

## ANOTHER CHALYBEATE SPRING AND COLD BATH AT TUNBRIDGE WELLS

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DURING the widening of the A26 adjacent to the Pantiles, Tunbridge Wells (N.G.R. TQ 58153885), in April 1971, a chalybeate spring with a stone well sunk over it, and also a structure subsequently identified as a cold bath, were revealed on the edge of the Common, known as Fonthill. Despite proximity to the new traffic lane, the Corporation has preserved the sites and made them available for public inspection, with the approval of the Lady of the Manor and the Commons Conservators. Thanks should also be expressed to Mr. S. E. Rigold, Mr. L. R. A. Grove and Mr. W. Taylor for their advice about identification and preservation, and to the County Archives Office for their co-operation in the search for documentary evidence. Full details will be deposited at the Reference Library, Royal Tunbridge Wells, but a brief summary of the research appears below.

### SITE A: CHALYBEATE SPRING

The square chamber, which is just over 8 ft. deep, is constructed of roughly-worked sandstone blocks, surmounted by a brick 'beehive' top, of later date, with a narrow circular aperture in the centre. Inside, vegetation deeply stained by chalybeate deposits, and an opalescent scum on the surface of the water, invited comparison with the Pantiles spring. Chemical analysis later confirmed the original assumption of a chalybeate spring, although there is much dilution by seepage of surface water. The footings of the structure rest on a narrow bed of irregularly compacted sandstone about 18 in. deep, through which the water rises, above a floor of natural clay, similar to that found beneath Site B.

This type of construction indicates a seventeenth- or eighteenth-century date for the stonework and that the canopy is a nineteenth-century addition, possibly contemporary with the buried path which appears to lead from the spring to the site of a forge and some cottages which were demolished in 1938.

Associated finds confirm this dating sequence: the presence of a 1911 coin at the bottom of the well indicates that the site has only become buried quite recently. On the other hand, tin-glazed earthen-

ware from inside the well, fragments of an apothecary's pill-rolling slab,<sup>1</sup> ointment pot, and glass phial, all from the base of the filling around the structure, and a piece of vitreous slag<sup>2</sup> embedded in the wall, confirm an earlier date for the stonework. Archæological evidence, therefore, seems to imply a date c. 1700 and an association with the numerous apothecaries known to have been established on and around the Walks, at least since 1682.

Documentary proof is, to say the least, elusive. Surveys following excavation identify the spring with that marked on John Bowra's map of 1738, which also shows a stream running alongside the road. We are told that 'Tunbridge Wells abounds with springs of this character'<sup>3</sup> and Benge Burr writing in 1766 says that wells were sunk over 'the two principal of seven several springs'<sup>4</sup> but there are no direct references to the precise location of any of them. Documentary evidence before c. 1700 refers only to 'mineral or medicinal waters . . .', as in the lease of 13th August, 1682, granted by Thomas Neale, Lord of the Manor of Rusthall, to Thomas Janson.<sup>5</sup> The Rusthall Manor Act of 1739, however, refers to disputes between the Freehold Tenants and the Lord of the Manor 'concerning the Inclosure of the Medicinal Springs or Wells of Water . . .'. This has, by custom, been presumed to be a mere legal reiteration safeguarding any possible misinterpretation of the term 'Springs' or 'Wells'; however, a subsequent phrase demands a reassessment of any such interpretation: 'The said Freehold tenants . . . have insisted, that the said Medicinal Springs, *and* the Wells of Water and the said Walks, and the Nine-pin or Skettle-pin place are part of or situate on the waste of the said Manor, called Bishopsdowne . . .'; the balance of the phrasing leaves no doubt that there were *not only* Medicinal Springs *but also* Wells of Water, on Bishopsdowne. The 'right to common' and 'other benefits in the said Walks and Springs' were claimed by the Freeholders; it is significant therefore that the copy of John Bowra's map, which accompanied the Rusthall Manor Act, has added an enclosure round the Fonthill spring. Perhaps, this was one of the infringements which the tenants were complaining about?

