

Watermeadows in Wessex — a Re-evaluation for the Period 1640–1850*

By G G S BOWIE

THIS short article does not propose to present a comprehensive survey of watermeadows in Wessex. Rather the aim is to bring to the fore some statements made by Prof E Kerridge, Dr E L Jones, M C Naish, Dr J H Bettley and Dr J R Wordie during the last thirty years or so, and assess them in the light of evidence from primary documentary sources, ever bearing in mind what is practical and feasible in farming life.¹ There appear to be some inconsistencies in the section on watermeadows in the recently published volume of the *Agrarian History of England and Wales*, notably where Dr Wordie suggests on one page that they were not a 'crucial element' in the farming economy of the Wessex downlands in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, and on another that there was 'indeed a great boom' in watermeadow construction between 1640 and 1750. This paper will show that the second supposition is probably correct, but dispute the first contention. The suggestion that watermeadows were not crucial is based on estimates which show the small acreage of watermeadow compared with other farmland. This will be countered with

evidence that 'Every brook and riverlet' was 'applied to irrigation when practicable', because the produce of watermeadows was invaluable to the downland farmer and sheep breeder.² Indeed, such was their value and importance, that nearly all suitable sites had been converted into watermeadows by about 1790, if not forty years before. Other historians, such as Prof Kerridge, recognize the significance of watermeadows, but find it necessary to minimize construction and maintenance costs, and exaggerate the number of hay crops and hay yields, to prove it. However, such aspects will be seen to be less important than the prospect of a reasonable return on capital investment, and the advantages of a grass crop in early Spring and a reliable hay crop in July — factors which are really crucial for a proper understanding of watermeadows at this time.

I

The predominant type of watermeadow in the region was the 'floated' or 'flowing' meadow. These were located on or near the downland rivers and streams of Hampshire, Wiltshire, Dorset and Berkshire. This involved draining and landscaping riverside meadow, marsh and waste. Such land was 'frequently a flat morass', in which case the first consideration was 'how the water is to be *carried off*', or drainage.³ Equally significant was that the land of watermeadows was irrigated with water that carried silt and lime in suspension which induced fertility and encouraged grass growth — 'a water-meadow is a hot-bed

* The author acknowledges the advice and assistance of Dr E J T Collins and B Afton in the preparation of this article.

¹ Eric Kerridge, 'The floating of the Wiltshire water meadows', *Wiltshire archaeological and natural history magazine*, LV, no 199, 1953; 'The sheepfold in Wiltshire and the floating of the water meadows', *Econ Hist Rev*, 2nd ser, VI, no 3, 1954; *The Agricultural Revolution*, 1967. E L Jones, 'Eighteenth century changes in Hampshire chalkland farming', *Ag Hist Rev*, VIII, 1960. M C Naish, 'The Agricultural Landscape of the Hampshire Chalklands, 1700–1840', unpublished MA thesis, Univ of London, 1960. J H Bettley, 'Sheep, enclosures and watermeadows in Dorset agriculture in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries', *Exeter Papers in Economic History*, no 8, 1973; 'The development of water meadows in Dorset during the seventeenth century', *Ag Hist Rev*, XXV, 1977, pt 1. J R Wordie, 'The South . . .', J Thirsk (ed), *The Agrarian History of England and Wales*, V, part 1, Cambridge, 1985.

² Wordie, *loc cit*, pp 331, 329; E Little, 'Farming of Wiltshire', *JRASE* V, 1845, p 167.

³ Thomas Davis, *General View of the Agriculture of Wiltshire*, 1813, p 120.

for grass . . . water acts upon land so as to accelerate vegetation'.⁴ Attempts were made to build 'floated' meadows elsewhere in Britain, but these were not generally successful or permanent. Their effectiveness on the chalk downlands of Wessex was probably due to a unique combination of factors, including the reliability of the flow of chalk rivers and streams; the geomorphology and topography of the area, where the ruling gradient in the valley was a critical factor; and the 'magical effect' of the 'calcareous waters', rich in minerals.⁵

