

# Holy Wells: a source of inspiration or an archaeological distraction?

Dave Weldrake

*Corresponding author*  
Heritage Education  
daveweldrake@yahoo.co.uk

*Keywords* Holy wells, Water troughs, Archaeology, Folklore

## Introduction

In recent years, much has been written about the subject of holy wells (*e.g.* Bord 2006; Bord 2008; Harte 2008; Rattue 1995; Weldrake 2013; Weldrake n.d. 1; Whelan 2001). The material is of varying quality and with few exceptions seems to concentrate on the folklore elements of the subject. This interest is reflected in English Heritage's Single Monument Class Description which defines a holy well as follows:

'The term *holy well* is used to define a wide variety of water sources which have specifically religious associations. Specifically Christian associations of springs and wells can tentatively be dated from at least the sixth century. The cult of the holy well remained strong in the British Isles throughout the Middle Ages, but was curbed at the Reformation.' (Bond 1990).

This article will argue that using folklore in this manner is a serious distraction and that a better approach would be to study all wells in terms of their construction, function and social associations. Those that have religious or ritual connotations would then be seen to be only a sub-group of a much larger assemblage. The majority of examples to be considered are from West Yorkshire where the author lives and works.

## Definition

One of the problems in making this study is defining exactly what is being considered. In common parlance the words *well* and *trough* are often seen as being interchangeable. The issue is exemplified by the 1908 Ordnance Survey map of the Almondbury area (Yorkshire Sheet CCLX.NE, accessed through the Nation Library of Scotland; see bibliography). On Castle Hill Side on the south-western flank of Castle Hill (Almondbury) are two features. One is marked *W* (for *Well*) and the other *Trough*. However, the two features have precisely the same construction. For the purposes of this article the word *well* will be used to indicate any source of water. This may be contained in a *trough*. A single well may therefore have many troughs.

## The nature of the problem

The modern interest in holy wells can be traced back to *The Legendary Lore of Holy Wells* (Hope 1883). This is a work of Victorian folklore and, like early works published by the Folklore Society (*e.g.* Henderson 1879; Gutch 1901), it is a miscellany of material taken from a variety of magazines and journals with very little commentary or interpretation. Given the views expressed by the folklorists of the early 20th century such as

Frazer (1922) and his contemporaries, that folk customs represented survivals of pagan religions, it is not surprising that holy wells came to be seen as survivals of pre-Christian worship. This is a *sine qua non* with many New Age groups and is occasionally encountered in archaeological literature (e.g. Faulk and Moorhouse 1981, 176). Taken with the English Heritage definition cited earlier, this attitude has led to several anomalies in the way which archaeologists view wells and other water sources.

The Single Monument Class Description tries to avoid the issue by focusing on the medieval, but this still gives rise to complications for which few examples will suffice. West Yorkshire has only one surviving medieval wellhead which is sited at Ryhill near Wakefield. From its name, St Oswald's Well, it might appear that it comes under the definition provided by Bond. However, this is not so. The well was probably constructed to supply water to the Priory at Nostell some two miles (3.2km) away possibly by Prior Cumin in 1520 (WYAAS 1). The Priory was dedicated to St Oswald and it is the Priory that has lent its name to the well. There is no ritual or legendary association to the site whatsoever: St Oswald's Well is simply a medieval conduit-head. In contrast, West Yorkshire's most famous holy well, St Helen's Well on the Thorpe Arch / Walton boundary presents more complicated problems of interpretation. A post-conquest cross shaft was found near the site of the well and a chapel is known to have existed there in 1429 (Pastscape 1). This has made the well a medieval holy well by association, though there is no direct evidence for this.

