# A SINGLE WRITTEN FORM FOR CORNISH:
## ACCOMMODATING CONTEMPORARY VARIETIES

**A memorandum from Kenneth MacKinnon to the Cornish Language Commission**

I was the main researcher and principal author of the Independent Academic Study on Cornish commissioned by Government Office of the South West in 2000. (1) Its principal purpose was to advise the present government on the historical development and contemporary state of the Cornish language at the time of public demands for Cornish to be included in the government's ratification of the Council of Europe Charter for Regional or Minority Languages. The Study was remitted to be produced without recommendations. However, on accepting this research commission, I did point out that I would have ideas arising out of this study and that I did feel myself free to make recommendations independently of it. I also pointed this out to representatives of GOSW and other English regions and U.K. nations at the Study debriefing at Eland House, Victoria, SW1 on Friday 24th March 2000.

I have in fact made my views upon the Study known to the interested public on various occasions since. I provided a public debriefing on the Study in Boscastle Village Hall on Saturday 4th November 2000, and an account of the address was published in Cornish Studies 10 (2). I have further analysed materials of the Study, which formed the basis of the Caroline Kemp Memorial Lecture, and which I gave to the University of Exeter Institute of Cornish Studies on 1st December 2003 at the Royal Institution of Cornwall, Truro. This comprised an analysis of the three focus groups I conducted in 2000 with the principal language organisations. I produced a verbatim account of the dialogue at these events, together with commentary, and made this available to the three groups and to major academic institutions and libraries in Cornwall. The address was published in Cornish Studies 12. (3)

I have participated and given papers at other conferences held in Cornwall, such as the Cornish Language conference (Towards a Single Written Form, Tremough on Saturday 17th September 2005, and Twenty-First Century Celts (Institute of Cornish Studies, County Hall, Truro) 8th–10th September 2006, at which I gave a keynote paper. (4)

The Independent Academic Study led to the signature of HM Government for Cornish in Part II of the European Charter by an official declaration on 11th March 2003, which was registered by the Council of Europe on 18th March 2003. This has been popularly interpreted in Cornwall as 'official recognition' of the language, and it has also been the spur to further developments of provisions for the language. The interests of the language had previously been 'cared for' by the Cornish sub-committee of the European Bureau for Lesser-Used Languages (EBLUL), and from this has developed the Forum and Partnership. Following a series of public consultations A Strategy for Cornish was produced in 2004 (5) and adopted by Cornwall County Council in 2005, which led in turn to the appointment of a Strategy Manager and a Development Administrator in 2006. The appointment of eminent international linguistic and language planning specialists to the Commission for the Single Written Form followed in 2007, together with and its advisory linguistic group of specialists and experts in the various contemporary varieties of Cornish, provides the point of reference for the present observations.

The Cornish Language has thus been provided with the elements of an infrastructure which did not exist before 2000. The language has now entered a new phase a century after the beginnings of the revival with Henry Jenner's Handbook of the Cornish Language of 1904 (6), and the institutions which stemmed from it: the Gorseth, the Federation of old Cornwall Societies, the 'Nancean Synthesis', the Language Board and the Examination System. If there is to be a further phase of progress for the language towards a fully fulfilled and realistic place in modern Cornish society, what has already been achieved in the second century of its revival gives considerable promise and hope. If a century of measured progress ( Nance's 'generation getting the language on its feet') is fully to reap the benefit of the recent strides forward ('another generation making it walk again'), then the lessons of the 'Tripartite Split' of the 80s need to be learned well and constantly borne in mind. Without a widely accepted Single Written Form there will be no further progress for the language, the respect it has earned will be dissipated, and Cornwall will have lost the opportunity for an authentic and unique social institution and voice which enables it to 'punch above its weight', gain further attention to its problems, and assert its distinctiveness in constitution and culture. This is the last chance for the language to be taken seriously by people who matter.

