

LEGENDS AND TRADITIONS OF ZENNOR

Selected and Edited

by

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for the Wayside Museum, Zennor.

INTRODUCTION

Although in the century since the coming of the railway Cornwall has lost most of its individuality, its remoteness has throughout history tended to make it a place where old ways and old beliefs have lingered longest. Furthermore, ^{such} ~~old~~ things have always tended to ^{be best preserved} ~~linger longest~~ in the Land's End Peninsula, ^{also called} West Penwith; and in West Penwith, nowhere more so than in the 'High Country', the name given to the beautiful parish of Zennor and its neighbours, Towednack and Morvah. Many material relics of old times have been collected and may be seen at the Wayside Museum, Zennor.

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~~Amended copy~~

The object of this booklet is to ^{provide} ~~make available~~ in a cheap form ^{for} ~~to~~ visitors to ~~the~~ ^{this museum} ~~Wayside Museum, Zennor~~, a few of the facinating legends and traditions that survived in the parish until the middle of the 19th century. My task has ~~simply~~ ^{mostly} been that of a compiler; these ancient tales were already dying out, and known only to a few of the older people, when they were recorded by Robert Hunt and William Bottrell, to whom all students of Cornish lore owe an eternal debt. Some of the best Zennor stories thus preserved were too long to be included ~~here~~, and others have had to be abridged; if you ~~now~~ enjoy ~~the~~ reading them here, it is suggested that you buy a copy of Hunt's "Popular Romances of the West of England", which is still fairly easy to obtain; Bottrell's "Traditions of West Cornwall" is unfortunately very scarce indeed.

~~Wayside~~ Zennor has changed ^{much} ~~in~~ in the century that has elapsed since these stories were told by ^{the} semi-professional droll-tellers, who were formerly welcomed at all firesides, fairs and feasts for their recitals of the old ballads and stories in which they abounded, and of which their audience rarely tired. The mines that worked then have now been closed for over half a century; the people are nearly all farmers, plus a fringe of artists and coastguards. Television and a regular bus service have virtually completed the integration of Zennor with the outside world, and few of the people retain much interest in the beliefs and traditions which meant so much to their grandfathers, although when conversing with them it is still unwise ^{to mention} ~~to allude to the topic of~~ goats! ^(See page —) Yet, although much has been lost, much still remains, and the 'high country', despite its proximity to Penzance and St. Ives, ^{is still} ~~remains~~ completely unspoilt and unmarred by the monstrosities of modern civilization. Here, whether one prefers to climb the great hills, bestrewn with boulders and crowned with ~~fantastic~~ ^{fantastic} rocks carved into fantastic shapes by the elements; to drive along the coast road, following a serpentine switch-back course between hills and lowlands, heading for every farm in turn and making a hairpin bend in the middle of it, and well ~~deserving~~ ^{deserving} the name, 'the Cornish Corniche'; to walk along the peaceful field-path along the 'morrapp' or coastal ^{plain} ~~plain~~ to St. Ives, through small irregular ~~fields~~ ^{fields} separated by massive stone walls; or to scramble ~~some~~ ^{some} of the most impressive cliffs and headlands in Cornwall; here one can revel in a feast of scenic grandeur unequalled for miles around. Cornwall has higher hills and higher cliffs, but nowhere else are they so close together. Long may the predatory hand of the developer be stayed!

Lastly, mention should be made of the fact that Zennor parish is extremely rich in prehistoric antiquities of every description. These lie outside the scope of this booklet, but visitors interested in archaeology are urged to buy a copy of "The Principal Antiquities of the Lands End District", by Mr. A.C. Thomas ^{and the water,} likewise obtainable from the Wayside Museum, in which booklet the most interesting relics are described and located.

P. A. S. P.

Zennor, May 1958.

