

Madron Well, Cornwall

Repair of west wall



Cornwall Archaeological Unit



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A Report for Penwith District Council and the Bolitho Estate

Madron Well, Cornwall

Repair of vandalism

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CORNWALL ARCHAEOLOGICAL UNIT

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On site, the work was carried out by Adrian Thomas and David Cutting; Andrew Nicholls, of nearby Boswarthen Farm, gave permission for access across his land.

Within Cornwall Archaeological Unit, the report was edited by Peter Rose.

Cover illustration

Madron Well Chapel, c 1910, from Harris Stone 1910, 212.

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Abbreviations

| | |
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| CAU | Cornwall Archaeological Unit |
| EH | English Heritage |
| HER | Cornwall and the Isles of Scilly Historic Environment Record |
| PRN | Primary Record Number in Cornwall HER |
| OS | Ordnance Survey |

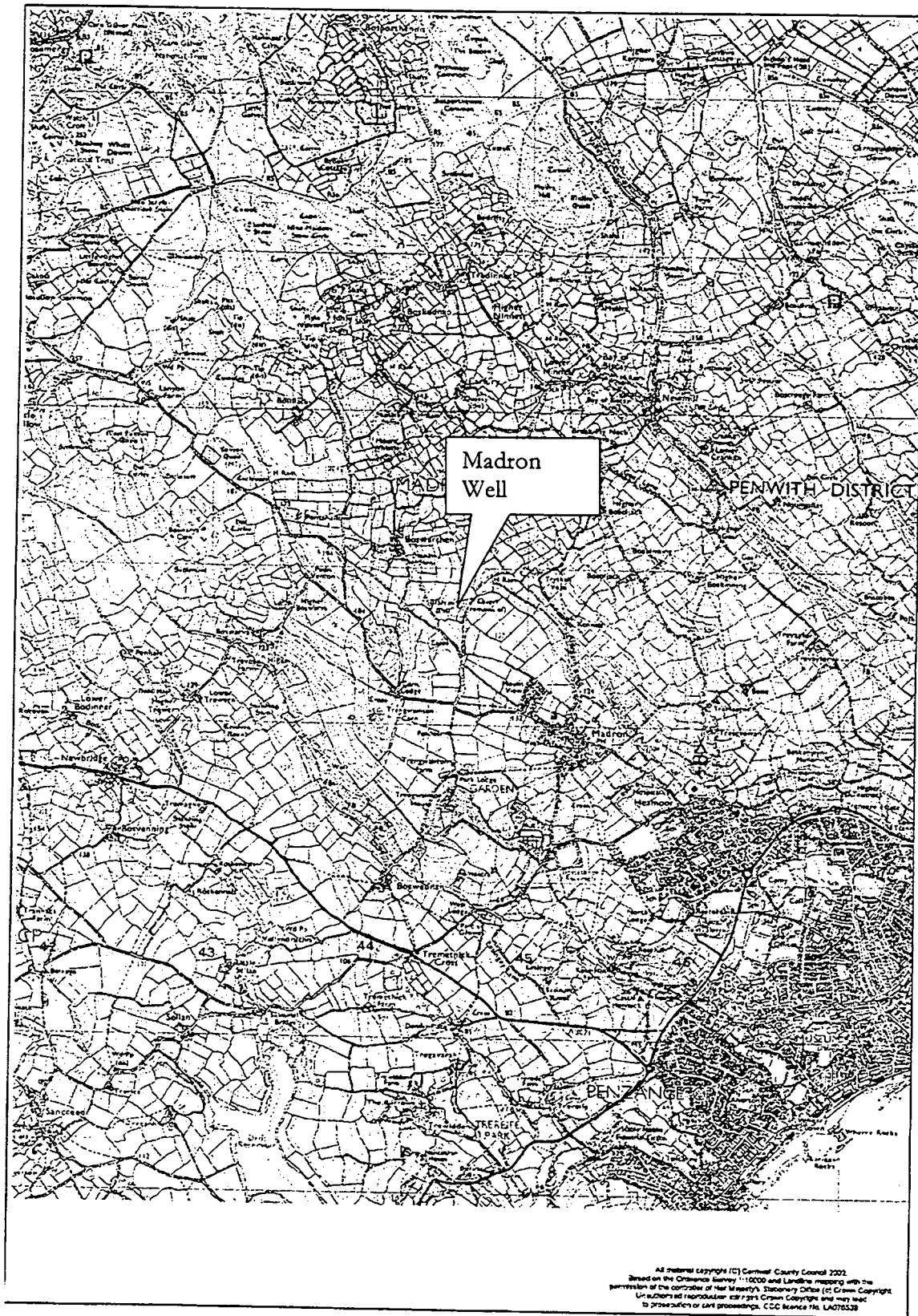


Fig 1. Location of Madron Well

Summary

Vandals have repeatedly damaged the chapel at Madron Well, one of Cornwall's most famous holy wells, over the last few years. In the latest attack, in April 2003, stones from the wall forming the northern side of the trough or cistern in the chapel's south-west corner were thrown down into the water below. Although this is an area that has been repeatedly damaged in the past, the latest attack involved the removal of even more stone, this time eating into the wall of the chapel itself, leaving a section of frighteningly overhanging stonework, directly above the area where many visitors stoop to drink or fill bottles with the spring water.

In order to rebuild the damaged section of wall, more stone had to be removed, to create a secure surface to build up from. In so doing, a number of discoveries and observations were made. Four pieces of cut granite were discovered, though none in their original situations. These included two chamfered stones, possibly from a doorway or window, and two pieces of chamfered stone similar to the stone benches around the edges of the chapel. Evidence was found to show that this part of the chapel has been rebuilt; although the very lowest parts of the west wall may be original work, for at approximately only 0.5 metres above the ground, behind the bench and cistern wall, was found a small area of *in situ* lime plaster.

