of the water meadows systems on the River Meon. The discovery of a hand drawn-map of the water meadows system and the mills between Wickham and Titchfield in the Hampshire Record Office archives demonstrates how extensive the network was, and the struggle between milling and farming interests for control of the river in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries.

INTRODUCTION

On the 1st October 1754 Asher Humphreys, the steward for the Delme family of Titchfield Estate, together with Mr Delme's carpenter and eleven men from the Funtley Iron Works and Funtley Corn Mill, confronted farmer Richard Barham at Knowle Hatches on the River Meon just south of Wickham. In the words of Mr Delme's carpenter John Newman:

> he went upto the said bay or dam in the most peacable manner where he was met by the farmer Richard Barham and Mr Humphreys observing that the river was perfectly dry he begged and intreated farmer barham to let the water go in its normal channel, the farmer absolutely refused and having a large stick in his hand threatened to cleave the scull of the first man that meddled with the bay I and my servants proceeded to break up the bay and notwithstanding the farmer's threats no assault or violence was offered on either side.

We would have known nothing about this except that the farmer's landlord was the Duke of Portland. When farmer Barham pointed out to the Duke's agent that he could not pay the higher rent for his water meadows if he had no water, it did not take long before threats of legal action led to twelve letters of apology to his Lordship for interfering with his water rights (Asher Humphreys explained that one, a young apprentice, was now 'out of his reach').

The letters of apology (HRO 5M53/1126/51) a later copy of a 1715 map of the system of 'carriers' off the main river (Fig. 1, HRO 5M53/1126/41a) and other correspondence between the Duke's man of business, his local agent and a chastened Asher Humphreys all survive in the Wriothesley family papers at the Hampshire Record Office. They provide a link to earlier papers held at Gloucester Record Office and the National Archives which date the construction of the water meadows system between Wickham and Titchfield and show the challenges of managing a sometimes-scarce resource to the satisfaction of all the stakeholders.

The River Meon's water meadows were so important as they impacted upon the rates of rent that could be charged. A landlord could charge much higher rental for water meadows. Contemporary evidence suggests that in the eighteenth century water meadow rents were double those of dry meadows (Bettey 1999). In the eighteenth century a first quality dry meadow could produce a 36 cwt grass crop per acre, an inferior dry meadow 22 cwt, but a water meadow 40 cwt per acre. Dry meadows were also much more dependent on weather than water meadows (Stearne & Cook 2015). A water meadow would also produce a first grass crop four to six weeks earlier in the spring which enabled farmers to overwinter more livestock: this was such a major advantage that Thomas Davis, writing about Wiltshire in the eighteenth century, said their usefulness is 'almost beyond computation' (Davis 1813). As we have seen, it

