The Waters of Epsom Spa

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The therapeutic properties of natural mineral waters, for bathing and for drinking, were recognised by the ancient Egyptians, the Greeks and the Romans. The early Christian church believed in the healing properties of the waters taken from holy springs and wells, a belief that declined after the Reformation. Nevertheless, the sixteenth century saw a revival of interest, partly stimulated by the teachings of Paracelsus (1493-1541), such that in 1553 the collective work on balneology De Balneis was able to quote 70 authorities (including Galen, Averroes and Maimonides) and to list 200 watering-places[1-3].

Spa is a town in Belgium, south-east of Liége in the wooded hills of the Ardennes, and its local mineral springs were known to the Romans, who called them pouhons. In 1326 they were rediscovered, and from the sixteenth century Spa was increasingly frequented, the zenith of its fame being reached in the eighteenth century, when it was visited by European royalty. Spa gave its name to other watering-places in Europe, and in England was referred to by the upper classes as 'The Spaw'.

The first English books on balneology were written by the Dean of Wells, William Turner (1568)[4] and by John Jones (1572)[5]. They were able to recommend the warm mineral waters of Bath and Buxton for the treatment of rheumatism, skin diseases and infertility, but at that time the waters were not taken internally. Although Lord North discovered the waters at Tunbridge in 1605, it was Epsom that became the first town in England to be developed as a spa for the drinking of purgative waters for medicinal purposes.

The Rise of Epsom Spa

The medicinal properties of the Epsom waters may first have been observed in Queen Elizabeth's time but, according to Fuller's 'Worthies', it was in 1618 that Henry Wicker, a local farmer, discovered the Epsom well at Flowerdale on Epsom Common, a half-mile west of Epsom village[6] (Fig. 1). He noticed during the dry summer that a hoof-print in the field remained full of water. He enlarged the depression for the purpose of watering his cattle, but they refused to drink. A 12-foot well was then dug, and the waters from it came to be applied externally for skin diseases as an abstersive.

Fig. 1. Ordnance survey map 1867, showing the sites of the Old and New Epsom Wells. (Courtesy the Surrey Record Office.)
(cleanser) and as a vulnerary (ointment) and were found to be useful for healing skin ulcers. Later, in 1630, it was noted that, taken orally, the waters had a purgative effect. The news of this reached the ears of some London physicians, who visited Epsom, confirmed the findings and began to send their patients to Epsom for the cure. The well was pleasantly situated on the edge of the Downs, and the lord of the manor had a wall built around the well and a shed erected to shelter the sick. Epsom now became increasingly frequented by visitors from London, who made the 15-mile journey by coach and horses[7].

In 1645 Lord North claimed that the Epsom waters were 'first made known by him to the citizens of London and the King’s people, the journey to the Spaw being too expensive and inconvenient to sick persons, and great sums being thereby carried out of the Kingdom'[8]. This was, of course, a reference to the original Spa in Belgium. The earliest written description of the Epsom well was by Abram Booth (1629), who travelled on behalf of the Dutch East India Company. He wrote: 'People coming there took a few glasses of the mentioned water—which has a taste different from ordinary water—after which, walking up and down, these had in our opinion very good effect'[9]. By 1640 the fame of the Epsom well had spread to Europe and many distinguished persons came to drink the waters. The accommodation and amenities of Epsom were improved to receive these visitors, and by 1648 there was the additional local attraction of horse-racing on the Downs (although it was not until 1780 that the annual Derby horse race was founded).

