

KERNOW SPLANN!

Bard of Gorsedh Kernow, **Merv Davey** shares stories of Cornish history

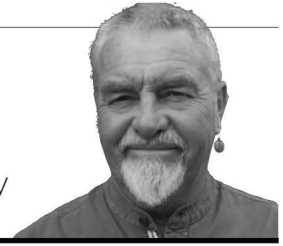


Image: Donald MacLeod

On the afternoon of August 18 St Petroc's Church in Bodmin will hold a special service commemorating the 1549 Rebellion.

It is hosted by the Bodmin Old Cornwall Society and the 40 odd banners representing all the societies in Cornwall provide a spectacular pageant as they process through the church.

The story of the rebellion and the repercussions that followed are recounted during the service and those who lost their lives remembered.

Bodmin was a focal point for the uprising. When it failed, Sir Anthony Kingston was appointed by the King to 'serve vengeance' on those involved and he made a special point of visiting Bodmin, dining with the mayor and then hanging him!

The events of 1549 are explored in detail in a new book edited by the historian Professor Philip Payton, *Cornwall in the Age of Rebellion*, in which it is linked to earlier and later armed risings in Cornwall covering a period

The age of rebellion

ABOVE: *Crossing the Tamar* is by Donald MacLeod of St Ives Gallery, Wharf Road, St Ives. The artist is well known for his naval history and maritime paintings and prints set on the Cornish coast. A print of this painting can be ordered by special request. stivesgallery.co.uk

of 200 years. We are shown that medieval Cornwall was left largely to its own ends. This accommodation was achieved with the Kings of Wessex and the early English state. Provided they benefited from the lucrative tin industry, the Normans and Plantagenets also interfered little with Cornwall.

The Cornish language thrived, and religious customs enjoyed a continuity back to the time of the Celtic saints 1,000 years earlier, as did Cornwall's close ties with Brittany.

This all changed with the coming of the Tudors, who sought to expand and centralise English power at the cost of long-standing traditions and alliances. In

Cornwall, this intrusion triggered a series of dramatic uprisings.

This 'Age of Rebellion' starts in 1497 with an insurgency led by Michael An Gof of St Keverne and Thomas Flamank of Bodmin. This was a protest at the extreme level of taxation introduced by the newly crowned King Henry VII, directed largely at funding his ambitions to extend English rule into Scotland.

The Cornish host formed initially at St Keverne, rallied at Bodmin, and then marched on London gathering support as they went. They were ill equipped and outnumbered in relation to Henry's army and were defeated at Blackheath just outside of Guildford.

Although an example was made of the leaders – who were duly hung, drawn and quartered – the establishment’s confidence was shaken and there was little in the way of further repercussions in Cornwall. Indeed, over the next few years Henry increased the powers of the Duchy and the Stannary Parliament, providing Cornwall with a large degree of independence.

When his successor, Henry VIII, was crowned he included ‘Duke of Cornwall’ alongside of ‘Prince of Wales’ and ‘King of England’ in his titles. This constitutional distinctiveness remains part of our modern Cornish identity today.

The sharp end of the Reformation came with Henry VIII’s young son Edward VI, and the Regency Council governing on his behalf. There was widespread destruction and appropriation of Church property and, in 1549, the introduction of a prayer book in English rather than Latin. Christianity in Cornwall predated that of England and still owed much to the independence of the old Celtic Church. The imposition of control from afar was not to the taste of Cornish congregations – nor was the introduction of English when they were used to a combination of Latin and Cornish.

There were rumblings of dissent and violence across Cornwall, which took form in Bodmin in June of that year where a series of demands

were made upon the Crown. Encouraged by a parallel, if smaller, incident at Sampford Courtenay in Devon, the Cornish host once again marched across the border.

‘No quarter was given and there was wholesale slaughter both on the battlefield and subsequently as a punishment across Cornwall’

They met with and defeated Crown forces at Crediton but were finally routed by the King’s army at Exeter. On this occasion no quarter was given and there was wholesale slaughter both on the battlefield and subsequently as a punishment across Cornwall.

