

Cornwall - The Mysteries of St Piran

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I thought of calling this piece “The Perils of Piran”, or “Vexillological Vexations”. However, I have decided on “Cornwall – The Mysteries of St Piran”!

Cornwall’s flag, the flag of St Piran, is a plain white cross on a black field.



St Piran’s – The Flag of Cornwall

St Piran was a sixth century holy man who is said to have floated to Cornwall from Ireland on a mill-stone.

He has become the patron saint of Cornish tanners and of Cornwall itself, with his Saint’s Day – 5th March – being celebrated as Cornwall’s national day and his flag considered by many as Cornwall’s national flag.

Cornwall occupies a peninsula at the far south west of the island of Great Britain, with the River Tamar forming the historic border between it and the English county of Devonshire.

Cornwall is one of the six Celtic countries, three of which – Scotland, Wales and Cornwall – share this island with England.

Scotland has its Parliament, Wales its Assembly but Cornwall is considered to warrant only a County Council.

At present there is a strong campaign for a Cornish Assembly. The Cornish Constitutional Convention, which has gathered 50,000 signed declarations calling for such an Assembly, uses 5 active St Piran flags in the form of a cinquefoil as its emblem.

From its first reference in the 1830s St Piran’s flag has now become *the* emblem of Cornwall.

The flag has, as it were, passed through the hands of the antiquarians, the Celtic revivalists, the political nationalists into those of the people themselves.

I am trying to piece together the history of that passage. Unfortunately, many of those who were active in popularizing the flag in the early part of last century are no longer with us.

Others have forgotten those days. And those who are neither dead nor forgetful believe that I know everything about the flag that they do – but I don’t!

So, there is my difficulty in getting this history together. But, as well as dealing with fact, vexillologists need also pay attention to theories, inventions, myths, legends, misidentifications, misattributions and mistakes concerning the flags they study

There are many of these – because the facts about the Cornish flag are few.

It almost seems necessary to invent a new science – paravexillology – to accommodate them!

I am briefly going to look at three areas where I feel it is necessary to record such “mysteries” and finish with two brief case-studies to show what we have to put up with.

The three areas are:

1. Creation Myths,
2. Misidentifications and
3. Misattributions.

Possibly what links these three together is patriotic wishful thinking.

Origin

The first time that we know of anyone writing about St Piran’s flag was in 1835.

Davies Gilbert (1767-1839), towards the end of his life, finally got round to editing the histories collected by two previous writers Hals and Tonkin. He added some statistical and geological details and a few notes of his own for each of the over 200 Cornish parishes.

He was writing about the parish of Perranzabuloe (St Piran in the Sands) in 1835 – he gives the date in his book – which was published in 1938.

Here we find the first known reference to St Piran’s flag: “A white cross on a black ground was formerly the banner of St Perran and the Standard of Cornwall; probably with some allusion to the black ore and the white metal of tin”¹.

But where did he get his information from? He gives no references and apparently has left nothing behind in his papers to help us. I am not the only one who has looked. What happened to the notes he made while compiling his *History*? I believe there were no notes. He says in his preface that as well as editing Hals & Tonkin’s work he added “under each parish, such matters as happened to occur to my recollection”.

At the time he wrote about Perranzabuloe, St Piran's 9th/10th Century Oratory was once again uncovered by the shifting sands. It is possible that that event was what brought the banner back to his memory.

Clearly he and other nineteenth century writers believed it to be a thing of antiquity.

