

# WELLS

D. MURPHY & M. SAVAGE

A survey published in 1983 showed that, at that time, more than 90% of the population of Northern Ireland had access to a piped water supply. Water is, of course, a vital ingredient in all our lives but tap water is so common and convenient that we rarely remember its source. Not so long ago one of the most important considerations in choosing a site for a house was proximity to a spring or well, for all water had to be carried and those who undertook that task can verify what a tedious chore that was.

Wells appear much less important today, but down through the centuries they have been of vital importance and often feature in stories and legends of Saints and have often become places of pilgrimage both for the pious and the ill.

In Ireland and further afield, many place names include "Well" the Irish for well being *Tobar* — Tobermore, Tubbercurry etc.

This article is about wells in general, — holy and not so holy — and the recollections of some locals about wells, well-diggers and diviners.

## HOLY WELLS

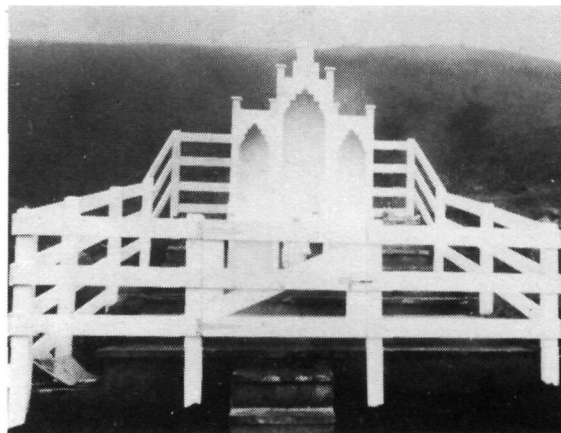
Holy Wells abound in Ireland the figure being put at around 3,000. Most are said to have healing powers and often there is an explanation or legend as to how a particular Saint came to have a well named after him or her. Some historians think that the features and practices attached to Holy Wells are pre-Christian, now in the guise of Christian practices. Another theory put forward is that after the dissolution of the Monasteries in 1536 people turned to folk medicine. They believed wells had curative properties. The Monasteries had housed and looked after the sick, and it is interesting to note that near the sites of some of these monasteries Holy Wells or Spa Wells can be found, e.g., Downpatrick, Ballynahinch and Carrickfergus.

Pilgrimages to Holy Wells were very popular in the nineteenth century but this practice has died off in most parts of Ireland. The Catholic Church did not entirely approve of them, as it was a time of celebration, religious and otherwise and often finished with fighting.

In his book "Holy Wells of Ireland", Patrick Logan writes, "other things associated with these pilgrimages are stones and trees. The most usual trees are whitethorn, hazel and ash, and formerly oak, but holly, rowan and yew are also found near wells. In a few cases the well is found in the stump of a tree. There are, of course, stories of the origin of the tree which is often said to be immortal, and due to a miracle of the Saint. Sometimes there is a sacred stone at, or near, the well and part of the pilgrimage may be a visit to and prayers at this special stone. The stone may bear the marks of the saint's feet, hands or knees and there are often stories to explain why and how the imprints were made."

Medals, statues, holy pictures, rosary beads, coins and rags are seen at holy wells. These are called "Votive Offerings." Votive means given in fulfilment of a vow. There is some doubt as to why these objects are left. Again this practice goes back to pre-Christian times. In visiting the wells different rituals are performed such as walking around the well in a clockwise direction or as the sun travels and praying as they go along. This may be done once, three or five times or more often but usually in odd numbers.

In some instances pilgrims go round on their knees. Having completed their prayers and walk around the well, pilgrims will bathe in the water or bathe the affected part and may also drink the water.



St. Monina's Well, Killeavy.

