SHORTER CONTRIBUTION

SILLY SUFFOLK

by KEITH BRIGGS

THE EXPRESSION 'SILLY SUFFOLK' has been put into print numerous times in the last two hundred years. Recent examples are often accompanied by a supposed explanation that 'silly' does not have the modern meaning of 'foolish', but is a corruption of the Middle English word *seely* meaning 'holy', 'sacred', or 'blessed', and the phrase is then alleged to express imagined ancient characteristics of the county. Two such examples, both from respected historians, are these:

> The phrase 'silly Suffolk', companion of 'normal for Norfolk', is a variant of *seely*, referring to a general reputation for piety. Only in the nineteenth century did 'silly Suffolk' acquire a derogatory meaning, […].[1]

> I am sure that most people with any knowledge of or association with Suffolk have heard the term 'silly Suffolk', which is of course a corruption of the Middle English 'seely Suffolk' – 'seely' meaning holy, and usually taken as a reference to the proliferation of churches in the Suffolk countryside.[2]

A modern lexicology textbook, however, has a contradictory understanding of the phrase, again stated as if fact:

> The word *silly* had an older sense of 'happy' (compare German *selig*, 'blessed') but this sense has been ousted by the current meaning of 'foolish' or 'absurd'. A phrase sometimes applied to the county of Suffolk in eastern England, silly Suffolk, dates from the days when Suffolk was one of the wealthier counties, and therefore 'happy' or 'fortunate'. But if the saying is quoted at all these days, either it has to be explained, as we have just done here, or it is taken to be an allegation of foolishness or backwardness.[3]

To anyone following a scientific approach to language history, this is all very unsatisfactory. No evidence has been displayed to support the various assertions, always a fatal flaw in any philological enquiry. Was the expression 'silly Suffolk' really created in the medieval period, so that meanings from Middle or Old English are relevant? Furthermore, the use of the word 'corruption' arouses suspicion, as it is not a normal part of the terminology of historical linguistics. In fact, as we shall see below, the modern word 'silly' is a regular phonetic development of Middle English word *seely*, with only the shortened vowel being a slight irregularity (though parallels for this can be found). Possibly the change of meaning is considered to be the corruption, but in fact the Middle English word already had a very wide range of senses, and it is this very vagueness which has allowed the narrowed development of the sole modern meaning of 'foolish'.

It thus seems very necessary to re-examine the evidence for this expression, and to look at how its meaning has been understood in the past. I have found 'silly Suffolk' no earlier than 1819. It occurs in the following quotation, and the meaning of 'silly' here is clearly far from 'holy':

> There is however one species of insanity, denominated GAME-MANIA, which, most probably from its locality, has escaped the notice of all those writers who have directed their attention to this malady; it is chiefly confined to the Eastern part of Suffolk, proverbially called SILLY SUFFOLK,

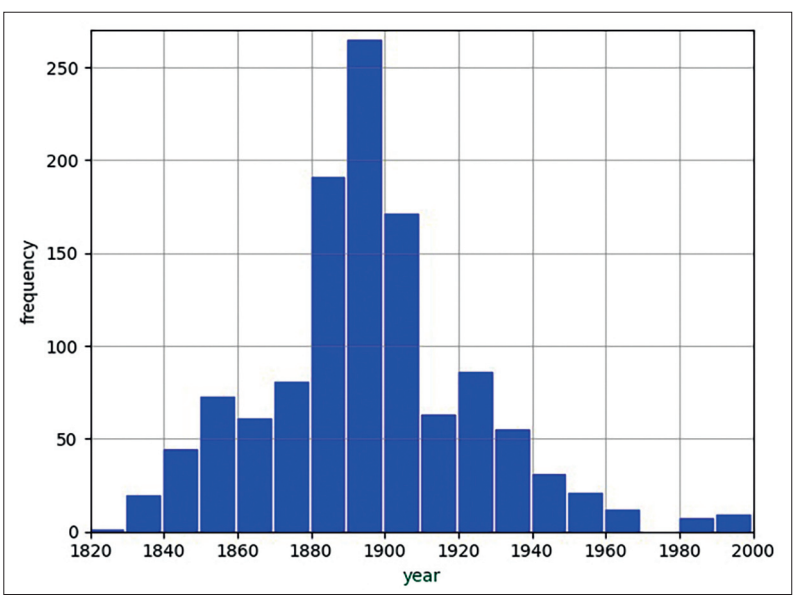
> from the imbecility, cupidity, and folly evinced in many of the public acts, which have emanated from its notorious Aristocracy.[4]

This comes from a tract (perhaps rather a rant) against game-hunting. But, importantly, the anonymous writer states that the phrase 'silly Suffolk' is proverbial and refers to foolishness; it must have been already known and assumed (at least by this author) to have this sense in 1819. A similar example comes from a verse published in Halesworth in Suffolk in 1846; after starting with 'Come, silly Suffolk', the author continues a few lines later with the explanation 'Thy sole assumption of the blockhead's name'.[5]

