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'CORNISH SAINTS'
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S. SELEVAN,
A Cornish Saint.

Patron of S. Levan.

By the Rev.
G. H. DOBLE, M.A.

With notes on the Parish
of S. Levan or Selevan by
C. G. HENDERSON, M.A.



S. SELEVAN,
A Cornish Saint.
Patron of S. Levan.

Being a Sermon preached in the Parish
Church on St. Levan Feast, 14 October, 1928.

BY THE

Rev. GILBERT H. DOBLE, M.A.,

Author of

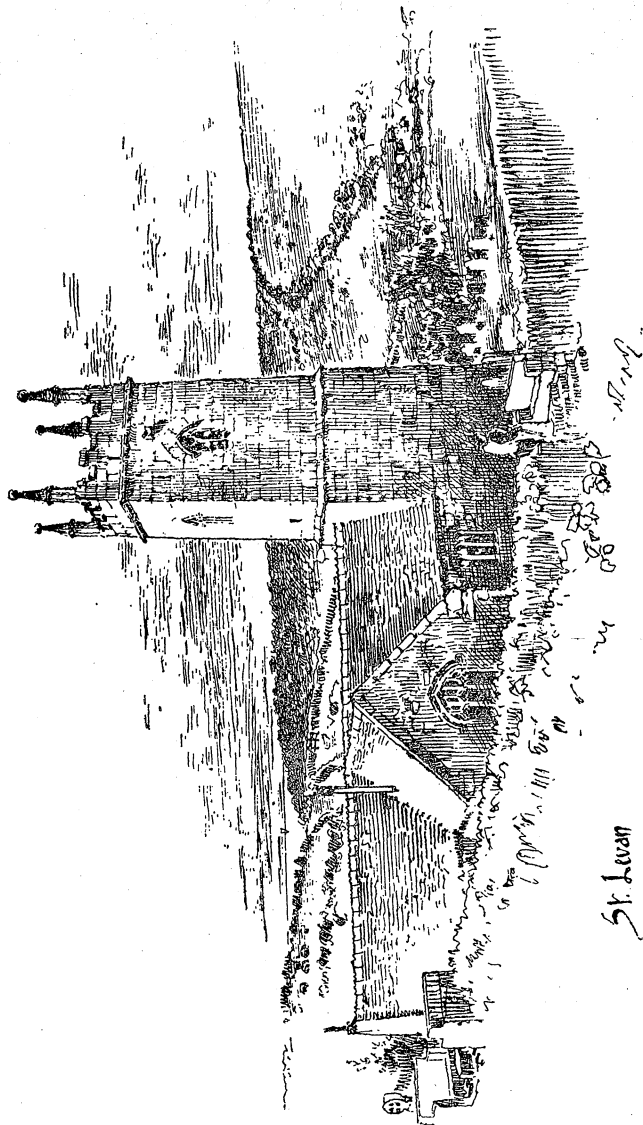
*'S. Mawes,' 'S. Euny,' 'S. Budoc,' 'S. Winwaloe,'
'S. Corentin,' 'S. Melaine,' 'S. Carantoc,' 'S. Gwinear,'
'S. German,' 'SS. Mewan & Austol,' 'S. Feock,'
'S. Petrock,' 'SS. Docco & Kew,' 'S. Melor,' 'S. Nonna,'
'S. Brioc,' 'SS. Sithney & Elwin,' 'A John Wesley of
Armorican Cornwall,' etc.*

*Vicar of Wendron and Examining Chaplain
to the Lord Bishop of Truro.*

With notes on the Parish of S. Levan or Selevan
by C. G. Henderson, M.A.

1928.





St. Levan Church.

St. Levan



A.M.D.G.

SAINT SELEVAN.

"His name shall be called Solomon."—1. Chron. 22. 9.