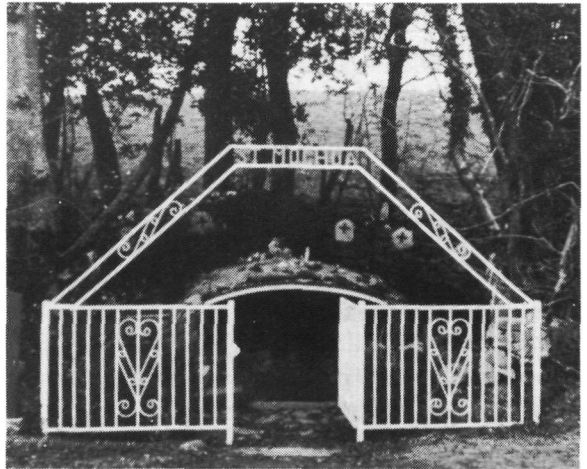
Holy Wells were supposed to cure such ailments, as headaches, backaches, toothache, eye diseases, sprains, wounds, rheumatism, sick children and mental illness and quite a few other complaints.

St. Mochua's Well in Derrynoose Parish near Keady is traditionally known for curing eyesight among other ailments.



Votive offerings at St. Monina's Well.

**St. Monina's Well, Killeavey** — No particular cure is known, — although Votive Offerings are left on a bush near the well. This well is situated on the side of Slieve Gullion. Her feast day is 6th July. Her father was a prince and ruled a large part of Louth. It is said that she was blessed by St. Patrick as a baby and he prophesied that her name would long be remembered. She had a convent in Louth, and then came to Slieve Gullion to set up a convent. She died in 513 aged 83 years. It is said that the well was built in her honour, that it was not there when she was living but she used to pray here. Processions to this well took place up until about 40 years ago.



St. Mochua's Well, Keady.



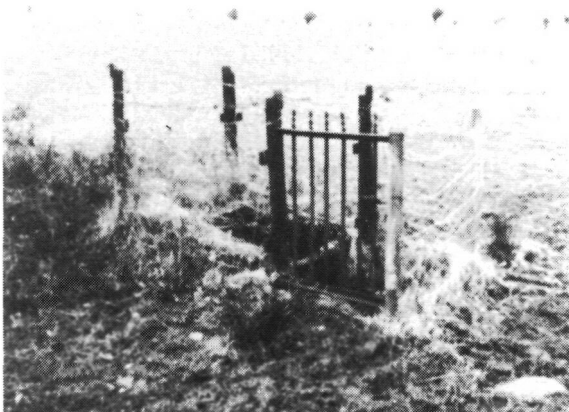
Votive offerings at St. Mochua's Well.



The 'Crockerah' Well.

### MISSES MINNIE AND SARA SAVAGE

Misses Minnie and Sara Savage of Laurel Hill, Cullentrough have a number of wells on their land. Minnie remembers one particularly dry summer when water was needed for the cattle. James Sands, of Cullentrough, divined for water. He found it "in the back field beside Meehan's, using a Sally Rod." The men dug for 3 days to about 7-8 feet and had not reached water. On the sixth day they found blue shingle which was a hopeful sign and the following day they reached water. This well was about 18 feet deep filled to the brim.



The Bog Well.

Another well, known as the **Bog Well**, is in a field nearly opposite their house. The lower end of this field is bogland and this is where the well is situated. Turf was cut here at one time. According to a story told to Minnie and Sarah, the turf had all been cut away except around the well and an old man, who as a boy

assisted in the building of their house, (circa 1850), said he remembered a woman climbing a few steps up to lift water out of the well. The steps were made of turf but had stones laid on them for firmness. The woman was a clergyman's sister who lived in an old house nearby. The steps fell apart and the well was brought down to ground level. Dark water comes from it when being cleaned. The farmer "taking" this field does not use slurry or fertilisers on it was the water from this well is still used.

On one occasion, years ago, the intake of water became clogged so Miss Savage's father and Tommy McGailey decided to dig a trench a few yards beyond the well to find out what was causing the clogging. They hadn't dug far when a great spout of water shot up in the air like a fountain. Evidently, the water was liberated and it showed just how strong the spring was.

