

# Foxtan Softwell and Pump

17th & 18th Century documents describe Foxtton as being a '*Ring Town*' due to the village settlement having a surrounding '*back lane*' and maps show this to have remained pretty much complete on both sides of the village until the middle of the 19th Century.

Although clearly shown on late 18th and early 19th Century maps, by the time of the 1886 O.S. Map the '*back lane*' on the eastern side, approached by what became known as Soft Well Lane, had fallen into disuse and only parts remained as footpaths and bridleways.

An early mention of what became known locally as 'The Foxton Soft Well' and then 'The Foxton Soft Well Pump' appears under the entry for Foxton (in Gartree Hundred) in White's Directory for Leicestershire of 1863 which records:-

*'In and near the village are many lofty trees and prolific orchards and a little to the east is a copious spring of pure soft water'*



Alfred Percy Carryer, nephew of the Minister at the Foxton Baptist Chapel in the 1860's, spent his childhood at the Manse in Foxton and left an unpublished '*Memoir of Village Life*' at that time. In this he mentions that around 1865 the villagers in the upper portion of the village still

obtained their drinking water from a well just below the church graveyard but that this was badly polluted. However he records that there was another well in Foxton called '*the Softwell*' and that he believed this supplied '*good drinking water*' and that villagers using this well '*had to fetch it by yoke and bucket*'.



By the time the 1886 Ordnance Survey Map of Foxton was prepared a Pump had been installed at the Soft Well and is marked on the map accordingly. This pump was also no doubt installed under the auspices of the Parish Vestry (forerunner of the Parish Council) as they had provided the well which would feed the pump and this was situated on the verge of what remained of the original 'back lane', or public highway, on that side of the village.

From a note in the Market Harborough Advertiser Newspaper published in early 1945, a controversy had arisen over the site for a planned new cemetery in Foxton due to fears that this might cause pollution of the soft-water spring



which supplied much of the village. The note states that this spring fed several wells in the village and that early in the 19<sup>th</sup> Century there had been a well in an orchard near the ancestral home of

the Sprigg's Family (later to be rebuilt as Dale cottage) which the owner allowed the villagers to use.

However

*'the demand was so large that a meeting of the Parish Vestry was called and the present Soft Well was sunk and the ancient road which came out at Mr. Bootheway's Farm was closed. Soft Well Lane was called Feathered Lane and there were some good class houses there.'*

(This note agrees with the early maps of Foxton which depict properties on what became known as Soft Well Lane.)

Because the water was soft and clear it was used by villagers for drinking and also by the many small laundries established in Foxton at the end of the 19th Century, in order to cater for the 'well to do' Hunting Parties who rented some of the more substantial village properties during the fox hunting season.



By the time of the Rating Assessment carried out in 1914, under Lloyd George's Old Age Pensions Act, a section of the closed former old back lane adjacent to the Softwell Pump had been acquired as a *'very poor piece of boggy garden ground'* by Harry Marvell, Derek Lewin's Grandfather, which he let to another villager, Mr Tilley, as an allotment garden for 10/- (50p) a year. Mr Marvell was able to obtain a reduction on his rates because there was still a footpath over his land. This footpath followed the line of the old back lane and originally came out by Schofield's Farm.

The Soft Well Pump remained in use until the end of the Second World War and the water supply was also used by visitors to the village who camped or had caravans in the adjacent fields, and also by the local Scout Group.

Photographs exist of a small boy filling a bucket from the original pump at some time early in the 20th Century and of a group of villagers and children fetching water from the Soft Well in the 1940's.

By early 1944 the Soft Well Pump was only working with difficulty and the following press report of a Market Harborough Rural District Council Meeting held on Tuesday 9th May, 1944 states:-

*'FOXTON WATER A letter was received on behalf of several residents of Foxton requesting that the soft water well pump should be put in repair in view of the present shortage of rainfall. The Acting Sanitary Inspector reported that he had already given the order for the pump to be repaired.'*

However, if they were carried out at all, these repairs didn't keep the pump working for long as around this time the pump was dismantled and the well capped. Only the brickwork and grating of the pump drain eventually remained and the vestiges of the Soft Well and its Pump gradually disappeared into the undergrowth.

Since the wartime airfield had been provided with a mains water supply, agitation commenced at the end of the war for the village to be connected to this supply and eventually, after much

procrastination, this was carried out around 1947.



Aerial View of the Airfield

In due course local historian Derek Lewin inherited his Grandfather's allotment garden, adjacent to the former pump, and although no longer living in the village he gradually turned the property, which also contained a small pond, into a nature reserve for local wildlife, indigenous trees and wild flowers. Having childhood memories of the Soft Well Pump in action, whilst he was growing up in Foxton during the war, Derek suggested to the Foxton Society, formed in the 1990s, that it should be restored.

A village project to restore the Soft Well Pump was begun around the Millennium and although the necessary replica pump and other materials were obtained funding remained a problem for many years.

In 2017 a Tesco 'Bags of Help' Award was obtained which enable further work to be carried out on Derek Lewin's 'Soft Well Garden' nature reserve, which he intended to bequeath to the village, and thanks to Bernard Rice the pump restoration project eventually became incorporated within this funding.

The Tesco logo consists of the word "TESCO" in a bold, red, sans-serif font. Below the letters, there are three horizontal blue lines of varying lengths, creating a stylized representation of a shopping basket.

Bags of Help

Not long after the Millennium the local Highways Authority had carried out drainage works on the site in connection with the adjacent Bridle Way and had installed a suitable base by the capped well for eventual installation of a replica pump. A replica of the original pump drain was constructed on this base and a replica of the former pump constructed using the materials obtained previously, all the work being carried out by Local Volunteers.

In 2017 the replica Soft Well Pump was finally successfully remounted and can be seen by users of the Soft Well Lane footpath and bridle way. Very sadly Derek Lewin died in 2016 before the project's completion but the garden and pump stand as a fitting tribute to his memory.

Under the terms of Derek's will the Soft Well Garden site has been bequeathed to the village, as has the former Foxton Baptist Chapel Graveyard which also belonged to him, and together with the Replica Pump they have become Foxton Parish Council property. It is hoped that they will remain attractive parts of Foxton's Heritage for many years to come.

Volunteers to help in the upkeep of these assets are always welcome and should contact a member of the Parish Council accordingly.

Please contact Adele Rogers on 01858540348 or email [Adelerogers59@gmail.com](mailto:Adelerogers59@gmail.com) if you would like to get involved with the upkeep of the Soft Well Lane nature reserve.