

**PATRONYMICA CORNU-  
BRITANNICA; OR,  
THE ETYMOLOGY OF  
CORNISH SURNAMES**

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**RICHARD STEPHEN CHARNOCK**

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PATRONYMICA  
CORNU-BRITANNICA;

OR, THE

*Etymology of Cornish Surnames.*

BY

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Rowas nebas, ha rowas da.

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## PREFACE.

THE commencement of the 18th century beheld the extinction, as a spoken language, of the Celtic dialect of Cornwall.\*

This dialect, which differs to a considerable extent from that of Wales,† and is most nearly allied to that of Bretagne, is now only to be found in a few manuscripts, the most remarkable of which are of the 15th century; in the names of Cornish localities; and in the surnames borne by many inhabitants of the county.‡ The latter are especially valuable, inasmuch as they throw light on the names of places

\* The introduction of the English Church Service paved the way for the gradual decline of the Celtic dialect of Cornwall. In 1602 it was going fast into disuse. In the early part of the last century the Cornish was still spoken by the fishermen and market women near the extreme South-Western point of the county. Cf. Carew and P. Cye. Pryce tells us, in the preface to his work (published 1790), that the Cornish was then spoken at the extremity of the county; and Polwhele (in 1808) adds, that he did not believe that there then existed two people who could converse for any continuance in the Cornish, whether ancient or modern.

† Observe that the Cornish *flogh* means a boy; *guilkin*, a frog; *golvan*, a sparrow; *guis*, a sow; *louuern*, a fox; *croinoe*, a lizard; *colh*, an old man; *conna*, the neck; *abrans*, the eyebrow; *ail*, an angel; *steren*, a star; while the Welsh equivalents are *bachgen*; *llyffant*, *adary to*; *hwch*; *cadnaw*, *llwynog*; *madgall*; *henafgnor*, *henwr*; *gwddf*; *ael*; *angel*, *cenad*; *seren*.

‡ Pryce gives the Lord's Prayer, Apostles' Creed, and Commandments in the ancient and modern Cornish; and some proverbs, mottoes, rhymes, songs, &c., in the modern vulgar Cornish.

with which most of them are connected. There is no book which treats fully and scientifically of Cornish Surnames. The works of Pryce and Polwhele, however, contain the etymology of many of them.\* This information I have of course made use of, and to considerable advantage. I have likewise consulted many other works, a list of which will be found at the end of this Preface. I have lately been informed that a work on Cornish Surnames is now coming out in parts. To that I have not been at all indebted; indeed, the present volume has been in hand several years, and was nearly ready for the press upwards of two years ago.

The basis of a work like the present is of course a good collection of names.† For one list I have to thank Miss Hext, sister of Mr. J. H. Hext, late of Gray's Inn. For another list I am indebted to Mr. J. C. Hotten, the publisher. I have, however, obtained the greatest part of the names from the Post-Office Directory for Cornwall and from the works of Pryce and Polwhele. The present volume contains from 1200 to 1400 surnames. Many of these, though they are often borne by distinct families, are merely different versions of the same name; while some of them are not now in use, at any rate in their present form. Why there should be so large a number of Cornish Surnames, and so small a number of Welsh Surnames, I am at a loss to comprehend. Another curious fact is that so few of the latter should be derived from geographical names.

In consequence of a resemblance between Cornish and

\* Pryce, *Archæol. Cornu-Britannica*; Polwhele, *History of Cornwall*.

† Non-Celtic names preponderate in Cornwall; perhaps in the proportion of 10 to 1.

Welsh names, it is not always possible to distinguish between them. Thus Trevor, Pennant, Peatrice, Trahern, Gwyn, Gwynn, Gwynne, Glynn, Winn, Morgan, are both Welsh and Cornish names. It is indeed often difficult to distinguish between Cornish, French, and Italian names: thus Goss, Gosse, and Laity are found both as Cornish and French names; and Tripcony is by some considered to be of Italian origin. Further, it by no means follows that, because a similar name occurs out of Cornwall, although fortified by a co-existing geographical name, it may not be also of Cornish origin when found in Cornwall: thus Landry is found both in Cornwall and France; but the French name is without doubt corrupted from the ancient Teutonic name Landericus. Lannion is the name of a place in France, Côtes-du-Nord; but the Cornubian surname Lanyon is doubtless from one of the places so named in the county. Fenton is the name of places in the counties of Lincoln, Stafford, and York; the surname found in Cornwall may mean a spring, fountain, well. The Cornish surname Anderton signifies the oak hill; but the Lancashire local name is of quite different origin. These remarks apply to other than geographical surnames: thus Derrick is without doubt generally corrupted from the Teutonic name Theodoric; but the Cornubian name may mean a grave-digger: while the Cornish Connor is etymologically different from the Irish name, which is nearly equivalent to Biddulph, Botolph, and the O. Norsk Böldulf.

