

The Scottish Maidenwells

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INTRODUCTION

In a previous article in this journal, I suggested that the name-type Maid(en)well represents a dedication to the Virgin Mary, along similar lines to other recurrent formations such as Lady Well and Mary Well (Hough 2010a).¹ My case was based on the argument that early spellings, some of which reflect an origin in Old English, are consistent with a singular form of the qualifying element, rather than requiring interpretation as a plural. I also discussed the distribution of the name-type, as follows:

The geographical distribution of Maid(en)well appears to be restricted to southern Britain. I have found none in Scotland or the Isle of Man, and none in England further north than Lincolnshire, where the sole occurrence is in the south of the county. In this respect the name-type contrasts both with Maiden Castle, which is found mainly in the north, and with Lady Well, a formation represented extensively in northern Britain but also common as far south as Devon and Somerset (Hough 2010a, 29).

This distribution pattern was based on the corpus of twenty-one occurrences presented in the article, but must now be revised. Research into Scottish toponomastics has advanced apace in the last few years,

¹ A version of this paper was presented to the Twenty-Fourth Annual Conference of the Society for Name Studies in Britain and Ireland in Norwich, 27–30 March 2015.

partly through funded projects such as ‘Commemorations of Saints in Scottish Place-Names’² and ‘Scottish Toponymy in Transition’,³ and partly through independent projects by members of the Scottish Place-Name Society such as John Garth Wilkinson’s ongoing work on West Lothian place-names.⁴ At the same time, additional resources have also become accessible, particularly through the availability of the Ordnance Survey Name Books on the ScotlandsPlaces website.⁵ As a result, no fewer than seven occurrences of the same formation have now come to light in Scotland.

The purpose of this article is to repair the omission in my previous study by drawing attention to these names, and to explore three inter-related issues in this connection. Firstly, given that the English and Welsh Maidenwells appear to represent a single group or name-type,⁶ are the Scottish names part of the same group, extending its distribution further north, or are they unrelated to the southern names? Secondly, are the Scottish Maidenwells themselves a single group, or a disparate collection of place-names from different origins which have developed identical modern forms, either by chance or through mutual influence? Thirdly, do

² ‘Commemorations of Saints in Scottish Place-Names’ was funded by The Leverhulme Trust between 2010 and 2013 at the University of Glasgow (Principal Investigator Thomas Clancy), and produced the Database of Scottish Hagiotoponyms that will be drawn on extensively during this article.

³ ‘Scottish Toponymy in Transition: Progressing County Surveys of the Place-Names of Scotland’ was funded by the Arts and Humanities Research Council between 2011 and 2014 at the University of Glasgow (reference AH/I002014/1, Principal Investigator Thomas Clancy).

⁴ A small selection of material was published as Wilkinson (1992); more recent findings have been presented at conferences of the Scottish Place-Name Society. Completion of his comprehensive gazetteer (Wilkinson forthcoming) is eagerly anticipated.

⁵ For a discussion of the importance of these resources in relation to Scottish onomastics, see Williamson (2015).

⁶ Twenty of the place-names in Hough (2010a) are in England, and one in Pembrokeshire.

any or all of the Scottish Maidenwells represent dedications to the Blessed Virgin Mary? Much of the material in the following section has been contributed by Simon Taylor and John Garth Wilkinson. I am extremely grateful to both of them for generously sharing their findings with me, and to them, the editor and an anonymous referee for their helpful comments on a draft of this article.

THE SCOTTISH CORPUS

The seven names will be discussed in turn. As in the appendix to my earlier article (Hough 2010a, 41–4), they are treated in roughly chronological order of their first appearance in documentary or cartographic records.

