

The Carswell (or Castlewell), Ock Street, Abingdon.

FIRST RECORDED ATTEMPT AT A PUBLIC WATER-SUPPLY FOR ABINGDON.

By A. E. PRESTON, F.S.A.

THE earliest mention so far traced in the local records of the little spring of water that used to flow until about 1875 as an open stream from the old structure called the Conduit House in the south-east corner of the Albert Park, Abingdon, to about the middle of Ock Street on the north side occurs in one of the old registers of Abingdon Abbey that has recently come to light.

This old register amongst a multitude of other things contains transcripts of medieval title deeds of properties belonging to the Abbey at the date of its compilation. The volume has had a checkered career, and after being for many years given up as lost, recently almost by chance came into the hands of Mr. J. P. R. Lyell of Abingdon and is now in his possession. The spring is there mentioned in connexion with the boundary of one of the properties described as being in "Hocke Street next the watercourse of Carswelle."¹ The deed (Latin) in which this reference appears is undated, but speaks from about the late thirteenth or early fourteenth century, i.e. from about 1275 to 1325. *Carse*, the first element of the name Carswelle, is an obsolete form of the word *cress*, and gives a clue to the feature from which the spring originally took its name. Within the recollection of the writer of this note, watercress was plentifully grown in this little stream, and many a time has he seen it being plucked for sale, when the garden through which the stream ran was in occupation of one John Fletcher a grocer. In course of time, memory of the origin of the name faded away, and in Abingdon records of the eighteenth century the well-head was spoken of as "the Caswell." or less frequently as *Carswell*. In either form the term had no obvious meaning, and in popular speech was gradually transformed into *Castlewell*—equally meaningless. And by this designation it was known to the end.

From a cursory examination of the land adjacent to the Conduit House on the north and west sides, made in 1917, it was found that the spring supplying the well apparently originated near the north-western shoulder of the present Albert Park and followed an underground course to the position where it rose to the surface a few hundred yards to the south-eastwards; and from there was led into a large cistern built to receive it, over which the Conduit House was raised (*Plate No. II*). The examination also revealed

¹ *Lyell's Register*, f. 103d. Particula V, No. 97.

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Photo : E. Charieton.

PLATE I.

The Carswell (or Castlewell), Ock Street, Abingdon.
During process of removal in May 1940.

that as the water approached its point of issue from the ground, it had been made to flow through an artificial channel lined bottom, top and both sides with slabs of stone. Some of the larger stones forming the bottom of the channel were worked and carved, and would appear to be of fifteenth century date. They looked as if they had come from the Abbey church or some such ecclesiastical building (*Plate No. III*). Two of the slabs were placed for preservation in the Conduit House nearby, where they may still be seen. The portion of the channel uncovered was something over 120 yards to the north-west of the Conduit House and pointing directly towards it.

The object in view being the collection of sufficient water to satisfy the needs of dwellers in Ock Street, the probability is that other neighbouring springs were similarly captured and made to discharge into the same cistern. At least one such spring escaped collection, as it still exists as a separate dip-hole nearly opposite the main entrance to the central enclosure of the Park. It is said that this spring has never been known to lose its supply of water even in the driest summers. The Conduit House—or waterhouse as it is called in some of the documents—appears to be of sixteenth century date. It is mentioned as being in existence in Amyce's official Survey¹ of the town properties, prepared in 1554 in anticipation of the granting of the Borough Charter of Incorporation. In plan the house is hexagonal, with a conical stone roof, and was obviously built to cover and protect the cistern. From the Conduit House the water used to run in a shallow channel in a southerly direction towards Ock Street.

A century or so later—about 1617—a somewhat similar enterprise was undertaken at Oxford when one Otho Nicholson provided at his own expense a Conduit at Carfax, Oxford, for the supply of fresh water to the citizens and colleges of Oxford. The water was derived from springs at North Hinksey, a mile or two distant on the south side of the City, and the pipes carrying the supply had to pass under the main stream as well as tributaries of the Thames. These springs are still in existence and still augmenting the City supply of drinking water. The situation of the Conduit being at the centre of four cross-roads in the heart of the City, the Conduit was removed as an interference with traffic about 1787. The ornamental stone structure over the Conduit was presented by the City of Oxford to Viscount Harcourt of Nuneham, who caused it to be re-erected on the left bank of the River Thames as it passed through his Park, where it may still be seen.²

In the time of the Abbey, the land bearing the Abingdon spring formed part of one of the home farms of the monastery known as

¹ Amyce's Survey (*P.R.O.Land Rev. Misc. Books* 187, ff. 196–221) item 251.

