

THE FIVE CHURCHES OF CARANTOC (CARANNOG)

At the Annual General Meeting of the Welfare Committee (April 2011) the invited speaker was Nancy Hollinrake, a Consultant Archaeologist, who, with her Archaeologist husband Charlie, excavated the site of Carantoc's Church in Carhampton.

Nancy began by saying that back in the 90s they had discovered one of the churches of Carantoc (in Carhampton in Somerset, their home county) and as a result of the work she and Charlie had done on the excavations they had become interested in the various Carantoc Churches. They wanted to look at all of them in order to understand each of them, and to understand the life and society of the times better. In addition to visiting all the five major churches dedicated to Carantoc (Crannog's Latin name), Nancy Hollinrake undertook an M.A. in Celtic Studies at Cardiff.

Four of the churches visited by the Hollinrakes bear the Saint's Latin name but, here in Llangrannog, the saint is known as Carannog. Other churches are at Carhampton (Somerset), Crantock (Cornwall), Carantec (Brittany) and Lismore (Ireland).

Much of what is known about Carantoc is taken from "The Life of St. Carantoc" (referred to as "The Life"), which was written in the 12th century, a long time after the saint was alive (he probably lived well before the 7th century). "The Life" describes the founding of churches in Llangrannog and Somerset and Carantoc is also described as bringing Christianity to the area of Legan (Leinster), under the Irish name of Cernach.

"The Life" identifies Carantoc as the son of Ceredig, the King of Ceredigion, and the first church founded by Carannog was in Llangrannog, which, in common with many other churches begun at this time, could not be seen from the sea. Carantoc's/Carannog's cave, called Edilu, still exists (although now unsafe for visitors) and there is a large flat area in front of it from where it would be quite possible for someone to have taught while living in the cave. In Llangrannog there is a rock (Eisteddfa Carannog) having some resemblance to a large chair; similar rocks can be found at other "Carantoc" sites. Also to be found at most of the sites are a well, a port, metal resources, fisheries, and, it seems, medical facilities. With the exception of Carantec there are aristocratic households associated with the places and Carantoc appeared to have received wealthy endowments supporting the theory that he was, indeed, a Prince.

From Ceredigion it seems Carantoc went to Ireland, then came back to Ceredigion where it is

possible a monastery was founded. He travelled to Somerset, choosing his location by the simple expedience of throwing his portable altar into the sea and following it. It came to land near Carrum (the ancient name for Carhampton). He went to Cornwall where he built a church and monastery and to Brittany (where there are two places named after Carantoc).

The big question though is “is he a real person”? Professor O’Riáin, professor of Old Irish, in Cork, has studied him and suggests that Carantoc wasn't a real person, but something like the head saint for Ceredigion, and it is the cult of the people of Ceredigion. The name Carantoc is derived from the word 'Cara' meaning 'Pal'. The 'oc' ending in the Latin is a diminutive and together the name means “My little friend, My little pal”. This may well not be his birth name. But to support his existence there are memorial Stones, one in Egremont which tells of “Carantum” while a stone in Exmoor (close to Carhampton) speaks of “the family of Carantoc” which could mean his personal or religious family. At Lismore, Ireland, the Cathedral's Patron Saint is known as Carthac (pronounced Carroc) and his nickname is “Mahudda” (Irish for “My little friend”).

Llangrannog tithe map describes the vicar's hamlet (the area that pays tithe to the church) and it is possible that the area was owned by a monastery. Loch Tyn is also an Irish name, meaning the place of the fire (Loc = place, tyn = fire), possibly referring to a beacon mount. Above it is Pen Dinas, referring to a fort site. In Cornwall the Crantock tithe map shows many similarities to the Llangrannog tithe map. The Church is out of sight of the sea; after landing on the beach, the monastery controlled the access to the rest of the town. The rest of the map looks a little like the vicar's hamlet. There is a shipyard, tin smelting, smuggling. St. Carantoc is portrayed in the carving over the door of The Old Albion pub. In France, there are no tithe maps for Carantec; these were burned along with everything else during the revolution. But here, as in Llangrannog, as well as at Lismore and Crantock, there is a stone chair.

To sum up: in most places visited by Carantoc he was given Princely estates. There are five churches bearing a variation of his name with many similarities: a well, stone chairs, aristocratic households (except at Carantec), medical facilities, a port, metal resources (lead mines, copper mines in Ireland, iron foundry in Carhampton, tin in Cornwall and Brittany), and also fisheries. He could well have been the son of the Prince of Ceredigion.