

# The Harnham Water Meadows and the Cathedral



*Cathedral and Harnham Water Meadows*

Many people associate the Meadows with the famous Constable painting of the Cathedral from Long Bridge 1831. However, the Meadows date from the early 17th C when Salisbury was well known for wool and the 'sheep-corn' system. The Wiltshire Horn sheep were pastured on the Meadows during the day and "folded" back onto the chalk downs at night to fertilise the soil for growing corn.

The Meadows, man-made and managed, had a system of irrigation so that they could be "drowned" in the cold months with the nutrient rich warm river water. This brought on good grazing grass a month ahead of the downs which was extremely valuable in bringing on the sheep and lambs and was known as the 'early bite'. "Drowning" when the

ground was cold and frosty was achieved through a system of hatches or sluices allowing the water to flow along the top of the man-made bedwork (humps or ridges), and trickle over them to return to the river through ditches; this encouraged the 'early bite'. "Drowning" demonstrations are a feature of the



*A winter 'drowning' of the Meadows*



*A working party clearing one of the channels*

Trust's annual activities: two of them are publicly advertised and attract a good following.

Originally the Meadows were owned largely by the Earls of Pembroke and Radnor. In 1931 the Dean and Chapter purchased two large areas, now leased to the Trust. In 1990 the then Dean Hugh Dickinson and local businessman Harold Cory set up the Harnham Water Meadows Trust to buy the rest of the 84 acre site. It was much neglected, full of ragwort, briars, overgrown channels and broken sluices. A herculean fundraising effort enabled the Trust to buy the remaining 49 acres and Friends of the Trust raised money to repair hatches, drains, sluices and fencing allowing sheep back to graze. The land is registered for agricultural use by Natural England for which the Trust receives appropriate payment and grants.

Recent fundraising has enabled the Trust to enhance Rose Cottage, creating



*A working party clearing one of the channels*

upstairs a single lecture room with a fixed screen. The cottage is not only its headquarters, but a valuable meeting place full of detailed information about the Meadows and is used for the extensive education programme where children can learn about the history of the Meadows, their importance as a flood defence, the creatures that live there and to care about the environment.

The Trust, amongst whose trustees is, ex-officio, the Dean, manage the whole area, ensuring preservation of the ancient irrigation system, replanting hedges to provide corridors for birds, mammals and insects and supporting a range of flora and fauna. We have a splendid grazier whose sheep continue to graze the grass. We encourage new members to join us, providing a corps of local and not so local people interested in knowing more about, and helping to preserve, this historic site: their modest annual subscriptions help towards maintenance of the Meadows. The membership provides us with an increasing team of loyal volunteers – several of them Friends of the Cathedral – who meet on a regular basis as working parties to do the less arduous “chores” like clearing water channels, brambles and debris. They are informed by our annual Newsletter and subsequent information sheets about events and other matters of interest.



*A Meadows hatch*

Those of us who walk across the Meadows on the Town Path and stop to admire the view of the Cathedral know how lucky we are: and how valuable is the work of both Cathedral and Trust in wanting to protect and enhance the environment for future generations.

**Ruth Hawley**, Trustee, on behalf the Harnham Water Meadows Trust

*(photographs Stephen Lycett, copyright)*