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ST. MARY'S WELL, JESMOND, NEWCASTLE UPON TYNE

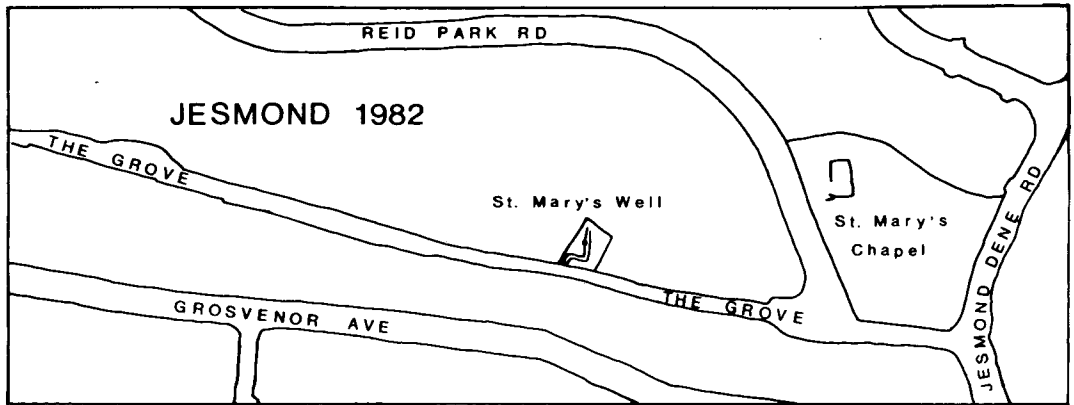
R. Fraser

St. Mary's Well, Jesmond, (NZ 2585 6651) was acquired by Newcastle Corporation in May 1932 because it was felt that the site constituted an Ancient Monument within the meaning of the Ancient Monuments Consolidation and Amendment Act of 1913. By virtue of the above act, the Corporation were empowered to acquire and maintain it,¹ but during the course of time, the combination of soil movement and tree root growth caused the whole structure to become increasingly unstable. In view of this, at the beginning of 1982, the Estate and Property Department of Newcastle City Council decided to renovate the site in order to stabilize its condition, thereby making it more attractive to the general public. The extensive nature of the renovation meant that much of the site would have to be dismantled. It was felt that if this work was done by archaeologists, detailed drawings could then be made to facilitate reconstruction and the site could also be examined in an attempt to shed some light on its earlier history.

St. Mary's Well lies in a wooded hollow to the north of a footpath called "The Grove" in Jesmond, some 2 km north-east of Newcastle (see fig. 1). Originally the well, or spring, would have been located just to the north of old Jesmond Village, on the south bank of a small dene which ran into the Ouseburn to the east. Subsequently this dene, the Moor Crook Letch, was filled in and conduited along part of its course, while the lands to the south and north of it, including the well-site, were enclosed by the gardens of large houses such as Jesmond Manor House and The Grove, built in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. Because Jesmond has changed so radically in the past 130 years, from farmland to a suburban landscape, little trace remains of the original topography and place names, with the result that traditionally "old" features like St. Mary's Well are completely divorced from their original settings and relationships.

Today, St. Mary's Well is linked by name and proximity with the ruined Norman Chapel, which lies about 200 m to the east. While it is possible to establish a case for St. Mary's Chapel as a pre-Reformation place of pilgrimage, and certainly members of the Catholic Church regard both chapel and well as holy sites,² the documentary evidence for the chapel nowhere includes any reference to a holy well.³

There was some dispute at the beginning of this century about the exact site of St. Mary's Well. Not only were there a number of wells in the area, but specifically there had been two wells within the then grounds of the Chapel. One was Pigg's Well, which according to Parker Brewis was relatively modern, in that it was a disused



