

From Boson to Bodinar

- ▶ Nicholas Boson: A few words about Cornish
- ▶ John Keigwin: Translation of King Charles' Letter
- ▶ Thomas Boson: Hymns Ancient and Modern
- ▶ John Boson: Letters to William Gwavas
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- ▶ William Bodinar: author of the last letter

We are now fully into the period of Modern Cornish. It will be described as 'Modern' rather than 'Late', as this is the norm with other languages (no-one describes Dickens' work as being in Late English for example, or the languages of today as Late French or Late Welsh and so on). It was also actually called Modern Cornish by those still promoting it at the turn of the eighteenth century (Gendall, p. 2).

As we have seen, Middle Cornish was entirely religious in content, and some of the modern writers wrote on religious matters too. William Rowe of Sancreed, for example, wrote translations of the Scriptures and the Book of Common Prayer into Modern Cornish of a high standard in the seventeenth century. However we now also have secular prose on a whole range of issues relating to everyday life, and in this unit, we shall look at a selection of works written down by Cornish speakers and learners in the late seventeenth and eighteenth centuries. The earliest of these date from about 1660 and were produced by Nicholas Boson and William Rowe, who were contemporaries. The latest, by William Bodinar, dates from 1776 and marks the last piece of original Cornish prose ever written when the language was still spoken, although, as Bodinar's letter informs us, not by very many people.

It should be noted that the authorship of some of these pieces cannot always be verified. For example, Nicholas Boson is generally credited with being responsible for *Daralla Jooan Chei a Horr* (which Lhuyd notes as being written in about 1660) but we cannot know this for certain. Similarly, William Gwavas and Thomas Tonkin were in regular correspondence, and some of the items credited to the one may actually be the work of the other.

There is no dispute, however, as to who wrote the two items in Cornish about Cornish, namely Nicholas Boson's *Nebbaz Gerriau* and William Bodinar's letter, which was written bilingually. There is an inherent sadness in these two pieces which, despite being separated by about a century or so, both record the gradual demise of Cornish as a living community language. These two accounts will therefore mark the beginning and the end of this unit.

Nicholas Boson (1624-1708): Nebbaz Gerriau dro tho Carnoack

- ▶ Gun tavas Carnoack eu mar pell gwadnez, uz na ellen skant quatiez tho e wellaz crefhe arta
- ▶ Rag me a hunnen ve gennez en collan an powna eu an Curnooack mouyha cowsez
- ▶ Na oravee drel an Kembrean gweel rah tho gwetha ge Tavaz
- ▶ Our Cornish tongue is so far weakened that we can hardly hope to see it strengthen again
- ▶ For I myself was born in the heart of the country where Cornish is most spoken
- ▶ I know not what the Welsh may attempt for the preservation of their tongue

Nicholas Boson (1624 – 1708) was the first of the Boson family to write in Cornish. Thomas Boson (1635 – 1719) was probably Nicholas' cousin, and John Boson (1655 – 1730) his son. All three are buried in Paul Parish churchyard, a couple of miles south of Newlyn and Penzance, where there is also a memorial to Dolly Pentreath, the (incorrectly) reputed last speaker of Cornish. Nicholas was not brought up to speak Cornish. He notes his mother's '*forbidding the servants and neighbours to talk to me otherwise than in English*' (PBE, p. 85). However, it was clearly of great interest to him, as he not only learned it, but wrote in it and about it as well, producing three important works in total.

The Duchess of Cornwall's Progress is in English and Cornish with a bit of Latin thrown in, and *Jooan Chei a Horr* will be discussed in greater detail on the next slide. However, in addition, in about 1675 he wrote his *Nebbaz Gerriau dro tho Carnoack* (A few words about Cornish), giving his view of the status of the language at the time. There is an English translation of it in Oliver Padel's *The Cornish Writings of the Boson Family* (pp. 35-37).

