Contents

Acknowledgements .................................................................................................................. ii

The History of the Hurst Water Meadow .................................................................................. 1

1. Introduction – location and geology ................................................................................... 1

2. Early history ....................................................................................................................... 5

3. Medieval history ................................................................................................................. 8

4. The Hurst after the Dissolution ......................................................................................... 18

5. Agricultural activities on the Hurst, 12th–19th centuries ................................................. 19

6. Families associated with Overy and the Hurst ................................................................. 25

7. The 19th century ............................................................................................................... 27

8. The 20th century ............................................................................................................... 30

9. The Hurst Water Meadow Trust ....................................................................................... 31

Old Bridge Meadow – A Brief History .................................................................................. 33

Abbreviations ......................................................................................................................... 39

Bibliography ........................................................................................................................... 39

Appendices ............................................................................................................................... 40
Acknowledgements

I am greatly indebted to Nigel Joyner, who was most generous with information from his Applied Landscape Archaeology MSc dissertation and supplied some of the illustrations. I would recommend anyone requiring a more in-depth appraisal of archaeology on the Hurst to consult Nigel’s dissertation entitled *An Investigation into aspects of medieval and post-medieval water management with the landscape of an Augustinian monastery*, copies of which are deposited at the library at Oxford University Department For Continuing Education.

My great thanks, as ever, to Mary Tame and her unsurpassable knowledge about all things ‘Dorchester’.

Thanks also to my anonymous sponsor and the Trustees of the Hurst Water Meadow Trust for their patience.

Karen Selway Richards
Warborough
2010
The History of the Hurst Water Meadow

1. Introduction – location and geology

The Hurst Water Meadow is an area of land of some 18 acres situated at SU 565 935 at Dorchester-on-Thames, Oxfordshire (see Figure 1). It is currently owned and managed by

![Figure 1: Hurst Water Meadow and Old Bridge Meadow.](image)

the Hurst Water Meadow Trust, a charitable organisation formed by members of the local community to buy the meadow in 1996. Part of the meadow lies within the Conservation Area of Overy, a hamlet to the east of Dorchester. The Trust owns only the upper part of the meadow, the southern portion being in the possession of Mr Morrison. However, throughout this report, the meadow will be considered in its entirety. The remains of fish-
ponds in the gardens of Monks Close, Dorchester, formed part of the same medieval landscape as The Hurst (see Figure 1).

Buck Pool, in the eastern corner of the site, was traditionally part of the small Buck Mead, which underwent a different ownership history to that of the Hurst. In 1983 the Dorchester by-pass intersected this meadow, and Buck Pool and, later, Buck Pool Spinney – what remains of the former Buck Mead on the western side of the by-pass – came under the management of the Trust.

In 2009, the Trust purchased Old Bridge Meadow, a nearby 3.39-acre site to the south of the Henley Road, and the history of this site is also considered.

**The Hurst Water Meadow – chronology of ownership**

- **Late Saxon period – 1086:** Bishop of Lincoln or Britveca, Anglo-Saxon thegn
- **1086–1397?:** Bishop of Lincoln
- **1397?–1536:** Augustinian Abbey of Dorchester; farmed by tenants later in period
- **1536–1808:** Edmund Ashfield of Ewelme and subsequently passing, through marriage, to the Fettiplace Family. Land probably tenanted by a combination of Davey, Gosford, and Cherrill families from late 16th century
- **1808–1831:** William Davey
- **1831–1857:** George Davey
- **1857–1901:** Robert Davey/Thomas Taylor (but probably let out to Queenford Farm, formerly known as Queensford Mill Farm, from late 1870s)
- **1901–1926:** Richard Hatt, Queenford Farm
- **1927–1950s:** Richard Hawken and family: Queenford Farm – grazing and hay
- **1950s–1980:** Richard Whittle
- **1980s:** ARC later Hanson Trust
- **1991–1996:** Dorchester Fisheries (1993 sold bottom 5 acres of meadow)
- **1996 – present:** Hurst Water Meadow Trust
The drift geology of the site is alluvium, overlying the Northmoor gravel terrace, the youngest of the four gravel terraces in the upper Thames valley, at roughly 3 m above the
The underlying rock is Gault Clay, laid down in the lower Cretaceous period (see Figure 2).

As suggested by the alluvial geology of the site, the Hurst is now effectively an islet of the small river Thame (see Figure 2 and Figure 3). The Thame meanders in a roughly south-westerly direction from its source near Quarendon, Aylesbury, passing through south Oxfordshire until its confluence with the River Thames just to the south of the present settlement of Dorchester-on-Thames. The site itself is criss-crossed by a number of palaeo-channels, undoubtedly multi-phase, which will be discussed later in the context of medieval fisheries and mill management. In the eastern corner of the meadow is the Buck Pool and Spinney (see Figure 1); the mill-race, mill-pond, and channel form the southern boundary, whilst the river Thame, with its relict weirs, leats, and possible mill site, forms the northern boundary. The meadow is bisected by a public footpath situated on a causeway leading from the access to the meadow at the end of Manor Farm Road to Overy Mill (Figure 4).

The land is currently laid down to pasture with 3 hectares over-seeded with wild flowers.

Figure 3: Aerial photograph of Dorchester Abbey with the Hurst in the background, taken in the 1950s. The by-pass and the Monks Close developments have yet to be built. From the Dorchester Museum archive.

---

1 Powell (2005) p. 81.
2. Early history

The land around Dorchester has been settled for millennia, and at least since the Neolithic period (c. 4000–2200 BC). Because the Hurst is used as pasture and the gravel terrace is overlain by alluvial deposits from successive river flooding activity, no field-walking or gravel extraction has taken place. As a result little is known of the earliest occupation, unlike the large ritual sites to the north-west of the current settlement and, to a lesser extent, the Iron Age Oppidum in the south. It would have fallen outside the walls of the Roman walled settlement, and, whilst ample Romano-British artefacts have been recovered from all the surrounding arable fields, the Hurst has, so far, yielded no information about earlier occupation, as evidenced by the finds map provided by the Oxfordshire Historic Environment Record (see Appendix 1)

The name itself is generally considered to be derived from the Old English ‘hyrst’. The meaning of hyrst is somewhat ambiguous, somewhere between a hillock and a wood, and is generally taken to mean ‘wooded hill’. The ‘hyrst’ suffix is more common in wooded and hilly counties such as Sussex and Surrey. As the Hurst is not sited on raised ground, certainly not in relation to the current settlement or even in relation to the known Anglo-Saxon

![Figure 4: Vertical aerial photograph of Hurst taken from the east after the intersection of Buck Mead by the Dorchester by-pass. Source: NMR.](image)

habitations, it could be that the name is of a relatively late Saxon origin, i.e. not recognised by the earliest Anglo-Saxon migrants as land appropriate for arable farming.\(^3\) In Middle-English, *hurst* developed to mean ‘sandbank in the sea or river’ such as Hurst Castle at Milford-on-Sea, Hampshire. The drift geology on the Hurst is alluvium but might overlay some sand and gravel deposits. Indeed Arthur Young in his 1813 report *A General View of the Agriculture of Oxfordshire* describes Davey’s land around Dorchester as ‘sandy loam’.\(^4\) Whatever its toponymic development, it would seem likely that the area had been cleared of some woodland for either pasture or meadow use by the late Saxon period.