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1895

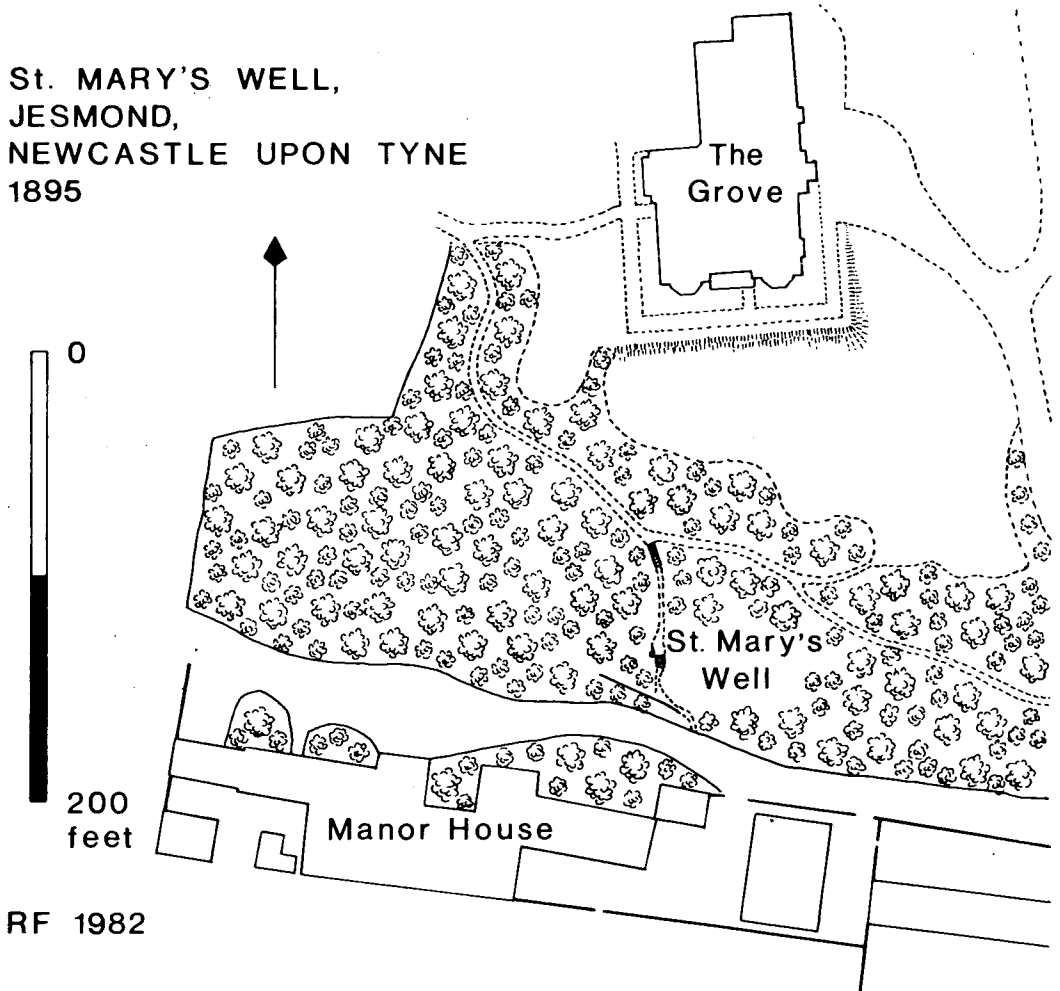


Fig. 1.

spring until it was cleaned out and surrounded with brickwork by a Mr. Pigg.⁴ The other well was "covered up" by Lord Armstrong (then Sir W. G. Armstrong) who bought the Chapel and its land in 1872.⁵ This well was situated on the north bank of the Moor Crook Letch, and slightly to the east of the Chapel. Both Dendy⁶ and Parker Brewis quote Lord Armstrong as being the person on whose authority the present St. Mary's Well was identified as such by the Ordnance Survey. It is my personal opinion that Lord Armstrong identified the present St. Mary's Well as the original because he was aware of what the local histories, in particular that of Bourne, had to say on the subject.⁷

The earliest historical reference mentioning the existence of a "holy well" in Jesmond, is that made in a footnote by Bourne, who when writing of the suburbs of Pilgrim Street says,⁸

The Gentleman of this Place (Jesmond) at present is William Coulson, Esq; who lately built a very pretty House (Jesmond Manor House), and accommodated it with Gardens.

St. Mary's Well in this Village, which is said to have had as many Steps down to it, as there are Articles in the Creed, was lately inclos'd by Mr. Coulson for a Bathing-Place; which was no sooner done than the Water left it. This occasioned strange Whispers in the Village and the adjacent Places. The Well was always esteemed of more Sanctity than common Wells, and therefore the Failing of the Water could be looked upon as nothing less than a just Revenge for so great a Prophanation. But Alas! the Miracle's at an End, for the Water returned a-while ago in as great Abundance as ever.

