

Devosow Dons Kernow:

Dances rituals, ceremonies and associated traditions in Cornwall
Devon and Cornwall Pagan Federation Conference 07/03/09

1 Dance Rituals Ceremonies and traditions

- Simple dictionary definition: *the observance of actions or procedures in a set, ordered, and ceremonial way*
- The professional folklorist introduced the notion of pagan ritual in relation to dance:

“notions of pagan rites, sacrifices and initiations, all part of hypothesised primitive religious practices, were fundamental in approaches to ritual dance studies beginning in the late nineteenth century, when such studies began, to the post-World War II period. The common and consistent point is that they took a selection of historic performance practices—morris dances and sword dances, mumming, and others in England—and declared them to be the survivals of ancient sacrificial rituals. The picture was of a generalised pagan prehistory, surviving in village festivals, and much the same the world over” Stephen Corrsin.¹
- These notions were enthusiastically “deconstructed” in the 1980s .
 - In the *Invention of Tradition*² Hobsbawm and associates revealed the extent to which traditions were created in order to legitimise the status quo of political and monarchical establishments or nationalist aspirations.
 - More specifically, people such as Dave Harker³, Vic Gammon⁴ and Georgina Boyes⁵ challenged the scientific basis for some of the conclusions reached about the origins of folk dance and song traditions.
- There is another position that to an extent accommodates the above but places the emphasis on *meaning* and *personal experience* so that rituals are a way of connecting with the natural, social and spiritual environment:⁶

All these things offer explanation and understanding but for me the Cornish dialect philosophy sums it up – “It just belongs to be”.

People will have their own understanding of the terms “ritual”, “ceremony” and “tradition”. This presentation does not seek to re-define or challenge these understandings but rather to explore Cornish dances that in some way connect with a ritual or a custom. To do this we need to look at how dances are located culturally as well as how they are performed.

2 Roots of Cornish Dance

Cornish Language and Dialect

Language, like dance is an expression of being and the links between the Cornish Language and dance go back a long way.

Dance makes an interesting appearance in the oldest Cornish Vocabulary - the Vocabularium Cornicum⁷ dated from the 12th Century. It is Cornish / Latin and thought to be a teaching aid.

Vocabularium Cornicum

Lappior Saltator

Lappiores Saltatrix

Medieval Latin for a *male and female* dancer respectively

700 years later Lapyor transferred into Cornish dialect term for step dancer:

Cornish Dialect

**As Lapyeor Tom from Bolancan did hie
He saw *shallal* a shackets passing by
With *Jallow Clathing* Lapyeors lembs were graced
Shallal a *petticoat* had round his waist⁸**

In 1850s the children sorting and stirring the tin ore with their feet as part of the dressing process were nick named "Lapyors".

Korolli⁹ : to dance in a circle

Troillia: To reel /to spin / to spiral / to whirl

Cornish Dialect

Troyl: Fish cellar dance / barn dance / quay fair

Tremadheeves and the Stone Circles

"Still practiced among the Cornish the Greeks had such a dance at their hymeneal solemnities – appears on the shield of Achilles where the young men are said to dance in a ring" (Borlase)

Mystery Plays and Morris Dances

The mystery plays of medieval Cornwall were both secular and religious and drawn to close with a dance¹⁰:

Gwreans An Bys (The Creation of the World)¹¹

Minstrels Grogh theny peba

May halan warbthe downsya

Del ew an vaner han geys

Minstrels do ye pipe

That we might together dance

As is the manner and the jest

Geys is a mock or a jest and Geysor a jester

These plays merged with the folk drama and mummers plays¹² and parish accounts records are rich with reference to donsynge bells, moryse cotes, friars coates, streamers of red moccado and locrum¹³.

By the 19th Century they had become the Cornish Geeze or Guise Dance:

“A Kind of Carnival or Bal masque at Christmas..... This dance answers to the mummers of Devon and the Morrice dancers of Oxfordshire etc in Celtic Cornish ges means a mockery , a jest” (Jago 1882¹⁴)

Care must be taken not to confuse the moryse of 15th and 16th Century Europe with the 19th Century Morris of Cecil Sharp and Gardiner. Morris dance English Cotswold style was introduced to Cornwall by Trigg in 1971 followed by Border Morris.

Having said this it is clear that the English, the Cornish and all the cultures of Europe are dipping into the same historical melting pot of tradition and ritual .

