

WASHING IN THE WELL

Bathing
In The Past

REMEMBERING JACOB'S WELLS



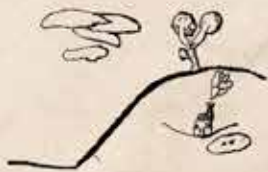
VILLA BRISTOLIN 1273 MCCLXXIII

VILLA BRISTOLIAE 1273 MCCLXXIII

Brandon Hill dates back to the 12th century. Arguably England's oldest open public space has never been built on. Historically called St Brendon's Hill, after St Brendon who crossed the Atlantic in the 5th century in a coracle.



Bewell's Cross marked the town boundary and was perhaps strategically placed next to the gallows to allow sinners to repent in their last hours.



In 1480, William Worcestre makes reference to a hermitage attached to the chapel of St Brandon. This was probably where Cabot Tower is currently located.



There was a Jewish cemetery beneath what is now Queen Elizabeth's Hospital (QEHS) School.



There is evidence to suggest that Jacob's Well was used by Bristol's medieval Jewish community, perhaps for ritual cleansing.



Gargoyles take their name from the French legend of La Gargouille of Rouen, a dragon who swallowed up ships and flooded the town. When it was eventually captured and burned at the stake, its head would not burn, so legend has it that the townspeople cut it off and secured it to their church as a warning to other dragons. From the 13th century, the grotesque carved faces started appearing projecting from the gutters of churches, designed to keep rainwater from destroying the fabric of the building.



The gallows at the top of St Michael's Hill, on the town border would have been visible for miles around. Its location presumably chosen to deter visitors and locals from committing any offence in Bristol.



Bristol has had a mayor since the 1260s. The mayor-making ceremony took place annually on Michaelmas (29th September) in St Michael on the Mount Without Church and was overseen by the castle's constable.



WASHING IN THE WELL

Jacob's Wells - an ancient source of water, bringing communities together to drink, to wash and to bathe.

The oldest Hebrew inscription to be found in this country, carved into a stone lintel above a well in what is now a private house on Jacob's Wells Road suggests a ritual use of the waters harking back to a time before Edward I, before 1290, before Jewish people were banished from England, prevented from living and worshipping here.

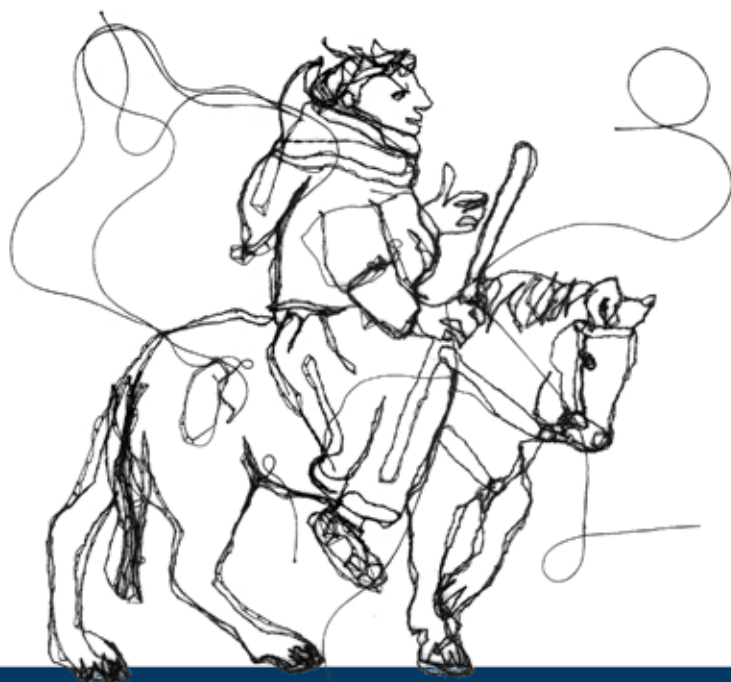
Christian pilgrims travelling along the bridle path between monasteries, up the steep slopes from the river to the plateau of the Bristol Downs may well have shared the clear water of the 'Sandbrook' and water from the springs with the medieval Jewish community.



The Hebrew inscription, possibly translated as 'flowing' was discovered in the 1990s. The phrase appears to be incomplete; other word(s) have possibly been lost over the centuries, and there has been ongoing debate about what these words might have been and what significance they may have had.

