

The History of Epsom Spa

by H. I. LEHMANN

NOTES

The literary sources of this paper have been quoted rather fully, as, owing to their age, many of them are not easily accessible. Whenever possible the original publications have been consulted. Of Abram Booth (Note 3) and Celia Fiemmes (Note 18) no old printed editions seem to exist. The spelling of names of persons and places in the seventeenth century varied considerably, in the quotations in this paper the spelling is that of the original sources.

The aspect of the history of Epsom Spa, for long based on an anonymous article in *Lloyd's Evening Post* of 1769¹, has been altered by F. L. Clark.² His researches in the Court Rolls of the Epsom Manor Court have established the location of the Spa in the 'Leg of Mutton' Close at the west end of the High Street. There remain however a number of points still to be explained, and the following notes may contribute towards the clearing up of these queries. In particular some details about the well in the town, described as spurious by the writer of *Lloyd's Evening Post*, will be given, and reasons be suggested for the rapid decline of the Spa after only twenty years of existence.

The earliest mention of the Epsom Well is quoted by Clark.³ In 1629 Abram Booth, who travelled through many lands on behalf of the Dutch East India Company, describes the well a few years after its opening.

This well, called Ipsom-Well, after the nearby village, was only discovered a few years ago, and made easily accessible at the expense of this same village; of which water and its effect strange things have been told and confirmed to us, and especially that it was wonderfully healthy without any effort purging.

People coming there took a few glasses of the mentioned water—which has a taste different from ordinary water—after which walking up and down, these had in our opinion very good effect.

At the time there were still many people coming, even sick people too from far away places, to drink the mentioned water, and also to carry it with them in bottles and jugs.

This well lies some 10 or 11 miles from London, and, as mentioned, a short mile from Ipsom on the rise of a very large heath, where one always finds somebody who serves the visitors with glasses and otherwise.

For the next 60 years our only information is indirect, Tho. Shadwell's Comedy *Epsom Wells* (1673), a ballad *Newes from Epsom Wells* (1663), a rather crude broadsheet *Flos Ingenii, being an exact description of Epsom, and Epsom Wells* (1674) [which it is not!], and Ogilby's map of 1675.

In Edmund Gibson's translation of Camden's *Britannia* (1695), there is an addendum (on p. 166):

at some distance from hence (Ashtead) is Woodcote, a pleasant seat among groves, much adorn'd by the widow Evelyn lately deceas'd; to which belong those medicinal Wells, that rise in the adjoining Common. They are tinctur'd with Allom, and of late years are in so much repute, as to occasion a very great increase of buildings in the parish of Epsom for the reception and entertainment of such as resort hither for the sake of the Spaws, with the diversion of the Downs hard by.

The treatises on mineral waters published in these years, Jorden's *Discourse on Mineral Waters* (1631, 1632, 1669 and 1673) and Martin Lister's *De Fontibus Medicatis Angliae* (1684) (two editions), do not mention Epsom.

In 1684 Robert Boyle published *Short Memoirs for the Natural Experimental History of Mineral Waters*, a treatise on the examination of mineral waters, measured the density of Epsom Water amongst others, and proposed to investigate (on p. 90) 'from what salts the Purgative vertue that is found to belong to many of them, as Epsom, Barnet, Acton, etc. do's proceed'. On 26 June and 3 July 1679, Nehemia Grew, Secretary of the Royal Society, had, according to the Minutes Book of the Royal Society, read two papers on the preparation of salts from mineral waters, but did not leave them for publication. Peter⁴ states that Grew referred to Epsom on this occasion. In 1695 Grew published his *Tractatus de salis Cathartici amari in aquis Ebbeshamensis* which describes in detail the salt prepared from Epsom water and its medical indications, and thereby establishes the name of Epsom Salt, still in use today. In 1698 Nehemia Grew took out a Patent (No. 354) for 'The Way of Makeing the Salt of the Purgeing Waters perfectly fine in large quantities and very Cheape, so as to be commonly prescribed and taken as a Generall Medicine in this our Kingdome'. Meanwhile others had seen the opportunity created by Grew's book, and had started to manufacture the salt in competition to Grew. In particular, a chemist, Francis Moulst (who was a member of the Company of Apothecaries, London)⁵ went even to the trouble of translating and publishing Grew's *Tractatus* under Grew's name without Grew's permission.^{6,7} This caused Grew to have the book translated officially, and this translation was published in 1697. In 1699 Benjamin Allen published his *The Natural History of the Chalybeat and Purging Waters of England*.

