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(Re)sounding holy wells

A heritage project funded by Creative Ireland County Cork Grant Scheme

Richard Scriven & Vicky Langan

Vicky Langan is a Cork-based artist whose practice operates across several overlapping fields, chiefly performance, sound, and film. She has gained bursary awards from Cork City Council and the Arts Council of Ireland. She has also been awarded a residency at the Centre Culturel Irlandais, Paris.

Dr Richard Scriven lectures in Geography in UCC and NUIG. He was an Irish Research Council Government of Ireland Postdoctoral Fellow and a Royal Irish Academy Charlemont Scholar.

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pilgrimage.ie/resoundingholywells

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Cover image: St Fanahan's well, Mitchelstown



(Re)sounding holy wells was an artistic and cultural heritage project led by Vicky Langan, independent artist, and Dr Richard Scriven, Department of Geography, UCC, to imaginatively explore holy wells in Cork through workshops, audio recordings, and oral histories. It blended contemporary artistic production and cultural heritage in an active and community focused style.

Using a collaborative approach with both primary schools and community heritage groups, the project examined and highlighted the roles of holy wells as cultural amenities and sites of vernacular heritage. Through creative workshops, students and local residents shared their accounts of holy wells, focusing on oral history, spoken non-fiction, and photographs/drawings. Primary school classes made audio recordings and took photos at the wells. Fresh understandings of the wells were produced through the use of audio by combining field recordings with accounts of the holy wells from young people and community members.

In this booklet, quotes from participants are highlighted with larger font and quotation marks.

The audio recordings and sound art can be accessed here: pilgrimage.ie/resoundingholywells

Above: Exploring St Fanahan's well using a hydrophone



"We're having fun and checking out the sounds which are around us and in water; and, we're taking photos of the natural environment. We heard multiple sounds that we probably won't hear again."

Above: Drawing of St John's Well, Carrigaline

Sound, sound art, and field recording

A key feature of this project is encouraging appreciations for the role of sound in shaping our experiences of the world around us. It is an important ever-present feature of life, but sound is often taken for granted. More often, the world is described and presented in visual terms; however, research is establishing the importance of audio in shaping our perceptions, understandings, and even well-being. Similar to smells, sounds can be deeply meaningful and evocative for people.

The term soundscape is used to describe the sonic environment. It is the collection of noises and acoustic elements that surround us. There are natural, rural, urban, and many other soundscapes. While each landscape or environment has different physical features that we can see, they also have different acoustic components that we can hear. This idea helps demonstrate the centrality of sound to life. By focusing on soundscapes, we can access the world in new ways. In this project, we use audio recorders to explore the soundscapes of holy wells.

Field recording refers to audio recordings that are taken in the real world. These recordings happen outside of the controlled environments of studios. It is often used to describe recordings taken out of doors which capture ambient sounds. Field recordings can be used to audibly examine, analyse, and illustrate particular places or events. More and more people are engaging in field recording as it has become easier with new and more portable technologies. Central to our work has been the collaborating with others to make field recordings off holy wells, including the use of hydrophones to record underwater in the wells.

Sound art is an art form that works primarily with audio. While visual artists use images and photos to create, sound artists use audio. Sonic recordings are made, manipulated, and presented in different forms, like other media. For this project, the field recordings taken at the holy wells are combined with the oral histories and stories from community groups and primary school students to generate a pieces of sound art. These will offer a fresh and novel insight into the holy wells as living and layered cultural and spiritual spaces.

Holy wells

"A holy well is where saints were before and they used to pray there and now lots of people come and pray here…and you are able to come down here any time and it's a very holy place."

Water is a common feature of religious and spiritual practices. It is a used in ceremonies as a form of purification and as a symbol of cleansing. In Ireland, the holy well tradition attests to the role of water in Pagan and Christian worship. There are over 3,000 recorded holy wells across the island, with 356 sites in County Cork. They are increasingly appreciated as a part of the Irish spiritual and cultural landscape.

Although some of the wells have fallen into disrepair, many remain as active sites of personal and communal devotion. They range from small remote springs that attract a handful of visitors to shrines that can receive thousands of believers annually. These springs are located in fields, on roadsides, on shorelines, at mountain passes, and in urban areas. They can be recognised by common features, such as enclosures or surrounding walls, and the leaving of votive offerings, including religious statues, textiles, or coins. The more developed locations tend to have elaborate structures, statues and grottoes, altars and seating, concrete or gravel paths, and well managed vegetation.

