# The Life of Cornish


Crysten Fudge

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by

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# THE LIFE OF CORNISH

## Introduction

A concise but comprehensive survey of the early history of Cornish has been needed for a long time. *"The Life of Cornish"* describes every piece of Old and Middle Cornish that has come down to us; it examines the evidence of place-names in the history of Cornish to 1600, and discusses the literary and dramatic interest of the medieval Cornish plays. There are suggestions for further reading in the notes for those who wish to follow up the ideas and facts briefly introduced here.

*"The Life of Cornish"* is designed as part of a trilogy covering the complete history of Cornish. *"The Death of Cornish"* by P.A.S. Pool (Penzance 1975), tells the story from 1600 to 1800; and *"The Revival of Cornish,"* soon to be published, brings it up to the present day.

I am grateful to P.A.S. Pool for his help and encouragement.

## THE LIFE OF CORNISH

"I am always sorry when a language is lost," wrote Johnson, "because languages are the pedigree of nations." The pedigree of Cornish goes back a very long way. It is descended from British, the language brought to Britain in the Iron Age by invading Celts from the Continent. We know very little about British - only names and brief inscriptions remain - but these glimmers of the language enable us to trace the history of Cornish back to the beginnings of history in this island.

When Caesar came to Britain, British was spoken all over the lands we call Cornwall, Wales and England, and it continued to be the language of the great majority of Britons after the Roman Conquest.[1] However, Latin, the language of the conquerors, became the prestigious official tongue, the language of law and administration, the Church, and trade. Any Briton who wanted to participate in these activities had to learn Latin; and when these Britons spoke their own tongue, they transported into it a large number of Latin words. Most of the new Latin words found their way into the British spoken in the east and centre of Britain, since these were the highly populated areas where the chief commercial and administrative work of the colony centred. Yet many of the new terms spread to the fringes of Britain, and many common Cornish words derive from Latin. These are often words to do with the new culture - building terms, words used in commerce, administration and education; and while their sounds have changed over the centuries, their Latin parentage can still be clearly made out. The days of the week, *(de) Sul, Lun, Merth, Mergher, Yow, Gwener,* and *Sadorn* are Latin *(dies) Solis, Lunae, Martis, Mercurii, Iovis, Veneris* and *Saturni.* The months, *(mys) Genver, Whevrer, Merth, Ebrel, Me,* and *Est,* were Latin *(mensis) Januarii, Februarii, Martis, Aprilis, Maii* and *Augustii. Lyther* (a letter) is from *Iittera, dysky* (to learn) is from *disco; deneren* (a penny) is Latin *denarius. Fenester* (a window) is Latin *fenestra, porth* (a doorway) is *porta.*

Although the Roman Conquest made British the language of subjects, it enriched its vocabulary. The next invaders of Britain, however, were to have a devastating effect on British. The Anglo-

Saxons had begun to raid up and down the British coast in the third century A.D. By the fifth century they had become invaders, and after consolidating their forces in the east of Britain, they began a series of raids with the intention of winning as much land as possible from the Britons. Organised resistance was not the Britons' strongest point. The Saxons drove a wedge across the country and by the end of the sixth century, they had reached the Bristol Channel. The Britons were now divided into two with a barrier of Saxons between them. The Welsh[2] of Wales and the "West Welsh" of Cornwall and Devon (Dumnonia) could no longer communicate freely with each other, and their separation was soon reflected in their language. Until this time, the language spoken in the west and south-west of Britain was homogenous. There were probably differences of dialect, but a speaker would have been understood over the whole region.[3] Now that the Saxons stood between the Welsh and the 'West Welsh,' the languages of the two areas began to diverge into the early forms of Welsh and Cornish. From the end of the sixth century, we can begin to talk about a Cornish language as it evolved from British into a dialect distinguishable from Welsh.

While the Saxons were celebrating their victories in the east of Britain, the Britons were fleeing in terror across the sea to the west. The land in which these refugees settled was named after them "Little Britain," or Brittany. The outcome of these migrations - the close linguistic and sentimental ties between Cornwall and Brittany - is clear, and manifest to our own day. Yet certain aspects of the colonisation of Brittany are very puzzling. We know that Britons began to escape to Brittany in the fifth century A.D.[4] We know, too, that most of the emigrants must have come from Cornwall and Devon, since Breton was, at this stage, practically identical to Cornish.[5] But the Saxons did not begin to threaten the Devon border until the start of the seventh century; and it seems unlikely that the Britons, no matter how much they feared the Saxons, would have anticipated them by a couple of centuries! Two theories have been put forward to explain the discrepancy between the start of the migrations and the Saxons' entry into Devon. Nora Chadwick agrues[6] that it was not the Saxons who were inspiring such terror in the Britons, but Irish raiders. The Irish had colonised parts of the southwest of Wales and were using these as springboards for aggressive forays into Cornwall and



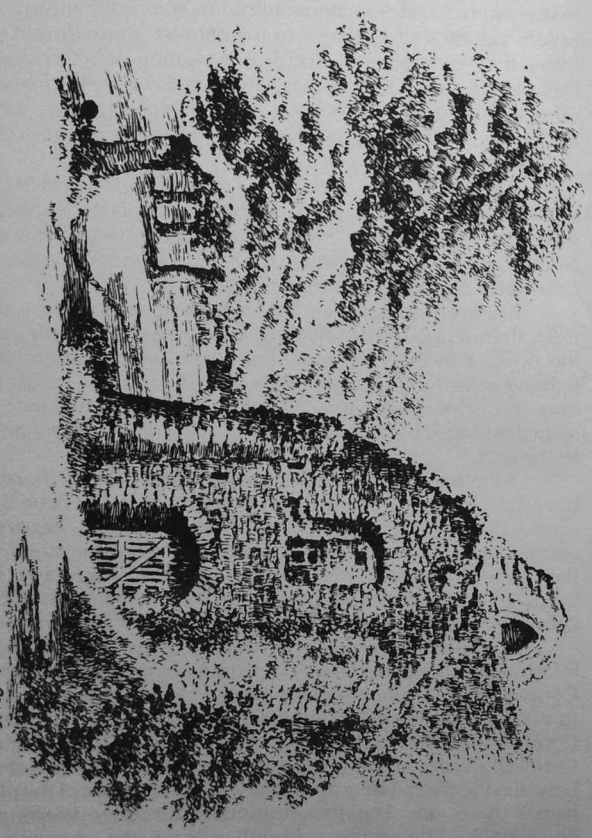
Devon in the fifth century.[7] Kenneth Jackson, on the other hand, argues convincingly that the emigrations had two peaks.[8] The first occurred when the Britons fled from eastern Britain, where the Saxons were gaining a stranglehold in the fifth century. As the Saxons penetrated further into the country, more Britons joined these first emigrants. A flood of emigrants left Cornwall and Devon in the late sixth century, when the Saxons were massing on the Devon frontier. Because these later emigrants were so numerous, their language displaced the eastern British dialect spoken by the earlier arrivals.

The emigrations to Brittany left the little villages of Devon desolated and empty, and this fact helps to explain the speed with which the Saxons took this region. By the start of the eighth century, Devon was annexed to the Saxon kingdom of Wessex and Cornwall's boundary was threatened.

During the next two and half centuries the Saxons and Cornish fought out a deadly duel, with the Saxons slowly gaining the upper hand. In 926, Athelstan of Wessex put an end to the fighting when he set the boundary of Cornwall at the Tamar. From now on, the Cornishman's genius for independence was maintained only by his ignoring, to the best of his ability, the land to the east.

