

CAPEL FFYNNON FAIR

THE CHAPEL OF ST. MARY'S WELL, NEAR CEFN,
DENBIGHSHIRE

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THE LOCATION AND HISTORY OF THE SITE

THE excavation of this well and chapel, together with the preparation of large-scale measured drawings and an illustrated report, was undertaken in 1963 by a group of students from the School of Architecture at the Liverpool College of Building, under the direction of the author. The project was assisted by a small grant from the Ancient Monuments Society.

The site lies in a meadow about 100 yards north of the River Elwy at the foot of a steep wooded slope half a mile west of the A.525 road from Denbigh to St. Asaph and three miles from the latter. North of the bridge by which the A.525 crosses the Elwy is a narrow lane to the west, sign-posted to Cefn, and some 400 yards along this lane is a fork at which a track drops almost to the river. At this point was once a ford and the chapel lies about a quarter of a mile to the west. The site is on the estate of nearby Wigfair House, a 19th-century brick building, the property of the Hon. Miss Myfyda Tyrrell-Kenyon, who kindly approved the project.

On the south bank of the river the track from the ford passes beside the 15th-century manor house of Dol Belidr, unused for over half a century and now ruinous. The site of the manor has been occupied since the 13th century and connections with the chapel and its well are possible.

The early history of Ffynnon Fair is unknown. The earliest dateable events are the 15th-century rebuilding of the well and the contemporary enlargement of the chapel, even then an ancient building. Worship at the holy wells of Wales began in the Dark Ages and was very widely practised. In the 16th century such shrines were suppressed and the disused wells quickly became overgrown and filled with their own crumbling fabric. At

Ffynnon Fair soil was washed down the hillside and collected against the north wall of the early church to such a depth that the remains of the well were almost completely buried. In 1847, however, there still existed "a fragment of a building with some traces of walls . . . but no architectural features . . . a little to the south west of the chapel" and it may be assumed that this was the dwelling of a priest or the keeper of the well.

Until the mid-17th century the chapel continued to be used at intervals for marriages, mostly clandestine, performed by one of the vicars choral of St. Asaph, in which parish the chapel lay until the formation of the parish of Cefn in 1865. By 1800 the chapel was in ruins. In the 1840's the well was "cleaned out and made



The Well from the north east. Note the absence of one pier on the well surround (middle left). The top stone at this point was part of a moulded transom.

rather more accessible to visitors. But . . . in one night all that he (the then owner, a Colonel Howard) had done was destroyed and the well desecrated more than ever." Following this vandalism a wrought-iron spiked railing was set up round the site but for several decades there have been gaps in this fence. The result is that the feet of unwanted visitors have worn down the top of the wall between the well and the bath and also the upper course of the well basin. There are many graffiti scratched into the surfaces, mainly outlines of feet with square-toed shoes, initials, hand outlines, and one partially illegible date (possibly 1828). At least one stone was found to be worn and inscribed on two sides, having been turned over and reset many years ago.

Colonel Howard is generally held to have erected the fence and also created around the ruins a garden in the romantic manner, complete with rockeries. At the same time as the well basin was cleared out the parapet was built up with any stonework to hand. Other medieval fragments of stone were probably used to create the rockeries but the resultant mounds could not be excavated in the time available to the students in 1963.

THE SITE AS FOUND

In 1962 the author cleared the well basin of overhanging bramble and weed and in February of the next year he visited the site with Mr. O. E. Craster, then H.M. Inspector of Ancient Monuments for Wales. Extremely severe winter conditions had frozen the River Elwy and covered the valley with a thick layer of snow yet the water of the spring, the surrounding stonework and over 20 yards of the outlet channel were completely free of ice. It was subsequently found that the water rises at the rate of over 4,000 gallons per hour at a constant temperature of 52°F. (i.e. 20°F. above freezing). Hence the immunity of the stones from frost erosion.

The roots of mature sycamore trees on the slope immediately above the well had badly displaced the stones of the basin and in places the overhang of the stonework was such that collapse seemed imminent. Moreover, the well basin was almost filled with large stones thrown in by vandals and the bath adjoining the well basin was full of mud deposited by a trickle of water flowing

down the slope through the sycamores. The chapel was covered with dense ivy and a number of small trees were growing on the walls. Within was a morass, for the well spring had leaked out of the basin below the present soil-level and had seeped into the church. The chancel was the only comparatively dry part, being the farthest from the spring and well drained.

In July, 1963, the approaches and surrounds of the site were cleared of bracken and undergrowth but the trees were only extensively thinned as the Wigfair estate agents wisely did not wish newly-exposed stonework to attract destructive passers-by. Exploration of the site itself proved exceptionally difficult as all excavations quickly filled with water. Selective narrow trenching was a partial answer, as the rising water and mud could be removed by bucket-chains. Raised plank footpaths were used for crossing the morass. Such remedies were possible owing to the generous supplies of plant and equipment on loan. Nevertheless because of the extensive flooding the internal floor-level over most of the chapel could not be discovered although both remaining doorways on the west side of the building had sound thresholds.

THE CHAPEL

The existing fabric is mainly of two periods. Originally there seems to have been a simple roughly-rectangular building of rubble walling in local limestone. This was immediately adjacent to the south side of the holy well having the long axis aligned approximately east-north-east to west-south-west, with the altar presumably at the eastern end. At this end of the building a mass of hand-placed stone filling with a roughly level surface may indicate a sub-floor, possibly under the original chancel step, the level of which is approximately the same as that of the water in the well.

Full details of the original chapel were difficult to determine as there has been much alteration and no contemporary windows remain. The lower parts of the wall against the well have been roughly rebuilt with used stones and little attempt at bonding, probably in the nineteenth century. Against the inside of this wall a flat-topped bank of puddled clay was found about two feet wide and two feet high, bedded upon the grey shale sub-soil.

This clay was probably placed there in an attempt to keep the chancel dry but it has deteriorated and the well water again seeps through into the chapel to form the morass already mentioned.

The gable walls of the chapel are largely complete. The western gable has coping similar to that of the later chancel. This similarity may indicate a persistent local pattern or that some renewal took place when the 15th-century chancel was built, an operation which would in any case have necessitated substantial alterations to the pre-existing roof. The eastern wall of the older chapel retains a bell-cote of a simple and traditional form, as are the copings and kneelers of the gables.



