

# Dr Caitlin R. Green

History · Archaeology · Lectures & Seminars

The personal website & blog of Dr Caitlin Green

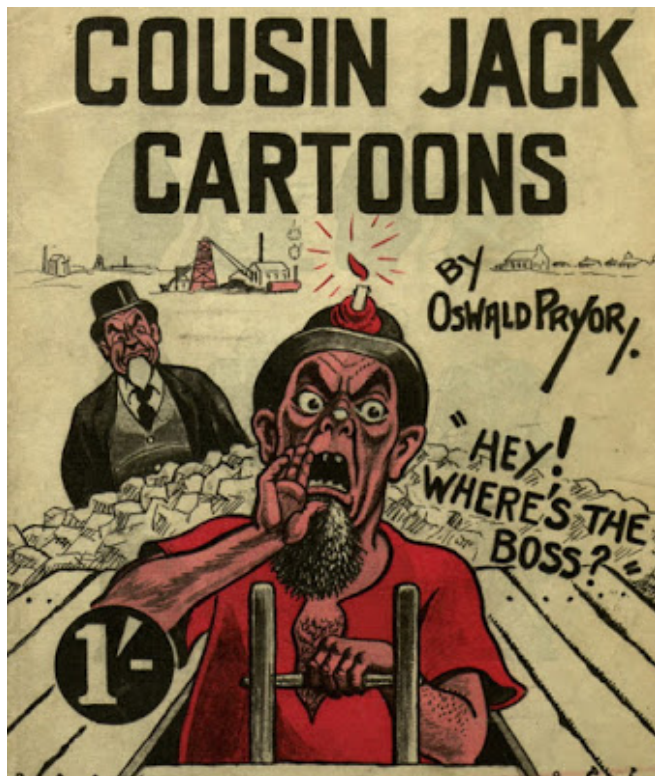


Home	About	Academic Research	Late/Post-Roman Britain	Lincolnshire History	Long-Distance Contacts	Cornwall & Other Topics	
------	-------	-------------------	-------------------------	----------------------	------------------------	-------------------------	--

Friday, 22 January 2021

## Why 'Cousin Jack?' The origins of the nickname of the Cornish overseas

The following draft is concerned with the curious use of the nickname 'Cousin Jack' for the Cornish in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. The 'Great Emigration' of the Cornish between around 1815 and the First World War saw what has been termed the 'wholesale scattering' of the Cornish to the new mining frontiers of North and South America, Australia and South Africa. From at least the mid-nineteenth century, these emigrants were known as 'Cousin Jacks', but the origin of this term seems rather obscure. The aim of the following note is to investigate the evidence for the early usage of the term 'Cousin Jack' and make some suggestions as to its origins in light of this evidence.



The cover of Oswald Pryor's *Cousin Jack Cartoons* (Sydney, 1945); Pryor was the son of Cornish parents and born at Moonta, South Australia. The book says the following of the front cover image: 'The cover design suggests a miner who has knocked off early, and has come up a ladderway remote from the main shaft in order to avoid running into the boss. Unfortunately he has run into the trouble he meant to avoid. This situation will be, obvious to all who know the Moonta scene. —The miner's hat here depicted is made of hard compressed pulp and colored a deep maroon when new. The candle is stuck on the front of the hat with a lump of wet red clay. This was the practice of old Cornish miners for generations.' (Image: [State Library of Victoria](#))

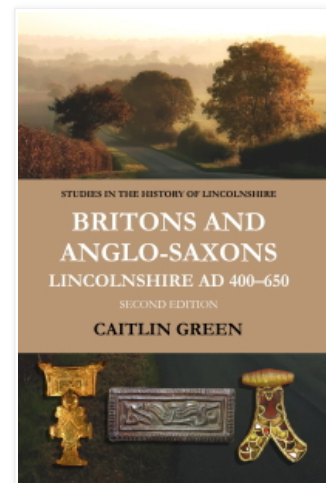
The 'Great Emigration' of the Cornish in the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries seems to have occurred on a quite remarkable scale. Margaret James-Korany has, for example, identified 42,000 individual emigrants sailing from the principal ports of Cornwall for Canada between 1831 and 1860, with some 6,200 leaving from Padstow alone in that period, and this outflow continued long after 1860 too. Thus the *Cornish Telegraph* for 5 September 1866 published a piece regretting 'the rage for emigration' in recent years,

### About This Website

This is the blog of Dr Caitlin Green FSA. It features posts on my main academic research foci alongside other topics that I'm currently working on, including drafts of papers, ideas and similar—these are usually identifiable by the presence of footnotes. You're free to cite these drafts if they are of interest, and are reminded that academic blogs are indeed [citable](#) under most citation systems. In addition, the current site also houses posts relating to my personal interests, including long-distance trade, migration and contacts; landscape and coastal history; early literature and legends; and the history, archaeology, place-names and legends of Lincolnshire and Cornwall. For further details of this website & how to contact me, please see the ['About'](#) page or [@caitlingreen](#) on Twitter.

### Search This Blog

**Britons and Anglo-Saxons (Second Edition, 2020)**  
by Dr Caitlin Green



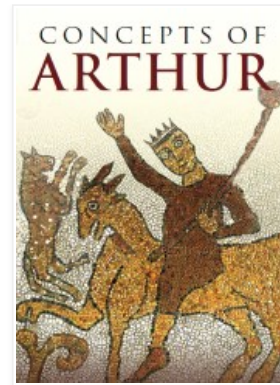
**Concepts of Arthur** by Dr Caitlin Green

noting that 'the rush for Australia and America has been very great', and recent calculations suggest that at least 240,000 Cornish went overseas between 1860 and 1900, with a similar number leaving for England and Wales, with the result that Cornwall lost around a third of its population across the period. This depopulation was particularly marked amongst the youngest age-groups. Philip Payton observes that 44.8% of the Cornish male population aged fifteen to twenty-four left for overseas between 1861 and 1900, along with 26.2% of the female population in the same age group, and another 30% and 35.5% respectively left for other counties within Britain as well.(1)

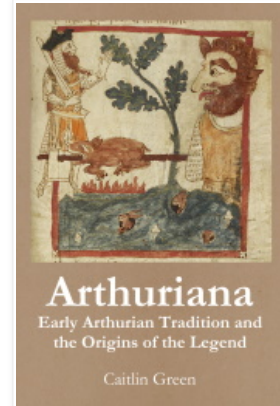
The use of the term 'Cousin Jack' for the Cornish, particularly miners and especially emigrant miners, along with its companion-term 'Cousin Jenny', is well-evidenced from the second half of the nineteenth century onwards. John H. Forster's account of 'Life in the copper mines of Lake Superior', given to the Michigan Pioneer and Historical Society in 1887, contains the following illustrative passage:

The Cornishman, or "Cousin Jack," is a native of the duchy of Cornwall, England... The Cornishman of the present day, like his father, is of a roving disposition. His footsteps may be traced around the globe. There is no prominent mining field in the world wherein you will not find "Cousin Jack." He is in Alaska, California, the Rocky Mountains, Mexico, Central and South America, in Australia, India and Lake Superior. He is a first rate miner and possesses a certain sturdiness of frame and disposition that commends him to the observer. He works hard, eats well and fights bravely. He is, numerically, very strong in our northern mines, and, being, as a rule, steady, conservative and skillful, he finds ready employment. He likes mining; esteems his vocation among the most honorable, if not aristocratic. He despises the duties of an ordinary day laborer. In short, he is a born miner and nothing else... But "Cousin Jack's" language attracts most attention. His dialect, pure and simple, is unique. He uses many English words with a strange twist, while other words of his you would look for in vain in Webster's unabridged... But we find in the mines many gentlemen of Cornish birth who are well educated and efficient, occupying positions of trust and responsibility. Many of the captains and agents are Cornishmen.(2)

