

A town shaped by water

**How Axminster's bounds were set by water and sewerage,
and the 100-year struggle to acquire effective municipal services.**

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To the reader:

This remains a work in progress. There are bound to be errors and omissions, and they are entirely mine. If you find any mistakes, and if you draw them to my attention, I will happily correct them in later versions. If you have additional information which you would be happy to share, I will do my best to accommodate it.

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Chapter 1: Introduction

The purpose of this document

Just as every individual needs access to food, shelter and a degree of security before the finer things in life are even worth considering, so every dwelling and hostelry needs access to a source of fresh, clean water before it can be considered in any way sustainable. In the case of Axminster most of the larger, richer houses had their own wells, but many 19th century (and earlier) residents relied on public sources of one sort or another. Rivers such as the Axe had long ceased to provide safe drinking water.

Tanneries, fulling mills and dye houses dumped concentrated pollution into rivers to go alongside the universal hazards created by the disposal of animal and human waste of all sorts, and it was not until the mid-19th century that any serious efforts to address this were initiated by Parliament, and it was another 40-50 years before those reforms seriously impacted on Axminster.

Most Axminster residents had long relied on an artificial stream called the 'town leat' for their water. No documentary evidence has been found to confirm when the source of the leat was first identified, or the delivery infrastructure (i.e. the leat itself) dug, but there is a general assumption that it was in the era of Newenham Abbey. Beyond the town limits mills, farms and cottages had to make their own arrangements as far as drinking water was concerned.

The fact that the leat ran down the eastern side of Lyme Road shaped the town. The centre of the town occupies a bluff above the river Axe, and as late as the early 19th century only Castle Hill was occupied all the way to the river bank. With the exception of the Lyme Road and Castle Hill, all of the other roads leading out of town changed character from urban streets to rural roads as soon as they headed down-hill. To the north, but more particularly to the west, the fact of flooding acted as a real barrier to expansion, further emphasising the degree to which the town's footprint was influenced by water.

With the availability of clean water being so limited, the purpose of the leat was therefore to deliver as much as possible to the town centre, by preventing it from running off prematurely into the Millbrook or Purzebrook streams. Most of what was left over after the centre of town had taken what it needed ran down Castle Hill, as did much of the town's drainage.

A major focus of this document is on how the town's water supply was managed during the 100 years following the accession of Queen Victoria (in 1837), in response to wider economic and social trends and pressures. It was the availability (or absence) of clean water which determined where and when the town could expand. As well as water, I also chart the development of the town's sewerage system as it struggled to adapt to the arrival of the flushing toilet; as well as the town's gas, electricity and telephone systems over the same period.

A snap-shot of Axminster in 1837

This introductory snap-shot of Axminster at the start of the Victorian age draws on the 1838 tithe map¹. Before that, though, it is worth considering briefly the forces that had shaped Axminster over the previous quarter of a century.

The bankruptcy of Samuel Ramson Whitty, the last of his family to make carpets in Axminster, had happened only just over 2 years earlier, in late 1835. Largely due to the legacy of carpet making Axminster was quite a rich town, though with its abrupt ending that wealth was now vulnerable. Nevertheless, the services (such as lawyers) that supported it had other clients as well, and Axminster remained both a market town, and host to the various courts of law that sat locally.

Some indication of this wealth can be drawn from a valuation undertaken for tax purposes in 1815, which allows comparisons to be made across all of the parishes in Devon². In absolute terms, only 12 Devon parishes, out of more than 500, were richer than Axminster at that time. When the comparison is made on the basis of wealth per capita, only eight other Devon market towns were richer than Axminster, though these included both Colyton and Ottery St Mary in East Devon. On

¹ The illustrations used in this document are taken from a partial copy held by Axminster Heritage Centre rather than from the more widely-known version which includes some damaged sections.

² The raw data can be found via the hathitrust.org website, in a document entitled 'Comparative account of the population of Great Britain; 1801, 1811, 1821, 1831'. Pages 68-77 cover Devon. The data can also be found in electronic format via the 'Census' page of the Devon section of the genuki.org.uk website.

this measure Axminster residents were, on average, richer than those of Tavistock, Crediton and Tiverton, and everywhere north of them, such as Barnstaple and Bideford.

On Trinity Sunday 1834 a major fire had burned down 30 or so houses in front of the church, allowing a very awkward road junction to be eased, and in the process creating Trinity Square. When this redevelopment of the town centre took place, it created more modern buildings where larger shops and institutions like banks could be accommodated. Some of these may still have been in the process of being finished in 1838. Another significant fire affected South Street in 1836. In common with many other Devon towns, Axminster suffered repeated and frequent fires, though mostly they resulted in modernisation via better re-building (from cob and thatch to brick and tile) rather than wholesale re-shaping of the town's footprint.

A year before Victoria's reign began, in 1836, the new Axminster Union workhouse, catering to Axminster and 16 other parishes in a semi-circle from Beer to Stockland and Charmouth, was built well outside the urban boundary (see the bottom right corner of Map 1 below).

Map 1: Section of the 1838 tithe map, showing the majority of the town of Axminster



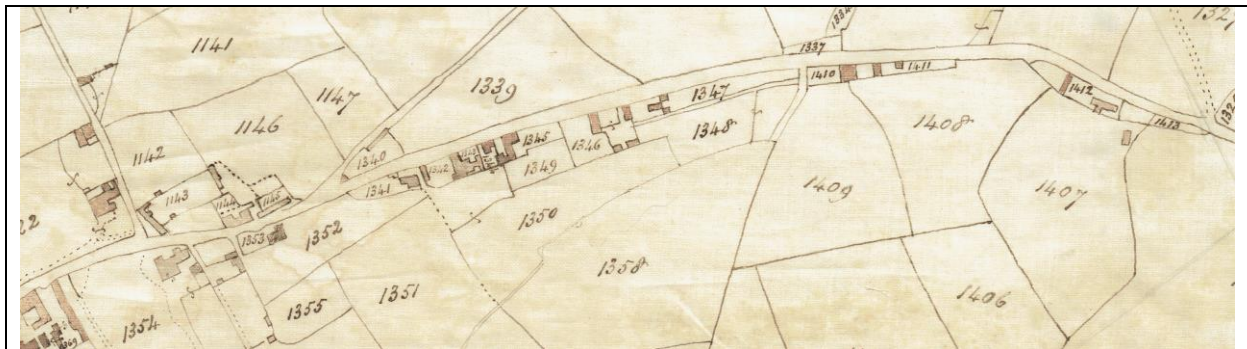
Note: This map (and the original from which it comes) is oriented approximately NE-SW. It covers an area of just under 1km (2/3 mile) square.

By 1838 the glory days of the coaching trade, from which Axminster had benefitted greatly, were coming to an end, because within 2 years Exeter was connected by rail to London, via Bristol. This changed for ever the economics of both personal travel and the carriage of goods between Devon and London. It would be 20 years before Axminster had a rail connection of its own, and in those 20 years some of the town's more entrepreneurial residents were tempted to move elsewhere.

The footprint of the town had not changed greatly since mediaeval times, though the density of housing had increased. In 1838, a circle with a radius of a quarter of a mile centred on The George (i.e. most of the area covered by Map 1) would have enclosed a very high proportion of the houses that could properly be considered to form part of the town. The main exception to this was Lyme Road, which was populated on the southern side for a further quarter of a mile (this being where the town's water supply ran).

Those who are familiar with Axminster as it is today will quickly see from Map 1 that in 1838 there was not much of the town to be found south west of the junction of Church Street and West Street. On the Musbury Road Purzebrook marked the edge of the town proper; as did Stoney Bridge (to the west of Castle Hill); Hilary House (on the Chard Road, well short of Millbrook, which was distinctly rural); and the start of Sector Lane (on Lyme Road). A further quarter of a mile of Lyme Road itself, as illustrated by Map 2, was, however, clearly part of the town.

Map 2: Lyme Road beyond the junction with Sector Lane



The structure of this document

In the rest of this introductory chapter, having outlined the content and structure of this document, I explain the background to local government between 1834 and 1945, and set out the principal sources that I have used.

Chapters 2 to 5 then deal with the supplies of water, sewerage, gas, electricity and telephones.

Local Government between 1834 and 1945

The Axminster Board of Guardians

The Poor Law (Amendment) Act of 1834 ended parish-by-parish control of poor relief, bringing in Boards of Guardians, and establishing principles of public supervision, inspection and audit by a Central Board of Commissioners. In 1871 these oversight responsibilities were passed to the Local Government Board.

The 1834 Act also required groups of parishes to form themselves into Unions. In Axminster's case the Union comprised 17 parishes spanning the Devon / Dorset county boundary, of which the other 16 were (in alphabetical order): Axmouth, Beer (including Seaton), Chardstock, Charmouth, Colyton, Combpyne, Dalwood, Hawkchurch, Kilmington, Lyme Regis, Membury, Musbury, Shute, Stockland, Thorncombe and Uplyme. The parish of All Saints had not been created by then. The Union had four Overseers, whose duties were performed by salaried Assistant Overseers.

The responsibilities of the Board of Guardians, and the day-to-day work of the Overseers of the Union, extended well beyond the workhouse, into areas such as public health. From 1834, therefore, it was the Axminster Board of Guardians that was officially responsible for water and sewerage services throughout the Union district.

Axminster Rural District Sanitary Authority

Rural Sanitary Authorities were set up in 1875 to take over responsibility for a range of functions from the Poor Law Unions and Boards of Guardians, including water and sewerage. They only lasted until 1894 (see below).

Axminster Rural District Council

Rural District Councils were set up in 1894 to oversee many of the functions of local government, including roads, water and sewerage. Axminster Rural District Council (RDC) administered 15 parishes centred on Axminster. The other 14 parishes were: Axmouth, Beer (including Seaton), Chardstock (including All Saints), Colyton, Combpyne, Dalwood, Hawkchurch, Kilminster, Membury, Musbury, Rousdon, Shute, Stockland and Uplyme.

Axminster Urban District Council

On 24 September 1914 a formal notice was issued³ dividing the civil parish of Axminster into two parts with effect from 30 September of that year⁴: Axminster Town and Axminster Hamlets. Axminster Hamlets continued to be administered by Axminster RDC (see above), while Axminster Town was administered by the newly-created Axminster Urban District Council (UDC).

At the time of the split, it was estimated⁵ that Axminster Town accounted for 790 acres (roughly 1.5 square miles) and about 2,000 persons, while Axminster Hamlets had an area of 6,100 acres and about 1,000 persons.

Axminster Parish Council

Historically the Parish Council, which met 'in Vestry', had managed aspects of parish life, but by 1834 it had no great influence over sanitary and health matters, and no formal responsibilities for them. In 1895, almost 20 years before the UDC was formed, the Parish Council assumed some duties for water and sewerage on behalf of the RDC, but both technically and legally the RDC retained its responsibilities.

Key sources and references

I list here the main source document that I have used, and to which I refer repeatedly. Other sources which are used only in particular chapters are explained there, and those which are used once or twice only are explained more fully in footnotes.

Tithe apportionment was a process which was undertaken in the mid-19th century to modernise the system under which tithes were paid by many property owners to the parish church. Some other properties were exempt from tithes because they were associated with former monasteries. This was of particular relevance to Axminster, where Newenham Abbey had been a major landowner. The source documents can be found on-line. A scan of the 'Tithe Apportionment Map' is accessible on-line via the eastdevonaonb.org.uk website (search for 'tithe': the map is in the 'conservation' section of the website, under the 'Parishscapes' project). Although slightly damaged in parts, this gives each field a unique reference number which can be linked to a schedule of fields which can then also be accessed via the eastdevonaonb.org.uk website. The tithe apportionment work in Axminster parish was undertaken in 1838. The extracts from the tithe apportionment map used in this document have been taken from a partial copy which is held by Axminster Heritage Centre, and is restricted to the town itself and its surrounds.

Numerically, the greatest number of external sources are old newspaper reports, and almost all of those which I have used can be accessed via the britishnewspaperarchive.co.uk website. In all cases I identify the newspaper concerned, and the date of publication. Most of the newspapers are identified by their initials (BN = Bridport News, CIN = Chard & Ilminster News, EFP = Exeter Flying Post, EPG = Exeter & Plymouth Gazette, PWN = Pulman's Weekly News, TCWA = Taunton Courier & Western Advertiser, WG = Western Gazette, WT = Western Times, WMN = Western Morning News). The reason why I have not made greater use of Pulman's Weekly News is that it is not (yet) one of the newspapers which has been digitised. Given George Pulman's opposition to all forms of external 'meddling', it is in any case unlikely that his newspaper would have provided a calm and dispassionate account of the controversies which arose.

³ Source: EPG, 2 Oct 1914.

⁴ Source: EPG, 17 June 1913.

⁵ Source: EPG, 10 Dec 1913.

For those who want to see in reasonable detail how the town evolved during the reign of Queen Victoria I recommend two Ordnance Survey (OS) maps. The first OS map at a sufficient level of detail to be useful for the purposes of this document is dated 1891, and was published at a scale of 25 inches-to-the-mile. It was based on a survey made in 1888. The next equally detailed (25 inch) map is the 1905 OS map, based on revisions to the 1888 survey made in 1903.

Both of these can be accessed via the nls.uk website. To get to both maps go through the following sequence from the nls.uk home page.

- Hover your cursor over 'Digital resources' and select 'Map images' from the list of options offered
- Click on 'Ordnance Survey maps'
- Scroll down and click on 'Ordnance Survey 25 inch England & Wales, 1841-1952'
- Click on 'Seamless zoomable layer (1890s to 1920s) side-by-side'.

By clicking and dragging on either of the maps or satellite images that you can now see you can navigate yourself to Axminster. The left-hand map should be the 1905 OS map. Check by looking at the station. If the branch line is shown heading off towards Lyme Regis, then this is indeed the 1905 map.

To change either of the two images (left or right) to the 1891 25 inch OS map:

- Click on the drop-down box next to the text saying 'Select a category', and choose 'England and Wales'⁶
- Click on the drop-down box next to the text saying 'Select a map series', and choose 'SW England OS 25 inch 1873-1888'.

A third, less detailed map which is accessible from the same source may also be of some interest, because it shows how the town had started to spread by 1957. It also shows contours, which are highly relevant to water flows, more clearly than the earlier OS maps. To see that map:

- Click on the drop-down box next to the text saying 'Select a category', and choose 'Great Britain' (i.e. the same set of maps as the 1905 OS map)
- Click on the drop-down box next to the text saying 'Select a map series', and choose 'OS 1:25,000, 1937-61'.

⁶ For the 1905 OS map the 'category' in the first drop-down box is Great Britain. It is very easy to forget this distinction, and as a result not to be able to find one or other of the maps.

Chapter 2: The Town's Water Supply in and before 1837

Introduction

The Town Leat

For centuries Axminster's town leat carried spring water from a point between Furzeleigh Farm and what is now Cooks Lane to the top end of Lyme Road, and from there down into the town via several branches. Its course is described in more detail below.

The difference between a drain and a leat is that a drain typically carries unwanted surface water away towards a stream or river, whereas a leat is designed to prevent that from happening. Most leats wind their way gradually down-hill, intercepting water that would otherwise run away, and carrying it to a place (in this case the centre of town) where it is wanted, relying on gravity alone. Like irrigation canals, leats may be lined with stone or clay to minimise leakage, and like irrigation canals, leats have to be kept in good repair if the water that they are intended to carry is not to drain away, or to become polluted.

Once ceramic and iron pipes were developed, leats were largely superseded, but until the third quarter of the 19th century Axminster's leat was critical to all those residents of the town who did not have a well of their own.

The Town Lake

The town lake is simply another term for the town leat. In East Devon a lake does not have to be an open body of water, but can be a small stream. Other local examples of this usage include Gamberlake and Warlake (both of which can be found to the south of the town, with Warlake being close to the parish boundary with Musbury, running between Trill, Ashe House and the Axe).

In this document I generally prefer the term town leat, but where I have quoted from other sources which refer to the town lake, I have retained their wording as recorded.

Sources (and non-sources) of information

Non-sources

No ancient map of the town leat has (yet) been found, though the leat must have existed for centuries, and may well have been installed at the behest of Newenham Abbey, both because without a decent water supply the town would never have developed, and because the monks developed a grange farm at Furzeleigh, where the springs are located. Logically, having found the source springs, they could relatively easily have arranged for the leat to be dug and maintained until the dissolution of the monasteries, at which point it would probably have become a matter for the Lord of the Manor.