John Aubrey visited Epsom in 1654. He drank the waters and carried out some experiments, boiling the well waters, which left 'a sediment of flakey Stuff, of colour of Baysalt in loose flakes—as much as filled a Tobacco Box. I gave it to old Dr W. Harvey, who thought it to be a sort of Nitre; but he spoke at Random. I admire our Physicians, and Virtuoso’s here have not been more curious in experiments of it’[10]. In 1670 the diarist John Evelyn came to Epsom for the funeral of his brother, Richard Evelyn, the lord of the manor, who had suffered from bladder-stone, and Evelyn considered that it was caused 'perhaps by his drinking excessively of Epsom water when in full health and that he had no need of them'[11]. Samuel Pepys paid two visits to Epsom. On 25th July 1663 (Lords Day) he found the spa full of people. 'But, Lord! to see how many I met there of citizens that I could not have thought to have seen there; that they ever had it in their heads or purses to go down thither.' There was no accommodation in the town, and Pepys was forced to stay the night in nearby Ashtead, 'in a little house we could not stand upright in.' On the following day, he found it 'very pleasant to see how they are there in the morning to drink the waters.' Pepys’s second visit was on 14th July 1667, when he ‘took horse to Epsom . . . By eight o'clock to the well, where much Company. And to the town, to the King’s Head, and hear that my Lord Buckhurst and Nelly are lodged at the next house and Sir Charles Sedley with them, and keep a merry house. Poor girl! I pity her’[12]. Nelly was, of course, Nell Gwynne, the companion of Charles II, who held court at Epsom. The site of the King’s Head is now the entrance to a shopping precinct, and the 'next house', formerly Nell Gwynne’s cafe, is now a jeweller’s shop.

A wash drawing by the Dutch artist, Willem Schellinks in 1662 (now in the National Bibliothek, Vienna) provides a pictorial record of the Epsom wells, and life at the spa at that time is further illustrated by the ballad, ‘Merry Newes from Epsom Wells’ (1663); the rather indifferent play Epsom Wells (1672) by Thomas Shadwell who mentions ‘the impertinent ill-bred City wives’ who flocked to the well on the downs; as well as the bawdy description in the broadsheet Flōs Ingenii (1674). On 19th June 1684, the London Gazette announced: ‘The post will go every day to and fro betwixt London and Epsom during the season [May, June and July] for drinking the waters’[13]. This was the earliest daily stage-coach outside London. By 1707, the buildings at the well had been enlarged by the lord of the manor, John Parkhurst, and assembly rooms were built, containing a ballroom 70 feet long. The ground around the well was encircled by a brick wall and avenues of elms and limes were planted nearby[6,14].

During this period, other English spas were also developing, some rivalling the attractions of Epsom. Chief among them were Tunbridge Wells[15] and, later, Cheltenham and Bath. Epsom had the advantage over Tunbridge of being nearer to London, but the chalybeate waters of Tunbridge were reputed to help gout and the stone, diseases of the rich, who therefore were drawn there. The rivalry between Epsom and Tunbridge may be seen in Malcolm’s Ballad:

When fashion resolved to raise Epsom to fame,
Poor Tunbridge did nought; but the blind or the lame
Or the sick, or the healthy, ’twas equally one,
By Epsom’s assistance their business was done [7].

And similarly between Epsom and Cheltenham spas, in the following epitaph:

Here I lies with my two daughters,
All through drinking Cheltenham waters;
If only We’d stuck to Epsom salts
We should’n t be lying in these here vaults[16].

Dr Nehemiah Grew and Epsom Salts

The purgative action of the Epsom waters soon led to a demand for the dried salts obtained by evaporation of the waters from the well. Some early chemical analyses were carried out by Robert Boyle (1685) who sought 'for what salt the Purgative vertue that is found to help them at Epsom . . . do's proceed'[17].

The man whose name is most closely associated with Epsom Salts is Dr Nehemiah Grew (1641-1712) (Fig. 2). He was born in Coventry, attended Cambridge University, and in 1671 qualified in medicine at Leyden, with an MD dissertation, ‘Disputatio medico-physica de Liquore Nervoso’. He practised as a physician in London and became FRCP in 1680. His major interest, however, was in botany, and in 1682 he published his magnum opus, Anatomy of Plants, which made the first observations on sexual reproduction in plants. He became FRS in 1671, and was Secretary of the Royal Society (then at Gresham
prescribed and taken as a General Medicine in our Kingdome'. The salts were sold in London by apothecaries at five shillings an ounce, and were also exported abroad.

