

The Treacle Well

In 'A Mad Tea Party,' Chapter 7 of *Alice's Adventures in Wonderland*, the Dormouse tells a story of three sisters, Elsie, Lacie and Tillie, living at the bottom of a treacle well.

Alice



The Dormouse discusses the Treacle Well. John Tenniel (1865).

Alice was one of three sisters named Lorina (L.C.), Alice and Edith (i.e., Elsie, Lacie and Tillie). She was out rowing with Carroll on the River Isis (upper Thames) near Binsey when he was making up the story about the nearby 'treacle well', from which the brackish water was called 'treacle' on account of its curative powers.

“ ‘Once upon a time there were three little sisters,’ the Dormouse began in a great hurry; ‘and their names were Elsie, Lacie, and Tillie; and they lived at the bottom of a well - ’

‘What did they live on?’ said Alice, who always took a great interest in questions of eating and drinking.

‘They lived on treacle,’ said the Dormouse, after thinking a minute or two.

The Treacle Well

St. Margaret's Well in Binsey dates from the 12th century. It is said to be the model for Lewis Carroll's 'Treacle Well' from the Mad Hatter's Tea Party in *Alice's Adventures in Wonderland*.

Eleanor



St. Margaret's Well in Binsey (1874 restoration).

This holy well was dedicated by St. Frideswide, the patron saint of Oxford. This 7th century princess had fled from Oxford up the River Isis to Binsey in a bid to escape him. The well reputedly arose as a result of Frideswide's prayers on behalf of the local nunnery, who had to get their water from the river. In time, the healing power became associated with the well. In mediaeval times the term 'treacle' was derived from the Greek word 'theriac'

‘They couldn’t have done that, you know,’ Alice gently remarked; ‘they’d have been ill.’

‘So they were,’ said the Dormouse; ‘VERY ill.’

Alice tried a little to fancy to herself what such an extraordinary way of living would be like, but it puzzled her too much, so she went on: ‘But why did they live at the bottom of a well?’

...

The Dormouse again took a minute or two to think about it, and then said, ‘It was a treacle well.’ ”

Alice’s Adventures in Wonderland, Chapter 7.

The curate of Christ Church, Thomas Prout, a good friend of Lewis Carroll’s renowned for his tendency to fall asleep at the college staff meetings run by Dean Henry Liddell, has been identified as the model for the Dormouse in the *Wonderland* book (Davies, 2010). Indeed, it was Prout himself who instigated the restoration of the St Margaret’s Well at Binsey in 1874, perhaps prompted by this very role in Tea Party. His identification suggests that the Tea Party may thus be read as a satire on the college staff meetings, with Henry Liddell in the role of the Hatter. In a further twist, Tenniel draws the illustration to be reminiscent of the *Last Supper* of Leonardo da Vinci, with the Hatter adopting the pose of Christ and Alice that of the shocked Bartholomew at the end of the table, and perhaps the March Hare as “the antithetical Judas figure (which might suggest an interesting subtext). Curiously, no contemporary identification of the March Hare seems ever to have been made, but another staff member at Christ Church may now be sought for this character in the Tea Party/staff meetings (see p. 122).

The Binsey churchyard was well known to both Lewis Carroll and Alice Liddell, as was the church at Iffley downriver, where they sometimes stopped for tea. The Iffley church was the subject of preservation efforts by Dean Liddell, and where the 12th century Iffley Yew may well have been the origin of the tree with a door that Alice used as she left the tea party (Gopnick and Smith, 2011).

for an antidote to poison (Grosmont, 1354), so St. Margaret’s healing well was a ‘treacle well’.

Many stories surround Frideswide, who founded the original monastery that became an Augustinian priory in the 12th century, forming the basis of Christ Church, Oxford and its origin as a seat of learning. The well-preserved churches at both Binsey and downriver Iffley date to the 12th century and were both properties owned by the priory. The legends, which were codified by prior Robert of Cricklade in the 12th century, say that King Algar hoped to marry her after her father died; she refused the king, and he planned to have her kidnapped and put in a brothel. Through her prayers to be protected, his men were blinded, and when all had repented, her prayers on their behalf cured them. From these stories arose another legend: that English kings avoided Oxford lest they be blinded.

It was Frideswide who dedicated the well to St Margaret of Antioch, probably because Margaret, the daughter of a pagan priest during the final Roman persecution of the Christians, also had to flee from the unwelcome advances of the Roman Governor. When she refused to renounce her Christianity, Margaret went through various tortures, such as being swallowed but then regurgitated by Satan in the guise of a dragon; she was nevertheless finally beheaded in the year 304.

The bewilderment of Alice in the face of the bickering between the March Hare and The Mad Hatter is reminiscent of the situation with Eleanor of Aquitaine and Henry II who were renowned for the meals at their ‘Christmas Courts’, when the royal family would gather for a feast featuring a high table. These occasions included the Christmas Court at Lambeth Palace in London, in 1154, when Henry claimed the throne of England, the one at the Beaumont Palace, Oxford, in 1166, when their son John was born, the one at Chinon, France, featured (inaccurately in 1183) in the film *Lion in Winter*, or the one at Barfleur in 1184 when Eleanor crossed the Channel to rejoin her family for the first time in ten years for Christmas at Windsor.