The Place-Names of Wessex

W. F. H. Nicolaisen
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Those familiar with the publications of the English Place-Name Society will be aware of the fact that the annual volumes of that series have, since its inception in 1925, covered about half the counties of England. Whether it will take another fifty years to publish the remaining half of the counties, is another matter and need not concern us here, but it is of interest to us that, although volumes presenting the place-names of Essex, Sussex and Middlesex have been available for some time, the place-nomenclature of Wessex has not so far received similar treatment, nor is, as we understand, a toponymic survey of this area to be expected in the near future. The present paper is therefore intended to undertake a preliminary scrutiny of some of the better known names in Wessex and to analyze them particularly with regard to the linguistic affiliation, meaning and etymology of their generic elements.

Despite the availability of many maps of Wessex, some readers may not be immediately aware of its geographic
location and extent, and a few words of explanation are therefore perhaps appropriate as a reminder. Wessex, as one would expect from the name, is situated in the southwest of England. Unlike its eastern, southern and middle counterparts already mentioned, the name does not refer to a single county but to a region subdivided and labelled by suitable onomastic markers, into the counties of South, North, Mid, Lower, Upper, and Outer or Nether Wessex. A full treatment of the names of the geographical features, both natural and man-made, of this cluster of counties would therefore take several volumes; nor have these names ever been fully collected and recorded. This paper can consequently be devoted to only some of the more striking aspects of that nomenclature, as revealed in the most important names.

This means that we shall largely have to concentrate on the evidence supplied by settlement names, and since normally elements used as generics in compound names provide the quickest and most convenient way of assessing the toponymic structure and linguistic stratification of an
area, the systematic analysis which follows may rightfully serve as a preliminary index in that respect, even if early spellings and local pronunciation are not taken into account.

Of the elements which themselves refer to a permanent human settlement of some kind and which for that reason must be associated with primary habitation names, Old English (OE) tun "an enclosure, a farmstead, an estate, a village" is by far the most common in our area, occurring in such names as Alfredston, Newland Buckton, Camelton, Carlton House, Creston, Leddenton, Lornton, Markton, Middleton Abbey, Nether Mynton, Chalk Newton, Rookington Park, Roy Town, Scrimpton, Shaston, Sherton Abbas, and Southerton. Such names may refer to anything from the "big house" on an estate to a sizable market-town, and tun may therefore originally have had any of the four meanings quoted as possibilities above.

Second in the order of numerical importance would come the dative singular (obviously used as a locative) byrig of OE burh or burg "a fortified place." This invariably ap-
pears as Modern English -bury, in such names as Anglebury, Exonbury, Oakbury (or Buckbury) - Fitzpiers, Nuzzlebury, Pummary (= Poundbury), and Weatherbury. Burh itself, developing in the course of time such distinctive meanings such as "an ancient pre-English earth-work or encampment, a Roman station or camp, an Anglo-Saxon fortification, a castle of post-Conquest date, a fortified house or manor, a fortified town, a town," and others, shows its normal modern form -borough in Chaseborough, Delborough, and Toneborough. In both its nominative and dative cases, names containing this generic invariably apply to fairly substantial settlements such as large villages or towns, or even cities. Also initially connected with fortifications would be Ivelchester, Melchester and Wintonchester, all containing OE ceaster "an old fortification," then "a city"; and Castle Boterel, Red King's Castle, Stancy Castle, Stourcastle, and Sylvania Castle, incorporating Middle English (ME) castel(l) "a castle, a camp." The same word is likely to be the first part of Casterbridge, as parallel formations in other names outside Wessex demonstrate. Only
detailed knowledge of local history and/or careful archaeological excavations could, of course, provide us with clues as to the exact meaning and dating of this group of names. OE ḥām "a village, a manor, a homestead" survives in Aldbrickham, Pos'ham, and Springham, although OE hamm "an enclosure, a meadow" is at least a slight possibility for the last two of these. Another three names - Athelhall, Fernell Hall, and Knollingwood Hall - contain OE hall "hall, large residence."

