

Our Heritage

A look at yesteryear of a spa town



With

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Father Christmas and the Old Magnesia Well at the Valley Gardens



The Old Magnesia Well in about 1880, showing the open nature of Bogs Field.

When my great-nephews Finley, who is seven, and Hamish, who is five, called on me during the summer, they asked where Father Christmas lived when he was not in the Valley Gardens Old Magnesia Well, as they remembered meeting him there during Christmas 2011. The answer to this question is that as the 1858 agreement between the Harrogate Improvement Commissioners and the Duchy of Lancaster specifically prohibits the permanent occupation of the building [clause 9, paragraph 4], Father Christmas can only occupy the Old Magnesia Well Pump Room for a few hours each day.

The reason for this is that the structure was built on Stray land, as described by the 1778 Great Award, and Stray land cannot be enclosed, as such an enclosure would prevent the public from accessing every square inch of the Stray. Thus a special agreement was required between the Duchy - who own the subsoil - and the Improvement Commissioners - who administered the surface of the Stray on behalf of the people - to enable a pump room to be built.

The Duchy feared that if the Magnesia Water ever fell from popularity, the Improvement Commissioners might be tempted to lease the building as a cottage, and thus commit a major infringement of public right of access. The Magnesia Water had been used to treat diuretic problems for several centuries, but its promotion by the medical profession in the 19th century made it popular - hence the need to have a building which would could dispense the water properly, and provide shelter for the at-

tendant and the visitors drinking the water.

The Old Magnesia Well Pump Room is one of Harrogate's prettiest buildings, although after the New Magnesia Well Pump Room [now the cafe] was built in 1895, it fell into decay, with much of the original woodwork being lost, and the building hidden behind a dense mass of vegetation, which was completely alien to the open nature of that part of the Stray known as "Bogs Field".

Today, the 1858 pump room is being skillfully restored, thanks to the Friends of Valley Gardens, whose chairman, Mrs Jane Blayney, opened negotiations with Father Christmas's agents two years ago, to see if Father Christmas would be willing to visit the newly restored building, without infringing the above-mentioned clause of the 1858 agreement.

This is why Father Christmas will be at the Old Magnesia Well only between the hours of noon and 3pm, on Saturday, December 22 and Sunday, December 23. A further complication then arose with transportation requirements.

Although the 1986 Stray Act carried over many of the enactments of earlier legislation, it did not give the council power to construct a landing strip for a reindeer-drawn sleigh, because the Valley Gardens site was considered too narrow; and also, because Harrogate's Parks and Gardens Department expressed anxiety that Father Christmas's reindeer might try to eat some of the valuable trees and shrubs in the gardens.

All this looked bad for Father Christmas's planned arrival, until Mrs Blayney persuaded Father Christmas's agents to agree to his arriving by Land Rover, as the accompanying photograph shows. Health and Safety requirements prevent me from revealing where Father Christmas's sleigh will be landing, or where he will stay when the Old Magnesia Well will be closed. But those children who want to see Father Christmas during his visit to Harrogate might also like to take a look at one of the town's prettiest old buildings, which thanks to the Friends of Valley Gardens, is being expertly restored.



Father Christmas arriving in Valley Gardens last Christmas.