

ACCOMMODATING MIDDLE AND LATE BASES IN CORNISH ORTHOGRAPHY

Ken George

The first principle of SWF as set out by Bock and Bruch (2008) is that of **inclusivity**: “Users of all varieties of Revived Cornish should be able to write as they speak”. The two most contrasting varieties are those based on Middle Cornish and those based on Late Cornish. Originally, SWF was to be a *single* written form; all users of Revived Cornish would write the language the same way, even though they might use differing pronunciations. It is, however, impossible to have a single written form which encompasses Middle and Late, because of unpredictable forms in Late Cornish. For example, it is quite unreasonable to expect a Late Cornish speaker to read the word *epskop* and pronounce it as *espak*.

If one requires an inclusive orthography, Middle and Late variants are therefore inescapable.

There have been calls, during the review of SWF in 2013 and since, for the number of variants to be reduced. However, since having no variants in an inclusive orthography is not an option; the question is “how many variants should there be?”

The principal **predictable** phonetic changes in Cornish, 1400 to 1700, are shown in this table; the later spellings are shown in [blue](#).

	Date	Medieval spelling	KK	SWF Middle	Signpost spelling	Lhuyd	SWF Late	Ref.
[ɛ] > [a] in final open syllables	c. 1475	e > a	a	a	a	a	a	1
[ɛʊ] > [ɔʊ] in polysyllables	c. 1475	ew	ew	ew	ow	ou	ow	2
Stressed [-ɪʊ] > [-ɛʊ]	various	yw	yw	yw	ew	eu	ew	3
Unrounding of [œ:] > [ɛ:]	c. 1525	u, eu, ue	eu	eu	e, ea	ê	eu	
[ɛ] > [a] in final closed syllables	c. 1525	e > a	e	e	a	a	e	
[ɔ] > [a] in final syllables	c. 1525	o > a	o	o	a	a	o	
[o:] > [u:]	16 th cent.	o, oy, oe	oe	oo	oo	û	oo	4
Pre-occlusion [nn, mm] > [dn, bm]	c. 1575	nn, mm	nn, mm	nn, mm	dn, bm	dn, bm	dn, bm	
Unrounding of [y:] > [i:]	c. 1575	u	u	u	ee	î	u	
[rð] > [rr] medially and finally	c. 1600	rth	rdh	rdh	rr	rr	rdh	
Lowering of [i] to [ɛ]	c. 1600	y	y	y	e	e	e	

- 1 Unstressed [-ɛ] was common in the earlier Middle Cornish texts (PC, RD, OM, PA) in various groups of words: notably verbal nouns and 3rd plural endings. Following Unified Cornish, this form is not shown in KK nor in SWF; the later form <a> is used.
- 2 This may not be a real sound-change.
- 3 *byw* apparently changed to *bew* earlier than *yw* changed to *ew*.
- 4 Here a Late form <oo> is used even in SWF Middle, but it stands out like a sore thumb.

Many of the changes are evident in Middle and Late translations of the following sentence: *The bishop said: “The girls from Probus wish to take flowers from the garden”, but they replied: “We do not know if we have permission to cut the tops from them”.*

We now examine the spelling of those translations in detail, firstly the Middle Cornish forms. The version labelled “Medieval” uses wherever possible actually attested words, shown in *bold italics*; where a word is not attested, the expected form is shown in *non-bold italic* script.

