

The Cloutie Well



The village of Munlochy sits in the heart of the Black Isle, the promontory that lies north of Inverness, bounded by the Moray Firth to the south and the Cromarty Firth to the north. Half a mile west of this junction, the road enters a forested area, and as it does, passing motorists are treated to the odd spectacle of bits of cloth and clothing hanging off the trees and bushes on the south side of the road. Welcome to the Cloutie Well!

The Cloutie Well is a rather weird remnant of an ancient tradition once commonly found in Scotland and Ireland, of holy wells to which pilgrims would come and make offerings, usually in the hope of having an illness cured. The tradition dates far back into pre-Christian times, to the practice of leaving votive offerings to the local spirits or gods in wells and springs. With the arrival of Christianity, the practice was simply adopted to the new circumstances.

Over time, most of these holy wells became associated with local churches. A good example was at St Mary's, the Parish Church of Tynninghame and Whitekirk, in East Lothian. In just one year, 1413, no fewer than 15,563 pilgrims visited the holy well at St Mary's, to the great financial benefit of both the church and local economy.

Over time, as the Roman Church supplanted the Celtic Church in Scotland, practices which echoed the old pagan ways became frowned upon, and the number of holy wells diminished. And the Reformation of 1560 also served to suppress religious activity outwith a closely defined Presbyterian norm: in 1581 an Act of Parliament in Scotland made pilgrimage to holy wells illegal. Nonetheless the practice seems to have continued in some areas, and when Welshman Thomas Pennant toured Scotland in 1769, he recorded seeing holy wells *"tapestried about with rags"*.

The holy well at Munlochy is said to date back to - and probably beyond - the time of St Boniface or Curitan, who worked as a missionary in Scotland in about AD620. Pilgrims would come, perform a ceremony that involved circling the well sunwise three times before splashing some of its water on the ground and making a prayer. They would then tie a piece of cloth or "clout" that had been in contact with the ill person to a nearby tree. As the clout rotted away, the illness would depart the sick person. An alternative tradition suggests that sick children would be left here

overnight to be healed. Presumably any with the strength or spirit to survive what would have been an exceedingly creepy ordeal were pretty likely to recover anyway.

Today's Cloutie Well remains an unsettling place. Having left your car in the purpose-made parking area in the forest a hundred yards or so to the west, you make your way along a woodland path over the brow of a hill and find yourself in a setting that is - especially when the trees have no leaves - distinctly odd. At its heart on the far side of the hill is a spring, below which is a stone trough in which water collects.

Many people still obviously believe that leaving an offering will be of benefit to them or to others. One problem is that many choose to leave items made of modern synthetic materials that will never rot away. This does little for the local environment: and neither, according to the tradition of the well, can it do anything for the health of the individual needing to be cured.