

Reference Chart of the Main Developments in the History of the Cornish Language

Compiled by David Matthew

5th c	6th c	7th c	8th c	9th c	10th c	11th c	12th c	13th c	14th c	15th c	16th c	17th c	18th c	19th c	20th c	21st c
AD	500	600	700	800	900	1000	1100	1200	1300	1400	1500	1600	1700	1800	1900	2000
PRIMITIVE Cornish			OLD Cornish 800–1200 AD				MIDDLE Cornish 1200–1600 AD				LATE Cornish 1600–1800 AD		REVIVED Cornish 1900+ AD >>>			
<p>Single Celtic language spoken throughout GB before the middle of the century: Brythonic or British.</p> <p>Many words ended in -os.</p> <p>Roman occupation of Britain ended this century. Saxon invaders from Europe arrived.</p> <p>As a result, many people emigrated from Cornwall to Brittany.</p> <p>The Celtic Kingdom of Dumnonia in SW England - present-day Devon & Cornwall.</p>	<p>By the middle of this century the -os ending had fallen away.</p> <p>The Celts were pushed to the West of Britain. Under Saxon pressure, they eventually became separated:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Cumbria Wales South-West <p>At the Battle of Dyrham, 577AD, the Saxons cut off the Celts of future Wales from those of Dumnonia, and the two languages began to diverge.</p> <p>Three distinct language strands eventually appeared:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Old Cornish Old Breton Old Welsh <p>At the end of this century, another wave of emigration from Cornwall to Brittany took place.</p> <p>Between 450 and 550, missionaries came to Cornwall from Ireland and Wales.</p>	<p>There are no written records at all of Primitive Cornish (600-800 AD).</p>	<p>The Saxons took Devon. In 936, Athelstan of Wessex defeated Hywel, the last independent King of Cornwall and established the Tamar as the boundary between his Saxon kingdom and that of the Celtic <i>west weahlas</i>.</p> <p><i>Weahlas</i> (> Wales) was the Saxon word for 'foreigners'. Kernow was called 'land of Cornish foreigners': <i>Cornu-weahlas</i> (> Cornwall). Cornwall was marked as 'West Wales' on maps until 17th century.</p> <p>Athelstan imposed Saxon ways on Celtic centres of learning, no doubt destroying many early Cornish MSS, as there is a lack of literature from this period.</p> <p>The legend of Arthur dates from this period of the struggle against the Saxons.</p> <p>The Bodmin Manumissions. Details of slaves freed in Bodmin, written in Cornish in the margins of Latin and Old English Gospels. Discovered in 1833. The earliest written example of the Cornish language.</p>	<p>1066, the Norman invasion of England. At that time, Cornwall was ruled by Cadoc, whose arms were a black shield with golden bosses. Still fairly independent of the Saxons.</p> <p>The Normans became baronial landowners in Cornwall, but didn't interfere with the language. Many of them spoke Breton.</p>	<p>c.1100, at the very start of this period: the Vocabulary Cornicum. Just a few pages, originally thought to be Welsh, but identified as Old Cornish by Lhuyd in the 18th c.</p> <p>The Latin Prophecy of Merlin had been translated from a Cornish original, now lost, but it has a few Cornish passages.</p>	<p>The harsh Old Cornish had softened into Middle Cornish.</p> <p>Glasney College, near Penryn, was founded in 1265. It became the major centre of Cornish learning.</p>	<p>The Charter Fragment (1340). 41 lines of Cornish verse written on the back of a land charter. Part of a poem about marriage written in comedic style.</p> <p>Passhyon Agan Arloedh (c.1375). Mystery play written at Glasney. 259 stanzas of eight 7-syllable lines. Christ's sufferings and death, from Palm Sunday to Easter morning. Sometimes called <i>Mount Calvary</i>.</p> <p>The Ordinalia (c.1390). Set of three mystery plays written at Glasney. Generally considered the most important piece of literature from this period:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <i>Origo Mundi</i> <i>Passio Christi</i> <i>Resurrexio Domini</i> <p>The plays were performed at <i>plenow an gwari</i> across Cornwall.</p>	<p>The Wars of the Roses (1455-1485) hurt the Cornish language. Cornish gentry on the losing side lost property, and English speakers moved in. To be a 'gentleman', one had to speak English.</p> <p>The An Gof Rebellion (1497). Reaction to Henry VII's suspension of the Stannary Parliament. Led by Michael Joseph (An Gof) and Thomas Flamank. Crushed by the king's forces. A blow to the language as many Cornish speakers were killed.</p>	<p>Bewnans Meriasek (1504), play written at Glasney. Life of the Breton saint. Longest extant work in Cornish with 4568 lines, to be performed over two days.