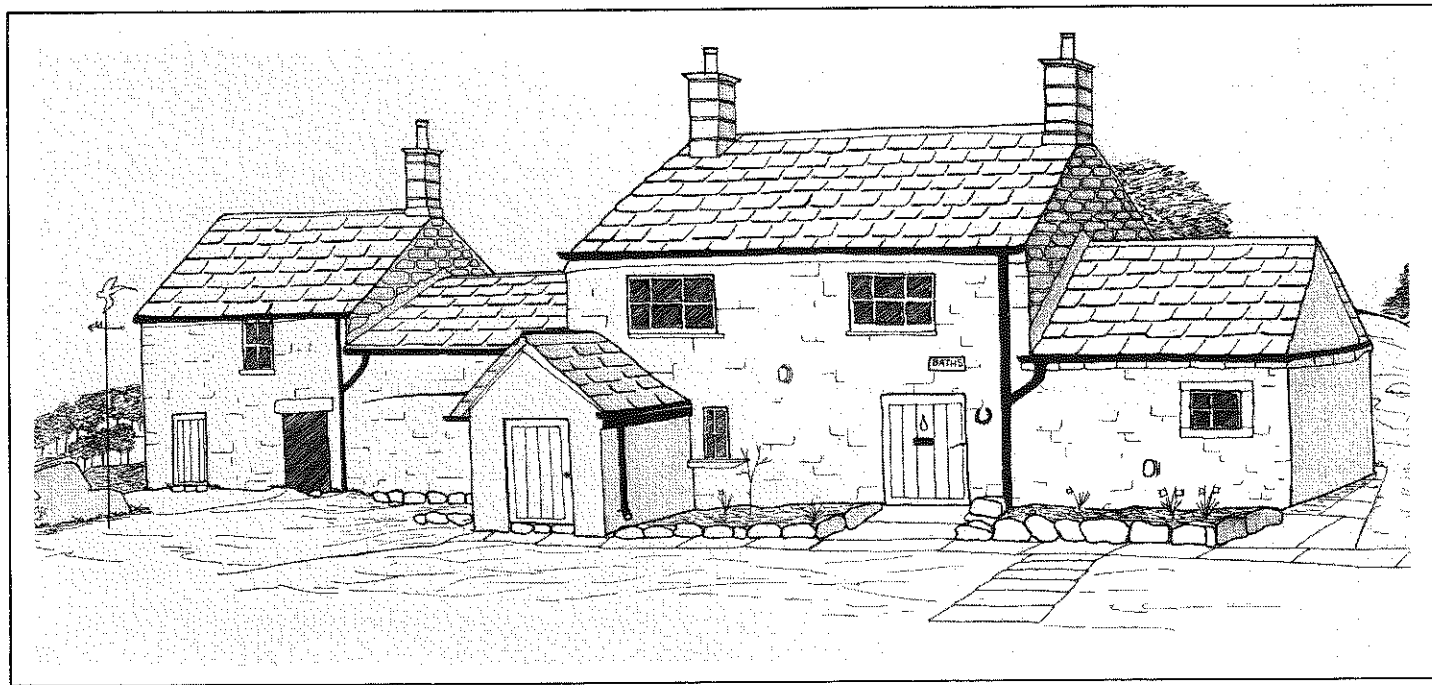


White Wells, Ilkley

*Reader: be by me advised;
Flee the nostrums advertised;
By patent medicine dealers,
Throw your drougts and pills away;
Come to Ilkley Wells and stay;
O'er the breezy moorlands stray,
Take a douche bath every day;
These are Nature's healers.*



White Wells

But for the fashion of immersing the body in cold water as a cure for ill-health, the springs on Ilkley Moor would still be flowing untapped. In 1830 the physician, Thomas Shaw, wrote of the Ilkley spring water that

"... for its purity, tenuity and coldness, the best qualified to be of utility for relaxed and sedentary habits of any water in this part of the country. It has frequently been analysed, but the decomposition always proved that it contains no medicinal property. In my opinion it is its purity and softness only which makes it more efficacious by passing to the utmost and finest limits of the circulation than any water known."

