



history 4u

Jottings 2

Jacobs Well - Historic Background

Early accounts of Bristol's history tell of the bridge path leading Pilgrims and travellers from the Augustinian Monastery, just outside the town of Bristol, to the Monastery College at Westbury-on-Trym.

A path led from St Augustine Abbey across the slopes of Brandon Hill, crowned by the Chapel dedicated to St Brendan, down into the steep sided valley of the Sandbrook, which it crossed before rising through the equally steep slopes of Clifton Wood. Passing through the Manor of Clifton, the traveller would have at last reached the plateau of the Downs, high above the river Avon, even high enough for the traveller to see a gleam where the river joined the distant Severn Sea. From there the path continued off the far side of the plateau and down to Westbury.

Our interest in this journey lies in its first part - the bridge path that spiralled around the hill of St Brandon before leading down the steep sided valley where the silver rill of the Sandbrook flowed down to a creek on the bank of the Avon.

Through the millennia, before travellers embarked on the next part of their journey - the steep climb to Clifton - they had been able to break their journey amongst the picturesque openings and glades and refresh themselves at the springs gushing from the rocks on either side of the path.

In those ancient times it is likely that, owing to the Sandbrook's relative seclusion, the sites of these springs were known only to Clifton's manorial tenants and travellers or pilgrims passing between the monastic houses. It is also likely that, in those early days, sailors would have come to the small creek to refill their water barrels from the sparkling stream before setting off once more on their voyages of exploration. Centuries later Admiral Lord Nelson was reputed to insist on always having a supply of 'Bristol Water' on board for his personal use.

This sylvan scene was probably unchanged until shortly after the Norman Conquest, when Geoffrey of

Coutances and St. Lô chose Bristol as his west-country power-base, building a Motte and Bailey castle on the site of Bristol's Saxon fortifications. Geoffrey's undertaking was destined to become one of the largest Castles in the new Kingdom, known as "The Flower of English Keeps". It was rebuilt by Robert Earl of Gloucester, an enterprise which required significant expenditure. To help with this the Norman conquerors bought with them their own Jewish financiers. Thus it was that in about 1100 Bristol became home to a small but gradually increasing group of Jews who established themselves in the area just outside the walls between Broad and Small streets.

In accordance with their religion and customs the Jews needed a secluded hillside for a separate cemetery together with two sources of water, one for the washing of their dead and the other for their purification rituals. The spring and the chamber for preparing the dead for burial - known as the 'Tohorah' - needed to be close to the cemetery. Members of the 'Chevra Kahdisha' from within the Jewish community carried out the preparation of the dead. The Mishnah, a first or second century compilation of Jewish practice, set out the requirements and operation of the 'Mikveh' - the purification bath. A Mikveh could utilise either still or flowing water but the rules for construction and use were different and thus the distinction had to be clearly marked.

Although we do not know who first drew the attention of the Bristol Jews to this site and directed their footsteps to the valley of the Sandbrook, we can imagine their pleasure at finding such an ideal location - a secluded hillside away from the busy town and the eyes of the townspeople but a little more than a mile from their new Jewry. Directly opposite their proposed cemetery an unadopted spring gushed forth from a crevice in the rocks which could be enlarged to form a Tohorah.

Following the path alongside the sandy brook down the valley, they came down to the point where the water from the springs beside the slope of the path to Clifton flowed into the Sandbrook. Noticing that another of these springs also emerged from a small chamber in the rock

and flowed into the main brook they realised that this would be suitable for a 'Mikveh'. The water from this spring flowed downhill before joining the main brook and would not therefore be contaminated by the water from the Tahara. Because their small community predominately comprised businessmen and not artisans, they probably enlisted the help of local stonemasons to enlarge the natural spring chamber to meet the requirements of a Mikveh.