Whether it was the dispute between Grew and Moulst which drew Allen's attention to Epsom or not, Allen described on p. 122 ff.

Epsom Water was the first of the Purging kind discover'd in England, viz 1630, or soon after. The Hill is a clay of a brown colour and red-dish; and where the wells are more grey. The Well is about twelve foot deep; the Earth where the Spring is, afforded the Selenites plentifully. . . Of the private Well which was newly sunk, I inform'd my self by examining the Earth cast out of it, which I receiv'd of the owner Mr Symonds, together with this Account. The upper Earth, for two Spit deep, was the same; then they came to a harder and Loamy, which

lasted about seven feet; then to a looser, which sparkled with small Selenites, as at the publick Well; this held for two feet, where they came at the Stones and Water together: The Water in Summertime flow'd in at the rate of an Ale barrel in 24 hours. Below the Selenites they came at a dead heavy Earth and black, partaking of Iron, under which was the common dead Loam, or Cortex of the Mineral Region: And though they dug three or four feet deeper, yet neither was Water or the former signs found. . . The Water is moderately clear, of Taste bitter, together with a maukish Saltishness, not manifestly Lixiviat, but a little of the taste of the second salt of Salt Marine and of that Cellar Salt that is gather'd by things hanging in the middle of Cellars, and not what fixes to the walls.

It is suggested that we have here the well on which the future spa was to be founded, and we see that it was certainly not spurious as alleged by the *Lloyd's Evening Post* writer.

John Symonds is mentioned by Clark⁸, his land was bordering on that of Anne Emerson in the South. In the Manorial Survey of 1679⁹ on p. 28,

John Symonds Claymes to hold by copy of Court Röll one parcell of land conteyning one Rood parcell of A Close of land late of Humphrey Beanes Esqs. Deceased Abutting on A Lane leading towards Woodcott on the East part upon the lands of the said John Symonds on the West part and on the lands late of the said Humphrey Beane on the North part

and his land on which this parcell borders, on p. 81,

John Symonds Claymes to hold by Ffree deed One Messuage One Barne One Stable One Garden One Orchard and One Close of Arable land conteining One Acre and an halfe thereunto Adjoining Abutting on the lands of Katherine Beane widow on the North part on the lands of Ald. Starling on the South and West parts and on the highway on the East part.

The Highway on the East of the land described cannot be any other than today's South street which in 1675 on Ogilby's map is shown as the main road to Ashted, although it is in the earlier entry described as 'a Lane leading towards Woodcott'.

This is the land on which John Symonds dug the well described by Benjamin Allen in 1699, presumably with no other purpose than to obtain a convenient water supply for his land, without suspecting that it would yield anything but plain water.

Meanwhile Grew had been maliciously accused of plagiarism in some other matters and the validity of his patent had been attacked. He therefore assigned his patent to Josia Peter who undertook Grew's defence, and in 1706 published a book¹⁰ containing testimonials by a large number of authorities testifying for Grew, a justification of the Patent, proving Grew to be the first inventor, the usefulness of the product to the general public,

and Grew's ability to satisfy the demand, and a sharp attack on Francis Moulton and his brother George and other infringers of his Patent. Nothing has so far been found as to whether the matter came to court, but an obituary in the *London Journal*, and in the *British Journal* of 27 May 1727 describes George Moulton under a Bath date line as 'an eminent and rich Chymist of this City'.

The commercial potentialities of Symond's well were taken up by John Livingston, apothecary. Very little is known of this person so important in the history of Epsom Spa, but he must certainly have been a good businessman. In 1701 he acquired the available part of John Elmer's land¹¹, only two years after John Symonds had dug his well a few yards away.

In 1707 he advertised (in the *Daily Courant* on 22 March, 10 and 12 April) the opening of the new establishment, shops, Bowling Green and Pumproom on Easter Monday of that year, 14 April (old style).

In 1711 Benjamin Allen published a new edition of his book¹² and again gives a description of Symond's well, with some more details than in the previous edition.

