

Public Health and Water Supply in Bridgwater, Somerset

by Tony Woolrich

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9) The Bridgwater Waterworks 1939-1963

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Wartime

WARTIME restrictions would have had an effect on the running of the local water supply, not only the rationing of stores, fuel and equipment, but also the calling up for war service of personnel. Several aerial mines fell on Bridgwater that did some property damage: much glass blown out in 1941 in High Street and Penel Orliou, for example, but so far as has been discovered there was no damage to the property of the waterworks in the war.

Post-War Legislation

In 1942 the Medical Officer of Health reported no serious shortage for domestic purposes, but felt that intensive food production would demand more and more water. He felt there was a need for a survey to be made of water resources in the county which had not yet been utilised to include considerations of those farm and industrial requirements for which pure water is unnecessary. The Rural Water Supplies and Sewerage Act came into force during 1944. It provided for government contributions towards the expenses incurred by a local authority, after the passing of the Act, in providing a supply or improving an existing supply of water in a rural locality, and where such contribution was made the County Council must also give financial assistance.

Also in 1944 a White Paper "A National Water Policy" was also published. Part 1 foreshadowed legislation setting up regional water advisory committees with statutory powers to collect information concerning existing and potential sources of supply, the estimating of future requirements, the co-ordinating of resources and the formation of joint boards.

The Water Act, 1945, came into operation on the 1st October of that year. This, following the Rural Water Supplies and Sewerage Act, 1944, completed the process of giving legislative effect to Part 1 of the White Paper. In short the Act gave the Minister of Health specific statutory responsibility for promoting the conservation and proper use of water resources and the provision of water supplies.

The Water Abstraction Regulations, 1947 made under the Water Act, 1945, came into operation on 1st November. These related to the need for recording of large volumes of water abstraction as an aid to future planning.

The next ten years or so saw important projects

undertaken to rebuild the infrastructure, following the restrictions of wartime and the shortages of the years which followed it, but progress was frequently held up by an insufficient labour force and by the slow delivery of materials. In some instances it took twenty-seven months from the date of the order for the delivery of pipes and even longer period for certain fittings. Daily consumption per head of the population varied considerably when mains water was available; in some areas it could reach sixty to seventy gallons, whilst in others it was less than fifteen gallons, these figures including the needs of agriculture and industry.

The installation of water closets and baths in the council houses built by local authorities also had its effect on those with limited sources of supply. Over recent years the rest water levels of underground supplies had dropped, in some cases to an alarming extent. Apart from low rainfall, there were two other contributory factors to this diminution in storage; one was that more water was being consumed and the other that in provision of sewerage schemes waste water, which was previously thrown on to the ground and absorbed, was then discharged into sewers and flowed to rivers and the sea. By 1952 owing to the drop in the water level of underground supplies more use was being made of streams by water undertakers to meet the rising demands.

The county was comparatively well served with piped supplies in 1951. Apart from the urban authorities, out of the 397 parishes in the rural areas 357 or 90% had services from the main so of which 320 were owned by the District Councils and 37 privately. Regarding house supplies, approximately 64,946 or 98.5% of the houses in twenty Borough and Urban Districts had piped supplies, 845 or 1.3% obtained their water from standpipes and approximately 0.2% of the houses used wells. In the sixteen Rural Districts 49,040 houses or 79% had mains water laid on, 3,694 or 6% used standpipes and approximately 9,500 or 15% used well water.

In September 1956 the Minister of Housing and Local Government issued Circular 52/56 which requested water undertakers to consider their role in the process of 're-grouping', which had been taking place since the passing of the Water Act, 1945. It was stressed this should proceed faster and more radically. The underlying aim was to promote the most effective use of water and '... to do this successfully, smaller ones to combine with their neighbours....' In

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1957 to the south of the Mendips, whilst meetings of the respective Water Authorities had taken place on the re-grouping of water undertakings, few positive decisions had been reached, and in 1958 in the western part of the county discussions were held up because of the need to obtain observations from the Ministry of Housing and Local Government about the Districts to be included.

