


OUR FEATURE PRESENTATION: THE STORY OF THE CORNISH

The fourth and last of a series, by **John Webb**.

The aim of the series had been to show how the history of each period had an impact on the lives of the Cornish people and contributed to the traditions and culture that we associate with Cornwall today.


Part 1- Pre-history

Trezaise 3500 BC
(CAU Video from CAS)



Part 2 – 1st Millennium AD


Penhale Round 400 AD
(An illustration from "A Brush with the Past", by Jane Stanley)



Part 3 - The medieval period

My story today

Will show how the history of the medieval and early modern periods led to the distinct characteristics of Cornwall and the Cornish people that we recognize today.




Angles and Hibernia by Sebastian Münster - 1550

The past episodes had taken us from the Ancient Britons to Bishop Trelawny, so it was time for:

Part 4 - Cornwall in the Modern Age 1660 – 1960

Cornwall and its Roads and Railways



1770: Three turnpiked routes created
1790-1810: Canal Mania
1852: Construction of the Cornwall Railway
1859: The Royal Albert Bridge opened, giving access to Cornwall from the railways of Devon.

Cornwall at the start of the Modern Age suffered bad communications. According to one of the travel writers of the early days: "Cornwall, I believe, at present has the worst roads in all England."

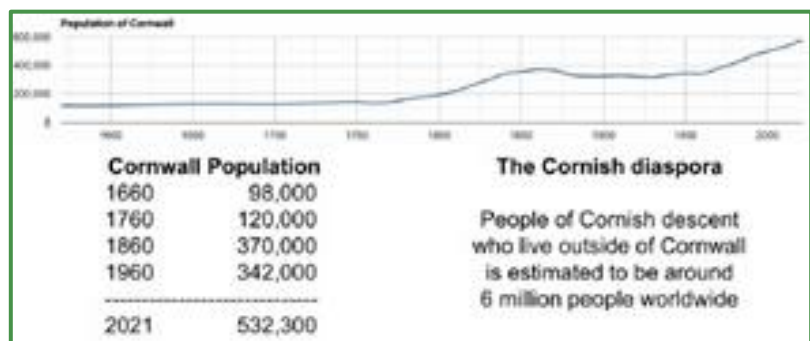
It was even worse in West Cornwall because of the growing number of mule trains that trekked to and from the ports, carrying ore to the ships and bringing back coal and mines supplies.

Fortunately, turnpike routes into Cornwall were established in 1770 and the Cornish railway system started its development in 1852. There was a brief canal mania, but only the Bude canal was completed in 1825.

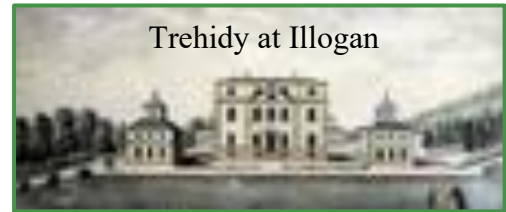
Cornwall and its Population

The population in 1660 was around 98,000. After that, the population grew steadily as they were marrying at a younger age because of the good earnings in the mines. But, in the second half of the 19th century, the population growth slowed as the craze for overseas emigration swept through communities across Cornwall.

The turning point occurred in the mid 1860s when population growth turned into absolute population decline and this continued until 1960. This was the time when the planners of Cornwall Council forecasted that population would only grow slowly, if at all. But events were soon to prove them hopelessly wrong. Note the increase from 1660 to 1960 from 98,000 to 342,000, and present day 532,300.



Cornwall's Landed Gentry played a part in the story. To the most part, they lived the good life on their estates. Some, like the Bassets of Illogan gained enormously because of the mineral deposits on their lands. Others succeeded in politics, especially during the days of the “rotten boroughs” when Cornwall had 44 MPs.



THE STORY OF THE CORNISH IN THE MODERN AGE

There were three topics that I used to describe this period. The major topic of course was Mining, but I kept running into the phrase, “We are more than just mining and methodism”, so I have combined the two into the first topic: **Mining and Methodism**. The second topic is the **Celtic Revival**, and the third topic is **How others told our story** and I shall be pointing the finger at the tourist industry, the authors and the artists. This will be the story of how they all combined to create the Cornwall that we know today.

