

Colchester Castle Well, an unusual excavation (PL I)

By Stuart R. Bacon

THE well is situated inside the Castle to the right as you enter, and enclosed by the wellhouse which was restored in the 18th century by Charles Gray, he also cleared out the well and strengthened it during the restorations. Earlier, in 1683 the whole Castle had been bought by John Wheelley for demolition and he removed the original stone lining of the well. However the task of breaking up the Castle walls proved to be too much and the ruins were left.

Looking down the well there is a drop of over 40 feet to the water. A wooden shaft could be seen protruding from the water. The top 8 feet of the shaft is bricked but the remainder is of hardened clay, except for the centre drainage point which is also brick. The main idea of excavating the bottom was to find out if there was a cistern underneath, and to discover any evidence of Roman work. Several books on the history of Colchester Castle state there is a false bottom and underneath a bell shaped cistern. In earlier years the well may have extended to the floor above.

A metal grid now covers the opening at the top allowing people to look down and, of course, drop objects down the well. However, for many years the opening had been covered with wood therefore it appeared there would be an accumulation of recent rubbish, including new coins, and then a halt in deposits when the opening was covered. It is probable that Charles Gray covered the opening after cleaning it and restoring brickwork, etc., in 1750. Previous to that and the demolition of 1683 there would probably have been a cover of some sort on the well opening. Feelings were, therefore, rather mixed as to what would be found at the bottom.

The project was announced at a meeting of the North East Essex Sub-Aqua club and was greeted with much enthusiasm. This was a relief to myself as at least eight men were required to operate the ropes and gear.

Scaffolding, lighting and all the necessary tackle were installed on the 24th March 1972 in preparation for the excavation the following day. Two of us could not resist going down the well, an experience I shall never forget. I asked to be lowered slowly in the bosun's chair in order that I could examine the sides of the well on the long descent to the water. The first few feet had been bricked at various periods and rested on blocks of concrete. However, apart from this structure which appeared completely insecure and held up by nothing, the walls of the well were of hardened clay down to the water level. At the half-way mark a very uneven band of bricks (that appeared to be Roman tiles when viewed from the top) had been installed. The reason for these was to reinforce this part of the well when the water drained in from the outside walls of the castle. In old books on the subject and referring to workmen working on the well state that a small passage was found leading south but not large enough for a man to crawl along. I feel this 'passage' was in actual fact a drain and holes in the ring of bricks at the drainage point confirm this.

Roman tiles are embedded in the clay walls in the bottom part of the well and other than these the walls are featureless. At the water level the original stone lining (most probably Reigate from the Norman quarry) can be seen and it would appear the water level has changed little since 1683, when John Wheeley attempted to demolish the castle, as it would have been difficult to remove the remaining stones underwater. To add to the general unpleasant surroundings at the bottom of the well, bubbles were constantly appearing on the top of the water therefore we tested for noxious gas.

On the 25th March 1972 we made a start. Some twenty divers from the North East Essex Sub-Aqua Club had volunteered to go down the well and operate all the ropes etc., at the top. At first the divers had the unpleasant task of removing recent rubbish that had been dropped through the grill at the top. A schoolgirl had recently dropped her glasses and we had been asked to look for these.¹ The water at the bottom turned black as the bottom was disturbed and the smell was appalling. At one time a valve on one of the lungs was dislodged by a safety rope and the foul air was quickly renewed by the compressed air.

We were using buckets to bring up the bottom and these were containing more and more of the newer decimal coins. The divers had been instructed to remove the bottom in layers, but one has to work in the restricted area of a well over 40 feet to appreciate the actual conditions. A team of volunteers had assembled outside the castle to examine and sieve the contents of the buckets.

By midday less coins were being found and the removal of the bottom was becoming much more difficult, so much so that we decided to have two divers working at one time. In the early afternoon pieces of pottery were being found, old nails and part of a clay pipe. Very few decimal coins but a great number of older coins were coming up. By 4 p.m. we had dug down the stone lining and found a wooden collar which appeared to be the original former and below that an opening with a vertical iron bar twelve inches in length set into the stonework. A few pieces of Roman mosaic were the best items found before we finished our first day.

