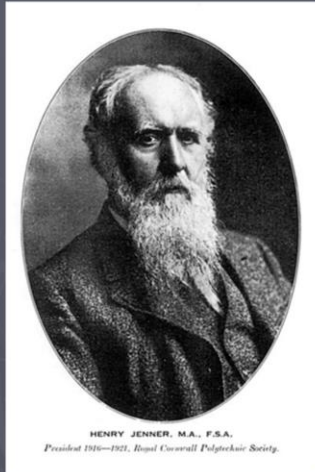


The Cornish Language Revival



- ▶ Revival began in earnest at the turn of the twentieth century
- ▶ Disagreement over what form of the language (particularly its orthography) should be revived
- ▶ Agreement in 2008 on Standard Written Form

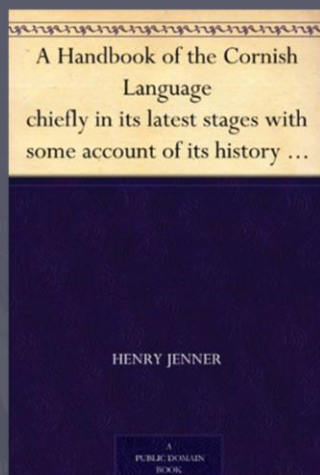
The twentieth century saw the birth of a movement to revive Cornish as a spoken language. However, in recent years there have been more disagreements over how to write it than how to speak it. From the 1930s until the 1980s, the standardised form of Cornish in use for the purposes of language revival was well established. Nevertheless, cracks then began to appear and it became subject to criticism, leading to the development of rival factions arguing their own cases. Some kind of compromise clearly needed to be found, and a Standard Written Form eventually emerged from this.

It should be noted that Cornish is far from the only language to go through this process. The closely-related Breton language has its own rival spelling systems, not to mention the differences between British and American English. Irish went through a period of spelling reform in the mid twentieth century which was criticised for being artificial (a common accusation) and German has altered its orthography on several occasions. Changes almost always arouse strong emotions, but are felt to be necessary so that books, for example, especially in state schools, can be written in a standard format.

Cornish shares all the problems faced by these other languages, but also has a few additional ones of its own, such as what words to use for things which have come into existence since the death of the language. Should new terms be coined from Cornish elements, or should words like *radio*, *television* and *robot* simply be borrowed from other languages, as they, and many others, have been by English? English is in fact notoriously inconsistent in its spelling as testified by the combination *ough* in words like *cough*, *enough*, *though*, *through* and *bough*. It also retains silent or mute letters such as the *k* and *e* in *knife*. English, however, unlike Cornish, has a huge community of native speakers to support it. Revival brings with it extra challenges of its own.

Image: Photograph of Henry Jenner bearing the legend M.A. F.S.A. President 1916–1921, Royal Cornwall Polytechnic Society

Henry Jenner and the Origins of the Cornish Language Revival



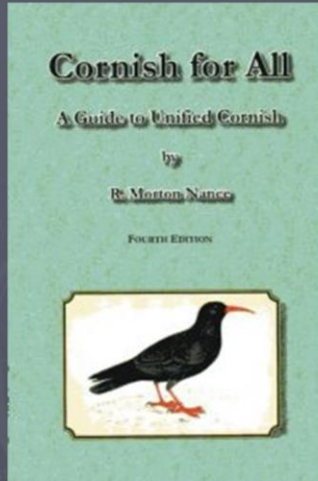
- ▶ Handbook published in 1904
- ▶ True beginning of the language revival
- ▶ Aimed to move the language on from where it left off
- ▶ Based on Modern Cornish foundation