A bottle of water from this well sometimes asked for to cure hiccoughs. The affected person was to hold his breath and then gulp as much of the water as possible. This ended in one huge hiccough! A neighbour did this effectively. Not long ago two bottles of this water were taken to "The Royal", Belfast to another neighbour who was suffering from hiccoughs as a result of a stroke. Miss Savage thinks perhaps the gulping of any cold spring water would just be as effective.

Sara remembers "River Wells". A little river or stream runs between Leish and Cullentrough on past Lisnaree towards Clare. This stream had two good springs in its banks. To gain access to these wells large stepping stones went across the shallow stream. Drainage has obliterated these "River Wells".



The "Drinking Sheugh".

One of the River Wells in their field was used by six families. They remember Mrs. Ferguson lifting two pails of water and carrying them inside a hoop, this was a sally rod twisted to keep the water from spilling out onto her skirt. Women all carried water this way. A "Go" of water was two buckets. Another such well on the same stream had a footstick to it at one time.

There was a well in their backyard which was 80 feet deep. (They used to drop a stone into it and listen to hear how long it would take to plop). It is no longer used, this well dates back to before their grandfather's time (1849).

On the Crankey Road there was a well called **The Watering Hole or Drinking Sheugh** — now dried up. Horses drank from it and ducks swam in it. Miss Savage's father could not understand why the horse would stop and drink from it as the water was far from clean.

**The 'Crockeragh Well'** on the roadside near Lissummon Chapel is very old — according to local legend it was used by The Garrison in Lissummon Fort!

**Joe Cully's Well** at Carrickbrack was used by the neighbourhood. Mrs. Shields still uses it and she also keeps it clean. It is not deep but water constantly runs in and out.

Another Well in Lissummon is **'Carty's Well'** situated at Kevin Murphy's on the Tunnel Road. It was used by several families living locally. The Murphy family still use it as drinking water as does Jimmy Clulow.

**'Sleeth's Well'**, Mr. and Mrs. Smith who live in Sleeth's House on the Tyrone's Ditches Road, have a well in their ard but the water is not drinkable. Miss Savage remembers that Mrs. Sleeth used to carry water from this well down to Ballennon Church for Sunday School Parties.



Minnie Fegan's Well.



The site of the Hog's Well.

At Drumbanagher Wall there was a well known as the **Hog's Well**. The story goes that at midnight a pig would climb out of the well and to meet it was unlucky! If you were out you tried to be home long before twelve or you waited to long after twelve in case you met this pig!

The late Miss Minnie Fegan from Mossview Road has a very picturesque well in her garden. She was very interested in gardening and the path leading to the well had circular steps with flowers growing between the stones. The steps are now gone and the path overgrown but it still retains some of its charm.

Some of the wells in the Lissummon area dried up after the Railway Tunnel was built. This was probably due to the water table being lowered. When a large hole or tunnel is excavated to below the water table level, water from the surrounding land will drain into it in an effort to bring it up to that level. This led to the lowering of the water table.



Carty's Well.

### TOMMY McSHERRY

The local diviners Tommy knew were Herbie Throughton, Pat Lynch and Shane Garvey. Some of the locals he knew who dug wells were Jemmy Shevlin, Billy Crothers from Scarva and Hugh Kennedy from Fourtowns.

There is a well at the back of Frank Watters' house, Aughan Park which is still used for drinking water by many of the neighbours.

An analysis of the water from the well at Aughan Park was carried out. Resulted as follows:

Ph 6.6 (Slightly Acid)

Colour Hazel (Turbidity 0.5 Low)

Iron 0.07 mgs. per litre

Copper 0.04 mgs. per litre

Manganese 0.2 mgs per litre

Zinc .02 mgs per litre

Hardness 80 high.

The water was satisfactory for drinking.

Wells can be found in most gardens in Church Street.

