

## Holy Wells in Derbyshire.

By the REV. PETER B. G. BINNALL.

THE following notes represent an attempt to recover and record vestiges of hydrolatry in the county of Derby, which presents a somewhat fertile field for this particular kind of enquiry. They are based upon the printed and manuscript collections of the late Mr. Robert Charles Hope, F.S.A., which were placed at my disposal by his widow in 1926, with a view to the completion of a second edition of his work on *The Legendary Lore of the Holy Wells of England*, first published in 1893. As it is hoped that, after the war, this task may be completed, any corrections or additions to the list would be very welcome.

Any credit for the completeness and accuracy of this account of Derbyshire Holy Wells, which comprises something like a quarter of all the parishes in the county, must be divided between the late Mr. Hope and Mr. F. Williamson, F.R.Hist.S., who has most kindly given me very great assistance. Replies to enquiries on the subject, made by Mr. Williamson, were kindly sent by the following: Mr. Angus Buchan, headmaster (1929) of Dove Holes School; Mr. Edwin Shimwell, of Youlgrave; Mr. Frank Mohan of Glossop and Mr. H. S. Twells, of Derby. Mr. Hope received assistance, many years ago, from a Mr. R. N. Bull.

I have given references wherever possible, but in cases where none appear, it must be understood that I am

basing my notes upon those of Mr. Hope, which were carefully compiled and can generally be relied upon as accurate. It may interest members of this Society to know that Mr. Hope was a Derby man and a brother of that great antiquary, the late Sir William St. John Hope.

#### LIST OF PLACES.

ALLESTREE. A well here was formerly known as Mary Well or Capersich; it is now covered by a pump. It is doubtful if Capersich was ever an alternative name for the well, as Capersich is the old name for the deep depression which runs down to the river between the modern Ferrer's Way and Devonshire Avenue, and the pump is near the church half a mile away.

ASHBOURNE. Three wells here are worth mentioning:— (1) That in the garden of The Mansion, the home of Dr. Johnson's friend, Dr. Taylor. The water was noted for its curative properties in cases of ocular disorder and was used for this purpose as recently as the last quarter of the 19th century. (Mr. H. S. Twells). (2) Mudge Meadow Well, at Sturston, about a mile east of Ashbourne, was reputed to cure fits. (3) There was another celebrated well in the same locality at Agnes Meadow. I do not know the origin of this name; but suggest that the well may have been dedicated in honour of S. Agnes, although, as patron of wells she otherwise only appears in Somerset and Cornwall.<sup>1</sup>

ASHFORD. Skinner's Well is a spring situated in a little dell at the foot of Great Shacklow. It was formerly the custom to drink water from this well, to which sugar had been added, on Easter morning, a usage which is found, with slight variations, in many parts of England.

ASHOVER. S. William's Well is marked on the 6-inch

<sup>1</sup> It is the meadow which is called 'Agnes,' not the well; the earliest mention of 'Agnis' meadow is in a deed (No. 622) in the Derby Public Library, dated 1676.—Ed.

O.S. map. It is not possible to identify the saint, who is hardly likely to be either S. William of York or the boy saint of Norwich.

BASLOW. Well-dressing takes place annually here.

BELPER. The Lady Well here was formerly celebrated for its healing virtues and water was taken from it for both drinking and bathing by invalids. Children were once wont to drink the water mixed with oatmeal and sugar. Jacob's Well also possessed a local reputation, the nature of which I have not ascertained.

BIGGIN, (Hulland). On the Lane End Farm is a chalybeate spring, Biggin Well, once much resorted to for the cure of skin diseases. The water in this well is strongly mineral, and is said never to have been known to freeze. In the vicinity a chapel is known to have existed from the thirteenth century, but even its site is now lost.

