

Our ancient landscapes:
Holy wells in Ireland



An Chomhairle Oidhreachta
The Heritage Council





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Cover image: Tobar Mhuire, St. Mary’s Holy Well, near Rosserk Abbey, Ballina, Co Mayo, consists of a spring well enclosed within a rectangular stone-built, well house.

Image this page: A rag tree at Mountbridget, near Liscarroll, Co Cork, as photographed in 1943. This well, at the base of a cliff had a canopy of bushes and an ash tree known as ‘Biddy’s Tree’, where rounds were performed on St Bridget’s day. String and cloths were tied to the ash tree in honour of the saint (National Library of Ireland).

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Folklore recorded at St Coleman's Well, Slievemore, on Achill Island, Co Mayo, tells that the first person at the well early on the pattern day will have his or her wish granted.



What are holy wells?

Ireland's holy wells are sacred places steeped in long held traditions and customs. Holy wells hold an important place in Ireland's cultural heritage and religious tradition, offering visitors a peaceful place for personal devotion, prayer and healing. Some holy wells may have their origins in prehistory, however they are largely associated with Christian devotions from the medieval period (5th-16th centuries AD) onwards, being well established by the 17th century and declining in use by the mid-19th century.

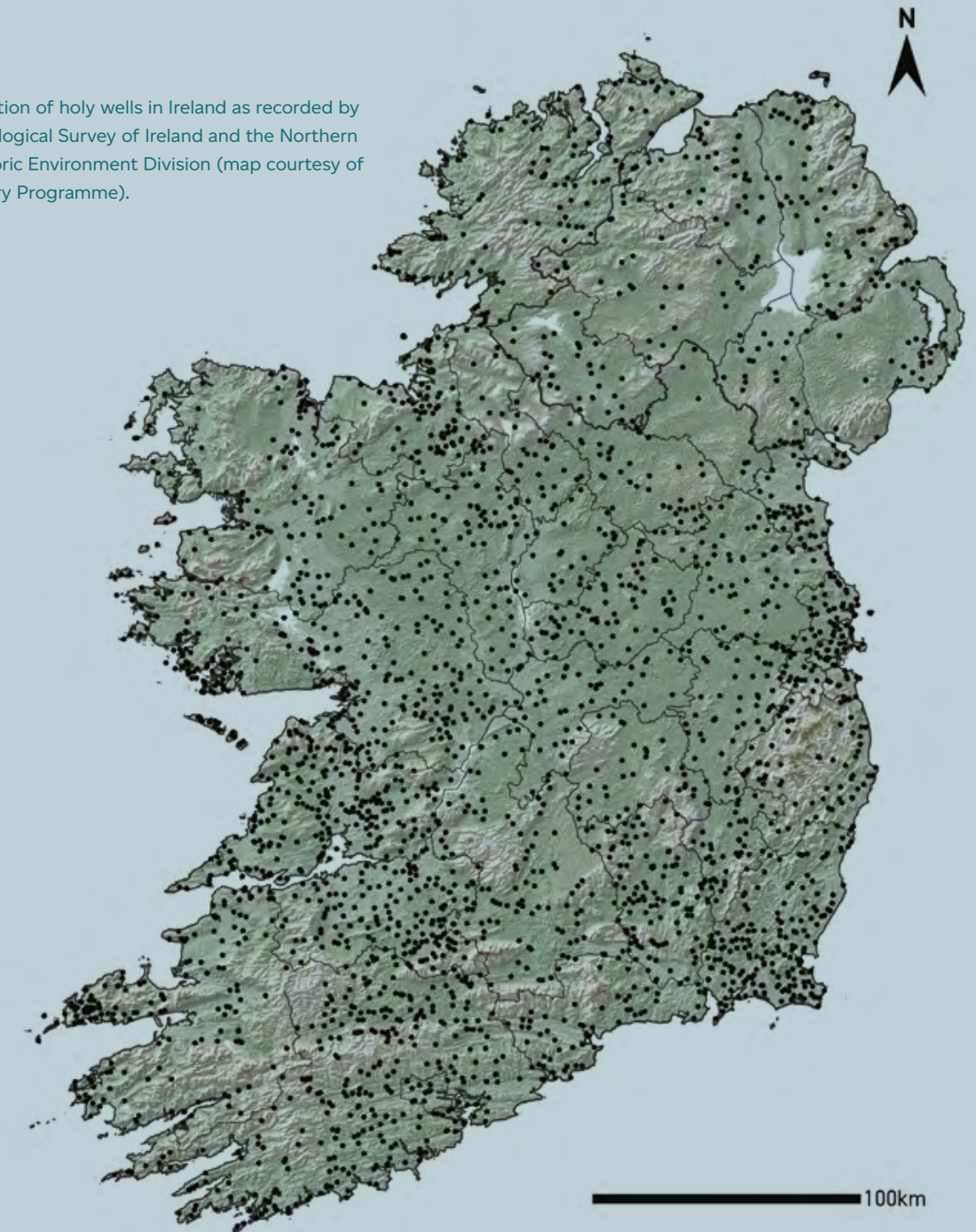
Holy wells (*Tobar Beannaithe*) or blessed wells as they are often referred to, are not unique to Ireland. However, with over 3,000 holy wells, Ireland has far more than any other country in the world. Almost every parish in Ireland has its own holy well, and occasionally multiple holy wells. There are many holy wells which are regularly frequented, and pattern (*patrún*) days are still observed. There are many more, however, that are disused, fallen into neglect, overgrown or used as a water source for livestock, and unfortunately the tradition of the well has long been forgotten.

Holy wells can be found in a wide variety of places including the seashore or in sea caves, mountain tops or passes, bogs or marshes, islands and lakes.

Holy wells on mountain tops, in bogland or on the seashore, may be considered particularly miraculous for a freshwater spring to occur at that location. The majority of holy wells are found near old church sites or graveyards, usually outside the wall of the church site in a nearby field. Holy wells are not just a rural phenomenon, they are also situated in our villages, towns, and cities.

Embedded in the landscape, holy wells can take many forms: a simple spring, a large pond, a small lake, a pool in a waterfall, or even a hollow in a tree that holds rainwater. Often, they are contained within an artificial basin or drystone-built structure, simply lined with stone slabs with steps or kneeling stones to access the water. The setting surrounding the well can be simple with the well comprising a natural hollow, whilst other wells are contained in a well house resembling a mini oratory or a beehive hut. Holy wells can be modern in appearance, adorned with statues, landscaped, whitewashed, with seating provided and a paved surface for ease of access. Some wells are conveniently signposted, but many are not and require local knowledge to find them.

The distribution of holy wells in Ireland as recorded by the Archaeological Survey of Ireland and the Northern Ireland Historic Environment Division (map courtesy of the Discovery Programme).



What are the origins of holy wells?



- ◀ Doon Well, Co Donegal, as photographed 1870-1890. This well is located close to Doon Rock, which was the traditional inauguration site of the O'Donnell ruling family (National Library of Ireland).

The origin date of holy wells is not known and has been subject to much debate. In all likelihood, different holy wells probably originated at different points in time. Some of Ireland's holy wells may be pre-Christian in origin, there are holy wells that clearly associate their origins with an early Irish saint, while others were significant in the later medieval period following the introduction of Continental saints. Several holy wells were considered particularly special, amongst those are the wells associated with the royal sites of Ireland, such as the Hill of Tara, Co Meath, and Rathcroghan, Co Roscommon. Other wells were sites for the inauguration of kings, for instance, the O'Donnell's inauguration site - the Rock of Doon, is near Doon Well in Co Donegal.

