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).

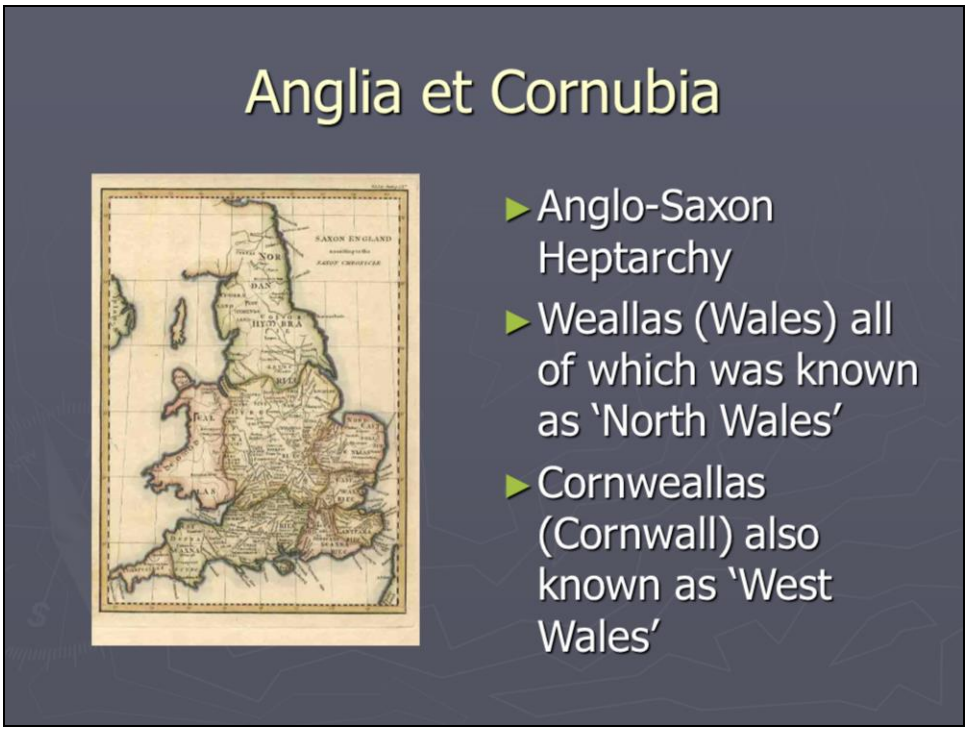
There are two different 'versions' of Cornwall, the Unitary Authority controlled by Cornwall Council (basically the Cornish mainland) and the traditional Ceremonial County which also includes the Isles of Scilly. This means that two sets of statistics exist for area and population, but, given that the 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.

Traditional industries in Cornwall include fishing, farming and tin-mining, although the last in particular has been replaced by tourism, a consequence of Cornwall's spectacular coastline and relatively mild climate.