Athelstan appointed Saxon overlords where there had been Cornish rulers. But it was not only in the upper echelons of society that the English became established. Whole villages were established by Saxon invaders in the north of Cornwall; and where the invaders settled, they displaced the Cornish and their language. Less than four centuries after it evolved from British, the Cornish language ceased to cover the whole of Cornwall.

The place-names of Cornwall give us a good deal of information about the retreat of Cornish in front of the Saxons. In Cornwall overall, ninety-one percent of place-names are Cornish to this day; but in certain areas, English names have supplanted Cornish ones. The largest proportion of English place-names in Cornwall occurs in the north-east, in the angular piece of land between the rivers Tamar and Ottery. Ninety percent of the place-names here are English: Stratton, Whitstone, Werrington, Poundstock, Maxworthy - English place-name elements are everywhere apparent. In south-east Cornwall, too, English place-names are far more common than in mid and west Cornwall,



St. Thomas's Chantry built in 1377, stands in the church yard of the Parish Church of St. Petroc, Bodmin, where a facsimile of the Bodmin Gospels may be seen.



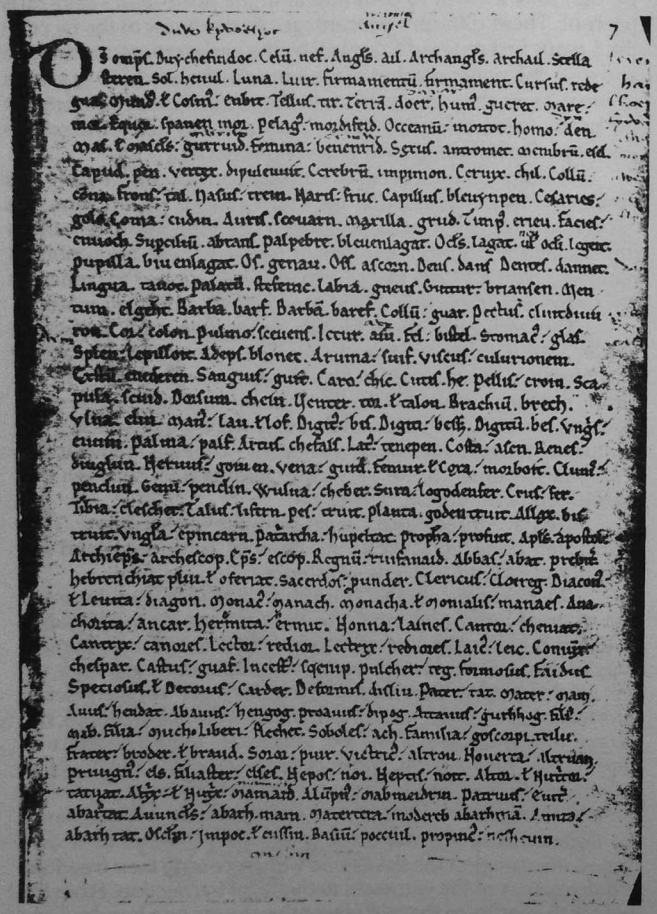
though they are not as common as in the north-east - only forty percent. These different percentages bear witness to the fact that the Saxons first entered Cornwall by the easiest route, on dry land and over the upper reaches of the Tamar in the north. They settled in force here; their compatriots in the south, however, were put off by the wide stretches of the river and did not settle on the southern Cornish banks with such enthusiasm.[9]

A few precious pieces of written Cornish survive from this time. Our earliest evidence for Old Cornish, (as we term the earliest form of the language, spoken from the ninth century to the thirteenth century), consists of glosses. These are scribbled notes written on a Latin text by a reader who wanted to comment on, or to remind himself of the meaning of, a difficult word.

The earliest of these glosses are written on a text which glories in the name of *Smaragdus's Commentary on Donatus.*[10] The nineteen glosses, which date from around the end of the ninth century, were originally thought to be Old Breton; however, in 1907, Loth showed that they were Old Cornish.[11] The confusion between the two languages, by no means limited to this text, bears witness to the very close relationship between Old Cornish and Old Breton.

We have three more glosses from the tenth century. They are written on a Latin text of the Book of Tobit contained in a manuscript called *Oxoniensis Posterior.*[12]

The next piece of Old Cornish writing is more substantial, and of great interest as much for the social as for the linguistic evidence it holds. The *Bodmin Gospels*[13] are an ordinary enough copy of the New Testament stories, written in Latin at the start of the tenth century. However, they hold some very important information. The Bible, locked away or chained in the church, was always the safest place in the village to record matters of importance. Such a large, conspicuous book could not easily be stolen, and it was hardly likely to get lost. So, when some of Bodmin's slave owners decided to free a number of their slaves, the Bodmin Bible was the place where they entered their own names, the names of the slaves who were receiving their freedom, and the names of the witnesses to this legal transaction. From the mid tenth century to the mid eleventh century, one hundred and twenty two slaves were freed in Bodmin; and analysing their names, and those of their masters, is very instructive. The great



The first page of the *Vocabularium Cornicum*, opening *Deus Omnipoteus duy chefuidoc*



majority of the slaves - ninety-eight of them - were Cornish, with names like Riol, Rumun, Brenci and Freoc. Only twelve of the slaves were Saxon; and twelve may have been either Cornish or Saxon, since they had Biblical or Latin names. The slave-masters, however, were predominantly Saxon - twenty-four of them, while only five were Cornish (another four had Biblical names). The Anglo-Saxon dominance in Cornwall is very apparent.

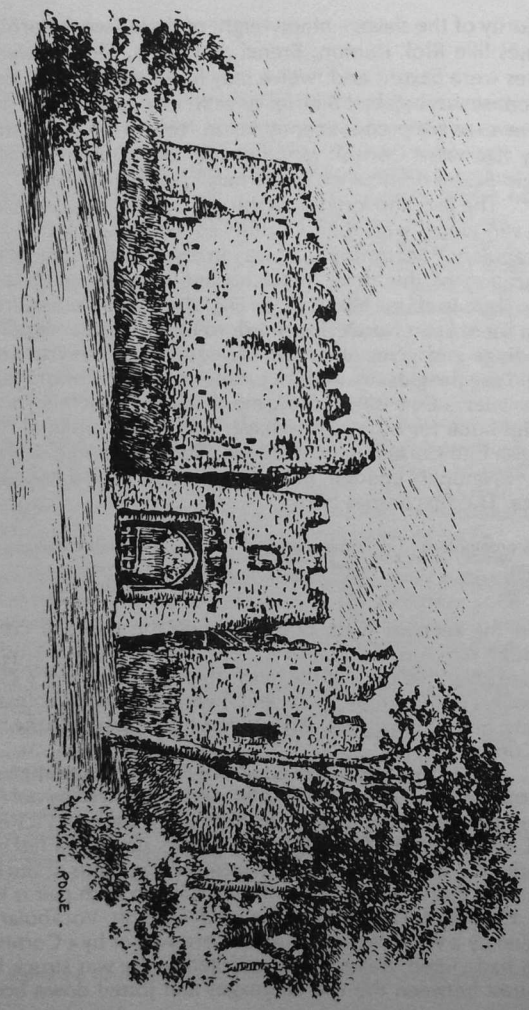
The last, and longest, of the old Cornish pieces is a long list of Latin words with their Cornish equivalents, the *Old Cornish Vocabulary*.[14] Mastering Latin was an essential fundamental of the education of this time, and language-teaching methods were thorough. In about 1000 A.D., an English abbot called Aelfric drew up a list of Latin words. The words were grouped under different headings and given their English equivalents, so that students could use the glossary to learn Latin vocabulary. About a hundred years later, a Cornish-speaking monk decided that this would be a useful book for his pupils to have; and so he translated Aelfric's English into Cornish, and made the glossary a Latin-Cornish one.