Amongst the best descriptions of water-meadow construction and management are those given by Charles Vancouver and Thomas Davis in their *General Views* of the agriculture of Hampshire and Wiltshire respectively. Their effective use depended upon management and maintenance by skilled men, known as 'meadmen', 'drowners' or 'watermen'. Repair work on the sluices and water channels was undertaken about Michaelmas, and the regularity and timing of the subsequent phase of winter irrigation varied from meadow to meadow, partly as experience suggested, but also sometimes dictated by the need to share a water supply with neighbours. Irrigation was stopped in March and the watermeadows allowed to dry out. It was also advisable at this time to 'employ some people to go over the meadows and cut up the rank weeds that appear, before the grass is too high'.⁶ Between the end of March and the middle of May, watermeadows were normally pastured with livestock, normally sheep, but sometimes, especially near towns, dairy cattle. The watermeadows were then repaired, 'watered' again, and a hay crop taken in July. The subsequent aftermath was usually fed off with cattle (stores and dairy stock) and horses, and the cycle started

again.⁷ The nature of the soil on which watermeadows were built was important, and a gravel subsoil was particularly good as it drained freely. Peat beds did not drain so freely, and required more careful management, but the alkaline water neutralized the acid in the peat which helped to make reasonable crops, and even heavy yields, possible. Watermeadows on peat at Broughton in Hampshire were described as producing heavy crops 'although growing a coarse herbage'.⁸

The first grass crop on the watermeadows was some 4–6 weeks ahead of that obtainable from ordinary meadows, and this 'early bite' was invaluable to sheep farmers on the downs. Generally ewes and young lambs, known as 'couples', fed off this early grass, though which part of the flock was pastured on the watermeadows, and for how long each day, varied from area to area. This green feed was important. 'Even a small watermeadow which will produce an early crop of spring feed at the very time of the greatest pressure of scarcity . . . must be more valuable to a poor arable farm than can be easily imagined.'⁹ In the early nineteenth century Thomas Davis considered the alternative — 'the consequences of the month of April', that month between hay and ryegrass, where 'recourse is had to feeding the grass of those dry meadows that are intended for hay . . . frequently the young wheat; in fact, everything that is green'.¹⁰ Arthur Young extolled 'this spring eatage, which is of such importance to flock masters, supplying them with plenty of food at the most pinching season of the year'.¹¹ Indeed watermeadows were considered to be essential for every 'farmer who keeps a flock of sheep, and particularly a breeding flock', and the question was asked

⁴ Davis, *op cit*, p 117.

⁵ W Marshall, *The Review and Abstract of the County Reports to the Board of Agriculture*, V, 1817, pp 201, 375.

⁶ Wimpey, *Rural Improvements* . . . , 1775, p 107.

⁷ J Wilkinson, 'The Farming of Hampshire', *JRASE*, XXII, 1861, pp 289–90; J B Spearing, 'On the Agriculture of Berkshire', *JRASE*, ser 1, XXI, 1860, p 25.

⁸ PRO, IR/18/8920.

⁹ W Smith, *Observations on the Utility, Form and Management of Water Meadows*, Norwich, 1806, pp 30–31.

¹⁰ Davis, *op cit*, pp 123–4.

¹¹ A Young, *Annals of Agriculture*, XXIII, 1795, p 266.

'how could the farmers of South Wiltshire . . . pursue their present system of sheep breeding, if these meadows were taken away?'¹² For most of the period under review the sheep were folded at night on that part of the arable land which was being prepared for 'lent corn', or spring barley, thereby enriching the ground with their manure. From the late eighteenth century suitable fodder crops were also used for 'night' folding during this critical period. The inclusion of swedes, July-sown rape, winter rye, and vetches, thus supplemented the effect of the enriched dung derived from the watermeadows. In this sense alone watermeadows were important in the evolution of the sheep-corn mixed farming system on the Wessex downlands.¹³

