



The Old Conduit at Whitley, Reading.

By Edward Margrett, F.G.S.

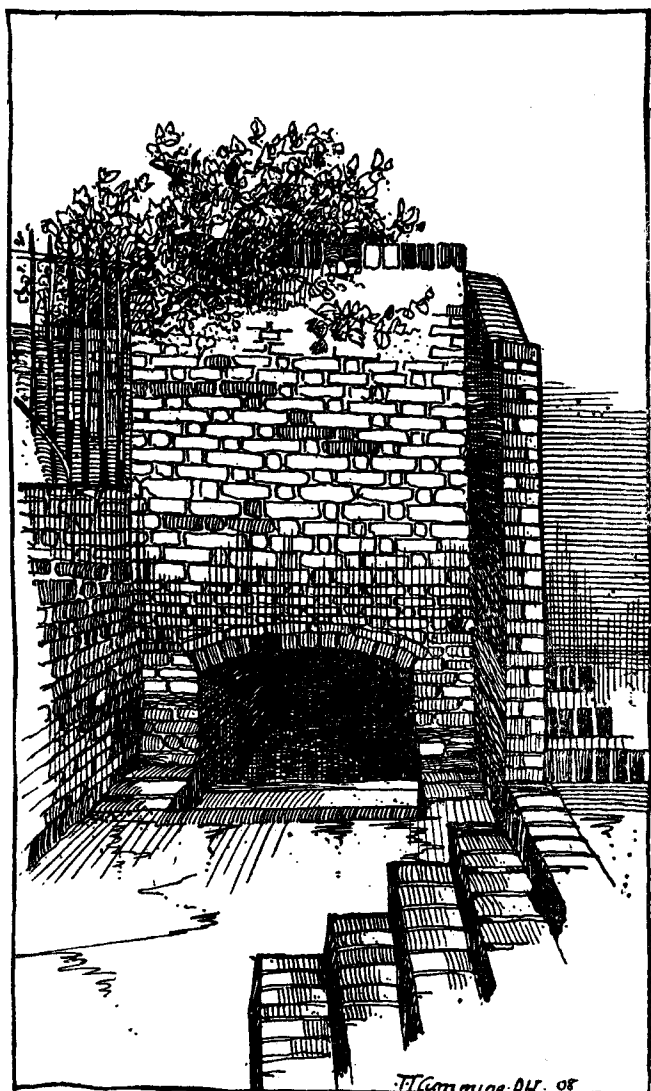
IN the April, 1906, number of this Journal, I wrote a short account of St Ann's Well at Caversham, in which I mentioned the existence of a spring at Whitley, "which is said to have supplied Reading Abbey with water." I have been recently enquiring about this and tracing its history, which I think is of sufficient interest to present to you.

There are considerable remains of a brick superstructure much overgrown with ivy of great age, some of which I have had cut away, so that the old brickwork can now be examined.

It is situated on the West side of Highgrove Street, about 50 yards North from the Christchurch Road in a small enclosure about 18 feet square, and enclosed with an iron railing and gate with a padlock, the key of which I borrowed from Mr. I. Walker, of the Boro' Surveyor's office.

On examination I found the remains in a somewhat ruinous condition. The brick structure is about nine feet in length and five feet six inches in width, abutting on the north wall of the enclosure, and rising about four feet above ground level. On the west side is an opening or pit about four feet deep, leading down to the ancient front of the Conduit. This I found to be an old brick archway about three feet wide in a wall measuring about seven feet frontage; there are two steps down to the present water level, which is one foot six inches below the level of the bottom of the pit.

So far as I was then able to examine, I discovered that there was an interior arch of a seven-feet span, which covered in the water to a distance of about eight feet; there was also another arch on the south side covering in a considerable area, I judged about fifteen feet, also containing water. Subsequent investigation proved this to measure fourteen feet six inches from north to south. I further ascertained that the former approach to the Conduit was by a pathway from Whitley Street which led by a slope down to the level of the present steps.



THE WHITLEY CONDVIT 1908.

By the courtesy of Messrs. Martin and Martin, Solicitors, of Reading, I am able to give the following short history of the title :

Re "THE CONDUIT CLOSE WITH THE CONDUIT THERE SITUATE AT WHITLEY, READING."

"Her late Majesty, Queen Elizabeth, by her letters patent under her Great Seal of England, dated in the 2nd year of her reign, gave and granted to the Mayor and Burgesses of the Borough of Reading (among other properties) "a close of pasture lying at the *End* of *Svyvor Street*, called the Conduit Close."