Naturally enough, the vocabulary takes God as its starting place. The first entries are:-

| | | |
|---|---|---|
| *Deus omnipotens* | *duy chefuidoc* | (almighty God) |
| *Celum* | *nef* | (heaven) |
| *Angelus* | *ail* | (angel) |

Then the sections work down through the ranks of creation: through star, sun, moon, world, earth and sea, to mankind. Next we are given the parts of the body; then the ranks of the church; members of the family; crafts and their implements; animals and plants; household goods - 961 words in all, a treasure in the history of Cornish.

In a few instances, the copyist of Aelfric's glossary gives two alternative translations of the Latin, and links them by *uel* ("or"). There are *broder uel braud* ("brother"), *cos uel caus* ("cheese"), and *douer uel dur* ("water"). These pairs provide a fascinating insight into the relationship between the fragments of the British nation at this time. The second alternative in each pair is *Welsh*, not Cornish.[15] Presumably, the *Old Cornish Vocabulary* was copied by a Welshman working in Cornwall, or by a Cornishman who had visited Wales.[16] This travelled scribe was struck by the contrast between the two languages and jotted down both the



Restormel Castle, built by the Normans to subjugate the Cornish.



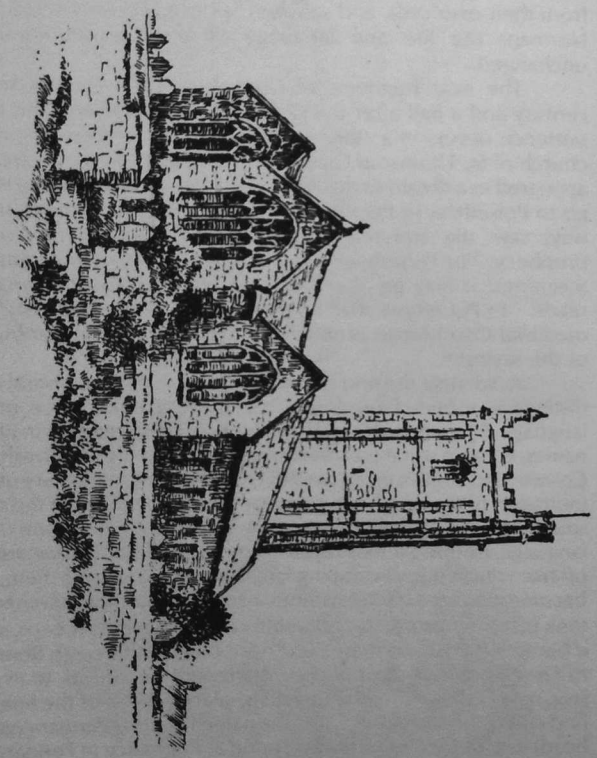
forms he knew. Two hundred years after the Anglo-Saxon Conquest, Cornwall was still looking to the Celtic world for its cultural links.

The Norman Conquest of 1066 made little impact on the Cornish language. Cornish speakers were a race and a class away from their overlords, and so when Saxon rulers were replaced by Normans the life and language of the Cornish continued unchanged.

The next fragment of Cornish to survive dates from a century and a half after the *Old Cornish Vocabulary.* This single sentence occurs in a story which recounts the founding of the church of St. Thomas at Glasney in 1265. St. Thomas, we are told, appeared in a dream to the Bishop of Exeter and instructed him to go to Polsethow in Penryn and consecrate an altar there. In this way, says the storyteller, was fulfilled the ancient Cornish prophecy, *"In Polsethow ywhylyr anethow." Anethow* has two meanings: it may be 'dwellings,' or 'marvels.' So the sentence reads: "In Polsethow shall be seen dwellings (or marvels)." The medieval Cornishman probably enjoyed the punning ambiguity of the saying.[16]

As we near the end of the Old Cornish period, a number of distinctive sound-changes are beginning to take place in the language. By examining the distribution of these changes in place-names, we gain some useful information about the relationship of Cornish and English in the twelfth century. Place-names are useful indicators of the health of a language. They are subject to the same sound-changes as the language they belong to; but as soon as the language around them is replaced by a foreign one, they are cut off from the living, developing language which formed them, and become fossilized names without a meaning. Two sound-changes took place in Cornish in the twelfth century. *-nt* became *-ns,* and *-d* became *-s* (z). If we draw a line from Padstow, through Bodmin, to Fowey, we find most of the instances of *-nt* and *-d* to its east (e.g. *nant* (valley), and *bod* (dwelling-place)). West of the line, we find chiefly *nans* and *bos.* Thus the name found as *Pennant* (valley head) east of the line, is always found as Pennance (= Pennans) to the west of it. In this way, we can deduce that English replaced Cornish in the eastern area during the twelfth century.

We are given more proof that Cornwall was divided by an imaginary line from Padstow to Fowey between Cornish and



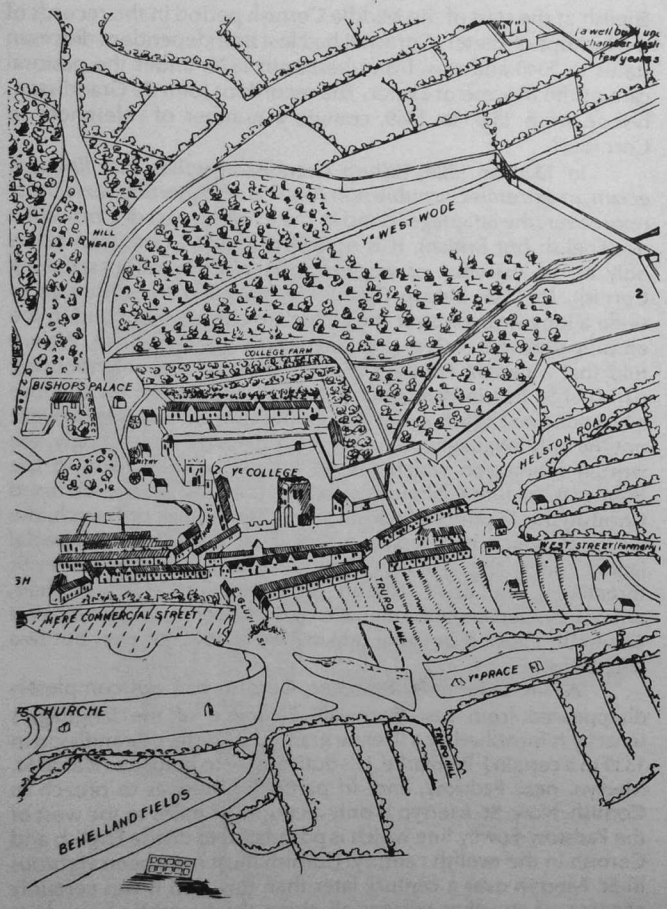
ST. BURYAN CHURCH



English at the start of the Middle Cornish period in the records of the bishops of Exeter. Cornwall had lost its independent diocesan status in 1040 and was, from then until 1876, under the pastoral care of the diocese of Exeter. The records of John de Grandisson, bishop from 1327 to 1369, contain a number of references to Cornish.[17]

In 1328 or 1329, Bishop Grandisson writes that *linguam eciam, in extremis Cornubie non Anglicis set Britonibus extat nota* (moreover, the language found in the extreme part of Cornwall is not English but British). It is noteworthy that Grandisson refers only to the extreme, or western, part of Cornwall as speaking Cornish. In 1336, Bishop Grandisson travelled to St. Buryan to settle a long wrangle over the collegiate church there and in the ensuing debate it is clear that languages were a problem. We are told that a certain Henry Marsely, rector of the neighbouring parish of St. Just-in-Penwith, had to act as interpreter for all those who spoke no English, only Cornish. But Cornish and English were not the only languages of the West of Cornwall. Interestingly, the written submission which the St. Buryan people made to the Bishop is in three languages. While the less well-to-do used Cornish, the 13 principal parishioners used English or *French*, the language which had replaced English at the top of the social ladder since the Norman Conquest, and which was even threatening to drive English to extinction. Cornish had, onimously, become the language of the lower class even in West Cornwall; above it in social ranking were now not one, but two languages.

