

Fragments and Remains



- ▶ Dictionaries, notes and collections
- ▶ Rhymes, verses, numbers
- ▶ Vocabulary in local dialect
- ▶ Place and personal names

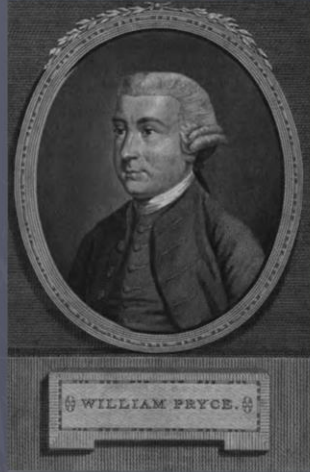
The nineteenth century was a period of ‘remembrance’ for the Cornish language. This was in many ways the language’s ‘lost century’. Having ceased to be spoken as a living community vernacular, but not yet revived, fragments of it clung on in the form of individual sayings and expressions remembered ‘off by heart’ (without the speaker necessarily knowing what the words meant) and the fossilised remains of Cornish place and personal names.

Scattered individuals and families were found to be aware of rhymes, phrases and vocabulary, and have an ability to count in the old language, usually up to 20. Several hundred Cornish words were noted as being still in use in the 1860s, albeit within an otherwise English language context. Other words of Cornish origin would be absorbed into English as ‘local dialect’ forms in the same way that the English spoken in the former South Wales coalfield has resulted in ‘Wenglish’.

The spelling of place names reflected the changes that had happened to the language over the centuries. Often, Cornish place names were spelt in an Anglicised orthography, and due to their familiarity, some revivalists would later argue the case for ‘signpost Cornish’ to be used as the basis for a spelling system.

The continuity of these fragments have led some to claim that the Cornish language never actually died completely, although this depends on the definition of that word, as, if the continued use of set phrases in specific circumstances counts as showing the continued existence of a language, then a similar case could be put forward for arguing that Latin, for instance, has never died either.

William Pryce: *Archaeologia Cornu-Britannica* (1790)



- ▶ An Essay to Preserve the Ancient Cornish Language
- ▶ Published in 1790, the year of his death
- ▶ Great-nephew of William Borlase

We do not know exactly when William Pryce was born, but he was the son of a doctor from Redruth, and baptised in 1735. He produced two works, the first, *Mineralogia Cornubiensis*, was published in 1778 and, as the title suggests, was '*a treatise on minerals, mines and mining*', particularly in Cornwall, but had nothing to do with the Cornish language.

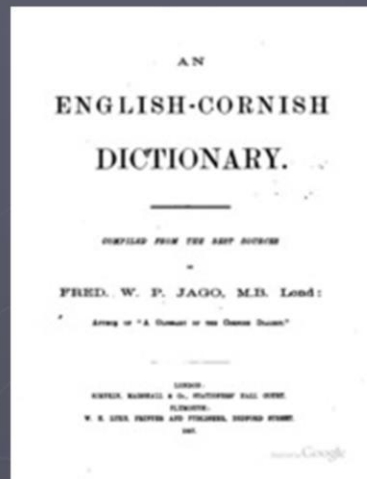
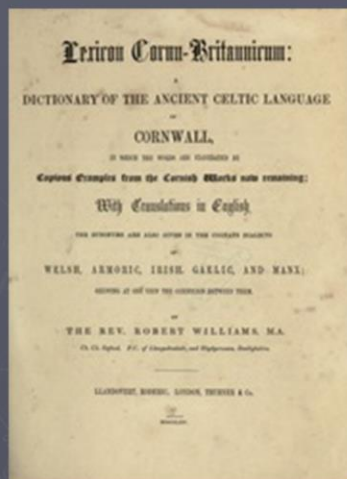
He was not a linguist (a point frequently made by his critics) but nevertheless published in 1790 the *Archaeologia Cornu-Britannica*, subtitled *An Essay to Preserve the Ancient Cornish Language*. 'Preserve' here doubtless meant 'record' rather than preserve as a community language, given that Cornish was probably starting its last decade as a living vernacular at the time of the book's publication. The longer, full title, notes that it contains '*the rudiments of that dialect, in a Cornish grammar and Cornish-English vocabulary, compiled from a variety of materials which have been inaccessible to all other authors*'.

'Inaccessible' is a little bit misleading here, as what Pryce actually did was discover the unpublished notes of William Gwavas and Thomas Tonkin, and then publish them, without acknowledgement, as if they were his own work (PBE, p. 122), alongside a version of Edward Lhuyd's Cornish grammar.

