

THE CORNISH ARE REVOLTING by Chris Dunkerley Bard D.Urr

Pause ... look around room "Well we seem to have a peaceful enough lot here today. No need to read the Riot Act of 1715 before the pasties are served, and I feel we'll need no hanging, drawing, or quartering today!"

You know however that Cornish people haven't always been quiet Methodist tee-totallers - in fact I doubt very much if they ever really were deep down. Sure the religious faith was real enough but that independent streak was just lying dormant. Even in Australia Oswald Pryor's cartoons show humour of a decidedly defiant bent.

My hypothesis, however 'tongue in cheek' is that the Cornish have been, indeed so many of us in this very room, may be potentially: - to not put too fine a point on it - Revolting! To test this hypothesis I will touch lightly on several points in Cornish history.

Our story begins a long way back. The Romans when extending their domain over Cornwall were sensible enough to leave the Cornish, especially the Tinnars, to get on with their lives. Even incursions by Irish along the north coast, after the Romans had left due to the bad weather and visitors expected at home, were assimilated well enough so that even now Guinness has to be imported. However at this time, about 700 AD there was a new mob on the block. This lot were called Saxons or in Cornish *Sawson* (down the ages a.k.a "The English" or "they lot up-country"). This lot seemed to subscribe to the theory we have heard of as 'Terra Nullius' or to give it the more technical term - "What's yours is mine, .. push off."

The Cornish, who had only just realised they were Cornish after 3/4 of their Kingdom of Dumnonia had been hacked off by their terribly rough neighbours, decided that really the Saxon's table manners had not improved since Romano-Briton King Vortigern hosted a party in Kent and the Saxon guests had shown themselves altogether too handy with knives. The west Saxon King Ine came for a picnic much to the consternation of Cornish King Geraint and some of his party stayed over in the lands between the Tamar and the Lynher Rivers. Well, the Cornish thought this a bit of bad form and by 722AD they had had enough and trounced a Saxon army at the Camel, allying themselves with some relatively more civilised Danish Viking friends. The Wessex Kings (like Egbert (with a name like that I'd be bad mannered too) ... and Athelstan) attacked again in 753AD, 815, 838, and finally in 936. Athelstan after annexing the living room and outside loo drew the line at the Tamar and said "That's your bit for ever and a day, and this is my bit!" The Cornish may have been inclined to agree except the next aside was "Oh, by the way after I've massacred the Mercians, nobbled the Northumbrians, and wacked the Hwicca I'll be back for the rest!" It was poetic justice then that the Normans (even more civilised Vikings) said "that's enough of that then" at Hastings in 1066. To the Cornish the Normans, especially their Breton allies, had much better table manners.

It was unfortunate however that rubbing shoulders with their Saxon villeins affected the Normans too for when in 1113 Norman churchmen visited Bodmin Priory they had the audacity to suggest that King Arthur may, in fact, be dead! A *right punch up* ensued, but the Cornish seem to have won and thus given Hollywood a guaranteed cash flow stream in the 20th C. The revolting nature of the Cornish monks so impressed the Kings that in 1337 King Edward III established the Duchy of Cornwall to show his good will to the Cornish (not to mention guarantee *a nice little earner* for his royal person). This move was to be decisive in future relations between we Cornish and the Crown.

It was perhaps surprising when in 1497 after a hundred years or so of family bickering a Welsh Norman family got their hands on the crown and immediately picked up some pretty tacky table manners. The Cornish were puzzled by this and really thought that their King Tudor or Henry 7th needed a severe talking too. He had already put red tape around the Stannary system and tried to suspend Cornwall's Stannary Parliament. Now he wanted to levy heavy taxes so he could gate crash a Scottish party in the north. Bodmin Lawyer Thomas Flamank took a good look at his law books and shaking a finger at Henry said "Nyns yu herwyth lagha" ! Oh yes, we still spoke Cornish then - it translates to something like - "*tha' baint legal*". These were just fine words! Truly! That is until Michael Joseph - *An Gof*, the village Smithy from St. Keveerne on the Lizard Peninsular led a popular revolt in that area and took many men with him to the County Town, Bodmin. Here with many yeoman, lesser gentry, and tanners the group swelled. Cornwall had seen decades of unrest during the English War of the Roses and in 1492 a band of 200 had attacked the Priory at Bodmin over tin-rights so the mood was dark. 12 years before Henry Tudor had won at Bosworth Field with Welsh and Cornish Long Bowmen at his side and maybe some of these weren't impressed with his actions as King (certainly the 300 Cornish archers were the Uprising's main strike force).