The conservation work involved rebuilding the north wall of the cistern and the wall of the chapel above this. The section of the stone bench immediately adjacent to the cistern wall was also rebuilt, incorporating one of the newly discovered bench-stones as its seat. One or two stones in the west wall of the cistern, found to be loose, were mortared back into place. The strongest hydraulic lime, NHL 5, was used in the work, in the hope that this will make it more difficult for vandals to damage the wall again. The majority of the stone used was salvaged from the site, but some weathered granite had also to be brought in.

Following this work, it is recommended that the condition of the cistern wall is closely monitored. The stonework here was found to be in poor condition, with some stones loose. This poses a considerable threat to visitors, many of whom stoop to collect water from the pool. A further recommendation is that a thorough survey and architectural appraisal of the building is carried out. The purpose of this would be to establish which parts of the chapel are original medieval work, and which have been recently rebuilt, and would therefore help in assessing the impact of any further vandalism, should this occur.

1. Introduction

1.1 Project background

Madron's well-chapel has suffered repeated vandalism over the last few years, the majority of the damage being to the north wall of the cistern in the south-west corner, with some damage also to the north doorway and the stone benches. The English Heritage (EH) Field Monument Warden's file contains various reports and notes of this damage; previous repairs co-ordinated by CAU are described in Preston-Jones 1999 and 2000.

The last repairs, funded by Cornwall Archaeological Unit, were carried out in June 2000, but this work was partly dismantled a few months later. Then in June 2002, a corner was broken off one of the stone benches along the north wall (see the EH Damage Report: Preston-Jones 2002). The latest damage, probably again the result of vandalism, was reported to Ann Preston-Jones by Andy Norfolk, at the end of April 2003.

This continued attrition is unacceptable in a monument which is of such interest and so frequently visited. It was therefore decided that the damage should be repaired as soon as possible, even though it was not immediately apparent where the funds to do the work would be found. In the event, Penwith District Council and the owner, the Bolitho Estate, agreed to share the cost of the repair work, with recording and organisation by CAU.

