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## New Light on Milford's Salterns

by *K. F. Sawyer, B.Sc.*

The preparation of salt by the evaporation of sea-water is as old as civilisation itself. It is still an economic method in some parts of the world, but vanished from these shores in the first half of last century as rock-salt deposits began to be worked more efficiently. The earliest record of a saltern in Milford occurs in the 12th century. As the number of salterns multiplied slowly over the next 600 years, the industry became a major local resource and a significant contributor to the Exchequer by way of tax. In the prosperous days of the 18th century, the shoreline from Hurst shingle spit to Pennington and beyond was one expanse of salterns glistening white in the sunlight and dotted with little pumping windmills and boiling-houses.

In a monograph on the subject, A. T. Lloyd<sup>1</sup> has given a detailed account of the local industry - its history, practice, economics and eventual decline. In it he had necessarily to assume, for want of other evidence, that the salterns which lay within Milford parish suffered the same fate and declined at the same rate as those at Lymington and elsewhere. In the light of some recent research that assumption is no longer strictly true. Many of Milford's salterns closed at a much earlier date and in a much more abrupt fashion than those elsewhere as the result of a local catastrophe.

The new light on the subject derives from a detailed examination of two sets of old parish records - the ledger accounts of the churchwardens, which run from 1713 to 1800, and those of the Poor Law overseers covering the period 1797 to 1835. Both the "wardens and overseers obtained the major part of their income from a rate laid on the parish, collected annually by the wardens and more

frequently by the overseers. Both sets of the accounts run from Easter to Easter. The rate was assessed, just as at the present time, on the occupational use of property, so that the income sides of the ledger accounts furnish complete lists of rate-payers from year to year with details of their properties (all carefully done early on, somewhat slipshod by the 1770s). Since salterns could be bought, sold or rented like other property - houses or land - they too were rated and, fortunately for the present enquiry, separately itemised among the ratepayer's assessment. The 18th century method of arriving at rateable values was no less obscure than that in use today. In the case of the salterns, rateable values appear to have been based primarily on size and an assumed (theoretical) output per pan. The latter was very dependant upon the weather, so that operating a saltern inevitably involved a certain speculative element and in years like 1802, when prolonged rain cut the season to just two weeks, it could be heart-breaking. But despite weather, rates, tithes and taxes the salterns evidently paid their way and seem to have been a sought after local investment right up to the final disaster.

The rate lists themselves were the product of a succession of parish clerks and other officers and accordingly they vary widely in the clarity of the handwriting, the idiosyncracies of the spelling (occasionally Hampshire phonetic) and the general orderliness - lack of it - with which the accounts were kept. The main problem in extracting the relevant information from them arose from the nomenclature used for the salterns. Except for the inclusion after 1760 of one or two specific names like Mount or Highlea, the clerks knew each saltern only by the name of

