

The Place Name *Beggars Bush*

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Introduction

This article is based on an analysis of 120 sites where the place name *Beggars Bush* has been recorded, and other *beggar* / *bag* sites. I have posted evidence, references and detailed analysis online.¹

I reject the “rendezvous of beggars” explanation on the basis of geography of sites, absence of evidence and defects in sources. I make a positive case for the derogatory meaning, from contemporaneous literary usage and precursors. I suggest specific mechanisms for the distribution of the phrase. Finally, analysis of foreign *Beggars Bush* sites shows common characteristics at the time of naming supporting this.²

Historical and Geographical Distribution

The place name *Beggars Bush* is found disproportionately compared with other *beggars* and *bush* name combinations. The majority of sites are field names. Although early records show many variations in spelling these are not outside the range to be expected. There is no evidence that *Beggars Bush* comes from any other form. There are *loddere* (Old English ‘beggar’) *thorn* and *Beggeresthorne* earlier but neither can be connected to any later *Beggars Bush*.³

The geographical distribution of *Beggars Bush* sites and *beggars* other names are different. Derbyshire, Hampshire, Shropshire and Yorkshire have significantly more *beggars* other names, while in Somerset and Sussex there are more *Beggars Bushes* than all *beggars* other names.

¹ For details, see <<http://www.beggarsbush.org.uk>>.

² Thanks are due to many, but particularly to the late Sir Angus Fraser, John Pile, Richard Coates, Jane Pennington, Alan Akeroyd and Philip Saunders at Cambridge-shire RO, and to Prof Peter Edwards for allowing a presentation of some of the arguments in this paper at a Postgraduate Conference at Roehampton University. All errors and foolishness remain the responsibility of the author.

³ A. Mawer and F. M. Stenton, *The Place-Names of Bedfordshire and Huntingdonshire*, English Place-Name Society, 3 (Cambridge, 1926) p. 55; G. B. Grundy, *The Anglo Saxon Charters and Field Names of Somerset* (Taunton, 1935) p. 154–156.

<i>Date</i>	<i>Number</i>
1500–1549	2
1550–1599	7
1600–1649	12
1650–1699	8
1700–1749	7
1750–1799	13
1800–1849	34 (12)
1850–1899	12
1900–1949	2
1949–2000	2
after 2000	1
Total	101

Table 1: Distribution of earliest records of *Beggars Bush* place names (Figure in brackets excludes data from Tithe Surveys)

Although both *beggar* and *bush/busk* are recorded in the *Oxford English Dictionary* (OED) before 1300, the first record of them combined is in 1528 (*Beggars busch*, Annington, West Sussex). There is only one other example before 1550 (*Beggars Busshe*, Totternhoe, Bedfordshire, 1548). The seven other examples from before 1600 include two more from East Sussex (*Beggars Bush*, Hartfield, 1565; *Beggars bush*, Rye, 1587) with a wide distribution of others (*Begars Busshe*, Minster in Thanet, Kent, 1566; *Beggars boush*, Donnybrook, Dublin, 1573; *Begersbusshe*, Godmanchester, Huntingdonshire, 1576; *Beggars Bush*, Warminster, Wiltshire, 1581; *beggars bush*, Philipstown, County Offaly, Ireland, 1597).

The sites from before 1650 show some clustering in Sussex, the Somerset / Wiltshire border and the South Midlands. There are also records of literary usage in or linked to Sussex and Oxfordshire, which suggest the place name originated with language in common use. The County Offaly site is one of a series of ‘frontier/plantation’ *Beggars Bush* sites abroad examined below.

Source and Meaning

There are only three early instances which unequivocally identify a single bush—Hartfield, Frome (West Woodlands) and Stratford-upon-Avon. The earliest record to Donnybrook, Dublin (1573) refers to “the wood called Beggars boush”. At Annington, the site is also recorded as *Quochmans furlong*. OED for *queach* gives “A dense growth of bushes; a thicket ... a patch of untillable land characterized by such thickets”.

The generally accepted source of the name in most place name studies is poor land. The editors of the EPNS volume for Wiltshire describe it as “uncomplimentary”.⁴ John Field, discussing *Beggary*, noted the difficulty in separating the literal from the figurative use of *beggar*.⁵ In early modern England beggars were not necessarily itinerants—‘vagrants’, ‘vagabonds’ ‘rogues’ or ‘Egyptians’. Beggars could be poor householders without moral turpitude. I will argue that the beggars were the owners or occupiers, and that the usage is similar to the *Coldharbour*, which Richard Coates has demonstrated to be a proverbial usage with origins in a real place.⁶ About 10% of *Beggars Bush* sites have *Coldharbours* nearby.

It is possible that some *Beggars Bush* sites record an association with poor relief, being owned by local charities—Ditchling, Minster in Thanet and Rye. I suggest these are special applications of the wider usage.