The importance of this passage lies in that it is the first written evidence we possess of a "holy well" of some antiquity in Jesmond, although Bourne is doubtless relating a local oral tradition which may have grown up over a long period of time before he came to record it in 1736. While many others have written of this "holy well", they do no more than repeat this original passage.⁹

The location of the present St. Mary's Well within the then boundaries of Jesmond Manor House, referred to in the passage as having been built by Wm. Coulson, and its close proximity to the old site of Jesmond Village, meant in all probability that Bourne was referring to the modern well site of the same name. Subsequent discovery of a "bathing pool" during the course of excavation proved this beyond doubt.

It was evident from the information obtained through excavation that the present structure does not date back beyond the seventeenth century. While it is always possible that there may have been an earlier structure on the site of which no trace has survived, or that initially there was a spring emanating from the ground at this point, and that today's St. Mary's Well may at least mark the place of a spring once esteemed of more sanctity than common springs, the lack of corroborative evidence means the same may be argued of both the spring adjacent to the Chapel and the disused spring of Pigg's Well.

THE EXCAVATION

The excavation was limited to an area 5 m by 10 m primarily because the site was

surrounded by private gardens and trees at a much higher level. This also placed a further restriction on the overall depth of the site. While this area was sufficient for the total excavation of the well, only a small part of the bath structure could be uncovered. On this basis, it was decided that only a trial trench should be dug through the tip layers filling the bath in order to test its depth, and the manner of its construction.

Phase 1

The earliest phase that we were able to identify comprised a well and an adjacent area of flagging (see fig. 2). The lower three courses of the present extant well lining, together with a single stone, cut and shaped like a millstone, which forms the bottom of the well, were all that remained of the original. The lower stone courses of the well lining comprised dressed sandstone blocks with curved inner faces arranged with stones of equal height in each course. While these stones were packed from behind with pink-brown clay, no clay had been used on the bedding joints; the bottom course was laid on top of the "millstone". Although a certain amount of the water did seep through the stone joints, most of it was forced up through the eye of the bottom stone.

Associated with the well in its first phase was an area of flagstones. Because of their large size and the accuracy with which they had been laid relative to one another,

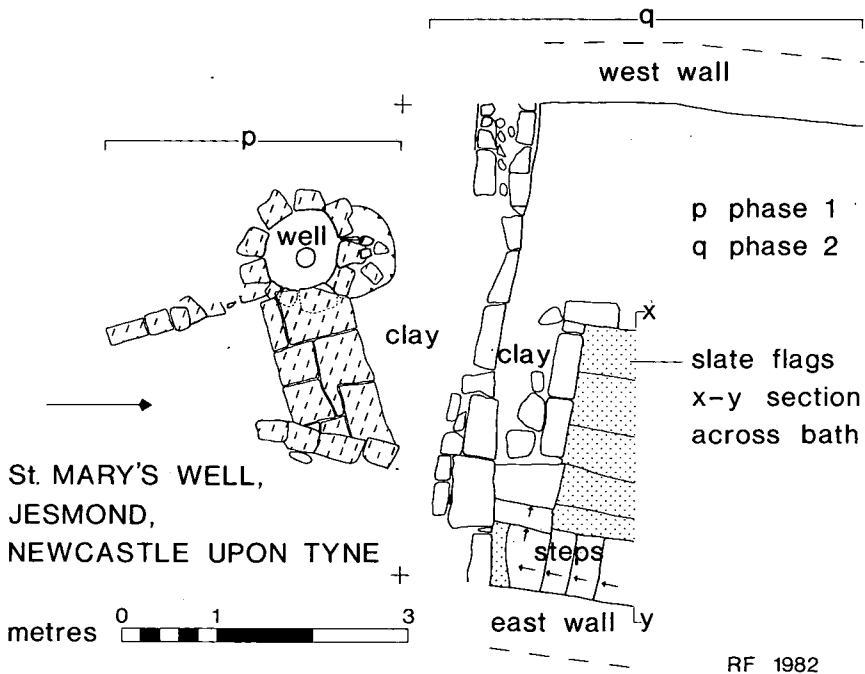


Fig. 2. The earliest phases of St. Mary's Well.

they were particularly distinctive. This area of flagging was bedded on the same pink-brown clay used to pack the stone of the well lining. It also overlapped the upper stones of the third course on the east side, thereby illustrating that in this first phase, the well had a side opening. This particular type of well configuration would seem to be the result of the acute slope of the land surface around the well top, which effectively precluded access (to the water) vertically down the shaft.

