

Meyn Mamvro

ANCIENT STONES & SACRED SITES
OF WEST PENWITH. Issue 1 £1.20



CRAIG WEATHERHILL on Cornish Fogous
HUGH MINERS writes about the Gorseth
HOLY WELLS • MILPREVES • PAGANISM
LEYS & EARTH MYSTERIES • BOOK REVIEWS

CONTENTS

Editorial	p. 1
The Gorseth of Cornwall - Hugh Miners	p. 2
The Riddle of the Fogous - Craig Weatherhill	p. 5
Milpreves, or Adder's Beads - Jo O'Cleirigh	p.10
Ley No. 1 for West Penwith	p.12
Holy Water - Carol Slater	p.14
West Penwith Wells	p.17
Paganism in West Penwith - Cheryl Straffon	p.18
Book Reviews	p.22
The Pipers Tune	p.24

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And to all those who have given me such help and encouragement in the setting-up of this magazine, in particular Tony, Carol, Jan and Jo, and of course Arthur. And to those, especially Hugh Miners, Craig Weatherhill and Alan Bleakely who responded so positively to my insistent requests for contributions! And a big raspberry to the one person only I asked for help who totally ignored me! To all who gave of their time and effort freely my gratitude. I only hope I have done them justice.

Cheryl Straffon 11/86.

MEYN MAMVRO

**EARTH ENERGIES • ANCIENT STONES • SACRED SITES • PAGANISM • LEYPATHS
CORNISH PRE-HISTORY & CULTURE • MEGALITHIC MYSTERIES • LEGENDS & FOLKLORE**

Meyn Mamvro (Cornish for 'Stones of our Motherland') is a new magazine for Cornwall and specifically West Penwith - that special part lying to the 'west of the Hayle river'. West Penwith has perhaps the greatest concentration of ancient sites in the whole of Western Europe, and its landscape has always attracted and stimulated writers, artists and lovers of the stones - those able to respond to its unique atmosphere and character. Those writers, artists and stone-lovers have all responded in their own ways, but until now have lacked a (hopefully) regular forum for their ideas, views and discoveries of the landscape. Meyn Mamvro aims to provide that forum, that outlet, for an exchange of ideas and interests in the fields of earth studies, archaeology, Cornish culture and paganism. These different categories are not mutually exclusive - what they all have in common is a respect for our land, a great interest in the monuments and sites of the past built on it and in relationship to it, and a desire to protect and preserve both the land itself and the way in which men and women have responded to that land.

At a time when our precious earth and ancient history is increasingly under threat - from the Chairman of Geevor mine who wants to dump nuclear waste down it, from the landowners who unthinkingly clear the ancient sites, destroying 5000 years in one act of sacrilege (as has happened on Truthwell Common and near Chysauster), from the despoilers and speculators who would turn our country into just another part of England - it is more important than ever to record, investigate and respond to the ancient sites and ways. We cannot ignore the present, but we must care for and preserve the past, if we are to have any future. Meyn Mamvro hopes in its own small way to contribute to this: its title aims to sum up the three axis of our viewpoint - a title in Cornish incorporating the ancient stones of our Motherland, our earth and Neolithic and Celtic heritage.

But while we aim to locate our articles in West Penwith by people living in or near the area, or associated with it, we hope the magazine will be of wider interest to those who live outside Cornwall but who have visited it and responded to its special qualities. We hope that readers will feel stimulated by the magazine to write to us with their reactions and responses to its articles and their own ideas and feelings about the area. We have deliberately angled the magazine to be of interest to a wide range of people who can respond to our land and our past, and not 'narrowcast' ourselves to any one particular -ism. At the same time we have tried to produce a professional and polished magazine that can be read and enjoyed by outsider and insider, amateur and professional, alike, and bridge the worlds between sometimes separate interests and disciplines, allowing a great breadth of vision and creating an interaction of knowledge.

West Penwith has long needed an Earth Mysteries/Archaeological/Pagan magazine - now it has one. Please support it by telling others of it, and buying copies. A new venture like this very much depends on a good level of response so we can carry on with it. Copies may be obtained direct from:



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The Gorseth of Cornwall

BY HUGH MINERS

The 1986 Gorseth (or Gorsedd), the annual gathering of the Bards of Cornwall, took place at the Merry Maidens stone circle in West Penwith. So it is very appropriate that the first article in the first edition of this magazine should take a look at this ceremony, now over 50 years old, but, as Hugh Miners points out in this article, probably of much greater ancestry. Many people know of the Gorseth, but not so many know about it and how it relates to our motherland of Cornwall, so we are especially fortunate in having an article written for "Meyn Mamvro" by Hugh Miners, past Grand Bard of the Gorseth.

Hugh Miners was born Madron parish, and brought up in Penzance for the most part. He soon gained an interest in prehistoric Cornwall and that and walking remain his paramount interests. After a career in Customs & Excise, he retired back to Cornwall with his wife Joan, who is also a Bard of the Gorseth. He has been, in his time, Chairman of the London Cornish Association; President & Chairman of the Bristol Cornish Association; President of the Penzance Old Cornwall Society; President of the Federation of Old Cornwall Societies; and Grand Bard of Cornwall.

The slight breeze gently billowing her full blue robes, topped by the Arabian-type head-dress in the same colour but bearing a distinctive band of black and gold - Cornwall's colours - across the forehead, the Horner stepped before the dais, raised the curved instrument of polished bone and sounded a throaty, rather melancholy series of mono-tones to the four corners of the land, each series being followed by a declamation in the ancient Celtic tongue of Cornwall by the Herald Bard: "Cornwall of the North" (or South, East or West) "Clew galow an Orseth" - "Hear the call of Cornwall."

Thus, annually on the first Saturday in September, at 3 o'clock the way is prepared for the Grand Bard of Cornwall to open the Gorseth



Ceremony as have his predecessors in every year, barring the War Years, since 1928 when, at Boscawen-Un, Arch-Druid Pedrog of Wales inaugurated the first Gorsedd of Cornwall. Fifty-eight years is not a long span of life for a ceremony which is virtually the only public appearance of an organisation dedicated to “the preservation of the Celtic Spirit of Cornwall” and harks back to the time of the Celtic hegemony which followed the withdrawal from Britain of the Roman legions in AD 410, or even earlier.

At that time, each petty kingdom, principedom or clan boasted its own Bard, a person of considerable importance for his or her knowledge of their history, their music, their poetry, and, above all, the genealogy of the ruler or rulers and their titles to land, property and position. On occasions bards would assemble for competitions in poetry and song - such an assembly was called a Gorsedd. (I commend to those readers not acquainted with early Celtic poetry the verses of Taliesin and Llywarch Fawr in old Welsh ballads) In a society where all communication was oral with no written matter whatsoever, the beauty of these poems whether epic or tragic is unsurpassed and the sentiments soul-stirring.

With the break-down of the Celtic Society, and its replacement by the much less accomplished Teutonic, the role and the skill of the Bard dwindled, so that, probably by the time of the Norman Conquest the tradition had died in Cornwall. In Wales, however, it lingered on, and a tenuous connection with the first days of Celtic Art lasted until, at the end of the 18th Century a rise of interest in our past, and particularly that which (usually wrongly) was associated with the Druids, led to the Welsh people developing and strengthening their Gorsedd and Eisteddfod, until now the Royal National Eisteddfod of Wales is one of the great festivals of music and poetry of the world, and its Gorsedd the central piece of glorious pageantry and soul-stirring appeal to all that is fine in the Welsh love of ‘home and beauty’.

