A Profile on St Piran: Patron Saint of Cornwall

By Trin Gleason

Who was St Piran, and why is he important to Cornish life?

Saint Piran is the patron saint of Cornwall and tin miners. An Irish bishop, St Piran lived during the 6th century and is celebrated throughout Cornwall. According to legend, he was thrown off a cliff in Munster tied to a millstone because of his opposition to the actions of King Aegnus. However, the stone floated when Piran hit the water, bringing him across the Celtic Sea to Cornwall. He established a church in Perranporth where he landed, and ministered to those who worshipped Celtic deities.

One of the most important impacts St Piran left to the Cornish people was his knowledge of smelting tin. It is believed that he accidentally discovered tin, and instructed tin miners on how to smelt it. Cornwall is one of the only places in the UK to have natural tin deposits, and by learning how to utilise those resources, tin miners profited greatly and tin mining became inherent to Cornish culture. Tin mining was the dominant industry in Cornwall since its discovery, though it peaked during the Industrial Revolution - making Cornwall one of the richest areas in the UK. It is obvious as to how important tin mining and smelting is to Cornish life, and is the reason St Piran is the Patron Saint of Cornwall!

FUN FACT: ST PIRAN SHARES HIS NAME WITH A 15 mm HERMIT CRAB!

How is St Piran celebrated today?

Though he lived and died more than a thousand years ago, Saint Piran is still celebrated in Cornwall today. He is celebrated on 5th March with parades, parties and re-enactments, which rose in popularity in the 20th century, and the Celtic revival.

Even more, the black and white colours of the Cornish flag have their own special connection with Piran! It is said that when he discovered the smelting of tin, St Piran noticed a stream of liquid metal flowing from the black rock, perhaps making a cross. Alternatively, it is thought that the white cross represents good and truth overcoming the evil of the world. Thus, the flag of Cornwall is a white cross on a black background - a nod to its tin mining and religious past.

St Piran's Oratory:

One of the most important sites for St Piran is the oratory he built in the 7th century, nestled in the sands of Perranporth. The chapel was believed to have been used for some 400 years before the sand of the area obscured it, and its patrons abandoned it. It is believed by some to be the oldest Christian building in Britain! St Piran is celebrated for bringing Christianity to Cornwall - according to legend, the first of his converts were animals. However, he was very influential and in time converted many individuals to the Christian faith. Today, a pilgrimage taken by celebrators of St Piran's Day is welcomed at the ruins of the chapel.

Other Cornish Saints:

There are many saints venerated in Cornwall. One such saint is St Petroc, which some believe to be the true patron saint of Cornwall. 'The Captain of Cornish Saints', Saint Petroc was a

British Prince born in Wales, who founded a monastery at Padstow and ministered there. In Cornwall, he founded a monastery named Lanwethinoc and is known for saving the deer Constantine of Cornwall was hunting, and thus converting him to Christianity. His feast day occurs on June 4th.

Saint Michael is also an important Saint in Cornwall. Though he was not necessarily from Cornwall, he is still revered here. The patron saint of fishermen, it is said that apparitions of St Michael lead fishermen to safety on St Michael's Island as early as the 5th century. A church was built on this island in his honour in 1135, though the building that stands today was rebuilt in the 14th century. There are four miracles attributed to the island, which strengthens its importance as a site for St Michael.

It is possible to visit these religious sites, and many thousands do each year! Whether it be to celebrate these saints, revel in the beauty of their sites, or simply to better understand their histories, there is something for everyone to enjoy.

There is a history woven through every aspect of Cornish life from its saints to its landscapes, and learning about it ties you to a story hundreds of years in the making.

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