A number of Grew's friends in the Royal College of Physicians and the Royal Society published works in his support—Benjamin Allen (1699)[23] and Josia Peter (1710)[24], the latter including a plea by Sir Christopher Wren. The Moults tried to resist but were reprimanded by the Lord Chancellor.

Later writings on Epsom Salts by John Brown (1723)[25] described how the salts were being extracted from sea water (at Newcastle and Portsmouth), and further experiments on the salts were carried out by Stephen Hales (1751)[26] and William Saunders (1805)[27].

**Epsom Spa in its Heyday**

Towards the end of the seventeenth century, Epsom was established as one of the foremost spas in Europe, but the old well now presented problems; it occasionally ran out of water and it was a half mile from the village of Epsom where the social activities were centred.

In 1690, John Livingston, an apothecary, settled in Epsom. His practice prospered and in 1701 he purchased from Sir John Parsons land in the centre of the town, between the old manor house and the Magpie Inn, in the area known as Shoulder of Mutton Close, situated at the west end of the present High Street. In 1706 he erected a large house with assembly rooms for music and dancing, other rooms for gaming, and shops for milliners and jewelers; he planted a grove and laid down a bowling green[28,29]. More important, there was already a well, Symonds Well (1696), on the site, but Livingston sank another well, erected a pump and had a pipe conducting the waters to the assembly room, where the waters were drunk. This came to be known as the New Wells, and the opening day was Easter Monday 1707. Nothing was charged for the waters, but the venture was paid for by the sales in the shops and by the various social activities.

By 1708 an active social programme was in full swing—Epsom was 'the Bright limestone [Brighton] of its day'[14]. New inns were built, the New Tavern being the largest in England at that time. Numbered Hackney coaches and sedan chairs moved to and fro. There were public breakfasts, and music and dancing every evening. In addition, there were sporting activities such as foot racing, wrestling and cock-fighting[30].

'The Company' was lured from the Old Well to the New Wells. John Toland (1711) wrote: 'The Old Well, at half a mile's distance from the town, used formally to be the meeting place in the forenoon, but are not at present so much in vogue; the mineral waters (it is said) being found as good within the village, and all diversions in greater perfection'[31]. The spa was visited by the nobility, and Queen Anne and Prince George of Denmark came to Epsom to take the waters, while the ladies of the Court attended the balls.

The spirit of the time is well conveyed in the writings of several literary figures who visited the spa. Celia Fiennes...
(1662-1741), that remarkable eighteenth-century diarist, wrote in her Journies (1711)[32] of the spas having replaced the medieval pilgrimages as an excuse for a holiday. With the growth of wealth and excessive leisure among the upper classes, the resultant enui and hypochondria needed ‘a cure at the Spaw’. Celia Fiennes classified the spas by social class: Tunbridge was more Royal, Epsom predominantly middle-class, Hampstead and Dulwich for the poor. The licentiousness she discovered at Epsom Spa led her to describe it as ‘the palace of Venus’.

A visit in 1710 by a German traveller, Von Uffenbach, is of interest. He found the town very busy on account of horse racing. He visited the Old Well and found the water being drunk from ‘small nasty stoneware jugs’, three pints at a time, three days in succession. The resultant vomiting and purging were very exhausting. He then visited the New Wells in the town: ‘The well tastes much like the other’, he wrote[33].

Decline of Epsom Spa

By 1715 it was evident that the water of the New Wells was not as effective a purge as that of the Old Well, and the reputation of both declined. Nevertheless, John Livingston was very resourceful and was not put out by this development. In 1715 he purchased the lease of the Old Well and promptly locked it up, and so it remained until his death in 1727. The visitors therefore had no alternative but to drink at the New Wells in the village, and were no longer able to compare the two waters. Many have later written of Livingston as being something of a knave, but there can be little doubt that he contributed a great deal to the success of Epsom Spa in its heyday[14]. In the next few years the popularity of the Spa declined further, although in 1720, with the boom of the South Sea Bubble, there was a temporary revival. In 1724 Daniel Defoe confirmed the lessened interest in Epsom Spa as ‘very much frequented a few years ago, on account of mineral waters. But its reputation now flagged...’ Too near London for a Journey for the Quality and Gentry, according to the old saying: ‘Far fetched and dear-bought is fittest for the Ladies’. There is still one house on the spot where a countryman and his wife carry water in bottles to adjacent places. The town, however, begins to be resorted to in the Summer by People of Fortune; and may perhaps in the Revolution of Vogue and Fash- 
"ion, or Whimsey, be one day, once more, a Shewing or Market-place for the Sex, especially as the new Bridge at Westminster is now finished which will induce the Gentry at the end of the Town to pass over into Surrey, as they may do so without going thro’ the whole length, and dirty, or half-paved rattling streets of London’[34].

