

The Farnhill “Shelley Well” – the origin of this odd name

Time and again have I pondered and sifted my thought in the prison of the night.

From [“Elene” by Cynewulf](#)

What is the Shelley Well ?

For those of you that don’t know, “Shelley Well” is the local name for the stone trough, fed by a spring, and located on the road-side in front of Spout House, in High Farnhill.



Fig 1: The curiously-named Shelley Well

It’s an odd name, and some people in the village will tell you that it is properly called St. Helen’s Well. Of course this immediately poses two questions: who was St. Helen, and why is there a well bearing her name in Farnhill ?

This article aims to offer some possible answers.

Who was St. Helen ?

It’s not an easy question to answer, because:

- There’s an historical St. Helen, the mother of the Roman emperor Constantine the Great.
- There’s also a mythologized St. Helen, where the basic facts associated with the historical Helen have been re-imagined, to provide a British origin.
- And, most confusingly, there’s a mythological Helen, whose mythology has subsequently been used to create an almost certainly imaginary early Welsh saint.

The historical St. Helen, the mother of Constantine the Great

Helen, or more correctly Helena, was born around 250AD, probably in Asia Minor, and was the daughter of an inn-keeper¹.

Around 270AD she married Constantius Chlorus, a Roman general. They had a one son, Constantine, who was born in 272 (or perhaps 274), but were divorced in 289 when Constantius made a politically advantageous marriage to the daughter of the emperor of the western half of the Roman empire, Maximian. Political divorces of this sort were not unusual in the Roman empire.

Constantius subsequently became head of the western empire himself (May 1st 305), but died soon afterwards at York. He was succeeded by Constantine, who went on to reunite the western and eastern halves of the empire, and also began the process of its conversion to Christianity.

Whether Constantine was himself a Christian, is a matter of debate. He was only formally baptised in 337, on his death-bed. However, his toleration of Christianity (following the Edict of Milan, published in 313); his building projects, which included several Christian churches; and his key role in the Council of Nicea (in 325), are all strongly suggestive of an emperor who was inclined towards Christianity at least in private, but who perhaps felt unable or unwilling to make a public confession of his belief in what was still a largely pagan empire.



Fig 2: Coin from the reign of Constantine the Great, showing the head of Helena

Whatever Constantine's beliefs, it is thought that Helena was certainly a Christian. In 326, when she was already considered a very old woman for the time, she embarked on a journey around the holy sites in Palestine, ordering the building several churches; returning, in 328, with a large number of Christian relics. These, supposedly, included²:

- The True Cross – the excavation reputedly organised by Helena herself
- The nails of the crucifixion
- Earth from Golgotha – which was used to create the gardens of the Vatican
- The tunic of Christ
- Rope used to tie Christ to the cross

Helena died in 330 and was buried in Rome. Her sarcophagus, of purple porphyry, survives and is in the Vatican museum.



Fig 3: Sarcophagus of Helena

In the Catholic Church, St. Helen is revered as the patron saint of:

- Archaeologists, and discoverers
- Converts
- Divorcees, and those in difficult marriages

She is celebrated on the 18th August (Roman Catholic Church); and the 21st May (Orthodox, Anglican and Lutheran churches). The discovery of the True Cross used to be celebrated by the Catholic Church on May 3rd (it's now no longer a feast day); the date also being known as "St Helen's Day in the Spring", or Ellenmas, in the north of England³.

A British St. Helen – Geoffrey of Monmouth

If Geoffrey of Monmouth's "History of The Kings of Britain", completed around 1136, were ever to be made into a TV series, it is likely that the credits would open with the familiar caption "Based on a true story"; with all that that implies for its historical accuracy.

In Geoffrey's version, Helen is a British woman of noble birth; the daughter of Duke Coel of Colchester. According to this account⁴:

... her beauty was greater than that of any other young woman in the kingdom. For that matter, no more lovely girl could be discovered anywhere.

