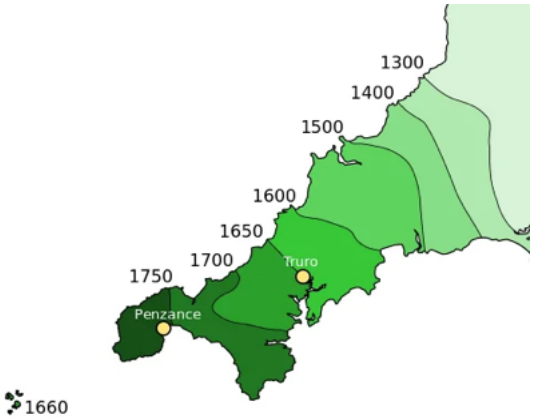
How prevalent is Kernowek in modern-day Cornwall and the wider world?

(For Henry Morris Memorial Trust)

The Cornish language is a beautiful relic from the Celtic age, an artefact that takes speakers through the culture of ancient Dumnonia (also known as West Wales, although the area is generally around Cornwall and Devon!) over a thousand years ago! I first discovered the language through a Wikipedia article on Celtic languages - in fact the Cornish language is quite similar to Welsh and Breton through Celtic roots!



The Cornish language was widely spoken in the kingdom of Dumnonia in Southwest England, where Cornwall and Devon are now. However, over time, people began speaking more English and less Cornish, so the area where Cornish was spoken retreated westwards and westwards until the language officially went “extinct” by the late 18th century (Although when speaking to Cornish linguists and enthusiasts during my trip, I realised that Cornish did not really go “extinct”!).

Luckily, in the 20th century, the government began efforts to revive the Cornish language. Using old Cornish written records and local slang, Cornish was reconstructed and revived! Cornish began appearing in media, such as news broadcasts on BBC Radio Cornwall, as well as a passed motion in the Cornwall Council to promote Cornish in council writings and signs. Therefore, by 2009, UNESCO reclassified Cornish from “extinct” to “critically endangered”, a huge step in the recovery of the language! By 2026, the BBC

reports that up to 5000 people have at least a basic understanding of Cornish, stunningly showcasing the increase in the number of Cornish speakers!

This extraordinary recovery of the language motivated me to embark on this enticing journey to Cornwall to investigate how prevalent it is in Cornwall as of now! My fascination with the art of linguistics and literature reflects those of Henry Morris, who had a similar interest in the arts of life and the learning of cultural identities. Therefore, I will take this project through the lens of Henry Morris' interests and explore the question 'How prevalent is Cornish in modern-day Cornwall and the wider world?'!

My initial predictions of Cornish were that it was quite a common sight in public and in media; however, it would not hold too much cultural significance, as it has very few speakers. To support my study on how prevalent Cornish is in Cornwall, I used some methods during my time in Cornwall to test my theories and see whether my thoughts about Cornish were true.

Firstly, my first theory was that Cornish was more prevalent in West Cornwall than East Cornwall, as Cornish speakers were reduced to just western Cornwall by the 1600s, so the west would naturally be more closely tied to the local language. So, to prove this theory, I looked at the percentage of shops that had Cornish signs on the main streets of Penzance (in the west) and Truro (in Central/West Cornwall). In Penzance, 8% of shops had Cornish signs, whilst only 3% did in Truro. Interestingly, most shops that made up the 8% in Penzance had a sign which spelt "Ygerys" - meaning "open" in Cornish! Therefore, this survey suggests that Cornish could potentially be more prevalent in the West than the East.



Another assumption I had was that Cornish signage was everywhere, as common as Welsh is in Wales. Upon arriving at Penzance railway station, I noticed a great

number of bilingual signs across the station, which extended to bins and tourist centre signs! However, other than bins, I did not see much Cornish on public signs and road signs, unlike Wales. When I interviewed locals later on, most people agreed that they see a few signs, and that the number of signs is gradually increasing, but as of now, there are not many. Therefore, my assumption that Cornish signage is everywhere is not entirely true - I see signs in some shops and public spaces; however, they are not prevalent everywhere, making Cornish only somewhat 'prevalent' from my observations so far.



Finally, I also assumed that Cornish appeared in lots of media across Cornwall; however, the locals have said that they rarely see Cornish online in their many years living in Cornwall. As I searched across television channels and newspaper stands, I did not manage to see any Cornish language at all! Therefore, from my findings so far, would that mean that Cornish is not prevalent in modern-day Cornwall, and nothing more than a greeting sign in shops and stations?



Helen, who is a bookseller in Penzance, Cornwall, whom I had the privilege of interviewing, however, argues that Cornish holds great significance to Cornwall culturally and economically. In Redruth, Cornwall, she states, the local community comes together through the Cornish language to bond locally and support one



another's local businesses, leading to financial resurgence in the town. Additionally, the unique celebration of the Cornish language and culture also attracts tourists to visit Redruth and learn about Cornish, increasing both income to the local area and general knowledge of Cornwall's unique language and traditions. Helen strongly believes that although Cornish may not be as prevalent in Cornwall as it should be currently, it is the key to inspire a better future for Cornwall and its people.