Henry Jenner (1848-1934) was a Cornish linguist born at St Columb Major. Unlike the ‘antiquaries’ of earlier centuries, Jenner’s real objective was not to ‘record’ the language for posterity, but to revive it as a spoken language, and his 1904 publication *‘A Handbook of the Cornish Language’* is the work that marks the true beginning of the Cornish language revival. He notes that the Handbook’s aim is *‘to represent in an intelligible form the Cornish of the later period’* (p. ix) and his specific reference here to the later period is significant. With a nod to the spelling irregularities of Cornish writers of all periods, he uses his own orthography, which *‘has been adapted for the occasion’* (ibid), but he does not promote the phonetic ideal of *“one sound to each symbol”* (p. x). His view was that Cornish orthography should not be *‘too startlingly different from the spellings of earlier times, especially from that of Lhuyd, whose system was constructed from living Cornish speakers’* (p. x). Indeed, the examples given by him in the Handbook are clearly typical of eighteenth century Cornish, and written in an orthography influenced by Lhuyd. That said, he places little emphasis on the difference between Middle and Modern Cornish anyway, describing it as *‘more apparent than real’* (p. x). Jenner did not approve of the liberal borrowing of words from Breton and Welsh *‘for which there is no authority in Cornish’* (p. xv) as a means of maintaining linguistic ‘purity’. In short, he felt that the revival movement should take the language forward from where it had left off.

Jenner had a very strong sense of Cornish ethnicity, and maintaining a separate identity was, for him, a primary objective of the language revival. On page xi he asks (and answers) the following question: *‘Why should Cornishmen learn Cornish? There is no money in it, it serves no practical purpose, and the literature is scanty and of no great originality or value. The question is a fair one, the answer is simple. Because they are Cornishmen.’*

Jenner was the leading figure in Cornwall’s submission to join the Celtic Congress, which was accepted in 1904, the same year as the publication of his Handbook. In 1920 he co-founded the Old Cornwall Society (with Nance) and in 1928 became a founder of the Cornish Gorsedd, which was based on the Welsh and Breton versions. He wrote under the Bardic name *Gwas Myghal* (the Servant of Michael).

Robert Morton Nance and Unified Cornish



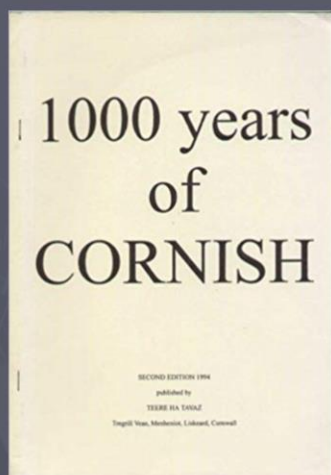
- ▶ Publication in 1929 of *Cornish for All*
- ▶ First use of Unified Cornish system
- ▶ Based on medieval rather than modern
- ▶ Foundation for first generations of new language learners

Robert Morton Nance (1873-1959) was born in Cardiff to Cornish parents (*Nance* is the Cornish equivalent of the Welsh *Nant*). In 1906 he moved to Nancledra near St Ives. In addition to being an authority on the Cornish language, he was also a maritime archaeologist of some skill, writing books on the subject in the 1920s. Initially a student of Henry Jenner's, they would together form some of the most significant organisations related to Cornwall and its language, such as the Old Cornwall Society (1920) and the Cornish Gorsedh (1928) where Nance took the Bardic name *Mordon* (Sea Wave).

The following year, however, saw him produce his most famous work, namely *Cornish for All* which introduced us for the first time to the spelling and grammar system known as *Unified Cornish*. In 1934, Nance and A.S.D. Smith published *An English-Cornish Dictionary* with the words spelt in this system. Considered a necessary step to better enable the teaching of the language, Unified Cornish was based, not on the Modern Cornish used by Henry Jenner, but on Middle Cornish manuscripts (described by the language movement *Agan Tavas* as the period when Cornish literature was in its primacy). A desire to standardise the spelling inevitably led to the pursuance of the phonetic ideal of “*one sound to each symbol*” which Jenner had not supported, and, given its medieval foundation, the need to also fill some gaps in vocabulary, sometimes achieved by respelling Breton or Welsh cognates. Put bluntly, virtually everything Jenner disapproved of, Nance did, and shifted the direction of the revival as a consequence.

As Jenner died in the same year that the dictionary was published, it is not easy to establish whether Unified Cornish would have led to differences between the two men in due course. Nevertheless, this was the system used by the first two generations of new Cornish language learners, and it would have been familiar to everyone attempting to learn the revived language between the 1930s and 1980s, including those who would later question its suitability. Numerous editions of *Cornish for All* have been published over a period of more than ninety years, and its release saw the language revival move to a new level. The debate over a standardised orthography based on Middle Cornish versus a traditional orthography based on Modern Cornish, though, would return with a vengeance many years after Nance's death in 1959, and lead to a fractured revivalist movement.

