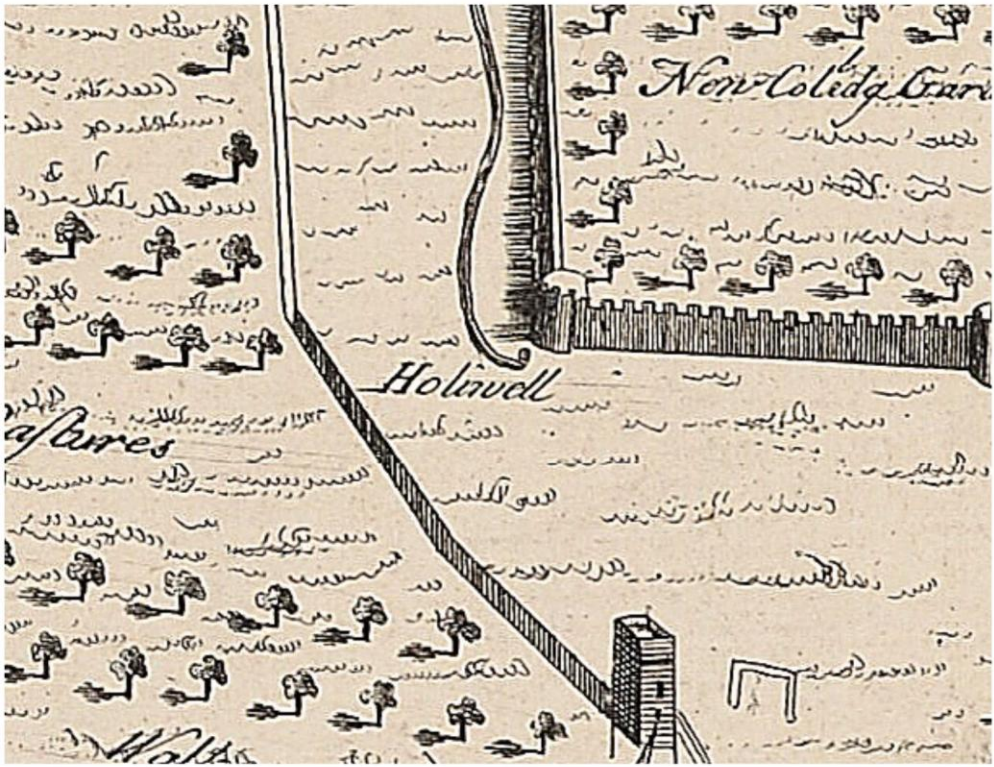
Aquae Oxoniensiae

The Holy and Noted Wells of Oxford



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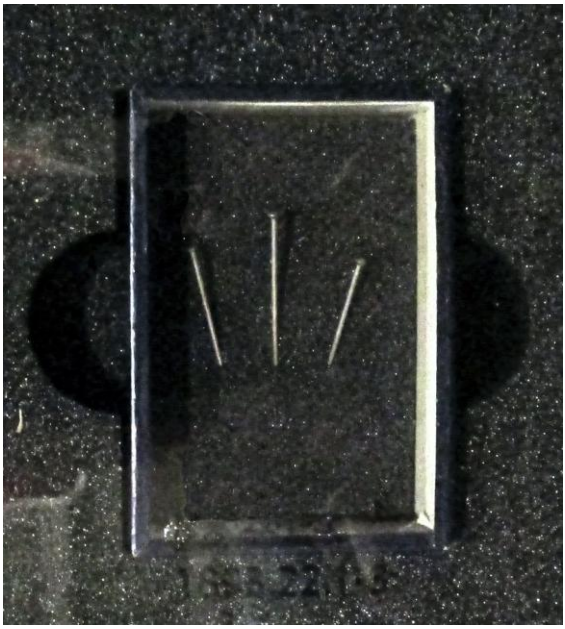

James Rattue

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Thanks to: North Yorkshire County Record Office for discovering the reference to Robert Charles Hope; the staff of Holywell Manor for allowing me to inspect the Holy Well; the staff of the Pitt-Rivers Museum for guiding me to the pins.

Front cover: 'Holiwell' – in reality Crowell – as shown on Ralph Agas's map of 1578. Back cover: votive offerings at St Margaret's Well, Binsey, November 2024. Frontispiece: the three pins left at Binsey in 1893 and now at the Pitt-Rivers Museum.

Contents

Introduction

Early October 1988 was dreary and wet in Oxford, and my first Sunday in the city after arriving to begin my degree, particularly so. Balliol College was, I discovered, dead quiet on a Sunday afternoon. A couple of school contemporaries had gone to other colleges, but I knew nobody apart from them and had nothing to do. After a fairly miserable scraped-together lunch eaten alone in my room, in some desperation I went out to find St Margaret's Well. I followed the long lane across Port Meadow, whose margins were barely visible through the rain, and eventually the hamlet of Binsey came dimly into view. In such conditions it was far from picturesque, but having found the Well gave me just a little bit of a lift: a shape to a shapeless day.

I began retracing my steps. Port Meadow is broad and flat and at points you can see a long way ahead, even when the rain is sheeting down. I'd left Binsey some way behind me when I caught sight of a couple of figures coming from the direction of the city. As we neared one another I could see they were a

young man and woman in waterproofs, maybe students like myself. They stopped, and the man spoke to me, the only human soul, as it turned out, who did so that day: 'Excuse me', he said, 'Is this the way to the Holy Well?'

. . . . .

My previous monograph examining the holy and folkloric wells of one locality was about that strange and mystical town, Glastonbury. Oxford is also a strange and mystical town in its own way, but its strangeness and mysticism isn't the same as Glastonbury's. Glastonbury bears the signs of very ancient settlement, its history and nature inextricably linked with its weird topography, the Tor rising from the Somerset marshes; Oxford, on the other hand, bears the signs of absolutely nobody living there permanently until the early Middle Ages, and it's in a flat river plain surrounded by hills. It's a very different place.

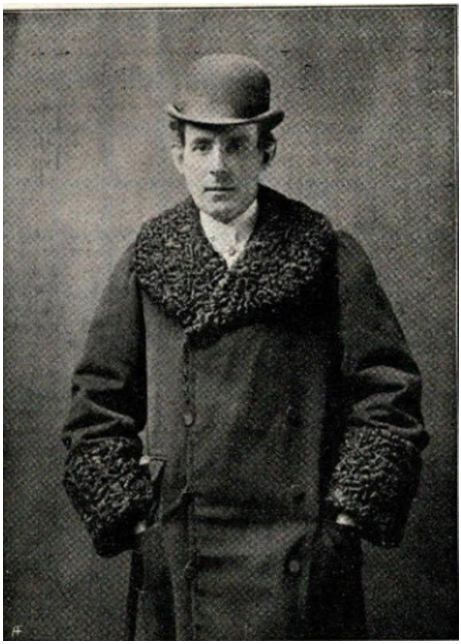
In fact, of course, it's different from everywhere else, apart from a certain town in the Fens. Whereas the wells of Glastonbury are marked by pagan-tinged antiquarianism and belief, those of Oxford have been affected by the presence of the University, and of lots of people who look at their surroundings with a *kind* of antiquarianism coloured by Classical literature and culture. We find hints and suggestions of the same kind of thing scattered across the country, but nowhere else (indeed including Cambridge) is it as concentrated as in Oxford.

Although a lot had been written about the wells of Glastonbury, the information had never been brought together in one place before, and so it is with Oxford – almost. Nearly everyone in this country who has ever been interested in holy wells has, usually close to the start of their hydrolatric odyssey, turned to a dusty Victorian volume entitled *The Legendary Lore of the Holy Wells of England* written in 1893 by Robert Charles Hope; about him, nobody seems to have written, so we will give a brief account of him now.

Hope was born in 1855, the second son of the vicar of St Peter's, Derby, William Hope, and his first wife Hester. His mother died when Robert was just seven and after that he seems to have lived nearby with an 'aunt', Catherine Fisher. Why this was when the rest of the family remained in the vicarage is anyone's guess: he was neither the eldest child nor the youngest. He attended Derby Grammar School, Hurstpierpoint College, and then Peterhouse College Cambridge, rather later than most undergraduates. He may have studied law, as in 1884 he was enrolled at Lincoln's Inn, but if so, he apparently never practiced in any way; he may not even have graduated as

his entry in the *Alumni Cantabrigiensis* doesn't list any degrees. In fact, he never seems to have had any gainful employment at all, but was able to spend his time pursuing a wide variety of interests; his brother William St John Hope became a prominent antiquary and archaeologist, eventually being knighted in 1914 for his history of Windsor Castle written at royal request, but Robert was, if nothing else, a man of multifarious activities.

These began when he was living in Aylsham, Norfolk, between 1871 and 1875, where he studied farming and, more consequentially for his later interests, dance and music. Moving to Scarborough in 1875, eventually it was 'chiefly his lot to cater for the entertainment of the residents of the borough in the dull winter months, when the absence of the animation and gaiety of the season threw us back upon our own resources'. This activism took the form of Hope's directing, in series and in parallel, the Scarborough Operatic, Choral, and Dramatic Societies, the Scarborough Amateur Band, the town's Lawn Tennis Club and Rangers Football Club, and a variety of Sunday Schools, Mission halls, and political groups. When the Channel Fleet came to town, it was Robert Charles Hope who organised the balls and banquets. 'The one point that has always struck us with wonder', wrote his panegyrist in *Some Scarborough Faces Past and Present*, 'was that Mr Hope ever came out alive from the worry, hurry-scurry, and innumerable labours and responsibilities of these entertainments'. His interest in tennis was pursued far more widely than just Scarborough, and his legacy to the sport includes inventing the little winch still used to re-tension tennis nets. He was a Fellow of the Society of Antiquaries, a Fellow of the Royal Society of Literature, and even held a commission in the West Riding Artillery Volunteers. The *Scarborough Faces* article from 1901 includes a natty portrait photograph, where Mr Hope appears in a bowler hat and overcoat with Astrakhan collar and cuffs.[1]



Mr Hope had already been on a global tour in 1895 (fitting in a season with a London-based amateur dramatics society) and, on leaving Scarborough in 1900 after a bout of ill-health, went to Geneva, where he got married. The Hopes seem to have spent time in Florence and elsewhere, finally coming to rest in Dulwich, where they ran Wood Hall as 'a select hotel' and where Robert died in 1926. It was quite an itinerary.

And he amassed quite a bibliography as well. He wrote books and learned articles on subjects as diverse as placenames, bellfounders and goldsmiths, Rutland church plate, medieval music, and temples in Japan (which he had indeed visited). His last book, published the year of his death, was *The Leper in England: with some account of English lazar-houses*. And in the midst of this roster of antiquarian endeavour came *The Legendary Lore.*

Both the brothers Robert and William seem to have had High Church leanings; Hurstpierpoint was a school run on Tractarian lines after the pattern of the grander Lancing College, and Robert chaired the Cambridge branch of the Church Union. Perhaps this inclined him towards that neglected facet of the ecclesiastical past represented by holy wells.

As others have noted, the *Legendary Lore*'s lists are skewed to the Midland and Northern counties he might have been more familiar with.[2] And yet Oxford is the exception. With 19 sites mentioned in the book, it comes 11th in the county lists: above it, the only southern counties are the West Country ones of Devon, Cornwall and Somerset. Oxford is the only location for which Mr Hope provides a map; as for his own university town, he doesn't manage to find a single well. Nothing we know about, except maybe a sentimental link with the Oxford Movement in the Church, connects Robert Charles Hope with the city, and nothing of that emerges in the text. It's all rather unaccountable, but Hope's list is the closest we have had to a description of the city's named wells until now.

We will meet other personalities on our journey to the wells, but there is one more we should deal with before we embark. RC Hope's list was largely based on the notes compiled by the 17th-century antiquarian of Oxford, Anthony Wood, and so we are indebted to him for much of our knowledge, even when that amounts to nothing more than a well's name. Wood lived and breathed the past of Oxford. He was born and died in the same place, Postmasters' Hall, which his parents rented from Merton College, and in

Postmasters' Hall (with the timber-framed gables) in 1991, the site of Anthony Wood's labours

1660 set up one room of his top-floor apartment as a study, literally a scholar scribbling in an attic, looking out across the city whose story he was assembling. Wood was given access to the Bodleian and other libraries, let into the college muniment rooms, and allowed to take the University registers home, a privilege only revoked in 1678 out of fear that he was about to be arrested in connection with the Popish Plot. Completely dedicated to his work, unfortunately Wood was also (as *Oxfordshire Blue Plaques* puts it) 'a cantankerous and vituperative character who fell out with everyone sooner or later', and it must have been the greatest blow of his life, in 1693, to be expelled from the University – though not from Postmasters' Hall – for publishing a libel about the Earl of Clarendon. He was dead within two years.[3]

Wood's account of the University was prized greatly by its authorities (at least until his disgrace) but his topographical survey of the city would have to wait until the 1890s before it appeared in print. *The Survey of the Antiquities of the City of Oxford* was a by-product of his research into the history of the University itself, undertaken in the 1660s. It fell to Andrew Clark, vicar of the city-centre churches of St Michael-at-the-Northgate and All Saints Turl Street, to batter Wood's notes into some sort of shape on behalf of the Oxford Historical Society. Fragmentary, repetitious, incomplete and sometimes added to and amended by scraps of paper pinned to the main text, the *Survey* is far from a coherent piece of work. Anthony Wood was no great prose stylist anyway, and this particular writing taxes the reader especially. But, even if the confused references can be contradictory as the author sticks in another note collected years after his first, the wells are there; and for that we should be grateful. Nevertheless, his work has been far from carefully

used: its confusion has confused his successors in turn. Writers, in print and online and over a long time, have sometimes misread him, or failed to distinguish between his main text and his notes; or even between what Wood himself writes and the comments of his editors. Robert Charles Hope is particularly guilty of this! Wood seems to have intended to write a chapter specifically devoted to Oxford's wells, and had he managed it the account would probably have been fuller and better organised.

Alongside RC Hope's work and Anthony Wood's underlaying it, I ought also to mention my own not entirely helpful contribution to the topic. This was a gazetteer of holy wells in Oxfordshire, published in the pages of the august journal *Oxoniensia* in 1990. Innovative it may have been, but I fear it got a number of sites wrong. I will own up to these sins in the proper places.

. . . . .

How should we arrange our itinerary? Listing the wells in alphabetical order makes perfect sense but is a bit unimaginative. For Glastonbury, I went through sites based on rough guesses as to their age, but as our sources are so similar for Oxford's wells it would be hard to adopt the same approach again. So I have decided to group them by category – the *kind* of site they represent. There would be other ways, of course.