1. Maidenwell Cottage, Lanarkshire

a fonte puelle 1504

Maiden well 1596

Maidenwell 1747

Maidenwell in Glassford parish, Lanarkshire, is first recorded in Latin in 1504, and in English from 1596.⁷ Like English *maiden*, Latin *puella* could also be used either as a common noun or with reference to the Virgin Mary. The former sense is illustrated in a toponymic context by medieval references to Edinburgh Castle as *Castellum Puellarum* ‘maidens’ castle’ (Coates 2006, 21, 30–1), and in England by names such as *pontem puellarum* ‘the maidens’ bridge’ in Lincolnshire, recorded in a charter of

⁷ Adv.MS.70.2.9 (Pont 34). As the National Library of Scotland notes, ‘This is the only Pont map to bear a date’ (<maps.nls.uk/rec/297>). The letter *n* is unclear on the image at <maps.nls.uk/pont/view/?id=pont34#zoom=6&lat=4770&lon=1902&layers=BT>, and although the NLS website gives the Pont name as *Maidenwell* without word division, the second element is written underneath the first. It is in fact not quite certain whether this is the same toponym as Maidenwell Cottage. NLS associates it with the modern name Maidenlees (NS705483), but the geographical location is such that the historical spellings seem more likely to relate to a single name than to two separate occurrences in close proximity.

1366 (Cameron 1992, 117; cf. Hough 1996, 28 n. 21). The latter sense, however, would be more likely to have been translated *fons virginis*, so it seems reasonable to conclude that any putative association with Mary had been lost by the beginning of the sixteenth century. A point in favour of such an original association is the fact that the name appears in an ecclesiastical context:

In 1504 the provost of Lochwinnoch collegiate church, who was also to be the rector of *Glasfurd*, had the great teinds of the township (*villagii*) of *Glasfurd*, from the Maiden's Well ('a fonte puelle') to the lands of *Kitemuir*, extending to £45; and the glebe, except for a spot of ground and a manse assigned for the vicar etc. (*Glas. Reg.* p. 508, quoted in *OPS*, I, 102).

This may at least be suggestive.

The Lanarkshire Maidenwell is the most southerly of the seven Scottish occurrences, as well as being the earliest and the only one to be recorded in connection with church land. It is also worth noting that Glassford is only 2.51 miles from Maiden Burn in Avondale parish, and that Avondale itself contains St Mary's Church, formerly known as *Maiden Kirk*.⁸ These facts taken together mean that a dedication to the Virgin Mary may appear plausible, though unproven.

2. Maiden Well, Midlothian

Maiden Well 1773

Maiden Wells 1832

Maiden Well in West Calder parish, Midlothian,⁹ is recorded from 1773 (Dixon 1947, 306), and forms the basis of the secondary formations

⁸ This information is from the Database of Scottish Hattotonyms, which has no entry for Maidenwell itself. *Maiden K* is the form that appears on Timothy Pont's map of 1583.

⁹ The reference is to the historical location of the border parish. West Calder is now in West Lothian, and will thus be included in Wilkinson (forthcoming).

Maiden Well Stone and Maidenwellbrow. Also in the immediate vicinity are another Maiden Burn and a Maiden Hill, the latter in turn forming the basis of the secondary formations Maidenhill Moss and Maidenhill Plantation. John Garth Wilkinson, to whom I am grateful for sight of his gazetteer entry in advance of publication, comments that the well may be named literally after a young girl, mythically after a water-nymph or similar, or as a dedication to the Virgin Mary, the referent of a lost *Ladywell* in the neighbouring parish of Livingston (Wilkinson forthcoming). A further alternative, as he also points out, is that the name may have been influenced by the Medwin Water, which is formed from the North and South Medwins and flows through West Calder as a single river until it joins the Clyde.

With no clear etymology for the river name, the semantic opacity of Medwin makes it likely to attract folk etymologies,¹⁰ and indeed the Ordnance Survey Name Book records that a derivation from Maiden Well was briefly considered:

Maiden Well in Edinburghshire and adjacent to this Turnpike, was shown to, and considered by the examiner, as the source of the North Medwyn; hence the original name in this case. But on reference to the field again it was found that both the Turnpike and Well took their names from an adjoining Hill called Maiden Hill, on the brow of which the Turnpike is situated. The Authorities now recommend maidenwellbrow T.P. to be written on the Plans (OS I/2I/I2/8).

