# Time for change: the case for Modern Cornish

**A submission to the Cornish Language Commission on behalf of the Cussel an Tavas Kernuak**

**Executive summary**

- The Cornish language revival has failed to produce a sizeable core of fluent speakers.

- Attempts to create a standard based on medieval Cornish have not succeeded.

- There have been two dominant and overlapping approaches to medieval Cornish spelling – historicist and rationalist. The first claims authenticity to lie in closeness to the historical texts and the second seeks authenticity in the relationship between pronunciation and spelling.

- The medievalist project has proved to be flawed. Its underlying ideology is over-romanticised and unable to strike a chord with the contemporary Cornish population.

- The work of Edward Lhuyd and the writings of the later Cornish speakers provide a much more logical and accurate base for the pronunciation of Cornish and bring it closer to contemporary Cornwall.

- Modern Cornish avoids the squabbles that are rife among the medievalists, provides a colloquial and fluent register, re-connects with the aims of the early revivalists and recognises the history of Cornish as it really was rather than as we might wish it to have been.

- Modern Cornish is a more rounded project which recognises that the revival of the Cornish language is not just a question of linguistics but involves important issues of identity and history as well.

- Critics of Modern Cornish have failed to understand the project, which is fundamentally different from the more authoritarian projects built on late medieval Cornish. Those who have studied Modern Cornish in depth have dismissed criticisms of its syntax and lexicon as exaggerated.

- In order to build a language fit for twenty-first century Cornwall the Commission is urged to recommend we adopt the pronunciation of Modern Cornish as the basis for the spoken language.

- There are then four possible options for the orthography. First, use either native or Lhuydian spelling systems for Cornish. Second, recognise the current pluralist situation by proposing two standards. Third, reach a compromise with the historicists and the 'unified Cornish revised' project. Fourth, reach a compromise with the 'common' Cornish project. All but the first would involve recognising different registers, literary and colloquial, for Cornish.

### The failure of the language revival

In 1947 A.D.Smith (Caradar), one of the intellectual leaders of the early twentieth century revival, stated that revived 'unified' Cornish was 'a compact medieval language … and (it is) little likely to undergo any further change' (Smith 1947, 20). In the event, Smith was proved hopelessly wrong. Within a generation the consensus built around 'unified' Cornish was crumbling. On its demise, a more pluralist situation emerged, with four main orthographies in use and different theories abounding about the pronunciation and grammar of the revived language. This produced disputes that have spluttered on over the past 20 years, often descending to regrettable levels of personal insult and vitriolic abuse amongst that small group of people who comprise the core of the Cornish language 'revival'.

Faction-fighting has become endemic largely because of the failure of the revived language movement to increase its numbers. The number of people who can speak the revived language remains tiny. MacKinnon estimated in 2000 that that there were between 250 and 300 'effective' speakers of Cornish (MacKinnon 2002, 271). However, this figure appears 'to be generous and based on an undemanding definition of fluency' (Kennedy 2002, 286). It is more likely that the number of competent speakers remains well below 200. An addition of less than two net speakers a year over the century or more since the Cornish revival began is evidence for the failure of that revival.

> **How many people speak Cornish?**
> Intelligent estimates of the number of speakers of revived Cornish are hampered by efforts on the part of all schools of Cornish to exaggerate their importance. The 'Kowethas an Yeth Kernewek' survey of November 2005 allows is to draw a more accurate estimate. This organisation includes the bulk of fluent users of 'common' Cornish plus some users of 'unified'. Its membership is 279. In response to a questionnaire completed by 176 of its members (Kowethas an Yeth Kernewek 2006, 9) only 61 claimed to be able to speak Cornish competently or fluently (equivalent to 88 of all members). It is unlikely that there are more than another 60 or so competent or fluent speakers who are either users of medieval Cornish but not members of this body or users of Modern Cornish. A more reasonable estimate of the number of competent and fluent speakers of Cornish would therefore be 140 to 150 at most.

Groups with small membership bases, such as those on the far fringes of the political spectrum, have an inevitable tendency to succumb to the personalisation of their activities and to subsequent splits. This organisational aspect is part of the reason for the failure of the Cornish language revival. But paradoxically, what some people view as the 'chaos' of pluralism is not the main cause of this failure. Indeed, the competition produced by the onset of pluralist dialects and orthographies in the mid-1980s may possibly even have engendered a greater level of activity. Instead, the limited number of competent speakers results from the more

deep-seated failure of the ideological assumptions taken for granted within the revival to strike a chord with a significant number of Cornish people. To understand why this should be so we need to know a little about the roots of the revival.

Cornish emerged as a language distinct from Welsh in the second half of the first millennium. It reached the horizon of literacy in the later thirteenth century. Bolstered by the patronage of the Church (but unlike Wales not the gentry) Cornish stabilised and indeed flourished in the period from the Black Death in the fourteenth century to the Reformation in the sixteenth. However, the anglicisation of the English Church from the 1530s onwards exposed the over-dependence of Cornish on that institution and in consequence the language's domains began to shrink. Around 1800 Cornish had ceased to be a vernacular as, during the course of the eighteenth century, people had stopped transmitting it across the generations (see also Spriggs 2003).