His appraisal of its prospects was (correctly) bleak and, some 25 years before Lhuyd, he notes the areas where the language was still spoken in Penwith and Kerrier. Even here, '*there is more English spoken than there is of Cornish*'. He adds that '*if there will be anything done to save Cornish, it must be by those that are born here*', a sentiment echoed some 240 years later by Henry Jenner. He didn't see much hope for Breton in the face of French either, and was unsure, although rather less pessimistic, about the future of Welsh. The content strays from the point here and here, but his assessment of the fate of all three Brittonic languages, and Cornish in particular, was eerily accurate.

Nicholas Boson: Jooan Chei a Horr

- ▶ En Termen ez passiez
thera Trigaz en St. Levan;
Dean ha Bennen en Tellar
creiez chei a Horr
- ▶ Ha an Weale a Kothaz
scant: Ha meth a Dean Da
an Wreag; mee a vedn
moze da whelaz weale da
weele; ha whi el dendal
gose bounans obba
- ▶ In tyme that is passed,
there Dwelt in St. Levan a
man & woman in a place
called The House of a
Ramm.
- ▶ And the worke did fall
scarce; & saith the man to
his wife; I will goe to looke
for worke to doe; & you
can earne your living here.

Daralla Jooan Chei a Horr is a traditional folk story, also found in other languages, but written in Cornish in about 1660. The story tells of a young man looking for work and learning three points of wisdom from his employer while working for him. Nicholas Boson wrote the first fourteen verses down, but taught the whole story to his son John, who recited it to Edward Lhuyd. The entire 46 verses are written in Lhuyd's *Archaeologia Britannica* (pp. 251-253) in his phonetic script, with a Welsh translation of it opposite. This phonetic script enables us to overcome some of the inconsistencies of the different orthographies used by Cornish writers of the time. In the specific case of *Jooan Chei a Horr*, for example, Nicholas Boson uses **chei** for both 'house' and 'they' in Cornish, whereas Lhuyd uses **tshei** for the former and **dzhei** for the latter. This tells us that the 'ch' in 'house' is pronounced as in the English words 'chip' or 'chat' while the 'ch' in 'they' is pronounced like the 'dge' in the English words 'bridge' or 'ledge'.

The first two verses are shown with an English translation in the slide above. This particular translation was written in John Boson's handwriting. The location of Ram's House (which is actually 'House of **the** Ram' rather than 'House of a Ramm' as per John's translation) can be precisely located to Trengothal Farm. St. Levan, where a field-name was recorded as Chyanhor in 1840 (Padel p. 22).

A link has been provided on Moodle to a translation of the first fourteen verses.

John Keigwin (1641-1716)

- ▶ En Tavaz Greka,
Laten ha'n Hebra'
En Frenkock ha
Carnoack deskes
dha, Gen ol an
Gormola Brez ve
dotha, Garres ew ni,
ha Neidges
Ewartha.
- ▶ In Greek & Latine &
in Hebrew Tongue,
in Ffrench & Cornish
mighty strong, With
all the glory of his
mind – Is chang'd &
left us here behind.

John Keigwin was born at Mousehole, just south of Penzance. He was William Scawen's nephew (his mother, Elizabeth, was Scawen's sister) and so he would no doubt have had a head start as far as developing an interest in the language was concerned. After his uncle's death he became the 'senior' member of a group of enthusiasts who were keen to promote everything Cornish. This group included Thomas Boson, John Boson, William Gwavas, Thomas Tonkin, Oliver Pender, and, the baby of the group, William Borlase. For some reason, it did not seem to include Nicholas Boson, perhaps for reasons of ill health, but that is speculation.

It appears that Keigwin was something of an amateur linguist, who translated *Pascon agan Arluth* (the Mount Calvary Poem) and the *Creacion of the World* into English. He also translated King Charles' letter to the people of Cornwall from 1643 into Cornish. He dabbled in other languages as well, including Greek, Latin, Hebrew and French (as well as English and Cornish of course).

