

ST BEDE'S WELL

An ancient, hidden treasure

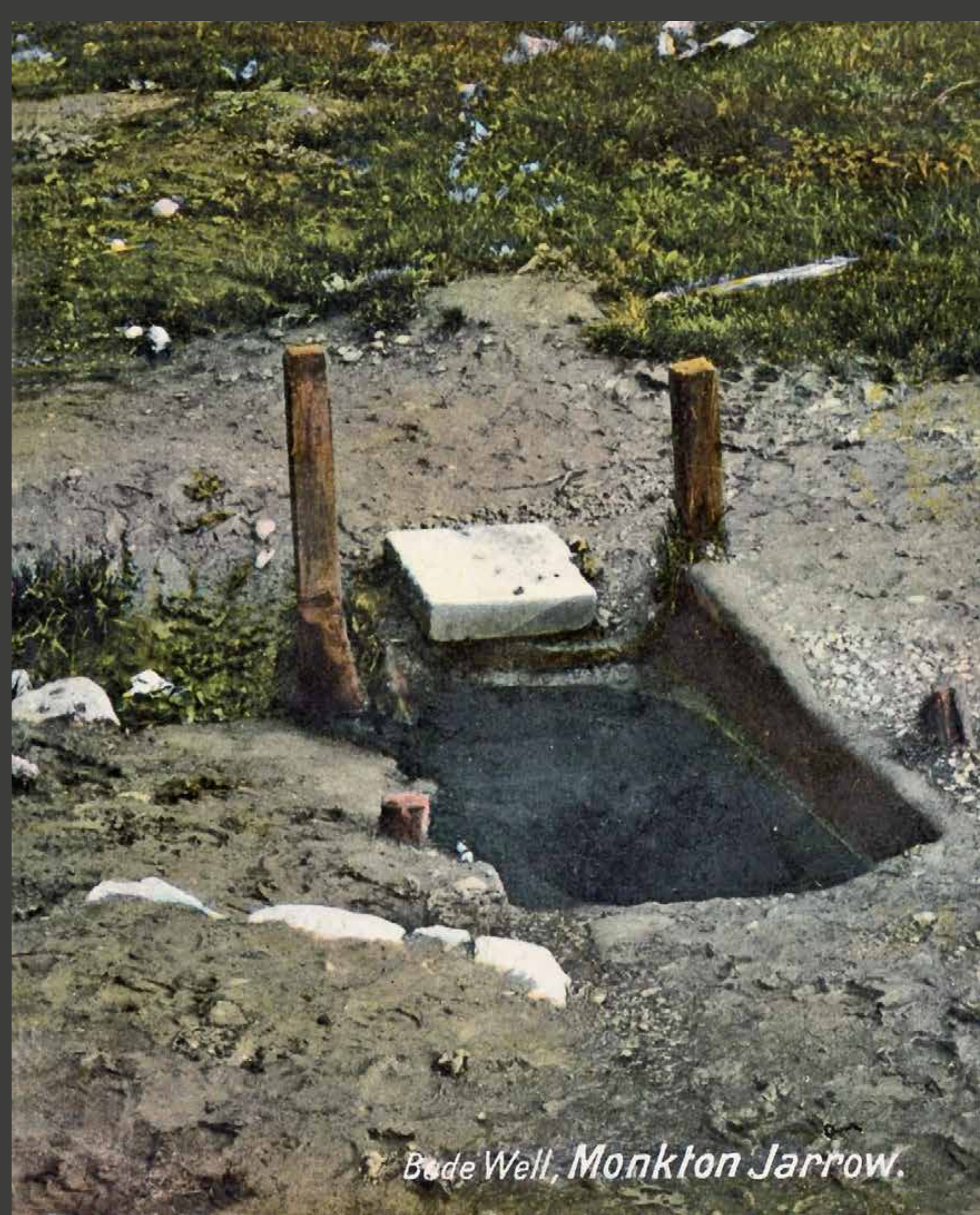
St Bede's Well is a hidden, historic treasure named after the local saint, Venerable Bede. The site of an ancient spring believed to have healing properties, it is one of Tyneside's oldest relics. The Well was granted Listed Building status in 1949 and as such is part of a unique register of our country's most significant historic buildings and sites.

