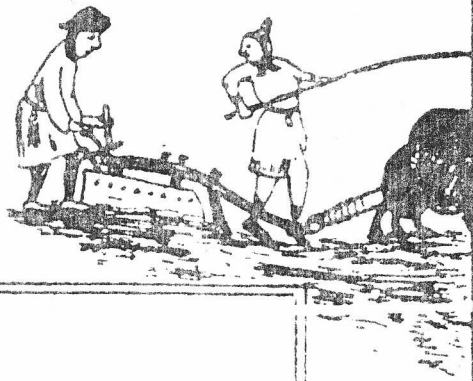
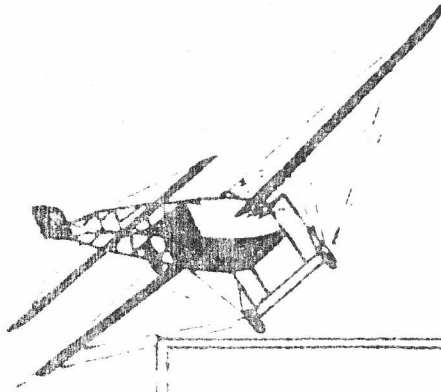


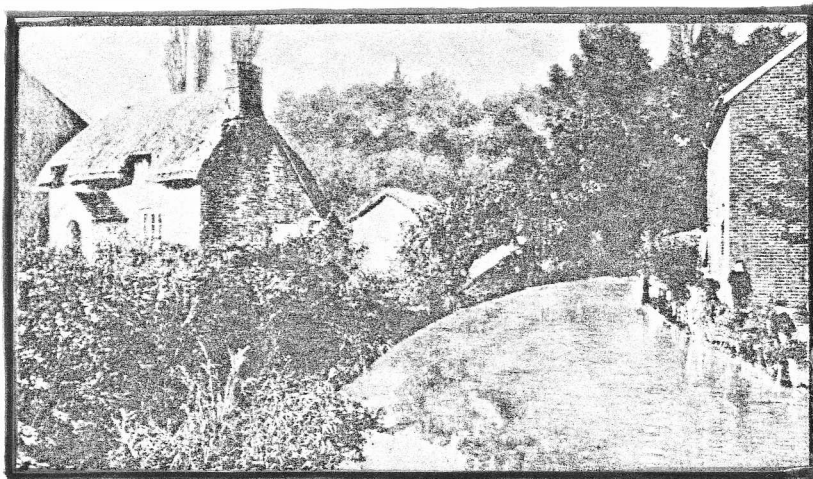
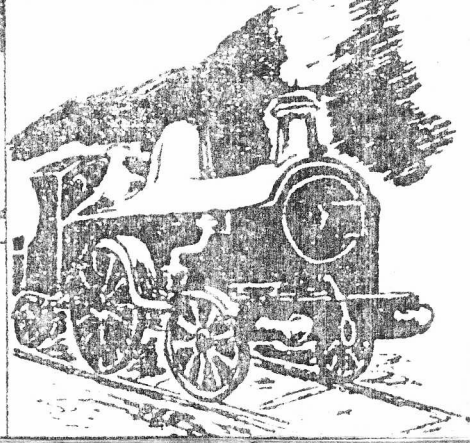
Bishopstoke Water Meadows.

