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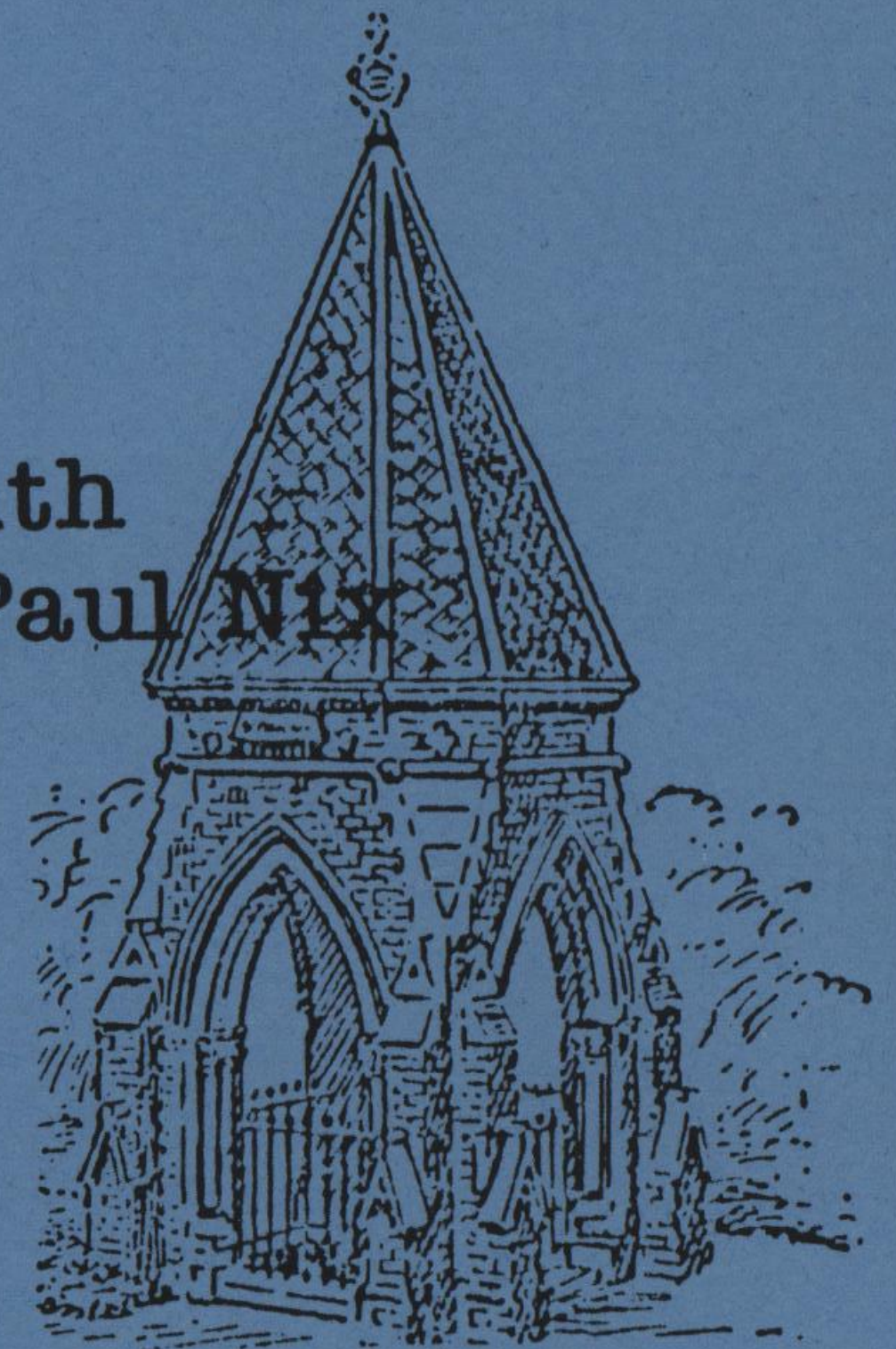
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ST. ANN'S WELL

*and other
Medicinal and Holy
Wells of Nottingham.*

Robert Morrell
in association with
Syd Henley and Paul Nix



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St. Ann's Well and Other Medicinal and Holy Wells of Nottingham

THE St. Ann's area of Nottingham centres upon a finger-like valley about two miles long which juts away from the city northwards. The valley is bounded on the west and north by the Mapperley Hills and on the east by the Sneinton Hills. These hills are of Bunter Sandstones capped with Keuper Marl, the latter once being quarried in both St. Ann's and Sneinton for material to make bricks with. One of the noteworthy features of the Bunter Sandstone is its ability to absorb water, and it has been estimated to absorb 23% of its own volume. The nature of the stone, then, explains why in the lower area of the valley there were in the past a great many natural springs, for the rain percolated into the sandstone, sinking to the point where it was saturated, this level being termed the water table. The table does not have a flat surface but approximately corresponds to the surface of the area above, consequently springs occur at differing levels. Where the surface of the valley meets the water table are to be found marshes and, of course, springs, where the water issues forth and usually forms small streams.

Until the early part of the 19th century St. Ann's was not heavily populated, indeed, for the most part it was well-wooded open country. In medieval times much of the area was within or adjacent to Sherwood Forest, which explains why for much of the 16th and 17th centuries it was a source of valuable timber, particularly oak; there are many references in local documents of wood being felled in the area, often in very considerable quantities. This probably explains why much of it soon became deforested, though until the middle of the 19th century there were woods at the far end of the valley.

The actual title, St. Ann's, is derived from a medieval chapel dedicated to the Christian patroness of wells and springs which once existed there. Local antiquarians are unanimous in holding the chapel to have been constructed to serve the needs of a "hermitage" which was situated near a spring, the waters of which were celebrated as being possessed of healing properties. It was not the only such spring in the area, but it became the most famous, and its name is now recalled in that of a local infants' school and a road.

Although the name of the spring has come down to us as St. Ann's Well, this was not its original name, being applied to it only after the establishment of the chapel, the first name it had being Robin Hood's Well. An even earlier name has been suggested, the Owsell, this being held to have been the name of the "hermitage". The evidence for the "hermitage" being named thus is vague, and I am certainly not convinced the Owsell and the Robin Hood Well are names for the same spring, nevertheless some 19th century Nottingham antiquarians appear to think this to be probably so.

There are no documentary records concerning who resided at the "hermitage", and local antiquarians have failed to shed any light on the problem, most of their discussions revolving around whether the establishment was independent of the various religious orders represented in Nottingham, which they resolved to their own satisfaction as being the case, however, personally I do not feel they are correct on this point, but of this more later.

Just who established the "hermitage", if such it actually was, we do not know, for if the inhabitants were literate they seem to have left nothing documentary behind them, nor to have stimulated anyone in nearby Nottingham, for the site was about two miles outside the town, to put anything on record. We are thus left with the intriguing question as to whether the hermitage was set up near an extant spring known for its healing powers or whether the people at the "hermitage" simply utilised one of the many springs in the area as a source of water and discovered its supposed properties. It is a fact that from time immemorial people have held certain springs to be sacred, and such was the widespread nature of this popular cult that the Council of Arles in 452 CE condemned the worship of "fountains" as sacrilegious. However, a popular practice is not as easily suppressed, and in the main what happened was the locals simply changed dedications from pagan to christian and carried on as though nothing had happened. Whether the St. Ann Well was one such "fountain" we know not, but the fact it is known from an early date without a christian designation is not, I feel, without significance, particularly as the name Robin Hood became associated with the spring. This individual was a forest dweller, hooded, and dressed in green or scarlet, descriptions which can be taken as indicative of the legends involving him as possibly embodying pre-christian nature cult beliefs and practices similar to the green man stories related in other parts of the country. Christianity is a cult prone to syncretism and assimilated an amazing rag-bag of beliefs, practices and doctrines belonging to other cults.³

According to Stapleton⁴, who is citing a letter from another local antiquarian, W. Stevenson, the authorities at Nottingham's St. Mary's Church, siezed "the great spring of the township" and built a chapel there dedicated to Ann, who is said to have been the mother of Mary, after which their church was named. Stapleton himself thought it was unlikely the reference was to the chapel at the spring, but if not, and the documentation on which the claim is based stands up, though Stevenson's sources are not cited, we are left with the problem of just where the spring in question was located, for while there was certainly a chapel within St. Mary's dedicated to Ann⁵, it was not associated with a well. In later years there was a public well in St. Mary's churchyard and another at the gate⁶, but there is no evidence of these being dedicated to Ann or any other personage, or being other than purely public utilities, consequently I cannot share Stapleton's doubts as to the place referred to being the historic Robin Hood's Well site, and consider the circumstantial evidence available to indicate this to be so.