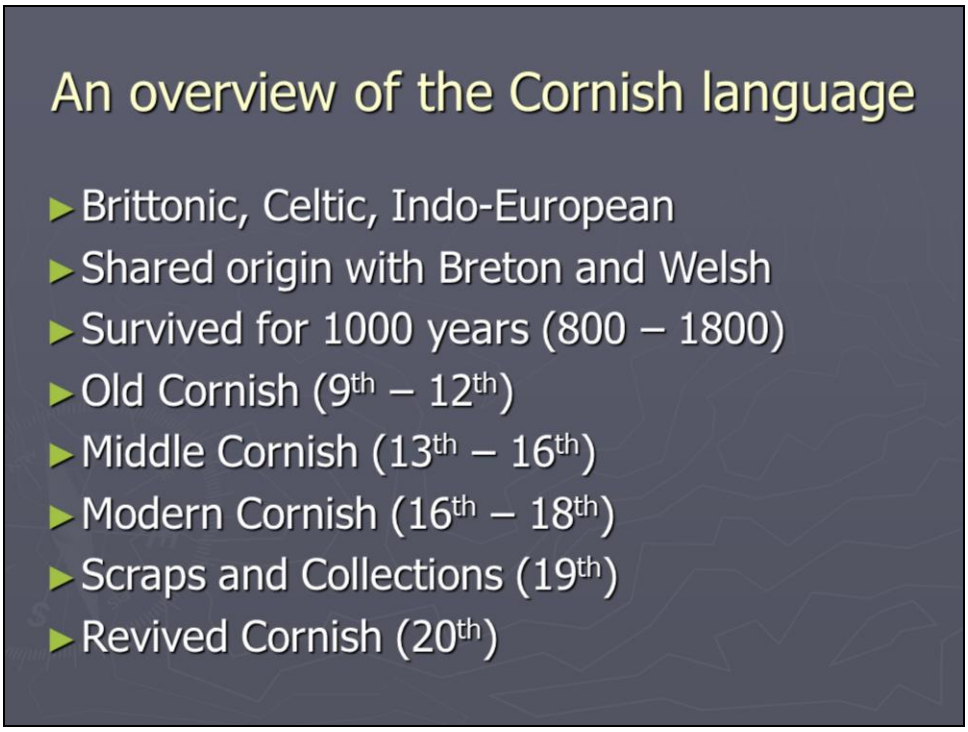

Although now officially an English county, Cornwall's relationship with England has always been rather ambiguous. Following the collapse of Roman Britannia, the Anglo-Saxon Heptarchy was established in the early medieval (pre-Norman) period, and consisted of seven primary kingdoms, namely Wessex, Sussex, 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)

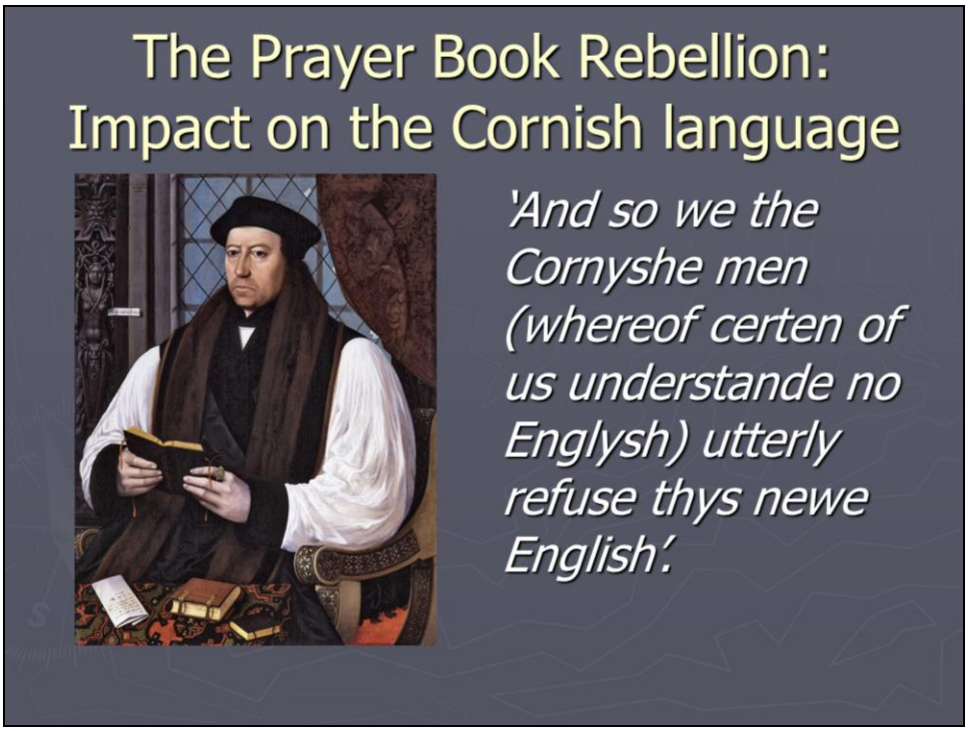



Cornish is an Indo-European language, but before it is an Indo-European language it is a Celtic language, and before it is a Celtic language it is a Brittonic language. Of these three, for the overwhelming majority of its lifetime as an individual language, its speakers would only have been aware of 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.