² Wood's *City of Oxford* (O.H.S.), I, 446–9; *Handbook of Oxford* (pubd. Parker & Co., 1875), 261.

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PLATE II.

Sixteenth-Century Conduit House, at the south-east corner of the Park, Abingdon. March 1941.

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Photo: W. J. Vasey.

PLATE III.

Slabs of Worked Stone forming bed of Artificial Channel to Conduit House. 1917.

Lacy's Court. It was a small farm of about ninety acres in extent. At the dissolution in 1538 the great possessions of the Abbey passed to the Crown. Some ten years later in 1548 the wealthy Fraternity of the Holy Cross was similarly suppressed and its possessions also were grasped by the Crown. This ancient Guild had been established in St. Helen's Church for centuries; its ranks were open to both men and women, and the objects to which it devoted itself were partly religious but mainly charitable and utilitarian. In a sense as compensation to the inhabitants of the town for the loss of so valuable an institution as the Guild of the Holy Cross, the present Christ's Hospital was founded in 1553. Amongst the endowments it received from the Crown was the Lacy's Court farm which carried with it the Conduit House and the stream of spring water.

At the time the Abbey came to an end, Lacy's Court farm was held on lease from the monks by one Thomas North at a rental of £6 per ann;¹ but by the time it was granted to Christ's Hospital in 1553 the farm was in the tenure of a certain Richard Armeyrer under a Crown lease.² For some three centuries after the expiration of this lease, the land continued to be let on tenancy by Christ's Hospital for farming purposes; and the covenants of the leases from time to time granted betoken the care exercised by the Governors of the Charity to preserve the spring and its amenities.³ For instance, the tenant of the farm in 1719 was one Edward Jennings who held it on terms of a lease granted to his ancestor John Jennings in 1683.⁴ The counterpart of this lease is still in existence and provides that the tenant should keep in repair

“the waterhouse called Conduite and all the Bancks, Arches and Covering running to the same Conduite and the door to the same Conduite and the lock and key thereunto belonging.”

The farm tenant in short was made liable for the preservation of the spring until it reached the Conduit House; but not beyond.

Under the covenants of their leases, tenants of Lacy's Court farm were also obliged to permit the holding of a horse-fair in the neighbourhood of the Conduit House. Before the rise of the present Michaelmas Fair the greatest and oldest of the Fairs held at Abingdon was St. Mary's on 8 Sept., the festival of the Nativity of the Virgin, and the dates preceding and following that Festival. The main business of the Fair took place on the Bury (now the Market-Place) and in the streets converging on the centre of the town, but trade in horses was one of the features of the fair and legislation in the early years of Philip and Mary to prevent the sale of stolen animals required that fairs for horses should be held in special and separate places, and a register of the horses kept.⁵

¹ Ministers' A/c (Henry VIII), No. 109.

² *L. & P. Hen.* 8, Vol. 20, pt. 1, 684, and *Ch. Hospl. Mins.*, I, f. 151.

³ *Cal. Ch. Hospl.*, Vol. 4, No. 870, a-z.

⁴ *ibid.*, 870, p.

⁵ 2 and 3 Philip and Mary Cap. 7 quoted in *Fairs Past and Present*, Walford, p. 43.

The ordinary Abingdon horse-market had for centuries been held in or near Ock Street, at one time in what is known as St. Edmund's Lane, and subsequently at a place called Ruddle Cross (near Dr. Woodford's present surgery); but under this new law the part of St. Mary's Fair devoted to horses was removed to a position adjacent to the Conduit House, probably on the east side where the ground slopes to Boar Street, and the Fair acquired the name of Conduit Fair.

