

WITH THE ODOUR OF A CESSPOOL AND BAD HORSERADISH: THE MINERAL WATERS OF DAVIESVILLE SPA, BURNHAM-ON-SEA, SOMERSET, UK

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In 1800, the Reverend David Davies, the local curate, built a lighthouse to aid navigation in Bridgwater Bay. He used the income generated in dues and the later sale of his rights to build the small hamlet of Daviesville. Considering that the underlying strata resembled that of Cheltenham, Davies sank a well to 22.9 m which encountered saline water, within calcareous laminated clays, considered to have medicinal properties. A shallower well, completed at 7.6 m, yielded a sulphurous water. Both sources were exploited and a pump room and baths built. The spa operated from 1832 into the early 1870s after which the wells were neglected and the buildings demolished or put to alternative uses. Organic pollution was found in 1938 and the wells had been filled in by 1949. Lithological logs from modern site investigation boreholes suggest that the saline water was derived from clays of the Middle Lias and the sulphurous water from sandy horizons within the overlying Quaternary estuarine deposits. Saline groundwaters are widely distributed within Liassic clays and the spa owes its origin more to the enterprise of the Reverend Davies rather than to the geochemistry of its waters.

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INTRODUCTION

Burnham on Sea, which was simply Burnham prior to 1917, is situated on the Somerset coast to the north of the confluence of the Rivers Parrett and Brue (Figure 1). These rivers subsequently flow northwards as one, almost parallel to the town's Esplanade, before swinging westwards, across the Gore Sands, into the waters of the Bristol Channel. The early settlement was protected from the sea by a high sandy ridge and, to the east, Emanuel Bowen's 1750 map of Somerset (reproduced in McDermott and Berry, 2011) shows undrained land known as Brent Marsh. Land communication with the outside world was confined to two sandy tracks and Burnham was isolated and remote, even from other parts of Somerset. Changes began to take place towards the end of the 18th Century as drainage and sanding of the land increased its agricultural value. When Edmund Rack visited in the early 1780s he found a "considerable parish" of 100 houses and nearly 580 inhabitants. The land was mostly down to pasture and the marshland had become a fine moor in which great numbers of cattle were grazed (McDermott and Berry, 2011). Improved links to the turnpike road (now the A38) to the east made access easier and Burnham began to develop as a seaside resort. According to John Rutter, by 1829, "Burnham [was] resorted to by many families in the summer season, for whose accommodation an hotel and several new houses [had] been created near the beach" (Rutter, 1829, p.89).

Amongst the developers was the stipendiary curate the Reverend David Davies who arrived in Burnham during the 1790s, first as curate for the Reverend John Golden, vicar from 1768-99, and then for the succeeding incumbent, Dr. Walter King. Both vicars were non-resident and probably came to Burnham infrequently. Combining his curacy with those of

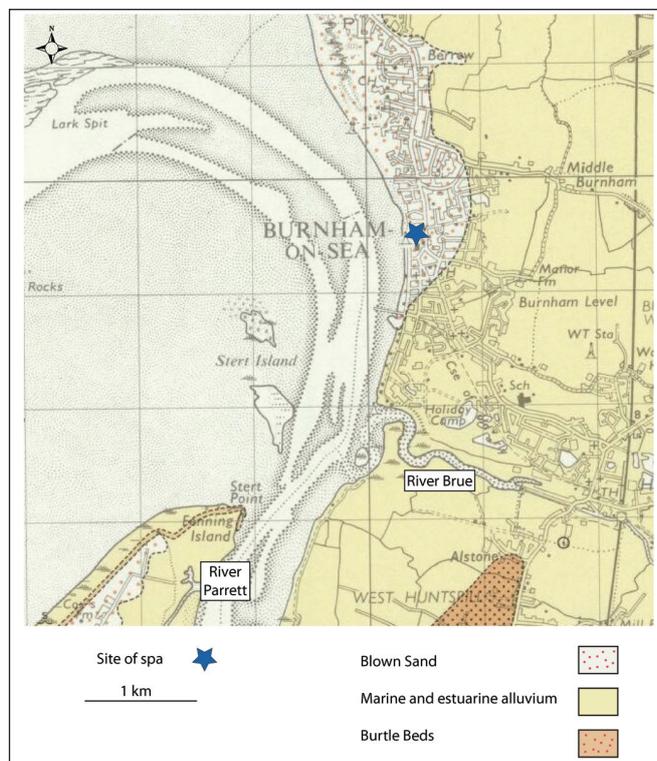


Figure 1. Map of Burnham on Sea and the surrounding area, showing the geology and the site of Daviesville Spa (contains British Geological Survey materials © NERC 2014; © Crown copyright and database rights 1980 Ordnance Survey 100021290).