

Asset Details

Asset name	Dorchester Water Meadows
Asset address	River Frome north of Dorchester
Additional location information	latitude / longitude
	50.719605,-2.436610
Asset type	Sites and places

Heritage Significance

Value	Description	Level
Archaeological value	The site contains extensive earthwork remains of post-medieval bedwork water meadows, part of a run of meadows that extend along the River Frome from Charminster to Stinsford. Bedwork water meadows are visible as prominent ridges and interlocking channels, and these are evident across the site, which extends across the whole of the northern edge of Dorchester. In archaeological terms, the water meadows contain little complex stratigraphy, so their archaeological integrity is maintained largely by the retention of visible features such as earthworks and associated structures. However, they also have the potential for buried/waterlogged artefacts and palaeoecological remains. More widely, they are becoming increasingly rare as an asset type, but the predominance of their use in Dorset, Hampshire and Wiltshire means they are relatively common in these areas.	Moderate
Architectural value	As well as earthworks and field boundaries, the water meadows contain a range of built features such as sluices, hatches, bridges, walls, roadways and culverts. The architectural and historic interest of some of these features as individual heritage assets is reflected in the grade II listing of two of the extant sluices, and a listed bridge that is integral to an irrigation pond. A grade II listed wall along Westleaze Road may also be functionally related to these water meadows, seemingly being intended to protect the causeway from being undermined by the water and, potentially, to keep livestock off the road. Other structures related to the operation of the water meadows also survive across the site and beyond, with sluices at both Cokers Frome and Stinsford water meadows. Many other water management features that were integral to the water meadows operation are likely to be identifiable through more detailed field survey.	Outstanding
Historic illustrative value	<p>Water meadows are a system of channels within meadows alongside a river or stream that are irrigated with water. The large numbers of water meadows in the area, of which this site is a part, illustrate the fertility of the land, which was fertilised by calcium from the chalk geology and the leachings of arable land. This led to greater hay yields and lush pasture, which in turn meant that larger sheep flocks could be kept and more manure produced, enabling the extension of arable cultivation. As such, the water meadows were essential to the livelihoods of the community. Their abundance, survival, and continuity of use and management over centuries illustrates the importance of the rural economy to the area, where they formed an essential component of the 'sheep and corn' economy for over 400 years. Their ability to tell this story has been diminished to some extent as the economy has shifted and the meadows themselves are no longer in use, but they still retain many of the components that document the historic importance of the site.</p> <p>The site includes individual assets, such as sluice gates and bridges, which survive relatively well and illustrate the different features needed in order to manage water levels in the meadows. Such survivals are rare because for the meadows to function properly, the sluices and other operational infrastructure needed to be maintained and renewed. This means that those that survive today</p>	High

	generally date from the end of a water meadow's use and may be much later than that of the site's origins, but still have an important story to tell about the management and purpose of the site.	
Historic associative value	Dorchester and the surrounding area have particularly strong associations with the writer and poet Thomas Hardy, who was born and lived in the area. Hardy's works are set within a fictionalised region referred to by the ancient nomenclature Wessex. In defining Wessex, Hardy drew upon real places to inform his imaginary landscape. In such a way, Dorchester became 'Casterbridge' and subsequently featured prominently in his works including poems and several of his books, including <i>The Mayor of Casterbridge</i> , <i>Under the Greenwood Tree</i> , <i>The Trumpet Major</i> and <i>Far from the Madding Crowd</i> . In <i>The Mayor of Casterbridge</i> , Hardy writes that the town "... had no suburbs - in the ordinary sense. Country and town met at a mathematical line." Beyond the town Hardy described the fictional 'Durnover Moor', an area of water meadows and corn fields that draws directly upon the historic landscape character of the site.	High
Aesthetic or artistic value	The historic design of the water meadows was based primarily on function rather than aesthetics, meaning they have little designed aesthetic value as an historic asset. However, the water meadows do have some fortuitous aesthetic value now as a result of their scenic qualities and contribution to the rural setting of Dorchester. This 'natural' picturesque quality was recognised in the 18th century through the incorporation of part of the meadows into the town walks.	Moderate
Communal value	The water meadows are well used as recreational space by residents and visitors to Dorchester, with public footpaths providing access along the river as well as through some of the meadows. Although much of this importance is related to their amenity value, their contribution to the character, history and local distinctiveness of Dorchester is also recognised locally, as was evident in the reaction against their inclusion in a proposed allocation site as part of the local plan.	Moderate



Examples of a bridge and sluice gate.



The River Frome, the meadows, another, larger sluice gate, and Dorchester in the distance.