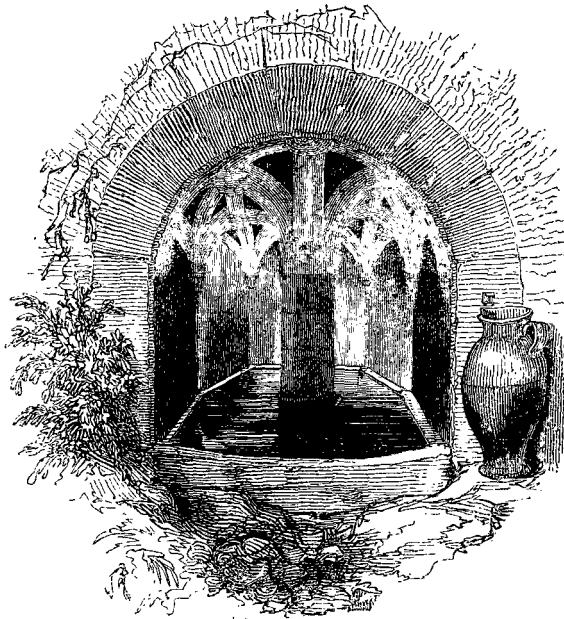


III.

SUGGESTIONS FOR THE REMOVAL OF ST MARGARET'S WELL, NEAR RESTALRIG, IN THE VICINITY OF EDINBURGH, TO A MORE FAVOURABLE SITE. BY DAVID LAING, Esq., F.S.A. Scot.

It will be in the recollection of the Members that Mr Spottiswoode of Spottiswoode, at the concluding meeting of the last Session, called the attention of the Society to the present degraded state of St Margaret's Well, near Restalrig. A



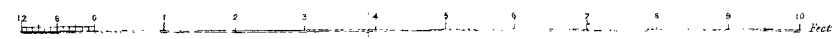
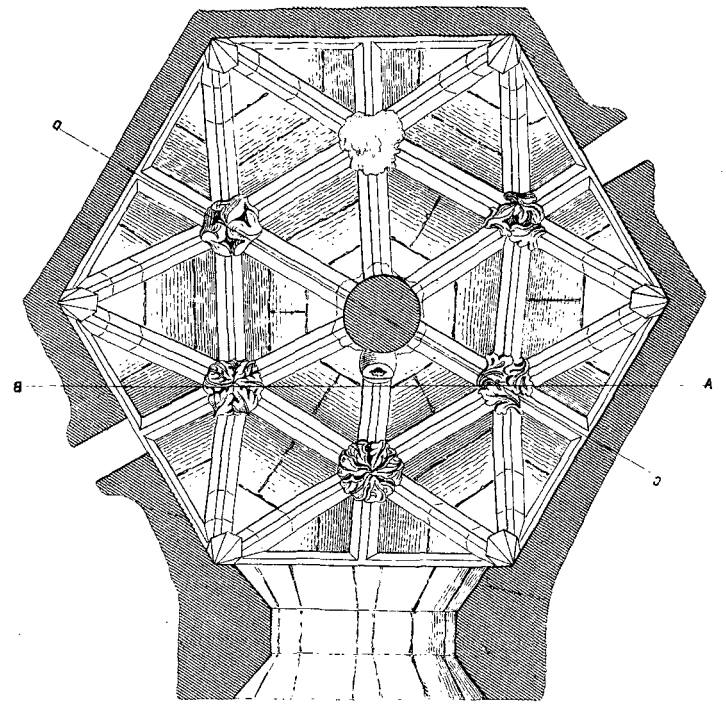
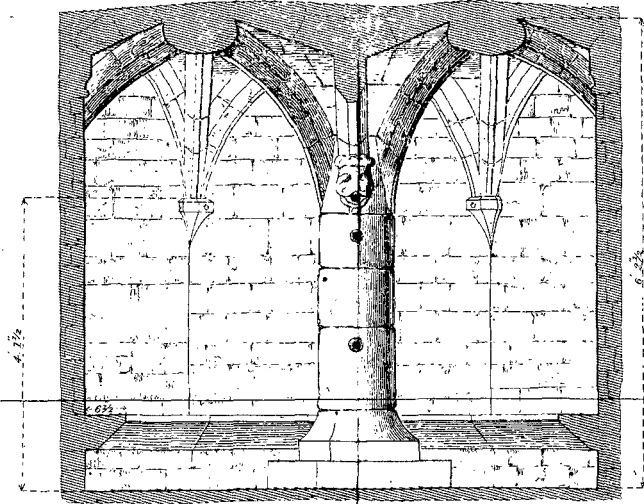
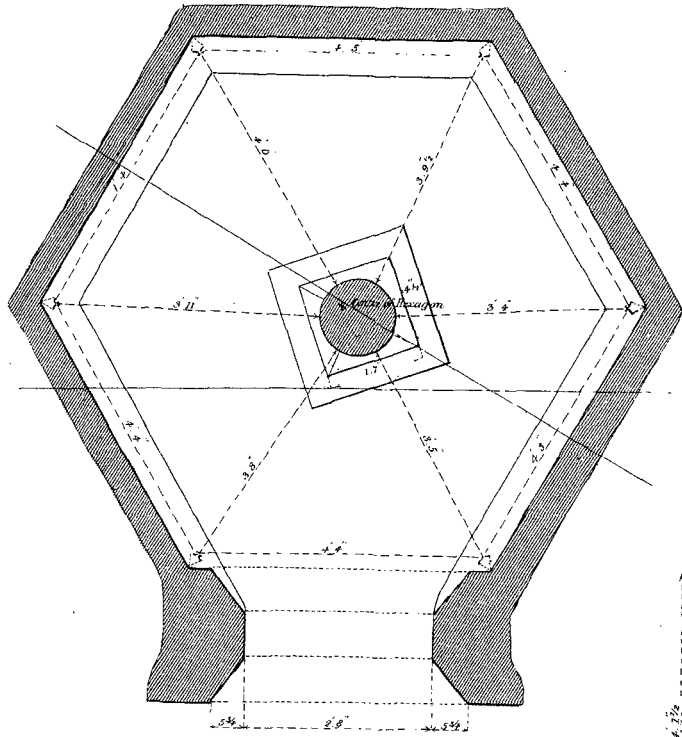
Committee was named to report; but what report can be made in a matter which is altogether hopeless of any improvement? and which must remain an utter abomination, unless by the actual removal of the Well to another site? That such a plan would be practicable, I am enabled to state on very competent authority; and having in the course of the summer mentioned the proposal

