

Cures and Controversy in Early Modern Wales: The Struggle to Control St. Winifred's Well

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From the seventh century to the present day, pilgrims have journeyed to St. Winifred's Well at Holywell in Flintshire. The well commemorated the heroism of the fifteen-year-old St. Winifred (Gwenfrewi), virgin and martyr, who refused the sexual entreaties of a persistent suitor c. 615. In a fit of vengeance, Winifred's would-be lover decapitated her. According to hagiographers, a spring gushed forth where her head landed. Miraculously, Winifred's uncle, St. Beuno, healed her, reattaching her head to her body and leaving only a small scar. Her assailant was struck dead instantly, a victim of divine wrath. Winifred went on to live for fifteen more years and became a prominent Abbess renowned for her sanctity.¹ Her relics found a home first at Gwytherin (the site of her death) and then with the Benedictines at Shrewsbury in 1138.² Its paucity of relics notwithstanding, Holywell remained a powerful source of attraction as the site of the saint's martyrdom. Likewise, the lure of its miraculous waters attracted pilgrims, making it an important center of lay piety in the British Isles.³ Those seeking divine favor for their undertakings or cures

¹ The standard medieval Latin account of Winifred's story that circulated in English translation in the recusant era was D. M. Rogers, gen. ed., English Recusant Literature, 1558-1640, 394 vols. (Yorkshire: Scholar Press, 1976), vol. 319: The Admirable Life of Saint Wenefride (1635), by Robert, Prior of Shrewsbury, translated by John Falconer, S. J. STC 21102. For a version dated c. 1610-1615, see C. Hortsmann, ed. The Lives of Women Saints of Our Contrie of England (London: Early English Text Society, 1886), 88-91. Additional medieval lives of Winifred include Ronald Pepin and Hugh Feiss, trans. Two Mediaeval Lives of Saint Winefride (Toronto: Peregrina Publishing Co., 2000) (with Pepin's own translation of Robert's text); Curt F. Buhler, "A New Middle English Life of Saint Winifred?" in Jess B. Bessinger, Jr. and Robert R. Raymo, eds. Medieval Studies in Honor of Lillian Herlands Hornstein (New York: New York University Press, 1976); William Caxton, Legenda Aurea (discussed extensively in Buhler); and John Mirk's late fourteenth-century prose sermon in Karen A. Winstead, ed. Chaste Passions: Medieval English Virgin Martyr Legends (Ithaca: NY: Cornell University Press, 2000), 82-85. See also Fiona Winward's work on the two Latin lives, "The Lives of St. Wenefred," Analecta Bollandiana 117 (1999). G. Hartwell Jones quotes extensively from medieval and early modern Welsh language poetic memorials of Winifred's life in Celtic Britain and the Pilgrim Movement (London: Honourable Society of Cymmrodorion, 1912). Important later editions of Winifred's life include a hostile account by the Protestant Bishop of St. Asaph, William Fleetwood, The Life and Miracles of St. Wenefrede (London, 1713) and Thomas Meyrick, Life of St. Wenefred, Virgin, Martyr, and Abbess, Patroness of North Wales and Shrewsbury (Felinfach: Llanerch Publishers, facsimile of 1878 edition reprinted in 1996). Satiric treatments include Thomas Deloney, The Pleasant and Princely History of the Gentle-Craft (London: H. Rhodes, 1675?). My thanks to Fran Dolan for the Deloney reference.

² Some of Winifred's relics apparently were kept at Gwytherin in Denbighshire as late as the nineteenth century. Recent analysis of the reliquary that housed them (known as the Arch Gwenfrewi) demonstrates that it dates to the mid-eighth century. Catherine Hamaker, "The Well-Cult of St. Winefride," in Pepin and Feiss, Two Mediaeval Lives, 121.

³ The well had a good location on Wales' primary north to south road, which connected Holywell to the important pilgrimage site of Saint David's. Jones, Celtic Britain, 407. In between, the road also took pilgrims to the monastery of the White Monks at Ystrad Fflur in Ceredigion, which possessed an important relic of the

of bodily ailments believed that the well's waters were highly efficacious. In 1398, Richard II visited St. Winifred's Well.⁴ Henry V walked from Shrewsbury to Holywell in 1416 in thanksgiving for his victory at Agincourt.⁵ In 1427, Pope Martin V allowed Basingwerk Abbey, located in close proximity to the well, to sell indulgences to those who visited and gave alms at the Chapel of St. Winifred. The papal directive indicated that the Chapel's buildings were "collapsed";⁶ ideally the income from indulgences would assist in their repair. The Welsh Henry VII's mother, Lady Margaret Beaufort, established an elaborate chapel at the well in the late fifteenth century out of gratitude for victory at Bosworth.⁷ By the end of the century Winifred was honored as the patroness of five English churches and the events of her life were celebrated and commemorated in paint, carving, stained glass, and song.⁸ In the early sixteenth century, the well-shrine earned about ten pounds per year from pilgrims' donations.⁹

With the advent of the Reformation, however, St. Winifred's devotees faced fervent governmental opposition to their traditional religious activities. As the cult of saints and the rituals associated with it fell into official disrepute, pilgrimages to Holywell continued, but the context in which they occurred was irrevocably altered. Thomas Cromwell's Injunctions of 1536 "attacked pilgrimage ... in a muted way." The Injunctions of 1538, however, were more severe and forbade people from reposing "their trust and affiance in any other works devised by men's fantasies beside Scripture; as in wandering to pilgrimages, offering of money, candles or tapers to images or relics."¹⁰ Ultimately, devotion to the saints and illegal religious activities such as pilgrimages endured, but they operated clandestinely among only a minority of English and Welsh people.¹¹

Holy Cup. Thus in one journey travelers might be able to visit three shrines. T. Charles-Edwards, Saint Winefride and Her Well: The Historical Background (Holywell: W. Williams & Son Printers, nd), 3.

⁴ Diana Webb, Pilgrimage in Medieval England (London: Hambledon Press, 2000), 134.

⁵ Christopher David, St. Winefride's Well: A History and Guide (privately printed, 1971; reprint, 1993), 6. Webb indicates that the date of Henry's pilgrimage is uncertain and may have occurred before Agincourt. Webb, Pilgrimage, note 111, 288.

⁶ Papal Registers concerning Great Britain, 7: 504, as quoted in David, St. Winefride's Well, 7.

⁷ Judith F. Champ, "Bishop Milner, Holywell, and the Cure Tradition," in W. J. Sheils, ed. The Church and Healing (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1982), 154. Henry VII had a statue of St. Winifred made for his chapel in Westminster Abbey. David, St. Winefride's Well, 6. M.J.C. Lowry, "Caxton, St. Winifred, and the Lady Margaret Beaufort," The Library V, sixth series (June, 1983): 101-117 emphasizes Beaufort's role in spreading the cult of St. Winifred. Michael K. Jones and Malcolm G. Underwood, The King's Mother: Lady Margaret Beaufort, Countess of Richmond and Derby (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1992), 150-151 de-emphasizes her role.

⁸ Roy Fry and Tristan Gray Hulse, "The Other St. Winifred's Wells," Source: The Holy Wells Journal 1, new series (Autumn, 1994); Melissa Jones, "'Swete May, Soulis Leche': The Winifred Carol of John Audelay," Essays in Medieval Studies 14 (1997).

⁹ Hamaker, "The Well-Cult," 123.