In the absence of a known origin, theories are rife. Here are a few, without comment:

1. Invented by Davies Gilbert himself^{2 3 4}.
2. A modern invention⁵.
3. Invented by the great Cornish language scholar R Morton Nance (1873-1959)⁶.
4. Invented by Helena Charles one of the founders of the nationalist party Mebyon Kernow who did much to popularize the flag in the 1950s^{7 8}.
5. St Piran made a fire which melted tin in the rocks. He made a cross of the tin which became the basis of his banner⁹.
6. Based on the arms of the Earl of Cornwall or the later Duchy of Cornwall¹⁰.
7. Based on the many black and white family arms in Cornwall¹⁰.
8. Linked to the Breton black cross (Ar Groaz Du) – because of the colours^{11 12 13 14}.
9. Linked to a Breton Admiralty flag – for the same reason¹⁵.
10. Derived from St George's flag and given Cornish colours¹⁶.
11. Linked with the black and white livery of the Knights of St John¹⁷.
12. Originally derived from the Banner of Victory¹⁸.

Misidentifications

If the Cornish flag had a recognizable emblem on it – say a Cornish pasty! – there would be no difficulty in spotting it in old photographs and even paintings.

Because it is such a commendably simple design, patriotic wishful thinking sees it flying in black and white photographs where it may not be.

Many times such 'discoveries' are brought to my notice. Here are a few candidates of flags misidentified as St Piran's – some more obvious than others.

1. Denmark – white Scandinavian cross on red.
2. Signal flag 'R' – yellow cross on red square.
3. Signal flag '4' – white cross on red triangle.
4. Isles of Scilly Steamship Co house flag – white cross on blue with red letters I S S Co in the cantons.
5. Italy – a version with the Savoy Arms draped over a wall seen as St Piran draped over a white wall!
6. Greece – a photo of the Duke of Edinburgh's standard on his car visiting Truro. The 2nd quarter for Greece (white cross on dark blue) mistaken as a St Piran flag¹⁹.

Misattributions

From time to time assertions are made of the flag flying before its first known reference – Davies Gilbert 1838.

I take this as due to :

1. patriotic wishful thinking, or
2. artistic licence, or
3. just plain mistakes.

Again a few examples, working back into the past:

1. 1737 Queen Charlotte's funeral – misinterpretation of reference to the Duchy Arms in an old newspaper.
2. 1694 Queen Mary II's funeral – the same source.
3. 1690 The Battle of the Boyne.
4. 1642/51 English Civil War – recreationists like the Society of the Sealed Knot use banners based on St Piran's flag.
5. 1549 Prayerbook Rebellion in Cornwall – artists producing work for commemorations show St Piran's flag.
6. 1497 An Gof Rebellion in Cornwall – same thing. One writer identified St Piran's flag in the words "they do paynt the Image of a cross in a rag with the words 'Hoc Signo Vinces'"²⁰.
7. 1415 the Battle of Agincourt.
8. 1346 the Battle of Crécy.
9. 312 the Battle of Milvian Bridge. This is the most flamboyant of wishful thinking – "On the eve of the battle of the Milvian Bridge [Constantine the Great] had a vision of a white cross on a black ground... Hence Constantine's Cross is claimed as the origin of the *Crows Wyn* or St Piran's Cross." A spectacular theory only spoiled by the fact that, as I believe, Constantine saw a sign of the Chi-Rho not the cross!

Finally I want to close with two anecdotes or object lessons. The first shows how a passing suggestion can be brought into serious print.

I mentioned before the allegation that Helena Charles invented the flag. This was stated recently in a letter to the *West Briton* newspaper: "The so-called Cornish or St Piran's flag is neither Cornish nor St Piran's. It was seen by Helena Charles being used in German mines as a warning of explosives and she brought it back for similar use in Cornish mines."

I couldn't resist sending an answering letter: "Would you wave a black flag in a coalmine to warn of danger? Even with the lights on?" and challenged the writer to supply his evidence – none came.

Subsequently, in an article in a journal devoted to Cornish language studies, referring to the flag, I read "It has been suggested by some that a white cross on a black ground was used as a warning before blasting in German mines." However the writer continues: "There are many links between the mining industries of Germany and

Cornwall, but that a predominantly black flag waved in the cramped and dark conditions underground appears fanciful to say the least". So why mention it? ²¹.

I finish with what appears to me to be the sanctification of a myth.

