

## A Cornish Cross in Canada

*John Tyacke, September 2010*

The first time I learnt of a Cornish Cross in Canada was on reading Charles Henderson's article (1). On page 392, while referring to the parish of St Michael Penkivel and the probability of a chapel in the property called Fentongollen, he quotes Langdon's Cornish Crosses (2)

*Some years ago, the Rev F L Osler was driving by a farm in the parish of St Michael Penkivel when a granite font and cross were pointed out to him lying dirty and neglected on the ground. As no one on the spot seemed to set much value on them, he purchased them and sent them to Canada. It appears that at the farm there was a field called Chapel Meadow...the cross is about 2 feet high and is morticed into a base of Canadian stone.*

Osler and his distinguished descendants are mentioned in the early history of Simcoe County, Ontario (3). Part 1 page 306:

*The Rev Featherstone L Osler. the pioneer clergyman. was a native of Falmouth, Eng., and came to Canada in 1831, proceeding to Newmarket where he stayed for a short time until the completion of the parsonage at Bond Head. He then took charge of the new parish, which included all South Simcoe, and a great part of North Simcoe. An active and vigorous man in the performance of his work, he built many churches and established several congregations. He labored for twenty years in the large parish, out of which new parishes were formed from time to time as the county developed. and in 1857 was transferred and became rector of Ancaster and Dundas, where he resided until his resignation in 1882. His death occurred In Toronto, February 16, 1895, at the ripe age of 90 years. While in the Tecumseth (an earlier name for Bond Head) charge, he took an active part in educational affairs, some account of which may be found in the chapter on schools. Several sons in his family have been distinguished in Canadian affairs, Justice F Osler of the Ontario Court of Appeal-, B. B. Osler. KC, one of the most prominent members of the Canadian bar, (d. Feb 5, 1901, aged 62 years); E. B. Osler, MP for West Toronto; Prof. Wm. Osler of Oxford University, England (formerly of John Hopkins University, Baltimore, US).*

Although Osler must surely have had his Cornish Cross with him at Bond Head, he certainly took it with him to Dundas, as we find in "History of the Diocese of Niagara to 1950", anonymous, presumably circa 1950. page 45:

*Meanwhile Canon Osler was at Dundas and in 1864 he bestowed upon Christ Church, West Flamborough (the church is in the village of Greensville, in*

*what is now the Town of Flamborough) within his parish what is proudly possessed in Niagara, the oldest piece of Church furniture in Canada, the celebrated Cornish font. He has found it in the possession of his brother-in-law, Mr. J H Hickes in Cornwall and having asked for it brought it to Canada in 1837. The Font Bowl standing on a Tau Cross dates from the fifth century and is believed to be the only surviving relic of an old British Church. The Tau Cross, so named for the Greek letter T which it resembles in shape, is only found in Cornwall where the Scandinavians came in search of tin. It was used by the early Christians as a religious symbol to conciliate the northerners who used the similarly shaped double hammer as a symbol of their god Thor. The Greensville font is stepped in Canadian stone, thus forming a link between the Ancient British and Canadian Churches. The first child to be baptized in this priceless font, after it had placed in Christ Church was John Louderwick Baillie.*

The above reference was given to me by Len Snell, son of a former Rector of Christ Church, the Rev George Heath Snell who is shown in the illustration on page 63 of the above quoted book. He came to Canada in 1912 as a missionary to mining families in the interior of British Columbia, near Nelson, moving to Niagara Diocese in 1915; he was at Christ Church from 1945 until his retirement in 1950. They are, of course, Snell's of Cornish descent. Len's grandfather Daniel was born in Chacewater in 1848, his father in Swansea in 1881. Len also provided the photograph of the triple tier combination - block of Canadian stone - Tau Cross - font.

Len has also provided extracts from another book giving more details of the Osler's (4). In this we learn that Featherstone Lake Osler's ancestors were Falmouth "sailors, merchants and shipbuilders" and that Featherstone spent four years at sea before going to Cambridge University to read for the church. He was ordained, married to Miss Ellen Free Pickton, and the couple sailed for Canada in 1837. Apparently, his brother Harry, followed him out and was near Bond Head as a missionary clergyman "in action for sixty year until his death at 88". Featherstone was inducted on 20 October 1837 as Rector of St James' Dundas and also St. John's Ancster [these places, and also Greensville and West Flamborough are just west of Hamilton. the steel city at the western tip of Lake Ontario). In 1865, he was appointed Rural Dean, retiring in 1888 to live in Toronto until his death in 1895. Mrs. Osler, mother of ten children, died in 1906, three months after her one hundredth birthday.