Christian holy wells

The wells of this first group arise from Christian tradition. Apart from the possible *mikveh* (see p.53) there are no water sites in Oxford which clearly reflect any other religious identity, and historically this is what we should expect, as the city's origins seem to lie with St Frideswide's abbey in the late 7th or early 8th century. People coming new to the subject of holy wells can invariably be relied on to ask enthusiasts 'What makes a well holy?' and, while that very reasonable question is actually quite difficult to answer, this category of sites can be roped in pretty unequivocally as examples.[4]

Childswell. Having said that, the alphabet takes us first to a curious example, and launches us into the complexities of 17th- and 18th-century antiquarianism. Childswell was, Anthony Wood tells us, so named 'by the holiness of the chaplains successively serving there, had virtue to make women that were barren to bring forth children'.[5] He lifts this sentence directly from the work of an earlier writer, Leonard Hutten of Christ

Church. Dr Hutten's 'Antiquities of Oxford' took the form of a descriptive perambulation of the city, and was written in the early 1600s. In Wood's time it only existed in manuscript, and had to wait until 1728 to emerge in print, when another great Oxford antiquary, Thomas Hearne, appended it – rather oddly – to an edition of a collection of documents kept at Rochester Cathedral, the *Textus Roffensis.* Hearne has more to say about Chilswell, as he calls it, in an appendix to his edition of the *Liber Niger Scaccarii*, the 'Black Book of the Exchequer', printed in 1774 long after his death (again, a somewhat odd place to put it). Hearne refers back to the grandfather of all antiquaries, the Tudor traveller John Leland, and, finally, Wood also cites in connection with Childswell the work of Brian Twyne, the University's first Keeper of the Archives: many of the medieval records of Oxford only survive in the 24 volumes of manuscript copies Twyne had made, and which have never been published as a whole.

Dr Hutten described the spring as being 'at an House on the left hand in the ascent of an Hill' as a traveller enters Oxford from the south, which is true but slightly misleading as it isn't actually in the city at all, but at Chilswell Farm in the parish of Cumnor a couple of miles to the southwest.[6] The explanation of the name seems to be folk-etymology as it first appears as *Chiefleswell* in about 1180, and so has nothing to do with children or childbirth – even if the *English Place Name Survey* volume for Berkshire's guess that it comes from an unknown owner called 'Cifel' also smacks of desperation.[7] Brian Twyne's notes refer to 'Chilswell pool' in 1586, and that would have been within the town; we might also wonder whether the name referred to the stream that runs through the farm rather than a spring, but Thomas Hearne was very definite that there was an actual well at Chilswell Farm – it was, he said, 'still to be seen about a furlong eastwards from the farm house'.[8] Nothing appears on the Ordnance Survey maps, apart from a small pool right beside the stream just downhill from the farm.

Now: a further complication. The story the monks of Abingdon told about the foundation of their Abbey was that it was set up either by Cissa, a sub-king of Wessex who held sway over west Berkshire, or his nephew Hean, its first abbot, on a site originally occupied by a hermit called Aben, but that it was eventually moved after the buildings at the original site continually collapsed.[9] It's unclear where the first location was: Leland gave the name of Bagley Wood, and this led Thomas Hearne to conclude that Aben's hermitage had been at Chilswell, not far away from there.

Now though I will not detract from the credit of the story of the virtue of the well (which hath been confirm'd by constant Tradition, to which, in affairs of this kind, particular regard is to be had), yet I am of opinion that the place receiv'd it's name rather from Cissa … Heane went all about Cissa's Territories, and at last coming to this place, which we now call Chilswell*, he looked upon this as being the most proper piece of ground (the country being most delicious and woody) that he had met with, and here it was therefore that he resolv'd to build a monastery.*

Aben the hermit had first arrived fleeing the persecution of Hengist, Hearne goes on, and 'twas at his first coming hither, that the well or spring broke forth. For being very thirsty, he address'd himself for help to God Almighty, who harken'd to his prayers'. Hearne gives Dugdale's *Monasticon Anglicanum* as the source for this story – a pattern so familiar from other places – but a check of that great work reveals it's not in there.[10]

Well done if you've kept up so far! Perhaps all these doubtful matters explain why the compilers of the *VCH* refer to 'many traditions, all rather vague, connected with Chilswell' including Hearne's further suggestions that the place was the site of a great battle, and, along with other settlements in the area, had once been an extensive village or even a town. The story Thomas Hearne tells of a hermit producing a holy well by prayer at a site later attached to a great religious house is so similar to other places – including the relationship between Binsey and Oxford, as we shall see – that we could get very excited and see Chilswell as an example of the same thing. But we need to keep our heads and remember that only Hearne's dubious etymology links it with Abingdon Abbey at all.[11] There may well have been a holy well associated with a chapel here, but the real question to be considered is how far back the fertility tradition, itself surely based on misinterpreting the placename, goes beyond Dr Hutten who originally recorded it; and that, at the moment, we can't answer.

Holywell Holy Well. Having just exited a cloud of confusion over Childswell, we enter into another hanging across the Holywell area northeast of the city wall. By way of summary (we will go into the details shortly) I think the most reasonable way of interpreting the statements made by various writers is that there were two 'Holy Wells' so-called, one at Holywell Manor and one further to the south at Holywell Green, in addition to the Crowell close to the walls; and that Jenny Newton's Well became an alternative name for the Holy Well on Holywell Green. Once upon a time my instinct was to

multiply wells; now I am inclined to reduce the number to the minimum sensible![12]

If Jeremy Harte's contention that 'holy wells' so-called are in general older than wells named after Christian saints, the Holy Well of Holywell is – with the possible exception of the Binsey well *infra* – the oldest in the Oxford area. It fits exactly Harte's typical model for a 'holy well': outside the centre of a town in what might originally have been a sparsely-inhabited area, though in this case not all that remote and beside a major ancient route leading north away from the Thames crossings. The name first appears in Domesday Book in 1086 and so it will certainly date back earlier than that, but how *much* earlier is unclear. No pre-Conquest remains in the vicinity have come to light that might help us.[13]

The manor of Holywell was always separate from the city of Oxford itself. It seems to have been carved off from the ancient royal manor of Headington when William the Conqueror gave Robert d'Oigli his lands and made him governor of the town; and its later owners, Merton College, and its manorial officials regularly had to rebuff the attempts of Oxford's to exercise authority over it. The church, though, was a chapelry of St Peter-in-the-East within the town walls, which Robert d'Oigli also owned, and as there is, again, no trace of pre-Conquest work around it, it is quite likely that he had it built. Anthony Wood couldn't decide how the well became called Holy, 'whether for the employment of the water thereof about sacred uses for the church … or else that by the reputed holiness therein in respect of the miracles it wrought', but if I were forced to guess, I would suggest that in this case the well probably preceded the Norman church, to which it gave its name. There was a resident hermit at Holywell in the 13th century, a man called Matthew who played a crucial role in the controversy between Winchester Cathedral and Dorchester Abbey as to who owned the real body of St Birinus, though Wood's guess that the well might have gained its reputation through being used by Matthew's predecessors is probably a red herring: that would be an improbably long chain of hermits. When the Praefectus of Holywell Manor, Oswyn Murray, was compiling his *Anecdotal History* of the Manor in 2007, his predecessor Diego Zancini told him a story about a 13th-century student who drank from the well and acquired the ability to speak fluent French; Prof Murray seems not to have questioned this yarn but it's recorded nowhere else. Miraculous waters conferring intellectual faculties is a folklore motif we find in many other places, including, perhaps, Aristotle's Well.[14]

Merton remained in ownership of Holywell throughout the Middle Ages, which is why Richard Fitzjames, the college's Warden and a future bishop, built a structure over the well in 1488: Robert Plot saw it two centuries later, 'a fair house with … a roof to it … and a dolphin naiant carved on a shield', the Fitzjames coat of arms. The College's tenants at the Manor house in the 15- and 1600s were the Roman Catholic Napier family (including the priest and martyr George Napier, executed in 1610), but even they seem to have allowed the well to pass into some obscurity. In 1677, Dr Plot described it as 'eminent *heretofore* for curing distempers' in his *Natural History of Oxfordshire*, and a year after that it was being used to keep ale cool. The Manor House became a workhouse in the 1700s, and the next time we hear of the well itself, in 1765, it's being referred to as 'the Cold Bath', having seemingly been taken up within the contemporary enthusiasm for spas and water cures; at the start of the 1770s Revd Peshall found 'many persons yearly relieved by these wholesome waters to this day'.[15]

How long the Holy Well retained this kind of popularity is uncertain. In 1837 James Ingram wrote that the waters 'have entirely lost their former celebrity, and are deserted for more fashionable springs. The water is remarkably pure, intensely cold, but seldom freezes: there is still a cold bath, but it has few visitors'. Those few visitors, according to George Simms writing in *Jackson's Oxford Journal* in 1889, included the future Cardinal Newman, and a Captain Wood who insisted on bathing as early as possible in the day in the conviction that the first person in got the greatest benefit from the water and 'took the chill off it' (another very old folkloric motif applied to a new site). 'The basin [was] amply large enough for several persons to bathe at one time and swim around; dressing rooms were at the east and west ends'.[16] This sounds like a significant structure, but we have no idea what it really looked like, or who built it.

What does seem likely is that by the time the Sisters of St John the Baptist, an Anglican order of nuns based at Clewer in Windsor, took over Holywell Manor in 1862 to run a women's penitentiary home, the well had been forgotten and covered over. A generation later, in 1896, the Sisters commissioned the architect CC Rolfe to build a new chapel for the Manor and in the course of the works the well was rediscovered: to the side of the well-chamber Mr Rolfe found a tub-shaped stone which he identified as part of an Anglo-Saxon well structure, 'the work of the old Anchorites who lived on the spot'. The chamber was dry by this stage, but the Sisters wanted to preserve it, encouraged both by CC Rolfe and the incumbent of Holywell church next door, Mr Freeling, who were both convinced Anglo-Catholics:

picking up on a reference in Peshall's *The Antient and Present State …*, they decided that the well had been dedicated to SS Winifred and Margaret, and it remained within the new chapel.[17]

The Sisters stayed in occupation until 1930. One strange story relating to their time is a report of a ghostly nun 'who hovered around the altar in the chapel arranging the flowers' and then disappeared through a wall; this would have been very close to the well. The habit she wore, so witnesses said, was not that of the Clewer Sisters. When the wall was removed, a skeleton was found and was formally buried in a ceremony conducted by Charles Gore, Bishop of Oxford between 1911 and 1919. This motif, again, is a very familiar one from ghost stories all across Britain, and the story isn't actually recorded until 1968.[18]

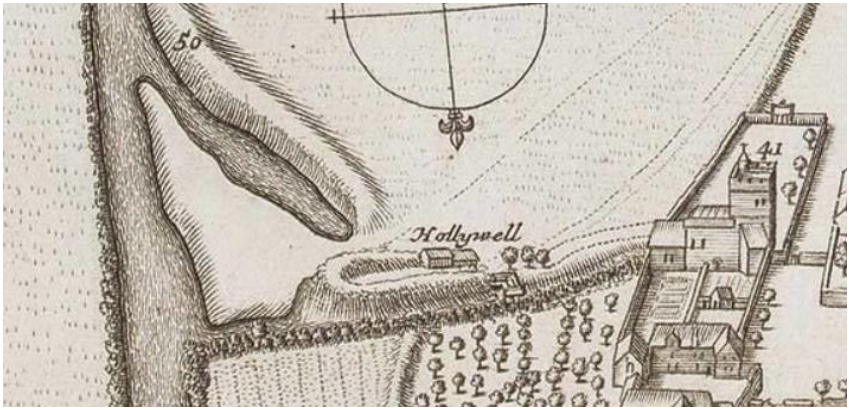
Once Balliol College took on the tenancy of the Manor, the nuns' chapel was demolished, leaving one wall running along the south edge of the Praefectus's Garden, and the well beneath an iron grille in the pavement. And there it remained, visitors occasionally being allowed to descend into its depths, but mostly ignored. Well-researcher David Stone came in the mid-1990s, and examined the supposed Anglo-Saxon well-stone in the corner of

The exterior and interior views of the Well, the latter, showing the tub stone, taken by Mark Doyle the Balliol maintenance manager

the chamber. It rested on three smaller stones and then what seemed to be a concrete base; the rubbish filling the well-stone went down through the bottom block and presumably into a shaft below ground level. According to CC Rolfe, the bathing chamber was about 20 feet by 12, whereas Mr Stone estimated the basin was no more than 6 by 12, and a mere 4'6" high; it's not clear when the reduction took place. He descended by what he thought were 'moss-covered wooden steps', whereas actually they seem to be very rusty iron.[19]

In 2025 I was allowed to inspect the well but given the state of the steps I happily concurred with the Manor authorities' advice that I shouldn't go down into it! Immediately beneath the pavement the structure is brick, and there is a brick wall across the back of the chamber behind the well-stone, but the rest of the chamber walls is constructed from large stones. Balliol College now aims to do some remedial work on the well – at least to make it safer – but in an ideal world a site with such substantial remains, rare among holy wells, would be properly examined. Is that tub stone really Anglo-Saxon, as CC Rolfe fondly imagined? It would be exciting if so.

Holy Well (Holywell Green). The northern boundary wall of Holywell



From David Loggan's map of Oxford, 1675 (south is to the top)

Cemetery runs east from St Cross Church, past the slightly terrifying tomb of Dean Burgon. A little way along it and on the far side, roughly where the adjoining house garden begins, seems to be the site of the Holy Well of Holywell Green, the name for this area between the Manor grounds and Magdalen Grove before the cemetery was created. 'Hollywell' appears on

David Loggan's 1675 map of Oxford as a small shed-like structure with a u-shaped enclosure beside it. But although I bracket it in this survey with the Christian sacred springs, in its case, unlike its neighbour yards away at the Manor, 'holy well' might be something of a courtesy title.

Anthony Wood says this spring was 'found out by – Cowdrey [presumably he meant to determine the forename and never got round to it], a precise shoemaker of [the parish of] St Peter in the East', who turned it into a well in 1651, before one 'Henry Broome, gent.' built a stone seat around it in 1666. This is presumably the odd little structure we can see on Loggan's map, if that was an accurate representation, and the sheds are ancillary buildings of some sort, perhaps for people to change in. What we *may* have, then, is quite an early example of a spa-type well. We stand very little chance of discovering who Mr Cowdrey was, but Henry Broome may have been a member of the family who were lords of the manor of nearby Holton at the start of the century. In his account of the Holy Well at Holywell Manor in 1677, Robert Plot felt obliged to inform his readers that 'I intend not that well of late erection (though perhaps the water of that is as good) and now most used, but another ancienter Holy-well behind the church', suggesting that the old well was being eclipsed by the new.[20] The 'Holy Well' title may have just been borrowed from the site next to the church, but perhaps it reflects a feeling that all medicinal springs were 'holy wells' regardless of any link to something specifically religious.

