

Bath House Spring

In the middle of the 18th century, some medical practitioners believed that bathing the body in cold water was extremely beneficial. Such bathing was claimed to cure many ailments, from a faulty blood supply to stimulation of the organs. Spring water was believed to contain special medicinal properties. John Wesley himself, Founder of the Methodist movement, claimed that *'cleanliness was next to godliness'* and extolled the virtues of cold bathing to the extent that it could cure blindness and leprosy. Then there were those who understood it to be a more virile thing to do, a move away from the somewhat effeminate 17th century. Others also saw it as pleasant recreation in picturesque countryside.

The Rev. Barfoot Colton became Vicar of Shrivenham in 1764, and it seems he too, was swept along with the trend of taking to the waters. In the Wiltshire County Archive there is a document that shows he built a *'Cold Bath.'* But whether it was a business venture or a charitable one is unclear. The lease is dated 3rd October 1767 (WRO 11/392) and is between the Hon Stephen Fox Esq, landowner, and Lord of the Manor of Watchfield, and the Rev Barfoot Colton, aged 31, Samuel Barrington, age 37, and William Barrington, age 8. (*) It refers to: *'a House and Buildings as the same has been lately erected and built by the said Barfoot Colton together with the site or ground whereon the same now standeth with the use of the Spring of Water adjoining to and running into the same situate, standing and being within the parish and is part of the Manor of Watchfield in a certain place there called Watchfield Common on the West side and near unto a place there called West Mill together with all Ways and Paths etc..'*

There is only one site that fits the description, which is close by Pennyhooks Bridge on the Watchfield side of the brook (Grid Ref SU 2355 9050). The natural Spring at this location is plentiful and exudes a steady stream of cold, clear water. The Ordnance Survey maps of the late 19th Century bear the name *'Bath House Spring'* at this spot. The Willington map of 1758 shows no footpath here at all and it's likely that the origins of the footpath were a legacy from when people made their way to the Bath House from the direction of Shrivenham. It's further likely that the original bridge that was recently replaced may also owe its origins to the Cold Bath.

Some brief archaeological work was carried out by Shrivenham Heritage Society member, Neil Maw in 2011/12. This led to the conclusion that the Bath House itself was a very simple set up and consisted of a barrel set upon a stone with the spring water diverted into it by means of a sluice. There was evidence of a wooden structure that had a tiled roof and was likely to have covered the barrel and provided some privacy for the bather.

It is uncertain for how long the Cold Bath remained in use. Barfoot Colton died in 1803 and there is no mention of the bath in his Will. It's likely that it was in use for a short period of a few years rather than decades.

(*) Further research has established that the 37year old Samuel Barrington was the Admiral who was born at Beckett House, Shrivenham in 1730. The 8year old William Barrington was likely to have been the Admiral's nephew, the son of his brother Major General John Barrington. Just why these two formed an alliance with the Vicar of Shrivenham to make a bath house is not yet known.