Crucially, for the dating of this phase, two almost complete handmade bricks were recovered from the clay packing of the stone lining of the well, while a third was recovered from the same clay which was used to bed the flagstones. All three bricks might be as early as the seventeenth century.¹⁰

Phase 2

The bath structure (see fig. 2) clearly post-dated phase one, the construction trench of its main south wall cutting the clay bedding of the flagging of phase one. This wall was built of dressed sandstone blocks of varying sizes, clay bonded in their lower courses, and mortar bonded above the level of the water table. The construction trench between the south face of the wall and the cut for the trench was packed with clay. In the side of the west section there was a mortar-bonded sandstone wall, surviving four courses high in places, which was bonded to the south wall. It is impossible to say whether this wall was an outer wall or not.

The bath itself does not appear to have occupied the whole of this internal area. On the west side it seems to have had a walkway some 2.45 m wide, which narrows on the south side of the pool to between 0.7–0.85 m. The bath itself was some 1.22 m deep, and 2.82 m wide, with steep steps leading down into it on its east side. All three sides of the bath were constructed in large sandstone ashlar blocks, as was the walkway around the pool, and packed behind with brown clay. The bottom of the pool on the other hand was flagged with very large slates.

The demolition debris that filled the bath comprised alternating bands of clay with mortar, wooden slats and black pantiles in profusion, giving the impression that the "bathing place" was at some time partially roofed.

Because the archaeological remains reflects Bourne's description so accurately, we should not hesitate in ascribing this structure to the early eighteenth century.

Phase 3

The nature of the finds would indicate that the bathing place was demolished at about the beginning of the nineteenth century. After the bath was filled in with clay and demolition material, a wall foundation was built running north from the well itself. At this time a stone-capped drain was built in amongst the demolition material, running along the edge of the west wall and linked to a second drain, which took the water through the west facade wall and into a soak-away pit cut through the tip layers filling the bath. To the east of the well a small curving wall was built to act as an ornamental revetment (see fig. 3).

The presence of a secondary cut related to the upper three courses of the well lining and the capstone, suggests that there had been a subsequent phase in the building

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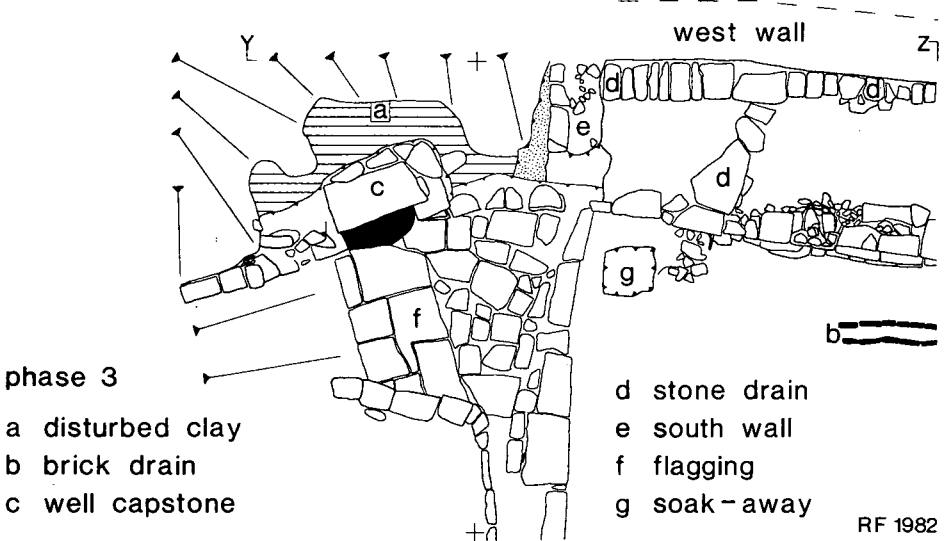
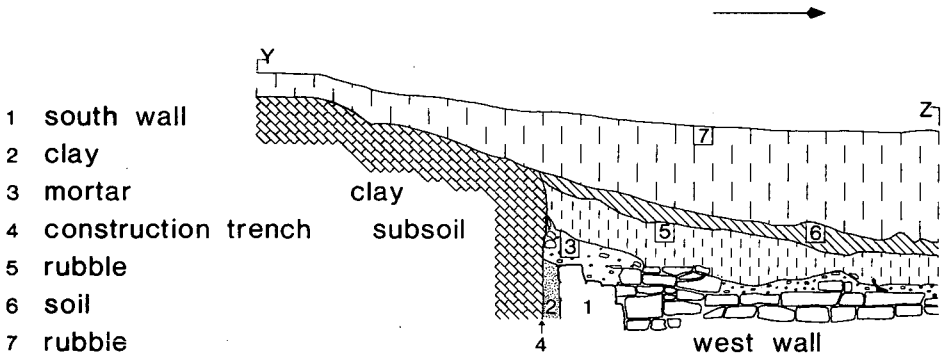