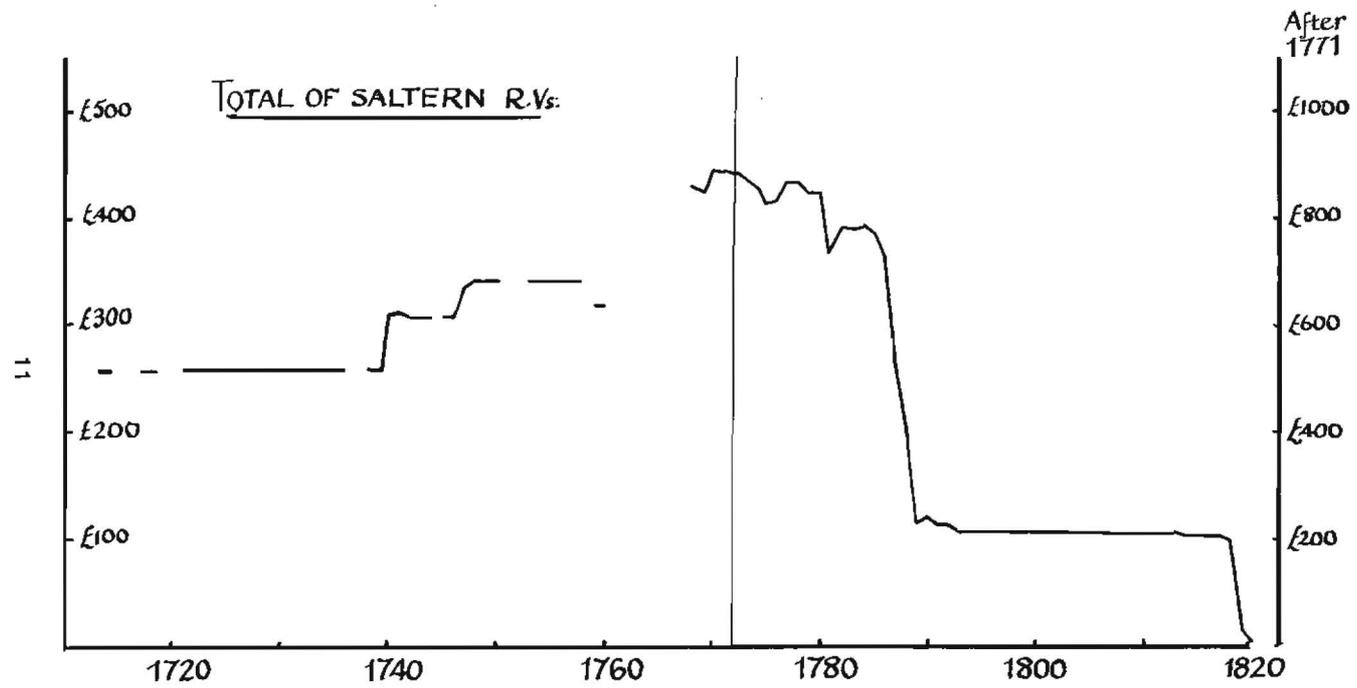
some previous (often long dead) owner or operator – as Gates', Lisle's, Wavell's, etc. The salterns changed hands quite frequently and no distinction was made in the rate lists between those who worked their own salterns and those who merely rented them. (Hence the non-specific term "operator" used here where there is any doubt). When, in addition, new salterns were opened, or old ones merged or divided, or when the clerk changed the names to those he thought more appropriate, identification could at times be tricky. Nevertheless, a coherent story has emerged and it has been possible to set out, as a basis for further study, a history of each saltern in terms of its operator and rateable value. There are only a few gaps where the rate lists are missing, the largest being the eight years between 1760 and 1768.

Less helpfully, the rate lists provide only a rough guide as to where each saltern was located. For rate collection purposes the earlier lists divided the parish into four "tythings", Milford, Keyhaven, Efford and Pennington, but as the boundaries between them are now somewhat obscure, "Keyhaven" as used here extends south as far as Hurst shingle spit and includes what is now Keyhaven marshes and "Pennington" refers to the rest of the present marshes as far as the old parish boundary just beyond Pennington Creek.

An account of the salterns as a whole resulting from the present analysis can best be set out in the form of the accompanying diagram. There the individual rateable values of the salterns have been added together to give, as it were, their "total worth" in each year of the records up to 1820. Thus, in 1713 there were nine salterns whose rateable values totalled £256. They varied greatly in size, the smallest being valued at only £3 10/- and the largest at £72. Of the six people who

worked them, three probably resided outside the parish, two had additional small-holdings (presumably for their support in winter) and the sixth was John Hicks, a substantial farmer of Pennington, whose link with the salterns foreshadowed the shape of things to come.