Pryce was not found out until 70 years after his death, when philologist Louis Lucien Bonaparte (Napoleon's nephew, and the man responsible for the memorial stone to Dolly Pentreath) came across Gwavas and Tonkin's original manuscripts.

Image: a 1778 engraving of William Pryce by James Basire. His book *Mineralogia Cornubiensis* was published that same year.

Dictionaries and Glossaries: Robert Williams (1865) and Fred Jago (1882)



Alongside William Pryce's effort, several others attempted to record as much as possible of the Cornish language for posterity or for more serious study. Two such attempts were made by Robert Williams and Fred Jago. In 1865, Robert Williams published his *Lexicon Cornu-Britannicum*. Williams was one of those who had little time for Pryce, and so stated at the start of his own volume that Pryce's vocabulary was '*so full of errors that the Editor soon felt satisfied that Pryce was entirely ignorant of the Cornish Language, and had no acquaintance whatever with the Welsh.*' Of course, on discovering that this was actually the work of Tonkin and Gwavas, Louis-Lucien Bonaparte, writing the foreword, found it necessary to backpedal a little by noting that this did not mean that Tonkin and Gwavas were entirely ignorant of Cornish also, but rather that '*neither of these two Cornish gentlemen had any pretensions to a knowledge of Welsh, but for the Cornish of the 18th century, I am satisfied that they were the very best authorities of their time, and ought not to be despised by Welsh linguists.*' Williams was a Welsh vicar and 'gentleman scholar', who discovered the only extant copy of *Beunans Meriasek* at Peniarth Library. As Williams had criticised Pryce, so was his work itself criticised by several Celtic scholars.

Fred Jago was of Cornish descent but lived much of his life next door in Plymouth. His *Ancient Language and Dialect of Cornwall* was published in Truro in 1882. It contains various chapters on the decline of the Cornish language, specimens of the language and dialect, a glossary and so on. At the end of his foreword he notes '*that even now the Cornish people are speaking a large number of Celtic, or Ancient Cornish words, without being very much aware of it. The Cornish dialect may be called the shadow, or penumbra of the ancient language;*'

Although clearly enamoured with the Cornish language, Jago's objective was not so much its resurrection as a living tongue but in a more scholarly fashion as implied by his question on page 28: *Is not the ancient tongue worth preserving just as, but not perhaps to the same extent as Greek and Latin?*

Serious attempts at reviving Cornish as a spoken community language would have to wait until the twentieth century.

Numbers and counting

► 'Breel! Mata!

► Idn

► Deaw

► Try

► Pedwar

► Pymp

► Whea

► All scawd!

In the 1860s:

► One family able to count up to twenty and use Cornish words

► Counting of mackerel by fishermen recorded in 1865 (opposite)

Remembering numbers by rote in a forgotten language has quite a tradition to it in many parts of Britain. Interestingly, these numbers are thought to have their origins in the Brittonic languages, even in places where these have long since been displaced by English. The well-known *yan, tan, tethera, pethera* method of counting sheep, for instance, is known across large parts of northern England and is often linked to the old Brittonic language of Cumbria – which, of course, is in origin the same word as Cymru. Nevertheless, some areas where variants of this system are used extend as far east as Lincolnshire, where English was established much earlier. The rote aspect means that these words, often considerably altered over time, can be remembered when other vestiges of the language have disappeared. As they are numbers, their meaning is also still clear.

In the case of Cornish, the Brittonic language in question is obvious, and some examples of counting in the Cornish language were recorded in the 1860s. One source, from 1864, refers to a family in Paul *'who can recite the Cornish numerals up to 20'* (PBE, p. 127) alongside, perhaps more impressively, a compiled list of 404 *'Cornish words in common use'* (ibid).

In the following year, the extract shown in the slide above was sent to the *Gentleman's Magazine* by one J. H. Nankivell of Penzance. It translates as 'A mackerel! His fellow, 1,2,3 4,5, 6, all the shoal!). The use of *'pedwar'*, which is identical to the modern Welsh numeral, looks a little out of place, as it had as far back as the medieval period become in Cornish *'peswar'* and by the modern period *'pager'* (with the 'g' pronounced like a 'j'). All the others, though, are easily recognisable as modern Cornish numerals.

Due to their repetitive nature, this tradition of remembering numbers in Cornish outlived the nineteenth century, and was recorded in Mullion as recently as 1925 (PBE, p. 128)

The Legendary John Davey

The Cranken Rhyme:

A grankan, a grankan,
A mean o gowaz o vean;
Ondez parc an venton,
Dub trelowza vean.
Far Penzans a Maragow,
Githack mackewee,
A githack macrow,
A mac trelowza varrack.

