

THE HISTORY OF OLD ALRESFORD POND

A RE-ASSESSMENT

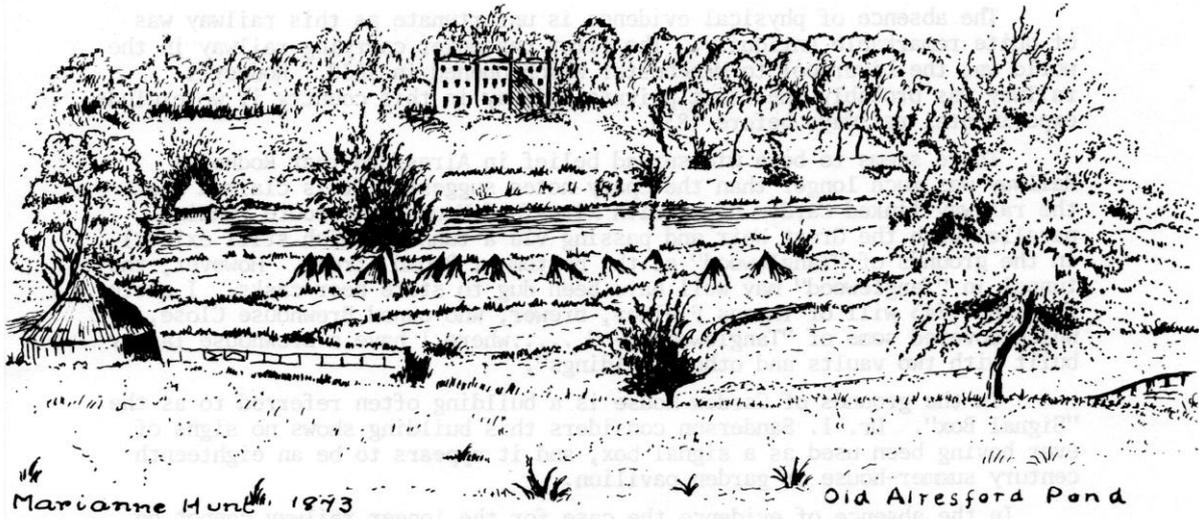
By

Edward Roberts

Anyone who is interested in the history of Alresford will be familiar with the story of Airesford Pond. It is said to have been constructed about the year 1199 on the orders of the Bishop of Winchester, Godfrey de Lucy, in order to create a head of water for a canal. This canal is supposed to have run from Alresford Pond to Winchester, Southampton and the sea. De Lucy is said to have finished it with locks and aqueducts so that barges laden with wool could travel downstream. It is a charming story and it is quite untrue.

How did the canal story originate? About the year 1275 some citizens of Winchester were indeed interested in constructing a canal from Winchester to Southampton, but not to Airesford. John de Pontoise, who was bishop at about this time, was not pleased with this plan. An improvement of the river Itchen was likely to reduce the profits of his valuable fisheries and water mills. In about 1280 a charter seems to have been "found" by the bishop which claimed that Godfrey de Lucy had already improved the Itchen between Winchester and Southampton and that King John had granted all the profits of this improvement to the bishops of Winchester. The production of this charter may well have discouraged the citizens of Winchester. At all events, a Winchester-Southampton canal was not constructed in the Middle Ages. This is the conclusion of Dr. D. Keene after considering the evidence as stated in his recently published Survey of Medieval Winchester.

Dr. Keene also argues that the bishop's charter was a forgery, something which had been suspected for many years. However, in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, the Citizens of Winchester again became interested in constructing a canal. In c.1640 John Trussell, the Mayor of Winchester wrote a book called *Origins of Cities* which he dedicated to the Marquis of Winchester. In this book Trussell asked for the Marquis's leadership in a new attempt to improve the Itchen. In support of his argument Trussell quoted the doubtful medieval charter, claiming quite falsely that it referred to the canalization of the Itchen as far upstream as Alresford. Trussell embroidered his story with the claim that Alresford Pond had been intended as a canal reservoir.