At the same time, however, Cornish had not completely disappeared from East Cornwall. Evidence of the language's tenacity is furnished by a licence granted by Bishop Grandisson in 1339 to a certain J. Polmarke. His duties were to help the vicar of St. Merryn, near Padstow, and, in particular, he was to preach in Cornish. Now, St. Merryn is only a couple of miles to the west of the Padstow-Fowey line which is postulated to divide English and Cornish in the twelfth century. Cornish must have been vigorous in St. Merryn over a century later than this, and it was certainly clinging on in other villages all along the linguistic boundary. Indeed, Cornish must have remained in pockets in mid-Cornwall right up to the end of the Tudor period. As late as 1595, a girl testified in court that when weeding a garden in St. Ewe, not far




A Map of Penryn from the time of Elizabeth I marked *The College*. (Taken from Thurstan C. Peter, *Glasney Collegiate Church*, Camborne , 1903).



from St. Austell, she heard two women talking "both in English and Cornish."[18]

One of Bishop Grandisson's records for 1354-55 is further testimony to the fact that Cornish still survived in mid-Cornwall in the fourteenth century. He appointed two penitentiaries for Cornwall; Brother John of Bodmin for those who knew Cornish and English, and Brother Tyrel of Truro for those who knew only Cornish. The locations of the two men show, not only that monoglot speakers were mainly in the West of Cornwall, around and beyond Truro, but also that there were still speakers of Cornish in the Bodmin area.

The first piece of written Cornish extant from the Middle Cornish period was discovered by Henry Jenner in the British Museum in 1877.[19] Jenner was looking at some charters relating to St. Stephen-in-Brannel when he glimpsed on the back of one of them some faint writing which turned out to be forty-one lines of Cornish verse. The charter is dated 1340; Jenner dates the Cornish writing to about 1400. The content of the fragment is different from that of any other Middle Cornish literature we have, since its subject is secular. The poem's theme is marriage, and it offers a girl some advice concerning the way to achieve mastery over her husband:

mar az herg zys gul neb tra
lavar ze sy byz ny venna
laver zozo gwra mar mennyz (lines 31-33)
(If he orders you to do something,
Say to yourself, "Never will I do it!"
Say to him, "I'll do it if you wish.")*

This rather cynical worldly wisdom is very different from the spiritual wisdom which the rest of medieval Cornish literature imparts.

The first complete sentence of Cornish to survive relates to Glasney, as we have seen; and this is highly fitting, since it is most probable that the most important piece of Cornish to survive was written at Glasney, which was a collegiate church of secular canons. The *Cornish Ordinalia*[20] is a long mystery cycle of three separate plays which recounts the story of man's fall and redemption. It was probably written in the latter part of the fourteenth century - D.C. Fowler ascribes it to the third quarter of

* *The 'z' of some Cornish manuscripts has been retained: it represents either 'th' or 's'.*

the fourteenth century on the basis of place-name forms in the text.[21] It is these place-names, too, which point to Glasney being the place where the play was written, for they centre on Penryn, and were obviously intended to interest and amuse a Penryn audience.[22]

The *Cornish Ordinalia* took three days to perform. On the first day, *Origo Mundi* (The Beginning of the World) told of the sin of Adam and Eve and of its consequences, man's search for and God's promise of forgiveness. On the second day, *Passio Christi* showed how Christ's death brought that forgiveness to earth; and on the third day, *Resurrectio Domini* showed the result of that forgiveness, as Christ rose from the dead and entered Heaven to await the just.

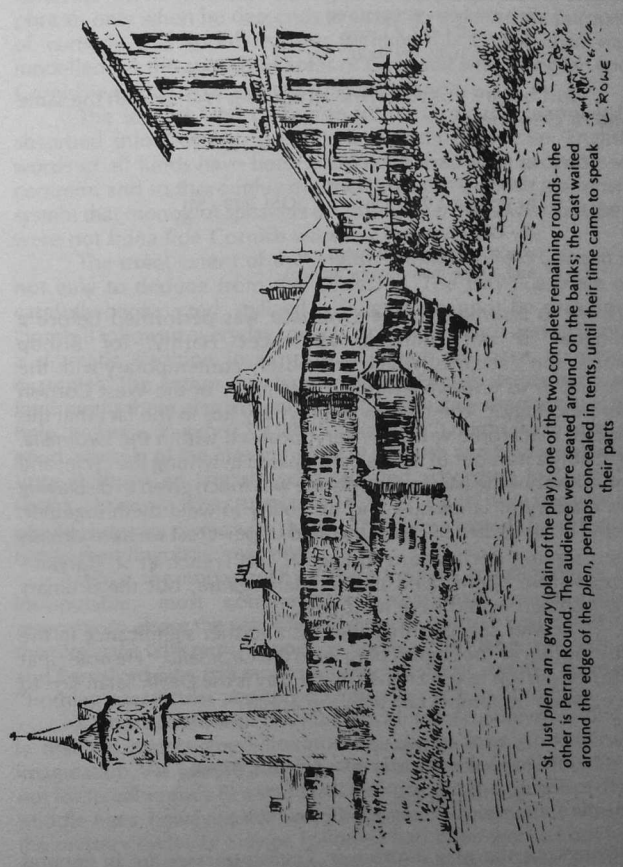
The *Ordinalia* was performed in the open air, in the large rounds called *plenys an gwary,* or playing places, examples of which still exist in St. Just-in-Penwith and at Perranporth. The cast, usually local people, were positioned around the edge of the round; at the appropriate moment, they would "parade" in front of their station and declaim their lines.[23]

The *Ordinalia* is treasured for its linguistic value. Since it is by far the longest piece of Cornish extant, it contains many words which are found nowhere else. It is, moreover, an important witness to the state of Cornish in the fourteenth century and to its relationship with English. English words and phrases are found throughout the play; but we must be careful to distinguish between two different kinds of English in the *Ordinalia.* One sort is found in whole lines or complete phrases which are not part of the corpus of Cornish; they have not been absorbed into the language, but are additions which decorate or give effect. The other sort consists of individual words which have become an integral part of Cornish, and are used as if they were Cornish words.

The first kind of English in the *Ordinalia* is perhaps best exemplified in the Maximilia episode of *Origo Mundi* (OM2629 - 2778). There is so much English here that the effect is macaronic:-

heyl ov arloth stout ha gay
wheys yr ov thal by thys day
thy's o gy ov fystene
tel me annon y the pray
what shal y do yf y may
my a'n gura war ov ene. (OM 2685 - 90)





St. Just *plen - an - gwary* (plain of the play), one of the two complete remaining rounds - the other is Perran Round. The audience were seated around on the banks; the cast waited around the edge of the *plen*, perhaps concealed in tents, until their time came to speak their parts

(hail my lord, strong and merry,
sweaty is my brow, by this day,
hurrying to you.
Tell me at once, I beg you,
what shall I do? If I may,
I will do it, by my soul).

Just before this verse, the writer uses French with the same kind of cleverness:-

by godys fast wel y seyd
vos eet bon se dev ma eyd
ha den fur a'd cusullyow (OM 2679 - 81)

(By God's fast, well said,
you're good, if God helps me,
and a wise man in your advice).

