

Seething Wells and the local area

Introduction

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Seething Wells

Seething Wells is part of Surbiton and today straddles the Kingston and Elmbridge border. It is located on the Portsmouth Road. It is the site of the Lambeth and Chelsea Water Works, which were built from 1848 to 1856. The first to open was the Lambeth Water Works in 1852. The water works consisted of large water filter beds, that took water from the Thames and filtered it through sand, gravel and shells. It was pumped to reservoirs and then to the companies' customers in London. The beds operated until well into the 1990s.

Pre Water Works

Rivers were greatly used during history and pre history as they provided a source of freshwater, hunting and fishing. They were also good communication and trade routes.

There is little evidence of a prehistoric settlement. Archaeological reports from Museum of London indicate that during the construction of the filter bed for the Chelsea Waterworks in the 1850s, a number of artefacts were recovered which include a Neolithic stone axe, Bronze age daggers, a possible Roman cremation urn and an iron spearhead of unknown date.

James Simpson Junior presented to the Surrey Archaeological Society the following

1. An urn of great pottery
2. A bronze brooch, probably of the 15th century

A larger collection was donated by Dr William Roots, a son of a well known collector.

1. A flint axe
2. A basalt axe
3. A bronze dagger
4. An iron spearhead.

They were generally found within the clays from 8 – 10 feet below the surface. Such objects have been found up and down the Thames in this area, for example during the construction of the Kingston bridge in the 1840s. They are usually described as votive offerings. Whether they were deposited in this area is unknown; they may have been washed down-stream over time and collected on the bend of the river, where Seething Wells is located.

The ordnance Survey maps of 1860s shows "Roman Remains found here" found during the construction of the beds, which could be a wharf, or the cartographers being mistaken about what was actually there (Museum of London, 1993).

Wells and Seething Wells

The apt name of Seething Wells is a gradual phonetic corruption of the original 'Siden Wells' which appears on maps from the 18th century. It was the site of springs (reportedly warm springs) and famous for its purity and healing properties.

The water of the Thames was often seen as medicinal. Water by Hampton Court was believed to possess medicinal properties. In 1794 it was described as “efficacious in the gravel (for kidney stones), excellent for drinking and washing...” For many centuries the Hampton Court area had a reputation of good health, as it was reported that it escaped epidemics, of sweating sickness, plague, small pox and scarlet fever which raged in neighbouring areas. This was ascribed to the protection of the river (Ackroyd, 2007)

Little seems to be known about the wells that may have existed in the area, or gave name the name “Seething Wells”. In Walford’s Greater London (1883/4) the area is mentioned:

“At the far end of the esplanade are the reservoirs and filtering beds, and the extensive ranges of buildings... the locality in which the waterworks are placed is called “Seething Wells”. The hot spring at Seething Wells was once thought an infallible remedy in certain cases of ophthalmia” (Gilman)

The Seething Wells spa, a natural spring is thought to date from the medieval period. It was fully demolished in the mid 19th century when the waterworks were constructed. Local people talk about several springs once existing along this stretch of the river, but again there is little evidence or primary source material for this. We have descriptions of the well. From at least the 18th century the spring has become “enclosed within a very old ivy covered wellhouse containing a well and spring” (Ayliffe, 1914.36). The spring itself yielded “an abundant supply of water, whose hot waters were exploited medicinally, especially for ophthalmia” (Biden, 1852. 34).

Early 19th century

The area seems to have been open land for most of its life. It was enclosed in 1808, when acquired by the Earl of Lovelace. After this time, the tithe maps indicate a considerable amount of occupation along the river side of the Portsmouth Road. Between the road and the river lay the riverbank, the osier beds, fields and at least one wharf, and pubs. Five out of the seven of the houses were owned by Samuel Gray and let to tenants (Gilman).

Much of the land in the Long Ditton area of SW was owned by the Earl of Lovelace and leased to tenants. Again there were arable fields, Jeffrey’s Warf on the river bank, along with a house, outbuildings and yard. Some areas were used as meadow. Thames Ditton there was agriculture, brickyards, boat-works. Altogether you get the picture of a totally pre-industrial life, with a few big households - potentates who had retired to the country, and some schools.

The Rose and Crown public house, its garden and outbuildings, a small meadow was located on the south side of the Portsmouth Road, owned by the Earl of Lovelace and rented to the Widow Payne. Between the Rose and Crown and the River was a wharf, and

meadow, to its east was an ozier bed and spreading along the river bank to the west was a large garden with a substantial house, all leased by the Earl to Thomas Page.

The Portsmouth Road was the main coaching route from London to the south coast (Portsmouth, Southampton to London, via Kingston). This was an important route and would have been fairly busy throughout the 18th century and first part of the 19th century. The river would too have been busy, with industry and routes to Hampton Court Palace (Gilman).

Surbiton

Surbiton had been in existence as a settlement from at least the Saxon period. The name Surbiton also dates from that period, which relates to grain stores. The area remained agricultural until the 1830s, after the main railway line was built between London and Southampton. The original intention had been to build this through Kingston, but due to landowners and the council objecting, the route was changed went through Surbiton Hill. A station Kingston-on-Railway was established on the north of Surbiton Hill, but later in 1840 the station was located at its present site.

Entrepreneurs recognised the significance of the railway. Thomas Pooley was instrumental in developing the area, creating long, wide streets with large houses built for the middle classes who would be commuting to London. They style of the area was very Italianate with low pitched roofs, villas, a campanile type tower on St Andrews Church. This development was ongoing up to the 1880s. The 1866 the Ordnance Survey maps show a half developed Surbiton, but with an established centre. The OS maps 20 years later show a mature town.

The Construction of the water beds

After lengthy negotiations, a parcel of land was bought from the Earl at the end of 1849. Eviction notices were given to those living by the Thames at Long Ditton. It is not known whether the adjoining land was acquired in the same way. Owners of the land may have received compensation, but the fate of the tenants is unknown. In all, as many as 200 people may have been cleared to make way for the works, only a few can still be traced to the local area. The severe poor laws would have meant that they were not left on the parish and it is possible that they may have been forced into emigration.

The Construction of the filter beds started with the Lambeth Water Company from 1850 – 1852 when the site opened. This was closely followed by the Chelsea Water Company from which started construction in 1854, the site opening in 1856. The look of the site must have been momentous, changing from a quiet, small industries and a few houses to a major engineering feet. A description of the site in 1854 is found in the Surrey Comet:

“... The Banks of the river at Seething Wells, on a fine day are worth a visit, for the busy and animated scene there presented. It is impossible for anyone unacquainted with the plans of the undertaking to form any judgement of what will be the eventual condition which the spot is to assume, but at the pace now maintained order and effect will soon emerge from the present temporary chaos and confusion... Above 800 men are now engaged and over £1000 was disbursed last week for wages alone.”

Surrey Comet 7 April 1854
Courtesy of Kingston Museum and Heritage Service

From late 1850s through to 1990s building work must have been virtually constant - there was, for instance, a notable review in 1886 recommending new engines and filters.

Bibliography

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