It is worth noting that there was also a meadow called the Hurst in Drayton St Leonard, another of the Bishop of Lincoln’s holdings a mile or so up the Thame. This 7-acre meadow appears in the 1808 Fettiplace Great Sale catalogue and is described as being in the occupation of Vincent Cherrill.\(^5\) As we will see, the Cherrill family were closely linked with the Hurst in Dorchester. The Drayton St Leonard Hurst is also situated in an arc of the river Thame, close to a potential former mill site (see Figure 5). Part of this meadow was still

\[^{3}\text{Ibid.}\]
\[^{4}\text{Young (1813) p. 132.}\]
\[^{5}\text{DMA, G (1), Sale Catalogue, Lot XII.}\]
known as the Hurst in the 1841 Tithe Award, but the name appears to have passed out of use by the end of the 19th century.

A little further up the Thame we find the *hurst* name again, this time as a suffix in the place name Chippinghurst, a hamlet in Cuddesdon parish. The VCH gives the derivation of this name as ‘the hill of cibba’. There is a small hill here, but once again there are also meadows in arcs of the Thame, close to relict weirs and a possible mill site. Whilst it is not possible to develop this idea further within the context of this history, it seems that there is an argument for a more detailed study of *hurst* names along the river Thame, especially as *hurst* is a comparatively little-used suffix or place name in Oxfordshire.

In the mid-7th century, Birinus, a papal envoy sent by Pope Honorius I, succeeded in converting the pagan king of Wessex, Cyneigils, who subsequently married the daughter of the Christian King of Northumbria. An Episcopal See was founded at Dorchester, the place of Cyneigils’ baptism, and Birinus was made the first Bishop. Over the course of the next few centuries, it appears that a number of other churches were built in Dorchester, and the site of the present settlement would have grown to support these foundations.

In the Neolithic and Mesolithic periods settlement had been located to the north-west of the Hurst, shifting to the south and east during the Iron Age and Romano-British periods. However, the establishment of the conjectured first and subsequent Abbey buildings meant that the current meadowland moved closer to settlement foci.

The Episcopal See moved to Lincoln by 1070 and, in 1086, the Domesday Book records that the Bishop of Lincoln held Dorchester, which was divided into 100 hides less 10, and this included a mill worth 20s, a fisherman worth 30 sticks of eels, and meadowland worth 40s. Bricteva – a thegn – apparently held 20.5 hides from Lincoln at Dorchester, with meadows and fisheries worth 22s 8d, 9 sticks of eels, and 4 mills worth 38s. A further 28.5 hides were held by English Men and others, which included 50a of meadow. This seems to support the accepted thought that considerable meadowland was being cultivated by the late Saxon period, possibly providing a key impetus for nucleation of settlement. The locations of the five mills are not named but are likely to include Queensford Mill (most probably the mill named as being directly held by the Bishop of Lincoln as it remained part

---

6 OHC, Par89/15/T1 & 2.
8 Leland, Toulmin Smith (ed.) (1906–10) Vol 1, p. 117.
9 A hide was a widely recognised unit used to determine taxation and military service until the 12th century. It related to the area of land that it would take to support a family rather than physical acreage (Penguin Dictionary of British History, p. 336).
10 A ‘stick’ was equivalent to around 25 eels.
12 Williamson (2003) pp. 66–69. Williamson contends that haymaking was an incredibly labour-intensive activity, requiring large numbers of labourers working in tandem for periods of a time, and may have encouraged homestead kin groups and their overlords to move to nucleated settlements in order to share equipment and labour.
of his holdings once the manor fragmented in the 12th century). The site of the present mill at Overy, with which much of the Hurst’s later history is linked, was probably one of the mills under the control of Bricteva, along with any settlement that grew up around it. Archaeological survey has suggested that one of the mills may have been situated on an ‘islet’ in the west of the Hurst between the Hurst channel and the river Thame (see below). So far, the location of the other mills has not been established, but an examination of old cartographic evidence would indicate that there may have been another mill to the south of what is currently called Bridge End. Also, it is important to remember that these may not necessarily have been water mills or even, indeed, major structures and may have left little evidence in the landscape.

3. Medieval history

Although the See had been moved to Lincoln, in 1140 Bishop Alexander founded a new order of Augustinian Canons and transferred the nucleus of an estate to the Order, forming a new manor. The Bishop’s home estate was administered from Bishop’s Court in the north of the settlement, whilst the new Abbey estate had a demesne farm adjacent to the Abbey precinct to the north. The Abbey also held widespread land outside the parish.

According to charters of 1146 and 1163, the land transferred to the Abbey included land once held by Hunfredus the Priest, i.e. Humfrey Mede, Brademera (meadow/pasture),

Figure 6: The earliest known cartographic evidence for Hurst Meadow, the 1761 Davis map. Source: COS.
and a curtilage and croft once belonging to Hundredus (possibly the same person). The estate also included 100a of land and meadow bordering the river extending as far as Queensford Mill. Two mills were included in this grant and the meadow and pasture belonging to the mills. We can conjecture that these mills were Overy Mill (described as ‘ultra-pontem’ or ‘over the bridge’) and the possible mill sited on the western half of the Hurst. The first specific mention of The Hurst comes in a charter of 1397: “Quator acras tre vocat le conyngerre viginti et quator acras pasture vocat ‘le Hurst’ et totam Piscarium ipsius epi in acquis Thamis et Thamestreme”, or “4 acres of land called Conyngerre [former rabbit warren?] and 24 acres of pasture called ‘Le Hurst’ and all the associated fisheries in the Thames and Thamestreme”. However, it should be remembered that grants of this nature were often retrospective, and the actual transfer could have taken place some considerable time earlier (see also Figure 6).

The Overy mills

The Hurst is crossed by a number of extant and relict channels, some of which undoubtedly relate to the two mills that operated on the Thame. Water corn mills are driven by an often complex water management system. A new channel has to be diverted from a river, either by digging a new channel or canalising an existing stream and placing a weir on the existing stream, forcing some of the flow down the new channel. A dam is then created above the mill, and water is forced down the mill-race and wheel, thereby operating the machinery in the mill alongside. In practice, mill-streams require relief leats or channels to take excess

Figure 7: Overy Mill in 1907. From DMA.

---

13 VCH VII, p. 46.  
14 NA, Patent Roll 20 Ric 2 p2 m17 (1397).
water away in times of flood and heavy rain, and this would certainly appear to account for at least some of the channels on the Hurst (see Figure 1 and Figure 9).

Although recent archaeological investigation has failed to establish a firm date for earthworks and water management systems around Overy Mill, it seems as though the site and channels can be fairly reliably dated to this period. This mill had space for two mill wheels and races\textsuperscript{15} and was operational until the early 20\textsuperscript{th} century (see also Figure 7 and Figure 8).

\textsuperscript{15} Cornish (1902) p. 101.
The location of the second mill is open to debate. Warwick Rodwell suggests that a relict leat that led off the Thame almost opposite the leat from the medieval stew-pond met with the Hurst channel to form a mill-stream and islet in the western part of the meadow.
Recent archaeological research discovered structural stonework in test pits on the proposed mill site, and this has been interpreted as a possible head race for a water mill. There is also a relict weir, dating to the Victorian period, a little way downstream of the leat (Figure 10).

**Fishery**

Although there had been a general presumption that the Hurst has always been used as meadow land or pasture, recent archaeological research suggests that part of it may have

---

had an alternative incarnation in the medieval period. In investigations beginning in 2008, students of Oxford University’s Department of Continuing Education have found that the lower portion of the meadow may have been utilised as the Abbey fishery and a water management system evolved to supply water to the various ponds and mills (Figure 11 and Figure 12).  

Because of cost factors and religious prohibitions on meat consumption at certain times of the year, fish was an integral part of the medieval monastic diet, being eaten three times a week and exclusively throughout Advent and Lent or approximately 215 days a year. Surviving accounts from a wide range of cartularies (or Abbey records) reveal that a mixture of salt-water and fresh-water fish was consumed, even in monastic houses at a considerable distance from the sea. Unfortunately the cartulary for Dorchester Abbey was destroyed, but records for Abingdon Abbey, a few miles upstream on the Thames, show that in the mid-14th century the kitchen was purchasing a wide variety of fish including herring, mackerel, oysters, haddock, eels, salmon, and lamprey. The more local fresh-water fish, such as trout and pike, were often considered a luxury and served only on feast days or to important visitors.