II

Regrettably, some modern historians have made exaggerated claims about the subsequent hay crop from watermeadows. Kerridge stated, 'if the need for more hay was great' renewed watering 'could produce a second or even a third crop on part or whole of the watermeadow', and Wordie suggested that 'watermeadows could . . . be mowed two or three times a year'.¹⁴ Charles Vancouver, writing in the early nineteenth century, was rather more cautious when he said 'these watermeadows are sometimes, but rarely, laid up for a second crop. They are more frequently fed . . . with grazing or store cattle'.¹⁵ A few years later William Marshall said, 'the watermeadows are laid up for a second crop in some instances; but this is only usual when hay is scarce: not that it is suffered to hurt the land, but the hay is of that herbaceous soft nature, and takes so long time in drying, that it is seldom well made'.¹⁶

H P Moon and F H W Green suggested that 'occasionally in Hampshire a second crop of hay was cut, but the length of time which watermeadow grass takes to dry and the uncertainty of late summer weather made a second crop too precarious'.¹⁷ Occasionally two hay crops were taken where the spring crop was mown instead of being fed. This hay was 'more valuable than the second crop', but required 'great care in making'.¹⁸ No primary source known to the author ever mentions a third hay crop, nor was such a crop likely to be a practical proposition on 'floated' meadows.

Hay yields can also be exaggerated. Prof Kerridge claims that watermeadows 'crop about four times as heavily as other meadowland'.¹⁹ Before continuing, it may be remembered that Charles Vancouver provides reasonably reliable figures of hay yields from 'dry meadows and lowland pastures' for Hampshire in the early nineteenth century. The produce of hay from 'first quality' dry meadow was estimated at 36 cwt per acre, and of the 'inferior' sort 22 cwt.²⁰ Arthur Young stated in 1795 that a good yield from a properly managed watermeadow on a gravel subsoil was 2 tons of hay per acre, and supporting evidence for this figure is provided by the watermeadows at Wickham which were described as 'properly managed' in 1799 and which produced 'upon an average nearly 2 tons of hay upon an acre'.²¹ The sixty-two acres of watermeadow at Broughton were described in the late 1830s as 'good, one half on gravel . . . the other half peat', and yielded 2 tons of hay per acre at the same time six acres at Meonstoke also yielded 2 tons per acre; and 40 acres at Stoke Charity, which were described as being 'very scantily

¹² Davis, *op cit*, p 123.

¹³ Jones, *loc cit*, pp 16-17, for background information; also Wilkinson, *loc cit*, p 283.

¹⁴ Kerridge, 1953, *loc cit*, pp 107-8; Kerridge, 1954, *loc cit*, p 287; Kerridge, 1967, *op cit*, p 259; Wordie, *loc cit*, p 330.

¹⁵ C Vancouver, *General View of the Agriculture of Hampshire*, 1810, p 272.

¹⁶ Marshall, *op cit*, p 199.

¹⁷ H P Moon and F H W Green, 'Water Meadows in Southern England', appendix 2, *The Land of Britain*, pt 89, Hampshire, 1940, p 382.

¹⁸ Spearing, *loc cit*, p 25.

¹⁹ Kerridge, 1967, *op cit*, p 259.

²⁰ Vancouver, *op cit*, p 264.

²¹ Young, *op cit*, p 265; *The Annals of Hampshire Repository*, 1, Winchester, 1799, p 72.

supplied with water', yielded 1¾ tons.²² These figures are sufficiently similar to suggest an average which is far less than Kerridge would have us believe. Individual yields could be even less, as for example in the case of a poorly managed watermeadow on peat. The sixteen acres which belonged to Thomas Heathcote in Otterbourne Mead near Winchester yielded 9 tons of hay in 1743, 17 tons in 1744 and 13 tons in 1745.²³

Haymaking could provide its problems as well. Watermeadow grass was said to be 'often coarse', and the 'cutting of the grass young and in full sap' was 'indispensable for preserving its nourishing qualities'.²⁴ Farmers were urged to mow their watermeadows 'before the grass is over ripe, otherwise the bottoms will grow yellow and contract a disagreeable rankness'. Care had to be taken when drying the grass and the hay had to be 'pretty well made . . . one is more apt to under make it in hot scorching weather . . . as the outside will seem very dry, when the inside is full of its native sap and moisture' . . . in these circumstances, if a large hay rick is set up 'there will be danger of its firing; if a small one, it will turn musty'. Nevertheless, although an opinion was strongly cherished that the hay did not contain that 'feeding or fattening quality' obtainable from good dry meadow, the grass from watermeadows was said to be 'very succulent and juicy, if cut in good season'.²⁵ Thus reliability can be seen to be the critical factor — after all, farmers were 'nearly certain of a crop of hay on their watermeadows, be the season what it may', and good watermeadow was 'very valuable land, especially in dry summers, when crops on dry meadows run very short and thin'.²⁶

