

# Holy Wells

A report on the sacred sites of  
(Northern) and (The Republic of)  
Ireland

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# Introduction to Holy Wells

Ireland is a beautiful place full of rich cultural traditions and long-standing community. Songs, poems, paintings, and dances are all methods used to continue carrying out sacred rites, passing down lore and stories, and connecting to ancestry. Religious and spiritual faith is highly valued by many, and as such, ceremonies with distinct purposes that emphasize these traditions are held in very high regard. One of the most well-known collections that carry this significance are the sacred Holy Wells of Ireland. Holy Wells are natural sources of water, typically springs, believed to have religious and spiritual powers. They are composed of water, a tree, and a rock or hill. Many are dedicated to patron saints and are said to have healing or enlightening effects related to the legacy of the saint. The three official patron saints are Saint Patrick, Saint Brigid, and Saint Columba (or Colmcille, pronounced com-sill). In addition, there are a variety of lesser-known deities and powers that were also associated with sometimes smaller, less visited holy wells. These typically occurred in more rural communities that were potentially surrounded further by nature. Regardless of the size and visitation of Holy Wells, they carry a large historical significance and remain a sacred part of Irish religious and spiritual culture.

**Note:** As Holy Wells are quite old and highly religious, there aren't many scholarly texts available. Much of the information is from folktales, stories, surveys, and individual speculation. This is not meant to endorse or negate any of the information and notes provided, merely to educate. It is at the reader's discretion to find what (if anything) resonates with them and to respectfully leave the rest. Thank you.

## History

### The Evolution of Holy Wells

Holy Wells have been traced back by some to as early as the 7th and 9th centuries BCE. Philip Dixon Hardy's *Holy Wells of Ireland*, published in 1836, is the earliest recorded work dedicated specifically to Holy Wells. In 1893, Robert Charles Hope published *The Legendary Lore of Holy Wells of England*, which was one of the first general surveys of its kind and noted a number of wells that were not associated with a patron saint, as well as many sacred rivers and lakes. The use of the term Holy Wells became far more widespread throughout the second half of the 19th century and has remained a fascinating topic for many researchers and anthropologists since then. Before the Protestant Reformation, many rituals and practices were believed to be associated with pagan or Celtic rites. These were passed down orally, then recorded by typically Christian scribes or bards of nobility. As the cycles of nobility transitioned and fell, many traditions went back to being passed down orally. As a result, there are many complex historical lenses and layers to the mythology. During the 16th century, it's said that Christian saints replaced the pagan deities in order to try and gain religious popularity and help with a smooth religious conversion.

Tuberculosis, whooping cough, and scurvy are all illnesses and diseases that plagued many throughout the 18th and 19th centuries, worsening during the Irish Potato Famine. Modern medicine asserts that prescribed antibiotics are the most effective route of treatment, along with

things such as consistent hydration, increased vitamin intake, and supervised rest. However these treatments weren't available or even developed yet, leaving many to their own devices. Holy Wells provided a method of care and were often seemingly the only hope. A sick person or family member may visit the well, then 'pay the rounds' by reciting a series of movements and prayers meant to show their devotion to the patron saint of the well and ask for help. This was typically done in the direction the sun moved, called 'deiseal'. A piece of cloth from the diseased person(s) was then tied to a tree nearby called 'rag trees'. It was believed that as the cloth rotted away, the illness or disease would as well. In some cases, typically dependent on the depth of the water and size of the surrounding rocks, the person would bathe or lay down in the water, which would cleanse them of their ailment. Tokens such as rosary beads, shells, rocks, or candles may have then been left in thanks to the patron saint.

During periods of religious persecution, visiting Holy Wells became a way to keep culture and beliefs alive. They were considered highly sacred by many and held great importance. It was said that the Saints would create shrouds of mist around the wells to protect the people meeting there. Unfortunately, a lack of proper maintenance has led many wells to fall into decay. Because of the historic dangers around recording them, it's not fully known how many wells have been used and then abandoned throughout history. It's estimated there are currently around 3,000 Holy Wells in the Republic of Ireland, approximately 187 of them in Northern Ireland. However, not all of these wells are in suitable condition to be used, although restorative projects are being undertaken by anthropologists and historians. Modern medicine has decreased the need for many to visit for medical purposes but are still being used as places of religious and spiritual worship. Holy Wells are considered places of deep heritage and efforts are being made to maintain them for continual future use.

## Specific Myths, Tales, and Rituals

Some dates are said to hold an emphasized importance, sometimes pertaining to specific wells and their associated deities. The 1sts of February, May, August, and November, for example, were all considered turning points in the year. The Otherworld was a middle ground between the deities, who could control natural forces on the Earth, and the devotees. The veil was said to be thinnest on these days, similar to the concept of a semi-permeable, two-way portal. The belief was that the saint or deity would hear the request more clearly, and provide help that would manifest more easily. Some believed that the saints communicated between them and their God(s). As a result, it became routine to visit Holy Wells on these days to increase the chances of your request or prayer being heard or answered. The last Sunday in July and August 15 were also dates where visiting held additional significance, for similar reasons.

