

DSWA Dorset News

May 2021

‘May brings flocks of pretty lambs, skipping by their fleecy dams’. Most of the poor little critters I’m seeing this month spend much of their days sheltering from the rain (photo Joan Gray). Even



a dry stone wall affords some protection from the icy downpours that have churned up the mud at Renscombe and seen us once again wearing our wellingtons. Indeed, it’s been so breezy that we’ve tasted the salt blown across the fields from Chapman’s Pool. Through it all the skylarks continue to lift our spirits with their unmistakable joyous song.

Once again, thanks to my friends in Cumbria who sent this photograph of Sunenkirk Stone Circle near Swinside in the Lake District.



This stone circle of Neolithic/Bronze Age date, measures approximately 28.7m in diameter with at least 55 stones closely set in a near perfect circle. It is sited on level ground on a wide east-

facing slope overlooking Black Beck. The stones vary in height from 1.5m to nearly 3m with approximately half of the stones standing with the rest recumbent. On the south-east side is an entrance, marked by a pair of portal stones outside the circle. The circle entrance appears to align with the midwinter sunrise, suggesting that it had a ceremonial function tied to astronomical observances.



The site has never been properly excavated, but a brief archaeological survey in 1901 revealed that the stones are bedded in a layer of packed pebbles and that the ground had been levelled before the stones were erected. The stones used in the construction of Sunenkirik are porphyritic slate collected from the adjacent fells and are of the type known locally by the 20th century as 'grey cobbles'.

If you like stone circles and other stone monuments as much as me please do send your photos and I'll include them in a future newsletter.

Langton Herring, 1-2 May



Back to this lovely, peaceful site surrounded by farmland. Piles of stone wait to be sifted and sorted by eager wallers hoping to lay all the foundations and raise a couple of courses.

I was interested to learn from Sally that Langton Herring is one of only thirteen 'Doubly Thankful' villages in England and Wales, and the only one in Dorset. These are communities in which all those who served in the armed forces during World Wars One and Two returned. As such, they have no

war memorials. Langton Herring, about five miles north-west of Weymouth, is set on a ridge above the Fleet. In the spring of 1943, it was on this lagoon lying behind Chesil Beach, that Barnes Wallis conducted the prototype tests of his famous 'bouncing bomb'.



Phyllis and Wendy clear the last of the old foundation stones while Geoff lays the first footings of his section of wall. Strings are up, ready to go!



Perhaps not as socially distanced as they should be but Mary and Merrie decide this foundation stone is a two-person roll.

By the end of the weekend the wall is beginning to take shape. Tucked away behind Sally's wall, Merrie discovered the lovely chunky stone that I promptly put on to the cheek end. When Sally arrived after a day's sailing, she informed us that she'd set aside this stone for something else. Whoops! Sorry Sally.

It remains to be seen whether the stone is still in situ when we arrive at Langton Herring this weekend (it wasn't!)



Renscombe 15-16 May



The wall at Renscombe has two sections – the corner – here being worked by Tim, Merrie, and Mary ... and the cheek end where Peter and David are just finishing the final course.



David and I at the cheek end with the first of the coping stones. This magnificent stone was discovered by Peter and definitely not lifted by me!



Coping the wall ... and voilà ... after six months of lockdowns and other Covid faffs, this section of wall rises again.

I was meant to be out the following day but as I was leaving the car park, Peter noticed that



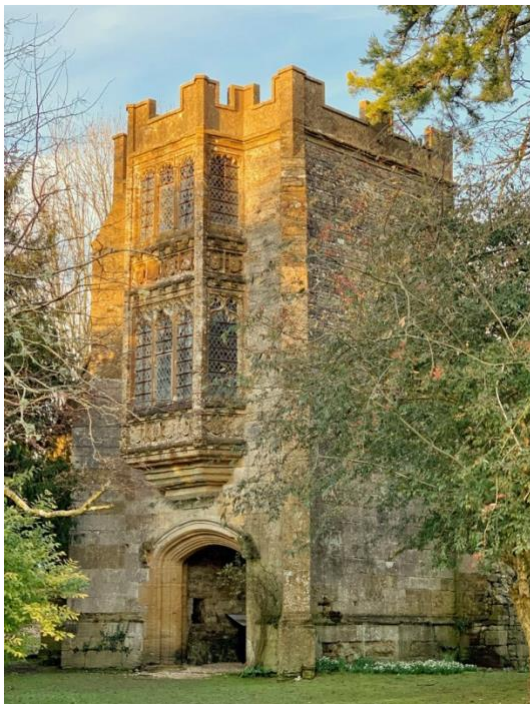
one of my rear tyres was flat. Fortunately, I always carry a digital tire inflator so was able to limp home but had to wait until Monday to have a new tyre fitted. I remembered driving over what I thought was a large stone adjacent to one of the Purbeck quarries but it may have been something a lot sharper.

By the end of the weekend, the corner section of the wall looks to be almost up to coping level. Another day should do it.

