

Cornwall Today! Celtic past! Celtic future?

(A personal view)

*By Chris Dunkerley Cornish Bard (Kevrenor) D.Urr
Hon. Secretary of the Cornish Association of NSW*

INTRODUCTION

WHERE FROM?

ANCIENT BRITONS

DUMNONIA

THE DUCHY

BRITAIN

ENGLAND ENCROACHES

CORNISH EMPIRE

THE COUNTY

THE KNACKED BAL

PASTIES & CREAM

EMMETS

WHERE NOW?

TRELAWNEY'S ARMY

WHERE TO?

DEVONWALL

KERNOW BYS VYKKEN

INTRODUCTION

Those who grew up 35 or more years ago in Cornwall, those who have visited as tourists as I have, even with that blood in your veins, we all think we know Cornwall! But there is much more to Cornwall than meets the eye. Is Cornwall that place left for better opportunities (and weather?) many years ago? What's Cornwall like now? Is Cornwall really only a place for giddy family history tourists to fool themselves that all is as it was, whilst north country incomers buy up the farms and staff the shops. London's masses flock to Cornwall for a sunny bit of sand and a day at Flambards! Is Cornwall just the tourist brochure land of pirates with parrots on their shoulders! Where is Cornwall really now and where is it actually headed? If it was Celtic, if it is now, will it be when Whitehall and Brussels are finished with it? To perhaps answer those questions let us first go back and find out how the Cornish have seen and defined themselves throughout history! Much of the time it has been through contrast – what wasn't England – but today that viewpoint is perhaps changing.

CORNWALL? Where from?

Ancient Britons

Whenever I hear this term I think of my youthful days at camp singing, to near enough the tune Men of Harlech, of ancient Britons tramping up Snowdon with only their woad on! But ancient Britons did not only lived among the mountains of north Wales painting themselves blue! No they were as much tin streamers on Mount's Bay, or the villagers at Chysauster in Penwith, or Romanised tribal rulers in their halls on Castle Dore near Fowey. Well we know of close links between the tribes battling Roman rule in Gaul and tribes in southern Britain, and of trading links between the Atlantic coasts of Europe and the Mediterranean. Despite the influx of Celts around 1000-500BC bringing their language and culture the mass of the people probably were (and

perhaps still are) those who had lived there when they built the cromlechs, standing stones, and chambered tombs. The culture though has been definitely infused with the Celtic mind and culture for thousands of years.

Dumnonia

The Kingdom of Dumnonia arose from the most western areas of Roman Britain after the Romans themselves left in 410ad. It stretched from the Scillies to the River Parrett in Somerset and to west Dorset. In 495ad the Saxon advance was stopped at Badon (Dorset?) and life went on but with the Saxon victory at Dyrham (near Bath) in 577ad the West Welsh (as the West Saxons called the Dumnonians) were cut off from land contact with Wales and Rheged in the north. From that point on Cornish history begins. Although the Romanised settlements in Dorset and Devon (particularly Exeter) staggered on there is evidence that the 'high king' of Dumnonia resided in Cornwall and ruled lands in the daughter colonies in Armorica (or Brittany). The settlement of Celtic holy men and women (later called 'saints') from south Wales and Ireland re-invigorated the residual Christian faith, and the stories of King Mark, Gawain, Trystan and Ysolt, and of course Arthur show how vigorous cultural life was. By the end of the 7th Century however Dumnonia was pushed back from Dorset, Somerset and North Devon. In 710ad King Geraint was attacked by the Saxons and held the line around Exeter and in the north the Tamar, but Saxon settlement still occurred in far north Cornwall. Cornwall as the remnant but core of Dumnonia kept its independence and its Celtic Church. In 815ad after a Cornish attack King Egbert harried Cornwall from east to west, and by 838ad the battle at Hingston Down near Callington ensured the Cornish no longer threatened Wessex, which in the east and north was now establishing England.

