

## PILGRIMAGE TO BINSEY: MEDIEVAL AND MODERN

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Binsey's holy well, with its literary and spiritual overtones, represents a key attraction of the little church for the modern visitor. In this brief essay, the broad history of pilgrimage in England is considered before approaching Binsey's own post-Reformation history. Others have dealt with the history of St Margaret's Well authoritatively in this volume; little of value can be added here to these excellent historical and archaeological syntheses.

### PILGRIMAGE IN ENGLAND: SACRED SPRINGS

The attitude of the present English church towards holy wells is a peculiar one. Where other nations attempted to 'reform' away all trace of superstitious water, or else 'Lourdize' springs into a holy business enterprise, England's wells still remain under the radar for many sections of her national church. The suspicious whiff of Popery or rural ignorance that hung about such waters was dealt with in the past by dismissing it as superstition, or by transforming wells into semi-medical spas as at Bath and Harrogate. Traces, where they remained, of a more spiritual aspect to the 'cure' were discouraged. It is typical of the Anglican Church's desire to avoid extremes whenever possible, and of its dry urbanity when faced with enthusiasm. This distaste does not necessarily represent a lack of faith, but a discomfort with its public expression.<sup>1</sup>

Matters were different prior to the Reformation. Pilgrimages were a popular activity in medieval England, whether they took the traveller to Jerusalem or to Canterbury. This activity may be traced back to the Roman and even to the pre-Roman period, and certainly to pre-Christian worship practices. Even small sites dedicated to local saints could become modestly famous for their healing and oracular powers; it is reasonable to assume that many of these were among the places Pope Gregory mentions in his famous seventh-century letter to the missionary Mellitus. Gregory wanted native temples preserved, their idols cast down and replaced with Christian saints' relics, and the premises sprinkled with holy water. He meant, of course, water blessed by a priest, deriving its agency from that of the actions of the person performing the blessing, and not from its own origins. The two types of 'holy' water were still frequently conflated throughout Europe.

It is clear that water, particularly in pure springs, represents a primal object of respect and religious observance. Like fire, seeds, and animals of the chase, clean water is necessary to human survival in a way unimaginable unless it is absent, and a potentially rare resource in a pre-modern landscape. For primitive tribes living at subsistence levels, a source of pure water was something to be treasured and protected. Such protection could of course be physical, but was also psychological: the association of a supernatural spirit with a water source gave it the power to protect itself from harm. Logically, something endowed with the power to harm might also heal; and so the stories of cures spread, and people began to travel specifically with the intent of visiting a well.

However, the number of pre-Christian pilgrims or pilgrimage routes to wells in England is confused by a lack of pre-classical written evidence. True examples are further obscured by poor archaeological and anthropological recording practices. The tendency

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<sup>1</sup> This may be said to be lessening under the effects of modern cultural practices; see, for example, the revival of the cult of the Virgin at Walsingham in Norfolk.

of modern faiths to unquestioningly adopt the romantic symbols of a perceived pagan past has also caused problems in determining what represents a genuine continuance of a spiritual practice rather than a modern interpolation. Of those wells that are firmly established as dating to at least the pre-Roman period, Bath (*Aquae Sulis*), that is 'the Waters of the goddess Sulis Minerva' is the best known today. Smaller springs more comparable to Binsey may include Coventina's Well, dedicated to the nymph-goddess Coventina in Northumberland, which has a well-established history of Roman deposits though it seems thereafter to have fallen out of use.<sup>2</sup>

These wells were used in a number of rituals, some of which were carried over into the Christian era, and which are roughly divisible into *deposit* and *healing*. The familiar practice of votive deposition, inherited and remade by the Church, may be traced back to this primitive urge to thank or bribe; some ancient wells, when dragged, show objects ranging from pins and needles all the way up to gold, money, and arms. The spring at Bath has provided the largest number of Latin lead curse tablets in England. Some swamps and bogs in Northern Europe (including the famous body from Lindow Moss, Cheshire) even show limited deposition of human bodies.