III

Watermeadows provided the downland farmers of Wessex with a new supply of

animal food, and as such played a crucial part in the evolution of the 'sheep and corn' husbandry system. Hence it is surprising that there appears to be no proper consensus of opinion about the date by which they were in general use. Instead a range of dates has been suggested for major phases in watermeadow construction which rather reflect the historical bias of the authors than demonstrate a careful examination of the available evidence. Kerridge linked them with his concept of a seventeenth-century agricultural revolution, asserting confidently that 'everything points to the years between 1629 and 1665 as the period when floated meadow construction was at its height', whilst at the other chronological extreme Jones commented that 'another sign of the growing need for an alternative to natural pasture may be seen in the "boom" in water-meadow construction between 1780 and 1830', reflecting his belief in a sheep food/tillage crisis in the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries.²⁷

Watermeadows were certainly widely distributed in Wessex at a fairly early date. In Hampshire they had been built on all the major south-flowing rivers by about 1686, as for example at Sturbridge Mead, North Stoneham, constructed on a tributary of the River Itchen in 1648; How Park Meads near Kings Somborne, River Test, built about 1657; and Gorley Meade, River Avon, built in 1686–7.²⁸ Kerridge suggests that the 'essential pattern' of the 'floated meadow network' was determined by 1665, but the evidence from Hampshire, though fragmentary, indicates that such an essential pattern was not established until the early years of the eighteenth century, and was then followed by a phase of 'infilling'.²⁹ For example, a considerable number of watermeadows had been built between Kingsworthy and South Stoneham on the

²² PRO, IR/18/8920, 9066, 9146.

²³ HRO, 18M54, Cof 11, Box P. Heathcote Estate Papers.

²⁴ Vancouver, *op cit*, p 269.

²⁵ Wimpey, *op cit*, pp 107–8; Vancouver, *op cit*, p 277.

²⁶ Davis, *op cit*, p 125; Wimpey, *op cit*, p 105.

²⁷ Kerridge, 1967, *op cit*, p 266; Jones, *loc cit*, p 15.

²⁸ HRO, 102M71, T 133. Fleming Estate Papers; HRO, 5M50/2529. Daly Mss; HRO, 6M80, ME/T 124.

²⁹ Kerridge, 1967, *op cit*, p 266.

River Itchen by the 1700s, including 'meads' at Winnall, immediately to the north of Winchester, built about 1660; Marsh Moores, immediately to the south of Twyford, between 1670 and 1672; and North Stoneham Meads, constructed about 1700.³⁰ Compton Malin, built about 1730 between St Cross and North Twyford, and Otterbourne Mead, built in 1730-31, show the process of infilling. In fact the latter appears to represent an example of overcrowding as within ten years it was 'overflowed with water and lain in a ruinous condition'. Here the watermeadow could neither be drained or irrigated properly because of the competing needs of watermeadows already existing immediately upstream and downstream of it.³¹ M C Naish postulated a 'boom' in watermeadow construction in Hampshire for the period 1791-1840, but his evidence is not convincing, and actually indicates that most of the suitable locations in the county had already been exploited by 1791.³² In fact it is probable that the situation in Hampshire in the early 1790s was similar to that in South Wiltshire at the time, where 'very few spots of land capable of being watered remain otherwise'.³³ Jones makes this point when he agrees with H P Moon and F H W Green that 'during the eighteenth century in particular, watermeadows must have been pushed to the limits of areas where it was possible to construct them', and also provides two pages of evidence which 'indicate the scale on which meadows were floated' in the eighteenth century. No such evidence is given for the postulated 'boom' of 1780-1830 other than citing a 'personal communication' with P G H Hopkins.³⁴ On balance it would appear that the main phase of watermeadow construc-

tion in Wessex was completed by about 1750, and certainly by 1790.