Riverine fishing was an obvious source of fresh fish, and rod and net fishing were frequently supplemented by basket-work traps, made from osier or willow, set into wooden frameworks or weirs. Ample evidence of these structures exists for Abingdon Abbey. Fishing rights along the country’s rivers were closely guarded, and there are many disputes recorded about the illegal positioning of weirs and traps along the Thames and, in all likelihood, the river Thame. By the 14th century, the Bishop appears to have ceded fishing rights on the Thame and Thames to the Abbey estate.

---

17 Joyner (2009).
20 Kirk (ed.) (1892) p. 38.
23 Ibid.
24 VCH, p. 46.
However, river fishing was notoriously unreliable, and, from the middle of the 12th century, it became increasingly common for both secular and religious houses to supplement stocks from their riverine fisheries with fish-ponds. These fish-pond complexes often extended over many acres and, contentiously, were usually carved from former pasture and valuable meadows, as this was the land closest to the water supply. It has been calculated that a small house of 10 canons – such as Dorchester – would need around 15 acres of fish-pond to achieve self-sufficiency. Recent archaeological survey and some small-scale excavation on the Hurst and surrounding land has so far found potential fish-ponds at five locations with a combined surface area of 7,492 m² or 1.85 acres (see Figure 1 for potential fishery sites). Although this land now regularly floods, it can only be supposed that the medieval water management schemes, which have subsequently fallen into disuse, prevented regular inundation of the land and the fisheries thereon.

Some fisheries had just one pond fed by leats – or channels – diverted from local rivers and streams; others had two or three ponds, which allowed a greater variety of fish to be raised. In these cases, a far more complex system of channels, leats, and dams would be required. In the case of Hurst meadow, an earthwork topographic survey undertaken by Oxford University Department of Continuing Education (OUDCE) students in the summer of 2008 suggests a series of relict fish-ponds (see Figure 13 and Figure 14) linked with both the Hurst channel and the relict stream.

It is now thought that the long relief ditch that can be seen curving away from the mill-stream in the direction of the Abbey and relict fish-ponds (see Figure 1 and Figure 12) was in fact a channel feeding the fisheries. Recent archaeological investigation has proved that this channel in fact extended for 2 metres south of the causeway, although this is now invisible on the surface. The extant channel, which appears on aerial photographs, has been filled in to a depth of 65–75 cm. It is interesting that this channel does not appear on the 1846 Tithe map or other earlier maps (Figure 15).

25 Bond op. cit.
28 Ibid.
Sometimes the size of a fishery bore little relation to the size or status of the House, and there was a broad tendency for reformed orders such as the Augustinians and Premonstratensians to have larger, more complex systems.\textsuperscript{30} However, even given that Dorchester was a relatively small reformed Order, the scale of fish-ponds located so far would suggest that the Abbey was not self-sufficient in fresh-water fish.\textsuperscript{31} It could be that future survey will locate more extensive ponds.

There were generally two types of fish-pond: \textit{Vivaria}, which were larger ponds used for the breeding and growing of fish, and the smaller \textit{Servatoria}, where live fish were stored ready for the table. Sometimes the rectangular servatoria were known as \textit{stew-ponds}, and the remains of the pond in the gardens of Monks Close – within the precincts of the Abbey home farm – is probably one such stew-pond. It has also been suggested that three further stew-ponds were located downstream in the Manor House gardens between the bank of the Thame and the raised terrace on which the Abbey buildings are situated (see Figure 1),\textsuperscript{32} but investigations on these earthworks have so far proved problematical and inconclusive.\textsuperscript{33}

\textsuperscript{31} Joyner (2009) p. 122.
\textsuperscript{33} For full details see Joyner (2009).
It would have been necessary to replenish fish stocks periodically; in 1322 – incidentally a time of famine in the country as a whole as harvests had failed for successive years – Abingdon Abbey spent 9s 6d restocking their ponds and a further 2s 2d on fish feed, whilst Ely Abbey spent 10s on live pike for their fish-pond in 1291–92. Although both Abingdon and Ely were larger, Benedictine orders, we can imagine the canons at Dorchester would have faced proportional expenditure. It is likely that eels were a staple of the monastery diet and continued to be an important catch in the area until the 20th century (see section 5 below).

In reality, the extent and longevity of any fishery at Dorchester is open to debate. The Augustinian Order presided over the monastery for close on 400 years. The couple of centuries leading up to the mid-14th had witnessed a major growth in England’s population to a conjectured 5–6 million. All over the country, marginal, unproductive land was being farmed, as agricultural output struggled to keep up with population growth. This was a rich time indeed for landowners as both grain and livestock prices were high. However, the climatic downturn in the second decade of the 14th resulted in failed harvests and famine in 1319–25. Matters did not really improve over the next decade, which meant that the Black Death was able to decimate an already weakened population in 1348–49, and there were three subsequent epidemics in the 1360s and 1370s. It has been estimated that the population shrank by up to 50% during this 30-year period to 2.5–3 million.

Figure 14: The right-hand photo shows the south-west view of the extant fish-pond which lies across three gardens in Monks Close. The left-hand image shows it draining into the river Thame. Photographs by kind permission of Nigel Joyner.

34 Kirk (ed.) (1892).
36 Miller & Hatcher (1978) p. 29.
In the successive decades, as demand for food and land declined and the country witnessed the collapse of the feudal structure and the start of the ‘Golden Age of Peasantry’, large estate owners found it more profitable to lease their land to third parties. In 1391 the manor was leased, but it is unclear to whom. At Dorchester, very little information survives for this period, but Visitations by the Bishop of Lincoln in 1441 and 1445 reveal that the house was “in debt large and heavy sums” (£60), and the dilapidation of the buildings are referred to on several occasions along with the dissolute and venal conduct of the canons. The keeper of the warren is mentioned in 1441, but there is at no point any reference to a fishery (although any fishery would have undoubtedly been rented out by this period). It also seems that the canons’ adherence to monastic rule was somewhat lax by this stage – the brothers were not keeping canonical hours – and it is probable that strict rules regarding diet were being largely ignored. Furthermore, it was reported in 1445 that the “convent does not eat in frater for a quarter of the year, but in mixed company with secular folk”, and there are several other references to non-communal eating. It is unlikely that the kitchens would have required the same amounts of fish, particularly as the number of canons appears to have dwindled to eight.

Additionally, the fishery would have required regular maintenance. The ponds, which would have been lined with clay puddling, needed to be drained and cleaned every few years to prevent silting and fouling; banks and dams would need to be reinforced with thorns and willow stakes. Given the reported state of the monastery buildings, it seems unlikely that money would have been found for upkeep. Even if a third party – the miller at

---

37 VCH, p. 46.
38 LRS, Visitations of Religious Houses II, p. 68.
40 LRS, Visitations of Religious Houses II, p. 80.
Overy Mill for example – were responsible for the maintenance of the fishery, the small town of Dorchester was by all accounts a poor backwater and would have presented as an insubstantial market.

Another piece of evidence that raises questions about the longevity of the fish-ponds is the document charting the sale of the former monastery land by the Crown to Edmund Ashfield.\textsuperscript{41} In this, Heyhurst Mede and Longhurst Mede, containing an estimated 13 acres, were described as pieces of pasture, with no mention of fish-ponds.\textsuperscript{42} Hence, whilst the various earthworks on the Hurst and Overy fields might indeed be relict fish-ponds and associated water systems, they may well have fallen into disrepair and disuse long before the Dissolution of the Monasteries in 1536.

