

St Winnow Church, Lostwithiel, Cornwall

Edited by Adrian Greaves

During the summer, it was my pleasure to be taken by Society member Tom French and churchwarden Frances Stephens to visit the church of St. Winnow (or more properly, St Winnoc), where Lieutenant Melvill, 24th Regiment, worshipped immediately prior to departing for South Africa. There are both a fine memorial window and plaque dedicated to him. St. Winnow is near Melvill's home and his parents are buried in the small church cemetery. Although the church address is Lostwithiel, it is on the estuary some four miles south of the village and can be reached by driving down a very narrow lane and ignoring signs stating that the road is unsuitable for motor vehicles. We were lucky and saw no other traffic. The church and memorial are truly delightful and well worth a visit.

The church stands on the same piece of ground where probably the oratory of St Winnoc was erected at the end of the 7th Century. Of that building, made of cob (mud and straw) and thatched, nothing remains. In the 12th Century a stone building was erected – the lower courses of the north wall and transept are probably of this date. In the 15th Century, about 1465, the south wall was pulled down and the aisle with the pillars and arches was put up, together with the tower and porch. The roofs are of this date too, except for the chancel, which is a Victorian restoration. There is a wonderful stillness, tranquillity and timelessness about the place, which speaks of centuries of life and worship.

Some sympathetic restoration was done in late Victorian times by the architect J D Sedding, and the overall impression of the interior retains a feeling of the past. There are fine wagon roofs and much excellent carving in the screen and bench ends.

St Winnow, was one of the tireless band of Celtic priests and evangelists who consolidated and extended the Christian Church in Wales, Ireland, Cornwall and Brittany after the withdrawal of the Roman legions in the 5th Century. St Winnoc probably grew up in Wales and came here in about 670 AD to begin his missionary work, forming a small religious community and establishing a Lan or sacred enclosure. Eventually he moved to Northern France and founded a monastery at Wormhout, not far from Dunkirk. According to legend, when he became too infirm to rule the community, he offered to grind the corn in the monastery mill. The supply of flour diminished and the brethren complained. St Winnoc was found to be at his prayers, rather than working. The Lord decided that Winnoc's prayers were much more important than grinding corn and obligingly sent an angel to do the work instead!

He died there in 717 and his relics were later taken to the Abbey of Bergues-St Vinoc near Calais where the parish still exists. In the small window near the north transept, the left-hand figure is St Winnow, carrying a handmill, which is his symbol.

The Font

The granite font dates from the 14th Century. It has a rounded bowl with four cheerful angels bearing shields. The Latin inscription reads *Ecce carissimi dei veri baptizabuntur spiritu sancto* (Behold the beloved of the true god shall be baptised with the Holy Spirit).

The Letter

On the west wall is the modern transcription of the letter of King Charles I to the people of Cornwall, written at the height of Royalist success in 1643 to thank them for their support. An older copy is on the large painted panel behind the organ.

The Organ

The organ was originally a chamber organ from some large house and parts of it date from 1850. It has been enlarged and renovated.

The Elizabeth Foster window

The middle window in the north wall commemorates the life of service of Elizabeth Foster of Lanwithan. The figures in the window are Elizabeth of Hungary representing charity and St Faith, patron saint of the house of mercy, a local home for young women on their release from prison. The small window high up was given in memory of Elizabeth's husband Richard by their daughter Mabel. It shows St Winnow with his hand mill and St Nectan with his staff and book.

The North Transept

The north transept is now used as a vestry. At one time it was the private chapel of the Lower family who bought the Manor of St Winnow in 1469/70 and owned it for three centuries. Being Royalists in the Civil War they were heavily fined when the Parliamentarians eventually triumphed. The property gradually fell into ruins. In 1736 permission was given to take down the building and use some of the material to build a dwelling (the present farmhouse) and repair the barns. The archway into the old Manor house can still be seen just up the road.

