

HPCS5023 Cornwall without Cornish: Introduction

- ▶ An overview of Cornwall
- ▶ An overview of the Cornish language
- ▶ Cornwall with Cornish in the early modern period
- ▶ Cornwall without Cornish in the modern period
- ▶ Place-names and the language revival
- ▶ Non-linguistic aspects of Cornish identity

The aim of this module is to offer students an overview of the Cornish language and its relationship to Cornish identity.

After an initial brief introduction to Cornwall and the Cornish language so that these can be placed in context, the module will concentrate predominantly on the early modern and modern historical periods. Although the precise dates for these can vary from circumstance to circumstance, for the purposes of this module we shall treat the 'early modern' period as beginning in the last quarter of the 15th century and finishing at the end of the 18th century, with the 'modern' period beginning at the start of the 19th century and continuing to the present day. This conveniently divides the overall period of modern history in Cornwall (i.e. both the early modern and the modern taken together) into two halves of virtually equal length, the first of which coincides with the last period of the Cornish language as a living vernacular, so that we have one half with Cornish and one half without it. An attempt will be made to map the fate of the Cornish language during these periods against expressions of Cornish identity and descriptions of the Cornish people over the same timescale.

The historical periods (Medieval, Early Modern, Modern etc) and the language periods (Old Cornish, Middle Cornish, Modern Cornish) overlap to some extent but not completely. Broadly speaking, Old Cornish is the language of the Early and High Middle Ages, Middle Cornish is the language of the Late Middle Ages and Modern Cornish is the language of the Early Modern period. The language did not survive into the full Modern historical era from the 19th century onwards, and so that period belongs to the Revival movement. Non-linguistic aspects of Cornwall during the revival period will therefore also be examined to try to establish what maintains a sense of specifically Cornish identity in a Cornwall without the Cornish language.

An overview of Cornwall



- ▶ Extreme south west of Great Britain
- ▶ Land boundary with Devon only (Tamar)
- ▶ Area: 3500 km²
- ▶ Population: 560,000
- ▶ Administrative centre (and only city): Truro

Cornwall is located on a peninsula in the extreme south-west of the island of Great Britain. It is surrounded by sea on all sides bar the east, where it has a land border with Devon. This sole land boundary is marked for virtually its entire length by the River Tamar, and Cornwall's relatively isolated geographical position has often led to it being considered, by both natives and outsiders, as 'a land apart' (Stoyle. p 9).

There are two different 'versions' of Cornwall, the Unitary Authority controlled by Cornwall Council (basically the Cornish mainland) and the traditional Ceremonial County which also includes the Isles of Scilly. This means that two sets of statistics exist for area and population, but, given that the Isles of Scilly are small on both counts, we can safely say that Cornwall is roughly 3500 km² in area with a population of about 560,000. This makes it broadly comparable to Luxembourg.

The (Royal) Duchy of Cornwall, created in 1337, is an altogether different body. As its website notes:

'The Duchy estate has never owned the entire county of Cornwall and a large part of the estate has always lain outside of it.' <https://duchyofcornwall.org/history-of-the-duchy.html>

The Duke of Cornwall is also Prince of Wales, although the two titles are distinct. As with the Duchy of Cornwall, the Principality, which has not existed since 1542, likewise never covered the entire territory of Wales. When Cornwall's new unitary authority was created in 2009, the word 'County' was dropped, leaving just Cornwall Council. Some of the possible reasons for this will be raised during the module.

Traditional industries in Cornwall include fishing, farming and tin-mining, although the last in particular has been replaced by tourism, a consequence of Cornwall's spectacular coastline and relatively mild climate.

