

A South Westmorland Medieval Holy Well? The Case of St. Gregory's Well, Preston Patrick

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Observant travellers on the M6 near junction 36 are likely to notice St. Patrick's Church, Preston Patrick, some six miles south of Kendal. This mid-Victorian Anglican church, which replaced a chapel built on the same site *c.*1500 (itself a replacement of an even earlier chapel, each dedicated to St. Gregory), is less than a mile away on the upward slope of St. Gregory's Hill.¹ On a dark night throughout Advent and at other times during the year, the illuminated cross on the church tower may seem to hover even closer to them. The church has been described as 'an excellent example of how churches came to be built on rising ground'.² Downwards, and some 200 yards eastwards from where the church now stands³, a sealed well is, with the aid of a substantial rusty steel plate, locked in the field wall. This well is named as St. Gregory's Well, situated in St. Gregory's Park, on the Ordnance Survey map surveyed in 1858 and published in 1862. Although there are a number of wells and springs in the locality, no others carry holy or saintly names, and no others are as close to the church. St. Gregory's Well is by the side of an old right of way taking pedestrians across St. Gregory's Hill between the minor road from Gatebeck to School Houses and the Kendal-Kirkby Lonsdale section of the A65 at Crooklands, near the junction with the Milnthorpe-Heversham road. In wet weather the well can be heard gurgling noisily, although it now looks of no consequence whatsoever. To the immediate north of the well is a small, relatively flattish area before the hill climbs quite steeply. Water which would have surfaced at the well was apparently diverted last century. It emerges at a small roadside trough opposite some 80 yards away to the south across a field.

Do we have here what was a medieval holy well?

THE earliest known reference to St. Gregory's Well (Figs. 1 & 2) is that by an antiquary, the Revd. Thomas Machell in 1692. Machell, a parish priest, 'was an archaeologist of exceptionally wide interests and precision of mind', who had a 'keen eye, accurate pen, and [executed] meticulous sketching of monuments'.⁴ He did a sketch of the chapel in Preston Patrick,⁵ which was part of the parish of Burton-in-Kendal until it became a separate ecclesiastical parish in 1873. There is no sketch of the well in his MSS, nor is there any descriptive detail.⁶ 'In what s[ain]t's name this chapel was dedicated is not certainly known', Machell wrote, noting the distance between the two and surmising that the chapel was dedicated to the same saint. 'Howbeit, their rushbearing is at St. James tide',⁷ this latter saint being the dedicatee of the parish church. Such brevity suggests there were no structures and he saw nothing unusual about the well. Had there been, then, given the interest Machell displayed in St. John's Well, Skelsmergh, and in the healing qualities of Holy Well, a mile to the south of Witherslack Chapel, we may assume he would have recorded more.⁸ In the late eighteenth century Joseph Nicolson and Richard Burn (who were familiar with Machell's observations) made the name St. Gregory's widely known at least regionally in their *History and Antiquities of Cumberland and Westmorland* (1777),



FIG. 1. St. Gregory's Well on the south side.

The public right of way runs by it, and up to and through St. Patrick's churchyard.

the original altar stood'.¹¹ He was unable to track the course of the water beyond the church wall. The many graves are an obstacle to such endeavours. Page ascribes to the well pagan/Christian roots, but is uncertain about baptismal use, and indicates the well is fed by 'Spring from church'.¹² If we follow Page's reasoning, the medieval holy status of St. Gregory's Well is possible – perhaps probable – for two reasons in particular: first the link with the saint's name, and second, his conclusion that, 'about fifty per cent of the Anglican churches that had a Catholic origin' had been 'sited over an underground spring or springs, always in the earliest part of the building on the original site of the first church, or at the junction of the chancel and nave of the earlier ruins if they are nearby'. The constancy of this had 'led to the expected existence of a nearby holy well fed by a subterranean spring from below the church'.¹³

In 2006 the Cumbria Holy Wells Trust was founded by Gill Edwards, Eileen Palmer, and Tim Sowton. Their first popular booklet published in 2008 sold out, indicating substantial interest in its subject-matter. A second edition of their *Holy Wells of Cumbria: A Seeker's Guide* was published by the trust four years later. Palmer and Sowton, the surviving co-authors, are quite sure that St. Gregory's was indeed a holy well, noting (without, however, pointing out by whom) that, 'The well was said to be used for baptism'.¹⁴

but they had nothing to say about it other than, like Machell, that it possibly suggested the chapel's patronal saint.⁹

Towards the end of the nineteenth century, R. C. Hope in his *Legendary Lore of the Holy Wells of England* (1893) did not include St. Gregory's Well among his two Westmorland mentions: Kirkby Stephen and Patterdale.¹⁰ The well is not mentioned in James Rattue's important study of holy wells in their historical context, *The Living Stream* (1995), nor is it one of the five Cumbrian ones identified in Janet Bord's guide to *Holy Wells in Britain* (2008).

Reporting on a serious county-wide investigation in the late twentieth century, which involved the dowsing of 327 sites, Jim Taylor Page put St. Gregory's Well in the gazetteer in his *Cumbrian Holy Wells* (1990), published by the North West Catholic History Society. Page suggests that there is an underground spring beneath the present church on the nave-chancel line, 'probably over the place where



FIG. 2. St. Gregory's Well on the north side. Farleton Fell is in the background.

In contrast, in the same year, a folklorist and museum curator, Jeremy Harte, in his three-volume study *English Holy Wells: a sourcebook* (2008) puts St. Gregory's Well in his third volume: 'Holy Wells of Modern Times'.¹⁵ Documentary evidence generally about holy wells in the Middle Ages appears to be less than extensive, but it is this which, Jeremy Harte says, 'marks them out', and which liberates us from any romantic subservience to unproven notions.¹⁶ Unlike the residual core on which Harte focuses in his study of English holy wells, St. Gregory's Well, is not only not mentioned in any known medieval record but is also not linked to the place-name.

