

(The Oratory was once again uncovered in 2015). Encroaching sand meant that this church also had to be abandoned. It is recorded that the relics of Saint Piran were kept here and in other local churches and they were in fine silver reliquaries. Sadly they were dispersed and disposed of during the Protestant Reformation and their whereabouts is now quite unknown. Excavations carried out at the hermitage in the 19th and early 20th centuries revealed human remains within and around the building, many of which were carried away and even stolen.

Of the tiny hermitage, Gilbert Doble wrote: "...standing at the lonely Oratory amid the sand hills, we feel more than anywhere in the Country, that we are treading in the footsteps of one of the makers of Christian Cornwall." (Oratory – place of prayer and preaching).

Among the churches Piran founded or which bear his name in Cornwall one is at Perranarworthal although the present building is much later and considerably rebuilt in the 19th century. Nearby there still exists Saint Piran's Holy Well (Spring), but the present small granite structure dates only from the 15th century. This Holy Well, where the Orthodox Outdoor Blessing of Water sometimes takes place is just a mile or two from our Orthodox church. The water of the Well has been noted for its healing qualities, especially for sick children.

Having completed his life's work, Holy Piran went to his rest in the year 480, his body being buried below his little hermitage at Perranzabuloe and although another date is suggested within that year his feast day is universally celebrated on March 5th. His life is credited with miracles and wise counsel, zealous preaching of the Gospel of Christ and a deep pastoral concern for the people in his care. He is also said to have re-awakened the Cornish to the importance of tin mining (which is known to have been an industry in Cornwall for at least 4000 years) and is regarded as the patron of tin miners and with Archangel Michael, of Cornwall.

Today, Piran and the more modern symbol – a white cross on a black ground – hold a prominent place in the minds and customs of the people of Cornwall, on the one hand for his Christian holiness and witness and the other as a symbol of Cornish nationalism and tin mining. Neither should be over romanticised. The Christian saints of the undivided Church prior the Great Schism of 1054 who witnessed in Cornwall during those early days are best seen in the context of the wider apostolic zeal found elsewhere in these islands. In this latter respect the Venerable Bede's Ecclesiastical History and Anglo-Saxon Chronicle makes interesting reading.

(Fr.N.2007 rev.2018/20/25).

Orthodox Cornwall – Holy Piran



At a time when the early heresies were being addressed by councils many miles distant from what is now the United Kingdom and the Republic of Ireland, and before Constantine the Great was proclaimed Emperor in the English city of York in 306, the Gospel of Christ was being proclaimed in these islands. Across present Ireland, Scotland, Wales and England, missionaries were travelling among pagans and warring local chieftains and lords, building little churches, sanctifying springs of water (holy wells), establishing monasteries and communities of Christians.

In the first four centuries the Church among the Celts flourished but with the coming of the Saxons in the 5th century Celtic culture was submerged and with it Celtic Christianity in England. The movement of Celts further west into Wales, and Cornwall (with other West Country areas known as Dumnonia) brought a degree of isolation from continental Europe which isolation, apart from in a very few cases, came to an end with the Synod of Whitby in 664 at which among other things the issue of dating Easter was resolved.

When speaking of the witness of Celtic saints throughout the British Isles, the most numerous and prominent were from Ireland, Wales and Brittany, those entering Cornwall doing so chiefly via its river estuaries, with a lesser known number from Cornwall. To some extent separation into these modern nations is deceiving since in those early days such divisions were by no means so clear.

In his book "The Land Beside the Celtic Sea," Richard Pearce writes of Cornwall as being "Britain's richest treasure house of ancient Christian crosses, of which more than five hundred are known to exist within the County. The great majority, cut in granite, date from pre-Norman times down to the Middle Ages." In his analysis of cross types, Latin and Greek, he identifies the higher proportion of Greek crosses as being in parishes where there are Celtic patron saints and Latin in parishes with patrons from further afield.

William Dalrymple in his book "From the Holy Mountain" wrote of the similarities between Byzantine iconography and artistic style and the early Irish/Saxon manuscripts such as the Book of Kells, the Lindisfarne Gospels and Saint Chad's Gospels, each dating from the 6th – 8th centuries. It would take a great leap to place on the strength of the above a connection between Byzantine and Celtic Christianity in these islands but they add to the historical and other evidence of the place that Celtic Christianity enjoyed within the

universal Church prior to the Great Schism of 1054.

Although there are numerous Medieval "Lives of Saints," for a detailed account of a number of Celtic Saints who laboured in Cornwall, including Saint Piran, Gilbert Doble's series – "The Saints of Cornwall," is recommended as an excellent source. Canon Doble, writing in the early part of the 20th century, drew upon the main written references then available, notably John of Tynemouth, a 14th century priest and monk of Saints Alban's; John Leyland (C16th); and the Ducal Library of Gotha. Doble's works are still available. The Cornish Centre/Kressen Kernow (Cornish Studies Library) in Redruth has a wealth of material on this and allied subjects.

Doble noted that during the Reformation and the succeeding centuries of indifference, all the written lives of the patron saints of Cornish parishes were deliberately or negligently destroyed. But in Brittany there was no reformation, and so numerous "lives" of Cornish saints which have disappeared in Cornwall (though some of them were written here) have been preserved in Bretton manuscripts.

In 1937 it was discovered at the British Museum that the Ducal Library of Gotha in then East Germany contained a volume of 45 lives of English and Cornish Saints. Among other rare documents, one that still exists, by a certain Anselm (not the Archbishop of

Canterbury) is of Saint Gwinear (Guigner), at one time a companion of Saint Patrick (C5th). Gwinear, with others, was martyred at the hands of Cornish pagans under the rule of Theodoric (Tewdrig), King of Cornwall.

The fifth century found Saint Piran (Perran, Pyran) among those travelling from place to place, country to country. Although his mother is said to have been from Dumnonia he came first from Ireland to Wales where he spent his formative years, meeting Saint Finnian with whom he returned to Ireland, from where he was later expelled by antagonistic pagans who threw him into the sea. By the grace of God he arrived and landed in Cornwall. He subsequently travelled to Brittany where he is to this day venerated (i.e., he is patron of the parish of Trezelide in Leon) and then returned to Cornwall – known as "The Land of Celtic Saints" – even now having more towns and villages bearing saints' names than any other county in the United Kingdom.

On his arrival in Cornwall, after being expelled from Ireland, Holy Piran built a small hermitage/oratory at Perran-Zabuloe (Piran in the Sands) not far from the modern village of Perranporth. The little chapel still exists albeit in a ruined and hazardous state having been covered by advancing sand which has produced over the centuries dunes of considerable proportions. A medieval church was built nearby and contained Saint Piran's relics.