East Meon – the name

Those born and bred in East Meon and longstanding residents find it odd when they hear the name of their village pronounced so as to rhyme with "neon"; while others, seeing an "o" in the word cannot imagine why it should not be pronounced in this way, instead of rhyming it, as the locals do, with "Ian". The following short history of the name and its spelling may help to clear up this little local difficulty.

The derivation of "Meon", the river that rises at South Farm and, 23 miles later, enters the sea at the foot of the Southampton Water, is lost in the mists of time, but it appears possible that the name shares a common ancestry with the river Main in Germany (see Coates, *The Place-Names of Hampshire* (1989)). The river valley is popularly supposed to have been inhabited in the dark ages by the "Meonwara", who, so spelt, sound like warriors on the march. The derivation is from the Venerable Bede, who, in 731 completed his *Ecclesiastical History of England*. He referred (in Latin) to *meanuarorum provincia,* the province of the Meanwari, or dwellers about the Mean. So it might be more appropriate to refer to those early inhabitants as the old Meanwarians, although this might perhaps sound too much like a cricket club.

The *Domesday* book of 1086 called East Meon both "Mene" and "Menes" (and Meonstoke was referred to as "Menestoch" and "Menestoche"). It is the spelling "Menes" that appears consistently in the medieval Pipe Rolls, which contain the manorial accounts of the Bishops of Winchester. East Meon was a manor of the Bishops from before the Conquest, although it was then divided into Menes and the smaller manor of Menes Ecclesia (or East Meon Church). The first Pipe Roll is that of 1208-9 and the last is that of 1461-2. Although elsewhere there are occasional insertions of a "u" or an "o" in the word, it is "Menes" that appears to predominate throughout the Middle Ages. There is no apparent reason for the "s" at the end, but its use persisted.

It may well be that the "e" after the "n", in those early days before spelling conventions became established, was intended to indicate a second syllable on the "n" itself. Thus Chaucer in his *Canterbury Tales*, written between 1386 and 1389, spells blossom "blosme". Another attempt to indicate a second syllable is found in the alternative spelling "Mean", which appears for instance in Saxton's 1575 map of Hampshire, and the "ean" form was indeed in the ascendancy for some time.

But "Mene" and "Mean" look like single syllable words. The use of an "o" to represent what linguists call an obscure vowel – one that is scarcely pronounced – appears to have gained currency in the 16th century. Thus Chaucer's "blosme" became for Shakespeare 200 years later "blossome", the word "common" assumed its present spelling (displacing "comun", "comoun", "comyn" and other versions) and what had appeared in Chaucer as "leoun" became "lion". So the insertion of an "o" rather than an "a" in Mene to indicate a second, but almost vowel-less, syllable would have seemed an appropriate thing to do for those preparing legal and other documents.

It took quite some time, however, for the "o" version to become established and for long the "ean" version predominated. On 27 March 1644, two days before the Civil War battle of

Cheriton, the regiments of Sir William Waller's Parliamentary army mustered at East Meon. One soldier's contemporaneous account refers to "East Meane", another to "Eastmean". In the Parish Register (the church's manuscript record of christenings, marriages and burials) "Anno 1645" is headed "East=Meone", but the "o" appears to have been altered to (or from) an "a". Consistency in spelling was in any event of no importance. Thus a single entry in the marriages for 1656 has no fewer than three versions: "Eastmeon", "East Mean" and "Eastmean".

The "o" version appears to have increased in use in the 17th century. But map makers were slow to adopt the convention and "Meane" and "Mean" appear throughout the 17th and 18th centuries until Harrison in his 1788 map of Hampshire used "Meon". After that the "o" seems to have been universally used.

Until well into the 20th century, however, there was competition between the alternatives of "East Meon" and "Eastmeon". The latter was, for instance, preferred in the page headings in all the censuses up to 1901, with the exception of that of 1891, and it was the official spelling for the name of the civil parish. The single-word form may well have reflected a spoken emphasis on the first syllable (as in Eastbourne). The two-word form has, however, prevailed.

So those seeing the "o" in East Meon should not be deceived. It has never been more than an obscure vowel (as in the second syllable of blossom and common and lion – and, indeed, London), and the gentle sound that it gives to the name is the one, we can be sure, that has prevailed through the centuries.

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