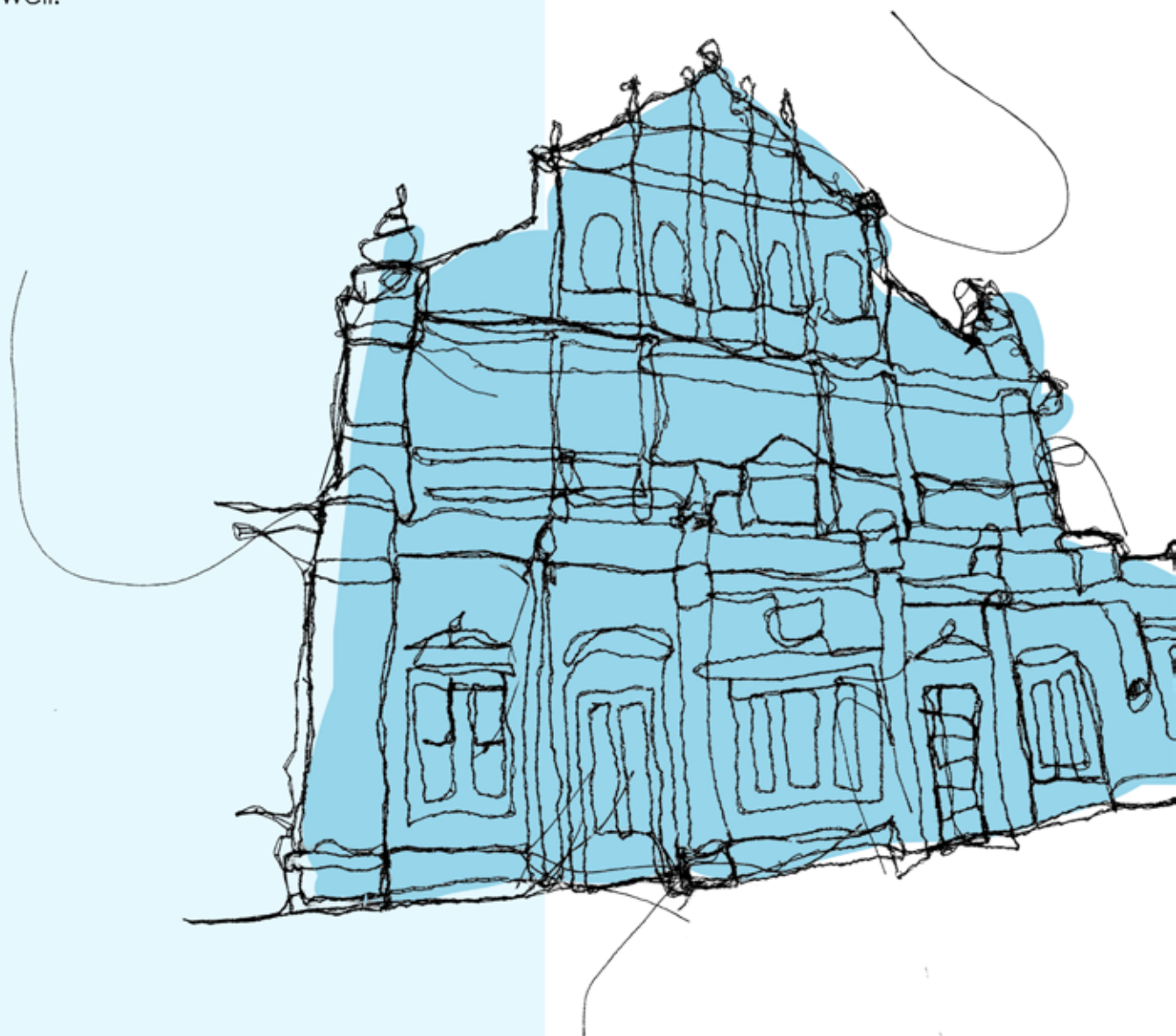
Was it a Bet Tohorah, used for cleansing of the dead before burying them in the Jewish cemetery (now beneath Queen Elizabeth's Hospital School (QEH) situated further up Jacob's Wells Road) ?

Was it a Mikveh, a ritual cleansing place for women or for those celebrating a holy day ?



Jacob's Well, with its natural springs and close proximity to the harbour has always played a significant role in bringing people together, a place where they could gather to wash their clothes, wash their bodies and even wash their horses!

Since 2015, Jacob's Wells Community Hub have been working to facilitate the establishment of a local, inclusive community centre. They have set their sights on Jacob's Wells Baths, and with thanks to Heritage Lottery funding, Rowan Associates South West Ltd and Myers-Insole Local Learning Community Interest Company have thoroughly enjoyed exploring, with local residents, the histories and mysteries of the well.

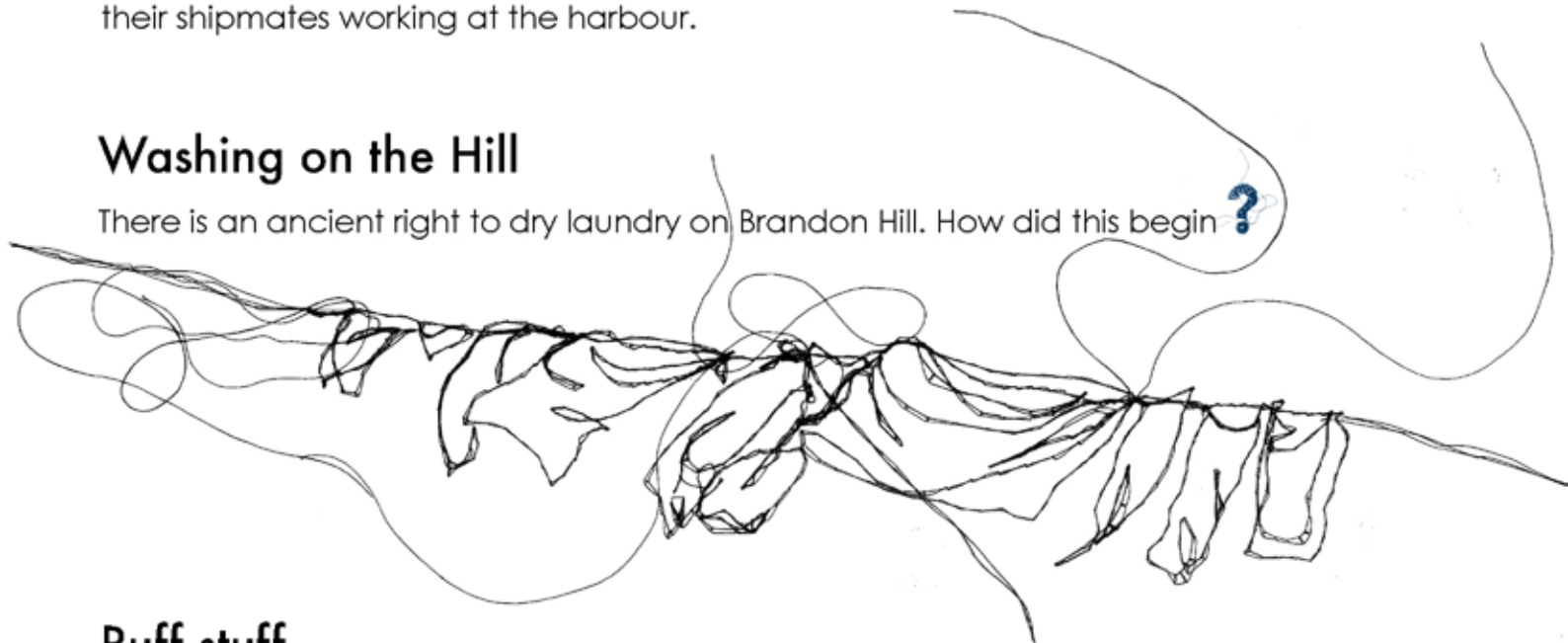


ONCE UPON A TIME...

