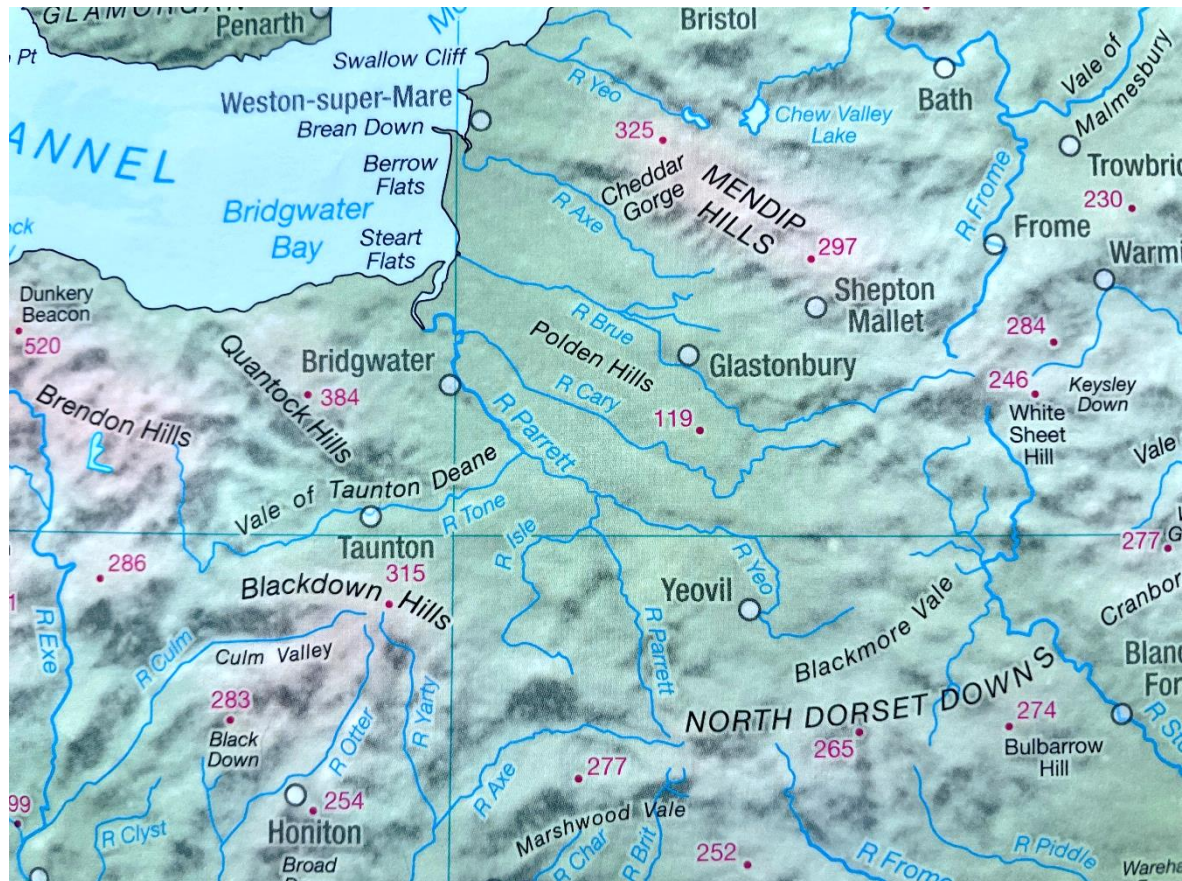


5.3. Somerset Levels

1. Location

The Somerset Levels are a coastal plain and wetland area of Somerset, running south from the Mendip Hills to the Blackdown Hills. The Levels are bordered to the north by the Bristol Channel and Bridgewater Bay and are traversed by a number of north-westerly flowing rivers, including the Yeo, Axe, Brue, Cary and Parrett.



2. Why was the Case Study Site selected?

The Somerset Levels was selected because it has a low-lying topography with a long history of flooding problems and a considerable experience of drainage management. It contrasts with the other case study sites selected in south-west England, which are generally fast flowing upland streams running from Dartmoor to form wide fast flowing rivers emerging on the south coast of Devon.