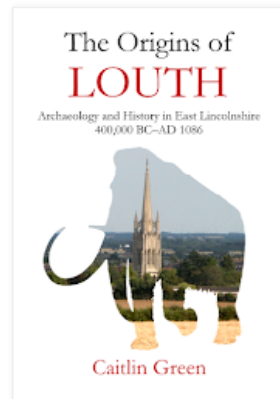
Quite when and where these Cornish emigrants started to be known as 'Cousin Jacks' is not wholly clear, unfortunately, and various theories have been proposed over the years, most of which locate the genesis of the term overseas in America, Australia or other places where Cornish miners emigrated to in the nineteenth century. The *Cornubian and Redruth Times* in 1908, for example, carried a piece suggesting that the term 'Cousin Jack' was first used in the California mining districts in the very late 1840s and spread out from there, with the additional claim that 'twenty years ago the term in Cornwall was unknown'; however, as we shall see, neither claim stands up to scrutiny, and the reality is perhaps even more interesting.(3)



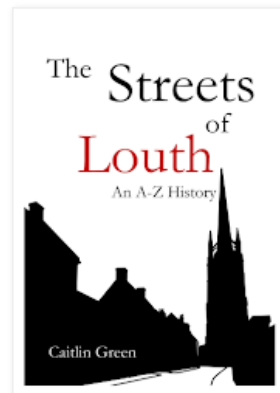
Arthuriana by Dr Caitlin Green

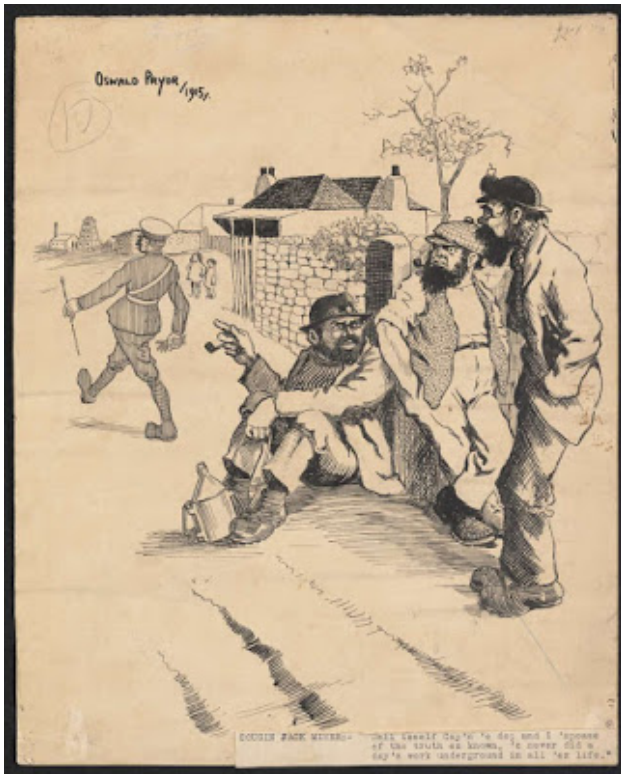


The Origins of Louth by Dr Caitlin Green



The Streets of Louth by Dr Caitlin Green





An Australian Cousin Jack cartoon by Oswald Pryor from 1915; the caption reads 'Cousin Jack miner: - "Call issel'f Cap'n 'e do; and I 'spouse ef the truth ez known, 'e never did a day's work underground in all 'ez life.'" (Image: [Trove](#))

Looking at the documentary evidence for the usage of the term, a traditional place to start is with the *Oxford English Dictionary*, which cites a number of examples of the use of Cousin Jack under their *Cousin, n.* and *Jack, n.* entries. One, from Rolf Boldrewood's Australian novel *Miner's Right* of 1890, describes 'a short man, whose blue-black curly hair and deep-set eyes betrayed the Cousin Jack', (4) whilst the earliest given is from *The Star* newspaper of Ballarat, Victoria (Australia) on the 19 March 1857, which runs as follows:

They were 'Tips', and 'Geordies', and 'Cousin Jacks', altogether, and I did as well as I could. (5)

The fact that both of the early citations are from Australia has sometimes been taken to suggest that the term could have emerged there, and it is certainly treated as such by the *English Dialect Dictionary* under its entry for *Cousin*. (6) In addition to these entries, the *OED* also records what it treats as a variant of Cousin Jack, *Cousin Jacky*. This is said to be documented first in the *South Australian Register*, from Adelaide, for 2 June 1854, via the following passage: 'John O'Connell then said to him, "You're a b---, Cousin Jacky, an't you?"', although the term also occurs in dialogue from Australian court reports of the 1840s too, e.g. 'I don't like you cousin Jackies, keep your own company, and I'll keep mine', which appeared in the *South Australian*, 30 May 1848. (7) However, 'Cousin Jacky' is not only documented in Australian contexts; it also appears in, for example, Thomas Quiller Couch's *East Cornwall Words*, published by the English Dialect Society in 1880, where it is treated as an East Cornwall term for a miner from West Cornwall:

There is a marked difference between the speech of East and West Cornwall... At the beginning of the present century mining adventure, especially in the search for copper, became a furor in East Cornwall, and a passionate enthusiasm brought hither the skilled miners of the West, who flocked to the banks of Tywardreath Bay, and further east to the central granite ridge about the tors of Caradon. These immigrants brought with them and have left an infusion of their language, especially its technical portion, but I remember when it was a great mimetic feat, and productive of much mirth amongst us, to be able to imitate the talk of Cousin Jacky from Redruth or St. Just. (8)

T. Q. Couch of Bodmin, the father of Sir Arthur Quiller-Couch (aka Q), was born in 1826 at Lansallos near Fowey, and seems to be here recounting a usage known to him in his youth, and is clearly referring to someone from West Cornwall, not a Cornish emigrant overseas. Likewise, in a letter printed in the *West Briton and Cornwall Advertiser* for 28 March 1862, Christopher Childs of Liskeard uses 'Cousin Jacky' in passing as a seemingly well-known, common and friendly term traditionally used between Cornish miners:

- ▼ 2021 (2)
- ▼ January (2)

Why 'Cousin Jack'? The origins of the nickname of ...

[Lissingleys, the meeting-place of Anglo-Saxon & An...](#)

- ▶ 2020 (7)
- ▶ 2019 (2)
- ▶ 2018 (9)
- ▶ 2017 (9)
- ▶ 2016 (18)
- ▶ 2015 (22)
- ▶ 2014 (23)

#### Popular Posts



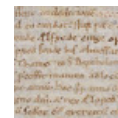
[The medieval 'New England': a forgotten Anglo-Saxon colony on the north-eastern Black Sea coast](#)

Although the name 'New England' is now firmly associated with the east coast of America, this is not the first place to be called th...



[A very long way from home: early Byzantine finds at the far ends of the world](#)

The following brief post is once again offered largely for the sake of interest, being concerned with the furthest limits of the distributio...



[King Alfred and India: an Anglo-Saxon embassy to southern India in the ninth century AD](#)

One of the more intriguing references to early medieval contacts between Britain and the wider world is found in the 'Anglo-Saxon Chroni...



[Britain, the Byzantine Empire, and the concept of an Anglo-Saxon 'Heptarchy': Harun ibn Yahya's ninth-century Arabic description of Britain](#)

The aim of the following post is to offer a draft look at an interesting Arabic account of early medieval Britain that appears to have its o...



