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English cuckoos, dignity and impudence

Richard Coates (pp. 43–49)

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ABBREVIATIONS OF COUNTIES AND EPNS COUNTY SURVEYS

Co	Cornwall
Ha	Hampshire
He	Herefordshire
K	Kent
La	Lancashire
Nb	Northumberland
Sf	Suffolk
So	Somerset
Wt	Isle of Wight
CPNE	<i>Cornish Place-Name Elements.</i>
EPNE	<i>English Place-Name Elements, Parts 1 and 2.</i>
PN BdHu	<i>The Place-Names of Bedfordshire and Huntingdonshire.</i>
PN Brk	<i>The Place-Names of Berkshire, Parts 1, 2 and 3.</i>
PN Bu	<i>The Place-Names of Buckinghamshire.</i>
PN Ca	<i>The Place-Names of Cambridgeshire and the Isle of Ely.</i>
PN Ch	<i>The Place-Names of Cheshire, Parts 1–5.</i>
PN Cu	<i>The Place-Names of Cumberland, Parts 1, 2 and 3.</i>
PN D	<i>The Place-Names of Devon, Parts 1 and 2.</i>
PN Db	<i>The Place-Names of Derbyshire, Parts 1, 2 and 3.</i>
PN Do	<i>The Place-Names of Dorset, Parts 1–4.</i>
PN Du	<i>The Place-Names of County Durham, Part 1.</i>
PN Ess	<i>The Place-Names of Essex.</i>
PN ERY	<i>The Place-Names of the East Riding of Yorkshire and York.</i>
PN Gl	<i>The Place-Names of Gloucestershire, Parts 1–4.</i>
PN Hrt	<i>The Place-Names of Hertfordshire.</i>
PN Le	<i>The Place-Names of Leicestershire, Parts 1–6.</i>
PN Li	<i>The Place-Names of Lincolnshire, Parts 1–7.</i>
PN Mx	<i>The Place-Names of Middlesex (apart from the City of London).</i>
PN Nf	<i>The Place-Names of Norfolk, Parts 1–3.</i>
PN Nt	<i>The Place-Names of Nottinghamshire.</i>
PN NRY	<i>The Place-Names of the North Riding of Yorkshire.</i>
PN Nth	<i>The Place-Names of Northamptonshire.</i>
PN O	<i>The Place-Names of Oxfordshire, Parts 1 and 2.</i>
PN R	<i>The Place-Names of Rutland.</i>
PN Sa	<i>The Place-Names of Shropshire, Parts 1–6.</i>
PN Sr	<i>The Place-Names of Surrey.</i>
PN St	<i>The Place-Names of Staffordshire, Part 1.</i>
PN Sx	<i>The Place-Names of Sussex, Parts 1 and 2.</i>
PN W	<i>The Place-Names of Wiltshire.</i>
PN Wa	<i>The Place-Names of Warwickshire.</i>
PN We	<i>The Place-Names of Westmorland, Parts 1 and 2.</i>
PN Wo	<i>The Place-Names of Worcestershire.</i>
PN WRY	<i>The Place-Names of the West Riding of Yorkshire, Parts 1–8.</i>

English Cuckoos, Dignity and Impudence

Richard Coates

This discussion centres on the parish-name *Coxwold* in Birdforth wapentake, North Riding of Yorkshire (Smith 1928: 191-2). It is generally regarded as being the *Cuha.walda* recorded in a papal letter of 757x758 (BCS 184; not in Sawyer). Its later attestations include:

Cucualt DB

Cucuald c1110 RA

Cukewald' 1154-89 *MaryH* to 1304 BM

Cucawald 1157 YCh, 1308 Ch

Cukewaud' 1231 *Ass*

Cokewald usual medieval spelling with variant in *K-*

Cuchewald 1389 Patent Roll, 13 Richard II, ii, m.26

Cookwold 1545 BM

Cuckhould 1572 Patent Roll, 14 Eliz I, ii, m.7

Cuckwould 1577 Saxton

Cuckold "c16" *VCH* II, 8

Cockwould 1665 Visit

Cookwood 1882 Hope

(Some of these spellings are taken from *PN YNR* and others from *DEPN*. Abbreviations for relevant documents are explained in these books. Other spellings are fully sourced.)

There are serious problems with the OE form, and indeed with the document, although all commentators appear to give them credence. The first, and most pressing, is that the letter is unique in giving a spelling of this name with medial *-h-*; later documents are unanimous in suggesting that the place-name had a pronunciation with */-k-/*. To sustain its credibility,

scholars have had to suggest a change of /x/ to /k/, and adduce an apparently similar change in the name of *Cockfield* (Suffolk), where the evidence is, however, equivocal, and appears to involve, if anything, a change of a geminate /xx/ to /k/. In any case, the form *Cuha* which is saved by this hypothesis is not known either as an OE word or an Anglo-Saxon name. The MS., B.L. Cotton Vespasian A.xiv, f. 161, was transcribed also by Wilkins for the *Concilia*, and his version is recorded as *Cuchawalda* both by Birch and by Haddan and Stubbs (1964: iii, 394). This spelling clearly presents less of a problem in being interpreted as containing /k/ between the first two vowels; compare the Patent Roll form of 1389. Smith (*PN YNR* 192) judiciously says that the document is "hardly to be accepted in its present shape" – the transcript's final section is completed in a seventeenth-century hand (according to Birch) – though it "undoubtedly contains ancient and authentic matter". He concludes that "there is no reason to mistrust the form *Cuhawalda*". In view of all this, the form *Cuha.walda* is about as trustworthy as a nine-pound note. A more radical problem still is that no monastery at Coxwold is known before the grant of land at Newburgh to the Austin canons in 1145 and of wasteland at New Byland to the Cistercians in 1147, but that requires a different kind of investigation.