GOATS, SINGERS AND CHARMERS

Until fairly recently a favourite Cornish pastime was making up uncomplimentary nicknames and anecdotes about neighbouring parishes. Bottrell compiled a list of such nicknames, from which we learn that Towednack people were called 'cuckoos', from having tried to build a hedge round a cuckoo in order to keep the Spring; Morvah folk were called either 'chick-chacks' (from their habit of idle conversation) or 'devils'; while the inhabitants of Zennor rejoiced in the appellation of 'goats', from the great number of semi-wild goats formerly kept in the high rocky hills of the parish. It was also said that Zennor people would contrive, by their thrifty habits, to live like goats, where other animals and ordinary human beings would starve. In the words of the late Lt.-Col. F.C. Hirst, founder of the Wayside Museum, "We who live in Zennor are accustomed to being blamed for all sorts of things, or being associated with things that we believe to have happened elsewhere". It is sometimes said that the grazing in Zennor was once so poor that a ^{starving} cow ~~out of pure starvation, one~~ got into the Church and ate the bell-ropes. Usually, however, this is ^{said} ~~said~~ to have happened in Morvah, and certainly the cows of present-day Zennor look sufficiently well nourished to render such sacrilege unnecessary.

Bottrell also tells us that the Zennor people were once famed throughout the district for their melodious voices; they were often invited to Parish Feasts quite a distance away, so that the feasters might be gratified by their harmonious strains in church on the Sunday, and brisk dancing tunes to set their heels a-shaking on the other nights of feaster week. Their services were also much in demand at funerals; "whether seed-time or harvest, sunshine or rainy day, Zennor folks, young and old, will leave their work and scamper over hills and moors miles away to a good "buryal", where there is likely to be plenty of toddy and tobacco, cake and biscuit, provided for all comers." Sad to relate, though, the Zennor singers ^{as} would so often out-stay and out-eat their welcome at feasts and funerals that such invitations were becoming a thing of the past when Bottrell wrote.

Hunt tells us that Zennor people were also ~~also~~ ^{very} skilled charmers, "pellers" or white witches (not to be confused with the black witches referred to later), able to stop blood, however freely it might be flowing, and cure warts, toothache and other afflictions. Among the charms used by such "pellers" was the "magic square":-

SATOR
AREPO
TENET
OPERA
ROTAS

THE MERMAID

In the south transept of Zennor Church there is a seat incorporating two ancient bench-ends, the only ones to survive. On one of these is a lively carving of a mermaid, complete with comb and mirror. Several versions have come down to us of the legend explaining this; the one which follows is taken from Bottrell.

Hundreds of years ago a very beautiful and richly attired lady attended service in Zennor Church occasionally; her visits were by no means regular, and often long intervals would elapse between them. Whenever she came the people were enchanted with her good looks and fine singing. Although Zennor folks were remarkable for their fine psalmody, she excelled them all; and they wondered how, after the scores of years that they had seen her, she continued to look so young and fair. No one knew whence she came nor whither she went; yet many watched her as far as they could see from Tregerthen Hill. She took some notice of a fine young man, called Mathey Trewella, who was the best singer in the parish. He once followed her, but never returned; after that she was never more seen in Zennor Church, and it might not have been known to this day who or what she was but for the merest accident.

One morning a vessel cast anchor about a mile from Pendour Cove; soon afterwards a mermaid came close alongside and hailed the ship. Rising out of the water as far as her waist, with her yellow hair floating around her, she asked the captain to trip his anchor just for a minute, as the fluke rested on the door of her dwelling, and she was anxious to get in to her children. Her polite request had a magical effect upon the sailors, for they immediately worked with a will, hove anchor and set sail, not wishing to remain a moment longer than they could help near her habitation. Sea-faring men regarded the appearance of mermaids as a token that bad luck was near at hand; it was believed that they could take such shapes as suited their purpose, and that they often allured men to live with them.

When Zennor folks learnt that a mermaid dwelt near Pendour, and what she had told the captain, they concluded that it was she who had visited their church, and enticed Trewella to her abode. To commemorate these somewhat unusual events, they had the figure she bore, when in her ocean-home, carved in holy-oak, which may still be seen.

It is also said that the women of Zennor thereafter rearranged the seating in the church so that they sat between the men and the door, in case the mermaid came back for more!