</p> <p>Bewnans Ke (c.1510), also written at Glasney. Discovered 1999. Only existing copy dated 1575, and incomplete.</p> <p>The Reformation under Henry VIII opposed Cornish Catholicism and closed Glasney College (1548). The Prayer Book Rebellion (1549) under Edward VI saw Cornish further suppressed. No Bible or Prayer Book in Cornish.</p> <p>The Reformation hurt the long association between Cornwall and Brittany. Many Bretons moved back to Catholic Brittany.</p> <p>The Tregear Homilies (c.1560). 13 sermons by Bishop of London translated into florid, anglicised Cornish by John Tregear. Discovered in 1949.</p>	<p>At start of 17th c most people were bilingual. Cornish-speaking monoglots were increasingly confined to the extreme SW.</p> <p>Richard Carew published his <i>Survey of Cornwall</i> (1602). Cornish still fairly widely spoken, and miracle plays popular (up to 1620s).</p> <p>William Jordan of Helston believed to have authored the play <i>Gwrians An Bys</i> (c.1611), but maybe he just copied or reworked it. Many English loan-words reflect the fading of Cornish.</p> <p>The Civil War (1642-46) further suppressed Cornish, with English soldiers everywhere.</p> <p>William Scawen listed in 1680 some reasons for the decline of Cornish.</p> <p>Nicholas Boson (of Newlyn 1624-1708) began recording the Cornish language, recognising that it was dying out. He wrote <i>Yowann Chi An Hordh</i> (1666).</p>	<p>The Antiquarian Movement started by Nicholas Boson gathered momentum. The Penzance group led by John Keigwin set out to preserve and further the language.</p> <p>The shadowy figure of Richard Angwyn (d.1675) lurks everywhere, but we have nothing from his hand.</p> <p>Welsh scholar Edward Lhuyd (1660-1709) made a serious study of the Cornish language. He noted that Cornish was spoken only in West Penwith and the Lizard, but that all spoke English, too.</p> <p>William Borlase (d.1772) of Ludgvan published <i>Antiquities of Cornwall</i>, including a vocabulary. Daines Barrington (d.1800) spoke to Dolly Pentreath, as did fisherman William Bodinar, whose letter to Barrington is the last known prose in Cornish before the revival. Redruth surgeon William Pryce (d.1790) produced a grammar and vocabulary. Whitley Stokes (d.1909): a prolific Celtic scholar.</p>	<p>Evidence that there were still a few pockets of native Cornish speakers through this century, like John Davey of Zennor (d.1891).</p> <p>Scholarship flourished. Robert Williams produced the first proper dictionary in 1865. Several Middle Cornish MSS were discovered and published.</p> <p>Celtic scholar Henry Jenner (1848-1934) was the chief initiator of the modern language revival, promoting it outside academia, among the common people. His <i>Handbook of the Cornish Language</i> (1904) was influential. He founded the first Old Cornwall Society (1920) and helped found the Gorsedh in 1928.</p> <p>Correspondence course KDL went online in 1983.</p> <p>Ken George's Kernewek Kemmyn appeared in 1987, based on Middle Cornish, and became dominant.</p>	<p>Robert Morton Nance (1873-1959) took the reins from Jenner as the major proponent of the revival. He produced <i>Cornish For All</i> in what he called Unified Cornish. His major work was his 1938 Cornish dictionary.</p> <p>A.S.D. Smith (1883-1950) started the first correspondence course in 1933, and a teach-yourself book, <i>Cornish Simplified</i>, in 1939. Retallack Hooper (1906-1998) was one of the first five bards admitted for language proficiency, and helped found Mebyon Kernow in 1951. Key organisations established: <i>Kesva An Taves Kernewek</i> (1967) to publish, and to set and monitor exams. <i>Kowethas An Yeth Kernewek</i> fosters classes, runs the Pennseythen, and publishes <i>An Gannas</i>.</p> <p>Correspondence course KDL went online in 1983.</p> <p>Ken George's Kernewek Kemmyn appeared in 1987, based on Middle Cornish, and became dominant.</p>	<p>Cornish officially recognised as a minority language by the EU in 2000, with UK government recognition in 2002 (though they withdrew funding in 2016).</p> <p>Cornish language classes continue to attract more and more students, both in Cornwall and beyond.</p> <p>Music, poetry and prose being widely produced. Oral Cornish available on radio, TV and the Internet.</p> <p>Some friction between proponents of different forms and orthographies, with SWF finalised in 2008 and becoming an increasingly unifying factor.</p> <p>The 2nd edition of Ken George's <i>Gerlyver Meur</i> (Kernewek Kemmyn) was published in 2009, and the 3rd edition in 2020.</p>		