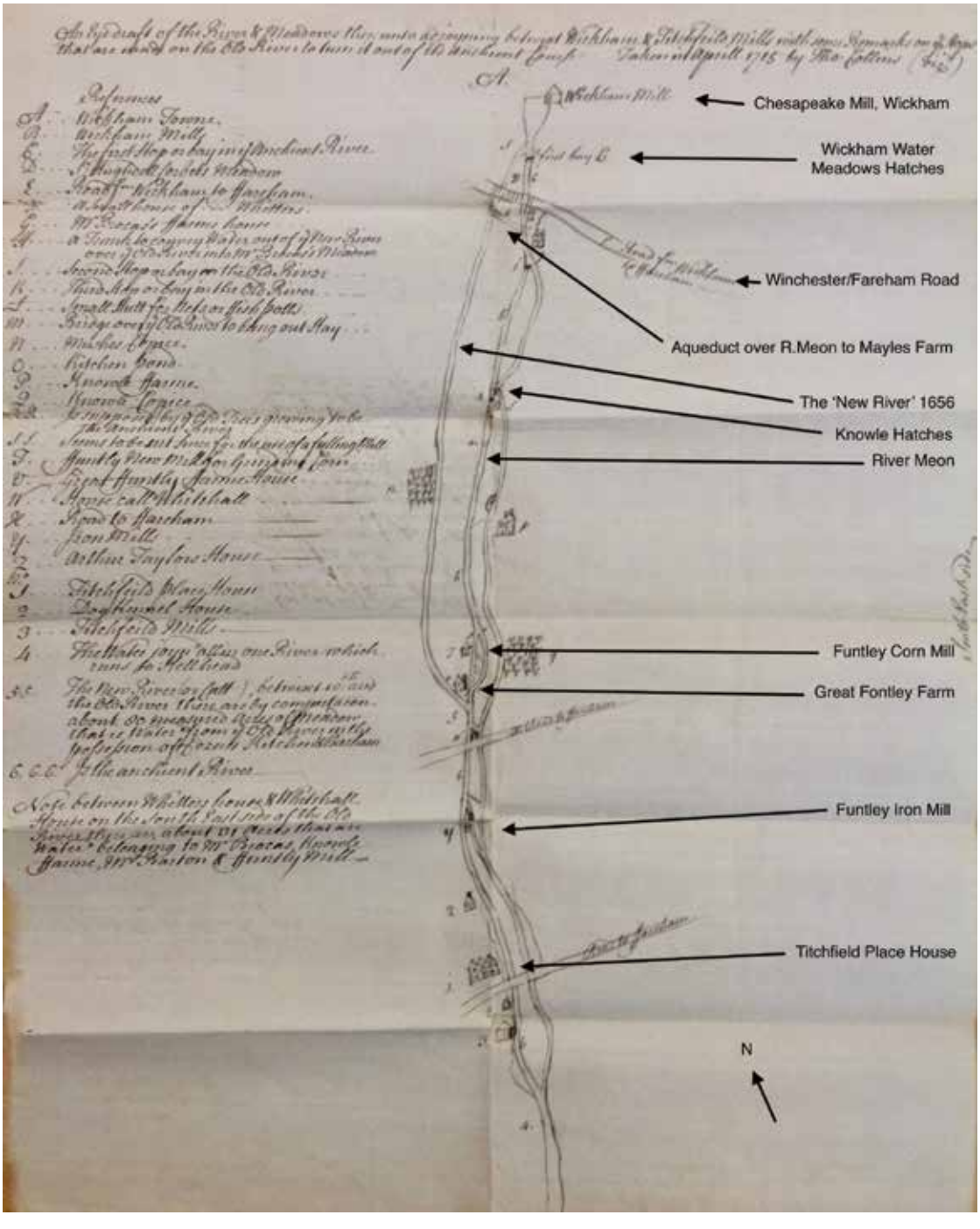

Fig. 1 1755 copy of 'An eyedraft of the River & Meadows thereunto adjoining between Wickham and Titchfield Mills' originally drawn by Thomas Collins in April 1715 for Chancery proceedings. Hampshire Record Office [HRO] 5M53/1126/48 1755. Key locations added

was the possible loss of the higher rent charged for water meadow land that spurred the Duke of Portland into action when his water rights were challenged. The 1715 map of the water meadows system south of Wickham suggests that it supported about 80 acres of water meadow in the 3 miles or so to the Funtley Mills (Fig. 1). This is, of course, only one small part of the whole network on the 22-mile-long River Meon.

A successful water meadow system required extensive development and management. An eighteenth-century visitor to the River Meon today would be very unimpressed by our current use of the land by the river. Then every usable piece of land by the river was pressed into service as water meadow, and this pattern was repeated across all of the Hampshire chalk rivers. There is a detailed mapping and analysis of the known water meadows across the Hampshire chalk streams, which was commissioned by Hampshire County Council in the mid 1990s (Chandler & Ridley 2000).

Creating a water meadow system was an expensive business, involving the construction of miles of channels, ridges, bridges, sluices, weirs and even aqueducts. Engineers were needed to achieve this and they also had to ensure the carriers were watertight and exactly followed the contour as the river fell away below the carrier. The ridges (called 'panes') and the drains (collectively called 'bedworks') had to be designed to cover all the grass with flowing water of the right depth; any mistake would inhibit or destroy grass growth. Once the capital cost of installation was met, the whole system had to be managed by the wonderfully named 'drowner'. He was a skilled agricultural worker, paid the equivalent of a shepherd's wage. The 'hatches' (controlling water to the carriers) and the drowner's tools were carefully illustrated by George Boswell with detailed guidance on all aspects of construction and operation (Fig. 2) (1790). The variety of uses of water meadows and complexity of their management over the year included sheep getting the "first bite" on the early grass crop, cattle grazing later in the season as well as one or possibly two hay crops (Stearne & Cook 2015, based on Boswell) and an example of how a system operated is shown in Figure 3 (Clark undated).

The system south of Wickham had a main carrier on the west side of the river generally called 'The New River'. It extended for at least three miles on the 20m contour, from the Millennium Water Meadows in the centre of the village to Great Fontley Farm on Titchfield Road, and even had an aqueduct to Mayles Farm on the east side close to Wickham (Fig. 1). From text on the back of the plan we know the New River was built between 1656 and 1662 (HRO 5M53/1126).