These were the words which were spoken when your patron saint was born. S. Levan should be *Selevan*, which was the Welsh and Cornish way of saying *Solomon*. I am told that old people still pronounce S. Levan *Selevan*, which shows how long the ancient form of a name may survive in oral tradition. Selevan has been corrupted into S. Levan as Symphorian has been corrupted into S. Veryan. The name S. Levan is therefore a mistake, and there is no connection between this parish and Porthleven, which, though certainly called after a saint, is called after an entirely different saint—S. Elwin or Elvan. The Celts were fond of Scriptural names. The greatest of the Welsh saints was called David. The greatest of the Breton saints was called Samson. One of the Welsh cathedrals owes its name to a saint called Asaph, after one of the Hebrew psalmists. Solomon was a favourite name in Celtic countries. In Wales and Cornwall the name was pronounced Selyf¹ or Selevan, in Irish Sullivan, in Brittany Salomon and later Salaun.

Who was S. Selevan?

Our sole source of information about him, so far as documentary evidence goes, consists of a Latin Life of S. Cybi, written in Wales, and of two Mediæval manuscripts in the Welsh language, called respectively "Pedigrees of the Saints," and "Pedigrees of the Welsh Saints." The Life of S. Cybi tells us that "S. Kepius, whose feast is kept on the 8th day of November...was one of the good servants of the Heavenly Father. He was born of the region of the

¹ The Revd. A. W. Wade-Evans has kindly sent me the following note:—"Selyf (the f=v) is from *Salom*—o=Salomon. If the Cornish Selevan is Selyv, then the former is a diminutive, not the reverse, for Selyv=Salomo; and the *an* is a diminutive ending."

Cornishmen, between two rivers—the Tamar and the Limar ;¹ whose father Salomon was son of Erbin, son of Geraint, son of Lud. His father was a military chieftain.” In the “Pedigrees of the Saints” No. 30 says that “Cybi was the son of Selyv, the son of Geraint, the son of Erbin, son of Cystennyn Gorneu” (i.e. the Cornishman). It will be observed that this statement does not agree with that in the Life of S. Cybi.² In the “Pedigrees of Welsh Saints” No. 22 is “Silwen was daughter of Geraint son of Erbin,”³ and No. 33 is “Iestyn was the son of Geraint, son of Erbin, son of Cystennin.” On the strength of these statements it has been asserted that Selyv or Salomon was the brother of Iestyn, who is assumed to be the same as S. Just,⁴

¹ i.e. the Lynher, (presumably.)

² The Revd. A. W. Wade-Evans, in a note to his edition of the Life of S. David, pp. 98-100, discusses the question of these genealogies, and comes to the conclusion that “there can be no doubt that the Life of S. Cybi, which makes Geraint the son of *Lud* records the genuine pre-Conquest Cornish-Breton tradition. The “Geraint ab Erbin,” therefore, of Welsh writers is a 12th century mistake.....It follows from this that the pedigrees should read :

- (1) Kyby m. (mab=son of) Selyv m. Erbin m. Gerient (m. Lud).
- (2) Custennyn Gorneu (=Constantine the Cornishman) m. Erbin m. Geraint (m. Lud.)
- (3) Yestin m. Erbin, brawt Custennyn.”

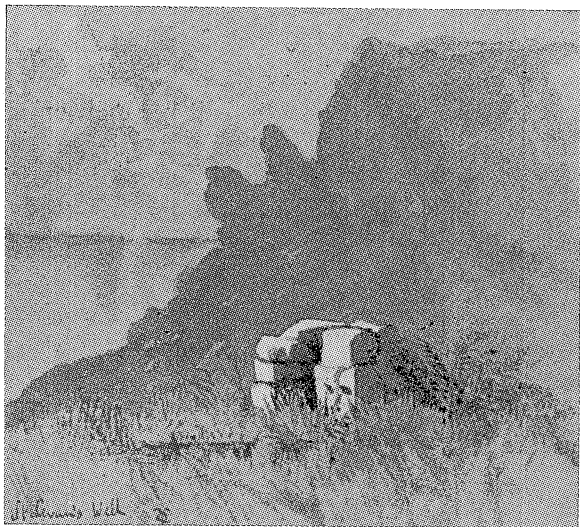
Iestyn, Selyv, Constantine and Cyngar, he concludes were all brothers, sons of Erbin, and Selyv was the father of S. Cybi.

