

The Sands of Cornwall

Transcript

If you look at the UK on a map, you might notice a bit of land that sticks out in the south-western corner. It kind of looks like a tail. I live in Devon, a county that is about halfway along this tail, and just fifteen minutes across the border is Cornwall, the place where the land meets the sea, the place where the land ends, and the birthplace of my girlfriend, Artoria.

I've talked about Cornwall before on the podcast. I did an episode called *The Mermaid of Zennor*, based on a traditional Cornish fairy tale, and I also talked about the history and culture of the place. You can listen to that episode at [EasyStoriesInEnglish.com/Zennor](https://www.easystoriesinenglish.com/Zennor).

Recently, me and Artoria went to Cornwall for three days, visiting Penzance and St Ives, near where she grew up. But first, we drove down to the Eden Project, a massive environmental project. Originally, there was nothing there but a big china clay pit – china clay, or kaolin, is a kind of soft rock used in producing paper and ceramics. A pit is a big hole in the ground, so a china clay pit is a place where they dig china clay out of the earth to sell it. It's also known as a 'quarry'.

By the mid-1990s the clay pit was empty, and no life could grow there. It was basically just a big, ugly hole in the ground. The Eden Project changed all of that. They filled the land with plants and trees and built two big collections of plastic domes that each have their own unique biomes inside. Biomes are essentially 'biological communities' – areas where the land and climate support certain kinds of plants and animals. The Eden Project has a Mediterranean biome and a rainforest biome, as well as native plants, exhibitions and even an art gallery.

I'd been to the Eden Project as a kid, but it was great to see how much the plants had grown and what new things had been added. I especially enjoyed going around and smelling all the flowers. I also like caressing the leaves of trees. For a long time, I found it hard to appreciate nature as an adult, but now I go around touching plants like they are my friends because, well, they are!

After that, we went to our B&B – a B&B, or bed and breakfast, is a kind of hotel common in the UK where you have a private room and breakfast is included. Traditionally, B&Bs were private family homes, and the host would eat with you and give you advice on where to go during your stay.

That night, we ate at the Waterside Meadery. A meadery is a kind of traditional Cornish restaurant where they serve mead – a kind of alcohol made from honey – you eat seafood with your hands, and everything is decorated to look medieval, from the Middle Ages. The waitresses even dress up like medieval barmaids or 'wenches', although 'wench' in modern English is a very rude word to refer to a woman! I don't recommend using it.

I said that meaderies were 'traditional', but I'm pretty sure that they only started in the 20th century. Sadly, although the meadery we went to in Penzance is very popular with locals, the town council are going to knock it down as part of a project to make the waterside more attractive and efficient.

There's definitely a tension, a difficult feeling, in Cornwall, between the locals who have lived there for generations, and the tourists who fill its roads and beaches in summer and the rich people who buy second homes there. There are now lots of expensive restaurants and

art galleries in Cornwall for these people, which locals often can't afford, as well as the house prices always going up. So while the food at the Waterside Meadery wasn't life-changing, it was *good*, and it was nice to be in a place that had such a friendly atmosphere and was part of the local history.

Speaking of local history, that evening we walked along the harbour in Penzance and all the way to Newlyn, a fishing town next to it. In the past, Cornwall's economy depended on fishing, and Artoria's father was a local fisherman, so we took a stroll down memory lane. A 'stroll' is a long, relaxed walk, and when we say that we 'take a stroll down memory lane', it means thinking a lot about the past, usually in a positive way. In this case, we were literally strolling, past all the fishing boats where, as a child, Artoria helped her father work on his boats. Though she didn't do any fishing herself!

The next day, we did some shopping and then went to my favourite beach, Porthcurno. It's quite small, but you get a gorgeous view of the nearby cliffs, and on a good day, the sea shines a beautiful green-blue colour, aquamarine. I forgot my swimsuit, but I did go and dip my feet in the water. In fact, I stood there for a long time, letting the waves crash over my legs. I had forgotten how good it felt, especially when the water pulls the sand away from under your feet as it returns to the sea.