Are we to assume that the *Ordinalia* was performed before a bilingual, if not trilingual audience? Hardly, for Bishop Grandisson's records, which are closely contemporary with the plays, give us enough evidence that many of the West Cornish were monoglot. The clue to the mystery lies in the fact that this kind of macaronic writing is very localised within the *Ordinalia*. Probably a number of hands participated in writing the cycle; and the author of the Maximilia episode was much given to displaying his mastery of languages and his ability to weld them together. Some of his audience - the educated upper-crust we have already seen signing declarations in English and French at St. Buryan - would have appreciated this scholarly game; but the ordinary Cornishman would have let it pass.

Fowler suggests that there is a further significance in the distribution of the English phrases in the *Ordinalia*.[24] He notes that the first person to use English in the play is the Devil. Satan says to Eve, when he tempts her with the apple,

torr'e yn ow feryl vy
heb hokye fast haue ydo. (OM 197 - 8)

(pick it at my risk,
without hesitating, quickly have done).

Throughout the play, moreover, English phrases are in general given to the meaner sort, people who have vicious or comic personalities - torturers, messengers, a carpenter, executioners.



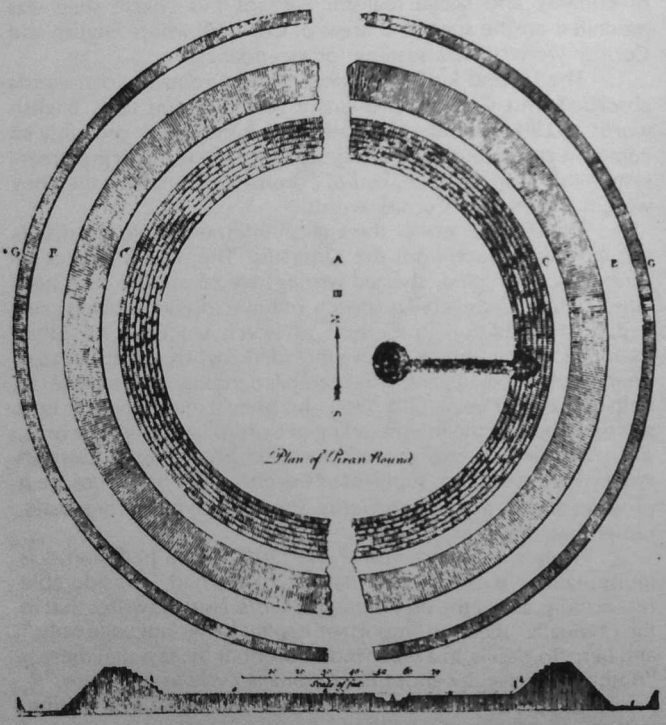
Fowler goes on to suggest that the dramatist uses pure Cornish when he wants to write in a dignified style and admits English phrases only when he descends to a coarser style for the purpose of comedy and social realism. Perhaps this coarse style was modelled on the speech of areas of Cornwall where English and Cornish were by now jostling for ascendancy.

The second kind of English in the *Ordinalia*, loan-words absorbed into Cornish, presents a very different case. English words of all kinds have been adopted;[25] they were probably so common and so thoroughly digested into the Cornish grammar-system that monoglot speakers of Cornish were unaware that they were not *bona fide* Cornish words.

The exact extent of the English infiltration into Cornish is not easy to deduce from the *Ordinalia*. The play is a piece of carefully-constructed, stylized writing; we cannot be sure how closely it followed everyday speech, or how closely it derived from a dramatic tradition in Cornish of which we have no other examples. The author may have included English words because he thought them elegant, and English is certainly used at times to help the verse. *Y vody* (OM 2069 - "his body") might seem to be a good example of the intermingling of Cornish and English words, since it shows an English word mutated according to Cornish syntax. However, it has supplanted Cornish *y gorf* here because it provides an easy rhyme with *thethy*. The rhyme is made for artistic, rather than linguistic, reasons!

While the importance of the *Ordinalia* to philologists is indisputable, most commentators have had considerable reservations about the play's literary merits. Norris[26] writes that in the *Ordinalia* "the term 'important' applies to the language only," and Berrisford-Ellis, in a much more recent study, says that there is "nothing spectacular about the *Ordinalia* cycle as literature."[27]

Our problem, with this play as with most medieval writing, is that we expect good literature to spring from an original imagination. We admire poetry for its character and individuality, not for its adherence to a standardized style. For the people of the Middle Ages, however, this was not the case. The sequence which the mystery cycles of Europe followed had been worked out by trial and error over many, many years; the pattern which finally evolved was the arrangement of Biblical episodes which, the medieval dramatists felt, was the best to produce a narrative which




The *plen an gwary* at Perran. The central *plen* is 130 feet across, the earthen walls are 8 feet high, and 7 feet wide. The spoon-shaped depression and trench running to the centre are a mystery. Perhaps they were used as Hell or the grave in Resurrection plays; it has been suggested, too , that the trench was covered with tarpaulin so that actors could crawl along it and make a surprise appearance!



was charged with theological meaning.[28] The medieval playwright felt no need to change this form arbitrarily in order to impose his individuality on it, any more than we would design an aeroplane with five wings. The traditional way was simply the best.

The *Cornish Ordinalia* does, however, have a unique achievement. Its authors have worked within the dramatic conventions of the mystery cycle, and yet not been restricted by them. They have cleverly adapted them to fulfill their own aims. The chief aim of the *Ordinalia*, like any mystery play, was to educate the people. In a society in which most people were illiterate, important doctrines such as the Fall and Redemption could only be taught by means of preaching from pulpits, stained-glass windows, or plays. The *Ordinalia's* writers chose to concentrate the narrative as fully as possible on the single theme of Redemption and they excluded any material from the conventional mystery play sequence which is not directly relevant to this theme. For example, it was usual to enact the Nativity in full; despite the dramatic strength of this story it is not essential to a play about sin and redemption, and so it does not appear in *Passio Christi*, which starts with Christ's temptations, and his refusal to sin. The playright adds material, too. *Origo Mundi* is threaded together along its length by an apochryphal story, the Legend of the Rood. This story tells how, after Adam's death, three pips from the apple he and Eve ate are planted in his mouth. Three saplings grow: and because of their miraculous properties, they are placed in the Temple by Solomon, to be venerated. Later, the wood is used to make Christ's cross. The saplings are thus a physical link between the Fall and the Redemption, between the apple which brought about the Fall and the cross which saved man.[29] The Legend of the Rood is a very successful dramatic device which ties the first two days of the play together around the doctrine which the author wanted to teach. The *Cornish Ordinalia* is important, not only for the language it contains, but also for the way it shows us the medieval dramatists' freedom and skill within the restrictions of the traditional form of the mystery play.[30]

The *Ordinalia* is related enigmatically to another religious work dating from around the same time. *"Pascon Agan Arluth"*[31] is a versified meditation on the Passion from the temptation in the desert to Easter Sunday. Like the *Ordinalia*, it is syllabic rather than rhythmic; there are seven syllables per line, in eight line stanzas.

The syllabic verse is terse and solemn, not bounding along with the energy of a rhythm, but moving with dignity, each syllable having weight and significance:-

Tays ha mab han speris sans
wy abys a levn golon
re wronte zeugh gras ha whans
ze wolsowas y basconn (PD - 4)

Father and Son and Holy Spirit
You shall pray with full heart
That He may grant to you grace and desire
To listen to His Passion.

The mystery which surrounds *Pascon agan Arluth* stems from the fact that twenty-three of its lines are closely similar to lines in the *Ordinalia*, and were clearly borrowed from one text to the other. For example, the *Ordinalia* has:-

yn pup maner y coth thy's
gorthye the dev ha'y hanow
ke the ves ynskemenys
yn defyth yn tewolgow
the vestry a vyth leyhys
neffre war an enevow. (PC 140 - 4)

(in every way it behoves you
to worship your God and His name.
Go away accursed,
into desert, into darkness.
Your mastery shall be lessened
ever over the souls).