Following the death of Livingston in 1727, the lord of the manor, Mr Parkhurst, repaired the buildings around the Old Well and reopened it. Nevertheless, visitors from afar failed to patronise it, although local gentry came every Monday in the summer for breakfasts, and there was music, dancing and card playing[13].

By 1753 a further blow—the coup de grâce—was struck against Epsom (and other English spas), when Sir Richard Russell pioneered the cult of sea bathing as a health-giving and healing activity. The seaside resorts, such as Brightelmstone (Brighton) took over from the spas as the centres of fashion and social life. From 1760 to 1770, a London anatomist and surgeon, Dr Dale Ingram, rented the well, prepared Epsom salts from the waters, and once again advocated the use of the mineral waters, but he had little success in restoring the spa. George III and his queen visited Epsom in 1767 but did not take the waters[35].

What Remains of Epsom Spa

Modern Epsom is a pleasant, thriving town and the spa has passed into history. No trace remains of the New Wells, which have been built over. In 1804 the buildings at the site of the Old Well were pulled down, and a private house erected, and its successor is a house used at present as a home for mentally handicapped children. A housing estate has been developed in the area around the Old Well, and some streets have been given names, e.g. Wells Road and Spa Drive, that recall the spa’s glorious years. The original Old Well may still be seen, situated in a small grass enclosure surrounded by railings. A plaque states:

BOROUGH OF EPSOM & EWELL
THE EPSOM WELL
The mediaeval waters
that in the seventeenth century
made Epsom a place of great resort
and its fame known throughout Europe
were drawn from this Well

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Europe; this made him cautious, at first, in his treatment lest he should kill instead of cure. But he used his own methods and medicines and met with great success, confessing that he never saw a disease in Jamaica which he had not met with in Europe. Unaware of the mosquito's role in causing malaria, he noted that 'Bedes are sometimes covered all over with gauze to hinder the mosquitoes from buzzing about, biting or awaking those lying in them'. Water was reckoned by many to be the most wholesome drink—a view to which he subscribed; the next most general drink was Madeira.

Sloane's *Natural History of Jamaica*, as it is more often called, although the proper title is much longer, did not appear until 20 years after the completion of his voyage, at least the first volume; the second was delayed for a further 18 years due to 'a multiplicity of business in the practice of physic, which I esteem one of my first cares.' By now Sloane had assembled a library of nearly 8,000 books in Greek, Latin and modern European languages, covering medicine, natural history, chemistry, anatomy, etc. These he used to embellish his own descriptions of plants with what other authors had written. He had no wish to claim the credit for being the first to discover particular plants. When his friends urged him to publish the account of his voyage, Sloane first submitted his descriptions to Ray 'as the greatest judge I could advise with'. He was surprised to find that according to Ray there was nothing amiss with his observations; in fact Ray seemed to think more highly of them than Sloane himself.

The *Natural History of Jamaica* is the work on which the author's reputation as a natural historian is founded; it is an early example of a naturalist's account of his travels, a species of literature almost unknown at a time when travellers paid little attention to the plants and animals of the places they visited. They confined themselves to a few notable vegetable or animal curiosities. Sloane was a close observer, who took a common-sense view of the things he encountered. A man of unlimited curiosity, he was a tireless recorder and investigator. He is a worthy precursor of Darwin and a host of other naturalist-travellers.

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