

# St Ann's Well, Sutton, St Helens

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St Ann's Well lies close to the boundary between Sutton and Rainhill townships about 10m east of Pendlebury Brook, 800m south of Eltonhead Farm, Sutton (SJ 4997 9142). The isolation of the site and the reputation of its water's healing properties have given rise to local legends associating it with a medieval monastic house and burial ground (St Helens Leader, 1878).

### HISTORICAL BACKGROUND

'St Anne's Well' is marked in gothic letters on the first edition Ordnance Survey 6" map of the area (sheet 107, surveyed 1845-7) and is shown just to the north of a track running north east to Eltonhead colliery. On the tithe map for Sutton township (LRO DRL 1/77, 1808 and 1843) the well is indicated in the field named Well Meadow. An interesting description of the well, written in about 1850, has been preserved in the Owen MSS in Manchester Public Library. It is accompanied by a sketch of the site as it appeared in about 1843 (fig 1). 'The well is of a square form and is lined with masonry. On one side, the eastern, there is a flight of four or five steps...It is about 4 feet in depth and the diameter from east to west is 5 feet 9 inches; from north to south 5 feet 6 inches. The overflow is conducted by a stone channel 14 feet 7 inches long to a stone basin 18 inches diameter sunk level with the ground. Close by is a square block of stone said to be for sitting upon whilst making use of the basin...The tradition of the neighbourhood says that here stood a chapel and burying ground; but there came a time when the building fell into decay and the stones were used for the construction of a stable at the hall Eltonhead. It appears however that there was some impiety in the removal of these stones which had been dedicated to a holier purpose. The stable had not long been erected when it fell killing the unfortunate animals enclosed therein. Some time having elapsed a mill was erected at a short distance and the old stones were removed again and employed in its construction but ill-luck attended the mill as it had done the stable and fatal accidents occurred to two or three of the millers in succession which caused the mill to be abandoned and eventually become a ruin... About 1794 the remains of the mill were removed, the ground

since ploughed over and when I visited the spot in 1843 there was not the least trace to show that a building ever stood there. At the same time I was taken to the well by my grandfather; around the well were many rough stones just peeping through the soil which he said were the remains of headstones marking the burial place of people belonging to a former generation.' (Owen MSS, 77-8).

The sketch which accompanies this information is headed 'Santon's or St Ann's Well, Sutton near Prescott, now destroyed'. It shows a bird's eye view of the well with the steps, the stone channel, basin and block described. In the lower left hand corner, there is a small additional sketch showing what would appear to be a stone block with an engraving on it of a figure holding a jug or pitcher (fig 1).

There are two published descriptions of the well. In 1866-7, Rev W.H. Higgins noted 'a cavity filled with water almost overgrown with grass and weeds: this is the St Ann's well, which formerly enjoyed a rather extensive reputation for the healing virtues of its water especially in cases of diseases of the eye. I once saw at the well a poor girl who, with her companion, had come from the neighbourhood of Billinge to bathe her eyes with the water' (Higgins 1867, 66). Forty years later the well was also described by Henry Taylor in his book Ancient Crosses and Holy Wells of Lancashire. He noted that the well 'is now nearly filled up' and also 'Rev J.E. Gull informs me that he has discovered that an ancient burial ground adjoined the well...Sixty years ago the farmer ploughed up the bones and deported the ancient gravestones' (Taylor 1906, 192 and 487). The Rev J.E. Gull was vicar of St Ann's church, Rainhill, from 1897 until 1911 (Dickinson and Dickinson 1968, 18).

The history of the Eltonhead estate in which the site lies is well documented. In 1194 William, son of Ivo, granted four oxgangs of land to Hugh le Norreis who later enfeoffed William le Norreis (?son of Hugh) with Eltonhead. William took the name of Eltonhead and the family lived there until 1684. The hall and lands were sold to Thomas Roughley and by 1712-13 had passed into the hands of Isaac Greene. The estate then descended to the Gascoyne family through the marriage of Isaac's daughter, Mary. On the death of Bamber Gascoyne junior in 1824, the estate was inherited by the only daughter, Frances Mary, wife of the 2nd Marquis of Salisbury. The estate is still held by the Salisbury family (VCH Lancs 3, 359-360; Rankin 1957). No reference to a chapel, burial ground or, indeed, the well has been found amongst the estate papers. However, a grant of six acres of land at Eltonhead was made c 1267 by Hugh le Norreis to Cockersand Abbey (Farrer ed. 1900, 600). It is possible that the memory of monastic ownership of land in Eltonhead is the origin of the local tradition concerning a priory there. The exact location of the lands held by Cockersand Abbey is not known.