The Water Act, 1958, came into force on 1 September. It was mainly designed to assist statutory water undertakers in times of drought. It empowered the Ministry of Housing and Local Government to make Orders enabling water undertakers to obtain additional supplies of water for a limited period when faced with serious shortage. During 1959 various meetings took place in connection with the regrouping of water undertakings. The county was to be divided into three groups, namely the West Somerset, Mendip and Wessex areas. In 1960 active steps for the regrouping of water undertakings in the West Somerset area were somewhat delayed, and at the end of the year no positive recommendations had been made as to the form regrouping should take, but during 1961 considerable progress was made, with the formation of a Water Board for the West Somerset area which should become operative on the 1st April 1963. The Board was to take over the water undertakings operated by nine local authorities and one private Waterworks Company and local authority involvement would cease.

The West Somerset Water Board Order, 1962 was made by the Ministry of Housing and Local Government on the 3rd December 1962 and came into operation on 1 January 1963, The day of transfer was 1 April 1963, after which the Board was to be responsible for water supplies in the following districts:

Boroughs and Urbans

Bridgwater
Minehead
Taunton
Watchet
Wellington

Rurals

Bridgwater
Dulverton
Taunton
Wellington
Williton

The final report of the Trade Effluents Sub-Committee of the Central Advisory Water Committee stated:

One of the conclusions reached, is that farmers and local authorities should have the same rights and duties in connection with farm effluents as they have in connection with trade effluents. A Public Health Bill, being considered by Parliament, provided that farm effluents are trade effluents subject to the provisions of the public health (Drainage of Trade Premises) Act, 1937. Thus will be removed any doubt about the true legal position concerning liquid waste from farmyards.

The Public Health Act, 1961, the provisions of which came into force on the 3rd October, contained some important sections concerning trade effluents and the provision of sewers. required.

Bridgwater Rural Supply and Service

In 1941 owing to the heavy demand in the area served by the Huntworth Gate main a duplicate 7" main from Huntworth Gate to Crandon Bridge was laid and completed at a cost of £12,173. Additional chlorinating plant was purchased for £140. Increased storage was authorised in 1942 by two 13,000 gallons service reservoirs at Middlezoy and Othery to meet shortages experienced in the villages during peak draw-off times. These were completed in the following year. The Nether Stowey supply was improved in 1944 by the laying of service pipes. Connection was made to the supply for the lower part of Stoke St. Gregory which was in Taunton Rural area.

Severe shortages were experienced in January and February of 1945 when defective service pipes were affected by the severe weather. Hundreds of leaks were discovered and repaired. Approval was received for emergency works, namely the duplication of the main around Dancing Hill, for a distance of approximately 1 mile, and the provision of a booster station at Crandon Bridge. A main supply for the parish of Over Stowey was placed in priority group 1.

1,700 feet of 10" main was substituted for an old 8" main to improve distribution in 1946. During 1947 long and short term proposals were under consideration. The short term programme provided for a new 10in. main from Barford Park (Enmore) to Dancing Hill, North Pethererton and the provision of new service reservoirs to serve high and low levels.

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In 1948 a connection was made between the R.A.F. main and the Middlezoy main, greatly improving the supply to the whole area. A booster station erected on the Bath Road enabled the Polden Hills to have a constant supply. Minor extensions of mains were made to the Council's new housing estates. Future proposals included a scheme for Over Stowey at a cost of £21,500

No extensions or improvements to supplies were carried out during 1949, but approval was given to the Over Stowey scheme. In 1950 extensions of mains were carried out at Petherton Park, North Petherton and Plainsfield, Over Stowey. There was a breakdown in the supply at Fiddington but this was remedied by a temporary supply pipe being laid from Over Stowey. The Over Stowey water supply scheme was under construction at a cost of £22,000. Planning was done for the Over Stowey to Fiddington 3" link main, £1,900 and a complete waterworks scheme at Merridge, £2,625.

In 1951 mains extensions were undertaken at Shapwick, £2,542; Otterhampton to Steart, £2,583; Moorlinch £1,191. No water shortages were reported from the Bridgwater Urban and Rural areas.