Fig. 3. Phase 3 of St Mary's Well.

of the well. These courses comprised roughly dressed stones, laid in uneven courses, pointed in places with mortar. The most noticeable feature of these courses was that they did not extend around the whole circumference of the well, but left a gap in the side of the well lining. Where this opening occurred the stones were very large with the effect that they broke up the sequence of the stone courses in the lining. Within this pattern of disjointed courses were two fragments of nineteenth-century handmade brick, which would tend to reinforce the attribution of a late date to this upper section of the well lining.

In order further to protect the cleanliness of the water, it appears as though the well opening was fitted with a hinged door. All that has survived today are the two iron hinges on the stones to the right of the well opening, one of which is broken, and the iron stub of the retaining bar on the left. This feature would appear to be contemporary with the rebuilding of the upper half of the well lining in the third phase.

During this phase the original area of flagging was extended northwards to include the remnants of the south wall of the bath structure. We were unable to find any evidence to suggest that it was continued beyond this point at this time.

Phase 4

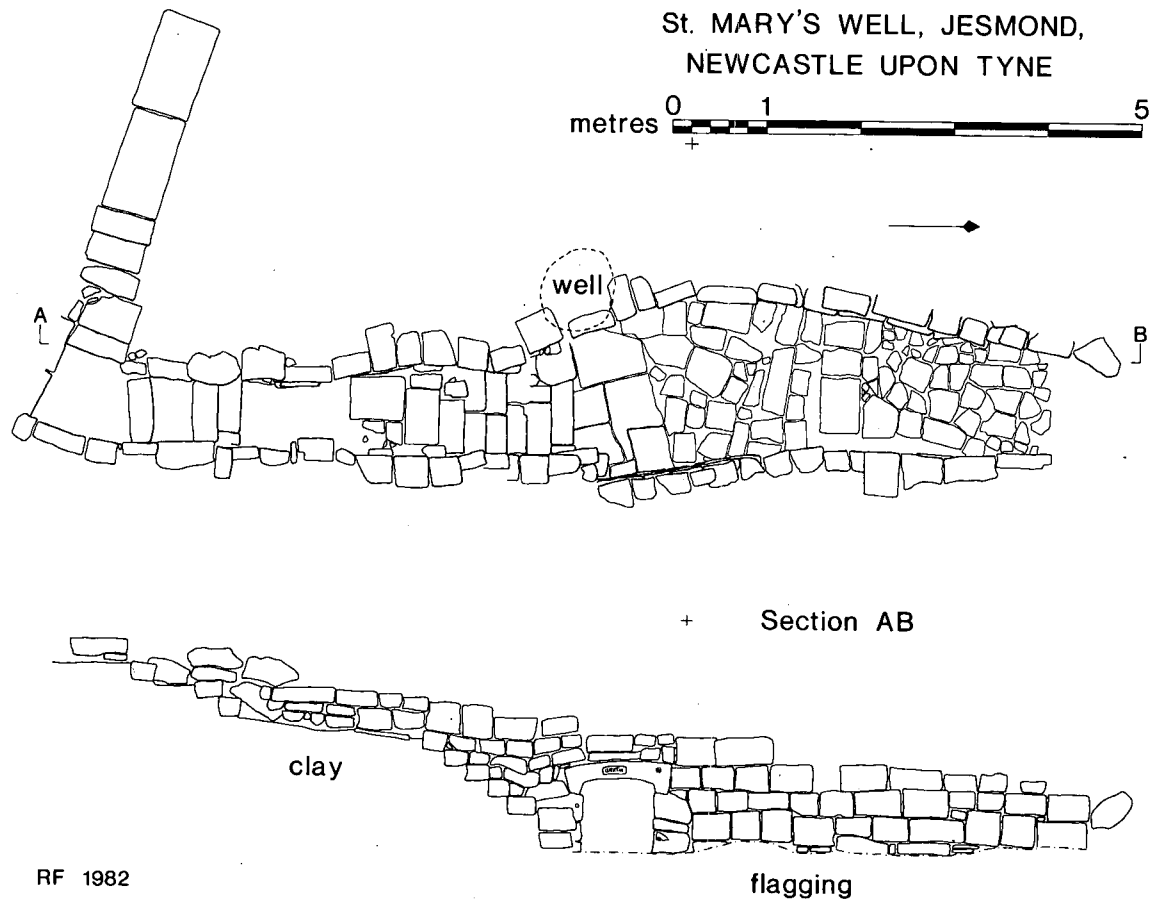
The well as it exists today with east and west facade walls enclosing a flagged and cobbled area with steps leading down into it from the south (see fig. 4), has already been in existence for some eighty years. It was depicted in this form on the 10" Ordnance Survey sheet for the area of 1895.¹¹

