

## Belisama and her Daughters

### *Introduction*

Good afternoon and welcome to this talk 'Belisama and her Daughters'. Today I'm going to be speaking about Belisama, the goddess of the river Ribble which runs through Preston, the spirits of our local watercourses and wells, and discussing the impact of industrialisation and fracking on our sacred waters and the need for resacredisation. This will be supplemented with samples of my devotional poetry.

### *Belisama*

Let's begin with Belisama, whose waters have nourished the people of Preston physically and spiritually for thousands of years. Belisama, 'Most Shining One' or 'Most Mighty One', is a Gallo-Brythonic goddess whose name is attested at Vaison-la-Romaine in Provence and Saint-Lizier in the Pyrenees. We know she is the goddess of the river Ribble because in Ptolemy's *Geography* (2AD), he labels the co-ordinates of the Ribble estuary *Belisama aest*. The Ribble begins at Jam Syke in North Yorkshire and flows through Settle, Clitheroe, Ribchester, and past Preston here in Lancashire out to the Irish Sea.

It is possible that Belisama had a centre of worship at Ribchester. Its name in the Domesday book, *Ribel-castre* means 'the camp on the Ribble' and refers to the Roman camp. In the Romano-British period it was known as *Bremetenacum*, 'place by the roaring river'. There was a temple to Minerva at Ribchester and this is significant because Belisama is equated with Minerva, the Roman patron of warfare, wisdom, trade, medicine and the arts, by *interpretatio Romana* at Saint-Lizier. It seems possible Belisama shares these qualities. However, ironically, the temple was swept away by the Ribble. Belisama may be depicted on the Roman altar to Apollo-Maponus as the genius of Ribchester, wearing a turreted crown, receiving an incense-box from a veiled figure representing *Bremetenacum*.

Preston (from the Old English *Preosta Tūn*, 'Priest Town') was founded in 670 when lands were granted *iuxta Rippel*, 'round Ribble', to St Wilfrid's abbey in Ripon. Wilfrid was Preston's patron saint. The mention of the Ribble shows it was decisive in the founding of this profoundly religious town. The Ribble was used for baptisms by the first Mormon missionaries in 1837, and it seems possible baptisms in the past were also performed in the Ribble, although as yet I have found no records.

There has been much speculation surrounding the river-name 'Ribble'. The Saxon *Ripel* was taken by Ekwall to mean 'tearing, reaping' making the Ribble 'the tearing one'. Breeze suggests instead it may derive from the primitive Cumbric *ri* 'very' and *pel* 'wise'. More simply it might be an abbreviation of *Riga Belisama* (*Riga* means 'Great Queen') to *Ri...bel*. This suggests the river remains intimately associated with its shining mighty goddess. Anyone who has seen the Ribble in summer with elf lights dancing on the ripples or in winter when floods have raged through Avenham Park will attest to these qualities.

There is also a darker piece of folklore: the Ribble claims a life every seven years. Having lived near the Ribble most of my life I can confirm the sad truth of this lore. Not only that, it seems to have been taking a life at least every year. This February, it took Michael Brooks, who was only 19 years old. A shrine to him in a tree beside the river on Avenham Park is still currently tended. Then in July the body of 72-year-old John Culshaw was removed from the Ribble.

My own relationship with Belisama began when I first came to Polytheism in 2009. I felt a calling to walk the Ribble Way from Jam Syke to the Ribble Estuary at Longton. Throughout my walk I heard

snapshots of a song echoing from the waters and sensed a feminine presence. Having only been taught about the Greek and Roman myths at school and having no idea that Britain has its own gods and goddesses, I identified her as 'the nymph who lives in the Ribble'. Soon afterward from a local Pagan at the Beautiful Planet Cafe in Preston I learnt her name is Belisama. When I first addressed her by this name she appeared to me as a beautiful lady of shining waters. I've also seen her as an immense shining being filling the sky whose light shines downwards pervading the whole watershed.

After our first meeting I knew I needed to write a poem for Belisama. My first attempt was a conversation between she and her consort, the sun-god Bel, but that didn't work. Instead, as I was walking by the Ribble near Preston, I was struck by the gnosis that Belisama was here before the city and knows all its history. Her song flowed through me and I wrote a poem in her voice.