The places on the list are protected by law and most are not open to the public. According to legend, Bede visited the Well as a boy and later preached there, converting the local Anglo-Saxon population to Christianity. Situated in Hebburn, on the border with Jarrow and Monkton, it dates back centuries - perhaps to the Dark Ages. Older maps sometimes refer to the Well as being in Jarrow, on land which in ancient times belonged to the Monastery.

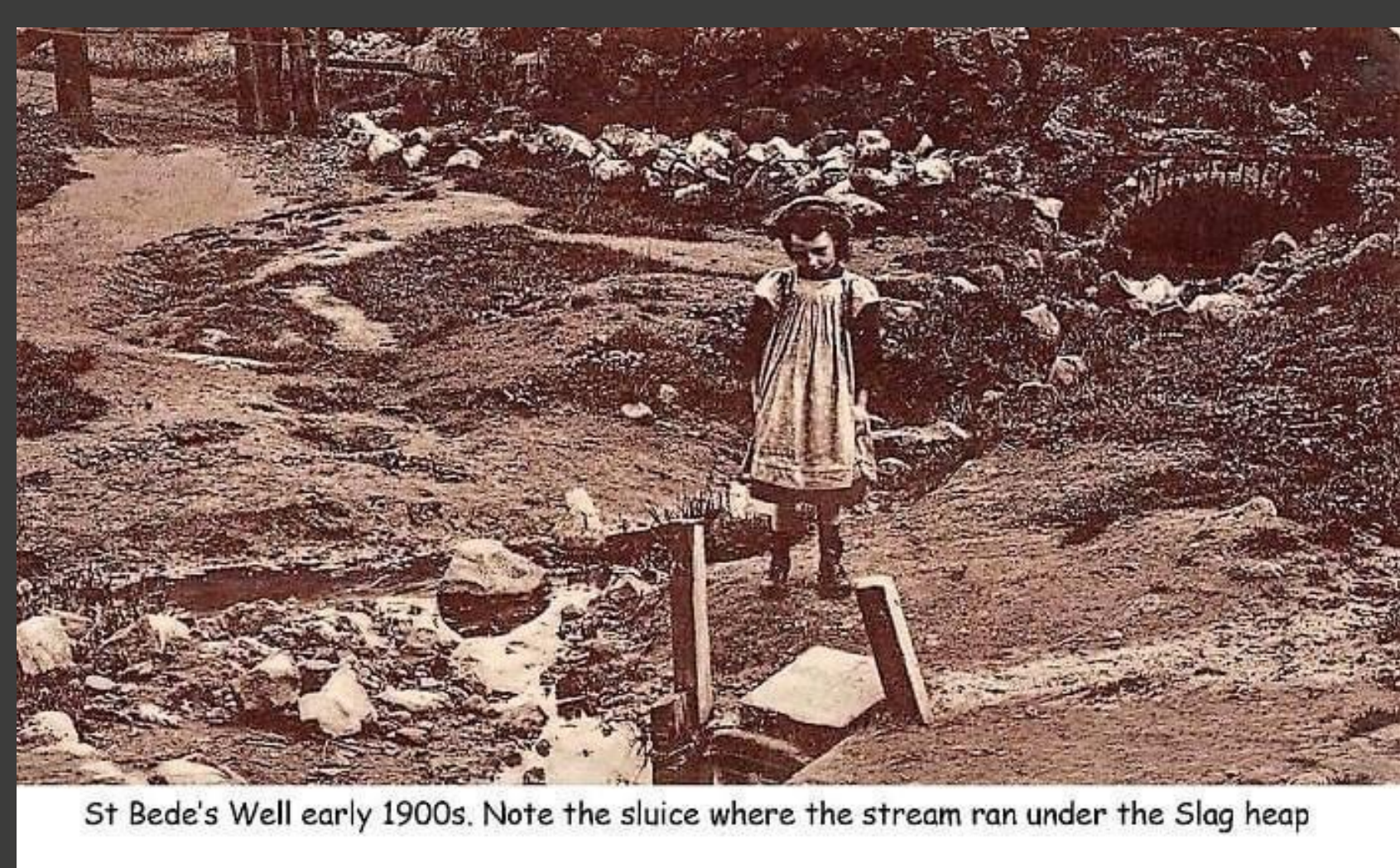
The term 'Well' is misleading. It was, in fact, a spring in a now-culverted stream called Bede's Burn - an ancient waterway which appears on early maps of the area. The Well was considered to have curative properties - and sick adults and children would travel from far and wide to be dipped into the water in a bid to cure them of infirmities.