The Well and Bath from the west, with the eastern gable of the original chapel at the rear.

Along the inside of the western gable of this early chapel ran a channel which carried the well water through the church and out again towards the River Elwy. There is no indication of how this channel, which ran immediately inside the western doorway, was bridged. It is narrow enough to step across but there is a drop of some one and a half feet from the threshold to the stonework of which the bottom is formed. Unfortunately the floor level of this older part of the chapel could not be determined.

On the outer face of the wall above the exit culvert to the south, roughly over the centre of the lintel and about a foot below the bottom of the rectangular window opening, are two holes. These appear to have formed part of a support for some object, perhaps a small shelf for a statue. They are of insufficient size and depth to have supported a weight of more than a few pounds for any length of time. On the interior of this wall, just above the exit culvert, was found a roughly-chiselled shallow groove running vertically upwards to slightly below the sill of the later 15th-century window opening. Over the exit culvert is a crude uncut lintel some five or six feet long on the outer face. It was not possible to establish whether there was any sill to the culvert, apart from a few large stones set in the shale, and it would be necessary to divert the water to examine this area further.

The water channel inside the chapel may have been originally uncovered and had a few traces of a stone lining. The water in it appears to run at the level of the top of the original foundations of the west and south walls. Foundations which are exposed in the channel are of large unwrought stones. A line of similar stones marks the position of the original southern wall of the early church where it was removed to erect the 15th-century chancel. These stones are undoubtedly the foundations of the old chapel. They lie on the bed of grey shale which underlies the whole building and also appears in the bed of the river some distance to the south. There must have been some sort of filling to raise the floor level above these foundation stones but this filling has now disappeared.

The doorway in the western gable of the present chapel appears to be the original, and identical with the south entry to the first building which was removed to the 15th-century chancel. To

the south of the western door is an area several feet in extent of newer masonry. This resembles the fabric of the original building very closely but is slightly yellower in colour and contains mortar of a different texture. It was not established whether this masonry was merely a repair or whether there had been an opening through the wall at this point, as the internal face was heavily covered with a green algae and ivy. Above the door the original window would have been narrower than the present one, and so probably was the adjacent window at the western end of the south wall over the exit of the water channel.

In the late 15th century the well basin was completely and elaborately rebuilt but there are as yet no indications to show how this newer well structure was integrated with the original chapel. At the same time as the rebuilding of the well a large chancel, aligned at right-angles to the original church, was added to the southern side of the old building. Between the fabric of the original building and the western wall of the 15th-century extension is a vertical crack signifying an unbonded joint. This crack is visible only on the inside of the western wall of the new chancel as on the opposite side of the chancel the walls have collapsed almost to ground level at this point. All the 15th-century wrought stone is of sandstone, well finished and bonded into limestone rubble closely resembling the walling of the earlier church. The doorway in the new portion is, as has been stated, identical to that in the western gable and was almost certainly moved from the original building to its present position.

The 15th-century chancel produced the only examples of ancient flooring. In the south-west of this chancel was an area of 3-4 square yards of plastered floor some $1\frac{1}{2}$ -2 inches thick, laid on clay and very uneven. To the right of the altar and some nine inches above the general level was another small portion of floor plaster, seemingly of a later date and quite unrelated to the other portion found.

The floor and threshold levels found all indicate a change in the floor levels within the chapel. This change most probably took place at the junction of the original chapel and the new chancel, on the line of the original foundations, as would be demanded by the natural fall of the site at that point.

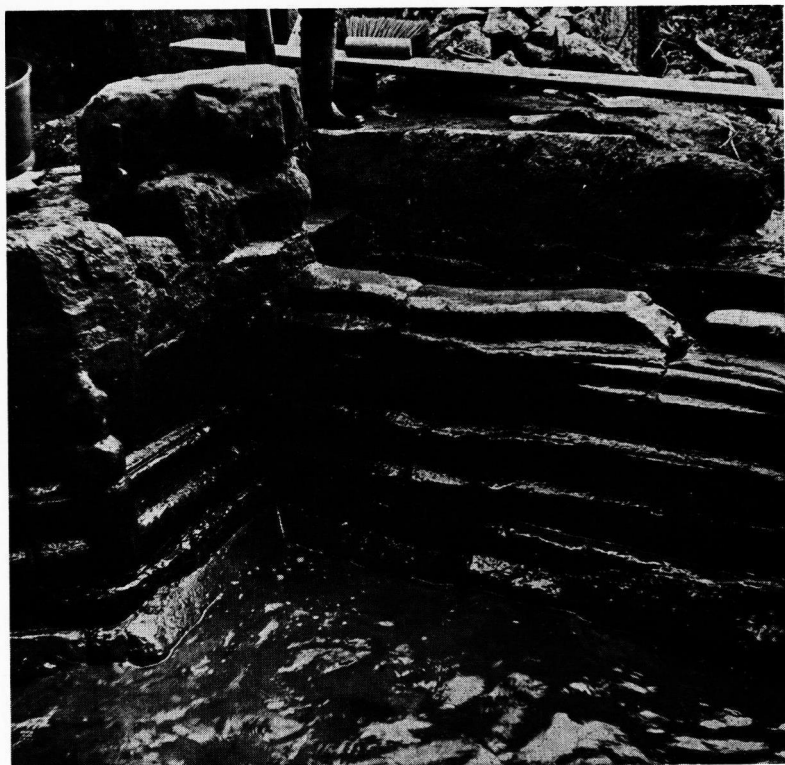
At the same time as the new chancel was built, two of the remaining windows, probably once narrow lancets, seem to have been enlarged. These are in the western gable and south wall respectively of the older building. In the western wall of the 15th-century chancel was once another window, of which portions of the sill survive. The only evidence for its size and form are moulded blocks of sandstone forming the two ends of the sill, so only the original width could be ascertained. The more complete 15th-century window in the western gable is badly eroded, being in a fairly soft sandstone. It has a four-centred arch with hood mould and, externally, the remains of corbels. No tracery is left but fragments of jambs and the ends of the sills indicate the type of moulding employed. Externally there was a hood mould terminating in two corbels in the form of heads but now weathered beyond recognition. Below the bed of the sill was a rectangular depression in a roughly-central position. This depression resembled the much deeper rectangular opening below the sill of the window in the southern wall over the outlet for the stream. This latter window is roughly square and of two ogee-headed lights. The stones at the head are very badly weathered and were displaced but have now been reset by the Ministry of Public Building and Works. The rectangular opening below the sill level is without splay and there appears to be no provision for bonding any stone jambs into the structure.

