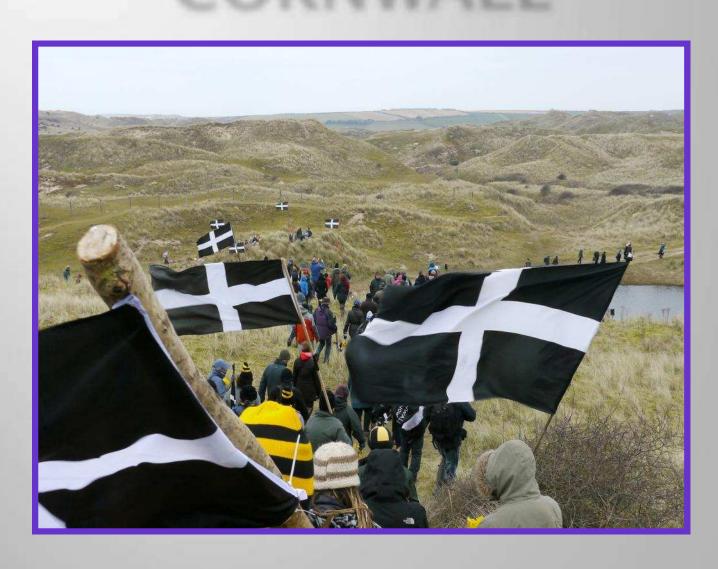


# FOLK SONG, DANCE AND IDENTITY IN CORNWALL



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# Folk Song, Dance and Identity in Cornwall

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Kernewek Lowender

### Raklavar

This paper follows the story of folk tradition and its symbiosis with identity in Cornwall. It is a story that starts with Cornish medieval mystery plays and brings us to a 21<sup>st</sup> Century where the Cornish are recognised as a national minority in Britain with their own distinctive language, culture and folk traditions. At the same time this paper synthesizes current thinking to propose a model of folk tradition as a dynamic contemporary process rather than historical stasis. It is a model that can be applied to understand the process behind any folk tradition.

# The Fly Wheel of Folk Tradition

The relationship between folk tradition and identity is a fascinating one. The term "folk" has its origins in the work of Johan Gottfried Von Herder and his study of Latvian peasant culture in 1778. He observed that despite Russian and German political and cultural domination the Latvians had retained their language and an identity as a distinct ethnic group. This struck a key with the Romantic Movement and the counterreaction to the urban, mechanised world of the industrial revolution. It was an idea seized upon by the emerging Celtic movement of Morgannwg in Wales, <sup>2</sup> Macpherson in Scotland, and Renan in Brittany <sup>3</sup> who used folk tradition as a medium to counter English and French cultural domination.

This was a view of folk tradition as the spirit of a people's identity, a survival from a cultural golden age of the past resilient against foreign incursion. Although the developing science of social anthropology had moved on from this romanticism by the end of the 19<sup>th</sup> Century this did not stop Cecil Sharp, the English folk enthusiast, from embracing a notion of folk tradition as the soul of the English nation in the first decades of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. Remarkably this model of folk tradition as an immutable vestige of a past golden age survived even the Bert Lloyd's counter cultural folk revival of the sixties. <sup>4</sup> The term "traditional" was used to distinguish the purity of the old folk songs from the protest songs and contemporary composition that became part of "folk music" as a genre of popular music.

The romanticism of folk purity did not survive the post-modernist critique of Dave Harker <sup>5</sup> and Georgina Boyse <sup>6</sup> who argued that the early folk revival was largely a contrivance to preserve the male dominated hegemonic social structures of British Empire. Hobsbawm and Ranger's seminal "The Invention of Tradition" followed this up by questioning the historic authenticity of tradition generally, targeting the Celtic revival as well as the institutions of British Royalty. <sup>7</sup> Whilst this went largely unnoticed by the practitioners of folk song and dance traditions it did tend to impact on the perception of authenticity. Something we will return to when we consider the competition between English and Cornish folk song and dance traditions in Cornwall.