For Cornwall’s connection with this one must go back to the end of the 18th Century again, not to a re-birth of an ancient culture, but to the death of an equally ancient language; for when Dolly Pentreath and her contemporaries in Mousehole and Paul were buried they took with them to the grave the Celtic tongue which had been the language of the Cornish people for 2000 years. Paradoxically, its death inspired a growing interest amongst antiquarians who painstakingly

researched scraps of written Cornish, and gradually rebuilt the language in part at least, so that, in 1893 Henry Jenner, who was born in St. Columb Major, was able to make a speech in Cornish which his Breton audience could follow. Other Cornish men and women followed him: the dawn of the 20th Century saw Robert Morton Nance captivated by the thought and ambition of fully reviving the tongue and, with, preserving as many as possible of "the fragments" of old Cornish customs, words, games, sayings, etc. To this end, an Old Cornwall Society arose in many Cornish towns and villages, so that, by 1928, there was such an extent and depth of interest in our past and such a desire to be part of a great Celtic Revival in these Islands that Jenner and Nance, together with other distinguished Cornish people, petitioned the Arch-Druid of Wales to inaugurate a daughter-Gorsedd here. And thus on a fine sunny day in the Summer of that year the First Gorsedd of Cornwall was held, amongst great enthusiasm, as the local paper reflected.

Boscawen-un was chosen because it is probably the site of one of the three most holy places in ancient southern Britain, the other two being Caerleon and Salisbury Plain, but the Gorsedd has since been held annually at a different ancient site - cross, cromlech, menhir, well, etc. - up and down Cornwall. Its ceremony is conducted in the Cornish language.

1986 saw its return to Penwith, to the Merry Maidens. It was blessed, as always, with fine weather (only once since 1928 has it been rained-off!) as the procession of blue-robed bards, led by the Gorsedd banner, its three golden rays signifying respectively Truth, Wisdom and Love, entered the circle, the Grand Bard, his officers and guests. The Opening, with Gorsedd prayer, is followed by a Children's Dance, the offering of the Fruits of the Earth by the Lady of Cornwall, a roll call of Bards who have died during its past 12 months, the reception of new Bards, the Oath of Fealty, and the closing and the Procession away from the circle. This last ceremony was notable by reason of the presence of a contingent of Cornish folk from Australia, of whom four were made bards.

A large slice of the afternoon is occupied by the presentation of many trophies for all types of poetry, music, arts and crafts won in open competitions organised and run by the Gorsedd, which is thereby encouraging the growth in volume and excellence of a wide variety of cultural and artistic activities, and in this way renewing and strengthening its links with our distant past, whilst at the same time pushing forward to a fine native culture in the years to come.

In a short article it is impossible to do more than cover the more prominent points but the attention of those who wish to know more about our Gorsedd is drawn to the official history of the Gorsedd: "Gorsedd Kernow - the First Fifty Years" by Den Toll, the writer of this article. It is obtainable from most bookshops or direct from Dyllansow Truran of Redruth.



Article (c) Hugh Miners. Photograph (c) Editress.

THE RIDDLE OF THE FOGOUS

BY CRAIG WEATHERHILL

Craig Weatherhill is well known and respected by lovers of Cornish ancient sites as author of "Belerion - Ancient Sites of Lands End (Alison Hodge 1981, reprinted 1985); and "Cornovia - Ancient Sites of Cornwall and Scilly" (Alison Hodge 1985). He is a Committee member of the Cornwall Archaeological Society and on the Council of the Cornwall Heritage Trust as well as being Bard 'Delynyer Hendhyscans' (Draughtsman of Archaeology) of the Gorseth. He regularly broadcasts on Radio Cornwall, and is currently working on a new book "The First and Last Wilderness" about all facets of the Penwith Moors. He has recently completed his first children's book "The Lyonesse Stone" which he is trying to get published. He has an article published on "The Tinners Way" in Cornish Life Magazine (August 1986), and has especially written this following article on Cornish fogous for this magazine.

In all of Kernow's vast wealth of ancient sites, there is nothing as mysterious as a fogou. Even today, the speculation, discussion and outright argument regarding their original function rages on as they have for years.

These curious, passage-like structures - their name comes from the Cornish word **fogo**: a cave - belong to a group of monuments also found in Brittany, Ireland, and Scotland, and which are collectively known as Souterrains. They are not found in Wales or the remainder of Britain.

The Breton souterrains appear to be the oldest, followed by the Cornish fogous, and both belong to the Later Iron Age and Roman period - roughly, between the 7th century BC and the 1st century AD. Those of Ireland and Scotland seem to be later in date, being built during the Early Christian period.

Over the years, a number of misconceptions have emerged regarding the subject of fogous, the first of which is that they are purely underground structures. Of the twelve examples which survive in Cornwall, four can be considered as underground, four semi-underground, and four were built totally above ground. Evelyn Clark, in her book "Cornish Fogous" (1961), held that all fogous with the exception of that at Boleigh, St. Buryan, were

through passages with an entrance at each end. In fact, this is only certainly true of one of the passages at the huge site of Halligey, Trelowarren, although it could have been the case at four other sites.



*Piskey Hall Fogou,
Constantine*

Of the twelve survivors, eleven can still be seen in their various states of preservation, but the twelfth, at North Treveneague near St. Hilary, has been lost since the turn of the century. It is presumed buried but not destroyed.

In most cases, fogous consist of a long passage five or six feet wide and often six feet or more in height, their walls corbelling inward at the top in all cases bar Piskey Hall, Constantine. This passage is usually curved, often the gentle, sweeping curve beloved of Celtic craftsmen and artists, although Pendeen Vau contains quite a sharp bend.

Subsidiary passages are common, including tiny ones aptly described as "creeps". All fogous were associated with settlements: either the Courtyard House villages of West Penwith, or the palisaded settlements known as Rounds, and none occur east of the Fal estuary. Two distinct geographical groups emerge from the map: West Penwith (with an outlier at St. Hilary), and a small area around the head of the Helford River.

The total length of fogous varies wildly; from the 23 feet at the above ground example at Bosulow Trehyllys, discovered a few years ago by the writer; to the 126 feet of Halligey, with passages as much as seven feet high.

Best known of all is the beautiful fogou at Carn Euny, which was thoroughly excavated by Patricia Christie over the years 1964-72. Her most significant finding was that the fogou was a multi-phased construction.

The oldest part is the amazing round chamber which, as an underground structure, is quite unique although it is echoed almost to the inch by the above-ground fogou at Bosporthenis known as the "Beehive Hut." Carn Euny's round chamber, built at around 500 BC, was entered by a straight passage from the south-east, which survives in part. At a later date, maybe a couple of centuries later, the curving Long Passage was built, cutting across the entrance passage to the Round Chamber and running from south-west to north-east. At this stage, the entire fogou was **completely closed**, except for the tiny creep which angles steeply to the surface near the south-western end.

The north-eastern entrance was opened up when the adjoining courtyard houses were built in the 1st century BC or AD. The present south-west entrance has only been open in recent times and was never a part of the fogou during its years of use.

And so we come to the question which has caused so much discussion and argument: what was the use to which Fogous were put?

Three ideas are currently on offer: i) Refuges ii) Storage chambers iii) Religious or ritual cult centres. To this day, no-one knows for sure. Despite five excavations using modern methods, the fogous stubbornly cling to their secrets, even though some recent books unfoundedly claim that fogous were storage chambers. If this were true, what possible use was the Carn Euny fogou when, for a long time, the only way in and out was by means of a tiny, awkward passage less than three feet square?

Excavation has shown in all cases that secrecy was not essential: even the great fogou at Halligey would have been obvious to anyone standing on the surface. The idea of refuge, then, is highly doubtful, and once inside, the occupants could have been smoked out with ease.