The 1776/78 map drawn up for the Petre Estate, which owned almost all of the relevant land at that time, shows the leat as a faint blue line from its source, and down the Lyme Road as far as The Lamb Inn, but does not label it as such. Nor does it show the various branches of the leat beyond The Lamb.

Perhaps surprisingly, given its watery focus, and the fact that the 4th edition was published in 1875 when debate about the leat was frequently in the newspapers, 'The Book of the Axe' by George Pulman has relatively little to say about the leat.

Sources

The earliest description that I have found so far takes the form of a typescript entitled 'The Town Water of Axminster' which is based on a survey apparently taken on 30 May 1800 by six local residents (Charles Steer, Charles Buckland, James Edwards, Andrew Gamis, Thomas Hallett and William Wills). This typescript forms part of a bundle of documents retained by a local solicitor (W E Pitfield Chapple), which is now held in the Axminster Heritage Centre. When quoting from this document I have added some punctuation to make it easier to understand, but have otherwise made a minimum of corrections (and it needs to be borne in mind that the available source is already a typed transcript which has then been corrected by hand). This document is referred to below as 'the 1800 survey'.

We then have a small map which was incorporated into a legal agreement dated 1857 regarding a swap of two parcels of land. These parcels were a field near Fawnsmoor and another near

Furzeleigh House, and the parties to the agreement were James Davidson of Sector Hall (Owner of Fawnsmoor) and John Stevens. The accompanying map, which is reproduced below as Map 3, clearly identifies a section of the 'town leat'. This document is also held by Axminster Heritage Centre.

Sources of water

The 1800 survey describes the source of the water delivered by the town leat as "... two springs in some grounds belonging to Mr Amos Liddon called Spanish Lee Grounds, one of them in a field at the back of Edward Winters' house about one mile and three quarters from the Town; the other in a field above Fursley Copse to the East of it, the former lying to the South". This should be read as meaning that the springs are respectively south and east of the copse, and in fact both the springs and Furzeleigh Copse are located just north of Cook's Lane.

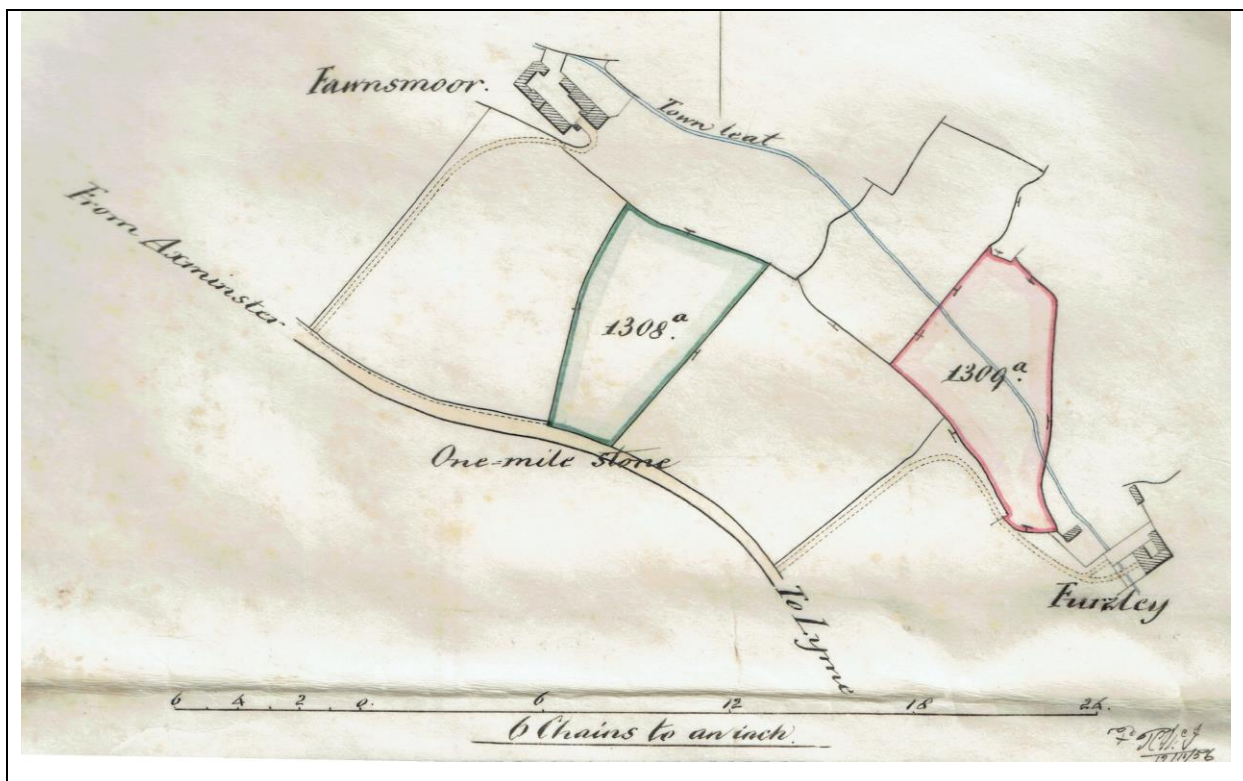
These two springs lie between what is now called Cook's Lane (but which in 1776/78 was called Gore Lane) and Furzeleigh Copse (which has been spelled in many different ways over the years). Cook's Lane runs roughly parallel to the eastern end of the Axminster by-pass, and is accessed by turning left off Lyme Road just before the by-pass. Before long it crosses a small stream which runs below it in a culvert. The springs are close to this culvert on the down-hill (northern) side, and Furzeleigh Copse is the piece of woodland which can easily be seen from the lane. Confirmation that this is the right place is provided by both the 1776/78 map and the 1838 tithe map, both of which attach the name 'Spanish Ley' to the field immediately to the east of the small stream after it has run beneath Cook's Lane. On the 1776/78 map that field is numbered 422, and on the 1838 map it is 1294. Furzeleigh Copse is numbered 1288 on the 1838 tithe map.

Route of the leat as a single channel

From Furzeleigh Copse to Fawnsmoor

The 1800 survey continues as follows. "Both streams unite in the copse near the East end, and run directly through it. The water then continues its course to Fursley House, passes through the court in front of it, crosses the end of the orchard below, [and] runs through Fawnsmoor meadow and orchard (leaving the farmhouse on the left) ..."

Map 3: Part of an 1857 plan showing the leat between Furzeleigh House and Fawnsmoor



Map 3, comprising a segment of the plan which forms part of the 1857 agreement, covers the second part of the section described above. Overlaying this onto a modern map shows that after leaving Furzeleigh copse, the leat follows close to the line of the 95m contour.

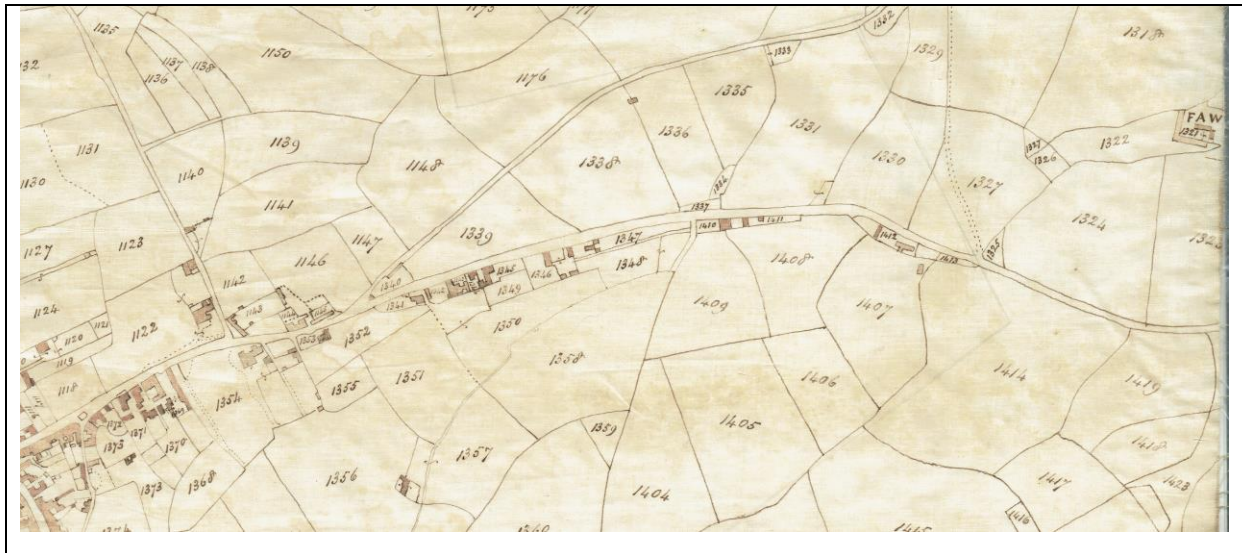
In the absence of the leat, the water from the springs would run northwards down the hillside and into the stream which then runs beneath the low point of Sector Lane and through the fields to Millbrook. After Millbrook that stream runs below the junction of Stoney Lane and the Chard Road, and onwards towards the Cloakham end of Willhays Lane, and the Axe.

The Book of the Axe says (on page 584) in a footnote about Millbrook that "... a certain part of the stream, it is said, was sold some hundreds of years ago to the town of Axminster, and was diverted for the town watercourse, now called the Town Lake".

From Fawnsmoor to the Lamb Inn

The route which the leat takes between Fawnsmoor Farm (just visible on the eastern edge of the map below) and the eastern edge of the town runs through Map 4, which extends a bit beyond the area covered by Map 2 in Chapter 1. This section of description runs as far as the junction between the Lyme Road and the area around the Lamb Inn, including the junction with Sector Lane (now sometimes known as Granny Rockett's corner, close to where the turnpike toll gates previously stood).

Map 4: Section of the 1838 tithe map showing the ground traversed by the town leat between Fawnsmoor and Axminster



After passing Fawnsmoor the 1800 survey follows the leat "... through a small plot and the field beyond into one of Mr W B Tucker's called Crabbs Wood. From thence it crosses the London Turnpike Road a little below Mr Matthew Liddon's garden wall ...".

What we know with high confidence is that after the leat passed close to Fawnsmoor farm and its orchard (plot 1322 on the map above), it ran through one of several fields which at the time of the 1838 tithe map included Crabb's Wood in their names. This section of the leat is actually the easiest to find in the 21st century, in the field marked as plot 1327. A short section of the public footpath which runs down-hill and towards Sector Lane from a point on the Lyme Road beside the more modern reservoir is often wet, and the reason is linked to the historic course of the leat which emerges from the wood below the modern reservoir, and follows the contour heading directly for the first of the 20th century houses on the northern side of Lyme Road (in plot 1331 above). The leat passes through that house's garden⁷ before crossing underneath Lyme Road onto the southern side.

⁷ In fact it may have run a bit further on the north side of the road before crossing. The evidence for this is that the third house on the north side of the road is called The Leat.

Although it is not known for certain which house was Mr Liddon's in 1800, the schedule which accompanies the 1776/78 map shows that at that time the Liddon family was living in a house on the plot which is numbered as 1412 on the tithe map (and which is where Mount House now stands).

Having crossed under Lyme Road, the 1800 survey tells us that the leat enters "... *Mr Ellard's field, and running along the south side of the hedge next the road into another field of his, it passes through Quick's Orchard [and] crosses a lane leading to some fields ...*".

None of the fields in this area had the name 'Quick's Orchard' in the schedule attached to the 1838 tithe map, but the 'lane leading to some fields' is almost certainly the one running between plots 1348 and 1409 on the 1838 tithe map, which is the lane which now leads to Fairacre Lodge.

At this stage of the leat's progress its primary objective was to prevent the town water from running down (southwards) into the ditches and streams that then fed into the Purzebrook, thereby by-passing the town centre.

When describing this section of the leat's route, the 1800 survey refers to it passing "... *through Robert Henley's garden ...*" (his plot being numbered 1342 on the tithe map), before "... *passing by the south end of his house, ... [after which it] crosses a corner of the same field to a line adjoining the Lamb where it divides into two principals ...*". Based on the information provided here, anyone seeking evidence of where the town leat first divides into two branches needs to look near the southern end of the Lamb. The purpose of this division was to enable the leat to serve the houses on Chard Road as well those on the Lyme Road.

The various branches of the leat

From the Lamb Inn to Trinity Square, South Street and West Street

The description provided in the 1800 survey is of limited use, because it relies on the reader knowing exactly who lived where in 1800, and that is hard to discover. However, it is clear that from the Lamb Inn the main branch ran past the site of the Roman Catholic church (which in 1800 was an open field), then past Lea Combe House (which is no longer standing), near where there was a reservoir of sorts. It then appears to have followed the southern edge of Lyme Road and Lyme Street to the corner with South Street.

At this point one branch served South Street and Thomas Whitty's property on Silver Street (though we also know that he had his own well), with whatever was left over at the end of South Street running down Musbury Road and into the Purzebrook.

The other branch carried on round the corner and headed towards the church. Between 1800 and 1838 the route would have been changed to accommodate the opening up of Trinity Square. What the 1800 survey says is that it "... *continues its course to the Church Yard and around it beyond the Yew Tree crosses the road opposite the workhouse ...*" where it divided again, with one part running through the workhouse yard⁸ and down the hill towards the river, while the other part ran towards the junction of West Street and Church Street where the Green Dragon Inn had previously stood, and then down towards the river.

The other branch (from the split near the Lamb) re-crossed the Lyme Road, crossed the bottom end of Sector Lane and then Stoney Lane, and headed across the plateau where the Axe Vale College's playing fields now sit, on its way to the garden of Hilary House. From there it ran through Rev G Tucker's garden, then "... *through the Meeting House yard to Chard Street, then down [the] street to [the] corner of [the] George Inn opposite Mr Hawkins' shop, where it falls into the common sewer. A small part branches off near the bottom of Chard Street through Wills to the Old Dolphin Yard to a dipping place behind Messrs Hallett's old warehouse*".

In other words the residents of Castle Hill got almost no clean water from the town leat, because whatever entered the common sewer was of no use to them, and the amount delivered to the Old Dolphin Yard (near the Market Square) was small.

The reference to 'a dipping place' is instructive. Basically the leat was at least partly covered for much of its length within the town, and 'dipping places' were locations where members of the public could extract some water for their own use.

⁸ In 1800 the Axminster workhouse was on West Street, close to the gate leading west out of the churchyard. By 1838 the new and much larger Union Workhouse, Box House, had been built off Musbury Road.

This is confirmed by a much later newspaper report, from 1880⁹ which, in looking forward to promised enhancements, tells us the following. *"The water at present flows from the adjacent hills in open channels, and is dipped up at various places for use. This is a very old process, and of course has many disadvantages. In frosty weather the water that is wasted around the dipping-places freezes, and proves dangerous to pedestrians. Sometimes the covers are left open, and children occasionally fall into the stream. Should a fire occur in the town it would be difficult to throw water to any great height; whereas, when the new water supply is completed, it will be possible to throw a stream of water over any house."*

A more detailed description of the various branches of the leat is contained in James Coate's 1892 pamphlet (accessible via Axminster Heritage Centre, and entitled 'To the inhabitants of Axminster'), but it is too detailed to be understood with anything less than a great deal of concentration and local knowledge, and is in any case essentially consistent with the description given above.

The Fountain in Trinity Square

Information about the fountain comes from newspaper reports much later than 1838, but is provided here rather than in Chapter 3 because the original fountain was fed by the leat. Also, as Chapter 3 shows, the first of these two reports, written in 1878, pre-dates any significant improvements to the town water supply, in an era when few locals would have thought of any Axminster water as good to drink.

The 1878 report¹⁰ forms part of a much longer article about Axminster's merits as a place to visit as a day tripper. It refers to the fountain in Trinity Square, as follows. *"On the north side of the churchyard there is an open space, and in that space stands a public fountain, from one side of which the lieges may obtain hard water, and from the other side water known and appreciated as soft, a double conduit from Furzeleigh being answerable for the apparent anomaly."* Given that all the water came from the same springs and was mixed at source, it is hard to see how what the writer set down could be true. However, an 1876 Inquiry into water and sanitation in the town (of which, more later) was told¹¹ that there were two public water pumps in Trinity Square, one providing drinking water, and the other not. The most likely explanation is that the drinking water came from a nearby well, while the leat water was deemed unsuitable for drinking.

