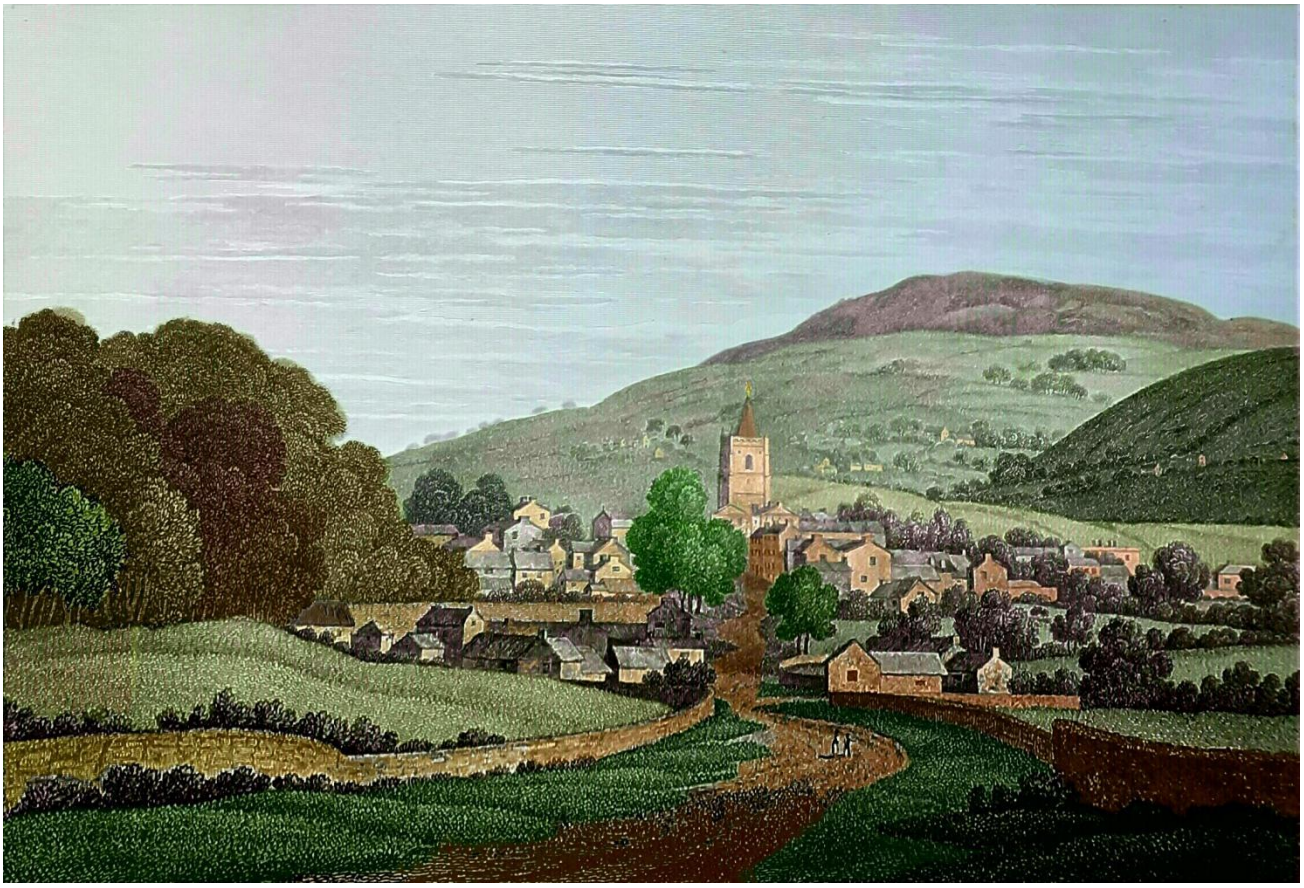
Wirksworth Old Bath and the waters of Wirksworth

In our previous work "Issues in the archaeology of Wirksworth" (2009) we noted: "Being at the junction of the limestone and gritstone strata means that Wirksworth was well supplied with streams, springs and wells. Most importantly, some of these springs were thermal, and it was necessary to look back into historic documents for evidence of this. The hydrology of Wirksworth was drastically changed during the Jacobean and Georgian periods when many drainage soughs were built, virtually eliminating the thermal springs and the streams they fed. A good example of this loss was the Warmbrook, which ran from near Gate House and Hammonds Court down the east side of the Meadows, and where its course can now only be traced by a little avenue of trees, and then crossing under Derby Road, along the south side of Water Lane: where its course is completely obliterated.