³ “No. 22 in *Achan'r Saint* (“Pedigrees of Welsh Saints” in Rees) is “Sylwein verch Geraint vab Erbin” in the MS. of 1527, and “Ssilwein verch Geraint vab Erbin” in that of 1586. Sylwein or Silwein might stand for *Silvania* or *Selmania* or some such form, though none of these is known to me.” Rev. A. W. Wade-Evans.

⁴ Canon Taylor has called my attention to these words, written by Leland in 1538, “from Lanant by the north se to S. Just alias Justinian.” The Revd. A. W. Wade-Evans, however, writes to me saying, “*Just* and *Iestyn* are not the same. *Just* is in Welsh *Ust*, pronounced like the English word *east*. He has foundations in Wales, such as Llan Ust in Fishguard, Pembrokeshire.”

Mr. Charles Henderson says that *Priest Cove*, near Cape Cornwall in the parish of S. Just-in-Penwith, was in 1584 *Porth-Uste*, i.e. the Cove of S. Just. *Priest* is a contraction for *Porth-east*. “In late Cornish *Ust* became *East*. Hence





The Holy Well of St. Levan.

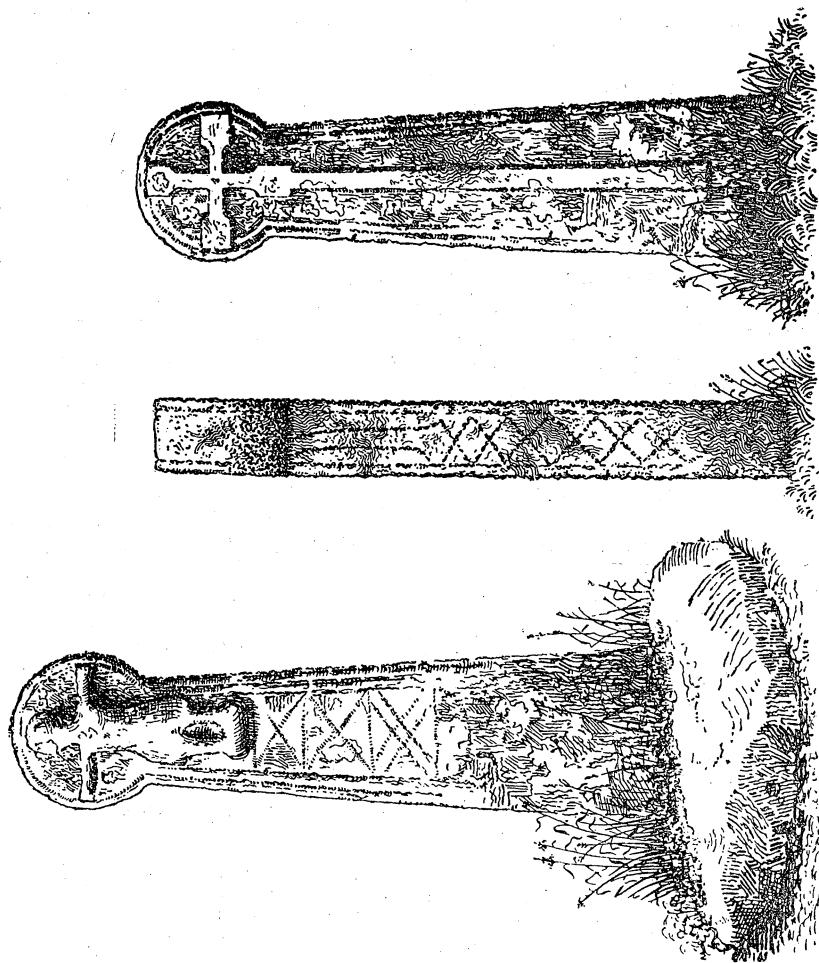
and in support of this assumption it has been pointed out that the parish of S. Just-in-Roseland adjoins that of Gerrans, which means Geraint, while S. Just-in-Penwith is near S. Levan. Not far from Penberth there was formerly a place called *Pelnagerens*. It has even been suggested that the inscribed stone in the church of S. Just-in-Penwith, which has upon it the words *SELUS IC JACIT* (=Selus lies here), may be a monument to S. Just's brother, though one would have expected the monument to be in the church of Selevan and not in that of S. Just, and Selus seems an unlikely form of Solomon. Selyv and Iestyn apparently had a sister called Silwein, of whom nothing is known.