¹⁰ Eamon Duffy, The Stripping of the Altars: Traditional Religion in England, 1400-1580 (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1992), 407.

¹¹ Counting recusants is a notoriously difficult enterprise. In 1603, Welsh diocesan returns listed 808 recusants in contrast to a churchgoing population of 212,450. Glanmor Williams estimates that the more likely number of Welsh recusants was about 3,500. He notes that although the proportion of Catholics might appear quite small, the Welsh dioceses of Llandaff and St. Asaph were ranked third and fourth "in relation to the number of recusants per parish" when compared to all other English and Welsh dioceses. Only Chester and Durham had higher figures. Williams, Wales and the Reformation (Cardiff: University of Wales Press, 1997), 374-375. Holywell itself had fifty-three known recusants between 1601 and 1621. E. Gwynne Jones, "Catholic Recusancy in the Counties of Denbigh, Flint, and Montgomery, 1581-1625," Transactions of the Honourable

The fate of Catholic pious practices in the era of religious reform has been thoroughly studied, most notably in the work of Eamon Duffy.¹² Likewise, James Rattue and Alexandra Walsham have done important new work specifically on the history of holy wells.¹³ No recent scholarly studies have focused on St. Winifred's Well, despite its status as the most significant recusant pilgrimage site in the British Isles and the only one of Britain's hundreds of holy wells to maintain a largely uninterrupted tradition of pilgrimage from the middle ages to the present. Yet enduring devotion to the well stands as an important example of the complexities of religious reform, particularly in geographically remote regions; the site was a contested space at which several groups struggled to attain different types of control. For pilgrims, the well represented an opportunity to harness sacred influence to improve bad fortune; for English governmental officials, the site signified a challenge to their authority to control religious dissent; for elite recusant residents of Holywell and their priests, the well represented a source of religious prestige and economic gain which they strove to place under the dominion of the clerics of their choice.

**“Strange Wonders Never Before Heard Of”¹⁴:
St. Winifred's Power Over Adversity**

From pilgrims' perspectives, the well was a sacred space—where otherworldly figures worked miracles on a specific patch of Welsh soil. In times of dire necessity, particularly illness, the faithful came to the well because of their firm belief in its potency. Petitioners were both quiescent—powerless in the face of St. Winifred's ability to mediate (or not) and God's authority to cure (or not)—and empowered by their hope that the well might work on their behalves. Religious rituals, if devoutly performed, could be efficacious, transforming pilgrims from victims of their ailments to victors over them. As the Sarum Missal's description of the well promised, “Here wonders great God's hand doth work,/The blind do see, the dumb do speak,/Diseases which in bodies lurk,/Are cured, when Faith is not weak.”¹⁵ Thus any governmental sanctions that believers risked as a result of their activities at Holywell paled in comparison to potentially infinite religious rewards.

Catholics themselves—notably Thomas a Kempis and Thomas More—had at times questioned the excesses of the pilgrimage tradition.¹⁶ Yet neither their misgivings nor Cromwell's novel theological directives eradicated the practice of journeying to the well in order to try to gain control over some of the most persistent challenges of early modern life: to cure disease, to petition for an end to infertility and for the birth of healthy children, and to overcome the nefarious machinations of witches. Catholic clerics, particularly the Jesuits,

Society of Cymmrodorion (1945): 121. John Bossy estimates that there were approximately 39,000 Catholics residing in England and Wales in 1600; by 1641, there were about 60,000, a figure that remained constant throughout the rest of the century. Bossy, The English Catholic Community, 1570-1850 (London: Darton, Longman, and Todd, 1975), 422.

¹² Duffy, Stripping of the Altars. See also Robert Whiting, The Blind Devotion of the People: Popular Religion and the English Reformation (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1989).

¹³ See James Rattue, The Living Stream: Holy Wells in Historical Context (Rochester, NY: Boydell and Brewer, 1995) and Alexandra Walsham, “Reforming the Waters: Holy Wells and Healing Springs in Protestant England,” in Diana Wood, ed. Life and Thought in the Northern Church, c. 1100-c. 1700: Essays in Honour of Claire Cross (Rochester, NY: Boydell and Brewer, 1999), 227-255.

¹⁴ Carolus de Smedt, ed. “Documenta de S. Wenefreda,” Analecta Bollandiana 6 (1887): 332.

¹⁵ Robert, Prior of Shrewsbury, Admirable Life.

¹⁶ Duffy, Stripping of the Altars, 191; Walsham, “Reforming the Waters,” 231-232.

recorded what they saw as St. Winifred's miraculous activities at the well. So, too, they preserved and circulated accounts of her punishments and/or conversions of skeptics and of non-believers, including the occasional Protestant.¹⁷ Analysis of these accounts reveals that the saint's appeal was broad based. Pilgrims were rich and poor, men and women, young and old, clerical and lay, and they traveled to Holywell (often barefooted) from across England and Wales.¹⁸ In some parts of northern Wales, head poets (*pencerdd*) declared the appropriate times for pilgrimages to wells to occur "at the direction of some old gentle woman."¹⁹ As James Rattue points out, although "the official backup" for traditional rituals was gone, many people continued to inhabit "the ritual landscape the medieval church had created for them ... and nothing had changed in their lives to persuade them to leave it."²⁰

The earliest of Holywell's recorded miracles formed a trinity: first, the creation of the well itself, when Winifred's severed head landed on the ground; second, Beuno's reattachment of her head, which reanimated her as "another Lazarus"; and third, her assailant's sudden death, after which his corpse was "presently either swallowed up by the earth, or taken away by devils, so as no sign thereof afterwards appeared."²¹ After this dramatic beginning Holywell was the site of manifold legendary cures in the Middle Ages. Likewise, in the recusant era, surviving accounts chronicle many reputedly miraculous occurrences at the well. For example, John Gerard, S. J. recorded the story of the renowned cure of Edward Oldcorne, S. J. c. 1600, a tale that Gerard was at pains to indicate that he had heard both from Oldcorne himself and from a witness. Father Oldcorne had developed a "kanker" or "cancer" in his mouth and his doctors planned on excising some bones that were decaying around the wound. Well known as "a talented preacher," Oldcorne feared the ramifications that such surgery might have for the practice of his vocation.²² Determined to seek a cure by making a pilgrimage to the well, he set out on a journey to Holywell, but "St. Winifred forestalled him." While resting at a recusant home during his travels, he spied one

¹⁷ Rattue gives several examples of Protestant use of various holy wells other than St. Winifred's. Living Stream, 109.

¹⁸ Rattue argues that "... the Catholic gentry apparently took a far less enthusiastic view of holy wells than their lower-class coreligionists," Living Stream, 110. The strong gentry presence at documented pilgrimages to St. Winifred's Well does not support this assessment. For references to members of the gentry making pilgrimages to the well, see David Thomas, "Saint Winifred's Well and Chapel, Holywell," Journal of the Historical Society of the Church in Wales VIII (1958): 20; M. D. R. Leys, Catholics in England: A Social History, 1559-1829 (London: Catholic Book Club, 1961), 187; E. A. B. Barnard, A Seventeenth Century Country Gentleman: Sir Francis Throckmorton, 1640-80 (Cambridge: W. Heffer & Sons, Ltd., 1944), 47; Margaret Blundell, ed. Cavalier: Letters of William Blundell to his Friends, 1620-1698 (London: Longmans, Green, and Company, 1933), 313; and Jones, "Catholic Recusancy," 117.

