

Was there a Celtic Sanctuary in Mid-Devon?

Angela Lake (Revised edn. April 2014)

Part One

If anyone out there enjoys a challenge, then read on....!

Well over a year ago I was contacted by Peter Green, the then chairman of Bow History Society, regarding my 2006 comment about the 'nymets' of mid-Devon on the Megalithic Portal website. (<http://www.megalithic.co.uk/article.php?sid=8430>)

Passing Coplestone's ancient cross shaft on regular trips from my present home in S.Devon to my friends and family in N.Devon, had prompted just enough research about the pillar to find that the area to the west of there (centred on Bow and North Tawton) had a very interesting history. One clue to this was the proliferation of village names that included the word 'nymet', which comes from 'nemeto' or 'nemeton', meaning 'sacred grove'.

If you look on the OS Landranger 191 map 'Okehampton & North Dartmoor', or the OS 'Coplestone Sheet SS 60/70', the concentration of 'nymets' close to the E-to-W-running A3072, is uncanny. Add to this, the site of a rare henge monument just west of Bow, and a Roman road leading from Exeter to the remains of a Roman fort and Roman marching camp – (amongst other ancient sites) – and you have a very special area indeed. The fort was named 'Nemetostatio' ('The Outpost of the Sacred Grove/s') and Bow was once 'Nymetboghe'.

Peter hoped I could help, by dowsing, to locate the site of a possible Celtic Sanctuary – which surely existed if the area was studded with places whose names linked with 'sacred grove'? Meanwhile, I was also intrigued by the henge, the outline of which was spotted as cropmarks by County Archaeologist Frances Griffiths during an aerial survey, in a period of drought, in the summer of 1984.

I began to collate various authors' information about the nymets; Celtic religion; similar sites in England, etc., and, to date [writing this in 2011] have four display-book files of clues. [There are now – 2014 – at least ten!] We have copies of Tithe maps too, which Peter has patiently copied and stuck together. I've visited the Westcountry Studies Library in Exeter a few times and delved into books; scoured maps; emailed Hugh Franklin, regarding his earlier research on the subject; even tried to dowse in the area, but it is still like trying to find a needle in a haystack! We could be looking for a woodland site (since cleared!); a riverside site; the area of the henge; the area of a chapel (maybe built on an earlier sacred site); wells; springs; posts; pits; hilltops. I feel strongly that Cosdon's dominating bulk in the southwest, towards Winter Solstice sunset, may also have been a focal point in their rituals. Maybe unearthing ritual deposits would be the best clue?? Perhaps a metal-detector user has had some success?

My own interest began after reading the excerpt 'A Sacred Bus Journey' from 'Wisht Maen' [Issue 4] by Tracey Brown (who was editor between 1993-1997), and Hugh Franklin's 'Signposts in Nymetland' from Issue 2, Spring '94.

Briefly, Tracey wrote that “The journey to Exeter along the A3072 is full of prehistoric sites. The road itself is the old prehistoric causeway from the Exe valley to North Cornwall.” (On the nymets, she refers to Hugh’s earlier article in Issue 2.) Mention is made of Tom Graves’ idea that the foliate ‘Green Man’ images in Sampford Courtenay Church somehow link with the nemetons’ sacred groves centred on Bow, or Bow Henge. (A deep-rooted folk memory of beliefs that the early church accommodated, but images that may have upset the famous Crediton-born man who went on to become famous English evangelist and pagan shrine destroyer – St Boniface [or Wynfryth].)

Generally attributed to him, and following the canons of the council held under Carloman and Boniface in 742, number six of the practices condemned in the 8th century list of thirty superstitious and pagan practices, the *Indiculus superstitionem et paganiarum* was:

“of the sacred rites of the woods which they call ‘nimidas’.”

In ‘Devon’s Sacred Grove’ (Westcountry Folklore No.17), Dr. Angela Blaen writes about this and the interesting chapels in the vicinity that are, or were, dedicated to St Martin of Tours, who became famous in Christian countries thanks to the writings of his friend *Sulpicius Severus*. Martin was a lover of solitary places, particularly zealous in eliminating paganism and forcibly destroying pagan altars!

At Broadnymet (to the southwest of the henge), St Martin’s sadly-dilapidated chapel still stands, thanks to the farmer’s erection of a good roof to preserve the walls. At Nymet Tracey (now St Bartholomew’s Church, south of Bow and southeast of the henge), the rather pleasant church is in full use. Dr Blaen describes a circular symbol carved on the doorway arch at Broadnymet chapel: “.. To the left of the door, within the archway, 133cm above the ground” as “7cm in diameter” and “formed by three concentric circles of varying diameter, with five radii”. “To the right of the doorway, on the south wall of the building, and 106 cm above ground level, is a second circular pattern, 12 cm in diameter, composed of apparently random lines crossing through the central point.” On visiting, and photographing these, I found the one with five radii carved on the *right* of the doorway – as you look into the interior – and the other on the *left* (a basket-work-like design). At the time I didn’t measure their height from the ground.