In 1969 the so-called "Falmouth Incident" occurred. A petty government official demanded that a pleasure boat skipper "get that load of rubbish down" – referring to the St Piran's flag he had been flying for weeks during the summer holiday season.

This insult to the national flag caused a good deal of resentment. The ensuing publicity led to correspondence between Cornwall and both William Crampton of the Flag Institute and Whitney Smith of the Flag Research Center.

A Cornish nationalist councillor wrote a long letter on the flag to William Crampton giving much valuable information. He also asserted, giving an *Encyclopaedia Britannica* article on Cornish wrestling as his source, that the St Piran's flag flew at Agincourt with Henry V.

A banner said to have flown at Agincourt is known only from the poet John Drayton in the line "two wrestlers the Cornish had for theirs".

The *Encyclopaedia Britannica* article referred to a banner flown at Agincourt which is still used by the Cornish Wrestling Association today.

The Cornish Wrestling Association banner is gold with the black outline of two wrestlers in a hitch and the mottoes *Kernow Bys Vykken* "Cornwall for Ever" and *Gwary Whbeg yu Gwary Teg* "Fair play is good play".

The Councillor's information was given in good faith, and has been used in Vexillological material ever since.

Its latest manifestation being "The Cornish flag is black with the white cross of St Piran, patron saint of Cornwall, and dates back to the beginning of the 15th century" – The World Encyclopedia of Flags ^{22 23}.

These are the mysteries, perils and vexations of *Baneronieth Kernewek* – Cornish vexillology.

1. Davies Gilbert (1838) *Parochial History of Cornwall* Vol III p 332.
2. M C V Stephens (1960) (Untitled article) *New Cornwall* 8(3) pp 4 & 6.
3. Gwlasarcar Kernewek (1960) (Untitled letter) *New Cornwall* 8(4) p 7.
4. M C V Stephens (1961) "Some Notes on the Flag of St Piran" *New Cornwall* 9(4) p 9.
5. Colin Gregory (1997) "Is Cornwall lost in a Celtic Myth?" *Western Morning News* 21 November 1997. Review of *The Celts, The Construction of a Myth* by Malcolm Chapman.
6. Anon (2000) "The Breton Flag" *Gemini* The Magazine of the Twinning Committee for Cornwall. Spring 2000 p 4.
7. J W Reid (2000) "Let us all shout 'Cornwall Forever', but scrap all this fake paraphernalia" *West Briton* 27 July 2000.
8. Phil Rendle (2000) Critic wrote from England" *West Briton* 3 August 2000.
9. Revd W S Lach-Szyrma (188?) *A Church History of Cornwall and the Diocese of Truro* p 16.
10. See 4 above
11. Perig Keroad (196?) "Le Drapeau Cornique" *Sturier Yaouankiz*.
12. William G Crampton (1973) "Lesser Known British Flags" *Flag Bulletin* XII (3) pp 68-73.
13. Philippe Rault (1998) *Les Drapeaux Bretons de 1188 à nos jours* Coop Breizh pp 86.7.
14. Divi Kervella (1998) *Emblèmes & syboles ds Bretons et des Celtes* Coop Breizh pp 41/2.
15. See 11 and 13 above.
16. See 4 above.
17. Joan Gill (2000) letter dated 24 April 2000.
18. Royston Green (198?) *The National Question in Cornwall. A Historical Review* Communist Party of Great Britain p 5.
19. Philip Hosken (1998) "Nationalism or plain common sense?" *Cornish World/Bys Kernowyon* Sep/Nov 1998 p 6/7.
20. See 7 above.
21. Pol Hodge (2001) "Was Piran Really Kieran? A Cornish Speaker's View" *Agan Yeth* Cornish Language Studies 3 April 2001 p 43.
22. Alfred Znamierowski (1999) *The World Encyclopedia of Flags* Lorenz Books p 237.
23. Alfred Znamierowski (2000) *Encyclopédie Mondiale des Drapeaux* Manise p 237.

