

The Bemusement of Americans over Place Names In England

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When the people of one cultural community comment on the characteristics of another cultural community, they are sure to give place names a fair share of attention. Since the eighteenth century, the reports of American travelers in England have contained criticisms of the place names there. Some of the comment sprang from naive surprise at the unexpected, but some was a retaliation against the contemptuous criticism by English travelers in America.

The most sensitive American critics have felt that there was a special fittingness in English place names. Most memorable of the commentators was Ralph Waldo Emerson, in his book *English Traits* of 1856, who declared: “The names [in England] are excellent, – an atmosphere of legendary melody spread over the land. Older than all epics and histories, which clothe a nation, this undershirt sits close to the body. What history too, and what stores of primitive and savage observation it infolds!”¹ In a later passage he remarked upon “. . . a sincerity and use in naming very striking to an American, whose country is white-washed all over by unmeaning names, the cast-off clothes of the country from which its emigrants came; or, named at a pinch from a psalm-tune.”²

The same spirit was shown by the playwright Marion Balderston, who wrote in his travel book *Here Is England* in 1927: “The names, like the villages, literally grew out of the earth around them. . . . It takes centuries to mellow alien material into a landscape. The names are never alien, they ‘belong’ also.”³

The esthetic evaluation of English names by Americans has run through a wide range. Samuel S. Cox, in *A Buckeye Abroad* of 1852, exclaimed: “Liverpool! How languidly the word melts in the mouth!”⁴ Mrs. Julia Addison in 1912 was attracted by jauntiness, when she wrote about the names near Clacton-on-Sea: “Some of the towns in this district have jaunty names, – Jay Wick rather attracted me. It sounds light-hearted.”⁵ A similar response was recorded in 1924 by Charles S. Brooks, as follows: “Even place names . . . solicit our wanton notice. Who would

not willingly lose his breath on Kettlebury Hill, passed yesterday in ignorance, just for the pleasure of its tinkling syllables? Or grieve to be in Winkworth, which sounds like a village on the Lotus Eaters' sleepy shore?"⁶ The oddities attracted Willard Price, in his book *Innocents in Britain* of 1958, when he declared: "Impish names give flavour and character to the villages. We note on the map profane-sounding Godalming, Christmas Pie, Normandy, Friday Street, Pennypot, Chobham, Tillingbourne Valley and many others equally unстереотyped."⁷

The speculations by Will O. Jones, of Lincoln, Nebraska, in 1923, were more mundane. He wrote: "The place names are full of fascination to us. It may be that the original settlers here two or three thousand years ago had no more imagination than the early explorers of America, but when they named a place 'Cow Creek' or 'Sheep Fold' or 'Dead Horse' they used the tongue of their time."⁸

Many travelers were outrightly adverse in their evaluations. In a tour taken in 1835, Heman Humphrey, a college president from New England, visited the Isle of Wight, and wrote in his travel book: "'This little town of Cowes,' said I to myself, as we neared the wharf, 'is well enough: but was there ever a more *un-romantic* name?'"⁹ A few miles farther on he came to Ryde, which he called "'another *lackaday* named town."¹⁰ Later in his trip he recorded: "Waited all the forenoon in Slough, (what a name for a place lying right under the towers of Windsor Castle)."¹¹

In 1860 E. K. Washington recorded that "The queen's mother – the Duchess of Kent – lives in a place within sight, rejoicing the uneuphonious name of Frogmore."¹² In 1883, two travelers, Silloway and Powers, referred to "that peculiarly named town, Stoke-upon-Trent."¹³ Later in the trip they went "to Stoke Poges, a place of very uneuphonious name, but classic and known the civilized world over."¹⁴

In 1892 Reuben Gold Thwaites, the noted historian of the American West, took a cycling tour of England and had much to say of its names. One cluster he described as follows:

On the river Puddle (*alias* Trent), whose valley we now ascend for an hour or two, are numerous little villages worthy of prettier names, – Turner's Puddle, Bryan's Puddle, Affpuddle, Tolpuddle, Puddletown, Puddlehinton, and Puddletrenthide. We passed through most of them, and sign-boards pointed the way to others. It is plain that these names originated in early times by way of distinguishing the several settlements on the Puddle, and our map shows frequent cases of a similar fashion in neighborhood nomenclature: but seldom is the result more grotesque than in this smiling vale.¹⁵