I have had a lifelong interest in the Cornish language stemming from war evacuation from the London blitz in 1940 to Summercourt and St Ives. I was most fortunate to have a Cornishwoman as one of my London teachers and a local Cornishman teacher both of whom brought to my attention the language, the traditions, the stories and songs of Cornwall. On return from evacuation, these caused me to realise that I had a similar tradition in my own family, stemming from Gaelic Scotland. So I made it my business to acquire the language of my own forebears. I have subsequently contributed to Gaelic adult education development, speech-community research, and language development (with membership of official advisory body, and board). But I never lost an awareness and interest in Cornwall. I have returned many times, and in recent years strengthened my interest in the language.

I have maintained the objective of familiarising myself with all contemporary varieties of Cornish and have supported efforts in all of them. I have attended events in Common Cornish such as the Penseythun, contributed monetarily to publications in Unified Revised (such as the New Testament), encouraged efforts in both Late/Modern and Unified varieties, and taken the effort to learn the language more seriously and take the exams. For a very pragmatic reason I have chosen to take these in Unified: it was the form I was most familiar with when I started the process.

The Commission and its associated Linguistic Group provides a tremendous opportunity for all within the language movement to bring its different branches together. I feel that there are a number of guiding principles which are important in this process:-

- Above all, a Single Written Form needs to based upon thorough scholarship and rigorous scientific method, and thus to be able to demonstrate that it has the respect of disinterested, independent, expert linguistic science in Cornwall and internationally.
- It needs to be based upon fully attested and traditional Cornish orthography. This was originally devised to indicate pronunciation in the first place, is a valuable witness, and now requires update for the needs of modern Cornish.

- It needs to enable all contemporary forms of Cornish readily to accommodate to it.
- It needs to pick up from where the language last left off as a vernacular.
- It needs to use the witness of all traditional forms of the language to enable the written system effectively to represent the sound system.
- It needs to be able to demonstrate continuity with historic Cornish, and with placenames which the language has produced.

This is an exacting specification. It may be a bit like map projections. No projection can fully represent the true shape of a land area on a spherical surface upon a flat plane. There always has to be some accommodation. Projections may feature equal area or true bearing but will have to sacrifice other requirements. However, map projections may not be too exact an analogy. I feel that many more of the above requirements may in practice be accommodated in language development if there is some degree of give and take on all sides.

The process which has brought the present initiatives into being has been soundly based. It has started with a research initiative and has addressed the priorities of corpus planning before status planning and media planning. It has thus proceeded:

Research → Corpus Planning → Status / Media Planning – *in that order*.

The process needs to continue:

Further Research → Strategy → Application in Action - again *in that order*.

Order is important. So is research. I feel both have been sorely neglected in the current development of provisions for the Gaelic language in Scotland - but that is another story. I only mention it in order to commend the developments which have led to the current initiatives for Cornish, and to urge that the impetus is maintained in the manner outlined above.

I have given personal encouragement and support to the initiative for **Kernowak Standard**, as I feel that it is developing its proposals very much in the manner and on the principles outlined above, which is why I have been a signatory to it. I would maintain however that my support is not exclusive or doctrinaire. There may be other proposals which merit as much – or more – consideration, and I remain open to them. But in signing up to **KS**, I feel that it definitely epitomises the principles detailed above. In particular, it deals with Cornish in its most recent and still widely used form. It thus conforms to Jenner's principle of picking up the language where it last left off, from its last speakers (Alan M. Kent, in Williams, op cit, p.128). I have always felt that it would have been better to have developed Jennerian Cornish rather than gone off at a tangent or gone back to the later Middle Ages with Nance. Richard Gendall has drawn attention to the larger corpus of later writings in Cornish than those of the 'classical' period. (Gendall, R.1994, 1000 Years of Cornish, pp. 4, 14.) These provide a most useful witness to pronunciation, idiom and usage when Cornish was last a community language and vernacular and therefore deserve closest attention, which Nance and Smith somewhat neglected. Had the earlier written system continued to develop to take account of this, continuity with the earlier historic varieties would have been maintained. No doubt this would have been the case had some centralised intellectual,