A later owner was Robert Walker, Vicar of St Winnow for 54 years. He carried out a number of experiments to improve agriculture in Cornwall and was a founder Member of the Royal Cornwall. On his death the property was sold to the first baron Vivian of Glynn. The Vivian Celtic cross memorials stand in the south-west corner of the Churchyard.

The Tower

The Tower contains a ring of six bells, five of which were new cast in 1714 and have been re cast at various times since, the sixth bell being added as a commemoration of the Jubilee of Queen Victoria.

The Pulpit

The pulpit with its rich carving dates from about 1600 towards the end of Queen Elizabeth's reign. It was restored with new legs at the beginning of this century.

The Brass

Just by the steps to the pulpit there is a modern brass depicting St Francis. It is a memorial to Francis Buller Howell of Ethy in whose memory the rood figures of Our Lord, his Mother and St John were given in 1928.

The Screen

Dividing the nave from the chancel, the screen dates from the end of the 15th Century being completed by the early years of King Henry VIII's reign. The panels depict wonderfully carved leaves and flowers – each one different. In medieval times the screen would have shown a brilliant display of colour – gold, red and green. Through vandalism or neglect the figures and the loft disappeared and the upper part of the south aisle screen cut down. All the woodwork was restored by Violet Pinwill in 1907 at the cost of £301-2-8d.

The Chancel

There are memorials to two Vicars in the chancel. Percival Frye with members of his family and Chichester Tomkyns whose marble tablet is written in Latin.

The glass in both east windows dated from about 1500 and is thought to be amongst the finest stained glass in Cornwall, second only to the windows in St Neot. The main east window depicts the crucifixion with Mary and John on either side of the cross. The Latin text refers to the words of St Paul 'God forbid that I should glory save in the cross' (the missing letters are GLO). On the nearby wall is a slate memorial to William Sawle in the form of an anagram, "I was ill; now I am well".

Between the two altars is a statue of the Virgin and Child, carved by Violet Pinwill in memory of the Whiteway family.

The east window in the Lady Chapel is probably a collection of parts from different windows; the subjects in the tracery are principally figures of saints and donors. Great interest lies in the detail of costume, ecclesiastical, domestic and military. It was restored in 1867 by the Foster family who also gave the window on the south side depicting Jesus with children, in memory of their three little grandchildren.

The brass tablet on the windowsill just inside of the screen is a memorial to Lieutenant Teignmouth Melvill of Ethy who with Lieutenant Coghill endeavoured to save the Queen's colours in the battle of Isandlwana during the Zulu war in 1879. Edward VII awarded them the first posthumous Victoria Crosses. The next window in the south aisle was given in memory of Teignmouth's parents, Philip and Elizabeth Melvill.

The memorials on the south wall commemorate members of two well-known Cornish families who lived at Ethy: Vice-Admiral Vinicombe Penrose and Major Llewellyn Howell, the son of Francis Buller Howell.

Over the inner porch is the Charities Board, which records the gifts given by Lady Drummond and others to the poor of the Parish.

There are many interesting memorial headstones in the churchyard and you can enjoy the wonderful view of the River Fowey. St Winnow Parish has two daughter churches well worth a visit. St Nectan's stands

within farmland about two miles up the road. The building is largely 15th Century, though the foundations are older. The churchyard is a haven for wild flowers as it has been designated as 'A Living Churchyard'. St Saviour's on the outskirts of Lostwithiel is just over 100 years old and was built to serve the local community.

Bench Ends

The carved bench ends are not only of exceptional merit in design but of excellent craftsmanship as well.

There are three main periods of carving. The earliest bench-ends with a carved border date from about 1485 – note one with the ship of that period (with a carver's error), and another with a Cornishman wearing a kilt and drinking from a leather bottle.

Several show the symbols of our Lord's Passion – cross, scourge, spear and nails. A second group from the end of the 17th Century resembles the pulpit in style and date. The third group dating from the 1630s is simpler but has good deep carving of such subjects as a bell, a wheel, the cup and bread of the Eucharist and the crossed keys of St Peter, which are the arms of the Bishops of Exeter.

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