In printed sources before 1700 there is no such implication of another well in use; Dr. Rowzee (1632)<sup>6</sup> specifies 'two small springs

<sup>1</sup> Tin-glazed earthenware. The arms depicted are those of the Apothecaries' Company and were granted in 1617. The latest known pill-rolling slab of this type is dated 1710, but there are many examples from the intervening period.

<sup>2</sup> Vitreous slag was commonly associated with the Wealden iron industry of the sixteenth to eighteenth centuries.

<sup>3</sup> John Britton, *Descriptive Sketches of Tunbridge Wells and the Culverley Estate*, London, 1832, 80.

<sup>4</sup> Thomas Benge Burr, *The History of Tunbridge Wells*, London, 1766, 18-19.

<sup>5</sup> K.A.O., U749 T2.

<sup>6</sup> Lodwick Rowzee, *The Queenes Welles*, London, 1632, 34.



*Photo: Kent & Sussex Courier*

A. Fonthill Site B: Cold Bath, c. 1766, with nineteenth-century Brick Canopy above.



*Photo: A. D. F. Streeten*

B. Fonthill Site A: Interior of Stone Chamber sunk over Chalybeate Spring, dating from c. 1700.

## ANOTHER CHALYBEATE SPRING AT TUNBRIDGE WELLS

contiguous together', and Celia Fiennes' very detailed description (1697)<sup>7</sup> also refers only to 'two with large Basons of stone'.

However, a 'new draw-well' mentioned in the Will (dated 1706) of Edmund Baker the Elder,<sup>8</sup> on his property 'commonly called the Rockhouse on Bishops Downe . . .' must have been built at about the same time (1705) that Thomas Weller decided to allow Edward Allen to build 'a small drinking box'<sup>9</sup> on the Walks, to replace the old one which can be located on Martin O'Connor's map (1725). Perhaps, some improvement to the drinking-box was necessary because of the rivalry afforded by the new draw-well? Curiously enough, this well is described as being at the end of the 'garden plott'<sup>8</sup> which is 32 ft. from east to west of 'my little new-built house',<sup>8</sup> where Mercy Chambers is to live after Edmund Baker's death. Bowra's map also shows the spring as approximately 32 ft.—east to west—from the nearest of two 'Deeper Houses'; Edmund Baker's property also included an ironmonger's and a turner's shop, a forge, and a 'turf-house'. Again, Bowra's map marks a forge with an adjacent 'hovel'. The crux of the problem is, however, 'the house where I myself now live', which is 'on land commonly called the Rockhouse, on Bishopsdowne'. Although there are a number of documents referring to the Rockhouse, no such property is marked on Bowra's map nor apparently on any other. He does, however, show houses near the rocks and other buildings near the forge and the spring.

Whatever speculation may remain about the exact location of 'the land commonly called the Rockhouse' there can be no doubt that all the evidence confirms that the spring was in existence in 1738, that it had been enclosed and was undoubtedly associated with the local apothecaries.

### SITE B: COLD BATH

As with Site A, two phases of construction appear to be represented. The lower part of the structure, taking the form of an elliptical basin of finely worked stone approximately 3 ft. deep, seems to be earlier than the barrel vault which covered it. Although all but a small section of this was destroyed in the course of the roadworks, it is possible to see that it rested on a crude rectangular base of stone and tile wedges on top of the elliptical structure. The quality of this transition from stone to brick contrasts so strongly with the fine craftsmanship of the worked stone blocks that the brick must be an early nineteenth-century

<sup>7</sup> Ed. Christopher Morris, *The Journeys of Celia Fiennes*, London, 1947; the Northern Journey and the Tour of Kent (1697), 133.

<sup>8</sup> K.A.O., U749 T16.

<sup>9</sup> K.A.O., 6U38 T32.

addition, though not later than c. 1850 because of the use of lime mortar.

Excavation revealed an irregularly brick-paved floor, slightly damaged in one corner, where it was apparent that the structure rests on clay. The method of filling and emptying the basin cannot be definitely determined, but the workmen refer to a spillway stone, which was subsequently found on the spoil heap, and which is said to have come from the damaged portion of the structure. At present, surface water merely trickles in around the stones, and, although this may have been the original intention, deliberate filling, possibly from the nearby spring (Site A), 33 ft. away, seems more likely.