Athelstan in 936ad swept the Cornish out of Exeter and set the border, not at the cultural border (there being Cornish speakers in south Devon for about another 400 years) but a clear unequivocal one, the River Tamar. The border was one between what was now called Cornwall and England. Athelstan did not incorporate Cornwall into the England that he had formed from Wessex, Mercia, etc., but as a vassal state. Thus this single most important historical event for Cornwall had defined Cornwall and the Cornish - Those that lived west of the Tamar! On maps Cornwall was to appear as "West Wales" even into Tudor times. Although the Celtic Church of Cornwall now came under great pressure, the establishment of a See of the Roman Church at St Germans with the Cornish Bishop Conan showed the degree of accommodation made by England with Celtic Cornwall. Cadoc was Earl of Cornwall and the King of England held no land in Cornwall. The Normans and their Breton nobles changed a few things of course but The Domesday Book also recognised the border. The major change was that the Earldom went to the new King's brother, and from then on was held either by a King's favourite or by the King himself. The Earl's castle was built at Tintagel to give a 'legitimacy' going back to tales of Arthur and Cornwall's independent rulers.

The Duchy

In March 1337 Edward III established the Duchy of Cornwall for his son. He was conscious of ancient tradition of the earldom and the earlier kingdom as he referred to 'Dukes who for a long time successively presided as chief rulers' (Duke being drawn from the old Roman name for a military ruler of an area). The Duke was quasi-sovereign within his Duchy. This form of accommodation by the English Crown with the Cornish echoes the establishment only 30 years before of the Principality of Wales. The medieval history of Cornwall is quite different to that of England. The Duchy was administered from Lostwithiel and through the 17 Duchy Manors worked the tenant farmers on their 7 year leased 'Celtic' fields. Quite different to the English system with its villeins and Sheriff's of Nottingham!

This class of independent small lease farmers inhibited the growth of a strong and influential local lesser nobility or gentry. The other important aspect to the rule of Cornwall as a Duchy was the Stannaries. This grew out of the long tradition of mining with customary rights and privileges. The Duchy accommodated the Stannary system and as well as making lots of money out of it recognised the authority of Cornish stannary law (an amalgam of Celtic Cornish, Saxon, and Norman law). The Stannary Parliament operated in a manner little different from the English House of Commons, and due to most of Cornwall being metalliferous most of Cornwall was covered by it. These workers together with the free farmers and absence of lesser nobility gave Cornwall a very egalitarian and independent population for 14th and 15th Century Europe. At this time too over 3/4 of the population spoke only Cornish. The bubonic plague of the 1300s which heightened demand for labour, and a continuing influx of Bretons added to the difference of Cornwall. The Celtic Cornish language had thrived during the Norman period and even now almost all of Cornwall was Cornish speaking, save the extreme east and the emerging towns. All these things placed Cornwall more in the Celtic world, and outside the English experience.

In June 1497 over various grievances including years of increasing taxes, Cornwall's tanners, free farmers, and lower gentry rebelled. Under Michael Joseph An Gov (The Smith) a St Keverne blacksmith, and Bodmin lawyer Thomas Flamank several thousand men crossed the Tamar and with no active impediment moved across southern England. Marching on London they were only defeated at Blackheath by an army of 10,000 which had been readied for service to drive the Scots out of northern England. That, apart from the drawing and quartering of the leaders, the Cornish force and Cornwall itself was spared much reprisal, showed the need for England to accommodate Celtic Cornwall as a separate entity at that time, but that was deceptive. The Cornish however were thought a breed apart.

