

VERNACULAR NAMES OF WOODLICE WITH PARTICULAR REFERENCE TO DEVONSHIRE

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INTRODUCTION

Many people, if asked, will have recollections of one or two or maybe more “old” (i.e. traditional / local) names for woodlice either from their own childhood or from what their parents / grandparents may have told them although, disappointingly, many present day schoolchildren only know them as woodlice. In Scotland the usual common name for these animals was “slater”, a name which persists in more southern parts in naming *Asellus* as “water slater” and *Ligia* as “sea slater”. In *Fauna Britannica*, Stefan Buczaki (Buczaki, 2002) comments that woodlice “have acquired far more names than any other British animal”.

In 1917, W. E. Collinge of St. Andrew’s University, in a letter to *Nature* (Collinge, 1917), appealed to readers for information relating to folk-lore and local names of woodlice, remarking that he had more than a hundred local names such as bibble-bug, chisel-hog, cud-worm, palmer, lock-chester, slater, tiggy-hog and had noted districts in which they were in use. His appeal seems to have fallen on deaf ears as there were no letters in that journal responding to this appeal over the following weeks. Some years later he prepared lists of nearly 70 names with localities for most of those that he had collected (Collinge, 1935, 1946). These included some Gaelic, Manx and Irish ones.

Buczaki (2002) listed more than 150 of names, some of which are clearly variants on each other, remarking that the list was not exhaustive and was based on those of Collinge, H. G. Hurrell and Gillian Moore and communicated to him by Stella Turk. In some cases he indicated a specific county, village or other area from where the name came. Moore (1965) had published a report on dialect in the Devonshire Association Transactions which is referred to later. H. G. Hurrell, the naturalist, lived at Wrangaton on the southern flank of Dartmoor and had a list of more than a hundred woodlice names when I met him soon after coming to Devon in the 1970s. There is likely, therefore, to be a significant South-West England content in the Buczaki list. Internet searches yield further remarks on woodlice names for both Britain and Ireland and elsewhere.

Arthur Chater in his *Woodlice in the cultural consciousness of modern Europe* (Chater, 1988) provided an interesting exploration of attitudes to woodlice and it is in this context that the origins of popular names can be considered.

In terms of differentiating the various kinds of woodlice, Schmallfuss (1984) divided terrestrial isopods into ecomorphological groups; runners, clingers, rollers, spiny forms and non-conformists and behavioural traits and ecology clearly influence the way we think of them. Probably most people in Britain would recognize only two or perhaps three of these categories. Rollers (= pill bugs, pea bugs, etc.) are easily distinguished from what we might, for convenience, call “slaters”. People also tend to note unusual colour forms and may see colour as distinguishing different kinds of woodlice when, in fact, a single species might show a wide range of colours as for instance in *Porcellio scaber*. According to Udagawa (1989) in Japan there are three categories recognized; Funa-musi (boat/ship = runners), Warazi-musi (sandals or flat shoes made from rice stems = clingers) and Dango-musi (a small ball of cooked paste = rollers); Musi is “a bug”.

Within his list, Buczaki recognized various groups including pig names, grandfather/grandmother names, names associated with wood, names that suggest an ability to bite, names that suggest smallness and names that refer to the armoured appearance of the body. He said that there was no obvious reason for pig or hog unless it is some perceived ugliness or because they are scavengers. However, I would suggest that seeing clusters of slaters such as *Porcellio scaber* (itself a pig name, little pig) on the underside of a plank of wood, does somehow suggest the backs of a group of pigs in a pen at an agricultural show or field or of piglets feeding from the sow. According to Collinge (1935), Gaers-swyn is an Anglo-Saxon name for woodlice. The names Saint Anthony's pig or Saint Anthony's button will refer to the traditional name for the smallest pig in the litter, dedicated to that third century saint ("the Abbot"). Suggestions about biting are, as Buczaki says, erroneous and grandfather/granny can only be "terms of endearment".

Both "woodlouse" and "slater" are 17th century in origin, the latter being more common in Scotland and the north of England. Apparently the name "cudworm" (Shropshire) derives from an old practice of feeding them to cattle supposedly to improve chewing of the cud. Pill-bug is a name relating to a similarity to medicinal pills and at one time, it seems, woodlice were prescribed for treating a wide range of illnesses. Collinge (1946) tells us, amongst other interesting snippets, that in some old books of *Materia Medica*, we are informed that if the pill-louse is dried and pulverized and put into Rhenish wine; this is an antidote to all obstructions of the bowels, a cure for jaundice, ague, weakening of sight and many other ills. Another recipe, from Gloucestershire, involved stirring 300 live woodlice into six quarts of mild ale, along with raisins, rhubarb and the roots of ferns. Drunk in the spring and autumn it was said to be an "almost" infallible cure for rickets (cited in Laver, 1989).