The first topic: MINING AND METHODISM.

1a Mining



Dolcoath Copper Mine, Cambourne, 1832

Materials mined

- Tin, until mid 1700's
- Copper, 1730 - 1860
- Tin again, 1830 onwards
- China clay, 1800 onwards
- Lead, mid 1800's

Technical advances with steam engines

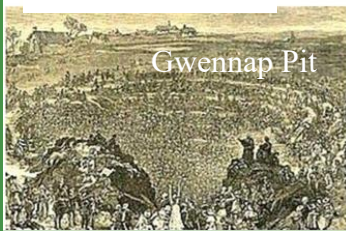
- 1740 - 1800 Newcomen, Smeaton and Watt.
- 1800 - 1840 Trevithick

This period in Cornwall was sometimes called “The Industrial Age” and listed here are the key dates and the materials mined. It was the technical advances with steam engines that gave Cornwall the edge and the reputation.

But Cornwall's greatest drawback in the industrial field was its lack of coal. In the case of

tin, it proved economic to carry fuel to the ore, but it was necessary to ship the copper ore to Bristol and South Wales for smelting. As a result, except for a few well-known engineering concerns, there was no significant diversification of industry.

1b Methodism



John Wesley first arrived in Cornwall in 1743 and visited no fewer than thirty-two times. It's not entirely clear why the Methodist message took hold so firmly in Cornwall, but the industrialisation that was underway certainly helped. New mines were creating new communities that were often miles from the nearest parish church. He filled a need, and granite was readily available to build the

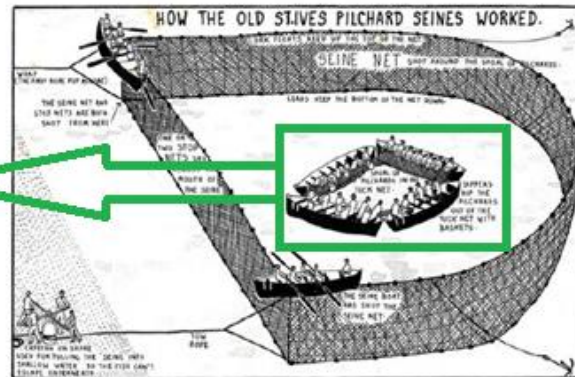
chapels. Despite the hardship of the industry, community life was rich. Villages were centred around the Methodist chapel which offered moral guidance, social events, and mutual aid societies. Methodist revival meetings provided spiritual solace and reinforced values of sobriety, hard work, and self-discipline. Although Wesley himself had no intention of founding a new denomination, that's not how things worked out. After his death, Cornish Methodism continued to grow, encouraged by enthusiastic local lay preachers, women as well as men, and boosted by periodic ‘mass revivals’. By 1850, fully 60 per cent of the Cornish population was Methodist.

I did find a way to mention **Fishing**.

Harry's Song for Cornwall : *When I sing of Cornwall there's one way to begin
To tell the story of the men of copper, fish and tin*



Tucking a school of pilchards, Mounts Bay



Seine Netting, St Ives

The Pilchard Fishery was the other major revenue source for Cornwall. It wasn't until the mid 1700s that tin surpassed pilchards as Cornwall's major revenue source. The pilchard fishery had been in existence since at least the thirteenth century and remained remarkably little changed until the early twentieth century. It was essentially an export fishery, packed and preserved pilchards were shipped directly from Cornwall to France, Spain and above all Italy, where strict Catholic observance of Lent and meat-free Fridays created a huge market for cheap salt fish.

However, all good things come to an end, and **1866 was a perfect storm**.



Engine Houses (1)



Enclosures (2)



Mousehole 1900 (3)

(1) Cornish copper production had peaked in the 1850s. But a banking crisis in 1866 triggered a price crash, and with the increased competition from overseas resources, Cornwall began the process of de-industrialization. All that remains are the engine houses.