3. Summary of the Geology, Fluvial Geomorphology and Processes

The Somerset Levels and moors form a vast flood plain that receives substantial volumes of water from the surrounding Mendip, Quantock and Blackdown Hills, as well as from the higher land along their eastern borders with Wiltshire and Dorset. Deep deposits of clay, sand, peat and silt cover the valleys in this floodplain, in some places over 20 metres thick. The Levels are the clay-dominated stretch along the coast, now slightly higher than the inland peat Moors (Brunning, 2015¹). The Levels cover an area of some 650 square kilometres and are bisected by the Polden Hills. The areas to the south are drained by the River Parrett, and the areas to the north by the Rivers Axe and Brue.

The Mendip Hills separate the Somerset Levels from the North Somerset Levels, which consist of marine clay 'Levels' along the coast, and inland peat-based 'moors'. The run-offs from the surrounding high ground form the major river systems that originally meandered across the plain but which have now been controlled by embanking and sluices (known locally as clyses). The

Somerset Levels are prone to winter floods of fresh water and occasional salt water inundations. The Levels themselves are underlain by much older rocks of Triassic age and these formations protrude to form what would have once been islands within the lowland landscape. Glastonbury Tor and the Isle of Wedmore are examples, these being of Carboniferous and Jurassic age.

The Somerset Moors and Levels formed from a submerged and reclaimed landscape, consisting of a clay belt only slightly above mean sea level, with an inland peat belt at a lower level behind it. There is a long history of major flooding events extending back to the Great Storm of 1703, whilst, more recently, the winter flooding of 2013/14 was declared a major incident by the local authorities with 6,900 hectares of agricultural land submerged for over a month (Williams, 1970²; Wikipedia, 2022³).

4. How can the Art Imagery inform us of river change?

South-west England has a very rich art heritage with a wealth of paintings held within museums and galleries across the region. The topographical art record generally commences from the last decade of the eighteenth century, when the French Revolution and the Napoleonic Wars prevented aristocrats from taking the Grand Tour of Europe. As a result, antiquarians and artists turned to the English landscape for inspiration, but conscious of the fact that their patrons often wished paintings of dramatic scenery as they had observed in the Alps and the Mediterranean, the subject matter chosen by artists tended to be more mountainous topography or coastal scenery such of that of North Devon or the touristic coastal towns with grand architecture such as at Weston-Super-Mare. Consequently, low-lying land, such as the Somerset Levels, was not a subject generally favoured by artists, and this is reflected in the very small number of artworks held in the principal public collections and image libraries. However, there are a large number of artworks, mainly drawings or engravings, of architectural subjects contained within the villages of the Somerset Levels, including important houses and churches. Some of these are held in major collections such as the Braikenridge Collection held at Somerset Heritage Centre.

The opportunity to illustrate the chronology of change within the Somerset Levels and the rivers passing across it, are, therefore, quite limited, although a fine exception is the watercolour drawing by William Walter Wheatley of *Peat Heath, Mere with Glastonbury Tor in the distance* (Figure 3.1). In locations such as Somerset Levels and other low-lying, less frequently painted areas, such as the Fens, further information can be found through historic maps and early photographs. Clearly, as far as this study is concerned, the site demonstrates that there are limitations in the use of artworks, although this is the exception rather than the rule.

5. What are the key issues that can be learnt from this Study Area?

Although only a very small number of artworks were identified after extensive research, these do provide information about past management practices on the Somerset Levels. For example, the Wheatley watercolour shows the nature of the landscape and peat cutting in progress. In such locations, cartography can be helpful and a detailed study on the usage of cartography was undertaken as part of the Interreg 2 Seas Arc Manche project completed in 2013.

6. References

1. Brunning, R. 2015. *The Lost Islands of Somerset – Exploring a Unique Wetland Heritage*. South-West Heritage Trust. ISBN: 978-0-9957251-1-9.
2. Williams, M. 1970. *The Draining of the Somerset Levels*. Cambridge University Press. London.
3. Wikipedia. 2022. *The Somerset Levels*.