¹⁹ British Library (BL), Lansdowne MS, 111, fol. 10, as quoted in Williams, Wales and the Reformation, 364.

²⁰ Rattue, Living Stream, 109. For a fine analysis of the psychological significance of pilgrimages, see Duffy, Stripping of the Altars, 190-205. Glanmor Williams notes that bishops across Wales would have empathized with the complaints of Nicholas Robinson, Bishop of Bangor. In 1567, Robinson wrote that the Welsh people participated in "much pilgrimage-going, many candles set up in honour of saints, some relics yet carried about, and all the country full of beads and knots [rosaries]." Wales and the Reformation, 246-247. For further examples of hostile Protestant commentary on Welsh religiosity, particularly in reference to holy wells and pilgrimages, see Williams, 272, 283, 287, 364, and 370. For a general survey of such attitudes, see J. E. C. Hill, "Puritans and 'The Dark Corners of the Land,'" Transactions of the Royal Historical Society, 5th series, 13 (1963) : 77-102.

²¹ Robert, Prior of Shrewsbury, Admirable Life, 63, 50-51.

²² John Gerard, The Autobiography of an Elizabethan (London: Longmans, Green, and Company, 1951), 46.

of the famous red stones from the well “covered or at least sprinkled with blood,” which pilgrims often collected as relics.²³ Father Oldcorne:

... took it in his hands and kissed it very reverently. Then going aside by himself, he went down on his knees and began to lick the stone and hold part of it to his mouth. He prayed silently all the time. After half an hour he got up: all his pain was gone and the cancer cured. But he finished his pilgrimage to the well—not to beg a cure from St. Winifred, but to make his thanksgiving for it. While he was there he recovered also from that anaemia which was thought to be the cause of his cancer, and he came back stronger and healthier than he had been for many years.²⁴

Oldcorne’s devotion to St. Winifred continued until the moment of his execution in 1606 for alleged complicity in the Gunpowder Plot; she was one of the saints to whom he commended his soul in his final speech.²⁵

Accounts similar to Oldcorne’s abounded. Clerically recorded cures included, to list only a few: Elizabeth Roberts, age ten, cured of a stroke, 1603; Catherine More, a blind “poor Catholic servant,” told in recurrent dreams to go to the well, cured, 1604; Sir Roger Bodenham, Protestant, suffering from leprosy, cured in 1606 and converted to Catholicism; Mrs. Anne Price, cured of the effects of witchcraft, 1618; Mrs. Isabella Shawe, injured leg near amputation, cured 1635; Mrs. Frances Fortescue, cured of blindness after saying rosaries in honor of St. Winifred, 1656; William Morgan, junior, cured of leprosy, 1659; John Lane, age twenty, cured of a back injury, 1665; and William ap Richard Jeffrey, cured of pain and weakness after trips to both St. Hillary’s Well in Anglesey and St. Winifred’s Well, 1668.²⁶

Although pilgrims visited the well in the hope of gaining control over their misfortunes, God and St. Winifred were the ones who possessed ultimate power, able to inflict punishments, grant cures, or both. Unsurprisingly, recusants believed that God wreaked vengeance on those who publicly doubted or mocked the well.²⁷ For example, William Shone, a Protestant servant witnessing Catholic devotions at the well in 1574, “being a lusty and strong fellow of a dissolute disposition, out of scorn and contempt did irreligiously leap booted into the water, saying he would wash his boots, and while he leaped, held his hand on the hilt of his sword to save it from wetting: when immediately the said hand was contracted and withered, and withall his whole body stricken with a lameness and benumbed.” Reduced to beggary, “after some time” Shone followed the advice of Catholics who urged him to “to ask pardon of God by the intercession of St. Winifred” for his irreverence. He did so, recovered significantly from his ailment, and converted to

²³ Gerard, *Autobiography*, 47, 46.

²⁴ Gerard, *Autobiography*, 47-48. For further accounts of this incident, with some variations in detail, see Henry Foley, ed. *Records of the English Province of the Society of Jesus* (New York: Johnson Reprint Corporation, 1966), 4: 216-217 and De Smedt, ed. “Documenta,” 312-315.

²⁵ Foley, *Records*, 4: 242.

²⁶ For detailed versions of these accounts, see De Smedt, ed. “Documenta,” 315-316, 316, 316-317, 319, 330, 338, 340, 342-344, 348.

²⁷ Some Protestants believed this as well. Keith Thomas, *Religion and the Decline of Magic: Studies in Popular Beliefs in Sixteenth and Seventeenth Century England* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1971), 70.

Catholicism, an appropriately didactic conclusion to his story.²⁸ Interestingly, although a repentant sinner like Shone might be healed, sometimes faithful visitors to the well were not. Such may have been the case with the “strange, poor woman” whose burial was recorded in the Holywell Parish Register, which indicated that she “died at the well” in 1698.²⁹ Devotees of St. Beuno who traveled to the well believed that if they were not cured after three attempts, they would die, but the saint would “grant them extra spiritual rewards instead,” perhaps a way of coming to terms with what might look like divine injustice.³⁰

Two miracle stories in particular—those of Dorothy Harcourt and Edward Powell—demonstrate that even when the faithful were healed, the path to a cure could be a circuitous one fraught with unanticipated suffering. In 1622, Mrs. Dorothy Harcourt of Staffordshire went to the well with her husband and eight priests in order to beg for the saint’s intercession after several childless years of marriage. Nine months later, she joyously gave birth to a son, Henry. In a judgment that sounds especially harsh to modern ears, the Jesuit commentator on the case recounted what happened next. “But it pleased God, that they (being too fond of their child) were deprived of it by its untimely death before it was a twelvemonth old. After which the mother was barren some years.”³¹ Again, Mrs. Harcourt journeyed to Holywell with her husband and priests. This time she conceived a daughter, Anne, who went on to become a Carmelite nun at Antwerp. The following year, Mrs. Harcourt repeated the same formula and bore another daughter, who also became a Carmelite nun. To early modern readers, the moral was clear: repeated journeying to the well was often necessary in order to attain desirable results and believers might have to learn some hard lessons along the way. According to the Jesuit commentator, when Mrs. Harcourt forgot the dictum that God must be loved above all, she received a harsh reminder.

The second miracle story under detailed consideration here also demonstrated to the faithful that successful cures required appropriate respect for higher powers. Young Edward Powell of Monmouthshire begged his parents to let him seek healing at Holywell for his painful, crippled leg. Although they were concerned that he might not survive the journey, they yielded to his persistent entreaties in 1650. To the surprise of many, Edward managed to endure the well’s extremely cold temperatures. After three days of bathing:

... it happened that being in his inn, those of his company in a jesting manner casting on one another some of the water of the holy fountain, he also unadvisedly did the like; which was no sooner done but reflecting with himself that he had done an irreverence to that blessed water, that so many devout persons throughout England greatly esteemed, he was

²⁸ De Smedt, ed. “Documenta,” 311. For another version of Shone’s story, see Gerard, *Autobiography*, 47. The Jesuits reported thirty-five conversions in northern Wales in 1672 and fifty-two conversions there in 1673. It is impossible to know how many resulted from the influence of perceived miracles at the well. Foley, *Records*, 4: 527. Walsham states that the high number of conversions “contradicts any claim that St. Winifred’s was a kind of Catholic ghetto.” “Holy Wells,” 255.