[A note on the evidence for African migrants in Britain from the Bronze Age to the medieval period](#)

The degree to which pre-modern Britain included people of African origin within its population continues to be a topic of considerable int...



[Another eleventh-century medieval Chinese coin found in England](#)

A previous post discussed a find of a Northern Song dynasty Chinese coin from England whose context suggested that it may have been a genui...

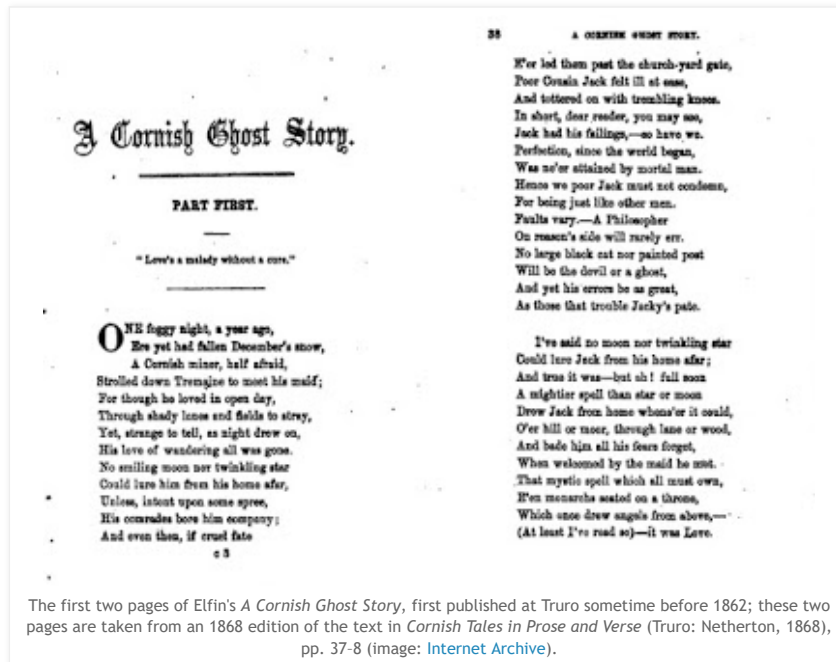


[Were there Huns in Anglo-Saxon England? Some thoughts on Bede, Priscus & Attila](#)



The very motto of the Cornish miners, "One and All," at once bespeaks our favour, and indicates that [Cornish miners] are not naturally selfish, but on the contrary, are kindly disposed one toward another. If any one doubt this, let him attend the funeral of a miner, and observe how they congregate to pay the last sad tribute of respect, and drop a tear over the grave of their departed comrade... How forcibly does the familiar name "comrade," and the expression of "Com'se along Cousin Jacky," speak in favour of his friendly and social disposition.(9)

In contrast, in Margaret Ann Courtney's *West Cornwall Words* (which was bound together with Couch's *East Cornwall Words* of 1880), 'Cousin Jacky' features as a local dialect term meaning 'a foolish person, a coward', with 'Cousin Jan' instead being given as the name for Cornishman—the latter variant is discussed further below, as is the former definition for Cousin Jacky.(10)

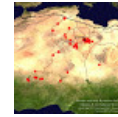


The first two pages of Elfin's *A Cornish Ghost Story*, first published at Truro sometime before 1862; these two pages are taken from an 1868 edition of the text in *Cornish Tales in Prose and Verse* (Truro: Netherton, 1868), pp. 37-8 (image: [Internet Archive](#)).

Needless to say, the above references do seem to cast serious doubt upon the implication of the report in the *Cornubian and Redruth Times* in 1908 that the term 'Cousin Jack' and similar was unknown in Cornwall in the late 1880s, and in this light it is worth noting that Sharron Schwartz has, in fact, suggested that the 'evidence seems to point to the mines of Devonshire in the eighteenth century' as the place where the term Cousin Jack originated, via migrant Cornish miners seeking work in Devon rather than overseas.(11) Although she unfortunately offers no citation to support this, this suggestion certainly would seem to accord reasonably well with the apparent mid-nineteenth-century Cornish usage of 'Cousin Jacky' for a miner from West Cornwall discussed above. Some further evidence that supports such an early usage in Britain, rather than just overseas, for 'Cousin Jack'/'Cousin Jacky' might be sought in the following three publications. The first is *A Cornish Ghost Story*, by Georgina Verrall writing as "Elfin", of which only the second edition survives, which was printed at Lemon Street, Truro, in 1862, priced 3d. Quite when the first edition was printed is unfortunately unrecorded, although a notional date of c. 1860 has sometimes been supplied; this poem starts as follows:

One foggy night, a year ago  
Ere yet had fallen December's snow,  
A Cornish miner half afraid,  
Stroll'd down Tremaine to meet his maid...  
Poor Cousin Jack felt ill at ease,  
And totter'd on with trembling knees,  
In short, dear reader, you may see,  
Jack had his failings,—so have we...  
Now cousin Jacky was, no doubt,  
A comely youth when "oal trick'd out;"  
To use his own expression, he  
A "clain-off man" was said to be,  
And many a maiden inly sighed  
To be the handsome miner's bride;...(12)

The following post offers a little idle speculation to help pass the time on the question of whether there was any Hunnic influence on fifth...



#### Saharan and trans-Saharan contacts and trade in the Roman era

The following post offers a brief discussion of Saharan and trans-Saharan contacts in the Roman era along with a distribution map of Roman f...



#### A Christmas visitor: the Byzantine emperor's trip to London in the winter of 1400-01

The aim of following post is to share an interesting fifteenth-century image of the meeting between King Henry IV and the Byzantine emperor ...



#### Global Britain? A brief chronology of an awareness of Britain's existence

The following quick post is really just a bit of fun, designed to look briefly at the potential evidence for a spreading awareness of Britai...

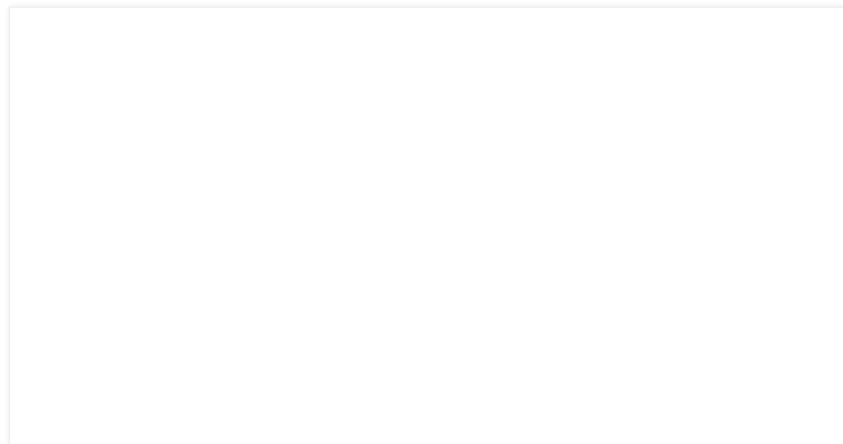
It then continues with long passages written to reflect Cornish dialect, relating the meeting of the miner 'Cousin Jack/Jacky' with his maid, Mary, and their subsequent talk and deeds. Needless to say, this passage would seem to provide evidence for a Cornish usage of 'Cousin Jack/Jacky' for a miner still living in Cornwall sometime in the 1850s or very early 1860s. Interestingly, the same pamphlet also offers evidence for 'Cousin Jan' and perhaps Jenny—both Jan and Jenny occur for other characters in the text of the poem, suggesting they too were seen as conventional names for Cornish characters, and 'Cousin Jan' moreover recurs in the titles of two further pamphlets that are advertised on the rear of *A Cornish Ghost Story*, namely *The Bâl, or, 'Tes a Bra' Keenly Lode, Cousin Jan's Story* (first published at Helston in 1850) and its sequel *Cousin Jan's Courtship and Marriage* (first published at Truro in 1859), both by William Bentinck Forfar. The earliest of these, published three years before the first reference in the *OED* reference to *Cousin Jan* (which is, in fact, taken from a newspaper advert for this pamphlet from 1853, although the *OED* doesn't mention this), includes the following passage:

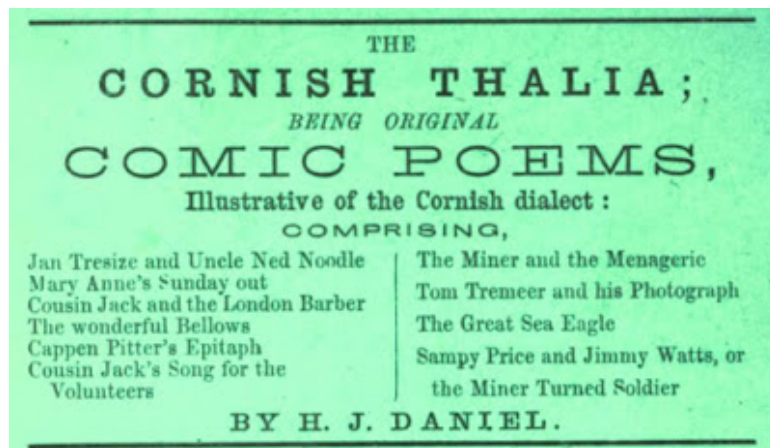
If you'll listen to me for a moment, you shall  
Hear all about trying and working a Bâl;  
How the Lode is discovered by a small hazel twig,  
Carried over the ground by some knowing old prig...  
When the knowing old Dowzer this discovery's made  
He marks out the spot and then calls his comrade,  
Saying, "Hallo! Cozen Jan, d'ee come 'long wi' me,  
'Tes the keenliest gozan thee ever ded'st see...(13)

Cousin Jan in the narrative then takes a sample of the ore to a Captain Polglaze, 'a Purser, well known, Who quickly, by mining, a rich man had grown'. He declares that they must go to London to raise funds ('The went up to Bristol by a steamer from Hayle, And proceeded from Bristol to London by rail'), and their adventure is then recounted in Cornish dialect by Cousin Jan. Subsequently, the form 'Cousin Jan' is found in a handful of Cornish newspaper articles from the 1860s to the 1890s as the name of a Cornish 'everyman' or as a general name for Cornishmen/Cornish miner, *i.e.* it seems to have functioned as a variant form of 'Cousin Jack'/'Cousin Jacky'. This is supported by the fact that 'Cozen Jan' first appears in Forfar's poem as part of a phrase that seems essentially identical to Christopher Child's traditional Cornish miner's phrase "Com'se along Cousin Jacky".

The second publication that further illustrates an early usage of 'Cousin Jack' and similar in Britain, without obvious reference to Cornish emigrants, is a report in *The Cornish Telegraph* for 27 September 1854. This briefly recounted the exhumation of a miner who fell down the shaft of Pednandrea Mine, Redruth in the 1820s. The rediscovery of his remains apparently prompted 'great excitement' and his funeral procession on Sunday, 17 September 1854, was attended by four thousand people, equal to around half of the population of Redruth at that time. What is particularly striking is that, although his real name is given as John Stephens, the newspaper notes that in life he was 'better known as "Cousin Jack Cobbler,"(14) something that obviously suggests the use of the nickname 'Cousin Jack' in Cornwall as far back as the 1820s. The status of Stephens' alternative name as a nickname is confirmed by the report on the inquest published the previous week in the *Royal Cornwall Gazette*:

On Saturday the 16th instant, an inquest was held... on the body of John Stephens, aged 25 years. According to the evidence of William Thomas, miner, it appeared that as long ago as the 9th of August, 1828, the deceased and his brother were employed in stripping the shaft, and drawing up the materials in the Pednandrea Mine, near Redruth... The deceased and witness both fell into the shaft together... Deceased was well known in the neighbourhood by the nickname of "Cousin Jack Cobbler."(15)





A mid-nineteenth-century advert for H. J. Daniel's *The Cornish Thalia*, published c. 1860 at Devonport, which included two poems with 'Cousin Jack' in the title (image: [Internet Archive](#)).

The third interesting early publication from Cornwall to refer to Cousin Jack is the collection of comic poems by Henry John Daniel's published as *The Cornish Thalia, Being Original Cornish Poems, Illustrative of the Cornish Dialect*. Although this was published at Devonport without date, it is advertised in the rear of a pamphlet published in 1859 and advertised in the *Cornish Times* on 28 July 1860, so was presumably written in the 1850s and in print by either the end of that decade or 1860.<sup>(16)</sup> This volume included poems with the titles 'Cousin Jack and the London barber' and 'Cousin Jack's song for the volunteers', and H. J. Daniel followed it up in 1862 and 1863 with new books of poems entitled *Mirth for "One and All;" or, Comic Tales and Sketches* and *Mary Anne's Career (continued) and Cousin Jack's Adventures*, which included items with the titles 'Cousin Jack and the sundial', 'Cousin Jack at Summercourt Fair', 'Cousin Jack and the Piskies', and 'Cousin Jack and the Gipsy'.<sup>(17)</sup> In the front of *The Cornish Thalia*, Daniel has the following to say, which suggests that 'Cousin Jack' was being used by him at least partly in the West Cornwall sense of 'a fool', as documented by M. A. Courtney in 1880 for 'Cousin Jacky', in addition to being a commonplace term for a Cornish miner:

In the following pages, merely to illustrate the mode of thought and expression amongst a certain class of the mining population of Cornwall. Whatever surprise the uninitiated reader may experience from the exaggerated and *bizarre* observations of *Cousin Jack*, they are strictly in accordance with fact. This arises from an ignorance of the world at large; at the same time there is no race of men possessed of better natural abilities. Shrewd, quick, and discriminating, they may be deceived once, but seldom twice; besides this, a rich vein of originality frequently runs through their remarks, which affords considerable amusement.<sup>(18)</sup>

This sense is confirmed by Daniel's first poem in *The Cornish Thalia*, 'Cousin Jack and the London barber', which begins thus:

About a dozen years or so  
 Ago,  
 A Cornish Miner (let the truth be written)  
 Was walking through the streets with wonder smitten—  
 His eyes wide open, staring at the shops.

Subsequently, Cousin Jack, as he wanders around London, spies a barber's shop and declares 'There's nething down to Camebourne like this here' and goes in for a shave. He then becomes confused by a bar of soap and a basin of suds and water ('What es it here?'); taking it for broth with potatoes in, Jack consumes it entirely to the shock of the London barber, declaring that he:

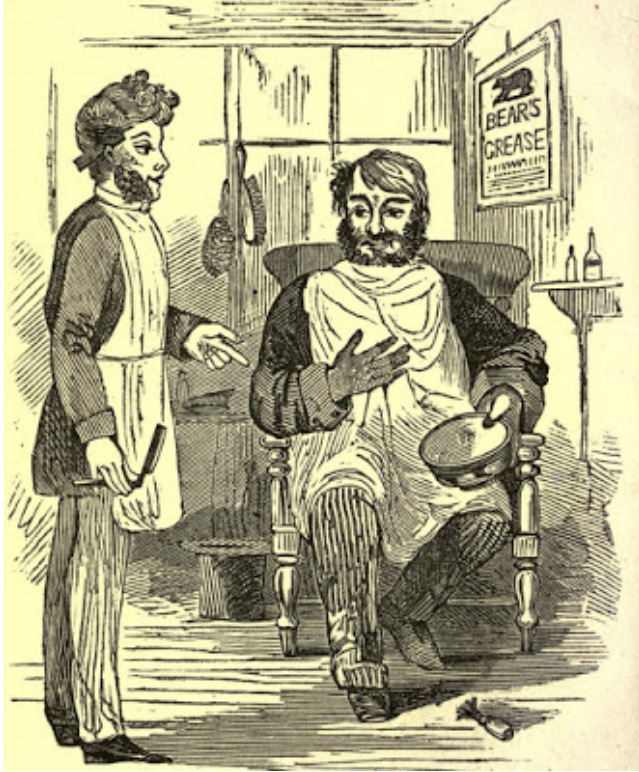
lapp'd it in a moment like a cat...  
 I dedden mind for spoons, or sives [=herbs], or bread;  
 I liked your brath oncommon well I ded...  
 [but] I cudden bear the tettiess[=lumps of soap], no my dear!<sup>(19)</sup>

Needless to say, the poem seems rather mean-spirited, but it does at least once more add weight to the case for 'Cousin Jack' being a well-understood phrase in 1850s Cornwall, and one that Daniel, a Cornishman born at Lostwithiel in 1818, could freely use both as a generalised term for a Cornish miner and to make a mock of such men without worrying that it would need explaining. In this context, it is worth pointing out that the similar use of 'Cousin Jacky' as a name for both a miner and a fool seems to underlie the following

passage on a mine captain from T. R. Higham's *A Dialogue Between Tom Thomas and Bill Bilkey, Two Cornish Miners*, printed at Truro in 1866:

Tom: "What soort of Cappen es he down to thy Bâl, Bill"

Bill: "Well, I b'lieve he's so good a heart as ever took a mug in hand; but we dooan't know what to maake of un sometimes, caase he do git 'pon his jokes so often; he do think we are oall Cousin Jackies, but we arn't so bad fools as he do think we be, for we do know a passel moore 'bout copper an' tin than he do..."(20)



Cousin Jack and the London barber, from Henry John Daniel's *The Cornish Thalia*, published in the late 1850s or 1860; Cousin Jack has just drunk the barber's bowl of soap-suds and soap, thinking it broth and potatoes (image: [Internet Archive](#)).

If the date by which Cornish miners started to be known as Cousin Jacks/Jackies is somewhat uncertain, (although the term would certainly seem to have been in use in Cornwall by the 1820s and Australia by the 1840s, if not before), the same is true for the question of quite why they were called this. Much of the literature on 'Cousin Jacks' and the Great Emigration seems to pass over these questions or address them only briefly, frequently suggesting that it may result from the oft-cited 'clannishness' of the Cornish emigrants. For example:

The term "Cousin Jack" is believed to have originated from the fact that Cornish miners were clannish. It was very typical for a miner to assist his skilled countrymen in finding work in the mines of Grass Valley [California]. The tight relationships that formed amongst the Cornish led to criticism by outsiders that they all seemed to have a cousin named "Jack" with whom they were willing to work to the exclusion of everyone else.(21)

'Cousin Jack' is an informal term for a Cornishman, apparently originating with regard to labour migration during the 19th century. Several theories as to its development exist, but the most popular suggests that upon gaining employment at a mine, Cornish miners would lobby the management for the employment of fellow Cornish miners, stating that a newcomer was his 'cousin Jack'.(22)

In the early days "Cousin Jack" evoked envy, jealousy and even hatred, for it seemed that every position in the mine was reserved for yet another "Cousin" from Cornwall.(23)

Certainly, the 'clannish' Cornish miners seem to have often been commented upon in contemporary and near-contemporary reports. For example, in an article entitled



'Cornishmen on the Rand' about South African mining, published in the *West Briton and Cornish Advertiser* for 14 May 1908, the following passage occurs:

The Witwatersrand has proved a happy hunting ground for large numbers of Cornish miners, and at one time there were large mines here that employed only Cornishmen as skilled labourers... Often the manager was neither a Cornishman nor a mining man, and he found the Cousin Jack mine captain indispensable. A Cornish mine captain invariably meant Cornish shift bosses, and that, in turn, means Cornish workmen. (24)



A view of Cornish Town, also known as Cousin Jack Town, Inangahua County, New Zealand, with working men's huts, a narrow railway line running through the centre, and native forest behind; photograph taken by William Archer Price c. 1910s (image: [Flickr/National Library NZ](#)).

Whilst there is thus clear evidence that the Cornish miners in South Africa, Australia and America were indeed perceived as 'clannish' and could dominate mines in the manner suggested above, the idea that Cornish miners overseas suggesting their mine managers employ their supposed relatives could offer a full explanation for the origins of the term 'Cousin Jack' is certainly open to question. Not only does such an 'origin story' have the distinct feel of folk-etymology about it, but it is worth noting that whilst 'cousin' nowadays usually carries with it some sense of a claimed direct kin relationship, in the past it could also be used 'as a familiar and friendly term of address among non-kin', and it was apparently especially so used in this manner in Cornwall. (25) Perhaps most importantly, such a scenario also seems out of accord with the fact that the terms 'Cousin Jack' and 'Cousin Jacky' were *not* restricted in use to Cornish miners overseas, but were also known and used in the same period in Cornwall too, back at least as far as the 1820s, as discussed above. This is not to say that the 'clannishness' of the Cornish miners overseas might not have played a very large role in popularizing the wider usage and longevity of this phrase, but the idea that the term 'Cousin Jack' actually had its origins in Cornish miners overseas claiming to have a supposed 'cousin named "Jack" with whom they were willing to work to the exclusion of everyone else' seems unlikely to be strictly true in light of the evidence we have.

How, then, might the names 'Cousin Jack' and 'Cousin Jacky' be explained? A potentially more plausible scenario may be that the term 'Cousin Jack' or 'Cousin Jacky' actually had its roots in England, not overseas, as Sharron Schwartz has indeed suggested, perhaps being used originally of Cornish miners from West Cornwall working in Devon and/or East Cornwall in the eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries. Some of the Cornish references would certainly suggest that it was a familiar and well-known local nickname for a Cornish miner by the mid-nineteenth century, with no obvious indication that it meant someone who had been overseas. Of particular interest here may be the apparent 'mocking' tone of some—though by no means all—of the references: this is explicit in Daniel's *Cornish Thalia* and related poems of the late 1850s/1860s, and probably also underlies Thomas Quiller Couch (1826-1884) of Lansallos and Bodmin's apparent youthful memory of the fun to be had by mimicking 'the talk of Cousin Jacky from Redruth or St. Just'. The negative connotations are made particularly clear in Margaret Ann Courtney's *West Cornwall Words*, where 'Cousin Jacky' is defined as a local dialect word for a fool, the same sense as it clearly has in Higham's *A Dialogue Between Tom Thomas and Bill Bilkey, Two Cornish Miners*. This suggests that the name may not have been entirely appreciated by some Cornish miners, at least at first, and perhaps originated from outside of the Cornish mining



communities, *i.e.* it was applied to them by those whom they encountered outside of West Cornwall (the use of 'Cousin' could be a further element in this, referencing and/or mocking the apparently particularly West Cornish usage of 'cousin' as a term of friendly endearment for non-kin).(26) In this light, it is interesting to note that two of the handful of other compounds of the form 'Cousin X' in English are also negative in tone. Thus, *Cousin Betty* and *Cousin Betties* occur from at least the first half of the eighteenth century as a generic name for one or more female beggars or itinerant prostitutes, whilst *Cousin Tom* occurs from the 1740s as a name for a male beggar. Be this as it may, the name 'Cousin Jack' or 'Cousin Jacky' seems subsequently to have been 'reclaimed' and adopted by the Cornish miners both at home and, especially and increasingly, abroad, losing its negative/mockling connotations. As Sharron Schwartz notes, the term "Cousin Jack" became one 'used to express an "otherness"', with the Cornish overseas particularly leveraging it to promote their claimed identity as a 'distinct people with specific mining skills that they jealously guarded'.(27) Certainly, by the mid- to late nineteenth century it was being used as a self-designation by Cornishmen both at home and abroad, with people signing letters to newspapers in this era as either 'Cousin Jack' or 'Cousin Jacky'.(28)

