

Hobbits?...And what may they be?

Michael Flowers

Independent Scholar, mflowers81@live.co.uk

Follow this and additional works at: <http://scholar.valpo.edu/journaloftolkienresearch>



Part of the [Literature in English, British Isles Commons](#)

Recommended Citation

Flowers, Michael () "Hobbits?...And what may they be?," *Journal of Tolkien Research*: Vol. 4 : Iss. 1 , Article 2.

Available at: <http://scholar.valpo.edu/journaloftolkienresearch/vol4/iss1/2>

This Peer-Reviewed Article is brought to you for free and open access by the Library Services at ValpoScholar. It has been accepted for inclusion in Journal of Tolkien Research by an authorized administrator of ValpoScholar. For more information, please contact a ValpoScholar staff member at scholar@valpo.edu.

Hobbits?...And what may they be?

Cover Page Footnote

Cleaver, Harry M & H Browne, "Wireless, an Hundred Years Ago?", *The Listener*, 13 Sept 1933, p.396.

“Will you kindly arrange...with your Tenant who has the good Potatoes, that he... should send me 12 Hobbits.” (Sir T.H. Browne, 1836)

Éomer’s query in the second chapter of *The Two Towers* (*Lord of the Rings*, 434), utilised as the heading for this paper, has been asked in either those or similar words regularly in the eighty years since *The Hobbit* was published. A question asked almost as frequently is: ‘Where did Tolkien get the word “hobbit” from?’ Meanwhile, Sir Thomas Browne’s 1836 letter was published for the first time in 1933, later in the same year in which Tolkien is believed to have completed his children’s book (Rateliff, xx). Four decades ago *The Times* announced that “the origin of the engagingly elusive [word] hobbit has at last been tracked to earth” in a Victorian book called *The Denham Tracts* (Howard, 14). However, this paper will demonstrate, on the eightieth anniversary of the first publication of Tolkien’s perennially popular children’s book, *The Hobbit*, that a down-to-earth Welsh word is even more likely to be the true genesis of the word ‘hobbit.’

Tolkien invariably explained to various interviewers that one summer he was marking examination papers, which he found a laborious and boring task, when he came across a blank page. In a TV interview first broadcast in March 1968, he revealed he was suddenly inspired to write on the clear paper: “in a hole in the ground there lived a hobbit” (Megahey, 1968); a sentence which has recently been described as “a kind of tipping point for British folklore and fantasy writing” (Larrington, 9). The whole object of Tolkien’s recollection appears to show that this was a sudden impulsive act of creation, or in his own words the “actual flashpoint” (Megahey, *ibid*). He emphasized this aspect in the example above because immediately before he recited the first sentence of *The Hobbit* Tolkien preceded it with a prefatory remark “I can’t think why” (*ibid*). He made a similar comment almost every time he related the event. In a near contemporary magazine interview he added: “I don’t know where the word [hobbit] came from” (Plimmer, 32), whilst in a letter to W.H. Auden he confided “I did not and do not know why” (Letters, 215). It is significant for this study that in addition to the word hobbit this first sentence also revealed that hobbits were strongly associated at the moment of inspiration with holes in the ground, and, of course, by implication, with the soil. It could therefore be argued that both the origin of the word hobbit and the hobbit’s natural habitat were a bubbling up from the “creative unconsciousness” (Shippey, *Road*, 75) or what Tolkien himself would probably have called a submerged memory from the ‘leaf-mould’.

In 1971 when Tolkien was answering a question about the origin of the word Gondor, he informed his correspondent that “one’s mind is, of course, stored with a ‘leaf-mould’ of memories (submerged) of names, and these rise up to the surface at times, and may provide with modification the basis of ‘invented’ names” (Letters, 409). Similarly, in a letter to Roger Lancelyn Green when discussing the source of the word hobbit, he confided that “one cannot exclude the possibility that childhood memories might suddenly rise to the surface long after (in my case after 35-40 years), though they might be quite differently applied” (*Ibid*, 406-7). The first sentence of *The Hobbit* seems to be a perfect exemplar of a moment when a submerged memory of a long-forgotten name may have risen to the surface. However, if this is the case, where may Tolkien have come across the word hobbit, or a similar word earlier in his life?