*Pascon agan Arluth*, stanza 17, has:-

yn pub gwythres ycoth thys
gorzye ze zu hay hanow
ke ze ves omscumvynys
ze zyvetyth veth yn tewolgow
the vestry a vyth lezys
neffre war en enevow.

(in every act it behoves you
to worship your God and His name.
Go away, accursed,
to desert, ever, into darkness.
Your mastery shall be lessened
ever over the souls).



There is no agreement, and really no conclusive evidence, as to which way the borrowings went. We do not know which work preceded the other.[32]

One more piece of literature has some connection with the *Ordinalia*, even though it survives in a much later manuscript. *Gwreans an Bys* (The Creation of the World)[33] is the first part of a mystery cycle of which the other day (or two days) is lacking. It was copied out in 1611 by William Jordan of Helston, but details, (such as references to Limbo, and the English of the stage instructions), point to a date before the Reformation for the original composition of the play; Nance suggests 1530-40.[34] The construction of the play follows that of *Origo Mundi* closely, and sometimes whole passages are remarkably similar to the earlier play, although this material has been extended and padded so that the whole day's play covers only the Creation and the Flood. A possible explanation for the plays' relationship is put forward by Paula Neuss:[35] she suggests that *Gwreans an Bys* was constructed around the remembered part of one of the players who had taken part in performances of *Origo Mundi*.

As the fourteenth century drew to its close, Cornish was struggling to maintain the ground it still held; yet English, too, was in difficulties. Ever since the Norman Conquest, French had been preferred to English by the Court and all who tried to emulate it, and for a while, the future of English seemed to be in some doubt. English had its champions however, and among those, ironically, were three Cornishmen. The foremost of these, John Trevisa, was contemporary with the *Ordinalia* and *Pascon agan Arluth;* he was born in about 1342, and died in 1402. His interests, though, were very different from those of the Cornish poets. The work for which he is chiefly remembered is a translation from Latin to English of Ranulf Hidgen's *Polychronicon*. Trevisa ignores Cornish completely, even though his provenance is clear from the remarkably south-western dialect of his written English. Indeed, he thoroughly identifies with the southern English, and never loses an opportunity to condemn northern English; which, he says, is "so scharp, slyttyng, and unschape, that we Southern men may that longage unnethe (= hardly) undurstonde!"

The other two Cornishmen who helped set English on its feet again were John Cornwall and Richard Pencrych. Writing of them, Trevisa says, "Johan Cornwall, a mayster of gramere,

chayngede the lore in gramerscole, and construction of Freynch into Englysh; and Richard Pencrych lurnede that manere teching of him." Cornwall and Pencrych, then, were largely responsible for the replacement of French by English in schools, a major victory in the campaign to halt the decline of English. It must have seemed a hollow victory to the writers of Cornish at Glasney.

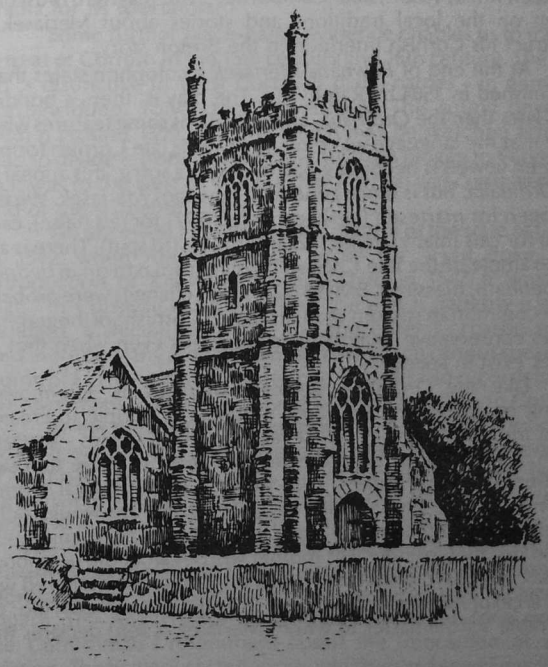
Much of the Cornish medieval literature draws on the Bible as its source; but the Bible was not the only tradition which furnished the Cornish with entertainment and spiritual edification. Writers had a wealth of traditions about the saints to turn to. The saints were very dear to the medieval imagination; they were the Supermen and Wonderwomen of the day, virtuous miracle-workers who offered help in trouble. The patron saint of Camborne was Meriasek; and at around 1500 a play celebrating his life was composed.

*Bewnans Meriasek* (the life of Meriasek) is the only complete saint's play to have survived in the whole of Britain. The little manuscript containing the play was discovered in 1869 in Merioneth, and is now in the National Library of Wales.[36] The play tells the story of Meriasek, the son of a Breton duke. A pious boy, Meriasek becomes an exemplary priest. He sails to Cornwall, lands near Land's End, and then journeys to Camborne, consecrating a chapel there. For a while he works miracles and converts the populace; then he is chased back to Brittany by the evil King Teudar. After numerous adventures, he dies, ordaining that his feast-day shall be held in Camborne on the first Friday in June of each year.

Meriasek's cult was predominately a Breton one. There are several Breton lives of the saint, and one of these, the Tréguier life, corresponds very closely with *Bewnans Meriasek*. Neither this Life, nor any other, however, mentions any visit of Meriasek to Cornwall, and so it appears that the visit was added on to a Breton play of Meriasek's life to give it topicality for a Cornish, and in particular a Camborne, audience.[37]

The playright is careful to include in the Cornish episode all the elements of Meriasek's cult in Camborne.[38] When he arrives at Camborne, the saint sees a chapel which a serving man identifies for him as the Chapel of Mary of Camborne. (BM.642f). He causes a fountain to spring up, and heals several people in it (BM.671f). He decides to found a church (BM.720). When Teudar is hunting





CAMBORNE CHURCH

him, he hides beneath a great rock, Carrek Veryasek, (BM.1016). We know that Mary's chapel and the well existed in Camborne; the church is Camborne Parish Church, still dedicated to Martin and Meriasek; and A.C. Thomas identifies Meriasek's Rock with the Reen Rock, Troon, near Camborne.[39] The playright must have drawn on the local traditions and stories about Meriasek to construct his Cornish interlude in the Breton story.

At the end of *Bewnans Meriasek* a colophon states that it was finished in 1504 by Ralph Ton. The play is, then, a hundred years later than the *Ordinalia*, and it contains some features which show that the language was moving towards late Cornish forms. *s* between vowels is becoming palatalized to a soft *g*; this appears in the *Ordinalia*, but is more general in *Bewnans Meriasek*. We find *martegen* for *martesen* (perhaps), *falge* (777) for *fals* (false), *calge* (2046) for *cals* (many), *felge* (1273) for *felse* (to split). There is also one example of the late Cornish change from *n* to *dn* in *bedneth* (for *bennath*, blessing), BM198, 224. These changes were probably more common in spoken than in written Cornish; orthography is always conservative, maintaining old forms even when they no longer exist in speech.

Like the *Ordinalia*, *Bewnans Meriasek* is slow-moving, relying on pageantry and large numbers of people to create a visual interest. The play has several powerful scenes - battles, a storm, a man-hunt, the projected slaughter of three thousand children. In some scenes, too, there is psychological tension. When Meriasek argues with his parents that he would rather become a priest than marry a rich princess, they act as any parents would do, then or now. His mother worries what the neighbours will say (BM.334): his father wishes that he hadn't bothered with such an expensive education (BM.363). There is comedy, too; the miserable schoolmaster to whom Meriasek is sent declares that

> "pan ve luen ov gos a wyn
> ny gara covs mes laten" (BM.80-1)
>
> (When my blood is full of wine,
> I only like to speak Latin).

