

The Unimportance of Being Cornish in Cornwall

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Introduction

In 1973 at Cornwall Technical College, the first Director of the Institute of Cornish Studies, Charles Thomas, lectured on the importance of being Cornish in Cornwall. He outlined the historical origins of Cornwall, asked how we might spot that endangered species – the Cornish – and discussed the various pressures on Cornwall. In doing so he painted a gloomy picture and issued a stark warning. Unless there was ‘a more effective approach ... this little land of ours will end up scarcely distinguishable from the Greater London area, with undertones reminiscent of Blackpool or Skegness’.¹ At his inaugural lecture at Exeter, Professor Thomas was even blunter: ‘there were not many real Cornish left, and not all that much left of real Cornwall’.²

Now, from the perspective of my swansong [Caroline L. Kemp Memorial] lecture at Cornwall’s gleaming new university campus of Tremough, almost 40 years and several booms and slumps further on, things are clearly different. Or are they? It is time to revisit Charles Thomas’ analysis. I shall begin from the perspective that it is still important to be Cornish in Cornwall, before moving on to the implication that it is supremely unimportant. I want to pursue two of the same questions Charles Thomas posed in 1973. I intend to ask who the Cornish are and, like Charles, how many of us remain. I will then review what the rest of this century holds for the Cornish before finishing with some brief speculation on the role of a Cornish studies project in coming decades. What I do not intend to review are the origins of Cornwall or of Cornishness. Since the 1970s, that particular ground has been well tilled with general histories appearing written from a variety of perspectives. Readers are now able to acquire a better knowledge of the narrative of Cornwall’s past, if not to agree on its causes and consequences.³

As some of you may guess from the title, my conclusion could well strike an equally gloomy note. This might to some extent be personal. It suddenly dawned on me the other day that I had gone from being an angry young man to a grumpy old man, with no apparent time spent in between. It is too easy to draw the conclusion that we – and by we I mean the Cornish people – seem doomed to re-live our past. Small victories flicker before being extinguished within larger defeats. New passions excite us, only to melt into air, squashed by a structural juggernaut that steadily marches us mind-numbingly onwards. Being Cornish can easily seem irrelevant in a context of global warming, widening economic inequality and cynical political manoeuvrings. Yet belonging to and identifying with a place has proved to be stubbornly persistent, surviving modernity and going on to a new lease of life in conditions of post-modernity. We live in an ever-changing world, made and unmade by the dizzying impact of trillions of dollars seeking temporary, sometimes very temporary, havens in their voracious hunt for profits. In this world people desperately search for moorings that can anchor them to communities and to deeper moral values than mere consumption. A search for certainties can, of course, produce a deeply conservative reaction, as we scurry back to basics and haul up the drawbridge, until we realise that our basics are built on sand and the tides of our economic system will soon make short work of any modern-day Canutes. But it can also produce a more hopeful, more realistic will to resist. For me, Cornishness has never been only or even mainly about preserving stuff but more about giving us the strength and the confidence to say this is what we want, this is where we live and struggle, this is the line that we will not allow ‘them’ to cross.

But who is this ‘we’ and how far does ‘our’ extend? In short, who are the Cornish? Charles Thomas was pretty pessimistic about this back in 1973. The ‘true Cornish’ he concluded, were already ‘slightly in the minority’.⁴ Others go a lot further. In an intriguing aside in his book of last year on *Vanished Kingdoms*, Norman Davies mentions one case study dropped through lack of space. It was that of ‘Kerno’ [sic], ‘decorated by reflections on the theme of cultural genocide’. Later, he is more explicit. While the Britons survived in Wales, we are informed that in Cornwall ‘they did not’.⁵ We have become used to reading historians who tell us that we no longer exist but it is still a slightly odd feeling, akin to reading your own obituary. If indeed we have not survived, then clearly this whole lecture is pointless. Being Cornish in

contemporary Cornwall is irrelevant because there is no such thing beyond an attachment to a mere place on the map.

I assume Davies is equating being Cornish with speaking the Cornish language. But, as Charles Thomas rightly pointed out in 1973, ‘the knowledge of the existence of a separate language, as distinct from a full knowledge of that language itself, is probably sufficient ... to foster a sense of otherness’.⁶ We do not have to be able to speak Cornish to feel Cornish; just as we do not have to be a fisherman or a bal maiden to be Cornish. Cornishness cannot be reduced to such simplistic cultural or economic determinism. Yet neither is it so nebulous that it is impossible to quantify. So let us return to the question of how many of us there are, whether quaint survivals, angry rebels or both.

