

# The Saints Come Marching In: Saints' Names in the Toponymy of Cornwall

Leonard R.N. Ashley

*Brooklyn College of The City University of New York, Emeritus*

Cornwall, virtually cut off from the rest of Britain until the end of the eighteenth century, about the time the last native speaker of Cornish died, offers a rich storehouse of still extant placename oddities. Here I survey one aspect of that toponymy: the names of saints on the map of Cornwall. All saints' names connect the existing placenames with the religion and folklore of the earlier days and underline the heritage which the modern Cornish have for a century been trying to recapture with the revival of the ancient language. The ancestors of the Cornish were driven westward by Anglo-Saxons in AD 500. In what is now Cornwall, the language became Cornish. Cornwall and Brittany share certain early saints, some originally from Ireland, some antedating Anglo-Saxon Christianity, and some with their names on the land in both Cornwall and Brittany. This paper is meant to underline the need in toponymic study to review the historic, linguistic and folkloric concerns, not just the geographic.

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Legends that once were told or sung  
In many a smoky fireside nook.  
Henry Wadsworth Longfellow

The Celts were the first Indo-Europeans to spread over Europe. They were first noted in south-central Europe around 500 BC, and they went to the British Isles in two waves: to Ireland about 400 BC (whence Gaelic, later spread to Scotland and the Isle of Man); later to southern and western parts of the island of Britain; and in AD 400 some were driven over into Brittany. Cornish and Breton are called Brythonic languages. Cornish became extinct as a spoken language in Cornwall at the end of the eighteenth century (hanging on a bit longer in prayers and common expressions). It remained in the literature and in the placenames. Ancient Cornish placenames are found in both old forms (such as *Carantoc*) and in Middle Cornish as well (*Merandoc* became *Meransek*), the old stress on the final syllable shifting to the penultimate. Cornwall and Brittany share "P-Celtic" (the *kw-* becoming *p-*,

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whereas the Gaelic of Ireland, Scotland, and the Isle of Man retained the *kw-* though it was later written as *q-* or *c-*). The placenames preserve a once-living language like a fly in amber.

Naturally, Cornish baptisms involved many saints' names familiar to us in the English forms such as *John*, *Mary*, *Michael*, and *James* (which as *Jago* produced such placenames as *Trag* and *Treago*) as well as personal names taken from ancient kings and chieftains (the most famous of which is *Tudor* from Teudar, King of Cornwall). The Cornish form of Constantine is *Custentin*. In the tenth-century "Bodmin Gospels" (a manuscript once in Bodmin Abbey) or "St. Petrock's Gospels" (at whose altar slaves were manumitted) there are 33 names of persons freeing slaves (24 English, 5 Cornish, 4 with Graeco-Roman names) and many names of freed slaves (12 Latin, 12 English, 98 Cornish). That early, some Cornishmen had English names, some Cornish, and a very few one of each. At this point there were no surnames. However, I shall bypass both given and inherited personal names of ordinary individuals, and limit the presentation to the names of the locally revered saints who produced local placenames.

These placenames are to be found not only in the names of churches and holy wells but also in those of parishes (*Budoc* recalls St. Budoc), towns (*Pinnock* is for St. Pynoccus), and so on. Names sometimes undergo drastic alteration. Examples include *Zennor* from St. Senara and *St. Veep* from St. Vepus. There was a Latinizing of Celtic names, a Celticizing of Latin names, and many names that look English (*Penny-Come-Quick* is well known, and signals distortion; most such examples do not) are modified Cornish. Landrake goes back to an eleventh-century *Landerhtun*—this demonstrates the need to look for all the earliest forms of a placename in the archives—and that means the place was *lannergh* 'clearing', *tun* 'farm' or 'town', the common toponymic element *tre* also indicating either town or farm). This Anglicization in placenames likewise occurs in Cornish surnames such as *Tossell* (St. Austell). It is the same kind of thing that in English produced *tawdry* from the fairs of St. Audrey.