Anglia et Cornubia



- ▶ Anglo-Saxon Heptarchy
- ▶ Weallas (Wales) all of which was known as 'North Wales'
- ▶ Cornweallas (Cornwall) also known as 'West Wales'

Although now officially an English county, Cornwall's relationship with England has always been rather ambiguous. Following the collapse of Roman Britannia, the Anglo-Saxon Heptarchy was established in the early medieval (pre-Norman) period, and consisted of seven primary kingdoms, namely Wessex, Sussex, Essex (all Saxon) Kent (Jutes), and Mercia, East Anglia and Northumbria (all Anglian). Various of these were dominant at different times and often in conflict with the others during the centuries until England became a unified kingdom.

Outside of the Anglo-Saxon territories stood the native Britons of what are now Wales and Cornwall (as well as those still to be found in other parts of the island, especially the Old North) who were labelled as 'Welsh' by the Anglo-Saxons. The 'Wal' at the beginning of Wales and the end of Cornwall reflects this. Cornwall means the 'Welsh of the Horn', a reference to the shape of the peninsula.

The border between England and Cornwall was set at the River Tamar by Athelstan, King of the English, in 936, and for some on both sides (but certainly not all) that has been the arrangement ever since. As such, references to *Anglia et Cornubia* (England and Cornwall), where Cornwall is referred to as if it were outside of England, can be found throughout the medieval period.

According to Philip Payton in his book *Cornwall*, (p. 91) '*it is no coincidence that most European languages have their own word for Cornwall (but never for Hampshire or Rutland), as though it were a Scotland or a Wales...*' the point being that Cornwall should not be thought of as merely 'another English county'.

Image: Saxon England according to a 19th Century unnamed cartographer (c. 1830)

An overview of the Cornish language

- ▶ Brittonic, Celtic, Indo-European
- ▶ Shared origin with Breton and Welsh
- ▶ Survived for 1000 years (800 – 1800)
- ▶ Old Cornish (9th – 12th)
- ▶ Middle Cornish (13th – 16th)
- ▶ Modern Cornish (16th – 18th)
- ▶ Scraps and Collections (19th)
- ▶ Revived Cornish (20th)

Cornish is an Indo-European language, but before it is an Indo-European language it is a Celtic language, and before it is a Celtic language it is a Brittonic language. Of these three, for the overwhelming majority of its lifetime as an individual language, its speakers would only have been aware of the last, regularly referring to themselves as Britons. Wider links to the Celtic and Indo-European families only became known during the final century of the language's existence. The shared origin with Breton and Welsh, however, was common knowledge. Of the two, Cornish is closer to Breton than to Welsh, although this should not be overstated, as Cornish sits geographically and linguistically between them, and sometimes shares with Welsh rather than Breton. On the other hand, there are no known examples of Breton and Welsh sharing features which are absent in Cornish (Jackson).

The Cornish language existed as a living language for more or less a thousand years, from about 800 – 1800. As with other European languages, it is divided into periods. Old Cornish covers the ninth to the twelfth centuries, Middle Cornish from the thirteenth to the sixteenth, and Modern Cornish the sixteenth to the eighteenth. The sixteenth century is sometimes seen as a transitional period between Middle and Modern Cornish, often labelled 'Tudor Cornish'.

Care should be taken with taking these periods at face value, however, as languages do not instantly change from one period to another. Also, it should be remembered that the written language, especially in religious contexts, can be very conservative and reflect an earlier period rather than the contemporary spoken language. Cornish had died as a community language by about the turn of the nineteenth century during which time the occasional saying or verse could still be heard and several 'antiquaries' put together some collections for posterity. Serious efforts to revive it began in the early twentieth century and have continued to this day.

The historical Cornish language never had a standardised orthography in any period.

Old Cornish (c. 800 – 1200)



- ▶ Old Cornish, Old Welsh and Old Breton very similar
- ▶ Old Cornish limited to glosses and vocabularies
- ▶ Often misidentified as Old Breton or Old Welsh

At the beginning of the ninth century (c. 800 – 805), Smaragdus, the future abbot of Saint-Mihiel in the diocese of Verdun, France, wrote a commentary in Latin about the work of the fourth century Roman grammarian Aelius Donatus (*Grammatica major seu commentarius in Donatum*). This work contains a handful of glosses on Cornish words.

