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From an unpublished article on Kent wells.

and Ashford. As regards dedications, Mary is still in front with eight, but, as with the confirmed wells themselves, not far in front. SS Peter and Paul have five, Peter on his own four, and All Saints also four. This is pretty similar to church dedications in the rest of the country, and very different from the normal pattern of well-names.

But these forty possible holy wells should give us pause for thought. For the recording of a good few of Kent's wells is fairly haphazard. St Nicholas's Well, Strood, is known only from a single reference in a will of 1444, although an account of the 'makyng of a trowghe to the common well' in 1556 may also refer to it; St Mary Magdalene's at Goudhurst appears only on an estate map of 1621; and Lady Well, Lamberhurst, is not recorded until the Tithe Map of 1841.[30] We have to wait until 1870 before St Ivo's Well in Eastry comes to light.[31] By the end of the eighteenth century, too, there were notable springs which had no dedication but which probably had some centuries before: for instance, 'a clear spring of water in the high road' at Sittingbourne, and at Postling the source of the East Stour next to the church, 'a constant fountain, which never fails in the driest season'.[32] In view of this it seems quite possible that a holy well could reach the Reformation period and then vanish without being recorded anywhere. If these forty springs were indeed holy wells with saint's dedications, that would make Kent's total look more respectable, not as high as Cornwall, but certainly comparable with the more conservative, more Catholic areas of the North and the West.

Dedications of wells, as well as of churches, do have a habit of changing, of course. In Kent there is no certain, clear instance of this, but a good many hints. One of the better-known Kentish holy wells, St Augustine's at Ebbsfleet in the parish of Minster-in-Thanet, is where the saint is supposed to have landed in 597, struck the ground with his staff and caused a spring to flow.[33] It is very unclear how venerable this legend is: Bede mentions that Augustine arrived in Thanet but is no more specific; John of Tynemouth does not mention the legend, nor does Leland, nor Camden in the *Britannia*; it does not appear even in Hope. The site of the landing was not believed to be certain until late in the nineteenth century: in 1897 it was reported to have been moved recently into the current position 'chiefly on the representation of the late W.R. Bubb'.[34] What *is* mentioned is the story of St Mildred, abbess of Minster, arriving at Ebbsfleet after her sojourn in France, and leaving her footprint on the rock; there was a St Mildred's Chapel on the site, which Hasted seems to describe as being so close to the place of Augustine's landfall as to be indistinguishable.[35] In view of the commemoration of other local Anglo-Saxon saints abbesses in wells within their minster-parishes - Ethelburga at Lyminge, Eanswith at Folkestone - I feel St Augustine's Well was originally St Mildred's Well.

More suggestive are the wells dedicated to St Thomas Becket. The murder of Becket in Canterbury Cathedral in 1170 was an event which shocked the whole of Christendom and his shrine swiftly became an immensely popular place of pilgrimage. His was a cult with profound political implications. Becket was a martyr not just for the Church, not just for Christ, but for the Church's independence of the State. He died for, and symbolised, the Church's effort to shake itself free of lay interference and control. Henry VIII well understood his significance when he ordered the saint's shrine to be demolished; and William Lambarde, an early Kentish Puritan who toured the county in the 1570s describing and denouncing all the monuments of 'Papism' he discovered, characterised Becket as 'a Prototraitor and a rebel against his Prince'.[36] So it would be unsurprising if the Church in Kent rededicated local holy wells to Becket in the years following his death.

There are nine wells which are known to bear Becket's name in Kent; not a single one shares its dedication with the parish church.[37] This is especially notable at Otford, where St Thomas was supposed to have created a water supply for the bishop's palace here by striking the ground with his staff.[38] The Well is a grand bath-like structure, which local church accounts suggest was in existence at least in 1440-41. Excavations carried out in the 1950s revealed that the fabric dated to the fourteenth century, possibly linking it with the rebuilding of the manor house in 1382, and that the flint floor of the well was perhaps another two hundred years older than that.[39] Otford is a Roman site and a springhead village, so we would expect any holy well to be pretty ancient. Now, the parish church is dedicated to St Bartholomew, and the local fair was held