The division of the Fair presumably took place immediately after the legislation (1555-6)—perhaps even before the Borough received its Charter of Incorporation in November 1556. One of the numerous orders recorded on the Minutes during the Town Council's first year of existence relates to the division of another of the Fairs—St. Margaret's held in July—the sale of horses at that gathering being allocated to Broad Street and Boar Street.¹ No sixteenth century order concerning St. Mary's Fair has survived, but the Fair had certainly been divided by 1596: from that date onwards, leases of Lacy's Court farm include the covenant relating to the holding of the Fair on part of the farm.² In 1692 by order of the Corporation the St. Mary's horse-fair, like that of St. Margaret's, was transferred to Broad Street and Boar Street,³ though the covenant to permit the Fair was not omitted from the Lacy's Court leases until 1804.⁴ The name of the Fair again followed its situation, and it became known as Broad Street Fair—the designation it kept until it died out within living memory.

There seems little doubt that some means of making so excellent a supply of wholesome water as that proceeding from the Conduit House available to the dwellers of Ock Street for domestic purposes had been adopted long before the brick-canopied Fountain was built at The Carswell in 1719. By whom and when this first attempt at a public water supply for Abingdon was undertaken, there is nothing definite to shew; but it was probably contemporary with the date of erection of the Conduit House during the sixteenth century. Whatever the date may have been, it is clear that by 1719 the previous apparatus had become insufficient or out of order and was in need of reconstruction. At this stage, the Corporation of Abingdon and one Richard Ely entered on the scene and between them carried out the necessary renovation. The Corporation accounts of 1718-20 tell of the part they respectively played in the matter. For example, by a minute of 3 Jan. 1719 whilst William Tudor was Mayor, the sum of £6 was "allowed to Mr. Richard Ely towards repairing and beautifying the Caswell."⁵ A little later the amount was enlarged and the Borough Chamberlain

¹ *Selections from the Records of the Borough of Abingdon* (ed. Challenor 1898), 118.

² *Cal. Ch. Hospl.*, 870 c *et seq.*

⁴ *Cal. Ch. Hospl.*, 870 v.

³ Challenor (as above), 180.

⁵ Challenor, 186.

was ordered 19 May 1720 to "pay to Mr. Richard Ely twelve poundes for his charges in erecting & beautifיעing a place for the Conduit Stream to run und'r in the Ockstreet, & for making and railinge in a Cestern there."¹

From the language here employed, it will be noted that it was not a case of building a new fountain but of reconditioning an old one.

The same Chamberlain's Account also discloses further payments to tradesmen as follows:—²

To Nathaniel Sheeres for a Copper dish for the
Caswell and for tinning the same 3s. 6d.

To Robert Saunders for painters worke at the
Caswell and at the Markett house 19s. 0d.

It may be presumed that the lining of the drinking dish with tin was intended as a protection against verdigris.

It will be seen from the accompanying illustrations (*Plates I and IV*) that as originally designed, the 1719 Fountain was of a simple and not unpleasing character. Although the brickwork is now in places in a dilapidated state, the semi-circular recessed niche that formerly held the drinking basin still survives. The quality of the workmanship suggests the hand of a master of the craft, such as Samuel Westbrooke the builder of the contemporary Brick Alley almshouses. The basin itself and the copper drinking dish have however disappeared—as well as the cistern and the enclosing iron railings. The whole structure of about 10 feet high was in 1719 inset into the facade of one of the small dwellings abutting on the pavement of the Ock Street, and now belonging to Messrs. Morland & Co. Ltd. At date of this article the Fountain is in course of removal to a nearby position in the Ock Street. In the tympanum of the pediment is a cartouche bearing a stone shield on which is carved the Borough Arms. The arched head of the niche has a keyblock, with acanthus leaf ornament in low relief. Immediately above is a slightly projecting panel on which the following inscription was incised, and the lettering painted black:—

MR. R. ELY
1719

It would have been well if this inscription had been less cryptic, but the Borough arms in conjunction with Ely's name (so prominently displayed) were doubtless intended to proclaim that both were associated with this public improvement. It would be consistent therefore with the facts before us to regard Richard Ely as the originator of the project and the moving spirit in getting the work carried out.

Who then was this "Mister Richard Ely." At date of the

¹ *ibid*; charges here means expenses.

