

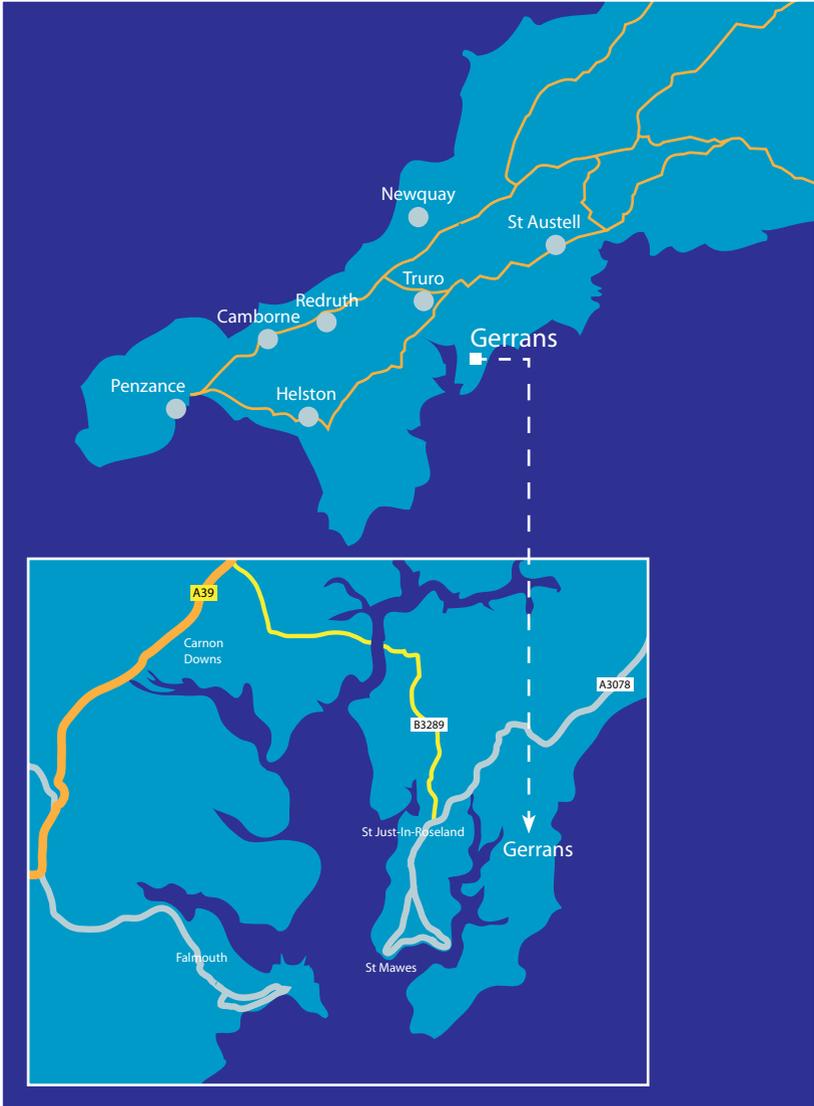
THE
WELLS,
SHUTES
& SPRINGS
of GERRANS
PARISH



Edited and compiled by Hilary Thompson



Gerrans and Porthscatho Old Cornwall Society



Cover photo: The pump in The Square, Porthscatho

Introduction

The motto of the Federation of Old Cornwall Societies is 'Gather up the fragments that are left that nothing be lost'. With this in mind the St Gerrans & Porthscatho Old Cornwall Society decided to record the wells, shutes and springs of the parish, which, until quite recently, were the sole source of water for domestic purposes.

In the past springs and shutes provided easy access to water which rose naturally to the surface. Such a spring was tapped at Gerrans Churchtown at the top of appropriately-named Well Lane, the principal source for most inhabitants, while downhill by the shoreline at Porthscatho, springs directed into shutes provided for their needs. As the villages grew and skills improved, so wells, both public and private, became increasingly common.

While this record cannot claim to have discovered all individually-owned wells, the survey does show the extent to which households relied upon the availability of water from natural sources.

Many residents, both members and non-members of the Society, have contributed much information and this, together with research of existing records, has led to the publication of this booklet. The village of Gerrans is referred to as 'Churchtown' throughout, to avoid confusion with Gerrans as a parish. The Society is most grateful to the Cornwall Area of Outstanding Natural Beauty Partnership and Natural England for supporting the production of this booklet through the Sustainable Development Fund; and to Cornwall County Council's Historic Environment Service for providing support with the design and printing of this booklet.

Portscatho: Public Wells, Shutes and Standpipes



The Wells, Shutes and Springs of Gerrans Parish

The geology of the area in which we live has ensured a plentiful supply of water. Thus the inhabitants were seldom faced with a shortage, although means had to be devised to obtain it. Until the introduction of a mains supply around 1950, the carrying of this water to individual homes was one of the most time-consuming household chores. Some were fortunate enough to own an individual well on their premises but it was not until well into the 19th century that this became common.



