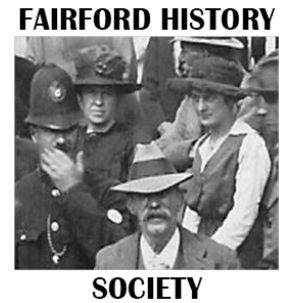


Fairford Flyer

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We hope you are enjoying these online newsletters. If anyone has anything they would like to contribute or have any local history questions please email enquiry@fairfordhistory.org.uk.

The 'Court Brook' by Syd Flatman

'The Court Brook' - I use the word loosely, the 'Town Ditch' more like, although I don't for one moment wish to undermine the proud residents of that upmarket estate that bares the Courtbrook name.

Percy Chick, the Highworth property developer, who constructed the estate, when looking for a name I'm sure would not have been aware of the ditch's dark past, which at that time passed through the middle of his new development.

In my younger days, I spent a lot of time in and around Back Lane playing with my friend Patrick Howse. His father Stan was the slaughter man for Woodward's the butchers (now the Pizza Parlour). The slaughterhouse was where Mike Parker's mower repair shed is today. During that time, I developed quite a fascination for this dried up ditch that ran parallel all along Back Lane on the South side.

Today, due to back filling and piping under, the only evidence of the ditch's existence is when it first comes into view in the bungalow gardens of No. 15 and 16 Moor Lane, when you turn into Snake Lane from The Plies.

Starting originally from the river Coln, behind the White Hart complex, the ditch makes its way towards the river at the Broadboards area. Most of you have crossed over the ditch I refer to on your river walks via the narrow wooden bridge when gaining access to Lake 104.



1. The town ditch at the rear of Lygon Court
2. The Town ditch by Lake 104



From the Broadboards area the ditch runs parallel (only a few yards apart) alongside the Coln almost to the village of Whelford, then veers off towards Warrens Cross on the Lechlade Road, where eventually it returns to the river once again.

So what was its purpose and why does it travel all that way? Why not enter the waters of the Coln much sooner? Going back, probably as far as Saxon times, all the gory businesses of our town were situated on the south side of London Street. Starting from the bottom of the market place and running through to the Plies area, they all needed somewhere to wash away their filth.

So what kind of things found their way into the ditch? Let's start with the residue from the Brew houses and contents of chamber pots etc. Discharge from the slaughterhouses e.g. blood, urine, the contents of bladders etc.

Again, the Tan yards, with their weird and wonderful processes for removing animal hair and curing the hides, things like dog poo, urine and animal brains. And I'm sure that sometime in the past, where you have all these slaughtered animals, there would have been glue making from the hooves, also candle manufacture using the fats. Then there was the dairy, with its constant need for cleansing of jugs, bottles and churns and where there was milk there would be cheese and butter making with surplus curds and whey to be rid of. Most of the aforementioned businesses revolved around livestock kept in the cow yards out the back, creating a constant flow of effluent.

The Plies area was a busy place, especially in the time of the Tame's. Vast quantities of stale urine, which is basically ammonia, were used for bleaching and removing the lanolin's from the woollen fleeces. A pretty whiffy operation which after needed plenty of washing to remove the smell.

The Plies, of course, takes its name from the wooden frames where the finished cloth was hung on tenterhooks to dry. I mentioned it being a busy place, when you consider that in the year 1480 John Tame was the fourth largest exporter out of the Port of London. He must have been moving a lot of fleeces, cloth and yarn.

So why did our forbearers take the trouble to run a ditch all that way? Why not return it to the river just below the town? There it is not going to affect the town's drinking water.

There was a problem, and that was the village of Whelford, which by river is only a short distance from our town. The old thatched village of Whelford sits on the gravel beds of the Thames basin, a quarter of a mile west of the river Coln. The villagers, not drawing their drinking water from wells, instead had a unique running water supply system. Every cottage had access to a labyrinth of small streams from the river just above Whelford Mill. These streams, I might add, are not to be confused with the Thames and Severn Canal feeder that came through in 1789, running along the front of the village, drawing its water from the Coln at Whelford Mill and topping up the canal at Kempsford.



1. Thatched cottages in Whelford with the Canal Feeder in front
2. The last remaining thatched cottage in Whelford



Fresh water was the reason Fairford's town ditch didn't enter the river above Whelford. Had it done so, apart from it affecting the marine life, the village drinking water, although diluted by the Coln would, I am sure, have had an unpleasant taste to it.

Moving into more modern times, in 1852 Fairford's new Gas Works was constructed alongside the ditch - perfectly placed to run off the unwanted bi- products of gas making, tars etc.

Finishing in 1961, the town centre's sewage was piped into the ditch, just below Moor Farm at East End, where a reed bed digester system was planted along its banks. This area became known to the Fairfordian's as the "jelly wobbles", the ground becoming unstable due to the amount of marsh gas contained within it. The problem was, with this system, it was forever expanding, as more and more ground became contaminated until finally it reached the river's edge. This was the catalyst for the whole town to be laid on to a 20th Century sewer system from which we all benefit today.

So, as you can see, our 'Town Ditch', the 'Court Brook', has taken a fair amount of abuse down through the centuries.