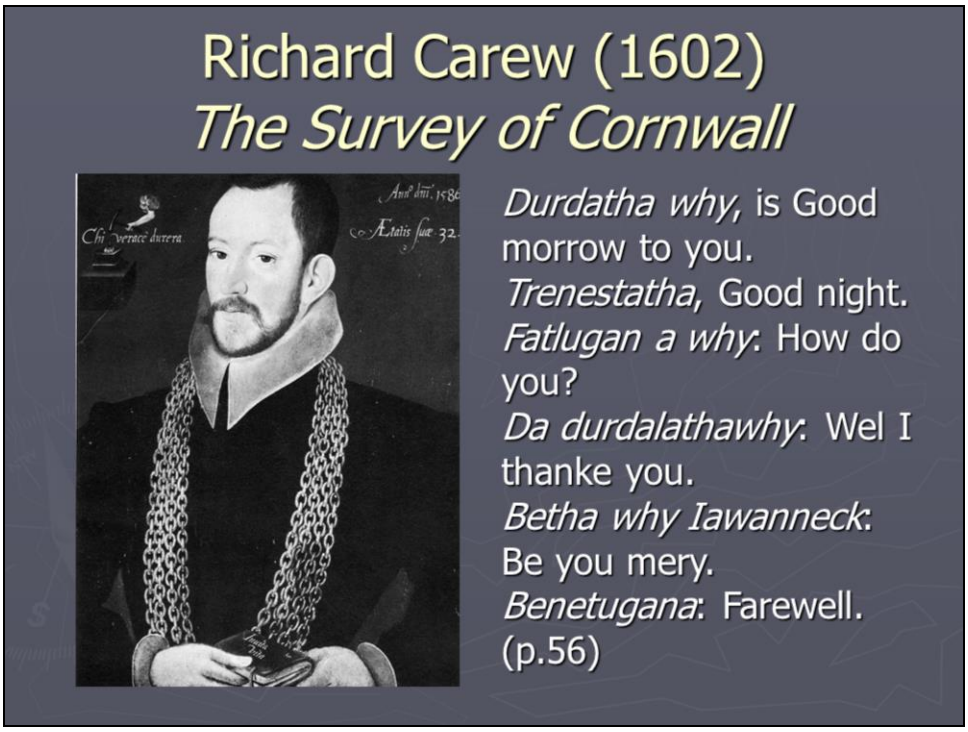



The imposition of the Book of Common Prayer in 1549 was opposed in many areas of the realm, but the Cornish, like the Welsh, had an additional reason to be upset, namely, the effect on their own languages.

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 though 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



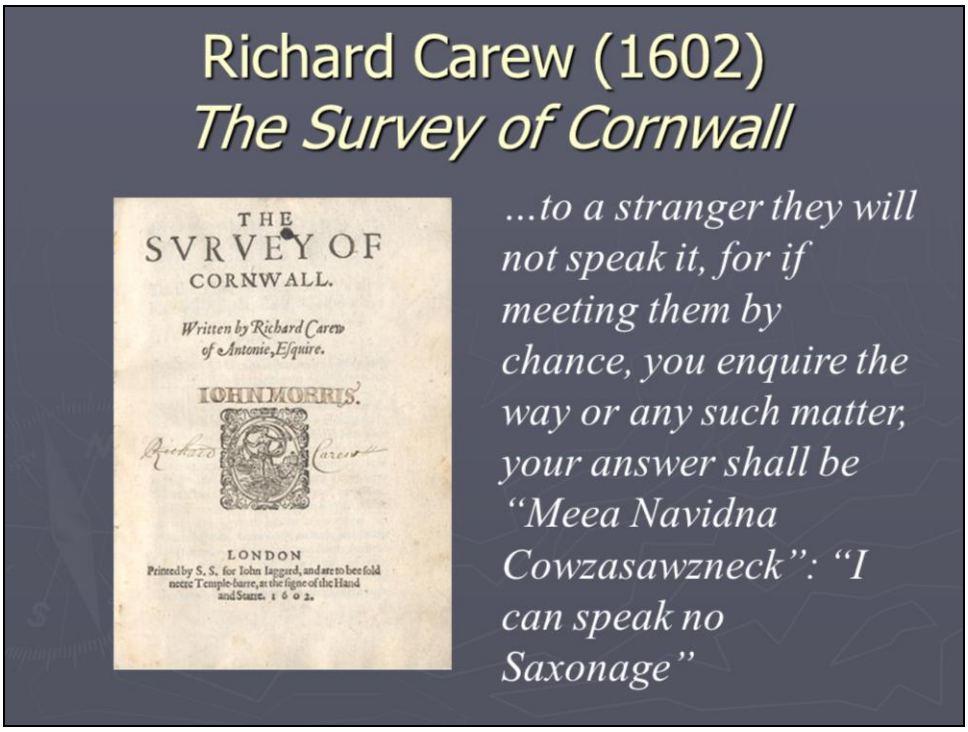

Richard Carew was a native of the parish of Antony in the east of Cornwall. From a prominent gentry family, he was a skilled translator, educated at Christ Church College, Oxford. During the 1580s he was both High Sheriff of Cornwall and MP for Saltash. He was a personal friend of Sir Walter Raleigh.

By the time of the publication of his *Survey* at the beginning of the seventeenth century, the Cornish language had all but disappeared from this part of Cornwall and Carew's not totally supportive stance towards it may be just as much to do with geography as with his association with the English establishment, reflecting an east/west split in attitude. A few years after the *Survey* he wrote *An epistle concerning the excellencies of the English tongue* which may leave us in little doubt as to his opinion of that language.

In the introduction to the first book, the words *the Cornish people call it Kernow* offer us the earliest example of what Cornwall was called by its native inhabitants. He also mentions the language's link to Welsh, showing us that the common ancestry of Welsh and Cornish (and Breton) was well known:

*'And as the Cornish names hold an affinity with the Welsh, so is their language deduced from the same source, and differeth onely in the dialect. But the Cornish is more easie to bee pronounced, and not so vnpleasing in sound, with throat letters, as the Welsh.'* (p. 55)

Again, separate words are written as one long word, but the similarities with Welsh can be seen. The **nesta** in tre**nesta**tha, for instance, is cognate with 'nos da' (good night) and the **benetu** of benetugana is cognate with bendith Duw (the blessing of God), as good bye in English comes from a contraction of 'God be with ye'.



