

Pilgrims once sought them for their curative powers and today we're more secular but still as curious, **Clive Fewins** discovers

Well acquainted with curing properties

THE 'OLD witch' who was said to have stood beside the ancient Skimmington Well at Curry Mallett in Somerset and dispensed cures has long since gone, but the legend of the long-lost well lives on. It is one of the hundreds of 'holy wells' that are referred to in folklore as places where miraculous cures have taken place but have vanished in the mists of time.

However, if you take the trouble to find the Whistlebitch Well near Utkinton, Cheshire, you stand a better chance of succeeding. The well – 400 years ago its curative powers are said to have attracted 2,000 people daily – lies in undergrowth, its exact location revealed by a broken-down wire fence. The well, now a murky pool accessible only on foot, was rediscovered by a small band of enthusiasts a few years ago.

It is estimated there are two to three thousand holy well sites in England and Wales – many lost to sight and buried – that are known only to enthusiasts and to people in the immediate area.

In Malvern, Worcestershire, where it is still possible to drink from several of the wells, two of which are believed to be medieval holy wells, determined well hunters, Cora Weaver and Bruce Os-



Dedicated to the sixth-century Irish missionary – as is the nearby church – St Nectan's well at Welcombe, North Devon

borne, have just come up with a major find after a ten-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," Bruce Osborne said. "It is only a hole in the hillside just above Malvern Priory church, but we have found some ruins beneath the surface and

are certain we have tracked down the site. We think it is probably the original site of the church.”

In Totnes, Devon, there has been another exciting recent discovery. A group of enthusiasts have uncovered an immersion pool fed by a holy well on the site of a long-disappeared medieval hospital. It lies close to the town’s historic Leechwell, a large stone-walled enclosure with three water spouts, which flow into separate stone troughs.

All this is good news according to author Janet Bord. Last year saw the publication of her second book on holy wells – *Cures and Curses – an alphabetical introduction to the holy well lore of the British Isles and Ireland*. She is now completing her third – a guide book to all the holy wells in England, Wales and Scotland that can still be identified today.

“Currently there is no national record

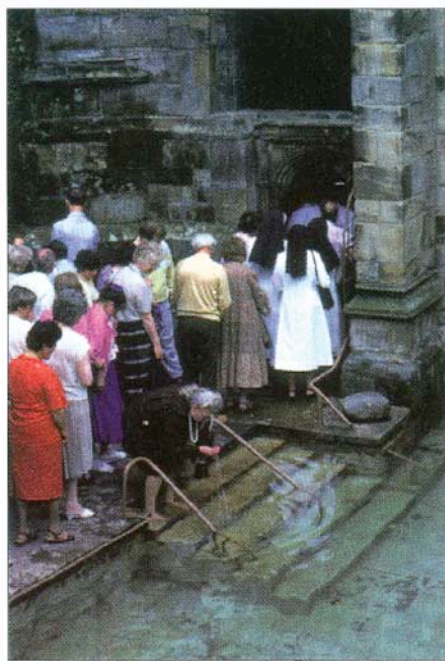
of all the holy well sites and the folklore associated with them,” Janet said. “So those of us who are constantly working on holy wells are grateful to local groups, several of which have made some splendid discoveries.

“There is a genuine fear of loss, but there is also cause for optimism because with the increasing interest in local history of all sorts there are more and more enthusiasts out in the field.”

Terry Faull, whose book on the ancient and holy wells of Devon was published in 2004, says: “Many holy wells have been visited over the centuries by people who believed that at this place they might find healing, forgiveness or perhaps a change of fortune. Such a journey into the deep countryside where many of our holy wells wait to be rediscovered is our chance to reconnect with the world of nature and the ancient mysteries of renewal.”

But how do you know when a water source is a holy well, especially when it is just a contained spring in a field? “The problem lies in differentiating a holy well from an ordinary village well, where people would draw water for domestic use,” Janet says.

“There are several aspects to defining a holy well. One is relating it to its location in a sacred landscape. A number of these have been recorded in Ireland, where every major pilgrimage site could be classed as one. In Britain probably the best known example is the area around St Non’s Well at St David’s in Pembrokeshire. Here the ruins of the tiny chapel are



Holy water ...the ‘Lourdes of Wales’, St Winefride’s at Holywell, North Wales, attracts thousands yearly. Right, St Withburga’s at East Dereham in Norfolk

part of a sacred landscape on an evocative cliff-top location. "Another key to a holy well is the involvement of saints or other holy persons in its history and folklore and a third is if the well has a healing reputation.

