

# Gunwalloe by John Evans

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The parish of Gunwalloe lies on the west coast of Cornwall's Lizard peninsula, with quite a long boundary with the sea. Its neighbouring parishes are Porthleven to the north-west, Wendron to the north-east, Cury and Mawgan in Meneage to the east, and Mullion to the south. The church is about 1½ miles to the south of the village of Chyanvounder which today is joined to Berepper, the largest of the parish's hamlets. The church is set very much on its own in an isolated position so typical of the sites favoured by the Celtic saints and their followers. The detached tower set into the bluff behind the church is said to be on the site of a monk's cave that predates the church records.



Not far away is the site of the former manor house of Winnianton, the important manor which, in the Domesday survey, occupied the whole Hundred of Kerrier. It belonged to the King, and was bestowed on the Earls of Cornwall. Gunwalloe and Cury were then manorial chapels within the mother parish of Breage, and when the latter was appropriated to Hayles Abbey in 1246, the Chapelries obviously followed. Even after Hayles Abbey was dissolved at the Reformation, the 2 Chapelries remained subsidiary to Breage, and only achieved parochial status in their own right in 1838.



The church we see today is mainly 15th century, the only remaining evidence of the previous church being the Norman font and part of the west gable of the nave. The church has a chancel and nave under one roof, north and south aisles slightly shorter than the chancel and nave, south porch, and a detached two-stage tower with a pyramidal roof set into the rising ground to the west. It was restored under the supervision of the architect John Dando Sedding between 1869 and 1871. The church is dedicated to the Celtic saint Winwaloe who is perhaps better known in Brittany (having been the founder of their great Abbey of Landévennec in that part of Brittany known as Cornouaille), but is also revered in Cornwall at Towednack in West Penwith, Landewednack on the Lizard, and at Tremaine in the east – yet another example of the close historic ties between Cornwall and Brittany.



Walking down the narrow track from the car park opposite Winnianton Farmhouse, we pass Dollar Cove – so called because the vessel “Vrijdag” of Amsterdam was wrecked here on 8 February 1743 carrying 2½ tonnes of Spanish pillar dollars. A little further on we come to the newest part of the graveyard on the northern side of the church. Then, coming around the eastern gable of the church’s south aisle, ahead we have a lovely view of the squat porch (with a mounting block on the far side of the doorway), the separate tower beyond, and a statue of St Winwaloe with outstretched arms in welcome.

Moving around a little to the south-west, we are able to admire the panelled jambs to the porch’s outer doorway, and note the rood-stair turret protruding from the south wall, behind St Winwaloe. It is said that the oblong stone above the porch doorway was brought from the ruins of Landévennec Abbey. The waggon roof timbers inside the porch are 15th century, although the door is 19th, and above it is the welcoming sign “St Winwaloe – The church of the storms.”

As we enter the south aisle of the church itself, immediately to the left of the porch inner doorway is a panel which was formerly part of the 16th century rood screen, having 4 paintings of saints (James the Less, Matthew, Simon

Zelotes and Matthias) in the lower part – reminiscent of the panels in St Budock church, although the Gunwalloe paintings are not as sophisticated. It is said that the screen was made from timber salvaged from the wreck of the “Saint Anthony of Lisbon (or Padua)” which went down in 1526 en route from Flanders to Portugal – which, if true, doesn’t say much for the navigational skills of her skipper! Nearby is the Norman font of Pentewan stone, the base and bowl of which were clearly amended at some stage to allow it to be positioned close to a pillar.

Turning then to face eastwards, we are treated to a fine view of the 15th century waggon roof – plain at the west end, but with carved wall-plates, purlins and ribs at the east. And at the east end of the aisle is the doorway to the rood-stairs, with the unmistakeable opening above which would have given access to the rood beam.

Moving across to the nave, it is immediately clear that the roof is of a totally different construction to that in the south aisle, and indeed this part of the church was re-roofed in the 19th century Sedding restoration following severe storm damage. The chancel is plain but dignified – the granite altar which has a polished top was designed by Scottish born Sir Ninian Comper, one of the last architects of the Gothic Revival. The pleasing and well-made carved oak chancel stalls and parciose screens (and the pulpit in the nave) date from 1929 and are the work of Herbert Read of Exeter, whose work can also be seen at Pillaton.

