

THE SCUNTHORPE PROBLEM

Darryl Francis
Brampton, Cumbria, England
darryl.francis@yahoo.co.uk

Scunthorpe is an industrial town in North Lincolnshire, England, with a population of about 80,000. So, what's the Scunthorpe problem?

According to Wikipedia: "The Scunthorpe problem is the blocking of websites, e-mails, forum posts or search results by a spam filter or search engine because their text contains a string of letters that appear to have an obscene or unacceptable meaning. Names, abbreviations, and technical terms are most often cited as being affected by the issue. The problem arises since computers can easily identify strings of text within a document, but interpreting words of this kind requires considerable ability to interpret a wide range of contexts, possibly across many cultures, which is an extremely difficult task for computers at present. As a result, broad blocking rules may result in false positives affecting innocent phrases."

The four letters at the heart of the **Scunthorpe** problem were the basis for the research in this article. There are many dictionaries of slang which list numerous words beginning with those four letters. An extensive source is the excellent three-volume *Green's Dictionary of Slang*, published in 2010; also available at www.greensdictofslang.com. However, the thrust of this article is to document some of the types of words that just coincidentally contain the **Scunthorpe** tetragram appearing together and in order.

Let's take a look at what can be found in traditional paper dictionaries.

Webster's Second Edition contains two such words:

- **placuntitis**: the same as placentitis, inflammation of the placenta;
- **placuntoma**: the same as placentoma, a tumor developed from the placenta or placental remnants.

Foster's Medical Dictionary (properly titled *An Illustrated Encyclopaedic Medical Dictionary*, by Frank Foster, 1888) contains just one word that displays the four letters:

- **placuntechos**: another name for 'uterine souffle', defined as 'a blowing sound like that heard over an aneurysm, recognised as synchronous with the mother's pulse'.

Although Foster's is over 130 years old, **placuntechos** can be found on a current website. *The Big Dictionary*, subtitled *The Ultimate English Dictionary on the Web*, is at thebigdictionary.com – and provides exactly the same definition, 'uterine souffle'.

I should note that none of the three preceding medical terms, with exactly those spellings, appear in the latest editions of medical dictionaries such as *Dorland's Medical Dictionary* and *Stedman's Medical Dictionary*. Although **placuntitis** and **placuntoma** do appear in earlier editions.

The *Oxford English Dictionary* has several occurrences of the tetragram, occurring in words in their own right:

- **Cuntz**: the surname Cuntz appears in an 1891 quote from New York's World newspaper, at the main entry 'stick-handling' (a term from ice hockey and lacrosse); thus "H. F. Cuntz and Maxfield played a good game, their stick-handling being capital."
- **sowcunt**: this is an undefined word appearing in a list of compound entries at the noun 'sow'; the OED notes it as a "coarse, nonce word" taken from James Joyce's *Ulysses*;
- **vecunty**: this is a word appearing in a 1545 quote at 'transume', thus: "The autentik copy of the said letter of merk autentikly transumyt in the toun of Arkis under the sele of the tabellioun and keparis of the sele of the vecunty of Arkis." Or, rendered into modern English, "The authentic copy of the said letter of mark authentically copied in the town of Arkis under the seal of the notary and keepers of the seal of the vecunty of Arkis." This same quote also appears in *A Dictionary of the Older Scottish Tongue*, available online at dsl.ac.uk. I believe that **vecunty** is a 15-16th century obsolete spelling of 'viscounty' (itself an obsolete spelling of 'viscount') or 'viscounty' (the rank of a viscount).

The OED also contains obsolete and/or variant spellings of more modern words, typically occurring in the 16th to 19th centuries:

- **cuntur**: a 16th-18th spelling of 'condor', a large South American vulture;
- **quincuntial**: a 16th century spelling of 'quincuncial', pertaining to a quincunx, a pattern used for planting trees in which they are arranged in one or more groups of five, so placed that four occupy the corners of a square or rectangle and the fifth occupies its centre;
- **reacuntar, recunter, recuntir, recuntyr**: Scots pre-17th century spellings of the verb 'recounter', to encounter in battle;
- **scunt**: a 19th century spelling of the past participle of the verb 'skin', skinned or stripped;
- **scuntion**: an 18th century spelling of 'scuncheon', the bevelled inner edge of the side or jamb of a window or door.

