

HOW MANY PEOPLE SPOKE CORNISH TRADITIONALLY?

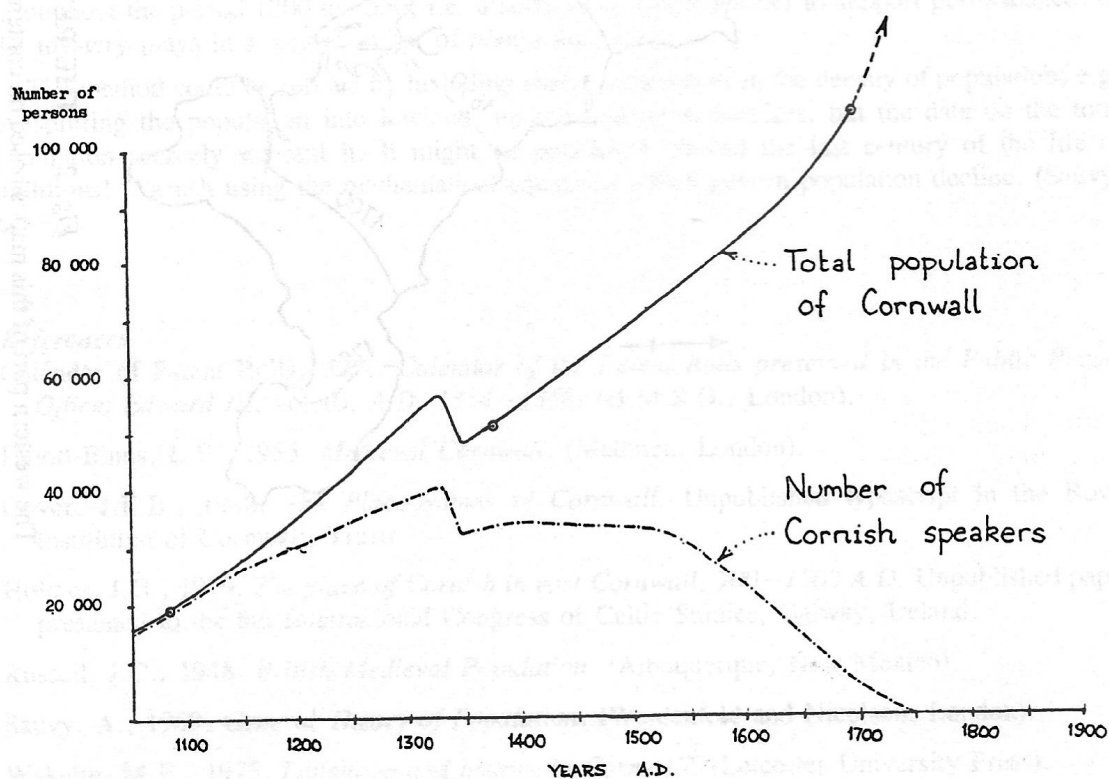
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An attempt is here made, apparently for the first time, to estimate the number of speakers of traditional Cornish. Estimates of the total population of Cornwall were collected by Wakelin (1975, p.40), as follows:

YEAR	POPULATION	SOURCE
1086	19 033	Russell (1948)
1377	51 411	Russell (1948)
1700	105 800	Elliott-Binns (1955)
1801	192 281	Elliott-Binns (1955)

Despite their accurate appearance, the first three of these figures must be regarded as guesses. In the absence of any other information, however, these very scanty data were used to construct the upper graph on Fig. 1, making some allowance for the Black Death in the 1340s. The assumption was made that, throughout the period plotted, the density of population was the same in all parts of Cornwall, and varied only with time.

