

The Work of Old Cornwall Societies

The Federation has a number of Recorders whose job it is to work in conjunction with the Recorders from each local Society to gather up and record any stray scraps of Cornish dialect, language, local traditions, folklore, and antiquities in their area; to take newspaper cuttings, to note changes in shop functions, and to photograph physical changes in the environment, etc. Societies can also become depositories for artefacts, books and memorabilia. Some societies even open their own museums or work in conjunction with others in operating them.

So, to expand on this, the work of Old Cornwall Societies includes:

The collecting, recording and using of place-names, especially those of fields, lanes, earthworks, streams, pools, cliffs, rocks, fishing grounds, etc., with the old pronunciations. Such names are often absent from Ordnance Survey maps. The contents of Tithe Apportionment lists and maps, valuable as they are, need to be corroborated, resurrected if necessary, and perpetuated by usage.

The recording, collecting and handing on of folklore, folk-songs, local names of herbs and flowers, customs connected with healing, the old beliefs of miners, fishermen, smugglers, farmers and other occupational traditions.

The collecting, recording and the use of Cornish dialect words and expressions, including those peculiar to each area in Cornwall.

The collecting of detail concerning museum material, illustrating old Cornish industries, methods of working, tools, vehicles, farming implements, boats, buildings, house-keeping, dress, etc. and the making of photographic or other pictures of these. The advent of the computer opens up a new dimension to recording.

The collection of biographical detail concerning local worthies, odd characters and other such characteristic people of note.

The giving of watchful care to the antiquities, ancient stone monuments, crosses, bridges, cottage architecture, etc. of the neighbourhood and the spreading of a knowledge of the great value of such things. Any threatened danger to an antiquity should be made known to the necessary authorities.

The fostering in every way possible of the old customs of Cornwall, including Parish Feast, seasonal sports and amusements, wrestling, hurling, guise dancing, May and Midsummer observances, and also "Crying the Neck" ceremonies.

The encouragement of a wider and more practical interest in the Cornish dialect by studying, using, writing, tape-recording, and preserving printed matter.

The encouragement of and interest in the Cornish language and a lively sense of kinship with other Celts – the Welsh and Bretons, who so greatly helped us in restoring the traditions of the Gorsedd; also an interchange of activities with the Irish.

The use, whether seemingly old-fashioned or not, of the known correct Cornish pronunciation of our personal and place-names, of which spelling is often a false guide, but where the "old folk's" ruling is a safe one.

The regular use of footpaths over which a legal right of way exists, thus assisting to keep them open, and the safeguarding in every possible way of the natural beauties of Cornwall.

The handing on to Cornish children of an adequate part of their heritage, that their self-respect may be assisted by pride in all things Cornish.

The Societies

Kernow Goth or Old Cornwall is a movement with a mission. Its members have the broad and inclusive aims of preserving and recording Cornwall's threatened traditions, its unique culture, its language and dialect, and of caring for its environment, and promoting public awareness of these concerns.

In existence for over 90 years, it has spread across the length and breadth of Cornwall, with new Societies still being created from time to time.

A great number of other organizations, some amateur, some professional, have taken up Old Cornwall's early lead. They aim to look after particular aspects of Cornwall's culture, for instance, the Cornish language, the music, or the archaeology. Looking to the future, there are encouraging signs of mutually shared ambitions to foster improved cooperation.

Some Old Cornwall Societies are quite small, whilst a number have well over 100 members. Each one is run independently with its own officers and committee. Membership is certainly not confined to those with long Cornish ancestries, but Old Cornwall welcomes all those who truly care for Cornwall's distinctiveness.

Each Old Cornwall Society normally elects a Recorder, whose duty it is to collect and record the data gathered by its members about aspects of their community which might disappear, perhaps buildings, place-names, dialect words and phrases, archaeological artefacts, recollected history, and so forth. This is a very important role, and some Societies might choose to supplement the general Recorder's post with another of, say, Dialect Recorder, or Photographic Recorder, or Archaeological Recorder.

Publishing Old Cornwall members' research has been a long-standing activity (see overleaf). Walks and talks for community bodies and schools have long been a feature of Society activities, and many Old Cornwall local historians give freely of their time and expertise to inform and educate others.

Members of all Societies join together at Summer and Winter Festivals, Spring and Autumn meetings, and traditional events such as Midsummer Bonfires, Crying the Neck ceremonies, and the Cornish Gorsedd, when their colourful banners are paraded.

