

St Mary's Well

A sacred spring that may predate the castle itself

There is something a little different about St Mary's Well. Its name connects it to the medieval parish church – and possibly something even older.

Holy wells, where clean, natural spring water bubbled out of the ground, were seen as sacred places long before the Normans came to Lancashire. Many holy wells have pre-Christian origins, and were thought to be life-giving and magical.

It is possible that St Mary's Well existed before the first church was built in Clitheroe. It could have been associated with a local spirit or deity before it was dedicated at St Mary.

Stand here for a moment. A spring has been flowing here, and people have been coming to this exact spot, for well over a thousand years. The steps beneath your feet have been worn smooth by countless footsteps just like yours.

What you're looking at

Two stepped entrances face each other – you go down one side out of the other, keeping people moving. A stone gangway divides the pool into two halves. At the centre sits a worn cube-shaped stone, thought to have been used for scrubbing clothes. The entry stones are rubbed smooth by generations of hands steadying themselves.



In later history, the well was used as a water source for people who lived in this part of the town. As with the other two town wells, it would have been a daily meeting place for exchanging news and gossip, as well as gathering water.

A trough for watering animals was added to the road side of the well in the 19th century. This was buried at some point, then re-discovered by road workers in 1989



Clitheroe grew rapidly in the 19th century, and a serious Cholera outbreak in 1849 prompted action to bring clean water to the town. Piped water from Grindleton Fell arrived in Clitheroe for the first time in 1856 and Heald Well fell quiet.

The well is now grade II listed and is an irreplaceable part of Clitheroe's history.

Did you know?

A 'Holy well' didn't just mean religious. Springs with unusually pure water were thought to have healing properties, and were called 'holy'. People would travel miles to visit them, and St Mary's Well may have been a place of pilgrimage as well as the daily water stop.

Early origins

Pre-1066 – possible early settlement at Clitheroe, built on a rocky outcrop close to natural springs

Norman power

Early 1100s – Clitheroe Castle built by the de Lacy family to protect important trade routes through the Ribble Valley.

Medieval town growth

1200s – Clitheroe had a charter and regular markets, attracting farmers and traders from the surrounding area. They passed the wells on their way into town.

1519 – Henry VIII grants rights for additional fairs – the stone walls around the wells possibly date to this time, to cope with the extra people visiting the town.

Industry and expansion

1780s – first industrial textile mills built at Low Moor Mill and Primrose. Quarrying and lime production expand. The populations grows rapidly and diseases spread in the water.

1856 – piped water arrives in Clitheroe. The wells become redundant as a water source.