It is understood that the fountain had been in Trinity Square since its creation following the fire of 1834¹², but that the original had been placed closer to the churchyard wall. In 1887, however, it was decided to build a new fountain to mark Queen Victoria's golden jubilee, and in May of that year it was reported¹³ that a tender had been issued for the erection of a new fountain, and that Mr W B Parsons' bid had been accepted. Mr W Harvey was entrusted to ask the Sanitary Authority for permission to lay on and connect the water on its completion, and it was also reported that Mr W J Enticott and Mr Stuart had generously offered to lay on the necessary gas and water pipes free of cost.

A month later it was reported¹⁴ that *"... during the past week the old fountain in Trinity Square has been removed, and the foundation stone of a new fountain has been laid by Dr Hallett, amid a concourse of spectators. Mr W B Parsons, the contractor, is making good progress towards its completion"*. A week later a third report confirms¹⁵ that the work was completed, and that the fountain had been *"... gaily decorated"*.

The accounts of the Jubilee celebrations (also held in Axminster Heritage Centre) show that the work to build the Jubilee fountain had cost £76-17s-10d, most of which was accounted for by Mr Parsons' account. As well as providing access to drinking water, the Jubilee fountain was used to support gas lamps. This may well be why the new fountain was placed more centrally within the square than the earlier fountain (which was evidently less grand, and incorporated a hand pump).

The Jubilee fountain was cleaned and renovated by Axminster Chamber of Commerce in 1984, long after it had ceased to provide water to passers-by.

⁹ Ref: EPG, 17 Feb 1880.

¹⁰ Ref: Somerset County Gazette, 28 July 1878.

¹¹ Ref: CIG, 2 Dec 1876.

¹² Before the opening up of Trinity Square the fountain may well have been in existence, but simply standing on the side of the road.

¹³ Ref: PWN, 17 May 1887.

¹⁴ Ref: PWN, 21 June 1887.

¹⁵ Ref: PWN, 28 June 1887.

The purpose of the 1800 survey

According to an article in Pullman's Weekly News in 1880¹⁶ the 1800 survey was carried out because the citizens of the town perceived that something needed to be done. Having set down in writing where it ran "... *they commenced an annual subscription for repairing and keeping in repair the watercourse, from its sources to its entrances into the town, and for prosecuting all nuisances and any diversion of the stream; appointed a committee to superintend and act; also a person was appointed at a yearly salary to inspect the course, and report to the committee any required repairs or any nuisance of obstruction or diversion. A meeting of the inhabitants was for many years held annually on Ascension Day to settle the accounts, appoint a new committee, and take steps to protect the stream. In this manner was the common right in the water and the watercourses then preserved and attended to by the inhabitants themselves*".

¹⁶ Ref: PWN, 4 Oct 1880.

Chapter 3: The Town's Water and Sewerage Systems in the Victorian Era

Introduction

This chapter charts the challenges faced during the period of Queen Victoria's reign (1837 to 1901) by those citizens who were charged with supplying water to those residents who lacked access to a private well. The same citizens were simultaneously responsible for dealing with public drainage and sewage disposal.

At the start of her reign the water supply relied on the historic town leat, but as her reign progressed the various public bodies were first encouraged and then required to adapt and extend this historic structure in order to upgrade both the volume and quality of the town's water supply, both to protect public health, and to allow the town to grow.

As far as sewerage is concerned, for most of this period the town continued to rely on sewers which had been laid beneath the main thoroughfares of the town, mainly by the Turnpike Trust¹⁷. These sewers discharged most of the town's untreated sewage into the mill leat (and thence into the river Axe) or directly into the Axe.

1837 to 1870

For the first decade or so of the Queen's reign, Axminster's water supply relied entirely on the town leat, as described above in Chapter 2. Most if not all of the rate payers would have had access to private well water, and probably did not think very much or very often about the circumstances in which non-voting residents of the town had to manage as far as gaining access to clean water was concerned.

The Public Health Act of 1848 represents one of the first attempts by Parliament to address the growing problems of pollution in towns and cities, and the increasingly frequent outbreaks of typhoid and cholera. By 1853 attention was turning to smaller towns, and it was announced¹⁸ that on 28 July 1853 Thomas Webster Rammell, Superintending Inspector from the General Board of Health, would hold a public inquiry and examine witnesses at The George, Axminster covering a wide range of issues. Among these were to be: sewerage, drainage and the supply of water; the state of the burial grounds; the number and sanitary conditions of the inhabitants; the existence (or otherwise) of any Local Acts of Parliament covering paving, lighting and water etc; the town's natural drainage areas; and the existing parochial and other local boundaries, and any changes to these which might be advisable. It is highly probable that this was a standard agenda, not one specifically designed for Axminster.

The Exeter & Plymouth Gazette tells us¹⁹ that he identified the poorly defined limits of the town as a problem, and drew attention to deficiencies in the town's water, sewerage and lighting. In an editorial comment, the newspaper urged the town to address these issues itself rather than allowing the Board of Health to intervene. This commentary cited Croydon and Salisbury as warnings of the costs which might be involved if the Board was allowed to dictate what was to be done.

Then, on 22 September 1853 the Morning Post carried long and detailed directions issued under Section 10 of the Nuisances Removal and Diseases Prevention Act of 1848 to local authorities, including the Guardians of the Poor in a large number of towns including Axminster. The main focus of these directions was on preventing outbreaks of typhoid and cholera, but there was a clear link to the hearings carried out by the General Board of Health two months before. The tone of the accompanying editorial comment was again to express outrage at this unwarranted interference in local affairs.

In terms of active engineering interventions, there is no evidence from press reports to suggest that the Axminster Board of Guardians did much if anything over the following 25 years to improve matters as far as the water supply was concerned. However, we know that discussions had been held in 1853, because it was reported in 1882²⁰ that Mr Bradford, a member of the Board of

¹⁷ Source: CIN, 2 Dec 1876.

¹⁸ Source: WT, 9 July 1853.

¹⁹ Source: EPG, 6 Aug 1853.

²⁰ Source: EPG, 28 Aug 1882. NB The three parts of this quote have been re-arranged here to make their sense more accessible. The meaning has not been in any way changed.

Guardians at that time, had been "... *abused for the part that he took ... when he went round among the rate payers ... when the question of the Axminster water-supply was first raised, about 29 years ago*".

1870 to 1877: Two more Government Inspectors intervene

In about 1874 an Inspector called Dr Blaxall was dispatched to Axminster by the Local Government Board to see what progress had been made. His visit went almost unremarked in the local press at the time, but we know he came, and what he concluded, because his report was referred to in subsequent inquiries. A written statement which was sent to the Local Government Board in 1876 by the Parochial Sanitary Committee (i.e. not an off-the-cuff remark made in the heat of the moment), reads as follows²¹. "*The Inspector, Dr Blaxall, was sent down, we believe, in 1874, at the instigation of a few persons not really, we venture to think, much concerned about the health of the town, or likely to be affected by an experimental expenditure, and they must, we should think, be certainly indifferent to the consequences of any interference with, and overthrow of, the present firm, unobstructed, and capacious sewers, or with the arterial course of the running water.*"

In 1876, recognising that the Board of Guardians was not planning to make any significant changes to the way in which water was supplied and sewage removed, despite Dr Blaxall's findings that they should be urgently pursued, a further letter was sent to the Local Government Board by another group of citizens. One of the immediate triggers for this letter was the death from typhoid of William Tapscott, the town's postmaster and an auctioneer. The death of a member of the middle classes appears to have had a galvanising effect on opinion, not least because the medical advice being given to the Board of Guardians was sceptical about the strength of the link between polluted drinking water and typhoid.

It should be borne in mind that at this time flushing toilets were still a rarity, but clearly a thing of the future.

This 1876 citizens' letter can be read in full in a contemporary newspaper report²². For the most part it complained about the effects which poorly maintained cess pools were having on nearby wells, and about the fact that little or no maintenance had been done on the town's sewers for many decades. Particular attention was drawn to the deficiencies of the sewer running from the Old Bell Inn towards Castle Hill, and also to the very unhealthy conditions created at the foot of Castle Hill by the discharge of raw sewage into the mill leat from multiple sewers. The mill leat, which only flowed when the mills were working, sometimes ran dry. The signatories included James Alexander Knight, a lawyer and brother of the Lord of the Manor; a retired rear admiral; a curate, a bank manager and a doctor; several innkeepers and shopkeepers; and the residents of some badly-affected cottages: a fair cross-section of the town's population. Several of the signatories limited their endorsement to specific opinions based on their personal experience. For example, William Newbery, the well-known local artist; and Charles Taylor, who ran a china warehouse in the town; limited their criticism to the statement that "*I am of the opinion (an opinion founded on long experience of the town and the water courses) that no town can be better or more liberally supplied with water than this, but its quality and supply has been spoilt by injudicious interference.*" Most other signatories were much more critical than this.

The press report cited above records that the Local Government Board then wrote to the Axminster Rural Sanitary Authority enclosing a copy of the citizens' letter that they had received. Their covering letter said that the letter appeared to provide grounds for a further inquiry to be convened, but before instigating such an event, they were seeking the response of the local authorities to the statements contained within it.

Two weeks later the same newspaper carried a long report²³ entitled '*Report of the Parochial Sanitary Committee, in reference to the memorial which the Local Government Board has received from certain inhabitants of Axminster, relating to Drainage and Water Supply of the town*'. This had been read out at a meeting of the Board of Guardians, and stated that the sewers were in good condition, and that however hard the rain might fall, the town's drains and sewers were able to cope.

With regard to the water supply it said the following. "*We beg to say there are a great many deep wells of excellent spring water in the town, besides the 'town pump', and one or two other public*

²¹ Source: CIN, 16 Sept 1876.

²² Source: CIN, 2 Sept 1876.

²³ Source: CIN, 16 Sept 1876.

pumps, numbering together at least one hundred. We believe that the water is not unwholesome, and that the health of the inhabitants is in no 'serious danger' from any such cause as the memorial assigns. There is an excellent supply of running water, called the town water, which flows from a spring about two miles distant, and scours every part of the town, and of course effects a most desirable purpose, but is not intended for, and ought not to be utilized for, drinking purposes."

It went on to refute many of the statements made in the citizens' letter. It blamed some of the complainants for preventing work which the authorities had sought to undertake; and it explicitly denied that fever was a particular problem in Axminster. In one of the few nods in the direction of compromise it was acknowledged that "... some wells might require cleaning out and grouting, which ought to be done by the owners".

The Parochial Sanitary Committee then went on the attack, contending that "... the old-established inhabitants and ratepayers have every confidence in the Sanitary Authority, having elected without any opposition a Parochial Committee to assist that Authority, and that all the members have been unanimous in their proceedings."

They particularly blamed Mr Heal (a relative newcomer) for the way in which he was operating the mill stream, and dismissed most of the complainants as "... not of long residence, and cannot possess much personal knowledge of the subjects upon which they have given their personal opinions, and indeed many are very poor and dependant tenants." They then developed a line of argument that suggested that those whose wells and sewers were in a good state had no cause to complain, while most deficiencies fell under the heading of landlords' responsibilities. Finally they stated that there was a counter-memorial in support of the elected officials with 120 to 130 signatures on it, which had been sent to the Local Government Board, without any response to date.

A further two weeks later the same newspaper carried an anonymous letter to the editor²⁴ which is quoted in full, as follows. "Sir: The sapient individuals who have discovered 'after due enquiry, and from personal knowledge, that the sewers of Axminster are excellent', would have had an eye-opener if they had passed through Castle Street on Thursday afternoon, when one of these 'excellent arterial constructions' was opened. The bottom was made of pantile, the sides rough stone, the top ditto, and the soil around black from percolation. The surface grating communicating with this sewer near the Chapel is untrapped, and the householder who lives near it complains bitterly of the stench from it. This is only a solitary instance of a host of other sewers in a similar state, well known to everybody, and how an honest man could consent to be a party to the recent 'Report of the Parochial Committee', with all its mis-statements and mis-representations, is an enigma to many of the inhabitants. Will the Parochial Committee enlighten the public by informing it what connection the three persons who died from fever in one house in Paradise Row had with the 'local causes' around the Post Office²⁵? I am, Sir, your obedient servant, a 'Recent Resident'."

There then followed a satirical list of 108 probable reasons why 'settled and responsible ratepayers' might have signed the counter-memorial to the Local Government Board. Number 4 was 'Reads Pulman's paper'. Indeed one feature of this controversy which is quite striking is that whereas it was fully reported in the Chard & Ilminster Gazette, the Devon-based newspapers hardly mentioned it at all.

In the last week of November 1876 Mr Arnold Taylor, an Inspector from the Local Government Board, held a 2-day inquiry at the George Hotel²⁶. When his report was published 3 months later²⁷, he referred to a letter dated 21 July 1876, which was presumably the citizens' letter which had attracted so much venom from the elected officials. He quoted one sentence in particular: "The Axminster Rural Sanitary Authority has not provided the town with sufficient sewers, nor with a supply a pure water, and in consequence of the insufficiency of the former, and the unwholesomeness of the latter, the health of the inhabitants is in serious danger." Mr Taylor found that statement to be a fair summary, and he fully endorsed the findings and recommendations of Dr Blaxall's 1874 report. In particular he endorsed the need for all streets to have new sewers.

²⁴ Source: CIN, 30 Sept 1876.

²⁵ At this time the Post Office, where Mr Tapscott had died of fever, was on the corner of Chard Street and Paradise Row, a short distance down-hill from the independent chapel.

²⁶ Source: CIN, 2 Dec 1876.

²⁷ Source: CIN, 24 Feb 1877.

As far as drinking water was concerned, he noted that although some wells were good, he had observed that the George Hotel relied entirely on its neighbours' wells for its supply of drinking water. As regards the leat, he wrote: "*I never saw a more glaring instance of misuse and neglect of one of nature's most precious gifts.*" All that was required to reverse this position, he stated, was for the leat to be given proper protection.

He was scathing about the fact that only two of the Rural Sanitary Authority's 32 members had even attended his inquiry as observers.

His conclusion was that the complaints that had been made were accurate and fully established, and that action should be taken.

From 1878 to early 1883

The first evidence²⁸ of any real action to upgrade the water supply shows that in about 1878 local surveyors Messrs Pinney & Son were engaged to develop designs for enhancements to the system. The approach normally taken by Boards of Guardians at that time was not to pay for design work, but to offer the engineer (or surveyor) a percentage of the eventual work, to be paid when it got under way. However, in July 1879 it was reported²⁹ that at a recent meeting of the Board of Guardians "*... the Axminster water supply was again adjourned sine die.*" On the matter of sewerage, the Board had written to the County Council seeking permission "*... to carry the new Axminster sewer under Stony Bridge, and that the answer received was that they declined to grant it.*"

This did not stop people from looking forward, and early in 1880 there was a comment piece in the Exeter & Plymouth Gazette³⁰ predicting that once the proposed work was done the water pressure would be raised to such a level that the local fire brigade would be able "*... to throw a stream of water over any house*". The same piece explained that the "*... water will be brought from a reservoir in iron pipes, so that every householder will have the opportunity of taking the water if he chooses. This will be a great boon, but it is a long time coming. Legal difficulties have stood in the way, and now that they are removed the unemployed should be speedily engaged in executing the necessary works.*"

Not for the first time the press anticipated faster progress than the Rural Sanitary Authority was able to deliver. A few weeks later the same newspaper complained³¹ that "*... scarcely anything has been done for the past twelve months beyond fruitless correspondence between the solicitor for the Authority and the owners of property through which it is proposed to lay the mains ...*". They also revealed that not all of the members of the Sanitary Authority shared the same view of the proposed scheme, given that "*... a question has been raised, and an important one to the ratepayers, as to whether the present scheme is the best and the cheapest*". They went on to report that James Boon (the highly entrepreneurial owner of a woollen mill at the foot of Castle Hill, and one of the members), was continuing to argue that "*... they could utilise resources, without payment, by bringing the present stream, now in an open channel, into reservoirs, forming filter beds, taking what is required for high-service supply through the pipe into the town, and allowing the overflow (which would be pure compared to what it is now) to run in its accustomed channels for the sake of vested interests*".

In August it was reported³² that the Clerk to the Board of Guardians had confirmed that "*... the committee had held a meeting since the Board's last meeting ...*" at which it had been decided to write to land owners and occupiers from where water was to be taken making fresh offers. If agreement could not be reached, then arbitration would be proposed. However, it was reported that agreement had been reached regarding the land needed for a reservoir. A motion to seek a loan to allow the work to start was passed.