As the diagram shows, the salterns underwent no further development during the next 27 years. Over the same period, except for one saltern, there was also little change of operator. The one exception was Gates' (later called Mount) saltern, where a succession of tenants tried their hands at making salt and gave up after a few years, possibly because operating conditions there were already becoming difficult. To the parish the salterns were a valuable asset as collectively they provided it with a regular, dependable income amounting to 17 per cent of its rate revenue. But if the salterns were relatively static during those years, farming was not and surplus cash from its rising prosperity turned farmers' attention to the salterns as a promising alternative investment. So, in 1740, expansion began with the opening of two new salterns, both worked by farmers, followed in 1747 by a further addition and other adjustments which brought the total to 13 salterns with an aggregate value of £338. In that expansion, the local family of Hicks played a leading part. They had been well-heeled yeomen at the beginning of the century and their success since as farmers had given them a dominating position in the parish and an urge to climb the social ladder. To John Hicks' single saltern of 1713, his widow and brother had added two more. Their successor had doubled the family investment so that, by the 1750s, Richard Hicks (soon to be "Esquire") alone or in partnership operated eight of the 13 salterns. Thus, by the late '50s, much had changed. The small man who, earlier on, had been content to make a living from just a saltern or two had now largely given



place to richer men with wider interests consolidating the salterns into fewer hands.

The break in continuity caused by the missing rate lists for 1760 to 1768 is particularly unfortunate because those eight years were a period of great activity, physical and financial. Five new salterns had been dug out and brought into use, others had been enlarged and two merged to bring the total temporarily to 17 before further mergers in the next few years reduced it to 15. More significantly, perhaps, there had been a major change in operators, the farming interest having been replaced by what appear to have been entrepreneurs exploiting a rising market. That had largely come about by Richard Hicks having let or sold all his farming and saltern properties and gone away to live the life of a gentleman. His salterns had been acquired variously by Moxham and Beckley & Co., and they with Rogers and Furner worked all the salterns save one by 1770.

The salterns were now at the peak of their prosperity, grossing an annual value of £445 and providing the parish with a very welcome 28 per cent of its rates resources. (The doubling of rateable values in 1772 is of no significance in the present context. It applied generally throughout the parish and, since no more money was raised thereby, was probably an administrative adjustment to bring a lagging parish into line with others). But hardly had the salterns reached that peak than they began to falter and then to fail. The first hint that all might not be well came in 1774/5 when Mount saltern was forced to close for a time and did not re-open until 1777. No great significance was attached to the event as Mount saltern had been in trouble before and, carried away no doubt by the enthusiasm of the time, another saltern was optimistically opened at Pennington in 1776. However, within three years misfortune struck again, this time with greater

effect and set in train a whole cascade of closures in the next ten years. Two neighbours of Mount saltern closed in 1779, followed by the re-opened Mount saltern and two others in 1781. After a brief respite, closures began again with the saltern newly opened in 1776 closing in 1784, the largest saltern of all in 1787 and a further three in 1788. So, by 1789, when closures came to an end, only six salterns remained in use out of the 16 in operation in 1778 and among those six survivors, four had their rateable values substantially reduced – in the worst case from £108 to £20 – because their output in future would be much restricted. None of the salterns which closed re-opened at a later date and rateable values once lowered never rose again. The finality of the disaster is impressive and it must have involved all concerned in heavy financial loss. Indirectly, Milford parish suffered too, for it lost one-fifth of its rate income at a time when unemployment and poor relief were beginning to press hard upon it.

What caused disaster so unexpectedly and on such a scale? The Salt Tax and commercial competition which ruined the salterns in later years had no part in this earlier collapse. Nor was the war with the American colonies (1775-1783), which interfered with the salt trade for a time, in any way to blame. The disaster was a local affair and the culprit was the sea. In the stormy years of the late 18th century, the sea repeatedly breached the Hurst shingle spit and, surging in to flood the salterns, put many of them out of action for good. The justification for that statement is the evidence from the rate lists that the closures did not occur in haphazard fashion but took place in a "logical" sequence, of which the temporary disabling of Mount saltern was the beginning. The latter is the one saltern whose location is accurately known from old maps. It was sited in the 18th century on land which lay to the south-east of the