It is important to note that Trussell offered no evidence for the assertion that Alresford Pond was a medieval canal reservoir other than

the probably spurious medieval charter which did not even mention Alresford. It is hard to say why he apparently invented this story. However, the Marquis of Winchester held an estate at Itchen Stoke where there was a ford over the river and thus might have been more likely to support a canalization of the Itchen as far as Alresford. rather than one that stopped at Winchester.

In the event a Winchester-Southampton navigation was constructed in the late seventeenth century, but although there was some talk of an extension upstream to Alresford, nothing ever came of it. However Trussell's story lived on! His manuscript *Origin of Cities* circulated widely and was known to Robert Boyes when he wrote his history of Alresford in 1774. Boyes repeated Trussell's story and the story has gone on being repeated to the present day.

If Alresford Pond was not a canal reservoir, what was it? The answer is simple. It was one of the bishop of Winchester's great fishponds. Fresh fish was a highly prized luxury in the Middle Ages. Pike, perch and bream eaten fresh on fishdays and during Lent were delicacies enjoyed by only the very wealthy. Ordinary folk had to make do with dried fish. The bishops

of Winchester made great fishponds near their palaces. Fresham ponds supplied the bishop's castle at Farnham. Fisher's Pond supplied their residence at Mansell. Bishop's Waltham palace had a superb fishpond which was partly destroyed by an act of bureaucratic vandalism in the 1960's, while Alresford Pond supplied the palace at Bishop's Sutton. On great feast days the bishops would entertain the nobility and sometimes the King himself at Bishop's Sutton palace, which is now buried in the meadows near the cross beds and Bishop's Sutton Church. Then the order would come to fish Alresford Pond. The bishop's fisherman with his assistant would come to supervise operations and about 8 men would be hired at a penny a day to haul the seine net. This net, many yards in length, was used in catching fish within 6 feet of the surface of the water. One end was held at the pond side while the other was drawn from a boat in a wide arc across the pond. The fish were caught, as it were, in a bag which was pulled out by the 8 hired men. This process was repeated time and again for several days at a stretch.

Alresford Pond is first mentioned in a document dated 1208, but it is probable that it was constructed in the late .12th century. It seems to have remained an important fishery until the 18th century when, thanks to the agricultural revolution, fresh protein in the form of meat became more abundant in the winter months.

In recent years, the Pond has been allowed to silt up, but in the Middle Ages on at least one occasion it was drained and the silt was removed. One such operation took place between 1252 and 1254. Firstly, the sluices that controlled the water leaving the Pond were opened and the water from the Pond was allowed to drain away. The streams which fed the Pond were almost certainly directed around the outside of the Pond in by-pass channels. The precious fish stock was caught and put in small holding ponds, one of which was at Bishop's Sutton.

Then an army of about a hundred labourers with eighteen carts spent many weeks clearing away silt from the bed of the Pond. Finally, new cluices were made with wood from Medstead and the Weir was built up to the sluices and made firm. Then the Pond was allowed to fill and was restocked with 115 pike, 229 perch, 603 bream and 1072 roach.

This, and many other fascinating incidents in the history of Alresford Pond, may be found in the bishoprit of Winchester's pipe rolls which are kept at the Hampshire Record Office in Winchester. These pipe rolls survive from as early as 1208 and are of international importance. Year after year they mention the fishery at Alresford Pond. They describe the farming, the mills and many other details of daily life. No item is too trivial. The halfpenny spent on repairing a basket at the Town Mill in 1262 is faithfully recorded. Yet no mention is made of the canal banks, wharves, locks, or barges, nor of the wages of officials who would have supervised cargoes and collected tolls. Surely so large an enterprise would have been recorded, if it had ever existed.

In conclusion, it is a pity to spoil a good story, but the truth is just as interesting and ultimately more satisfying. If any reader would like a further account than can be given here, it may be found in my paper in the current volume of the Hampshire Field Club proceedings. Offprints may be purchased from me for a modest sum.

Copyright: Edward Roberts, Brandy Mount, Cheriton, Hants. March 1985.