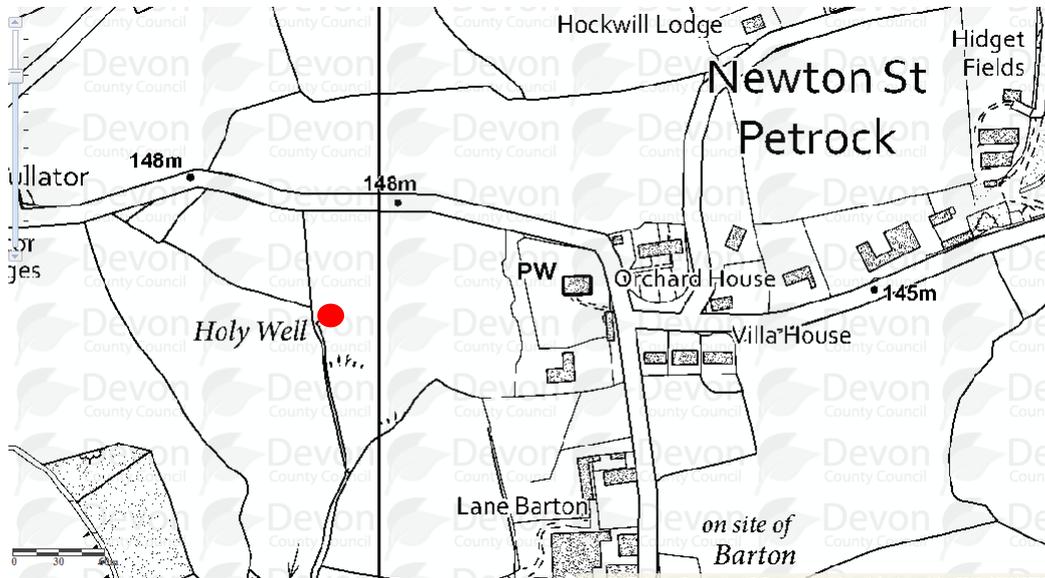


Friends of Berry Castle
Archaeological excavation Sept 2019
Well of St Petrock, Newton St Petrock



Grid ref. - SS 409 122

142m above sea level

Background

Brown, T., 1957, Holy and Notable Wells of Devon, 214 (Article in Serial). SDV304810.

Holy well (probably St. Petrock's) circa 145 metres west of church in a field. Stone surround almost vanished, overhung by ancient ash stump.

Ordnance Survey Archaeology Division, 1978 - 1980, SS41SW1 (Ordnance Survey Archaeology Division Card). SDV343688.

Visited 19th March 1954. Uncovered and has appearance of a spring. There is some rubble around suggesting a low wall previously surrounded it. The whole is in dilapidated condition.

Visited 16th November 1978. There was quite possibly a spring at this point but no evidence of a well in the form of any stone structure survives.

The well is situated 165m West of the Church, on the western boundary of a field. Most references to the well, from the last 20 years, call it 'the lost well', as it's precise location was unknown.

According to the legends, St Petrock was returning from a pilgrimage to Rome, when he stayed at Newton St Petrock. During his time there, it rained constantly. The locals asked him when the storm would stop and he told them that it would end the next day. Unfortunately for him, it continued to rain. He was appalled at his own presumption that he could foretell the future and set out on a journey of penance to Rome, then Jerusalem, then India. There, he befriended a wolf, which he is often pictured with. His journey took seven years, before returning to Britain. The well is one of the few, which claims to have direct links to a saint.

The current landowner had bought the house, with the land, as he had been Christened in the well's waters, as had many families and generations before him. From this, we knew that the well was still accessible, around the 1940s. He also described the base having 'holed stones'.

Introduction

Two days were spent preparing the site. For the dig itself, we had one whole day and three half days, which were dictated by the weather and volunteer's availability.



i previous view of well

The dig was carried out by volunteers from the village, Berry Castle members ACE Archaeology other interested parties. Two of whom had experience in archaeological digs. Due to unavoidable circumstances, we didn't have a qualified archaeologist on hand, for the dig itself. However, advice was sought from County Archaeologist Bill Horner, as to how to proceed. On his advice, we didn't dig below the original levels.