Given the potential breadth of the subject of English vernacular names in this context, it seems useful to look at one area of England, the county of Devon for which there have been several papers published relating to the subject including those of Moore, Laver (1988) and Smith (2008).

WOODLICE NAMES IN DEVON

Devon, with Cornwall, part of the relatively isolated South-West Peninsula of England, is about 110km (70 miles) from north to south and from east to west with an area of about 6,700 km² (2,590 miles²) was, and to a fair extent remains, a largely rural county, with, west of Exeter, relatively poor north-south communication links. Over a many years, groups such as the Devonshire Association have recorded survivals of dialect words (or, as Laver puts it "Demshur mouthspaich") including those used for woodlice. Papers have recorded their local names in the Association's Transactions and their regionality in the county, relating them to the occurrence of other dialect names e.g. for Devonshire splits (cream & jam) and left-handedness. The only Devon name recorded by Collinge (1935, 1946) is "God's pigs" whilst Buczaki also reports "chiselbob" (Yealmpton), "granfer greeks" (Modbury) and "horace" (Wembury) all in south/south-west Devon.

Gillian Moore (1965)

Miss Moore, in her report on dialect, came up with 34 terms and many of these had variants, she especially thanked the Devon Federation of Women's Institutes for their help in gathering this data. Except in Kingsbridge, where she heard "chuggy-pig" from, she suspected, a North Devonian, there was a fairly constant pattern although in some towns and areas as many as four different names were used:

North & West Devon

- chuggy-pig (most common), billy-button, chunky-pig (or –peg), hardy-back, sow-pig.

South Devon (from Plymouth to Exeter)

- granfer-grig (prevailing term), granfer, gammer-zow, granny-picker
- billy-button, carpenter, carpenter's flea, cheese-bug, cobber, hard-back,
- rolinto ball, soda-pig, sow-pig, St. Anthony's pig, wood-bug.

The East Devon sowey-peg, pig, sow-pig also extend into this area.

East Devon

- sowey-peg, pig, sow-pig, curly-button, grampus wood-bug, pig-louse, slater, sour-bug, tiddy-hog

(see also Appendix I & II for more detail)

F. J. M. Laver (1988)

Dr. Laver also worked with the Women's Institutes and circulated a questionnaire through them, again reporting his results in the Devonshire Association Transactions (Laver, 1988) and relating his results to those of Miss Moore. Additional names that were recorded included chizzle-balls, crawlers, flat-backs, fuzzy-pigs, hard-backs, Jacky pigs, nits and Parson's pigs. Other names included in previous issues of the Transactions included bible-bugs, coffin-cutters, jovial-lice, mackintoshes, pea bugs, sheel-backs and tanks.

He divided the county into 7 sectors (Table 1; Fig. 1) and recorded the distribution of certain names, grouping together names clearly related together e.g.

- granfer-grigs, grammer sows, grammer sales, gramfa-greys, grandfathers and granfer pigs
- pigs, guinea-pigs, penny-pigs and piggies
- pigs-lice, pig's fleas
- carpenter, carbender

TABLE 1: Occurrence of woodlice names in 7 areas of Devon according to Laver (1989)

Name	NW	N	NE	E	SE	S	W	Totals
Sow pigs	16	20	13	8	8	4	12	81
Chunky-pigs	4	15	4	3	2	3		31
Granfer-grigs, Grammer sows			4	5	5	6	4	24
Pigs			1	10	1	3		15
Pig's lice			5	7	2			14
Carpenters					6	3	2	11

J. B. Smith (2008)

In 2008, J. B. Smith revisited the Laver data to look at possible origins of the names referring to various texts including that by Iona & Peter Opie on nursery rhymes (Opie & Opie, 1997). He notes that, within the broad geographical pattern described, most of the names referred to in the Laver corpus suggest some real or fancied resemblance to the pig. "Pig" and "sow" were used in at least

parts of the East Midlands with the latter also being found in both South Devon and Cornwall. This suggests (despite the lack of any national map of woodlouse names) that comparison with the pig has been a widespread motivational factor in naming woodlice. Using the Laver data, he calculates that 165 out of 176 forms (94%) are motivated by relation to pigs although if all names, including the less common, were brought in the proportion would be smaller.

