

BELIEF IN THE NORTHEAST:

HOLY WELLS SURVEY PROJECT

Instruction Manual: Version 1.0



1773 image of St Oswald's Well, Durham (Samuel Grimm)



Looking for Holy Wells

Holy wells or springs once formed an important part of the religious landscape of North-East England. Some could be elaborate affairs with stone-built structures over them or carefully constructed basins or pools, others could be little more than a muddy puddle where a spring or a source of water emerged from the ground.

A good example of a well-built and carefully maintained holy well is that of St Aelric and St Godric at Wolsingham (County Durham) (*Figure 1*) and an example of a less well developed is the so-called Pin Well near Wooler (Northumberland) (*Figure 2*).

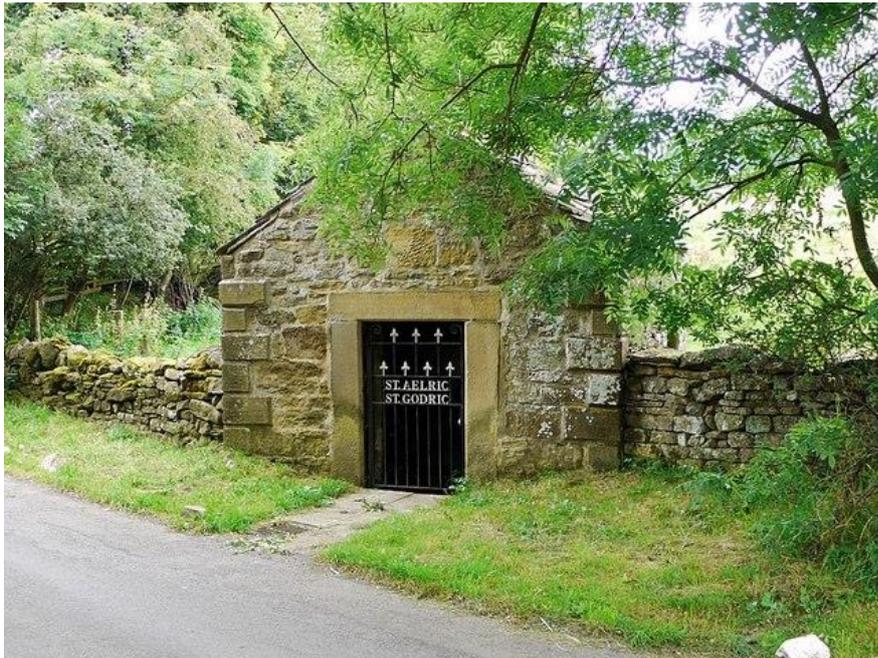


Figure 1: St Aelric and St Godric's Well, Wolsingham © Creative Commons



Figure 2: The Pin Well, Wooler (Northumberland) © Creative Commons

In Britain, the use of ritual wells and springs is best known in the medieval and early modern period. Sites could be visited simply for good luck; others were reputed for their healing powers. Sometimes, the water was simply sipped or poured on the part of body that needed healing; in other cases a small offering, such as a pin, might be left by the visitor. Sometimes in Northern England and Scotland, a small rag or ribbon could be tied to a nearby tree.

Use of holy wells was a perfectly respectable part of Christian worship. Many were located close to (or even in) churchyards, and others were given Christian names (e.g. St Oswald's Well; Our Lady's Well). It is these names that are often an important clue when we are looking at old maps for the site of possible wells.

It is often suggested that the use of holy wells goes back to pre-Christian times. It is certainly possible that some sites may be of considerable antiquity, and we know that in prehistoric societies wells and springs were often seen as having real religious importance. Today, there has also been a revival of interest in holy wells, particularly amongst those with an interest in 'New Age' beliefs and neo-pagans.

What to look for on maps:

The first source of evidence we are going to be using for the project is historical maps. We will start by surveying all the past Ordnance Survey maps. These maps were first produced in the mid-19th century and provide a coverage of the entire country, although we are going to begin by focusing in on just the old County Durham (roughly between the Tyne and the Tees) – we will then move on to looking at Northumberland.