Old Cornish and Old Breton were so similar that even Celtic philologists could confuse them, as happened in 1906 when Henri d'Arbois de Jubainville (Lewis, p. 2) published an article on Smaragdus' work entitled *Mots bretons connus par un auteur français du commencement du ix siècle* (Breton words identified by a French author at the start of the ninth century). They were later proven to be Cornish by fellow French linguist Joseph Loth in the 1907 article *Les gloses à Smaragdus*.

There are a small number of other glosses and proper names from this period, including some in the Bodmin Manuscripts, which date from the tenth century and are held in the British Library, and also the Domesday Book of 1086. However, the largest manuscript in Old Cornish is the *Vocabularium Cornicum* sometimes known as the Cottonian vocabulary, which is a Latin-Cornish glossary of almost 1000 common nouns. In similar fashion to Smaragdus' work, this wordlist was also misidentified, on this occasion for Old Welsh. It was known as the *Vocabularium Wallicum* until 1707, when Edward Lhuyd identified it as Cornish. From time to time, glosses in other languages such as Old Welsh, Old Breton, Old English and Norman French can also be found (Mills, 2014) presumably for additional clarification. This amounts to more or less everything from the Old Cornish period, which contains no complete literary works. These would not appear until the Late Middle Ages.

The content of the *Vocabularium Cornicum* can be found here:

https://wikisource.org/wiki/Vocabularium_Cornicum

The image in the above slide is from the copy of the Bodmin Manuscripts kept at the British Library:

<https://www.bl.uk/collection-items/the-bodmin-manuscripts>

Middle Cornish and Glasney College



- ▶ The Mount Calvary Poem *Pascon agan Arluth*
- ▶ The *Ordinalia* series of three miracle plays
- ▶ The 'lives' of two saints, *Meriasek* and *Ke*

Glasney College (1265 – 1548) of Penryn was a major ecclesiastical centre in Cornwall. Miracle plays were both written and performed here. Virtually the entire corpus of Middle Cornish is the product of Glasney College, and, unsurprisingly, is religious in nature. The major works are:

Pascon agan Arluth (The Passion of our Lord) which is the earliest complete work of literature in the Cornish language. It dates from the early 14th century, and is also known as the Mount Calvary poem. The original manuscript had no title, and the author is unknown, but is thought by some, by virtue of the writing style, to have been linked to Glasney College.

The *Ordinalia*, is a 15th century trilogy of miracle plays comprising *Origo Mundi* (Origin of the World), *Passio Christi* (The Passion of Christ) and *Resurrexio Domini* (The Resurrection of Our Lord). These three plays were designed to be performed on three successive days. The *Passio Christi* contains the earliest known reference to Cornwall in the Cornish language, where it is written as *Kernow*.

There are also two 'Lives', giving accounts of the lives of two saints, namely:

Beunans Meriasek, the Life of Saint Meriasek (Meiriadog in Welsh and Meriadeg in Breton) a Breton saint who lived in the fourth century. The work was completed in 1504 by one Dominus Hadton, otherwise known as Radolphus Ton, but the play itself may date from the second half of the 15th century (NLW website). It is in two sections, designed to be performed over two days.

Beunans Ke (or *Bewnans Ke*) the Life of Saint Ke, who was a fifth century saint from Yr Hen Ogledd (The Old North) – the Brittonic speaking areas of what is now northern England and southern Scotland, although he was more active in Cornwall, Brittany and Wales. Like *Pascon agan Arluth*, the actual manuscript has no title. It was most likely completed around the year 1500. Both 'Lives' are held at the National Library of Wales:

<https://www.library.wales/discover/digital-gallery/manuscripts/the-middle-ages/beunans-meriasek/>

<https://www.library.wales/discover/digital-gallery/manuscripts/early-modern-period/beunans-ke/>

They are the only surviving Lives written in Middle Cornish and it is possible that both came to Wales

together. They can be considered as marking the end of the middle period.