Water Carriers, Churchtown

Natural springs rose to the surface; one long forgotten gave its name to an area in Portscatho at the lower end of River Street – Venton Gavas, or goat's spring. Water from these springs was contained in dipping wells or channelled through iron pipes to outlets easily accessible – shutes. Every household could collect rainwater for domestic purposes, such as cleaning and laundering.

These springs rose along the ridgeway which runs north to south at Gerrans Churchtown to feed these shallow wells and shutes. For the inhabitants of Gerrans the old well at the upper end of Well Lane supplied their needs for many centuries. Now only a boggy area below the last house at the top of the lane gives an indication of its site.

Wells were either deep dug or 'dipping.' The nature of our rock differs from the granite areas of the county. Whereas the latter produces soft water ours was lime-rich and hard, producing scale but generally appreciated as having a much better taste.

For centuries the inhabitants drew their water from these wells or springs. Frequently a well was shared by a group of neighbours. At Parkanvrane on the St Anthony road to the south of the Percuil turning there existed in the 17th and 18th centuries a row of cottages, all with right of access to a well in the adjoining Well Meadow. For instance, on 31 December 1640 the rector, John Dell, leased to Ed. Beare, husbandman, 'a lately erected house and garden at Parkanvrane with a footpath forth and back to the well.' Another clergyman, the rector James Trenhayle, was the principal lessee of several tenements in Churchtown in 1720. He reserved the 'liberty to take and carry away water for his use out of and from the pump or well on the said premises but not to permit or grant leave or licence to any other person to do the same without joint consent of the tenants of the other moiety.' This appears to be the well, only comparatively recently filled in, at the rear of 'Trematon' in Gerrans square. Right of access to this well was mentioned as late as 1941 in a conveyance.

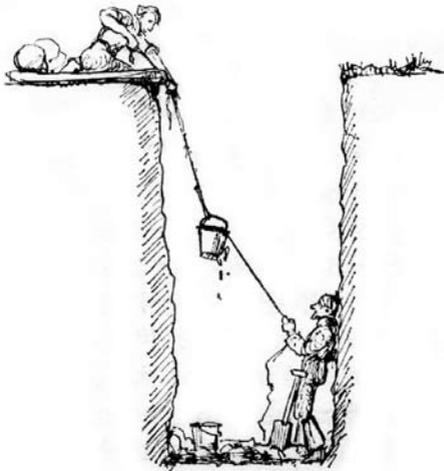
Water butts were universally employed to catch rainwater for toileting, clothes washing and house cleaning. The day book of a local master carpenter in the late 19th and early 20th centuries contains many references to the repair of water barrels. In a village where pilchard seining and curing was the mainstay, coopers were always on hand to produce these.

It was not until 1948 that the local authority turned its attention to provision of a piped water supply for the parish. Thus the centuries' old trek to the well ended, and with it the companionable meeting place for news and gossip.



Pump in Square, Portscatho

Well digging was a laborious and dangerous occupation. Many were unlined, dug out of solid rock, as at Lower Treloan, still to be seen and forty feet deep. Others showed evidence of men's skill with impressive stonework.



Well Digging

Shutes in Portscatho

The village has always been well provided with spring water by means of shutes, the water being channelled through iron pipes into a trough, the surplus eventually finding its way through cliffs to the sea. Along North Parade, below Shute Meadow, an iron pipe delivers water over a drain.



Shute, North Parade

Two other shutes are still to be seen in the stone quays along the waterfront – below North Parade and in particular below the slipway on to the beach below the Post Office. This shute, known as The Diggey, and recorded in Enys records, was renowned for the purity of its water. Local inhabitants fetched water for drinking purposes even after the provision of a piped supply. It was revered as 'a healing stream', and said to have been responsible for the recovery of the sick from their deathbeds on occasion.



The Diggey, Portscatho

Public wells in Portscatho and Churchtown

By the early twentieth century each village boasted two public pumps, all still in situ. Of the two in Portscatho - at Highertown and in the Square - one of these was certainly in existence in the 18th century. In 1774 a wall, some 654 feet long, was to be built from the end of the Luggar westwards, 'the well in the field' being a location point.