Wirksworth looking north from Oat Hill in 1817
Hand coloured from a black and white engraving in
"Britannia Depicta: of the most interesting and picturesque objects in Great Britain"
by J Farington RA.

The warm brooks

Thomas Short (1734), in a famous book about the mineral waters of Derbyshire and other places, discussed two warm brooks in Wirksworth, one on the east side of the town, one on the west:

The Hannage Sough

The Hannage Sough represented the east side "warm brook" in Thomas Short's day: "That on the east side of the town is a sough a mile long, made for carrying water from their lead workings; where it appears first to the day, they have made a very convenient bath." (The Old Bath at Bath Close, near Willowbath Mill).

This description is the Hannage Sough, started in 1693, which is said to have drained a warm spring in the churchyard via its Lees Vein branch, which it reached in 1696 (building soughs is very slow) and at that time the main sough didn't drain anything else. In the progress of its various stops and starts of construction in the nearly 30 years it took to complete, the Hannage Sough might have worked wonders for the drainage of the lead mines but it did terrible damage to the springs in and around the town. Thomas Bagshaw, a local lawyer much involved in litigation about the soughs said, in 1702: "the town of Wirksworth hath borne the losses of their water from the town to the impairing of their health, being utterly deprived by the sough of as fine springs in the town as the Kingdome had" (Slack, 2000). It is not possible to identify the location of churchyard spring, there are no accurate records, but the sough branch came into the churchyard in the south-east corner, ran under the south side of the church and then under the west of the church yard. The churchwarden's accounts for 1697 report the repair of the church well hole and a spring, which may or may not equate to the church well, is listed in Wirksworth Churchyard by Farey (1811), but Farey may have been repeating previous documents about the churchyard spring without knowing it had ceased to exist by the date of his work.

The Meadowcroft Sough and the Warmbrook

The Meadowcroft Sough and the Warm Brook: As far as the Warm Brook itself is concerned, the warm spring which fed it was near Gate House and this spring probably originated in the Yokecliffe lead rake. "Le Warmbroke" is first recorded as a place-name in 1395.

The Warmbrook appears to have flowed down from the east side of the Gate House gardens, past Hammonds Court and then along the east boundary of the Meadows, until 1693, when the short-lived Meadowcroft Sough was built, which diverted it and drained it back into the Yokecliffe stream near the junction of the Yokecliffe stream with the Warm Brook, close to the Cock Pit. Hackett, in 1863, wrote that "at Warm Brook" two springs, one warm, one cold, had been so near each other at the bottom of the shaft that you might have placed "one hand in each at the same time". In the past, then, the Warmbrook began near Gate House and was disrupted in Tudor times by lead mining from the Yokecliffe vein between Hammonds Court and the back of Waltham House. The modern location of "Warmbrook" as a row of terraced houses on Derby Road leads to us to misunderstand where the two springs really were. They were not at Warmbook on Derby Road, they were at the bottom of the Dog Kennel watershaft of the Meadowcroft Sough, which was at the west end of the outbuildings at Gate House, now buried under the lounge bay window of Claire Cottage.

The total loss of the warm spring, and of the whole Warm Brook itself, was probably due to the effect of the later Meerbrook Sough, which had reached a point in 1798 capable of draining the groundwater of the whole of west side of the town, which its still does.