There remains more than a drop of truth in these stories that have been passed down from mothers to daughters as they hung out their washing, from headmistress to her students as she lined them up on the steps of her school, from sailors to their shipmates working at the harbour.

Washing on the Hill

There is an ancient right to dry laundry on Brandon Hill. How did this begin ?



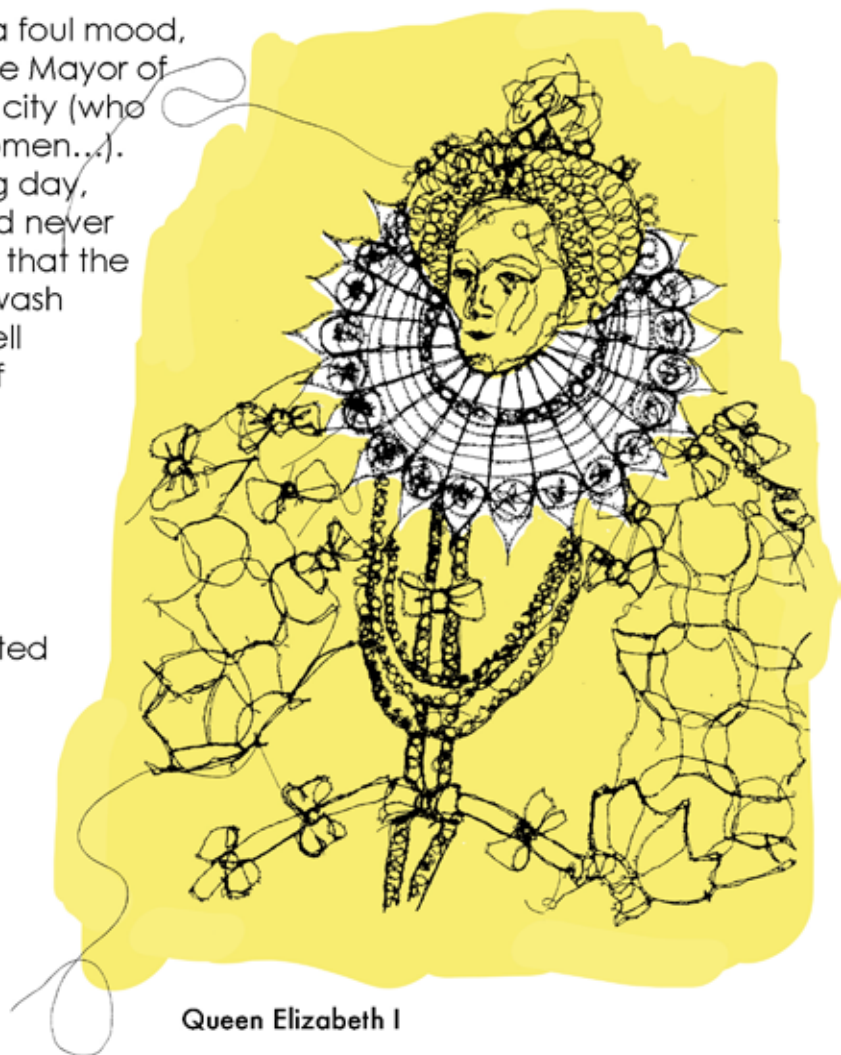
Ruff stuff

1574, Bristol - Queen Elizabeth I arrived in a foul mood, her fine ruffs made dirty on her journey. The Mayor of Bristol gave them to the loyal wives of the city (who we assume gave them to their washer-women...). When the ruffs were returned the following day, the Queen was delighted, saying they had never been so clean. In gratitude, she decreed that the women of Bristol would have the right to wash their linen in the pure water of Jacob's Well and to hang it to dry on the south slope of Brandon Hill.

But there is another story...

According to the Bristol Times and Mirror (15 February 1862), Queen Elizabeth granted this right to the daughters of Bristol

“as some compensation for their native ugliness so that those who married them, if they could not have fair faces would at least be free from foul linen...”



Queen Elizabeth I

Pleasure had a hut in Jacob's Well...

1729, Jacob's Wells Road - A tiny theatre opened outside the city walls of puritanical Bristol (described in Chatterton's poem below). A convenient hole was knocked through the party wall of the pub next door. Even famous London actors walked outside the front of the building to change stage entrances. The route

from Bristol over Brandon Hill or along Lime Kiln Lane passed pickpockets and footpads, so performances when the moon was full were popular. One actor claimed, "On the night of my benefit, Madame Cynthia will appear in her utmost splendour." The expected 'star' was a myth. She was the moon.

**Avarice sat brooding in her whitewashed cell.
And pleasure had a hut in Jacob's Well
A mean assembly-room, absurdly built,
Boasted one gorgeous lamp of copper gilt:
With farthing candles, chandeliers of tin,
And services of water, rum and gin.
There, in the dull solemnity of wigs,
The dancing bears of commerce murder jigs.
Here dance the dowdy belles of crooked trunk,
And often, very often, reel home drunk.**

Excerpt from Thomas Chatterton's Kew Gardens

Water, water everywhere

It is said that Nelson insisted on barrels of pure, clean spring water from Jacob's Well on his ships and that after his dinner he would have a glass of wine diluted with Bristol water.

Abracadabra

"...There was a great shop just further up in Berkeley Place where they could put the fizz into drinks which was magic... She had a glass of cordial and then she had something under the counter that put the fizz in it."