Cornish sand is quite special. On many beaches, it's actually made up of lots of tiny broken shells. Shells are the hard skin of some animals, like crabs, and often on beaches you find pretty shells from sea creatures. But on Cornish beaches, the shell mixes in with the sand and... it doesn't like to say goodbye. It sticks to your legs, and sometimes you can be washing bits of sand off you in the shower for days afterwards! I still need to clean out my sandals.

Watching the waves crash onto the land, I remembered how irregular they were here. It's very different from the beach near my home. In Porthcurno, sometimes a wave is big, sometimes it's small. Sometimes, if it comes at the 'wrong moment', it doesn't push the water out very far. And sometimes, the wave comes at just the right moment and suddenly you're *covered* with water!

After getting a bit sunburnt at the beach – hey, I'm English! – we climbed up the cliff to the Minack Theatre. But the Minack Theatre is no old traditional theatre. It's built outdoors, right on the edge of the cliff. A woman who lived above it, Rowena Cade, built it by hand with the help of her gardener and another Cornishman. Now, thanks to their work, you can sit on the beautiful stone seats and watch a play with the cliffs and sea as your background.

We went to see *Calvino Nights*, which was based on fairy tales collected by the Italian author Italo Calvino, and since I've been to the Minack before, I knew it was important to bring lots of blankets and cushions so you don't end up freezing cold with a sore bottom! But somehow, we also managed to forget the blankets. What are we like? Fortunately, the friendly host of our B&B gave us a huge bag of supplies to take with us. In the end, though, it was a warm, still afternoon, and we were actually quite hot!

It wasn't just because of the weather – the play had plenty of pyrotechnics and fire juggling. Juggling is when someone throws three balls in the air again and again and catches them, although in this case, they were juggling sticks with fire on the end! There was also lots of dancing and puppetry – puppets are small wooden people that you move around with strings, also known as marionettes. At one point, a rocket even went off and exploded into a firework above the sea. It truly was a show that could not have happened anywhere else.

On our last day in Cornwall, we went to St Ives, a beautiful seaside town very near where Artoria grew up, but I think you've heard enough from me! To finish this episode, I'm

going to talk to Artoria a bit about growing up in Cornwall and her feelings about it now. Enjoy!

Conversation with Artoria

Artoria: Hello, I'm Artoria, um...

Ariel: A woman of mystery.

Artoria: I used to be a software engineer and now I'm looking to be a historian.

Ariel: It's wonderful timing, yeah, because recently Artoria's become really interested in studying history and particularly Cornish history. Is that correct?

Artoria: That's correct.

Ariel: Awesome, OK. So I'm sure some of my listeners maybe haven't heard of Cornwall before because of where they live. I don't know if it's known all around the world. So, if you were to summarise Cornwall for people who live outside the UK, and maybe outside Europe, what would you say?

Artoria: Cornwall is the bit of the UK that sticks out at the far bottom left. It's very sunny, very pretty, a popular destination for tourists, and has an interesting history.

Ariel: OK, and what does Cornwall mean to you?

Artoria: For most of my life, Cornwall has just been where I'm from. But more recently, I've come to realise that, more fundamentally... Hmm, is 'fundamentally' OK?

Ariel: 'Fundamentally' is OK!

Artoria: OK.

Ariel: For the listeners, I was, like, talking to Artoria before about, like, don't use super difficult words, but in that case it's OK, because you could understand the meaning of that sentence even if you weren't quite sure about 'fundamentally'. So 'fundamentally' is like 'basically'. Yeah.

Artoria: So fundamentally it's my home. it's where I was shaped and it holds a lot of meaning to me that I'm still deciphering, that I'm still working out.

Ariel: So you said it shaped you, and I think that's a really interesting metaphor. Because often when people talk about growing up, family, the place they're from, they talk about, you know, roots and, like, growing like a tree, but shaping, does that bring any specific ideas to your mind?

Artoria: I think of the cliffs and the sea and fishing boats, harbours. Particularly places like St. Ives and Newlyn. Places where either my family came from or worked at or both.