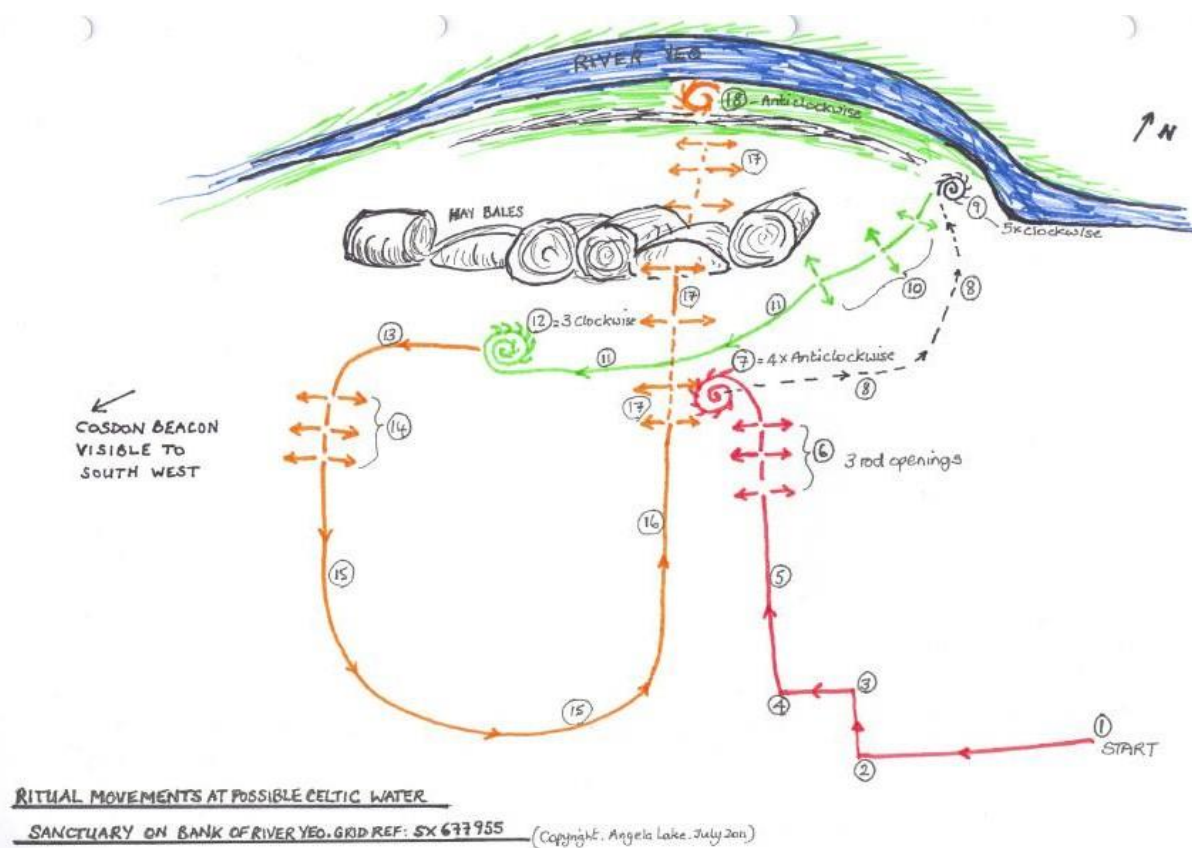
Names of local places and the rivers running through the area were linked. The present River Yeo was once named the ‘Nymet’, and has also been called the ‘Nymed’. Dr Blaen says: “It is not unusual for Devon rivers to have the same name and Nymet may also have been applied to the Mole, a tributary of the Mole, the Bray”, ..etc. There is confusion over whether the river was named for the area, or vice versa. (The area near South Molton has villages that include ‘nymet’, as in Kings Nympton, George Nympton, etc.)

Given the Celts reverence for rivers (esp those that run NE like the R.Yeo here) and springs, my friend Jackie and I set out in March 2011 to look at an area between East and West Nymph. (Dr Blaen wrote: “...the Yeo, which begins at Nymph (now recorded in the name of East Nymph Farm), flowing past Broadnymet, Nymet Tracey and Nymet Rowland, to join the Taw.”) We started in a field by the B3219 just south of the turning to East Nymph, and where a public footpath was clearly marked heading southwest in the direction of the predominant and rather awesome outline of Cosdon Beacon. (Cosdon’s

bulk seems to 'haunt' you wherever you go in mid-Devon, and I'm sure it is a northern focal point for 'Grey Wethers' twin circles on Dartmoor.)