The forest, *wald*, is no problem. Leland passed through the parish, and recorded "from Biland to Newborow a thoroughfare, wher is a priori of chanons, a mile much by woodde" (*Itinerary* fo. 91; Toulmin Smith 1964: IV, 12).

The simplest solution for the rest of the name would be to assume that Wilkins' and Haddan and Stubbs' version of the eighth-century form better represents what was in the [lost] original; that *cuckoo* has been an English word since before the first attestation given in *OED*, and that its OE form was **cucu*. The standard OE word for 'cuckoo' was *gēac*, featuring in place-names like *Yaxley* ('cuckoo's wood', Suffolk and Huntingdonshire). English *cuckoo* is customarily said to be of French origin, and a sound lexical case and a defensible phonological case can be made for this. But it is surely possible that the English could have invented such a word for the bird without Norman assistance. It seems quite clear that the Germanic **gaukaz*, the source of *gēac*, was replaced very early in North Sea Germanic territory: Dutch *koekoek*, Low German *kukuk*; High German followed suit slightly later with *kukuk* (modern *Kuckuck*). The same competition between traditional and onomatopoeic forms is perfectly credible for English. OE

**Cucuwald* ‘cuckoo forest’ would be a good etymon for the subsequent forms of *Coxwold*. Since cuckoos characteristically return to the same haunts year after year, it is perfectly in order to think that some particular stretch of woodland could be distinguished as ‘*the cuckoo forest*’. The possibility of the existence of *cuckoo* before its earliest attestation (thirteenth century in *OED*) has been suggested by place-names scholars before, notably by Mawer and Stenton in *PNSx* (261) in discussing *Cuckfield*, for which spellings like *Kukufeld* exist as early as the reign of William II.

A funny side to this story becomes apparent when one tries to consider how a scribe of Norman-French linguistic background would have coped with such a name. Old French *cucuauuld*, Anglo-Norman **cucuald* (a derivative of *cucu*, of course), means ‘cuckold’ (and is indeed the source of this word, the anglicization proceeding via such forms as ME *cukeweld*, *cokewold*). One can imagine any francophone monks at nearby Byland Abbey or Newburgh Priory sniggering under their cowls, or indeed anglophone monks once the word had become fully anglicized. The *Cuckhould* recorded in 1572 is one usual period spelling for ‘cuckold’. In 1579, a scholar of Gonville and Caius College, Cambridge, went so far as to write the name down openly as the derived noun *Cuckoldie*. (Smith transcribes this extraordinary form without comment.) Such considerations did not inhibit the locals, who obdurately pronounced it *Cook(w)ood* (the phonetically regular development) well into the nineteenth century (Hope 1883, Forster 1981).

The current spelling and spelling-pronunciation are a polite cover-up, no more and no less. No evidence of the emergence of the new version of the name can be seen in Smith’s list of forms. It can be shown, however, that this version is older than Victorian prudery. Laurence Sterne was preferred to the living of Coxwold in 1760, and the letter of Lord Fauconberg asking the Archbishop of York to endorse his protégé (28/3/1760; earlier date erased) is in existence. It clearly says *Coxwold* (facsimile in Curtis 1935: opp. p. 102). Sterne’s own letters from the place (on the scattered occasions he was there between 1760 and his death in 1768), where a place is mentioned at all, are invariably inscribed *Coxwold* or *Coxwould*. It is a little surprising that no play on what Sterne must have known to be the local pronunciation has been noted in any of his surviving works.