Ariel: Something that I'm sure you will have lots to complain about is tourism in Cornwall. You did mention at the beginning it's a very touristy part of the UK. What is the relationship between Cornish people and tourism?

Artoria: Mixed. On the one hand, it is the main industry, money maker, for the region. Every summer we get thousands of people coming down to visit, to explore, to see the sights, to spend a lot of time on the beaches sunbathing, surfing, playing.

But, on the other hand, it's damaged the region a lot. It's damaged Cornwall to a very deep extent. Because the industry is very seasonal, there isn't much else going on at other times of the year, and so many places feel so empty. And feeding into that is that so many houses and buildings are now B&Bs, hotels, or second homes that just sit empty for most of the year, and so, where once there were communities, there isn't much left. It's a shadow of its former self. Property prices are way higher than what locals can afford, driving someone such as myself away, and killing the communities.

Ariel: I remember when we were in, uh, St. Ives quite recently, and we walked down to Newlyn, and the difference between the two is really, like, very stark, very strong. You immediately notice that this is not a touristy area. Obviously, it's where the fishing market is, and so it's really much more based around the local fishermen. But I remember you saying there were buildings that looked very old, worn down, and you said, you know, they were exactly how they were now as they were when you were growing up when they were already very old, right?

Something I've always felt, actually, going to Cornwall is that Cornish people are so friendly and, you know, we live now in Devon, which is right next to Cornwall, but you can feel a big difference in Cornwall, that, OK, people are used to a lot of tourists, so people in shops and stuff, they're really chatty. But would you say there's also a feeling of resentment, or is it kind of more of a complicated feeling? Towards the tourists, I mean.

Artoria: Depends on who you ask. If you ask someone who is connected to the tourism industry, there is that more complicated feeling of, yes, resentment, but also, almost a relief that at least there is some sort of money coming into the region. But if you're asking anyone who isn't connected, people who work in the fishing industry, farming or anything else, um, such as most of my family, there's a lot more resentment towards tourists, as particularly the older generations remember there being communities and life in many places like St. Ives, and today, there are many new constructions, houses, hotels that don't fit. They really don't fit the character and they're not owned by the locals. The locals have nothing to do with it. And so tourism is seen as a destroyer of what was there.

Ariel: Hmm. OK, um, maybe let's move to a slightly less depressing topic and talk a bit about Cornish history. So what is it about Cornish history that interests you?

Artoria: So there's history in general, which I love. I love learning about why people acted the way they did, why things happened the way they did, what impacts and events and catastrophes, but also, traditions and ceremonies impacted people, and how they formed communities. Growing up, I knew basically nothing about my own home's history, along with its culture, and I had no idea there was even a Cornish language.

What particularly drives me with Cornwall is, Cornish people, what our history is, and how our culture forms, and even something like the Cornish dialect, like, how did that form from the language and the region's distinct identity?

Language does separate and form how we view the world and it wasn't until the 18th century where the Cornish language started to actually die out. And so that's a very long time in which Cornwall was a part of England, a part of the United Kingdom, and was part of this wider history, but at the same time was separate, due to the language and the geography.

Cornwall is very separate from the rest of the UK because of how distant it is. The River Tamar does form a natural barrier. And I want to learn more about what came before in Cornwall and why things are the way they are today and to share that with others.

Ariel: I'll just explain for the benefit of the listeners: the Cornish language is a Celtic language. So it's related to Welsh, uh, Scots Gaelic, uh, Irish. And then of course there are Celtic languages in other parts of Europe, but, um, pretty much all of them are extinct or, you know, struggling right now. And there have been lots of revival efforts, especially for Welsh, but, uh, Cornish revival is quite a recent thing, isn't it?

Artoria: Yeah, the last known person to have spoken Cornish as a mother tongue died right towards the start of the 20th century, and there was a good couple of decades before some sort of a revival effort started to take place.

It's growing. The number of people who are learning Cornish is growing, but it's very slow. And it doesn't have that much support. As far as I'm aware, there is only one nursery that actually teaches Cornish and uses Cornish as the primary language.

