

On <wh> and <hw> in Cornish orthography

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The Old Cornish Vocabulary was written by a Cornish speaker who was translating a Latin-Old English word-list into a Latin-Old Cornish word-list. He used, naturally enough, Old English orthographic conventions when he devised his orthography for Old Cornish. (It is not likely that he wrote Old Cornish words on the fly. He had worked out an orthography before writing down the Old Cornish Vocabulary on expensive vellum.)

The author of the Old Cornish Vocabulary wrote <hp> which we render as *hw*, though the letter he used, *p wynn*, is not a *w*, since the letter *w* hadn't been invented then. Cassidy and Ringler say that <hp> represents [hw̥], which is voiceless velar continuant [h] followed by a devoiced labio-velar approximant [w̥]. They also say that *h* was written before other consonants which were devoiced by assimilation to them (*hl* [hl̥], *hn* [hn̥], *hr* [hr̥], likewise *fl* [fl̥], *fn* [fn̥], *fr* [fr̥], *þr* [θr̥]).

What did <hp> mean in Old Cornish? There's no reason to think that it represented a sound which was very different from the Old English one. There's certainly no *evidence* that it did. One might make a claim on the basis of Celtic chauvinism that it was different, but that would seem to be little more than a wishful assertion. The Old Cornish speaker used Old English graphs in general; if he used <hp>, he did so because it was similar to the sound in his own language.

A long time passed between the Old Cornish Vocabulary and the Middle Cornish documents which are the next relics of Traditional Cornish which we have. During that period the English language also changed—from Old English to Middle English. One of the things that happened was that the Old English orthographic system was lost, because the Old English scribal tradition were replaced by a tradition based in part on that of Norman French. The letter <p> was lost, being replaced by <u>, <uu>, and eventually <w>. Mossé says that in Middle English orthography

“*wh-* is also generalized in place of OE *hw-* (*wher, why, what* instead of OE *hwer, hwy, hwæt* [he means *hper, hpy, hpæt*], etc. In the North this sound was written *quh-, qu-* (*quhat, quat*). The spelling *hu-* for *hw-*, *wh-* is frequent in Kentish.... Moreover, the Anglo-Norman scribes frequently reduced *hw-* to *w-*, thus in the *Owl and the Nightengale* we find *wat, wile*, etc., for *what, while*.... The Scots spelling *quh-, qu-* indicates a strong pronunciation of the spirant [xw]- at least originally.... In the South, or more exactly, among Anglo-Norman scribes... *wh-* (new spelling for OE *hw-*) often became *w-*... there is *wīle* instead of *whīle* ‘while’, *wō* instead of *whō*, *wī* instead of *whī*, etc. This may come from a difficulty in articulating a breathed *h*, for we also have *oure* for *houre* ‘hour’.... This may also indicate an early tendency to reduce [hw] to [w] such as developed later on. Some scribes by hypercorrection put *h* before words with an initial vowel: e.g., *hūle* for *ūle* ‘owl’.

So much for Middle English graphs. What sound did <wh> represent in Middle English? Was it [hw̥] as it was in Old English? We can't be perfectly sure, of course. It is interesting to note Mossé's suggestion that *qu* in Scotland was [xw], and that a continuum of sounds ran down the island weakening as it went. In fact in much of the south of England, the Middle English reflex of Old English <hp> is written simply <w>, indicating that [hw̥] may have fallen together with original [w].

What we do know is that in Modern English *wh* remains present as [ʍ] in many Modern English dialects, though some of them are conservative dialects as in Scotland, Ireland, and parts of the North

America. (In Scotland [ɹ] is sometimes strengthened to [f]; my own dialect, originally Eastern Pennsylvanian, preserves [ɹ] always under stress, though in relaxed speech [w] is often typical.) It is important to note, however, that the sequence [hw]—a voiceless glottal fricative *followed by* a voiced labial-velar approximant—is found in no dialect of English anywhere. The real sound is a single sound [ɹ]. In most dialects of English today “the *wine/whine* merger” applies. This merger of [ɹ] with [w] was present in the south of England as early as the 13th century, but did not become acceptable in educated speech until the late 18th century.