The practice of visiting holy wells is one of the oldest traditions of Irish Christianity. The archaeologist Peter Harbison suggested that the presence of a venerated well may have influenced the choice of location for the early monasteries to achieve a frictionless continuity from pagan to Christian cult. Saints performed baptisms at wells and springs, likely places that were held sacred by people. Virtually every saint, whose life was documented, is credited with the miraculous production of a well. Indeed, the significance of holy wells was not ignored by early Christians but instead it often assimilated vestiges of older religions which may survive in customs and traditions. The establishment of an early church close to a well helped to assimilate old religions into the new, or perhaps there was also a functional reason to locate a church near a well as a useful water source. In many cases, the presence of a holy well may be the only indication of a long-disappeared church.



◀ Tobernalt (Well of the Glen), on the eastern side of Lough Gill, Co Sligo, has a circular stone setting enclosing the well.

In the early 19th century, the Ordnance Survey maps were produced for Ireland and the locations of many holy wells were mapped for the first time. The anglicised name of the well was recorded, often revealing the cure associated with the well or the saint to whom the well was dedicated. The name of a well can be associated with the cure the well provides, for example *Tobar na Súil* (Well of the Eyes), *Tobar na Plaighe* (Well of the Plague) and *Tobar na Deilge* (Well of the Thorns). Holy wells are mostly dedicated to Irish saints, both local and national saints, with St Brigid (Bride's Well) and St Patrick amongst the most common dedications across the country. The main Catholic saints, have well dedications, but less commonly so. There are many wells that are named *Tobar na Naomh*, 'Well of the Saints'.



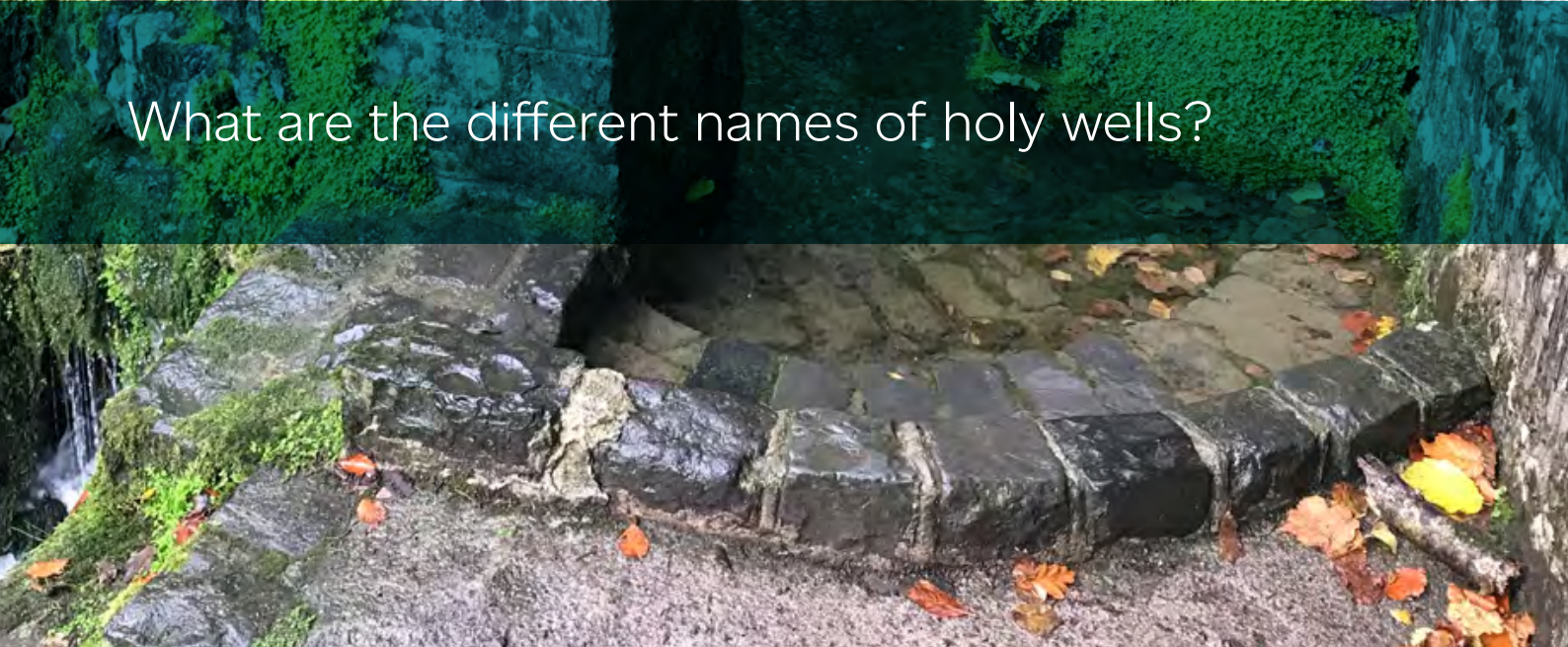
Tobernalt, Co Sligo, as photographed 1860-83 showing two 'Mass Rocks' or altars either side of the well (National Library of Ireland).

A nineteenth century photograph of Sunday's Well, Cork city, prior to its removal by road widening in 1946. The well house was constructed over the well with stone steps leading down to the water (Cork City Cork Public Museum).



What are the different names of holy wells?

Wells which are named *Lady's Well*, *Mary's Well* or *Tobar Mhuire*, are associated with the Blessed Virgin Mary. Wells named *Sunday's Well* or the *King of Sunday's Well* are dedicated to Almighty God. *Tobar na nAingeal* in Co Donegal translates as 'the Well of the Angel', and is visited on the Feast of St Michael, Archangel. There are wells named after a local priest, usually a clergyman who performed miracles or cures at the well. *Father Moore's Well*, Co Kildare, is associated with Fr Moore, a priest considered to have a gift of healing, and many visited him for cures. Before his death in 1826 he blessed the well so people could avail of cures after his death.





When are holy wells visited?

- ◀ St Patrick's Well, Bunduff, Co Leitrim, has an oval cairn with a small rectangular drystone well. It was practice at many wells for the pilgrim to leave a stone at the well and this is how the cairn has formed over time.