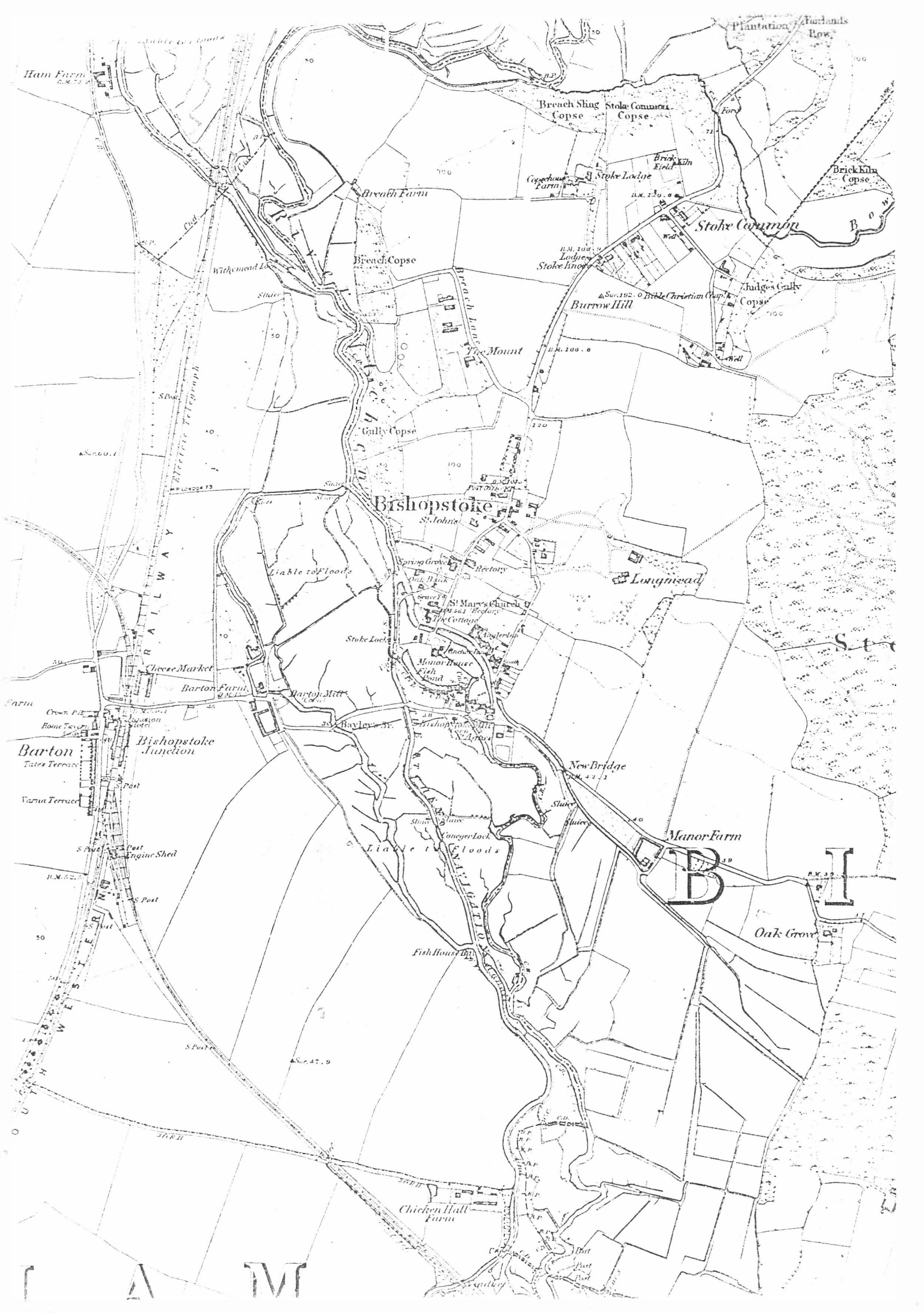


*Eastleigh & District  
Local History Society*

OCCASIONAL PAPER No. 10

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Ham Farm  
T.M. 72

Plantation  
Hurlands Row

Breach Shing Copse  
Stoke Common Copse

Breach Farm

Stoke Common

Withymond Lodge

Breach Copse

Brick Kiln Field  
Stoke Lodge

Brick Kiln Copse

Burrow Hill

Judges Gully Copse

The Mount

Gully Copse

Bishopstoke

Longmead

Liab. to Floods