Opinion is divided as to the standard of Keigwin's writing, which was praised in the eighteenth century as being 'profound and complete' by Edward Lhuyd and William Borlase (Jenner, p. 19), only to be criticised in the twentieth by Henry Jenner and Robert Morton Nance. John Boson, who wrote his epitaph on 20 April 1716, clearly agrees with his contemporaries. The epitaph, along with the English translation also written by John Boson, are shown in the above slide. (Padel, p. 59)

E.G. Retallack Hooper (1906-1998), the twentieth century Cornish writer (and founding member of Mebyon Kernow) considered Keigwin to be '*one of the most important and sadly maligned figures of the revivalist group*' (PBE, p. 111).

Thomas Boson (1635-1719)

- Gen Taz es en Nefe, benegaz eu de Hanou, grua de Guelaze dose, de both bo grues en Nore, pecare ha en Nefe....
- Our father who art in Heaven, hallowed be thy name, thy Kingdom come, thy will be done on Earth, as it is in Heaven....

Thomas is the second eldest of the Boson family's Cornish writers. We cannot be entirely sure what his relationship was to Nicholas and John (who were almost certainly father and son). Henry Jenner in his *A Handbook of the Cornish Language* (p. 19) refers to Thomas as John's brother, and therefore Nicholas' son, which is highly unlikely unless Nicholas became a father at 11 years of age. Oliver Padel in *The Cornish Writings of the Boson Family* (p.5) notes that it is more likely that Thomas was a cousin.

Most of Thomas' writing was of 'hymns ancient and modern', which, although religious in nature, are more general than the content of the medieval plays. A version of '*All people that on earth do dwell*' has been provisionally credited to him while there is no doubt that he authored a Cornish version of The Lord's Prayer, Creed and Ten Commandments. These are part of a group of manuscripts collected by William Gwavas, 'translated into Cornish by Mr. Tho: Boson, Anno Dni 1710' (Padel, p. 41).

Five years earlier, Thomas had written a hurling ball inscription for William Gwavas. We can be sure of the year because it is included in the rhyme itself:

'An pelle arrance ma ve resse, gen mere Hurleyey, Creve ha brosse, do wella Gwavas an Deane gentle, an Kensa journa a messe Heddra an Centle, en plew Paule, in Cernow Teage, an Blooth Creste an Arleuth wheage, Meele Sithcans ha hanter deege'

The inscription was translated into English, with some mistakes, by Gwavas himself. It can be seen below with the errors removed:

This silver ball was given, by many Hurlers strong and great, to William Gwavas gent, the first day of October in the gathering, in the parish of Paule in Cornwall fair, in the year of our Sweet Lord Christ, one thousand seven hundred and half of ten (i.e. 1705)

John Boson (1655-1730)

- ▶ An Taz ny es en
Neu, benignas vo goz
Hanou, goz Glasgar
doz, goz Bonogath
vos gureys en Aor,
pykar en Neu....
- ▶ Our father who art
in Heaven, hallowed
be thy name, thy
Kingdom come, thy
will be done on
Earth, as it is in
Heaven....

John Boson was Nicholas Boson's son. He taught the Cornish language to William Gwavas and exchanged several (bilingual) letters with him about it. The part of the Lord's Prayer shown in the slide above was included in a letter sent to Gwavas on Christmas Day 1709, and it can be seen that there are numerous differences between this and the one written by Thomas Boson on the previous slide. This lack of standardisation presented problems for the later language revival.

Although John shared certain writings in common with Thomas, such as The Lord's Prayer, Creed and Ten Commandments, he also had his own individual themes. He wrote a rhyme about curing pilchards (an important industry in that part of the world) and offered moral advice both to friends and more generally. One of his most distinctive features, though, was the writing of epitaphs, especially for those he felt were a loss to Cornwall. We have already seen the one for John Keigwin, but he also wrote epitaphs for Oliver Pender, interestingly in Latin and English, and for James Jenkins, a Cornish poet of some skill. These are the words that he wanted to be placed on his tombstone:

Dadn an mean, ma deskes brose dean, en tavaz Kernooak Gelles, Termen vedn toaz, rag an Corf the thoras, Boz Tavaz Coth Kernow eu kelles.