literary or cultural institution such as Glasney continued in existence. I suppose that Nance attempted to remedy this deficiency with his proposals for spelling and orthography. Likewise, I suppose Ken George's proposals for phonemic / phonetic Cornish were a similar proposal. It is fundamentally important that the subsequent scholarly and scientific debate upon them gets a considered hearing based upon linguistic, scientific and scholarly criteria and not left to be settled merely on a numbers game.

Having followed the arguments and studied the evidence presented, I feel that the Commission should consider the **KS** proposals carefully in the light of scientific linguistics. The proposals represent a debate between all the current extant forms of Cornish, a real measure of accommodation, and the give-and-take between them. They are principally a coming together and a move forward from three principal varieties: Unified, Unified Revised, and Late / Modern. At the same time they are informed by an input from Common Cornish (Kemmyn) specialists, and thus also comprise an accommodation with that system. I would sum up its merits as:-

- Normalisation upon a period and point in time when Cornish had developed into its Late or Modern form, was still widely spoken as a vernacular, and was capable of producing a written literature.
- Informed by professional, linguistic science, and by practitioners who are leading academics in their fields, and who bring to bear thorough and rigorous scholarship.
- Use of all periods of Cornish as a means of attestation of authentic forms, and evidence of the development of pronunciation: the principle of *tota Cornicitas*.
- Traditional orthographic conventions which were based on Cornish as it actually was, and as it was spoken for real.
- Use of the Late / Modern corpus as a witness to how Cornish was pronounced and used in its final vernacular phase.
- A phonetic approach which enables phonetic / phonemic Cornish such as Kemmyn to be accommodated.
- Conventions which enable users of Unified and Unified Revised forms to adapt to a historically continuous system.
- Conventions which enable placenames in their present-day form to be rendered in an authentic Cornish spelling system, and thus assist the general public with bilingual place signage.

All of these criteria are important considerations for language acquisition, language development and language planning. This brings me to the final point which I wish to make about the use and promotion of the SWF. The present priority is for a Single Written Form to be determined and accepted. However, it is not too early to begin to consider how it will be used and promoted, and in this connection what are the anticipated further research needs of the Cornish language. This may be beyond the present remit of the Commission – but it is not too early to begin think about it. I am therefore putting down a marker, and forward it as an indication of context.

I therefore take the opportunity to reproduce the conclusion of my keynote address to the Twenty-First Century Celts Conference at Truro in September 2006, and I shall conclude this memorandum by following it with some ideas on the research needs of the Cornish Language. I append these as annexures to this memorandum.

I would be very happy to participate in helping to bring an agenda for further research and development for provisions for Cornish into being. I would be very happy to come to Cornwall and assist in any way with a session on the research needs of the Cornish Language, its users, speakers and its general public, for starters. I did something similar some years ago for the Ulster Scots language-group ( they acted upon on it !), and for the Scots language-group in Scotland (they did not !)

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**ANNEXURE 1:**
Conclusion of keynote address to Twenty-First Century Celts Conference, Truro:
**CORNISH AND THE FUTURE OF THE CELTIC LANGUAGES:**
(10ᵗʰ September 2006.)

**'Plan B' in a Cornish Context**

In connection with current language-planning needs of Gaelic in Scotland, Jentsch and Herd (2006) (7) have drawn attention to:-

1. Native Gaelic speakers (and 'semi-speakers');
2. Integrated Gaelic learners who may or may not have 'Highland connections' ('New Gaels'),
3. Indigenous / native non-Gaelic speakers (who may have a recent Gaelic background);
4. Integrated non-Gaelic incomers ( 'New Highlanders'); and
5. Non-integrated, non-Gaelic speakers ('White Settlers', recent immigrants).