Some generics found in our Wessex toponymy started out as words referring simply to a place or site, and the names in question may therefore well be secondary settlement names. OE stede as in Lullstead meant "a place, a site, a locality," while usually referring to the site of a building. OE stoc, as in Mellstock, Holmstoke, and Stoke-Barehills, also began its existence as a word meaning "a place," developing semantically towards "a religious place, a secondary settlement," whereas OE stōw, as in Edelstow, similarly moved from its earlier semantic significance to "a place of assembly, a holy place." Another two elements
with primarily ecclesiastical connotations are found in
Emminster, with reference to the local Abbey Church, and in
Hope Church and Tolchurch. Port - Bredy and the trio
Casterbridge, Kennetbridge and Wellsbridge, as well as
Higher Crowstairs (containing OE stæger "a stair") are the
only other names basically associated with man-made struc-
tures, unless a path or gate as in Corvesgate and Lewgate,
and a park as in Falls Park and Rockington Park also
qualify here. All other etymologizable names indicate
that the place in question was named secondarily from a
natural feature nearby.

The generics involved in such names are:

OE bearu "a grove" or baer "a pasture," as in Kingsbere
OE burna "a spring, a stream," as in Narrobourne,
        Sandbourne, and Warborne
OE cnaepp "a hill-top," as in Mistover Knap
OE dun "a hill," as in Haggardon (Hill), Lumsdon, and
        Weydon - Priors
OE cumb "a hollow, a valley," as in Cresscomb, Flint-
        comb Ash, Norcombe (Hill), Overcombe and Owlscombe
OE ford "a shallow place across a stream," as in Canford Manor, Carriford, Moreford, Muckleford Farm, Shottsford - Forum, Stapleford, and Stickleford

OE feld "open country," as in Farnfield

OE grāf "a grove, a copse," as in Jordon Grove

OE grēne "a grassy spot, a village green," as in Marygreen

OE ħēafod "a head," as in Evershead, St. Aldhelm's Head

OE hege "a hedge, a fence" or (ge)haeg "a fence, an enclosure," as in Talbothays

OE hlinc "a ridge, a bank," as in Elm - Cranlynch

OE holt "a wood, a thicket," as in Yewsholt

OE hrycg "a ridge, a long narrow hill," as in Trant-ridge

OE hyll "a hill," as in Greenhill

OE hyrst "a hillock, a copse," as in Bramshurst Court

OE land "land," as in Welland House

OE lēah "a wood, a clearing in a wood," as in Deans-leigh Park
OE maéd "a meadow," as in Gaymead
OE mūta "the mouth of a large river or estuary," as in Budmouth
OE ofer "a slope, a hill," as in Durnover, Mistover
OE pōl "a pool, a pool in a river," as in Havenpool
ME pond "a pond," as in Millpond (St. Jude's)
OE *puddel, ME podel "a pond or pit full of water," as in Longpuddle
OE saē "a sea, a lake," as in Knollsea, Solentsea
OE sceat(a) "a corner or projecting piece of land," as in Quartershot
OE waeter "water," as in Knapwater House, Shadwater Weir
OE wella "a well, a spring, a stream," as in Oxwell
OE worst "an enclosure," as in Alderworth, Enkworth, Ringsworth
OE wudu "a wood, a grove, a forest," as in Knollingwood, Marshwood

What the generic elements in Abbot's Cernel, The Hintocks, Ivell, and Marlott are ultimately going to re-
veal etymologically, is difficult to say. They may all be non-, even pre-English; there are hints of a pre-English Celtic population in names like Flychett which seems to contain British *cētō- "a wood,"⁴ and Kennetbridge, the first element of which is a British river-name Cunētio,⁵ or the like. Abbot's Cerial, Sherton Abbas and Weydon Priors, on the other hand, reveal ecclesiastical ownership and Kingsbere indicates royal property, while Oakbury (or Buckbury) Fitzpiers points to Anglo-Norman proprietors.

The first elements of all these compound names are also well worth exploring, especially in their references to Medieval and Dark Age flora and fauna, to the geology of the area, to individual ownership, and to general environmental conditions, but that investigation, however fascinating, cannot be part of this paper. The main point has definitely been made: The settlement names of Wessex are almost exclusively of Anglo-Saxon origin, spanning many centuries of naming and occupation in their chronological stratification, with only traces, and no more, of a pre-English Celtic nomenclature.
What about the names of natural features in this context? Well, although a warped sense of humor tempts me strongly to continue the mockery, there probably has to be an end to it at this point; for mockery it has so far been, of course; after all, the Wessex whose place-names we have been exploring, does not really exist in the sense in which Essex, Middlesex, and Sussex are real, but is Thomas Hardy's fictitious creation, or re-creation, and I was just having fun giving it the serious, dedicated, academic English Place-Name Society treatment. There never will be any volumes on the counties making up this region, in the publication series of that Society, and our preliminary survey is not likely to be enlarged, intensified or repeated. It stands unique in its folly.