It is certainly the case that a present-day form in *maiden* has developed from other origins elsewhere in the Scottish toponymicon. A third

¹⁰ Baldwin and Drummond (2011, 26) describe Medwin Water as an ‘old British river name, origin uncertain, but possibly meaning “a full or extended river”’. Wilkinson (forthcoming) suggests that ‘*Med-* could be for B[rythonic] **medjo-* “middle”, fitting in a geophysical sense, or it could be related to W[elsh] *medd* “mead” ScG *†meadh*, a once-sacred ritual drink’. As he notes, the former possibility may be supported by comparison with the former name of the river Ouse in Sussex, recorded in 1237 as *Midewinde* from OE *midde* ‘middle’ + OE *windan* ‘to wind’.

occurrence of Maiden Burn in Denny parish, Stirlingshire, is first recorded in 1741 as *Madieburne*, and John Reid suggests that it may share an origin with the nearby Myot Hill (*Miathill* 1539–62), the latter of uncertain derivation but possibly related to the tribal name *Maeatae* (Reid 2009, 176, 309–10). Kirkmaiden parish in the Rhinns, together with its doublet in Glasserton parish, Wigtonshire, commemorates a saint whose identity has been much debated, but who was certainly not Mary. MacQueen (2002, 50–2) explains the name as ‘church of Medana’, but also reviews other possibilities, including a connection with the female saint Modwena (also known as Moninne or Darerca) or the male saint Muadán. Again, Kirkmaiden has an occurrence of Lady Well, perhaps the result of a late re-interpretation of the parish name as referring to Mary. It may be possible that Maiden Well in West Calder was influenced by the lost *Ladywell* in Livingston rather than representing a parallel formation, through the process of ‘analogical reformation’ discussed by Coates (1987). Against this, however, is the fact that they are about eight miles apart, whereas none of the pairs of places discussed by Coates is more than five miles apart.

The primacy of Maiden Hill as the source of the surrounding names, as suggested by the Ordnance Survey informants, is supported by the occurrence of the synonymous formation Maiden Law (Scots *law* ‘rounded hill’), which is found both in Caddonfoot parish, Selkirkshire, and near Innerleithen in Peebleshire. Potential doublets in England are listed in the appendix to Hough (1996, 32–48). The interpretation of such names is unclear, but their recurrence suggests a common motivation.

In sum, the origin of the Midlothian Maiden Well remains uncertain, with the case for a dedication being much weaker than for the Lanarkshire Maidenwell.

3. Maidenwells, Perthshire

Maidenwell 1843

Recorded from 1843 on the Ordnance Survey six inch first edition map is Maidenwells in Kinnoull parish, Perthshire, appearing on the map as

Maidenwell although the Ordnance Survey Name Book records that the local informant and owner gave the plural form *Maidenwells*:

A Small row of Cottages Situated East from Parkside, With a pendicle of land attached, & Occupied by Charles Lonie and Mrs Anderson; it is the property of J. Murray Graham Esq. of Murrayshall. The Proprietor states that Maidenwells [with an 's'] is the Correct name (OS1/25/45/8).

A reference to multiple water features is not implausible, as the Ordnance Survey map shows other named wells in addition to several simply designated 'Well', while the Name Book description specifies a row of cottages rather than a single dwelling. However, a plural referent would be unparalleled in the English corpus. The only plural formation in southern Britain is Maiden Wells in Pembrokeshire, and even this appears originally to have been singular. The earliest recorded spelling is *Mayden Welle* (1336), with a plural form developing only from the late sixteenth century (*Mayden Wells* 1583) (Charles 1992, II, 722).

The Kinnoull name is the only Maidenwell to be included in the Database of Scottish Hagiotoponyms, which links it to entries for the nearby place-names Virginhall (0.64 miles away) and Lady Well (2.28 miles away), both in Kilspindie parish. As with many name etymologies, derivations within the database are sometimes insecure,¹¹ so each entry has a confidence level to indicate the degree of likelihood that the saint commemorated has been correctly identified. These confidence levels are 'Certain', 'Probable', 'Maybe' and 'Extremely doubtful'. The linked entries give a dedication to the Virgin Mary as 'Probable' for Lady Well and 'Certain' for Virginhall. For Maidenwells, however, the dedication is

¹¹ The 'Help' section explains succinctly: 'The cult of saints is a complex and fascinating phenomenon. At a distance of several hundred years, it is difficult to unravel: the identity of a saint is frequently forgotten, or reinvented, it is rarely clear when a commemoration – if that is what it is – dates to, and evidence which might tell us for how long a commemoration is reflective of live cult rather than dim memory of devotion in the past is often absent.'

classed more doubtfully as ‘Maybe’, and no further information is presented.