On the 19th July, 1839, the Mayor, Aldermen and Burgesses of the Borough of Reading, obtained an Act of Parliament (2 and 3, Victoria Cap. 40) enabling them to *sell* certain real estate, for purposes therein set forth and in the schedule is an entry describing this property with a piece of land adjoining, and four messuages with the appurtenances lately erected thereon called Conduit Crescent, which appear to have been let on lease with a yearly rent of £21 12s. and *Two Pullets*.

On May 16th, 1842, this property was conveyed to Mr. John Jackson Blandy, and after being acquired by him, formed part of his Highgrove property, after his death it was purchased by the late Mr. Robert Toomer, who in the year 1902, sold the property to Messrs. Alexander Beale, John Wessley Martin, William Galt Millar and Frederick William Martin, the purchasers of the Highgrove estate.

The owners of the Highgrove estate being desirous for the Well to be preserved for the public, entered into an arrangement with the Corporation of Reading on the 1st of December, 1892, whereby they conveyed to the Corporation a piece of land covering and surrounding the Well or Conduit, and also the said Well or Conduit, and the site thereof together with access thereto from a new street constructed by the owners of the Highgrove estate, called Highgrove Street, on which the well and site thereof abuts, and the deed stated that the Well or Conduit and the site thereof were conveyed—as a *public* cistern, well, or Conduit, for the purposes of the Public Health Act 1875.

It is clear from the recital in the Act of Parliament, 2 and 3 Victoria Cap. 40, that Queen Elizabeth became possessed of the Whitley estate from her father, Henry VIII., who had seized it on the suppression of Reading Abbey."

The following extract from Coates' History of Reading carries the title still further back :

"Before the reign of Henry II, Peter de Cosham sold to the Abbey all his lands at Whitley, within and without the Borough of Reading; for which he received £80, and an annual present of a bezant of gold, (in value about 9s.) This was reduced by Thurstan de Cosham to a pepper-corn rent. The original grant was registered in court, before the Justices itinerant; as appears in the charter of Henry II. In 1349, the Abbey purchased 21 acres of land here, belonging to John de Sulkdene, or Suthdene; and, in 1399, Gelbert de Hegfield gave a piece of land called "La Lynch," near *Cadelgrove, in the village of Whitley; and in the ninth, tenth, and fifteenth years of Edward III. licence was granted to William de Whitley to alienate 20 acres of land to the Abbey of Reading." [Coates History of Reading p. 390.]

The connection of this Conduit with Reading is shown by the following extract from Coates' History and Antiquities of Reading, which has been followed by other writers:

"The Abbey, which may seem remarkable, was supplied with spring water from so great a distance as the Conduit, beyond Whitley turnpike. This is mentioned in the schedule of Mr. Gray's purchase, already recited; whereby 'The King's House,' the abbey is undoubtedly meant."

In a paper dated August 9th, 1739.—"I went," says a very accurate observer "to see the spring called the Conduit; it is in the garden of the Fountain Ale-house, which stands on the left hand just above the Whitley turnpike. From this spring, by leaden pipes which went under the river, was water conveyed to the Abbey. The water is cold, clear, and soft; it has been thought good for weak eyes. Within the memory of man there have been several yards of these leaden pipes dug up."

"A stone reservoir, which is filled by this spring is still remaining in the Conduit field; a stone building once erected over it is destroyed. The water still has the reputation of being good for the eyes." [Coates' History, 1802, pp. 279-280.]

All trace of the stone reservoir as well as the stone building above the spring have long since disappeared.

The brick arch forming the entrance from which the water was formerly taken, is apparently of 16th century date. This I judge from the size and appearance of the bricks and the manner in which they are laid. The upper part of the brickwork is of later date, but

* Cadelgrove is probably Catsgrove, now known as Katesgrove.

of respectable age, from the appearance of the sturdy stems of the ivy which has covered the whole structure.

The following extract from Man's History of Reading, page 254, throws some further light on the history of this Conduit :

"It is doubtful whether there was any well belonging to the Abbey, at its first erection ; one has since been discovered in the cloisters, which is now filled up with rubbish, but it is probable this was of later date, as it is not we believe, usual to find wells in such situations ; perhaps it was dug for the use of the garrison during the civil war, as they could not be supplied with spring water by any other means. Before the reformation, this religious house was supplied from the Conduit, near the turnpike, at the South end of Sivier Street. The name given to this spring shows it to have been derived from the Norman, who were the founders of the Abbey. As some labourers were excavating a saw-pit, about the middle of the last century, at the eastern extremity of Mr. Blandy's wharf, on the south side of the river, they discovered a leaden pipe, about two inches in diameter, lying in the direction of the Conduit, and passing under the river towards the Abbey, part of which, from its situation under the water, they were obliged to leave ; the remainder they sold for old lead.