If we look across the Channel to Brittany, we are interested to find the name Selevan in the parish of Caudan, near the coast between Hennebont and Lorient, in what is now the Department of the Morbihan. Much further inland, at Guern (S.W. of Pontivy) is a S. Salomon, pronounced locally sant Selawen, and a little to the N.W., in Langoelan, is another S. Salomon. All these places are in the Morbihan.¹

Here at S. Levan our saint has left visible traces of his presence, not only in the parish church which bears his name, but also in a chapel and holy well on the cliff. Dr. Borlase, the great Cornish antiquary of the 18th century, visited S. Levan's Well about 180 years ago and wrote, "Over the Spring lies a large flat stone, wide enough to serve as a foundation for a little square Chapell erected upon it; the Chapell is no more than 5 feet square, 7 feet high, the little roof of it of Stone. [The roof has now disappeared, and the walls are only 3 or 4 feet high.] The water is reckoned very good for eyes, tooth-ache, and the like, and when people have washed they are always advis'd to go into this Chapell and sleep upon the stone, which is the floor of it, for it must be remember'd

Venton-East. The fishing village of Goran Haven was anciently called Porth-East....The chapel in the village was dedicated in honour of S. Just, as I found in a document of 1568, wherein it was described as "S. Ewst, alias Just, Chapel in the Parish of S. Goran."

¹ Loth, *Noms des Saints Bretons*, pp. 111, 112.



Cross in Churchyard, St. Levan, (from Langdon's *Cornish Crosses*.)

that whilst you are sleeping upon those consecrated stones the Saint is sure to dispense his healing influence." Below this well, on the very edge of the cliff, are the remains of a building called S. Levan's Chapel, connected with the well, in Dr. Borlase's time, by a pathway of steps "shaped with stone." In 1892 Mr. Masterman visited this chapel and wrote a description of it for the late Mr. Wm. Copeland Borlase. "It consisted of two rooms, presumably the chapel and the cell, the one $6\frac{1}{2}$ ft. by $9\frac{1}{2}$ ft., the other 6 ft. by $12\frac{1}{2}$ ft. The length of the building lay east and west, and the N.W. portion of the eastern room was formed of one large block of granite fallen from its place. The doorway was on the south side, the flooring roughly flagged with granite, and fragments of very rough and thick slating were found amongst the debris." Dr. Borlase's statement about the necessity of sleeping on the stone is particularly interesting, as we know that at Madron well the same practice prevailed. John Trelil, the cripple, whose cure Bishop Hall refers to in an oft-quoted passage of his "Invisible World" (1652), after washing in the water of the well, slept on a grassy mound close by called S. Madron's bed.

A number of ancient crosses also show that S. Levan was a holy place in Celtic times.

At present, then, we have little evidence to help us to answer the question, Who is S. Selevan? We have plenty of evidence that a Celtic saint had a hermitage here, but of the story of his life we know practically nothing. All we can say is that he was a Welsh or Cornish saint of the 6th or 7th century, who may be the same as a Selyv son of Geraint¹ mentioned three times in mediæval manuscripts of Welsh origin but of whose career nothing whatever is told us. We may suppose that he is the same saint as the Selevan or Salomon honoured in the south of Brittany. That is all we know for certain.