He speaks of 'Symond's Well, in the Town'¹³ and on p. 6

Of Symond's well which I view'd Two days after the Digging of it, I receiv'd the following Account from the Men employ'd in the sinking of it. The uppermost Earth was the same with that of the Hill, for a foot, or Two Feet deep; then they came to a harder, and more properly a Clay, which lasted for Six or Seven Feet; and then they came to a looser clay, which was sparkling as if Salt or Glass had been mix'd with it; this held for a Foot or Two, and then they came to the Stones, meaning the Selenites; of which those in the Figure were some that I received there. Below the bed of the Selenites, he said, the Earth was a black, dead and heavy Loam, and reputed to partake of Iron, on which were some hard Clods, collected like more tender stones. The bottom of that ferreous Loam, was the common dead Loam. There were not any of these signs found deeper, nor any water, tho' they dug lower by Three or Four Feet. The Water did not come plentifully in, but oosed at the rate of about a Barrel in 24 hours, as he had found upon the emptying it... The Purging Condition of the Water is owing to a Salt which it contains, in Quantity of about half a Dram in a Pint, and is white, and shot into small Stiriae*.¹⁴

He adds later

Epsom Water in Surry, near the top of the Hill, Westerly One, the other in the Town, in a reddish Clay, and brittle, the Depth of the Well is about 12 feet. The Hill here and there, hath veins of Blew Loam; Chalk is found in a large Pit at the end of the Town. The Water is moderately clear, of Taste bitter, join'd with a maukish Saltishness, a little of the Taste of the Second Salt of Sal Marine, and of the Salt gathering to Things in Cellars.¹⁵

* i.e., crystallised in small (Needles or Flakes).

We see that Symond's Well was in town, and is the only well mentioned there and that its water was bitter. Surely Allen would have mentioned it if there was another well close to it, especially as by 1711 Livingstone's Spa was in full swing. It seems very probable that the well which Livingstone used was in fact Symond's well described by Allen. No other eye witness, including Celia Fiennes, has seen the well itself, as the water according to the *Lloyd's* Writer was pumped from the well to the assembly rooms. Benjamin Allen's description provides the conclusive evidence for Clark's argument¹⁶ to the genuineness of the well in town. The yield of the well, given by Allen, was only small, some 30 gallons per day, and probably soon proved insufficient for the demand. This may be the reason why Livingstone acquired the lease of the old well, and augmented his supply in this way; a considerable part of the water was anyway sold away from the well in bottles.¹⁷ Incidentally, the 'same man at the well, keeps it, sells coffee there also' mentioned by Celia Fiennes¹⁸ is more likely referring to the new well and does not necessarily imply the combined ownership of the wells.

One fact illuminating the business acumen of Livingstone is shown on Owen's reprint of Ogilby's Map of 1720. Whilst the map itself had not been brought up to date, there is a marginal note, that

at Epsom (described above) is held a Market Weekly on Fryday, and 2 Fairs Yearly, Viz 24 July & 29th September, obtained & put in force lately by Mr. John Livingston Apothecary in that Town who is the present Proprietor of the Market and Fairs.

As the Market and Fairs are mentioned by Toland²⁰ this must have taken place before 1711.

The contemporary descriptions of the Spa, by Celia Fiennes¹⁸, Daniel Defoe¹⁹, Toland²⁰, and Aubrey²¹ are not sufficiently clear to enable us to draw any definite conclusions. Aubrey quotes verbally²² Benjamin Allen's description of 1699, implying that this is the well in town, and Toland's letter to Eudoxa in full²³. There is some confirmation of the quality of the water of the well in the town from yet another source: In 1723 John Brown, Chymist, F.R.S., states that by then most of the 'Epsom Salt' was manufactured from the 'Bitterns' left after the crystallisation of common salt from Sea Water, at Works near Portsmouth and at Newcastle. He carried out some experiments to compare these salts, and writes (on p. 377):

In order to have a Standard for these Experiments, I purposely got my friend, Mr Hyet, Apothecary at Epsom (whose Fidelity I could depend on) to boil me down some of their Waters, which he did from the well in the Town, and sent me a sufficient quantity of the Salts, to answer the Purpose I wanted them for.²⁴

In 1727 Livingstone died, his Spa collapsed, and Epsom becomes the residential town it has been ever since. In 1728 Nathaniel Salmon writes:

The Mineral Waters of Ebesham have made that place frequented, and

drawn a concourse of those that retire also for Pleasure, being nearer the Town than those of Tunbridge, and better situated for Airing and Sports. The Course upon the Downs near Carshalton, is now almost neglected, for a new one laid out within three miles of Lethered, in a more eligible Place, at least for its neighbourhood to the Wells.²⁵

In 1735, Epsom is still mentioned in the *Bath, Bristol, Tunbridge and Epsom Miscellany*, but the only activity described is the Races. In the second edition of Defoe's *Tour* of 1738²⁶, we find the description of the has-been Spa given by Clark.²⁷

In 1756 Lucas states that he

could not now get sight of the spring; because it is covered with a building and has a pump set in the source for raising the water... I shall give it its deserved place here; assured that however neglected from our present love of novelty, it is equal, if not superior to such as now attract the public attention.²⁸

As we see from the article in *Lloyd's Evening Post* of 1769¹, the activity of the Epsom Well continued still on a minor scale. The export of bottled water also persisted for many years: In 1767 in Dale Ingram's *An Enquiry into the Origin and Nature of Magnesia Alba and the properties of Epsom Waters* appears an advertisement:

The Epsom Waters and Magnesia are sold by W. Owen, the Mineral Water Warehouse, near Temple Bar; at Morris's Coffee House at Epsom; and by Dr Ingram in Arundel Street, who prepares Magnesia.

The same Dr Dale Ingram in 1773 in the *Gentleman's Magazine* tells of 'A new well water discovered at Epsom and compared with Harrigate',²⁹ the well was first sunk in 1767, to a depth of 39 feet, containing about 26 feet of water, but Ingram does not give any indication of its location. The taste of the water is

rather nauseous and brackish, somewhat disagreeable, like to a stale egg. The smell very foetid, insomuch as to scent the room much like the washings of a foul musquet.

One wonders what kind of water that was!

In his treatise on the *Chemical History and Medical Powers of the Most celebrated Mineral Waters* William Saunders writes in 1805³⁰ that

4 to 5 sixths of the Salt from Epsom Water is sulphated magnesia, mixed with a few muriats [i.e. chlorides] such as that of lime, and probably magnesia, which render it very deliquescent...

and in a table at the end of the book

neutral purging salt 40 grains, and 8 grains selenite and earthy carbonate [i.e.: calcium salts] in an English Wine pint of 28.75 cub. in.

In the *Mirror of Literature*³¹ of 1833, a description largely based on

Pownall's *History of Epsom*³² and therefore on *Lloyd's Evening Post* is given. It states:

The Well is preserved, as are also the old walls which inclose the garden; but the spring is now only visited by curious strangers, who have little or no faith in the Mineral Waters.

The more astonishing is the statement by Whitacker who quotes the magnesium content of the waters as nil, but states himself 'There must be some error, inasmuch as Sulphate of Magnesia is known as Epsom Salts from its occurrence in this Water'.³³ An error there certainly is: Whitacker quotes M. Gairdner, *Essay on the Natural History of Mineral Waters* (1832), who in fact states the Magnesia content of Epsom Waters as '0', quoting Daubeny (1830). Now Daubeny in 1830, published a paper³⁴ on the occurrence of Iodine and Bromine in certain mineral waters of South Britain; Epsom is amongst these (which fact again proves that the well was still in use then). He gives some not very comprehensive analyses and, in all cases, including Cheltenham, being interested only in the Bromine and Iodine figures, leaves Magnesia blank. Gairdner two years later reads this blank as '0' and this in turn has been accepted by Whitacker as the only figure available. For Cheltenham Water there exist some later reliable analyses by F.A. Abel and T.H. Rowney³⁵ which show considerable amounts of Magnesium in place of Daubeny's blanks. No modern analysis of the Epsom Water has been published. The old Well on the common is described on the 6-inch Geological Map³⁶ 'The Old Well, 24' to Water, Epsom Salts'. There is no indication of a well anywhere near Livingston's Spa. But on Sheet TQ2060 NE of the 50-inch map of 1962 there appears a 'disused well' on the land once owned by John Symonds which possibly could have been Livingston's well.