The basin itself contained a quantity of early nineteenth-century debris, with two anomalous fragments of late seventeenth-century glazed brick, but the absence of any stratification, either by soil or date implies deliberate filling in. Archæological evidence, therefore, points to an eighteenth-century date for the stone basin, with the addition of a brick barrel-vault in the early nineteenth century.

While archæology can indicate the nature and possible date of the structure, its purpose is more difficult to determine. There is no reference to it on John Bowra's map of 1738, although the approximate site is occupied by two 'Deepers' Houses'. However, the Benge Burr reference (1766) to a cold bath laid down 'about a furlong from the Walks'<sup>10</sup> might well apply to the site. His dating is ambiguous; 'within these very few years'<sup>11</sup> has usually been assumed to refer to 1708, when he is discussing the construction of the Cold Bath at Rusthall in the preceding paragraph. However, in a later comparison, Rusthall is referred to as 'the antient bath' thus implying that it had been in existence considerably longer; it would, therefore, appear that he means that the second bath was constructed within a few years of the time of writing, that is, shortly before 1766.

Comparison of the Fonthill structure with the Rusthall cold bath shows remarkable similarity not only in the method of construction but also in the shape and proportions. Although the Fonthill bath is slightly smaller, the working of the sandstone blocks and the spillway stones are strikingly alike, and leave little doubt that the Fonthill structure is a cold bath. Similarly, although the bath known as Adam's Well (1768),<sup>12</sup> near Langton, is rectangular, it is also constructed of worked stone blocks and the size approximates to that at Rusthall while the depth is similar to Fonthill (Fig. 1).

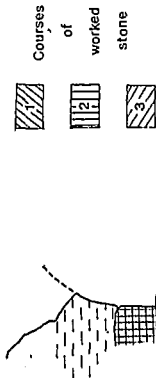
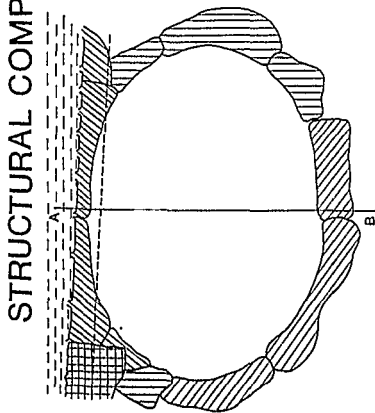
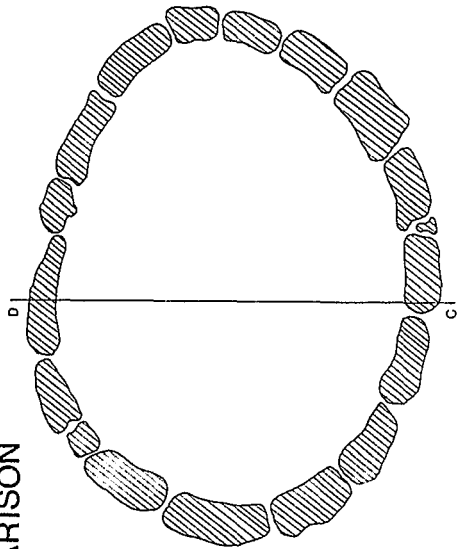
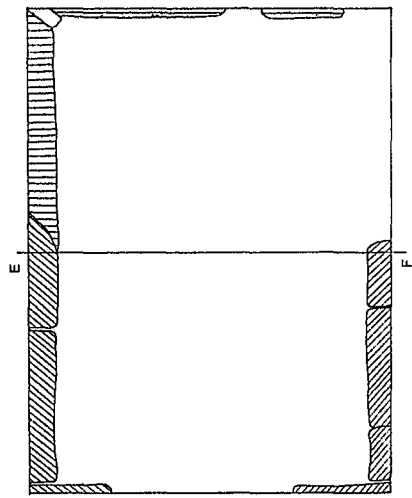
In the light of this, a very grave doubt must fall on the local tradition that a cold bath was laid down in the time of Queen Anne

<sup>10</sup> Thomas Benge Burr, *op. cit.*, 61.