The Cornish language movement also needs to recognise that there are similarly quite different kinds of people in Cornish society. Respectively they relate to Cornish differently, and are socialised within local society in quite different ways:-

1. Through networks of family, relations and friends, participation in linguistic culture;
2. neighbourhood, associations, friends, active participation in linguistic culture;
3. networks of family, relations and friends, passive participation in linguistic culture;
4. neighbourhood, associations, friends, but non-participation in linguistic culture;
5. no affinities, involvements, attachments or commitments.

Any competent strategy must take into account that the situation it works in will be socially diverse, and will need to appeal to different kinds of people in different terms.

I have questioned if current strategies for Gaelic will be shown not to have been effective by the 2011 Census, what is the default position ? Jentsch and Herd suggest it amounts effectively at present to 'Dignified Burial'. But there may be viable alternatives. I have felt there should be a 'Plan B'. As a first shot, an immediate 12-point plan might incorporate the following elements:-

1.  Action research programme, basing strategies and policies on outcomes.
2.  A pro-active involvement in community,
3.  Community competition (Best community for the furtherance of the language.),
4.  A family outreach and policy unit,
5.  A campaign to give confidence to semi-speakers.
6.  Networks and energy centres across the country,
7.  Education as access to both language *and* culture – enabling effective incomer integration,
8.  Rethinking education on a multi-model basis.
9.  Exploit electronic communication and IT, networking in cyberspace.
10. Embed the language in new ways-of- life ( as it has been in traditional occupations.)
11. New learner initiatives – network, units, welcomes, recognition. (Cornish has something to teach the other language-groups here.)
12. Multifunctional social centres / one-stop enterprise and resource centres.

Although revived from extinction as a community language, the present-day speakers and users of Cornish have demonstrated that there is no prospect for 'Dignified Burial' for the Cornish language. And this is a salutary lesson for Gaelic also. Perhaps versions of the above ideas may also be appropriate in a Cornish context.

## A prospect for Cornish in the 21[st.] Century

Neil Kennedy has observed that it makes quite a difference whether you regard the last speaker of Cornish to have been an unlettered fish-jowster of Mousehole or a highly literate schoolmaster who taught mathematics to mining engineers. In terms of the revival from 1904 onwards, it makes a difference whether you view the foundation document as an antiquarian study, or an electronically transmitted message – a product of modern technology: Hambley Rowe's 'Caernarfon Telegram'. (8)

In the mid-20[th.] Century Caradar (A.S.D. Smith) wrote: 'the decline of Cornish need not be regretted… Had the language survived it would inevitably have lost much of its own idiom…and…would have become more English than Cornish. As it is we have a compact medieval language, whose idiom is Celtic and…little likely to undergo any further change.' (Smith 1947, p. 20) (9)

Many of us would find little to agree with here. But we should look at the situation as we find it, and perhaps work with its advantages and opportunities rather than merely bewail what has been lost. We have the chance today in its second century of revival to restore to Cornwall and the Cornish a language able to take its place in the post-modern world of the 21st century.

We have seen how the ideas of the times shaped the earlier stages of the Cornish language revival. We are now part of a changed world: Cornwall is a part of a global society, it lies at the heart of the anglosphere, and it is like all the Celtic lands in being permanently settled by new kinds of incomers, while its own people continue to diasporise as the result of powerful political, economic and social forces. A strategy for restoration needs to recognise these realities – and work with them. There are now new ways of thinking and relating to language in society and of building new language

realities which were not available to the earlier revivalists.. These provide the present generation of speakers, supporters and learners with new ways to think about and use their language. And new hope in building an effective place for Cornish in society. As a first sally at a new strategy for our new situation, I put forward the following suggestions:-

