



# IRISH GAZETTE



VOLUME 21 • NUMBER 2 • MARCH 2007

CELEBRATING 20 YEARS OF SERVING THE IRISH COMMUNITY 1987 - 2007

## Exploring Northern Ireland: A Visit to St. Patrick's Holy Well

By

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The sign said the water was known for its curative powers. Nearby, there were bits of clothing and rags tied to the trees, a visible testament to how many others believed in the powers of St. Patrick's Well. These "rag trees" are found near holy sites throughout Ireland. After dipping a bit of their clothing or a rag into the well water, people leave them in the surrounding shrubs and trees, hoping to leave their sins or afflictions there as well. Would it work for me?

Myths, legends and even some facts surround St. Patrick's time in Northern Ireland. While he didn't actually drive away the snakes (it was already documented that there were no snakes in Ireland), he did spread Christianity throughout the island. Patrick first experienced Ireland as a slave. He escaped, was welcomed home by his loving family, and then had dreams about returning to Ireland. He did so in approximately 432 AD. While he traversed all of Ireland, many highlights from his travels occurred in Northern Ireland. He preached his first sermon there, built his first stone church and is said to be buried there. Two towns in particular, Armagh and Downpatrick, are treasure-troves of St. Patrick facts and legends.

"Affliction" is too serious a term to describe my ailment — a sore wrist. I'd been taking extensive notes during our travels in Northern Ireland and now my wrist was aching — bad enough to wake me during the night, though not bad enough (yet) to test out Northern Ireland's medical system. At St. Patrick's Well, in-



Legend has it that this stone chair was created specifically for St. Patrick when he traveled through this part of County Tyrone.

stead of leaving a piece of clothing (we — my husband Steve and I — travel light), I dipped my wrist into the well, rubbing it with the cool water. I decided to not mention this to Steve, for fear of somehow "jinxing" it.

It is estimated that Ireland has more than 3,000 holy wells, or springs, linked to St. Patrick or other local patron saints. Pilgrimages to these holy sites are still a common occurrence. The holy well in this story (actually called St. Patrick's

Chair and Well) is located in a remote corner of Co. Tyrone. Surrounded by tall trees and holly shrubs, the well appears to be a carved bowl in a huge stone. According to legend, the well never runs dry.

After exploring the wooded trails near the well, we returned to our car. It was late in the day and we needed to find our way back to a main road before dark. As I refolded the road map for the umpteenth time, I noticed it. Rather, I noticed the lack of it



Looking down at St. Patrick's Well, the bowl-shaped depression in the rock.

— there was absolutely no pain in my wrist. None at all. Since Steve had patiently listened to all my complaints about my wrist, I told him the good news. We were surprised, amazed, thrilled and, honestly, a bit skeptical — how long would it last? That night we arrived at my relative's farm and I immediately relayed the story to them. They were very happy I wasn't in pain anymore, but not the least bit surprised. I got the same reaction from their neighbors too, and the folks at the local pub — happy that the pain had disappeared, but not at all surprised. I was amazed that my wrist had somehow healed and they were . . . not. It was obvious they had heard similar sto-

ries, or even had similar experiences. One more thing — skip the skepticism; I wrote pages and pages of notes during the rest of our time in Northern Ireland without the slightest hint of pain. You know I'll be celebrating St. Patrick's Day!

*Kathy McGorray Dougherty is owner of Northern Ireland Travels, which specializes in creating personalized, self-guided trips to Northern Ireland. For more information visit her website at [www.nirelandtravels.com](http://www.nirelandtravels.com).*