

The Revolting Cornish



- ▶ The 1497 rebellion
- ▶ Led by Michael Joseph (An Gof) and Thomas Flamank
- ▶ Protesters marched on London
- ▶ Ended at the Battle of Deptford Bridge

In the century and a half between 1497 and 1648 the people of Cornwall were involved in no fewer than six uprisings. The flashpoint for the first one of 1497 was a demand for increased taxes by Henry VII to pay for a military campaign against Scotland. This levy was supposedly in violation of Stannary laws and concessions granted to the people of Cornwall by Edward I.

Incensed, and led by Michael Joseph (An Gof) a blacksmith from St Keverne, and Thomas Flamank, a lawyer and former MP from Bodmin, an 'army' of people decided to march on London. This they did largely unopposed, gathering sympathisers in Devon and Somerset, the most notable being James, Lord Audley, who joined them at Wells. Some panic set in as they drew close to London.

On 16 June the rebels made camp on Blackheath with a perhaps exaggerated figure of 15000, given that up to a third of these developed cold feet overnight and slipped away. The following day, the Battle of Deptford Bridge took place at Blackheath against (another possibly exaggerated figure of) 25000 on the King's side. The King's forces, led by Giles, Lord Daubeney, were victorious, and ten days later both An Gof and Flamank were hanged, drawn and quartered, their heads displayed on spikes at London bridge. Audley, in keeping with his station, was simply beheaded.

The image in the slide above (courtesy of Trevor Harris) is of the statue of Michael Joseph the Smith (An Gof) and Thomas Flamank located on the road out of St Keverne. It was unveiled in 1997 to commemorate the 500th anniversary of the rebellion. A march retracing the route was also held and a bilingual plaque unveiled at Blackheath, confirming that An Gof had succeeded in achieving the final aim of his last words by having '*a name perpetual, and a fame permanent and immortal*'.

This rebellion needs to be put in context, however. In the previous decade there was an uprising in Yorkshire in very similar circumstances, when people there objected to paying increased taxes towards a campaign in Brittany to support it against aggression from France. (Payton, p. 121).

The (still) Revolting Cornish



- ▶ Second rebellion of 1497
- ▶ Perkin Warbeck (pictured) declared King Richard IV on Bodmin Moor
- ▶ 'Cornish army' surrendered at Taunton

Perkin Warbeck was a pretender to the English throne, claiming to be Richard of Shrewsbury, Duke of York. He was also a possible impostor, but nevertheless received some support for his position from various people with an axe to grind against Henry VII, such as Yorkists, the King of Scotland - and yet more Cornish rebels!

Still angry after the collapse of the first rebellion, the Cornish gentry were supportive of Warbeck's cause, particularly following his promise to end the levies imposed upon them by Henry that were the cause of the rebellion earlier that year.

He landed at Whitesand Bay near Land's End on 7 September 1497 with a view to staking his claim, and backed by only 120 men. In Cornwall he accumulated an army of between 3000 and 6000 (reports vary) and was proclaimed Richard IV at Bodmin, which significantly, was also where Henry Tudor had himself been declared Henry VII, quite an achievement for a relatively small town in a 'fringe' location.

These marched on Exeter and badly damaged the city walls before continuing to Taunton. Here they were confronted by the King's men led by Giles, Lord Daubeney, the same man who defeated the Cornish rebels in the first rebellion. Warbeck deserted in panic and the men he left behind surrendered to Henry VII on 4 October. The next rebellion in Cornwall would have to wait another half a century.

Warbeck was later captured and kept prisoner by Henry for another two years, but after trying to escape, he was eventually paraded through the streets of London, made to read out a confession that he was an impostor, and then hanged.

The Killing of William Body



- ▶ Archdeacon sent to impose unpopular new practices
- ▶ Opposed by 1000 men led by parish priest
- ▶ Murdered in the street
- ▶ Killers and parish priest hanged, drawn and quartered

As part of the Reformation, major changes in promoted religious practices were taking place across the Kingdom of England in the 1530s and 1540s. Although Henry VIII started the separation of the Church of England from Rome, he remained a Catholic. His son Edward VI however (the boy-king), was raised as a Protestant, and during his reign reforms were introduced to change the realm from Catholic to Protestant. These reforms included the removal of 'Catholic imagery' from churches.