For over 90 years our Societies have kept a watchful eye on Cornwall's ancient monuments. Their care and restoration has often been at their instigation. Sometimes this is in co-operation with other societies, sometimes the local authorities, for whom the local awareness provided by Old Cornwall can be vital.

Some Societies have established museums, e.g. St Ives and Redruth. In other communities members are involved with volunteer-managed museums, e.g. Liskeard, Helston, St Agnes and Perranporth.

A twice-yearly journal, Old Cornwall, is published by the Federation, and contains very varied articles, many contributed by members. This is available to members at a preferential rate, but subscriptions by non-members are also accepted.

Contact the Publications Officer.

Over the years the Federation has published a considerable number of books usually by members, and pamphlets about particular customs.

Old Cornwall Societies

Motto

"Kyntelleugh an brewyon es gesys, na vo kellys travyth."

"Gather ye the fragments that are left, that nothing be lost."

There are over 40 Societies spread throughout Cornwall, each one affiliated to the Federation of Old Cornwall Societies. The Federation is run by an elected Executive Committee with a President who normally serves for 3 years.

Why not join us?

What We Stand For

Robert Morton Nance

When a name was wanted for the first of our Old Cornwall Societies, founded in 1920 at St. Ives, the two suggestions "Cornish Society" and "Old Cornish Society" were made and rejected; the first because it was too vague, and hardly distinguished our aims from those of Cornish Associations outside Cornwall, the second because it might be supposed that our one interest was the long-lost Celtic language popularly known as "Old Cornish." "Old Cornwall Society," however, was thought exactly to meet the case, for we had come together to strengthen one another in our devotion to all those ancient things that make the spirit of Cornwall—its traditions, its old words and ways, and what remains to it of its Celtic language and nationality. The motto that we adopted was a Cornish rendering of the words, "Gather ye the fragments that are left, that nothing be lost," and these fragments we set ourselves to gather, not in the spirit of collectors of quaint and useless curios, but as gleaners of the folk-culture of Cornwall, upon which all really Cornish art and literature of the future must be based, and hoping that future generations will arise, Cornish still, to make good use of them. It is for such a "New Cornwall" that we work, but it is "Old Cornwall" that provides us with all this essence of Cornishness that we mean to hand on to it, so "Old Cornwall Societies" we have been ever since, and OLD CORNWALL is the obvious name for our journal.

For over a century we have had learned societies that deal with Cornish Antiquities, and these have done much to uphold the honour of Cornwall. To them, however, Cornwall's past is a subject for antiquarian discussions; to us it holds a living spirit, and in our unlearned way we aim at spreading a knowledge of this past amongst Cornish people of every sort as a thing that is necessary to them if they would remain Cornish. From these learned societies, to which we may serve as recruiting bodies perhaps, but which we do not rival, we differ also in that we are as much interested in the holiday, workaday, and home life of older generations—the festivals, the hearthside tales, the printed dialect literature, and the old songs and words—as in any other side of the past of Cornwall, and are as ready to honour the teller of a good Cornish story in the good old way, as we are to recognise the value of more difficult but less love-inspired research on Cornish Antiquities.

To talk with those who remember Cornwall sixty or seventy years ago brings home to us how rapidly things change even in a comparatively unchanging country like ours, and makes us realise how much closer in many ways the Cornishman of that time was to those of centuries before than to any of his descendants to-day. He had almost forgotten, perhaps, that there had ever been a separate Cornish language, but he daily used many words of it in his own re-made Cornish-English speech, and thought in Celtic fashion by arranging his sentences according to its rules. He had but the vaguest notion that Cornwall had ever been a separate Celtic nation, but he kept much of the Ancient British spirit of independence, and scorned to imitate the ways and speech of the up-country "foreigner"; which meant that the "foreigner," if he stayed long enough in Cornwall became as Cornish as the best by imitating his ways instead. He had no particular intention in treasuring up all sorts of traditional knowledge inherited from the Cornish store of ages ago, but he did instinctively treasure it, and thus kept in close touch with