I was also privileged to speak to Ms Lisa Bettens, the Cornish Lead at Penpol School, who has spent most of her life living in Cornwall. She has taught primary school students to practice using greetings and formalities in Cornish, as well as teaching Cornish within lessons, even in subjects such as Science. Cornish, she argues, is absolutely necessary to be taught in schools for the local children to know about their heritage. The children love learning Cornish, and the presence of Cornish is increasing massively in Cornwall, showing the positive effects of Cornish being taught in schools.



However, there have also been opposing voices towards the discussed budget for the Cornish Learning Strategy for the next ten years. Reform UK Councillor Sean Smith, a member of the Cornwall Council, questioned whether the budget of £170k per year for the next ten years from the Cornish Learning Strategy for 2026-2036 reflected the priorities of Cornwall, especially considering the "pressure on public services across health, education, housing and social care". I had contacted Mr Smith via email and was able to ask a few follow-up questions regarding the reasoning behind his argument.

With the Cornwall Council having a total debt of £1.5 billion and having to cut £59 million in spending, Mr Smith states that “we should be able to celebrate our regional identities and traditions without shielding every related spending decision from proper parliamentary oversight”, and that “enthusiasm from a relatively small group of dedicated advocates does not justify expenditure without proper examination of its cost, reach and outcomes”.

Councillor Sean Smith <Cllr.Sean.Smith@cornwall.gov.uk>
to me

Sun 14 Jun, 22:39

Information Classification: PUBLIC

Good evening, Amos,

Thank you for your contact, I asked our press department for advice but if you want to send some questions in writing I can look at but below is the two statements I have promoted in relation to comments.

“It is, of course, entirely right and proper for elected representatives to question how public money is being spent. That is quite literally their job: to scrutinise expenditure, to challenge priorities, and to ensure that taxpayers’ funds are being used effectively and responsibly.
In raising the question of whether the current level of spending on Cornish language teaching represents good value for money, I was simply doing what any conscientious public servant should do. Cornish is a fascinating part of our cultural heritage, and no one disputes the passion of those who wish to see it preserved and promoted. However, enthusiasm from a relatively small group of dedicated advocates does not justify expenditure without proper examination of its cost, reach, and outcomes. With pressure on public services across health, education, housing, and social care, it is perfectly reasonable to ask whether this particular spending delivers sufficient benefit to the wider community relative to its cost.
The strong reaction from some quarters is understandable, but it is worth noting that much of the criticism appears to come either from those with a direct interest in Cornish language programmes or from others who instinctively oppose anything associated with Reform UK, regardless of the merits of the question. Legitimate scrutiny should not be dismissed simply because it challenges a favoured project. Protecting the public purse is not an attack on culture; it is a basic duty of good governance. We should be able to celebrate our regional identities and traditions without shielding every related spending decision from proper parliamentary or council oversight.
Taxpayers, whether in Cornwall or elsewhere in the country, deserve to know that every pound is being spent wisely. Asking tough questions about value for money is responsible stewardship.”
(this is used to post on social media and public area)

Statement 2 “As A proud Cornishman who deeply values our Cornish heritage and identity, I fully support the preservation of our culture,

However, as a responsible public servant, I also have a duty to scrutinise all council expenditure, especially at a time when Cornwall Council faces £2 billion in debit and £59 million in cuts this year, with public services under immense pressure.

My question was simply whether this spending represents good value for taxpayers’ money, it is fair and reasonable to ask difficult questions, even a emotive subject, Cornish pride should never exempt public spending from proper scrutiny.”

Whilst Mr Smith seems to be reasonably cautious of spending considering the debt circumstances of the Cornwall Council, is the prevalence of Cornish in modern-day Cornwall really limited to “a relatively small group of dedicated advocates”?

Following this, I was privileged to meet a group of dedicated Cornish learners who meet weekly at Penzance to practice speaking Cornish, led by Mebyon Kernow Councillor Loveday Jenkins, whose parents Richard and Ann had a key role in revitalising the Cornish language for children through being part of the Cornish Language Board to oversee the teaching and preservation strategies for the language



and their efforts in Cornish politics towards reviving the Cornish language. During our conversations, Loveday explains that the budget towards the Cornish Learning Strategy was part of the UK government's funding for maintaining regional identities, and therefore this could not be spent elsewhere for i.e. healthcare or maintenance. Furthermore, the funding of £170k is only worth as much as one and a half annual salaries, so most of the work is done by volunteers, such as Ms Bettins who took on Cornish Lead at the Penpol School, whilst most of the funding goes to the promotion of Cornish in schools in order to make Cornish more prevalent. Loveday therefore argues that the budget is only a small portion of money that does not even go to the pockets of contributors, and this amount is insignificant compared to the expenses of other priorities in healthcare, education and social services.