The first record of the site is on an estate map of 1817 (WYAAS 2). It is true that by the late 19th century the site had developed as a rag well (e.g. see the photographs uploaded to Yorkshire Holy Wells n.d). However, there is no evidence that it is the continuation of a medieval rite. There is nothing to preclude the concept that the sanctity of this well may be a ritual developed after the Reformation. This is certainly the implication of Watson's description of another St Helen's Well at Holywell Green (Stainland near Halifax). Crabtree (1836) repeats his assertion that strangers came to the village to visit the well and the former chapel (turned into a house in Crabtree's time). He then goes on to quote Watson as saying in 1775 'from the behaviour of some of them, the inhabitants concluded that they were Papists, whose zeal brought them thither, to behold this once famous place of which their forefathers were once despoiled'. This is possibly so, but there is no direct evidence. Whatever the original status of the converted chapel, the well itself would not appear to be medieval. The well has been restored on a number of occasions and what remains now is modern work. However, Watson's illustration of the site (reprinted in Hope 1893) shows a well consisting of a row of three troughs with a low wall at the rear. This is similar to that found on Jagger Green Lane approximately 1 mile (1.6km) to the south. Watson would probably also have been astounded to find that *taking the waters* on special days was to become a popular ritual in the 19th century. For example, Lady Anne's Well at Howley was visited on Palm Sunday (Weldrake n.d. 1) and a variety of wells in Upper Calderdale were visited on Spaw Sunday (the first Sunday in May). This latter custom has recently been revived at Crag Vale and Midgeley (J. Billingsley *pers comm.*). The fact is that many of what are now seen as simple roadside troughs had, and in some places gained, a ritual significance as well as a utilitarian one, even in the 18th and 19th century, a fact unrecognised by the Single Monument Class Description.

## An archaeological solution

This confused situation is the result of giving primacy to folkloric associations. It is not that these are not important. They would, for instance, need to be taken into account if one was excavating a trough into which votive offerings were once thrown. However, it is the opinion of the author that this is putting the proverbial cart before the horse and that there is a great deal to be gained by looking at wells from more traditional archaeological viewpoints. If research was not confined solely to holy wells, however defined, it would also have the benefit of enlarging the number of examples available for study and of setting them in their proper historical

and archaeological context. Such approaches might include analysing construction methods, possible regional groups and dating the troughs. These approaches are considered in more detail below.

## **Construction of troughs**

The construction of any superstructure over a trough tends to reflect local vernacular architecture and the availability of building materials. For example, Cranes Well at Temple Newsam is faced with stone but the chamber itself is constructed of brick. On the other hand, the well-house at Spink Well (Bradford) is entirely constructed of local stone. Others may merely be troughs set in a recess capped by a sandstone slab. However, there is more conformity when one looks at the troughs themselves. The majority of troughs, at least in the Pennine areas of West Yorkshire, are carved out of a single block of gritstone, although they vary in size and depth. Examples include Ailsa Well (Bingley), Jennet's Well (Blackhill near Keighley), Tan Well (Hebden Bridge; Fig 1) and three wells on Lumb Lane (Almondbury; Fig. 2). Larger wells can be created by placing troughs together in a row. This necessitates the cutting of a semi-circular notch in the lip of each trough to allow the water to flow from one to the other. This technique was often favoured by Local Boards in the 1800s as concern for the quality of water supply grew following outbreaks of diseases such as cholera. Such civic wells with multiple troughs can be seen at Guiseley, Calverley and Crosland Moor. There is also a strong association between these civic wells, irrespective of construction, and the local pinfold, the same agency presumably having built both (Weldrake n.d., 2). Examples of the proximity of the pinfold and the well occur at Heath (near Wakefield), Honley, Ossett, and Tong (near Bradford).

Naturally exceptions to the single-block construction method occur even in gritstone areas. There is a well near the summit of Somerset Road (Almondbury) which is made of stone slabs jointed together in a manner reminiscent of wood-working techniques. This allows for a greater depth of water than can easily be achieved using a single block. In other instances, the slabs of stone have been fitted together more loosely and were possibly packed with clay. This is the case with Bankhouse Well (Fulneck) and the two examples in Clark Spring Wood (Churwell). The latter, recently restored by the Churwell Environmental Volunteers, are small enough to be the work of local farmers (Weldrake forthcoming). In contrast, the stone slab used as a divider at Honley Wells is much larger and is indicative of its status as another civic well.

## **Regional groups**

Closer study of the troughs and their surrounds might make it possible to identify regional groupings. Single troughs set in a recess are common through the Pennine districts. Often these are surmounted by a single stone slab though it is difficult to imagine what its function may have been. Examples of recessed troughs can be found at Hebden Bridge, Slaithwaite and Upper Batley. A more localised type can be found in the area around Laycock and Braithwaite where the trough has been set at right angles to the road rather than parallel to it, allowing access to the well from both sides of the wall. Animals are prevented from escaping from the field beyond by the insertion of a vertical slab of stone into the centre of the trough. There are indications that there is another regional type to be found in the upper Calder Valley. These are wells which are recessed into the surrounding wall with a segmented arch over them. Examples can be found in the cemetery wall at Sowerby, Tan Well (Hebden Bridge) and the well in High Field Lane (Hoyland). More fieldwork needs to take place in all of these cases to establish the extent and number of such wells.