1.2 Aims

The aims of the project were therefore

- To repair the recent damage
- To repair the damage in such a way that the work would not be conspicuously modern
- To repair the damage to the wall of the cistern so that it would be more robust and resistant to future attempts at vandalism, while retaining the overall plan and appearance of this piece of stonework.

2 Background

2.1 Location and setting

A couple of miles to the north-west of Penzance, in a low-lying swampy area, now willow-grown but formerly more open and grassy (see Fig 2) is Madron holy well, and the chapel which is the subject of this report.

'After visiting the church [Madron Church] I told the driver of our wagonette to take us to visit the famous well associated with this saint. Through pleasing lanes and amid rural scenery of the picturesque, homely kind we drove, till we came to a gate....Pushing open the gate, we entered on some marshy ground, and after some searching and following various tracks through dense thickets of bramble and bracken, at last struck the right one... (Harris Stone 1910, 210).

2.2 The monument

'A few yards beyond the well I came upon a circular hedge or wall of about twenty to twenty-five yards in diameter. This was entered by a sweetly pretty Cornish stile, and within was a roofless building of rudely shaped granite stones – the interior twenty-five feet by 12 ft 6 inches in size, the walls 2 ft 6 inches thick....' (Harris Stone 1910, 212).

Though small, simple, and roofless, the building contains a number of features of interest. At the east end, is a shallow step up to the chancel area, upon which stands an altar built of a single large slab of granite with a small socket in it, to receive an image, or a portable altar (Henderson 1958, 320). Along the north, south, and west sides of the building are simple stone benches, and in the south-west corner is a roughly circular area (variously described as a well, a trough, a cistern, a basin) into which water from Madron well is conducted. It is this area of the chapel which this report is concerned with.

Antiquarian accounts of the building, the results of previous limited work here (Preston-Jones 1999 and 2000), and a superficial examination of the building itself, make it clear that at least parts of the building have been rebuilt over time. To take an obvious example: Blight's mid 19th century sketch of the chapel shows the south and west walls in a low ruinous condition, with a tree apparently growing out of the west wall, and his plan indicates that the stone bench, particularly along the south wall, was fragmentary (fig 3). Sedding in 1909 notes that although 'the highest point of the east wall is about 10 feet above the ground, the side walls are considerably lower'. Yet 'the stone seats of the nave were perfect'. And a photo in Lane Davies 1970 book on *The Holy Wells of Cornwall* (page 67) shows the results of a recent 'restoration' in which the whole appears to have been rebuilt in the style of a Cornish hedge (Fig 4).

2.3 Condition of the monument prior to conservation work

As noted above, the last repairs to the chapel took place in 2000. The damage on this occasion had been to the north wall of the cistern, which had been pulled down to the level of the adjacent stone bench. This was rebuilt; but within a very short space of time, had been demolished again.

On this latest occasion, the main area of damage was to the west wall of the chapel, above the wall which was pulled down in 2000. There were also several less serious problems. All are described below:

- The stonework of the west wall of the chapel, above the previously damaged wall of the cistern, had been pulled out, exposing the rubble core of the wall. The area affected measured approximately 0.75m x 0.4m wide and was up to 0.3m deep. Above this, there was one overhanging course of stones at the top of the wall. Rubble pulled from the wall was lying in the cistern, and on the ground below the west wall.
- One stone in the bench along the west wall had been dislodged slightly.
- One stone in the bench along the north wall had been dislodged and was loose.
- One stone had been lifted from the top of the north wall.

3 The conservation work

In helping to achieve these aims of the project, set out in section 2, above, the following guidelines were used. These are quoted from the project proposal – Preston-Jones 2003.

1. The rebuilding of the cistern to be planned in close liaison with CAU.
2. If any new stone had to be brought onto the site in order to carry out the repair to the cistern, this was to be weathered granite, which matched that already existing on the site in terms of texture, colour, and size.
3. The stones to be bedded in a hydraulic lime:sand mortar, using NHL 5 and New Milton sand.

4. Any mortar to be kept well back from the face of the stones, so that it would not be over-conspicuous.
5. Any visible mortar or fresh-looking stone to be smeared with earth, to help it blend in with the existing stonework.