As an archaeologist, albeit amateur and restricted to "spare-time" pursuit of the subject, I have often been criticised for studying folk-lore and legend in search of clues to such mysteries, but mere narrow-mindedness fails to convince me that the study of legend is valueless.

The fogou at Higher Bodinnar, now little more than a bare, stony ditch, was said to be haunted by spriggans. Pendeen Vau and Boleigh's "Fogie Hole" were both believed to be of incredible extent. Pendeen had its Christmas ghost, but the legend of Duffy and the Devil contains a vivid account of witchcraft and devilry in the Bo'eigh fogou. Could this be the folk memory of pre-Christian rites held in those far-off Iron Age days? Gerald Priestland, in "West of the Hayle River" (1980) suggests that these rites included the sexual elements which have found their way into modern Satanism (and after all, doesn't the present view of the Devil as a horned being originate with Cernunnos, the horned Celtic god of the underworld who, like the fogous themselves, was a Gaulish import to Britain.) The legend tells that the devil soundly "kicked" the witches. Priestland suggests that this word was substituted for a coarser one, and that the tail being twirled by the devil (or the man in the guise of a devil) was a bull's pizzle.

Of all the fogous, it is Boleigh which seems to be giving us hints of its former purpose. Jo May, who runs the Centre for Alternative Education and Research, is lucky enough to have this very fogou within the grounds of his Centre and, according to him, the fogou's atmosphere is especially conducive to meditation. One psychic asserts that this atmosphere is one of healing, and dowrsers say that there is a strong field of energy fifteen feet wide along the path of the fogou.

The monument itself provides a visual clue, for on one of its entrance jambs is a carving: a rough, bas-relief image of the upper half of a human figure. Both arms, held horizontally from the shoulders, are upraised at the elbow. The figure's right hand holds a staff or spear while the other brandishes a diamond-shaped object which may be a serpent's head, or the ram's horns often depicted on the heads of snakes in Celtic carvings. The body of the serpent, if such it is, is wrapped around the wrist of the raised hand and the tail faintly hangs down behind the shoulder.



The Fogou, Chysauster

The enigmatic figure has been seen by some to have long hair, but my own interpretation of the carving is that the figure is hooded. No facial features can be discerned. The style of the carving, which is about a foot and a half high, is noticeably Celtic and, if genuinely so, would be the only known Iron Age carving in Cornwall.

The figure almost certainly represents a Celtic god, perhaps one associated with healing. The serpent is a symbol used by many mythologies to represent this art and Celtic deities such as Dianecht, the Gaelic god of healing (the Brythonic equivalent of his name or sect hasn't survived) were always associated with serpents, as was Cernunnos.

However, the hooded figure seems to be one of the nameless **genii cucullati**, hooded godlets which are sometimes depicted in triplicate as well as singly. At times, they are shown to accompany a greater god of the Celtic pantheon, and are often shown in association with a horned serpent. Again, these dwarfish deities are Gaulish imports, and wear the Gaulish hooded cloaks. The fact that they are apparently dwarves may explain the origin of the spriggan legend found at Higher Bodinnar. More importantly, these godlings are linked with prosperity, healing and fertility, and in this last, we are back to the hints of the Duffy and the Devil legend.

The notion that the fogous of Cornwall were religious or ritual buildings, associated with healing and fertility, is not a new one, but I hope that my deliberations add to the supporting evidence for this interpretation, which is far and away the best on offer.

The more hard-nosed for scholars may look on this interpretation as overly mystic, but I would answer that the Celtic religions of more than 2000 years ago are as mystic and mysterious to us, as modern Christianity, and its curious rituals, (such as the Holy Communion) would be to them.

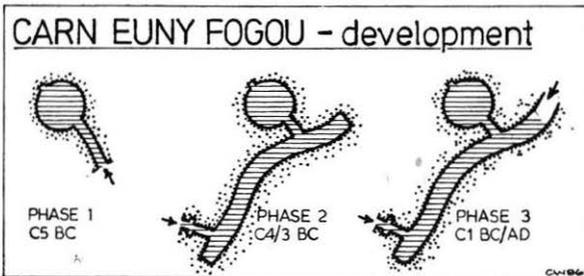
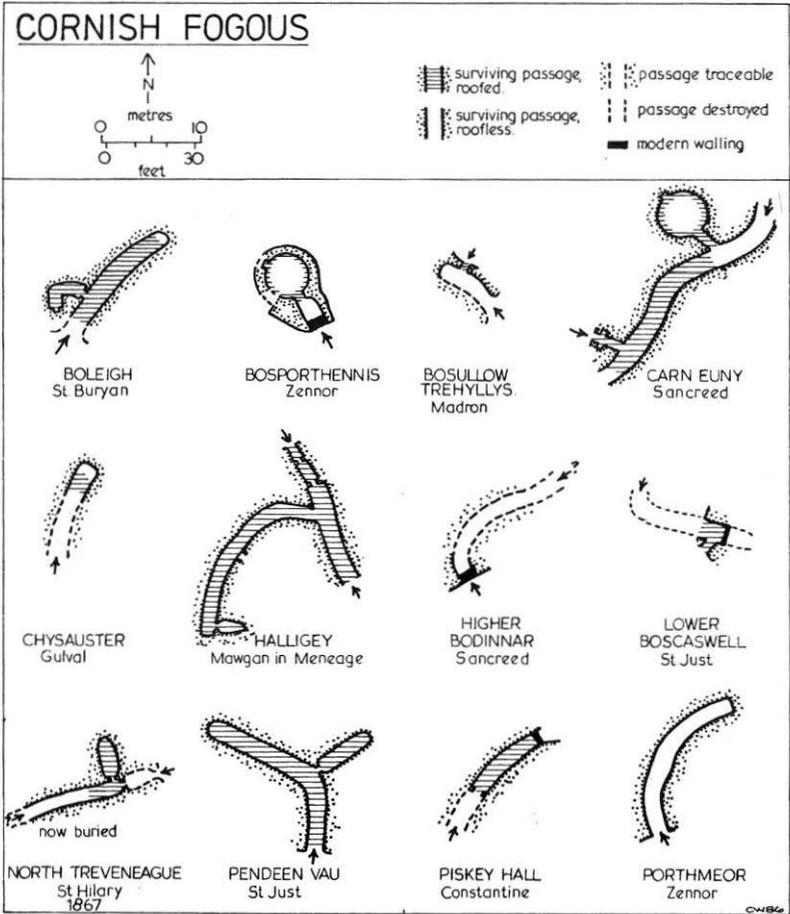
Like parish churches, Celtic settlements seem to have sprung up around the fogous (as the Carn Euny evidence suggests), and, like a modern church, a fogou may have witnessed many types of

ritual apart from its prime function; such as "christenings", marriages, funeral services, and harvest ceremonies. The analogy, I think, is an apt one, and until future findings show otherwise (and we're running out of fogous to excavate), I will continue to believe that the function of the Cornish fogou was a religious one, and that each fogou was to its settlement and people what a parish church is to us today.

Article & Photography (c) Craig Weatherhill



Carn Euny Iron Age Fogou, Penzance. The Long Passage.



MILPREVES - OR ADDERS BEADS - A POSSIBLE CONNECTION WITH THE DRUIDS

BY JO O'CLEIRIGH

Jo's background is in archaeology and he has been on many excavations and digs. He was a voluntary worker on excavations from 1956-1965, and assistant to Dr. Wainwright full time from 1965-71, during which time he took part in excavations on late Neolithic henges, such as Durrington Wells, Marden and Mt. Pleasant. He was also at But (City of Snake Goddess) on the Nile Delta for 4 seasons, Osiris dig for 3 seasons, Akhenaten Temple Project for 3 seasons, and Upper Egypt for 9 seasons until 1982. Since then he has been planner and artist at the Kummos Minoan site in South Crete for 5 seasons. He lives in Lamorna Valley, where he is a practising pagan, and founder of the Pan-Pagan School of West Penwith.