The British

Britain, as a concept and a political reality was born with the victory of the Tudors to ascend the English throne. Tudor England was the up and coming power in Europe, even balancing the similar rise of Castille and Aragon in the new Spain. The Tudors moved quickly to strengthen their personal power and government. This necessitated a much greater degree of control over their subject peripheries - Cornwall, Wales, Ireland, the North, and Scottish borders. In the period between 1497 and 1660 there were 2 more rebellions, the Reformation, the defeat and Annexation of Brittany by France in 1532, the Armada (with a landing at Mousehole and surrounding settlements being sacked or burned), and loss of the Celtic language east of Truro. Cornwall was pushed into the front line of Europe, and it's new Atlantic facing vision. Cornish speakers still however numbered 40% from the 76,000 population in 1550. Andrew Borde was still able to note on his visit in 1542 that "In Cornwall is two speches, the naughty English one, and the other Cornyshe speche".

England encroaches

The English Civil War of the 1600s brought foreign armies to Cornwall for the first time since Athelstan. Forces raised in Cornwall fought with great ferocity at the Cornish border and in battle against Devon forces but were less forthcoming when asked to serve in England. Nevertheless Cornish miners and farmers gained the English language and due to it's loyalty (not so much to the English King as to the Duchy), Cornwall suffered greatly the wrath of Cromwell. It by now had a large English speaking population including many native Cornish .. but still clearly not part of England. The next two centuries were ones however of growth in mining, fishing, wrecking, and smuggling. We are starting to see the modern image of the Cornish emerging. Despite the wild food rioting of the 1700s and early 1800s the great reformation preaching of the period by men such as John Wesley swept away the earlier rebellious lawless image, but not the stubborn

independent Celtic spirit. The 1600's saw a strong movement among the educated classes to preserve and use the Cornish language, although they didn't see that they only had to walk to the harbour to speak Cornish.

Cornish Empire

The great wave of energy and creativity released in Cornwall by Methodism and its attendant liberal political philosophy came just as the great inventions of the Industrial Revolution based on steam swept Cornwall with its mineral riches into the mainstream of British life. The Cornish economy was one of the first to industrialise and the population burgeoned (almost doubling during the 1700's) and, unlike much family history supposition, mostly from natural growth.

The technological innovation which accompanied Cornwall's mining pre-eminence in the 18th and early 19th century also led to its emergence as a principal centre of engineering excellence. By 1850 it was said the Cornish had a greater experience of deep mining and mine pumping than the rest of the world put together. With this came the export of men, women, and expertise to all corners of the world. What some revisionist Cornishmen today half-jokingly call the Cornish Empire. The sun did not set on this one either with Australasia, North and South America, Africa, and even Asia included. At the bottom of every hole was a Cornishman, and their tributing and ticketing systems, and their strange clannish ways. That peculiar breed, the Cornish mine Captain, was welcome anywhere.

The County

The Great Migration which had started in the 1830's and continued for 80 years was seen then and perhaps now as a great achievement. The new Cornish national consciousness saw the establishment of Cornwall Diocese in 1877 and the building of Truro Cathedral which, designed in the Breton style, opened in the 1890's. There was a common Cornish pride, though perhaps not seen as Celtic (for that term was only just emerging).

In 1832 Cornwall was the Duchy of Cornwall with 44 MPs (albeit from rotten boroughs) - by 1888 Cornwall was now the County of Cornwall with only 12 MPs at Westminster! Although this brought greater self government and suffrage and still recognised the ancient national border, it also meant that we were set on a century long slippery-slide - 'just an English County' after all. No need to worry, we Cornish still called the English 'foreigners' and even in Australia a migrants birth place was usually Cornwall not England, and "from Cornwall near England" was a clear enough description of one's background even among the Moonta Mines Directors.