The deconstruction of hallowed authenticity in folk tradition opened the way for it to be recognised as a contemporary social phenomenon rather than historical stasis.<sup>8</sup> It can be understood as a contemporary process taking place within a community that is informed but not defined by the past. It is the process

whereby a song, a dance, or a tune is passed on person to person and generation to generation and altered a little each time it moves on. This change is not just about the narrative and nature of the performance, sometimes it is the meaning that it has for the participants that changes. The prevailing social climate will impact upon the experiences and perceptions of the performers and influence this change.

Folk tradition is like a flywheel travelling through time which increases momentum as new ideas and meanings are added. It may lose momentum at one point in time as interest wains and gain momentum as interest resurfaces. Understood in this way it can be seen that folk traditions do not necessarily have a single point of origin or invention. They can also coalesce from a variety of story lines and musical or choreographic ideas. What marks tradition out in particular from commercial or artistically driven music and dance is the identification with, and sense of ownership by, a community.

### **Gwarv Mvr**

In Cornwall this flywheel is personified in the Guize or "Geeze" dance tradition. A package of music, dance, songs and folk drama processed through the streets and villages that provided a vehicle for the performance and perpetuation of folk tradition. These are most famously witnessed today by the Padstow and Helston May celebrations but are still widespread across Cornwall. The roots of these traditions might well reach back to first millennium Cornwall and beyond but it is the Cornish Mystery Plays, the Gwary Myr,

that give us our first glimpse of what they might have been like in medieval times.

The Gwary Myr were performed in outdoor theatres or rounds called the Plen an Gwary, literally "playing place". Glasney College in Penryn was in many respects the the epicentre of Cornwall's literary golden age and several of the plays are known to have been written there. The narrative and stage directions of these plays give us a glimpse of the cultural life in Cornwall during this period. For example in the first part of the Ordinalia, written between 1350 -1375, 9 musicians are called upon to play:

"Abarth an Tas, Menstral a ras,

Pebough ware"

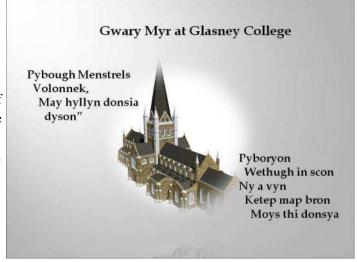
(In the name of the father, Minstrels of grace, Pipe at once)

The division between the secular and the religious was less marked in the medieval world and the plays drew their inspiration from a wide range of cultural sources. In Beunans Meriasek 1504 (Life of St Meriasek –Patron Saint of Camborne) we have dragons, quack doctors, torturers, demons, knights, hobby horses and more pipers:

"Pybough Menstrels volonnek, May hyllyn donsia dyson"

(Pipe you hearty minstrels -that we might dance without delay)

And later in same play



"Pyboryon wethugh in scon Ny a vyn ketep map bron Moys thi donsya"

(Pipers, blow quickly- we will, every son of a breast - go to dance)

This Bruegelesque image of pipers and dancers is augmented by records in accounts like the Guild Stewards who paid for piper for the Lostwithiel Riding in 1462 and the Camborne Churchwardens who "Paid to the piper in the play - 4d" in 1550. The Launceston Parish records of 1462 record payment in kind: "Expended in wine to ..... Le Mynstrall in the vigil of St Mary Magdelene ..... and other singers for the feast of Mary Magdalene". The Minstrels of St Mary's are immortalised in stone on the East Wall of St Mary's Church in Launceston and provide us with carvings of horners (trumpets or shaums) and crowders (fiddlers) together with a piper and harpist.

There are indeed several carvings of pipers to be found in Cornish churches. St Austell church tower has a magnificent gargoyle playing a double chanter pipe dating from 1480. There is also a double chanter bagpiper carved on a 16<sup>th</sup> Century bench end at Davidstow. The clearest image of piper is that to be found a bench ends dating from 1520 at Altarnon Church. Here the piper is accompanied by a crowder, two dancers, a Guizer and a dog! This carving is very detailed and is the inspiration for the reconstruction and revival of the Cornish bagpipes.