² Boro' Chamberlain's A/c for 1719.

renovated Fountain the Ely family had been established in the town for generations and were people of consequence. A Richard Ely was one of the twelve principal burgesses appointed under the Charter of 1556 incorporating the Borough, and by the same Charter was made one of the first two Bailiffs of the new Borough¹—an office second only in importance to that of Mayor. Sir John Mason was a friend and patron of this man, and on the death of Thomas Tesdale Senr. at Fitzharris in November 1556 nominated Ely (March 1557) to the position of Governor of Christ's Hospital,² which he only held for a short time, his death occurring in October 1558. Members of the Ely family (always with the baptismal name of Richard) were almost continuously elected representatives on the two great Corporations that governed the town.

The Richard Ely of 1719 was a Governor of the Hospital from 1698 and Master six times. His handwriting bespeaks a man of education (*Plate* No. V). By calling he was an Inn-keeper, and served an uneventful year of office as Mayor in 1706-7. In his younger days he was described as "Yeoman" and later as "Inn-holder," but towards the close of his life in 1732 he appears in the Borough rentals as "Gentleman."³ He kept, as his ancestors had done before him from at least 1554, the well-known coaching-house called the Lamb Inn, formerly situated on the western side of the present Cinema in Ock Street. He held this under lease from the Borough, together with adjoining premises rented from Christ's Hospital. After his death in 1732 the Lamb Inn went into other hands.

As landlord of the Lamb Inn this Richard Ely, or another of the same name, was one of about a dozen of the larger and more important tradesmen of the town, who issued a Trader's token to assist the scarcity of small change in national currency. An example of the token may be seen in the collection at the Ashmolean Museum, Oxford, bearing round the obverse the name "RICHARD ★ ELY ★ ★", with a figure of a lamb (or other four-legged animal) in the centre; and on the reverse the initials "R E" in the centre, and "LAMB : IN : ABINDON ★" round the margin. It is undated.

By the abortive Charter to the Borough of 1626 Ely was appointed for life one of the chief Burgesses of the Borough⁴—a short-lived distinction that only lasted till the Charter (with many other similar Charters throughout the country) was annulled by Proclamation during the flight of James II from the kingdom, October 1688. This temporarily unseated Richard Ely, but with three others he was restored to the Borough Council about twelve months later.⁵

¹ Challenor, 8.

² *Cal. Ch. Hospl.*, 861 b.

³ Boro' Bailiffs A/cs, *ad ann.*

⁴ Challenor, 80.

⁵ *Boro' Mins.* 2, f. 59.

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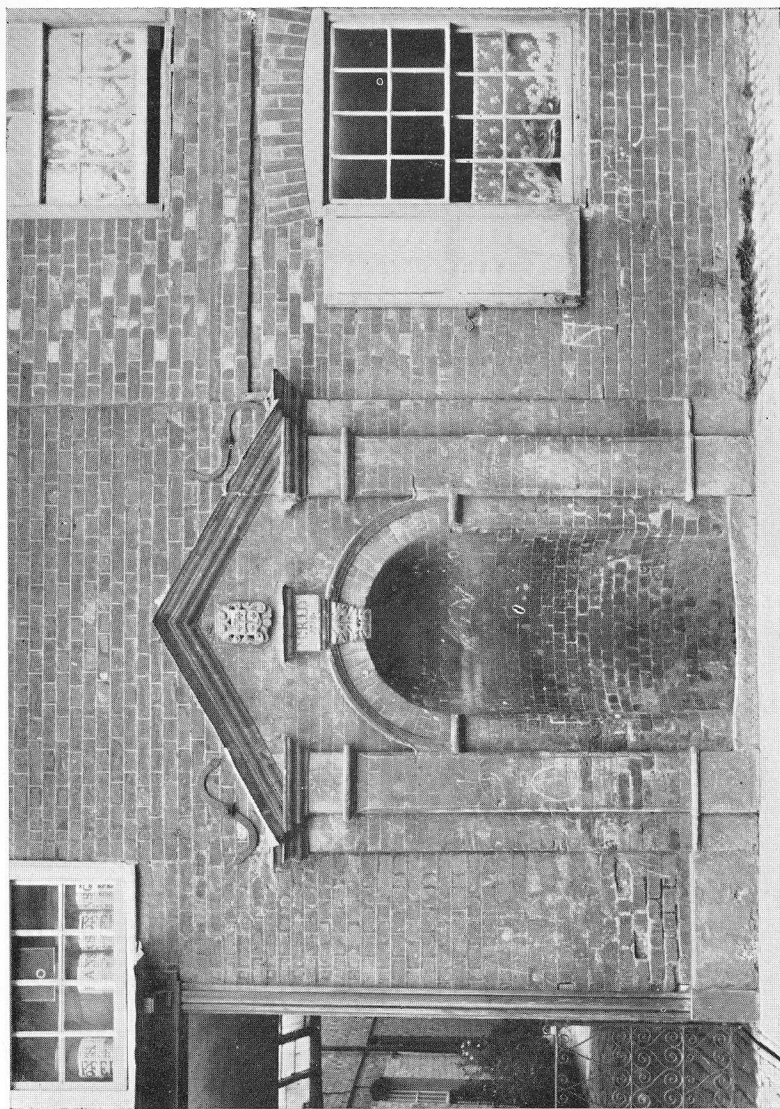