Mysterious Mattachins

This is nowhere better illustrated than the 16th Century Bench ends at Altarnon. Here we have a Geyser, Swords Dancers, a piper and a crowder who fit Arbeau's description some 50 years later of a French dance called the buffens or mattachins:

“They dance to a special tune played in duple time accompanied by the clash of their swords.....” (Arbeau ¹⁵)



3 Geeze Dances and Guising



Kalan Gwaf marks the season of the dark and the beginning of November - Mys Du, - the dark month in Cornish, December is Kevardhu - "also with the dark" and marks the start of the guising which embraces and reclaims the dark and in Cornwall carries on until midsummer.

The Hobby Horse of European folklore melting pot is variously used to represent a medieval knight or a mythical creature, in Cornwall it tends to be the latter. The "Obby Oss" makes an appearance in the Mystery Play "Gwreans and Bys" ¹⁶ and together with the Gaukum marshalled the 19th Century Geezers and kept helped keep up the momentum of the play. This is the Penguizers and Pen- Gwyn borrowed from West Cornwall's Pen Glaz blue head.

There are several components which might be seen as part of the Geeze dance ritual and appear in one way or another in all the traditions associated with Guising:

Becoming The Other:

Cross dressing , blacking of faces, masks, lace veils, mock posh
Assuming a different identity

Connecting with time, place and people.

Associating with a particular time of year
Parading through the village or town,
Visiting or engaging people

Themes

Life Cycles : life > death > re-birth
Earth Year
Astronomic year
Fertility

Combat: Good v Evil,
Knight v Dragon,
Summer v Winter,
Dark v Light

Enacted through dance
Incorporating dance
Finishing with a dance..

Duffy and the Devil

Faustian story of Duffy who makes a pact with the Devil who entices her by performing a Scoot dance in the Kitchen. The Three Hand Reel is also associated with the devil



St Ives Guizers

Revived by the OCS in 1920s after flagging at the turn of the century. Has continuity through to the present although has moved from Christmas to February

The Madron Geeze Dance

Processed through the village performed a mummings play and used a dance called Turkey Rhubarb as the finale. Penzance's Montol festival of 2008 saw the introduction of the Turkey Rhubarb Guisers.



Hal An Tow

The Hal an Tow song is choreographed to provide a battle scene between good and evil : St George, St Micheal an (More recently) St Piran in combat with their respective dragons.

Obby Oss

The most celebrated of our geezing traditions – The mimed dance combat of the Oss and the Teazer is sometimes interpreted as the ritual dual between Summer and Winter and sometimes Good and Evil¹⁷.



Padstow Mummings Day

Recently the victim of culture clash where blacking up has been misconstrued as intending to demean others. Sadly this was probably deliberate misconception for political gain which has discredited the campaign for racial equality¹⁸. Faces are blacked up and colourful costume worn, usually with a dash of Cornish symbolism and the Guisers / mummings process around the town from pub to pub . The official line is that people just want a bit of escapism and to out and enjoy themselves re is an element of reclaiming Padstow for the locals .

Lanson Giglots Market

Geezer dancers blacked their faces and wore brightly coloured clothes and strange headgear¹⁹ . They were part of the Lanson Giglots Market a mock hiring fair where the girls would parade in front of potential escorts and perhaps husbands but the entertainment was provided by their spurning of the hapless mens. The geezers visited houses and danced in return for cider and cake the broom dance was one of their dances.

4 Furry Dances

“Furry” – Cornish “fer” and in turn from Medieval Latin “Feria” meaning a market rather than a holy day

The term Flora is simply descriptive as flowers and foliage are used to celebrate the start of summer. The convention in Helston is to use “Flora” for the day and “furry” for the dance.

It is a widespread tradition in Cornwall and was probably always so, certainly in the West. It seems to have faded in popularity at the turn of the 19th /20th Century and enjoyed a revival again from the 1920s. This probably due to a mixture of revivalist activity by groups such as the Old Cornwall Societies and the publicity associated with Katie Mosses popular adaption of the tune as a song in 1911.

It is impossible to put to much distance between Terry Wogan’s “Floral Dance in a Quaint old Cornish Town” and the traditional furry dances of Cornwall. His 1978 Top of the Pops performance was a debacle and fortunately now faded from memory although the term “Floral” still haunts us

There are a number of tunes used but the most widely used would be recognised as close relatives of the known at Helston. Tunes thematically related to the Furry dance reach across Europe and quite a long way back in time.