Cornish Piper and Dancers: Altarnon Church Bench End 1530

The images on the Altarnon bench ends are similar to the drawings and description of the "Mattachins" in a French book of dance edited and published by Thoinot Arbeau in 1598. Here it is described as "... the dance of fools or Mattachins, who were habited in short jackets with gilt paper helmets, long streamers tied to their shoulders, and bells to their legs. They carried in their hands a sword and buckler, with which they made a clashing noise, and performed various quick and sprightly evolutions".<sup>10</sup>

My favourite reference to bagpipes has to be that concerning Henric, Piper of Trigg from the accounts of the Earldom of Cornwall 1296 to 1297 where "Johanna, wife of Henric, Piper of Trigg, paid his two shillings and six pence fine for transgressions"!

Perhaps the most poignant stage direction comes at the very end of the last mystery play in, Gwreans An Bys – The Creation Of The Word, transcribed by William Jordan in 1611:

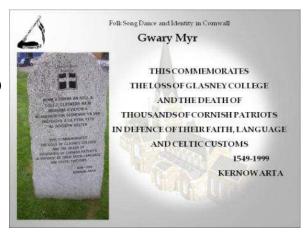
"Minstrels growgh theny peba May hallan warbarthe downssya Del ew an vaner han geys"

"Minstrels, pipe for us - That we may together dance -As is the manner and the custom / guise"

These words are a portent of what is to come and provide a thread of continuity through to the present day. "Geys", conventionally translated as "custom" also means a guise or a jest. In his Cornish Glossary of 1882 Fred Jago describes the Guise Dance as "A kind of comical or Bal masque at Christmas .......the guise or disguise dance, for so the Cornish pronounce guise (geeze). This dance answers to the mummers of Devon, and the Morrice dancers of Oxfordshire &c. In Celtic Cornish ges, means mockery, a jest." <sup>11</sup>

Glasney College in Penryn was destroyed in 1548, just as the Tudor fortifications at nearby Pendennis were completed. The medieval golden age of Cornish culture was brought to a bloody conclusion with the slaughter of 2000 men following the failed rebellion of 1549.

With a population of just 78,000 at the time the impact must have been felt economically and culturally by every family and every village across Cornwall.

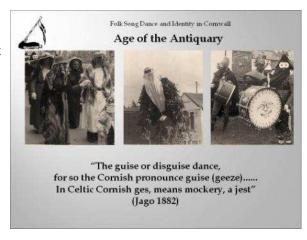


This was not the end of Cornish spirit and sense of a distinct identity. In his study, "The West Britons", Mark Stoyle argues that the Cornish involvement in the British civil war in 1642, and 1648 was a continuation of the same protest and expression of identity as the rebellions a century earlier. <sup>12</sup> It might also be argued that Cornwall's reputation as a lawless "West Barbary" in the 18<sup>th</sup> century was a reflection of Cornwall's resistance to English cultural and civic domination.

### The Age of the Antiquary

Without official sanction records of folk music and dance traditions inevitably fade in the 17<sup>th</sup> and 18<sup>th</sup> centuries but absence of evidence is not evidence of absence. When scholarly interest in these activities emerged in the 19<sup>th</sup> Century antiquaries and folklorists found a Cornwall rich in deep rooted and well established folk song and dance traditions.

One of our first insights into the world of nineteenth century folk tradition is provided by Richard Polwhele in his "History of Cornwall" published in 1803. <sup>13</sup> The Furry

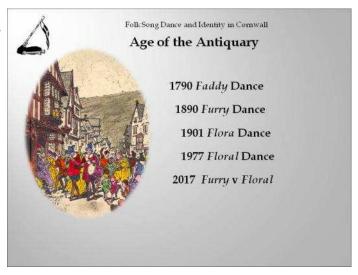


Dance, or Faddy as it was known at this time was clearly well established tradition and invited some explanation. Like his contemporaries Polwhele was unable to resist classical allusion and says that it must be like the "feastal dance of the Greeks" and the "Farandeule" of the "Provencause" in France. In fact the Farandele survived in Cornish Tea Treat tradition as the serpent dance, a quite different entity from the Furry Dance. Polwhele also makes a connection between the Faddy / Furry dance and the Irish Rincce Fada. Polwhele does not elaborate but this is interesting in that the Gaelic term means long dance (rinnce-dance,

fada-long) and there was a processional dance like the Furry known to have been danced in Kilkenny to celebrate the coming of summer. <sup>15</sup>

The change of name from "Faddy" to "Furry" to "Floral" according to the tastes of the time is an ingeresting example of the "Folk process in action".

