

OPENING REMARKS

Fleet Study Group Meeting, Strangways Hall, Abbotsbury - 27.10.84

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I regret that I have nothing of a scientific nature to start off the morning's activity - indeed after working here for some seven years I am hesitant still to put my hand on my heart and say that I really know what a 'mollusc' is. My purpose is twofold:

1. To briefly trace the background of the Estates' interests in the Fleet and Chesil Bank.
2. To remind you how the Fleet Study Group came into existence and to thank the many people, from a variety of backgrounds, who have over the years contributed to the pool of knowledge that is gradually accumulating about the area.

There is in the Estate Office what is in effect a bibliography of the documents relating to the Fleet starting with the translation of King Canute's original grant of the land to Orc, his 'chamberlain'.

It is clear from the documents that the Fleet had in earlier times a greater commercial importance than in the present day - in the Middle Ages, judging by the documents, the right to take wrecks on the beach was of considerable importance and, of course, fishing was an important activity well into the present century, although today, alas, there are no 'crews' operating off the beach at Abbotsbury.

You may recall the quotation from Defoe, the 18th Century traveller, "..... the catches were so much that the men could hardly draw them on the shore - the mackerel the finest and longest I ever saw were at the seaside for a hundred for a penny".

It is, however, interesting to speculate on those things about which little is known, such as the attempts to drain the Fleet in the 1630's - the historic reasons for the changes in the mudflats - the history of the development of the ferrybridge.

The point, therefore, I would like to make is that, whilst we are adding all the time to knowledge of the Fleet's structure and content we have not been so successful in tracing the influence that man has had on the area and in particular the influence the continuity of ownership by the Fox-Strangways family has had on preventing its over-exploitation.

Turning then to the background of the Fleet Study Group it is, perhaps, surprising that it is now just under ten years since the initial gathering at Weymouth College of Further Education when, largely due to the energy of Miss Brotherton of the Dorset Naturalists' Trust, those who had a scientific interest in the Fleet agreed to the pooling of their knowledge and the encouragement of further investigation.

I believe that a great deal has been achieved since then which is reflected, not only in the variety of our speakers here today but also in the publication of the pamphlet on the Fleet which resulted from our previous symposium at Dorset County Museum in 1980.

I would, therefore, like to take the opportunity of thanking Mrs Jeanne Fitzpatrick, who is the Secretary of the Group, for her tireless efforts to keep the momentum going and to Dr Mike Ladle and Dr John Whittaker who have been the mainsprings of the Group's development.