

A Water Wonderland

Current discussions in the media include trading relations with mainland Europe, and the problems of plastic water bottles. As imports of water from France and Italy contribute to our adverse balance of trade with the continent, perhaps there is some connection. Excessive executive pay is also under discussion.

Bottled water has become a sort of modern luxury and convenience just at a time when piped water quality is better than ever. Indeed, within living memory, clean piped water was once also a modern luxury in rural areas such as Bicton. The community once had to rely on shallow wells dug into the thick glacial deposits, while reliable supplies from the underlying sandstone could only be reached by deeper wells. One at the Four Crosses, for instance, was over 150ft deep and others nearby were similar. In these circumstances, several households would share a pump, filling their pails to carry home.

In nearby Shrewsbury, there is a longer story of public supplies pumped from the river at the English Bridge, or arriving down a long pipe from springs in Cruckmeole. In 1854, a new waterworks was built on Chester Street, where cleaner river water upstream of town pollution was pumped up into the town. Eventually, in the 1930s, all this was replaced by a new works at Shelton where a water tower on this high point could distribute supplies by gravity around the expanding suburbs. At first, water was extracted directly from the river, but more recently it is drawn from adjacent boreholes, where the glacial sands can act as an additional filter.

New houses in the town could be connected to the supplies but those in the surrounding countryside had to wait a little longer. Dorothy Lewis, growing up at Milnsbridge, off Shepherds Lane in the early thirties, still remembers visiting a friend in Shrewsbury where she could enjoy the novelty of 'pulling a chain'.

While Shelton served the town, the rural areas, including Bicton, were connected to new boreholes at Ford and Eyton. These extracted clean water from sandstone under the glacial deposits and therefore contained dissolved minerals which helped to fur up kettles and boilers, if not softened.

In more recent years, the county's systems have been reorganised, so that Bicton is now supplied from Shelton, resulting in much cleaner kettles, thanks to the soft water originating from the river.

This year, the Government in their wisdom, has been promoting some variations to the now 'privatised' water companies. Severn Trent and United Utilities (each reported to have the highest paid chiefs in the industry) have combined to create a new company to handle their 'retail' market to 'commercial' customers. This company, 'Water Plus' will introduce 'new systems and tools' (bigger spanners?) to make sure that dealing with water is effortless. It will continue with the Severn Trent 'branding' although businesses will now be able to select their own supplier, similar to the energy trade. Because the market has opened for competition this company will be able to offer

the customer a choice of 'price and products', but even if they would prefer soft Welsh water or hard Anglian water, they will still get the same local stuff down the same old pipes! Only the bills will come from a different address. ***All this would be starting on April 1st.....***

Meanwhile, more conventional retail customer choice has already been developed by the bottled water trade. One company is even sponsoring the Shrewsbury Town football team now and boasts successful exports.

Sources are generally natural springs or shallow boreholes and therefore continue the traditions of mineral waters taken for health at numerous 'spas' across Europe. Many had a revolting taste of iron or sulphur, but were considered good medicine at a time when domestic supplies could be a health hazard. The modern versions have milder tastes and have been able to reach wider markets in first glass and now plastic bottles.

Limestone formations produce the best springs, which are also rich in calcium, while fissured volcanic rocks yield water richer in sodium and potassium. Some sources pumped from sands and gravels can boast mineral-free purity. By law the mineral content must be displayed on each bottle and these can give clues to the type of geological background. Customers seldom read these closely however, preferring their own sense of taste, or succumb to marketing hype or just accept what is on offer.

Critics of the trade point out that many continental brands can be matched by British supplies, so that long distance "diesel-hauled" imports are quite unnecessary. How many customers at our local Co-op actually realise how far that Volvic or Evian have travelled to reach the shelf?

Shropshire and the Welsh borderland can boast a varied geology and water derived from it so if you must buy bottled water, look to local sources at Church Stoke or Wenlock for your Volvic or Evian taste. Also remember, as one poet said, "*The water in this bottle has minerals good for you but the chemicals in the plastic may change your gender too*".

Sources of Bottled Spring Water in our Shops

and their associated geology

