

GUISELEY WELLS

THE HISTORY OF A SPECIAL PLACE



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Details of a speech given by Jennifer Kirkby on the history of Guiseley Wells for the first Guiseley Wells Dressing on 30 April 2022

Regeneration and Ownership

Guiseley Wells is a 'special place' of natural springs and legend, and we are very lucky to still have it. By the late 1990's the Wells had become dilapidated and dangerous and there was a Council move to wall them up: imagine, Guiseley's number one attraction on Trip Advisor, gone – like so many of the beautiful, wild flower bedecked becks running through Aireborough from hills to dales– now culverted and hidden. The Wells were saved by taking them into the ownership of the Freeholders and Residents of Guiseley – they are not Council owned they belong to you under '*rights of common*'. A team from Guiseley Wells Society led by Geoff Brook and Aireborough Rotary Club then set about restoring the Wells' fabric with the help of the Heritage Lottery Fund.



The Guiseley Wells Society work on the Wells regeneration in 2000

Later, in 2015, we in the Aireborough Neighbourhood Development Forum set about turning the tarmac car park opposite the Wells into a pocket park for people to meet and be tranquil near the Wells. It started with the paving and herb planters, now looked after by Incredible Edible, and in 2021 we installed the Leeds Civic Trust Take A Seat bench, designed by local people and artist Lucy Phillips to commemorate the resilience of the local community during the 2020 Pandemic Lockdown.,

Guiseley Green

The millennium saw the start of the Wells area regeneration– but strip away all the surrounding post-Georgian buildings and you'd find yourself on the top corner of Guiseley Green, a wide, flat expanse of marshy, muddy Ings at the bottom of the Guiseley Gap glacial valley, with cows and geese grazing whilst frogs spawned in the Rectory Pond would migrate here in late spring. Around us, would be a pool of water right across Well Lane draining into a stone water trough before running clear and bright down Wells Beck to meet Tranmire Beck at Green Bottom. In the mid-19th century the Wells produced 45 gallons of water a minute; by harnessing this in a series of reservoirs, the Springhead Scribbling and Fulling Mill ran a 20 horse power steam engine. Sorting out the remains of this system was why the road was up in 2021 helped by a description of the system from the 1840s we'd found in Bradford Archives.

At A Cross-Roads

Leading west down towards Springfield Road, and across what was once Broad Ing, is an ancient track that once led across the cold windblown, Guiseley Gap, before climbing up on to the moors at Hawksworth and thence across the Pennines. Tracks are some of the oldest landscape features; many formed by Mesolithic hunter gatherers moving from one seasonal hunting ground to the next, in a regular sequence. Crossing this east-west track is one going north-south along the line of Moor Lane to the Green – this led from the Dales, through Guiseley Beck Ghyll to the Aire. The Wells were therefore situated at a cross roads where people down the ages could stop, meet, and refresh - imagine Bronze Age tribesmen travelling to large ritual gatherings near the Chevin's Bull Stone, Roman Legionnaires on their way to conquering the local Brigantes as they sought out natural resources, or Viking invaders on the roads they called 'gates' crossing from the continent to Dublin. The track to Hawksworth can still be found going around the Job Centre, running up behind Morrisons, and cutting to the north of Guiseley School sitting on Cuddy Hill.



The many Viking 'Gates', still around us.

It means a road to a place eg York

The Medieval Butts

The old stonework of the multi-troughed Wells channels water from the numerous springs hereabouts, rising behind is Well Hill leading to more farmable land; the bank here was once covered in primroses, violets and brambles, with a ridge crowned by great trees. Beyond was a large orchard and the medieval West Field; tilled in strips and often used for hay. The Butts were the end of the West Field, the abutment where the plough pulled by oxen leaned to the left as it turned and built up a soil platform. The Butts are said to have been used for archery practice after church in the Middle Ages, but no definite proof either in records or archeology has been found – it was just a traditional use in many places.

Keeping The Wells Clean

Right up to the 20th century children were being sent to the Wells for water especially in times of drought – although in the summer of 1929 the Leeds Mercury reported that '*even the famous Guiseley Wells were completely dry*'. In the medieval Manor Court along Church Lane, where all the residents gathered to make decisions on local affairs, they were constantly making 'pains', or rules, not to use the Wells for unhygienic activity such as washing away textile dye or dumping carrion. In 1909 Guiseley District Council paid for the cleaning out of the Wells every Friday, and protected

them with painted railings. Geoff Brook and Peter Woods still pull out various things from the Wells today !!



The Wells at the turn of the 20th Century.