THE GIANT

Until the last century many of the great rocks with which Zennor is strewn retained names like the Giant's Rock^r, the Giant's Chair, the Giant's Bed, etc. We give here the tragic legend of the local giant, slightly abridged from Bottrell. Carn Galva, the scene^c of the story, is a majestic saddle-shaped ~~rock~~ hill in the extreme west of the parish. It should be added that another collector, J.O. Halliwell, was fortunate enough to secure the name of this giant as Holiburn; Mr. R. Morton Nance, the ^{late} Grand Bard of Cornwall, ~~has~~ pointed out that a somewhat similar name, Rialobran, appears on a dark age memorial stone not far from Carn Galva, and that the legend of the giant of the carn may represent a folk-memory of this Celtic chieftain.

The giant of ^{Galva} ~~Galva~~ was more playful than warlike. The people of the northern hills have always had a loving regard for his memory, because he appears to have passed all his life at the carn in single blessedness, merely to protect his beloved people of Morvah and Zennor from the depredations of the less honest Titans who then dwelt on the Lelant hills, Trencrom and Trink. He never killed but one of the local people in his life, and that happened all through loving play. He was very fond of a fine young fellow of Chun in Morvah, who used to take a turn over to the carn, every now and then, to see how the old giant was getting on, to cheer him up a bit, to play a game of bob, or anything else to help him pass his lonely time away. One afternoon the giant was so well pleased with the good play they had together that, when the young fellow from Chun threw down his quoit to go home, the giant, in a good-natured way, tapped ~~the~~ his playfellow on the head with the tips of his fingers, saying "Be sure to come again tomorrow, and we will have a capital game of bob". Before the word "bob" was well out of the giant's mouth, the young man dropped at his feet; the giant's fingers had gone right through his skull! When the giant became aware of the damage he had done, he did his best to remedy matters by plugging up his finger-holes with turf, but all to no purpose; the young man was stone dead, long before the giant ceased doctoring his head.

When he found it was all over with his playmate, he took the lifeless body in his arms and wailed and moaned over it, bellowing and crying louder than the booming billows breaking on the rocks in Porth Moina Cove. He never rejoiced any more, but, in seven years or so, pined away and died of a broken heart.

THE WITCHES

From Zennor Church a path leads north to the Giant's Rock, a huge granite boulder poised, seemingly precariously, upon a smaller rock. Despite its name, legend links this rock not with the unfortunate Holiburn but with the witches of Zennor. Although it is now ^{quite difficult} ~~virtually impossible~~ to move, ~~it~~, formerly it was a very sensitive 'loggan' (rocking) stone, and anyone who aspired to become a witch had only to get on it nine times without shaking it. Hunt tells us that in former ^{on Midsummer Eve} times all the witches in Penwith gathered on Trewey Downs, and lit fires on every cromlech, and in every rock basin, until the hills were alive with flame, and they renewed their vows to the evil ones from whom they derived their power. We give stories of two Zennor witches, the one taken from Bottrell, the other from Hunt.

Sir Rose Price, the hunting squire of Trengwainton in Madron, often started a hare near Kerrowe in Zennor; his hounds would run it to the farm, where it would always escape by entering a drain that ran from a pool up under a nearby house. One day, however, the hunters ^{placed} ~~loaded~~ guns to prevent it from escaping thus; the hare when started took the usual course, and one of the guards shot at it, but failed to kill it, for it reached the farm and entered the drain as usual. Sir Rose ^{and a companion} entered the dwelling to ask leave to open the drain, and, lo!, sitting on the hearthstone they beheld the old woman of the house, much bleeding about her head and face, with her hair all hanging down. Beside her sat a monstrous big black cat, with his back up and eyes like coals of fire, showing his teeth as if ready to spring at the intruders, who turned tail and went away, without speaking a word, when they saw how they had hunted and shot a witch. And none of them ever prospered after!