At the same meeting Mr Boon complained about the water supply on behalf of the residents of Castle Hill and other places. Mr Forward (the Clerk) pinned the blame on Mr Boon's own traction engine for breaking the pipes, a charge that Mr Boon rejected, stating that if the water was properly managed there was a plentiful supply. In his view simply paying men £4 a year (presumably to keep the town leat in running order) was not enough to deliver a good water

²⁸ Source: EPG, 12 Feb 1881.

²⁹ Source: BN, 11 July 1879.

³⁰ Source: EPG, 17 Feb 1880.

³¹ Source: EPG, 27 Apr 1880.

³² Source: BN, 27 Aug 1880.

supply. He also drew attention to the problem of sewage in the stream (i.e. in the mill leat) by his works.

Matters evidently ground to a further halt, because in early 1881 Messrs Pinney & Son were again lobbying the Board of Guardians for their fees to be paid³³. They complained that they had been engaged 4 years earlier to work on the proposed water works, and now they learned that the Board of Guardians (or more precisely the Rural Sanitary Authority) was not going to proceed with the works. Mr Forward again proposed, and the members agreed, that they should borrow £50 to open the springs and evaluate the supply, and if this proved positive Mr Pinney would get his 5% of the work's value.

This piecemeal approach evidently did not satisfy Mr Pinney³⁴, who by April was threatening to sue the Board of Guardians for his money. The Board declared, as though this was the end of the matter, that they simply did not have the money to pay his bill.

A further report 6 months later³⁵, in September 1881, reveals that the Rural Sanitary Authority was making a complete mess of applying for the necessary loan. They had asked for the money, but had evidently failed to provide the detail demanded. The Clerk blamed the state of confusion over what was proposed to be done, and when. They must have persevered, however, because early in 1882 a tender was issued³⁶ for "... erecting reservoirs, laying and jointing pipes, and other work connected with a new water supply for the town of Axminster". The tender was issued over the name of the Axminster Rural Sanitary Authority, with plans viewable at the offices of Messrs Pinney & Son, with bids requested to be delivered by 1 March 1882.

We do not know who the successful bidder was, but by April Mr Pinney informed the Board of Guardians that work was under way³⁷. True to form, the members quibbled with the fee (of 50 shillings a week) which Mr Pinney wanted to charge so that his son could act as clerk of works and oversee the contractor's work. In August 1882 it was clear³⁸ that the application for a loan was still a work in progress. At a meeting of the Board of Guardians, Mr Bradford complained that back in about 1853 Mr Pinney had "... estimated that the work could be done for about £700, and here they had now spent about £800 before the work was properly commenced". About 10 days later, however, Mr Pinney informed the Board of Guardians³⁹ that the work was nearing completion, and would be finished on time provided that the weather remained favourable. In January 1883 he proposed to the Board of Guardians⁴⁰ that the main water pipe be flushed once a week. The Board was told that the accounts for the water works were now available for inspection. The work had been funded by a loan of £4,000 approved by the Public Works Loan Commissioners.

By reference to the 1891 OS map we can confirm that the reservoir which was built in 1882 was located on the edge of town, on the western side of Lyme Road, above Fawnsmoor Farm. This is the same location as the present reservoir.

1883 to 1884: Unhappy customers

If the Board of Guardians thought that they would be showered with praise by a grateful town, they were sorely and quickly disappointed.

In mid-1883 a long newspaper report⁴¹ tells us what happened when Mr Downes of Lyme Road and Mr James Coate were granted a hearing by the Board of Guardians. James Coate had the year before taken over one of James Boon's mills at the foot of Castle Hill to manufacture tooth brushes, and had also become a local resident. The actual newspaper report consistently gives his surname as 'Coats', whereas it has been corrected to 'Coate' here to allow digital searches to work. It has also been broken into shorter paragraphs to assist the reader.

"Mr Coate said that he had had complaints made to him with regard to the pollution of the water which was drunk by many of the poor people of Axminster. In consequence he had taken the trouble to trace the stream of water. He found that it crossed the road and a farm yard. All the

³³ Source: EPG, 12 Feb 1881.

³⁴ Source: EPG, 9 Apr 1881.

³⁵ Source: EPG, 10 Sept 1881.

³⁶ Source: WT, 6 Feb 1882.

³⁷ Source: EFP, 12 Apr 1882.

³⁸ Source: EPG, 28 Aug 1882.

³⁹ Source: EPG, 9 Sept 1882.

⁴⁰ Source: EPG, 13 Jan 1883.

⁴¹ Source: EPG, 29 June 1883.

refuse of the yard ran into the stream. The water was in a most abominable state, and he could not find language to describe all he saw. It was a great nuisance, and the Board should inspect the stream. If the evil to which he had alluded were not remedied there would be every probability of a serious outbreak of disease, as many poor people were compelled to drink the water in question.

"The Chairman said he had no doubt that what Mr Coate had said was perfectly correct, but he wished him to understand that the stream was not intended for drinking purposes. However, there was no reason why the stream should be polluted, and it ought to be kept in a proper state before the introduction of the new water-supply. At all events, the Board would do all they possibly could to keep the supply as it was before.

"Mr Downes then said that he had, in conjunction with Mr Coate, inspected the stream of water spoken of and he believed that the whole of the inhabitants drank from it. ("No"). However, he could prove that at the present time quite one-hundred people at the upper part of Axminster drank the water. A portion of that stream had been diverted to the new reservoir, and, as a consequence, the strength of the stream had been reduced. The filth which ran into the stream, therefore, was not carried away as rapidly as heretofore. The Chairman: I presume the question is not altogether new. Mr Downes: Then I am sorry to hear it. The Chairman said that he did not suppose that the people were obliged to drink the dirty water. Mr Downes: They have no other source of supply. The Chairman: But there is the new supply for them. Mr Downes: Quite so; but landlords will not go to the expense of providing their cottages properly with a water-supply. I know of five or six cottages in the Lyme Road without a supply. The Lamb Inn has no water to consume but the water I have referred to. The Chairman: Very well; we will endeavour to remedy the evil as soon as possible. Mr Coate begged to Board to take immediate action for purifying the stream. The Chairman said that the Sanitary Authority had done a great deal with regard to the water of Axminster, and if they had the power to compel people to take the new water they would do so.

"Messrs Downes and Coate thanked the Board for hearing them, and withdrew. It was resolved that a list of names of those now taking the reservoir water and those without it or any other supply be presented to the next meeting."

No report on the relative lengths of the lists referred to above has been found, but 9 months later Mr Henley, a local stone mason, member of the Board of Guardians, and by then resident of Lyme House⁴² (close to the junction of Lyme Street and Coombe Lane) brought two bottles of water to a meeting of the Board⁴³. One was town water, and was described as discoloured, while the other was clear, and had been collected from the source of the leat. Holding up the sample of town water, Mr Henley complained that "... *this is what cost us £4,000!*". From the discussion that followed, it can be seen that new filter beds were in the process of being constructed, and they can be seen on the 1891 OS map close to the springs and due south of Furzeleigh copse, together with a small covered reservoir.

1884 to 1891: More engineering, continuing dissatisfaction

In August 1884 Messrs Pinney & Son sent a letter to the Board of Guardians⁴⁴ complaining about "... *the non-payment of the account for work in constructing the filtering beds at the impounding dam ...*" and rejecting "... *some very inaccurate statements made by Mr Henley concerning thereto. As we do not consider Mr Henley a competent authority on works of this kind we are willing that an inspection be made by the Local Government Board of this work, should your authority think proper*". The letter ended with a further demand for payment.

In July 1885 both the Chard & Ilminster News and the Western Times carried a copy of a letter sent by Mr A A Peniston to the Chairman of the Sanitary Board regarding the gutter drains in Castle Hill⁴⁵. This said that "... *during the hot weather experienced lately, the stench arising from the same is almost unbearable.*" He explained that he had reason to walk up or down Castle Hill seven or eight times a day, and noted six recent instances of scarlet fever in the street. He concluded: "*Where is our Sanitary Inspector, who I presume is the person deputed to report these matters to the Board? Evidently a sleeping partner in the firm of 'Axminster & Co'.*"

⁴² He had previously lived just up-hill from the Lamb Inn.

⁴³ Source: EPG, 4 Apr 1884.

⁴⁴ Source: BN, 12 Aug 1884.

⁴⁵ Source: CIN and WT, both dated 11 July 1885.

In 1887 a further report⁴⁶ from a meeting of the Board of Guardians tells us that they were reviewing continuing problems with the water supply, which had evidently fallen short of "... *gaugings that were taken at the spring sources both before the works were commenced and at their completion in 1882. Messrs Pinney, engineers, had volunteered gratuitously to make a thorough inspection of the work, and to report thereon*". On 6 May Messrs Pinney, together with Mr Harvey and Mr Swain, had inspected the connections. They found that the inlet supplying a drinking trough at Towns Moor⁴⁷ was disabled, and that other valves were in a very poor state. At the reservoir itself they found no evidence of any leakage, nor from the pipes between the reservoir and the 'impounding dam' (which was just below the source springs). They attributed the reduction in flow to the fact that one of the springs had been 'cut off'. They considered that this could be re-instated, and they quantified the current supply from the reservoir as 1,213 gallons per hour, equivalent to 14 gallons per head per day for the town's residents.

Based on these figures we can see that the population to which water was being supplied was assumed to be about 2,000. For the purposes of comparison, 21st century targets for water consumption per head are very close to double the level of provision under discussion (i.e. 125 litres per head per day, or 28 gallons). At this time relatively few houses in Axminster would have had flushing toilets, or baths.

By 1889 James Coate, who had been so critical of the town's water supply in 1883, had been elected as one of the Guardians of the Poor. A newspaper report at that time⁴⁸ tells us that he organised a meeting of rate payers (i.e. voters) at The George at which he expressed his continuing concern at the way in which the town's water and sanitary measures were being managed. When he had arrived, 7 years before, he said, the town had been in the middle of "... *a contention about the water*". Since then the town had borrowed £4,500 at a cost of £340 per year over 30 years. The work that had been done had certainly helped as far as firefighting was concerned. Without the current system he was sure that "... *the fire at Mr Tytherleigh's the other day would have swept over a great part of the town*". However, as far as drinking water was concerned, the problem was not the source, which he described as a "... *beautiful bed of white gravel ...*" but the mains pipes and the pollution en route. A sample taken from one cottage was said to be "... *thick and reddish*". What was more, whereas the system was costing the town £340 a year in loan repayment alone, water rents were only bringing in £133 a year. He was confident that if the water could be delivered pure to people's houses the demand (and therefore the town's income) would increase greatly. By way of illustration he stated that he could not use town water in his factory because it would spoil the brushes which he made. His proposed solution was the appointment of a competent manager and regular inspections by the Guardians. He supported the efforts of Messrs Henley and Swain, and reminded those who attended the meeting that elections were imminent.

In July 1890 it was reported⁴⁹ that a tender from Mr Parsons to build a 2-foot barrel arch at Castle Hill had been accepted. This would be designed "... *to carry sewage to the back of the hill, and thence into the mill stream*." The phrase 'back of the hill' probably meant that the sewer would run beneath Vale Lane, to discharge the sewage further from where such large numbers of people lived and worked.

A year later there was further discussion about a new tender to build a sewer under Castle Hill⁵⁰. It is not obvious that any firm decision was taken.

1892 to 1895: Conflict at all levels

By 1892 a report⁵¹ on a meeting of the Board of Guardians shows evidence of an extraordinary level of conflict between the members of the Board of Guardians, both individually and collectively. There was a bitter personal attack on James Coate for first agreeing to some drainage work to be carried out at Purzebrook, and then for having that same work stopped. The Clerk (Mr William Forward) said "... *he should end his days in a lunatic asylum if the sanitary and water works*

⁴⁶ Source: EPG, 13 May 1887.

⁴⁷ Towns Moor is shown on some maps as sitting between Sector stream and Coles's Lane. If this is the location referred to, it cannot have formed part of the main water supply system, because it is much lower than Fawns Moor Farm, through which the leat always flowed.

⁴⁸ Source: EPG, 28 Mar 1889.

⁴⁹ Source: CIN, 19 July 1890.

⁵⁰ Source: WT, 9 July 1891.

⁵¹ Source: BN, 2 Sept 1892.

matters were not carried out in a better manner ... As they were now going on they were simply a laughing stock for the neighbourhood".

The same report stated that a leak had been found at Prospect House (Mr Wilmott's residence), sending water to Mr Coate's fields and on to Purzebrook, instead of down the town leat. Mr Benjamin Gage also reported that a pipe in the water course at Fawnsmoor had been taken up, and it was now dangerous to cross the stream with a horse and cart. It was alleged that the pipe had been removed on Mr Coate's order, having originally been installed at the Board's instigation. He referred to the 'state' of the water supply for 35 years, complaining that it was now so poor that it could not be crossed safely. He called for a culvert to be installed.

Although it is not possible to be sure exactly where the location was about which Mr Gage was complaining, it may very well be the public footpath, formerly a much more substantial track leading down towards Sector Lane from the Lyme Road, on the town side of the reservoir.

In 1894 the Bridport News reported⁵² that an unnamed water rate payer in Axminster had written a letter describing the water as unfit for washing clothes or for cleaning vegetables, let alone for drinking. The paper asked its readers "*Can you tell us whose fault or neglect is this?*"

1895 to 1901: A change of characters, but no end to conflict

It was reported in April 1895⁵³ that Axminster Parish Council had "... *agreed to take over the sanitary powers conferred on them by the District Council. Five Overseers were elected after a division, as follows: R Henley, H Morrish and E Harvey, eight each; H Swain, seven; C Osbourne and T B Heal, six each; J S Hellier and G Swain, five each. There was a tie for fifth place, and a second division resulted in Mr T B Heal being elected*". The Chairman of the Parish Council was W E Pitfield Chapple (a local solicitor) and the Vice Chairman was J S Bucknole. If they had hoped that James Coate would give them a period of grace they were disabused immediately, because he sent a letter to the same meeting stating that the Committee "... *had interfered with his water rights at Lea Combe, and he should go to law to recover the rights. The Chairman said any alleged interference was done by the Sanitary Authority while Mr Coate was a member of that body*". By way of context, in 1892 W E Pitfield Chapple had been James Coate's solicitor.

A few months later⁵⁴ the Parish Council was inviting "... *tenders for providing and laying at the Water Supply, near Furzley, 450 ft of High Pressure water pipe, the pipe to be previously coated, with Dr Smith's solution, and to be jointed with lead, the Tender to include all excavating and making good the ground afterwards*". Tenders were to be delivered by 21 September 1895.

It is not clear that any tender was accepted, because 2 months later it was reported⁵⁵ that at a meeting of the Parish Council "... *Mr J G Pinney, of Axminster, reported that springs at Higher Furzeleigh Coppice had been selected, the water being of good quality and plentiful. He recommended that seven-inch iron pipes be laid from the impounding dam to the reservoir. The filter beds, if properly made, were quite sufficient to purify the water, but the beds should be cleaned much oftener than at present*". The scheme described by Mr Pinney seems almost (if not actually) identical to what was already supposed to be there.

Three months later James Coate sent a long letter to the Bridport News⁵⁶ detailing his latest criticisms of the way in which Axminster's water supply was being managed. He stated that work was in hand to replace existing pipes, but limited to a cost of no more than £100 per year. He drew attention to on-going problems with tree roots damaging clay pipes, and highlighted a serious leak that had recently been detected in a field belonging to Major Cann (who lived at Symonds Down House, and owned some of the land where springs were located, though this was not stated in James Coate's letter). Then, apparently, a worse leak had been found some three or four fields away. The Parish Council had apparently tried to amend the agreed contract, but had failed to obtain the agreement of the District Council. Even the work which had been done, he stated, had been highly imperfect.

⁵² Source: BN, 19 Oct 1894.

⁵³ Source: EPG, 19 Apr 1895.

⁵⁴ Source: EPG, 16 Sept 1895.

⁵⁵ Source: WT, 22 Nov 1895.

⁵⁶ Source: BN, 31 Jan 1896.

Shortly thereafter it was reported⁵⁷ that Messrs Clarke & Lukin (solicitors from Chard who were by then representing James Coate, though this is not stated in the newspaper report) acknowledged receipt of a report drawn up by the District Council, but noted that in their opinion it differed "... emphatically from the somewhat hasty conclusions arrived at by the Council".