The thread connecting 19<sup>th</sup> century folk tradition with the Mystery plays is picked up by Davies Gilbert, industrial scientist, politician and antiquary. He published a book of Cornish Carols in



1922 and a second, enlarged edition in 1923 with additional folk songs and dances including the Helston Furry. <sup>16</sup> He saw the Carols as "traces of ancient mystery" which had their roots in the apocryphal themes of the mystery plays. No manuscript has yet surfaced to enable us to connect up Gilbert's melodies to the tunes to which people danced in the mystery plays <sup>17</sup> but the term "carol" is derived from the "carole" a circular medieval dance to sung music. Gilbert's medieval Cornish carols may or may not be descended from the dances tunes of the Gwary Myr but they do give us a feel for the kind of music used.

Like Polwhele, Gilbert recognised an Irish connection with the Furry dance and describes this as a "specimen of Celtic Musick". <sup>18</sup> Celtic identity within Cornish folk tradition was a popular theme with the 19<sup>th</sup> century Cornish antiquaries. William Bottrell used the pen name "Old Celt" in his newspaper column on Cornish folk tradition and Margaret Courtney makes several references to the Celtic nature of the Cornish people. <sup>19</sup>

Bottrell also provides a number of accounts of Guize dancers <sup>20</sup> and they way in which they incorporate drolls (a story or folk drama) with songs instrumental music and dance. Similar descriptions are found in the work of the other major folklore writers right through to the first decades of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. <sup>21</sup> These references show the way in which Guize dancing acted as a cultural location for an evolving folk song and dance tradition in Cornwall and provided a thread of continuity between the dance traditions of early times, and revivalists of the early twentieth century.

## **Celto-Cornish Revival**

The theme of Celticity took on a very different significance for the early 20<sup>th</sup> century and the Celto -Cornish revivalists lead by Henry Jenner, British Librarian and Celtic scholar. It was essentially about the realisation of Cornwall as a Celtic nation alongside of the other members of the Pan Celtic Congress. Initially it was very linguistically focused and had little impact upon folk tradi-

tion. This changed with the advent of the Old Cornwall Societies and Robert Morton Nance's aspiration to "collect the fragments" of Celtic Cornish in order to create a new Cornwall. Folk traditions, songs and dances were seen to be an important part of these fragments.

From the point of inception to date there are some 151 Folk phenomena recorded in the in the Old Cornwall Society Magazines. It is difficult to compare like with like, but to place this in context, leading 19<sup>th</sup> Century collector / folklorists such as Baring Gould and Courtney recorded just 73 and 50 items respectively. <sup>22</sup> Activists like Wallace, Watson, Miners and Thomas connected the Celto-Cornish movement firmly with folk tradition as a way of expressing identity. <sup>23</sup> Unlike the visiting folklorist or and folk collector they were folk practitioners who recorded what they performed and remembered from their own experience.

When the American folksong Collector James Madison Carpenter arrived in Cornwall with his wax cylinder recording machine in 1931 the Celto-Cornish activists were a well organised force who descended upon him with some enthusiasm. They provided him with songs in Cornish and introduced him to singing sessions in the coastal villages where he was notably the first person to record the Cadgwith Anthem. There are some 41 items from in Cornwall in the Carpenter Collection. <sup>24</sup>



James Madison Carpenter

The singing sessions witnessed and recorded by Carpenter are part of the "lore" of what it is to be Cornish whether the hymns sung by the Bal Maidens or the migrant miner's improvised harmony of the Sweet Nightingale. <sup>25</sup> They provided a rich seam of material for Peter Kennedy when he visited Cornwall in the winter of 1956 and recorded sessions and singers at Cadgwith, Redruth, Malpas and Boscastle. These singing sessions have continued as a living tradition through to the present day and are popularly referred to as a "shout" to distinguish them from more formal choral music.