4. The Hurst after the Dissolution

The Order of Augustinian Canons at Dorchester was dissolved and surrendered to the Crown in 1536, with the Bishop of Lincoln’s estate following suit in 1547.\textsuperscript{43}

The Bishop of Lincoln’s estate was sold to Lord Norreys of Rycote by 1577\textsuperscript{44} and descended through marriage to the Bertie family, Earls of Abingdon, who had title until 1876.\textsuperscript{45} This included land in and properties in Overy, for much of which the Daveys later held Copy.\textsuperscript{46}

A second estate was formed following the Dissolution, based around Bishop’s Court Farm and including Queensford Mill. In 1585 this estate was granted to the Dunch family of Little Wittenham, passing through marriage to the Oxenden family until 1783 when the Dorchester property was sold to William Hallett.\textsuperscript{47}

The Abbey estate, including two mills, was sold to Edmund Ashfield of Ewelme. At this time the Abbey estate consisted of 7.5 yardlands\textsuperscript{48} of arable; 80a of meadow and pasture; waters and eyots\textsuperscript{49} and two Overy Mills. Hurst meadow would have been included in the 80a of meadow and pasture and was undoubtedly closely linked with ownership of Overy Mill at that time. In 1549, Roger Hatchman of Ewelme had the tenancy of Bishop’s Court

\textsuperscript{41} Addington (1860) Appendix, p. 169.
\textsuperscript{42} Unde voc’ Heyhurst Mede et alter voc’ Longhurst Mede cont’ p estimac’ Xili acr. Molend’ et aquat’ vocat Overy Myll cu ptinent necnon cert’ terr’ibm. Firma molendi acquatic ibm cu’ decimis dict’ molend accum cert’ terr’ et cotagis ibm sic dimiss’ Rogero Hatchman p indentur ut dicit hend CXVs illid.
\textsuperscript{43} VCH, pp. 42–43.
\textsuperscript{44} VCH, p. 42.
\textsuperscript{45} VCH, p. 43.
\textsuperscript{46} Tithe Award for Overy 1840 and Reapportionment 1876 – OHC Tithe 132a Dorchester.
\textsuperscript{47} VCH, p. 44.
\textsuperscript{48} An Old English measurement of farm land, encompassing between 10 and 30 acres, depending on which part of the country it was found; also known as a ‘Virgate’.
\textsuperscript{49} A small islet in a river, often used for the growing of osiers.
Farm and Queensford Mill and also leased a mill at Overy. Apparently, a second Overy mill was sold to Hatchman,\textsuperscript{50} but, at present, we cannot be sure of its location.

The estate subsequently passed, through marriage, to the Fettiplace family, who had substantial landholdings in Oxfordshire. John Fettiplace founded Dorchester’s first grammar school, housed within the Abbey precincts in what is now the museum. However, in practice the descent of ownership probably made little difference to the farming of the Hurst, which would have been undertaken by tenant families, much as it had been for the past few centuries. Section 6 below will look at some of the families that were associated with the Hurst from the 16\textsuperscript{th} to the 20\textsuperscript{th} centuries, but first we will look at the agricultural and other activities associated with the Hurst between the 17\textsuperscript{th} and 19\textsuperscript{th} centuries.

5. Agricultural activities on the Hurst, 17\textsuperscript{th}–19\textsuperscript{th} centuries

Haymaking and pasture

It seems likely that the Hurst was farmed as meadow and pasture during this period: there is certainly no evidence of any conversion to arable. From the early medieval period, hay was a valuable commodity, necessary for the feeding of livestock over the winter when they were confined to byres. Additionally, haymaking was a very labour-intensive activity and remained so in many areas until the late 19\textsuperscript{th} century. Practically the whole village or hamlet would have to turn out to cut the grass and only then in the correct conditions: if the conditions were too wet, the harvest would be ruined. The grass would then have to be dried and turned regularly to reduce the water content to around 15% before stacking into ricks.\textsuperscript{51} A report of 1728 stated that the meadows around Dorchester were said to be poor despite their proximity to rivers, apparently not producing more than $\frac{1}{2}$ a ton to an acre.\textsuperscript{52}

There would have been strict rules about when animals could be turned out onto the grass. None would have been allowed before the first harvest. On some meadows a second crop would be harvested later in the summer, and this land would have been unusable for pastoral activity until after this date. We have no documentary evidence relating to the annual use of the Hurst, but it is frequently described as pasture, so would have been used for grazing.

Generally speaking, the term ‘water meadow’ is used to describe a technique of deliberate flooding of meadow and pasture land via a network of man-made carrier channels. These channels, leats, and sluices were dug into the meadow and controlled flooding permitted by means of a system of boards and hatches. This enhanced the fertility and productivity of the grassland. As yet no evidence has emerged to suggest that the Hurst was a ‘floating’ meadow of this type, although it could offer another explanation for the

\textsuperscript{50} Addington (1860) Appendix, p. 169.
\textsuperscript{52} Addington op. cit.
largely infilled drainage ditch that flows from the mill-stream in a south-westerly direction towards the relict fish-ponds and the abbey.

**Osiers**

Other activities would have taken place in and around the meadow. The Hurst still boasts a number of osier trees. Osier is a loose term covering a number of species of willow (*Salix*), which can be coppiced. Traditionally, most lowland villages had osier beds, the harvest of which would be used for making basket-work, eel traps, thatching spars, firewood, and fencing. Although they are often associated with rivers and meadows, osiers in fact grow best on well drained land, although they will not tolerate extremely dry conditions.\(^53\)

The willow for basket-making is harvested annually, usually during the winter months before the sap starts to rise in the spring. The osiers are cut using a heavy-backed sickle hook, and an experienced cutter can harvest up to 40–50 bundles per day. Figure 16 is an engraving of osier-cutting in the mid-19th century. Naturalist C. J. Cornish observed that, as the demand for fruit grew throughout the second half of the 19th century, so too did the demand for willow baskets to store and transport it.\(^54\)

Osiers need to be planted in January or February in well cleared land in trenches up to 20 inches deep and 12 inches apart and can grow anything up to 18 inches a week in season.

---

\(^{53}\) Cornish (1902) p. 121.

\(^{54}\) Ibid.
They are also a useful crop to plant as a cover for wildfowl. There was an osier bed just to the north of Buck Pool, as well as many specimens on the meadow itself.

Once the osiers had been harvested, they were graded into differing lengths, the shortest usually being 3 feet. These were made into hurdles and the rougher potato baskets. For finer basket-work it is necessary to peel the osiers. This used to be done by hand using a ‘brake’ mounted on a wooden post, through which it was necessary to feed osier wands (see Figure 17). Later on, machines were developed to do the stripping. White osier wands are achieved by peeling them in spring, when the buds are just bursting. ‘Buff’ rods are made by boiling the peeled osiers for several hours in large tanks. The process releases tannins which stain the wood a reddish brown. After peeling, the rods were put in the sun to dry – usually up against walls or hedges or, occasionally, in post and wire cages. It was essentially an important cottage industry which could involve the entire family, as demonstrated in Figure 17.

As the 19th century progressed, osier stripping, like many other cottage industries, became more industrialised. That sometimes involved the osiers being transported to a central place, such as the yard in Fisher Row, Oxford, where the osiers would be stripped and made into baskets etc. as shown in Figure 18 (see also Figure 19).
Figure 18: Taunt: Fisher Row, Oxford. Osier peeling taking place in April. The resulting willow wands would be made into a variety of objects. 1901. Copyright Oxfordshire County Council, Oxfordshire History Centre.