When the first stirrings of revivalism appeared, in the shape of attempts to teach the grammar and vocabulary of Cornish in the decades following 1870, the natural assumption was that the project would pick up from where the eighteenth century speakers had left off. In 1904 Henry Jenner's *Handbook of the Cornish Language*, the first book-length grammar of revived Cornish, adopted a version of Cornish that was heavily indebted to the work of Edward Lhuyd, who had described at length the language he heard on his visit to west Cornwall around 1700.

However, the bulk of Cornish literature dates from the period before the Reformation. Around a third of the estimated 150,000 words of Cornish were written before 1450, another third was the product of the 50 years either side of 1500, and the final third was penned in the period from 1550 to the 1780s. The early twentieth century revivalists were more interested in the written than the spoken form and also more attracted by romantic notions of a 'purer' Cornish-speaking Cornwall of the medieval period, one unsullied by either industrialisation or by Protestantism (Payton 1997). In consequence the revival changed direction in the 1920s. This was driven largely by the energies of one man – Robert Morton Nance – who devised a 'unified' Cornish orthography that based the language firmly on its medieval foundation.

'Unified' Cornish was acceptable while Cornish remained a hobby for the crossword-puzzle solving middle classes. However, when people began to speak the language to each other and to their children in greater numbers in the 1970s its shortcomings soon became apparent. It possessed a double drawback. First, its archaic spelling system removed it unduly far from the Cornish language that had survived in placenames and surnames, thus making it hard for Cornish people to own it. Second, its spelling gave no clear direction to its pronunciation. Nance himself had vaguely suggested basing the pronunciation on the dialect of West Penwith and

thus by implication later Cornish. Yet the syntax and lexicon looked back to the medieval texts, giving most weight to the oldest of those, the Ordinalia cycle of the fourteenth century.

One response to these problems was to ground the revived language more closely on a reconstructed phonology of 1500 (George 1986). George's 'common' Cornish, which also promised being 'easier to learn', was rapidly adopted by the revivalist movement. Unfortunately, the fundamental problems of this new proto-standard became apparent even more quickly than had those of 'unified'. In consequence, its failure to impose itself as a de-facto standard has directly led to the current pluralism and to the need for a more acceptable Standard Written Form (SWF) for pedagogic and official purposes.

### From 'unified' Cornish to pluralist Cornishes

The attempt to build a standard around 'common' Cornish has, like that of 'unified' Cornish, also failed because of the failure of the revivalist movement more broadly to reflect on its foundation myths. Instead, the movement has been dazzled by the quick 'fix' offered by linguists (in the main enthusiastic but amateur and self-trained). The reliance on linguistics for a solution to the failure of revived Cornish to draw in larger numbers of active speakers and the restriction of the debate to the specialist discourse of linguistics is fundamentally mistaken (for this argument at greater length see Deacon 1996, 2006, 2007a).

Broadly speaking, we can discern two linguistic approaches to the revival of the language. These might be termed 'historicist' and 'rationalist'. The historicist approach privileges the historical texts and has also been described as descriptivist, setting out to describe the syntax and lexicon of the language and basing the revived language as closely as possible on the historic texts. The alternative approach attempts to reconstruct the language, less interested in being bound by the authenticity of the texts but in the process engaging in more active language planning, for example standardising the orthography, purifying the lexicon, inventing neologisms etc. For the historicists the revived language's authenticity lies in its relationship to historical texts; for the rationalists the language's authenticity lies in its faithfulness to the pronunciation of Cornish. In the 1980s the rationalists temporarily won the argument and imposed a phonemic approach whereby the spelling of Cornish would attempt to reflect its phonological base.

But which phonological base? Unlike other languages no real speech community existed in the 1980s. Those who spoke Cornish used the vowel sounds of modern English, sometimes with an Anglo-Cornish intonation but as often with a Received Pronunciation intonation. Basing a Cornish spelling on that was deemed too inauthentic by the linguistic rationalists of the time. Therefore the decision was made to base it on the language as it

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was spoken in 1500, uncritically reflecting the medieval thrust of Nance's 'unified' Cornish. 'Common' Cornish then set out to change people's pronunciation of Cornish in order to bring it into line with a hypothesized pronunciation of 1500 while at the same time using a phonemic orthography that related the spelling closely to that purported pronunciation.

This was a brave but ultimately forlorn attempt to overcome a basic difference between Cornish and other languages. In most languages the spelling can be discussed, revised and re-written if desired in relation to the pronunciation of a living speech community. Spelling systems can be more or less phonemic, with the speech community providing a litmus test for the pronunciation. We know how English or Welsh are pronounced because there are speakers of those languages. Not so in Cornish. In Cornish we only have the ghosts of Cornish speakers to turn to as the twentieth century revival had not produced a viable contemporary speech community. Cornish died before the days of the tape recorder and we cannot be certain how it was pronounced. This has two consequences; it means that Cornish learners are more dependent than others on the written word (the justification for adopting a 'phonemic' system) but it also means that we cannot base that phonemic spelling system on actual testable, currently pronounced speech. The result is somewhat tautologous and involves a considerable suspension of belief. We are asked to believe that the reconstruction of Cornish as it sounded more than half a millennium ago is accurate and then we are asked to base our pronunciation on that late medieval Cornish, as taught to us by a spelling system derived from that reconstruction.