There is a problem with such placenames as *Virginstow*, which was dedicated to St. Bridgit, and *Advent*, which seems to come from St. Adwena and not from the Roman Catholic church season. Occasionally the "St." designation is there but the personal name is obscured: *St. Winnock* for St. Winnocus. St. Tudy is one holy person honored on the maps of Cornwall and Brittany. For a while I could find no person for

the placename St. Issey, but eventually I located an obscure saint called St. Idi. Spittle and Field (1990) and various hagiographical references identify some of the saints commemorated in Cornish placenames, but others are not in the official lists of the Church and may indeed be as fabulous as (say) St. Faith or St. Christopher, who are now recognized as mere inventions.

The Irish missionaries, "wandering for the love of God," were early sent by St. Patrick to Cornwall. Famous was St. Peran (sometimes called Piran or Peirian). He is the patron saint of tin miners. They were important in early Cornwall and eventually some migrated to work in the mines of the United States, Canada, Australia, and so on, so Cornish names of both persons and places have spread all over the world.

From Hillary Rodham Clinton, if nowhere else, you will know of St. Hilary. (There are at least a dozen saints of the name, all male.) From the nursery rhyme you will know: As I was going to St. Ives / I met a man with seven wives....

If you have visited Cornwall you may know of *St. Just in Roseland*. There were no roses there originally, just a *ros* 'heath', but in time the natives planted roses to explain the name! Tourists are likely to have encountered also the seventeenth-century mansion of Lord Robartes, *Lanhydrock House* (*lan* meaning enclosure or churchyard of that saint), the resorts of *St. Agnes* and *St. Austell*, the Bronze Age stones standing near *St. Buryans* (called *Boscawen-Un*, *The Merry Maidens* from the Cornish word not for maidens but stones, and *The Pipers*), *St Michael's Mount* (once belonging to monks of *Mont St-Michel* in Brittany), the oratory of St. Piran (a sixth- or seventh-century church, the oldest in Britain still boasting its four walls, near *Perranporth*, where a Norman church to house the saint's relics was also built but sank into the sand in the nineteenth century and was not excavated until after World War I). They may have seen the smaller islands (*St. Mary's*, *St. Martin's*, *St. Helen's*) of the Isles of Scilly (where they do not like to hear them called the "Scilly Isles").

There are other places of interest, of course, in Cornwall. These include: *The Cheesewring* (rocks that resemble one), *The Lizard*, *Falmouth* (mouth of the *Fal*, other major rivers called the *Tamar* and the *Camel*), *Lostwithiel Castle* and *Tintagel* (said to be the site of King Arthur's castle), *Truro* (principal city, with a Victorian cathedral tacked onto a sixteenth-century church), not to mention placenames unusually pronounced, such as "Foy" for *Fowey* and "Muzzle" for *Mousehole*.

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Examples of Placenames of Cornwall from Cornish Saints  
(Many obscure, some perhaps imaginary)

St. Anietus	St. Gulval	St. Nonna
St. Blazey	St. Guron	St. Merteriana
St. Breage	St. Gwennarth	St. Mewen
St. Breward	St. Hilary	St. Moran
St. Clether	St. Hugo	St. Morwena
St. Colanus	St. Hyacinth	St. Mylor
St. Cornelly	St. Hydrock	St. Nectan
St. Credan	St. Ida	St. Neot
St. Crewenna	St. Ildierna	St. Nivet
St. Cubertus	St. Ive	St. Non
St. Cuby	St. Julian	St. Padernus
St. Day	St. Juliot	St. Petherwin
St. Dunstan	St. Julitta	St. Petroc(k)
St. Edelienta	St. Just	St. Pierani de Udnoe
St. Enedoc	St. Kea	St. Pol de Leon
St. Enoder	St. Kerin	(St. Paulinus de Leon)
St. Erme	St. Kew	St. Probus
St. Erney	St. Keyn(e)	St. Rumonus
St. Erth	St. Lô	St. Salwys
St. Ervan	St. Loe	St. Sampson
St. Euny	St. Mabyrn	St. Sativola
St. Eval	St. Madurnus	St. Selevan
St. Ewe	St. Manarca	St. Sidinius
St. Felicitas	St. Marina	St. Stedyana
St. Feoca	St. Marwin	St. Symphorian
St. Filius	St. Maudiz	St. Talian
St. Gennys	St. Maunanas	St. Teath
St. Germans	St. Mawes	St. Tinney
St. Gerrans	St. Mawgan	St. Uny
St. Gluvias	St. Melanus	St. Wendrona
St. Gonandus	St. Melor	St. Wenn
St. Gothian	St. Merrin	St. Wennapa
St. Grada	(St. Merin)	St. Winwall