By 1837 the 'Holy Well' title had fallen into disuse: the spring was known as 'Jenny Newton's Well'. It was, James Ingram reported, 'still in some repute for "curing the eyes"', but whatever structures might have been put up in the 17th century, all were now gone. George Simms said tailors and seamstresses had resorted to it for eye problems, but by his time (1889) it had dried up because of the drainage works when the cemetery was created.[21] Who was Jenny Newton? Someone who looked after the well, or perhaps sold the water?

St Bartholomew's Well. Most readers will first encounter St Bartholomew's Well (if we can so call it) through RC Hope, quoting the Bohn edition of John Brand's *Popular Antiquities*, quoting John Aubrey's *Remains of Gentilisme and Judaisme*, quoting Wood: 'time out of mind', he says, the Fellows of New College had attended at Bartlemas Chapel east of the city between 8am and 9am on Ascension Day, said prayers and sang an anthem,

before processing to the well along a pathway strewn with flowers by the residents of the almshouses attached to the chapel, where they 'warble[d] forth melodiously a song', drank the water, and returned to town. Wood isn't quoting anyone,[22] so we wonder where his information came from. This passage is actually a summary of his lengthy description of the ritual and its history, which intrigued him enough to investigate, and try to account for. What he only hints at is the way this custom sat at the centre of a whole suite of ceremonies that involved the same site, and the same time of year, and we will try to pick that apart later.

The story all begins with a leper hospital dedicated to St Bartholomew, founded about a mile outside the city centre in about 1126; the land to support it was donated by King Henry I out of the royal manor of Headington. The chapel's position near the main road out of Oxford to the east[23] allowed it to become something of a pilgrim destination, and it acquired a set of relics including a piece of St Bartholomew's skin. A period of disruption and mismanagement resulted in the hospital being passed to the new Oriel College in 1328: the college rebuilt the chapel 8 years later but moved the relics into their own church in town. Leprosy had largely disappeared from England by this time and Bartlemas had shifted to being a general almshouse. The community suffered during the Civil War: Royalist soldiers cut down the elm grove to the north and set fire to the almshouse, while once the Parliamentarians were in charge the chapel was stripped of lead for musket balls. Once the wartime sieges of Oxford were past the chapel was restored, and a few almsmen remained, though some of the buildings became a farm. In 1832 the chapel was used as an isolation ward during a cholera outbreak. Finally, in 1913, with no almsmen living on the site, the foundation was dissolved and the chapel passed to the local Anglican parish.[24] Bartlemas remains today as a secluded island of old buildings in the midst of East Oxford, with the Oriel College playing fields stretching to the north.

The name *Strowell* goes back at least to the 13th century, when it was stated that the hospital's property had been taken from tillage land so called; it may derive from an Old English word *strod* meaning 'marshy land overgrown with brushwood'. *Showell* was an alternative version but may just be a misreading; then William Boase called it *Hickwell*, which could mean 'the helpful spring'. RC Hope seems to be the first writer to give it the saint's name (and I and others have followed his somewhat dubious example). Nevertheless, a leper hospital would need a source of water not just for domestic but also therapeutic purposes, and so a relationship between St Bartholomew's, the

cult of its patron saint, and a holy well would be absolutely reasonable. Landscape historian Graham Jones, who assisted with the Archeox group's excavation of Bartlemas in 2014, points to several parallels in the UK and elsewhere.[25] Old plans of Bartlemas show a curving water feature close to the chapel, which could originally have been a bathing pool for the brethren.

So we come, finally, to the ritual Anthony Wood describes. As mentioned, his account is actually more complex than the quotation in *The Legendary Lore*. The procession was originally made on May Day, he says, but New College moved it to Ascension Day to avoid involvement with the city's rowdier celebrations of the May which had long antecedents. The chapel was decorated with flowers and fruit, and once the Fellows were in place, the service began, including a psalm, scripture reading, anthem, collect, and a second song; though, he says in a note, 'within these 60 years they only sang the collect'. Then the Fellows went one by one to deposit a gift of silver in 'a certain vessel decked with tuttyes'[26] on the altar, offerings which were then distributed to the almsmen. The company left the chapel and followed a path strewn with flowers by the almsmen to the spring in the grove, where another short service of an epistle and collect followed, culminating in a song: 'about 24 years ago they commonly sang an Oriana or else one of Mr John Wilbye's songs of 5 parts beginning thus, "Hard by a christall fountain"'.[27] This concluded the ceremony and the Fellows went home. According to John Peshall, the procession made its way *to* Bartlemas by the main road to the south, but returned via the 'Divinity Walk' to the north, and down Headington Hill.[28] When Wood first wrote the account, it seems, the ceremony was still happening, but at some point he altered all the tenses from present to past: clearly, whatever else, nobody could have walked to Bartlemas while troops were burning down houses and stripping lead from the roofs.

Wood was convinced this rite originated from Bishop Henry Burghwash of Lincoln granting an indulgence of 40 days in 1336 to anyone who visited the chapel during the Octave of St Bartholomew's Day and gave alms for the upkeep of the brethren, but he was puzzled that he could find no evidence in the archives of New College itself. We might also wonder why New College was involved at all: they had nothing to do with Bartlemas. Why wasn't it the Fellows of *Oriel* who went on procession and performed the ritual?[29] It resembles other public excursions to holy wells by municipal authorities, for instance, to mark their ownership of them as part of the water supply, but clearly New College wasn't in that position.

What's really going on here? According to Wood, the decorous procession wasn't the only ceremony which included a trip to Bartlemas. He mentions the scholars of Oriel, 'the youths of the city', and 'Magdalen college men and the rabble of the town' coming there on May Day, which might be linked with the May Morning celebrations at Magdalen and Oxford's other May observances; and there is also the weirdest of Oxford's calendar customs, the 'bringing in of the fly' by the university cooks on the Tuesday after Pentecost: the fly in question, possibly a butterfly, was traditionally caught at Bartlemas.[30] It's hard to see each of these ceremonies as discrete reflections of pagan antecedents, but we do have a kind of concatenation of customs which for some reason all coalesce around the same site.

Wood says that the ritual he describes grew up because the decline of the religious observances around St Bartholomew's Day led to the impoverishment of the Bartlemas brethren:

> *The almsfolk, being by degrees reduced to poverty, became at last the objects of compassion; which working on the hearts of charitable people, especially the worthy fellows of New College, did (reforming their old way) change the former day from May Day to Holy Thursday … using the same innocent ceremony as I have before in the former page expressed and is now become a laudable custom.*

Wood's timing may be accurate, but the ceremony bears all the signs of having been made up about that time, at least in the form he knew of it. In particular, the strewing of the path to the spring with flowers sounds as though it may have arisen from the name of the well itself, while the songs sung in the grove were contemporary madrigals, and secular ones at that. It may be that the Bartlemas custom was part of the great battle between Puritan and anti-Puritan factions in early Stuart Oxford, and which found its symbolic climax in the struggles to suppress or to promote the varied celebrations in the city which orbited around the start of May.[31] New College had a strong Catholic and then anti-Puritan tradition: the flower-decked Bartlemas procession may have been a way of asserting it. Perhaps it was even the start of such events, or came to affect the older ones, which was why so many also ended up roping in a trip to Bartlemas. As for the supposed charitable purpose of the rite, the odd groat tipped into a strange-looking cup can't have made that much of a material difference to the welfare of the almsmen.

Wood's language runs the danger of hoodwinking us into thinking the custom is older. Thinking of the scholars singing in the grove around the

Strowell as the spring sun filters through the trees recalls to his mind 'the ancient Druids', and in several places he mentions Flora, the Roman goddess of the Spring. Educated people in Renaissance and early-modern Britain were accustomed to invoking the deities of the Classical world, and the name of Flora occurs across the 17th century in both elite poetry and street ballads.[32] She came to mind whenever scholarly souls thought of Spring and its delights, of the earth gathering itself for fruitful abundance, and popular customs involving flowers, fruit and garlanding were, mentally at least, liable to be assimilated to her literary cult. Accordingly, the Puritans, who had a point about the degree of disorder which accompanied May celebrations, loathed her. Thomas Hall's furious pamphlet from 1660, *Funebris Florae: or, the Downfall of May-Games,* adamantly insisted that May festivities were ancient paganism dressed up, originating in a ceremony dreamt up by the Roman Senate to commemorate 'one Flora a notable Harlot, which had got much riches whoring, at her death bequeathed her substance to the people of Rome … all the whores were called to these sports where they danced naked about the streets, with trumpets blown before them'.[33] Many modern commentators, scanning Anthony Wood's comments about Druids and Flora, have read distinct pagan antecedents into the restrained actions of the Fellows of New College in the early 1600s. By stringing suppositions together, even the sober Archeox report on the Bartlemas dig of 2014 gets quite close to suggesting that the hospital was on a pre-Christian holy site.[34]

But we have to be very careful with this material. For instance, here is Wood describing the annual visit of 'the youth of the city' to Bartlemas. It's not clear whether this procession formed part of the same event as the May Morning singing from Magdalen College tower, or something separate:

> [they would come] *every May Day with their lords, ladies, garlands, fifes, flutes and drums to acknowledge the coming in of the fruits of the year or (as we may say) to salute the great goddess Flora and to attribute her all praise with dancing and music.*[35]

The editor, Revd Salter, points out that this is a note added by the antiquary to his main text. When John Peshall quotes this passage in *The Antient and Present State* … he misses out the bracketed words 'as we may say', words which make it clear that the allusion to Flora is not Wood *reporting* what's happening, but *commenting* on it – giving it the type of elite-culture gloss one would expect from a classically-educated scholar. Wood also – apparently – writes about the Magdalen May morning custom in the same terms:

> *the choral ministers of this House* [Magdalen College] *do, according to an ancient custom, salute Flora every year on the first of May, at four in the morning, with vocal music of several parts. Which having been sometimes well performed,* [!] *hath given great content to the neighbourhood and auditors underneath*.[36]

Is the reference to Flora, again, Wood commenting on what happened on Magdalen Tower before it became a Christian observance with the performance of the *Hymnus Eucharisticus*, as it is now; or did the scholars of the college actually invoke the goddess of the Spring, as (for instance) Tim Healey concludes?[37] Here, however, I run into the difficulty that, although this passage sounds authentic, I can't find the original. It's stated variously to come from Wood's diary for May 1674, 1675, or 1695, but isn't in any of those entries (or at least not in the published text). It isn't in any of the entries for the whole of those years, either. The only reference to the May Morning singing in the diary that I can see comes in 1688, when Wood said it didn't happen due to lack of choristers. Wood *does* talk about the custom in his history of the University:

> *In fastigio Turris Collegii S. Magdalense Oxon., Ministri istius Sodalitii chorales, annuatim de more, primo die Maii ad horam quartem matutinam melodice cantant.*[38]

- but there's no reference to Flora in that. We should be wary of generating a cult of a pagan Roman goddess in early Stuart Oxford when it may not have existed outside of Anthony Wood's head, if there. Even the Puritan Thomas Hall alleged that the May revellers were worshipping Flora *unwittingly*, not consciously.

I wonder whether history rather repeated itself in 2009. Just as, very likely, New College revived or invented a custom attached to Bartlemas in the late 16th century because some bright spark among the Fellows thought it might be amusing, so in that year it was resurrected again. This time the impetus seems to have come from New College School, and even though Anthony Wood made no mention of boy choristers being involved in the procession, that was happily glossed over. The College itself was involved in the form of tutor in English William Poole, who preceded the boys, playing appropriate pieces on the fiddle. Early on Ascension Day 2013, choirmaster Edward Higginbottom reported, 'we duly sang a short office in the exquisite chapel' before proceeding along a flower-strewn path to the top of Oriel's playing fields and joining in Thomas Morley's madrigal 'Now is the Month of Maying', 'a jollier number' than 'Hard by a Christall Fountain'. 'Plenty of

curious onlookers turned out to witness this spectacle', though they were not invited to the champagne breakfast afterwards.[39]

Many years ago, when I first visited Bartlemas and was rather a sloppier scholar than I hope I am now, I completely overlooked Wood's clear statement that the well was 'at the upper end of the grove adjoining' and I assumed the nice stone well between the chapel and Bartlemas House was the right location. It is very much not, picturesque a group though they may form: it is the well of the house, belongs to it, and is private. Edward Higginbottom was most disappointed in 2013 to find not the shady spring the New College party expected, nor even 'some water seeping out of the ground, if not bubbling' that was evident in wet weather. If anything at all survives, it is in the woody area to the top left of the playing field, and discharges into the ditch that runs down the western side of what was the original Bartlemas enclosure.

Sadly, St Bartholomew's Well is not *the one on the left (photographed in 1989), but somewhere in the view on the right from 2024!*

St Edmund's Well. Oliver Sutton was the 13th bishop of Lincoln, elected to the see in 1280 and holding it until his death in 1299. Before that he was Dean of Lincoln cathedral, and his uncle Henry had been bishop some years before; three other uncles and a brother were also priests. One uncle, Stephen of Lexington, become Abbot of a small Cistercian monastery at Stanley in Wiltshire, where his former tutor at Oxford, Archbishop of Canterbury Edmund Rich, had sometimes come to stay. There is every possibility, then, that Bishop Sutton had known Archbishop Edmund before the latter's death in 1240 and his speedy canonisation 7 years later, and it was equally possible that he was astonished to learn, in 1291, of a holy well in the

late archbishop's name being venerated in Oxford, which lay in the far southwest corner of Oliver's diocese.[40] This was a fraud, the bishop decided, and he fired off a memorandum to the Archdeacon of Oxford that the veneration of the spring and its 'simulated holy miracles' should be put a stop to. That same year he would condemn another novel holy well at Peterborough, and eight years later a third at Linslade. There were innumerable holy wells the Church supported and promoted at this time, but when a cult sprang up that was unofficial, outside the established structure, it could try to suppress it.