Nonetheless, all of this does still leave open the question of why, specifically, 'Cousin Jack' came to be a nickname applied to Cornish miners and used by them, and not some other name. There is no sense that 'Jack' is a specifically or typically Cornish name, being rather a common English personal name (a by-name for John), despite occasional claims to the contrary. Jack might, of course, be being used in 'Cousin Jack' simply as a word for an 'everyman'. The *OED 2* notes under *Jack, n.* that 'Jack' was generally used in English as a term 'for any representative of the common people' or for any 'lad, fellow, chap; *esp.* a low-bred or ill-mannered fellow' back to at least the sixteenth century, if not before, so this is not an implausible suggestion.(29) Yet such a case would still not tell us *why* this specific nickname became so exclusively associated with the Cornish miners, initially perhaps being used of them by people outside of these communities who felt threatened by them and/or were mocking them before being adopted as a badge of ethnic identity and pride. There may, however, be a potential answer to this in the name and story of one of the most popular fictional Cornishmen of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, namely Jack the Giant-Killer.



A woodcut of Jack killing the giant of St Michael's Mount, Cormilan (aka Cormilion/Cormelian/Cormoran), from a chapbook version of *The History of Jack the Giant Killer* published in c. 1820 (image: [Wikimedia Commons](#)). Jack, a farmer's son from the Lands End district, dug a pit 24 foot deep in a single night with a shovel and pick-axe, into which he tricked the giant the next morning, whereupon Jack finished him off with his pick-axe.

*The History of Jack and the Giants* seems to have been first published in the early eighteenth century, with the earliest reference to it being sold coming from 1708 and the earliest surviving text having been published in 1711.(30) The tale proved to be incredibly popular and went through multiple print-runs, adaptations and revisions over the next century and a half, and Jack's origins in far west of Cornwall remain a strong thread throughout these. The chapbook tale begins as follows:

In the reign of King *Arthur*, near the *Lands-End of England*, namely, the county of *Cornwall*, there lived a wealthy Farmer, who had one only Son, commonly known by the name of Jack the Giantkiller.(31)

Jack's initial enemy is the giant Cormilan who lived at St Michael's Mount, Cornwall, and who Jack tricks by digging and disguising a hole, then rousing the giant and finishing him off with a pick-axe when he falls into the trap. Jack's reward is the giant's treasure and he

is named by the worthies of Marazion "the Giant Killer," a title that carries with it a sword and an embroidered belt, which read:

Here's the right valiant Cornish Man, *Who slew the Giant Cormilan.*(32)

Jack subsequently leaves Cornwall for overseas, in this case Wales, where he encounters further giants in need of his special skills. In one encounter, he holds the following important conversation and so tricks a Welsh giant into hiding in his dungeon whilst Jack and King Arthur's son feast in the monster's hall:

Jack rides full speed, when coming to the Gates of the castle, he knock'd with such force, that he made all the neighbouring hills resound. The Giant with a voice like thunder, roared out; who's there? He answered, none but your poor cousin Jack quoth he, what news with my poor cousin Jack? He replied, dear uncle, heavy news; God wot pritheer what heavy news can come to me? I am a Giant, with three heads; and besides thou knows I can fight five hundred men in Armour and make them fly like chaff before the wind. Oh! but (quoth Jack) here's the King's Son coming with a thousand men in Armour to kill you, and so to destroy all that you have. Oh! Cousin Jack, this is heavy news indeed; I have a large vault under the ground, where I will immediately hide myself, and thou shalt lock, bolt and bar me in, and keep the keys till the King's Son is gone.(33)



Jack the Giant Killer gives the finishing blow to the giant of St Michael's Mount, Cornwall, from J. Corner, *Favourite Fairy Tales* (Edinburgh, 1861), p. 79 (image: [Internet Archive](#)).

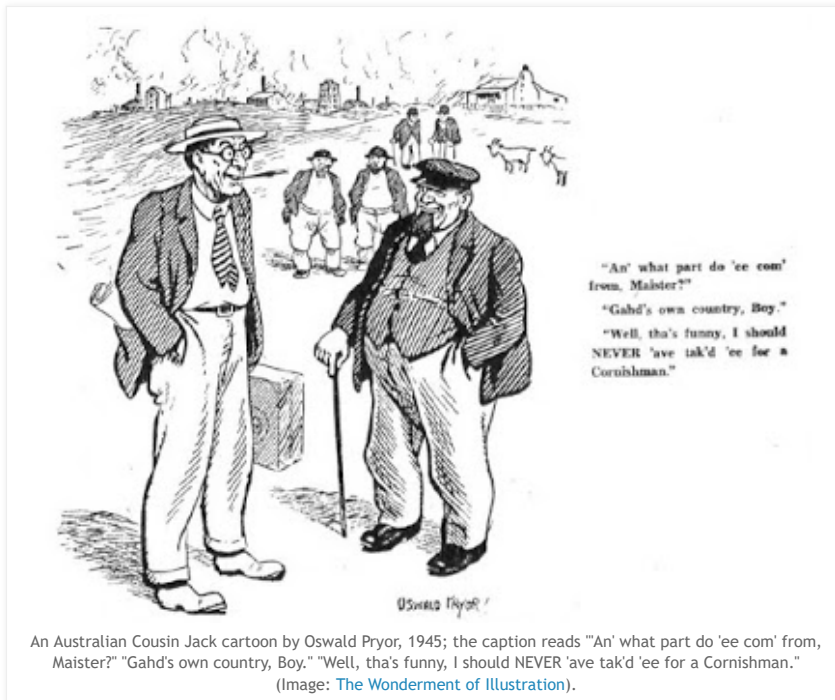
Needless to say, this is arresting. We have here a very well-known hero of eighteenth- and nineteenth-century popular tales who was named Jack, who grew up in West Cornwall, who achieved fame through the excavation of the Earth (digging a hole which the giant Cormilan could fall into and be finished off with a pick-axe), who travelled overseas—here Wales—to pursue his calling, and who, whilst there, was at least on occasion known by the name 'Cousin Jack'. This tale was adapted variously and frequently as, for example, a farce, a 'musical entertainment', a ballet, a 'burlesque extravaganza', and multiple times as a 'favourite Serio-Comic Pantomime' and similar.(34) It also became a popular nursery and children's tale, being issued variously with lurid woodcuts, tinted pictures, or grouped in collections with *Jack and the Beanstalk* (itself arguably a variant of *Jack the Giant-Killer*), *Sleeping Beauty*, and *Little Red Riding Hood*.(35) As *The Illustrated London News* opined in 1848, Jack the Giant-Killer was:

the hero dear to all boys who have a particle of generosity and imagination in their souls. Does there exist a man who never envied Jack his seven-league

boots and his invisible coat, and who never laughed at that inimitable trick by which he made the gluttonous, false-hearted Welsh giant commit suicide? If there do exist such a man, he is like the man who hath no music in his soul... Let no such man be trusted... The man who did not, when a boy, admire Jack the Giant-Killer... is a hard, dry man, with no poetry in his composition; and does not deserve to see Jack reproduced even in a magic lantern.(36)

In other words, the immensely popular eighteenth- and nineteenth-century fictional Cornish hero Jack, aka 'Cousin Jack', would clearly be a natural reference point for anyone encountering a person from West Cornwall. In such circumstances, it seems quite credible that the widespread knowledge of Jack's adventures might have led to people from West Cornwall, especially those who dug holes(!), being jokingly—and perhaps somewhat mockingly—nicknamed 'Cousin Jack' after him in the manner hypothesised above, with the nickname being subsequently reclaimed and adopted as a badge of ethnic identity and pride by the Cornish, particularly those living overseas. Certainly, such a scenario seems to offer the only really plausible explanation thus far advanced for why miners from West Cornwall were specifically nicknamed 'Cousin Jack', rather than any other name.

