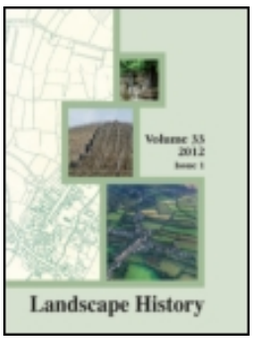

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Holy Wells and the Cult of St Helen

Graham Jones

This paper has two purposes

1 To discuss the occurrence in Britain of religious sites under the patronage of St Helen
2 To press the need for programmed investigation, listing and conservation of Britain's holy and healing wells and related features in the landscape.

It has long been recognised (Arnold-Foster 1899, Vol 1, p. 189; Vol 3, pp. 10, 16) that the dedication of churches to St Helen was particularly popular in Yorkshire, Lincolnshire and Nottinghamshire.

What Miss Arnold-Foster was unable to demonstrate — in the absence of distribution maps to match her prodigious listings of parish church dedications — is the remarkable and intriguing way in which the cults of St Helen and of the Holy Cross divide mainland Britain into two distinct regions. On one side of a line drawn across the country (Fig. 1) lie 90 *per cent* of dedications to St Helen listed by Miss Arnold-Foster or known from other sources. On the other side lie 70 *per cent* of dedications to Holy Cross or Rood.

Explanations should presumably be sought in cultural or religious distinctions between regions and/or between periods — bearing in mind also that dedications have accumulated over time and that Fig. 1 may represent a number of development patterns underlying the whole. Why is a religious site named after a particular saint? Factors governing choice include preference of patron, church establishment, and people; acknowledgement of the attributed efficacy of relics indigenous or imported; fashion — a wave of Helen dedications might have taken place, say, around the time Cynewulf wrote his poem Elene in the eighth century; and expediency, which covers a number of conditions including the intention of assisting the Christianisation of a pagan site. Any of these factors, or others, may have been predominant in the case of a Helen dedication. But what are the influences so strong that they account for the Helen/Holy Cross divide? Figure 1 shows that overall the Holy Cross dedications are more diffuse. But both Holy Cross and Helen dedications show core zones of concentration, centred on the Cotswolds and Humber Basin respectively. Are the two zones the result of similar processes? [1]

Alongside these questions are those raised by the relative popularity of Helen as patroness of holy wells. R. C. Hope, the first scholar to attempt to catalogue Britain's wells (Hope 1893), recorded more wells under Helen's patronage than were attributed to any other non-biblical saint. Of the 450 wells listed by Hope, most bear non-recurring, secular names. Of those bearing saints' names, twenty-eight are attributed to Mary or the perplexing (Our) Lady. The second largest group is the ten attributed to Helen. But Hope understates Helen's popularity. My Table 1 records forty-three reportedly under her patronage plus four pools and twenty-seven wells under other names associated with Helen churches. There may be more.

Two points of caution are necessary. First, that published fieldwork is uneven — heavy here, scanty there. Hope based his survey on county topographies in the main and the extent to which his listing is comprehensive depends on his sources. It is not surprising to find Yorkshire predominant in a book written by a Yorkshireman. His chapter on Devon, on the other hand, with fourteen entries, proves a mere sampling when compared to the 240 or so wells recorded in Devon by the Devon scholar Theo Brown (1957-66 and pers. comm.). Similarly Hope lists eleven wells in Somerset, whereas Miss Brown knows of seventy-four. Second, the recent gazetteer of Scottish wells (Morris & Morris 1981) shows Helen to be far less popular north of the Border. We need to ask, as with England, whether the preponderance of secular well names indicates secularisation or whether in some, if not all, cases affiliation to a Christian saint never took place. In Scotland, Wales, Ireland and Brittany, areas where Helen is only occasionally found, the dating of well names presents particular problems (Jones 1954; Audin 1983 (a) & (b); Killanin & Duignan 1962; Weir 1980). A further problem is our incomplete knowledge about the extent of secularisation or suppression following the Reformation. A recent popular account of holy wells (Bord & Bord 1985) estimates that there were 4,000 in pre-Reformation England. Certainly many sites, particularly in the south, must be awaiting rediscovery.

Mapping only known sites, there is in general terms a match between the distributions of the 25 *per cent* core of St Helen churches and 25 *per cent*

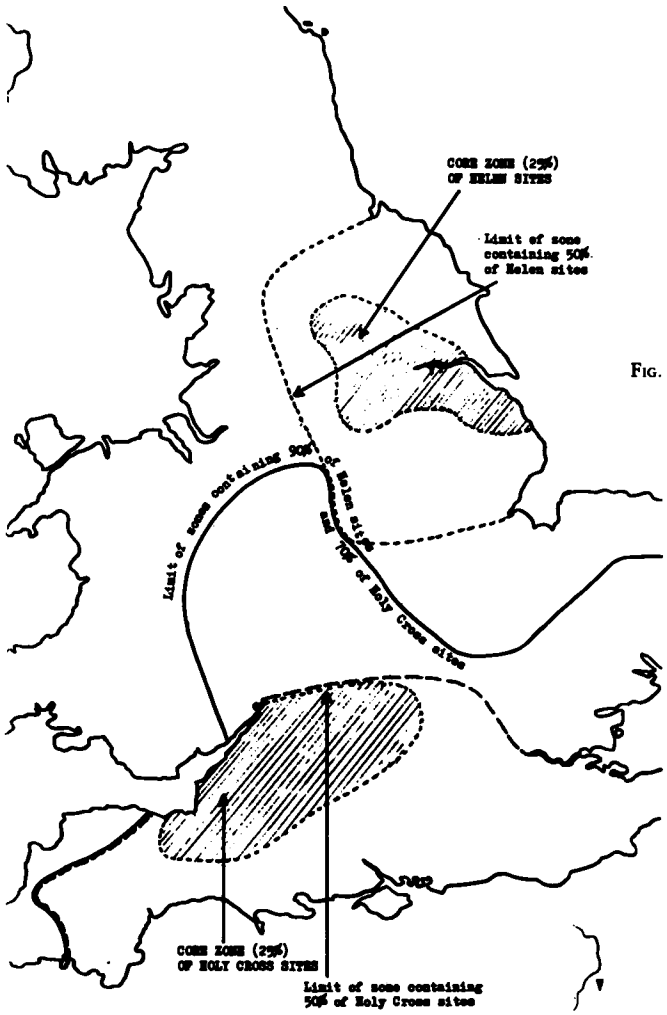

FIG. 1 Cults of St Helen and Holy Cross: zones of popularity (churches, wells and other sites)

