Pixilated: A Somerset word?

Folklorists have long understood that “pixilated” should be connected to pixy-lore and that the word means “to be pixy-led”.¹ Linguists have long known, meanwhile, that “pixilated” is first attested in American English. “Pixilated” appeared in a political pamphlet in Salem in 1848 (the OED’s first instance);² and in the same year was written down by Hawthorne in his notebook (this reference seems to have gone unnoticed).³ It appeared in a Marblehead novel, Agnes Surriage, in 1886, interestingly for a straying boat,⁴ and it was first placed in a folklore context in 1891.⁵ It even had an outing in a hit Hollywood film of 1936, Mr Deeds Goes to Town,⁶ after which it enjoyed brief international celebrity.

However, there has been no proper attempt to explain the derivation of the word, other than noting the obvious correspondence with “pixy-led”. “Pixy-led”, though, should have produced “pixilet”/“pixileted” in America (or some such word). Nor are we in sympathy with Gillian Edwards’s suggestion that the word was “an alteration, modelled maybe upon the many verbs of action ending in -late, such as emulate, accumulate, speculate and so on.”⁷ Nor, is an (admittedly tentative) attempt to derive “pixilated” from Dutch in the least convincing.⁸ Still less, should the folk etymology “pitch-belated” be taken seriously!⁹ The most probable explanation is that “pixilated” was not based on “pixy-led”, but on one of the other south-western words for the same phenomenon: “pixy-laden” or “pixy-laid” or, most interestingly, “pixy-laided”.

This last form is poorly attested but it did apparently exist, in Somerset, despite the absence of “laided” as a participle for “lay” in the OED. In 1904, a Somerset reader wrote to his local newspaper with the following question:

“Can any reader say if they have ever heard a person, or persons, being ‘Pexelated’? I only give the word as I have heard it spoken. I have heard old persons declare that they have been ‘Pexelated,’ and have been unable to follow their own inclinations, as if a power was holding them back. I have heard of charms being used to ward off the danger of being ‘pexelated.’”¹⁰

Various readers wrote in with the folklore relating to being pixy-led, but only one attempted to explain the word in linguistic terms:

“It is fully expressed by the true form of the word as pronounced – Pixy-laided ... a more forcible expression than Pixy-led.”¹¹

The idea of an extra “ed” reinforcing is not conventional, nor convincing. But “pixy-laided” could have been coined as “pixy-laid” ceased to be familiar, the added “ed” creating, in the minds of users, an adjectival participle. The linguistic progression might be expressed as: “fairies pexelaid [to use the reader’s spelling] Joe Bloggs”, “Joe Bloggs was pexelaited by fairies”. 
As to the use of an identical word in New England, broadly speaking there are two possibilities. First, a parallel process took place in the New World and in Somerset: a process that should be connected to the collapse of the pixy tradition in both regions. Second, “pixilated” was brought across to New England, not from Cornwall, from which one would have expected, in any case, “piskey-led” or “piskilated”, but from Somerset, where the lore of being “pixilated” continued, in the Mendips, well into the 1920s. The word “pixilated” is found, incidentally, in Somerset as late as 1946: or was this the influence of Mr. Deeds in British cinemas?

Any other instances of “pixilated” from Somerset or Dorset would be gratefully received.

Notes

2. Fannie Hardy Eckstorm, “Pixilated: A Marble Head Word”, American Speech, 16 (1941), 78-80, at 79.
6. Eckstorm, “Pixilated”.
10. Aniso, “Pexelated”, Taunton Courier and Western Advertiser (November 30th, 1904), 4. The form must have existed because a second reader asked the same question fifteen years later: W. G. Willis Watson, “Pixylated”, Taunton Courier and Western Advertiser (July 30th, 1919), 6.
11. “Pexylated”, Taunton Courier and Western Advertiser (December 28th, 1904), 4.
14. L. H. Dopson, “Pixies in Somerset”, Taunton Courier (April 27th, 1946), 2: “I knew a man who was pixilated like me when he was coming home late after courting over Staple way… This was just the region where I got pixilated in 1944.”

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