

READING

READING PASSAGE 1

You should spend about 20 minutes on **Questions 1–13**, which are based on Reading Passage 1 below.

Stepwells

A millennium ago, stepwells were fundamental to life in the driest parts of India. Richard Cox travelled to north-western India to document these spectacular monuments from a bygone era

During the sixth and seventh centuries, the inhabitants of the modern-day states of Gujarat and Rajasthan in north-western India developed a method of gaining access to clean, fresh groundwater during the dry season for drinking, bathing, watering animals and irrigation. However, the significance of this invention – the stepwell – goes beyond its utilitarian application.

Unique to this region, stepwells are often architecturally complex and vary widely in size and shape. During their heyday, they were places of gathering, of leisure and relaxation and of worship for villagers of all but the lowest classes. Most stepwells are found dotted round the desert areas of Gujarat (where they are called *vav*) and Rajasthan (where they are called *baori*), while a few also survive in Delhi. Some were located in or near villages as public spaces for the community; others were positioned beside roads as resting places for travellers.

As their name suggests, stepwells comprise a series of stone steps descending from ground level to the

water source (normally an underground aquifer) as it recedes following the rains. When the water level was high, the user needed only to descend a few steps to reach it; when it was low, several levels would have to be negotiated.

Some wells are vast, open craters with hundreds of steps paving each sloping side, often in tiers. Others are more elaborate, with long stepped passages leading to the water via several storeys. Built from stone and supported by pillars, they also included pavilions that sheltered visitors from the relentless heat. But perhaps the most impressive features are the intricate decorative sculptures that embellish many stepwells, showing activities from fighting and dancing to everyday acts such as women combing their hair or churning butter.

Down the centuries, thousands of wells were constructed throughout north-western India, but the majority have now fallen into disuse; many are derelict and dry, as groundwater has been diverted for industrial use and the wells no longer reach the water table. Their condition