Old local and county histories do not help us resolve the matter. No finds from or around the well are in Kendal Museum. The only entry in the Historic Environment Record is for the well itself. To determine with any certainty the well's status we would need the results of careful archaeological investigation. However, Church authorities are unlikely ever to permit any digging within the church itself, or in the churchyard to determine whether or not there is an underground water source along the nave-chancel line. St. Gregory's Well itself is in secular ownership, and here again, archaeological investigation seems an unlikely prospect in the foreseeable future. Nevertheless, given the literature's uncertainty about the well's status, an assessment is timely.

A holy well can be defined so broadly that the definition is useless. Pragmatically, a holy well is understood here to be one that is named after a saint, or is called 'Holywell'. Ideally, it will be mentioned in the medieval documentary record – which would prove a key determinant – and be linked to a place-name.¹⁷ This definition may

lack sophistication but the compensation for the simplicity is greater intelligibility.¹⁸ It is certainly suitable for an enquiry into one well. Blake Tyson writes that, 'It seems likely that strong religious beliefs and enthusiasm for folk traditions may encourage some to "discover" holy wells even when the evidence is distinctly tenuous'.¹⁹ He is probably right, at which point I confess to being a member of St. Patrick's Church. However, I am also a historian and therefore, naturally, will be quite coolly rational!

We can be very confident that Preston Patrick's St. Gregory was Gregory I, Pope Gregory the Great (590-604). He does not figure in Harte's carefully distilled list of well dedications to continental or Biblical saints. Dating sequence, Harte says, suggests that well 'dedications to foreign saints began in the early twelfth century and comparison with the series of saints [he lists] tends to bear this out'.²⁰ This, we must acknowledge, actually tallies with the argument of the Lake District historians Roy Millward and Adrian Robinson that the origins of many *chapel* dedications there are to be found in the twelfth and thirteenth centuries. This, they say, was thanks to the boost to pilgrimages resulting from the Crusades, and the knowledge of some saints from written accounts of their lives.²¹ Whilst acknowledging the likelihood of this, we need to note that no Gregory at all is in Harte's reckoning; that a medieval dedication of Preston Patrick Chapel to St. Gregory in what is now Cumbria appears to be curiously unique, which may suggest that an explanation for the choice of this saint is to be found in the merits of the geographical location for preaching the gospel in pre-Conquest times, with a putative connection with an Anglian minster [see below];²² and that a dedication to Gregory the Great was not unusual in Anglo-Saxon England.²³ We need only consider Bede's presentation of his significance to understand why the last point was the case. However, the English were revering him *even before* Bede's *History of the English Church and People*,²⁴ which was finished in 731. As C. Grant Loomis has shown, Bede chose with the utmost care the miracle traditions for that work using the *Dialogues of Gregory the Great* as an authoritative guide.²⁵ There is no doubting St. Gregory's significance to the Church in Northumbria of the early Middle Ages. Preston Patrick was then within at least the influence of that kingdom.²⁶ Bede's *History* and Gregory's own writings, including the *Moralia*, *Vita Benedicti*, and *Liber Regulæ Pastoralis*, also contributed to the continuance of the saint's influence through the Central Middle Ages and beyond, an influence further strengthened (as will be explained) by the use of him in the Church's efforts from the thirteenth century to spread an orthodox understanding of the elevation of the Host during Mass.

Where a saint's well is near to a church and has the same dedicatee as the latter, the dedication 'may simply have been transferred to the well', as Ian Whyte says.²⁷ In other words, it would 'become holy by association', to use James Rattue's phrase.²⁸ 'Holy or magic wells were certainly associated with many early-Christian saints or with churches dedicated to them', observes Whyte, 'but this does not necessarily prove that a well dedicated to [for example] St. Ninian was used during the fifth century'.²⁹ However, in the Preston Patrick context, it is a perfectly legitimate speculation that an early dedication of a spring or well was transferred to the chapel dedicated to St. Gregory which preceded the c.1500 rebuild rather than the other way round.³⁰ Richard Morris has made the point that 'it seems possible that there were more spring-sited churches in England than was formerly realized'.³¹ 'St. Gregory's Hill'

cannot be used as evidence of the saint's transfer from the chapel to the well, if only because, as Graham Jones points out, 'The devotional meaning of other landscape features, principally stones, mountains, and rivers, is little explored'.³² And why give a well a saint's name at all if not to signal its sanctity? Preceding the building of a chapel on St. Gregory's Hill, and prior to the creation of the parish system, naming the well as that saint's would have been only natural if it was a nub for Christian worship in the surrounding countryside, an example of a 'surrogate' chapel where folk could assemble, listen to preaching of the Gospel, and participate in celebrations of the Mass.³³ That it was simply a convenient way of differentiating it from the other wells in the district is hardly tenable.

