

How Two Millenia of History Shaped the River Itchen

Intro: Welcome to Hampshire HistBites. Join us as we delve into the past and go on a journey to discover some of the county's best and occasionally unknown history. We'll be speaking to experts and enthusiasts, asking them to reveal some of our hidden heritage, as well as share with you a few fascinating untold stories.

Richard: Hello and welcome to today's episode of Hampshire HistBites. I'm Richard North, your podcast host, and I'm joined by Elizabeth Proudman, our expert on Winchester's historic waterways. Elizabeth has lived for many years in the historic centre of Winchester and is a former city tourist guide and lecturer. She holds a diploma in local history from the University of Winchester and published two articles on its historic waterways in the City of Winchester trust newsletter, *Trust News*, in 1994 and 95. Today, Elizabeth continues her heritage work as a trustee and indeed as a former chair of the Jane Austen Society.

So Elizabeth, thank you very much for joining us to record a podcast episode about the waterways of Winchester. I thought we might start by asking you a little bit about yourself and how you came to be interested in the waterways of Winchester.

Elizabeth: Well, I came to Winchester when I was first married as an adult and was absolutely overjoyed to find myself in a place that was so beautiful, but also so interesting. And I've been following clues around the past of Winchester ever since. I arrived at Winchester and immediately bought a history of Winchester and started reading it and then gradually took more and more interested in different parts.

Eventually I became a tourist guide and for many years I took groups of tourists around Winchester. And of course, that made me even more interested. I particularly like the river and I like the fact that Winchester is built in a river valley. I think it's part of its beauty, but of course it's a very important part of its history as well, because it's here because of the river and the shape and the form of the city is due to the river and the various uses that people throughout history have put the river to. I started getting especially interested when I bought a copy of Bucks' *East Prospect of Winchester*, which dates from 1736 and has a picture of the High Street with water flowing from, what looks like a lake really, from more or less the entire Broadway. And I wondered why? And then walking up Colebrook Street, I was particularly struck by the fact that the water outside St Lawrence's Rectory flows in the wrong direction. It flows away from the river, well, why? Little things like that made me think. And so I got more and more interested.

The story of the river Itchen is interesting in itself. It has three tributaries. The main one arises in the field just off the A272, just beside the turning to Cheriton. There's another branch of the river that rises in Alresford, the river Alre, and another branch which is the Candover Brook, which is a winterbourne, it only flows in the winter. And that rises up near Northington. And these three streams join together just south of Alresford and flow down towards Winchester. And then there's another little branch that rises near Headbourne, and then we have the Itchen complete. Of course, the Itchen itself, and I find it difficult to say this because I am an Itchen lady, is originally a tributary of the river Test. Which in itself was a tributary of the river Solent. So the story of the river is quite interesting. It's a chalk stream, which means that the water is always clean and always fresh. The rain falls on the chalk, it soaks into the chalk, and then many, many years later it comes up again in springs along the course of the river, which means that the river is always clean and fresh. And also, it is always the same temperature. It's 11 degrees centigrade, winter and summer, which means that it's particularly good for the wildlife and the flowers and so on.

So, the river flows down into Winchester where it enters a large flood plain. And the very first people who lived in this area, as you would probably be aware, probably lived on St Catherine's Hill but there are two other Iron Age, or Pre-Iron Age, fortifications in the Winchester area, and one is up on St. Giles's hill, which you might not be aware of, but the funny humps and bumps on St. Giles's hill date back to the Iron Age, if not before. And the other fortification which dates to prehistoric times is on Oram's Arbour. Not an awful lot is known about it, which stretches from the top of the Arbour, where there are still mounds that you can sit on, which are Iron Age mounds and came down along the High Street and then finished probably in the area of St. Peter Street. And this was a very important possibly marketplace in the time of the prehistoric people who lived here, who were called the Belgae. And when the Romans came to Winchester in 43AD, they found this flood plain, with these three Iron Age fortifications and they also found down at the bottom of St. Giles's hill where the city bridge is today, they found a ford. It was a gravel spur that stretches out from the bottom of St. Giles's Hill up into the present High Street, which was a place where it was possible to get across this marshy valley. And the Romans saw this. They used it and they followed the Iron Age trackway up to what we call Oram's Arbour. And they called the town Venta Belgarum, because the Iron Age fortification was a fortification of the tribe called the Belgae. So, this is where we get the name Venta Belgarum from.