## **Proud of Preston**

Belisama:

Proud of Preston heed my entry  
Hear the voice of ancient memories  
Hearts purloined by Roman sentries  
Like a river shining bright.

Proud of Preston born free traders  
Made by commerce and hard labour  
Merchants gilded artists favoured  
Like the Brigantes warred in tribes.

Mechanics shift the scene of battle  
Raise the red brick smog industrial  
Cording hearts like twisting material  
On the wheels of the cotton lords.

Step the Chartists to the engines  
Pull the plugs release the tension  
The rioters face the sentries  
Dye the river dark with blood.

Grey arise the business faceless  
Fake fulfillment for the faithless  
Mass the market for the tasteless  
Selling life for capital.

High in the stone fortress  
The sentries hold their rule  
Beyond the mall and office  
Do you hear a river call?

Proud of Preston I have carved you  
In my sweeping spirit formed you  
Through your veins floods dazzling water  
My Setantii shining bright.

Will you hearken to my entry

Drown false dreams in ancient memories  
Will the proud of Preston  
Like a shining river rise?

'Proud of Preston' won the Preston Guild Poetry Competition in 2012. This was a great achievement for me as someone just beginning to write poetry (particularly as my poem was polytheistic and the judge, Michael Symmons Roberts, was Catholic!) and it confirmed my relationship with Belisama.

### *Fish House Brook*

I live in Penwortham, which is across the Ribble from Preston and lies in the same watershed. My local brook is called Fish House Brook and charting its course and history has played a significant role in establishing a relationship with its spirit. I live on Bank Parade, on the former bank of the brook, which once began about a yard south of my house. It also gives its name to Burnside Way. It is now culverted beneath the gardens opposite to me.

It emerges through a concrete pipe behind Malt Kiln Cottage, which once used the brook to power a water wheel. The maltsters also used the water to soak the barley in troughs before it was taken by horse and cart round the corner to the Black Bull pub. The diminishment of the brook to a slow trickle on all but rainy days shows the effect of the building of 300 houses and their accompanying pipelines for clean water, drainage, and sewage in the 1980's.

Fish House Brook then flows into Greencroft Valley where it once formed a natural pond where people panned for fish. On the Tithe map it is labelled 'Fish Pan Field'. Culverted beneath Hill Road South, it emerges close to Rosefold House and Cottages. The cottages and yard were part of a tannery. Water from Fish House Brook was used in two tan pits to wash the hides, a process that involved slaking with lime to remove the flesh and hair. This was notorious both for the smell and pollution, which may have run off into the brook. It then flows behind the houses, adjacent to a footpath, through Campbell's Park Homes (which nestles in the triangle of an old railway junction) and Penwortham Allotments before being culverted into the Ribble at Fish House Bridge.

As an act of service to the brook I clear the portion in Greencroft Valley once or twice a year with the Friends of Greencroft Valley (a group I set up in 2012 to pick up litter and take care of the green space).

This is a poem evoking the spirit of Fish House Brook.

### **Brook Sprite**

Sluice feet treading pebbles,  
filmy fingers spreading through stone,  
swimming a new stroke, turning  
a water wheel hand by hand,

treading stars, holding  
the setting sun and new moon rising,  
up the volume, push down the accelerator,  
beneath your clouds all is drowning.

Rising, casting off bounds  
you are not like a shadow walking  
or stream sculpted in night air

cloaked in conjured water.

In the cleft of your powerful laughter  
the valley is a dark lullaby  
summoning me out to the glassy sea  
where your heart spring is perfect.

### *Culverted Rivers of Preston*

There are several rivers culverted beneath Preston whose presence is only recorded in the street names and on old maps. Most people are completely unaware of their existence. Their old courses can still be walked and it's possible to get a sense of the presence of their deities still beneath in the dark.