The Wirksworth Old Bath in Georgian times

The history of Wirksworth Old Bath near Willowbath Mill is interesting but poorly recorded. To touch first on the issue of "warm" in relation to its feeder, the Hannage Sough: Thomas Short, in the summer of 1733, took the temperature of both the "warm brooks" of Wirksworth, with the primitive equipment then available to him. In other places, such as Stony Middleton, he was tending to take the temperature at or near the baths themselves. This means we can perhaps make some tentative modern comparisons.

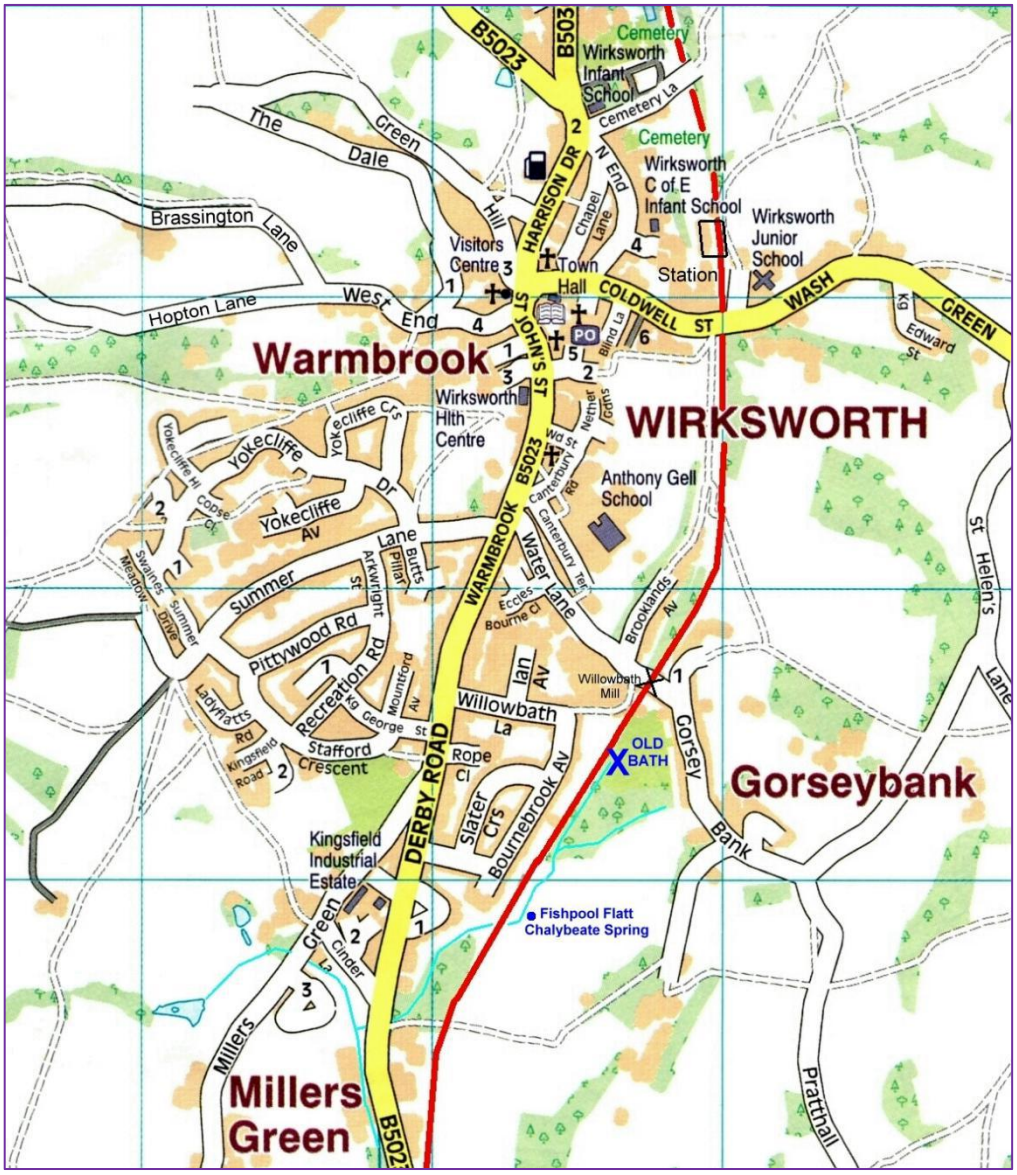
Beginning with cold water out of your tap, this varies with time of year and other factors, but might be an average of 10-12 degrees Celsius. The Ecclesbourne stream, south of Water Lane, in May is typically 10.7 degrees and in August 14.2 degrees: samples which illustrate a variance in water temperatures due to time of year, seasonal warmth from the sun's heat and so on.