Public Pump, Highertown, Portscatho



Public Pump, The Square, Portscatho, present day

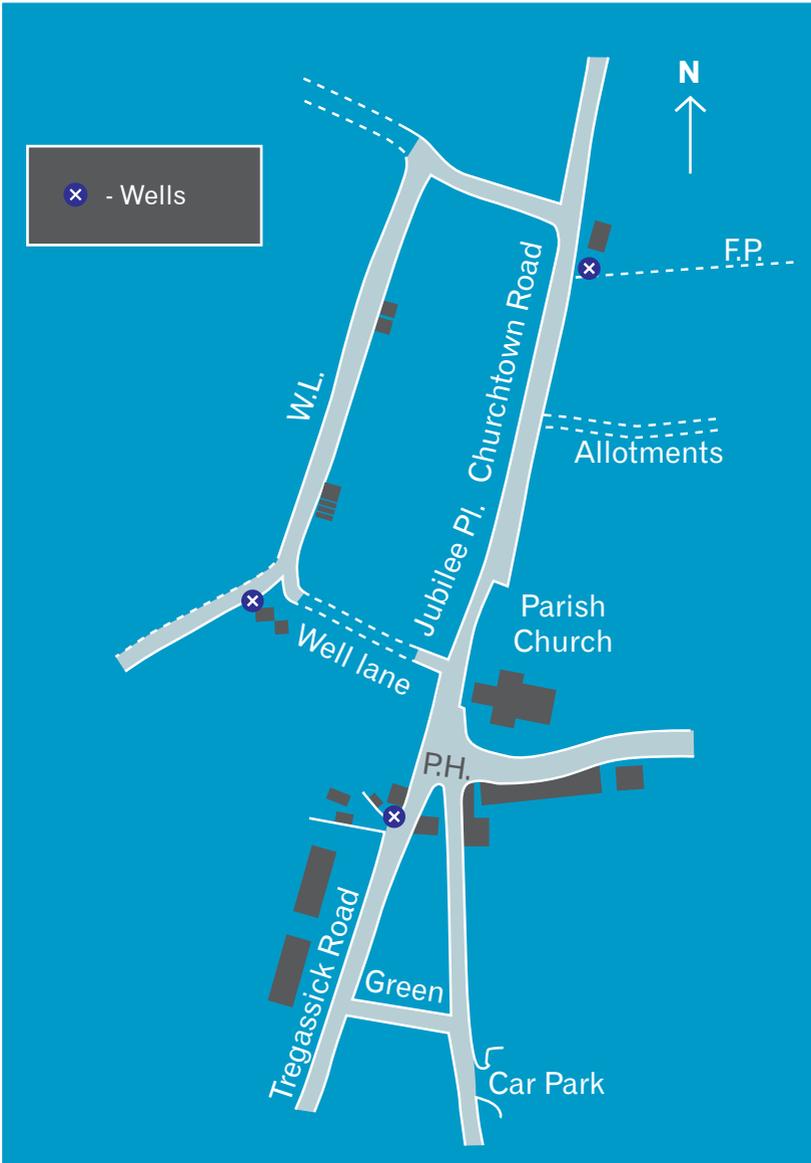
The pump in the Square is situated some yards from the well itself and was installed in this more convenient position in 1923. An old garden, which had occupied much of the Square, had gone and the well was now exposed in the centre and was deemed to be a danger to the increasing traffic – the motor car had arrived. Recently the cover of the old well was removed and the well drained when the nearby Plume of Feathers inn was flooded. It refilled immediately, confirming the popular belief that it had never been known to run dry.

While there appears to have been no threat to people's health for the most part from drinking this natural water, there was an occasion in November 1831 when seepage into the well in the Square at Portscatho gave rise to pollution, as reported in the *West Briton* at that time:

It seems that a fish cellar has recently been erected in the upper part of the village ... the draining of the exuviae from this cellar has passed into the street, and part of it has sunk into the interstices of the small limestone with which the road has lately been paved, and there furnishes an offensive odour to all persons passing. The remainder of this draining runs over to the opposite and lower side of the road, where, in conjunction with other filth, it accumulates against a wall, part of it remaining stagnant, and the other part filtering through the ground underneath, down upon a spring which supplies a well, from which a majority of the inhabitants usually procure their water. The water has often of late been found... extremely unpleasant, and possessing a disagreeable taste as if fish had been boiled in it. That the draining from this cellar has been the cause ... of the present attack of fever, follows as a necessary inference from these facts that, up to the period of the pilchards being deposited there, the whole village was in a state of the greatest healthiness, and that the disorder first shewed itself in the immediate vicinity of the cellar, and proceeded down each side of the street to the beach.'

At Hightertown a new well was proposed to be sunk in 1929 'in the garden of a cottage' the wall to be removed and replaced by a new wall surrounding the well, so that the public might have access from the outside.

Gerrans Churchtown and Well Lane: Public Wells



Churchtown Public pumps

As the 19th century progressed and new houses were built, so Churchtown's residents looked for a more convenient supply than the old dipping well in appropriately named Well Lane.

The first public well, with pump, is situated next to the Wesleyan Chapel. A water shortage due to drought in 1899 led to demand for a further well to be sunk. People were asked not to draw water for their gardens but it was not until 1911 that a further well was dug opposite Pearce's forge, now the Heritage Centre. This latter was dug by James Rowe, a Churchtown resident. He used dynamite; the late Cyril Johns remembered warnings being given when this was about to take place. Another former inhabitant, Jim Pollard, is remembered as having charged a shilling a foot for well digging.

