

Roche Holy Well, Cornwall

Consolidation work and archaeological recording



Historic Environment Service (Projects)

Cornwall County Council

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Consolidation work and archaeological recording

Dick Cole BA

With a contribution from Eric Berry

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Historic Environment Service, Environment and Heritage,
Cornwall County Council
Kennall Building, Old County Hall, Station Road, Truro, Cornwall, TR1 3AY
tel (01872) 323603 fax (01872) 323811 E-mail hes@cornwall.gov.uk
www.cornwall.gov.uk

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Within the Historic Environment Service, the fieldwork and conservation works were co-ordinated by Dick Cole. Sean Taylor carried out the EDM survey of the valley and the project was managed by Ann Preston Jones.

The views and recommendations expressed in this report are those of the Historic Environment Service projects team and are presented in good faith on the basis of professional judgement and on information currently available.

Cover illustration

Images of Roche Holy Well in the 19th and early 20th centuries.

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Abbreviations

HER	Cornwall and the Isles of Scilly Historic Environment Record
HES	Historic Environment Service, Cornwall County Council
NGR	National Grid Reference
OS	Ordnance Survey
PRN	Primary Record Number in Cornwall HER

1 Summary

In September and October 2006, conservation works were carried out on Roche Holy Well, due to concerns that the well house structure and associated walling were in an unstable condition.

Volunteers from the St Austell Old Cornwall Society cleared vegetation from around the monument and cleared silt in an attempt to improve access to the site. Masons from Darrock and Brown then stabilised the Holy Well structure and rebuilt the walls which flanked its arched opening.

As part of the project, Historic Buildings Consultant Eric Berry visited the site. He concluded that although the main stonework elements are of Tudor date, they come from another building and were only erected here in the 18th century. A survey of the valley bottom around the well was also produced.

2 Introduction

2.1 Project background

Roche Holy Well lies at the bottom of a small valley near Victoria, Roche, on the western side of the stream which divides the parishes of Roche and Withiel (Fig. 1). Access to the well is down a tree-shaded set of concreted steps (a public right of way) from Holywell Farm. Traditionally a tranquil and beautiful place, the recent construction of the new A30 dual-carriageway, which was taking place during the time of this project, has had a major negative impact on the overall setting of the monument.

A granite-arched holy well, it is located at SW 9850 6173. It is a Scheduled Monument (Cornwall no. 636) and is also recorded in the Cornwall and Isles of Scilly Historic Environment Record (PRN 21515). The well house structure comprises a substantial 1.6 metre high arch, set over a square granite-lined basin which is walled on three sides. For many years, the stones forming the arch had been disjointed at the apex, partly due to the growth of trees in the mound within which the well was set. The roots had also pushed out the stone facing which flanks both sides of the well frontage.

Concern about the general condition of the Holy Well had been raised as early as the 1930s, when a specification for its restoration was produced by an architect working on behalf of St Austell Old Cornwall Society. More recently, the Old Cornwall Society revived the idea of carrying out restoration work. Following a visit, they reported to the English Heritage Field Monument Warden that its condition appeared to have deteriorated significantly, highlighting movement in the arch-stones as a particular worry because of the potential threat to any visitors to the monument. The condition of the monument was assessed by English Heritage's Structural Engineer, Keith Weston, who confirmed the need for fairly urgent action.

Repair work to the well and the associated walling was undertaken in September and October 2006, while other works such as vegetation clearance and attempts to improve the access track to the monument had been carried out in the preceding summer.

2.2 Condition of the monument

The following assessment of the stability of the monument was produced by Keith Weston following an inspection in October 2004. His views on the condition of the structure are summarised as follows:

“The stones forming the arch have moved and there is concern about the overall stability of the arch ... the arch is formed of a single stone on the left side and two stones on the right. In addition to vertical movement of the stones, the left hand stone has also rotated in plan. There now appears to be minimal contact between the stones at the apex of the arch ... further movement of the arch is possible which is likely to result in the arch stones falling to the ground.

He also identified a number of other related problems:

- The cement mortaring in the back of the well was cracked, unsightly and in need of replacement.
- The roots of trees growing in the bank to either side of the well were threatening both the Holy Well and the facing of the bank, by pushing stones out of position.
- The ground surrounding the well was extremely boggy, making access difficult.

- Woodland surrounding the site was unmanaged and in places, fallen branches lay across the path to the site.

3 Roche Holy Well

3.1 Local traditions

Roche Holy Well was well known as a cure for all kinds of diseases. J. T. Blight writing in 1858, noted that:

“The spring is still in repute, and is frequented by the peasantry, before sunrise, on holy Thursday and the two following Thursdays; the blessing of the tutelary Saint is bespoken by the offering of pins, sometimes bent before being thrown into the water”

(Blight 1872, 86; second edition).

Writing some 35 years later, M. and L. Quiller-Couch reworked much of Blight’s text, adding some further detail.

“It retains its repute, and is resorted to on Holy Thursday and the two following Thursdays, before sunrise, for the cure of eye diseases, in children chiefly, but not exclusively, and, the neighbours tell me, with great benefit. The favour of the tutelary saint is first bespoken by the offering of a pin, sometimes bent before being thrown into the water.”

