

THE VILLAGE PUMP

BY BRIAN McELHERRON



The Village Pump, Poyntzpass

An individual considering building a new house today would probably look for a good site. It should have certain features and a nice view seems to be the top priority for many. Next on the list would be some thought about proximity to a workplace, shops, schools, etc. and then some consideration might be given to ease of access to other amenities such as electricity, sewage and mains water. In former times the list of priorities would have been very different, for above all else, in choosing a site for a farm or a dwelling or indeed a village, the close proximity of a reliable source of water – a good well – was the first essential.

The situation of every traditional house throughout the countryside was dictated by the availability of water and on farms in particular, where animals consume vast quantities of water, a plentiful supply - reliable even in the driest summer - was of fundamental importance. In the time before mains water reached all parts, you would sometimes hear of farmers who were desperately transporting water in barrels from rivers and ponds, to meet the needs of their animals, when their well failed during a prolonged dry spell.

One feature of every village in the country in former times, was the village pump. I don't know how the sites of Acton or Poyntzpass or any other villages were chosen back then, but it is certain that the availability of a good source of water was the first item on the agenda when decisions were being made. In the case of Poyntzpass, the well and pump, the chief source of water for the

inhabitants was, in every sense, at the very heart of the village and it seems very likely that the site of the well having been identified, the village was designed around it. Its position in the centre of the crossroads meant that the residents of four of the village's streets had equal access to it. A separate pump in William Street met the needs of the people of 'the Far Pass'.

In his novel *'The Green Republic'* (1902), William Robert MacDermott (*A.P.A. O'Gara*) - who was the Dispensary Doctor here from 1867 to 1918 - describes the village pump. While ostensibly he was writing about a fictional village called *'Jiggstreet'*, supposedly in South Tyrone, there is no doubt at all that *'The Green Republic'* is a factual description of Poyntzpass village and its inhabitants as MacDermott knew them at the end of the nineteenth century. He described the pump in *'Jiggstreet'* (Poyntzpass) as "... a metal pump, glaring in a coat of red-lead paint in the middle of the crossing

streets with a single tree beside it, the state of which may be guessed from the fact that it was stripped of its bark for between four and five feet from the ground, the work, of course of the village urchins.....”.



Brannock

It is hardly surprising that Dr MacDermott took a keen interest in the wellbeing of the village pump and that he was regularly commenting on the quality of the water villagers were drinking. He was constantly complaining to the council about the water-quality and sending samples off to Dublin for analysis.

Because of their location, the pump and well were vulnerable to pollution and vandalism. When the monthly fair was at its height and with as many as 2,000 animals thronging the village streets on the fair day, it was almost inevitable that some contamination of the

well would occur from time to time. There had originally been a series of short pillars connected by chains to keep animals away, but the chains had been broken or stolen or lost and not replaced. Dr MacDermott states that there were five other private pumps in the village but that 90% of the inhabitants used the village pump.

Whether there was a pump installed when the village first came into being in the 1790's or there was simply a well with a windlass in 'the Square', is not recorded, but there may have been a pump, for pumps of one kind or another have been used for over 2,000 years.

The first references to Poyntzpass pump are to be found in MacDermott's letters regarding the high rate of infant mortality and the prevalence of various ailments in the village, which could, in his opinion, be attributed to the poor quality of the water from the village pump. *The Newry Reporter* on July 23rd 1901 recorded that it had been decided to replace the old pump with a new model. The old pump, which may have been the village's first, was bought by Francis J. Monaghan for 'thirty-shillings'. At the same time, local blacksmith Bernard Conlon was awarded a contract to maintain the new pump for £3 per annum. While on the face of it, £3 seemed generous, as one could suppose that the new pump would require little maintenance, because of vandalism, this was not the case. In *The Green Republic* MacDermott included a list of objects which had to be removed from the pump on one occasion when the pump stopped working. These included a bottle of castor-oil, various other bottles, spoons, stones, unidentified bones and a dead rat. Much to his annoyance, Bernard Conlon's services were constantly required and in due course he applied for a rise.

An early photo shows that the pump which stood at the junction of Church Street and Railway Street is what is usually referred to as the 'Belfast Pump'. This style of pump is found mainly in the northern half of Ireland.

This pump which previously stood in the middle of the



Clare



Demoan



Belfast Pump



**Loughbrickland
Large Pump**



*Loughbrickland
Paragon Pump*



Acton Village Pump



Mountnorris



*William Street,
Poyntzpass*

'crossing streets' as MacDermott described it, was removed in the early sixties when a major street widening took place. What became of it is not known. However, there are at least four of these pumps still in and around Poyntzpass. Three of them are situated at the roadside.