It is worth emphasizing at this point how sacralized was the landscape to the immediate south, west, and north of Preston Patrick before the Conquest. If Page is correct and St. Helen's Well at Burton (said by Nicolson and Burn to be 'about 60 yards north-east from the church')³⁴ was a replacement dedication 'in the old territory of the Brigantians' for that of St. Bride, which was itself a change from an Irish goddess, Brigid, we may have evidence of Celtic well worship within what became Burton-in-Kendal parish. It is even possible that the well may once have been called Bridewell.³⁵ Only three miles away Celtic missionaries from Ireland brought the Gospel to Heversham.³⁶ Here there was 'the one early monastery known to have existed in Westmorland'.³⁷ *Monasterium* was a term covering a diversity of communities of the religious.³⁸ So we do not know for sure what was the nature of the community there. Sir Frank Stenton describes Heversham positively as 'an English minster'.³⁹ Burton parish church's first known incumbent, Adam, has a date given as 1180,⁴⁰ but this does not rule out an earlier foundation. If 'minster' is a concept of 'marvellous ambiguity', as C.N.L. Brooke says, and is defined as 'serving an area wider than a village',⁴¹ such a foundation at Burton may have had some resemblance to the minster at Heversham. And take the Preston Patrick place-name. The second word comes from a thirteenth-century man of substance, Patrick de Culwen, but the first was simply *Prestun* (as in the *Domesday Book*) which is derived from the Old English *preosta*, the plural of *preost* ('priest') and Old English or Old Norse *tun*, meaning 'enclosure' or 'field': the *tun* of the priests, as translated by Eilert Ekwall.).⁴² In the vernacular, Brooke points out, a *preost* may have been a monk or a secular priest;⁴³ a significant distinction because if the former, then we may infer the existence of a religious community. Anglian thanes would provide a field to support a priest of their choice so that they could have services in their own churches or chapels,⁴⁴ but *tun* in this particular case may, perhaps, indicate a settlement where there would be more than one priest. Less than a mile from St. Gregory's Hill is Wath Sutton. The place-name comes from Wathsuthenam. The 'suthenam' comes from Old Irish Suthan. This is an individual's name, in the *Domesday Book* written as Sudan. Taken as a whole it may mean Suthan's ford. This may take us back to a warrior chief during the Norse-Irish invasions of the 10th century. On the other hand, it might be the name of a Celtic Church missionary from much earlier times. A wheel-head cross depicting Christ which was found in Burton, and the names of two settlements close to Preston Patrick, Stainton (*Steinn*, Old Norse for the name of a person or what might have been a stone cross, united with *tun*) and Crosscrake (Old Norse, Kraka's cross) are evidence of the Christianizing of the Norse-Irish invaders who settled in the area in the tenth and eleventh centuries.⁴⁵

With such a historical background, it is perfectly rational to imagine a preaching cross, free-standing and high up on elevated land, with a nearby source of pure water for baptisms (from a spring on the site where eventually a chapel was to stand or from the well a little further away).

Early dedication of the well may also be indicated by the fact that it is on ‘the outskirts of settlement’. This is contrary to the ‘strong preference’ Harte has found that later saints’ wells had ‘for sites in villages and towns’.⁴⁶ The vill (later township) of Preston Patrick had no village, just scattered farms and settlements. Well sites at Goose Green, Millness, and Kaker Mill lack the desired position and elevation for a preaching cross.

There is no early (or late) medieval miraculous tradition associated with St. Gregory’s Well. No stories come down to us of the well’s healing powers. But this does not mean there never were such stories among the laity. As Eamon Duffy wisely remarked, ‘it is always dangerous to take lack of evidence as evidence of lack’.⁴⁷ Recent studies, focusing on Brittany *c.*850-1250 and Anglo-Saxon royal saints’ cults respectively, have shown the significance of landscape sites in oral tradition, and that not all such sites actually needed written stories about miracles to underpin their holy status and draw people to them. A saint’s name and its associated topographical feature could be sufficient to sustain an oral tradition among lay folk.⁴⁸ This article is not the place for a discussion of the tricky concept of popular religion. Suffice it to say that a truly nuanced approach to the religious beliefs of the common people should be taken. We cannot get inside the minds of pre-Conquest peasants but we can be confident that those beliefs came from not only what they were told by priests but also from invocations they felt impelled to make at landscape features such as wells to save themselves or their communities from disasters that repeatedly threatened their very survival. It is possible to understand devotion to St. Gregory, both before and after the Conquest, being expressed in popular ways at the well, and in an orthodox ecclesiastical way initially at a free-standing cross and subsequently at the chapel which would have replaced it. Medieval rural religious worship, a hybrid, had deep roots in the local landscape.

In post-Conquest England, whereas the Normans may have wanted to remove English dedications,⁴⁹ whether to church, chapel or well – a matter which is also subject to debate – they would not have found one to St. Gregory unacceptable, a point reinforced by an article by Catherine Cubitt. She notes that ‘Ridyard, Pfaff, and Rollason have shown that Norman contempt for Anglo-Saxon saints was not universal and its extent has been exaggerated’. However, Cubitt herself provides a powerful motive for what she calls the Normans’ ‘scepticism’ about those saints: ‘a native tradition of veneration for victims of violent and undeserved death’.⁵⁰ Gregory the Great was not part of that tradition, and therefore not subject to any such scepticism. Removals of dedications, for whatever reasons, may explain the inconsistencies Rattue notes that could occur between church and well dedications.⁵¹ We have examples near Preston Patrick at Burton and Heversham.⁵² This is not the case with St. Gregory’s Chapel and St. Gregory’s Well. Such consistency is just as likely to point to a pre-Conquest dedication as to a later medieval one; indeed, in a largely oral world more so.

