

PLACE-NAME EVIDENCE FOR THE HISTORY OF
MODERN ENGLISH *HUT*

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Abstract

Citations of *hut* in the *Oxford English Dictionary* are substantially ante-dated by occurrences of the word in the place-names Hutfall and The Hutt. The place-name evidence also demonstrates that the sense 'a dwelling of ruder and meaner construction . . . than a house' is earlier than the sense 'a wooden structure for the temporary housing of troops'.

One of the many fascinating field-names documented in the English Place-Name Survey for Derbyshire is Hutfall in Appletree Hundred, recorded as *le Hot(t)falle* 1294, 1376, *Hutte-*, *Hutfall* 1415, 1498, 1525, 1596, 1604, 1698.¹ The county editor identifies the second element as 'probably (*ge*)fall "forest clearing"', but comments that 'the first is difficult and presents a problem'. Suggesting a possible derivation from the precursor of ModE *hut* (a term represented in later field-names such as Hut Close and Hut Field 'land containing a hut'²), he notes cautiously that this word is recorded only from 1658 according to the *New English Dictionary*,³ although 'somewhat earlier' in the Lancashire place-name The Hutt. The latter name, recorded as *the Hutt* 1499, *the Hutte* 1546, *Hutte* 1526, is also of uncertain etymology, but again is tentatively attributed to *hut* by Ekwall:

I suppose the Hutt was originally a hunting-lodge in Halewood, and that the name is the word *hut*. The only difficulty is that Engl[ish] *hut* is not evidenced in the NED until 1650 and that the Fr[ench] *hutte*, from which it is usually derived, is not found much earlier.⁴

The dating which presents such a stumbling-block to the interpretation of both toponyms also appears in the latest edition of the *Oxford English Dictionary*, where sense 1.a. of the noun *hut* is defined as 'A dwelling of ruder and meaner construction and (usually) smaller size than a house, often of branches, turf or mud . . .', evidenced from 1658.⁵ Sense 1.b., evidenced from 1545, is defined as 'A wooden structure for the temporary housing of troops', with the comment that this is 'app[arently] the earlier use'.⁶ This inference is incorrect, however, since substan-



tially earlier citations of the word in the former sense appear in the *Middle English Dictionary*, where the meaning ‘a shed or hut [?orig. of wattlework]’ is evidenced from *a.1350*⁷ – one and a half centuries before the earliest spellings of the Lancashire place-name, but some fifty years later than the Derbyshire field-name, which thus remains the earliest attestation of the word in English. Alternative forms of the headword assembled by the editors of *MED* are *hotte*, *hote* and *hutte*, reflecting the same variations as in the early spellings of Hutfall cited above. This appears to confirm the derivation of both Hutfall and The Hutt, which in turn throw additional light on the history of the word *hut*.

Notes

1. K. Cameron, *The Place-Names of Derbyshire*, 3 vols, EPNS, 27-9 (Cambridge, 1959), III, 528.
2. J. Field, *English Field-Names: A Dictionary* (Newton Abbot, 1972), 112.
3. J. A. H. Murray et al., *A New English Dictionary* (Oxford, 1888-1933).
4. E. Ekwall, *The Place-Names of Lancashire* (Manchester, 1922), 110.
5. *Oxford English Dictionary*, 2nd edn. (Oxford, 1989), s.n. *hut* sb.
6. *Ibid.*
7. H. Kurath and S. M. Kuhn, *Middle English Dictionary* (Ann Arbor, 1952–), s.v. *hotte*.