

John's Pond and the Watermeadows

The River Frome divides into several streams in this area. This section is the Mill Stream, which powered Friary Mill. There were also mills to the west (West Mill) and the east (Louds Mill).

All down the Frome valley there were water-meadows. This system of water channels, weirs and 'hatches' (small gates) to regulate the water levels was developed by Dutch engineers in the 17th century. They discovered that a small amount of water flowing across the soil kept the ground temperature up and meant that the grass could grow all year round, rather than stopping growing in the winter.

Water was diverted back into the river again when the meadow was needed for sheep or cattle to graze. In Dorset farmers kept sheep on the water-meadows between late February and late March. Then they flooded the fields again to encourage the hay crop. After the hay was cut cattle were brought in.

The water-meadows are no longer maintained, but you can see signs of the channels and some of the hatches are still used to regulate water levels in different stretches of the river.

John's Pond is part of the system for regulating water in the Mill Stream and may also have been used as a sheep dip.

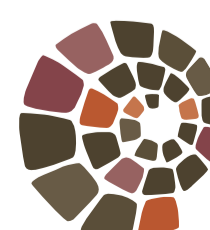
Lots of animals make their homes by the river.

How many types of bird can you see or hear here?

The Dorchester Dormouse trail



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Read *More History on your Doorstep* by Terry Hearing.

Discover signs of old water meadows up and down the Frome Valley.

Interactive Dorchester



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Aerial photograph of the area north of Dorchester.

The channels of the former water-meadows can be seen. They covered an extensive area down the valley of the River Frome.



The water-meadows at Coker's Frome, late nineteenth century. Watercolour by H.J. Moule.



Michael Henchard, Thomas Hardy's Mayor of Casterbridge, looking over Grey's Bridge. Towards the end of the book he leans over the weir at Ten Hatches:

"To the east of Casterbridge lay moors and meadows through which much water flowed. The spot at which the water's instrumentation grew loudest was a place called Ten Hatches, whence during high springs there proceeded a very fugue of sounds.

"The river here was deep and strong at all times, and the hatches on this account were raised and lowered by cogs and a winch. A path led from the second bridge to these Hatches, crossing the stream at their head by a narrow plank bridge. But after night-fall human beings were seldom found going that way, the path leading only to a deep reach of the stream called Blackwater, and the passage being dangerous.

"In a second or two Henchard stood beside the weir-hole where the water was at its deepest. He looked backwards and forwards, and no creature appeared in view. He then took off his coat and hat, and stood on the brink of the stream...."

A working water-meadow near Salisbury.