WELL, WELL, WELL

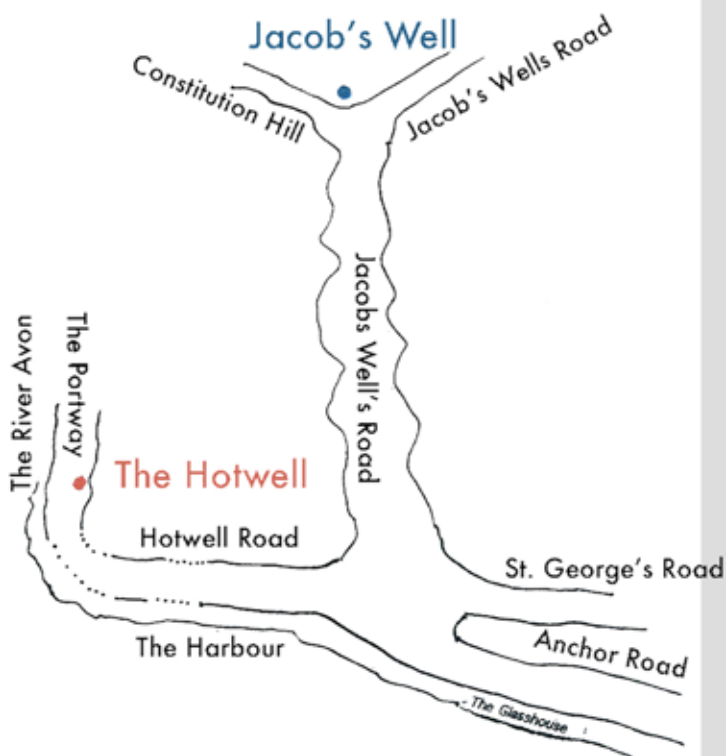


Diagram by John Parke

Before water was carried by pipe from reservoirs to our homes, the only sources were springs and wells. Even people living in the tenements that lined what became Jacob's Wells Road had pumps in their yards and a constant supply of clean, fresh water from the springs that rose beneath the stone built house at the bottom of Constitution Hill. The name 'Jacob's Well' dates from the medieval Jewish settlement in Bristol, echoing an ancient holy site in Israel, and is used across the world to imply 'purity'.

Was it always clean?

The Corporation (or Council) demolished a house which had been built over Jacob's Well because the privy was being emptied into it, and wells all down the road were in danger of being polluted by sewage.

1815: Beer, safer to drink than most water supplies, was brewed by many pubs on their premises. Opposite the Well stood a brewery and distillery. It advertised its pure water supply, boasting “many Bristol breweries find it impossible to brew saleable liquor from contagious ingredients contained in the receptacle of filth called the New Dock” (also known as Bristol Harbour).

Jacob's Wells: some like it cold

Fed by the waters of the well, a grand mansion was built in 1760, on the land below Bellevue, complete with its own private “cold bath” which the owner and guests could use. It was considered a luxury in its day.

Cold Bath Court was built further down the hill. Here were two public baths which also had dressing rooms. Admission was by ticket for which a fee was paid. They stood until 1853. The “Bath Arms” pub was built on the former baths.

Nearby, there was at least one horse pool which stood close to where the steps of Brandon House now are. Horses were the only means of transport, so it was important to keep them in good and working order. There were horse troughs, so horses could drink at regular intervals in the city right up to the 1950's.

The famous washerwomen of the area would have taken advantage of the endless supply of (usually) clean water.



HOTTER WATER FROM A DIFFERENT SOURCE

Hotwells water bubbles from a hot spring in the river bed and is covered by the incoming tide. It is warm (not hot), contains minerals and has a recognisable taste. Believed to be health-giving, and noting the success of Bath's Pump Room, the Merchant Venturers (who owned most of the Manor of Clifton) leased the area, enclosed the spring and built a large house around it.

Bristol had its own Spa! Throughout the eighteenth century, taking the waters became a fashionable outing for the well-to-do, and a healthy retreat for the not-so-well. But, with so many poorly people in the neighbourhood, the death rate increased and soon St Andrew's churchyard began to run out of room. The now derelict Stranger's Burial Ground was opened to accommodate the increase in the death rate.



The source of the Hot Well at low tide. Image courtesy of Warwick Moreton and Bristol City Council's Know Your Place website.

...Many drops to drink

Records show that the Limekiln Glasshouse, a glass-making factory, made quart bottles for the Hotwell water at an average of 850 dozen a year. That's 10,200 bottles, or about 11,500 litres.

Jacob's Well water is pure drinking water, with a sweet taste. Still flowing at the rate of 60,000 gallons a day, it was last bottled and sold in distinctive Bristol Blue bottles in the 1980s.

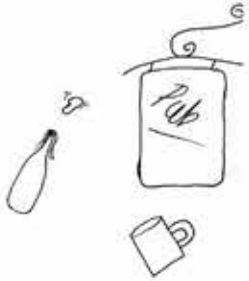


Where does it go now?

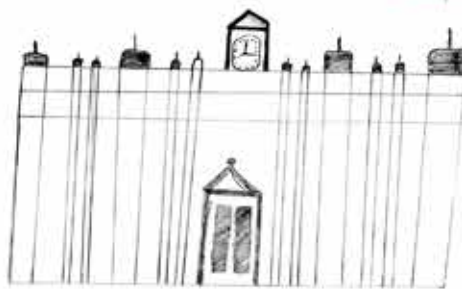
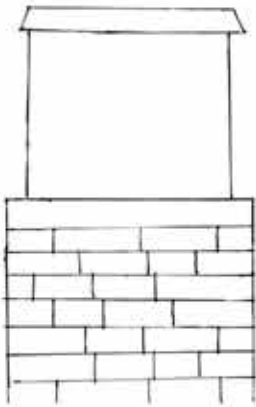
The water from Jacob's Well was taken by underground pipes. One pipe was owned by the Corporation. It emptied into a cistern on the corner of Unity Street and College Green and supplied their property at that location. Another was owned by the Church and emptied into a cistern in a house just below the Cathedral to supply church property in that area. When the Jacob's Wells Baths were opened the Church diverted the water pipe to supply the baths.



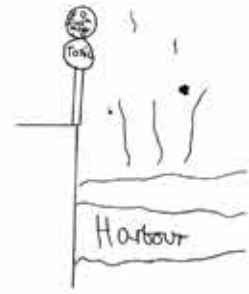
Horse Pool



The Well.



