

## ***Bakers and Bastibles: A note on traditional West-Country baking and cooking***

J. B. SMITH

It is well known that proverbialisms can be windows opening on to the past. An example is provided by the Devonshire saying *He 'th a got no more manners than a hoss an' a pair of pangars*, in which the last word rhymes with “hangers” and means “paniers”.<sup>1</sup> This harks back to the decades up to maybe 1840, when wheels were not often to be seen in country places, and the old pack-saddle roads were paved for a width of about two feet in the middle, and then sloped up on either side. As a result, there was just enough room for the packhorses, each with its *pangars* jutting out to left and right, but no room at all for anyone to pass.<sup>2</sup> To meet with a train of packhorses on such a road must have been at the very least an uncomfortable experience, to which any encounter with a ruthlessly thrusting and unmannerly person could well be compared.

Boorishness is the subject of another West Country saying, which runs: *Manners? Why, she was born in a turf-heap and bred up in the dish-kettle*. This is plain enough, but prompts us to ask what a *dish-kettle* might have been. According to Elworthy, who speaks for west Somerset and adjacent parts of Devon, it was used to warm the skim milk before its conversion into cheese, but generally served the purpose of the modern (as it was in his day, towards the end of the nineteenth century) washing copper, “or furnace, as we call it in the West”.<sup>3</sup> In south Devon, too, a *furnace* was “the large back-kitchen or washhouse boiler”.<sup>4</sup> In Cornwall, at least, whether or not it acquired the meanings referred to, the expression *dish-kettle* at one time stood for a large high-domed metal cover placed over dough that was to be baked while resting on a flat metal disc in the middle of an open fire, the result being known as a *kettle-loaf*. The flat metal disc, which had a handle on either side and was known as the *iron*, could be used to bake cakes, biscuits, pasties, buns, or splits. Over the iron, as it rested in the fire, could be fitted a vessel known as the *baker*, a shallow metal cover “like an upturned frying-pan”, on and around which blazing or glowing furze or peat could be heaped, thus ensuring all-round heat during baking. It will be clear that the *baker* was a smaller version of the above-mentioned *dish-kettle*. The latter could accommodate not only loaves, but also cakes or even roast dinners,<sup>5</sup> though for these it will surely have needed to be the right way up.

In west Cornwall, if not farther east, there was a special term for the process of enveloping the baking-vessel in embers. It was *to blast*, as in the following quotation, in which *dishcover* appears to be used as a synonym for *dish-kettle* or *baker*:

“She put an iron dishcover over the cake and said she would blast. This process consisted in sweeping up the turf ashes over the dishcover, piling dry furse [sic] over them and lighting it.”<sup>6</sup>

In his rendering of a Christmas masquerade or *guise-dance* called “Lady Lovell’s Courtship”, Robert Hunt casts further light on the matter, when the housekeeper, Jane, bids the maid, Duffy:

“You can bake the pie, Duffy, and give the Squire his supper. Keep a good waking [‘steadily burning’] fire on the pie for an hour or more. Turn the glass again; when the sand is half down, take the fire from the kettle.”

To this, Duffy pertly replies,

“Never fear, I’ll bake the pie as well as if you were under the kettle along with it; so go to bed, Jane.”<sup>7</sup>

In parts of Devon, if not Cornwall, a pie of the type described seems to have been called a *crocky-pie*,<sup>8</sup> for reasons that will become apparent.

Having arrived in Devon, we recall a recent article on the Dartmoor Oral History Project containing a lively account of how at Uppacott and Sherwell a *camp-kettle* that had been buried in the hot embers of an open fire for an appropriate length of time would in due course be opened to reveal a perfectly cooked roast dinner, much to the amazement and delight of guests who had looked in vain for any sign of culinary activity.<sup>9</sup> We must not, however, jump to the conclusion that the Dartmoor *camp-kettle* was exactly the same in function or construction as the Cornish *dish-kettle*. In fact, the *camp-kettle* seems to have been more versatile, as indicated by its alternative names of *baker* and *baking-kettle*. Here is a description from the pen of Charles Laycock:

“The *baking-kettle* is a cast-iron – sometimes brass or copper – vessel, with loose bow-handle and three short legs, similar to those of the *crock*. The dough having been placed in the *baking-kettle*, the vessel was then turned upside-down on a circular flat sheet of iron, known as a *baking-ire*, which was placed on the hearth, and the *baking-kettle* was packed around with embers of wood or peat, or both, from the fire, which were constantly changed until the bread was baked.”