Wandering along beside the stream, which I took to be the River Yeo (as it appears on the OS map to flow from a source south of Trundlebeer,* north of the A30), I came to a wider, level area at the foot of the sloping field. Here, just upstream from a pronounced curve in the banks, I began to pick up some interesting possible ritual movements with my L-shaped rods. *(beer/beare/bearu also being an old Anglo-Saxon/Old English word for 'sacred grove' – Terry Faull, author, 'Secrets of the Hidden Source – In Search of Devon's Ancient and Holy Wells'.)

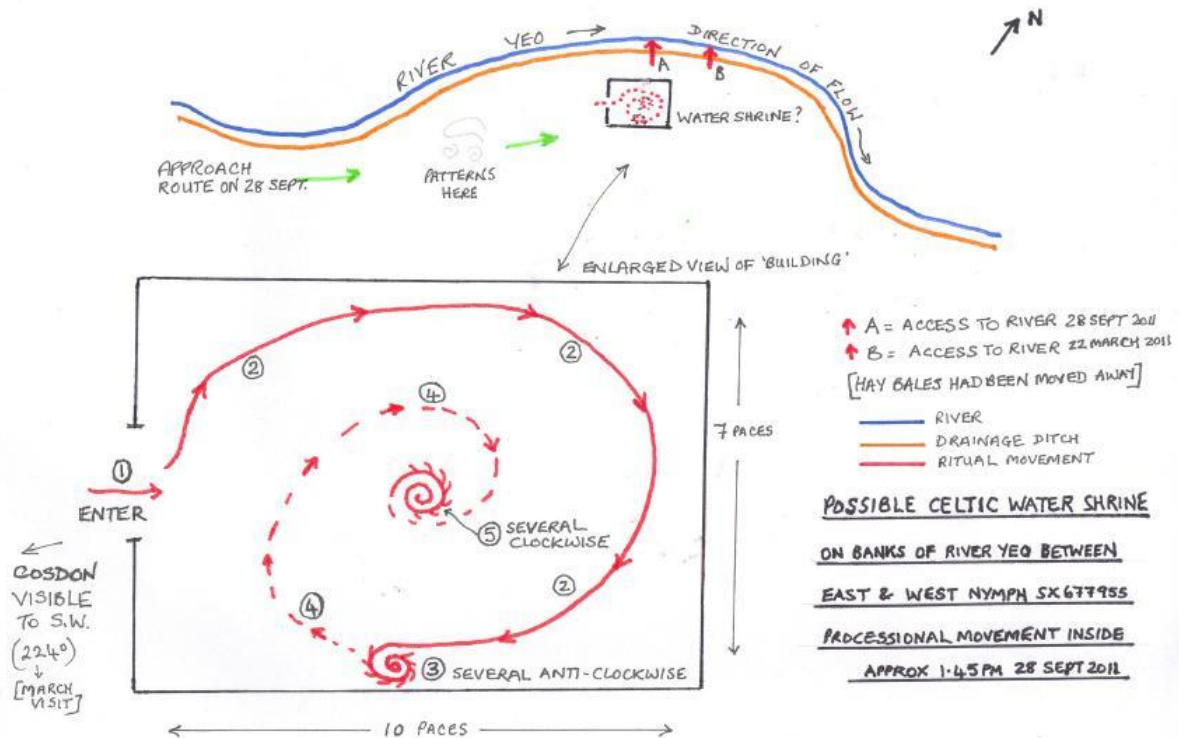
Jackie filmed me on my camcorder and I transferred the movements to a plan. (Remaining bales have since been moved to another area further upstream.)



The visit in March 2011 produced this [ritual?] movement pattern, but no building (lack of time to dowse): Moves are numbered in sequence from bottom R, ending above the water. The drainage ditch was quite hard to climb back and forth over!

On 28th September 2011 I returned with Peter to show him where this action had unfolded and to dowse for a structure of some sort, possibly a 'water shrine'; my previous movements having ended on the bank above the river, as if approaching the waters with reverence. The OS map shows another tributary joins just upstream, and I wondered if – in periods of drought – the waters would dry up to this point, and the Iron Age or Celtic people had built a shrine here to plea with their gods.

Approaching from upstream this time, I soon dowsed a rectangular building of 10 by 7 [of my average strides] lying parallel to, and a few yards from the river. Entering from the narrow end facing Cosdon, I was taken in a similar route to that taken at Maiden Castle's Romano-Celtic shrine. (See a previous DD magazine.)



I did dows a route on exit from the building that finished again on the riverbank.