(Quiller-Couch 1894, 196).

A writer from the mid 20th century, Mr Creswell Payne, meanwhile noted that:

“Long ago, it is averred that the country folk hung strips of red flannel and other brightly-coloured stuffs on bramble, bush or briar about the well, seeking thus to propitiate the spirit of the waters for the granting of cures or good fortune. None of the old inhabitants questioned in the writer’s lifetime have ever remembered seeing such decorations, but several had heard from an older generation that the custom once prevailed.”

(Creswell Payne nd, 16).

3.2 History of the site

The post-medieval settlement at ‘Holywell’ is first recorded on the 1808 Ordnance Survey drawings and the subsequent 1813 one inch map (Fig. 2), while the well itself is first mentioned in 1814 by Lysons (1814, 278). The early mapping shows that in 1808, the holding was edged to the south and west by open moorland, while to the east lay the steep-sided valley and stream where the actual well is positioned.

There is also a well-known local tradition that there had previously been a chapel (Cornwall and Scilly Historic Environment Record PRN 21514) in the general vicinity of the well, which may have provided some of the stonework for its construction. This is first noted by D. and S. Lysons, who stated that:

“There was a chapel, with a cemetery, at Holywell, near Tremodret”

(D. and S. Lysons 1814, 278).

An illustration by M and L Quiller-Couch from 1894 shows that in the late 19th century the well house stood three courses of stone high, with the roof area open to the sky (Fig. 6). In the accompanying text in their publication, they also make reference to the chapel.

“It is much ruined now; but the fabric having been massively built of large blocks of granite originally, and the well still ministering to the daily needs, and occasionally helping the sickness, of neighbouring folk, it has fairly stood the wear and tear of time, and the hand of desecrating man. Stories are told in books of it once having had a granite figure of a saint standing on its roof, of its having been thrown down and carried off; of a chapel standing near the well about the latter part of the last [18th] century, and of its font being removed by a mason, who used it for making mortar or limewash in”

(Quiller-Couch 1994, 195).

There is however no material evidence to confirm this or to suggest the actual location of the structure.

3.3 Architectural fabric of the Holy Well

Eric Berry

A brief site visit was carried out on 10th October 2006 to the Holy Well at Roche, which enabled a rapid inspection of the architectural features, the context of these features and the relationship of the construction of the well with its immediate landscape and topography.

The first impression was of an important doorway and associated structural masonry apparently complete and unaltered. However, closer inspection revealed that though there is a similarity in the moulding of the discrete architectural dressed granite elements of the doorway feature, only two of them provide an exact design or measurement match either with adjacent masonry or anywhere else in the monument. Therefore the principal doorway feature of the building appears to be constructed of salvaged architectural fragments. These roll-moulded dressed granite fragments originate probably from a single building that must have had similar architectural detail in different parts of it but now re-assembled to give the impression of a complete design feature.

The whole doorway is made from six individual dressed stones: two arch-stones standing on two jamb-stones and in turn standing on plinth stones. The left-hand plinth stone has a chamfered top and is from a similar origin to the plinth stone to its left. The plinth stone right of the doorway has remnant roll moulding and is apparently a re-used jamb-stone. The jamb-stones beneath the arch have similar section and may have come from the same doorway feature originally but not necessarily in their present relationship. Each arch-stone has a different moulding sequence but both have a roll moulding at the front. The left-hand arch-stone has an extra rebate and must have belonged to a feature with deeper moulded section. Each arch-stone is inverted, belonging originally to a four-centred arch with the smaller radius centres at the bottom of the arch. Effectively the bottom of each of the arch-stones would originally have formed the apex of a four-centred arch and the top of each stone would have been the springing of the arch. Behind the arch the vault that covers the well has two more arch-stones set in a similar way to those at the front but with only the plain underside visible.

The four-centred arched form and the type of moulding places these features clearly in the Tudor period, either late 15th century or early-mid 16th century. Little dressed granite is used in Cornwall before this date range, the medieval masons preferring to work architectural features from softer freestone. The increasing use of dressed granite during the Tudor period coincides with deeper excavation (initially through rab subsoil with embedded loose granite boulders) for mining tin and copper and the improved stone-cutting techniques that accompanied these industries.

There is not sufficient survival of features in the monument to determine whether the stones originate from an ecclesiastical building, a public building or a domestic building. However, the chapel that is said to have stood near here is one possible source; or even the chapel on Roche Rock.

Dressed stones that surround the sump of the well are of different height at the sides to the taller monolith that forms the base of the back wall. The threshold has a runnel cut out of it for overflow of excess water. All these stones may also be re-used but may have come from a different source. The interior back wall of the well has considerable irregularity in its construction and (with some stretch of the imagination) there may be evidence for a blocked former statue or lamp niche of the kind that exists in a number of other holy wells.

In its present form with arch stones inverted to give the impression of a more pointed (and in appearance more Gothic) arch the building is likely to date from the late 18th century when Picturesque Gothic was the prevailing fashion for garden landscape buildings. Since then the building has clearly been the subject of further 'restoration' in the not too distant past. There are many vertically-set stones and other anomalies uncharacteristic of traditional stonework construction that is strong evidence for partial or near-total reconstruction by unskilled masons.