Relations between James Coate and the Parish Council then went from bad to worse. In late July 1896⁵⁸ he brought an action against the Axminster water bailiff at Axminster Petty Sessions, in front of Mr S Stevens in the chair, together with Captain Forward and Captain Rogers. Captain William Forward was either himself clerk to the Board of Guardians, or the clerk's son. Although the clerk had regularly clashed with James Coate, Captain Forward evidently saw no conflict of interest in hearing Mr Coate's complaint. The report is quoted in full below.

"Alfred Frost, water bailiff, in the employ of the Axminster Rural District Council, was summoned for assaulting Edward Loud, groom and gardener in the employ of Mr Coate, of Axminster. Mr W Marsh of Yeovil, appeared for the complainant. In his evidence [the] complainant stated that acting on the instructions of Mr Coate he had from time to time inspected the Axminster Town Lake. He did so on the 16th July and found that some portion of it was covered in brambles and weeds. On the Saturday following he again went up to the source of the town lake of the water supply and met Frost, the bailiff, who used abusive language to him and followed that up by using threatening language. He went there by the consent of the tenants. Defendant's defence was that it was a part of his duty to prevent anyone walking along that path except the tenants and the members of the Council. Mr W E P Chapple, Chairman of the District Council, gave evidence as to printed notice boards being up on the Water Works and on the Town Lake, informing people that if they trespassed there they would be prosecuted. Frost had been cautioned from time to time not to allow any trespassers there. After a brief consultation the Chairman said they were of [the] opinion that a technical assault had been made. They could not consider it was a part of the defendant's duty to turn anyone back after he has walked there with the consent of the occupier. They thought the justice of the case would be met by a fine of 1s. The costs were remitted."

A week or so later James Coate complained to the RDC⁵⁹, via a letter sent by his solicitors, Messrs Clarke & Lukin, stating that he had not had a drop of water at Lea Combe since 25 July "... and that the supply of adjacent buildings had also been suspended. The Clerk said his water had also been cut off, and it had been done in a very blackguardly way".

Over the next year he (James Coate) then evidently decided to escalate the dispute by suing the Parish Council. The specific details in his complaint are not available, but the Council's statement of defence was read out at a meeting in July 1897, as follows⁶⁰. "It stated that the Council did not deny the right of the owner of Lea Combe House to a supply of water for domestic purposes through an inch pipe from a spot near the Roman Catholic Chapel, but they did deny that the owner of Lea Combe ever had a branch system flowing down through the meadows as had been stated. The water had not, as suggested in the claim, flowed for 40, or even 20, years to Lea Combe House and meadows, nor was it admitted by the Council that the owner had a legal right to the supply. The Council approved the statement of defence."

Late in October James Coate evidently attended a meeting of the RDC⁶¹ (of which he was an elected member) at which there were heated exchanges between him and the other members. He refused to leave the meeting "... unless I am compelled to go by force". The Council then set up a committee comprising all of the members other than Mr Coate to consider the matter further. Before leaving, James Coate referred to "... a report which had been spread all over Axminster to the effect that he was to be committed to prison for three months or pay a fine of £500 for issuing a pamphlet dealing with the water dispute. It was monstrous that Mr Forward, the Clerk to the Council, should be able to do what he had done. Such a thing would not occur except in a petty place like Axminster". The Clerk pleaded no personal bias, and said he was simply doing his duty to the Council and taking advice from Counsel.

We then learn⁶² that Mr W Forward reported to the next meeting of the RDC that he had written to the Local Government Board seeking their advice on who would be liable for any legal costs in the Lea Combe dispute: the RDC or the Parish Council. Their reply indicated that the cost would fall on

⁵⁷ Source: BN, 28 Feb 1896.

⁵⁸ Source: WT, 29 July 1896.

⁵⁹ Source: WT, 7 Aug 1896.

⁶⁰ Source: EPG, 21 July 1897.

⁶¹ Source: EPG, 29 Oct 1897.

⁶² Source: EPG, 26 Nov 1897.

the RDC. As might be expected, the majority of members, representing communities outside Axminster, were not particularly happy with this advice, and a month later⁶³ the RDC was evidently lobbying for a different opinion. The Local Government Board declined to come down firmly one way or the other.

Possibly unrelated to the legal dispute, in the Spring of 1898 a notice placed on behalf of James Coate by Clarke & Lukin announced⁶⁴ that a small farm of 42 acres adjacent to Lea Combe (and comprising the fields up until then occupied by James Coate) was to be let, described as comprising rich meadows and pasture, with buildings.

Frustratingly, there are no detailed press reports of the outcome of the Lea Combe dispute, but we do have a copy of a technical report dated 9 June 1898⁶⁵ which was prepared for the High Court of Justice, Chancery Division in relation to a case between Alexander Collingwood Fownes Luttrell and (many) others including James Coate (collectively the plaintiffs), and Axminster RDC and the Axminster Parish Council (defendant). The report was written by Edward Pollock, Official Referee representing Grove Son & Peak of 57 Lincoln's Inn Fields and Hugh R Poole & Son of South Petherton in response to an order made by the judge, Mr Justice Kekewich, on 1 March 1898.

(At the end of this chapter there is an explanatory note setting out a bit more background to the plaintiffs in the case, most of whom had only tenuous links to Axminster.)

That technical report addresses seven specific questions which, irritatingly, are not set out in the report. However, the first four key findings were as follows, and it not hard to work out what questions had been asked. *"(1) The nature of the user of the Town Lake at all the times mentioned was a user of the water to supply houses for domestic purposes also for watering cattle and for watering the roads. (2) The course of the Town Lake was the same both before and after the construction of the said tank and the lake had flowed in such course for a period of thirty years and upwards. The tank was constructed in the course of the Town Lake. (3) Previously to the construction of the said tank Lea Combe House had been supplied with water for domestic purposes for thirty years and upwards by means of a pipe one inch in diameter leading from the Town Lake at a point below where the said tank was constructed. (4) The construction of the said tank has had no effect at any time upon the flow of water in the course of the Town Lake below the said tank nor upon the supply of water for domestic purposes to Lea Combe House."*

The fifth answer is more enigmatic in the absence of the matching question, and is as follows. *"(5) Previously to August 1892 water did not flow in a defined course from the Town Lake where the Town Lake flows through the grounds of Prospect Cottage to upon of through the meadow and pasture lands occupied with Lea Combe House. In or about August 1892 owing to want of repair in the channel of the Town Lake water flowed from the Town Lake through a drain into a ditch leading down to the meadow and pasture lands occupied with Lea Combe House. The want of repair was discovered in a few days and was at once made good. With the exception of this occasion and the period between the 25th of September 1895 and the 23rd of March 1896 the occupiers of the said meadow and pasture lands did not use water flowing from the Town Lake."* The strong implication of this is that a major part of the dispute was about the use of water from the town leat to supply cattle in the adjacent fields, rather than about strictly domestic supplies. The sixth answer tells us nothing (*"No flow of water as mentioned existed"*) but the seventh is crucial to what happened next: *"No damage has been occasioned to any of the Plaintiffs by any act of the Defendants or either of them."*

Very soon after this opinion was submitted it was reported⁶⁶ that the RDC was informed that *"... the plaintiffs in the Lea Combe water case had written to the defendant Council intimating their intention of issuing a summons, returnable on Tuesday next, requesting the Court to discontinue the action. The Council resolved to oppose the application and proceed to judgement in the interest of the public"*. James Coate, who had also just been heavily defeated in an election for a seat on Devon County Council, had evidently accepted that his case was not going to be upheld by the court. Nevertheless, the Parish Council was not awarded costs, and in May 1899 the Local

⁶³ Source: EPG, 24 Dec 1897.

⁶⁴ Source: TCWA, 9 Mar 1898.

⁶⁵ Source: A bundle of documents kept by Mr W E Pitfield Chapple (whose practice was absorbed into what is now Messrs Scott Rowe of Chard Street). This bundle is now held by Axminster Heritage Centre.

⁶⁶ Source: EPG, 10 June 1898.

Government Board sanctioned the Parish Council⁶⁷ to make a special sanitary rate to meet the costs of the court case. The Clerk stated that the rate would be 4½d on houses and 1½d on land.

By the time Queen Victoria died, in 1901, Axminster's historic (largely mediaeval) water supply system had been adapted rather than transformed. The addition of a concrete reservoir had helped to smooth out peaks and troughs in availability, though shortages remained frequent. Some parts of the open channel system had been replaced by pipes, but the quality of the water which reached households left much to be desired; and anyone who had a well in their house or garden almost certainly cherished it. The ability to deliver water at a higher pressure than before had significantly enhanced the fire brigade's ability to fight fires effectively. Nevertheless, the shape and scope of the system in 1901 would have been very recognisable to anyone familiar with the town when Victoria ascended the throne in 1837.

The Plaintiffs in the Lea Combe case

From the 1850s until 1874 Lea Combe House had been occupied (and almost certainly owned) by Mr George Jeremy, a barrister of Lincoln's Inn Fields, and author of (among other things) 'Jeremy's Equity Jurisdiction'. When he died in 1874 he left a controversial will in which the majority of his assets went to three of his cousins, one of whom was Charlotte Ann Fownes Luttrell, wife of the vicar of Minehead. His will was the subject of litigation on the part of disappointed relatives, but it was settled in 1876 in line with his stated wishes.

Charlotte Ann Fownes Luttrell had just one child, a daughter called Margaret Charlotte, who then retained her surname by marrying John Alexander Fownes Luttrell, no doubt a cousin, in 1870. Their eldest child, born soon thereafter, was Alexander Collingwood Fownes Luttrell, the first-named plaintiff in the Lea Combe case.

In 1877, no doubt drawing on her recent inheritance, Charlotte Ann Fownes Luttrell had paid the full cost for a new church to be built at Minehead, in memory of George Jeremy. The assumption has to be that she also inherited Lea Combe House, which was then let to tenants, including from about 1893, James Coate. Charlotte Ann Fownes Luttrell herself died in 1887, and most if not all of the plaintiffs in the Lea Combe case were beneficiaries under her will, and therefore directly interested in maintaining the value of one of her core assets.

After James Coate left Lea Combe House (in about 1907, not long before his death) it was taken over by Alexander Collingwood Fownes Luttrell, grandson of Charlotte Ann. He had been the first-named plaintiff in the lawsuit, and was the author of a description of the town leat cited in full in Chapter 4.

⁶⁷ Source: WT, 3 May 1899.

Chapter 4: The Town's Water and Sewerage Systems in the 20th Century

Introduction

With the ending of the Lea Combe water dispute, greater attention started to be focussed on the town's sewerage system. Just as they should be in the real world, so in this chapter water and sewerage are treated separately, though to make it easier to follow how the two systems were developing, the two stories are set out in parallel below, organised by time period. Because the next phase of work started on the sewerage system, it is described first in this chapter.

It is worth noting that James Coate, who had done so much to try to force change on Axminster in the late Victorian era, increasingly withdrew from public life in the early 20th century. Indeed, in the final years of his life, and after his wife died in October 1902, he moved house from Lea Combe to Smallridge, where he died in 1910.

1901 to 1920

Who were 'the ratepayers' at this time?

One feature that the Lea Combe dispute had highlighted, and which had been identified as a problem in 1853 by the Superintending Inspector from the General Board of Health, was the conflict between the interests of the inhabitants and rate payers of the poorly-defined urban area of Axminster, and those of the outlying districts. This was not just a conflict between the residents of Axminster parish and those of the other parishes which made up the Axminster Union and the RDC, but was equally evident between the residents of the town and the rest of the parish who had access to 'town services' when they came into the town, but had to arrange and pay for their own supplies and services at home.

Anyone who is interested in this aspect of municipal politics in the specific context of Axminster, its water and its sewerage, should read an open letter to the inhabitants of the town published in the form of a pamphlet in the 1870s but mostly comprising letters written in 1869. These were written, and the pamphlet published, by James Alexander Knight whose brother Henry was the joint owner of the Manor of Axminster (and from 1871 the sole owner). His advocacy of the case in favour of establishing an Urban Council was simply ignored at the time.

The split (in 1914) between the RDC and the new UDC is described briefly above in Chapter 1 under the heading 'Local Government between 1834 and 1945'.

One specific source document which helps to provide valuable context is the report on the outcome of the re-valuation process, carried out in 1910 across the country for property tax purposes, by the District Valuer, Inland Revenue. This is often referred to as the second 'Domesday' book because of the scope and detail which it provides. The valuation figures for Axminster can be seen in the DHC (where the reference number is 3201V/2/5).

Although that document does not provide a total value for the parish, Kelly's Directory of 1919 gives the taxable value of Axminster Town at that time as £10,173 and that of Axminster Hamlets as £9,380. It also tells us that the total value of the parish in 1910 had been £18,754.

The value of the parish's tax base was dominated by a relatively small number of houses and businesses, and by its farms. In any argument between the interests of the town and its surrounding countryside, it can be taken as read that the farmers were on the side of the countryside.

Within the parish there were 50 non-farm premises with a taxable value greater than £25, the combined taxable value of which was at least⁶⁸ £2,210. Leaving on one side the many residents of other parishes within the Axminster District, the owners of these properties were the people with the greatest financial interest in how local services were paid for. Ten of these 50 (Chattan Hall, Old Park, Weycroft Mill, Cloakham, Symonds Down House, Furzebrook, Sector, Brooklyn, Brookhill and Mount House, together accounting for a tax base of £530, or almost a quarter of the figure of

⁶⁸ The reason I say 'at least' is that the values cited here refer to the main properties. Several of the houses and commercial premises concerned had closely-associated gardens and out-buildings which were separately assessed.

£2,210, were outside or on the very edge of the area that could be considered urban, and certainly not supplied with town water or any sort of mains sewerage connection.

The remaining 'high-end' tax base of £1,680 was split almost exactly evenly between 20 business premises and 21 private houses. Not all of these should be assumed to have been against change, however. The most highly taxed premises of all (The George Hotel, £100) had been found (in 1876: see above) not to have a reliable water supply. Several other 'high end' premises were on or close to Castle Hill, with its long-standing problems of sanitation (namely Edwin Dawkins' shop on Victoria Place, £80; Richard Southwood's wine business at Castle Mount, £45; The Old Bell, £40; Castle Hill House, £32; and The Green Dragon, £30).

The majority of the votes, however, lay with residents of medium-sized and small houses and shops, many of which were valued at between £10 and £20, while the smallest and least desirable cottages were valued for tax purposes at between £2 and £5.

Sewerage

Although questions relating to sewerage had been given a lower profile than those related to water supply in Axminster's municipal politics over the decades prior to 1900, in February 1902 they came centre stage⁶⁹, as follows. *"For some very considerable time past sanitary matters in Axminster have, it is understood, been far from satisfactory. Matters culminated last night in a public meeting in the Board Schoolroom, to consider a letter from the Local Government Board, which stated that '... it appears to the Board that the Rural District Council should now place the matter in the hands of a competent engineer, with a view to the preparation of such a scheme of sewerage and sewage disposal as is suggested in the Board's letter of 7th September 1900'. Mr W E Pitfield Chapple (Chairman of the Parish Council) presided over a very large attendance. The Chairman said there was no doubt that the sewage scheme of the town would have to be dealt with. By allowing the sewage to enter the river they were infringing the River Pollution Act. They would have to drain the whole town from end to end. That would be a big matter, but it could not be put off any longer."* Some of the farmers in attendance objected to having to pay for works of benefit only to the town, and the wider question of whether or not a UDC was needed was aired.

A month later⁷⁰ a follow-up public meeting discussed the merits and practicalities of establishing an Urban Area. It was reported that a letter had been received from the Local Government Board to say that they would consider an application to form a special drainage district. They would require 1 acre per 1,000 persons to be made available for sewage treatment, or 1 acre per 150 persons for the spreading on farm land of untreated sewage. Rev A Newman proposed a formal motion supporting separation into Urban and Rural Districts, defining the putative Urban District as *"... the present lighting area"*. The Chairman rejected his motion as premature, and the meeting agreed to look further at the options.