Volunteers were briefed, on arrival, about the main objectives, dealing with finds, general trench etiquette and health and safety. A daily log was kept, along with labelling and photographing finds.

Preparation

In June, NDAS member and qualified archaeologist, Steve George, visited the site with two FOB committee members, in order to locate the site and plan an approach to the dig.

Located in thick undergrowth, the well was hidden. It was only when almost on top of it, could the shape be seen. The biggest surprise was the size. Measuring around 2.5 – 3m across, it was a lot larger than expected.



ii First discovery



iii Clearing begins

Over the next weeks, volunteers strimmed and cut back the vegetation surrounding the well and pulled out the grass, which had established inside it. This gave a clearer view of the site and made it safer to move around.

Grass was removed from the drainage channel, exposing a pavement of flat stones.



iv Opening up the drainage channel

Sadly, due to unavoidable circumstances, the dig was postponed until September, where further strimming was carried out. The site was prepared with lines laid out and measurements taken. The dig then commenced.

Aims

The main objectives were:-

. Removing the silt from the well and restoring the stones, which have fallen in, to their original position around the sides.

The water was removed by hand, as previous pumps couldn't keep up with the water coming in. This allowed us to scrape back, without obscuring our view, from floating silt. We then removed the silt from the fallen stone and the base of the well. The base was then run over with the metal detector, to indicate if anything was between or beneath the stones.



v Emptying the well

. To uncover the stone platform, which is believed to be across the top, above the well and find the full extent of it.

The association with baptisms, meant that there would probably be an audience. Therefore, there may be a defined standing area above the well. This involved scraping back the soil and stems from previously overgrown vegetation to reveal the edges.

. To open up the original pavement/drainage channel, running from the well.



vi Pottery from the surface of the channel

Having already found pottery and quartz shards near the surface, we hoped to find further artefacts, which may help us in dating the site and give us an indication of who was using it.

The Excavation

The well

The first day was spent taking the water out and removing the silt from the sides. The fallen stone, from the surrounding wall, was uncovered and removed, ready to be used as part of the restoration. Underneath the silt, was a blue grey clay.

Pottery shards were discovered, near the opening to the lower pavement, as well as a large number of quartz stone and small flakes. These littered the well, to the W side, around the opening.



vii N side of the well cleared-shows previous digging out

Judging by the lack of blue clay on the N side and being more elongated than the rest of the well, it appeared to suggest that the well had been dug out, at some point in the past. This was also the side where we found most of the fallen stone and soil. As the water refilled, there were several 'swirls' in the suspended sediment, indicating that the water was coming in from several points. On returning for the second day, the sediment had settled, leaving a blue-veined effect

on the base, where the springs had pushed away the silt.



ix Blue vein effect in the well



viii stone step, in well entrance

The second day was spent scraping back, at the entrance to the well. If this was a pool for baptisms, it's probable that there would be steps into it. A small stone step was discovered, towards the

base of the entrance. This consisted of several flat stones, lined up across the opening.

One of the more intriguing finds was whilst scraping back, around the entrance. Small quartz stones were embedded into the clay, around the sides of the well. These were not amongst the silt (although there were a lot of flakes in it), but 'pressed' into the clay walls.

Further strimming went ahead, along the N side, to investigate whether the hillock (2m beyond the well) was the stone and soil from the N edge. It was identified as being so, by the blue clay deposits amongst the stone and soil. Pottery shards were also found in it.

Trench 2 (the lower pavement)

The lower pavement had been exposed, whilst preparing the site. With the



water being bailed out of the well, the build-up of silt was washed away, leaving defined stones and exposing large numbers of quartz stone and pottery and porcelain. Again, the quartz surprised us, as a small rectangular 'tile' was found in the channel.

X Lower pavement/drainage channel-pottery and quartz – before and after





xi Quartz 'tile'



Trenches 1 and 3 (above E side of well)

The first task involved cleaning back the topsoil, and sinking 'test pits', in order to investigate whether there was a platform above the well. Test pits are a simple way of determining whether there is anything there, before opening up a trench. The test pits proved fruitful, revealing flat, smooth stones compacted together.



xii Test pits



These test pits were then extended. Trench 1, to the N and E, trench 3 to the S and W. Archaeologists, whether professional or amateur, apply attention to detail. At the next stage the earth from each trench was carefully trowelled back layer by layer. Normally, you'd expect the nature of the soil to change, the deeper you go. However, no changes were observed.