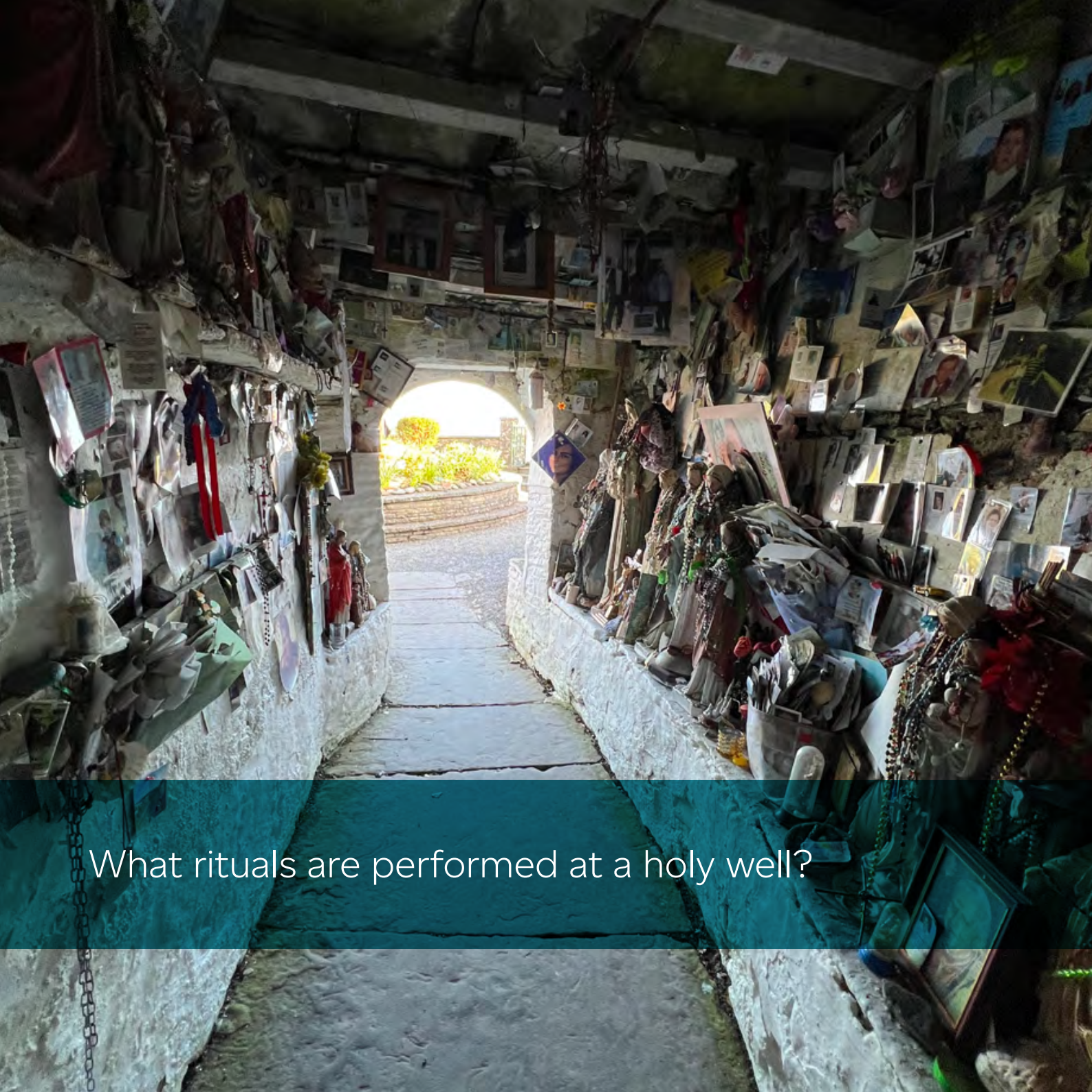
Holy wells were visited throughout the year, but most wells are associated with a saint and the saint's feast day was the most popular day to visit a well and perform the pilgrimage. Wells named *Domhnagh* or 'King' were visited mainly on a Sunday. Wells named *Tobar na hAoine* are visited on a Friday or on Good Friday. The most popular days for visiting wells was St Patrick's Day (17 March) and the Feast of the Assumption (15 August). Wells are said to be at their most powerful the eve of the saint's feast day. It is particularly advantageous to avail of this by performing a vigil at the well from sunset to sunrise.

The practice of pilgrimage is thought to long pre-date Christianity in Ireland. The date that some holy wells were visited hint at the earlier worship of sacred springs; indeed, wells are visited on the pre-Christian festivals of Imbolc (1 February), Bealtaine (1 May), and Lughnasa (1 August). Fewer wells are visited at Samhain (1 November), with the spring and summer seasons, particularly the months of July and August, being a more favourable time for outdoor worship. Those visited at Samhain tend to be called All Saint's Well and are visited on November 1st, All Saint's Day.

Rounds were performed on May Day (Bealtaine) at *The City* (or *The City of Shrone*), Co Kerry. The site comprises a stone fort with penitential stations and a holy well, the waters of which are contained in a cauldron-like concrete basin and bubble up strongly from below. Cattle were driven here on May Day and

ushered around the well to protect them for the coming year. Other wells were visited on St John's Eve (23 June) which is a Christian enactment of the festival of midsummer or the summer solstice. On St John's Eve, many people in rural Ireland made bonfires. People jumped through the bonfire for good luck and cattle were herded through the dying embers for the same purpose.

By far the most enduring and popular time to visit holy wells and mountain holy places was the last Sunday in July, Garland Sunday or *Domhnach Chrom Dubh*, which coincides with the festival of Lughnasa. Lughnasa marked the end of summer and the beginning of the harvest season. Communities traditionally gathered on certain hillsides or waterside locations, assembling at rivers, lake shores and at holy wells to spend the day enjoying dancing, games and bilberry-picking. It is at Lughnasa that the pilgrimages to the holy mountains of Mount Brandon and Croagh Patrick took place. St Declan's Well at Ardmore, Co Waterford, is visited on the last Sunday of July; at Tobernalt, Co Sligo, thousands of pilgrims visit the well on that day. According to Máire McNeill, author of *The Festival of Lughnasa*, the later saints were able to inherit these places and many functions of the pagan god Lugh. The popularity of these pilgrimages shows how successful some of the saints were in succeeding the pre-Christian deities associated with wells and other sacred sites.



What rituals are performed at a holy well?

◀ St Brigid's well at Liscannor, Ballysteen, Co Clare, is within a well house which holds offerings left over many years by pilgrims.

The well in 1943 showing the offerings left at the time (National Library of Ireland). ▶



Pilgrimage to the holy well is a local event referred to as doing the rounds, the *turas* and the patten or pattern (*patrún*), derived from the word patron or patron saint. Wells were gathering places and pilgrimage often served as a social occasion. On this day people came together to perform the pilgrimage ritual, which ultimately ended at the well where the water was drunk for its curative properties, to protect against illness and to protect against evil. Many holy well complexes also included a sacred tree or stone. These features played a role as stations or stopping places in the rounding practices that were performed at the wells. Rituals were quite varied, but the route of the rounding or circumambulation, the number of stations, the prayers recited, the number of circuits performed and the day or date for visiting were strictly prescribed. The detailed pilgrimage ritual had to be performed for a pilgrim to obtain a cure or blessing for themselves, or on behalf of another. Sometimes pilgrims fasted or kept overnight vigil. Rounds were

performed barefoot or on bare knees while reciting special prayers. The rounds were performed deiseal or sunwise; to do the opposite was known as *tuathal* and was thought to invoke a curse. Some wells were used for cursing, indeed even the saints were known to curse, as well as bless.

The circuits are usually performed in threes or multiples of three, or seven times, with one decade of the rosary usually recited. Prayers are counted on rosary beads or small stones used as counters. Pilgrims pray at stations usually marked by a cairn of stones, an altar, or a large natural boulder associated with the saint. Crosses are inscribed with pebbles on 'marking stones' at these stations. The counter stones are placed on the penitential cairn on each circuit or on the final circuit, and a cross is inscribed on the well house or other place of importance. The stones or other features are touched or rubbed to obtain a blessing. The well water is consumed, applied to the body, or washed in during each round or the final

round. Sometimes an older woman in the community fills the cups and offers pilgrims a drink from the well, keeping an orderly flow to proceedings. If a stream ran from the well the feet, hands or heads are washed in it. At some wells, moss, watercress, or other plants growing around the well are consumed or applied to an affliction.