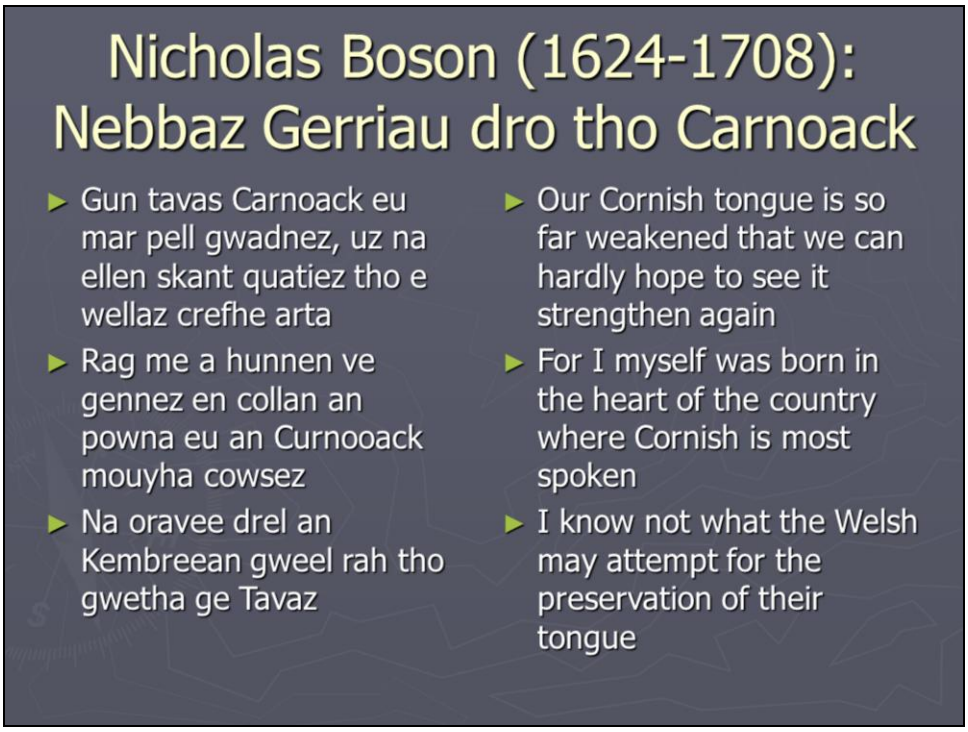

The above quote from page 56 of Carew's *Survey* refers to the reluctance of many Cornish to speak in English. Interestingly, the first part of the quote is nearer the mark than his translation at the end, as *'Meea na vidna cowz a sawzneck'* actually means **I will not** speak English, rather than **I can not**.

Here is the piece in its full context:

*Which termes, notwithstanding thogh they witnes their spite on the one side, yet retayne they as great a proofe of their deuotion on the other: for* ***the Lords Prayer, the Apostles Creed, and the ten commaundements, haue beene used in Cornish beyond all remembrance****. But the principall loue and knowledge of this language, liued in Doctor Kennall the Ciuilian, and with him lyeth buryed: for* ***the English speach doth still encroche vpon it, and hath driuen the same into the vttermost skirts of the shire.*** *Most of the Inhabitants can no word of Cornish; but very few are ignorant of the English: and yet some so affect their owne, as* ***to a stranger they will not speake it: for if meeting them by chance, you inquire the way or any such matter, your answere shal be, Meea nauidua cowzasawzneck, I can speake no Saxonage.*** *The English which they speake, is good and pure, as receyuing it from the best hands of their owne Gentry, and the Easterne Marchants: but they disgrace it, in part, with a broad and rude accent, and eclipsing (somewhat like the Somersetshire men) specially in pronouncing the names:* (p.56)

Carew also offers some information on the different types of status that Cornwall has 'enjoyed' over the years:

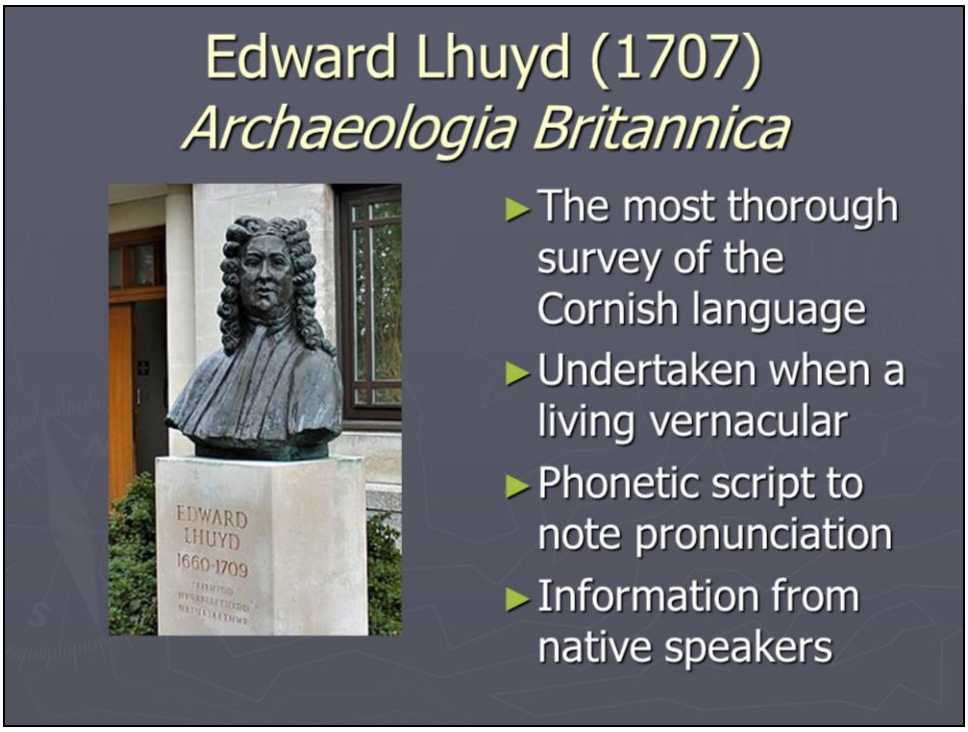
*Cornwall, as an entire state, hath at diuers times enioyed sundry titles, of a Kingdome, Principality, Duchy, and Earledome;* (p. 77)




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.

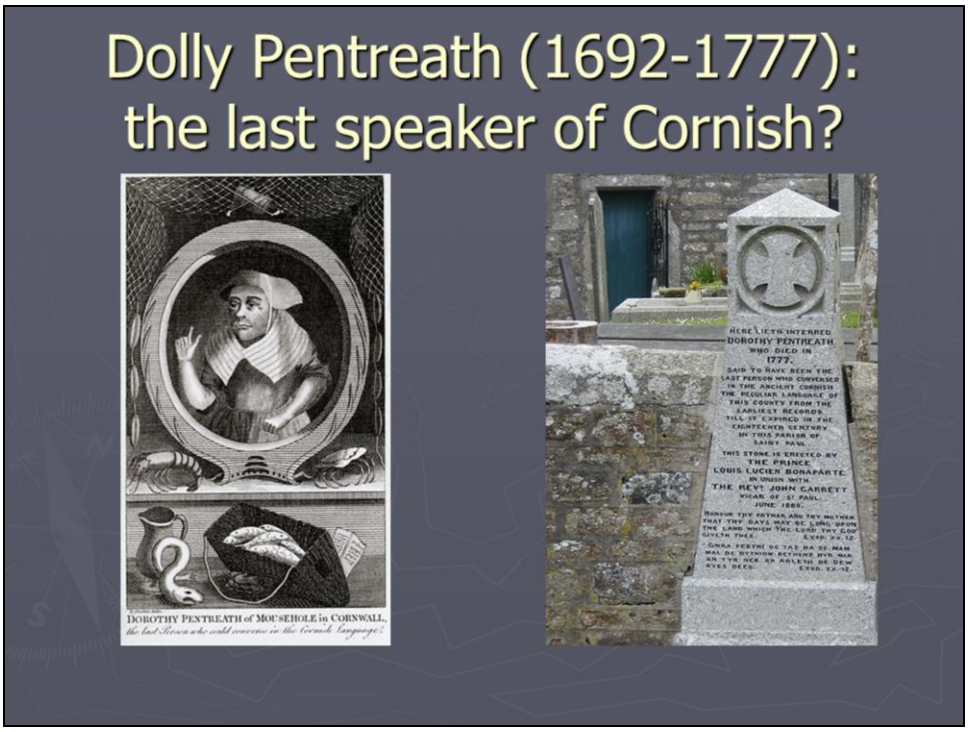
*The Duchess of Cornwall's Progress* is in English and Cornish with a bit of Latin thrown in, and *Jooan Chei a Horr* will be discussed in greater detail on the next slide. However, in addition, in about 1675 he wrote his *Nebbaz Gerriau dro tho Carnoack* (A few words about Cornish), giving his view 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 bleak and, some 25 years before the visit of Edward Lhuyd (over), 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.