¹ or grandson.

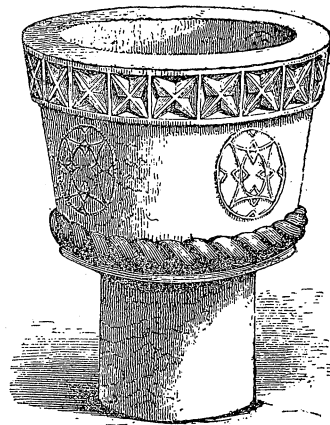
But although History can tell us so little about S. Selevan, his memory has been preserved in local legend in a very remarkable way. Only in one other parish in Cornwall—that of S. Neot—has the story of the local saint been so cherished by the people. S. Neot and S. Selevan are the only Cornish saints who live in popular tradition. It is due largely to the fact that both are isolated parishes. Till less than 100 years ago S. Levan was very much out of the world. Consequently the wonderful beauty of the cliff scenery of the parish of S. Levan is equalled by the richness of its folk-lore. Some of the most interesting stories in Hunt's *Popular Romances of the West of England* come from S. Levan, and were collected by W. Botterell of Caerwyn in this parish (p. 31, cf. pp. 374, 362, etc.) And while other parishes have forgotten the legends of their patron saints, S. Levan has clung to her's.

Dr. Borlase heard the stories about the saint when he visited S. Levan in 1740. "Whilst we were at dinner at the inn it was very pleasant to hear the good old woman, our Landlady, talk of S. Levin, his cursing the name Johannah, his taking the same two fishes twice following, his entertaining his sister Manaccan, and as a confirmation of everything we were desir'd at our departure to observe his walk, the stone he fish'd upon, with some other particulars of like importance." "Within the churchyard," he continues, "lies a round stone evidently cloven into two parts. Our good landlady informed us that in her mother's time there was scarce room enough to thrust the hand betwixt the parts of this stone, but they are now a foot distance from one to the other, and when they are grown wide enough for a horse loaded with panniers to pass betwixt them, I know not what great wonders are to happen, according to the predictions of St. Levin."

Hunt has recorded for us, in the book to which I have already referred, the stories given below, being those Dr. Borlase quotes.

1. The Saint and Johana. "The walls of what are supposed to be the hut of St. Leven are still to be seen at Bodellen. If you walk from Bodellen to St. Leven Church, on passing near the stile in Rospletha you will see a three-cornered garden. This belonged

to a woman who is only known to us as Johana. Johana's Garden is still the name of the place. One Sunday morning St. Leven was passing over the stile to go as usual to his fishing-place below the church, to catch his dinner. Johana was in the garden picking pot-herbs at the time, and she lectured the holy man for fishing on a Sunday. They came to high words, and St. Leven told Johana that there was no more sin in taking his dinner from the sea than she herself committed in taking her's from the garden. The saint called her 'foolish Johana,' and said that if another of her name was christened in his well she should be a bigger fool than Johana herself. From that day to this no child called Johana has been christened in St. Leven. All parents who desire to give that name to their daughters, dreading St. Leven's curse, take the children to Sennen."



Font, St. Levan.

2. The Saint's Path. "The path along which St. Leven was accustomed to walk from Bodellen, by Rospletha, on to St. Leven's Rocks, as they are still called, may yet be seen; the grass grows greener wherever the good priest trod than in any other part of the fields through which the footpath passes."

3. The St. Leven Stone. "On the south side of the church, to the east of the porch, is a rock known by the above name. It is broken in two, and the fissure is filled in with ferns and wild flowers, while the grass grows rank around it. On this rock St. Leven often sat to rest after the fatigue of fishing; and desiring to leave some enduring memento of himself in connection with this his rude but favourite seat, he one day gave it a blow with his fist and cracked it through. He prayed over the rock and uttered the following prophecy:—

'When with panniers astride,
A pack-horse one can ride
Through St. Leven's Stone,
The world will be done.'