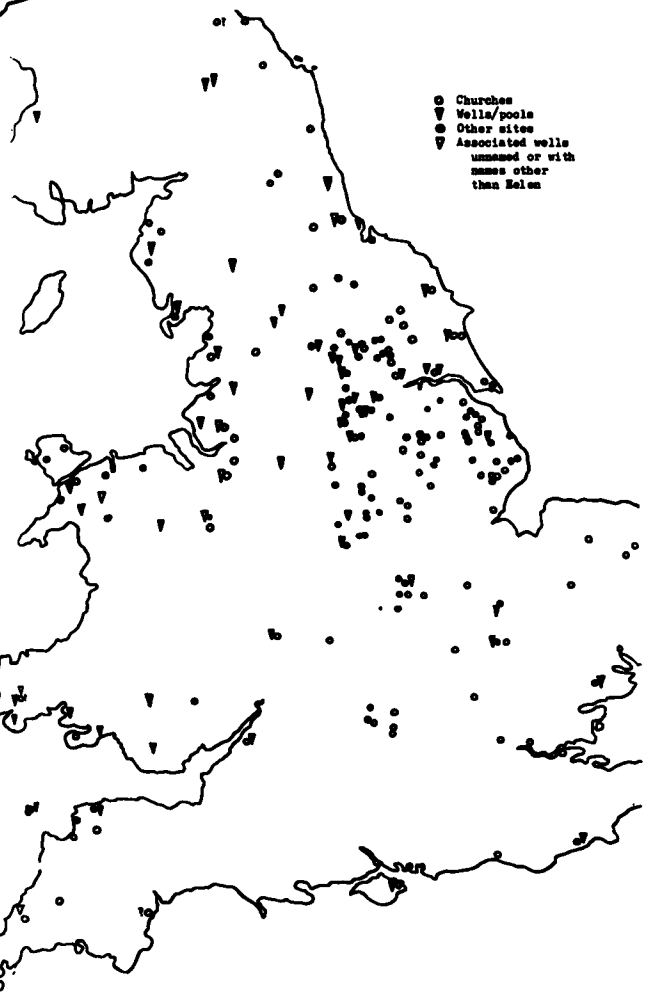

FIG. 2 Helen sites

TABLE 1 *Distribution of sites associated with (St) Helen*

	Prehistoric site	Romano-British site	road	find	Anglo-Saxon mother church	document	burial	fabric	Other
SOURCE OF MAJOR STREAM									
Holy/healing well (Helen) without burial place									NEWBIGGIN on LUNE
Holy/healing well (Helen) with burial place (Helen)									
Holy/healing well (Helen) with burial place (not Helen)									
Holy/healing well (not Helen) with burial place (Helen)									
Well (not k.a. holy/healing) with burial place (Helen)									
Burial place (Helen) with no known well									
Other site									
COASTAL SITE									
Holy/healing well (Helen) without burial place		CAERNARVON							SWANSEA
Holy/healing well (Helen) with burial place (Helen)				ORE					ST HELEN'S (IoW)
Holy/healing well (Helen) with burial place (not H)			SOUTH CAVE						ANGLE (B.p. lost)
Holy/healing well (not Helen) with burial place (Helen)			WELTON						
Well (not k.a. holy/healing) with burial place (Helen)				6th c. find LLANELEN (Gower) LUNDY					
Burial place (Helen) with no known well		SCILLY CAPE CORNWALL	CUMBERWORTH WILLOUGHBY			ABBOTSHAM CLIFFE	ALDCAMBUS		THEDDLETHORPE MAREHAM le FEN WEST KEAL EAST KEAL STICKFORD LEVERTON SKEFFLING KILNSEA OVERTON CROYDE ST HELEN's (Rosslare)
Other site								(folklore)	LLEYN
ASSOC. WITH BODY OF WATER									
Holy/healing well (Helen) without burial place									
Holy/healing well (Helen) with burial place (Helen)									
Holy/healing well (Helen) with burial place (not H)									
Holy/healing well (not Helen) with burial place (Helen)									
Well (not k.a. holy/healing) with burial place (Helen)									
Burial place (Helen) with no known well								(?) (folklore — supposed)	COLEMERE
Other sites: Lakes								(folklore) (place-names)	LLYN CAWS (SELKIRK (STRATOUN DALTON

TABLE 1 *Distribution of sites associated with (St) Helen*

	Prehistoric site	Romano-British site	road	find	Anglo-Saxon mother church	document	burial	fabric	Other
RIVER CROSSING									
Holy/healing well (Helen) without burial place		WALTON (Wharfe)							HUNSLET KIDWELLY
Holy/healing well (Helen) with burial place (Helen)									TARLETON (?) COCKERMOUTH
Holy/healing well (Helen) with burial place (not H)									
Holy/healing well (not Helen) with burial place (Helen)									PARRACOMBE
Well (not k.a. holy/healing) with burial place (Helen)									
Burial place (Helen) with no known well	LAUNCESTON	ABINGDON SHARNFORD ELSTOW GATE BURTON							
Other site									
SITE ON MAJOR RIVER other than crossing									
Holy/healing well (Helen) without burial place									DARNICK GATESHEAD
Holy/healing well (Helen) with burial place (Helen)									BARMBY-on-M. DENTON
Holy/healing well (Helen) with burial place (not H)									
Holy/healing well (not Helen) with burial place (Helen)				(see WORCESTER)					(see CORN-HILL
Well (not k.a. holy/healing) with burial place (Helen)									
Chapelry (Helen) with nearby well (not H)		CORBRIDGE							
Burial place (Helen) with well (not H) in parish				WORCESTER					CORNHILL (Berwick)
Burial place (Helen) with no known well		ETWALL KNEETON W. LEAKE E. LEAKE BURTON JOYCE STAPLEFORD GATE BURTON WILLINGHAM LEA BOULTHAM LONGHORSLEY	DARLEY, N. LLANELEN (Gwent)		BENSON	STILLINGFLEET			COTHILL SKIPWITH THORGANBY ESCRICK WHELDRAKE S. SCARLE THORNEY
OTHER SITES									MAYBOLE KILPATRICK FI
Holy/healing well (Helen) without burial place		CWM CROESOR ADEL BRAMHOPE	DALTON BRINDLE		LOUTH BLEASDALE				DERBY STAINLAND WINTERBURN BURNSALL ?Between Skipton/ Bolton Pr. MONKS' BRETTON LLAWHADEN DANDY RUSHTON SPENCER ASBY

TABLE 1 *Distribution of sites associated with (St) Helen*

	Prehistoric site	Romano-British site	road	find	Anglo-Saxon mother church	document burial	fabric	Other
Holy/healing well (Helen) with burial place (Helen)		WYKEHAM				BARNBURGH		SEFTON
Holy/healing well (Helen) with burial place (not H)								
Holy/healing well (not Helen) with burial place (Helen)		BOURNE				GUMLEY	EYAM	TREFELEN TREFTON
Well (not k.a. holy/healing) with burial place (Helen)							KELLOE	HEMSWORTH BURTON St LEONARD PLUNGAR ALVESTON GLENDON COCKSHUTT
Chapelry (Helen) with nearby well (Helen)		COLCHESTER						
Burial place (Helen) with well (not H) in parish		COLNE BURGHWALLIS			HEXAMSHIRE ST HELEN'S (Lancs)			ASHBY-de-la-ZOUCH TARPORLEY BURTON-AGNES
Place name (Helen) in parish with well (both Holy Cross)								OXFORD
Burial place (Helen) with no known well	SELSTON SWINHOPE	UPPER LANGWITH St H-on-the-WALL (York) HANGLETON LUDFORD MAGNA THOROTON S. WHEATLEY EDLINGTON L. CAWTHORPE N. ELKINGTON N. ORMSBY N. THORESBY BRIGSLEY BARNOLDBY-le-BECK KIRMINGTON BURGH-on-BAIN BISCATHORPE SAXBY MARR BILTON-in-AINSTY L. EVERSDEN FARNLEY			?S. MOLTON ST. HELEN (Auckland)	AUSTERFIELD HEALAUGH RAINHAM WHEATHAMPSTEAD BISHOPSGATE		Gt OXENDON SIBBERTOFT THORNBY SADDINGTON PINXTON ALBURY AINDERBY Steeple SANDAL MAGNA NORTHWICH Other sites SHERIFF HUTTON BERWICK SALOME ?CHALGROVE GROVE PAPPLEWICK TROWELL ASWARDBY ASHBY-by-PARTNEY BRANT BROUGHTON SAXILBY THURNSCOE WADDINGTON E. WHITTON GREENLAW YORK YORK Fishergate Stangate AMOTHERBY DRINGHOUSES ESTON N. FRODINGHAM KOLNWICK PERCY LEPPINGTON NUN KEELING E. BECKHAM GATELEY NORWICH RANWORTH SANTON HOLLINGFARE WARRINGTON FOLKSWORTH IPSWICH HELLAND