St. John's  
St. Mary's Church

Barton  
Tates Terrace

Bishopstoke Junction

Barton Mill

New Bridge

Manor Farm

B I

Oak Grove

Fish House Farm

Liab. to Floods

Chicken Hall Farm

T A M

## THE OLD WATER MEADOWS

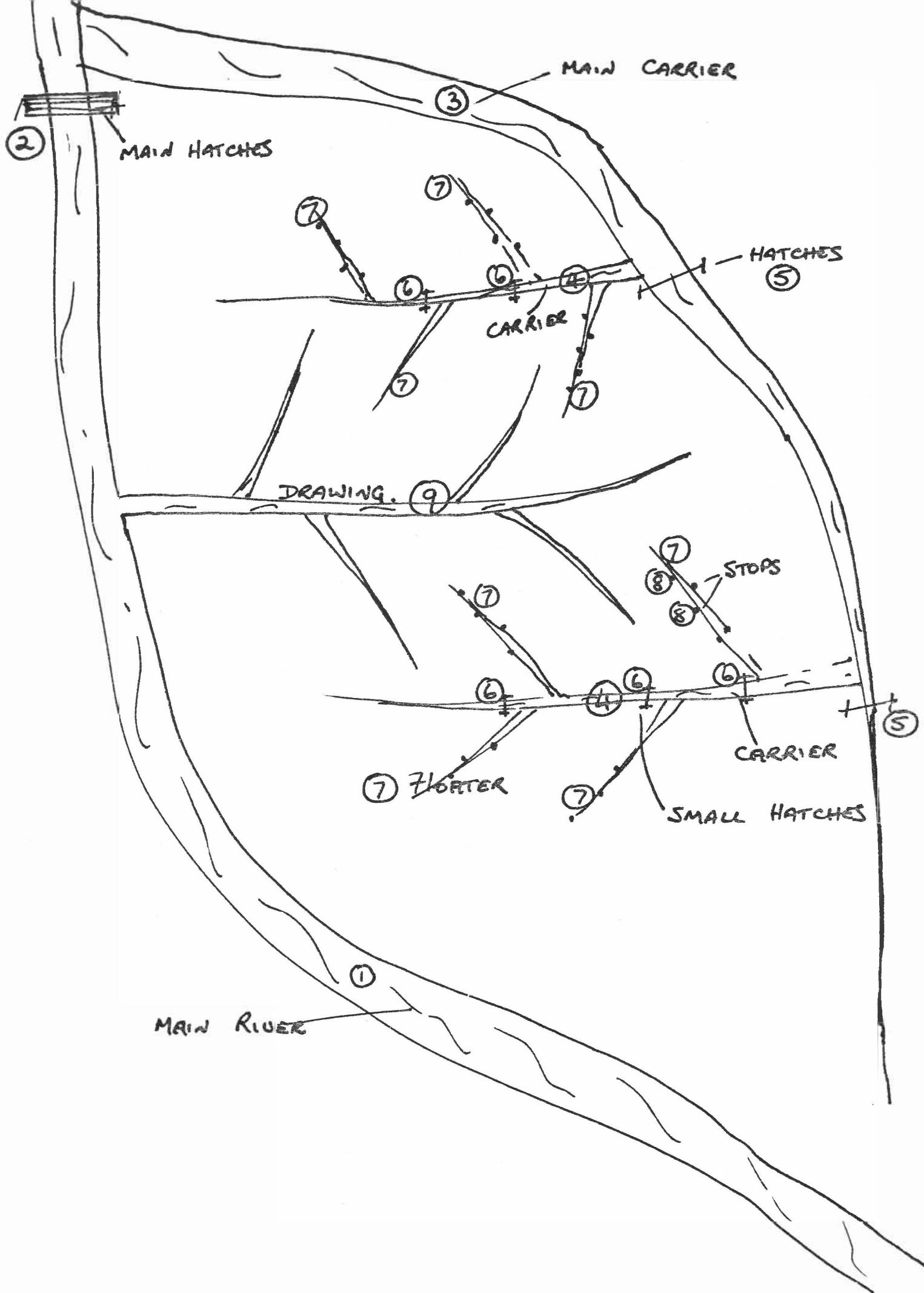
While being entertained to lunch recently by two country loving friends, the conversation turned to the water meadows and their method of irrigation - a system that has become a thing of the past.