**Figure 1** Large Well on Lumb Lane Almondbury. This structure is typical of many in the Pennine areas. The single block of gritstone which forms the trough is recessed into the surrounding wall and is capped by a large stone slab.



**Figure 2** Tan Well, Hebden Bridge. This trough is recessed into the wall and surmounted by a segmented arch, as are a number of others in Upper Calderdale. There is a bung-hole in the front of the trough which, if stoppered, would raise the level of the water within.

## Dating

The dating of troughs is problematic since very few are inscribed with dates. There is one in Tan House Lane at Wilsden but the inscription is not clearly legible. Another example can be found at Holme House near Keighley which bears the inscription *Pro Bono Publico 1797* and is conceivably the oldest dated trough in the region (Weldrake 2013). Other wells have date stones in their superstructures. However, this kind of information cannot always be trusted. The inscription incorporated into the surround of the Honley Wells gives the date of their construction as 1796 but the wells we see today are a mutilated Victorian reconstruction. The date stone was salvaged from its predecessor (Huddersfield Daily Examiner n.d.).

Documentary sources may also prove unreliable especially when attempts are made to use them as proof of continuity of usage from the medieval to the early modern periods. The difficulty can be exemplified by considering yet another well, dedicated to St Helen (the dedication was popular in the north of England: see Harte 2008, 69–72.) This was situated adjacent to St Helen's Gate at Almondbury. There was also a chapel there as Hulbert explains:

‘Hence we gather from an ancient paper extracted from a Manuscript said to be at Woodsome that there was an ancient chapel dedicated to St Helena erected by the Woodsome family of Kaye probably in the 15th century. On the site still called *Chapel Yard* and giving name to the steep road that is still called St Helen's Gate and where is the well still called by that name.’ (Annals of the Church and Parish of Almondbury).

The association of the well and chapel has given rise to the assumption that St Helen's Well was regarded as a holy well though it should be noted that Hulbert does not in fact say this explicitly. A trough is marked by the junction of St Helen's Gate and Dark Lane on the first six inch to the mile Ordnance Survey map (Sheet 260 viewed online through the National Library of Scotland; see bibliography). However, it can be said with certainty that this is not a medieval wellhead or conduit. The site is at present buried under rubble, but some years ago Mr E Vickerman managed to insert a camera through a hole which had appeared in the rubble. His photographs show a stone-built recess with a flat stone slab roof. No trough is visible but the floor of the recess is choked with rubbish. As noted above, this form of well construction is common in the area and would be consonant with the large well still to be seen in Lumb Lane. There would seem to be no direct way of dating such features. However, it would seem reasonable to suggest that some of them at least are products of enclosure. Free access to water can often cause disputes after land has been enclosed. Such was certainly the case with the Holy Well at Eccleshill (Bradford) and the Spa Well at Bingley, both discussed by Shepherd (1994). In this view, the present buried well on St Helen's Gate could be no more than a replacement for a medieval water source, if indeed, one existed at all. Like many of the other Pennine wells, it must be of a similar date to the walling which surrounds it and this would be consistent with the few dated examples which can be identified, and a late 18th- to early 19th-century date would seem to be likely for many of West Yorkshire's roadside troughs.

## Conclusion

Clearly, the ideas discussed in this article can only be of a tentative nature. Insufficient wells and troughs have been studied in detail to make statistical analysis viable. Of those that have been studied, there is a clear bias toward those that seem to have attracted some intrinsic folklore interest. To some extent this is reflected in the material chosen for discussion here. However, there are different approaches that might be undertaken, some of which have been outlined in this paper whose pursuance could add significantly to our understanding of the early modern landscape.