Offerings were left as part of rituals and can be found strewn around the well and associated features, including broken crockery, holy medals and coins, and faded rags hanging from an associated tree. Often the items were of no monetary value like buttons or pins, flowers or food like butter, candles, crosses, holy medals, pictures, or statues. In modern times personal items are left appealing to the saint for a good outcome, such as a lighter to help a person quit smoking, an inhaler for an asthma sufferer, or a pen to bless someone doing exams. Memorial cards, Mass cards, and photos of people suffering illness are now commonplace at holy wells. Sometimes coins were thrown in the well or hammered into a nearby tree. The idea was that the illness was transferred to the tree. At St Finbarr's Shrine, Gougane Barra, Co Cork, a wooden cross was so covered in coins it collapsed from the weight, people then began to hammer coins into the tree at which the broken cross was placed. Crutches are found as offerings at holy wells reflecting the cure that was sought by the pilgrim. At Doon Well, Co Donegal, many crutches stood by the well in the 19th century; in the absence of a tree the crutches were adorned with rags. During the Covid-19 pandemic face masks were left at holy wells, indicating the relevance of holy wells in more recent times.

After the religious devotions at a holy well, the pattern day gatherings continued with amusements involving

Practices such as those depicted in this painting of the 'Pattern at Glendalough' c. 1816 led to the suppression of patterns and assemblies at religious sites (Maria Spilsbury Taylor, National Folklore Collection, UCD).

A rag tree at St Patrick's well or Tobernaboghilla, Abbeylands, Ballyshannon, Co Donegal.



games, sports, dancing, and stalls. The fair days often coincided with the pattern day and brought large crowds from far and wide to the area. On occasion these secular amusements would lead to drunkenness, courting and faction fighting. Without official clerical sanction, rowdy amusements took place. Thus, at the Synod of Tuam in 1660 it was decreed that 'dancing, flute-playing, bands of music, riotous revels and other abuses in visiting wells and other holy places were forbidden' (Ó Danachair, 1974). The synod decreed that visits to holy wells should not take place on Sundays and the clergy were forbidden to be present at these gatherings. The church disapproved of the faction fighting, drunkenness and courting that took place, and the rituals like rounding the well on bare knees, which were viewed as barbaric and superstitious. An observer of the pattern at St Declan's Well, in Ardmore, Co Waterford, noted that pilgrims had 'bloody knees from devotion, and bloody heads from fighting' (Hardy 1840). Because of these non-religious activities several patterns were suppressed during the 19th century by the Catholic clergy.



Located on the seabed, Colmille's Well, Doonierin, Co Sligo, is named after the saint associated with the nearby Drumcliffe monastery. The well is only visible, and accessible, at low tide. It is visited by pilgrims on the 9th of June (St Colmille's feast day).

Why did worship at holy wells decline?

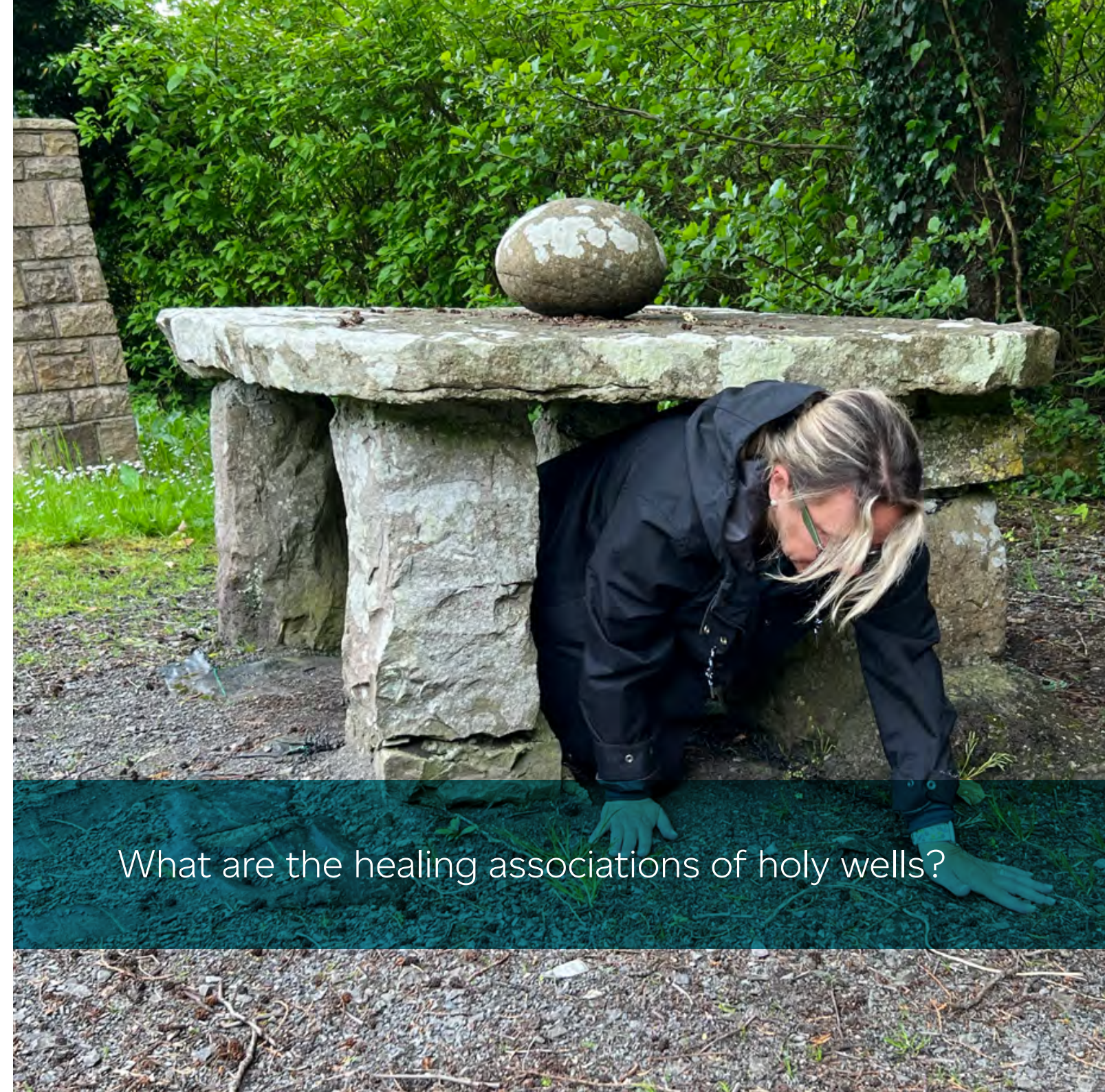
As well as a holy well at St Lassair's, Kiltonan, Co Roscommon, there are a number of prayer stations. One of these is a large slab mounted on four stone pillars which was used as a mass rock. Pilgrims would try to ease sore backs by crawling under the altar stone.

