

SOME ASPECTS OF CELTIC SURVIVAL IN SOMERSET

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Many years ago, W. H. Stevenson pointed out that the Celtic names preserved by Asser in his *Life of King Alfred* indicate the existence of Celtic-speaking populations in the south-western counties at the end of the ninth century. For instance, Asser records the British name for the Dorset Frome as *Frauu*, which is the exact Old Welsh equivalent of Old English *Frōm*; a form such as this can only have come from the mouth of a Welsh speaker in the district.¹ From the same source we learn that the Celtic name for Selwood Forest was *Coitmaur* 'the great wood'.

The survival of Celtic-speaking and probably bilingual populations in Somerset during the Old English period may be inferred from other sources. In a Glastonbury charter dated 682, Creechbarrow Hill near Taunton is described as *collem qui dicitur britannica lingua Cructan apud nos Crycbeorh*.² In some Glastonbury manuscripts, ancient Celtic place-names are glossed with later English names which supplanted them; examples are *Cedern .i. Elenbeorge* (Elborough in Hutton) and *Lantokai .i. lege*, referring to Leigh in the parish of Street.³ An early sixteenth century copy of a Wells charter dated 1065 describes Biddisham as *Biddesham quod Tarnuc proprie appellatur*.⁴ An early Stogursey charter mentions a piece of land called Welcroft which had the alternative name of *Ros*, identical with Cornish *ros* 'heathland, moor, peatland', Welsh *rhos* 'moor, heath'.⁵

Place-names containing Celtic elements are numerous in Somerset; among these, early compounds, in which the qualifying element is placed first, are well evidenced. Evercreech (Old English *Evorcric*,

¹ W. H. Stevenson: *Asser's Life of King Alfred*, pp. 248-9.

² B.C.S. 62; on *Cructan*, the Celtic form of the name, v. Ekwall, *English River-Names*, p. 412.

³ The first element in *Cedern* is formally identical with Primitive Welsh *ced* < British *cēto-* 'wood'. On *Lantokai* 'the church of St. Cai', v. *Proceedings*, Vol. xciv (1950), pp. 117, 118 note; Bulletin of the Board of Celtic Studies, Vol. 14, Part II (1951), p. 113; *Proceedings*, Vol. xcvi (1951), p. 152.

⁴ On Tarnock, which contains the stem *tarn-*, evidenced in Old Welsh, v. *Proceedings*, Vol. xciv (1950), p. 122; B.B.C.S., Vol. 15, Part I, p. 18.

⁵ B.B.C.S., Vol. 14, Part II (1951), p. 118.

from British **Eburo-crouco-*)¹ and Camel (Old English *Cantmæl*, British **Canto-mēlo-*)² belong to this class ; a further example is Polden, in which the first element is derived from an early Old English *Bouelt* from British **Bouo-gelt-* ‘cow pasture’.³ Among hill-names, special mention may be made of Quantock. The Old English form was *Cantuc*, from British **Cantāco-*. The meaning behind British **canto-* was probably ‘corner, nook, bend’, while the suffix *-āco-* can convey a sense of plentitude or possession. Thus the sense behind the name might be ‘abounding in corners and nooks’, a reference to the deep and winding valleys which are a striking feature of the range.⁴

Hybrid names containing a Celtic first element occur throughout the county. We may note in particular Glastonbury, the first element in which may be identical with Cornish *glastann* ‘oak-trees’, from British **glasto-tannā*.⁵ Edingworth (*Iodena Wirda* in the Exeter Domesday) has a first element derived from British *Itunā*, the fundamental meaning of which is simply ‘water’.⁶ The first element in Tintinhull (Middle English *Tinten-*, *Tynten-*, from British **Tintinio-*) is found in the Cornish place-name Tinten, in the parish of St. Tudy.³

Late Celtic compounds are rare, although some occur in the centre and south of the county.⁸ Among these Dommett (*Duum Meten* in an early Muchelney charter) contains as a first element a word identical with Old Cornish, Old Welsh *din* ‘fortress’.⁹ *Stretmerch* formerly the name of a wood near Broadway or Ashill, contains Old Cornish *stret*, later *streth* ‘stream, brook’.¹⁰ *Peon Mynet*, once the name of a locality on the Black Down Hills,¹¹ just over the Devon border in the parish of Culmstock, is identical with Modern Welsh *Pen Mynydd* ‘end or top of the mountain’. Forms

¹ *Ib.*, Vol. 15, Part I, pp. 15-16.