Figure 19: Pollarded osiers at the bottom of the Hurst and Overy meadows, with the Thame in full spate at the end of the 19th century. From DMA.
Eels and fishing

We have already seen the importance of eels to the medieval monastic diet, and this importance continued throughout the following centuries. Eel traps are commonly associated with mills and weirs, and Buck Pool almost certainly derived its name from the basket-work eel traps – or ‘bucks’ – that were attached to its weir, where the Thame separates from the Overy mill cut. As the naturalist C. J. Cornish wrote, “Fish and flour go together as bye-products [sic] of nearly all our large rivers.” Cornish visited Overy Mill in the late 19th century and wrote a descriptive account of his trip and of eel fishing in general.

It would seem that, traditionally, the ‘eel run’ was an annual event of river life, as millions of eels used to migrate down-river towards the sea to breed in the autumn, whilst the young elvers swam back up in tens of millions between February and May. They always travelled by night, and that was when the eel bucks were lowered, although eels apparently will not swim in the full moon or in very still weather. Most of the eels caught by the miller at Overy were between 1 lb and 5 lb in weight, although he once caught a 9 lb fish.

The bucks were located beneath the mill dam at Overy and at Buck Pool (Figure 20), using old-fashioned equipment not dissimilar to mill machinery. These were apparently of a very ancient design and one, photographed by William Taunt at Caversham in 1880, is shown in Figure 21.

In the late 19th century, the price of eels apparently never fell below 10d per pound, and it was considered to be a very profitable catch.

\[\text{Cornish (1902) p. 100.}\]
Teasel cultivation

The Hurst also has specimens of teasel (Figure 22), which might have been grown as a commercial crop since the Romano-British period. The heads of certain varieties were invaluable as a means of nap-raising in the textile industry. They are also supposed to be a valuable plant for encouraging honey bees. Teasels were harvested in August, when they were cut and placed on poles to be dried, preferably in a shed with a roof, but no sides.56 Once dried, the teasels were packed in sacks and marketed in October, most destined for the Northern cloth industry.

56 Topham (1968).
**Rushes and reeds**

Basket-work was an important cottage industry, sometimes utilising rushes as well as osiers (Figure 23). The last recorded basket-maker in Dorchester was Frederick Batten, of Scott’s Row (Albert Terrace), who tended osiers on Old Bridge Meadow until late into the 19th century. Batten’s father, Job, who married in 1823, had also been a basket-maker. Thatch has long been a popular roofing material in Dorchester, with thatchers using a mix of straw, osier, and reeds in their work. These are all materials that can be grown locally, and there are still many reed beds by the Hurst (Figure 24).

![Figure 23: Rush gathering (in Norfolk). Picture by kind permission of John Metcalfe.](image1)

![Figure 24: Reed beds by the Hurst. Picture by Lisbet Clements.](image2)

6. Families associated with Overy and the Hurst

From the late 16th century it would seem that a network of influential, intermarried families from Overy, Dorchester, and the surrounding district occupied the Hurst and much of the Overy estates. These families included: the Daveys of Overy; the Cherrills of Dorchester and Overy; the Gosfords of Dorchester and Overy; the Taylors of Slade End, Wallingford; the Kennetts of Dorchester; and the Moulderns (spellings various) of Little Wittenham.

The **Cherrills** were substantial yeoman farmers. Their first mention came in the Lay Subsidy of 1577, and they lived at Overy Manor from the late 17th century, following John Cherrill’s marriage to Philadelphia Bishop, daughter of Sir Francis Bishop of Overy Manor. A descendant of John and Philadelphia Cherrill, Margaret, married into the **Kennett** family in 1785. The Kennett family were also to have a long association with Dorchester, but Margaret’s son, General Kennett, was later murdered in the Indian Mutiny of 1857. The Cherrills also intermarried with the **Gosfords**, a Roman Catholic family who came to Dorchester in the early 18th century and with whom they frequently tenanted Overy Mill. Although the Cherrills seem to have been very interconnected with the Overy families, they do not seem to have been Roman Catholics themselves. There were various branches of the family: some were tenants at the mill, commonly known as ‘mealmen’, e.g. Robert Cherrill

---

57 VCH, p. 47.
58 Davey (1897) p. 25.
and his nephew, George. Vincent Cherrill, on the other hand, lived at the manor house. Their close relationship with the Davey family was attested when William Davey was declared guarantor of Vincent Cherrill’s estates during the latter’s period of lunacy in 1820.

The Daveys of Overy were also of great local importance. A devoutly Catholic family, mass was held at their house during the centuries when many Catholics faced persecution, there being no money to maintain a missioner in Dorchester at that time. The family’s chronicler, E. C. Davey, asserts that the location of Overy, with its mill and eight houses and cottages and lying away from the main road on a lane that terminated at the mill, was only frequented by those having business with the mill or farm. Davey described Overy’s residents as “a knot of catholics undisturbed in the days of persecution. The old chapel house at the end of a bylane enclosed by rickyards, gardens and orchards, did not in any way challenge the curiosity or suspicion of poursuivants”. The Daveys apparently always enjoyed good relations with their Protestant relations, being one of the highest contributors to the church rate and paying and owning tithes.

William Davey I was born in 1575 and purchased the first recorded copyhold in Overy in 1633. Although part of Dorchester parish, Overy always formed a separate tithing, hence it appears on a separate map in the later Tithe Reapportionments of 1840. As was common for the time in south Oxfordshire, the Daveys had freehold title of a comparatively small proportion of the lands that they farmed, particularly until the start of the 19th century, much of it being rented from the Earls of Abingdon estate. However, in 1712, the family built Overy House, which bears the date on a stone above the front door. A later William Davey (1760–1831) became a progressive farmer and leading agriculturalist of the day and was one of the founder members of the Oxfordshire Agricultural Society. In 1809 he farmed 320 acres and had 600 sheep, and his ploughing was praised by Arthur Young as being the “neatest and truest ... I anywhere viewed”. Young went on to describe Davey as “a very capital and intelligent farmer”. Indeed his techniques were supposed to be so advanced that George III, when staying at nearby Nuneham House, is alleged to have ridden over to inspect the farm himself. Davey laid the first stone of the new Dorchester Bridge in 1811 and was also a successful speculator in Government securities, which fluctuated

59 OHC, Misc. WW VIII/ii/1.
60 Davey (1897) p. 66.
61 Davey (1897) p. 57.
62 In existence since the 11th century, a tithing was a group of 10 men who performed various legal obligations within their community, including View of Frankpledge.
63 OHC.
64 Davey (1897) p. 44.
65 Young (1813).
66 Young (1813) p. 131.
67 Davey (1897) p. 45.
greatly at the time as a result of the French and Peninsular wars. As a result, he was often in London and ended up leaving £20,000 in his will.68

William’s third son, George (1793–1857), became a well respected farmer in his own right and a successful breeder and exhibitor at Smithfield Cattle Market. In 1820 he married Elizabeth Taylor of Slade End, the daughter of another Catholic family who were famed in the area for their piety and observance of religious services and Lenten fasting. George’s sister, Sarah, also married a Taylor, Charles. They went to be tenants at Sir John Willoughby’s farm at Baldon but were forced from the area after disastrous harvests in 1822, after which time they moved to Beaulieu, Hants.69 Another son, John (born 1787), lived at Bridge House, Dorchester from 1831 and went on to endow the small Catholic church of St Birinus in Bridge End in 1849.