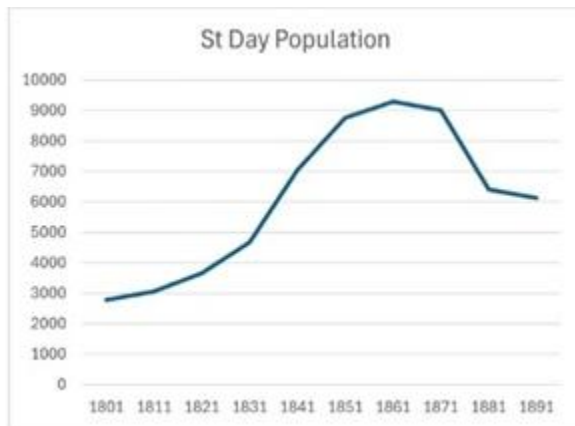
(2) During the 19th century, the enclosure movement in Cornwall took hold. Between 1869 and 1889, the enclosure of 40,000 acres of farmland had very negative effects on rural life. Many villagers lost access to common land, and small farmers and landless labourers were often forced to migrate to towns or emigrate abroad as they could no longer sustain themselves. The enclosed land was reshaped with new field boundaries and hedges. Many old roads and paths disappeared, while new ones were created to suit the reorganized farms. We see much of this hedging as we drive the lanes.

(3) When the pilchards failed, it left Comish fishing in a peculiar situation. In 1891 it was reported that, in the previous season, 'Not a single pilchard has been caught by a seine off the coast of Cornwall'. For centuries the fishing industry had been exclusively focused on pilchards.

A single seining enterprise required a large workforce, but it could also, in a good season, generate great returns. Cornwall's fishing bosses were almost entirely invested in a fishery that used open rowing boats, and they had little interest in creating a modern offshore fleet from scratch. This is what gives today's fishing industry and its harbours its distinctive characteristics.

The boats were generally independently owned and smaller, with a flexibility and a try-anything willingness to improvise. And this gives us our traditional harbours that we visit today.

St Day, Boom and Bust:



It was a perfect storm, and times were tough, but life moved on. But how did they manage after the boom years? This is a part of the story that is an example of the resilience of the Cornish people during the boom-and-bust times in the Cornish mining communities.

I've chosen to focus on the town of **St Day** which is close by the Camborne/Redruth copper deposits. This population chart shows how the population doubled during the good years of copper mining and how the population declined followed the crash.

One relic of the boom days are these church ruins. This is St Day Holy Trinity Church, known as “The Cathedral Of The Mines” because of the prosperity of St Day. It was built in 1828 when the local population was expanding, cost around £4000 and could seat 1500 people. Unfortunately, the church proved to be too big as the population declined and the galleries were removed, compromising the stability of the building. In 1956 the church was declared unsafe due to structural problems and was closed. and was abandoned.



This summary from a St Day guidebook tells their story:

The Collapse Changed Everything. By the late 1860s, the deep mines around Gwennap were shutting down. With pumps silenced and shafts flooded, the community's lifeblood drained away. Generations had relied on mining, but now thousands were jobless. Wages collapsed—from thousands a month to just £90 by 1877. Shops closed, families starved, and some men turned to charity-funded roadwork, while others suffered in silence.

Women became the backbone of the village - working in fuseworks and brickworks, holding families together, and raising children often unfamiliar with their distant fathers. By the 1870s, whole families were leaving under assisted schemes.

But for a brief period in the 1890s, remittances from South Africa transformed St Day—wives cashed £20–£30 monthly, shops revived, and children wore new clothes. Well-dressed returning miners strode through town in mustard shoes and bowler hats, proud of their tan and their travels.

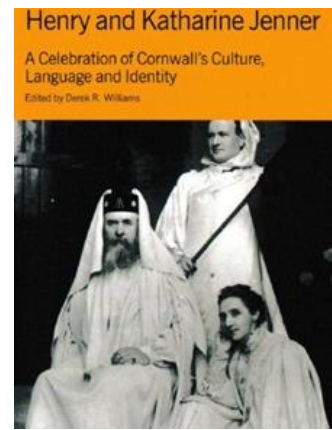
For those left behind - especially the old, infirm, and poor - life was grim. Overcrowding, makeshift housing, and disease plagued the area. Still, St Day endured. Community charity stepped in - blankets, coal and soup from local charities, and united support from both Wesleyan and Anglican churches.