Richard Gendall and Modern Cornish



In favour of:

- ▶ Reviving the modern language
- ▶ Basing spelling on actual forms found
- ▶ Using Lhuyd as the pronunciation base

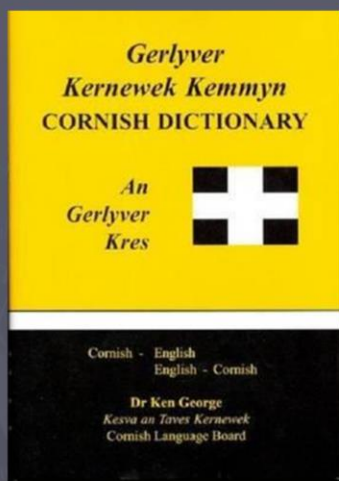
Richard Gendall (1924-2017) started learning Cornish when he was four years of age and spent over 60 years of his life actively promoting the language. He was also a talented musician and songwriter. In the 1950s he provided the draft for one of Nance's dictionaries, and wrote a book for language learners in 1972 entitled *Kernewek Bew* (Living Cornish). Although initially accustomed, like everyone else, to Unified Cornish, Gendall became convinced that Jenner's idea of continuing with the language from where it had left off in the modern period was a better way forward than Nance's. He also questioned the assertion that the medieval era represented the time when Cornish literacy was in its primacy, claiming that Middle Cornish was subject to at least as much borrowing as Modern Cornish, and that the modern period had just as large a body of literature.

Despite agreeing with Jenner in principle, he wanted to go even further by not only basing the revival on the grammar of the modern period, but also basing its orthography solely on actual spellings of words as found by native writers such as the Bosons. In short, he wanted to 'invent' as little as possible. In the case of neologisms, he would rather borrow an international term than make up a new Cornish word based on Breton or Welsh in an attempt to keep Cornish more 'Celtic'.

He was at his most productive from the late 1980s onwards, forming *Teere ha Tavaz* and publishing books on the history and pronunciation of the Cornish language, as well as *A Students' Grammar of Modern Cornish* and *A Students' Dictionary of Modern Cornish*, a book which, according to the author, 'contains every word, in every found variety of spelling, that could be gleaned from all available sources from the 16th century onwards' (p. 1).

The stance taken by Gendall has both advantages and disadvantages. On the positive side it takes the language's grammar forward from its latest stage of development, it can claim to use 'authentic' spelling, and bases its pronunciation on the phonetic alphabet used by Edward Lhuyd in 1700 – the only example of a specific attempt at recording on paper the actual pronunciation of Cornish words when it was still a living community language. On the negative side, it can lead to words with similar pronunciations being spelt quite differently, making the learning process more difficult for students.

Ken George and Common Cornish



- ▶ Computer assisted orthography
- ▶ Based on Cornish of the year 1500
- ▶ 'Improvement' on Nance's system
- ▶ Criticised for being unauthentic

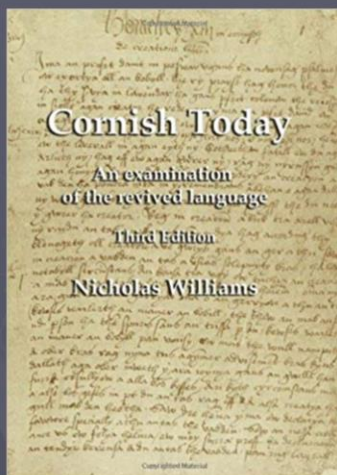
Ken George is a Cornish linguist (now retired) most famous for being the inventor of the Common Cornish (*Kernewek Kemmyn*) orthography. He is also an oceanographer who at one time lectured in Ocean Sciences at the University of Plymouth. George developed *Kernewek Kemmyn* from Unified Cornish in 1986. Like Unified Cornish, it is based on the medieval period, albeit late medieval, taking the year 1500 as its ideal date. Attitudes towards the Cornish of the modern period, especially the eighteenth century, are generally negative, with a tendency to view it as being overly 'corrupted' by the influence of English and 'in a period of terminal decline' (*Which Base for Revived Cornish?*, p.4)

Ken George used phonemic theory and computer assisted reconstructions to develop *Kernewek Kemmyn*, considering it to be an improvement on Nance's system, and a consistent and scientifically sound basis for the revived language. The Cornish Language Board, of which Ken George was a member, adopted *Kernewek Kemmyn* as its preferred system in 1987, giving it a boost, as the Board was the main recipient of Cornish language funding at the time. This decision led to some supporters of other systems ending their association with the Board.