Picture from Aireborough Historical Society

The Dragon

When the Wells were restored, Geoff Brook carved a new keystone. The dragons are a copy of a dragon on the Anglo/Viking cross of the 9th century found in St Oswald's Church's north wall in 1908 and now in the church by the baptismal font. Dragons are powerful zoomorphic symbols of protection and strength in Northern European cultures; think ships, helmets and flags, not forgetting the Beowulf saga. We call this the Guiseley Dragon, and there is another now looking after Crooklands Orchard in Parkinson's Park.



The dragon on the 9th Century Anglo/Viking cross in St Oswald's Church

Early English Christianity and York

We are lucky to have the early medieval cross fragments, for they add to the evidence that the Wells area was at the centre of a large parish, - important in the development of early English Christianity –these lands belonged to the Liberty of the Archbishop of York. The siting of the Church, on a hill, with a track running down to the Wells is significant; Well Lane was owned by the church. It is likely very early Christians raised a preaching cross here, on the route from Otley Minster to the Aire. Indeed, the old Guiseley Pageant, performed annually, had a scene where King Oswald himself raises a Guiseley Preaching Cross in the 7th century. On that basis, it is probable that the Wells were used for adult immersion baptism as they have worn paving at the bottom – we are

talking at least 700AD when Bede the Father of English History, was writing his Anglo Saxon Chronicles.



Wells Lane links St Oswald's church to the Wells. Seen during the 2022 Wells Dressing.

Picture: Darren Sanderson Photography

St Oswald and Northumbria

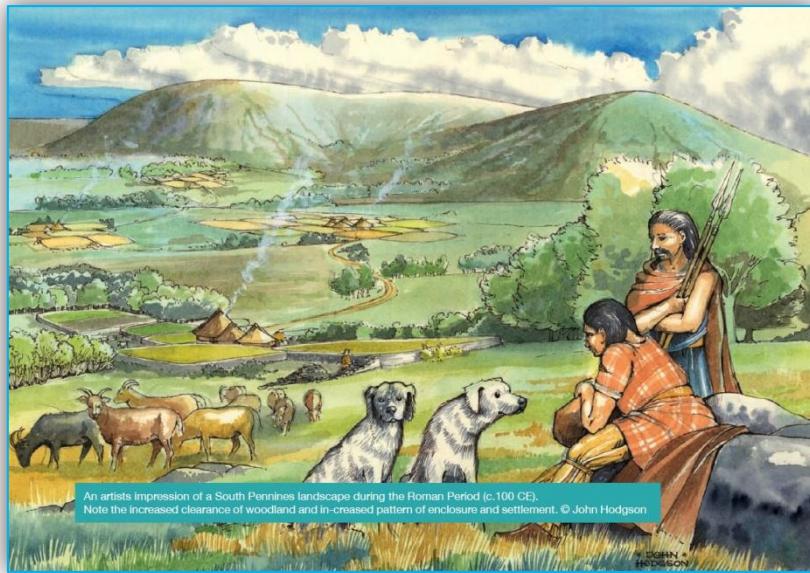
Later a church was built and developed. When and why the church was named for St Oswald, the Northumbrian King who helped refounded Christianity in the 600s AD by inviting St Aidan to found Lindisfarne, is not written; likely the 10th century. However, a St Oswald dedication is often found at Parish Churches linked to holy springs. This is due to the circumstances of his death in 642 AD at the battle of Maserfield fighting the pagan 'king' Penda of Mercia. A raven takes up Oswald's severed arm which had been blessed by St Aidan, and where it drops a healing spring comes up.

Rome Becomes A Christian Empire

There is evidence that this area's Christian roots date back earlier to the Roman Christians in the 4th century AD – Constantine the Great, who decreed the Roman Empire would become Christian, was hailed as Emperor in York and sits outside York Minister still. If, as seems likely, the Wells were a 'ritual site' in prehistory, then they would have been 'converted' to Christian use at this time. When St Wilfrid was given lands said to be in our area around 678 AD, it is written that they were in the consecrated places where the "*British Clergy had deserted the land fleeing the Anglo Saxon sword*"

Prehistory Ritual Site?

And before Christianity? There is a strong probability that the springs hereabouts were used by the local British tribes – there is growing evidence of Iron Age dwellings, most recently on Wills Gill and Kelcliffe. The Wells area was likely a special place then because of the landscape features; you can see both the rising sun to the east over Yeadon Haw, and the setting sun to the west over The Odda. From the later Bronze age (1,500 BC) the springs may well have been used for sacred rituals where water was seen as a doorway between this world and the world of the ancestors. In the Iron Age from 1000 BC, springs and wells were visited for healing, divination or wisdom. People believed that all sacred Wells were joined to the '*well of wisdom*' at the centre of the 'other world'.