We made an early start on the 2nd April, 1972 with great hopes, especially as the area had been cleared of early rubbish and we now had the possibility of discovering the false bottom. At midday we found our oldest coin, a King George III penny dated 1806 and I feel this coin was dropped in the well at the completion of restoration initiated by Charles Gray. Shortly after this an old ladle was found. In the early afternoon the shaft in the centre of the bottom of the well had become free and was removed. It was extremely heavy and in excellent condition. It appeared the shaft was used in connection with pumping the water and it had a hole in the centre with holes in the sides at its base. Shortly after this our most important find was made, being a 15th-century hunting arrowhead, which was handed over to the Museum. (PI. Ib). The second day ended without further finds and still no evidence of the possibility of a false bottom.

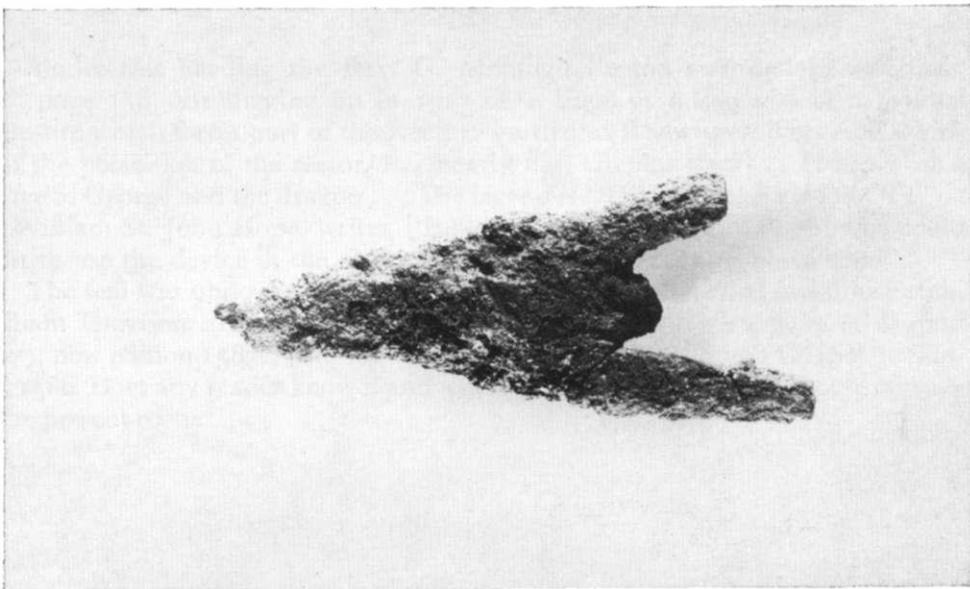
The next attempt was made on the 9th April, 1972 and we decided to lower pumps to reduce the water level and make the excavation easier and enable us to

¹ They were safely recovered, Ed.

PLATE 1



(a). Colchester Castle Well: Excavation in progress.



(b). Colchester Castle Well: Iron arrowhead.

see what we were doing. The pumps reduced the water level by about 2 feet and it was possible to see the perfectly cut stone lining and wooden collar/former all in very good condition. The collar/former was carefully made with slots cut in the bottom part.

The excavating continued but all we were now removing was fine sand and I felt the shaft was being undermined. In order to prove the existence of a false bottom we drove a metal tube 3 feet into the silt at the bottom of the well. Whilst at times there seemed to be a hollow sound. I had to admit there was not a false bottom and the project was closed.

Acknowledgements

The members of the North East Essex Sub Aqua Club who worked so very hard deserve special thanks, especially Dink Balls and Brian Jay who supplied the necessary ropes, scaffolding and tackle.

Mr. D. T-D. Clarke, Curator of the museum gave me permission for the venture, my thanks to him, and finally the lady who sorts out my unreadable notes, Jean Carter.