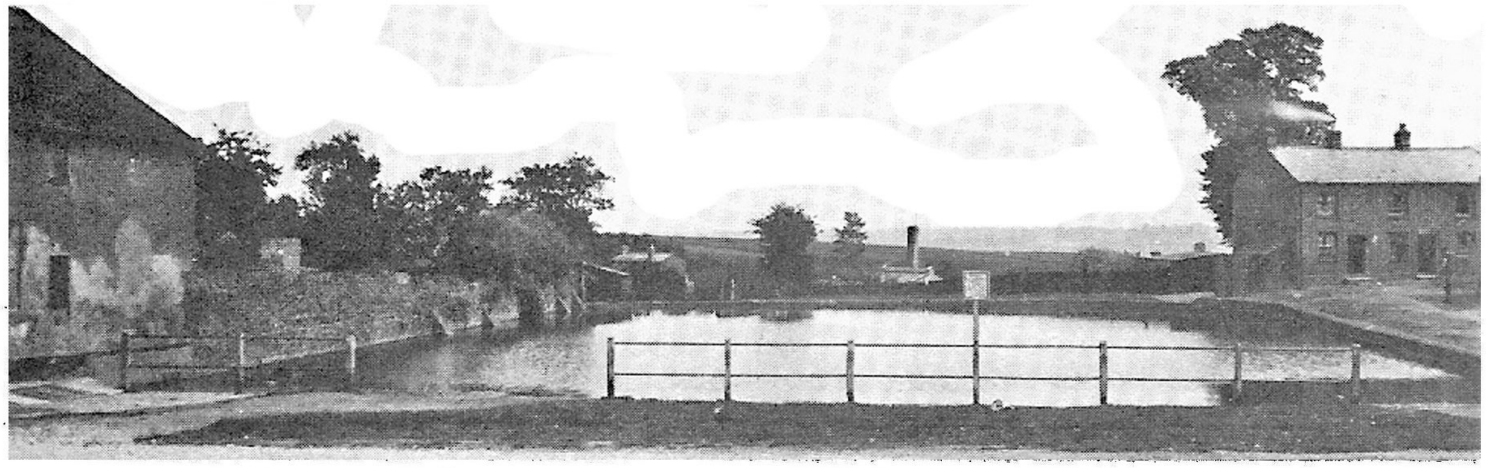

Toddington village pond, as it appeared in the early 1920s
(Photo: Luton Museum)

Toddington Memories – Well-sinkers and Builders

By R. V. H. SEYMOUR

SOME TWENTY OR THIRTY MEN were employed in Toddington by three or four local building firms, and there were a few others who were self-employed. Between 1900 and 1920, little actual house-building was undertaken in the locality – I can only think of ten houses built in those twenty years. There was of course the new council school, built in 1910, but that was built by an outside firm with outside labour, and had little impact on local conditions of employment. Building was the trade that had been selected for me to follow, so it is perhaps pertinent for me to make a few observations on my experience. The work was then chiefly maintenance, of anything from the top of a chimney to the bottom of a well, from a picture frame to a tithe barn roof, which meant that one was in contact with a whole cross-section of the village community and acquainted with nearly every aspect of its life.

In this period all building was of a private nature. Public or council building of houses to be let to tenants did not take place in Toddington until 1923, when the council built eight houses in Dunstable Road, on the old Strangers Field. The first consideration when a new house was to be built was the provision of water, both for use by the builder and for domestic use afterwards, and so a well had to be sunk. Local builders had a fair idea of what problems might be involved, but these were not predictable enough to be included in a contract, and were usually a separate item in the expenses. A family of professional well-sinkers by the name of Wilshire used to live at Flitton but as they were in great demand and were rather independent, local men with little qualification sometimes undertook the work. I know of one man who went down sixty feet in the chalk at Chalton Cross and did not use a brick or support of any sort at all in doing so. The requisite in the sinking of a well was a wooden curb, made in the shape of a big drum to act as a guide or template for the sinker, who caused it to go lower by digging under it, and built circular courses of bricks above it as it got lower. On one occasion, when we needed a well sinking, Archie Wilshire told us that he had one or two days to spare, and would start immediately if we could make

a card for him. The cart was at Ted Pepper's timber yard at Harlington but no horse or cart was available to fetch it, so two of us were sent with a hand cart, five miles there and five miles back, the last mile home being all uphill.