Under this stone A might learned one is, in our Cornish Language gone. Att the Great assize, his body will rise, Cornwall forgets her native tongue.

John obviously taught Gwavas well, as he modified the original slightly

As for James Jenkins himself, sadly only a couple of his poems have survived. Here are a few lines:

Ma leeaz Greage, lacka vel Zeage, gwell gerres vell commerez, ha ma leeaz bennen, pocare an Gwennen, eye vedn gwrrez de gu Teeez, dandle peath an beaz.

In English:

There are many wives, worse than chaff, better left than taken, and there are many women, like the bees, they will help their men in earning worldly wealth.

William Gwavas (1676-1741)



- ▶ Che Dean Crêv, leb es war
Tîr, Inthow grâ, gen skians
fîr, ha'n Dew euthella,
vedn-ri, peth ew gwella ull,
rag whi.
- ▶ Thou strong man who on
earth dost dwell, today
with prudence act thou
well, and God supreme, for
thee will do, what he
thinks best is good for you.

Gwavas wrote the words in the above slide as a kind of maxim in rhyme for how to live one's life. He was not Cornish by birth, having being born in Sussex, but was clearly so by ancestry as Gwavas is a Cornish name meaning 'winter farm' (a contraction of *gwav* + *bos*). As well as a family name it is also a place name, and his father indeed had property in Penwith which he left to him.

Gwavas inherited the right to take tithe of fish landed at Newlyn and Mousehole. This brought him into long-term conflict with the local fishermen, who, ironically enough, would have been one of the best sources of fluent Cornish to be found anywhere at that time.

As well as writing in Cornish himself, he collected all manner of written materials in the form of verses, rhymes, letters, proverbs, epitaphs and so on, covering a much wider range of topics than the purely religious. His manuscripts were sent to the British Museum where they are still held as reference 'Add MS 28554' and noted as papers written between 1709 and 1736. His manuscripts total about 1400 words. Although, this may not sound like a lot, in the context of Modern Cornish, it is very valuable, not only as a source of material, but also for the nature of the content which throw light on a variety of social practices.

Having been taught Cornish by John Boson, Gwavas went on to himself teach it to Thomas Tonkin (1678-1742), who was briefly MP for Helston between 1714 and 1715. Although Tonkin did acquire a knowledge of Cornish, he was more historian than philologist. Like Gwavas, though, he put together a large collection of manuscripts which would be published after his death by William Pryce.

The portrait in the above image dates from 1873, some 132 years after Gwavas' death.

Some Selected Snippets

- ▶ Ês kês? Ês po nag ês?
Mar ês kês, drô kês; a
pô nag ês kês, dro'n
peth ês!
- ▶ An lavar coth yu lavar
guîr, bedh darn rê ver,
dhan tavaz rê **hîr**, mez
dên heb davaz a gollas
e dîr
- ▶ Is there cheese? Is
there, or isn't there? If
there's cheese, bring
cheese, and if there's
no cheese, bring what
there is!
- ▶ What's said of old will
always stand, too
longue a tongue, too
short a hand, but a
man without a tongue
has lost his land

The above and many other snippets were recorded in the late seventeenth and early eighteenth century by our handful of Cornish language enthusiasts. It would be wrong to call them 'revivalists' (a term which will be used later in a more accurate context) as the Cornish language had not yet died. There was a continuous line of enthusiasts from the likes of William Scawen William Rowe, Nicholas Boson and James Jenkins in the late seventeenth century, through John Keigwin to the early eighteenth century group of John Boson, William Gwavas, Thomas Tonkin, Oliver Pender and William Borlase. Each of these had various degrees of interest in the language, history and natural history of Cornwall, things which went together at the time to a greater extent than they do now.