For many this marks the point of serious decline in the use of the Cornish language.

In proportion to the population of Cornwall at the time, the death rate would have been comparable to the loss of life in the First World War. Just as we still remember the fallen from that war today, so the loss of life in 1549 would have been part of Cornish consciousness a hundred years later as the British Civil War erupted. Cornish particularism leaned towards the royalist cause and the King’s Army in the west was dominated by Cornish troops. One of the Cornish leaders, Richard Grenville, actually proposed an autonomous Cornish state as a compromise

to end hostilities in the West, but this was not well received by the King. Eventually King Charles I lost his Cornish military support and escaped via the Scillies.

The last rebellion is sometimes described as the one that did not happen! In 1688, along with six other bishops, Jonathon Trelawny refused to endorse King James II’s proposal to ease restrictions on Catholics and religious dissenters and was imprisoned in the Tower of London.

Feelings ran high in Cornwall that a fellow Cornishman should be treated in this way but there was no armed rising. Tucked away in the parish register of St Tudy is a fragment of manuscript dating from this time which reads, ‘And shall Trelawny die? We are Twenty Thousand will know the Reason Why’, written by Edward Trelawny, cousin of said bishop. This is an expression that seems to have remained within folklore and been the inspiration for Robert Stephen Hawker’s song *Trelawny*. It was first published anonymously in 1825 and quickly became adopted as the Cornish National Anthem sung by Cornish communities around the world.

Philip Payton and colleagues deliver a detailed and a formidably well researched account of this period of Cornwall’s history which in turn provides insight into our modern Cornish identity. ♦

BELOW:
Bodmin Church will host a procession of banners representing all the societies in Cornwall as part of the 1549 Rebellion commemoration

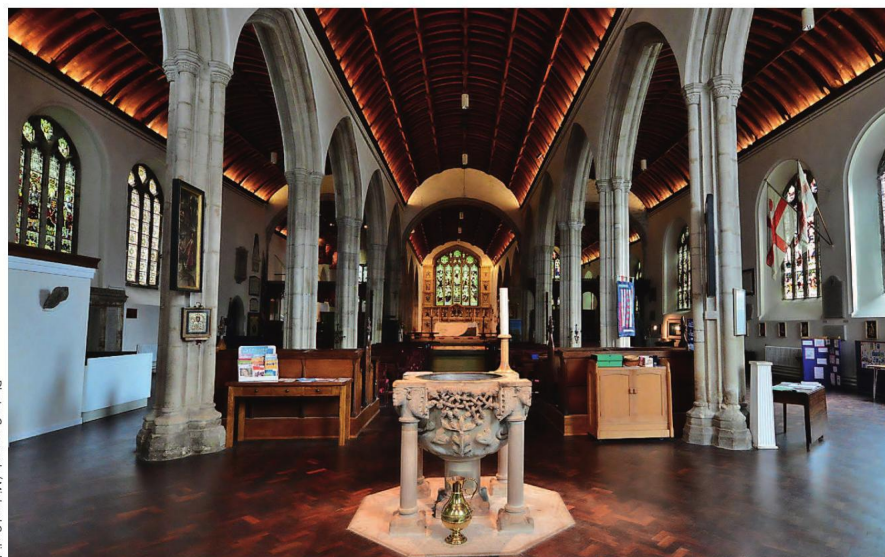
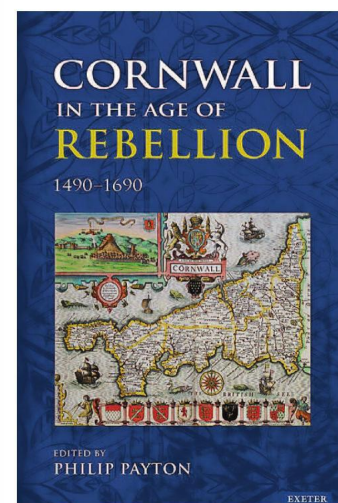


Photo: Geography / Michael Garrick



Cornwall in the Age of Rebellion is available from
The University of Exeter Press
exeterpress.co.uk