A Ten-Point Agenda and Challenge

1. Achievement of a single written form (SWF). All else stems from this. It is essential for the wider use of Cornish in public signage and in schools. When you achieve it, ensure that it gets the widest publicity. Ensure it gets used everywhere. Go for it – and really exploit it. When it is used insist it gets equal respect with English – and not symbolically subordinated into an inferior position. Without SWF you will not be able to make any significant advance in schools or get Cornish on the curriculum. Apart from a handful of households using the language, and an annual handful of fluent learners, the next generation of speakers will come from nowhere else

2. Assertion and promotion of Cornish as a central element of Cornish identity, integrity and awareness. The Cornish language signifies that Cornwall is not just " a mere Essex or Herts " ( Jenner 1904, p. xi) but the sometime "kingdom, principality, duchy and earldom" (Carew 1602) (10) with a unique and distinctive constitutional relationship to the rest of the United Kingdom. People today need to be enlightened on that – none less so than our rulers. The Cornish language enables this to be credible – and also enables Cornwall to punch above its weight.

3. You urgently need more speakers, learners and users. This calls for a pro-active outreach programme to extend the speech-community and language-group.

4. Linked to this is an initiative to provide effective access to Cornish for all Cornish children through the schools. Use the opportunities in the National Curriculum for languages and local studies in order to get a foot in the door. Make it your friend not your enemy.

5. Identity and language questions on the 2011 Census will be a big step forward in publicity and status for the language. Make sure they are proper questions and not just 'write-ins'. They will begin to provide the real facts you will need to make policies and make progress. Now is the time to start negotiations with the Office for National Statistics. Do not be fobbed off with bureaucratic evasions and half-truths. Our establishment is a past master in this.

6. This links in with the need for language usage, ability and attitudes surveys of speakers, users and learners. Ute Hirner has made a good start for you. Use her work, involve her – and extend it. Without good data, you cannot make good policies. You have made an excellent beginning by basing your present initiatives on research and corpus planning. These need to precede all other stages. Work with the public will necessitate not only focus groups but public opinion polling. This can be a great strength in countering detractions and baseless assertions.

7. The Institute of Cornish Studies needs to develop further its role as a centre and leader of research in Cornish language studies.

8. A Cornish Language Trail: **Lergh an Yeth**. Remember the 'Tiger Trails' in Cornwall 30 years ago? We need one for language – both to raise awareness of heritage locally and to promote cultural tourism. Put up plaques on significant sites ( for which SWF will be essential), print leaflets and booklets. Promote publicity. As a project it could start now – with HLF funding.

9. A Cornish-speaking community needs to be brought into being to enable the language to live and to normalise. Some ideas here could be a Cornish housing association ( as with the Belfast Irish initiative – Maguire 1991).(11) A more immediate development might comprise the enhancement of networks based on 'fun days' and **Yeth an Weryn** which already exist, plus camps, holidays and residential activity courses **Penseythen 'plus'.**

10. A Community Language Competition: **Lef an Kernowyon**. Make it an annual process – for the best community to advance and feature the Cornish language in its everyday life. A very successful Irish-language scheme Glór na nGael is a good model for this.

Success in these next stages will enable a credible and successful case to be made for inclusion of Cornish at Part III of the European Treaty for Regional or Minority Languages – and maybe even a Cornish Language Act

Cornish, as a language – not of a compact medieval past – but of the present-day and a post-modern future, deserves to be an essential and central part of Cornish identity – part of what makes Cornwall distinctively Cornish. More than that, it gives Cornish people everywhere a sense of distinctiveness and a symbol of their identity. For an increasing number it will become more than a symbol. It will be their means of actual communication regarding things Cornish – and maybe a lot more.

*Chons da – ha sowena !*

**ANNEXURE 2: The present research needs of the Cornish language**

The following represents a recent communication to Craig Weatherhill of the linguistic group, and copied to Vanessa Beeman, Grand Bard. (e-mail 30.03.07: some of it overlaps with the foregoing – but I reproduce it much as it stands (with a few corrections).