Recent writers have suggested that the cross is not in fact a Tau cross. Miss

M. Henderson quoted George C. Boase in the *Western Antiquary* in 1883 and subsequent correspondence to give the history of the crosses arrival in Canada, and also corresponded with Rev. Lambie, Rector of Christchurch, West Flamboro in 1972. He supplied an article from 1930 written by a former incumbent, the Rev. W. Hadly, and also a photograph, from which she gave her opinion: (5)

*Without knowing what the surface of the Stone is like under the font she suggests it could be a mutilated Latin cross with the top arm missing: the distinct chamfering of the other arms indicates a mediaeval period, and this point alone supports the suggestion of it being a mutilated Latin Cross.*

The present-day expert on Cornish crosses is Andrew Langdon who is unrelated to Arthur Langdon, author of the 1896 book already referred to. He has recently written (6):

*On close examination of photographs of the cross it can clearly be seen that the stone, although rounded in section, was originally octagonal. suggesting a Gothic style cross and is possibly a thousand years later than the Rev'd Osler first estimated. Further evidence to support this is the remains of a similar Gothic style Latin Cross which still remains in the parish of St. Michael Penkivel, (see Old Cornwall No 72) The Latin cross had formerly been damaged losing its upper limb which led the Rev'd Oster to believe the stone was a Tau cross.*

An illustration accompanying the text shows clearly what is being described. I am grateful to Angela Broome of the Courtney Library of the Royal Institution of Cornwall for bringing my attention to these two recent opinions on the cross.

Arthur Langdon's *Old Cornish Crosses* of 1896 is not widely available, but most good reference libraries have a book including a section by him (7). This includes several plates of illustrations showing many typical styles of Cornish crosses- Plate X on page 430 shows some Latin crosses; the closest example to the cross under discussion appears to be "Fig, 77 - Trerank" (he states on page 423 that this cross was one of 15 that had come to light since 1896]. The text on page 434 states that this is in the Parish of Roche and that it has "a cross in relief on front and back"; two similar examples are quoted. I believe it is significant that Langdon makes no mention of Tau crosses.

On 20 June 1996, members of the Toronto Cornish Association visited the church to inspect the cross and font. No conclusive (amateur!) opinions were reached. I was surprised to find that the cross was incised into the stone, as I had thought from the photos that it stood out from it; it did not appear to have been

incised recently. The back of the cross is severely mutilated, but the lower two inches of the incised cross remain, confirming that it was two-sided. The chamfering is clear and looks original under the left arm of the cross, but otherwise the cross appears to have been much worked over, possibly by some crude farm mason back in Cornwall who wished to use the stone for some secular purpose. Perhaps this gave the cross the strange proportions it now possesses.

I have not seen comment on the "font" mounted above the cross, but it is unlike any font I have seen in Cornwall: it appears not to be granite. It is probably a piscina or some such church basin, In the top surface of the "boss' on the rear left is a vertical hole several inches deep and an irregular 5-6 mms in diameter (that is, not drilled with circular hole). Could this be to hold a taper or the spike of a candle holder? Perhaps it held the hinge for a cover for the piscina? In the centre of the font is the bolt holding it to the cross, close to it is a blocked up drain with a little of a circular brass drain fitting still visible, Rev Don McIntyre told us that he believed that this had been installed and blocked up by the parish in Canada,

Notes:

1. Journal of the Royal Institution of Cornwall, New Series, Volume III, Part 4 of 1960. The Ecclesiastical History of the Four Western Hundreds by Charles Henderson. Part IV.
2. Old Cornish Crosses. by Arthur G Langdon. 1896,
3. A History of Simcoe County, by Andrew F Hunter. in two parts, 1909. Reprinted 1948.
- 4 Fountain Come Forth, The Anglican Church and the valley Town of Dundas. 1784 -1963 anon. The Osler's are described in detail on pages. 22 - 31.
- 5 Old Cornwall. Volume VIII, No 4 Spring 1975, pages 178-180
- 6 Stone crosses in Mid-Cornwall by Andrew Langdon, 1994, page 10\_ (Cornish Cross Series No 2).
- 7 A History of the County of Cornwall. Volume 1 (the only full volume published), edited by William Page, 1906. Langdon's contribution was Early Christian Monuments on pages 407 - 449.