Since Tolkien's death many words have been written in an attempt to determine where the word hobbit came from. In 1977 *The Times* revealed that a researcher for the *Oxford English Dictionary* had found the word hobbit in a book published in the nineteenth century (Howard, 14). This was in an obscure book of folklore collected by Michael Aislabie Denham earlier in the century, and edited by James Hardy and named *The Denham Tracts* (1895). Careful comparisons made between the different lists of ephemera Denham issued, have shown that the original publication which included the word 'hobbit' was published in 1853 (Gilliver, 146-8). Hobbits are included in a long catalogue of supernatural species of spirit just before hobgoblins. No further details of the characteristics of these 'hobbits' are forthcoming beyond the name. It cannot be proved that Tolkien ever saw this list, but if he did peruse this esoteric volume, it is reasonable to suppose that this may have lain dormant in the 'leaf-mould' of his mind until the first sentence of the hobbit was scrawled on the examination paper.

The Times headline "Tracking the hobbit down to earth" and the journalist's remark that Tolkien's source "has now been identified" were intended to show that the origin of the word had been definitively traced (ibid). The *OED* is a respected publication and has an international reputation, so this claim appears to have gained precedence over any other possible explanation. Once this information was disseminated every scholar who considers the genesis of the word 'hobbit' seems to feel obliged to take the *Denham Tracts* into account. Douglas Anderson's *Annotated Hobbit* lists creatures with the 'hob' element in their name, and then spends a paragraph explaining *The Denham Tracts* (Anderson, 9). Although Anderson does not pass judgement on the validity of the *Denham Tracts* theory, the fact that it is allocated a whole paragraph implies that this is the favoured explanation. However, a note of dissatisfaction or scepticism is often apparent by those who elaborate on this rather tenuous hypothesis. Tom Shippey mentions *The Denham Tracts* briefly when he considers the origin of the word hobbit, but concludes that there is "slender evidence" that the Tracts provide the true source of the inspiration (Shippey, Author, 46). When Marjorie Burns summarised the various options, she emphasised that there was no proof Tolkien had actually read the book in question (Burns, 201). One of the most exhaustive examinations of the likelihood of the *Denham Tracts* supposition occurs as an appendix to John Rateliff's comprehensive *History of the Hobbit*. After a detailed analysis of the complicated publication history of the original ephemeral listings, and the probability of Tolkien reading the list, Rateliff's considered overall opinion is that "it is highly unlikely that *The Denham Tracts* was actually Tolkien's source for *hobbit*" (Rateliff, 849). The authors of *The Ring of Words* go a step further when they point out that if Tolkien had used another unique name only found in *The Denham Tracts* then the possibility that he had seen the list would have more credibility, but "there is no trace of them [i.e. the curious words found in the list]" (Gilliver, 146). They also argue that *The Denham Tracts* "certainly seems an unlikely origin for 'buried childhood memories'," (ibid) which helps to ratify one of the main arguments of this study.

What most scholars who have pondered *The Denham Tracts* have so far ignored, is that when Tolkien suggested that he may have resurrected a half-buried memory to create a word like 'hobbit', he also added the significant qualification that any childhood memories "might be quite differently applied" (*Letters*, 407). *The Denham Tracts* has attracted most attention because it contains the name of a creature with the same name as Tolkien's, but his own words suggest that this would in reality make *The Denham Tracts* a less likely source for

the origin of his word. This paper will prove that the word ‘hobbit’ already existed in North Wales, and it is possible Tolkien may have encountered this as a child. John Rateliff is on less sure foundations when he boldly asserts that *The Denham Tracts* “contains the only known occurrence of the word ‘hobbit’ before Tolkien” (Rateliff, 263-4). Examination of newspaper archives reveals that the word ‘hobbit’ or the alternative spelling ‘hobbet’ appeared countless times well before Tolkien was born, and many of them predate *The Denham Tracts*. One of the earliest surviving examples is from 1832 in which it was reported that corn was being “sold at 18s. per hobbit” (*N.Wales Chronicle*, 3 Apr 1832, 3). This was to become a typical appearance of the word over the ensuing century. The letter at the beginning of this paper is another instance, and was written in the year after that press report. Meanwhile, the alternative spelling appeared in print nearly forty years earlier, which was almost a century before the birth of Tolkien. A Flintshire magistrate wrote a letter to William Pitt, the Prime Minister on 11 Feb 1796, which was published in a regional newspaper to which he appended a note, which referred to “a man who sent a load of 21 hobbets of barley to a kiln in the town” (*Chester Chronicle*, 19 Feb 1796, 3).

