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The Search for Blandings

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Abstract

PG Wodehouse is widely considered to be one of the best known and best loved English comedic authors and one of his most loved creations was that of Blandings Castle. In recent years researchers within the English Literature discipline have tried to pinpoint the location of Blandings, using the author's memoirs and interviews, along with architectural research and site visits. A split site location has been the result of this earlier work, covering Sudeley Castle, Weston Park, Shifnal and Buildwas. In this research we use a multi-criteria evaluation method through GIS and spatial analysis to create a surface of suitability for Blandings using clues from the Wodehouse novels. The final result of this is that Apley Park in Shropshire best fulfils the geographic criteria extracted from Wodehouse's novels.

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1. Introduction

Part of the lure of fiction is that of the unknown. This can be taken as either new people and places, or new situations with old people and places. In some cases a book or series of novels become so accepted into common culture that the public start to regard the places as being real, or, when they are obviously not so, imagine just how the made-up places look.

A classic example of this phenomenon, and probably the novel which has spawned the most thought on the subject, has been JRR Tolkien's *Lord of the Rings* trilogy, which, along with the companion novels *The Hobbit*, *The Silmarillion* and *The Unfinished Tales*, tell the life story of Middle-earth, a fantasy world loosely based upon the world as we know it, but in a different time. Some of the spin-offs resulting from Tolkien's writing have included atlases of Middle-earth. Examples of such atlases include [Fonstad \(1994\)](#) and [Sibley and Howe \(2003\)](#), both of whom attempt to map the imagination and fix the relationships penned by Tolkien, providing readers with a guide to the fictitious places in the stories. Even more, the act of compiling maps into a formally structured atlas reinforces the authenticity of the presented geography as perceived by the reader.

Whilst in the case of Tolkien, the *Shire*, *Gondor*, *Rivendell* and so on are completely imaginary and bear no relation to reality, many other authors do place imaginary locations within the real world. There are many examples in English literature, such as Thomas Hardy's Wessex in *Tess of the D'Urbervilles* or *Return of the Native*, or Gabriel Garcia Marquez's and Louis De Bernieres' invented South American states. In many of these cases, the authors would claim that the names and places they describe are invented, yet are also based on a mixture of places they have known and visited. With continued use these invented places become reinforced and a more formal (though imaginary) geography is created, which allows the reader greater insight into the author's world. However, although attempts have been made to map these imaginary places based on descriptions authors left behind and, in some cases, maps by the authors themselves, there has been no application of spatial analysis or other quantitative technique to query the geographic data within literary sources.

A more realistic application of locating places in fiction has been Heinrich Schliemann's discovery of the historic city of Troy ([Schliemann, 1875](#)). Schliemann's claim was that he was guided by the landmarks and clues left by Homer in his epic poem, *The Iliad*, and by interpreting the geography found within he was led to Hisarlik in north-west Turkey ([Antonova et al., 1996](#)). However, in more recent times [Allen \(1999\)](#) has cast doubts on these claims, and has attempted to demonstrate that it was Calvert who was originally responsible for tracking down what was supposed to have been a mythical city. Wherever the truth lies, however, it still demonstrates an early use of literature based evidence to locate sites.

2. PG Wodehouse and Blandings

One author who has followed in this style of superimposing fictitious places on a real landscape has been Pelham Grenville Wodehouse. Wodehouse was born in 1881 in Guilford, Surrey, and had a successful writing career spanning 73 years, covering 1902 to 1975, the year of his death. He has been described by many as Britain's greatest comic writer (see, for instance [Fry, 2001](#); [Adams, 2002](#)), and even 100 years after the publication of his first book and the traumas and difficulties brought upon him during World War II, his popularity is yet to wane.

During his life Plum (the nickname by which Wodehouse was commonly known) published somewhere in the region of 90 novels, plays, essays and musicals. When he died, on St Valentine's Day, 1975, shortly after being knighted, he was still writing and left behind the yet uncompleted manuscript for his final Blandings novel: *Sunset at Blandings* ([PG Wodehouse Society, 2000](#)).

Aside from Wodehouse's most famous creation, Bertie Wooster and his gentleman's gentleman, Jeeves, there have been a plethora of Wodehousean characters and places that have reappeared throughout time. One of these is Blandings Castle and its resident Threepwood family, the (supposed, if it were not for his tyrannical sisters and frightening head gardener) head of the estate, Clarence, Earl of Emsworth, and the prize winning pig, the Empress of Blandings.