The Knacked Bal

Increasingly at home the mines were becoming 'knacked' or played out. Of course to begin with new ones opened just as fast but soon miners flocked overseas as the growing population could not be accommodated. As the skilled Cornish worked rich deposits in Australia or North America competition became greater for the mines at home, and more closed. Cornish technology slowly became dated, and the mines more marginal: more mines closed. Only China clay and a little tin hung on. The descent into crisis (so described by Philip Payton) was complete by the 1890's when the County and Diocese arrived, and across the world vibrant modern Cornish culture brought forward Associations such as that in SA in 1890. As population plummeted by tens and even a hundred thousand, agriculture contracted, and the fishing grounds were becoming played out too. The 1890s depression added fuel. For the next 20 years Cornwall was supported by pay cheques sent home to families. As Philip Payton says in his latest book, Cornish culture was confident but 'fossilising' fast. The only positive new influences after 1900 being the introduction of Rugby

Football, at which Cornwall represented Britain in The Olympics in 1908 and some groups called first Celtic societies such as the Cornu-Keltic Society in 1898, and then "Old Cornwall" Societies. The Cornish Gorsedd formed in 1928 in conjunction with the Welsh and Breton Gorsedd was to turn out a major milestone.

Pasties & Cream

With an increasingly fossilised popular culture however Cornwall was ripe to become a quaint tourist destination and after WW1 the trains with names like the 'Cornish Riviera Express' rolled into fishing towns like Penzance, St. Ives, and Newquay disgorging tourists and writers and artists. The Cornwall of pasties and cream, tourist postcards, Daphne de Maurier and Poldark was to add a new dimension on the public face of Cornwall. Below the surface the 'old' new culture continued, or those who did not find it vibrant enough left for up-country or overseas. This continued right to and beyond WW2. Many in Cornish Associations around the world are a product of this period. In the 1950s and 60s so many of Cornwall's best young people left; the population was static. But the County of Cornwall was the delectable Duchy still! Celtic still! Cornish still! Or was it? From 1960 to this day incomers, emmets, foreigners, call them what you will, have flooded in boosting the population by well over 100,000.

Emmets

Despite the crippling unemployment and poverty in Cornwall, which is more akin to Albania than the EU, walk into Truro today and you will find a vibrant neat little city, with shops filled by shop assistants from Surrey, Yorkshire, Birmingham! The lady talking proper Cornish to the old dear in Blewetts stands out like a foreigner, in her own land! Hundreds of thousands of emmets (a dialect word for ants) flock to Cornwall each year, and enjoy the holiday. But do they go to look at Cornish history or culture, or even to get back to nature. No they go for a quick dip on the beach, a sunbake, and off to the theme park run by their neighbours from Sheffield (note: it's any theme but Cornish)! Who can blame them -it's their holiday from the satanic mills or offices, but what does it do for Cornish people. At the Hal an Tow on Furry Day in Helston Howard Curnow's Town Criers speech in Cornish talks about ants, but the English version is modified for public consumption! Where are the Cornish? Unemployed or emigrated. The last working mine in Cornwall and the last tin mine in Europe closed down just 6 months ago. A survey of Cornwall just a few months ago asked one simple question: "Are you Cornish?" 40% said "yes"! A friend visiting Cornwall just last month reports his hosts middle-aged father stating " my generation is the last proper Cornish". Depressing, but is it really true? Today nearly half of all people living in Cornwall are not Cornish or were born to non-Cornish parents. Pasties and Cream, or black pud & Chip butties?

WHERE NOW?

Trelawney's Army

What hope is there for the old Celtic Cornish culture, or the newer mining and Methodist chapel culture, or a new **today** Cornish culture? We went in 1992 to Perranporth for the Conference on Cornwall. On the Sunday night 13 of us went to the Methodist Chapel. We exactly doubled the congregation, the sermon was insipid, and no one welcomed us until we were going! I'm being cruel from an isolated example, but what hope the chapel?! While we were in Cornwall however there were many people in the street wearing bumble-bee jumpers; Cornwall Rugby jumpers. The day before we arrived Cornwall played Yorkshire at Twickenham. 24,000 Cornish made the trip to cheer their team. Everyone called them *Trelawney's Army*. Cornwall is not Rugby mad, the district games get meagre crowds. What they go for is to wear the black and saffron, to wave St Piran's

Flag (which is quite old but only really flown commonly in the last 15 years - we were ahead here in Australia) and to put themselves behind their country. That is continuing today, with 25,000 in black and saffron, with huge pasties, and tartan kilts against 3,000 from Cheshire.