Perhaps the Ilkley waters do reach parts that other waters cannot reach but it is certainly true that the water at White Wells contains no minerals with curative properties.

The hydropathic fashion in Ilkley developed from the simplicity of White Wells to the grandeur of the Wells House Hydro, the Ben Rhydding Hydro and Craiglands. In the light of modern medical knowledge it is difficult to believe in the curative properties of cold water, but it is possible to agree with Capt. J. K. Lukis who, in *The Common Sense of the Water Cure* wrote

"... the pure, clear and sparkling liquid that gushes from Ilkley hills is not less exhilarating, and is much more wholesome, than manufactured champagne and of such water it may be said with truth what is falsely said of such wine, that there is not a headache in a hogshead of it."

In an age of sedentary habits and over-indulgence, when the local industrial towns were heavily polluted, fresh air, exercise and a simple healthy diet were naturally curative in

themselves. A plentiful supply of unpolluted water both for drinking and washing together with a rigorous daily regime soon enabled the hydros to establish their reputations.

White Wells, however, originated before the Victorian period. There have been "wells" on Ilkley Moor from the earliest times; these were recognised either as reliable sources of pure water or as having mineral properties, such as the iron-rich or "chalybeate" springs. Contrary to popular belief there is no evidence that the Romans used or even discovered the White Wells springs. Not only have no coins or pottery been found but common-sense dictates that the Romans were more likely to have taken warm baths in the comfort of a bath-house in Roman Ilkley (or Olicana as the settlement was then called).

Much of the history of White Wells is hearsay. For instance, a certain ninety-year-old Master Ramsden, when asked in 1822 what he knew of the 'Wells', replied that "... they were just the see'a (same) when I were a lad". Its origins are suggested in a tale from the 18th century which has it that a shepherd had a wound in his leg which refused to heal until he bathed it daily in the clear spring water at White Wells. At that time a circular pool near the spring head was used for bathing and was free to all-comers. The parish register of 1783 records that Ann, aged 9, daughter of William Harper, butcher, drowned on August 15th whilst bathing "in the Spaw Well" (presumably the open pool).

The earliest positive reference to White Wells is in a letter of 1709 which says

"Ilkley now is a very mean place, and is equally dirty and insignificant, and chiefly famous for a cold well, which has done very remarkable cures in scrofulous cases by bathing and in drinking of it."

The present building developed over a period of 250 years

in three phases, the earliest being the central two-storey section dating to about 1700, (at which date it was probably quite unassociated with the "Spaw Well" to the rear). In about 1756 this earliest building was converted into a bathing establishment by William Middleton, the Lord of the Manor, by the addition of two bathing areas to which water was channelled from the open pool. Visitors could have a short douche, a quick plunge or a shower on payment of a fee. A visitor in 1841 described "... two baths, one for male, the other for female patients" which were surrounded by a wall of stone six to eight feet high and open to the sky. Above "... a centre room placed between the two baths, there is a dressing room but all this arrangement is quite in the rough and the whole arrangement looks like those stone-built shelters one meets on the Alps." The job of attendant at White Wells was given to Mr. William Butterfield in 1820 and his family held it until 1918. It was about this time that it was claimed that fairies had been seen at White Wells. One tale of these tiny green-clad people was that they had been seen frolicking by the water but when surprised they leapt over the wall and disappeared into the bracken.

In 1829 Mr. Middleton erected another bath to the west of White Wells for the free use of the people of Ilkley forever, in contrast to White Wells itself where charges were levied. In 1856 the lease of White Wells was taken over by the Wells House Hydropathic Company. It was this company that probably invested in the roofing of the bathing areas and a small extension above a stable which was added to the eastern end of the building in the third and final building stage. Having improved the property the company discouraged the use of the free baths, no doubt with a view to increasing their profits at White Wells. The free baths fell into disrepair and were eventually converted into public

toilets. Another relic of the Wells House Hydro is the underground stone-built water tank, discovered at the back of White Wells in 1929, which was part of the water-supply to the hotel and used for its own hydropathic treatments.