In the middle of all this, in the year 1700, at the request of some of the above, came the scholar Edward Lhuyd. He spent four months learning Cornish from Nicholas Boson, James Jenkins and John Keigwin, and made an invaluable contribution to the Cornish language of the time. Incidentally, the circumflex diacritics above the vowels in the examples in the slide (e.g. *ês*, *drô*, *guîr*, *rê*, *dîr*, and so on), show that these particular versions were written down after his visit, as it was Lhuyd's idea to use these symbols to show the length of vowels. For all of this, he was not above criticism, as Oliver Pender stated to William Gwavas some years later:

*Rag na algia en clappia na screffa Curnoack pecarra why. Thera moy Gembrack peath rig ea gweele.
For he could neither talk nor write Cornish like you. It was more Welsh, what he did.*

The Cornish movement really needed a combination of serious scholars, enthusiastic antiquaries and local fluent speakers for it to stand on a firm foundation. It had all of these to an extent, put perhaps ultimately not enough of any of them. The last line on the above slide about the man without a tongue (which can of course mean 'language') losing his land is particularly ironic.

Dolly Pentreath (1692-1777): the last speaker of Cornish?



Dolly Pentreath (1692 – 1777) was something of a minor celebrity in her day, achieving fame as the reputed last speaker of Cornish. A memorial to her in Paul Parish churchyard dating from 1860 claims that she was the ‘*last person who conversed in the ancient Cornish*’ which she certainly was not.

Richard Polwhele (1760 – 1838), notes in his *History of Cornwall* that he had been told in 1797 by a local fisherman that she would talk for hours in Cornish with William Bodinar, who himself did not die until 1794. It is also known that Dolly was able to speak English, so, in all probability, both were bilingual, with Cornish being Dolly Pentreath’s first language and English William Bodinar’s. It may be that she was the last person who spoke Cornish as a mother tongue, but the added comment that ‘scarcely anyone’ could understand them implies that at least some other people could do so, and so this may not be the case either. The likelihood is that she was one of a very small number of fluent Cornish speakers in the late eighteenth century who was undoubtedly more comfortable in her first language than in English. She was infamous for swearing at people in Cornish and would sometimes be paid by other people just to speak it.

Image left: An engraved portrait of Dolly Pentreath produced in 1781, four years after her death.

Image right: The memorial stone to Dolly Pentreath dating from 1860 (courtesy of Pauline Eccles)

William Bodinar's Letter: The last word in Cornish.



- ▶ Letter written in 1776
- ▶ Learned Cornish from fishermen as a boy
- ▶ Hardly heard a word of English there
- ▶ Cornish is "all forgot with young people"

Image: William Bodinar's letter, dated 3 July, 1776 (the day before the United States' Declaration of Independence). The letter is short enough to be shown in full below with his own English translation:

Bluth vee ewe try egence a pemp.

My age is three score and five

Theara vee dean bodjack an puscas.

I'm a poor fisher man.

Me rig deskey Cornoack termen me vee mawe.

I learnt Cornish when I was a boy.

Me vee demore gen seara vee a pemp dean moy en cock

I have ben to sea with my father and five other men in the boat

Me rig scantlower clowes eden ger Sowsnack coves en cock rag sythen ware bar.

And have not heard one word of English speak in the boat for a week together.

Na rig a vee biscath gwellas lever Cornoack.

I never saw a Cornish book.

Me deskey Cornoack moas da maor gen tees coath.

I larnd Cornish going to sea with old men.

Na ges moye vel pager po pemp en dreav nye ell clapia Cornoack leben,

There is not more than four or five in our town can speak Cornish now,

poble coath pager egance blouth.

old people, four score years old .

Cornoack ewe oll neceaves gen poble younk.

Cornish is all forgot with young people.