



Discover Fobney pumping station



Built by the Reading Corporation near an old mill where the Kennet and Avon canal and River Kennet meet, Fobney pumping station officially opened on 11 April 1878.

We know lots about its past thanks to Alexander Walker (1835–1905) and his eldest son Leslie, who was just four years old when Fobney was built. They were both the live-in managers of the old Reading Waterworks for many years, and they kept a detailed scrapbook of newspaper cuttings* that provide us with a rich history of the pumping station as it was then.

Fobney through the ages

Producing clean water at Fobney would have been a busy and smoky affair, as the old chimney was located close to the footpath. Inside, two huge steam turbines pumped up to 18 million litres of water a day out of the River Kennet, which was then sent to be cleaned at the works behind. Fuelling these turbines required boatloads of coal, which arrived daily along the Kennet and Avon canal.

Around 1896, the Walkers installed two triple expansion engines and two Lancashire boilers to help meet demand, supplying an extra 13.5 million litres a day – enough for around 59,000 people. But Leslie Walker noted that they didn't often hit this target because icy winters and dry summers made it too challenging.

Around the same time, a huge pipe about 2km long and half a meter wide was installed between Fobney and the existing Bath Road reservoir. Each 3.5m section of the cast iron pipe weighed well over half a tonne, and 571 sections were needed to complete the project. Installing it wouldn't have been an easy feat back then!

What does 'Fobney' mean?

“Very many years ago the site occupied by Fobney Mill was an islet known as 'Vobens' Eye', where oysters abounded. It was owned by a Dutchman named Vobens, hence anglicised to Fobens' Eye – i.e. Fobney.”

Reading Standard, 21 February 1936

A map held by the Berkshire Records Office confirms that oyster farming happened just a little further downstream.

* If you'd like to see it, it's available to view at the Berkshire Records Office

The case for Fobney

The existing Southcote Waterworks was in an ideal spot to pump water because:

- it was accessible by both road and canal
- it was set right where the canal and River Kennet met, meaning deeper water for the pumps
- it was upstream of the town, so the water was cleaner

But in the late 1860s, Reading's population grew quickly – and so did the demand for a reliable source of clean water. Southcote Waterworks couldn't supply enough on its own.

Civil engineer Mr James Mansergh, who was responsible for famous projects like the Elan Valley dam and aqueduct in Wales, advised the Reading Waterworks Company to “forsake the Kennet as a source of supply”. His plan was to sink wells in the Norcot area of Tilehurst instead, which would have cost up to £150,000 (around £12 million in today's money!).

Reading Waterworks Company eventually went ahead with the construction of Fobney at the much more economical price of £15,000 (£1.3 million today), and it supplied twice as much water as Mansergh's proposal.



Fobney Turbine and lock, 1975. Photo CR Dr Neil Clifton (cc-by-sa 2.0)