During 1952, capital improvements carried out were: an additional pump installed at Bath Road booster station to improve supplies in the Polden Hills area for £780; a high level tank erected at Chapel Road, Pawlett, to improve mains pressure to properties in the area; the linking of Over Stowey and Nether Stowey supply systems for £800. Approval was also obtained for various schemes: Fiddington, Otterhampton and Stockland Bristol augmentation, £6,220; Thurloxtion, improvement of supply £1,660, Steart Extension £867.

In 1953, water supply schemes for Steart and Shapwick were completed. A pump was installed at Inwood Farm, Fiddington, and a new rising main laid to the reservoir. Planning was done for constructing reservoirs at North Petherton, Edington and Puriton, and approval was given for the Nythe extension, £910.

Industrial demands increased rapidly and in 1954 it was estimated that in the Bridgwater Borough alone, and within the next three years, such consumption would amount to nearly two and a half times the quantity required for domestic purposes. Proposals to augment the existing sources as an interim measure were put to the Ministry, but these provided little

surplus to meet any future demands. Another source, or help from Taunton Corporation's scheme at Clatworthy would become necessary in the near future.

The position in the Bridgwater district was described as precarious in 1955. It was found necessary to impose restrictions in the Borough as late as November and December due to the inadequacy of their supplies. Until a further permanent source was found measures to afford temporary relief were likely to be adopted to prevent further restrictions to consumers. The Rural District was to a great extent affected by the position of the Borough respecting their sources of supply; as agricultural demands were growing the serious nature of severe restrictions could be readily appreciated. £78,500 was spent on Stage 1 of long term proposals to augment the water supply.

Water restrictions were in force in Bridgwater Borough in 1956.

The central area, comprising the Rural District and Borough of Bridgwater, was practically the centre of a watershed. The supply position was precarious; this applied to both authorities as the Rural was, to a great extent, dependent upon the Borough source. The Medical Officer reported that augmentation water could possibly be received in the northern area from the Axbridge or Burham-on-Sea mains when more water was available and the carrying capacity of the mains had been dealt with. In view of the demand on the Clatworthy source when developed, he felt there was little hope of any material quantity of water from the south or the eastern parts of the area. This district would appear to be a self-contained unit. Projects undertaken in 1956 included the Fiddington water supply, £1,900; Over Stowey Water Supply Scheme, £26,378.

An improvement in the Bridgwater area was noticeable in 1957 following the completion of the first stage of the RDC long-term proposals. Shortages experienced in the various Districts during the twelve months were fewer than the previous year. Of these the most seriously affected was Bridgwater, where industrial demands were comparatively heavy and whilst possible new sources for augmentation of supplies had been explored, it would be some time before the situation was relieved. It was found necessary to restrict supplies from 10.p.m. to 5.a.m. in the period July to November. The RDC was

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dependent for much of its water on the Bridgwater Corporation and as the latter had shortage difficulties these were spread as far as possible over the two areas.

Extensions or improvements carried out during 1958 included the provision of linking mains at Pightly, Spaxton, a new booster at Coultings, and link mains from Downend to Pawlett and Catcott main road to Kingston Inn. Planning was done on long term proposals for the Catcott extension.

A 20,000 gallon capacity elevated water tower at Ashcott was provided in 1959 at a cost of £2350. Mains were laid to serve the Woolmersdon - Rhode area, also to serve the higher levels on the Catcott - Shapwick road, the total cost of which amounted to £3,256. Approval was given for the North Petherton - Woolmersdon and Rhode water supply extension, £2,745; Pawlett - relaying of water mains, £2,400; Stockland Bristol - relaying of water mains, £1,800. In 1960 a new 6" main to augment existing supplies was laid from Puriton to East Huntspill, also a 3" main from Greinton to Greylake to replace existing service pipes. With regard to the scheme for Broomfield and Merridge a starting date was expected early in 1961. Approval was given for various schemes: Fiddington water supply, £9,820; long term proposals - first stage works - high level water tower to serve Ashcott, £2,500; Broomfield and Merridge water supply, £21,800; Pawlett, Puriton, East and West Huntspill - augmentation of water supply, £30,000; Greinton - augmentation of water supply, £3,640.

