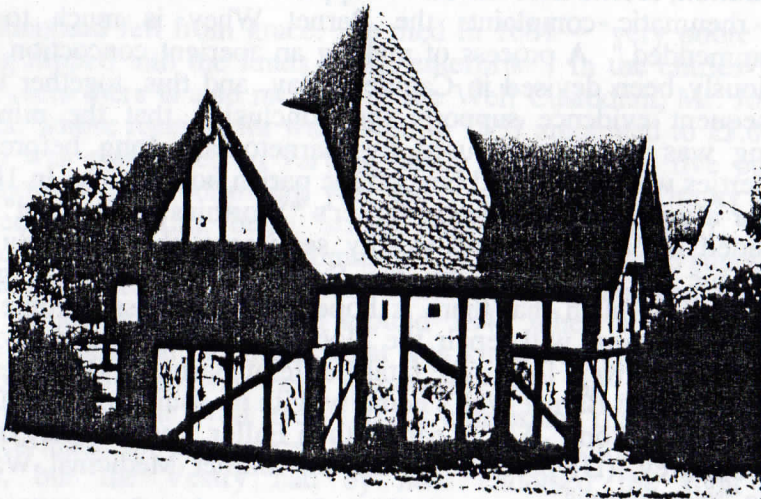


Barnet & District Local History Society

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THE BARNET PHYSIC WELL



1. In the 1930's the Barnet Urban District Council purchased land at the foot of Bells Hill and developed a housing estate, setting aside a small plot upon which, in 1937 the Council erected a shelter to protect the chamber of the Physic Well. The immediate area was designated Pepys' Crescent, perpetuating the local association with the diarist who recorded two visits he paid, to take the waters, between 1660 - 1669, the span covered by his journal.
2. The origins of the well are obscure, and are complicated by the interpretation which historians have placed on the terms - "Discovered" and "Found". In this context reference is usually made to a notice in the bulletin "The Perfect Diurnall", issue dated 5th June 1652, (A) when it was announced that - "There is lately found at Barnet, 10 miles from London, an excellent purging water. It springs from a nitre mine. Half the quantity works as effectively as that of Epsom. It is much approved of by several eminent physicians. Those that have occasion to use it may repair there and take it free." This final sentence, as will be seen, soon

became qualified. But, perhaps 50 years before this report, William Camden (1551-1623) was aware of the Well and mentioned it in his work, originally published in Latin, "Britannica" (B). Camden wrote:- "Upon the south border" - (i.e. of Herts.) - "was discovered a medicinal spring.....it is of great service to the Sex where there is general languour, difficult respiration, febrile heat and loss of appetite. In all colds and fevers and rheumatic complaints the Barnet Whey is much to be recommended." A process of making an aperient concoction had obviously been devised in Camden's day, and this, together with subsequent evidence supports the conclusion that the mineral spring was known and used by Barnetonians long before its properties were publicised beyond the parish boundaries. In 1662, a year after its author's death, Fuller's "Worthies of England" (C) included the assertion, and worthy sentiment, that "Already the catalogue of cures done by the Spring amounteth to a great number, insomuch that there is hope in the process of time the water rising here will repair the blood shed hard by and save as many lives as were lost in the fatal Battle of Barnet." The reverend author claimed Barnet Well's equality with its counterparts at Tonbridge and Epsom. A year earlier than Fuller, another clergyman, Dr. Childrey, (D) proclaimed that the Barnet Medicinal Waters were "very famous".

3. This sort of publicity fell on eager ears, for medical science and practice in the seventeenth century involved patients in fearful treatment and nauseating specifics. It was an age given to gross overeating and drinking, and it is understandable that simple, tolerable and moreover efficacious salts were in popular demand. A 17thC parson summed it up, writing "My wife pretty hearty, having taken physic this day and it working very easily with her, a great mercy"(E) It worked, however, uneasily for Samuel Pepys who, on 11th July 1664 swallowed five glasses. He wrote - "The woman would have me drink three more but I could not." From his subsequent entry, his refusal was prudent. Pepys was at the Well again on Sunday 11th August 1667, and it is significant to note his report that, although he arrived at 7 a.m. and it was a very cold morning, he found "many people a-drinking". (F)

4. The Well is situated on the former Barnet Common, 600 acres of land which ran in the area between Underhill and Arkley Gate in the declivity from Barnet Hill, Wood Street and Arkley Lane. The

Common, and consequently the mineral well, was administered by the Vestry of the Church of St. John the Baptist, Chipping Barnet. Transcripts of Vestry business, covering over a century have been examined and the first traces of "Well" business relate to the years 1656/57 (G) when one, Nicholas Sheppard was appointed honorary Overseer and Treasurer.