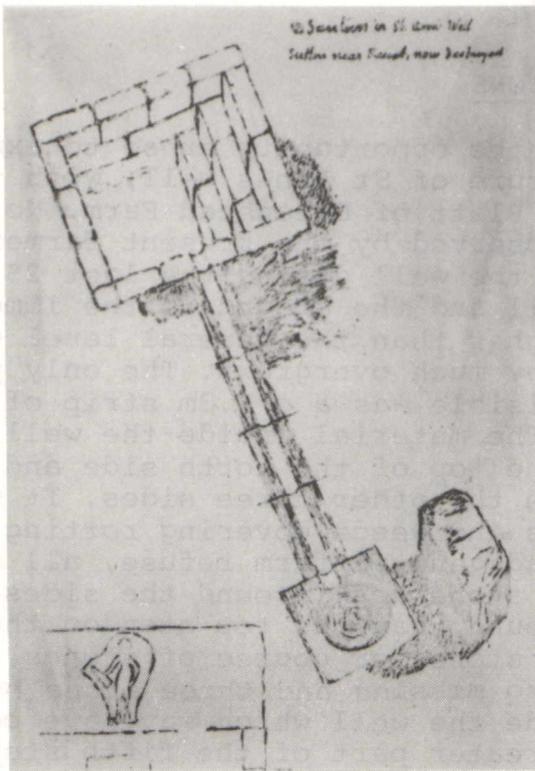


Figure 1 St Ann's Well

Sketch reproduced from the Owen MSS by kind permission of Manchester Public Library

## FIELD INVESTIGATIONS

In October 1976, the opportunity arose to examine and record the structure of St Ann's well, with the kind permission of Mr T. Platt of Eltonhead Farm. No stonework or bones had been observed by the present farmer in ploughing the field around the well during the last 25 years. At this time both the well and the ground in the immediate vicinity were somewhat higher than the general level of the surrounding field and very much overgrown. The only part of the well which was visible was a c 0.3m strip of masonry along the north side. The material inside the well came up to within 0.5m of the top of the north side and sloped up over the stone work on the other three sides. It was made up of a thatch of grass and weeds covering rotting vegetation, field boulders and general farm refuse, all rather lightly packed. When the stone work around the sides had been exposed it was found that the top step on the east side was missing. The top stone, or course of stones, on the wall opposite were also missing and three stone blocks were later found inside the well which may have collapsed from this wall. The greater part of the fifth step was missing, the two pieces that remained bonded into the side walls were badly eroded. About 0.05m below the fifth step on the south, west and north sides, a stone shelf projected from the walls of the well. When the loose refuse had been removed to this level, a compact floor of fine silt was reached. This did not appear to have been recently disturbed and was not further excavated. The well was quite dry at this level which is 0.5-0.6m above the level of water in the brook to the south. It was noted that there were a number of roughly dressed stone blocks embedded in the banks of the brook and these were not disturbed. Subsequently the well has been infilled to protect it from weathering and vandalism. Copies of the photographic record taken of the remains uncovered are deposited in the Merseyside Sites and Monuments Record, MCM.

Comparing the well in its present state with Owen's sketch, it would appear that, in addition to the stones whose absence has already been noted, the stone channel, basin and block had also been removed since the mid 19th century. Although the sketch gives a good idea of what the well must have looked like, a close comparison shows differences in detail which suggest that, like the manuscript, it may have been drawn up some time after the event. There is one irregularity worthy of note. There was no sign of the channel being continued through the top stone of the well on the south side, as is shown on the sketch. Could it be that this small section of channel was included in error on the sketch? Does this suggest that the channel was a later addition to the well? It seems unlikely, given the height of the well above the brook, that the natural water level in the well would ever have been sufficiently high for water to flow down the channel without mechanical aid. From earlier

writers it would appear that the well has been dry or silted up for many years. In 1866-7 it was described as filled with water (Higgins 1867, 66) but Owen does not refer to the water level in his description neither is it clear from his sketch. Coal mining has been carried out in Sutton from the 16th century and continues to this day. It is more than likely that this has resulted in a general lowering of the water table in the local area.

All the material removed from the well during excavation was of very recent date and it would appear that the well has been investigated several times in the last seventy years. No dating evidence for the construction of the well was discovered. However, two sherds of later medieval pottery were recovered from within 5m of the well during field walking in 1978 (Davey 1980, 81).

#### ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

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