

Why did Cornish and Manx die, and Welsh survive? Assignment 2 by David Trowt

Introduction:

Great Britain and Ireland have a rich and diverse history of language which culminates in the now dominant modern English language and the surviving Celtic languages. Within this history of language other influences are present such as Latin which was introduced after the invasion by Rome in 43CE¹ and whilst it wasn't spoken widely by the general populace, it did take its place as the 'language of law and administration'.² Welsh words such as *eglwys* (meaning church) and *ystafell* (meaning room) have their origin in the Latin words *ecclesia* and *stabellum* respectively.³ In the fifth century CE the Jutes, Angles and Saxons invaded Britain bringing with them the Germanic language. Over time this evolved into the English language and its influence over the British tongue was evident, as seen in the usage of vowels in Cornish. Ball and Muller talk of Middle English *loan-words*⁴ being incorporated into the Middle Cornish language that actually changed the rules of vowel length from three rules to two.⁵ There are many other influences that have taken place that affect Celtic languages, such as the Irish incursion in Wales in the fifth century CE and the Norman invasion into Britain in the eleventh century CE, however this essay is focussed on the effects on Manx and Cornish, why they were considered 'dead languages' and why the Welsh language not only survived, but thrived over the centuries.

Manx:

Manx is the language of the Isle of Man and belongs to the Goidelic sub-group of the Celtic language. Its ancestor is the Old and Middle Irish language of mainland Ireland which was spoken by the original settlers of the Isle of Man when they populated the island in the fourth to fifth centuries CE, displacing the native British language.⁶ The Isle of Man underwent many changes in rule over several centuries; the Scandinavian presence in the tenth to thirteenth centuries CE, the Scottish and English then disputed ownership until in 1405CE King Henry IV gave the land to Sir John Stanley;⁷ it remained in the Stanley family's possession until 1710CE when, after the death of William Stanley, the Manx farmers were given the right to possess/buy/sell their land.⁸

¹ CE stands for Common Era, an alternative to AD, meaning Anno Domini. Both refer to the same time periods, but CE is the preferred term of reference for this essay.

² Janet Davies, *The Welsh Language: A History*, (Cardiff: University Of Wales Press, 2014), p. 7.

³ Ibid., p. 7.

⁴ Loan-words are words taken from another language and then incorporated into another, sometimes undergoing some change to fit the hosting language.

⁵ Ken George, 'Cornish', in *The Celtic Languages*, Martin J. Ball and Nicole Muller, (Abingdon: Routledge, 2015), pp. 488-535 (p. 507-508).

⁶ George Broderick, 'Manx', in *The Celtic Languages*, Martin J. Ball and Nicole Muller, (Abingdon: Routledge, 2015), pp. 305-356 (p. 305).

⁷ IsleOfMan.Com, *The Stanleys*, 2001. <https://www.isle-of-man.com/manxnotebook/people/lords/stanleys.htm> [accessed 9 April 2025].

⁸ This was made possible by the Act of Settlement 1703/4.

Despite the ruling class changing on the island over many centuries, the Manx language continued to be spoken by the local inhabitants but diverged from Irish in the late thirteenth century CE.⁹ It should be noted that Paul Russell feels that an exact date for this divergence is difficult to calculate, he states:

the difficulty in establishing when Scottish Gaelic and Manx can be seen as separate dialects is complicated by the complete lack of early Celtic material from Scotland of Man, and even when we do have some evidence, it has been influenced by the standardized language of elevated court poetry.¹⁰

Following this divergence Manx continued to develop as a language but it wasn't until 1610 when a Bishop by the name of John Phillips translated the *Book of Common Prayer* from English into Manx. This was a great uplift for the Manx people given that in 1549CE the *Act of Uniformity* was passed making it law that all prayers and services were to be conducted using the wording from the *Book of Common Prayer*, abolishing the previous Latin-based Catholic practices.¹¹ The fact that Bishop Phillips felt it 'necessary'¹² to translate the book into Manx gives a good indication of how broadly Manx was spoken by the local inhabitants, although given the lack of a Gaelic-speaking hierarchy there was an 'impoverishment of the Manx vocabulary'.¹³ John Koch describes the Isle of Man's isolation and states that:

owing to the necessity of the few English settlers for their sustenance to cultivate the goodwill of the Manx people, the small world in which Manx existed was thus initially protected.¹⁴

This 'protection' would not last though and one way this erosion of the Manx language occurred, was in its orthography. When translating the *Book of Common Prayer*, Phillips appears to have used his knowledge of English and Welsh to model the words written, meaning that the underlying Manx is altered. An example of this is the use of 'w' and 'y' by Phillips to represent vowels, these letters do not appear in Manx but are vowels in Welsh. Koch describes this practice of replacing consonants and vowels as a way of changing palatalization as in his words, 'was Manx more striking to the English or Welsh ear than the corresponding consonants in Scottish Gaelic and Irish'.¹⁵ This point is echoed by D. B. Gregor who speaking of John Wesley (1703-1791), following a visit to the Isle of Man in 1777 and 1783 enjoyed the location but when speaking of the Manx language 'we should do everything in our power to abolish it from the earth'.¹⁶ Manx was not popular amongst the English speaking ruling class.