<sup>11</sup> *Ibid.*, 60.

<sup>12</sup> J. Sprange, *The Tunbridge Wells Guide*, Tunbridge Wells, 1817, 40.

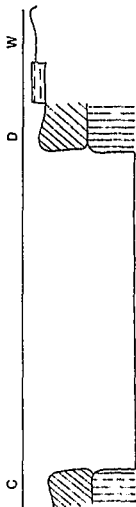
# STRUCTURAL COMPARISON



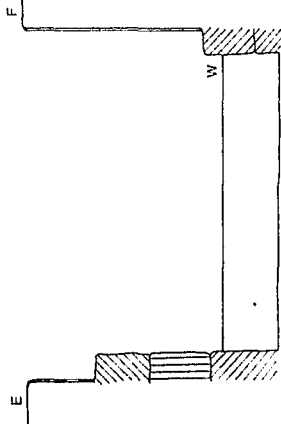
Courses of worked stone

- 1
- 2
- 3

0 1 2 3 4 feet

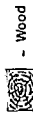


COLD BATH : RUSTHALL  
1708

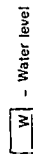


ADAM'S WELL 1768

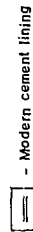
M.F.F. STREETEN,  
1972



- Wood



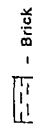
- Water level



- Modern cement lining



- Base of canopy



- Brick

FONTHILL c.1766

Fig. 1. Structural Comparison of eighteenth-century Cold Baths in the Vicinity of Tunbridge Wells.

on the site of the later bath-house (now Messrs. Boots, the Pantiles). This is further borne out by the correspondence concerning the construction of the new baths (1800-1803) by the Lady of the Manor, Mrs. Shorey, who was expressing great anxiety about the possibility of damage to the chalybeate spring which might occur if baths were constructed. She was constantly reassured by Mr. Groves, her agent, who explained that 'the Cold Bath I should think would almost form itself with little expence or trouble on the same surface as the Well now Is . . .'.<sup>13</sup> Surely if a bath already existed the original foundations would have been utilized? Printed material supports this view: Paul Amsinck, writing in 1810, says that 'the spring . . . was enclosed by a triangular stone wall, and in this state it continued until within these few years . . .'.<sup>14</sup> (i.e. until the construction of Mrs. Shorey's bath-house). He also explains that 'Baths had frequently been demanded at Tunbridge Wells. There was indeed an excellent cold bath near Rust-Hall Common; which had formerly been an appendage on a place of public entertainment: but this was at too great a distance for invalids: difficult of access; and moreover in a very dilapidated and uncomfortable condition. Warm baths there were none. It was suggested that some benefit might be derived from baths composed of mineral water, and . . . Mrs. Shorey . . . put in her exclusive claim to the advantages of the undertaking . . .'.<sup>15</sup> Again, surely the implication is that these new baths were not only the first warm ones but also the first on the Walks composed of mineral water? An earlier Queen Anne bath on the site would have been unlikely to use any source other than the adjacent chalybeate spring. Thus the local tradition of a cold bath on the site of the later bath house must now be discounted.

The Fonthill bath therefore seems to have enjoyed only a very short period of use, as it would undoubtedly have fallen out of favour with the construction of Mrs. Shorey's 'handsome edifice' 50 yds. away. A print of 1827<sup>16</sup> supports this view, because, although the barrel vault is clearly marked, it is of minor importance in the picture, which suggests that the Fonthill bath was of little interest by that date.

There can be little doubt that the recently uncovered structure on the part of the Common known as Fonthill, is a cold bath dating from c. 1766 and that it is the one mentioned by Benge Burr, 'about a furlong from the Walks'. It was still visible in 1827, but archaeological evidence and omission from subsequent maps and guide-books suggest that it was filled in and covered over at about that time.

<sup>13</sup> K.A.O., U749 E88.

<sup>14</sup> Paul Amsinck, *Tunbridge Wells and its Neighbourhood*, London, 1810, 33.

<sup>15</sup> *Ibid.*, 34.

<sup>16</sup> W. Marshall, *Cabinet of Fashion*, Holborn, London, 1827.