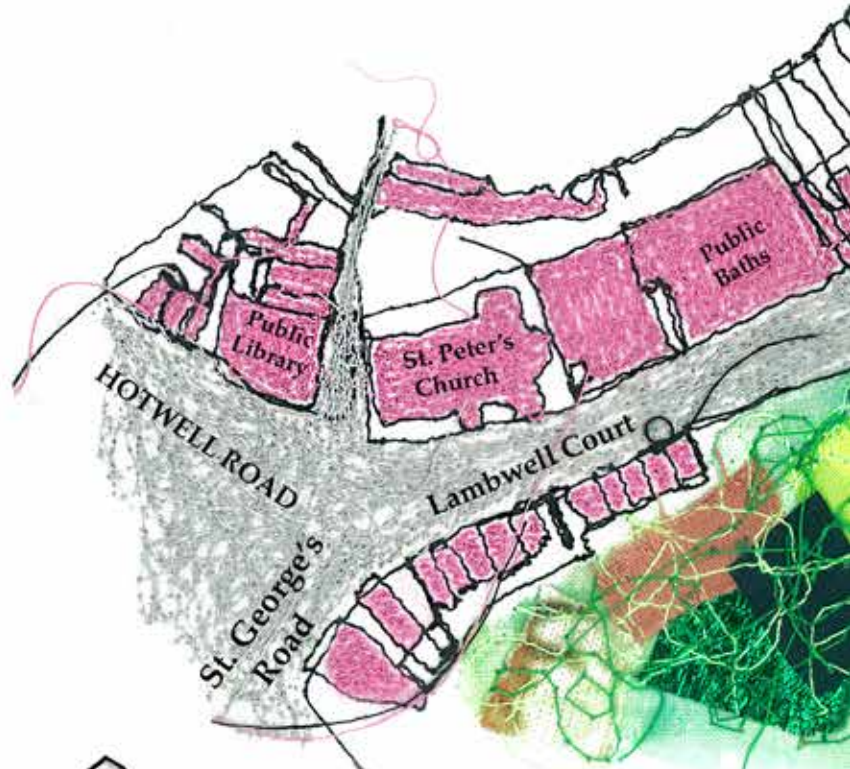
Jacob's Wells Baths



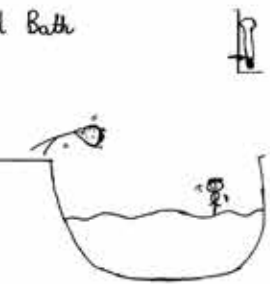
Public Cold



Victorian map produced by students from St George's C of E Primary School and Carmen Garaghon. Supported by Judy Goldsmith and John Parke.



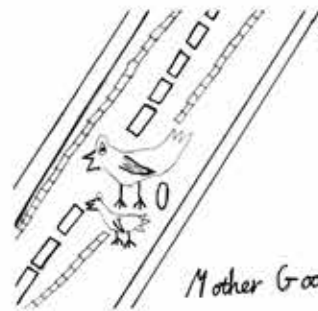
JACOB'S WELLS
Stitched map base



Private bath



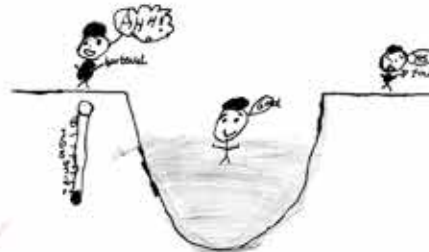
Mother Goose Lane.



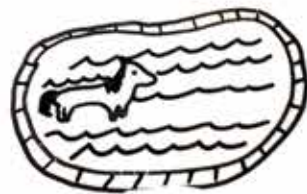
Mother Goose Lane.



Private cold baths



WATER PUMP



The well



Jacob's Wells Baths

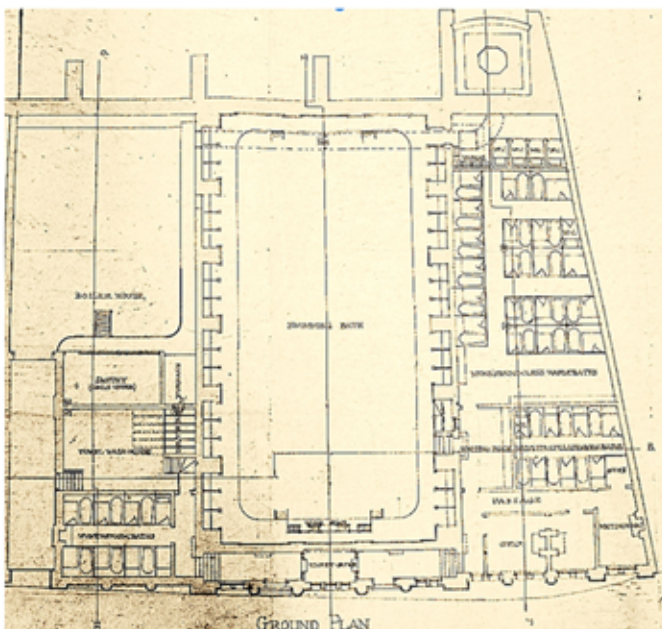
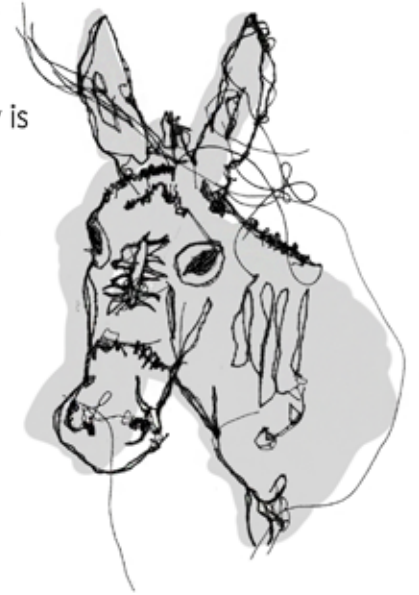
JACOB'S WELLS ROAD circa 1900
based on plan by John Parke

BATHING, IN THE PAST

In the early 1800s, the dockside area next to Jacob's Wells Road stank. The city's main drain ran from Park Place, down Jacob's Wells Road and discharged straight into the Harbour. While richer folk lived uphill in semi-rural Clifton, this was a densely populated, damp and poor area with tenements built into the hillside lining Jacob's Wells Road and Hotwell Road. Down here, typhoid and cholera were rife.