THE WELL

With the aid of pumps the well basin was almost entirely emptied of water, and large quantities of rubble stones and mud were removed, but the pumps were unsuitable for removing the sludge which formed at the bottom. All the visible stonework was cleaned and precise measurements and the profiles of mouldings were taken. From this information large-scale detailed drawings were prepared. As a conservation measure most of the two top courses of masonry round the well were removed and accessible joints of the remainder were cleaned out for re-pointing. Almost all traces of the original mortar had gone but some cement repairs, no doubt of the Colonel Howard period, were found and were left if sound. Open joints and cavities below normal water

level were packed with a stiff damp mix of cement and sand mortar (1 : 3) and larger cavities were filled with a dry mix of the same composition. Stones above water level were relaid with unpointed joints. The stonework of the bath and chapel were left untouched. When the survey was concluded all the newly-exposed fabric was re-covered with about a foot of soil, and the trenches were filled in.

It was found that the 15th-century well basin has a very strong architectural affinity to the famous and better-preserved basin at the shrine of Holywell dedicated to St. Winefride (a 7th-century saint) and rebuilt in 1480 by Lady Margaret Beaufort, the mother of Henry VII, of Welsh parentage. It is possible that Holywell



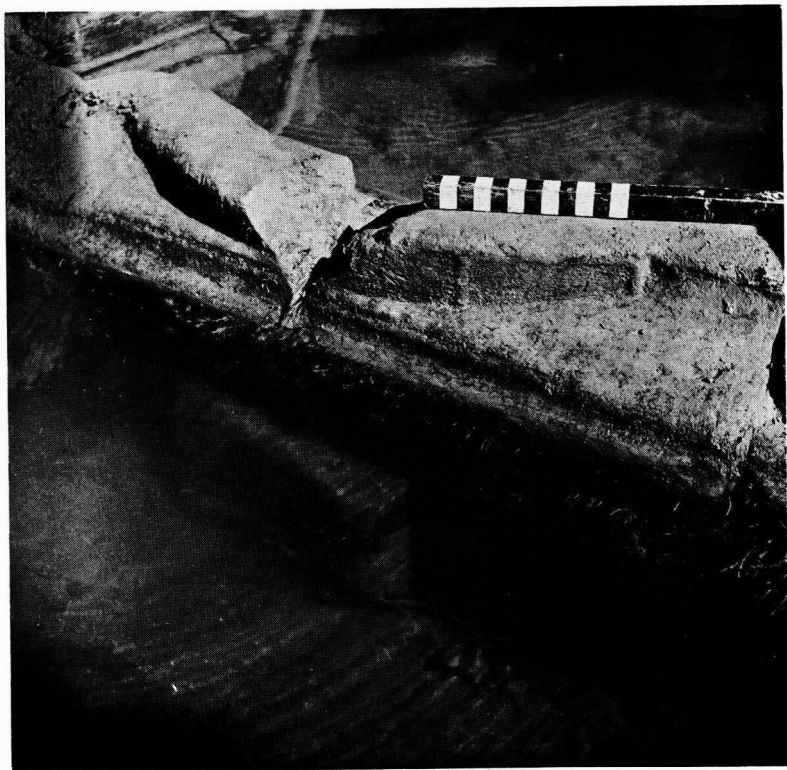
Moulding details inside the well basin, and the back of the wall with bowed sill (water pumped out).

was designed and built by one of the masons employed by Lady Margaret on her other enterprises at Cambridge. The university monuments have not yet been searched for proof of this. Holywell is about ten miles from Capel Ffynnon Fair. It lies above the southern side of the Dee estuary only eight miles east of St. Asaph. The shrine, which is one of the "Seven Wonders of Wales" is based on an eight-pointed star resulting from the superimposition of one square upon another so that the points of the star are of 90° and the internal angles 135° . At Ffynnon Fair the design is similarly derived from an eight-pointed star but measurement at the lowest point that could be reached, where the fabric was not disturbed by roots, etc., show the star form to have been more subtly constructed, resulting in the points being less than right angles and the internal angles greater than 135° . The bases of the piers at each point are regular octagons.

Owing to the high water-table it was not possible to remove enough soil to show the footings of the well structure or any traces of original pavement which surround it. Small ledges of unknown use were found in places round the outside of the masonry and, except where the well basin abuts on the chapel, appear to have been surrounded with a layer of puddled clay. The very high water level also prevented any attempt to establish the exact shape of the exterior of the basin at the point of contact with the northern wall of the chapel, which at this point would seem to be a 19th-century rebuild. The architecture of the canopy cannot yet be determined but it certainly contained a transom at some upper level and details of stone fragments give almost conclusive evidence that above the transom was probably a vault. The evidence for this statement is some re-used stones found built into the wall of the basin. Two of these stones appear to be part of a transom and were originally located above the outer points of the basin, each having a vertical attached shaft penetrating a horizontal moulding. These stones were broken in such a way as to indicate another moulding forming the other side of an angle such as can be seen on the plan. On the plan it will also be seen that two of the three points adjacent to the chapel do not conform to the general pattern of the remainder. Re-used stones indicate drastic 19th-century rebuilding here. Whilst there are

slight variations in the mouldings of the octagonal bases on the side away from the chapel and of the central pier shown (as it now exists on the site) built into the side of the chapel, there is no evidence of a pier at one of the other two points. Returning to the interior of the basin, there appears to be a fairly regular layer of stone a foot or so below the lowest level uncovered.

Between the well basin and the bath is a moulded masonry wall. Here as at Holywell this feature cuts off one of the points of the star and the sill connecting the two adjacent piers is bowed outwards in the middle. This sill shows evidence of having once supported five mullions, the positions of which are indicated by badly-weathered vertical ribs of shallow projection stopped at



The Wall between the well basin and the bath showing the stopped mouldings on the bowed sill and the rectangular plaque below the modern water level.

their lower ends against the concave outer surface of the sill. There is no indication on the inner face of similar mouldings. The inner face of the masonry wall carries the plinth mouldings found round the remainder of the basin and has various coved and chamfered surfaces occasioned by the bowed form of the sill.