As part of this process, Archdeacon William Body, an unpopular man who supported reform, was sent to Helston on 5 April 1548 and began removing the possessions from the parish church. This was seen as desecration by those of the traditional faith. Cornwall had always been traditional and staunchly Catholic, and, as soon as Body's actions were made known to people from the surrounding area, over 1000 of them marched on the town, led by one Martin Geoffrey, the priest of St Keverne. The unfortunate Archdeacon was dragged into the street and there stabbed to death by William Kilter and Pascoe Trevian.

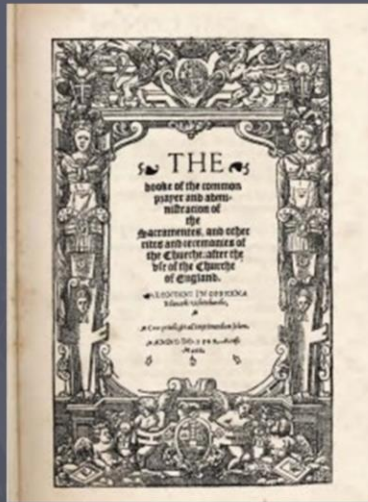
In an attempt to stop the murder being investigated, an even larger crowd of some 3000 people, many of whom were armed, gathered at Helston to obstruct any investigation. These were eventually dispersed by men from outside the area who were paid to intervene by the local gentry (Stoyle, p.21). Subsequently, 28 men were arrested, 15 of them from St. Keverne. The majority were either released or pardoned, but 11 were sentenced to death. Eight of these, including Kilter and Trevian, were hanged, drawn and quartered in Launceston. The priest Martin Geoffrey, however, had the sole 'privilege' of being taken to London before being hanged, drawn and quartered there and his head impaled on a spike on London Bridge in similar fashion to his fellow parishioner An Gof half a century earlier.

This act was no doubt meant as a deterrent to future rebels. If so, it failed spectacularly, as an even larger rebellion would take hold the following year.

<https://www.cornwallforever.co.uk/history/the-killing-of-william-body>

Image: of Helston with (rebuilt) parish church in the background.

The Prayer Book Rebellion



- ▶ Book of Common Prayer published on 15 January 1549
- ▶ Act of Uniformity passed on 21 January 1549
- ▶ Language of service changed from Latin to English

The Prayer Book Rebellion can be seen as a continuation of the unrest that was unleashed the previous year, but made worse by two linked events that took place in January 1549, namely the publication of the Book of Common Prayer and the passing of the Act of Uniformity. The names of these are fairly self-explanatory and represent the top-down centralising tendency typical of the time. The main author of the book of Common Prayer was Thomas Cranmer, Archbishop of Canterbury. From Whitsun 1549, it would be unlawful to use Latin liturgical rites, or indeed any other language than English, and so this date proved to be a catalyst for a revolt which would last for over two months in all.

On Whit Monday, after one day of the new order, the parishioners of Sampford Courtenay in Devon pressurised their parish priest into reverting back to the traditional way. On June 6, a group of rebels gathered at Bodmin (of course) led by the Mayor Henry Bray, landowners such as John Winslade of Tregarrick, and members of the gentry, significantly Sir Humphrey Arundell of Helland. They gathered a force of some 7000 men and, led by Arundell, marched via Plymouth and laid siege to Exeter for five weeks. They were joined there by, among others, the villagers of Sampford Courtenay. During this time they set out a series of demands in a petition for the King. They were opposed by forces led by Lord John Russell and Lord William Grey totalling about 8500. A series of inconclusive battles followed until the Battle of Clist St Mary on August 5, where the tide turned in favour of the King's men. About 900 captured rebels were slaughtered by having their throats cut. The fifth and last battle of the rebellion was, ironically, fought at Sampford Courtenay on August 17. Unlike the uprising of 1497, where the leaders were punished but the rest released, the Prayer Book Rebellion saw thousands of rebels killed and many more hunted down in the aftermath. Winslade and Arundell were hanged and dismembered at London, and their estates given to the Carew family. 1549 was very much a year of 'commotion'. In July of that year no fewer than three uprisings were taking place simultaneously. Apart from the Prayer Book Rebellion there was a smaller uprising in Buckinghamshire and Oxfordshire for much the same reason, and yet another significant revolt in Norfolk led by Robert Kett (who was hanged for his trouble) albeit in this case in a protest against land enclosure rather than religion.

Image: Title page of the book of common prayer 1549.