Although this was seventeenth century 'agri-business' it was not an ecological desert. George Morris, one of the last drowners to work on the Test in the twentieth century, described how wading birds valued the flooded meadows as did water voles, otters, water snakes and grey herons. The 'drowner' benefited from a good supply of eel, trout and salmon. There was a wide variety of different grasses and water loving plants particularly around the drains. The landscape was constantly changing as sections were flooded, sheep and lambs were pastured, cattle put out later in the season and grass crops were grown and mown (Morris 1995, and undated).

There was, however, controversy over the perception that these water meadows interfered with ancient rights as, unfortunately for the farmers, there were others competing for the use of the Meon's water. Three mills at Funtley relied on water power from the river south of Wickham, although only two were operating during the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries. Funtley Corn Mill is referred to in Domesday and appears to have operated continuously as a corn mill into the twentieth century (Yoward 2012, 105), while Funtley Iron Works, half a mile downstream was built between 1603–05 by the third Earl of Southampton. It closed in the early nineteenth century (Yoward 2012, 106). Both mills therefore had pre-existing rights to water from the Meon.

The first conflict we know of between millers and farmers is recorded as having been in 1683/4 when the Funtley Miller 'broke down' the hatches (which controlled the supply of water into the carriers), which were probably at Wickham village where the later weir is now in the Millennium Water Meadows. The Miller was convicted of riot at the Wickham Manorial Court eventually having to pay £10

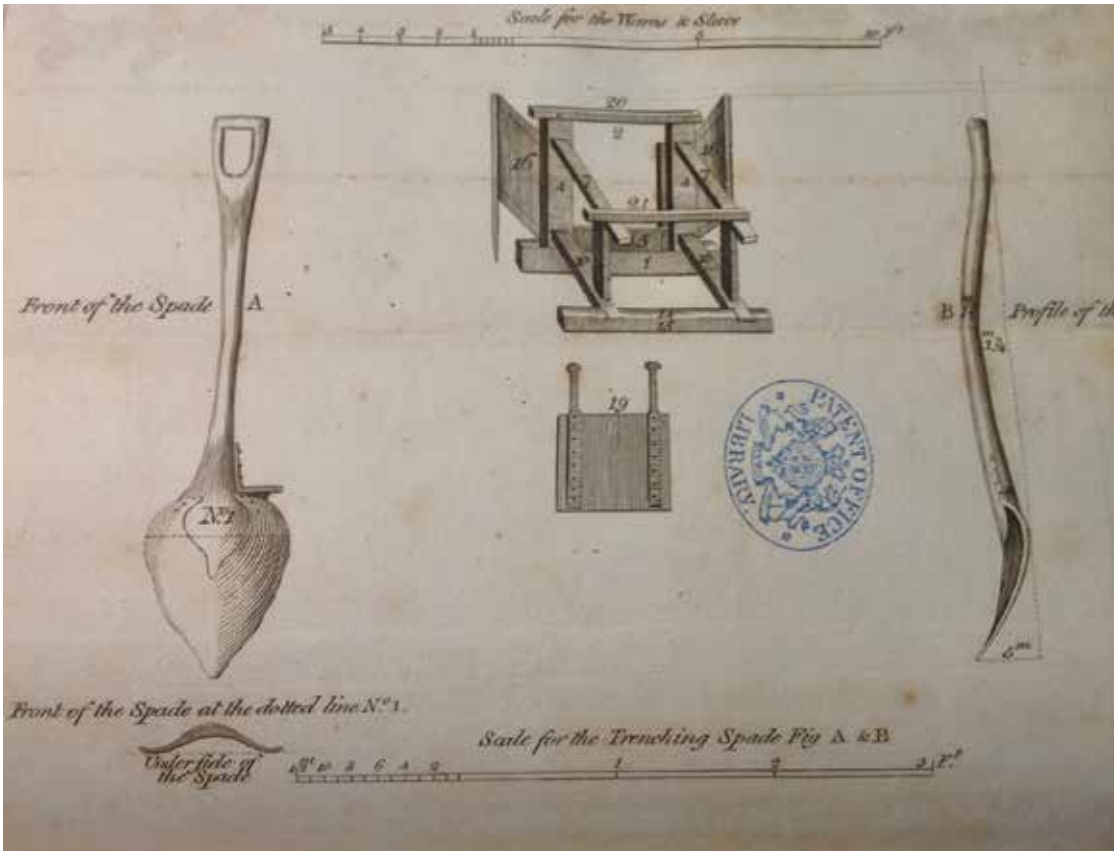

Fig. 2 Illustration of the drowner's trenching spade and a hatch design from Boswell (1790)

to the poor of Wickham (GRO 1717 D2700; NAO 1717 C11/1394/23). Witnesses for the millers alleged it was common practice to break down hatches where the millers required more water or the farmers had not complied with agreements over which days they should take water, and examples were given in 1701 and 1707 (GRO 1717 D2700).