BUXTON. S. Anne's Well was a famous place of pilgrimage in the middle ages. As in the case of Bath, the Romans evidently had a regard for the curative properties of the water and in Christian times a chapel was erected to the east of the spring, which is alluded to in the *Valor Ecclesiasticus*. At the time of the reformation, the chapel and well were closed and the image of S. Anne was removed by Sir William Bassett, acting under the orders of Thomas Cromwell. The chapel then apparently fell into decay or was deliberately demolished. Its foundations were found and uncovered in 1698 and in 1709 a certain Sir Thomas Delves, who had benefited from the water, erected a stone alcove over the well, probably in the place formerly occupied by the tall tower-like building shown on Speed's map in 1610. For fuller details, see R. C. Hope, *Legendary Lore of the Holy Wells of England*, pp. 50 ff; M. V. Ronan, *S. Anne, her Cult and her Shrines* (1927), pp. 97 ff; J. C. Cox, *Churches of Derbyshire*, II, 72.

CAVEDALE. Our Lady's Well. On Good Friday, the children used to take bottles to the well, fill them, bring

them home and put liquorice and spices into the water and then leave them in the dark until Easter Day, when they took them to church, shook them and allowed one another to drink from them. (*Folk-Lore*, XXI, p. 31).

CHESTERFIELD. Holywell Street and Holywell Cross in Chesterfield commemorate a "Haliwell in Cestrefeld," mentioned in *Pedes Finium* of c. 1196. (Hunter's *Fines* II, 16).

CHAPEL EN LE FRITH. Mermaid's Pool, Mill Hill. At 12 o'clock on Easter Eve, when Easter Day is coming in, if you look steadfastly into the pool, you will behold a mermaid.

CRICH. A pump near the church is called Holy Well Pump.

DALE ABBEY. The story of the Hermit of Deepdale, extracted from the *Chronicle of Thomas de Musca*, has been frequently printed. The following is Dr. Cox's concise description of the hermitage and its environment before they were altered about 1880:—"The cave, as originally scooped out by the hermit baker, still remains. It is cut in the sandy cliff that stands above the valley on its S. side, and it is nearly concealed by the overhanging wood. The hermitage has a doorway in the centre, with a window opening on each side. Not far from it, on the same side of the valley, is the small church, which is actually under the same roof with a dwellinghouse, and having a door of intercommunication between them. Some fifty years ago this component part of the church was actually licensed as a public-house. . . . It is recorded that the hermit moved here in order to be near a spring that he discovered, and the well at the corner of what is now the orchard of the "Church House," is still called the "Hermit's well."

(J. C. Cox, *Tourist's Derbyshire*, p. 91. See also Glover, *Hist. Derbyshire*, II, *sub. nom*; *Derbs. Arch. Soc. Journal*, V, 1-30).

DERBY. Celebrated wells in Derby were: S. Alkmund's, Becket Well, S. Helen's, The Pilgrim's Well, the Virgin's and S. Peter's. The Virgin's Well was in Abbey Street, the Pilgrim's Well was in Normanton Road, but has now disappeared.

Particulars of S. Alkmund's Well may be found in the fourth volume of Dr. Cox's *Churches of Derbyshire*, quoted at some length by R. C. Hope (*op. cit.*). It was last 'dressed' in 1926.

Becket Well is described in detail in an illustrated article in *Derbs. Arch. Soc. Journal*, Vol. XII, and in the *Derbs. Advertiser*, 16 March, 1928.

It is often stated that Becket Well receives its name from S. Thomas of Canterbury, and that a chapel dedicated in honour of that saint stood near it, but there is no evidence for either statement. The well was referred to as 'Begette' well in 1510, which is against all probability if it had been named in honour of S. Thomas.

DOVERIDGE. S. Cuthbert's Well is shown on the 6-inch O.S. map.

EYAM. Though not an ancient holy well, Mompesson's Well at Eyam deserves notice on account of its connection with the courageous vicar, whose name it bears. It is on the moor, high above the village, and is covered with a stone, the upper surface of which is carved in the shape of a cross. This was one of the points on the imaginary line drawn round the village which, in the time of the pestilence, none was to pass. Here provisions and other necessaries were brought for the inhabitants, who placed their money in the pure, running water of the spring, to prevent contagion. It is said that, to ensure disinfection, vinegar was poured into the water. (J. M. J. Fletcher, *The Plague-stricken Derbyshire Village*, p. 45).

