



## Cornwall Research Trip, August 23-27 2022

Genevieve Cain - DPhil Archaeology (part-time), OUDCE

Kellogg College

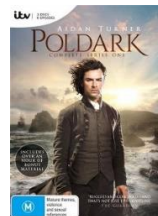


*The early medieval Long Cross (with Latin and ogam inscription) near the village of Trelights, Cornwall.*

I have recently returned from a wonderful few days in Cornwall and I just wanted to share some of the highlights with you. This was a research trip, very kindly supported by the Kellogg College Travel Grant. My principal goal was to get a real feel for the Cornish landscapes and its archaeology, in the hopes of forming a deeper contextual understanding with my own study area of Wales. The subject of my DPhil research is in defining and characterising a mysterious kingdom known as Brycheiniog (pronounced bruh-kine-eeog), which is thought to have been centred on the upper Usk Valley – the Usk being the river that rises in the western Brecon Beacons (mountain range), flowing through the town of Brecon, and making its way eventually all the way down to the Severn Estuary. I am a landscape archaeologist - which means that I take a particular interest in looking at how landscapes have been knitted together through time using a variety of [usually] non-invasive techniques.

The early medieval period in Britain begins approximately around 400 AD, so, after the collapse of the Roman Empire, and it runs all the way through to around 1100 AD with the arrival of the Norman Conquest – for those of you who might find an Oxford landmark reference point helpful, the mound (or motte) and original timber tower (or keep) of Oxford Castle down near the Westgate shopping centre, was built around the end of the period in which I am studying – so, we are thinking about the 600 years or so leading up to this where much was happening in terms of change, but also continuity, throughout the British Isles and North West Europe. The biggest problem with understanding the early medieval period in Wales is that there is such poor survival of remains. Given that we are working with so little, landscape archaeology and its flexibility as a discipline (in terms of methodologies etc.), is a great way to approach this challenging period.

Where is Cornwall? For those of you who are international students, Cornwall is a historic county in the south-west of England – roughly speaking, it forms part of the ‘foot’ that extends out into the Atlantic and down to the most southern point of the UK at Land’s End (circled in red). These days it is famous for a number of things – for the TV buffs among you, there is the comedy that is Doc Martin where a London surgeon with a fear of blood quits his job and relocates to a small Cornish fishing village to serve as a local Doctor (filmed mainly at Port Isaac). Then of course there is the sultry and dramatic Poldark which is now a popular TV programme adapted from the novels of Winston Graham with the delightful Aidan Turner playing the character of Ross Poldark. Cornwall is also a foodie paradise and you can be sure to enjoy wonderful classics such as fish and chips, not to mention the world-famous Cornish pasty, and all the fresh seafood you can eat! Cornwall boasts some of the most dramatic and varied landscapes and natural habitats in Britain, as well as having some of the best beaches for surfing – it’s a wonderful place, with something for everyone, and I highly recommend a visit!



*Stock images.*

But, back to archaeology. It is simply impossible to get to grips with thousands of years of history in just four days, so I had to be strategic in my approach – I decided to focus on seeking out potential landscape and site comparisons with my own study area of mid-Wales. One of the themes which has long characterised the early medieval period throughout Britain is the rise of Christianity (which was brought to the British Isles by the Romans) – as such early Christian sites (and sites with an ecclesiastical association) are of great interest to us. So in the landscape, we might be looking for place names that help us in this area, such as dedications to Saints (e.g. St Ives, St Austell), or certain types of enclosures with/without a present day church. We might also think carefully about Christian landscapes in terms of their interconnectedness, seeking the potential for understanding pilgrimage, guided perhaps by proximity and distance to shrines and holy wells or springs.

One of my first stops was at coastal St Levan’s church, right in the very south-eastern corner of Cornwall. I was there to see the site of a recent excavation and holy well, however, a feature in the churchyard of St Levan caught my eye immediately (Figure 1). It looked like an orange, sliced in half and placed flat side down; it then looked as if someone had cut a central wedge out of the middle. I pondered this for some time before asking the lady who had very kindly waived my parking fee (given that I was unprepared...!) and she told me that ‘the day a horse and cart can pass through it, is the day the world will end’. I loved this evocative folk-lore! While there is simply no telling how old this feature is, or whether it has any relevance to the early medieval period, it is an important and distinctive feature of the landscape and part of its story, particularly in terms of its place in an oral tradition – wonderful!