Quantifying the Cornish

Just to ask that question is to step into a minefield. While Catalans, Basques and Scots gird themselves for their final push for self-determination, even mentioning the Cornish and their right to exist can for some seem slightly distasteful. Liberal hackles rise and deeply buried embarrassments at a colonial past threaten to resurface. The simplest way of defining who is Cornish would be to assume that the category includes anyone born in Cornwall. This is also convenient as we have a benchmark in the 1951 Census. At that time 69% of Cornish residents were Cornish born.⁷

Unfortunately since then no-one has thought it important to count those born in Cornwall or, more precisely, those whose mother lived in Cornwall at their time of their birth, as hospitalization of births in England was forced on the Cornish of the east and birthplace data became rather irrelevant. The last properly conducted survey that investigated details of place of birth was that of 1981/82 by Ronald Perry and others. Seven wards from St Just in the far west to St Stephen in Brannel in mid-Cornwall were sampled in a study of counter-urbanisation.⁸ The researchers discovered that 57% of the people in these wards, which included a cross-section from the already predominantly non-Cornish Feock to the overwhelmingly Cornish St Stephen, had been born in Cornwall. Interestingly, one in five of these were return migrants.

But almost 30 years of further in-migration will have eroded this proportion of Cornish-born to under 50 per cent. Despite Cornwall Council's 'equality and diversity framework', which 'robustly' commits the Council to collect data for ethnic monitoring purposes, no similar scientifically acceptable survey of the proportions of non-movers, return migrants and incomers has taken place during the last quarter of a century. The 1983 survey implied a fall from around 70% at the time of the 1951 Census to 55-60%. As net in-migration did not start until the early 1960s, this had occurred in little more than 20 years, a drop of around 15 percentage points at a time when the population rose by 22 per cent. This in turn might suggest that for every one per cent rise in the population the proportion of native Cornish falls by around 0.7 per cent. Using this as our base we could calculate it will have fallen by maybe another 17%, to be as low as 40% now.

We could but we should not. As the more numerate of you will no doubt quickly inform me, this method is nonsense, as at current rates of growth the numbers born in Cornwall would become zero by around 2095. That could only happen if one of those enduring myths about Cornwall – that all in-migrants are retirees – were correct and no-one was ever born in Cornwall. In fact, the age profile of in-migrants is skewed more towards those of working – and therefore child-bearing age – than is that of the native population. These in-migrants will therefore have children who will in turn replenish the stock of those who qualify as Cornish by the simple criterion of birthplace. So, unless out-migration has become heavily skewed towards the non-Cornish, as people arrive on a sunny whim and leave in sodden desperation, the percentage of Cornish by this definition will at some point stabilise even with continuing high rates of gross migration. Nonetheless, after five decades of mass migration the proportion of the population born and brought up in Cornwall is likely to be somewhere around 40%.

Qualifying the Cornish

But this is where the problems begin. Unprepared to accept such a simple definition, there has been, since the 1960s, an excessive concern to define who is or is not 'truly' Cornish. For Charles Thomas this meant having both parents born in Cornwall. I am

quite happy with this, but that is because I qualify. If you do not qualify, then other definitions are always possible. For the late Fred Trull, being Cornish was a matter of proving the presence of ancestors in Cornwall back in the days of the 1508 Charter of Pardon. I am not sure how many achieved this feat, but my attempts to trace my family back soon foundered on the reefs of serial illegitimacies well before I had reached 1800.

This rejection of the idea that anyone can be Cornish – that if a kitten is born in an oven it does not make it a pasty – runs deep. A desire to patrol the ethnic boundaries helps us to explain the surge of interest among the Cornish in family history since the 1970s. We strive to root ourselves in our land, proudly displaying our genealogies as credentials of Cornishness, credentials that can only be extended to those beyond the chosen people after many years, indeed generations, if not centuries, of residence. Such an over-exclusivity is hardly surprising in the face of the demographic growth since the 1960s that has wreaked profound social changes, not the least in the way we speak. But it remains a sign of a lack of confidence and goes hand in hand with an over-nostalgic Cornishness. This in turn stems from a preservationist trope that has dominated discussions of Cornishness since the antiquarian impulse of the early 18th century at least.⁹ By all means *cuntelleugh an brewyon ez gerez, na vo kellez terveth* [collect the fragments that remain, so that nothing is lost] but an over-concentration on the rear-view mirror leaves us in danger of failing to spot the scat-up that is coming right at us over the horizon.

We might call this the we-belong-to-do-it-this-way syndrome. It was nicely illustrated by a letter to the London *Guardian* in March about the Tory/Liberal Democrat Government's vindictive tax on pasty-eaters.¹⁰ The chattering metropolitan classes were sagely informed that 'a true Cornishman or Cornishwoman eats an oggie cold'. Really? The implication of this debatable assertion is that nothing must ever change from the days when our great grandfathers took their pasties down the mines with them for their crowst. Comforting perhaps in the face of unstoppable change but a slight overstatement when we note the number of pasty shops in our towns doing a roaring trade in hot (or even tepidly warm) pasties. It is all very well us saying *na ra gara an vor goth rag an vor noweth* [do not leave the old road for the new road]. Remembering the past with pride and affection has its place but nostalgia for a world

that is gone can be counter-productive. If we can only do things in the way that we have always belonged to do them, how will we ever find the new ways necessary to build a Cornwall that is not driven primarily by external agendas?