Sheppard fell from grace. He died in 1661 - "very poore" - having dipped into the funds of the enterprise. In the entries for these years there is also mention of the Well Custodian, Mr. John Draper, whose receipts for water sold in 1657 amounted to £5.6.0. which was distributed in varying small sums to fifty five poor parishioners. The following year the Vestry granted Draper the privilege of selling beer, "strong Waters," (i.e. spirits) "and tobacco on the Well on the Common". It is reasonable to suppose that he conducted his refreshment trade in a house adjacent to the Well, which was demolished around 1840 when a small farm house was built on the site in what was known as The Wellhouse Field.(H) Draper was held responsible for the conduct and maintenance of the Well itself and his concession did not include charges made to "foreigners" taking a cure. Visitors paid for a purge, but the Vestry had by now endorsed the right of parishioners to free dosages. In 1658 Draper laid out five shillings for repairs to the Well House. This minute entry is important in so far that it indicates the presence of some sort of building over the chamber which, it has been deduced, (J) was excavated and bricked about the time of "The Perfect Diurnall" article, if not before.(V) With Draper tending the Well and plying visitors with stronger liquids, the Vestry decided to appoint two overseers to replace the defaulting Sheppard. One, in 1658, was a parliamentary Captain Randolph Holmes, an interesting local character who, four years later was implicated in an alleged plot, together with some religious crackpots, to assassinate King Charles II. Holmes was acquitted and lived until 1672, when "the ground was broken" for him, serving not only as Well Overseer, Parish Constable and Trustee of the town's first Workhouse, in Wood Street, but also engaged, commercially, as an innkeeper. In 1658 Draper passed Holmes £14.10s.1d. This sum is not, conclusively, the total takings for the year. However, the local supplicants received about half of it, and by 1659 business seems to have developed, commercially, to the extent that the Vestry imposed a temporary ban on the removal of water in bulk. It was not to be

"taken away in rondelets" (i.e. casks) "or greater vessels until further notice". Agreement had been reached and further notice issued, probably some long time before 1663, for an advertisement was promulgated by The Angel & Sun Inn, which stood on the north bank of the Thames, near Strand Bridge, carrying the message:- "Constantly to be sold, all the year, Fresh Tunbridge Water and Epsom Water by Barnet Water and Epsom Ale and Spruce Beer", (K) One customer, not necessarily via this medium, Sir Edward Harley, father of Lord Oxford, writing to Lady Harley, in 1680 (L) said - "I have, this week, sent four bottles of Barnet Water for my sister to take if she continues with you".

5. But, unfortunately from the restoration of King Charles II in 1660 onwards a curtain descends in the available transcripts of Vestry meetings, minutes and accounts, in the context of the running of the Well. It must be assumed that until 1729, when the Lord of the Manor took over, separate records were kept and, if they exist, they are not reflected in this paper. However other sources shed some light, and a Barnet benefactor, by indenture, left a sum of £270 to the Fishmongers' Company, the interest payable to Queen Elizabeth's Grammar School, to the Parish Poor Fund and 20s0d per annum for the maintenance of the Physic Well. In the event of the well becoming "Foresaken or Useless" Alderman John Owen stipulated that this sum should revert to the school to teach one other poor boy of the town of Barnet. (M) Owen, a city merchant, was possibly an Old Elizabethan. He was certainly a governor in the 1650's, and a John Owen, very possibly his father, was also a governor. The former died about 1618 and the latter in 1679, being buried in Barnet on 21st February.