Travel writers and antiquarians wrote detailed commentary and eyewitness accounts of pilgrimage practices in Ireland in the 18th and 19th centuries. Hardy's *Holy Wells of Ireland* (1840) influenced how pattern day activities were viewed. He was horrified by the practice of rounding on bare feet and knees, which he saw as the barbaric customs of the peasantry. He also strongly disapproved of the secular activities following the religious element of the pattern. Hardy argued that 'the voice of an enlightened public will be raised against the longer continuance of practices as degrading and immoral as any of those which are attended to by the most unenlightened heathen nations.' Despite his disapproval, he provided invaluable eyewitness accounts of the practices, 'and so thoroughly persuaded were they of the sanctity of those pagan practices that they would travel barefooted from ten to twenty miles for the purpose of crawling on their knees round these wells, and upright stones and oak trees westward as the sun travels, some three times, some six, some nine, and so on, in uneven numbers until their voluntary penances were completely fulfilled'.

McParlan's *Statistical Survey of the County of Donegal* (1802) observed the activity at Malin Well, a tidal well at Malin Head, Co Donegal. He wrote: 'a famous pilgrimage is performed on some certain day in summer, at a creek of the sea which comes in among

the rocks of Mawlin head, by dropping a great number of beads: some walking on their legs, some on their knees, and some stationary, all vehemently whispering prayers: but the ceremony finishes by a general ablution in the sea, male and female all frisking and playing in the water stark naked and washing off each other's sins'.

Hardy and McParlan's hostile sentiments were echoed by the Catholic clergy and the rising Catholic middle class, who in post-Famine Ireland now preferred to pray in new chapels. The relaxation of the Penal Laws following the 1829 Catholic Emancipation Act enabled the Church to build new churches and establish schools. Priests condemned traditional wakes, fairy beliefs, crossroads dancing, and other folk practices, and encouraged devotions to the Stations of the Cross, and the veneration of the Sacred Heart (Ray 2015). The reformed Catholic Church favoured attendance at Mass, confession and communion, processions, and novenas, leading to the decline of the traditional pattern day and visits to holy wells. Campaigns by both church and state to stamp out what were seen as superstitious beliefs and indecent behaviour resulted in the decline of holy well worship (Foley 2010).



What are the healing associations of holy wells?

Holy wells played an important part at all stages of life. It was customary to visit a holy well the night before getting married; holy wells were used for baptism before fonts were introduced to churches; and sometimes people wanted to be buried close to a holy well. Wells were visited for many reasons, for penance and devotional worship of the saint, but a well's reputation for miraculously curing ailments was one of the main reasons for visiting a well.

Conventional medicine was not always available to people. Indeed, it was cheaper to visit a holy well than visit a doctor, and often it was considered more effective if the pilgrim had belief in the healing power of the saint. The best time to seek a cure was at midnight on the saint's feast day when the water was thought to be at its most potent. Holy wells dedicated to St John the Baptist are said to boil up at midnight on St John's Eve (23 June) and it was believed that the water at this time could cure anything. There were many taboos associated with the correct time to seek cures but generally it was between sunset and sunrise on the saint's feast day. Whilst some wells could cure any ailment, or were non-specific, others held specific cures. Common cures included sore eyes, headache, rheumatism, toothache, backache, infertility and lameness. Others could cure mental illness, plague, and various animal illnesses. Cattle were driven to the seashore where the well was located, and horses were

swum through a lake associated with the saint. Indeed, the water running from the well was considered curative and protective and could be used for driving cattle through, and water from the well was sprinkled on animals and the byre.

Tobar na Súil (Well of the Eyes) was a common name for a holy well throughout the country. Eye problems were commonplace and eye wells were considered powerfully curative. These same wells were also particularly vengeful to those who interfered with them and could cause blindness. At St Sgreabhan's Well, Co Clare, not alone did the well cure sore eyes, but pilgrims were also protected against the fairies. The idea that supernatural powers could do good or do harm was a very real concept.

A common ailment was backache, and the cure involved a certain amount of discomfort. The penal altar at Tobernalt, Co Sligo, has a natural curving edge into which the pilgrim should press their back, and this would provide a cure for backache. At St Lassair's well, Co Roscommon, the sufferer must crawl under a low stone altar for the cure, and in Disert, Co Donegal, squeezing through a narrow space between two upright stones offers a cure for backache. Sleeping at a holy well was reputed to be curative. At Caher Island, Co Mayo, there is a stone called *Leabaidh Phadruig* (Patrick's Bed); if a person with epilepsy slept on it, they would be cured.

The early ecclesiastical site at Disert, Co Donegal, has a structure called St. Columcille's arch which consists of upright stones supporting a horizontal lintel slab, on top of which is a loose heap of small stones. According to tradition, those seeking a cure from backache squeezed through the arch three times, while reciting prayers. There are also penitential cairns and a holy well.



Some wells are known as *Tobar na nGealt* meaning the 'Well of the Lunatics'; these were thought to cure mental health issues. In 1841 O'Donovan wrote in the Ordnance Survey Letters for Kerry of a holy well in *Gleann na nGealt*: 'it is still believed by the natives, that all madmen feel a yearning to make to this valley and that their gloomy disease is relieved by drinking of the clear waters and eating of the water-cresses of *Tobar na n-Gealt*, the Well of the Lunatics. They give many instances of mad persons who sojourned in this valley, and returned home, sane and in excellent health.' Indeed, many wells have water which contains trace minerals and elements like iron and sulphur, meaning there may have been a certain level of truth to the supposed curative properties of these wells.

Praying at certain holy wells could increase fertility and ease childbirth. Logan's book on holy wells (1980) gives examples from across Ireland. In 1625 St Brigid's Well, Brideswell, Co Roscommon, was visited by MacDonnell and the daughter of Red Hugh O'Neill to pray for children. Following the pilgrimage, their son and heir was born. In gratitude, the earl built a gateway to the bathhouse. Some holy wells could cure sick children by dipping the child in the water. At *Tobar na Taise* 'the Well of the Ghost,' Co Clare, an ill child was laid out in the coffin-shaped well in the hope the child would be restored to health. At St Ultan's Well in Inishowen, Co Donegal, poorly children were brought to the well by their mothers, who undertook the pilgrimage ritual on their behalf. St Ultan is known for his ability to cure sick children. Moss was gathered from St Brigid's Well, Darragh, Co Limerick, and boiled with milk and given to a child with whooping cough as part of the treatment (Logan 1980). The 'Chink Well' or Chincough near Portrane, Co Dublin, is in a cave that is inaccessible at high tide. As the name Chincough

implies, the well is reputed to cure whooping cough. To obtain the cure, pieces of bread are left as offerings. If the tide carries the bread away then the prognosis is favourable. However, not everyone believed in the curative waters of holy wells. Medical practitioners viewed wells as superstitious sites of pseudo-cure. A visitor to St Declan's Well, Ardmore, Co Waterford, in 1867 noted 'you are expected to drink a glass of water, which is nothing but ordinary spring water' (Ó Cadhla 2002).

Holy trees can be found at holy wells. The tree can be named after a particular saint and are often considered to have miraculous powers. Hanging a rag on the tree was an integral part of the pattern or rounds performed at many holy wells. Votive offerings of rags, rosary beads or personal items of the sick person were hung on the rag tree as they were known. To obtain a cure, the afflicted part of the sick person's body (particularly the eyes) was washed with the rag and then it was tied to the tree. It is said that when the rag rotted from the tree the pilgrim's problem would cease. Those who were bedridden had a strip of their bed clothes hung on the rag tree. Traditionally, the rags chosen were red, a colour said to resist evil spirits, but nowadays any colour rag is used, and a wide variety of personal objects are hung on the tree. Sometimes notes are tied to the tree, as a plea for divine intervention. Trees growing at holy wells are considered sacred and must not be used for firewood, indeed a branch that has touched the well water can never be burned.