The South Pennines landscape of dispersed Iron Age dwellings about 100 AD, just as the Romans had conquered the North of Britain.

Picture: from Celebrating Our Woodland Heritage – Pennine Prospects

Ice Age

Factually, we do know that the Wells today are a doorway for ice age microbes contained in the water that comes from deep in the Chevin's layers of millstone grit rock to see the light of day again. It also remains at a constant temperature: the water is cool in summer and doesn't ice in winter.

Wells Dressing 2022

For the Wells Dressing organizer Abi James asked school children from Guiseley Primary to write poems about what the Wells meant to them. A number had striking imagery of how the Wells had seen so much as the landscape around them grew, filling up with people and houses especially from the late 19th century – until they were nearly enclosed themselves. There's a lot of truth in that, and we need to look after this great asset as we, all of us, are the current guardians of it.



Guiseley Wells from the top of St Oswald's showing The Odda in the distance.

Picture: Revd David Pickett

The front cover shows the Yarns Wells Spun Guiseley Wells Dressing 2022, produced by more than 60 local residents.
Picture: Darren Sanderson Photography

POEMS WRITTEN BY GUISELEY PRIMARY SCHOOL CHILDREN FOR THE 2022 WELLS DRESSING

Abi James, the lead artist and project manager for the 'Yarns Wells Spun', Leeds 2023 Art Project arranged for schoolchildren from Guiseley Primary to write poems about what Guiseley Wells meant to them. These are the top four poems chosen to represent their views. Pictures of the poems on display by Darren Sanderson Photography.



In our town there is a well
That warms our heart with its swell.

It runs through our forever time,
Through generations, like yours, and mine.

A penny tossed symbolises a child's dream,
Its secrets betrothed to this sacred stream.

As landscapes changed and populations grew,
The Wells stayed forever true.

To this day, it's the artery of the town,
Spreading its joy all around.

Arthur Wilkinson, aged 11



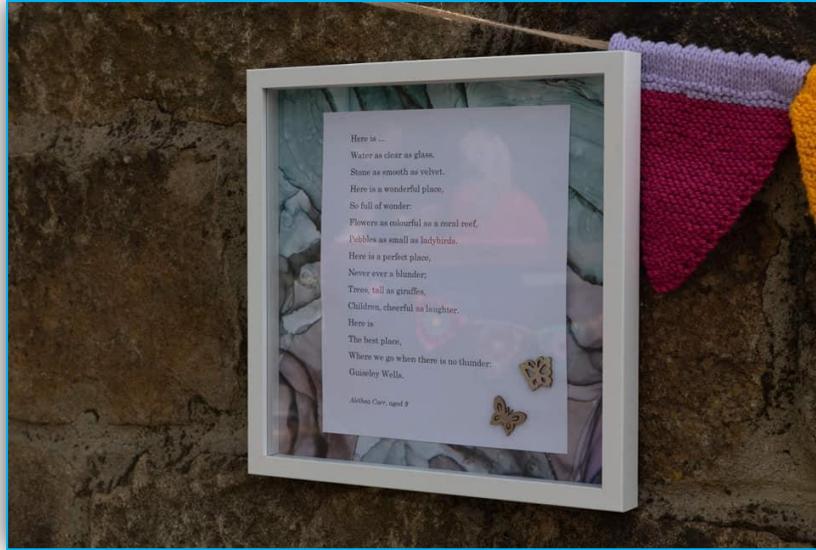
Strong, stone walls hug liquid glass;
A welcoming note, etched in brass;
The scent of flowers in the air;
A relaxing bench to show that we care;
A place to hear the church bells ring;
A place to hear the robins sing;
A beautiful place (if you couldn't tell.)
Come on up, it's Guiseley Well!

Nellie Fitzgerald-Cooke, aged 10



Into the silvery water,
I look and see
Anglo-Saxon villagers,
Drinking the fresh, flowing water;
A horse and cart,
Carrying a mother and daughter;
Houses being built,
And a new landscape appearing;
Many secrets and voices
The Wells can't help hearing.
I see people on bikes, scooters,
And driving cars, too.
The Wells sees a lot of things,
Sometimes even you;
And it knows so many things
That you never knew.

Alice James, aged 10



Here is ...

Water as clear as glass,

Stone as smooth as velvet.

Here is a wonderful place,

So full of wonder:

Flowers as colourful as a coral reef,

Pebbles as small as ladybirds.

Here is a perfect place,

Never ever a blunder;

Trees, tall as giraffes,

Children, cheerful as laughter.

Here is...The best place,

Where we go when there is no thunder:

Guiseley Wells.

Alethea Carr, aged 9