In October 1902 the Chard & Ilminster News ran an editorial piece as follows. *"The sanitation of Axminster has lately had the serious consideration not only of the local authorities, but also of the townfolk generally. It is quite clear that something will have to be decided on before very long. The present drainage system is admitted to be far from satisfactory, and unless steps are taken to remedy its defects the results may be exceedingly serious. The authorities have dabbled in improvement schemes since 1882, but very little of practical utility has been carried into effect. The outfall works are in such an awful condition as to be a standing disgrace, and are alleged to be a menace to the public health. All schemes seem to be outside the ken of the authorities now, who evidently believe that where ignorance is bliss, 'tis folly to be wise'. Let them beware, however, for in endangering the public health by apathy and dilatoriness they are incurring a great deal of responsibility. We trust this warning note may ring clear and be sufficient to arouse our local governors."*

Over the next year or so proposals for solutions to the sewerage challenge were discussed, shelved and even lost in the post⁷¹ at a critical moment. Late in 1903 a delegation from the newly-formed Axminster Development Syndicate Ltd (comprising Dr Langran, Messrs Southwood, R Snell, W J Harris and Madge) met the RDC⁷² to discuss drainage of the Hakes Estate (i.e. Hillhead Terrace, Alexandra Road and the surrounding area), where they were proposing to build a significant

⁶⁹ Source: WT, 18 Feb 1902.

⁷⁰ Source: WT, 18 Mar 1902.

⁷¹ Source: WT, 31 July 1903.

⁷² Source: EPG, 9 Oct 1903.

number of houses. They must have received satisfactory assurances, because construction started the following year on Hillhead Terrace.

The urgency of the need for new housing in a new part of town was highlighted by a comment made to a meeting of the RDC in 1904⁷³ at which "... *the Clerk drew attention to a nuisance at Castle Hill. He said the stench was enough to kill a horse, and it was fortunate for himself that when he passed the other day he was smoking a pipe, or he would have collapsed*". The source of the stench was the town's sewage, which continued to drain down Castle Hill and into the mill leat.

This can be better understood if it is remembered that shortly before 1838 the town weir had been constructed, increasing the flow of water which passed through the mills, but greatly reducing the flow in the main river. When the railway had been constructed in the late 1850s it had substantially and further affected the layout, with the result that the efficiency with which the contents of the sewers which entered the mill stream at this point from the northern part of the town were carried away and dispersed was significantly reduced.

The other main sewers, which served the southern part of the town, entered the Purzebrook. Writing in 1892⁷⁴, James Coate had observed that "... *the sewer, which is a barrel-arch in South Street, ... enters a stone-covered drain and runs down by the doors of Penney's Cottages, giving off sewer gas at every imperfect joint of the stone covers as it goes down to the bottom of the hill ... where it enters the general sewer; and here the sewer from the Union side comes down and joins also ...*" before merging with a further sewer from West Street and flowing into the mill stream and then the Axe.

By June 1904 matters had got so bad that the Council was threatened very credibly and directly with legal proceedings by Devon County Council⁷⁵. Under a headline of 'Axminster sewage scheme – Proceedings to be taken' the following was reported. "*The General Purposes and Parliamentary Committee recommended to the County Council yesterday that proceedings under the River Pollution Prevention Acts be taken against the Axminster District Council owing to the unreasonable delay which has occurred in providing efficient means for treating the sewage of Axminster.*

"Lord Clifford said the pollution of the river at Axminster had been going on for a very considerable time. There had been lengthy correspondence over it, and [the] Committee was of the opinion that nothing would be done unless some pressure was brought to bear on the locality.

"Mr W H B Knight said the Axminster Council was not quite so bad or unreasonable as depicted. It would cost £2,000 or £3,000 to take the sewage out of the river, and [an] application was made to the Local Government Board in the matter. They refused to grant such [a] loan unless they brought forward plans for the dealing with the whole of the sewage of the town. That would have entailed an additional expenditure of £5,000. The rateable value of Axminster was only £18,000, and if the Parish was put to the expense mentioned, it would mean an increase in rates of about 6d which was a very serious matter. From the point at which the sewage entered the river until it reached the sea there was not a house within a considerable distance, and no water was drawn from the river for domestic purposes. He moved that the matter be referred back to the Committee. The amendment was not seconded, and the report was adopted."

Axminster RDC was then informed by means of a letter from the County Council⁷⁶ that they had 2 months from the motion of 9 June before proceedings would start. "*Mr W H B Knight ... thought a letter should be sent ... pointing out that steps were being taken ...*", given that engineers from Messrs Willets and Philpott of Cheltenham were taking levels and proposing plans for the purpose of taking the sewage out of the river, and exploring a 'septic tank option'.

More than 4 years later discussions were still dragging on between the Local Government Board and the RDC⁷⁷ over the question of a loan, not least because key details such as an appropriate site and access were still only provisionally agreed. It was reported that the Local Government Board was proposing to hold a local inquiry. It was also reported that the local mill owners (i.e. the owners of the brush factories and the foundry) would not agree to water being taken from the mill stream / leat. James Coate, whose bitter dispute with the Council over water rights had dominated the previous decade, was one of those owners.

⁷³ Source: WT, 11 Mar 1904.

⁷⁴ Source: A pamphlet entitled 'To the inhabitants of Axminster', and dated 8 October 1892.

⁷⁵ Source: EPG, 10 June 1904.

⁷⁶ Source: WT, 26 Aug 1904.

⁷⁷ Source: WT, 6 Feb 1909.

The Local Government Board Inspector, Dr Sweeting, recommended, among other things, that Mr J Loveridge should not be re-appointed as the local Sanitary Inspector, and that his replacement should be appointed to work full-time⁷⁸.

Although no contemporary report of the event has been found, we know from a later newspaper article⁷⁹ that a further inquiry was held into the Axminster sewage issue on 23 November 1910, and that recommendations and requirements were generated.

In early February 1911 the RDC considered a report on the proposed sewerage system⁸⁰, which may well have arisen from that inquiry. The proposal was for an outfall near the railway station. It was also recommended that all sewer pipes should be new, and that the existing ones should be used to carry surface water drainage only. The question of the division of responsibilities between the Parish Council and the RDC arose again at the Council meeting, with the Parish Council wanting to drive matters forward, while the RDC remained the statutory body with responsibility for sewerage.

Two weeks later⁸¹, at another meeting of the RDC, Mr W H B Knight "... moved a resolution to the effect that, in face of the probable unsatisfactory working of the proposed plan for pumping sewage both at Castle Hill and at the railway station, and also considering the large permanent cost which such pumping entailed, the Council was strongly of [the] opinion that, if possible, a sewage disposal scheme be devised which would necessitate simple gravitation only". This resolution was unanimously agreed.

A third inquiry was held⁸² under Mr R G Hetherington, AMInst CE, into the RDC's application to borrow £10,000 for sewerage and sewage disposal at Axminster.

The farmers of the district (and parish) remained exercised over the costs to them in return for no benefits, and a lack of consideration of their views⁸³. Their views were articulated by Malcolm Couper Gibb of Old Park and by Francis Thornhill Swain of Tolcis. By their reckoning those farmers who lived outside the lighting area would have to meet half of the cost, reflecting the relatively high rates paid on land compared to houses.

Very soon thereafter the split between Rural and Urban districts came into force, and World War I broke out. Little if any work was undertaken until the end of the war, and the effect of that work went almost completely unremarked in the local and regional press. When the sewage treatment works was constructed, it was located well to the south of the station, and on the eastern side of the railway line.

Water

As reported above, for much of the first decade of the 20th century the attention of the Axminster RDC was firmly on sewerage and sewage disposal rather than water.

However, as iron pipes were more widely installed and jointed, the distribution system became increasingly able to be run at pressure, which in turn enabled water to be pumped up-hill for the first time. Leaky pipes are only suitable for gravity-fed supply systems.

As a consequence, by 1905 a lot of new houses were being built to the south of Purzebrook, in an area which until then had had no access to 'town water', and a new consulting engineer, Mr H Phillott, had been engaged to advise the Council about the water system⁸⁴. In 1907, even in the winter, supplies were stretched, with the water being cut off from 6:30 each evening until 6:30 the following morning⁸⁵.

In 1910 the Sanitary Committee of the RDC⁸⁶ was asked by the Axminster Mercantile Association⁸⁷ to provide a better and more reliable water supply. Cecil Forward (the Clerk) reported that the term of the 30-year loan which had been taken out to pay for the reservoir and related works

⁷⁸ Source: CIG, 3 July 1909.

⁷⁹ Source: WT, 1 Nov 1912.

⁸⁰ Source: EPG, 3 Feb 1911.

⁸¹ Source: EPG, 17 Feb 1911.

⁸² Source: WT, 1 Nov 1912.

⁸³ Sources: WT, 5 Mar 1913 and EPG, 29 Mar 1913.

⁸⁴ Source: WT, 10 Nov 1905.

⁸⁵ Source: EPG, 18 Jan 1907. Ironically, this was the same issue as reported the funeral of James Coate.

⁸⁶ The report refers to the Parish Council, but the personnel referred to suggest that it was actually the RDC.

⁸⁷ Source: EPG, 10 May 1910.

would end on 3 November 1911. The water rate was currently yielding £238, half of which was spent on labour. The Chairman, Mr W H Percy-Hardman, said that he and others had been up to Beaver Batch, where they had seen two good springs which could easily be used to supplement the existing supply, requiring only three quarters of a mile of new pipework. Mr Snell also reported that the filter beds and reservoir were in very good condition. The Council decided to engage Mr Phillott to look further into the practicalities of adding the Beaver Batch springs to the town's water supply.

About 3 weeks later Mr Phillott reported back⁸⁸. He agreed that the Beaver Batch springs could be tapped, and reckoned that one of the springs was yielding 14,400 gallons a day, with the other giving 44,460. Taken together, he said, this represented 19.6 gallons per person per day (implying that the population of the area served by mains water was about 3,000, which appears to have been a significant over-estimate on his part). He recommended building a small tank at Beaver Batch, with a pipe running from that tank to the existing filter beds. However, he also drew attention to the continuing problems with earthenware pipework elsewhere in the system, including root damage. He stated that 906 yards of new iron pipe was required.

Early in 1911 Cecil Forward, Clerk to the RDC, reported⁸⁹ that he had written to the owner of Beaver Batch, Mr Parsons of Misterton, asking if he would be prepared to sell the water from the springs to the Council. The reply that he had received indicated that Mr Parsons would want the delivery to be metered.

The RDC evidently decided to seek a loan of £1,450 to undertake additional works to boost the capacity of the water system⁹⁰, and in June 1914 an inquiry into this proposal was held by the Local Government Board. The inquiry was told by Cecil Forward that the capacity of the existing reservoir was 60,000 gallons; that there had been shortages of water during the summer of 1912; and that the pipes between the filter beds at Furzeleigh and the reservoir were still leaking. The daily yield had been measured at 136,000 gallons in November 1913, but only 60,800 gallons in June 1914. The new proposal was to add a second reservoir so that "*... if and when the town leat scheme was carried out, the same could be connected and used if required. There was no objection*". A few weeks later it was reported⁹¹ that the Local Government Board was generally supportive of the proposal that they had seen, subject to some technical changes. What is not clear from the above is exactly where the additional reservoir was to be located.

This decision coincided almost exactly with the coming into being of Axminster UDC, though any positive effect which may have been hoped for as a consequence of this was more than outweighed by the outbreak of war, which put the work on hold. That did not, however, prevent the ratepayers of Axminster from lobbying for work to be started⁹² while hostilities were still very much under way.

By 1920 the UDC, which was also actively encouraging the building of more new houses off Musbury Road, returned to the question of the water supply⁹³. A meeting of the Council considered the water supply, and called for an expert to be engaged now that the war was over. Mr Hern asked "*... why the contractors of the housing scheme had been given permission to use the town water, seeing that it had been decided not to do so*". It was resolved that the contractor be given 14 days' notice of being cut off. The housing scheme concerned was almost certainly Nos.1-22 Boxfield Road, promoted directly by the Council. There seems to have been no thought given to how the houses were to be considered habitable without a water supply.

By August 1920 the Council had been provided with a report by Messrs J Mansergh & Sons⁹⁴, with technical recommendations and a budget of £12,000. The Council decided to press ahead with works to the proposed new settling tank and additional filters, and changes to the existing filters. Mr Dawkins urged the Council to install proper water meters at the tank so that they would know how much water was actually being used. This was agreed. Work to construct a new 500,000 gallon tank, and the laying of two new 3" mains was deferred while the Clerk was asked to obtain a more detailed budget break-down for that work.

⁸⁸ Source: EPG, 1 June 1910.

⁸⁹ Source: EPG, 3 Feb 1911.

⁹⁰ Sources: EPG, 26 June 1914 and WT, same date.

⁹¹ Source: WT, 21 Aug 1914.

⁹² Source: EPG, Oct 1916.

⁹³ Source: EPG, 16 June 1920.

⁹⁴ Source: WT, 31 Aug 1920.

1921 to 1938 (and beyond)

Sewerage

Throughout the period 1921 to 1950 the press was remarkably silent about Axminster's sewerage system, which could be taken to suggest that the technology adopted was delivering the benefits expected of it.

Some further information from this period can be drawn from the Annual Reports submitted by Dr D Steele-Perkins, the Medical Officer of Health for No.2 Sanitary Area (covering Seaton and Honiton as well as Axminster District). These can be accessed via the archive.org website⁹⁵. In his reports between 1938 and the mid-1950s he commented regularly on the shortcomings of the sewerage systems of the outlying hamlets, villages and parishes, but not on Axminster. As late as 1950 almost all of the sewage outside the town went into septic tanks, or in a few places, directly into streams. The formation of the East Devon Water Board in 1950 had this high on their agenda from the outset.

A second sewage treatment works was built to serve the wartime US army hospital at Millwey Rise⁹⁶, and it subsequently served the civilian housing and industry. It was located to the north of Cloakham Lawn, between Chard Road and the railway line. By 2006/07 it had evidently been replaced by a pumping station.

Water

In July 1921 the UDC's surveyor reported⁹⁷ that the water supply now amounted to 42,000 gallons a day, or 21 gallons per head of population. Although this hardly appears much better than had been achieved over 50 years earlier, for a population that had not grown, the conclusion of the discussion was that the supply was keeping up well, and "*... the Surveyor and foreman were thanked for the manner in which they had kept the town so well supplied*".

Two months later⁹⁸, what amounted to a 'hosepipe ban' was put in place, though this was linked to the cleaning of vehicles (a new activity for Axminster) rather than the watering of gardens.

In March 1923 the Exeter & Plymouth Gazette ran an editorial comment piece⁹⁹, prompted by a recent Ministry of Health inquiry into the UDC's application to borrow £15,000 for a further round of water-related works, as follows. "*For a considerable time the town has suffered as a result of shortage of water, and although experiments have been made from time to time they have achieved little material result. The only method of providing a supply during the summer has been to cut off the water fifteen hours every day. Naturally this has caused great inconvenience. In 1913, a scheme was mooted whereby Gamberlake stream should be brought into the existing waterworks, but this had to be abandoned as riparian owners did not give their consent. Since this time the Council has acquired a site at Beaver Batch, where three springs have been located, and it was in respect of this place that the inquiry was held. The work has been commenced, and so far, has involved an expenditure of £1,800 which has been borrowed locally.*" The Council was said to be "*... optimistic about the future of the town, for whereas the present population is 2,500 the scheme is calculated to provide an adequate supply for 3,500 people*".

Three months later The General Purposes Committee of the UDC reported to the council's monthly meeting¹⁰⁰ that the Ministry of Health had sanctioned a considerably smaller loan for the water scheme, of £4,000. The Council then discussed at some length a letter from Messrs Mansergh. Based on this discussion they decided to omit the filter; but to retain the settling tank. On the question of the proposal to build an additional reservoir, they resolved to build a new one; to seek tenders based on the original drainage arrangements; but to ask for variations based on alternative forms of construction. The implication is that they would shave the costs if they could.

The National Archives holds a file¹⁰¹ covering the period 1922/23, which I have not seen, relating to Axminster's water supply, collecting, filtration, storage etc.

⁹⁵ To find the reports, search for "No.2 sanitary area" (in quotes) and select 'full text of books'.

⁹⁶ It can be clearly seen on an aerial photograph taken in 1948. This is accessible on-line via the devon.gov.uk website, which also has an aerial photograph from 2006/07 which shows that it was no longer there.

⁹⁷ Source: EPG, 19 July 1921.

⁹⁸ Source: WT, 20 Sept 1921.

⁹⁹ Source: EPG, 22 Mar 1923.

¹⁰⁰ Source: EPG, 22 June 1923.

¹⁰¹ Ref: HLG 50/175.