I have used inverted commas when referring to the "hermitage" for two reasons; first I am not convinced this was located at the well site, and, secondly, if there was a religious establishment at the site it was a hermitage in the strictest sense of the term. The chapel points to there being such an establishment, but this could have been founded at the same time as this was built, or shortly before. St. Mary's church was controlled by the Cluniac priory at Lenton, just outside the town, which when established sometime between 1109 and 1114 at the invitation of William Peveril, the Norman castellan of Nottingham Castle, was presented with the "temporalities" of the church as part of its endowment. According to a historian of the St. Mary's, the Lenton monks tended to neglect the church although pocketing about three-quarters of its income. The priory provided priests to take services, or we can assume they did for the record of the names of the priests at the church

are blank for much of the early period when the priory ran St. Mary's. In 1228 a non-resident rector was appointed with a condition attached to his status of "*Salva Vicario vicaria sua*" (saving the vicar his vicarage), which Hood⁷ regards as indicating the monks having a deputy in residence. By 1290 this had become something of a scandal, one senses, and a reforming bishop installed a resident vicar (*perpetuus vicarius*).

The Lenton monks undertook to supply priests to serve the Chapel of St. Mary le Roche, the remains of which now survives as a cave behind a car and van hire establishment along Castle Boulevard, and may have existed as a hermitage before the priory was established, though eventually becoming a possession of the priory.⁸ Ownership of the chapel, though, did not prevent the monks getting the king to pay them for serving it,⁹ as Henry III was doing in 1244; twenty years later he was still paying!¹⁰ From these facts it is clear that the monks of Lenton were not the sort to give up the opportunity to make money. Whatever they claimed to know about heaven they certainly knew a thing or two about earthly commercialism. The "hermitage" at St. Ann's, then, may have in reality been nothing more or less than a retreat house for the Lenton Priory, or somewhere the monks were sent to recuperate from illness, while perhaps having the duty when there to run the well site. A similar situation appears to have existed at Burton-on-Trent where another well dedicated to Ann was to be found (it still exists), which had adjacent to it a retreat house for monks from a local monastery.

Stapleton¹² frowns strongly on the suggestion that priests would stoop to making visitors to the well pay for using the water, though just why the monks of Lenton should differ from their kind in other parts of the country when it came to exploiting for all they were worth supposed holy sites and relics is difficult to understand. Monks were famed for their rapaciousness as much as their ignorance,¹³ and Godfrey in his book on Lenton¹⁴ presents us with a good picture of the vast wealth of the Priory and also the frequency its monks were sued for not paying their bills, as well as how quick they were to use the law when the boot was on the other foot. A powerful religious order would readily recognise the financial potential of the well site, and probably not relish a secular rival possessed of healing powers, and those in charge of the priory would have experienced little difficulty in arranging the site's expropriation.

I have already referred to the possibility of the well being called the Owsell, though just what this means, or from where it was derived, I do not know, or even if it actually relates to what became the St. Ann's Well. But one thing is certain, the well was also known as Robin Hood's Well or spring, both terms being employed. The use of the name Owsell led to speculation that it was derived from the name of Robert Fitz-Ooth, the supposed Earl of Huntingdon, who was held by many to be the original Robin Hood. F. C. Laird devotes considerable space this story, though treating it sceptically.¹⁵ He points out that the title became extinct in 1237 and was not revived until 1337 when conferred upon William de Clinton, however, critical he might be, totally dismissive he is not, and sought to salvage some of the story. Unfortunately, like many other writers he accepted at face value an erroneous genealogy invented by William Stukeley concerning one Ralph Fitz-Ooth, the supposed ancestor of Robert.¹⁶ Stukeley's book, *Palaeographia Britannica*, was described by another writer as consisting of "simplicity, drollery, absurdity, ingenuity, superstition and

antiquarianism".¹⁷ Whatever we might feel about the historicity or otherwise of Robin Hood, and the latest authorities¹⁸ accept him as being an historical personage, it is certain that the earliest name for what became St. Ann's Well was Robin Hood. Documentary evidence from 1596 refers to "Robyn Hood Well *alias* Saynt Anne Well",¹⁹ which clearly establishes the connection between the two. Charles Deering in his celebrated book on Nottingham, posthumously published in 1751, has no hesitation in according priority of name to Robin Hood over Ann when discussing the well, noting that even when he wrote some locals persisted in using the old name²⁰. His claim is supported by local legal records concerning what may possibly have been a dispute over land boundaries, for amongst the Presentments at the Sessions for July 20, 1500, is one concerning a Robert Wyly of Sneinton, who is said to have led a band of sixteen men armed with clubs, knives, spades and shovels who "unjustly broke, dug up, and turned the soil of the Mayor and Burgesses of the town of Nottingham, in the holding of John Selioke...near Robynhood Well, on April 24" of that year.²¹ This evidence, and other data could be cited too, shows that the re-attribution of the well must be dated to early in the 14th century, for it is not until 1544 do we find the well called after Ann, even though the chapel of St. Ann seems to have existed for many years prior to the re-naming.

The date of the construction of St. Ann's chapel is not known for certain, for the first documentary reference to it dates from 1543-4, some five years after the suppression of Lenton Priory and the execution of the last prior, Nicholas Heth (or Heyth), who is reputed to have been hanged above the priory gateway for refusing to accept royal supremacy, opposition to the prohibition of appeals and payments to Rome, as ordered by Parliament in 1534, and his support for the so-called Pilgrimage of Grace.²² If Lenton controlled the site, as I suspect, this would place the date of the chapel's construction some years before 1543, for by the middle of the 14th century events had combined to place the site into the ownership of the town of Nottingham. Whether this was the result of the town asserting a claim based upon previous ownership I cannot say, but that the town did exercise ownership is beyond dispute.

A tale which told of James I presenting the site to the town as a reward for being lavishly entertained on a visit there is dismissed as "ridiculous" by Stapleton²³, and I find no reason to dispute this. Once in possession the site was exploited for social activities. The chapel was demolished and a house erected in its place, the building being used, at least in part, as a place of refreshment. Parts of the stonework from the chapel were incorporated into the building, and a manuscript account compiled by an anonymous individual, but in Deering's hand, dated 1641, refers to the "ribs and ruins" of the chapel, and the use of it as a source for building materials.²⁴ From this document it would seem that the secularisation of the site dates from about 1617-18, when the house was erected, though whether this building actually stood on the chapel site is uncertain. The reference to the ruins of the chapel suggest it did not.