²⁹ Ernest Arthur Ebbelwhite, “Flintshire Genealogical Notes,” *Archaeologia Cambrensis* IX, 5th ser. (1892): 122. For an account of Sir George Peckham’s death at the well, see Janet and Colin Bord, *Sacred Waters: Holy Wells and Water Lore in Britain and Ireland* (London: Granada, 1985), 44.

³⁰ Thomas, *Religion and the Decline of Magic*, 642.

³¹ De Smedt, ed. “Documenta,” 324.

sorry of it and purposed no more to do it. But being again provoked, he rashly broke his good purpose, besprinkling some [of] them with [the] said water: and immediately three of the company somewhat rudely playing with one another, suddenly and unawares all at once fell upon his sore leg ... which put him to a most grievous torment ...

After yielding to the youthful temptation to play with the holy water, Edward learned an immediate and obvious lesson. Suitably chastened, he developed the requisite degree of reverence. After continued bathing, a new injury, and return trips to the well in 1652 and 1657, he was cured.³²

Yet another didactic layer was added to Edward Powell's story when Henry Herbert of Colbrook, a Protestant and a "Parliament man," heard about the boy's cure and then sought healing at the well himself.³³ Various reports to have either cancer or syphilis, Herbert found that the water "did him some ease" and he sent a horse and cart to collect more of it and transport it to his home. However, the Jesuit commentator recorded that, "But in fine it did him no great good: for not long after he died of his disease. And it is no wonder that it availed him no more, because being a schismatic and heretic he wanted (in a very great measure) faith, which is always necessary for the obtaining of supernatural favors."³⁴ From the recusant perspective, not all were worthy of harnessing the power of the well, particularly not most "heretics" who when confronted with a miracle "know not what to say to it, finding that it agreeth not with that doctrine of theirs that miracles ceased long ago, and that we cannot desire the intercession of the blessed saints without injury unto God."³⁵ Seen in this context, Henry Herbert's journey to the well, which demonstrated a belief in the water's potential efficacy, must be distinguished from faith, as recusants understood it. Some Protestants' conviction that the waters were medicinal was not synonymous with the Catholic belief that divine forces were the source of the water's power. As Alexandra Walsham states, "there were both Catholic and Reformed ways of taking the waters."³⁶ The line between "Catholic" and "Protestant" understandings of holy wells could be a flexible one.³⁷ Many of the cure stories recorded in the Jesuit records demonstrate that recusants often tried a variety of secular or quasi-magical approaches to curing their ailments. Many initially sought the assistance of physicians and only came to the well as a last resort, sometimes on doctors' advice.³⁸ Others consulted with local women renowned as healers, in one case at the suggestion of the patient's Jesuit confessor.³⁹ Still others visited multiple holy wells, or combined resort to Holywell with sacraments, prayers, and other devotional

³² It was not unusual for pilgrims to visit the well three times in order to attain their desires. De Smedt, ed. "Documenta," 327-329.

³³ Finucane argues that the well's cures of non-Catholics, coupled with its paucity of relics, allowed it to endure the era of religious reform. Ronald C. Finucane, *Miracles and Pilgrims: Popular Beliefs in Medieval England* (Totowa, NJ: Rowman and Littlefield, 1977), 215.

³⁴ De Smedt, ed. "Documenta," 335.

³⁵ De Smedt, ed. "Documenta," 336-337. Some Protestants claimed to be cured at the well. However, those individuals usually proved to be converts to Catholicism after their recoveries. Presumably St. Winifred was most likely to intercede for "heretics" in whom she saw the potential for embracing the Catholic faith. De Smedt, ed. "Documenta," 311, 316-317, 345-346.

³⁶ Walsham, "Holy Wells," 255.

³⁷ My discussion of this point is heavily indebted to Walsham, "Holy Wells." See especially, 254-255.

³⁸ De Smedt, ed. "Documenta," 315, 317, 330, 332, 336, 338, 339, 340, 347, 349, 350-351.

³⁹ De Smedt, ed. "Documenta," 333.

practices.⁴⁰ Protestants like Henry Herbert, on the other hand, reposed some hope in the efficacy of traditional holy wells but held that belief in a “de-Catholicized” manner, “disinfected” of papistry.⁴¹ In 1653, the Protestant Edward Thomas even received a pass from the vicar and churchwardens of his parish permitting him to seek a cure at St. Winifred’s Well, something scarcely possible if all local officials perceived the site as an exclusively recusant preserve.⁴² However, although Catholics and Protestants alike at times sought some control over their ill health by journeying to Holywell, the duration and scope of recusant activities there rendered the well a frequent focus of hostile governmental attention.

“No Complaint but the Usual”: Attempts to Control Religious Dissent

For English governmental officials, the well represented one component of their broader quest to control the movements and activities of the troublesome Catholic population. From the perspective of the central government, Catholics were resistant subjects stubbornly mired in a state of willful “superstition,” while simultaneously entirely pliant in the hands of traitorous priests. The well’s remote Welsh location made it difficult for the government to control, but its spiritual significance for Catholics made it impossible for officials to ignore.

The dissolution of the monasteries—“the largest confiscation and redistribution of wealth since the Norman Conquest”—netted the English Crown 1.3 million pounds between 1536 and Henry VIII’s death in 1547.⁴³ Early in this process, the monks of Basingwerk Abbey were forced to cede their control of St. Winifred’s Chapel. Yet these new financial arrangements did not go uncontested in Holywell. William Holcroft, who leased the rectory of Holywell and had anticipated enjoying the well Chapel’s income, complained to the Court of Augmentations that he found it impossible to collect the oblations to St. Winifred, long placed in a box in front of her statue in the chapel. He reported that three local men—calling themselves “church reeves” of the parish—had entered the Chapel on St. Winifred’s feast day and urged people to give donations to them rather than to Holcroft. According to Holcroft, they argued that, “Such money as you offer in to the said stock goeth to the King, and shall never be remedy for yourselves, for here standeth one of the King’s servants which will soon take it forth; and that which you put in our boxes, or deliver to our hands shall be remedy for your souls.”⁴⁴ Holcroft sought the government’s assistance in obtaining the money and an ox that should have been his that day. Without such aid, he warned, he would lack the funds necessary to pay his rent to the King. The dispute between Holcroft and the church reeves stands as the best documented conflict between representatives of the government and religious traditionalists at the well in the 1530s and 1540s. The appeal to “remedy for souls” in the church reeves’ statements clearly demonstrated how high the spiritual stakes were in such encounters. Churchgoers had to

⁴⁰ De Smedt, ed. “Documenta,” 348, 343, 338.

⁴¹ Walsham, “Holy Wells,” 227.

⁴² De Smedt, ed. “Documenta,” 337.

⁴³ John Guy, *Tudor England* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1990), 149, 144.

⁴⁴ Public Record Office, London (PRO), Court of Augmentations, Proceedings: Bundle 2, No. 28 as quoted in Edward Owen, “The Monastery of Basingwerk at the Period of Its Dissolution,” *Flintshire Historical Society Journal* VII (1919): 71.

determine which allocation of their alms they believed would smooth their ways to Heaven and which would not.