Richard: Which is marketplace of the Belgae, is that right?

Elizabeth: It - possibly marketplace of the Belgae. Yes. So, the Romans came and they found this muddy valley, but it's a very pleasant place to live as we all know today. And so they set about draining the river. They built a stone bridge over the river where the - more or less where the City Bridge is today. And eventually they built a town in Winchester, which had a population of maybe 5,000 people. They built walls around the town, which we, most of the walls have gone today, but we still remember them. If you think of the name Eastgate Street, think of the name North Walls, you think of the name Southgate Street, and we still have, of course the Westgate. Westgate is not Roman, but it's on the site of the Roman west gate. So the city that the Romans created had an area of 143 acres, and they built a stone wall around it, which was three miles wide.

Now what they did to the water is very interesting because in order to live in the valley, they had to drain it. Now we don't know an awful lot about what they did, because a lot has happened in Winchester since, but we know that just south of Easton, they diverted the water into two streams and the one stream follows what we know as the river today down through the east of the Winnall Moors Nature Reserve. And this river course is actually manmade, it is believed. It was manmade by the Romans, and they created this trench in order to make the rest of the river valley habitable. Because naturally, left to itself, a chalk stream like the Itchen is what's called a multi braided stream. That means it goes off wherever it likes. And you get an idea of exactly the problem that our ancestors were up against when you think about Five Bridges Road, the road that runs from St. Cross out towards Twyford. Five Bridges. Well early man didn't build five bridges unless he absolutely had to, so it shows that the river wound around through the river valley.

Richard: This Roman diversion was really the start of a long history, wasn't it?

Elizabeth: This is the beginning of Winchester as a delightful place to live. I think that's a very good way to describe it actually.

Elizabeth: We don't know an awful lot about what the Romans did, but there are various suggestions of pipes and aqueducts and so on. And we've no idea where the Roman Baths were. There's a suggestion that the amphitheatre was in the chalk pit, just beside the old Chesil Railway Station. But a lot of Roman Winchester has been destroyed except the name, of course. They called it Venta Belgarum.

So the Romans left Winchester when they left England in the early fifth century. And we have a period, which is generally known as the Dark Ages, although more and more is coming to be known about the Dark Ages, more and more is known about it so be a bit careful about using that word, but that's what we used to call this period between the departure of the Romans and the arrival of the Anglo-Saxons. And the story of Winchester becomes more understandable with the arrival of King Alfred. But Alfred didn't become king until 871. And Winchester cathedral was built in this marshy plain in the middle of the six hundreds.

Richard: Yeah.

Elizabeth: So we say it was the Dark Ages - lots was going on. I think possibly what was going on in the river was they were going back to being a multi braided stream. Actually, I don't think they get organized again until Alfred comes along.

Richard: And Alfred did come along and do quite a lot, didn't he?

Elizabeth: Alfred, Alfred is an absolutely amazing man. The more you think about Alfred, and you hear about Alfred and his wife and his son and his grandson and so on, the more amazing these Anglo-Saxon Kings were.

Richard: Really?

Elizabeth: They were not only brilliantly clever, but they were also very healthy and lucky as well.

Richard: Well I know, when we've been talking and thinking about what we're going to talk about today, we've thought about the water and the many waterways providing amenities, and perhaps both having a role in health and wealth in the city. I know that you've done a bit of thinking as well about, what Alfred did outside of the city walls and a bit further north. Do you want to tell me a little bit about that and those diversions?

Elizabeth: Well, let's go back a bit because Alfred came to Winchester, well he became king in 871. He probably arrived at Winchester in about 870, 874 or something like that. And he created in Winchester, one of his burghs. So in order to, organize his country, if you like, he created a lot of these fortified towns.

Richard: Yes.