ST. MARGARETS WELL.

NEAR

RESTALRIC.

Measured and drawn July, 1855.



to various persons connected with that locality, who all concurred in the expediency of the Well¹ being removed and reconstructed in some suitable spot. I now beg to bring the matter under the notice of the Society.

It is, I think, scarcely necessary to refer to the former picturesque appearance of the Well, close to a thatched cottage, and partly overshadowed by an old alder tree, in a retired cross road leading to the village of Restalrig, unless to contrast this with the present obscure and filthy entrance. This access has the appearance of a dark cellar without a door, and is not more in height than four feet eight inches, but by stooping and descending a few steps one is able to stand upright. At the extremity of this passage, which in length is about forty-six feet, and three feet two inches wide, it requires, even in the brightest day, the aid of a lantern to distinguish the form of the Well.

In considering its actual removal, there can be no hesitation in saying, that the Well ought to be erected, so as to command a copious supply of water, over one of the similar pellucid springs within the Royal domains in the Queen's Park; and it might be named the Rood Well, in commemoration of St Margaret's son, founder of the adjoining Abbey of the Holy-Rood or Cross. The site which at first suggests itself is the spring celebrated in Scottish song, and known as St Anthony's Well, on the acclivity leading to Arthur's Seat. As this, however, might be considered to interfere with old associations, one or two other spots even nearer at hand might be deemed fully more suitable. Such, for instance, as close to a spring which rises up at the North-East corner of the Queen's Park, where the Well might be connected with the eastern entrance in the proposed improvements of the grounds attached to the Palace of Holyrood; while a small pipe might supply, as at present, the trough on the outside of the wall, used for watering horses, near to Parsons Green.

In offering any suggestions for transferring this ancient piece of architecture to a site where it might be ornamental without destroying the associations connected with the Well itself, no person, I apprehend, would start any serious objections against its removal. It might free the Directors of the North British Railway from an actual nuisance; and the inhabitants of Restalrig being now supplied with the Crawley water, are not so dependent as formerly. I should indeed regret were they deprived of a privilege which they so greatly prized; but instead of leaving them to avail themselves of its supply by the present horrible access, I would propose that the water be conveyed close to the road, or

¹ The preceding wood-cut was engraved for the volume, *Charters of Holyrood*, contributed by the EARL OF ELLESMERE to the Bannatyne Club in 1840.

even to the village of Restalrig, by means either of a leaden pipe, or of burnt-clay tiles, of a small diameter; and at no great expense, a handsome public well or fountain might be erected in the village, in the event of Government acceding to a proposal for having the original Well reconstructed within the grounds of Holyrood.

A few weeks since there appeared in the *Witness* newspaper an editorial article on this subject, and advocating the scheme of rebuilding St Margaret's Well over the similar spring near St Anthony's Chapel. Without touching further on this point, I gladly avail myself of the article to which I refer, written by Mr Hugh Miller, to quote a portion of his graphic description of the old Well, which vividly brings back its quiet and rural appearance to persons like myself, who were accustomed, in their boyish days, to visit that neighbourhood when resorting to the Figgat Whins as a favourite bathing-place on a fine summer's day. But the sandy downs, covered with whins along the beach, have long since disappeared and been converted into irrigated meadow land.