Research reveals that the word ‘hobbit’ was in common use in specific areas of Wales from at least the late eighteenth century right through the nineteenth century and into the early decades of the twentieth century. A hobbit was defined as a measure of 2½ bushels or four pecks, which represented “147 lbs of barley, 168 lbs of wheat, 105lbs oats, and 180lbs of vetches, clover, and beans” (*Northern Whig & Belfast Post*, 21 Feb 1921, 2). The Welsh equivalent of the *OED*, the *Geiriadur Prifysgol Cymru* (GPC), has traced the Welsh term back much further, at least as far back as the late medieval works of Dafydd ap Edmwnd, which is several centuries before the word appeared in English (Livingston, 7).

One of the most vivid uses of the word prior to Tolkien occurred when the antiquarian Sir Thomas H. Browne wrote to John Wynne, a major landowner in North Wales on 5 October 1836, of which the following is the whole of the first paragraph:

Will you kindly arrange for me, as you did last year, and the year before, with your Tenant who has the good Potatoes, that he, or such other of them as may have the best, should send me 12 **Hobbits** (they say the measure is extinct by Law, but I like the old **hobbit** notwithstanding) when he gets them up. [My emphasis] (Cleaver, 396).

In September 1933 *The Listener*, a weekly periodical published by the BBC for ‘wireless’ listeners, printed the above old letter which had recently been discovered in a book in St Asaph Cathedral, Wales. The letter was republished because Harry Cleaver, a correspondent of *The Listener*, believed that the fourth paragraph would be of interest to listeners. Fortuitously, the whole text of the letter was published, which is why the paragraph quoted above survives in full. Interestingly, the letter shows that the term “hobbit” was supposedly extinct by law as early as 1836, but research shows it was in general usage much later than that, and not just by antiquarians.

It is entirely appropriate that the recipient of the above letter was a Welshman, living in Coed Coch, near Abergele, which is on the north coast of Wales between Rhyl and Colwyn Bay. An examination of Welsh newspapers and periodicals from the late nineteenth century shows that ‘hobbit’ was still in very common usage almost on a weekly basis in the list of prices from the local Welsh markets. For instance, it occurs virtually every week in *The Wrexham Advertiser* throughout the 1896 market season between 18 January and 25 April when the agricultural prices for Mold or Ruthin are listed. Although the *Wrexham Advertiser*

used the spelling ‘hobbit’, as did *The Denbighshire and Flintshire Telegraph*, some newspapers favoured the alternative spelling of ‘hobbet.’ For example, in the four years between 1897 and 1900 *The North Wales Times*, which was published in Denbigh, Clwyd, printed the word ‘hobbet’ on at least 161 occasions. ‘Hobbit’ or ‘hobbet’ was always more common in North Wales including the areas of Mold, Denbigh, Rhyl, and surrounding areas, but others parts of Wales were also aware of the measure. For example, also in 1896, *The South Wales Daily News* reported that flooding in North Wales meant that “potatoes are rotting in the ground, and can be bought for 3 shillings a hobbet” (8 Oct, 5).

The hobbit/hobbet as a measure of agricultural produce did become known further afield than Wales. In the *Hampshire Advertiser* of 1842 it was reported that good quality barley “was sold as low as 14s. 6d, a hobbet” at a market in Pwllheli (10 Sep, 4). In 1867 in an article about raising chickens in the *Oxford Journal*, a farmer explained that his young poultry were fed on barley, which cost him between 8 and 10 shillings per hobbit, which he clarified was a North Wales measure (16 Feb 1867, 3). In 1870 *The Cheshire Observer* reported on a court case at Holywell County Court which arose because of the discrepancy between the quality of samples of barley measured in hobbits before they were purchased, and after they were delivered. The word ‘hobbit’ appeared nine times on the same page of the newspaper (5 Feb 1870, 3). This particular spelling was exceptional for *The Cheshire Observer*, because it habitually referred to prices per ‘hobbet’ for market sales in Denbighshire, as did the *Shrewsbury Chronicle* and the *Bradford Observer*. *The Belfast News-Letter* pointed out that the hobbet measure varied in different parts of Wales; “at Pwlhefi it was the equivalent of 252 lb, but in Wrexham it was only 168lb!” (9 May 1864, 4). As recently as 1921 *The Northern Whig and Belfast Post* in an article about standardising agricultural measures chose the ‘hobbet’ of North Wales above all other measures to first illustrate the various weights in the different crops of barley, wheat, oats, vetches and clover (21 Feb, 2).