Elizabeth: And one of them, one of the important ones was Winchester. So there was one in Southampton. There was one in Wareham, there are lots of them all over the place, but Winchester was one of his most important, and it is believed that this is the reason that Alfred did so much work on the waterways of Winchester, in order to make the town a pleasant place to live. Because I think I'm right in saying that the Anglo-Saxons naturally were not town dwellers. The Romans had been town dwellers and the Anglo-Saxons prefer to live in the country, but Alfred had to have them living in town to defend his wars. And if you want people to come and live in town, you improve their amenities.

And what he did was he went back to this division of the river, up at Easton that the Romans had probably done. And he brought one stream in to Winchester, in to the river as it is today. And he brought other streams into the town, further up. Now the streams flow across the North Walls recreation ground.

There's one very wide stream, which is rather unimaginatively called the Broad Ditch. which in fact is a modern ditch, but the two that are closest, the one that runs along beside the Winnall Moors Nature Reserve, is called the Black Ditch.

Richard: Yes.

Elizabeth: And this is one of Alfred's diversions of the river. And parallel to that is another stream called the Swift's Lake, which is actually in the nature reserve. These come into the edge of the North Walls Recreation Ground, where some of them - they turn at a right angle, and they flow down towards St. Giles's Hill. Now at the bottom of St. Giles's Hill, there has always been from time immemorial built by, we say, built by King Alfred has been a great sluice gate called Swift's Lake Hatches. And from that point always the flow of the water has been controlled. Now I'm talking in 2021 and they've just built another sluice at this point - it's at the end of the Durngate Car Park. So go down to the Durngate Car Park and you can see where King Alfred controlled the water that was coming through Winchester. Some of it comes through the river. Some of it goes through the stream, which runs through the Friarsgate flats and under what was the Friarsgate Medical Center and across the High Street and then turns down the High Street and becomes the mill stream that runs across the Abbey gardens. And to follow this, I think you'll need to look at a map, and there will be a map that you can turn to at this point

Richard: There will. We'll put a good map to guide us through this walk, online on the show notes.

Elizabeth: Now the Black Ditch and the Swift's Lake not only flow to Swift's Lake Hatches, but they can, when those hatches are closed, they can flow across North Walls and into the area which is called the Brooks. And of course the Brooks are called the Brooks because King Alfred's Brooks ran along - one of them on Upper Brook street, one of them on Middle Brook street and one of them on Lower Brook Street.

Richard: And most of them are still there today on, even though we can't see them any more.

Elizabeth: They are still there today, although you can't see them any more. Of course you can see them around the medical centre and so on, the lower one, but you can't see the ones under the Brooks. But there is a really lovely painting, by Samuel Prout done in 1813 of Middle Brook street as it was, or as he liked to paint it, looking really beautiful with an open stream running down the middle of the road.

Richard: And I think potentially as well, if I remember rightly with people doing laundry or washing or performing some sort of, kind of day-to-day activity.

Elizabeth: And there's a really nice picture of a little boy fishing.

Richard: Yeah. Which tells us a bit about the uses of the Brooks and what they were employed for.

Elizabeth: Well, of course, I mean, in nowadays we just switch on the light and we don't know whether it's hydrogen or whether it's electricity or what it is, but in the time that I'm talking about, the power you had was making fire with wood, or it was the power of water. And a stream, like the river Itchen running through a city was very, very important and there were endless mills, through the city. The water was used for washing. It was used for transport. It was used for, particularly in Winchester, it was used for weaving and fulling and all the sort of cloth trades.

Richard: So in diverting the course of the river and creating these streams, Alfred was thinking, as we've said, about health, about access to clean water, washing amenities, but as you said also, it's also about wealth, it's about industry, it's about potentially about the cloth trade. I know people grew crops for - teasel, for example, for the wool trade and potentially also woad and other colorants for dyes.

Elizabeth: Yes, yes. So out at Fulflood there's evidence of a lot of that sort of activity. And later in the Victorian period, of course, when these streams became really rather unpleasant sewers, there was evidence of a lot of fulling, and dyeing, particularly dyeing and leather working and so on in the town.