The Syke (from Old English *sīc*, 'small stream, rill'), originated as a spring of water at the junction of present-day Queen Street and Grimshaw Street. It flowed from Syke Hill, along what is now Syke Street, supplying the water troughs in Avenham and feeding Avenham Mill. Its course can be traced under Winckley Square, the Fishergate Centre, and the railway station, running parallel to Fishergate before emerging into the Ribble from its culvert south of Fishergate Bridge. It's said that if you put your ear to the drain at the bottom of Main Sprit Weind it can be heard rushing beneath at times of heavy rain.

Swill Brook's source lay in present-day Waverley Park in Ribbleton. It entered Preston north of Salmon Street then flowed across London Road, through Larkhill Grounds, down the steep bank which forms part of Frenchwood Knoll Nature Reserve into the Ribble at the Tram Bridge. At the confluence was a washing stead where local women used the fast-flowing water to swill their clothes. This is how Swill Brook got its name. Swill Brook Lane marks the route the washer-women used.

The Moor Brook began east of present-day Deepdale Road then ran across Preston Moor, feeding Brunswick Place Mill and Brookfield Mill, giving its name to Brook Field Street and the Moor Brook pub. From the car park behind the pub you can see the steepness of its valley. Its course can be traced from Moor Brook Street to Brook House Street (where it fed Brook House Mill) and Greenbank Street. It finally became Swansea Gutter (near Swansea Terraces) at Ashton Quays and entered the Ribble at Watery Lane.

There are two unnamed streams between the Moor Brook and the Syke on the 1774 map of Preston. Keith Johnson mentions that one of them has its source near Bow Lane in a field called Springfield, thus providing the names for Springfield Place and Spring Bank. On a local walk Aidan Turner-Bishop mentioned that the second stream was culverted beneath the Lamb and Packet, but I have not been able to find any further information.

### *Ladyewell*

Devotion to Our Lady of Fernyhalgh at a shrine based around the well has taken place since the 11<sup>th</sup> century. It was once believed 'Fernyhalgh' meant 'ancient shrine' but a more likely etymology is 'a field with ferns' from the Old English *fernig halph*. The well was a pool of water until the nuns paved it in 1905, constructed steps to the well-head and added the existing statue. Water from the well can be drunk from a tap where it is considered proper to speak a blessing. Hundreds of pilgrims still come every year to visit the well, Ladyewell House, the prayer chapel and chapel dedicated to the English Martyrs. Whether you like the Catholic regalia or not it remains a powerful place where a sense of deep connection can be found.

### *St Mary's Well*

St Mary's Well was a natural spring located at the foot of Castle Hill in Penwortham. On Penwortham Marsh there was a Bronze Age Lake Village and upriver, at Walton-le-Dale, Mesolithic flints have been found. This shows the area has been inhabited for thousands of years and people would long have viewed Castle Hill, the 'pen', 'prominent headland', in Penwortham, and the spring as sacred.

It is unknown whether the well was dedicated to St Mary the Virgin by Brythonic or Anglo-Saxon Christians. It had a Saxon cross inscribed with the Magnificat over it. In the 11<sup>th</sup> century a Norman church dedicated to St Mary was built on Castle Hill, likely replacing a wooden Anglo-Saxon church, and St Mary's Priory was built. This was closed during the reformation and later demolished.

St Mary's Well had a beautiful location and was renowned for its healing and cleansing properties. In 1854 the poet James Flockhart described it: "At the bottom of the steps, a little to the right, is a spring of clear water flowing into a sort of natural basin, surrounded by brushwood, near which I have seen primroses and other wild flowers blooming in the greatest luxuriance... I have heard many people in the neighbourhood say, that to wash the hands in its water is a certain antidote to evil."

In 'De Mowbray: A Legend of Penwortham' Flockhart wrote the following verse:

For maidens oft at eve repair  
Believing that a power is there  
Which them from every harm can save  
If but their hands its waters lave.

St Mary's Well remained an important place of pilgrimage until the 19<sup>th</sup> century. People washed their hands in, bathed in, and drank from it. It was not only a sacred site, but a source of clean pure water for local people. It supplied nearly 6,000 gallons a day. People walked a mile from Middleforth to St Mary's Well every morning to get their supplies. It was so important that when the West Lancashire Railway was built they left a cutting so locals could continue walking to the well.

