

River Itchen

28th April 2011 - Roy Underdown Pavilion

Jill Daniels, who gave the illustrated talk, started at the River Itchen's source and then travelled down through its valleys & villages describing the places of interest.

The source of the River Itchen is near the village of Cheriton but the tributaries Candover Brook and the River Alre, which flows through Alresford, also feed into it. She told of the Battle of Cheriton during the Civil War, the 12th century tradition of the distribution of the Titchborne Dole and Avington House, where King Charles II's mistress, Nell Gwynne, stayed when the Dean of Winchester would not allow her to accompany the King in Winchester.

Over the years the course and depths of the river have changed and today the bore holes that supply our water can also affect the river. Waterpower was used by various types of mills on the River Itchen and wool from the sheep was sent down river to the Wool House at Southampton.

The river flows through Winchester, which has its own corn mill that dates back to the Domesday Book. The river flows in several different channels through the city, some of which are close to Winchester Cathedral and this has caused serious problems to the building's foundations and a diver had to be used at the beginning of the 20th century to stabilise it.

Hamble has close connections with Winchester and the river runs by Winchester College which for many centuries was Lord of the Manor of Hamble. Also the Prior of Hamble used to send in mid Lent 20,000 locally caught oysters to the Monks of St Swithins in Winchester. In return the six monks at Hamble received 21 loaves and 42 flagons of ale weekly.

The water meadows south of Winchester were flooded to encourage hay growth for the animals. The river was also used to transport goods and in 1710 the Itchen Navigation canal was opened, which straightened up the meandering river between Winchester and the tidal river at Southampton. It was necessary to build a number of locks in the construction of the Itchen Navigation and the main commodities carried were agricultural goods and coal.

Lower down the river was West End Mill (now known as Gaters Mill) which once produced paper but more recently corn, followed by Mansbridge and Woodmill where the River Itchen becomes tidal.

Jill spoke about the importance of the aircraft manufacturer 'Supermarine' next to the river at Woolston, which produced the famous Spitfire during the Second World War and that of the Floating Bridge chain ferry.

During the journey of just under 30 miles down Hamble's neighbouring river, Jill also mentioned the inspiration that the River Itchen had given painters, poets and authors, such as LS Lowry, John Keats and Charles Kingsley.