Dunstan (1857 – 1933) is an interesting figure from the Celto-Cornish folk revival in that he was a professional music academic with a career in London but had started out as a tutor / student bandsman in the midst of the Tea Treat and regatta culture of mid Cornwall. When he retired to Cornwall he reconnected with his musical roots and published two collections of songs and dances from both his own experiences and that of his Cornish contemporaries: The Cornish Song book in 1929 and Cornish Dialect and Folk Song in 1932. <sup>26</sup> Both collections contain a wealth of material from folk tradition but the first coincided with the inaugural Cornish Gorseth and includes material that overtly expresses Celto-Cornish identity. These two publications inspired a series of subsequent collections which drew on material collected from both oral and archival sources and firmly stamped them with a Celto-Cornish identity.

The nineteen sixties saw the emergence of popular music festival culture, the Cambridge Folk Festival started in 1964, the Isle of Wight in 1968 and the iconic Woodstock took place in 1969 followed by Glastonbury in 1970. This wave of interest also encouraged the development of Celtic Festivals with all the variety of definitions, national allegiances and identities that the term offers. The festivals that influenced the folk traditions of Cornwall, however, were those that were expressly Pan Celtic with an expectation of, and opportunity for, representation from Cornwall. The largest of these was the "Festival Interceltique" held in Lorient, Brittany (1970) which had evolved from an earlier bagpipe festival. Also very influential on the Celto-Cornish movement was the Irish "Pan Celtic Festival" (1970) and the Manx "Yn Chruin-

naght" (1978). Cornwall's own Lowender Peran started in 1978 and was inspired and materially supported by these festivals.

The advent of the Celtic festival provided a platform for performers like Brenda Wootton to take Cornish music on to the international stage and enjoy wider recognition. It also encouraged the formation of dance teams along the lines of the Breton "Cercle Celtique" and the Welsh "Dawnswyr Werin". The pressure was on for them to collate Cornish dance traditions in order to establish a repertoire that would be recognised as representing a distinctive Cornish identity. In this they were fortunate in that antiquarian interest in the nineteenth century, and the Old Cornwall Society Movement from the 1920s,



had already laid down the foundations for the music and dance which might be used for this. A major bonus for dance teams in Cornwall was the continuation of Cornish Scoot dancing (step dance using shoes with metal reinforced soles and heels) as a living oral tradition well into this period. Scoot dancing lends itself well to choreographic arrangement for display and there were existing practitioners who taught and coached formative dance teams with some enthusiasm. <sup>27</sup>

### **Competing Folk Identities**

It was against this background that the British /English folk revival arrived in Cornwall in the 1960s and 1970s. This revival was an interesting, almost volatile fusion of of the eclectic and counter cultural sixties folk song revival with the fairly rigid Edwardian orthodoxy of the English Folk Dance and Song Society. <sup>28</sup> From Cornwall's perspective this arrival was marked by the advent of two institutions, the "Folk Club" and the "Morris Side" neither of which were well placed philosophically to recognise Cornwall as anything other than an English shire county. There was certainly no room for the notion of a distinct Cornish Celtic folk tradition within the orthodoxy of the English Folk Song and Dance society.

The Folk Clubs were rooted in the "people's theatres" of the 1930s and shaped by singers like Ewan Mac-Coll and Bert Lloyd to provide an informal "art house" performance space for folk music. The Count House at Bottallack hosted the first club in Cornwall in the early sixties followed by "The Pipers" at St Buryan and the "Folk Cottage" at Mitchell. These clubs became associated with a number of folk performers who subsequently became well established on the British folk circuit, including Ralph McTell, Wizz Jones, Pete Berryman, Michael Chapman and Brenda Wootton. The "Bodmin Folk Club" formed in 1969, it was affiliated to, and subsidised by, the English Folk Song and Dance Society and had a reputation for a fairly orthodox approach as to what was traditional and suitable for folk club performance.