A proposal that the building is an assemblage of architectural fragments from another building is not an unexpected finding. This seems to be the case with many other holy wells. What makes the Holy Well at Roche unusual and special is the unusual design of the architectural fragments that have been used. The result of this is a very picturesque monument that evokes a strong sense of history.

Belief in healing properties of water from holy wells was obviously important to medieval and post-medieval Christianity but belief in the healing properties of spring water from some hillside sites may well have pagan origins. Certainly, water from an underground source was unlikely to be contaminated and therefore safer to drink than stream or river water.

4 Archaeological survey

Following the vegetation clearance but in advance of the conservation work, archaeological recording was carried out in the small valley. The front elevation of the well structure was drawn for record purposes and a survey of the valley around the well was produced in order to place the well within its immediate landscape (Fig. 16).

This survey showed that the valley is between 25-35m in width and edged by pasture fields, with a watercourse, about 3.5m wide, running through the centre of it. The eastern side of the valley is delineated by an eroded bank, which dips down between 1.0m-2.0m to uneven ground along the stream. Above the bank, the remains of a stone-faced bank may be noted. The western side is even more pronounced standing to a height of between 3.0m-4.0m immediately to the west of the Holy Well itself. In one area, there is an eroded hollow which extends into the bank and there is a further irregular sloping deposit of material to the front of main valley side.

The actual Holy Well lies within an earthen mound, measuring approximately 7.5m by 2.5m, which slopes down to the wet ground to the rear of the structure. No other structural features were noted in association with the mound.

To its north, the survey recorded a pathway climbing down from one of the fields of Holywell Farm to the well. Clearly cut into the side of the valley, the sloping bank on its western side was 1.0m high while to the east the ground dipped down 2.0m. Two further

slight dips were also recorded along the very edge of the pathway. Even though this feature appears to have all the attributes of a pathway, it corresponds to the line of a small stream on the 1880 and 1907 OS Maps (see Fig. 3 and 4).

To the immediate west of the Holy Well, the truncated remains of a field boundary were recorded, running approximately parallel with the stream. An earthen bank, still largely covered with vegetation at the time of the survey, it had a maximum height of 0.5m. A number of sections of the bank were missing and this is particularly so in the area alongside the well and where the spring water would have escaped to the water course.

To the east of this boundary there is a slight gully, which extends about 5.0m before meeting the stream, and a little further to the south there are two small gullies, flanked by a number of raised mounds of soil, part of which is the fragmented remains of the field boundary. It is likely that these gullies have either been created by animals accessing the stream or manufactured to allow rainwater to drain from the surrounding land into the stream.

At the base of the pathway down to the valley, there are two small granite uprights. The western one of these is positioned at the immediate base of the path. It is 1.2m high and measures 0.25m by 0.12m. The second stone was positioned close to the area of raised soil and measured 0.3m by 0.12m, standing to a height of 0.7m. This evidence obviously points to there having been a formal entry point into the well area.

The survey found no evidence of footings or a flat area where there might have been a chapel in the general area of the Holy Well. Given Eric Berry's suggestion that the well structure reuses Tudor stonework but is stylistically of 18th century date, it would have been easy to transport these pieces stonework to the valley at that time and there is no reason to assume that such a building would have originally been positioned in the valley bottom.

5 Conservation and management works

5.1 Objectives of conservation and management work

The objectives of the works were to

- Carry out the necessary repair work to the well structure
- Improve access by drainage and silt clearance
- Improve access to the well by signing.
- Improve the safety of the site by repairing the unstable arch, carrying out drainage of the surroundings, removing any dead wood or overhanging branches

5.2 The well

Keith Weston's recommendations for the well's arch were as follows:

“The stability of the arch could be improved by packing mortar into the joints but the improvement would be minimal and is unlikely to significantly improve the long-term stability.....In my view it would be better to take down the stones and rebuild them in their correct position. Any future movement could be controlled by introducing stainless steel dowels (12mm diameter) connecting the base of the arch stones to the supporting stones. The joints should also be mortared to ensure full contact between the connecting surfaces of the stones.

“It is also advisable to remove the vegetation around the monument, and cut down the nearby tree on the right-hand side, to prevent possible future damage.

Mr Weston made the following recommendations:

- Any trees or woody growth in the bank should be cut down and their roots treated with a weed killer and left to rot in situ or, by agreement with the archaeologist on site, to be dug out and completely removed.
- Any stones in the face of the bank which have been dislodged by root growth are to be taken down and rebuilt, in exactly the same positions.
- The bank should be re-turfed after rebuilding and removal of trees.

5.3 The conservation and management work

The volunteers from the St Austell Old Cornwall Society visited the site on three separate occasions (Fig. 11). On the first two visits, they removed the sycamore tree that was growing out of the Holy Well structure and also a number of limbs from trees in the general area of the valley in order to improve the visibility of the monument. On their third visit, in the presence of an archaeologist, they excavated out the bank immediately to the rear of the front walls flanking the well and around the well itself, in order to make it easier for the masons to carry out the conservation work. To the south, it proved easy work to remove a large number of roots and allow the wall to be pushed back and consolidated. However, to the north, the roots of the removed sycamore tree were quite extensive and difficult to remove, though the volunteers removed as much as they could.