The Second Topic: THE CORNISH CELTIC REVIVAL

The Cornish cultural renaissance began in the early 20th century and focused on revitalizing the Cornish language and culture. This movement aimed to re-establish Cornish heritage, language, music and folklore, and to foster a sense of Cornish national identity. This really is the story of one man, Henry Jenner.

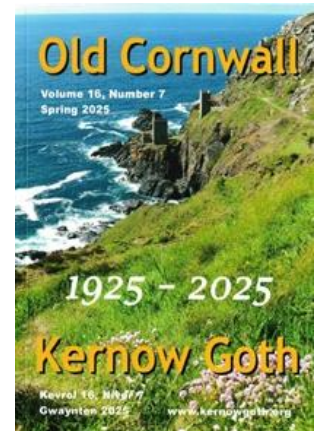
Jenner published *A Handbook of the Cornish Language* in 1904 which was explicitly aimed at Cornish people who wished to reclaim a lost cultural inheritance. He made the case that **Cornishness** was **not** a form of regional Englishness, but **a form of Celtic nationhood**.

The Celtic Revival required some vital tools to ensure its progress, one of which was a standardised system of spelling. In order to overcome this problem, Robert Morton Nance published *Cornish for All* in 1929, in which he outlined a standard form for the language referred to as Unified Cornish. While Cornish had vanished from everyday communication, it remains embedded in local place names, family names, and cultural memory.



In the 1920s, Jenner and the other Revivalists gathered other symbols of nationhood; the flag of St Piran, the white cross on a black background was established as a national flag.

Jenner and Morton Nance formed the first Old Cornwall Society in St Ives in 1920. Its motto was "Gather ye the fragments that are left that nothing be lost." Soon, there were sufficient Old Cornwall Societies to form a Federation and the Old Cornwall magazine is being celebrated this year on its 100th anniversary of its publication. In 1928 the Revivalists established Cornwall's own Gorsedh with its first ceremony held at Boscawen-un.



However, the Revival remained a largely middle-class endeavour, disconnected from the Methodist and industrial heritage that shaped much of modern Cornish life. Luckily, this is all behind us as the Revival gained pace in later decades and took in a far wider demographic. It gradually incorporated Cornwall's industrial heritage alongside the mystic medievalism; the Gorsedh grew up to become a greatly respected cultural institution; and the revived Cornish flag was everywhere.

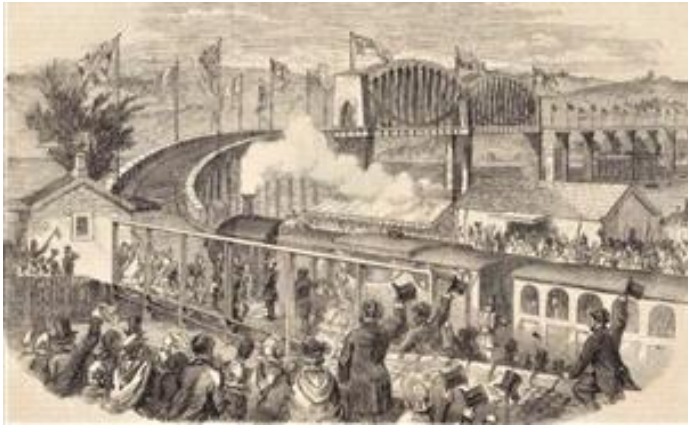
The THIRD Topic: HOW OTHERS TOLD OUR STORY

I'm pointing the finger at 1) the tourist industry, 2) the authors and 3) the artists.

1) The Tourist Industry

It's hard to say when exactly tourism in Cornwall began. Celia Fiennes was certainly a tourist in 1698, seeing the sights and journeying for her own amusement. She used the Cremyll Crossing to cross the Tamar from Plymouth Devon to Cremyll, Edgumbe, Cornwall.





But, the tourist industry really began in 1859, when the **Royal Albert Bridge** opened, spanning the Tamar from Plymouth to Saltash and connecting Cornwall's internal railway network to the national mainline.