Doing some online investigation into Celtic water gods, one site tells us: "It is known that she (Coventina) was looked upon as the queen of river Goddesses, particularly of the watershed where the Celtic believe the power of the river deity could be seen and its energy most keenly felt." There would have been many, Arnemetia among them. "Arnemetia was a Romano-Celtic water goddess whose 'Sacred Grove' was at Buxton Springs in England. It is thought that the Corieltauvi worshipped Arnemetia 'she who dwells at the sacred grove' long before the Roman Period. Here on the valley floor where two springs close together, and those who drank of her waters were cured of wasting disease and sickness." "Aequae Arnemetiae - 'The Spa-Town of the Sacred Groves' .." "Around 70AD the Romans arrived founding Aequae Arnemetiae, the site was important enough for the Romans to use the name 'Aequae' on only two towns in Britain the other being Aequae Sulis (Bath). ... The prefix aequae means 'of the waters' ... and the second part of the name is associated with the Celtic word 'Nemeton or 'Sacred Grove', which here is used in its plural form."

It's interesting to see where that very important shrine was situated, though this area by the source of the River Yeo (or Nymet), at SX677955, could be a smaller, local shrine, rather than the major one - possibly as important as Lydney in Gloucestershire - that Peter believes existed in the area. Scattered settlements would surely have had their own

sacred areas and possibly their own gods, and smaller shrines might be placed along the pilgrim route.



Peter stands on the northern corner, and my backpack [L] marks the eastern corner. [See plan.] The field was being ploughed that sunny September day, for the first time in many, many years!



Note how Cosdon peeks over the dip between distant slope and riverside trees on both visits.

The river bank is easier to access in colder months, due to less foliage, but the drainage ditch is still an obstacle! The river *is* kind of 'special' along here.

Meanwhile, did the Romans site their fort and marching camp in 'the most important area of all', to participate in local religious rites, and at the same time monitor the local pagans? Should we be looking there, on the banks of the River Taw? While walking the public footpath south from North Tawton to The Barton, through the marching camp site (which was also being ploughed!) on sunny 28th September, my rods indicated an area west towards the river. Too hot and too tired by then...

Leaving the riverside that day in March, Jackie and I drove close to the north side of the A30 where we could look over a field gate to the north and survey the area where the river rose between Trendlebeer and Lovaton. Later we investigated the banks of the River Taw at Taw Green, dowsing nothing special; paused at East Rowden on the Taw to look in the direction of the Roman Fort; visited Sampford Courtenay Church; and, lastly, attempted to see the fort site from the Railway Inn car park off the B3219.

On the second day of our investigations in March Jackie and I visited the church and graveyard at pretty Spreyton village. I took Peter there on 28th September too.



It was here, high on this hill, in the empty area to right of photo [near the church end of the avenue of trees], that we dowsed a rectangular structure that may have also been a Celtic Shrine. It appeared to have wooden walls to the south, east, and west but no continual wall to the north, though some kind of barrier existed. The entry was on the south. After 'refreshment' in the atmospheric old Tom Copley pub (yes, *the old grey mare's* rider came from here, and his grave is in the church-yard), we visited St Bartholomew's Church at Nymet Tracey, but ran out of steam. We didn't realise we'd missed the well down the lane towards Walson Barton. Known as Puttock's Well*, Terry Faull (author of 'Secrets of the Hidden Source', a guide to Devon's Ancient and Holy Wells) thinks it may have some connection with the 'sacred grove' tradition of the area. *(A 'Bishop Putta' is mentioned in the Coplestone Cross site page..?)

We then re-visited Broadnymet Chapel and spoke with the farmer, who lives opposite and owns the land around here. I'd wondered if the nearby lake was significant, but he told us that he'd created it some 20 years beforehand by damming a stream. So. no ritual deposits *there*, then!

Note that the road to Broadnymet is very narrow. It seemed best to approach it [travelling west from Bow] via the junction called Hampson Cross [after Burston Cross], and come out at the more westerly junction nearest to Nicholls Nymet. That rectangle also encloses the field with the henge, opposite Silverstreet cottages.

Another likely place in the area is de Bathe Pool, which we hope to visit with Peter some time: he knows the landowner. [Achieved in 2013.] Springs are significant to Celtic

religion and this one – like another in a known revered ‘pit’ site in the south east of England – has a legend about/ linking to a horse, and water springing up. Risdon [1811] writes about “*Bath, in which barton there is a pit, of large circumference, and so deep in the centre as the height of a man well mounted on horseback; whereout, sometimes a spring breaketh, by some called a borne, which filleth the pit, and so continueth full for many days together, taken to be a forerunner of sorrow to ensue.*” [He gives examples.] You can imagine the Celts revering a site like this.

Jackie had the good idea of dowsing for the direction of the ‘major’ Celtic Shrine from places on the outskirts of our target area. To this end, we’ve dowsed when leaving Hatherleigh: at Basset’s Cross, Jacobstowe, Sampford Courtenay, a field near the B3219 south east of East Nymph, and from her home. All results seemed to point back towards the general area of the henge.

Meanwhile, I dowsed from Morchard Road bus stop, and later from Nymet Mill area, and when I plotted the lines carefully on my OS map, they crossed in the main street at Bow .. not far from Peter’s house!! (*Impossible* to treat as accurate!)