Tolkien may never have read the word hobbit in a contemporary newspaper when he was a child, but the sheer ubiquity of the word ‘hobbit’ or ‘hobbet’ in Welsh newspapers of the late nineteenth century indicates that the word had a pervasive and fairly wide currency, especially in agricultural circles, and the likelihood of being encountered by a child either in print or in speech was much greater, than a single example printed in a rare volume of folklore.

It is known that Tolkien participated in a family holiday in Trywn Llanbedrog, North Wales in the summer of 1920 (Phelpstead, 11), but as he was in his late-twenties at the time it seems improbable that he encountered this archaic agricultural term at this period in his life. If he had, it seems highly likely that as a practising philologist he would later have remembered encountering the word. Although North Wales was the centre of the use of the word ‘hobbit’, by 1920 its use was definitely in decline. The word was far more commonly used a decade or so earlier, so it is more likely that if he overheard the word at all, it was during a childhood visit to Wales, rather than when he was an adult. It has been claimed that Father Morgan “regularly took the young Tolkien and his brother on vacations in Wales” (Livingston, 7), but the surviving evidence is much flimsier than implied in that quote.

Tolkien mentioned several times that he was first attracted to the Welsh language as a child when he saw Welsh names on coal trucks when he lived in the Midlands, which

Hammond and Scull date to “late 1900 or early 1901” (*Chronology*, 7). Moreover, it is known that Tolkien visited Wales at least once as a child with Father Francis Morgan, who was also half-Welsh (Carpenter, 27). However, attempting to date this visit proves rather problematic. Humphrey Carpenter laconically states “later in childhood he went on a railway journey to Wales, and as the station names flashed past him he knew that here were words more appealing to him than any that he had yet encountered” (ibid, p.26). There is nothing in the Bodleian Library about this childhood holiday (Blackburn, Cathleen, pers comm email, 27 Sep 2016), so Carpenter probably conflated this information from the brief reference in the essay “English and Welsh” (*Monsters*, 192) with an interview Tolkien gave in 1967, in which he was reported as saying: “as a small boy I remember going on the train to Wales and seeing the name Ebbw. I just couldn’t get over it. Not long afterwards, I started inventing my own languages.”¹ Unfortunately, Carpenter’s wording is extremely vague, and from the text there is nothing to suggest whether Mabel Tolkien was alive or not. His account is rather muddled and the immediate context of his words implies that Mabel was still alive. However, it is still conceivable that Tolkien would have described himself as “a small boy” if this visit had been the one with Father Morgan after his mother’s death, when he would have been at least 12. We know that Tolkien began inventing words in the code-like ‘Nevbosh’ in 1907 at the age of 15, but he was involved in his Inceledon cousins ‘Animalic’ language earlier than this (*Secret Vice*, xi-xiv). Hammond and Scull place the visit to Wales under the heading “Summer 1905”, where their wording implies that this visit may have occurred in 1905 at the very earliest, but it could just as easily have occurred in a subsequent year (*Chronology*, 11).

