

THE WELL ON WICK GREEN

At the north-west corner of Wick's village green are two grass-choked flagstones, often mistaken for the base of some long-demolished village cross. In fact they mark the site of a public well which served Wick's villagers throughout the latter part of the nineteenth century, and the early part of the twentieth.

One thing that should be stressed, however, is that neither the well nor the village green existed before the 1840s. In the detailed survey of local tithes carried out for James Harris – future 1st Earl of Malmesbury – in 1796, neither feature is mentioned; nor does either feature on the map accompanying the survey. What we see instead is large open space labelled '2047', which is indexed as 'Street of the Village'.¹ Similarly, the Christchurch Inclosure Award of 1805 speaks of various cottages 'on the west side of the street' (as opposed to, say, 'the west side of the green'), and the 1843 tithe commutation map depicts nothing more than a wide open stretch of land, where the green and the well were later developed.

Both features *were* marked on the 1872 Ordnance Survey map, however, which depicted two further wells in the district: one on the site of Wicklea Road; and the other just around the corner, at the roadside adjoining a gravel pit, now the site of the Hengist Park caravan site.

Sadly, memories do not extend to the late nineteenth century, but in 1958 *The Christchurch Times* did make a useful study of several villages close to Christchurch, at which point there were several Wick residents alive who remembered using the well. The water was 'very good to drink',² recalled Mrs. Hilda Gray, *née* Legge, who lived opposite the green at Laurel Cottage (or 'The Laurels', as it was called in her youth). Mrs. Gray had been born in 1887, and as a girl she used to draw water for her grandmother before going to work:

The village well was used until about 1914 and was covered over by large stones which can still be seen. Buckets were lowered into the water at the end of a long pole with a hook attached ...³

This corresponds closely with Lawrence Popplewell's description of the well in *Wick: The Last Village on the Dorset Stour* (1979), which derived partly from similar reminiscences and partly from a watercolour – 'Evening in Wick Village' – owned by Miss Helen Clark of Quality, a cottage on the green's south-eastern side. The watercolour, by Tuckton-based artist William G. Hooper (active until *c.* 1914), depicted a girl using the pole and bucket of Mrs. Gray's recollection; this was necessary because the well had no winch. The only difference between Hooper's watercolour and Mrs. Gray's account was that in the former, the well had a trapdoor, covered not by the stones of Mrs. Gray's recollection but by 'a boarded covering which opened up and outwards'.⁴

We should not get too misty-eyed about such facilities. Concerns had been voiced about the well on Wick Green on 2 December 1898, at the monthly meeting of the Christchurch Rural District Council, to which Wick then belonged. George Brownen, 'analyst',⁵ had been examining wells for the Town and District Councils, and pronounced those in Bargates, Pit

and Christchurch High Street to be impure. Having analysed a water sample from the Wick facility, Brownen found it ‘contaminated with surface pollution’⁶ – to which Charles Dowden, representing the Southbourne Parish Council, replied that the same water had been certified pure by ‘the public analyst’⁷ on three previous occasions. The answer was simple, thought Dowden. Remove the surface pollution, and there would be no further contamination.

This differed slightly from the view of Mr. Burry, the district sanitary inspector, voiced at the same meeting. He observed that the well was only nine feet deep and as such, it was ‘affected by the tides’.⁸ The inference was that the well-water came from the river, filtered by the local soils. This is relevant as there had been complaints about the quality of river water at Wick for several years, resulting in a public inquiry; the main problem was the sewage outfall pipe from Stour Road, which emptied into the path of Wick Ford a short distance off. The outfall ‘smelt continuously’, said one witness at that inquiry, ‘and there was a black decomposing sludge around the sewer, which was a standing danger to health.’⁹ Charles Dowden had also testified at this inquiry, and while he had no complaint concerning the river water, he did state that there was no drainage system at Wick: ‘Matters from the houses there naturally ran into the river.’¹⁰ If such ‘matters’ were seeping through the soil, none of the nearby wells were likely to be unpolluted.