To most ordinary Cornish the Celtic culture of the Cornish language enthusiasts at the weekend we went to at Michaelstow and the Celtic dancers at Camborne's Trevithick day (itself only 15 years old) is foreign, but yet still Cornish. The tartan worn by some of us seemed to some as foreign too, but at the same time equally acknowledged by many as Cornish. Exciting new projects like the Mineral Tramways point to ways forward! What is happening to Cornish culture today? The old old, the new old, and the new - all coming out in the Cornish today! Why, because they are Cornish. What stimulus may be causing this!

WHERE TO?

Devonwall

The County Council is just 110 years old. The border is next month 1,063 years old; Cornwall at least 1,400 years old; and the Cornish maybe 2,500-4,000 years old. What does it matter if the County goes? For the last two decades Cornish institutions which demarcate modern society, police, public utilities, government boards have become increasingly joined with Devon, or even with far away Bristol! Bristol is closer to Edinburgh than to The Scillies! The words in the major circulation papers is repeatedly "The Southwest", "The West Country", anything but Cornwall! 16 year old Radio Cornwall stands as a very shaky beacon, but even they talk incessantly of the County, not Cornwall! The Review of Local Government in Britain for Cornwall in 1995 saw huge opposition to a loss of the Cornwall identity. The big guns of Government, media and business however relentlessly have Cornwall tagged for a some amorphous union, a Devonwall County run from Exeter, or even a South West Region run from Bristol. The Conservatives were neglecters (and not of the benign variety) and Blair's new Labour is full of promises and delivers only hot air - and our fear is despite supporting Scotland and Wales to new structures - possibly much, much, worse for Cornwall!

Many Cornish look strongly to a Europe of the regions. The European Parliament Constituency of Cornwall & West Plymouth (*Cornwall & bits of England* as we call it). Semi-rural Celtic Cornwall is swamped by Urban English Plymouth and South Devon. The fight has been on for a Cornish European Constituency so Cornish concerns are heard in the councils of Europe and are not filtered by English politics or by Whitehall. Almost all real Cornish institutions back this, from the Gorseth to District and Cornwall Councils. Yet the latest changes place Cornwall in an even larger area. If Mebyon Kernow won every single vote in Cornwall it could not win a seat.

A few years back Whitehall coerced Cornwall into putting a development funding application in to Europe jointly with Devon (a move which made it bound to fail!). When my children visit Cornwall as cultural pilgrims in the 21st century will they find a Cornish Cornwall or Devonwall. Will that farm at Dowha where their ancestors lived be a theme park dedicated to Athelstan or part of the Camborne bye-pass taking Germans to Club Med at Lamorna Cove. Will you be able to get a proper pasty in Cornwall?

Kernow kensa - Cornwall first!

I am honoured to be a Bard of the Cornish Gorsedd. I have made a solemn oath to fight for Cornwall and the Celtic Cornish culture of Cornwall. I intend to go on fighting from this distance as best I can, whilst I can! I see Cornwall as a special place and we, the Cornish, as special Celtic people. All I have told you today has been to try to convince you of that. The Cornish in Cornwall

today are proud to be British and to be Europeans. They respect the English, but don't want to become one!

There is hope. There are still people in Cornwall, and they include incomers, who see Cornwall as a special place, a special people and are working on all fronts. A Group called CoSERG led by Bernard Deacon wrote an important book, 'Cornwall at the Crossroads' to argue the case for new ways of thinking about Cornwall, and its development. A book I have liberally drawn on, with his permission, Philip Payton's 'The Making of Modern Cornwall' argues the political dynamic of the new Cornwall. He is the Director of the Institute of Cornish Studies which is seeking to find solutions for Cornwall's problems today. Other Cornish do great work around the world to get the Cornish dispersion ('Cornish colonies' as one friend recently described us - I prefer 'the warmer districts of Cornwall') to understand what it means to be Cornish.