When the link between water and disease was established following an outbreak of cholera in London in 1854 the well was capped. The reason given was fears about Irish migrants bathing in the water and taking their horses in with them, demonstrating the prejudices of the time.

Worse was to come. In 1884 the Ribble was moved several hundred yards south from its old course near to present-day Watery Lane to its current course adjacent to Castle Hill. The digging of the new river-bed shattered the sandstone bedrock and breached the aquifer beneath the hill. St Mary's Well began to dry up. Its flow had diminished so badly it could not meet the demand by 1888. Piped water was soon delivered at a cost. Surprisingly there is no record of any uproar about the destruction of St Mary's Well and the loss of the waters on either a practical or spiritual level.

When I was researching this material I had a vision of a water-dragon who I believe was the spirit of the aquifer. It is recorded in this poem along with an ancestral chorus voicing the lament that never was.

### **Spirit of the Aquifer**

In eighteen eighty-four  
a monolithic feat of engineering  
shifts the Ribble's course:  
*no water to the springs.*

From the hill's abyssal deep  
a rumbling of the bowels,  
a vexed aquatic shriek:  
*no water to the wells.*

Breached within the chasm  
a dragon lies gasping  
with a pain she cannot fathom:  
*no water to the springs.*

Water table reft  
her giving womb unswells,  
surging through the clefts:  
*no water to the wells.*

Unravelling inside  
her serpent magic streams  
to join the angry tides:  
*no water to the springs.*

Culverted and banked  
her serpent powers fail,  
leaking dry and cracked:  
*no water to the wells.*

The spinning dragon-girl  
tumbles from her swing  
and slips to the underworld:  
*no water to the springs.*

Her spirit will not rise  
through the dead and empty tunnels,  
disconsolate we cry:  
*no water to the wells.*

The hill, no longer healing  
stands broken of its spell,  
*no water to the springs,*  
*no water to the wells.*

To add insult to injury when the A59 was widened in the 1960s St Mary's Well was buried under the embankment. Then, during the construction of the flyover for the bypass, part of Well Field was covered with a metre of hardcore and used as a car park. Because of these factors the exact site of the well has never been located. We believe it lies somewhere near the bottom of the existing steps.

### *Lost Wells of Preston*

Lady Well was close to Preston Franciscan Friary. Its location off Marsh Lane, in the Maudlands area, and proximity to the leper hospital dedicated to St Mary Magdalen, suggest its Lady was the Magdalen. The Grey Friars (who gave their name to Friargate and the Grey Friar's pub) lived by begging, saying masses, and praying for the souls of the wealthy. After the friary was dissolved in 1539 the devout continued to venerate the well. In 1794 the digging of the Lancaster Canal altered

the water table and it dried up. Excavations for the Legacy Hotel in 2007 revealed the location of the friary and well. It gives its name to Lady Well Street and lies beneath the car park of Brunel Court.

Spa Well was located on Spring Row in the Spa Brow valley where crystal springs were abundant. Nearby was Spa Bath, an open-air cold-water bath constructed in 1708, which survived for 150 years (Cold Bath Street led to it). Spa Well possessed strengthening qualities and children were taken to it. Preston Waterworks Company formed in 1832 and built the Grimsargh reservoirs in 1835. When piped water was introduced, Preston's wells and springs were drained and covered. Spa Well was the last. Its site lies east of Spa Street on the bank behind the gardens of Wellington Terrace.

Ashton Quays Well was situated on the north bank of the Ribble at Marsh End and possessed medicinal qualities. Like Spa Well it was probably drained and covered when piped water was introduced. Another factor in its demise was the movement of the Ribble from Watery Lane to its current position near to Castle Hill. Its site is on the north of Watery Lane to the left of Key Line Civils and Drainage.