From minority to majority status: reversing the discourse of decline

That said, despite the predictions of the doom-mongers of the 1970s, we find that both Cornwall and the Cornish have survived and in many ways are stronger than before. Different, certainly. More confident in some ways, more explicit, more ‘in your face’ perhaps. Here we meet the paradox of modern Cornwall. As the quantity of Cornish has declined in relative terms, the quality of Cornishness (and indeed *its* quantity too) has been enhanced. We are now used to the ubiquitous St Piran flags fluttering in the gentle westerly gales, forgetting how as recently as the 1970s flying this black and white icon was something only done by consenting adults in private. ‘Cornish’ has become a marketable brand; supermarkets sell a choice of Cornish beers. The Cornish language, or at least a revived version of it, is more visible and is backed by a (now fast diminishing) pot of public money. Even the good old pasty is re-branded as something ‘cool’, if often re-heated. Sanitised and hi-tech reminders of our heritage are scattered around the landscape courtesy of heritage lottery funds and European grant money. We may not care too much for the banal ‘dumbing down’ that seems to be a necessary accompaniment of this progress from pasties to pastiche. But Cornishness – in the sense of Cornwall being a different and special place – survives, albeit in a new guise and in many ways seemingly more secure now than 40 or 50 years ago. And yet, it is also hard to shake off that distinct feeling that the Cornish themselves still teeter on the brink of extinction. Are we not *lawetha an darraz po marth ledrez* [locking the door when the horse has been stolen]? The ways of our parents and grandparents are no more, soon to be as curious and foreign as the lives of those medieval peasants who spoke our former language. We may be more culturally confident but we are still granted little or no political respect, or even awareness of our right to exist. We are still casually ignored, blatantly patronised and persistently misunderstood. We are still being asked to look on helplessly as the landscapes that were the playgrounds of our youth disappear under the houses and roads of a new population.

But wait. If I am right and around 40% of the population is Cornish born, then why does a recent doctoral thesis on Cornish ethnicity conclude that the proportion of ethnically Cornish in Cornwall is not 40% at all but more like 25%?¹¹ And why is this figure in fairly close agreement with the 2007 Quality of Life survey conducted for Cornwall County Council, which in turn reinforced the evidence from parish surveys which also suggest a proportion of Cornish somewhere between 25 and 30%? The reason is simple. These surveys measure the proportion of those ‘who self-identify as Cornish’. The problem then occurs when this group of what we might call ‘consciously Cornish’ people is wittingly or unwittingly confused with the native Cornish. The two are not the same.

There is considerable confusion over the word ‘Cornish’, and who or what qualifies. Two uses of the term are possible. The first rests on an objective reference to things that are Cornish because they happen to be located in or associated with Cornwall. This applies to artefacts such as the pasty, geographical features such as beaches, cliffs or settlements, or people, such as the native Cornish. The second use invests the term with more subjective meaning. In this case a pasty is not Cornish just because it is baked in Cornwall. Instead, the concept of a Cornish pasty invokes other things such as memories of home, family meals, or even a proud mining history. When it comes to people, this second, more subjective meaning encompasses those who would claim a Cornish ethnicity. This might include some but not all of the native Cornish, and of course could include others who are not native Cornish by my earlier definition of birthplace.

Until now, whether calculating the quantity of objective or subjective Cornish, the obvious conclusion to draw is that not only are the Cornish a national minority within the state in which they are governed but, unlike the Scots or Welsh, we are a national minority in our own homeland.¹² This has led to a situation where those who wish to see more protection for the remaining Cornish adopt a minority rights discourse. Their argument is that as the Cornish become a minority, the danger of marginalization increases. A non-Cornish majority is able to impose its views and shape the land to suit their own convenience. More generally, the slow erosion of Cornwall’s native population has resulted in community fragmentation, if the

conclusion of researchers at Sheffield University in 2008 is right and rapid population growth undermines community resilience and cohesion.¹³