Richard: So, if we move forward then, Alfred by the sound of it succeeded in employing these rivers to make Winchester an attractive place to live and of course, as we know, as we've seen the in the burgh's high days, it was a prosperous town. It could raise a lot of men, to, to defend the burgh. As we go on into the city, you get a bit of a sense, don't you, of how these rivers physically move on through their courses, but also how they were further manipulated over time. What sort of happened after Alfred?

Elizabeth: So King Alfred of course was a Christian. And very soon after his time, Winchester became a very important Christian site and was the site of three great minsters. The Old Minster, which is what has been replaced by the Cathedral today, The New Minster, which has disappeared, but became Hyde Abbey later, and the Abbey gardens, which were the site of the Nunnaminster, the nunnery in Winchester. And these streams that Alfred brought through the town were actually used as a very important amenity for the minsters.

So the reason that the stream in Colebrook Street flows in the wrong direction is that it was part of the stream that provided a water supply to the nunnery. And the reason that Colebrook Street is such a funny street with two exits and two entries is that that street ran round the periphery of the nunnery and was the site of these, the stream that ran round. And the stream that runs across the middle of the Abbey gardens provided a head of water for the nun's mill. So, that was a very important asset for them.

Richard: So again, side of industry, the mill directly powering the workings of the nunnery.

Elizabeth: Absolutely. But the other stream, the stream that comes off and goes through the Brook streets, actually doesn't go anywhere near the Abbey Gardens, well it goes quite close. It goes along from Lower Brook Street and then across the High Street. And when I was first interested in this story, you were able outside the Cross Keys Passage, you were able to look down into two little gratings, one on either side of the High Street, and you could see the water flowing through. I mean, it wasn't just a dribble. It was a proper stream of water flowing through, and that was very exciting.

Now, when they paved the High Street, these gratings were covered up. However, every here and then, the waterboard have to come and lift up these gratings and look in. So if you're ever in the High Street and you see waterboard men working around about Cross Keys Passage, go and have a look down into the hole they've dug and see if you can see Alfred's Brook, which has been there since 870 something or other still flowing under Winchester High Street. And it flows past, along Paternoster Row, past the east end of the cathedral. And then across the little passage that runs from Colebrook Street into the Close. And if you don't know that little passage, I do recommend that you go and try and find it from Colebrook Street past the east end of the cathedral into the Close. Because on that little passage, on the left-hand side, as you're walking towards the Close, there is a grating, and you can see the water running as it always has. Now in the middle of the grass, southeast of the cathedral, there's a great big concrete slab. And this covers hatches that controlled the flow of water past the cathedral and into the cathedral close.

Richard: There's an interesting story isn't there? Some rather beautiful, poetic language about how these conduits, as we might call them were created.

Elizabeth: The person who is credited with creating these water courses that run all the way around the cathedral close is a Bishop of Winchester called Saint Æthelwold. When he was Bishop here, after the time of King Alfred, at the time when the cathedral was being extended and modernized. Æthelwold was Bishop from 963 to 984. And he died, on the 1st of August. And you should really go to a service in Winchester cathedral on the 1st of August, because it's his Obit. And on this day, they pray for him and they pray for him as builder of the second minster, maker of conduits, lover of music.

Richard: Useful description.

Elizabeth: And I love that because it shows that in those days, the drainage was very, very important. You couldn't appreciate your music unless you had good drains first. And fortunately, there was a monk at the cathedral who wrote a lot about Æthelwold and we still have details of what he wrote. And Wolston, the Cantor wrote of Æthelwold:

He brought here sweet streams of fish for water and an overflow of the stream passes through the inner parts of the monastic building, cleansing the whole monastery with its murmur. He built all these dwelling places with strong walls. He covered them with roofs, and he clothed them with beauty.

I think that's lovely.

Richard: It's a wonderful description.

Elizabeth: So Æthelwold brought the Benedictine monks to Winchester, which is why he found the water supply so important because of course the Benedictine monks were based on the Roman ideas of cleanliness and order and washing and hygiene, and so on. It was very, very important to them.