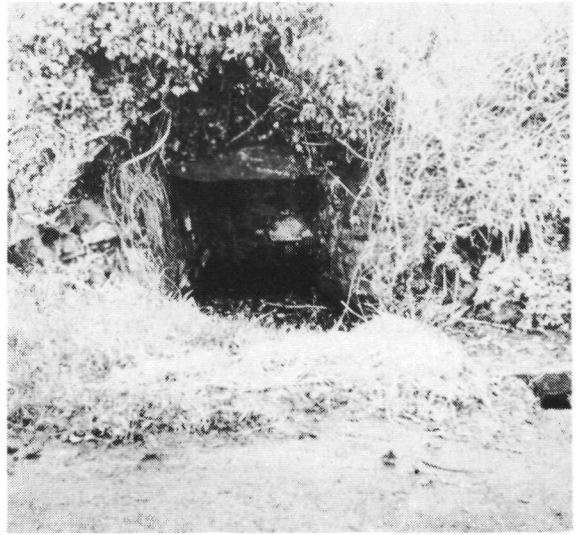
Jemmy Shevlin sank a very deep well in Magill's Field (now Hanlon's Garden), Newry Road. Some wells could be up to 100 feet deep.

Tommy remembers hearing a story about Billy Crothers sinking a well for Abie Gordon. It was customary then to use the farmer's tools. Now the tools Abie had were old, so when Billy started to use the pick-axe the shaft broke. He then went on to use the spade and the shaft of it broke too. Billy is supposed to have turned to Abie and said, "You know we have a few preliminaries to go through before we get started!"

There is a "SPA WELL" near Heak's Crossroads, Ballyargan which is described as "Chalybeate". This means that the water is rich in iron. People used to drink this water for a cure.

### MISS BRIDGET QUINN

Now in her 92nd year, Miss Quinn was a housekeeper for Joe Monaghan, a well known diviner who lived at the Canal Bank. Miss Quinn said she did not know very much about Joe and his water-dividing but it was very much an everyday occurrence. She knew, though, that Joe used any sort of "A Forky Stick". When he came across water the stick turned. If she tried water-diving with that stick nothing happened but if Joe held her hands the stick would turn up. Joe divined for about 69 years, some of people she knew who dug wells, Joe divined were Tom Burns and Danny O'Hare.



Joe Cully's Well.

### EAMON MAGILL

There are two wells near Mr. Magill's Farm. These were sunk by Danny O'Hare, Dan Crossan and John Sands.

One well is about 60 feet deep and the other is 28 foot deep. The latter well was left one night with the shovels at the bottom of the shaft. The next day when the men came back to start digging again the well was bubbling over and the workmen never recovered their tools.

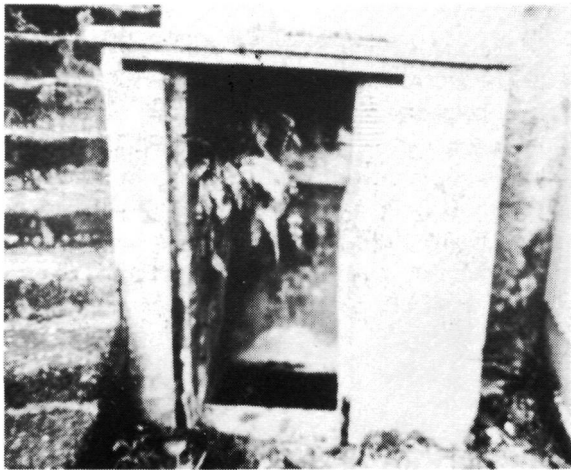
### JOHN SANDS

As a young lad John Sands helped in the digging of wells. He worked at this for about 10 years. The first well he helped to sink was for a farmer called Abie Gordon, Rathconvil, Loughgilly. Billy Crothers, from Scarva was sinking the well. The last well that he helped to dig was for Eamon Magill at Glassdrummond. Danny O'Hare and Dan Crossan were sinking it. They left that well one night having reached a depth of 24' and intended to carry on digging the following morning, when they returned the next day it was bubbling over.

The depth of the well obviously depended on how soon they reached water. John knew of a well that was dug to 60 feet and water was never found only a very small trickle and it had to be abandoned. The wells usually measured 4' across and another 2' was dug around the top of the well and this was cemented in

to prevent the sides caving in. John Says wells were not lined just cemented around the top.

