

## Look out, the Falmouth Trollops are coming to Shag Town

Pete London explores the colourful connotations of some Cornish parish nicknames. In the past, many parishes in Cornwall acquired a nickname.

Sometimes these were associated with local occupations or parish customs. Others related to animals and birds found in the neighbourhood. Yet at a time when rivalry between local areas was often fierce, frequently the names were less than flattering.

Some of the earliest recorded nicknames appear in the West Cornwall newspapers, *The Cornishman* and the *Cornish Telegraph*; pieces in the latter from the 1870s are thought to be by William Bottrell. In 1875, the Rev E J Harvey listed 11 names in his *Mullyon*, particularly the St Ives Hakes, as well as the jeer "Who flogged the hake?"

The story behind this recalls a time when the St Ives fishermen could catch nothing but hake, though they were searching for herring. To deter the unwanted fish from local shores, they flogged a hake on the quayside and threw it back in the water as a terrible warning to its brethren to leave the area.

Mount's Bay and Newlyn fishermen became known as Newlyn Buccas after their custom of leaving fish on the sand as an offering to Bucca, the storm god. Newlyn folk had other names too: Pirates, Rob-the-Dead and Walk-the-Plank, given to them by St Ives people. Mousehole's Cut-Throats were so-named after a local woman who was said to have slit the throat of a sleeping Spaniard during the incursion at Mount's Bay in 1595.

A Newlyn 'Bucca' or so the fishermen from that port were called. Picture courtesy of Penlee House photographic archive.

Elsewhere in Penwith, St Just people had several nicknames. Red-tailed Drones referred to the miners' clothing, stained by iron oxide. Other names were St Just Witches, Santusters and Santust Fuggans. The fuggan was a cake beloved by St Just people, consisting of lumps of potato and raisins, rolled in dough and baked. It was frequently eaten in the mines at crust.

Nancladra Rats were so-called after the rats that infested the local flourmill. The unscrupulous miller would pass off poor flour, claiming discerning rats had eaten the good grain brought to the mill, leaving only the bad. On feast Monday, the Gulval Bulls would bring young oxen together to fight; the strongest would later be used as stud. Other animal nicknames arose as goads; the Mullion Gulls were so-named after local people foolishly threw a gull from the cliffs in an attempt to kill it. A similar episode took place at sea, when fishermen threw a conga eel into the water to drown it – though the location of that tale is unknown.

During the 19th century Camborne folk were known as Merrygeeks, Merry Sickers and Merry Sicks, after the town's patron, St Meriasek. By the early 1900s they were dubbed Bulldogs and later, Square Heads. Camborne people would mockingly ask their Redruth neighbours: "Who crowned the donkey?"

The tale goes that to celebrate the coronation of William IV in 1831, Redruth folk led a donkey sporting a crown and a red robe to the top of Carn Brea. Camborne people also referred to the Redruth Choppers; a term still in use. The mark of a Redruth man was said to be "three chops to the heel", after the blows meted out by a butcher on a person fleeing from Redruth market. Later, local miners working overseas would mark their tools with three notches.

Mevagissey Monkeys stems from an episode during the Napoleonic Wars, when a monkey was washed ashore at Mevagissey and caught by local folk. Believing the monkey to be a French spy, a court was convened; the creature was tried, found guilty and summarily hanged.

At Fowey, The Gallants came by their name following their buccaneering episodes during the Tudor Spanish wars. St Anthony Pigs appeared during feast-tide at Meneage, when the best pig in the village was slaughtered, decorated and displayed in a shop before being eaten. This gave rise to the local sayings 'Dance like a Tantony pig' and 'Done up like a Tantony pig'.

A bus shelter in Fowey: the best bus shelter in Britain? A fitty place for the Fowey Gallants to relax...

In 1870, William Bottrell recorded the name St Levan Witches. The story has it that the women of the parish practised witchcraft widely. They would gather at Treen Dinas before flying on their broomsticks across the Bristol Channel to Wales, where they would steal whatever they could before returning with their booty.

Around the port of Falmouth, the nickname Falmouth Trollops arose during the late 18th and 19th centuries, a reference to the supposed questionable morality of the local women. At nearby Penryn, one interpretation of the name 'Shag Town' is more graphic, though its origin may stem from work carried out by local industry. For much of the 19th century, cattle were shipped to Penryn from Spain, for processing by the town's tannery. At low tide, the animals were made to swim ashore to the beach below St Gluvius Church. Often, some drowned; their abandoned carcasses attracted the seabirds, among them large numbers of shags.

At nearby Flushing, the name Straw Buccy, meaning a straw scarecrow was used to taunt the villagers. In the distant past, some Dutch people staying at Flushing apparently attempted to build houses using foundations of straw. The term Tremcrom Buccas was also used to suggest a scarecrow, or a stupid person.

'Who hedged the Cuckoo?' was a taunt aimed at St Agnes folk. Villagers attempted to 'hedge in' or imprison a cuckoo, believing this would prolong the good spring weather that had accompanied its arrival. The Towednack Cuckoos also attempted to trap a spring cuckoo, following a succession of cold winters; during April they built an enclosure at Cold Harbour Downs, with a gap left through which the bird could be driven. Whether they were successful isn't recorded, but the villagers agreed to meet every year on the same date, to hold a feast celebrating the winter's end. This became known as Crowder Feast, with music and a procession to Towednack Church.

St Agnes folk were taunted 'Who hedged the Cuckoo' after apparently trying to prolong good spring weather. Pictured is a scene from St Agnes Bolster Day celebrations.

The Federation of Old Cornwall Societies has carried out detailed research into the origin and meanings of Cornish nicknames and has kindly made information available for this article. If readers can supply any further facts, the Society would be pleased to hear from you at the address below.

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For a complete list of Cornish parish, town and village nicknames, please go to [www.cornishworldmagazine.co.uk](http://www.cornishworldmagazine.co.uk)

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