Yet, I want to suggest that a minority status for the Cornish is not at all inevitable. Indeed, classifying the Cornish as a minority group plays right into the hands of those who think that being Cornish in Cornwall is unimportant, and is a dangerous game in a society that at least pays lip service to democratic forms. For the Cornish do not comprise some unchanging essential category. In reality, ethnic boundaries are porous; people can and do change their ethnic identifications. Change is the only thing we can rely on. But it is too easy to forget that change can operate in different and perhaps contradictory directions. While the proportion of native Cornish changes only slowly, the proportion of consciously Cornish could change relatively quickly. Indeed, since 2006 something strange and unexpected has happened. The Cornwall Pupil Level Annual Schools Census (PLASC) collects information about the subjective ethnicity of schoolchildren, that of children of primary age being supplied by parents. Every year the percentage of Cornish children has increased, even as the native Cornish decline. In the first survey of 2006 the proportion of self-identified Cornish children in our schools was 24 per cent. By 2008 this had risen to 30 per cent. Last year (2011) as many as 41 per cent said they were Cornish. The PLASC surveys are evidence of a greater willingness of children and their parents to choose to define themselves as Cornish and give rise to the strong possibility that the proportion of self-consciously Cornish, as opposed to native born and bred Cornish, is increasing and could soon comprise a majority again. This evidence is backed up by a small scale survey in 2008 which tried to measure the relational aspect of identity.¹⁴ It found that 41% of those questioned felt either 'Cornish and not English' or 'more Cornish than English'. Another 14% felt 'equally Cornish and English' while 43% were more English than Cornish. This illustrates the polarisation of identities that has taken place. More of us are now more likely to define ourselves as Cornish as opposed to English and only a small minority as both.¹⁵ Given the mass in-migration of the past half-century these data also imply that at least some in-migrants must be choosing to define themselves as Cornish in addition to, or instead of, English.

The important point here is why settle for minority status in Cornwall when we still retain the possibility of claiming majority status? With 40% native Cornish, a

growing proportion of whom are now asserting their Cornishness, together with an unknown but presumably growing number of incomers who are prepared to identify themselves as Cornish, we still have a window of opportunity – a chance to build on the cultural resurgence of the past twenty years and demand our right to retain Cornwall as the homeland of a distinct people. If we allow the Cornish to be labelled as a minority group, an interesting historical relic consigned to the museum shelves and the local histories, then we give up a critical weapon in the struggle to obtain the right to make our own decisions about how we live and what sort of Cornwall we want here – in Cornwall.

If, in contrast, Cornwall is regarded as the homeland of a majority group of Cornish people, and that majority becomes revitalised and more self-aware, then we can more easily demand recognition and respect from central and local government as well as from European levels of governance, which seem more sympathetic to our case. However, this is a window of opportunity that is in danger of being closed if the political/bureaucratic plan succeeds to increase the population growth rate again. Inducting a new population into awareness and respect for the unique heritage of the place they have chosen to reside in becomes ever more difficult as Cornwall becomes less distinctively ‘Cornish’. Less Cornish in terms of the environment around us; supermarkets, housing estates and industrial units tend to look the same whether they are in Cornwall, Canterbury or Caithness. And less ‘Cornish’ in terms of its society. The decline in the proportion of native Cornish has to be stabilised and reversed – and soon if we are to have any chance of retaining a Cornwall that is still in some way recognisably Cornish.

The future of Cornwall – and the unimportance of being Cornish

It is time to turn from who the Cornish are to what the future holds for them. Here, the picture is considerably more depressing. I have argued that while the Cornish are at present a minority this fate is not necessarily predetermined. A cultural resurgence – seen in areas as diverse as music, literature and drama and sporting activities – shows that Cornishness is alive and kicking.¹⁶ Yet that nagging doubt persists. Can the latter really thrive if the proportion of native Cornish in Cornwall continues to decline? And here we meet those who think it is unimportant to be Cornish in modern

Cornwall. *Bewnans Kernow*, which represents 65 Cornish cultural organisations, when submitting its views on Cornwall Council's Local Plan, containing its planning policies for the next 20 years, pointed out that 'Cornwall has a unique demographic environment which entails a special care and responsibility for maintaining the homeland of this ethnic group in a sustainable fashion'.¹⁷ They pointed to Article 16 of the Framework Charter for the Protection of National Minorities, something ratified by the UK in 1998, endorsed by Cornwall County Council in 2007 and reaffirmed by Cornwall Council in 2011, which states that 'all parties shall refrain from measures which alter the proportions of the population in areas inhabited by persons belonging to national minorities'.

But not a word appears in the Council's Equality and Diversity Assessment of its Local Plan about this rather important matter. So what more generally does the Local Plan have to say about the Cornish or about the responsibility of the Council to protect and sustain this ethnic group? The short answer is nothing at all. Earlier this year a draft of the Local Plan made no mention of the Cornish people as such in any of its 366 pages of consultation documents. In fact it seemed a bit embarrassed altogether about using the word 'Cornish'. It only resorted to 'Cornish' four times as an adjective – 'the Cornish context', 'Cornish language', 'Cornish World Heritage Site' and 'Cornish average'. This echoes a curious predilection among bureaucrats to use the term Cornwall as an adjective rather than Cornish – as in the odd phrase 'Cornwall towns' (rather than Cornish towns) which found its way into a previous structure plan. To some extent this reflects a wider tendency – Cornwall cottages, Cornwall media for example, although never Cornwall pasties.