Foolish and funny as it may have been, however, it has also produced, almost imperceptively, some results worth stating in a more serious manner:

The novelist, we find, unless he is an informed student of linguistic, particularly onomastic, history will not be in a position to reproduce the number of linguistic
strata which would have developed over the centuries in a given region. He finds it particularly difficult to go beyond the lower chronological border of the onomastic stratum affiliated to the language which he speaks himself. Consequently practically all Wessex names are English, although there is a certain amount of stratification within the stratum. Most Wessex names, or at least their generics, are also transparent etymologically, more so, one feels, than in a random sample from any region. Indeed, it is the non-random nature of the names deliberately chosen by the writer, which distorts the picture in comparison with the natural, historical growth of a local place-nomenclature. That this distortion is not any greater must be due mainly to Thomas Hardy's close observation of the morphological structure of the place-names in the real area of England on which his Wessex, itself a revived ancient territorial name, has been superimposed, including chiefly "the counties of Berkshire, Wiltshire, Somerset, Hampshire, Dorset, and Devon, either wholly or in part." It is also undoubtedly to be ascribed to the fact that, as we shall see, many of
his names are only semi-fictitious, in so far as they have been coined in imitation of, or with only slight altera-
tions of, existing place-names. On this subject, the
novelist himself has this to say in his 1912 General Pre-
face to the Novels and Poems:

In respect of places described under fictitious or ancient names - for reasons that seemed good at the time of writing - and kept up in the poems -- dis-
cerning persons have affirmed in print that they clearly recognize the originals: such as Shaftesbury in 'Shaston,' Sturminster Newton in 'Stourcastle,' Dorchester in 'Casterbridge,' Salisbury in 'Mel-
chester,' Salisbury Plain in 'The Great Plain,' Cran-
borne in 'Chaseborough,' Cranborne Chase in 'The Chase,' Beaminster in 'Emminster,' Bere Regis in 'Kingsbere,' Woodbury Hill in 'Greenhill,' Wool Bridge in 'Wellbridge,' Hartfoot or Harput Lane in 'Stagfoot Lane,' Hazelbury in 'Nuzzlebury,' Bridport in 'Port-Bredy,' Maiden Newton in 'Chalk Newton,' a farm near Nettlecombe Tout in 'Flintcomb Ash,' Sher-
borne in 'Sherton Abbas,' Milton Abbey in 'Middleton Abbey,' Cerne Abbas in 'Abbott's Cernel,' Evershot in 'Evershead,' Taunton in 'Toneborough,' Bournemouth in 'Sandbourne,' Winchester in 'Wintoncester,' and so on. ...I do not contradict these keen hunters for the real; I am satisfied with their statements as at least an indication of their real and kindly interest in the scenes.

Elsewhere Hardy gives this tongue-in-cheek account of the location of the little village central to the plot of The Woodlanders:
I have been honoured by so many inquiries for the true name and exact locality of the hamlet 'Little Hintock,' in which the greater part of the action of this story goes on, that I may as well confess here once for all that I do not know myself where that hamlet is more precisely than as explained above and in the pages of this narrative. To oblige readers I once spent several hours on a bicycle with a friend in a serious attempt to discover the real spot; but the search ended in failure; though tourists assure me positively that they have found it without trouble, and that it answers in every particular to the description given in this volume. At all events, as stated elsewhere, the commanding heights called 'High-Story' and 'Bubb-Down Hill' overlook the landscape in which it is supposed to be hid.

In so far as the author himself gently discourages the over-zealous identification of his fictitious places with those in the "real" countryside of the English equivalent of Wessex, this paper is not primarily concerned with the relationship between the fictitious name and its supposed real counterpart, a relationship which may, however, merit more detailed study in a different context. For the moment, an impression of Hardy's sensitivity and craftsmanship in this respect may be gained from a brief listing of some of the major conversion techniques he employed. In all instances, only name parallels are used, the identification
of which is attested by those writers who have been most assiduous and painstaking, and are therefore most believable, in their attempts at identifying those places in the "real" countryside which, in all likelihood, served Hardy as models or inspiration. Two clearly definable major categories emerge:

(a) The generic element is retained while the specific is changed: Budmouth from Weymouth, Chalk-Newton from Maiden Newton, Emminster from Beaminster, Havenpool from Poole, Holmstoke from East Stoke (and Holme), Ivelchester from Ilchester, Lornton (Inn) from Horton (Inn), Middleton (Abbey) from Milton (Abbas), Nuttlebury (or Nuzzlebury) from Hazlebury (Bryan), Oxwell (Hall) from Poxwell (Hall), Pos'ham from Portisham, Roystown from Troytown, Shottsford (Forum) from Blandford (Forum), Solentsea from Southsea, Targan Bay from Pentargan Bay, Trantridge from Pentridge, Warborne from Wimborne, Wellbridge from Wool-Bridge, Wintoncester from Winchester.

Perhaps attention should be drawn to some peculiar relationships between the replaced and the new specific in
this group of names. Oxwell, Roy-town, and Wellbridge are minor phonological adaptations of their originals. Ivelchester and Wintoncester are approximated older historical forms of their "real" equivalents. Pos'ham is the purported local pronunciation of Portisham, and there is a playful semantic connection between Nuttlebury and the Hazelbury which it replaces. Em- in Emminster may well be from OE imbe "a swarm of bees" (as in Emley, Surrey), thus punning on the Bea- of Beaminster which, of course, really developed from a personal name Bebbe. There are other subtle connections. The main point to be reiterated, however, is that it is clearly this category of converted names, with its retention of the "original" generics, which keeps the toponymic fiction of Wessex within the bounds of the possible.

(b) The specific element is, more or less, retained while the generic is changed: Abbot's Cernel from Cerne Abbas, Enkworth from Encombe, Evershead from Evershot, Exonbury from Exeter, Lulstead (and Lulwind) from Lulworth, Marlott from Marnhull, Oakbury (Fitzpiers) from Okeford
It is evident that some minor changes were made in some of specifics but these are insignificant when viewed within the context of the general principle of conversion. Since Taunton is on the River Tone, the change to Toneborough has special meaning. A ninth-century spelling of Exeter is Exanceaster, hence Hardy's Exon-bury.

Some of the remaining changes, though not clearly categorizable, are nevertheless worth mentioning: Aldebrickham is a humorous descriptive reference to Reading; Alfredston records the fact that King Alfred is said to have been born in Wantage in 849; in Castle Boterel (from Boscastle) the order of elements is reversed, with minor changes; Corvesgate Castle has an element added to Corfe Castle; Flychett rhymes with Lytchett; Ivell is an older form of Yeovil, and Kingsbere of Bere Regis; Leddenton is
a reminder that Gillingham is on the river Leddon (or Lodden), while Kennetbridge for Newbury derives from the latter's location on the River Kennet; Longpuddle, on the model of Affpuddle, reverses the order of elements in Pydelhinton and changes the specific; Marshwood does the same with Middlemarsh, Sandbourne with Bournemouth, Stoke Barehills with Basingstoke, and Casterbridge with Dorchester; (Nether) Moynton for Owermoigne involves a similar but not identical process, as does Port-Bredy for Bridport; Pummery is the local pronunciation of Poundbury; Shaston is an approximately hypocoristic form of the first element in Shaftesbury; St. Launce's turns the, for English speakers, meaningless first part of Launceton into a saint's name.

There are naturally also several instances in which the fictitious replacement does not bear any obvious relationship to its original counterpart, as Anglebury for Wareham, Christminster for Oxford, Durnover for Fordington, East Egdon for Affpuddle, Endelstow for St. Juliot, Knollsea for Swanage, Melchester for Salisbury, Overcombe for Sutton Poyntz, Stickleford for Tincleton, Weatherbury for Puddle-
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town, Welland for Charborough, etc. This does not mean that the physical characteristics and location may not have been taken from one place, and the name adapted from another. 11

Characterizing Hardy's toponymic conversions in toto, one is inclined to speak of a strong sense of historicity, a fine feeling for linguistic appropriateness, and an undisguised delight in creative playfulness as the major motivating forces, always granting, of course, that the suggested identifications are correct. It is not our theme, however, to establish the convincing verisimilitude or attested, or at least attestable, veracity of Mr. Hardy's place-names of Wessex, but rather to see and understand these place-names as a nomenclature, as a system within itself, a task which enabled us to go through the little charade at the beginning of this paper. Once the individual and systemic choice of place-names has been declared to be both judicious and successful--and these are exactly the two epithets which I would use--then the relationship of this internal Wessex nomenclature to non-fictitious names
used in the same novels, stories and poems can be examined. Again the novelist is prepared to state his own position with regard to this matter:\textsuperscript{12}