In 1715 John Gringo (of Funtley Iron Mills) and Isaac Miller (of Funtley Corn Mill) were alleged to have 'in the month of April in an open and violent manner in the daytime pull down, destroy and very much damage the said flood gates'. This was again at the same location as the 1683/4 event, and seems to have been a direct challenge to the Wickham and Knowle farmers and their Lords of the Manor, as it was carried out during the day in Wickham village. Whether intentionally or not, it provoked William Russell, Lord of the Manor of Wickham, and Sir Richard Corbett, Lord of the Manor of Funtley together with local farmers and landowners, to begin proceedings in the Court of Chancery against the 'said confederators' and their Lords of the Manor: the Duke and Duchess of Portland and the Duke of Beaufort (NAO 1717 C11/1394/23). They responded with the counterclaim that the river itself had been wrongly diverted in a 'clandestine and private way' into the New River and that the millers 'ancient rights' to water had been infringed (GRO 1717 D2700).

Why was there so much 'trouble at mill and meadow' here in the late seventeenth/early eighteenth century? There is no evidence that the 1717 case ever came to court and

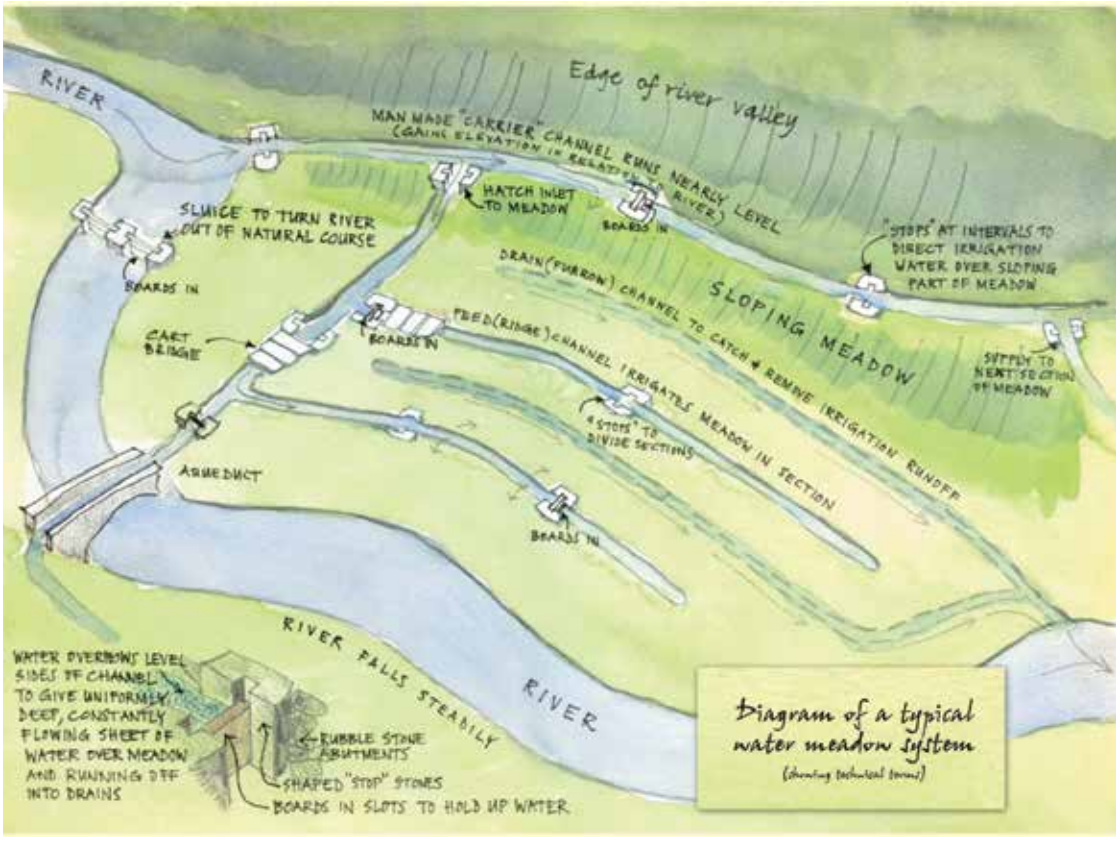

Fig. 3 Plan of a typical water meadows system from Clark (undated)

there is then only the 1754 incident in the written record (see Introduction). None of the correspondence regarding the 1754 incident suggested there had been similar issues since the case in 1717. There is no further evidence known of any incidents in the nineteenth century although the water meadows system was still operating into the twentieth century. So were there particular reasons for the incidents in this period?