Some two feet below the present water-level of the bath, on the outer surface of the masonry wall, is a rectangular projection chamfered on the top and both sides. The face of this panel is very badly weathered and there is consequently no trace of any inscription there may have been. Immediately below this panel, in the face of the wall, is an opening which was found to be blocked by bricks and mud. On the other side of the wall, in the well basin, clay had accumulated against this spot below the lowest water level that the pumps could achieve. Some of this clay was finally removed and the outlet of the water from the basin discovered. The outlet had been almost entirely blocked with bricks set and rendered in hard mortar, so that only a small orifice remained near the bottom. The true floor of the bath, as yet unlocated, must therefore be below the level of the orifice.

Whereas the well basin is of sandstone showing clear evidence of great age, the bath consists of coursed limestone rubble in an excellent state of preservation. In the top course of this rubble is a coping stone from one of the gables of the chapel, built in upside down. At each end of the bath are curved steps. These are built up of flagstones roughly cut to shape and there is evidence that they do not form an integral part of the sandstone well structure, for the vertical joint between the bottom of the bath and the outer face of the masonry wall next the well points to very irregular bonding if any at all—the bricklayer's trowel used to probe may only have been resisted by hard mortar or small stones. The bottom of the bath, flagged, appears also not to be bonded into the outer surfaces of the masonry wall.

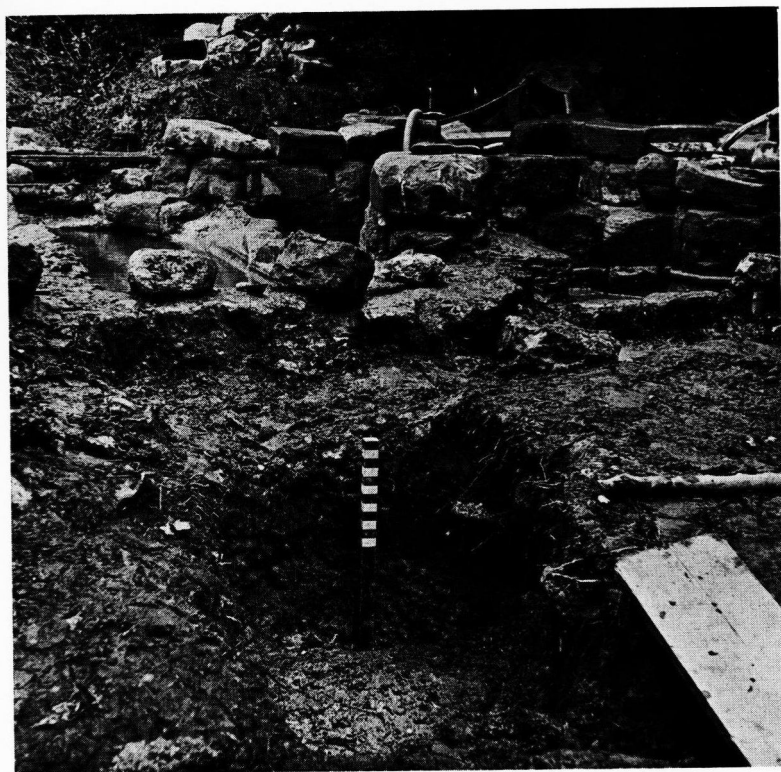
Arched over the point where the outflow channel leaves the bath in the direction of the chapel are two carved sandstone spandrels set in the top courses of limestone. These are the remains of a single block of stone which has eroded through at the apex of the arch, probably due to weathering and vandalism. The spandrels have on the side facing the bath a "flower and fern"

decoration identical with several stones at Holywell and typical of the late 15th century. This decoration at Ffynnon Fair is much weathered and is only clearly discernable in the morning sun.

The water runs from the bath into a stone channel leading to the chapel. Against the outside of the chapel wall the channel ends. From it the water makes a drop of two feet and then passes under the wall, through a hole with a rough lintel, into the channel already described inside the western gable of the church.

CONCLUSIONS

Any attempt to explore further the interior of the original chapel and the accumulation of earth around the well will be



The clay lining (shown by the scale) against the inside of the north wall of the original chapel. The bath and well encroach upon the north wall at this point.

futile until the level of the water in the well can be substantially lowered and kept at a low level for some days to permit the surrounding earth to drain. Excavation of accumulated soil and the uncovering of the mediaeval ground level should then prove conclusively that the bath was a later addition. This was suspected after the material and photographs obtained in the 1963 project had been scrutinised. Until then the bath and the well had been considered to be coeval.

The sandstone spandrels over the outlet from the bath would never have been built thus in the 15th century, although their original location on the site cannot be conjectured.

Compared with the sophisticated sandstone masonry of the well basin, the limestone bath and its steps are crude and unfinished. For a shrine of such quality the steps and bath, if part of the 15th-century design, would have reflected equal refinement and been of the same stone as the well basin.

The form of the outlet from the well basin into the bath, with arched soffit and rectangular plaque above it, strongly suggests it was intended to be seen, not submerged. The plaque would have been a most likely place for an inscription.

If a channel once existed running directly from the sill of this outlet to the trough along the inside of the western gable of the chapel, the water would have flowed gently along it. At present a weir about two feet in height is incorporated against the chapel wall. It may be that in early days the spring rose in a small stone-lined pool and when the original chapel was built this spring was diverted to the chapel wall along a rough channel which continued inside the building. This arrangement would probably have persisted when the present well basin was erected in the late 15th century and would imply a contemporary ground level a little lower than the well outlet and a water level inside the chapel slightly below the floor level. If the present basin was similar in this respect to that at Holywell, the water originally contained therein was of no great depth—perhaps a foot or two—and flowed out unrestricted through the outlet found in the masonry wall between the basin and the bath. Some water would always have remained in the well basin as the floor of this was lower than the outlet. This outflow arrangement may well indicate the original

form of the Holywell sluice, which has suffered numerous alterations and now has an opening quite unlike earlier illustrations.