There is just the one stained glass window in the church – in the east window of the chancel. It is the work of Frederick Charles Eden (1864-1944), a church architect who often designed the glass and other fittings for the churches he had designed, but he became frustrated with the work of others, and in 1910 started producing his own stained glass. The example in Gunwalloe depicts St Luke in the left light, Christ in the centre and St John the Evangelist to the right. The faculty for its insertion was granted on 5 May 1922, and the window is dedicated to Douglas Vernon Cow, who was an extremely well-qualified member of the Cambridge University Medical School where he was well known for his work on pharmacology. Apparently he came down to Mullion for a holiday with his wife at the end of the 1921 Lent Term and contracted a fatal illness, dying in Redruth Hospital on 23 June that year, aged just 40, and was buried in Gunwalloe churchyard.

Looking back to the west end of the nave confirms that the church has a second font, this one octagonal in shape and carved from granite, and believed to date from about 1300. The arcade between north aisle and nave is said to be constructed of “porcelain stone” – a description sometimes applied to the partially kaolinised granite known in the china clay area as china stone, and was reputedly brought from St Stephen in Brannel parish, a considerable distance away, given the period of the church’s construction. Attached to the wall of the north aisle is another part of the former rood screen, this one depicting Saints Peter, Andrew, James the Great and John.

Returning outside, looking at the east gables provides a good view of the interesting window tracery, and also confirms that the chancel is longer than the aisles. Although there are a few burials to the east, the majority are to the north of the church, and some unusual headstones can be seen. One is to the crew of the vessel “Heidrun” of Oslo which came to grief in 1915. She had sailed from Swansea on Boxing Day 1915, loaded with Welsh anthracite destined for Rouen – a supply base used by the British Army. She rounded Land’s End successfully, but then encountered vicious south-westerly gale force winds, approaching 90 miles per hour, which no doubt played havoc with her intended course. She was spotted off Mullion in the morning of 27 December and although she was clearly in difficulty, there were no nearby vessels which could go to her assistance. The Mullion lifeboat had been withdrawn in 1908, and the Porthleven and Penzance lifeboats would not have been able to launch in such a south-westerly. Wreckage and lifebuoys were soon washed up, confirming the identity of the casualty, with the body of the first member of the crew coming ashore at Halzephron on 28 December. There were no survivors, and the headstone names the 16 victims of that disaster. Another unusual headstone comes from the following World War, a Luftwaffe pilot being killed in action on 20 October 1941 – no doubt connected with the German raids which were made on RAF Predannack at that time.

A more peaceful scene, at least in good weather, can be viewed from the high ground behind the church – although the rocky cliffs and outcrops provide ample evidence of the danger posed by the west coast of the Lizard."

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**All text and images by John Evans.**

I am most grateful for John's agreement to publish this piece about Gunwalloe on my website.

Gunwalloe is the earliest known home of the Ripper family, dating back into the mid-1400s. At that time the family name had not been shortened from the toponymic version of 'Beauripper'. The longer version lives on today in the name of the hamlet of Berepper in the parish from whence the family name was derived. 'Beau' and 'repaire' meaning 'a beautiful place unto which to repair or retire' was based upon Old French and reflects the closeness of association with folk living on The Lizard with the Bretons across the Channel.

We have no records of family events in the church dating back into the 14th and 15th centuries but we can be sure that the family worshipped there and probably were baptised, married and buried there. On the court roll for the Manor of Carminow dated 9 September 1480 was listed the conventional tenants of the parish. At Berepper is recorded "Lawrence Jamys, 1 ferling, at will; 9 s[hillings]" and on the cliff top above at Chyvarloe, amongst others was recorded "Richard Beauripper, 1 holding, at will; 12s[hillings]". Richard was recorded at this time as the reeve of the Manor.

Ken Ripper October 2023.







St. Winwaloe  
The Church of  
the Storms

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To Preserve Warmth & Light  
Thank You































