

A photograph of a stone well in a wooded area. The well is constructed from rough-hewn stones and is partially covered by a wooden boardwalk. To the right of the well, there is a wooden sign with text, and some pink flowers are visible in the foreground. The background is filled with dense foliage and trees.

Holy wells of Wales

Prof. Jane Cartwright

How old are holy wells?

- Water worship and the association between healing and water is undoubtedly ancient.
- Rivers, lakes, bogs, springs and the sea – essential to life and fertility and water, like the sun, is a regenerative force.
- Romano-Celtic healer-deities are associated with rivers, lakes, bogs and wells (see Miranda Green, *The Gods of the Celts* Gloucester: Alan Sutton, 1986), chapter 5 for a discussion)
- According to Green:

By the Roman-Celtic period, and indeed, in the century or so before, water cults were becoming more formalized and recognisable as identifiable religious entities. In North Britain, the Romano-British goddess Covnetina presided over a natural spring and well at Carrawburgh; she is named and is depicted as a single or a triple water-nymph, reclining on water-lilies and pouring water from a vessel; and she had a temple built in her honour.' (pp. 148-49)

- Ritual associated with well sites became a feature especially in southern Britain in the later Iron Age.
- Sacred wells persist throughout the Roman period and there is some British evidence for association with healing.
- Several wells were known at Caerwent in Wales – one contained a mother goddess (frequently associated with sacred water sites according to Green) and 5 dog skulls.
- Healing and ritual cleansing went hand in hand.
- Water was believed to heal in a number of ways – washing, immersion and drinking.

Take care not to assume that all holy wells are ancient and pre-Christian!

Some typical quotes from secondary sources which assume this:

‘With the advent of Christian missionaries[...] the worship of gods and goddesses was gradually discontinued, but their places were taken by Christian saints to whom these wells were then dedicated.’

W. McIntire, ‘Holy Wells of Cumberland’, *Transactions of the Cumberland and Westd. Arch. And Antiq. Soc.* (1944): 1

Broadhurst:

‘Throughout the length and breadth of the land, the time-hallowed sites and sacred springs were rededicated to the Christian saints, their latent spiritual properties transferred to the latest in a long line of mystical tenants.’

P. Broadhurst, *Secret Shrines: In Search of the Old Holy Wells of Cornwall* (Cornwall: Tintagel, 1988), p. 36)

James Rattue, *The Living Stream: Holy Wells in Historical Context* (Woodbridge: Boydell Press, 1995)

‘And it is at this stage that the image is at its most compelling and most dangerous. Compelling because it dovetails neatly into the modern world’s aching need to retreat to a mythical, timeless past. Dangerous because it is a distortion of the real past, an act of mental indiscipline, the preference of the pleasant over the real. The adoption of pagan sites by Christian missionaries is acknowledged as a universal phenomenon, but as regards holy wells the adoption seems to have been by no means as smooth or as total as the popular accounts tend to suggest[...] Holy wells have been and continue to be appallingly served by scholarship.’

- Nor can we assume that all medieval wells were holy.

Francis Jones in his seminal book *The Holy Wells of Wales* lists 437 wells bearing saints names, of which 119 were known to be healing wells and he also provides a total of 369 healing wells in Wales.

- Wells were an integral part of the late medieval geography of the sacred, a matrix of ancient holy places where ordinary people could approach and invoke the divine.
- Despite the heroic efforts of local historians and interested individuals and societies, this aspect of British heritage is in rapid decline. Wells are often overgrown and dilapidated and large numbers have vanished from the landscape altogether.
- Casual weekend visits by ramblers and picnicking families are almost all that remains of the thriving culture of pilgrimage to such hallowed spots.
- What local holy wells are familiar to you?



