

## THE FORGOTTEN SPAS AND MINERAL SPRINGS OF SOUTH-EAST SOMERSET

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Provincial spas developed at the end of the 16th Century as places where the wealthy could gather, often in a rural setting, without being constrained by the conventions which normally governed their behaviour. A number of mineral springs in south-east Somerset achieved brief fame in the following centuries for the medicinal properties of their waters. There was such a rush to Alford Spa, near Castle Cary, in the 1670s that there was insufficient water to serve all the patrons; Horwood Spa, near Wincanton, had its own bank in 1809 although the enterprise was bankrupt by 1819. At East Chinnock, near Yeovil, a salt spring, the water from which contained about 6000 mg/l of NaCl, was used for salt making until at least the mid-19th Century. Many of these springs are derived from the Lower Lias where water quality is generally poor and where mineralised waters are liable to be encountered in any well sunk into the clays. The East Chinnock waters are believed to originate from the Inferior Oolite and may contain a component dating from the Pleistocene.

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### INTRODUCTION

During Roman times extensive use was made of mineral and thermal waters for public bathing. In Britain baths were constructed at Bath (Aquae Sulis) and Buxton (Aquae Arnemetiae), where thermal springs were developed and both became the location of Roman settlements. As the Roman Empire declined, buildings were neglected or destroyed and the baths were used only by local people. During the Middle Ages, their use was actively discouraged and the Christian Church denounced the warm bath as sinful (Hembry, 1990).

Additionally, for perhaps thousands of years, certain non-thermal springs and wells had been places of pilgrimage. Many sulphurous springs were believed to have mystic or curative properties and the red iron staining associated with chalybeate springs was associated with blood and death. Such sources were often adopted by the church becoming holy wells perhaps dedicated to a saint or to the Virgin Mary. Holy wells are widespread in south-west England and some hundreds have been described from Cornwall (Quiller-Couch and Quiller-Couch, 1894), Devon (Faull, 2004) and Somerset (Horne, 1923).

At the Reformation holy wells were suppressed, as they were associated with the Catholic past, images were removed and wells sealed. However, it was soon clear that, although shrines could be pulled down, it was less easy to dam the flow of springs. Additionally wealthy individuals, especially Catholics, who were denied the opportunity to take the waters at "home" migrated to the continent to do so. The government became concerned that they were providing an excuse for Catholics to congregate at Spa, in Belgium then under the control of Spain, where a potential column of English dissidents was being formed (Hembry, 1990). So, for reasons of political expediency and because people were reluctant to abandon their use of holy wells for the cure of illness, an accommodation was reached and the policy of prohibition was abandoned. By the reign of Elizabeth I (1558-1603) a new approach allowed the bathing in, and drinking of, waters. So began the development of the provincial "spa" where the wealthy could gather, often in

a rural setting, without being constrained by the conventions which normally governed their behaviour.

By Stuart times taking the waters had become an accepted social fashion and spas were patronised by royalty and the court. The practice of going to spas does not seem to have been diminished by the Civil War but it was after the Restoration in 1660 that the number of spas proliferated. After Catherine of Braganza, the wife of Charles II, began visiting Bath or Tunbridge Wells as a cure for her sterility, the vogue for visiting spas became almost universal with every social rank catered for by different establishments.

Overall the south-west of England missed out on the boom in spa-building which followed. Although chalybeate springs with potential for development existed in abundance in Devon and Cornwall no such development took place. The primary reason for this was the isolation of this part of England in the late 17th Century, when wheeled traffic was still rare and journeys were undertaken on horseback. Celia Fiennes, who travelled through Devonshire to Lands End in 1698, found that the lanes narrowed progressively until even single horses sometimes had difficulty in getting through them (Morris, 1947). For similar reasons the two counties missed out on later spa booms and the only mineral water source known to have been developed commercially for medicinal purposes was the Victoria Spa in Plymouth where groundwater with a total dissolved solids concentration of around 17,350 mg/l was pumped from a 360 ft (110 m) borehole (de la Beche, 1839).

The situation in Somerset was rather different because of the occurrence of thermal waters at Bath in the north of the county. Even travel to Bath was difficult in the 17th Century and it was to be some years before the primitive medieval town became a Georgian city. However, the visit of Charles II and his queen in 1663 secured the patronage of the upper classes and facilities gradually improved. Bath waters were noteworthy for improving long-standing gout but unfortunately a side effect of their use was constipation. In consequence other springs within range of the town, which had aperient (purging) properties, were developed to relieve the consequences of drinking Bath waters! One of these was at Alford in south-east