A couple of years ago I found another ‘nymet’-like site near a lovely old wooden fenced bridge over the Taw on the back road from Nymet Rowland to Eggesford. My photos [not shown here] were taken by the bridge, looking north towards Clotworthy Farm and also along the river showing part of Nymet Woods.

Update:

Since 2011, Angie and Jackie also dowsed the possible “pilgrims’ route to the major Celtic Sanctuary” from some of the stopping points along the SE ‘frontier’ of our target area, via: Whiddon Down, Hittesleigh, Yeoford, Neopardy, Posbury, Uton, Crediton...

... and from stops on the NW-N-NE ‘frontier’ via: Iddesleigh, Dowland, Dolton, Wembworthy, Nymet Mill, Nymet Rowland, Copplestone.

None of these lines is conclusive, though there are some intriguing crossing points.

Part Two

Following last November’s [2011] article (Reprinted here in Part One of this post. **Ed**) in Devon Dowsers’ News and about our search for a major Celtic Sanctuary in the Bow area and the possible ‘water shrine’ that was dowsed in a field [SX677955] next to the infant River Yeo not far downstream from its source near Trundlebeer* (just north of the A30), I’m curious to know if anyone has anything further to add. Did any DD members physically check out the site with their rods or pendulums, or map-dowse this area? Remember, the mid-Devon area around Bow has a proliferation of villages with the word ‘nymet’ in the name, and this is linked to the word ‘nemeto’ or ‘nemeton’ which means ‘sacred grove’. The fact that the Romans chose to establish a fort and a marching camp south of North Tawton led some historians to wonder if they placed it there to monitor the locals who were reluctant to give up their pagan beliefs. There was also a large henge in the area, just west of Bow village, and the A3072 lies close to prehistoric trade route from Exeter to the north coast of Cornwall. An E-W running Roman road is shown on the

OS map lying parallel to, and just south of, the rail line. Bow was once 'Nymetboghe', and the Roman fort 'Nemetostatio' – 'the Outpost of the Sacred Grove/s'. [*Beer/Beare/Bearu is also an Anglo-Saxon/Old English word for 'sacred grove'.]

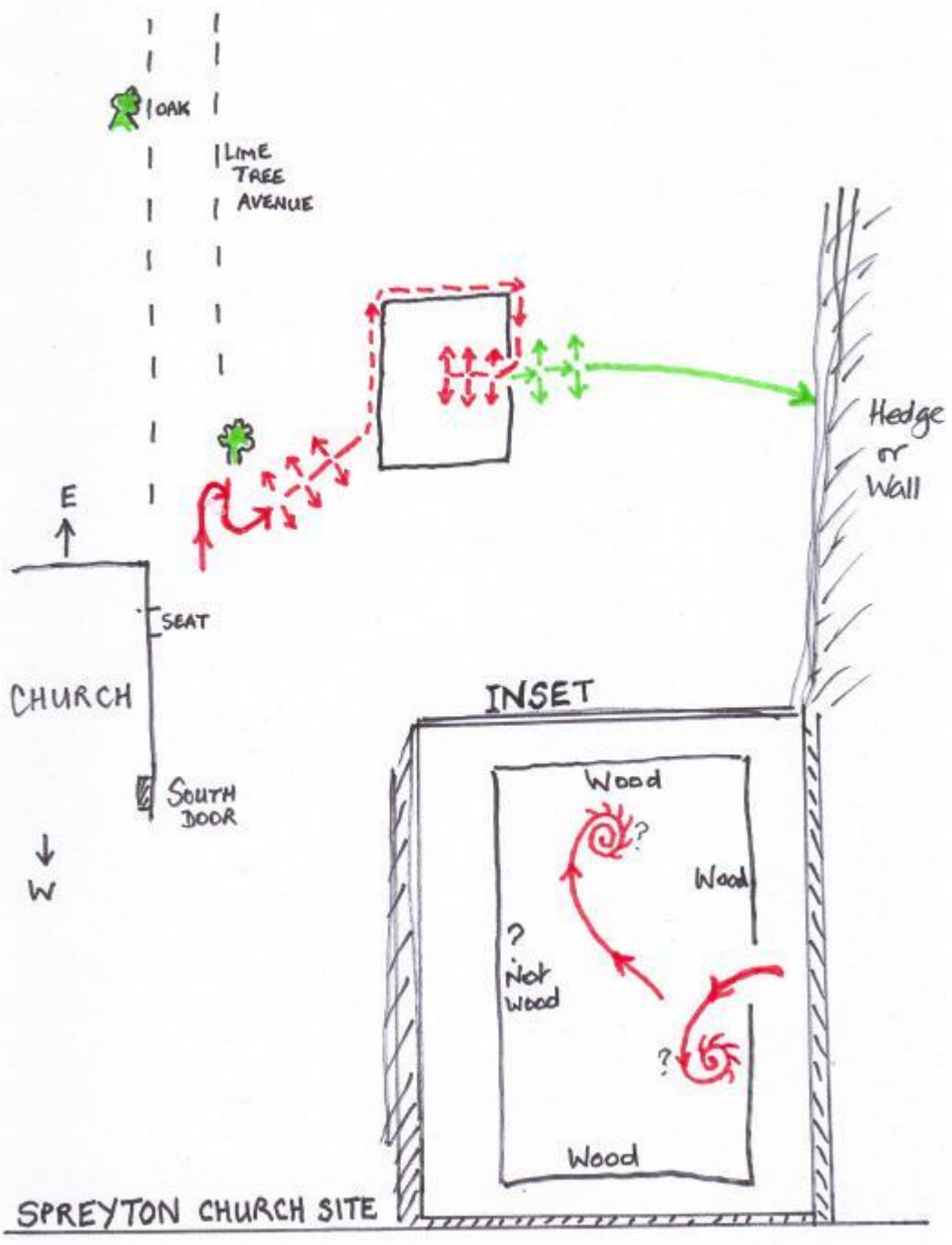
Looking for a Celtic Sanctuary is like looking for a needle in a haystack, but we read that their 'holy' places were not only in groves of trees (which might be cleared today), but also by water, by springs, near rivers' sources, by pits (Bathe Pool site near the Roman fort still intrigues me), on hilltops, and, in this case, possibly in or near the henge, or Broadnymet chapel, which could have been erected over a previously important pagan site. There were once other small chapels in the area too (ie: at Crooke Burnell), which need investigating, not to mention Clannaborough church. We have looked at Nymet Tracey church. Location of a treasure hoard might lead us to a site where votive offerings had been deposited. These may have been cast into water, or placed in shafts in the ground.