Lewys Glyn Cothi's C15th poem to Edudful daughter of Cadwgon who went on pilgrimage to St Non's and St Davids Pembrokeshire and visited the holy well

Edudful Dduwsul a ddaw
ar Dduw i wir weddiaw;
bwrw ei phwys yn eglwys Non,
bwrw ei phen lle bo'r ffynnon,
dyrchaf dwylaw yn llawen,
addoli oll i'r ddelw wen,
ennyn y cwyr melyn mawr,
a'i roi oll ar yr allawr;
oddyno heibio'dd a hi
i glos da eglwys Dewi;
offrymu, cusanu'r sant, i lldo gwyr rhudd ac
ariant.

On Sunday Edudful comes
to pray sincerely to God;
She visits Non's Church
puts her head in the well
raises her hands merrily,
worships the holy image,
lights the large, yellow candles,
and puts all of them on the altar;
From there she passes to the good close of St David's church;
makes an offering of crimson wax
and money and kisses the saint.

Jane Cartwright, *Feminine Sanctity and Spirituality in Medieval Wales* (Cardiff: University of Wales Press, 2008), p. 106

Antiquarian sources (useful when looking at healing wells)

- Richard Fenton, *Historical Tour Through Pembrokeshire* (London: Longman, 1811)

‘...a most redundant spring arched over, and at one time inclosed with a wall. The fame this consecrated spring had obtained is incredible, and still is resorted to for many complaints. In my infancy, as was the general usage with respect to children at that time, I was often dipped in it, and offerings, however trifling, even of a farthing or a pin, were made after each ablution, and the bottom of the well shone with votive brass.’























L'ANGE APPARAÎT A XANTVS, ROY DE WALES, PERE DE MONSIEVR SAINT DIVY, ET LUI ANNONCE
 QUE LE LENDEMAIN, CHASSANT IL RENCONTREROIT VN CERF VN POISSON ET VN ESSAIM
 D'ABEILLES, QUI PRONOSTIQUEROIENT LA SAINTETE DE SAINT DIVY. SON FILS, LE CERF PRONOSTIQUERAIT
 SON ZELE, LE POISSON SON AVSTERITE ET L'ABEILLE SA SAGESSE.





From the C11th Life of St David by Rhygyfarch

but the place where the labouring mother was groaning was lit with such serene light that it shone as if God were present, though the sun was obscured by clouds. The mother, in her labour, had a stone near her on which she had leaned with her hands when pressed by her pains, which is why to those who look the rock shows the mark impressed as on wax. It broke in half in sympathy with the mother in her agony; the other part of it jumped over the head of the nun as far as her feet when the mother gave birth. A church has been built in that place, and this stone lies hidden in the base of its altar. 'Rhygyfarch's Life of St David'(trans.) Richard Sharpe and John Reuben Davies in St David of Wales: Cult Church and Nation, ed. J. Wyn Evans and J. M. Wooding (Woodbridge: The Boydell Press, 2007), p. 117



CLASS	NAME	SN	SW	PARISH	CHURCH	OR	RE	REAR
St Non's Chapel	NGR	51	47	66	84	14	SW	
CD								

NATIONAL MONUMENT RECORD FOR WALES

Ancient church to be rescued from neglect

ANCIENT church ruins in West Wales are to be opened to the public for the first time in many years.

The medieval St Non's church in Llanon was left to a local council in an unusual bequest.

It has stood neglected for almost a century, full of mounds of rubble and rubbish.

Now new owners Ceredigion district council plan to give the historic church a facelift.

The tiny church is at least 500 years old, but museum curator Dr John Owen believes parts of the building may date back to the Dark Ages.

A rare Celtic statue of Non and her son David was discovered in the church ruins — battered by the elements.

The 12-inch high stone figure has been taken to Ceredigion museum in Aberystwyth for safe keeping.

"It is difficult to date the church because medieval stonework was so basic," said Dr Owen. "But finds like the statue help us to prove that the building

was used as a church."

The church was turned into two cottages at the beginning of this century.

"It has only started to fall into ruin since then," added Dr Owen.

"The walls have been crumbling and a large amount of rubbish appears to have collected in the church."