Because of the importance of the written rather than the spoken word in the history of the revival and because the quantitative bulk of written texts predate the 1550s, revivalist logic forces it back to late medieval Cornish. But this involves a basic problem – we can never be confident we have this late medieval language right. It has become increasingly clear since the 1980s as our knowledge of the historic language has grown, that there are considerable, indeed insurmountable, doubts about the reconstruction of the phonological base of 1500.

Almost from its inception 'common' Cornish has come under a sustained academic critique. This revolves around

- The timing of a 'prosodic shift' in Cornish and the presence or absence of half-length vowels in the Cornish of the late fifteenth and early sixteenth centuries (Williams 2006a).

- The fact that, despite its claims to be phonemic, the same grapheme sometimes represents different sounds and the same phonemes are sometimes represented by two or more graphemes (Williams 2006a).

- Failures of methodology. The inaccuracies of the analysis underpinning the reconstruction of a late medieval phonology have led one linguist to despairingly conclude that 'there is very little that could be said to be right about any of them' (Mills 1999, 201).

- Perhaps most critical given the insistence that it is the product of a computerised examination of the corpus of Cornish, the database that underlies 'common' Cornish has been shown to be seriously flawed - and not just occasionally. Williams (2001 and 2006a) has cited over 400 instances where the data concerning attestations in the historic texts that are cited in the *Gerlyver Kernewek Kemmyn*, the dictionary of 'Common' Cornish, are plainly wrong.

- Finally, it is also clear that hardly any 'common' Cornish users actually pronounce late medieval Cornish as it is intended to be pronounced and are blissfully unaware of the difference between a half-length and full length vowel. The claim of its devisor that the pronunciation and spelling of 'common' Cornish are 'closely wedded' (George 1995, 113) is just another example of that wishful thinking that seems to have bedevilled the revivalist movement since the early years of the twentieth century. As 'common' Cornish is not pronounced in line with the hypothetical pronunciation of 1500 then the switch from 'unified' to 'common' Cornish would appear to have been a 'complete waste of time and energy' (Mills 1999, 207).

The 'waste of time and energy' involved in this second unsuccessful quest to ground revived Cornish on a putative and highly questionable late medieval phonology is doubly tragic when we consider that a perfectly valid alternative exists - the pronunciation of the speech community of 1700 and the Cornish that was on the lips of the last generations of its speakers.


### *Modern Cornish*

Although the medieval texts supply the quantitative majority of the historical corpus of the language they are not a good basis for reconstructing the everyday spoken language that should be the foundation for a modern contemporary, spoken tongue. This is because the first extended text that was written in prose, rather than in seven or nine syllable lines of verse, did not appear until the 1550s. As Mills (1999) points out, the religious plays that make up the bulk of Cornish literature have a highly marked stylistic nature. Because words were often reversed in order to scan or rhyme, the word order actually tells us little about normal unmarked structures. In addition we have no knowledge of their authors or whether they were first or second language speakers. However, although quantitatively smaller, the Cornish of the 1550s to the 1770s does provide us with a variety of genres, both prose and verse, and we

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know who the writers were. Indeed, it has been stated that late Cornish was a working Celtic language with many features reminiscent of colloquial Welsh or Breton two centuries later (Wmffre 1999).

But this is not the only advantage of basing Cornish on its early modern rather than its late medieval period. The former also contains the only direct description of the grammar and pronunciation of the language during its spoken period – that written by Edward Lhuyd who visited Cornwall around 1700. Lhuyd's account of the language, while ambiguous in places, is a much more secure base for realising the pronunciation of the Cornish spoken in a historical period than any theoretical reconstruction based on the archaic scribal tradition of the medieval period. While it has been correctly stated that 'it is impossible … to recover historical Cornish' and that there will always be a degree of 'experimental error' involved in such attempts (George 1995, 106 and 118), that 'experimental error' can be greatly reduced by grounding Cornish on the period described by Lhuyd. In addition it has been argued that Lhuyd's description of the pronunciation of Cornish closely reflects the former dialect of the fishing ports of west Penwith, the last places in which Cornish was spoken (O'Coilean, nd). This dialect has been recorded and offers a valuable bridge back to the historic language.

Avoiding the problems posed by late medieval Cornish, the Cornish of Lhuyd's time which he and his contemporaries described as 'Modern Cornish', also provides a much more logical base for contemporary twenty-first century Cornish. For Modern Cornish is what medieval Cornish became. Had Cornish survived into the twentieth century as did Manx, we would no doubt now be speaking something akin to Modern Cornish, which has to be the logical default standard for revived Cornish. Indeed, this is why the early revivalists rightly based their Cornish on its latest period, seeking to pick up where the language left off. This eminently sensible strategy was derailed by the disastrous turn towards medievalism that took place in the 1920s.