On the second day of our investigations in March 2011 Jackie and I drove up to Spreyton village, which is only about 1.5 miles NE of the 'water-shrine' site '*as the crow flies*'. Having dowsed by water, we were now investigating a hilltop site and made a point of travelling from the west, passing over the same river Yeo (which was also once known as the Nymet) near the bottom of Dragdown Hill.

I knew nothing about Spreyton before this visit and was entranced by its charm on this sunny day. After exploring the lovely church we set about dowsing for our 'Celtic Shrine'. Outside the south wall of the church I walked back and forth with the rods in the 'search' position, asking to be shown if there was an ancient Celtic sanctuary or shrine here. Soon the rods began to take me east towards the avenue, then turned to lead me in a curving path, avoiding the first tree on the south side of the avenue, and continued in a SE direction towards the central area of the graveyard, while the rods opened three times at right-angles to my forward movement. (See plan). The rods then led me around a rectangular outline, and took me inside this 'building'. Once more the rods opened three times at right-angles to forward movement, which usually occurs when entering a doorway (though this time not in the actual doorway), and almost always occurs on entering a sacred area, or a stone circle, or happens when passing the opposing stones of a stone avenue, (or even pews in a church, which happened once in Wales).

On the many occasions this has happened in the forecourts of chambered tombs, the action of the rods might acknowledge the previous presence of posts lining the route to the mouth of the tomb which were contemporary with the ritual movement I'd been dowsing.

Meanwhile, at Spreyton I'd walked around inside the 'walls', then exited via the same 'doorway', recording just two rod openings after leaving. The rods then led me down the slope towards the graveyard's southern wall or hedge, but at an angle sweeping slightly to SW.





Site of possible Celtic Sanctuary found in open area between graves.