Blandings has appeared in roughly seventeen novels and short stories, and acts as a location to house star-crossed lovers, irritating secretaries and out of control aristocrats, whilst surrounding them with tales of mistaken marriage proposals, pig-kidnaps and scarab purloining. In a typical plot, amongst the mayhem and confusion, pairs of lovers will invariably become engaged to the wrong other halves; Emsworth's sisters will attempt to chase off broke (and hence highly unsuitable) young suitors for their nieces, while Galahad (otherwise known as Gally, the Earl's younger brother) will be doing his best to introduce the said unsuitable suitor by passing him off as someone completely different; and the Empress will either disappear or be off her food, much to Clarence's shock and horror (the only other comparable thing for him being the death of his roses or the gardener wishing to uproot the yew alley and replace it with a gravel path). Fortunately, by the end of the novel the correct set of lovers will become re-enamoured, somehow Gally will have threatened whichever troublesome sister is causing bother to allow the unsuitable young man to marry their niece, McAllister's (the head gardener) efforts to construct a gravel path on the moss lawn will come to nought, and the Empress will be returned to full health and triumph, yet again, in the Shropshire County Show.

3. Methods

3.1 The search for Blandings: traditional methods

As Blandings Castle is one of the most commonly reoccurring locations in Wodehouse's stories, the question of exactly where he set it has been a long and curious mystery. A number of things are known about the location of the model for Blandings that can be found within the author's writings as well as interviews and recorded conversations with Wodehouse. The first and foremost of these known and accepted facts is that Blandings was located someplace within the English county of Shropshire.

In the recent past, there have been three names most closely associated with discovering the location of Blandings, yet all three have, by and large, focused on architectural and feature based characteristics of the site, rather than locational characteristics. Perhaps the earliest publication on the subject came in the appendix to Wodehouse's final novel, *Sunset at Blandings* (Wodehouse and Usborne, 1977). Richard Usborne, a biographer of Wodehouse, collected the final manuscripts of the novel together and submitted this incomplete story to be published. To flesh it out he included sections on how Wodehouse wrote, where the writings referred back to earlier stories, and what he was likely to have changed along with how the story probably would have continued, given the opportunity of it being finished. In addition to this, however, Usborne also included a long section on how he had attempted to find Blandings. In this task he was assisted by Colonel Cobb, a respected expert of the British intra-war rail system. Between them they compiled a list of key characteristics regarding Blandings and its surroundings, and attempted to find the best place in Shropshire which fitted all of these. Usborne himself states that their search was not particularly successful, but the most notable conclusion they drew was that Buildwas, found to the west of Telford, was the most likely train station based on the train times and connections provided (usually given as 3 hours 40 minutes, but sometimes as long as 3 hours and 41 minutes!).

The most informative search appeared in Norman Murphy's *In search of Blandings* (Murphy, 1981). Murphy has become renowned as one of the pre-eminent Wodehouse historians and biographers and has been, until recently, the long-time president of the PG Wodehouse (UK) Society. Murphy's search was considerably more in-depth and laborious than the earlier efforts. He started from a slightly different perspective, and rather than searching for which locations best fitted the characteristics, he instead drew up a list of possible houses in Shropshire that had the right age and textual descriptions. From this, he then paid a visit to each of the 20 short-listed estates to compare the local characteristics to those in the novels.

Textual clue	Relative frequency / importance
In Shropshire	Highly frequent, mentioned in most books and accepted as fact
The Wrekin can be seen from castle and grounds	From two sources that are well defined
Shrewsbury is 45 minutes drive away	One source, but fuzzy in detail
The River Severn is near or within the castle grounds	Highly frequent, but exact distances not provided
The castle is about 2.5-3 miles from the station	c. 10 sources all falling within defined band
The drive is 0.75 of a mile in length from the main road	Highly frequent, but with no description of sinuosity
It takes 3 hours 40 minutes or so on the train	Highly frequent
There are water meadows and a boating lake within the grounds of the castle	Each has about five sources

Table 1. Clues extracted from the Blandings stories.

Murphy's search produced a split result, and he came to the conclusion that the village of Market Blandings, the estate, and the house were all from separate places. Sudeley Castle in Gloucestershire played host to the buildings, Weston Park the estate, and Shifnal the local village. However, as with earlier searches, his conclusions tended to ignore geography, instead focussing on the architectural and descriptive characteristics of the estates and houses.

3.2 The search for Blandings: a GIS method

When reading novels in general, and Blandings novels in particular, it becomes apparent that many of the descriptive clues are inherently spatial, and therefore, to fill in the gaps left from earlier research a geographical information system (GIS) was used to attempt to identify a probable location.

To achieve this aim, an arduous six months of reading Blandings novels was undertaken, and each geographical clue extracted from the stories. In some cases, these clues can be cross-referenced between books, whilst others may appear less frequently or even only once. The final set of spatial characteristics are provided in Table 1.

Unfortunately, it has not yet been possible to make use of all of these characteristics. The latter two in particular were omitted from analysis due to data constraints - to adequately assess train travel time a complete network coverage of the contemporary rail system is required along with accurate timetables. Data such as this is without obvious source. Furthermore, with most of the branch lines closed in modern times, present day OS maps do not provide information about early twentieth century train stations. To have made use of this, it would have required digitisation of each closed station to add to the model, which was beyond the constraints of this project. Without the train system, therefore, it additionally seemed prudent to drop the distance between possible train stations and the castle. The reintroduction of the rail system would be a priority for any future research in this area. However, even without these, the others provided enough clues to use with a multi-criteria evaluation (MCE) method.