*Figure 1: The cloven stone feature in the churchyard of St Levan church, Porthcurno, Cornwall.*

St Levan's Chapel and holy well (Figs. 2 and 3) are sited some distance away from the present-day church on a dangerous and eroding sea cliff. The chapel was excavated in 2021 due to its potential as an early medieval Christian site and as a rescue archaeology project after a series of flash flooding events. The initial findings of the excavation indicate a small complex of buildings associated with the holy well and the extent to which the chapel overlies an earlier site has not yet been determined.



*Figure 2: St Levan's holy well overlooking Porthchapel beach, Cornwall.*

The siting of such chapels in the landscape is very interesting indeed, and their association with the sea and in their seemingly remote and isolated position (hermitic?) is not yet fully understood. Some comparisons may perhaps be drawn with St Govan's chapel and well in Pembrokeshire, Wales and St Medan's Chapel at the Mull of Galloway in Scotland, just to name two of many, many more dotted around the British coastline mainland. Next time you are out with an Ordnance Survey map, and you are in a coastal area, then why not look for a chapel or two? They are often places of pilgrimage, even today. Check out the recent excavation at St Patrick's Chapel, Pembrokeshire as a great example:

<https://www.ucl.ac.uk/archaeology/research/directory/st-patricks-chapel-excavation-project>



*Figure 3: St Levan's holy well, close to the chapel.*



*Figure 4: The Trelights Long Cross, 6<sup>th</sup> century.*

Also associated with early medieval Christian landscapes are inscribed stones (script/images). Just north of the hamlet known as Trelights is a monument called 'The Long Cross' (Fig.4) which has been designated as an early Christian memorial stone. This is a granite stone with an inscribed motif called a 'Chi Rho monogram', visible as an upright cross formed from a capital letter I with a central cross bar in the upper portion of the shaft. Below reads 'Brocagni ihc iacit nadotti filius' which translates as 'Brocagnus lies here, the son of Nadottus'. Along the right-hand edge of the same face is another inscription incised in an early medieval script of Irish origin called 'ogham', which occurs on Christian monuments of the fifth and sixth centuries AD. The ogham inscription is read as 'Brocagni' repeating the name in the Latin inscription. A sixth-century date is suggested for this monument.

What is particularly fascinating about the siting of this stone, for which there are comparable examples in my own study area of Brycheiniog, is the apparent emphasis on interconnectedness. This stone lies at an important junction whereby the stone is sited between the harbour at Portquin and St Endellion at an important crossroads. Interestingly, the dedication of that church to St Endellienta forms a possible link with Brycheiniog and its founding (Irish) ruler Brychan (as non-contemporary written sources suggest) as it is claimed that Endellienta was one of his many children (Brychan was said to have had an extraordinary number of children, all of whom were saints!). It has also been suggested that the name 'Brocagni' on the inscription equates to the 'Brychan' of the legend.

Along these same lines of thinking, I spent a very enjoyable half-day up in the Valency Valley, just north east, and away from, the summer crowds of the famous site at Tintagel – known of course of its legends surrounding King Arthur. It was however, in the peace and tranquillity of the Valency Valley, that I was particularly interested in the clustering of potential early medieval activity suggested by the trio of (probable) Christian sites (and their associated monuments) in such close proximity, within this natural valley leading to the harbour at Boscastle. These sites tempted me into visiting, and then walking between them to try to understand aspects of landscape connectedness – certainly there are patterns here that are repeated in my own study area.

