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THE UNBROKEN TRADITION: ST. WINIFRED'S WELL (FFYNNON WENFREWI) HOLYWELL

by Howard Huws

Many of the generalizations in the previous article on Holy Wells may be illustrated by the particular example of the most well-known of Welsh holy wells, Ffynnon Wenfrewi (St. Winifred's Well) at Holywell in Flintshire.

The oldest object of veneration at the site is Maen Beuno, St Beuno's Stone, on which the 6th-century saint knelt many days and nights in prayer. The maiden Gwenfrewi was his niece: and she being home alone, a young nobleman, chancing to pass by, attempted intimacies with her. She ran off towards Beuno's chapel, but the villain overtook her, and struck off her head for daring to refuse him. Where her head fell to the ground, a great spring instantly gushed forth, flowing with milk for three days thereafter.¹ Beuno, arriving at the scene, cursed the nobleman with such vehemence that he melted away like wax before a fire, and then set his niece's head back on her shoulders, restoring her to life. She then became a nun, and eventually an abbess. Maen Beuno can be seen in the present bathing pool.

The healing power of the fount ensured it wide renown and royal patronage. Kings, princes and the nobility visited it as pilgrims, donated rich clothing to the shrine, and granted annuities. Poets of the calibre of Iolo Goch and Tudur Aled sang its praises:

*"...Os help y feddyges hon,
Y ddau iechyd a ddichon;
Iechyd y corff uchod caid
A chadw fyn iechyd fenaid..."*

*"...By the aid of this doctress,
Both species of health shall be ensured;
Bodily health will be granted from above,
And she will preserve the health of my soul..."*

and the force of its flow, estimated to be twenty-one tons of water per minute, was enough to power nineteen mills and factories further downstream.

1. Bord, Janet and Colin. Sacred Waters: Holy Wells and Water Lore in Britain and Ireland. London: Granada Publishing, 1985. Thomas Pennant (A Tour in Wales, Vol. 1 pp. 28-40, London 1778) remarks that the water takes on "a wheyey tinge" after heavy rain, and I've observed the same myself.

The rituals of healing observed included confession, repeated bathing over a number of days, the recitation of prayers whilst immersed, and keeping vigil in the chapel overnight.

At the beginning of the 16th century Margaret Beaufort, mother of King Henry VII, caused a particularly beautiful shrine and chapel to be erected at the well: and this strong royal connection probably saved it from destruction. The Protestant reformers also stayed their hands for financial reasons, as offerings at the shrine then amounted to £10 per annum: no mean sum. Politically acceptable or not, the tradition of pilgrimage continued unbroken throughout the following centuries, with many reports of miraculous healings. Rich and poor, from near and far: there was no stopping the devotees. Soldiers were sent to arrest priests, local taverns (doubling as chapels) were shut, and the shrine was damaged by Parliamentarians and an anti-Catholic mob: but to no avail. Indeed, by the end of the 18th century, the veneration of Gwenfrewi had spread back into the local Protestant population, if indeed they ever ceased from it.

Red stains on stones in the water were said to be those of Gwenfrewi's blood, as an anonymous poem of 1823 declares:

*Ar y ceryg, yn y ffynnon
Mae y gwaed yn amlwg ddigon,
Rhwn a gollodd Winiffreda
Pan ga'dd ei phen ei dorri yma..."*
"...On the stones in the well
This blood which Winifred lost
When she was beheaded here
Can be plainly seen..."

They were most obvious on three particular stones which were constantly in motion, and objects of great awe. Andrew Boorde was more sceptical:

"There is a well in Wales called Saynte Wenefrydes Well. Walshe men sayth that if a man doth cast a cuppe, a staffe, or a napkyn in the well, it will be full of droppes or frakils, and redyshe like bloude; the which is false, for I have proued the contrary in sondry tymes."

Perhaps he lacked patience. Thomas Pennant remarks upon the same phenomenon, attributing it to the growth of a fragrant red moss.² He also states that the water never freezes.

Disaster struck in 1917, when civil engineering works severely interrupted the flow. It was subsequently restored, and continues unabated. Pilgrims in number still resort to the well for both spiritual and bodily healing, and an annual Orthodox pilgrimage is held on the first Saturday in October. ✚

2. Pennant, Thomas, op. cit.