Although the songs from Cornish traditional singing sessions made an occasional appearance in the folk clubs there is no sense in which they were a regular part of the repertoire. They were seen as community singing rather than authentic folk music. Similarly the songs and music espoused by the Celtic revival were at home in events organised by the Old Cornwall Societies and the Celtic Congress but not something regu-

larly heard in the folk club, especially not sung in Cornish. For the most part the English Folk Revival and the Celto-Cornish movement continued to follow their own trajectories in Cornwall.

The 1990s saw an escalation in the material, available both in print and audio formats, which presented Cornish music as a distinct tradition. This raised the profile of Cornish folk tradition, but as Mike O'Connor points out, also encouraged criticism from the Folk Revival establishment:

"Opposition to newly identified Cornish material was fostered by a few vociferous speakers, some well respected. Some were conservative: reflecting Bodmin Folk Club's old extra- Cornish agenda they mistrusted

anyone outside the EFDSS [English Folk Dance and song Society] or not subject to academic overview. Some believed that nothing more could possibly remain to be discovered, so anything new must be false. Some saw the overt celebration of Cornish culture as an invention to promote Cornish political consciousness." <sup>29</sup>

There is a sense here in which the more powerful English Folk Revival placed a greater burden of evidence for material to be recognised as distinctively Cornish than it did for recognition of English tradition. The story of "I love my love" / "Ryb an Avon" provides a good example of this.



In 1905 the Rev Quintrell sent George Gardiner, an academic folk song collector, the music score for a nameless tune he had collected from a Mrs Boaden of Cury near Helston.<sup>30</sup> Gardiner in turn sent this to a fellow collector, Lucy Broadwood for her comments. She decided that the melody was a very good match to the lyrics of a song called "I love my love" and drew the conclusion that this must be its original and correct title.<sup>31</sup> Anyone listening to the lyrics of "Clementine" sung to the tune of the hymn "Bread of Heaven" will appreciate that such a deduction is not well supported! But Gardiner and Broadwood did succeed in making a very beautiful tune widely accessible by associating it with the words of "I Love My Love" and it reached a wide audience through Holst's military band arrangement.<sup>32</sup> It was subsequently reclaimed for Cornwall by Tony Snell who wrote lyrics in Cornish for it and renamed it "Ryb An Avon" (By The River). It can be seen that neither name has precedence of authenticity over the other. The title "Ryb An Avon" is nevertheless viewed as inauthentic and contrived by the English Folk Revivalist whilst not questioning the title "I Love My Love".

The term "Morris" has its roots in the world of Medieval Europe with a broad meaning of dance in bizarre costume as described by Thoinit Arbeau in 1598. <sup>33</sup>Cecil Sharp meticulously collected and published the Morris dance traditions of England, particularly of the Home Counties but also the Midlands and the North. Morris sides (teams) often use the terms "Cotswold" (Oxfordshire) or "Border" (Shropshire) to describe the origin of their particular style. The term Morris has now lost wider currency in Europe but following the work of Sharp and his acolytes it is strongly identified with English dance tradition.

The first Morris side in Cornwall formed on 1971 and took the name Trigg from the area in North Cornwall where they were based. Since then a number of Morris sides have been formed in Cornwall by dance enthusiasts and, except for one North West Clog team, all base their style upon "Cotswold" or "Border" traditions. Taken at face value there is no judgment to be made about this and Morris Sides join with Irish

Dance Schools, Samba Dancers and Jive classes etc as a healthy social activity available in modern multicultural Cornwall.

The competition for identity arises when Morris sides present themselves as representing Cornish folk tradition. In their introductions, and the background information provided about their dances, sides sometimes cite references in the St Columb parish records as evidence of the provenance of Morris dancing in Cornwall. There are certainly references to Morris dancing in Cornwall in 16th century records such as the Green Book of St Columb <sup>34</sup> and the household accounts of the Arundels at Lanherne, <sup>35</sup> but these are concerned with the purchase of materials and provide no description of the dance or detail of the custom involved. The term "Morris / Moryse" is used in the records but there is no evidence to suggest that this has the same meaning as Morris in 21st century England. The best guess is that these would be akin to the French Morris dances described by Thoinit Arbeau.