Toward the end of the 19th century and beginning of the 20th, the Well narrowly survived the onslaught of industrialisation. Thousands of tons of slag and waste from nearby Palmer's Shipyard and Ironworks, the giant plant on the River Tyne at Jarrow, was dumped there.

As well as having a long-standing reputation as a place with supposed magical healing powers and being a popular destination for a peaceful stroll, St Bede's Well was well-known to people in Hebburn and Jarrow as a 'wishing well' where young lovers would conduct private romantic rendezvous and throw pins and coins in for good luck. The spot has a forgotten darker history too. In 1884, the Jarrow Express reported an attempted shotgun murder which took place there. In the same year, the Shields Gazette told how police officers interrupted an arranged prize fight at the "very secluded spot", leading to the boxers and a large crowd of spectators running away towards the open countryside.



By the late 1980s and early 1990s, the slag heap had finally been cleared and the wider area transformed with trees, grassy areas and paths for walkers and cyclists.



Holy Wells, Healing Wells and Dipping Wells

Healing or Dipping Wells often began as pagan sites and predated Christianity. They were believed to have healing properties. The May Day festival of Beltane, although traditionally associated with fire, became a popular time for people to visit Dipping Wells to seek the healing properties linked to the sites. They also played an important part in Solstice and Equinox celebrations such as the Autumn Equinox, Mabon. The Wells were believed to increase in their healing powers at Midsummer - it is documented in history books that people would gather at St Bede's Well on Midsummer's Eve. Many Dipping Wells were taken over by the early Roman Catholic Church and were linked to a saint - a local one in the case of St Bede's Well. Dipping Wells became places of pilgrimage where converts to Christianity were baptised.

Many of the pagan rituals and celebrations relating to the Wells were later adopted by Christians to help convert people to the new religion. Archive sources record that people travelled from around the country to visit St Bede's Well.



ST BEDE'S WELL

South Tyneside's own Healing Well

St Bede's Well is one of the most famed of the Healing/Dipping Wells. Across the centuries, local people, and others from further afield, would flock to St Bede's Well seeking to find a cure for ailments.

An account from 1702 by physician John Floyer stated: "Nothing is more Common in this Country... for the preventing or curing of Rickets, than to send Children of a Year old and upwards, to St. Bede's Well."

A later account from 1789 by historian John Brand declared: "About a mile to the west of Jarrow there is a well, still called Bede's Well, to which, as late as the year 1740, it was a prevailing custom to bring children troubled with any disease or infirmity. A crooked pin was put in, and the well laved dry between each dipping. My informant has seen twenty children brought together on a Sunday, to be dipped in this well; at which also, on Midsummer-eve, there was a great resort of neighbouring people, with bonfires, musick, (sic) etc."

An 1893 report in the Sunderland Times noted: "When the well is occasionally cleared out, a number of crooked pins (a few years ago a pint) are always found among the mud."



These have been thrown into the sacred fount for some purpose or other, either in the general way as charms for luck, or to promote and secure true love, or for the benefit of sick babies... In days when the ague was common in this country, the usual offering... was a bit of rag tied to the branch of an overhanging tree or bush."