REFERENCES

1. *Lloyd's Evening Post*, XXV, No. 1890 14/16 August 1769.
2. Clark, F. L., 'The History of Epsom Spa', *Surrey A.C.*, LVII (1960), 1-41.
3. Clark, *ibid.*, 39: *Een Dienaer der Oost-Indische Compagnie te London in 1629. Journal van Abram Booth*, ed. A Merens (The Hague, 1942), 124: Dit wel, genaemt Ipsom-Wel, naer het dorp daernaest aen gelegen, is over eenige jaeren eerst gevonden, ende op costen van t'selve dorp bequaem gemaect; van welck water ende sijne operatie ons vreemde dingen verhaelt ende geaffirmeert waren, ende vooral datted wonder gesont was ende sonder eenige beweeginge purgeerde. Aldaer comende namen van't gemelte water eenige glazen in—hebbende eenen anderen smaak als ord(inari)s water—waerop wat gins ende weder treedende, deed(e) het selve seer goede operatie tegens ons(e) opinie. Terwijl aldaer noch waren quamender veele, iae ook siecken van verre gelegen plaetsen, soo om hetselve water te drincken, als ook in bottles off

cannen mede te voeren. Dit wel leyt ontrent 10 off 11 mylen van Londen ende gelijk geseyt is, een myltgen van Ipsom op't affgaen van een seer groote heyde, waerby men altijt yemant vint, die met glasen ende anders de besoeckers van't selve dient.

4. Peter, Josia, *Truth in Opposition to Ignorant and Malicious Falshood* (London, 1701), 27.
5. Lists of members of the Company of Apothecaries, London, 1693, 1702, 1713 (but not any more in 1736), at the two latter dates with the note: 'has left off the trade', i.e. gave up practising medicine.
6. Peter, *ibid.*, 54, 60.
7. *A Treatise of the Nature and Use of the Bitter Purging Salt contain'd in Epsom and such other Waters*. The copy at the British Museum contains a label pasted in:
Advertisement: That this Salt is made and sold in greater or lesser Quantities, by Francis Moulst Chymist, at the sign of Glaubers-Head in Watling-Street; and this Translation at no other place.
8. Clark, *ibid.*, 16; Surrey R.O., 31/1/6 membr. 8.
9. Surrey R.O., 31/4/1.
10. Peter, *ibid.*
11. Clark, *ibid.*, 12.
12. Allen, Benjamin, *The Natural History of the Mineral Waters of Great Britain* (London, 1711).
13. Allen, *ibid.*, 5.
14. Allen, *ibid.*, 6.
15. Allen, *ibid.*, 13.
16. Clark, *ibid.*, 32.
17. Defoe, D. *A Tour Thro' the Whole Island of Great Britain by a Gentleman* (London, 1724), 114.
18. *The Journeys of Celia Fiennes* (Cresset Press, 1947), 158.
19. Defoe, *ibid.*, 111.
20. Toland, John, *Description of Epsom: in a letter to Eudoxia* (London, 1711).
21. Aubrey, John, *The Natural History and Antiquities of the County of Surrey* (1718), II, 190.
22. Aubrey, *ibid.*, 192.
23. Aubrey, *ibid.*, 197.
24. Brown, John, *Philosophical Transactions of the Royal Society*, XXXII (1723), 348, 372.

25. Salmon, Nathaniel, *A New Survey of England, on Camden's Britannia* (1728), 65.
26. Defoe, *A Tour thro' the Whole Island of Great Britain, By a Gentleman* (1738), I, 233.
27. Clark, *ibid.*, 31.
28. Lucas, C., *An Essay on Waters* (1756), II, 95.
29. *Gentleman's Magazine*, XLIII (1773), 125.
30. Saunders, William, *Chemical History and Medical Powers of the Most Celebrated Mineral Waters* (1805), 218.
31. *The Mirror of Literature, Amusement, and Instruction*, No. 606 (1 June 1833), 337.
32. Pownall, H., *History of Epsom, by an Inhabitant* (1825).
33. Whitacker, W., *Water Supply of Surrey* (Mem. Geol. Survey) (1912).
34. Daubeny, C. G. B., *Philosophical Transactions of the Royal Society*, CXX (1830), 230.
35. *Journal of the Chemical Society*, I (1848), 193.
36. Sheet XIX N.W. and XVIII N.E. Surveyed 1866-7, revised 1894, geologically surveyed by Henry Dewey, 1912.