Maternal mortality and other birthing complications were widespread worldwide for much of the 18th and 19th centuries, especially in places where hygienic and waste systems were poor. There were hospitals, but those in rural areas or otherwise without means faced additional risks during pregnancy and labor. Holy Wells were a way to aid the process. Some wells had depressions in the rocks, large enough for a person to crawl into. Pregnant women would lie in

the depressions after completing the appropriate rituals, hoping the patron saint or deity would help them achieve a safe and smooth pregnancy and labor. Some women would lie in the depressions after praying for an effective conception. Holy Wells called Blessed Wells were said to provide a cure for a specific illness or disease, and some were also said to provide enhancing care. Bathing in these 'enhancing' wells could provide creative inspiration, visions, or healing knowledge or powers.

A variety of flora and fauna, as well as their spiritual significance, accompany Holy Wells. They may have been associated with cows, deer, horses, squirrels, or birds, especially owls, that resided nearby. Some sources say that seeing a fish in the well, especially a spring, was an omen of good luck and that the wish would be granted. This likely stems from the belief that some goddesses could appear as fish, most commonly salmon or trout. Salmon were called 'iomas', meaning a kind of supernatural knowledge that is only attained after a supernatural encounter. Some say that if you caught a fish and ate it, you would be granted wisdom and potentially prophetic visions. Frogs, however, were considered highly unlucky and a sign that the patron saint or deity was unhappy. If patrons used it for something mundane (such as collecting drinking water) or otherwise offended the patron, it's said the well would dry up, move, or even harm the person who used it offensively. As such, they were highly sacred and worshiped with great care. Trees were also a component of a Holy Well site and had many taboos around cutting them down for fear of angering the patron saint or diminishing the healing powers.

## Cultural Significance in Modern-Day Ireland

Although Holy Wells have an extensive past, they still play a role in modern Irish culture. Early churches may have used them for baptisms, a practice that can still be seen, albeit less frequently, today. Religious schools may also make trips regularly to nearby wells. Maureen Berry, a grader-school student says,

*"We go to holy wells in the summer and in the winter. We go to pray for other people and for ourselves. Holy wells are very special. Some wells are very important to other people, too... God blesses Holy Wells. Sometimes you can see visions in the well. Lots of people go to visit them a lot of time. We don't have special prayers for each well, we just go to pray if something is gone wrong. Holy wells are called holy wells because Saints are seen there. And some people go to pray when things go wrong for them."*

Their shrouded past is also attractive to historians, anthropologists, those specializing in religious studies, and people with strong religious or spiritual beliefs. A lot of information about human behavior in Irish history has been revealed in part by studying Holy Wells and the documents surrounding them. Restorative projects are believed to be a good way to preserve these precious pieces of history, as well as obtain new information and data. Visiting the wells may serve as an 'awakening' of sorts for some, leading them to dig deeper into their personal values and beliefs surrounding religion and spirituality or feel more connected to any Irish ancestors.

Many people, especially those in smaller communities may keep regular routines around Holy Wells because of the sense of community associated. It would be fair to call them keystones of religious and spiritual culture in past *and* present-day Ireland.

## Through a Broader Lens

### Connections to Other Holy Sites and Sacred Places

Many other cultures and religions have similar practices to the rituals performed at a Holy Well. The Church of St. Mary of the Spring, for example, is located in Istanbul. It's one of the most common pilgrimage sites for Greek Orthodoxy, and was named due to a nearby spring rumored to have healing powers.

Nymphaeum were monuments consecrated to nymphs, typically those of springs, in ancient Roman history. They were pillars with a half-dome, curved around a pool of water, originally grottos believed to be presided over by the nymphs. They were historically sacred places, but as time passed they became rotundas used as sanctuaries or places of assembly. Nymphae were prominent in the development of floor-to-ceiling mosaics, and were considered symbols of purification. They similarly were created as more pagan and spiritual places to honor and connect with deities, but as various religions passed through power, became more artistic places of gathering. Unlike Holy Wells, however, there was little persecution involved and were able to continue as a part of mainstream culture.

Phiale, the Greek equivalent, were a bit smaller but were typically used by a churchgoer to bathe in before entering the church, as the same ideas of purification were seen. It was also used as a source of holy water for benedictions and baptisms. The Castalian Spring in Delphi, for example, was used by visitors to Delphi as well as priests to cleanse themselves before consulting the Delphic Oracle, so as to not cloud or add impurity to the visions.