Clearance of soil in front of the walling also demonstrated that the lowest course of stonework, previously not visible and not shifted by root action, was chamfered (Figs. 14 and 15). In front of this there was a flat ground surface which dips down to the area in front of the well through which the water flowed out through the well basin.

At this point, Darrock and Brown carried out the consolidation of the well house structure in line with the methodology proposed by Keith Weston (Figs. 12 and 13). The cement pointing that had been added to the monument in past years was removed, the arch was stabilised with stainless steel dowels inserted between the arch-stones to the supporting stones and lime mortar packed into joints to further improve the long-term stability of the structure. The cement pointing in the rear wall of the well was also removed and redone with a lime mortar. Fragments of concrete block in this walling, which had clearly been reconfigured in the recent past, was removed and replaced with other local stone. Further stone was used to pack in around the well top, prior to the addition of soil.

One problem encountered following works was that the water from the spring to the rear was no longer feeding through into the well. It was extremely important that this was resolved as the well continues to supply drinking water to the residents of Holywell Farm via an external pump. The rear of the structure's mound had to be excavated away and a new channel for the water found. This was successfully done following the conservation works, though the level of water is now at a lower level than previously.

In all these excavations, no archaeological evidence was found to confirm or disprove Eric Berry's conclusion that the well was constructed in the 18th century.

5.4 Improvement of access to the well

At the start of the project it was noted that the extreme muddiness on the track to the well made access to the monument difficult. It was considered that this was partly due to seepage of water from the springs to the rear of the well, mixing with branches, leaf litter

and silt. In fact, as well as feeding the actual well, the water rising to the rear of the structure also flowed to both sides of it.

It was also noted that rainwater running down the concreted path that leads from the small-holding to the valley also contributed to making the area rather wet.

In order to help this general area to dry up, the volunteers from the St Austell Old Cornwall Society used lengths of wood and soil to build up the ground to the south of the well so that the water rising to the rear would feed the well, with the excess supply running around the northern edge of the structure, before entering into the nearby river. A considerable quantity of silt was removed from in front of the well. Overall, the improvement from the works has been quite limited and the area continues to be quite boggy.

The proposal to improve signage was not done due to the modifications to the road network which was being carried out in this area at the time of the conservation work.

6 Recommendations

Roche Holy Well was visited again in August 2007 (Figs. 14 and 15) and it was noted that the vegetation around the well had grown back remarkably well and the character of the monument and its immediate environs was largely that as prior to the conservation works taking place. To the north of the arched opening, there is considerable fresh growth of sycamore.

It is recommended that a proactive management regime is established and this should be arranged through the English Heritage Field Monument Warden in association with the tenants at Holywell Farm and could involve volunteers from bodies such as the St Austell Old Cornwall Society.

Management work should include:

- Control of sycamore regrowth through annual cutting or spraying with herbicide.
- Clearance of silt from pathways once a year.
- Control of brambles by cutting and spraying on the mound at least twice a year in order to encourage a vegetation cover of grass and fern.

7 References

7.1 Primary sources

Ordnance Survey, c1813. *1 Inch Map* First Edition

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Ordnance Survey, c1907. *25 Inch Map* Second Edition (licenced digital copy at HES)

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7.2 Publications

Blight, J T, 1872. *Ancient Crosses and Other Antiquities in the East of Cornwall*, London

Creswell Payne, H M, nd. *The Story of the Parish of Roche*, Newquay

Meyrick, J, 1982. *A Pilgrim's Guide to the Holy Wells of Cornwall*,

Quiller-Couch, M and L, 1894. *Ancient and Holy Wells of Cornwall*, London

8 Project archive

The HES project number is **2005048**.

The project's documentary, photographic and drawn archive is housed at the offices of the Historic Environment Service, Cornwall County Council, Kennall Building, Old County Hall, Station Road, Truro, TR1 3AY. The contents of this archive are as listed below:

1. A project file containing site records and notes, project correspondence and administration.
2. Field plans and copies of historic maps stored in an A2-size plastic envelope (GRE 616).
3. Electronic drawings stored in the directory ..\CAD ARCHIVE\SITES Q-T/ROCHE HOLY WELL
4. Digital photographs stored in the directory ..\IMAGES\HES IMAGES\SITES R\ROCHE\ROCHE HOLY WELL
5. This report held in digital form as: G:\CAU\HE PROJECTS\SITES\SITES R\ROCHE HOLY WELL 2005\ROCHE HOLY WELL REPORT 200504810.DOC

