



Dive in & explore

Heading to wells, lochs, rivers and other watery destinations can lead you to enchanted and sacred places, says Clare Gogerty

Water is the backdrop to our lives, running through the landscape and our bodies, keeping humans and animals alive, and nourishing crops and forests, yet we largely ignore it. Although it provides the setting for some of our most memorable experiences, our treatment of it is decidedly casual as the rise in river and sea pollution demonstrates. Our ancestors were more in touch with water. As they actively had to seek it out to survive, they worshipped and respected this magical fluid and its life-giving properties. Unlike us, spoilt by modern convenience, and at the mercy of water companies driven by profit rather than water

health, they had to find it, carry it and store it. It is time to make like our ancestors and treat water with the respect it deserves. One way to do this is to make it a destination for holidays and excursions. Scotland has many wonderful watery places, from magical lochs to healing wells and lonely waterfalls, each shrouded in mystery, history and legend. Here are five of my favourites. **A wishing tree, a healing well and a brutal cure: Loch Maree, Wester Ross** The magic of Loch Maree is largely due to its number of islands: 66 altogether, some of which boast ancient Caledonian pinewood. It is a wonderful place to kayak, camp and even swim (though midges can be a nuisance). One of the largest islands, Isle Maree, has a ruined chapel, which is believed to be the 8th-century hermitage

A view down Loch Maree from Tollie Bay

“The magic of Loch Maree is largely due to its number of islands: 66 altogether

of St Mael Ruba (who died in 722). It also has an oak tree, once visited by Queen Victoria, studded with coins from those seeking answers to their prayers, and a holy well credited with healing powers. One brutal cure was to tie the sick or insane person to a boat with a horsehair rope and then tow them around the island several times, before immersing them in the well. The loch is also credited with its own monster, called Muc-sheilch, which loosely translates as ‘turtle-pig’.

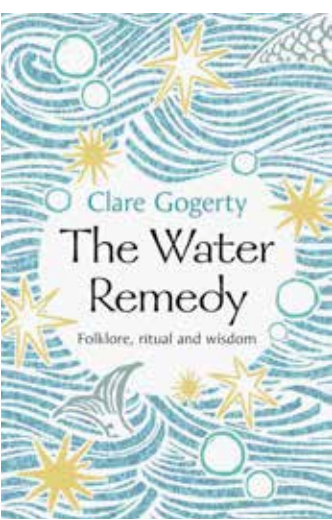
A sacred spring: Loch Sheanta, Flodigarry, Isle of Skye Now hidden in a hazel copse, this sacred spring at the western end of Loch Sheanta was traditionally used for healing. Invalids would circle the spring three times deosil (sunwise or clockwise) before drinking the water. Many tied rags to nearby trees or left offerings of pins and coins. The spring drains into the loch, once full of trout left untroubled and unfished because taking any would ‘signal judgements to follow upon it’. Similarly, it was considered unlucky, and foolish, to cut down the trees that surround the spring, which it was believed were the homes of nature spirits. The loch itself lies near the foothills of the mighty Quiraing mountains, a landscape of strange and monumental rock formations worthy of the books of JRR Tolkien.

A health loch: Loch mo-Naire, Strathnaver, Scotland This dark and moody loch surrounded by distant forbidding hills was a pilgrimage destination for the sick until the mid-19th century. Those wishing to be cured went down to the shore at midnight, took a sip of the loch’s water, removed all clothing then walked backwards into the water. There the pilgrims would immerse themselves three times before making offerings of silver coins (some of these are in the Strathnaver Museum in Thurso). This cure was said to be especially powerful on the first Monday in August, and increasingly so if the day fell on 4 August. This may have some association with the Celtic festival of Lughnasadh – held to mark the harvest season – celebrated on 1 August.

A wild and lonely place: the Falls of Glomach, Ross-shire, Scotland The only way to reach this 113 m high, single-drop waterfall – one of the highest in the UK – is by walking 9km across glens and moors, before descending into a narrow ravine. Its isolation and the mist that shrouds it (glomach means ‘gloomy’) is what makes it magical. Just reaching it feels adventurous, if not a little heroic.

A riverside pilgrimage: River Ayr, Ayrshire Apart from swimming in it, there is no better way to get to know a river than to walk alongside it, especially if you journey from its source to the sea. As the river flows constantly onwards, it changes, from tumultuous rapids to gentle ripples, responding to the surrounding landscape. A walk of this length is no simple undertaking, of course: rivers tend to be long and winding, and rarely have footpaths running conveniently alongside. There will be many obstacles along the way, from private land to industrial development. (You could take it as a

metaphor for life.) Rather than attempt a single long walk or pilgrimage, it is easier to tackle the 65km long River Ayr in stages selecting different, accessible stretches each time. **Rising from the depths: Kelpies** In Scotland, most lochs have their own legends of dangerous young horses called kelpies. On a good day, kelpies play relatively harmless pranks, but on a bad day they wreak havoc, sinking ships, drowning men, conjuring up storms, even eating animals and humans. One kelpie legend concerns a man called McGregor who, weary from walking, stopped by Loch Slochd and wished aloud for a horse. Incredibly, a horse with a saddle and bridle appeared, so he mounted it. The horse was not a horse, however, but a kelpie. It did not obey the man’s commands and instead galloped off towards the lake. Terrified, McGregor prayed fervently and was thrown off. The kelpie kept going into the water, but McGregor managed to hold on to the bridle, dislodged it and took it home. He unwittingly found the kelpie’s weak spot: anyone who gets hold of a kelpie’s bridle can use it for benevolent magic, as can their family and descendants.



This is an edited extract from *The Water Remedy: folklore, ritual and wisdom*, by Clare Gogerty, published by Calon, priced £14.99, out now.

SCOTTISH CHAMBER ORCHESTRA

8-9 May, 7.30pm
Edinburgh | Glasgow

Maxim Emelyanychev Conductor
Yeol Eum Son Piano
Anna Dennis Soprano
Katie Bray Mezzo Soprano
Anthony Gregory Tenor
Neal Davies Bass Baritone
SCO Chorus
Gregory Batsleer Chorus Director



Yeol Eum Son plays Beethoven

Also featuring music by Brahms and Haydn's Nelson Mass

For tickets and more info visit sco.org.uk

DUNARD FUND

THE SCOTSMAN

EDINBURGH

SCOTTISH GOVERNMENT

Company Registration Number: SC075079. A charity registered in Scotland No. SC015039.