Earlier still, we find *Coxwo(u)ld* beginning to occur from records of the Commonwealth period onwards. The earliest attestation I have found is the *Coxwold* of the quarter sessions records of Malton (13/7/1652), after which this or *Coxwould* is general in such records (see North Riding Record Society volumes, *passim*). *VCH* II, 22, says that items of church plate dated 1627 are inscribed *Coxwold*, and if this is correct, then this is the earliest record of the new spelling. The last official testimonies of the earlier type known to me are *Cockwold* in recusancy returns dated 1/10/1612 (*NRRS* III: 99) and *Cuckwold* in the report of a special quarter session held there on 8/5/1616 (*NRRS* II: 133) and in a probably later undated one. As far as local officialdom was concerned, then, there was a change of name between about 1616 and 1627. The most significant event locally during this period was the ennoblement of the phenomenally rich landowner, Sir William Belasyse, as Baron Fauconberg in 1627 (later Viscount, in 1642). His family had acquired Newburgh and the manors of Byland at the Dissolution, and had waxed fat and influential (e.g. leasing the advowson of the parish from Trinity College, Cambridge, from 1590). Perhaps the deformation of the name was due to the Fauconbergs acting to sustain their dignity; "Baron Fauconberg of Newburgh in the parish of Cuckold" may have failed to have the appropriate ring. It should be kept in mind that the Fauconberg name was already in bad odour, sustained in popular song, because of the activities of the notorious multiple kingmaker, turncoat, arsonist and harrier widely known simply as the Bastard of Fauconberg (beheaded 1471). The circumstances were right for massaging names, at least at the official level. The church plate mentioned above may well have been presented by Belasyse on his ennoblement, and the chance taken to enshrine the new name on items of permanence and value, seen and used by literate vicars who would sustain it when they wrote.

The name appears to recur in *Cucket Nook* /kʊkɪt/ in Lythe, Langbargh East wapentake, North Riding, though Smith (136) declines to equate the two because of the pre-Conquest *Cuha* form in *Coxwold*. The spread of spellings is closely comparable, though rather sparser; and oddly enough includes an early form with a pseudo-genitival *-s-* *Kukeswaud* 1228, Feet of Fines) which is lacking in the Middle Ages in the name that ultimately acquired one. The giveaway is the form *Kokuwald* recorded for 1265 in the fifteenth-century Whitby Cartulary, which contains the clearest possible

indication that the first element contains a full back vowel in the second syllable and is therefore the word *cuckoo*. Despite this, Smith derives the name from a personal name *Cuca*, presumably for one of the dithematic names in *Cwic(u)-*. A confusing sidelight is the fact that the fruits of the burdock are known as *cuckolds/cuckits* in some parts of the country including North Yorkshire. Joseph Wright's *English dialect dictionary* correspondent T. Stephenson from nearby Whitby goes so far as to derive the name of "Cuckit Newk" from the abundance of burdock there. For all the apparent authenticity of this piece of information, I cannot believe it, for the place is on record simply as *Cukewaud* from 1223, and some kind of generic element would be expected with the name of a herbaceous plant. Stephenson evidently rationalized an obscure name in the light of local knowledge.

Much the same tale as of Coxwold can be told of Cuxwold (Lindsey, Lincolnshire), with eleventh- and twelfth-century spellings *Cucualt*, *Cucuwalt*, *Cucuwald*. This name shows every sign of having the same origin as *Coxwold*, and the traces of a /u/ in the second syllable could hardly be clearer. The cover-up has resulted in a slightly different pronunciation, /kʊks-/ not /kɔks-/, though the procedure is essentially the same. Its circumstances and dating will have to wait for the publication of the relevant volume of *The place-names of Lincolnshire* for elucidation.

I have the suspicion that other cuckoo-woods lie either ignored or insufficiently documented. Chope (1891: 8) notes a minor name *Cook-wood* in Hartland (Devon), and says it is locally pronounced "cook-ooda" [*sic*]. (This name does not appear in *PND* or on the most recent OS 2.5in. sheet.) The final syllable is a characteristically Devonian fossilized oblique case marker; the rest seems very probably a southern representative of the same kin as *Coxwold*, namely *Cucuwudu*; but dating such a form is very hard.

At the very least, a careful new look should be taken at place-names with a first element of the type *Cook-/Cuck-* and a second element which is topographical and compatible with the haunts of the cuckoo, even where there is no clear indication of a rounded vowel in the second syllable. *Cookley* in Suffolk looks a reasonable bet for a cuckoo-wood (*Cokelei* DB, *Kukeleia* t. Hy2 (1268)). *Cookley* in Wolverley, Worcestershire, has a totally different origin (*Culnan clif* 964, BCS 1134 (S 726)), but appears

as *Cuckele* in 1281 (Close Roll), suggesting that it was (sporadically at first, but relentlessly) reinterpreted as being a name of a more familiar and transparent type. Much the same transformation afflicted the *Grang' de Cokey* in the Hamlet of St Martin by Haverfordwest (Pembrokeshire), recorded as *grangia de Cookeley* in 1592 (Charles 1938: 77), and now further prettified to *Cuckoo Grove*. Cookridge, Yorkshire (West Riding), is a further possibility, because Smith (*EPNE* ii, 83) believes that the etymon of **ric* 'strip of land' may have denoted land which was tree-grown. *Cuckfield* in Sussex, as noted above, was identified as a possible *cuckoo* name, in this case 'cuckoo-haunted open land' (*PNSx* 261), on the basis of late-eleventh century spellings like *Kukufeld*. Unless this and all such spellings are analogical or folk-etymological, surely Mawer and Stenton were correct in their suggestion.

Other similar names seem less likely to contain a reference to the cuckoo, by virtue of either a series of spellings which suggest otherwise (*Cookbury*, Devon; *Cooksey Green*, Worcestershire) or topographical inappropriateness (*Cuckmere* [river], Sussex).

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