Trench 1 was extended, to investigate the extent of the platform, away from the well. Trench 3 was extended to investigate how far it reached towards the well. A smaller extension was dug to see if it followed the outline of the well, to the S.

All soil removed from the trenches was examined so that very small finds such as pottery sherds were not missed. The soil was then placed alongside the trench on what is known as a spoil heap. Even the spoil got attention as a

metal detector was passed over it, in order to identify pieces of metal that may have been missed.

Pathway to the South side



After establishing the original level of the platform, we wanted to investigate whether it led to a path and steps, running around the side of the well, as this would bring people down to the opening. Plenty of flat stones were partially exposed, so by scraping back, it gave more of an insight into this. It was clear that the edges, on this side of the well, had been disturbed, with stone from the field strewn nearby. We can't conclusively say whether these particular stones were intended as steps, or just happened to create a path down to the well.

A large stone slab was exposed, along with a large broken bone, to the side of it.

xiii Exposed stone of a possible pathway

The current level of the possible steps were above the platform, so it's unlikely that they would be of the same age. However, these may have been laid above the original ones, which, currently, we are not digging below, to find out. At the lower end of the steps, more quartz was uncovered.



xiv Stone slab, where bone was found



xv Bone from S pathway

Finds

Pottery

The pottery which was found in both the well and the trenches, was identified as North Devon, by one of our volunteers and Burton Art Gallery. The green/yellow glaze and thick, rough texture, is a distinctive characteristic of the type. It has been dated to between 300-500 years old. White china was also found in the lower pavement (Trench 2).



xvi Pottery and china from the lower pavement

Pottery of this kind was uncovered in all trenches and the well. Smaller, thinner finds were unearthed in the well.

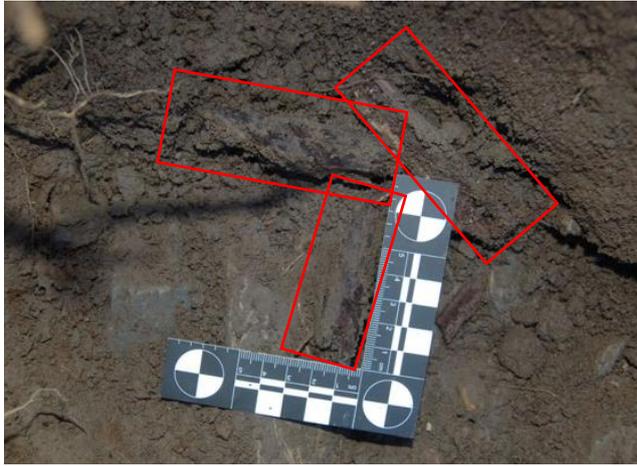


xvii Pottery from the well



A grey round rock was found in Trench 1 (30cm below the surface). The texture is similar to concrete, but it appears to be rounded, as if it had been through an attritional process in water.

xviii From Trench 1



On the last day, in Trench 3, several small branches were discovered, in the extension to the trench. These were found nestled between and resting on the stones of the platform.

xix Preserved branches

The strangest finds were the quantity of quartz, both in the well and trenches. The well contained many tiny flakes of quartz, as well as large lumps. Many seemed to have been pressed into the sides of the well, whilst others were in the base.

A number of pieces were found in the trenches, with larger stones being uncovered, wedged between the platform stones, when the trenches were being cleaned up, on the last day.

The quartz 'tile' was the biggest mystery, as somebody had taken significant time to shape it.



xx A discarded part of agricultural machinery?

Despite using the metal detector around the site, only one item was picked up. Beyond the lower pavement (Trench 2) and into the boggy area, this object was uncovered. It was buried about 10cm below the surface. The surrounding soil had been blackened by it. It was suggested that it could have broken off old agricultural machinery and been thrown to the side of the field.

Although we didn't find many objects, with the detector, the surrounding soil in the well and the boggy area, beyond had a high iron reading. Once on the field boundary, the ground was completely water-logged, which gave the water a red tinge.