As with all of the different orthographies, *Kernewek Kemmyn* has received both support and criticism. Its adherents note that it grew to become the most prominent form of Revived Cornish in the days before the Standard Written Form, with a greater number of learners and publications than any other system, while detractors, such as Charles Penglase, Jon Mills and especially Nicholas Williams, berate it as being unauthentic or erroneous.

In a sense, just as Richard Gendall took the principles of Henry Jenner even further in one direction, so Ken George took those of Robert Morton Nance even further in the opposite direction, but as with the Modern Cornish option, this system has its advantages and disadvantages. On the one hand it provides a regular system which makes the pronunciation of words obvious. On the other, it is open to criticism for being 'artificial' in its spelling, and ignoring the last centuries of the language's development, rather like using, say, Shakespearean English as the basis for teaching that language to students today.

Nicholas Williams and Unified Cornish Revised



- ▶ An 'improvement on the improvement'
- ▶ Based on Nance's Unified system
- ▶ English-Cornish dictionary in 2000
- ▶ Published '*Towards Authentic Cornish*' in 2006

Nicholas Williams is a Celtic scholar who has written extensively on the Cornish language. Over the years he has translated some of the great works into the language such as Tennyson's *Morte D'Arthur*, *The New Testament* (from the Greek) and eventually, in 2011, *The Bible* in its entirety.

At various points in the 1990s he wrote several articles criticising the *Kernewek Kemmyn* of Ken George, for, amongst other things, including symbols which represented sounds that had never existed in the Cornish of any period. All in all he noted 26 'flaws'.

In support of his view, he himself set about producing an orthography which he felt represented the actual pronunciation more accurately, and so was born *Unified Cornish Revised* in 1995. As suggested by the name, UCR is based on Nance's system, and was no doubt devised as 'an improvement upon George's improvement' of Nance. Ken George, as might be expected, responded to the criticism of his system, which in turn led to a counter-reply by Williams, and so on.

Despite being a modification of Nance's orthography, Williams' real objection was not to so much to the use of either Unified or Modern Cornish but, undoubtedly, the *Kernewek Kemmyn* of Ken George. In his '*Towards Authentic Cornish*' (p. xii) Williams accuses it of being, on the one hand full of '*misunderstandings and misconceptions*' and on the other '*largely invention*' adding that '*it is imperative that Kernowek Kemyn does not become the system of choice*' (ibid). Note that Williams does not even spell the name of Ken George's system in the same way as its originator.

Nicholas Williams, along with Michael Everson and Neil Kennedy, went on to promote an orthography known as *Kernowek Standard*, the objectives of which were to both respect the tradition of historical written Cornish and also link the spelling of a word to its pronunciation. Rather than opting for the year 1500, it used William Jordan's *Gwreans an Bys*, a medieval style work, but actually written in the early seventeenth century (1611), as the base for such a system. This stance is therefore somewhere between Unified and Modern Cornish.

Differences in Orthography: Some Examples

► Texts and English	► UCR versus KK
► Arluth (lord)	► Arluth : Arloedh
► Bewnans (life)	► Bewnans : Bywnans
► Carharou (shackles)	► Carharow : Kargharow
► Clowes (hear)	► Clowes : Klywes
► Crehellys (shake)	► Crehyllly : Kryghylli
► Enys (island)	► Enys : Ynys
► Tomder (heat)	► Tomder : Toemmder
► Whelas (seek)	► Whelas : Hwilas
► Whythre (examine)	► Whythra : Hwithra

Above we can see some examples of just how different these orthographies can be. The left-hand column above shows some Cornish words from traditional texts together with their English translations, while the right-hand column has that same word spelt according to the *Unified Cornish Revised* and *Kernewek Kemmyn* orthographies. It must be noted that these examples come from Nicholas Williams' book *'Towards Authentic Cornish'* (p. x) and so have no doubt been chosen to prove a point. It must also be noted that some of the text examples also have alternative spellings (due to the inconsistency of writers) which do not match the UCR version. Nevertheless, there does appear to be a difference in emphasis. For the UCR examples, a spelling has been chosen either to match an example from an historical text, or else resemble it as closely as possible. The KK examples, on the other hand, seem to place uniformity of the spelling system and the ability to instantly tell the pronunciation of a word above all other considerations (such as whether a word was ever written that way in any historical texts). The one method places more importance on continuing with an orthographic tradition, whereas the other appears to see orthography as more of a means to an end, the end in question being the enabling of language learners to immediately know how to pronounce a word.

