

ALRESFORD POND, A MEDIEVAL CANAL RESERVOIR: A TRADITION ASSESSED

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ABSTRACT

Alresford Pond was an important fishery in the Middle Ages. Although it provided water power for mills, it is not clear how significant this function was. The Great Weir which dammed the Pond also served as a causeway for the former Southampton-London road where it crossed marshy land. The tradition of a medieval Alresford-Winchester canal with Alresford Pond as its reservoir appears to have been begun by John Trussell in the seventeenth century and perpetuated by subsequent local historians. The lack of evidence for a medieval canal between Winchester and Southampton is discussed more fully elsewhere (Keene 1985, 57-59).

INTRODUCTION

Alresford Pond is a shallow expanse of water covering some thirty acres. It has been formed by damming two streams with an embankment called the Great Weir. This embankment, which is about twenty feet high and over 400 yards long, has at its southern end sluice-gates known locally as 'the Shettles' (Sanderson 1975, 38). The infant River Alre issues from Alresford Pond, flowing through the Shettles and under the medieval stone bridge at the end of Broad Street, New Alresford. From here, it passes the Town Mill and Weir Mill before turning sharply westward to the ancient fulling mill. About a mile beyond this point, the Alre is joined by two tributaries. It then becomes the River Itchen and flows on to Winchester and Southampton (Fig 1).

It has for many years been believed that Godfrey de Lucy, the Bishop of Winchester who founded New Alresford around the year 1199 (Luard 1865, ii 252) also ordered the construction of a canal from New Alresford to Winchester and thence to Southampton. It is claimed that the canal ran along the course of the rivers Alre and Itchen and that Alresford

Pond was formed to create a head of water to serve these navigable rivers.

Most local histories accept this tradition and one claims that de Lucy furnished his new canal 'with sluices, locks and aqueducts in proper places' (Robertson 1937, 15). Among regional and national histories, Beresford, calling New Alresford by its early name of 'New Market', paints a charming picture for us. 'From the canal wharves and through the New Market came the carts and horses that had collected the goods from the barges, and through the Market came the traffic from the hinterland that was going to the canal, and thence to Winchester and Southampton and the sea' (Beresford 1967, 110). Hinton, in his book on Alfred's Wessex, writes of the River Itchen, 'one bishop attempted to improve its navigation at the beginning of the thirteenth century, and intended his new town upstream of Winchester at Alresford to act as an entrepôt where goods for London would be unloaded to go the rest of the way by land', but he concedes that there is '... nothing to suggest that this was effective ...' (Hinton 1977, 183).

A FISHERY, A MILL POND AND A CAUSEWAY

If there ever were an Alresford-Winchester canal, we would expect to find some reference to it in documents written shortly after its supposed construction by Godfrey de Lucy around the year 1200. An examination of the very lengthy entries for both Old Alresford and Alresford Borough (New Alresford) in all the surviving bishopric pipe rolls before 1300 produces no mention whatsoever of a canal. These minutely detailed accounts of the bishop's income and expenditure, which even