We cannot rule out the possibility that the absence of archaeological remains – principally of a well-housing or an enclosing wall – may be because miraculous traditions associated with the well may have been forgotten before such physical features were regarded as highly desirable. Rattue, in his pioneering study of holy wells set in their historical context, observes that ‘descriptions of wells as they were in their medieval heyday are unsurprisingly few’. He also points out that ‘fewer still are the sites where the topography has remained sufficiently unchanged for the descriptions to be useful’.⁵³ However, he is able to suggest there were four main features of the late medieval well.⁵⁴ (i) What he calls a ‘processional way’, or ‘sacred cul-de-sac’, perhaps made permanent with stones, and visiting the well would have been the only reason for using it. (ii) To achieve a deepening holiness commensurate with the journey from churchyard to the sanctuary, a holy well would possess a ‘hierarchy of enclosures’: encircling trees, a wall surround, and then a well-housing. (iii) The flow of water from a holy spring was ‘broadly’ eastwards and the well would look to the east. Eastwards was where Jerusalem lay and Jesus, it was believed, would return there on Judgement Day. For heathens also, eastwards flow was important: the sun rose from the east, the natural light of the world. (iv) In contrast to chapel-goers moving through the church door, up the nave, towards chancel and altar, a late medieval holy well had a ‘motif of descent, coupled with the idea of an entry into darkness’. Rattue gives examples of these features of well topography.⁵⁵

St. Gregory’s Well, Preston Patrick, does not fit neatly into this model, but a neat fit is not necessary. If Page is right about the nave-chancel spring, the flow to the well is eastwards. Moreover, the well being by the side of an old right of way facilitated any processions downwards from the church, especially as, in a late-medieval demesne park with a chapel without a graveyard, the absence of field walls meant chapel and well could be conceived and treated as one linked entity. Note further that Rattue describes his four features as ‘a model’. Although the features can indeed be illustrated with actual examples, a model nevertheless represents an ideal. The everyday world does not work in terms of ideals, and did not do so in medieval rural England. We know that medieval religious practices varied considerably across the country,⁵⁶ and Preston Patrick, on the margins of York diocese and then after 1541 that of Chester, no doubt found itself contributing to that variety.⁵⁷

Even if a well might have only approximated – perhaps quite roughly so – to such a model as has been described, it may well have been no less holy in the minds of the people who visited it than famous pilgrimage sites. Indeed, a very difficult question arises for historians: even if a well was not classified as ‘properly’ holy (merely so by association) but perhaps like St. Gregory’s Well, close to a chapel and therefore used by the clergy and people as if it was holy, but only for purely instrumental purposes (e.g. as a source of water which was subsequently blessed for baptism, or simply for cleaning sacramental vessels), how would we be able to discriminate between it and a well that was definitely proven to have been a medieval holy well?⁵⁸ Harte says, rightly, there is a continuum between the ‘really sacred’ and wells ‘with merely nominal dedications’.⁵⁹ We ourselves might imagine a well enclosure being arboreal or of stone, but by simply gathering around a well, people themselves could act temporarily but effectively as such a feature. Even a pilgrimage could be merely a sixty-yard procession,

as at Fersfield, Norfolk.⁶⁰ Moreover, we would be dealing with more than the built physicality of a well, but also with what was going on in people's minds if and when they thought about the well. And how could we tell? What if someone distressed (a common enough condition in a harsh world) had taken it into his or her head to stop at the well, knowing its water was used at the chapel, whilst walking from Goose Green to Crooklands and, stopping, toss in a votive token, and make some kind of invocation before going on? Such behaviour would contribute to the well's 'aura of sacredness',⁶¹ and a rural priest, inured to country ways, might have encouraged it.

In the case of St. Gregory's Well we need to think beyond what may have been the *precise* built features and consider the synergy of the various factors that existed on the eve of the Reformation when, c.1500, St. Gregory's Chapel was being rebuilt. Perhaps the first (and highly important) point to make is that in the later medieval context, Pope Gregory the Great had a particular significance. Having committed itself from the thirteenth century to the doctrine of transubstantiation, the Church had to silence doubters. By the fifteenth century there were many who were not convinced by the priest's words, '*Hoc est enim Corpus Meum*', as he lifted the Host over his head. The people went to Mass expecting to see above the altar their Maker visible, his blood pouring out from his wounds when the Host was broken. But there was a difficulty: what if you could not see Christ?⁶² All sorts of ideas had come to be held about the Host, among them, most dangerously for the Church, denials that it actually changed into Christ.⁶³ To combat this, stories were told, depicting Pope Gregory celebrating Mass, with a bleeding Christ appearing above the altar. This was, Duffy emphasizes, 'an image of forgiveness and grace, not of judgement',⁶⁴ which deepened its appeal. Note the vernacular verse reflecting on Jesus's wounds 'as wells of grace': 'Yif thee list to drinke/To fle fro the fendas of helle/Bowe thu doun to the brinke/And mekely taste of the welle'.⁶⁵ If such linguistic symbolism was widespread at the time (as it was), what effect did it have on how a 'church' well (a feature that was ever-present) was regarded by the country folk, already predisposed to 'magical' interpretations? Impact, surely.⁶⁶ There is a debate among historians over the degree of attention given to a parish's patronal saint in the later fifteenth and earlier sixteenth centuries.⁶⁷ As far as Preston Patrick is concerned, this image of Gregory can only have enhanced his appeal to the chapelgoers, who, while acknowledging emotional, legal, and economic (tithes) ties to the parish church at Burton, would nevertheless have been conscious of their separate identity even if this could not be translated into a separate parish because of the Burton incumbent's determination to preserve his rights and dues and the small size of the population. St. Gregory as patronal saint of the chapel symbolized Preston Patrick's identity. Because generous indulgences were associated with it, his image's appeal was at its most powerful just at the period when the Chapel of St. Gregory was being rebuilt c.1500.⁶⁸ During the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries the Church was trying hard 'to wean people off "superstition" and on to more "spiritual" devotions to Christ and the Virgin'.⁶⁹ Pope Gregory the Great's image was thus an important part of these exertions.