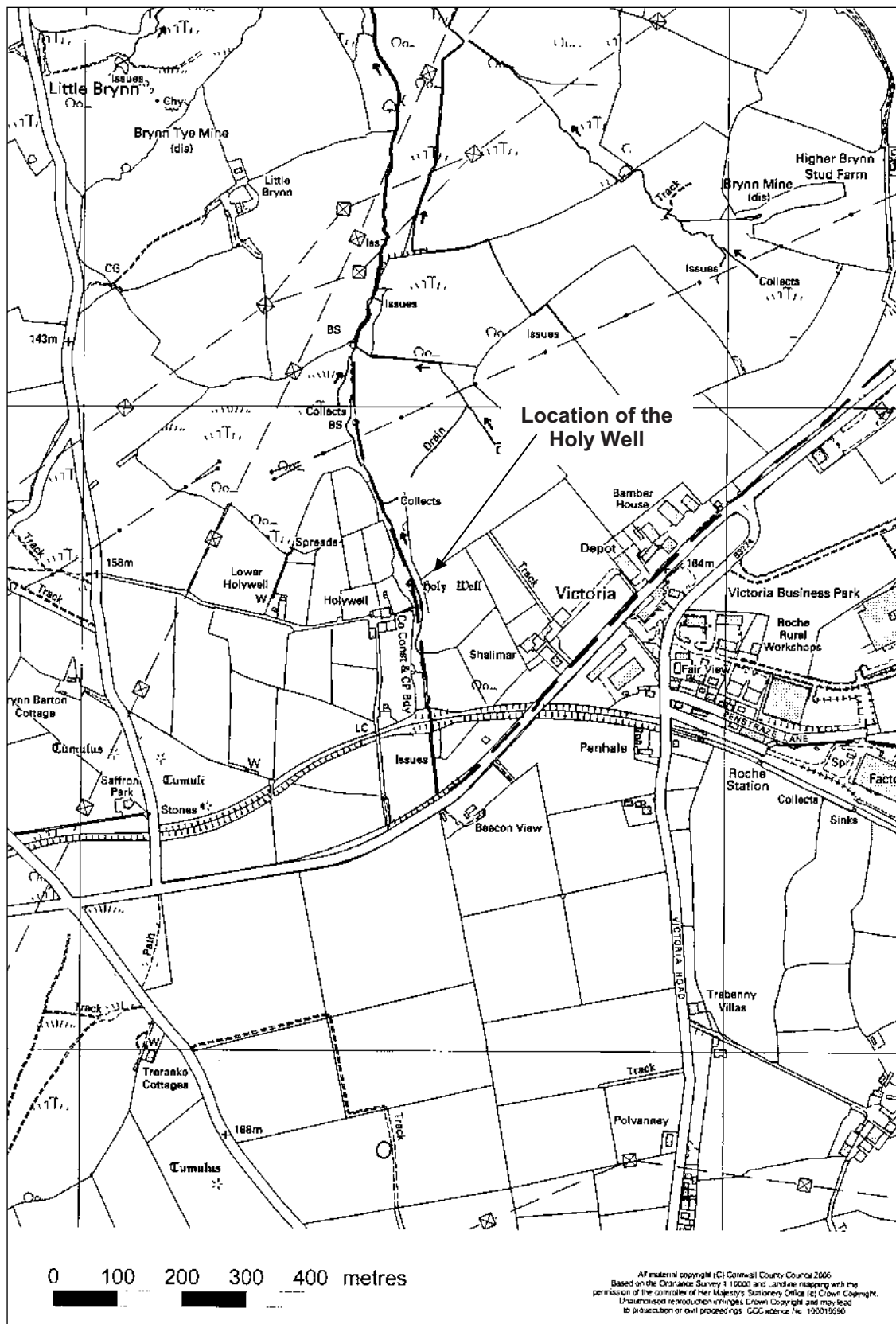


Fig. 1 Location map. The new A30 dual carriageway is not shown.