GOOD FOR SORE EYES

The earliest illustration known of the Robin Hood/St. Ann Well (and also the only one of the well proper I have seen) appears in Thoroton's, *Antiquities of Nottingham*.²⁵ This shows the well with an arched structure over it and steps leading down to the water. There are various records which speak of it as being used as a bath, though it must have

been uncomfortable for the water is described as being "very cold" and able to "kill a toad".²⁶ The water was said to be particularly efficacious in treating rheumatic pains, being credited with many cures. A view painted by C. T. Moore in Victorian times shows the site complex, but though this is titled, St. Ann's Well, it illustrates not so much the well as its run-off stream surrounded by the buildings on the site. The water flowed away to join a nearby stream called the Beck. As descriptions of the well refer to it having a tiled roof we may deduce from the picture that the small structure on the left of the picture may house the actual well. Laird²⁷ describes the well as being covered with an arched stone roof of crude workmanship, noting it to have "formally been often used as a cold bath", adding, "even now rheumatic patients derive some benefit from its application". It is a strange but true fact that for all its local fame the well never seems to have attracted much attention from artists.

The St. Ann's Well was by no means the only such spring in the valley (I use the terms well and spring as being synonymous as do the Bords in their book on the subject²⁸), and several others, named or otherwise, are known to have existed. One such was the Rag Well, which stood at the bottom of what was called New Road, now Ransom Road. Its water was credited with the power to relieve or cure eye troubles, and obtained its name from the practice of visitors leaving the scraps of linen they used to bathe their eyes hanging on nearby bushes. The existence of two springs in the immediate area of one another brings to mind a similar situation at Repton in Derbyshire, where one well, also called after St. Ann, was credited as being able to cure "king's evil" (tuberculosis), while the second, dedicated to St. Thomas, was reputed to be "good for sore eyes". Neither of these wells receives any mention in Peter Naylor's book on Derbyshire wells.²⁹ There was, in fact, a second Rag Well in St. Ann's, but of this more later.

A letter from the Nottingham geologist, James Shipman, is cited by Stapleton³⁰ as containing the explanation why the wells should have been so good for eye trouble. According to him, the water feeding the springs came from rain which fell on the Mapperley hills, that had when percolating down to the St. Ann's valley encountered clay strata containing Fuller's earth, which the geologist had discovered from long experience to be an excellent remedy for inflammation of the eyes. Shipman wrote of having heard when a youth people speaking of the virtues of the water from the springs and of their recommending visitors to take bottles of it away with them.

A MINI VAUXHALL GARDENS

During the 17th century it became the practice of the Mayor, Aldermen and other town officials, accompanied by their wives, to process in full regalia to the St. Ann Well, though whether their visit had anything to do with the well as such is an open question. The visit took place on Black, or Easter Sunday (except one year when it was too cold and was postponed until Whit Sunday). The official party was accompanied by "the Town Waits" (musicians), and on arrival a good, and seemingly expensive, time was had by all for civic funds were drawn upon to pay for ample wine and sugar (then very expensive).³¹ Those entitled to attend but failed to were fined, while private parties held by the same personages at their own homes on the day of the visit were also banned.³² These social outings, for they were certainly not of a religious character as the procession commenced after prayers, appear to have caused so much financial stress for the lessee or tenant of the site, who was obliged to provide food and drink, that eventually the town council decided to

pay "the poor man".³³

When reading of such visits, and details as to what the civic party did at the site apart from eating and drinking to the accompaniment of music is not on record, leads to legitimate speculation in respect of the motives, or ideas, which lay behind the institution of the visits in the first place. Deering writes of them as commencing "time beyond memory", and involving a visit to the Woodward, an official who may have lived at the site, though this is not certain, having charge of the town's forestry in the area. But if it was an ancient practice why are the earlier records of the town so silent about it? Of course it could have involved pre-Christian beliefs associated with nature deities, which might well explain a certain reluctance to set down details in writing. However, the bare facts are an annual visit was made to a site where a sacred well stood which was christianised only in the 14th century; this took place at a time which was sacred to both pagan and christian cults and involved feasting; the location was in a wooded area associated in the popular mind with a legendary character who secreted himself there and dressed in green or scarlet. While I do not feel these facts constitute definite evidence for the origin of the visits stemming from a continued reverence for pre-Christian beliefs and practices, but I do argue they suggest the possibility cannot be totally ignored, whatever these annual visits may have degenerated into later. Put whatever construction you want on the facts, one thing is definitely certain, after all their feasting and drinking I seriously doubt whether the civic party would be in a sober enough condition to process formally back to Nottingham at the end of the day.

Why and when the formal visits ceased I have not been able to discover. Local historians attribute the cessation to the civil war, and I see no reason to dispute this, although public displeasure, which is hinted at if not specifically stated in the *Borough Records*, arising from the lavish entertainments met out of public funds, may have been a contributory factor. The success of Parliament in the war, which brought in an official philosophical dislike of festivities in general, probably also played a part, for Nottingham was a parliamentary town. The visits were never resumed after the war, although in 1702 a civic party made a formal visit to inspect some trees and report back as to whether they could be cut down to enable the bowling green to be enlarged.³⁴ We may conclude from this, then, that the site was in the process of becoming a sort of mini-version of the once celebrated Vauxhall Gardens.

