

REQUIREMENTS FOR A SINGLE WRITTEN FORM OF CORNISH

1.0. Introduction. What follows are the recommendations of a diverse group of people who use a variety of forms of Revived Cornish. We are users of Unified Cornish (UC), Revived Late Cornish (RLC), and Unified Cornish Revived (UCR). We are conversant with the aims and arguments of those who make use of Common Cornish as an orthography for Revived Cornish. The recommendations which we give are informed by our understanding of the aims of the Cornish Language Partnership, including the objective that the Commission will recommend that either one of the four current forms of Cornish be chosen as the Single Written Form, or that a new fifth form be chosen.

We believe that that the Single Written Form must be a new fifth form. In this document we outline our reasons for this belief. In the coming weeks we will present you and the Linguistic Working Group with a proposed orthography which aims to accommodate all.

2.0. The Single Written Form should not be UC, RLC, or UCR. Why do we not argue that the Commission recommend that these orthographies, which are based on historical forms of Traditional Cornish be chosen for the Single Written Form? One answer is that we now know more about traditional Cornish than ever, and the time is right to bring the three historically-based orthographies of Cornish together. They are all normalizations of the spellings used at different periods of the history of the Cornish language. Another answer is that we believe that that none of the four existing orthographies can be chosen since to choose one would be to favour one over the users of the others.

2.1. Unified Cornish. When Morton Nance codified Unified Cornish in 1928, much of what is now available in Cornish was unavailable. (The writings of John Tregear, for instance, were not discovered until 1949, and *Bewmans Kê* was only discovered in 2000.) Unified Cornish remained unchanged even after the later materials began to be studied, and by the early 1980s some Revivalists were dissatisfied with its conservatism. (It is important to remember that not everyone shared this view.) Unified Cornish had been normalized largely on the basis of medieval poetic texts, since little prose was known at the time. Some learners and teachers of Cornish felt frustrated by the ambiguities in Unified Cornish orthography, particularly with regard to vowel length in monosyllables: when one sees a Unified Cornish word for the first time, one is often uncertain how it should be pronounced. This shortcoming doubtless helped to give rise to Common Cornish's "phonemic orthography" as well as the turn to Late Cornish. The ambiguity about length remains a shortcoming of Unified Cornish.

2.2. Revived Late Cornish (also called Modern Cornish). Richard Gendall spearheaded the effort to examine and analyse this material, and promulgated it—in part in reaction to the appearance of Common Cornish—to students as an alternate orthography. The spelling of Cornish after the *Creation of the World* (1611) is rather different from that which precedes it. It owes less to the native scribal tradition and more to the conventions of English

spelling and the orthography established by Edward Lhuyd. The orthography of Late Cornish is, nonetheless, something of a barrier to earlier forms of the language. If a standardized Late Cornish spelling became the Single Written Form and were the only spelling taught in schools, learners might experience difficulty in understanding Cornish of an earlier period (when the overwhelming bulk of our extant literature was written). Although Late Cornish writings are of the utmost importance in increasing our understanding of the language, particularly in colloquial registers and when dealing with secular matters, a standardized Late Cornish orthography is not to be recommended as the Single Written Form.

2.3. Unified Cornish Revised. Nicholas Williams' UCR was an attempt to move the Revival forward by reconciling Unified Cornish and Revived Late Cornish. Williams showed that the real differences between Unified Cornish and Revived Late Cornish (or indeed between Middle Cornish and Late Cornish) were differences in orthography and register, not differences in language. It is apparent to us on reflection that UCR is still more conservative than necessary, and its orthography is still ambiguous as far as vowel length in monosyllables is concerned.

Each of these orthographies is based on the spellings of the traditional texts, and each has its strengths and weaknesses. We believe that the corpus of Traditional Cornish is at last well-enough understood to permit us to devise a single orthography, based—as it must be—on attested spelling, which will bring Unified Cornish, Revived Late Cornish, and Unified Cornish Revised together in a single form.

3.0. The Single Written Form should not be Common Cornish (also called Kernewek Kemmyn). We consider the orthography called Common Cornish to be unsuitable. Much has been written about its flaws and we shall not rehearse all of the arguments here. Its orthographic system is fixed on only one historical pronunciation, and in our analysis it would not be possible to “fix” Common Cornish to accommodate other forms of pronunciation. The claim made that Common Cornish represents late medieval pronunciation has been challenged regularly over the years by scholars of Middle Cornish and other disciplines. Common Cornish prefers to adopt words and grammar from Breton and Welsh than to use attested Cornish forms. It rejects other vocabulary and grammar on the grounds that they are “influenced by English”. Its spelling moves the revived language very far from the historical corpus of Cornish of all periods. It is a very inaccurate representation of the language. Common Cornish was a bold experiment—but its core assumptions were flawed, its implementation of them is inaccurate, and even if it were true that its users make up an alleged “absolute majority” among users of Cornish—a proposition which is disputable—it cannot be accepted that Common Cornish enjoys a mandate for the exclusion of others. The continued use of Common Cornish cannot be recommended. We have not accepted it for nearly two decades, and we do not accept it now.

4.0. The prerequisites for a Single Written Form. Two guiding principles are essential for a Single Written Form to be acceptable to us. A standard orthography must meet the minimum requirements of Cornish users from every tradition. These are:

1. The spelling system must be based on attested traditional orthographic forms.
2. In the orthography the relationship between spelling and sounds must be as unambiguous as possible.

Such an orthography will by its very nature be a compromise, but we believe that it is essential that the Single Written Form do the following things:

- a) give due weight to the Cornish scribal tradition of the medieval period, which began its decline with the closure of Glasney in 1548;
- b) offer a form of the language that is in its grammar and syntax close enough to later Cornish to be recognizably the same language;
- c) suggest a variety of Cornish that is sufficiently close to the Celtic toponymy of present-day Cornwall as to appear to be part of the same linguistic tradition;
- d) present a language that looks as though it could be learnt, written, and spoken without undue difficulty; and
- e) provide a robust orthography that equips the Revival with spellings which are as unambiguous as possible in their representation of the sounds of Cornish, and which at the same time remain faithful to the forms found in the Cornish texts which are the source of the language.

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