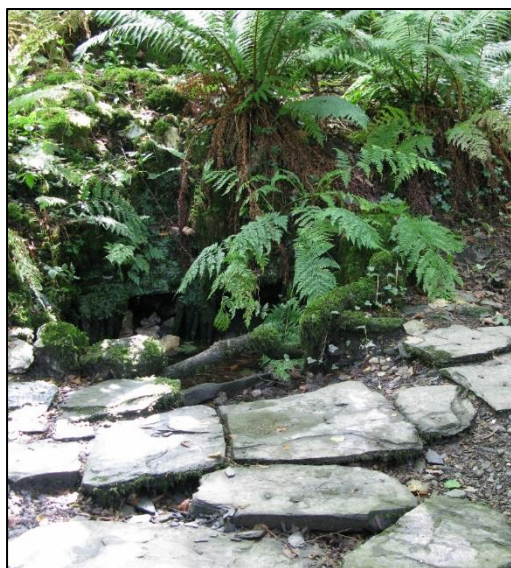


It is also worth, at this juncture, sharing with you a little about my own **process** as a landscape archaeologist. Certainly, there is much that I can obtain from the existing online digital database of the Historic Environment Record (which lists all known archaeological sites and monuments in Britain, with links to excavation reports etc. and this is a great place to start), however with a period as challenging as the early medieval period, we need to think about the landscape in a different way – not just as sites, but as landscapes, and how they might be connected in their culture and character through long-standing patterns of landscape use, alongside environmental interaction indicators and environmental affordance ( i.e. what the environment can offer in terms of its resources).

As you can see in the photo below of my own Ordnance Survey map (Fig. 5), I tend to buy paper maps and then scribble all over them with highlighters, marking sites, tracks, springs, rivers, fords, topographical features, aspects etc. it is all important in terms of attempting to understand a landscape! I have dozens of these for my study area in Wales all with highlights and notes – sometimes multiple maps for different themes! I have always loved maps since I was a child (hence I initially became a geographer) – and after a while (with my eye now firmly in with landscape archaeology) they tell a very rich story indeed. They are, of course, never a substitute for experiencing the landscape first-hand via walking, but they offer a critical overview and one that is always a very helpful starting point for brainstorming my initial thoughts and reactions.



Figure 5: For me, landscape archaeology often begins with checking the HER and then giving myself the freedom to scribble all over an Ordnance Survey map.



The site at St Mertiana's church (now known as Minster, Celtic name Talkarn or 'rock chapel') furthest to the west (closest to the sea) has early Christian origins as a hermitage or 'cell' and a holy well (Fig. 6). I spent some time splashing around in the stream looking for clues as the quartz stone association with springs and purity was prevalent here – the quartz, along with the water, seemed to simply flow out of the hillside.

Figure 6: The holy well/spring (and close up, left) at the site of St Mertiana's church, near Boscastle.



At Lesnewth church, 2 km east of Minster, stands an impressive wayside ‘wheel’ head cross (mounted on a modern shaft and base, Fig. 7), which are generally associated with the medieval period. Although its original location is unknown, it would not be too outrageous to suggest that it marked a way within the parish to this church site (pilgrimage?). Some lovely comparisons were noted at the church site of St Juliot (Julitta, thought to be another of King Brychan’s children) on the opposite side of the valley (across the River Valency) at Hennett where the churchyard boasts three more wayside crosses (Fig. 8)



Figure 7 (left): Wayside cross at Lesnewth; Figure 8 (right): wayside cross at Hennett (St Juliot).

I was keen to further explore the inscribed stones with ogham inscriptions within their landscape context – particularly in terms of the number of comparable examples within my own study area. Two fine examples were seen at St Martin’s church, Lewannick (dedication St Martin). A number of really important elements came together in my mind at this site – firstly, the place-name in Cornish is ‘Lannwenek’, and this is important, as the place-name ‘*llan*’ is prolific throughout Wales, yet we remain unsure about its meaning; it is derived from the Late Brittonic word *lanna*. The traditional definition has long been generally associated with ‘an enclosure relating to an ecclesiastical site’ yet throughout Brycheiniog and the rest of Wales I have not seen this to be the defining factor by any means, certainly, this has shown to be not the case in Cornwall either, yet many questions remain unanswered. Within my own research area, several themes continue to run through the landscape concerning these enclosures some of which I also witnessed in Cornwall. Ultimately seeing this reinforced will help me to shape my thinking on this and the proposals that I will put forth.