The charms, spells and dark incantations of the witch of Trewey made her the terror of the neighbourhood. However, she failed to impress her husband with any belief in her supernatural powers, nor did he fail to proclaim his unbelief aloud. One day this sceptic came home to dinner, and found, not only that there was none ready, but that there was no meat in the house. After mutual recriminations, he resolved to put his wife's powers to the test, and told her that if in half an hour she gave him some good cooked meat, he would believe all she had boasted of her power, and be submissive to her for ever. St. Ives, the nearest market town, was five miles off, but, nothing doubting, the witch started. Her husband watched her go down the hill; at the bottom he saw her place herself on the ground and disappear; in her place a hare ran on at its full speed.

He was very startled, but waited, and within half an hour in walked his wife, with meat and potatoes all cooked and ready for eating. There was no longer any doubt, and her poor husband lived in fear of the witch of Trewey until her death.

When this occurred a few years later, the room was full of evil spirits, and the woman's shrieks were awful to hear. A black cloud rested over the house when all the heavens were clear and blue. ^{On its way to the grave her} ~~her~~ coffin was twice abandoned ~~on its way to the grave,~~ when the bearers fled on seeing a hare leaping over or sitting on ^{it.} ~~the coffin.~~ When the parson commenced the burial service, and reached the words "I am the resurrection and the life", the hare uttered a diabolical howl, changed into a black unshapen creature, and disappeared.

THE SMALL PEOPLE

If most Cornish traditions are dead, it might ~~always~~ almost be said that our delightful fairy legends have suffered a fate worse than death; they have become commercialized on a large scale. Fortunately the odious and degrading traffic in spurious Birmingham-made souvenirs, which appears to be centered on Polperro, has not yet spread to Zennor, where the visitor is much more likely to be accosted in the road and asked to buy a flint arrow-head!

According to ^{legend} ~~that~~, there were various tribes of 'small people' in Cornwall, such as the 'spriggans', who guarded treasure buried beneath prehistoric stones; the 'knockers' ^{of} the mines; the sea-spirit called 'bucca'; and the ~~pixies~~ ^{piskeys} or 'piskeys', by far the most common. These mischievous and at times dangerous beings were said to be the descendants of former inhabitants, doomed to become smaller and smaller until at length they became 'muryan' (Cornish for ants). One of their most ~~common~~ common frolics was so to bemuse a benighted traveller that he became totally lost on the most familiar path; if one was thus 'piskey-led' the only remedy was to turn a garment inside-out, failing which one might well ^wander round a field looking for the stile until dawn.

One of Hunt's best fairy legends concerns the adventures of Cherry, a girl from Treen in Zennor who left home to seek service in the 'low country' parishes. On the downs she met with a fairy widower, who engaged her to come and look after his small son. For some time she lived in great happiness, but at length ^{she} ~~she~~ was tempted to use on her own eyes the magic ointment she had been ~~instructed~~ instructed to put on those of her charge. This curiosity proved disastrous, for she could then see the other fairies with whom her master played. After a chance remark had thus revealed her disobedience, she was discharged, and after her return to Zennor ~~she~~ was never the same girl again. She was the object of much speculation as one who had been taken by the small people to their kingdom under the hills, and was never afterwards quite right in the head, for on moonlight nights she would wander on the downs in the vain hope of again meeting her fairy master.

• She has been identified with Azenor, the mother of St. Budock, but this cannot be regarded as an established fact.

• Chief among these was Robert Morton Nance, Grand Bard of Cornwall for 25 years, who died in 1959 and is buried in Zennor churchyard.

MISCELLANEOUS

The Name 'Zennor', the last name in the alphabetical list of British Parishes, is believed to be derived from ~~St.~~^{st.} Senara, one of the Celtic missionaries who worked in Cornwall during the dark ages, of whom very little is known. It is possible that the spring on the side of Zennor Hill formerly called 'Venton Zennor' (Cornish for 'Zennor Well') may have been this saint's holy well. Many versions of the name are found in old documents, of which perhaps the most amusing is 'Sinner'!