The area of flagging associated with this phase was that which lay to the north of the stones of the south wall of the bath structure. These cobbles which included several pieces of re-used masonry, were embedded in a layer of black ash-like soil, containing a large number of nineteenth-century pottery fragments. The east and west facade walls delineated the edges of this latest area of flagging. While the eastern facade had no precursor, the present extant western facade did not precisely correspond with the line of the west wall footings of Phase 3.

We were unable to find any trace of the original steps leading down to the well to which Bourne refers, implying, clearly from hearsay, that there were eight. The steps which have survived, were of sandstone, and were underlain by a dark brown loamy soil which contained a variety of fragments of nineteenth-century pottery. It may be the case then that the original steps have been replaced or relaid in the nineteenth century and that no trace of them has survived.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

I would like to thank Lucy Brown, Francis Burton, Dave Kear, Mary Lakin, Nick Till and Chris Webster for their unstinting efforts on a site which was almost continually waterlogged. Thanks are also due to Brian Royce for giving us the opportunity to excavate and for his support throughout the project; to J. & W. Lowry for their help in raising the "millstone"; to the staff of Northumberland County Record Office, Tyne & Wear Archive Department and the City Library; to Margaret Chard for her



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Fig. 4. Phase 4 of St. Mary's Well.

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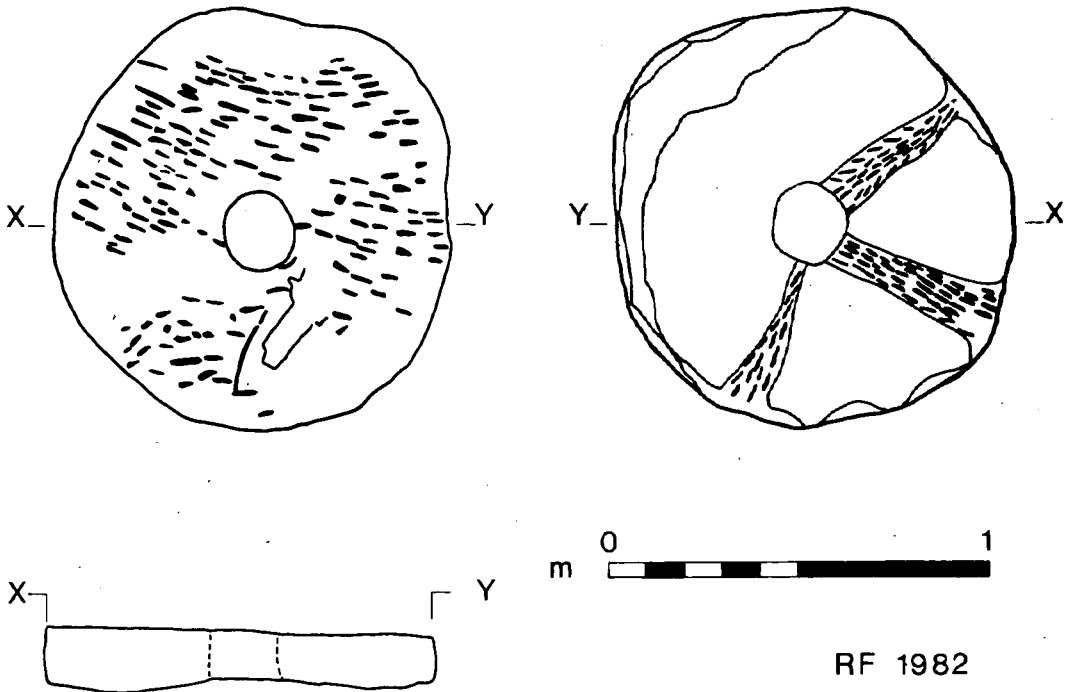


Fig. 5. The base-stone of St Mary's Well.

help with the pottery and the glass from the excavation; to Adam Welfare for his advice on the "millstone"; and most of all to Barbara Harbottle for her patience and encouragement.