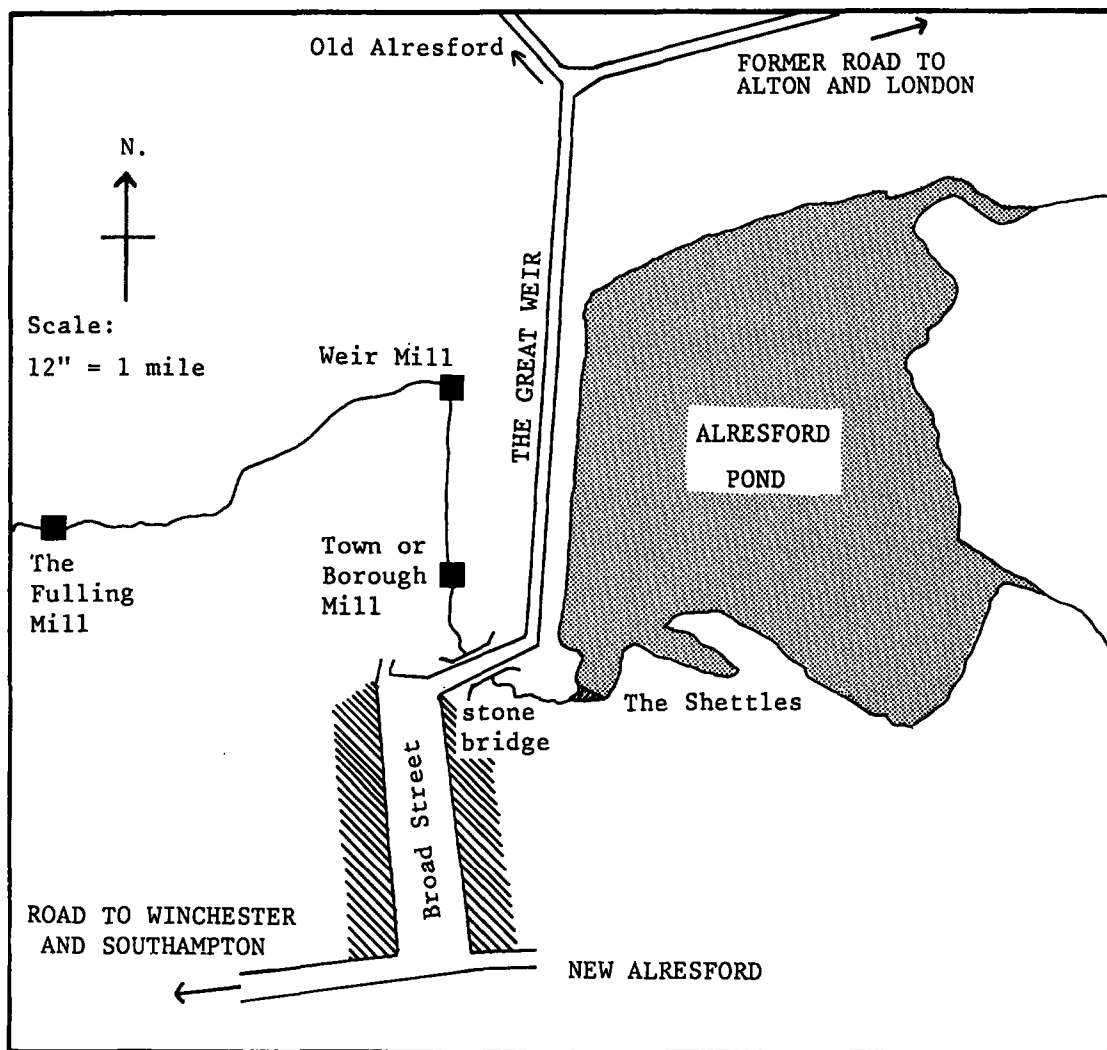


Fig 1. Alresford Pond and its environs.

record one halfpenny spent on mending a basket for carrying corn at a mill in Alresford (HRO, Eccl 159294), make no reference to expenditure on the repair of canal banks, wharves, locks or barges, nor to the wages of those officials who would have supervised the incoming and outgoing cargoes, nor to the collection of canal tolls. Nor is there the slightest hint of the existence of a canal from

the lengthy and detailed rental and customal of Alresford which dates from the mid-thirteenth century (BL, Eg 2418, 42-46).

Where the pipe rolls specify the means of transport by which heavy goods were carried between Alresford, Winchester and Southampton, they make it clear that horse-drawn carts and not canal barges were used. In the year 1248, the pipe roll records that 24s 4d