Near Salisbury he came upon "Crampton Moor, a harsh name for a lovely dell."¹⁶ He also recorded: ". . . the finger-posts interest us, with their references to quaintly named Hamlets off our path, – 'Penny Pot' was one, for instance, and 'Old Wives' another."¹⁷

Later travelers continued the same tradition of poking fun at oddities. In 1908 Anne Warner wrote: "I think the names are outlandish, 'Toot Baldon' and 'Shap' – did you ever?"¹⁸ In 1910 Thomas D. Murphy, an Iowan, referred to ". . . the queer little village of Yatton Keynell, as odd and uncouth as its name."¹⁹ The Shackletons in 1914 reported: "One of the curious things in England is the way in which it loves to attach queer names to decent places, and this reflection comes as we motor on and into the little seaside village of Rottingdean."²⁰ In 1928 Wallace Nutting, in his book *England Beautiful*, asked: "What should have induced anyone to name a village Pulldown? And were there no clergymen at all at Laity? And why is a headland near the Lizard, Hot Point?" He also commented: "Christmas Common ought to have been discovered by Dickens."²¹ In 1932 Harry A. Franck asked us to consider this: "But imagine an American chamber of commerce facing the handicap of such names as Wombwell or Moreton-in-the-Marsh."²²

Nor did Americans hesitate to make drastic criticisms of the form that English names had taken. William W. Nevin, in his *Vignettes of Travel* in 1881, declared:

Cheshire, the county name, is slovenly and ignorant English for Chestershire, but it has been adopted by all England, although its origin must have been from the thick-lipped hinds. Cheshire is clownish, and means nothing; Chestershire is sonorous, stately, and records two volumes of English national history, – the Latin rule of the camp and the Saxon rule of the shire.²³

Other travelers, out of a Puritan background, were surprised to find that the word *Devil* figured in a number of English place names. This was before the untrammelled conditions of our own Western frontier yielded a crop of *Devils*. Samuel Curwen, a loyalist who had to flee from Massachusetts during the American Revolution, wrote in his journal of May 28, 1777, while in the Peak District of Derbyshire: "From hence we went forward to the Devil's cellar; of the origin of this name we could not be informed; there is nothing in its appearance hideous, nor from whence we could conjecture its name."²⁴ The noted scientist of Yale, Benjamin Silliman, remarked on a similar name, while traveling north from Portsmouth, in his journal of September 14, 1805, as follows:

Between Liphook and Godalming we passed a curious excavation among the hills; it was a vast hollow, almost perfectly spherical and is ludicrously called *the Devil's Punch-bowl*. Appellations of this kind are frequent, I believe, in most countries, where there is any thing in nature, quite out of the common way, especially if it borders a little on the terrible, or on the ridiculous. You will recollect in our country a rocky mountain covered with a thick forest which is called the Devil's Den, and the famous whirlpool of Hell-gate, near New-York is well known.²⁵

Likewise the journalist Henry Colman in a letter of November 17, 1843, found a geographical feature near Newmarket, Cambridgeshire, which he described as “. . . a ditch, which here goes by that very remarkable name, which I almost fear to quote to ‘ears polite,’ called the ‘Devil’s Ditch.’ ”²⁶

A traveler in the eighteenth century, the noted American playwright William Dunlap, was surprised at the uncertainty that he found over a name. During a walking tour from London to Oxford in November, 1786, he recorded in his diary: “. . . stopped at Norcoat to refresh ourselves with a draught of Ale. we asked ye name of the place & strange to tell! the people of the house could not agree in what their dwelling place was called, mine host calling it Southcoat & mine hostess northcoat. few couples in the matrimonial state could differ more widely even at St James’s.”²⁷

Another feature remarked upon was the doubling of names often found in England. Elihu Burritt, known as the “learned blacksmith,” in his book *A Walk from London to Land’s End and Back* of 1865, wrote as follows:

And here it may be proper to notice this peculiar characteristic in the nomenclature of English towns and villages. Scores, perhaps hundreds of them apparently have their Christian and surnames, just like individual men and women, given at as full length as Jack Robinson or Betsy Baker; and for the same reason, to distinguish them from a number of other Robinsons and Bakers. ‘Budleigh Salterton,’ ‘Otterly St. Mary,’ ‘Newton Abbot,’ ‘Newton Bushel,’ ‘Newton Popleford,’ are Devonshire specimens of these town and parish names.²⁸

Some names were noted as having the prefix *The*. A traveler of 1937 wrote: “England has so many dear places with ‘The,’ as The Naze, The Nore, The Solent, and The Needles.”²⁹

Another American criticism was that English place names were often repeated and duplicated. Richard Biddle, in replying to Captain Basil Hall in 1830, stated:

The shifts to which England has resorted are truly embarrassing to a stranger. Thus, if he have an acquaintance at ‘Newcastle,’ he may not hope that a letter, thus directed, will reach its destination by mail, unless he know whether the proper addition by ‘*under Lime,*’ or ‘*upon Tyne.*’ Then there is ‘*Henley upon Thames,*’ and ‘*Henley in Arden,*’ &c. &c. In London, too, the same scanty nomenclature is a source of like inconvenience. The American Consul’s Office is in Bishopsgate Street; aye, but ‘*Bishopsgate Street within,*’ or ‘*Bishopsgate Street without?*’ The word *New* is in perpetual requisition, ‘*New Bond Street,*’ ‘*New Burlington Street,*’ &c., whilst half-a-dozen of the same name are distinguishable only as *attachés* to different Squares, and are very much offended if the title be not given in full. Every stranger remembers, ‘I have ordered supper to-night in Eastcheap,’ but if he go in pursuit of the Boar’s Head with no other clue, he is quite embarrassed to find, that in the march of improvement, there is ‘*Great Eastcheap,*’ and ‘*Little Eastcheap,*’ and in his vexation, he is tempted to wish that these people had known, where, as Falstaff says, ‘a commodity of good names were to be sought.’³⁰

Benjamin Moran, a secretary of the American legation in London, made a similar point while traveling in Sussex, in a diary entry of June 23, 1862, as follows:

We wound our way down the valley of the Ouse (in Sussex, the third or fourth of the name in England) which was soon dissipated by stern reality. To my right peeped up the village of Wilmington, and that recalled the town of the same name in the State of Delaware, and also reminded me that the names of places are much oftener repeated in England than most people imagine. There are the two Wilmingtons to my certain knowledge within 70 miles to the south of London, and there are no less than three Washingtons in England alone.³¹

The naturalist John Burroughs, in his book *Fresh Fields* of 1885, made reference to “the river Avon (I saw four rivers of this name in Great Britain).”³²

Some of the American responses to English place names have been emotionally charged. The many Auburns in America have attested to the popularity of Goldsmith’s *Deserted Village*. An English traveler, Thomas James, in 1846 met an elderly lady on a steamer and reported this conversation:

She said she should like to have visited England once in her life, if it were only to have visited ‘*Auburn*,’ which must be a sweet pretty place, according to Goldsmith’s description of it – ‘Sweet Auburn! loveliest village of the plain.’

‘Ah!’ said the lady, in a deep lachrymose tone, ‘we have many Auburns in America, but I am afraid none of them come up to yours.’

I replied that there was no such place in England as Auburn, and it was the mere creation of the poet’s fancy; but her mind having dwelt for many years on the reality of Auburn, she could with great difficulty believe me, and I rather think I spoiled for the remainder of her short life one of ‘the greatest spots in memory’s waste.’³³

But more importantly, Americans loved to visit English towns that had names borrowed in America. In 1786 John Adams, in England on a diplomatic mission, took a trip through East Anglia to visit various towns from which New England towns were named. In his diary on July 27, 1786, he wrote of one of them:

Went with Mrs. Adams to Braintree, about eight miles from the Hyde.