The Dolphin Fountain, set in a stone alcove built in the 1860s on Avenham Park, was served by pipes from a nearby spring that never ran dry and was reputed to cure eye ailments. It was used until the mid-20<sup>th</sup> century when the tap and two cups on chains were removed. The alcove remained empty until re-instated in 2011. Oddly, the feature, remodelled from the 19<sup>th</sup> century, looks more like a sea-serpent than a dolphin. I wonder if it represents a serpentine water spirit? No water flows from the fountain, but it runs from a rock on the left down a channel to a drain.

Near the bottom of Main Sprit Weind was a well frequented by young petticoated ladies who carried water along with milk and butter to the town centre. For this reason this narrow passageway was also called Petticoat Alley. The well had disappeared by 1840, indubitably replaced by piped water.

### *Industrialisation*

During the industrial period when 'everything sacred was profaned' the building of the canal and Riversway Dockland had a devastating effect on the watercourses and wells of Preston. The section of the canal in the city centre fell out of use and was drained and filled in during the 1960s. Riversway Dockland closed in 1981 due to the silting up of the Ribble. Engineering feats useful for less than two hundred years destroyed the natural hydrological systems which had provided Preston and its surrounding area with physical and spiritual nourishment since the Mesolithic period.

### *Unholy Wells*

Our watercourses now face another threat from unimpeded industrialisation: fracking. This is particularly dire because the bedrock of Preston and its surrounds is Sherwood sandstone, which is renowned for its porosity and permeability, making it 'the most important aquifer in the North West of England.' This explains why we once had so many sacred springs.

Proposals were put forward by Cuadrilla to drill four fracking wells at Preston New Road and four at Roseacre in 2014. These sites lie beyond the Woodfold Fault, the limit of our groundwater aquifer, but geologist David Smythe believes contaminated fracking fluid could pass through the fault and poison our aquifer with devastating effects.

I was involved in the protests from 2014 to 2016. This is a poem I sent to Lancashire County Council:

Four wells at Preston New Road.  
Four wells at Roseacre.

Four wells in the darkness  
between drilling and decision.

Four wells of steel meets shale.  
Four wells boring into the mind.  
Four wells of screaming poison.  
Four wells of deadly sands of time.

Four wells where gas the question  
scorches ears of invisible skies.  
*Four wells?* An uneasy whisper  
from underworld gods.

Four wells to decide the future.  
Four wells of choice. Four wells of trembling.  
By the word on four wells our land  
will be saved or destroyed.

Lancashire County Council turned down the decisions to frack at both sites. Preston New Road was originally refused on 'visual impact' and Roseacre due to 'traffic issues'. However, the central government forced Preston New Road through against the wishes of both councillors and local people.

The first well was drilled at Preston New Road in April this year. Should fracking take place and fluids enter our aquifer, Preston's drinking water, which comes from upland and groundwater sources, will run brown with sand and lethal chemicals and ignite at the stroke of a match. Our once nurturing water deities will take new forms – toxic, dangerous. Our miraculous aquifer will be poisoned beyond repair. Such formations take millions of years to create and we won't find another one.

### *Resacredisation*

I departed from activism a couple of years ago because it left me feeling burnt-out and helpless. I'm not comfortable in large, noisy crowds and I had grown fed up of trying to confront the government in its own terms, on the grounds of 'visual impact' and 'traffic issues', in arenas where there is no room for discourse on the sacred. Arguments for the sanctity of our watercourses and the intrinsic value of the landscape and its ecosystems have never been listened to and, it seems, never will be. I decided instead to focus on where my talents lie: using poetry and writing to bring about resacredisation.

This May my work was included in an exhibition called 'Precarious Landscapes', which looked at how the land surrounding Preston has been and is being transformed by industrialisation. I noted the term 'precarious' has its root in the Latin *precarius* 'obtained by treaty' and this is also the root of 'prayer'. I believe our precarious situation will not be rectified until the land is viewed as sacred again and our prayerful relationship with its deities, with Belisama and her daughters, is restored.

\*Part of this essay has previously been shown in the display 'Precarious Landscapes' and published on my blog as 'Lost Wells and Watercourses of Priest Town'  
<https://lornasmithers.wordpress.com/2018/06/12/lost-wells-and-watercourses-of-priest-town/>

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Information board beside the Dolphin Fountain on Avenham Park