present mouth of the Danes Stream and which is now submerged well out to sea. In 1720<sup>2</sup>, the saltern stood some distance back from the shingle spit, but by 1780<sup>3</sup> the spit had moved up to and lay alongside the saltern's sea-wall on its southern side, making it particularly vulnerable to damage by the sea. Part of it was destroyed in 1758/9 and it again fell victim to the sea in 1774/5. The damage was repairable and the saltern was hopefully re-opened in 1777. But two years later the shingle spit gave way again, this time in no uncertain manner and initiated a series of floods of exceptional frequency and extent. On every successive occasion the breach (or breaches) grew wider, thus allowing the flood waters to reach ever further inland as the following sequence of closures shows. In the winter of 1778/9 the sea burst in and destroyed two salterns at Keyhaven, one certainly, the other probably, in the vicinity of New Lane. Mount saltern survived on that occasion, but two years later was destroyed in the next invasion, along with another saltern at Keyhaven and the first victim at Pennington. The sea claimed a further saltern at Pennington in 1783/4, another in 1786/7 and took a final toll of three there in 1788/9, with two others badly damaged. Thus, Keyhaven suffered first in the onslaught and lost four salterns out of five; Pennington, attacked later, came off rather better and lost six out of eleven.

The whole episode, with so much damage in just ten years, is right outside modern experience and must be considered unique. Mere gentle flooding could hardly have destroyed the salterns; the flood waters must have been deep enough for destructive waves to do their work. The shingle spit could therefore have offered little resistance to the sea and itself may well have been washed away over a considerable distance. That would account for the unusual frequency with which flooding took place and implies that, in the absence

of corporate responsibility, local resources were inadequate to keep the spit in sufficient repair. In consequence, the salterns had largely to be abandoned to their fate. What brought the closures finally to an end in 1789 is an unresolved question. It seems unlikely that natural processes – the regeneration of the shingle spit and all that that involves – could alone have acted quickly enough. Most probably they were aided, or even preceded, after the alarming losses of 1788, by the erection of local defences around the surviving salterns.

The above explanation is usefully supplemented by two contemporary maps. The first<sup>3</sup>, on a scale of 3" to the mile, is based on a nautical survey carried out in 1781. It shows the coast in considerable detail, but omits all but token features inland. As far as the salterns are concerned, its chief feature is a clearly marked sea-wall protecting the Pennington salterns and extending to round part of the present Keyhaven marshes. From there through Keyhaven to the shingle spit there is no raised protection against the sea. Possibly none had been needed earlier or possibly it had already been swept away, but certainly whenever the shingle spit gave way the salterns there would be entirely at the mercy of the sea. Mount saltern is marked "in ruins" although its sea-wall appears to be still intact. The other salterns are shown in a formal manner without comment as to their condition.

The second map,<sup>4</sup> also to a scale of 3" to the mile, is the surveyor's draft for the first Ordnance Survey map of the area. It was made in 1797, eight years after the last of the closures, when the sea had largely digested its grains. The transformation since 1781 is most marked. Nothing remains of Mount saltern except the rubble of its boiling-house in a wide expanse of mud. Similarly, there is no trace of salterns around New Lane and, farther along, the sea at high tide lapped

the whole length of Saltgrass Lane submerging the saltern (now the marsh) to the east of it and also covered what is now Keyhaven car park. Opposite the latter, a new feature – a low bank running round the shoreline to join the end of the old sea-wall – was probably one of the defensive measures taken to bring closures to an end in 1789. A large, cross-hatched area adjoining the sea-wall is broadly labelled “Salt Works”, but without a key to its markings, individual salterns cannot be identified. However, the map does bring out another important feature. The Avon Water, which today flows to the sluice gates at Keyhaven, in those days turned eastwards half-a-mile inland and flowed as twin streams among the salterns to empty into the sea through two openings (sluices?) in the sea-wall. They were potential weaknesses and it was possibly by way of those two streams that the sea in the 1780s was able to flood the Pennington salterns from the rear and destroy many of them despite an intact sea-wall.

All the evidence, then, points to the sea as the cause of the disaster. When it ended in 1789, Milford’s salterns had lost three-quarters of their manufacturing capacity. No-one at the time could have been certain that the danger from the sea was indeed over and, in contrast to the euphoria of the 1770s, the outlook for the future remained precarious. No attempt was made at further salvage and the reduced output of the crippled survivors was recognised as permanent by their new rating assessments. The salterns entered their final phase in sombre mood.