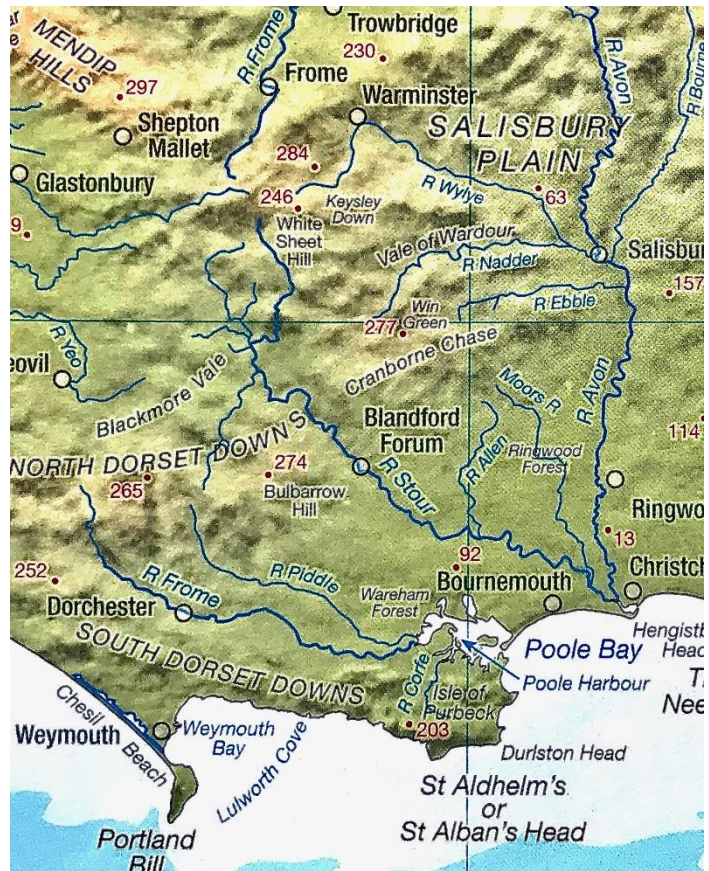
Figure 3.1: This detailed watercolour by William Walter Wheatley is the only topographical artwork identified within English public collections showing the Somerset Levels. The view entitled *Peat Heath, Mere – Glastonbury Tor in the Distance* (1844) shows peat cutting taking place, a task that continues today.

Courtesy: Somerset Heritage Centre, Braikenridge Collection A/DAS/7/258/4.

5.4. The Dorset Stour

1. Location

The Dorset Stour, which is 98km in length, flows south-east from the Wiltshire-Dorset border, through beautiful natural landscapes, cutting its way through downland and following the Vale of Blackmore on its course to the coastline at Christchurch.



2. Why was the Case Study Site selected?

The rich variety of natural landscapes, a range of fluvial features and developed river frontages within the Dorset Stour catchment together with a rich cultural and artistic heritage all combine to provide an ideal case study in terms of assessing the contribution that historical artworks can make towards our understanding of lowland English rivers from source to sea.

3. Summary of the Geology, Fluvial Geomorphology and Processes

A visual description of the character of the Stour and its depiction through imagery can be provided most effectively through an examination of its three geographical components – the Upper Reaches, which extend from the river source at Stourhead southwards to Gillingham, the Middle Reaches from Gillingham through the Vale of Blackmore to Wimborne Minster, and, finally, the Lower Reaches extending south-east from Wimborne past Bournemouth to Christchurch Harbour and the English Channel (McInnes & Stanford-Clark, 2018¹).

The Stour, and its wider catchment, extends from Wiltshire, through Dorset, to the sea, encompassing a total geographical area of some 1,240 square kilometres. The river flows through a widely varying landscape, which has been determined by the underlying geology of chalk, limestone, clay and mixed sands and gravels. The landscape is characterized by elevated chalk downs, limestone ridges, and low-lying clay valleys, which are designated, in part, as an 'Area of Outstanding Natural Beauty'. Along its course the Stour is swollen in size by numerous tributaries as it follows a southern then south-easterly course, from south of Stourhead to Christchurch Harbour. From the north-east side, the Stour is fed by the Shreen Water, the River Lodden, the Iwerne, the Tarrant, the Allen, and the Moors River. From the west and south-west, its tributaries include the Cale, the Lydden, the Divilish, and the River Winterbourne. Between the high chalk

downs can be found wide vales and floodplains, such as the Blackmore Vale, which is bounded on its eastern side by Cranborne Chase, to the north from above Gillingham and extending toward Sherborne to the west. The high hills bordering the Stour offer outstanding vantage points for observing the course of the river as it meanders through its upper and middle reaches.