The origins of holy wells in Ireland seem to reach back to the pre-Christian era in Ireland. Archaeologists have found evidence of Pagan worship at water sites, while folklorists have highlighted the importance of some locations as ritual spaces. However, the majority of the existing holy wells emerged in the medieval period. There is a strong association between the springs and Celtic saints, who are believed to have used them on their evangelising missions to baptise converts or even perform miracles. Afterwards, these sites took on the name of the saint and were used as places of devotion.






The water from these sacred sites provides blessings, wards of misfortune, and offers a cure for a whole range of aliments. Different wells can be linked with alleviating certain maladies, especially, toothaches, and eye and skin conditions.

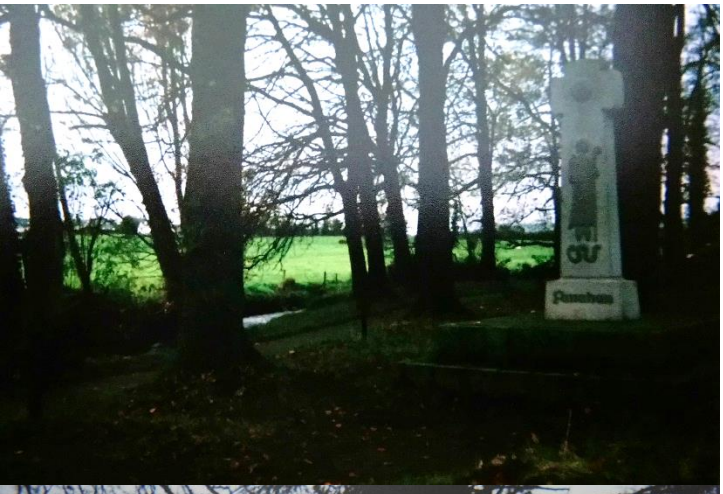
The annual pilgrimage day to the holy well is called the Pattern Day. This is a reference to it being the patron saint's day. People travel to the well on that day or close to it, to preform sets of devotions, sometimes called the 'rounds' or the *deiseal*, and drinking or collecting the well water to bring home. Cork has a number of active holy wells which continue to attract large numbers of pilgrims today.

"The holy well is likely to have been a place of pagan worship in pre-Christian times."

Images, clockwise from top-left: Trinity Well, Rathclaren, near Timoleague; Skour Well, Lough Hyne; Lady's Well, Bantry; St Bartholomew's Well, Garryantaggart, near Rathcormac (photo courtesy of Amanda Clarke holywellsofcork.com).

St Fanahan's well, Mitchelstown

St Fanahan of Mitchelstown was a seventh-century warrior monk. Although much of his life remains clouded in myth, it is held that this lively young cleric, the son of an Ulster petty chieftain, was expelled from the monastery of Bangor and went in search of a place to establish his own community. The king of Munster, Cathal MacAedha, granted him a land to build a monastery in the present-day townland of Brigown. After his death, the well became a centre for devotional activity.







"The well got its name from St Fanahan a warrior monk famed in the medieval times for his firey temper."

"I talked to my nana and she said that when she was like around my age they had warts and she had kind of red eyes on her hands and stuff, and then a couple of years later she went to St Fanahan's well and she put some the holy water on her hands, and St Fanahan cured her."

Images taken by students from Bunscoil na Toirbhirte and C.B.S Primary Mitchelstown

A novena to St Fanahan is held in Mitchelstown on the lead up to his feast day, 25th November. While on the day itself families and groups call to honour the saint. The well site is in good condition with the long path from the Mulberry Road leading down to the main site and secure steps facilitating access to the water. The stone cross, with the representation of the saint, dominates the well space, while the Stations of the Cross lead visitors around the site.

"You know up by Pairc United there? And, anyway, it used to be there. I don't know who told me this anyway; but, a woman kept coming down and washing her clothes in the well, even though it was a holy well. Then one day she went down and the well wasn't there and they looked all around the town for it and they found it down here."



