

The Cross Well

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The first public water supply and the beginning of local government and taxation; the appellation of Falkirk people as Bairns!

Introductory Film: [Falkirk's New Public Water Supply](#)

In June and July 1681 East Stirlingshire was badly affected by a severe drought. At the time the townsfolk of Falkirk obtained their daily water supply from the West Burn or the East Burn and these all but dried up. This was not merely an inconvenience, but a serious threat to public health. To prevent this from arising again Alexander Livingston, the second Earl of Callendar, had a pipeline laid from a copious spring in Callendar Wood to the town centre at his own expense. The pipes were hollowed wooden logs joined together by iron collars. An underground cistern was built at the Cross in the High Street opposite to the Steeple and water could be pumped to the surface through lead pipes. The head of this cistern, known as a fountain, came to be called the Cross Well due to its location. The work was undertaken in the spring of 1682 and the project was completed on 29th May. The opening ceremony is thus described by an historian in 1827:

"having filled a bicker from the pure well stream, which was poured from the mouth of a sculpted lion, the grey-haired baron stood up in his stirrups, and drank off the Quaich, "To the Wives and the Bairns o' Falkirk," giving them "the well and all its fountains" in a present for ever."

And this, it is said, is how the natives of the town came to be known as Bairns.

Illus: The Cross Well of 1682.



The 29th May was presumably the "Fountain Day" noted in the contemporary poem, *Patronus Redux*, when toasts should be made to solemnise "this twice auspicious Day." (The 29th May was Oak Apple Day when the restoration of the monarchy under Charles II was celebrated). The rather lengthy and tortuous poem – it is 167 stanzas long – was composed by Michael Livingston of Bantaskine and published in Edinburgh in 1682. He was related by blood to the Earl of Callendar and the poem is full of praise and flattery for him, making unwarranted comparisons with sacred and classical heroes. The significance of the construction of the well is

A History of Falkirk in 10 ½ Objects: Object 7

fully appreciated in verse. Its flowing waters are liberally equated with the ancestry or “verdant stream” of the Earl’s family. Indeed it would be hard to over emphasise the importance of the new structure to the town. As well as providing insurance against another drought it reduced the time and labour required day in and day out to collect the water. That it was a matter of pride to the people of Falkirk is suggested by the later adoption of the red lion from the apex of the structure as the town’s emblem (even as late as the 1940s the Falkirk hockey team took the red lion as its emblem).

The poem provides some useful footnotes that tell us much about the administration of the town. The town’s fate seems to have been in the hands a just a few individuals. By a series of unfortunate incidents their ranks were seriously thinned and the institution of the Cross Well together with a body responsible for its maintenance was to have a radical impact upon this aspect of the town’s life – well beyond anything suspected at the time. That body was, of course, the Stentmasters.

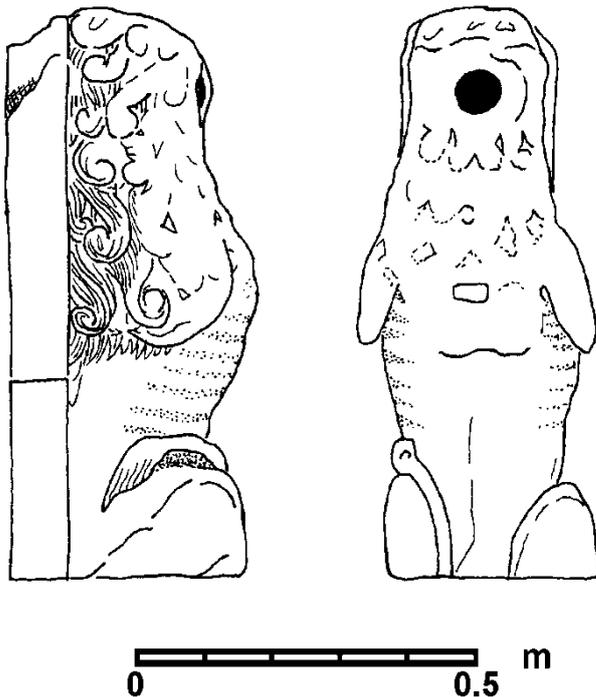
The original source of water for the well appears to have been the site of the Barrel Well in Callendar Wood. From there the water was gravity fed northwards a little to the east of the Glen Brae. It then turned to the north-west crossing Comely Place to enter the town along the Cow Wynd and proceeded up the High Street. The well-head stood on the south side of that street in front of the site where Wilson’s Building was erected in 1842. At this point there was a large underground cistern or tank in which water was stored prior to being pumped by hand to the surface. The drawbacks of this system are well illustrated in this letter to the Falkirk Herald in 1851: *“the rude but substantial stone wells of our forefathers, which, at all times, contained in their capacious bowels – the wells, I mean, not our forefathers – at least “twa raiques” of water ready for removal when wanted. They not infrequently, however, were also the repository of various specimens of the viviparous tribes, & c. These, especially the defunct ones, were objected to by some people fastidious about their beverage, and hence, a few years ago, two of the stone wells with large cisterns were taken down and replaced by the neat fluted iron kind, in order that the inhabitants might have the choice of the two sorts of waters, ie, the pure or the winged, for you know, Mr Editor, it is not every one who liked tadpoles either in his tea or grog.”* (Falkirk Herald 15.5.1851).