In conclusion, although the nickname 'Cousin Jack' is often thought to have emerged overseas and to reflect the 'clannishness' of the Cornish emigrant mining communities and their desire to have mine-owners employ only other Cornish emigrants, claiming them to be their supposed 'Cousin Jacks', the evidence does not really support this. Instead, the term seems to have been used from at least as early in Britain too, if not earlier, and it appears to have additionally been thought by the nineteenth-century Cornish to have had some sort of mocking connotations. One potential explanation for this situation is that 'Cousin Jack' was originally a joking or mocking nickname applied to miners from West Cornwall by those outside of this community who encountered them, perhaps initially in Devon or East Cornwall in the eighteenth or early nineteenth centuries. This name is most plausibly explained as a jovial reference to the immensely popular eighteenth- and nineteenth-century hero Jack the Giant-Killer, whose tale tells how he came from West Cornwall, killed a giant by excavating a large hole into which he fell, and was known on occasion as 'Cousin Jack' when away from home. At first, the nickname would seem to have been seen with some ambivalence by Cornish miners, but it would subsequently appear that 'Cousin Jack' was reclaimed and adopted by the Cornish, especially by those taking part in the 'Great Emigration', who used it to express their 'otherness' and promote their own distinctive identity.



#### Footnotes

1. See especially P. Payton, *The Cornish Overseas: A History of Cornwall's 'Great Emigration'* (Fowey, 2005), and P. Payton, *Cornwall, A History* (Fowey, 2004), chapter 10. For earlier scholarship see, for example, A. L. Rowse, *The Cousin Jacks: the Cornish in America* (New York, 1969).
2. John H. Forster, 'Life in the copper mines of Lake Superior', *Michigan Pioneer and Historical Collections*, 9 (1888), 175-86 at pp. 183-4.

3. "'Cousin Jack" and "Cussing Jack"', *Cornubian and Redruth Times*, 4 June 1908, p. 3.
4. *Oxford English Dictionary* (Second Edition, 1989), s.v. Jack, n.<sup>1</sup>, sense I.1.c.
5. 'Court of General Sessions for the District of Buninyong and Ballarat', report, *The Star* (Ballarat, Victoria), 19 March 1857, p. 2; *Oxford English Dictionary* (Third Edition, December 2019), s.v. Cousin, n.
6. J. Wright (ed.), *The English Dialect Dictionary* (London, 1898), vol. 1, s.v. Cousin, 5.2, p. 750; J. Ruano-García, 'On the colonial element in Joseph Wright's *English Dialect Dictionary*', *International Journal of Lexicography*, 32 (2019), 38-57 at p. 43.
7. 'Coroner's inquest.—manslaughter', *South Australian* (Adelaide), 30 May 1848, p. 2.
8. T. Q. Couch, *East Cornwall Words*, in *Glossary of Words in Use in Cornwall* (London: English Dialect Society, 1880), pp. 70-1.
9. C. Childs, 'The social and moral improvement of the working miners of Cornwall and Devon', *West Briton and Cornwall Advertiser*, 28 March 1862, p. 8.
10. M. A. Courtney, *West Cornwall Words*, in *Glossary of Words in Use in Cornwall* (London: English Dialect Society, 1880), pp. 14-15.
11. S. P. Schwartz, 'Creating the cult of "Cousin Jack": Cornish miners in Latin America 1812-1848 and the development of an international mining labour market', *The Cornish in Latin America Project*, [online paper](#), p. 33.
12. G. Verrall, writing as Elfin, *A Cornish Ghost Story, a Night's Adventures at the Devil's Stile, or, Jack Trevoze and Mary Trevean*, 2nd edn (Truro, 1862), pp. 3-5.
13. W. B. Forfar, *The Bâl, or, 'Tes a Bra' Keenly Lode, Cousin Jan's Story* (Helston, 1850), reprinted in *Cornish Tales, in Prose and Verse, by Various Authors, With a Glossary* (Truro, 1867), pp. 55-6, and see *OED* 3, s.v. Cousin, n., under 'Cousin Jan'. This collection includes a number of other tales of Cousin Jan, including *Cousin Jan's Courtship and Marriage* (Truro, 1859); for the original publication dates, see W. W. Skeat (ed.), *A bibliographical list of the works that have been published, or are known to exist in MS., illustrative of the various dialects of English. Compiled by members of the English Dialect Society* (London, 1873), pp. 21-2. Note, 'Cousin Jenny' isn't treated further here; Rowse, *The Cousin Jacks*, p. 9, suggests it is a 'later addition', and the newspaper records seem to confirm this, the first instance I have come across coming from 1868 in *The Brisbane Courier*, 25 July 1868, p. 5: 'Cousin Jacks and Cousin Jennies (a nick-name given to miners and their wives coming from the Burra Burra mine, being mostly Cornish) have a barbarian custom belonging to an unenlightened era...'
14. 'Local Intelligence: exhumation of a miner', *The Cornish Telegraph*, 27 September 1854, p. 3.
15. 'Inquest on a body, twenty six years dead', *Royal Cornwall Gazette*, 22 September 1854, p. 5.
16. H. J. Daniel, *The Cornish Thalia, Being Original Cornish Poems, Illustrative of the Cornish Dialect* (Devonport: W. Wood, n.d.). This was advertised in the rear of C. Mansfield Ingleby's *The Shakespeare Fabrication* (London: John Russell Smith, 1859), p. 32 of the 'Catalogue of books published or sold by John Russell Smith' appended to the volume, and is mentioned in an advert from 28 July 1860 in the *Cornish Times*, when it was described as 'just published'; as such the notional date of '1870?' assigned to it in J. Milroy & L. Milroy (eds), *Real English: The Grammar of English Dialects in the British Isles* (London: Routledge, 1993), p. 326, can be disregarded.
17. H. J. Daniel, *Mirth for "One and All;" or, Comic Tales and Sketches* (Devonport: W. Wood, n.d.), advertised in the *West Briton and Cornwall Advertiser*, 7 February 1862, p. 8, and H. J. Daniel, *Mary Anne's Career (continued) and Cousin Jack's Adventures* (Devonport: W. Wood, n.d.), advertised in the *Cornish Times*, 13 June 1863, p. 1.
18. Daniel, *The Cornish Thalia*, p. 3.
19. Daniel, *The Cornish Thalia*, pp. 20-2.
20. T. R. Higham, *A Dialogue Between Tom Thomas and Bill Bilkey, Two Cornish Miners* (Truro, 1866), reprinted in *Cornish Tales, in Prose and Verse, in the Cornish Dialect* (Truro, 1890), pp. 51-2.
21. F. G. Wolf, B. Finnie & L. Gibson, 'Cornish miners in California: 150 years of a unique sociotechnical system', *Journal of Management History*, 14 (2008), 144-60 at p. 150.