From this point on, the newspapers carry fewer reports on Axminster's water system, though in 1925 questions were raised¹⁰² at a meeting of the Council regarding the efficacy of the filtration system. The Council's decision on this was to seek the advice of Messrs Mansergh. It was also reported at the same meeting that Axe Vale Laundry had applied to take 1,000 gallons a week from the town supply. In 1930¹⁰³ the town's water supply was described as 'continuous and good', fully justifying the decision of a few years before to augment the supply by collecting additional water from Beaver Batch. Then in 1933 the UDC considered a further report from Messrs Mansergh¹⁰⁴ regarding 'hardening plant' and additional filter beds. The two items were expected to cost £2,950. The councillors queried the cost, and resolved to seek further details before taking any decision. By 'hardening plant' I believe they meant a dosing system to raise the pH (i.e. reduce the acidity) of the water, in order to prevent or minimise the dissolving of lead from the pipework.

However, as the population grew further, interruptions to the supply re-emerged as a regular feature of Axminster life, and in 1938 there were at least five cases of typhoid in the town (the first for many years), with one of these leading to a death¹⁰⁵. Although the water system was not directly blamed in the newspaper report, it was decided to install a chlorination system, which was completed on 19 August with results which were described as good. This episode prompted members of the UDC to inspect the water system more generally, by walking round it¹⁰⁶. They were accompanied by Mr J W Pike, their relatively long-serving surveyor, and by Mr B S Chubb, for 20 years the water bailiff. Mr Chubb placed the blame for some of the recent difficulties on the neglect of former councillors, who he said had dispensed with the filter beds on cost grounds many years before. The members' conclusion was that the Council should again bring in a consulting engineer to advise on the best way forward.

A report in early 1939¹⁰⁷ shows that Messrs Mansergh were again retained to give advice. They were asked to respond to suggestions that the capacity of the pipe between the filter beds and the reservoir was insufficient, and that preference should be given to the water from Beaver Batch over water from Furzeleigh (which was mis-spelled Turgley in the newspaper report) because it was of a better quality. Their conclusions were that no additional water could be obtained from Beaver Batch at a sensible cost. The supply from Beaver Batch was then usually running at about 55,000 gallons a day, but somewhat less some of the time. This was described as insufficient for the town, making Furzeleigh water necessary most of the time. In their opinion none of the suggestions that had been put to them for increasing the supply would be likely to represent good value for money.

The Medical Officer of Health's report for 1939¹⁰⁸, written after the outbreak of war, commented on the additional strain being generated by evacuees and military personnel, as follows. "*One of the greatest difficulties has been the heavy calls on the water supplies of the District, which in ordinary times has hardly been sufficient for the civil population. This has been particularly marked in Seaton, Axminster Urban and Honiton Borough, but with the co-operation of the Military Authorities and the strict conservation of supplies, it has been possible to supply the demand without causing a great deal of inconvenience. In the meantime steps have been taken to augment the supplies.*"

The statistics provided in his 1939 report show that the population of Axminster Urban District at the end of 1939 was 2,731 living in 698 habitable houses, up from 2,355 a year before in the same number of houses. The area of Axminster Urban District by 1938 was given as 1,300 acres.

By way of comparison, his reports show that most of Axminster Parish outside the Urban District, and most of the surrounding parishes too, relied on springs for their water. Raymonds Hill and parts of Uplyme relied on a spring at Burrowshot, supplemented by a borehole at Yawl. Kilmington's public water supply came mainly from eight wells, and Shute also relied heavily on wells. Chardstock purchased water in bulk (from where is not reported) which was fed into a mains system. Most other places relied entirely on springs. The places where the water supply was identified as being particularly unsatisfactory included Sector, parts of Kilmington, Dalwood, Seaton Junction, Whitford, all of Musbury and the area around Cannington viaduct.

The Medical Officer of Health's annual reports show that in 1941 Axminster obtained an additional supply of 12,000 gallons per day from the Rural District. This was added after overnight cuts in

¹⁰² Source: EPG, 20 Mar 1925.

¹⁰³ Source: EPG, 10 July 1930.

¹⁰⁴ Source: WT, 24 Feb 1933.

¹⁰⁵ Source: EPG, 2 Dec 1938.

¹⁰⁶ Source: WMN, 31 Aug 1938.

¹⁰⁷ Source: EPG, 24 Feb 1939.

¹⁰⁸ See the text above on sewerage for details of how to access these reports.

service had to be re-instituted in April 1940, and serious shortages which lasted into 1941. Further supplies were developed for the American Military Hospital at Millwey Rise, but for security reasons these measures were not discussed. However, he does report that in 1944 the shortages were again severe, and highlights his concerns about the acidity of the water from Beaver Batch which had a tendency to dissolve lead. By 1944 the daily average supply from Beaver Batch was 96,000 gallons, which was not enough to meet the demand. At that time the Urban District area remained 1,300 acres, and the population (excluding military) was 2,435.

In 1945 the Water Act made provision for the formation of local Water Boards, and after some discussion, and some local opposition, an order was made to form the East Devon Water Board¹⁰⁹ in 1950. The Medical Officer of Health's report for 1949 indicates that very little new work had been undertaken in Axminster between 1945 and 1950, though approval had by then been given to replace the 6" main beneath Lyme Road with an 8" pipe, and to link Chard Street to Castle Hill with a 5" pipe.

A slightly different impression can be gained by reference to a report from mid-1948¹¹⁰ which stated that a wall at the reservoir was to be re-built, and new meters installed. Mr H R Jeffrey, Chairman of the Council's Public Health Committee remarked that "... *in his view they were beginning to pay for the niggardly policy and procrastination of past years. They had now reached a point when they had to do something to the supply or make other arrangements, and that was why the burden was falling rather heavily*".

The brief of the East Devon Water Board was to take over responsibility for water supplies to Honiton Borough and Urban District, Ottery St Mary Urban District, Axminster Urban District and parts of Axminster Rural District. The Head Office was in Honiton. When the new organisation was formally established¹¹¹ several councillors from Axminster deplored the development, appearing to forget just how unsatisfactory Axminster's locally-managed water supplies had been over the previous 100 years, and how much investment was required to bring it up to scratch.

The town leat after the improvements of the 1920s

Introduction

The following account, retained for many years in the files of local solicitors Chapple Measures (later Scott Rowe) and now held by Axminster Heritage Centre, was evidently written by Major Alexander Collingwood Fownes Luttrell of Lea Combe House, Lyme Road, Axminster in or shortly before 1927. Major Fownes Luttrell (1870 to 1957) had been one of the plaintiffs in the 1898 Lea Combe case referred to extensively above. He had settled in Axminster after World War I and was a local JP. He lived at Lea Combe House until it was destroyed by an incendiary bomb during World War II.

A small number of spelling corrections have been made, together with some minor changes to punctuation to make the meaning clearer. Otherwise this is the original text in its entirety.

At the time of writing most of the town leat was redundant as far as drinking water supply was concerned, but as will be seen, it was still considered to have some capacity to provide water to fields and gardens adjacent to its route.

"The town lake

"The town lake is the joint property of the riparian owners of the land through which its course runs. That is to say, while each owner has the full benefit of the water supply, he has no right to divert or obstruct the flow, or in any way to interfere with its course, so as to prevent the owners on lower levels obtaining water.

"The history of the leat is somewhat obscure. Tradition has it that the supply was first introduced by the Abbot of Newenham prior to the dissolution of the Monastery. Anyhow the lake is very ancient, and up to the formation of the Axminster Water Works was the only public supply to the town. For a very considerable period the leat was administered and kept in repair by the Axminster Parish Council, and afterwards by the Axminster Urban District Council. The arrangement, however, was by mutual agreement. The Council apparently have no legal rights to divert or interfere with the course, nor, apparently, are they bound to keep it in repair.

¹⁰⁹ Source: WT, 23 June 1950.

¹¹⁰ Source: WT, 23 Apr 1948.

¹¹¹ Source: WT, 22 Dec 1950.

"About the year 1912 the Axminster RDC approached the riparian owners with a view to their giving up their legal rights in exchange for a free water supply to all parts served by the lake. The idea being to take the town lake into the existing water supply for the purpose of augmenting it. The scheme unfortunately fell through. It was revived again after the war, but was, I regret to say, rejected for a very much more costly one by the Urban Council. Up to the formation of the new Urban Council the old Parish Council of Axminster had maintained the upkeep of the lake. On the formation of the new Urban Council, the duties of the former devolved on the latter, but owing to the want of labour during the war, and other difficulties, the leat was allowed to fall into disrepair, leaks began to manifest themselves, breaches were made in several places.

"The Urban Council have long since ceased to exert any control over the lake or to effect any repairs. In 1925, I, jointly with Messrs Mitchell, Toms & Co¹¹², called upon the Urban Council to repair the town lake, which was carried in pipes behind The Lamb Inn. The overflow of the lake in wintertime was causing serious damage to my property and also to the foundations of The Lamb Inn. The Council declined to accede to our request, and my solicitors advised that the best plan was to do the repairs ourselves. This we jointly did. About the same time, the Council decided to do no more repairs to the town lake. They, doubtless considered they were not justified in spending the ratepayers' money for the benefit of a certain number of riparian owners. Whether they were right or no, I am not prepared to say. My opinion is, that having assumed the care of the leat they should have put it into reasonable repair before handing it over to the owners. My solicitors are doubtful if we could compel the Council to maintain or even put the town lake in order. They have no legal right over the lake, and are not riparian owners as a body. Litigation would be expensive and the result doubtful. In 1901 the late Mr Coate and the trustees of my grandmother's will, sued the Axminster Parish Council on two counts and lost both, though the case was a strong one. It cost the plaintiffs about £1,000. My solicitors say that the fact of the Council declining to repair or maintain the leat, constitutes repudiation by them of any control or management they may have claimed, and that in the future it will have to be maintained by the riparian owners themselves.

"The Urban District Council have recently sealed up the private 'dipping pills' in Lyme Road. This they have no right to do, and the riparian owners are quite justified in breaking the 'pills' open; on the other hand the owners are bound to keep the 'pills' in order, and under them safe for foot passengers.

"Course etc¹¹³

"The town lake rises from a number of springs under the Furzeleigh farm on the property of Mr J Loveridge. It passes through Furzeleigh copse owned by Mr Churchill of Symonds Down Farm. At the town end of the copse is a 'goyle' over which it passes in an open leat into the grounds of Furzeleigh House, owned by Mr Hart, and from there into the grounds of Fawnsmoor farm, and through Mr D Rowe's rick barton and court. From his premises it passes into the field below the reservoir which belongs to Mr Rowe. There it receives the overflow of the reservoir and at the end of this field passes under the Lyme Road into the property of Colonel Robertson¹¹⁴. It passes through his fields, providing them with drinking water, and then into Loup House and grounds, owned by Mr Horn. From there under the Lyme Road by a ditch through the gardens above Prospect House, into Mrs Hardman's and Mrs Bradford's properties¹¹⁵. Thence through the cottages and gardens above the Lamb. In the gateway to the Lamb Fields is a 'pill' where it divides. The right hand crosses the road and runs through the field above the Convent¹¹⁶ into Terrace Lodge¹¹⁷ thence down to Hillary House, and ultimately I believe through Chard Street, down to Castle Hill into the river. The left hand branch runs through the Lamb Fields. At the back of the Lamb Inn the Axminster Parish Council erected a tank to supply their water cart. I do not know what right they had to do this, but probably were given permission by the late Mr Knight. From Lamb Fields it proceeds in an open ditch to the Presbytery Garden where it goes underground, falls in a lower covered leat which divides outside Lea Combe House, the right hand proceeds under Lea Combe lawn into Mrs W Forward's garden¹¹⁸. Thence into Mr Pitfield Chapple's property.

¹¹² Mitchell, Toms were brewers, and the owners of the Lamb Inn.

¹¹³ This description is very much in line with the 1800 survey description quoted in Chapter 2.

¹¹⁴ Colonel Robertson lived at Fairacre.

¹¹⁵ Mrs Hardman lived at Adrienne House; Mrs Bradford at The Limes.

¹¹⁶ The convent was housed in the property now known as Loretto Cottage.

¹¹⁷ Now called Pippins.

¹¹⁸ Mrs Forward lived at The Elms.

"The condition of the course

"There are splendid springs of water at the source: enough to supply the whole of Axminster. At the goyle at the lower end of Furzeleigh copse was a breach caused largely by timber hauling. The leat was carried across the goyle by 4" iron pipes. It was found that these pipes were insufficient to convey the amount of water, the result of which the water overflowed and formed breaches about the pipes. Mr Hart and I arranged with Mr Churchill to put a 2ft trunk in place of these pipes and to repair the breaches. The cost of this was £10. There is now a splendid flow of water through Mr Hart's property and the first field of Mr Rowe's farm. At this point is a breach. I recently visited this spot with Mr Rowe and found a great volume of water escaping down the ditch in Millbrook. No water from the lake source is proceeding further than this point. The water we are receiving is obtained entirely from the overflow of the reservoir. Mr Rowe informed me that the breach can easily be stopped, but the ditch by which the lake passes through this field to his court is in such a leaking state that little or no water passes along it. The soil just there is of a very porous nature, the water escapes through the hedge into the lower fields. During the management by the Council, this ditch appears to have been a constant trouble, and required 'puddling' at frequent intervals. The leat below the Fawnsmoor court is in fairly good condition, and can be kept so at very little expense by the various owners. The leat supplies free water to the fields belonging to Mr Rowe, Col Robertson, Prospect House and cottages, Loup cottages, Mrs Hardman, Mrs Bradford and myself, Dr Padbury¹¹⁹, Mrs W Forward, and many other smaller tenements. The right hand branch waters the fields above the convent, also the gardens of Terrace Lodge and Hillary House. It will be seen therefore that were this leat in proper repair it would give an invaluable supply of free water to a large number of owners and occupiers. To the owners of pasture land it is essential: without it the value of their property is very much depreciated. With regard to the ditch above Mr Rowe's court, which is the only serious obstacle to the proper supply of water, I examined this with Mr Rowe recently, and we came to the conclusion that the only really satisfactory job there would be to pipe the whole course from the breach to the Fawnsmoor court. To do this with 4" collar pipes including labour would cost about £25 to £30. To do same with 6" pipes from £35 to £40. Were this done, the water would be carried by the force behind it over this nearly level part of the course without being able to soak away, and the full volume would be delivered to the outskirts of the town. There is nothing seriously wrong with the remainder of the course, and periodical cleaning is all that is required. It remains with the riparian owners to say whether or no they will find the initial expenses of piping the portion in question. They must realize that unless this is done they will not receive, or only in a very small measure, the town lake water. The present supply is a very undependable supply, and would fail altogether in a dry summer.

"Outlay on the course

"According to law each riparian owner is held to keep his own portion in proper repair so that those below him may have the use of the water. It would not, however, in this case be fair for the initial expense to fall on one, two or three of the owners. The land where the lake requires piping belongs to Mr D Rowe. He is quite ready to allow this work to be carried out and to help. It would be of very material value to him. There are, I believe, at least 20 owners below Fawnsmoor farm, so that the expense should arrange less than £2 per head. I consider that the greater beneficiaries should bear the greater expense; that is to say the owners of fields should contribute more than those with only gardens or pills. I myself am quite willing to contribute my quota. It has been suggested that the riparian owners should subscribe annually for the upkeep of the leat. This should not exceed £5 per annum when the initial outlay of the piping has been carried out, and would average about 5/- per owner. Not a very large sum for the benefit of a free water supply."

The next paragraph is simply headed 'Later'. It says *"I have inspected the leat between Furzeleigh copse and Furzeleigh House and find it requires cleaning out. The water is overflowing and escaping in many places down over the pill. It is causing considerable damage to the land below the leat, and would be a material improvement were the leat cleared and the leaks stopped."*

The final paragraph is hand-written, signed (simply 'Luttrell') and dated (Nov 1927). It says: *"I have since visited Mr Rowe's ditch in company with Mr A Strawbridge, who considers that were the ditch thoroughly dug and cleaned it would not require piping, and strongly recommends this being first tried this winter. The cost at about £7."*

No reports of the work proposed by Major Fownes Luttrell being carried out have been seen.

¹¹⁹ Dr Padbury lived at The Laurels at this time.