‘The City of Swans by the Sea’: A History of Abbotsbury Swannery

Last month I featured a very pretty wall at Abbotsbury rebuilt by Dorset professional Shaun Seaman. The 'stepped' nature of this boundary shows that it cut across a previous field-system, probably created in the late 8th/9th century. That got me thinking about the history of Abbotsbury and in particular its famous Swannery. Did the testing of Barnes Wallis’s ‘bouncing bomb’ on the Fleet disturb the peace of its regal residents?

Abbotsbury Swannery bird sanctuary is the only well-established colony of Mute Swans (*Cygnus olor*) in the British Isles.



The monastery at Abbotsbury was founded in about 1044 (some accounts give the date as 1026) by Orc and his wife Tola, within the estates given to them by Cnut, the Viking prince who became king of England in 1016 but who kept Wessex under his direct control. Orc and Tola, both seemingly of equal nobility, filled their monastery with Benedictine monks from ‘Cermill Abby’ (Cerne Abbas, the photo shows the Abbot’s Porch), which had earlier been plundered by Cnut. By the end of

the Anglo-Saxon period, Abbotsbury's considerable monastic estates, as recorded in Domesday Book (1086), extended to Portesham, North Poorton, Netherbury, Hilton, Waddon, Whitchurch Canonicorum, and Tolpuddle – named after Tola who purchased the land there.



Adjacent to Abbotsbury is the twelve km stretch of water behind Chesil Bank, known as the Fleet. The Fleet opens to the sea at its eastern end, but towards the western sheltered end, the water in which the swans live is almost fresh.

Abundant stocks of food, especially eelgrass (*Zostera spp*) and tasselweed (*Ruppia spp*) have made this an attractive haven for swan colonies through the centuries.



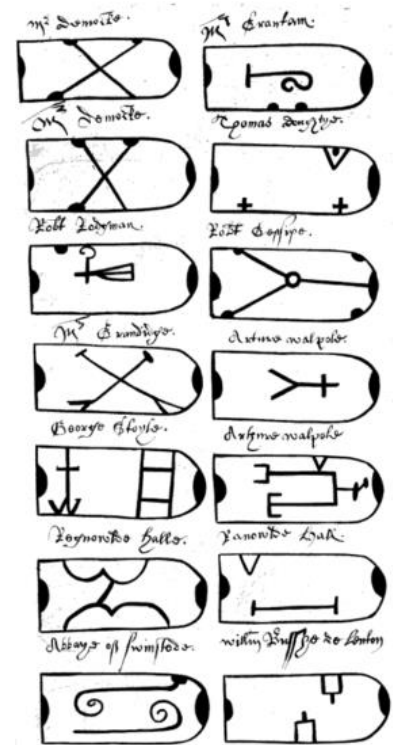
Today, Abottsbury Swannery is owned by the Ilchester Estate, which dates the earliest recorded statement about its management to 1393. In that year, the court rolls of the Manor of Abbotsbury noted that 'William Squilor', keeper of the swans, 'stirred up the water under the bridge' with 'les hacches' (in this context, some form of sluice gate), causing 'le Flete' to overflow and destroy both nests and eggs. Clearly, Squilor's swan-keeping techniques left something to be desired although it does suggest that, from the earliest times, flood management was a serious concern. In November 1824, gales drove the sea from West Bay along Chesil Beach where it overflowed into the Fleet, flooding it to a height of twenty-four feet above its normal level. A large number of swans were killed, and the eelgrass on which they depended for food, was washed away.

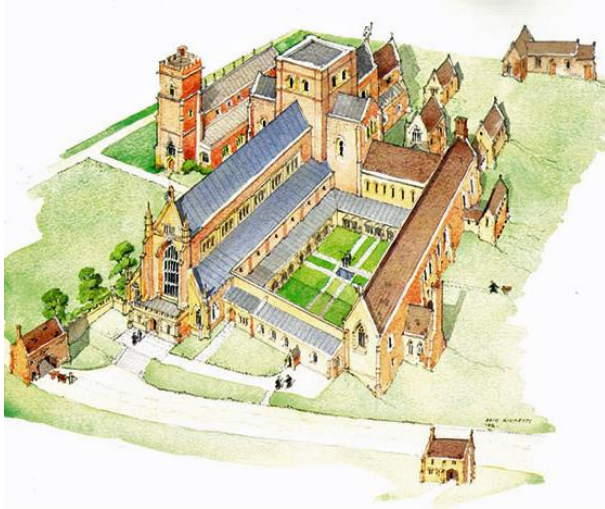


Historically, swans have been highly valued as food as depicted in this early 17th century kitchen scene by the Flemish artist, Adriaen van Nieulandt (1587-1658), and at one time, all Mute Swans in Britain were the property of the Crown. Over the centuries, gifts of ‘Swan Royalty’ to various important families and institutions led to elaborate and complex systems of ownership including distinctive bill-marks. Henry Scherren, writing in 1901, indicates how this worked at Abbotsbury.