The white witch in Cornwall, usually known as a Pellar, very often wore a magical ring or perforated bead made from a blue stone or of glass which had a zig-zag yellow line running through it. These were known as Milpreves or Adders Beads, the former from the Cornish 'mylpryf' - a thousand snakes.

Carew in 1602 wrote:¹ "The country people retain a conceit that the snakes by their breathing about a hazel wand doe make a stone ring of blew colour in which there appeareth the yellow figure of a snake, and that beasts which are stung, being given to drink of the water wherein this stone hath been soaked, will there through recover." One which he had been given had been found with a stick in it.

William Bottrell in 1880² comments to this effect that: "Others were supplied (by the Pellar) with blood stones, milpreves, or snake-stones... manufactured by the pellar family, to be worn as amulets. The blue-stone rings, in which some fancied they saw the figure of an adder, or when marked with yellow veins the pattern of a snake, were particularly prized, because it was believed that those who wore them were by that means safe from being harmed by any reptile of the serpent tribe."

One of these beads is to be seen in Penzance Museum Penlee House and is mentioned by Borlase writing in 1872³. He refers to it as the Clain

Neider or Adders Bead, and says that this example was found in the neighbourhood of the Boscawen Un stone circle and the barrows close by. It appears to be made of glass of a blueish colour, and has a wavy yellow line surrounding it. He describes how T.Q. Couch told him of one in his possession which was found in a stone cairn near Fowey. The Penzance Museum say that this type of bead is Romano-British in origin, and if so it would seem that there is a long tradition of manufacture of these in Cornwall.



In an article by Henry Jenner (which I have not yet located) he is referred to as having pointed out that the Milpreve constitutes the last surviving link between recent Cornish inhabitants and the Druids; and although the Druidic examples to which I shall refer are not so much beads as eggs, the belief about their coming into being via the congress of snakes seems to be a convincing link between them. Lewis Spence⁴ refers to Pliny concerning the Druids who wrote that they were suspended from their necks the serpent egg, an oval ball of crystal said to be produced from the foam of serpents meeting in congress. He described the snakes twining together in a mass and throwing off these globes, which were formed from their viscous slime. By their hissing the ball was cast into the air, a Druid caught it in a cloth before it fell and made off on a swift horse. The snakes pursued him but if he crossed a running stream first, he could retain it. Pliny himself had seen a specimen.

Spence also quotes the Welsh Bard Aneurin:-

“The quick glancing ball,
The adder’s bright precious produce,
The ejaculation of serpents.”

Robert Graves⁵ mentions:- “An early Cornish poem (which) describes how the Druid Merddin, or Merlin, went early in the morning with his black dog to seek the glain, or magical snake’s egg...” Graves though suggests that these may be a fossilised sea-urchin found sometimes in Iron Age burials, and it may well be that we are dealing with different, though related, magical objects.

One of the names used for the Druids was ‘Nadredd’ or ‘Adders’, and Davis⁶ thought that these eggs were manufactured in the Summer at a given moon. Kendrick⁷ says that snake stones were used in Cornwall, Wales, Scotland and Ireland, and were also called ‘Druids Glass’. Many of them date from the first two or three centuries before the Christian era. The Cornish association of a hazel wand with the Milpreve may be explained by Grave’s claim that the hazel is the tree of wisdom and so suited to wise women and men, and is also the tree of white magic and healing.

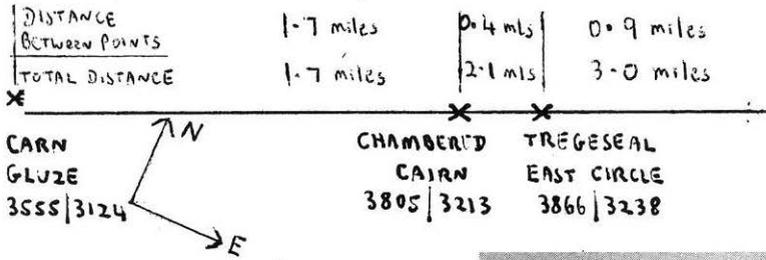
Article & Photo (c) Carol Slater

(Editor’s note): A further reference to milpreaves may be found in Bottrell³ where he describes an occasion when an adder got into a pot of milk which a man who was cutting turf on the moors near St. Buryan brought with him to drink. He imprisoned the adder by placing a turf on the mouth of the pot, which by making a peculiar noise attracted other adders. The turf-cutters enclosed the adders in a ring of furze and set fire to it. Bottrell comments “They say that the noise made by the burning adders was frightful, and that a great number of milpreaves were found in the ashes.”

REFERENCES

- 1 - ‘Survey of Cornwall’ - Carew (1602)
- 2 - ‘Traditions and Hearthside Stories’ : William Bottrell (1870)
- 3 - ‘Naenia Cornubiae’ : W.C. Borlase (1872)
- 4 - ‘The Magic Arts of the Celts’ : Lewis Spence
- 5 - ‘The White Goddess’ - Robert Graves
- 6 - ‘Mythology and Rites of the British Druids’ : Davis
- 7 - ‘The Druids’ - Kendrick





WEST PENWITH LEY LINES - No. 1

This classic ley was first noted by Lockyer in 1909 as an alignment between Tregeseal (East) stone circle and the Boswens menhir on the far horizon, marking the May Day sunrise. According to John Michell (1974), the tip of the menhir is just visible on the skyline from a position a few feet to the east of the circle, though in fact the very tip is visible from the circle itself. He adds: "If a person were to climb on top of it, he would be visible from the circle itself." As far as one can tell, it would also have been visible from Tregeseal Central, and perhaps Tregeseal West circles, now both destroyed, (though the latter is more doubtful) although it is only the one remaining circle of the 3 that incorporates the alignment. Boswens is however much more prominent and visible from higher ground to the west and north-east of the circle.

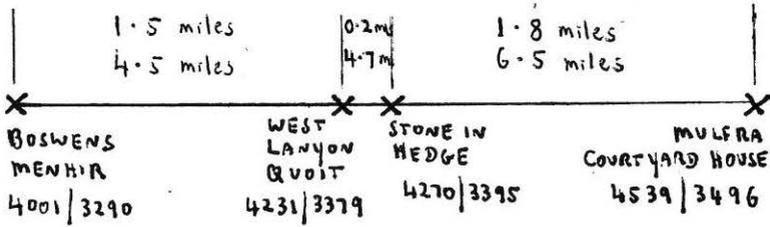


Looking back at Tregeseal Circle from Boswens Mehir

Michell subsequently extended the ley north-eastwards to West Lanyon Quoit, from where Boswens is not quite visible, but from higher ground a few feet to the east of the Quoit it comes into sight. However, West Lanyon was once covered by a tall mound, from the summit of which it would have been visible. Michell continues the ley to the ruins of an ancient settlement below Mulfra Quoit (though there are a number of courtyard houses here), and has subsequently discovered a possible intermediary ley point - a stone in the hedge at the edge of the field near West Lanyon farm.



West Lanyon Quoit - Boswens is on hill top right of picture



The ley, impressive as it is, can however be further extended backwards from Tregeseal East circle where it crosses two further ancient sites. The first, just over the brow of a hill at the edge of Kenidjack Common, is the Tregeseal Chambered Cairn. An unusual entrance grave, it is now buried amongst the gorse and bracken and rather difficult to find, but the chamber passage is quite well preserved.