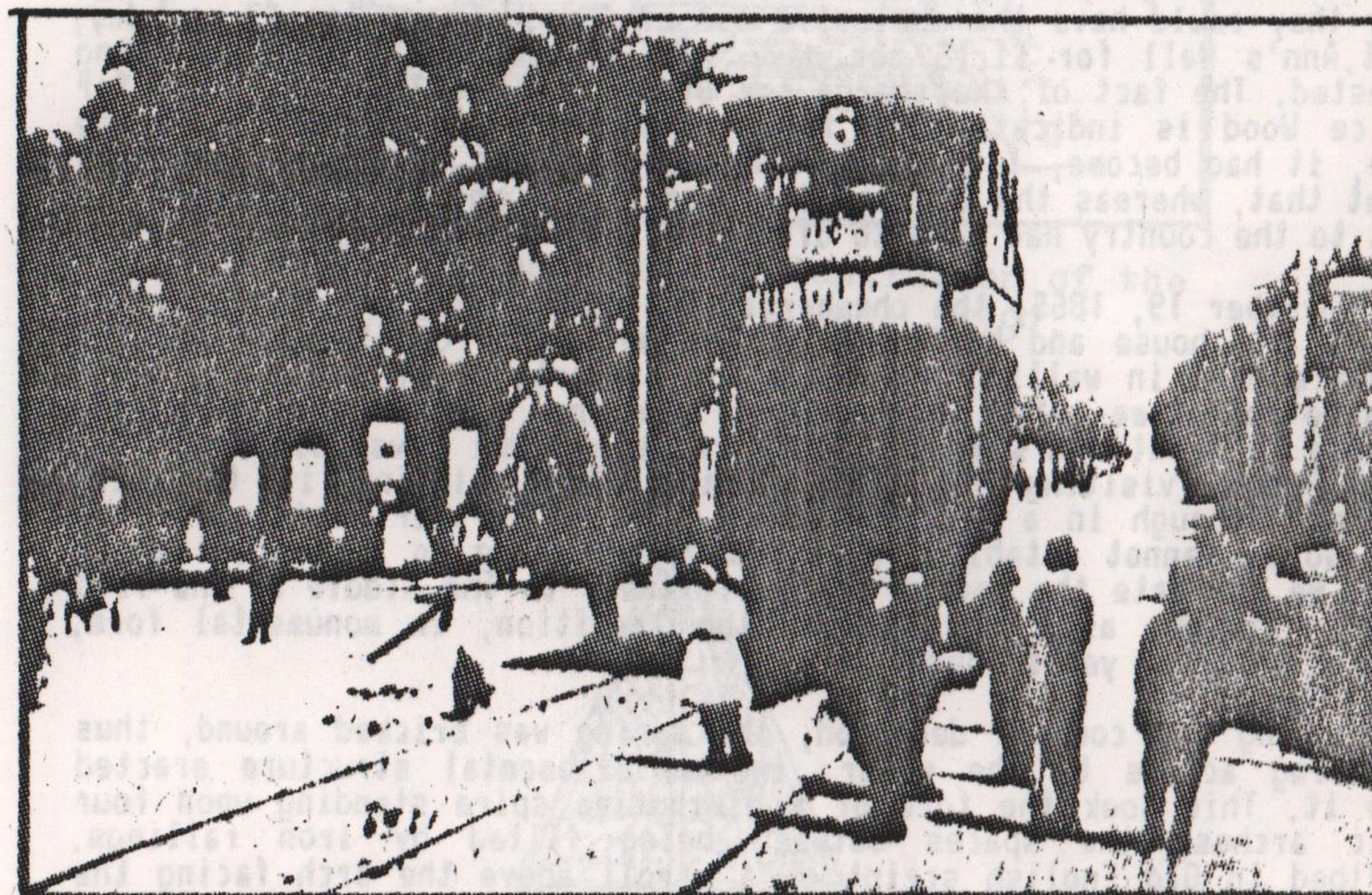
THE BROTHERHOOD OF THE CHAIR

St. Ann's Well remained in the ownership of the town, though in 1647 there was a proposal to sell the site. This was rejected, and on June 28 of the same year it was resolved not to dispose of it without the consent of the council.³⁵ By 1698, though, the site had been leased³⁶ and was to remain privatised, to use a current political expression. The house at the well site became firmly established, according to Laird, who wrote about 1813, as place of entertainment, "surrounded by a few trees which add much to the beauty of the place in a summer evening".³⁷ Exhibited were several relics supposed to be associated with Robin Hood, and accounts are related of a ceremony performed in the house which involved seating visitors on what was claimed to be Robin Hood's chair; when seated the visitor had a cap, also said to have belonged to Robin Hood, placed on his head with great solemnity, and certain undescribed ceremonies then performed (which, if Blackner is anything to go by, involved the consumption of large quantities of "Woodward's nut-brown ale"³⁸). The visitor then received the freedom of the chair and

incorporation into "the society of that renowned brotherhood".³⁹ The so-called relics were sold in 1827 to a Mr. Raynor, an actor, who is reported to have taken them to London where they were employed in various melodramatic theatrical productions. Eventually they are said to have been presented to the British Museum, though that prestigious establishment seems to have lost them.

THE END OF THE WELLS

By 1815 the St. Ann's Well seems to have declined greatly in popularity, and Blackner refers to the bath and the house as being kept in a "slovenly manner" causing it to become "almost deserted".⁴⁰ Janet and Colin Bord have written of the well having been very popular until the late 19th century,⁴¹ but in this they are incorrect, for while the well site fell almost into disuse early in the 19th century, as Blackner noted, it does seem to have enjoyed a modest revival soon after the



A view of the drinking fountain erected at the site of the first hag Well, late 19th century.

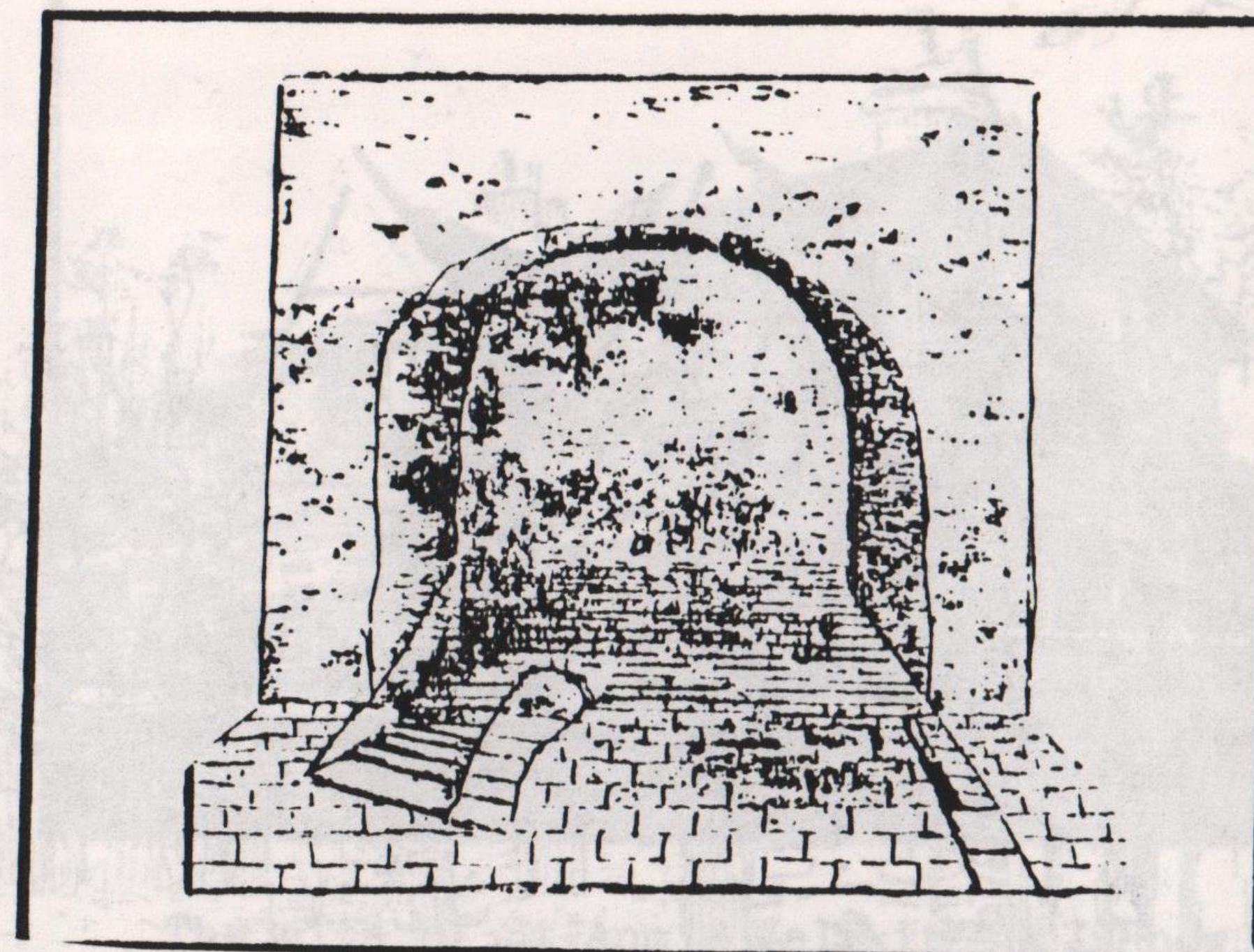
historian wrote, becoming popular. W. Stevenson relates in a short article he contributed to a Nottingham newspaper about 1900, in the 1840s amongst "wedding parties of the poorer class", his elder brother having spent his wedding day there "about 1846 or 1847", when Stevenson attempted to smoke his first cigar. He also recalls going to the well with a friend and stripping off to descend into the water, but were "quickly out again, however, for the water was icy cold, no sun ever played upon it". Stevenson says he could not recall whether the well was located in the house itself or in a separate building, but was "a brick cistern, arched over, and had steps down into it, as Throsby pictures it", adding that it was certainly constructed for a bath, "the water occupying one-half of the apartment, and it was a cold, damp place".

Local evangelical religious fanatics clearly looked upon the attractions of the well site with extreme displeasure, the first half of the 19th century being a time when this form of expression of religious belief underwent a revival, and St. Ann's Well was condemned as being a "resort of loose characters, who spent the Sabbath Day in drunkenness and tumult", forgetful, assuming they knew their local history, of this behaviour probably reflecting that of the town fathers on their visits at Easter in the 17th century, consequently it comes as no surprise to discover the house lost its license to sell drinks in 1825. With no license St. Ann's went rapidly into decline, the site becoming little more than a country retreat, though still attracting a few visitors including, it would seem, at least one school party, for the Nottingham Record Office preserves a letter (M.23,902) dated June 30, 1852, written by J.F. Wood from Coppice House, which is still extant and overlooks the site of the well, to an unnamed school, replying to an inquiry respecting a school visit to either Coppice Wood or St. Ann's Well. Wood states the charge per child for a visit to be 3^d., but for a large party they could have the exclusive use of Coppice Wood for £2 per day, or St. Ann's Well for £1.15 per day, with various dates in July being suggested. The fact of the charge for St. Ann's being less than that for Coppice Wood is indicative, I feel, of the changed character of the place, it had become, I suspect, a country retreat, and a rather small one at that, whereas the Coppice Wood was larger and thus in terms of a visit to the country had more to offer.

