

HISTORY OF SAINT FEOCK

This is the first of a series of articles written by Mrs. S.M.Satchwell which will appear from time to time.

The Visitor to Cornwall is struck at once by the profusion of unfamiliar saints' names in parish nomenclature, such as St. Piran St. Petroc, St. Gwineat, etc. etc. Many are household names known outside the Celtic West Country through stories re-told by modern writers; and as names of railway stations. St. Feock, on the contrary, is a nebulous figure who inspired no cultus, and is described by Boase as "an Irish devotee who gave his name to the parish of St. Feock." Even the two acknowledged authorities on Cornish Saints, Canon Doble and Charles Henderson, are undecided even as regards the sex of the Saint, basing their assumption that it was feminine on the terminal "a" of the alternative spelling of the name FEOCA, and the entry "Sancta Feoca" in Bishop Stapleton's Register (Exeter).

In the fifth century there was an influx of Celtic saints to Cornwall, mostly from Ireland, landing on the north Cornish coast along estuaries such as Hayle where the arrival of a large band of male and female missionaries, led by ST.GWINEAR, ended tragically in a mass murder at ROSEWORTHY. Transport by sea was almost certainly in boats of the coracle type, a wooden frame covered in prepared hide. Such a craft was capable of seaworthiness over long distances. This was proved by Tim Severin, who successfully re-enacted the voyage of St. Brendan the Navigator. (As a point of local interest, the hide of this boat was prepared by a Cornish firm of tanners). We must (regretfully) discount the magical voyages on altar-stones, etc. which were acceptable to the Medieval mind.

The name of Feock or Feoca is found only as the eponym of this small Cornish parish, though very similar names can be found in Brittany and Ireland. Can our local saint be identified with, for instance, St. FIACC or St. FIACRE, about both of whom a great deal is known? St. FIACC was Bishop of Fletty, and there is no record of his ever having visited Cornwall. In any case the early Irish missionaries were usually monks who were still unknown. The name FIACC is a well-known name in early Ireland, and survives in the Anglicised form O'FEE.

St. FIACRE was a delightful character driven by missionary zeal to visit, and settle in, Gaul in the sixth century, who built his hermitage in a wood and established a garden, becoming known as the patron saint of gardeners. His ability to cure fleshy tumours, either miraculously or with the aid of herbs, attracted many pilgrims.

A point which I have not found suggested anywhere is that the date of St. Feock's feast day, 2nd. February, does not tally with the feast day dates of other saints of similiar sounding names with whom it has been suggested he can be identified -
FIACC - October 12th, FIACRE - August 20th or September 1st.
FEOCK - February 2nd.

The historian Hals tells us that the word Feock or Feage (and by mutation vegue) indicated "a lofty local place". The higher part of the village of Feock is known as La Feock. The prefix La or Le occurs in other places as a corruption of Lan meaning a religious establishment - a monastery or hermitage - hence "a hermitage in a high place" which in this case contains that essential factor for habitation, an ancient well (Grange Well).

Is it therefore unreasonable to deduce that our saint was not a well-known missionary but an un-named monk who arrived with a band from Ireland, escaped the massacre by the pagan chieftain Feodor, ultimately found a well (the Grange Well in La Feock lane) settled in this delectable spot and became known as the man on the hill in the holy place or "the holy man on the hill" SAINT FEOCK.