- ▶ Lived during the 19th century (1812-1891)
- ▶ Knowledge of the traditional language
- ▶ Only known source for the Cranken Rhyme

John Davey was a farmer and sometime schoolteacher from Boswednack near Zennor. He learned whatever Cornish he knew from his father. There is a memorial to him in Zennor parish churchyard noting him as *"the last to possess any traditional considerable knowledge of the Cornish Language"*. Exactly how much knowledge that amounted to is open to debate. According to the first major language revivalist, Henry Jenner, it meant little more than a few words and phrases. It is a great pity, and not a little surprising, that Jenner, as he could have done, never took the trouble to visit Davey and find out.

Although it is possible that Davey learned what he knew from books such as Pryce's *Archaeologia Cornu-Britannica*, the Cranken Rhyme, shown in the slide above, is not known from any other source, suggesting that this knowledge was original. It was recorded by a local historian from St. Ives, named J. Hobson Matthews. Below is an English translation:

Oh Cranken, Oh Cranken!

Beyond the field of the well,

you give but little,

-only three shoots by the stone.

The road between Penzance and Marazion

is very green,

and a whole lot fresher,

- three shoots grow for every passing horseman.

It is not believed that Davey was a fluent speaker along the lines of Dolly Pentreath or William Bodinar, but it does seem as if he had some knowledge of the language and an understanding of the meaning of what he was saying. It is also worth noting that there are believed to be some individuals with a knowledge of Cornish who outlived even Davey, all of them based west and north of Penzance towards St. Ives, rather than south of it towards Newlyn, Paul and Mousehole as might be expected.

Cornwall's place-names



- ▶ Brown Willy (photo) is not what it seems
- ▶ Most place-names are Cornish
- ▶ English names fairly common and also some French
- ▶ Bilingual names are rare

As noted by Oliver Padel in his *'A Popular Dictionary of Cornish Place-Names'*, it is very important *'not to trust the modern forms of names'* (p. 3) as these can be changed over the years by people who do not understand their original meaning, especially if that was in another language. For example, the highest point in Cornwall is the rather unfortunately named Brown Willy, on Bodmin Moor, but these words are not of English origin, deriving instead from the Cornish *Bronn Wennili*, meaning 'Swallow Hill'. Cornish, like Welsh, uses mutations, one form of which requires dropping the **g** from words beginning with **gw** and so we have *Bronn* (*Bron* in Welsh) meaning 'hillside' and *Gwennili* (*Gwenoliaid* in Welsh) meaning 'swallows', with the second word having undergone mutation.

Although the meaning of a place-name can be obvious, sometimes, confirming the original meaning can be an arduous task requiring the checking of the oldest records possible. Understanding elements which are still in common usage, such as 'Newcastle' or 'Portsmouth' is relatively easy, but knowing the meaning of, say, 'Birmingham' 'Exeter' or 'Carlisle' is not immediately obvious.

Place-names in the Cornish language can be found all over Cornwall, although they are rare in two small areas in the extreme east, around Bude and Callington, where the place-names are more like those of Devon than the rest of Cornwall. This suggests early enclaves of Anglo-Saxon settlement.

The place-names of Cornwall, then, can give us an insight into the history of Cornwall itself and the languages spoken there. Cornish, English or French names imply Cornish, English or French speakers, and in the case of the Cornish language, we can actually see examples of how the language changed over time, as *penn* becomes *pedn*, *nant* becomes *nans*, *bod* becomes *bos* and so on. Places further east tend to have older forms because the language died out there first.

Image: Brown Willy, at 420m /1380ft, the highest point in Cornwall (courtesy of Stephen Dawson)

Cornish place-name elements

▶ Bronn (Bron/Hill)	▶ Melin (Melin/Mill)
▶ Carn (Carn/Crag)	▶ Nans (Nant/Valley)
▶ Chy (Tŷ/House)	▶ Pen (Pen/Head or End)
▶ Dinas (Dinas/Fort)	▶ Pol (Pwll/Pool or Cove)
▶ Dour (Dŵr/Water)	▶ Pons (Pont/Bridge)
▶ Eglos (Eglwys/Church)	▶ Ros (Rhos/Moorland)
▶ Ennis (Ynys/Island)	▶ Sans (Sant/Saint)
▶ Goon (Gwaun/Downs)	▶ Towan (Tywyn/Dunes)
▶ Kelly (Gelli/Grove)	▶ Tre (Tre/Settlement)
▶ Lan (Llan/Church Site)	▶ Treath (Traeth/Beach)

Cornish place-name elements share their origins with Welsh and Breton. We have already seen *Bronn Wennili*. In the slide above we have some common elements, with their Welsh and English equivalents in brackets, and below we have some examples (as usual, the spelling may not be consistent):

Carn: *Carn Brea* (Hill Crag), *Carnyorth* (Roe Deer Crag).