Try; but in the case of St Edmund's Well at Oxford, try unsuccessfully. The well, lying according to Dr Plot about a furlong south-south-west of St Clement's Church, survived: it wasn't necessarily that easy for a medieval bishop sitting in his palace in Lincoln to stop people visiting a spring in the fields outside a city 140 miles away. The signs are that Bishop Sutton wrote his memorandum and then did nothing more about it; neither did its recipient, Archdeacon Simon of Ghent, who also happened to be Chancellor of the University at the time. Anyway, the *fontem Beati Edmundi*, as Bishop Sutton named it, survived another two-and-a-half centuries at least. In 1304 Bishop Sutton's successor-but-one, John Dalderby, also issued a memo condemning the selling of candles by the well, and in 1528-9 an Oxford carpenter was paid by Cardinal College to make a bridge across a stream nearby. Dr Plot claimed the well was 'so effectual in curing divers distempers, and thereupon held to be of so great sanctity, that here they made vows and brought their alms and offerings', and that in his time it was still remembered 'by some of the ancientest of the Parish'. Wood wrote that it was resorted to both for drinking and bathing, to cure wounds and various sicknesses. Both writers make it sound as though the well was still operating within living memory: until Millham Bridge fell down in the icy winter of 1634, said Wood, 'and then by degrees for want of recourse thereto in summertime [it] was stopped up'. This suggests that by then the well was only visited casually by passers-by, rather than people making a special effort to seek it out. In 1630 'Lady Forster' had donated 40s to the well, presumably to repair it, but Wood gives us no clue as to who she was, and there's no contemporary figure who seems to fit.[41]

As we are finding with Oxford's wells in general, St Edmund's is a bit unusual. Why does Bishop Sutton call it the well of *Blessed* Edmund, and not *Saint* Edmund? This nomenclature is, as far as I can remember, unique among medieval English holy wells. Was he, having respect for the saint, annoyed at Edmund's name being invoked in this unsanctioned context; or

alternatively, *dis*liking him, did he disapprove of him being culted at all? Certainly Edmund wasn't universally popular: the monks of Canterbury had clashed with him over the respective rights of the Abbey and the Cathedral there. And who was promoting the well in the first place? St Edmund was an academic - in fact, the very first Oxford scholar of whom we know a great deal individually[42] – and not really the kind of person to capture the imagination of ordinary laypeople no matter what his virtues. He died in France on his way to a Papal audience and was buried at the Cistercian abbey of Pontigny: the shrine there was popular for a while (and King Henry III went there), but declined by the end of the 13th century, and, while Edmund's feast day appeared in many church calendars thanks to his connections with the liturgical powerhouse of Salisbury Cathedral where he'd been Treasurer, his was an elite cult of most interest to monks and priests.

Why did Bishop Dalderby condemn the candle-sellers at the well? Was this an organised sale of holy souvenirs? Was there some sort of structure at the site to make the activity easier; or were the vendors just turning up and standing around to catch visitors?[43] What John Dalderby's reference to the well does make clear is that there were those who encouraged others to visit it, presumably the clerics to whom Edmund was an important figure, and there were two groups of whom that was likely to be true: the monks of Abingdon, his birthplace, and the staff of the University Hall that would eventually bear his name, and which occupied the site where he was supposed to have taught. The Hall seems to have come into existence some time in the middle of the 13th century and was referred to in the records of the landowner, Osney Abbey, as 'the House of Cowley', as it was leased and operated by the vicar of Cowley; the name 'St Edmund Hall' was first recorded in 1317 but it may have been in use long before that. 1317 is not all that far away from Bishop Sutton's condemnation of the well in 1291, and it makes complete sense to see the site in the context of the re-branding of an academic business, as it acquired a rather more elevated identity with the patronage of a saint. Over time the well generated enough of a reputation to be visited in its own right, eventually, as we've seen, dwindling in importance in the early 1600s.

But why locate the holy well of St Edmund in the fields outside the city? What was later called the Campus Field, the site of the well, was part of the commons of the parish of St Clement, not enclosed until 1853 when it became the property of Christ Church, so St Edmund Hall wouldn't have clashed with a landowner in establishing the well as a sacred place. Anthony

Wood guessed that the actual site might have had something to do with a vision of the Child Jesus the saint had had while at school in Oxford, an event which was supposed to have happened in meadowland somewhere near the city.[44] This is not at all unreasonable, but it remains Wood's conjecture as no legend of the kind was ever actually attached to the well. It's also remarkable that more was not made of the medieval well in the front quadrangle of St Edmund Hall; it would have been the main water supply for the Hall for some centuries, is mentioned in the 15th and 16th centuries, and it is by no means implausible that it could have been used by St Edmund himself. Perhaps the Hall did not acquire the well until the Front Quad reached its current extent in 1469, or maybe the authorities didn't fancy visitors coming and going to a holy well in the Hall premises themselves, doing inconvenient things like drinking the water and buying candles. Better keep that out in the fields. The well was rediscovered in 1927 and the current handsome well-head was added, carved with the verse from Isaiah 12.3, '*haurietis aquas in gaudio fontibus salvatoris*', 'with joy you will draw water from the wells of salvation': the inscription was recarved in 1963 and gilded in 2018 (I remember it as being very hard to read about 1990). The story goes that Edmund quoted this phrase on his deathbed, after asking for a crucifix, and washing Christ's wounds on it with wine, which he then drank – his last earthly sustenance, and a perfect evocation of the medieval imagery of the wounds of Christ as the wells of divine grace.[45]

St Edmund's Well thus emerges as a very informative example of a medieval well dedicated to a contemporary figure, and promoted by a religious institution. It would be interesting to compare it to similar sites where medieval bishops are culted, such as the springs of Edmund's contemporary Richard of Chichester at Droitwich. It's a surprise that the well at St Edmund Hall has never become a true holy well: but perhaps that's a task for the future.

The well at St Edmund Hall, 2025

St Margaret's Well, Binsey. The spreading flat ground of Port Meadow lies west of Oxford city centre, and the hamlet of Binsey on its north side; to the west even of tiny Binsey, separated by a half-mile lane through an avenue of trees, is Thornbury – little more than a denominator for a field and a cottage. That is where you will find St Margaret's Church and, yards to the west of it, the saint's well. Four brick and tile steps lead down into a stone enclosure: at one end, beneath an inscribed stone, is an arch over a terracotta tub full of water. The inscription has the name in English, and the rest in Latin:

St Margarets Well

S. Margaretae Fontem
Precibus S. Frideswidae fertur concessum
Inominatum diu obrutumque
In usum revocavit
T.J. Prout Aed. Xti. Alumnus Vicarius
AD MDCCCLXXIV.

The Well of St Margaret
Made to rise by the prayers of St Frideswide
Long nameless and forgotten
Summoned back into use
[by] TJ Prout, Alumnus of Christ Church, Vicar
AD 1874.

At the open end of the enclosure walls are two small containers for flowers, and the well is very often decorated. When we visited in November 2024 there was a protective wooden frame of chicken wire over the well-mouth, which had been adorned with various items of Roman Catholic popular devotional memorabilia – medallions and cards of St Michael defeating a dragon, and of St Jude, and a rosary. Flowers had been pushed into the wire, while next to the well stood a candle depicting Our Lady of Vailankanni, an Indian Roman Catholic devotion. You wonder who it is that's come out to this isolated spot and left these items. But there's an older question to ponder: if the well arose at the prayers of St Frideswide, why is it named after someone else? What's the story of this site?

The well is much tidier since my visit in 1988

Frideswide, or *Frithuswith* as she would have been in her own time, first emerges into the historical record in

the mid-11th century text *The tale of God's Saints who first rested in England* which lists the locations of the shrines of fifty-plus saints of the Anglo-Saxon Church: there, she's said to be buried at her priory in Oxford. The first account of her life dates from within the century after that and states she died in the year 727, daughter of a Mercian sub-king based at Eynsham and founder of the religious house at what was going to become Oxford – all of which is perfectly plausible as it follows the pattern we know from other noble holy women and church-founders of the time.

The history of Frideswide's priory was not entirely untroubled. At some point the nuns of the original foundation seem to have been replaced by secular canons, who were in turn succeeded by the monks of Abingdon who took the place over for a while. In 1002 the church was used – fruitlessly as it turned out – as a sanctuary by Danes fleeing what has become known as the St Brice's Day Massacre, and the monastery was damaged so badly by fire as a result that King Aethelred refounded it two years later. Finally in about 1120 King Henry I reorganised it as an Augustinian house with his chaplain Wimund as Prior.

It was soon after this that the canons of Oxford had the first *Life* of their founder St Frideswide written, giving the outlines of her story – the pious princess menaced by a wicked king who flees to a wild location and only returns to Oxford later. At some point a different writer, probably the Prior Robert of Cricklade, wrote another version of Frideswide's *Life*, tidying up the Latin of the earlier one and extending the text. In the older *Life*, Frideswide runs away to Binsey, described as a wood near Bampton, which is of course some distance from Oxford; Robert, if it is he who wrote the second account, corrected this, and added that she and at least some of her nuns relocated at a site near Binsey called *Thornbiri* 'because it was overgrown with many kinds of thorns, lonely and suitable for devotion'. Here, because the river Thames was inconveniently distant, she prayed for water and a spring arose, 'which performs healing works for many who drink from it'. But a difficulty occurs to add to the matter of the well's dedication; why doesn't it appear in the earlier *Life*?

Had anything happened between the writing of the two texts that might have a bearing on them? In fact it had. According to the register of Godstow Abbey, the woman who became that house's founder, the knight's widow Edith Lancelene, had come to Binsey in response to a vision and 'there she dwelled and much holy life she led' until a further revelation directed her to Godstow where she procured a grant of land from the knight John of St John

and started her community of sisters. Although all the dates are relative rather than absolute, these events seem to have occurred between the composition of the two *Lives* of St Frideswide. Dame Edith's foundation might have seemed an important event to the community at Oxford, repeating what their founder had done, especially as they had undergone their own vicissitudes and changes in the meantime.

As far as Binsey's well is concerned, different possibilities thus present themselves:

1. The well, and its name, date back to St Frideswide's time in the early 700s.
2. The well dates back to St Frideswide, but its name was coined later, perhaps when Dame Edith arrived at Binsey.
3. The well was identified, and its name given, in Dame Edith's time, perhaps even by her.

We can discount proposition 1. Although it's been suggested that Frideswide may have seen parallels between her own experience and that of the virgin martyr St Margaret, this appealing idea runs against the fact that the cult of St Margaret reached England much later than Frideswide's time, and while that close identification with saints was very characteristic of medieval Christian thinking, the devotions of their Anglo-Saxon forebears did not tend that way.[46] When it comes to choosing between options 2 and 3, it would help if we could point to some sort of continuity in the use of Binsey (or, more specifically, the site of Thornbury where the church and well now sit) between St Frideswide's time and the 1100s. In a series of articles in *Oxoniensia* in the 1980s about Frideswide, her legend, the history of the Abbey, and Thornbury's archaeology, Dr John Blair devoted considerable effort to proving just this; but while the evidence suggests fragmentary and on-off activity at Thornbury for several centuries, it falls short of demonstrating the presence of a religious community there in her time or later.[47] The first *Life* certainly suggests that there was some association in the minds of the canons of Oxford between Binsey and their founder, but the absence of the well and the name *Thornbiri* from that earlier text implies that the details were only filled in after Edith Lancelene had started her community there. Dame Edith was a visionary: perhaps she received this story about her predecessor that way and passed it on to the canons. It is after all very striking that the episode of the well is the *only* miracle of Frideswide which appears in the second *Life* and not the first. If pushed, I would opt for Edith Lancelene being the source both of the story of the Binsey well and the

dedication of it and the church, and it's not often that we can point to so definite an origin in the history of English holy wells.[48]

Nor is it common to be able to recount a documented miracle at a medieval well. Prior Philip of Oxford, Robert of Cricklade's successor, wrote an account of the healing wonders wrought by St Frideswide in the very last years of the 12th century. One story concerned a woman called Brichtiva from Northamptonshire, who was advised to visit the well at Binsey and was cured of deafness in the right ear by applying the water. Several other miracle tales in Philip's list refer to the 'blessed water' of St Frideswide, but this was likely to have been water poured over her shrine in the Priory and used as a healing mediuim, not the water of the well.[49]

So many pilgrims came to the well, Anthony Wood tells us, that the Prior of St Frideswide's appointed priests there to hear their confessions before they made their visits, bathing three or four times apiece and then heading off to the Priory to present themselves before the statue of the saint and make an offering. Such was the prosperity that the well brought to the nearby village of Seacourt, just over the Thames, that there were upwards of twenty inns there for their accommodation, and a bridge over the river. 'The village that was once much bigger than it appears' is a common folkloric motif (we've already met with it in connection with Childswell), and thanks to archaeological investigation we know that the real extent of Seacourt was much more modest; it was also probably deserted soon after 1400, which might suggest that the well's best days were over by then.[50]

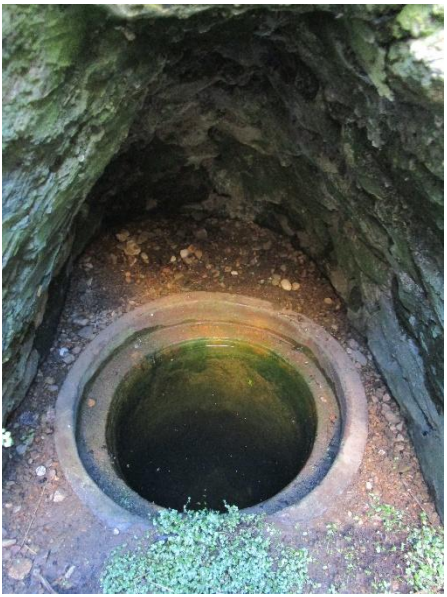
Nevertheless, even if he hadn't seen it himself, someone told Wood the well had had 'a little house of stone … with a lock and door' over it, and the image of St Margaret (or perhaps St Frideswide) on the front. This was destroyed by Alderman John Sare or Sayre 'a little before the late war, anno 1639'. Wood's various notes are unclear whether Sare defaced only the *image* or pulled down the whole structure; at one point he says the latter was done very recently, about 1660. Alderman Sare's assault on the well sounds like a typical Puritan attack, but in fact his motives are not very obvious. He was a prosperous chandler in Oxford who served twice as Mayor of the city, in 1627 and 1634, and in 1642, the year before he died, he contributed towards the subscription paid to the King when he arrived to make Oxford his base in the Civil War. None of this excludes his being a man of firm Puritan opinions who might object to the remains of Popish superstition, but nor does it sound very characteristic of such a person.[51]

