

The Landmark Trust

ST WINIFRED'S WELL, WOOLSTON, NR. OSWESTRY, SHROPSHIRE

St. Winifred's Well consists of two separate elements: the well itself and the little building over it. The spring of clear water has no doubt had a chamber of sorts around it for centuries, but the structures around it surviving today date from the late Middle Ages. What stands today at St. Winifred's Well is a very rare survival of a late fifteenth-century timber chapel, made all the more precious by its association with the well itself, with pilgrimage and the healing of the sick.

Certainty as to its nature emerged slowly. The building has been a cottage since the early 19th century, and in secular use since the early 17th, so that alterations and repairs have occurred. An article by a local historian, Adolphus Dovaston, in 1886, quoting the notes of an 18th-century antiquarian, apparently provided authoritative written evidence conclusively ruling out the existence of a chapel on the site. A holy well there might have been, but the building was put up as a Court-house "over a well made for a bath for the Jones of Sandford". The medieval trusses incorporated in the building were, so argued Mr Dovaston, re-used from West Felton church.

On the other hand, a Survey of the Lordship of Oswestry of 1602 referred to Woolston Chapel; and the previous owner of the Well told of 16th-century graffiti found on the posts of the wing, found when removing old plaster.

It was only as we began to strip down the structure in preparation for its repair that its true nature emerged. First of all it became clear that the two main trusses, with their cusped struts, were not reused from somewhere else. They fitted their position, and the rest of the timber frame very happily. All are typical of the late 15th century.

Then the moulded wall plate encircling the building appeared, again confirming this as one integral structure. The presence of an original doorway with decorated lintel at the west end, and another door in the south wall for the priest (slightly to the east of the existing doorway), confirmed that this was an ecclesiastical building, not a dwelling. Details at the east end also indicated the existence of a retable, or altar back.

Examination of the frame confirmed that the projecting wing is also part of the original structure. The dressed stone supporting it appears to date from the 17th century, and it was thought that the whole wing might therefore be an addition. However, it too has a chamfered wallplate consistent with the dating of the rest of the building, and the entrance to it is clearly marked in the interior of the chapel itself, by a more elaborate moulding on the wallplate.

Due to later alterations, the position of original windows is not clear. It is likely that there would have been at least one in the south wall; and more than probable that there would have been at least a small window in the east end, to light the altar. The dating of the whole building has since been confirmed by dendrochronology to c.1485.

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Examination of the chapel's frame showed that at some period quite early in its history it suffered a period of deterioration and neglect. This would of course fit in well with the history of religious upheaval in the 16th century, and with the suppression of pilgrimage and well worship as a result of the Reformation. That the well was still visited is born out, however, by the presence of graffiti of that period.

The history of Woolston's Well after the Reformation is typical of many such buildings, except in its survival. The next phase in fact follows Dovaston's theories quite happily, but with the building of a court-house being a repair and re-use of the existing chapel, rather than the putting up of a new structure. Many such buildings were put to a secular use at this period, and the holding of a manorial court would be entirely in keeping with its long-established local importance.

Evidence of extensive repair in the early 17th century was found throughout the building. The insertion, or rather addition, of a bay window at the east end was no doubt part of this phase, as was the new stonework under the wing, partly no doubt to provide extra support, but also related to the creation of an additional pool.

Dovaston's antiquarian had said that the Court-house stood "over a well made for a bath for the Jones' of Sandford", who were granted the manor in 1613. Again, the adaptation and enlargement of a holy well to form a bath occurred elsewhere, at Ffynnon Fair in Flintshire for example; cold bathing was considered good for the health in the 17th and 18th centuries, so that in effect this was simply a rationalisation of the early belief in the healing qualities of water.

The private bath later became a public bathing place, much frequented by local people. Ale houses apparently grew up nearby, and no doubt revels and wakes were held there, as at many wells. Such promiscuous behaviour shocked local worthies, and in about 1755, the use of the well was suppressed. This may have been the result of a new landlord who came into residence at Sandford in 1757, after a long period of absenteeism. The Court-house continued in use until 1824, after which the chapel was converted to domestic use, in which it has remained until the present day. To this phase in its history belong the inserted chimney and bread oven, the insertion of bricks in the frame, instead of the traditional plaster infill, and the pigsty which is now the bathroom.

In 1928 the cottage was bought from the farmer who owned it by Rev. Frank Taylor, Vicar of West Felton, who was concerned about its condition. He renewed the roof in about 1930. He used to come and sit at the chapel, to read and compose his sermons. In about 1932 he gave St. Winifred's Well to his niece, Mary Taylor, who in 1936 became Mrs Ashby. The Ashbys planted the trees around the building and formed the large pool by damming the stream. They in turn handed the cottage on to their daughter, Margaret Phythian-Adams. She in turn sold it to the Landmark Trust in 1987.

The Landmark Trust is a building preservation charity that rescues historic buildings at risk and lets them for holidays. St Winifred's Well sleeps up to 2 people. To book the building or any other Landmark property for a holiday, please contact us.