The Mouldens were an important Long Wittenham family and appear to have purchased the Overy Mill estate before 1758.70 The 27a Overy Mill estate comprised the corn mill, house and surrounding waters, Horsecroft (which was rented by the Daveys), Parson’s Shade, Buck Pool, and Buck Meadow. The Mouldens also intermarried with the Cherrills, as George Cherrill is described as “the late Joseph Mouldern’s nephew” in an 1847 document that seeks to establish fishing rights in the vicinity of Overy Mill prior to its sale to the Barrington Kennetts.71

7. The 19th century

In 1808 the entire Fettiplace estate was put up for sale in what became known as ‘The Great Sale’. Much of the estate was purchased by George White of Newington, who acquired significant other properties in neighbouring parishes at this time. Lot II, however, consisted of the property occupied by Mrs Gosford, widow of Vincent Cherrill,72 and Vincent Cherrill:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Land Description</th>
<th>Quantity</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>The Hurst</td>
<td>19a 0r 27p meadow land</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Little Meadow</td>
<td>3a 0r 25p meadow</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Spring Meadow</td>
<td>1a 23 38p meadow</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Long Bridge Close</td>
<td>3a 2r 17p arable</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Home Close and Osiers</td>
<td>3a 1r 4p arable and osiers</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

All the land was free from tithe payment, no doubt reflecting its origins as part of the Abbey demesne. This land was bought for £1,820 by William Davey according to the family historian.74 At the same time, he also purchased a right of roadway 20 feet wide leading to

---

68 Ibid.
69 Davey (1897) p. 52.
70 SJC, Munim LXVIII (7).
71 SJC, Munim LXVIII (X).
72 DMA G(1), 1808 Fettiplace Sale Catalogue.
73 VCH.
74 Davey (1897) p. 45.
Overy; ‘Picked Piece’ for £2,060; farm buildings near the Manor £600; 16a of Broadmoor £820; 5a of Fleet Furlong £300; and the tithes of Longbrook.\textsuperscript{75} It is probably reasonable to assume that Davey had been farming the Hurst as a tenant prior to its purchase.

When William Davey died in 1831, he left much of his estate to his son-in-law, Charles Taylor of Beaulieu,\textsuperscript{76} with the proviso that specified land be independently valued and sold back to one of William’s three sons should they so wish.\textsuperscript{77} The St John’s College archive shows that George Davey purchased the following lands for £6,920 in 1831\textsuperscript{78}:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Land Description</th>
<th>Acres</th>
<th>Remarks</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Spring Meadow</td>
<td>1a 2r 36p</td>
<td>(both previously occupied by Sophia Gosford)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Water &amp; Rook Demesnes</td>
<td>24a 2r 3p</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Long Bridge Close</td>
<td>3a 2r 17p</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Hurst Meadow</strong></td>
<td>19a 27r (£355 5s)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Little Meadow</td>
<td>3a 25r</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Overy Meadow/Hen Pool</td>
<td>20a</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

According to the terms of the will, Spring Meadow, Water and Rook Demesnes, and Long Bridge Close were to be offered to William’s eldest son, also William, whilst his second son was to be offered arable between the Oxford and Abingdon roads, also Swan’s Nest and Webb’s piece. George was also to be offered 24a of arable in Overy field and Meadside Piece. The St John’s College archive does not contain any information about lands purchased by William or John, but it seems that George purchased the lands described as they formed part of the old Davey estate sold to St John’s College in 1874.\textsuperscript{79}

By the 1846 Dorchester Tithe Award, both the Hurst (Lot 843) and Little Meadow (Lot 844) are described as pasture and as belonging to George Davey.\textsuperscript{80} The Award also shows the meadow (Lot 845), an orchard (Lot 846), and the fish-pond and plantation (Lot 849) as being in the occupation of Vincent Cherrill, and owned by Colonel Kennett.

It appears that John Moulden purchased the ‘freehold and tithe-free’ Overy Mill estate by 1758, as we find a lease agreement for that date in the St John’s College archive.\textsuperscript{81} It is presently unclear whether Moulden bought it from the Fettiplace estate or from a third party. It seems that the Overy Mill estate included the 2a 3r Buck Meadow and an eyot containing 1r 2p of osiers. Throughout much of the first half of the 19\textsuperscript{th} century, Robert Cherrill was tenant at Overy Mill, assisted from 1815 by his nephew, George Cherrill.\textsuperscript{82}

\textsuperscript{75} Ibid.
\textsuperscript{76} This was possibly William Davey’s way of providing for his daughter and her husband who had found themselves in straitened circumstances since the failure of their Baldon farm tenancy in the early 1820s.
\textsuperscript{77} National Archive, PROB 11/1787, Will of William Davey, Gentleman, Dorchester, Oxon.
\textsuperscript{78} SJC, Munim XVIII (4(i)).
\textsuperscript{79} SJC, Munim LXVIII (4(i)).
\textsuperscript{80} Transcription of Tithe Award, Dorchester Museum Archive.
\textsuperscript{81} SJC, Munim LXVIII (7).
\textsuperscript{82} SJC, Munim LXVIII (x).
was a 7-year period, 1822–29, when Moulden let the mill to James Kennett. Apparently the occupier at the mill enjoyed the exclusive right of fishery in the streams belonging to Overy Mill.\(^{83}\)

After Moulden’s death in 1847 the estate was sold at the White Hart Inn, Dorchester. The estate was described as two water corn mills,\(^{84}\) a dwelling house, fishery, arable, meadow, and pasture, and two cottages with gardens in Dorchester, comprising in all 27a 3r 39p with common rights and included Buck Pool, Buck Mead, and osiers. It was bought by Hugh Gibb of the East India Company in Bombay for £3,620.\(^{85}\) Gibb, it transpires, was the son-in-law of General Brackley Kennett\(^{86}\) and appears to have bought the property on the latter’s behalf. After General Kennett’s unfortunate demise in the Indian Mutiny in 1857, it seems that all his Dorchester and Overy estates passed to his cousin’s son, Vincent Barrington Kennett, who held title until 1878. Thomas Cherrill appears to have tenanted the mill during much of this period.

In 1861, the open fields and commons of Dorchester and Overy were the subject of parliamentary enclosure, although the process had no immediate impact on the Hurst, as it was already enclosed land. The Daveys were awarded four large enclosures in Overy (see Appendix 2).

In 1876 the Davey family sold the bulk of their Overy estate to St John’s College, Oxford. However, it seems that Robert Davey, the last Davey to live in Overy, retained 32 acres of land including the Hurst and Little Meadow, which he later settled in trust to support the priest serving St Birinus church.\(^{87}\) Bridge House, the former home of Robert’s brother, Henry, who served as priest at St Birinus from 1864 to 1878, was also bequeathed to the church to serve as its presbytery.\(^{88}\)

St John’s College was already a significant landowner in neighbouring Warborough and Shillingford, having steadily increased their holdings in the wake of that parish’s enclosure in 1851. The land purchased from the Daveys formed part of a 1,000-acre estate in this part of south Oxfordshire. Vincent Barrington Kennett sold the Overy Mill estate to St John’s College for £6,390 19s 4d in 1878,\(^{89}\) and the college had also purchased the remaining Earls of Abingdon land in Overy that had been in the occupation of the Davey family in 1875.\(^{90}\)

\(^{83}\) Ibid.
\(^{84}\) The location of the second water corn mill is not clear. Cornish, writing in the late 19th century, describes the mill as one long building “but with two sets of stones, and space for two wheels”, so maybe this represented two separate ‘mills’. It is not easy to explain where another mill might be situated by this period, as Queensford Mill was under separate ownership and no other mills appear on any maps or documentation.
\(^{85}\) SJC, Munim LXVIII (x).
\(^{86}\) SJC, Munim LXVIII (xviii).
\(^{87}\) VCH, p. 63.
\(^{88}\) VCH, p. 63.
\(^{89}\) SJC, Munim LXVIII (xviii).
\(^{90}\) OHC, Far XV/12, Lot 3.
8. The 20th century

