

## Museum News: the discovery of a nineteenth-century well on the new museum site

On the afternoon of 28 January 2014, during the clearance of rubble from the demolition of 14 and 15 Brand Street, a disused well was discovered. It had been backfilled and capped with a concrete slab; the mechanical excavator disturbed the slab and some of the brickwork at the top of the well. The backfill starts at a depth of around 1.50 m from the capped top of the wall, although this may have slumped since the filling took place.

It lay three metres west of the west wall of 15 Brand Street and beneath the floor of the room that had been used by the hairdressing business as a kitchen. The well was around a metre in diameter (probably constructed to be three feet across) and was lined with red brick, of which around 90% were curved bricks made especially for lining wells, drains and sewers; the remainder were standard house bricks. This suggests the builders skimped on its construction. It had been sunk through the light yellowish brown sandy deposits of the [Hitchin lake bed](#), a feature dating from the early [Hoxnian Interglacial](#), around 424,000 to 400,000 years ago. The fill is currently covered with material that has spilled in during the clearance of rubble from the ground above; given that there may be voids further down in the fill, no attempt was made to climb in and examine the soil beneath.



A brick-lined Victorian well

### The significance of the discovery



An 18th-century well excavated at Portmill Lane in 1980; half a millstone can be seen in the water at the bottom

Post-medieval wells with brick lining are not uncommon and have been recorded elsewhere in Hitchin. A somewhat finer example, of eighteenth-century date, was excavated by Letchworth Museum at [Portmill Lane in 1980](#); a similar example was found during excavations in 1998 at The Priory. In 1963, a well about 25 feet (7.6 m) deep was found at the back of 22 Churchyard; it was lined with soft, chalky stone and contained a depth of about 15 feet (4.6 m) of water and was conjectured to be of medieval date. Excavations before the construction of Whittings Court at Paynes Park in 2004 revealed an unlined well of uncertain date; cut through the lake-bed deposits, it may originally have

Museum News: the discovery of a nineteenth-century well on the new museum site been timber lined. Another undated well was found during trial excavations to the rear of 93 Bancroft in 2008. A medieval pottery kiln discovered by Heritage Network behind 96 Bancroft in 2005 (now the pharmacy by the entrance to Sainsbury's) was found to have been partly destroyed by a post-medieval well.

The bricks in the well at 15 Brand Street are of mid nineteenth-century date and are poorly laid, with no mortar. In addition, the use of ordinary house bricks to make up the shortfall in the number of curved bricks suggests cheapness and lack of attention to fine detail. Household wells of this type would once have been relatively commonplace, particularly in parts of the town away from the River Hiz. While intrinsically interesting and adding to knowledge of this part of Hitchin, the discovery is of no great significance.

## Thoughts on date

The location of the well clearly dates the well to before 1851, when that part of the building appears on the Local Board of Health map, as indoor wells were not a feature of small Victorian homes. This part of 15 Brand Street was evidently an addition to an original two-up/two-down design of the cottage, confirmed by a straight joint in the west wall exposed during demolition work. The demolition also confirmed that the original build element of 14/15 Brand Street post-dated the construction of 16/17 Brand Street, which is probably contemporary with the Workmen's Hall. In the Listing record for the New Town Hall, the Workmen's Hall is said, on uncertain authority, to date from 1841. This would place the construction of 14/15 Brand Street and its extension to the north in the period 1841-51.

There are some unusual features about the buildings that deserve further research, though. The [structural polychromy](#) (use of bricks of contrasting colours) of the Workmen's Hall and 16/17 Brand Street is generally supposed to have been promoted by John Ruskin from the late 1840s on, his book [Seven Lamps of Architecture](#) (1849) being seen as the driving force behind its adoption. However, interest in Italian polychromy seems to have developed in the late 1820s and to have formed the subject of architectural experiments in the 1830s, prompting Alfred Bartholomew (briefly editor of *The Builder*) to publish a dismissal of the style in 1840. Nevertheless, James William Wild's Christ Church, Streatham, built 1840-42 has been seen as an important example of early polychrome



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ecclesiastical architecture. This would make the  
Workmen's Hall and 16/17 Brand Street —  
which are surely contemporary builds —  
unusually early examples of the style and  
therefore of considerable architectural  
importance.

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