Another newspaper story recalls one visitor's early-morning walk to the Well, where 'he seated himself on a rail to enjoy the singing of the birds. Before long an Irishman came up, who had been walking very fast, and was panting for breath. He took a bottle out of his pocket, stooped down and filled it from the Well, put it to his mouth, and took a copious draught. "A fine morning, sir", said our friend. "Sure and it is", replied the man, "and what a holy man St Bede must have been! You see, when I left Jarrow, I was as blind as a bat with the headache, but as soon as I had taken a drink just now, I was as well as ever I was in my life". So he filled his bottle once more with the precious liquid, and walked away.

Many times when it was cleared out, pins and coins thrown into the Well for good luck were found at the bottom, including 20th century coins suggesting the custom remained popular until relatively recent times.

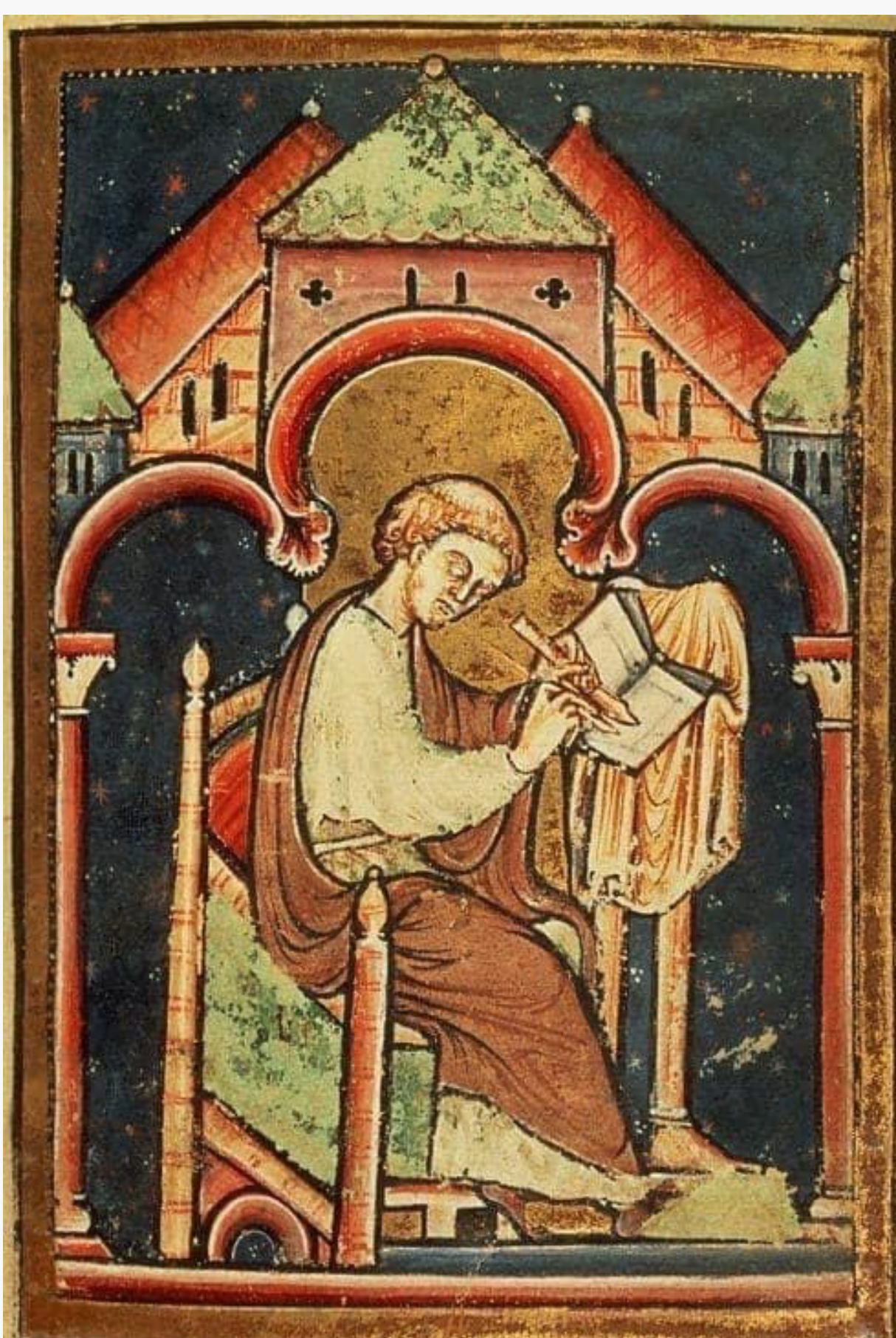


Who was The Venerable Bede?

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Bede entered the twin Monasteries of Monkwearmouth and Jarrow at the age of seven and spent most of his life at the latter location.

Bede was a renowned scholar, a skilled linguist, a translator, scientist and historian. He is known as the Father of English History. He wrote many important works for the early Christian Church in England, including his most famous work The Ecclesiastical History of the English People, which is a comprehensive account of Anglo Saxon England. He died in the Monastery at Jarrow on May 25th, 735. This day became the Feast Day of The Venerable Saint Bede, Patron Saint of Scholars and Historians. Bede was declared Venerable by the church in 836 and was canonised in 1899.

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St Bede's Well in the 1950's