Impact on the Cornish language



*'And so we the
Cornyshe men
(whereof certen of
us understande no
Englysh) utterly
refuse thys newe
English.'*

The imposition of the Book of Common Prayer was opposed in many areas of the realm, but the Cornish, like the Welsh, had an additional reason to be upset, namely, the effect on their own language. As was the norm at the time, the rebels had drawn up a petition to the King setting out a number of demands, such as:

'we will have the general counsel and holy decrees of our forefathers observed, kept and performed, and who so ever shall speak against them, we hold them as heretics.'

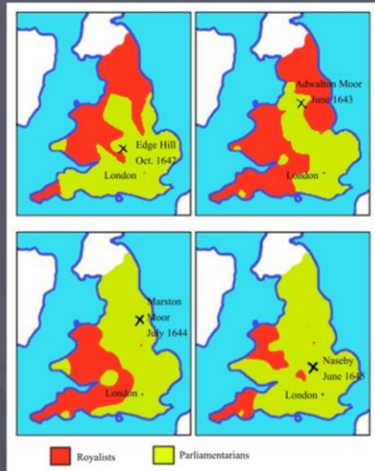
'we will have the Lawes of our Sovereign Lord Kyng Henry the VIII concerning the Six Articles, to be used as they were in his time.'

'we will have the mass in Latin, as was before, and celebrated by the priest without any man or woman communicating with them.'

The nature of the rebels' demands irked Cranmer, with the use of 'we will have' in particular being seen as aggressive and disrespectful. As well as demanding the traditional use of Latin, though, their eighth demand refused the use of English on the basis of their Cornish speech (quoted in the slide above). Cranmer's response was to ask why they should be offended by the holding of services in English as opposed to Latin when they had not understood that either. However, the traditional service in Cornwall had been bilingual, and both languages of it were now under threat. In addition to the 'ritual' Latin, *'the Creed, the Commandments and other elements had been said in Cornish since time immemorial, something that the act of Uniformity was specifically designed to eradicate.'* (Payton, p. 139) The previous year had also seen the destruction of Glasney College, a centre of both religious and linguistic significance throughout the Late Middle Ages, and this was a huge loss for the language's status. In 1563, *An Act for the Translating of the Bible and the Divine Service into the Welsh Tongue* passed through Parliament, leading to the translation of the Book of Common Prayer into that language, and, ultimately, the Bible. Regardless of the Cornishmen's refusal of English, however, no equivalent Act was passed for Cornish.

Image: of Thomas Cranmer, main author of the Book of Common Prayer

Little Wales Beyond England!



'Pembroke is the only remnant of Wales (if it be true Welsh) which rebels against his majestie, for as Pembroke (still called little England beyond Wales) forsook their allegiance when all other Welch counties stood loyal to his Majestie; so Cornwall (which is little Wales beyond England) proved themselves true Brittaines, when no English county stood intirely for his Majestie.'

So said Sir John Birkenhead during the English Civil War (1642-1651). Others have since commented on the fact that the Cornish and all counties of Wales except Pembrokeshire declared for the King, and did so overwhelmingly. Why might this be?

According to Mark Stoye (p. 5) '*...to the west of Offa's Dyke, as in Cornwall, ubiquitous popular royalism had been a product of deep-seated ethnic fears. Cornish and Welsh behaviours had been founded on the conviction that Parliament was the party of Englishness...that English nationalism lay at the very heart of the English Civil War.*' The King then, was felt to have a greater respect than the Parliamentarians for the 'true' or 'ancient' Britons of his realm.

It is interesting to note that support in both Wales and Cornwall did fall along ethnic lines, with little England beyond Wales declaring for the Parliamentarians, and Little Wales beyond England doing the reverse. Furthermore, Cornwall had enthusiastically declared for the King in all regions but one, namely the extreme north east around Stratton, undoubtedly the most Anglicised part of Cornwall. Southern Pembrokeshire had been deliberately settled with Flemish settlers by Henry I in the twelfth century (as well as English to keep an eye on them) both as a means of solving a 'refugee' problem and changing the demographics of a very rebellious Welsh area. An English presence here was therefore long established.