Again, then, the interpretation of the name remains uncertain. Neither an ecclesiastical nor a secular derivation can be ruled out, but if the plural form in *-wells* is original, the latter is to be preferred.

4. Maidenwells Farm, Kinross-shire

Maidenwells 1859

Maidenwell 1866

Like the name discussed above, Maidenwells in Fossoway parish, Kinross-shire, is recorded on the Ordnance Survey six inch first edition map as *Maidenwell*, although the Ordnance Survey Name Book notes that all three informants give the plural form *Maidenwells*. Here, however, a single cottage is in question, rather than a row. It is described as follows:

Near the central portion of the south part of the parish. A small cottage on the farm of Keppocks with vegetable garden attached. Occupied by James Saunders (OS1/25/33, 61).

The three authorities for the spelling *Maidenwells* are the occupier James Saunders, John Saunders (described in a previous entry as the occupier of Keppocks farm), and Mr Gentle (described as a schoolmaster). No explanation for the name is offered, and as with the doublet in Kinnoull, there is no indication as to which of several nearby water features may be the referent(s).

The entry for Maidenwells Farm in the forthcoming place-name survey for Kinross-shire, one of the main outputs of the ‘Scottish Toponymy in Transition’ project mentioned above, raises the possibility of a dedication to the Virgin Mary, but notes that ‘In Lowland Scotland the more usual way of referring to a place dedicated to or associated with the cult of St Mary is by the element *lady*’ (Taylor *et al.* forthcoming). The balance of evidence – or rather, the lack of it – combined again with the putatively plural form of the generic element, may therefore appear

to favour a secular origin, comparable to that of Henry Auld's Well in the same parish.¹²

5. Maiden's Well, Perthshire

Maiden's Well 1866

Maiden's Well in Glendevon parish, Perthshire, is discussed briefly by Richard Coates (2006, 17) in connection with nearby Maiden Castle. The Ordnance Survey Name Book describes it as 'A small spring well situated near the south side of the hillock called Maiden Castle' (OS1/25/35/88). First recorded in 1866, Angus Watson (1995, 99–100) notes that:

According to the *Dollar Chapbook* ... this was supposedly inhabited by the spirit of a maiden who could be summoned up at night, but would-be lovers with the temerity to attempt this were found dead beside the well in the morning. Haliburton however ... says the well was named after the captive princess who named the Burn of Sorrow &c ... as she was sometimes allowed to walk to the well to drink its water.

Either version of the legend would point to a secular rather than religious interpretation. On the other hand, legends about spirits and captive princesses could easily have been inspired by the name, as opposed to giving rise to it. This is the case with at least two of the place-names associated with the cult of the Nine Maidens, described more than a century ago by Mackinlay (1906). As noted by the Database of Scottish Hagiotoponyms, Nine Maidens Well in Mains & Strathmartine parish, Angus, is first recorded in 1583 as *Maidiens*, but by 1794, a legend had sprung up relating to a dragon which had devoured the maidens and was killed by a person called Martin. Similarly, the Database entry for Nine Maidens' Well in Auchindoir & Kearn, Aberdeenshire, notes a tradition

¹² Like Maidenwells Farm, Henry Auld's Well first appears on the Ordnance Survey six inch first edition map (1856). Taylor *et al.* (forthcoming) note: 'The identity of the eponymous Henry Auld has yet to be established'.

recorded in the Ordnance Survey Name Book that ‘nine young women were slain by a boar’. No such legend is known to be associated with Nine Maidens’ Well in Pitsligo, Aberdeenshire, nor with Ninemaiden Chapel in Drumblade, Aberdeenshire, recorded in 1624 as *Nynemadinchapell*, and also associated with a well.¹³

Maiden’s Well in Glendevon, then, cannot be taken to be secular on the evidence of the legends associated with it, but neither is there evidence of a religious connection. Its close proximity to Maiden Castle can scarcely be coincidence, so it seems reasonable to assume that it was named through the influence of that landscape feature.