3.1 The repairs

The repair work took place during the week of Monday 4th to Friday 8th August. The guidelines quoted above were closely adhered to and in detail, the work involved the following steps:

1. All the stone which the vandals had thrown down was collected together, to be re-used.
2. At an early stage, it was noted that a number of the stones in the corbelled wall of the cistern are scantily supported, the bedding mortar having washed out, leaving voids behind the stones. One particularly loose stone was propped with a wooden support while work was taking place, to make working safe and to make the area safe for visitors.
3. The stonework directly below the damaged cistern wall was taken down by two further courses, in order to create a level surface to build up from. In fact, this was all stonework which had been previously rebuilt.
4. To make a more solid and stable wall on this occasion, the plan was to make it slightly wider than before. In order to achieve this, the stonework of the stone bench adjoining the wall of the cistern also had to be dismantled, because it was very uneven and incapable of providing support for the new wall. Discoveries made in the process of doing this are described below in section 5 of this report.
5. Two large long pieces of granite were laid to form the base for the rebuilt cistern wall. These were both brought in, and are distinguished from most other stone on the site by a slightly crisper appearance and by the fact that one of them has drill marks on it. This particular stone was laid in such a way that it forms a bridge over the stream carrying the spring water away from the cistern (see fig 6).
6. The wall was built up from here, using weathered granite and a hydraulic lime mortar based on NHL 5. On the very top was placed one of the chamfered stones discovered in the course of dismantling the bench next to the cistern wall. The final height is similar to that of the wall on the opposite side of the cistern (see fig 7).
7. The damaged west wall of the chapel was rebuilt, bedding the stones in a hydraulic lime mortar.
8. The stone bench immediately adjoining the cistern wall was rebuilt and a slab of chamfered granite, found at the bottom of the wall when it was dismantled, was restored to its correct position as a seat.
9. Further stones in the bench along the west wall were re-bedded, and the area generally tidied up.
10. The propped loose stone in the wall of the cistern was securely mortared back into place.
11. Finally, earth was thrown over the areas of fresh mortar, to make the repairs less conspicuous. Stonework joints were not pointed, but were left slightly recessed.

It should be noted that the other minor problems listed above, in section 2.3, were not repaired, as the rebuilding of the cistern and wall above took considerably longer than initially anticipated.

4 Results of the recording

The repair work described above was, for the most part, to an area of stonework which had been damaged in the past, although the damage on this occasion was of greater extent than previously. An appropriate level of archaeological recording was therefore considered to involve:

- Making a photographic record (using black and white, colour slide and colour prints) of the damaged area before and after the conservation work.
- Advising on the nature of the repair, which would involve trying to balance the need to make as robust a repair as possible, while attempting to keep the style of the repair as close as possible to that of the original stonework.
- A watching brief when work commenced, while any stonework which had to be taken down prior to rebuilding was removed.
- Recording any observations made in the process of carrying out the work.

This recording was carried out as specified. The archive numbers of the photographs taken are listed at the end of the report. Features discovered in the process of carrying out the work are listed below:

1. It was found that the north wall of the cistern was not tied into the west wall of the chapel (even in the lower parts, which had not been *recently* rebuilt).
2. Adrian Thomas felt that the west wall of the chapel definitely had been rebuilt. The wall was considered to be 'like a hedge' in having an earth core and in using earth for bedding the stones. This agrees with observations made above (page 7) on the state of the wall prior to the 1960s restoration.
3. Despite this, the very lowest part of the wall may be of medieval origin, for when the stone seat adjacent to the cistern wall was dismantled, traces of lime plaster were found on the wall here. This was not disturbed, and was covered up again.
4. The stone bench was in very poor condition and evidently rebuilt. In fact, it is possible that the bench along this wall is a modern fabrication, for Blight's plan of the chapel does not depict a bench along the west wall (Fig 3). The bench incorporated a chamfered slab of granite, similar to the slabs used for the tops of the benches along the north and south walls, but this piece was found in one of the bottom courses of the bench.
5. A number of other pieces of cut granite were found, amongst the stonework from the damaged wall, and amongst the dismantled stone from the bench. These included:
 - The bench-stone noted above
 - A further piece of granite seat, of uncertain provenance. This was placed on top of the rebuilt cistern wall
 - A stone with a broad simple chamfer, possibly from a doorway or mullioned window. Of uncertain provenance.
 - A stone similar to that described above has been re-used as a seat at the northern end of the bench against the west wall.