It is known that the soil has risen against the east and north walls of the chapel. In consequence the north side of the chapel became very wet from water soaking into the accumulating soil instead of running away. The wall was therefore damaged and the clay wall was presumably placed on its inner side to reduce the unwanted flow of water onto the chapel floor. Probably the chapel was abandoned in the mid-17th century as much because of its permanently sodden state as through lack of worshippers. The seepage of water may also explain why it was seemingly never used for farm purposes. During the next two centuries the north wall



The chapel window over the exit culvert. The arched doorway on the right came from the original chapel in the fifteenth century.

collapsed owing to the accumulation of soil and the effects of flowing water on the mortar in the stonework. The clay bank may have prevented the gradual movement of parts of the well basin itself into the chapel because the clay held the footings of the wall and was itself unaffected by the water, which flowed round its ends.

The 1847 descriptions are too vague to give any indication of the extent of the well's restoration a few years earlier or the history of the bath. The 19th-century "restorers" attempted to create a structure resembling Holywell and the person responsible seems to have concluded that a similarity of basin justified the creation of a similar bath from the debris on the site. The rapid encroachment of mosses and water-plants over a few years persuaded the romantically-minded "H.L.J." that what he described in *Archaeologia Cambrensis* in 1847 was entirely mediaeval.

Nothing has yet been discovered which explains why so fine a shrine should have been erected in so remote an area. The history of the throngs of pilgrims visiting St. Winefride's Well at Holywell is well documented but no records are known of either benefactors or pilgrims to Ffynnon Fair.

The excavation of the immediate surroundings of the site would be a very worth-while project and the discovery of quantities of wrought stonework may be predicted with confidence.

To carry out this work it would be necessary to drain the well basin by releasing the water into the Chapel through a temporary outlet. As, however, one of the effects of excavation to the mediaeval ground level would be the restoration of the original water level in the well basin and permanent exposure of the well masonry, this would have to be made good against the elements.

There would, no doubt, be some objections to the destruction of the bath—sham though it may be—but the writer is of the opinion that, once the soil had been allowed to drain, careful exploratory probings would establish the presence or otherwise of a medieval channel and paving. In their absence the bath might be preserved but the well basin exposed and the stream re-channelled at a lower level.

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ILLUSTRATIONS

Plan and elevations by Frank Lofthouse.

Details of Well Basin by Pauline Ann Lyon.

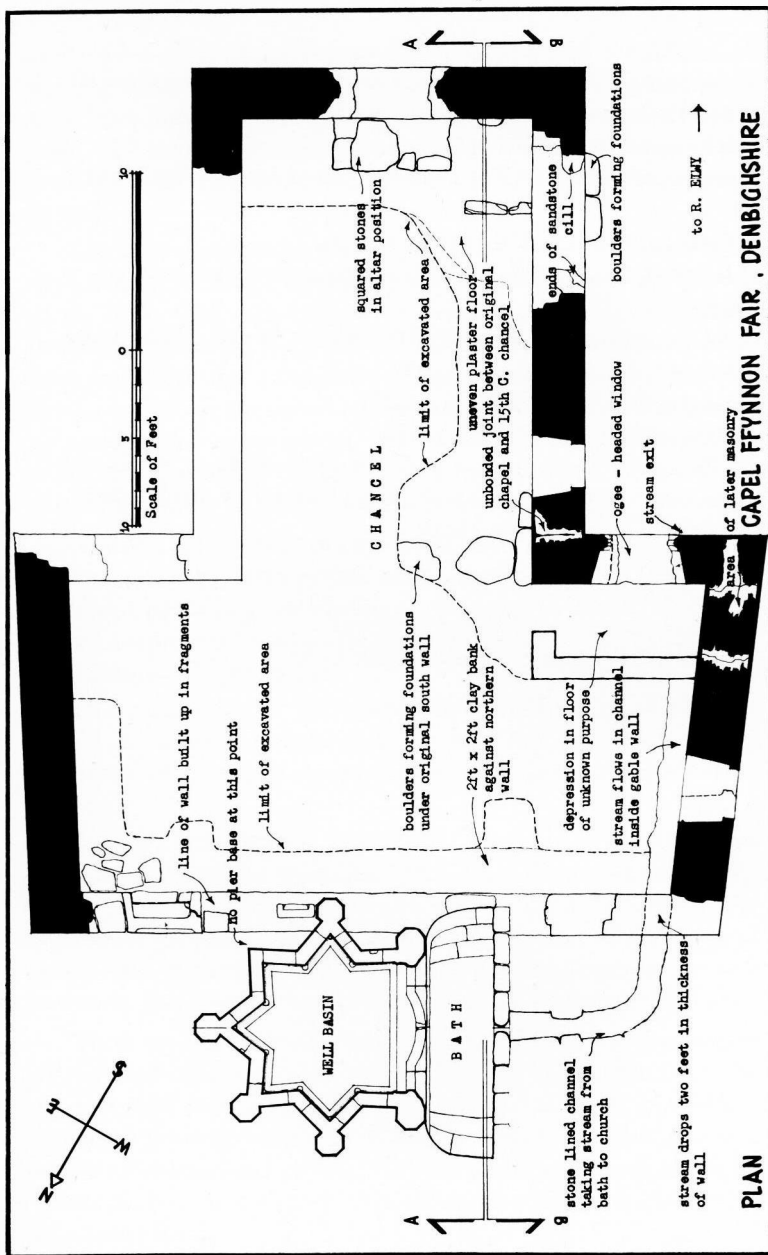


FIG. 1. Ground Plan of the original Chapel, the fifteenth-century Chancel, the Well Basin and Bath, and the channel for the stream