His wretched pupil declares that he finds Latin too difficult, only

> Unwyth a caffen hansell
> me a russa amendie (BM.108)



> (Once I had breakfast
> I'd get better).

At once locally-relevant, instructive, exciting and humorous, *Bewnans Meriasek* must have contained all the elements of a good drama for its spectators.

Some further place-name evidence enables us to trace the retreat of Cornish in the 15th century and 16th century. The sound *dn* is distinctive in West Cornwall place-names - in names like *Porthgwidden, Tolvaddon, Towednack*. This sound developed from *n* around 1500. The line which may be sketched across the map to divide *n* from *dn* runs roughly from Illogan to Veryan; and so it was to the west of this line that Cornish was contained at the end of the sixteenth century.

We are given an unequivocal picture of the state of Cornish in 1542, when Andrew Borde wrote his *"Fyrst Boke of the Introduction of Knowledge"* (published in 1547).[40] Borde says that, "In Cornwall is two speches: the one is naughty (i.e. non-standard, dialectal) Englyshe, and the other Cornyshe speche. And there be many men and women the which cannot speake one worde of Englyshe, but all Cornysche." Borde also records twenty-five specimens of Cornish phrases and the numbers in Cornish.[41]

By the mid-sixteenth century, the Reformation was in full swing. It was to prove one of the most potent factors in the decline of Cornish. The miracle plays, full of the old theology, became immediately suspect, and were suppressed. Glasney College was suppressed in 1545. Contact with Brittany, which had been a very important support to Cornish, soon ceased since France, to which Brittany had been linked in 1532, was hostile to the Reformation. Moreover, the old Latin of church services was replaced by English. This Anglicisation of services became the focal point of the Cornishman's resentment about the imposition of a new religion. The first Act of Uniformity which introduced English in all church services in 1549 was met with hostility and rebellion in Cornwall. The Cornish took up arms and marched east, setting down their demands in a petition to King Edward. The eighth article stated that "We, the Cornishmen, whereof certain of us understand no English, utterly refuse this new English." The Lord Protector replied, not without pertinence, that if the Cornish understood no English, they knew less Latin; but, as he probably knew, he was avoiding the real issue. The imposition of the new

English service was a political gesture, and ensured the death of Cornish.

The Cornishmen's complaint carried some weight, however, and in 1560, a conference held to study the laws of the new Anglican church moved a resolution, "that it may be lawful for such Welch or Cornish children as can speake no English to learn the Praemises in the Welsh tongue or Cornish language."[42] In the same year, the Bishop of Exeter directed that Cornish could be used to teach the Catechism if English was not understood. Whereas the future of the Welsh language was left secure, at least for the time being, by the passing of an "Act for the translating of the Bible and Divine Service into the Welsh tongue" in 1563, the fate of Cornish was left to individual effort.

At least one person took up the challenge, though we know of his work only through a chance discovery. With the accession of Mary Tudor to the throne in 1553 Catholicism became, briefly, the state religion again. In 1555, Edmund Bonner, Bishop of London, celebrated the return of the old religion by writing "a profitable and necessarye doctyne, with certyne homelies adioyned therynto." Some time after 1555, and presumably before Elizabeth brought Protestantism back with her accession in 1558, these twelve homelies were translated into Cornish by a certain John Tregear.

The Tregear manuscript[43] was discovered in 1949 in Flint, Wales, among manuscripts bought by the British Museum. Tregear writes in a neat, methodical hand; he heads each page with a holy name, as was the Catholic habit, and signs each homily. There is a thirteenth sermon added to Bishop Bonner's; the original of this one is unknown, but it is in a different writing from Tregear's, an untidy, straggly hand.

Tregear may have been translating for a Cornish audience, but there is no doubt that he is thoroughly English-speaking. He uses all sorts of English words, even when there is a perfectly good Cornish one available; and when there is a more difficult word, such as *inclynacion*, he often does not even attempt to translate it. R.M. Nance[44] notes that in one place he starts to write in English, "we have thereby," and has to correct it to *us thynny drethy;* in another, he corrects "truth" to *gwryoneth*. Sometimes the effect of his unique mixture of English and Cornish is far from the serious exhoration Tregear intended. He translates "rauenyng wolues" by



*rampyng blythas settys rag devorya;* "ringleader" by *pen leder an besow;* and "to fall out with" by *cotha in mes gans;* literal and clumsy renderings. Yet Tregear's good intentions are worthwhile; he provides a number of new Cornish words, for students of Cornish, as well as posing a problem. Nowhere in the homelies signed by Tregear do we get an instance of the *dn* or *bm*, which should be commonplace by the mid-sixteenth century. Nance suggests that Tregear writes a dialect of Cornish in which these forms have not yet appeared; but as we do not know where Tregear was priest, the mystery is not likely to be easily solved.

Tregear is the last writer of the Middle Cornish period. In many ways he is a forerunner of the group of gentlemen and intellectuals who were to study Cornish, translate into Cornish and loudly lament its decline in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries.[46] Tregear knew Cornish thoroughly; yet it was not his natural language. He may have been brought up to speak Cornish, but he was clearly educated by means of English, and this was the language which came to him most easily. His translations were a work of pastoral zeal; they did not spring from any living Cornish tradition, and can only serve to underline the position of Cornish at the end of the Tudor era. John Norden surveyed the state of the language at the close of the sixteenth century, and wrote that Cornish was most in use in Penwith and Kerrier, the hundreds of the far west. Even here, however, Cornish is chiefly the language of the home, and Norden writes that "Though the husband and wife, parents and children, master and servants, do mutually communicate in their native language, yet there is none of them in manner but is able to converse with a stranger in the English tongue, unless it be some obscure people, that seldom confer with the better sort."[47] Confined to the west by the superior prestige and value in communications of English, by the neglect of the government in refusing a Cornish Bible, and the lack of a new culture to replace the medieval one which had been the guardian of the language, Cornish was slowly deserted by the ordinary people. No amount of support from the few gentry who applied themselves with such care and affection for Cornish in the years to come could ever replace the loss of the allegiance of those "obscure people" of the far hundreds of Cornwall.

## NOTES

**Abbreviations:**
R.C. Revue Celtique
R.C.P.S. Royal Cornwall Philological Society
F.O.C.S. Federation of Old Cornwall Societies
J.R.I.C. Journal of the Royal Institute of Cornwall
Trans. Phil. Soc. Transactions of the Philological Society