Tubrid, Millstreet

"It was Fr Griffin who claimed he was cured, he had a stutter. That was the beginning of the real development of Tubrid well. "

Tubrid Well is located on the western edge of Millstreet in north-west Cork: it lies north of the Killarney Road and is adjacent to the River Finnow. It is a developed local pilgrimage site with considerable individual and communal devotion practised. The annual May mass holds a particular significance for the Catholic community of the area. It serves as an opportunity for shared outdoor worship.

"I surmise that Tubrid, which is the most popular well [in Milstreet Parish], is of modern origin. And, the reason for that is it doesn't feature in the 1840 Ordinance Survey, which you would expect, if it was a holy well at that stage, it would feature…it dates back to the beginning to the twentieth century anyway. According to the folklore, it's associated with a miracle prior to that in the McCarthy-O'Leary era."

"It was a priest who used to walk down there, Fr Griffin, that had a stutter, he would drink the water…he was cured. It was tough to get down there from the Killarney road,…Fr Griffin, then, went around the town, he got the donations from people; and, then they brought in the rock and they put in the statue and trees, and there's a place to say mass; but that all took a long time. "

“The second tradition then is about the McCarthy-O’Leary. They were at some feast in Limerick – wasn’t it? – and this blind man was there, and he had a dream about some place where there was water that would cure his blindness. So he arrived there, and washed his eyes. The well appeared, or he dug the ground; there was water there, and he washed his eyes and his blindness was cured. “

Below: Cups at Tubrid





Trinity Well, Kinsale

Trinity Well, or *Tobar na Tríonóide*, is located adjacent to Charles Fort in the burial ground, near the former Church of the Holy Trinity. Historically, the well was visited on the feast of the Holy Trinity, including many devotees arriving by boat from Nohoval, Oysterhaven, and Sandy Cove.

As with other sites in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, civil and religious authorities sought to supress practices at the well due to the excesses of celebration that accompanied the pattern day. This led to the gradual neglect of the well, and deterioration over the years. However, in 2013 the Trinity Well Conservation Group was formed by local residents who enlisted the help of Tús Community Work Placement Initiative to restore the well. Due to the efforts of this group, Trinity Well has been renovated and the pattern day returned.

Above: Renovated Trinity well, photo courtesy of Amanda Clarke holywellsofcork.com

"The group got together to restore it and to revive its pattern day…That was the condition the well was in when we started – totally overgrown. Partial clearance had revealed that a brick arch well, the front of it had broken away…We found the original bricks from a brickworks in Ballinadee, we recovered some from an old building…We had to have an archaeologist on site the whole time…and the County Council heritage Office. It was decided we'd put a slab in here [to enable access] and we had quite a job knitting it in…The most significant find was an 1830s miraculous medal that we found right in the threshold of the well…We have mass out there on Trinity Sunday, usually in May. "

