Moonhill

Carole Hough and Barrie Cox (pp. 32–35)

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

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The first element of the place-name Moonhill in Sussex is either Old English *mōna* 'the moon' or its Middle English reflex *mone*. According to A. H. Smith, the word was used 'in some undetermined application'.[1] The place-name is first recorded in 1279 as *Monhell*, but of course it may be pre-Conquest in origin. The editors of the Sussex volumes of the English Place-Name Survey, noting that 'the meaning of the compound is not clear', suggest that 'such names might arise in the same casual way as the numerous Rainbow Fields to be found in the *Tithe Awards*'.[2] However, more recent scholarship has shown that the latter names are far from casual, referring topographically to land ploughed in concentric curves resembling the bands of a rainbow.[3]

OE *mōna* (ME *mone*) is not apparent elsewhere in major English place-names. However, it may occur also in the field-names Moon Field in the parish of Great and Little Munden, Hertfordshire, earlier recorded as *Monefildole* 1416, *Monefeld* 1463 and *Moonefeild* 1601,[4] and in *le moneheye, le monehaye* 1306, 1423 in Essington, Staffordshire.[5] Concerning Moon Field, the editors of the Hertfordshire volume of the English Place-Name Survey comment, 'The first element seems to be "moon", but the sense is obscure',whilst John Field's dictionary of field-names describes it as 'a name not yet satisfactorily explained', adding that 'it may allude to a location favoured for moonlight activities, such as poaching'.[6] J.P. Oakden, the editor of the uncompleted Staffordshire survey, notes that the first element of *monehey* may be OE *mōna*; but for both the Hertfordshire and Staffordshire instances David Mills suggests that the ME surname *Mone* is a possible alternative.[7]

References to the moon may, however, have other associations. In literary contexts, such allusions often relate to the folk-tale of the Man in the Moon, traditionally regarded as a thieving peasant

carrying a bundle of stolen thorns or brushwood. The story is discussed by Menner in his analysis of the Middle English lyric 'The Man in the Moon', where the central figure is represented as a peasant who *haþ hewe sumwher a burþen of brere*.[8] Among other literary allusions is that in Shakespeare's *A Midsummer Night's Dream* III, i:

> One must come in with a bush of thorns and a lantern,
> and say he comes to disfigure, or to present,
> the person of Moonshine.

The playwright no doubt expected his audience to be familiar with the story of the Man in the Moon, as indeed did Chaucer in *Troilus and Criseyde* I, 1023-4:

> Quod Pandarus, 'Thow hast a ful gret care
> Lest that the cherl may falle out of the moone.'

It is possible that the tradition survived in dialectal usage into the nineteenth century. Elworthy records the use of the word *moon* in Somerset dialect to refer to 'a stooping gait',[9] a usage not attested in *The English Dialect Dictionary*.[10] It is tempting to speculate that the meaning may have derived from the personification of the moon as a peasant bent beneath a load of brushwood or thorns.

The folk-tale is not apparently represented within the small corpus of extant Old English literature, but it may be reflected in one of the Exeter Book Riddles. Riddle 29 describes the moon as a plunderer, as follows:

> Ic wiht geseah   wundorlice
> hornum bitweonum   huþe lædan[11]

The *huþe* 'booty' carried between the moon's horns has usually been taken to represent moonlight itself, or 'the earthlit dark portion of the moon cradled by the crescent light'.[12] Neither explanation is wholly convincing, however, and an allusion to the tradition of stolen brushwood or thorns would be fully in keeping with the riddle genre.

Moonhill in Sussex presents a large expanse of what is now woodland and pasture, south of Cuckfield ('the cuckoo-haunted open land')[13] between the uplands of St Leonard's Forest and Ashdown Forest. It falls steeply along its length towards the south. Nowadays, the hill is difficult to observe comprehensively as a feature because of mature planted woodland on its eastern and lower southern slopes. However, a circumnavigation of the area reveals a series of ridged conformations lying across the breadth of the hill, clearly visible from Isaac's Lane on its eastern reaches. What appears to be a large natural crescentic feature lies with its upper horn towards the top of the hill in the north-east. It curves downwards towards the south-west. Tucked below the upper reaches of the inner sweep of the crescent in the north-east lies Heasewood Farm. Above its upper horn, just off Isaac's Lane, is Heaselands. These modern local names are from the earlier recorded *boscus de la Hese* 1202 and *Hese* 1327, which appear eventually as *Heseland or Heyswood* in 1589.[14] The ridged nature of the great slope of the hill is reflected in the names Upper Ridges and Lower Ridges at the top and bottom of the hill slope respectively.

The name Moonhill thus appears to be in essence topographical in origin, reflecting the unusual curving ridge lying across the hill's slope, a shape reminiscent of the crescent moon. What is intriguing is the possibility that the notion of the hill's name was once reinforced by the shape and nature of its early scrub cover to the north-east. Heaselands and Heasewood lie on the upper horn of the crescent. Both names derive from OE *hæs* 'brushwood'.[15] It may have been that here the topographical crescent moon was seen to carry on its shoulder a burden of brushwood or thorns just as did the peasant in the folk-tale of the Man in the Moon.

Notes

1. A.H. Smith, *English Place-Name Elements*, 2 vols., EPNS 25-6 (Cambridge, 1956), II, 42, s.v. *mōna*.

2. A. Mawer and F.M. Stenton, *The Place-Names of Sussex*, 2 vols., EPNS 6-7 (Cambridge, 1929-30), II, 264.

3. P.H. Reaney, *The Place-Names of Essex*, EPNS 12 (Cambridge, 1935), 600-1.

4. J.E.B. Gover, A. Mawer and F.M. Stenton, *The Place-Names of Hertfordshire*, EPNS 15 (Cambridge, 1938), 288.

5. J.P. Oakden, *The Place-Names of Staffordshire*, Part 1, EPNS 55 (Cambridge, 1984), 54.

6. J. Field, *English Field-Names: a Dictionary* (Newton Abbot, 1972), 141. John Field (personal communication) adds to these early field-name examples the later Moon Ley (Woodham Walter, Ess), Moonlight (Great Barrington, Gl and Bullington, Ha), Moon Mead (Great Canfield, Ess) and Moonshiney Field (Stow Maries, Ess).

7. A.D. Mills, 'Some alternative analyses of medieval field-names', *Leeds Studies in English* 18 (Leeds, 1987), 201-7, at 204.

8. R.J. Menner, 'The Man in the Moon and hedging', *Journal of English and Germanic Philology* (1949), 48: 1-14. The poem is conveniently published in *The Harley Lyrics*, ed. G.L. Brook, 3rd edn (Manchester, 1964), 69 and 87; and in *Early Middle English Texts*, ed. B. Dickins and R.M. Wilson (Cambridge, 1951), 123 and 231.

9. F.T. Elworthy, 'On some fresh words and phrases in the Somersetshire dialect', *Transactions of the Philological Society* (1895-8), 515-27, at 524.

10. J. Wright, *The English Dialect Dictionary*, 6 vols. (Oxford, 1898-1905), IV, 153, s.v. *moon*.

11. B.J. Muir, *The Exeter Anthology of Old English Poetry*, 2 vols. (Exeter, 1994), I, 309.

12. C. Williamson, *The Old English Riddles of the Exeter Book* (Chapel Hill, 1977), 227.

13. Mawer and Stenton, *Place-Names of Sussex*, II, 261.

14. *Ibid.*, 260.

15. Smith, *English Place-Name Elements*, I, 218.