It seems likely that for the last 30 years of the 19th century, the Hurst was leased to Queenford Farm (formerly known as Queensford Mill Farm), which had formed part of the Dunch estates but was owned by Jabez Balfour until 1897.91 Apparently Queensford had ceased to be a functioning mill by the late 19th century and already had meadow and pasture land, including Whalley Meadow, Custard Meadow, and The Slays, which ran into the Hurst near Buck Pool. The estate was purchased by Richard Hatt, who subsequently purchased the Hurst and Little Meadow in 1901, following Robert Davey’s death, for £1,775.92 Richard Hatt is certainly named as owner and occupier of the Hurst (no. 311) in the 1911 Land Valuation Records, when it formed part of the 329-acre estate.93

In 1926, Richard Hawken, who had previously been farming Field Farm (now Mount Farm) as part of the Willoughby Baldon estates, purchased Queenford Farm. The story has it that, in the late 19th century, Hawken hired a private train to transport his livestock from St Columb in Cornwall to Culham Station, from where he drove his animals to their new home at Little Baldon.94 Apparently he moved from Cornwall to Dorchester to be nearer to the London and Midlands dairy markets, his stock in trade.95 After selling Queenford Farm to Hawken, the widowed Mrs Hatt and her daughter moved to Beech House in Dorchester, and the manor yard was known as ‘Hatt Yard’ until the 1950s.96

Buck Pool and Buck Spinney were part of the estate numbered (3) in the Land Valuation Award, owned by St John’s College and occupied by Thomas Jordan.97

In the 1950s, Queenford Farm was bought by the Whittle Family, who farmed the estate until 1980, when he sold what remained of his estate to ARC, later Hanson Trust.98

Dorchester had already been subject to significant gravel extraction since the 1950s, mainly to the north of the settlement. The vast pits created by the extraction were later turned into lakes and used for fisheries and recreational purposes. In 1983, the construction of the Dorchester by-pass bisected Buck Meadow, close to Buck Pool and Buck Spinney, and the water-courses of the Thame were altered as they passed below the new road bridge.

In 1991, ARC sold the Hurst to Dorchester Fisheries, but retained the mineral rights. In 1993, the bottom 5 acres of the Hurst were sold to Mr Morrison, who owns the old toll-house and the modern house on stilts just to the south of the Abbey.99

---

91 VCH, p. 44.
92 VCH, p. 44.
93 OHC, Valuation Book – Finance Act 1910, DV XII/II.
94 Anecdotal evidence from Mrs Mary Tame.
95 Anecdotal evidence from Mrs Mary Tame.
96 Anecdotal evidence from Mrs Mary Tame.
97 OHC, Valuation Book – Finance Act 1910, DV XII/II.
9. The Hurst Water Meadow Trust

The Hurst Water Meadow Trust came into existence on 13 October 1995, when a group of Dorchester residents combined forces to buy the Hurst after the collapse of Dorchester Fisheries. An appeal for funds was issued to every household in the parish, and the Parish Council also made a substantial contribution. In the event, the Trust paid £31,000 for the 18-acre site on 17th May 1996, including fishing rights. The Trust achieved charitable status from the end of 1995. Up to ten local residents are trustees.

Since this time, the Trust has worked tirelessly to manage the meadow along traditional lines, with a hay crop taken in July and then grazing by cattle or horses through the autumn and winter. Major projects have included rebuilding the access bridge over the River Thame, researching ways of reintroducing wild flowers typical of hay meadows, and running an educational programme for local schools.

In 2009, the Trust purchased Old Bridge Meadow, a nearby 3.39-acre site to the south of the Henley Road.

Figure 25: The Hurst today. Photograph by Lisbet Clements.

100 Charity No. 1050272.
Figure 26: Buck Pool today. Photograph by Lisbet Clements.
The Old Bridge Meadow, Dorchester-on-Thames, Oxfordshire
– A brief history

The Old Bridge Meadow (OS Reference SU 579 938) is a 3.39 acre (1.372 hectare) flood meadow, now owned by the Hurst Water Meadow Trust (Figure 27). It is situated on the Overy side of the River Thame, at Dorchester-on-Thames, 0.6 km before its confluence with the River Thames. The drift geology of the site is alluvium, overlying the Northmoor gravel terrace, the youngest of the four gravel terraces in the upper Thames valley, at roughly 3 m above the present river level.\(^\text{101}\) The underlying geology is Gault Clay (see Figure 2).

A flood meadow is an area of pasture or meadow lying alongside a river that is regularly flooded. It differs from a water meadow in that flooding occurs naturally and, usually, seasonally, depositing nutrient-rich alluvium on the grass.

In pre-history, although no evidence has yet been uncovered, we can imagine that the meadow would have had mixed use: pasture for the rearing of livestock; for growing hay crop; it may well have had areas of reeds and osiers (willows), which would have provided

---

\(^\text{101}\) Powell (2005), p. 81.
building and weaving materials as well as cover for wildfowl, an important part of the diet of the times.

It is possible that, in both the Roman and Saxon periods, a timber bridge crossed the Thame at this point, linking the walled town at Dorchester with lands to the east along what is now the old Henley road. Certainly by the medieval period, this was the site chosen for the construction of a stone bridge across the Thame in 1146. This was located some 80 m downstream from the present bridge and entered the town at Bridge End. At that time, the site formed part of a larger meadow which was common land, under which system inhabitants in possession of copyhold tenancies (usually attached to particular dwellings) were allowed grazing and other common rights. In 1381, the bailiffs of Dorchester were granted pontage (bridge tax) for three years to raise tolls for the repair of the bridge, and further repairs in the mid-15th century were apparently funded by two local landowners. John Leland, the 16th-century antiquarian, described the bridge in one of his Itineraries as: ‘of a good length, and a great stone causey is made to come well onto it. There be 5 principal arches in the bridge and in the causey joining to the south end of it’. An engraving of the old bridge was published in The Gentleman’s Magazine of 1818 and is reproduced below (Figure 28).

Figure 28: Dorchester old bridge, a late-18th-century engraving from The Gentleman’s Magazine 1818. Probably looking downstream, so part of Old Bridge Meadow can be glimpsed through the arch.

102 VCH VII, p. 40.
103 Ibid.
104 Leland, Toulmin Smith (ed.) (1906–10), Itinerary I.
Throughout this period, the meadow surrounding the causeway would have been used for the grazing of livestock by those holding common rights and as a source of osiers. The preliminary results of recent geophysical survey by Nigel Joyner of Oxford University Department for Continuing Education (OUDCE) have revealed the probable route of the medieval causeway but no evidence of other land use. Local residents have said that it is still possible to see the line of the old causeway, particularly in certain flood conditions, and this is visible in Figure 29 and Figure 30.

By the late 18th century, road traffic had grown both in size and volume, as Dorchester became a popular staging post for travellers between London and the West Country. The Dorchester-to-Henley road was ‘turnpiked’ in 1734, and there was apparently a toll-house for the collector on the river bank beside the bridge — although presumably at Bridge End rather than the Overy side of the river. Throughout the 17th and 18th centuries, the bridge often fell into disrepair and, in 1781, over £200 was raised to pay for its repair and widening. By 1808, a Grand Jury deemed that the bridge was ‘narrow, inconvenient and out of repair’, and in 1810 plans were commissioned for a new bridge.