In 1973 Charles Thomas noted that 'certain sections of the local government machine are, probably without realising it, committed to courses of action that could destroy Cornishness for ever'.¹⁸ In this respect it appears that little has changed. Cornishness may be able to survive in a context of demographic turnover. But it may not. And it would certainly be easier to envisage its survival in a context of a stable population which supplied the breathing space which many of us have repeatedly called for since the 1970s.¹⁹ However, we have had nothing like a stable population in Cornwall for a considerable time now.²⁰ Indeed, population rose from 1961 to 2011 by 57% in Cornwall, compared with 21% in England, 15% in Wales and less than 2% in

Scotland. When compared with English counties, we find that just seven of the 46 experienced a faster rate of growth and these are all clustered on the edge of the London labour market in an arc running from Cambridgeshire and Buckinghamshire through Wiltshire and around to Sussex.

This demographic growth is important not just for the ability to be Cornish in Cornwall. The really over-heated growth occurred at just that period in the 1970s and 80s when the Institute of Cornish Studies was in its enthusiastic first blaze of youth. The rate of growth in the resident population of Cornwall is in fact slowly – too slowly – declining. The growth in the 20 years from 1971 to 1991 was 87,000. From 1991 to 2011 that growth fell to 63,000. Fitting a trend line projection for the next 20 years would result in a further fall to 53,000. As councillors ponder their Local Plan, in a rational world, therefore, they might have been expected to reduce the expected housebuilding rate to match this gradual slowdown in population growth. However, they are doing nothing of the sort.

In the 20 years from 1991 to 2011, according to the Council's own data, 41,320 houses were added to Cornwall's housing stock. The latest iteration of the Council's Local Plan aims at a housing target of 48,500, voted through in November 2012 by the Cabinet by four votes to three, with up to three councillors abstaining. The closeness of the vote hints at growing doubt on the part of councillors as they begin to realise that something is not quite adding up here. But, deluged by their officers with distinctly dodgy data and apocalyptic warnings about annoying the Secretary of State, urged on by a powerful developers' lobby, and encouraged by a neo-liberal political consensus unable to see beyond the next housing boom, they look determined to hand over decisions about the timing and quantity of housebuilding to developers.²¹ In the process they irresponsibly ignore the pleas of such groups as *Bewnans Kernow* for that much-needed but constantly deferred breathing space.

Our gurus of growth at County Hall/Lys Kernow stubbornly stick to their script. The Consultation Draft of the Local Plan stated that this number of houses resulted from 'the level of need that comes from the number of new households that come from our existing communities, young people leaving home, family break-up, older people living longer, and through an expected level of migration into or back

into Cornwall'.²² What the Council is claiming here is that household size is falling as the result of a number of social changes and that demand remains high due to net immigration.

Navigating the Boscoppa Triangle

With the benefit of hindsight and the 2011 Census results we can test out these assertions. Much to the consternation of Cornwall's planners, mean household size in the 2000s was virtually stable, falling from 2.285 in 2001 to 2.272 in 2011. This means that just 1,250 houses, or 5% of those built from 2001 to 2011, were in fact required to meet increased longevity, young people forming new households, family break-up and the like among the existing population. Another 14,350 houses, or 58% of the total, would have been sufficient to house the flow of in-migrants, a flow that was incidentally far lower than that predicted by the Council as Cornwall's growth rate slipped below that of Avon, Dorset and Wiltshire, though still higher than Devon and Somerset.

But you might notice that we have a mystery here. We seem to have our own version of the Bermuda Triangle – let us call it the Boscoppa Triangle – as 9,340, or 37%, of the houses built in the last decade appear to have disappeared into thin air, surplus to the requirements of either household change or demographic growth. This Boscoppa Triangle has other implications. In England, for every 1,000 rise in the population in the 2000s 421 houses were built; in Wales every 1,000 rise was accompanied by 517 more houses. But here in Cornwall for every 1,000 growth in our numbers we need to build 765 houses. Let us put it another way. In Cornwall we have a build rate that, relative to population growth, is 82% higher than that in England. Only in Cambridgeshire and Lincolnshire were more houses built in the ten years after 2001 in relation to the 2001 census population. And both had population growth rates in that decade well above Cornwall's (13% and 10% respectively, compared with our 6.5%).

