

The secret story of Woodmill by Terry Gould



Woodmill today

Just northeast of the bustling heart of Southampton you'll find the pleasant leafy suburb of Swaythling, once South Stoneham, with its small parish church of St Mary set in the middle of housing and a scatter of Southampton University student halls.

As the weathered grey stones of the church testify, the roots of this part of the city are ancient. South Stoneham appears in the Domesday Book, the painstaking account of land and assets compiled by England's new Norman overlords in 1086. The survey tells us that the Bishop of Winchester once held a wealthy manorial estate here called 'Stanham', boasting two fisheries and two mills.

Not far from the church, you'll find people of all ages paddling their kayaks and canoes on the lowest reaches of the River Itchen, where fresh river water meets the tidal salt water of the Southampton estuary. Some circle around the mud-fringed tidal river basin below Woodmill that marks the start of the Itchen Navigation, once a vital commercial water route to inland Winchester, over 16 kilometres to the north.

They're practising their skills under the watchful eye of the Woodmill Canoeing Centre, based in the solid redbrick Victorian building that sits on a sharp jink in Woodmill Lane where it passes over the river.

From medieval times until the 1930s, corn was ground here by great stone mill wheels powered by the fast-flowing River Itchen. The rushing water of the mill race is silent now, but Woodmill and the area around it still have many fascinating stories to tell.

An ancient history

The passage of centuries has changed this place. Documents have disappeared, sea levels changed, and river channels shifted. How people trade and make their living has changed beyond recognition.

But throughout history Woodmill has been important for many industries, including fishing, milling, manufacturing and transport, all linked to the importance of water.

From the days of Saxon Southampton, the River Itchen was a vital source of food and power to local people, and a major artery of transport and commerce in Hampshire. By the 18th century, barges on the Itchen Navigation were carrying bulk goods inland from Southampton's busy docks significantly more cheaply than was possible on the muddy, rutted roads of the day.

Fishing the river

The River Itchen has been an important source of food from earliest times, and is still one of the premier fishing rivers in England. Fed by clear cold spring water, it's ideal for salmon and trout. Between Winchester and Southampton, the salmon fishing was once so rich that a 1538 document complains local people were neglecting their normal work so they could steal fish.

A Saxon charter tells us that in 1045 South Stoneham had a 'sea weir' for trapping fish. This may have been located at the head of the tidal river – a weir still stands at the top of the ancient Woodmill pool where the waters of the river and Monks Brook join. The Domesday Book also suggests that this was an important place for fishing, listing two fisheries at 'Staneham' worth 39 pence.



Sketch of the salmon pool c.1851 from Southampton City Archives

For centuries the River Itchen, including the fishery at Woodmill, was controlled by the powerful bishops of Winchester, yielding significant revenues from salmon catches for the clergy's coffers.

In 1301-02, the Bishop of Winchester's 'pipe rolls' or business accounts note that 53 salmon from the manor of Bitterne were sold for seven pounds and four shillings. The Bishop even sent a gift of two salmon to Queen Margaret when she visited Winchester in May 1302.

The River Itchen and the Navigation are still highly valued for fishing. A salmon rod (a length of river bank) can cost £3,000 for a year's fishing, while a day's fishing for trout can cost £200 to £350. Fishing in Woodmill Pool now costs £180 a night.

Grinding the corn

Since humans began to eat bread, they've needed to find efficient ways of crushing grains into flour.

Mills, with their large grinding stones powered by a strong, constant flow of river water, were the ideal solution. Valuable assets throughout England's history, they were often owned by kings and bishops.

Anglo-Saxon charters and leases speak of many mills on Hampshire rivers, and we know there

were mills in the villages of Downton on the Avon, Longstock on the Test, and Easton on the Itchen. By the time of the Domesday Book, over 300 mills were listed on the streams and rivers of Hampshire.

The mouth of the freshwater River Itchen, where it enters the tidal river, was a perfect location for a corn mill, which was also ideally placed to ship flour by water or road to the thriving settlement of Southampton, with its hungry mouths.

We know that there was a mill in the bishopric manor of Bitterne (presumably Woodmill) from medieval times. The Bishop of Winchester's 1208-09 accounts mention the need for repairs. A century later in 1301-02, we learn that the mill cost two pounds eleven shillings and ten pence to run, including buying a new millstone for one pound and eighteen shillings. In the same year, the mill earned three pounds eight shillings and sixpence from ground wheat, barley, malt and oatmeal - a healthy profit of sixteen shillings and eight pence.