In most cases, however, Cornish names are very easy of identification. Carew wrote:—

By Tre, Pol, and Pen,  
You shall know the Cornish men.



Camden's rhyme is more comprehensive :—

By Tre, Ros, Pol, Lan, Caer, and Pen,  
You may know most Cornish men.\*

The names compounded of *Tre*, *Pen*, *Pol*, *Bo*, *Ros*, *Car*, *Lan*, and *Nan* are without doubt the most numerous. Between 400 and 500 forms of surnames with the prefix *Tre* are given in the present volume ; about 106 names occur under *Pen*. None of the other prefixes will give 60 surnames. The least frequent is *Nan*, the names compounded with which are under 30.† As it is quite clear that neither of the above couplets of Carew and Camden is strictly accurate, a friend proposes to substitute—

Tre, Pen, Pol, Bo,  
Ros, Car, Lan, Nan,  
Will make you know  
The Cornish man.

I will also hazard the following :—

By Tre, Pol, and Pen,  
'Tis said you know the Cornish men ;  
Yet you may know a Cornish man  
Sometimes by Ros, Car, Bo, Lan, Nan.

It is not always possible to explain the Celtic Surnames of Cornwall by reference to the local dialect singly. Gilbert, indeed, speaks of the necessity of consulting the *kindred* British dialects for this purpose. Examples will be found in the following pages.

\* Remaines concerning Britaine, p. 114. Lond., 1614.

† The calculation as to names compounded of *Tre* does not include names compounded of *Re*, *Ken*, *Fre*, which are corrupted from *Tre*, *Tren*. The same remark is applicable to some names compounded of *Car*, *Pen*, *Pol*, *Lan*, *Nan*, *Ros*, &c.

A recognition of the principles according to which Cornish Surnames have been usually formed will, however, furnish a key to most of them. On this point something may be gathered from Polwhele,\* who, speaking of the tracts of land around the castles of the ancient captains and princes of Cornwall, says:—"These little territories, the demesne lands of their several lords, were not divided into regular farms till the Romans. But before the Romans they probably gave name to their possessors. And the first Cornish families, deducing their names from their places, seem to have been distinguished by the appellations *pen* and *tre*.† The *pens*, it is likely, were the more remarkable hill-pastures; the *tres*, the agricultural spots or places.‡ In process of time each lordship was separated into various farms, by strong and permanent enclosures; and the farms borrowed their respective names from their site on high or low ground—their relative situations—their vicinity to rivers and the sea—from the *forma loci* and its qualities—from woods, and particular trees and other vegetable productions—from their pasture and corn—from native animals—from tame or domestic animals, and from various circumstances which it would be tedious to enumerate. These names they imparted (like the origi-

\* Vol. i. b. i. ch. v. p. 166.

† "Camden says, '*tre*, *pol*, and *pen*;' but if *pol* mean a *pool*, it must be classed amongst names of places enclosed after the Roman arrival, and can only be referred to husbandry or otherwise, as the syllable or syllables in conjunction with it may direct." (*Polwhele*.)

‡ Richards (Welsh Dict.) says the *tres* in Cornwall were for the most part only single houses, and the word subjoined only the name of a Briton who was once the proprietor; thus Tref-Erbin, Tref-Annian, Tref-Gerens, Tre-Lownydd.

nal lordships and manors) to their different possessors or occupiers.”\*

In illustration of what is here said by Polwhele, I give the following :—Carminow, the little rock ; Carnsew, the black rock ; Killigarth, the high grove ; Linkinhorne, the iron church or enclosure ; Mulfra, the bare hill ; Nancarrow, the deer’s valley ; Pengelley, the head of the grove ; Penhale, the head of the moor ; Polglase, the green pool ; Trefry, the dwelling on a hill ; Tregonning, the dwelling on the downs ; Trewinnick, the dwelling on the marsh ; Trewoofe, the place frequented by blackbirds ; Tresize, the place for corn.

In another part of his work Polwhele † says the names of the most ancient families of Cornwall were taken from their seats, as the names of such places existed long before the appropriation of surnames. And in time the surname adopted from the place of residence became an appropriated name. Thus, the descendants of Drogo de Polwhele were afterwards called by the name of Polwhele.

Carew ‡ tells us that John, the son of Thomas, living at

\* The Post-Office Directory for Cornwall says, “The whole of East Cornwall is full of English names [local ?—R. S. C.], and nearly the whole of the people are English, though some of the places have the prefix *tre*. In West Cornwall the places have mostly Cornish names, and the people are chiefly of British origin, although much mixed with English. There are 800 varieties of local names with the prefix *tre*; but the whole number of places beginning with *tre* is much greater, for some of the names are used very frequently. *Pew* is given 150 times, and *Pol* about 70. In East Cornwall, *Tre*, *Pen*, and *Pol* are often applied with English and Norman names, and constitute the chief vestiges of Cornish connexion.”

† Vol. ii. p. 43, *note*.

‡ Survey of Cornwall, 1602, p. 55.