

Beggars Bush

A study of liminality and social exclusion

Phil Quinn takes a new look at the ubiquitous place-name of Beggars Bush and finds the darkness at the edge of town.

BOUNDARIES ATTRACT MUCH interest and study; archaeologists and historians study the physical and documentary evidence for territorial demarcation whilst folklorists and anthropologists appreciate their mythic and wider societal implications. Over the past decade contributors to *3rd Stone, At the Edge* and other 'non-denominational' journals have explored the concept of liminality: the nature of 'the edge' between worlds both physical/temporal and supernatural.

On the ground, the edge is frequently a place of unpredictability and a place where dangerous and undesirable phenomena are relegated to; it is a place for 'the other' - that which has no place in the safe 'centres' of our homes and places of work, where much of our life is conducted and where stability and safety are valued.

In many societies elementals, demons, ghosts, fairies and unquiet spirits are believed to naturally gravitate around boundaries or are pushed there by the magic or interference of the living human inhabitants. Some of these supernatural entities may once have been seen as protective - ancestral spirits for example - helping to protect their living kinsmen from attack by hostile exterior forces: a spiritual dimension reinforcing physical systems of ownership. On a less amicable level the evil spirits resident at boundaries were frequently believed to be responsible for disease or misfortune, and those afflicted would go to the boundary to return their miasmas and ill luck. Boundaries are places where unwanted things can be left, they are no-man's lands, social dustbins. It is no surprise to find that many places of execution were at boundaries, especially small areas of land that were not officially claimed by either side of the agreed boundary.

Liminal sites can also be found within conventional boundaries; crossroads, religious buildings, sacred wells or other striking landscape features which can be found dotted around territorial boundaries. All these features can have the same suite of social and supernatural phenomena as boundaries; they too are places of 'the other'.

There is liminality too within human populations. Most settled societies have groups within them that are perceived as 'the other'. This can take the form of castes as seen in India, in underclasses, or as minority ethnic groups. Rarely do these groups enjoy the full range of benefits which are open to the dominant members of that society; they may be viewed as potentially dangerous and frequently they are displaced to sub-optimal environments of poorer housing and poorer resources in general. In recent years within Britain there has been an issue in providing for 'travellers', whether New Age, Irish or Romanies and there has been much effort devoted to finding suitable locations to establish 'traveller sites'. Such locations are frequently away from main settlements, often on wasteland and occasionally at the edges of a territory. Modern travellers are in many ways the latest incarnation of a semi-nomadic phenomenon stretching back (with the Romanies) into the Middle Ages. Other itinerants once peopled the British countryside: the disposed, traders and religious mendicants. The latter two groups were essentially part of the wider fabric of conventional settled society but the disposed and other social outcasts were definitely of 'the other': threats to established order pushed to the edges of settled society along with disease, the supernatural, and the executed.

Just as modern British populations have acknowledged that travellers must have

sites at which they can reside before moving on, it is apparent that earlier generations operated on similar principles and with the same preference for allotting unwanted liminal sites. Medieval and early modern 'traveller sites' are a little-known phenomenon, but they can be found in the place-names that are recorded for fields and minor roads.

Most of these indicative place-names contain the word 'beggar'. In a study of the place-names of over 150 parishes within north Somerset and south Gloucestershire I have found 28 sites with the place-name element 'Beggar', its Old English antecedent 'loddra' or its successor 'Tinker'. In his definitive work on English field names, John Field notes 30 combinations involving the word 'Beggar' as well as six involving 'Bedlam'. Field suggested that the latter might refer to waste places where former inmates of London's Royal Bethlehem Hospital, (contracted to 'Bedlam'), who were licensed to beg, could establish themselves and solicit alms (Field 1972:17-18).

The earliest examples of ancient travellers' sites are possibly those place-names containing the word 'loddra' found in Anglo-Saxon estate boundary charters. The 972 AD charter for Dyrham in south Gloucestershire lists one such site: Loddra wyl, which has been translated as 'beggar's spring'. This site has been tentatively located alongside the ridgeway track which runs across south Gloucestershire from the lower Frome valley to the Cotswold scarp; a route that would have had great importance possibly from prehistory and certainly well into the early modern period (Grundy 1935(i):119). Similarly, a document of 1248 notes the presence of a Beggereswelle on the northern boundary of the medieval city of Bristol.

By the time of the earliest surviving perambulation of Medieval Bristol, William Worcester's *Itineraria* (1485), the Beggarswell was still an important boundary marker, the natural spring enclosed within a metre tall square-shaped freestone structure. The place-name still survives in the area as Beggarswell Close, a residential street lying approximately 50m north of the site of the well.