In 1618, a report commissioned by the City of Winchester from one John More of Fareham, surveying the river between Winchester and Southampton, clearly shows a 'Woodmeille' at the mouth of the Itchen, along with seven other mills on this stretch of the river.

The old wooden mill burnt down in 1820, and was replaced by the present Victorian brick building that stands on the site. But corn continued to be ground at Woodmill until 1930, when the flow of water was no longer powerful enough to turn the mill wheels, and the mill was finally closed.

Now all that remains of the ancient mill are some massive timbers, sitting on iron columns, which support the floor of Woodmill Canoeing Centre.



Woodmill c. 1890
Courtesy of
Southampton City
archives

Tenants, salmon and eels

Over time, the bishops of Winchester began to lease out Woodmill and its fishing rights. In the 15th century, the lease for two mills 'which are conjoined and are called lez Wodemyllis' was held by one Thomas Ederigge of Swaythling, at a rent of £14 a year. He was also allowed to use the mill's 'gynnys'. These were wooden traps built to catch salmon moving upstream, and are still called 'gins' in the west of England and Ireland.

In 1741, the Bishop of Winchester agreed a lease for 'two mills within one roof called Woodmills'

(perhaps suggesting two pairs of millstones) with one William Sloane of South Stoneham House - the family that gave its name to modern-day Sloane Square in London. Mr Sloane enjoyed the use of 'two mills, millstones, bank and bridges, floodgates, waterworks and enclosures', as well as fishing rights.

The lease was to run for 'three lives', last renewed in 1792 by Sir Hans Sloane, whose book collection provided the start of the British Museum. The Sloane family paid some of their rent to the bishop in kind. In the terms of their lease, they were obliged to give their clerical landlord four good salmon 'well grown and serviceable taken between Easter and Whitsuntide' each year.

Eels and lampreys were once plentiful catches on England's rivers. In the Domesday Book, just two weirs on the River Teme are described as yielding 2,500 eels, while in 1257, King Henry III gave a feast at which 1,500 eels were served. In 1409, the Bishop of Winchester's accounts list five 'stitches' – a 'stitch' contained 25 eels - from the mill at Brambridge on the Itchen, upstream of Woodmill.

In the 15th century, the lease held by one Mr Ederigge allowed him the use of Woodmill's 'rackis' or eel racks. These were wooden or iron ladders placed on the bottom of an artificially narrowed part of a river, such as a mill stream or a weir, and angled upwards. Eels on their way upriver came out of the water at night to go up the ladder, only to spill over into a holding tank.

The eel rack at Woodmill is clearly shown on an 1867 ordnance survey map, and we know that racks were still in use at Woodmill in Southampton and at Durngate mill in Winchester in the early 1900s. They are still used on the Test, Avon and Stour rivers, and other rivers in Britain and America.



A disused eel rack on the Itchen

Sadly, eels now are in serious decline, and the use of eel traps is likely to be restricted in future. But steps are being taken to improve things. Special measures are being introduced to allow elvers, or baby eels, to travel freely upstream, and bypass the many weirs on the rivers.

Transporting goods

First the Itchen River, then later the Itchen Navigation, have provided vital routes for moving heavy cargoes up to Winchester and down to the port of Southampton. Water transport was cheap - about one tenth the cost of taking goods overland. It was good for carrying bulky and heavy cargoes, such as coal and stone, and cumbersome items such as large timbers, as well as fragile items safe from the jolting of carts.

The famous double tide of Southampton made the city a key trading centre since its early days as

the Saxon port of Hamwic. It was a major focus for shipping, and by 1450 was described as the third most important port in Britain after London and Bristol, handling valuable goods such as wax, honey, cotton, flax, sugar and various fruits.

As early as Saxon times, boats were using the River Itchen to take cargoes to and from Southampton. In 960, a land charter for the village of Bishopstoke, 3.5 kilometres north of Woodmill, describes a 'stathe', or a place for unloading boats, on the west bank of the river. An ancient track for moving livestock, Doncaster Drove, now partly covered by Southampton Airport, probably ended near this 'stathe'.

From early times, considerable engineering work has gone on to improve the navigability of England's rivers. In the Saxon period, it seems that an artificial channel was constructed around Woodmill to separate the river with its boats and fish, from the flow of water needed to power the mills.

The clue lies in two Saxon land charters. In 990–992, King Aethelred II granted a charter for the manor of South Stoneham, and in 1045, King Edward the Confessor gifted the manor to the monks of the Old Minster in Winchester. The boundaries in these documents clearly point to the existence of an old and a 'new' river near Woodmill.

