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**St. Edith's Well and St. Peter's Cross, Bristol**

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## ST. EDITH'S WELL AND ST. PETER'S CROSS, BRISTOL

by CHARLES E. BOUCHER, B.SC.

THE development and growth of a town is largely dependent on adequate supplies of water. In this respect Bristol is fortunate. Springs are numerous and there is water in abundance not very far below the surface. At first the local springs provided all that was necessary and then, as the town grew, wells were sunk. In the older part of the city, these wells, though now unused, are still in existence.

With the increase of the population it was necessary to find new sources of water, and in the 13th century the monastic bodies and the parochial authorities secured possession of several of the large springs in the outlying country, from which they brought the water into the town by means of wooden pipes.

Although documentary evidence is lacking there seems some reason to believe that the earliest source from which the town obtained its water was the large and abundant spring adjacent to St. Peter's church. In a letter to the Press in 1906, the late Mr George Weare, a well-known local archaeologist, first pointed out that as the spring was situated in the most ancient part of the town it may well have been the site of the original settlement.

Writing in 1789 Barrett says 'opposite to it (St. Peter's almshouse) is St. Peter's pump or the Well of St. Edith, remarkable for fine water'.

The dedication of the well points also to its early date, as both the St. Ediths were of Royal Saxon birth. It is not known which of the two saints the name of the spring commemorated. The better known of them is St. Edith,

the Abbess of Wilton, a natural daughter of King Edgar, who died in 974. Her early years were spent at Kemsing, a village in Kent, where there is a well dedicated to her. The well at Kemsing is surrounded by a wall and steps lead down to the water, which is still reputed to have the power of granting the wish of anyone who takes up a handful and throws it over the left shoulder. The other St. Edith was the daughter of Edward the Elder and a sister of Athelstan. She married Sithric, king of Northumbria, was repudiated by him and became abbess of Tamworth. Like St. Edith of Wilton, there is a holy well dedicated to her at Church Eaton in Staffordshire, which also is reputed to have healing powers.

Neither of the two saints had any direct association with Bristol. The cult of St. Edith of Wilton was the more widespread, but St. Edith of Polesworth was a Mercian princess, and another Mercian princess, St. Werburgha, was commemorated in one of our local and ancient churches.

Although St. Edith's well does not figure in any very early document, the statement of some of the local historians that the well was sunk by William Canynge is quite erroneous, as there are allusions to it in documents long before his time. The earliest reference to St. Edith's well, which I have met, occurs in the will of William Frost of the date 1391. He bequeathed to his wife Margaret his dwelling house in Worship street (now called Bridge street) by St. Edith's well.

In 1423 James Cokkes left to his wife Margaret a messuage in Worship street, situate between the shops of the abbot and convent of St. Augustine of Bristol on the one side, and the shops held by John Spyne of the prioress of St. Mary Magdalene on the other, and extending from the said street to a certain lane leading 'ad fonte vocat Edde Well'.

In 1435 Walter Norton transferred sufficient land to enable his brother Thomas Norton, who occupied the



Peter's Pump, Stourhead Park, Wilts.

*Ph.* A. J. Dorrell

*facing p.* 96

western half of the great house now known as St. Peter's hospital, to make an entrance from the churchyard and a way for ingress and egress. Their father had left the house in two portions to his two sons, Walter and Thomas. In the deed, a copy of which is in Tyson's collection, the western half of the house is described as situated on the south of the churchyard between a certain lane called St. Edywell lane on the west part and the hall of Thomas Norton on the east part. This gives the position of St. Edywell lane, which has long since disappeared. Presumably it ran from the west end of St. Peter's hospital behind the houses in Worship street into Peter street.

In 1458, Canynge gave to his son William and his daughter-in-law Isabella a tenement described as being opposite the cross of St. Peter in which John Meryfeld, baker, lived.

From this time onward the old romantic title of St. Edith's well disappears, to be replaced by that of St. Peter's cross. Evidently Canynge, who owned a good deal of property in Peter street, had intended the erection of a cross over the well, and it may have been begun in his lifetime. But it was not finished until after his death, when the work was completed by his executor William Spenser, the cost being defrayed out of Canynge's estate.

The reason for the work is obvious. The well added something to the amenities of his property and it was of the utmost importance that it should be protected from contamination.

Peter street, one of the widest and most open in the town, was an important residential area. The largest house in the city adjoined it and the Recorder of the city owned a mansion which he had built on the north side. The street contained a large open space, described as the 'locum rectum quadrati', outside the crossing of St. Peter's street, for which 'vacua placea juxta ecclesiam Sancti Petri' Roger Leche paid the city in 1350 three pence.

