

ST. THOMAS À BECKET'S WELL, OTFORD

By F. R. J. PATEMAN AND OTHERS¹

EXCAVATIONS at Becket's Well were carried out by the Otford and District Historical Society, under the personal direction of its Chairman, Mr. F. R. J. Pateman, in consultation with Lieut.-Col. G. W. Meates, who planned the procedure. The work was done exclusively on Sunday mornings during the summer, from 1951 to 1954. A detailed report has been deposited in the K.A.S. Library.

THE SITE

N.G.R. 51/531592. Becket's Well is situated where springs issue from below the lower chalk and where the upper gault emerges on the east side of the Darent gap through the North Downs. The Roman villa at "Progress" (*Arch. Cant.*, XXXIX) is 500 yards to the east and Otford Church 300 yards to the north-west. Between the well and the church is another Roman site (*Arch. Cant.*, XLVII).

Becket's Well is a stone-walled sunken reservoir into which flow springs of pure water, principally through two inlets with two-centred arches. This well chamber, which is enclosed on three sides by a surround wall, is about 35 feet long by 13 feet wide (east end), its walls being about 8 feet high—their tops are at ground level—with the exception of the sluice wall on the west which is 5 feet high. Although the sluice wall is about 5 feet thick there is a substantial buttress on each side of the outlet on its western face. Six stone steps at the south-west corner give access to the well chamber. The stream after passing through the sluice wall runs thence by a channel between steep banks westward through a lower chamber, which is enclosed by ruined walls, 27 feet (north and south sides) by 35 feet (west side). The water flows from the site through a rectangular outlet in the base of the west wall into watercress beds and a small lake; and finally, by underground conduits, probably Tudor, passes through the site of the early manor house and later Tudor palace of the archbishops. The stream, which formerly fed the old moat, now discharges into Bubblestone Brook, a tributary of the Darent.

As the name implies, there is a strong Becket tradition associated with the well (*vide* Lambarde's *Perambulation*), and it has certainly been linked with the archbishop's house in Otford from early times as a primary source of pure water. Since the late nineteenth century it has

¹ See end of Paper.

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also acquired a Roman association, owing, no doubt, to the surrounding scatter of Roman material; but the excavations have not disclosed any Roman work.

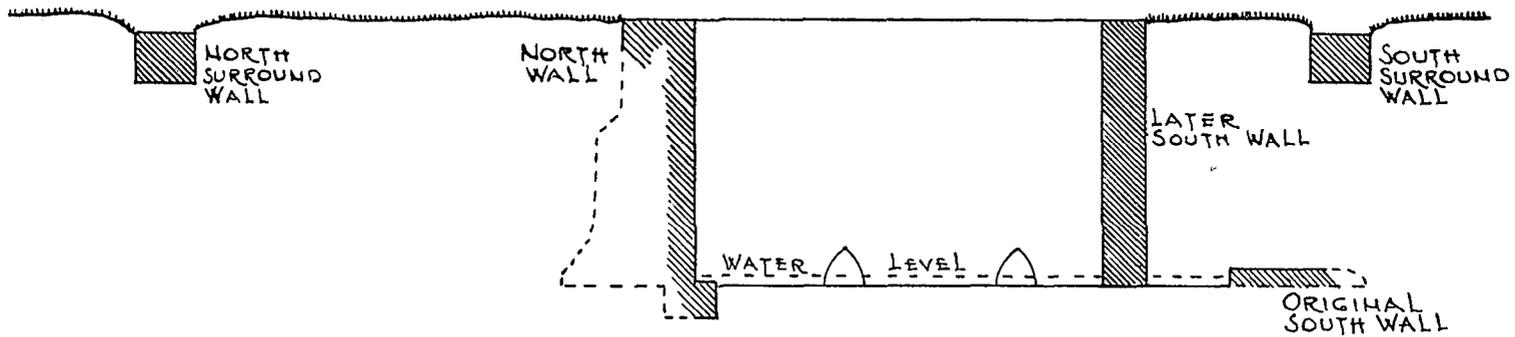
THE EXCAVATIONS

The excavations proved more difficult than was anticipated. The initial work of clearing vegetation and debris took several days, the first trench being opened in July, 1951. Later the surrounding springs greatly impeded work at the lowest levels.