IV

Some modern writers have tended to oversimplify the question of construction and maintenance costs. Construction costs of watermeadows in the early nineteenth century were estimated at between £12 and £20 per acre for Wiltshire; £6 and £8 for Dorset; £5-£6 for Hampshire; and between £15 and £40 per acre for Hampshire in the mid-nineteenth century.³⁵ These are so much at variance as to be almost meaningless, but fortunately more precise figures are available. Marsh Moores, Twyford, cost approximately £3 6s 0d per acre to build in 1670-72, whilst Otterbourne Mead cost just over £6 per acre in 1730-31.³⁶ Surveying, designing and supervising contracts appear to have been undertaken by local engineers. At Twyford, Richard and John Baily were referred to as 'millwrights', and were also responsible for reconstructing nearby Shawford Mill at the same time. Their fees accounted for over half the cost of the watermeadow project, whilst Thomas Hardin charged two-fifths of the total cost for watering Otterbourne Mead. However, there is just not sufficient data available to generalize about construction costs and fees. Kerridge stated that 'the cost of maintenance was not great. The carriages and works have only to be scoured and repaired annually', and Bettey that 'once laid out, the subsequent annual costs of maintenance were very low, no more at most than 10s per acre'.³⁷ Thomas Davis gives similar maintenance figures, adding that the expense of the hatches (sluice-gates) 'if well made' was a 'mere trifle for many years'.³⁸

In reality, the cost of correcting poor or inadequate original design, and of repairing,

³⁰ HRO, 18M61, Box F, Bundle 1. Knight Estate Papers; HRO, 46M72. Mildmay Estate Papers — 4 long account books; HRO, 102M71/ES.

³¹ HRO, 18M54, Cof 11, Box P, Pkt 1. Heathcote Estate Papers.

³² Naish, *loc cit*, pp 260-77.

³³ Davis, *op cit*, p 122.

³⁴ Jones, *loc cit*, pp 6-8, 15.

³⁵ Davis, *op cit*, p 121; Bettey, 1977, *loc cit*, p 43; Vancouver, *op cit*, p 268; Wilkinson, *loc cit*, p 288.

³⁶ HRO, 46M72; HRO, 18M54, Cof 11, Box P.

³⁷ Kerridge, 1953, *op cit*, p 106; Bettey, 1977, *op cit*, p 43.

³⁸ Davis, *op cit*.

replacing and rebuilding hatches, weirs and revetments, could be considerable. Marsh Moores, Twyford, appears to be an example of this as by 1686, fourteen years after its construction, its hatches and weirs were decayed and 'waterbankes' eroded. Between 1686 and 1688 over £120 was spent on repairing 'wyars', rebuilding banks, leveling pasture and on other associated works, and the main hatches, Great Wyer and Segars Wyer, were completely rebuilt in 1704 and 1706 respectively.³⁹ Unfortunately, the watermeadow element cannot be isolated in the estate accounts and rentals surviving for this period, so that it cannot be proved that increased rents and returns from the improved land actually covered the cost of these repairs and replacements. Bad design, problems with water supply, water drainage and neighbours, and poor management feature in the unfortunate story of Otterbourne Mead, built 1730–31, aspects of which have already been mentioned. At first its fifty-four acres appear to have been watered successfully, so that by 1736 it was sufficiently drained and fertilized to allow double the number of cattle stock to be kept. However, by 1740 it was in a 'ruinous condition', and some improvements were attempted. £163 was spent on further alterations in 1746–47, but by the end of the century the meadow was again in a very poor state, and it is possible that it never did provide much of a return on the capital invested in it.⁴⁰

Thus it would appear that at least some watermeadows were subject to alteration and modification until a tolerable balance between irrigation and drainage was achieved. Thereafter the return on the capital investment was normally good. In 1728 forty acres of waterlogged, unimproved meadow at Compton Malm, near Twyford, was worth 10s per acre; it was estimated that if watered its value would be increased to £2 per acre. A valuation of Pittleworth