Tavas Kernow (the Cornish Language) On the south wall of Zennor Church is a memorial (erected by St. Ives Old Cornwall Society) ^{to} ~~of~~ John Davey of Boswednack, the last man to have any considerable traditional knowledge of the Cornish Language. He died in 1891, more than a century after the death of Dolly Pentreath of Mousehole, who is generally claimed as the last native speaker of the language. Unfortunately the only piece of Davey's Cornish to have survived is a rude rhyme about a farm in the adjacent parish of Gulval. It is noteworthy that virtually all the place-names in Zennor and the surrounding district are pure Cornish, and that this ancient tongue, very similar to Breton and Welsh, is now slowly being revived by devoted local scholars. ~~A copy of the Lord's Prayer in Cornish may be seen in Zennor Church.~~

The Serpent Not far from the prominent ^{house} ~~house~~ called Eagle's Nest, on the St. Ives road, is a bold carn formerly known as the Burning Mountain. It is said that there once lived here a large serpent, which made such a loud unearthly hissing that the people were unable to pass by on their way to market at St. Ives. Various contrivances were resorted to for the purpose of destroying the monster, but all failed until it was suggested to set fire to the furze with which the hill was covered. This either killed or frightened away the serpent, for his hissing was never more heard; the people went to market ^{again} in comfort, and the hill thus received its name.

King Arthur On the wild moors behind Carn Galva is a large flat stone, with a small cross cut in it, marking the meeting place of the parishes of Zennor, Morvah, Madron and Gulval. According to legend, King Arthur and other kings dined there when on their way to repel a Danish invasion; afterwards they won a great victory at Vellan-Druchar ^{west of} ~~near~~ Penzance, and so frightful was the carnage that ^a ~~the~~ mill was worked with blood. Although it does not prove anything, it is noteworthy that ^{the name of} the most westerly farm in Zennor, Bosigran, is Cornish for 'Abode of Igraine', the name of the mother of King Arthur.

The Plague Stone By the garage door of the Wayside Museum can be seen a large

• The point of this story is that, despite the long coastline of Zenon, the lack of safe landing-places has always caused the people to neglect the sea as a means of livelihood, so that such ignorance of nautical matters was quite understandable.

granite slab with a small circular ^{bowl} depression in the surface. This was ^{rediscovered} ~~found~~ nearby during road-widening works before the war, after being obscured for many years, ~~during which its existence was remembered.~~ Legend has it that when plague raged in Zennor those stricken with the disease placed money in the bowl for food, that was left near it for their ^mconsumption.

The Anchor Many years ago, after a great storm, a large ship's anchor was found embedded in the sand of Zennor Cove. Nobody could even guess ~~of~~ the meaning of this strange object; only age and experience could solve the mystery, so the oldest inhabitant was ^uhastily packed into a wheelbarrow and bumped down the rocky track to the beach. Breathless and excited, he was solemnly trundled round and round the anchor, but was puzzled and could make nothing of it. "Rull ~~me~~ round agen, coomraades," he said; and rulled he was again and yet again until inspiration came and he cried, "I d'knew what a'ez now, coomraades, iss, I d'knew what a'ez, 'tez nawthen but a g'eat giant turvy-biddax!" (turf-cutter) ^{is} Similar stories ~~are~~ told of another ~~anchor~~ ^{at} Sennen Cove, and the first donkey ever seen ~~at~~ Bodmin ("the gran^dfather of all the rabbits").

The Mines Bottrell and Hunt were told that the downs above Trewey had been 'streamed' for tin over and over again, and that some of the old workings dated from before the flood; there was nothing so old anywhere else in Cornwall. The visitor can observe that ^{most of} ~~all~~ the ^{brooks} streams that drain these moors and are crossed by the road flow in deep and wide trenches, the legacy of the former intensive 'streaming' for alluvial tin.

Epilogue - the Raven ~~The visitor must not think that strange happenings in Zennor are entirely a thing of the past. It is true that we no longer see giants, mermaids or witches, but those who climb Zennor Hill and walk along the ridge to the quoit are liable to be accosted by a large and sinister raven, which sits on rocks and says 'Come on!' in sepulchral tones.~~