This stone must have been venerated for the saint's sake when the church was built, or it certainly would have been employed for the building. It is more than fifty years since I first made acquaintance, as a child, with the St. Leven Stone, and it may be a satisfaction to many to know that the progress of separation is an exceedingly slow one. I cannot detect the slightest difference in the width of the fissure now and then....."

4. *The Two Fish.* There are a considerable number of ancient carved oak bench-ends in St. Leven church. Several of the figures on them are of great interest. On one of them are two panels, each containing two fish, apparently on one hook. "These are to commemorate a remarkable incident in St. Leven's life. One lovely evening about sunset, St. Leven was on his rocks fishing. There was a heavy pull upon his line, and drawing it in, he found two breams on the same hook. The good saint, anxious to serve both alike.....took both the fishes off the hook and cast them back into the sea. Again they came to the hook and again they were returned to their native element. The line was no sooner cast a third time than the same two fishes hooked themselves once more. St. Leven thought there must be some reason unknown to him for this strange occurrence, so he took both the fishes home with him. When the saint reached Bodellen, he found his sister, St. Breage, had come to visit him with two children. Then he thought he saw the hand of Providence at work in guiding the fish to his hook. Even saints are blind when they attempt to fathom the ways of the Unseen. The fish were of course cooked for supper, and, the saint having asked a blessing upon their savoury meal, all sat down to partake of it. The children had walked far, and they were ravenously hungry. They ate their suppers with rapidity, and, not taking time to pick out the bones of the fish, they were both choked. The apparent blessing was thus turned into a curse."

(The more usual form of this story is that the fish were chads. They were not considered dainty enough for the saint's guests, and so were twice thrown back. Consequently when they were finally
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retained and served up, the first mouthful choked the children. Ever since, the St. Leven fishermen call the chad "chuck-cheeld" (choke-child). (It will be noticed that Dr. Borlase gives Manaccan instead of Breage as the saint's sister.)

Brittany is full of stories like this.¹ Every parish has its traditions about its saint, and very often they contain, like the stories about S. Selevan, a decided comic element, which sometimes scandalizes people without a sense of humour who forget that the countryman has frequently a very strong sense of humour. In every case, of course, these stories are the invention of the peasantry. The true story of the life of the patron saint has been entirely forgotten ages ago, the name and the traditional veneration paid to the saint have alone remained, and the imagination of the people has created fairy tales about him. But we must not conclude from the childish stories which popular imagination has woven around them that the men who gave their names to our Cornish parishes were idiots or eccentrics. They were saints and heroes. They set a high standard of holiness and self-denial amidst violence and unbridled passion. S. Selevan "kept under his body" by long fasts, and he would often, like S. Patrick and other Celtic saints, stand for hours in the cold water reciting psalms. They were patriots, keeping alive the national aspirations of a race continually exposed to the attacks of cruel and powerful enemies—the heathen English. They were scholars, preserving literature and learning when civilization had almost perished. Your Solomon lived up to the name which his god-fathers and god-mothers gave him in his baptism. "His name [was] called Solomon," i.e. Peaceable. He could say, with the Psalmist, "I labour for peace" (literally "I am peace,") among people only too ready to "make them ready to battle." (Ps. 120: 6.) He taught the rough warlike tribes of this district the blessings of peace. The Lord gave to him, as to his greater namesake, the gift of wisdom. Many souls thirsting for light and guidance came to his little hermitage on the cliff "to hear the wisdom of (your) Solomon," and to receive from him instruction in righteousness. The Cornish saints were the leaders of a great religious movement, and each year at our parish feast we are to look back for inspiration in the difficult times in which we live to that great religious movement which made Cornwall Christian.

¹ Cf. Sébillot, *Petite Légende dorée de la Haute Bretagne*, and Cadic's *Contes et Légendes de la Bretagne*.