Tregeseal Chambered Tomb

Finally, the ley ends beside one of the major megalithic buildings in West Penwith; Carn Gluze or Ballowal Barrow. Described by Craig Weatherhill as “a huge complex and magnificent monument... the like of which is unknown”, he postulates that sacred rituals were once performed there by the last of the megalithic builders. The fact that the ley can be extended in this way is strong confirmation for the veracity of this alignment: there are at least 6 major points during its length of 6½ miles, including a complex burial chamber, a chambered cairn, a stone circle, a standing stone, a quoit and a courtyard house. Three of the points would have been intervisible (just), two of which marked an astronomical alignment. The western point at which it ends is arguably the last monument in West Penwith, in Cornwall, at the very end of the land (assuming that it did not extend further into ‘Lyonesse!!) If leys do not exist, then someone has invented something quite extraordinary here!

holy water

BY CAROL SLATER

Carol Slater has lived in West Penwith for the last 10 years, where she has worked as a restorer of pottery and porcelain. She is also an artist and writer, and works in watercolour and pencil. She has contributed articles to numerous magazines, writing about the stones, earth mysteries, old customs & traditions, etc. She belongs to the Folklore Society and takes a keen interest in all related subjects.

In remote times springs and wells, rivers and lakes were regarded as mysterious spirit haunted places.

The water brought fertility to man and beast and to the land where it flowed. So it was believed that such a force must house a very powerful spirit to which both sacrifice and ceremony were due.

It was a widely held belief that there could be no new life without a death - it was common practice to make a sacrifice, often human, to ensure the continuation of life or the succession of crops.

To the Celts water not only brought fertility but housed a mother-goddess; patron of all wells and springs was the goddess Coventina. But rivers too took their names from Celtic deities and became the personification of the goddess. They mirrored her supernatural force of strength and the powers of destruction and fertility. Sacrifice to the goddess was a decapitated head which was regarded by the Celts as a symbol of fertility, divinity and otherworld powers. It became the guardian of the well and was thought to placate evil forces, ensure a constant supply of water and help guard against drowning and floods.

Celtic warriors decorated skulls with gold and silver and used them as cups for offering to the goddess and it became custom to drink the spring or well water from a skull. This practice survived into the present century at St. Teilo's well in Pembroke, where the saint's skull was kept at a nearby farm. It was thought necessary for a member of the custodians family to fill the skull with well water and hand it to the patient for a cure to be induced.

In Scottish tradition also there is a strong belief in the efficacy of spring water drunk from the skull of an ancestor. Tradition suggests that water was drunk



*Madrons Well
& rags hung
as a votive
offering or a
protection from
evil forces.*

from human skulls in order to acquire the desirable qualities of the dead person.

Wells were seen as entrances to the magical underworld and deep shafts were cut into the earth as ritual wells. Skulls bones, pottery, coins and pebbles were thrown there as offerings. Much later when human sacrifice became less acceptable young girls were married to the various rivers and streams to appease the spirits that caused the floods. Wells and springs were honoured with ceremony and dance and decorated with flowers and greenery.

Evidence has shown that the water cult was widespread throughout Europe and traditional tales and customs are many. Running water was said to be particularly effective in keeping away evil spirits and the Celts often buried their dead on islands or else they dug moats around the tombs into which rain water could run.

Wells were used for purification, sacrifice, divination, cursing an enemy, fertility and forecasting the weather.

The old lore of geomancy placed each country, district and piece of land under the influence of a particular astrological sign. Each sign corresponded with a different part of the body. Thus one well may be known for its virtue in healing rheumatism another eyes and so on. Although wells could be visited and cures taken at any time many were only at their most potent on the seasonal festival days of the year. The old festivals of Lughnasad, Imbolc, Beltane and Samhain were popular days as well as midsummer day.

When Christianity came water worship was forbidden. Many of the Saints made their homes

near the wells and springs not only for domestic reasons but for the purpose of baptism. Gradually they put an end to the old rites and ceremonies by superimposing their own saints days onto the days of pagan festival and thus finally obliterating the old ways. The wells were purged of their old pagan associations, purified and rededicated, often to the virgin Mary or one of the saints. They were still decorated with flowers and honoured with procession and thanksgiving but these ceremonies were now for the glory of God, who gave the gift of water.

Instead of sacrifice, pilgrimage was now made to the more important wells in order to be healed by the holy waters. But much of the ritual remained. Pilgrims were instructed to walk three times sunwise or clockwise around the well before taking the waters. Only the devil and witches went anti-clockwise. After taking the waters an offering was given and a bead, pin, pebble or coin was thrown into the water while the prayer was repeated. If the request was for the curing of a disease then a fragment of clothing was spat upon dipped into the well and hung on a nearby tree. There are several thoughts on this custom. Some said as the cloth rotted so the ailment for which the pilgrim sought a cure would fade away. That if the well dried up its spirit would be moved to the nearby sacred tree. Some said it was merely an offering and others that it kept the supernatural at bay. Whatever the real reason there are similar customs in Indian, Ceylon, Iran, Abyssinnia and Arabia.

Over the centuries meanings for the different well ritual were lost or obscured or had a Christian version superimposed. Crucial information was gone forever. Nowadays many wells lie forgotten and overgrown but there are still some who believe in their power and the occasional cure is still sought. It is hard to believe that once their waters were all powerful and wrought so many amazing documented cures. What now seems certain is that ancient man not only knew about the power but that somehow, perhaps through ceremony he was able to reactivate it. This life force then pulsed through the wells and springs like a series of arteries recharging and having the power to heal all living things.



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WEST PENWITH WELLS

The 2½" OS maps for the area list a great number of 'wells', but the antiquity and sanctity of many of these is in doubt. Vivien Russell gives over 15 holy wells in her survey (Cornwall Archaeological Society, 1971), but some of these are now lost or destroyed, such as Gulval, Morvah & Chapel Jane (Treen). Others that remain are in a very ruined or despoiled state, many being little more than overgrown muddy patches. The following list includes most of the remaining well-known sites, and in addition one or two that are much less referred to or visited. If any others are known please let us have details (Ed.)

MADRON (446328)

"One of the most famous Holy Wells in Cornwall" (Lane-Davies) Chapel nearby. Well is a stone-lined hole in the ground. Pieces of cloth are often tied to trees & bushes nearby (see photo in article).

SANCREED (418293)

In a prominent grove of trees on the slope of Sancreed Beacon. Stone steps lead down to an underground vault. Approach by path through Glebe farm. "The spot always seems to me to possess a greater air of mystery and sanctity than any other in Cornwall" (Lane-Davies). Ruined chapel and modern Celtic cross beside well. Winter moonrise visible from clearing in the trees.

ST. LEVAN'S WELL (381219)

Stands above Porthchapel beach. Small square roofless building, its floor a massive slab of stone over a spring. "The water is still used for baptisms in the church" (Thomas, etc). Old flight of steps leads from the well down to scanty remains of St. Levan's chapel on cliff edge.

CHAPEL EUNY (399288)

Near Carn Euny ancient site. Mentioned by Borlase (1757) & Hunt (1865) as being a particularly potent healing well. Tradition of children being dipped 3 times against the sun and dragged 3 times around the well on the grass in the same direction. (See article). 7 steps lead down to a clear spring. There is a second well a few paces to the west.

LOWER BOSCASWELL (377346)

Not far from a ruined fogou. Formerly a chapel there. Well is protected by a cairn of stones.