Farm, near Romsey, made in 1793 indicated that the watermeadow was worth over twice the value of the arable land.⁴¹ About the same time, George Boswell provided figures for watermeadows rented by the year which were located within a few miles of Puddletown, Dorset.⁴² The yearly rental for a watermeadow 'detached from any other land' was said to be 25s to 45s per acre, and the occupier also had the 'liberty to sell the hay'. Sometimes the spring feed on a watermeadow was let to one person, the grass standing was sold to another and the aftermath rented by a third. In this case, the spring feed let for about 10s an acre (rather a low figure), the uncut grass or hay, 30s to £3, and the aftermath from 10s to 15s 'according to demand and quality'.⁴³ About the same time Young stated that the 'spring eatage' from watermeadows 'let commonly at 20s to 25s per acre', whilst the 'aftergrass' on the meads at Wickham, Hampshire, was let from 15s to 20s per acre in 1800.⁴⁴ Generally, their rental value appears to have been about twice that of ordinary dry meadow. The yearly rent for a part of Winnall Mead, north of Winchester, was £16 1s in 1752, and the 'advantage of the water' to the meadow was said to be 'not worth less than £30 a year'.⁴⁵ The watermeadows at Stoke Charity were described as 'very scantily supplied with water' but still worth 55s per acre in 1837, whilst the 'dry meadows of indifferent quality' were worth 30s.⁴⁶ The rental value of the pasture at Britford, Wiltshire, in 1839 was 80s per acre for the watermeadow and 40s for the dry meadow.⁴⁷

Further evidence of the value of watermeadows is provided in a 'Report to the Proprietors of Mills & Meadows' between

³⁹ HRO, 46M72.

⁴⁰ HRO, 18M54, Cof 11, Box P.

⁴¹ HRO, 18M54, Cof 6, Box H, Pkt F; Cof 5, Box G.

⁴² G Boswell, *A Treatise on Watering Meadows*, 2nd ed, 1790, pp 108–9.

⁴³ Boswell, *op cit*.

⁴⁴ Young, *op cit*, p 266; *Annual Hampshire Repository*, *op cit*, p 72.

⁴⁵ HRO, 18M61, Box F, Bundle 1.

⁴⁶ PRO, IR/18/9146.

⁴⁷ PRO, IR/18/10925.

College Mill, Winchester and Wood Mill, Swaythling, on the River Itchen, written in 1808. The 1271 acres of watermeadow were said to be worth £4050, or £3 12s per acre per annum. As unwatered meadows they were said to be worth only a third as much.⁴⁸ However, watermeadows probably had an even greater significance as 'appendages to adjoining farms' — the 'abstract value of a good watermeadow' was said to be £5 an acre; 'but its value when taken as part of a farm, and particularly of a sheep-breeding farm, is almost beyond computation . . .'.⁴⁹ The value of watermeadows was such that 'in many instances' farmers were 'at a considerable expense in purchasing a supply of water' from watermill owners and tenants.⁵⁰ For example, at West Aston Moors, Longparish, five farmers made an agreement with John Hayes, the owner of Upper Mill, in which he allowed them to use his water on three days a week at the rate of 2s per acre per year 'for a terme of ten yeares' provided that they 'ground their grist' at his mill — otherwise they paid 4s per acre.⁵¹ A similar agreement was made when a watermeadow was built in Hunton Moor, near Stoke Charity, in 1729-30. The occupiers agreed with the owner of Weston Mill to have the use of the water on Mondays, Tuesdays and Wednesdays for twenty-one years at a yearly rental of 4s per acre, and the mill owner also had a separate agreement with a major local farmer, Robert Cropp, to supply water to his two watermeadows on the other days of the week, this time at the rates of 4s and 8s for a ten-year period. These two agreements, embodying a lucrative income for the miller, were confirmed and continued when the 'common down, common meads and moore ground' were enclosed by private agreement in 1732.⁵²

V

Watermeadows were regarded as such a safe and reliable form of investment that owners were prepared to commit themselves to complicated legal agreements which involved a high degree of cooperation with their neighbours as for example Pool Mead, Otterbourne, a small spring-fed system on the side of the Itchen Valley, which was improved with the construction of a new main carrier in 1829. Its eight meadows occupied just over eleven acres, and belonged to no less than five proprietors who followed up their investment with an indenture which set out a rota for using the water, based on seven days and nights each, and established the maintenance costs for which each proprietor and his successors were liable.⁵³