Evaluation and Conclusions

What first began as a small-scale dig, has given us many surprises along the way. Our initial preconceived ideas of the well, being a small stone-lined hole in the ground, have been literally blown out of the water. From the first visit with Steve, we realised that this was not what we were expecting. Rather than a standard well, this appears to be more of a plunge pool. Uncovered and clearing back the vegetation, has given us a better overall view of the well, although the dig has raised many more questions.

This dig was intended to investigate the possibility of a stone platform above the well and restore the well, for the community to come together over. These objectives have been reached, but without any finds which can help us date the site, we are still having to make educated guesses, rather than establishing hard facts. But this is often the way with any archaeological excavation; can we ever really definitely know what people thought, or how they used a site, many centuries ago?

The trenches sides showed no signs of changing layers (contexts), which was unexpected. Although there were obvious signs of stone being dumped around the well, (as with many agricultural fields) there wasn't a significant change in levels, from the natural gradient of the field.

The level of the possible stone platform was the same as the top of the surrounding stone wall of the well, suggesting that these were related. However, dating is not known. It makes sense that there was a solid surface to stand on, for onlookers, when baptisms were taking place. Standing inside the well, the platform would be around head height.

The pathway of stones, leading round the South side of the well, was just below today's surface level, descending to the entrance of the well. Having not dug down, below these stones, we can't tell if there was another, previous set of steps, underneath. This is something to investigate further, once we have an archaeologist to advise.

The shards of N Devon pottery, which were found littering the site (dated between 300-500yrs old), would be expected, as people would have filled bowls and jugs with the water. However, this well has always been seen as a baptism well, rather than a source of drinking water. The village has many wells and springs, so drinking water wouldn't have been a limited. However, local 'legend' tells us that the well has never dried up, even in long hot Summers. So, could this have been a source, when other springs dried up? If this was a place which always provided water, it's not surprising that it had religious connections, both Christianity and possibly earlier.

This brings us onto the quartz. It's obvious that this type of stone was brought to the site from further afield, as it's not a naturally occurring stone, in the area. A recently discovered enclosure, a mile to the East, also has a large

number of quartz stone, where the banks would have been. Although the stones are spread, probably from ploughing, they tend to follow the lines of the banks. Could there be a connection to this site? Another unconfirmed enclosure, 700m to the NE, also shows large amounts of quartz, both large and small stones, whilst the surrounding fields have none. Both enclosure sites were visible from a distance; the later having a full 360 degree view extending to Woolery, Bodmin, Dartmoor and Exmoor. This enclosure site, especially, would have stood out in the landscape. Was there something 'special' about the area, which was marked with quartz?

The large number of stones found in the well, platform and pressed into the clay sides, indicates that the quartz was deliberately used for a purpose, at the well. Maybe decoration, as it would enhance the 'sparkling' effect of the water, or as Time Team's Francis Pryor puts it, if we are not sure what it's for, just call it 'ritual'! Most of the quartz, pressed into the sides, was found around the entrance – something which would have been most visible from the platform, above. Hundreds of tiny flecks were also found around the well base and sides, mixed with the silt. Could people have been smashing the stones, for some reason? This may explain the large quantity of slivers found in the well.

The entrance, at the Eastern side, had a significant drop, into the well. We imagined that there would be steps into it. One set, at least, was uncovered. These measured 14cm front to back, but not wanting to dig too deep into the clay (as advised), we can't be sure if further stones lie behind them. This is something to investigate further, next season.

The North side of the well seemed elongated, in comparison with the rest of the sides. Once the silt was scraped back, it was clear that it had been dug out, at some point in the past. A pile of soil and stone, a few metres back from the side was strimmed back and cleared. The characteristic blue clay, pottery and quartz was found within the pile, leading us to believe that this was from the well. These stones will be used to restore the North side.

The lower pavement became much clearer, as the water was taken out. The silt around the stones flowed away, leaving a flat stone pathway, leading out of the well. Here, we found the largest number of pottery fragments, along with a high number of quartz stones. The most intriguing find was that of the 'tile'. If we had found several, it could suggest that they may have lined the pavement. However, a single one is hard to explain.

The dig met our objectives, but created many more questions, which we hope to answer when we dig again, next season. With a qualified archaeologist, on site, we can investigate further down to the original stone base and underneath, as well as below the stone platform and pavement. This may unearth more artefacts, which could help us date the well.