was paid for hiring eighteen carts to carry stakes from Alresford to the mill at Bitterne near Southampton (HRO, Eccl 159290). In 1270, a millstone was carted from Southampton to Alresford (HRO, Eccl 159299) and in 1276 casks of wine were carried by cart from Southampton to Bishop's Sutton, which is about two miles from Alresford (HRO, Eccl 159303). During the same period salt, wine and grain were being carried by waggon between the bishops' manors at Farnham and Bitterne. The only practicable route for these goods would have been the road from Farnham through Alresford and on to Southampton. A thorough examination of the bishopric pipe roll entries for Farnham has revealed no reference to goods from Farnham being loaded onto barges at Alresford to complete the journey to Winchester and Southampton by canal (Robo 1935, 114 and 130; HRO Thesis, Brooks, PD *The Bishop's Tenants*, 1983; and Mr P D Brooks pers com). For example, in 1246 five carts were hired to carry oats from Farnham to the bishop's palace at Wolvesey in Winchester. It would have been necessary for these carts to pass through Alresford, yet no mention is made of the oats being loaded onto barges there (HRO, Eccl 159289).

Turning to the fourteenth century, we find that in 1381 three men and eight horses were sent from Alresford to Southampton to fetch a millstone (HRO, Eccl 159388) and in the fifteenth century there are references to the carting of iron, salt, hides, oil and other goods from Southampton to Alresford (Coleman 1960-1, i 45 and ii 208, 226, 293, 309). For example, in 1439-40, William Smith carried a load of iron from Southampton to Alresford in his own cart (Bunyard 1941, i 45). If there were a medieval canal it is hard to understand why anyone should resort to carting heavy loads between Alresford and Southampton by road. This is especially true of the bishop, whose goods would have been carried free of tolls on his own canal.

In fact, numerous thirteenth century bishopric pipe rolls make it quite clear that, so far as the bishop and his officials were concerned,

Alresford Pond was a *magnum vivarium*, a great fish pond. Sometimes the names '*magnum vivarium*' and 'Alresford Pond' *stagnum de Alresford* were employed interchangeably (HRO, Eccl 159291A and B). It was still called 'the bishop's great fish pond at Alresford' in 1491 (Greatrex 1978, 503) and again in a survey of 1552 (HRO, Eccl 136/1, 126b). While remaining totally silent on the subject of a canal, the bishopric pipe rolls of the thirteenth century record the management of the fishery of Alresford Pond in fascinating detail. Year after year we are told of the hiring of fishermen, the methods of fishing and the despatching of the catch to the bishops' residences.

The pipe roll entries which argue most tellingly against the canal tradition occur in 1252-54. In the winter of 1252-53, Alresford Pond was deliberately broken and the water was allowed to drain away. Elaborate precautions were taken to preserve the precious fish stock. Little eels were sold, but larger ones were salted down. Other fish were taken live to the stewpond at nearby Bishop's Sutton. The bed of the Pond was left dry for the whole of the summer of 1253. Draining fishponds and allowing them to remain dry for a season has long been recognized as an effective way to increase their fertility (Hickling 1971, 26). In the autumn of 1253, as many as 122 labourers with their overseers and up to 24 carts were occupied in clearing the silt which had accumulated in the Pond during the preceding years. Nine sluices were replaced and the Great Weir was repaired. The whole operation does not seem to have been completed until the winter of 1253-54. Finally the Pond was allowed to refill and it was re-stocked with 1072 roach, 603 bream, 229 perch and 115 pike (HRO, Eccl 159291A, 159291B, 159296 and 159292). Had Alresford Pond been a canal reservoir, its draining would have had a disastrous effect upon canal traffic. Yet, once more, the pipe rolls are entirely silent on the subject of a canal, while offering abundant information on the management of the fishery at Alresford Pond.