1. For a full discussion of the relationship between Romans and Britons, and their languages, under the Empire, see K.H. Jackson, *Language and History in Early Britain.* (Edinburgh, 1953). 76-121.
2. The Saxons called both the Welsh and the Cornish *wealhas,* "foreigners," from which come the words Welsh, Wales, and the latter part of Cornwall. The Saxons distinguished between the Welsh and Cornish by terming the latter "West Wales."
3. Jackson, op. cit., 24-25.
4. For a summary of the evidence for the date of the Breton migrations, see J. Loth, *L'émigration bretonne en Armorique du Ve au VIIe siècle de notre ère.* (Paris, 1883).
5. *Cornubia vero et Armorica Britannia lingua utuntur fere persimili:* Giraldus Cambriensis, (twelfth century): ed. R.C. Hoare, London 1804.
6. N.K. Chadwick, *"The Colonisation of Brittany from Celtic Britain,"* Proceedings of the British Academy, 1965.
7. See A.C. Thomas, *"Cornwall in the Dark Ages,"* Proceedings of the West Cornwall Field Club, II (1957-8), 59-72.
8. op. cit., 11-28.
9. See J.E.B. Gover, *The Place-names of Cornwall,* 1948, unpublished ms.; copies are lodged with the Royal Institution of Cornwall library, and the English Place-name Society.
10. Paris ms. Lat. 13029 (Bibliothèque Nationale). Ed. Arbois de Jubainville, RC xxvii, 1906, 151-4.
11. J. Loth, Archiv fiir celtische Lexicographie, iii (1907), 249ff; and RC xxxv, 215-6.
12. Bodleian ms. 572. Ed. W. Stokes, *Old Breton Glosses,* (Calcutta, 1879), 21. ed. J. Loth, *Vocabulaire Vieux-Breton.* (Paris, 1884), 68-9, 113, 129.
13. BM. ms. add. 9381.
ed. W. Stokes RC i, 332 ff.
ed. M. Foster, *Die Freilassungsurkunden des Bodmin-Evangeliars,* in *A Grammatical Miscellany offered to Otto Jespersen,* (Copenhagen, 1930), 77 ff.
See also H. Jenner, "The Bodmin Gospels," J.R.I.C., xxi, 1923, 113-145; xxi, 1924, 235-260.
14. BM Cott. Vesp. A, xiv, ff. 7a-10a.
ed. E. Norris, *The Ancient Cornish Drama,* (1859), Vol. II, 311-435.
ed. J.C. Neuss, *Grammatica Celtica,* (Berlin 2nd edn. by H. Ebel, 1871), 1065-81.
ed. Graves, Eugene Van Tassel, *The Old Cornish Vocabulary,* (University Microfilms Inc., Ann Arbor, 1962).
15. For a brief description of the differences between Old Cornish and Old Welsh, see H. Lewis, *Llawlyfr Cernyweg Canol,* (Caerdydd/Cardiff, 1946), 3.
16. H. Jenner: *Some miscellaneous scraps of Cornish.* 96th Annual Report R.C.P.S., vol. VI, Pt. 3, 1929, 238-255.
The text of the story is given in translation by J.A.C. Vincent, *The Cartulary of the Collegiate Church of St. Thomas of Canterbury at Glasney,* J.R.I.C. vi 1879, 216-263.
17. ed. F.C. Hingeston-Randolph, *The Register of John de Grandisson, Bishop of Exeter (A.D. 1327-1369),* (1894-9).
18. Henderson mss. Truro Museum, vol. x, 124.



19. Jenner, Handbook of the Cornish Language (London, 1904), 25-6.
The Charter is B.M. add. 19491.
Ed: W. Stokes, "Cornica," R.C. iv (1879-80), 258-62.
H. Jenner, "Descriptions of Cornish mss. II" J.R.I.C. xx, (1915), 41-8.
R.M. Nance, "The Charter Endorsement in Cornish" *OC* ii, 4 (1932), 34-6; "New light on Cornish," *OC* iv, 6 (1947), 214-6.
E. Campanile, "Un frammento scenico medio-cornico." *Studi e Saggi Linquistici* (Suppl. to L'Italia Dialettale, XXVI) iii (1963), 60-80.
20. Bodleian ms. 791; Ed. E. Norris, *The Ancient Cornish Drama,* 2 vols, (Oxford, 1859); reprinted by Benjamin Blom (New York and London, 1968).
ed. P. P. Harris; University of Washington, Seattle: ms. copy in R.I.C. Library, Truro.
Trans. Markham Harris, *The Cornish Ordinalia: A Medieval Dramatic Trilogy.* (Catholic University of America Press, 1969).
For a full bibliography of this, and other Middle Cornish drama, see Institute of Cornish Studies Special Bibliography 2, *The Medieval Cornish Drama* (Redruth, 1973).
21. D.C. Fowler, "The Date of the Cornish *Ordinalia,*" Medieval Studies, XXIII, (1961), 91-125.
22. For full discussions of the *Ordinalia* place-names, see Norris, op. cit, Vol. II, 473-514; Fowler, op. cit., 96-104; Bakere, J.A., *The Cornish Ordinalia,* (Cardiff, 1980), 31-49.
23. For full discussion of the *plen an gwary,* see Norris, op. cit., II, 452-57; R.M. Nance, "The Plen an Gwary or Cornish playing-place," J.R.I.C. xxiv (1935), 190-211; F.E. Halliday, *"The Legend of the Rood,"* (London, 1955), Introduction; A.C. Thomas, "The Henge at Castilly, Lanivet," Cornish Archaeology 3 (1964), 3-14; Bakere, J.A. op. cit., 23-27.
24. op. cit., 111-113.
25. For a list of these words, see Fowler, op. cit., 113-120.
26. op. cit., Vol. I, v.
27. P. Berrisford Ellis, *The Cornish Language and its Literature,* (London, 1974), 38.
28. For a full discussion of the "prototype" cycle and the relationship of the Cornish play to it, see V.A. Kolve, "The Play called *Corpus Christi,*" (London, 1966).
29. This story is given full treatment in F.E. Halliday, *The Legend of the Rood,* (London, 1955).
30. See R. Longsworth, *The Cornish Ordinalia, Religion and Dramaturgy,* (Harvard University Pres, 1967).
31. Also called the *Poem of Mount Calvary,* or *The Passion,* B.M. ms. Harley 1782. There are 4 mss. which apparently derive from this: see B.O. Murdoch, *The Medieval Cornish Poem of the Passion,* Special Bibliography 5, Institute of Cornish Studies, (Redruth, 1979).
Ed. W. Stokes, *The Passion, a Middle-Cornish Poem,* Appendix to Trans. Phil. Soc. (1860-61), 1-100.
32. For the two opposing views as to which work borrowed, and which lent, see R.M. Nance "A Cornish Poem Restored," *OC* iv, 10 (1949), 368-71; Bakere, op. cit., 103-108; *contra,* Fowler, op. cit., 104-111.
33. Bodleian ms. N 219. There are also 4 other copies of the text, as well as a fragment. See Stokes, ed., f.2.
Ed. W. Stokes, *Gwreans an Bys,* the Creation of the World: a Cornish Mystery, Trans. Phil. Soc. (1864), part IV, 4. The play was put into Unified Cornish spelling by R.M. Nance and A.S.D. Smith, and published, with a useful English translation, as *Gwryans an Bys* (F.O.C.S., Padstow, 1959).
34. Nance, op. cit., i.
35. P. Neuss, "Memorial Reconstruction in a Cornish Miracle Play," *Comparative Drama,* 5 (1971), 129-137.
36. N.L.W. ms. Peniarth 105.
Ed. W. Stokes, *The Life of St. Meriasek, Bishop and Confessor: A Cornish Drama,* (London, 1872).
37. A detailed examination of the Breton sources is found in G.H. Doble, "The Saints of Cornwall," I, (Chatham, 1960), 111-145.

38. The play's relationship with Camborne is analysed in A.C. Thomas, "Christian Antiquities of Camborne," (St. Austell, 1967), 21-39.
39. op. cit., 34.
40. Ed. F.J. Furnivall, EETS. e.s. 10 (1870).
41. Ed. W. Stokes, "Cornica," *RC* iv, 1879-80. 262-64.
42. Corpus Christi, Cambridge, ms. Synddalia CXXI; BM ms. Egerton 2350 f. 54.
43. BM Add ms. 46397.
Part of one homily is printed by R.M. Nance, "The Tregear ms." OC. iv, 11, (1950) 429-34.
44. "More about the Tregear ms.," OC. v, 1, (1951), 21-27.
45. op. cit., 26.
46. See P.A.S. Pool, *The Death of Cornish (1600-1800)*, (Penzance, 1975).
47. J. Norden, *Description of Cornwall*, (1728), 26.

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