TABLE 1 *Distribution of sites associated with (St) Helen*

	Prehistoric site	Romano-British site	road	find	Anglo-Saxon mother church	document	burial	fabric	Other
Chapel with no known burials									DAVIDSTOWE THORPE HESLEY CAPEL ELEN ?MOEL yr EGLWYS
Chantries, statuary, processions, etc									HADDINGTON DUNDEE ABERDEEN DURHAM WOLBOROUGH HULL BEVERLEY
Non-religious sites	PEN CAER HELEN CAER HELEN ?SARN HELEN ?FFORDD GAM HELEN								Villa LANELEN COED HELEN BECKERMET SEATON POLESWORTH HELEN'S CASTLE NESSCLIFFE HORSFORD BOROUGHBRIDGE BORROWBY SCOTTON BRIGG ?ELLENBROOK
'Alauna' sites		ALCHESTER (R. ALNE) WATERCROOK ELLENBOROUGH River ALN (Northumberland) ALLAN Water ?nr Manchester ?in S.W. Scotland R. Allen (Hants) R. Allen (Cornwall)/ST ALLEN ?Other Allen/Allan/Aln rivers							

of St Helen wells — at the head of the Humber and within an estimated fifty miles of York (Fig. 2). But why should another 25 *per cent* of wells be grouped around the northern Irish Sea from Anglesey to Cumbria? The relative absence of Helen wells in Lincolnshire, Derbyshire and Nottinghamshire, which together have forty-seven Helen churches, is another anomaly. So is the fact that in many cases, particularly either side of the Pennines, Helen wells are found in parishes whose churches bear other dedications. Whether the well names pre-date those of the churches or *vice-versa* is open to question. Hey (1979, pp. 37-41) draws attention to St John the Baptist church and well at Throapham, Yorkshire, enclosed in a loop of Throapham's boundary half-way between that village and Laughton, of which Throapham was a township. Laughton church has Saxon fabric but in origin may be associated with Laughton castle. St John's, on the other hand, gave its name to one of Laughton's open fields. Thus St John's, to which there was a medieval midsummer pilgrimage and under which rises a stream, may preserve an older religious site than the parish church. Hey suggests parallels at nearby Barnburgh and Thorpe Hesley, both of which have St Helen's Fields. Barnburgh's contains a St Helen well and chapel; Thorpe Hesley's a St Helen chapel and Thorn Well.

Elsewhere it is argued that well and chapel names, particularly exotic dedications, became widespread only in the twelfth century and later, perhaps partly in reaction to the new fixedness of the parochial system: an outlet for superstition, cult interests, which could not be accommodated within the formal ecclesiastical framework and so on. A difficulty is to gauge just how recent or otherwise such superstitions and cult interests may have been in relation to the age of the parishes concerned. Also, if well dedications are more recent than those of their parish churches, why was Helen so frequent a choice?

Table 1 lists the 233 Helen sites known to me in the British Isles. In Fig. 2 they are mapped as churches, wells and pools, associated wells under other names, and miscellaneous sites — mainly legendary. Table 1 groups them topographically: which sites have wells, springs or other water features; which are close to prehistoric or Romano-British sites; which are on or near major Roman roads; which are on a major waterway or coast; which have Saxon features; and so on. To test whether the incidence of St Helen sites in each category was significant, a control group was established, composed of pre-Reformation parishes selected at random intervals from the entire alphabetical list of English and Welsh parishes in Crockford's. The group was equal in

(1002-1024) a group of peasants who were dancing in the churchyard at Kölbigk one Christmas Eve were cursed by the priest, so that they danced unceasingly for a whole year; when the year was up, some fell dead, while others became wandering beggars, afflicted with bouts of uncontrollable jerking and trembling. This story was much used in sermons (Tubach 1969, no. 1419). Its relevance here is that in some later versions it became a topographical legend, drawing upon local landscape features to add to its persuasive force. German accounts of the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, still referring to the original site at Kölbigk, end thus: –

> When a year had passed, Bishop Herbert of Cologne came and freed them from the curse. Four of them died immediately and the others became very ill. It is said that they danced themselves into the earth up to their waists and hollowed out a deep hole, which can still be seen there. The lord of the land had as many stones as there had been dancers set up as a memorial (Ward 1981, I, p. 197).[2]

In Sweden, the legend has been localised at a village named Hårga and a nearby mountain, Hårgaberg. Some wicked people held a dance on the evening before a great church festival, and went on through the night until the church bells rang; then the Devil came and led them out of the village to the mountain peak, where they danced on, till only their skulls were left. Many local people have maintained that their feet wore a round groove into the rocks, but modern researchers have failed to find any mark of this type on the mountain, so there is nothing to show why the legend became attached to this particular site (Lindow 1978, pp. 148-50). In Iceland, however, a variant of the tale is told about a deserted site called Hrúni, where an area of sunken ground resembles the shape of church foundations. It is said that a church did once stand there, but its priest was so fond of merrymaking that every Christmas Eve he would hold a dance, not a service, in his church, with drinking and gambling and other games going on all night. One year the Devil came, and church and churchyard sank into the ground, with all the people inside it, leaving only its outline in the earth (Simpson 1972, pp. 194-5). Perhaps the same story was once current in Scotland, for there are two stone circles in Aberdeenshire of which one is called The Sunken Kirk and the other Chapel o'Sink; however, the former has no surviving legend to explain its name, while the latter's legend is of a different type (Grinsell 1976, pp. 20, 208).

The theme of sinking brings us to another group of legends, about buildings or towns submerged by the sea, a lake, or a swamp, on account of their wicked inhabitants. Needless to say, this is not a pattern confined to Britain; it has famous precedents in Ancient Greece (Atlantis, and the story of Philemon and Baucis), and is one of the most popular local legends in European folklore (Ward 1981, I, p. 390; Maurer 1976, pp. 189-214). A broad range of sins is punished in this way, most of them being offences against justice and charity, or manifestations of pride, not sins of sacrilege or blasphemy. Occasionally, however, impiety *is* involved; in Sutherland, it is said that a castle well overflowed and drowned a whole town after a wicked lord held a ball which went on into a Sunday; in Shropshire, Bomere Lake is said to cover a village which sank at midnight one Christmas Eve because its inhabitants would not go to church for Christmas — or, alternatively, because a farmer cut his wheat on a Sunday (Dempster 1888, p. 155; Burne & Jackson 1883-6, pp. 64-6).

Wales is particularly rich in stories about buildings sunk in lakes. Five sites are involved: Llyn Syfadon (Llangorse), Kenfig Pool, Llyn Tegid (Bala), Llynclys Pool, and Tyno Helig (Rhys 1901, pp. 73-4, 403-15; North 1957). The earliest recorded version, which does not yet show the full development of the type, dates from 1572, and is strongly religious in tone; it tells how St Germanus of Auxerre came to the kingdom of Powys to preach against the Pelagian heresy, but was rejected by its ruler: –

> The kynge whereof, . . . because he refused to heere that good man, by the secret and terrible iudgement of God, with his Palace, and all his householde, was swallowed vp into the bowels of the Earth, in that place whereas, not farre from Oswestry, is now a standing water, of an unknown depth, called *Llunclys*, that is to say: the devouryng of the Palace (Llwyd 1573 in Rhys 1901, p. 412).

By about 1700 a more dramatic version had evolved, in which a supernatural voice calls out repeatedly, over many years, that God's vengeance will come on the wicked inhabitants of a castle or city. The nature of the wickedness is sometimes left vague; it concerns an 'impious' prince at Tyno Helig, a cruel one at Llyn Tegid, a family 'notorious for riotous living' in a nineteenth-century variant of the Llynclys legend. But at Llyn Syfadon and at Kenfig Pool the crime is clearly specified; the story connected with the former was summarised by Sir John Rhys as follows: –

> All the land now covered by the lake belonged to a princess, who had an admirer to whom she would not be married unless he procured plenty of gold: she did not care how. So he one day murdered and robbed a man who had money, and the princess then accepted the murderer's suit, but she felt uneasy on account of reports as to the murdered man's ghost haunting the place where his body had been buried. So she made her lover go at night to interview the ghost and lay it. Whilst he waited near the grave he heard a voice inquiring whether the innocent man was not to be avenged, and another replying that he would not be revenged till the ninth generation. The princess and her lover felt safe enough and were married: they multiplied and became numerous, and their town grew to be as it were another Sodom; and the

vernacular audiences. The first is in verse form, and the second is narrative. The St Helen's of the verse might be Cornhill or Longhorsley since it cannot be Aldcambus which, like St Abb's, is on a 'nabb' or headland and must certainly be the chapel of the second item 'erected by St Helen'.[3]