From the Archives

The earliest mention of the Court Ditch that could be found is in the Parish Council Minutes of 1898 when the Conservator of the Thames served an action on the Parish Council to discontinue the flow of sewage or any offensive matter into the Court Ditch or Green Ditch from the sewers, pipes or drains in the town into the River Coln. The matter rumbled on for quite some time, the ditch was cleaned up but not to the satisfaction of the Conservators and various schemes were discussed. However, the Conservators were not satisfied until assured in 1899 that the sewage should be entirely cut off from the ditch, and carried by a separate course to the filter beds, and there be dealt with.

In the Parish/Town Council Minutes up until the 1980s the clearing out of the Court Ditch was mentioned many times as it was the responsibility of the District Council, the aim being to clean it up to prevent flooding. In fact in the 2007 Fairford flooding event, the overflowing of Court Ditch was instrumental in causing flooding in the town.

The origin of the name Court Ditch is not known. Hyde Court (part of Fairford Manor) was to the north of Fairford and Warwick Court or 'old court' was the site of John Tame's house thought to be approximately where Fairford House is now, close to the church. There were various ancient 'Courts' held in Fairford e.g. the 1633 court leet and manorial courts but, perhaps there was a larger house with a courtyard?

The Meadows and Ford - taken from information recorded in June Lewis-Jones notebooks

The meadows from the Court Ditch to the river was very swampy. Years ago they were allowed to flood to make good hay. This also applied to the lower meadow of the Green. The flooding of the fields kept off the late frosts so the grass began to grow earlier in the season. The flooding of the fields and subsequent draining was carried out by men called 'drowners'. The hay was cut with scythes and the women with large sun bonnets and wooden rakes later turned the hay - quite an idyllic picture.

The Ford

In ancient days the ford was broad, extending from Farmer's yard (top of Waterloo Lane) to the garage and White Hart. There was a huge area of flood plain it was where waterfowl and amphibians abounded.



Milton Street in the floods, a common enough sight before the new drainage system of 1945 relieved flood pressure. The original ford was very broad, extending from the present Waterloo Lane to the White Hart.

Light was thrown on the actual position of the Ford when in 1945 a new drainage system was being cut through Milton Street to relieve flood pressure from the back of the Bull, some 38 inches below the level of the existing pavements; a slanting runway was discovered running from east to west. It was lined on either side by large

heavy stones, chased and worn as though by wheel traffic. The runway was 3 ft 5 ins (104 cm) wide and went down into a rock bottom 9ft 6ins (2.9 m) from the edge of the present pavement on the White Hart side.

This possibly marked the entrance to the old Ford which appears to have taken a slanting course across the present river, right away along the front of Busby's Garage (by Groves Place) to further along where there is a steep rise on to a hard loam and gravel soil. The old buildings, standing on the old 'silt' were built on arches of stone to keep them above the flood level.

Teeth and bones of animals (sheep, cattle, pigs, cats and dogs) were found at the bottom of the old ford, also old copper coins. It is interesting to note that most of the copper coins were Irish and it is a well-known fact that a lot of the Irish cattle were landed at Bristol and brought by road to London. It was the custom in olden days when cattle went through a ford or stream for the herdsman to throw copper coins into a ford or stream for luck or a blessing on the cattle.

Fetid Fairford

This piece first appeared in the Fairford Flyer Newsletter No. 11, July 2010.

Although today we all take the provision of efficient sewers for granted (until they become blocked!), this was not always the case. The Second Report of the Royal Sanitary Commission, published in 1874, presented the results of a nation-wide survey of the state of Britain's sewers, drains, water supply and medical facilities. The report makes uneasy reading!

Under the heading *Sewerage* the report for Fairford reads:

"There is no proper public sewerage or drainage in the town. Sewers are ventilated by open gratings and in part by rain pipes. Sewers and house drains are not trapped. Some drains go into the river, many into a watercourse, which empties into the river between Fairford and Lechlade. The houses are not generally supplied with waterclosets or privies capable of being flushed with water. Cesspools and ashpits are not deodorized. Houses do not generally drain into the sewers. A great many are without the means of communication."

Under the heading of *Water Supply* it stated that:

"Water supply is chiefly obtained from wells, some of which are polluted, and in very few it is pure, in part from the river Colne, into which very little drainage runs. There is no general plan for utilizing the rainfall."

Perhaps surprisingly the section on *Treatment of Disease* records that: *"There have been a few cases of typhus or scarlet fever, but no special outbreak of disease, since 1853."* Perhaps people had stronger constitutions in the 1870s!

The Commissioners obtained their information by sending a questionnaire to each parish and the respondents for Fairford are listed as Lord Dynevor, the vicar; Robert Hayward, a plumber; Henry Dancy, the owner of a drapers in the Market Place; and Samuel Vines, a retired ironmonger. They sent in their reply on 16 February 1870 but it took another four years for the report to be published – nothing changes, does it?

Another Government survey, *Water Undertakings*, published in 1914 showed little real progress with the majority of the Fairford's water coming from a spring near the Mill, the river Coln and numerous wells.

From the Fairford Parish Council Minutes, July 8th, 1903:

"Reference was made by Mr Cole that on certain days there was a quantity of soapsuds escaping from the drains of the cottages belonging to the Church Lands into the Green ditch & the Clerk was directed to write to Mr A H Iles drawing his attention to the fact."