The ritual aspect of the Furry dance is the celebration of connection with place, community and time of year . Going in and out of peoples houses or stopping at strategic points to commemorate a person or event. It is clear from the description

In Helston it is the arrival of summer.

Newquay used it to celebrate Midsummer dancing from the town out to the site of the bonfire but (suspiciously) moved it to August and the tourist season

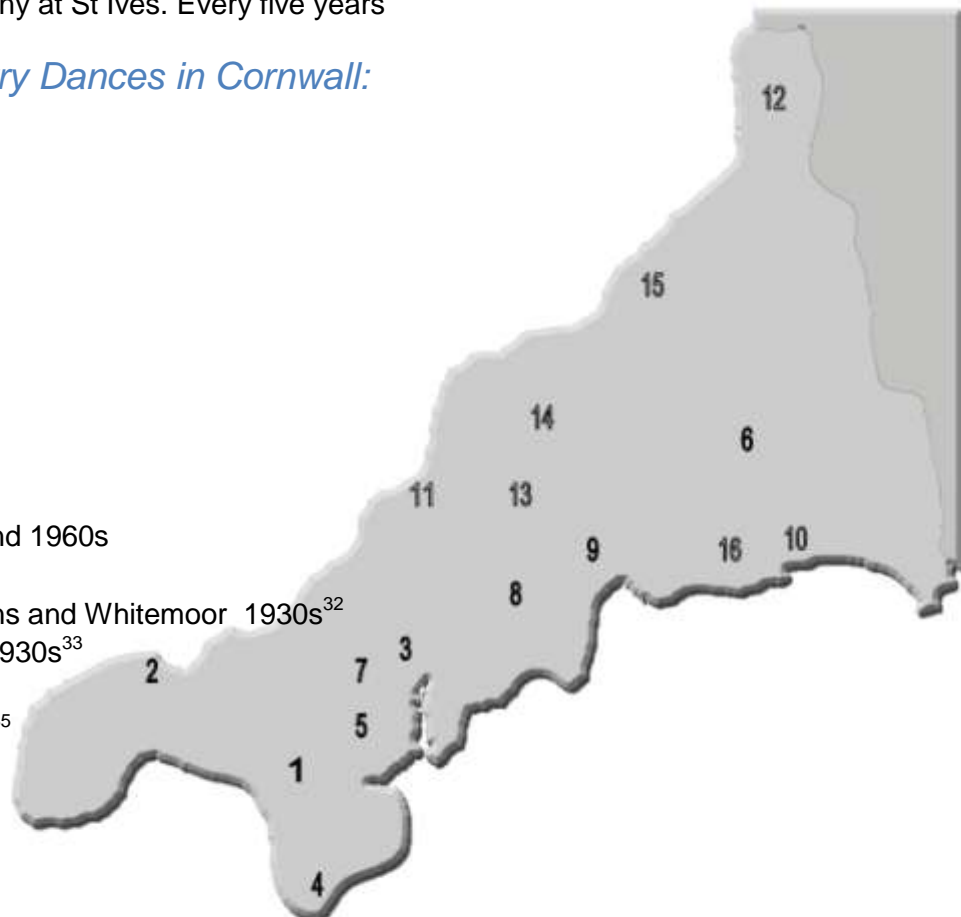
Boscastle held theirs in August

In Bodmin they pause to commemorate the An Gof / Flamank Rebellion

It is used for the Knill ceremony at St Ives. Every five years

A few Examples of Furry Dances in Cornwall:

1. Helston 1790²⁰
2. St Ives 1801²¹
3. Truro 1822²²
4. Lizard 1834²³
5. Penryn 1834²⁴
6. Liskeard 1856²⁵
7. Chacewater 1837²⁶
8. Grampound 1913²⁷
9. St. Austell in 1913.²⁸
10. Looe in the 1920s.²⁹
11. Newquay 1930s³⁰ and 1960s
12. Bude 1930s³¹
13. St Dennis, St Stephens and Whitemoor 1930s³²
14. Withiel and St Wenn1930s³³
15. Boscastle 1948³⁴
16. Polperro 1999 / 2008³⁵



5 Snail Creeps and Serpents and Summer Celebrations

Serpent

The serpent dance is a descendant of the Medieval European farandole and comprises of a line of people hand in hand following a musician or band of musicians. There are a series of moves:

- Spiraling into the centre and reversing back out
- Spiraling in and “escaping under a series of arms
- Leading in and out under arches
- Leader turns the dancer immediately following under his / her arm and leads arch over whole line to end.