Figure 9: The raised churchyard, Lewannick.

What struck me immediately about this village, is the height and extent of the mound of earth upon which the subcircular church enclosure sits; this circular/oval form often indicates an early medieval origin (Fig. 9). Here at Lewannick, it is clear that the church enclosure is centrally located within the settlement around it – and from this encircling road, the mounded enclosure is approximately 20ft high and lined with a retaining stone wall. It is an extraordinary site, and is echoed in a number of sites within Brycheiniog. There were other important elements here, which I was thrilled to see – including two inscribed stones in Latin and Ogham representing both the Irish and Roman influence (Figs. 10, 11).

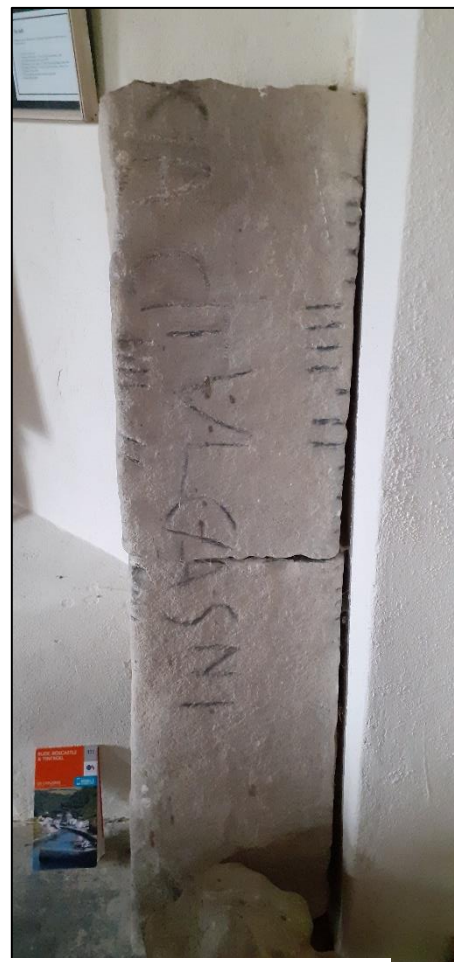


Figure 10 (above): Early Christian memorial stone in Latin with ogham on left and right edges.

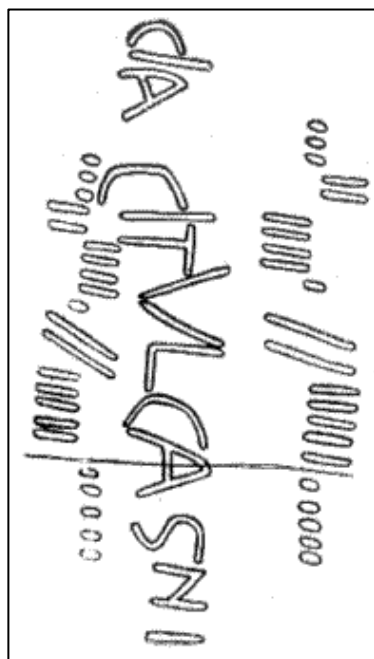


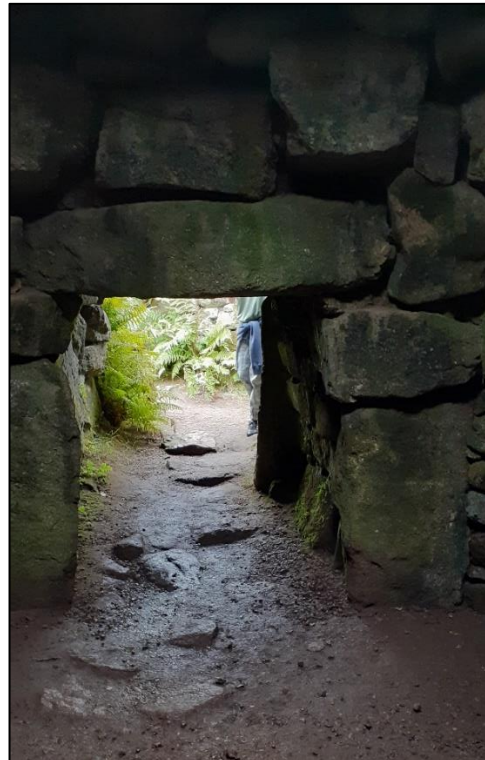
Figure 11 (left): Monument sketch, Macalister (1945).  
Latin translation 'here lies Ulcagnus'.