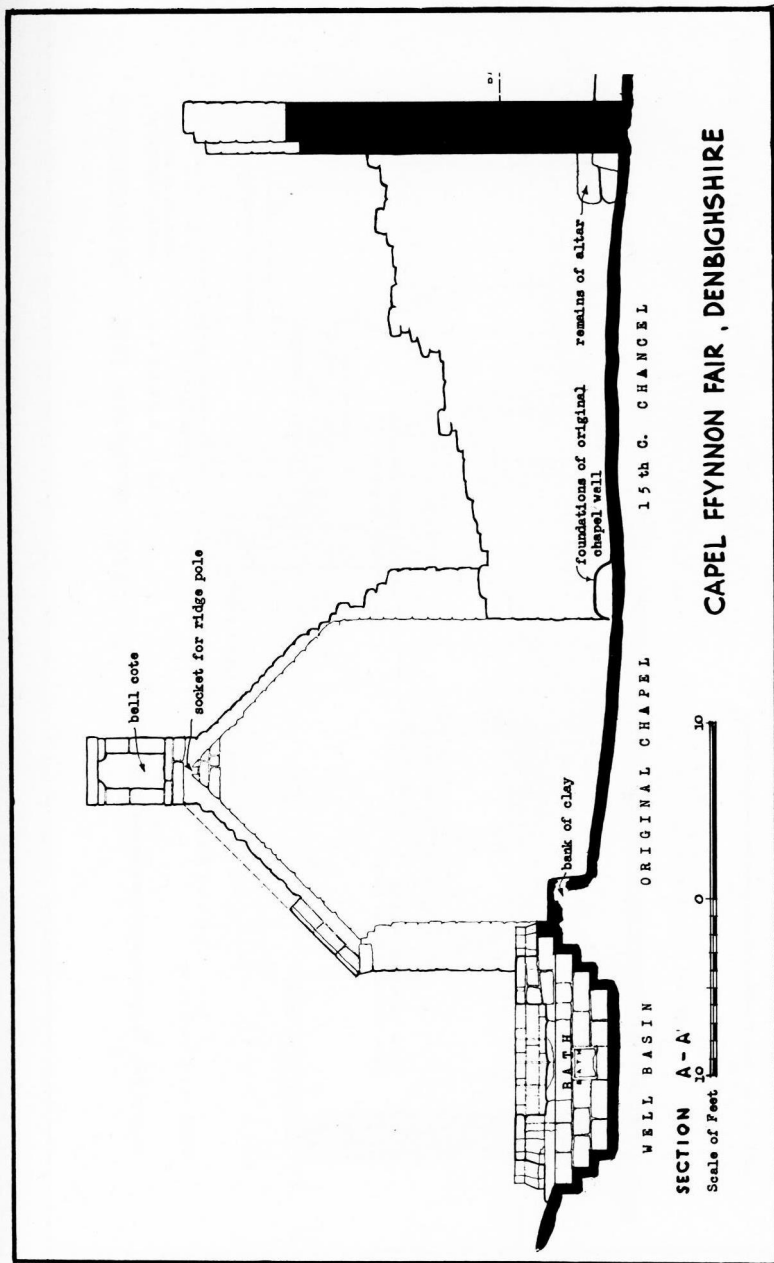


FIG. 2. The north-east interior elevation of the Chapel, with the Well Basin

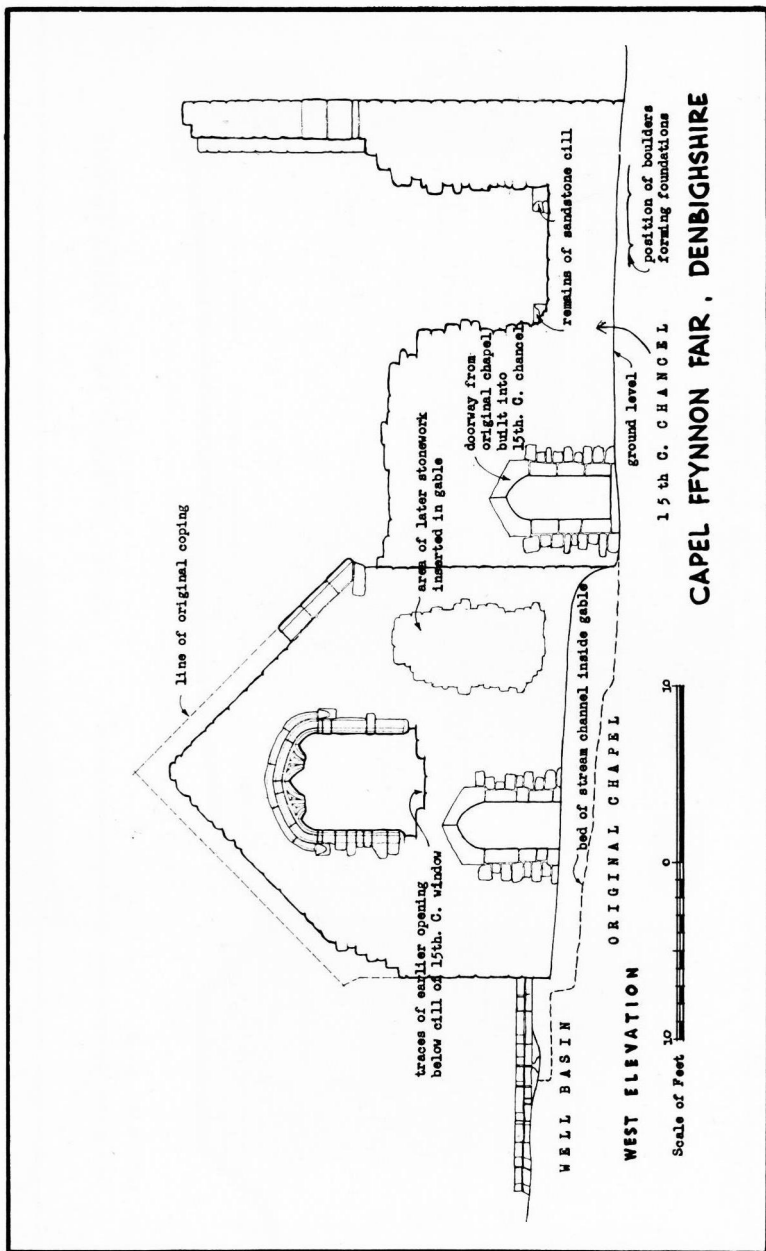


FIG. 3. The south-west exterior