

## MEMORIES OF OVERTON

### **Overton Utilities** *including research for the Overton Oracle by Ken Farrell* WATER

Up to the late 19th century, Overton, like most villages, got its water from wells. A Parish Council Minute dated 14th January 1896 proposed: *"that Mr. Holt be appointed to uncover and if necessary clean out the following wells and have them prepared for inspection and while open to see that they are properly protected - 1. Salop Rd. pump. 2. Jubilee pump. 3. School Lane pump. 4. Turning St. pump. 5. Tanners Row pump"*. (Mr. Reuben Holt was the local plumber with premises in the High Street. )

These were the 5 wells and their pumps

- The Salop Rd. pump stood at the corner of Springfield Park and
- The Jubilee Pump is on Station Road to the right of the hairdressers in the Old Police Station. The well of the Jubilee Pump is inside the adjoining building and can be found by lifting up a trapdoor in the shop floor. The shop was originally the robing room for the Magistrates attending the Court House and was added after the main building was built. In order to accommodate this room the Jubilee Pump had to moved along a bit but, of course, the well could not be moved.
- The School Lane pump was along from Llanycefn cottages, in the hedge of the garden of Frondeg
- Turning Street pump is at the side of Pendas House
- The Tanners Row pump was in the hedge at the front 17, Maelor Court

Many houses, of course, had their own private wells and one of the most impressive pumps is still fixed just inside the front garden wall of the house next door to Gwydyr House. There was one in the yard at Rose House in School Lane. Other wells, I am told, stood at the corner of Musley Lane and in Willow Street, (or as it was called, Plough Lane).

In 1899 Ellesmere invited Overton to join it in a scheme for a Fire Service but sadly the Parish Council was obliged to reply *"as the village of Overton has no water supply Fire Engines are of little service, consequently we decline the offer to join you"*. This sounds like tough luck if your house caught fire, but there is an old map of the village showing a 'Fire Station" at roughly where the Car Park of Peel Close now stands.

Unfortunately, wells are prone to pollution and in 1895 the Local Authority wrote to Overton Council proposing *"a scheme for the drainage of Overton"*, presumably an early sewage system. Again the Council declined, saying *"that earth closets would more effectually meet the difficulty of the wells being polluted by the privies"*.

There was also water from springs and Overton is certainly not lacking in springs as a short walk through Llan-y-cefn woods will reveal. One such spring much emerges from the bank to the side of the road leading to the Sewage Works. Various people have told of the quality and purity of this water which still flows steadily throughout the year. Some folk considered it to have healing powers and came regularly to fill their bottles when they were not well.

Early in the 20th century the Bryn-y-pys estate decided to provide Overton with an improved water supply and to do this they erected stand-pipes and taps throughout the village.

These were located

- by the Salop Road Smithy, at the corner of Springfield Park,
- at the rear of Corracle Terrace outside the school (which can be recognized where part of the hedge to the gardens of Frondeg is set back from the rest),
- by the Wrexham Road Blacksmiths, opposite the corner shop
- and by the Estate Office where Peel Close now stands.
- one behind the fence and in the hedge by 7 Salop Road on the corner of Millwood Rise which has sadly disappeared,
- one set into the wall of the playing fields along the Wrexham Road which appears to be the sole survivor.

The water supply for these taps came from the stream that runs down the woods by Pen-dyffryn and enters a field alongside the Sewage Works, which of course did not exist in those days. Just outside the wood was fitted remarkably efficient piece of machinery called a hydraulic ram or Hydram, which was self operating and which could force water up to the village indefinitely, relying solely on the flow of water to power it. The Overton hydram disappeared when the sewage works was built but an original one dating from the same period can be seen in its brick housing along the Public Footpath in Llanycefn woods, now recently restored and fully working. Another working example is by the Cup & Saucer waterfall at Erddig.

By the 1930s mains water had arrived in the village flowing from the direction of Penley and enabling every household to have at least one tap to supplement the water from the street taps. Later, much work was undertaken to replace obsolete lead pipes with modern plastic ones.

### **Memories from Mary Caspar**

“Overton’s water was mostly Liverpool water, *i.e. from Lake Vyrnwy*. This is very soft water, wonderful for washing, but bland to drink. The Hilton Jones’ had well water when they lived at the Lodge (*by the gates to the Avenue, Wrexham Rd*), and Mary and I often went to one another’s houses to drink the water.”

