

## Cootie

The origin of the holy wells may be linked to the Celtic era. They influenced the native Irish in terms of their religious beliefs, especially with an emphasis on the *'Power of Place.'* A belief existed that society was intrinsically linked with nature itself. Certain physical sites preserve both regenerative & curative powers. Site surveys indicated that several Holy Wells locations were formed of three distinct elements. Several locations include a water source that serves it, an ancient tree, a hazel tree or often a standing stone or a link. Rituals known as *'Patterns'* generally included a prescribed clockwise walk around to site. A common ritual was to tie a scrap of cloth: known as a *'cootie'* to the branches of the holy tree for bathing / washing or drinking from the holy well. [\[iv\]](#)

## Healing Properties

Holy Well rituals tended to date from pre - Christian times. They served as a form of natural religion in which they were considered sacred. They varied greatly in appearance: some simply decorated with rounded river stones. Whilst others were highly ornate adorned with holy statues, medals, pictures, rosary beads, flowers, or candles. Holy Wells were famous for their healing properties. In several areas, rags, handkerchiefs, or clothes were tied to trees above or around the area. It was a belief that as the rag disintegrated the illness or disease would leave the person. A red coloured cloth was believed to resist the powerful evil spirits. In his publication *The Holy Wells of Ireland* Logan Patrick cites a claim that there are approximately three thousand Holy Wells in Ireland with a possibility that every parish within a county has one in situ. An extract from *Holy Wells of Ireland* by Most Rev. John Healy D.D. Archbishop of Tuam reported that *'as a rule, all the Irish Saints have one or more blessed wells dedicated to their memory in the immediate neighbourhood of the churches they founded. Indeed, the church was never founded except near a well. Water was necessary, mainly for Baptism and the Holy Sacrifice but also for daily needs of the holy men and women whose lives were given there in the service of God. We believe them (i.e. the saints) ancient holiness still lingers round our blessed wells, that their holy patrons still pray in a special way for those that frequent them.'* A list of Ireland's Holy Wells feature on this link. [\[v\]](#)

## Altars

Some historians believed that the springs from which St. Patrick & the early saints of Ireland took water to baptize their converts was held in veneration by the early Christians. Regarded in those early times as sacred places of pilgrimage. However, it was only when the persecution of Catholics began following the reformation that large numbers began to assemble for devotional purposes at such wells. When Catholics were forbidden under the penal laws to assemble for mass in churches altars were constructed beside those holy wells. Mass was celebrated in secret whenever possible for the assembled faithful. If no priest could be found private devotions were carried out by a lay leader of the people. Each holy well is usually found in a quiet place sheltered by trees or covered by a flat stone slab to preserve it from contamination. A circle is traced with stations or resting places for prayers or meditation at regular intervals along the line of the circle. Close to the holy well is an altar beside a tree trunk on which a crucifix in wood or stone is hung. On the branches of the trees in the vicinity: small pieces of cloth may be fastened as memorials of pilgrims' visits. At the completion of the pilgrimage the pilgrim may drink water from the holy well from a vessel secured by a chain to a nearby stone or wall. (*Extract from Sight Unseen Programme Bernadette Players 1958*) [\[vi\]](#)

Twenty - three holy wells exist in Co. Mayo. The following counties have holy wells in situ: Galway twenty - two, Kerry twenty - one, Roscommon & Waterford fourteen, Sligo & Limerick eleven, Wexford ten, in Louth nine, Kildare eight, Offaly seven, Meath six, Leitrim & West Meath five, Wicklow four, Kilkenny & Tyrone two. Just one appear in both Tipperary & Fermoy. [\[vii\]](#)

Twenty - one holy wells are located within Dublin with sixteen in the Fingal area identified by Petra Skyvova 2005. (*A Step Back In Time with James Reddiough* [October 14, 2017](#)) [\[viii\]](#)

Below are descriptions of several Holy Wells around the country:

### **The Well of the White Cow, Tara Hill, Co. Meath**

Worldwide Celtic evidence portray holy wells as sites of great religious or ritual Importance. Within Ireland possibly due to the faith of animistic beliefs with a plethora of deities of either local or national instances it may have been the reason for its unpopularity. Not too many well sites have been fully archaeologically excavated either. Those excavated dated to seven thousand years ago were of Christian origin. Sites were situated outside the community boundaries. It has been suggested that they were a clever way to introduce or spread the faith: it was observed that live clean, drinkable water was essential to all people's existence. Holy Wells during the eighteen or nineteenth centuries were neglected in that area. Several were enclosed with small hedges grown around the perimeter. Seats or trees were dedicated to several people's memories. This Well of the White Cow was largely forgotten during the eighteenth & nineteenth centuries until renovated or transformed by Dinny Donnelly with the National Restoration Society. It is situated at the base of Tara Hill. It has been known also as Caprach Cormac, Liagh, Tipra bo finne, Deared Dubne, Poillocair na Tuiliche or even St. Patrick's Well. (*It was referenced in an ancient manuscript: that on entering the water or rising out of it : if one had a black spot it proved guilt or if one was spotless one was proved to be innocent*) The name Tibra bo finne appeared in several legends. Legend of a sacred pagan white cow was confirmed by oral tradition from the twelfth or thirteenth centuries. The Táin may also refer to bulls as symbols of virility or religious powers. An image of Tara Hill Holy Well features at this link. (*Adomnán 14<sup>th</sup> October 2011*) [\[ix\]](#)

### **Our Lady's Well, Dundalk, Co. Louth**

Our Lady's Well is situated within a flat area surrounded by a couple of houses. It is accessed by a long track. This at one time been surrounded by tall thin trees. During the 1900's it was one of the most famous holy well within Ireland. Several steps were added with railings also a new cross were added to the area. The Pattern Day was held annually on the fifteenth of August. On the Feast Day's eve at 10.45 pm. Our Lady's Well was blessed then followed by a procession. Early on the morning of the fifteenth: mass was again celebrated followed by a procession. An old tradition stated that the well was dry for three hundred & sixty - four days each year with water magically appearing on the feast day. [\[x\]](#)

### **Ogulla Holy Well Tulsk, Co. Roscommon**

St. Patrick's Holy Well at Ogulla is believed to be the site where St. Patrick baptized the daughters of the High King of Ireland Fidelma & Eithne. People leave votive offerings of St. Patrick while they perform their stations of the cross at the shrine. A small modern oratory has been constructed where mass is celebrated on the last Sunday of June. It has been reported that various cures & healings have occurred at Ogulla. [\[xii\]](#)

### **St. Colmán's Well, Oughtmama, Co. Clare**

This holy well is part of the monastic landscape of Oughtmama: located in a valley above Turlough Hill in the Burren in Co. Clare. The Oughtmama area was associated with three different St. Colmán's: one of which was St. Colmán Mac Duash, patron saint of Kilmagdaugh. It was reported that St. Colmán moved to this area for his retirement. According to *The Ordinance Survey Letters of 1839* the well had '*migrated from its original position and broke out a short distance lower on the slope of the Hill, where*

*it is now known by its new name of Sruthan na Naomh, the Rivulet of the Saints: but its original locality is still called Tobar Cholmain has a small enclosure of stones, in the centre of which grows a small stunted, white thorn bush, exhibiting votive rags of various colours. The well is imbued with extraordinary naturally medicinal, or supernaturally miraculous virtues, for people have often washed their eyes in it, which are veiled with thick pearls, and ere they had completed the third washing these pearls (films) off leaving the eyes perfectly clear & bright. ' During the late 1830's a Pattern was held on the 1<sup>st</sup> of November in honour of St. Colmán's Feast Day. No date is available of when the Pattern tradition died out at this holy well. St. Colmán's Well is located on a steep north - eastern slope of the valley. It consists of a rectangular stone walled enclosure with steps down to the well waters. A leacht with a tree is on either side of the holy well. It continues as a pilgrimage site with votive offerings or rags tied to the tree. [\[xiii\]](#)*

### **Tobernalt Holy Well, Co. Sligo**

Tobernalt Holy Well in Sligo is in one of the most picturesque sights of Ireland. The name is derived from the cliff where the water gushes from. According to the Rev. Fr. Jim Murray *'the well has a double sanctity as beside blessed by St. Patrick; its waters were used during the Penal Days during the celebration of Mass. Today Mass is celebrated at various times on Garland Sunday, last weekend of July with the most popular one the 6.00 am service. Pilgrims walk from St. Anne's Church to Tobernalt at 4.45 am.'* A mural by artist Nik Purdy is painted on the community centre wall near Carroe Church that depicts Tobernalt Holy Well. *(first published by Val Robus in the Sligo Now magazine in 2019)* [\[xiv\]](#)

Tobernalt Holy Well is situated in a beautiful woodland setting near the shores of Lough Gill. It may originally have been called *'Tobar san Aill'* or *'Tobar na nGealt.'* It existed pre – fifth century when the Celts celebrated Lá Lughnasa. It became known as Garland Sunday when it was Christianized. Legend stated that St. Patrick's fingerprints are visible on one of the stones of the nearby mass rock or carrying an airfrinn. It was believed that if pilgrims placed their hands on the rock they would receive cures. Well has retained several Celtic - inspired customs i.e.: to walk in a clockwise direction or the length of cloth or ribbon left on nearby trees or bushes. This site features beautiful images, a map of the well, shrine also the mass rock. *(Fergus 8<sup>th</sup> February 2019)* [\[xv\]](#)