The story that these sites were the rendezvous of beggars is given in local histories, anthologies and dictionaries of proverbs and phrases. Examination of sites that can be precisely located shows these were characteristically on high, open exposed ground (e.g., the Somerset clusters and Huntingdonshire site discussed below). These were less suited to habitation than nearby sheltered, wooded valleys. Nor were they well located for begging compared with sites such as *Penniless Porch* in Wells, Somerset (1451) in a town with a high footfall at a pinch point for pedestrians.

The sites recorded at Frome/Berkley and Lullington / Laverton / Hemington (all Somerset) form two clusters. The Frome / Berkley sites are

⁴ J. E. B. Gover, A. Mawer and F. M. Stenton, *The Place-Names of Wiltshire*, English Place-Name Survey, 16 (Cambridge, 1939) p. 455.

⁵ J. Field, ‘Derogatory Field Names’, *Journal of the English Place Name Society*, 9 (1993) pp. 20–25.

⁶ R. Coates, ‘Coldharbour—for the last time?’, *Nomina* 8 (1984) pp. 73–78.

either side of a road at the top of a hill, on the edge of a common field. The Lullington / Laverton sites also form one, straddling the parish boundary. The Hemington site is only a few hundred metres away. The origin of the name in Hemington is clear from the names of the adjacent fields: *Gutter Land, Poor or Little Mead Portway, Long Bush, Poor Tynning, and Cuckoo's Nest or King's Meadow*. At Lullington / Laverton adjacent field names include *Folly, Kid's Feast, World's End, Barren Close Hill and Coldharbour*.

During the early modern period during which the place-name was recorded beggars and vagrants were anything but tolerated.⁷ I have not found any mention of *Beggars Bush* in early modern law enforcement records, including examinations of vagrants. The phrase is absent from the rogue literature of the period, even where it was used elsewhere by an author (e.g., Robert Greene). If it had been used to mean an actual haunt of rogues and vagabonds such authors would not have missed the opportunity to include such a striking phrase.⁸

Literary Usage—see Table 2

I rely upon the literary usages as evidence of the vernacular use, popularity and meaning of the phrase in the period during which the place-name is first recorded.

Beggars Bush emerged from the large stock of proverbial phrases popular in early modern England. In the early modern period imagery was important. Servants were known by their livery and saints by their emblems. Beggars had their emblems—staves, bags, bowls and bushes.

The symbolic nature of the association is shown by the existence of precursor phrases. In 1506 Isabel Plumpton wrote from Yorkshire to her husband in London urging him to end litigation there: “Sir for God sake take an end, for we are brought to begger staffe [...]”. In 1564 William Bullein in an identical context lamented “Fellowes are so braine sicke” they waste their money on going to law in London, and in the end “go home many miles, by foolam crosse, by weepyng cross, by beggers

⁷ A. L. Beier, *Masterless Men: The Vagrancy Problem in England 1560–1640* (London, 1985) pp. 3–13; D. Mayall, *English Gypsies and State policies* (Hatfield, 1995) p. 22–24; L. Woodbridge, *Vagrancy, homelessness, and English Renaissance literature*, (Baltimore, 2001) pp. 1–17.

⁸ See A. V. Judges, *The Elizabethan Underworld* (London, 1930).

Barne, and by knaues Acre, &c". Robert Greene used *Beggars Bush* and *Weeping Cross* in a similar context. *Knaves Acre* and *Beggars Bush* are both found in Ditchling.

<i>Date</i>	<i>Author</i>	<i>Work</i>
1588	Martin Marprelate	<i>The Epistle</i>
1589	Jane Anger	<i>Her Protection for Women</i>
1591	Adam Foulweather	<i>A wonderfull, . . .astrologicall prognostication</i>
1592	Robert Greene	<i>Quip for an Upstart Courier</i>
1597	H.C.	<i>Dialogue of Silvynne and Peregrynne</i>
1598		<i>The Two Angry Women of Abington</i>
1609		correspondence
1615	Anon	<i>The Oath at Beggars Bush</i>
1621	John Taylor	<i>The Praise Antiquity and Commodity of Beggary</i>
1622	John Fletcher & Philip Massinger	<i>The Beggars Bush</i>
1623	James Mabbe	<i>The Rogue: or the life of Guzman de Alfarache</i>
1625	Ben Jonson	<i>The Staple Of News</i>
1640	John Day	<i>Peregrinatio Scholastica</i>
1651	Thomas Randolph	<i>Hey for Honesty</i>
1657	Matthew Wren	<i>Considerations upon Mr. Harrington's Commonwealth</i>
1658	James Harrington	<i>The Prerogative of Popular Government</i>
1659	John Cleveland	<i>Midsummer Moon</i>
1662	Francis Kirkman	<i>The Wits, or Sport for Sport</i>
1662	Thomas Fuller	<i>History of the Worthies of England</i>
1672	Anon	<i>London's Ordinarie</i>