In addition to early Christian sites, I was keen to pay a visit to Carn Euny (Fig. 12), an 'ancient community' high in the hills with successive use from the Iron Age to Roman period (so, in the lead up to the early medieval period). The site is almost equidistant between Land's End and Penzance in the south west region of Cornwall and requires a fairly long drive along single-track lanes to reach it. But it was worth it! Radiocarbon dates have shown occupation from approximately the fifth century BC to the fourth century AD. One of the earliest features, and the biggest lure for me to the site, is the presence of a subterranean circular chamber and tunnel near the centre of the complex (Figs. 13,14) – these subterranean features are also known as 'fougou' and are largely found in Cornwall. Built around the fougou is a settlement, in its earliest phase consisting of timber-built round houses. During the Roman period (2<sup>nd</sup> – 4<sup>th</sup> centuries AD) the timber build round houses are replaced with an interlocking group of stone built, single-roomed round and ovoid houses with courtyards and paths (Fig. 15).

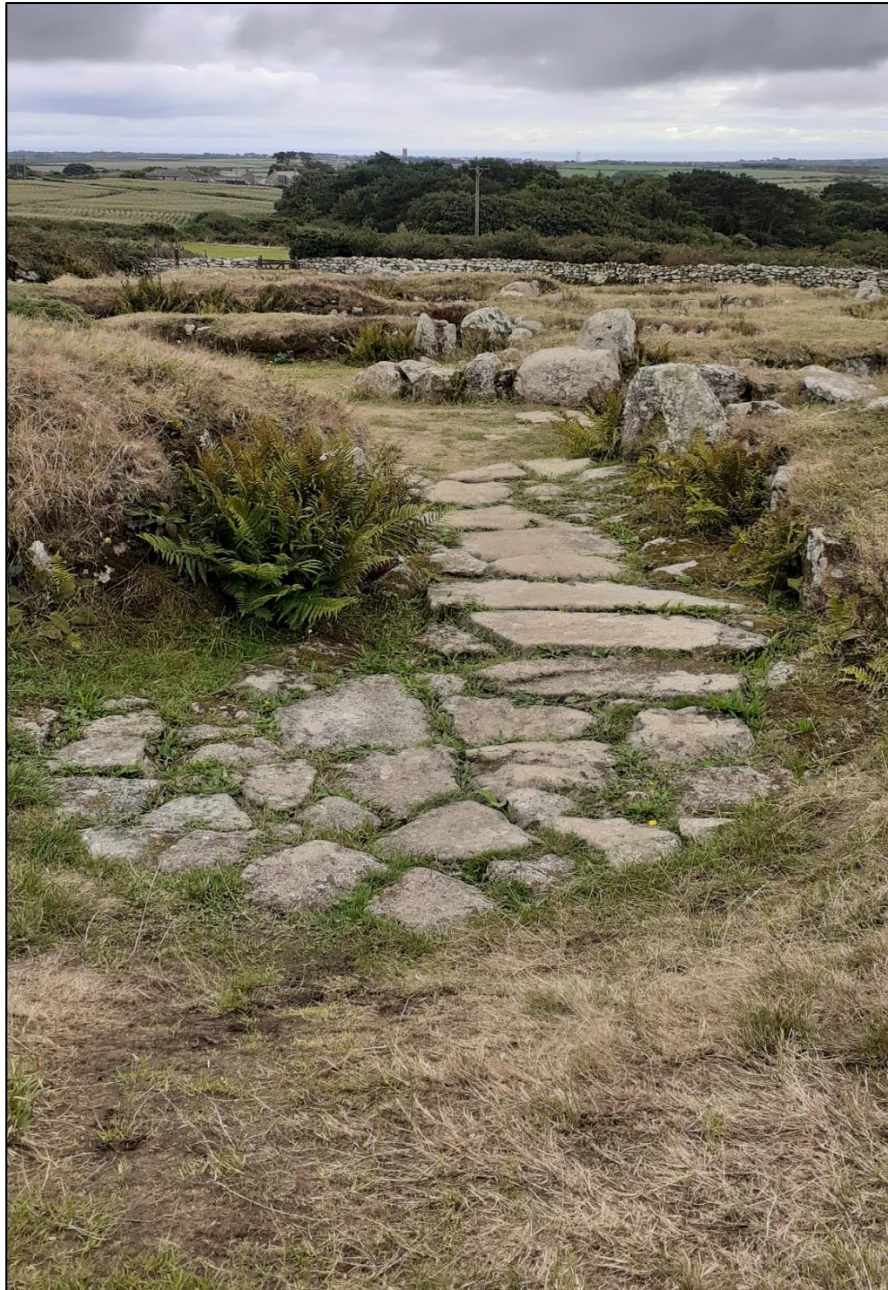


*Figure 12: The Carn Euny complex – an 18<sup>th</sup> century cottage within.*



*Figures 13 and 14: entrance to the central fougou chamber (left and right)*





*Figure 15: Paving leading into the upper part of the excavated part of the complex at Carn Euny.*

In summary, this has been such an insightful research trip, and my thanks again to Kellogg College for the financial support to make this happen. Upon reflection, I think what has struck me the most has been what I feel must now be 'instinct' – after nearly seven years of immersing myself in landscape archaeology, I now feel so much more confident in terms of 'reading' the landscape. Maps, such as OS for instance, now offer me clues that I would not have picked up on without several years of training, often in the form of reading followed by application and site visits, in addition to drawing upon my background in geography. Four