22. E. K. Neale, *Cornish Carols: Heritage in California and South Australia* (University of Exeter and Cardiff University PhD Thesis, 2018), p. 37. See also, for example, Rowse, *The Cousin Jacks*, p. 9, who says 'When men were wanted for the mines, or a job was going, they always knew somebody at home for it: Cousin Jack. So they became known all over the world as "Cousin Jacks"; "Cousin Jennies" for the womenfolk seems to be a later addition'. J. Rowe, in *The Hard-Rock Men: Cornish Immigrants and the North American Mining Frontier* (Liverpool, 1974), p. vi, similarly comments that "The most common explanation is that when a job fell vacant there would be a Cornish worker ready to tell the boss or foreman that he would send home for his "Cousin Jack" to fill it', although he also notes a Northern Michigan theory that, due to the profanity of the Cornish miners, they were called 'cussin' Jacks! The same 'folk-etymology' for the name Cousin Jack has also been, interestingly, attributed to a Californian context, as follows:

A Cornishman who was familiarly known as Jack, reached a mining camp in the western state in 1848, and being profuse in his use of profanity, soon won himself the name of "Cussing Jack." In time other Cornishmen arrived in the Californian camp and naturally they associated themselves with their erstwhile countryman, "Cussing Jack." The cosmopolitan mining population, not knowing the names of the newer arrivals, dubbed them all "Cussing Jacks," which was soon changed to "Cousin Jacks." ("Cousin Jack" and "Cussing Jack", *Cornubian and Redruth Times*, 4 June 1908, p. 3)

23. Payton, *Cornish Overseas*, p. 225.

24. 'Cornishmen on the Rand: the past and the future', *West Briton and Cornwall Advertiser*, 14 May 1908, p. 8.

25. N. Tadmor, *Family and Friends in Eighteenth-Century England: Household, Kinship, and Patronage* (Cambridge, 2001), p. 160; *OED* 3, s.v. Cousin, n..

26. Courtney, *West Cornwall Words*, p. 14; Tadmor, *Household, Kinship, and Patronage*, p. 160 n. 285; *OED*, s.v. Cousin, n., sense 2a.

27. Schwartz, 'Creating the cult of "Cousin Jack"', p. 33.

28. To give some examples, a Cornish correspondent signed a letter critical of a local Cornwall MP in the *Western Morning News* in 1884 that was reprinted in the *Royal Cornwall Gazette* on 3 October 1884, p. 8, with a follow-up letter written under the same pseudonym to the *Royal Cornwall Gazette* being printed on 10 October 1884, p. 5. Likewise, someone signing himself 'Cousin Jack' wrote a letter about how well the men of Newlyn were doing in terms of joining up to fight the First World War in the *Daily Mirror* for 7 May 1915 (p. 5), and another correspondent, commenting on mine policies at the Providence Mines, Carbis Bay, wrote to the *The Cornish Telegraph* in December 1869 and had their comments summarized in the 22 December 1869 issue on p. 2. Overseas, a correspondent signing as COUSIN JACK is mentioned in *The South Australian Advertiser*, 21 February 1860, p. 2, whilst a letter signed by COUSIN JACK entitled 'A hint to mining managers' was printed in the *Mount Alexander Mail* (Victoria, Australia), 28 December 1860, p. 5, and the *West Briton and Cornwall Advertiser* carried a letter signed by A COUSIN JACKY from British Columbia on 26 September 1862 (p. 6).

29. *OED* 2, s.v. Jack, n.<sup>1</sup>, senses I.1.a and I.2.a, <https://www.oed.com/oed2/00122699>. For the suggestion that it was a peculiarly Cornish name, see for example 'Why are the Cornish "Cousin Jackies"?', *Western Morning News*, 13 April 1939, p. 3.

30. C. Green, 'Tom Thumb and Jack the Giant-Killer: two Arthurian fairy tales?', *Folklore*, 118.2 (2007), pp. 123-40 at pp. 129-35; C. Green, *Arthuriana: Early Arthurian Tradition and the Origins of the Legend* (Louth, 2021), pp. 143-4.

31. I. Opie & P. Opie, *The Classic Fairy Tales* (Oxford, 1974), p. 64.

32. Opie & Opie, *Classic Fairy Tales*, p. 66.

33. Quotation taken from the 1787 chapbook printed in Falkirk and housed in the Bodleian Library, Oxford, transcribed in Green, *Arthuriana*, pp. 148-65 at p. 156, my emphasis; the text is almost identical, albeit slightly modernized, in the 1711 text published by James Halliwell and included in Green, *Arthuriana*, at pp. 170-1.

34. For example, *Jack the Gyant-Killer: A Comi-Tragical Farce of One Act* (London: J. Roberts, 1730); *An English Musical Entertainment, called Galligantus* (London, 1758); the 'New Grand Mock-Heroic Serio-Comic Ballet of Action, called Jack the Giant-Killer', advertised in *The British Press*, 14 August 1810, p. 2; H. Byron, *Jack the Giant Killer; or, Harlequin King Arthur, and Ye Knights of Ye Round Table: A Burlesque Extravaganza* (London, n.d., first performed 1859); and the 'favourite Serio-Comic Pantomime of Jack the Giant-Killer', as advertised in *The British Press*, 27 June 1803, p. 1.

Other instances of *The History of Jack and the Giants* being adapted into a pantomime are advertised or reviewed in, for example, the *Caledonian Mercury*, 8 March 1800, p. 1, and the *Morning Advertiser*, 14 January 1829, p. 2 ('a splendid Comic Pantomime, called Harlequin and Jack the Giant-Killer'), and the *Morning Post* of 31 December 1831, p. 3 ('The new Christmas pantomime, *Jack the Giant-Killer* promises to have a run... through the holidays. Some of the tricks and scenery are very good. To-morrow evening the performances will be honoured with the immediate patronage of Prince George of Cambridge').

35. As advertised as a series in, for example, the *Illustrated London News*, 10 January 1846, p. 15, or a separate series in the *London Daily News*, 30 May 1846, p. 7.

36. Uncle Tom, 'Christmas sports', *Illustrated London News*, 23 December 1848, p. 22.

The content of this post and page, including any original illustrations, is Copyright © Caitlin R. Green, 2021, All Rights Reserved, and should not be used without permission.

Posted by Caitlin Green at 20:00

Labels: Cornwall, emigration, folklore, group-names, History, Local History, Names

[Home](#)

[Older Post](#)

#### Featured post

### [Britain, the Byzantine Empire, and the concept of an Anglo-Saxon 'Heptarchy': Harun ibn Yahya's ninth-century Arabic description of Britain](#)

The aim of the following post is to offer a draft look at an interesting Arabic account of early medieval Britain that appears to have its o...



#### Most popular posts in the last 30 days



### [Another eleventh-century medieval Chinese coin found in England](#)

A previous post discussed a find of a Northern Song dynasty Chinese coin from England whose context suggested that it may have been a genui...



### [Lissingleys, the meeting-place of Anglo-Saxon & Anglo-Scandinavian Lindsey, and the antiquity of Ogilby's 1675 road from Lincoln to Grimsby](#)

The focus of this post is on two important yet lost elements of the pre-modern landscape of Lincolnshire, namely a large area of common land...



### [Were there Huns in Anglo-Saxon England? Some thoughts on Bede, Priscus & Attila](#)

The following post offers a little idle speculation to help pass the time on the question of whether there was any Hunnic influence on fifth...



### [The medieval 'New England': a forgotten Anglo-Saxon colony on the north-eastern Black Sea coast](#)

Although the name 'New England' is now firmly associated with the east coast of America, this is not the first place to be called th...