Catholics and Protestants continued to battle over control of the well as the tumultuous years of religious reform wore on. Although Thomas Goldwell, Bishop of St. Asaph during Mary Tudor's reign, formally restored the tradition of pilgrimage to the well and obtained papal renewal of the indulgences available to pilgrims there, that official revival was shortlived.⁴⁵ By 1579, Elizabeth became concerned that people "in great numbers" visited St. Winifred's Well "after a superstitious sort and manner of pilgrimage, although it be by some colored to be for the water, which is pretended to be medicinal." She ordered "a substantial trial" of the waters in order to determine whether or not they were curative. If the liquid possessed "any such virtue" local officials were to restrict access to the well solely to "diseased persons" who might attain a cure and to restrain "the repair of such great confused multitudes of others."⁴⁶ If the waters did not have medicinal powers, then officials "well affected in religion" were instructed to "deface" and have "taken down" "the buildings and walls of the said Well or fountain."⁴⁷ It is unclear what the precise outcome of this governmental order was, but it did not result in the destruction of the well. Instead, visits to the well persisted and Catholics repeatedly and successfully strove to circumvent the legal limits placed on their pilgrimages. For example, Father Henry Garnet, head of the Jesuit mission in England, led a pilgrimage of thirty people to the well in August, 1605, just a few months before discovery of the Gunpowder Plot led to his arrest and execution and a more stringent crackdown on recusant activities.⁴⁸ Protestants later recalled this pilgrimage with suspicion and suspected that it was an attempt to disguise secret meetings with other alleged plotters.⁴⁹ In 1617, governmental agents reported that they were forcing pilgrims to take the Oaths of Supremacy and Allegiance if they refused to attend services in the Church of England during visits to Holywell. Consequently, officials noted that for a time "the great concourse of people thither ... [was] stopped."⁵⁰ But the Protestant polemicist John Gee's account of 1624 demonstrates that this situation was not a permanent one. He complained that at Holywell:

⁴⁵ Leslie Stephen and Sidney Lee, eds., *The Dictionary of National Biography* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1938), 8: 98; Francis Jones, *The Holy Wells of Wales* (Cardiff: University of Wales Press, 1954; reprinted 1998), 59. Goldwell himself was an eyewitness to miraculous occurrences at the well. Thomas Francis Knox, "The Last Survivor of the Ancient English Hierarchy: Thomas Goldwell, Bishop of St. Asaph," (London, 1876), 37.

⁴⁶ BL, MS Cotton Vitellius C. I, fol. 81v.

⁴⁷ BL, MS Cotton Vitellius C. I, fols. 81v-82r.

⁴⁸ Michael Hodgetts, "Shropshire Priests in 1605," *Worcestershire Recusant* 47 (June, 1986) : 24-25. Edward Oldcorne, S. J. also was a member of the group; presumably he made the trip in continued thanksgiving for his cure several years before. Antonia Fraser, *Faith and Treason: The Story of the Gunpowder Plot* (New York: Doubleday, 1996), 135. After the Gunpowder Plot's discovery, Anne Vaux (one of Garnet's companions on the pilgrimage) refused to reveal his presence on the journey to her governmental interrogators. Fraser, *Faith and Treason*, 253.

⁴⁹ Fraser, *Faith and Treason*, 135. Some surreptitious activity did occur related to this pilgrimage; the Jesuit lay brother Nicholas Owen constructed and renovated priests' holes in the homes at which the pilgrims sojourned along the way. Fraser, *Faith and Treason*, 137.

⁵⁰ BL, MS Royal 18B, VII, fol. 1v, "List of causes determined before the President and Council of Wales and the Marches, 1617."

. . . once every year, about mid-summer, many superstitious papists of Lancashire, Staffordshire, and other more remote countries, go in pilgrimage, especially those of the feminine and softer sex, who keep there their rendezvous, meeting with diverse priests their acquaintance; who make it their chief synod or convention for consultation, and promoting the Catholic cause, as they call it; yea, and account it their chiefest harvest for commodity and profit, in regard of the crop they then reap by absolutions and indulgences. Let me add, that they were so bold, about mid-summer the last year, 1623, that they intruded themselves diverse times into the church or public chapel of Holywell, and there said Mass without contradiction.⁵¹

By October, 1626, Sir John Bridgeman reported to the members of the Privy Council that he had attempted “restraint of the resort of persons ill affected in religion” to the well by making innkeepers in the vicinity reveal the names of their lodgers to the local justices of the peace. Pleased with his efforts, Bridgeman reported that he had eliminated the summertime flow of pilgrims to the well and thus prevented those visitors from hearing masses in Holywell.⁵²

Some local recusants had feared that such draconian governmental actions were imminent. In January of 1626, Father Edward Bennet, a leading secular cleric, had written to Richard Blount, the Jesuit Provincial of England and Wales, in order to complain that John Prichard, S. J. was running a not-so-secret recusant school at Greenfield Abbey near Holywell, the home of Anne and John Mostyn. Bennet claimed that Catholic officials had already warned Prichard “that if he did continue his schoolkeeping in that manner it would not only draw a persecution upon himself but also upon that holy place of pilgrimage.” Bennet stated that Prichard was continuing nonetheless and had to be stopped, for “if that he draw but a reasonable company together in these unquiet times it cannot be kept (in that place) so private, but that the neighbor justices will know of it and they will be glad of any occasion to trouble the Catholics who live near them.”⁵³ It is unclear whether or not the governmental authorities were aware of the school as the recusants claimed, but there was no pilgrimage to the well that summer. Catholics, particularly those affiliated with the secular clerics, continued to worry about the school, which apparently persisted for a time despite attempts to close it. The local recusant Edward Pennant warned in 1627 that the existence of Prichard’s school was “as sure as that there is a school at Eton.” He stated that

⁵¹ T. H. B. M. Harmsen, *John Gee’s Foot Out of the Snare (1624)* (Nijmegen: The Cicero Press, 1992), 121-122. For a charge that Mass was said openly at the well in 1625, see David, *St. Winefride’s Well*, 10. Over a century and a half after Gee wrote, Thomas Pennant also stated that most pilgrims to Holywell were women. Pennant, *The History of the Parishes of Whiteford, and Holywell* (London: B. & J. White, 1796), 230. In an attempt to discredit their foes, early modern Protestants and Catholics alike often claimed that religious practices that they found to be particularly objectionable were female dominated. The idea that women were especially prone to gullibility and clerical seduction, for example, is apparent in Gee’s statement. Nonetheless, women’s roles in pilgrimages to Holywell demand further scholarly investigation. The recusant belief that the well could cure infertility lends credence to the idea that women may have had a particular interest in it.

⁵² PRO, SP 16/38/73, transcribed in Foley, ed., *Records*, 4: 534.

