



MOUNT NODDY

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LEFT: Mount Noddy in 1928 (Frith post-card 81486). St Johns Road is off the picture on the left, the tennis courts off it on the right. A shelter has replaced the cottage.

Everyone in East Grinstead knows Mount Noddy recreation ground and cemetery. How 'the Noddy' got its name and what was there before are questions frequently asked.

The cemetery was opened in 1916 [1], the recreation ground apparently in 1911 [2], possibly earlier. Previously they were two fields, listed in the 1841 tithe survey as Mount Hoddy (an error in transcription) belonging to Blackwell Farm and Noddy belonging to Moat Farm. The earliest known reference is in a book of maps of the Saint Hill estate in 1776 [3] where the fields of Moat Farm include 'Mow Knotty' - a delightful example of a 'foreign' surveyor's attempt to write exactly what he heard a native tell him. A cottage (illustrated above) was built in 1831 by an aunt of A.H.Hastie [4] and demolished, if memory serves, in the late 1940s. It too was called Mount Noddy.

The name is not uncommon; locally there are or were instances at Cowden, Danehill and Turners Hill; further afield in Sussex at Fletching, Anstye, Slindon, East Ashling and Bosham. At Broadwater Down, on the edge of Tunbridge Wells, there was a Mount Nod: and Mount Nod is also the name of an area of modern Coventry. Danehill's Mount Noddy, a field first recorded in the 1740s, gave its name to Noddy Lane alongside and later to a nearby Jacobean house whose earlier name seems unknown [5]. The Bosham, Cowden and Fletching examples come from tithe surveys of c.1840, that at Broadwater Down from a late 18th or early 19th century map [6]. There appear to be no examples earlier than the 18th century.

Any explanation of the name should be applicable to all the instances. Dr Golding-Bird's confident 'derived from a traditional shrine to the Roman god, Nodens' [7] and the Danehill Parish Historical Society's tortuous connection with the Nordelands or Northlands of which their Mount Noddy was a part [5] both lack any supporting evidence.

The currently prevailing explanation seems to have been first put in print by our own W.H.Hills, referring to the local

iron industry: 'The scoria of the iron ore was variously known as slag, slug, shag, noddy or cinders and great quantities of this waste material accumulated in many places. So Mount Noddy was possibly originally nothing but a noddy or a cinder heap.' [4] Ernest Straker, the pioneer of the systematic study of the industry, says the same, 'a name for slag', in a parenthetical explanation of the field names Long Noddy, Noddy Mead, Noddy Pasture and Mount Noddy at Cowden [8]. His word is accepted by the authority on Sussex place-names, Dr Richard Coates of the university of Sussex [9].

Straker used his Cowden names as supporting evidence for a bloomery obliterated by the nearby railway but testified to by vermiform cinder around it. In the Noddy fields he found traces of ore and very large minepits. Subsequent investigators have reversed this procedure, seeking evidence of iron working to explain their Mount Noddy. Thus three large minepits are noted as adjoining that at Danehill [5] and the Bosham one is near a former Hammer Field and a pond [9].

It seems to me, however, that this explanation is 'not proven'. Slindon, East Ashling and Bosham are well away from the iron working areas of the county. The East Grinstead and Turners Hill examples are not near iron working sites. Slag could, of course, be dumped elsewhere, for a reason; normally it seems to have been transported only for road building. Pits, often now ponds, were created by digging for marl or brick earth as well as for mine (iron ore). Moreover there is no evidence of iron slag at our Mount Noddy. Furthermore I have come across no examples of noddy as a word in its own right for slag in any other published work on either the Sussex dialect (including annotated copies) or the Wealden iron industry, whether before or after Hills and Straker. (The lack of interest in the word by the Wealden Iron Research Group and the definitive work it sponsored [10] may be significant.)

Two questions are left to answer: Where did Hills and Straker get their definition from? and What is the explanation of the place-name?

Straker (died 1941) at Reigate and Hills (died 1932) at East Grinstead could well have met or corresponded. Hills regarded himself as an authority on the Sussex dialect [11] and could conceivably have heard the word 'noddy' in use, though the Wealden iron industry was long dead and already the subject of research before he was born. Alternatively he read or was told it (not necessarily reliably) or made a guess.

A satisfactory explanation of the name can only come after a complete collection of examples of its distribution, with dates and other relevant information, and expert analysis. That would need the co-operation of numerous researchers, hardly a task for our Society though we may hope to provoke some responses and publish further information or ideas.

Meanwhile the best I can suggest, with all due diffidence, is that the name is one of those ironic ones (like Little London or Slab Castle) that seem to have become popular in the 18th cen-

tury. Tunbridge Wells started a trend with Mount Sion, Mount Ephraim and Mount Pleasant as the names (with the Walks) of its original 'villages' in the 17th century. Mount Pleasant, for example, is found at Lingfield and also at Chalvington and Westham in Sussex. Noddy as a word for a fool, simpleton or noodle is traced back to 1530 by the Shorter Oxford English Dictionary. All the Mount Noddys seem to be somewhat isolated places, away from centres of habitation. This argument would be stronger if they began as house-names rather than field-names, but once a fashion starts it is employed with decreasing discrimination. So the original Mount Noddy lends its second element to adjacent fields.

REFERENCES

- [1] G.Golding-Bird, E. Grinstead and its Parish Church (1931), p.4
- [2] Mrs V.Z.Garmonsway in E.G.S. Bulletin 28 (Spring 1980), p.3
- [3] recently transferred from Worthing public library to the West Sussex County Record Office
- [4] E.G. Observer, 21 July 1917
- [5] Danehill Parish Historical Society Magazine, vol.2, no.5 (Aug.1983), pp. 3f.
- [6] Fletching and Broadwater Down ex inf. J.Pettitt; Cowden see ref.8 below; Bosham see ref.9.
- [7] see ref.1 above; in subsequent editions he prudently inserts 'possibly'
- [8] Wealden Iron (1931), p.231
- [9] Sussex Archaeological Society Newsletter 29 (Dec.1979), p.194
- [10] H.Cleere and D.Crossley, The Iron Industry of the Weald (1985)
- [11] E.G. Observer, 21 June 1923

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- vol.78 (1937) p.lxiii Warren, Wych Cross, National Trust
p.lxx Accession of E.G. deeds (no details)
pp.68-73 Brasses in E.G. church
pp.211-17,223 1340 taxation
- vol.79 (1938) pp.61ff. Taverns in 1636
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p.lxii Wilmington House wall painting
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to be continued