There was no standardised orthography in Middle Cornish. Authors followed their own rules and were sometimes even inconsistent within the same piece of work. This tradition would lead to problems in the more recent revival period.

From Middle to Modern Cornish

Middle Cornish:

- ▶ Entirely religious in content
- ▶ Written in rhymed verse
- ▶ Produced at a single location

Modern Cornish:

- ▶ Varied everyday content
- ▶ Written in prose
- ▶ Produced at various locations
- ▶ Simplified grammar

Following on from the two ‘Lives’ of *Meriasek* and *Ke* we enter into a language period which has occasionally been labelled ‘Late’ Cornish (Gendall) but we will here simply mark it as the period when Cornish transitioned from a medieval language to a modern one. There are two literary works from this period: **John Tregear**’s thirteen (Catholic) homilies of c. 1560 entitled simply ***Homelyes XIII in Cornysche*** represent a transitional period. This work is the single largest manuscript in the Cornish language, comprising over 30,000 words of continuous prose (Chaudhri) and is comparable in length to all three plays of the *Ordinalia*. It is a translation of an English work published in 1555 for the Bishop of London. The homilies had been translated so that they could be read out as sermons in church. This implies that there were still sufficient Cornish speaking congregations in the middle of the 16th century to make this undertaking worthwhile, and Cornwall was still a Catholic stronghold at the time. The work coincides neatly with the reign of Queen Mary in the 1550s, who worked aggressively and violently to reverse the Protestant Reformation instigated by her father Henry VIII, to such an extent that she became the original bearer of the label ‘Bloody Mary’. The work probably dates from towards the end of this decade (and Mary’s reign), and was heavily influenced by the English original. **William Jordan’s *Gwreans an Bys / Creacion of the World* (1611)**. Although published later than Tregear, its content is much the same as the earlier *Ordinalia*. Indeed, *Origo Mundi* means ‘Origin of the World’, and so, of these two works, Tregear’s should be considered as being more representative of the period in which it was published. The oldest available copy of Jordan’s work is kept in the Bodleian Library (manuscript 219) and a link can be found here:

<https://digital.bodleian.ox.ac.uk/inquire/Discover/Search/#/?p=c+1,t+William%20Jordan,rsrs+0,rsps+10,fa+,so+ox%3A sort%5Easc,scids+,pid+,vi+>

This same period also saw some of the earliest records of comments on Cornwall and the Cornish, sometimes by outsiders and sometimes by themselves. The fully Modern linguistic period contains texts on everyday topics by authors who lived between the 1630s and the 1790s, and we will be looking at several examples of these in detail.

Cornish Rebellion



- ▶ The 1497 uprising of An Gof and Thomas Flamank
- ▶ The 'Prayer Book Rebellion' of 1549
- ▶ Two risings during the Civil War (firmly royalist)
- ▶ Letter of thanks from Charles I

The Cornish were involved in six uprisings during the Tudor and Stuart periods, two each in the 1490s, 1540s and 1640s (Stoye, p. 7/8). Like the Welsh, they had never accepted English domination and held on to the myth that *Y Mab Darogan* would one day come to lift them out of their servitude, although the part played in these rebellions by ethnic sentiment is open to debate.

An unknown fifteenth century author noted that: *'the Cornysch sayeth thus, that Arthur levyth yet....and schalle come and be a king again'*. They could easily have been forgiven then, for thinking that this once and future king had arrived in the form of the Welsh-born Henry Tudor, destined to be crowned Henry VII in 1485. How ironic, then, that the earliest uprisings, in 1497, took place during his reign.

The first 1497 rebellion originated in St Keverne on the Lizard peninsula, initiated by Michael Joseph (An Gof) the Smith and Thomas Flamank. It ended at Blackheath in June of that year. A second, less famous uprising took place in September and October when the pretender to the throne Perkin Warbeck landed in Penzance and raised an army of at least 3000 men. These were, however, soon defeated.

