

MADRON WELL & BAPTISTRY

SW 4465 3280 [OS Maps Explorer 102; Landranger 203]

MADRON HOLY WELL - This page

MADRON WELL-CHAPEL (BAPTISTRY) - Page 2

LOCATION Madron Holy Well & Baptistry lie to the north of the village of Madron, which is about a mile from Penzance on the Penzance-Madron-Morvah road.

GENERAL ACCESS About half a mile outside the village of Madron, there is a turning on the right that is signposted and leads to a parking area. Leave cars here and then take the path that runs through the trees down to the Well & Baptistry. The path is suitable for disabled and wheelchair access all the way to the Baptistry, but not to the Well, which lies in a very wet and boggy area with no actual pathway.

MADRON WELL

ACCESS Follow the path from the car parking area to the 'Cloutie Trees' (trees festooned with coloured rags and pieces of cloth). Here there is a small stone marker sign set into the ground, pointing right to the Baptistry and left to the Well. There is no proper path to the Well, so if you wish to visit it, it will be a case of stanking (wading) through a very wet and boggy area. In particularly wet conditions the access to the Well is really impassable, and generally should only be attempted with suitable wellington boot or wader gear.



DESCRIPTION The well lies about ¼ mile into the boggy area (Note - the area below the Cloutie Tree is not the well, though many believe it to be so), and is identifiable by a stone enclosure of granite slabs, which could be submerged below the water in particularly wet conditions. This stone surround was rebuilt in the early 1980s from stones found in the area, so it may not be exactly how the well originally looked, though it probably is quite close. The well probably originally dates from pre-Christian times, and was here long before the Baptistry (Well-Chapel) was built.

FOLKLORE & LEGEND

The clouties (pieces of rag) tied to the tree was a traditional custom at healing wells, particularly this one. The rags were torn from a part of the body where there was an injury or hurt and tied on a tree close to the well. As the material disintegrated (most materials were biodegradable) so the hurt was supposed to go. The Well was also much visited for healing and divination. Robert Hunt in 1871 recorded that maidens went there in May (the first three Thursdays being the most propitious time) and made a cross to float on the water, the number of bubbles indicating the years before matrimony. This custom continued right up until the 1st World War in the early 20th Century.

PURPOSE AND MEANING

Holy Wells like Madron would originally have been a source of fresh water for people, and came to be venerated for the 'genus loci' or spirit of the place who was thought to dwell there. Later, under Christianity, they often became dedicated to saints [see page 2].

**PLEASE TREAT THIS SITE WITH RESPECT & LEAVE NO LITTER OR OFFERINGS.
IF YOU DECIDE TO TIE A CLOTH TO THE TREE PLEASE ENSURE IT IS APPROPRIATE.
IF YOU FIND ANY DAMAGE OR VANDALISM PLEASE PHONE 01736-787186 OR 787522**

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MADRON WELL-CHAPEL (BAPTISTRY) - This page **MADRON HOLY WELL** - Page 1

LOCATION & GENERAL ACCESS - See Page 1

MADRON WELL-CHAPEL (BAPTISTRY)

ACCESS Follow the path from the car parking area all the way (about ¼mile) down to the Baptistry. Disabled access.

DESCRIPTION The Well-Chapel (usually known as the Baptistry) is a small roofless rectangular building, with an altar stone at the eastern end and a well with running water in the SW corner. This water was originally channeled here from the source of the Holy Well itself [see page 1], although nowadays it also contains run-off water from the surrounding fields.



The present building dates from about the 12th century, though there was probably a simple building here from Celtic times onwards.

FOLKLORE & LEGEND

The earliest reference to this site was in 1640, when it was recorded that the "cripple John Treill" came here and bathed once a week for three weeks in May. He then slept on a mound nearby called St.Maddern's Bed (the location of which is now not known) and was cured. From then onwards, the site was much visited and venerated. It is sometimes not clear as to whether it is the Holy Well or this Baptistry Well that is being visited, but children were certainly brought to one or other, stripped naked and plunged three times through the water widdershins (against the sun, or clockwise) to restore their health. Note the recurrence of the number three in all these rituals and the time of year when it occurred. Three was a magic number to the Celtic people, and the beginning of May was the time of their Beltane festival. So we may have a folk-memory here of use of the site from very early times.

In the 19th Century, an old dame An Kitty used to attend the Baptistry (or well) in the Spring-time to instruct 'the gentry' (who were then beginning to visit sites such as these) on the correct rituals to perform at the well. Unfortunately, the precise nature of these are not recorded, but they are likely to be similar to those given above.

PURPOSE AND MEANING

This site has a long continuity of spiritual use by both Christians and pagans. Up until very recent times local Methodists would still go here for an open-air service on the first Sunday in May, and the site is also used by local pagans for ceremonies to honour the Earth Mother. The Chapel is dedicated to St.Madern, who is also the patron saint of Madron Church. St.Madern is a curiously named saint: 'he' may in fact be a variant of Modron, the mother-Goddess of the Welsh Triads. Modron was Christianised into the female Welsh saint Madrun, who could have then been brought to Cornwall by Welsh incomers in the 5th & 6th Centuries. In the process it is possible that the sex of the Celtic mother-Goddess/saint became masculinised, because both the Welsh 'Madrun' and the Cornish 'Madern' are etimologically identical.

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