The conclusion that such a large weir and

pond should be constructed for a fishery may seem somewhat surprising today, but in the Middle Ages 'fish was consumed in great quantity, not only during Lent, but also on Wednesdays, Fridays and Saturdays, which were usually fish days all the year round' (Burnett 1969, 30). Furthermore, freshwater fish – especially pike – was a prestigious and costly food (Labarge 1965, 80–1) and fish from Alresford Pond went to supply a royal banquet when the king visited Winchester at Whitsun in 1236 (HRO, Eccl 159284). Moreover, neither the Pond nor the Great Weir were uniquely large. A vivarium at Byland Abbey in Yorkshire had a dam which was slightly larger than the Great Weir at Alresford (McDonnell 1981, 26) and larger fish ponds than Alresford Pond were not uncommon in the Middle Ages. Indeed, the bishop of Winchester had several large fish ponds scattered among his estates. Frensham Ponds, which today cover over 100 acres, were important fisheries from which fish was sent to the bishop's palaces at Southwark and Farnham (Robo 1935, 113). On the bishop's estate at Taunton, the vivarium extended to at least seventy acres and great quantities of pike, bream and eels were despatched to magnificent feasts, some attended by the king (Somerset County Gazette 24.2. 1982).

It is a fair supposition that Alresford Pond was also a source of water power for the mills of Alresford (Schadla-Hall 1977, 44). In the thirteenth century, the Town Mill had its own sluice-gate at an outlet of the Pond called the sluice of the Borough Mill, *exclusa molendini de Burgo* (HRO, Eccl 159287). The cost of repairing this sluice gate is sometimes entered in the pipe rolls under the heading of 'expenses of the Town Mill' (HRO, Eccl 159300). This was most probably the sluice which was later called 'the Shettles' and which is still behind The Globe Inn in Alresford today (Sanderson 1975, 38). Within living memory, the miller at the Town Mill had the right to operate the Shettles to build up a head of water for his day's milling (pers com Mr T Childs, the last miller at the Town Mill, Alresford).

Although there were at least two other corn

mills, called Weir Mill and New Mill, and a fulling mill in Alresford in the thirteenth century, the pipe rolls do not make clear whether these mills were dependent on Alresford Pond for water power. Indeed, the roll of 1210–11 suggests that when a fulling mill was made in Alresford, its own mill pond *stagnum* was constructed at the same time (Holt 1964, 186). This pond could not possibly have been one and the same as Alresford Pond, which was already in existence at this date. We know this because both Alresford Pond and the Great Weir are referred to in the previous pipe roll of 1208–9 (Hall 1903, 42).

The Great Weir also served as a causeway for the London-Southampton road until a turnpike road was made along the line of the present A31 in about 1753 (WCA, Boyes 1774, 29). It is difficult to assess whether the Weir was constructed solely as a dam and was used incidentally as a causeway, or whether it was originally intended to serve both functions. The latter view would be supported by the fact that it carried an important trade route across 400 yards of marshy land, although its great height would be more than necessary for a causeway. Apparently, causeways of this sort were already in use in the Fenland (Darby 1940, 106) and the Great Weir at Alresford was called both 'Ware' and 'causeway' *calcia* in early thirteenth century pipe rolls. In 1220, Richard Palmer, a miller at Old Alresford, was fined heavily for damaging the Great Weir, *pro dampno Ware* (HRO, Eccl 159277), while in 1208–9 the causeway was repaired, as was the bridge at the head of the causeway of the great fish pond; *In ponte reparando in capite calciae magni vivarii* (Hall 1903, 42, lines 13 and 35). This nomenclature is repeated in the eighteenth century when it was said that the 'Causeway called the Great Ware which forms the Head of the Pond begins at the Stone Bridge at the North End of the Broad Street of New Alresford' (WCA, Boyes 1774, 29).

THE CANAL TRADITION

What can be said in favour of the view that Alresford Pond was a medieval canal reservoir?