⁵³ Archives of the Archdiocese of Westminster, Series A (AAW/A). Material quoted from this series is published with the permission of the Archbishop of Westminster. AAW/A, vol. XIX, no. 111, p. 391 as transcribed in J. M. Cleary, “Recusant Schools in North Wales, 1626-1627,” *Worcestershire Recusant* 32 (December, 1978): 14.

there were seven pupils involved and that “the vicar of the parish (who keeps school at the church) took notice thereof, and grumbled to me thereat. And a great magistrate in the neighbourhood, that bears no affection to the religion, complained to me of great indiscretion and overboldness” for Prichard’s teaching at an earlier location.⁵⁴ The secular cleric Thomas Pennant and several laymen composed a notarial attestation that Father Prichard’s school was “as well known to most Protestants in the neighbourhood as to us, and the most judicial of both sorts feared (if this course would hold) it would breed some trouble to the country and that holy place.”⁵⁵ In June, 1627, John Mostyn agreed to close the school.⁵⁶ The fact that the school’s Catholic critics had repeatedly insisted that its existence was well known to Protestants sheds considerable light on the local situation in Holywell. If they were correct, and the local authorities knew about the school, then there was a degree of toleration operating on the local level, as long as recusants avoided flaunting their religiosity. If the Catholics were wrong, and the school was a secret, their worries nonetheless illustrate their intense concern with Protestant opinion and their fears of harassment. Recusant worries about attracting hostile attention notwithstanding, on November 3, 1629—St. Winifred’s feast day—government spies recorded that about 1,400 knights, ladies, and gentlemen gathered at the well, scarcely a discreet assembly.⁵⁷ More disturbing still, from a governmental perspective, were reports that approximately 150 Catholic priests also were in attendance.⁵⁸ This was a remarkable phenomenon given the restrictive legal climate of the era.

In 1633, the Bishop of St. Asaph reported to the Archbishop of Canterbury that “all was exceedingly well [in his diocese] save only that the number and boldness of Romish recusants increased much in many places, and was much encouraged by the superstition and frequent concourse of some of that part to Holywell, otherwise called St. Winifred’s Well.”⁵⁹ These illegal pilgrimages persisted, leading Sir John Bridgeman, Chief Justice of Chester, to reassure the Privy Councilors in 1636 that he would take extreme measures in order to halt them. He pledged to “suppress all unnecessary alehouses thereabouts being the usual receptacles of those persons [pilgrims],” to keep a “strict watch” over the well, and even to attempt to plug “the head of the spring where the superstition (as I am informed) is used.”⁶⁰ William Laud, Archbishop of Canterbury’s report in 1636 that “in the diocese of St. Asaph there is no complaint but the usual, that there is great resort of recusants to Holy Well” demonstrated the Protestant clerical perspective that pilgrimage to the well posed a chronic problem. Likewise, the fact that elites took part in the ritual in the summer of 1636 infuriated Laud. Specifically, he lamented the “boldness” of the vocal and recalcitrant Elizabeth Cary, Lady Falkland, a convert to Catholicism who also had participated in the

⁵⁴ Cleary notes the lack of a pilgrimage that year, 15. AAW/A, vol. XX, no. 82, p. 291, as transcribed in Cleary, “Recusant Schools,” 16.

⁵⁵ AAW/A, vol. XX, no. 83, p. 295, as transcribed in Cleary, “Recusant Schools,” 18.

⁵⁶ There is no record of Anne Mostyn’s opinion on the issue, but she had been a fervent supporter of the enterprise.

⁵⁷ Major pilgrimages to the well typically occurred either on June 22nd, the commemoration of the Saint’s decollation (which Gee probably was describing above) or on November 3rd.

⁵⁸ PRO, SP 16/151/13.

⁵⁹ Lambeth MSS as quoted in Thomas, “Saint Winifred’s Well,” 21.

⁶⁰ PRO, SP 16/346/25, transcribed in Foley, ed., *Records*, 4: 535. Since the spring yielded “over twenty tons of water a minute,” attempts to stop it at its source were unlikely to be successful. Thomas, “Saint Winifred’s Well,” 16.

large pilgrimage of 1629. He stated that in 1636 she and a group of other recusants “came as pilgrims thither, who were the more observed because they traveled on foot, and dissembled neither their quality nor their errand.” He successfully urged the King to “confine” Falkland for such activities, yet the point remained that prominent Catholics habitually frequented the well with impunity.⁶¹ By April 1637, Sir John Bridgeman ordered the parish churchwardens to disfigure the image of St. Winifred at the well and to remove and sell the iron posts upon which pilgrims had steadied and supported themselves. Furthermore, the names of all pilgrims were to be recorded and reported at the next Assizes. All inns except for two were ordered closed.⁶² Governmental agents reported that by September “the posts had been removed and the image whitewashed.”⁶³ Although these actions were dramatic, even they did not eradicate pilgrimages.

Thus the respective positions of Catholics and most Protestants on the well were clear. Recusants valued the well as a holy site and were persistent—even audacious—in their continued resort to its healing waters. They strove to maintain traditions of Catholic piety even in the face of stringent legal constraints. The longer that the well endured, the more that its continued existence made it “a standing miracle” for Catholics.⁶⁴ As John Falconer, S.J. wrote in 1635, St. Winifred’s “monuments now after a general [de]vastation of monasteries, and saints’ memories in our country, remain undefaced, and no less glorious in Wales and England, than St. Catherine’s tomb on Mount Sinai, amongst fierce Mahometans and Paynims, is strangely, yet conserved.”⁶⁵ For recusants, the well was a wonder of the world, worthy of universal adulation as a sacred space which thrived notwithstanding its location in a land awash with heresy.⁶⁶ Governmental officials and local Protestant churchmen, on the other hand, repeatedly developed new tactics to discourage the flow of pilgrims and stem access to the site. St. Winifred’s Well was a source of profound irritation to an English government bent on cleansing the nation of “papist superstition.”

“A Scandal to our Religion”:

Recusant Disputes over Control of the Well

Pilgrimage to the well sometimes came into jeopardy not as a result of governmental measures, but because of disputes among recusants themselves in the Catholic stronghold of Holywell.⁶⁷ Their shared situation as the victims of religious

⁶¹ J. P. Kenyon, ed. *The Stuart Constitution, 1603-1688: Documents and Commentary* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1969), 163.

⁶² National Library of Wales (NLW), Great Sessions 4/982/1/34. My thanks to David Klausner for this reference, to Gia Hayes for providing a transcription of the document, and to the National Library for furnishing a copy of it.

⁶³ Document in the Royal Library, Brussels, as quoted in David, *St. Winefride’s Well*, 15. Pennant states that an image of the Virgin Mary, housed in a niche at the well, was pulled down in 1635. Pennant, *History of Parishes*, 220.

⁶⁴ Gerard, *Autobiography*, 46.

⁶⁵ John Falconer, Preface, *Admirable Life*.

⁶⁶ Among the scenes of martyrdom painted in 1583 on the chapel walls of the English College, Rome to inspire aspiring Catholic clerics was St. Winifred’s, demonstrating that her cult was not neglected even by recusants abroad. Scott Pilarz, “‘Campion dead bites with his friends’ teeth’: Representations of an Early Modern Catholic Martyr” in Christopher Highley and John N. King, eds. *John Foxe and His World* (Burlington, VT: Ashgate, 2002), 225.

⁶⁷ The largest concentrations of recusants in Wales were in the northeast—the diocese of St. Asaph—and in the southeast—the diocese of Llandaff. Flintshire and Denbighshire had particularly high recusant populations

persecution notwithstanding, local Catholics disagreed as to which priests should control the well, minister to pilgrims, and collect alms. For these elite recusants, the well represented a powerful site of cures and a source of wealth that they sought to entrust to competent clerical hands. A hostile legal climate—coupled with tensions among secular priests, Jesuits, and their respective lay partisans—at times rendered alliances among Catholics unclear, complex, or nonexistent. Shared commitment to helping the tradition of pilgrimage endure did not inevitably trump dissension. All Catholics did not perceive their interests in the well as equal and, when pressed, they were capable of manipulating the climate of persecution against coreligionist enemies.