I have seen many attempts at water divining, some amusing, but since a man of local knowledge and experience has a good idea what are the chances of finding it, and men like Wilshire an almost precise idea of where it is, divining water here is about like divining coal in South Wales. The depth of the water level under Toddington varies from about ten to forty feet, the latter depth being in the Leighton Road area, but the variation becomes much greater on some occasions, according to whether contact is made with a spring or with seepage from surface water. In the first instance the level will be fairly constant, in the second it can vary as much as fifteen feet, according to seasonal conditions. This was demonstrated on a site in Harlington Road when we attempted to find water. After going down twenty-five feet we had seen no sign, and had to think again. A hundred yards away on the same site was a vein of sand, which we were using to build with, the sand being on ground at least twelve feet higher than that where we had been trying for water, but when the pit got to be about eight feet deep, it was found to be half full of water each morning, and this eventually provided the supply for three houses. The well was built upwards from the bottom of the pit instead of downwards in the usual way, the only time I saw a well built upwards.

The village pump on the Green, in 1932

(Photo: Luton Museum)

The sinking of another well comes to mind. A man had been engaged as a well sinker on his own recommendation and a labourer sent with him to haul up the soil in a bucket, and they were left to get on with it. After a few days it seemed that the job was being discussed with more than usual interest in the circles of building workers and pub critics. The man was employed directly by the architect and was not really the responsibility of the builder, but we thought the architect should satisfy himself that all was well, and so arranged to be with him on the site. The labourer was busy with a wheelbarrow some distance from

the well, and after exchanging the usual good mornings, was asked how Tom was getting on.

'I don't know, Sir,' was his reply.

'Why is that, isn't he here?'

'I think so, Sir.'

'Well, hadn't you ought to be pulling the muck up for him?'

'Yes,' said Jack, 'but I darn't go near there, he's down there somewhere, but I darn't look.'

Without more ado we looked down the hole, but could not see Tom, or even the bottom of the hole. We were, however, reassured by sounds of digging going on down there, and on closer examination found that Tom had got somewhat out of perpendicular, and worked his way completely out of sight to one side of the hole. Any bucket that was let down touched the side at about fifteen feet, then slid down at an angle, until it too vanished from sight. The brick steining had been abandoned as impossible, and the earth at the side had collapsed in one or two places. We let him know who it was at the top, trundled a bucket down from the windlass, and hauled him up. Then he was told in the kindest possible way that we felt the conditions were too dangerous for him to continue, a state of affairs that, I think, had begun to dawn on him. This came as a great relief to his labourer, who ever afterwards avowed 'Tom was making for the *Red Lion* cellar'.

The old 'Red Lion', now a private house

A favourite tale that 'Nashy' Hart (who did a bit of bricklaying when he wasn't market gardening) used to tell me more than fifty years ago, was how a man having started to dig a well, left it for a short time, and on returning found that the sides had colted and the hole had filled in. He thereupon took off his coat, laid it beside the hole and went home, returning late in the afternoon to

find that all the earth had been excavated again, in the belief that he was buried under it. 'Nashy' said that he worked with the man, Tom Burgess of Wolves Cottage, Harlington Road, but 'Nashy's' tales of Burgess's escapades would fill a book, and were of the fantasy that boys in the building trade were fed on.

Having secured a supply of water, the work of building could proceed, and to talk of it would be of only technical interest, except perhaps how some of the materials were obtained. There were good supplies of lime and cement from the Chiltern Hills, and as soon as one got away from the chalk there was clay and sand. At all the villages around claypits where bricks had been made were in evidence. They were still being made at Caddington, where the well-known Luton Grey was made (a very good brick); a red sand-faced was made at Woburn Sands by Dudley's, and a light buff wirecut at Leighton Buzzard by Yirrel's, also at works near Sharpenhoe. At Westoning there were works that could not have been long in disuse, for a tall chimney shaft was still standing, and pits remained at Fancott, Harlington and Tebworth. It seems that where there was a demand for bricks they just dug a hole and made them.

