

CHANGES IN THE SPELLING OF WORDS WITH w-DIPHTHONGS

Background

w-diphthongs in Cornish are notoriously difficult to disentangle. In early Middle Cornish, there were apparently six of them: /iʊ/, /ɪʊ/, /ɛʊ/, /uiʊ/, /aʊ/ and /ɔʊ/, but here we are concerned with only the first three of these. Their study is complicated by the fact that Cornish was largely written as if it were English: Middle English c.1400 had two w-diphthongs:

- /iʊ/ as in *brew, clue, due, drew, hue, knew, new, slew, true, yew*; both <yw> and <ew> were used for this diphthong;
- /ɛʊ/ as in *dew, ewe, few, hew, mew, sew, shew, shrew, strew*; usually spelled <ew>. In MidE, the digraph <ew> was therefore ambiguous, since it represented two different diphthongs. Circa 1575, /ɛʊ/ merged into /iʊ/, so that *dew* and *due* became homophones; this meant that <ew> was no longer an ambiguous digraph in early ModE, but remained ambiguous when applied to Cornish. /iʊ/ was a falling diphthong, but it changed first to a rising one, and then by c.1700 to [ju:]. Native speakers of English who are learning Cornish find it very difficult to realize w-diphthongs with anything other than this English [ju:] sound.

In contrast to this confusion, in Late Cornish, earlier /ɛʊ/ was often spelled <eaw> or <ow>, and may thus be distinguished (George 2007, Bock & Bruch 2009).

Historical /iʊ/ changed in Breton to /ɛʊ/ <ev>; in Welsh it retained its traditional spelling <yw>, but is pronounced [iʊ] north Wales and [iɔ] in south Wales. When *Kernewek Kemmyn* was first devised in the 1980s, it was known that historical /iʊ/ changed to /ɛʊ/ (like /ɪ/ > /ɛ/ before any consonant), but not until more recently was it appreciated that both changes operated by lexical diffusion, i.e. different words suffered the change at different times. There was therefore a tendency for KK to give more weight to the etymological spelling than to that suggested by the evidence. Each of the words in now examined in turn.

The words for ‘hears’, ‘hearing’

B. *klevout* and W. *clywed* lead one to think, as did Jackson, that the form in Primitive Cornish was **klɪwed*. This would give *klywes*, the form found in GM93 and GM09. However, late forms of the verbal noun such as *clowas* indicate historical /ɛʊ/, as pointed out by Schrijver (1995: 341). The late form *clɔv* (found in BM) was reformed from *clowas*. The words should be spelled **klew**, **klewes**. This fault has been corrected in KK, but too late to be included in GM09.

The word for ‘rudder’

This case is similar to the previous one: erstwhile KK *lyw* corresponded to W. *lyw* and B. *lew*; but Old Cornish *leu* (VC.282) and *leuuit* (VC.274) suggest that /iʊ/ > /ɛʊ/ at an early stage. The KK spelling has therefore been changed to **lew**, but too late to be included in GM09.

The word for ‘bruise’

Breton *brev* and Welsh *briw* do not fit with each other; we would expect B *-ev* to correspond to W *-yw*, and B *-iv* with W *-iw*. The spelling *browi* in Late Cornish points to **brew** as the best spelling in KK.

The word for ‘today’

W. *heddiw* and B. *hiziv* indicate that the original diphthong was /iʊ/. The form *hebeu* (VC.467) suggests that /iʊ/ had changed to /eʊ/ yn Old Cornish. The Middle Cornish tend to support /eʊ/, as does the change to <-ow> in Late Cornish.

Type	Spellings	PA	OM	PC	RD	BM	BK	TH	SA	CW	Lh	VLC
{yw}	<yv, yw, yu>		2	2	3	8					1	
{ew}	<eu, ev, ew>	1		11	16		2	3		1		
{ow}	<ow>	1		1		2		3			1	11
{u}	<u, u>				1						2	

The rhymes in Middle Cornish, however, are consistent with /iʊ/. Nance gave both *hedhew* and *hedhyu*. The KK spelling, **hedhyw**, is a compromise; it is recommended that this be unchanged.

The word for ‘weir’

This word is attested only in place-names, as shown in this table:

mappa	Cutcrew	mappa	Lescrow	mappa	Scraesdon
	(St Germans)		(Fowey)		(Antony)
KK	Koeskryw	KK	Ryskryw		
1316	Cutcreu	1483	Rescrewe	1349	Creulisdon
1327	Cutkreu	1696	Liscrow	1357	Crewlesdon
1360	Cotkrew	1840	Liscrow	1610	Skreysdon
1621	Cutcrew	1855	Lescrow	1749	Scrowson
1664	Cutkrew	1884	Liscrow		
1884	Cutcrew				

The Welsh cognate is *cryw*, whence the present KK spelling **kryw**; but there are no <yw>-type spellings in Cornish. The historical place-names show the change *ew* > *ow*, suggesting an early change /iʊ/ > /eʊ/, so it is better to spell this word **krew**.