Folk art statue at St Kieran's Well, Shalwy, Co Donegal. ►



What stone features are associated with holy wells?

Stones found at holy wells include curing stones, holed stones, praying stones, bullaun stones, penitential stations or cairns, ogham stones, pillar stones and cross inscribed stones. These features can be incorporated into the pilgrimage practice at the wells, whether it is adding a stone to a penitential cairn or incising a cross into a special stone. Sometimes these stones were arranged in the shape of a chair or a bed, on which the saint is said to have sat or slept on. The type of stone also had significance, coloured stones or quartz were thought to be endowed with supernatural powers. Amber coloured stones from a holy well will protect the possessor from loss due to fire or water. Having a stone from a holy place on board a vessel was said to preserve it from danger.

Certain stones were sometimes kissed or caressed, and others were held or passed around the body as part of the pilgrimage ritual. Rubbing the afflicted part of the body off the pillar stone near St Adamnan's Well, Co Donegal, would cure a pilgrim. Stones with holes were also thought to have special powers. Stones with indentations were said to be the imprint of the saint's knees, fingers, or feet, and even in one case the saint's behind! Other stones, if removed from the well, could return to the place from which they were taken. Often stories tell of heavy stones that were stolen, misfortune bestowed on the thief, and the stone would miraculously appear back at the well. Other legends tell of large flagstones that could float and were used as boats by saints, some could even bring the saint to other countries. Interfering with or disrespecting a stone could cause the stone to lose its power. Stones at holy wells were used for swearing oaths. These stones were believed to be very powerful and could exact vengeance on a person if the oath was broken. At *Tobar Fheichin*, Maam, Co

Galway, there is a large oval shaped flagstone known as *Leac Fheichin*. A person accused of a crime or evil doing was required to pray at the stone and turn it in a clockwise direction. If they were telling the truth nothing would happen; however, if they were not then St Feichin would be insulted and exact vengeance on the person. Relics of saints, especially bell shrines, were used to swear oaths upon. The relic of the saint was brought out on the pattern day and pilgrims would bless themselves by passing it around their bodies three times clockwise.

Bullaun stones are commonly found at holy wells. Bullaun stones contain natural or artificial depressions, the word '*bullla*' meaning a bowl or basin. The hollow in a bullaun stone was sometimes said to have been created by the saint using the stone as a pillow. The water that gathered in a bullaun stone was said to have healing properties, particularly effective for curing warts. In some cases the stones themselves have been regarded as the holy well.

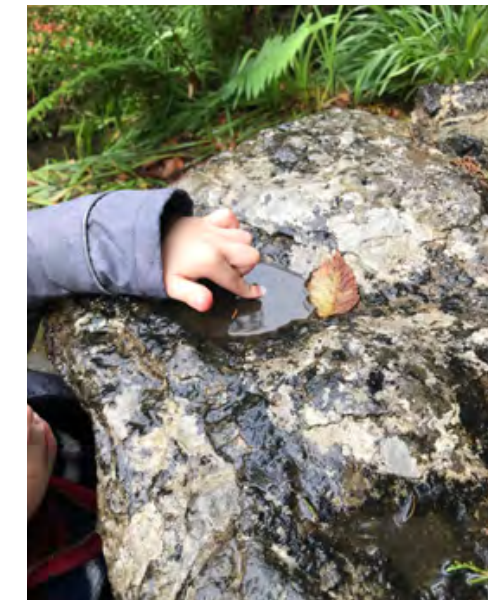
Cursing stones can be found at holy wells. There is a famous set of cursing stones known as the *Clocha Breaca* or the Speckled Stones, on Inishmurry, Co Sligo. To invoke a curse the person placing the curse must fast from the night before. The following day the stones on the cursing altar are turned nine times anti-clockwise. The curse had to be performed for the right reasons; if the curse was not justified it could rebound on the person who had turned the stones. It is said that when counting the stones of the *Clocha Breaca*, the same number can never be reached each time. The use of cursing stones has roots in liturgical cursing by early medieval clergy as a sanction against enemies and oath breakers.



Left:
Bullaun stone at St Gobnait's Grave, Ballyvourney, Co Cork.

Left below:
This bullaun stone at Killinagh, Blacklion, Co Cavan, is known locally as 'St Brigid's Stones', these were formerly used as cursing stones. They are close to the Killinagh ecclesiastical site and Toberbride holy well in Termon townland.

Below:
The depression in this stone at Tobernalt, Co Sligo, is locally known as the imprint of Saint Patrick's hand.





The well house at St Patrick's Well, Grallagh graveyard, Co Dublin. This is recorded as 'St Michael's Well' on the 1837 Ordnance Survey map. It is also known locally as 'St Macullin's Well' and 'St Patrick's Well'. The water of the well is accessed down three steps with a shamrock carved into the first step (©Photographic Archive, National Monuments Service, Government of Ireland)

Stones found close to holy wells and pilgrimage sites can have fertility and birth associations. At St Attracta's Well, Monasteraden, Co Sligo, the saint is believed to have slain a serpent at the site of the well. Along the top of the wall of the well house are several rounded stones known as the 'serpent's eggs'. Traditionally, a woman wishing to have children would bring a stone home with her and return it after giving birth. In many cultures, serpents and snakes represent fertility; snakes shed their skin, thus they are symbols of rebirth and transformation.

Penitential cairns are heaps of stones which are often found close to holy wells and are stations or stopping places during the rounds. Pilgrims added a stone each time they counted a prayer or a circuit. Some wells have large cairns, a testament to the number of pilgrims who have performed the rounds. At Inishkea South, Co Mayo, the stones on the cairn near St Deirbhile's Well are specially selected and are all white stones. The stone might also be a gift from the pilgrim to the saint when little else could be afforded as a votive offering.

Penitential cairn at Tullaghan Hill, Co Sligo. It was recorded in 1878 that 'near the well is a heap of stones thrown there no doubt, by devotees, as the complement of their visit'.





St Brendan's Well, Kilmeena, Co Mayo is surrounded by a low stone enclosing wall.

What is the folklore of holy wells?

Holy wells are rich in folklore. Common stories tell of how the well was created; how the saint overcame enemies who sought to destroy the well; how the well obtained its powers; or how local pagans were converted and baptised at the well. Some wells can foretell the future. If a pilgrim could not see their reflection in the water of the well, it was a bad omen and a sign that the person would die within the year. Other wells can change natural forces. At *Tobernacoragh* (Well of Assistance) on Inishmurray, Co Sligo, it was the custom of the islanders to drain the well of its water and in so doing calm is restored to the sea. Clay taken from some holy wells was said to protect sailors from shipwreck.

Occasionally, a well can be associated with a story of family lineage. At St Brendan's Well, Kilmeena, Co Mayo, 'it is believed that once the English ordered the destruction of the O'Malley Clan and killed all the male children and babies. However, a baby girl was taken secretly to the well, which was guarded, and dipped, and so turned into a boy, and from him all the O'Malley's are descended' (Logan 1980).

