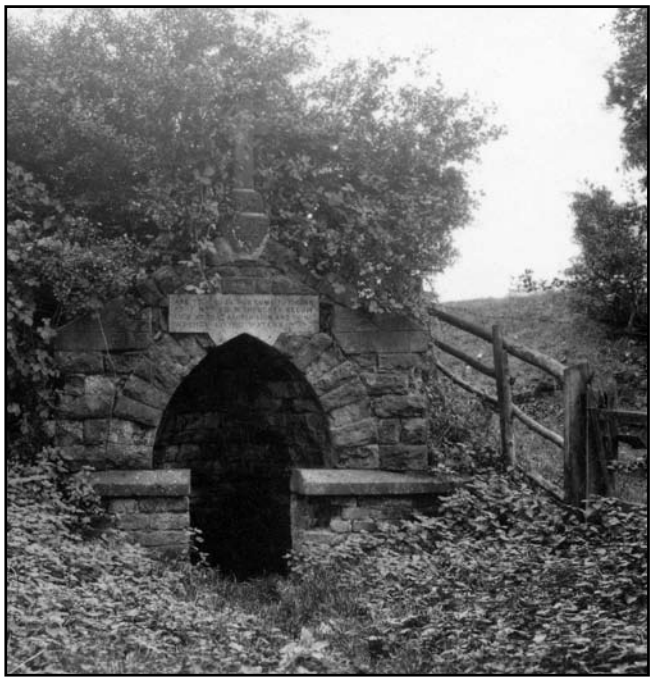
Cavendish Walters' holy wells

Rupert Cavendish Skyring Walters (1888–1980) was a water engineer and geologist, a past President of the Institution of Water Engineers, and sometime Fellow of the Geological Society of London who also served on its Council. He was author of *The Ancient Wells, Springs and Holy Wells of Gloucestershire* (1928), *The Nation's Water Supply* (1936), and *Dam Geology* (1962, 2nd edition 1971). From at least 1924 to the end of his life he accumulated information on holy wells, springs and bournes of England and Wales and, to a much lesser extent, Scotland and France.

In October 2018 the British Geological Survey archivist at Keyworth (A L Morrison) was pleased to accept the kind donation by Walters' daughter, Wendy, of her father's holy well collection, consisting of typescript and manuscript notes, newspaper cuttings, photographs (mostly by Walters) and postcard views, arranged by county. It is possible that he had intended to publish a series of books or papers on the holy wells of other individual counties along the lines of that for Gloucestershire, and indeed had progressed so far as to prepare the typescript of a book titled *The Ancient Wells, Springs and Holy Wells of Kent*, which was never published.



The well at Ashwell, near Oakham, Rutland, which carries this inscription carved in stone above its entrance arch:

'All ye who hither come to drink,
Rest not your thoughts below
Look at that sacred sign and think
Whence living waters flow.'

The spring that feeds this well, from which the village evidently takes its name, emerges from the Lower Jurassic Marlstone Rock Formation (photo: BGS).

Silk Willoughby, Lincolnshire: ancient cross, together with a pump erected in the late 19th century over a spring. An inscription includes the line: 'If any man thirst let him come unto me and drink'. This well is situated on the Cornbrash Formation (Middle Jurassic) close to a mapped geological fault (photo: BGS).

The terms well and spring both occur in Old English and appear to have essentially similar meanings in referring to a place from which water naturally wells up or springs out of the ground, except that the former term may also imply a pool fed by a spring. Such sites have always been imbued with great importance and often treated with sacred reverence. As a source of water they could be inconstant, controlled by a pagan deity or later a saint who must be placated with supplications and offerings.

Cavendish Walters (he was familiarly known as Caven) neatly sums up the abiding fascination of holy or sacred wells in the preface to his *Ancient Wells, Springs and Holy Wells of Gloucestershire*: "Whether visited for the purposes of pleasure or study, a spring of water is always fascinating. From time immemorial it has been an object of adoration; it was worshipped by the Druids; it was decorated with flowers by the Romans; it was sacrificed to by other Pagans. Ceremonies with water became adopted in the religions of different peoples... Each succeeding generation added to or modified the customs of the preceding, until, in our time, there is not only the common ceremony of Baptism, but also other special ceremonies connected with water. There are several pilgrimages to several places, there are services held at decorated wells by peoples of different religions in all parts of the world, and there are many springs known as 'wishing', 'lucky' or 'haunted' wells."

The photographs reproduced here have been selected from the R C S Walters holy well collection (BGS Archives RCSW/1–42) on account of their East Midlands interest. They probably date for the most part from the late 1920s.

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