What was the weather like? Rainfall information is understandably unreliable for these periods, but web-published research compiled from diary records taken variously from London, Essex and Oxford shows that the incidents referred to above in 1701, 1707 and 1715 were all in years with low rainfall. April 1701 was one of the coldest on record and very little rain before May was recorded in Essex (Hart 2015). 1707 was recorded as a very dry year in the London records, with deaths from heatstroke reported in London in July (Hart 2015). 1714 was a very dry year generally (Hart 2015). There are no records for spring 1715 so, although floods were reported in the summer in London, it seems reasonable to assume that river levels may still have been low for a good part of 1715. The ten year period from 1751 was one of the wettest on record, but 1754 is not mentioned at all in these records so perhaps

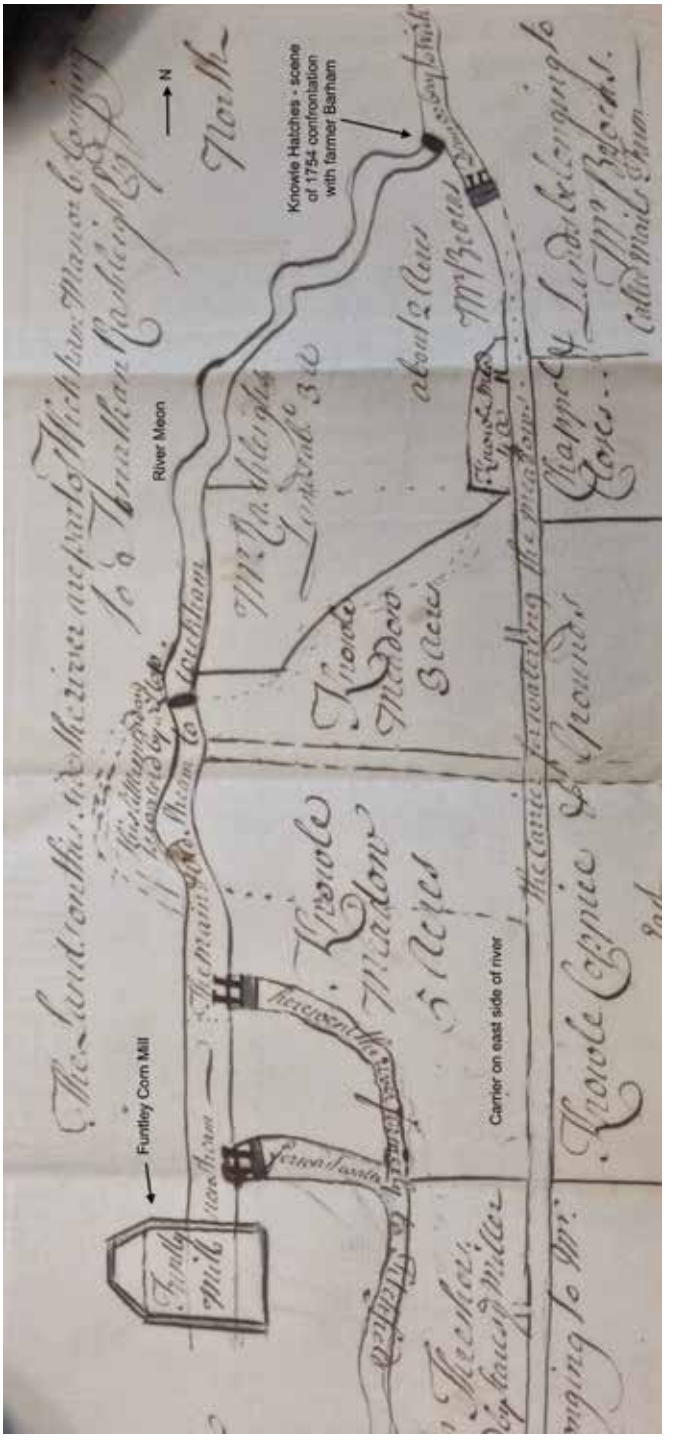

Fig. 4 Contemporary hand drawn diagram showing river and carriers between Knowle Hatches and Funtley Corn Mill, drawn by Clem Wales 1755 following 1754 damage to farmer Barham's hatches. Hampshire Record Office [HRO] 5M53/1126/51 1755

that was an exception (Hart 2015). There are even fewer records for the seventeenth century. Essex records suggest a wet year in 1683, there are no records for 1684 – which were the earliest reported incidents (Macadam 2012).