6. Maiden’s Well, Aberdeenshire

Maiden’s Well 1869

The two most northerly occurrences of the name are both in Aberdeenshire. Maiden’s Well in the parish of Old Machar is given in the same spelling by all three informants, and is described in the Ordnance Survey Name Book as ‘A well of excellent Spring Water, on Seaton Estate. Well known by this name’ (OSI/I/69/69). No further information is available. The apostrophe in all recorded forms may point towards a late date of origin, although it is of course not uncommon for modern punctuation to be added to an early name.¹⁴ Here a dedication cannot be disproved, but there is no evidence to support it.

7. Maidens Well, Aberdeenshire

Maidens Well (site of) 1872

The second occurrence in Aberdeenshire is in the parish of Old Deer, and has the most overtly secular associations of the group. The Ordnance

¹³ The Database of Scottish Hagiotoponyms notes: ‘The chapel is associated in a charter of 1624 with Chapelton in Drumblade, beside the chapel and a well’.

¹⁴ Out of the twenty-one names discussed in Hough (2010a), only the modern spelling of Maiden’s Well in Staffordshire contains an apostrophe, which is absent from the three seventeenth-century forms.

Survey Name Book entry strikes a rather poignant note – ‘This was once a fine spring well but it is now run into a drain’ – but also provides a fully plausible derivation: ‘It takes its name from two Old Maiden Ladys who used to live adjacent’ (OSI/I/68/64). Although the information given in the Name Books is not always reliable, there seems no reason to doubt a prosaic explanation such as this. Whatever the interpretation of the six Maidenwells discussed above, the Old Deer name cannot be taken to have a religious significance.

DISCUSSION

The most striking contrast between the Maidenwells in Scotland and those in southern Britain is chronological. Whereas eleven out of the twenty-one names presented in Hough (2010a) are on record from the fifteenth century or before, none among the Scottish corpus appears before the sixteenth century, and only one (No. 1) before the late eighteenth. Notwithstanding the relative paucity of early records in Scotland,¹⁵ this means that the Scottish names cannot be attributed to Old English. They thus stand apart from the occurrences in southern Britain, two of which are recorded in Domesday Book while others preserve reflexes of Old English inflections in later medieval spellings. Such a derivation would in any case be precluded for names outside areas of Anglo-Saxon settlement in Scotland, as with the four in Aberdeenshire and Perthshire. Since these comprise more than half the Scottish corpus, a direct parallel between the names in northern and southern Britain may confidently be ruled out.

Comparison between the two groups of names also reveals a morphological distinction. Whereas four of those discussed in Hough (2010a) have the form *maid* (in various spellings) rather than *maiden*, all seven names presented above have a two-syllable qualifier. This may be

¹⁵ See Nicolaisen (2001, 25–43) for a comparative discussion of the earliest written sources for English and Scottish place-names.

significant in view of the fact that the terms were not used identically in different varieties of English and Scots. According to the *Oxford English Dictionary*, both *maid* and *maiden* are attested in the sense ‘A virgin; *spec.* the Virgin Mary’.¹⁶ The *Dictionary of the Scots Language* records this sense for *maid* but not for *maiden*, the form found in all seven place-names.¹⁷ Unlike in England, then, the term *maiden* does not have a lexical use in Scotland with reference to the Virgin Mary. This does not in itself preclude such a use in the onomasticon. Differences between uses of terminology in names and in other areas of language are increasingly being recognised, and have formed a major focus of recent research (see e.g. Scott 2008; Hough 2010b; Grant 2016, 575–6). Particularly relevant in the present context is evidence that the term *lady* in both England and Scotland is more likely to refer to the Virgin Mary in the toponymicon than in the lexicon (Hough 2009). However, clear contextual evidence would be required to support such an interpretation of *maiden* in Scotland, and this has not been found.

Turning to comparative evidence from other Scottish place-names, it is notable that whereas a secular use of *maiden* is reflected by occurrences in metaphorical formations such as Maidens Paps in Dunbartonshire and Maidenpap in Kirkcudbright,¹⁸ the Database of Scottish Hagiotoponyms identifies no definite occurrences of the term with a religious significance, except with reference to the Nine Maidens mentioned above (No. 5). While these are clearly regarded as virgin

¹⁶ *Oxford English Dictionary*, s.v. *maid*, n.¹, sense 1a, 3rd edn June 2000; s.v. *maiden*, n. and adj., sense 2a, 3rd edn June 2000.