Soon after about 1820, the expression starts to become common in newspapers (but not elsewhere), especially in letters to the editor on political themes, or topics related to agricultural reform. It is often not clear from the context how the letter-writers themselves understood the phrase, but in most cases there is certainly no implication of piety. In 1824, an article on the Suffolk Life-Boat Association did conclude with:

> Never, surely, was an attempt made to confine exertions in the cause of humanity, to those only who hold particular creed. O, 'silly Suffolk'. Christianity, thank Heaven, is altogether of a different spirit.[6]

But much more typical are instances from letter-writers suggesting, for example, that the wrong man had been elected to parliament: 'There's a disgrace to Suffolk — O silly Suffolk!'; that the 'voters of Silly Suffolk (Suffolk farmers) shall vote freely and not be intimidated' (with 'silly' here implying 'naive' or 'supine'); or that recent political actions have 'delivered the shire from the contemptible nickname of Silly Suffolk'.[7] Numerous further examples could be cited from newspapers of before 1900, and whenever a connotation for the phrase can be deduced, it is of a pejorative or even insulting sense. The popularity in newspapers peaks in the 1890s, before dropping off rapidly (see Graph 1).[8] All modern usage of the phrase should be seen as a vestige of this former popularity.



GRAPH 1 – Frequency of 'silly Suffolk' in newspapers.
The bars represent the number of occurrences per decade.

Starting in 1871, we start to get antiquarian enquiries into the origin or meaning of the phrase. An anonymously authored book review even attempted to push back the phrase to the Anglo-Saxon period, as always, with the complete omission of any evidence:

> "Silly Suffolk," as it is commonly called, to the great but needless pain of worthy South-Folk, not conscious of exceptional unwisdom. […] it seems to us clear that the epithet is simply a localized instance of the curious revolution of meaning by which the Anglo-Saxon *selig*, holy, gradually acquired a contemptuous signification, as piety degenerated into superstition, and finally developed into 'silly' in its present acceptation. The fervent piety of the early East-Anglian monarchs, and the extraordinary devotion paid throughout the county to its hero-saint Edmund, amply account for its original application […].[9]

This may be the origin of the theory that 'silly Suffolk' is of medieval date. We could admit the possibility that some of this may be correct, but proof is still lacking. Enquiries of this sort apparently came only from gentleman amateurs (as may be assumed from their general character and from the frequent use of pseudonyms); no properly trained philologist seemed to have published any comment, and this deficiency has allowed mythology to reign until the present day. In 1877 'Habitans in alto' wrote:

> Thus 'silly,' written 'seely' in our earlier English, is, beyond a doubt, the German *selig*, which means 'blessed' […] It was, I think, in this particular sense of "lucky" or "happy" that the word "silly" had its primary application to our dear old Suffolk.[10]

Apart from the odd idea that a German word would be used in English (as opposed to being a cognate, which is in fact the case), this is not necessarily wrong. But clearly it is a only a hypothesis; Habitans has displayed no evidence to support his claim.

In 1877, however, the clergyman Cecil Deedes issued a very sensible plea for a more reasoned approach:

> There is absolutely no foundation for the statement, so persistently circulated of late, that this familiar localism was ever used in the sense of "holy" or "pure". Nor as far as we can learn can a single piece of evidence be adduced in favour of the assumption that Suffolk was at any time specially singled out for the designation "holy". The more correct meaning of the word "seli", is to be found in its mediæval use — artless, inoffensive, simple; but as there is no reason to think the expression "Silly Suffolk" can lay claim to anything like a remote ancestry, it is altogether improbable that this latter interpretation was understood in any such connection. It is unlikely that the phrase ever had any higher signification than that commonly accepted by us at the present day. It is much to be regretted that the misleading statement we have called into question should have gained currency by going the round of the public papers as if some interesting philological discovery had been made, which, after all, proves to be surmise and nothing more.[11]

This corrective was unfortunately not heeded. It was ignored in a series of letters to the London Evening Standard in 1898, which was triggered by a speech of Lord Kitchener when he said 'that he should have been a product of the silliest part of Suffolk if he had not been able to lead the magnificent troops confided to his direction to a successful issue in the campaign'. In response, a correspondent, evidently following the opinion of 'Habitans in alto', asserted that:

> the word "silly" applied to Suffolk is really a corruption of the German "selig" — happy or blessed — and is supposed to have been applied to the county on account of the numerous and beautiful churches for which Suffolk is renowned.[12]

A few days later, two correspondents wrote in support of this notion: firstly:

> There is abundant authority for the connection of "silly" and "selig", as any good dictionary will prove. The first meaning of the English word is 'happy', thence it has the sense of 'harmless';

and secondly:

> I open Johnson's Dictionary, and under "Silly" (adj.: German Selig), I find these meanings: — (1) Harmless; innocent.; inoffensive; plain ; artless, (2) Weak; helpless. (3) Foolish; witless. I leave it to anyone who knows Suffolk to say which applies best. Unquestionably the first.[13]

