

A VISIT TO DORTON SPA



In scorching weather, on 4th August this year, 38 members and visitors assembled outside Dorton House (nowadays Ashfold School) near Brill for a walk that we led to see the site of the short-lived chalybeate spa at Dorton. Strategically-placed trees, and the wood which now covers the site of the spa, gave participants reasonable protection from the sun.

The chalybeate spring at Dorton had long been used, without authority, by local farmers who had discovered its healing properties for various bovine diseases. They had taken to driving their cattle to the spring where health was improved by standing in, or drinking from, its water. This activity attracted the attention of Thomas Knight, a Brill surgeon who sampled the spring water over several years and was surprised to find that it had the highest iron content recorded at any spa in England. In the 1820s he began with some success to prescribe the foul-tasting Dorton water for some of his patients' ailments.

The damage done to the field containing the spring by the cure-seeking cattle had also been noticed by Charles Ricketts, a retired naval officer who had married Elizabeth Aubrey, heiress to the Dorton estate. Despite his apparent lack of land management experience, he appears to have taken over the management of this large estate when his wife inherited it and moved into Dorton House in 1826. Moving with more speed than caution, Ricketts decided in the late 1820s to make a virtue out of necessity and to develop the trampled area around the spring into a spa, with associated housing. He commissioned a London architect to design a spa house and to lay out the 12-acre field around it as pleasure gardens with a one-acre lake. Construction took place between 1828 and 1834.

Ricketts opened the spa to the public in 1833, when the pleasure gardens still looked like a building site, and this may have done irreparable reputational damage when the hardy few who braved the mud in that year regaled their friends with the story. A publicity campaign in 1834 led to what was probably a peak for visitors (8000 were claimed in that year), but from then on it was largely downhill. An invitation for Queen Victoria to visit Dorton Spa in 1837 was declined, Whatever Dorton Spa looked like, there was no avoiding the fact that access to it

was difficult and that there were no spa-style hotels in the area. The building of a spa hotel in Brill in 1842 was already too late to help and, while it is difficult to chart the spa's decline, it clearly died during the 1850s (if not a little earlier) and most of its buildings were demolished in 1907.



Dorton Spa

The BAS visitors viewed the dried-up bed of the boating lake and its island and pondered whether Ricketts had replaced one large-ish spa building with two smaller ones (tantalisingly the only surviving colonnade columns are on the site of the spa building which the Ordnance Survey did not record). They then moved on to see the brick hut over the dried up chalybeate well, walked the routes of what were once garden paths (during which they got close views of the resident breeding partridges) and peered through undergrowth at the remains of the tea room (or was it a lodge?). The visit ended along the remains of the entrance causeway flanked by what is left of rolled iron fencing. Throughout the walk it was necessary to remind ourselves that what is now a well-established wood (Spa Wood) was, in the 1830s, a vista of lawns, clipped hedges, and flower beds around the spa buildings.

We would like to acknowledge the help of the Dorton Estate for agreeing the principle of the visit, Mr. J.Sprinz of Spa Farm for allowing us to cross his land, and the keeper Chris Humphreys, for allowing access to Spa Wood.

Peter and Diana Gulland.