Although recusants often banded together to maintain their clandestine religious practices, some significant divisions existed among them. For example, riven by competition for gentry patronage and control over seminaries abroad, bitter divisions had arisen among Catholic clerics. Those laypeople who favored the Jesuit order and those who supported secular clerics often were at loggerheads. In 1640, Anne Fox Mostyn Petre and her husband, George Petre, knight, began to build an inn in Holywell about sixteen yards from St. Winifred's Well. Like his wife, who had been involved in the schoolkeeping controversy of the 1620s, George Petre was a well known recusant and a supporter of the Jesuits.⁶⁸ Sir Francis Windebank, Secretary of State, promptly sent orders to the Sheriff of Flintshire "for reasons of State, best known to His Majesty [Charles I]" to "command that the building do immediately cease."⁶⁹ The Petres' structure had become controversial because of suspicions that Catholics intended to use it as a chapel and retreat center for pilgrims making illegal resort to the well. An anonymous pro-Jesuit commentator on the case claimed that when the sheriff told George Petre that he was to cease building he revealed that it was "persons of Mr. Petre's own religion" that had wrecked the construction plans.⁷⁰

Anne Petre suspected that her cousin, Father George Gage, a secular cleric, was the source of the rumors about her building that had made her family the focus of unwelcome governmental attention.⁷¹ Other recusants also attributed the authorities' interest in the Petres' building to Gage's machinations. From Anne Petre's perspective, the motive for her cousin's hostile activity against her was not hard to assess. She believed that Gage and his clerical brethren were jealous of the Petres' longtime support of the Jesuit order and feared that their new inn with its optimal location would attract more pilgrims than the one that the seculars maintained. The pilgrimage trade and its considerable accompanying alms were at stake. Their shared situation as persecuted Catholic clerics notwithstanding, Jesuits and seculars perceived their respective interests in the well as inherently antagonistic.

because of the well. Williams, *Wales and the Reformation*, 278, 375. On the history of Welsh recusancy, see Williams, *Wales and the Reformation*, chapter 10; Martin Cleary, "The Catholic Resistance in Wales: 1568-1678," *Blackfriars* 38 (1957) : 111-125; W. Llewelyn Williams, "Welsh Catholics on the Continent," *Transactions of the Honourable Society of Cymmrodorion* (1903) : 46-144; and Jones, "Catholic Recusancy."

⁶⁸ On the significance of the Jesuits in Wales, see Thomas M. McCoog, "The Society of Jesus in Wales; The Welsh in the Society of Jesus: 1561-1625," *The Journal of Welsh Religious History* 5 (1997) : 1-27. Jesuits in Holywell compiled a library in the early modern era. McCoog, "The Society," 18, 26. From 1664 until 1835, the Jesuits' residence also housed a relic of St. Thomas of Hereford, one of the last canonized English medieval saints. Finucane, *Miracles and Pilgrims*, 216.

⁶⁹ PRO, SP 16/459/49.

⁷⁰ AAW/A, vol. XXIX, no. 131, 414.

⁷¹ For more on Gage, see Godfrey Anstruther, *The Seminary Priests: A Dictionary of the Secular Clergy of England and Wales, 1558-1850* (Great Wakering, Essex: Mayhew-McCrimmon, 1975), 120-124.

Anne Petre rapidly took her cousin to task in a blistering letter and noted that she was not alone in her negative assessment of his intentions towards her. She reported that “both Catholics and Protestants of quality” suspected that Father Gage had come to visit her the summer before with a “main purpose” “to bring information against my building.”⁷² In fact, the anonymous chronicler of the 1640 dispute cited as incriminating evidence the fact that Gage had resided with a secular clerical colleague, not with his cousin’s family, during his visit.⁷³ Petre reminded Father Gage of further details of his visit which in retrospect seemed suspicious to her. For example, she recalled that he had persistently urged her to show him the chapel in her partially constructed building.⁷⁴ Yet when she had said to him that she did not intend to put the structure to spiritual uses, he still “pressed” her in the matter. She had come to the reluctant conclusion that Gage’s “purpose was to urge me to confess somewhat in that point, whereby advantage might be had against me.” More tellingly still, Petre alleged that her cousin had requested that she sign a document attesting that her building would cost 2,000 pounds. Even when she replied that it would only cost 400 pounds, she claimed that he spread a rumor confirming the higher price. This was a significant accusation for Petre to level. The more expensive her building was, the more likely it was that governmental officials would believe that she intended it to be “superstitiously used” as an illegal Catholic chapel. In closing, Petre blamed her cousin’s “friends” for leading him to cause “scandal to our religion.”⁷⁵

There is no record of Gage’s response to his cousin’s accusatory letter. In an earlier missive, however, he had indicated his belief that her structure was ill-timed.⁷⁶ He probably would have agreed with other opponents of the Petres’ building that it was “only calculated to exasperate Protestants.”⁷⁷ Nonetheless, governmental investigators’ findings ultimately vindicated Anne Petre’s position. State agents reported that after analysis of the structure they could not “by the eye find any outward appearance of church or chapel, for such Romish use.” Furthermore, they stated that the Petres’ inn was not immediately adjacent to the well. Five or six houses and the vicarage separated the controversial structure from the pilgrimage site. An unnamed government informant observed that the Petres’ building “doth more approximate the well than another fair inn adjoining unto it, out of which house [that of Father Williams, a secular cleric] we conceive this cloud burst out into a tempest against Mr. Petre. For apprehending that his house might prejudice their benefit, we think they did out of malignity calumniate him with such imputations.”⁷⁸ A pro-Jesuit commentator recounted how one Mr. Roberts, a fervent partisan of the seculars sometimes “would seem to excuse them [the seculars], by saying that their information was not against Mr. Petre but against the Jesuits.” Mr. Roberts allegedly also stated “that the secular priests had ... informed [the government] that the said building was to be a college of Jesuits.”⁷⁹ This anonymously authored source reiterated the position that the seculars were gravely

⁷² AAW/A, vol. XXIX, no. 113, 355.

⁷³ AAW/A, vol. XXIX, no. 131.

⁷⁴ It is unclear whether or not the Petres intended to build a chapel, although they probably did. It is clear that they meant their structure to serve pilgrims and house Jesuits.

⁷⁵ AAW/A, vol. XXIX, no. 113, 356-357.

⁷⁶ AAW/A, vol. XXIX, no. 101, 319.

⁷⁷ Foley, *Records*, 4: 536.

⁷⁸ AAW/A, vol. XXIX, no. 114, 359-360.