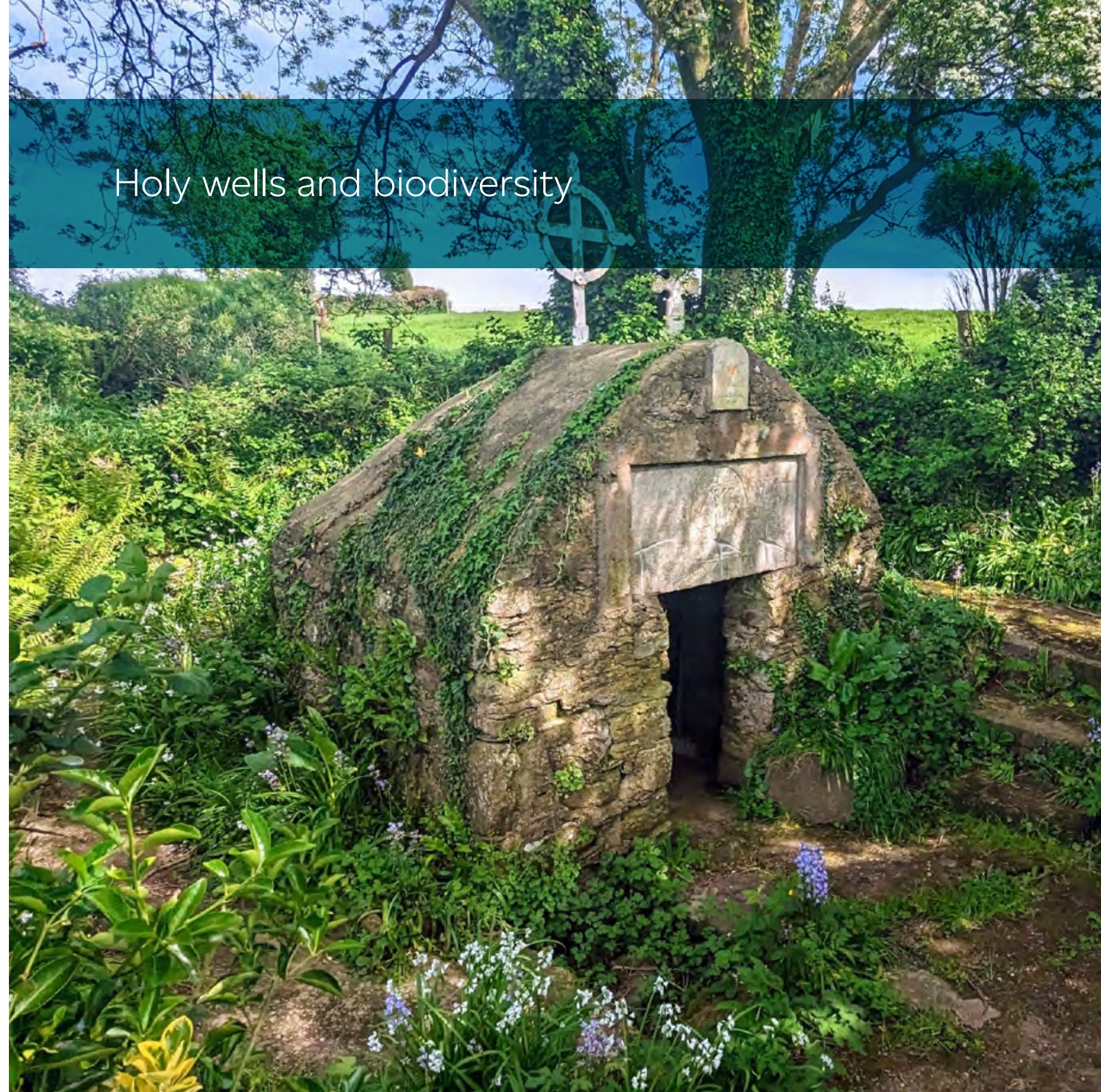
Sacred fish were commonly associated with holy wells. These supernatural immortal fish, most often a salmon or trout, and occasionally an eel, are said to appear in a well to those seeking an omen for the future. An eel that was seen by a woman in St Brigid's Well, Liscannor, Co Clare, is attributed to helping her win the Lotto! Catching the fish was taboo and an omen of death. The individual would die either three days, three months, or three years after taking the fish. Capturing and attempting to cook the fish features in many stories of holy wells, culminating in the fish escaping and reappearing in the well with tell-tale burn marks on display.

Many holy wells have stories of a small creature that can enact great change and even foretell death. At St Colman's Well, Achill, Co Mayo, the first person at the well early on the pattern day will have his or her wish granted, though 'some people say that there is a little worm in it and if he comes up to the top of the water you or someone belonging to you will die' (National Folklore Collection Schools, 0086:257). A domestic well, at Old Pound Street, Sligo, is known as *Tobar na Selmide* or 'The Snail's Well'. The Ordnance Survey Letters (1836) describes the power of a snail living in the well "which, prophetic tradition says, will in time to come overwhelm by its waters the whole town. The reason why it is called *Tobar na Selmide* is, a snail is seen coming out of the well every seventh year, which is thought to be an enchanted and metamorphosed being, possessing the power of affecting in some time future an overflowing well, which will have the narrated effect."

If a well was disrespected or misused it could move location overnight, disappear altogether, or might re-appear in a hollow of a nearby tree or move to a neighbouring parish. Sometimes the well was insulted because the water was used to clean clothes, boil or cook food, make poitín, wash animal carcasses or an enemy tampered with the well. There are stories of dire consequences for those who fill in a well, usually the local landlord who disapproved of the well worship. Sometimes the holy well afterwards appeared overflowing in the landlord's home. Oftentimes a well could simply naturally dry up, but someone had to be blamed, perhaps a neighbour who was disliked or distrusted in the community. If a well disappeared and reemerged in the neighbouring parish, people would accuse one another of interfering with the well or stealing it!

All Saints Well near Blarney, Co Cork, shows how a well can be an oasis for biodiversity. ▶

Holy wells and biodiversity



Due to their cultural importance and ritual meaning, holy wells have generally not been modified as much as the surrounding countryside, so they are in some ways similar to graveyards – an oasis for biodiversity. Some fauna and flora have adapted specifically to the conditions associated with the environmental conditions of wells. Wells often have an overflow stream, or wet areas around them, and these can further increase their ecological significance. The running water supports water-loving plants such as marsh-marigold (*Caltha palustris*) and water mint (*Mentha aquatica*), which in turn provide food and habitat for a variety of supported insects and small creatures. The moist, and often shaded, environments of the well surroundings foster the growth of various mosses, lichens, and fungi, some of which are uncommon elsewhere.

Vegetation around the wells typically includes native and naturalised trees such as yew (*Taxus baccata*) and hawthorn (*Crataegus monogyna*) and occasionally even imports such as sitka spruce as at St Brigid's Well in Tully, Co Kildare. Many of these trees, especially hawthorn, often do not get a chance to grow into proper trees but they can be beneficial in providing nesting and shelter for birds as well as habitats for invertebrates and small mammals. They are also striking and beautiful in the landscape.

Many of the holy well cures can have their origins in their associated herbal flora, the bark from willow trees (*Salix Spp.*) is a long-held source of aspirin and wells surrounded by willow trees are often known as 'headache wells'. Celeste Ray (2020) has written that 'whooping cough was treated at wells with plentiful stitchwort; the presence of speedwell germander indicated 'eye wells', and wells where comfrey proliferates are still considered ameliorative for arthritis and joint pain even though well devotees might not now be aware of comfrey's folk medicinal use'.