## Bibliography

- Bond, C.J. 1999. *Single Monument Class Description: Holy Wells*. Draft manuscript.
- Bord, J. 2006. *Cures and Curses*. Loughborough: Heart of Albion Press.
- Bord, J. 2008. *Holy Wells in Britain: A Guide*. Loughborough: Heart of Albion Press.
- Crabtree, J. 1836. *A Concise History of the Parish and Vicarage of Halifax in the County of York*.
- Faull, M.L. and Moorhouse, S.A. (eds). 1981. *West Yorkshire: An Archaeological Survey to AD 1500*. Wakefield: West Yorkshire Metropolitan County Council.
- Frazer, Sir J.G. 1922 (reprinted 1998). *The Golden Bough: A Study in Magic and Religion*. Oxford: Oxford World Classics.
- Gutch, E. 1901. *Examples of printed folklore concerning the North Riding of Yorkshire, York and the Ainsty*. London: David Hunt.  
<http://archive.org/stream/countyfolklore02folkuoft#page/n5/mode/2up> [Last accessed: 01/12/2014].
- Harte, J. 2008. *English Holy Wells: a sourcebook*. Loughborough: Heart of Albion Press.
- Henderson, W. 1897. *Notes on the Folklore of the Northern Counties of England and the Borders*. London: W. Satchell, Peyton and Co.  
<http://archive.org/stream/cu31924006726552#page/n7/mode/2up> [Last accessed: 01/12/2014].
- Hope, R.C. 1893. *The Legendary Lore of the Holy Wells of England Including Rivers, Lakes, Fountains and Springs*. London: Elliot Stock.  
<http://archive.org/stream/legendaryloreofh00hope#page/n5/mode/2up> [Last accessed: 01/12/2014].
- Huddersfield Daily Examiner n.d. *Honley Wells emerge from the darkness after long absence*.  
<http://www.examiner.co.uk/news/west-yorkshire-news/honley-wells-emerge-dark-after-4936534> [Last accessed: 01/12/2014].
- Hulbert, Charles Augustus 1882. *Annals of the Church and Parish of Almondbury*.  
<https://archive.org/stream/annalsofchurchpa00hulb#page/n9/mode/2up> [Last accessed: 01/12/2014].
- National Library of Scotland n.d. *Ordnance Survey Maps: Six-inch England and Wales, 1842-1952*.  
<http://maps.nls.uk/os/6inch-england-and-wales/> [Last accessed: 01/12/2014].
- Pastscape 1 n.d. *St Helen's Chapel and Well*.  
[http://www.pastscape.org.uk/hob.aspx?hob\\_id=54717&sort=2&type=HOLY%20WELL&typeselect=c&rational=a&class1=None&period=None&county=101281&district=None&parish=None&place=Walton&recordsperpage=10&source=text&rtype=&rnumber](http://www.pastscape.org.uk/hob.aspx?hob_id=54717&sort=2&type=HOLY%20WELL&typeselect=c&rational=a&class1=None&period=None&county=101281&district=None&parish=None&place=Walton&recordsperpage=10&source=text&rtype=&rnumber)  
[Last accessed: 01/12/2014].
- Rattue, J. 1995. *The Living Stream*. Woodbridge: Boydell Press.
- Shepherd, V. 1994. *Historic Wells in and around Bradford*. Loughborough: Heart of Albion Press.
- Weldrake, D. 2013. *A simple question*. <https://daveweldrake.wordpress.com/a-simple-question/> [Last accessed: 14/05/2015].
- Weldrake, D. n.d. 1. *The Mystery of Lady Anne's Well*. <https://daveweldrake.wordpress.com/the-mystery-of-lady-annes-well/> [Last accessed: 01/12/2014].
- Weldrake, D. n.d. 2. *The Pinfold and the Well*. <https://daveweldrake.wordpress.com/the-pinfold-and-the-well/> [Last accessed: 01/12/2014].
- Weldrake, D. forthcoming. *Clark Spring Wood 2014: An archaeological investigation of two wellheads in Churwell (West Yorkshire, UK)*.
- Whelan, E. 2001. *The Magic and Mystery of Holy Wells*. Chieveley: Capall Bann.
- WYAAS 1. *West Yorkshire Archaeology Advisory Service*. Online record for Monument 2536.  
[http://www.heritagegateway.org.uk/Gateway/Results\\_Single.aspx?uid=2536&resourceID=105](http://www.heritagegateway.org.uk/Gateway/Results_Single.aspx?uid=2536&resourceID=105) [Last accessed: 01/12/2014].
- WYAAS 2. *St Helen's Well, Chapel Wood*. *West Yorkshire Archaeology Advisory Service*. Online record for Monument 1960.
- Yorkshire Holy Wells n.d. *St Helen's Well (The Wishing Well) at Walton near Wetherby*.  
<http://www.halikelid.f9.co.uk/holywells/north/helen6.htm> [Last accessed: 01/12/2014].