6. The noted historian, Sir Henry Chauncy, writing in 1700 (N) although uncertain about the chemical constitution of the Water, pronounced that it was an excellent and safe purger. But he expatiated to the extent of claiming that it was of great use in most weakly bodies - "especially those that are hypocondriacal or hysterical". Chauncy was sound on costiveness, but his sally into psychiatry is dubious indeed. Daniel Defoe follows with observations included in his "Tour of the whole Island of Britain", published between 1724 - 1727. Defoe, a cornucopia of sometimes questionable facts, reported that, having visited Totteridge, he then observed "The Mineral Waters or Barnet Wells

on the declivity of a hill". He continues - "They were formerly in great request, being much approved by physicians, but of late they began to decline and are now almost forgotten; other waters at Islington and Hamstead (sic) having grown popular in their stead". Subsequent evidence demonstrates that Defoe's assessment was perfunctory and precipitate. The period between "The Discovery" and the following half century was probably the heyday of the Well's popularity. Yet it does not appear to have run down, as a resort, completely until the last quarter of c 18th; even then it was not dormant. It was sufficiently important to have been specified in some detail when, as already mentioned, The Lord of the Joint Manor of East and Chipping Barnet, James Brydges, 1st Duke of Chandos, best remembered, perhaps, as a patron of Handel, stepped in and, in a spirit of philanthropy, not, surely, unconnected with self-interest, enclosed 135 acres of Barnet Common, acquiring the Physic Well in the process. (O) The transaction required an Act of Parliament, dated 1729, and Chandos contracted to make an annual payment of £50 out of this asset, towards Barnet poor relief. The Act included a clause spelling out the right of the parishioners to have free access, at all reasonable times of the day to - "The medicinal Waters on the Great Waste or Common, for their use and benefit only, as of antient time they have been accustomed to use the same". The term "Antient", used less than 80 years after the well was found, fortifies the surmise of a much earlier history. Vestry accounts show that Chandos, initially, made his remittances. One, in 1738, for ten guineas, was received, in his office as Overseer of the Poor, by James Ingram, a surgeon of Barnet who acquired, c. 1720, the Antelope Inn when that establishment was converted and changed its sign to The Red Lion, taking the name of its then defunct opposite number, which was in the neck of the High Street, alongside the parish church. Mention is made of both these establishments because the earlier Red Lion with its "Great Room", visited by Pepys, became the local Assembly Rooms for the entertainment of visitors to the town, when Barnet enjoyed the reputation of a minor spa. The Antelope, The Green Man, The Mitre, The White Bear and other licenced houses enjoyed custom associated directly with the Physic Well. The Duke and the Second Duke defaulted. Their debts to the parish were discharged in 1749, but in the meantime, one John Thomlinson, by private Act of Parliament, and for the, then, considerable sum of £2,630, purchased the rights of the Joint Manor, his perquisites included toll roads and "The Mineral Well

on Barnet Common". (P)

7. With the disappearance of Vestry entries, details relating to the first half of 18thC are scarce. Between 1750 and 1777 some data emerges from a transcript of Petty Sessions held in local inns, which dealt with highways, constables' reports for the district, and the annual granting of victuallers' licences. Four entries concern the Well, and they confirm that the privileges by the local authorities to John Draper, a hundred years earlier, were still being applied for and issued to his successors. In 1754, a city man, with a colourful name of Silver Crispin, acquired a cottage at Underhill which he rebuilt and hung out the sign of 'The Red Lion'. (Q) Acquiring more property, Crispin, or his agent, appeared at Sessions held in the upper Red Lion in 1761, where he was granted a licence for "The Wells". Then, in 1770 and 1771 William Turpin applied for "The Wells on the Common", followed by William Field in 1772, licenced for Barnet Wells by the justices sitting at The Mitre. (R) These licences refer to the Physic Well alone, and the use of the plural should be discounted. Chandos Charity a/cs cover the Well toll 1734 - 1868. (X)

8. An analysis made of the coaching trade, as it affected Barnet (S) showed that the peak was reached between 1785 and 1837. There is no space in this paper to argue the reasons for the decline and near extinction of the Well as a resort when access to it, hitherto for the privileged few outsiders, had become infinitely easier. One reason stands out, viz:- the process of extracting and bottling the Salt content of the Spring and selling it over the counter. In 1808 (T) Barnet Salts were to be had from Mr. Sorrell, chemist in the town, and it can be assumed that chemists elsewhere stocked them. In his treatise "The English Olive Tree" (T), Rev. Martin Trinder appended a chapter in which he exhorted the Township to do something about its ancient medicinal spring, which, he said, had formerly made Barnet a place of such resort that not less than 30 carriages were kept ready for visitors to the Well. His lengthy and rambling appeal may have stimulated some local interest, for, at the time this book appeared, a group of gentlemen launched an appeal for funds to provide shelter for the Well chamber, and for a pump. Trinder had commented that the Well had deteriorated since 1800. A temporary cover may have been supplied. In 1826 a road guide (U) saw fit to draw attention to the mineral spring which was "near the road where the races