As our objects were fresh air, exercise, and the gratification of curiosity, I thought we ought to make a little excursion to the town after which the town in New England where I was born and shall die, was originally named. . . . I examined all the monuments and gravestones in the church and in the churchyard, and found no one name of person or family of any consequence, nor did I find any name of any of our New England families, except Wilson and Joslyn, Hawkins, Griggs, and Webb. I am convinced that none of our Braintree families came from this village.³⁴

In the next year the couple visited the south of England, and Mrs. Abigail Adams wrote in a letter of September 15, 1787: “We . . . went ten miles out of our way in order to visit Weymouth, merely for its name.”³⁵

Many Americans found special interest in the English Boston. The

noted Senator Charles Sumner wrote in a letter of November 4, 1838: "How I thrilled when I saw a guide-board on the road pointing 'to Boston.'" ³⁶ And two Americans who were making a tour of cathedrals in 1883 declared: "What a charm has this word Boston. It is to us of greater interest than any [other] spot in Old England." ³⁷ In 1936 Marguerite Allis recorded this experience in Lincolnshire: "On one jaunt the Pious Pilgrim paused to stare at a guide post pointing this way 'To Boston' and that 'To New York,' certain that her eyes were playing tricks." In the course of conversation, a passing farmer said: "'And,' he went on, swelling with pride, 'more folks went from our New York and settled your big city. That's why our New York is so small.'" ³⁸

Names that had been echoed in New England were found to be rife. The Shackletons in 1914, traveling in the vicinity of Stonehenge, remarked: "A good New England name is Andover; and, indeed, there are many good New England names all about, such as Stockbridge, Amesbury and Newton." ³⁹ And in 1936 Lucien Price reported on others: "All along the way to Ely a New Englander is haunted by echoes of home in such place names as Haverhill, Hardwick, and Milton." ⁴⁰ James M. Hoppin, in his book *Old England* of 1867, on visiting Plymouth, spoke of it as being "a name dear to the American." ⁴¹ Joel Cook, on a holiday tour, was impressed by Chester and declared in a letter of July 24, 1878: "And American Chester, on the Delaware, may also be well satisfied with bearing the name of English Chester, on the Dee." ⁴² In 1851 A. C. Coxe, traveling near Durham, reported on two emotion-laden names: "In this neighborhood occur two names that startle an American: he comes to *Franklin*, and to *Washington*, little villages which have imparted their names to hundreds of places in America, by first giving them to two really great men." ⁴³

One American woman, Anne Wharton, in 1908 told of a misunderstanding over a name. She was describing certain historical pageants that she had seen, and she mentioned "the surrender of Yorktown." An Englishwoman in the party was not a bit crestfallen but exclaimed – "Yorktown? We never say Yorktown; it is just York; it is a very ancient city, once occupied by the Romans. They say that one of the Roman emperors built the walls. Perhaps he is the one who surrendered." ⁴⁴

The material presented here has shown, I hope, the human dimension of place-name investigation. When we study human beings in relation to their naming practices, we can come to an understanding of the dynamic processes that have produced the place-name cover of an area.

Americans have demonstrated a remarkable alertness to the naming process on their journeys in England. Furthermore, we may conclude

that the attention to place names has served as a binding link between England and America.