It was from this source, therefore, the Abbey was supplied with spring water ; and as everything belonging to these religious foundations were supposed to be holy, and to be attended with some miraculous powers, so this spring was supposed to be beneficial in the cure of sore eyes."

I think it probable that the lead pipe would be ended in the middle of the Cloister Garth, a very usual position. The head of water from Whitley would be sufficient to work a fountain and keep its basin well filled.

I drew the attention of my friend the Mayor, W. M. Colebrook, Esq., to the neglect of the trust by the Municipal Authorities and he at once directed that the proper steps should be taken. Workmen were sent, the brickwork repaired and brick steps placed to provide convenient access. The interior was cleared out of accumulated rubbish and the vaulting of the reservoir exposed. Further the water was pumped out and the dirt and rubbish, brickbats, etc., were removed, restoring the reservoir to its original depth. It was found that the vaulting was in a precarious state which has now been secured by underpinning. Nothing of interest was found in any of the rubbish or dirt removed. After clearing out it was ascertained

that the area of the reservoir was 14ft. 6in. from north to south, with a semicircular ending at the north, and a width 6ft. 6in. from east to west. The total height from the floor of the reservoir to the crown of the arch is about 7ft.

For some reason the work of the Corporation has been suspended, but I trust that it will shortly be resumed and completed and arrangements made for public access to the conduit.

I have had many conversations with old residents of Whitley who tell me that it was formerly the water supply of the district, and that it was always reputed to be good for sore eyes. Some of them remember as children being sent with jugs to fetch some of the water for other members of the family who were thus suffering. Many have since enquired when the Conduit will be opened again that they may have access to it for this purpose.

The following has been written for me by Mr. James Cox, of Christchurch Road, and is a fair sample of what I have heard from many. There can be no doubt that clean cold water is excellent for external application :—

“THE CONDUIT SPRING.

The entrance to this ancient spring was in Whitley Street, the way to reach it was going along a passage and down a few steps. The water from this spring was considered very good for weak or inflamed eyes. I used to fetch it when I was a boy for a lady, a Mrs. Huggins, of Southampton Street. Some years after I used it for inflammation of the eyes and found it better than any lotion. Many people I am sure would have been glad to have known of it. I used it till the building, then the rubbish that got thrown in made it unfit for use. But now it is all cleared and railed off from the street. Years ago the spring was the main supply of the neighbourhood, people would be fetching all day long for domestic use.”

The following is an extract from “Reminiscences of Reading,” by an Octogenarian, (the late W. S. Darter) page 16 :—

“There is a spring of water, called the Conduit, situate near Highgrove which was supposed by the credulous to possess medicinal properties, because from this source the Abbey had been supplied with water ; and in confirmation of this a lead pipe in a perfect condition was found in cutting the new straight channel below High Bridge, by which the navigation of the Kennet was greatly improved, and this pipe was supposed to be part of that originally used as stated.”

GEOLOGICAL, Etc., NOTE.

The water in this Conduit is found in a bed of Plateau gravel lying mainly on the London clay, but partly on the Reading beds. It extends in an irregular form nearly a mile from East to West, and about $\frac{3}{8}$ ths. of a mile in its greatest width from North to South, and is, so far as I have been able to observe, from 4 to 12 feet in depth. Some water is found nearly over the whole area, but is probably most abundant in this part. The water is very bright and clear and fairly pure, but contains distinct traces of iron.

This gravel is "implement-bearing" and I have before me several specimens which were found when gravel was being dug to the S.E., about two years ago. I found one "in-situ" at a level which shewed distinct traces of having been the land surface or floor in paleolithic times. In the same locality occur a number of spots which in more recent times were hearths or possibly sites where cremation had taken place. Associated with these was pottery in a more or less fragmentary condition, while one complete urn, although broken by being moved, was found. The pottery is of a rude Celtic type, unornamented except at the rim, which is regularly notched into low relief. No traces of burnt bone were found, but in each case beneath the separate finds of pottery were loose flints, forming a bed quite distinct from the remainder of the soil and gravel.

I have made many enquiries, but in vain, to find a piece of the lead pipe which led the water from this spring to the Abbey, but it appears to have been all sold as old lead. It probably was made of sheet lead cut in strips folded over, with soldered joints similar to the Roman pipes in the Reading Museum.

I hoped, and have delayed this paper in the hope, that the Reading Corporation would have completed the repairs, so as to preserve as far as possible this interesting landmark of old times and to have erected a tablet with an inscription shortly stating its history. Perhaps some day this may be recorded.

The picture of the Well is from a pen-and-ink drawing by my friend Mr. T. T. Cumming (Messrs. Jos. Morris and Sons, Architects, Reading).