Late medieval Catholicism was characterized by a 'lavishness' to which Eamon Duffy has drawn attention,⁷⁰ a lavishness by then experienced against the background of the British landscape in which topographical phenomena such as springs and wells

had been transfigured by the Church for centuries to make its authority manifest.⁷¹ Strong devotion to traditional religion appears to have characterized the family of the manorial lords, the Prestons of Preston Patrick.⁷² Pleasure and pride would have resulted from the communal effort behind, and doubtless pleasure and pride in, the chapel rebuild, which like ecclesiastical construction work elsewhere reflected not merely the generally better economic conditions in which Westmorland shared,⁷³ but also the continued vigour in late-medieval Catholicism. As ever, water, readily available, was regularly needed to wash the chapel's sacred vessels and the chapel priest's hands. Behind all this was the powerful biblical significance of 'living' water,⁷⁴ and the thoughts of individuals weaving along what Walsham calls 'the hazy boundary between Christian supplication and magical coercion'.⁷⁵ Even if 'wells were not high in the hierarchy of catholic "ritualia"',⁷⁶ were these various factors together in the 'medieval heyday'⁷⁷ of holy wells not nutrients for a heightened perception of the one near Preston Patrick Chapel as holy?

It is true that the first documentary evidence for St. Gregory's Well is indeed late (1692), but as has been justly observed, 'dates [of first record] are often no guide to antiquity'.⁷⁸ Rattue has also noted that 'even a holy well's memory could vanish within three generations of the Reformation', citing an account written in 1646 of a search for St. Thomas's Well in Stamford.⁷⁹ Here it is worth observing that before the end of the 17th century, Machell (who is not in Harte's bibliography) had been made aware of the Preston Patrick well being 'cald St. Gregory's'. His supposition of the chapel dedicatee's name was to be confirmed as correct by the only documentary evidence we have which, clearly, he knew nothing about: a bare record of the chapel in Archbishop William Melton's Register in 1331 as a visitation centre, and the other a mention in a 1445 inquest report.⁸⁰ Harte quotes a report in 1894 of the then vicar of Preston Patrick Church telling visiting CWAAS excursionists that 'the dedication of the church was uncertain, but ... it was probably dedicated to St. Gregory, as the well was called Gregory Well'. Harte, despite having cited Nicolson and Burn and the 1862 OS map, concludes that this 'suggests that the dedication was a hagiolising form of the personal name Gregory'.⁸¹ However, it was not such hagiolising. It was because the *well* was known as *St. Gregory's* that made Machell assume this saint was the dedicatee of the chapel, despite the fact that 'Preston Chapel' was how the chapel was commonly known, at least in early modern times.⁸²

Preston Patrick folk memory proved robust enough to keep the name of the chapel's dedicatee alive.⁸³ Crucially, it was the *chapel's* dedicatee and the chapel continued to function until the mid-nineteenth century when it was rebuilt as a church, but *the well's story after the English Reformation could only be different*, and any legends would have easily been forgotten after three generations. Although in post-Reformation years the well may have attracted (let us imagine), girls' seeking to gauge their paramours' intentions by tossing stones, pins or other objects into the water and studying the effect,⁸⁴ any connection with *chapel-organized* custom or rituals would probably have ceased long before the mid-seventeenth century. The 1640s and 1650s were times particularly unsympathetic to holy wells: the most significant priest in the parish of Burton was Thomas Taylor, Puritan curate of Preston Patrick Chapel, bold and radical enough to allow a thriving Seeker community to use his chapel, which meant

preaching by lay leaders.⁸⁵ Many of these separatists from the State Church became Quakers (as did Taylor), the most ardent religious group in the chapelry at the time, who certainly had no use for holy wells. Roman Catholics, whom we may suppose might have had – after all, ‘formal Roman Catholicism was of particular importance in maintaining the well-cult in Lancashire’⁸⁶ – were non-existent in Preston Patrick by 1724 (although fifty-five years later one family of ‘papists’ was recorded).⁸⁷ Long before, the Prestons had during the 16th century post-1523 made Furness their chief home.⁸⁸ Any break in a well’s religious use would have meant that use coming to an end because the impulse had been lost.⁸⁹ But it was the *well* that was to preserve the medieval saint’s name as the chapel’s dedicatee.

That no reference to a water source beneath the chapel was made in the architect’s report in 1850 on the state of the chapel, nor in the report of the new church’s consecration in the *Westmorland Gazette*, does not negate the possibility.⁹⁰ E. G. Paley, of the Lancaster firm of Sharpe and Paley, wrote that, ‘the flooring and the walls’ were ‘excessively damp – the latter being in many cases covered with a green vegetation’. Paley suggested that ‘one great cause’ was that, ‘The whole of the East end and a great portion of the walls of the South and North sides have the earth against them, considerably higher than the floor of the interior’ [Emphasis added]. He does not identify any other causes of dampness, great or small. Paley’s report is far from detailed. There is no documentary evidence, so far as is known, of what might or might not have been found on the demolition of the old structure and the clearance of the site for the rebuild. We may be surprised that a man with the keen antiquarian and historical interests Paley had did not do an archaeological investigation, however limited, but the Preston Patrick rebuild was taking place at the same time as his partner, Edmund Sharpe, was handing over the reins of the Lancaster practice to him, and it is likely Paley was a very busy man.⁹¹ Of course, he may have done and left documentation helpful to us now, but ‘in 1944 ... the entire contents of the ... office’ of the firm, then known as Austin and Paley, ‘were taken to the tip or salvaged for waste paper. Except for a few items which escaped this wholesale destruction, the complete records of the practice ... were destroyed’.⁹²

Thanks to the generosity of the congregation, other local people, and friends of the church, it could be stated in the 2008 Quinquennial Report on the condition of St. Patrick’s Church fabric that ‘the main church roofs ... have all been recently overhauled and are all in very good condition’.⁹³ Nevertheless, the church council continued to be concerned about the serious ingress of damp. In particular, such ingress was causing the interior plasterwork of the south-facing wall to deteriorate where the nave joins the chancel. The causes seemed clear and were identified in the Quinquennial Report. External stone walling was in only a ‘fair condition’, there were open joints to the buttress at the nave-chancel junction, and many gullies needed attention to improve drainage. A ‘lack of low-level heating and good ventilation’ meant that ‘the damp ingress contributes to a musty, damp environment.’ The report notes ‘a build-up of vegetation’ increasing the land level around the church footprint.⁹⁴ Although the roof repairs mean the church is now essentially dry, and the immediate footprint of the church and the gullies subsequently received a clearing, the lack of a permanent low-level heating system and improved ventilation, and the continuing ‘fair condition’ of

the external stone walling mean it is not known whether their introduction would finally solve the damp problem. Re-decoration of the internal south-facing wall by the nave-chancel line subsequent to the clearing of gullies and downspout has rather been in vain: the condition is as damp as ever.

