

St. Boniface and the Wishing Well



Behind Hillside is St. Boniface Down which rises up steeply to 791 feet (241 metres), the highest point on the Island. Its southern face is now a holm oak woodland but it obtained its name from its association with St. Boniface.

St. Boniface. Winfrith, a Christian missionary from Wessex, was based at a Benedictine monastery in Hampshire when he is reputed to have visited Bonchurch on the Isle of Wight where he preached from Pulpit Rock. That would be about 710AD.

A few years later Winfrith set out on a missionary expedition to Frisia, intending to convert the inhabitants to Christianity by preaching to them in Anglo-Saxon English which was similar to Old Frisian. But the Frisians were at war, making his task impossible, so he returned home.

Two years later he visited Rome to ask Pope Gregory II for his blessing to continue as a missionary. The Pope gave him the new name Boniface whereupon he embarked on 35 years of missionary work in various parts of what is now Germany.

He went on to found many new churches and monasteries and eventually became Archbishop of all Germany.

Boniface was constantly travelling: his journeys and letters show his energy and spirituality. Many of his fellow missionaries also came from Anglo-Saxon England.

Close to his 80th year he still wanted to take the gospel to Frisia and he set off with 52 companions on an evangelical mission. At Pentecost, on 5th June 754, near the modern town of Dokkum in the Netherlands, they were all massacred by heathen brigands. Boniface was himself struck down by a sword which pierced the bible he had raised to shield his head. As requested in his will, his body was taken back to the monastery he had founded at Fulda, in central Germany, where a magnificent Cathedral now encloses his tomb.

Some traditions credit St Boniface with the invention of the Christmas tree. The Oak of Thor was chopped down by Boniface in a confrontation with the pagan gods and the local heathen tribes. A fir tree growing in the roots of the Oak was claimed by Boniface as a new Christian symbol.

Saint Boniface's feast day is celebrated on 5th June. He is the patron saint of Germany, of brewers and tailors. It has been suggested that the name Bonchurch may be derived from his name.

St. Boniface Well

John Andrews map of the Island in 1769 shows a 'Holywell Spring' on St. Boniface Down. The first published accounts of the Well appeared in the 18th Century by which time several myths and customs were already well established.

In 1796 Charles Tomkins wrote "Just above St. Boniface Cottage there is a spring, which was formerly held in high veneration by the seamen. It was their custom, in passing this place, to lower the fore-topmast in reverence to St. Boniface. The youth of both sexes, on that saints day, used to resort to this spring, proudly decorated with chaplets of flowers, in order to regale themselves".

A description from 1867 comments "High up on the steep face of St. Boniface Down, not far from the summit, a white chalky patch in the turf marks the position of the Wishing Well, interesting to the geologist from the remarkable fact of a spring bursting forth at so great an elevation and to the lover of old superstitions from the reverence which it is said, was formerly shown to it. The popular belief was that, if the Well was reached without once looking back, any wish formed while drinking the water would certainly be granted".

Another 19th Century legend concerns an old pensioner who attempted to deepen the Well but had the opposite effect of causing it to dry up. It remained dry for several years until the pensioner died, whereupon it filled with water once more.

In the 20th Century, a large wood of evergreen holm oaks spread over the face of St. Boniface Down making it difficult to locate the Well. A travel guide from 1974 notes "The Well is difficult to find and distinguish, as only in wet weather is any water apparent. In summer it is merely the chalky bed of a dried-up spring situated in a clump of trees".

In 1962 two local residents excavated the Well and recorded what they found. It was re-located again in 2009 but the site is very difficult to reach, and somewhat dangerous, being on a very steep part of the downs that is overgrown with holm oaks.

It is still possible to identify a saucer-shaped pit, which would have been the Well. There is a water-worn hole in the chalk above the pit, which probably acted as the source of water, and another hole below which may have been a drainage channel. There is no longer any sign of water.

The National Trust have placed this commemorative plaque, sponsored by Hillside Hotel, on a plateau above the well

Saint Boniface Well

The site of St. Boniface Well is located within the holm oaks on the steep slope below.

St. Boniface is reputed to have preached in Bonchurch around 710AD.

An annual custom took place over many centuries in which young people would visit the well on the Saint's day, to garland it with flowers.