PLATE IV.

The Carswell (or Castlewell), Ock Street, Abingdon, shewing its relation to the receiving facade and other neighbouring buildings. (From photograph by H. W. Taunt, Oxford, c. 1890).

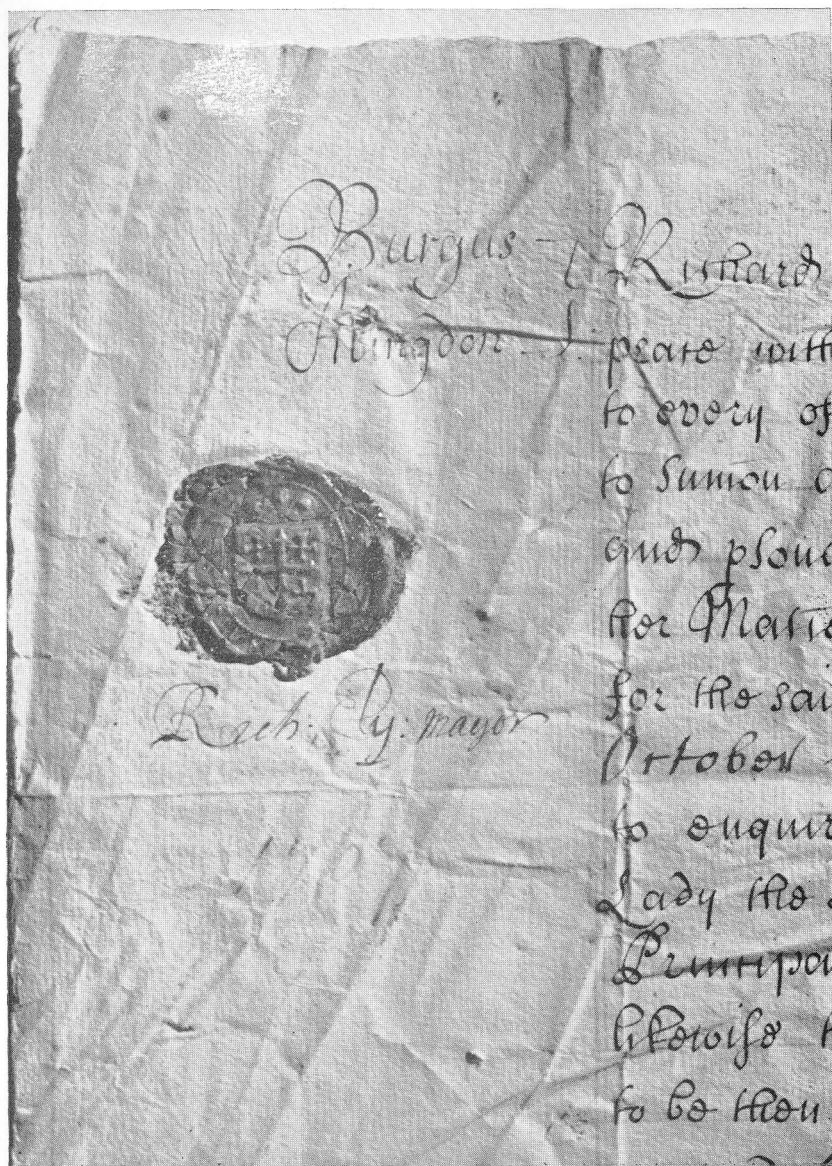


PLATE V.