Holy Wells are also seen throughout England and Great Britain. Freshwater springs were considered holy, and evidence that a divine source was sustaining Earth. As taps and plumbing became widespread, there was less necessity for them but the spiritual respect continued. Well-Dressing is a practice where wells are decorated with flowers, cloth, and art to show gratitude and respect. It was believed that these springs and wells responded to music or song, which could be used to facilitate the transaction of blessings. Pilgrimages to famous sites, such as Bath and Fernyhalgh, are still made today.

A well-known cultural phenomenon is the Fountain of Youth, said to slow or reverse the effects of aging for those who drank from or bathed in it. It would also cure any diseases or

sicknesses. Various tales and accounts have been dated back to the 5th century B.C.E. and throughout the Crusades, becoming prominent during the 16th century.

The practice of performing rituals near sources of water believed to be holy is a quite common practice seen across the span of history. Different cultures, religions, and places (mostly in Eurasia and the Americas) have varying beliefs. While Holy Wells are being particularly examined for their ancient history and development throughout Irish history, the idea of holy waters began a very long time ago and continues to persist in modern culture.

## The Scientific Standpoint

Holy Wells carry a large amount of religious and spiritual significance, a sphere typically associated with tension between it and science. A common question may be, *“After a pattern of healing, there must be some truth to the lore surrounding Holy Wells. If I don’t believe in any supernatural forces, what other options are there?”* And while this is meant to neither discount nor endorse the spiritual and religious elements of Holy Wells, there is some scientific reasoning that’s worthy of noting.

The water in Holy Wells was usually rich in potassium, magnesium, sulfur, iron, salts, and lithium. These essential minerals were typically lacking in the average person’s diet, especially during times of food insecurity or famine. Headaches, fatigue, and muscle pain all could have been alleviated with the help of these minerals. Another example is ‘sore eyes’, today a condition called dry eyes. People during the mid-20th century would go to Holy Wells to have their eyes cured. We now use sodium chloride as a common treatment, which may have been found in some of the wells.

This also goes for the flora surrounding the wells. Willow trees, which produce salicin, were called headache trees. We now use salicin as an ingredient in aspirin, used to relieve headaches. Stitchwort, comfrey, nettles, and elderflower were used for things like coughing, allergies, diarrhea, and bronchitis. They are still used as natural remedies and have been accepted as cures in many communities for centuries.

## Wells of Focus

### St Brigid's Well in Liscannor

St Brigid's Well is one of the oldest Holy Wells rumored to have healing powers, as well as the audible sound of running water. It serves as the final resting place for many ancient mythical clan leaders and kings. Its natural beauty makes it very mystical and spiritual. The well is named after Brigid, the goddess of higher consciousness, ground, and learning. She is the patron goddess of the Druids, and many signs of worship are seen throughout the well. She became Mary of the Gaels, or Brigit as Christianity became more widespread, and her cross is seen across the country. Due to her popularity, the well is frequently visited and usually has candles 24/7. Thousands of cloths, rosaries, and tokens have been left in the grotto and surrounding area by both locals and tourists.

### St Brigid's Well in Mullingar

A mass takes place on February 1st every year to celebrate St Brigid's Feast Day and the beginning of spring. A path of small stones leads up to it, and it is the site of many holy monuments. The well is near the Hill of Uisneach, considered the sacred center of Ireland. It also served as the burial place for many Irish gods, as well as holding the roots of a sacred tree called the *Bile Uisnig*. There are a variety of different stones, monuments, and tombs. The artwork and activity has been dated back to the Neolithic Stone Age, and blending into the Early Middle Ages. Its reputation for being a holy area has led to many pilgrimages and visits from both locals and tourists alike.

### St John's Well

St John's Well has a distinct significance with relationships to nature and the natural world. It's situated atop Musheru Mountain, which overlooks miles of deserted moorland. Farmers and herders would pray for the well-being of their livestock, as well as for prosperous harvests. Rituals seen at other wells, such as bringing cups, coins, rocks, and flowers as offerings are still consistent. June 24th, Midsummer's Day, is when the feast of the nativity of St John the Baptist occurs and is observed as one day. This is likely due to the convoluted religious history and evolution of pagan practices to meld into Christian ones. Massive bonfires are lit, assemblies are held, and feasts are prepared.