⁹ Broderick, 'Manx', p. 305.

¹⁰ Paul Russell, *An Introduction To The Celtic Languages*, (Oxon: Routledge, 2013), p. 61.

¹¹ UK Parliament, *The Reformation*, 2025. <https://www.parliament.uk/about/living-heritage/transformingsociety/private-lives/religion/overview/reformation/#:~:text=During%20Edward%20VI%27s%20reign%2C%20the,of%20the%20old%20Catholic%20practices> [accessed 9 April 2025].

¹² Broderick, 'Manx', p. 305.

¹³ Ibid., p. 305.

¹⁴ John T. Koch, *Celtic Culture: A Historical Encyclopedia*, (Santa Barbara: ABC-Clio, 2006), p. 1250.

¹⁵ Ibid., p. 1254.

¹⁶ D. B. Gregor, *Celtic: A Comparative Study*, (Cambridge: The Oleander Press, 1980), p. 296.

Cornish:

Cornish is the language of Kernow, modern day Cornwall in the south-west of Britain. It belongs to the Brittonic sub-group of Celtic languages with its ancestry coming from the original Brittonic language spoken throughout Britain prior to the Anglo-Saxon invasion in the fifth century CE. The Cornish language developed as its own dialect over several centuries, but ‘with its roots in the Anglo-Saxon invasions of the 4th and 5th centuries, which represented the first negative consequences for the Celtic language.’¹⁷

In 936CE the Anglo-Saxon King, Athelstan, fixed the boundary of his English kingdom and Cornwall at the River Tamar¹⁸ solidifying the border between the two, however, this did not make Cornwall a separate country like Wales was. Much like the Isle of Man, Cornwall had an administrative hierarchy of non-native speakers and Athelstan placed a new Bishop (albeit seemingly a Cornish one)¹⁹ at St Germans²⁰ in north Cornwall close to the border. Peter Beresford Ellis speaking of Athelstan, ‘He started to eradicate the Celtic culture as a ‘reform’ and in this way remodelled Celtic monastic centres of learning along Saxon lines.’²¹ William of Normandy invaded Britain in 1066CE and brought with him a new language. Norman-French replaced English as the language of the ruling class, however this does not appear to have affected the Cornish too much as, according to Ellis, ‘they interfered little with the Cornish language.’²² The Bretons that had arrived with William and came to Cornwall took work in places of authority and ‘among the lower classes, since wages were higher in Cornwall than in Brittany.’²³ It is reasonable to postulate that Cornish and Breton were still sufficiently close enough for communication to be intelligible, something that would have bolstered the use of Cornish at the time.

Whilst the English were fighting for their language,²⁴ Cornish continued to develop and entertainment was featured heavily in the Cornish plays from Glasney College during the mid to late fourteenth century CE. However, it should be noted that whilst the words were Cornish, they were written down ‘using the contemporary English orthography’²⁵ of the time, which itself was not too consistent. Much like Manx in the sections above, this would have had an effect on the Cornish language as it was slowly changed over time to suit a more English palette.

In 1496CE Henry VII suspended the Cornish Stannary Parliament²⁶ and levied taxes on the local populace to fund his war in Scotland. Unhappy with their money being used in such a manner unrest took its toll and in 1497CE a rebellion led by Michael Joseph (also known as *An Gof*, meaning ‘The Blacksmith’ in Cornish), made its way to London. This Cornish army

¹⁷ Siarl Ferdinand, ‘A Brief History Of The Cornish Language, Its Revival And Its Current Status’, *e-Keltoi: Journal Of Interdisciplinary Celtic Studies*: Vol. 2, Article 6, 2 December 2013, pp. 199-227 (p. 204). https://minds.wisconsin.edu/bitstream/handle/1793/94464/ferdinand_2_6.pdf?sequence=1&isAllowed=y [accessed 10 April 2025].

¹⁸ George, ‘Cornish’, p. 489.

¹⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 489.

²⁰ Peter Beresford Ellis, *The Story Of The Cornish Language*, (Redruth: Tor Mark Press, 1998), p. 7.

²¹ *Ibid.*, p. 7.

²² *Ibid.*, p. 8.

²³ George, ‘Cornish’, p.489.

²⁴ Ellis, *The Story Of The Cornish Language*, p. 9

²⁵ Russell, *An Introduction To The Celtic Languages*, p. 222.