The serpent dance has been many things to many people the patterns available certainly evoke the mystical labyrinth.

The stories of people we have talked to make clear the opportunity these dances offered for pairing off.

The hypnotic movement around the circle and spiral opposite other dancers provides **connection with self and others**.

Similarly the **experience of sound** as the band weaves through the dancers permeates one’s being much more than passive listening.

The Millers Dance
provides a similar experience

The Snail Creep
Unique to the Eastern half of the Clay Country in Central Cornwall
Dance for couples
Involves very large numbers 300 or 400 dancers

In addition to the ritual aspects that the Snail Creep shares with the serpent dance

***“Jin-jorn, Jin jorn put out your long horn
The cows is eatin the barley corn”***

***“Snail snail come out of your hole
Or I will beat you as black as coal”***

***“Lucky Snail, Lucky Snail , go over my head
And bring me a penny before I go to bed
Old Cornwall Society Journal³⁶***

At first glance it seems strange of the oldest dances in Cornwall, those most likely to connect with the primitive ritual dances pursued by the 19th century folklorist are to be found in the traditions of the non conformist chapel culture of 19th Century Cornwall. It seems a little less strange when you read Billy Brays own description of his prayer meetings which seem more like 20th Century American Gospel music than Victorian austerity.

Golowan

Old hand in Hand

In Traditions and Hearthsides Stories of West Cornwall, Bottrel mentions a dance, which he calls the peculiar hand in hand dance³⁷. This makes an appearance in various drolls / folk tales as the dance done around the bonfire on midsummer eve. Sometimes by people, sometimes by pyskies and sometimes witches.

Golowan Dance

Bottrel³⁸, Hunt³⁹ and Courtney⁴⁰ all describe the Golowan festival held in Penzance and elsewhere in Cornwall but a very clear description of the dance is provided by J S Courtney's 1845:

- 1 Dancers (mostly lads and lasses) would form a line with as great a number as possible.
- 2 They would run through the streets calling 'an eye, an eye, an eye' .
3. They would stop and two individuals at the upper end would raise their arms in an arch, through which would run the entire line, lead by the last dancer.
4. Having 'threaded the needle' the situation is reversed and those dancers who were in the rear now lead the procession and repeat the exercise.

Guide to Penzance and its neighbourhood⁴¹

Goldheys

There is a sense in which the geeze dancers dominate the Winter and Spring months and the Serpent Dances and Furry dances the Summer Festivals. From August onwards the focus moves towards the, equinox, the harvest and the Autumn.



Scoot Dancing: An interesting variation on the theme of "Combat" comes with the celebrations held at the end of the fishing season typically in the sail lofts and fish cellars which were now empty. The step dancing tradition of the lapyor and lapyores lent itself well to competition dances where one dancer would try to out do the other. This was (and is) a custom rather than a ritual.

Cornish Gorsedh and Dons Blejow

The Gorsedh was revived in 1928 and originally held on the equinox although it has subsequently been moved to the beginning of September presumably to avoid the equinoxial gales. The ceremony is denominationally neutral but essentially a mixture of Druidic and Christian. It starts with the horner:

Kernow an Howldrevel, clew galow an Orseth

Cornwall of the East hear the call of the hGorsedd

Dyghow - South

Howlsedhas _ West

Cleth - North

Part of the ceremony has the Dons Blejow / flower dance introducing Arlodhes a Gernow/ The Lady of Cornwall who represents Cornwall as the Earth Mother who brings an offering of the fruits of the earth.

6 Celtic Connections

- **Celtic Revival in Cornwall**

The Celtic revival in Cornwall can be traced back so far that you are almost talking waves of interest and continuity rather than something that stopped and re-started. It is, however, useful to highlight the activities of people such as Robert Morton Nance⁴². Although now known for his work on the Cornish Language he was also an avid folklorist who collected folk plays, songs, dances and dialect. He also set up the Old Cornwall Societies which were instrumental in recording and reviving Cornish folk traditions and customs e.g. Hal and Tow, Tom Bawcocks and Geeze dancing.

- **Parallel Folk Universes**

These were well established customs when the first English Morris team arrived in Cornwall in 1971 and in a sense this created a second “dance universe” in Cornwall. A natural development of the celtic revival was the formation of Cornish dance groups in the late 1970s. (perhaps heightening the difference between these universes). These groups did take the ritual dances out of their original context so that significance was lost in one way. By promoting the dances, however, they did encourage the re-instatement of dances in an original setting. E.g. Turkey Rhurbarb, Cock in Britches and the furry dance.