APPENDIX 1: THE MILLSTONE (see fig. 5)

A complete, subcircular stone with a central eye was found to form the base of the well. The stone varied in thickness between 143 mm–91 mm, and had an overall diameter of between 115 cm–106 cm. The sides of the stone were crudely delineated, but were approximately vertical. The horizontal upper surface was dressed with pick marks over 60 per cent of its surface area, which were aligned, for the most part, in one direction. The subcircular, truncated cone-shaped eye of the stone had a diameter of 200 mm at the upper surface which expanded to a maximum of 235 mm at the base; its thickness varied between 120 mm–130 mm, and its sides were dressed in a crude herring-bone fashion. The base was very irregular, part of its surface having been detached along the places of horizontal lamination, although where

the original surface survived intact it had a convex profile. The most marked feature of this lower surface were three neat, pick dressed, irregular radial grooves. The grooves vary in depth between 120 mm–88 mm along their length.

Geology

The stone is a horizontally laminated, medium grained, yellow brown sandstone, probably of fairly local origin.

Discussion

It will be plain from the description given above that the stone was very like a millstone. However, the dressing of the upper surface would be poorly suited to grinding grain, and there was no evidence whatsoever of the characteristic wear patterns one would normally expect. Indeed, the only characteristics in support of that hypothesis, apart from its overall shape and central perforation, are the radial grooves on the base. These could have been utilized to bed and level up a lower stone to minimize the possibility of it revolving in sympathy with an upper stone in use.

While it cannot be denied that the stone has not seen service in a corn mill, since it may have undergone drastic modification to fit it for its new role in the well (its diameter and thickness could have been cut down), there would seem to be no reason to do this as the diameter of the stone is larger than the inner diameter of the well shaft lining which is based on it.

Nevertheless, this perforated circular stone is ideally suited to its purpose, for not only did it provide a solid bottom to the well, but it also allowed easy egress of the water from the aquifer to the well shaft. As a result, the sediment volume might be reduced, and most importantly, the well might be easily cleaned.

APPENDIX II: THE FINDS

As a result of large scale tipping at the beginning of this century, the uppermost layers of the site contained predominantly building materials such as brick, pantile and window glass, together with a vast quantity of red earthenware plant pot. Indeed, the whole range of modern detritus is present, from "tuberculin tested" milk bottles to plastic forks. With the exception of one small, heavily abraded sherd of medieval pottery, all the finds from the other layers were post-medieval in date. These included fragments of clay pipe, animal bone, iron and lead, window and bottle glass, and pieces of seventeenth-, eighteenth- and nineteenth-century pottery. Apart from those pieces recorded below, all the finds have now been catalogued and discarded.

From the clay packing of phase 1

1. Three fragments of dark red-brown brick with grey-black reduced interiors; all three measured 114 mm in width, and 56 mm in depth, and one measured 243 mm in length. These fragments correspond closely in colour and statistics to Type XI from the seventeenth-century bastion of the Castle, Newcastle upon Tyne.¹²