As the well shaft deepened a windlass was used to get in and out of the well. The wind lass consisted of a wooden beam about 9" in diameter supported on iron stands at each side of the well. A rope was put around the beam with a crank or handle at each end of the beam. Not all beams ahad two cranks this depended on the weight of the man going down the well. John described Billy Crothers as a stout enough man but he only used one crank. He felt that Billy must have placed a lot of trust in him as he was just a slip of a lad then. If two cranks were used it took two men — one at each side. A bucket was attached to the rope and the person was lowered into the well by standing in the bucket and holding on to the rope. The man sinking the well had his own tools, a pick-axe and shovel, both with short shafts. This was because he was working in a confined space. If he used the farmer's tools the shafts were cut in two. On the first few days of digging they would average a depth of 4 to 5 feet each day. After that they might manage about 1½ feet and, that was on a good day! The work was dark and dangerous. If they encountered rock this was blasted with dynamite. The dynamite was wedged into a hole in the rock and the fuse was lit before leaving the well. John remembers hearing about a farmer who was supposed to take a man out of the well after he had lit the fuse but forgot about him and went into the house. Luckily enough the digger put the fuse out in time but when he came out of that well shaft he never went back to it!



Sleeth's Well.

The charge for sinking a well was £1 to £1-10s-0d (£1.50p) a day and this did not include other labourers.

John tells of helping Billy Crothers one day and was working the windlass when a lorry came into the vicinity and he, John, went over to the lorry. Needless to say Billy Crothers scolded John very severely with the result he knew never to leave a windlass unattended again as the work was highly dangerous. Apart from this incident John found Billy "a very pleasant gentleman to work for."



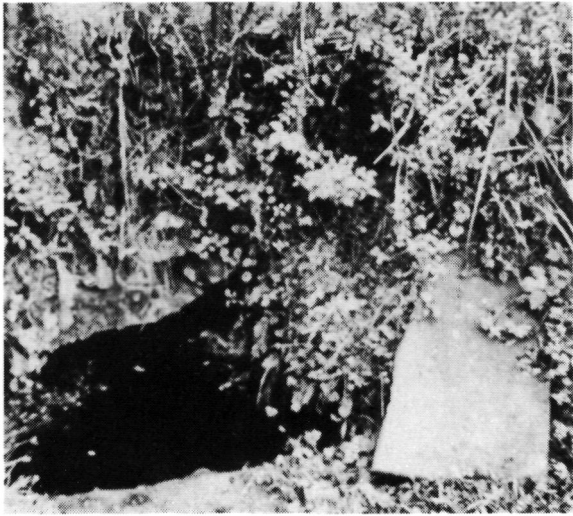
HERBERT TROUGHTON.

#### ERNIE TROUGHTON

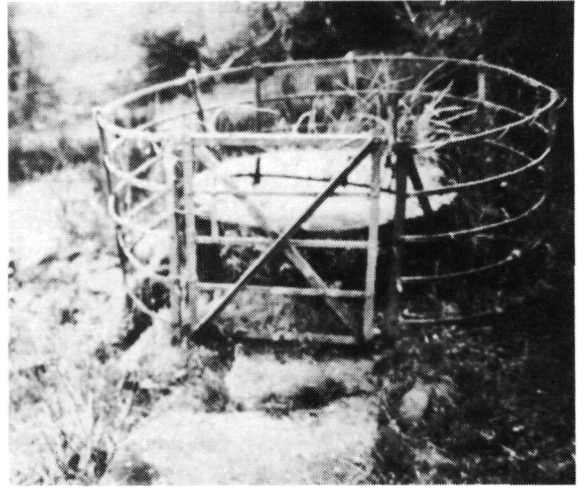
Mr. Ernie Troughton's father, Herbie was a water diviner. He was from Ballyreagh. Ernie remembers his father travelling throughout the country-side divining for water. He went to places such as Portadown, Richhill, Armagh indeed, wherever he was asked to divine. Herbie was a very popular man and well thought of. Whenever he was divining, he used a sally rod, in the shape of a two-pronged fork. The fork was held in the palms of each hand and when he walked over water the stick automatically turned upwards. No amount of restraint would stop it from turning and it tore the skin if resisted. Herbie followed the run of the water and where there was a "Crossroads" of water he would advise the farmer to sink the well at that spot. By the strength of the pull he could estimate how far down the water was. If he held a watch in his hand over it, it would stop.

