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Ancient wells with tales to spill

Clive Fewins digs out the truth about Britain's sacred water sources

An "old witch" is said to have stood beside the ancient Skimmington Well at Curry Mallett in Somerset and dispensed cures. She is long gone, and the well's location is likewise lost, but the legend of both lives on. It is one of the hundreds of "holy wells" referred to in folklore as places where miraculous cures have taken place.

Easier to find, however, for those who take the trouble to seek it out, is the Whistlebitch Well near Utkinson in Cheshire. Four hundred years ago, the well's curative powers are said to have attracted 2,000 people daily. Now it lies in undergrowth, its exact location revealed by a broken-down wire fence. The well was rediscovered by Tristan Gray Hulse, one of a small number of enthusiasts whose main spare time activity over many years has been hunting down these ancient water sources and the legends associated with them.

There are an estimated two to three thousand holy well sites in England and Wales. Many of them are, like the Whistlebitch, just a murky pool, accessible only by foot. In the past 12 months dedicated "wellies" (as they are known) like Gray Hulse have made some remarkable finds.

In Totnes, Devon, wellies have found – on the site of a disappeared medieval hospital – an immersion pool fed by a holy well. At Malvern, Worcestershire, it is still possible to drink from several natural wells, two of which are believed to be medieval holy wells. Here local historians Cora Weaver and Bruce Osborne have just unearthed a major find after a 10-year search.

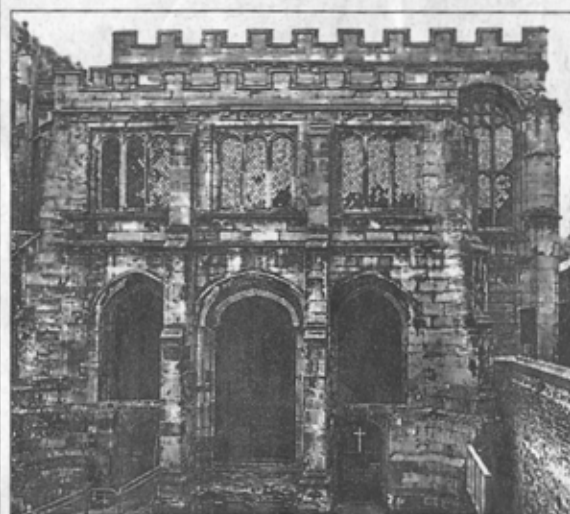
"It is a long-lost holy well dedicated to an obscure local saint, St Werstan, whose legend is recorded in the ancient windows of Malvern Priory," says Osborne. "It's only a hole in the hillside, but we have found some ruins beneath the surface, which tell us we have tracked down the site."

Some holy wells are signposted for all to see. At Dunsfold in Surrey, a wooden sign in the churchyard directs visitors a few hundred paces down a muddy track to a wooden structure that covers the well, from which water is drawn regularly for baptisms.

At places such as Hinderwell in North Yorkshire, and East Dereham in Norfolk, the wells are in a churchyard or adjoining one. At other well-known wells, such as St Anne's (also known as the Virtuous Well) at Trellech, Monmouth, and St Gwenfaen's at Rhoscolyn, Anglesey, the wells are walled, with steps leading down.

But today, drinking from any of the above-listed sources is not recommended. For those who do partake, any "cure" they receive is likely to come later, at the hands of their GP. That's unless you visit St Winefride's Well at Holywell, North Wales. There, an estimated 30,000 visitors a year visit the "Lourdes of Wales" and drink the water free of charge, seven days a week. In addition, more than 5,000 bottles of the water are purchased and taken away annually.

Author Janet Bord has just published *Cures and Curses* (Heart of



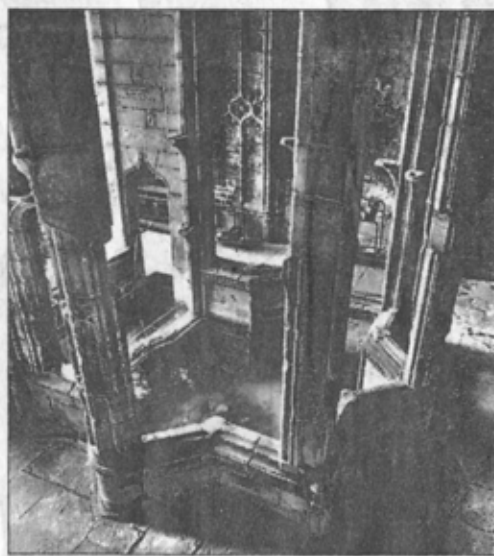
Sunken treasures:
St Anne's Well,
Trellech (above);
St Gwenfaen's,
Anglesey (right);
and St Winefride's,
Holywell (left
and below)



Albion, £14.95), an alphabetical introduction to holy wells. She is currently involved in the mammoth task of producing a guide to all those that can still be identified today.

"There is no national record of all the sites and the folklore associated with them," says Bord. "So those of us who are constantly working on holy wells are grateful to local groups, several of which have made some splendid discoveries. More work needs to be done for the holy wells and sacred springs throughout Britain. They must be sought out and protected, before it is too late and many of them are lost."

For more information on holy wells, see www.holywells.com. For a list of "wellies" operating in different parts of the country, try www.jiscmail.ac.uk or email Janet Bord at janet.bord@forteanpix.demon.co.uk.



SPIRITUAL DEPTH

What differentiates a holy well from an ordinary village well where people would draw water for domestic use?

❖ A holy well contains references to saints or other holy persons in its history and folklore.
❖ It also has a reputation for healing gained over many generations.
❖ The well at Holywell, North Wales is easily the most visited holy well in Britain, precisely

because it combines all of these qualities.

❖ The legend of St Winefride, to whom the well is dedicated, says she was attacked and beheaded after refusing the advances of a would-be lover. A miraculous fountain immediately gushed from the ground where her head fell. Word spread, and the lame and sick flocked to the spring in an attempt to be restored to health. Sick people still come in search of a cure.