Several of the houses on the north side belonged to Canynge and a further number on the same side, called St. Peter's place, formed part of the marriage portion of Queen Philippa.

The sanitary condition of the neighbourhood was deplorable. Close at hand were Worship street, Bull lane and the Shambles where cattle were slaughtered. Down the middle of Peter street was a central gutter, little better than an open sewer into which garbage and refuse made their way. Further, St. Peter's street was one of the few places in the city where gorse, broom, hay, straw and coal were sold, and once a year oxen, sheep, pigs, horses and other animals were allowed to stand for the purpose of sale. It was imperative for one of the most important water supplies of the town to be protected from pollution as far as possible, and this could only be done by walling the well round and covering it with a building.

As previously mentioned the credit for this is due to Canynge, who conceived the idea and bore the expense.

In his itinerary William Wyrcestre, who died about 1484, alludes four times to the new cross :—

' Via prope ecclesiam Sancti Petri ducente de Wynchstrete ad principium cornerii viae orientalis partis inceptionis de le bochery continet ex transverso prope fontem de via prope ecclesiam Sancti Petri. . . '

' Vicus defensorius incipiente ad finem viae vocatae le Shamelys, directe incipiendo ad locum rectum quadrati per vicum de extraverso de Seynt Peterstrete coram novo fonte facto de bonis Canyngs de alta domo de frestone ab exteriori parte via de Wynchstrete continet 135 gressus '.

' Vicus transiens de Wynchstrete ad vicum vocatum Seynt Peter strete ex opposito fontis de frestone prope ecclesiam Sancti Petri continet 80 gressus '.

' Via defensiva Defenstrete videlicet a Castelstrete veniente de Newyate usque secundam venellam directe intrantem in dictam viam a vico vocato Seynt Petyr

strete coram fonte novo de frestone noviter erecto et fundato de bonis Willelmi Canyngys ex transverso dictam viam intrantem et defendentem magnum murum inter castrum villae Bristol qui quidem murus adherebat murum defensorem villae predictæ'.

In the interval between the erection of St. Peter's cross and 1546 we see that a change had taken place. In that year Nicholas Thorne left 'Thirtie tonne of salt for the reparacion of the high waies about the said City of Bristowe and for the mayntening of condittes, the pittie well and of Saynt Peter's plumpe' and in 1548 Margaret Wudhouse left ten shillings for the 'rep'acions and maynteynyng of Saint Peter's Plompe'. Evidently in the interval, instead of drawing the water by means of buckets, a pump had been installed. The first mention of pumping apparatus occurs about the year 1440 in connexion with ships, but early in the 16th century the word pump is used frequently to designate an instrument for raising water. Convenient though it doubtless was, the pump at St. Peter's cross was an endless cause of expense to the church and the parish. Mechanical devices are liable to get out of order and need continual care and repair. St. Peter's pump was no exception. There are several deeds dealing with this, of which one, an agreement between the churchwardens and a ship's carpenter named John Fletcher, is an example. By this undertaking Fletcher covenanted to repair 'the two plompes . . . latelie in decay and out of reparacion' at a cost of six pounds lawful money of England and he further agreed to maintain the two pumps, 'plompe work, timber work and iron work', paving and mason work excepted, in return for the 'sum of forty shillings lawful money of England at the four principal and most accustomed terms in the year, that is to wit the Feast of the Nativity of St. John the Baptist 10s, St. Michael the Archangel 10s, the Birth of our Lord God 10s, the Annunciation of our Lady 10s'. When it is remembered that the stipend

of the rector of St. Peter's at that time was £10 a year, it will be easily recognised that the pump was a serious burden on the churchwardens and parish.

Towards the recurring expense Ralph Dole in 1586 assigned an annual charge on his house in the Shambles of a pound a year.

With the passage of time Canynge's cross evidently became ruinous and out of repair. There seems to be some evidence that a wave of feeling for the renovation of the crosses had been arising locally, as Bishop Goodman of Gloucester, in a letter to the mayor of that city, referred to what had been done in this respect in Bristol.

This feeling found its expression not only in the restoration of the city cross, but also of that of St. Peter's cross which was taken down and replaced in 1633, Canynge's cross making way for a new one. Adams' *Chronicle* describes what took place.

' In the month of May 1633 the High Cross of Bristoll was taken down to be new builded.

Also this summer the Cross of St. Peter's Pump was taken down new built and beautified by the parishioners with great charges '.

It is pretty certain that the moving spirit in the enterprise was Robert Aldworth, as is evident from an examination of the structure.

But though the cross was new, the pumps continued an embarrassment to the parish. In the earliest church account still remaining (1654) we gather that the pump had to be repaired twelve times at a cost of £3 1s 1d and there was a charge of 6s 10d for certain renewals. This led to its being locked and a woman, named Mary Hackett, employed to take charge of it.