Herbie divined water right up to his death in 1964 when he was the same age as the century. He did not charge for his services, to him it was just something he could do.

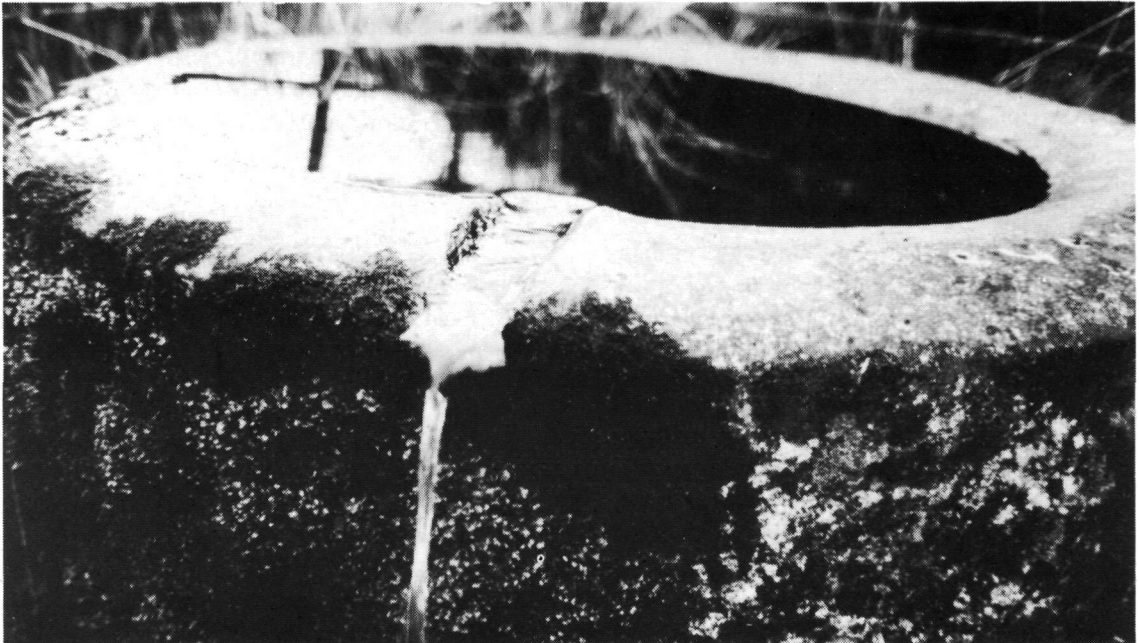
Ernie, himself, can water divine. He had a very good well at the back of his house, but when they were doing renovations to the house they had to fill the well in.



Loy's Well.



The "Camla Galt".



The "Camla Galt" Well.

### ARTIE O'HARE

Mr. O'Hare remembers the **Cooper McSherry's Well**, now owned by Kevin Quinn and nearly opposite the front gates of Dromantine. Families living locally used this well.

The well in this field is filled in. (Another source holds that the priest used to hide here in penal times although Artie is unaware of this story.)

This well belonged to the Innes's of Dromantine.

Artie's son, John has a draw well in his garden in Railway Street. The well is 18 feet deep and at present has 15 feet of water in it.

Artie's remembers two types of pumps, stock pumps and lifting-force pumps. The pump in Poyntzpass Square was a stock pump. A lifting force pump had a cylinder at the side of it and was used to fill the water tank in the house. When coming home from school, Artie and his friends would have been stopped by the parish priest at Barr Parochial House and asked to pump water into the tank. It was hard work and both the priest and his housekeeper were elderly and unable to do it. This took quite a time to fill the tank and when Artie got home and told his mother what kept him she did not always believe him! Joe Irwin of Knockduff, Jerrettspass also had a lifting-force pump.

