

The Unflattering Reputation of Hook Norton

*He was born at Hogsnorton, where, according to popular saying,
the pigs play upon the organ.*

Sir Walter Scott, *Kenilworth* (1821), chapter 9

From an early time the people of Hook Norton received bad reviews. In 1610 the traveller William Camden reported that such was “the rustically behaviour of the inhabitants” of this parish that, “*in the age afore going*, it grew to be a proverb” that “folke would say of one rudely demeaning himselfe and unmanerly after an Hoggish kind, that he was borne at Hocknorton.” Camden was reported long afterwards as also saying that “the clownishness of the inhabitants occasioned it to be popularly called Hog’s Norton”.¹ In fact, the place was called Hog Norton (or some such) long before the proverb arose: government records regularly spelled the name with a “g” from 1228 onwards, but the first hint of humour does not come until 1368. As the proverb expert Edward Sugden said, this was a case of “giving a dog a bad name and then hanging him”.²

This unfortunate association of ideas was reinforced when the name became part of a popular jingle. When Thomas Nash mentioned the village in 1593, he described it as “Hoggenorton, where pigges play on the organs.”³ Late Elizabethan and Jacobean dramatists frequently repeated the line, as did the popular comedian Robert Armin in his play *The Valiant Welshman* of 1618.⁴ In Thomas Randolph’s

¹ William Camden, *Britain, or, a Chorographical Description of the most flourishing Kingdomes, England, Scotland, and Ireland* (London: George Bishop and John Norton, 1610), my italics; Robert Nares, *A Glossary; Or, a Collection of Words ... which have been thought to require illustration* (London, 1822), pages 236.

² Margaret Gelling, ed., *The Place-names of Oxfordshire* (Cambridge University Press, 1953-1954), vol. 2, pages 353-354; Edward H. Sugden, *A Topographical Dictionary to the Works of Shakespeare and his Fellow Dramatists* (Manchester University Press, 1925), page 252.

³ Thomas Nash, *The Apologie of Pierce Pennilesse* (London, 1593), K 4.

⁴ Robert Armin, *The Valiant Welshman* (London, 1663), act 2, scene 3.

The Muses' Looking-Glass, a play of 1632, a character who was full of extravagant projects announced he was going to build a cathedral:

*It shall be at Hog's Norton, with a pair
Of stately organs; more than pity 'twere
The pigs should lose their skill for want of practice.*⁵

By 1659 the claim that pigs played on the organ (or organs) in Hogs Norton had found a place in dictionaries of proverbs that it would long retain.⁶

But what did it all this stuff about pigs and organs mean? Jonathan Swift repeated it in a dialogue entitled *Polite Conversation* in 1738, as Sir Walter Scott did (at the top of this article) in 1821. In 1814 Scott had produced an edition of Swift's works and in a note explained the Hog's Norton reference:

The true name of this Leicestershire village is said to be Hock-Norton, vulgarly pronounced Hoggs-Norton. The organist there happened at one time to be called Piggs, which gave rise to the proverb.⁷

It is difficult to take Scott entirely seriously as there was no village in Leicestershire called anything like Hock-Norton, and the Oxfordshire Hook Norton had no organ until the 1850s.

A better explanation is that the word "organ" (or "organs") was based on a common corruption of the herb *origanum*, otherwise known as pennyroyal. The phrase meant that the pigs were allowed to eat specially planted garden herbs. Consider this verse recorded in 1640:

A good wife once a bed of organs set,
The pigs came in, and eat up every whit;
The good man said, wife, you your garden may
Hog's Norton call; here pigs on organs play.

⁵ Thomas Randolph, "The Muse's Looking-Glass" (1632), Act 3, scene 1, in [Septimus Prowett et al., eds.], *A Select Collection of Old Plays*, 12 vols., (new edition, London, 1825), vol. 9, page 181.

⁶ For example, James Howell, *Paroimiographia: Proverbs, or, Old Sayed Saws and Adages in English* (London, 1659), page 16; John Ray, *A Collection of English Proverbs* (Cambridge, 1670), page 249; George Latimer Apperson, *A Dictionary of Proverbs* (London, 1929), page 304.

⁷ Jonathan Swift, *A Complete Collection of Polite and Ingenious Conversation* (1738), reprinted in Walter Scott, ed., *The Works of Jonathan Swift* (Edinburgh, 1814), vol. 11, page 415.