The connection made between Ebba and Helen is intriguing, nevertheless, because Aldcambus is an outlying part of Coldingham parish. Ebba's family did indeed flee from civil war, to the court of Dalriada, whence Oswald returned imbued with Celtic Christianity. Finlay (1979, p. 196) points out that Ebba was consecrated by a Saxon bishop, but if Aldcambus is what the legend suggests, a monument of pious gratitude, intended presumably as a landmark for other storm-tossed seafarers, the chances are enhanced of its being a product of the seventh-century revival inspired by

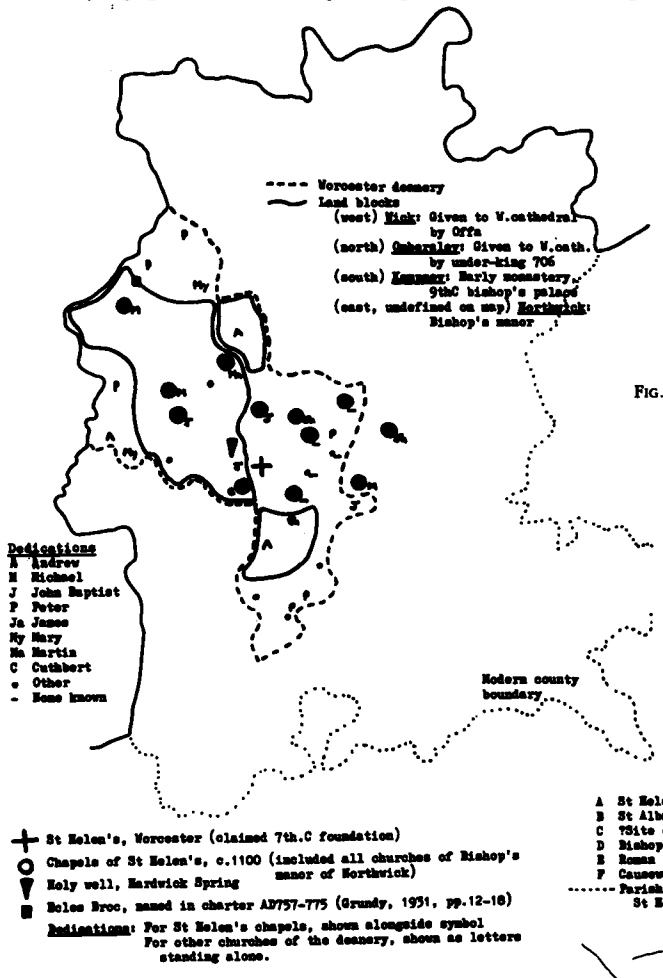

FIG. 3 St Helen dedications in pre-Reformation diocese of Worcester (Not shown, Alveston (Glos))

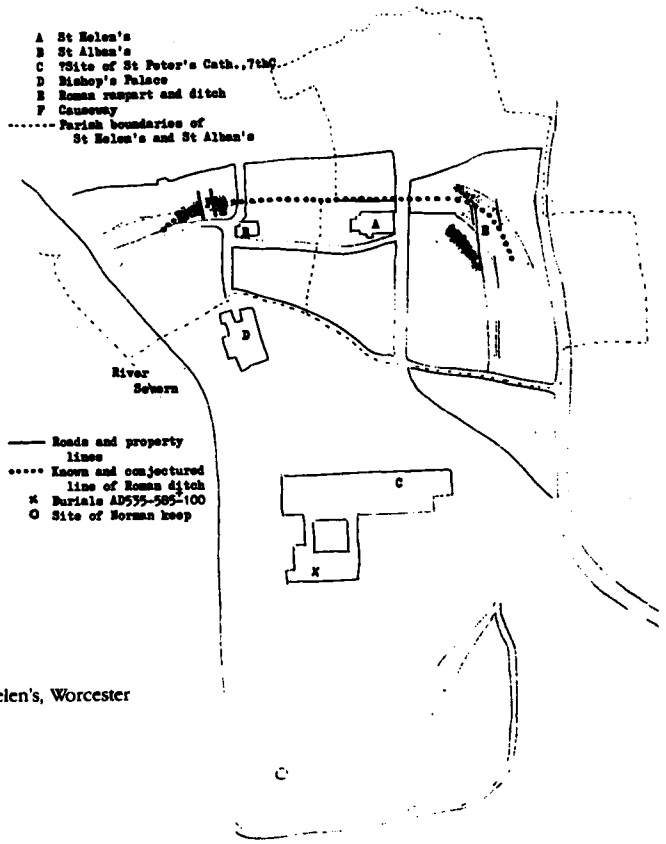

FIG. 4 St Helen's, Worcester

the Celtic missions. As one of a group of coastal sites bearing Helen's name, Aldcambus also points forward to an aspect of the cult of possible greater antiquity, to be discussed later.

First to take the veil in the seventh-century revival was Heiu, consecrated at some date during the period A.D. 635-651 by the Irish missionary Aidan. Her first abbey was at Hartlepool, where she was succeeded by the more famous Hilda. On the spit of land linking Hartlepool to the mainland is a holy well under the patronage of St Helen. From Hartlepool Heiu moved to Tadcaster in Wharfedale (Bright 1878, p. 185), where a mile or two north of the Roman town Healaugh's church is set on a prominent hillock and its dedication is to St Helen. Another mile or so west is the holy well of St Helen on the north bank of the Wharfe where it is crossed via St Helen's ford by the Roman road known as Rudgate. There was a stone cross by the well, albeit of post-Conquest date (Faull & Moorhouse 1981, p. 222). Ebba of Coldingham, Heiu's contemporary and probable relative, has two dedications outside Northumbria: St Ebbe's, Oxford, and a now desecrated church at Shelswell in the same county. Oxford is at the edge of a cluster of Helen dedications on the Middle Thames and has a St Helen's Passage off Holy Well Street on the way to Holy Cross church and well.

The Middle Thames cluster — it includes a hilltop St Helen's at the interestingly named Albury ('old fortified place') — is centred on Abingdon. The chronicle which speaks of a nunnery there 'at Helenstow' (see above) claims it was founded by Cilla, relative of the sub-king Cissa, and that her brother Hean founded a monastery at nearby Sunningwell — another interesting name. Abingdon itself is derived by Ekwall (1960) from the personal name Abba (from the same root as Ebba?) and dated to about A.D. 730.

Other Helen churches with possible seventh-century origins are Thameside Rainham, part of Barking Abbey's estate founded by Ethelburga in A.D. 666; Cliffe-at-Hoo across the estuary in Kent, part of a monastic estate given to the monks of Medeshamstede (Peterborough) and perhaps where the eighth-century Council of Clovesho met; and Welton on Humberside, another Medeshamstede endowment (with holy well). Monastic communities in an age of expanding power and wealth are unlikely, perhaps, to have left outlying estates without centres for lay devotion.[4]

Mother churches and those with significantly large parishes form a class of Helen churches suggestive of early date. Among these are Abingdon, a tenth-century *monasterium* and recipient of church-scot in the thirteenth century from a large area (Stenton 1913, pp. 24ff), and Garstang, Lancashire, an isolated site with rounded churchyard on what was an island in the River Wyre. Parish boundaries in the vicinity of Bourne, Cambridgeshire, a Helen parish with chalybeate well, suggest it was once the centre of a much larger parish; one constituent village, Little Eversley, also has a Helen church and its name probably indicates an older settlement than neighbouring Great Eversley.

What are we to make of the isolated group of five Helen churches on the Leicestershire/Northamptonshire border? One of them is Gumley, reputed location of a *Witangemot* in Offa's reign, with chalybeate well and the church located against the estate bank (fortified enclosure?). (Compare Offa traditions at Thameside Benson, Oxfordshire, at Colchester, and at Ore, near Hastings; the last two have Helen wells.) This is one of the half-dozen highest points in central England and in the Helen parishes of Thornley and Saddington rise the Warwickshire Avon, the Welland and a principal source of the Nene — indeed the heart of England.

