

## Water on the brain

This story is about local village water supplies over the last 180 years ...

A lady called Pat Negal recently wrote to me, saying "I have been looking at your Kilsby Tunnel page on the Kilsby website and found the information about the navvies particularly interesting. I photocopied a letter to the editor in the Mercury of the 31<sup>st</sup> October 1840 from R. Hains of Kilsby". She sent me the photocopy, and this is what the letter said:

*"London & Birmingham Railway*

*Kilsby, Oct 26<sup>th</sup> 1840*

*To the Editor of the Northampton Mercury*

*Sir – since the opening of the above Railway the inhabitants of Kilsby have been greatly inconvenienced, in consequence of the tunnel having drained the once fine supply of water from all the wells in the village. So completely dry are they that one of the maltsters has been obliged to suspend his operations. In fact we have not sufficient for our domestic purposes, several of us, unable to brew, having had to buy beer for our men during the time of harvest. Should a fire take place, as in September last, the consequence must now be dreadful, as the well in the yard at the George inn, which then supplied the water to extinguish the devouring element, is completely dry. Several applications have been made to the officers of the company, who promised that something should be done, but up to this date have not made a commencement. Your inserting the above in your valuable paper will much oblige one of the many unfortunate sufferers.*

*I am your obedient servant,*

*R. Hains"*

This set me thinking, and I recalled another reference – a story told to me by Mr Sam Emery, and recorded in one of my own books ("At That Particular Time"):

*"You know", continued Mr Emery, "if you could have harnessed all the water that was running under Kilsby, I dare say you could have supplied a good part of Rugby with drinking water. And it was that clear and cold! And one well used to feed another, so to speak, for they were all tapping a common underground water supply. But in the end they all got contaminated, as folk began to spread more and more fertilisers on the fields, and there was more and more stuff coming down into the ground from up on top.*

*I remember when our well got contaminated. We were living at that old cottage on the junction of Barby Road and Main Road, just opposite the White House - the one that's pulled down now; and old George Cowley was our landlord, he owned pretty near all that side of the village. And he came up to look at the well, when we told him about the problem. 'Ah, yes,' he said 'it does smell a bit'. And then he got old Hardy Emery down from the farm, and they opened up the well-cover (the well used to be covered over, you see, with a big oak slab about five or six inches thick). Hardy had got a blooming great long ladder, and they stuck that down the well. And my dad said 'Hey! You're not going down there, are you?'. 'Course I am,' said Hardy, and put his leg over the side. 'You wait a bit,' said Dad, and went off to fetch a candle; then he lit it and they lowered it down on a bit of copper wire. And that candle went out as soon as it got down near the water, because of all the gas down there. 'Ah,' said Dad, 'and if you'd ha' gone down there then you'd ha' gone out like that an' all!'. And the water had got this dirty bluish tint, and it stank to high heaven."*

It's a shame that things turned out this way – for everyone who recalled those far-off days for me had special memories of Kilsby's pure clear well-water, bubbling up icy-cold from under the hill. But of course, it wasn't only Kilsby that went this way – things were changing in Barby and Crick and Rugby, too, and the new artificial fertilisers were leaching their way into the water-supplies of the whole nation. We speak of the Green movement as though pollution were a problem brought on in the last twenty or thirty years. In fact, the unsettling of the precarious balance of nature has been going on at least since Victorian times.

Clearly, when the railway was finished the underground water-courses found their way back to the village (hopefully getting the maltster back into production!).

As you would expect, the sandy water-table under Kilsby Hill has refilled several times since Stephenson originally pumped it out in the 1830s – and British Rail has to pump out the tunnel regularly to prevent recurrence of the flooding. There's nothing anyone can do to stop this – it was a basic engineering error to bring the tunnel along that route in the first place, and Stephenson's pumping was only a temporary stop-gap measure. If the job were being done from scratch today, the civil engineers would use a totally water-proof sectional concrete casemate construction, as used nowadays when tunnelling under rivers and waterways – but such solutions were not possible in the 1800s.

My next quotation is from the memoirs of the Evans family, formerly of Barby Wood Farm:

*"In September 1936 I went down with a very bad throat infection, which turned out later to be diphtheria; in the meantime [my sister] Mona was very ill with the infection, and was taken to Harborough Magna Fever Hospital by mistake – the doctor thought we were living in Warwickshire not Northamptonshire. But it turned out well for her! Then [my brother] Glyn was taken to Staverton Fever Hospital a few days later; the hospital left a lot to be desired – it contained two wooden sheds as wards. The men and women were all mixed together, the children too; also the poor night nurse slept in a bed in the far corner of the ward – so if we wanted her, we just called out for her ...*

*I later joined Glyn in that hospital, and it turned out that I was a carrier of the diphtheria – the Health Inspector found out that the infection came from the pump water that we were all drinking. Mr Jewitt had to bring the mains water down from the village at his expense, as he was the landlord ...*

*... in the meantime we were virtually cut off at the farm; groceries and other foods were left at the gate. We were not allowed to sell the milk – and at that time we were producing 80 gallons a day! No going to school or church for 6 weeks or more. The rest of the family were gargling away, someone had told us that gargling with paraffin was a good cure(!). ... It must have worked, as we were the only ones who were ill ..."*

This is clearly a further instance of exactly the same pollution problem that had afflicted Kilsby's wells and pumps in the 1910s.

The sequel to the above story came unexpectedly, just last week. I was up on Barby Hill with my team of archaeological volunteers, making geophysics surveys to map the traces of Iron Age roundhouses and other features of the settlement that existed up there over 2000 years ago – when the readings revealed a buried metal pipeline leading straight across the plot that we were surveying. To the east it headed directly towards Barby village; and the western end of it made a bee-line for Barby Wood Farm; and I recognised that I had stumbled upon the very water pipeline that Mr Jewitt had been obliged to install in 1936, as reported in the above story ....

Historical fragments have a happy knack of linking together, to make an interesting joined-up story.

Gren Hatton,

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