(Is Geoffrey, perhaps, trying to make a connection here between his British Helen and the fabled Helen of Troy ?)

The History describes how, during a period of revolt against the Roman empire, Coel usurped the British throne and became king (this is the same King Coel who appears in the nursery rhyme as being "a merry old soul"). The Roman senate despatched Constantius to restore control over Britain and, after suing for peace, Coel died. Constantius then married Helen and assumed the throne of Britain for himself.

Geoffrey's biography attempts to give Helen a noble background, but it is a total fiction. There is no evidence that Helen ever visited Britain, let alone that she was a native. Her divorce from Constantius happened in 289: well before Constantius arrived in Britain, in 305.

A mythological Welsh St. Helen – The dream of Maccsen Wledig

Another Helen with links to a Roman emperor appears in "The dream of Maccsen Wledig" one of the stories that form the collection of Welsh tales known as "The Mabinogion". These were first written down in the fourteenth century, but it is likely that at least some of them date from very much earlier.

The story describes how Maccsen Wledig, a Roman emperor, dreams of a country far away in which he sees a castle and⁵:

... a maiden sitting before him in a chair of red gold ... the fairest sight to see of mortal kind.

This woman turns out to be Elen of the Hosts. Maccsen eventually travels to the far-off country, which happens to be Britain (actually the castle is Carnarvon) , and marries Elen.

The latter part of the story relates how, because Maccsen was away from Rome for more than seven years, a new emperor took power. Maccsen then fights and regains the throne with the help of Elen's three brothers.

Although this Elen has some similarity with Geoffrey of Monmouth's Helen – a native woman of noble birth and exceptional beauty – Magsen is believed to represent the historical character Magnus Maximus⁶, a Roman general who was stationed in Britain and who led a revolt against the western Roman emperor Gratian, in 383.

He invaded Gaul, taking all his troops with him, and set up a power base at Trier; and although he was able to defeat and kill Gratian, a subsequent attempt to take control of Italy failed and he was executed by the eastern Roman emperor Theodosius I, in 388.



Fig 4: Coin of Magnus Maximus

A later tradition transforms this mythological Elen into the equally mysterious and most likely fictitious St. Helen of Carnarvon. It also assigns her five sons, the oldest of whom is called Constantine⁷.

That Magnus Maximus had a wife is clearly attested, although her name is not known. His son, who was not called Constantine but rather Flavius Victor, was also killed in 388^{7a}.

Is the Shelley well Roman ?

So, if St. Helen was the wife of a Roman emperor – whether that emperor was Constantius or the usurper Magnus Maximus – does this mean that we have a Roman well in Farnhill ?

Sadly, that's unlikely. There's no evidence of any other Roman activity in the area: there may be Roman track ways that cross the Aire but these don't signify anything other than the Roman penchant for getting from A to B as quickly as possible. The nearest attested Roman sites are the forts at Elslack and Ilkley.

The Shelley Well is mentioned in one of the earliest charters that has any reference at all to Farnhill⁹. This charter probably dates from the reign of King Stephen (1135 – 1154) – although the well may be considerably older – and records a grant by Adam de Fernil to the Knights Hospitallers of:

*unum toftum in Fernil...juxta fontem Sancte Helene
a homestead in Farnhill ... close to St. Helen's well*