Table 2: Literary uses of *Beggars Bush*

There is evidence for a clear and consistent usage of *Beggars Bush* from 1588 as a literary phrase meaning to fall into poverty, sometimes by one's own folly. The Marprelate pamphlet *The Epistle* (1588) said of any preacher that did not conform that he would “go home by beggars bush for any benefice he hath to liue vpon”. In *Her Protection for Women* (London, 1589) the pseudonymous Jane Anger wrote:

The great Patrimonies that wealthy men leave their children after their death, make them rich: but vice and other marthriftes happening into their companies, never leave them until they bee at the beggers bush, where I can assure you they become poore.

Almost all of the early examples were by writers or in works noted for their use of the vernacular and proverbial. There is a degree of overlap between the distribution of early *Beggars Bush* place-names and the literary record. Henry Porter's play is set in Abingdon, and he seems to have had personal knowledge of the area. In 1609 Brian Twyne, a student at Oxford, used it in a letter to his father in Sussex. Many of the writers had studied at Cambridge, and would almost certainly have encountered the Huntingdonshire site, if only via maps (see below). In only two examples, ‘H.C.’, which will be examined below, and John Taylor, are the authors referring to actual places.

There have been a number of *Beggars Bush* inns & pubs. The broad-side ballad *London's Ordinary* (1629–30) associates characters with inn names; it is the spendthrifts who go to the *Beggars Bush*. This was based on a song by Thomas Heywood (1608) in which the bankrupts go to the *World's End*, another derogatory place-name found near *Beggars Bush* at several locations.

Specific Routes for Distribution

As Adam Fox has shown, the relationship between oral and written culture in early modern England was complex. Fox argues that oral use is sufficient for the preservation, maintenance and communication of a word or phrase, but that literary use is required for distribution.⁹ Literary use must be extended to include maps and dramatic performance. In the

⁹ A. Fox, *Oral and literate culture in England, 1500-1700* (Oxford, 2000) pp. 1–50, 113–172, 259–298.

case of *Beggars Bush* some specific routes can be identified which are likely to have sustained and distributed the phrase.

The Play *Beggars Bush*

The ‘Beaumont & Fletcher’ canon included a play called *The Beggars Bush* (1622). As to the eponymous *Beggars Bush* itself the play is vague. It does not attempt to portray a real location—the play is set in and around Bruges.

In considering the importance of plays it must be remembered that in the early modern period books might be printed in print runs of perhaps 600–1000 for the popular Marprelate pamphlets while the weekly audience for the theatres in London has been estimated at 21,000 in 1605. These audiences included country gentry, and students at the Inns of Court. The plays of ‘Beaumont & Fletcher’ were more often performed in the hundred years after they were written than the works of Shakespeare. Records of dramatic performances show the play being performed until the early nineteenth century in London, and the provinces.

Plays were also read and performed away from theatres by amateurs and small groups of players. An extract was published with other comic drolls in *The Wits* by Francis Kirkman (1662 and 1672) who claimed they had been performed by strolling players in halls, taverns, markets and fairs. Such informal performances would be unlikely to leave records.

The Godmanchester, Huntingdonshire, *Beggars Bush*

Saxton’s Map

The actual site is an exposed plateau. There is no cluster of other *Beggars Bush* place-names around it, which would be expected if it was a prominent place-name locally, and no local rendezvous of beggars story. *Beggars Bush* ceased to be used locally in the early eighteenth century, when it became *King’s Bush* (perhaps ironic).¹⁰

The Huntingdonshire *Beggars Bush* (as *Begersbusshe*) is a prominent feature on Christopher Saxton’s ‘Five Counties’ Map (1576) uniquely shown as a hill with a single tree on top (See Figure 1). Saxton published the first series of maps of English Counties. His maps were widely distributed in atlas form and as single sheets. The plates for them

¹⁰ P. Saunders, ‘*Beggar’s Bush to King’s Bush*’, *Records of Huntingdonshire* (1993) pp. 13–15.

remained in circulation and as late as 1775 they were sold through a network of chapmen in towns markets and fairs around England. In addition, the map and symbol were copied so this *Beggars Bush* appeared on almost every map of Huntingdonshire printed over the next two hundred years.



Figure 1 : *Beggars Bushe*, Huntingdon from an extract from John Speed *The Theatre of the Empire of Great Britaine* (1610) based on Saxton's *Five Counties Map* (1576)

Anthologies and the 'Rendezvous of Beggars' Fallacy

The Godmanchester *Beggars Bush* also acquired significance through inclusion in many collections of proverbs. Brewer's *Dictionary of Phrase and Fable* (1868) gave:

Beggars Bush. To go by beggar's bush, or Go home by beggar's bush – i.e. to go to ruin. Beggar's Bush is the name of a tree which once stood on the left hand of the London road from Huntingdon to Caxton; so called because it was a noted rendezvous for beggars [...]

