



A simple Cornishman

THIRTY YEARS AFTER JOHN BETJEMAN'S DEATH, WE EXPLORE HIS LOVE FOR HIS ADOPTED COUNTY

Words by **Stephen Roberts**

Thirty years ago on May 19, 1984, that master of gentle social satire and teaser of modern mores, Poet Laureate Sir John Betjeman, passed away at the age of 77. I had always associated Betjeman with the railways, with *Metro-land* (1973) and his whimsical mourning of the Somerset & Dorset Railway; yet Highgate-born Betjeman also had a great love of Cornwall. He died at his home, Treen, in Daymer Lane, Trebetherick (half a mile from Polzeath, North Cornwall), and was buried half a mile away in the churchyard of St Enodoc.

As a child, Betjeman enjoyed family holidays at Trebetherick (in fact, he said he was brought up there as a boy) and he returned many times as an adult. It was to be his favourite part of Cornwall, even though, or maybe because, it was a lonely place out of season. This area with its churches, railways and breezy landscape, and indeed Cornwall in general, featured heavily in his poetry. A poem aptly entitled just Trebetherick recalls picnics among the wildflowers on the cliff edge, while *Greenaway* describes the stretch of coast at Trebetherick with its stiles and sandy paths. Sunday Afternoon Service draws the reader to the church of St Enodoc itself.

In *The West In England's Story*, broadcast in 1949, Betjeman rejoiced in Victorian provincial life in the South West, when Truro was as distant a capital city as London is today, and a trip there was "an event that happens only two or three times in many a remote cottager's life". Yet change was afoot and Brunel's bridge across the Tamar ensured that "Cornwall was connected with England by steam", with the "opening of branch railways with gay abandon" the inevitable corollary. The railways were never far from Betjeman's thoughts, it seems.

This was a series where Betjeman's love of Cornwall, resonated. He talked of the end of the 19th century and the artistic, who found in St Ives, Polperro, Looe and Boscastle "a second Brittany". Crucially for Betjeman, his beloved Cornwall was not so badly hit

by what he called 'progress'; the countryside remained and agriculture and fishing continued to hold their own. Thus it was that Cornwall remained "another country within our island".

In 1938 in Seaview, Betjeman had compared Cornwall to the Scillies and ventured that "there are parts of Cornwall where you can find equal quiet and wilder, grander scenery", with "the Atlantic rollers ... tumbling in as high as a house in stormy weather". For the poet, the pleasure of Cornwall was lighting a fire with the wind howling up the chimney, the thrill of rough weather, when "you meet the wind and let the rain whip against your face, and like it". People who flock to airports in search of sun should read some Betjeman and come to Cornwall.

Betjeman was fascinated too by Cornish saints, particularly St Petroc, whose name is borne by several churches in the county. The son of a Welsh king, Petroc lived during the 6th and 7th centuries AD. He opted for a monkish life, and after a spell in Ireland arrived in Cornwall, at Trebetherick. It's no wonder that Betjeman took to him particularly. It was here where Petroc was supposed to have struck a rock with a freshwater spring promptly appearing.

Betjeman described many places with which I am familiar, from St Endellion, with its granite church tower topped by pinnacles "which look like a hare's two ears sticking out above the hilltop", to the deserted former fishing village of Port Quin, "mournful and still". He observed with a keen eye and recorded with a lyrical phrase, for example, when he captured perfectly the wild flowers among the walls and hedges of Cornwall, "grasses, bedstraw, milky-pink convolvulus, pale purple scabious ... valerian".

Betjeman loved Port Isaac as the "sort of place town planners hate", "the quintessence of quaint", for he adored things to be natural and unplanned, a bit higgledy-piggledy here and there. He thought this a proper fishing village, where you'd get a shoal of pilchards, the splashing of oars in the harbour as a dingy made its way out to a fishing boat, the roar of the sea and the letting down of the nets. When it was all over the fishermen would hopefully return to cottages "clinging by their eyelids to the cliffs", although this was by no means certain when "the sea is an army always fighting the land". Somehow he was able to describe what it was about Cornwall that made it different and why people wanted to come and see it.

Betjeman may have been poet laureate, a CBE and was knighted, but in his heart he was just a simple Cornishman, someone who was never happier than when he was at home in the county that he adopted as his own, and one which he described so perfectly. 

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