

Milborne Port's Water Provision

Today we all have indoor plumbing, but this is comparatively recent. Even fifty years ago there were still properties without indoor bathrooms, many bought as a way onto the property ladder and then modernised.

It was not always like this; for many years, the quantity of springs in Milborne Port meant that there was no shortage of water and people used wells (or later pumps) to fetch what they needed in buckets and jugs. Similarly, sewage was either dumped as 'night soil' to be used as manure; collected and used by the tanneries; or thrown into the open drains that ran along the streets. All of this was normal, and happened in all towns. However, as the population grew, problems arose, until the 1854 outbreak of cholera in London, when it was proved the sewers were contaminating the water supply. Now people wanted better.

By 1889, the water in Milborne Port, still drawn from wells and springs, was of poor quality. The state of the sewers meant it had become polluted, and in 1889 there was an outbreak of cholera.

The water supply was now the responsibility of the Rural District Council in Wincanton and nothing was done. In 1896, water samples were taken and analysed. At the time, 76 grains of impurities, including sewage, was the limit that rendered water unfit for drinking; the Milborne Port samples had 84 grains. The only water in Milborne Port fit for human consumption came from the spring in Bathwell orchard. Even so, it took a year for the RDC to agree that a pumped water supply was needed.

Finally, in 1906 a contract to install piped water from an artesian well at Bradley Head, and to build a new pump house, was signed. This brought clean water to the village, though not into the houses, whose residents still had to collect their water, unless they paid for pipes to be laid to their homes.

However, access to better water meant there was a greater volume of sewage to be dealt with. The existing system was built in 1876, with a field for irrigation added in 1895. In 1912, a new septic tank was built and a sewer alongside the stream was laid. An old inhabitant once told me that, as a child in the 1920s, their cottage had a toilet built directly over the stream: *"All right in summer, but in bad weather the water came back up through the hole in the seat before you could use it!"*

In 1925, the RDC found the Milborne Port sewers were in a poor state: the storm overflow tanks jammed with sediment; the irrigation area overgrown; the

sewer needing cleaning. Little was done, so in March 1932 the farmer at Goathill wrote to the Ministry of Health to complain that no-one in the parish or district councils would do anything. Dorset County Council became involved but due to the costs of the work, it was not until after WW2 that improvements were made.

Now both the water supply and the sewers work perfectly, while the stream itself is clean and carefully channelled between well built walls and banks to prevent the flooding that used to be common.

Dr Lesley Wray