The Boscoppa Triangle is actually rather easily explained. The number of missing houses is almost identical to the growth in the number of second and holiday homes in Cornwall. Strange then, that Cornwall Council chooses to emphasise factors

that account for only 5% of the houses built as the reason we have to build so many while usually completely forgetting to mention the demand from those they now prefer to call ‘temporary residents’. Our housing growth rate therefore has to be maintained at an artificially high rate and we have to consume our countryside at a faster rate than elsewhere in order to fuel the growth of the holiday home sector. There are bigger issues here than Cornishness. Continuing this rate of building growth not only irresponsibly threatens environmental diversity and landscapes but is also likely to reverse the long-term fall in the population growth rate. This must strike any rational observer as deeply unsustainable behaviour. Even allowing for the way our housing stock is being siphoned off by temporary residents, if a rate of 48,500 houses every 20 years is maintained for another century we are looking at a possible increase of population from its current 535,000 to 900,000 by 2100.

In 1976 County Council planners estimated that in order to ‘maintain the physical characteristics of Cornwall’ its ideal population capacity would be 430,000.²³ We are well on our way to more than doubling that – and with hardly any public debate, as the issue of planning policy remains stuck in the arcane sidings of a technical planning discourse. Meanwhile, a smokescreen of housing need and jobs growth - or indeed any kind of growth at all – is manufactured in order to divert our attention from the long-term consequences. I do not have time to delve into the reasons for this. But you will be able to read more about the financial and ideological imperatives that drive the growth fixation in my *The Land’s End: The Great Sale of Cornwall*, due to be published in 2013.

In 1973 Charles Thomas spoke of the circular logic of more population, more roads, more land given over to housing and greatly increased tourism, to bring more income and so on in a never-ending cycle.²⁴ Although 40 years of such logic has left us at the bottom of the UK wages league, policy-makers remain stuck in a mindset that insists we need more houses to bring more jobs to be filled by more in-migrants who will live in the new houses linked by the new roads along which will drive all the new people ... and so on, and so on. We live in the midst of a giant Ponzi scheme which is sacrificing our environmental and cultural capital for illusory benefits peddled by a political class that has lost its will to live and a regeneration project and mandarin class that has lost all touch with reality.

Charles Thomas pulled no punches in 1973. The Cornish had a ‘shocking environmental record’ while local councils were ‘short-sighted’ and ‘stuffed with builders, developers and those engaged in the tourist industry’.²⁵ The tourist trade came in for special condemnation, the annual influx having reached ‘nightmare proportions’. Would the ‘residents of Cornwall’, Charles asked, ‘consent to be exploited on an ever-increasing scale by that 11% of the population whose livelihood is tourism’?²⁶ That proportion is now 14% and the answer is, sadly, yes. As we have seen, tourism is directly implicated in the artificially high rate of housebuilding and loss of agricultural land in Cornwall. It stimulates demand to move temporarily or permanently to Cornwall, despite Cornwall’s economic unattractiveness. It helps weave the fabric of a low-wage, flexible labour, non-unionised economy and high rent housing market. Tourist numbers have grown from three to five million since 1973 and the sector remains over-influential, despite intermittent calls since the 1980s to diversify the economy. The tourist trade’s domination of public discourse and the ubiquitous dissemination of this discourse by an uncritical local media drown out alternative ways of organising our economy.

While little seems to have changed in relation to tourism, attitudes towards the environment remain surprisingly complacent despite awareness of our effect on climate change. Recently, I sat through two hours of a Cornwall Council Planning Policy Advisory Panel meeting that was discussing the Local Plan housing targets. The environmental consequences of current growth rates were hardly raised. Truffling around in the statistics of affordable housing, job creation and demographic projections, councillors seem to have lost all capacity to think through the consequences of policy decisions.²⁷ Any hints of vision were largely bleached out, replaced by an arid, mechanical and soulless debate, restricted and regulated by an ideological self-policing. All in all, a fine example of that old Cornish saying *nag ez goon heb lagaz na kea heb scovarn* [there is no down without an eye nor hedge without an ear].

Reasons to be cheerful?

In 1973 Charles Thomas looked to two areas for inspiration. The first was the environmental lobby. He suggested that environmentalists automatically believed that ‘the convenience of those in Cornwall must be put first’.²⁸ Cornwall’s voters were urged to ‘bring about the election of councillors who are committed to put the environment first’ and who believe that Cornwall should be governed in ‘the long-term interests of all the inhabitants, not the immediate convenience of the temporary residents’. This is still a valid position and provides us with useful criteria when considering one of our now rare opportunities to vote for local councillors in May 2013.

But, just as democracy is becoming a distraction from the business as usual of ‘sustainable’ development, we ought to be a little less sanguine 40 years on about the environmental lobby. Take *Our Cornwall*’s campaign this year (2012) for a more sustainable planning policy. This was enthusiastically supported by some, notably Friends of the Earth and most, though not all, members of the CPRE. But, despite several invitations to sign up in support, neither Greenpeace nor the Green Party felt able to. Indeed, when Camborne Town Council debated whether to support *Our Cornwall*’s call to Cornwall Council to reduce its housing target, the sole Green Party councillor joined with the Labour Party in voting against.