were formerly held." The Barnet racecourse in c 18th rivalled the Fair in the sense of an annual influx of rowdy, drunken and criminal elements. The Course finally disappeared when the railway reached High Barnet in 1871. The crowds may very likely have benefitted Mr. Crispin under his Red Lion sign, but trade from the Physic Well itself is unlikely to have boomed during these incursions. But, by 1876, Thorne's authoritative "Environs of London" reported that the Well House had been demolished c. 1840, that the well was covered over and all that remained in sight was a small iron pump. Edward Walford, in his "Greater London" published some 15 years later, tolled the final bell when he revealed that the farmer (Mr. Vyse) had painted the pump and drinking cup green to camouflage its existence against unwelcome intrusion.

9. Between the two world wars the Governors or Q.E.G.S., still in receipt of Owen's Charity, and the Urban District Council ordered chemical tests of the Water. It was found remarkably uncontaminated and pronounced safe to drink. The Council decided to take charge of the Well when purchasing the Wellhouse Estate, and directed that it should be opened up and certain renovations undertaken. A formal inspection was made on 21st May 1932 by members of the Council, Governors of Q.E.G.S. and members of the Barnet Records Society. The chamber was found in a perfect state of preservation. It was assessed by the Council Surveyor and others as being typical of c 17th architecture. An arched, or barrel shaped roof spans the chamber and the whole is constructed of small, red, hand pounded and burnt bricks. A flight of stone steps offered access and there was accommodation for about twenty people. A sump, some eight to ten feet deep, had been excavated and two rectangular basins built, into which the water from the spring percolates. (V) Before the pump was installed, drinkers were expected to stoop and help themselves by scooping the water from one of the basins, although, as noted, Pepys was ministered to by a female attendant. The Council ultimately allocated nearly £500 and in 1937 the present shelter was erected. When completed a representative of "The Barnet Press" sampled the Water, in the course of duty, and found that it tasted "very clear, very cold and somewhat grim". (W) His drink was partly paid for by the late Alderman Owen whose subvention was used towards restoration of the Well.

10. The Barnet Council in their public spirited care for this relatively unimportant but interesting little historic monument, was prompted by notions of reactivating the Well as an attraction to visitors. Perhaps, however, it is best left secure until, generations hence, another "Diurnall" announces a discovery "in" rather than "near" London.

August 1976

Brian Wise

Grateful acknowledgement is made to The Bodley Head Ltd., for permission to reproduce the sketch from W. G. Bell's "Where London Sleeps".

APPENDIX – Sources

- (A) "Perfect Diurnall" No.131. (Civil War Tracts, 1647–1654) 5th June 1652.
- (B) William Camden, "Britannica", 1586 rev. 1607.
- (C) Rev. Thomas Fuller, "Worthies of England", 1662.
- (D) Rev. Joshua Childrey, "Natural Rareties of England, Scotland and Wales", 1661.
- (E) Sir Arthur Bryant, "Restoration England", 1960.
- (F) Diary of Samuel Pepys. ed. Latham & Matthews, Vol. VIII, 1974.
- (G) Barnet Museum Transcript.
- (H) Jas. Thorne, "Environs of London" 1876.
- (J) Misc. papers of B. F. Leftwich & A. S. Mays, Barnet Museum
- (K) Middx. and Hert. Notes and Queries.
- (L) R. Comm. Hst. MSS. Portland MSS. Welbeck, Vol. III.
- (M) F. C. Cass. Queen Elizabeth's School. Barnet Museum.
- (N) Sir Henry Chauncy. Antiquities of Herts. 1700.
- (O) Leftwich MSS. Vol. II. Barnet Museum.
- (P) Leftwich MSS. Vol. II. Barnet Museum.
- (Q) Manor Rolls. East and Chipping Barnet.
- (R) Petty Sessions. Sub Division. Liberty of St. Albans.
- (S) J. W. Falkner. Lecture Notes on Barnet's Coaching Traffic. Barnet Museum.
- (T) Rev. Martin Trinder. "The English Olive" 1808.
- (U) Paterson's Roads. ed. Mogg. 1826.
- (V) A. S. Mays. Notes on the Physic Well. 1932.
- (W) Barnet Press Reports.
- (X) Herts. Record Office. Manorial. 54812 & 54819/20.