

Swildon's – What's in a name?

Rich Witcombe excellent tome 'Who was Aveline anyway?' contains the following entry :-

Swildon's Hole, Priddy – Herbert Balch gave the origin of the name of Mendip's longest cave as a dialect corruption of St. Swithin or Swithun who was a 9th Century Bishop of Winchester, and said that the land around the cave had been secured by the mediaeval St. Swithin's Priory of Winchester. The priory church is the present day Winchester Cathedral. The cathedral archivist has confirmed that the priory had a manor at Bleadon on Western Mendip with rights of pasture in Priddy and Harptree, and has found a document mentioning the grant of "Pridia" to the priory in 1180. Some cavers are still not convinced by Balch's idea, and prefer to think of Swildon's as a version of "swallowing" or "swilling" hole. There is a Swilly Hole in Cumbria.

This offers a very succinct summary of the theories to date, but it is by no means the full picture, as I will endeavour to explain below.

It is not unusual on Mendip to find important *risings* with names attributed to Christian saints. Obvious examples include St. Andrew's Well and St. Aldhelm's Well, two 'holy wells' whose history can be traced back over centuries. St. Andrew's Well for example lies in the shadow of St. Andrew's (Wells) Cathedral, and actually gives the City of Wells its name, while St. Aldhelm's is named in honour of the saint of that name, who perished nearby (or possibly even in it!) in 709 during a visitation. There are many similar examples spread throughout Somerset.

That the church should regard such risings as 'holy' should come as no surprise. In truth, veneration of springs harks back to a time long before the advent of Christianity, when our pagan ancestors treated such places as sacred, worshipped both for their life-giving gifts and in many cases, for their healing properties. These ancient practices continue to this day, in the form of wishing wells. While today's votive offering of choice usually involves a coin of the realm, in some place decorative rags are used instead, a custom which involves dipping a piece of cloth into the water, rubbing it on an area of affliction before hanging it on a tree as a possible cure. Compton Martin's recently restored Rag Well doubtless commemorates one such place.

With the arrival of Christianity, the church not surprisingly sought to subjugate many of the pagan world's most sacred sites, and in much the same way as Norman invaders built castles to suppress the indigenous local population, the church quickly took over and rechristened some of the most revered springs, often building their churches alongside them to demonstrate the new religion's superiority over the earlier beliefs. Gradually as paganism faded the springs original names were lost or forgotten. Not all sacred pagan springs suffered this fate however. Some - presumably those deemed too far from population centres to warrant the construction of a church - have retained vestiges of their original names. Examples locally include Whitehole Rising near Holcombe, and Snakes's Well near Failand.

The point of this preamble is that the new 'Christian' names *supplanted* the pagan names, and not the other way around. Those sites which were rechristened *stayed* rechristened, and there is simply no place in the country where a rechristened site has reverted to its pre-Christian name. In other words, if the cave or the area surrounding Swildon's had at any point in time been called St. Swithin's, then it *still* would be called St. Swithin's, and to suggest that it had somehow been corrupted back to an earlier name is patently absurd.

In any case it is doubtful that sinks were ever held in the same esteem as risings. Far from being treated as sacred places, sinks were probably historically viewed with suspicion - features which *took* the life giving water away from the people, rather than dispensing it. As a result the church clearly felt no need to rechristen such features, which probably explains the distinct lack of 'Christian' names associated with swallets. The only obvious exception to this rule would appear to be St. Cuthbert's Swallet, but as Richard's book tells us, the swallet is named after its location in the St. Cuthbert's Minery which is in the St. Cuthbert's Out Parish of Wells, rather than from any sacred or direct association with the saint.

Which brings us to what I consider to be the true derivation of Swildon's Hole. As Richard pointed out many cavers prefer to think of Swildon's as a version of 'swallowing' or 'swilling' hole. There are many variations of this, including not just Swilly Hole in Cumbria, but also Swale in Kent and Yorkshire, Swallow in Lincolnshire, and Swallowhead Spring in Wiltshire, to name just a few. All appear to derive from a phrase which means 'rushing stream'. The 'don' element of Swildon's is even easier to explain, for this is simply another version of dun, an old word meaning hill or down, of which numerous local examples exist e.g. Bleadon Hill, Black Down. Combining the two elements of 'swil' and 'don', gives us Swale Down or 'the hill of the rushing stream or streams', and Swildon's Hole as 'the hole in the hill of rushing streams', which seems a perfectly straightforward description of both the cave and the hill upon which it sits.

So if the hill was originally called Swale Down, then when exactly did it transmogrify into North Hill? It's hard to know for sure of course, but North Hill has to be north of somewhere - with the obvious place being Wells. North Hill may have been the northern limit of a parish or minery perhaps, and possibly connected to the agreement between William Bishop of Bath and Wells and Joan de Vyvona, the Lady of the Manor of Chewton, established in 1295, although further investigation would be needed. In case anyone doubts that earlier names can easily be forgotten, Beacon Hill - an even larger hill a few miles to the east - was once called Ryebury. The name change apparently dates from Elizabethan times when the country came under threat from the Spanish Armada.