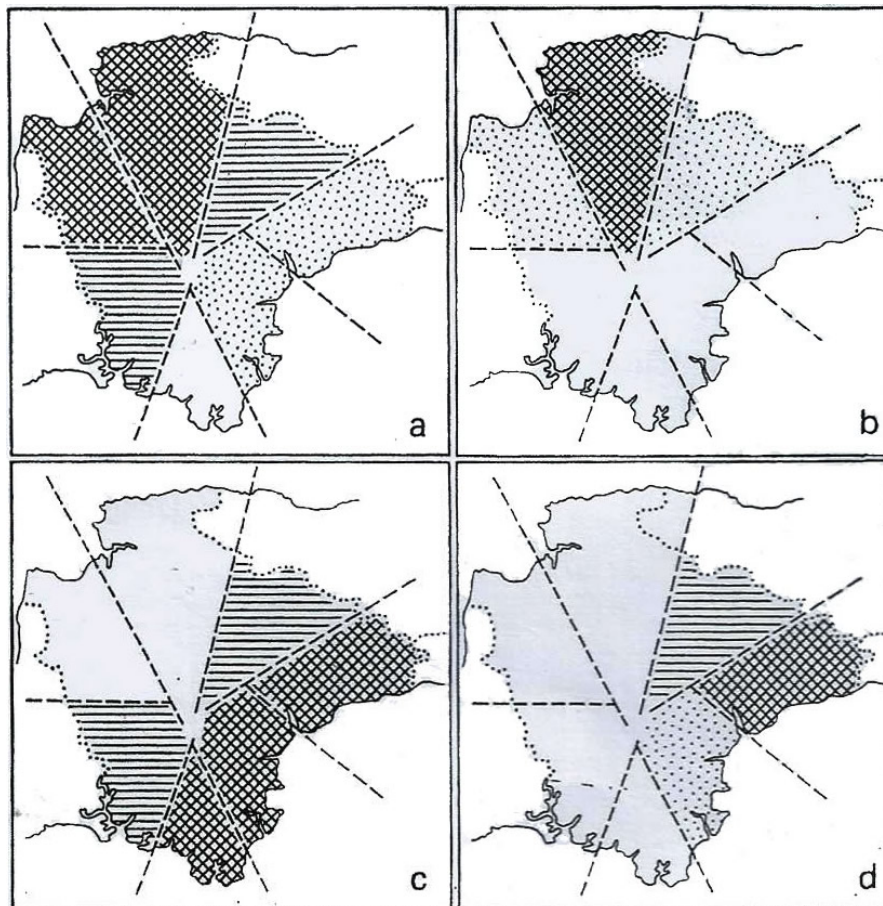


FIGURE 1: Maps of Devon showing predominance of particular names (from Laver, 1989)

a) Sow-pig; b) Chucky-pig; c) Granfer-grig / Grammer-sow; d) Pig/Pig's Louse

Cross-hatching = principal areas of use; Horizontal lines = moderate use; Dotted shading = minor use;
Unshaded = few or no reports of use

“Pig” names

“Sow-pig” and “chucky-pig” from North Devon are apparently exclusive to the county with, at the back of the latter the name “choogy”, a predominantly West Country children's word for a pig as in the Somerset nursery rhyme, recited by an adult when taking each of the child's toes one by one:

This choogey-pig went to market.

This choogey-pig stayed at home.....

Choogey is onomatopoeic, echoing calls to pigs along the lines of choogey, chook and chuck (this last also a call to fowls hence “chucky-hen”). According to In Herefordshire the names “chooky pig” and its variant “choogy pig” were used for woodlice. In line with these usages is “jacky-pig” as a woodlouse name where evidence from elsewhere shows that “jack” is a call to pigs.

In relation to the name “pig louse” from East Devon, it seems that the variant “pig’s louse” is more common and has also been recorded from Somerset. In this case, rather than referring to pigs it might refer to pig-lice (hog lice) (*Haematopinus suis*), a widespread and well-known parasite of both domestic and wild pigs. These animals are large enough to be easily seen with the naked eye (4-6mm) though only about a third of the size of an adult *Porcellio scaber*.