Thus the limited evidence suggests, as we would expect, that low river levels due to dry weather were a very important cause for most if not all the incidents. Clearly all water meadow systems faced this problem to a lesser or greater extent, and there will have been dry years after 1715, so low water levels should only be seen as a 'trigger' that highlighted other water management problems.

What else indicates that water use at times was not well regulated south of Wickham? The evidence of witnesses on both sides for the 1717 case suggests there were at least four specific local problems. The first is some evidence of a piecemeal and uncontrolled development of the system. Three witnesses for the millers refer to a 'new cut' about a mile and a half south of Wickham built on the same side of the river as the New River without the permission of both Lords of the Manor. Another witness refers to a similar new cut on the east side servicing Knowle farm causing ongoing problems (GRO 1717 D2700). This is almost certainly the cut which caused the later 1754 incident at 'Knowle Hatches', referred to in the introduction and illustrated in a sketch drawn for John Lucas, the Duke of Portland's London agent (Fig. 4).

The first Ordnance Survey maps dating from 1866 show that there was a very well developed system of water meadows from Mayles Farm just south of Wickham on the east side of the river. Part of this system is likely to have been added subsequent to the New River's construction on the west side as the New River originally also watered Mayles farm on the east side with an aqueduct over the river. According to evidence from William Russell, Lord of the Manor of Wickham (GRO 1717 D2700), the millers themselves had also added to their problems by creating their own water meadows.

Secondly, Wickham Manor itself was in transition from 1652 until its purchase by the Rashleigh family in c.1726. The New River was built by the tenant of Great Fontley Farm during the Commonwealth period, about four years after the Royalist supporting Sir William Uvedale had died (HRO 5M53/1126). His son died while still a child and the two Uvedale daughters inherited a split estate. A brewer, William Russell later became Lord of the Manor while Sir Richard Corbett held the Manor of Funtley. It was during this lengthy period that all but one of the reported incidents took place so it may be that tenant farmers and millers then had a freer hand to act more independently and the various Lords of the Manor and their stewards had taken a more short term view of the estate's needs and the capacity of the river.

Thirdly the farmers also complained in their evidence that 'the said Mills are much enlarged of late years, requiring more water to drive and work now than the ancient Mills there required' (GRO 1717 D2700). The Iron Mill was certainly a very successful operation during this period. The Titchfield estate records show that three coppices were rented for the Mill in the period 1714–8 paying a very substantial £275 (GRO 1718 D2700). The research for this article has not included the Titchfield village mills further down river: these are cited as parties too and could also have expanded production.

Finally there were three, or at times four, Manors involved in the control of the river: Wickham, Funtley Knowle and Titchfield. That inevitably made management more difficult, especially when on this stretch of the Meon the Titchfield estate was more concerned with milling activity and Wickham and Knowle benefitted more from rents from the water meadows. It seems likely it was the combination of divided interests and limited cooperation between the Manors, reduced control and short termism at Wickham and Funtley manors, together with the rapid expansion of iron production that led both to difficulty in managing water shortages during dry years, and to the ensuing conflicts between the millers and the farmers.

In the Rodgers and Hammerstein musical 'Oklahoma' the cowhand and the farmer are told to be friends as they square up to each other at the dance. It was good advice for the Meon's millers and the farmers too. They were often related, farmers took corn to be milled, millers had water meadows and the iron mills employed local people. During most years there was plenty of water for everyone and the

farmers and landowners were both profiting from the success of the water meadow system while the iron mill and corn mill were also successful operations for both tenants and owners. The evidence of conflict come largely from witness statements for a court case where it was in everyone's interest to overstate the problem, and it seems as though the issues were largely overcome from the mid-eighteenth century onwards. Perhaps the legal costs and local fallout from the 1717 case made everyone take a step back and look at cheaper and more practical ways of accommodating different demands on the river?

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Author: Geoffrey Phillpotts, Dale Cottage, Bridge Street, Wickham, Hampshire P017 5JE