6. In the process of doing the work, it was observed (by Adrian Thomas) that a number of the stones in the wall of the cistern, even at a fairly low level in the stonework, were levelled with slates when the walling was built. Slate is certainly used today to level stones, but I do not know when the technique was first employed. It seems doubtful that it was the habit of medieval masons to use slates in this way. This observation therefore raises questions about the extent to which a building like Madron Well-chapel, which we know has been in use in some sense or other for hundreds of years, has been rebuilt

5 Conclusion

The section of wall which has been repaired looks considerably more solid than it has done for many years. Even forty years ago (see Fig 5) , it looked rather like a rough pile of stones, and was therefore always potentially vulnerable to the vandalism that has afflicted the building for the last five years. Hopefully, the stronger construction will deter future efforts to damage the building, and we hope that the efforts of the vandals will not now be directed to other easier targets, like (for example) the stone benches along the north and south walls.

The stones which turned up in the course of this very small piece of work, and the observations made, have thrown a little extra light on this famous monument, highlighting in particular its continued use, re-use and repair up to the present day.

6 Recommendations

This is such an intriguing and interesting monument, with (to judge from the sample of visitors encountered when this repair work was taking place) a fame which is now world-wide. And yet the chapel, the well and their setting are all sadly neglected, rather tatty, and, perhaps as a result of these factors, subject to continued vandalism.

For the short term, it is recommended that that the condition of the cistern wall is closely monitored. The stonework here was found to be in poor condition, with some stones loose. This poses a considerable threat to visitors, many of whom stoop to collect water from the pool. A further recommendation is that a thorough survey and architectural appraisal of the building is carried out. The purpose of this would be to establish which parts of the chapel are original medieval work, and which have been recently rebuilt, and would therefore help in assessing the impact of any further vandalism, should this occur.

For the long term, what is really needed is a long hard look at all aspects of this complex. We need to look at the current condition and management of the area as a whole, as well as the individual components, so that a plan for sympathetic and sustainable management can be drawn up and implemented. Continued vandalism which eats a little further into the fabric each time it occurs, is simply not desirable. Nor does the condition of the place, with its muddy track, fractured pipes and invasive Knotweed, present a good impression to the many visitors, be they ordinary tourists or individuals seeking spiritual refreshment.