It is advisable to state here, in response to inquiries from readers interested in landscape, prehistoric antiquities, and especially old English architecture, that the description of these backgrounds in this and its companion novels has been done from the real. Many features of the first two kinds have been given under their existing names; for instance, the Vale of Blackmoor or Blakemore, Hambledon Hill, Bulbarrow, Nettlecombe Tout, Dobbury Hill, High-Stoy, Bubb-Down Hill, The Devil's Kitchen, Cross-in-Hand, Long-Ash Lane, Benvill Lane, Giant's Hill, Crimmercrock Lane, and Stonehenge. The Rivers Froom or Frome, and Stour, are, of course, well known as such. And in planning the stories the idea was that large towns and points tending to mark the outline of Wessex - such as Bath, Plymouth, The Start, Portland Bill, Southampton &c. - should be named clearly.

The subtle blend, then, of fictitious or semi-fictitious settlement names with the real names of natural features--rivers, valleys, hills--creates an onomastic cohesion which, in its turn, becomes the conceptual framework which ultimately convinces the reader of the acceptable reality of Wessex. The use of real settlement names outside Wessex not only establishes its borders, it also
makes the region part of the larger world to which it belongs, and this includes Glamorganshire, London, Heidelberg, Baden, Mount Caucasus, New Zealand, and every other corner of the earth. If one can travel from Casterbridge to Bristol or from the Hintocks to London, or if one can arrive in Wessex from South Carolina, then one place and its name are as real as the other, or just as fictitious, if you like. The place-names of Wessex are therefore no self-contained entity; they radiate out into the world. Every single one of the generics discussed earlier, for instance, also occurs outside Wessex, making the toponymic integration of the fictitious with the non-fictitious complete. The place-names of Wessex are in themselves believable; thus their integration increases their credibility, and the illusion of reality is heightened.

It is self-evident that Hardy cannot use his whole battery of names in every one of his Wessex novels, even less so in the shorter works, especially since the action of each narrative takes place in different parts of a fairly large region. The events in The Woodlanders, for example,
center on The Hintocks in general, and Little Hintock in particular. The happenings of *The Trumpet Major* have an Overcombe setting. The locale of the action of *The Mayor of Casterbridge* is alluded to in the title of that novel, *Tess* has particular connections with the village of Marlott, the d'Urbervilles' seat called The Slopes, the dairy at Talbothays, the vicarage at Emminster, and the village of Flintcomb Ash, the *Native* returns to Egdon Heath, and so on. In spite of this variation in setting, the author manages to inject enough toponymic allusions into each novel, as to create an onomastically satisfying network of cross-references which links, at least topographically, each plot with the other, and each character with the next, even in the absence of direct verbal or genealogical references to each other. Wessex and its people exist not so much because of what these people do but because of where they are, and the place-nomenclature symbolizes this sense of location.

Hardy probably more than any other novelist in the English language--and I am not forgetting Trollope and
Faulkner--utilized the structuring potentialities of place­names in the creation of fictitious reality to the full. There is every evidence that he worked hard at this narrative illusion, especially at the beginning of each novel and in spurts throughout the story. For both the place­name scholar and the student of literary onomastics, his creative use of toponymic material forms a rich source for investigation and analysis, and although the English Place­Name Society will never have a set of volumes entitled The Place-Names of Wessex, one somehow feels that it should.

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NOTES

1Thus is a much revised version of a paper first read at the Section on "Literary Onomastics" of the Annual Meeting of the Northeast Modern Language Association at the Pennsylvania State University, April 4-6, 1974.

2English Place-Name Society VI (1929) and VII (1930) for Sussex; XII (1935) for Essex; XVIII (1942) for Middlesex.

3Information with regard to the elements listed in the following was largely obtained from A.H. Smith, English Place-Name Elements, 2 vols., English Place-Name Society XXV and XXVI (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1956).


5Ekwall, p. 271.


8 Orel, pp. 20-21.


10Smith I, p. 180, s.v. imbe.

11Weatherbury Castle, for instance, "is an earthwork near Wimborne Minster, and suggests the origin of Hardy's fictional use of Weatherbury" (Cox, p. 59 note 1).

12Orel, pp. 46-47.