

Well, well,

The excavation of two wells on New Walk Terrace, York 1999

Readers who walk or cycle along New Walk may have noticed a curious building, resembling an imitation ruin, adjacent to the path, at the bottom end of Hartoft Street. This building is the ornamental covering for a well, known as the Pikeing Well. In July 1999 a desktop study and an archaeological evaluation of Pikeing Well was undertaken on behalf of the York Millennium Bridge Trust. The aim of the work was to better establish the archaeological and historical background to Pikeing Well and to identify the function of an apparently associated crescent shaped structure to the west which was visible on the first edition Ordnance Survey map of York surveyed in 1852.

The original New Walk was laid out for public use and entertainment in 1732–4 in the area of St. George's Close, from the Friargate postern to the confluence of the rivers Ouse and Foss. The walk proved so popular that in 1738 it was decided to extend it and a bridge was built across the River Foss at the cost of £110 7s. This was a wooden drawbridge painted blue — hence its name — the 'Blue Bridge', a name which it has retained despite successive rebuildings. In 1739 the width of the walk was increased from 8 to 28 feet and its length was extended by 2–300 yards south of the Blue Bridge. A double row of trees was planted in 1740 when 340 elms were ordered from John Telford. More trees and plants were ordered throughout the 18th and into the early 19th century and in 1818 Hargrove describes the walk as being interspersed with garden seats at convenient distances whilst the full regimental band from the neighbouring barracks provided entertainment.

As early as 1749 the corporation appointed a committee to look into the building of '*an hansom fountain at Pikeing Well and a ha-ha along Foulforth Field*'. The commission was eventually awarded to John Carr, and the well house was constructed by 1756. Carr was a journeyman mason who worked with his father; he had previously designed Harewood Stables and Skelton Hall with his father whom he also seems to have assisted in his role as Surveyor of Bridges for Northern England. The commission for Pikeing Well seems to have been his first lone project and this is the earliest date that he is known in York. After this

he went on to design the new grandstand at the Knavesmire in 1754 and 80 country houses in Yorkshire are attributed to him as well as several public buildings in York. In 1757 he was admitted to the freedom of the city when he is described as 'stonecutter'. The corporation maintained the well and seems to have regulated its opening. In 1760 William Wood was to be paid 2 guineas a year for keeping clear and opening and shutting up the well. In 1818 it was said that an 'open receiver' was situated in front of the well which was visited every morning for medicinal purposes when the well was not open. This is probably the crescent shaped feature shown on the 1852 Ordnance Survey map which lies between the well house and the river on the opposite side of New Walk. By 1831 the area seems to have declined slightly in status, the Blue Bridge was dilapidated and dangerous, there are references to 'fallen women' frequenting the area and 'a set of blackguards congregating on New Walk on Sunday mornings for dog fighting'. The practice of naked bathing from the Walk 'renders walking there, for ladies, extremely unpleasant. However, in the mid 19th century exclusive suburban villa houses were built adjacent to the well, and seem to have resurrected the area. In 1858 extensive renovations described as 're-erection' were made to the well house; this work was supervised by Thomas Pickersgill, who belonged to the architectural practice founded by Carr. His work included flagging the well-house floor and fencing in the 'outer well' (presumably the open receiver) which was also to have steps provided, and the re-gravelling of the walk outside the well house. The plans and elevations from these renovations exist in York City Archives.

In 1929 the Ministry of Health cut off the water supply to the well, as it was unfit for drinking, the spring apparently draining through the extended York cemetery (Wilson 1996). From this time onwards the well has been neglected.

Two evaluation trenches were excavated on the site, one inside the Pikeing Well building which aimed to locate the original interior, while the second trench was designed to locate the 'open receiver' in the grassed area between New Walk and the River Ouse.

Trench 1 extended from the front gates to the rear wall of the well-house building. The earliest excavated levels consisted of a flight of steps leading to a paved floor, surrounding a stone-lined pool, which almost certainly formed part of Thomas Pickersgill's restoration

work of 1858 (Figure 1).



Figure 1. The interior of the well-house showing the central pool, flagged floor and flight of steps

The flight of four steps which led downwards from west to east was located immediately inside the entrance gate of the well-house. The steps were of differing heights, ranging from only 0.03m to 0.35m. It is possible that when the well was re-erected by Pickersgill the original steps were carelessly re-laid giving a flight of steps with variable risers. The third step had a small socket and a lug on the upper surface, which presumably related to earlier gates of the building. To the east of the steps was a floor of flat paving stones surrounding a rectangular pool, which was located centrally within the well house. The pool measured 0.80m x 0.99m and was lined on all four sides with stone slabs. The water table within the pool was only 0.05m below the level of the paved floor, consequently the pool filled with water to this level no matter how much infilling material was removed from the well. The standing water made it impossible to excavate fully the interior of the well, but probing suggested that the stonework lining of the pool continued downwards for at least 1.00m.