Our other Medieval reference is from the Anglo-Saxon estate charter for Bleadon in north Somerset; here a Beggaresthorne (beggar's thorn tree) is listed (Grundy 1935(ii)). The document in which it appears is ostensibly from the later 10th century but written in the language of the 14th century, suggesting translations were substituted for the original Old English place-names when the original charter was copied. Whether attributed to the 10th or 14th centuries, this is the earliest local instance of the conjunction of 'beggar' and 'tree': an important fact given that the Beggaresthorne is part of the largest grouping of local Beggar place-names: the Beggars Bushes.

Of the 26 'Beggar' place-names within the north Somerset/south Gloucestershire study area 19 appear as Beggars Bush. But why 'bush'? There are certainly occasional accounts of notable trees growing at some of these sites: at one Somerset site, on the boundary of Long Ashton and Abbots Leigh parishes, Joseph Leech noted that there was 'an ancient whitethorn tree on the roadside and now supported by a friendly prop in its venerable old age' (Leech 1847). This thorn tree grew on former wasteland close to a site of execution - the Hangman's Oak - but it failed to see out the decade and was felled in 1850. Few other descriptions of actual Beggars Bushes have been recorded, but north Somerset folklorist Gray Usher wrote of how he had been told the name arose from the custom of 'the Big House' putting unwanted food in a hollow tree, or occasionally in a stone container under a hawthorn bush (Usher 1977:4). Such alms-giving could have given rise to a generic naming whereby any patch of land where vagrants could find shelter and alms became known as a Beggars Bush, irrespective of whether a thorn tree existed there or not. It is also apparent that the nomenclature of travellers' sites was capable of evolution, for a map of 1740 shows a Tinkers Leys on the eastern edge of the Somerset parish of Walcor; a parish which already



contained a Beggars Bush on its northern border. Tinkers are traditionally itinerant metalworkers and are rarely found in place names before the mid-18th century. Over the course of the following two centuries the term also becomes applied to Irish travellers to distinguish them from Romanies.

The geographical positioning of these ancient travellers' sites has been touched upon with the discussion of early estate charters. Within the study area there is a marked Somerset predominance in their distribution; this may reflect the fact that approximately twice as many Somerset parishes were investigated as Gloucestershire parishes! However, historical differences in land use may account for some of this geographical weighting as a large area of the central plain of south Gloucestershire was, until the mid-18th century, a succession of heathlands with a sparsely distributed settled population. Equally, large areas of the south Gloucestershire coastal lowlands alongside the River Severn remained thinly populated and far from the road network even into the late 19th century. It is possible that so much waste land was available that there was

little need to dedicate specific areas for vagrants in much of south Gloucestershire. North Somerset however - with the exception of the Mendip plateau where Beggar names are rare - had much more enclosed waste ground and thus there may well have been more of a need to identify specific areas where itinerants could rest.

Twenty-one of the twenty-seven recorded instances of 'beggar' names from the study area are located either on or within 200m of a parish boundary. At least one other 'Beggars Bush', in the Somerset parish of Weare, lay on a manorial boundary within the parish and less than 100m south of St Ern's Well, a sacred site which must once have attracted considerable custom from pilgrims and others visiting the well. The remaining six sites may also have lain on manorial boundaries within parishes but more research is necessary to test this theory.

There are two sets of Somerset parishes, East Brent/South Brent and Lullington/Laverton, where the respective 'Beggars Bush' sites are immediately adjacent to each other. These situations may represent the existence of extra-parochial no-man's-lands or possibly an example of the parishes in question co-operating on allotting small areas of adjacent liminal land for the provision of the destitute. Another pair of Somerset parishes, Frome and Berkley, have Beggars Bush sites separated by a distance of less than 300m and situated on two sides of a major crossroads. It is possible that these sites were once part of a larger area of waste land which was gradually reduced in extent until two relatively small and disjunct areas remained. Another reminder of this area's support for those without a fixed abode is the name of the roadway running east from the crossroads and adjacent to the Berkley Beggars Bush - Gipsy Lane - a name which occurs sporadically throughout the study area.

Twenty-two of the sites lie adjacent to roads or tracks, frequently crossroads or road forks; this was almost certainly a prerequisite for the establishment of a traveller's site, for free access across private land would have been unlikely. It was also important to be near the road network to solicit alms from travellers. We must also not forget the classically liminal nature of the crossroads: 'among the most magical

spots in the whole of folklore' (Klein quoted in Hand 1992). Suicides and evil spirits were disposed of at these sites, and others cast out from society would have found a form of cold comfort here. Within living memory tramps would hole up at a minor crossroads in the north Somerset parish of Tickenham. Here, at the 'Devil's Hole', a scrubby pool in the north-western angle of the crossroads, they risked demonisation from local children who would never loiter there but run quickly by on the other side of the road, unsure whether it was the tramps or Satan that they were more frightened of (Miss D. Fisher, per. com. Jan 1995).