The water supply system for Broomfield and Merridge was completed in 1961, also the provision of an improved public supply for Thurloxton. In order to improve supplies in the Polden Hill area the District Council were to provide new pumping plant at the Bath Road booster station to replace the existing pump which was totally inadequate. Approval was obtained for the following schemes: Thurloxton and Shearston (North Petherton) - water mains extension, £4,525; long-term proposals- first stage works, £86,050; Pawlett, Puriton, East & West Huntspill -augmentation of water supply, £32,500.

The Broomfield and Merridge Scheme was further extended in 1962 by providing a piped supply to parts of Merridge and Spaxton. In addition an 18,000 gallons per hour pumping plant was installed at Bath Road to replace one of smaller capacity. 5" and 4"

mains were soon to be very shortly laid in the Woolavington and Chilton Polden Districts. Approval was obtained for the following schemes: Bath Road-Bridgwater Without - booster station, £810; Broomfield & Merridge - extension of water mains, £2,875; New Tynning, Catcott - extension of water mains, £803; Othery - replacement of defective mains, £717; Pawlett - augmentation of water supply, £1,280; Westonzoyland - purchase of mains from R.A.F., £1,050; Bath Road, Woolavington -extension of mains, £1,750.

Bridgwater Urban Supply and service

In 1944 additions were made to the purification system and in 1945 local extensions carried out to meet industrial, farming and housing needs. During 1946 local extensions were made to meet housing requirements. Future proposals included further extensions within the Borough at an estimated cost of £3,500. No shortages were reported. 1947 extensions were made to Sunny Bank and Rhode Lane new housing estate; Sydenham new housing estate; Park Lane, Cannington, for 250 yards to serve 2 farms and 4 houses; Kraft Factory, and Clink. Trial borings were started on the new impounding reservoir at Radlett with an estimated capacity of 500 million gallons. Works under consideration included: extension of mains at Chilton Trinity; a high level reservoir at Durlough, and improvements at the Durlough and Ashford reservoirs.

No extensions were carried out during 1948 but various works were planned: an extension from Durlough Road to Hamp Estate to improve the pressure in this district, and a high level reservoir at Spaxton to improve distribution throughout the village. Owing to the prolonged hot and dry summer of 1949 it was found necessary to curtail supplies, particularly in the months August to the end of October.

The Medical Officer commented in his report for 1950 that to meet any increase in consumption the needs could possibly be met by water from either Taunton Corporation's projected new source at Clatworthy or from the Bristol Waterworks' resources in the Cheddar Valley. In that year an 8" main was laid linking Durlough Road to Hamp to increase the pressure in the area. (This work was part of the High Level Scheme.) No new works were contemplated apart from extensions to housing estates. The supply

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had to be restricted during August. No water shortages were reported from the Bridgwater Urban and Rural areas during 1952, but in 1953 shortages were experienced during the summer. The use of hoses for washing cars and watering gardens was prohibited. It was not necessary, however to curtail the supply. Capital works carried out that year were 9" and 8" mains from the Town Bridge to Bristol Road, and 10" main Durleigh Road (part of new high level water scheme within Borough boundary). Future proposals included a new 10" trunk main and new high level reservoir in Spaxton Road (R.D.C. area) at an estimated cost of £27,176. Industrial demands were comparatively heavy and whilst possible new sources for augmentation of supplies had been explored it would be some time before the situation was relieved.

During 1958 the Bridgwater Corporation Water Order (1959) was passed into law. In order to augment the supply to the District Council's existing reservoirs during dry spells it was proposed to construct a reservoir at Hawkridge, on the Spaxton stream, with a capacity of 190 million gallons.