Weathering and erosion of soil from steep hillsides within the Stour valley increased in the past through intensification of agriculture, particularly during the Second World War when vast areas of downland pasture were ploughed for the growth of crops. As the river flows through the wide Blackmore Vale, it follows a course through a pastoral landscape, within a wide and settled floodplain. Small blocks of wet woodland alongside the river provide structure and diversity and a sense of intimacy to this otherwise flat and open landscape.

Dense hedgerows with trees, small scale fields and occasional grassy meadows and remnant withy beds along the river give way to nucleated villages and large blocks of deciduous woodland along the valley sides. In places remnants of water meadows can be found, a resource that fell out of use from the late nineteenth century onwards following the onset of a deep agricultural recession, which continued almost unabated up until the Second World War.

Whilst a scattering of sites through the upper reaches of the Stour catchment are affected by flooding, the river south-east of Blandford, past Wimborne, and to the north of Bournemouth, has experienced numerous flooding incidents and some of the historic bridges and mills are frequently affected by inundation; such flood events are monitored and recorded by the Environment Agency. At Wimborne Minster, which is also built close to the Stour floodplain, art images show an increasing encroachment of vegetation, both scrub and trees, adjacent to the riverbanks in areas that were previously largely pasture land. Flowing east and then south-east from Wimborne Minster, the Stour follows a winding course forming a northern boundary to the Bournemouth conurbation. From there the river flows past Iford and Tuckton to Wick, before emerging into Christchurch Harbour.

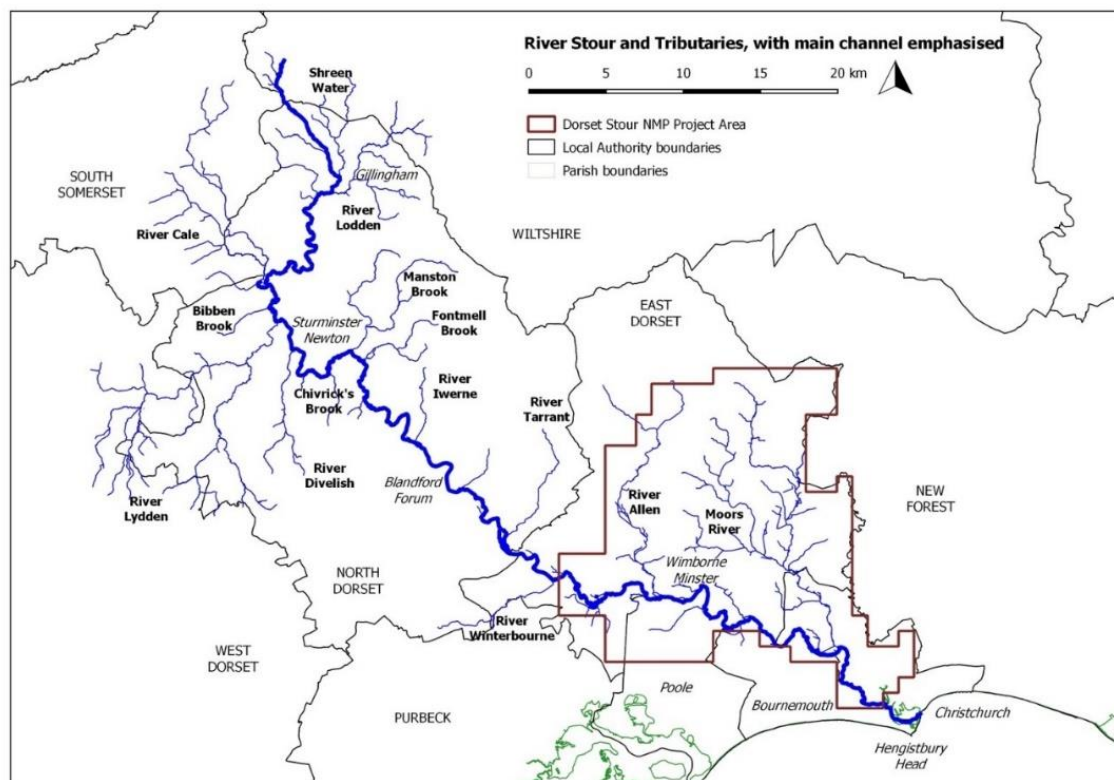


Figure 4.1: The River Stour and its tributaries

3.1.1 The Upper Reaches

The source of the River Stour is marked by a Scheduled Ancient Monument, St Peter's Pump, within the National Trust property of Stourhead. The springs from the natural Chalk and Upper Greensand aquifers within the surrounding hills were collected to form a component of the landscaped grounds of the magnificent Stourhead estate. The town of Gillingham down-river is best known for the fact that John Constable painted both the bridge and nearby mill in 1823.