On 25 October 1811, William Davey, an important agriculturalist and landowner in Overy, laid the first stone of the new Dorchester bridge at the Overy end, as commemorated on the tablet on the crown of the central arch. An inscribed foundation stone is found on the underside of the central arch on the Shillingford side, but it is now badly eroded. The new bridge, which opened in 1815, bisected the meadow further to the north and diverted traffic away from Bridge End to

---

105 Joyner, Nigel (2009) *An Investigation into aspects of medieval and post-medieval water management with the landscape of an Augustinian monastery*. Unpublished MSc Dissertation deposited at Oxford University Department For Continuing Education. Please refer to this for more information and other archaeological activity on Old Bridge Meadow and The Hurst.
107 *Ibid*.
108 Davey (1897).
its present course, entering the town by the Abbey. It is possible that the stone from the old bridge was re-used in the building of the new bridge, and there has been infill building on the site where the bridge entered the town at Bridge End, where a dressed stone remains incorporated in the wall of one of the cottages. At the same time, a new toll-house was built by the Abbey. An engraving of the new bridge is illustrated in Figure 31.

![Figure 31: Dorchester new bridge, with part of Old Bridge Meadow to right of the image.](image)

By the mid-19th century, although the new road bisected the land, the meadow was still viewed as one piece of common land. The 1840 Tithe Apportionment map – see Map 1 (Appendix 3) – shows that the meadow (162) was called Birds Green. It is possible that this is a transcription error and the name should be Bridge Green, although the name might be correct and reflect the presence of wildfowl. A small portion of the Green (161a on the map) was called the Common Plash. A plash can be a pool of water or a down-pouring (of rain or wildfowl) from the Middle English *plaesc*. It can also be used as a verb to mean ‘to interlace the shoots of’ or to ‘pleache’ a hedge. This could very possibly refer to the fact that this land was an osier (or willow) plantation, used for basket and hurdle-making, although it is ascribed no specific land use in the Tithe Apportionment. Certainly, the last basket-maker in Dorchester, Frederick Batten, of Scott’s Row (Albert Terrace), tended osiers at this spot until late into the 19th century. Batten’s father, Job, who married in 1823, had also been a basket-maker. Osiers, or withies, are still planted on the Hurst and Old Bridge Meadows in Dorchester (see Figure 32) and are a feature of the Thames and Thame, particularly on ground where winter flooding occurs. Harvested on an annual basis, they were used for the manufacture of baskets, crates, lobster pots, and eel traps. As fruit cultivation increased throughout the 19th century, so demand for baskets rose, and osiers remained a profitable

---

109 Information supplied by Mary Tame.
110 Cornish (1902), p. 121.
crop until the 20th century. Willow was also a very important crop for thatching, and many of Dorchester’s houses were thatched before the 20th century.

After the Enclosure of 1861, when the agrarian strips, meadows, and commons were consolidated and redistributed according to eligibility, the meadow was subdivided, with the 1 rood, 26 perch piece of land to the north of the turnpike road going to the Lord of the Manor, the Earl of Abingdon – no. 39 on Map 2 (Appendix 4) – whilst the land containing the remains of the old bridge causeway was amalgamated with Horsecroft, pasture land belonging to Robert Davey – no. 47 on Map 2 (Appendix 4).

The Daveys had been an influential family in the Dorchester and Overy area since at least the 16th century. Robert’s father, William Davey (1760–1831), was a successful and progressive farmer, and his methods were praised by Arthur Young. He ran large flocks of Oxford Down sheep as well as his agrarian interests and was also one of the founders of the Oxfordshire Agricultural Society. The Davey estate included a mixture of freehold and leasehold land, the latter under copy from the lords of one of the Dorchester manors, the Earls of Abingdon. In 1808, the family purchased lands including the Hurst Meadow from the Fettiplace family – Lords of the Manor of the former Abbey Estate – to consolidate their holdings in Overy. Committed Roman Catholics, they built the small Catholic church of St Birinus in Dorchester in 1849 and reportedly built a small wooden bridge from Old Bridge Meadow to Bridge End to afford a speedier passage to church from Overy. This bridge appears on the 1861 Enclosure map, the 1876 Tithe Reapportionment map (Maps 2 and 4; Appendices 4 and 6) and the Ordnance Survey, but unfortunately no image has yet come to light.

In 1875, the Earls of Abingdon sold their estates around Dorchester, including the “remarkably attractive freehold estate in the hamlet of Overy, currently in the occupation of Robert Davey”. Map 3 (Appendix 5) shows the extent of the land under the hammer, which was sold, in the first instance, to Captain. B. H. Barrington Kennet, a Captain in H.M. 51st Regiment of Light Infantry, at that time resident at the Manor House. St John’s College, Oxford, subsequently purchased this estate in 1878, to add to their large (almost 1,000-acre) estate in this area, built up in the post-Enclosure period. In 1876, the Daveys sold their remaining freehold lands, including Old Bridge Meadow amalgamated with

---

111 Ibid.
112 Davey (1897) p. 45.
113 OHC, Far XV/2, Sale Catalogue.
114 SJC, Munim LXVIII 7. A younger member of the Barrington family, Mr Guy Kennett Barrington, purchased the other main Dorchester estate from the Willoughbys of Marsh Baldon in 1916.
Horsecroft (described as 6 acres, 3 roods, and 14 perches of meadowland – No. 21 on Map 5 (Appendix 2)) to the college,\textsuperscript{115} and the land was subsequently managed out of Shillingford Farm for the next century, initially by the Shrubb family. Land use throughout the 20\textsuperscript{th} century continued much as it had for previous periods – a mixture of pasture and meadow.

In 1968, St John’s College disposed of its Dorchester and Overy estates to the Amey Group, although it seems that the estate continued to be run out of Shillingford Farm, and some meadowland in Overy, which apparently included Old Bridge Meadow, was rented to Townsend of Overy Farm. From 1960, Shillingford Farm was tenanted by the Cook Family, who subsequently bought the estate. The land remained in their ownership until 2009, when it was purchased by Richard Douglas who sold it to the Hurst Water Meadow Trust, at less than cost.

Karen Selway-Richards
Mary Tame
October 2009

\textsuperscript{115} SJC, Munim LXVIII 4 (i).
Abbreviations

COS – Centre for Oxfordshire Studies
DMA – Dorchester Museum Archive
LRS – Lincolnshire Record Society
NA – National Archive
NMR – National Monument Record
OCCPA – Oxfordshire County Council Photographic Archive
OHC – Oxfordshire History Centre
SJC – St John’s College, Oxford
VCH – Victoria County History for Oxfordshire, Vol. VII

Bibliography

Primary sources consulted:

Archive of St John’s College, Oxford. Munim XVIII
Oxfordshire History Centre:
  Tithe Awards for Dorchester and Overy
  Enclosure Award
  Land Tax Awards
  Various other collections
National Archive:  PROB 11/1787: Will of William Davey
  PROB 11/2254:  Will of George Davey
Dorchester Museum Archive: various

Secondary sources:


Kirk, R.E.B. (ed.) (1892) *Accounts of the obedientiars of Abingdon Abbey* (Camden Society New Series v. 51).


Young, Arthur (1813) *General View of the Agriculture of Oxfordshire*. 

Abbreviations and Bibliography  
Page 40
Appendix 1: Archaeological finds for the Hurst 2008. Supplied by the Oxfordshire Sites and Monuments Record. No finds recorded on the Hurst (blue boundary).
Appendix 2: The purchase of land by St John's College from the Daveys in 1876. From St John’s College Oxford, Munim LXVIII 4(i).
Appendix 4.

Enclosure Map
Overy 1861

MAP 2

- Small bridge erected by Davey?
- Old bridge meadow now forming part of 47, Horsecroft owned by Robert Davey

Diagram showing
- River
- Bridges
- Roads
- Land parcels

Legend:
- River
- Bridge
- Road
- Land parcel

Legend:
- River
- Bridge
- Road
- Land parcel
Appendix 5.
Appendix 6.