

The Germoe Parish Circular Walk

Introduction

This gentle walk explores the countryside in Germoe Parish which is in an 'Area of Great Landscape Value' and part of the Tregonning and Gwinear Mining Districts World Heritage Site.

This area has a strong historic connection with mining, agriculture and china clay production. It is dotted with engine houses, some of which are still clearly visible, mines and assorted air shafts and 'adits' – drainage tunnels. You will see farming settlements, field patterns from the medieval and post medieval periods, including miners' small holdings, and will pass through the settlements of Balwest, Tresowes, Germoe and Boscreege.

The Start

The walk starts by the Balwest Methodist Chapel Schoolroom. You may park in the Car Park by the graveyard. (Donation invited)

The name Balwest reflects the complex mining activity to the west of Great Works. 'Bal' is Cornish for mine. The 1841 census shows there were 25 family/households in 'Ball West' with a total population of 112 of which 42 were children under 11. There were 12 tin miners, 2 copper miners, 3 carpenters, 1 farmer and 3 agricultural labourers, one housekeeper and 3 'independents' (all women over 65). In 2021 Balwest had 17 households plus three holiday cottages. There were 35 residents of which 14 were of retirement age and five were children.

Take the path through the graveyard between the car park and the Balwest Methodist Chapel Schoolroom. Turn right, with the Balwest Methodist Chapel on your left, and after about 50 metres follow the road round to the left. You then follow the road towards Ashton. The road is popular with walkers, horse riders and cyclists, particularly as this stretch is part of the new 'West Kernow Cycle Trail'. Traffic can be a little heavy at times so be aware.

The Methodist Chapel was built in 1829 to accommodate the growing mining population. It is believed there was an earlier chapel in the 1790s alongside the road down to Germoe but no evidence now exists. There was an engine house on the Schoolroom site pumping the Balwest workings in the 1860s. It has been suggested that Balwest was originally called 'Barwest' as a bar of hard road building stone called 'grey elvan' lay in an east-west direction on

Tregonning Hill accessed by the path up to the hill. The house at the start of path is called 'Barwest'.

On the hill above you on your left is Cookworthy Quarry where Cornwall's first china clay deposit was discovered in 1746.

A Plymouth chemist, William Cookworthy had been searching for the right ingredients to perfect a recipe for hard-paste porcelain. In 1746 Captain Nancarrow from Great Work Mine invited Cookworthy to stay with him at Godolphin. Whilst visiting the mine, Cookworthy saw the men were repairing the furnaces with clay. Enquiring about the source of the clay, he was told it was found on the slopes of Tregonning Hill. Cookworthy took samples back with him to his laboratory. He found that when either petunse (aluminium and potassium silicate) + china stone, or kaolin (aluminium silicate) + china clay were fired together to a great heat, both combinations produced porcelain. Cookworthy took leases on various clay pits on Tregonning Hill and evidence of these can still be seen today. Clay was exported from Porthleven to Plymouth, where Cookworthy had a small factory. Tregonning Hill's clay contains dark specks of mica and was not of the finest quality. When purer clay was found at St. Austell two years later, the Tregonning clay industry declined but lasted until the early years of the 20th century.

After about a mile you will reach the thatched Adit Cottage which was built around 1700 and in the 20th century was home to the Lamb Swan Pottery. In front of the cottage is an adit, renovated by Germoe Parish Council in 2014. Water would have been collected from here in buckets to water cattle and also for horses employed to carry materials for the clay pits and quarries on Tregonning Hill.

If you wish a shorter walk after the adit you can turn right down Moors Lane with Tremorvu camp site on your left and flooded pits on your right which are deep and dangerous. You can join the longer route at the end of Moors Lane in Tresowes Green.

Moors Lane, is a traditional horse route to the quarries on Tregonning Hill. Moors Lane would have been busy with horse-drawn carts carrying granite from the hill and clay from the pit. In the early days of road building, quarrymen on Tregonning Hill would have their own pile of granite boulders, all sorted by size.

At the bottom of Moors Lane join the longer route to Tresowes Farm. *The walk continues on the road to Ashton until you reach a bridle way on the right by Trevaskis. Take this path.*

You could take the road down to the junction with the A394 at Ashton where the old Post Office used to be. You will find the Lion and Lamb public house further down on the left.