days was a wonderful 'taster', which I can now examine within the context of my own study area. But so many questions remain, and another trip will be on the cards in the near future. The questions concerning relations with Ireland, specifically given the origin legends of Brycheiniog, remain ever-present and as such need further attention. For now, there is plenty to get on with in terms of thinking about Cornwall, together with Wales, during what appears to be a time of great change, and also continuity.

**Further reading:**

Carver, M. 2019. *Formative Britain*. Oxford: Routledge.

Charles-Edwards, T.M. 2013. *Wales and the Britons 350-1064*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.

Dark, K.R. 1994. *Civitas to Kingdom – British Political Continuity 300-800*. London: Leicester.

Ferguson, S. 1887. *Ogham Inscriptions in Ireland, Wales, and Scotland*. Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press.

Gerrard, J. 2013. *The ruin of Roman Britain: an archaeological perspective*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

Langdon, A.G. and Allen, J.R. 1895. Catalogue of the Early Christian Inscribed Monuments in Cornwall. *Archaeologia Cambrensis* 5th series vol.12 (1895) pages 50–60.

Macalister, R. 1945. *Macalister, Corpus Inscriptionum Insularum Celticarum Vol. I*. Dublin: Stationery Office.

Maddrell, A. and Scriven, R. 2016. Celtic pilgrimage, past and present: from historical geography to contemporary embodied practices. *Social & Cultural Geography*, 17:2, pp. 300-321.

Ó Carragáin, T. and Turner, S. 2016. *Making Christian landscapes in Atlantic Europe: conversion and consolidation in the early Middle Ages*. Cork, Ireland.

Rippon, S. 2018. *Kingdom, Civitas, and County*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.

Thomas, C. 1994. *And Shall These Mute Stones Speak? Post-Roman Inscriptions in Western Britain*. Cardiff: Cardiff University Press.

Turner, S., 2006. *Making a Christian landscape: the countryside in early medieval Cornwall, Devon and Wessex*. Exeter: University of Exeter Press.