The Bridgwater Borough Water Order was activated in 1959. This enabled the Borough Council to reduce the compensation water required by the Bridgwater Corporation Act, 1935, to be discharged from their Durleigh Reservoir into the Durleigh Brook from 250,000 gallons per day to 100,000 gallons per day during the water shortage.

In 1960 the Borough Council made application under section 40 of the Water Act, 1945, for permission to increase the maximum rate of charges for domestic supplies, the minimum charge of 30/- per annum to be introduced with effect from the 1st January, 1960, and domestic charges to be on a basis of 4/6 in the £ on the net annual value. Supplies by meter were to be 3/6 per thousand gallons. New water mains were laid in West Street and Halesleigh Road at a total cost of £4,100. The Borough Council again made application to the Minister for an order empowering them until 31st December, 1960, to reduce compensation water discharged from their Durleigh reservoir into the Durleigh Brook to 100,000 gallons per day. The construction of trunk mains to improve pressure and distribution was carried out during 1961 and in 1962 the Hawkridge Reservoir at Spaxton with a capacity of 1,980 million gallons was brought into use. Future proposals were concerned with the provision of a 12" main from Farrington Hill to Blackmore Lane, the

estimated cost of this work which was £30,000

Urban Sewerage

The final report of the Trade Effluents Sub-Committee of the Central Advisory Water Committee contained provisions applicable to urban areas. A new effluent sewer was provided in Bridgwater Borough in 1942 and during 1944 a survey of the sewerage system was made with a view to the provision of a disposal works in Bridgwater Borough. The sewer in Bristol Road was extended in 1945 to meet industrial requirements.

Proposals under consideration in 1947 included

- a) Provision of sewage disposal works
- b) A new sewer in Quantock Road
- c) A new scheme for dealing with the effluent from the Cellophane works.

No new works or extensions of sewers were made during 1949 but it was proposed to provide a sewer from the river via Salmon Lane and Penzoy Avenue to the southern portion of the Sydenham housing estate.

No new works or extensions were carried out during 1950. Future proposals included the laying of a relief sewer to correct local surcharge in times of storm at Quantock Road and Halesleigh Road (£11,650) and the laying of a sewer at Westonzoyland Road primarily to drain the southern portion of the Sydenham housing estate (£69,000). The Somerset River Board assumed responsibility for the supervision of rivers and watercourses as from 1st April 1950.

A new sewerage and sewage disposal system at Cannington was undertaken in 1952 and in 1953 the construction of trunk sewer at Westonzoyland Road was started. The estimated cost to end of 1953 was £20,000. New works or improvements during 1956 comprised the provision of new sewers upon the extension of housing development at Sydenham estate at an estimated cost of £160,000. Work in progress in 1959 concerned the reconstruction of a sewer at Eastover, the estimated cost of which amounted to £180,000. The reconstruction of the sewer at Monmouth Street was completed in 1960 and the final estimated cost was given as £48,409. The reconstruction of the sewer at Eastover was still in progress, and the cost was given as £180,000. A sewerage system for Colley Lane at a cost of £6,460 was completed in 1961. In addition two new 21"

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diameter storm pumps were provided at the pumping station in Colley Lane.

The Council completed the reconstruction of the Eastover sewer in 1962. Future proposals concerned a scheme for Chilton Trinity - then being designed with consultants, and the provision of a storm water relief sewer in West Street upon which work was due to commence early in 1963. The Eastover scheme was part of the long-term proposals for linking existing river outfalls and pumping to a proposed sewage pumping station down river.

Rural Sewerage

Consultants surveyed the area of the Rural District in 1944 with a view to post-war needs. By 1946 proposals submitted and in preparation included the provision of sewerage and sewage disposal to the following parishes in order of priority.

	Estimated cost
Cannington	£30,500
Chedzoy	£15,500
Nether Stowey	£21,200

A scheme covering the parishes of Huntspill (East and West), Puriton, Woolavington, Cossington and Bawdrip was in preparation. A proposal to take over the R.A.F. sewage works at Westonzoyland and Middlezoy was being considered.