Lhuyd made an in-depth study of the Cornish language based on his travels there, and meetings with Cornish speakers in the year 1700. This he put in his *Archaeologia Britannica*, and although the full publication is concerned with all of what we now call the Celtic languages, Lhuyd gives a thorough description of Cornish contained within over 30 very full pages, and consisting of an introduction written in Cornish to the people of Cornwall, a Cornish grammar, a traditional tale written in Lhuyd's phonetic script with a Welsh version opposite, and a list of all the parishes where Cornish was still spoken at the beginning of the eighteenth century. All of these were in Penwith and Kerrier (basically the Land's End and Lizard peninsulas).

The information contained within this survey is so important that it needs to be treated separately, and examples from it will be used in the next unit when looking at actual samples of the Cornish language from the period c. 1660 – 1800. One factor that needs to be singled out, however, is his General Alphabet for Cornish Pronunciation (p. 225). This was his International Phonetic Alphabet of the day, and without it, our knowledge of how the language sounded would be very much the poorer. Apart from the descriptions of the sounds, we also have the added benefit of the same symbols being used for other languages, as was the case with *Daralla Jooan Chei a Horr* (The Legend of Johnny Ram's House) where the Cornish and the Welsh were written side by side with the same symbols. Given that Welsh is thankfully still with us, we can use the symbols used for Welsh to confirm the sounds of Cornish. The script does look a little odd, but it was intended as a guide to pronunciation, not as a standard orthography.




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)

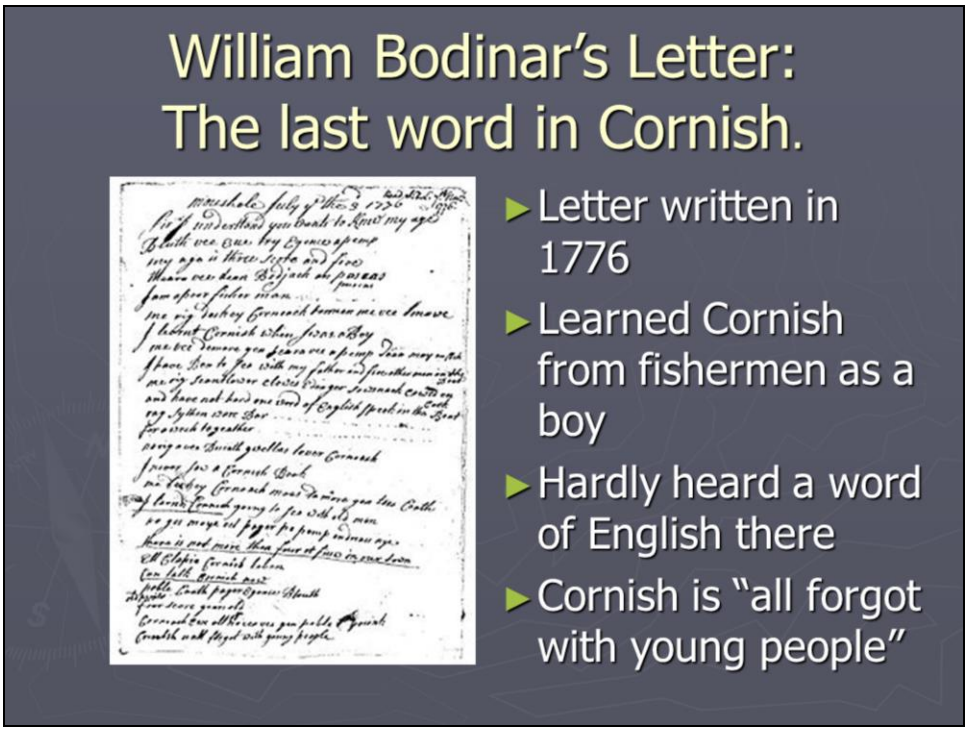



Image: William Bodinar's letter, dated 3 July, 1776 (the day before the United States' Declaration of Independence). The letter is short enough to be shown in full below with his own English translation:

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 cowes en cock rag sythen ware bar.
*And have not heard one word of English speak in the boat for a week togeather.*