We also do not know which part of Wales Tolkien visited as a child, but “the name Ebbw” suggests that South Wales is more likely than the North. Father Morgan was proud to be distantly related to the Morgans of Tredegar, Newport who owned property in the south of Wales (pers comm email, José Manuel Ferrández Bru, 16 Aug 2016), so this also lends credence to the probability that South Wales was a more likely venue than the north. Unfortunately, very little is known of precisely the type of place to which the young Tolkien brothers were taken. If it was a rural location, which seems credible, then it is possible that the word hobbit could have been spoken in a local market. It would have been more likely to have been overheard in North Wales, or the price per hobbit/hobbet even chalked up next to the relevant produce, but in the South of Wales the word hobbit in comparison would have seemed more like a mere whisper or a rumour. An argument could be made that if Tolkien had visited North Wales when he was a child, he would later remember exactly where he had encountered the word ‘hobbit’ because the term was more widespread there. However, because he visited South Wales the word would have made a much less obvious direct impact on his consciousness. There is also the faint possibility that Father Morgan, who had Welsh connections stretching back a further generation in time, may even have referred fleetingly to this archaic agricultural term in conversation. In either case it could have entered a child’s unconscious or become submerged at this period, before it suddenly rose to the surface again when it was written on an examination paper perhaps a quarter of a century later. In Tolkien’s letter to Roger Lancelyn Green quoted earlier he made it quite clear that the forgotten memory if it returned to the surface “might be quite differently applied.” If the

¹ I am grateful to Cathleen Blackburn who supplied this information in an email of 27 Sep 2016, and said the quote was from “Tolkien Talking”, *The Sunday Times*, 27 Nov 1966.

word 'hobbit' was a submerged memory it was indeed quite differently applied because it was transformed from a word for a Welsh agricultural measure into an imaginary being half the size of an adult human.

The more Tolkien wrote about hobbits the more strongly he entwined them with an agrarian lifestyle. In *The Hobbit* itself when hobbits are first described Tolkien confines himself in the text to a physical description of their portly stomachs, bright clothing, nimble fingers, hirsute heads and feet, and their propensity for eating and drinking, but absolutely nothing is forthcoming about how they were employed (*Hobbit*, Facsimile, 12). Of course, this was perfectly suitable for a children's book when long digressions about agriculture would probably have been found extremely off-putting by impatient childish readers. Following Fimi's example of examining Tolkien's early illustrations for details not explicit in the text (*Tolkien*, 180-1) a perusal of the frontispiece which adorns the first edition of *The Hobbit*, does appear to show an agricultural system of fairly small fields bounded in by either hedgerows or fences between Bag End and Hobbiton. This becomes more explicit in the watercolour version, which was added to the book in the second printing of 1937 (Hammond & Scull, *Art of Hobbit*, 6), and on the cover of the first American edition (1938). In this there are clearly demarcated fields containing differently-coloured crops, which are immediately obvious even after the most cursory of glances (Hammond & Scull, *Artist*, 106). Hobbits were evidently heavily involved in agricultural pursuits although Tolkien did not make this overt in the text.

By the time he worked on the fourth version of the early drafts of what became *The Lord of the Rings* the agricultural nature of hobbits was made more explicit within the narrative. When the prototype character of what became Frodo was still called Bingo Bolger-Baggins, Tolkien chose to introduce his relationship with Gaffer Gamgee in this manner: "Bingo had always been very polite to Gaffer Gamgee, calling him Mr. Gamgee, and discussing potatoes with him over the hedge" (*Return of Shadow*, 38). Therefore, the most down-to-earth character is immediately linked to horticulture, and specifically to the propagation of potatoes. In late 1938 it appears that Tolkien worked on what was called at the time a 'Foreword' in which he bolstered the hobbits' links with agriculture. Readers were to be informed that Hobbits are: "fond of peace and quiet, and good tilled earth: a well-ordered and well-farmed countryside is their natural haunt" (*ibid*, p.310) and this survived unaltered into the third paragraph of the published Prologue (*Fellowship*, 11). A short time afterwards Tolkien planned to add that they had "a kind of professional skill...aided by close friendship with the earth and all things that grow on it: the power of disappearing quietly and quickly" (*Return*, 311). Most of this survived in the published Prologue with the exception of the reference to the growing things. One addition which appeared in the Prologue under the sub-heading "Of the Ordering of the Shire" was that for hobbits "growing food and eating it occupied much of their time" (*Fellowship*, 19). Later, when readers are introduced to Gaffer Gamgee in the final published text one of the initial things they learn is that "in the matter of 'roots', especially potatoes, the Gaffer was recognised as the leading authority by all in the neighbourhood" (*ibid*, p.30). Finally, when the narrative had progressed as far as Ithilien in the published chapter 'Of Herbs and Stewed Rabbit', Sam Gamgee talks about taters (a vernacular name for potatoes) and mentions to Gollum that his cooking speciality is fish and chips (*Lord of the Rings*, 749).