HAYFIELD. Near here is the Mermaid's Pool, concerning which it is said that the gift of immortality is bestowed by the mermaid upon any who are fortunate enough to behold her.

ILAM. Though just over the Staffordshire border, the well of S. Bertram at Ilam seems properly to belong to the Derbyshire group, which existed long before county boundaries.

The saint was a local man, reputed to have performed several miracles in the neighbourhood and to have been buried near his well, beside which was an ash tree, popularly regarded as capable of becoming invisible.

In the vicinity are certain ancient cross-shafts which may have marked the saint's grave. (R. M. Clay, *Hermits and Anchorites of England*, p. 15; *Parliamentary Gazetteer*, 1841, III, 469-70).

ILKESTON. Though nothing to do with holy wells, the following piece of water-lore, recorded in Mr. Hope's book, is of some interest. Precisely similar accounts from other parts of England have, from time to time, been printed. "Some few years ago a body was drowned in the canal near Ilkeston; the means taken to discover it was as follows: A penny loaf of bread was procured, the inside scooped out, and the vacuum filled with quicksilver; the loaf was then put into the water, and allowed to float down with the current, the superstition being that, when it came to the spot where the body lay, it would stop." (Hope, *op. cit.*, pp. 59-60).

KEDLESTON. Here and at Quarndon are mineral springs, whose medicinal properties have been recognized for many centuries; a note on them occurs in the fifteenth volume of *The Reliquary*.

KING'S NEWTON. An engraving of the ancient well here appears in Mr. Hope's book. It is marked in Gothic lettering on the O.S. map.

KNIVETON. Well-dressing used to take place here annually in June.

MILFORD. An interesting form of divination was practised here on 22 July, 1882. A young woman having been drowned in the Derwent and the river unsuccessfully

dragged for her body, the following method was adopted to discover its whereabouts. A drum was loudly beaten in a boat for several hours, under the impression that it would emit no sound when it passed over the place where the corpse lay. (Hope, *op. cit.*, p. 60).

**NORTH LEES.** The Trinity Well here is near the site of the Roman Catholic chapel, built by the Eyre family in 1603. Its name is probably modern and I do not know of any particular beliefs regarding its properties.

**REPTON.** S. Thomas' Well is behind Repton Laundry and S. Anne's Well is just off the footway from Repton to Newton Solney; both are marked on the 6-inch O.S. map.

Hugh, Earl of Chester, confirmed to the canons of Calke various lands, c. 1162, including the following, which had been given by his father: "The land of Loftescot (Loscoe Farm), as the road descends from Rapendone (Repton) to the spring (fons) called *Neuhalhewelle*, and as the same Spring descends to the boundaries of Meltone" (Milton). (Jeayes, *Derbyshire Charters*, No. 536).

**ROSTON.** The Friday Well, in a farmyard at the back of the Primitive Methodist chapel, was first dressed in 1887. The practice was discontinued during the last war, but has since been revived. A good photograph appears in R. C. S. Walters, *Holy Wells of Gloucestershire*.

**STONY MIDDLETON.** Here is a well dedicated in honour of S. Martin, who is traditionally supposed to have been a local worthy, cured of leprosy by the waters whose medicinal qualities were evidently recognized by the Romans, since they erected a bath here. The church is supposed to stand on the site of a well-chapel, erected by Martin. (J. C. Cox, *Churches of Derbyshire*, II, 246).

**TIDSWELL.** The popular derivation of the name (which is not accepted by authorities) is that it denotes the ebbing and flowing of a well, a natural process, popularly called "tiding." The well, which no longer tides, still exists in the garden of Craven House, on the right hand side of the Manchester road.

On the road to Wheston, near Cross Gates Farm, is the base of an old wayside cross, which is called the Wishing Well. (J. M. J. Fletcher, *A Guide to Tideswell and its Church*, pp. 3, 53. For an interesting custom here, see Glover, *Hist. Derbyshire*, I, 307).