To reiterate: Old English (and presumably Old Cornish) <hp> represented [hɹ] and was replaced by <wh>, which may have started out representing [hɹ] but certainly became [w] then [ɹ] and later in some places [w]—in both English and Cornish. Middle English and Middle Cornish both sometimes write original *wh* as <w>.

The graph <hw> is also not written by Lhuyd except once in his lament for William III (ACB). He writes <hɹ> throughout *Archeologia Britannica* for the Cornish *wh*, and <χɹ> for the Welsh *chw*; this in IPA is [xɹ]. But is there evidence that Lhuyd’s <hɹ> is [hw] as opposed to [hɹ] or [ɹ]? No, there is not. Unfortunately, the IPA was not available to Lhuyd, so he had no recourse to distinguish [hɹ] from [ɹ].

There is a persistent myth that <hw> is pedagogically easier than <wh> because it looks better in mutation charts and because the sound [hɹ] should be taught. The answer to the first assertion is simple: People do not read mutation charts; they read novels and stories and letters. This is no argument against the use of traditional graph. <wh> occurs some 860 times in the corpus; <hw> occurs once in a poem written by Lhuyd.

The second assertion is more worrying. The sound in Cornish was [hɹ] or [ɹ], not [hw]. The sequence [hw] isn’t even easy to pronounce, and doubly-articulated fricatives are unconfirmed in any language. Pawl Dunbar attempted to explain the merits of [hw] to me:

And you, Michael, have never attempted to teach Cornish to E1 speakers who pronounce E. ‘which’ and ‘witch’ identically. After correcting some of them umpteen times (and the best some ever achieve is *h-w* with an audible pause between—that is when they are not getting confused and saying *w-h* ditto) you might just begin to realise that there is virtue in ‘*hw*’ after all.

The failure Pawl describes here may be due to the fact that he does not have [ɹ] in his own speech. His description certainly suggests to me that by attempting to teach [ɹ] as a sequence of [h] + [w]... it is no wonder that his student is pronouncing “*h-w* with an audible pause between”. This sequence *is* difficult; it is not the sound found in conservative dialects of English, and I do not believe that such a sequence occurred in Traditional Cornish, which was certainly influenced by English phonology.

The technical features of the voiceless labial-velar approximant [ɹ] are these:

- Its manner of articulation is approximant, which means it is produced by constricting air flow through a channel at the place of articulation that is not narrow enough to cause turbulence.
- Its place of articulation is labialized velar, which means it is articulated with the back part of the tongue (the dorsum) raised toward the soft palate (the velum) and the lips rounded.
- Its phonation type is voiceless, which means it is produced without vibrations of the vocal cords.
- It is an oral consonant, which means air is allowed to escape through the mouth.
- It is a central consonant, which means it is produced by allowing the airstream to flow over the middle of the tongue, rather than the sides.
- The airstream mechanism is pulmonic egressive, which means it is articulated by pushing air out of the lungs and through the vocal tract, rather than from the glottis or the mouth.

The paedagogical problem is inherent in the graph <hw>—that graph is by no means the cure. Getting students to pronounce *whath* as [h^hwæ:θ] is exactly the wrong thing to do. The KS draft explains how to teach the sound correctly:

1.6.26. <wh> [ʍ]

wh is voiceless, pronounced [ʍ] like the **wh** of Scottish English and Hiberno-English **whistle**, that is, with the devoicing clearly audible, e.g. **why** [ʍi:], [ʍəi] ‘you (pl.)’, **wheg** [ʍe:g] ‘sweet’, **whel** [ʍe:l] ‘work’. In traditional Cornish, however, **wh** and **w** are not always kept clearly separate.

NOTE: The sound of **wh** is not [hw] or [xw]. It is closer to the voiceless bilabial fricative [ɸ]; learners who do not have [ʍ] may try to approximate the sound of **wheg** as [ɸwe:g], which is like [fwe:g] with a very soft **f** blown between the lips.

Let us look at attestations for these graphs in Traditional Cornish.