Given the significant distribution of Helen sites in Britain — a greater concentration than anywhere else in the Christian world, as far as I am aware — why is it that Helen does not figure in any major British pre-Reformation calendar? The weight of Helen dedications in the Humber basin is usually attributed to regional pride in the proclamation at York of Constantine the Great, son of Helen of the Cross and the man who made Christianity Rome's state religion. It was said that his father's resting place was marked by a perpetual light in the church of St Helen-on-the-Walls (Drake 1736). On the face of it this is a convincing explanation, particularly in view of the relative lack of Holy Cross dedications in the North — but undermined by the absence of calendar references to Helen. The spurious tradition that Helen was British by birth is irrelevant, since it is unknown before the twelfth century and can be explained by confusion with the supposedly British wife of Magnus Maximus, called Helen in Welsh tradition. Indeed, how critical should we be of the assumption (Baring-Gould & Fisher 1907-13, Vol. 3, p. 255; Bowen 1969; & others) that some of our Helen churches may be dedicated to this latter Helen? If Maximus's wife was British and named Helen — and many girls must have been so named who were born in the middle years of the fourth century — confusion and conflation may have been inevitable.

Sulpicius Severus (Monceaux 1928, pp. 53, 215-16) describes the wife of Maximus playing both Mary and Martha to the saintly Martin. Unless she was also playing the hypocrite for her husband's political advantage, here are the actions of a typical Christian matron of Late Antiquity. It would be surprising if the wife of Maximus did not endow a church or two during her husband's five-year reign, which began with baptism (Mommsen 1898) and in which questions of religion played such an important part. But fervent Christian ladies of the age were not canonised: even Constantine's mother owes her sainthood to the supposed discovery of the Cross rather than the endowment of, say, Trier Cathedral. What if, however, the wife of Maximus returned to Britain after her husband's execution as tradition insists (Barnwell 1878; Styles 1979 & pers. comm.), and there became a venerated member of the emerging Celtic church

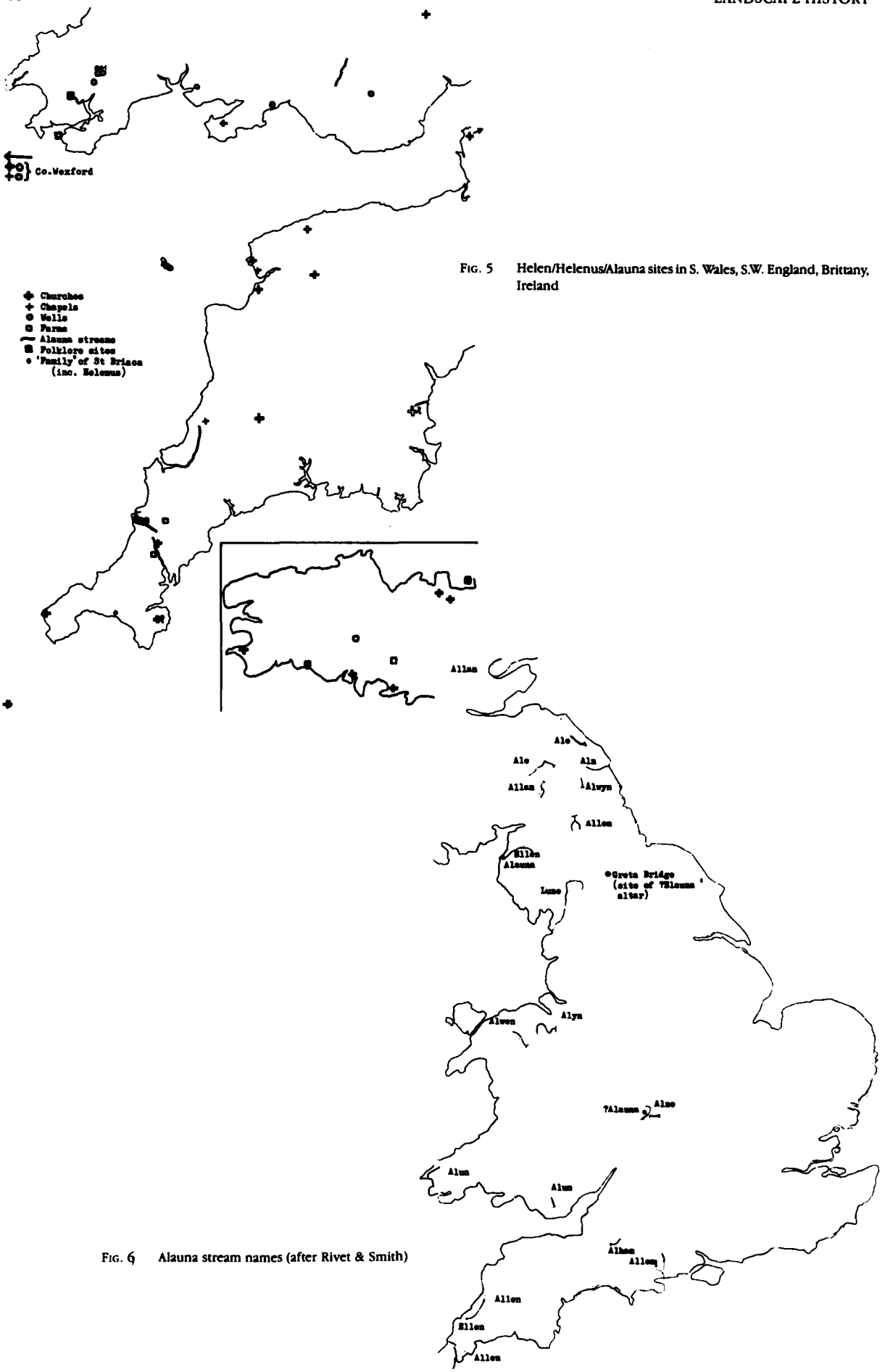

FIG. 5 Helen/Helenus/Alauna sites in S. Wales, S.W. England, Brittany, Ireland

FIG. 6 Alauna stream names (after Rivet & Smith)

which by the end of the fifth century, if tradition is to be believed, was counting women among its leaders and saints — Nonna, mother of David, Gwladys, wife of Gwynllyw, Tudful, daughter of Brychan.

Although Helen of the Cross is not commemorated in any major British church calendar, in the Western Church her day is normally August 18. What are we to make, then, of the entry to 'Helena, Queen and Widow' on August 25 in the calendar of Tavistock Abbey, whose estates included Helen sites in Devon and Cornwall? The entry is recorded by William Worcester, who, though he may have misread or miscopied the date, was making a note of several entries of particular interest to him as an antiquarian — some Celtic, some Continental. (Coincidentally, St Ebba is commemorated on the same day, August 25.) If this is not the mother of Constantine, could it be the wife of Maximus?

In respect of the Devon and Cornwall dedications, and indeed those of Wales and Ireland which together with them form a discrete mainly coastal group of churches and wells (Fig. 5) it is necessary to note the veneration in northern Brittany of a male saint Helen. His feast day, July 26, is shared with churches in the south now under the patronage of the female Helen. Gender-change in the development of cults is not unknown and it is tempting to assume that this is what has happened with the Helen churches in southern Brittany. At Breage, Cornwall, a Helen was commemorated as a member of the 'family' of the Irish St Breaca and might thus be the saint commemorated at one or more of the sites in south Wales and south-east Ireland. Dr Molly Miller's work on The Saints of Gwynedd discloses that some of the north Wales sites are 'suspect', too (Miller 1979, pp. 55, 57, 97).

The picture is further complicated by the fact that many of our Helen wells, as distinct from churches, were venerated not on St Helen's Day, August 18, but on the feast day of the Invention (literally 'bringing to view') of the Holy Cross, May 3. In the north of Britain this became known as St Helen's Day-in-the-Spring.