One of the things that has been discovered again, comparatively recently, not, not quite so recently but in 1859, a clergyman in Winchester, his name was the Reverend Woodward. And he was a friend of the Dean and he asked the Dean, if he might go and investigate a rather unusual sort of mound in the Dean's garden. And he went and he dug there and he found that it was the remains of the monks necessarium. On the upper floor was their laboratorium, where they washed. And on the lower floor, it was their necessarium, where they did other things. And he discovered that they were actually - it was a very beautifully constructed building with Roman arches, and there were 15 arches on two rows. So 30 arches all together. And on top of each of these arches was an aperture. And the aperture was where the monks went. Now, the Benedictines worked order. They prayed to order, they studied to order, and one can only imagine since there were 40 holes, that after breakfast they all trotted off to the necessarium together as well. Anyway, this discovery of this necessarium, I've joked about it a bit, but it was very, very important because it made historians in the 19th century actually understand a lot about how the monastic buildings in Winchester work, whereas up until that nobody had really known.

And so the streams, the channels that are still there, Æthelwold's conduits, still run around the monastic buildings. They go across the Close, under number 10, I think it is, which was the cellars building, where he did all the cooking. And then it goes off into Dome Alley where they believe was the monastic infirmary. And then it comes back and it went across in front of the judges' lodgings, but by the 19th century, that had to be closed because it was not hygienic for them, judges to have these, what were by then Victorian drains.

Richard: Drains, which of course didn't flow very well because of the way that the river had been diverted.

Elizabeth: It didn't flow anything like fast enough.

Richard: But there is still a stream, which until relatively recently was open, but it's now we think being closed over that runs across in front of the Pilgrim School, isn't there?

Elizabeth: Yes. Yes. And that stream ran in front of the Pilgrim School playground. It's now a little single story, practice room, I think for musicians. About 30 years ago that was an open stream called Logie and the little boys waiting to be fetched by their parents used to throw things into the stream. Very sad, very sad when it was closed off.

Richard: I could imagine. And yet it flows on doesn't it, that stream, and eventually it becomes the Lockburn, which some people would have heard of.

Elizabeth: Lockburn, I believe is an Anglo-Saxon word that means dirty stream.

Richard: Which is interesting, isn't it? That takes us back to health, and it's about that cleansing function of the water brought into the city.

Elizabeth: The purpose of the stream originally, it was for health. To keep the place clean.

Richard: It's interesting. You can see having traced through places where day-to-day we come into contact with the river and may not be aware that these diversions and all of this history of the health and the wealth has been manipulated and made Winchester what it is today. You can trace that journey and see how water has very much been at the centre of Winchester's growth and success over time.

Elizabeth: And I think you can say quite categorically that if it wasn't for the river Itchen, Winchester wouldn't be here.

Richard: And of course, then. We can see little bits of the river, as we've said. So we walked through the River Park and we see the diversions, some of the Romans, some of them later Alfred. At Durngate we have modern flood defences constructed in the last couple of years, exactly where we think the Romans and then the Saxons also built their flood defences to capture and manage the flow of water into the city.

Elizabeth: I think one of the things we're learning is that people in days gone by were actually as intelligent as us, they realized what they had to do to control the water coming through the city. They didn't want the city in flooding any more than we do.

Richard: Very much so. Exactly. And eventually of course, it does go on and it's still at the heart of our city. Some of these culverts are now hidden, some may be uncovered in the medium term, who knows? We'll wait and see what happens there. And eventually of course, things flow on don't they? So we talked about the Pilgrim school. You can get on outwards and there's a whole 'nother story, that one day we might get into of Winchester College's foundation and the links of William Wykeham, even some disputes of what might've happened around the river and, and different use of the river.

I know it as well there are a couple of quite fun stories that we might just want to dwell on. So we talked about the monks and the necessarium, and I know that if we go back into the centre, that there's a bit more of, of colour that you might like to bring out, why don't we go onto that?

Elizabeth: Yes. Well, of course. We worry about a litter and so on today, but I think the problems we have today are not quite what they used to be. There's an absolutely marvellous and there's a very interesting book by a man called Tom Atkinson about Elizabethan Winchester and he talks about all the laws that were passed to prevent people leaving litter in the street. But whereas we complain about a crisp packet, he's talking about edicts or ordinances of what you had to do to the Brook.