Laycock goes on to say that, without the use of more than one *baking-kettle*, this method allowed only one loaf to be baked at a time. He also says that, in the absence of a proper *baking-kettle*, a *crock* could be used, this being, in the south-western counties, a round cast-iron cooking-pot standing on three legs.<sup>10</sup>

For a pictorial representation of a *baking-kettle* to complement the verbal one just given, Peter Brears’s *The Old Devon Farmhouse* may be consulted, where two relevant items from Charles Laycock’s own collection are illustrated against the numbers 976 and 979 respectively, and referred to as *bakers*. The second, which has a lid, was purchased in 1933 from R. Kernick, blacksmith at Widecombe-in-the-Moor, and is said to have a “removable bottom plate” resting inside. Presumably this has the same function as the flat, round *baking-ire* that is numbered 973 and apparently matches in every way the item thus named in Laycock’s description given above. In other words, it was the job of the “bottom plate”, alias *baking-ire*, to support the dough for baking and, over this, the inverted vessel.<sup>11</sup> It will be

noted, by the way, that the Devonian *baking-ire* corresponds to what our Cornish authority cited above simply calls an *iron*.

Brears's book also has an illustration, taken from a contemporary photograph, of dinner being cooked on an open fire for farmer T. Endacot's family at Wingstone, Manaton, in 1927. This is of interest not least because it shows a *baker*, alias *camp-kettle*, not buried in embers, but suspended from a *chimley crook*, this being an iron bar fixed perpendicularly above the fire and having at its lower end a hook from which to hang pots. Not only do the *camp-kettle*'s contents – presumably all or part of a Sunday lunch – thus benefit from the heat of the fire below, but also from hot embers heaped on the vessel's lid.<sup>12</sup> A rather similar way of cooking Sunday lunch, though apparently without the use of heat from above, was described in May 1995 by a native of mid-Devon. She recalled how a few decades before that date she had “roasted meat in a *crock*. That has three legs, but you hang it in the fire, not too fierce, and put the meat in with butter. Then you tip out some fat and put potatoes in too, with a little water.”<sup>13</sup> This reminds us of the north-west Devonshire *crocky-rattle* alias *crocky-stew*, “a stew made of meat, turnips, and onions, and covered with a thick layer of dough of the same diameter as the “crook” or saucepan in which the stew is cooked.”<sup>14</sup> In *crocky-rattle* we have, incidentally, evidence for the occurrence in Devon of a word *rattle* that has otherwise been recorded only for Cornwall, in the sense of “stew consisting of potatoes, turnips, and beef, to which are sometimes added onions.”<sup>15</sup>

We now return to Charles Laycock's above-cited description of a *baking-kettle* as used for making bread. At the end, he asks for further information on the subject, and this is in due course provided by G. D. Melhuish, incumbent of Ashwater in west Devon, close to the border with Cornwall. Melhuish says: “What Mr. Laycock calls a *baking-kettle* was here known as a *wover-pan* or *woving-pan*. I wonder whether *wover* could by any pathway have come from *turnover*. *Turnover-pan* exactly describes the thing, but guessing at a derivation is always a rash act.”<sup>16</sup>

Entirely correct in his statement that guessing can be rash in matters of etymology, Melhuish might well have been surprised at the true origin of *wover-pan* alias *woving-pan*. At the back of these expressions is the ancient verb *whauve*, sometimes represented in the south of England by *whelve*, but also in Somerset and Devon by *hulve*, the sense being “to turn a vessel or other hollow object upside down so as to cover something; to cover over with a hollow vessel”. A relevant nineteenth-century citation from Surrey is, “I'll whelve a pot over 'em, to keep off the sun.” An amusing offshoot is the eighteenth-century Gloucestershire *whelver*, for “large straw hat”. In Cornwall, the verb could appear as *whilve*, whence Cornish-English *wilver* for “pot or ‘baker’ under which bread is buried in burning embers and baked”, and *wilver-loaf*, meaning “loaf baked under a ‘wilver’”.<sup>17</sup> Here then we not only have yet another name for the pots so far described; we also note that *wilver-loaf* and the above-mentioned *kettle-loaf* would appear to be alternative names for the same thing. While we are on the subject of loaves and cakes cooked in the way described, it will be appropriate to mention what in Devon appears to have been a kind of cake baked in a *crock* and referred to as a *crock-cake* or simply *crock*. As for the Somerset *crock-cake*, the recipe seems to have

been simple enough: “A bit of fat, a bit of flour, and a few figs”,<sup>18</sup> *figs* in this part of the country being raisins, or dried fruit in general.<sup>19</sup>

So far we have distinguished between two types of vessel in Devon. On the one hand there was the traditional cauldron-type pot known as the *crock*; on the other there was the *camp-kettle*, alias *baker*, alias *baking-kettle*, known in the extreme west of the county as the *wover-pan*, alias *woving-pan*. The same two types seem to have existed in Ireland. Corresponding to the *crock* was what, writing in the 1950s, Estyn Evans called the *three-legged pot*. With predecessors going back to Neolithic times, this was the country housewife’s maid-of-all-work, “only slowly giving way to flat-bottomed pans and kettles”. He then refers to our second type, calling it the *oven-pot*. He describes it as a kind of Dutch oven, widely utilized for cooking to perfection the pot-roasts that had replaced spit-roasted meat. He gives an alternative name, *bastible*, said to come from the fact that it was first made at Barnstaple in Devon. He continues:

“The oven-pot may be suspended over the fire but in the south rests on a trivet: the lid is dished so that live turves may be placed on top. It is used also for bread-baking, though the griddle is most commonly employed for this purpose.”<sup>20</sup>

He does not say whether, when used for baking, the *oven-pot* is turned upside down or *whauved*.

