

## Historic legacies and modern challenges: the Cornish language

If the Cornish person looks closely into the mirror of the Cornish language they might find contemporary Cornwall staring right back out at them. For the Cornish language mirrors the doubts and uncertainties confronting Cornwall at the beginning of the second millennium.

The language has a proud history, dating back to Cornwall's first millennium, a time of shadowy and insubstantial Cornish kings and independent kingdoms. Familiar placenames such as Trewassa, Carnglaze, Rescorla, Creegbrase, Bosulow provide everyday reminders of our Celtic and non-English roots. Yet the texts of the language are heavily suffused with English borrowings even from the earliest miracle play cycle of the 1300s. The reality is that Cornwall, since the ninth century, has been to a greater or lesser degree influenced and structured by its powerful neighbour to the east – England. And so has the Cornish language. For example, words such as *pont* or *nant*, which retained that form in Cornish's sister languages Welsh and Breton, changed to *pons* and *nans* in Cornish well before the fourteenth century, an early effect of the influence of English.

For centuries the language was marginalised and despised, a thing of no worth, low-status gibberish fit only to call the pigs to their food. However, like Cornwall, the language has been patronised and romanticised in more recent times. Since the 1870s Cornwall has been buffeted by a storm of signifiers as the artistic and literary metropolitan gaze settled on what it perceived as a primitive and simple folk whiling their time away in age-old harmony with the environment on the fringes of 'civilised' Europe. As Cornwall became the subject of romanticised longing, the perfect setting for saints, Arthurian knights, adventurers and craggy, windswept heroes, the Cornish language was invested with similar nostalgia. Its medieval texts helped provoke a reverence for a simpler past before Cornwall was subjected to the twin evils of Protestantism and industrialisation.

Fanciful myths such as these have also attracted many outsiders, lured by an exotic Celtic 'other' that was, unlike the Irish, safely domesticated as well as easily accessible at the end of a comfortable rail journey from London. Adeptly marketing a myth of a sunnier, simpler, purer Cornwall, image-makers from the Great Western Railway at the beginning of the twentieth century to the arts entrepreneurs and a transient 'regeneration' project class of the beginning of the twenty-first have paradoxically helped make modern Cornwall one of the most rapidly expanding British regions. After the 1960s its population soared as a mass influx of people seeking a pale green rural idyll descended on its unpretentious towns and villages. Just as Cornwall has suffered suburbanisation since the 1960s so was its language colonised by a group of outsiders. Over the past hundred years they have flocked around the cadaver of Cornish and tried to reset its bones in a fashion more suited to their tastes.

Nonetheless, while both Cornwall and its language are portrayed through a backward looking trope of melancholic longing for what might have been, there is hope for a better future. For example, there now exists a core of native critics who, while a minority, are key actors in the struggle to reshape Cornwall as a forward-looking, progressive European region, one that escapes the unimaginative hand of state

bureaucracy on the one hand and narrow-minded, racist and Europhobic populist English culture on the other. Their efforts to transform the tourism-obsessed hype and rhetoric of 'quality Cornwall' into a properly sustainable Cornwall chime with recent struggles to reform the Cornish language so that it can become a proper community language available to all in Cornwall rather than the property of a small revivalist elite.

The two projects are not unconnected. The Cornish language is a powerful symbol of Cornwall's identity because it is one of the few markers reminding us we are not English. In all other respects - in religion, dialect, shopping habits, dress, sports - the Cornish have converged with the English since the early 1800s. But the language is something that is uniquely ours. Yet only a small number can speak it and its use is restricted to relatively few domains. Moreover, since the 1980s what was already a tiny revivalist movement succumbed to the niche specialization of post modern capitalism and fractured into four sub-groups. Each uses a different spelling system and bases its preferred pronunciation on different historical periods. In order to make some sense of this situation we need some facts about the history of the language.

The past of the Cornish language can be divided into four phases. Old Cornish comprised the phase of the language between around 600 (when it became distinct from old Welsh) to around 1200. This vast extent of time has left few examples other than a plethora of placenames, notably those beginning with *tre*, the Cornish for farmstead or homestead. There also survives a list of manumissions of slaves, including several Cornish names (significantly most of the slave holders had English names). But the main record for Old Cornish is a book known as the *Old Cornish Vocabulary*, a twelfth century dictionary of 961 words intended to teach English to monoglot Cornish youth.

Ecclesiastical zeal remained important during the Middle Cornish phase. It was in this period – roughly from 1200 to 1550 - that the Cornish language flourished, attaining the horizon of literacy and bolstered by the active patronage of the Church. However, Cornish also ceased to be the dominant language in the eastern parts of Cornwall, ceding that position to English possibly before the Black Death of the mid-1300s. Over the next two centuries the linguistic border stabilised; in mid and west Cornwall the main language was Cornish, in east Cornwall it was English. Cornwall was a land of two tongues. During these centuries mystery plays and saint's plays were written to be acted at feast days and religious festivals in the rounds or plain an gwarrys dotted throughout mid and west Cornwall. It was not until the very end of this phase, in the 1550s, that the first prose Cornish can be dated – a long set of catholic homilies translated by a priest, John Tregear.