So why did Tolkien appear to emphasise the link between potatoes and hobbits, when the hobbits at a first glance would appear to emanate from an earlier epoch in time, and potatoes are a vegetable from the New World? Shippey believes that Hobbits are inherently anachronistic in themselves and provide an indispensable bridge between a more ancient world Tolkien wants to describe and our own world (*Author*, 5-7). Tolkien noted that “hobbits are just rustic English people” (Gueroult, 1965), and it is only an infinitesimal step from this to add that there seems “nothing could be now be more distinctively English” than mentioning their favourite national dish: fish and chips (*Author*, 47). Strangely, Tolkien seems to refer pointedly to potatoes or ‘taters’ far more frequently than other traditional agricultural crops which might have been more expected. For instance, oats are not mentioned at all, and the only reference to barley occurs towards the close of *The Lord of the Rings* when we are informed: “the Northfarthing barley was so fine that the beer of 1420 malt was long remembered and became a byword (*Lord of the Rings*, 1024). However, there are more references to corn, including early in the narrative while Frodo is preparing to leave the Shire when readers are told “the corn was tall and full” (*ibid*, p.67). During the ruffians’ occupancy of the Shire the corn-mills “grind no more corn at all” (*ibid*, p.1013), but after they are ejected and order is restored “everywhere there was so much corn that at Harvest every barn was stuffed” (*ibid*, p.1024). Corn (or wheat), barley, oats and potatoes were all measured out in hobbits in North Wales throughout the nineteenth century, so there was a connection between those words in the real world. It is almost as if Tolkien retained a vestigial remembrance from far back in his distant childhood, so that he ensured that there was also a connection between corn, barley, potatoes and hobbits in his vision of bucolic innocence in The Shire.

The Welsh hobbit/hobbet measure has been noticed by some earlier critics, but often it has been too readily rejected before the full implications have been considered. For instance, in 1986 Donald O’Brien attempted to summarise all of the possible origins of the word ‘Hobbit’ in the journal *Mythlore*. He ruminated on the *Oxford English Dictionary* definition of Hobbet in his article, which was “a local measure” and followed this with an entry from Joseph Wright’s *The English Dialect Dictionary*, which includes a Welsh noun ‘hobbit’ whose meaning is given as: “*HOBBIT*, sb. Wal. Also written *hobit*. A measure of corn, beans &c. ...being 2½ bushels imperial” (O’Brien, 46). O’Brien correctly points out that Tolkien was “closely associated with Wright”, having attended his lectures while at Oxford, and notes that before 1910 Tolkien had studied Wright’s *Primer of the Gothic Language*. Wright was one of the first people to recognise Tolkien’s interest in language, and was able to influence the way his studies were directed. So, it is possible that Tolkien could have become aware of the hobbit measure if he ever consulted the right page of Wright’s book. It certainly seems more likely that Tolkien would have read a friend and colleague’s book in a subject which interested him personally, rather than an obscure book which had such a restricted circulation, such as *The Denham Tracts*.

O’Brien was unable to locate the word in any Welsh dictionaries, and he believed that the corn measure given above seemed “to have no obvious connection with Tolkien’s hobbits” (*ibid*), so he moved on to other possible sources. O’Brien was incorrect to state that the word does not occur in dictionaries. An 1815 English-Welsh dictionary defined hob and hobaid as “a peck of corn or meal in *Glamorganshire*” (Richards, 267). Whilst in Caernarvonshire it was described as “a measure containing four *Winchester* bushels” (*ibid*).

O'Brien may have shown more interest in this definition if he had located the word in a Welsh dictionary, and even more so than if he had been aware of Sir Thomas Browne's striking 1836 letter quoted above.