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on his feast day in August. Even more importantly, the saint 'was of great credit here for the gift of curing barrenness in women, which caused great resort of people to his image and shrine in this church'.[40] This is a fairly common activity of sacred springs, and the arrangement of image inside the church and well outside it is familiar too. If Otford's well is older than the murder of Becket - and given the topographical context, it ought to be - surely its previous patron was Bartholomew? Why this renaming should be inflicted on the Otford well and not on the neighbouring well of St Edith at Kemsing may lie in differences in property ownership. Otford was a clerical village in which the Archbishop of Canterbury owned both the manor and the advowson of the church; but the manor of Kemsing was always held by secular lords, and the advowson was owned first by the Crown and then Bermondsey Abbey.[41] In the latter place the influence of the Archbishop, who had the strongest interest in promoting the cult of St Thomas, was that much weaker.

The pilgrimage to Canterbury had an impact on Kentish wells in different ways. All of St Thomas Becket's wells are within a mile or so of the Pilgrim's Way or Watling Street (apart from the one at Gravesend, which as Goodsall points out is at an important ferry site), and some were pre-existing, non-holy wells which were renamed in the years after the Archbishop's death. We have seen this happen at Bapchild; at the same thing seems to have happened at Singlewell in Milton-by-Gravesend, where the Well of St Thomas, first recorded in the thirteenth century, appears to have replaced the 'pebbly spring' which gave the hamlet its name.[42] Even at Folkestone, where pilgrims would have landed from Europe, there is a late record of a St Thomas's Well 'on the hills above' the town, and the author mentions that 'such are scattered all over the district'.[43] Other springs are associated with the pilgrim traffic. Pilgrim's Spring at Burham we have already noted; and at Aldington near Folkestone is a path 'called the Pilgrim's Way, from the fact that there is a well at the Lympne end'. Even in the Weald there is a 'Pilgrim's and Well Wood' in Tonbridge.[44] At Court-at-Street in Lympne the ruins of St Mary's Chapel stood near a pond 'used by the pilgrims', which may be simply antiquarian talk, although Lympne is an old Roman town. Court-at-Street may have been the moot-place for the Hundred, and a priest called William was living there as a hermit in 1525.[45]

At the centre of the pilgrimage was Becket's shrine in Canterbury and its accompanying well. The Well of Becket stood on the north side of the Choir, and is first mentioned in the late 13th century. By that time it was supposed to be the place where the dust and blood from the saint's murder was swept: from its contact with the hallowed blood the well's flow was increased; four times its water was altered to blood, and once to milk. It had, the sources relate, repeated this miracle several times in subsequent years. Taking water from the Well was an integral part of the pilgrimage, and Canterbury is one of the only places where contemporary accounts give an insight into what went on at a medieval holy well.[46]

Other well-names indicate an origin which is comparatively late. The cult of St Radegund, like rabbits, came to Britain with the Normans, but unlike them did not spread particularly far: three of the four English church dedications are in Kent.[47] The only confirmed Radegund well is at Canterbury - a 'St Radegund's Bath' first recorded in 1777 - but there may have been others at Alkham, where in the yard of St Radegund's Abbey is 'a large broad pond, of distinguished use in such a locality, whence probably the manor took its name of Bradsole'; and Postling, where the East Stour rises adjacent to SS Mary and Radegund's Church.[48]

In this context it is worth mentioning St Eustace's Well at Withersdane in Wye parish. Its legend is fairly well-known: Hope and the Bords both relate the story of the saint blessing it.[49] Wye is a minster town and we would expect its holy well to be quite old. However, the St Eustace of the story is not the early saint but a medieval French abbot who visited south-east England on a preaching tour in about 1200, and the tale of the well first appears in the Chronicle of Roger of Hoveden, which was written very soon after the event. Eustace, Roger tells us, 'blessed a certain well there, which God imbued with such grace that the blind were made to see, the lame to walk, the mute to speak, and any sick person, if he drank from this blessed fountain, rejoiced that he had recovered his health'. But what everybody misses is that Abbot Eustace moved on to Romney