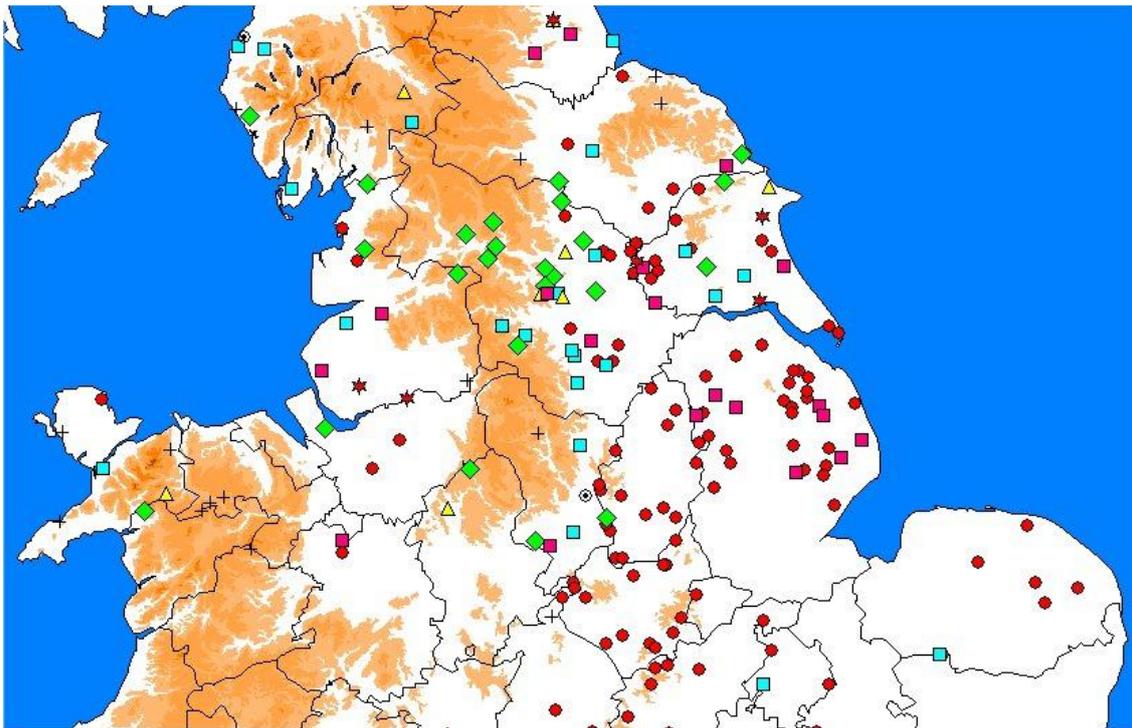
Note: The fact that Adam is giving away land adjacent to the Shelley well sits comfortably with the suggestion that the Norman lords of the manor of Farnhill had their manorial house on the site of the current Farnhill Hall.

Is the Shelley well unique in its attribution ?

Again, the answer is No.

There are lots of wells named after St. Helen. In fact there are more wells in England associated with St. Helen than with any other non-biblical character (the number of St. Helen wells is only exceeded by those that carry the name of Mary or “Our Lady”). A survey carried out in 1986 found forty-three wells and four pools attributed to St. Helen; with a further twenty-seven wells associated with churches dedicated to St. Helen¹⁰.

An update to the 1986 survey has produced the following map¹¹.



Key (partial):

- Red circles: St Helen churches
- Red squares: St Helen churches with springs
- Blue squares: St Helen wells with chapels
- Green lozenge: Other St Helen wells (rural locations)
- Yellow triangle: Other St Helen wells (in village streets)

Fig 5: Distribution of “St. Helen” sites in N. England

The dense cluster of churches dedicated to St. Helen in and around York is only to be expected, given the connection of that city with the emperor Constantine.

The sites that occur south and south-east of the Humber, in what was the Anglo-Saxon kingdom of Mercia, can perhaps be accounted for by the attempts by King Offa (ruled 757 – 796) to establish himself as a ruler in the mould of Constantine.

Not only do many of the St. Helen sites in Mercia coincide with known royal sites of Offa's time, but Offa was also the only Anglo-Saxon king to mint coins showing the image of his wife, Cynethryth^{11a}; imitating Constantine's coinage featuring the head of Helena (see Fig 2).



Fig 5: Two coins from the reign of Offa, showing the head of Cynethryth

Offa's promotion of the cult of St. Helen may have inspired the creation of the Old English poem "Elene" or "St. Helen Finds the True Cross", by the author Cynewulf, which dates to somewhere between the late 8th and 10th centuries⁸. Cynewulf may, himself, have been Mercian, although a Northumbrian origin would seem to be more likely¹².