English	The	bishop	said	“The	slim girls	from	Probus	wish			
Medieval	<i>An</i>	<i>epscop</i>	<i>a</i>	<i>leverys</i>	<i>an</i>	<i>mowysy</i>	<i>mon</i>	<i>a</i>	<i>Lamprobus</i>	<i>a</i>	<i>vynn</i>
KK	An	epskop	a	leveris	“An	mowysi	moen	a	Lannbroboes	a	vynn
SWF-M	An	epskop	a	leveris	“An	mowysi	moon	a	Lannbrobus	a	vynn
Notes A		A 1		A 2		A 2	A 3		A 4		
Notes B							B 1		B 2		

English	to take	flowers	from	the	garden”	but	they	replied	“We do not know		
Medieval	<i>kemeres</i>	<i>blegyow</i>	<i>dyworth</i>	<i>an</i>	<i>lowarth</i>	<i>mes</i>	<i>i</i>	<i>a</i>	<i>worthebys</i>	<i>ny</i>	<i>wothyn</i>
KK	kemmeres	bleujyow	diworth	an	lowarth”	mes	i	a	worthybis	“Ny	wodhon
SWF-M	kemeres	bleujyow	dhyworth	an	lowarth”	mes	i	a	worthybis	“Ny	wodhon
Notes A		A 5							A 2		A 6
Notes B	B 3			B 4							

English	if	we have permission	to cut	the	tops	from them”		
Medieval	<i>mar</i>	<i>sus</i>	<i>cummyas</i>	<i>thynny</i>	<i>treghy</i>	<i>an</i>	<i>pennow</i>	<i>a thyworta</i>
KK	mars	eus	kummyas	dhyn ni	treghi	an	pennow	a-dhiworta”
SWF-M	mars	eus	kummyas	dhyn ni	treghi	an	pennow	a-dhyworta”
Notes A	A 7		A 1	A 6	A 2			A 6
Notes B								B 4

Here the group of notes labelled A are concerned with the differences between the Medieval orthography which was used for Middle Cornish, and the two orthographies of Revived Cornish, Kernewek Kemmyn (KK) and the Middle version of SWF Main Form (SWF-M). They are:

Note	Medieval	KK and SWF-M
A1	Used <c> and <k> for [k]	Use only <k>
A2	Used <y> for /i/ and /i/	Use <i> for /i/ and <y> for /i/
A3	Used <o> for /o/ and /ɔ/	Distinguish /o/ and /ɔ/
A4	Shows internal sandhi	Do not show internal sandhi
A5	Reflected [ɛː] < [æː]	Reflect [æː]
A6	Used <th> for /θ/ and /ð/	Use <th> for /θ/ and <dh> for /ð/
A7	Different convention for division of words	

The group of notes labelled B are concerned with the differences between KK and SWF-M.

Note	KK	SWF-M	Remarks
B1	moen	moon	Here SWF-M uses a digraph from the Late Cornish “Signpost” orthography, which does not fit comfortably with the remainder of SWF-M spelling.
B2	Lannbroboes	Lannbrobus	The final unstressed syllable of this place-name arose from Old Cornish /oi/, as is shown by <i>Lanbrebois</i> 1086. This diphthong became /o/ in Middle Cornish, and is spelled <oe> in KK. In SWF it is spelled <o>, which is an error, because it makes short /o/ and /ɔ/ indistinguishable, whereas they were pronounced differently throughout the time of traditional Cornish. It would be much better to spell short /o/ as <u>, which is what has actually been done in the list of place-names produced by the Signage Panel.
B3	kemmeres	kemeres	Caused by the fact that KK is largely morpho-phonemic and SWF is largely phonetic.
B4	diworth	dhyworth	Breton <i>diouzh</i> and Welsh <i>oddi wrth</i> suggest that SWF <y> is an error.

Next we compare the Medieval spelling with Late Cornish forms. Most of the 17th century writers had no option but to spell Cornish using the conventions of contemporary English; this is “signpost spelling”. A few, notably John Keigwin, had access to some Middle Cornish texts, and were able to write Late Cornish using an updated form of the Medieval orthography. After Lhuyd produced his own spelling, the 18th century writers had a choice of orthography. In the table, both signpost and Lhuyd’s orthographies are given, using the same font as before. Where the Late forms differ from the Middle forms, they are coloured blue for predictable and purple for unpredictable.