Controversial it may be, and certainly no substitute for a properly conducted archaeological investigation, but dowsing cannot be shrugged off. It is noteworthy that Tyson, while urging ‘a full sceptical study of all supposed holy wells in Cumbria’, emphasizing ‘quality of proof’ and ‘detailed attention to the physical relationships between the well or spring and its associated church’,⁹⁵ treats Page’s ‘stimulating’ work with respect. It is significant that the importance of the well’s link with the saint’s name which his study emphasizes is increased by what we have said about the importance of Gregory the Great, both in terms of the medieval Church and as symbolic of Preston Patrick’s identity. Folk memory reached back into the Middle Ages and kept his name alive. Page noted, moreover, that ‘so frequent is the existence of a hill spring that any church built over one and without a damp course’ – which Preston Patrick Church does not have – ‘is invariably damp in the region of the original early site’.⁹⁶ What we have said about the present condition of the church would seem to support his observation.

Conclusion

Differing views have been published in recent years on the question of the medieval holy status of St. Gregory’s Well, Preston Patrick. Given that an archaeological investigation is not in prospect, and the serendipitous surfacing of an unchallengeable medieval document unlikely, the aim of this article has been a modest one: to suggest that there is a real possibility that St. Gregory’s was indeed a medieval holy well, arguably reaching back before the Conquest. This article is a rational and timely contribution to a developing debate which does not romanticize the past. Until it can be confirmed one way or another by archaeological investigation (and perhaps not even then), the jury must be out. Meanwhile, it is hoped that the article will add to the landscape and religious history of south Westmorland, as well as provoking a number of questions, relating to both definitional and contextual issues surrounding other ‘holy’ wells.

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Notes and references

1. For the backstory of the present church, see P. Lucas, *A Question of Identity. Exploring the History of Preston Patrick Church and its Patronal Saints* (Low Park, Endmoor, 2011), and *The Green Man of Preston Patrick Church. The Grotesque and the Holy: Interpreting the Late Medieval Stone Carvings* (Low Park, Endmoor, 2012).
2. S. Ricketts, *Lakeland Country Churches: A Visitors' Guide* (Maryport, 1994), 205.
3. James Rattue notes 'an enormous number of named wells within a couple of hundred yards or so of churches; about 370 in England, even with the present partial and uneven state of research, the majority being deemed holy ...' *The Living Stream. Holy Wells in Historical Context* (Woodbridge, 2001 repr.) [*Infra, TLS*], 67.
4. J. Rogan and E. Birley, 'Thomas Machell, the Antiquary', *CW2*, LV (1956) (132-153), 148-149.
5. See J. M. Ewbank, *Antiquary on Horseback. The First Publication of The Collections of the Rev. Thos. Machell Chaplain to King Charles II Towards a History of the Barony of Kendal* (Kendal, 1963), *CW Extra Series*, XIX, 42. [*Infra, Antiquary*]
6. I am indebted to Tom Robson, senior archivist, Cumbria Archive Service, for checking what Machell had to say about the chapel in his manuscript.
7. CRO(C), Machell MSS, no. 2, 287, 297-301.
8. See B. Tyson, 'St. John's Well and Chapel, Skelsmergh: their location and present condition', *CW2*, xcvi (1998) (155-167), 156 and 158; *Antiquary*, 80.
9. N&B, I, 242.
10. Tyson, *op. cit.*, 166, note 1.
11. See his research notes, CRO(K), WDX/1196, 'Springs and Wells – Collated evidence by F. J. T. Page for the Definitive Book on Cumbria's Holy Wells, Springs and Stone Circles, 1990'; footnote to his Table 2, 'Springs below Cumbrian Churches' in a type-written MS entitled A Survey of Subterranean Springs and their Significance in Relation to the Stone Circles and Early Church Sites of Cumbria (undated), 5-6.
12. See J.T. Page, Appendix (19-29) in *Cumbrian Holy Wells* (Wigan, 1990), 27.
13. Page, *Cumbrian Holy Wells*, 3-4. For a broader perspective, see R. Morris, *Churches in the Landscape* (London, 1989), 84-92, especially 87.
14. E. Palmer and T. Sowton, *Holy Wells of Cumbria. A Seeker's Guide*, second edition (Blindbothel, Cockermouth, 2012), 12.
15. J. Harte, *English Holy Wells: A Sourcebook, III, Holy Wells of Modern Times* (Wymeswold, Loughborough), 419. [*Infra, EHW*]
16. *EHW*, I, 2-3.
17. I am following Harte here. *EHW*, I, 4.
18. *EHW*, I, 4.
19. Tyson, 'St. John's Well and Chapel', 165.
20. *EHW*, 66.
21. R. Millward and A. Robinson, *The Lake District* (London, 1970), 130.
22. This would seem to cover three of the five influences Alan Everitt recognises as bearing on the selection of a titular saint. *Continuity and Colonization. The Evolution of Kentish Settlement* (Leicester, 1986), 230-9, cited by R. Marks, *Image and Devotion in Late Medieval England* (Thrupp, Stroud, 2004), 67.
23. See, e.g. L. Butler, 'Church Dedications and the Cult of the Anglo-Saxon Saints in England', in L. A. S. Butler and R.K. Morris (eds.), *The Anglo-Saxon Church: Papers on History, Architecture, and Archaeology, in Honour of Dr. H.M. Taylor* (London, 1986), (44-50), 44.
24. G. Jones, *Saints in the Landscape* (Chalford, Stroud, 2007), 159, *Infra, SiL*.
25. C. Grant Loomis, 'The Miracle Traditions of the Venerable Bede', *Speculum*, 21 (4), Oct. 1946, 404-418.
26. See F.W. Stenton, 'Pre-Conquest Westmorland' (xIviii-Iv) in RCHM, *Westmorland* (London, 1936), xIviii-xIx.
27. I. Whyte, 'The Dark Age Landscape', in W. Rollinson (ed.) *The Lake District. Landscape Heritage* (Newton Abbot and London, 1989) (49-75), 67-68.
28. *TLS*, 66. See also *EHW*, I, 77.
29. Whyte, 'The Dark Age Landscape', 67-68.
30. Page observes that transference of a dedication from spring to church 'is not unlikely' because 'some of the names' of the springs or wells in Cumbria are 'so ancient'. *Cumbrian Holy Wells*, 10.
31. Morris, *Churches in the Landscape*, 87.