St Helen's or Eline's Day-in-the-Spring appears to have had folkloric significance. In 1868 a Mr Atkinson described it as 'Rowan Tree Day' or 'Rowan Tree Witch Day'. According to Atkinson, sprigs of the rowan, or mountain ash, were cut on that day and one placed above every door and a piece carried in the pocket 'all to ward off witches and their spells'. Farmers' whipstocks of rowan tree wood were credited with the power of 'making them safe against having the draught fixed or horses made restive by a witch'. The Northumberland Household Book says it is the day when 'certain servants receive their yearly allowance for horsemeat'.

The link with horse-lore is intriguing, but even more so is the reference to witches and trees, for it prompts attention to a piece of folklore well outside northern England. At Northleach in Gloucestershire we find the legend of Old Helen, a witch living in or buried under an oak, elm or wych-elm. The tree was burned down many years ago, but the legend survives, as does the name Helen's Ditch in the same locality for what appears to be a drove road of perhaps Iron Age date (RCHM 1976; *NNV*; & W. C. Fallows, pers. comm.). This is not the only Helen connection with fauna and flora. In Wales the alpine herb known as spignel, which flowers in June and July and whose rootstock used to be eaten in Scotland, is known as Elen's Spignel . . . a parallel perhaps to the more widely known St John's Wort. We should note also *Inula Helenium*, Elecampane, formerly used to treat chest complaints.

St Helen's Day-in-the-Spring was a popular day for observances at wells, and not only those bearing Helen's name. It stands alongside May Day itself, and Ascensiontide when the famous well-dressings of Derbyshire take place. It is the time of the year when the powers of water were popularly said to be at their fullest. Many stories are told of 'prophetic' wells and springs whose appearance or absence at the beginning of May was held to portend good or evil fortune.

A feast day of the Holy Cross in May time would be an appropriate day for observances if the well was accompanied, as so often was the case, by a then-blossoming tree which shared the attentions of the faithful. The significance of the Tree of Redemption (Bradley 1984, pp. 84-100) would not be lost at a site where a tree shared some of the attributes, or at least the location, of a holy well. This does not in itself, however, explain why it was necessary to transfer the name of the discoverer of the Cross to the day in question. Or indeed why it should have been Helen's name that was appropriated to some of the wells concerned. If in each case the tree was an elder a simple explanation might suggest itself: Old English *ellern* has produced place-names with the prefix Ellen- or the like. But this is unlikely to have been the case at all our Helen wells, particularly those in towns. However, we should not ignore the possibility that there are influences at work in the naming of our Helen wells that go beyond the expression of veneration for the memory of Helen, mother of Constantine. In the Welsh traditional sources, Helen mother of Constantine becomes confused with the wife of Maximus, and in turn the wife of Maximus is conflated with a tutelary figure, Elen of the Hosts. Could this have happened at any of our Helen wells?

This is not a new notion. A Mr Gregson, quoted in *The Ancient Crosses of Lancashire* at the turn of the century, suggested that 'the St Helen of the county of Lancaster is not unconnected with the Celtic St Elian *(sic)*, both descended from Ella, the water sprite'. His suggestion echoes the recording by Sir John Rhys (1883) of a water spirit named Elen in traditions of the Lleyn Peninsula in north Wales. There she is one of the daughters of the goddess Don whose home is the drowned city of Arianrhod, only twelve miles from Caernarvon, the legendary home of Elen of the Hosts. Rhys

(1888) conjectured that the Mabinogion story of Helen or Elen of the Hosts and her marriage to Magnus Maximus was a reworking of an earlier myth in which Elen figured with some other hero. Via the Mabinogion story (Jones & Jones 1974, pp. 79-88), the Welsh named a number of their Roman roads Sarn Elen — Helen's Causeway. Thus she becomes not only a water spirit, but also protectress of roads and armies, or both at once, as at Llyn Caws on Ffordd Gam Helen, Powys. Beyond her in the shadows of myth and legend stands the prototype of those women of the Grail and Arthurian stories variously named Elaine, Elen, Helain the White and the Lady of the Lake. None of these legendary or literary figures is known from sources earlier than perhaps the tenth century, however. Is there any earlier evidence which may help to establish a more convincing connection?

I believe there may be some value in examining the class of place-names which includes the rivers named Ellen and a small number of location names such as Ellenborough in Cumbria. Ellenborough is the ancient precursor of Maryport and its name refers to the fort on the River Ellen. The Romans who built a fort to guard that lowest crossing of the Ellen as it spills into the Irish Sea, called both the place and the river by the same name — Alauna, a very common river and place-name in the Celtic Roman world (*AB* 1972). Rivet and Smith (1979, pp. 243-7) connect it with the continental god Alaunus and a female counterpart Alauna, unattested but not unreasonably presumed. Nicolaisen (1976, pp. 173-87) believes it to be pre-Celtic. Figure 6 shows the distribution of Alauna names in Britain — based on those mapped by Rivet and Smith. Over the centuries a variety of forms of the name have evolved: Allan, Alne, Ellen, Lyne. Watson (1926, pp. 467-9) thought the first element of Alauna names represented the meaning 'rocky', but Pokorny preferred 'bright, brilliant'. Nicolaisen plumps for 'flowing'. An earlier etymologist, Canon Isaac Taylor, derived the element from a Gaelic 'all' (white) to mean 'clear, transparent'.

The author of *The Ancient Crosses of Lancashire*, Henry Taylor (1899), reported Canon Taylor's interpretation in a discussion of the county's holy wells. And he added this comment: 'Such is eminently the case' (i.e. clear, transparent water) 'at the St Helen wells at Sefton and Brindle.'

I have noted that a goddess or female spirit Alauna is not attested. However, I would draw attention to an altar found at Greta Bridge Roman fort in the early eighteenth century and since lost. In the opinion of Horsley, the most reliable of those who recorded the inscription, the altar was set up by a mother and daughter in honour of a water nymph named Elauna. If Horsley's reading can be accepted — and it has to be noted that Collingwood and Wright do not agree (*RIB*) — does it provide support for any postulated link between Elen the figure of myth, the guardian spirit of rivers named Alauna, and a tutelary of holy wells supplanted in name and observance by the mother of Constantine and St Helen's Day-in-the-Spring?

As to the process by which Alauna names could have been Christianised, I offer the evidence of St Allan, a village near Truro. Ekwall identifies the Alauno root in the name, popularly supposed and accepted by Ekwall to be that of a Breton abbot, patron of the parish. But Ekwall does not point out that St Allan stands near the head of the *River* Allan, which forms its eastern boundary. The sequence must surely be saint's name from river name, rather than the reverse.

Pagan observances generally honoured a named spirit of the river or its source. What name, then, would be venerated at the source of the Lancashire Lune? Lune is derived from Alauna, and it would be not unreasonable to guess that the spirit of the Alauna bore the same name. We do not know if the source of the Lune was venerated in pre-Christian days. But there is certainly a Christian holy well there, at Newbiggin-on-Lune, and it is dedicated to St Helen.

Attractive as Alauna, and Elauna, and Elen the water sprite are in explaining holy well observances on St Helen's Day-in-the-Spring, we do not have to go beyond the mother of Constantine to make contact with pagan belief systems. And in the following discussion it may be useful to bear in mind that Constantine's adoption of the Christian religion as that of the State had a decidedly syncretic character, strongly echoing aspects of Sun worship.