English	The	bishop	said	“The	slim girls	from	Probus	wish			
Medieval	<i>An</i>	<i>epscop</i>	<i>a</i>	<i>leverys</i>	<i>an</i>	<i>mowysy</i>	<i>mon</i>	<i>a</i>	<i>Lamprobus</i>	<i>a</i>	<i>vyn</i>
Signpost	<i>An</i>	<i>ispak</i>	<i>a</i>	<i>lavaras</i>	<i>an</i>	<i>muzzi</i>	<i>moon</i>	<i>a</i>	<i>Lamprobus</i>	<i>a</i>	<i>vedn</i>
Lhuyd	<i>An</i>	<i>espak</i>	<i>a</i>	<i>laveraz</i>	<i>an</i>	<i>mūzi</i>	<i>mūn</i>	<i>a</i>	<i>Probus</i>	<i>a</i>	<i>vedn</i>
Notes		1	2	3, 4		5	6			2	7, 8
SWF-L	An	epskop	a	lavaras	“An	mosi	moon	a	Lannbrobus	a	vedn

English	to take	flowers	from	the	garden”	but	they	replied	“We do not know		
Medieval	<i>kemeres</i>	<i>blegyow</i>	<i>dyworth</i>	<i>an</i>	<i>lowarth</i>	<i>mes</i>	<i>i</i>	<i>a</i>	<i>worthebys</i>	<i>ny</i>	<i>wodhon</i>
Signpost	<i>komeraz</i>	<i>blegyow</i>	<i>durt</i>	<i>an</i>	<i>looar”</i>	<i>buz</i>	<i>an gye</i>	<i>a</i>	<i>worebaz</i>	<i>na</i>	<i>woryn</i>
Lhuyd	<i>kȳmeraz</i>	<i>bledzhyow</i>	<i>dhort</i>	<i>an</i>	<i>lūar</i>	<i>bez</i>	<i>an dzhyi</i>	<i>a</i>	<i>worrebas</i>	<i>na</i>	<i>woren</i>
Notes	9, 4		10		11, 12	13	14	2	15	16	17
SWF-L	kemeres	bleujyow	dort	an	lowar’	bes	anjei	a	worthybis	“Na	woryn

English	if	we have permission	to cut	the	tops	from them”		
Medieval	<i>mar</i>	<i>sus</i>	<i>cummyas</i>	<i>thynny</i>	<i>treghy</i>	<i>an</i>	<i>pennow</i>	<i>a thyworta</i>
Signpost	<i>mars</i>	<i>ez</i>	<i>kibmias</i>	<i>theny</i>	<i>trehe</i>	<i>an</i>	<i>pednaw</i>	<i>thortans</i>
Lhuyd	<i>mars</i>	<i>ez</i>	<i>kibmiaz</i>	<i>dho nei</i>	<i>terhi</i>	<i>an</i>	<i>pedno</i>	<i>dhortans</i>
Notes		18	19, 20	21, 22	23, 24		8, 25	26
SWF-L	mars	eus	kubmyas	dhe nei	treghi	an	pednow	dhortans”.

The following table gives details of the differences between Middle and Late forms, and indicates that about 16 of the 26 are written in SWF-L:

Note	Change from Middle to Late Cornish	SWF-L	Remarks
1	Metathesis	no	
2	The a particle was sometimes lost in Late Cornish	?	
3	Loss of vowel affection	yes ?	
4	[ɛ] > [a] in final closed syllables	yes ?	
5	Smoothing	yes	<z> would help here
6	[o:] > [u:]	yes	
7	Lowering of [i] to [ɛ]	yes	
8	Pre-occlusion [nn] > [dn]	yes	
9	Reduction of pre-tonic vowel to schwa	no	
10	Reformulation on 3 rd person	yes	
11	[ɔʊ] > [u:]	no	
12	Loss of [θ]	yes	
13	Permanent lenition	yes	
14	Reformulation on verbal ending	yes	
15	Medial [rθ] > [rr]	no	
16	Grammatical change	yes	
17	Reformulation on 3 rd person sing.	yes	
18	[œ] > [ɛ]	no	
19	Unrounding of [y] to [i]	no	
20	Pre-occlusion [mm] > [bm]	yes	
21	Reformulation of pronominal prepositions	yes	
22	Final [i:] > [ei]	yes	
23	Medial [x] > [f]	no	
24	Metathesis <i>tre</i> > <i>ter</i>	no	
25	Reduction of [-ɔʊ]	no	No need to show this
26	Reformulation on 3 rd person pl. verbal ending	yes	