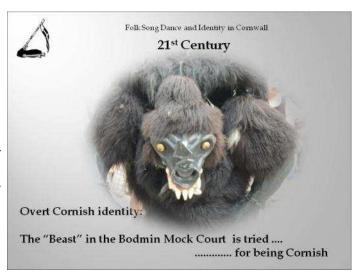
Whilst it is dangerous to form firm conclusions about the provenance of Morris dancing in Cornwall based on the interpretation of Parish and Household accounts there remain clear sign posts to the possibility of quite different dance traditions in Cornwall. There is certainly no record of anything resembling the traditions of the English Home Counties and the Midlands. There is a sense here in which Morris sides in Cornwall are competing with indigenous dance culture by importing dance traditions from England. There was a well-documented Scoot Dance tradition in Boscastle at the time Trigg Morris was formed <sup>36</sup> and a little local research would have provided dancers with steps and moves that could have been interpreted to create a distinctive style of dance. The received wisdom of English Folk orthodoxy was that Cornwall did not have a distinctive culture from England so there was no encouragement to look. Similarly, the Guize dancing tradition still extant in St Ives, with its history of cross dressing, might also have provided inspiration for the development of a Dance Tradition along the lines of the revival of Molly dancing in East Anglia described by Elaine Brandke.<sup>37</sup>

# 21st Century and Cornish National Minority Status

The deconstruction of the narrow, and from Cornwall's perspective, Anglo centric, vision of Folk Tradition discussed at the beginning of this paper had percolated into the wider public conscious by the end of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. A distinctive Cornish folk tradition was increasingly understood as no more or less authentic than an English one. It also coincided with an increasing assertion of Cornish identity across a much wider social domain. In 2002 Cornish language, Kernewek, was formally recognised by European Charter and in 2014 the Cornish were granted National Minority Status under European Framework Convention. It is a powerful statement for Cornish identity that Cornwall's distinctive folk traditions formed part of the case that won this recognition.

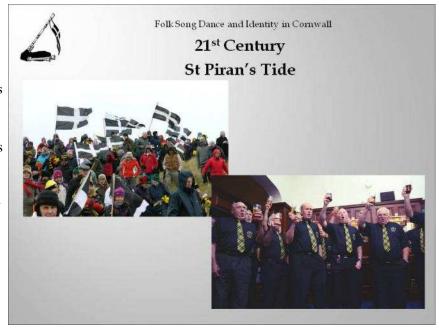
This burgeoning sense of Cornish identity has certainly added momentum to the flywheel of Cornish folk tradition and manifests in many events and customs in the Cornish calendar.

Long established traditions like Padstow May and the Helston Flora Day celebrations have evolved to embrace greater symbolism of Cornish identity. Revived traditions such as the Bodmin Play overtly express Cornish identity. This custom is enacted during the towns's Riding Day and takes the form of a mock court which tries the "Beast" for unseemly conduct. The "Beast" represents Cornwall and the unseemly conduct is to assert a distinctive Cornish identity. Needless



to say the "Beast" is found innocent! Similarly new events, like the midwinter celebration of Montol, draw upon expressly Cornish music, dance and imagery.

The most powerful assertion of Cornish identity within tradition is the Cornwall wide celebration that has evolved in the days around March 5<sup>th</sup>, St Piran's Day. This has become known as Pirantide and is marked by processions and Furry Dances in the major Cornish towns together with a liberal sprinkling of music, dance and singing sessions. The highlight is provided by the St Piran Play and with its pilgrimage across Perran Sands which attracts 1000 people and invokes the spirit of the Gwary Myr. As St Piran's day itself draws to a close the Cornish sing-



ing tradition comes to the fore when at 9pm pub singing sessions right across Cornwall give a heartfelt rendering of Trelawny.

# Image 2 21st Century Cornwall :St Piran's Tide

Folk song and dance traditions are but a small part of the way that Cornish identity is expressed in the 21<sup>st</sup> century but it can be seen the symbioses between the two runs deep. Not only is it rooted a long way back in history, it is also a very positive modern force. The sense of identity in Cornwall has been instrumental in preserving and celebrating folk tradition at the same folk tradition has provided a potent vehicle for the expression of Cornish identity.

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