TISSINGTON. There are five wells here: the Hall Well, Hand's Well, Town Well, Yew Tree Well and Coffin Well, all of which are dressed annually on Ascension Day. The details of the ceremony and the method of decoration are described in most of the accounts mentioned below.

This custom of well-dressing, which has been revived in several Derbyshire villages, at Tissington dates from an unknown and remote period, generally said to be that of the Roman occupation. A note in the parish register recording a serious drought in 1615, has sometimes been quoted in support of a suggestion that the well-dressing originated in a kind of thank-offering for an abundant local water-supply at that time, but there can be little doubt that the usage was already ancient in the seventeenth century, when Anthony Wood mentions its observance at Oxford.

Outside Derbyshire, we have found traces of similar procedure at the following places; Bethcot, Bibrooke, Brewood, Canwell, Endon, Rudyard and Rushton Spencer, all in Staffordshire, Oxford, Collingtree, Northamptonshire, Colwell, Northumberland and Louth, Lincolnshire.

References: Gentleman's Mag. Library, *Popular Superstitions*, 142-146, largely, but inaccurately, and without acknowledgment, quoted by R. C. S. Walters, in *Holy Wells of Gloucestershire* (1928), chap. XXVII; E. M. Hull, *Folklore of the British Isles*, 115-7, largely quoting The Observer for 22 May, 1927; Christina Hole, *English Folklore* (1940), 101, 102 (illus.). *Notes and Queries*, 2nd series, X, 38; W. Hone, *Everyday Book*, II, 636 ff.; *The Treasury*, III, 187-9; E. W. Brayley, *The Graphic and Historical Illustrator* (1834), pp. 30, 283.



WHITFIELD. A well here, which may be the same as the Haliwell, mentioned as being in the parish of Glossop in c. 1330 (*Quo Warranto Rolls*), has been dressed for many years on or about September 15th.

WILNE. S. Chad's Well here, near the church, may have supplied the water in which he baptized his converts. It is noteworthy that in most of the places where S. Chad dwelt, e.g. Barton-on-Humber and Lichfield, wells are found bearing his name.

WIRKSWORTH. Well-dressing has been revived here and takes place annually on the Wednesday in Whitsun week. A good account appeared, with an illustration in *The Derbyshire Advertiser* for 24th May, 1929.

WYASTON. Dressing of an ancient well, not that which now supplies the village, used to take place here annually.

YOULGRAVE. The following interesting account of the Tap-dressing here was written by Mr. Edwin Shimwell: "Prior to 1829 this village had no direct water-supply and water was obtained either from the river Bradford or from a number of wells in the village, of which there were about a dozen, most of them on private property, but one well, named Holy Well, near the Old Hall, is situated in the middle of the road and is now completely covered over and the traffic passes over it every day, without its existence being known. The road leading from this well to the river is still known as Holy Well Lane.

The use of this well must have been discontinued many years ago. It has been uncovered on several occasions, when excavation has been going on and it is said to be about five feet wide and lined with grit-stone; a number of steps lead down to it and the front edges are worn almost level with the next.

Prior to 1893, only one tap was dressed, on Midsummer day, the one called the Fountain. It is a circular structure, built of grit-stone and railed all round. It stands on the site of the old village stocks and cross.

After that time a number of young men began to take more interest in the event and now we have five taps in the main street dressed.

Usually the central picture is a building and different kinds of mosses are used for making it. One, which we call white moss, is obtained from limestone rocks and is very scarce. Instead of using this for the Taj Mahal, fluor-spar was used; this is ground down to a powder and scattered on. We also use this for the sky and colour it blue.

When making a human figure, we use the white moss for face, hands and feet and make the dress of different flowers, among which none looks better than scarlet geraniums, blue lupins, delphiniums and ladies' slippers. The border is made of different coloured flowers, with a ground-work of either green moss or spar.

The central picture stands back about 9 or 10 inches from the border board."

#### ADDITIONAL NOTE.

The attention of any who are interested in this subject may be drawn to some valuable records of customs connected with wells in the Castleton neighbourhood, to be found in the chapter on Derbyshire Folklore, by the late S. O. Addy, in *Memorials of Old Derbyshire*.