SWF-L lies between the following two extremes:

- Minimum, a spelling having the minimum number of variants; i.e. one which uses Middle Cornish for all but the unpredictable forms (shown in purple).
- Maximum, a spelling having the maximum number of variants, i.e. one which uses Late Cornish forms (both predictable and unpredictable) wherever possible.

These three orthographies are compared in the following table:

English	The	bishop	said	“The	slim girls	from	Probus	wish	
Minimum	An	espak	a leveris	“An	mosi	moen	a	Lannbrobus	a vynn
SWF-L	An	epskop	a lavaras	“An	mosi	moon	a	Lannbrobus	a vedn
Maximum	An	espak	a lavaras	“An	mosi	moun	a	Lannbrobus	a vedn

English	to take	flowers	from	the	garden”	but	they	replied	“We do not know
Minimum	kemeres	bleujyow	dort	an	lowarth”	bes	anjey	a worthybis	“Na woryn
SWF-L	kemeres	bleujyow	dort	an	lowar’	bes	anjei	a worthybis	“Na woryn
Maximum	kameras	blejyow	dort	an	louar	bes	anjey	a worrebass	“Na woryn

English	if	we have permission	to cut	the	tops	from them”
Minimum	mars	eus kummyas	dhe-ni	tregghi	an	pennow a-dhiwortans
SWF-L	mars	eus kubmyas	dhe nei	tregghi	an	pednow dhortans”.
Maximum	mars	es kibmyas	dhe-nei	trehi	an	pednow dhortans”.

The number of variants recognized in each of these orthographies is as follows:

	Minimum	SWF-L	Maximum
No. of unpredictable variants recognized	9	8	9
No. of predictable variants recognized	0	9	18

SWF-L includes all unpredictable variants except for *espak*; as regards predictable variants it lies halfway between Minimum and Maximum.

It is understandable that, since the original idea was to have a *single* written form, some people wish to reduce or indeed minimize the number of variants; but the disadvantage of this is that Late Cornish speakers are obliged to memorize all the effects of the numerous sound-changes in order to pronounce a written text in a Late fashion. It would be better to maximize the number of variants; this would allow users of Revived Late Cornish truly to “be able to write as they speak”. At the same time, SWF-M could be purged of its Late intruder, <oo>, replacing it by <oe>. Of course, making both orthographies fit their respective pronunciations better would mean that there would overtly be two “standard” forms instead of one; but when one looks at the significant differences between SWF-M and SWF-L, it is clear that two “standard” forms already exist:

SWF-M	An	epskop	a leveris	“An	mowysi	moon	a	Lannbrobus	a vynn
SWF-L	An	epskop	a lavaras	“An	mosi	moon	a	Lannbrobus	a vedn

SWF-M	kemeres	bleujyow	dhyworth	an	lowarth”	mes	i	a	worthybis	“Ny wodhon
SWF-L	kemeres	bleujyow	dort	an	lowar’	bes	anjei	a	worthybis	“Na woryn

SWF-M	mars	eus	kummyas	dhyn ni	tregghi	an	pennow	a-dhyworta”
SWF-L	mars	eus	kubmyas	dhe nei	tregghi	an	pednow	dhortans”.

I do not think that this problem was properly thought through when SWF was introduced (probably because of the entrenched positions of some of the contributors). It now needs to be looked at properly. I believe that the solution is to make both Middle and Late orthographies as close as possible to the respective spoken forms, while using the same principle to spell both.