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Heavy Industry and the threat to St Bede's Well

In Victorian and Edwardian times, the rolling green land surrounding St Bede's Well was used as a popular recreation area. People would take a stroll to what was a peaceful, rural location not far from the smoke, noise and grime of nearby shipyards, mines and factories. The land was open farmland until around 1854 and at one time had belonged to the Monastery at Jarrow. Palmer's Shipyard and Iron Company opened in 1852 and Charles Palmer built and launched the first iron-screw collier in the world at Jarrow. Called the John Bowes, it was so successful it resulted in the expansion of iron and steel foundries nationwide. By 1874, Palmer's was turning out 100,000 tons of pig iron and 50,000 tons of manufactured iron every year.

In an era when conservation and preservation were not a priority, the area became increasingly used as a place where slag from blast furnaces was dumped, and the Well became surrounded by industrial waste. The mountainous slag heap can be seen in the background of many old pictures and is marked on maps.



The Ancient Burn of St Bede, which fed the waters for the Well, was culverted - meaning that it was diverted underneath the slag heap, which led to the Well drying up. Many times during the last century, local people rallied to save the Well which came under repeated threat from the onslaught of heavy industry. Local newspapers carried countless letters and stories on the subject. Against the odds they largely succeeded in protecting it, even when surrounded by the slag heap.

Most recently, in the late 1980s/early 1990s, the site was landscaped and the location of the Well commemorated by a modern monument. Sadly, it has fallen into ruin over time.

