

## St. Brigid's Well at Liscannor



Ireland boasts a number of ancient wells that were regarded as healing wells in Celtic times. Christianity saw the logic in keeping with the ancient traditions and adopted them, giving them saints' names, mostly St Patrick or St Brigid.

Maureen Kelly (Sister Bernadine of the Brigidine Sisters) visited Fanore and surrounding areas in 1999. On her trip, she had visited the well in Kildare and Patsy's uncle told her that they used to visit a local well and asked if she had been there also. Thus this story of St Brigid's well in Liscannor.

Dabhach Bhríde is found near the [Cliffs of Moher](#) in an area of great scenic beauty and behind the well on a higher level to which steps lead, is an ancient cemetery in which the Uí Bhrian, the Kings of Dál gCais, are buried. There is a large cross here and a circular path around it and part of the Rite of the Holy Well is performed in this area known as the 'Ula Uachtarach' or upper sanctuary.

The Well itself is in the lower ground, the 'Ula íochtarach' or lower sanctuary, enclosed in a little house full of votive offerings such as holy pictures, rosaries, medals and so forth left by pilgrims. Small items which people carry around with them, such as pens, biro's and combs, are commonly found also as offerings at wells.

This site has a particularly mysterious atmosphere which may be felt at once by the pilgrims as they enter the grove and hears the gentle lapping of the water in the background. Something of the ancient 'Nemeton' (modern Irish neimheadh)- the outdoor Celtic Sanctuary - is, perhaps, to be experienced here.

Many pilgrims from all over [County Clare](#) and from the [Aran Islands](#) came to [Liscannor](#). There were four different Pattern Days on which large groups attended:

1. St Brigid's Eve
2. Garland Saturday and Sunday - the Saturday and Sunday of Crom Dubh (the last Sunday of July and its vigil)

3. The Feast of the Assumption of the Blessed Virgin Mary into Heaven, on August 15.
4. The really great occasion was Domhnach Chrom Dubh when the people of Clare and of Aran spent the whole night at the well. This caused some surprise to a Clare reporter:

*They left home on Saturday, held an all-night vigil at the Blessed Well and arrived home on Sunday. The strange thing about it was that those people didn't mind missing Mass on that Sunday as if the 'round' was more important. This provides an interesting insight into the native and Roman forms of Catholicism. Candles blazed around the well and on St Brigid's Night itself candles were lighted all over the parish and in the surrounding parishes.*

Liscannor Well was regarded as a place of healing and crutches were left there as an indication that a pilgrim has been cured through the intercession of the Blessed Brigid. A wandering poet describes his visit to the well:

*On St Brigid's Eve, as night fell, My mother and I went to Saint Brigid's Well, Where the candles do burn and the great walls do shine on the graves of the dead and the vaults of O'Brien.*

Luckily, there survives an account of the Rite of Dabhach Bhríde. Padraig Mag Fhloinn got the information from people from the parish of Kilfenora and it is clear from his report that the various parts of the rite were carefully laid out in a well-organised form.

*In 1993, I saw a sign at the well instructing pilgrims as to how to perform the rite, and clearly only minor differences had taken place in the number of prayers to be said while performing the rounds — the Our Father, Hail Mary and Glory be to the Father to be said once while walking around the circular path deisceal or sunwise, instead of five times. Nowadays, one Hail Mary is said at each circumambulation of the cross at the Ula Uachtarach instead of the Our Father, Hail Mary and Glory be to the Father formally. The prayers to be said while making the rounds vary according to the particular well and this may indicate that these were a late introduction. It is possible that originally the circumambulations were made entirely in silence. When doing the rounds, each pilgrim walks alone, one after the other; they do not proceed two by two as in a procession in the Roman Rite. Generally nowadays, the pilgrims at Liscannor Well do not perform the rite barefooted as was the custom formally. The barefooted pilgrim, of course, is in direct contact with the earth.*

## **The Rite of St Brigid's Well at Liscannor, Co. Clare**

### **Introduction**

Go on your knees in front of the statue of St Brigid and express your intention (e.g. you come to have your headache/arthritis healed). Then say:

Go mbeannaí íosa duit, a Bhríghid Naofa, Go mbeannaí Muire duit is go mbannaím Féin duit; Chugat a thána' mé ag gearán mo scéil chugat Agus d'iarraidh cabhair in onóir Dé ort

Translation:

May Jesus salute you, O holy Brigid, may Mary salute you and may I salute you myself. It is to you I have come making my complaint and asking your help for the honour of God

Go on your knees and say 5 Our Fathers, 5 Hail Mary's and 5 Gloria's.