Below: Photos cataloguing the renovation of the well courtesy of Tony Bocking



St John's Well, Carrigaline

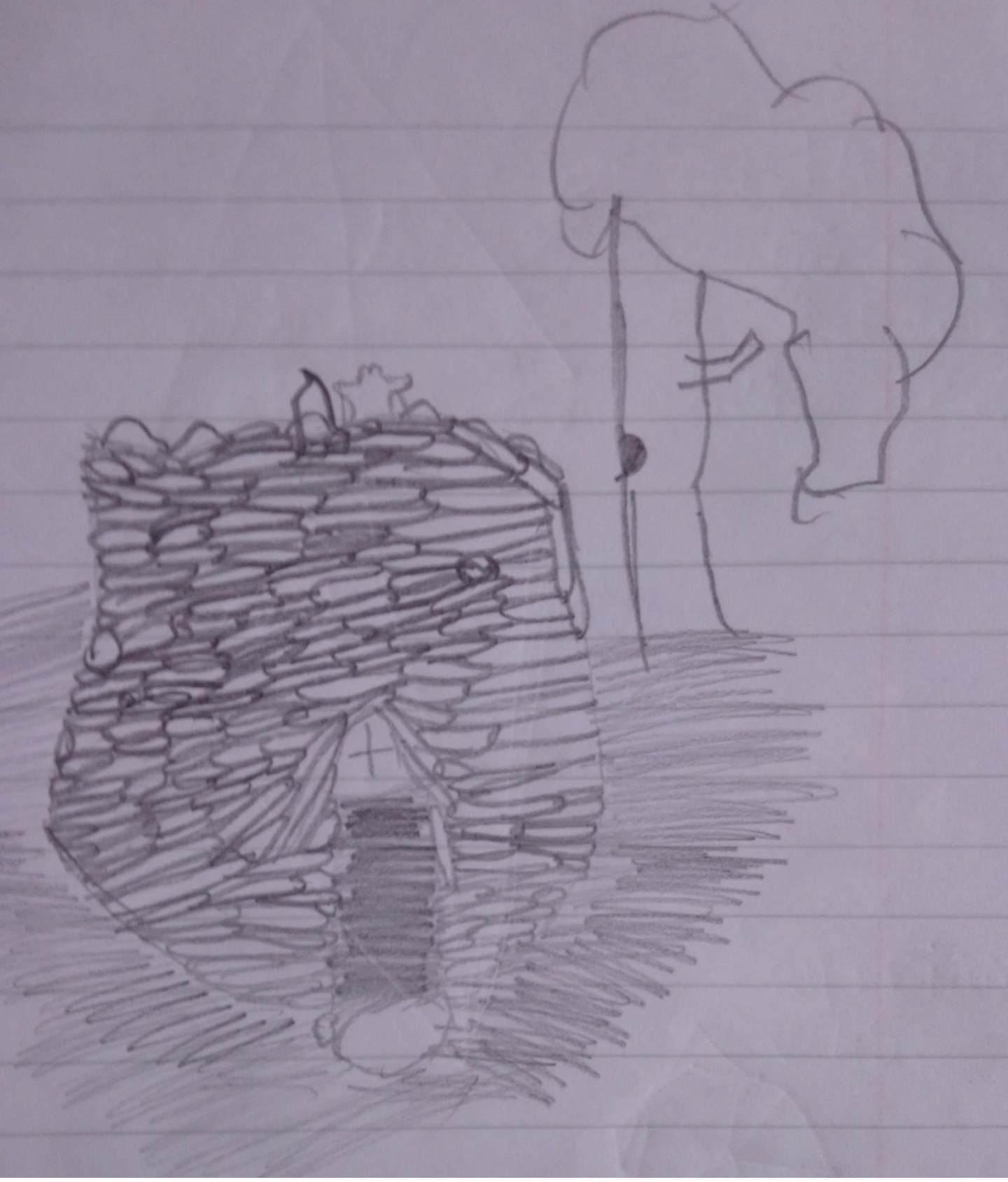
St John's Well, Carrigaline is venerated on St John's Eve (23rd June) in a tradition that dates as far back as at least the early nineteenth century. The modern celebration of the well sees over a hundred locals gather for prayer and hymns at the site.

The well, also referred to as *Tobar Eoin Óg* or St Renogue (in a corrupted form), is located to the north-west of the main town, along a path between the Ballinrea Road and the Ballea Road (R613), adjacent to the Dun Eoin residential area. It is encased by a bee-hive shaped structure, with a small entrance from which water flows. A damaged cross tops the structure, while five pilgrim crosses are inscribed on the exterior walls. While a number of locals are very dedicated to the upkeep of the site.

St John's Eve is a traditional time of celebration. It is a mixture of the Summer Solstice, Pagan/Celtic customs and Christian/Catholic saintly devotion. The lighting of bonfires was a prominent way of marking the occasion; this practice is still common in Cork city with both official community events and unofficial fires. As part of the customs surrounding the night, wells and sites associated with St John are venerated.

"Holy wells, people say that they can cure you."

The current form of the devotions at St John's Well are organised by a small group in conjunction with the Catholic parish clergy. The rosary is lead by a priest who circles the well, with someone inscribing crosses to mark each decade of the rosary. The Eucharist or Blessed Sacrament is displayed and venerated, while music is provided by members of the parish choir and the Carrigaline Pipe Band. After the formal service, some go to the well to drink the water, bless themselves and/or collect some to take way.



"A holy well is usually blessed or sometimes people have stories about holy wells."

Above: Drawing of St John's Well Carrigaline

Back cover image: Cups at St Gobnait's Well, Ballyvourney



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