Its less conjectural phonology, its greater closeness to our own time and its colloquial and simplified grammar all make Modern Cornish the ideal choice for the revived language. But it has one further great advantage: it would be considerably easier to sell this form of the language to the 99.96 per cent of Cornish people who are not Cornish speakers.

### *Beyond linguistics: ideology, identity and history*
In contemporary Cornwall the Cornish language is significant for most people (if it is significant at all) as a symbol of identity and not as a means of communication. This is both a strength and a weakness. It is a strength because the language can potentially be part of that resurgence of interest in Cornishness that has been observed over the past generation (Payton 1999; Deacon and Schwartz 2007). But it is a weakness in that for many

people knowledge of a few phrases suffices. Furthermore, people attracted to the language revival have been attracted in the main for patriotic reasons. They bring with them all the assumptions of the wider Cornish cultural revival, or if they do not they are soon acculturated into those assumptions. As we have seen the Cornish revival has been obsessed with the medieval period and with a search for purity. There is a simplistic tendency to adopt a binary English bad/Celtic good approach and to see Cornwall as equivalent to Wales, Ireland or Brittany, just smaller.

The problem with this world-view is that it does not square with the actual lived identity of the Cornish people, only appealing to those who subscribe to a romanticised vision of Cornwall and the Cornish people as something entirely separate from England and the English people. This may explain why so many Cornish learners (a third or more) do not live in Cornwall at all, viewing Cornwall through the rose tinted gaze of the Cornish diaspora or the romanticism of the English suburbs. The leading proponents of 'common' Cornish appear most prone to this (see Deacon 2007a). If we dig below the surface of their preferred discourse of scientific rationality we find a most unscientific set of ideological assumptions about Cornish that owe more to nineteenth century notions of linguistic 'purity' and to romantic nationalism than they do to science (see Deacon 1996, 2006, 2007a). In their efforts to distance revived Cornish from English the inner core of 'Common' Cornish proselytisers has followed the purism of Morton Nance and invented some lexicon while purging traditional words on no other grounds than they appear too 'English' (see Williams 2006a). (Although paradoxically this rejection of English means that late medieval Cornish is actually greatly influenced by English in its creation of unnecessary neologisms and the way it structures its vocabulary – see Mills 1999, 208).

'Using Cornish is always a self-conscious political act approaching "performance"' (Kennedy 2002, 287) and this is a performance that most Cornish people have always regarded with some scepticism. Their scepticism flows from their history. Unlike our medievalist colleagues, rather than adopt a romantic narrative of Cornish and Cornwall as we wish it had been, those who advocate Modern Cornish urge that we accept Cornish as it actually was. We prefer to engage with Cornwall's real past. Cornish has been affected by English at <u>all</u> stages of its past since 1000 at least, borrowing widely from English lexicon and influenced by English pronunciation and grammar. We may regret this or, for patriotic reasons, desire it were otherwise, but we cannot wish away a thousand years. Indeed, the language is reflective of Cornish society more generally. Cornwall has been influenced by the English and the English state throughout its late medieval and modern periods. It has been a land of two tongues for a thousand years and the complexity and hybridity of its people's modern identity is testament to a dual cultural tradition, part English and part non-English. Rather than ignoring this past, the Modern Cornish project accepts it, engages with it and, moreover, celebrates it as

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an aspect of Cornwall's uniqueness, a uniqueness that makes Cornwall and its people intriguingly different from other Celtic countries and nations as well as much more than a mere English county (see Deacon 2007b and 2007c). Modern Cornish, like medieval Cornish, may not be the 'pure' Cornish of the medievalist imagination, but it is based on an attested phonology, has historical validity and relates more closely to the actual lived experience of the Cornish people.

Adopting Modern Cornish as the basis for the SWF would situate Cornish firmly in the very early days of Cornwall's precocious industrialisation, which began to gather pace in the late seventeenth century as tin mining expanded its operations. The decline of the language overlaps with the growth of deep mining, the erection of steam engines, and the arrival of John Wesley. These were the elements that underpinned the classic Cornish identity of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries and that remain critical components of the contemporary identity of the Cornish as 'industrial Celts'. Modern Cornish is the form of the language spoken at the dawn of the modern age and is contemporaneous with the appearance of modern Cornwall. Its adoption is therefore not only relevant but rational. It avoids the patent illogic of basing Cornish on a medieval form last spoken in the days before the Reformation (even if we accept that such a form can be accurately recovered) in a Cornwall that was Catholic, agrarian and steeped in medieval customary practices and superstitions that have long since been swept away by the stiff breezes of modernity that began to blow in the later 1600s. Inserting a late medieval form of Cornish into a modern society was always a transparently absurd project. The turn to 'common' Cornish has exacerbated this absurdity by removing the spelling even further from the traces of Cornish that are still evident in the physical and social landscape of mid and west Cornwall – in placenames, in some surnames and in dialect words. The result is that ordinary Cornish people tend to view the Cornish language as alien and foreign and something irrelevant to them. But the existence of Modern Cornish allows us to transcend this ludicrous and, to the wider public, nonsensical and irrelevant project. To sum up, Modern Cornish represents merely the mature phase of the Cornish language. It is the latest point in the development of the language, the one that is closest to our own period and therefore by far the most relevant form.


