

Snapshot in Time: Mapping Wells

THE OLD CONDUIT

In 1451, an event of major significance for Wells took place. Bishop Bekynton granted in perpetuity a supply of water to the master and the burgesses of the borough, and their successors. The grant allowed for *“one head for a water conduit with trough, pipes and other necessary engines above and under ground, to have receive, enclose and conduct a certain parcel of our [the bishop’s] water springing from and arising within the ... precinct of our Palace of Wells, from a certain most limpid well of ours called Seynt Andrew welle, ...and in which at our Costs and expense by reason of the affection we bear them [the town inhabitants] we have now erected such head sufficient and*

*competent to lead and supply from thence in certain pipes containing 12 inches in circumference of Lead stone, chalk or other Materials ...in which the said water may descend and run in and from the aforesaid Head and Well of Seynt Andrew unto the high cross built in the Market of our said City.”*¹ The water was piped to a new conduit in the market place. In return for this grant of water, the master and burgesses had to *“once a year visit the*

place where the said bishop [Bishop Bekynton] is buried in the church of St Andrew to render prayers for his soul...”.



Figure 1 W. Simes, A Plan of the City of Wells, 1735. Reproduced with kind permission of Somerset Archaeological and Natural History Society (ref: DD\SAS/C795/PR/504)

If you look carefully at Simes’ Plan of 1735 (figure 1), tucked to the left of the High Cross (E) is a small and insignificant-looking structure (F) which is labelled on the plan as the Conduit. But was it insignificant? How it looked, and its size, is something of a puzzle for

¹ Bishop Bekynton’s Grant of Water to the City, Wells City Archives (WCC/1001/20)



Figure 2 Engraved by James Redaway (1797-1858) from an earlier sketch by the late William Alexander. Originally produced for John Britton's "Picturesque Antiquities of the English Cities" (London: 1828-1830). (The Bishop's Palace Collection)

The lower level has water outlets, on each of the visible sides, protected by a grill.



Figure 3 Original watercolour of the Old Conduit, William Alexander c. late 1700s. (The Bishop's Palace Collection)

furnished with inverted trefoil heads at its base. This was typical Somerset tracery of the fifteenth century.”² Surmounting this second level is “a crenellated parapet with bold corner merlins, and a pyramidal stone roof with a finial”.³ Rodwell also says that “there

historians and is a fitting example of how we must always keep an open mind when interpreting drawings, paintings, engravings, etc. Different images of the conduits are shown here (figures 2, 3 and 4). These show a tall, square structure, in a state of some decay, listing to the north.

Warwick Rodwell, archaeologist and architectural historian writes that above this are “two tiers of traceried panelling, surmounted by a band of quatrefoils. There were six bays of trefoil-headed panelling in each tier, the upper being also

² W. Rodwell, *The Archaeology of Wells Cathedral: Excavations and Structural Studies, 1978-93*, (English Heritage, 2001), p402

³ Ibid



Figure 4 E Dayes, Polychrome watercolour drawing of Old Conduit Wells, endorsed 'Old Conduit at Wells, Somersetsh, now (1805) demolished - Dayes', SANHS Illustrations Collection (South West Heritage Trust) (SHC A\DAS/1/420/31)

would have been a lead-lined reservoir inside the conduit head, with an overflow from which the excess water ran into a subterranean channel [.....] (and) was conducted into one or more channels running down High Street".⁴

This would have been a welcome flow of water helping to wash away the detritus from the meat and fish shambles (market) in the centre of High Street and other noxious items such as human and animal excrement. Note a significant difference in these first three pictures: the height of the conduit, using people as scale, differs in each!

But contrast these images above with the following images (figures 5, 6 and 7) which suggest a hexagonal or polygonal structure.