32. *SiL*, 28.
33. A. Walsham, *The Reformation of the Landscape. Religion, Identity, and Memory in Early Modern Britain and Ireland* (Oxford, 2011), 35, citing Harte, 72, 103.
34. N&B, I, 235. Machell writes that Burton church 'is said to be St. Aidan's, there being a well three score yards North East of the church which bears that name, though the Rushbearing feast or wake is yearly observed on St. James's Day ...' *Antiquary*, 46–47. I am following Nicholson and Burn on the basis of Helen's popularity in terms of well dedications. See *EHW*, 62; also the index of saints' names in *SiL*.
35. Page, *Cumbrian Holy Wells*, 10. Caution is necessary, it has been argued, when considering the supposed change from Brigid to St. Bride. *TLS*, 34. Helen was particularly popular in the north of Britain. *SiL*, 118. Jones notes a gender problem with Helen, which was also the name of a male saint in various areas, including coastal Cumbria. *SiL*, 146.
36. R.K. Bingham, *The Church at Heversham. A History of Westmorland's Oldest Recorded Church* (Ackenthwaite, Miln thorpe, 1984), 10.
37. Stenton, 'Pre-Conquest Westmorland', xl ix.
38. C.N.L. Brooke, *Churches and Churchmen in Medieval Europe* (London and Rio Grande, 1999), 9.
39. Sir F. Stenton, *Anglo-Saxon England* (Oxford, 1989 3rd edn.), 320.
40. J.G. Langham, *Parish Church of St. James Burton in Kendal* (Burton, 1972), 2.
41. Brooke, *Churches and Churchmen*, 9–10.
42. E. Ekwall, *The Concise Oxford Dictionary of English Place-names* (Oxford, 1960, 4th edn.), 374.
43. Brooke, *Churches and Churchmen*, 239.
44. Stenton, *Anglo-Saxon England*, 149.
45. A.H. Smith, *Place-Names of Westmorland* (Cambridge, 1967), English Place-Name Society, XXLII, Part I, 62, 96; W.G. Collingwood, *The Lake Counties*, edited and revised by W. Rollinson (London, 1988, first publ. 1902), 4; W. J. Sedgefield, *The Place Names of Cumberland and Westmorland* (Manchester, 1915), 14, 176, 144; Stenton, 'Pre-Conquest Westmorland', 1.
46. *EHW*, 67–68.
47. E. Duffy, 'Revealing a hidden past', a review of Marks' *Image and Devotion in The Tablet*, 9 April, 2004. <http://www.thetablet.co.uk/review/177>. Accessed 19 March, 2012.
48. J.M.H. Smith, 'Oral and Written: Saints, Miracles, and Relics in Brittany, c. 850–1250', *Speculum*, 65 (1990) (309–343), 320, 322–24, 326, 328–29, 331, 335, 337; C. Cubitt, 'Sites and sanctity: revisiting the cult of murdered and martyred Anglo-Saxon royal saints', *Early Medieval Europe*, 9, 1 (2000) (53–83), 60–63; 67–72, especially 68. This paragraph is based on their studies.
49. *TLS*, 70.
50. Cubitt, 'Sites and Sanctity', 80. Her references to the historians are: S. J. Ridyard, 'Condigna Veneratio: Post-Conquest Attitudes to the Saints of the Anglo-Saxons', *Anglo-Norman Studies*, 9 (1987), 179–206; R.W. Pfaff, 'Lanfranc's Supposed Purge of the Anglo-Saxon Calendar', in T. Reuter (ed.), *Warriors and Churchmen in the High Middle Ages: Essays Presented to Karl Leyser* (London, 1992), 95–108; D. Rollason, *Saints and Relics in Anglo-Saxon England* (Oxford, 1989), 215–39.
51. *TLS*, 70.
52. By the side of the road to the north of St. Peter's Church, Heversham, is St. Mary's Well. See also p. 4 and note 34.
53. *TLS*, 75.
54. *TLS*, 75–78.
55. *TLS*, 77.
56. C. Brooke, *Medieval Church and Society. Collected Essays* (London, 1971), 165.
57. In 1856 the new church was transferred to Carlisle diocese. It has thus always been on a diocesan border.
58. Morris, *Churches in the Landscape*, 89.
59. *EHW*, 79.
60. *EHW*, 80–81.
61. See Walsham, *The Reformation of the Landscape*, 52.
62. E. Duffy, *The Stripping of the Altars: Traditional Religion in England 1400–1580* (New Haven and London, 2005), second edition, 102.
63. M. Rubin, 'The Eucharist and the Construction of Medieval Identities', in D. Aers (ed.), *Culture and History 1350–1600: Essays on English Communities, Identities, and Writing* (New York, 1992), (43–63), 59.
64. Duffy, *Stripping of the Altars*, 108–09.