² *Ib.*, Vol. 15, Part I, p. 18.

³ *Ib.*, Vol. 14, Part II (1951), p. 117.

⁴ *Ib.*, Vol. 15, Part I, p. 18.

⁵ *Proceedings*, Vol. xciv (1950), pp. 116-118; B.B.C.S., Vol. 15, Part I, p. 16.

For another possible etymology, however, v. Sir Ifor Williams, ‘Glasinfryn,’ *Trans. Caern. Hist. Soc.* 1948.

⁶ *Proceedings*, Vol. xcvi (1951), pp. 155-156.

⁷ *Proceedings*, Vol. xciv (1950), pp. 122-123 ; B.B.C.S., Vol. Vol. 15, Part I, p. 19.

⁸ They include *Lantocai* and *Cructan*, mentioned above.

⁹ B.B.C.S., Vol. 14, Part II (1951), pp. 114-5. The *-uu-* spelling in the form *Duum* may be ascribed to the influence of Old English *dun* ‘hill’.

¹⁰ *Ib.*, p. 118.

¹¹ In B.C.S. 724, an original document dated 938.

such as these indicate that the British language in Somerset had developed into a stage corresponding to Primitive Welsh before it finally gave place to English.

Folios 27*b* and 28 of the *Codex Wintoniensis*¹ contain, along with other passages, an Old English version of the extensive land boundaries given in Latin in BCS 476. One of the localities named is described as *ðan halgan æsce* 'the holy ash'; in the Latin version, however, this is rendered *quendam fraxinum quem imperiti sacrum vocant* 'a certain ash-tree which the ignorant call sacred'.³ A similar name occurs elsewhere in the county; Hallatrow in the parish of High Littleton is *Helgetreu* in Domesday Book, 'holy tree'. As the West Saxons were converted to Christianity before they overran Somerset, it might be postulated that we have here relics of Celtic heathendom, which the indigenous population may have been slow to renounce.³

A number of Somerset churches have Celtic dedications. St. Petrock is found at Timberscombe, St. Dubricius at Porlock; St. Carantoc was formerly connected with Carhampton.⁴ The church at Culbone is dedicated to St. Columbanus, and there was once a chapel to him at Cheddar.⁵ The name of St. Kew (originally **Ciu*⁶) survives in Kewstoke, which is *Chiwestoc* in the Exeter Domesday. St. Congar, to whom the church at Badgworth is dedicated, gave his name to Congresbury. St. Cai left his name in *Lantocai*, St. Bridget is found at Brean and Beckery. The parish church of Street was formerly dedicated to St. Gildas, while the name of St. Brannoc occurs in the lost *Brannocmynstre*.⁷ It is just possible that Butleigh (early forms *Budecleg*, *Budeclega*, *Budecalech*, etc.) contains the name of St. Budoc; Butleigh is not far from Glastonbury, and it is interesting to note that the abbey

¹ B.M., Add. MS. 15,350.

² The actual locality referred to was near Dean Farm in the parish of Fitzhead; v. further GrSo, p. 16.

³ For a similar relapse into heathendom in a nominally Christian district elsewhere, cf. the incident of the idol worship in the district of Trigg, Cornwall, recorded in the life of St. Samson; v. Canon G. H. Doble, *Saint Samson in Cornwall*, pp. 10-11.

⁴ G. H. Doble, *Cornish Saint Series*, 14, p. 15 note.

⁵ This is *capella Sci Columbani de Ceddre* etc., 1322 Wells (1).

⁶ This personal name is formally identical with Old Welsh *ciu*, Modern Welsh *cyw* 'young bird, chick'. It also occurs in the Somerset river-name Chew, v. Ekwall, op. cit., p. 77. The church at Kewstoke is now dedicated to St. Paul, but the name of the Celtic saint is preserved in *St. Kew's Steps* (shown on the Ordnance 6in. Map).

⁷ *Proceedings*, Vol. xcvi (1951), pp. 152-155.

had relics ascribed to *Sancti Buddoc et Budecac*.¹ These dedications are found for the most part in or near coastal districts, and adjacent to Glastonbury. Their distribution is important, as it may indicate an area in which Celtic society escaped the full impact of the West Saxon conquest.²

The group of Celtic dedications in the vicinity of Glastonbury adds strength to the traditional claims of the monastery to be a British foundation. The connections which existed between Glastonbury and Ireland were of long standing. Beckery (from Old Irish *Bec-Ériu* 'Little Ireland') where a chapel of St. Bridget was situated, was a name given by Irish pilgrims, or Irish monks resident in the monastery. In *Cormac's Glossary*, a work compiled about the year 900, the place is described as *Glasingpere nan Gáidel* 'Glastonbury of the Gael'. If the story of St. Indract's martyrdom is reliable, pilgrims from Ireland were visiting Glastonbury as early as the reign of King Ine.³ If the monastery was an English foundation, these Irish connections are not easily explained.