Artie knows of a very deep well, 100 feet, this is at Kilbodagh House near Drumbanagher Church.

### MICK LOY

The Loy family have two very old wells on their farm which they used for drinking, household and other purposes. One is half-way down a lane to their old home and other is in a field about two fields away from their present home. Water was carried from this well for many years until a pump was sunk beside the house. These wells were there in their grand-uncle Blacker's time and he was born around 1830 so they are over 160 years old. The well in the field is known as **Blacker's Well**. The Loy brothers, themselves, sunk 4 wells on the farm. It was difficult and dangerous work as the further down you went the darker it got.

Mr. Loy mentioned a few other wells around the countryside.

**Redmond's Well**, off the Tullynacross Road on the left-hand side near Rafferty's. This well was about 4 feet wide.

He thinks that Danny O'Hare and Paddy Watters sunk the well in Magill's field, now Hanlon's garden, but is not sure about this. He knows that when they



The Fairyhouse Well.

were sinking the well in Hanlon's Garden they had to dig to the same level as **Lennon's Well** which was across the road and in a much lower position.

There is a well above Alfie Donaldson's at Drumbanagher Wall which has a great flow the spring being very strong. A wall is built round it and the Donaldson's have water piped from it which is gravity fed. It is known as the "**Commla Gulp**" or "**Camla Galt**".

### ALFIE DONALDSON

Mr. and Mrs. Donaldson were told by Mrs. Gibson the name of the well was the "**Camla Galt**" and it was supposed to mean "The well on the hill". This well is the same level as their chimney and water is piped down to the house from it. They have it on tap in their yard. If for any reason they are unable to get a mains water supply they attach a connection to their water tank and water flows up as it is gravity fed. The well is said to be a "Crown well" in that it has 3 springs. It flows continuously winter and summer. People often come to their yard asking for a bottle of spring water. The army built the wall around it (1939 - 1944).

Near Mr. Donaldson's is **The Hog's Well** which Miss Savage mentioned earlier — all that can be seen are the remains of a pump. Before the pump was attached to it there were steps leading down to the well and you went along a short tunnel to reach the well. This was alongside Drumbanagher Wall.





ALBERT SHANKS.

### ALBERT SHANKS

The **Fairyhouse Well** is near Albert Shank's house on the Bann Road. Albert does not know how long it has been there but it was there in his Father's time and his Grandfather's time. His father died around 1905 — 1910. He thinks it must be several hundred years old. The well is lined with granite and a holly tree stands over it.

Local folklore has it that this well was the last resting place of the fairies before they left Ireland!

Many people from the surrounding neighbourhood formerly used this well.

There are several other wells on Mr. Shanks' farm. One, in particular, called the "**Black Bog**" was cut out of solid rock. Water ran out of it the whole year round. Mr. Shanks' mother was a great butter-maker and as a young boy he would have been sent to collect water from this well for butter-making as it was so cold. Another well is situated at the top of a field is 12 feet deep. There is another well above the Fairy Well and when workmen were laying pipes in the road they were nearly washed away!

The Rev. Reid who was in Loughbrickland around 1920s-1930s could divine. He used a gold watch and chain and when he came across water the watch went round. The Rev. Reid divined a well for Mr. Shanks outside his house. The well was dug to a depth of 6-7 feet and no water was found. The Rev. Reid divined again at the same place but the shaft was covered over for safety. This time nothing happened. He asked if they had left their tools there, which they had. This was the reason for the watch not turning. He said:— "It has to be metal to metal, gold to gold, silver to silver." Digging was recommended and they found water at 10 feet down.