After completing the work on the spring the final addition would have been a notice "SACHOLIM", advising their brethren that it was a Mikveh with flowing water and to use it in accordance with the appropriate rules. Fortunately for posterity the important word was deeply carved into the massive lintel stone above the Mikveh chamber, where it remains today undiminished by the passage of time.



The massive lintel stone at the head of the 'Jacob's Well' spring showing the only pre-expulsion Hebrew 'Mikveh' inscription discovered in England © TLHG May 1987

People have often asked if the spring occupied a significant place in Bristol's pre-history. The answer is "probably not", for the following reason: the Jewish community would not have appropriated springs already identified as Christian Holy Wells and, in accordance with Pope Gregory's letter to St Augustine, all pagan places of worship or veneration were not to be destroyed

but were to be kept and overlaid by the Christian faith. A probable example of the conversion of a pagan holy place to the cause of Christianity is the healing well dedicated to St Anne's at Brislington on the south-east side of Bristol. A famous chapel was built at this site to receive the pilgrims.

Even nearer to hand, in 1174 William Earl of Gloucester gave the summit of Brandon Hill to the Priory of St James. On this summit, called Mutton Tump, a chapel was dedicated to St Brendan; this may or may not also have been a conversion from an earlier pagan site. In 1480 William Worcester in his description of Bristol recounted that the community of the Priory of St James said that the hill "... resembled that of Calvary at Jerusalem".

With two possible examples of local sites converted to Christian use, one within sight of both the Augustinian Abbey and the Sandbrook, it is unlikely that this spring running into that same brook would have been overlooked by the church authorities if it had a Pagan significance. This supposition is supported by the fact that the earliest known named references to the Mikveh Spring refer to it as the 'Jacob's Well'.

When the Jewish community adopted the spring that we now know as the 'Jacob's Well' for their own use, it is likely that the other spring, the 'Garden Spring', on the opposite side of the same path, continued to be used by travellers. There the situation would probably have remained if it hadn't been for the expulsion of the Jews in 1290, after which the spring water once more ran free down to the river Avon.

The departure of the Jews coincided with the Augustinian Abbey needing ever more water, both for their monastic establishment, and for their secular neighbours. They followed the example of the Carmelite Friars, who in 1267 decided to have water piped to the friary from their springs on the opposite side of Brandon Hill (a full account of which was published in Temple Local History Group's book, 'An Account of St John's ~ [one of] Bristol's Medieval Water System[s]'). Thus it was that the Dean and Chapter of the Abbey were allowed to take a pipe from the springs of the Sandbrook across the slopes of Brandon hill to their abbey precincts. It was the existence of a 19th century hand pump, uncovered during building redevelopment in 1987, that drew the attention of knowledgeable members of Temple Local History Group to the site.



Close-up view of the 19th century hand pump that first attracted TLHG to the rebuilding work at Jacob's Wells Road
© TLHG January 1987

The Group's idea that this water source could be connected with the 'Jacob's Well' was confirmed when



The entrance to the spring at 'Jacob's Well' when it was first cleared, directly behind the wheelbarrow. Now the hand pump has been removed the head of an arch can be seen at the floor level
© TLHG March 1987

the site was cleared and the spring opening was uncovered.

An idea of the flow from these springs can be gained by reference to a Lead Blowing Mill at Woodwell Lake on the Sandbrook. This reference was contained in the account of the first major perambulation of the bounds of Bristol in 1373. The perambulation was to define the boundaries, and confirm the placing of stones and markers in support of the Royal Charter signed at Woodstock on the 8th of August 1373 granting Bristol county status.

This vignette of the history and development of the area known today as the Jacobs Wells has only been possible due to the research efforts of those acknowledged in the main report, "Historical study of the area known as Jacob's Wells, Clifton, Bristol England, from pre-expulsion to modern times" under ISBN 0 951 0068 9 4 & Bristol City Council Archives Ref BRO. 41252 [Commercial access restricted to copyright holder], which quantifies the research that led to this understanding.

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