When a new gas main was laid along the High Street in 1989 it cut through the last stone cistern to have served the Cross Well. It was substantially constructed of well dressed square blocks and measured 2.44m by 6.5m with a depth of c2.3m. It was roofed by a low stone vault and the interior walls had been coated with bitumen. Various improvements were made to the aqueduct from the woods, to the cisterns in the town, and to the augmentation of the water supply, and are dealt with elsewhere (for example Love, Reid, etc).



Illus 2: The lion finial.

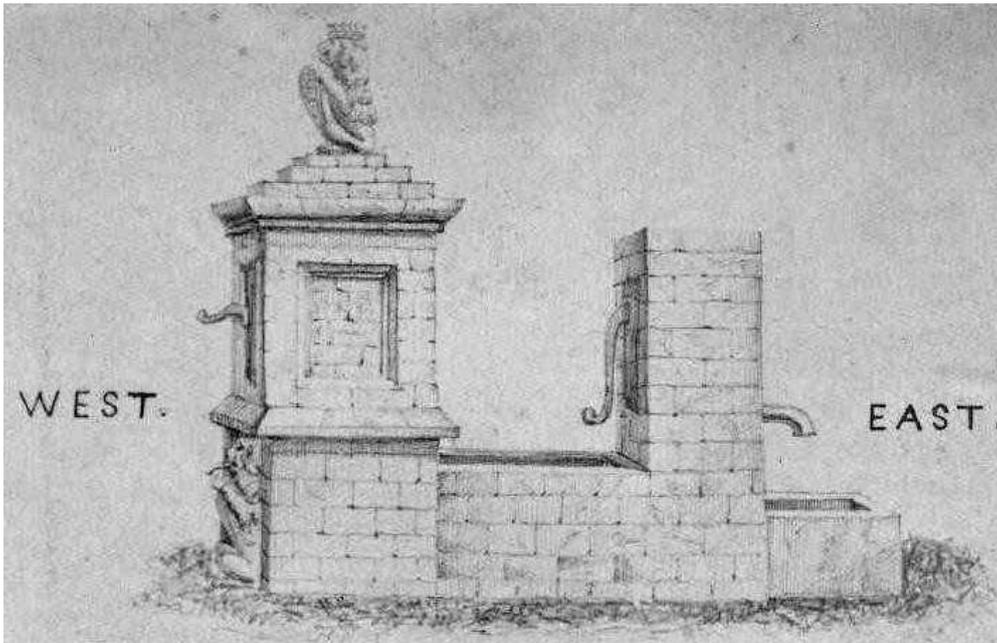
The superstructure of the Cross Well of 1682 was also substantial and produced a balanced design. Essentially it consisted of a square column of masonry with a projecting string course and cornice, surmounted by a stone lion. The chamfered string course was set just above waist height. Above this each face had a recessed panel with moulded sides. Above the cornice the top was stepped and finished off with the finely carved demi-lion sporting a heavily curled mane and a toothy grin. It is wearing an earl's coronet and clasps a shield in its paws, upon which was a coat-of-arms. This was parted per pale and charged – dexter, quarterly, first and fourth, three gillyflowers slipped within a double tressure flory-counter-flory; second and third, a bend between six billets; sinister, quarterly, first and fourth, three cinquefoils; second and third, a galley. These are the arms of Alexander, second Earl of Callendar, and his wife Mary, third daughter of the second Duke of Hamilton. Today this sculpted lion can still be seen on the High Street, though the top right portion of the shield is missing. Michael Livingston makes it clear that when first erected the lion was painted red, and it is reasonable to assume that the coronet was gold, with the coat-of-arms suitably coloured. There was to be no doubt who had supplied the well. Sibbald, writing in 1707, noted that the second Earl had added "a Fountain curiously built" to the town's public buildings.



Illus 3: The demi-lion in the Museum collection.

At the front of this square edifice, facing west, was a matching demi-lion with its back set into the structure. It too survives, in a worn state (it was built into a shop front before being lodged with Falkirk Museum, accession number 1983-11-11). The style of carving is the same as that on the lion finial. A lead pipe protruded from its mouth and it was from this that the water gushed. It may be this pipe that is depicted on the town's old coat-of-arms as a blue tongue. The pumping lever to produce the flow of water was set in a vertical slot in the recessed panel above the lion. The main purpose of the superstructure was to hide the two-stroke pump and its valves.