Constraints	Factors (weighting)
Within Shropshire	Distance from River Severn (0.4)
Within Wrekin viewshed	Length of driveway (0.35)
	Drive time from Shrewsbury (0.25)

Table 2. Constraints, factors and weightings for the MCE.

Prior to running the MCE a number of data structure constructions were required. Initially a viewshed analysis was run on the whole of Shropshire to a set of points covering The Wrekin (using NASA SRTM data), providing a Boolean layer into which the castle must fall. Following this a new road network was built by reducing the modern day OS Meridian2[®] dataset down to one which agrees with the early 1920s OS county maps. A set of travel isochrones were produced using a driving speed of 20 miles per hour (on advice from vintage car owners in the Solway Jaguar Club) from the revised road network. This, however, introduced a considerable amount of fuzziness, for there is no way of knowing that this is the region of speed that Wodehouse meant by “*not hurrying*” (though evidence from one of his other books, *Summer Moonshine*, indicates that he thought 40 to 45 mph to be extremely fast). This point therefore influenced the relatively low weighting of this factor in the MCE, which is demonstrated in Table 2. The other factors were derived as products of the certainty of the clue definition. Thus the distance from the River Severn is given the highest weighting as it is one of the most commonly found clues in the text. Although no distances are provided by Wodehouse, his writing does suggest that the river is easily accessible on foot across the estate. More problematic than this was the distance of the house from public roads. The full length of driveway is very well defined (at about 0.75 of a mile) but no indication of how sinuous the drive was is given. To deal with this an optimum distance of 0.75 of a mile from all public roads was used, and the weighting reduced slightly to account for the fact that the true straight line distance could be considerably lower than this. The final absolute values used were produced based on an estimate of the relative certainty for each clue and the fact that the MCE module in IDRISI32 requires all factors to sum to 1.

Before the factors could be used in the MCE routine, each required converting to a function of distance on a scale of 0 - 255 (where 0 is the least applicable area and 255 is most). This was achieved through normalisation based on the range of each factor. From this a standard MCE was run using IDRISI32, producing a resultant surface. The surface indicates the relative possibility of Blandings Castle and its estate existing at each location.

4. Conclusions

The optimum location produced by the aforementioned method was rather surprising. The result expected was that the most likely location would be at a place of no true significance - for instance, within a town or village, or in a set of farmer's fields. However, as can be seen in the large-scale inset, the most likely location provided actually coincides with Norman Murphy's second choice estate: Apley Park, a country home and estate that has, until very recently, fallen derelict, and prior to that underwent a number of changes in use, including, at one stage, serving as a school. Although other areas of Shropshire also come out with a high possibility, Apley Park does have an added reason for its selection. It is known that Wodehouse did visit Apley Park during his many trips to Shropshire, so would have been aware of its location and characteristics. Additionally, there was a nearby train station that would have been suitable to account for the railway clues. The train station was at Linley, across the River Severn from the house, and was on the Great Western Railway so would have been able to carry passengers from London onwards. It does not, however, seem fully suitable as it is not within a small town (Market Blandings in the novel) and is closer to the house than Wodehouse describes.

The technique used is, admittedly, not perfect, and contains a considerable amount of uncertainty, not least of all that the subject matter does not actually exist! It follows then that the key characteristics used - as they have been taken from novels - are very difficult to quantify, and Wodehouse himself was not always completely consistent. Furthermore, as has been noted in the resulting press coverage, the results are not always favourably accepted, as demonstrated by Murphy's statement of "*I think it's a nice try, but rubbish*" (Brown, 2003; Tibbetts, 2003). However, as discussed earlier, Osborne, Cobb and Murphy's work all took a different tack, without focussing on the geographical situation, and therefore we would argue that this quantitative view of literature is an additional way to analyse the geography found within fiction, and sits alongside more traditional styles of research. As for whether this produces the 'right' answer to the location of Blandings is debatable - it is correct insofar as the definition of the search provided, but this does not mean that the searches based on architectural characteristics have given false results. Besides, it is highly unlikely that Wodehouse only had one place in mind when conceiving Blandings, especially considering the long period over which he wrote about it, most of which he spent abroad in the United States of America or France. Therefore the most likely scenario is that all of the places mentioned in the various research have played their own contributing role to Wodehouse's thoughts and conceptions.

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Software

ArcGIS 8 was used for data manipulation and preparation. This consisted of the derivation of the basic surfaces used in the MCE - the viewshed; distance from road surface; driving distance from Shrewsbury; and distance from the River Severn. IDRISI32 was used to perform the analysis upon these layers through its multi-criteria evaluation model before the resultant surface was exported back into ArcGIS which was then used for the final cartographic output.

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