

WATER SUPPLIES OF THE BLACK COUNTRY "SMESTOW VALLEY"

The Smestow Valley is one of the most important sources of underground water in the Midlands area. Underlain by red sandstone with beds of shingle and pebble, this fifty square mile area is capable of producing some 20 million gallons/day.

No community could exist without a dependable supply of water and this water course undoubtedly supported settlements in the past.

Smestow Brook as a potential piped supply was identified by Henry Marten as early as 1851. Marten is the forgotten Engineer of the South Staffordshire Water Works, being overshadowed by John McClean with whom he was jointly responsible for obtaining the Act of Incorporation in 1853.

Prior to his involvement with S.S.W.W., Marten was engaged as a Consulting Engineer of the South Staffordshire Mining District Waterworks Company - whose prime object was supplying water to the Black Country Towns. The chosen source of supply rose between Wednesfield and Wolverhampton and flowed south to join the River Stour near Kinver. Marten gauged the stream in 1851 and found over 10 million gallons/day capacity.

A bill promoted in Parliament in 1851 by the Mining District Company was opposed by the Kidderminster Carpet Manufacturing Company who feared that abstractions of large amounts of water from the Brook would seriously interfere with the flow of the River Stour. Observers had reported that the River Stour possessed an ink-like appearance caused by effluent from the Carpet Works at Kidderminster.

The bill failed at its second reading when the local M.P. drummed up support amongst fellow Members.

In the autumn of 1852 several sources of water supply were sampled with the view to forming the South Staffordshire Water Company. Samples were again taken from Smestow Brook by Henry Marten and analysed by Henry Medlock FCS, the Analytical Chemist of London, in an endeavour to find a suitable source of water supply for the South Staffordshire District. Medlock considered the waters of the Smestow far superior to the other samples tested; beautifully clear and bright and free from decaying matter. His advice to utilize the source was disregarded because of the expected opposition that could have again been encountered from Mill owners in the District.

Henry Marten's confidence that an abundant supply of water would be found in the Smestow Valley was proved forty years later with the opening of the Ashwood Works. Several other Pumping Stations have been established in Smestow Valley by South Staffs Water Company and Severn Trent Water PLC who took over Stations built by Wolverhampton Corporation, Bilston Corporation and Stourbridge and District Water Board. Other industrial undertakings also abstracted water for trade purposes.

The Great War Mystery

Just before the outbreak of the 1914-1918 War, mysterious excavations began at Six Ashes by a Team of Germans. The Team working under the utmost secrecy naturally caused the local villagers' imagination to run riot. So much so that headlines in the Express and Star reported that speculation was rife as

to what the "furiners" were up to! Then, just as the villagers' interest reached fever pitch, the Germans were rounded up in the early weeks of the war and taken by the military to an internment camp. Rumour was that the hole had been dug to hide ammunition and that a concrete pad was planned to house guns to be pointed by the enemy at munitions factories in the area. Another theory was that the 700ft. deep pit was to hide ammunition for German airships. Other, more rational explanations, suggested that the investigations were to prove the existence of coal or water. Following the armistice no one returned to complete the work and eventually water shot up from the excavation and formed a rivulet which flowed into Smestow Brook. As you might imagine this was promptly renamed "Hun River" by the locals.

Records in the archives of South Staffs Water Company hold the key to this mystery. During the War the Company was instructed by the Ministry to provide 200,000 gallons of water to the Birmingham Metal and Munitions Company. S.S.W. was facing difficulties in providing the water as they were already supplying a large number of local factories and military camps. An application was made to take a supply from the Smestow Brook at the boring carried out by the Germans who according to records were prospecting for coal. Subsequently a quantity of approximately half-a-million gallons a day of water was found in the sandstone.

The borehole was in the district of Bilston U.D.C. who had the Bratch Pumping Station about a mile from the borehole site. The Ministry suggested that negotiations should be conducted with the landowner and Bilston U.D.C.

However, South Staffs Water wanted authority to extend their water extraction rights beyond the duration of the war but both Bilston and Seisdon District Councils objected strongly and the scheme was never pursued.

Later Development

Cookley Pumping Station near Kidderminster was developed by the South Staffs Water Company in 1960 to assist them in meeting the district demands prior to the development of the River Severn Water Scheme. The application to build the works was opposed by Kidderminster Borough and Rural District Councils, plus seven industrial users including the British Sugar Corporation, I.C.I. Limited and Kidderminster Carpet Manufacturers due to possible depletion of their supplies. Eventually, following a public enquiry, the Minister of Housing and Local government gave permission to develop the site. Three boreholes, each 600 feet deep, were sunk into the sandstone. This will possibly be the last of the Water Pumping Stations to be developed in the Smestow Valley.

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