Chy: *Chyandour* (House of the Water), *Chysauster* (House of Silvester).

Dinas: *Castle-an-Dinas* (Hill-fort Castle), *Pendennis* (Fort Headland).

Dour: *Chyandour* (House of the Water), *Dour Conor* (Conor's Water).

Eglos: *Egloshayle* (Estuary Church), *Treneglos* (Church Settlement).

Ennis: *Carines* (Island Hut), *Porthennis* (Island Harbour – the Cornish name for Mousehole).

Goon: *Goonbell* (Distant Downs), *Goonhilly* (Hunting Downs).

Lan: *Lanreath* (Retha's Church-site), *Lansallos* (Salwys' church-site) – these are named after people.

Melin: *Portmellon* (Mill cove), *Melenowith* (New Mill).

Nans: *Nanstallon* (Valley of the River Alan), *Trenance* (Valley settlement).

Pen: *Pendogget* (Head of the Two Woods), *Pentire* (Headland).

Pol: *Polgooth* (Goose Pool), *Polyphant* (Toad's Pool).

Pons: *Ponsanooth* (Bridge of the Water-course), *Ponsmur* (Great Bridge).

Ros: *Rosenannon* (Ash-tree Moor), *Rosemullion* (Milyan's Moor).

Sans: *Penzance* (Saint's Headland),

Towan: *Carn Towan* (Sand-dune Crag), *Porthtowan* (Sand-dune Cove).

Tre: *Tresco* (Elder Tree Settlement), *Trewavas* (Winter Dwelling Settlement).

Treath: *Portreath* (Beach Cove), *Tywardreath* (House on the Beach).

Cornish personal names

- | | |
|----------|------------|
| ► Boys: | ► Girls: |
| ► Branok | ► Chesten |
| ► Cador | ► Gwennol |
| ► Gerens | ► Jennifer |
| ► Goron | ► Kelynen |
| ► Jago | ► Keresen |
| ► Jory | ► Lowena |
| ► Jowan | ► Morwenna |
| ► Piran | ► Tamsyn |
| ► Pasco | ► Tegen |
| ► Ruan | ► Wenna |

In the slide above there are some examples of Cornish names, with some additional notes below:

Branok (a name based on the Cornish word for Raven), **Cador** (the name of a legendary Duke of Cornwall), **Gerens** (Cornish form of Geraint), **Goron**, (a saint's name as in the place Gorran Haven), **Jago** (Cornish for James), **Jory** (Cornish for George), **Jowan** (Cornish for John), **Piran** (Cornwall's patron saint), **Pasco** (Cornish for Easter) **Ruan** (another saint's name)

Chesten (Cornish for Christine), **Gwennol** (Cornish for Swallow), **Jennifer** (Cornish form of the name Guinevere), **Kelynen** (Cornish for Holly), **Keresen** (Cornish for Cherry), **Lowena** (Cornish for Joy), **Morwenna** (Cornish for Maiden), **Tamsyn** (Cornish form of Thomasina), **Tegen** ('Fair One' often spelt as Tiegán with different pronunciation), **Wenna** (White or Blessed, also seen as Gwenna)

As for '**Demelza**', the name made popular through the fictional character in William Graham's *Poldark*, this is actually a place-name in origin, Demelza being a hamlet in the parish of St Wenn (which is itself named after Wenna/Gwenna) near Bodmin. It was not used as a personal name before these novels, which were written between 1945 and 2002. The meaning of Demelza is not clear, but it is clearly Cornish in origin. The most common Cornish name in regular use, though, is almost certainly Jennifer. Some common Cornish surnames include Chegwin, Chenoweth, Penhaligon and Trevithick.

Due to their survival into the present day, Cornish personal and place-names can be considered among the remaining fragments of the language. Anyone mentioning a Jennifer Ennis from Penzance, for instance, is actually speaking a little bit of Cornish, just as they would be speaking a little bit of Gaelic if talking about a Malcolm MacDonald from Kintyre. The Cornish language, however, was not used as a medium for conversation in the nineteenth century. Nevertheless, there were other distinctive aspects of Cornwall which maintained and reflected a sense of Cornish identity, and it is to these that we will now turn.