

St Torney's, North Hill, Cornwall

by John Evans

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The parish of North Hill lies on the eastern fringe of Cornwall's Bodmin Moor, its neighbouring parishes being Lewannick to the north, Lezant (with a very short boundary) to the east, Linkinhorne to the south and south-east, St Cleer to the south-west, and Altarnun to the north-west. The parish is effectively divided by the River Lynher, with the portion to the east being essentially agricultural, and that to the west being predominantly moorland and home historically to quarrying and mining. The impressive parish church is in the centre of the village of North Hill, on a site which has hosted a place of worship since at least the time of the Norman Conquest, although no part of the structure today contains unmistakable work of that age. But the manor of Trebartha, which almost certainly included a church or chapel of some nature, is mentioned in the Domesday Book – one of the hundreds of manors vested in King William's half-brother, Robert, Count of Mortain.

The parish was mentioned in the register of Bishop Bronescombe – initially on 6th February 1260, when the Bishop commended Ralph de Ilington to the church “at the presentation of Roger de Trelosk, true patron”, and then on 7th May 1275, when the Bishop instituted Master Roger le Rus to the living. Both appointees had previously held the living of Lawhitton, which was within the Bishop's gift, being part of the large episcopal estate of Landwithan. The church's dedication to St Torney, however, is a mystery. Nicholas Roscarrock's 17th century *Lives of the Saints: Cornwall and Devon* does not mention him, nor does Canon Gilbert Doble, whose research on the saints of Cornwall was second to none. Alban Butler, however (an 18th century English Roman Catholic priest), recorded Torney as an Irish priest and monk of the 8th century, although how the saint came to be venerated at North Hill is unexplained. There is a holy well dedicated to the saint in North Hill parish near the River Lynher, which flows down through the parish of St Erney where (near Markwell) there is another holy well – is it possible that the 2 names in fact relate to the same saint?

As mentioned, the church is in the centre of the village, and dominates it with its impressive west tower. The building we see today is essentially late 15th or early 16th century, although it underwent a sensitive restoration at the hands of architects Edmund Sedding and his brother John Dando Sedding in 1868 at which time, while removing the interior wall plaster, they uncovered wall niches and an Easter sepulchre (or perhaps a tomb niche) in the chancel, features which are believed to be 14th century or even earlier.

Access to the churchyard can be gained via a gate at the eastern end, or, perhaps more attractively, by a similar gate at the western end from which a path then leads past the tower to the porch. Before entering the church, it is worth pausing to admire the south aisle wall and the porch. They are constructed (as is the tower) of massive granite ashlar blocks, the aisle wall having buttresses with set-offs embellished with crocketed finials and topped with crenelations – details which were undoubtedly designed (successfully) to impress. The porch with parvise above follows the same design features, and is unusual for Cornwall for having a second storey, and also for being crenelated – features normally only found on churches in much larger or important places. Bodmin, Launceston and St Neot come to mind. The porch also carries a well-made slate sundial dated 1753 with the motto “Sic transit Gloria Mundi” but no maker’s name. Inside the porch is another impressive feature – a groined ceiling.

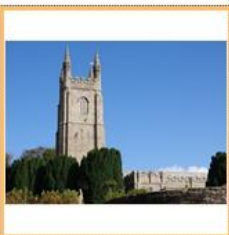
Entering the church itself, the font is immediately to our left, at the back of the south (or Trebartha or Spoure) aisle, and its bowl is believed to be Norman, even if the base is not. Turning around and facing east, we can immediately see that the south aisle is considerably shorter than the nave and chancel combined, the Spoure family pew at the east end being partitioned off by wooden panelling. The entire aisle has numerous memorials to the families for whom Trebartha Hall was home, the most impressive being the tall 17th century Spoure memorial at the east end. Thomas Spoure from Somerset married one Anne Trebartha at the end of the 15th century, and the Spoure family then lived at Trebartha Hall until 1729 when the last of the line, the widowed Mary Grylls (née Spoure) died in 1729. Mary had had a brother, Henry, who tragically died in March 1687-8 aged just 10, and their grieving father Edmund commissioned the elaborate memorial. Edmund is seen towards the front at prayer, kneeling facing his wife, with young Henry standing on the left and his sister Mary on the right, and a tablet with the epitaph between them. Mary Grylls was engaged to be married to Francis Rodd at the time of her death from smallpox, and she left the Trebartha estate to him in her will. As an interesting link, one of the other memorials in the aisle is to that Francis and his wife Alice, and four of their children.

The final service in St Torney’s as a parish church took place on Sunday 17th March 2019, and the building was vested in the Churches Conservation Trust in 2022. Much work needed to be done on the building, but it was re-opened on Sunday 19th October 2024 when the church was suitably decorated at harvest time – standing in the south aisle, the parish bier served as an interesting holder of the fruits of the harvest!