7 References

7.1 Primary sources

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7.2 Publications

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8 Project archive

The CAU project number is **2003016**

The project's documentary, photographic and drawn archive is housed at the offices of Cornwall Archaeological Unit, 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. Black and white photographs archived under the following index numbers: GBP 1595, 20 – 23
3. This report held in digital form as
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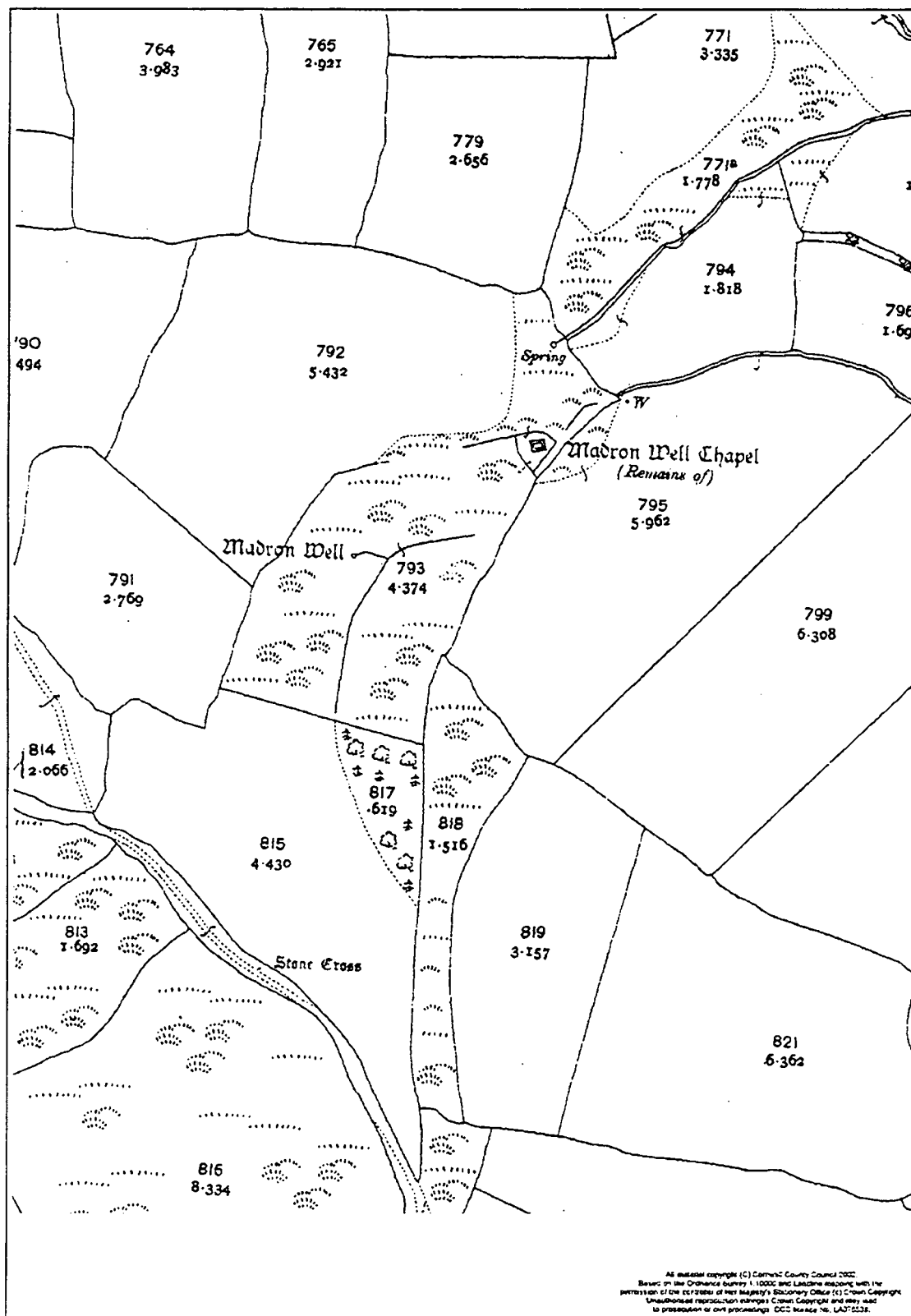


Fig 2. OS 1st edition 25 inch map of circa 1880, showing the locations of Madron Well and Chapel, and their contemporary setting, of grass with clumps of furze.



MADRON WELL CHAPEL.