A brief history of Reading's waterways

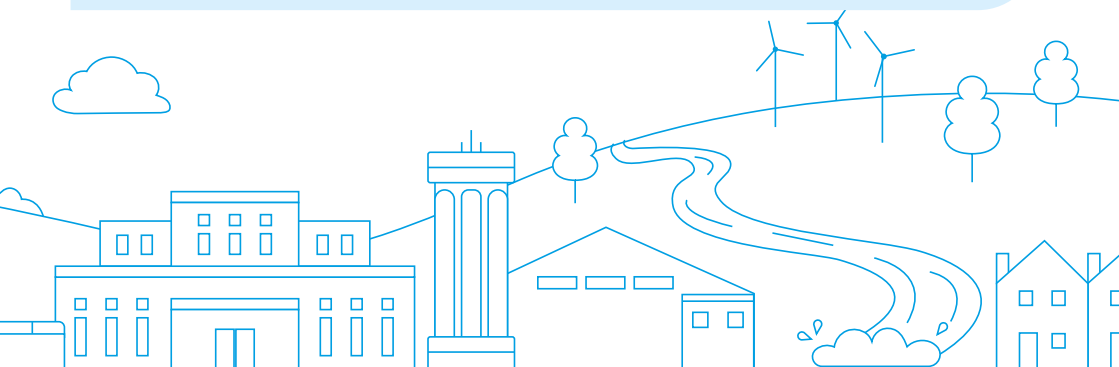
- 1515** The first reference is made to waterworks at Yield Hall near Minster Street.
- 1570** Queen Elizabeth I appoints Commissioners to look into Reading's water supply and sewage system.
- 1600s** The Holy Brook is the main source of water and is used for communal dipping.
- 1696** A group of ironmongers and gentlemen from Worcestershire lease a plot in Broad Street to build and maintain the first public water tank.
- 1697** The same group construct Reading's first watermill next to the River Kennet on what is now the site of the Oracle. They use tree trunks for its pipes, originating the phrase 'trunk main'. The mill provides Reading's entire water supply until c1820.
- 1715** The Kennet Navigation Act is passed to authorise a new canal between Reading and Newbury.
- 1718** John Hore is selected as chief engineer for the canal's construction.
- 1723** The Kennet Navigation opens, on which there are several pound locks, including Fobney, to bypass weirs and mills.
- 1794** John Rennie begins constructing a canal linking the River Kennet in Newbury and the Avon in Bath.



- **1836** Steam power is used to pump water from rivers for the first time.
- **1851** An Act of Parliament authorises the expansion of the waterworks and Bath Road reservoir is built.
- **1852** Southcote Waterworks opens, pumping water to Bath Road reservoir.
- **1868** Reading Waterworks Company takes over Reading's water supply.
- **1878** Fobney pumping station officially opens.
- **1894** Southcote temporarily stops pumping water as Fobney takes over.
- **1896** Southcote reopens with a new filter house.
- **1977** Construction begins on Fobney water treatment works as we know it today.
- **1981** Fobney water treatment works opens (with phase two opening in 1993).
- **1982** Southcote closes.
- **1985** Fobney pumping station closes.

Did you know?

Today, Fobney water treatment works can produce enough water to meet the demands of over 300,000 people every day. We're investing another £10 million to upgrade these works soon.



The original top-quality tap water

In 1906, Leslie explained the 'Reading System' – Fobney's special water treatment process – for the first time.

River water was filtered through coke, clinker and gravel to remove impurities. Then it was passed through three tanks of Polarite (a magnetic iron oxide) and sand for a final polish.

This system cleaned water six times faster than traditional methods and effectively removed about 98% of microorganisms. Back then, experts considered 80% good enough to drink.

It's no surprise that Reading was famous throughout England for its quantities of cheap, clean water!

Did you know?

Southcote produced Reading's first ever supply of filtered water in 1899. Quality tests showed it was 'chemically quite satisfactory'.



Above: Fobney Turbine House, 2014
Right: Photo CR Des Blenkinsopp (cc-by-sa 2.0)



Above:
Fobney artist impression

Restoring Reading's waterways

The original Fobney pumping station has been empty ever since our water treatment works took over, but we believe it could be a great place for the local community to explore. That's why we've commissioned a local architect to help us turn it into a visitor attraction.

The structures you can see behind the turbine house are part of the original water treatment works site. These were purchased by the Environment Agency, who, until recently, used the site as a Fish Microbiology Laboratory. We're working closely with the agency to manage their ownership rights as well as public rights of way.

The station's roof was most recently replaced in 2014 to keep it watertight and safe.

A restoration success story

The Kennet and Avon canal was originally used to transport building materials for the Great Western Railway. Trains eventually took over from boats, and by the 1950s, stretches of the canal were virtually derelict. That's when efforts to restore it began by the now Kennet and Avon Canal Trust. After several decades of fundraising and hard work, the Kennet and Avon was eventually reopened by Queen Elizabeth II in August 1990 and is still enjoyed by many today.

Wild about history?

Visit thameswater.co.uk/livewild to explore more of our heritage sites, including the materials held on our archive