"What we deemed the most interesting relic in the village of Restalrig or its neighbourhood," says the writer of that article, "was to be found a few hundred yards to the west, beside the broken pathway which at that time winded between the hamlet and the Abbey Hill. It was one of the two saints' wells to which we have already referred—that of St Margaret. An exquisite piece of old architecture rose over a hexagonal cell, groined in the corners, and with a central pillar rising from amid the pellucid water, and which furnished a resting-place to the massive ribs that bent over it. Directly over the mossy dome in which the erection terminated atop there rose an alder tree, gnarled and old; but, when we first saw it in the clear sunshine of a delicious morning in early summer, thickly speckled with its broad umbelliferous blossoms, it formed a not unpleasant object; while a little beyond there stood a small picturesque cottage, humble and not very tidy, but altogether such a one as the youthful linner would have chosen for a first sketch.

"Occupying a slope, too, the corner in which cottage and well were situated had escaped at least the immediate contamination, if not the unsightly neighbourhood, of the fœtid meadows and the foul water. But another, and at this time wholly unexpected enemy was at hand. The North British Railway now runs at some little distance above the saint's well; and well and railway might have continued to exist harmoniously together; but unluckily the sloping bank was marked out for a station, and the foundations of a great building, designed for a sort of general workshop, were laid down on the site of the spring. The picturesque cottage was pulled down, the old gnarled tree grubbed up, and the

workmen were proceeding to raze the little Gothic erection that had protected the water for more than six [four?] centuries, when they were arrested by an interdict. A sort of compromise was effected: the great building was erected on the purposed site; but there was a sort of open drain left under its foundations, to communicate between the well and the public road; and such of the curious as have zeal enough to enter a repulsive-looking hole little more than four feet in height—to descend by a few rude steps—to wade through a gloomy passage floored with ordure, and charged with an atmosphere somewhat resembling that which reeks over a dunghill in a warm day—may still find, just where daylight fails, the saint's spring welling up in darkness and disgrace under its canopy of ribbed stone. *Had it been utterly destroyed, it would have existed as at least an agreeable recollection; whereas not a single association can be connected with it in its present condition that is not displeasing.*

“It would be surely worth while bringing such a curiosity to the open day and the fresh air, were it but again to see the dancing sunlight reflected from the water on the richly fretted roof, gray with the lichens of many centuries.”

For the purpose of illustrating the present brief communication, Mr Alexander Christie will exhibit casts of the mouldings and ornamented bosses of the Well taken by some of his pupils, but chiefly by Mr Robert Anderson, who has also prepared a very accurate plan, with measurements, sections, and other details of the Well itself. These casts were chiefly taken during the night, and under circumstances which might have deterred any one of less zeal. (A copy of Mr Anderson's plan is herewith given, see Plate V.)

The members will readily believe, that nothing but a case of absolute necessity would lead me to make a proposal of removing any ancient fabric to a different locality. But besides its present position, buried under a large pile of buildings, Mr Anderson informs me that at no great distance, if not immediately above the central pillar of the Well, a small steam-engine is erected, which, when at work, causes the pillar to vibrate, and in the course of time must necessarily have the effect of loosening and displacing the stones, so as effectually to destroy the ancient masonry of the Well, unless some measures for its removal, as now suggested, be speedily adopted.

I beg, therefore, to propose, That the Society authorize a memorial to be addressed to the Chief Commissioner for Works and Public Buildings, calling his attention to the subject, and suggesting how desirable it would be to obtain a report from the Clerk of Her Majesty's Works in Scotland on the most eligible site within the Park of Holyrood for the removal and reconstruction of the Ancient Well of St Margaret's, in the course of the contemplated improve-

ments in the vicinity of the Palace ; and that the President of the Society be requested to transmit the said memorial.

[This proposal led to an animated discussion. A Committee was appointed to inspect the Well and proposed site, and to prepare such a memorial should the scheme for its removal be approved. This Committee unanimously agreed to the proposal ; and the Right Hon. Sir BENJAMIN HALL, Chief Commissioner, when in Scotland during the following autumn, after a personal examination, offered to have the Well rebuilt under certain conditions. The negotiations on this subject are not yet completed ; but there is reason to hope, from the great interest which Sir BENJAMIN HALL has taken in all such improvements, that the Well may eventually be re-erected on a most eligible site, over a spring which flows towards the north-east, and close to the small loch or beautiful piece of water which has so recently been formed on the low marshy ground beneath the ruins of St Anthony's Chapel. Of the Well, if thus renovated, may we not use the words of the Roman poet, and say :—

“ O Fons Blandusiæ, splendidior vitro,
Dulci digne mero

Fies nobilium tu quoque fontium,
. unde loquaces
Lymphæ desiliunt tuæ.”

D. L.]