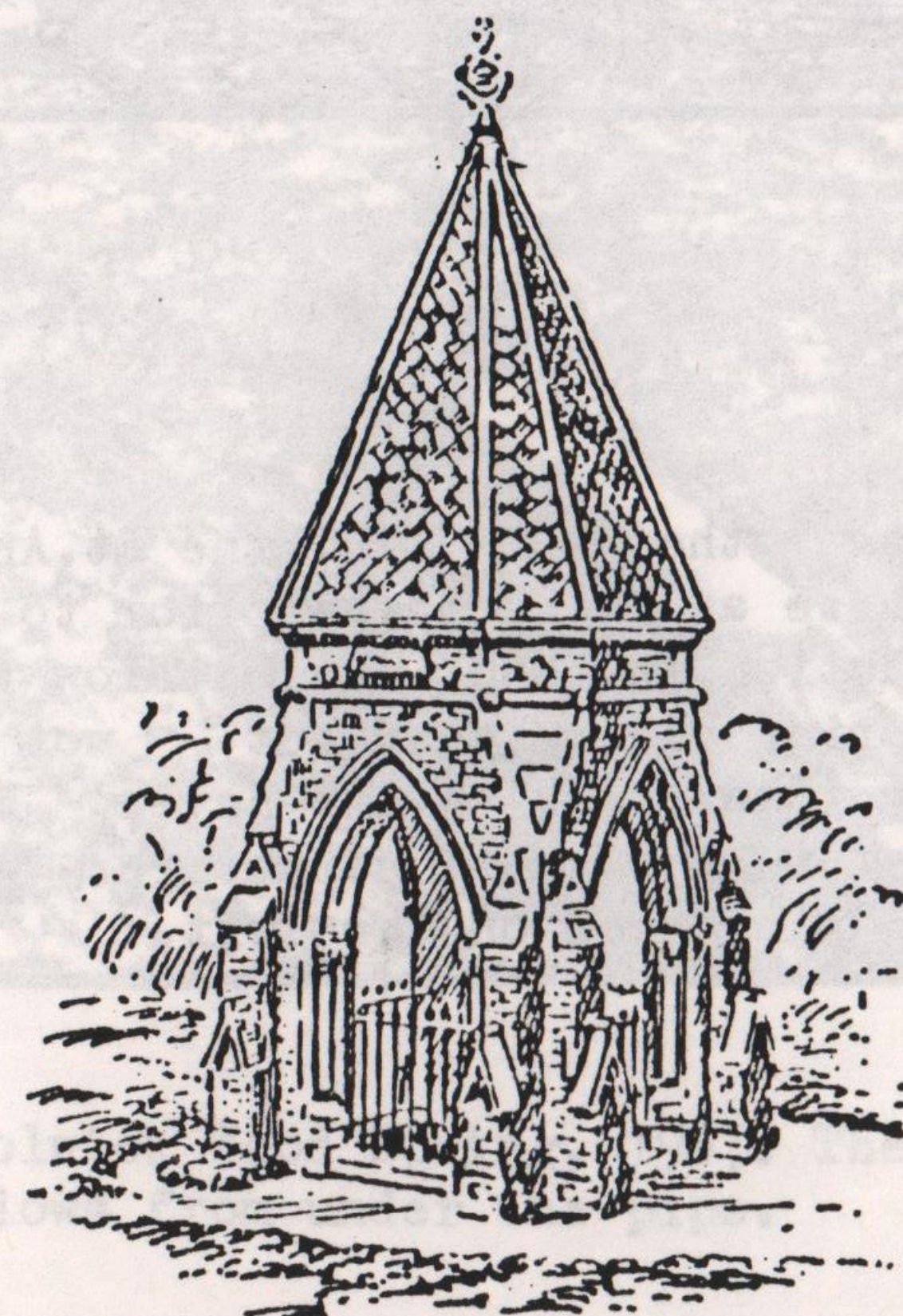
On November 19, 1855, the chamber committee of the town council voted to have the house and buildings at the well site demolished, and the materials used in walling a corporation property.⁴² On August 3, 1856, the same committee voted to spend not more than £100 on "Inclosing and covering in Saint Ann's Well".⁴³ There is a local newspaper report of one S.J. Mann visiting the site during 1856, finding it to still flourish, "though in a decadent style, but no further particulars are given so we cannot establish just what flourishing in a decadent style means. We can date the end of the well, then, to the middle of the 19th century, though, as I shall show, the tradition, in monumental form, lingered on a few years longer.

Following the council decision, the spring was bricked around, thus preventing access to the water, and an ornamental structure erected above it. This took the form of a diminutive spire standing upon four gothic arches, the spaces between being filled by iron railings. Inscribed in Old English script on a scroll above the arch facing the entry path to the well monument was the title, St. Ann's Well. Later a small hand pump and stone trough were added, seemingly the designer of the monumental structure, like the council committee who approved his design, overlooked the fact it was the water of the spring which was of value. Unfortunately, despite the reluctant willingness on the part of the hard-headed, and probably hard-hearted, businessmen who controlled the town council, to preserve a site of great antiquity, their decision made the well nothing more than a curious monument to the past rather than remaining a living and vital part of local life in the St. Ann's area.

During the 19th century the population of Nottingham expanded enormously. The census of 1801 showed it to be 28,972, by 1851 it was 58,529 and in 1901 it had reached 239,743.⁴⁴ The new inhabitants required housing which led to a St. Ann's, amongst other areas, being rapidly built over with low cost housing. The new residents knew nothing



The earliest, and only, illustration of the actual Robin Hood/St. Ann's Well, 1797.