elevation of the Chapel, with the Well

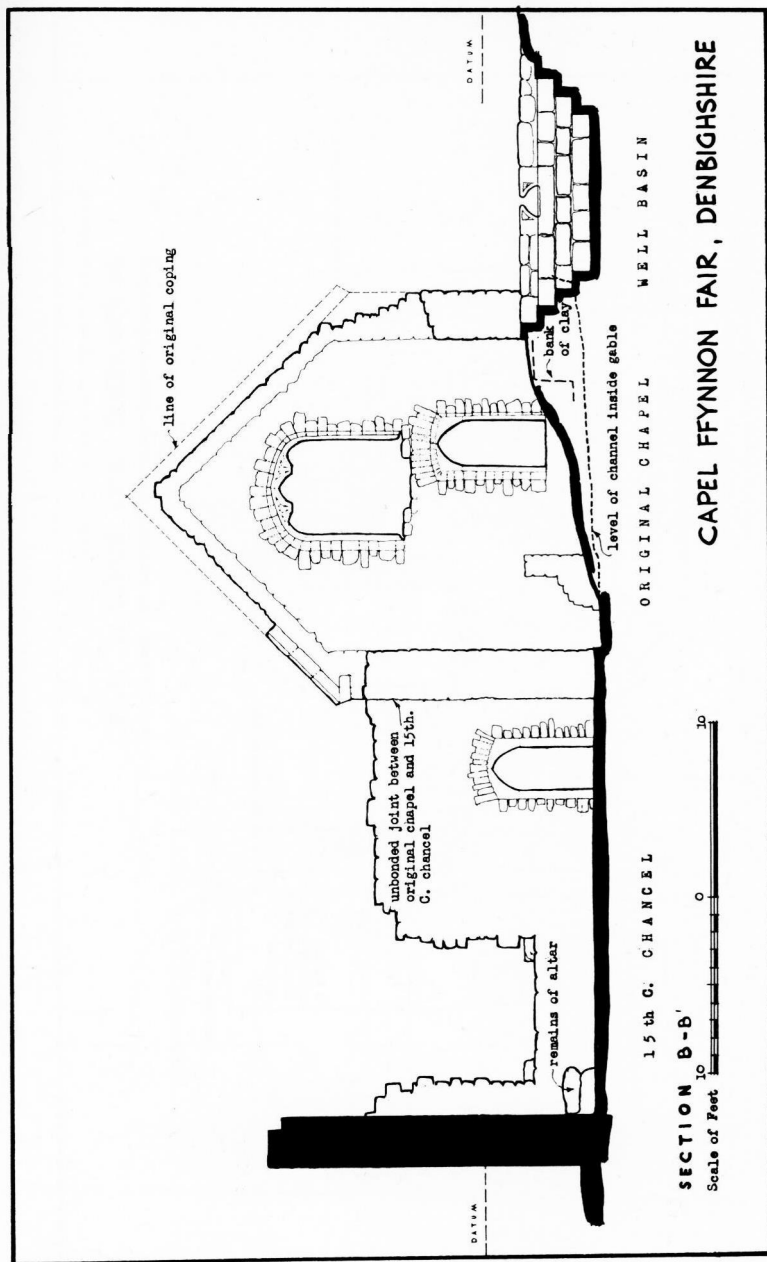


FIG. 4. The south-west interior elevation of the Chapel

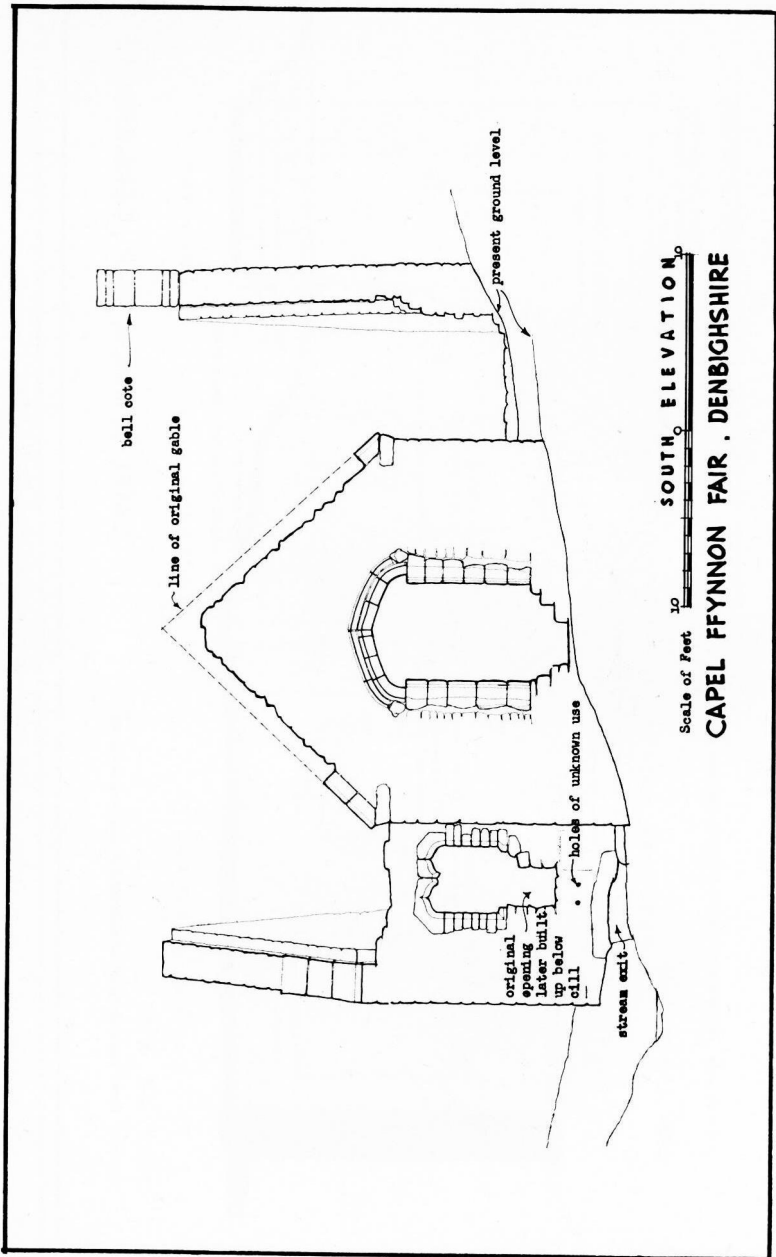