The OED also contains many other words from Middle English and earlier centuries, all invariably obsolete spellings of familiar modern words. Here are just a few:

- **accunt, acunt, acunte, acunthe**: obsolete form of 'account';
- **cuntasse**: obsolete form of 'countess';
- **cuntenance**: obsolete form of 'countenance';
- **cuntery**: obsolete form of 'country';
- **cuntirpoint**: obsolete form of 'counterpoint';
- **cunteward**: obsolete form of 'country-ward';
- **incuntrey**: a Scottish word for inland country, the mainland as opposed to outlying isles;

- **Gropecuntelane**: a street name in Oxford, England (now called Grove Passage and Magpie Lane);
- **porcuntine**: obsolete form of 'porcupine';
- **Westcuntre**: obsolete form of 'west country'.

The OED contains many Latin words, usually in quotations appearing under a range of different headwords. Again, here are just a few:

- **accrescunt agnoscuntur crebrescunt crescunt dicunt dracuntium ducunt dicuntur educunt erubescunt fatiscunt grossecunt iacuntius infervescent languescunt locuntur noscuntur obdormiscunt obliuiscuntur pascuntur pascuntur producantur quiescunt recognoscunt rigescunt secuntur tremiscunt uincuntur vescuntur veterascunt**

A Dictionary of the Older Scottish Tongue (available to search online at dsl.ac.uk) has the following entries:

- **cuntack, cunt-fish, cunt-plucker** and **cuntie**: a father-lasher, a short-spined sea-scorpion, *Acanthocottus bubalis*;
- **cunterfut**: some kind of plate or dish;
- **incuntré** and **incuntrie**: the Scottish Lowlands as opposed to the Highlands and Isles;
- **ramcunter, rancunter, and rencunter**: variants of the verb 'rencounter', to engage (an enemy, etc) in fight or battle (all obviously related to four similar words from the OED, above);
- **secunt**: a variant spelling of 'second';
- **wiscunt**: an alternative spelling of 'vicecount' and 'vicont', themselves more familiar as the word 'viscount'. There is obviously a connection between **wiscunt** and **vecunty**, the latter mentioned above.

Here are a few words and names which can be found in online sources:

- **Acunto Napoli Ovens**: an Italian artisanal pizza oven manufacturer based in Naples, Italy, founded in 1892 by Vincenzo Acunto (Wikipedia);
- **d'Acunto**: Francesco d'Acunto is an assistant professor at the Boston College Carroll School of Management (Wikipedia);
- **Escunta**: the fifth album by Canadian grindcore band Fuck the Facts, recorded in January 2001 (Wikipedia);
- **Kuccuntikka**: one of several bands of Shoshone people living on the eastern edges of the Great Basin along the upper Green River Valley, Big Sandy River and Wind River eastward to the Wind River Basin (Shoshone Basin) of western Wyoming and south-westward to Bear Lake and Great Salt Lake in southeast Idaho and northern Utah, they possessed from all Shoshone bands the greatest horse herds, also called Plains Shoshone, later called Washakie Shoshone or Wind River Shoshone) (Wikipedia);
- **lucunter**: this occurs in the scientific name *Echinometra lucunter*, the rock boring urchin, a species of sea urchin in the family *Echinometridae* which is found in very shallow parts of the western Atlantic Ocean and the Caribbean Sea (Wikipedia);

- **oolacunta**: an extinct marsupial, the desert rat kangaroo (*Caloprymnus campestris*), that lived in a sand-ridge and gibber-plain habitat in south-western Queensland and north-eastern Australia (Wikipedia). I had expected to find this word in the *Australian National Dictionary*, but there's no sign of it there.
- **Placunt**: the following quote is from the India Times sometime in May 2013 – “The shallow depths of the Zuari river at Chicalim Bay is home to the *Placunt placenta*, locally known as mendios and a variety of shellfish”.

So far, I haven't touched on placenames. Here are just ten, although there are many more such Chinese placenames:

- **Blancuntre**: a village in Chubut Province in southern Argentina (Wikipedia);
- **Bulollicunta** : a place in Somalia (US Board on Geographic Names - USBGN);
- **Cunter**: a place in Switzerland (USBGN);
- **Cuntima**: a place in Guinea-Bissau (USBGN);
- **Cuntis**: a place in Spain (*Times Index Gazetteer*);
- **Cuntuva**: a place in Angola (USBGN);
- **Dacuntou**: a place in China (USBGN);
- **Sibicunto**: a place in Guinea-Bissau (USBGN);
- **Sucuntang**: a place in China (USBGN);
- **Xicuntou**: a place in China (USBGN)

Although the surname **Cuntz** was mentioned above, it's interesting to note that there is a branch of algebra called **Cuntz algebra**, named after Joachim **Cuntz**, a German mathematician born in 1948. The explanation of the algebra, which is too complex to describe here, is on Wikipedia.

Any more?