Notes on the Parish of S. Levan or Selevan

By CHARLES HENDERSON, M.A.

The little parish of S. Levan at the extreme western end of Cornwall is only 2000 acres in area but contains many objects of natural and historical interest. Locally the name is pronounced "Slevan" and this is really more accurate than the official spelling "S. Levan." The name should be in full *S. Selevan* with the accent on the second syllable. In 1327 and 1340 official documents mention the *Parochia Sancti Silvani* but by 1549 we meet with the colloquial form *Selevan*. In 1556 an official record has *Sanctus Selevanus*. Dr. Borlase, who visited the place about 1740, writes it *S. Levin*, so by his time the present erroneous spelling was already in vogue. An analogous case of contraction occurs in the name of a parish east of Falmouth, "S. Vryan" which was formerly S. Severyan or Severyan *tout court*. The name Selevan which (as Mr. Doble shows) is a Cornish version of Solomon, is found in a place-name in the adjacent parish of Buryan, *viz.* Bosliven, anciently *Bos-selevan* or the "House of Selevan."¹ "*Bos*," a dwelling, has generally a secular significance and it is not necessary to suppose that the Selevan who lived there was identical with the Saint. On the other hand, there is in the parish of Gulval (S. Wolvel) a farm called Bosulval (anciently Bos-wolvel) which seems to imply the House of the patron Saint. Dr. Borlase the Antiquary left some interesting notes of his visit to "S. Levin" about 1740. His nephew Mr. W. C. Borlase has made use of them in his "Age of the Saints," p. 72.² It is a pity that the Doctor allowed Georgian scepticism to

¹ Mr. W. C. Borlase (Age of Saints, p. 73) suggests that the name of Selenia, another estate in Buryan, was connected with S. Levan, but the old spellings Solghena, etc., do not bear this out.

² see p. 5-7 of this booklet.
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get the better of him. We should have otherwise had a much more complete account of these interesting traditions, now, alas! so garbled as to be of very little historical value.

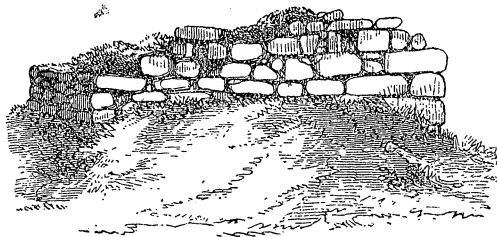
S. Levan Church stands at the head of a little rocky valley which descends abruptly to the sea at a cove called Porth-Chapel. It is a most interesting little building in spite of the bad "restorations" and neglect which it has suffered in the last century. The North Transept is part of a 13th century Cruciform Church. The rest of the building, including the Nave, South Aisle, Porch and Tower, was added in the 15th century. The fine series of carved oak bench-ends dates from about A.D. 1500. The fabric of the Church, however, contains nothing to throw any light upon the Cultus of S. Selevan although it must once have held his Shrine and *Legenda*. Outside the South doorway a fine round-headed cross is standing, apparently in situ. This is known as "S. Levan's Cross" and must indeed be much older than any part of the present church. Close to it is the well-known natural boulder called "S. Levan's Stone." This is cleft by a fissure about a foot wide. The stone is without doubt a rock-idol which had its votaries long before S. Selevan settled by its side, twelve or thirteen hundred years ago.



Bench-end,
St. Levan.