In a carving over the doorway of Sant'Elena, Venice, a Venetian admiral offers to St Helen the Mediterranean and its riches. This island church at the entrance to the Adriatic and a similarly named ninth-century predecessor on the landward side of the lagoon, hark back to the earliest days of Venetian sea-power. Helen must have been an efficacious protectress for Mediterranean sailors[5] long before Sant'Elena took possession of the arm of St Helen which it proudly displays to this day below the altar in her chapel. Although the derivation of the name St Elmo is disputed, Helen of the Cross appears to have taken the place of the Hellenistic Helen in these sailors' beliefs about St Elmo's Fire, the electrical efflorescence that manifests itself at mastheads (and today at wingtips also) during Mediterranean storms. Jack Lindsay (1974, pp. 115, 163, 211, 241) and others have described the way in which the Greek Helen became associated in beliefs about the fire with her mythic brothers the Gemini or Dioskuri, Castor and Pollux. Rendel Harris (1903, 1906) compiled instances of the occasions when the Dioskuri appear to have taken Christian guise. I have not yet been able to consult his work, but I wonder if anyone can tell me if he noted St Maria in Aracoeli, in Rome. There, in the church supposedly on the site of an altar raised by the emperor Augustus to 'the first-born of the one God', St Helen has her only place of veneration in Rome — other than her alleged mausoleum outside the city and the shrine in Santa Croce containing part of her alleged skeletal remains. Relics of St Helen share a

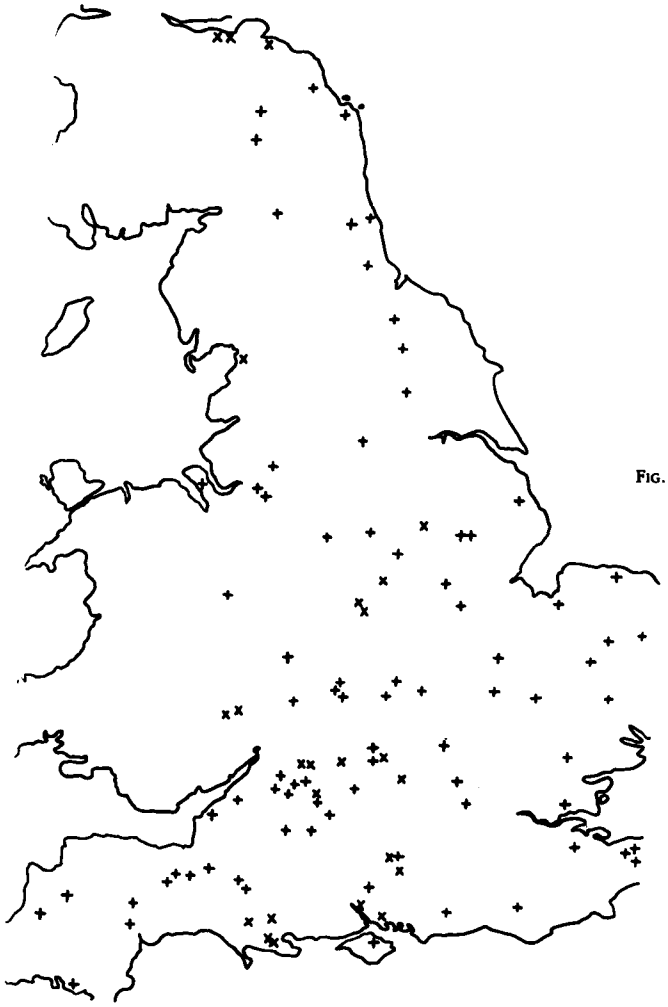

FIG. 7 Churches dedicated to the Holy Cross and the Holy Rood

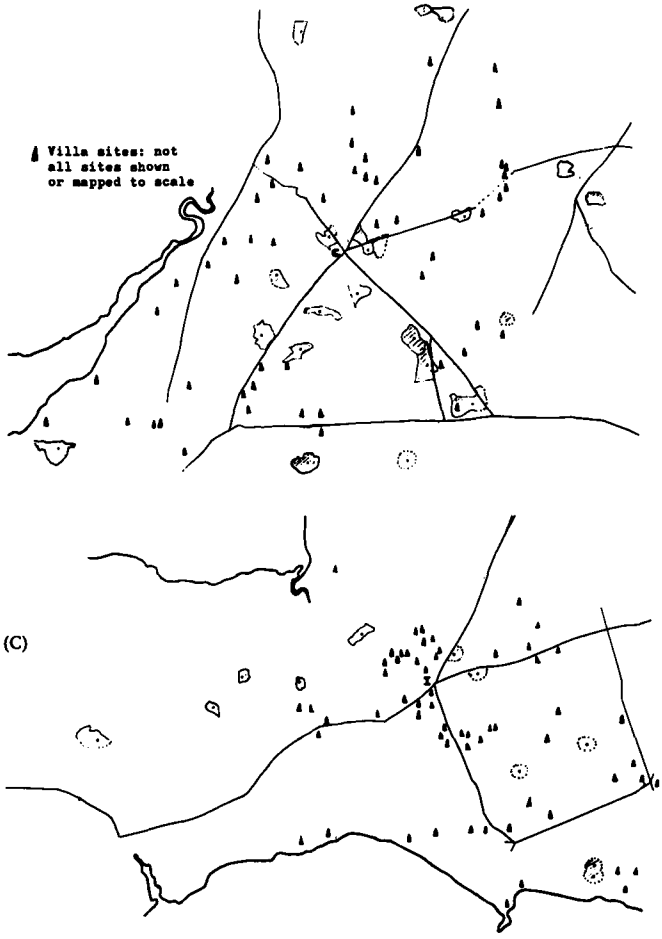

FIG. 8 Clusters of Holy Cross dedications around Cirencester (C) (top map) and Ilchester (I) (bottom map)

porphyry urn with relics of the saints Abundus and Abundatius, supposed victims of the Diocletian persecution. The Bollandists tell us that saintly twosomes with no documented history or hagiography should be treated with caution — particularly supposed victims of Diocletian. Is it too much of a stretch of the imagination to see the shadow of the Dioskuri, bringers in Greek myth of *abundance*, reflected in the veneration of Abundus and Abundatius, sharing a reliquary in their Christian chapel with St Helen, namesake of the Greek vegetation goddess who was sister to the Dioskuri?

Dr Marian Wenzel has kindly referred me to her work on the iconography of St Helen and the Dioskuri in south-eastern Europe. Dr Wenzel argues convincingly (1964 *et al*) that the medieval grave-cover and reliquary iconography of St Helen and the Cross can in some instances be traced stylistically to Classical representations of the Hellenistic Helen and her brothers.[6] Further, she demonstrates that in this process the cross replaces representations of the apparatus for the annual kindling of New Fire, known to the present day in Balkan rites associated with purification, passage and rebirth. Frequently such rites take place at water crossings. In her papers on the subject Dr Wenzel deals only with iconography in the Balkans. It would be interesting to have further opinions on an apparently parallel style of grave-cover decoration found occasionally in Britain in which the arms of the cross are surmounted by rosettes or similar motifs; I know of two examples each at Eyam (Derbyshire) and Llantwit (Glamorgan), and Peter Ryder has kindly provided me with others from Yorkshire and elsewhere in the North.

If parallel iconography is here — and I cannot emphasise too strongly that the parallel is in the eyes of a layman inexpert in such matters — could there be traces of parallel ritual? This is a point which will repay further inquiry and it can be noted as a starting point, perhaps, that Helen sites in Britain are frequently found in waterside contexts — including lakes and headlands as well as springs. A site such as St Helen's Well on the banks of the Wharfe near Tadcaster, with possible Dark Age antecedents, is a candidate for investigation. I have searched in vain for the well — its site hemmed in by an industrial estate, sewage farm and gas pipeline. But Dr Margaret Faull's research has turned up a photograph (Faull & Moorhouse 1982, Plate VIA) showing the bushes around the well festooned by votive rags. The photograph is presumably to be dated to the early years of this century. The author of *Brigantia* (Phillips 1976) records that an Edwardian botanist and his companion found at this spot vervain and other plants 'not normally found in Britain' and 'associated with witchcraft'. Other suggestive places are those sites where baptismal wells or healing wells occur near, against or even under churches. The researcher of St Helen wells wishes for a case as well documented as the church and well of St Pandiona at Eltisley, Cambridgeshire. We know the date when the reputed remains of the patroness were translated into the church and the date when the well's structural surround was deliberately destroyed. We know too of a legend of the saint that fails to satisfy the researcher: I am tempted to ask if we should look for Pandiona's origins not so much in a Scottish king's court as in the Romano-British temple at nearby Godmanchester where the devout worshipped an otherwise unattested god, *Abandinus*. Seeking a parallel between Abandinus and Abundus/Abundatius may be stretching scholarly credulity too far, but we are perhaps justified in noting a group of Helen churches in the vicinity, an area intensively exploited in Roman times.