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Notes

- ¹Ralph Waldo Emerson, *English Traits* (Boston, 1856), p. 181.
- ²*Ibid.*, p. 181.
- ³Marion Balderston, *Here Is England* (New York, 1927), p. 50.
- ⁴Samuel Sullivan Cox, *A Buckeye Abroad* (New York, 1852), p. 22.
- ⁵Mrs. Julia de Wolf Addison, *The Spell of England* (Boston, 1912), p. 312.
- ⁶Charles S. Brooks, *A Thread of English Road* (New York, 1924), pp. 74–75.
- ⁷Willard Price, *Innocents in Britain* (London, 1958), p. 161.
- ⁸Will O. Jones, *By Land and Sea* (Lincoln, Neb., 1923), p. 71.
- ⁹Heman Humphrey, *Great Britain . . . a Short Tour in 1835* (New York, 1838), I, 151.
- ¹⁰*Ibid.*, I, 151.
- ¹¹*Ibid.*, I, 307.
- ¹²E. K. Washington, *Echoes of Europe: or, Word Pictures of Travel* (Philadelphia, 1860), p. 189.
- ¹³Thomas William Silloway and L. L. Powers, *The Cathedral Towns and Intervening Places of England* (Boston, 1883), p. 186.
- ¹⁴*Ibid.*, p. 321.
- ¹⁵Reuben Gold Thwaites, *Our Cycling Tour in England* (Chicago, 1892), pp. 183–84. This River Trent, also Piddle as well as Puddle, is in Dorset. The various Puddles engaged the attention of another American traveler several decades later; Clifton Lisle, in *Hobnails and Heather* (New York, 1929), p. 75, wrote: “What names these are: Puddletown, Tolpuddle, Alfpuddle, a whole line of Puddles on the little river Puddle.”
- ¹⁶Thwaites, p. 111.
- ¹⁷*Ibid.*, p. 22.
- ¹⁸Anne Warner (latterly French, *Seeing England with Uncle John* (New York, 1908), p. 485, in words attributed to “Uncle John.”
- ¹⁹Thomas D. Murphy, *In Unfamiliar England* (Boston, 1910), p. 268.
- ²⁰Robert and Elizabeth Shackleton, *Four on a Tour in England* (New York, 1914), p. 159.
- ²¹Wallace Nutting, *England Beautiful* (New York, 1928), p. 197.
- ²²Harry A. Franck, *Foot-loose in the British Isles* (New York, 1932), p. 62.
- ²³William Wilberforce Nevin, *Vignettes of Travel* (Philadelphia, 1881), pp. 14–15.
- ²⁴Samuel Curwen, *Journal and Letters* (London, 1842), p. 129.
- ²⁵Benjamin Silliman, *A Journal of Travels in England, Holland, and Scotland . . . in the Years 1805 and 1806* (2nd ed.; Boston, 1812), II, 119.
- ²⁶Henry Colman, *European Life and Manners* (Boston, 1849), I, 147.
- ²⁷William Dunlap, “A Walking Trip from London to Oxford, November, 1786,” in *Diary of William Dunlap (1766–1839)*, “Collections of the New-York Historical Society, 1929,” LXII (New York, 1930), I, 1.
- ²⁸Elihu Burritt, *A Walk from London to Land’s End and Back* (London, 1865), p. 225.
- ²⁹Mrs. Amy Armour Smith, *Inn-Fires and Laughter; Gypsying in the British Isles* (New York, 1937), p. 332.
- ³⁰Richard Biddle, *Captain Hall in America* (Philadelphia, 1830), p. 50.
- ³¹*The Journal of Benjamin Moran, 1857–1865* (Chicago, 1948), II, 1025.
- ³²John Burroughs, *Fresh Fields* (Boston, 1885), p. 43.
- ³³Thomas Horton James, *Rambles in the United States and Canada* (London, 1846), pp. 69–70.
- ³⁴*The Works of John Adams*, ed. Charles Francis Adams (Boston, 1851), III, 404. He then took up Chelmsford.

³⁵Mrs. Abigail (Smith) Adams, *Letters of Mrs. Adams, the Wife of John Adams*, ed. Charles Francis Adams (2nd ed.; Boston, 1840), II, 183.

³⁶Edward L. Pierce, *Memoir and Letters of Charles Sumner* (London, 1877), II, 12.

³⁷Silloway and Powers, as in footnote 13, p. 270.

³⁸Marguerite Allis, *English Prelude* (New York, 1936), p. 167. America's *New York* triggered a different comment by a British traveler in New York; Henry Cooke Todd, *Notes upon Canada and the United States from 1832 to 1840* (2nd ed.; Toronto, 1840), Addenda, p. 101 (but not in 1st ed. of 1832): "The name of New York must be a little mortifying to the vanity of *Uncle Sam*, as it implies a position subordinate to that of York in England."

³⁹Robert and Elizabeth Shackleton, as in footnote 20, p. 149.

⁴⁰Lucien Price, *We Northmen* (Boston, 1936), p. 100.

⁴¹James Mason Hoppin, *Old England; its Scenery, Art, and People* (New York, 1867), p. 382.

⁴²Joel Cook, *A Holiday Tour in Europe* (Philadelphia, 1879), p. 32.

⁴³Arthur Cleveland Coxe, *Impressions of England* (2nd ed.; New York, 1856), p. 291.

⁴⁴Anne Hollingsworth Wharton, *An English Honeymoon* (Philadelphia, 1908), pp. 108–9.