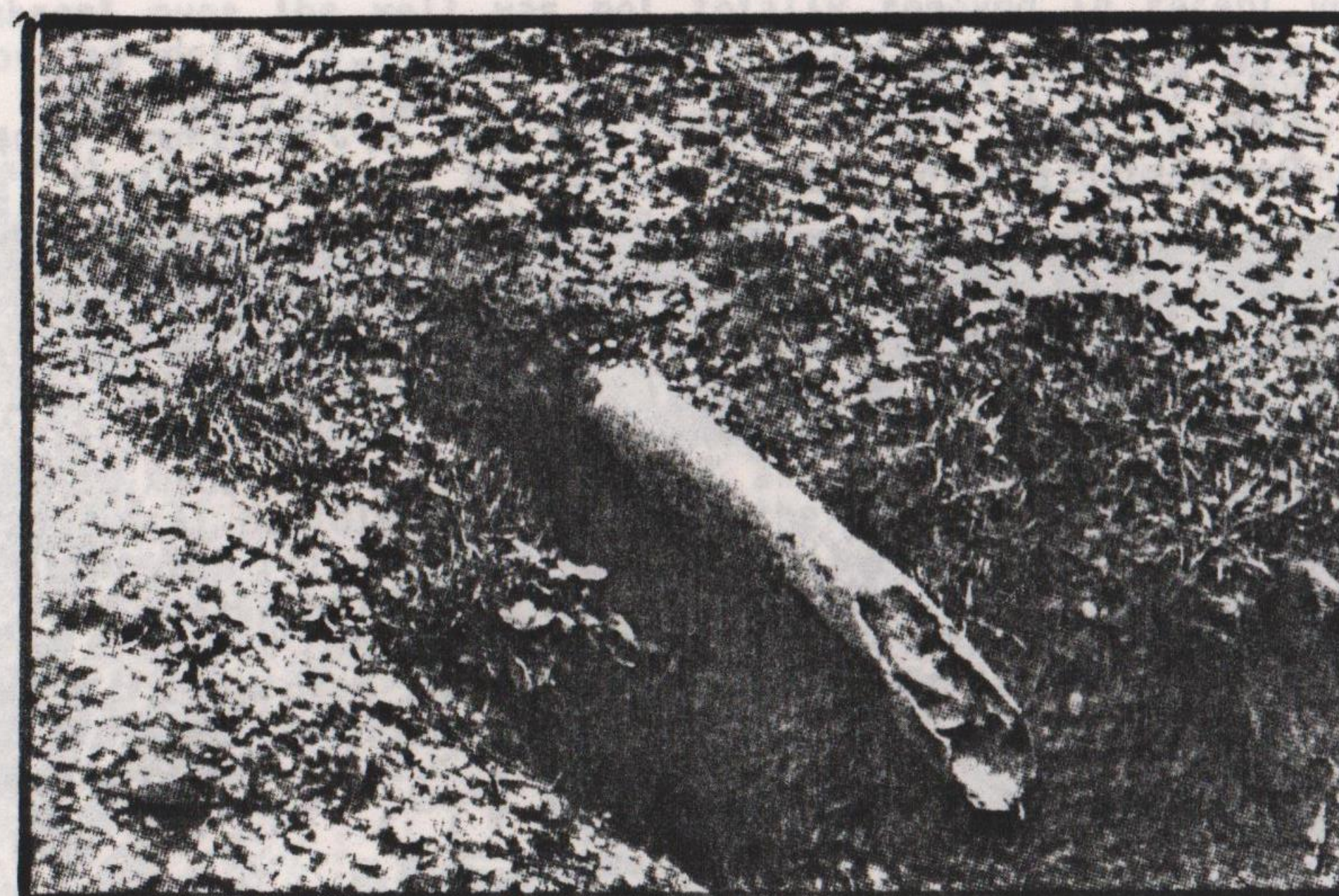
The monument erected over the well in 1856-7.



Looking rather run-down, the St. Ann's Well site as it appeared prior to its destruction in 1856. The outflow from the spring can be seen but not the spring itself, which may have been located in the small structure with the sloping roof on the left.



The site of St. Ann's Well in 1987, now occupied by the Hoe Down public house, soon to be re-named The Gardeners.

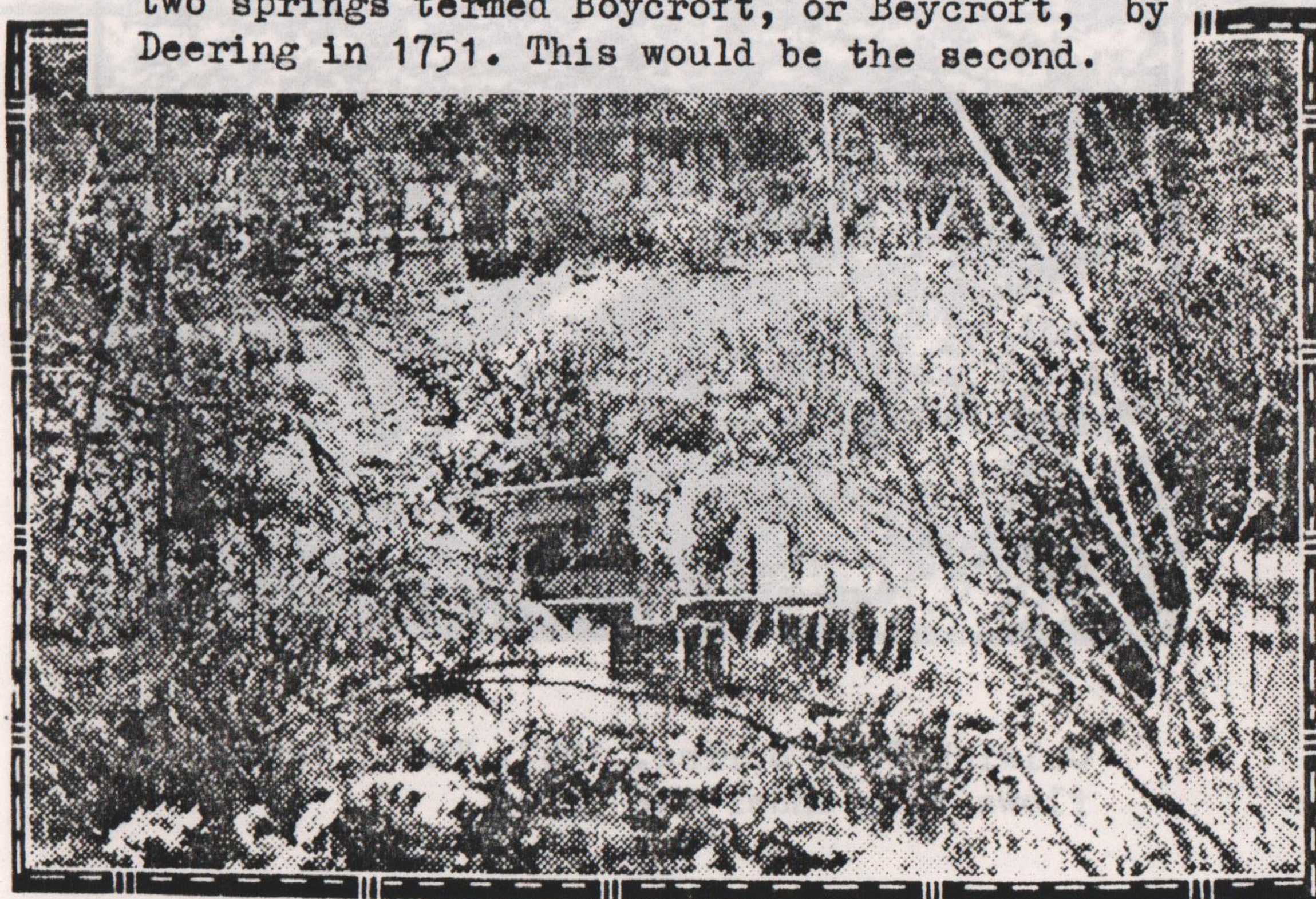


Colwick Wood Spring, 1987. The water flows from under the pipe.



Moorbridge Pond nature reserve, the site of the Bull Well.

The second Rag Well, 1918. Perhaps one of the two springs termed Boycroft, or Beycroft, by Deering in 1751. This would be the second.



of the local traditions, or transferred their attentions to other still existing springs, and the St. Ann's Well under its ornamental gothic tower was vandalised, becoming a dumping ground for rubbish (there is a very topical sound to this), thus there was hardly any protest when in August, 1887, the monument was demolished and the site of the well covered by the embankment being constructed for the Suburban Railway.⁴⁵ An offer by the railway company to present the well monument to the town for erection elsewhere was refused by the council. As Janet and Colin Bord show in their book, *Sacred Waters*, the St. Ann's Well was far from being alone in being destroyed through railway construction.⁴⁶ So ended centuries of tradition.

THE SITE OF THE WELL

The location of the actual well site and its associated structures has not so far been discussed. Though shown on an Ordinance Survey map, which would imply the task of pin-pointing the site to be an easy task, extensive redevelopment in the area over the past few years has made this rather more difficult than might be thought, consequently, it is not easy to state specifically where the actual well stood.