Richard Carew, in his 1602 *Survey of Cornwall*, noted of the Cornish that: *One point of their former roughnesse, some of the Westerne people do yet still retaine, & therethrough in some measure, verifie that testimonie which Mathew Westm. giueth of them, together with the Welsh, their auncient cuntrymen: namely, how fostering a fresh memorie of their expulsion long agoe by the English, they second the same with a bitter repining at their fellowship:* (p. 67)

There does seem to be some precedent to this opinion, then. Incidentally, Richard Carew was a native of South East Cornwall and not particularly enamoured with his fellow Cornishmen whereas Mark Stoye is an Englishman from Devon with a great affinity for Cornwall. John Birkenhead was an Englishman from Cheshire with an affinity for anything that helped the King's cause.

A letter from King Charles I



- ▶ Letter written to the people of Cornwall in 1643
- ▶ Thanks for their support in the Civil War against so Potent an Enemy
- ▶ Charles was beheaded in 1649

To the Inhabitants of the County of Cornwall, A Letter of Thanks from King CHARLES I.

Of Ever Blessed Memory, Dated SEPT. 10. 1643. from SUDLY Castle.
CAROLUS REX,

WE are so highly sensible of the extraordinary Merits of Our County of Cornwall, of their Zeal for the Defence of our Person, and the Just Rights of Our Crown, in a time when We could contribute so little to Our own Defence, or to their Assistance; (in a time, when not only no Reward appeared, but great and probable Dangers were threatned to Obedience and Loyalty) of their Great and Eminent Courage and Patience in their Indefatigable prosecution of their great work against so Potent an Enemy, backt with so Strong, Rich and Populous Cities, and so plentifully furnished with Men, Arms, Money, Ammunition and Provisions of all kinds; and of the wonderful success with which it hath pleased Almighty God (though with the loss of some Eminent persons, who shall never be forgotten by Us to reward their Loyalty and Patience) by many strange Victories over their and Our Enemies, in despite of all humane probabilities and all imaginable disadvantages; that as We cannot be forgetful of so great Deserts, so We cannot but desire to publish to all the World, and perpetuate to all time the memory of their Merits, and of Our Acceptance of the same. And to that end, We do hereby render Our Royal Thanks to that Our County in the most publick and lasting manner We can devise, Commanding Copies hereof to be Printed and published, and one of them to be read in every Church and Chapel therein, and to be kept for ever as a Record in the same, that as long as the History of these Times, and of this Nation shall continue, the Memory of how much that County hath merited from Us and Our Crown, may be derived with it to Posterity.

The Gear Rout: Cornwall's last stand?



- ▶ Last of the six uprisings held in 1648
- ▶ Some 500 men involved against Parliamentarians
- ▶ Defeated, some rebels threw themselves into the sea

In 1642 some 10,000 men had risen in arms to form a Cornish Royalist army. Things would not look quite so healthy a mere six years later. The rebels' strongholds on this occasion were in the peninsulas of Penwith and the Lizard in the far west of Cornwall where the Cornish language was strongest.

In May of 1648, a potential uprising in Penzance had been put down by Parliamentary troops who killed 70 Royalist sympathisers. This led to some 500 men from Mullion and, inevitably of course, St. Keverne, marching on the nearby town of Helston. They were confronted on their way there and defeated by Parliamentary troops under the command of Sir Hardress Waller, one of the individuals who would sign Charles I's death warrant the following year.

The Gear Rout itself took place near Helford and marked the last of the Cornish uprisings. Nearly all of the rebel leaders were former Royalist officers, showing that this was no 'peasants revolt', but an uprising led by ex-Royalist soldiers with considerable local support. Imposition of taxes, as in 1497, was once again held to be at least partly responsible for the uprising. This of course is a common factor and there is nothing particularly Cornish about it, but some (Stoyle in particular) have suggested that there may have been an ethnic element to it, with the Cornish wishing to show solidarity with the Welsh, who were involved in similar uprisings at the same time. This is thought to be based upon a lingering resentment of English domination, as well as a protest against excessive centralisation. The particular nature of this revolt is held to be a factor in its failure.

In the aftermath of the Gear Rout, a group of rebels, who had been pushed back to the sea, '*were so desperate, that scorning mercy, they joyned hand in hand and violently run themselves into the ocean, where they perished in the waters*' (Stoyle, p. 125). Perhaps, with everything that they held dear seemingly lost, they may simply have felt they had nothing left to live for.

The 1650s subsequently saw Cromwell abolish two institutions dear to Cornish hearts, namely the Duchy and the Stannary Parliament. Following his death in 1658, however, these would be restored following the Restoration of the monarchy under Charles II.

Image: A stretch of the Cornish coast near Mullion on the Lizard peninsula.