## GAS

Like a number of villages Overton had its own gasworks, in Salop Road. Overton's gas works were founded by the Gas, Light and Coke Company of Chester in 1873 and stood at "Mossleigh" on the corner of Musley Lane and Salop Road. There it continued to supply gas to the village till 1916 when it closed and was sold to Mrs. Keens grandparents to become their home.

The rear of the building was the "Retort Unit" where the gas was produced from coal and its bricked-up window could be seen from Musley Lane. The roof this section was originally built of steel trusses and laths to which slates were tied with wire – all designed for fire prevention in what must have been a dangerous area.

In the garden was the base of the gasometer still buried in the ground. Tar was a byproduct and traces could still be found. During the 1950s an underground tar storage tank appeared in the garden still containing tar.



Though gas was supplied to many of Overton's houses there was no gas lighting in the streets. In 1895 the Rector complained that the Parish Council had decided not to adopt the Lighting Act *"we suppose the village will be in darkness next winter. In most places people look upon the introduction of gas as a boon; but in Overton darkness is referred to light, and the expenditure of a few pounds per annum upon the lighting of the streets is regarded as folly and a waste of money"*.

However a 1908 photo shows a gas light outside the Chemists shop in High Street.

Gas was brought back to the village in 1990 by British Gas after a minimum of 100 householders agreed to sign up and pay £200 each for it to be installed.

## ELECRICITY

Electricity first came to Overton in 1926 and the supplier was Archibald Rennie Gamble, known locally as Archie. He was a Leicester man and his early exploits included providing stage lighting to many large theatres and Music Halls. He also had business links with his neighbours, the Curry family, now famous for their many electrical retail stores.

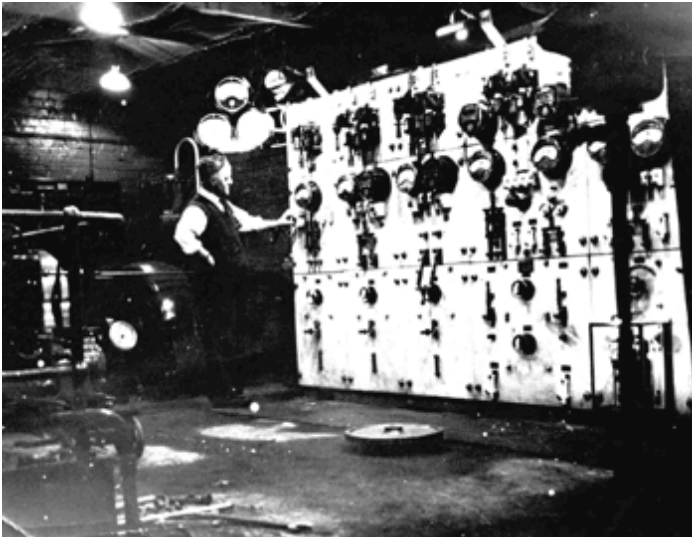
While installing an electrical supply to a newly opened Curry's shop in Oswestry he was approached by a man asking if he knew anything about generating

electricity. The reply was in the affirmative and he was invited to investigate the possibility of supplying power to the village of Glyn Ceiriog. The situation was perfect and a disused water mill was utilised for the purpose with installations in Dolywern and Chirk quickly following.

In 1926 Overton had a brand new Village Hall and Mr. Gamble was invited to install a small generating plant for its lighting and, at the same time, a further plant was installed in a bakery in Penyllan Street. There was clearly a huge demand for this new technology and a public meeting was called to discuss the possibility of lighting up the whole village.

North Wales Power, the predecessors of MANWEB, attended the meeting but concluded that a supply to the village was not economically viable as Overton was too far from its existing lines. Mr. Gamble then offered to supply every property within the district free of charge initially, with installation costs to be recouped via slot meters - an offer too good to miss.

However, there was a small pocket of resistance, with one local dignitary claiming that electricity was evil and that the intensity of its light could cause premature blindness! Nevertheless work commenced and Overton & District Electricity Supply became established at Electricity House, off Station Road.



With the diesel-driven generators installed at Electricity House and with power lines and many property installations completed, production of electricity began. However, within one week a High Court injunction was served on the Company on behalf of the unnamed dignitary mentioned in the previous part of this story. The grounds for complaint were noise and pollution concerns. There was

no alternative but for the supply to be halted, much to the anger of the residents who were enjoying the benefits of electric light.

The villagers took it upon themselves to protest in no uncertain terms and a street demonstration culminated with bricks being thrown through the windows of the opposition. As a result, the injunction was lifted and the electricity supply was re-established.