This note has shown, if imperfectly, that a comparative approach can contribute to our understanding of regional expressions and the things they represent. With this in mind, let us in conclusion extend our search to Newfoundland, an island that has many linguistic and cultural links with the West Country. What was in Newfoundland called the *bake-pot* or *baking-pot*, “a cast-iron utensil of various sizes used for cooking and baking”, obviously had a great deal in common with the West Country vessels so far described. No doubt in common with these, it could, we infer from a citation dated 1975 in *The Dictionary of Newfoundland English*, be used for cooking rabbits. As its names, however, suggest, it seems to have been used primarily for baking, though there is no mention of its being inverted over the dough so as to rest on anything corresponding to an *iron* or *baking-ire*. On the contrary, the citation of 1863 refers specifically to the need to “hang on”, that is suspend, the pot in preparation for the baking of a loaf. Further relevant information is provided by the citation of 1965, which runs:

“In my poor grandfather’s day, they had a baking pot. They make a good fire and get a lot of coals and put the cover on their pot. Put their bread in the pot and the pot on the coals.”

Moreover, from the citation of 1960 we discover the part played by tongs, which were “an important item for placing live coals on the covers of the bake pots when bread was baking to give it even heat on top as well as underneath”. In conclusion, the citation of 1865 is also worth mentioning, since it contains the proverb *Up sail and down bakepot*. This apparently refers to the women’s custom of starting to feast as soon as their menfolk had sailed away.<sup>21</sup> The same custom will no doubt have obtained here and there in the West Country. Whether it

is echoed in a proverb I cannot say. For the moment we shall have to content ourselves with the Cornish *The crock calls the kettle smutty*,<sup>22</sup> which is less to the point, but still of general relevance.

## Notes

1. Joseph Wright, *The English Dialect Dictionary*, 6 vols, Oxford, Oxford University Press, 1898-1904, rpt. London, Oxford University Press, 1970, 4, p. 418.
2. Cf. Cecil Torr, *Small Talk at Wreyland*, Oxford, Oxford University Press, 1979, 2, pp. 1-2, and Peter Brears, *The Old Devon Farmhouse*, Tiverton, Devon Books, 1998, pp. 44-45.
3. Wright, 2, p. 87. I have slightly modified the punctuation of the saying.
4. Wright, 2, p. 521.
5. Mary Wright, *Cornish Treats*, Penzance, Alison Hodge, pp. 3-4.
6. Wright, 6, Supplement, p. 33.
7. Robert Hunt, *Popular Romances of the West of England*, 3rd edn, London, Chatto and Windus, 1881, rpt. London, Chatto and Windus, 1930, p. 395.
8. Wright, 1, p. 800.
9. Becky Newell, “ ‘Much Different to What It Is Today’ – A Review of the Dartmoor National Park Authority’s ‘Moor Memories’ Oral History Project”, *Transactions of the Devonshire Association*, 136 (2004), 239-240. What now follows is a fuller version of J. B. Smith, “Dialect as a Key to Traditional Cooking and Baking”, in “103rd Report on Dialect”, *Report and Transactions of the Devonshire Association*, 138 (2006), 337-339.
10. Charles H. Laycock, “Old Methods of Baking in the Devon Farm-House”, *Devon and Cornwall Notes and Queries*, 12 (1922-23), 141-143.
11. Brears, p. 137.
12. Brears, p. 29.
13. Information from Mrs P. R. of Templeton to the west of Tiverton, May 15th, 1995.
14. Wright, 1, p. 800.
15. Wright, 5, p. 47. The correspondent who provided Wright with this information was F. H. Davey.
16. G. D. Melhuish, “Old Methods of Baking in the Devon Farm-House”, *Devon and Cornwall Notes and Queries*, 12 (1922-23), 166-167.
17. See the relevant headwords in Wright. For the corresponding Standard English verbs *wha(u)ve* and *whelve*, meaning “to turn upside down”, see J. A. Simpson, and E. S. C. Weiner, *The Oxford English Dictionary*, 2nd edn, Oxford, Clarendon Press, 1989, 20, pp. 195 and 208.
18. Wright, 1, p. 800.
19. Wright, 2, p. 352.
20. E. Estyn Evans, *Irish Folk Ways*, London and New York, Routledge, 1957, pp. 76-77.
21. G. M. Story, et al., *Dictionary of Newfoundland English*, Toronto, University of Toronto Press, 1982, p. 17.
22. Wright, 1, p. 800.