Examples of English-Language Placenames of Cornwall

Come-to-Good	Jesus Well	Rosewall Hill
Couch's Mill	Kingsand	The Rumps
Fire Beacon Point	Mother Ivey's Bay	Tideford
Hell's Mouth	Newland	Tucking Mill
Hole	Portholland	Widemouth Bay
Hore Stone Hedge	Rock	Yondertown

And here are some of the English names from Cornish origins (with etymologies):

Arrow Park (*garow* 'rough' + *parc* 'plowed field', or possibly *eru* 'one-acre' + *parc*)

Bacchus Park (*bagu* 'bush' + *parc*)

Cold Harbour (*co* 'neck' + *ar* 'over' + *burg* 'town')

Comfort (*cam* 'crooked' + *fordh* 'way')

Gold Arrows (*gweal* 'field' + *daras* 'by the door')

Well Man (*gweal* 'field' + *maen* 'stone')

So you can expect some distortion of saints' names from old Cornish to modern English.

Expectedly, personal names, those of saints included, suffer a little less in transmission than most names. The English penchant for bending names out of shape does not matter a lot because more than 90% of the placenames of Cornwall are in Cornish. A great many places whose names begin with the three very common prefixes found in Cornish placenames: *pen*, *pol*, and *tre*, about which there is familiar rhyme in English: By Tre, Pol, and Pen/You shall know the Cornishmen.

This not only may bring to the minds of literary types the novel *Pendennis* and the play *Trelawney of 'The Wells'* and to television viewers the series *Poldark* but also makes the point that a large number of Cornish surnames are the names of places from which people came. The earliest Cornish extra name was that of the father, but, when inheritable surnames came into use, placenames of origin were often used, along with the equivalents of English *Black*, *White*, *Russell*, and so on, of course. Cornwall produced John of Trevisa (1326-1412) and placenames and surnames such as *Tregaskis*, *Tremaine*, *Trenowth*, *Polglase*, *Polmear*, *Polwhele*, *Penhale*, *Penprase*, and *Penrose*. The

places named for saints did not often produce surnames. Saints were recorded in personal names chiefly in baptismal names; therefore, they served as a sort of surname almost exclusively in the era when the father's surname was attached to the children, a Celtic custom you may know from John Millington Synge's *The Playboy of the Western World*, where the heroine is known as *Pegeen Mike* (Little Peggy, daughter of Michael).

Informative and interesting as all Cornish placenames are, there is, I think, something special and worthy of notice in the placenames in Cornwall that recall their saints, even the very obscure ones whose shrines may be gone but who live on in toponymy.

In Cornwall, no matter how obscure the saint's name is in a place-name, even if hidden in placenames such as *Altarnun* (for St. Non), a real saint is at least intended. This points to even greater piety than we may find in Roman Catholic countries such as Canada (especially Quebec) and Mexico today, although today Cornwall is and has been for a long time decidedly Low Church ("chapel"), despite the fact that Cornwall rose in protest against Edward VI's Protestantism and the Cornish retained Roman Catholic sympathies for a long time until John Wesley made a great appeal to them. Cornwall is basically Methodist, more Methodist than Wesley (who never left the Church of England). It is a long time since there was reason for placenames such as *Altarnun* and *Bodmin* 'monk's house', or even *Penzance* 'holy headland'. Cornwall is dour Methodist country now, a faith that seems to me to go well with the great Atlantic storms and the granite and shale of the landscape.