A more recent researcher who gave far more attention to the Welsh measure than earlier scholars was Michael Livingston. He commenced by summarising all the possible origins listed by O'Brien, and added a couple that have been mentioned since, in addition to one referred to by Tolkien – Babbitt. Livingston examined the definition of 'hobbet' as "a seed-basket" in the *OED*, plus the local measure of 2½ bushels. He located the latter in a reference book: John C. Morton's *Cyclopaedia of Agriculture* (1863), which was itself subsequently utilised for 156 entries in the *OED* including in the 'W' section, on which Tolkien worked. He also unearthed an editorial by Charles Dickens for *All the Year Round* in 1863, which discussed the discrepancy between weights of hobbets in Pwllheli compared with Wrexham, and that hobbets of barley and oats were different yet again (Livingston, 5). Livingston even discovered that in around 1600 a hobbett became a term for the measurement of a small parcel of land in Llandrinio, near Powys, mid-Wales. This was presumably based on the amount of land required to produce a hobbet of wheat, barley, oats or potatoes (ibid, 9). However, the use of hobbett for a land measure appears to have had a very limited application, even though coincidental links could be made between it and Tolkien's creatures of the soil of The Shire. Finally, Livingston also emphasises that 'hobbit' with that spelling appears in Joseph Wright's book, so the word could have entered Tolkien's consciousness that way. However, if we are looking for a source which reached Tolkien in childhood this point of entry is probably less likely than the agricultural grain measure mentioned above.

When the hobbit/potato letter was published in *The Listener* in September 1933 J.R.R. Tolkien had an unpublished manuscript at home, which C.S. Lewis had read by 4 February earlier that same year and reported of it: "I have had a delightful time reading a children's story Tolkien has just written...Whether it is really *good* (I think it is until the end) is of course another question" (Ratcliff, xv). It is believed that this children's story was what Tolkien later entitled *The Hobbit; or, There and Back Again*. It is highly unlikely that Tolkien or Lewis would have seen that letter in *The Listener*. If they had it is possible that Tolkien's submerged childhood memories may have been fully reawakened.

When the Welsh measure was actually alluded to on previous occasions it was either very briefly considered before being too easily discounted or surrounded by all the other possible definitions, so that its true significance became eclipsed by all the extraneous detail. O'Brien's overall conclusion was that "the evidence supports no alleged resolution of the original of 'hobbit' unequivocally" (O'Brien, 37), which seems reasonable because he dismissed the measure definition far too readily without due consideration, and he was completely unaware of the proliferation of the word in the Welsh provincial press. Likewise, Livingston concluded "there can thus be no single word that stands behind Tolkien's hobbit; there are many" (Livingston, 11). However, some 'single word' candidates would appear to be far more probable than others. It is hoped that by isolating the Welsh measure from all but *The Denham Tracts* theory, this will help focus attention on this particular possible genesis of Tolkien's 'hobbit'. The many examples of actual uses of the agricultural 'hobbit' from newspapers taken in conjunction with the arresting letter at the head of this paper, hopefully permits the full implications of the possibilities of the word being a real contender as a more likely source of Tolkien's 'hobbit' to be highlighted for the first time. There is the real

likelihood that in the future further details about Tolkien's childhood excursions to Wales may yet emerge. Until that time any discussion of the antecedents of the origins of the word 'hobbit' must necessarily contain a great deal of speculation.

It is evident that the Welsh measure of a hobbit/hobbet could have reached Tolkien in at least two disparate ways, and at two distinct periods of his life: either as a child in Wales, or as a young adult scholar. We should also never discount the very real possibility that the word 'hobbit' was a true "coinage" (Gilliver, 145) from his own imagination. However, if it is accepted that when the word hobbit popped into Tolkien's head around 1930 he was vaguely recalling a submerged memory it does appear that his later comment that it would be "quite differently applied" may have been correct. It is far more plausible that a half-forgotten agricultural measure encountered in childhood would be utilised, rather than a definition from Joseph's Wright's book; and infinitely more likely than a single word in a long list of spirits in a rare book, which we do not even know he ever perused. In future when the origin of the word 'hobbit' is discussed, it is to be hoped that an obsolete Welsh measure for agricultural produce including corn, barley, oats and "Po-ta-toes" (*Lord of the Rings*, 654) will now be remembered as a possible source for Tolkien's 'hobbit.'