Chapter 5: The Town's Gas, Electricity and Telephone Systems

Gas in the Victorian era

Although the town's gas works opened in 1838, a year after Queen Victoria ascended the throne¹²⁰, nothing has been discovered about its early decades. The works were located on what became known as Gas Lane and then Mill Lane / Vale Lane, which runs south from the foot of Castle Hill. It can be safely assumed that from the outset the gas works manufactured gas from coal or coke.

Although almost all public pronouncements about the town's gas supply in the 20th century were made in the context of street lighting, it is clear that the works also supplied public buildings and private users, and not just for lighting.

In 1866 the following announcement was published¹²¹. *"To be sold or let, for a Term, the Axminster Gas and Coke Works, with possession at Lady-day next. Sealed tenders are to be delivered to C W Bond Esq, Solicitor, Axminster on or before the 23rd day of March next. For further particulars apply to Mr W S Pryer, Druggist, Axminster."*

No doubt anticipating this development, a local gas company had been incorporated in 1863¹²²; and a sequence of commercial directories tell us that from 1866 until at least 1873 the works were managed by Charles Silk. By 1878 the manager was John Copp, who ran the works for many years. The proprietor of the works, at least by 1883, was Walter Lewis Copp of Watchet, Somerset.

As reported in Chapter 2, in 1887 the new Jubilee Fountain in Trinity Square was provided with gas lighting.

In 1895¹²³ *"... great consternation was caused in Axminster yesterday when it became known that a fire had broken out at the Gas Works. It appears that some men were engaged in doing repairs in the meter-room, which is in close proximity to the gasometer, and on unscrewing some joints a quantity of gas escaped. As a light was burning in the room the gas at once ignited and set the room on fire. The Axminster Fire Brigade attended and fixed a standpipe, &c., to a hydrant. The Brigade also had plenty of hose and other appliances at hand. Eventually the fire was extinguished by a large quantity of sand being thrown on it. The danger of an explosion being imminent, people for a time left their homes in fear"*.

Later the same month a further disaster struck¹²⁴, as follows. *"At Axminster, on Sunday night, some of the principal stays of the large gasometer and one of the chief iron columns of the Axminster Gas Works snapped in two. The damage is supposed to have been caused by severe frosts. The town was in a state of darkness, and the service in the Parish Church had to be suspended."*

Five years later¹²⁵ an accident affected a customer. *"On Saturday, a serious gas explosion occurred at the premises of Mr Bastable, baker, of Market Place. Early in the morning when Mr Bastable came downstairs there was a strong smell of gas, and on his going into the shop with a light to discover its whereabouts an explosion took place. Some panes of the plate-glass window were blown out, and the interior of the house was much damaged. Mr Bastable's arms and head were badly burnt, and he is now under the case of Dr G J Padbury."*

1901 to 1920: Gas and the arrival of electricity

Town lighting was organised by tender, though the scope for competition was effectively nil. In 1901¹²⁶ the Axminster Lighting Inspectors, who were appointed under an Act of Parliament, met to consider the supply of gas and lighting of the lamps for the coming year. As reported, *"... the only tender came from the Axminster Gas Company, who offered to supply gas from one hour after sunset till 11pm except on Sundays, when the lamps would be extinguished at 10pm, at £1 17s per lamp per annum. The number of lamps to be supplied in the area of the Lighting Committee is 44"*.

¹²⁰ Source: The 1838 Directory.

¹²¹ Source: EPG, 16 Mar 1866.

¹²² The evidence for this comes from 1950 when the Seaton, Axminster & District Gas Co Ltd was dissolved. Its date of incorporation was given as 1863, though this almost certainly refers to the Axminster part of the company. Source: National Archives, Board of Trade BT 31/33981/847c.

¹²³ Source: EPG, 2 Feb 1895.

¹²⁴ Source: Blackburn Standard, 23 Feb 1895.

¹²⁵ Source: WT, 6 Nov 1900.

¹²⁶ Source: WT, 5 Nov 1901.

A year later it was announced¹²⁷ that James Coate (whose several interventions regarding water supplies are reported above) had erected at his own cost a lamp outside the Board School entrance on Chard Street. The Lighting Committee was also seeking permission to erect another one nearby to light the Post Office as well as the school entrance.

Early in 1904 a letter from James Coate¹²⁸ described the town's gas supply as 'abominable'. There had evidently been debate in several towns about the appropriate candle power of public lighting, with most towns opting for either 14 or 15 candle power. His letter also stated that "... *the Gas Company have no apparatus for testing the illuminating power, and, consequently, the rate payers have been paying dearly for an uncertain and inferior quality*".

Three days later it was reported that a similar, but more detailed, letter had been sent to the Axminster Lighting Inspectors by William Forward¹²⁹, and read out to the Axminster Lighting Committee when it met under the chairmanship of Mr John Gage, as follows. "*Dear Sir, Might I be permitted to draw the attention of your inspectors to the very poor state of the gas as lately supplied in this town. The smell has been terrible of late, and the villainous compound has injured even the taps, and the aid of the local gas-fitters has been constantly invoked at considerable expense to keep the fittings clear and in working order. The inhabitants of the town have complained bitterly, and it appears that the material forming the component parts of such gas are very far from what they should be, and it is question (sic) whether the contract has not been broken over and over again. Therefore, as it is understood that the works has changed hands, and the present manager has resigned his office, you will, I feel sure, interest yourselves to see that under new auspices the public is supplied with a good article, and earn the gratitude of the consumers generally; including yours faithfully, W Forward.*" The Committee members, in their discussion, were uncertain whether John Copp had indeed resigned as manager (the facts show that even if he had tendered his resignation, it did not come into force). The Chairman "... *remarked that the mains were not large enough to carry the gas*", and Mr R Clegg, one of the members, "... *asked whether they could not get in all the lanterns now in use and introduce incandescent burners. In such case less gas would be consumed*". The Committee agreed a precept of £115, to be raised at a cost of 4½d on houses and 1½d on land.

In March 1904 the Committee discussed with John Copp, clearly still the manager of the Gas Works, whether it would be possible to extend the lighting to the 'upper part of town' (possibly, but not definitely, meaning Lyme Road and/or Musbury Road). John Copp also invited the members to come and see the new incandescent lamps which were being tested down at the Gas Works.

When the Committee met in May¹³⁰ the discussion over candle power was resumed. It was reported that Axminster was receiving 17 candle power but only paying for 15, whereas Exeter, Chard and several other towns were making do with 14. The discussion focussed on whether reducing the light level was worth the potential saving.

In August 1904 John Copp wrote to Axminster RDC¹³¹ "... *asking whether the Council would be prepared to supply water for the Axminster Gas Works? The amount required would be 60 gallons per day in summer and 90 in winter. The Clerk said the letter had been referred to the Axminster Parochial Committee, who had not yet reported on it*".

It may have taken some time, but expansion of the network was in the air. In the autumn of 1906 the Axminster Lighting Inspectors agreed¹³² that a new lamp should be erected outside Mr Hardman's house (which was Prospect House, some way above the Lamb Inn on Lyme Road), and another outside Crabb's Wood (which probably meant on the other side of Lyme Road). On another topic, "... *Messrs Matthews Bros are to be asked to remove their advertisement plates, which were (it is alleged) an obstruction to the lamp at the South Street corner, adjoining Lyme Street.*"

Six months later¹³³ the Axminster Guardians received a letter from the Gas Works "... *stating that they were seeking the permission of the District Council to re-lay their gas mains in Musbury Road, and inquiring whether the Guardians were prepared to consider the lighting of the Workhouse by gas, the present price being 4s 6d per 1,000, which was lower than the charge of any other*

¹²⁷ Source: WT, 29 May 1902.

¹²⁸ Source: EPG, 2 Jan 1904.

¹²⁹ Source: WT, 5 Jan 1904.

¹³⁰ Source: EPG, 3 May 1904.

¹³¹ Source: WT, 26 Aug 1904.

¹³² Source: WT, 2 Oct 1906.

¹³³ Source: WT, 3 May 1907.

undertaking in the district of comparatively the same output. The Master (Mr Bevan) stated that the present lighting of the House cost, roughly speaking, about £6 per year. Paraffin was, however, very dangerous. The figure he quoted did not, of course, include the cost of breakages, etc". By way of context, Hillhead Terrace had been built by 1907, and with the opening of King Edward Road, significant additional housing was expected to be built in this part of town over the coming 20 years.

In 1909 John Copp wrote to the Lighting Committee¹³⁴ "... stating that two boys were caught turning on the lamp at the corner of King Edward Road, and he should be glad if the Inspectors would be willing to prosecute ... as a warning to others". It was decided to remove a lamp on the corner of Widepost Lane, as it was often damaged by cattle.

Later that year¹³⁵, The Axminster Gas Works' tender "... for lighting 49 lamps from August 15th to May 15th inclusive, and for 20 lamps from May 16th to August 14th inclusive was accepted. It was decided to fence a lamp at Purzebrook to keep away the cattle. Two automatic controllers are to be tried on two of the public lamps".

During the war the cost of coal rose, and in 1915¹³⁶ Axminster Gas Company raised its cost of gas by 4d per 1,000 feet.

1921 to 1950

Subsequently Axminster Gas Company merged with the equivalent company in Seaton to form the Seaton, Axminster & District Gas Co Ltd. This was dissolved in 1950¹³⁷.

Whereas gas provided the only realistic alternative to coal or paraffin for heating homes prior to 1920, soon thereafter electricity entered the frame, and as early as 1921 a meeting was held in Axminster¹³⁸ to consider whether or not to form a company to install electric lighting in the town. The question was adjourned on that occasion, but a few years later it was back on the public agenda when a formal application to supply electricity to the town was lodged¹³⁹, but not by local interests.

That application, under the Electricity (Supply) Acts of 1882 to 1922, was lodged by Charles Henry Beeston Prescott-Westcar of Strode Park, Herne in Kent, and was to generate and supply electricity to an area comprising the Urban District of Axminster, parts of the Parishes of Axminster Hamlets and Chardstock, the Borough of Chard and the District of Chard. The application identified the streets in Axminster to which supply was proposed in a rather complex way. The primary published list comprised "Castle Hill, Castle Street, Victoria Place, Trinity Place, West Street, Anchor Hill, Western Road from Anchor Hill to Whitpot Lane, Chard Street from Victoria Place to Hilary House (North Gate), Lyme Street from Victoria Place to Back Lane, Silver Street, South Street, Musbury Road from South Street to Bench Mark 137.3 Whitpot Lane, North Street, Willhay Lane from Castle Hill to the Laundry, and Church Street." However, reference was also made in the application to the need to break up the road surfaces of Station Approach, Saw Mill Lane, the lane between Musbury Road and Alexandra Road, and Gas Lane; as well as more general references to (among others) Western Road, Lyme Road, Stoney Lane, Musbury Road, and the Level Crossing at the foot of Castle Hill. This covered almost all of the streets in the town other than the recently built section of King Edward Road and Alexandra Road, and Boxfield Road (possibly still at that time known as Union Lane).

A few days later Cecil Forward, Clerk to the UDC, expressed¹⁴⁰ his opposition to "... the Chard and Bridport scheme". There were arguments over the size and number of generating stations required, and as far as he was concerned Axminster should have its own scheme. Chard Town Council evidently took a different view, and a year later Cecil Forward reported to the UDC¹⁴¹ that Chard had passed all of the necessary resolutions, and that it appeared that the scheme would proceed.

¹³⁴ Source: WT, 5 Oct 1909.

¹³⁵ Source: WT, 5 Nov 1909.

¹³⁶ Source: EPG, 28 June 1915.

¹³⁷ Source: National Archives, Board of Trade BT 31/22981/847c. (I have not seen this file, but it is available to anyone who wishes to consult it.)

¹³⁸ Source: WT, 18 Nov 1921.

¹³⁹ Source: London Gazette, 19 May 1925.

¹⁴⁰ Source: WT, 22 May 1925.

¹⁴¹ Source: WT, 21 May 1926.

In March 1927 permission was indeed granted¹⁴² to Mr Prescott-Westcar, whose interest in the scheme was taken over by the South Somerset and District Electricity Company (SSDEC).

A further notice in the London Gazette¹⁴³ tells us that under the 'Axminster Chard and District Electricity Special Order 1927' the coverage of SSDEC was being extended to include further parts of Axminster Rural District (but not the parishes of Axmouth, or Seaton and Beer, which were covered by the 'Seaton and District Electricity Special Order 1928'). The newly-introduced areas required cables to be laid in Musbury and Kilmington. There were further orders made in 1929 expanding the area of service, mainly in Somerset.

From Axminster's point of view the key date is 24 November 1928. On that day¹⁴⁴ "... *the inauguration of the electricity supply to Axminster and Chardstock took place on Saturday evening at the Drill Hall, Axminster, when Mr S G Nicholls (Chairman of the Axminster Urban District Council) performed the switching-on ceremony at the invitation of the South Somerset and District Electricity Company*". Mr G V Twiss, who was mainly responsible for introducing the scheme to Axminster mentioned that Parliamentary powers were only obtained in early 1921, and the speed of progress was a great credit to Mr W T Hilder, the resident manager in Axminster and his staff.

Of course there were set-backs. When gales blew the wires down on a Sunday night in January 1930¹⁴⁵ the town was plunged into darkness, and the church organ failed. A year later the UDC complained¹⁴⁶ that the light in South Street had failed for two nights, as had another on Widepost Lane. This sounds like bulbs failing rather than wholesale power outages. A lack of local supervision was blamed.

However, further power cuts did occur later that year¹⁴⁷, when "... *for the second time within a week the electricity supply at Axminster failed on Saturday afternoon. Fortunately, on this occasion the failure was of short duration ...*" though a couple's wedding was disrupted when the organ lost power. By then Axminster had switched the street lighting contract from gas to electricity.

By 1933 there was still little if any power accessible in Kilmington, Musbury and Hawkchurch, and a year later in Axminster questions were being raised about the relative costs of electricity and gas. A newspaper report tells us¹⁴⁸ that when the UDC queried the price of electricity, they were told by SSDEC that they had 85 domestic customers in Axminster using electric cookers. By then a wider electricity grid was being developed to link up the many local ones, and this started to operate from 1 January 1935.

It was many years before farms even a mile or two from Axminster obtained mains electricity. Many of them generated their own to allow them to run milking machines.

Telephones

Although no definitive statement to this effect has been found, it is clear that one of the reasons why a dedicated Post Office building was constructed in Trinity Square in 1908 was to make provision for the installation of a telephone exchange. It was reported at the time of its construction¹⁴⁹ that work to demolish the previous building on the site had started on 3 May 1908, and that the new building would have three floors plus a basement, which would allow for the installation of a telephone exchange. The builder was R G Spiller of Chard, and the architect was Symes & Madge of Axminster and Chard. A contract to install the telephone exchange on the first floor of the building was signed the following year¹⁵⁰.

By 1910 Edwin Snell's Directory listed all 13 of the subscribers who had signed up by then. Apart from the Post Office itself (No.1) the other 12 were all businesses of one sort or another: the two brush factories, the Axminster Mineral Water Co, Morrish & Son of Weycroft, Heal's saw mills at Millbrook, two merchant businesses based at the station, The George and The Old Bell, two shops and a firm of solicitors.

¹⁴² Source: London Gazette, 4 Mar 1927.

¹⁴³ Source: London Gazette, 4 May 1928.

¹⁴⁴ Source: WT, 30 Nov 1928.

¹⁴⁵ Source: WT, 17 Jan 1930.

¹⁴⁶ Source: WT, 20 Feb 1931.

¹⁴⁷ Source: EPG, 21 Sept 1931.

¹⁴⁸ Source: EPG, 21 Dec 1934.

¹⁴⁹ Source: EPG, 23 Sept 1908.

¹⁵⁰ Source: WT, 9 June 1909.

Snell's Directory also shows that Axminster was one of five telephone exchanges in the Lyme Regis area, the others being Lyme Regis itself (6 lines), Charmouth (2), Colyton (4) and Seaton (5).

By 1912 it was reported¹⁵¹ that the telephone service was now 'continuous', covering both weekdays and Sundays. The hours considered to constitute a continuous service were not spelled out.

When the replacement Post Office building was opened in 1938, it was reported¹⁵² that only the telephone exchange had been left in the old building, and that this was due to be replaced shortly (probably in 1939) by a new automatic exchange at South Street.

The associated motor maintenance and repair garage on South Street was built to service vehicles covering an area from Ilminster to Honiton.

¹⁵¹ Source: WT, 16 July 1912.

¹⁵² Source: EPG, 29 July 1938.