Loosely translated, the name Ashton means 'the place of the ash tree'. In the past there were at least 6 shops, including an undertaker and a blacksmith, as well as a school, a church and four chapels. One shop had a lending library and sold wallpaper, paint, paraffin, knitting wool, reels of cotton.

The main grocery shop sold niffling, which would be hung from the shop ceiling. Niffling was dried salted Newfoundland cod, which after being soaked was cooked and served with mashed potatoes. Fish sellers from Porthleven called jowsters would call daily in their pony and traps, selling the catch of the day.

Horse drawn buses, and later, early motor buses and charabancs operated from the area next to the garage. These served the towns of Penzance and Helston. The men of the village were employed locally at Great Work and Boscreage Mines, the clay pits at Tresowes or on local farms.

Today none of the original four chapels in Ashton are used for religious purposes, reflecting a general trend in falling attendances. The old chapel in Prospect Row now houses the Men's Institute. They originally used a wooden building located in front of Palm House. The local blacksmith worked from another in Chapel Row. The others in Middle Row and West End have become dwellings. Ashton Church is still used and the bricks around the windows were made at Tregonning Hill.

This path is known locally as Whippers Lane because farmers once drove their cattle through here.

After about 400 metres, where the path bends to the left, go over a stile on your right by the side of a gate. Go straight across the field and through a line of trees, then across the next field to a stile in the far right corner. Follow the hedge on your right to the corner of the field then round to the left a little. Go over the stile and immediately bear right through the gate, taking you to the side of a cottage (Higher Chygwins Farm).

Go through the next gate and, in the next field, follow the hedge to your left until you reach a stile. Go over the stile onto a track and go right. Soon you reach a group of dwellings and, just past this, turn left down a tarmac road between bungalows.

Go straight across at the next junction and follow the road round to the right. Soon you'll arrive at Tresowes Green junction having just passed Moors Lane on your right.

With the telephone box on your left, ignore the first right signed to Balwest and Godolphin and go straight across taking the road to Tresowes Farm.

On your left is the stack of Wheal Grey. Wheal Grey was the last place to produce china clay in the area. There were two pits here within a couple of hundred yards of each other and the clay they produced was taken to Porthleven for export. It is said there was also a kiln for making bricks and slabs for domestic fires. As the clay was cleared, alluvial tin deposits were found in the lower pit. In addition, there was a tin bearing lode here, mined until the early 1870s. These underground workings were kept dry by the pumping engine house that still stands near the spoil heaps.

The lower pit is now stocked with coarse fish and used by a local fishing club. The lake area is full of insects with evocative names as the Azure Damselfly, Beautiful Demoiselle, Emperor Dragonfly and Large Red Damselfly.

On the road to the farm take the stile on your right and, bearing diagonally left, head across the field. Use the Tregonning Hill monument in the distance as a guide. At Tresowes Farm you will be following the footpath around the farm complex keeping it on your left hand side.

At the corner of the field go into the next field and immediately turn left for 20 metres and cross the stile into the next field. Turn left and, on a clear day, use Mousehole in the distance for direction. Still keeping Tresowes Farm on your left, head towards a gateway where you pass through, immediately turning left. Head across to the gate opposite and go through to the next field to the stile in the left hand corner. Cross the stile (there is a long drop) and turn diagonally right and head for the stile across the field where you will be leaving Tresowes Farm.

Stretching out in front of you is Mounts Bay and on the headland in the distance is Tater Dhu lighthouse. Look for Paul Church tower above Newlyn and Creegbrowse engine house (often mistaken for Ding Dong) profiled on the hills further to the right. Down in the valley is Germoe Church tower – where we are now heading.

A clearly signposted path takes you beside a wood on your right coming out through a complex of buildings at Trethewey. At the road turn left down the hill and soon you'll be in the picturesque village of Germoe.

Where the road bears left up the hill towards the school, turn right towards Germoe church. If you want to explore this ancient building you'll find the gate into the churchyard on your right. St Germoe's chair is clearly visible on the far side. Following the perimeter of the churchyard you will find St Germoe's Well across the road on the left at a small junction by Hawthorn Cottage.

Germoe

In the mining boom Germoe was much bigger than it is now. The 1841 Census tells us that there were about 40 family households in Germoe. Of the 150 population 60 were children under 11. There were 12 tin miners, 2 copper miners, 3 farmers, 5 agricultural labourers, 2 carpenters, 1 shoe maker, 1 tailor, 1 blacksmith and 2 publicans. Yes, there were 2 public houses in Germoe - Cornish Mount and the Dolphin Inn! By 1851 the population had declined to 69. In 2021 Germoe Churchtown had 18 households plus three holiday cottages. There were 46 residents of which 16 were of retirement age and 8 were children. There are no pubs or shops.

