



A Water Diviner at Work

Oaksey

John Hitchings

For 30 years, John Hitchings has been a water diviner. He's found water nearly everywhere in and around Swindon, and one of his more recent jobs has been divining for the Birmingham Corporation, a job which, incidentally has proved eminently successful.

He lives in a queer looking little caravan with a decidedly Heath Robinson appearance on the "shores" of the Telford Pool, just off the Cheney Manor road, Swindon.

It was at Cleverton, near Malmesbury, that John Hitchings first saw the light of day 69 years ago. He came of a family of well sinkers, though, strangely enough, none of them had ever tried divining.

"My father was employed by someone else, but my grandfather and his brother were well sinkers on their own account," he told an Evening Advertiser reporter. "I can just remember my old grandfather hobbling about on a couple of sticks, he used to get bad attacks of the screws, and when I was a lad, he was almost too old to work. After him, one of my uncles carried on the business, and later I myself started well sinking.

John could not remember the actual date that he started in business, but he could fix it this way; when Baden Powell was released from Mafeking, during the South African War, John was sinking his fourth well.

That well was at Pitsland farm, Brinkworth, for a Mr William Rimming, and the diviner was a Mr Dainton of Wootton Bassett. "We dug down 85 ft without coming to any water," he said, "and then we bored another 70 ft, but still no water, so in the end the well was filled in."

Soon after that, he saw no reason why he should not do a little divining himself.

When I first caught hold of the twig it was no more use than holding this sheet of paper," he said, waving a piece of writing paper. "Lots of folk tell you there is nothing greater than manpower in things like this, but don't you believe 'em. Any way I followed it up, kept on trying and eventually it came sort of natural to me, just as if I was born to it.

"To-day I could follow a twig from here to Rodbourne, if I once got it on the move," he declared.

John Hitchings' first success as a diviner was at Oaksey. Here he located a spring at Sodam. "I sunk the well, and dug down altogether 18 ft, and then I were drowned out," he said in his Wiltshire dialect. "And that well has been supplying the village of Oaksey ever since."

After that John divined many a spring, at, among other places, Foxham, Lydiard, Wroughton, Hackpen, Hankerton Priory, and on the estate of the Earl of Suffolk and Berkshire at Charlton Park.

But his biggest and latest job was last July, when he found water for the Birmingham City Council on their estate at Canwell, Sutton Coldfield. Here he indicated two spots where the water would be found, and two wells, one 38 ft and the other 18 ft deep were sunk, with the result that plenty of water was found.

John retains a letter he received from the estate agent of the City Council on this matter. This states; "You will remember divining here last summer and marking a place in the horse field, and another in the Turfpits as good sources. During the autumn wells were sunk at these points 38 and 18 feet deep respectively. Enough water has been obtained for the requirements of this portion of the estate, and on test more than 60,000 gallons over 24 hours has been pumped out. I now propose to construct a reservoir to receive this.

"Water in the horse field well was found to be in a vertical crevice in the sandstone, and had the well been sunk one yard out of place the water would have been missed. This, I think speaks well for your power as a water diviner."

John sat down heavily and sighed, "I can't do any well sinking now. Getting old, and besides, it's that neuritis, it made an old man of me. But I can still divine water with anyone, and after all, water diviners are wanted now as much as they were during the dry weather. People want good water nowadays, not a duck's puddle.

So leaving the quaint caravan, which, for all its topsy-turviness was really quite cosy, John found a couple of twigs and proceeded to give me a demonstration. It was only a hawthorn twig, V-shaped with a wide angle.

We walked over to where there is running water from a spring near Telford Pool. John stood astride the water which was running very slowly, held the twig between two fingers of the right hand and grasping the other fork with his whole hand. The apex of the fork started to twist and squirm.

Then John shifted his position, and stood with one leg in the water, and the twig remained stationary. "If there were another spring below this one that twig would still move," he explained. "But if there were a thousand gallons of still water, and no spring down there, that twig would never move with me. If there were a pipe containing running water down there it would not move either."

At John's suggestion, I handled the twig, and although it certainly seemed to tug, above the stream it certainly never twisted. But John encouraged me. "You keep that twig," he said, "go home and keep on trying; you might be a diviner yet."

John gave me yet another demonstration. He produced a little cloth from his trousers pocket, peered inside and discerned a couple of half-crowns, and putting the bag on the ground, held the twig above it. Once again, the twig started to moved, but, compared with the water, it moved very slowly.

"It's not very strong with silver," John told me. "I can do it with gold as well. If I had been like some fellows, I suppose I might go to public houses and win bets with my twigs, but it's a gift, and don't believe in abusing it."

John told me that he bought a pig with his first sovereign, and thought he was earning only 12s at the time, soon made a "capitalist" of himself by procuring a complete litter of pigs.

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