In 1912 a W T Snell was granted permission to erect a slaughterhouse in Gerrans. This necessitated a conveniently placed water supply. A new well with pump was constructed, the cover of which can be seen today in Well Lane next to three lock-up garages which have replaced the slaughterhouse.



Sinking the shaft for the new village pump 1911

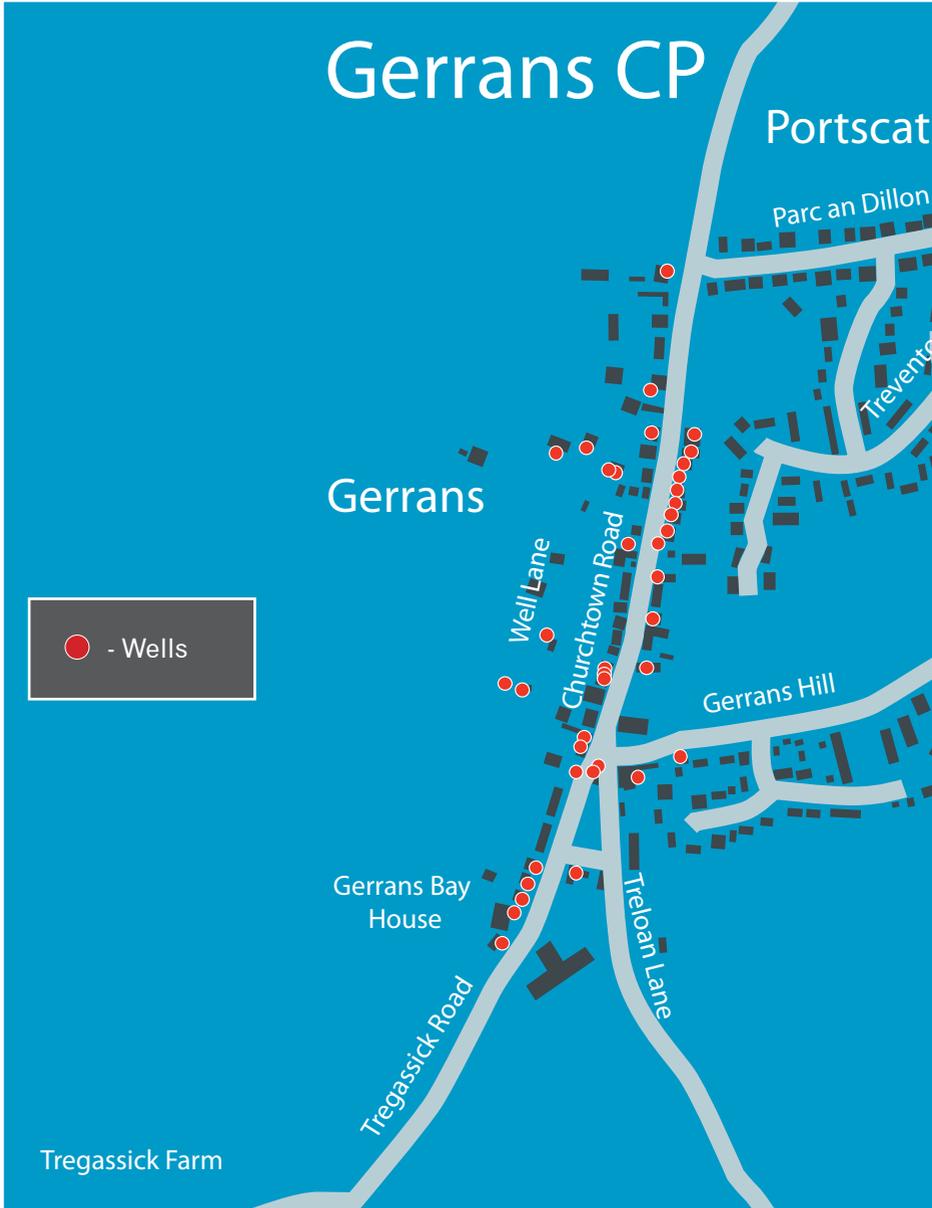


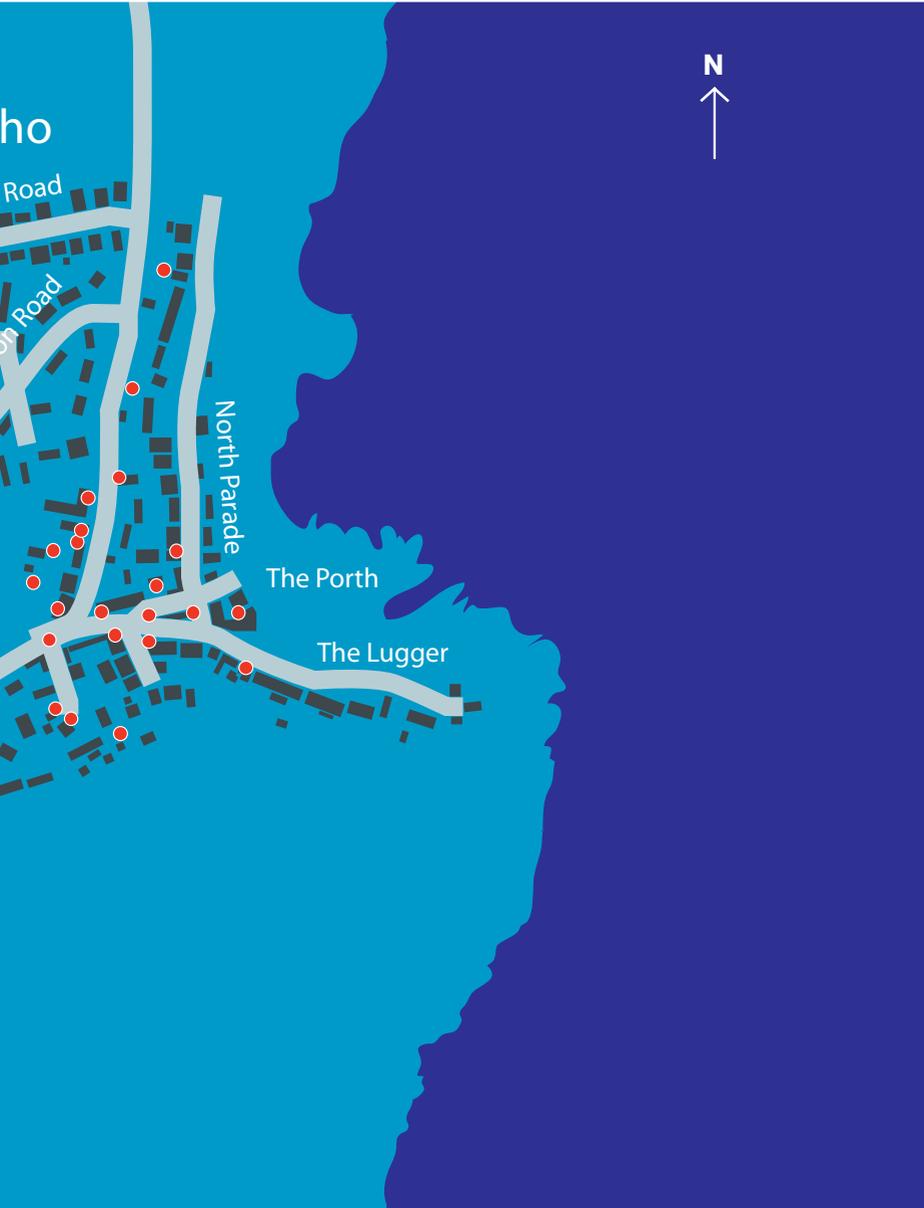
Public Pump, Churchtown, north



Public Pump, Churchtown south

Sites of known wells Portscattho & Churchtown





Private wells

There was much new building in both villages, notably Portscatho, in the 19th century and many of these substantial houses provided themselves with their own well, though this was not always the case. For instance three prestigious houses, initially known as Hedley Terrace, along the Luggar, do not appear to have had wells. It is likely, though not established, that they relied on a spring emerging from the quarry face at the rear of the terrace. The map on page 16-17 records the site of known wells in the two villages, most of which have since been filled in. The coastguards provided drinking water for the men and their families, first at the rear of their five houses known as Clifton Terrace. This was a dipping well, still in existence.



Coastguards' Well, Clifton Terrace, Portscatho

Later, when the second Coastguard Station was built a well was sunk for the Chief Officer, which was also used by the men, who took turns at pumping the supply to tanks on their individual premises.

Charles Eldred Peters, who financed the building of the second coastguard station, also built for himself the house known as Nanshute in part of Shute Meadow. He tapped into a spring at the higher end of the meadow, creating a pond which supplied his new house and a lower house, Varcoe, also in his family's possession. In addition he allowed residents of the coastguard houses nearest the supply to tap into this by means of a standpipe.

A similar supply was created by John Collette Thomas, who financed the building of Sunnyside and Trosvik immediately before the outbreak of World War 1. Here a well was sunk at the higher end of the row of cottages and a pipe laid down to the villa, Trosvik. However, the residents of the cottages along the route were not as fortunate as the occupants of the coastguard houses. They were not connected and were still obliged to fetch their water from the nearest public source.

Piped water for Portscatho

The need for a public supply had become an issue, particularly in Portscatho, by the late 19th century. This was now a popular holiday village with guests who were accustomed to modern amenities.