The second bright spot in the firmament of 1973 was the presence of a ‘national consciousness’, created and fostered by a revivalist movement that had toiled thanklessly among Cornwall’s Celtic remains since the end of the 19th century. It was this national consciousness that had produced the Institute of Cornish Studies and kept Cornishness alive. Here one could find the core of those who believed that being Cornish in Cornwall was important. Yet, would people be so positive about the role of Cornish revivalism these days? An explicitly national consciousness, as opposed to a Cornish consciousness, remains marginal and is likely to remain so in a context of continuing population turnover. Although until recently we had half a dozen MK councillors [reduced to four in the May 2013 elections], and although the party is taken more seriously than in the 1970s, it is still marginalised in both media and society.²⁹ Meanwhile, the revived Cornish language, now officially recognised and funded, finds itself in the dubious embrace of government.³⁰ But government funding has the paradoxical result of fossilising the language in its strange blend of

high modernism and twee medievalism. Street signs proliferate based on fifteenth century syntax but written in an orthography that never existed when the language was actually spoken by more than a handful. This guarantees that the Cornish language remains just as obscure now to the bulk of the population as it was back in the 1940s when Morton Nance was practicing his elvish script on the back of invitations from his stockbrokers to purchase shares.

For some of us, being Cornish is still important, although the ways of performing that Cornishness have changed considerably since the 1970s. For others being Cornish is supremely unimportant. So, finally, is Cornish Studies still important? In 1973 Charles Thomas spent a lot of time assessing the ‘present national malaise in Cornwall’ and its ‘internal social crisis’.³¹ In an echo of this, the second Director of the Institute of Cornish Studies, Philip Payton, called for a ‘new Cornish social science’ in the early 1990s.³² This would make contemporary Cornwall the subject of its researches. In practice though, just as the more dynamic and vibrant elements of the broader Cornish cultural movement can be found on its margins – music rather than language, for example – so has work on contemporary Cornwall been largely left to the periphery of Cornish Studies. By periphery I am here thinking of Plymouth University in particular, with its body of quantitative work on housing, migration and ethnicity. In its institutional phase, the ambitions of a new Cornish social science were doused by an epistemological tradition that equates Cornish Studies with the study of past times. Combine that with institutional imprisonment at Tremough within an outpost of a History Department based at Exeter, and those of us in the core of Cornish Studies were able to offer disappointingly small purchase on contemporary Cornwall and its tribulations since 1973.

And yet a critical contemporary Cornish Studies is now even more vital. In a world of complacent and anodyne press releases and the hyped-up promises of the marketing departments, someone has to speak truth to power. Someone has to ask what exactly ‘transforming knowledge’ means on the ground. Somebody has to think beyond the box of neo-liberal politics that drains democracy of meaning and hands policy-making over to the interests of a small minority. If I can slightly rephrase the question Charles Thomas posed in 1973: ‘does Cornwall really exist solely for the benefit of Wain Homes, Sainsburys, the Inox Group or the Duchy of Cornwall?’ A

critical Cornish Studies is still important. Although the questions remain - who will provide it? And how?