Richard Ely's Signature and Seal of Office as Mayor of Abingdon
1706-7.

During the years that Richard Ely took a leading part in town affairs the Borough of Abingdon was almost always represented in Parliament by a supporter of the Tory Party, though often only after fiercely contested elections. Sir Simon Harcourt (later Lord Chancellor) was the member from 1689 to 1705 in all the six Parliaments summoned between these dates. He was again elected in October 1710, but had to vacate the seat because before Parliament met he had been made Lord Keeper of the Great Seal, and as such was to sit in the House of Lords, although not created a peer until the following year. Three years later his son represented the Borough for two years. Towards the close of Ely's life the rival party seems to have gained local ascendancy, and from 1722 onwards Whigs were returned for Abingdon till almost the middle of the century.

It might have been expected that the great public usefulness of a free supply of pure drinking water, such as furnished by the Fountain, would have protected it from injury by the inhabitants of the town. But not so. The Corporation minutes of 1760 tell us differently. In November of that year it was found necessary to issue an Order as follows:—

That in Case any Information shall be made before Mr. Mayor against any Person or Persons who shall turn the Carswell Stream out of its Proper Channel; the Bellman do give Publick notice of One Guinea Reward upon Conviction to any Person or persons making such Discovery.¹ No record has been found of the result of this warning, but it may be presumed to have achieved its object.

For the remainder of its existence the Fountain appears to have performed its functions unobtrusively and without incident. The end however drew near with the carrying out of the Town main drainage scheme in the years round 1874. One of the consequences of the drainage operations was so to derange the deep springs feeding the Fountain that the supply of water dried up and the Fountain came to an end.

There was a brief period when at the beginning of the Volunteer movement the Conduit House was made use of as a place of storage for ammunition. The spring having ceased to flow, the cistern was filled up to form a floor.

The Conduit House and Ock Street fountain did not exhaust the attempts to provide Abingdon with a public water supply. For instance, a project was started in 1696 for supplying river water to houses in the town, by pumping water from a dam erected under one of the arches of Abingdon Bridge to a site in Stert Street now occupied by the station approach. But this supply was for purposes other than drinking water. The 1696 lease of the Stert

¹ Challenor, 204.

Street site stated that it was "to the end that the inhabitants might at easy rates be furnished with river water in their houses on all occasions and might be supplied with a present remedy in case of any accidental or calamitous fire."¹

The great risk of fire arising from the dressing of hemp and flax in the spinning shops and weaving houses within the Borough is strongly expressed in a Corporation minute of 10 October 1722, by which spinning and weaving or the working of hemp by candle-light was forbidden under heavy penalties.²

The promoters of the scheme for the supply of river water were one Thomas Picard of Abingdon, a goldsmith; and Henry Knapp, Town Clerk of the Borough and a Governor of Christ's Hospital.

The carrying out of the Scheme embraced the erection of an Engine House³ on a site described in a lease of 1697 as "part of the River Thames" on the east or up-side of Abingdon Bridge, leased by Christ's Hospital to Picard and Knapp for the purpose.⁴ The venture seems not to have been of a lasting character, since it came to an end with the demolition of the Engine House during the widening of part of Abingdon Bridge (at the town end) in the years round 1819, and some ten years before the completion work at the other end was carried out in the years 1829-30.⁵

It was another half-century before the ideas latent in Picard and Knapp's scheme took a practical form in a town water supply, but Picard and Knapp and still more so the unknown builders of the Conduit House with its early water supply to Ock Street, and also Richard Ely and the others who repaired and beautified the Carswell in 1719, may in the development of public works in Abingdon take their place as pioneers.

1 Richardson's *Berks. Collections*, B.M. No. 28665, 77.

2 Challenor, 187.

3 Richardson, (as above).

4 *Ch. Hospl. Mins.*, II, 12.

5 *ibid.*, *ad ann.*