"Old Cornwall." His life compared with ours was usually harder, his opportunities fewer, but he had something of such value to Cornwall that no amount of added book-learning or material prosperity could ever make up for its loss, for all this traditional knowledge is the very savour and Cornishness of Cornwall, without which the name is but an empty one; and it is this that we seek to gather up, bit by bit, and to hand on again to those of Cornish origin who are in danger of growing up without any of it. Those who have families of Cornish stock that are developing out of touch with Cornwall—divided by oceans perhaps from the old country, or by barriers stronger than those of mere distance can realise what a loss of its most energetic minds this must mean to a little country that can afford to spare none of them; but in Cornwall itself the loss of the more educated young people is almost as great, for all this traditional Cornishness is apt to be cast away in ignorance, that self-blinding ignorance that despises all knowledge lying near at hand for the sake of standardized book-learning from a distance. The latter has its practical uses in the material life; but in the spiritual and intellectual life that means character and personality, far more depends on that sense of race and locality which has always distinguished Cornish people in the past, and comes of just such local knowledge.

An important part of this local knowledge we hold to be the local speech, which should certainly be kept as a second language. It was no doubt with some idea of "betterment" by learning English that our ancestors gave up their beautiful old Celtic speech, but had they kept it as a second string to their bow they would certainly have done a wiser thing. Besides the help that it would have given them in learning other languages (for anyone who knows two learns another, even though quite a different one, more easily) it would have been a help to thought, giving, as it were two sides to the brain, and most important of all, we should have kept a full sense of our Celtic nationality that would have been the binding material that we need as a race, and would have made it easier for us to do many things that as a mere "County of England," divided into all sorts of parties of English invention, we have never yet thought worth the attempt. To a limited extent this can be more fully repaired for a very few Cornish people who have sufficient time and determination to set themselves to the work of learning Cornish, but on a wider scale, to include everybody, it must be done as far as possible by means of Cornish dialect speech which happily is still far from being a dead language.

Equally important in other ways are the old customs—Hurling, Christmas Plays, May Games, Carol Singing, etc.—a memory at least of which can be revived, and often, if not too long gone the custom itself. Old industries and methods of work on farm, fishing-boat, mine, or at home, though they cannot be revived, are full of interest, too, and need recording, and here is work that awaits Old Cornwall workers in every parish, who will look up the details of such things as ploughing with oxen, the seine-fishery, local mining and tin dressing, weaving, old-time cookery, etc. The old ways of pronouncing place-names—often the very names themselves—are going fast, too, for want of some opinion that would prevent their being destroyed by the imitating of the new-come English sounds in place of the ancient Cornish ones—"Lan-yonn" Quoit, the "Low-gan" Rock, "Kem-bawne," "Pen-zarnce" are familiar examples of this. We often have an uncertain feeling as to whether it is not "common," or still worse, "affected," to be true and natural in speaking what is left of our own Ancient British language in such names, and we must encourage one another to be firmer, for by no means can we be anything better than ourselves in speaking traditional Cornish, whatever our English visitors or neighbours

may think of it. They themselves, in fact, usually have the sense to wish to be right, and only wait to be told one certain pronunciation that they may safely follow. There are, of course a hundred other sides to "Old Cornwall,"—if any desirable un-named one should occur to the reader's mind it will probably be safe for him to assume that if not already on our Society's programme it will be put there at the first suggestion; but a typical Old Cornwall member is a person who is first of all on the watch for anything that is not generally known of the words and ways of the Cornish people of old times, with perhaps a preference for those of times not too old; one who never misses a chance of talking over these old times with the right person; who is ready to help with anything that brings Cornish people together as such; is as ready to acknowledge his kinship with a Breton or a Welshman, and who, however able to give the current coin of English speech when it is wanted will be as ready with a good supply of Cornish fashioned small change for familiar use. Such "Old Cornwallites" are the salt of the movement, without which no merely antiquarian, linguistic, or historical members, however brilliant, could long keep it from perishing. Up to the present there has been no lack of them, one town after another finding in its midst people who had, without naming it been doing "Old Cornwall" work for years. These only needed to be brought into one room together to make at once a living society, and to find that there, instead of being regarded as people of "queer" tastes, they were at once recognised as leaders in a movement to keep the Cornishness of Cornwall. This movement has but one enemy—that ugly thing Snobbery. It concerns itself in no way with questions of religion and politics, and has no anti-foreign side to its pro-Cornish propaganda. It asks the comradeship and help of true lovers of Cornwall, "one and all" saying to them:

KYNTELLEUGH AN BREWYON ES GESYS, NA VO KELLYS TRAVYTH
Gather ye the fragments that are left, that nothing be lost

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