

Water for drinking

In the twentieth century we are all used to having water piped into our houses. In Kilkenny City the supply comes from a reservoir at Muckalee and is filtered at Radestown to make sure the water is clean and free of bacteria, or it is pumped from the River Nore well upstream of the city, and filtered at Troyswood. Water mains, buried well underground carry the water to the city and pipes from these mains bring the water into our houses. There we have taps on the rising main to provide water for drinking, and each house has a tank in the attic to provide water for the hot water system and to flush toilets. The waste water from sinks and the foul water from the toilets goes into sewers and flows down to a sewage treatment works at Purcellsinch. There it is treated, cleaned and filtered so that the water which flows out of the treatment works is clean enough to be allowed run back into the Nore.

In the past things were very different. People got water for drinking and for washing from wells and streams. For the most part the water had to be carried to the houses from a distance. Buckets had to be filled and carried, and waste water was usually thrown out to run in channels in the streets.

Wells



The best known well in Kilkenny is Kenny's Well, on the slope below Kennyswell Road overlooking the river Bregagh. Here water which has flown through the limestone rock comes to the surface of the earth and flows downhill into the river. A small stone well house has been built over the actual well, and the water flows from a pipe into a stone-lined hollow.



This well has a long and interesting history. It is first mentioned in a thirteenth century document. Geoffrey de Tourville was bishop of Ossory between 1244 and 1250. In the archives of Kilkenny Corporation there is an ancient vellum document, stating that the bishop granted to the Friars Preachers, in other words the Dominican Friars of the Black Abbey, the right to take water from Kenny's Well. It is written in Latin and a translation by John Bradley may be found in the book, *Treasures of Kilkenny*. The charter states that the bishop has given the right to have a conduit (pipe) of water coming into their house which was less than half a kilometre from the well. The pipe was to have the circumference of the bishop's ring, and to make sure that there could be no doubt, a copy in copper of the ring is still attached to the bishop's charter. It is 24 cm wide on the inside. The next bishop of Ossory, Hugh de Mapilton gave Kenny's Well to the Friars Preachers. The charter making the gift is also in the Corporation Archives.

The Canal Walk starts at Canal Square and follows the right bank of the River Nore. It takes its name from an 18th century scheme to build a canal to take boats from Inistioge to Kilkenny. There are wells beside the walk at a number of points. They probably occur because of a fault between two units of limestone. This well formerly had an iron cup attached to the back wall of the shelter by a chain. This was intended for passers-by to use for drinking. We certainly wouldn't consider this a hygienic practice nowadays. In late years people are inclined to distrust water from wells like this, because of the increased pollution of ground water. The white-washing of wells like this with lime was common all over the country. It was intended to make the well clean, as well as to improve its appearance.



Farther down the walk, just beyond a turnstile is another well. There is no elaborate well-house this time, just an arrangement of stones around the spot where the water bubbles out of the ground. In the past a well like this would have been kept clean, because it was the nearest water supply for some houses in the neighbourhood. Since the well lost its

purpose it has been neglected.

The Lacken Well on the far side of the river is in even worse condition. It is on a passageway leading to the Lacken Walk along the Nore. [*Leaca – the side of a hill*]



Fifty years ago this well held beautiful clear fresh cool water. The inscription over the doorway reads “Lacken Well, Altered and Improved, July 1831.” One hundred and seventy seven years later this ancient well is very much altered and disimproved, with rubbish replacing the water.





This well is in the garden of Rothe House. It may have been in existence long before John Rothe built his house at the end of the 16th century. A well like this is different from the springs on the Canal Walk. It was dug down into the earth and was considered deep enough when the bottom of the shaft filled with water. This could happen before the shaft reached rock. This well is lined with stone. This would help to keep the surrounding clay from

falling into the shaft. It would be necessary to use a bucket on the end of a rope to raise water and there might be some sort of winding gear over the well.

Up to the 1960s many rural areas had to depend on hand pumps. Even in the city pumps were used. The hand pump was placed over a well, and could raise water from a depth of over twenty feet. With the coming of group water schemes to rural areas, these pumps were no longer needed, and most have disappeared over the years. At the junction of Upper Patrick Street and Upper New Street, an old pump has been replaced. It no longer pumps water, but is a reminder of days gone by, when people met at the pump, and chatted while they filled buckets of water to bring home for washing and cooking. The handle of the pump has been welded to the barrel, but when the pump was in use, the handle could move freely up and down. You can make out a small knob on the spout of the pump. This could be used to hold the handle of a bucket so that the water could flow straight into the container. A pump of this kind could lift water from a depth of fifteen or twenty feet. Nowadays this would not be considered deep enough to avoid polluted ground water.



Rivers too could be sources of water for household purposes. The washing of clothes in the river was common, and this regulation from 1586 shows the Corporation of Irishtown taking care that there shouldn't be any pollution of drinking water:

No person whatsoever shall wash any cloths either above the bridge of the Irishtown or any place near the same, where the neighbours do draw water upon pain of forfeiture of the cloths and imprisonment during the portreeve's pleasure

Public Water Supply

In the late nineteenth century the water supply for Kilkenny came from wells and pumps. A man was employed by the Corporation to keep the pumps in repair. Flagstones were laid around the pumps to keep the area dry. Each pump stood over a well, and the water from these wells had to be tested. The pump would be removed from time to time and the well cleaned and reported on. In October 1875 the Urban Sanitary Committee ordered "that the

passage into Jacob Street pump be closed up until further ordered owing to report read from Doctor Cameron as to the unfitness of the water for drinking purposes.”

In October 1902 Kilkenny Corporation signed contracts to provide a public water supply for the city. A reservoir was constructed by damming a small stream near Muckalee, some miles North of Kilkenny. The reservoir would store the water, and there were also filters to clean the water and a clear-water tank. From Muckalee, cast iron pipes brought the water to the city. Other pipes brought the water to the streets, and, as well as supplying houses, fire hydrants were provided so that a fire engine could use the water to put out fires, and, at a time when most transport was horse-drawn, drinking troughs were placed in some areas so that horses could drink from them.



When a public water supply was first provided in towns and cities, many houses did not have their own piped water. The Corporation in Kilkenny put fountains like this on the footpaths so that people from the nearby houses could fill buckets with water. The water was used for drinking and cooking. Although people still called them “pumps”, they were actually more like taps. The water came to them in pipes, just as it comes nowadays to the taps in our houses. The knob on the right was turned, and the water flowed from the mouth of the lion’s head. The stand under the lion’s mouth was where the bucket was placed while it was being filled. The knob was spring loaded, so that, when you took your hand away, the water was shut off. This prevented waste of water. On a hot summer’s day, children would get a drink by putting their heads under the lion’s mouth, while turning and holding the knob with the right hand. It was a

sure way to get your clothes wet.