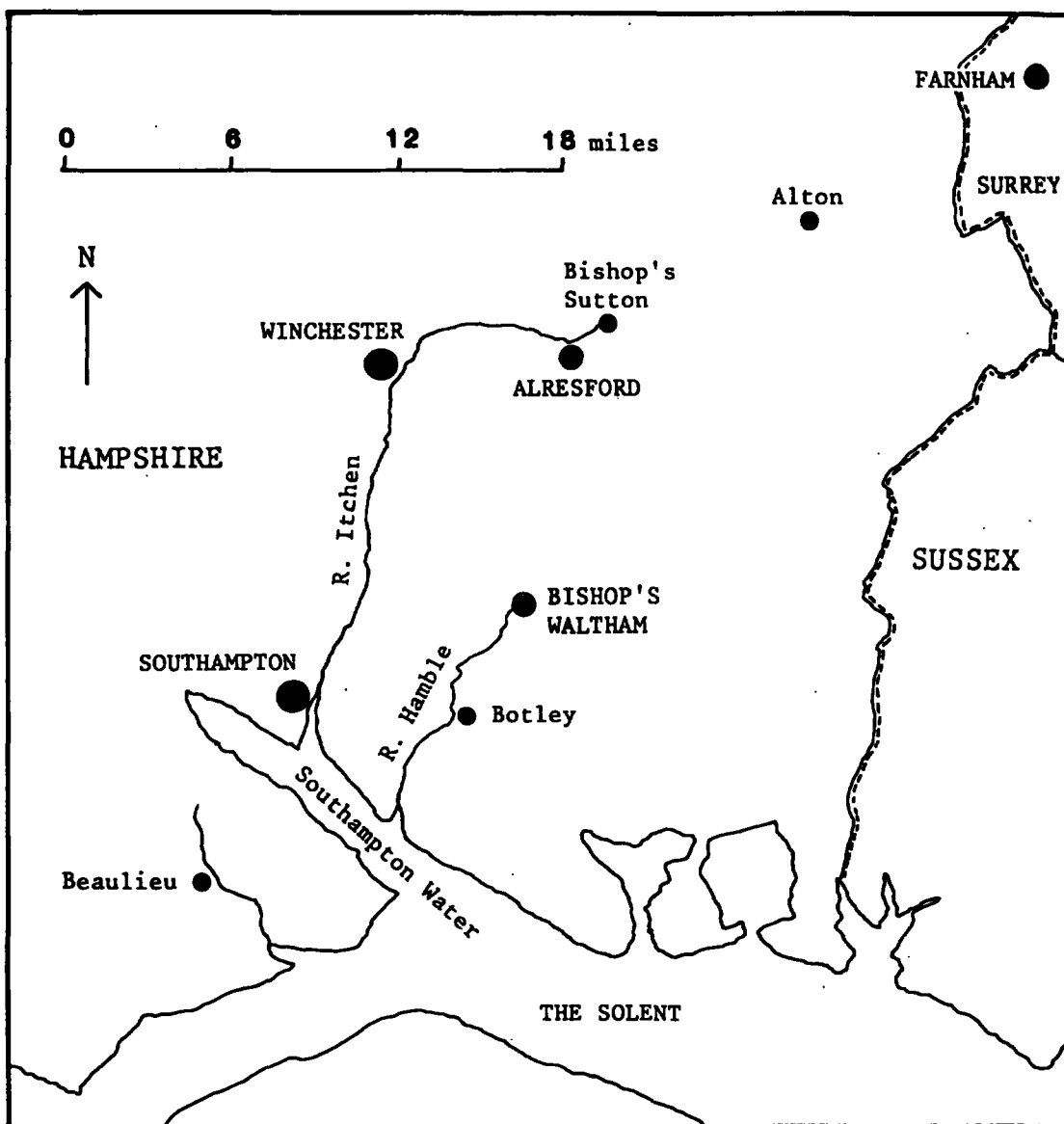


Fig 2. South-east Hampshire, showing the direct route between Bishop's Sutton and Beaulieu, overland to the Hamble estuary and thence by water. The medieval bishops of Winchester had palaces at Winchester, Bishop's Sutton, Bishop's Waltham and Farnham.

Early in the present century, Hall argued that some support for a canal might be found in the bishopric pipe roll of 1208–9. In discussing the evidence for trade routes in this roll, he writes,

'The most interesting entry in this connection is the charge for the carriage of wool from Bishop's Sutton to Beaulieu and back *per aquam*, ie by the Itchen navigation, the canal

made by Bishop Godfrey de Lucy a few years earlier' (Hall 1903, xix).