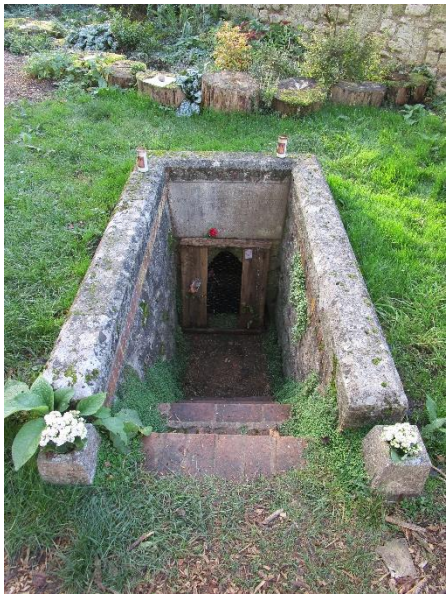
Whatever the details, and even though (Wood wrote) the well had been 'admired and resorted to, to this day, by some of the Roman profession, especially scholars who have read of its worth and virtue', it was declining fast. In fact, he found, it 'is become a very despicable well now, and grown almost over with weeds'; 'being overgrown with nettles and other weeds, and harbouring frogs, snails and vermin, scarce owneth the name of a well'. 'Tis pity' he lamented, 'it should lay like a hen-roost and the well stopped with dirt'. Nearly two centuries later in 1850 when the editor of the vast Roman Catholic encyclopaedia of saints' cults, the *Acta Sanctorum*, visited Binsey, he found a similar scene of dereliction:

> *There are hardly any traces of the spring. The chapel consists of two parts: the sanctuary and the kind of quadrangle attached to it. The sanctuary is larger than the quadrangle, which shows its antiquity. If the locals are to be believed, the spring was on the side of the quadrangle opposite the Sanctuary; but now it is completely filled up. On the right side of the Sanctuary there is a small pit, from which water drawn from the spring was taken, so at least local tradition says. Today, no pilgrims are seen, and the spring of St. Frideswide has been completely forgotten.* (translation from Latin)

This was presumably the state of St Margaret's Well when Thomas Prout rebuilt it in 1874. Revd Prout was a Gloucestershire-born doctor's son who attended Westminster School and then Christ Church College; he was a Classics tutor there before becoming Perpetual Curate of Binsey in 1857, a position he held until 1891. Binsey church belonged to Christ Church and the living was used to support University academics: both Mr Prout's predecessors were Regius professors. The population of the parish was miniscule – only a few dozen – so the incumbent had plenty of time to pursue other work. Mr Prout was known as a reformer of the University statutes (and less famously as a mountain-climber), but was so prone to dozy inattention during meetings that his friend Charles Dodgson/Lewis Carroll allegedly wrote him into *Alice's Adventures in Wonderland* as the Dormouse. The reconstruction of the well was part of a general restoration of Binsey Church. None of the structure we see today seems to predate 1874, though it may tap the original source of the water.[52]

In Chapter 7 of *Alice* Carroll has the Dormouse (between snoozes) make up a story about three sisters who live at the bottom of a treacle well. If the Dormouse was indeed a caricature of Thomas Prout, then perhaps St Margaret's Well did inspire the treacle well tale, but the connection doesn't seem to have been made explicitly until the 1960s. Yet the idea of treacle





mines at Binsey is well-attested: in early-1900s Oxfordshire if someone answered the question 'Where did that come from?' with the phrase 'From the Binsey treacle-mine' it meant the enquirer should mind their own

business. Chesca Potter thought the idea had some factual basis in the yellow algae that formed on the surface of shallow ponds in the Binsey area. The oft-stated theory that the word 'treacle' refers to healing balm, and therefore by extension to the well-water, seems to be just fancy.[53]

The restoration of St Margaret's Well brought it back to general attention and certainly people were soon visiting it as a wishing well – the Pitt Rivers Museum holds some pins left there as wishing tokens in 1893, and it has featured in virtually every book on English holy wells ever since. Unlike many holy wells, the devotion paid to it seems to be mostly Christian. The benefice of Osney, in which Binsey now lies, holds services of blessing around St Margaret's Day, while Bishop John Pritchard of Oxford made it one of his destinations in his pilgrimage around his diocese in 2011. More recently the Bible Society have reorganised part of the churchyard, incorporating the well, as a meditative garden based on the words of Psalm 23. 'We warmly welcome Christians of all denominations who wish to make a pilgrimage to this Holy Site', the parish church writes on its website, 'If you wish to organise a parish or congregational pilgrimage please contact the Rector who will work with you to make the arrangements you need'.[54] I was there for Evensong and Aspersing on St Margaret's Day 2025, when the level of water in the well was so low after prolonged dry weather that the Rector of Osney brought in some tap water blessed for the purpose instead. Offerings at the well then included stones, feathers, a wreath of artificial flowers, and

coins as well as rosaries, so there are unofficial visitors who have non-Christian spiritual traditions too.

St Mary's Well. An octagonal building with a pyramidal roof, like a kind of Gothic pepperpot, sits next to Catte Street on the line of the medieval city wall, next to a gateway leading into Hertford College. There's an arched doorway opening off the street with a battered carving over it. This is the former chapel of St Mary-at-the-Smith-Gate: Hertford has owned it since 1923, and it's now part of its Middle Common Room. But its current appearance belies its history. Until a dramatic restoration in 1931, it was commercial premises, its medieval fabric swaddled in layers of brick and plaster, sash windows, gables, dormers, and chimneys, so what we see now is a bit of a fantasy, a 1930s invention imitating a Victorian reconstruction of an ancient chapel. In the previous few decades it had been a bookshop, a grocer's, an accountant's office, and a florist. Before that it was 'St Catherine's Club', a base for students not attached to any college, the name deriving from the belief that the slighted carving over the door represented St Catherine, rather than the Annunciation, its real subject; and reaching back to the mid-1800s it was a billiard room.[55]

The chapel existed from the later 1300s, and probably owed its funny shape to being formed out of one of the defensive towers of the city wall; it was rebuilt in about 1520. There is a tiny view of it on Ralph Agas's map of Oxford made in 1578. Anthony Wood remarks that scholars would come here to pray, generously, for their tutors before crossing Catte Street to the Divinity Schools; the building was also frequented by travellers. It was disused by 1537, when its fixtures were removed to St Peter-in-the-East, and it later became a house; Wood says the carving was defaced after the Popish Plot of 1678-9.[56]

And the well? It's recorded only in one of Anthony Wood's marginal scribbles, and is nothing more than a name: '*vide* Wells', he notes, referring to the chapter of his *Survey* he never wrote, so perhaps he had more information to share that went unmentioned.[57] St Mary's was the only holy well within the walls of the city (or just outside them), and the most reasonable explanation for it is that it was an ordinary water-supply, identified by means of the chapel that happened to stand nearby, rather than being a deeply numinous site of spiritual encounter. It could be, as we often say in the

context of holy wells, that St Mary's Well 'became regarded as special because of its use in the church', but there's no specific evidence.

Winifred's Well. When he was discussing St Margaret's Well at Binsey, Anthony Wood's mind turned to other holy wells he'd heard of; they appear in one of his marginal notes. He mentions St Eustace's Well at Wye in Kent, St David's Well at Painsford in Devon, and 'St Winifred's Well', meaning, presumably, the famous one in North Wales with its attached medieval chapel and established pilgrimage. When John Peshall came to write his own account of the Holy Well of Holywell in *The Antient and Present State …*, he not only borrowed the phrase 'I find many persons yearly relieved by these wholesome waters to this day' from Wood, but also garbled the reference, and claimed that well was 'consecrated and frequented as Winifred and Margaret's'. This was then repeated by James Ingram in *Memorials of Oxford* from 1837, which was where the Sisters at Holywell Manor got it from.[58]

And that should be that; but it's not. In 1893 William Boase mentions 'Winifred's Well, east of St Bartholomew's Chapel, which perished at the same time' – that is, during the Civil War. It's easy to assume the location is a casual slip and arises from the confusion about 'Winifred's Well' mentioned in the last paragraph, yet although Ingram's information also comes from John Peshall, it's found in a different place – not his account of Holywell, but of Bartlemas. Peshall says that about two furlongs – 400 yards or so – east of the chapel there was 'the Well, called Winifred's' which 'was running until the time Oxford was a garrison, and the Rump people [supporters of the Rump Parliament] stopped it up'. In a footnote he goes into some detail:

> *Of whatever Estimation this was formerly, there is room for Conjecture, that this was no more than a Land-spring. The ingenious Owner has opened it, and searched deep for a Spring without Success. The Water oozes visibly from the sandy Bank into it. The same has opened many like Pits and Trenches to receive the current Streams that issue thenceforth into a Canal below. In continued dry or hot Weather, he fetches his Water from Oxford.*[59]

Now, this account comes with the considerable health warning that 'sloppy plagiarist' would be a generous description of Revd Peshall, but it does sound surprisingly precise to be simply invented, and it's hard to see his interest in making it up. The note really does read as though the writer has actually spoken to an individual and reported their experience. I think, then, that we are justified in believing that there was indeed a 'Well called Winifred's'

somewhere east of Bartlemas. Take a line 400m east of the chapel today, and we find ourselves somewhere around the top of Herbert Close, in land now occupied by the gardens of a residential block owned by Jesus College, and adjoining its playing fields. There is water here, and you could, should you be so disposed, regard that as the well.

I've included this site with the Christian holy wells, but it must be said that nobody, not even John Peshall, attaches a saintly title to it – it remains, if it indeed existed, just 'Winifred's'. It seems sensible to discuss it in connection with the Holywell mistake, hence its presence in this section.

Water supply & marker wells

Every community draws water for its common and ordinary purposes from somewhere, and some of these water-sources end up being named, mainly to make clear their ownership or location. By their nature, these wells don't have the elaborate legends and stories of the Christian springs, but that doesn't necessarily make their history any the clearer.

Aylmere's Well. Otherwise called Elmer's Well, this was according to Anthony Wood an 'antiquated well … near or in the fields of Wolvercote'. There was a landowner called Robert Aylmer recorded around the year 1230.[60] There were lots of wells in the vicinity of Wolvercote, but no indication as to which Aylmere's may have been.

Harold's Well. Wood found this reference in the papers of Brian Twyne; the name of 'Harold the priest' was attached to both a field and a well ('*fons Haroldi*') somewhere in Osney.[61]

Postern Well. In 1395 a group of men were commissioned to drain a pond at the East Gate of the city, and this may have been the Postern Well. Anthony Wood, who seems to have found his original reference in the archives of Brian Twyne, wrote that it was 'within New College walls' (though he changed his mind on that in one note, writing that it was *outside* the wall) and on the north side of the gate 'where one Cawdrey now lives'. Remember that the 'precise shoemaker of St Peter-in-the-East' who discovered the Holy Well of Holywell Green in 1651 was a Mr *Cowdrey*; this raises the possibility that Wood was confused about the various wells in this part of the city, and no surprise. Crowell (which we will come to), on the northeast angle of the city walls, was misnamed *Holiwell* on Ralph Agas's map

of 1578, while Wood admitted (we might imagine wearily) that some people claimed Postern Well *was* Crowell.[62]

Pule Well. Recorded in 1386, and presumably, to judge by the name, a pool.[63]

Revemore Well. Some time between 1205 and 1221, Abbot Clement of Osney wrote to Abbot Hugh of Abingdon asking that his own abbey might be given 'that spring which is called Revemore Well' to make an aqueduct through their arable land. This spring was probably in Hinksey Field to the west of Oxford; Wood speculated whether it might be the same as a spring called 'Cumnor Well', but neither name helps us locate it.[64]

Slaying Well. This name sounds interesting, as though it might conceal some fragment of folklore, but in fact it was so-called from *Slaying Lane*, a street occupied by butchers, first mentioned in 1478; the road acquired its modern name of Brewer Street in 1772, alternating with the old one for a while until the new eclipsed it. The well was 'under Pembroke College wall', said Wood. The brewhouse which caused the shift in nomenclature also brought about Slaying Well's demise, as it was stopped up and its water conveyed to the brewery in 1672; however it wasn't completely destroyed, as Herbert Hurst wrote in 1899 that 'at the extreme end of Brewers Street there peeps out just above ground the arch of Slaying Lane Well'. It doesn't any more, sadly.[65]

Ulward's Well. Along with Aylmere's Well, this was one of Anthony Wood's 'antiquated wells' 'near or in the fields of Wolvercote'. He related it to one John Ulward who rented property in the area from the 13th-century landowner Dionisia Burewald, a benefactor of Godstow Abbey. The *Placenames of Oxfordshire* includes references to a 'Wolward's Well' about 1260, associated with William Wolward. Could this be the same site, as the names are so similar? At one point Wood confuses Wolward's Well with Aristotle's Well, but this is clearly incorrect.[66]

Walton Well. 'Walton' was the name for the area northwest of Oxford city, rather than a person – though many derived their surnames from it, including an abbot of Osney, John de Walton. But before then the well here seems, along with what became known as Aristotle's Well to the north, to have been called Brumman's Well, after a landowner, Brumman le Rich. Anthony Wood said he was one of the benefactors of the College of St George in the Castle, granting it land in 1074, which was how the spring eventually passed into the ownership of Osney Abbey. Later there was a

'Thomas de fonte de Walton', and the name *Bromaneswelle* appears in 1382; finally a marker stone was placed at the well in 1671.[67]

The well remained, it seems, until the redevelopment of the area in the 1800s, and eventually found itself on the corner of Walton Well Road and Longworth Road. It had probably stayed useful because it was right next to this valuable route onto Port Meadow, over the Thames at a ford leading to Binsey, and might have had even more traffic once the canal opened. In 1885 the Mayor of Oxford, William Ward, paid for a very grand Classical drinking fountain, designed by the architect Harry Wilkinson Moore, to mark the site of the ancient well. It's dry now, but sits impressively incongruous among the red-brick buildings as though it's been bolted onto the garden wall: a plaque beneath the dome tells its history, along with the improving verse, 'Drink and think of him who is the Fountain of Life'.[68]

Folkloric Springs

This small section of wells which have particular associated traditions, but which aren't Christian holy wells, could be combined with the next, but

those couple seem to form a separate group which reflect the influence of the University in a pronounced way. That influence is often not far away even for the springs that follow here, as we will see, but for them the common motifs of healing and ghostly manifestations are more prominent.