### Criticisms of Modern Cornish
The ideological sands on which the foundations of the medievalist Cornish project have been built are rarely discussed, excluded by the discourse of linguistics within which revivalists seek to restrict the debate. In contrast, most of the criticisms of Modern Cornish revolve around its alleged linguistic shortcomings. But even these are exaggerated or distorted. Those scholars who have actually studied Modern Cornish have concluded that accusations by proponents of the revival of fifteenth century Cornish that Modern Cornish was 'corrupt' or anglicised are greatly exaggerated

(Wmffre 1999; Price 1999). They are the result of a superficial study of Modern Cornish texts.

Moreover, most medievalist critics have fundamentally misunderstood the nature of the Modern Cornish project which has been ongoing since the early 1980s. For example, because both 'unified' and 'common' Cornish were attempts to fix Cornish spelling and grammar they have failed to understand that Modern Cornish has been a more dynamic and diachronic process. Early dictionaries (for example Gendall 1990, 1997) were resources for rediscovering and standardising Modern Cornish rather than an end in themselves. As a result criticisms of Modern Cornish often betray a time lag, being unaware of the growing knowledge of Modern Cornish (Kennedy 1996).

For example, a somewhat superficial acquaintance with Modern Cornish might be suggested by the admission of George that he had not consulted a copy of Lhuyd's *Archaeologia Brittanica* (in which his published writings appear) and ignored large sections of Lhuyd's writings in Cornish when constructing his database (cited in Williams 2006b, 10). This decision was made on the highly dubious grounds that Lhuyd was 'idiosyncratic'. Instead, George made observations based solely on one Modern Cornish writer of the late seventeenth century, and on these insubstantial grounds was able to conclude that Modern Cornish is 'incapable of expressing all ideas and tenses' and that the 'bulk' of its lexicon would have to be re-invented 'or, ironically, re-spelled from Middle Cornish'(George 1986, 54). Almost a decade later George admitted rather grudgingly that 'the testimony of Lhuyd is a help' but insisted that 'Late Cornish' had a 'reduced competence' on the grounds of its syntax, lexicon, phonology, orthography and 'richness' (George 1995). Let us briefly review his criticisms.

- Syntax. George claimed that 'Late Cornish' is 'influenced' by English. This criticism stems from his ideological distaste for English influence. For the committed 'common' Cornish disciple English borrowings are not just 'borrowings'; they become 'flagrant borrowings' (*Agan Yeth* 4, 29), corrupting the pure unsullied language of their imagination. Changes in pronunciation as the language developed are not just linguistic developments. They have to be sorted between 'those features which were a natural development in Cornish and those which could be interpreted as corruptions from English' (*Agan Yeth* 4, 33). The key word here is 'interpreted' for there is little if any scientific justification for such a distinction. More recent work strongly suggests that the syntax of Modern Cornish was probably identical to that of sixteenth century spoken Cornish (Williams 2006b), the apparent difference being largely a function of the loss of the Cornish scribal tradition in the 1500s. Moreover, while there are some examples of word order influenced by English there are, equally, many examples of non-

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English word order. One example is the way the way the perfect and pluperfect tense were formed in Modern Cornish, in a less 'English' word order than in medieval Cornish.

- Lexicon. George claimed the lexicon is 'insufficient for the requirements of a modern language to be used in everyday living in the twentieth century' (George 1995, 108). This may come as news to those of us who use it perfectly happily every day. In fact no phase of Cornish can provide all the required vocabulary and all have to borrow from other phases.

  Furthermore, this claim is again just not borne out by the evidence. For example, taking a sample from his own *Gerlyver Kernewek Kemmyn* (1996) (the first two full pages for each letter of the alphabet) we find the following:

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  |---|---|
  | Headwords attested in medieval Cornish | 51.1% |
  | Headwords attested in Modern Cornish | 36.9% |
  | Headwords unattested in any historic phase | 32.4% |
  | Number | 1220 |

  Of these 1220 words 11.1 per cent are only found in Modern Cornish while 22.1 per cent are only found in medieval Cornish texts. But another 3.9 per cent were only found in the Tregear Homilies of the 1550s, which is also the first Cornish written in prose and not verse. If this is defined as Modern rather than medieval Cornish then the proportions of words attested in these two phases become 47-41, hardly the staggering difference in lexicon implied by George. Moreover, even a cursory check of George's data against the Modern Cornish corpus reveals that he has understated the Modern Cornish attestations by at least 5-6 per cent. Adding this makes the totals of words attested in Modern and medieval Cornish even in the main 'common' Cornish dictionary about even. We can conclude from this that the claim that the Modern Cornish lexicon is greatly impoverished compared with medieval Cornish is false. Indeed, the proportion of words of English origin in *Beunans Meriasek* (1504) is considerably higher than in Nicholas Boson's writings of the 1670s.

- Orthography. The evidence cited in George (1995) is now out of date and irrelevant in the light of the progression of Modern Cornish standardisation.