¹⁷ *Dictionary of the Scots Language*, s.v. *maid*, n., sense 2b; s.v. *maiden*, n., v.

¹⁸ Both examples are from the place-name glossary compiled by Alison Grant as part of the JISC-funded ‘Scots Words and Place-Names’ project, and available at <swap.nesc.gla.ac.uk/database>.

saints, they are equally clearly unconnected to the mother of Christ.¹⁹ Apart from Maidenwells in Kinnoull discussed above (No. 3), the only potential reference to the Virgin Mary is Maidenholm in Urr parish, Kirkcudbrightshire, again with a confidence level of only ‘Maybe’. First recorded in 1843 on the Ordnance Survey six inch first edition map, the etymology of Maidenholm cannot be established with certainty, although a dedication may be cautiously supported by the proximity of Mary’s Pool 1.24 miles away, forming the boundary between the parishes of Buittle and Urr.²⁰ In addition, such an interpretation seems plausible for *Maiden Kirk* discussed above (No. 1), and for the associated occurrence of Maiden Burn.

It is of course possible that other relevant names will come to light. For instance, comparison with Virginhall mentioned above (No. 3) would appear to support a similar interpretation for Maidenhall in Jedburgh parish, Roxburghshire (NT618329), which has not yet been investigated.²¹ However, since this is within an area of early Anglo-Saxon settlement, it may in any case align more closely with English usage.²²

¹⁹ The only one of the Nine Maidens who is known by name is Mayoca of Dalmaik/Drumoak. The Database of Scottish Hagiotoponyms explains: ‘The Aberdeen Breviary, for the feast of St Mayoca (23 Dec) includes a story about the Pictish king sending to St Brigit in Ireland, who came to him with nine maidens (“nouem uirginibus”) and established a church at Abernethy near the River Tay. Mayoca is named as one of these “most humble and gentle virgins”.’

²⁰ However, Mary’s Pool itself is not associated with the Virgin Mary according to the Database entry, which offers no etymology.

²¹ Maidenhall has no entry in Williamson (1942) or Macdonald (1991), and I have been unable to trace any discussion of the name. The hamlet is overlooked by Lady Hill.

²² Jedburgh (‘enclosure by the River Jed’) is first recorded as *Gedwearde* c.1050, and derives from a Celtic river-name with Old English *word* ‘enclosure’, later replaced by Scots *burgh* ‘town’ (Grant 2010, 55).

CONCLUSION

In conclusion, the Scottish names clearly stand apart from those in southern Britain, and there is little evidence that they themselves form a related group, nor that the formation has religious connotations. Of the seven Maidenwells discussed in this article, one (No. 7) is clearly secular in origin, while another (No. 5) has secular associations and may be a secondary formation from nearby Maiden Castle. In two instances (Nos 3 and 4), the plural form of the generic, if original, is also indicative of a secular interpretation, and provides a further contrast with the southern corpus. Only one (No. 1) is recorded in an ecclesiastical context, and although two others (Nos 2 and 3) are in geographical proximity to names making reference to the Virgin Mary, such dedications are so widespread throughout Scotland that this may be mere coincidence.²³ Neither can it be regarded as particularly significant that these three names are also the earliest, as only a few years separate No. 3 from the four later names, all of them being first recorded by the Ordnance Survey in the nineteenth century. It is possible that one or more may represent dedications, but the evidence is ambiguous and inconclusive. Whereas I argued in 2010 that the southern Maid(en)wells should be regarded as a name-type, the best approach to the Scottish names may be to treat each of them individually.

²³ The Database of Scottish Hagiotoponyms includes thirty-four instances of Ladywell(s) and twenty-two of Lady's Well, alongside others such as Mary Well, My Lady's Well, St Mary's Well and so on. It is salutary to note that Lady Well in Kirkoswald parish, Ayrshire, is only 2.12 miles from Maidenhead Rocks, but there is no question of a religious significance for the group of names to which the latter belongs. The Database entry notes: 'Maidenhead rocks may well be the feature which gave name (as *The Maidens, perhaps – cf. Blaeu "Maidens of Turnberry"), to the settlement Maidens which has grown up around the harbour (for which see NMRS Camore ID 151709), and thence gave their name to Maidenhead Bay / Maidens Bay (recorded in OSNB 1856)'.

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