Choswell Spring. Shown on the Littlemore Enclosure map of 1819 as lying where the path now called Spring Lane crosses the Northfield Brook, the name of Choswell Spring has mutated across the centuries. It first appears in the 1270s as *Caldewell*, then a new name for a piece of land which had been called Chirleham and which formed part of the possession of Littlemore Priory; it was Chawdell Spring in 1512, Chowleswell in 1604, and Chosewell in 1765. The spring had the reputation of being good for sore eyes, but vanished after the sewage works were built and altered the drainage locally. The name seems to come from *ceald*, and means 'the cold spring', though it's an unusual mutation. Landscape historian Dr Graham Jones speculated that the healing well might have been cared for by a hermit, and this explained the foundation of the Priory nearby in about 1150. It's possible, but there's no such evidence, and nothing except ownership to link Choswell with the tiny Benedictine nunnery; that was suppressed in 1525 by Cardinal Wolsey after a series of complaints about the behaviour of the Prioress and her Sisters, its revenues being absorbed into the funds for building Cardinal College.[69]

Crowell. Was it named after the bird, or a cross erected nearby about the year 1270? James Ingram actually names it 'Cross Well', but he is alone in doing so. It was anciently a boundary-marker, delineating the city of Oxford from the Manor of Holywell; the name goes back at least to 1246. It was, Anthony Wood tells us, a square structure, covered in the earlier 1600s by 'a fair house … of free stone'. The water's ability to cure sore eyes was referred to in an inscription:

> *There's none will hurt this well that's wise,*
> *For it hurts none but helps the eyes.*

'To which', Wood goes on, 'a waggish scholar wrote this answer, with a coal under it:'

> *None but will hurt this well that's wise,*
> *For it helpeth none but hurts the eyes.*

Yet again the Civil War put an end to this (allegedly) useful spring, when the structure was demolished and the flow 'suffocated by the town ditch to which it was joined'; although the water might have survived. Herbert Hurst

said both it and Cornish Chough Well were 'beautiful and bountiful springs … merely concealed by soil added in the process of ages', and that its sluice had been dug out no longer ago than the 1870s.[70]

So who was responsible for the 1600s rebuilding of Crowell? Wood had heard conflicting reports: different informants had given him the names of two successive Principals of St Edmund Hall, John Aglionby and John Rawlinson, though in one place he assigned a positive date of 1626 to the work, which would point to the latter. The confusion is in fact understandable, because the two men were similar in many ways. They were, inescapably, both Fellows of Queen's College, because Queen's elected the Principal of St Edmund Hall at that point; both were Royal chaplains, Dr Aglionby to Elizabeth I and James I, Dr Rawlinson to the latter as well as to Lord Chancellor Ellesmere. Dr Rawlinson also dedicated a book of sermons to Charles I and was on friendly terms with the unfortunate Archbishop Laud as well as his post-Restoration successor William Juxon, and Dr Aglionby came from an established Royalist family; as one of the foremost Greek scholars of his day he was on the commission of translators for the King James Bible.[71] These were men who both moved in High Church, Royalist circles. Whichever of them it was who rebuilt Crowell, he added his coat of arms to it (maybe mimicking what Dr FitzJames of Merton had done with the Holy Well at Holywell 140 years earlier). Now, recall that Ralph Agas shows Crowell as *Holiwell* on his 1578 map of Oxford; maybe this was not just a slip, but what contemporaries actually believed? If either John Aglionby or John Rawlinson really thought that they were embellishing a holy well from the Middle Ages, that would seem to place the act firmly within the pre-Civil War culture-conflict we have already referred to. The rebuilt Crowell, like Oxford's burgeoning Stuart May-games, becomes a counterblast to the Puritans: no wonder it got pulled down.

Nanny Martin's Well.[72] On old maps, the road through Barton to Wick Farm bends and twists in the same way it does today. So you approach – the only way you can – down the hill, turn along the Bayswater Brook and then cross it, before ascending again towards the farm, and soon there comes into view one of the most extraordinary sights the whole body of ancient English wells can afford.

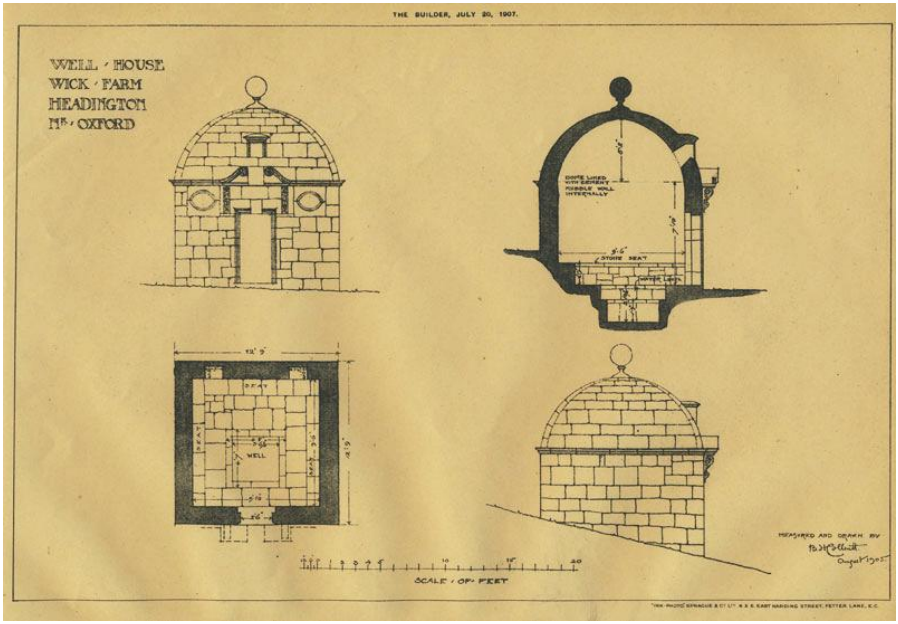
The well-house at Wick is a small, square building with a domed pyramidal roof, terminating in a globe finial. Two oval windows flank a heavily chamfered doorway, with a square aperture above it in the dome. The battered remains of a pediment supported by carved brackets top the door,

and over it is what might once have been a lion mask. Inside – not that you can get inside very often – a stone seat surrounds a now-covered shallow well set into the floor. This whole structure sits incongruously in a farmyard behind a dreadful metal gate with a barn faced in rusting corrugated iron beyond. It's not in a good state, but then it hasn't been in a good state for decades so it can probably hang on a while yet.

How did such an amazing object arrive in this unexpected place? Nobody knows for sure. The usual story is that the well-house was built by Unton Croke, a lawyer who'd served in the Parliamentarian army and briefly been MP for Oxford during the Commonwealth (sitting alongside his elder brother Richard): he acquired Wick Farm in 1665. His father, also Unton Croke, had served as the University's chief legal officer, the sub-steward, in the 1620s and 30s, and the family had many connections with the city. The Croke family are a contrast to most of the individuals we've met in these pages, in that they weren't Royalists. Unton Croke the elder sensibly retired into private life after the Restoration of the monarchy, and Unton junior kept his head down as well; Richard, however, seems to have had flexible enough opinions for his civic, legal and Parliamentary careers to carry on almost seamlessly under the new regime. There is no actual proof of when the well

was built, however, merely the style of the structure which seems to fit the 22 years Captain Croke owned the farm.

Buildings which vaguely recall Wick well-house were beginning to appear in London and Oxford in the mid-1600s, but it seems a bit humble to assign confidently a stylistic label such as Palladian, Baroque, or Mannerist to it. Perhaps we can imagine rather a local builder with some knowledge of relevant motifs, but not how they ought to fit, putting it together. The brackets match scrolls on two stone gateposts on another part of the site: our putative mason would have had to find someone to carve them.



The well-house surveyed for The Builder *in 1907, from the Headington History website*

Is it a folly? It doesn't seem to have that kind of self-awareness about it. Is it a reconstruction? Back in 1989 when I first visited I was told that its lower half was Roman, and sometimes it gets called the Roman Well. The 3rd – 4th century Roman villa a few hundred yards away was discovered, or at least brought to academic attention, in 1849, but maybe local people had always known that there were remains in the area and the well was intended to resemble what a Roman well was imagined to be like.[73] I should confess here

that in my *Oxoniensia* gazetteer I repeated the mistake that the structure was at least partly a Roman bath-house, which it isn't.

There is one further possibility: that the well was intended as a spa. The great heyday of spa enthusiasm comes some decades later, but we've already seen Mr Cowdrey promoting the Holy Well of Holywell Green as medicinal in the 1650s. Almost inevitably the Wick Farm well had a later reputation for being 'good for the eyes' (the Oxford folklorist Percy Manning said people were using the water for this in the 1850s), but Captain Croke was supposed to have suffered from gout in his later years: maybe his well helped him, and he thought it might be of benefit to others.[74] The subsequent owner of Wick, Sir William Walter, who acquired the house in 1687, filled the well in, but clearly its water was still accessible (you can see the drain emerging from below the building).[75] Folly, fake antiquity, failed spa: perhaps it has elements of all three.

You will have noticed that I have carefully referred to this site as Wick Farm wellhouse. It is now time to deal with the name at the head of the entry, given it by Percy Manning in 1902. Nanny Martin, he relates, was the 'guardian' of the well in the 1790s, 'and was very kind to those who came to use the water'; murdered, so the story went, after which her spectre haunted the farm and its surroundings. The ghost plagued anyone who came scrumping, and was seen at night alongside the Bayswater Brook, a tall figure in a silk dress. A Mr Green, 'when going late one night from Barton to Horton through the farm, found he had Nanny's company, and that being beery he tried to kiss her, but she vanished'. One owner of Wick, Bryan Wharton, and his wife were driven out of the house in 1833 by noises and apparitions, and left it to a bailiff to manage; the daughter of one, Miss Ely, was dressing for a ball in the house one night, and was shocked into illness after seeing Nanny over her shoulder in the mirror. The ghost tore down wallpaper the Elys attempted to put up. Finally the spectre was laid in a pond. Alternatively – so I was told in 1989 – *Nelly* Martin was a maid at Wick who drowned herself after falling pregnant, in the pond in which her ghost was later laid. The pond dried out, which perhaps explained later appearances. But Nanny or Nelly was not alone: 'a dog with saucer eyes' and a headless woman also haunted Barton Lane not far away.[76]

Wick Farm has gone through several changes of ownership since, but its various parcels of land have now been united under the ownership of Christ Church college, who have a plan to develop the whole area, including a restoration of the well. However, they've been planning it for some years and

it remains to be seen whether it will happen, or whether future residents will witness spectral manifestations.[77]

Dr Plot's unnamed springs. *The Natural History of Oxfordshire* of 1677 was Robert Plot's first book. This was an age when a gentleman whose doctorate was in law could become Oxford University's first Professor of Chemistry and Keeper of the Ashmolean Museum, and be considered an expert in natural and human antiquities, without any particular further qualification. Later antiquarians would often focus more on what we would characterize as 'holy wells', but although Dr Plot mentioned a couple of them, he was more specifically interested in mineral waters, describing several in Oxford. There was, he said, a petrifying spring at the Cross Inn off Cornmarket Street, which 'not only incrustates boards fallen into it, but inserts itself so intimately into the pores of the wood, that by degrees rotting it away, there is in the end the succession of a perfect stone'. He also called attention to a chalybeate (iron-bearing) spring discovered at Fulling Mill Ham Stream near Osney Bridge by his nephew, Thomas Taylor: its water, warm in winter so it was 'smoking all the time', tinged the stones in its channel with 'a deep rusty colour'.[78]

University wells

This next small category of water-sites has no parallel anywhere else in the UK, and in fact couldn't have existed except in a university city. It's not merely that they are called after two Ancient Greek philosophers, but the way that they interact with the culture that surrounds them which makes them stand out.

Aristotle's Well. George Wither's sequence of satirical verse *Abuses Whipt and Stript*, published in 1613, got him arrested and sent to the Marshalsea prison for libel, though nobody is quite sure why. Certainly Wither named nobody in the text, and confined his scorn to the generalised evils of his age. He was there only a few months, in any case. Early in the book he describes going to Oxford – 'our English Athens' – to study at the age of 15 (he was at Magdalen College, in fact). The University was, he said, 'A Christall fount, whose water is by odds/ Far sweeter than the Nectar of the Gods' but he admitted that perhaps he'd not made the best use of his time there:

But yet, indeed (may not I grieve to tell?)
I never drank at Aristotles Well.
And that perhaps may be the reason why,
I know so little in Philosophy.[79]

George Wither was at Oxford about ten years before writing these words; so can we take it that there was a spring near the city that students really believed would help them in their philosophical studies if they took its waters? Readers of Classical literature would be aware of the Hippocrene Spring on Mount Helicon, sacred to the Muses, which brought poetic inspiration to those who drank from it; was Aristotle's Well an example of the same motif translated to (as it would have been then) the meadows north of Oxford?

Along with Walton Well, Anthony Wood claimed that Aristotle's Well had been called Brumman's Well in the medieval period, named after the landowner Brumman le Rich; the two were a few hundred yards away from one another northwest of the city centre. But it seems to have acquired the Greek philosopher's name through connection with a University custom, the *coursing*.

The best account of this comes from the reminiscences of Anthony Ashley Cooper, the first Earl of Shaftesbury, who was at Exeter College in his mid-teens in the 1630s. The 'tall and raw-boned Cornish and Devonshire gentlemen' who formed the student body of Exeter, he recalled,

> *did then maintain in the schools coursing against Christ Church, the largest and most numerous college in the University. This coursing was in older times, I believe, intended for a fair trial of learning and skill in logic, metaphysics, and school divinity, but for some ages that had been the least part of it, the dispute quickly ending in affronts, confusion, and very often blows, when they went most gravely to work. They forbore striking, but making a great noise with their feet they hissed and shoved with their shoulders, and the stronger in that disorderly order drove the other out before them, and, if the schools were above stairs, with all violence hurrying the contrary party down, the proctors were forced either to give way to their violence or suffer in the throng.*[80]

Coursing was finally suppressed by Dr John Fell while he was Dean of Christ Church in the 1670s and 1680s, but someone still remembered it enough to tell Thomas Hearne the antiquary. As he recorded in his diary for 1718:

It [the well] was most of all frequented when Coursing was in practice … After Disputations on Ash-Wednesdays, the Scholars used to go out into the Fields & box it. The Places chiefly used for boxing were on the North side of the City, and such as came off Victor went away in Triumph, & were sure not to let Aristotle's Well be unsaluted upon those Occasions, where Trophies of their Victories were sometime left.[81]

'Boxing' sounds more controlled than the riotous events Anthony Ashley Cooper describes, but perhaps this refers to a somewhat later stage when the coursings were removed from the University premises and carried on elsewhere before disappearing completely. Goodness knows what the 'trophies' were – perhaps flower garlands, or something more rumbustious which Hearne doesn't want to spell out. The Well was also, says Anthony Wood, visited more generally 'in the summer season by our Peripateticks' – the ancient Peripatetics being the pupils of Aristotle – and Hearne states there was a 'house' built nearby for the purpose.[82]

Putting all this together, we can perhaps conclude that the renaming of the well, which would have happened some time before George Wither attended the University in the very early 1600s, was something of a scholars' joke. When the satirist himself talked about not drinking its water, what he actually meant was not taking part in the customary brutality of the coursing. Maybe the custom of visiting it arose as a kind of satirical counterpart to more stately official ceremonies such as New College's pilgrimage to Bartlemas.