The birth of the Itchen Navigation

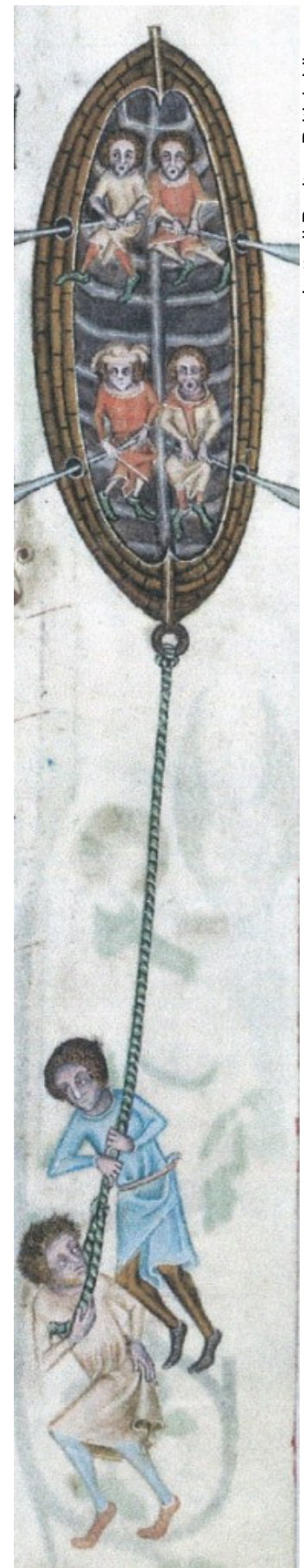
As the use of water as a way of transporting heavy goods developed, improvements were made to existing rivers, and sometimes entirely new routes constructed in the form of canals.

As early as the 13th century, civic authorities in Winchester proposed a scheme to make the River Itchen navigable from the city to the sea, leading to King Edward I requesting an 'inquisition' or investigation of the possibilities. The final report in 1276-7 showed that the river could indeed be deepened and made navigable from Southampton to Bishopstoke. But there was a price – five of the Bishop of Winchester's mills and a salmon fishery would need to be removed. Not surprisingly, the whole scheme was dropped.

Nothing more of the scheme was heard until in 1617-18 the City of Winchester commissioned a survey of the Itchen from Winchester to Woodmill. Mr More, their surveyor, again reported that the river could support navigation.

In 1665, an Act was finally passed to allow improvements to be made to the river for the 'preservation of Meadows from Summer Floods and the Improvement in the value of Land and Trade'. It laid the basis for the construction of the Itchen Navigation to link Southampton and Winchester by water. But it was nearly 50 years before the proposed improvements were made, and the Itchen Navigation was finally completed in 1710.

Coal was the main cargo for the barges that plied the new waterway. Ships were unloaded either directly into the barges or at Northam Quay on the west bank of the tidal river downstream from Woodmill. An entry in Pigot's 1832 Directory for Hampshire advertises 'water conveyance for goods to and from Northam to Winchester'.



Luttrell Psalter, British Library

The completion of the railway from the docks in Southampton to Winchester in 1839 triggered a slow decline in the use of the Itchen Navigation for moving cargoes. Traffic to Winchester finally ceased in 1869, but some water transport still continued on the lower Itchen, taking cargoes to Gater's Mill, just upstream of Woodmill.

