

# THE DEBUNKING OF TORPENHOW HILL

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## Introduction

In his second book, *Beyond Language* (1967), Dmitri Borgmann posed a problem and offered a solution that have both gone unremarked until now, over 35 years later. For those who don't have the book, here is part of Problem 35. Etymological Eccentricities:

Find a word or name that exhibits a pure, quadruple redundancy, consisting of four elements identical in meaning.

The resolution provided by Borgmann runs as follows:

In *The Story of English*, Mario Pei mentions a ridge near Plymouth, England, called TORPENHOW HILL. This name consists of the Saxon TOR, the Celtic PEN, the Scandinavian HAUGR (later transposed into HOW), and the Middle English HILL, all four of them meaning "hill". Hence, the modern name of the ridge is actually "Hillhillhill Hill"!

## The Catalyst

On a recent holiday in the English county of Cumbria (part of which used to be called Cumberland), I noticed the name Torpenhow on a road sign. As I was 400 miles from Plymouth (which is in the English county of Devon), I wondered if this was another Torpenhow, different from the one mentioned in Dmitri's book. I detoured through the small but unremarkable village of Torpenhow. No sign of any local feature that could conceivably be Torpenhow Hill.

On returning home, I started to do some checking on the Internet and in my local library. I concluded that there was no such place or geographical feature as Torpenhow Hill, and that this is a fiction that has been repeated and re-repeated many times over the past 50 years or so.

Let's review the evidence.

## The Story of English

Borgmann quoted Mario Pei's book, *The Story of English*. It seemed sensible to check a copy of that book, to confirm that it did indeed contain the item about the placename in question. Pei's book was first published in Britain in 1953, and I managed to locate a copy through an interlibrary loan. In Chapter X, The Saga of Proper Names, Pei wrote:

Few Englishmen realize what the force of combination is in placenames. Near Plymouth rises a ridge called Torpenhow Hill. *Tor* is Saxon for "hill"; *pen* is the Celtic word for "head" or "hill", added later, when the force of *Tor* was lost; *how* is the Scandinavian *haugr*, which also means "hill" or "height". Last came Middle English speakers on whom the force of the earlier words was spent. Their final contribution makes the name Hillhillhill Hill!

So, Borgmann's item faithfully relays the item from Pei's book.

### Can the Internet Help?

Searches using the Google search engine ([www.google.com](http://www.google.com)) revealed the following:

- “Torpenhow Hill”: 11 finds, including one reference to an entry in the Oxford English Dictionary of Placenames. There are various mentions of its location as being in Cumbria, but there were no references to Plymouth or Devon.
- “Torpenhow Hill” & “Plymouth”: 0 finds
- “Torpenhow Hill” & “Devon”: 1 find, but clearly indicating its location as Cumbria
- “Torpenhow Hill” & “Mario Pei”: 0 finds
- “Torpenhow Hill” & “Story of English”: 0 finds
- “Torpenhow”: 3510 finds

Switching from the Internet to my own library, I checked The Times Index Gazetteer, and confirmed that it has no entry for Torpenhow or Torpenhow Hill, the entries running from Torpedini Padula to Torpes. I also consulted Bartholomew's Gazetteer of the British Isles (9th edition, reprinted 1966, with 1961 census figures). This has as a main entry Torpenhow and Whitrigg, describing it as a parish in Cumberland with a population of 181, and says the parish contains the village of Torpenhow. There is no mention of a Torpenhow Hill, either in Cumbria (Cumberland, as was), or near Plymouth, or anywhere else in Devon. And there is no mention of any other Torpenhow. A careful examination of the most detailed relevant British Ordnance Survey map (West Cumbria, sheet 89, at a scale of 1:50000) shows Torpenhow as a place, a village, just northeast of the town of Bothel, between Carlisle and Cockermouth. It lies just to the southeast of the A595 road. There is no indication of the map of a nearby hill, ridge or any other feature called Torpenhow Hill. The British Ordnance Survey publishes a gazetteer of all the names (cities, towns, villages, farms, rivers, geographical features, etc.) which appear on all 204 of the 1:50000 maps. The 4th edition of the gazetteer contains just one Torpenhow, that in Cumbria. No mention, either of a Torpenhow Hill.