Aristotle's Well was on the south side of Aristotle Lane leading from Kingston Road over the canal bridge and on to Port Meadow, a path that Wood claimed was no more than a century old, meaning the 1570s: perhaps that was when it was named. By the late 1880s it was 'in a neglected state' and in 1888 a garden wall was built over it. 'They us'd to drink Water and Sugar there', says Hearne, a custom also recorded by Percy Manning nearly two centuries later; I wonder whether this habit was brought by students from other parts of the country, especially the North where it was more common. Manning also wrote that by the late 1800s it was known as a wishing well, but, after drinking the water, the wish had to be kept secret, or it wouldn't come true.[83]

Plato's Well. Of these two wells, Aristotle's is decidedly the more interesting: if that's essentially a learned joke, then its twin, Plato's Well, is a secondary one dependent on the first. In one note Anthony Wood claims the

site was another of Brumman's Wells but that's surely a mistake, as it wasn't near Brumman le Rich's property. Instead it first appears as Stocwelle in about 1205, and in 1423 the land around the *fontem vocatum Stokwelle* was owned by the Priory of Gloucester. There was a prominent Oxford family of Stockwell, taking its name from the spring, whose members held city offices between the late 12th and early 14th centuries. 'Stock Well' is a common spring-name, derived from the Old English *stoc*, a tree-stump, so in origin this well was nothing all that special.

However, Wood reported that by his time it had been 'called beyond the memory of man by the students of this University Platoes Well and Cornish Chough Well'. Renaming the well after Plato was clearly an imitation of the better-known Aristotle's Well, though no particular folklore or customs are known to have attached to it; it mirrored Aristotle's position west of the city, but to the south rather than the north. Its alternative name is more mysterious. The Cornish Chough is the national bird of Cornwall and appears on the badge of *Kernow Goth*, the Federation of Old Cornwall Societies. Through the Middle Ages it featured on the heraldic devices of Cornish gentry and aristocracy alone until the policy was relaxed in the early 16th century. One of the early non-Cornish recipients of arms incorporating the Chough was the Suffolk-born Cardinal Wolsey,[84] and from him it found its way onto the coat-of-arms of Christ Church college. Could the well have some link to Christ Church? It may be that its name also arose in reference to Crowell. As Crowell stood at the northeast corner of the city, so Cornish Chough Well was on the southwest, and it's intriguing that two springs named after birds crop up nearby and mirroring each other in this way. If, as we've speculated, Crowell was restored in the early 1600s by one of the Principals of St Edmund Hall as part of Oxford's early-Stuart culture-wars, was Cornish Chough well named as a sort of mockery of that? Choughs, with their gloomy downward-pointing red beaks and red feet, seem to me to be inherently comic birds, at least when they appear in heraldry. This is the only well in England known to be named after them.

By 1889 Plato's Well could be found just within the wall of Worcester College garden, but it was covered over after that.[85] When I compiled my survey for *Oxoniensia* in 1990 I got overenthusiastic and identified the spring in the College grounds that feeds the lake as the well. This emerges from a great curving seat at the Sainsbury Building of 1983, and is very handsome, but it's not Plato's Well, I fear.

Nice, but not the Stockwell (photo from 1991)

Field Name Springs (or streams)

Names that appear to refer to springs are very common, but are complicated by the fact that the Old English word *wiella* from which they ultimately derive can mean either a spring or a stream which runs from one. Oxford, in fact, displays a prime example in the name of the River Cherwell. The following group of sites once existed in the parishes around the city of Oxford, but it's not clear whether they denote springs or watercourses.

Blindwell. This is the name for the area just south of Peartree Park-and-Ride, in the angle formed by the A44 corridor and the railway line. It first appears in 1710. Don't get excited by the idea that it might indicate a former healing spring – it's just as likely to have been a stream that was overgrown by vegetation and didn't go anywhere.[86]

Catwell. Catwell – the 'spring/stream frequented by cats', presumably, was in the fields northwest of Church Cowley, recorded about 1240.[87]

Copwell. Recorded – connected with a pool – in Cowley in 1207.[88]

Crowell. The 'crow's well/stream', like the one within the city; this was near Cowley and appeared in the mid-1100s. Its site may be commemorated by Crowell Road.[89]

Dilverswell or Dilmerswell was in the fields of Wolvercote in 1358.[90]

Foxwell. Probably now represented by Foxwell Drive, this was in the fields of Marston in 1605.[91]

Hawkwell. Just northeast of Iffley, Hawkwell was commemorated by a house of the same name on the 1876 Ordnance Survey map, but contrary to appearances it doesn't seem to be anything to do with hawks. Instead the name first appears as *Hockeswell* in 1278-9, and probably relates to Hockmere, one that goes back as far as 1004. The first element could be a personal name, but might be an Old English word *hocc*, a mallow tree.[92]

Lidginge Well. Recorded in 1605, this seems to have been an alternative name for the Littlemore Brook.[93]

A Fake Well

There *is* a well shown within the garth of Godstow Abbey on the 1957 1:1250 map of the area; the same map, in fact, also shows a pump adjoining it. It appears on smaller-scale maps subsequently, which I think is where I noticed it. It may relate to the conduit which supplied the nunnery's water, constructed in 1135. When I wrote my gazetteer of Oxfordshire wells for *Oxoniensia* in 1990 I was still labouring under the fond belief that any water-source near a church building could be roped into holy status on the grounds that it must have been used 'for religious purposes', and I further wanted every such site to bear the name of its local saint. So, if you look in my article, you will find this listed as 'St Frideswide's Well'. It isn't, it never was, and if you visit the ruins of Godstow Abbey now, you won't even be able to find anything extant. Sorry about that, on all counts. At least I had the decency to put the name in quotation marks.[94]

Afterword – The Dons and the Wells

Dominated by an institution which is linked to the Church but not identical with it, Oxford is a unique place for looking at holy and named wells. In this environment, each individual institutional interaction with a well is an aspect of something larger. But even these engagements aren't straightforward, as the structure we call in summary 'the University' is expressed through subordinate organisations, communities, individuals and choices.

St Margaret's Well at Binsey and St Edmund's Well relate to religious institutions in a way we recognise from other places. Both Godstow Abbey and St Edmund Hall were organisations in the early stages of forming and promoting an identity for themselves, and their holy wells formed part of that process, enlisting the services of the local saint and the religious impulses of visitors and pilgrims. This is a very common, familiar business.

But, come to the 16th century, and matters look different. The University is now a powerful, developed organisation with its own interests and culture, and the organs that comprise it sometimes look at wells not just through the established, familiar pattern of the 'holy well', but also via the lens of Classical literature and history. Yet it doesn't speak with one united voice. We can see how the wells of Oxford, their structures and the ceremonies surrounding them, become part of a debate about what England should look like, and how Christians should behave in reference to the religious past. The Fellows of New College processing to Bartlemas, or whoever it was that restored Crowell by the city wall, were more afraid of Puritan demands for change in the arrangements of the Anglican Church than they were by any kind of spiritual threat that might be posed by the remnants of medieval piety or even pagan culture; conversely, we may presume Alderman Sayre, defacing Binsey's image of St Margaret, felt the other way. Wells, in this context, somehow represent an expression of authority: they sit implacably regarding us, freighted with ideological significance. The students had their own agendas, leading to the creation of the customs around Aristotle's Well.

The convulsions within the Anglican Church which shook 19th-century Oxford were not reflected in its physical surroundings as they had been two centuries before (apart from the building of Keble College) and as far as wells were concerned, by this time nostalgia had taken over instead. The restoration (probably a reconstruction) of St Margaret's Well was an imitation of something which had once existed, while the Sisters at Holywell Manor

uncovered a feature which they felt linked them back to a past age, and helped to validate their own activities. But the Holy Well, at least, was a kind of ghost by then, lingering and talked about like the spectral nun put to rest by Bishop Gore, but destined to withdraw like the Sisters themselves. When the choristers of New College processed to Bartlemas in 2013 they found St Bartholomew's Well long vanished. Of all Oxford's holy watery sites, only Binsey survives, the object of varied Christian spiritualities, or of visitors who traipse across a rainy Port Meadow to find it.

Here, then, is another contrast between Oxford and Glastonbury. In the Somerset Avalon, the wells still have a presence and a power; in Oxford, for now at least, they have served their purpose, and – for the most part – only phantoms remain.

Appendix 1 – St Frideswide's Other Wells

We ought to mention the two other localities associated with cults of St Frideswide, as both also feature holy wells. The more apparently-surprising is Bomy in the Pas-de-Calais. We should put no credence in the 17th-century texts that claim Frideswide actually *came* to Bomy, but there is no doubt about the site itself: John Blair uncovered a document of 1187 which named both St Frideswide's Chapel and St Frideswide's Well here, and – it being extraordinarily unlikely that there was a local French saint of the same name as the English one – we are left to explain how this came about. The chapel seems originally to have been the most important church in the area, in the process of being eclipsed by the parish church of St Vedast and demoted to a hermitage when it appeared in the record. Dr Blair puts this cult centre down to the 9th and 10th century contacts between the Churches in England and northern France, possibly even a little earlier in the form of someone who knew Frideswide directly (in the same way that, for instance, the 8th-century St Lioba took stories about St Cuthberga from her convent at Wimborne to her new home in Germany). Its existence, apart from anything else, makes it a bit more likely that the arrangement of chapel and well at Binsey does indeed go back to Frideswide's time, ready to be copied in this obscure place across the Channel.

The second Frideswide site looks at first glance far more plausible than Bomy, as it's at least English and in fact not far from Oxford, but it is really more dubious. This is the Berkshire parish of Frilsham, a few miles from

Newbury. John Blair completely ignored it in his discussions of Binsey and Frideswide, so perhaps was unaware of it, and it gets no mention in the *Oxford Dictionary of Saints* either. The 12th-century church is the only ancient English dedication to St Frideswide, and up in the woods east of the church we find St Frideswide's Well. Frilsham claims that it, and not Binsey, was the site of the saint's oratory, or at least an additional one. There is no one text which seems to be the origin of this idea, but the sequence of thought appears to be as follows. There is one manuscript summary of Frideswide's *Life* in the library of Balliol College in Oxford which interprets the name of the place she fled to, *Bentona*, as Abingdon rather than Bampton: perhaps it was copied by a monk at Abingdon Abbey, which had a close relationship with the Oxford priory. In the *Acta Sanctorum* account of Frideswide, published in 1853, the Bollandists duly mention this, and from that the Abingdon identification finds its way into the work of clerical writers who mention Frideswide, such as Sabine Baring-Gould and Francis Goldie. At some point Frilsham residents put together this, the dedication of the

church, and the name of the village, to make the claim that Frideswide had lived there. This is extremely unlikely unless we envisage the saint and her nuns paddling all the way from the Thames up the tiny River Pang in coracles, and the 'l' in the placename shows it has nothing to do with Frideswide. Nevertheless we still have the undeniable fact of the church dedication, and we'll probably never know what connection with Oxford – which certainly wasn't landholding or church patronage – led to that. In Frilsham they now say that the well in the woods was the main village water supply until about 1950; even that doesn't seem likely given its location, and it first appears as a 'spring' on Ordnance Survey maps in the 1890s and not before. It was rebuilt in 2007 with the aid of a National Lottery grant as part of a Parish Council effort to tidy up the landmarks of the area. The presence of staff from Oxford Cathedral at a schoolchildren's pilgrimage to the well on Frideswide's feast day (in 2017, anyway) cements the connection, and the Orthodox parish of St Nicholas in Oxford has also come to the well. So, whatever it once was, holy well it definitely now is![95]

Appendix 2 – The Oxford Mikveh

Until the expulsion of the Jews from England in 1290, there was a significant Jewish population in Oxford, centred around St Aldates. The community's ritual needs would necessarily have been served by a *mikveh*, a bathing pool that would ideally have been spring-fed. From the later 17th century there was a pub in St Aldates called the Jacob's Well which eventually became the Old Tom, and there has been some speculation that this name refers to the presence of a *mikveh*, as it sometimes seems to in other places. A well is marked on early Ordnance Survey maps a few doors to the south, and that may be significant.[96]

Notes

1. *Some Scarborough Faces Past & Present*, Scarborough Gazette (1901), 202-6
2. https://www.whitingsociety.org.uk/old-ringing-books/hope-r.c.-english-bellfounders.html; *Alumni Cantabrigiensis*
3. https://www.oxonblueplaques.org.uk/plaques/wood.html

4. We ought to add a mention of the *Halibroc*, 'Holy brook', recorded among the fields of Iffley parish in the mid-14th century. Its exact location is uncertain, and there is no suggestion that the 'holy' appellation applied to a spring there as well. We can only guess why the stream might have had some sort of sacred significance, or what that meant in practice. It's a very uncommon sort of name. (*Victoria County History: Oxfordshire*, ed MD Lobel (1957), v 190)
5. Anthony Wood, *Survey of the Antiquities of the City of Oxford*, ed. A Clark, Oxford Historical Society, Oxford (1889-99): i 389
6. T Hearne ed., *Textus Roffensis*, Oxford (1720), 345
7. M Gelling, *Place Names of Oxfordshire,* EPNS: Nottingham (1973-4), ii 446; *VCH* iv 398-405
8. H Hurst, *Oxford Topography,* OHS: Oxford (1899), 25; T Hearne ed., *Liber Niger Scaccarii*, London (1774), 560
9. M Gelling, 'The Hill of Abingdon', *Oxoniensia* 22 (1957), 54-62. The site was moved not, it seems, by diabolical intervention, as is often said to have happened elsewhere: in fact the Chronicle of Abingdon says that a hermit told Abbot Hean that God wanted the Abbey constructed where it now stands and not at – wherever it was.
10. *Lib Nig Scac* 561-2, 564; W Dugdale, *Monasticon Anglicanum,* London (1693), i 12, 13.
11. It doesn't help that Hearne also gives Hean a sister called Cissa, when in fact her name was *Cilla*, a contracted form of *Ceolswitha*. It's a mistake he copies from Dugdale – see Gelling, 'The Hill of Abingdon', 55.
12. Hearne adds to the confusion by the entry in his diary that discusses Aristotle's Well, in which he treats 'Crowe, or St Cross's Well' as identical with the Holywell Holy Well. (T Hearne, *Remarks & Collections of Thomas Hearne*, OHS: Oxford (1885), viii 186).
13. J Harte, *English Holy Wells*, Heart of Albion: Wymeswold (2008), 316; Gelling, *Place Names of Oxfordshire* i 21)
14. https://www.british-history.ac.uk/vch/oxon/vol4/pp265-283#h3-s9; Wood i 388, 389; C Horstmann ed., *Nova Legenda Angliae*, Clarendon: Oxford (1901), i 121; O Murray, *Holywell Manor, an Anecdotal History*, 2007, 23
15. R Plot, *The Natural History of Oxfordshire*, Oxford (1677), 358; Wood i 390; Murray *op.cit.* 16; J Peshall, *The Antient & Present State of the City of Oxford*, London (1773), 253n
16. J Ingram, *Memorials of Oxford*, Parker: Oxford (1837), iii Holywell 8; G Simms, 'Some Account of the Manor & Parish of Holywell', *Jacksons Oxford Journal* 30.3.1889.