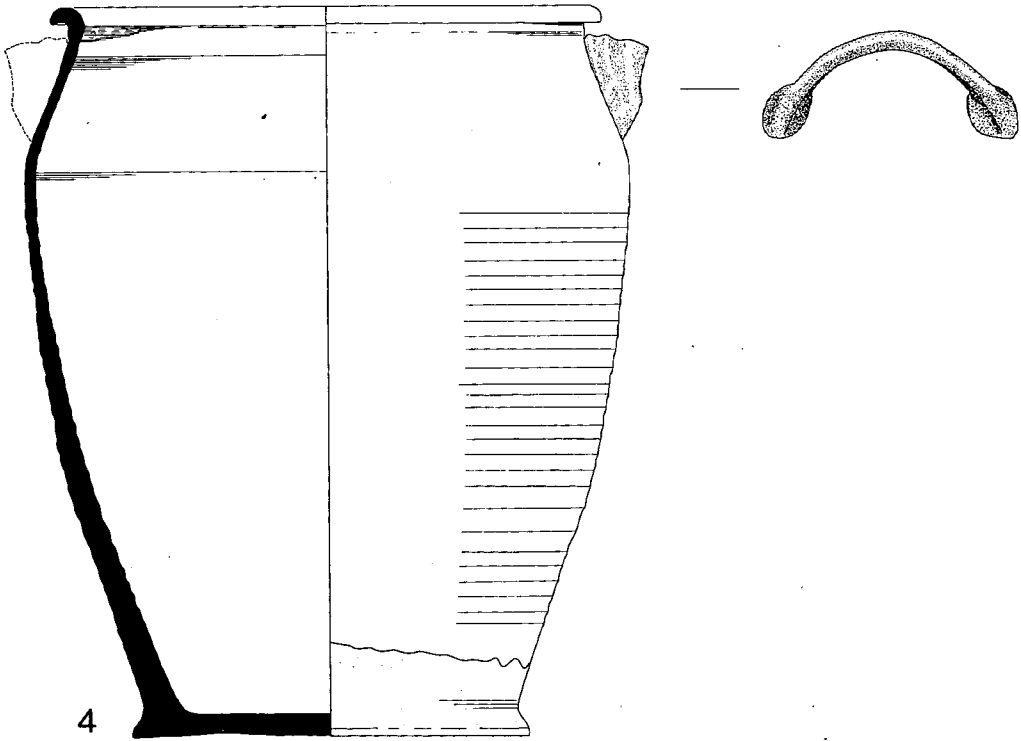
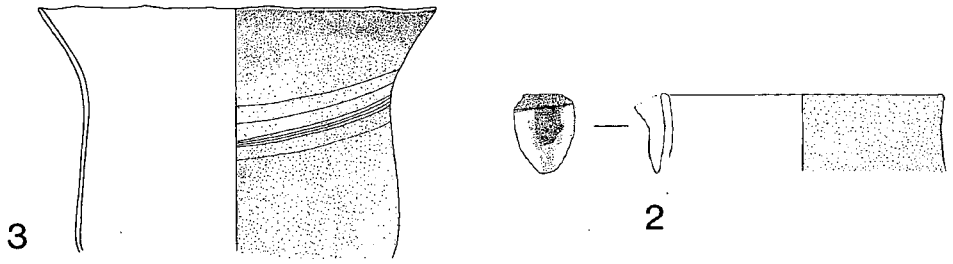


Fig. 6. Finds from excavation at St. Mary's Well.

From the layers sealing the bath structure (phase 3)

2. Rim fragment with the beginning of a handle, in a dark green metal, of a glass jug or flagon. This form has a potential date range from the late seventeenth century to the nineteenth century. A similar example was discovered in the well of The Castle, Newcastle upon Tyne in 1973 (not yet published).
3. Thirteen fragments of a glass bowl (or urinal), in a green tinted metal. It is potentially late seventeenth or early eighteenth century in date and is therefore somewhat earlier than the context in which it occurs.
4. Black-glazed, red earthenware jar with two lug-handles below the rim. It has a dark red fabric with full cover of glossy black glaze internally and partial cover externally. It is potentially late eighteenth century in date.

NOTES

¹ Tyne and Wear Archive Department (TWAD), Enrolment Book 63, Acc. No. 544, 195–197.

² D. Costar, *The Shrine of Our Lady of Jesmond*, (CTS, 1959).

³ *Ibid.*, 3–4, quoting a rescript of Pope Martin V, issued in 1428, concerning the chapel. Vatican Archives, Reg. Lat. 279, fo. 178 r-v, trans. by Rev. M. Hully O.S.B. Will of William Ecopp, rector of Heslarton, of 1472, partially calendared in *Testamenta Eboracensia* III, Surtees Society 45 (1864), 199–200. W. Grey, *Chorographia* (1649/1883), 8, 18.

⁴ Parker Brewis, “St. Mary’s Chapel and the Site of St. Mary’s Well, Jesmond”, *Arch. Ael.* 4, V (1928), 102–111.

⁵ *Ibid.*

⁶ F. W. Dendy, “An Account of Jesmond”, *Arch. Ael.* 3, I (1904), 80 ff.

⁷ H. Bourne, *History of Newcastle* (1736), 82.

⁸ *Ibid.*

⁹ J. Brand, *History of Newcastle* I (1789), 198, 620–22. Parson and White, *Directory of Newcastle upon Tyne*, 2 (1828), 434. Sykes, *Local Records* I (1866), 49. *Monthly Chronicle of North Country Lore*, April 1888, 148–151.

¹⁰ Margaret Ellison and Barbara Harbottle, “The Excavation of a Seventeenth-Century Bastion in the Castle of Newcastle upon Tyne, 1976–1981”, *Arch. Ael.* 5, XI (1983).

¹¹ Ordnance Survey Publications, 1895, Newcastle upon Tyne, Gateshead and Environs, Sheet 6, Second Edition, 10.56 in. to 1 mile.

¹² Ellison and Harbottle, *op. cit.*