These maps are often very detailed and include a lot of information – including noting the location of a range of springs, wells and fountains. So what are we going to look for? The main evidence we can use is local place names (the technical term is *toponyms*).

The most obvious place name to look for is not surprisingly 'Holy Well' or 'Holywell' – there are often variants to this spelling e.g. Hollywell, Halliwell, Hallywell etc. Sometimes the name is related to an actual well, but sometimes it is given to a nearby building (e.g. Hollywell House) or a natural feature (e.g. Holywell Burn). All these need to be included in our survey.

Another clue is a well or spring with a religious name, such as saints' name (St Oswald's Well; St Mary's Well) or another religious term (e.g. Our Lady's Well; Lady Well). Sometimes there are terms that are more unusual. We have already seen a picture of Pin Well near Wooler, but terms such as Rattling Well, Roaring Well might also be used, perhaps referring to the noise that the water made. The well might even be given a name associated with a legendary figure (for example, there is a King Arthur's Well, near Greenhead, Northumberland and a Robin Hood's Well, Chollerford, Northumberland).

Basically, if a well or spring has an interesting, unusual or intriguing name, it needs recording. If in doubt, check with *David Petts* or record it anyway. The details of how to record these sites can be found below.

What next?

Once we have completed an initial survey of the early Ordnance Survey maps we should then have an initial list of possible holy and healing wells. The next job will be to do more research on them. This will include

- Looking on older maps to see if they are marked or if the names have changed over time
- Visiting the sites where possible to see if anything survives
- Possibly recording any remains we identify.
- We will also create a map to show all this information.

Obviously any precise plans will have to be flexible to accommodate the impact of the coronavirus – but we will certainly be able to record and share all the information we find

Instructions for digital map survey

1. Visit this online Google Form (<https://docs.google.com/spreadsheets/d/1BTWSgBMD8FJ8FD1TVeKh3tNDyJk9UPVabWiPUQRmdJE/edit?usp=sharing>) Put your initials as a User ID next to the maps you wish to look at. If you hold your cursor over the map name (left-hand column) you should be able to follow the link internet link which will take you to the National Library of Scotland online map archive page for the relevant map.
2. **What am I looking for?** You are looking for possible or probable holy wells as outlined above – i.e. anything wells with unusual or intriguing names. If you are in doubt whether a site is relevant or not, include it, just in case.
3. **If you find a point that needs to be recorded:** zoom in- hold down the ALT key and click with your mouse. This will open up a new map screen
4. **On the new screen – make sure you cursor is over the point you want to record.** You then need to press the ALT key again – a little window will pop up with the grid reference details – press the button on this window that says “copy to clipboard”. Now use your browser <BACK> button to go back to your original map.
5. **Open up the recording form here** [<https://forms.gle/c1xtGMcLe2K3dq4A8>] – fill in the all the fields – including the grid reference (pasted in from the map website) and the name of the maps you’ve viewed and press submit. Bob’s your uncle!
6. **Now go back to your original** map and continue to look for more possible holy wells. Good luck!
7. If at any stage you have any queries or questions, please contact David Petts.

We have also made two short films on Youtube showing you how this system works – you can find them here :-

Project introduction: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Db1sWShK07Q>

How to search the map and complete the form:

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=8Tre9q60H-A>

If you have any suggestions as to how we might change, develop or improve our recording process please don’t hesitate to drop us a line: beliefnortheast2021@gmail.com

More reading:

If you want to read more about holy wells there are lots of helpful resources on the internet

A good start is the Wikipedia article on holy wells: https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Holy_well

Another great read is the *In Search of Holy Wells and Healing Springs* blog [\[https://insearchofholywellsandhealingsprings.com/\]](https://insearchofholywellsandhealingsprings.com/) which has lots of information including old versions of the *Source* and *Living Spring* journals.