During the Commonwealth the statues of Charles I in the city, had been removed, but at the Restoration they were replaced. In St. Peter's church accounts for 1660 there is an entry:—

' Pd to Henry Hoare, freemason, for worke done

about settinge upp the Kinges Picture at St. Peter's Plumpe 6s 11d'.

This picture was one of the statues in the cross.

The Restoration saw the re-erection of the may-poles which had been strictly forbidden during the Commonwealth. A may-pole which had been put up at St. Peter's cross in 1661 was ordered by the churchwardens to be pulled down at a cost of 1s 6d.

On 5 September 1663, Charles II and his queen came to Bristol. They were received at Lawford's Gate and escorted through the city. In their progress they passed through Peter street with its cross, which had been renovated for the occasion by Henry Hoare the freemason. The freestone work round the pump was repaired, two new arches placed over the statues and the cross painted. The work cost the churchwardens £1 19s 1d, of which 9d was given to the workmen for drink. Thirteen years later the Duke of Ormond visited the city and was sumptuously entertained by the civic authorities. His visit entailed the expenditure of the large sum of £5 17s 4d for the renovation and colouring of the Cross. The damage to the structure was due in some measure to the sleds used for conveying merchandise. The 1680 accounts contain the entry: 'putting a stoane to keep drayes from ye pump 00. 00. 04'.

Although the authorities frowned on the erection of may-poles, the high spirits of the populace found an outlet in the more dangerous practice of lighting bonfires in the streets, and in the baiting of offenders in the stocks which, in St. Peter's parish, were set up against the wall of the cross.

In the middle of the 18th century an important movement in the direction of street improvement took place in Bristol. The rapid increase in the population was the cause, but, as is frequently the case, zeal had little sympathy with antiquity and a good deal of unnecessary destruction of old features took place.

The authorities obtained an Act of Parliament empowering them to demolish the old bridge over the river, build a new one in its place and embark on a great scheme of street development in the city. This Act dealt not only with the approaches to the bridge itself, but also included the reconstruction and widening of Dolphin lane (now Dolphin street), Bull lane and the Shambles (now Bridge street). The carrying out and financing of the enterprise was entrusted to a body of citizens, called the Bridge Trustees, who heartily set about the work. The old houses facing Dolphin lane, Bull lane and the Shambles were pulled down and Dolphin lane was widened. A street now called Bridge street, 40 feet wide, was laid out on the site of the old Bull lane, the Shambles and Worship street. To the south of the new Bridge street a narrow street, 25 feet in width, was left as a wharf, the river was embanked and a quay wall was built at great expense.\*

The meetings of the Trustees occurred fitfully. On many occasions those attending were too few to hold them but, when it was a matter of destroying what was old, a quorum was easily found.

On 7 July 1766, the Trustees met at the Guildhall, Bristol and passed the following recommendation:—

‘ Saint Peter’s Cross and Pump should be removed with all expedition, and that instead of the present pump a shaft be sunk in or near the ground where Williams House now stand in Peter Street and that a feather be carried from thence into the present well. . . . ’

Later the meeting accepted the recommendation and ordered that St. Peter’s cross and pump be removed and the shaft sunk.

The wave of destruction that was passing over the City

\* Minute of Bridge Trustees, 6 April 1767.

brought about the demolition of the ancient and magnificent High Cross of Bristol. An agitation, largely fomented, it is said, by the well known Bristol china manufacturer, Richard Champion, sprang up, and led to its removal from the middle of College Green. The stones of the cross were deposited in the cloisters of the cathedral. Fortunately the Dean at the time was Dr Cutts Barton a friend of the cultured Henry Hoare, who was then laying out his beautiful park at Stourhead. Mr Hoare approached the Dean and obtained permission to remove the stones, at his own expense. This he did and re-erected the cross at the entrance to the park, where it now stands.

Mr Hoare then heard of the resolution of the Bridge Trustees to demolish St. Peter's cross and he made them a similar offer. The Trustees met on 4 August 1766 and considered the matter as described in the following minute :—

' At this meeting Mr Thomas Tyndall on the behalf of Mr Hoare offered to remove at his own expense the stones belonging to St. Peter's Cross and Pump, provided that the Trustees would make him a present of the stones '.

The Bridge Trustees agreed to this proposal and gave Mr Hoare permission to take down the cross at once. They were empowered to give this consent by a clause in their Act of Parliament of 6 Geo. III, which read ' to cause to be taken down or removed a certain erection or building in Peter Street called St. Peter's Cross and the public pump belonging to a well or spring of water within the said building or cross, so as the way and passage may be more easy and commodious '.