- **Revival of Celtic customs – ongoing**

Some ritual dance traditions have continued since time immemorial, some revived or re-invigorated by the Celtic Revival movement but if anything it is a growing tradition with the establishment of festival like Montol and Geeze dancers in 2007 and Furry dances everywhere.

- **Recognition of Celtic Calendar**

The Celtic revivalist promoted and revived traditions associated with the calendar and this provides a useful resume of Ritual dance in Cornwall:

Cornish Calendar		Associated Dance	<i>Pagan Calendar</i>	
31 st Oct	Kalan Gwaf	Cock in Britches	31 st Oct	<i>Samhain</i>
23 rd Dec 26 th Dec 1 st Jan	Montol Tom Bawcock's Eve Padstow Mummers	Geeze Dancers, Turkey Rhubarb, Broom Dance Three Hand reel	21 st Dec	<i>Mid Winter Solstice</i>
Early Feb	St Ives Feast	Geeze Dancers Procession Furry	2 nd Feb	<i>Imbolc</i>
Early Mar	St Piran's tide	Furry	21 st March	<i>Equinox</i>
Early May	De Hala Me and Flora Day	Furry Geeze Dance Drama	30 th April	<i>Beltane</i>
23 rd June	Golowan / midsummer bonfires	Old Hand In Hand Golowan Dance	21 st Junet	<i>Mid Summer Solstice</i>
Late July / Early Aug	Tea Treats	Serpent Dance Snail Creep Millers Dance	1 st August	<i>Lughnasadh</i>
Sept	Goldheys Gorsedh Troyls	Cock in Britches Lattapouch	21 st Sept	<i>Equinox</i>
31 st Oct	Kalan Gwaf	Cock In Britches	31 st Oct	<i>Samhain</i>

Merv Davey 07/03/09
merv@an-daras.com

www.cornishfolk.co.uk
www.an-daras.com

Notes

¹ Stephen Corrsin, 'The Founding of English Ritual Dance Studies before the First World War: Human Sacrifice in India ... and in Oxfordshire?', *Folklore*, 115 (2004), 321-31.

² Hobsbawm E and Ranger T, Eds *The Invention of Tradition*, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge 1983

³ Harker, Dave. *Fakesong, The Manufacture of British "Folksong" 1700 to the present day*. Open University Press, Milton Keynes 1985. Page 186

⁴ Gammon, V A F. *Popular Music in Rural Society: Sussex 1815 – 1914*. Unpublished PhD thesis dated 1977 .Chapter 5 p149.

⁵ Boyes, Georgina; *Imagined Village ,Culture, Ideology and the English Folk Revival*, Manchester University Press ,Manchester 1993. Pages 11-13

⁶ This is discussed by Marshall:

"It is argued that ritual practices generate belief and belonging in participants by activating multiple social-psychological mechanisms that interactively create the characteristic outcomes of ritual. Specifically, the distinctive elements of ritual practice are shown to induce altered subjective states and effortful and/or anomalous behaviours, which are subsequently misattributed in such a way that belief and belonging are created or maintained around the focus of ritual attention."

Douglas A. Marshall, 'Behavior, Belonging, and Belief: A Theory of Ritual Practice. ', *Sociological Theory*, Vol. 20, No. 3 (Nov., 2002), pp. 360-380, 20 (2002), 360-80.

⁷ *Vocabularium Cornicum*, Cottonian Library, Oxford

⁸ Davies Gilbert, *The Cornish Magazine* Vol 3 Philp, Falmouth 1818 p199

⁹ *Vocabularium Cornicum: Karol and William Borlase, The Natural History of Cornwall* W. Jackson, Oxford 1758 : korolli or corolla to dance

¹⁰ Bruch, Ben 'Words and Music in Medieval Cornish Drama', Harvard: Post-doctoral Fellow in Celtic Languages and Literatures Harvard University, 2006 Unpublished paper

¹¹ Stokes, W *Breens and Bys: The Creation of the World*. Willams and Norgate, London and Edinburgh 1864 lines 2546-2548

¹² Bakere, J . *The Cornish Ordinalia: A critical Study*. University Of Wales Press, Cardiff 1980 page 19

¹³ For example, *The Green Book of St Columb Thurstan Peter*, Supplement to Journal of Royal Institution of Cornwall, Truro 1912 page 9

