

# THE ZENNOR CHURCHWAY

## A Classical Cornish Coffin Line by Craig Weatherhill

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**Comero weeth na rewh gara an vorr goath rag an vorr noweth** ("Take care you do not leave the old road for the new") **Cornish Proverb.**

In a district with the geography of Penwith (or the Land's End peninsula of Cornwall, in SW England), it would seem impossible to lay out an almost straight route on a virtually level plane for 10 miles, and yet those who centuries ago laid the Zennor Churchway achieved just that.

Penwith is a granite peninsula consisting of a range of moorland hills up to 252m high, surrounded by a flattish bench at around the 130m level, cut by wave action in the Pliocene era. To the west and south, this bench may be up to three miles wide, but scored by deep, steep-sided river valleys: Kenidjack Cot, Nanquidno. Penberth, Lamorna. On the long north coast it is less than a mile wide - in one place, the width of the bench between the abrupt rise of the hills and the 100m cliff is only a few hundred metres. Any streams which cross this narrow bench are likely to have cut only shallow valleys.

The Zennor Churchway was laid out along this northern bench, parallel to the coast, and it is traceable for at least 10 miles from St. Ives to Pendeen, crossing continuous patterns of small, stone-walled fields first laid out by prehistoric farmers: arguably the oldest continually-worked landscape in the world. The path can be easily followed, marked by dozens of eighteenth and nineteenth-century stiles. These largely consist of two related types: the grid, or coffin stile where a gap in one of the massive stone-faced hedges may have three or four monolithic pillars laid out on the ground to form a cattle-grid; or the grid-step, or cattle stile where central stones are placed higher to form a barrier to more adventurous types of livestock.

From the ninth century, the route was way-marked by round-headed stone crosses, only a few on which survive in situ. The sites of some are still marked by cross-bases - earth-fast boulders, roughly squared, with a square socket sunk into the centre. From at least Iron Age times each farm-holding along this coast consisted of a long, narrow strip running from the coastal cliffs to the highest point of the long hill range, where the inland end of many butt onto another ancient trackway, a ridgeway known as The Old St. Ives Road, or the Tinnors Way. This was, in medieval times, adopted as a parish boundary for Morvah and Zennor. The sites and spacing of the stone crosses seem to indicate that each was originally set up on the boundaries between one holding and the next. The extreme age of these farm holdings is still evident: in quite a number the remains of the prehistoric and medieval farms survive alongside the modern farms which, apparently for convenience, have been sited exactly on the path of the Zennor Churchway. Earlier still, it may have been marked by menhirs (individual standing stones), at least three of which existed along the way. Close to Zennor, a stone row, the only one currently known in West Cornwall, runs at right angles to the route.

The track is also marked by field names. Churchway, Wayfield, and Road Field are common eighteenth and nineteenth century names which continue a tradition. Earlier field names are in the Cornish tongue: Furrywidden is *vorr an gwidn*, 'the white way', while the Cornish work for a cross, *crowz* is found in many other fields along the route as Park an Grouse, for example.

The north-eastern end of the route appears to be a rock outcrop on the Island at St. Ives, a jutting peninsula joined to the mainland by a now built over sand spit. This outcrop is still named Carn Crowze, 'cross tor' where, on the place name evidence, a stone cross once stood. The Island, once Dinas Eia, *St. Ives fortress*, was a sacred spot, connected with St. Eia herself. She was said to have been an early Irish priestess who arrived here by sea having sailed over on a leaf (a curragh?). Was she a Christian priestess, or an older sea-goddess? As the route travels westward, it passes Zennor and Morvah, both places closely connected with mermaids - or sea-goddesses.

The south-western end of the route is harder to determine. From Portheras Cross at Pendeen, it would seem to curve gently southwards, aiming for St. Just and as it does so, it coincides with Churchway routes centred on St. Just itself. If a curve in a coffin line is permissible, then the route may well be continuous from St. Ives to Penwith's southern coast, perhaps following the route traced by Tom Henderson and Gabrielle Hawkes (TLH 117) or by another one to the west, part of which is known as the Seven Steps.

The name 'Churchway' would appear to be a misnomer when applied to the Zennor path. Between St. Ives and Pendeen it passes three parish churches - and avoids each one. It passes well to the north of St. Ives Church, and a good 200m to the south of Morvah Church. At Zennor, this trait is not so obvious at first glance, when it appears to pass right by the churchyard wall. Here, the route has been altered. The positions of two cross bases, one in the field wall of Park Grouse, 300m north-west of Trewey, the other to the north-west of the vicarage, show that the original line of the route did not come within 100 m of the church. It is also noticeable that, of the dozens of stiles set along this path, only one is equipped with what would appear to be a coffin rest.

If this so-called Churchway was not associated with the parish churches, or, it would seem, the sites of early Christian chapels, then why the waymark crosses? Clearly older than any of the churches by at least two centuries, could they have been 'road signs' for the spirits of the dead, or for natural lines of force?

The route would also appear to have distinct associations with witchcraft, possibly an indication that the route was significant to older religions and beliefs than Christianity. In local tradition, witches are strongly associated with the hamlet of Trewey, where one witch had her powers challenged by a hungry husband. In response, she transformed herself into a hare and set off for St. Ives, over 5 miles away, returning within half an hour laden with food. The Churchway was the route she took. Also directly on this route to the north-east of Zennor, is a farm with the evocative name of Wicca. Alone among all the farms in the neighbourhood, this name is not a Cornish one, even though it is recorded as far back as 1327. The chances of the Anglo-Saxon place-name *hwicce*, 'settlement', being coined in what was then an almost exclusively Celtic-speaking area seem pretty slim - or is there a chance that Wicca means exactly what it says?

The next farm on the path from Wicca to Zennor is Tregerthen, 'rowan-tree farm', the rowan or mountain ash being a significant tree in ancient belief, although there are few, if any, hereabouts today. The steep, boulder-strewn hillside rising above Tregerthen is Burn Downs, the site of the Midsummer moot of all the area's witches and where the Witches' Rock once stood, before being broken up and carted off last century (by stonemasons or by dissatisfied Christians?). West of Zennor and Trewey, Boswednack and Morvah are also recorded centres of Witchcraft.

It has already been indicated that the Zennor Churchway may be significantly older than the churches it passes by, and therefore it would seem that mainstream Christianity avoided building their churches on its line, even though in all three cases their sites are not more than a few hundred metres from it. Caution or respect? Strangely, though, the route seems to have exerted an influence on the eighteenth and nineteenth century Methodists, who built chapels directly on its path in a number of places! John Wesley himself both preached and lodged at places directly on the line. The most curious instance is the chapel between Tregerthen and Wicca. Now a roofless shell in a withy grove, its walls hidden and overgrown, it was built on the boundary between the two farms with no other lane or road leading to it, other than the Zennor Churchway.

It is this stretch of the path, between Zennor and Wicca, which most strongly retains a sense of otherworldliness, which is instantly felt by anyone walking its route. Whatever its influence, power or significance may be, it is far from extinct even in our technological era.

**I have not attempted to reproduce Craig Weatherhill's highly detailed hand drawn map of the Churchway. If you are interested in seeing it you should go The Ley Hunter at <http://www.leyhunter.com/archives/arch4.htm>.**