

Pilgrims and holy wells on the Celtic frontier

Nigel Twinn (September 2014)

Any trip out with local historian and academic, Terry Faull, is an event not to be missed. Terry has spent decades researching the annals of the Celtic Christian religion, and clearly almost as long uncovering rarely visited and half-forgotten sites of immense interest.

This time, we started at Jacobstow village church – an intensely tranquil place was once on the front line of theological change. Here, the incoming Anglo-Saxon church squared up, philosophically, to its Celtic predecessor. While the Europeans eventually prevailed, after the Synod of Whitby, for a while this area marked the spiritual conflict zone between the old religion and the new.

The church itself, situated within its ancient llan, which divided (and, some might say, still divides) the sacred site from the profane and everyday world, is a gem for any dowser to investigate. The interior hosts the intersection points of three ageless energy leys, two crossing corner to corner, forming an etheric saltaire, the other leading from door to door. Abundant water lines are much in evidence, with three around the main altar area, and another around a secondary altar, formed from a granite slab, previously used as a farm bridge – but which had an uncanny resemblance to some of the tomb tops in the graveyard! A very active energy spiral in front of the main altar spun into acknowledgement action as I dowsed it and, to general amusement, rapidly filled all of the space available for my rod work. Nice to meet you too!

Terry took us next on a walk across a couple of fields to the once lost Holy Well of St James (via part of the pilgrim route that led from the ports of Bideford and Padstow to the shrine of St James at Santiago de Compostella). On the way, we used a series of wicket gates, each hosting an unusual metal plaque bearing a poetic epithet, concerning the protocols of kissing. We also passed a small, rather beleaguered, double row of stunted oak trees which, Terry had heard, had some theoretically unpleasant association with witchcraft. However, they dowsed as being the last remnants of an ancient sacred grove – and possibly a burial site – and had an unexpectedly pleasant energy about them. The Holy Well itself is in a ‘magical’ hollow, with a lovely sense of place – and finding it alone would have been well worth all the efforts of the day, without the rest. Located in the corner of a field, and with no formal access from the pilgrimage route a hundred metres or so away, it became neglected and overgrown. However, local people have now rediscovered their personal piece of our national heritage, have tidied it up in a sympathetic manner, and permissive access is now available. This is a ‘proper’ holy well, from a dowser’s perspective, and its proximity to the pilgrimage trail gives it added religious credentials. Follow that!

Which is exactly what we did. Terry’s next port of call was the strange church of St Gennys near Crackington Haven – and its two holy wells. The ‘first’ holy well is discreetly hidden in the private landscaped garden of what was once the village schoolhouse. It, too, dowsed as being a ‘proper’ Holy Well with its intersecting water, earth energy and (two) ley lines. Another lovely site, still supplying piped water and looking almost as enticing, in a more formal setting, as St James’ Well had appeared in its storybook glade. We had a friendly chat with the current (human!) custodian and proceeded to the other water source, now well-hidden and temporarily barricaded off

behind the church. The energies there were quite mixed, with some rather disrespectful drainage work taking place nearby, and the church itself locked up. A huge amount of effort had been made over the centuries to dig the successive expansions of the ecclesiastical building deeper into the hillside and this may have destabilised both the loose rock bank behind it, and the energies that underlay it. An engraved sign on the well-housing stated that it had been in use since the 6th Century. Hmm.

The dowsing indicated that the 'first' well had been used as a source of sacred water way back into the Bronze Age – and indeed may well have been a Christian healing site from around the 7th century. The 'new' well has crossing water and earth energy lines, but the associated ley is several metres away to the north, inside the church building itself. So, only a 'holy-ish' well by dowsing standards! It seems more likely that this well was discovered, or indeed announced itself as a spring, during building extension works and, being adjacent to the altar wall, was deemed to be a more appropriate site to the original one, which might still have had pre-Christian associations. Nonetheless, overall, another super place, and well worth revisiting on a day when the church is open and more welcoming.

Our last site was up the lane to the deserted village of Lower Tresmorn. At first sight, this seems no more than a few undulations in an insignificant field, guarded by an electric fence, next to the private track to Tresmorn Farm. Although never fully excavated by archaeologists, the site is believed to have once consisted of a dozen dwellings, including a smithy. The official dating of the houses gave a period of occupation between the 8th and the 12th Centuries. However, while our dowsing was broadly consistent with this finding, we noted that the site had been first settled in the period before the Roman invasion and that the last family had only left the Tresmorn field in the 15th century.

We were able to dowse several of the pre-mediaeval buildings, together with various stock-pens and trackways. We located potential well sites, and the location of a former shrine. There seemed only to have been up to about 40 people in the hamlet at its time of greatest occupation – perhaps that being all that the surrounding land could feed. Our search for the reason for the abandonment of the 'village' proved to be a bit more tricky. It did not appear to have been a plague site, nor one of eviction. We concluded that there were just too many more comfortable places to live in the valleys and more lowland areas around, once the tree cover had been reduced. Maybe the virtue of having a hilltop site with good visibility was of less value when times of anticipated invasion had passed. The arrival of a small herd of male cattle from the field next door indicated that the day's activities were drawing to a close, and we made an organised and graceful, if rather direct, retreat beyond the fence

Many thanks indeed to Terry Faull for taking us to some of his special sites – and for sharing some of his vast archive of personal knowledge, which is of such relevance to the local dowsing community.

Some recent books by Terry Faull include -

Secrets of the Hidden Source (Devon's Holy Wells) Halsgrove 2004

ISBN 978184 1143545

A History of St Stephen's Priory, Launceston Treslothen Press 2014
ISBN 978099 2917005

Photos courtesy of Paul Gerry:



Sacred Oak Grove – Jacobstow



St James' Holy Well, Jacobstow – with orb!



Jacobstow Church – secondary altar