- 'Richness'. George claims that Modern Cornish does not take from other periods whereas 'common' Cornish does. This is completely false as of course Modern Cornish borrows from earlier periods. Like all varieties of Cornish we subscribe to the policy of *tota cornicitas*. Indeed, it would seem more logical for Modern Cornish to borrow words from its past than for late medieval Cornish to borrow words from its future. Finally, George criticises Modern Cornish on the grounds that it was not a 'pure' language, being restricted by 1700 geographically and socially. But this again was also the case for the Cornish of 1500, restricted to the western four Hundreds of Cornwall. If this is important, then why isn't 1000 the preferred date for 'common' Cornish as this was around the latest date at which Cornish was spoken up to the River Tamar? Such a criticism is of course highly subjective and rests on the purist and romanticised notions that stem from the outdated value system of the Cornish revival.

We can conclude that criticism of Modern Cornish even from within a narrow linguistic discourse is either exaggerated, inaccurate or merely based on subjective and untestable claims (see also Deacon 2007a).

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**Ten reasons for 'common' Cornish to become the SWF?**
Academically beleaguered, the defenders of 'common' Cornish tend to deny the evidence and resort to unsupportable claims. For instance, 'Ten good reasons' for adopting 'common' Cornish as a standard (George 2006) include the claim that it is 'generally held to be a great improvement over Unified Cornish', which flies in the face of the weight of academic opinion. Four of the other ten reasons relate to the greater amount of resources commanded by 'common' Cornish, a contingent and highly predictable result of its supporters gaining control of the institutions of the Cornish revival in the mid-1980s. Meanwhile another two state that it is regulated by the Cornish Language Board (a body that since 1986 has only recognised 'common' Cornish) and that 'Common' Cornish students can sit examinations administered by the Board. These tautological assertions hardly constitute a case for 'common' Cornish to become a standard. On the contrary, having been prematurely pronounced the new standard by the Language Board in the 1980s, the failure of 'Common' Cornish to establish itself as an actual de-facto standard clearly displays its unsuitability for that role.

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### *The way forward*
The Cornish revival, in its century and more of existence, has failed in its ambition to produce a critical mass of Cornish speakers. Although there are wider socio-economic factors that help to explain this, its ideological

assumptions and their palpable failure to appeal to wide numbers of Cornish people are also intrinsic causes. The Cornish language is too important to be left any longer to the whims of Cornish revivalism, a movement that has since the nineteenth century brought it to the brink of extinction.

Nevertheless, the coming of official recognition for the language and the prospect of, albeit limited, financial support for Cornish creates a new environment within which the language can potentially again become the property of all Cornish people and not merely of a revivalist elite. If that happens then it has the chance to grow and flourish. The revival began the process of reviving the Cornish language; it is now time to construct a more professional, inclusive and sounder footing for a language fit for twenty-first century Cornwall and its people.  A modern language will have to move on from the medievalist assumptions of the current revival. The only credible base for the SWF is therefore the pronunciation of Modern Cornish.

The pronunciation of Cornish in 1700 provides the obvious phonology and, while having clear advantages of its own, avoids the disputes and uncertainties that surround the project to restore a hypothetical phonological base of 1500. We trust therefore that the Commission will recommend basing the SWF as closely as possible on Modern Cornish. Given the importance of the written word in learning Cornish this implies that the orthography reflects that phonological base.

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**Modern Cornish spelling systems**

Modern Cornish possesses two potential orthographies, examples of which appear in Appendix A. The first is native Cornish, based on writers of the late seventeenth century, such as William Rowe and Nicholas Boson, before the influence of Lhuyd. This has the advantage of being indigenous and resonant of the Cornish that has survived in the landscape. But it has the disadvantage that the pronunciation is sometimes not clear from the spelling.

The second possibility is to adopt Lhuyd's orthography. Edward Lhuyd developed his own spelling system, loosely phonemic. The advantage of this is that it is more rational but its disadvantage is that, like 'common' Cornish, it moves revived Cornish away from the historic texts.

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However, the *Cussel an Tavas Kernuak* is also realistic and recognises that unfortunately only 15-20 per cent of users of Cornish are using Modern Cornish. The greatest proportion of users have learnt 'common' Cornish, possibly as many as 50-60 per cent based on the attendance at the Tremough language conference in September 2006. Although in absolute terms a very small number, ideally we need to reach out to these people

and seek ways to harness their enthusiasm, energy and single-mindedness. We believe that, if the logic of adopting Modern Cornish was clearly set out to existing Cornish users, most could quite easily shift towards it. After all, those of us who have been Cornish speakers since before the 1980s first learnt 'unified' Cornish, but that has proved no hindrance to our adoption of Modern Cornish. However, if the Commission is not able to propose a SWF firmly based on Modern Cornish, it is not difficult to identify possible compromise solutions. We suggest three possible compromises that can be more inclusive in terms of the current language movement yet still provide a better basis for the future of the language.

### Three proposals for a compromise SWF

*a) dual standards*
The simplest and most elegant solution would be to recognise the hybrid nature and history of the Cornish language and the unique temporal base of the revived language by accommodating two parallel standards for different domains.