Sometimes this cooperation broke down and resulted in litigation, which in itself indicates the importance of watermeadows at that time. Some owners were prepared to undertake expensive legal actions to defend their rights and preserve the viability of their watermeadows, and in the mid-nineteenth century there were said to be 'many vexatious and expensive law suits' concerning watermeadows in Wiltshire.⁵⁴ Near Winchester, the owners and tenants of Winnall Mead, Hyde Abbey Mill, and Durngate Mill had been squabbling for some years about the size of water hatches, responsibility for maintaining particular banks and watercourses, and the amount that should be paid to Mr Knight who had the 'right of water' between Kingsworthy Mill and his own mill at Durngate, before finally submitting to an impartial arbitration in May 1738. Amongst the many clauses of this agreement four tenants of the watermeadows agreed to pay a total of £4 15s a year to Mr Knight for the use of his water.⁵⁵ The fifty-two acres of Compton

⁴⁸ HRO, 18M54, Cof 6, Box H, Pkt F, No 27.

⁴⁹ Davis, *op cit*.

⁵⁰ A and W Driver, *General View of the Agriculture of Hampshire*, 1794, p 19.

⁵¹ HRO, 11M56/119.

⁵² HRO, 2M52/27-28.

⁵³ HRO, 18M54, Cof 6, Box H, Pkt 1.

⁵⁴ Little, *loc cit*, p 167.

⁵⁵ HRO, 18M61, Box F, Bundle 1.

Malm watermeadows were the subject of a court case in 1832–34. It belonged to the Heathcote Estate and was split between two tenants, Richard Goldfinch, occupying the northern, upstream, part and James Comley, the southern. They were subject to an indenture of 1782 which stated a rota for winter, spring and summer watering, and had collaborated on improvements and drainage works in 1805 and 1816. However, in the late 1820s Goldfinch built a new carrier and drain which flooded and 'materially injured' Comley's watermeadows. Communications broke down and the landowner was forced to take legal action against Goldfinch. The latter was dead by the time the case was heard in September 1834, and judgment, with considerable costs, was made against his heirs who quit the farm soon after.⁵⁶

It is probable that problems about cooperating with neighbours, water supply and water rights and maintenance problems only influenced the decline of watermeadows when viable alternatives to their produce became available. Decline was slow and irregular, both in area and time, but the first signs of it can be recognized in the 1840s. In Wiltshire in 1845 the point was made that 'the real value of watermeadows is not as great now' as it had been in the early nineteenth century; 'it was thought impossible at that time for the sheep farmer to breed lambs on such farms as were not

fortunate enough to possess them, but since the introduction and extensive growth of swedes, turnips and other artificial food, many farmers that have little or no grassland, have produced lambs equal, if not superior to those occupying the best watermeadows'.⁵⁷ In Dorset in 1854 it was suggested that the growth of roots and 'artificial' grasses had rendered meads less necessary, but 'not less acceptable', in sheep husbandry.⁵⁸

The coincidence of interests of those involved in watermeadow construction and maintenance — landowner, tenant and farmer, and watermill owner — helps explain why watermeadows played such a crucial part in the development of the farming economy of the chalk downlands of Wessex during the period 1640–1850. Landowners and farmers especially shared mutual interests — landowners because the conversion of waterlogged marsh and waste into watermeadow constituted an improvement which increased the value of the land, and farmers because of the advantages of a grass 'bite' in early Spring and a reliable hay crop in July. Hence the role and function of watermeadows were vitally important during the changes in, and the evolution of, the 'sheep and corn' system on the chalk downlands of Wessex in the eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries.⁵⁹

⁵⁷ Little, *loc cit.*

⁵⁸ L H Ruegg, 'Farming of Dorsetshire', *JRASE*, XV, 1854, p 404.

⁵⁹ Jones, *loc cit.*, p 19.

⁵⁶ HRO, 18M54, Cof 6, Box H, Pkt F, No 27.