The incumbent monarch granted the abbot ‘a game of swans’, which conferred on him the right to keep these royal birds and to seize, within a district assigned to him, all ‘white swans’ (adult birds) that did not have the bill-mark registered by the royal swanherd. The image right shows various private swan marks, usually cut or branded onto the beak. The new owner was free to uniquely mark his birds although at Abbotsbury, in 1901, the mark was a slit on the web of each foot. In Elizabeth I’s reign, nearly all Mute Swans in England were owned and pinioned to prevent them flying away.

Historian Emily Cleaver, writing in the Smithsonian Magazine, says that swans were luxury goods in Europe from at least the 12th century onward; the Medieval equivalent of flashing a Rolex or driving a Lamborghini. Owning swans signalled nobility, along with flying a hawk, running hounds or riding a battle-trained destrier. Swans were eaten as a special dish at feasts, served as a centre-piece in their skin and feathers with a lump of blazing incense in the beak. They were particularly associated with Christmas, when they would be served in large numbers at royal feasts; forty swans were ordered for Henry III’s Christmas celebrations in 1247 at Winchester.





Little is known of the number of swans at Abbotsbury Abbey (left) from the 1300s to the sixteenth century although several popular sources give numbers as high as seven or eight thousand.



However, it is difficult to imagine how stocks of natural food could support those numbers. A more realistic count was made in 1591, when a dispute arose between the Crown and the Strangways family, which had leased the Abbotsbury estate from Henry VIII following the dissolution of the monastery. There was a total of 500 swans, of which 90 were cygnets, and every pair of swans and cygnets was valued at two shillings and sixpence, a sum of money that could keep a housemaid employed for six weeks!



The highest number of breeding pairs ever recorded at Abbotsbury was 130 in 1885. At that time the Ilchester Estate (Stephen Fox-Strangways was created first Earl of Ilchester in 1756) was still rearing cygnets for the table as well as providing pairs to grace ornamental waters.

This still happens as I know from a friend who purchased a pair of swans as an anniversary gift for her parents.

A hundred or so swans were presented to Weymouth Corporation, which housed them on Radipole Lake (right) where their descendants remain today on this RSPB nature reserve. A court case in 1889 (Ilchester v Rashleigh and others) tested the right of local fishermen and other members of the community to have access to the Fleet and Chesil Beach. The court found in



favour of Ilchester by maintaining that whilst the right to fish and navigate in open water was paramount, this did not extend to places like Chesil Beach, which was only occasionally covered by water. Thus, the swannery was saved from human predators.



Following a disastrous breeding season in 1969 when there were only 19 breeding pairs, the management of the swannery changed, with more food being provided for the cygnets, increasing their chances of surviving the winter. Extreme weather conditions impact on breeding numbers and survival rates although by 1980 there were 100 breeding pairs.

Nevertheless, in that year, a predator – thought to be a mink –

took fourteen cygnets from the pens. In the past, pinioned cygnets and swans were undoubtedly easy prey for some persistent predators including foxes, badgers and other mustelids, and even wolves. The Abbot of Abbotsbury, in 1272, claimed to have ‘free chace for wolves throughout all his land’.

Even under the most advantageous conditions, few swans live beyond fourteen years of age, but one bird, ringed at Weymouth in 1961 as an adult, was still alive twenty years later. I’ve been told that swan tastes ‘a little fishy’ but for those of you who fancy a change from your Christmas turkey, here is a recipe from a 14th century English culinary manuscript.

Roasted Swan with Chaudon:

For to prepare a swan. Take & undo him & wash him & do on a spit & lard him fair & roast him well; & dismember him on the best manner & make a fair carving, & the sauce thereto shall be made in this manner, & it is called Chaudon.

Chaudon. Take the issue (giblets) of the swan & wash it well, & scour the guts well with salt, & boil the issue all together til it be enough, & then take it up and wash it well & hew it small; & take bread & powder of ginger & of galingale (*Cyperus longus*) & grind together & temper it with the broth, & colour it with the blood. And when it is boiled & ground & strained, salt it, & boil it well together in a small pot & season it with a little vinegar. Bon appetit!



Tales from the Hairy Waller

Here's an interesting and informative guide to various aspects of dry stone walling from master craftsman, Norman Haddow, still walling in Scotland into his eighties. I really like the photo of Norman on the front page of his booklet. Initially, I thought it was an image of a 19th or early 20th century waller. You might agree when you see it!

https://disogniedipietre.weebly.com/uploads/2/4/6/0/24601259/illustrated_guide_current_new_book.pdf

Well, fellow wallers, I hope you enjoy reading May's newsletter and thanks to all contributors. Just a reminder that we are now able to run weekend courses. The first one on 3-4 July at Spyway, Langton Matravers is now full but the dates of further courses will be 7-8 August and 25-26 September. If you know anyone who would enjoy learning our craft, please direct them to the relevant page on our website: <https://dorsetdswa.org.uk/events/>

You can book online for any of the courses at: <https://dorsetdswa.org.uk/courses/online-course-booking/>

I look forward to seeing you on a wall very soon.

Carole Reeves