St Non's church was given to the district council two years ago, along with an old cottage and a plot of land.

All three were owned by former native of Llanon Mrs Elsiebeth Camm.

When she died suddenly, her husband Alex handed over the deeds of the three properties to Ceredigion District Council.

Once the church ruins have been cleared out, visitors will be allowed in.

Workers have made two more important finds at the church.

They have discovered an ancient tomb recess and an ecclesiastical corbel shelf — both of which are thought to date back to the building of the church.

Western Mail
12th July 1988



● Dr John Owen among the ruins of the church.





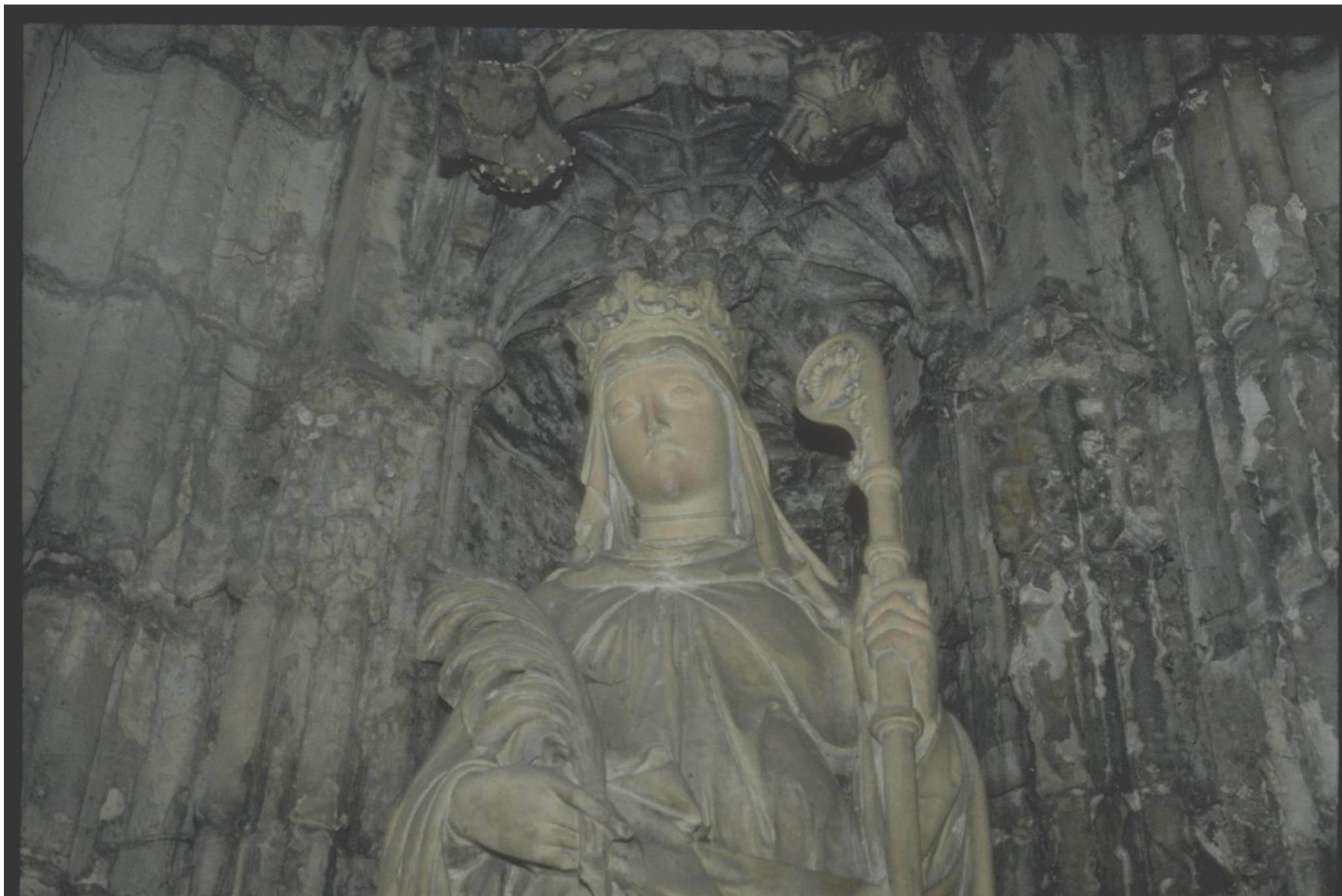




From the C12th Life of St Winefride by Prior Robert of Shrewsbury

‘But the profane youth, hearing himself being refused, and unable to bear his lust, and at the same time believing that she could not be diminished, nor that he could have peace while the virgin lived, having unsheathed his sword he cut off her head. And as soon as the virgin’s head fell down to the ground, in that place a most radiant spring flowed out, bursting forth abundantly, which has not ceased flowing to this day, providing health through the blessed virgin’s merits to many sick people[...] It is widespread and most well-known among almost all the inhabitants of Wales, that if someone with a fever or suffering in any part of the body should cover himself with that water, or should apply those stones, which we previously informed are found suffused with her blood along the stream, to the suffering part of the body, having first drunk the water which washes the stones, he will be immediately restored to health.

Vita Sanctae Wenedredae, trans. D. Callander Saints in Wales website (forthcoming)







Well creation – the Life of St Illtud

So in the early morning, as the angel had commanded him in his sleep, he took his course to the wave-driven sea. He began to go forward, the sea began to retreat, as though it were become capable of feeling and life. Its wavering became still, and its stopping place was on the shore. And when the shore showed dry, he pierced it with his bachall, and thereupon as quickly a very clear fountain flowed out and one beneficial for expelling sickness, which continues to flow without deficiency, and, what is more wonderful, although it is near the sea, it emits fresh water.