Holy wells are not just significant from a cultural and spiritual standpoint, but they can also form vital pockets of biodiversity in an increasingly human modified landscape, supporting a variety of life forms and helping to maintain a healthy balance in local ecosystems.



Marking stone at St Finbarr's shrine, Gougane Barra, Co Cork. Traditionally pilgrims rub stones such as this.

Many holy wells are accessible with active devotions taking place. The saint's feast day is the most common day to visit, but holy wells can be visited at any time of the year. Holy wells can be difficult to access, neglected or sadly no longer exist and the old customs associated with them have been lost. Many holy wells are located on private land and working farms; permission must be sought from the landowner before accessing these holy wells.

How can I care for a holy well?

In Ireland, holy wells are recorded archaeological monuments and are protected under National Monuments legislation. A notification of proposed works to a holy well must be provided two months in advance to the National Monument Service (NMS) for approval. It is important to maintain the character of the well. Each well is unique and has irreplaceable features that are part of the heritage of the holy well, and as such should be preserved. For advice, please consult the National Monuments Service in advance of proposed works, details are available at www.archaeology.ie.

- Always check ownership and make sure the owner is in agreement with any proposed changes e.g., improved access or interpretative signage
- Contact your local Heritage Officer, they may have done a survey of holy wells
- Good work is sometimes doing very little, so it may be a case of 'leave well alone'
- Be mindful of biodiversity, expert advice may be needed on ecology
- Holy wells are often part of an archaeological complex such as a church site, so try not to see a well in isolation
- Remember, holy wells are protected under National Monuments legislation
- Try to ensure that any offerings left at a well are bio-degradable
- Holy wells are places with a long history and they may have different meanings to many members of the community

Things you can do include:

- Talk to older members of the community about their memories of holy wells and what went on there
- Check the School's Folklore Collection for traditions about holy wells
- Take pictures, film, and sketches to document modern day practice
- Teach children and other young people about holy wells

Where can I learn more about holy wells?

In 1937 the Irish Folklore Commission, in collaboration with the Department of Education and the Irish National Teachers' Organisation, initiated a scheme in which schoolchildren were encouraged to collect folklore and local history from their parents, grandparents and other older members of the local community. Invaluable information was collected including the pilgrimage practice, customs and stories associated with local holy wells. The School's Folklore Collection is now available online at www.duchas.ie and is an important source of information on holy wells. The Archaeological Survey of Ireland have recorded, and continue to record, information on holy wells. County-wide surveys have been commissioned by many heritage offices of County Councils. Surveys are essential for gathering and preserving the memory of the local holy wells, their location, pilgrimage customs, feast day, cures, and associated saint.

Online resources

The website and Historic Environment Viewer of the National Monuments Service:

www.archaeology.ie

<https://maps.archaeology.ie/HistoricEnvironment/>

The Heritage Council's Heritage Maps viewer is a web-based spatial data viewer containing a wide range of built and natural heritage data sets in map form:

www.heritagemaps.ie

Irish Folklore Commission (1937-38) The Schools' Collection, National Folklore Collection. Available on Dúchas website:

www.duchas.ie

Social media pages and groups, podcasts and blogs also provide information about holy wells.

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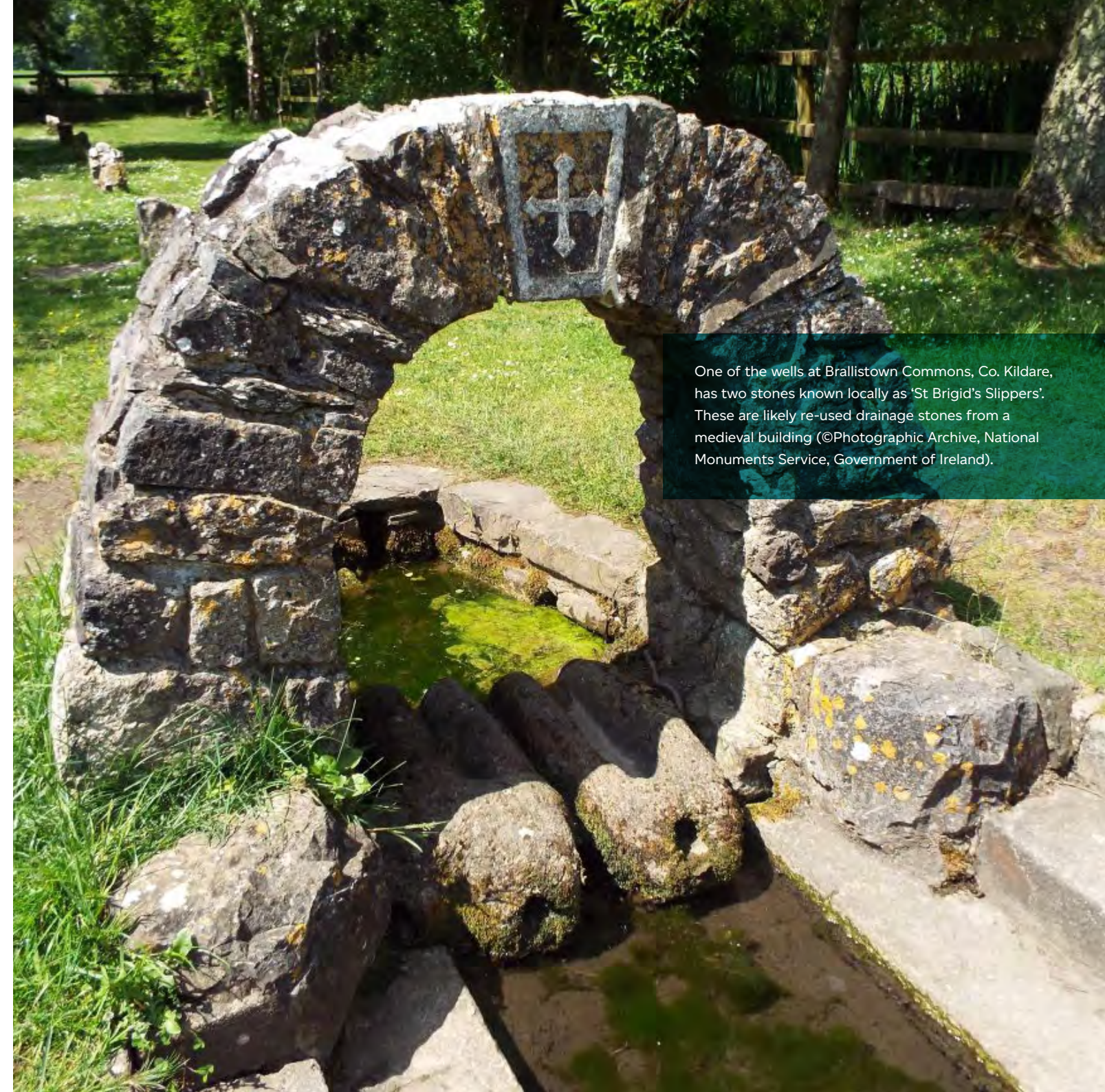
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One of the wells at Brallistown Commons, Co. Kildare, has two stones known locally as 'St Brigid's Slippers'. These are likely re-used drainage stones from a medieval building (©Photographic Archive, National Monuments Service, Government of Ireland).



An Chomhairle Oidhreachta
The Heritage Council