Mr Hoare acted on the resolution of the Trustees, and removed the cross to his park at Stourhead, where he re-erected it in 1768. It was entirely due to him that these important and interesting features of Bristol's life and history have been preserved, and the city should be grateful to him and his descendants for what he did.

The Act of Parliament authorising the demolition of the cross laid upon the Trustees the obligation of providing a new supply of water near its site and in discharge of this obligation they sank a well at the angle of Dolphin street and Peter street, at a cost of £1 10s. Dolphin street was then being rebuilt and the well was sunk in the piece of void ground adjacent to Mr Jere Amos' new houses in the street. The Trustees accepted the liability of erecting a building round the pump as high as the first story of the adjoining house and then gave liberty to the owner of that house to extend its upper floors over the pump building, with the condition that room should be left sufficient for drawing 'the spear of the pump'. Some elderly people will remember the pump house at this corner with its entrances from Peter street and Dolphin street and the women sitting and selling oranges and apples from their baskets.

The cross is now near the head of Six Wells valley in Stourhead park, above a large mass of built up flints. It is hexagonal in form and consists of two storeys, surmounted by a shaft raised above a six-sided pedestal. The shaft, which is broken at the top, is said to have terminated in an actual cross, but this seems to be open to question.

The lower part of the structure consists of six depressed four-centred arches, the apex of each being ornamented with a cherub's head. The capitals of the columns have a simple moulding on the outer sides and a large wedge-shaped stone on the inner. They have a set-off about a third of the way up from the bottom.

Separating the upper from the lower storey runs a simple moulded cornice. The upper storey is made up of six round-headed arches, each of which contains a statue (the 'pictures' alluded to in the churchwardens' accounts) but the figures are so badly weathered that it is almost impossible to identify them. However, there is little

doubt that they represented kings and queens with Bristol or local connexions.

The jambs are panelled and moulded. Over each of them there is a large carved fleur-de-lys and at the intersection of each pair or arches is a little pedestal supporting the carved figure of an animal, either a lion or a bear bearing a shield, but they are badly weathered.

The large pedestal carrying the crowning shaft has six carved panels. Three of them are so worn that the details of the carving which was on them are no longer recognizable. Of the others that to the south bears the merchant-mark of Robert Aldworth, figured in our 'Transactions' XII, 23, and that to the northeast the outlines of a ship. Both these devices are to be seen on Robert Aldworth's magnificent tomb in St. Peter's church. The third panel bears the date 1768.

Robert Aldworth was a famous Bristol merchant who lived in the Great House, now called St. Peter's hospital, which he renovated and extended. Its present impressive and interesting front is due to him. In all probability he was largely responsible for the building of the cross itself, though the writer of Adams' *Chronicle* assigns it to the parishioners.

The cross is stated to have been restored in 1895 under the supervision of Sir Aston Webb.\*

With the removal of the cross to Stourton the romance of the spring faded, but not its reputation as a water supply. Writing in 1789 Barrett says 'Opposite to it (St. Peter's Almshouse) is St. Peter's Pump or the Well of St. Edith remarkable for fine water'. Its reputation was due to the unfailing supply which it gave and the bright and sparkling appearance of its water, but owing to its situation in soil impregnated with the sewage of hundreds of years, the water was so heavily contaminated as to be a serious danger to health.

\* Sweetman, *Guide to Stourhead*, p. 24.

The vestry books of St. Peter's church have many entries of the purchases of lime and hair to be put into the well for the purification of its water, and for years its maintenance was a serious drain on the funds of the church, so serious that the churchwardens tried to induce the city to take over the liability. But the Commissioners of Pitching and Paving resolutely declined to do so. At last the Health Authority stepped in and ordered the well to be closed on the ground that the water was so seriously polluted that it was a source of danger to the inhabitants.\*

So in 1887 St. Edith's well, probably the most ancient water supply of the city, ceased to exist and with it went one of the few romantic features of Bristol life.

The site of the pump is now incorporated in the building, no. 4 Dolphin street.

\* The analysis made on 14 February 1887, by Mr Wallis Stoddarts, the city analyst, shows the dangerous character of the water. The impurities in parts per 100,000 were :—

Saline ammonia	..	..	.010
Albuminoid ammonia	..	..	.024
Nitrogen as nitrates and nitrites			8.24
Chlorine as chlorides	..	..	27.5
Total dissolved solids	..	..	189.1
Phosphoric acid	..	..	Heavy traces
Temporary hardness	..	..	29.5
Permanent hardness	..	..	38.5
Total hardness	..	..	68
Sediment	..	..	Flocculent organic matter and bacteria