

From Ponds and Wells to Taps and Hydrants

The Town's Pipelines

FOND AS WE ARE OF centenarians in Berkhamsted, we forgot to raise our glasses in 1964 to celebrate the 100th anniversary of the arrival of piped water. Perhaps a toast in company's water would not have appealed to the consumers. In any case the Great Berkhamstead Water Works Company failed to become a centenarian under its maiden name; in 1954 it joined pipes with a much larger Rickmansworth-based company.

Berkhamsted was making liquid history long before the first steam engine raised water from the first 200-ft. boring in the town centre, between the High Street and the canal. In medieval times our forebears obtained water from either the Bulbourne or its little and now dried-up tributary, St. John's Well, which sent a small stream bubbling down the lane of that name to the river. The well was so important that its use was regulated by wardens, who prosecuted washerwomen for polluting the water in 1400. At an earlier date water nymphs were worshipped at St. John's Well, and as late as Victorian times the water was said to cure sore eyes. People called to fill bottles for home treatment, but Berkhamsted never became a spa.

WELLS AND PONDS

In very early times a few rich people had their own wells. The oldest ones are in the Castle grounds—one in the arena, the other bored through the keep to ensure that the garrison, if driven to the last point of retreat, would not thirst. By Victorian times some of the smallest cottages had their own wells, and there was full employment for one of the town's last wood-turners, Tom Meek, who specialised in the manufacture of pump buckets and suckers. Most of the wells have been filled in and today it is rare to see the apparatus for

drawing up buckets of water or the heavy, creaking pump which was a familiar sight in gardens and kitchens. The ancient winding apparatus of a 200-ft. deep well survives in the cellars of Woodcock Hill; it takes 20 minutes to wind up the wooden bucket.

The deepest well is probably the one beneath the chapel of Ashridge House. Dogs and then horses or donkeys worked a treadmill to raise water from this 280-ft. well, a remarkable relic of monastic times at Ashridge. The monks'

BY

'BEORCHAM'

poor neighbours at Little Gaddesden, lacking the means to sink very deep wells, took their water from ponds until 1856, when the Ashridge Water Company, financed by Lord Brownlow, gave Little Gaddesden a modern water supply several years before Berkhamsted.

ACQUIRED TASTE

Long after the Berkhamsted company was formed, many people could not or would not pay for the installation of piped water; in some cases they genuinely preferred the taste of water from their own well, which was often sited dangerously near a cesspit. Some people wilfully and cheerfully reverted to wells after quarrelling with the water company over its charges. As late as 1896 Mr. Lines declined the company's terms for a supply of water to his cottage in Clarence Road and sank an artesian well. Early records of the Berkhamsted company are missing, and little is known of its activities until 1893, the

date of the earliest surviving minute book, now preserved at Rickmansworth. But there is no doubt that operations started near the Town Hall in 1864, a boring, 12-in. diameter, to a high-level reservoir at Kingshill (106,000 gallons) and a low-level reservoir in Green Lane, just off Chesham Road (90,000 gallons). The company's supply area eventually comprised Berkhamsted, Northchurch, Potten End, Flaunden, Ashley Green, Lye Green, Whelpley Hill and Latimer.

VICTORIAN SWIMMING BATH

Slipper baths and a swimming bath were provided at the company's High Street premises. Season tickets were available for swimmers: adults, 10s.; children under 14, 6s. The Berkhamsted Athletic Club secured a reduced charge of 5s. per person provided that not less than thirty members paid in advance.

In 1896 the Parish Council asked if the swimming bath could be set aside on Saturday nights 'for the use of the working classes at 1d. per head'; the directors decided to charge 1½d. between 6 and 10 p.m. Mr. Newell's request that the bath be opened to ladies between certain hours each day brought a reply that the directors did not intend to alter existing arrangements. Nevertheless, some ladies and girls used the swimming bath; a class of swimmers from Berkhamsted School for Girls received instruction by being tied together and pulled through the water.

Abnormal expenditure after a very severe frost, and the failure of a new engine, caused alarm in 1895; a squeeze followed the freeze, the directors forgoing their fees for six months.

POTTEN END WATER TOWER

It was not long before the company sought extra capital. In 1895 the Rural District Council requested a water supply for Potten End, and it was an expensive matter to provide a landmark which is now almost hidden by the trees which have grown up around Potten End water tower. Lord Brownlow originally preferred another site for this tower, but agreed to the company's choice on Berkhamsted Common provided that the reservoir was enclosed in an ornamental tower according to a design approved by his lordship. The tower holds 15,000 gallons.

In a growing district the company was forever laying new pipes and increasing supplies. A new borehole, 200-ft. deep, 13-in. diameter, was sunk in 1903-4, and a new steam pumping engine

capable of raising 80,000 gallons per hour was installed. The Kingshill reservoir was enlarged to a total capacity of 366,000 gallons.

In 1933, the difficulty of keeping up supplies in the high level parts of the company's district was worsened by the new Foundling Hospital at Ashlyns. Another pumping plant was installed and the reservoir capacity was again increased. The gaunt iron pipes which soared above Kingshill were replaced by a 'Norman keep' water tower with a capacity of 300,000 gallons, equal to 1,300 tons, with a water depth of 30-ft., the top water level being 633-ft. above sea level. If you would like a few more figures, the tower contains 80 tons of steel bars and 1,210 tons of concrete; the top of the conical roof is 126-ft. above ground level and the lightning conductor on the weathervane is 12-ft. higher.

THE HOOTER

Since the tower was built the daily consumption of water has risen enormously, but we have had only one serious breakdown in supplies. For a few weeks in 1944 water was a very dry subject indeed.

Older residents will not need to be reminded of the waterworks' hooter, a basso profundo which made itself heard many miles away. It called the fire brigade, sounded air raid warnings, and always played a dirge at 1 p.m. on Saturday to prove that it was in good voice. The hooter's record recital was at 11 a.m. on 11th November, 1918, when seven long, consecutive blasts ended with a whimper. All the steam had been expended, but crowds in the streets ensured that Berkhamsted would not stay silent that day.

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