The Public Health Act was passed in 1848. Frederick Ashmead, the City Engineer, worked with the Bristol Sanitary Committee and the Bristol Waterworks Company (both newly formed) to redesign Bristol's sewers so they no longer emptied into the docks. Lead water pipes from the springs in Jacob's Wells Road were also replaced by iron for a new public water supply.

An 1850 sanitary report to the National General Board of Health describes the crowded and dirty conditions of the parish of Clifton, which “commences at Woodwell-lane, in a very dirty thoroughfare on the west side of which are a number of low unhealthy dwellings, some of the worst of which being situated about Jacob's Wells... in the kitchen of Lambwell Court a donkey is kept; most of the rooms are badly ventilated.”



Architectural plans for Jacob's Wells Baths.
Image from www.jacobswellscommunityhub.com
courtesy of Bristol Archives.

The Well and the unwell?

Homes for the poor did not have running water. Women drew water for washing clothes from Jacob's Well. Men and children swam and washed in the sewage and chemically polluted docks. (Where did women wash?)

The growing crisis in public health throughout the country led to the passing of the 1846 Baths and Washhouses Act. It was heralded as one of the great social reforms of the mid-19th century. It provided for hot baths and public laundry facilities plus open air swimming pools as a way to reduce infectious diseases in British cities.

BUILDING OF THE BATHS

Bristol was one of the first local authorities to make use of its new powers under the 1846 Act: to pay for the provision to build public baths for everyone. 1871 plans for Jacob's Wells Baths included warm baths and a swimming pool, housed in a deliberately impressive Queen Anne Revival Style building. The location was ideal: in an area of poverty and social need, as envisioned by the Baths and Washhouses Act. And, it had its own, plentiful supply of clean water as well as access to Ashmead's sewerage system for the waste water.



Image by Samuel Loxton (circa 1910)

Water from the Well?

The Baths complex was fed by Jacob's Well Spring water, for which the Corporation of Bristol paid a nominal sum to the Dean and Chapter of Bristol. The well water was fed into an overhead cast iron tank which was supported on 21 feet high cast iron columns. They are still in the Boiler House at the Baths, but in poor condition now.

For more history, visit

www.jacobswellscommunityhub.com/baths/jacobs-wells-baths-complex/

Not for everyone?

Jacob's Wells Baths opened in 1889. There were 18 men's second class and 6 men's first class baths; and 6 women's warm baths to which there was a separate entrance. The swimming pool was for men only, accessible only from the men's side of the building. Women were not allowed to swim at all until 1895, when they were allowed one afternoon a week. In June 1922, a campaign finally won the right to mixed bathing in some Bristol pools. But not Jacob's Wells, where the women's entrance did not give access to the pool. By the 1930's, the Baths Brochures show a growing number of either women-only or mixed swimming sessions throughout the week.

Plans of the Baths building can be seen at Bristol Archives.

Bristol Archives offers 10 miles of historical documents and is an invaluable resource for our city, a place freely available to make your own discoveries about the city's past.

Bristol Archives, 'B' Bond Warehouse, Smeaton Road, Bristol, BS1 6XN

www.bristolmuseum.org.uk/bristol-archives

Many of the images from the archives have been digitised and are available on Bristol City Council's Know Your Place website. It also offers an opportunity for you to share your own photos, letters, postcards and other images on the website's community layer.

www.bristol.gov.uk/knowyourplace

BATHING IN OUR MEMORIES

The Victorian Baths were built at a time when very few people were fortunate enough to have running water in their households, a time when locals didn't appreciate the risks they were taking swimming in the dirty docks, a time when the whole family would have to take turns washing in a tin bath, in ever-murkier water.

Some of these experiences continued into the 20th century, within living memory...

“We had a huge metal cold tin bath in front of the fire in the lounge and a boiler in the kitchen... she had to carry buckets of hot water to the bath.”

“My mother and grandfather used to come across on the ferry from Coronation Road, to swim and to have a bath...”

“...It was a local meeting point for young people of my age...”

“They were the most wonderful baths ever.”

“They used to run the water for you and you just got in... the water would come just up to my shoulder... we got as much hot water you wanted and could get out of the attendant...”

“...I remember how amazingly luxurious it was to have a bath here... you just like sunk into it... big shiny metal taps... the spout would come through the wall.”

“...you could buy soap... funny little tablets of soap, white, thin, just enough for a bath... towels were supplied... big white towels with red writing on... Jacob's Wells Baths...”

“When we came with the school we had to kneel down along the edge and the teacher inspected our feet for verrucas before we were allowed in.”

“...I was working next to Colston Hall and used to go along to Jacob's Wells Baths twice a week... in my 1 hour lunch hour... had to run both ways to fit in my 10 minute but lovely bath.”

“... it was a massive great big white enamel bath and I was in there on my own... it was a bit like One Flew Over the Cuckoo's Nest with the big enamel bath... Scary...”

“It was pretty cold except for the hot water from the baths. Once it was full you jumped in and sort of stayed there as long as you could.”

“The partitions were flimsy.. and not up to the ceiling... you could hear people talking all around you... we'd be talking through the partitions... We did sing and actually smoked...”

“... and then there was not enough time to dry off... just had to change and roll your costume into your towel and take it home, good and soggy.”

“The man was rotund let's say, with grey trousers and white shirt open necked with braces and his sleeves rolled up. He'd make us go round the edge on the bar and then he'd poke us with what I would describe as a boiler stick, because my mother used to have a boiler stick, if we weren't doing something properly...”

“All my family swam at the baths, and I took my daughter swimming there from 3 months old. She loved it and would scream if I took her out of the water.”

“The attendant was “a very militaristic chap with white canvas pumps, white trousers and a white vest... little pencil moustache... very strict. People used to bring rubber rings to swim in. He always insisted they were car tyres and would never allow them in.”

“The roof was glass all over so it was very light, echoey... when the war started, the baths were closed because of the glass-roof...”

“The changing cubicles were on the edge of the pool... with curtains. If you caught your wet body with the curtain, you would drag the curtain open and then everybody in the pool could see you...”

“We didn't quite have the knitted swimming costumes but they were very heavy so as you got out you would haul your costume with you and the ruching would go. Not elegant.”