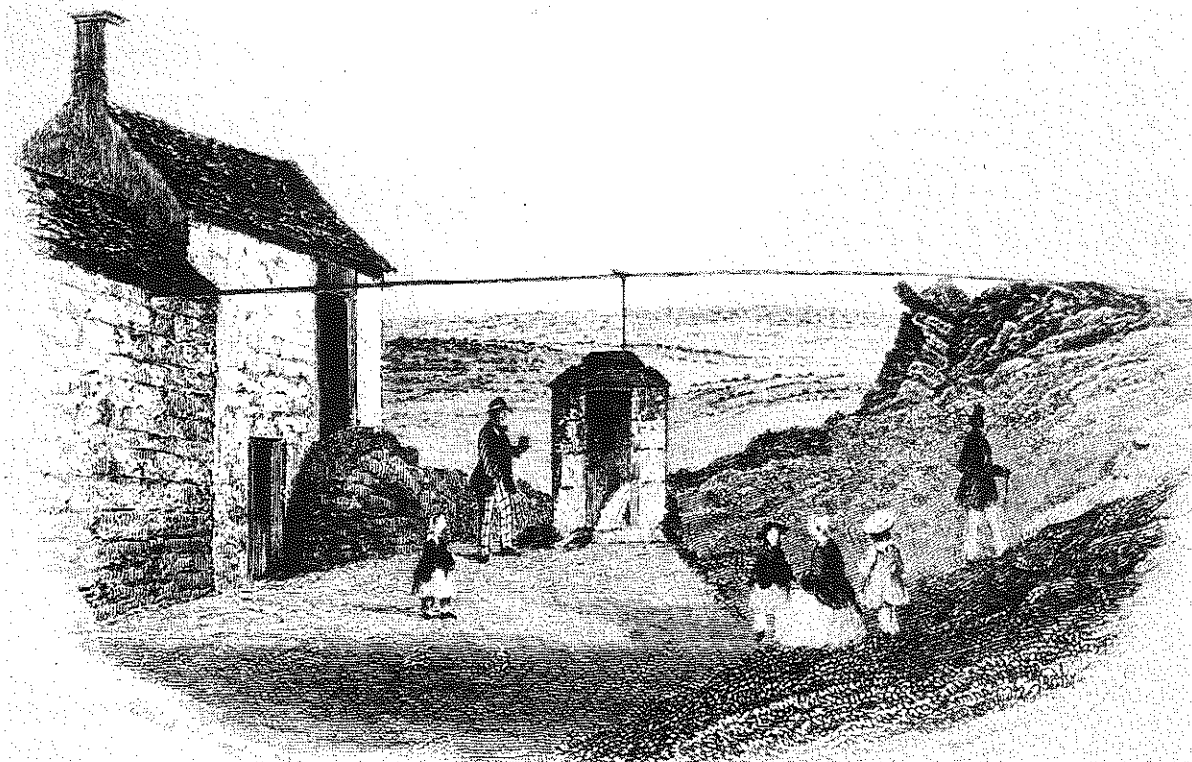
The Local Board acquired the property in 1872 and although it adopted the drinking fountain as the motif for its seal, the Board soon proposed its demolition and replacement with more modern tea-rooms. This idea was rejected in a storm of protest and, instead, refreshment rooms were erected to the south-west. However, although public opinion saved White Wells from demolition, the building became increasingly dilapidated. Eventually, in 1972, the lease was transferred to a local man, Mr. Eric Busby, who with the help of a grant from the Ilkley Urban District Council, renovated the building to provide living accommodation and an information/exhibition centre. In 1979 it was offered to the City of Bradford Metropolitan Council and became part of the Arts and Museums Division.

May 1982

White Wells is open to the public from 2.00 p.m. until 6.00 p.m. on Saturdays and Sundays and Bank Holiday Mondays, from April to September.

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Drinking the Waters at White Wells, Ilkley