Hampshire.	WINCHESTER.	Pigot & Co.'s
<p>LONDON, Aslett's Waggon, every Wednesday & Saturday, from the India Arms, to the Oxford Arms, Warwick-la-LONDON, Jones's Van, from the Dolphin, every Tuesday, Thursday & Saturday.</p> <p>LONDON, Burnett's Van, every Sunday, Wednesday & Friday, to the Castle & Falcon.</p> <p>ANDOVER, Cockram, from the Bell & Crown, every Wednesday & Saturday.</p> <p>ANDOVER, Rutt, from the City Arms, every Wednesday & Saturday.</p> <p>CLATFORD, Adams, from the Bell & Crown, every Wednesday & Saturday.</p> <p>OXFORD and Birmingham, Colcutt's Waggon, from the City Arms, every Friday.</p> <p>PORTSMOUTH and Gosport, Guyett, from the Crown & Anchor, every Monday & Thursday.</p> <p>PORTSMOUTH, Purben's Waggon, from the City Arms, every Wednesday & Saturday.</p> <p>POOLE, Burnett's Waggon every Monday & Thursday.</p>	<p>ROMSEY & Southton, Burnett's Van, every Sunday, Wednesday & Friday.</p> <p>SALISBURY, Mundy, from the Dolphin, every Monday & Thursday.</p> <p>SALISBURY, Sawyer, from the Coach & Horses, every Monday & Thursday.</p> <p>SOUTHAMPTON, Aslett's Waggon, from the India Arms, every Tuesday & Friday.</p> <p>SOUTHAMPTON, Lawrence, every day, from the Coach & Horses, to the Vine.</p> <p>SOUTHAMPTON, Colcutt's Waggon, from the City Arms, every Wednesday.</p> <p>SOUTHAMPTON, Burnett's Waggon, every Tuesday, Thursday & Saturday.</p> <p>COACHES.</p> <p>LONDON, Independent, from the Dolphin, every morn. at quarter past nine.</p> <p>LONDON, Collyer's, from the White Hart, every morning at a quarter before nine o'clock.</p> <p>CHELtenham, Light Coach, from the George, every Tuesday, Thursday & Saturday mornings.</p>	<p>PORTSMOUTH, Knight's Coach, from the India Arms, every Tuesday, Thursday, & Saturday.</p> <p>READING, the Trial, from the Waterloo, Tuesday, Thursday, & Saturday, at half past two.</p> <p>ROMSEY, Collyer's Coach, from the White Hart, every day at four o'clock.</p> <p>SALISBURY, Knight's Coach, from the India Arms, every Monday, Wednesday & Friday.</p> <p>SOUTHAMPTON, Hope, from the Dolphin, every morning at half past nine.</p> <p>SOUTHAMPTON, Light Coach, from the George, every Monday, Wednesday & Friday.</p> <p>SOUTHAMPTON, Collyer's coach, from the White Hart, every day at four o'clock.</p> <p>WATER CONVEYANCE</p> <p>NORTHAM, near Southampton, Barges every day, from Well's Wharf, for the conveyance of goods, &c. to and from Winchester & neighbourhood.</p>

