

The Diamond Jubilee drinking fountain

Next time you're waiting for a bus on the Green, spare a glance for the green metal object near the seat, and then have a longer look. It has a history, and it deserves inspection.



The fountain, 2012 (credit: Jaggery / Grade II listed Victorian drinking fountain, Shirehampton, Bristol / CC BY-SA 2.0 [cropped])

The bare facts are that it was a 9ft 6in high cast-iron drinking fountain made at the Saracen Foundry of Walter Macfarlane & Co. in Possilpark, Glasgow, in 1897. It is design number 8 in their catalogue, and if you really want to dive in deep, you can see it at <https://fauufpa.org/wp-content/uploads/2014/01/macfarlane-castings.pdf>, in the middle of page 5. Many of them were made, and quite a few still exist, for example in Wallingford, Cowes, Hexham, Sunderland, Hoylake, Leeds, Hull, Stansted Mountfitchet, Renton and Stranraer, and at the National Museum in Edinburgh, as well as Port Adelaide and North Melbourne in Australia. There is a very similar one in Suspension Bridge Road, Clifton, but less complete. The survivors have often been decoratively painted. They may differ in small detachable details, but the basic form is always the same. They could be “supplied with Dog Trough at an extra cost”.

This one *was* a drinking fountain because it used to have a water supply, connecting to the mains via a valve. There was a method of releasing water to the drinker, but nothing is there now and the mains water supply itself has long been cut off. It was equipped with four cups to drink out of, suspended on chains. The cups and chains have also long gone, along with the bacterial health hazard they presented.

Have you looked at what is left of it in detail, and with an architect's eye? At the top is an open filigree domed canopy. This used to have a spiky golden crown as a finial, as in the photo above. It had disappeared by 1966, but must have been replaced by the time of the photo. It has since disappeared again. The crown was once topped by a small cross, and guarded by four griffins, each perched on a console or bracket support on the corners of the square base of the canopy. Griffins were creatures with a lion's body, tail and back legs, and an eagle's head and wings, with talons on the front legs. For the Victorians, they symbolized guardianship (in Macfarlane's case, looking after water purity), strength and vigilance, but in spite of all their virtues they have disappeared as well. In panels (lunettes) below this there are cartouches encircled by rope-moulding. In these cartouches are three leaf-like shields, two of which carry an image of a long-legged crested bird in reeds. One online commentator, obviously not a birdwatcher, calls it a heron - the neck's wrong for a grey heron like those nesting in the riverside woods at Pill, but at least the heron has a crest, even if not exactly where this bird has it. I've seen it called (perhaps) a stork, which it also isn't because it has a crest and storks don't. Storks and herons can have the appropriate shaggy breast. It can hardly be a pelican, though its "chin" could suggest a possible large gaping bill if it felt like opening up. It might be meant to be a common crane; for the Victorians, the crane symbolized vigilance, but common cranes don't have crests either. It might be what heraldic artists call a "crane in its vigilance", which is sometimes shown with a crest, defying ornithology, though without the stone that this symbol should hold in its raised right claw (as in the small image). I think it's meant to be a crane, but we could just settle for "a big heraldic bird".



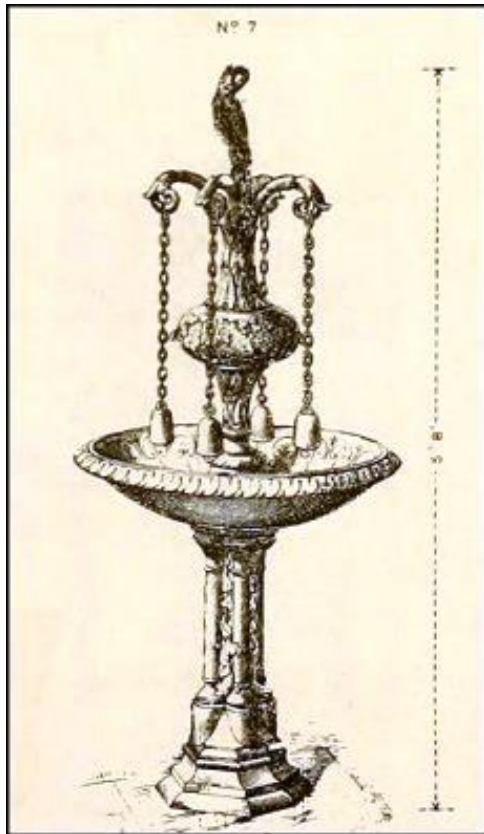
One of the cranes (credit Paul Francis, <https://artuk.org/discover/artworks/queen-victoria-18191901-jubilee-drinking-fountain-304544> [cropped])