Of the eleven websites which mention Torpenhow Hill, none looks particularly authoritative. Most appear to be amateurish sites dedicated to repeating the “fact” that Torpenhow Hill is a four-times-repeating name. One of the eleven websites, though, refers to The Oxford English of English Placenames. As the ODEP would seem to be a particularly authoritative source, I tracked down two different editions to see what it had to say about Torpenhow or Torpenhow Hill. First off, the correct title of the reference work is *The Concise Oxford Dictionary of English Placenames*, by Eilert Ekwall, published by the Oxford Press. (There is no corresponding “complete” dictionary of placenames.) Here's what the 4th edition (1960, reprinted 1974) says:

Torpenhow, Cumberland: The name contains the elements *torr*, ‘hill’, *pen*, ‘hill’ (Welsh *pen*), and Old English *hoh*, ‘ridge, spur of land’ or else *torr* and Old Welsh *pennou*, the plural of *pen*, or *torr* and a name identical with Pinhoe, Devonshire. In the first alternative the British name would have been *Torr pen*, to which was added Old English *hoh*. *Torr pen* would be analogous to Old Welsh *tormeneth* ‘top or breast of the hill’. The meaning would be about the same in the other alternatives.

The previous 3rd edition (1951) has exactly the same entry. No mention anywhere of Torpenhow Hill. And no mention of a Torpenhow near Plymouth in Devon. So, the website that mentions Torpenhow Hill and refers to the ODEP has got it wrong. There seems to be an element of wishful thinking in the content of this particular website.

Let's try another tack. There is an extensive series of volumes published by the English Place-Name Society. This is probably the most extensive and complete set of volumes on the placenames of English counties, with numerous variant spellings recorded over many centuries. The volume *The Placenames of Cumberland Part III* (Volume XXI, by Armstrong, Mawer, Stenton and Dickins, published by Cambridge University Press, 1950), says:

Torpenhow Hall and church, which doubtless form the nucleus of the settlement, stand on a 'rising topped hill' which is itself on the northward slope of a long hill, and the name Torpenhow is doubtless descriptive of the site. The first element is the British *torr*, 'peak', This would seem to have been compounded with British *pen*, *Torpen* then denoting 'peak-head'. To this was added in Anglian days the English *hoh*, giving forms *Torpenho* and the like. The old story, that the name bears witness to three successive races—British (*Pen*), Saxon (*Tor*), and Danish (*How*)--is incorrect: *torr*, though occasionally found in Old English, is really a loanword from British and *torpen* may well be pure British. The added *how*, to judge by earlier forms in *-oc* and *-oh* (ie *Torpenoc*, *Torpenoh*), would seem to be from English *hoh* rather than Old Norse *haugr*.

Again, no mention of the infamous Torpenhow Hill!

As one final check, I decided to check another of the volumes devoted to English placenames, published by the English Place-Name Society. Remember that Borgmann and Pei both referred to Torpenhow Hill being near the town of Plymouth. Plymouth is in the English county of Devon. In the two-volume *The Placenames of Devon* (by Gover, Mawer and Stenton, published by Cambridge University Press, 1931/2), there is no mention of Torpenhow or Torpenhow Hill.

## Conclusions

- The village of Torpenhow exists only in Cumbria, England.
- There is no evidence for any other village, place or feature called Torpenhow near Plymouth or anywhere else in the UK or world.
- There is no evidence for a hill or ridge anywhere called Torpenhow Hill. The relatively few websites mentioning Torpenhow Hill all seem to be peddling variations of the same story along the lines of four repeated placename elements (hillhillhill hill).
- Dmitri Borgman's statement about the existence of Torpenhow Hill is incorrect.
- Mario Pei's statement about the existence of Torpenhow Hill is also incorrect.

## The Pronunciation of Torpenhow

While I was visiting Torpenhow, one of the locals pointed out that the pronunciation of the placename was "tre-penna". I thought I was familiar with many strange British placename pronunciations, but hadn't come across this one before. On returning home, I checked further.

Entering "Torpenhow" & "Trepenna" on the Googol search engine, I located eight sites indicating that the pronunciation of Torpenhow is indeed "trepenna". I discovered a confirmation of this odd pronunciation on the website <http://users/tinyworld/co.uk/peterostle/friends.html>. The pronunciation is also confirmed by the *BBC Pronouncing Dictionary of British Names* (edited by G M Miller, published by Oxford University Press, 1971), along with the to-be-expected pronunciation "torpen-how".

It seems strange that this odd pronunciation has not surfaced before in Word Ways. Although the existence of Torpenhow Hill has been debunked, in its place I have managed to establish that Torpenhow is still noteworthy and of interest to logologists because of its strange pronunciation.