Moving across to the nave provides us with a good overall view of the chancel and its colourful east window which was installed at the time of the restoration of the chancel in 1868. Intriguingly, the Royal Cornwall Gazette, in its edition of 9th April that year in reporting on the restoration, said – “Only the circles in the head of the window are filled with stained glass, the lights themselves being glazed with Cathedral glass in varied patterns” and there does not appear to be any record of when the Cathedral glass was replaced with the stained variety. What is more interesting is that the newspaper report goes on to say – “In the course of the restoration some ancient niches were found in the East wall. These have been carefully preserved and re-inserted (with new labels and cusping) on either side of the end window and in the side walls.” At the same time the beautiful ogee-topped Easter sepulchre, or tomb niche, was exposed in the north wall. The corresponding niches can be seen on the southern side of the chancel, above the 3-seat sedilia, above which is a two-light stained glass window by the well-known firm of Clayton & Bell. It was commissioned in 1867 by the Rev. Charles Rodd (rector of North Hill) and his wife in memory of their only son Charles Edward, who had died in December 1865 aged just 16. It depicts, from left to right, the Adoration of Jesus by Mary & Joseph; Christ’s resurrection; and Christ’s body being carried to the grave.

The nave and both aisles have their original 15th century waggon roofs, but that in the chancel was renewed at the time of the 1868 restoration. The Royal Cornwall Gazette report of the restoration says – “The roof is entirely new, of oak, with moulded ribs, plates, and carved bosses, &c., have been painted in floriated patterns by Mr. John Sedding, brother of the architect”. This is obviously a reference to John Dando Sedding, and what a superb job he made of it! Moving across to the north aisle, the historian Dr. Joana Mattingly has written a fascinating article (on the North Hill Local History Group’s website) on the wallplates in the north aisle, which carry, at intervals along their lengths, shields bearing arms or symbols which she argues are linked with Landreyne manor, the Courtenay family and royalty, and show that the north aisle dates to the period 1495-1504 and significantly pre-dates the south aisle. At the west end of the north aisle is a superb tomb-chest with a tapered backplate of an unusual design, in memory of Jane Vincent who died in 1601 and her husband Thomas who followed her in 1606. It carries elaborate carving in low relief, and shows the couple at prayer, facing each other, with their 8 sons behind Thomas and their 7 daughters behind Jane. Two of the children (1 son and 1 daughter) have skulls over their heads indicating that they predeceased their parents.

Returning outside, it is difficult not to look up and admire the impressive tower and wonder at the skill of the masons of centuries ago dealing with huge blocks of granite without the benefit of any mechanical lifting aids. The granite west doorway has a hood-mould with carved label stops, and interesting carving in the spandrels. The tracery in the large west window is thought to be of the 18th century, but the window has an unusual band of carved roundels at the base. Finally, to the north-west of the church is a modern extension to the graveyard, a tranquil place to pause and ponder. Although no longer a parish church, St Torney's at North Hill will remain as an asset for the district, has been superbly restored by the Churches Conservation Trust, and is definitely worth a visit.



01 Church from the south.JPG



02 South side of church.JPG



03 Porch with parvise.JPG



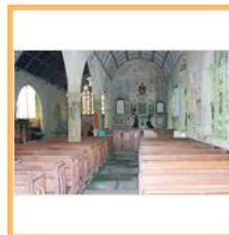
04 Sundial.JPG



05 Porch groined ceiling.JPG



06 Font.JPG



07 South aisle looking eastwards...



08 Spoure memorial.JPG



09 Rodd memorial.JPG



10 Parish bier with harvest prod...



11 Chancel.JPG



12 Chancel north side.JPG



13 Chancel south side.JPG



14 Chancel south window.JPG



15 Chancel & nave ceiling.JPG



16 North aisle wallplate.JPG



17 Vincent memorial.JPG



18 Impressive tower.JPG



19 West door & window.JPG



20 Modern graveyard extension...

Scroll down for larger images









Sic transi Gloria Mundi

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VI

VII

VIII

IX

X

XI

XII

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III

VI

V

III

II









SACRED
TO THE MEMORY OF
FRANCIS RODD,
OF TREBARTHA HALL, ESQUIRE,
WHO DIED 25TH AUGUST 1736, AGED 52.
AND OF **ALICE** HIS WIFE,
DAUGHTER OF WILLIAM SANFORD, ESQUIRE,
AND ELIZABETH HIS WIFE,
WHO DIED IN FEBRUARY 1770.

ALSO TO THE MEMORY OF THEIR CHILDREN.

BRIDGET RODD.
DIED 13TH FEBRUARY 1765, AGED 31.

ELIZABETH RODD.
DIED 4TH APRIL 1803, AGED 71.

FRANCIS RODD,
DIED 23RD JANUARY 1812, AGED 79.

JANE HIS WIFE,
DAUGHTER OF JOHN HEARLE, OF PENRYN, ESQUIRE,
AND MARY HIS WIFE,
DIED 30TH SEPTEMBER 1780, AGED 42.

ALICIA RODD,
DIED 16TH AUGUST 1816, AGED 81,
AT WHOSE REQUEST THIS MONUMENT WAS ERECTED.

*THE LORD GAVE, AND THE LORD HAS TAKEN AWAY,
BLESSED BE THE NAME OF THE LORD.*











IF WE BELIEVE THAT JESUS DIED FOR US

AND RISE AGAIN - EVEN SO - THEN WE ALSO WILL

SLEEP IN JESUS WILL GOD BRING US THROUGH

HOLY

HOLY

HOLY