Ritual, whether of purification or renewal, baptism or the Easter Eve kindling of New Fire, moved indoors relatively early in the development of the Christian church in Britain. Nevertheless, many well sites might repay investigation in the search for evidence of ritual use. A lot of work remains to be done before we properly understand the process by which St Helen became such a popular patroness of holy wells, but two points more need to be made: we cannot entirely dismiss the apparent links between Helen of the Cross, Elen of the Hosts, Helen and the Dioskuri, the Cross, the Tree of Life, the Greek Helen as vegetation goddess, and rituals at wells that involve trees or the dressing of branches; and in examining the geographic exclusivity of dedications to Helen and to the Holy Cross, we should look for possible parallels to Helen sites at those of the Holy Cross. As to the first, we should not ignore the healing aspect of a number of plants associated with the Greek Helen, elecampane (*Inula Helenium*) and calamint (*Helenion*) among them, with the interesting observation that the Old English *ellern*, for the elder tree whose medicinal properties were highly prized, gives us a number of Ellen- place-names. As to the second point, examination of Holy Cross sites (Fig. 7) reveals a core zone around Cirencester. Are these churches to be related perhaps to surviving Romano-British Christianity in a Dark Age context?

There is an area of overlap at which the two dedications mingle, and it is often uncertain which is the earlier dedication. It was possible for a church to switch dedication, as happened at Clifford Chambers, near Stratford. Only since the sixteenth century has it been St Helen's. Previously it was Holy Cross, probably related to the ancient Holy Cross church nearby at Alderminster. There the church is perched above the Warwickshire Stour across the river from the interestingly named Whitchurch and at one time belonged to the abbey downstream at Pershore, where the same dedication attaches to the parish church. Pershore is at the northernmost limit of the Holy Cross sites distinctively found on or near the Roman roads of the West Country (Fig. 8). Interestingly they cluster around Cirencester and Ilchester but in most cases in parishes which do not contain known Romano-

British villas. Does this mean they relate to less sophisticated communities or merely later ones? And how much later? Around Cirencester they include the mother churches of three administrative Hundreds.

In Hampshire a total of eight Holy Cross dedications is reduced to three if one discounts late medieval foundations or parishes held at some time by the Hospital of the Holy Cross, Winchester. Of these three, Binstead was a chapelry to Holybourne, which leaves two — Holybourne and Empshott. Holybourne, near Alton, lies on the Roman road between Silchester and Chichester; Empshott, a little to the south, is within two miles of that road. And both are spring sites: outside Empshott church rises the River Rother; twenty yards from the west door of Holybourne church rises the sacred stream that gave its name to the parish. What is more, the short-lived Holybourne empties after about half a mile into the Mole, which is then crossed by the Roman road. The river crossing, at the centre of Holybourne parish, was guarded by the Romano-British settlement of Neatham. Was the spring in Roman times the object of ritual observances? Was there an altar on the site of the present church?

A programmed investigation of holy wells should lead to a better understanding of a crucial historical and cultural process. That is, the way in which the Christian religion reinterpreted the sense which men and women made of their relationship with the elements, particularly as manifest in the landscape in which our forebears had their being and which they continually modified. As such, our so-called holy, healing and fairy springs are an important archaeological resource and an important component of our heritage. And while no one should underestimate the importance of well-known sites such as Bath and Carrawburgh, the former became a pilgrimage site for well-heeled travellers and the latter was under the protection of the military. We need to know much more about the religious observances of the *pagani*, the ordinary country people. Their sacred sites, if they were adapted to Christian use, were seldom grand and later suffered from the repressions of the Reformation and the laws against Recusancy. Today such sites are at the mercy of newer depredations: building developments, motorways, drainage improvements, vandalism and plain ignorance of the heritage they represent. Many holy wells recorded on the Ordnance Survey are now difficult to find or entirely lost. An example is the chalybeate well near St Helen, Colne, in Cambridgeshire, on the intriguingly named Bathe Hill. Within living memory its water was being sold as a treatment for rheumatism; today you can seek out the man who filled in the spring with a JCB; in a generation it will have passed into the limbo of forgotten things.

Thus an important archaeological and cultural resource is fast diminishing. Yet there is no reason for not believing that among these sites are potential parallels to Mount Beuvray near Autun. Here on the first Wednesday of May the villagers ascended the hill to drink from a sacred well before praying before a cross that had replaced the chapel of St Martin, and here excavations brought to light not only the chapel but the shrine of Bibracte which Martin had demolished.

We badly need a programme of recording, conservation and archaeological investigation. The first step should be a revision or replacement of Hope's *Legendary Lore of the Holy Wells of England* as a spur to interest by local conservation, archaeology and heritage groups. Such a revision is long overdue. A second edition was mooted in the 1920s but never published. A gazetteer is needed which can be consulted alongside the modern surveys of Scotland, Wales, Ireland and Brittany. Here surely is a project tailor-made for joint action by the two bodies which organised this conference; a working party to set matters afoot would be a most positive outcome of this section of our deliberations.

FOOTNOTES

1. Butler (1986, p. 44), discussing the dedications of churches showing Anglo-Saxon fabric, argues that those with a low proportion to the total number of medieval dedications (including Helen at 2.2 *per cent*) might indicate a predominantly late medieval popularity or might point to a total rebuilding. Similarly, that those with a high proportion of early churches to the medieval total (including Holy Rood/Cross 17 *per cent*) might indicate a pre-Conquest preference or a lack of rebuilding. However, if non-structural indicators are taken into account, the proportion of likely Anglo-Saxon foundation for churches then or later dedicated to Helen rises to at least 14.6 *per cent* (Table 1).
2. Dr Della Hooke (1981) writes 'Finberg follows Stubbs in believing that members of the Bernician ruling family found refuge in the West Midlands where early Christianity appears to display close links with the Northumbrian church' (Finberg 1972, p. 175; Stubbs 1862, pp. 237-52).
3. The interesting number of Helen churches traditionally held to have been erected by her may argue for ancient foundations of forgotten date. The St Bee's of these verses, now vanished, stood on the sands at Dunbar (Rankin 1981). Begu, the seventh-century nun recorded by Bede, may or may not be the St Bee of Cumberland, whose headland is close to a number of Helen sites.
4. Two other early but possibly not *so* early candidates are Wheathampstead (Herts) and Ore (Sussex). Saunders and Havercroft (1980-2) recorded mid-Saxon pillow flint graves at Wheathampstead and the village is close to St Albans in an area of likely Romano-British survival (Davies 1982, pp. 39-40). Ore is related to late Roman finds and a possible Roman harbour, overlooks an Ecclesbourne, may have passed to the South Saxons in the lifetime of Queen Eabba, has a St Helen's Well, and possesses possible Saxon fabric (Bullock 1951).
5. And perhaps for those around the British coasts. Aldcambus, Overton, Ore, Lundy, Cape Cornwall, Kilnsea and others are possible beacon points; also St Helen's and Hook in County Wexford. St Helen's Spring, Isle of Wight, was a popular watering place for ships out of Southampton and Portsmouth.
6. Professor J. H. C. Toynbee, *The Roman Art Treasures from the Temple of Mithras*, London and Middlesex Archaeological Society Special Paper No. 7, 1986, discusses a Dioscurus relief and a roundel depicting Rider Gods (Dioscuri) and Great Goddess (pp. 34-9) found in the London Mithraeum. Both parellel motifs illustrated and discussed in Wenzel (1964 *et al.*) and Professor Toynbee notes another Dioscurus relief at Corbridge. She also refers to 232 Danubian Rider-god monuments listed by D. Tudor, *Corpus Monumentorum Religionis Equitum Danuvinorum* i (1969), ii (1976), many including a central goddess figure, and notes references to the interaction of the Rider-gods cult with that of Mithras.

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