In the summer of 1733 the Wirksworth "warm brooks" were about the same temperature as the bath at Stony Middleton (because on a detailed reading of Short's book, he appears to use the

same equipment at both Wirksworth and Stony Middleton and gets nearly the same result). Stony Middleton spring still flows and is normally a constant 17.2 degrees, a little warmer at 18 degrees in the bath itself in the summer (Smith, 2017).

These temperatures can be compared with some other locations. The Old Bath at Matlock Bath is 20 degrees, it was described by Daniel Defoe in 1724 as being milk-warm, a similar description was also used of the Wirksworth Bath: "little more than" milk warm, bearing in mind a variability about what people describe 300 years ago. Today we would hardly describe 17-20 degrees as warm at all. St Annes Well at Buxton is 27 degrees and the modern Wirksworth Swimming Pool is 32 degrees: positively tropical.

In essence, then, the Wirksworth Old Bath of three hundred years ago was probably a rather cool 17 or 18 degrees, perhaps a little warmer in hot weather, but really, it could only ever be described as "tepid". However, if you wished to bathe or cool down in the summer heat it would probably be entirely acceptable.



Location of the Old Bath, Wirksworth

Rieuwerts in 1980 reported its position as being underneath the Gorsey Bank Rubbish Tip.

In a recent article in "T'owd Man" magazine, Wirksworth Old Bath was described as being "situated at the end of the Hannage Sough, from which it was filled in about half an hour; the bath being

about 12 yards long and 6 yards wide" (we don't know how deep); bearing in mind that the modern Wirksworth Swimming Pool is about 11 yards long and about 5.5 yards wide (10 m x 5 m) - the modern pool is actually a little smaller than the Wirksworth Old Bath of Georgian times.

There is no evidence that the bath was covered in a building, but it was probably at least walled and gated, because a charge was being made to bathe in it. Given it was fed from the sough, the earliest possible date of the bath cannot be before 1696 when the sough reached the warm spring in the churchyard.

There is a little disagreement about when the water supply to the bath ceased and the bath closed, on the one hand Anne Griffin, the owner's daughter, thought it about 1775-1776, but on the other hand another local, George Land, thought it about 1788-1789. This is perhaps an issue for more research. The remains of the bath could apparently still be seen in the 1830s, but after that no records mention it.

We don't know what the bath looked like, but there are others which have survived, often in modern buildings. Here, below, is an example of an outdoor bathing pool, which has recently been restored in an archaeological project in Wales.

St Dyfnog's Bathing Pool at Llanrhaeadr near Ruthin, Clwyd
St Dyfnog's pool is a cold water bath, it is said that the saint would stand under a waterfall there as penance for his sins. See https://stdyfnogswell.org.uk

It is certainly the case that the descriptions of the warm springs of Wirksworth, their locations, the relevant soughs, the Warmbrook and the Wirksworth Old Bath are rather confusing, but this is because the descriptions are mostly very old and their features are long gone.

The Chalybeate Springs

Bray (1783) said there were two chalybeate springs (mineral water containing iron salts) in Wirksworth, however like many others, he is simply quoting from Thomas Short. The first one cannot be located from a rather poor description, but may perhaps have been one of the springs near St Helen's Lane or those which feed the town's modern water supply at Breamfield Reservoir, but the wording is simply too vague: we don't know.