The town bridge carries traffic over the Shreen Water, a tributary of the Stour. These two watercourses combine a short distance to the south of the bridge. Following his painting of Gillingham Bridge in July 1820, Constable was to return in August 1823 to paint Purn's Mill, which was an undershoot mill located on the Shreen Water a short distance north of Gillingham Parish Church.



Figure 4.2:
Gillingham Bridge by
John Constable RA.
Oil.1823. Courtesy
Tate Images 2017.

3.2. The Middle Reaches

The Middle Reaches of the Stour can be regarded as the section flowing south and then south-eastwards from Gillingham towards Sturminster Newton and beyond, passing through the Blackmore Vale. The Blackmore Vale extends towards Cranborne Chase to the east and west to Sherborne with streams flowing from the catchment into the Stour. Along the middle reaches of the Stour the water body grows considerably in size as it is fed by a series of smaller watercourses and rivers, including from the north-west the River Cale, the River Lodden from the north, from the south-west the Rivers Lydden and Divelish and from the east the Iwerne and the Tarrant. A short distance to the south-east is Fiddleford where the mill and an important small manor house are located adjacent to the river. South-east of Hod Hill the road follows the river past Durweston then, close by, is Bryanston, an early mansion where the Stour passes through the school grounds before reaching Blandford Forum located on one of the major fords on the River Stour. A magnificent multi-arched stone bridge crosses the Stour here and probably dates from the late thirteenth century.



Figure 4.3: Fiddleford Mill, Sturminster Newton. The detail achievable through the medium of watercolour drawing is evident in this fine view of the mill at Sturminster Newton by Henry Joseph Moule (1825-1904). Watercolours are ranked most highly of all art media in terms of the topographical and architectural detail that they can provide. Courtesy: Dorset Museum.

Between Blandford and Wimborne Minster the village of Spetisbury is notable for Crawford Bridge. Constructed of Purbeck stone, this graceful nine arched structure is regarded by many as one of the most beautiful bridges in Dorset. A short distance to the east of Spetisbury is Shapwick, a village running down to the northern bank of the Stour. Its church is located picturesquely very close to the riverbank. The church was painted in oils by the prolific Dorset artist Frederick Whitehead (1853-1938).



Figure 4.5: This oil painting of *Shapwick Church* by Dorset artist, Frederick Whitehead (1853-1938), shows the church located very close to the north bank of the River Stour.

Courtesy:
Leamington Spa Art
Gallery & Museum.

3.3 Lower Reaches

The entrance to Wimborne Minster from the south-west is via Julian's Bridge, which was originally constructed in the mid-seventeenth century. Julian's Bridge features in many artworks of the town, although the spread of development and the growth of trees alongside the highway means that many of the vistas depicted by nineteenth century artists can no longer be appreciated. At Wimborne the Stour is joined by the river Allen, which flows south from Wimborne St Giles on Cranborne Chase. To the south the Stour flows under Canford Bridge towards Canford Magna.



Figure 4.6: The River Stour looking towards Wimborne Minster was illustrated by the watercolourist, Walter Frederick Tyndale in *Wessex* by C. Holland (1906). Water meadows occupy the floodplain south of the town.



Figure 4.7: This detailed oil painting by Arthur Henry Davis (1881) shows the rear view of Walford Mill at Wimborne Minster on the River Allen.

Courtesy: Russell-Cotes Museum & Art Gallery, Bournemouth

After Canford Magna the Stour flows east through Longham, then continues north of the Bournemouth conurbation, through West Parley to Throop. At Hurn, the Moors River joins the Stour, adding to its size and flow before passing beneath Iford Bridge, historically an important river crossing.

Approaching Christchurch, the Stour passes beneath the Iford Bridges with the original structure remaining preserved alongside its 1930s replacement. Close to Christchurch Priory, one of the most painted buildings on the banks of the Stour, stands Place Mill, which dates from Medieval times and occupies the location adjacent to the old quay. The Priory itself dominates the waterfront and was painted by numerous artists, often from across the river. The Stour and the Avon meet at Christchurch Harbour before flowing together past Hengistbury Head and Mudeford, to enter the sea through a channel called 'the Run'.