Many of the accepted criteria of what constitutes the liminal are found with the 'beggar' sites of the study area. They are places for 'the other', those elements of society which are unclean, cast-out, relegated to the dangerous and disputed

lands on the edge of society, lacking fixed social roles and posing a potential threat to the ordered structure and well-being of settled society. They are sites where dangers can be contained, along with ghosts, devils and disease. This brief survey has only scratched the surface of a fascinating phenomenon that links folklore, sociology, history and etymology: a liminal tradition that still lives in our landscape in the place-names of fields and trackways. Modern travellers' sites may need to possess better facilities than the rude shelter of a gnarled old thorn, but their position on the edge of what is safe and known keeps alive the realm of liminality that those outside conventional society have long been associated with.

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Distribution table of 'Beggars Bush' place-names (and derivatives) in north Somerset and south Gloucestershire

Name	Parish	Grid ref.	Source	On p.b.?	On Roadway?
Beggar Acre	East Brent (S)	ST339514	T.A.(1839)#418	Yes	100m south east of road
Beggar Dunsdon	West Littleton (G)	ST752760	T.A.(1840)#53	50m east of p.b.	150m s.e. of crossroads
Beggaresthorpe	Bleadon (S)	(not known)	Grundy 1935	Certainly on estate bdy.	(not known)
Beggarly Way	Wookey (S)	ST485450	T.A.(1839)#1037-8	200m east of p.b.	Yes (within a road fork)
Beggars Bush	Litton (S)	ST588511	T.A.(1839)#388	Yes	100m north of road
Beggars Bush	Iron Acton (G)	ST697848	T.A.(1839)#39	100m south of p.b.	Yes
Beggars Bush	West Harptree (S)	ST552568	T.A.(1840)#305	200m south of p.b.	On crossroads
Beggars Bush	Wickwar (G)	ST720877	T.A.(1838)#479	50m south of p.b.	Adjacent to track
Beggars Bush	Weare (S)	ST416519	T.A.(1839)#294	No - Manorial boundary	Yes
Beggars Bush	North Wootton (S)	ST556424	T.A.(1840)#211/2	400m south of p.b.	Yes (possible fork)
Beggars Bush	Evercreech (S)	ST661390	T.A.(1838)#582	200m south of p.b.	Yes
Beggars Bush	Henbury (G)	(not known)	HEA(1822)	(not known)	(not known)
Beggars Bush	Berkley (S)	ST786493	T.A.(1839)#84/5/6	Yes	200m east of crossroads
Beggars Bush	East Brent (S)	ST337515	T.A.(1839)#413	Yes	Yes
Beggars Bush	East Brent (S)	ST339515	T.A.(1839)# 414	Yes	Yes
Beggars Bush	Frome (S)	cST782495	T.A.(1840)#888/90-2	Yes	Yes. 100m west of crossroads
Beggars Bush	Hemmington (S)	ST762531	T.A. (1840)#389	100m north of p.b.	On crossroads
Beggars Bush	Laverton (S)	ST768525	T.A. (1845)#39-41	Yes	Yes (possible fork)
Beggars Bush	Laverton (S)	ST767526	T.A. (1845)#43	Yes	Yes (possible fork)
Beggars Bush	Lullington (S)	ST768524	T.A. (1845)#9	Yes	Yes (possible fork)
Beggars Bush	South Brent (S)	ST337515	T.A.(1842)#87-92	Yes	Yes
Beggars Bush	Westbury-sub-Mendip (S)	ST491494	T.A. (1838)#234/253/255-6	Yes	Yes
Beggars Bush	Walcot (S)	ST747661	TT (1740)	Yes	Yes (road fork)
Beggar Bush (Lane)	Long Ashton/Abbots Leigh(S)	ST552730	Various	Yes	On crossroads
Beggars Bush Lane	Oldbury-on-Severn(G)	ST637945	OS 1:25000 Pathfinder	Leads to p.b.	A track
Beggars Orchard	Buckland Dinham (S)	ST753508	T.A.(1841)#220	No - in centre of parish	Yes (road fork)
Beggars Rest	Churchill (S)	ST454624	T.A (1841)#315/316	Yes	Yes
Beggereswelle	St Paul, (B)	ST596738	A.H.	Yes	Yes
Loddra wyl	Dyrham & Hinton (G)	ST712765?	Grundy 1935	Yes	Yes (a ridgeway track)
Tinker's Leys	Walcot (S)	ST761663	TT (1740)	Yes	Yes

Abbreviations: p.b. - Parish Boundary, B - Bristol, G - Gloucestershire, S - Somerset, T.A. - Tithe Awards (all Tithe Awards are for the parishes in question), HEA - Henbury Enclosure Awards, TT - Thomas Thorp: A Plan of the Parish of Walcot, AH - A. H. Smith 'Bdy of medieval city of Bristol'.