I saw more of Cornwall on my last trip in 1992 than many do - the renewed interest in dance and song, the language revival still going on, the old Cornwall of Furry Dance, Obby Oss, Hal an Tow, going from strength to strength. The new - such as Trevithick Day and Millbrook Day, and works in reviving customs by Dick and Jan Gendall are also touching home with the Cornish. Education now has scope to include Cornish studies right through the curriculum. I believe that it is true to say that a modern distinctive Cornish and recognisably Celtic culture is evolving, with some young people actively working for this in the arts, especially poetry, song, using the language in a real way; and this needs recognition.

Next month's Inter-Celtic *Lowender Perran* has this array of Performers From Cornwall: Bolingey Troyl Band and Dancers, Ros Keltek, Asteveryn, Cara Cana, Pyba, Otta Nye Moaz, Tan Ha Dowr, Pete Berryman, Tamar Troylers, Calstock Singers, Mo Keast, Artys War Anow Kernow, Graham Sandercock, Hubbadillia, Mike O'Conner, Tony Franklin, Roger Bryant, Jon Hyslop, Tony Truscott, John Wallace, Scatter the Mud, Captain Kernow and the Jack and Jenny Band. Interestingly both native Cornish and incomers.

The cultural renewal rivals and surpasses that of the 1970's and this time - not in 'good' times, but in dire times. In politics things are happening again, with my party Mebyon Kernow standing firm against the onslaughts of Whitehall. The March last year which saw thousands take part in the 500th anniversary of the An Gov / Flamank March on London added more steel to the Cornish resolve, and from that grew Cornish Solidarity.

Kernow bys vyken - Cornwall for ever!

Above all, there seems a new willingness to work together as much as that goes against the Cornish grain. Cornish Solidarity is a loose coalition of groups and individuals concerned for Cornwall's future. The new Cornwall can draw on all the old and newer influences in Cornwall and from the Cornish cousins overseas. The vision for new Cornwall will be a self determining nation, a recognised Region of Europe, a partner with our fellow Celts, but I must say - remaining part of Britain. The new Cornwall won't be the old Cornwall, but it will be proper Cornish, and Celtic, not English.

The point of all this history has been so that you can understand Cornwall better, understand it's current position, and so that the identity and meaning of being Cornish are clear to you. The past of Cornwall has been Celtic in the widest sense. A people who demonstrate in practical ways the great legacy of strength, determination but also creativity. A surprisingly egalitarian people, a people who consider themselves equal, every bit as good as their next door neighbours over the Tamar. The culture we are building is not that of the Celts of old, of the Saints, of mines and chapael, or reflecting what Ireland or Wales see as Celtic, but one of a real Cornwall in Europe in the 21st Century. It will be Celtic because we Cornish are that at the very essence of our being. It

Where from, Cornwall? Cornwall Where to?

will be hard, and we will want the best help of our Celtic and even Saxon friends, but it is exciting too!

Meerasta dhe why oll. Kernow bys vyken!

Sources and References:

"The Making of Modern Cornwall" Philip Payton Dyllansow Truran December, 1992

A talk by Loveday Jenkin to the Cornish Assoc of NSW AGM March 1993

'Conference on Cornwall' proceedings Perranporth May 1992

"Cornwall at the Crossroads" by CoSERG (Cornwall Social and Economic Research Group) 1988

Mebyon Kernow Newsletters 1992, 1993 and various newspaper articles and other documents.

Gleanings and discussions during my time in Cornwall April - June 1992, information from Cornish Nation (Mebyon Kernow) and Cornssh World magazines, and innumerable emails from Cornwall over the two years.

Australian Celtic Journal, 1989 - My article on the History of the Cornish Language

© *C.M.Dunkerley* 1998

Talk to the Newcastle Celtic Conference - Civic Hall, Newcastle

Saturday 19th September, 1998

For the Centre for Celtic Studies, Newcastle