The name is derived from the Irish *'Tobar an Alt'* i.e. the *'Well of the Cliff.'* This natural spring well is situated in a small wooded area at the base of Cairns Hill in Co. Sligo. Two cairns on a hill are dated to the Neolithic era. It was believed that the ancient pagan festival Lughnasa was celebrated at the beginning of the harvest season pre – Christianity. Tobernalt Well became Christianized during the fifth century with the festival replaced by Christian services on Garland Sunday. During Ireland's penal times Tobernalt became a refuge where mass was celebrated. A replica of the penal cross may be viewed at the original well with the original altar still in situ. The pagan tradition of tying rags or clooties to trees as well as several Christian objects of rosary beads is still practiced today. Coordinates are longitude 8 26 45W, latitude of 54 14 38N. This site features several images of the shrine etc. [\[xvi\]](#)

Tobernalt Holy Well is a place of reflection & nurturing serenity. It predates Christianity within Ireland. Tobernalt Holy Well is cared for by St. John's Parish in Carraroe in Co. Sligo. Celebrations occur on Garland Sunday: a fusion of Celtic & Christian traditions. The first mass was celebrated at the holy well during 1921. Images & a video feature at this site. [\[xvii\]](#)

### **Ballintubber Holy Well, Co. Mayo**

Founded by the King of Connaught Cathal Croidhearg during 1216 Ballintubber Abbey (*Ballintubber The Townland of the Well*) was founded beside the holy well dedicated to St. Patrick. During ancient eras the abbey or monastery were designated as The Monastery of St. Patrick or The Well of St.

Patrick. The old church was constructed as a patrician church: it was previously known as Craobnach or Creevagh. Close by is where St. Patrick baptized pilgrims. A stone alongside this Ballintubber Holy Well was reputed to have the saint's knee imprinted on it. [\[xviii\]](#)

Ballintober Holy Well is referenced in John Healy's 1908 *Irish Essays: Literary and Historical*. [\[xix\]](#)

An article by Tom Kelly in *The Connaught Telegraph* 29<sup>th</sup> June 1983 detailed holy wells at Loughkeeraun or Lios na Meanach (*Fort of the Monks*) Founded by St. Ciaran of Clonmacnoise during the sixth century. Pilgrimages were held on Garland Sunday (*last Sunday in July*), Lady's Day 15<sup>th</sup> August also the Saint's Feast Day of 9<sup>th</sup> September. (*Information by Donovan from the Ordnance Survey Letters for County Mayo 1837-1838*) This article details the legends re the holy well etc. [\[xx\]](#)

### **St. Brigid's Shrine & Holy Well Clare**

Brigid's Shrine is divided into two sections; the upper sanctuary (*Ula Uachtarach*) also the lower sanctuary (*Ula íochtarach*) A small gap in the low wall leads one into a courtyard area with a large Mound in the centre topped with a statue of Saint Brigid encased in glass. The walls drip with prayer; the petitions for the sick, with expressions of thanksgiving, wails of sorrow & grief with moments of hope. A few small candles flicker towards the light rattle of water into a trough. Tradition states that it is visited by a fish (*an indication that this well is truly ancient in its Christian tradition as the fish is a symbol of Christianity that predates the cross.*) Pattern days are still observed at this Clare Holy Well: The Feast of Saint Brigid' Eve, Garland Saturday & Sunday, the last Sunday of July also the Feast of the Assumption in August. The rite of Saint Brigid at the Clare Holy Well is still recited. The pilgrim makes a salutation to Christ then Brigid & Mary (*known as a 'rann' or ritual verse*) reciting numerous 'hail mary's', 'our father's' & 'creeds' are recited prior to continue at various points along the path through the lower sanctuary then up into the upper sanctuary then one enters the holy well. The upper sanctuary is accessed by a small winding path that makes its way up through the trees to a stone cross that stands at the entrance to an ancient cemetery, (*believed to be the burial grounds of the Kings of Dáí gCais also contains the mausoleum of Cornelius O'Brien.*) (*A poem by Augustus Toplady (1740 - 78) features on this site with several images*) [\[xxi\]](#)