But even here the joke arises because it is presumed that the wife (and the reader) already know the proverb and take it literally.⁸

The saying fitted neatly with the idea that Hook Norton people were unduly “rustical”, implying dim as well as boorish, which became increasingly expressed in the sixteenth century. In the first years of Henry VIII’s reign a well-known brief morality play, *The Interlude of Youth*, was performed both at court and more widely, in which an apparently rude and ignorant man was asked whether he was “brought up at Hogges Norton.”⁹ Three plays of the 1590s make a similar reference to the village, and in a 1618 play entitled *Hans Beer-Pot*, one character said of one “Arch-Clown” that

His wit is like his mother’s milking payle:
Brought up at home, or at Hogs Norton Schoole.¹⁰

Through the seventeenth century the habit persisted: in the words of Thomas Fuller’s much-quoted *Worthies of England* of 1662, “boarish and clownish people are said to be born at Hog’s-Norton”.¹¹ Still in the 1730s, in his dialogue *Polite Conversation*, Swift wrote that one of his characters who was “a little on the silly” and had “not all the wit in the world” was “bred at Hog’s Norton”.¹²

In the eighteenth and early nineteenth century, the tradition was perhaps further reinforced by the building of a disproportionate number of lunatic asylums in Hooky, even if nearly all the patients came from outside the village. If so, such an association was based on a confusion: thoughtful people had long distinguished between *lunacy*, which was a mental illness and theoretically curable in asylums, and *idiocy*, which was permanent and the supposed characteristic of Hook Norton’s

⁸ Colin Gibson, *Wit’s Recreations: Selected from the Finest Fancies of Moderne Muses* (London, 1640), quoted in Nares, *A Glossary* (1822), page 354.

⁹ “Interlude of Youth”, in Ian Lancashire, ed., *Two Tudor Interludes* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1980), pages 18-20, 141.

¹⁰ Dabridgcourt Belchier, *Hans Beer-pot, His Invisible Comedie* (London, 1618), page G4.

¹¹ Thomas Fuller, *The History of the Worthies of England* (London, 1662), page 327.

¹² Swift, *Complete Collection of Polite and Ingenious Conversation*, reprinted in Scott, ed., *Works of Swift*, vol. 11, page 415.

people. After the 1850s the tradition seems to have declined, coincidentally, perhaps, with the closing of the asylum.

Curiously, the parish's reputation for "foolishness" was revived in the twentieth century by the BBC. In the 1930s the comedian Gillie Potter (real name Hugh Peel) had a radio show in which he appeared as "The Sage of Hogs Norton", telling absurd stories ("Hogs Norton Calling") of the silly things people got up to in his imaginary village. In 1943 a Ministry of Information film had him reading out a whimsical letter from Hogs Norton which spelled out the wartime need to save fuel; this is available online at <http://www.britishpathe.com/video/hogs-norton-trailer/query/entertainment>. Some radio excerpts may be found at https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=VD4d4ZZ_2Y0, and a CD may be purchased through http://www.musichallcde.co.uk/var15_page.htm. The show continued from time to time after the war, culminating in a swan song in 1953 entitled "Coronation at Hogs Norton."

Commentators have mused that Hook Norton may possibly not have been the Hog's Norton referred to in common parlance for so long. Some point out that Norton-juxta-Twycross in Leicestershire often used to be called Hogs Norton, which might fit with Sir Walter Scott's claim had not Scott specifically linked his Leicestershire village with the name Hoch-Norton, which the writers he had followed (like Fuller) knew stood in Oxfordshire. Potter himself seems to have had no original in mind when he created his imaginary village, but when invited he allowed the small hamlet (not much more than two houses!) of that name near Knebworth in Hertfordshire to assume the honour.¹³ When just before the Second World War the BBC evacuated most of its staff to Wood Norton Hall near Evesham, it too became known as Hogs Norton. Yet there is no doubt that, Scott apart, almost all the writers and dramatists who had mentioned the place in earlier centuries and said where it was, placed it in Oxfordshire, as still did Ebenezer Brewer's *Dictionary of Phrase and Fable* in 1870 and Morris Tilley's *Dictionary of Proverbs in England* in 1950.¹⁴

¹³ http://www.hertsmemories.org.uk/page_id_4784.aspx

¹⁴ Ebenezer Cobham Brewer, *Dictionary of Phrase and Fable* (London, 1870, and many subsequent editions down to 2012); Morris Tilley, *A Dictionary of Proverbs in England in the Sixteenth and Seventeenth Centuries* (University of Michigan Press, 1950), pages 313. In the works of both Camden and Fuller, Hook Norton appears in chapters on Oxfordshire.

The question does arise: was there perhaps some factual justification for saying Hook Norton people were unduly prone to poor brain development? For several centuries medical science has recognised that congenital deficiency of thyroid hormone, known as “cretinism”, may result from maternal iodine deficiency; such newborns have limited physical and mental development, unless it is treated with thyroxine tablets. We also know that before 1960 Hooky’s water was notoriously low in iodine.¹⁵ In theory there might have been a connection, but in fact there is no evidence, nor any well-based accounts, of any significant incidence of cretinism in Hook Norton. If it, or notably low childhood IQ, had been a particular problem here, it would almost certainly have been mentioned in the Medical Officer of Health reports in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, but was not.

So we are left to conclude that there is no objective evidence to suggest that the reputation was particularly deserved, beyond the usual effects of rural isolation. For whatever reason the reputation arose in the Late Middle Ages, it persisted mainly because of the village’s popular nickname and the amusing little proverb. Reputations have the power to feed on themselves long after the circumstances that may perhaps have justified their creation have passed away.

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I am grateful to Roy Meadow (who wrote the penultimate paragraph) and Alasdair Brown for their contributions and criticism.

¹⁵ See Roy Meadow’s article on “Health and Disease” in the [Health, Education and Welfare](#) section of this website