(A. C. Fox-Davies)

The cartouche facing south is blank – in other places, this space was used for coats of arms, but Shire was not yet part of the City of Bristol in 1897, and no other body filled the gap here. In the fourth cartouche, the one facing northwards onto the main road, is a bust of Queen Victoria, and on the strip above it appears in raised metal letters "Queen Victoria's Diamond Jubilee 1897". The corresponding strip is blank on the other three

sides, but this useful street furniture could be customized. Several of these fountains carried the words “Keep the pavement dry” on the strip. That has led people to think that the Temperance movement had a hand in providing them, or at least encouraged them; perhaps this wasn’t just about warning drinkers not to splash, but to stay off the bottle. Temperance Hall had been just up the road in Park Hill since before 1888 ... it was demolished by a Nazi bomb in 1941.



The cartouches sit on semicircular cusped arches with very complicated orders of decoration, accompanied by moulded filigree spandrels featuring a flowering plant design. Under the canopy stands the fountain itself, which could be chosen separately from the main structure: this one is design number 7 in the Macfarlane catalogue, as in the image (left), and it is 5ft 8in high. The water supply arrived through a single urn-like structure with intricate moulded decoration, from which sprout four plant-like forms resembling courgettes, and from their interiors emerge curling loops from which used to hang cups on chains. Maybe they can just about be made out dangling on this colourized Vaughan postcard of 1907:



The Green in 1907 (Bristol Archives 43207/9/23/41, via Bristol “Know Your Place”)

Above those loops stands another debatable bird – a pelican, according to the Listed Building statement, though it doesn't have obvious webbed feet. If it is a pelican, it will have symbolized nourishment and self-sacrifice; traditionally it will have been female, and her beak will have been shown aimed downwards as here, extracting blood from her breast to feed her young which usually also feature in images of her – a so-called “pelican in her piety”. The fountain in North Melbourne has a recognizable kangaroo here instead.



<https://uk.pinterest.com/pin/498140408784456955/> (on the left)

Let the reader decide what the bird is



The water supply was activated by four buttons on the most swollen part of the urn, but they have now been blanked off. The water fell into and drained out of a basin with a scalloped edge. That stands on another moulded pedestal containing the water pipe, which is heavily decorated with ivy-like plants descending between four plain columns. From the green plantlife emerge four salamanders (like lizards), with their heads pointing downwards, right at the bottom. Salamanders were thought to be fire-resistant



One of the salamanders – head of another on the lower right

– which is fine for decorating a source of water – but the Roman writer Pliny the Elder thought that they poisoned well-water, which is not so good on a drinking fountain.

The canopy stands on the capitals of four fluted columns. The columns each stand on buttressed octagons, which themselves each stand on a plinth of three stepped chamfered squares. The whole surviving structure is painted green, and stands on a concrete plinth of two steps. The concrete is in need of repair, just as a report stated in 1982

It's a Listed Building, and it must be one of the smallest ones in Britain. It was registered Grade II on 8 January 1959 (<https://historicengland.org.uk/listing/the-list/list-entry/1292465>). It's in good company in Shire, surrounded by these other Listed Buildings: 1-5 The Green, The Cottage and Park House, and these Locally Listed Buildings: The George Inn and 8-9 Penpole Place. In 1972 a local community group raised £42 6s 9d, and another in 1998 with a contribution from Bristol City Council, to repair, clean and repaint it. There are several good photos of it in 1966-70, themselves now historic documents, in the Ethel Thomas Collection (Bristol Archives 42242/Ph/2/36).

According to another source, the Shirehampton fountain has been celebrated in literature. On Helen Szafer's comprehensive "Memorial Drinking Fountains" website (<https://memorialdrinkingfountains.wordpress.com/2014/10/28/queen-victoria-jubilee-drinking-fountain/>), she quotes a "Verse from an old Shirehampton folk song":

I met me first love in the village
(name of Mary-Jean)
We shar'd a cup of water from
The fountain on the Green
We first sang carols there together
One cold Christmas Eve
Then went into The George to drink
Before I took me leave.

Where did she get this from? Does anybody local know it? Or know the tune and still sing it? (I suspect I know the answer to the last question.)

Richard Coates

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