In 1895 the Rural District Council received a petition from the inhabitants of the south-east portion of Portscatho for a more convenient supply of water. This was subsequently discussed at a parish meeting but nothing came of it. In the same year the question of a tank for the stream at the north end of the village was discussed, presumably the above-mentioned North Parade shute where water collected in a large pond immediately behind the shute itself. Again, nothing came of this as there was stalemate at the Parish Council meeting and the Chairman did not feel able to give a casting vote.

It was not until 1914 the Rural District Council recommended that a 200 gallon tank be fixed in the bank behind the shute at 'north cliffs' in order to provide increased storage for those using the supply.

In 1907 residents at the southeast end of the village were again agitating for an improved supply. They petitioned for a well to be sunk at that end of the village as they had so far to walk to the well in the Square. The matter was raised again in 1913, the parish council considering that a new well might be sunk or that the existing well be enlarged.

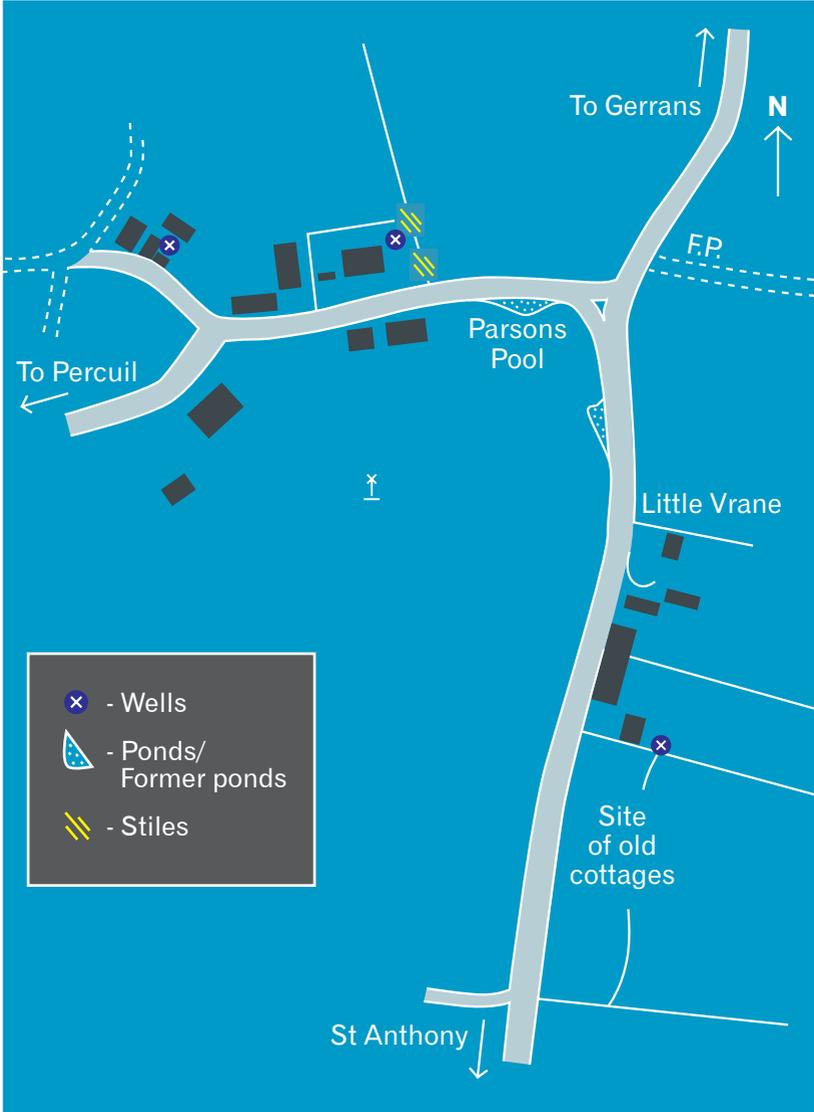
In this same year came the first move to install a piped water supply for at least some of the village's residents. First, however, the proposal was 'to carry water from the New Road to the southeast end of the village, i.e. Pencabe, towards which the landlords, Enys, would contribute £40.' This was opposed by the Parish Council, who would only support a scheme to carry water by means of a pipe 'from the present well near the hotel [the Plume of Feathers] to the northern corner of what was known as 'The Park'. This would take the form of a number of standpipes supplied by that well and would therefore only affect those living below that level. The scheme went ahead and in December 1914 the Council accepted Mr Hooper's tender of £47.10s.0d, the work to proceed forthwith. Standpipes were placed in six locations, all but one still in situ - at 'Cowries' near Pencabe, two along The Luggar, one by Trosvik garden wall in North Parade and the last at the southeast corner of the Social Club on the Quay. The sixth was sited a little further along North Parade.

It was not long before private residents were applying for permission to pipe the water into their houses, so that eventually most living in this part of the village were lucky enough to have a piped water supply, though it would take many years for the majority to have such a luxury.