Figure 4.8: *Place Mill and Priory, Christchurch* by Christina Allen. Oil. c.1880.

Courtesy: Red House Museum, Christchurch.



Figure 4.9: *Eel Traps. On the Stour.*

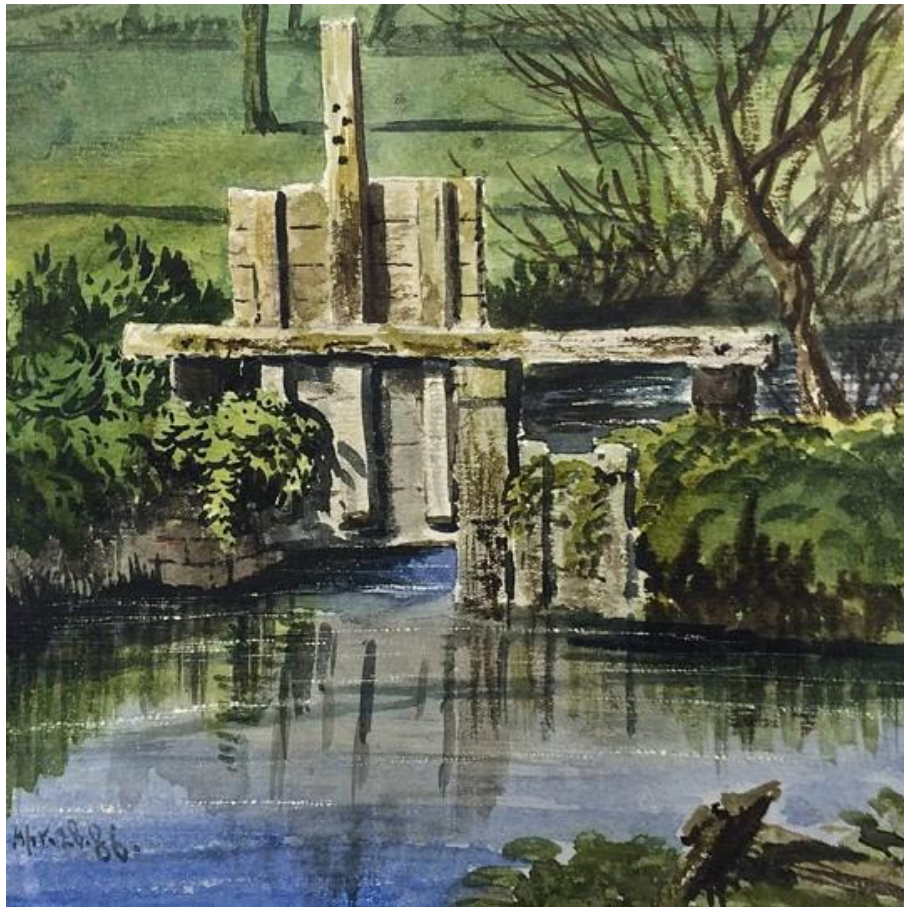
Although the location is not known, this Victorian watercolour provides a detailed depiction of a past rural practice, which was common on Dorset's rivers and streams.



Figure 4.10: *Wick Ferry (to the north of Christchurch)* by Arthur W. Davies. Oil. 1879.

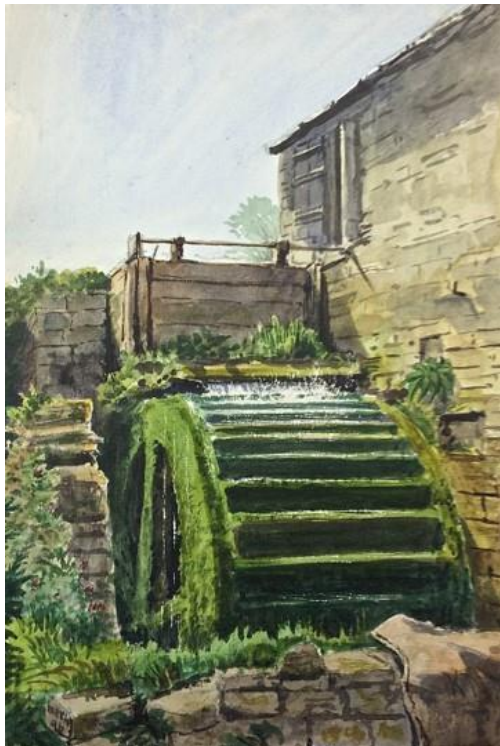
Courtesy: Russell-Cotes Art Gallery & Museum, Bournemouth.