Because of the problem of locating the well site members of AFRA and the Nottingham Hidden History Team, which is based in St. Ann's, undertook a detailed study of local maps coupled with a thorough field survey. This revealed that not only did much of the embankment of the Suburban Railway remain, along with a rather attractive bridge, but other landmarks and old paths did too. Contrary to what the Bords claim the embankment over the well was not totally removed in recent years. These provided definite pointers to the exact location of the well, which we concluded stood partly under the south wall of the Hoe Down public house, contrary to the claim made in a recent work by Pat Mayfield,⁴⁷ that the site is located at the rear of the Gardeners public house (the previous name of the Hoe Down). The pub displays a small green plaque high up on its east wall, near the rear, informing readers about the well having stood where the pub now does. Discussing the well with the manager brought forth news of a scheme to excavate the rear yard of the pub sometime during 1987, where a resistivity survey conducted for the owners in 1986 had indicated the presense of structures, in order to locate the well and perhaps open it again. As there were several buildings on the site the structures located, if not associated with the railway, for next to the pub is an old railway wall, need not of necessity be the actual well. No resistivity survey had been conducted at the front of the Hoe Down, so presumably the archaeologists who undertook it had used the information given in the book by Mayfield, which is not always supported by factual data.

THE RAG WELL

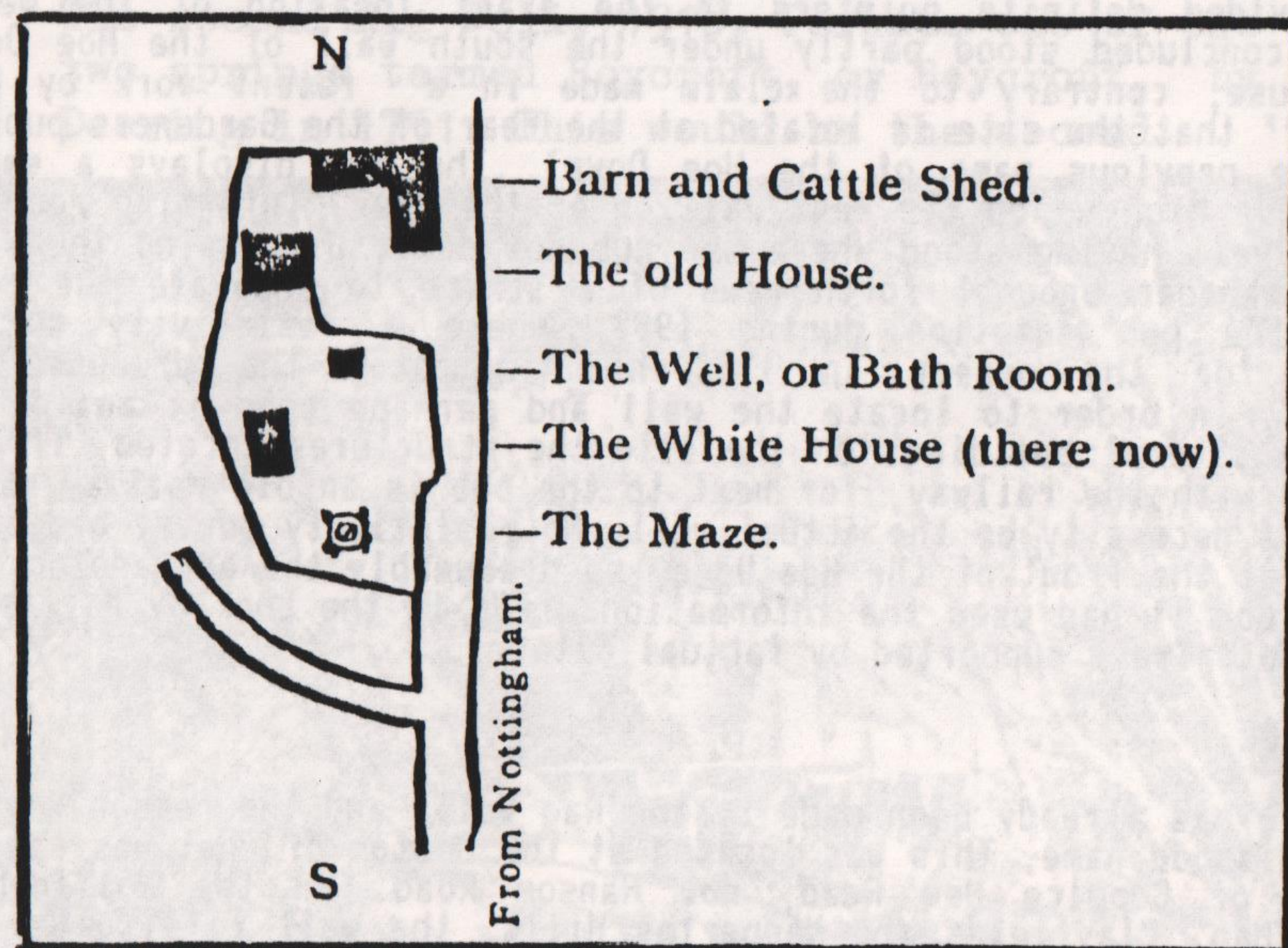
Reference has already been made to the Rag Well, and the reason why it carried this odd name. This was located at the bottom of what was called New Road, or Coppice New Road, now Ransom Road (on the Nottingham Enclosure Map, Clayfields and Mapperley Hills, the well is situated in plot No. 511), which was constructed as a scheme to relieve local unemployment in 1826. The spring was located adjacent to where a police lodge, as it was called, was constructed in 1887. During the construction work the Rag Well was bricked up and the water made to issue from an iron pipe located in a nearby wall. In 1890 a "cabmens shelter" was erected next to the police station and in the process of

this work the well was destroyed and a new public drinking fountain provided, with the water feeding it being drawn from the corporation water mains.

There is a mystery concerning the Rag Well, for although local historians are agreed as to the date of its destruction being 1890, as mentioned above, a Nottingham newspaper published a photograph of what they described as the Rag spring as existing in 1918!⁴⁸ Some notes which accompanied the photograph explained the situation in terms of there being two springs possessed of the same name, which is more than possible as the St. Ann's appears to have abounded in springs, indeed, while doing their survey the APRA/NHHT members located what they consider to be one which has eventually found another potential exit in the middle of the lawn of a house some yards up the road from the Hoe Down. Could this be the St. Ann's spring resurrecting itself? One would to think so.

It is just possible the second Rag Well was originally the nearby Hart Well, which was situated on the opposite side of St. Ann's Road just up from the Rag Well. The name was preserved by Hartwell Street, now Ball Street.

The springs in the area were sewered in 1901, and this date appears to mark the end, for the moment, of the holy wells of St. Ann's.⁴⁹



map of the St. Ann's well site just before its destruction.

OTHER NOTTINGHAM WELLS

Nottingham appears to have several other wells or springs looked upon as possessed of medicinal properties, though with one notable exception all have been destroyed. I do not claim the list which follows to be complete.

THE BOYCROFT, OR BEYCROFT SPRING.

This is first mentioned by Deering, though not discussed,⁵⁰ who refers to it and another located in the next close as being held to have value for their "excellent Eye-Waters". The *Nottingham Guardian* (20/7/1918) locates the spring as being in a field on the left hand when entering Thornycroft Road, formerly Wood Lane, from St. Ann's Well Road.

THE BRADWELL

Located just off St. Ann's Well Road, adjacent to Peas Hill Road. Referred to on a map but not discussed, though it is perhaps the well mentioned as being on the road from Nottingham to St. Ann's by some writers.

LAMBLEY SPRINGS

Located at or near Lambley above the St. Ann's valley, probably in fact going down from the higher ground. Lambley "dumbles" is a term applied to minor watercourses.⁵¹ The exact locations of these springs have not as yet been determined, they might still exist.

TROUGH CLOSE

No definite location other than being "near Mapperley Hill".⁵²

TRENT BRIDGE

There was supposed to be a spring under one of the arches of the old Trent Bridge, but no trace of this is now to be found.⁵³

NOTTINGHAM CASTLE

There was said to have been a spring in a close adjacent to the castle but no particulars of this have been located.