In 1948 the Electricity Supply Industry was nationalised. However, Mr. Gamble fought the might of Government and continued to generate power until 1953. Following nationalisation he concentrated mainly on supplying generating plants to Saudi Arabia, Egypt and other Middle Eastern countries.

Over the 50 years spanned by the business a number of villagers were employed, particularly during the wartime years. Two outstanding employees were Bill Bussey who lived in "Ivanhoe", Willow Street, who worked for Mr. Gamble for 45 years and Geoff Price, who lives in Dudleston Heath and who worked in the Company for 40 years.

Mr. Gamble, together with his wife Rose is also remembered for their running of the cinema at the Village Hall and for his love of Jaguar cars, of which he owned, at various times, 34 different models. One of his favourites was a white XK120 sports car that he bought from Diana Dors.

### **Memories from Geoff Price**

"I first started work at the age of 16 in 1937 for the princely sum of 35 shillings/6 pence, (about £1.75) for a 50 hour week. There were no cars or buses to get to work and it was a hard grind on a bike for the 4 miles from Criffins. This continued until I joined the RAF, from 1940 to 1946. On return and demob, Mr Gamble offered me my old job back.

Over the years we had several local men working for the firm. Bill Gunn, Jim Lee, Godfrey Haynes, Grenville Lloyd, Alf Knight and a fellow from Birmingham. After MANWEB took over, our work consisted of supplying and fixing diesel plants to farmhouses all over North Wales and Mid-Wales, the furthest being Dartmoor. This farm belonged to the daughter of Overton Sawmill manager, Emlyn Philips.

During all this time the health of Mr Gamble began to deteriorate and the business began to suffer. Mr Bussey retired and went part-time. I soon became redundant, but as we had quite a lot of work still going on at Mr Latham's farm, I was immediately offered the job of working as an electrician for him, which lasted 10 years until I retired at 65 in 1986.

Over the years much has changed in Overton of which I have fond memories. When meter reading, I used to be plied with tea and cakes, and often had a good natter at most of the houses - Turning Street especially. The cost of electricity was, for lighting, 9 old pence a unit and for power 2 1/2 old pence.

The supply for all this was 250 volt DC and consisted of 4 - 4 cylinder Lister diesel engines, and a 120 horse power Gardner, used mainly when load from the village became heavy and the saw mill was running full-time. Water for the cooling tanks was pumped from a well behind Wason's Garage (Salop Road) This was all before the village had mains water. The best water for making tea came from the "Jubilee Pump" in Station Road.

The jaguar mentioned needed quite a lot of repair before Ingrid used it to go to work, but boy could it go!! With not much traffic then, 120mph was a regular speed.

Reading about the cinema reminded me of one night Mr Jenkins, the boss, asked me to hold the fort while he went downstairs to check the sound. One of the machines decided to "spew" the film out. When he returned all he could see was film everywhere. Rewinding it was no joke.

During my time in Overton, I met and married May Lunt who then lived at Little Cloy farm. We had two children, Mark and Doreen."

### **Memories from Dave Austin**

"At the back of Archie Gamble's by where the fish tanks was stored was also glass tubes about 18" long which we used for pea shooters. Never once did I hear of anyone getting injured by the speed of a pea or from broken glass."

### **Memories from Mary Caspar**

"Electricity was brought to the village by an amazing son of Lancashire called Archie Gamble. He set up an electricity station and the supply was a bit limiting because it was D.C. only. A by-product was an endless supply of green glass tanks which had contained acid. They were used for a wide variety of purposes, including fish tanks, house plant containers etc. Why they were not returned to where they came from, I have no idea.

The village did not have any street lighting until, I believe after the war. About 1936 there was a proposal to light the village, but since this would have put 1d on the rates, a questionnaire was sent round, and the result was headlined in the national press (I believe in the Daily Mail) as "*Village Votes for Darkness*". In fact, since the blackout was not so far off, it was no great disadvantage."

### **Agreements between the Bryn y Pys and Overton Parish for the installing of street lighting - 20<sup>th</sup> June 1961**

Brackets and light upon the wall of cottage, No 7 Wrexham Road

Brackets and lights upon 2 cottages in Salop Road in the occupation of Mr. Evison and Mr. Henshaw

Bracket and lamp on No 6 Tanners Row, Bangor Road occupied by Mr. Davies.

Underground cable in the garden of a house in School Lane occupied by Mrs. Blanche Jones