The Roman Catholic saints are an inheritance from a distant past. Some few of them, in fact, may be pre-Christian divinities in disguise, particularly those associated with holy wells, very early dedicated to pagan gods of water. As in the rest of Britain these wells may be ceremonially decorated on occasion, vaguely recalling old rites. The names of these pagan deities, like the names of old chieftains, are obvious in *Bod Annam* 'Annam's home', St. Breoc Parish, or *Bod-Dell* 'Dell's home', whence surnames such as *Biddle*, as well as the place-name, while others may have to be guessed at. What some of these saints' names mean may also be uncertain. That at least the larger number of them actually were real persons is attested to by the *Register of British Saints* (in manuscript in the library of Cambridge University, the work of the Elizabethan scholar, Nicholas Roscarrock, who was put

into prison because he continued to adhere to his Roman Catholic faith) and by more accessible hagiographies which we need not bother with here. What the saints' names do as names on the land is clearer. They recall the earliest days of the bold Christian missionaries from the "Island of the Saints and Scholars" (Ireland) and the conversion of Cornwall from paganism to Christianity. They emphasize the isolation of Cornwall before the great iron bridge was built over the Tamar in the nineteenth century. They preserve the Roman Catholic names much better than in some other parts of Britain. They recall how the hard life in that often bleak part of the island caused the faithful to turn to saints for protection and solace. They recall how, in an area where so many placenames are merely descriptive and pragmatic, there were also religious names and indeed some extraordinary religious figures.

Examples of religious names include *St. Budoc(k)*, *St. Neot*, *St. Edellion*, and *St. Cleer*, all of whom have places named for them still.

St. Budoc(k)'s mother, Azenor, had been declared unfaithful and had been cast out to sea in a barrel. In that barrel the saint (whose name for English speakers is too close to *buttock* but was much revered in Cornwall) was born. Mother and child were washed ashore and the mother found employment as a washerwoman. The son grew up to be a saint.

St. Neot was given two fish by an angel and was told that if he ate only one each day he would always have fish for dinner. One day his servant made a mistake. (It was hard to get help even then.) The servant cooked not one but both of the fish. St. Neot threw them into a holy well, and everything was—well. St. Neot is said to have been only 15 inches tall, and had an arm preserved as a relic in Cornwall. The rest of his relics were stolen—the practice was common in the Middle Ages—for a church in Cambridgeshire. Stealing of relics reminds us that one good reason for giving a place a saint's name was to attract pilgrims there to visit the relics and leave offerings. In some sense, this is commercial toponymy. (The influence of monetary reward in place-naming I have written about in *Onomastica* of the Canadian Society for the Study of Names, and elsewhere, but, generally, it needs further attention.)

St. Edellion (or Endilion) had a cow which a nasty man killed. Her father killed the man in revenge. The saint kindly brought the man back to life. (No news of the cow.) Her shrine and holy well are in Wade-

bridge. Wadebridge is an odder name than it looks, for *waed* is Old English for 'ford' and *bryog* is for the bridge that replaced it in the fifteenth century.

St. Cleer, a sixth-century hermit in Cornwall, was outraged to see hurlers out enjoying themselves on a Sunday. Hurling is a rather violent Celtic game in which the players bash each other with their sticks, rather like the roughhouse of the Amerindian game that the French explorers called lacrosse. To preserve the quiet of the Lord's Day, St. Cleer turned the players, magically, to stone. Don't believe it? At Liskeard (the *lys* or 'court' of someone called Kerwyd) you can see the stone circle for yourself. It is, naturally, called *The Hurlers*. (Note in passing that the names of tourist sites tend to be in English).

I hope you will agree that the saints' names on the map of Cornwall are interesting. I hope you will further agree that there is much to be learned from even this tiny topic and the place that has the *pen von lass* (end of the earth) at Land's End and many another strikingly named feature. These placenames help to bring to you a people with a long and colorful history, and fascinating folklore. They are a people who were more than wild Britons, smugglers, wreckers, miners, and for very long (like the Welsh, whose Celtic origins they share) "strangers" (which is what *Welsh* means) to the English. The Cornish race of people is also of interest to us in North America. In our history are such Cornish names as those of John Hancock and Dashiell Hammett, Ezra Cornell and John Berryman. Our Canadian cousins can note the famous twentieth-century physician Wilder Penfield and James Yeo, a prominent figure in nineteenth-century Prince Edward Island.

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