## St. Patrick's Well

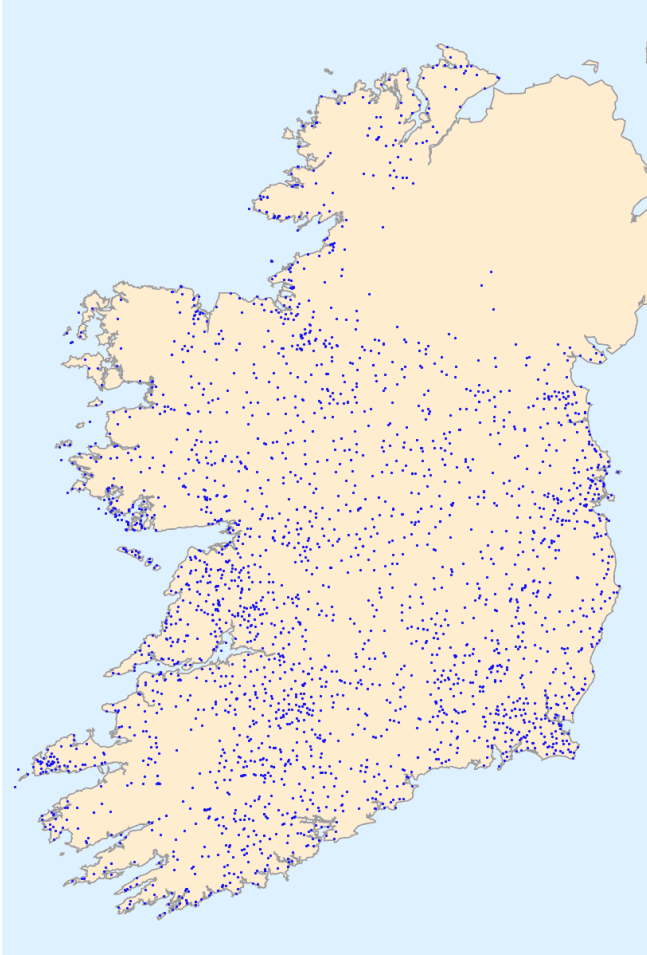
St Patrick is one of the patron saints of Ireland, and as a result has many wells dedicated to him. One of the most famous is in Belcoo, which was originally believed to be the domain of a dark pagan god that was known for human sacrifices. Legend has it that St Patrick struck the altar dedicated to the god with his staff, thereby expelling the dark energy and transforming it into a holy site. Feasts and gatherings are held to celebrate this transformation and honor St Patrick. Even before this, pilgrimages were made to the well on August 1st to celebrate Lughnasa, which honors the sun god Lugh, a hero and leader. In addition to the heavy religious significance, it is considered a blessed well. The well in Belcoo, for example, has a long standing reputation for curing stomach aches, as well as pain in the teeth, lips, head, and eyes. There is a stream that's said to have the coldest water in Ireland, and cold water globally is considered holier. Originally called Dabhach Phadraig, which symbolizes generosity from mother earth, it remains a very mystical and popular well.

## Tobernault Well

Located near Lough Gill, Tobernault Well stands out due to the fact that its name does not bear one of a patron saint. It's most widely accepted that it's connected to Saint Patrick, who would have seen pagans meeting there and turned it into a site of baptisms and Catholic worship. Some say that Saint Patrick's fingerprints are visible on a nearby 'mass rock', and if a devotee places their hand over the same spot, their wishes will be granted and ailments cured. During times of religious persecution, large rocks- such as the aforementioned mass rock- took the place of altars, and congregations would take place in the open air by 'nomadic' priests. Chapels legally could not have a spire or bell, and meetings were strategically on hilltops with a wide vantage point so approaching soldiers could easily be spotted. Lá Lughnasa evolved to become a celebration called Garland Sunday, held on the last Sunday in July. It's a thanksgiving of sorts, when thousands now congregate to thank their god(s) for blessing them with good health, fortune, and abundance. The celebration is typically a three-day affair, with pilgrims arriving and reciting the Rosary on Friday night, with penitential service and confessions Saturday evening. Mass on Sunday typically begins at 6:00 am, with services concluding at 4:30 pm. This holiday may alternatively be called Black Crom Sunday, going back to the tale of Lugh and Crom Dubh. To ward against the evil force, anyone walking around the well must go in a clockwise direction, as an anticlockwise path will attract bad luck. Tobernault Well is also rumored to improve the skill of footballers, another piece of unique lore. However, there are now signs advising against drinking the water.

## Conclusion

Holy Wells are an important part of both ancient and modern-day Irish religious and spiritual culture. They are famed for their holy energy, healing properties, and complex and rich history. The wells are an essential stop for anyone looking to deepen their connection to their religious and spiritual beliefs or ancestral lineage. Their natural beauty and sanctity draw millions of visitors annually, ranging from tourists continents away to locals carrying on traditions. All of these factors have cemented their place on the global cultural plane.



above: map approximating the location of Holy Wells in the Republic of Ireland



above: St Brigid's Well, Liscannor



right: St Brigid's Well, Mullingar



left: St John's Well on  
Mushera Mountain



top left: a rag tree near Doon Holy Well

top right: 3 women at St Declan's Holy Well  
(circa 1910)



left: Tobernault Well