



WHO WAS ST AUSTELL?

Who was “St Austell”. There is a town of that name in Cornwall, in the UK.

I am no expert on saints, and I would imagine that there are shoals of local saints in the Celtic regions of Britain. But I did find a source. Apparently the book to go to is Nicholas Orme, *The Saints of Cornwall*, Oxford (2000). Fortunately there is a Google Books preview, and it had an entry on [page 67](#) for this St Austell.

Let’s see what we can make of this entry. These sorts of handbooks are often stuffed full of abbreviations, so it can be hard.

Austell (Austoll)

(a) *Austoll* 10th (Olson and Padel: 59).

(b) St Austell: *ecclesiam de Austol* 1155 x c.1160 (Barlow: no. 74); *sanctuarium de Sancto Austolo* 1169 (1235) (PRO, C 53/28: m. 10); *ecclesie Sancti Austol* 1259 (Chanter 1: f. 6 V); *ecclesias . . . Sancti Austoli* 1281 (Oliver 1846: 43); de Sancto Austolo 1291 (Tax.); *ecclesie... Sancti Austoli* 1446 (Chanter X: f. 200r); *S. Austelles* (place) c.1540 (Leland 1907- 10: i. 201-2); *Austel* 1733 (Willis: 169); *Austell* 1742 (Ecton: 176); *Austle* 1782 (Jones: 98); *Austolus* 1846 (Oliver 1846:437), 1925 (Henderson 1925a: 23).

The 11th-century Life of Mewan, written in Brittany, claims that Austell was a priest and godson of Mewan who lived with him in his monastery at Saint-Meen (I.-et-V.), attended his deathbed, and died on 28 June (his subsequent feast-day), exactly one week after his master (Plaine 1884: 155-6; Doble 1939c: 4-11). Both saints were honoured at Saint-Meen. In Cornwall the parishes of St Austell and St Mewan adjoin one another, and have probably done so since at least the 10th century when the two saints occur together in the early list of saints (Olson and Padel: 34, 59). Austell’s Cornish parish, however, was much larger than Mewan’s, reversing their status in Brittany.

St Austell church is first mentioned distinctly in a document of the mid-12th century (above). Nothing is known about Austell’s cult there until the early 17th, when Nicholas Roscarrock wrote that local people believed that he and Mewan were great friends who lived together in the parishes named after them. Roscarrock refers to a statue of a bishop or abbot in a wall of St Austell church, which he supposed to commemorate Austell, and states that the saint’s feast was held on the Thursday after Whitsunday (Pentecost) (Orme 1992a: 56). This was perhaps to associate it with the holiday season of Whitsuntide. Since the mid-19th century St Austell church has been regarded as dedicated to the Trinity, because the parish feast was then held on Trinity Sunday, but in medieval times the dedication was always to Austell (Orme 1996a: 69).

In 1173 Tywardreath Priory near St Austell was said to be dedicated to Andrew and Austell, implying that the priory had acquired the latter’s relics (Oliver

1846: 38). In Wales Llanawstl in Machen parish (Mon.) appears to mean 'church-site of Austell', but no church is recorded there and none is known to have been dedicated to him in Brittany (Loth 1910:12). See also Doble 1939c.

The main text is clear enough, but the opening material in smaller text looks like references to primary documents. I can't make much of this, except that "PRO" is clearly "Public Records Office". "Leland" is John Leland, the antiquarian of King Henry VIII. He travelled all over England at the time of the Reformation, and his journal - he never published his finds - clearly was printed in a 1907 edition. If I had the complete book, possibly these entries would make more sense.

It's clear that this is a very obscure saint indeed. There is no "Saint's Life" for him; only a mention in the *Life* of St Mewan.

But Google comes mightily to our aid. A preview of what is plainly an important book, S. Boardman &c, *Saint's Cults in the Celtic World*, p.114, reveals in a footnote that the *Life* of St Mewan or S. Meen, is "Vita S. Mevenni: abbas et confessoris in Britannia armoricana", ed. F. B. Plaine in *Analecta Bollandiana* 3 (1884), 141-58.

I was unable to locate a downloadable copy, but it is at Hathi [here](#) if you have access. The mention of St Austell is at the end, cc.19-20, on pp.155-6, where he is introduced: "Quo viso Austulos quidam presbyter, ejus filioli, qui ei in monasterio serviebat humiliter,...", "Seeing this a certain presbyter Austolus, his godson, who humbly served him in the monastery...".

The Boardman book goes on:

The *Life* also, in its account of Meén's death, introduces a certain presbyter named Austolus, his godson (filiolus), who is comforted by Méen's prediction that Austol will join him in death within seven days. This indeed happens, and when Austol is taken for burial beside Méen, the monks find that:

"the saint's body, which diffused a fragrant odour instead of the odour of corruption, had moved and was lying on the right of the grave facing the vacant space on the left, as if waiting for his disciple. They believed that this had happened by God's appointment, and they buried the blessed godson by his blessed godfather. And thus the dead bones of the two saints declared the love which had ever united them.[137]"

137. *Vita S. Mevenni*, § 20: ed. Plaine, 156. Doble, *Saint Mewan*, 11.

Elsewhere we seem to be in a world of little antiquarian scribblers. Thus "Doble" is Rev. G. H. Doble, *Saint Mewan and Saint Austol*, 2nd edn (Long Compton, 1939), who turns out to be a deceased Cornish clergyman. None of those kinds of sources are online; they lie, buried in rural archives and libraries.

More promising is Olson and Padel, which turns out to be B.L.Olson and O.J.Padel, "A tenth-century list of Cornish parochial saints", *Cambridge Medieval Celtic Studies* 12 (Winter, 1986): 33-71. I didn't try very hard, but this too seems offline.

The same sort of process would probably apply to anyone seeking information on a vast number of Celtic saints. It reminds us that there is much still to do in getting the materials of scholarship online.

This information exists; but for how long, once libraries close down because “everything is online”? There is work to do.