In the valley a little below the Church is the Holy Well. When Dr. Borlase saw it the covering building had a roof of stone and walls 7 feet high. The roof has since fallen and the walls are very low. Internally the building measures about 5 feet square. There are no carved stones to help in determining its date. The floor is a granite slab covering the actual spring and the water finds an exit in front of the entrance. Below the well a rough track descends steeply to the cliff edge where are the ruins of two small buildings side by side. One of these is called by Dr. Borlase "S. Levan's Chapel," and the name of the adjacent cove, Chapel Porth, seems to confirm this appellation. Mr. W. C. Borlase (Age of the Saints p. 100) gives a detailed account of the two buildings, which was sent him after their exploration by a Mr. Masterman. The western room,
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on a slightly higher level than the other, was perhaps the Saint's cell. It is cut out of the hill-side and measures $6\frac{1}{2}$ feet by $9\frac{1}{2}$ feet internally. A huge slab of granite set on its edge forms the wall on the sea side. The other room measures $12\frac{1}{2}$ feet east and west by 6 feet. It had an entrance on the S. side. The N.W. part of the wall was formed by a granite slab now displaced. The rest was of dry stone-walling. No carved stones can be seen, but Mr. Masterman unearthed some coarse roofing slates and a stone floor. There was another primitive oratory near the cliff at Porth Curnow about a mile eastwards. This bore the name of Chapel-Curnow, and a



Porth Curnow Chapel.

picture of it by J. T. Blight appears in his "Churches of West Cornwall." According to him it stood upon a Tumulus or Pagan burial mound and had rude walls of dry masonry. It is somewhat difficult to identify "Chapel-Curnow." Near a marsh between Trendrennen farm and the cliff are remains of such a building but, it has no distinguishing features. "Chapel Curnow" appears as the name of a field on Treen estate in 1838.

S. Levan, like the other parishes of Penwith, was well supplied with ancient granite crosses of the round-headed variety. These stand or stood by the side of paths and tracks leading to the Church. There is one (not in its original position) near the Lych Gate of the Churchyard and another *in situ* by the Church path to Rospletha only 150 yards away. Going north towards Arden-Saweth we find another Cross-head and there is one more beyond it at Trebehor. There is said to have been another at Chegwiddden, but it was destroyed long ago. At Treen a field in 1838 was called *Era-Grouse* i.e. "Cross Acre." A few years ago Mr. R. Favell of Penberth found

an *unfinished* round-headed cross in the valley below Treen. This is now set up in his garden, which is actually in the parish of Buryan.

Two fields on Rosekestel bear the curious name of "*Aunt-S. Levan*" which is probably a corruption of *Hent-Selevan* or Selevan's Way. As a counterpoise we find on the adjacent estate of Arden-Saweth a track called *Vounder-Duel* which seems to imply the "Devil's Lane."

Like its neighbour Sennen, S. Levan first appears in records as a daughter Church of Buryan, though it was a separate civil parish so early as 1327. Buryan, a Celtic monastery converted to a college of priests in Saxon days (it is said by King Athelstan about A.D. 930), retained its Collegiate character until 1545. In the Middle Ages it possessed a Dean and three Prebendaries who drew their revenues from lands at Buryan and the Tithes of the three parishes. One of the Prebends was called that of Trethyne (or Treen) the name of a village in S. Levan parish. As early as the 13th century the Deans of Buryan claimed that the Deanery was a Royal "Peculiar," exempt, like other Chapels-Royal, from Episcopal or Archidiaconal jurisdiction. The claim was made good in the 15th century after a long and furious struggle with the Bishops of Exeter. The Deans and Prebendaries ceased to be resident, and at the Reformation three Curates were found to be serving the three parishes at yearly salaries of £6 apiece.

The Prebends were abolished under the Chantry Act of 1545 but the Deanery went on until 1864, when at the death of the non-resident Dean Stanhope, the three parishes were made into three Rectories independent of one another. As S. Levan was outside Episcopal jurisdiction we shall look in vain for documents relating to it among the Archives at Exeter. Unfortunately the records of the Deanery of Buryan are scattered and (for the most part) lost. There is therefore practically no documentary evidence to be had about S. Levan prior to the 18th century.

CHARLES HENDERSON.

Penmount, Truro, Dec. 11th, 1928.

The views of the font and bench-end in S. Levan church, and of Porth Curnow Chapel, are from Blight's *Churches of West Cornwall*. That of the well from *Ancient and Holy Wells of Cornwall*.