

The Rediscovery of a Fresh Water Spring beside the Sea: a local Holy well?

by **Sevket Akyildiz**

Relaxing and sipping a cup of black tea tastes that much better when the water used comes from a water source that we know to be natural, fresh and local. The fact that the water is free of any financial transaction surely adds 'value' to the tea experience. This notion of a taste test based upon the above factors is not an illusion; the tea really does seem have a different lighter taste. It is common knowledge that British tap



The Holy Well, Eastbourne, Summer 2010

water contains fluoride and other additives designed to supposedly safeguard our health. However, the natural water available on an Eastbourne beach – since the Summer of 2010 - at Holywell district truly has a sweet taste. (The etymology of the name Eastbourne refers to a human settlement built east of the Bourne spring. This is a separate water source to the Holywell spring.) Added to this personal delight is that many users of the water appear to welcome the spring as a sign of nature's abundance and the fact that it is mostly likely chemical free generates a confidence in the water.

The recent origins of the spring are seen as special and reveal a community minded project. However, the initial finding of the site and

its excavation are due to the mental, spiritual and physical efforts of one person called Dan. Dan says that inspiration for the work is derived from a Catholic belief. Still Dan's efforts have been enjoyed and accommodated by people from all faiths (Jews, Muslims, Buddhists, Pagans, etc), agnostics and atheists, - and by young, middle-aged and mature citizens. A local Catholic church has blessed this site twice and on each occasion has attracted a gathering of nearly 50-70 people. He tells people that when he was working alone to excavate the site he had just one vegetarian meal a day, and relied upon the spring water, and food gifts from passers-by, to keep him going. In addition, local residents speak of childhood memories of the area and periodical appearances of natural water leaking from the chalk cliffs up and down this local stretch of the beach and chalk cliff. Newer citizens of Eastbourne - those from economically deprived backgrounds and those living in the newly built partially-gated communities - mix in the social setting created by the

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The 'Holy Well' - Hollywell, Eastbourne - a local citizen passing by observes the excavation work

Holywell spring in mutual enjoyment and shared interest of personal health. For many the ambience of the spring and the sound of natural water - with the background accompaniment of the lapping waves on the beach of the tidal English Channel.



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The 'Holy Well' – Hollywell, Eastbourne – under excavation

The historical human usage of the Holy Well spring is both intriguing and ambiguous. A framed sign written by a local historian and attached to a wall besides the well describes the ancient and modern history of the site. It reads that the site might have been a destination for tired and thirsty travellers – perhaps having completed some form of pilgrimage. It is indeed interesting to contemplate the Holywell spring as either starting point or end point of a pre-Christian pilgrimage. A couple of natural spring waters are dotted around Eastbourne. Though local Iron Age settlements are mentioned in the written sign at that site, no information is given regarding any pre-Christian pagan culture

and any possible usage of the Holywell site is mentioned. A note is made that following the 16th century English Reformation the site disappears from history and does not reappear until some point in the Victorian era. At this time the water that had channelled into the well had two uses: i) a mass urban use, and ii) a revived spiritual-religious (and leisure) use. The mass urban use of the natural water supply from immediately the site relates to the pumping of the water from the by the Eastbourne Water Company for the town's growing population and overuse of Bourne spring site. Today, water that is not channelled and pumped for mass usage (and treated with chemicals by the local water company) leaks through the chalk to form the Holywell spring; when the water



The Holy Well - with framed sign.

reaches the clay found at sea level it appears as the spring. Critics of the Holywell spring say that the spring water is in fact little more than the overflow of the pumping station situated above the spring. However, even if this were the case, the water is surely still 'pure' as water treatment is not undertaken at Holywell by the water board. The sign as noted above reports that the water originates from an underground reservoir of melted glacial water – and is topped up by rain water falling on the South Downs. It is said that this water takes approximately five years to filter through the chalk. Chalk stone is the container of the Holy Well spring – and also is the material that filters and channels the water. Observations of the Holywell spring water have noted that the flow of water appears to be reasonably constant whether there has been rainfall or not. This is intriguing, because if rain water was the source of the spring's water one would assume at times of heavy rain that the spring would gush forth. Casual observations over some months would appear not to support this claim. The information in this paragraph stems from

the framed sign as noted above, and further historical, scientific and social research needs to be undertaken before one could form a conclusion.

Though Eastbourne has an image in British society as a notoriously sleepy English seaside town the mass consumerist culture holds sway. Therefore the discrete and non-corporate nature of the Holywell spring is something exploited by the local population. In one sense it is a return to a 'tradition' of collecting fresh water and also can be seen as a reaction against the norms of modern everyday life and consumption, for example, in the purchasing of bottled water (encased in plastic and non-local in origin). What the spring means to different people varies according to need, usage, perception, religious view (or not), spiritual outlook, politics and ecological consciousness. The low stone wall built by Dan and fellow helpers, Pat and Shaun, is both a built physical structure designed to protect the site and a creative act of care. All these three have a passion for the well and provide their labour for free; they say "We feel we are doing a job of worth at the spring and that we are helping people access an alternate source local freshwater...the Holywell spring is such a peaceful place to be, and we have made many new friends here." The low wall of large stones gathered from around the site protects the spring – and its vital source: the spring water.

The dark stones of the wall stand up close to the white chalk wall; the chalk cliffs rises up to almost 90 metres at this point (and stretches from the most westerly end of Eastbourne promenade (a place known as Holywell) and continue to Beachy Head (which is approximately 162 metres above sea level, 530ft), thereafter these



The 'Holy Well' - Holywell, Eastbourne (Looking eastwards)

chalk cliffs become the Seven Sisters country park and drop to sea level at the Cuckmere River Valley.

The site of the spring within a corner of the South Downs – where the green land meets the blue-grey of the English Channel is special and dramatic. Furthermore the juxtaposition of fresh water and the salt water of the sea is thought provoking and somewhat rare. Indeed, the sea tides at times will result in the salt water rising to less than a couple of metres from the Holy Well spring's protecting wall. Occasionally the lower portion of the spring site is temporarily flooded by a high-tide, but no damage is done. In the Winter of 2010 a high tide and strong on-shore wind resulted in the Holy Well spring once again being entirely covered by pebbles. At such times the spring disappears from public view – and even the unique sound of running spring water is lost. This makes the sites a mix of humankind's struggle to access natural resources and nature's ability to overcome our humble efforts, with apparent ease. Clearly, what we are experiencing here is nature's provision and the uncertainty of that provision. This leaves the onlooker to reflect upon issues of sustainability at the environmental level; others might perceive this site to be 'magical' in some sense, with the site being revealed and covered (veiled perhaps) in natural cycles over a period of historical time that perhaps pre-date both the Celts and Romans once resident in the region. Pat and Shaun, in response to the storm's recovering of the spring, cleared the pebbles from the site and allowed the passing public and regulars once more to bottle their fresh water. "We have been cleaning the site from the effects of daily high-tides, and have removed any seaweed and beach debris from the site of spring...but we see this site as a community project and welcome new volunteers to help care for this special site," say Pat and Shaun. When drinking my tea I am reminded of their collective efforts and their belief in the goodness of fresh spring water.

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Disclaimer: The author of this paper seeks to describe the physical and natural site found at the place known by local Eastbournians as the Holywell spring, and though he does regularly consume the water himself (with no apparent ill-health affects thus far) he does not take responsibility for consumption of the Holywell spring water by other people and does not encourage that people should consume the water themselves, unless they wish to do so.

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