⁷⁹ AAW/A, vol. XXIX, no. 131, 419.

concerned that the Petres' house would "prejudice Mr. Williams who was an ancient priest and lived in that place by the gains that he got [from pilgrims] in the summer season."⁸⁰ Anne Petre's version of events appeared credible to the governmental representative, who affirmed that the building's cost would "scarce amount unto 400 pounds."⁸¹ Thus the Petres were allowed to recommence their building, after presenting a 1,000 pound bond that they would not allow their structure to become "a place of meeting or devotion of Roman Catholics nor suffer any private conventicles whatever to be kept in it."⁸²

The anonymous pro-Jesuit commentator on the case related the ensuing events with relish. The writer alleged that Count Rossetti, the Pope's representative to Henrietta Maria's court, was disturbed to learn of the story and believed that the secular clerics involved were "de facto excommunicated" for their incendiary activities. Unfortunately, the commentator noted, the Civil War intervened before the Count could act on his threats.⁸³ The anonymous writer eagerly compiled evidence of alleged divine retribution at work in the aftermath of the building controversy. For example, one woman, who had opposed the Petres' structure and had at one time threatened to "throw hot scalding water" at a Jesuit whom she found particularly loathsome, came to a penniless and desperate end. Her husband, a knight, was also anti-Jesuit. When once pressed as to his opinion of a Jesuit of exemplary life and morals, he had provided an answer that had become locally famous. When asked if he loved God the Father, he answered yes, because He was his creator. When asked if he loved God the Son, he answered yes, because He was his redeemer. But when asked "what say you to God the Holy Ghost he soon replied, that he loved no ghost at all [but] if he had loved any ghost, he would have loved the Holy Ghost." In other words, "if I loved or affected any Jesuit, I should love him whom ... [we] speak of, but I do not love any of that company at all."⁸⁴ The anonymous writer further observed—with barely concealed glee—that this man, who had actively assisted the seculars in the building dispute, allegedly died without the benefit of the sacraments, despite the fact that three secular priests were in his home at the time of his demise. The Jesuit *Annual Letters* for 1642-43 recorded that the Assizes temporarily were held at the contested building "and it is worthy of remark that some of those very persons who had been most active in opposing the original destination of the building, were brought to trial within this court on charges affecting their lives."⁸⁵

Ultimately Catholics established two inns or "hospices" at Holywell to serve the needs of pilgrims. The Jesuits ran the Old Star, which the Petres had begun; the seculars were in charge of the Cross Keys. George Petre participated in the secret conveying of land to the Jesuits for the Star Inn from 1639 until near the time of his death in 1647; Anne Petre remained involved as late as 1669.⁸⁶ The period between the recusant struggle over control

⁸⁰ AAW/A, vol. XXIX, no. 131, 419.

⁸¹ AAW/A, vol. XXIX, no. 114, 360.

⁸² PRO, SP 16/466/35.

⁸³ AAW/A, vol. XXIX, no. 131, 420-421.

⁸⁴ AAW/A, vol. XXIX, no. 131, 422-423.

⁸⁵ Foley, *Records*, 4: 536.

⁸⁶ For accounts of the complex patterns of land exchange relating to the Star Inn and the Petre family's involvement in them, see Archives of the English Province of the Society of Jesus, London, MS 2/1, "Correspondence Relating to St. Omers and to North Wales, 1666-1781," fols. 4-5; Thomas M. McCoog, "The Society of Jesus in England, 1623-1688: An Institutional Study" (Ph.D. dissertation, University of Warwick, 1984), 335-336; and Foley, *Records*, 4:530.

of the well in 1640 and a similar dispute in the 1680s is a shadowy era in the site's history. During a 1643 raid in Holywell, Puritans "did pull down the organs, defaced the windows in the churches, and pulled down the arms and hatchments."⁸⁷ Damage to the stonework in St. Winifred's Chapel may have occurred at this time.⁸⁸ By 1652, the poet John Taylor reported that the "fair chapel" over the well "is now much defaced by the injury of these late wars ... it is frequented daily by many people of rich and poor, of all diseases."⁸⁹ Cryptic references in clerical correspondence seem to indicate that resort was not made to the well's chapel on June 22, 1674, because of security considerations.⁹⁰

Apparently by 1686 the Jesuits no longer had the opportunity to say Mass in the chapel, which was under the control of secular clerics.⁹¹ In August of the same year, the Catholic James II and Mary of Modena journeyed to the well to pray for the birth of an heir after fifteen childless years of marriage.⁹² When the monarchs visited the well the King donated thirty pounds to the Jesuits for the site's repair, since "the place had been for a long time used only as a Sessions House, and [for] similar profane purposes."⁹³ An account of 1687 discussed the emergence of a dispute between Jesuits and secular priests over the right to serve the well's chapel.⁹⁴ In 1687, Queen Mary indicated to Sir Roger Mostyn that the King had given her the chapel and that she wanted to present it to the Jesuits.⁹⁵ Christopher Tootal recounted the ensuing events:

[John] Brian, [secular] chaplain at the Cross Keys in Holywell town, gave me an account on June 22, 1687, that after he had procured a lease of Holywell Chapel and the possession given him by the landlord, the Jesuits' agents demanded the key of Mr. Brian; but he refused to deliver it. Whereupon they broke open the door and delivered possession thereof to the Jesuits. For redress of this wrong done to Mr. Brian he had recourse to the landlord, who fairly owned that his lease was good and duly executed, but withall declared that in regard it was the Queen's pleasure that the Jesuits should have the Chapel for their use, he was not willing to incur her displeasure by opposing their proceedings.⁹⁶

The Jesuits were unable to enjoy their victory in this dispute for long. The birth of a male heir to the Catholic monarch in June of 1688 soon led to the removal of James II from the throne. In Holywell, Roderick (Thomas) Roberts, S. J. endured the plunder of the Star Inn and chapel, during which a mob burned the Jesuits' library and one of the establishment's

⁸⁷ BL, Harleian MS 2125, fol. 135, as quoted in Thomas, "St. Winifred's Well," 28.

⁸⁸ Thomas, "St. Winifred's Well," 29.

⁸⁹ John Taylor, "A Short Relation of a Long Journey," in Charles Hindley, ed. *The Old Book Collector's Miscellany* (London: Reeves and Turner, 1873), 3: 7-8.

⁹⁰ David, *St. Winefride's Well*, 16.

⁹¹ David, *St. Winefride's Well*, 16.

⁹² Fraser, *Faith and Treason*, 139.

⁹³ Foley, *Records*, 5: 935.

⁹⁴ The chronology of the events in question is unclear. The sources at times present conflicting details. Foley, *Records*, vol. 5; David, *St. Winefride's Well*; and Catholic Record Society, *Miscellanea III* (London: Privately printed, 1906), 105.

⁹⁵ Foley, *Records*, 5: 935. The courts had resolved that the well's chapel belonged to the Crown.

⁹⁶ Tootal, *Ushaw Collection*, 1. 369, as quoted in David, *St. Winefride's Well*, 16. Catholic Record Society, *Miscellanea III*, 105 clearly identifies the landlord as Sir Roger Mostyn.

crucifixes in the marketplace. Roberts was reduced to a fugitive status, living in abandoned huts, in fields, and in recusants' homes for over a year as he successfully sought to evade capture.⁹⁷

Sustained examination of St. Winifred's Well demonstrates the challenges inherent in maintaining ancient religious traditions under new legal constraints. Likewise, analysis of cures and controversies at the well shows how several groups struggled to attain different types of control there. For recusant pilgrims, neither legal sanctions nor battles among elite Catholics halted their attempts to improve their lots by tapping into the sacred power of the well. For English governmental officials, control of the well signified some level of authority over religious dissent. For gentry families like the Petres, or the unnamed knight and his lady who opposed the Petres' building, the well was a site of miraculous cures which they wanted to see safely under the control of priests whom they favored and trusted. For the competing clerics of the English mission—secular and Jesuit alike—the well was both a hallowed space and the hub of a religious economy that could provide prestige and wealth for their orders. Throughout the early modern period, the quest to control St. Winifred's Well posed persistent challenges to all those who sought such authority, the site's advocates and its adversaries alike.

⁹⁷ Foley, Records, 5: 943-944.