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"A Nice Little Earner"

If you walk up the Pitham Brook footpath, or up the Leafield Road and then cross over the Cascades you will see two waterfalls; these were once part of the pleasure grounds of the now demolished Park House.

If you have already walked that way, how many of you have noticed the small stone building with its ivy clad walls and moss covered Cotswold stone roof at the side of the waterfall?

Some of you, of a more inquisitive nature, may have even ventured around the side and looked through the open doorway and saw the roll of flat chicken wire and short length of twisted iron fencing and thought "it's just a shed". Dating from about 1880 to 1900 this was much more than "just a shed". It was built to supply water to the Park House and many of the businesses of the town. Also the better off from around the market place area, those being prepared to pay a quarterly charge to the Fairford Estate, for whom that building was to be a nice little earner for the next fifty or so years.

How did it all work? Let me explain.....

Inside, there used to be a six foot diameter galvanised steel water wheel of about 2 feet in width mounted on a steel axle, which in turn drove a piston type water pump mounted at its side.

The water wheel was forced round by water flowing through the bottom of the wheel, known as an undershot type. Water entered the pump house via a tunnel leading from the upper side of the waterfall, (the wooden sluice gate is still there) and discharging again through a tunnel into the lower part of the waterfall.

Water from the pump was piped up the bank to the reservoir that is in the clump of trees by the cattle grid that you see today. Being the highest point on the eastern side of Fairford, water was able to gravity feed down to the town.

The west side of Fairford was on a different system; this was pumped from a waterwheel in the Mill House, piped past the Oxpens, across The Gassons to the reservoir situated above Dynevor Terrace. It's still there in amongst the trees on the side of the Quenington Road. Again, this is the highest point on the west side of Fairford.

As youngsters, living at West End Gardens, we would climb down into the, by then, empty reservoir which we always called "the tank". At that time the ballcock mechanism was still in place, complete with its giant copper ball. Next time you are at the Mill Pond feeding the ducks, take a look into the water by your feet, there is still a length of the reservoir feed pipe laying along the bottom.

I remember the pump house at the Cascades was still in use in the mid 1950's. Our gang, from West End Gardens, would sneak across there. It was still very private at the time. Though the pump house door was always locked you could hear the sound of the thrashing water as it went through the wheel.

It was a scary place for us, as there always seemed to be several Polish men dotted about on the grassy bank above the pump house like sentinels, silently gazing at us, caps on their heads and hands in the trouser pockets of their old looking suits. To this very day I am always reminded of them when I see pictures of the standing statues of Easter Island.

Today, when we hear about water wheels, it all sounds so old fashioned and very quaint, something from a bygone age, but I believe they are set for a second coming. The new buzz word, where energy is concerned, is "renewables", so we blot the landscape with our wind turbines and solar farms. This is all well and good but the downside is, in the depths of winter, just when our needs are greatest, very often "the wind don't blow and the sun don't shine", but there, right under our noses is this wonderful free energy source waiting to be harnessed once again. Our Saxon forefathers knew a thing about renewables, the Domesday Book of 1086 tells us Fairford (spelt Fareforde), 101 households, watermills 3.

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