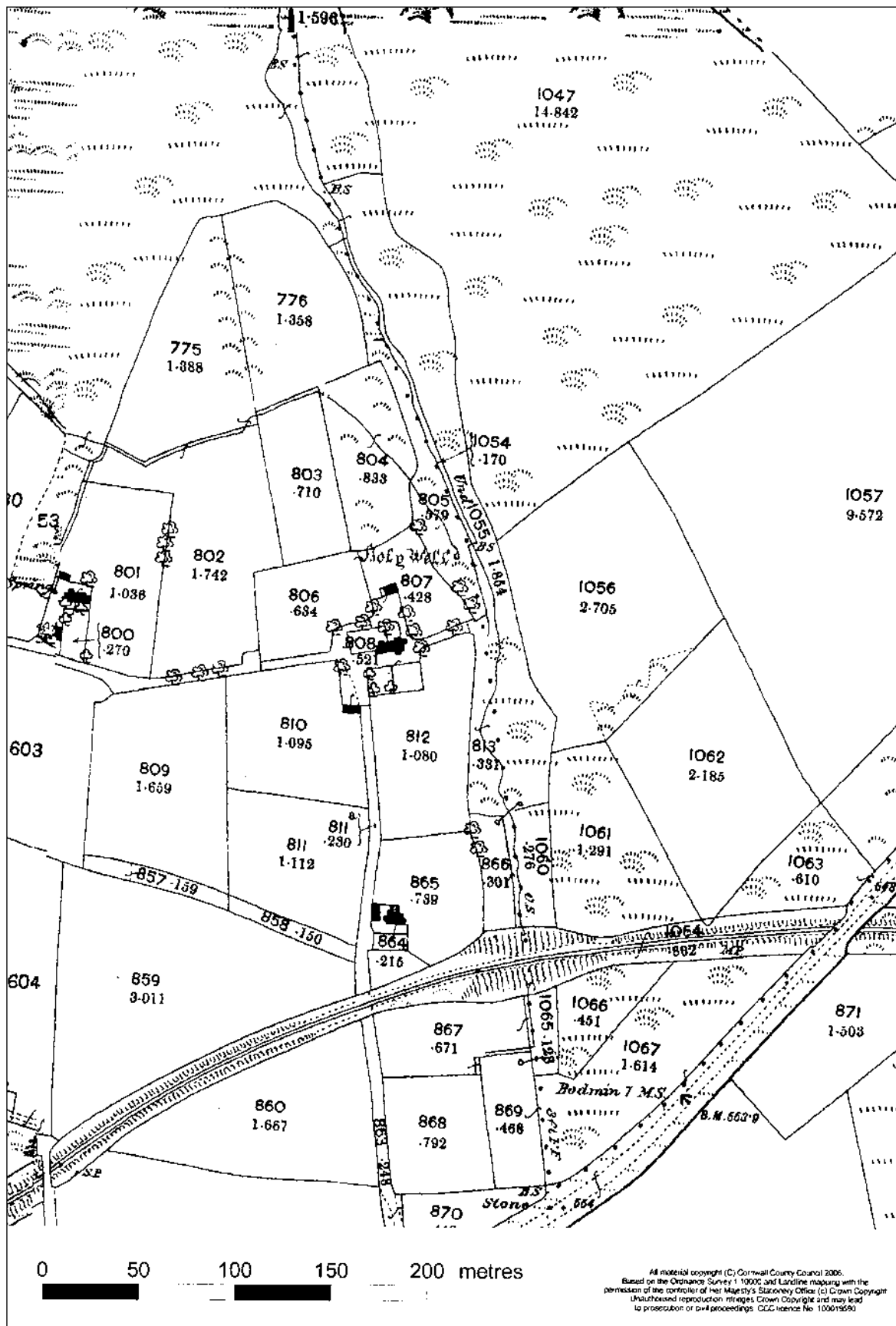
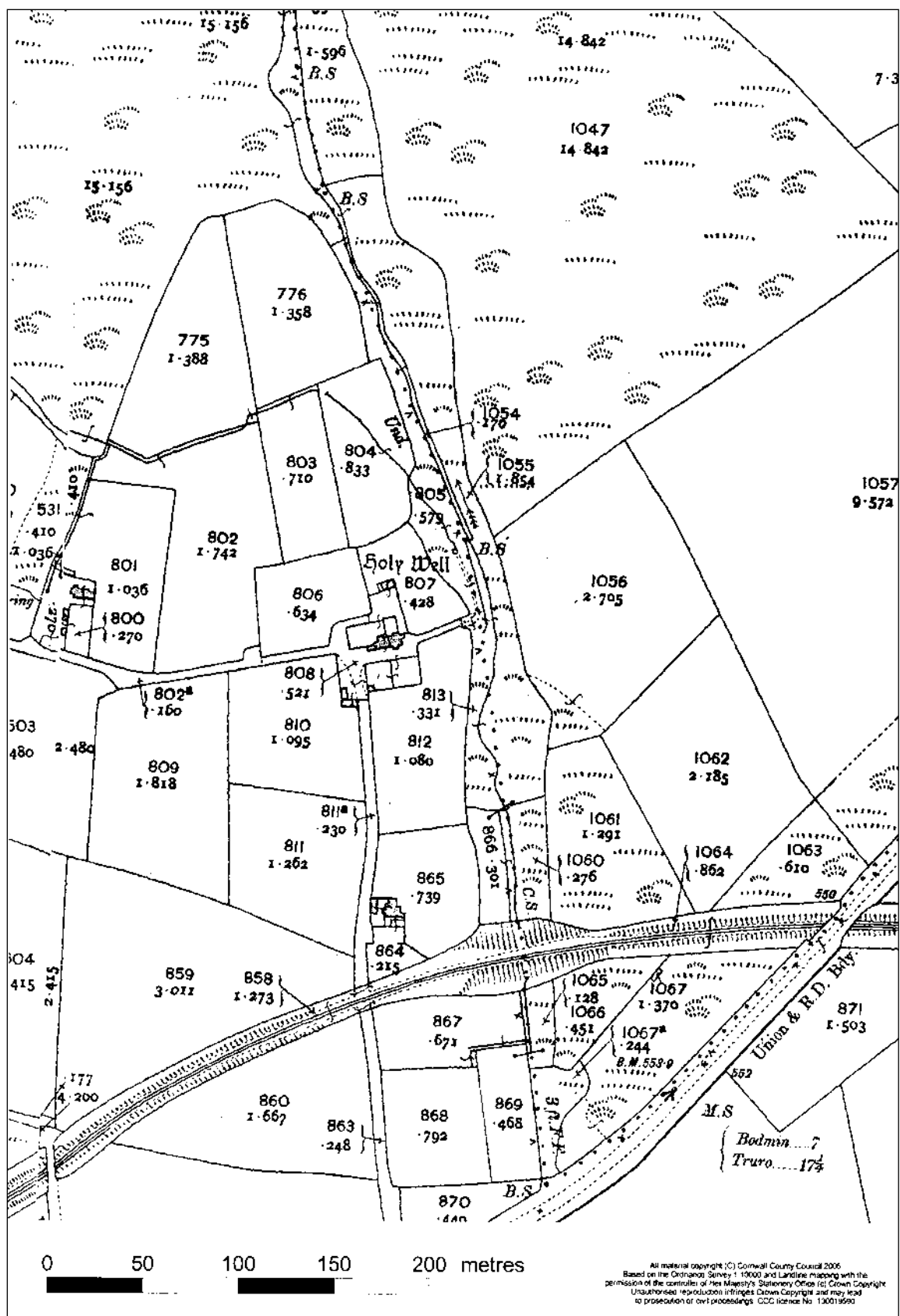