Whilst talking to these Cornish speakers (with my very limited Cornish vocabulary!), they explained that although Cornish was officially classified as "extinct" in the 18th century, Cornish still existed in various aspects of life in Cornwall, as well as other parts of the world! For example, fishermen in Cornwall used phrases that came from Cornish – they even counted fish using numbers in Cornish! Many Cornish idioms and histories also survived into dialects, such as the famous Hevva cake! The Hevva cake was baked by wives of fishermen when they returned from fishing, named after the phrase 'hevva!' which meant "Here they are!" in Cornish, yelled by Cornish huer lookouts to fishermen to set sail when they spotted large schools of pilchard sardines. This phrase likely fed many generations of Cornish people, even as most of them do not know the Cornish language history behind this phrase! As one of the learners I met said, "it's not just simple language, but the stories it keeps!". Therefore, although Cornish is no longer spoken by most people, many phrases and items of Cornwall do take their roots from the Cornish language!



Another fascinating fact I had found out about was that the term ‘penguin’ likely took root in either Welsh, Cornish or Breton (Cornish’s sister language), coming from ‘pen gwyn’, meaning white-head, applying to the now-extinct Greak Auk penguins of the North Atlantic. Also, the town where I stayed in, Hayle (Heyl), meant ‘Estuary’ in Cornish, reflecting its geographical location at the mouth of the local river. This supports the idea that although Cornish seems to disappear from prominence, it still leaves behind traces of itself within Cornwall and beyond! Additionally, although accurate estimates cannot be made, many Cornish texts and plays are probably still hidden in libraries, mistakenly miscategorised as Welsh or Breton, meaning there could be a plethora of Cornish literature yet to be rediscovered!

Cornish also lies within other aspects of Cornish culture and everyday life, such as religion and music. To this day, Truro Cathedral delivers a variety of services in Cornish, including praying the Lord’s Prayer in Cornish. Furthermore, young musicians in Cornwall are learning Cornish and writing songs in Cornish, such as Gwenno, who wrote ‘Tir Ha Mor’, amassing over 2.7 million streams on Spotify at the time of writing! In Lorient, Brittany (Where the native Breton language is the closest to Cornish in terms of language similarities), there is an annual Pan-Celtic festival where seven Celtic languages, including Cornish, are celebrated with a music festival covering all those languages. This year (2026), it was hosted in Ireland, with the focus language being Cornish, where over 200 singers gathered to perform songs in Cornish!



Finally, I had initially thought that Cornish only had prominence in Cornwall, perhaps in Wales and Brittany at best through trading. However, Councillor Loveday Jenkins shared that Cornish actually spread to the wider world through migration, as well as Mediterranean trade! Tint copper found in Cornwall formed bronze a millennia ago, which means that Cornwall could’ve

started the Bronze Age – who's to say that Cornish didn't spread alongside its bronze trade! Cornish traders would've frequently traded bronze with Ireland, Brittany and the Mediterranean states, which could've promoted some Cornish speaking across these places! Centuries later, many Cornish miners would move to the US, Mexico and Australia as the mining industry declined in Cornwall, bringing their Cornish roots with them. Most prominently, Cornish miners in Real del Monte, Hidalgo, Mexico formed their own Cornish-speaking community, sharing their pasty recipes to introduce a Mexican 'paste' as a fusion dish. Therefore, even as Cornish was barely spoken in Cornwall by the 19th Century, the Cornish language was proudly celebrated over 5000 miles away from its homeland!



In summary, despite Cornish being seemingly "extinct" for the greater part of 300 years, its influences still remain across the world, from hidden Cornish texts in libraries, local Cornish slang and phrases to migrant communities in Mexico. Even as many people do not speak the language anymore in Cornwall, the language consistently holds great symbolic importance for the pride of Cornwall and its people, with almost every person I interviewed across Cornwall identifying Cornish as a primary source for their regional pride and heritage. From my experiences, it is incredibly clear just how much Cornish means to Cornwall and communities beyond, how deeply connected it is to the everyday dialect of Cornwall, and how much potential it has for the future of Cornwall and beyond! Therefore, I think that it is unequivocally clear that Kernowek is prevalent in Cornwall to a very strong extent, from individual pride and heritage to the stories and phrases that raised many generations in Cornwall and everywhere else where Cornish reaches!





Overall, I have been completely humbled and awed by the significance of Cornish in Cornwall and Cornwall's worldwide links. It was a privilege to have embarked on this enriching learning experience and find out that Cornish is significantly more than a lexis, but a plethora of culture, history, identity and a sense of pride and home for many people - this is the art of the Cornish language; what Henry Morris enjoyed about the arts of living: the stories that weave into Cornish and the regional dialect and the most vulnerable side of human nature in the idea that Cornish, for many people, brings the idea of home and love!







A final thank you to everyone who I have had the pleasure of interviewing throughout the course of this inquiry in Cornwall, and a huge thank you for Henry Morris Memorial Trust for making this life-changing, awe-inspiring hands-on study of Cornish come true for me!

