

Lazar Houses in Cornwall

Extracts from the **Journal of the R.I.C. 1965, Part 1. (pp. 67 – 97)** “*Lazar Houses in Cornwall,*”
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"**Leprosy** came from the East and reached Europe in the beginning of the Christian era. It spread to Northern Europe in the dark ages, being recorded in Ireland in the 5th and in Brittany in the 7th centuries. In England and Wales it was prevalent in the 10th century, reached its zenith in the 13th and began to decline in the 14th century. It lasted longest in Scotland and south-west England.

In 1582, St. Laurence (Bodmin) was re-founded by Elizabeth for 40 lepers.¹

Cornwall, a long peninsula whose chief contacts to the outside world were by sea, was peculiarly vulnerable to attack, both from Europe on the south and Ireland on the north. The early appearance of leprosy in Ireland may have been from ships making the direct journey from Spain where the disease struck in 62 B.C.;

In the Middle East, where the Mosaic law, though strict, was not inhumane. An organisation expressly for the care of lepers was founded in Palestine in the 4th century, the Order of St. Lazarus of Jerusalem which nursed lepers, admitted them to its brotherhood and whose *Grand Master*² was a leper. The work of this order spread rapidly and its hospitals became known as 'lazarus' or 'lazar' houses. In the reign of Elizabeth it established a headquarters in England, at Burton Lazars in Leicestershire.

Queen Matilda, wife of Henry 1, the founder of the hospital of St. Giles in-the-Fields, took lepers into her house and washed and kissed their feet, offering this service as she told her young brother, who was shocked. Like St. Francis of Assisi, people like Queen Matilda were admired because they had overcome not fear but loathing. The fact that **the disease has a long period of incubation, sometimes as much as 15 years**, meant that people were unaware of the danger from contact. The first step in controlling the disease was taken in 1179 when Pope Alexander III decreed that lepers should not live with healthy people.

The number of lazar houses in England has been estimated at 200, and of these **27 were in Cornwall**. Thomas Bytton, Bishop of Exeter, who died in 1307, left bequests to 39 lazar houses in his diocese, 23 in Cornwall and 13 in Devon. [see Accounts of Richard of Gravesend and Thomas of Exeter; Camden Society, 1874.] In 1308-9 the executors travelled through Cornwall. The amounts distributed by them varied from 30 shillings at Launceston to 6d at Sancreed. Canon J. H. Adams has pointed out that the amounts are multiples of sixpence [Journal of the R.I.C., NS. vol. III p.51.] and if this be taken as the amount per head, it gives a total of **581 lepers in Cornwall** at the time. Nearly all the sites are near a parish boundary, as though the leprosy had been pushed as far away as possible.

In West Cornwall the term '**Clodgy**' means '**leper house**'³

When Bishop Bytton's legacies were paid out, the order of the list is based on that of his executors.;

1. Launceston [Lanston, Lanstone, Lanseton, Lanceton, Lawnstone] –
Dedication, St. Leonard.
Bequests & Donations
c.1250 The Priory of the Augustinian Canons of Launceston 6s 8d p.a.
1309 Bishop Bytton (Lanceton) [60 lepers there in 1308-9]

¹ R.I.C., vol. III, (p.21)

² Grand Master - a reference to Freemasonry?

³ See *Cornish-English Dictionary*: by R. Morton Nance.

The goods of Edward Blake, 'a sick man of Gilmartin (St. Leonard's site) who died in 1619 were valued, and included 1 old 'doust' (Chaff) bed and bolster and a blanket 3s. 0d. Evidently there were no lepers there in 1697, the Mayor and Corporation leased-out the property. Launceston is the only Cornish lazarus house which is a long way from the sea, but on the county border and as an assize town it saw a great deal of traffic.

2. Tremato, 3 miles from Saltash - dedication, possibly St. John the Baptist.
[15 lepers in 1308-9.]
Nearest religious house, The Augustine Priory of St. Germans.
3. St. Germans, 3 1/2 miles from St. Germans - dedication not known.
[10 lepers in 1308-9]
4. Liskeard, [Lescerd, Lescard, Lyskerd, Lyscherd, Liskyret.] 7 miles from Looe
Dedication, St. Mary Magdalene. [60 lepers in 1308-9]
Nearest religious house, The Benedictine cell of Lamana, at Looe.
5. Bodmin. There were 2 houses at Bodmin; St. Laurence Pontoboy and St. Anne,
a) Dunmere.
Nearest religious house, the Augustinian Priory, Bodmin.
Nearest port, Wadebridge, 6 miles.
The earliest mention as a hospital is 1302, with 6 poor lazarus men.
[1308-1309, 34 lazarus)

Dunmere in Bodmin, was dedicated to St. Anne. The nearest Religious Houses being the Franciscan Friary and the Augustinian Priory, Bodmin. In 1546 the numbers of lepers at Bodmin had doubled, probably due to the suppression of the monasteries and their associated lazarus houses. The smaller monasteries were closed in 1536, the greater in 1539. Chantryes were closed in 1547.

6. Maudlin in Lanhydrock, dedicated to St. Mary Magdalene.
Number of lepers in 1308-9, 28.
The nearest Religious House, Bodmin.
7. Fowey. Dedicated to St. Blaise. Number of lepers in 1308-9, 25.
Nearest Religious House, The Benedictine Priory of Tywardreth, 4 miles.
8. Grampound. Dedicated to St. Anne, number of lepers in 1308-9, 25.
Nearest Religious House, The Augustinian Priory of Tregony, 3/4 mile.
9. Sheepstall, (Schiepstall, Shepestalle, Schipstall, Sheepstors, Shepestall, Shepstall) a deserted village near Tregony. Dedicated to St. Margaret, 25 lepers in 1308-9.
Nearest Religious House, The Augustinian Priory of Tregony, 3/4 mile.
Site: South of Tregony on the left bank of the river Fal across the boundary between the parishes of Veryan and Ruan Laniorne. (close to 2 water-mills)

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