The object of Keskerdh Kernow 500, the 320 mile march to London which has been going on in Cornwall for the past month, is to raise money for Cornish charities whilst commemorating the uprising of 500 years ago in 1497 when the Cornish rose up against the cruel taxes levied by King Henry VII. It was not an army of professional soldiers but a group of ordinary men who, under the leadership of Michael Joseph, the village smithy known thus as 'An Gof' were determined to voice their opposition to King Henry VII. Their aim was to march all the way to London in the hope they would gather support as they went. At Bodmin they were joined by Thomas Flamank, a lawyer, along with other leaders and followers. From Bodmin they were now a force to be reckoned with. Their table manners were notable as they did not pillage or loot along the way as was usual but relied on supporters. As they approached London their numbers had swollen due to supporters who joined them along the way. They brushed aside the light opposition they encountered but were not joined by the equally independent Men of Kent as they had hoped. Nearing London the Cornish Archers won a skirmish over superior

numbers at Depford bridge. Some 10,000 mainly lightly armed or unarmed men are reputed to have arrived at Blackheath near London. They were no match for the King's men who had been assembled and armed for battle against the Scots, but who unfortunately were yet to leave for Scotland. Many slipped away during the night but it was the core 6,000 Cornish who arose to face the King and ask him the reason why!

In the bloody final battle that followed, the Cornish supporters fought valiantly but after 200 Cornish lay dead the leaders gave the order to surrender. The two Cornish leaders, Michael Joseph An Gof, and Thomas Flamank were taken prisoner and later hanged, drawn and quartered with their heads being stuck on stakes on London Bridge. As he was dragged through the streets of London to his execution An Gof is said to have stated in his native Cornish tongue; "Yma hanow nefra a-bys dhym ha bry a-sef ha pres a-vew" - "*I have a name perpetual and a fame permanent and immortal*". It has taken 500 years for that to be fully true, but surely the imagery of the great Trelawney song was and is that of An Gof and his thousands of Cornish bold centuries before!

Henry's manners, being Welsh & Norman, were a bit better and after that obligatory hanging, drawing, and quartering he let most of the Cornish return home.

You will excuse me if after the last section I become a little less light-hearted as I present to you more recent facts. The Uprising was crushed but there was still unrest in Cornwall so when Perkin Warbeck (who lay claim to the throne on the Yorkist side) landed in Penwith we Cornish used this opportunity to rise again. On 17th September, 1497 the Cornish force was at Exeter but failed to take it, with Henry's army arriving they pressed on to Taunton which had received An Gof's force so well. Alas the King's army defeated them there and although Henry pardoned many this time he imposed heavy fines on the craftsmen and landed people, and many old Cornish families lost their land.

52 years later in January 1549 the Act of Uniformity was passed. This was the epitome of the 'Tudor centrist revolution in government', an instrument which abolished the diversity of religious practices that had existed up to then and dictated one form of worship that was to be enacted throughout the realm. Moreover, there was to be a *Book of Common Prayer*, with services in English to which all must conform. The special treatment Cornwall had received as "not a part of England" was not followed and not only was Cornwall to be subject to this dictate but the English language was to be imposed upon a population that was only partly English-speaking and which, in the west, still contained a great many monoglot Cornish-speakers. The Cornish were outraged. There were disturbances at Penryn and Marazion, and at Bodmin the insurgents rallied around Henry Bray the mayor, two local leaders of the Catholic gentry, and many other worthy leaders. Those Cornish gentry who opposed the rebellion sought refuge in the castles of St Michael's Mount and Trematon, while the rebels themselves crossed from Cornwall into

Devon and laid siege to Exeter. The Cornish had by now drawn up a petition to the King, declaring that the new Service was:

. . . like a Christmas game. . . we will have our old service of Mattins, Mass, Evensong and Procession in Latin as it was before. And so we the Cornish men (whereof certain of us understand no English) utterly refuse this new English.

Archbishop Cranmer retorted that there were more people in Cornwall who understood English rather than Latin, but he was missing the point, for Latin was familiar (if not always understood) all across Cornwall, whereas English was not. Moreover, as Carew noted, the Creed, the Commandments and other elements had been said in Cornish since time immemorial, something that the Act of Uniformity was specifically designed to eradicate.