The word for ‘owns’

Hitherto this word has been written *piw* in KK (under the influence of Breton *piaou*), but the traditional spellings show a mixture of {ew} and {eaw}; {yw} is not found. This suggests **pew**.

Type	PA	OM	PC	RD	BM	BK	TH	SA	CW	Lh	VLC
{ew}		1	3		3	7	1		1		2
{eaw}											2

This is confirmed by the word *peuas* (PA.1173) ‘reward’, which is found in Late Cornish as *poes*; this shows {ew} > {ow}. So we should write **pewas** ‘reward’ and **pewa** ‘to own’.

The word for ‘follow(s)’

This loan-word is found in the texts as:

syw (PA.226, PC.3087, RD.1760), *syv* (PC.0648, 2433);

sew (OM.0711), *sev* (BK17.68), *seu* (Pryce)

The root is found in French *suivre* and in English *sue*, *pursue*. The Late Cornish forms *suyah* (verbal noun) and *suyow Vee* (imperative) support *iw* rather than *yw*. We do not find **sowya*; so **sew* cannot be correct. It is better to write this word as **siw**.

The word for ‘Jew’

Tregear did not use the word *Yedhow* for ‘Jew’ (did he not know it?); he used the English loan-word, spelled once as *jeu* and once as *jew*. He spelled the plural 16 times with *jew-*, but by Tregear’s time, <ew> was ambiguous. Earlier English spellings for *Jew* were *Giw* and *Gyu*, from Old French *giu*; in GM09, the word is spelled **Jyw**, but **Jiw** is probably better.

The word for ‘alive’

Dunbar and George (1997:120) gave the following basis for the KK spellings *klyw-* and *byw-*:

- (i) the roots *klyw-* and *byw-* each contain historical /ɪʊ/;
- (ii) <yw> is a reasonable digraph to denote /ɪʊ/;
- (iii) the diphthong in individual words within each set of words has not changed such as to invalidate the use of /ɪʊ/.

We have seen above that assertion (i) is invalid for *klyw-*, and the spelling has been changed to **klew-**.

Assertion (i) remains for *byw-*, however; all authorities agree that the diphthong in *byw*, along with that in ModW *byw*, ModB *bev*, is etymologically /ɪʊ/; the word comes from Celtic **biuō-s* < IE **g^hiūō-s*. In MidC, the mixture of {yw} and {ew} spellings in the table below also points to the /ɪʊ/ phoneme. In LateC, Lhuyd’s *bêu* and the vernacular *beaw(e)* show that the diphthong ended up as [ɛʊ], which accords with the development of words containing /ɪ/.

Orthographic profile of the word *byw* ‘alive’

Type	Spellings	PA	OM	PC	RD	BM	BK	TH	SA	CW	Lh	VLC
{yw}	<yv, yw, ÿw, iu>		1	1	4	5					1	1
{ew}	<ev, ew, ewe>		2	5	3	2	6	2	1	10	3	2
{eaw}	<eau, eawe, êu>										5	4
Other	<ui>										1	

If, however, we examine the cases of *byw* as a rhyming word in the Ordinalia (there are no cases in PA), we note that they are all spelled as {bew}. Although the {byw} spellings indicate /ɪw/, the rhymes operate far better with the word spelled as *bew* and pronounced as ['bɛʊ]. We are therefore forced to question assertion (iii) in respect of this word. It appears that the change ['brʊ] > ['bɛʊ] was in progress during the phase of Middle Cornish, which accounts for the variant spellings *byw* ~ *bew*. Other words showing a similar variation in Middle Cornish are *gwrys* ~ *gwres* ‘done’ and *sygh* ~ *segh* ‘dry’. For an orthography based on Middle Cornish, both spellings are valid, but modern practice seems to demand a single spelling for a given word. It is proposed that the newer form **bew** be used.

Summary

KK in GM09	English	to be changed to	Notes	SWF
<i>bryw</i>	bruise	brew		<i>brew</i>
<i>byw</i>	alive	bew		<i>bew</i>
<i>hedhyw</i>	today	(no change)		<i>hedhyw</i>
<i>Jyw</i>	Jew	Jiw		
<i>klew</i>	hear	klew	already changed	<i>klew</i>
<i>kryw</i>	weir	krew		<i>kryw</i>
<i>lew</i>	rudder	lew	already changed	<i>lew</i>
<i>piw</i>	owns	pew		<i>pyw</i>
<i>syw</i>	follows	siw		<i>sew</i>

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May 2019