Giving it further thought, I was intrigued by the fact that, though there are still many folk around who can remember them being used in their original capacity, I am probably the last in this area of those who took part in their upkeep - I am one of the last of the "DROWNERS", the name given to the water meadow workers. As a consequence, I felt constrained to try to describe these meadows and their uses. I feel sure it will be of interest to someone, even as it was to our young hosts.

I understand that the Dutch introduced the idea and its implementation to this country many years ago, during the reign of Charles I.

When I was a lad and came to live in this area (1922), there was a family who were involved in the upkeep of the local meadows. These meadows were all privately owned: Highbridge being owned by Hampshire County Council and farmed by my grandfather; Bow Lake owned by Mr. Charlie Neale of Hill Farm, Brambridge; Breach owned and farmed by my father; Home Farm and Chickenhall Farm being farmed by Mr. Frith. I became most familiar with Highbridge and Breach. The family to whom I refer are Mr. Beedon and his two sons, Bob & Jim. Old Mr. Beedon had been a 'drowner' all his life and two of his sons had learned the art as they grew up and for many years were involved in the work with him. I also learned much from the old gent and indeed worked with him and his young son, Jim. They were a delight to work with and always ready to impart any knowledge that could be of use to a beginner. From 1922, our family took over the work at Highbridge and Breach from the Beedons, having obtained our knowledge from them.

In the 'Off season', we carried on with the normal work of the farm; the Beedons, covering a considerable district, went mowing, hedging, ditching, house and rick thatching, hoeing, hay tying, hay making; they were in great demand. At the time, the farm labourers pay was 30/- per week, less 9d for insurance; the drowners pay being a little above this.



The River Itchen, meandering as it does from beyond Alresford, down through the valleys via Winchester, Shawford, Highbridge, Swathling and eventually reaching Southampton Water, was the source of much mineral wealth and this was utilised by the valley farmers. During the winter months, the river was full and fast flowing, carrying in its current much mud and silt. This was full of minerals and the object of this type of irrigation was to convey them onto the adjacent fields for fertilisation purposes. (I would even suggest that this might have been the origin of the old country saying, "February fill dyke".)

With the assistance of the accompanying diagram, I will try to describe how the system worked.

The main hatches across the river (2) were lowered to force a body of water into and along the main carrier (3).

At intervals along this carrier were smaller hatches (5), which in turn when lowered, sent the water along the carriers (4) and thence to the smallest of the supply channels, the floaters (7).

All the water was thus directed onto the highest lands which was contoured into beds. By the judicious use of the hatches (5) & (6), and the stops (8), the water flowed evenly at a depth of two or three inches over the high ground and down the slopes into the depressions known as drawings (9). During the course of its dispersal, the rate of flow of the water decreased, allowing the silt to settle around the roots of the grasses. The surplus water then drained via the drawings back into the main river.

This procedure, while simple in theory, was quite skilled in practice. The drowners had to know the levels of the land, the extent to which the hatches had to be raised or lowered dependant on the variable volume of water in the river and the correct positioning of the stops. These stops were merely turves which had been cut from high spots and placed into position across the floaters, their varying thicknesses doing the same work in the floaters as the hatches in the carriers. The drowning process was allowed to continue for approximately three weeks, adjustments being made as and when necessary. The main hatches were then raised and the river allowed to resume its normal course.

After the area was drained it was quite interesting and profitable, at times, to search the shallow floaters for eels and other fish which had been carried by the flood and stranded. These were the drowners 'perks'. Moles were also found, drowned when the water came up, or trapped. They were skinned, the skins being stretched on boards to dry, then packed and sent away for 'topgrade' - 3d, second grade - 2d.