Brewer's entry can be traced back to Thomas Fuller's *History of the Worthies of England* (1662) who linked the site with a report of the use of the literary phrase in an exchange between King James VI & I and Francis Bacon. Fuller's distinctive language was reproduced in several anthologies and conflated by Brewer with the suggestion from another anthology that *Beggars Bushes*, and this site specifically, were a rendezvous for beggars.

I have found no claims for *Beggars Bush* sites being a rendezvous for beggars which pre-date Brewer. For Donnybrook, Dublin, historians of Dublin have given the rendezvous explanation for the place-name, associated with the supposed lawless nature of the area in, variously, the mid seventeenth, mid eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries—the record of the name in 1573 has been overlooked.

Foreign *Beggars Bush* sites

The *Beggars Bush* sites recorded outside England provide compelling evidence of usage and naming because they can be precisely dated, we know the circumstances in which the name was applied, and in some cases we identify the person giving the name. They show remarkably similar circumstances in four continents over a period of more than three centuries all consistent with the literary usage.

County Offaly – 1597

The *Dialogue of Silvynne and Peregrynne* by 'H.C.' claims to be an account of part of the Nine Years War in County Offaly, Ireland. It describes 'diuers outradges' by Irish rebels in 1579–8, and in particular a 'whot skirmishe' at Philipstown (Daingean), a plantation town created to extend the Pale around Dublin. *Beggars Bush* is mentioned several times. The main reference says that the rebel band '[...] burned the moste parte of the subberbs withowt the north gate called beggars bush to the hinderance, and undoinge of many an honest subiect'. That is not a description applied to vagrants.

Charles River, Virginia – 1620

Charles City was an incorporation created by the Virginia Company, promoted as 'Earth's only Paradise' by Michael Drayton in *The Virginian Voyage*, 1606. Settlers complained that the reality was "nothing but

wretchedness and labour”, and the death rate for early emigrants to Virginia has been put at 80%.

Samuel Jordan probably arrived in 1610. He was later granted an isolated plantation which he called *Jordan's Journey*. During the uprising by the Pamunkeys in 1622 it is recorded that “Master Samuel Iordan gathered together but a few of the straglers about him at Beggars Bush which he fortified and lived in despite of the enemy”. Archaeological excavations show a palisade with what appears to be gatehouse, enclosing a variety of wooden structures.

Albany, Cape Province, South Africa—1832

Albany Division was created to be settled by English immigrants as a buffer zone against the Xhosa tribes. 4,000 largely unprepared English emigrants arrived in the 1820s, having been lead to expect something like the Home Counties. The area is *sour veldt* where the grass becomes poisonous and subject to drought. It was subject to frequent attacks during the numerous ‘Kaffir Wars’.

The farmstead called *Beggars Bush* is part of the furthest extension of the land grants. It was first surveyed in 1827 and allocated to another party of settlers who either died, returned home or declined their allocation. It was acquired by a P. C. Daniel in 1832. He can be connected with the Donnybrook, Dublin site, having lived about a mile away. Later living in Soho, London before he emigrated he must have known of the ‘Beaumont & Fletcher’ play, performed at Drury Lane in 1815 and 1816, as part of Edmund Kean's triumphant ‘Shakespeare Season’.

Suvla Bay, Gallipoli 1915

The naming of the final example can be precisely fixed between 7th August 1915 when the Royal Irish Fusiliers arrived at Suvla Bay and 1st September 1915 when Private A. J. Owens, 1st County of London Yeomanry, relieving them, was killed in action at a position called *Beggars Bush*. Dispatches record that the trenches “were both narrow and shallow, and enfiladed by the enemy's guns”.

Trenches were named by troops on the ground, usually junior officers who may have been aware of the literary usage or play.¹¹ As with tren-

¹¹ P. Chasseaud, *Rats Alley: Trench Names of the Western Front 1914-1918* (Stroud 2006) pp. 9–33, and personal communication.

ches on the Western Front locations at Gallipoli included names from home (*Piccadilly Circus*, *Brighton Beach*, *Oxford Street* and *Sauchiehall Street*) descriptive names (*Lone Pine*, *Rhododendron Ridge*, *Scrubby Knoll* and *The Zig-zag*) and locations that were descriptive of the soldier's experience (*Dead Man's Ridge*, *Hell Spit*, *Sniper's Ridge*, and *Rest Gully*).

Conclusion

This study has concentrated on a single minor place name. There are likely to be other place names for which similar analysis could be done—candidates include *Mockbeggar*, *World's End* and *Folly*.