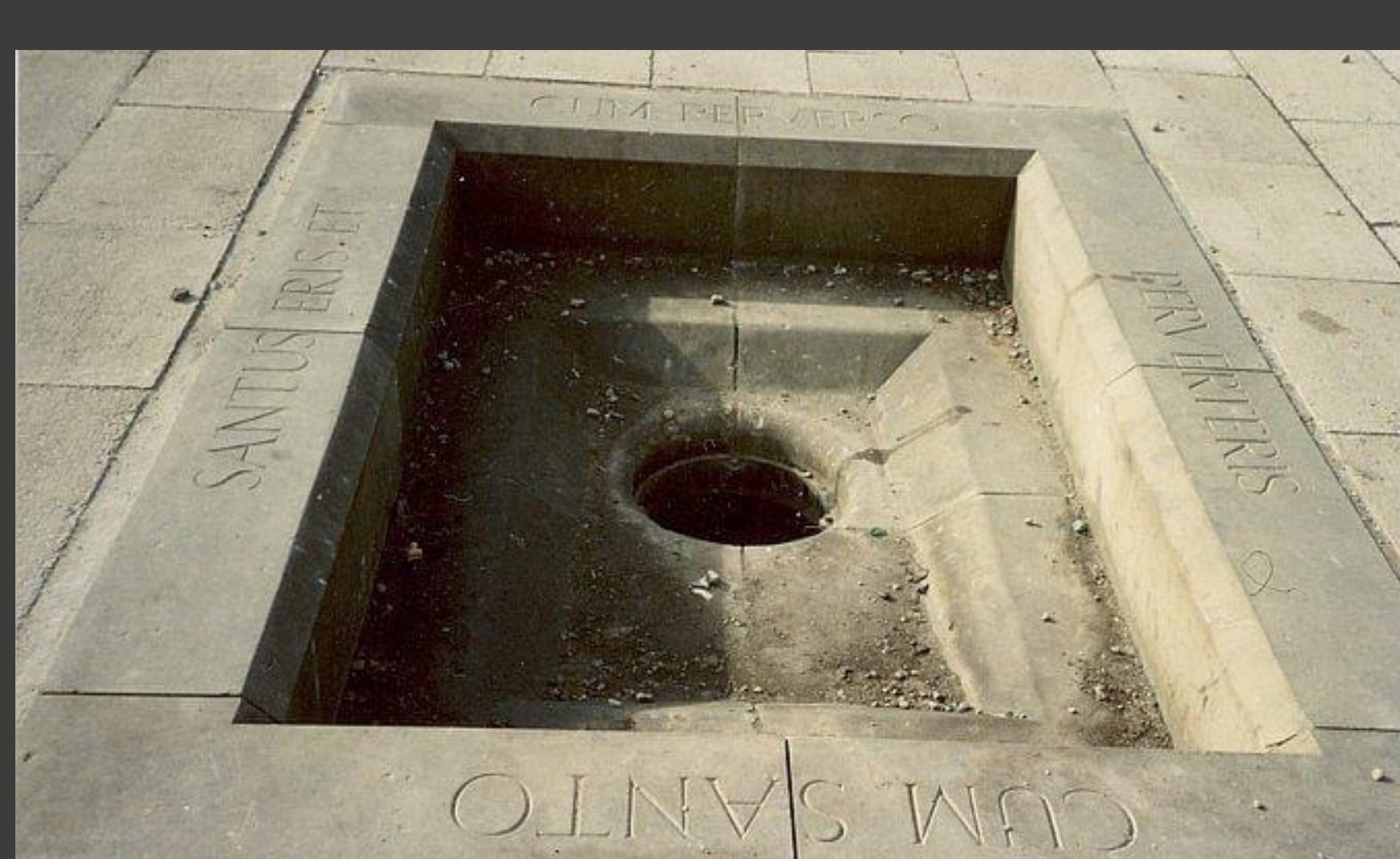


Saving the Well - or losing it forever

After the turn of the Millennium, the site of St Bede's Well fell even further into decline. The Facebook group Pictorial Hebburn was formed in 2014 by Hebburn resident Colin McFadyen and Colin shared photographs of the site. People of all ages began to share recollections and photographs of the Well, including long-lost stories of folk travelling from far and wide to collect special water, and memories of school trips and family visits to the site.

A dedicated Facebook page Friends of St Bede's Well (sister group of Pictorial Hebburn) was set up to explore and share the history of the site. Its main aim, backed by local people, is to restore the Well before it is lost forever and to make it the community asset it deserves to be. We are a constituted group and a partnership agreement has been made between group members and South Tyneside Council.

The notable, long-standing Hebburn family, the Carr-Ellisons, have been involved in previous restorations of St Bede's Well. The family has pledged its support to the latest project to save the site and preserve it for the long-term.



Be aware of the tremendous history, heritage, traditional beliefs, practices and customs associated with St Bede's Well. Visit the site and keep visiting. Help preserve this wonderful piece of local history.



**4th side to follow - quotes,
photos, press clippings
and acknowledgements.**