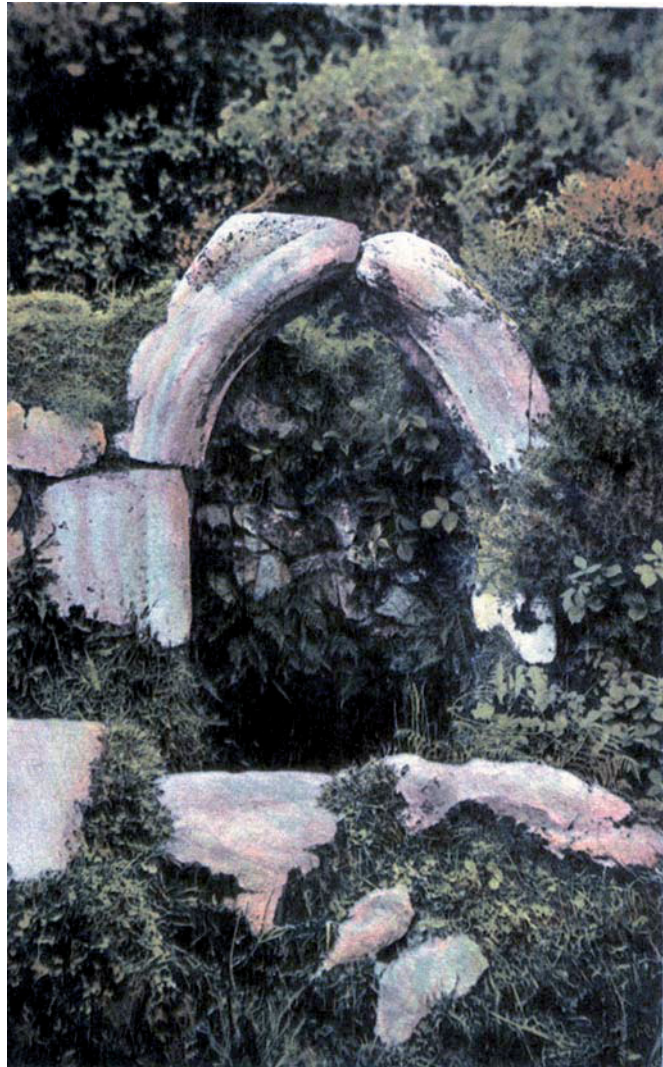
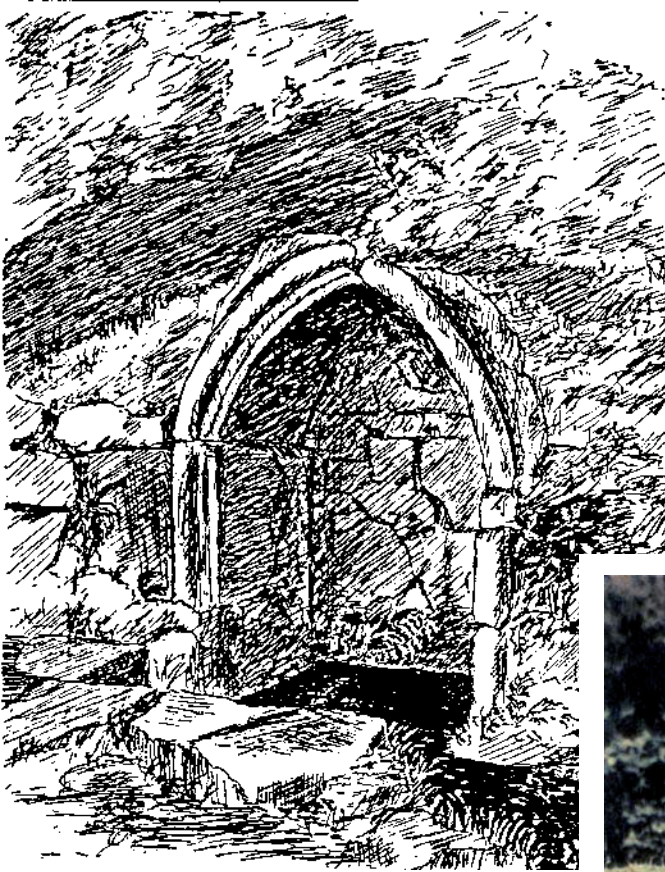