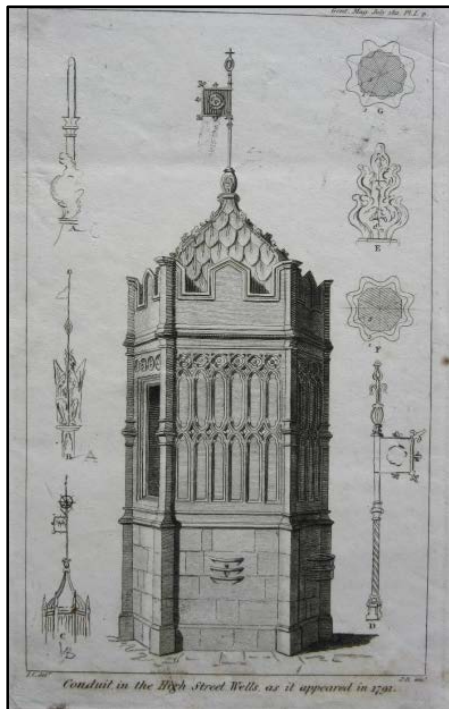


Figure 5 J. Carter, Conduit in the High Street Wells as it appeared in 1791, Gentleman's Magazine Vol. 81, Part II, plate 1 facing p9, 1811. (Bishop's Palace Collection)



Figure 6 W.W. Wheatley, sepia watercolour & pencil drawing of old fountain at Wells, South West Heritage Centre, SANHS Illustrations Collection (SHC A\DAS/1/420/32).

⁴ Ibid

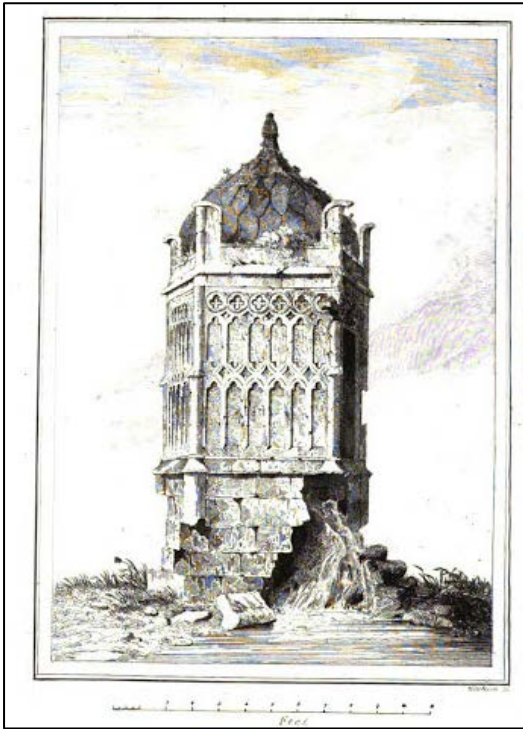


Figure 7 Anonymous drawing, S.H. Cassan, *Lives of the Bishops of Bath & Wells, Part 1*, (London), 1829, opposite p221

Figure 7 also includes a scale which suggests that the conduit was no more than 4.7m high.

What can we determine from these images? Rodwell concludes that the architectural detailing is as shown consistently across all the images, along with the lower and upper tier and the pyramidal roof. He goes on to suggest that the conduit would have been c. 1.8m (6ft) in length and c. 4.7m (15½ feet) high but is unable to come to any conclusions on whether it was polygonal or square – this is something we may never know. Written descriptions of the conduit also differ.

As Rodwell writes: *“The Wells conduit head provides an object lesson in the caution that has to be exercised in accepting drawn and written evidence at face value”*.⁵

The old conduit was taken down in the 1797 and replaced the same year with the conduit which can be seen today in the market place. This sits very close to the site of the former High Cross and was built by Mr Masters, a builder from Bath, for a cost of £150.⁶ In a note referring to 1796, the City of Wells’ Roll of Mayors records that the Bishop had *“set up certain claims in respect of the removal of the Conduit”*, but *“the Corporation were advised by an eminent Counsel that the Bishop had no right to, or control over the Conduit”*.⁷

If you would like further information on the history of Wells and its buildings, you are welcome to contact or visit Wells City Archives (archives@wellsmuseum.org.uk) and Wells & Mendip Museum (admin@wellsmuseum.org.uk).

⁵W. Rodwell, *The Archaeology of Wells Cathedral: Excavations and Structural Studies*, 1978-93, (English Heritage, 2001), p402

⁶ Wells City Archives, Convocation Book 1775-1819 (WCC/252) and Receiver’s Book 1759-1835 (WCC/271).

⁷ Wells City Archives, Roll of Mayors (WCC/3390/2), entry dated 22nd September 1796.