The use of the well had to be regulated in order to protect the quality of the water and on 11 July 1682, "*the baillies statutes and ordanes that no person nor persones qtsomever shall wash at the sd well nor to throw any roties... or any oyr unclean creators nor to wash any fish clouts or any oyr thing that is discharged be former acts and yt under the pain of tuentie shillings Scots and with power to the officers to poynd for the same they being apprehendit in doing thereof qch fine is to be exacted toties quoties for ilk failzie and qlk is applayed for the use of the well.*" (Barony Court Book of Falkirk, vol. 2, p.20). This was also the birth of the Stentmasters and such acts were normal in other burghs.



Illus 4: The Cross Well in 1800.

At some stage in the following century the Cross Well was enlarged by the addition of a second pump, set in another square column to the east. This column was smaller and plainer. Instead of a lion finial it had a low pyramid roof. It appears to have been separated from the original structure by a horse trough. On the new gable was a larger spout that extended out over a basin to reduce spillage. The handle to the new pump was set on the opposite side of the vertical stack and was considerably longer than the original, making it more efficient as a lever. The nature of the new water delivery system suggests that it probably replaced rather than augmented the original.

Up until 1800 the High Street was poorly surfaced with gravel and most of the rainwater was left to find its own escape, seeping into the sand below. In the first few years of the century cobbling was introduced for the first time. The overall level of the street in the vicinity of the Cross Well was lowered by a few feet to even out the road's contours, leaving the well standing at an impractical height. As part of the road improvements the Stentmasters decided to move the well to the north side of the street in front of the Steeple so that it would no longer obstruct the increasingly heavy traffic. The cistern below ground was to be retained and a pipe was in the process of being channelled into the forestair of the Steeple in 1803 when William Glen intervened and prevented the task from being completed. This was just as well, as the Steeple was demolished in August that year. The dispute about the positioning of the well ran alongside that for the Steeple and it would seem that a temporary cast iron well-head was provided nearby in its stead. Meanwhile the old Cross Well structure remained. In 1817, after the completion of the new Steeple, the Trustees of the Turnpike Roads requested that the old obstruction be removed. The Stentmasters saw their opportunity and insisted that the Road Trustees build a "substantial well"

A History of Falkirk in 10 ½ Objects: Object 7

on the new site close to the demolished forestairs at their own expense and to a design approved by them.



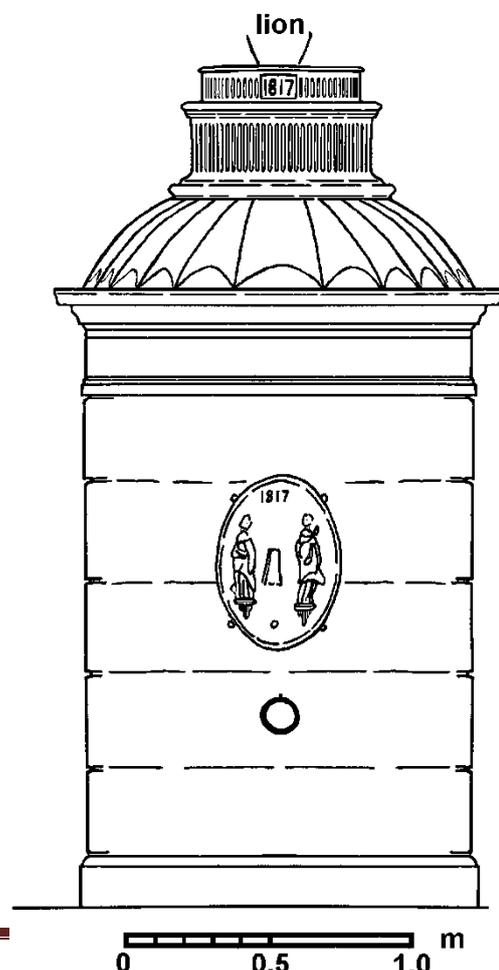
Illus 5: The 1817 Cross Well about to be dismantled in 1989.

The new structure, which still survives, was circular and retained the original red sandstone lion. It stands 2.9m high to the foot of the lion and is 1.4m in diameter at the base. Constructed of local sandstone in ashlar it was, according to the Royal Commission, rendered in reddish plaster to match the finial (RCAHMS 1963, 434). The overall shape is of a wide squat column capped by a flat dome surmounted by the lion. It is thus a classical Georgian version of the 1682 stack. The plinth course is 0.15m high with ogee moulding. There are then five courses of ashlar topped by a narrow string course, a plain frieze and a wide cornice. The low dome is fluted and supports a fluted drum. A second band of fluting provides a collar on the south arc for the lion to rest in and bears the date 1817.