FIG. 5. The south-east exterior elevation of the Chapel

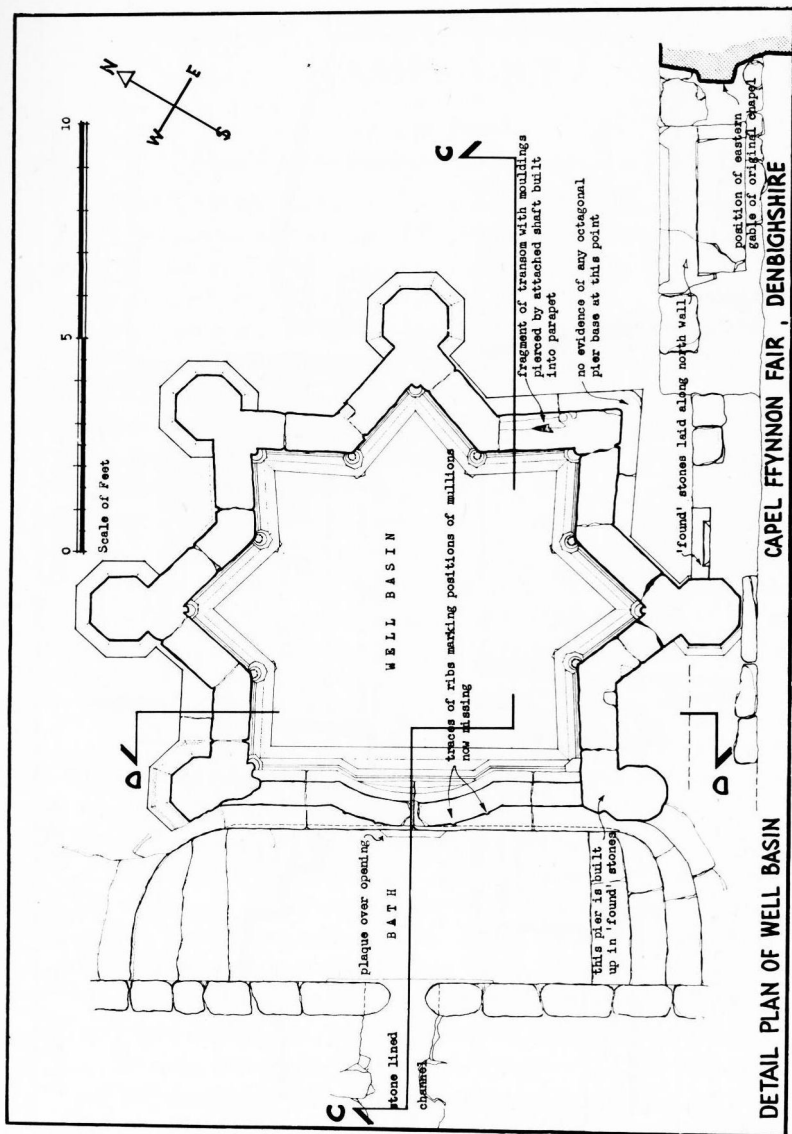


FIG. 6. Detail Plan of the Well Basin

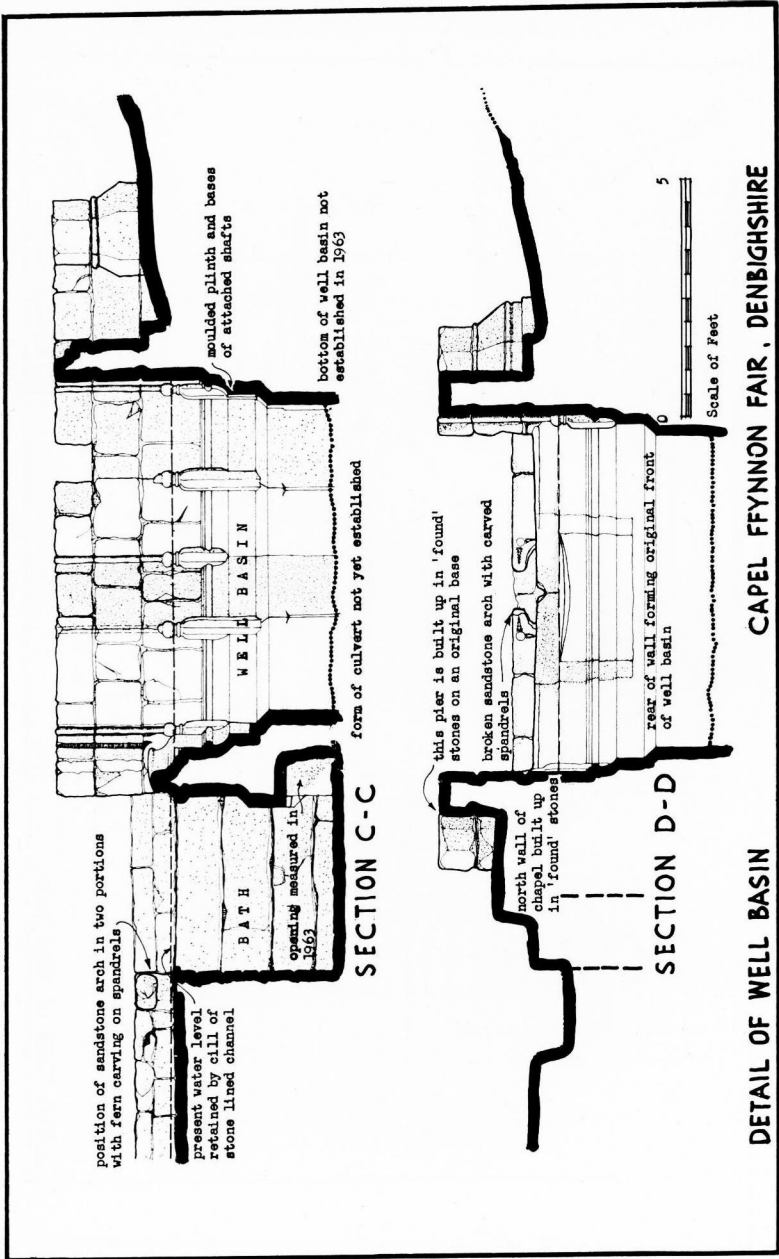


Fig. 7. Detail of the Well Basin