- ⁶⁵. D. Gray, *Themes and Images in the Medieval English Lyric* (London 1972), 131, 134, quoted by Duffy, *Stripping of the Altars*, 245.
- ⁶⁶. See P. Bourdieu, *Language and Symbolic Power*, edited and introduced by J.B. Thompson (Cambridge, 1992), 'Editor's Introduction', 12-14.
- ⁶⁷. See M. Aston, *England's Iconoclasts. Laws Against Images* (Oxford, 1988), 287; Duffy, *Stripping of the Altars*, 162; both countered by Marks, *Image and Devotion*, 83-84.
- ⁶⁸. K. Kamerick, *Popular Piety and Art in the Late Middle Ages. Image Worship and Idolatry in England 1350-1500* (New York and Hounds-mills, Basingstoke, 2002), 159. See also 169 and 172.
- ⁶⁹. *TLS*, 70, citing R. Finnucane, *Miracles and Shrines* (1977), 195-6.
- ⁷⁰. E. Duffy, 'Religious belief', in R. Horrox and W.M. Ormrod (eds.), *A Social History of England 1200-1500* (Cambridge, 2006) (293-339), 328. This is not to claim for Preston Patrick that any lavishness was on the scale of East Anglia, source of much of Duffy's data, for there were local and regional differences in religiousness. M. Groom, 'England: Piety, Heresy and Anti-clericalism', in Rigby (ed.) *Companion to Britain in the Middle Ages* (2003) (381-395), 382.
- ⁷¹. Walsham, *Reformation of the Landscape*, 78.
- ⁷². See Lucas, *Green Man of Preston Patrick Church*, 40-41.
- ⁷³. See e.g. A.J.L. Winchester, *Landscape and Society in Medieval Cumbria* (Edinburgh, 1987), 51-52; Bingham, *Church at Heversham*, 15.
- ⁷⁴. For example, Revelation 22:17; John 7:38; Proverbs 5:15; Psalms 22:14.
- ⁷⁵. Walsham, *Reformation of the Landscape*, 69.
- ⁷⁶. *TLS*, 104.
- ⁷⁷. *TLS*, 75.
- ⁷⁸. *TLS*, 63. See also *EHW*, 82.
- ⁷⁹. *TLS*, 108, citing R. Butcher, *The Survey and Antiquitie of the Towne of Stamford* (London, 1660), 15.
- ⁸⁰. R.M.T. Hill, *The Register of William Melton Archbishop of York 1317-1340*, I, 49-54 and notes; J.F. Curwen (ed.) *Records Relating to the Barony of Kendale by William Farrer* (Kendal, 1999), II, repr., first publ. 1924, 208. See also, Lucas, *Question of Identity*, 4.
- ⁸¹. *EHW*, III, 419; 'Excursions and proceedings 1883', *CW1*, 13, 1894-5, 57; N&B, I, 242.
- ⁸². Lucas, *Question of Identity*, 12.
- ⁸³. Under severe pressure; see *ibid.*, 10-13, 21-22.
- ⁸⁴. See Morris, *Churches in the Landscape*, 84.
- ⁸⁵. For an account of Thomas Taylor see C. Fell-Smith, 'Taylor, Thomas (1617/18-1682)', rev. C.L. Leachman, *Oxford Dictionary of National Biography* (2004) [www.oxforddnb.com/view/article/27084], accessed 14 August, 2008.
- ⁸⁶. See *TLS*, 108-109.
- ⁸⁷. L.A.S. Butler (ed.), *The Cumbria Parishes 1714-1725 from Bishop Gastrell's Notitia with Additions by Bishop Porteous 1778-1779* (CWAAS Record Series XII, 1998), 108, 195.
- ⁸⁸. J. and J.B. Burke, *A Genealogical and Heraldic History of the Extinct and Dormant Baronetcies of England, Ireland, and Scotland* (London, 1964), facsimile of 1st edn. 1841, repr. 1844, 425. See A.C. Parkinson, *A History of Catholicism in the Furness Peninsula 1127-1997*, (Lancaster 1998), 28-29.
- ⁸⁹. See Duffy, *Stripping of the Altars*, 494-95; and N.J.G. Pounds, *A History of the English Parish. The Culture of Religion from Augustine to Victoria* (Cambridge, 2004), 329.
- ⁹⁰. WPR/42 CRO(K), Report on St. Patrick's Church by Sharpe and Paley, architects, Lancaster, sent by E.G. Paley to Revd. J. Hebdon, 26 November, 1850; 'The Consecration of Preston Patrick New Church', *Westmorland Gazette*, 22 October, 1853, 5.
- ⁹¹. J. Price, *Sharpe, Paley and Austin: A Lancaster Architectural Practice 1836-1942* (Lancaster, 1998), 23, 28, 70-71.
- ⁹². *Ibid.*, 52.
- ⁹³. St. Patrick's Church, Preston Patrick, Quinquennial Report, November, 2008, 3:01. The report is in the possession of the church.
- ⁹⁴. *Ibid.*, 3:05.
- ⁹⁵. 'St. John's Well and Chapel', 165.
- ⁹⁶. Page, *Cumbrian Holy Wells*, 3-4. For a broader perspective, see Morris, *Churches in the Landscape*, 84-92, especially 87.