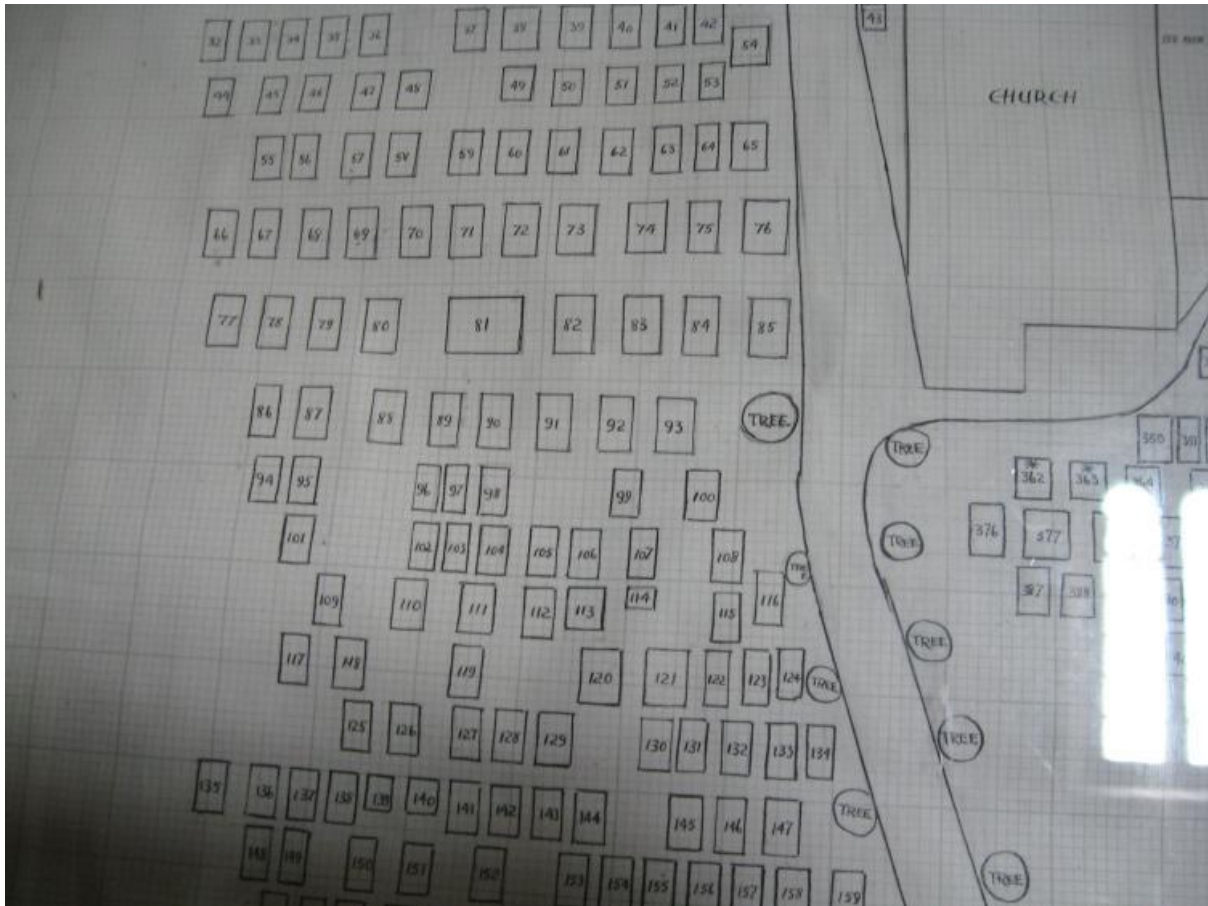
The Lime Tree Avenue and SE Wall

Returning to the 'building', I asked for the construction material used and was given 'wood' for all the walls but the northern one. This one didn't dowse as either wood or stone but it did dowse as a 'barrier' of some kind, open to the north. Feeling that it was possibly a 'Celtic sanctuary-type' site, and having dowsed the Romano-British temple on Maiden Castle to find two swirls where the 'priest' walked (at the west of the ambulatory area and in the most sacred area at the centre of the cella), I dowsed for any reaction here, and found those marked on the plan. [See Inset]. Did those areas contain a special god-type image that had to be acknowledged? ... or is this all rubbish?! Maybe some of our members can check me out?

Meanwhile Jackie dowsed and made notes:

"Landscape has been scrub or woodland. Occupies high ground (*fact!*) Rectangle? Not all wall, but barrier. Roof or canopy. Wood, and reeds/thatch. 4'3" to 4'9", so depth to it. Lower than today's ground level within rectangle..? Celtic/Druid/Pagan connection. No

burial or fire (smoke of spirits to heaven). Not left to animals. Bones did not go anywhere I could find. ? two walls ? tunnel like. No spring near surface in rectangle.”



The plan of the area and its graves, showing the SE corner of church and trees of avenue.

It's hard to tell exactly where the site lies in relation to all these graves, and the only large one is not in the same place and its length is orientated N-S, not E-W.

This website is full of helpful info:

http://www.spreyton.org.uk/church_and_churchyard.htm

It appears that the oak tree in the avenue“.... perhaps bears witness to a more ancient avenue of trees leading to this church or to an earlier church or sacred site.”

Maybe we had stumbled across the descendant of the remains of an ancient grove of trees, as well as a hilltop site!



Almost pagan-style church sign The ancient oak tree

I knew nothing of this before visiting Spreyton, having only just found it whilst writing this article. Noted on the website: The church – dedicated to St. Michael, and 735 ft above sea level – was built in 1451 but “the two fonts, the piscina and the altar stone (which is considered to bear evidence of early consecration for Christian use) appear to be of earlier date and are thought to have been part of an earlier church on the site.” Like other country churches in mid-Devon, this one has a pre-Christian style ‘green man’ and the three ‘tinnners’ hares carved in the roof bosses. The font has quaint old naïve carvings, too.



The Green Man



The Font



The three hares

Living at a distance from this area means that I usually investigate the area while staying with Jackie, hence the reason perhaps that we'd dowsed more of the southern section of our target area. (Though I've dowsed Bow henge in Oct. 2010, but not for the sanctuary, and we've dowsed around Broadnymet chapel together without positive results.)