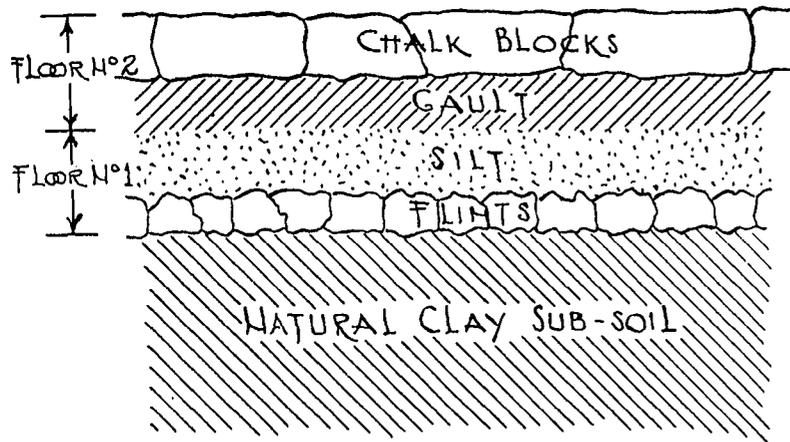
Trench IA, at the north-west corner of the sluice wall, was dug to water level, revealing that the sluice wall was built of large dressed ragstone. The natural soil rose sharply to the north, with a lower filling of gault clay containing no datable finds. Above the gault the earth had been much disturbed in recent times by the insertion of hop-anchors, except immediately north of the end of the sluice wall, where an undisturbed layer, containing a Nuremburg token (c. 1530) and fragments of a Siegburg jug and incorporating a well-defined charcoal deposit, was revealed. Elsewhere, scattered through the filling were Roman tile and shards of the fourteenth, sixteenth and nineteenth centuries.

Trench IIA at the corresponding point on the south side of the channel established the same dating for the south end of the sluice wall, another Nuremburg token appearing in a position similar to the first. Scatter from this trench included Wealden glass, plaster and tile fragments and sixteenth-century stoneware. The clay filling was the same as on the north and practically sterile. On the west side of the south buttress below water level a small post-hole contained the point of a stake.

Trenches IVA and IVB were dug between the south wall of the well chamber and its surround wall. The first revealed massive sections of the upper part of the original south wall, faced on both sides with stone, sandwiching a chalk core. It had fallen inwards, necessitating the erection of the present south wall north of the original. The trench's upper filling contained finds varying from Roman brick or tile to nineteenth-century pottery, and Wealden glass was prominent; but the finds in the lower filling indicated a late eighteenth-century date. Trench IVB contained Leeds ware and other nineteenth-century finds in the upper filling; large ragstone blocks and eighteenth-century shards in the lower. At the bottom was an extension of the east wall bonded into the original south wall about 4 feet south of the present south wall. These original walls were faced with stone on the inside only and backed by chalk blocks; but above a straight course visible inside the well chamber, 5 feet above floor level, the east wall was of the chalk-core type mentioned above, as was also the west end of the north wall

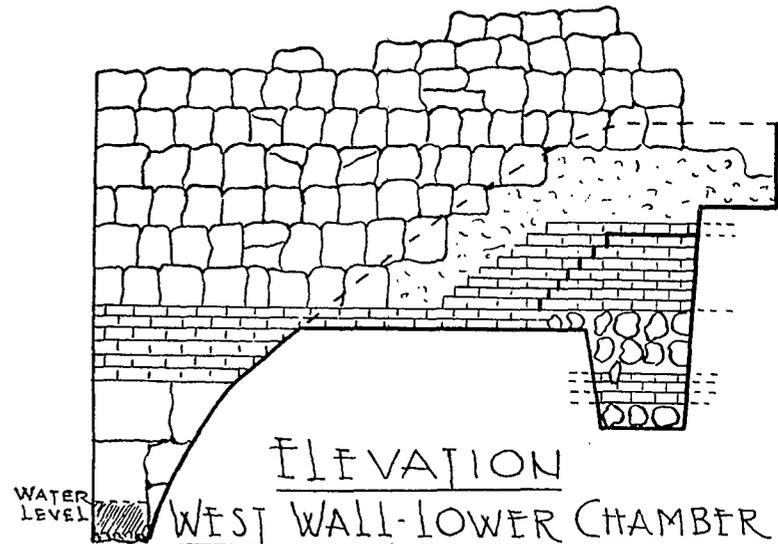


SECTION A-A
SCALE SIX FEET EQUAL ONE INCH

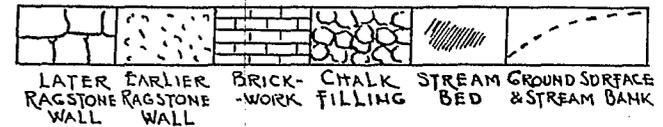


SECTION OF WELL FLOOR
SCALE ONE FOOT EQUALS ONE INCH

1
4"
v
3"
v
1"
4"
v
2 1/2"
v
1"



ELEVATION
WEST WALL-LOWER CHAMBER
AS VIEWED FROM TRENCH IIC



SCALE FOUR FEET EQUAL ONE INCH

uncovered in IA. Stratification in both trenches was not clear, but they established the dimensions of the original east wall, in which the inlet arches were never centrally placed, and also showed how the south wall had been rebuilt in recent centuries.

Trench V was opened outside the north-east corner of the well chamber. Under the nineteenth-century scatter there appeared behind the north wall a compact mass about 6 inches deep of plaster and brick, apparently hardcore, and similar in character to plaster in IIA and IVA in eighteenth- and nineteenth-century layers. Below this was a compact layer of broken roofing tiles. The section of the east wall displayed chalk core construction above the expected level (at which a layer of builder's sand stretched across the trench), and chalk backing construction below. At the base of the trench, a water channel encased in chalk blocks was found leading to the north inlet; the filling above it was the same largely sterile clay, and probing indicated that this extended at least 9 feet east of the east wall. Rods were passed through the two channels for a distance of 24 feet from the north inlet and 19 feet from the south before clay resistance was encountered.