Brannocmynstre—a further note.

Dr. W. G. Hoskins has recently pointed out to me that there are strong reasons for identifying *Brannocmynstre* with Braunton, Devon, where St. Brannoc was buried; cf. *The Place-Names of Essex* (Addenda et Corrigenda) lv, 'In Britannia, sancti Brannoci confessoris, apud Brauntone Exoniensis diocesis quiescentis'. Dr. Hoskins also points out that the Taw estuary near Braunton is a great salmon river, and that a salmon fishery has been in existence there since Norman times, cf. *Proceedings*, Vol. XCVI (1951), p.154 note. If this identification is correct, the difficulty of transporting fish from Braunton to Glastonbury may explain why *Brannocmynstre* passed from the Abbey's possession at an early date—A.G.C.T.

¹ Cf. G. H. Doble, *St. Indract and St. Dominic*, in *Collectanea III* (SRS), p.18, Note 6.

² *Proceedings*, Vol. xcvi (1951), p. 152.

³ For an independent Irish tradition about Indract, v. Doble, *op. cit.*, p.22.

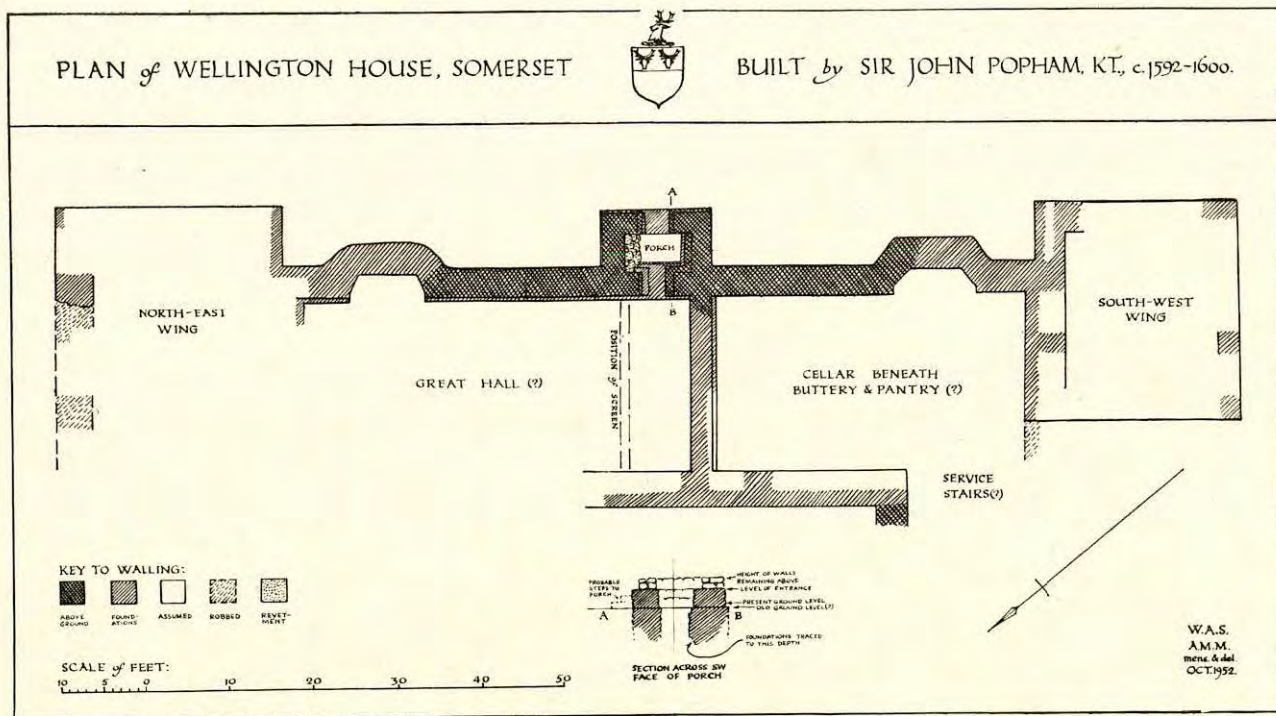


Fig. 1. Plan.