HIGHER BOSCASWELL (387341)

An unmarked and little known well beside path skirting bottom of Carn Eanes. 4 steps lead down to clear water.

COT VALLEY (365305)

Lies just over a small bridge over a stream beside a hidden track running round back of some cottages to Youth Hostel. (Permission from cottage should be sought to visit). Difficult to find and little visited, but beautifully situated. Steps lead down to clear water where flowers have recently been left as an offerings.

CHUN CASTLE (405339)

A stone-lined well can be seen at the north of the inner courtyard. According to Craig Weatherhill it has never dried up, despite its height, even during drought years.

ALSIA WELL (395252)

About 1½ miles from St. Buryan. Mentioned by Bottrell (1870) as a healing well - "mothers come from far and near with their weak and rickety children that may be strengthened by being bathed in its waters", and also by Quiller Couch (1894) as a wishing well, the fall of pebbles and pins giving rise to bubbles, the number of which foretold the number of years before sweethearts would be united or parted.

SOURCES

BORLASE: Natural History of Cornwall (1758)/HUNT: Popular Romances of the West of England (1865)/BOTTRELL: Hearthside Stories of West Cornwall (1870)/Q.COUCH: Ancient & Holy Wells of Cornwall (1894)/LANE-DAVIES: Holy Wells of Cornwall (1970)/RUSSELL: West Penwith Survey (1971)/THOMAS etc: Principal Antiquities of the Lands End District. (Rev. 1980).

paganism in West Penwith

BY CHERYL STRAFFON

Cheryl Traffon, Editress of this magazine, spent the first Celtic cycle of 19 years in Kernow before graduating from London & Cambridge universities. After working in bookselling, training, and librarianship she returned to her Motherland to run St. Just Library and live close to the ancient stones. She is a regular contributor to "The Ley Hunter" and other magazines, and is a member of the Cornwall Archaeological Society and the Old Cornwall Society.

Under the veneer of Methodism and Christian 'civilisation' West Penwith is still a quasi-pagan country, a strange and mysterious land of legend and myth. It is, in the words of "Wood & Water 7" (Samhain 1980), a land "of sea mists weaving around dolmens, stone circles, menhirs, Holy Wells, and the strange subterranean fogous." A place where the past is part of the present, and timeless magic lingers. But it is more than just a romantic and evocative landscape. It is a wild land whose roots go back deeply, and the elements and hints of the past have not been quite eliminated or destroyed.

We now live according to a Christian and secular calendar, but Christianity only built on and adapted the far older pagan religion, and in this most Celtic part of a Celtic country some of that older paganism still remains. This first part of a 2-part look at pagan customs and traces from the past and present in West Penwith will be considering the Winter months. By 'pagan' I mean elements that were originally pre-Christian and which perhaps continued through Christian times up to the present. But paganism is more than just a historical curiosity: it embraces a living respect for Mother Earth and all the creatures who inhabit her, and celebrates the changing of the moon and cyclic pattern of the seasons within the workings of the cosmos. It acknowledges that people in past times who were wedded to the soil and the land were sensitive to the changes of the earth's seasons, and responded to both the sacredness of the Earth and her inter-action with the Sun and Moon which gave life and continuity to life. As John Michell says in "The Old Stones of Lands End": "The Celtic Druids or Magi could in no way have failed to inherit the sacred sites, calendar of festivals, methods of divination and knowledge of the local deities from the earlier priests."¹ We too have inherited

that calendar, those sacred sites from our ancestors the Celts, even if we now observe their festivals without being aware of them. We live among the buildings of our Neolithic ancestors, the stone circles and menhirs; we live through the same cycle of life, death and rebirth as did our Celtic ancestors. We are the children of our Neolithic and Celtic parents, even if now we see them through a glass darkly with occasional flashes of light.

A time when we should feel close to them is at Samhain, the Celtic New Year (1st Nov.) when the worlds of life and death are very close and the borderline breaks down. Hence the association of Halloween with ghosts and spirits of the dead. "The souls of the departed are supposed to re-visit their old homes to warm themselves by the fire and to comfort themselves with the good cheer provided for them."² It was a season of fairies and witches as well as the dead, and many old Cornish tales tell of the dead and otherworldly beings coming back. Robert Hunt in 1871³ told of Carn Kenidjack, the Hooting Cairn, where "the spirits of the Celts, possibly the spirits of a yet older people dwell amongst those rocks. Within the shadow of this hill are mounds and barrows, and mystical

circles and holed stones and rude altars still telling of the past. The dead hold undisputed possession all around." The Cairn still seems a cold and melancholy place, even on a warm Summer's day, and when viewed from Tregeseal stone circle its strange shape dominates the skyline.



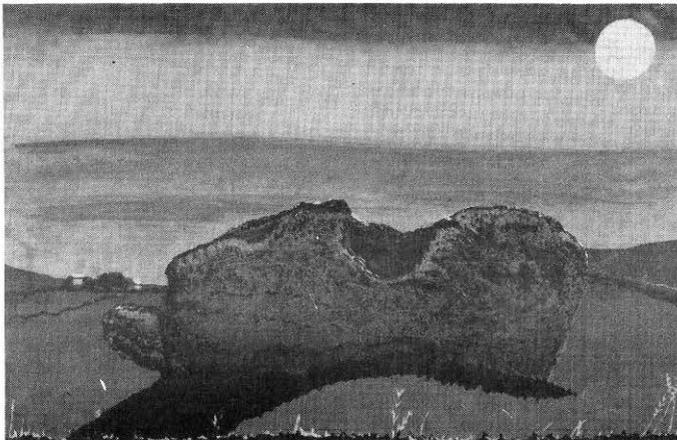
Light refracted on the Hooting Cairn

Hunt also told of the Gump being the playground of the fairies, the little people, the Spriggins, perhaps a folk memory of the smaller Neolithic people (though there are people today who claim to have seen fairies), just as the legends of Giants which all seem to cluster around the West Penwith area may be a folk memory of the taller Celtic race, or the legends may have originated in the days of the Celts themselves who saw the huge stone circles built by earlier settlers and considered them to be the work of some Titan race. Hunt recounts a tale which takes place at the night of the Harvest Moon when the fairies come out of the ground to feast at night. Elements of the tale seem very mythopoeic: the fairy children clothed in white strew flowers which at the moment they touch the ground take root and grow, a symbolic account of the death and renewal of life throughout the pagan year. Another time at Carn Kenidjack two miners see some devils wrestling. Devils often represent the 'old religion', and of course the miners vanquish them by giving the Christian blessing to one of the dying wrestlers. The demon then roars off into the West - significantly, for the far west is where the old pagan religion was finally driven along with the Celts.

Fraser goes on to say that: "In all Celtic countries Halloween seems to have been the great season of the year for prying into the future: all kinds of divination were put in practice that night."² At Allentide (nearest Saturday to Halloween) it was the custom in St. Just, St. Ives and other villages for elder girls to take apples to bed with them and put them under their pillows to dream of their future husbands. Other charms used to discover if she were to be married or not including pouring lead through the handle of the front door key and the fantastic shapes it assumed foretold her husband's profession or trade. Rolling 3 names on separate pieces of paper in a basin of water to see which unfolded first was also done. As was slipping a wedding-ring on to a piece of cotton held between forefinger and thumb saying: "If my husband's name is to be XXXX let this ring swing." This obviously has links with the old custom of placing two brass pins on the Men-An-Tol to see which way they would swing in order to answer any question. It was also the custom for young girls to

drop pins into Madron well, and for people to carry out what may have been similar rites at a (now lost) cromlech called the Giants Grave near Morvah church in order to be granted glimpses of the future. Samhain was a time when one part of the year was ending and another beginning and these customs which are about a transition in one's life and glimpse into a future time probably all relate to this. Similar traditions existed also on Twelfth Night (Old Christmas Day) where games of divination around open fires were played. Margaret Courtney⁴ tells of one at Sennen which involved young girls gathering ivy leaves and burning them in fires to determine whether they were to be married or how many of their friends would die before the year's end.