### **The Holy Well & Medieval Church at Drumcoo, Co Galway**

The earliest recorded evidence of pilgrimage at Drumcoo dated to the nineteenth century. St. Sourney (*Sairnait in Irish*) is the Patron Saint of the Drumacoo Holy Well & Medieval Church at in Co. Galway. (*Gwynn and Hadcock 1970 page 34*) Sourney was a holy woman who lived in Ireland during the sixth century however little is known about her life. She is also the patron of the small early medieval church of Teampall Aturnaí (*St. Sourney's Church*) at the village of Eochaill on Inismore. Tradition stated she founded a monastery at Drumcoo during her lifetime. Her Feast Day was celebrated on the 3<sup>rd</sup> May. St. Sourney's Bed was described in 1890 as one of those penitential stone cells. It measured circa six feet in length by four feet in width externally. (*Fahey 1893 page 33*) First edition Ordnance Survey map portrayed an extensive pilgrim landscape that surrounded the church, a holy bush, a saint's bed also the holy well dedicated to St. Sourney. The contemporary *Ordnance Survey Letters Co Galway (1838)* also recorded those religious stations. St. Sourney's Bush does not appear on later Ordnance Survey Maps that suggested devotions & local interest in the tree had ceased. Sórnach [*Sourney*] whose bed (*Leabaidh*), bush (*tseach*) also holy well (*tobar*) were located in the Drumacoo townland. (*Herity 2009 page 75*) St. Sourney's Bed was subsequently destroyed during a graveyard clean - up. Within the area just St. Sourney's Holy Well survived. It was restored by a work crew during the 1980's who unfortunately removed the stones to build it from what was reputedly St. Sairnait's Cell or 'Bed.' [\[xxii\]](#)

### **Footnotes**

[\[iv\]](#) Ireland's Wonderful Holy Wells (<https://www.theirishplace.com/heritage/holy-wells/irelands-wonderful-holy-wells/>) [Assessed 17<sup>th</sup> April 2020]

[v] Holy Wells in Ireland (<https://www.holywell.seomraranga.com/holywellsireland.htm>) [Assessed 11<sup>th</sup> April 2020]

[vi] Ibid

[vii] Holy Wells in Ireland (<https://irelandsholywells.blogspot.com/>) [Assessed 11<sup>th</sup> April 2020]

[viii] Holy Wells (<https://irish-memories.com/holy-wells-places-pilgrimage-step-back-time-james-reddiough/>) [Assessed 11<sup>th</sup> April 2020]

[ix] Holy Well (<http://irelandsholywells.blogspot.com/2011/10/well-of-white-cow-tara-hill.html>) [Assessed 18<sup>th</sup> April 2020]

[x] Holy Wells in Ireland (<https://irelandsholywells.blogspot.com/>) [Assessed 11<sup>th</sup> April 2020]

[xi] Ogulla Holy Well Tulsk (<http://www.megalithicireland.com/>) [Assessed 12<sup>th</sup> April 2020]

[xii] Ogulla Holy Well (<https://pilgrimagemedievalireland.com/>) [Assessed 12<sup>th</sup> April 2020]

[xiii] St. Colman's Well (<https://pilgrimagemedievalireland.com/>) [Assessed 13<sup>th</sup> April 2020]

[xiv] Tobernalt Holy Well (<https://sligohub.com/tobernalt-holy-well/>) [Assessed 13<sup>th</sup> April 2020]

[xv] Tobernalt Holy Well (<https://www.theirishplace.com/heritage/holy-wells/tobernalt-holy-well-sligo-history/>) [Assessed 13<sup>th</sup> April 2020]

[xvi] Tobernalt Holy Well (<http://www.megalithicireland.com/Tobernalt%20Holy%20Well.html>) [Assessed 13<sup>th</sup> April 2020]

[xvii] Tobernalt Holy Well (<http://www.holywellsligo.com/>) [Assessed 13<sup>th</sup> April 2020]

[xviii] St Patricks Holy Well (<https://www.waymarking.com/waymarks/>) [Assessed 13<sup>th</sup> April 2020]

[xix] The Holy Wells of Ireland (<https://www.libraryireland.com/>) [Assessed 13<sup>th</sup> April 2020]

[xx] Castlebar Co. Mayo (<http://www.castlebar.ie/mayo>) [Assessed 13<sup>th</sup> April 2020]

[xxi] Holy Wells (<http://irelandsholywells.blogspot.com/>) [Assessed 18<sup>th</sup> April 2020]

[xxii] Holy Wells in Galway (<https://www.visitgalway.ie/explore/religious-and-spiritual/holy-wells/st-sourneys-well/>) [Assessed 18<sup>th</sup> April 2020]

[xxiii] Holy Wells Places of Pilgrimage (<https://irish-memories.com/history/holy-wells-places-pilgrimage-step-back-time-james-reddiough/>) [Assessed 13<sup>th</sup> April 2020]