Figure 1



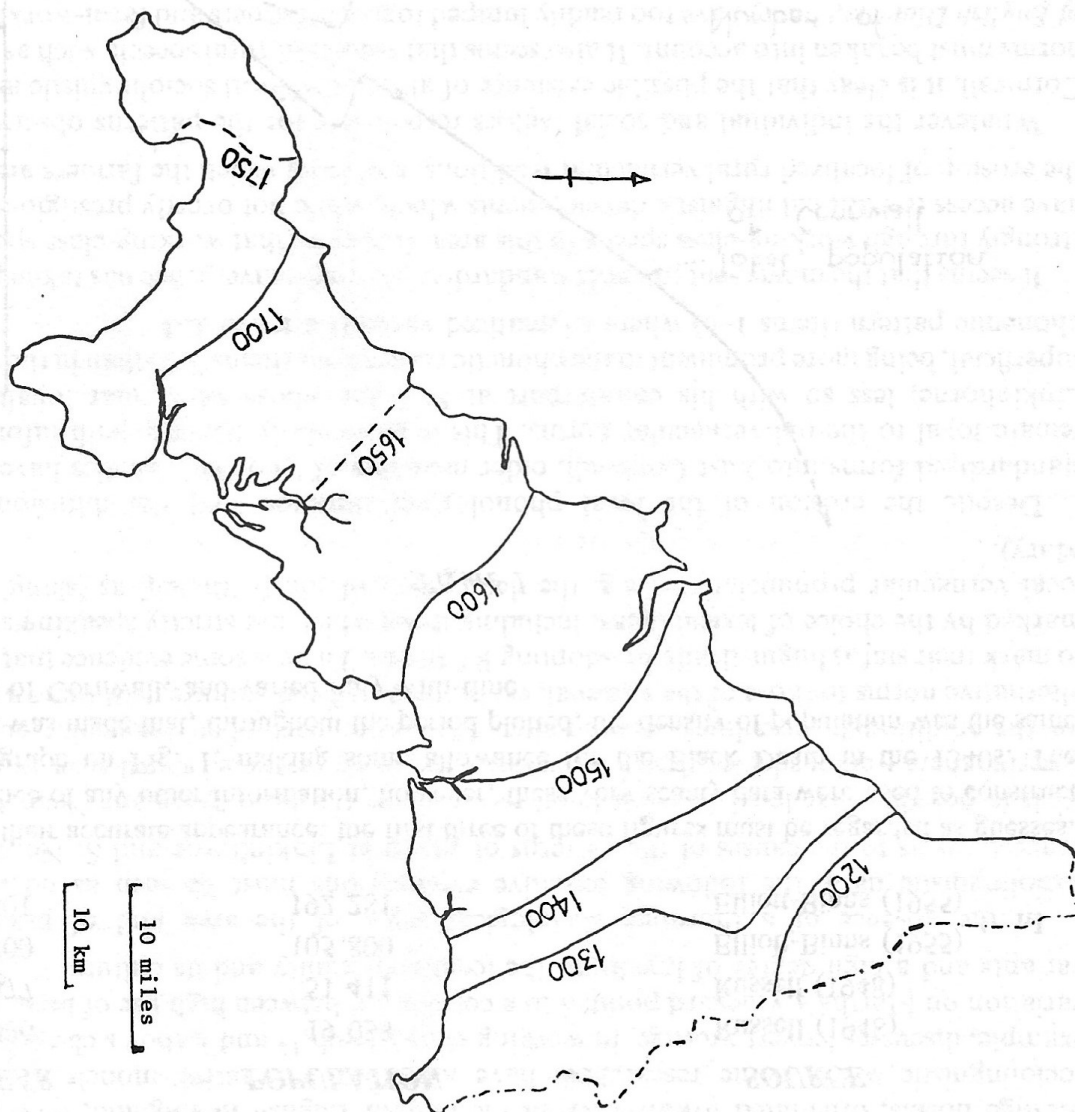


Fig. 2 THE RETREAT OF CORNISH

The western part of this map is based on contemporary statements; the eastern part on a conference paper by Holmes (1979).

The number of Cornish speakers was estimated by multiplying the total population (P) by the fraction of Cornwall (C) in which Cornish was spoken by (almost) everybody. This fraction was obtained from Fig. 2, a map which shows the westward retreat of the eastern boundary of the area where Cornish was spoken. The western part of the map is based on various contemporary statements. The eastern part is based on an examination by Holmes (1979) of the sound change in Cornish represented in writing by $t > s$. This change is difficult to date, but may have occurred c.1100. Places with names containing s rather than t may be supposed to have been Cornish-speaking at this date. Holmes has pointed out a number of places where t (or d) appears on the modern map, but which have forms in s for dates considerably later than 1100. For example, Cutparrett in Morval appeared as *Coyspernet* (n for u) in 1329 and *Gouspervet* in 1418 (Gover, 1948, p.282). Holmes argues that such forms indicate that Cornish was still being spoken at the place concerned at the time. When these places are plotted on a map, together with the dates of the later forms in s , a coherent picture emerges, which is the basis of the eastern part of Fig. 2. In north Cornwall, this map is in agreement with a recorded statement implying that Cornish was still spoken at Minster, near Tintagel, in 1355 (Calendar of Patent Rolls, 1909, p.247: cf. p.252).

It is only fair to point out that Holmes' argument has not received general acceptance; the later forms in s could theoretically represent a dialectal pronunciation in English, in which case the map would be too generous regarding the areas where Cornish was spoken. Although the author agrees with Holmes that Cornish was spoken in the places and at the dates indicated on the map, it does not follow that it was spoken by the whole of the population in those areas. To allow for this, and to go some way towards satisfying the critics of Holmes' theory, the dates have been shifted backwards in Fig. 3 by fifty years, to ensure that (almost) everybody in a given area spoke Cornish.

The results are presented in Fig. 3 and as the lower graph in Fig. 1. Although they are crude estimates, it does appear that there were between thirty and forty thousand Cornish speakers throughout the period 1200 to 1550, i.e. a sufficiently large number to support performances of the mystery plays in a large number of *plenys an gwary*.

The method could be refined by including spatial differences in the density of population; e.g. by splitting the population into lowland, upland and town dwellers, but the data on the total population scarcely warrant it. It might be possible to model the last century of the life of traditional Cornish using the mathematical equations which govern population decline. (Sauvy, 1969).

References

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Fig. 3 THE DEMOGRAPHIC HISTORY OF CORNISH

YEAR (t)	A	B	C	P	Q
1050			0.95	16 000	15 000
1100			0.94	21 000	20 000
1150			0.93	28 000	26 000
1200	3270	0.93	0.86	35 000	30 000
1250			0.79	43 000	34 000
1300	2780	0.79	0.73	52 000	38 000
1350			0.67	48 000	32 000
1400	2360	0.67	0.61	55 000	34 000
1450			0.54	62 000	33 000
1500	1890	0.54	0.48	69 000	33 000
1550			0.40	76 000	30 000
1600	1400	0.40	0.26	84 000	22 000
1650	910	0.26	0.15	93 000	14 000
1700	530	0.15	0.05	106 000	5 000
1750	160	0.05	0.00	140 000	very few
1800	0			192 000	nil

A(t) = area in km² where Cornish was spoken

B(t) = fraction of total area in which Cornish was spoken = A(t)/3500 (The total area of Cornwall is approximately 3500 km².)

C(t) = fraction of total area in which practically everyone spoke Cornish = B(t - 50)

P(t) = estimated total population of Cornwall

Q(t) = estimated number of Cornish speakers = P(t) x C(t)