Although respecting historical traditions could be seen as less efficient in this regard, it should be noted that it is very difficult to disregard them, as there is no reason why every language in the world could not be written in the International Phonetic Alphabet, rendering all words instantly pronounceable to the reader. Under these circumstances, the following from the Lord's Prayer in English for example:

our father who art in heaven, hallowed be thy name

would be rewritten, in a totally systematic and pronounceable script, like this: '

auə 'fɑ:ðə hu: ɑ:t ɪn 'hevn, 'hæləʊd bi: ðaɪ neɪm

We cannot tell, of course, whether changing English (or any other language) in this way to produce a more efficient orthography would lead to a heated debate, but we can no doubt hazard a good guess!

Pronunciation Difficulties

From Latin *quinque*:

- ▶ Cinq (French)
- ▶ Cinque (Italian)
- ▶ Cinco (Spanish)
- ▶ Cinc (Catalan)
- ▶ Cinco (Portuguese)
- ▶ Cinci (Romanian)

From medieval Welsh:

- ▶ Byd (representing both *byd* and *bydd*)
- ▶ Marchawc (*marchog*)
- ▶ Oet (representing both *oed* and *oedd*)
- ▶ Pawp (*pawb*)
- ▶ Trydyt (*trydydd*)
- ▶ Ulwyddyn (*flwyddyn*)

The contents of the above slide should give some indication of the difficulties involved in establishing pronunciation based solely on the written word.

On the left we have the number *five* as it exists today in six different Romance languages, each one descended from the ‘Vulgar’ Latin spoken in various parts of the former Roman empire. All of these words start with the same two letters (**ci**), however, if we ignore the second syllables for the moment and concentrate on the first, we know that the French word is pronounced much like the English word *sank*, the Italian like the English *chink* and the Spanish like English *think*. Catalan and Portuguese resemble the English *sink*, with the Romanian word sounding something like ‘*chinch*’ as in ‘*chinchilla*’. The letters **ci** therefore represent at least four different sounds. We know this because we can still hear them today, and if we could not, we might well come to rather different conclusions.

On the right, we see some examples of the same letter being used to represent more than one sound in Middle Welsh, such as the ‘*d*’ in *byd* which would be either ‘*d*’ or ‘*dd*’ in the Welsh of today. The ‘*c*’ at the end of *marchawc* represents the ‘*g*’ in today’s orthography, whereas the ‘*p*’ in *pawp* represents ‘*p*’ at the start and ‘*b*’ at the end. The ‘*u*’ in *ulwyddyn* is used as a substitute for ‘*v*’ but it is ‘*t*’ that perhaps does the greatest amount of multitasking, denoting what would be either ‘*t*’ ‘*d*’ or ‘*dd*’ today, depending upon the context.

In speech, the Breton language has lost the sounds represented in Welsh by **th** and **dd** (as in English **thin** and **this**) turning them into **z** or **h**, e.g. *Brythoneg* > *Brezhoneg*. Cornish, meanwhile has retained these sounds, but itself sometimes turns *t* and *d* into *s* and *z*, e.g. *nant* > *nans*, *tafod* > *tavaz*. In other words, it can be distinctly separate, and we cannot safely make assumptions about pronunciation based on the spelling of related languages. The best we have is Edward Lhuyd’s phonetic script from 1700, specifically designed (like the IPA) to indicate pronunciation, when Cornish was still a living language.