For pedagogy at the introductory school and adult education level up to GCSE the standard orthography should be a revised Modern Cornish. This would have the advantage of
  a) basing the spoken language firmly on its latest, most modern and most easily reconstructable pronunciation
  b) allowing learners to learn the least complex and easiest form of the language

For higher level educational purposes (degree level and perhaps GCE A level and beyond) the standard orthography should be based on late medieval Cornish. This should be close enough to the historic texts to allow for serious study of those texts. The more archaic and literary standard could also serve as the SWF for official government and bureaucratic use.

For signage a degree of flexibility should be allowed. For example in east Cornwall, the medieval based literary standard may be more appropriate; for west Cornwall the modern standard may be preferred. For such things as house or boat names, film dubbing or advertising purposes, the simpler, more colloquial and more familiar Modern Cornish standard would be most appropriate; for religious services, more formal occasions and more prestigious signage the literary medieval standard may be more suitable.

This solution would provide a compromise whereby all current forms of Cornish can be accommodated and the potential for the future growth of the use of the language maximised.

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But there also exist two other possible routes to a viable compromise with those who use medieval Cornish. These relate back to the division between historicists and rationalists within the Cornish revival.

*b) a historicist SWF*
A Cornish scribal tradition survived into the final decades of the sixteenth century, the Tregear Homilies and the transcribed Cornish of the *Creation of the World* of the 1550s-70s and 1611 being its last extant examples. It is now becoming clearer that the apparent difference between late medieval and Modern Cornish has been exaggerated by orthographical changes during the late sixteenth and seventeenth centuries. This opens up the way for a harmonisation of the scribal tradition of the sixteenth century texts with the changing pronunciation of the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries. The *Kernowak Standard* proposal moves some way towards this and could be the basis for discussion. If the more archaic features of the medieval scribal tradition are removed, for example the over-use of the grapheme <y>, and if certain aspects of Modern Cornish, for example pre-occlusion and the use of the graphemes <i>, <v> and <z>, are admitted, and if a colloquial register is allowed for dialectical variation we can perceive an obvious route to compromise. The literary register could remain sufficiently conservative so as not to cause great problems for those who have learnt 'unified' or 'common' Cornish. By being based on the spelling in the actual texts the SWF would be historically valid and allow learners to access the historical corpus in its original spelling more easily. By a degree of rationalisation a SWF based on the latest possible phase of the scribal tradition might also meet the desire of 'common' Cornish users for a more 'phonemic' and rational orthography.

*c) a rationalist SWF*
While medieval Cornish has its 'phonemic' orthography in 'common' Cornish, Modern Cornish has its own in Lhuyd's rationalisation. While Lhuyd is free of the uncertainties of the 'common' Cornish reconstruction it is possible that, were the production of a phonemic orthography deemed the major criterion, there could be a rapprochement between 'common' and Modern Cornish. If 'common' Cornish users were willing to recognise the more certain phonological base identified by Lhuyd, perhaps by adopting a colloquial register; if they agreed to drop the over-use of <k> and re-introduced <c> in front of <o,a,u,l,r> as in French and Spanish in order to make written Cornish look less alien; and if the grapheme <z> was introduced, then there might be the possibility of a rationalist compromise. By incorporating the pronunciation of Modern Cornish and yet retaining a medieval high written register this would be acceptable to those who prefer a more formal medieval style but allow Modern Cornish to become an accepted colloquial register. And by making the above changes to the spelling system the high register would coincidentally move closer to the historical traces of the language and perhaps satisfy some of

the historicist argument. Unfortunately, common Cornish users have been unwilling to discuss this potential compromise up to this point in time.

We can therefore see that Modern Cornish, as well as offering the most logical phonological basis for the language, also offers three ways out of the current dilemma. Now that we have this historic opportunity we should grasp it wholeheartedly and make Cornish into a real community language.

Cussel an Tavas Kernuak, April 2007

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### Appendix A: Modern Cornish spelling templates

NS = native spelling; EL = Lhuyd spelling; CTK = current standard Modern Cornish

*I'll buy it from you; here is the money ready*
NS –   Me an pern thurtawhye. Ota an muna parrez.
EL –   Mî an prên dhaworthez. Yta an munnah parrez.
CTK - Me an pern dhurtawhy. Ota an muna parrez.

*We would surely pay the money*
NS -   Nye venga pea an muna seer.
EL -   Nei vendzhah pea a muna sîr.
CTK - Ny venja pea an muna sir.

*He seems to be a priest, he'll have money*
NS -   Proanter eve haval seer, ma muna gen hedna.
EL -   Prounter ev a heval sîr, mâ munah genz hedda.
CTK - Proanter ev a heval sir, ma muna gen hedna.

*Like a robber he can rob many people*
NS -   Pocarra edn ladar eve ell robbia leeaz dean.
EL -   Pykara idn lader ev el robbia lîaz dên.
CTK - Pecâr edn ladar ev ell robia liaz dêan.

*And they put the nine pounds in the cake*
NS -   Ha angye worraz an naw penz en dezan.
EL -   Ha andzhei a wyraz an nau penz en dezan.
CTK - Ha anjy a woraz an naw penz en dezan.