But there was a contrary view too:

> I doubt whether the meaning of "silly" […] is to be found in the German *selig*, either in its sense of happy, blessed, &c, or in its sense of innocent, simple, helpless, &c. Some years ago, while engaged on a search in the Carew State papers, I came across the word "silly", used in the sense of 'rude' or 'uncultured', the sense in which it is much more likely to have been originally applied to Suffolk.[14]

These 1898 letters are, of course, no more than speculation, and except for the last are a backward step compared to the position advocated by Deedes. The writers can perhaps be excused in that the New English Dictionary fascicle containing a treatment of the word 'silly' did not appear until 1919. In that entry, last revised in 2013 in OED3, we find that forms such as *silie* (*syly*, *sylly,* etc.) are indeed variants with shortened vowel of *seely*, and are found from about 1450 in very many senses: worthy, good, pious, holy; auspicious, fortunate; helpless, defenceless, powerless; meagre, poor, trifling; weak, feeble, frail; weak, flimsy, trifling; sickly, ailing, in poor health; unfortunate, wretched; simple, rustic; lacking sophistication or refinement; ignorant, uneducated; lowly; plain, simple, uncomplicated; homely; foolish, thoughtless, empty-headed; characterized by or associated with foolishness.[15] These meanings are illustrated in the surname derived from the adjective, which takes modern forms such as Seeley, Selley, Silly, and many others. Hanks *et al*. give the interpretation 'happy, fortunate', or later 'pitiable' for the Middle English nickname from which the surname descends.[16] There are yet further extended senses in modern colloquialisms.

None of this, unfortunately, helps us determine the original intended meaning of 'silly Suffolk', nor its date of first usage. Unless examples prior to 1819 are found, both these issues must remain open. Many of the senses in the OED list are plausibly applicable to the county or its people, and the earliest examples in newspapers are quite capable of bearing the negative or pejorative interpretations which have sometimes been given. A possible source might be a popular ballad or verse, perhaps of the seventeenth or eighteenth centuries, where vague meaning and alliteration would be useful attributes.[17] Meanwhile, assertions such as are found in the quotations at the head of this note would be better avoided. Literary critics need to be more aware of the very dubious history of the phrase.[18] Local newspapers could also stop propagating a myth as if it were established history.[19] There is no evidence at all for a medieval or earlier date for 'silly Suffolk', or that the original sense was 'holy', 'blessed' or 'pious'; these are quite likely no more than artificial reinterpretations of the late nineteenth century.

NOTES

1 Wareham 2005, 6.
2 Young 2019.
3 Halliday and Yallop 2007, 34.
4 Flagellus 1819, 5.
5 Hughman, 1846, 3.
6 *The Suffolk Chronicle*; or *Weekly General Advertiser & County Express*, 13 November 1824. In this and subsequent quotations from nineteenth-century newspapers, minor changes to punctuation have been made to conform more closely to modern usage.
7 *Bury and Norwich Post*, 21 January 1835, 2; *The Suffolk Chronicle*, or *Weekly General Advertiser & County Express*, 16 September 1837, 4; *The Suffolk Chronicle*, or *Weekly General Advertiser & County Express*, 18 August 1832, 4, respectively.
8 As found by searching the British Newspaper Archive, https://www.britishnewspaperarchive.co.uk/ (accessed 5 February 2022).
9 *The Spectator*, 25 March 1871.
10 *Ipswich Journal*, 6 March 1877.
11 *East Anglian Notes & Queries*, 1885–86, 230.
12 *London Evening Standard*, 18 November 1898, 6.
13 *London Evening Standard*, 23 November 1898, 2.
14 *London Evening Standard*, 28 November 1898, 3.
15 **silly, adj., n., and adv**. Oxford English Dictionary, https://www.oed.com/view/Entry/179761 (accessed 7 February 2022); compare also **sĕlī adj**. in the Middle English Dictionary, https://quod.lib.umich.edu/m/middle-english-dictionary/dictionary/MED39301/ (accessed 9 February 2022).
16 Hanks *et al.* 2016, 2370.
17 A verse published in 1586 concerning a fire in Beccles in Suffolk did in fact refer to 'sillie poore Beckles', with *sillie* here apparently in the sense 'defenceless, powerless, unfortunate', see D. Sterrie, *A briefe sonet declaring the lamentation of Beckles* (Norwich: 1586), https://hdl.huntington.org/digital/collection/p15150coll3/id/5298/ (accessed 11 February 2022). I thank Laura Wright for pointing me to this example.
18 Kate Noske, 'Telling spaces: reading Randolph Stow's expatriation', *Journal of the Association for the Study of Australian Literature*, 19 (2019), 19–1, manages to write a whole essay speculating on the meaning of the phrase without being aware of any of its notorious history.
19 For example, 'A Suffolker, a fair-maid or 'Silly Suffolk': What are people from Suffolk called?', *East Anglian Daily Times*, 9 August 2020.

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