That final phase lasted nearly 30 years, during which the shrunken salterns did little more than plod on, as it were. Profitability began to ebb away, slowly at first, more steeply in the new century. The Salt Tax was doubled in 1798 and in the

following year three of the operators thought it wise, or were forced, to give up. Charles St. Barbe took over their four salterns. St. Barbe, business man and banker of Lymington, stands out in those last years of the salterns as, perhaps, the only man who still thought that money could be made from salt. He had invested in three Pennington salterns in 1781 and lost two in 1788/9. (It shows how little the threat to the Pennington salterns was appreciated in 1781 that an astute man like St. Barbe should have been caught out in that way). He had also financed others by loans and mortgages and it was probably as much to protect his financial interests as his faith in their future that he took over the additional salterns in 1799. At that stage, he alone operated all the salterns at Pennington.

The salt trade survived the Napoleonic war, but in its aftermath conditions worsened and, possibly hurried on by two very wet summers in succession, closures began again. The saltern at Keyhaven did not re-open after the 1817 season, St. Barbe closed all his salterns in 1819 and Jennins (who had re-acquired a saltern from St. Barbe) followed suit in 1820. Then St. Barbe seems to have had some second thoughts, for in 1821 he began operating again, though on a much smaller scale (£54), and continued in that way until his death in 1826. His “Representative”, as the rate lists called them, carried on production for a short time before closing down completely in 1828. For the first time in over 600 years, not a grain of salt was produced in Milford. The break lasted four years. In 1832, Samuel St. Barbe, as if to carry on the family tradition, restarted production in a small way (£20) and was still making salt on that scale when the rate lists were brought to an end by the closure of the local Poorhouse and the transfer of its luckless inhabitants to the rigours of the Union Workhouse in Lymington.

Of those who worked the salterns and left their mark on Milford very little is known. William Furner, who operated several salterns from 1760 onwards, including Mount saltern, did well enough out of them to build himself a fine house at Keyhaven around 1780. The parish clerk, much impressed, dubbed it "the Great House". William, sadly, did not live long afterwards to enjoy his new property and his son, inheriting it in the midst of the disaster to the salterns, found it an embarrassing white elephant. The house survives today as Fisher's Mead. The Jennins family had a long though intermittent, connection with the salterns. John Jennins, then at Vidle Van, was one of the two farmers who worked the new salterns in 1740 and his grandson Richard was among the last to operate a saltern in 1820. The Jennins lived from 1786 in what is now Carrington Grange, and it was Richard who enlarged the house with the stuccoed extension facing the road in 1814/16. How much of the cost was defrayed by the meagre profits of the salterns in their last years is problematical. The one remaining connection is more tenuous. In the 18th century there was a Salt Office in Milford with a resident Salt Officer to regulate the trade. In the 1760s, the then Salt Officer, Thomas Shepard, moved out of the old Office, which was later demolished, and

went to live (if identification is correct) in Rose Cottage, Barnes Lane, where he stayed until 1773. From a hint in the rate lists, it seems that Rose Cottage served as the Salt Office during those years.

Beginning in the 1820s, the derelict salterns were slowly levelled and turned over to grazing. Soon after, the Avon Water was diverted, as already mentioned, so converting marshy land into good pasture. By 1840<sup>s</sup>, farmers had taken over all the old saltern lands except the small corner near the parish boundary, where St. Barbe still worked his Troytown and Flat-form saltern. Succeeding years have added to the obliteration and, today, the level acres of the marshes yield little clue to the patchwork of baulk and salt-pan that once covered them.

#### REFERENCES:

- <sup>1</sup> A. T. Lloyd, *The Salterns of the Lymington Area* (Private publication).
- <sup>2</sup> Estate map, *Manors of Milford Barnes and Milford Montagu, 1720* (Hampshire Record Office).
- <sup>3</sup> *Chart of West Solent, 1781* (Hydrographical Office, Admiralty, 1808).
- <sup>4</sup> *Surveyor's 3-inch draft, sheet 75, 1797* (Ordnance Survey, Southampton).
- <sup>5</sup> *Milford Tithes Award Map, 1840* (Hampshire Record Office).