Note: The medieval Welsh examples come from the following website:

<https://www.mit.edu/~dfm/canol/chap29.html>

Cornish Language Organisations



- ▶ Agan Tavas
- ▶ Cussel an Tavas
Kernôwek
- ▶ Kesva an Taves
Kernewek
- ▶ Kowethas an Yeth
Kernewek

At the turn of the millennium, the Cornish language revival had four different organisations promoting it, all of which are still in existence today:

Agan Tavas (Our Language): According to its website, Agan Tavas 'exists to promote the use and study of the Cornish language and of any traditional forms of Cornish speech and spelling which have developed naturally in Cornwall.' It has traditionally used Unified Cornish or Unified Cornish Revised.

Cussel an Tavas Kernôwek (The Cornish Language Council) likewise claims to support research into the Cornish of all eras, but as far as reviving the language is concerned, seeks to further the learning, teaching and use of Kernôwek Bew- 'living Cornish', otherwise known as Revived Modern or Late Cornish, a spoken and written form based on later sources.

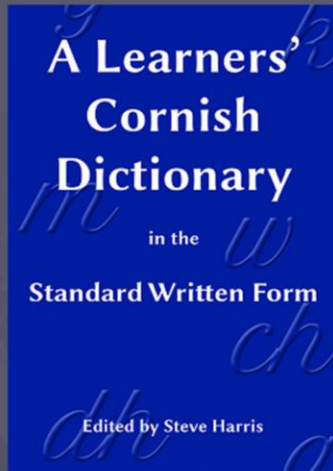
Kesva an Taves Kernewek (The Cornish Language Board) notes that it 'provides reliable information on all aspects of the revival of the language, organises teaching, conducts examinations and publishes educational materials.' It is a proponent of *Kernewek Kemmyn*.

Kowethas an Yeth Kernewek (The Cornish Language Fellowship) notes that its objectives are 'to advance the education of the public in the Cornish language by promoting, encouraging and fostering its use.' It recognises the validity of all forms of revived Cornish but has traditionally itself used *Kernewek Kemmyn* to a much greater degree than other forms.

In 2002, the UK recognised Cornish as a minority language under Part II of the European Charter for Regional or Minority Languages, and in 2004 a ten year Cornish Language Strategy was produced in English, and **four versions of Cornish** – i.e. Common Cornish, Modern Cornish, Unified Cornish and Unified Cornish Revised. <https://www.cornwall.gov.uk/leisure-and-culture/the-cornish-language/cornish-language/history-of-cornish/cornish-language-partnership-archive/>

Consequently, in 2005 the Cornish Language Partnership MAGA was established to try to bring the different groups together and find a way forward.

The Standard Written Form



- ▶ A 'neutral' choice of orthography
- ▶ Intended for public bodies/education
- ▶ Commission set up in 2006
- ▶ SWF agreed in 2008
- ▶ Revisions made in 2013

In 2006, the Cornish Language Partnership set up a Commission with a view to establishing a Standard Written Form for the language. Despite being relevant solely to the Cornish language, the process was aided by the contributions of 'eminent language planners' from outside Cornwall. The project was part funded by the European Union and carried out on behalf of the then Cornwall County Council. Interested parties were invited to present submissions for consideration, and conferences were held in September 2006 and October 2007. An agreed document was ratified by the Cornish Language Partnership in May 2008. The specification document entitled *An Outline of the Standard Written Form of Cornish* was authored by Albert Bock and Benjamin Bruch was published in June 2008. It notes the following in Section 1:

'The SWF is not meant to replace other spelling systems, but rather to provide public bodies and the educational system with a universally acceptable, inclusive, and neutral orthography. As such, it incorporates features drawn from a number of different Cornish orthographies, including Unified Cornish, Kernewek Kemmyn, Modern Cornish, Unified Cornish Revised, Kernowak Standard, and Kernewek Dasunys.'

The document does not use these same names when referring to the spoken language, preferring instead the terms Revived Middle Cornish (RMC), Tudor Cornish (TC) and Revived Late or Modern Cornish (RLC). When trying to connect the spoken to the written, RMC is represented by Kernewek Kemmyn and the Unified varieties, while RLC means Modern Cornish. TC is somewhere between the two.

Agreement on a single standard meant, amongst other things, that funding for the Cornish language from the UK government and the European Union would be easier to attract. The SWF was reviewed in 2013 and a small number of modifications were made. In the meantime, Cornwall Council has since established a Cornish Language Office and produced a second language strategy for the period 2015-2025.