Vita Sancti Iltuti (Cotton Vespasian A xiv)

(ed. and trans.) Wade-Evans *Vitae Sanctorum Britanniae et Genealogiae* (Cardiff: Welsh Academic Press, 2013), p. 213

- Another well was reputedly created from St samson's tears when he had to leave his teacher Illtud – possibly Ffynnon Samson at Llangolman, Pembrokeshire

St Teilo

Teilo's principal site is at Llandeilo Fawr in Carmarthenshire, but he became one of the chief saint associated with the diocese of Llandaf

His C12th Life is included in *Liber Landavensis* (The Book of Llandaf) and claims that when he died his body triplicated so that each of his churches (Llandeilo Fawr, Pennalun and Llandaf) could bury his body and have his relics.

- healing miracles took place at his tomb at Llandaf where his skull is now kept.
- It was not always kept there though and for many years was kept at his well at Llandeilo Llwydiarth near Maenclochog in Pembrokeshire.
- The water would be scooped from the well in his skull which acted as a kind of drinking cup.

St Teilo's skull at the well at Llandeilo Llwydiarth (Maenclochog, Pemb)

[Image: Mrs Melchior with the skull](#)

[St Teilo's Skull - The Dream-Quest of Unknown Kaganate — LiveJournal](#)

The Melchior family who owned the land and well would scoop the water from the well and hand it to the sick person.

It was believed to be particularly effective for whooping cough and chest complaints.



*Llandeilo Pembrokeshire
Mrs Melchior with St. Teilo's Skull*

- St Teilo reputedly told his favourite maid to take his skull to the other Llandeilo in Pembrokeshire after his body was buried at Llandeilo Fawr.
- Oral reports collected by the Welsh Folk Museum at Sain Ffagans record people travelling to the well by train from Neath and one boy from Swansea who drank the well water but not from the skull. He was not cured until he returned again and drank from the skull.
- The skull was reputedly used until 1947 and then vanished (some reports suggest the Melchior family sold the skull).
- It was found in Australia in 1994 and is now preserved in Llandaf cathedral.