Stand and proceed to make a round of the Statue of St Brigid (sunwise/desiceal keeping the statue on your right)

Recite the creed while moving.

Do this 5 times.

Go on your knees at the Well.

#### San Ula Uachtarach (In the upper Sanctuary)

Go on your knees and say 5 Our Fathers, 5 Hail Mary's and 5 Gloria's.

Stand and make a sunwise circumambulation on the long path while reciting the Creed

Do this 5 times.

#### At the Cross

Make a circumambulation (sunwise/desiceal) of the Cross while saying once the Our Father, the Hail Mary and the Gloria.

Kiss the Cross.

Do this 5 times.

#### At the Well

Descend the steps to the Ula Iochtarach and go to the Well.

Drink the water 3 times.

Go on your knees and express your intention again.

Presumably the pilgrims deposited their votive offerings on the wall before beginning the rounds. According to tradition there is a fish in Liscannor Well and if the pilgrim sees the fish they are certain to obtain their request.

This is obviously a very clearly constructed rite along strictly traditional lines and worthy of its magnificent setting. As an introduction, the pilgrim recites the traditional 'rann' or ritual verse: 'Go mbeannaí íosa duit, a Bhrighid Naofa.' This is commonly used at holy wells with a change of name according to the saint venerated at that particular well. The major part of the rite consists of the cor deiseal or sunwise movement around the statue of St Brigid in the lower sanctuary and around the cross in the upper sanctuary. At many holy wells a mug is provided for the pilgrim to drink the water 3 times in the name of the Father, Son and Holy Spirit. Often local people will show the pilgrim how to perform the rite.

As with many other holy wells, tradition holds that the water here will not boil. Sometimes the pilgrim will perform the rite for nine consecutive days. If the rounds are made outside of the four Pattern Days then they must be repeated three times to obtain the same results.

Considering that the first of February is the Feast of St Brigid it may seem surprising that the really big occasion in which large crowds gathered for an all-night Vigil at Liscannor Well was Domhach Chrom Dubh – the last Saturday-Sunday of July.

Máiré Mac Néill, in her great book, *The Festival of Lughnasa*, illustrates the complex tradition of this area regarding the god Crom Dubh, the Lord of the Harvest, known by different names. Donn Duimhche/Donn Mac Cromáin occurs in connection with the coast on the southern side of Liscannor Bay. Another opinion connects him to the Ennistymon area. Moreover, the local saint – Mac Creiche – the interesting remains of his church are still to be seen near Liscannor – is sometimes associated with Donn. Domhnach Chrom Dubh (Garland Sunday) used to be celebrated with great rejoicing on Sliabh Callainn to the south-east of the well. In this way, Dabhach Bhríde at Liscannor occupies a site within a district in which the Festival of Lughnasa was given wide recognition. It is notable that the second day of August, or the eleventh day according to another view, is the Feast of St Mac Creiche, thus connecting him to Domhnach Chrom Dubh and the festival of Lughnasa.

In other places in Co Clare, apart from Dabhach Bhríde, the 'Turas' or pilgrimage was on the 15<sup>th</sup> August (The Assumption). It is difficult to know how old this practice is or if the clergy had some influence in attaching

Lughnasa to a Christian Feast day, and indeed, the title of the Feast of the Assumption in Irish looks significant – ‘Lá Fhéile sa bhFómhar’ – the Feast of Great Mary in the Autumn. One suspects that there is a hint here of a Lughnasa background with the idea of the ripening of the corn and the first-fruits of the harvest.