

Caxton's Tale of Eggs and the North Foreland, Kent

Andrew Breeze
University of Navarre, Pamplona

One of the most famous anecdotes as regards the history of the English language occurs in the prologue to Caxton's *Boke of Eneydos* (c.1490). Some merchants were sailing from the Thames to Zeeland (perhaps to Flushing, near Middelburg), when `for lacke of wynde, thai taryed atte forlond, and wente to lande for to refreshe them'. One of them, a mercer named Sheffield, came into a house and asked for *eggys*; the woman there did not understand him; words were exchanged; then someone explained that Sheffield wanted *eyren*, and `the good wyf sayd that she understod hym wel'.¹

This story is endlessly repeated, with justice. Blake argues that it shows *egg*, a northern form from Old Norse *egg*, was being adopted by Londoners, including Caxton himself. It was displacing Middle English *ey* (from Old English), which was standard in southern dialects (and was the only form the `good wyf' knew).² Brewer suggests on the basis of Sheffield's name that he was a northerner and spoke northern dialect.³ Since the woman thought he was speaking French, this may be so. Blake observes that a mercer called John Sheffield issued from his apprenticeship to Robert Hallom in 1456/57.⁴ `Hallom' is a Yorkshire name, from Hallam, now a western suburb of Sheffield (SK 3086): John Sheffield's dialect may thus have been that of the Sheffield area. Burnley writes of the incident in a modern way, describing it in terms of stylistic choice (not mere frustrated comprehension).⁵

However, what follows discusses not *egg* but *forlond* `headland,

¹ H. S. Bennett, *Chaucer and the Fifteenth Century* (Oxford, 1947), p. 106 (slightly emended); cf. *The Oxford Book of Late Medieval Verse and Prose*, edited by D. Gray (Oxford, 1985), pp. 233–34; A. C. Baugh and T. Cable, *A History of the English Language*, 4th edn (London, 1993), pp. 191–92.

² N. F. Blake, *Caxton and his World* (London, 1969), p. 188.

³ D. S. Brewer, *English Gothic Literature* (London, 1983), p. 278.

⁴ *Caxton's Own Prose*, edited by N. F. Blake (London, 1973), p. 157.

⁵ J. D. Burnley, 'Lexis and semantics', in *The Cambridge History of the English Language*, vol. II, 1066–1476, edited by N. F. Blake (Cambridge, 1992), pp. 409–99 (p. 412).

promontory', which has been taken as a common noun and regarded as somewhere on the Kent or Essex coast.⁶ Can we be more exact? Caxton's original does not use capitals for place-names. Yet the use of *forlond* with the definite article in *atte* indicates a specific place, 'at the foreland'. If *forlond* is a name, as *tamyse*, *zelande*, and *sheffelde* are certainly names, where might it be?

Ships sailing from Thames to Zeeland pass the North Foreland, by the north-east tip of Kent on the Isle of Thanet (TR 4069). The North Foreland is called *Forland* in 1326 and *the Forland of Tenet* in 1432.⁷ The sea route from London to Zeeland follows the Kent coast, not the Essex coast, with ships leaving Essex behind at Shoebury Ness near Southend (where the sand and mud hinder access from the sea). At the North Foreland, in contrast, there is deep water close to shore. The North Foreland, an isolated place with a lighthouse, is still a landmark for mariners. The casualness of 'thai taryed atte forlond, and wente to lande' implies a place familiar to fifteenth-century seafarers, including Caxton.

The foreland where Sheffield's ship was becalmed could thus hardly have been in Essex or anywhere else in Kent. The evidence of *Forland* in 1326 and *the Forland of Tenet* in 1432 suggests it was the North Foreland, the house where Sheffield tried to buy eggs being nearby, perhaps at Kingsgate (half a mile north), where there is still an inn by the sea, indicating a landfall for mariners. Broadstairs can probably be ruled out, since it is over a mile south of the foreland (less handy for those sailing to the Low Countries), and the story implies an isolated place. In any case, the woman's dialect would be Kentish and of the Isle of Thanet, which in the fifteenth century was still an island (and thus remoter than it is now): hence, perhaps, the problems of communication between her and Sheffield.

If the above reasoning is correct, we can locate this famous incident in the history of English to a house by the North Foreland, perhaps at Kingsgate. If so, future editors should here print *forlond* as *Forlond*: the North Foreland, Kent.

⁶ Caxton's Own Prose, edited by Blake, p. 157; *The Oxford Book of Late Medieval Verse and Prose*, edited by Gray, p. 531.

⁷ E. Ekwall, *The Concise Oxford Dictionary of English Place-Names*, 4th edn (Oxford, 1960), p. 184.