Standpipe, The Ligger

Tregassick and Parkenvrane



The Farms

Wells were essential on farms, particularly in a dairy cattle area. They were extensively used for the cooling of dairy products in summer, apart from the normal domestic uses, and were usually to be found near the back door of the farmhouse. These were deep wells, accessed first by wooden pumps, later succeeded by cast iron. Typical are the following: At the small farmstead of Polhendra a pump still stands in the roadway.



Pump at Polhendra

A fine dipping well exists in the garden at Higher Tregassick. Here a stile in the hedge to the neighbouring field, with a further stile leading onto the highway, suggests access to this well for others, apart from the farmer himself.



Well, Higher Tregassick

The neighbouring farm of Lower Tregassick had two yards, one adjacent to the house, the other a little distance away. The landlords, the Ecclesiastical Commissioners, in 1928 surveyed the farm, noting that in the lower yard 'there is a good supply of water from a well in the yard, and the drinking supplies for the house are taken from this well.'



Curgurrell Farmyard

At Curgurrell a structure in the yard wall appears to have been a well, though now dry. A stream is said to have been piped under the yard close to the structure. Alternatively this may have served as a cool store – a hull.



Well in meadow, Lower Treloan



Uncovering well in meadow, Lower Treloan



House Well, Lower Treloan, 40 ft deep

The two farms at Treloan, Higher and Lower, were at one time served by a well in a field many yards distant. Each tenement subsequently had a deep well sunk by the farmhouse.

At Tregaire Barton two farm cottages were built in 1908, necessitating a new well which had to be sunk through rock, adding considerably to the estimate for the work. At the same time the well at the farmhouse 'gave out' and had to be sunk a further ten feet, also through rock. At this farm a metal-framed windmill was installed in the twentieth century to draw water. A similar windmill existed in the Mount field at Tregassick.

A fine example of a lined well exists on the previously-owned Duchy farm at Treluggan, though now covered over.

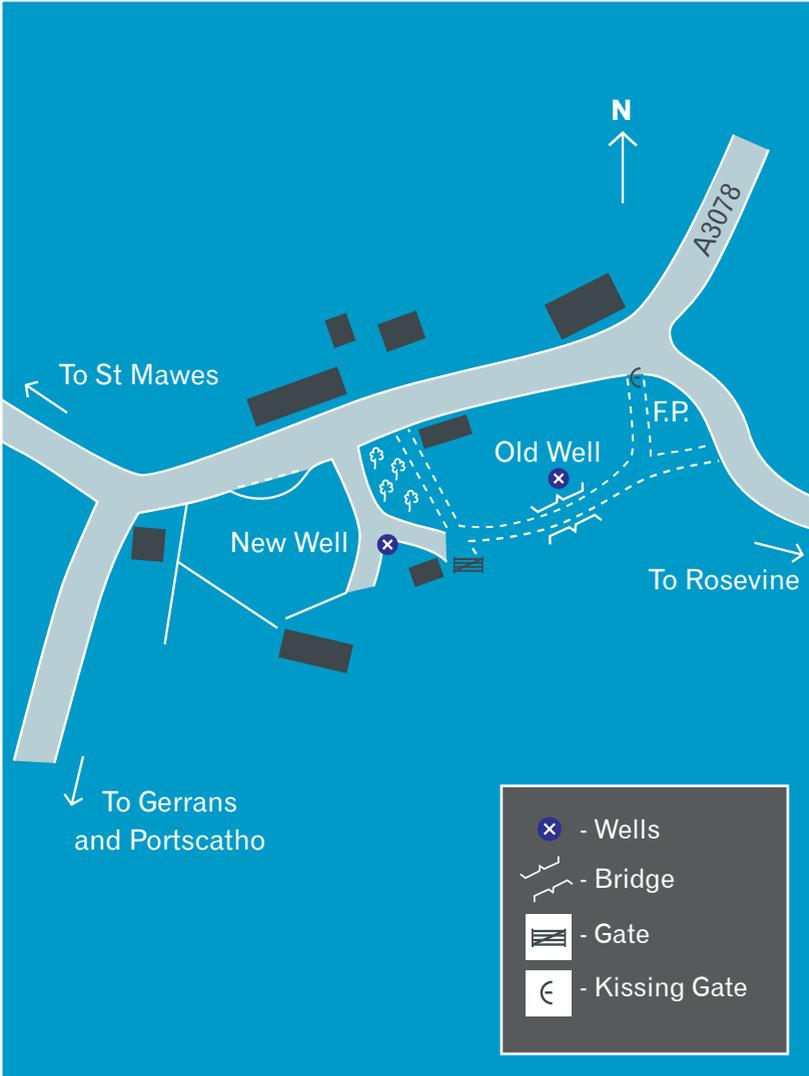
Trewithian Well



Site of old well, Trewithian

For many generations the people of the hamlet of Trewithian fetched their drinking water from an old dipping well situated in the short stretch of lane which runs parallel to the main road from the Green to the Rosevine turning. It continued to be used until the mid – 20th century, when a new well, with pump was sunk on the Green itself. In 1906 the Parish Council had taken a lease on the Green from the Enys estate, which probably made them more aware of the problems associated with the hamlet's water supply. There were problems with access and the quality of the water which may well have been polluted.