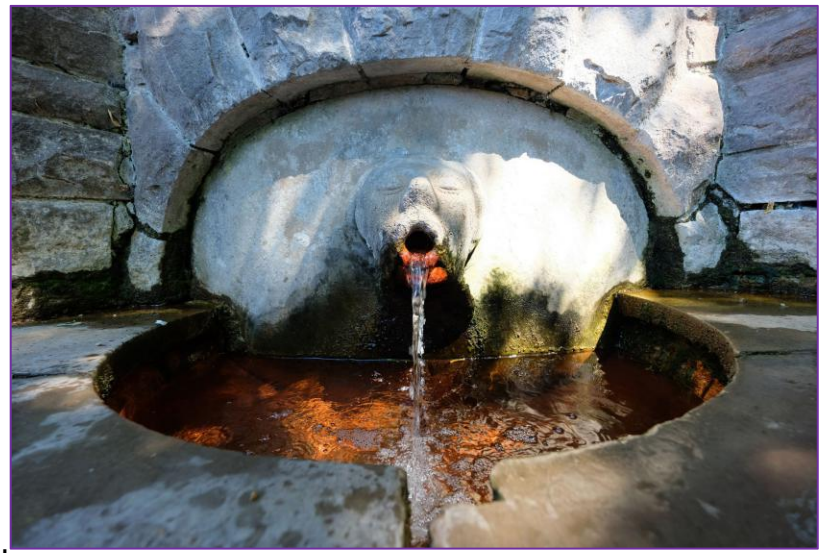
The other is stated as being in Fishpool Flatt. This is a meadow adjacent to the Ecclesbourne stream about 300 metres south of Water Lane at map reference SK 2863 5293. Short says:

"There is also a finer chalybeate spring at the south end of the town, in a marshy meadow called the Fishpool Flatt, at the foot of a fine hill, it's stream is dammed up with a very reddish brown ochre.

The water is a fine colour, sparkles and bubbles when poured out, has no inky smell, nor nauseous taste, but has the most delicious nitrous pungent flavour like Pyrmont Waters.

It rises out of shale and Gritstone. This I call Sui Generis ("in a class of its own") having found none like it in England."

Pyrmont Water was famous in 1734 when Thomas Short published his book and is famous yet: it is bottled and sold as a fine mineral drinking water in Germany - Bad Pyrmont is a well-known spa town near Hannover, in the county province of Lower Saxony.



The spring head at Bad Pyrmont near the great Pump Room

At the time of writing we do not know if the Chalybeate Spring in Fishpool Flatt at Wirksworth still flows, its site can be seen from passing trains and is excruciatingly overgrown, but might possibly be investigated with permission. Fishpool Flatt is indeed a marshy meadow at it lowest point: through which the Ecclesbourne stream bubbles happily, before it enters a large culvert to run under the railway north of Forty Steps foot crossing, through Bennet's Dowry field, under the little bridge at Derby Road, into Haarlem Mill and then down the valley to its confluence with the Derwent at Duffield. If this spring still runs it would be an interesting exercise to have the water tested to see if it is indeed in a class of its its own: "Wirksworth Spring"!

The source of the Ecclesbourne

Finally, while we are touching on all matters of waters, springs and Wirksworth, we have been considering where the Ecclesbourne rises. Typically, a question which never seems to have been answered, presumably in the past because it was well known and no-one thought to record it. Only Leyland (1543) mentions it: "Eglesburn risith in a roche in the paroche of Oreworthe". This is delightfully Tudor and Leyland was from the west country: he writes as he no doubt spoke and he also slightly mistakenly writes Wirksworth as Oreworth, which he also lists as one of the main market towns of Derbyshire. However, charming as it is, "The Ecclesbourne rises in a rush in the parish of Wirksworth", it tells us nothing about exactly where.

The best guide we have to to source of the Ecclesbourne is the Tithe map of 1849, which is before the railway disrupted some of the course of the headwater. The map appears to show the principal headwater stream of the Ecclesbourne rising at Great Bolehill, at Spring Close a little below Bolehill Road. The Ecclesbourne has a large number of tributary streams, which are associated, often, with the spring line near the top of the watershed which runs about the upper valley in which Wirksworth lies.

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