If a canal had ever existed, then Hall offers a plausible interpretation of *per aquam*. It is, however, important to note that *per aquam* means simply 'by water' and that this does not necessarily constitute evidence for a canal. In fact, in the complete absence of any contemporary reference to an Alresford-Winchester canal, a more probable account of *per aquam* presents itself. If there were no such canal, then wool from Bishop's Sutton to Beaulieu would have to travel part of the journey overland. As we shall see later, it appears that even a Winchester-Southampton canal in the Middle Ages must be ruled out. Consequently, the most direct route overland would probably be taken. This runs from Bishop's Sutton, through Bishop's Waltham and Botley to the Hamble estuary. From there, the wool could have been ferried across Southampton Water, into the Solent and up the Beaulieu River. If one does not assume the existence of a canal, the journey by Southampton Water and the Solent would seem to be a reasonable explanation of the phrase *per aquam* (Fig 2).

In spite of the lack of documentary evidence for an Alresford-Winchester canal, may there not be some archaeological evidence? Recent archaeological surveys of the Alresford area have failed to discover any physical remains of a canal (Schadla-Hall 1977, 44; Hughes 1981, 68-70). Beresford, however, in discussing medieval Alresford, compares the curves of 'the older course of the Itchen before the construction of the dam' with the straightness of the final length of the canal 'which is alongside the town mill' (Beresford 1959, 192). This straight stretch of river, which at this point might more properly be called the River Alre, runs for only some 200 yards between the Weir Mill and Town Mill in Alresford. Both mills were in existence in the early thirteenth century and it is unlikely that 200 yards of navigable river would have been constructed, only to be blocked at either end by water mills. Town Mill, formerly called Burrough, or Borough Mill (HRO, Eccl 158314) was called

molendinum de burgo in 1235 (HRO, Eccl 159284). Weir Mill was formerly called Ware Mill (Robertson 1937, 22) and in 1210-11 reference is made to Adam the miller and Adam de Ware (Holt 1964, 185). This suggests that Adam was the miller at the Weir Mill. It would not seem unreasonable to suppose that the short artificial cut to which Beresford referred was, in fact, a mill stream for the Weir Mill. This indeed was its use shortly before the Mill closed down about 1890 (pers com Mr T Childs, the last miller at the Town Mill, Alresford).

Water mills and canals go ill together on the same stretch of water. As Beresford points out, 'The picturesque fulling mill which now straddles the canal must date from after the disuse of the navigation' (Beresford 1959, 192). However, a fulling mill was in existence in New Alresford as early as 1210-11, barely a decade after the canal is supposed to have been constructed (Holt 1964, 186) and the bishop's income from fulling mills and corn mills in Alresford continues to be noted in the bishopric pipe rolls throughout the Middle Ages (eg HRO, Eccl 159318, Eccl 159388).

Although no contemporary reference to a medieval Alresford-Winchester canal has been found, there is an interesting record of a proposal to canalize the Itchen between Winchester and Southampton. In 1275, the jurors summoned on an inquisition *ad quod damnum* 'said that they did not think the citizens of Winchester would be able to bring the flood and ebb of the sea as far as their city. They might, however, be allowed by the king to bring it to Stoke, distant 4 leagues from Southampton, on the way to Winchester. The jurors also said that this must harm the bishop, because it would be necessary to remove a mill called the Wodemilne worth £5 a year and a salmon fishery of the annual value of 10 marks, and the mill of Stoke, worth to the bishop 44s . . . Furthermore, the mill of Brambridge, worth 43s 6d a year to the bishop . . . would also have to be removed, as well as the mills of South Twyford and North Twyford, worth 12 marks a year to the bishop, and two mills in Winchester leased to the



Fig 3. Part of Alresford Pond about 1890, taken from the Great Weir.

citizens at a fixed rent of £6 a year' (*VCH Hants* 1900–14, v 451–2). The *Victoria County History of Hampshire* offers this passage as evidence of efforts to improve an existing canal but Keene in his recent *Survey of Medieval Winchester* argues that the canal was never constructed and that the inquisition indicates that the citizens of Winchester probably would have liked a canal to increase trade, whereas the bishop did not want a canal which would have entailed the destruction of his mills and the consequent loss of revenue (Keene 1985, 57–9). Keene's interpretation is highly convincing. The clear implication of the inquisition seems to be that a number of watermills were standing on the Itchen between Southampton and Winchester in 1275 and that a canal could not be constructed until they were removed.