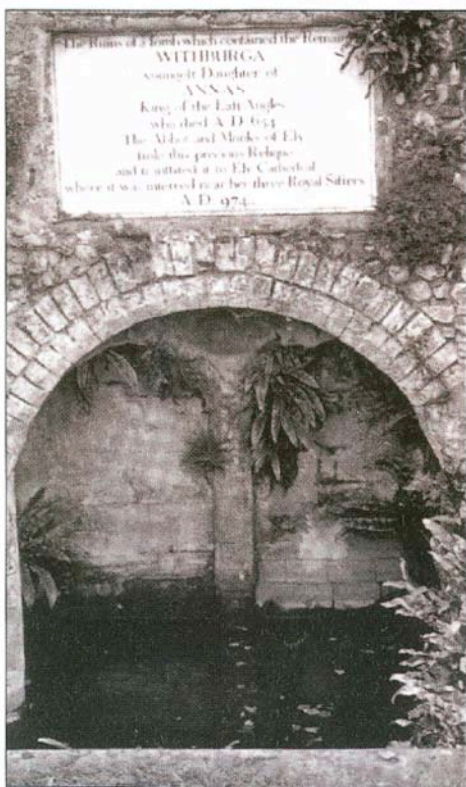
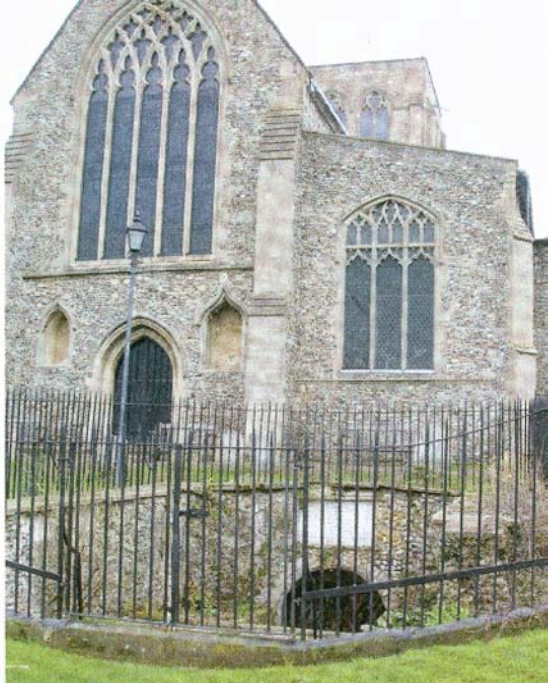
It has long been thought that many churches stand on what were originally pagan sites, where water worship formed a large part of the religion before Christianity took over and transformed these rituals into acceptable Christian practice. Some good examples of holy wells close to or even inside churches exist to this day. They include Marden in Herefordshire and St Trillo's chapel, on the seafront below the promenade at Rhos-on-Sea in North Wales.

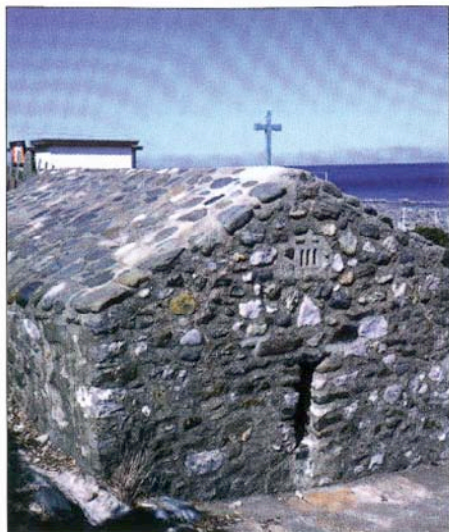
Other well-known ones are at St Hilda's, Hinderwell, in North Yorkshire and St Withburga's well in the churchyard at East Dereham, Norfolk.

In medieval times shrines were developed at some popular holy wells as places of healing. These places were generally associated with the cults of various saints. A specific saint was revered, often focusing on the relic of a saint. Sometimes, according to legend, these holy wells came into existence as a result of a saint's violent death.

The most famous example is St Winefride's well at Holywell, North Wales. The legend states that St Winefride, a nun of noble blood, was attacked and decapitated after refusing the advances of a violent would-be lover. A miraculous fountain immediately gushed from the ground where her head had fallen. Word got around, and people with many forms of handicap flocked to the spring in an attempt to be restored to health.

At Holywell pilgrims in search of a cure,





Six-seater ...Britain's smallest chapel – St Trillo on the seafront at Rhos-on-Sea, North Wales – has a natural spring under the altar

and also many tourists, are welcome to drink the water for free. The site attracts some 30,000 visitors a year and some 5,000 bottles of the water are purchased and taken away annually. The Roman Catholic church nowadays is very reluctant to claim cures, but the road signs as you approach proclaim Holywell as 'The Lourdes of Wales'.

It is generally presumed that most of these well-shrines disappeared with the Reformation, but Holywell managed to survive that enormous upheaval.

Others believe in the power of these holy wells outside the Christian faith. Today it is very common to visit a holy well and see votive offerings in the form of candles, pins, rags, coins, nails, fish-

hooks and an assortment of other items. "They signify a contract with whatever supernatural force is believed to be in control, and somehow stir 'religious' feelings in some indefinable sense," Janet Bord explains. "Whatever people may or may not believe, many display some form of belief in a 'Life Force' when they visit these ancient places."

Writer, broadcaster and theologian Martin Palmer has a slightly different take on holy wells: "They reflect our changing understanding of what is sacred. Originally they were mystical places of healing but all that went out of the door with the Reformation. Then they were regarded as medically beneficial – iron-rich springs and all that. Now we don't know what to make of them. In my view they are fascinating examples of how we have screwed up the environment – so many of them are polluted.

"So my suggestion is: uncover the ones you come across and sniff them. Then start thinking about how we can restore the damage. And of course apart from all this, hunting out holy wells takes you to the most fantastic parts of the British Isles and introduces you to the most fabulous stories." ■

For contact details of holy well enthusiasts operating in different parts of the country try www.jiscmail.ac.uk or email Janet Bord at janet.bord@forteanpix.demon.co.uk.

Cures and Curses – an Alphabetical introduction to the holy well lore of the British Isles and Ireland (Heart of Albion £14.95). At the back there are photographs and detailed descriptions of twenty-five readily-visitable holy wells in England and Wales.

Secrets of the Hidden Source – in search of Devon's ancient and holy wells: Halsgrove £14.95