



In Search of the Mystic Past

Healing Wells of Cornwall

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Natural wells have always been considered as sacred places throughout the British Isles. This was because they were perceived as a direct entrance into the body of the Great Mother Goddess, with water representing the natural life force, the source of both life and fertility. Such wells were often believed to be closely guarded by nymphs, or other supernatural creatures, who must be properly propitiated before access to the powers of the waters could be gained.

Paying homage to guardians and the ancient Pagan Gods and Goddesses at the holy wells was so deep-rooted in the consciousness throughout Britain that the Christian Church had to accommodate this Pagan practice to a certain extent. It replaced the Pagan guardians with saints and, therefore, the wells continued to pour out their blessings to all humankind - this time with the approval of the Christian Church. In areas where "too much" Paganism persisted, the Church tried to denounce well worship. However, this was often met with little effect, as the practice of honouring the local well guardian (either under their original name or a new Christianised one) was part of the people's local custom and folklore. Today this association with the Pagan past is still evident in the offerings left by those who have visited the ancient sacred wells.

Many of the wells around Britain and Ireland were accredited with individual powers. Some could be used in order to raise storms at sea, while others could cure various diseases such as eye ailments, toothaches and even barrenness. The offerings, which

were regularly made by the local people, or by those who had made special pilgrimages to these sacred wells, depended on the healing powers of the water. Fertility wells were often given pins and brooches, while wells believed to heal toothaches received hazel nuts and twigs. Other popular kind of offering was that of white quartz pebbles.

One of these sacred wells which I have visited is Madron Well in Cornwall, the country itself being described as a place pre-eminently of dream and mystery by Victorian novelist and poet Thomas Hardy in 1870. Situated some four kilometres north of the village of Madron is a serene and delightful place hidden down an overgrown, woody path - this is Madron Well, so named after the village's patron saint, St Madron. It takes about 15 minutes from the car park to walk down this natural green tunnel to the well, but somehow, only about five minutes to walk back. This, in itself, is an uncanny experience adding to the mystery of the place.

This ancient holy well is still in use today and captures the atmosphere of how holy wells used to be in earlier centuries when they were more widely used. From the branches of the wishing tree, which stands at the edge of a muddy mire, are rags (known as "clotties") tied as offerings to the spirit of the well. People for hundreds of years formed the belief that as the rag rotted away, so would their illness. And some of the rags looked as if they had been there for a long time if the moss and lichen, which had grown over where they were tied to the branches, was anything to go by. Beneath the branches of the neighbouring overgrown bushes, the entrance to the holy well itself can just be made out.



*Clotties tied to a tree overlooking
Madron Well*

Much folklore surrounds Madron Well, some still being used today. Crosses were floated on the water in May, on the first three Sundays or Thursdays, by maidens, linking a connection to the festival of Bealtaine (celebrated at the end of April in the Northern Hemisphere). Pins were thrown into the water and the number of bubbles counted was said to indicate the number of years before the maiden would marry. This custom was still being carried out as late as the 1950s where the local girls would go to the well in order to drop pins into the water for wishes to be

granted. It is generally thought that many were unaware that they were continuing a long tradition going back to when the well was a focal shrine for rituals.

Skin diseases are said to be cured if a person walked three times widdershins (against the Sun), then nine times deosil (with the Sun) around the well, then laid to sleep. The ritual should be performed in silence and a clottie made and left on the nearby Hawthorn tree when the person left the following morning as a token of respect to the Goddess and the water sprites. One documented cure, however, was made in 1640 when a boy crippled playing football followed the ritual of bathing in the well on three successive Thursdays in May and then sleeping on a nearby grassy mound known as St Madron's bed.

Paying reverence to an ancient spirit was a rather uncanny experience. When I visited Madron Well, it was overgrown and little of the water could actually be seen. But it was obvious that the size of the ancient wells does not matter for the nearby bushes were covered with clotties. Other wells throughout Britain, under a Christian guise have been turned into modern shrines with elaborate mosaic panels depicting scenes from the Bible, but this is not the case with Madron Well. It was left in its natural form.

Further down the path are the remains of St Madron's chapel, roofed only now by an old fir tree. The ruin of this medieval enclosure was believed to have been dismantled by Puritan soldiers in 1646, but this tranquil place is still believed to be used by pilgrims today for services and baptisms. The walls are overgrown with moss and ivy, and ferns now grow through the cracks in the stones. At one end a large granite slab, the altar, can be found, often covered with small offerings such as flowers, seashells and even small polished stones. At the other end of the enclosure a small natural spring enters the ruined chapel, trickling into a small stone basin. All around the site previous visitors had left offerings of small bunches of wild flowers, on both the altar and in the basin, which added to the serene nature of the place.

Over a thousand years ago St Madron is said to have baptised villagers. His feast day is remembered on 17 May. But who really is this St Madron, for there is nothing really known about him?

Cheryl Straffon in her book, *"Pagan Cornwall - Land of the Goddess"* suggests that St Madron seems to be one of the many ancient local Goddesses who had a "sex change" in order for the Christian Church to feel more comfortable with the local Pagan Deities.

Madron, she suggests, may have actually been a version of Modron, who is the Mother Goddess of the Welsh tradition. Modron may have been Christianised into the female Welsh St Madrun, who could then have been brought to Cornwall by Welsh comers. In the process, it is possible that the sex of the Celtic Mother Goddess/saint became masculinized because both the Welsh "Madrun" and the Cornish "Madern" are etymologically identical.

Another tradition associated with the sacred wells are that they are cared for by guardians, and that today some local families have taken on this role to look after the sacred wells, especially during tourist season. Indeed, towards the end of my visit at Madron Well an elderly man appeared from almost out of nowhere. Could it be that this gentleman was one of the well guardians? Or maybe Thomas Hardy was correct and this part of Britain was truly a place pre-eminently of dream and mystery.

References:

"Pagan Cornwall - Land of the Goddess" by Cheryl Traffon

About the Author:

Frances has been a student of metaphysics and the occult for most of her life, with her formal training commencing in 1993. She is trained in both ceremonial magick and Alexandrian Wicca, and has been initiated into the Alexandrian Wiccan tradition.

Frances founded the Temple of the Dark Moon in 1999 to provide accurate information on Paganism (in particular Wicca and Wytchcraft. For a period of six years from 2000 Frances was the secretary for the Pagan Alliance Inc (SA) and worked closely with both the SA Police and Attorney General with respect to changes in legislation.

In 2003 she was invited to speak at the New Zealand Pagan Fest where she also led the opening ritual with Chief Druid, Philip Carr-Gomm.

Frances regularly writes for Australia's number one spiritual lifestyle magazine "Insight" and her articles also appearing in over 10 separate publications around the world including the 2008 Llewellyn's Witch's Calendar. Frances has appeared in the "Sunday Mail", the "Messenger" and the "Melbourne Age" with respect to being a Wytch.

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