In the high Middle Ages, the more homicidal rituals apparently ceased. Their place was taken by the veneration of relics, particularly of the body parts of holy individuals. A fragment of a finger could make a site worthy of veneration; the translation of St Winifred's body to Shrewsbury in the twelfth century established the town's new Benedictine abbey as a national player in ecclesiastical politics. Some relics became peripatetic, traversing the medieval landscape. With the development of a standardized Church, travelling to confess sins in a particularly auspicious place became popular; Binsey may have been a popular location for this, as it was located near a good medieval ford.<sup>3</sup>

To modern eyes, the medical uses of pilgrimages and wells looms most practically. At a time when many people never travelled more than a few miles from home, and in which diets could therefore become nutritionally deficient, mineral waters could genuinely alleviate some forms of illness. Lydney Park in Gloucestershire displays Roman and prehistoric iron workings beside a combination temple and hydro-spa. The red, rusty water of the hillside is still an excellent source of potable iron. Anemic patients, or the pregnant women who are thought to have particularly used Lydney, would have found real relief in a course of treatment there.<sup>4</sup> The waters at Bath show a high level of calcium, bicarbonate, and magnesium, and are naturally effervescent; hence their association with skin disease and gastric problems. In short, some 'miracle cures' really were effective on a purely physical level.<sup>5</sup>

There is no evidence of any chemical content of this type in the water at Binsey, or in many other wells. But even the act of going on a pilgrimage could potentially relieve some medical issues, such as chronic vitamin deficiency. Travelling in the sunlight would cause exposure to fresher air and better sun than that available in close housing, and a long enough journey would thus at least relieve respiratory problems and Vitamin D deficiency. Psychologically, removing a patient from the causes of mental problems such as stress might lessen their effects.<sup>6</sup>

<sup>2</sup> L. Allason-Jones and B. McKay, *Coventina's Well* (Oxford 1985); B. Cunliffe (ed), *The Temple of Sulis Minerva at Bath. 2 The Finds from the Sacred Spring* (Oxford 1988).

<sup>3</sup> Blair, *Thornbury, Binsey*, this volume.

<sup>4</sup> M. Wheeler and T. V. Wheeler, *Report on the excavation of the prehistoric, Roman and post-Roman site in Lydney Park, Gloucestershire* (Oxford, 1932).

<sup>5</sup> A. Cruse, *Roman Medicine* (Stroud 2004), 136–7 fig. 66.

<sup>6</sup> R. Scott *Miracle Cures* (Berkeley and Los Angeles, 2010), 13, ch.6.

Modern medicine has accustomed its victims to pills, shots, and other internal, largely unseen cures. Tolerance for pain has decreased in tandem with the ability to relieve it with ease via chemical therapies. For the medieval traveller, unused to the ease of taking paracetamol for joint aches or antacids for a stomachache, a gradual cessation of pain as the result of pilgrimage would have seemed all the more marked—and miraculous. The very shock of immersion in cold water might on occasion be of aid, particularly in the case of hysteria. Again, the benefits seen might be temporary, but the relief for the sufferer was genuine while it lasted. It is important to recall this when considering the other medical basis for the real efficacy of pilgrimages for some travelers. That is psychosomatic; in other words, by believing so strongly that a saint could cure them on the performance of a specific task, patients might experience a cure. The religious and the medical were thus inextricably linked from their earliest development, and not disentangled until relatively recently. Bath's changing dedications provide a timeline for the process; it was dedicated first to the Celtic Sulis, then to the Roman Sulis Minerva, then to the medieval Christian king Bladud. Subsequently it became the preserve of Protestant doctors and the gout, and today belongs to beauty treatments and spa breaks.<sup>7</sup>

