

Navigating the Avon from Salisbury to Christchurch in the Medieval and Early Modern Periods

***Stephen Gadd's talk as reported by Alison Stott
Images from Stephen Gadd***

Stephen Gadd started his talk by showing us a picture of a ballad, written in 1665, all about linking Salisbury to the sea. In the 1660s considerable efforts had been made to improve the navigation, despite the problem of Christchurch harbour being so shallow. However for some reason – possibly the closure of the priory in Christchurch or the war with France in the 1690s – these efforts were not successful, and trade began to decline.

Four hundred years earlier, in the 12th century, Christchurch had both a priory and a castle and at this time the process of engineering the river began, with mill construction and deepening of the river which enabled larger craft to use it, stone from Purbeck being brought for the construction of both priory and castle. Vessels could go upstream all the way to New Sarum, bringing the material used for building the new cathedral.



Mills on the River Avon



Fordingbridge today

There had been a bridge, or ford, at Fordingbridge since 1086 and by 1240 the river had four bridges along its length. Stephen showed pictures of the strip maps published in 1675 and used by travellers to find their way from place to place – clearly showing the crossings at Downton, Fordingbridge, and Ringwood.

There is indirect evidence that the river was navigable in the 14th century. In 1372 the government commissioned military barges. One of these was built in Sarum, despite its not being a port, the cost being borne by the townspeople; all over England the same thing was happening. The French attacked in 1377 and more and bigger barges were ordered – these could obviously reach the sea and Stephen thought that only about 6 inches of water would have been needed for the unladen barges to make the journey downstream.

In the 14th and 15th centuries the presence of mills and fisheries impeded passage, and caused a conflict of interest with the river's use as a navigation. Climate change in the late 13th century from wet to dry led to a famine in Northern Europe in the early 14th century, but was also blamed on the shortage of mills to process the grain; on the other hand there were complaints of 'certain impediments which are called locks'! These 'impediments' could be destroyed by law as the river was, and still is, the King's (or Queen's) highway. For example the Priory Mill was destroyed in 1535 in order to allow navigation.

Stephen illustrated flash locks on the River Thames, and suggested that the rush of water these caused helped to keep the river running faster and deeper.

In 1660 twelve mills are recorded on the Avon; however there was a further problem with navigation as the narrow entrance to Christchurch harbour was silting up.

A cut that was proposed in 1670 was begun in 1686; Mudeford Quay was built and ironstone was used to make training piers. The new cut made some difference as twenty six tons of coal were recorded being shipped all the way to Salisbury.



By 1854 further ironstone was being mined from around Hengistbury Head, but unfortunately this removed the protecting bank and increased the rate of silting in the river mouth.

All the time Southampton was competing for trade and Stephen thought that perhaps restrictive practices there and the problems with the silting up of Christchurch harbour eventually led to the decline of navigation up the River Avon.