Butterfield's brick-works, Caddington – drying bricks under cover before firing
(*Photo: Luton Museum*)

In 1922 we were doing work that required grey bricks from Caddington and some reds from Woburn Sands, and had to arrange to do our own carting. Motor transport was now taking over this sort of work. Large lorries with bodies eight or nine feet high that carried over the top of the driver's cab had been used in the hat trade for some time. They were made to carry bulk rather than weight, but owing to the trade recession their owners were now looking about for any work that they could get. The owner of one such lorry, with no work on hand, contracted to cart the grey bricks for us. He had been a CO in the war, and on being 'demobbed' had tried his luck as a hat carrier. This trade was now letting him down. I don't think he had ever picked up a brick before:

driving the lorry was all right, but he also had to load it at one end of the journey and unload at the other. Now the loading and unloading of bricks is a prestige job among the he-men in the haulage business, something like drinking ten pints of beer in ten minutes or doing a four-minute mile. I have seen these men pick up and then stack bricks ten at a time, and I've seen one driver off-load and stack 5,000 bricks in an hour for £1, and have argued that that was too much. Our man picked them up one at a time. Butterfield's Caddington Greys are hard and rough; he had only loaded one load when he was through the skin of his fingers. When unloading, he decided to use his kid gloves and soon completely lost the fingers of them, Thank goodness he soon spotted how to make hand protectors from the inner tubes of motor tyres. I don't think he did very well out of the job: he never became more than a two-bricks-at-a-time man.

The red bricks were carted from Woburn Sands by another man. He had been a chauffeur at one of the local big houses, but after the war the house owner could no longer afford to employ him, and so he came to an arrangement to take over the shooting brake that he used to drive and started a taxi hire service. But again it was not easy. You didn't get much profit taking people to Harlington Station at 2s 6d a head or going to a late night dance for 15s or £1 a load. So, to fill in, he contracted to cart these bricks for the same rate of pay per 1,000 as a haulage contractor would have got, and went backwards and forwards to Woburn Sands, bringing about 300 bricks at a time, carefully stacked on the covered floor and seats of his brake.

If clay for bricks could be found almost anywhere it was wanted, sand was even more readily available. The largest sandpit near to Toddington was at Fancott. It joined the claypit there, and had provided sand for many years. Earlier than I can remember a cart load of sand could be self-loaded there for 1s. Even at that price it had been known for men to slip off without paying, given the chance. Before the 1914–18 war the cost was 2s 6d self-carted, or 4s 6d delivered. Most farms had their own supply, available just by digging for it. Labour, of course, was plentiful and cheap – in these days it would be far from profitable for a man working on a farm to go off with a wheelbarrow and dig under a hedge for sand (and spend half an hour digging for a rabbit as well, if he thought one was there). Locally dug sand also contained a proportion of soft loam or gault that made it less suitable for use with cement than the washed sand that was excavated from under water or river beds.

A lot of the ground in Toddington is of a flinty, gravelly nature, 'hungry and dry' as any gardener will tell you, containing an acid loam. Gravel was dug at various places and disused pits were still in evidence, but the only one I can remember being used was in Park Road, at the top of Stockings Hill and belonged to Mr George Foxon. It was worked by old George Garner and his son Willy, George pecking and shovelling away at the gravel face, and Willy sifting it free of loam and grading the stones, large or small, in separate heaps. It was hard work for which they were paid 1s or so for a cubic yard, which was an ordinary cart load. Even then, the demand became less and it did not pay, and they were forced to seek other kinds of jobbing work. He was a nice old chap, old George.

We are grateful to the author and to Luton Museum for permission to print this short extract from Mr Seymour's memoirs, to be published later in book form by the Museum.