Fairy Fair

It may seem unusual but Germoe was once thought to be the haunt of fairies. Now these fairies weren't the wish granting type, but were notoriously troublesome. On one occasion a man named Daniel Champion and his drinking companion were making their way home down Bal Lane in Germoe where the men "found it covered all over from end to end, and the Small People holding a fair there with all sort of merchandise". The following day at Croft Gothel, whilst describing the delights of the fair, Champion's companion was knocked backwards by some unseen force and killed instantly. Whilst carrying the body home Champion began to talk about his own adventure with the fairies but

was warned by a fellow traveller "Don't speak about them; they're wicked, spiteful devils." No sooner were the words uttered than the speaker was thrown clean over stairs and bruised dreadfully. This was no doubt taken as absolute proof of both the presence and the power of the Little People of Germoe.

St Germoe

Germoe is named after Saint Germochus an Irish missionary who, with many other missionaries, landed at Hayle sometime around 500 CE (500 AD) and settled here in order to preach the gospels to the local people. It is quite probable that the local population lived mainly on and around Tregonning Hill and that the boggy land in the valley where the village can now be found, was a pre-Christian sacred site. By siting his early church amongst the sacred springs, Saint Germoe would already be invoking the sacred as he preached. His original church would have been a simple wooden affair, the remains of which have subsequently been lost beneath the foundations of the current church. The church we see today dates mostly from the 14th century and is famed for The Germoe Monkeys, three long tailed monkeys carved on the Church porch. The cheeky creatures are thought to have been carved to ward off evil. The church is also remarkable for being one of the "Hairiest" in Cornwall. The "hair" is actually a type of lichen which grows all over the Church walls and is actually a sign that the air here is remarkably clean.

In the churchyard you can see St Germoe's Chair. This pillared stone structure with arches and a stone seat was once believed to be a shrine covering the bones of St Germoe, but it is now thought to have been constructed in the medieval period, possibly as a sedilia (a stone seat found in churches used during mass for the priest and his assistants). The seat is used on Palm Sunday when there is a procession to it from the church, followed by the reading of a lesson and the singing of hymns. The chair is said to have particularly good acoustics. The stones that form the chair possibly came from a canopy that covered the original Saint Germoe's Well. The original well was recorded in 1538 when Leland visited the area. He described "St Germoe's Welle a little without the chirchyard". When the road next to the church was widened and the level raised in 1905, all trace of the well was lost including the trough stones. As part of Germoe's Silver Jubilee of Elizabeth II celebrations in 1977, the well was reconstructed. In 2016 it was repaired and restored by the residents of Germoe to commemorate Her Majesty's 90th birthday. The new well cover was designed and constructed by village blacksmith James Kerr.

Smuggling & Wrecking

Sailors were once said to recite this prayer:

*“God keep us from rocks and shelving sands
And save us from Breage and Germoe men's hands”*

Like many coastal communities Germoe is associated with smuggling, wrecking and salvaging from ships that foundered on the shoals off Praa Sands.

In October 1671 a ship called The Speedwell was “cast away on the rocks at Pengersick” the stricken ship was “plundered of all that was between her decks” and in 1710 a letter described the local Germoe ‘Tinnners’ as “..mad people, without fear of God or of the World”. There is even the tale of an 18th clergyman rushing from the pulpit “demanding fair play to participate in the spoil of the wreck which the sea was bearing in upon Praa Sands”.

William Lemon

Born at Germoe in 1696 and baptised at Breage Church the same year, he was educated in the village school. He then became the clerk to Mr Coster of Bristol, who started deep mining for copper. When William Lemon married Miss Isabelle Vibart of Gulval – a lady of some property – he was able to finance his far-sighted mining ideas. Famously, he conceived the idea of working mines on a large scale. At Poldice Mine he was the principal adventurer and provided the capital to solve the mine’s water problem. Whilst John Williams planned the construction of a deep drainage tunnel (adit) to naturally drain the mine, Lemon campaigned in Parliament to get the duty on sea-borne coal dropped. When this duty was dropped in 1741 it became economic to buy steam pumping engines, and an order was immediately placed for 5 Newcomen engines. Deep adit construction played a vital role in dewatering Cornish mines and at its peak, the County Adit drained an estimated 13 million gallons/day from over 40 mines around Redruth and St Day through 38 miles of adits

Hurling

Germoe was also famed for the ferocity of its hurling matches in which opposing teams (and more often opposing villages) would attempt to reach their home goal with the silver hurling ball whilst every effort by the opposing team was made to bring the ball holding player to the ground. Injuries were common, deaths occasional but not unknown.