The inquisition appears to be associated

with a copy of a document purporting to be a charter granted by King John to Godfrey de Lucy. According to this charter, the king granted to the bishop the right to take tolls on goods carried between Winchester and Southampton on the canal which the said bishop of Winchester ordained to be made (Deedes 1924, ii 742). No copy of this charter has been found before its appearance, soon after 1282, in the register of bishop John de Pontoise and, according to Deedes, 'Mr Charles Johnson of the Public Record Office, having examined this document, is inclined to think it spurious' (Deedes 1924, ii 741). Keene shares this view, claiming that the charter is a forgery whose object may have been to discourage those citizens of Winchester who wished to construct a canal (Keene 1985, 57–9 and Keene pers com).

THE TRADITION REVIVED AND EXTENDED

How is it, then, that a charter of doubtful authenticity which makes no mention of New Alresford, has come to be offered as almost the only evidence for a medieval canal between Alresford and Winchester? The sixteenth century antiquaries Leland (Toulmin Smith 1907, iii 274) and Camden (Camden 1637 edn, 262) made no reference to an Alresford-Winchester canal in their brief descriptions of the topography of Alresford and the upper Itchen. The first writer to make such reference appears to have been John Trussell, an early seventeenth century Mayor of Winchester. Trussell wrote '... Godfrey de Lucye, ... Being then Bishopp of Winchester, effected

that worke, so advantagious to the whole sheir, in making a currant of water (now a swifte and pleasant river) for the better effecting whereof he caused that great causey [causeway] to bee made att the head of the great pond between owld and new Alisford ... This cutt, that Byshopp made passable with barges and fflat bottomed craft [?] from thence to the sea ...' (WCA, Trussell MS *The Origin of Cities* c 1640, 99). The only evidence which Trussell offers for this claim is the dubious thirteenth century charter of which he quotes sufficient to make it clear that it refers neither to the Itchen upstream from Winchester, nor to Alresford Pond.

In trying to account for this glaring insufficiency of evidence, it may be pertinent to note that Trussell went on immediately to



Fig 4. The Town Mill, Alresford in about 1890. In for foreground can be seen the artificial cut which runs between Town Mill and Weir Mill and which Beresford believed was a remnant of a supposed medieval canal.

address himself to the Marquis of Winchester, to whom Trussell's book was dedicated. 'To enter into a discourse of the commoditie which this passage, so used, might have brought to this decayed Cittie of Winchester, the manner how it was lost, the facilitie . . . to regayne yt. And the never dying Honor that would attend that person, that should undertake yt would I feare seem impertinent . . . I therefore humble leave yt to the honorable consideration of you my noble Lord marquesse . . .' (WCA, Trussell MSS *The Origin of Cities c 1640*, 100-101).

Trussell was aware of the wealth and glory of Winchester's medieval past and well aware of the city's present decay. Winchester's proposal to open the River Itchen to navigation in the 1620s had met bitter opposition from Southampton (Rosen 1981, 146, 152). Thus there was good reason for Trussell to quote the supposed charter of King John in order to support Winchester's cause. If a canal between Winchester and Southampton had brought wealth in the Middle Ages, why should it not do so again? This, however, does not explain why Trussell extended the canal upstream to Alresford without evidence. Such an extension might have appealed to the Marquis of Winchester who held an estate at Abbotstone near Alresford (Sanderson 1975, 8). Moreover, by the mid-seventeenth century the former existence of a Southampton-Alresford canal may have appeared to be a convincing explanation of the Great Weir and Pond at Alresford. The strict observance of fish days had greatly declined in England after the Reformation (Hole 1947, 21) and it may have seemed almost as improbable as it does to us today that such a massive work should have as its object nothing more than obtaining some coarse fish to eat. Historians owe a debt of gratitude to Trussell, but it must be confessed that he was not always reliable in his account of medieval history (Furley 1923, 14).