Peter Green of Bow History who instigated this search also came with me in September 2011 to the 'water shrine' site and to Spreyton. He and I also walked south from North Tawton to The Barton on the public footpath through the Roman Marching Camp's site, and my rods indicated the west of this path (towards the river Taw) as a likely area to look. It was being ploughed that day, so it's a job for the future.

This year Jackie and I have completed driving around the wider target area while stopping frequently to dowse for the direction ancient pilgrims would have taken to reach this 'major Celtic sanctuary or shrine', and then plotted the orientation of the readings on an OS map.

Some crossings occur: near the henge; south of the henge; in Bow; just east of Bathe Pool; east of Crooke Burnell; by the Taw north of The Barton; north of Spreyton; and near Hittesleigh.

We attended a talk on 23rd July at Bow History by Terry Faull (writer of book on Devon's holy wells) about Devon's sacred woods, which made us add Nymetwood to the list of places we must look at!

This year my exploration time was curtailed by at least two months (during May and June) following an emergency appendix operation while holidaying at my brother's in Lancashire. However, I'm still collating info on Celtic stuff and making indexes for the five or six large files, so have plenty to keep me busy!

If you need to contact me, my email is: angielake9@gmail.com

Angela Lake (October 2012)

Update 7th April 2014:

I now have about 10 files of info on various subjects related to Celtic Shrines and Romano-British temples, etc. Indexing them is an ongoing job – *like painting the Forth Bridge!* – however, the 7 files' indexes completed to date make retrieval of various topics *much* easier!

There is also a small mountain of books, mostly unread, to dip into on everything Celtic, and the history of Iron Age Britain.

Since the October 2012 article was written:

Jackie and I have visited de Bathe Pool with permission from the owner, but (mostly due to the presence of cows and their calves) had not dowsed thoroughly. A site of a small altar *might* be possible in the field above, but not sure of it. A 'processional route' led diagonally uphill from this area. Before leaving we dowsed from de Bathe Barton's car park for the 'major Celtic Sanctuary' in that area, and the rods pointed east.

During the same two days in April 2013, we visited Nymet Tracey to see the site of Puttock's Well, and re-visited the church, and dowsed a possible small 'shrine' near the great Yew tree. However, when subsequently dowsing in the church car park for the 'major Celtic Shrine', our rods swivelled to the west, as they did half an hour later, when we visited Clannaborough Church. It seems that the 'major shrine' is more likely to be towards the area of Bow Henge. We need to dowse there next. Clannborough Church, an ancient '*llan*' site on its circular mound, next to the Two Moors Way, **did** dowse as a 'Celtic Sanctuary', but, frustratingly, not the 'major' one.

We carried on to the churches of Down St Mary, and Zeal Monachorum (stopping at the banks of the River Yeo, and later, by Gissage Water near Nymphayes), and Coldridge. We didn't dowse for the sanctuary from all of those, though. (You know how you feel when you are 'dowsed out'..?)

After lunch, following our visit to de Bathe Pool, we walked north up the Tarka Trail beside the west bank of the River Taw. It was a very pleasant walk, though nothing conclusive there. We checked out North Tawton church before walking south, down the public footpath from the village to The Barton (Cottles' Barton), near Newland Mill, and Jackie's car.

I'd have liked to dowse the east bank of the River Taw here*, but Jackie advised (quite rightly) that area did not have public access, so we left that for another day and permission to dowse.

*(On a walk here with Peter Green a couple of years ago, the rods indicated this area when I asked for a Celtic Sanctuary. It was 'sod's law' that September day the fields were being ploughed! Many rich red 'sods' between us and the river bank, too!)

Our one outing this year [2014] in early March was to Colebrook/e, Morchard Bishop, and East Worlinton churches, and the 'long stone' just north of that village. (We only photographed this one over the hedge, btw.) Heading north, we noticed burial mounds on the OS map and may revisit this area sometime.

We had a fruitful meeting with Peter at Jackie's house to discuss our progress (or lack of it) so far. Any dowsing or historical help would be appreciated. (I've asked for this previously, but there's been no response.) Maybe someone knows what was in Spreyton churchyard, for instance?

Addendum 11th April 2014

"April 2011: From the Bow Sanctuary Research File

*"At Frilford, north-east of Abingdon, two Romanized shrines have been superimposed on **an earlier wooden building** which had consisted of a circular ditched enclosure containing **an open wooden shed****xxx. This had been razed to the ground in the Roman period and replaced by a circular enclosure, while a new temple of the common Celtic box-like design was built beside it. The sanctuary continued in use until the fifth century."*

xxx Since dowsing at **Spreyton**, this description made me sit up and take notice!! My very small shrine there dowsed as **a three-sided wooden rectangle, with the open side to the North, and entrance/exit in the south side.