The old style of pilgrim travel faltered during the Reformation. Early Protestants made pilgrimages a major target for Catholic criticism, alleging that the encouragement of pilgrims by the Church was the encouragement of idol-worship for its own financial gain. Such distrust of miraculous objects was not a new feature of Christian life, and Chaucer's fourteenth century pilgrim-Palmer remains the best and funniest exponent of it. While various aspects of old church dogmas such as transubstantiation were allowed to survive or to creep back in to Anglicanism over time, traditional pilgrimages continued to be discouraged by the English authorities.<sup>8</sup> The purer concept of Christian pilgrimage was not abandoned, however, but expanded exponentially. John Bunyan and others encouraged good men and women to see their entire lives as an allegorical pilgrim's progress. The act of walking became a powerful metaphor for the spiritual journey of the Christian, and Chaucer's rowdy, amiable band of holidaymakers from all walks of life was replaced in the popular imagination with Christian and his partially solitary journey.<sup>9</sup> The landscape of Bunyan's 1678 allegory *The Pilgrim's Progress* is a blasted one of empty heaths and morally bankrupt towns, populated mostly by the wicked, the careless, and a very few helpful guides. The Protestant vision of pilgrimage is of an internal struggle against one's own worse nature, a perpetual fight carried out, like prayer, in private.

Other factors also diminished the need for pilgrimages. Medicine and lifestyle were both improving, lessening the chance that a simple cold-water douche might help a problem. Springs with some genuine therapeutic content secularized and became the resort spas of the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries. Medical tourism emerged out of the old pilgrim networks.

## PILGRIMS TO BINSEY: POST-REFORMATION TRADITIONS

The Oxford area was once full of holy and semi-sacred springs, hardly surprising in a region of water-meadows. Binsey's chapel and well are dedicated to St Margaret of Antioch, but have been persistently associated closely with the Saxon St Frideswide since the building's inception. The pairing of these two saints, the early Eastern martyr and the regional princess-nun, reveals the deep desire of the Roman and the British churches to *localize* their

<sup>7</sup> Peter Davenport, *Medieval Bath Uncovered* (Stroud 2002).

<sup>8</sup> N.H. Keeble, *The Restoration: England in the 1660s* (Oxford 2002), 238–240.

<sup>9</sup> *Ibid.*, 243–244.

St Frideswide depicted in stained glass at St Frideswide's Church, Osney, in Oxford. (Russell Dewhurst)



faith. The same desire rebuilt the Bethlehem stable at Walsingham and established Joseph of Arimathea in Cornwall.

Binsey was drawn into the Frideswide narrative as a perceived location on the saint's flight from marriage, 'Thornbury'. The church began its existence as a chapel attached to a larger manor house or court, part of a larger complex that most probably incorporated the large earthworks to the south of the present church (see Blair and Munby in this volume for further details). The entire group belonged to St Frideswide's Priory in Oxford proper; Anglo-Saxon pottery finds and historical references suggest that it was owned by the priory from its Christian foundation. This ownership continued through the medieval period, and indeed to the present day via the Priory's direct successor Christ Church.

Binsey is traditionally supposed to have been used as a retiring house for members of the Priory, most famously the religious visionary Edith Lancelin in the early twelfth century. While the chapel is isolated today, in the medieval period it was close to a popular road and ford linking Eynsham and Oxford, and would have been much more convenient to traffic.<sup>10</sup> The seventeenth century antiquary Anthony à Wood reconstructed its history in his gossipy but vivid style as it moved through the past to his own time. He is given here in the vivid original, without criticism. Blair, in this volume, provides a more measured view of Wood's value as a historian, but his interest in this context is as an imaginative recorder of the traditions and practices of his own time, not others.

Leaving *Binsey* Town, and going about a Quarter of a Mile N. W. from it, we come to the forlorn Church or Chapel belonging to it.

<sup>10</sup> Blair, *Thornbury, Binsey*, this volume.

## BINSEY CHURCH

For I shall call it a Church, having been always decimated and taxed as a Parish Church. Was first built with Watlyn and rough hewn Timber, to the Honour of *St Margaret*, by *St Fridiswide*, about the Year 730, which *Fridiswide* being the Owner of this Soil, and taking great Delight in its solitary Shades and Privacy, being then environed with Woods, not only built this Church, but also several other Edifices adjoining, purposedly, that she and her Sisters the Nuns, who lived with her in *Oxford*, at the Priory of *St Fridiswide*, might retire in Times of Distraction in the City. The famous Lady re-edifying this Church, and enlarging the Buildings adjacent, instituted it to be a Cell or a Place of Retirement, as it had been for herself, for her Nuns; and here, not only at some Times they enjoyed themselves in great Repose and Devotion, but also were hither sent their more stubborn Sort, to be punished for Crimes committed against the Prior or his Brethren; which was commonly, either by inflicting on them Confinement in a dark Room, or by withdrawing from them their usual Repast, or the like.