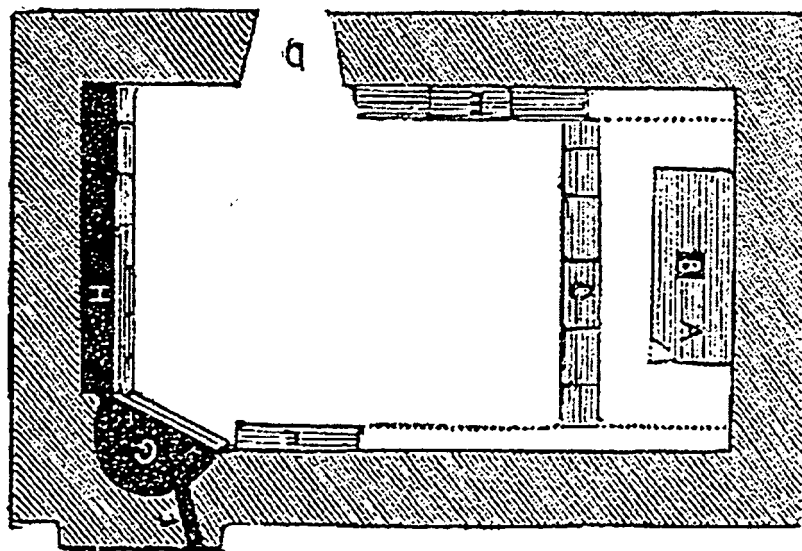


Fig 3. JT Blight's 1856 sketch and plan of Madron Well

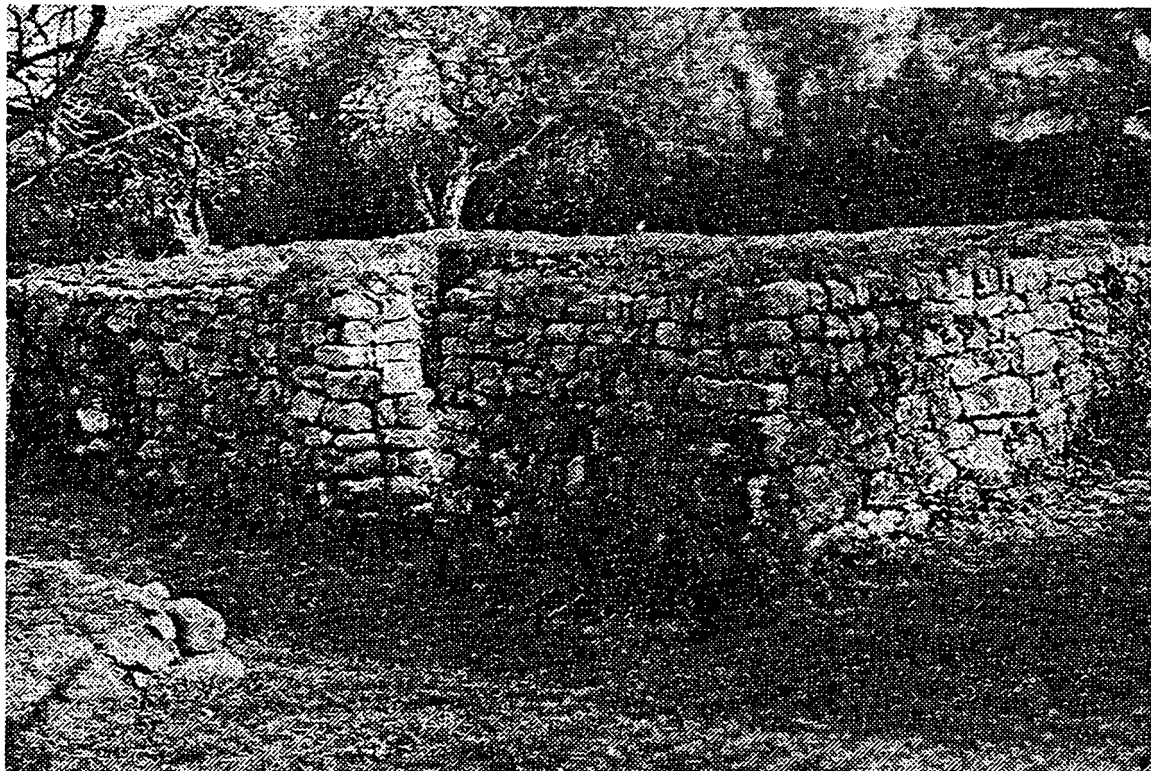


Fig 4. The 1960s (?) restoration of the chapel (photo from Lane Davies 1970, 67)



Fig 5. The cistern in about 1960 (photo Mary Henderson)



Fig 6. The vandalised wall above the cistern, before repair.



Fig 7. Work in progress



Fig 8. The repaired wall and bench