

Ireland's Holy Wells

You cannot drive very far in Ireland without encountering a Holy Well. Place names abound with the names of wells located nearby, for example Ballintubber - town of the well, or Peterswell in Co. Galway. There are, by some estimates, close to 3,000 Holy wells in Ireland.

In ancient pagan Ireland these wells were considered the source of life and the early druids considered them sacred. The Irish hold fast to tradition, and today, after thousands of years, people still frequent these wells in hope of a cure or just a little luck. With the coming of Christianity to Ireland, St. Patrick and his successors visited, prayed beside and blessed these wells making them even more sacred than the druids had before them.



According to some accounts in Irish Mythology, the waters that supply these wells originated in the otherworld. They were linked to the ancient gods, who caused these springs to flow into our world. The waters also had close relations to certain fruits or plants, especially the hazel which was used for "divining" or dousing.

In pagan Ireland, the wells were visited at special times of the year: Imbolc on February 1st, Beltaine on May 1st, Lughnasa on August 1st and Samhain on November 1st. These were all special turning-points of the Celtic year when the gates of the Otherworld were opened. This is especially true for Samhain, where the veil between the living and the dead was at its thinnest point, and often visions of the good people were seen in sacred places.

Often you will find more evidence of a time long ago with some ancient monument nearby, in the form of a standing stone or other large rock, used in ancient rituals. Often too, will be an old tree, usually an oak with a plethora of rags tied to its branches or some other offering placed at the time of more recent requests. People drank from the well, others bathed in it while more just splashed the water on an ailment for which they were seeking relief.

Many Christian churches were constructed near pagan wells, and the early Celtic church used them for baptism until the Roman church replaced them with the font inside the building.

Holy wells exist in most counties of Ireland. While many of the old wells have fallen into disrepair, many are visited on the feast of a local patron saint and with that the ancient ritual is continued to this day. Today, Irish Catholics often make pilgrimages to wells and many of the customs, including attaching clouties to tree branches, are still carried out.

Fore in Co. Westmeath has one of these wells complete with the old Oak Tree.

If you have a certain Holy Well in mind you can add the location here.