- ¹ Charles Thomas, *The Importance of being Cornish, in Cornwall*, Institute of Cornish Studies, Redruth, 1973, p.16.
- ² Charles Thomas, *The Importance of being Cornish*, University of Exeter, Exeter, 1973, p.16.
- ³ Narrative Cornish histories have appeared since 1973 from a range of perspectives, including John Angarrack, *Breaking the Chains: propaganda, censorship, deception and the manipulation of public opinion in Cornwall*, Stannary Publications, Camborne, 1999; Bernard Deacon, *Cornwall: a concise history*, University of Wales Press, Cardiff, 2007; Roy Green, *The National Question in Cornwall*, Communist Party History Group, London, 1980; Philip Payton, *The Making of Modern Cornwall*, Dyllansow Truran, Redruth, 1992 and *Cornwall: a history*, Cornwall Editions, Fowey, 2004; David Riley, *King Arthur's Realm: a history of the kingdom of Cornwall*, Arthur H. Stockwell, Ilfracombe, 2004. It is disappointing therefore to see how often historians beyond the Tamar and others still resort to Frank Halliday's *A History of Cornwall*, despite this originally being published in 1959.
- ⁴ Thomas, *The Importance of being Cornish, in Cornwall*, p.12.
- ⁵ Norman Davies, *Vanished Kingdoms: the history of half-forgotten Europe*, Penguin, London, pp.9 and 43.
- ⁶ Thomas, *The Importance of being Cornish, in Cornwall*, p.10.
- ⁷ *Ibid.*, p.12.
- ⁸ Ronald Perry, Ken Dean and Bryan Brown (eds), *Counterurbanisation: case studies of urban to rural movement*, Geo Books, Norwich, 1986, p.84.
- ⁹ See Simon Naylor, *Regionalizing Science: placing knowledges in Victorian England*, Pickering and Chatto, London, 2010.
- ¹⁰ *The Guardian*, 26 Mar 2012.
- ¹¹ Kerry Husk, 'Ethnic group affiliation and social exclusion in Cornwall: analysis, adjustment and extension of the 2001 England and Wales Census data', unpublished PhD thesis, University of Plymouth, 2012.
- ¹² For the implications of this see Kerry Husk, 'Ethnicity and social exclusion: research and policy implications', *Social and Public Policy Review* 5.1 (2011), pp.7-25.
- ¹³ See Danny Dorling et al, 'Changing UK: the way we live now', available at <http://sasi.group.shef.ac.uk/research/changingUK.html>
- ¹⁴ Joanie Willett, 'Cornish identity: vague notion or social fact?' in Philip Payton (ed.), *Cornish Studies Sixteen*, University of Exeter Press, Exeter, 2008, pp.183-205.
- ¹⁵ In this respect Cornwall resembles the Basque Country or Wales, rather than Scotland, Catalonia or Brittany where dual identities are more common – see data presented in Lieven de Winter, Margarita Gómez-Reno and Peter Lynch (eds), *Autonomist Parties in Europe: ethnic politics and the revival of the territorial cleavage*, Institut de Ciències Polítiques i Socials, Barcelona, 2006.
- ¹⁶ See for example Merv Davey, "'As is the manner and the custom"; folk tradition and identity in Cornwall', unpublished PhD thesis, University of Exeter, 2011; Alan Kent, *The Theatre of Cornwall: space, place, performance*, Redcliffe/Wescliffe Books, Bristol, 2010 and the refreshing contemporary novels of Myrna Combellack, Alan Kent and N.K. Phillips.
- ¹⁷ Jane Howells, 'Preliminary report on the Cornwall Council Core Strategy preferred approach equality impact assessment', Bewnans Kernow, 2012, p.15.
- ¹⁸ Thomas, *The Importance of being Cornish, in Cornwall*, p.14.
- ¹⁹ For example Bernard Deacon, Andrew George and Ronald Perry, *Cornwall at the Crossroads*, CoSERG, Redruth, 1989.
- ²⁰ For a study of this growth and its effects see Katarzyna Kowalczyk, 'Population growth in a high amenity area: migration and socio-economic change in Cornwall', unpublished PhD thesis, University of Plymouth, 2010.
- ²¹ For a good exposé of the contradictions of neoliberalism see Colin Crouch, *The Strange Non-death of Neoliberalism*, Polity, Cambridge, 2011.
- ²² Cornwall Council, *Planning Future Cornwall*, Truro, 2012, p.8.
- ²³ Cornwall County Council, *Structure Plan Policy Choice Consultation Document*, Truro, 1976, p.76
- ²⁴ Thomas, *The Importance of being Cornish, in Cornwall*, p.18.
- ²⁵ *Ibid.*, p.14.
- ²⁶ *Ibid.*, p.20.
- ²⁷ The unsustainability of current growth policies are more generally explained by Tim Jackson, *Prosperity Without Growth: economics for a finite planet*, Earthscan, London, 2009. For a more pessimistic take on the incompatibility of capitalism and the environment see Joel Kovel, *The enemy of nature: the end of capitalism or the end of the world?*, Zed Books, London, 2007. There is little evidence that any of our councillors have read or are even aware of these books.
- ²⁸ Thomas, *The Importance of being Cornish, in Cornwall*, p.20.
- ²⁹ Bernard Deacon, Dick Cole and Garry Tregidga, *Mebyon Kernow and Cornish Nationalism*, Welsh Academic Press, Cardiff, 2003.
- ³⁰ For recent work on the revived language see Anina Carkeek, 'Cornish language revival: attitudes, behaviour and the maintenance of an ethnic identity' unpublished PhD thesis, University of East Anglia, 2009; Andrew Donaldson, *Linguistic Minorities in Rural Development: a case study of the Cornish language and Cornwall*, Centre for Rural Economy, University of Newcastle, 1999; Dave Sayers, 'Reversing Babel: declining linguistic diversity and the flawed attitudes to protect it', unpublished PhD thesis, University of Essex, 2008.
- ³¹ Thomas, *The Importance of being Cornish, in Cornwall*, p.13.

³² See introductions to the series *Cornish Studies*, edited by Philip Payton.