In the Repository in the South Wall of the Chancel, was long standing her costly Statue, bedecked with Ornaments. To which the superstitious People, that came frequently to this Place, using Adorations on their Knees, have, to People's Amazement, worn the very Pavement about it hollow, as is now to be seen.

This Church continuing to *St Frid.* Priory till its Dissolution, was annexed by the Cardinal to his College; afterwards, by King H. VIII. to *Christ-Church*, in whose Possession it still remains.

—Is old, of Brick, without a Spire or Tower,—about 16 Yards long and 6 broad, — having but one Isle. — The Altar measures not 3 Yards in Breadth. — Two Bells.—In the East Window is painted *Jesus* with his Cross, and a Virgin, supposed *Margaret* or *St Fridefwide*, bearing a Cross.

At the general Taxation this stands thus: *Capella de Binsey Pertinens ad Priorem de St Frid. vis. and vmd.\**—It is now a Donative, worth about 50/. *per Ann.*—Curate, Mr. *Culberade*, A. M. of *Christ-Church*.

At the West End, about three Yards distant from this Chapel was the noted Well of *St Margaret*, which, as the Story goes, *St Fridifwaide*, by her Prayers at the Building of the Chapel, caused to be opened...Over this Well was a Covering of Stone : On the Front the Picture of *St Frid.* pulled down by Alderman *Sayre*, of *Oxon*, Anno 1639.

To this Well and her Image, and Reliques in the Chapel, did the People come on Pilgrimage with as great Devotion to ease their burthened Souls, and obtain an Answer of their Doubts as they would to an Oracle. And here also, when the maimed or unsound had been cured by bathing in, or drinking of this Water, they hung up their Crutches as a special Memorandum of their Cure, for which Reason several Priests inhabited here, appointed by the Prior of *St Frid.* to confess and absolve them, and *Sackworth*, on the other Side the River, distant about Half a Mile South-West, which has not a Stone in it, by the continual and numerous Resort to this Place, became a large Town, had in it 24 Inns, and was a thoroughfare Town from *Eynsham* and the Western Parts, to *Oxon*, long before the other by *Body* was thought of, having a Bridge formerly over the River running by it, of which, and the Ruins of *Sackworth*, are the Stones ploughed up, and those lying in great Abundance in the River.

A House, by some a Court, with arched Windows and arched Door, joining to the North Side of *Binsay* Chapel, was pulled down in *July* 1678, by the Widow *Fifield*, to sell and save Reparation.

This Well continued to the last to be so frequented, and especially about a hundred Years before the Dissolution so much, that they were forced to add a Door and Lock to it; besides enclosing it, as before, with a little House of Stone over it. This House about 25 Years ago...was pulled down and taken away and Nettles, Frogs, &c. possess it, now scarce deserving the Name of a Well.<sup>11</sup>

After the dissolution of the pre-Reformation Catholic Church in England, Binsey's chapel-church was small enough to avoid major damage. A few miles away, *St Frideswide's* bones were less fortunate. Her body was disinterred and famously reburied with that of an apostate nun, and her shrine destroyed. Binsey, while part of the priory and network of college lands running from *Christ Church* to *Godstow*, was never under the same kind of scrutiny. It did lose its locked and decorated stone well-house in 1639, the second such

<sup>11</sup> A. Wood and J. Peshall, *The Ancient and Present State of the City of Oxford* (London 1775), 320–322.



St Margaret's Well. (Robert Mealing)



St Margaret's Well – detail. (Julian Munby)

St. Margaret's Well  
S. Margaretæ Fontem  
Precibvs S. Frideswidæ ut fertur concessum  
inquinatum diu obrutumque  
in usum revocavit  
T.J. Prout Aed. Xti alumnus vicarius  
A.S. MDCCCLXXIV

T J Prout of Christ Church, Vicar, brought back into use St Frideswide's well, made to produce [flow] by the prayers of St Frideswide, and for long collapsed and [fouled] polluted, A.D. 1874

structure erected to protect the small spring from its devotees.<sup>12</sup> The chapel of the former retiring-house was re-imagined as a parish church, a function it had probably been fulfilling for many years anyway, and the canon's manor fell into disuse and disrepair.