By this date the number of Cornish speakers was in decline. The language's over-dependence on the church was tragically exposed in the 1540s as the Reformation gathered pace and the church was anglicised. A new English Prayer Book and sermons in English gave that language a greater role. The ambiguous demands for a Cornish Prayer Book that surfaced during the brutally put down conservative religious rising of 1549 helped to associate the language indelibly with subversion and revolt. In consequence the thrusting class of sixteenth century Cornish gentry who made money from growing trade and royal patronage via the Duchy of Cornwall also found they had no time for the Cornish language, which many now saw as a symbol of

medieval catholic obscurantism. Lack of gentry support was exacerbated as the English nationalism associated with the Reformation cut links with the continent and particularly with Brittany. Hundreds of craftsmen and labourers had come to Cornwall from that country in the fifteenth century, helping to consolidate Cornish by their use of the close and possibly mutually intelligible Breton.

As the church began to frown on the old open air plays, instead emphasising the reading of the (English) Bible and Prayer Book, Cornish retreated to the domestic and private spheres and into the west. The period from 1600 to 1800 was its swansong. The last native writing in Cornish was produced in the 1770s by 65 year old William Bodinar, a fisherman in Mousehole near Penzance. Bodinar poignantly wrote that *'nag es moye vel pager pe pemp edn dreav nye ell clappia Cornoack leben, poble coath pager egeance blouth'* (there are not more than four or five people in our town who can speak Cornish now, old people 80 years old). The language was in its dotage, ending its historic period amongst the poor who huddled together in the fishing villages of west Cornwall.

And yet the work of reviving the language began well before the last Cornish was heard on the lips of the old folk of Mousehole. During the seventeenth century a gentleman in east Cornwall, William Scawen, wrote an account of the decline of Cornish. Scawen was instrumental in urging a group of lesser gentry and professional men centred on Newlyn and Penzance to write and correspond in Cornish from the 1660s to the 1730s. This 'Newlyn school' of revivalists in turn invited the Welsh pioneer linguist Edward Lhuyd to visit Cornwall. This he did around 1700. Lhuyd described the 'Modern Cornish' he heard in west Cornwall during his visit, providing the first account of the grammar and pronunciation of Cornish plus a vocabulary of many thousand words. His work, published as *Archaeologica Britannica* in 1707, together with his copious unpublished notebooks, remains an invaluable guide to the pronunciation of Cornish in its latest and most modern phase.

The Newlyn School failed to arrest the decline of Cornish, marginalised by the onrush of eighteenth century modernity. But it was an early precursor of the drive to revive the language. The fourth and most recent revivalist phase of Cornish thus overlaps with the last phase of the historic language. When people began to produce teaching texts and grammars for Cornish after the 1870s they turned to the most modern phase of Cornish and to Lhuyd's work, as did Henry Jenner in 1904, author of the first book length Cornish revivalist grammar. In the 1920s, however, under the influence of Robert Morton Nance, the revival turned its back on Modern Cornish and adopted a medieval basis. A focus on the literary remains of the language, an ambivalence about the popular interest in Cornish that was plainly visible in Victorian almanacs and newspapers, and a predilection for an over-romanticised notion of a 'pure' Celtic Cornwall drove the twentieth century revivalists back beyond the Reformation to create what one of its leading lights in 1947 described as a 'compact medieval language'.

The shortcomings of an archaic spelling system, an uncertainty about pronunciation and an over-complicated syntax that looked back to the earliest mystery plays for inspiration had become increasingly transparent in the 1970s. In response to criticism of Nance's 'unified Cornish' the majority of users adopted a new spelling, given the name Common Cornish. This claimed to reconstruct the spelling of 1500 and then

produced a 'phonemic' spelling based on that reconstruction. Unfortunately however, the work underpinning this move was not subjected to rigorous examination. It quickly became apparent during the 1990s that the phonological base on which it was reconstructed was highly questionable. A debate continues to rage about the pronunciation of late medieval Cornish. Meanwhile, another group of Cornish users rejected the medieval basis of revived Cornish entirely and attempted to reconnect to the earlier revivalist project by turning to the Modern Cornish of around 1700. By the late 1980s the Cornish language had thus split into three warring factions (common Cornish, modern Cornish and the rump of unified Cornish users) and the language revival entered a more pluralist phase.

The Cornish revival remains tiny in numbers. Around 140 people may be able to speak it at a competent level. However, an estimated 30-40% of these do not live in Cornwall. Ninety competent Cornish speakers in a population of 510,000 is a poor return for a century and more of revivalism. Nonetheless, the Cornish language remains an important symbol for many beyond revivalist circles and more recently it has made an appearance in films and music and on signposts and in advertising. Partly in response to this growing popular interest in Cornish and partly as a result of the lobbying of the revivalist movement, the UK government belatedly recognised Cornish under Part 2 of the European Charter for Regional or Minority Languages in 2002. It now receives a small amount of public funding and in 2005 a Cornish Language Partnership was established to oversee its development. It soon became clear that extending the use of Cornish would be difficult in a context of orthographic pluralism so the process of agreeing a single written form for teaching purposes and official use is now under way, aided by advice from a panel of external experts. The days of reliance entirely on voluntary and amateur advocacy of Cornish are over and the language has entered a fifth post-revivalist phase of bureaucratic patronage. However, the challenge will be to maintain enthusiasm and commitment while submitting to a process of state-sponsored homogenisation.