

WHEN OUR TOWN HAD TOO MUCH WATER!

By "BEORCHAM"

"Company's water"—a rather "dry" subject of late!—is among the conveniences all urban householders take for granted nowadays. But, comparatively speaking, it is a modern luxury. We may wax indignant when cisterns are empty and taps refuse to function, but Berkhamstedians of a century ago had few cisterns to fill and few taps to turn. If she was lucky, great-grandmother was able to wrestle with a heavy, creaking pump in the kitchen; otherwise she drew every drop of water from a well at the bottom of the garden. Picturesque, but inconvenient!

Scores of these wells remain in older parts of the town. No one would think of drawing water from them to-day, yet their purity is probably less questionable now than it was when householders had no alternative but to drink well water. Water mains had to be laid before Berkhamsted could have a hygienic sewage and drainage system, and it is remarkable that epidemics were not more serious and more frequent in view of the appalling conditions described by a local writer of Victorian days. Cesspits, he says, were the only means of dealing with sewage, and "it was no uncommon sight to see the drainage from manure heaps" flowing through gateways into the High Street.

Whatever inconveniences our forebears had to endure, they were never short of water in the town itself. Rather, there was too much of a good thing, for the Bulbourne spilled itself into adjoining meadows, sometimes turning the valley into marshland for months at a time. The cutting of the canal largely checked that nuisance, and it has abated altogether since pumping operations have lowered the water level, putting many springs out of action.

The Castle's 800 Years-Old Well

Best known of our springs is the one which gave St. John's Well Lane its name. As told in an earlier article, this spring was originally in the grounds of the mediæval Hospital of St. John (possibly a leper hospital), and tradition has it that pagans worshipped water nymphs and sprites there until St. John the Baptist converted and baptised Berkhamsted's first Christians at the very same spring! This was the town's main water supply before cottagers had their own wells; two wardens regulated the use of the water, taking their duties seriously enough to prosecute washer-women for polluting the spring in 1400. In Victorian days St. John's spring was reputed to have curative properties.

No one knows when wells were first dug at Berkhamsted, but one at least 800 years old may still be seen in the Castle grounds, on the top of the shell keep ("Tower Hill"). Beautifully lined with stone, it was dug to a depth of 60ft.—the height of the mound—to ensure a supply of

water in the event of the outer defences being overrun and the garrison forced to retreat to their last place of refuge.

Almost as old as the Castle well was one dug by the Bonhommes when their monastery at Ashridge was founded in the 13th century. Water shortage has always been a problem at Ashridge—the nearest stream, the Gade, is two miles distant—and the monks fashioned a treadmill, operated by dogs, to draw water from their deep well. Reference to this ingenious use of dog-power appears in the Privy Purse Expenses at the time of Henry VIII's visit in August, 1530, viz.: "To Edmonde the foteman for so muche by him gyven in rewarde at Assherige to one that made the dogges to draw water, 3s. 8d." As late as 1860 two horses "in a great wheel" operated the heavy apparatus for drawing water at Ashridge House.

In the Rectory garden there may still be seen the remains of a well dating back to the time when the Rev. John Cowper lived in the old Rectory House, near the entrance to the drive. The well is traditionally associated with William Cowper, the poet son of our 18th century rector, a marble tablet recording that a "daily crystal draught refreshed the poet's fragile youth."

A Family Industry

Berkhamsted Place must have been exceptional in not having to depend upon wells. Water was apparently pumped through wooden pipes from the Bulbourne or the Castle moat, for we learn that in the Civil War, when Parliamentarians ransacked the house, the pipes and water-mill were broken.

About this time Berkhamsted parishioners were given a proprietary interest in a London waterworks. Thomas Baldwin, a subject of Charles I, left shares in "certain springs and waterworks near Hyde Park" to the poor of Watford, where he was born, to the poor of Berkhamsted, where he was educated, and to the poor of St. Martin-in-the-Fields, where he resided. Some years afterwards the waterworks were sold for £2,500, and Berkhamsted's share, £432, was used to purchase 40 acres at Chesham.

Incidentally, it was due to our once-abundant supplies of spring water that the cultivation of watercress became a minor local industry. Cress has been grown on a commercial scale in Herts and Bucks for 130 years, and some of the original beds are still yielding twelve good crops a year. The business is usually a family one, carried on by the grandsons and great-grandsons of the founders. Gum-booted in the streams, they still prune the cress in the time-honoured way.

Watercress was once grown in the Castle moats and in a large pond (now dried up) behind the railway station. Although too coarse for human consumption, a use for it was formerly found in a Manchester dye-works.

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WATTS' STORES

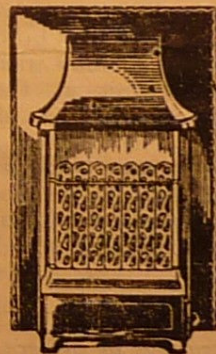
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