Traffic patterns shifted, a bridge was built, and St Margaret's and Binsey began slowly to take on the form they have today: a string of less than a dozen houses, a small pub, and a remote churchyard at the end of a one-way road. The well fell into disrepair between the seventeenth and early nineteenth centuries. Doctors discouraged the idea of a holy cure, and ecclesiastical fashions prohibited the popish practices of pilgrimage and confession. It is very possible that the spring continued to be used locally by poorer residents as a cure-all, but only because other, similar sites continued in that way during this period. By the 1660s, Wood could still describe a number of small wells and springs, holy and secular, within the city's purview.<sup>13</sup> Binsey's spring is described 'three yards distant' from the church in the vivid, almost zoological terms quoted above. It had lost both its religious and therapeutic value, and was in a perceptible decline.

That began to change in the nineteenth century, as England's Gothic past became romanticized. Pilgrimages and the Middle Ages were fashionable. By the time the FSA Robert Hope visited in October 1887, as part of a survey of English wells, the church was looking cared for again.

...the churchyard was tidily fenced and very neatly kept. At the well a descent of some five steps brought one to an arched vault, beneath which, in the centre of the flooring, was a round basin containing the water of the well, the surface of the water being about six feet below the level of the ground.<sup>14</sup>

St Margaret's took on its modern form with the erection of a Victorian well-head in 1874 by the vicar of the day, T.J. Prout. He repaired the church's fabric and restored the primacy of the well to the site. He was also indirectly responsible for Charles Dodgson's 1862 picnic by the well—the treacle well of *Alice*. The word treacle was used in the medieval period to denote a healing substance; it is a very donnish pun.

With the increased romanticism of the Victorian period, the idea of holy wells and pilgrimages began to be attractive once again. At the same time, a movement towards a 'rediscovery' of a perceived Celtic or pagan past began to gather steam. It is not surprising that as Prout rebuilt the well-head, the first modern Eistedfodds were taking place, and the first modern Druids enjoying the first of many disputations about which ancient tradition they were going to represent. These neo-Druids would provide the spiritual ancestors of some modern pilgrims to Binsey, in the neo-pagans who have claimed (they would perhaps say re-claimed) its well as their own. A visitor to Binsey today will see faceted crystals left by the well's edge, a twentieth-century New Age custom re-used by an ancient spring. The yew tree over the well also shows a recent growth of fabric strips and ribbons, representing the resurgence of a genuinely ancient custom used across England at spring sites. What it signifies is hotly disputed, but it cannot be denied that the practice dates back centuries. The practice of dressing the well with flowers has also made a return.

Christian usage of the shrine has also increased, with the Anglican church's wholesale and in some cases indiscriminate adoption of romantic symbols of the past. It is entertaining to consider what some of the Protestant leaders of the Elizabethan era would have to say about the modern church's use of labyrinths, saint's shrines, beatifications,

<sup>12</sup> R.C. Hope, *The Legendary Lore of the Holy Wells of England* (London 1893), 126.

<sup>13</sup> For example, the Ho;ywel Green well enclosed in 1651 by Cowdrey the 'precise shoemaker of St Peter's in the East'. *Ibid*, 119, 12.

<sup>14</sup> *Ibid*, 126.



Binsey churchyard. (Sue Dewhurst)

rosaries, pilgrim's medals, holy water, and other attractive medievalisms. The well is once more brought into regular use by the vicars of St Margaret's church, and its waters used in baptisms and blessings. There is an inevitability about this. Throughout its history, in the spontaneity of response to this little spring, the earliest moments of human religion—and the most recent—can still be read.<sup>15</sup>

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<sup>15</sup> In 2011 St Margaret's was one of fifteen churches specially selected by Bishop John Pritchard as part of the Oxford Diocese's Pilgrim Project. A full explanation of this interesting and popular program can be found at <http://www.oxford.anglican.org/the-door/features/thinking-about-pilgrimage-in-2011.htm>.