Circular 87/47, dated 12 May, 1947 drew attention to the policy on rural sewerage, and in that year a new sewer was laid in Woolavington Lane, Cossington, to serve existing properties and proposed development. Improvements under consideration were a) sewage disposal works at Cannington, b) sewerage and disposal works at Nether Stowey, c) sewerage and disposal works at Chedzoy. No main sewer extensions were made during 1948 except those to serve the Council's housing estates at North Petherton, Puriton and Ashcott. Future proposals included works for Cannington and the Northern group of parishes. The disposal works at Westonzoyland the Middlezoy were taken over from the Air Ministry in 1949, and the northern parishes scheme was ready for submission to the Ministry of Health.

In 1950 extensions of sewers were carried out at Chilton Polden and North Newton and a new sewage disposal works completed at Cannington. A 9" sewer was laid to connect the council houses at Cannington with the new sewage disposal works. 18in; combined

sewer at Spaxton and a 15" foul sewer at Ashcott. The Somerset River Board assumed responsibility for the supervision of rivers and watercourses as from 1st April 1950.

The Cannington sewerage works was completed in 1951 and projects planned included the West Huntspill sewerage and sewage disposal, £18,169. A start was made in 1953 on the West Huntspill section which formed part of the Northern Parishes Group Scheme. Future proposals included the extension of the Northern Parishes Group Scheme to Puriton. Works planned in 1954 included the North Petherton, Portman Estate, offsite works, £1,750; Westonzoyland sewerage and sewage disposal, £24,480. An inspection made in 1955 found the sewerage systems at Puriton, Middlezoy, Othery and Chedzoy to be unsatisfactory. In 1956 the scheme for Pawlett sewerage and sewage disposal was estimated to be £25,500.

Schemes approved in 1957 were first stage works, £14,800; Puriton sewerage, £2,430. A new pumping station at Puriton was brought into operation during 1958 and new sewers laid. Provision was made for the sewerage of Pawlett area and tenders were received. 1959 The provision of sewers and a new pumping station at Pawlett were almost completed in 1959. At Westonzoyland sewers and pumping stations were shortly to be provided. Approval was given to the Chilton Polden sewerage and sewage disposal, £27,217. The re-sewerage of the village of Westonzoyland was completed in 1960 at a cost of £39,610 and proposals were well advanced for schemes covering the parishes of Chedzoy, Chilton Polden, East Huntspill, Woolavington and Nether Stowey. Other schemes approved were Puriton sewerage (2nd stage), £23,600

Little progress was made during 1961 on schemes covering the parishes of Chedzoy, East Huntspill, Woolavington and Nether Stowey, although a Ministry investigation was held in connection with the Chilton Polden Scheme. West Huntspill Sewerage Scheme £61,287.

1962 No major works were completed in 1962 although a scheme for the re-sewerage of Cannington was in progress. Under future proposals were the provision of a sewage disposal scheme for the Parish of Chedzoy, £24,310, and the enlargement and reconstruction of works at North Petherton and Cannington. (Stage II £33,200 and final part £21,000)

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and Mill Lane £700; North Newton - proposed new sewer, £1,166; Woolavington sewerage scheme (temporary water supply) £750.

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The Final Chapter

The West Somerset Water Board came into being in 1963, taking over the responsibilities of the Bridgwater Urban and Rural concerns. In 1989, on privatisation, the Board in turn became a constituent part of Wessex Water. Plc.

Ashford works was upgraded as a state-of-the-art water treatment plant, and the old engine house formed the basis an education centre, where children and others might learn about the ecology, chemistry, geology and the history of the local water supply. The research to inform the design of the historical displays was undertaken by the writer in 1992-1994, and the results of the investigation written up in the narrative form published here. The investigation of the geology and ecology was undertaken by Mr Derek Briggs of North Petherton, artwork for the displays was undertaken by the late Mr Colin O'Hare of Huntworth and the design of the building conversion, as well as the exhibition, by the architects, Messrs Ferguson Mann, of Bristol. Mr John Willows was link with Wessex Water plc. The research notes for the investigation are held at Wessex Water's historical archive at Sutton Potntz, near Weymouth.