From Halloween we move to the Winter Solstice (Dec. 21st), the pagan celebration of the shortest day/longest night. This was one of the two pivotal points of the year (the other being the Summer Solstice). The descent into darkness is now at the farthest extreme, and from here on the sun begins to ascend into new life and rebirth of nature. The ancient Egyptians celebrated it as the Nativity of the Sun, as did the Persians in their Mithraic religion. The Romans from early times held their Festival of Saturnalia about this time, with evergreens as symbolic decorations. James Fraser adds: "Our Christmas festival is nothing but a continuation under a Christian name of this old solar festivity"¹² and points out that at the end of the 3rd Century AD the ecclesiastical authorities transferred the nativity of Christ from the 6th January to the 25th December "for the purpose of diverting to their Lord the worship which the heathen had hitherto paid on that day to the sun." The festival was called Yule in Northern climes and "it was to Odin that the people made their sacrifices at the time of the winter solstice."¹³ There are perhaps more remnants of this sacrificial aspect in Northern Scotland (particularly Shetland & Orkney) than Cornwall, although there is a local oral legend that at the time of the Harvest Festival or Feast Day in the remote and isolated community of St. Just, the first stranger to enter the village would be wined and dined for the day, and then at sunset taken out to the Tom Thumb rock where his throat would be cut. This has obvious links with both the Crying the Neck festival (of which more in the second article) and the pagan motif of 'King for a Day (or a Year)' - the chosen one who would be sacrificed at the end of a chosen day in order to ensure the fertility of crops for the forthcoming year.



*Tom Thumb
Rock*

William Borlase⁶ also claimed that the holed stones near the Nine Maidens circle were "the detached stones to which the Ancients were wont to tie their victims, while the priests were going through their preparatory ceremonies, and making supplications to the Gods to accept the ensuing sacrifice." The 18th Century was of course obsessed with druidical sacrifice, but it was only echoing an earlier obsession with burning of witches and others in fires in order to protect a hierarchical and patriarchal society from the threat of an alternative non-Christian religion, possibly the folk memory remnants of a pagan religion, usually practised by women as healers and carriers of ancient

lore and knowledge. A relatively recent echo of this can be found in Bottrell's 1870 book⁷ where he describes a game practised at Christmas called 'Burning the Witch', in which the participants try to sit on a pole and burn with a candle the paper or rag effigy of a witch. Though the witch is described as being "burnt for fun" (!), the existence of such a custom this far west of England where witches were generally not burnt in the Middle Ages (unlike Scotland & the Continent) shows that the sacrificial rites were deeply etched into the folk memory. Hunt³ also says: "There can be no doubt but that a belief prevailed until a very recent period, amongst the small farmers in the districts remote from towns in Cornwall that a living sacrifice appeased the wrath of God. This sacrifice must be by fire."

Another Christmas custom, the burning Yule log, called in Cornwall a 'mock' or 'block' was lit from the embers of the previous year and was supposed to ward off witches and evil beings. Shirley Toulson comments:⁵ "Even in Cornwall, a Celtic region which never had much experience of the Norse gods, the Yule log, in this case with the figure of a man roughly chalked on it, was considered a protection against the powers of darkness." Tony Deane & Tony Shaw⁸ recall that until quite recently Cornish children were allowed to sit up until Midnight on Christmas Eve to drink to the mock and sing carols round the flames. Margaret Courtney⁴ recounts a custom, dying out in 1890, for children on Christmas Eve to be found dancing round painted lighted candles placed in a box of sand, a motif which seems to have links with the dancing maidens or 'dons meyn', the dancing stones of the Merry Maidens stone circle.

A further remnant of the sacrificial theme can be found in the Mummings and Guizers plays traditionally performed at Yuletide. In many of these St. George or King George appears (Bottrell⁷ makes reference to a guise-dance of St. George and the Turkish Knight) in which presumably the contest consisted of the death and rebirth of the latter, an echo of the death and rebirth of the sun itself, played out through presentation, combat, cure and collection. Shirley Toulson says⁵ that George "stands as both priest and monarch. In the first role he is the chief celebrant of the mid-winter sacrifice and in the second he stands for the land itself." In West Penwith the Guizers were known as goose or geese dancers, and the parades through the streets went on from Christmas to Twelfth Night. The participants wore traditional bull masks and carried a wooden horse's head, similar to the Hobby-horse of Padstow. In 1870 Penzance Corporation tried to put an end to the custom as the processions had become very rowdy, but when W.H. Hudson visited the area in 1908⁹ he found it still flourishing. At St. Ives he discovered that "night after night a considerable part of the inhabitants turn out in masks and any fantastic costume they can manufacture... and dance on the beach to some simple music till 11 o'clock or later." The significance of masks is that it hides the identity of the wearer from the forces of evil and the Devil, and allows a reversal of roles and conventions to take place, in this case from sober Methodism to anarchic paganism. The dancers to music again finds a parallel with the legend of the Merry Maidens who were all turned to stone for dancing to the Pipers music 'on the Sabbath'. In all these cases Christianity is deliberately trying to protect itself against an older more elemental religion. As well as the masks, the Mummings and Guizers were characterised by brightly coloured costumes, with ribbons, beads, peeled rush, fabric scraps etc. These probably hark back to ritual garments worn by the medicine men or shamans who once conducted the sacrifices designed to propitiate the ancient horned god of vegetation.

Other legends associated with the Christmas/Yule period are of ghosts (the spirit of Pendeen fogou is supposed to be seen in the form of a beautiful woman standing within the entrance at dawn on Christmas Day), and the Devil (Bottrell gives extracts from a Christmas play Duffy & the Devil in which witches are seen in Boleigh (Rosemerryn) fogou). This all may have helped to give rise to the tradition which persisted in rural Cornwall that it was unlucky if the first person to enter the house on New Years Morning was a woman - presumably in case she were a spirit or a witch!

Pagan customs and traditions have thus been kept alive through centuries of Christian 'occupation', just as the Celtic spirit has endured in West Cornwall despite attempts at Anglisation. Paganism was never quite eliminated - like the winter sun it dies only to be reborn again and again, for it represents basic mortal needs, wishes and fears, and the immortal spirit and its relationship to the hereafter.

Article & Photo (c) Cheryl Traffon. Painting (c) Gabrielle Hawkes.

N.B. For references cited in this article see inside back cover.

BOOK REVIEWS

WILLIAM BORLASE (1696-1772) by P.A.S. Pool
 (Royal Institution of Cornwall, 1986) £12 (£13 inc. P. & P)

A biography of the antiquary, who did so much pioneering research into the ancient sites of West Penwith, has been long overdue. Peter Pool would seem to have the right qualifications, being a Fellow of the Society of Antiquaries, a member of the Board of Cornish Studies, and a Bard of the Cornish Goreseth, as well as having written the introduction to the reprint of Borlase's "Antiquities" in 1973. He confesses to have "fallen in love" with his subject, and lets Borlase speak for himself a great deal with generous extracts from his letters and journals, some of which is not readily available elsewhere.