I am very happy to signal my continued interest in Cornish language matters - in particular, interest in undertaking relevant research. I have no wish to put myself forward before others who may be interested. In fact, I think it would be very good for the interested parties (Commission, Linguistic Group, Partnership, etc,) to decide what they see as most immediate and relevant on the research front. Then to draw up proposals for research projects and put them out to tender. There are a number of outfits in Wales for example who are used to doing this sort of thing - and who might be very interested.

As I see it, the needs are to identify a research programme and strategy as a first step. Then to formulate the projects which would be necessary in order to achieve it. You would need to get a research budget funded. Then to go out to tender or identify the entities which could carry it out ( it could be research units, academic departments, specific individuals, or consultants.)

For my own part, I would see my role as contributing to the pool of ideas at this stage by:-
1) Identifying the needs of the language and its speakers, and
2) identifying the relationships and roles for the language in Cornish society which Cornish language interests seek to achieve.

With the agreement on a SWF, the language strategy will need to be taken a step further. There is no reason why the thinking for this should not at least commence now.

As the further development of the strategy takes place, there will no doubt be seen to be a need for:-

1) Outreach survey of language learners, users, speakers. (Ute Hirner has made a start on this - make sure she is brought in and full use made of her research findings on her learners' survey)

2) Public opinion survey of the general population concerning how they see the Cornish language, attitudes towards it and its use, opinions on policies and its place in Cornish life and society. (I did such a survey for Gaelic in 1981 - and it was extremely useful in moving things on.)

3) Develop relationships with ONS NOW for what you want in the 2011 Census. They are currently engaged in consultations with official bodies and general public following their census tests last year. Census data can be extremely useful for further research and for drawing attention through that to what is needed for the language. I have done scads of this for Gaelic. The only tragedy is that no-one is at all interested, and nothing is done with it. Gaelic policymakers just ignore what could be one of the most powerful weapons in their armoury. Make sure you get the census questions you want. Make sure you effectively analyse them and apply the results.

4) Develop projects which bring Cornish to the attention of the wider public. My Cornish language trail *Lergh an Yeth* could be one such - and could attract heritage funding to get it going. Another could be to get signage policy going and to ensure that all place with place-signs in Cornwall get equal-validity bilingual signage boards with their authentic placename forms properly displayed. (That means with a language etiquette: the senior language first, and both in equally-impactful and easily-distinguished typefaces.) Other priority signage projects could then follow. This would mean you would probably have to constitute a Placename Commission.

5) Motivational, attitudinal and psycholinguistic research to find out what turns people on to the Cornish language and what turns them off.

6) Decide on your rationale, then outline the elements of the status planning path you wish to develop and promote.

I would be very happy to function as research consultant for all of this. In any event, I hope that the present 'language establishment' develops a research culture and directs it effectively. I think that the language movement has heeded advice which has been given in the past. e.g. the need for a corpus planning job to be done before a status planning can be effectively operationalised. The immediate step is:-

1) Define the developmental and research needs of the language.
2) Plan what research you need.
3) Get the research carried out by competent, professional entities.
4) Study the results and think about them.
5) Base your policies and projects upon them.     IN THAT ORDER

If you proceed on these lines, I feel sure that your efforts will be substantially based, your money will be well spent, and what you do will have a chance of demonstrating actual successes. At the present time Gaelic has a language act, a development body, resources for language development and media - things which I have actively campaigned for all my life - but does no research and ignores what research on language issues is actually being done by others. It is in denial of what is actually going on, puts up projects and funds publicity campaigns without prior market research, and has no idea apart from anecdotal impressions of the characteristics of its speakers or potential learners. I have done everything I can to address this situation - but have become frustrated and disillusioned with it. In contrast, my activities re Cornish have always been listened to attentively and have resulted in action being taken as a result. I would much rather devote what potential I can still muster for something which is likely to be productive.

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