At the District Council’s next meeting, on 6 January 1899, the district surveyor stated it would cost £12 or £13 to sink a new well; but the question, of course, was whether this was worthwhile if the groundwater was simply not potable:

It was resolved to have a sample of water taken from a private well close by analysed, and to further consider the matter at the next meeting. Mr. Stainer moved that tenders for sinking a new well be advertised for in the event of the analysis proving satisfactory. – Mr. Dowden seconded, and the proposition was carried.¹¹

This ‘private well’ belonged to Dowden, who at that point was tenancing Wick Farm House – the long, white-fronted building which survives as 90 Wick Lane. The water from this source was submitted to Brownen, who pronounced it, likewise, ‘impure and unfit for domestic purposes’:

The Council directed the Inspector to procure other samples of water from neighbouring wells for analysis.¹²

The results were adduced at the Council’s 3 March meeting:

THE WATER SUPPLY AT WICK. – Mr. Brownen reported as the result of his analysis of a sample of water taken from a new well at Wick, that the water was impure and unfit for domestic purposes. – Mr. Dowden said that if the water was not pure he did not think it would be of any use to sink a public well. There were people living at Wick over ninety years of age who had always used the water, and down to twelve months ago nothing was heard about its impurity.¹³

It seems that the matter dropped there, and while the Town Council at Christchurch set about safeguarding its wells with concrete tubing, the Wick well remained untouched, and was still

in use in the twentieth century. *The Christchurch Times* states it ‘was used until about 1914’,¹⁴ but seems a very bad guess, and it was certainly still in use in 1918, when A. J. Tyrrell gave a lecture on local water sources to the Bournemouth Natural Science Society. Tyrrell’s findings were ambiguous. Having supplied figures illustrating the low levels of chlorides in local waters, he contrasted these figures with the well-water at Wick, which, he said, was 13.4% chlorides: ‘sufficient to condemn it instantly if one cared to dogmatise on the question of salt being an index to pollution’.¹⁵

This well, which is passed by the road-side as one walks from Tuckton Bridge to Christchurch Head, and is probably familiar to many people, is not easy to pronounce upon and is of interest on that account. It gives a clear yellow water. The hardness is quite of an average value, namely 17½, but the water is rich in dissolved organic matter, and nitrates and organic ammonia are high. Accompanying these objectionable impurities, however, is but a comparatively minute quantity of free ammonia – the chief constituent one looks to for indication of recent sewage contamination – and this added to the fact that the water remains beautifully clear after rains, showing that it undergoes good filtration from the soil, serves to pass it as safe water.¹⁶

Tyrrell was on less certain territory when he spoke of the source of the well water, but he felt that, given its situation, ‘it must receive water from higher lands which are subject to the full blast of the salty Southbourne winds.’¹⁷

The well remained in fiftful use from this time on, its ‘customers’ inevitably the villagers who lived in cottages scattered around the green. *The Christchurch Times* reported that the last user was thought to have been Rosie O’Brien – brother of the Wick ferryman, John O’Brien – who lived at Uncle Tom’s Cabin, a mud-walled, one-up one-down thatched property adjoining Laurel Cottage. She died, aged eighty-one, in 1930. However, Popplewell tells us that a Mrs. Pearce, of Rose Cottage, was the last person to use the well and that she did so ‘in living memory’ (as of 1979).¹⁸ This was clearly Fanny Pearce, who died in 1943, aged eighty-one. The well last appeared on Ordnance Survey maps in 1931.

¹ Malmesbury survey and valuation, vol. 2: Pokesdown and Iford, Tuckton and Week, The Borough, Bure and Street tithings (1796), p. 48.

² *The Christchurch Times*, 14 March 1958.

³ *Ibid.*

⁴ L. Popplewell, *Wick: the Last Village on the Dorset Stour* (Bournemouth Local Studies Publications, 1995, 3rd edn.), p. 6.

⁵ *The Bournemouth Observer*, 7 December 1898.

⁶ *Ibid.*

⁷ *Ibid.*

⁸ *Ibid.*

⁹ *The Christchurch Times*, 6 September 1894.

¹⁰ *Ibid.*

¹¹ *The Christchurch Times*, 14 January 1899.

¹² *Ibid.*, 11 February 1899.

¹³ *Ibid.*, 11 March 1899.

¹⁴ *Ibid.*, 14 March 1958.

¹⁵ A. J. Tyrrell, 'Some Analyses of Local Waters', lecture, 2 March 1918; in *Proceedings of the Bournemouth Natural Science Society* (1918-19), p. 66.

¹⁶ *Ibid.*, pp. 66-67.

¹⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 67.

¹⁸ Popplewell (*op. cit.*), p. 24n.

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