Works Cited

- Burns, Marjorie. "Tracing the Elusive Hobbit (In its Pre-Shire Den)," *Tolkien Studies IV*, (2007), 200-11.
- Carpenter, Humphrey. 1977. *J.R.R. Tolkien: A Biography*. London: George Allen & Unwin.
- Carpenter, Humphrey, ed., with the assistance of Christopher Tolkien. 1981. *The Letters of J.R.R. Tolkien*. London: George Allen & Unwin.
- Cleaver, Harry M & H Browne, "Wireless, a Hundred Years ago?", *The Listener*, 13 Sept 1933, p.396.
- Fimi, Dimitra. 2010. *Tolkien, Race and Cultural History: From Fairies to Hobbits*. London: Palgrave Macmillan.
- Forest-Hill, Lynn. Ed. 2016. *The Return of the Ring: Proceedings of the Tolkien Society Conference 2012*. Edinburgh: Tolkien Society.
- Gilliver, Peter, Jeremy Marshall, and Edmund Weiner. Eds. 2006. *The Ring of Words: Tolkien and The Oxford English Dictionary*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Gueroult, Denys, Interview with J.R.R. Tolkien, 20 Jan 1965: www.bbc.co.uk/programmes/p021jx7j
- Hammond, Wayne & Christina Scull. 2011. *The Art of the Hobbit by J.R.R. Tolkien*. London: HarperCollins.
- Hammond, Wayne & Christina Scull. 1995. *J.R.R. Tolkien: Artist and Illustrator*. London: HarperCollins.
- Hammond, Wayne & Christina Scull. 2014. *The Lord of the Rings: A Reader's Companion*. London: HarperCollins.
- Howard, Philip. "Tracking the Hobbit Down to Earth", *Times*, 31 May 1977, p.34.
- Larrington, Carolyne. 2015. *The Land of the Green Man: A Journey Through the Supernatural Landscapes of The British Isles*. London: I.B. Tauris.
- Livingston, Michael. "The Myths of the Author: Tolkien and the medieval origins of the word hobbit." *Mythlore*, 22 Mar 2012: 1-15.

- Megahey, Leslie, *Tolkien in Oxford*, BBC 2 TV, 30 March 1968. www.bbc.co.uk/archive/writers/12237.shtml
- O'Brien, Donald. 1989. "On the Origin of the Name 'Hobbit'." *Mythlore* 16, No.2 (Winter 1989): 32-38.
- Palmer, Alfred Neobard & Edward Owen. 1910. *A History of Ancient Tenures of Land in North Wales and the Marches*. N.P. Second Edition.
- Phelpstead, Carl. 2011. *Tolkien and Wales*. Cardiff: University of Wales Press.
- Rateliff, John D. 2007. *The History of the Hobbit, Part One: Mr. Baggins*. London: HarperCollins.
- Rateliff, John D. 2007. *The History of the Hobbit, Part Two: Return to Bag-End*. London: HarperCollins.
- Richards, Thomas. 1815. *Antiquæ Linguae Britannicæ Thesaurus*. Dolgellay: R.Jones, Third Edition.
- Scull, Christina and Wayne G. Hammond. 2006. *The J.R.R. Tolkien Companion and Guide*. London: HarperCollins.
- Shippey, Tom. 2000. *J.R.R. Tolkien: Author of the Century*. London: HarperCollins.
- Shippey, Tom. 2005. *The Road to Middle-earth*. London: HarperCollins, Third Edition.
- Tolkien, J.R.R. 2003. *The Annotated Hobbit*. Ed. Douglas A. Anderson. London: HarperCollins, Revised edition.
- Tolkien, J.R.R. 1954. *The Fellowship of the Ring*. London: George Allen & Unwin.
- Tolkien, J.R.R. 2016. *The Hobbit: Facsimile Edition*. London: HarperCollins.
- Tolkien, J.R.R. 1983. *The Monsters and the Critics and Other Essays*. Ed. Christopher Tolkien. London: George Allen & Unwin.
- Tolkien, J.R.R. 2008. *On Fairy Stories*. Ed. Verlyn Flieger & Douglas Anderson. London: HarperCollins.
- Tolkien, J.R.R. 1988. *The Return of the Shadow*. Ed. Christopher Tolkien. London: Unwin Hyman.
- Tolkien, J.R.R. 2016. *A Secret Vice*. Ed. Dimitra Fimi and Andrew Higgins. London: HarperCollins.