The early tourist industry quickly developed its own literature, which included the classic components of druidic relics, smugglers, wreckers, a beautiful landscape with its gothic weirdness, and a general eighteenth-century ambience.

The Great Western Railway was the great master of tourism promotion, and they did much to embed the popular conception of Cornwall as a tourist destination. The peak of their marketing was a poster that first appeared around 1907.

Presented in landscape format, the tagline was '**See Your Own**



Country First', and below it a statement: 'There is a great similarity between Cornwall and Italy both in shape, climate & natural beauties'.

And in this second poster, we have the introduction of another brand name for Cornwall -

'The Cornish Riviera'.

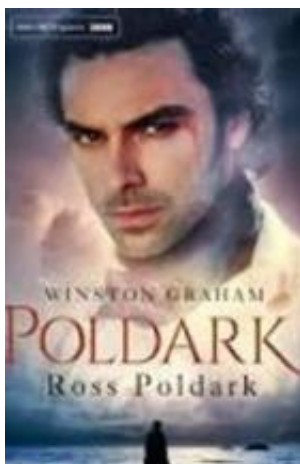


2) The Authors

These storytellers have a lot to answer for in their depiction of Cornwall during the modern age.

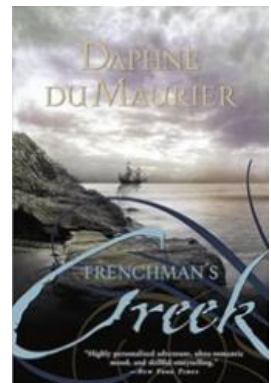
Daphne du Maurier created the Cornish Gothic style of writing and continued the image of the Cornish as "barbarians". We can also thank her for the images of Cornish smuggling and wrecking.

We have probably all seen **Winston Graham**'s hero, Ross Poldark



galloping along the clifftop at Gwennap Head, but it's just another example of the 'historical fiction' of the time, and basically a Victorian literary fantasy.

And finally, **Robert Hunt and William Bottrell** captured the stories of the old Cornish drolls. These were the storytellers who had told us of the giants of the cairns and castles, the knackers from the depths of the mine and the piskies and all tribes of small people from ferny dell and croft.



3) The Artists

In their own way, the paintings from the Newlyn School were just as much a narrative as the



words from the travel writers and the authors. The paintings weren't just images; they were a story line that we can easily read today.

But the artists followed the same sleight of hand. What the Newlyn School artists and their audience wanted was not modern fashions. They wanted a romantic vision of the Cornish fishing communities as a simple counterpoint to the industrial reality of mainstream British society.

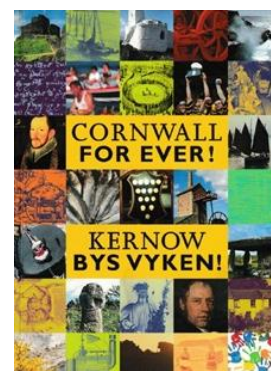
To find employment as artists' models, the women of Newlyn had to remember to dress like their grandmothers. The men of working age, meanwhile, were generally away at sea, too busy, or too sceptical to strike poses for the artists. This is why the paintings were overwhelmingly peopled by women, children and old folk.

To wrap up, I have to conclude that the events during the Modern Age have had the biggest influence of how we see Cornwall today. **Cornish identity is unique**, it is hybrid shaped by multiple historical layers and its association with royalty. 'Cornishness' is certainly not a static concept and encompasses Celtic Cornish notions alongside industrial and idealised elements of a Cornwall in the twentieth century.

And speaking of royalty, here are some serious **words from the Duke of Cornwall** in 2000:

.... we cannot take Cornwall's future for granted.

You will all come to carry an important responsibility for preserving the Cornish way of looking at life, the Cornish language and dialect, the Cornish culture and identity, and the very appearance of Cornwall.



This brings me to the end, and I wish to thank the many sources for my story, including:

- Bernard Deacon, and his Cornish Studies Resources website
- Terry Harry of St Day, and his Cornwall Yesteryear website
- Tim Hannigan, and his book, The Granite Kingdom
- and the books of the John Tyacke library

John Webb, TCA 2025