*Bull, oxen and steer*
NS -   Tarow, udgian ha denowez
EL -   Taraw, udzheon ha denowez.
CTK - Tarow, udgian ha denowez.

*The man is selling the horse*
NS -   Ma'n dean a gwerha an marh
EL -   Emâ'n dên a gwerha an marh.
CTK - Ma'n dêan a gwerha an marh.

*He has six cows, two horses and three hundred (young) sheep*
NS -   Ma wheth beuh dotha, deaw varh, ha trye canz lodn davaz.
EL -   Mâ hwî biuh dhodha, deau varh, ha trei canz lodn davaz.
CTK - Ma wheh beuh dodha, deaw varh, ha try canz lodn davaz.

*Today I see a stag*
NS -  Hethow me wel carrow.
EL -  Hidhu mî a wêl caraw.
CTK – Hedhiu me wel carrow.

*I know that you have stolen from inside my forest some of my stags*
NS -  Me ore dresta ladra seer berra'm cooz radn a herwaz'vee.
EL -  Mî a aor drestah ladra sîr abarha'm cûz radn a herwaz.
CTK - Me ore dresta ladra sir abera'm cooz radn a herwaz.

***Appendix B: 'Common' Cornish and the numbers game.***

To bolster their case some 'common' Cornish supporters are resorting to a numbers game, arguing that 'common' Cornish commands the greatest numbers of 'competent teachers, advanced students and fluent speakers' and the largest number of books and publications, and for this reason alone should automatically become the SWF.

While control of current resources should never be the sole reason for adopting a particular revivalist form as the SWF for a future language this argument is in any case disingenuous for the following reasons.

First, it is hardly surprising that the majority of those who have learnt Cornish in the past 20 years have learnt 'common' Cornish or that the majority of publications are in this form. This is because the Cornish Language Board adopted 'common' Cornish in the 1980s. The Board then systematically set out to publicise 'common' Cornish and ignore all other forms. It also re-spelt many of the texts originally published in the 'unified' Cornish period in 'common' Cornish. It did this with the aid of £10,000 of public funds from Cornwall County Council plus grants from other bodies. (While organisations supporting 'common' Cornish have received £11,400 from the County Council, Modern Cornish bodies received just £3,500 and 'unified' Cornish organisations £1,500 in the same period.)

This imbalance in financial support and the apparent legitimacy provided by taking over the institutions of the Cornish revival also explains the disparity in the numbers of learners. It is claimed that the number learning 'common' Cornish reflects an active 'choice'. This is not the case. If 'common' Cornish has been the only form on offer and if it has been sold as 'Cornish' rather than the medieval Cornish it actually aspires to be then it is hardly surprising that it has more learners. We have all met people who have progressed through the Cornish Language Board's exam system and are still blissfully unaware they have learnt a late medieval form of Cornish. In this context 'choice' is hardly the best way to describe their coming to Cornish in the absence of knowledge about the revival.

Second, given the 'common' Cornish domination of the Cornish language revival since 1986 the striking thing is not so much how many people use 'common' Cornish but how few. For example there are an estimated 238 members of the *Kowethas an Yeth Kernewek* who claim to be users of 'common' Cornish (calculated from KYK 2006). Of these perhaps 46 are by their own definition 'competent' and 37 are 'fluent'. Another 26 have passed grade 4 of the Language Board's exam. This suggests the Cowethas includes possibly 109 people who to some extent can speak Cornish. Most of the active users of 'common' Cornish are members of this organisation but even if we double this to 200 speakers, of whom maybe 70 or so are 'fluent', this is by no means evidence of great success.

Furthermore, many users of 'common' Cornish live outside Cornwall. Around 40% of Kowethas members do not live in Cornwall. Similarly, of those signing a petition in favour of 'common' Cornish becoming the SWF (see www.kk.kaskyrgh.cymru247.net - accessed February 20 2007), 38, or 44 per cent, are not Cornish residents. Just 48 people who live in Cornwall calling for 'common' Cornish to be the SWF is a tiny number. Overall, the small numbers who can actually speak late medieval Cornish is actually convincing evidence for the failure of the medievally based revival since the 1920s.

Third, 'common' Cornish's control of the revivalist infrastructure exaggerates its influence. For instance *Kowethas an Yeth Kernewek* publicity claims that it is open to all types of Cornish. However, the fact that the Cornish in this website (www.Cornish-language.org – accessed March 22 2007) is entirely spelt in 'common' Cornish and that it contains no mention of the other forms of Cornish gives the lie to this. In fact, the vast majority of users of 'unified' and Modern Cornish would never consider joining this organisation, which is why it is dominated by 'common' Cornish, 85 per cent of its membership using this form. Furthermore, eight of its eleven member committee in 2006 were also standing for election to the Cornish Language Board in January 2007. This overlapping core membership proves that these two organisations actually represent the same group of people.

Finally, the Commission must remember that, despite the noise they make, Cornish revivalists in total are a very small proportion of the Cornish population. Given its role as a symbol of Cornish identity the Cornish language does not just belong to its self-appointed guardians in the Cornish revival. It is the heritage of all Cornish people and all Cornish people have a right to a stake in its future.