You had to clean the Brook outside your house. You had to scour it. The first week in May you had to scrub it all, and if you didn't, you were fined. But a rather sad addition to what all these Elizabethan ordinances say is that these, these fines were issued to practically every citizen of Winchester over and over again and it was just considered like a tax on having your streets cleaned.

So you can imagine that these streams, as they flowed across the High Street, as the population of Winchester grew, as people did continue to throw in, but the dyers, for example, lots of dyers in Winchester. They had a very nasty stuff called woad [inaudible] and they threw it into the river. And butchers, they had very nasty entrails and things they threw it into the river. And glovers cut little bits of, you know how disgusting the smell of leather is being tanned. Everybody threw everything into the rivers and all sorts of edicts, again, were passed. You were only allowed to throw in your, your slimy woad [inaudible] at the Abbey bridge. Can you imagine how disgusting it was and you had to do it at night time, couldn't do it in the daytime, it had to be done between sunset and sunrise. But of course, lots and lots and lots of very disgusting stuff floated down through the town, through the Brooks area, which wasn't too bad really, you were upstream, but by the time it came to the cathedral close, it was exceedingly revolting indeed.

And there's a rather nice story about how the development of one of our great public schools was much affected by these very, very horrid streams. Because when William of Wykeham became Bishop in 1344. When he wanted to found his lovely public school, he decided that the nice place to have it would be just outside the city walls, just very close to his palace at Wolvesy. There's a big field called Dummers Mead. And he decided that he was going to build his school on Dummers Mead. However, there was a bit of a problem because the monks at the cathedral priory, they used Dummers Mead as their recreation ground and they didn't want a nasty school built there, so they made a great fuss, but they made a fuss particularly because if you walk along College Street, just before you get to the entrance to Winchester College on the left, there's a grating in the pavement. And if you look down in that grating, you can see the stream flowing across. Well, at this point, our stream is called the Lockburn, but of course, Winchester College have to be different, so they call the same stream Logie. And at this point it changes its name.

William of Wykeham insisted that the monks in the cathedral put a grating on the stream, when it comes out through the city walls. Now you can see this grating to this day, if you look down and you can see very often it's not flowing, but sometimes it's flowing. And William of Wykeham insisted that a grating should be put on this stream and that the monks should employ somebody to remove all the filthy, awful and revolting stuff that got stuck on it.

Now, I don't think the monks particularly objected to losing their field. They didn't object to providing somebody to clean this grating, but they did object very strongly to paying his wages. And the dispute actually went to the High Court and William of Wykeham had been Bishop for something like 50 years before his college was founded. And it wasn't until the college was founded that he was able to go back to the work on the cathedral and change what was left of the Romanesque cathedral into the wonderful Gothic building that his predecessor Edington had started. So I think we should be very,

very grateful, indeed. I personally love the Romanesque part of the cathedral that survives and had it not been for this grating on College Street, we might have lost the Romanesque transepts and the tower as well. So I think we should be very grateful to this grating.

Richard: Really interesting. Well, thank you so much in particular for giving us a bit of a sense of where we might find some of the hidden waterways still tucked away, covered over or down drains that we can look at when we walk around the streets today.

Elizabeth: And I would suggest that wherever you are in Winchester, and you hear a little trickling water, just think about where it's come from, and where it's going, and why. Because I'm sure it's got some sort of history

Richard: It's the trickle of history under our streets. Keep an ear to the ground as we might say. Well, Elizabeth, thank you so much for sharing your experience and talking to us about this today. Really interesting. And I know you've left me with a couple of extra new ideas about where I might go put my ear to the ground and hear a trickle. So thank you very much.

Outro: We hope you enjoyed listening to today's episode. If you would like to find out a little bit more about what we've been talking about, then please visit the website, www.winchesterheritageopendays.org, click on Hampshire HistBites, and there you'll find today's show notes as well as some links to more information.
Thank you.