

A History of Epping Drinking Fountain

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1905-20
Epping Forest District Museum



1989
Ray Aspinall Studios, Harlow

Look at any photograph of old Epping Town centre and you will see a broad High Street almost entirely clear of traffic and with Epping's drinking fountain dominating the foreground.

Today's paper boys, early morning dog walkers and insomniacs, out and about before the B1393 traffic builds up, see an almost identical view, perhaps leading some of them to think, 'Nothing much has changed in Epping over the past century'. They would be wrong. People living here between 1961 and 1988 will remember a High Street totally devoid of any drinking fountain.

What is the fountain's History? Why was it erected? Where and when did it disappear? How did it return?

1887 was a momentous year. England was at the height of her power. Queen Victoria had been on the throne for fifty years and Epping was a thriving market town, serving the needs of its own 4000 inhabitants and those of the surrounding villages and farms. "Public spiritedness" was the noble attitude during that period. What could the good townfolk of Epping do to commemorate their Queens Golden Jubilee?

Doubtless suggestions were put forward and rejected, discussions held sway in households and public houses, argument raged in committees and councillors promoted schemes bringing despair to their officers.

Eventually the proposal to erect a drinking fountain found favour. Passers by could slake their thirst on a hot summer's day. Carter's horses returning from carrying hay and corn to London would welcome a drink after the long haul through the forest. Even dogs were remembered with a small overflow bowl at just the right height.

Invitations for plans from experts in construction of stone monuments eventually produced the pattern of the fountain to be, with pink granite, the chosen material for the body. Above the main body, an elegant column supported two lights. The whole fountain was built on a low plinth with four small bollards marking the boundary. On one polished face, the inscription was picked out with leaded lettering.

The monies required to finance this fine edifice were raised by public subscription. The great and the good, the rich and the poor, all were invited to contribute, and their generosity was acknowledged on the fountain.

Thus it was, in fervour of civic pride, that Epping's drinking fountain became a landmark, which stood undisturbed for the next seventy years.

Progress is universal and inevitable, even if not entirely welcome. Gradually, Epping High Street changed. Shops replaced many private houses; cars and lorries replaced horses and carts. The cattle market dwindled and, late in 1950's, transferred to Chelmsford.

In 1961 Epping Urban District Council took a long hard look at the town's major artery and decided, "The High Street needs redeveloping. The car is king. Our commercial survival demands improved parking. Away with the cattle pens – and while we are at it, lets dispose of the fountain. It has no further use. It is an eyesore. IT MUST GO!!" – and it went.

Not everyone was in favour. Older residents missed the fountain. Councillor George Padfield gave voice to their feelings. "Removal of the fountain was the worst insult of their development scheme" he fulminated.

All the protests were to no avail. A new catchword typified the 1960's – "progress". Out with the old in with the new. The fountain was dismantled and trundled unceremoniously down Cottis' Lane to join spoil from the ironworks as landfill at the rear of the Old Baptist Church.

There the fountain remained for the next 27 years. Rubble covered it completely and its precise resting place was forgotten. Epping grew and a generation grew up not even aware of the fountain's existence. Sparks of interest still glimmered here and there. In 1978, builders working on the Old Baptist Church site in St Johns Road tried to pinpoint the fountain's site from the top of a tall crane but no sign remained after so many years. There, for a further 8 years, the matter rested.

My wife Ann, a member of Epping Forest District Council had heard of the buried fountain; and its whereabouts caught her interest. In 1986 she started to devote some of her energy into searching for the missing monument. At her request, trial holes were dug into the site, which, by this time had become the town's long stay car and lorry park. No sign of the missing fountain emerged. Next stage was a quizzing of a number of Epping's "greybeards" who had witnessed the dismantling and dumping of the unwanted memorial. Every person recalled the 'spot' exactly. Every given position differed from all the others – and they were all wrong.

Technology more accurate than failing memories was required. A noted water diviner was called to the scene. Up and down the car park he tramped marking each spot where his rod had given a hopeful twitch. Despite his reputation the diviner had no more success than his grizzled predecessors.

Would the lorry park ever reveal its secret? In 1987 Ann became Vice-Chairman of the Council. This may have increased her influence because, in July, Structure Testing Services brought their 'state of the art' magnetic field tester from Southampton. Surely this would solve the mystery. Up and down the site magnetic impulses probed the ground and bounced back to trigger a print out from their echoes. Result – "too much clutter" from all the underground foundry spoil. The lorry park was still winning and plans were afoot to asphalt the area to create a new long stay car park. The fountain's fate started to look rather grim, and the spirits of the searchers flagged noticeably.

During February 1988 the asphaltting contractors arrived on site. The re-surfacing deadline was set for 26th February. In a last ditch effort to recover the fountain, Ann prevailed on the contractors to excavate trenches across the area. On 25th February, in the afternoon, an excavator bucket hit something solid. Driver, Stan Harris, jumped down to investigate and saw the pink granite of the fountain's main section looking remarkably unscathed by its 27 years underground. Within minutes the remainder came to light. The search was over.

The fountain's sections were carefully lifted and taken to a storage area where skilled stonemasons and lighting experts could restore the fountain to its original glory: a process which took a full year. By April 1989 the fountain was ready to take pride of place in Epping's enhancement scheme. On 20th April, almost 102 years after it was first erected, Ann, then Chairman of Epping Forest District Council, unveiled the restored fountain. Canon Anthony Abbey, the then vicar of St Johns Church, blessed the fountain at brief service. Two of Epping's oldest inhabitants, Harry Speller and Alfred Wood, switched on the lights and turned on the water. Epping's drinking fountain was functional once again right down to the horse trough and the dog bowl. Ann presented Harry and Alf with pewter mugs to commemorate the occasion. Both lost no time in testing the water and both proclaimed it 'admirable'. Less enthusiastic was Councillor Aldworth's Airedale "Toby". He wanted nothing to do with the water in the dog bowl.

Today the fountain is dry. The risk of it harbouring the Legionella virus is too high to ignore and the cost of constant decontamination would be exorbitant so the water supply has been turned off.

Today Ann says: "In common with so many Council achievements, rediscovering and restoring the drinking fountain was an example of teamwork. Without the support of Epping Forest District officers between 1986 and 1989, none of this would have happened. Particular credit is owed to the Engineers Department together with the Planning Department who supported the search throughout. Had it not been for their tenacious and determined efforts this much loved monument would still be lying beneath the tarmac of the car park.

Every time I walk past the fountain, I am reminded of these events. Of all the occasions during my year as Chairman of EFDC, the recovery and reinstatement of Epping's drinking fountain gives me the greatest pleasure. The fountain's return to its rightful place is a reminder of our town's rich heritage. Those who stop and read the inscription carved into its pedestal will be reminded of this extraordinary story.

" That which was lost is found"

I am delighted that this Epping Landmark, which had been dismantled and discarded, is now to be refurbished once again. It is fitting that this will coincide with our Queen's 80th birthday celebrations as it was for another Queen's anniversary that the townspeople of Epping had proudly contributed to its erection.

I was always very conscience of the fountain's heritage value. I remember that my enthusiasm for sponsoring the search was given urgency by knowledge of the car park's planned development and by the fact that EFDC were about to embark on an upgrade of the High Street for which a budget had been set aside. Some of this was utilised for the refurbishment and reinstatement of the fountain.

Once again the Epping Forest District Council has demonstrated its care and concern for our heritage. It will be a reminder that Civic pride still has a place in our community."