Although Borlase was Rector of Ludgvan and Vicar of St. Just and there is some material on his period of tenure, and most interesting part for potential readers is likely to be his antiquarian studies. Pool points out that in undertaking his studies, Borlase was working on an almost untouched subject. "The peninsular of West Penwith, where Borlase lived, is so immensely rich in antiquities (especially stone circles and other megalithic monuments....) that the task of recording and classifying them, which he began, is still barely complete, after more than two centuries of work by many devoted successors" The irony was that Borlase's course of thought was set off by his discovery of rock-basins, which he assumed (erroneously) to be artificial and thus of Druidical origin. This led him to investigate, study, and accurately record other stone monuments in West Penwith which of course were man-made.

In 1754 he published his "Observations on the Antiquities, Historical and Monumental, of the County of Cornwall", of which Pool says: "It is upon this book that William Borlase must be, and has most often been, judged as a scholar; it has stood the test of time, and after 2 centuries is still recognised as one of the finest books on Cornwall." He deals with Borlase's mistaken Druidical speculations by pointing out as a counterbalance that his field-work was "accurate and comprehensive, often giving to posterity the only reliable record of sites since damaged or destroyed, and sometimes leading to the rediscovery in modern times of sites lost for many years." However, in his enthusiasm to defend Borlase against criticism, Pool sometimes makes unproven and inaccurate statements of his own. For example, in talking of fogous, he says: "Borlase's view that they were places of refuge in times of danger has not been bettered in two centuries of speculation." He is evidently not familiar with current thinking of John Barnett (see "Prehistoric Cornwall" p.34), Craig Weatherhill etc. (see "Cornovia" p.24 in which he says: "The theory that they were concealed refuges has been virtually discounted." Also see article in this magazine).

There is much else in this biography on Borlase's other interests - metereology, natural history (he and his wife even kept a pet chough), fossils, history and typography (he published a book on St. Michael's Mount in 1762) etc. But he will be remembered, as Pool says, for "the importance and accuracy of his records (which) are now so widely acknowledged that it is no longer necessary to defend his reputation against petty carpers.... Indeed, the old prophet has now received due honour in his own country." In concluding with an assessment of Borlase, Pool comments: "Most of the ancient monuments which he studied still survive, though some have perished through the ignorance and greed of mankind." Even in Borlase's day it was happening: in a letter of 10th Oct. 1766 he says: "At Carn Brea the masons are now stripping and ransacking the obelisks, pilfering the circles, demolishing the tribunials, without mercy or distinction." Borlase' achievement was perhaps that he taught respect for those monuments and bequeathed a valuable reference work on them to future generations. Pool's biography is itself an interesting record of the man and his work. (CS)

A PROSPECT OF CORNWALL by Donald Rowe
(Robert Hayle, 1986) (£10.95)

The author of "Cornish Hauntings and Happenings" now turns his attention to Cornwall's history and traditions. It is a lively, if slightly superficial, canter through Cornwall's past, present and future, and perhaps suffers by trying to cover too much ground to be of interest to those who know Cornwall, though it may be a useful insight for the visitor. The two chapters likely to be of most interest to readers of this magazine are those on 'Prehistoric Cornwall', and 'Traditions, Customs and Language'. Both chapters would be useful introductions to the subject to those not familiar with the material, but Rowe draws upon Craig Weatherhill for the first chapter, and Craig's own books would be a much more interesting guide to the monuments and the history of pre-history. One or two errors have crept in: Men Gurtha (printed as Men Gortos) on St. Broeke Downs is not the largest extant monolith in Cornwall: that honour goes to the NE Piper at 5.05 m against 4.92 m. Even judged solely on height above ground, the SW Piper is 4.10 m & Tresvennack Longstone is 3.55 m against Men Gurtha's 3.05 m. The information on the Men-an-Tol is also a bit speculative: "Originally the stone may have had a fertility significance symbolising the female sexual organ". Well yes it may, but it may also have symbolised entry into another world, or it may simply have been the entrance to a portal dorman - we just don't know. And the two uprights which he describes as "phallic longstones" (though they don't seem any more phallic to me than other standing stones) may have been moved in the last century or two as he says. However, Michell claims that only the Western stone has been disturbed, and I feel he should at least have been aware of this research. It is difficult always to get it right if you're not closely connected with the subject, but it is also important to try and make sure you do as much research as possible before going into print!

Rowe is on firmer ground in his chapter on traditions and customs. He postulates that hurling originally began as a fertility right, and then runs through a year of customs from Beltaine to Samhain and Christmas. The rest of the book is given over to other topics, such as fishing and religion, and a selective look at rivers, ports, buildings, villages, etc. and finishes on a rather sombre note: "Our present commitment to nuclear power and defence places Cornwall in the forefront of any possible holocaust ... As so often in our past, our land is under threat, this time in a way unparalleled in history." That at least is worth saying, as often and as loudly as possible. (CS)



Illustration by John Kempster from 'Wildlife Walkabouts: Lands End Peninsula' by local writer Des Hannigan (Wayside Books, 1985 - £3.95) 3 of the walks take in ancient sites.

'The Pipers Tune'

A mystery stands on the side of the hill of Carn Eanes near Pendeen. At approx. 386338 there is a recently erected standing stone, over 7ft. tall that seems to have been put up by the contractors who were clearing the Carn about a year ago as part of the Geevor exploratory mining searches. Information on it is sparse and confused, but locals do not remember there being any such stone there before, and it certainly is not listed on any OS maps or mentioned in Vivien Russell's West Penwith Survey (1971). The stone appears to be newly-quarried and it is very clean and not weathered, and there are certainly quarries and mineshafts around -the hillside is littered with them. But why would anyone, especially mining contractors, go to the bother of erecting such an impressive monument? At this point the plot thickens; rumour has it that the contractors, in clearing the site, uncovered a stone circle, which according to various reports, was either destroyed or reburied, the standing stone being erected to mark the spot. If this were the case, and the circle were destroyed it would be an act of incredible vandalism: but if that were the case, why put up such a large menhir to advertise the fact? From the site on Carn Eanes both Boswens hillside and Chun Downs are visible, but neither Boswens menhir nor Chufu Quoit can be clearly seen. Does anyone have any more information on this curious stone and rumour?

An excellent centre-page spread by Mike Rosendale on the destruction of ancient sites in West Penwith and a plea to preserve our heritage resource can be found in the Nov. edition of 'Peninsular Voice' Magazine.



From a mysterious stone to some mysterious effects at stone circles. The Ley Hunter magazine No. 100 featured an article on Radiation at Megalithic sites which dealt with Alan Bleakley's geiger-teller readings on the Cornish environment and ancient sites. Background radiation was, as might be expected in this 'granite kingdom', approximately double that of other areas outside Cornwall, and readings within a fogou were as high as 80/90 minute compared with background (again not unexpected because of the enclosed granitic environment). At some stone circles something unexpected happened though. Within the Nine Maidens some readings were much less (than half) than that of background, others equal or higher to background. At Stannon Circle on Bodmin Moor he got almost a totally negative reading (almost an impossibility) but at the Merry Maidens he obtained a peak much higher than anything in the environment. Don Robins (author 'Circles of Silence') on a visit to the same site in June 1985 found that the geiger readings approximately halved when brought a few feet within the ring of stones. The difference in these results is a measure of the difficulties inherent in measuring sites: they seem to vary according to the time of day and season. I (editor) geiger-checked all W. Penwith stone circles and found no radiation anomalies, except for the quartz stone at Boscawen-un and the Duloe quartz circle near Liskeard, which had a not unexpected lower count. But it needs a much more thorough programme or research. Any offers? (CS)

In the next edition of MEYN MAMVRO

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“Love the earth therefore, love it; love it and want it and cherish it. Those who form a communion will eventually see the rightful truth and beauty of their own nature.”

(from Canticle 3 by Louise Hodgson now living in West Penwith)

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