

Sevenoaks District Architectural History

a regional study of early vernacular buildings

from

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Dear Andrew,

Many thanks for passing on to me the letter about Becket's Well which the Department of the Environment carelessly misdirected to you.

Our paths seem to have barely crossed since 1951-53, when you were one of the youngsters who did noble work lending us a hand during the Otford & District Historical Society's excavation of the whole Becket's Well complex. Of course I knew your parents better.

I must explain that, in my present capacity on the Kent Historic Buildings Committee, I have a responsibility to oversee and report on the many structures of architectural or historic interest throughout this part of the county. In the case of those statutorily scheduled as Ancient Monuments or Listed Buildings, one of my obligations is to ensure that the appropriate national or local government departments fulfil their responsibilities where any structure is in need of attention, - and believe me this often entails a considerable amount of chasing up. I am thus in regular contact, especially with the DoE, Sevenoaks District Council, and Tonbridge & Malling District Council, about an enormous number of individual buildings. Pleasant as it would be to maintain contact with owners in every case, the sheer volume of work makes this impracticable and in any event three-cornered communication can lead to confusion and is frequently best avoided.

Evidently you are unaware of the foregoing and the acid comments in your final paragraph were made under a misapprehension.

With regard to Becket's Well, the collapse of the well chamber's north wall began in February 1954 (this itself is quite a story if you are interested) and deterioration has continued steadily ever since. In 1973 we were informed that you intended to restore the masonry, so a team of volunteers from the Otford & District Historical Society did a great deal of hard work clearing the fallen stonework in readiness. It was, therefore, a bitter disappointment to learn that you did not fulfil your side of the bargain. Direct negotiations with the owner having still proved fruitless by 1977, we had no alternative but to pursue the matter through the DoE and frankly I think you are bound to agree that you have only yourself to blame.

The letter misdirected to you was just one in a series which have been exchanged with the DoE during the period since 1977. They show that the essential repairs have been repeatedly deferred for one reason or another. Naturally I am pleased to hear of your present intentions but you will appreciate that, at the same time, we cannot overlook the fact that a similar assurance given ten years ago came to nothing.

It will be an immense relief to my Committee and all others concerned if careful and sympathetic restoration is now put in hand. Whilst it is realized that deterioration has been exacerbated by delay and that the work must be done strictly in accordance with the specification of the Ancient Monuments Inspectorate, it is greatly hoped that actual rebuilding will be kept to the absolutely unavoidable minimum. You are privileged to be the custodian of an important part of the national heritage, for Becket's Well is a remarkable monument unique in Kent (possibly in Britain), of late-Cl2 origin though largely rebuilt in the Cl4 and later. Grants towards the cost of restoration might be available even now, just as they were in 1977.

I look forward to the DoE's notification of the work's completion, during 1984 I trust - thirty years is a quite long enough delay! I also hope that I may be allowed to inspect it when finished.

Best wishes for the New Year to you and your wife.

Yours sincerely,



Director of Studies, Sevenoaks District Architectural History Group
Sevenoaks Area Representative, Kent Historic Buildings Committee

c. c. Department of the Environment