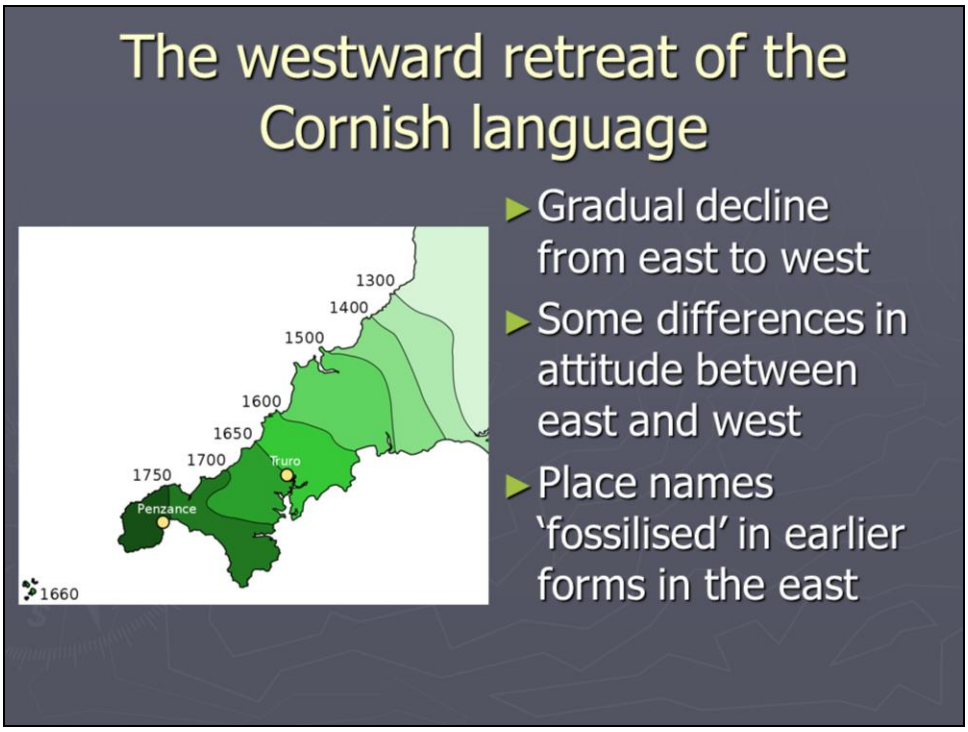
Na rig a vee biscath gwellas lever Cornoack.
*I never saw a Cornish book.*

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.*




There can be no doubt that the Cornish language did retreat westwards, as it ultimately lost its battle for survival, and did so in the far west. However the speed and extent of that loss are in dispute. Henry Jenner in his *A Handbook of the Cornish Language* claimed that Cornish was spoken as far east as the Tamar until the fifteenth century. Martyn Wakelin, on the other hand, in his *Language and History in Cornwall* has English in the eastern parts or Cornwall at a much earlier date, as early as the eighth century (pp. 204-205), with the two languages in competition from that point onwards. Ken George has attempted to trace the number of Cornish speakers through the centuries based on a gradual reduction in the proportion of Cornwall which was still Cornish speaking, painting a picture similar to the one in the map above in the slide (Payton, p.109), whereas Nicholas Williams literally moves in the opposite direction and goes even further than Jenner, stating that *'there is good evidence that until the Reformation, i.e. the middle of the sixteenth century, Cornish was probably spoken as far as the Tamar.'* (ibid). Finally, as we have seen, Edward Lhuyd in his *Archaeologia Brittanica* actually lists the areas where Cornish was still spoken in 1700 and these are all in Penwith and Kerrier (around the Land's End and Lizard peninsulas).

As happened in Wales, those who were Anglicised first (usually the gentry) often held a different, invariably negative, view of their fellow countrymen who had retained the vernacular. Elements of this can be seen in Carew's *Survey of Cornwall*. Mark Stoyle in his book *West Britons* regularly distinguishes (e.g. pp. 21-24) between the people of Cornish speaking west Cornwall and their more Anglicised compatriots further east, and there is a clear attempt here to link the speaking of Cornish with the rebellions that took place between the fifteenth and seventeenth centuries, seeing in them an attempt to maintain a distinctive Cornish identity.

*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.

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).

**Dowr:** *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).

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 Tiegan 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.