“Somebody bet me that I wouldn't show my bare bum through the curtain... I did but the teacher was just outside! “Right you, you're barred,” he said... I couldn't go swimming for four weeks...”

To hear more
of people's
recollections about
bathing in the past visit

[www.locallearning.org.uk
/washing-in-the-well](http://www.locallearning.org.uk/washing-in-the-well)

Stories were recorded by Barbara Cowell, Judy Goldsmith, Tot Foster and Lori Streich and edited by multi-media producer, Tot Foster. A special thank you to those who kindly shared their memories of Jacob's Wells Baths:

Pat Baker • Marion Britton • Mike Britton • Pat Brownen • Pat Chapple • Joan Clifford
Liz Darcy • Peter Fleming • Derek Gay • Judy Goldsmith • Julie Hardy • Malcolm
Hussey Yeo • June Jeffreys • Kevin Lehane • Mary Lehane • Clare McKeown •
Betty Mitchell • Geoff Mogg • John O'Neill • John Parke • Pan Radford •
Sally Silverman • Audrey Stazaker • Heather Watts • Sue Wilkins • Gloria Winter

WOMEN OF THE WELL

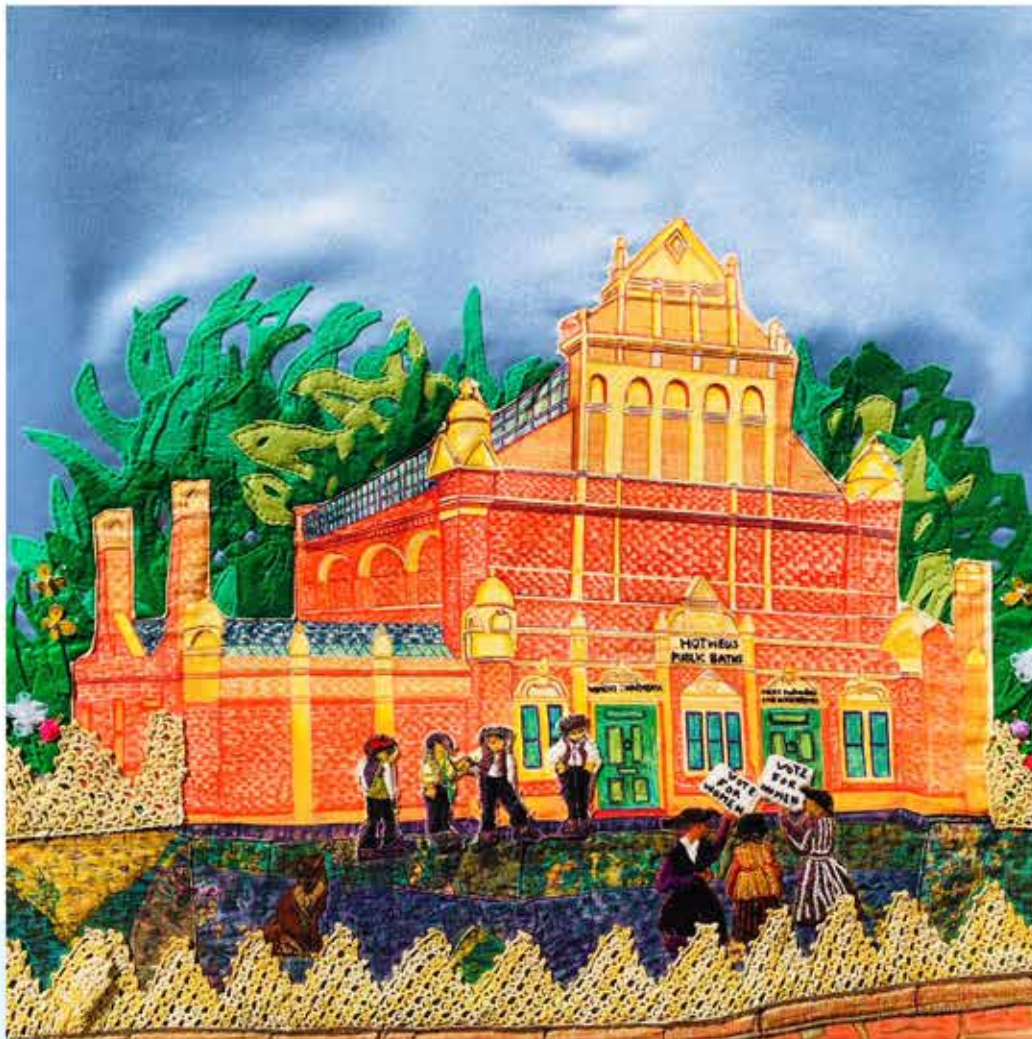
Women have always played active and practical, if often overlooked, roles in social reform and campaigning for better community facilities. And never more so than in and around Jacob's Wells...

Eliza Walker Dunbar (1845-1925) graduated from the University of Zurich in 1872, at a time when women were not allowed to study medicine (or much else) in UK universities. A year later, she moved to Bristol when she was appointed Resident Medical Officer at the Hospital for Women and Children on St Michael's Hill. Her appointment was met with fierce resistance by the all-male medical establishment, and she left the job within months. In 1874, she was appointed Honorary Medical Assistant at the Read Dispensary for Women and Children on the corner of St George's and Jacob's Wells Roads. She remained committed to providing medical care for women and children, and to keeping the costs low so that all women had access to healthcare. Her obituary in *The Medical News* reported that she would be much missed by “all those who had the good fortune to know her or be under her care.”

Susanna Winkworth (1820-1884) was one of four daughters of a deeply evangelical silk merchant. She moved to Bristol with her sister Catherine in 1864 and undertook district visiting, especially in Hotwells, 'the poor district of Clifton'. Influenced by the London-based housing reformer Octavia Hill, Susanna tried to tackle the problem of inadequate and unsanitary housing in Bristol. After two unsuccessful, and financially unfortunate, attempts, she formed the Bristol Industrial Dwellings Company and gained the backing of wealthy and influential (mostly male) shareholders. Its purpose was to design 'model dwellings' which would be built to a high standard for 'suitable' tenants at low rents. The Jacob's Wells Buildings (1875) were revolutionary. Each flat had running water and a balcony for better ventilation. The result was a very low incidence of infectious diseases. But bathrooms were still outside, shared with everyone else on the balcony.