The pump in William Street is on its original site. It is missing its lid, but is otherwise intact. Another pump at Brannock, mid-way between Poyntzpass and Acton, is complete, while the pump in Acton village has been restored by local people. It was fitted with a replacement lid and is now in good working order. The fourth, in Tullynacross, is a garden ornament. All the pumps have a graceful, ogee curved handle with a spherical terminal. This is usually referred to as a 'cow-tail' handle and variations of it are found on many pumps. There is at least one other pump in the village but it is of a completely different style. It is a small pump in the back yard of a house in Church Street. It is usually referred to as a 'yard pump'. It has the image of a lion on the side and was made by Joseph Evans & Sons, Wolverhampton. The firm was founded in 1810 but Joseph Evans had been involved in pump-making as far back as the 1790's. Their pumps are found all over Ireland.

To the south of the village, in front of Demoan Villas, is a very fine pump painted red. It has a mark on the side of the shaft indicating that the diameter of the piston is 3 inches. Above this is a small flag-shaped symbol. This is the trademark of Lee, Howl and Co. Ltd, Staffordshire. Many of the designs of Lee Howl pumps are similar to those of Joseph Evans. It is said that one of the designers at Lee Howl may have worked originally for Joseph Evans and may have taken his designs with him when he moved.

If you go to Clare village you may see another Lee Howl pump in a back yard. (It is easily visible from the roadside.) This is a completely different design. The barrel of the pump can be clearly seen with its 'flag' symbol. Attached to the barrel is another cylindrical part which is fitted with a tap. The problem with the other pumps is that they deliver an intermittent flow of water. As the handle is raised and lowered the water is delivered in small amounts with a gap between them while the piston is lowered to collect more water. Even if you pump very quickly you will not get a continuous flow. The extra cylindrical part in the Clare pump is known as an 'air vessel'. Before pumping begins the vessel is allowed to fill with air by simply opening the tap. When you are ready to pump, the tap is closed and the air vessel is now filled with air. When pumping starts the water moves into the air vessel thereby compressing the bubble of air within it. The compressed air is now pressing down on the water within the air vessel. When the tap is opened a continuous stream of water is forced out. More water may be added by



Dromore Ballymacormack Pump

pumping but it will always leave the air vessel as a continuous stream. Such pumps are usually found in private yards or where a continuous flow of water is necessary.

There are at least five pumps in Loughbrickland village. The most interesting is a Paragon pump which stands in a front garden of the Main Street. It is inscribed with a flag symbol and is probably made by Lee, Howl and Co. A short distance south of this is a pump with a large head but no inscriptions. It stands on private property but is easily viewed from the street. A short distance in the opposite direction is a standard *cowtail* pump. The pump on the Scarva Road has a missing spout and the lid is a poor replacement for the original. The pump on the Dublin Road is in better condition but also has a replacement lid which makes no attempt to mimic the original. The well-cover is inscribed '*Banbridge Foundry*' and it is possible that the pump was cast there too.

I have mentioned that problems could arise with intermittent delivery of water. The 'air vessel' helped to reduce this but the development of the '*wheeled pump*' was another attempted solution. A pair of heavy wheels are attached to the piston. These wheels have a weighted segment so the rotation of the wheels will continue while you catch your breath. There is a very good example at Ballymacormick, just to the north of Dromore. There were originally two pumps quite close together but one is now missing. The survivor has some

damage. This design is present all over Northern Ireland and there are some examples in the Republic.

Working pumps continued in use as late as 1990 but eventually with the connection of nearly all houses to mains water, their use declined and many were removed or neglected. At the beginning water was piped to hydrants in the main streets of all the towns and villages and people still referred to '*going to the pump*' for water. There were several of these hydrants in Poyntzpass and other local villages.

One of the main manufacturers of hydrants was the firm of Glenfield and Kennedy, Kilmarnock. They had been manufacturing valves for water control since 1863. A good example of a G&K hydrant can be seen at Mountnorris. The name appears on a panel on the front of the hydrant or on the lowest section. Many of the existing hydrants do not appear to be named but that is because they are now set in concrete with the inscription covered. Many of the hydrants have a '*lion mask*' surrounding the spout. These are mainly found south of the border but there are some northern examples. I have come across two examples of the G&K hydrant which are inscribed '*Shannon Foundry*'. These are in Co. Monaghan.

However, when eventually piped water was available in the town and village homes, the hydrants ceased to be of importance, and like the pumps before them, they fell into disuse and have largely disappeared from our streets.



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