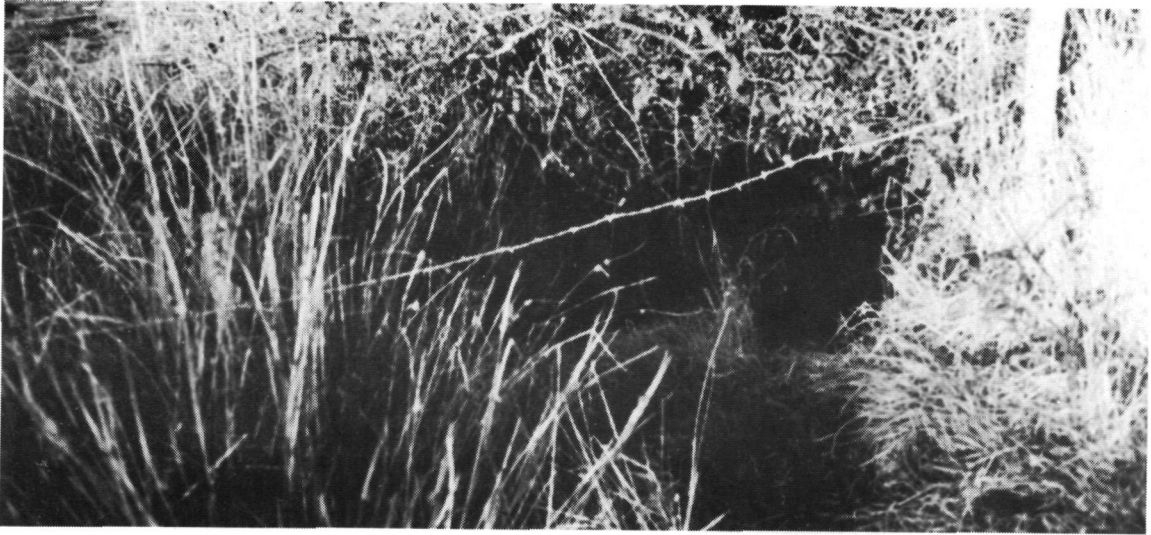
### POYNTZPASS PUMP AND WELL

In Dr. William Robert MacDermott's Book "Jigglestreet" the pump and its water is described thus:— ".... we have got a new pump but it is under suspicion and no wonder. For a long time the water had a peculiar flavour. It got so decided, that at last we sent a bottle of it up to Dublin to be analysed. Report satisfactory — a fairly wholesome potable water, but our old pump came to a standstill, and would yield none of the duly certified element. Had to be opened up when there was found in it a dead rat, the skeleton of a rodent of the same species nicely mamacerated, small bones not identifiable, box of Holloway's ointment, ounce bottle of castor oil (empty), two pewter spoons, a pen knife, a match box, two keys and other sundres, all alleged to have been stuffed down the spout by certain juveniles in spite of strongly worded testimonies from their parents. We shall very likely put the playful little dears under surveillance when the bubonic plague breaks out."

— Perhaps the piped water is not so bad after all!



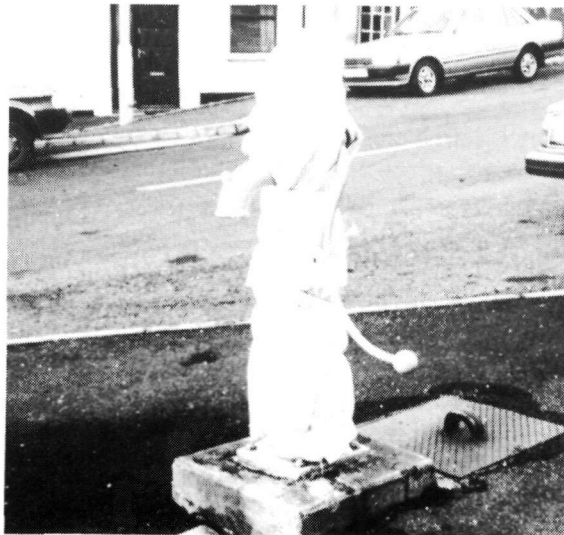
Cooper McSherry's Well.



Heak's Spa Well.



The former site of Poyntzpass village pump.



The 'Far 'Pass' pump.