At Fenny Bridges towards Honiton in Devon battle was joined. It was noted that 'The fight for the time was very sharp and cruel, for the Cornishmen were very lusty and fresh and fully bent to fight out the matter'. However, they were pushed back. On August 5th in the principal engagement of what has been called the *Prayer Book Rebellion*, the rebels were forced to retreat. The Cornish force had at least 2,000 fully armed and trained troops and they took up new positions at Sampford Courtenay in Devon north of Dartmoor. After a disastrous battle on August 7th the Cornish forces fled in the direction of Launceston, including Humphry Arundell who was captured and, with other rebel leaders, hanged, drawn and quartered at Tyburn. Tradition is a wonderful thing. In contrast to Blackheath in 1497, there were several thousand Cornish casualties in the engagements of 1549, and this time the aftermath was equally bloody. The clergy implicated in the Prayer Book rebellion were singled out for particular attention.

Thus the Church of England had replaced the Church of Rome as the main faith of Cornwall. So it was that two hundred years later the violence would be against those who, it was thought, were trying to threaten the Church of England - the Wesleys. For the famous brothers, the violent years were those of 1743 and 1744. On 22 July, 1743, an army of rebels broke into a prayer meeting at Morvah. The mob warned Charles Wesley's followers that they would be murdered if they did not abandon their gathering. They broke the brackets holding lamps, smashed the windows, tore away the shutters, wrecked the benches and were only brought to a halt by the sturdiness of the stone walls.

'Several times they lifted up their hands and clubs to strike me; but a stronger arm restrained them,' Wesley recorded. 'They beat and dragged the women about, particularly one of a great age, and trampled on them without mercy. The longer they stayed, the more they raged, the more power I found from above. The ruffians fell to quarrelling among themselves and broke their leader's head, and drove one another out of the room.' It later transpired that the mob had been led by the town clerk of St Ives, and that the mayor's son was another of the rabble. This was all the more amazing in that the mayor, who had seen

the riot, advised the Wesleyans to sue their attackers. But, as Wesley pointed out, such attacks and assaults might threaten the body, but the spirit would remain undiminished. It was, however, a miracle that more serious destruction had not occurred.

Two nights later, at Towednack, Wesley and his followers were again the target of a gang of ruffians who had been mobilised by the local clergy and rehearsed into sloganising that the evangelists had made a disturbance on the Sabbath-day; had lured established churchgoers from their place of worship; and had violated the day with their infamous mischief. The hooligans advanced under the cover of sticks and stones and, encircling the group of followers, outnumbered them and beat them without mercy and with no respect for age, sex or condition. The refusal of Wesley's followers to fight back shamed the attackers and, after a few minutes, they pulled off their hats, hid their faces and slunk away.

Let's not kid ourselves that in this last century we have been any less revolting. In Cornwall in the late 1800's the state of mining was such that the new unionism had hard ground to grow on, but in Australia at Burra the Cornish miners took less placidly to cuts in wages when their living conditions included living in the river bank. A large strike took place there and later on when the Cornish went to Broken Hill the largely Cornish or Cornish-Australian workforce saw very large strikes. The Labour movement and Labor Party in South Australia was born out of Cornish methodist miners. In Cornwall itself there have been more uprisings and riots: The 50 years of Food Riots between 1793 and 1847; The Falmouth Packet Mutiny of 1810, the 1912 Riot in the Clay China Districts over unionism, hours, and wages; In 1896 the Newlyn Fishing Riots over English east coast boats fishing their waters on the Sabbath, the odd mob attack on St. Hilary Church in 1932.

Tonight , June 21st 1997 a new Cornish "army", who have walked the same route as the 1497 uprising, from the village of St Keverne in Cornwall to London, in commemoration of the 500th anniversary, will arrive at 12 noon (about 9 or 10 our time) to the accompaniment of a Cornish piper. A memorial plaque, to be placed on the wall of Greenwich Park, will be unveiled by Lord St Levan, President of Keskerdh Kernow, while the evening sees a concert at Blackheath Concert Halls with music, song and dance. "Blackheath - the replay!" sees Cornwall pitted against Kent in an amicable, we hope, rugby match during the afternoon. This month of peaceful commemoration and perhaps in a way 'protest' at the state of Cornwall today, has galvanised many in Cornwall and entranced the media. It has been a truly historic event.

Equally truly it can be said, the Cornish are still revolting!

Chris Dunkerley, Kevrenor Bard of the Cornish Gorseth

Presented on June 21st , 1997 at the Cornish Association's Cornish Day at Epping.

Sources and further reading:

"Cornwall" by Dr Philip Payton

"Cornwall in Uproar" by David Mudd

"The Revolt of the Peasantry" by Julian Cornwall

"History of Cornwall" Vol. II by Davies Gilbert

"History of Cornwall" by Thurstan Peter

"The History of Cornwall" by Richard Polwhele (Vol 3&4)