Trewithian



In 1912 the District Sanitary Inspector recommended that a pump be fixed over this dipping well but it appears that this was not fixed until 1917.



Well with pump, Trewithian Green

Problems continued. In December 1928 there were complaints to the Parish Council that the footpath to the well was in a disgraceful state. Again in 1931 complaints were made that the County Council, who had recently bought Trewithian farm, had dumped rubbish in the lane which affected the water table. Residents who had used the lane for many years had never seen it in such a state. The Clerk to the Council, Thomas Ball, who lived in a cottage on the Green 'had many times been obliged to tie old wrapping around his boots, in order to wade through the slush.' The County Council agreed to remove the rubbish but disputed ownership of the lane, the District Council having installed a pump over the well. It must have been a great relief to the inhabitants when a new well on the Green replaced this old well.

Rosevine

The area between Porthcurnick beach and Curgurrell was much developed during the 20th century. At the turn of the century the remnants of cottages on the beach could still be seen. From there to the farm and cottages at Curgurrell only the farms of Upper and Higher Rosevine existed along this old highway.



Well, Penang bungalow, Rosevine

In the mid-Victorian period two villas were built above Porthcurnick beach, first the present Rosevine Hotel, noted on the 1880 ordnance survey map, and soon after the Porthcurnick House. Building of bungalows and larger houses took place between the world wars and has continued since. In the absence of a public supply these all required wells.

The Rosevine hotel's well was sited outside what is now its side entrance, with a large storage tank, or reservoir within the building. At Porthcurnick House there was a well in the lower field below the house. Since the water had to travel uphill against gravity, there was

a small windmill to assist, backed up by a Petter water pump. Upper Rosevine House, formerly a farmstead, has a well and pump in situ. Of the 14 or more bungalows and houses built between the wars, these either had their own well or shared with neighbours until the arrival of the public supply.

Geographical background

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Local rocks in the Roseland consist of the "Gramscatho" series, probably mid-Devonian in age (some 380-390 million years ago) and comprising interbedded blue and grey slates, sandy silts and the light brown grits of Grampound. Similar rocks outcrop in Brittany and indeed closer to home, on the other side of the Fal estuary. These rocks are tilted and folded in places, dipping steeply towards the sea where they are exposed, leaving smooth, steep surfaces along the cliffs and beaches and jagged seam edges facing upwards and inland, punctuated by seams of white quartzite. Inland and underground they form gentle ridges and vales, with frequent overlying patches of silt in the valleys and thick mud in the tidal creeks.

Changes of sea-level and climate have complicated this pattern further, the former leaving both drowned valleys (such as the Fal system), submerged forests and raised beaches along the coast, while the legacy of a colder age is seen in much unconsolidated material ("Head") which originally flowed as a partly thawed layer over a permanently frozen subsoil and overlies much of the area.

The way the rocks are arranged has in turn influenced the movement of water. As our plentiful rainfall has fallen over the millennia, water has seeped through the porous sandy rocks but has been halted by the

impermeable slates; because of the dip of the rocks, this has resulted in water collecting underground in aquifers (water-bearing layers) which are below layers of impervious rocks – an ideal and natural way to store water. The Local Environmental Agency consultation report on the Fal and St Austell streams classifies our local water-bearing rocks as “minor aquifers”, enough to support “locally important abstractions”. All that needs to be done is to sink a well in the right place and access the water below ground; and this has been done in the area for centuries, ever since people discovered that water was to be found in this way. There are places where the water is “artesian”, i.e. capable of coming to the surface under the pressure which is exerted by the rocks above. In addition, there are numerous natural springs where the water flows out onto the surface above an impervious layer.

The use of natural water has continued until this day and the grid came surprisingly late: in 1948, a water supply scheme proposed needs in the area of about 122,000 gallons a day. “only Veryan has piped water” it stated, and the Ladock area was quoted as a possible and convenient source for the scheme. Currently there is a network of 14 rain gauges in the Fal and St Austell catchment areas, monitoring a rainfall of between 1,000 and 1542 mm annually.

Useful sources in the Courtney Library include:

- » *Local Environment Agency Plan (Fal and St Austell streams) Report March 1997.*
- » *RCG Report 25/2/1948.*
- » *A History of Water in modern England and Wales – John Hassan (MUP. Ref 1628.1).*

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Water Carriers, Churchtown



Historic Environment Service
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