“Granfer” as in “granfer-grig”, on the face of it has little to do with pigs, literally meaning “grandfather” recorded from both Devon and Somerset. However, in Hampshire “granfer” also had a different sense, meaning “the smallest pig in the litter; a pig brought up by hand”. If it seems reasonable that this meaning had wider currency at one time, it is possible to see how it became transferred to woodlice. This can then give us “granfer-pig” and “gramma-zow” of which the latter is also known from Cornwall (from Dorset there is the name “grammer-pig”). Apparently there is recorded a rhyme from Wiltshire (no doubt once more widely known) and was sung by children holding in their hand a woodlouse and trying to charm it into curling up:

*Granfer Grig killed a pig,
Hung un up in corner;
Granfer cried and piggy died,
And all the fun was over.*

“Tiddy-hog” means small pig. St Anthony’s pig or Anthony pig was a widespread expression for the smallest pig in the litter, the favourite one, dedicated to and under the special protection of that saint, the patron saint of swineherds (see above). Another name with religious connotations, recorded once in Devon, “parson’s pig”, apparently once referred not to the smallest but the fattest pig (apparently a bitter memory of tithing).

“Carpenter” and “Slater” names

Eleven names in Laver’s table (just over 6%) are of the “carpenter” type, a name for woodlice also recorded in Shropshire and Warwickshire. “Cafender” is a south-western variant of carpenter and could also refer to woodlice. Apparently a Newfoundland word for woodlouse is “carpenter” or “cafner” (another is also “boat-builder”). These names clearly relate to the animals’ affinity to wood as will “carpenter’s flea”, “wood-pig”, “wood-bug”, “grampus wood-bug” and, of course “woodlouse”. The significance of “grampus” i.e. walrus is obscure (unless, of course, it is a corruption of “granfer”).

The same sort of anthropomorphism we find in “carpenter” could inform “slater” from being found under slates. “Sheel-back”, presumably relating to “shell-back”, as well as being purely descriptive might be an allusion to a person, a “shell-back” being, in nautical colloquialism, “a sailor of full age, especially if tough and knowledgeable”. “Shoe-maker” might be a similar sort of pun pointing to the trade of shoe-making or alternatively the somewhat shoe-like shape of a woodlouse on its back and about to roll into a ball.

“Pill bugs” & similar

The term “pill-bug” and related names have already been alluded to above in relation to medicinal pills but “billy-button”, “William-button” and “curly-button” clearly are descriptive names as is “cruller” which literally means “curler” (cf “crilly-greens” = curly greens from North Devon). “Cobber” possibly relates to a “cob” which can be small and round, “pea-bug” obviously to its shape (a name I also recall from a childhood in Kent). Cheese-bug is said to relate to a round Dutch cheese (as also the Hampshire “cheese pill” and the Norfolk “cheese-bob” – I have certainly heard the word

“cheesy-bob” in Devon) but equally could be connected with the cheesy smell of aggregated woodlice (Paul Harding, pers.comm.).

“Chizzle-ball” apparently relates also to “chissel-bob” (Isle of Wight), “chizzle-bob” (Berkshire) and “chesil-bob” (Hampshire) which seem to be corruptions of “cheslop(pe)” which has been variously recorded as a translation of “porcelet de S.Antoine” or of the French “cloporte”. The latter is a combination of clore (to close) and porte (door) and there are similar expressions in other languages, including an English “lock-door”. Interestingly English compounds for woodlice generally seem to relate to closing a chest rather than a door.

The name “fuzzy-pig” appears not to derive directly from the concept of pig but to hedgehog which, of course rolls up into a ball (other Westcountry names include vuzz-pig and vuz-a-boar – the fuzz/vuzz is gorse = furze; I can recall a Devon lady saying “*Uzz calls it vuzz!*”). Analagous is “guinea-pig”, known also from Wiltshire.

Crawlers and others

“Crawlers”, “flat-backs” and “hard-backs” could be purely descriptive although the possibly obsolete slang word “crawler” meant “louse, maggot, nit”. “Flat-back” has been used elsewhere as a slang word for bed-bug. “Coffin-cutter” could relate to the propensity to inhabit rotten wood although, interestingly the same word has been recorded in Northern Ireland for the staphylinid *Ocypus olens* (devil’s coach-horse or cocktail). As with “pig’s louse”, “carpenter’s flea” and “cheese-bug”, insects have clearly played a noticeable if not major role in woodlouse naming.

