

How The Introduction Of Clean Water Improved The State Of Public Health In Herefordshire

Known for its world-famous cider making and iconic cattle, the River Wye runs through Herefordshire forming a picturesque landscape. Boasting a rich history of farming, the county encapsulates a reputation for having the historic city of Hereford and many historic market towns. As with any civilisation or settlement, the introduction of fresh, running water was imperative in the development of Herefordshire as a modern county. In the mid-19th century, plans were put in to action to improve the quality of life for the citizens of Herefordshire and introduce accessible, clean water sources around the county.



River Wye in Hereford



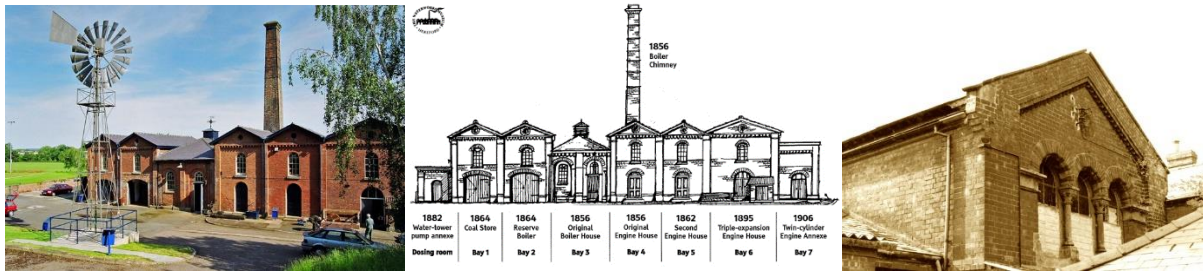
Leominster canal

Prior to the introduction of the Hereford Waterworks in 1856, Herefordshire relied on various unsanitary sources for accessible water. In Hereford, for example, people relied on the River Wye as the main source of water. This was problematic as river water often met sewage and other wastewater resulting in widespread diseases such as typhoid and cholera that ran rampant throughout Hereford and its neighbouring towns. Hereford's first municipal engineer, Timothy Curley, once stated that: 'I witnessed such scenes of filth and uncleanness in the city as I did not before believe could exist in a civilized community'.

Likewise in Leominster, disease was prominent prior to the development of the town's waterworks. One might think that the wealthier classes in Victorian society would prosper through better health than that of the lower classes, but this was, however, quite the opposite from the truth. It is recorded that prior to the pumping stations introduction in 1867 there were a number of wells in the town, that the upper classes used to access their drinking water. Local historian, Norman Reeves, states that: 'There were 444 wells in the town and at least one public pump was to be found in every street. Unfortunately, the wells were shallow and the water which collected in them was contaminated with seepage from the many cesspools which were within a few yards of them'.

The lower classes in Leominster relied on larger bodies of water to access drinking water, namely the river Lugg and the Pinsley Brook. Interestingly, Reeves noted that the lower classes were less impacted by the spread of disease and attributes this to their water sources: 'This was ascribed to the fact that the poorer people had no wells and drew their water from the Rivers Lugg and Pinsley which ran past their doors. In fact, water drawn from the Pinsley used to be sold in the wealthier streets of the town'. According to Reeves, the rate at which the rivers flowed, and the sheer volume of water that travelled through them, made them comparatively safe. Despite this, it took a major epidemic amongst the rich community in Leominster for a systematic change to public drinking water to take place. In 1865 a typhoid outbreak saw the deaths of 38 people who had been drinking

contaminated well water, which sparked major developments in the production of clean drinking water.



Between 1800-1900 was a time of great social change, not just in Herefordshire, but throughout Britain as a whole. It is estimated that during this hundred-year period, the average life expectancy rose from 30 in 1800, to 50 in 1900. The realisation of the link between clean water and good health played a highly significant role in this advancement. Government legislated Improvement Acts were passed in towns and cities which, by the middle of the century, saw implementation of pumping stations throughout the country. The first of these to be introduced to Hereford was the Broomy Hill pumping station in 1856. Originally the station contained just one Simpson beam engine which lifted water from the river Wye to a reservoir with sand filters on the high ground behind. Throughout the next 50 years the pumping station was expanded multiple times as technology advanced and demand for fresh water increased.

Over a decade later, in 1867, Leominster saw the introduction of a fully functioning pumping station. Following the typhoid outbreak in 1865, local councillor, John Tertius Southall, spearheaded a campaign to fund and build a pumping station in the town. Southall's obituary states: 'Mr Southall was a notable character in the civil life of Leominster and by his determination and sterling worth of character he was the means of securing notable reforms in the sanitary arrangements of the town'. Two steam engine-driven pumps and a boiler were installed, both systems pumped a maximum capacity of 200,000 gallons of water each over a 12-hour period and stored in a covered reservoir. Much like in Hereford, however, demand eventually outgrew capacity resulting in expansion in 1891.

The improvements to public health in the country were almost immediate. It is reported that prior to the introduction of the pumping station in Leominster, there were 1,033 deaths and this fell by a third over the next decade. The improvement to public health was so prevalent that by 1882, the Registrar General had reported that: 'It is most gratifying to find Herefordshire figuring as the healthiest county in England judged by rate of mortality; and this fact is to the credit of the county's sanitary authorities'. The state of health in Herefordshire went from strength to strength in the following years with it being reported in 1894 that the Borough was free of infectious diseases. Councillor Southall was quoted as saying: 'The present freedom in the borough from Zymotic Disease was a matter for congratulation, and was no doubt due to their splendid water supply and other improvements effected during the past 20 years'.

For more historical information please visit:

<https://www.waterworksmuseum.org.uk/discover-2>