Fig. 3 The site of the Holy Well in 1880 (from OS Map).





Figs. 5 and 6 Roche Holy Well drawn by Blight in 1858 and Quiller-Couch in 1894.



Figs. 7 and 8

Roche Holy Well drawn by H. M. Cresswell Payne (n.d. facing p.15) and an undated postcard.



Figs. 9 and 10 The stones forming the arch showing how they have shifted and one of the arch-stones standing on a decorated jamb-stone.



Figs. 11 and 12 Volunteers from St Austell Old Cornwall Society preparing the site for the conservation work and staff from Darrock and Brown repointing of the front walling.



Figs. 13

The repointing of the interior of the Holy Well.



Figs. 14 and 15 Roche Holy Well pictured in August 2007.

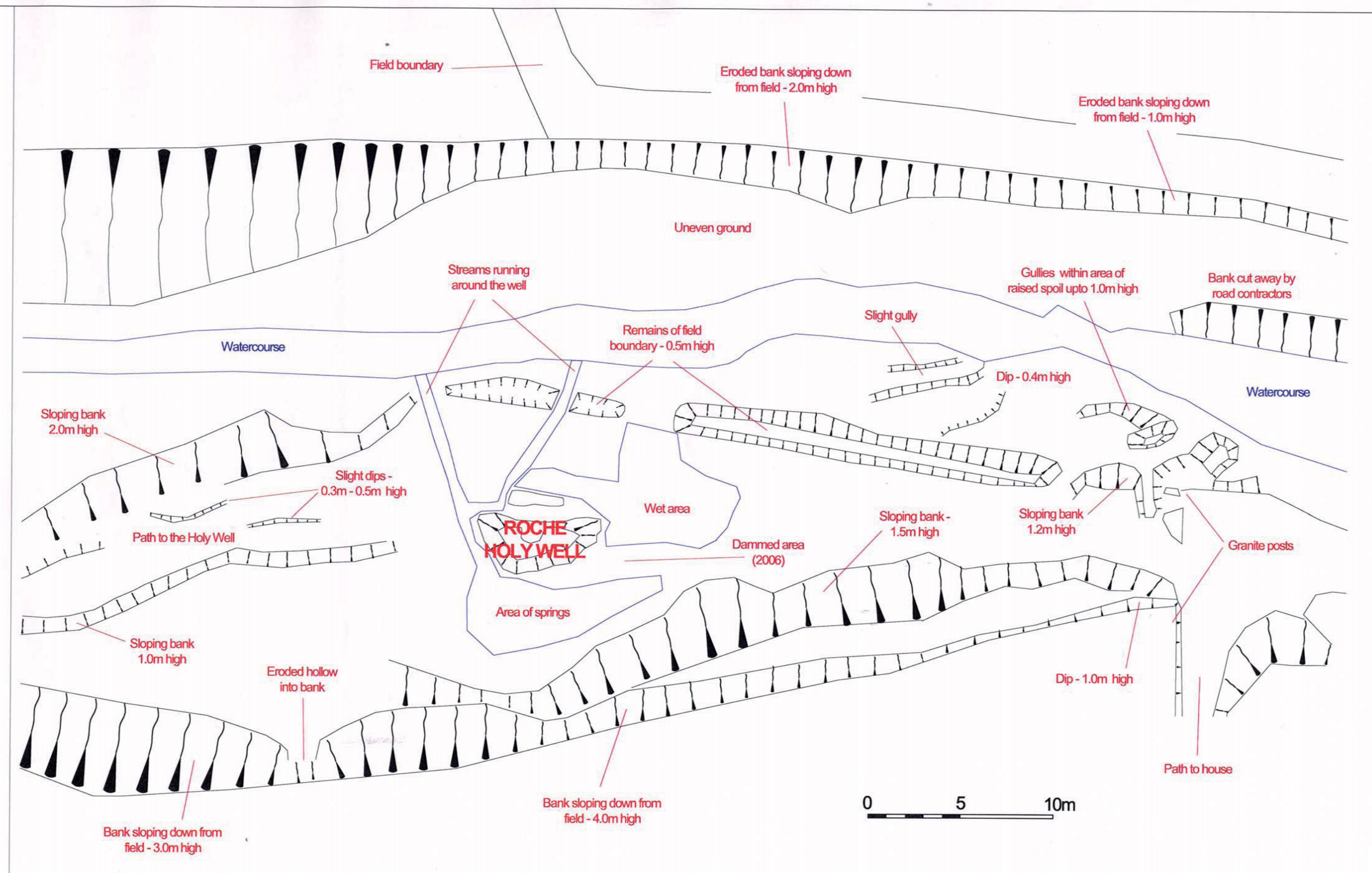


Fig. 16 Plan of the small valley containing Roche Holy Well