Past River Water Management Measures: Figures 4.11 – 4.14 Below.



The depiction of weirs, traps, water wheels and other such water management measures were often ignored by artists, with the exception of local artists/antiquarians who were fascinated with rural life and practices. In Dorset Henry Joseph Moule (1825-1904) painted rural scenes such as these along Dorset's rivers and streams. These scenes are typical of the river landscapes and structures within the catchment. Moule painted over 1,500 such views on the Stour and the Avon.

Images courtesy of Dorset Museum.



Sequences of artworks, through time, illustrate differing artistic styles and media and also test artistic accuracy, as well as depicting the historical character of the site. **Figure 4.15 (top)** is an aquatint engraving by the topographical artist, William Daniell RA, and is a plate from his *Voyage Round Great Britain* (Daniell & Ayton, 1814-1825²). **Figure 4.16 (middle)** is a lithograph taken from across the river by Louis Haghe in about 1840. The present-day view, **Figure 4.17** is shown at the bottom of this page.





Figure 4.18 (top) and 4.19 (middle) were painted by postcard artists Henry Wimbush and Alfred Robert Quinton respectively in about 1920. The views illustrate how, through the medium of watercolour, highly detailed depictions of riverside conditions, environments and cultural heritage can result. These two postcard artists alone produced over 4,000 views across England and form a very importance archive in full colour spanning the period from 1890-1934.

Courtesy: Figure 4.19 Salmon's.

Figure 4.20 (bottom) shows the view today.

4. How can the Art Imagery inform us of river change?

Over its 98 km length the Stour meanders through the Counties of Wiltshire and Dorset to the English Channel at Christchurch. Along its route it exhibits a range of geomorphological features as it cuts its way through a diverse range of natural environments, and more populated zones near to the coast. Fortunately, there is a rich art heritage along the Stour, with watercolour drawings and oil paintings in particular focussing on the physical and natural environments but also riverside cultural heritage.

The artworks tell the story of river side development, primarily for industrial purposes, and river alteration over the last 200 years. This includes particularly the mills, historic houses and bridges that are such a distinctive feature of Dorset. Local artists, including Henry Joseph Moule (1825-1904), were prolific in depicting rural scenery, including Dorset's many rivers and streams. Dorset Council's archive of over 1,500 of Moule's works describe riverside life through the mid and late nineteenth century, including, for example, past river water management measures, including weirs, traps, water wheels and other features that controlled levels of water within the meadow lands and flood zones bordering rivers such as the Stour and the Avon.

Some of the most visited historic sites, including some of the mills, bridges and, for example, Christchurch Priory, drew the attention of England's leading artists, including Turner and Girtin, and the case study illustrates how a continuous sequence of images of the riverside Priory are available, certainly from the early nineteenth century. For those interested in both river management and cultural heritage, the resources now available online through ArtUK and WatercolourWorld are comprehensive.

5. What are the key issues that can be learnt from this Study Area?

The study site demonstrates that a diverse range of subjects were chosen by artists along the course of the Stour. These are not confined to the river itself, but include historic buildings, great houses and parklands, bridges, mills, churches, abbeys and other historic industrial sites, as well as popular recreation locations nearer the coast. The extent of the art resource provides a wealth of images, particularly of the market towns and villages and the coastal zone, although some very rural locations were less frequently painted; the exception is H. J. Moule, whose archive is now contained on the WatercolourWorld website.

A key purpose of the range of selected case studies from across England is to raise awareness of the extent of the art resource and, through examination of the various illustrations, to try and offer assistance to a wide range of users interested in all aspects of river planning, management and heritage. Whilst there are some obvious areas of interest that may be sought, for example, past riverside management practice and assessment of any lessons that may be learnt that could be applied today, there may be other areas of particular interest that specialists may find and which could create wider value that can be derived from this new resource.

6. References

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2. Daniell, W. & Ayton, R. 1814-25. *A Voyage Round Great Britain*. Longman's. London.