Puzzling names

There are some Devon woodlouse names that remain puzzling. “Snot”, although referring to nasal mucus is also a dialect word for the squashy fruit of yew (Smith, 2008) but it could be a variant of “snob”, a word used in Herefordshire (and elsewhere) for a cobbler. “Bibble-bug” might conceivably be a corruption of “bible-back”, an expression (with connotations of blackness) for a hump-back or a person with round shoulders or maybe because it was sometimes found under or associated with the big bible in a church. On the other hand, the south-western verb “to bibble” meaning to drink or tipple might relate to its tendency to occur in damp or moist places.

“Rollinto ball” / “roll into balls” is apparently straightforward although it might, perhaps, have been a description rather than a name. Presumably “tank” is a neologism relating to its armour-plating.

CONCLUSIONS

The Devon papers have shown us not only something of the number and diversity of vernacular names for woodlice but how much variation there is even within a single (albeit large) English county. It would be interesting to look at similar studies for other parts of the country although now, with much improved mobility, there are likely to be many more cases like the Kingsbridge “chuggy-pig” where “incomers” have brought in their own names. The other factor clearly making such studies more difficult is the standardization of language where “woodlouse” is well understood everywhere and the “old names” die out through lack of use for not being understood and as being perceived as unfashionable. It is fortunate that the Devon studies were done at a time when many people could still remember the older names although, as can be seen below, they are not all dead yet and it would be interesting to collect more samples like that one.

POSTSCRIPT: AN EXPERIMENT

During an exhibition at Plymouth University during Insect Week in March 2012, visitors were asked what names they knew for woodlice and what area they came from. This was to see what traditional names were remembered and to try to localize them.

30 people completed the questionnaire & results were as shown. Although clearly not a scientifically collected sample the responses do give an indication that at least some of the old names are still remembered. One wonders how many generations must pass until these are only found in books on folklore and everyone refers only to “woodlice”.

What I call them	Where I come from
Woodlice	Plymouth, Hampshire, Callington (Cornwall)
Chuggy pigs	Plymouth
Carpenter`s bugs	Plymouth
Pea bugs	Hampshire, Kent, Plymouth
Pill bugs	Hampshire, Plymouth, Kent, Somerset
Hardy backs	Northumberland, Plymouth
Wood mice	Plymouth (child)
Cheesy bugs	Kent, Berkshire
Penny pigs	Essex
Tanks	Black Country
Chuckywigs	West Yorkshire
Chuckybacks	West Yorkshire
Granfer grigs	South Devon
Chucky pigs	Plymouth
Rolly Polly	Plymouth (USA)
Cheese log	Bristol
Pellet bugs	Buckinghamshire
Beetles	Buckinghamshire – the roll-up ones
Wood pigs	Plymouth, South Devon
Slaiter	Dumfries
Sow pigs	Nr Truro (Cornwall)