War Grave

In Germoe Church Cemetery, located outside of the village on the road to Balwest you can find the Commonwealth War Grave of Leonard Henry Laity, a sapper in the 2nd Battalion Canadian Engineers. Born in Germoe, Laity emigrated to Canada, where he enlisted into the army. He died 25th October 1918 aged 27 in the Lakenheath Military Hospital and was brought back to be buried near his family.

Continue along the road with the church tower on your right. As the road bends to the left, go straight ahead, up a track next to Churchtown Cottages, and enter the field on your right. Follow the footpath to the left around the edge of the field. Turn right at the top. Keeping the hedge on your left cross the stone cattle grid into a small field. A further cattle grid takes you back to the road up to Trethewey. Go left up the road. In the distance ahead of you is Tregonning Hill with its monument on top. About 100 metres further on from the houses at Trethewey turn left off the road onto a signposted footpath which takes you to Boscreege. Make sure you take the signposted path and not the track to a dwelling just before it. Follow the path round the field, bearing right twice until you meet a stile over the hedge. Turn left, through a gap in the corner of the field. Keeping the hedge on your left follow the field round to the right until you reach another stile over a hedge.

Climb over the stile. To your left are open fields and a view of Lady Gwendolen mine with Mounts Bay in the distance.

On the left you will see the remnants of the Lady Gwendolen Mine which was once part of a large mill complex containing plant for crushing tin ore. This was one of the last mines to work the Great Work Complex.

The mine itself was a relatively recent tin mine. Serious mining did not begin here until 1907. It was worked intermittently until 1929 when an investment of £100,000 built a new mill, headgear for the two shafts and an aerial ropeway to carry ore to the mill from nearby Wheal Reeth. It worked for five years. Then the mine closed after holing into the water-filled Wheal Boys workings to the east. Three men were trapped underground for three days until the water level was pumped out to rescue them. The falling price of tin along with extra pumping costs prevented further investment.

The mine was named Lady Gwendolen after the eldest daughter of the Duke of Leeds who was the mineral owner after inheriting the Godolphin Estate. The Dukes of Leeds only made occasional visits to Godolphin. They are remembered in several place names, notably Leedstown, where the Duke of Leeds pub can be found and Townshend, their family name. Mines were named after them too, including Wheal Leeds and the Leeds & St Aubyn Mine.

In contrast to Lady Gwendolen Mine is the ancient Trebolence Mine to the north-west. Today the chimney is all that remains of the engine house, which once contained the engine for dewatering the mine and driving the stamps. Documentary evidence of the mine dates back to 1510 and Trebolence village is shown on early maps, though no trace of it exists today. With the Cornish tendency to drop the prefix name to a place name, Trebolence was locally known as Bullens and was famous for particularly large sloes that used to grow there. In Cornwall these large sloes are referred to as bullens. It is difficult to know if the sloe gave its name to the place or vice versa. Given the age of the village it may possibly be the latter.

Straight ahead is a wooden stile, clearly visible from the top of the wall. Cross the field to this stile. After crossing the stile follow the track bearing right onto the lane at Boscreege. Go right up the lane and soon you'll reach a T-junction. Turn right along the narrow lane to the side of Rose Cottage and you will take a footpath with Boscreege Caravan Park on your left. After a short distance, where the lane is part of a gated driveway for about 50 metres, carry straight on along a footpath. You are heading towards Balwest. After about 20 metres there is a stile to the right. Ignore it and head straight on, crossing a wooden stile on the way. On your left you will see Tregonning Hill, and, on the Godolphin- Balwest Road, Castle Pencaire, a thatched house. After taking another stile over a hedge you will approach the Balwest/Germoe Road through a group of houses. Turn left and behind the Balwest Methodist Chapel Schoolroom through the graveyard is the car park you started from! Well done. We hope you enjoyed your walk!