As noted above the well was closed in 1929 by the Ministry of Health, and clear evidence of this event was found. The pool itself was infilled with dark grey-black organic sandy silts

containing bricks, limestone rubble and numerous fragments of modern bottle-glass. A wooden plank and a section of wrought iron fencing were then placed horizontally across the well-house floor (Figure 2). Concrete paving slabs were then laid above the iron fencing. The well had been effectively infilled and capped, preventing any further use.



Figure 2. The interior of the well-house with the re-used wrought-iron fencing sealing the well

The section of wrought iron fencing was of considerable interest. It consisted of seven uprights (two of which had become detached) and three horizontal sections. Three of the uprights culminated in a point and were thus longer at the top than the two groups of two uprights that evenly separated them. Conservation work on the fencing revealed part of a foundry tag plate attached to the first upright. Although approximately 25% of the tag plate was missing, after cleaning it became possible to clearly see an inscription which read – *MPSON – WALKER UNDER TO THE QUEEN ORIA WORKS YORK*. When the missing letters were filled in, this read as – *THOMPSON – WALKER IRONFOUNDER TO THE QUEEN VICTORIA WORKS YORK*. The lettering is in a fairly regular script and was in relief, having presumably been cast as a mould. The foundry tag plate made it possible to identify where the fencing was manufactured. William Thomlinson Walker began constructing his foundry ‘empire’ in 1853, in premises near the Foss. His business thrived throughout the second half of the nineteenth century and he was able to employ a large workforce

(probably over 120 people) and graduate to larger premises in Walmgate. He called the new building the Victoria Iron Foundry, almost certainly in homage to the queen after he received a royal warrant. Walker's success as an iron founder seems, at least partially, to have lain in his wide selection of products, ranging from the high class to the basic and affordable. He made the railings and gates of Kew Gardens and Buckingham Palace, but also manufactured 'prize cooking ranges and cheap iron fencing'. The lists of products manufactured by Walker that are still in use around York and elsewhere are a good indication of the success of this nineteenth century businessman. Sadly, his son J. R. Walker was not to follow his footsteps. After William's death in 1911, his son failed to continue the business successfully and the premises were soon demolished. Given the Victorian date of the fencing it probably relates to the 1858 work by Pickersgill.

Sealing the fencing and paving slabs was a varied build-up deposit slightly over a metre in thickness. This consisted of bands of sandy-silts, probably resultant from flooding, alternating with bands of rubbish and a succession of what were clearly tramps' beds made from various materials (linoleum, clothing, carpet and plastic fertiliser bags). There were also vast quantities of broken modern bottle glass, which increased from west to east, clearly the result of people throwing bottles against the rear-wall of the well house. Local residents informed us that the well house was regularly used as a toilet by fishermen... plenty of evidence of this was also present!



Trench 2 was located to the west of the well-house, on the grass verge between the River Ouse and New Walk. The trench was excavated to locate and assess the state of preservation of the crescent shaped 'open receiver' building shown on the 1852 Ordnance Survey map. The earliest deposit excavated was a curving wall, the outer face of which was of brick, and the inner face of carefully dressed limestone blocks 0.20m wide (Figure 3).

Figure 3. The 'open receiver' and deliberate infilling

This structure clearly represents part of the 'open receiver' well shown on the 1852 Ordnance Survey map. Four courses of stonework roughly 0.80m high were excavated; the lowest two courses had a deliberate gap in the masonry 0.77m in width, into which the third course of stonework had partially collapsed. The deliberate gap could represent the mouth of a culvert leading into the open receiver. Butting against the eastern side of the wall was an associated compact gravel surface, which had slumped by 0.35m in a linear east-west band 0.70m wide. This linear slumpage ran directly towards the gap in the lower courses of stonework in the wall, and may imply a collapsed linear feature beneath, possibly a culvert.

The open receiver had clearly been deliberately infilled with a massive dump of carefully dressed limestone blocks, presumably from the walls of the open receiver. It is unclear when this occurred, but it may have been in 1929 when Pikeing Well was closed. Dumping then occurred above the open receiver and its related gravel path in order to raise and level the ground surface in the area. The dumping was clearly modern, as one context contained a 1971 penny. The area was subsequently levelled and a tarmac path with a kerbstone edge was built. The area was then sealed by a build-up of river lain deposits, topsoil and turf.

It is not certain at this stage what future use the Pikeing well house will be put to. The interior is clearly well preserved and, if cleaned and restored, would make an interesting riverside feature. There would, however, be problems with attempting to use the well house in this way. The original building had iron gates, but similar gates would not prevent people throwing bottles against the rear wall of the well house, nor would they keep out flood-deposits. The building would also need to be protected from its current uses as a toilet and doss-house.

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