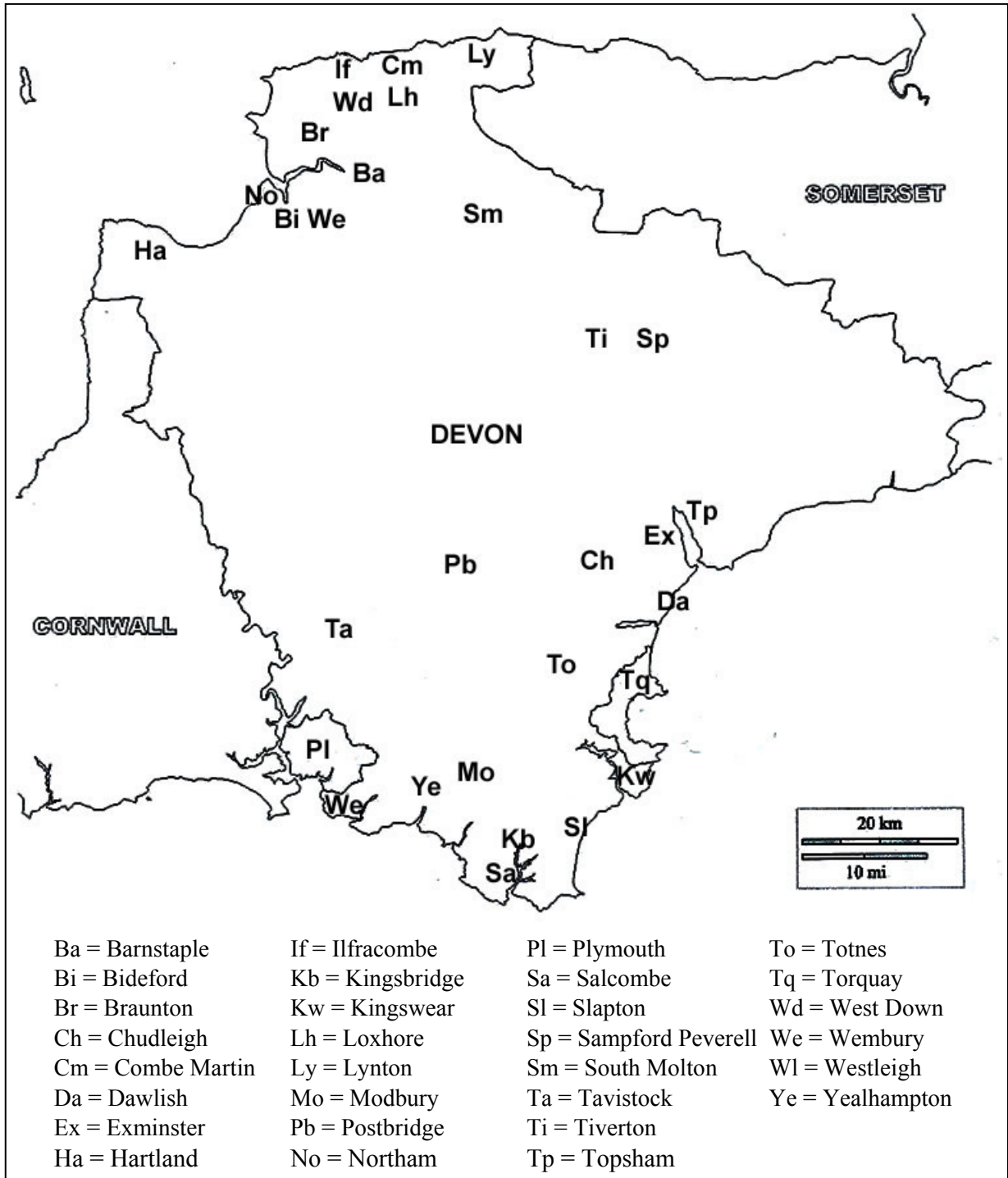
ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

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APPENDIX I: DEVON SHOWING LOCATIONS REFERRED TO BY MOORE (1965) AND BUCZAKI (2002)



APPENDIX II: WOODLICE NAMES BY (A) PARISHES AND (B) AREAS AS COLLECTED BY MOORE (1965)

^E = East, ^N = North & West, ^S = South

a) Parishes

Barnstaple^N	chuggy-pig	Lynton^N	sowey-pig
	sow-pig	Modbury^S	granfer-grig
Bideford^N	chuggy-pig	Northam^N	chuggy-pig
	sow-peg	Plymouth^S	carpenter
	snot	Salcombe^S	carpenter
Braunton^N	chuggy-pig	Sampford Peverell^E	pig-louse
Chudleigh^S	guinea-pig	Slapton^S	shoe maker
	sow-pig	S.Molton^N	chuggy-pig
Combe Martin^N	chuggy-pig	Tiverton^E	sowey-pig
Dawlish^S	sow-pig		tiddy-hog
	carpenter	Topsham^E	gramfer-grig
Hartland^N	chicky-pig	Totnes^S	carpenter
Ilfracombe^N	chuggy-pig	Torquay^S	granfer-grig
Kingsbridge^S	chuggy-pig	West Down^N	sow-pig
Loxhore^N	criller		chuggy-pig
Postbridge^N	sow-pig	Westleigh^N	chuggy-pig

b) Areas

Bideford Area^N billy-button chucky-pig chuggy-pig hardy-back sow-pig	Kingswear Area^S billy-button carpenter carpenter`s flea cobber granfer pig slater	Tavistock Area^{S/W} billy-button carpenter cheese-bug chookie-pig gammer-zow grammer-zow granfer-grig grannypicker hard-back roltintoball slater soda-pig sow-pig William button wood-bug	Totnes Area^S granfer-grig pig sow-pig wood-pig		
				Exminster Area^E curly-button grampus wood-bug pig sour-bug sow-pig	St. Anthony`s pig
					Modbury Area^S carpenter gramma-zow pig sow-pig