¹⁴ Jago, FWP *The Ancient Language and the Dialect of Cornwall*, Netherton and Worth, Truro 1882

¹⁵ Arbeau, Thinoiot. *Orchesographie*, 1589. Translation Evans, MS. Dover Press Toronto 1967 page 183

¹⁶ Stokes, W. *The Creation of the World* 1864

¹⁷ Rawe D,D *Padstows Obby Oss and May Day festivities a Study in Folklore and Tradition*, Lodenek Press, Padstow 2007. Also Magliocco . *Oss Tales*. Media Generation, Portland. Ore accession number 184985008 (Video)

¹⁸ See Davey, M. *Guiziong: Ancient Traditions and Modern Sensitivities*. Ed P Payton *Cornish Studies* 14. University of Exeter Press 2006 pages 229 - 244

¹⁹ North Hill Old Cornwall Society *Recorders notes 1930 to 1935*. Held at the Cornwall Centre Redruth

²⁰ Durgan 1790 *ibid*

²¹ The Knill ceremony at St Ives first took place in 1801 and the Furry dance is now part of the tradition but it is not known if the dance was included in the first ceremony or a subsequent addition.

²² *Royal Cornwall Gazette* June 1922

²³ *Helston Guide 1834: "Helston and excursions to Lizard, Kynance, Porthleven, Wheal Vor etc"* Penaluna Printers, Helston 1834 Hoskin, J. D., *Helston Furry Dance* (Helston Old Cornwall Society, 1931)

²⁴ *Helston Guide 1834: "Helston and excursions to Lizard, Kynance, Porthleven, Wheal Vor etc"* Penaluna Printers, Helston 1834

Hoskin, J. D., *Helston Furry Dance* (Helston Old Cornwall Society, 1931)

²⁵ Paynter WH . *The History of the Borough of Iiskeard – John Allen*. Edited and revised 1967 . Page 140. Original Version by Allen 1856. The description provided by Allen is that of a procession to music with a dance performed at the frolic green

²⁶ *West Briton* 21/06/1837

²⁷ Cecil J. Sharp, 'Folk Dance Notes', in *Cecil Sharp's Folk Dance Notes (Transcript)* (London: Vaughan Williams, Memorial Library, vol.3 p.116

²⁸ Sharp. *Folk dance notes (Transcript)* vol.3 p104

²⁹ 9.5 mm film shot by the Pell family, 1920s & 30s, in the collection of S. Johnson, 7 Woodlands La., Manor Park, Plymouth, PL6 8AS.

³⁰ Mary Davey recalled the Children dancing the Furry from Cratock Street School to Pentire Headland in the mid 1930s; 1946 – Newquay Old Cornwall Society Photograph WGON0402; Heva Dance 1961 see section 2.

³¹ Eileen (Sheila) Buse remembered them in Bude: Davey, A., *Corollyn, Cam Kernewek Perranporth* 1992

³² From meeting with St Dennis WI as part of the Rescorla Project June 2007

³³ From Meeting with Withiel WI as part of the Rescorla Project June 2007.

³⁴ *Boscastle Archive Photographs: Flora Dance on its way to the Cobweb* Aug 1948; *Flora Dance outside the Wellington*

11th August 1948.

³⁵ Participant Observation Polperro Festival and Mock Mayor Ceremony June 2008. The Helston Furry dance was initially used for the procession but Polperro festival commissioned their own Polperro dance in 2008.

³⁶ Morton Nance R. Ibid

³⁷ Bottrel, William. *Traditions and Hearthside Stories of West Cornwall. Second Series.* Deare and Son Penzance. 1873. Page 287

³⁸ William Bottrel, *Traditions and Hearthside Stories of West Cornwall, Second Series* Printed for the author by Deare and Son Penzance, 1873).

³⁹ Robert Hunt, *Popular Romances of the West of England; or, the Drolls, Traditions, and Superstitions of Old Cornwall* (London: J.C. Hotten, 1871).

⁴⁰ M. A. Courtney, *Cornish Feasts and Folk-Lore* (Penzance: Beare and Son, 1890).Page 40 – 41.

⁴¹ Courtney, S. *A Guide to Penzance and Its Neighbourhood, Including the Islands of Scilly, with an Appendix, Containing the Natural History of Western Cornwall, Etc* (Penzance, 1845).

⁴² Thomas, P.W. Williams, D.R., ed., *Setting Cornwall on Its Feet: Robert Morton Nance 1873 - 1959* (London: Francis Boutle Publishers, 2007).