²⁶ Ferdinand, ‘A Brief History Of The Cornish Language, Its Revival And Its Current Status’, p. 206.

suffered an overwhelming defeat with two thousand men killed and thirteen thousand enslaved. This was a devastating blow for Cornwall who lost not only a generation of workers and fathers/brothers, but also a great many Cornish speakers.²⁷

Another rebellion by the Cornish in 1549CE would ultimately seal the fate of the Cornish language. In the mid-sixteenth century CE Henry VIII started the Reformation with the dissolution of monasteries and removal of Catholic symbols from religious sites; this included Glasney College, a centre for Cornish writing at the time. In 1548CE the *Book of Common Prayer* was introduced and English was made the language of service in all Churches. Ferdinand, quoting an unnamed Cornishman from Fred Jago's 1887CE book *An English-Cornish Dictionary* says, 'and so we Cornyshe men, whereof certain of us understand no English, utterly refuse this new English.'²⁸ This sentiment almost certainly led to 'The Prayer Book Rebellion' of 1549CE, which ended with the English crushing the Cornish and Devon men who had joined, in battle. Again, many men were killed resulting in another loss for Cornwall and its language. In 1559CE Elizabeth I introduced a new *Act of Uniformity* which allowed the *Book of Common Prayer* and church to 'preach in the language of the people'.²⁹ Whilst Welsh, Manx, Irish and Scottish Gaelic were translated, Cornish was not. Whether this was in punishment for previous uprisings or just because there weren't enough Cornish speakers³⁰ to warrant the change cannot be known.

Welsh:

Welsh, like Cornish is a sub-group of the Brittonic Celtic language of Britain, however, unlike Cornish or Manx it has not died out but has thrived in the centuries it has been spoken. Like Manx and Cornish, it developed its own dialect after separation with the west and the proof of this is in the vast array of texts and manuscripts that survive. From the *Oxoniensis Prior* to the books of the *Mabinogion*, the musings of poets like Dafydd ap Gwilym (1320-1350) and the *Laws of Hywel*, Wales has a rich and continuous history of the written word. The Welsh law formed out of the *Laws of Hywel* in difference to Cornwall and the Isle of Man, show that 'Welsh was the language of law'.³¹ This advantage for Wales continued throughout the Norman-French invasion, even with French taking root in Welsh aristocracy and literature.³² The language, whilst surviving did diminish in some areas, the divides of the *Pura Wallia* and *Marchia Wallie*³³ gave rise to English and Flemish communities in the southern areas of the Marchia Wallie where English was increasingly spoken in the Middle Ages. The Magna Carta (1215)³⁴ gave some independence to Wales in the use of its law, which likely helped in maintaining Welsh in legal texts. This and the *Pura Wallia* were no

²⁷ Ibid., p. 206.

²⁸ Ibid., p. 209.

²⁹ Ibid., p. 209.

³⁰ P. A. S. Pool, *The Death Of Cornish (1600-1800)*, (Penzance: P. A. S. Pool, 1975), p. 7.

³¹ Davies, *The Welsh Language: A History*, p. 20.

³² Ibid., p. 25.

³³ The Pura Wallia (Wales Proper) and Marchia Wallie (Welsh Marches) were introduced by Henry I in the twelfth century CE in an attempt to maintain control of the Welsh who lived there. The Lords ruled as they saw fit and were not directly accountable to the King.

³⁴ Gregor, *Celtic: A Comparative Study*, p. 62.

doubt instrumental in ensuring, 'Wales remained overwhelmingly Welsh-speaking throughout the Middle Ages and beyond.'³⁵

In 1536 Henry VIII brought the *Act of Union* to bear on Wales. This act unified Wales within England, making it an English country under law. However, many of the ruling class remained Welsh and learnt English as a second language, however in time even this faded and English became the language of the gentry.³⁶ The Reformation put more pressure on the Welsh language as it did Manx and Cornish, but the *Act of Uniformity* in 1559 (and maybe because they did not rebel like the Cornish), relieved that somewhat, allowing Welsh to again be preached in church services, meaning the masses could continue speaking Welsh and worshipping in it. Whilst this separation of English speakers and Welsh monoglots existed, it would appear that harmony was achieved by the Welsh people and acceptance that those who spoke English but lived in Wales, were Welsh.³⁷

Conclusion:

To put a specific reason as to what caused the death of Manx and Cornish is complicated and ultimately impossible as the reasons were likely many. Without doubt and as shown above, the English language, which was so prominent throughout Great Britain, certainly was a major factor in their demise. English dominance as a spoken language within the ruling classes, in law and administration confined Manx and Cornish to a local language and whilst sentiment to speak it was strong, the reduction of populace over time meant less and less people were able to continue speaking either language. With church services also being conducted in English, the pressure to learn English mounted and with an increasing bi-lingual population one language would inevitably win out.

Wales did not suffer the same fate; its population was greater and they did not endure the human loss of the Cornish. The oral tradition of Welsh continued to be spoken amongst the populace, even when the gentry steered away from it and this gave rise to the English government allowing church services to once again be conducted in Welsh. Unlike the Isle of Man, sentiment towards those who spoke Welsh or English was mostly harmonious and as a result the compulsion to stop speaking Welsh was diminished.

Ultimately, in the Isle of Man and in Cornwall, pressure to speak English was too great on a smaller populace for them to resist, but in Wales, with a far greater population, this pressure was less and acceptance greater and thus the language thrived.

³⁵ Ibid., p. 26.

³⁶ Davies, *The Welsh Language: A History*, p. 35-36.

³⁷ Gregor, *Celtic: A Comparative Study*, p. 64-65.

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