What is the connection between St Helen and wells ?

Why name a well after St. Helen ?

There is no definitive answer, but here (in no particular order) are some conjectures:

- **St. Helen the archaeologist** – A possible connection is that St. Helen was responsible for digging up the True Cross: that is, bringing it up from the earth; just like water coming up from a spring. In fact it's possible that the True Cross was itself found in an underground rock cistern^{12a}.
- **The meaning of the True Cross** – In Christian thought the crucifixion and subsequent resurrection represent the conquest of life over death. In a parallel, a well or spring also represents the possibility of life in what might otherwise be a lifeless place.
- **Christianisation of pagan sites** – Wells, springs and pools are often associated with pre-Christian votive sites. Could it be that the dedication of a previously pagan water source to St. Helen, the patron saint of converts, is somehow related to the conversion of a pagan community to Christianity ?
- **From the Norse goddess Hel** – In Norse mythology, Hel is a goddess of the underworld^{12b} and it's not difficult to imagine a source of water coming out of the ground being referred to as "Hel's well". From there to "St. Helen's well" only requires the arrival of Christianity. The four large pools, reputedly bottomless, near the village of Croft, and known as Hell's Kettles may have acquired their name from in this way^{12c}.
- **From the Celtic goddess Alauna** – A connection between St. Helen and places named after the Celtic goddess Alauna has also been suggested¹⁰.

- **St. Helen's Day in the Spring** – Traditionally, the period around the beginning of May was a time when livestock would be moved onto new pastureland at the end of winter. This coincides with the old Feast of the Invention [discovery] of the Holy Cross, on May 3rd. In Pennine communities this day was also called “St. Helen's Day in the Spring”³. The concentration of St. Helen wells in rural and village locations in and around the Pennines (of which Farnhill is one – see Fig. 4) may represent a connection between the movement of livestock on or around St. Helen's Day in the Spring and the need for a good supply of water.
- **The “Baths of Helen”** – After Constantine became emperor, Helena set up residence in the Sessorian Palace in Rome, and restored the adjacent baths that had been built in the time of Alexander Severus (AD 222-235); these became known as the “Baths of Helen”¹³. It has even been suggested by one archaeologist that she built a new aqueduct to supply water to the palace¹⁴.

In the particular case of the Shelley well, Dr. Jones of Oxford University has suggested a possible connection between the well and the name of one of the nearby fields¹⁵.

Hellifield Croft, recorded on the 1835 Township map¹⁶ and reflected in the name Hellifield House, may derive its name from the Norse (meaning “The Farm of Helgi”) or from the Saxon (meaning Holy Marsh¹⁷); either way there is a “holy” connotation, as the name Helgi itself means “holy”¹⁸.



Fig 5: Part of the 1838 Farnhill Township map – showing most of High Farnhill

The feminine form of Helgi is Helga, and it's not difficult to see Helen as an Anglicised (or Christianised) form of that name. Thus in Russia, the Viking princess Olga (Helga) of Kiev took the name Yelena (Helena) when she was baptised, in 945 (or 957)¹⁹.

So, back in Farnhill, we have a field called Helgi → Holy; and we might easily have the derivation Helgi → Helga → Helen. Just up the road we have a well. Now what shall we call that well? How about “Holy Helen's well”?

I've got a better idea, let's just call it Shelley.

Acknowledgements

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- 6 For a truly wonderful study of the history of the Roman empire up to AD476, nothing comes close to the recently completed set of podcasts by Mike Duncan, available at <http://thehistoryofrome.typepad.com>. For details on Magnus Maximus, listen to episodes #155 to #157.
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- 8 Elene of Cynewulf, available at <http://archive.org/stream/theeleneofcynewu14781gut/14781.txt>. The words quoted at the head of this piece come from the start of the Epilogue (line 1238). This article is for insomniacs everywhere – read it and sleep.
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