When the land had become firm enough, the cattle were admitted and it was a picture to see the pleasure they showed in attacking a plentiful supply of lush grass. It was then early April and the Spring growth had started. Compared with the growth on ordinary pasture, the progress was almost phenomenal and to a dairy farmer this meant that the milk buckets were filled and the monthly cheques considerably increased. It was not all profit, of course, as the labour involved had been considerable. The cattle trod the carriers and floaters out of shape and hollows were made and humps raised, that, at the next time of preparation had to be rectified. When approaching the first of the preparations in February, the task looked daunting. The eight or nine feet wide main carrier had to be cleaned out to a depth of eighteen inches. The carriers were smaller and grew progressively more so as some of the water was dispersed, until by the time the floaters were reached, they were a spade width and about two or three inches deep. All these supply carriers were flat bottomed but the drawings were 'V' shaped. These, at their source were a few inches deep and wide but deepened and widened as they neared the river to accommodate the volume of water drawing away. Even after careful preparation it would sometimes take a week of adjustments to get the correct flow of water over every square inch of ground. If this were not accomplished, then much of the value of the operation would be lost. Even small hollows in the wrong places allowed water to escape from its correct course and the evenness of the flow was interrupted. This meant that a considerable area could be without the water and the minerals. The moles were also a considerable nuisance; it is surprising how much water can be diverted by the burrows made by these busy little creatures and so their burrows had to be effectively plugged.

When all was going well, the drowner in his rubber boots and spade tucked under his arm, needed to continually patrol his area - probably fifteen to twenty acres - to ensure that it remained so. At this time, when most of the back breaking work had been done, he experienced a feeling of satisfaction, knowing that his efforts had been worthwhile.

Owing to the exactness required to get maximum benefit of these preparations, all the work had to be carried out by hand. No machine has yet been invented which could pick up a turf, look around for a low spot and place it just where it was needed; perhaps where a cow had trod, a cart wheel had made a rut or a horse's hoof had gouged out a hollow. Unfortunately, because there were no machines capable of doing this, labour costs have soared and the modern worker would shy such work, these water meadows became a thing of the past, having been phased out around 1934- 38. It was a craft, and I use the term without apology, that has been lost for all time. Incidentally, the meadows supported only cattle as the wet conditions were unsuitable for sheep which are prone to associated diseases.

As most country lovers know, the water meadows, when utilised to their best advantage, when neglected and trodden out of all recognition and even when levelled off, supply endless interest and fascination.

In the meadows there are flowers too numerous to recall, but which include marsh marigold, buttercup, forget-me-not, milkmaid, orchid, meadow sweet, water aven, (known to the locals as Granny bonnets) and shivery, shaky grasses. By the deeper drawings and by the river edge there is comfrey, yellow iris, purple loosestrife and reeds and rushes of all descriptions. The reeds used to be harvested in order to thatch the hay and corn ricks thus enabling the straw from the grain crops to be used for cattle fodder, bedding and house thatching.

There was wildlife in abundance too - moorhens, coot, dab chicks, snipe, duck, the graceful heron and sometimes the majestic swan. Occasionally, one would glimpse an otter, water rat, water vole and more rarely, a snake slithering through the water. How blessed was the drowner to work in such surroundings.

As I said before, a drowner's lot was a hard and often a wet and cold one but nevertheless, a most rewarding one. I look back with nostalgia to the days when I worked with two of nature's gentlemen and we were all part of this scene.

R.G. Morris

Footnote: It may be of interest to know that the Playing fields on the Bishopstoke Road were once well kept and profitably run water meadows. I have assisted the Beedon family in their upkeep on a number of occasions.

Editor's Note: It may also be of interest to know that the Hampshire County Council is considering restoration of some areas of water meadows in the Itchen valley.



54.—THE RIVER ITCHEN AT THE MOUNT, BISHOPSTOKE.



55.—Stream, Bishopstoke, Ham.