17. Murray *op.cit.* 18. *The Antient & Present State of the City of Oxford* derives from the fertile pen of the Revd 'Sir' John Peshall, who took Anthony Wood's notes and squeezed them into a pleasing shape together with his own additions, not entirely faithfully. Mr Peshall had been Master of the Royal Grammar School in Guildford, but left in 1765 after being accused of neglect: the school had had no scholars for a year by that point. The trouble was that the reverend gentleman had become increasingly obsessed with proving his descent from the Peshall baronets of Horseley in Staffordshire, an effort which absorbed all his time, especially as he had family income meaning his actual job was an optional extra. His campaign incorporated changing his surname (from *Pearsall*), altering a family gravestone, erecting fictitious monuments, falsifying documents, and having a fallacious entry inserted into Kimber & Johnson's *Baronetage* of 1771. Whether you view Revd Peshall as deluded or an active fraudster is a matter of taste, but his historical credentials are demonstrated by his *History of the University of Oxford* of 1772 which stated that the University had been founded by King Brutus. *The Antient and Present State …* proposed that Julius Caesar had visited Oxford, a claim fairly jaw-dropping even by the standards of the day: one correspondent to the *St James Chronicle* scoffed that nothing short of divine revelation could have justified it. (D Jacques, *The Fabulous Peshalls*, North Staffordshire Press 2023; https://archive.org/details/antientandprese00peshgoog/page/n6/mode/2up). All that said, I can see no reason he may have had actively to distort the history of Oxford's wells, so I'm inclined to take his statements about them seriously unless there's a good reason not to. The Well of SS Winifred & Margaret is clearly a mistake, but see 'Winifred's Well', pp.35-6.
18. Murray *op cit* 22.
19. D Stone, 'The Holy Wells of Holywell, Oxford' in *Source* N.S. 6, Summer 1998
20. Wood i 386; Plot 358.
21. Ingram 1837, iii Holywell 8; Simms *op cit*
22. John Peshall (*Ant & Pres,* 279) quotes a version of the Bartlemas ceremony from Brian Twyne's notes, but there's no trace of that in Wood's text.
23. The road was probably even closer then than it is now. The southern boundary of the Bartlemas enclosure seems to follow the line of the old Roman road across the floodplain, some distance north of the Cowley Road.

24. D Griffiths & J Harrison, *The Archaeology of East Oxford*, OUDCE: Oxford (2020), 116-118
25. *Ibid* 145; Boase, 30; G Jones, *Further Reflections on the Excavations at Bartlemas*, 2014: https://phoebe-project.conted.ox.ac.uk/www.archeox.net/sites/www.archeox.net/files/reports/Reflections%20on%20the%20excavation%20at%20Bartlemas_1.pdf
26. Most commentators relate this use of 'tutty' to zinc oxide used as a polishing material, which in this context makes no sense at all. Instead it means a *nosegay* – this word survived into the 19th century in the West Country (see William Barnes, *A Glossary of the Dorset Dialect*, Case: Dorchester (1886), 113) but was in much wider use in the 1600s. Hungerford in Berkshire still celebrates Tutti-Day on the second Tuesday after Easter, another floral Spring festivity if a bit earlier than Oxford's (https://liza-frank.com/21-april-2020-tutti-day/; https://thetuttipole.co.uk/index.php/the-tutti-pole-history/)
27. Actually by Thomas Morley.
28. Wood ii 515n; ii 514; Peshall, 280
29. Boase says it was, but this must be a slip.
30. Percy Manning, 'Bringing in the Fly', *Folk-lore* 25 v2, 1913
31. https://www.magd.ox.ac.uk/wp-content/uploads/2024/05/Peter-Davidson-May-Lecture.pdf
32. *Ibid*. Ronald Hutton has some useful material on this in *The Triumph of the Moon*, OUP: Oxford (1999), 32-3, though oddly enough Flora doesn't get a mention among the other goddesses.
33. T Hall, *Funebria Floriae, or the Downfall of May-Games*, London (1661), 7
34. Griffiths & Harrison, 147
35. Wood ii 516
36. https://maymorning.co.uk/426023492/
37. *Ibid*. Mr Healey is another modern writer who absolutely mangles Wood's account, running together several statements which should be kept apart.
38. Wood ii 211
39. M Jenkinson, *New College School: A History*, Shire: Oxford (2013) 13; https://www.oxfordmail.co.uk/news/10413500.Stepping_out_in_traditional_style_for_Ascension_Day/; https://www.new.ox.ac.uk/sites/default/files/4NCN6%20%282013%29%20Bartlemas.pdf.
40. http://www.oxforddnb.com/view/article/26801 *Handbook of British Chronology*, 255

41. Plot 49; Wood i 288-9; https://www.british-history.ac.uk/vch/oxon/vol5/pp258-266#fnn60; EA Gee, 'Oxford Carpenters, 1370-1530', *Oxoniensia* 17-18 (1952-3), 149
42. DH Farmer, *The Oxford Dictionary of Saints*, OUP: Oxford (1987), 132-3)
43. We have a difficulty here in sourcing the statement. Bishop John Dalderby's Register of Memoranda, unlike Bishop Sutton's, has never been published and so only the manuscript exists. Diana Webb gets her information about the 1304 condemnation from HE Salter's *Oxford Formularies* ((1942), pp.7-9), but where did Boase ((1893), p.37) find it? Dr Webb points out that miracle stories seem to have been attached to almost everyone associated with St Edmund – not just his colleague St Richard, but his brother Robert and sister Margaret, prioress of Catesby, and his friends Archdeacon Thomas of Hertford and Archbishop Sewal de Bovil of York. None of them ever got anywhere near either a popular cult or official canonization (*Pilgrimage In Medieval England*, Bloomsbury: London (2000), 143, 68-9).
44. John Aubrey garbles this story into Classical guise, claiming Edmund 'met here with an Angel or Nymph, as [King of Rome] Numa Pompilius did with Egeria', but to be fair the saint was prone to visionary encounters: as well as meeting the Lord in his childhood, St John the Evangelist came to him one night, and his late mother Mabel appeared to him in a dream to persuade him to surrender any studies other than theology (J Aubrey ed J Britten, *Remains of Gentilisme & Judaisme*, Satchell, Peyton & Co: London (1881), 34; B Ward, *St Edmund, His Life As Told By Old English Writers,* Hedder: St Louis (1903), 11-14, 21-2, 32-33, 249).
45. Ward *op cit* 163; https://www.seh.ox.ac.uk/news/new-gilding-for-teddy-halls-historic-well
46. Both *Lives* have Frideswide on her deathbed seeing a vision of two more virgin-martyrs, Saints Catherine and Cecilia, coming to receive her into heaven. They may well have done, who can say, but a mid-period Anglo-Saxon princess wouldn't have recognised who they were without more divine assistance.
47. The short account of Dame Edith's career in the Register of Godstow is ambiguous, leaving open the question of whether she went to Binsey as a lone anchoress or joined some sort of community already there. The text could mean either.

48. J Blair, 'St Frideswide Reconsidered', *Oxoniensia* 52 (1987), 71-127; 'Thornbury, Binsey', *Oxoniensia* 53 (1988), 3-20; 'St Frideswide's Monastery: problems and possibilities', *Oxoniensia* 53 (1988), 222-258
49. https://www.documentacatholicaomnia.eu/20vs/202_Acta_Sanctorum/1643-1925,_Societe_des_Bollandistes,_Acta_Sanctorum_10_Octobris_Tomus_08_1853,_LT.pdf p.579
50. Wood i 577, 323-4, 325, ii 166; M Biddle, 'The Deserted Medieval Village of Seacourt', *Oxoniensia* 26/7 (1961-2), 70-201.
51. https://www.oxfordhistory.org.uk/mayors/1603_1714/sare_john_1627_1634.html
52. Wood i 578, 329, ii 132; Bollandists 541; https://gotellitonthemountain.net/jebel-umm-shomer-a-history/; https://www.npg.org.uk/collections/search/person/mp03669/thomas-jones-prout; *VCH Oxon* iv 270; https://archive.org/details/alumnioxoniense01oxfogoog/page/n400/mode/2up p.1153; https://collections.westminster.org.uk/index.php/prout-thomas-jones-1823-1909
53. EM Wright, *Rustic Speech & Folk-lore*, Oxford (1913), 176; https://theoxfordsausage.com/a-treacle-well-theres-no-such-thing/; C Morgan, *Strange Oxford*, Golden Dawn: Oxford (1987), 7.
54. E Ettlinger, 'Documents of British Superstition in Oxford', *Folk-lore* 54 (1943), 248; https://issuu.com/oxforddiocese/docs/map-low-res; https://sedangli.wordpress.com/2013/10/09/decently-habited-cxxvi/; https://morrisoxford.co.uk/treacle-well/; https://www.osneybenefice.org.uk/home-1/binsey
55. https://www.oxfordhistory.org.uk/broad/buildings/east/hertford/29.html; https://www.british-history.ac.uk/vch/oxon/vol4/pp369-412
56. Wood i 260
57. *ibid* i 389
58. *ibid*; Peshall 253n; Ingram *op cit* Holywell 3.7
59. Boase 57; Peshall 281
60. Wood i 352-3; Gelling *op cit* i 36
61. Wood i 457
62. Hurst *op cit* 150; Wood i 294, 576, 577
63. Gelling *op cit* i 15
64. Wood i 439, ii 205, ii 225; AK Salter, *Cartulary of Osney Abbey*, OHS: Oxford (1934), 473-4
65. Wood i 308, 577; Hurst *op cit,* 46; AS Symonds & N Morgan, *The Origins of Oxford Street Names,* Robert Boyd Publications: Witney (2011), 79
66. Wood i 384n; Gelling *op cit* i 36; Wood i 353

67. Gelling *op cit* i 23; Wood i 352-3, ii 187; AH Salter, *Records of Medieval Oxford*, OHS: Oxford (1912), 43.
68. *Jackson's Oxford Journal*, 5 September 1885, 5
69. Griffiths & Harrison *op cit,* 194; https://phoebe-project.conted.ox.ac.uk/www.archeox.net/sites/www.archeox.net/files/reports/littlemore%20and%20blackbird%20leys%20place%20names.pdf
70. Ingram *op cit,* Holywell iii 7; Wood i 385-6, 577; Gelling i 36; Hurst *op cit* 97, 136, 138
71. https://kingjamesbibletranslators.org/bios/John_Aglionby/; *DNB* 47: 331
72. Now officially in the parish of Beckley & Stowood, but in Headington for most of its existence, and so far as I'm concerned counting as part of Oxford.
73. https://www.beautifulbarton.co.uk/photos-1; *VCH* i 320
74. Sir A Croke, *The Genealogical History of the Croke family*, Oxford (1823) i 548
75. https://www.headington.org.uk/history/listed_buildings/wick_farm.htm
76. Percy Manning, 'Stray Notes on Oxfordshire Folklore', *Folk-Lore* 13 (1902), 14-15; W Jewitt, letter to *Folk-Lore* 14 (1903), 183-5.
77. https://www.headington.org.uk/news/items/bayswater_oxford.html; https://www.chch.ox.ac.uk/news/christ-church-submits-planning-application-new-sustainable-housing
78. Plot, 34, 357
79. https://quod.lib.umich.edu/e/eebo/A15623.0001.001?rgn=main;view=fulltext
80. W Christie ed., *Memoirs, Letters and Speeches of Anthony Ashley Cooper …,* Murray: London (1859), 16-17
81. Hearne, *Remarks*, viii 186
82. Wood i 354-5; Hearne *ibid*
83. Wood i 352, i 384n; P Manning, *Oxford Magazine* 11.3.1903
84. Though strangely enough Edmund Rich's arms also included the Chough – four of them, in fact.
85. Wood i 577; Gelling *op cit* i 44; Salter *Rec Med Oxf* 146, 148; Wood i 365
86. Gelling i 34
87. Griffiths & Harrison *op cit* 203, 212
88. Gelling i 15
89. *ibid*
90. *ibid*
91. Gelling i 182
92. Griffiths & Harrison *op cit* 201, 207, 211, 213
93. *ibid* 202

94. D Ganz, 'The Buildings of Godstow Abbey', *Oxoniensia* 37 (1972), 152; J Rattue, 'An Inventory of Ancient and Holy Wells in Oxfordshire', *Oxoniensia* 55 (1990), 176
95. Blair 'St Frideswide Reconsidered', 119-127; https://www.documentacatholicaomnia.eu/20vs/202_Acta_Sanctorum/1643-1925,_Societe_des_Bollandistes,_Acta_Sanctorum_10_Octobris_Tomus_08_1853,_LT.pdf p.566; https://orca.cardiff.ac.uk/id/eprint/162259/1/Encounters%20with%20Frideswide%20%20by%20Romola%20Parish%20.pdf; https://www.berkshirehistory.com/legends/frideswide01.html; https://www.berkshirehistory.com/legends/frideswide02.html; https://www.yattendonschool.co.uk/stream/news/full/4/-//; https://www.facebook.com/events/3340471002899827; https://www.heritagefund.org.uk/projects/frilsham-parish-council-will-make-improvements-st-frideswide-well-ensure-historic-momument
96. https://www.oxfordjewishheritage.co.uk/wp-content/uploads/2022/05/mikveh_article.pdf; C Hibbert, *The Encyclopedia of Oxford*, Macmillan: London (1988), 290

Index of Wells

A Christall fount, whose water is by odds
Far sweeter than the Nectar of the Gods

- was 17th-century poet George Wither's assessment of the University he'd attended as an undergraduate. The sacred and historic waters of Oxford have never been surveyed in any detail before. This account reveals a close relationship between these charismatic sites, few of which survive, and the academic institution that has so powerfully affected the city's history. It's a story significantly different from the tale of holy wells anywhere else in the UK.

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