John Milner in his *History of Winchester* tells us that antiquarians in Hampshire in the late eighteenth century were circulating Trussell's manuscript (Milner 1789, i preface 13) and it is fairly certain that it came into the hands of Robert Boyes, Master of Perin's School,

Alresford. In writing his *History of Alresford* in 1774, Boyes repeated the canal tradition in words which closely followed Trussell's phraseology, but he also added an English translation of that part of the supposed charter of King John which is quoted by Trussell. It was a full translation, except for one significant detail. Boyes omitted the phrase in which the canal was limited to the stretch of river between Winchester and the sea. He thereby made it appear as though the charter applied to the whole River Itchen, including the stretch upstream from Winchester to Alresford (WCA, Boyes 1774, 49-51). This, as has been observed, is false. Boyes was a proficient Latin scholar and it is not clear why he mistranslated the charter. His account of eighteenth century Alresford is invaluable to later historians, but like Trussell he was not always reliable when he wrote about the Middle Ages. It may be that Boyes was interested in an extension of the Itchen Navigation from Winchester through Alresford, although this possibility does not seem to have been mooted until 1792, nearly two decades after Boyes wrote his *History of Alresford* (Hadfield 1969, 176).

Trussell and Boyes are the authorities followed by later writers who repeat the canal tradition. Milner refers directly to Trussell (Milner 1809 ii 229, 297-8), the enlarged edition of Dugdale's *Monasticon Anglicanum* refers to Milner (Dugdale 1846, i 196), the *Victoria County History* refers to Dugdale (VCH Hants 1900-14, iii 350), Beresford refers to the *Victoria County History* (Beresford 1959, 190) and later writers refer to Beresford (Hughes 1976, 91; Schadla-Hall 1977, 44). In the same way Robertson, in the standard published history of Alresford, draws extensively on Boyes (Robertson 1937, 6). It would seem, then, that this is a vigorous tradition based on insubstantial evidence.

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Hicks, Dr D J Keene, Mr D Lamb, Mr T Mayberry, Dr I Sanderson, Mr G Watts and Mr A P Whitaker.

Since writing this paper, I have received information from further sources. Mr G. Watts has pointed out to me that the interest in an Itchen Navigation in the 1620s may have been precipitated by the construction of the Titchfield 'navigation' in 1611. Dr D J Keene has pointed out that there was an attempt to develop a Southampton-Winchester navigation under Henry VIII and that there was extensive promotion of fish days under Elizabeth I to encourage shipping. Dr E Course has commented that, 'of great importance is the distinction between

canals and navigations. Canals sometimes do have reservoirs for their summit levels; navigations have neither summit levels or reservoirs.' For this reason alone, he believes, the suggestion that Alresford Pond was a fish pond is 'beyond dispute. With regard to the water supplies for mills on chalk streams; in some cases the water level is raised with a weir and associated banks, but this is for the sake of the level and not for the storage of water. Clearly, the pond at Alresford would affect the water supply for the mills on the Itchen, but this would be incidental to its use for fishing.' I am grateful for these additional comments.

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Abbreviations

BL British Library, London

HRO Hampshire Record Office, Southgate Street, Winchester.

WCA Winchester City Archives at the Hampshire Record Office, Southgate Street, Winchester.

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British Library:

BL Eg 2418, Rental and Customal of the estates of the bishopric of Winchester, c 1260.

Hampshire Record Office:

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HRO Eccl 159277 (1220); 159284 (1235); 159287 (1244); 159289 (1246); 159291A (1252); 159291B (1253); 159296 (1254); 159292 (1256); 159294 (1262); 159299 (1270); 159300 (1271); 159303 (1276); 159318 (1299); 159388 (1381).

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