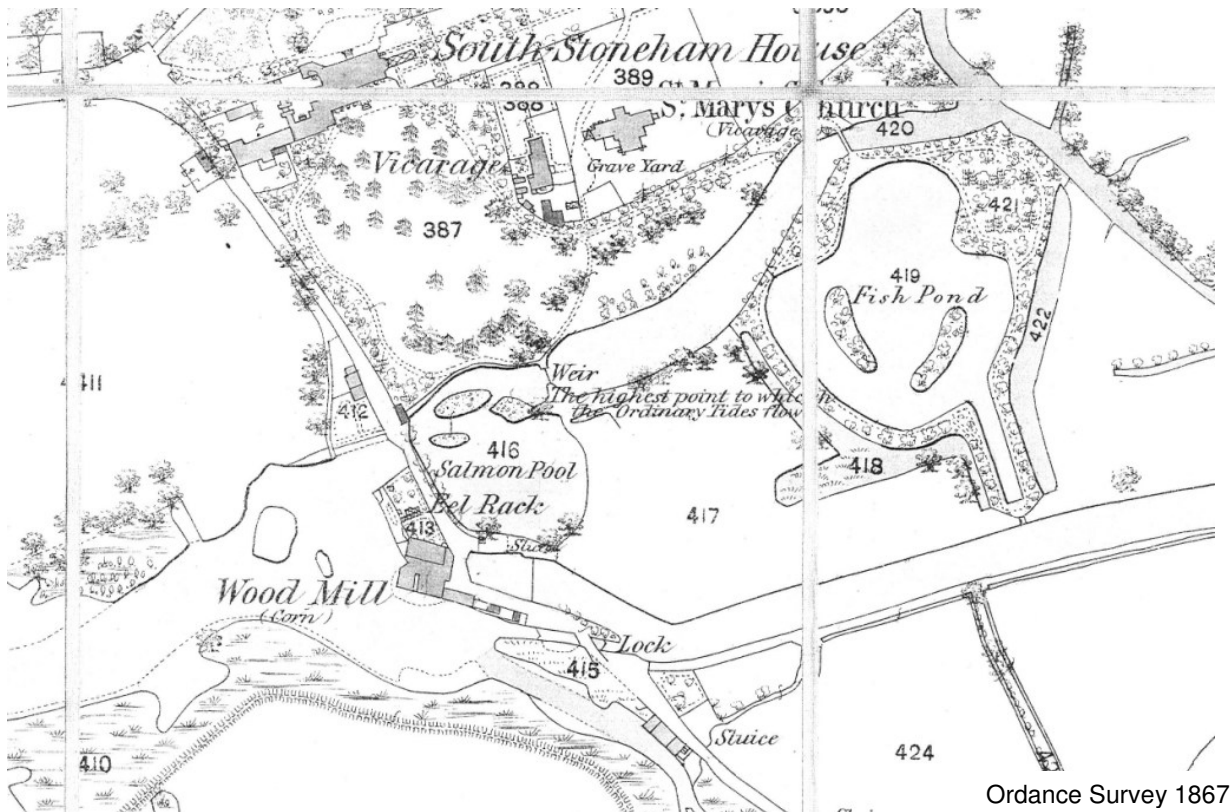
entry in Pigot's Directory 1832

Woodmill Lock

Woodmill Lock was the sea lock at the top of the tidal River Itchen – the start of the journey of the Itchen Navigation to Winchester. Two pairs of gates held back the river water, and another pair, pointing downstream, stopped seawater entering during very high tides.

We don't know the exact date the original lock was first built, but we do know that in 1829, it was re-built in brick. A wooden bridge across the lock was also built at around this time, but by the middle of the century was in poor repair. It was described in an 1862 report as being made of oak, with 23-foot-long timbers spanning the 15-foot wide lock at an angle of 40 degrees. Joseph Hill, surveyor, wrote that the bridge was 'in so bad and dangerous a state that any attempt to repair [it] would be a waste of money'. He suggested 'that steps be forthwith taken to stop all heavy traffic over the Bridge'.

The same view was repeated in 1863, in a report to the receivers called in to investigate the financial condition of the Itchen Navigation. Mr T P Clarke wrote that 'the bridge is quite dilapidated and very unsafe for the traffic which is drawn over it'. Both the lock and bridge are shown on an 1867 Ordnance Survey map, but only two pairs of lock gates are shown, the downstream gates having been removed.



Ordnance Survey 1867

From 1880 onwards, the Highways Board took over bridge maintenance. By 1896, an Ordnance Survey map shows that the bridge had been removed and the lock chamber filled in and the road safely built on top of the fill – creating a permanent solution to the problem.

In 2008, during excavation work to build road barriers on Woodmill Lane, Southampton City Council 's Archaeology Unit found two brick features the width of the lock apart, closely corresponding to the lock position shown in the 1867 map.

Woodmill and the Battle of Trafalgar

Probably the most dramatic part of Woodmill's story is the role it played as a factory during the period of the Napoleonic Wars.

Three generations of the Taylor family of Southampton – grandfather, father and son, all named William – were inventors and businessmen. The Royal Navy was then using large, cumbersome and weak wooden blocks (the points of attachment for the rope rigging used to support the masts and control the sails) on their ships. These blocks added greatly to the ships' weight and often failed at critical moments. A 74-gun ship required no fewer than 1,400 blocks for its rigging and the rope tackles used to move the ship's cannon.

William Taylor III patented the first power circular saw, enabling the blocks to be cut more accurately, and made smaller and lighter, by what was in effect some of the first mass-production machinery available. The blocks were also made more durable. He moved his business to Woodmill in 1781, and build additional buildings for his factory.

In the five years before the Battle of Trafalgar in 1805, the Taylor factory at Woodmill cut more than half a million blocks for the Royal Navy. These, together with vastly improved ships' pumps William designed and built, making ships safer, made him a wealthy man.

They also undoubtedly played a part in helping Lord Horatio Nelson and the Royal Navy to their famous victory over the French fleet, won at the cost of their charismatic admiral's life.

Uncovering Woodmill's secrets

Woodmill's story may be a hidden one, but its historic significance for Hampshire and its early industries is indeed great.

The clues to its importance are all still there if you care to look for them – the salmon and eels making their ancient way up the River Itchen, the massive timbers that lie under the Woodmill Canoeing Centre floor, and the bricks for Woodmill Lock that lie buried under Woodmill Lane.

And of course, the beautiful silver line of the Itchen Navigation itself, now a key conservation area and wildlife haven, which is being preserved for posterity by the Hampshire and Isle of Wight Wildlife Trust, and the efforts of its staff, supporters and volunteers.

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Illustration

Luttrell Psalter, Psalm 89, c.1325-1335. (Courtesy of British Library Add. 42130, f.160)

Sketch of Woodmill (salmon pool) c. 1851 (Courtesy of Southampton City archives)

Photograph of Woodmill c.1890 (Courtesy of Southampton City archives)

Entry in Pigot's Directory 1832

Woodmill – Ordnance Survey 2" series, 1867

This article was researched and written by Terry Gould for the Hampshire & Isle of Wight Wildlife Trust as part of the Itchen Navigation Heritage Trail Project; a lottery funded project which aims to conserve the Itchen Navigation for the future.