An upright oval cast iron plaque on the south side was decorated with two classical figures and also bore the date 1817. These represent women water carriers in flowing gowns, typical of the tastes of the period. It is reasonable to assume that they were cast at Carron Ironworks and would have been seen as a progressive piece of ornamentation. A vertical slot between the figures would have held the pump handle. On the east side of the hollow stone column was a curved iron door secured by a bar. This gave access to the internal plumbing.

Illus 6: Scale drawing of the body of the 1817 Cross Well.

Despite the classical nature of the new edifice and its return to a single column, it was not to everyone's taste. Robert Keir lashed out in 1827 "*All that remains of the*



old well, now, is the lion which surmounted it, grim and grey, grasping in its guardian-paw the escutcheon of the noble Livingstones. The arms of Callander are three quartered with those of Hamilton, so that they must have been executed in the second earl's time, who married Lady Mary, daughter of William Duke of Hamilton. The lion has lately, since the demolition of its contemporary fount, been, in the most barbarous taste, daubed with oil-paint and gilding, and perched upon the top of a meagre-looking circular building, intended as a substitute for that venerable edifice, which was so honourably obtained, and so wantonly destroyed. The right to the well-fountains which were situated in Callendar wood, was lately sold by the stent-masters to the Callander family, for a paltry sum, which, it is said, scarcely covered the expense of conveyancing." [Keir 1827 History of Falkirk p.206]

When it was constructed in 1682 the Cross Well was the only public well in the town and people still used the local streams. The latter became more polluted with the passage of time and the Stentmasters began to provide more wells. In 1790 there is reference to one on the north side of the High Street at the West Port (Reid 2004, 21). By 1830 there were at least eleven and in that year these each received an accompanying gas lamp so that they could be used late into the night – water was essential to public health and well-being (Reid 2001, 28).

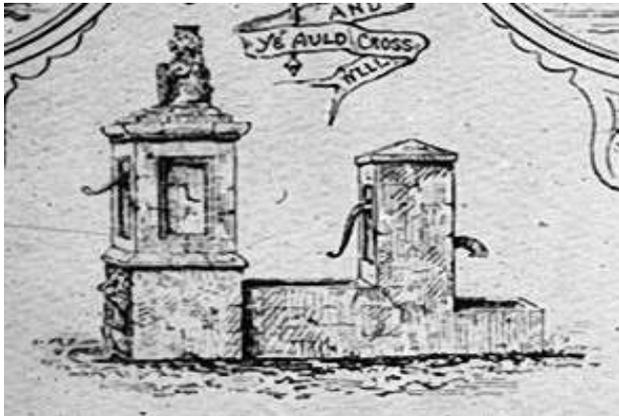


Illus 7: Public monuments. The Cross Well used for bill posters stands next to the Steeple. To its left is one of the first gas lamps, and the statue of Wellington.

A History of Falkirk in 10 ½ Objects: Object 7

The importance of the Cross Well to daily life slowly declined thereafter. By the 1880s the burgh council was connecting buildings to a much enhanced water supply. The monument remained, together with an appreciation of its place in the town's history. It still provided refreshment to shoppers on the High Street into the 1960s, having been connected to the mains supply. An iron cup fitted to the end of a chain was found inside the well when it was dismantled in 1989 and is now in the Museum (accession number 1989-25-1). A cast iron basin and tap were added, subsequently replaced by an inappropriate white vitreous china model.

In 1989, shortly after the High Street had been pedestrianized, a delivery lorry backed into the monument rendering it unsafe. It was carefully dismantled and stored in a builder's yard until repairs could be conducted. It was some twelve years before it was returned; this time to the site of the 1682 structure. Only now it faces east to the rising sun instead of west to its setting – surely a symbol of hope. Many of the ashlar blocks had to be replaced, but the bulk of the stonework is original. It is a listed building, category B, and one of only two features on the High Street that we can definitely date back to the 17th century.



Illus 8: Line drawing printed in 1891 to commemorate old Falkirk.

In 1859 the Falkirk Burgh Police Act subsumed the Stentmasters into a new Town Council. The coat-of-arms for the burgh had a shield supported by a red lion based upon that of the Cross Well; it even had a purple tongue resembling the lead pipe.

The Cross Well therefore represents several important aspects of life in Falkirk. It was the first structure built to supply water for public consumption, an essential of any community. It was the first time that representatives from the public in the town were given powers to raise taxes, and that led directly to the formation of the Council. And it also gave the name to the Bairns! For all of these reasons it is the seventh of our 10.5 objects.

Illus: Falkirk Burgh coat-of-arms had a red lion with a purple tongue as well as a motto referring to the Bairns.



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