In 1548, Archdeacon William Body was stabbed to death in Helston by a local mob which once again included many from St Keverne, and the following year saw the Prayer Book Rebellion with the oft-quoted claim that *'we the Cornyshe men (whereof certen of us understande no Englysh) utterly refuse thys newe English'*.

The final two uprisings took place during the English Civil War, in 1642 and 1648 respectively, with the Cornish firmly on the Royalist side to such an extent that they were sent a letter of thanks from King Charles I.

By Tre, Pol and Pen Shall ye know all Cornishmen

Personal names:

- ▶ Trelawny
- ▶ Trevithick
- ▶ Polwhele
- ▶ Poldark!
- ▶ Penhaligon
- ▶ Pentreath

Place names:

- Tregony
- Treneglos
- Polperro
- Polruan
- Penryn
- Penzance

By Tre, Pol and Pen shall ye know all Cornishmen is a rhyming couplet which is at least 400 years old (Carew, 1602). It refers to familiar names in the Cornish language, some examples of which are shown in the slide above. 'Tre' refers to a settlement or homestead, 'Pol' a pool or pond, and 'Pen' describes a headland or hill. All three are either identical or cognate with similar elements in Welsh and Breton.

There are of course many other Cornish personal names which do not begin with Tre, Pol or Pen such as Chegwin (white house) Chenoweth (new house) Gove (smith) and Nance (valley).

What is true of personal names is also true of place-names, and both together provide examples of the 'legacy' of Cornish via language elements which have survived to the present day, despite the demise of the language as a living community vernacular.

The majority of the place-names in Cornwall are indeed in Cornish (Padel) although some, as is common elsewhere, may combine elements from more than one language. They can also 'fossilise' and show the historical changes that have taken place over the centuries, and so, for example, place-names containing 'nance' in western areas can still be seen as 'nant' further east, such as Trenance versus Trenant.

The survival of these Cornish personal and place-names provides a link to the language in today's world and a basis for Cornish identity.

Non-linguistic Cornish identity



- ▶ Love of landscape
- ▶ Traditional industries
- ▶ Saint Piran's Flag
- ▶ Campaign for a Cornish Assembly
- ▶ The tick-box 'rebellion'

In addition to the linguistically-based personal and place-name elements mentioned previously, Cornwall has a number of non-linguistic aspects which contribute to a sense of difference. Perhaps the most obvious of these is Cornwall itself, that is, the very distinctive landscape, certain elements of which, such as its engine houses, are found in the same format in only very few places outside of Cornwall, if any. The amphitheatres used for miracle plays are unique within Britain, and the traditional industries of tin and copper mining (complete with lunchtime pasties), farming and fishing (especially for pilchards!) add to the Cornish recipe.

Flags of course are used precisely for the purposes of symbolising a particular group of people. The Cross of Saint Piran has been recognised as the Standard or Flag of Cornwall since at least the 19th century, and it may be much older. As with many other aspects, it shares similarities with Brittany and Wales.

In addition to, or perhaps because of, these various symbols of Cornish identity, a Cornish Constitutional Convention was formed in 2000 with a view to establishing an assembly for Cornwall on the lines of the other (newly) devolved bodies in the UK, a 'tick-box' campaign has pressed for the inclusion of a 'Cornish' option on UK census forms to reflect their status as a 'national minority' alongside the Welsh, Scots and Irish, and the local football association in Cornwall has recently joined Conifa with a view to playing 'international' football against other minority peoples. Only those born in Cornwall will be eligible. The article can be found here:

<https://www.bbc.co.uk/sport/football/46284060>

Although the Cornish language is a fundamental element of Cornish distinctiveness, it is far from the only one, and these non-linguistic aspects of Cornish identity will also be examined in greater detail.