

THE PLACE - NAMES OF WESSEX¹

W.F.H. Nicolaisen

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,² 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

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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 south-west 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

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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 elements³ 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) tūn "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 tūn 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-

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pears as Modern English -bury, in such names as Anglebury, Exonbury, Oakbury (or Buckbury) - Fitzpiers, Nuzzlebury, Pummery (= 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 Wintoncester, 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(1) "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

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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 hām "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

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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 structures, 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, Flintcomb Ash, Norcombe (Hill), Overcombe and Owlscombe

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- 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 hēafod "a head," as in Evershead, St. Aldhelm's Head
- OE hege "a hedge, a fence" or (ge)hæg "a fence, an enclosure," as in Talbothays
- OE hinc "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 Deansleigh Park

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OE mǣd "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 ponde "a pond," as in Millpond (St. Jude's)

OE *puddel, ME podel "a pond or pit full of water," as
in Longpuddle

OE sāe "a sea, a lake," as in Knollsea, Solentsea

OE scēat(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 worþ "an enclosure," as in Alderworth, Enkworth,
Ringsworth

OE wudu "a wood, a grove, a forest," as Knollingwood,
Marshwood

What the generic elements in Abbot's Cernel, The
Hintocks, Ivell, and Marlott are ultimately going to re-

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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 *cēto- "a wood,"⁴ and Kennetbridge, the first element of which is a British river-name Cunētio,⁵ or the like. Abbot's Cernel, 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.

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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

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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."⁶ It is also undoubtedly to be ascribed to the fact that, as we shall see, many of

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his names are only semi-fictitious, in so far as they have been coined in imitation of, or with only slight alterations of, existing place-names. On this subject, the novelist himself has this to say in his 1912 General Preface to the Novels and Poems:⁷

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 -- discerning 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 'Melchester,' Salisbury Plain in 'The Great Plain,' Cranborne 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,' Sherborne in 'Sherton Abbas,' Milton Abbey in 'Middleton Abbey,' Cerne Abbas in 'Abbot'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:⁸

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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

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of which is attested by those writers⁹ 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, Roytown 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

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this group of names. Oxwell, Roy-town, and Wellbridge are minor phonological adaptations of their originals. Ivelchester and Wintonchester 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),¹⁰ 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 Cerne from Cerne Abbas, Enkworth from Encombe, Evershead from Evershot, Exonbury from Exeter, Lulstead (and Lulwind) from Lulworth, Marlott from Marnhull, Oakbury (Fitzpiers) from Okeford

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(Fitzpaine), Ringsworth from Ringstead, Sherton (Abbas) from Sherborne, Stapleford from Stalbridge, Stourcastle from Sturminster (Newton), Tolchurch from Tolpuddle, Toneborough from Taunton, Weydon (Priors) from Weyhill, Yalbury from Yellowham.

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: Aldbrickham 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 Botere1 (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

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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 Tinkleton, 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

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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:¹²

It is advisable to state here, in response to inquiries from readers interested in landscape, pre-historic 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, Hambleton Hill, Bulbarrow, Nettlecombe Tout, Dogbury 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

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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,

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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

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Faulkner--utilized the structuring potentialities of place-names 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 place-name 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 Place-Name Society will never have a set of volumes entitled The Place-Names of Wessex, one somehow feels that it should.

W.F.H. Nicolaisen

State University of New York at Binghamton

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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).

⁴See Eilert Ekwall, The Concise Oxford Dictionary of English Place-Names, Fourth edition (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1960), p. 310; also Smith I, p. 92.

⁵Ekwall, p. 271.

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⁶Hermann Lea, Thomas Hardy's Wessex, Third edition (St. Peter Port, Guernsey: Toucan Press, 1969), p. xvii.

⁷Harold Orel (editor), Thomas Hardy's Personal Writings (Lawrence: University of Kansas Press, 1966), pp. 47-48.

⁸Orel, pp. 20-21.

⁹Bertram C.A. Windle, The Wessex of Thomas Hardy (London: John Lane, The Bodley Head, 1901); F. Outwin Saxelby, A Thomas Hardy Dictionary (London: George Routledge & Sons, 1911); Hermann Lea, Thomas Hardy's Wessex, Third edition (St. Peter Port, Guernsey: Toucan Press, 1969; first published in 1913); Charles G. Harper, The Hardy Country (London: A. & C. Black, 1925); J. Stevens Cox, Identification of Fictitious Place-Names in Hardy's Works, Monographs on the Life, Times and Works of Thomas Hardy, No. 39 (St. Peter Port, Guernsey: Toucan Press, 1968); F.B. Pinion, A Hardy Companion (London: Macmillan, 1968); Denys Kay - Robinson, Hardy's Wessex Reappraised

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(New York: St. Martin's Press, 1971).

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.