Excavation of the floor of the well chamber revealed the following layers: chalk blocks, gault, silt, flints, grey marl—14 inches from top to natural. The presence of silt over a bed of flints strongly suggests an earlier floor. The only finds were in the silt and none was datable later than Roman. The upper surface of the flint "floor" was 2 inches below the level of the under side of the ragstone blocks on which the north wall stands. Hence it appears to have been earlier than any of the surviving masonry. The flint "floor" was also found under the silt at the bottom of Trench V, and in this case it was above a layer of chalk set on the natural clay. A narrow channel from the northern inlet, marked by the absence of chalk flooring blocks, may mark the course of a lead pipe mentioned in the Otford Ministers' Accounts for 1440-1, for a blocked opening in the west face of the sluice wall appears at the appropriate point.

Trenches IC and IIB at the west end of the lower chamber showed the existence of two conglomerate masses, one each side of the channel, consisting mainly of chalk, ragstone and brick, mortared together. Associated with them was brickwork, laid as stretchers from the west wall along the banks of the channel, each course being set back from the one below, and the lower courses bonded into the brickwork above the outlet in the west wall.

The west wall of the lower chamber was seen (Trenches IIC and D) to rest upon a foundation of chalk and irregular brick courses, undefined in extent and depth. (The nature of the terrain, the presence of heavy railings and shortage of labour prevented further investigation.) On this foundation were eight courses of brick, each course stepped up

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southwards, apparently linked with the brickwork in similar form in the stream banks east of the wall. Under the eight, another course emerged from the chalk foundation and extended north to form the top course over the outlet and east to connect with the long stretcher course on the south bank of the channel. On the stepped bricks rested the lower courses of a stone wall, similar in character to the surround wall, and upon this the later west wall surviving above ground.

Two pieces of a bowl of Purbeck limestone were found in the upper part of the south wall of the well chamber. The internal diameter of the complete bowl was 1 foot 8 inches, and it may have been a medieval mortar or perhaps the original font of Otford Church.

The identification of the site of the conduit house of the archiepiscopal palace mentioned in the survey of 1573 (*Arch. Cant.*, XXXI, p. 21) could not be established. The sixteenth-century dimensions of the well chamber do not fit; those of the lower chamber are more amenable to identification, but the absence of foundations in Trenches IA and IIA make it highly speculative.

CONCLUSIONS

The excavations have shown that in the course of its history major repairs and renovations to Becket's Well were a frequent necessity. Disturbance of soil and re-use of material had been so extensive that finds in sealed deposits were somewhat rare and the interpretation of evidence was always difficult. The following conclusions are therefore tentative and should be received with caution.

The earliest surviving masonry visible is in the lower courses of the north and east walls and parts of the sluice wall of the well chamber. The work is not distinguished in character but suggests a late medieval date. It is surmised that a well chamber was built between the stream banks about 20 feet from the springhead and the space between banks and walls filled with clay and levelled off. Otford Ministers' Accounts demonstrate that a stone structure already existed in 1440-1. In view of the fact that the earliest medieval finds, fairly evenly scattered round the site, are fourteenth century, this first building is ascribed to that period. It may be significant that 1382-3 is the most outstanding year of building and repairs at the manor house recorded in the Ministers' Accounts so far transcribed. The present floor is also ascribed to that period, but the flint layer beneath it may represent the floor of an earlier structure.

Between 1510 and 1520 Archbishop Warham pulled down most of the manor house and built a palace covering about four acres. This would have necessitated an improved water supply. The original lower chamber would seem to belong to this period, but its purpose is not known. It may have housed cisterns to give a greater flow of water



St. Thomas à Becket's Well, Otford. View of sluice wall and well chamber, facing north-east.

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to the palace. In the period 1541-6, Henry VIII was spending money on the palace, which he had acquired from Cranmer in 1537. The sluice wall, strengthened by Warham, was now supplemented by two buttresses, but these may have been built for the support of some superstructure such as a conduit house.

During the second half of the sixteenth century the palace fell into decay, and early in the seventeenth century it passed into private hands; but the well continued to be a necessary source of water to the occupants of Castle Farm until recent times. Early in the seventeenth century the upper courses of the north, east and south walls of the well chamber were rebuilt or raised, and in the lower chamber a stone west wall was erected on Warham's brick foundations. The surround walls are also apparently of this period. Subsequently the south wall of the well chamber collapsed. It was rebuilt north of its original position apparently at the end of the eighteenth century. At the same time the north, west and south walls of the lower chamber seem to have been substantially rebuilt. The nineteenth century saw the erection of the short wall linking the north wall of the lower chamber with the sluice wall, and the rebuilding of the upper courses of the south wall of the well chamber.

Becket's Well has been scheduled as an ancient monument by the Ministry of Works. Part of the north wall of the well chamber has collapsed (February, 1954) and all the masonry urgently requires skilled attention, but unfortunately it seems unlikely that funds will be available to save the structure from rapid decay. The site is unique in Kent, and well worthy of preservation.

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

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