NOTTINGHAM SPAW

Perhaps the most celebrated of the springs in Nottingham proper. According to Blackner²⁶ it was located in Spaw Close, presumably this being called after the spring, and its exact location seemingly being adjacent to the bank of the River Leen, for he refers to it being having been fenced in on the leen side, and "the spring-head (being) removed without the fence". This act, according to the writer, was both unjustifiable and also the ruin of it for the spring ceased to flow in dry weather, "whereas, when in its former, and natural situation, it flowed in all the seasons". He also refers to another spring near by whose "water was of a smooth and emollient quality, and very useful to sore eyes". He adds, "The principal inhabitants of the town are very blameable for suffering parsimony and cupidity to remove a public benefit, which, very possibly, may never be restored". This destruction he dates to 1811. Deering, the first historian to mention the Nottingham Spaw, writes of it as having "a strong chalybeate Astringency", being, "a very heavy water", and referring to its medicinal properties.⁵⁵ The River Leen was filled in at the Spaw Close site and along Castle Boulevard in 1884 and its water diverted into the nearby Nottingham Canal. The Spaw is probably lost for good.

COLWICK SPRING

There are tantalising references to this spring in various local works, but sadly no detailed records. This is regrettable as it is the only spring discussed, with the possible exception of the Lambley springs, which still exists, albeit greatly neglected. Laird refers to it as being a spring, "formerly in great repute", but does not say why it was or what the reason, or reasons, were for its decline in status.⁶⁶ The spring is located to the left of the so-called "ash-path" which skirts a childrens' playground and leads off down towards the railway, the spring being not far from the railway fence. Past work on the spring sought to channel it through an iron pipe and this now sticks out of the bank in a rather battered state, however, the spring water does not issue from it but trickles out of the ground just below to run away in a small stream. The local antiquarian, William Stevenson, records visiting Colwick Woods, now a public park, when a boy to collect spring nettles which were made into "spring porridge", called by the family, "spring medicine".⁶⁷ Although he does not mention the spring it would be nice to think the nettles came from its vicinity.

BULWELL

Bulwell was incorporated into Nottingham in 1877, before which it was a village. The name implies association with a well and history records this to be so. The name according to one source was derived from water "bulling" or "bubbling" from the Bunter Sandstone of the "forest waste",⁶⁸ which was located near Moor Bridge at the corner of Bestwood Road. This site is now being transformed into a nature reserve, though sadly the spring no longer survives. Another suggested origin has the name deriving from a local Saxon landlord called Bulla; however, a more romantic origin is postulated in a local legend. According to this a mighty bull which once roamed Sherwood Forest one day found its path barred by a large rock firmly settled in the ground. Taking offence, the bull attacked the rock with its horns and eventually knocked a fragment of it off. Immediately from the fissure thus created issued forth a stream of water from a hidden spring. Time passed and around the spring a hamlet sprung up which eventually became a village taking its name from the well the bull discovered, the Bull Well.

In a place of Nottingham's size there were of course hundreds of wells, several of which have come to light during excavations in the city, two being shown in dramatic illustrations in James Shipman's book on the old town walls.⁶⁹ Most were purely utilitarian, and were never looked upon as holy, sacred or medicinal, nevertheless there are many tales associated with the wells and the water system which make interesting and entertaining reading, and one day I might gather some together to give readers an insight into this side of Nottingham's story; for the moment, though, a mystery. According to one local cave researcher, who shall remain anonymous, under a factory on Castle Boulevard exists a lake which even has a boat upon it. Fact or fiction? Decide for yourself.

A NOTE ABOUT ROBIN HOOD

The early association of the name of Robin Hood with what was eventually to become better known as St. Ann's Well is perhaps possessed of rather more significance than orthodox historians might credit it with. It suggests clearly there was no priestly control of the site, whether associated with the supposed 'hermitage' or not, unless, of course, the priests were not christian! Deering's reference to the

annual visits of the town officials to the well has having commenced at a "time before memory",⁶² is itself strange, for it does not tell us why the leading figures in the town of Nottingham should march in full official regalia (or, if you like, their Sunday best) on one day of the year, which was within a time of great importance in an earlier period, simply to meet, as the reason is presented later by various writers, a town employee. Of course that might really be the reason, but frankly I seriously doubt it. The town council, for want of a better word, may have simply wanted a day out in the country, for their wives, if any, went along too, so presumably their children may have also. But these people were the senior citizens of the town, and presumably wealthy, so such a reason hardly carries much conviction. So why did they go, and was it associated with some form of cult? In other words, the whole tale has what might be termed a "masonic undertone".

This brings us to Robin Hood, the enigmatic figure who flits about the pages of early folklore. Was Hood historical? Debate has raged on about this for years and still does. I suspect the story combines all manner of elements, myth, history, imagination, poetic invention, fiction and so on. But does the tale also embody elements of earlier nature worship beliefs and practices, and was it the continuing observation of these at an earlier date which lay behind the annual pilgrimage to the well site? By the time Deering wrote such reasons would have, I suspect, been lost to memory and the event looked upon as having more of a social character than anything else. The real reasons why traditional events are carried on are often lost sight of, as every student of folklore knows.

The well site was to be found in a wooded area, and woods were populated with all manner of spirit beings. Robin Hood was a secretive figure dressed in clothes which blended with the environment in which he secreted himself and his followers. He was the man in a hood. He hunted the deer, and ancient artifacts suspected of being ceremonial in character exist showing a hood bearing deer antlers. Easter, too, was a time of ancient earth-cult celebrations, being dedicated to the goddess of spring, Eostre, and Easter, or Black Monday, was a day devoted to games and festivities. Holt asserts, quite correctly, one might add, that there is no need to explain Hood and his companions away as mythical occupants of the forest,⁶³ but this does not dispose of the possibility of the saga concealing within it an ancient mythology which only the initiated would have recognised at the time.

NOTE

According to a letter from Douglas Silkstone, published in the *Nottingham Evening Post* (8/1/1987), segregated bathing for lepers was established at St. Ann's Well under a charter given them by King Henry I (1068-1135). Unfortunately Mr. Silkstone does not cite his sources for the charter, nor responded to a request for them. Another individual stated that the skull of an executed criminal was taken to the well for washing, which was an ancient Celtic practice, though carried on also by the Celtic christians. Again, I have been unable to obtain details of the source, or sources, for this story.

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ADDENDA

Since the main text was prepared we have undertaken further research into the wells and springs of Nottingham, during which we discovered one spring to still exist in the St. Ann's area.

On the Ordinance Survey map, sheet 129, a well and an unnamed spring are shown in the Hungerhill area of St. Ann's. We decided to try to locate these and found that both were located in what is now Hungerhills Gardens, which is given over to a large number of allotments. We followed the paths shown on the map and eventually reached the lowest part of the gardens where a small stream ran, bubbling quite strongly out of the bank and running off into this stream was a small spring. This is, to date, the only certain extant spring in St. Ann's. We could not explore the entire course of the stream because of access difficulties, and it was this problem which prevented us seeking out the well, which thus may still exist also. But we were quite excited at discovering that in St. Ann's, a place celebrated for its springs, one survives to the present day, long may it do so. As the spring is unnamed we have named it the Hungernill Spring. The grid reference for it is SK 584416.

According to John Hicklin (*The History of Nottingham Castle*, Hicklin & Co., Nottingham, 1834 (this date appears on the engraved title page, a second page in my copy gives the publisher as Hamilton Adams & Co., London, 1836)), there was a small spring near the entrance below the castle to what is traditionally called Mortimer's Hole, the spring being named Mortimer's Well (p.144).



"Your right, it IS real ale! No wonder the well is so popular."