Ariel: Yeah, it's very interesting because pretty much the only language that has successfully been revived to a widespread degree where it's become...

So we talk about nativisation, right? Where there are enough people who speak this language natively that the grammar becomes regularised, the pronunciation becomes regularised, and there starts to be a strong consensus of 'this is the way we speak'.

But the key step in that nativisation is the first generation passing on the language to a second generation and, um, pretty much the only language I know of that successfully, you know, had completely died out and they did that was Hebrew, where ancient Hebrew was kind of revived, and modern Hebrew is different to ancient Hebrew in many ways, but that nativisation process was able to happen.

Of course, these days, there are lots of factors that make that very difficult. You know, there are some regions of Cornwall which are some of the poorest regions in Europe, and as you say, because of the tourism industry, it's very hard for people to stay in Cornwall, so to even have generations of people staying there, settling down, having kids, passing on the language, that in itself is so difficult with the way that the world works now.

So are there any Cornish dialectal terms that you particularly like that you would like to introduce to people? The one that I think you've mentioned the most to me is 'dreckly'. So that's spelt D-R-E-C-K-L-Y. So what does 'dreckly' mean?

Artoria: OK, so dreckly is like, soon ish. Like, I'll be there dreckly. I'll be there soon, but the time frame is indeterminate. It could be a couple of minutes, it could be a few hours.

Ariel: It kind of sounds like directly. I don't know if that's where it comes from. In slightly old-fashioned English you can say 'I'll be there directly' to mean I'll be there soon. I don't know if that's where it comes from. But also there's a word they use in South America 'ahorita' which means 'little now' and it's basically the same thing. And that I think is a good example because it shows a cultural difference in the understanding of time between England and Cornwall.

Artoria: Yeah, Cornwall definitely has – ignoring the tourism – a very relaxed, sedate pace to life. Things will get done, but there's no, you know, specific time in which they'll get done. It will happen at some point in the future.

Ariel: Yeah, maybe after going surfing or, like, having a cup of tea.

Artoria: Pasties. Some scones. Heavy cake.

Ariel: If you don't know these foods, you should look them up. They're very nice.

So obviously we've talked about a lot of negatives about tourism, but I'm sure there are people listening who are thinking like, oh, maybe I want to visit Cornwall. So if someone is going to come and visit Cornwall, how can they be a respectful tourist?

Artoria: I would say stay at B&Bs, as they are going to be run by locals, and so that will help to put money directly to locals rather than big companies where locals don't really see much of the money.

Another thing I would say is, try and find and visit any local museums. A lot of them, I think, are run by volunteers and they tend to be quite hidden away, so people tend not to visit them too much. They have a lot of good things there, talking about the local history of, and culture of, the settlements that those museums are a part of. And it's good to keep that alive and to share that.

And the final thing would be to just don't feed the seagulls. They're bad enough as it is.

Ariel: Absolutely. I would also maybe add, and this is just more of a general tip, consider visiting off season. You know, the main tourism season is the summer, but of course the beaches get so packed at that time. And, you know, with the British summer, you're not even guaranteed great weather if you go in the summer.

If you go off season, you can have a lot more space on the beach, you can talk to locals more, and they'll probably be a lot more friendly because it won't be such a busy season, and there's plenty of stuff you can do, even if the weather isn't great, like walking along the coast, visiting museums, like you suggested. I think it's a really great way to get more of a, like, a realistic view of what it's like there.

Well, it's been really lovely talking to you about this. Obviously a lot of these conversations we've had together privately, but it's really nice to hear you share them in this way, and I'm sure the listeners are really going to appreciate it as well. So thank you so much.

And, um, if you would like me to interview Artoria again, you should email me at Ariel@EasyStoriesInEnglish.com and tell me what you thought of the interview and if there's anything in particular you'd like to hear about. Thank you so much, Artoria.

Artoria: Thank you.

Ariel: All right, bye. Well, not really bye, I mean, we live together, so. Bye, bye to the listeners.

Artoria: You want me to say bye?

Ariel: Go on!

Artoria: Bye.