The graph <hp> occurs 7 times in the Old Cornish Vocabulary: **dialhpet** ‘key’, **hpannen** ‘flea’, **hpeger** ‘mother-in-law’, **hperthin** ‘laugh’, **hpigeren** ‘father-in-law’, **hpilen** ‘beetle’, **hpirnores** ‘hornet’. The letter *wynn* is not a *w*; it is a different letter.

The graph <hw> occurs once in Middle Cornish at line 1231 in Pascon Agan Arluth: *y hwalsons ol adro*.

The graph <hw> occurs once in Late Cornish in the line: *Ah hwidlow yw genniv ent re hagarow* by the Welshman Edward Lhuyd in his lament for William III. In this poem Lhuyd’s Cornish is very unidiomatic. It is attested in the two place-names recorded by Lhuyd **Hwelan Tshei** (Gwennap) and **Hwelan Vrán** (Gwennap); see Padel 272.

The graph <wh>, on the other hand, is attested in the Middle and Late Cornish texts *over 1300 times* in such words as **whék**, **whég** ‘sweet’, **wherow** ‘bitter’, **whans** ‘desire’, **whes** ‘sweat’, **whetha** ‘blow’, **whylas**, **whelas** ‘seek’. It is also commonly reduced to *w* in some texts:

ef a wese ‘he was perspiring’ PA 58c; *y gorff wék* ‘his sweet body’ PA 132c; *Ihesus wék* ‘sweet Jesus’ PA 257d (there are all told 34 instances of **wék** ‘sweet’); *yma an gwyns ow wetha* ‘the wind is blowing’ BM 1062; *the weles thymmo trumach* ‘to seek’ a passage for myself BM 1075; *thyn yma wans* ‘we have a wish’ BM 2473.

The graph <wh> occurs in the surname **Polwhele** and is used to spell the Cornish word in dialect **wherrick** (< *wheryk* ‘little sister’) ‘greater pipe-fish’. It also occurs commonly in place-names (many of which are still in use):

Helygy Whethlowe, Tollan Wheath, Polwheveral, Wheal an Clay, Wheal an Coats, Wheal an Cullieck, Wheal an Dellick, Wheal an Dinner, Wheal an Gogue, Wheal an Harbier, Wheal an Hor, Whel an Lowren, Wheal an Peber, Wheal an Porrall, Wheal an Seavy, Wheal an Wens, Wheal Arrans, Wheal Bal Hill, Wheal Basset, Wheal Buller, Wheal Busy, Wheal Callice, Wheal Dees Gentle, Wheal Dreath, Wheale an Dowothick, Wheale an Gothilly, Wheale Bebel, Wheal Fortune, Wheal Growan, Wheal Howl, Wheal Kitty, Wheal Mundy, Wheal Noweth, Wheal Owles, Wheal Reath, Wheal Reeth, Wheal Rose, Wheal Sperries, Wheal Sperris, Wheal Sterren, Wheal Varizick, Wheal Vor, Wheal Zawson, Whel an Voag, Whele an Phelp, Wheal Arantall, While an Attol, While anglastannon.

It was used for revived Cornish by Jenner, Nance, Caradar, and Gendall. No one even thought of using it as a regular spelling until 1986. The graph **wh** is as essential to an acceptable SWF as **c/k/q** are. The graph **hw** can also mislead learners to hyper-correct, saying [hw] which can strengthen to [xw]; that is a Breton sound, not a Cornish one. The fact that **wh** and **w** are not always distinguished in traditional Cornish means that even if Cornish learners substitute [w] for [ʍ], this error is less bad than the hyper-correction. If the SWF has **c/k/q** alongside **hw**, it will simply be absurd.

Cassidy, Frederic G. & Richard N. Ringler. 1971. *Bright's Old English grammar & reader*. Third edition, second corrected printing. New York: Hold, Rinehart and Winston. ISBN 0-03-084713-3
Mossé, Fernand. 1983. *Handbook of Middle English*. Translated by James A. Walker. Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press. ISBN 0-8018-0478-7.