Women activists, like Eliza and Susanna, also campaigned for the right of women to vote. Others fought for the right to swim. These women swimming pioneers are sometimes called 'swimming suffragists' as their presence in the pool was analogous to their presence at the polls. For women, access to the water would give them the freedom of not having to wear Victorian clothing. They had to combat the same conventions, the same issues around social class and the same imposed cultural roles to participate in sports as they did to get the vote.



Saved in Time by Bristol artist, Gillie Bolt

“I had the image of dockers queuing up on Friday nights for their weekly bath. They could also swim. But where did the women go?”

- Lorna Brierly and Helen Reid, 2000. **Go Home and Do the Washing: Three Centuries of Pioneering Bristol Women**, Bristol: Broadcast Books
- Madge Dresser, Ed, 2016. **Women and the City: Bristol 1373 - 2000**, Bristol: Redcliffe Press/Regional History Centre UWE
- Jane Duffus, 2018, **The Women Who Built Bristol 1184-2018**, Bristol: Tangent Books
- Jenny Landreth, 2017, **Swell: A Waterbiography**, London: Bloomsbury

THE WOMEN AT THE HUB

Local residents Sally Silverman, Judy Goldsmith and Heather Watts got together in 2015 and formed the Jacob's Wells Community Hub. Their initial purpose was to find community spaces for local activities and, in the process, they became involved with the Baths building. At the time, the Dance Centre was coming to the end of its life in the building, the roof was leaking, costly maintenance was needed and Bristol City Council was looking for an organisation to look after the listed building. It was too big for JWCH to take on the management of the building themselves, 'but we had the power to campaign' and the vision to campaign to save Jacob's Wells Baths.

They secured a grant to gather community views and worked with Helen Bone from Vivid Regeneration to run an extensive consultation. Along the way, they have set up and run a range of community-based activities and events including a regular craft hub, Tai Chi classes and a summer Chess School for children. The result of their tireless work is the successful Asset Transfer of the lease of the Baths to Fusion Lifestyle Ltd. The future of the Baths looks secure – and even the swimming pool (but not the slipper baths) will be restored.



Photograph of Jacob's Wells Baths courtesy of Mike Britton



“It's quite surprising how easy it is, if you feel strong enough about something... if you know what the community want, if you've consulted the community and there's a lot of support for it... You just feel the power of people behind you.”

Judy

To stay up to date with the latest developments or find out how you can get involved with Jacob's Wells Community Hub visit:

www.jacobswellscommunityhub.com

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

As well as the women at Jacobs Well's Hub, we are indebted to John Parke. It is as clear as the waters from the well that he is someone with a deep and profound knowledge of Jacob's Wells' past. Myers-Insole Local Learning and Rowan

Associates are most grateful to Heather, John, Judy and Sally for sharing their insights and understanding of the area's rich heritage and working with us to create this written legacy of the Washing in the Well project.

The Washing in the Well project was coordinated by Ruth Myers and Lori Streich.

Ruth Myers is co-director of Myers-Insole Local Learning, a small, Bristol-based community interest company who specialise in exploring our local heritage with all members of the community, to uncover and share what we learn about our past.

ruth@locallearning.org.uk
www.locallearning.org.uk

Tot Foster is a director of Bristol-based Wildman and Herring Ltd, who provide media consultancy, training and production for charities, community interest companies and public bodies. Tot facilitated the collection of the audio stories, and then edited them.

tot_foster@hotmail.com
www.wildmanherring.com

Lori Streich is the Director of Rowan Associates, a Bristol-based consultancy that works with organisations and partnerships to develop and evaluate projects that investigate local history, as a way to engage people in their communities.

lori@rowanassociates.com
www.rowanassociates.com

Carmen Garaghon is an artist and printmaker predominately working with stitch. Carmen has provided the illustrations and graphic design element of this booklet.

carmen_garaghon@yahoo.co.uk
www.carmengaraghon.com

Lori and Ruth have enjoyed working with staff and students of St George's C of E Primary School and St Michael on the Mount C of E VC Primary School. We are particularly thankful to all the parents and friends of the two schools who shared their memories and memorabilia with us throughout the course of this project.

And we would also like to thank the following, who helped to make this project possible:

Angela Baum • Art Space Life Space • Gillie Bolt • Helen Bone (Vivid Regeneration) • Martin Booth • Macauley Bridgeman • Mike Britton • Malcolm Boynes and Allie Dillon and Dan Jones (Bristol Archives) • Dawn Dyer and Robert Harrison (Bristol Central Library) • Dreadnought Books • Eugene Byrne • Pat Chapple • Joan Clifford • Barbara Cowell • Councillor Asher Craig • John Crinion • Richard Fenlon • Professor Peter Fleming • Judy Goldsmith • Michael Gorely • Trevor Haddrell • Carrie Hitchcock (Bristol Ferries) • Josh Hitt • Jill James • June Jeffreys • John Parke • Sidika Petterson • Dr Rachel Sara • Zeynep Sert • Alex Schlesinger • Sally Silverman • Solly Tagg Foster • Councillor Jerome Thomas • Heather A Watts • Nick Williams (Richmond Events Management - Harbour Festival)



Historic
England



Myers-Insole Local Learning CIC
www.locallearning.org.uk

“ I left home when I was quite young, about 17 and ended up living in various bedsits... every Saturday, regular as clockwork, we would come down to Jacob's Wells Baths and have a hot bath. I just remember them as being the most wonderful baths ever and I often say if they were still here I would come. ”

The front cover was based on an original sketch by Samuel Loxton 1893

The Hebrew inscription was based on an image in the **Transactions of the Bristol and Gloucestershire Archaeological Society Jacob's Well, Bristol: Mikveh or Bet Tohorah?** by J. Hillaby and R. Sermon 2004, Vol. 122, 127-152 © The Society and the Author(s)

Booklet designed by Carmen Garaghon.
Printed by Sebright Printers Limited, Stokes Croft.