I'm taking a punt on the origins of the word 'quant'

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Quant is one of our local dialect words. As you'll know if you grew up in a Norfolk family – especially in the Fens or the Broads – a quant is a long pole for propelling a punt or a wherry; and to quant is a verb meaning to push a boat along using a quant.

The English Dialect Dictionary shows the word quant as occurring only in East Anglia, Kent and Sussex.

It gives a number of quotations, including one from the 1890 book Noah's Ark – a Tale of the Norfolk Broads, by Darley Dale (who was in reality the author Francesca Maria Steele): "The man, seizing the quant, worked away with a will, supplementing the wind by poling her along".

Another comes from the 1895 book Birds, Beasts and Fishes of the Norfolk Broadland, by Peter Henry Emerson, who was an author and photographer specialising in marsh and fen scenes: "If a good quanter goes in after the pike, he will soon 'muddle' him up".

The etymology of quant seems to be difficult, but Walter Skeat (1835–1912), who was Professor of Anglo-Saxon at Cambridge, and president of the English Dialect Society, had an interesting idea

■ Punting or 'quanting' across the almost still River Ant, Eric Edwards heads for the reed beds at How Hill. This picture was taken circa 1987.
Picture: **ARCHANT**

about it. He suggested in his etymological dictionary that punt and quant might originally have had the same Indo-European origin.

Quant could go back to Ancient Celtic quonto, which was related to Latin contos and Ancient Greek kontos 'punting-pole'; while punt came from Latin ponto 'punt', which was borrowed by the Romans from Gaulish, the pre-Roman Celtic language of France. Skeat reckoned that ponto also went back to quonto, which is a definite possibility since ancient Celtic qu- did change to p- in Gaulish – as well as in Brittonic Celtic, the ancestor of Welsh, Cornish and Breton.

Irish and Scottish Gaelic, which did not undergo this change, are often referred to as "Q-Celtic", while the Brittonic languages are known as "P-Celtic".

The Gaelic word for son is mac (with the kw sound represented by qu having changed to the k sound represented by c), while in mediaeval Welsh, son was map. Gaelic surnames, of course, often begin with Mac; and Welsh names like Pritchard come from Ap-Richard, where the ap derives from map.

I would like to think that, back here in Norfolk, our two words punt and quant were originally the same word. And maybe they really were.