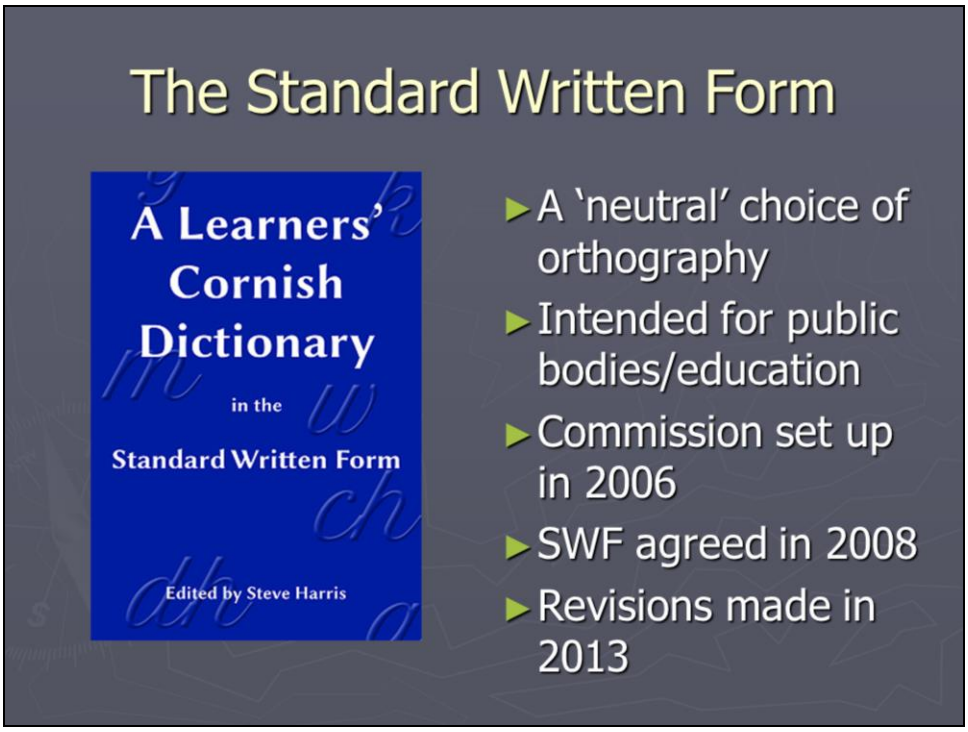
Due to their survival into the present day, Cornish personal and place-names can be considered among the remaining fragments of the language. Anyone mentioning a Jennifer Ennis from Penzance, for instance, is actually speaking a little bit of Cornish, just as they would be speaking a little bit of Gaelic 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.

The twentieth century saw the birth of a movement to revive Cornish as a spoken language. However, in recent years there have been more disagreements over how to write it than how to speak it. From the 1930s until the 1980s, the standardised form of Cornish in use for the purposes of language revival was well established. Nevertheless, cracks then began to appear and it became subject to criticism, leading to the development of rival factions arguing their own cases. Some kind of compromise clearly needed to be found, and a Standard Written Form eventually emerged from this.

It should be noted that Cornish is far from the only language to go through this process. The closely-related Breton language has it own rival spelling systems, not to mention the differences between British and American English. Irish went through a period of spelling reform in the mid twentieth century which was criticised for being artificial (a common accusation) and German has altered its orthography on several occasions. Changes almost always arouse strong emotions, but are felt to be necessary so that books, for example, especially in state schools, can be written in a standard format.

Cornish shares all the problems faced by these other languages, but also has a few additional ones of its own, such as what words to use for things which have come into existence since the death of the language. Should new terms be coined from Cornish elements, or should words like *radio, television* and *robot* simply be borrowed from other languages, as they, and many others, have been by English? English is in fact notoriously inconsistent in its spelling as testified by the combination *ough* in words like *cough, enough, though, through* and *bough*. It also retains silent or mute letters such as the *k* and *e* in knife. English, however, unlike Cornish, has a huge community of native speakers to support it. Revival brings with it extra challenges of its own.

Image: Photograph of Henry Jenner bearing the legend M.A. F.S.A. President 1916–1921, Royal Cornwall Polytechnic Society




In 2006, the Cornish Language Partnership set up a Commission with a view to establishing a Standard Written Form for the language. Despite being relevant solely to the Cornish language, the process was aided by the contributions of 'eminent language planners' from outside Cornwall. The project was part funded by the European Union and carried out on behalf of the then Cornwall County Council. Interested parties were invited to present submissions for consideration, and conferences were held in September 2006 and October 2007. An agreed document was ratified by the Cornish Language Partnership in May 2008. The specification document entitled *An Outline of the Standard Written Form of Cornish* was authored by Albert Bock and Benjamin Bruch was published in June 2008. It notes the following in Section 1:

*'The SWF is not meant to replace other spelling systems, but rather to provide public bodies and the educational system with a universally acceptable, inclusive, and neutral orthography. As such, it incorporates features drawn from a number of different Cornish orthographies, including Unified Cornish, Kernewek Kemmyn, Modern Cornish, Unified Cornish Revised, Kernowak Standard, and Kernewek Dasunys.'*

The document does not use these same names when referring to the spoken language, preferring instead the terms Revived Middle Cornish (RMC), Tudor Cornish (TC) and Revived Late or Modern Cornish (RLC). When trying to connect the spoken to the written, RMC is represented by Kernewek Kemmyn and the Unified varieties, while RLC means Modern Cornish. TC is somewhere between the two.

Agreement on a single standard meant, amongst other things, that funding for the Cornish language from the UK government and the European Union would be easier to attract. The SWF was reviewed in 2013 and a small number of modifications were made. In the meantime, Cornwall Council has since established a Cornish Language Office and produced a second language strategy for the period 2015-2025.