

# S H A C K

*Shack, or SHAC? These are colloquial usages, and so the tradition is mainly oral. So far this is the only evidence we have found in the Archives. Perhaps we may note in passing that the OED give a suggestion that the word, first found in the US in the later nineteenth century, is in fact a loan word from Mexico.*

1926

Letter from MA Sutton (O40), 18 Sep 2006: The story, as related by Fr Anthony Ainscough, who was in the school with Russell Morgan, is that one day in the winter of 1925-6 he was sitting with friends in the Old House (to become St Oswald's in 1926) in a heavy rainstorm. The roof was leaking and Russell Morgan exclaimed, "This place is a real shack". Everyone laughed, and the name caught on, so that by the time of the cricket season of 1926, Russell Morgan was able to encourage his team by saying, "Come on, don't let the old Shack down"

1929

James Lind (A29), quoted in *Ampleforth Journal* 86:2 (1981) 66-67 (from Zimbabwe)

Memories of a successful 1st XV congregated round a piano at the end of the Christmas term singing lustily to the tune of *Soldiers of the Queen*:

Now in 1929 again we're what we always used to be.

We think it's quite useless to explain, you only have to look and see:

So when we say that this shack's master...

I would like to end by saying that all my life has been influenced by my monastic education at Ampleforth. I am tremendously grateful to 'the old Shack'.

1931

WB Atkinson (C31), letter 7 Aug 2001 (Q13-24):

I can add nothing to your research on the incidence of Shack except that it was in current use during the 27/31 years I was there and thereafter. In correspondence it has always had a minor 's'.

1932

Basil Rabnett (A31), letter quoted in *Ampleforth Journal* 38 (1933) 174:

While I was at Banff, Ranald got word from an Amplefordian - Nicholas Smith, you may have heard the name - who is farming at Lethbridge, which is about 90 miles south of here. I knew him quite well at "shack", so we'll make a point of passing through there.

1935

Abbot Patrick Barry (W35):

I was involved with Patrick O'Donovan in the publication of a pretentious little magazine of which the title was SHACK. It was before its time (or just plain bad) and died after a few issues. [It had articles by G Williams, Douglas Woodruff, Laurence Bevenot, Ronald Knox, Brian McIrvine, Patrick O'Donovan; it had 16 pages and was printed at the Catholic Records Press, Exeter. It cost 6d in June 1935.] I feel quite certain that the coining of the name Shack by Headmonitor Morgan, and its use by us for our pretentious little magazine, was simply an example of derogatory affection (rather like the gentry's use of 'My little place in the country' to describe their stately homes). When I asked about it as a boy I was told that Headmonitor Morgan in the usual Headmonitorial address to the whole school in the Theatre at the beginning of term had begun with the memorable phrase, 'Now that we have all come back to this little old Shack on the moors...', which got the whole school talking about 'Shack'.

1937

The word is spelt Shack in an unsigned cartoon in *Ampleforth News* Feb 1937

1951-53

Patrick Brocklehurst (B58) and Francis Dearlove (W57) clearly recall the common usage of SHAC while they were in the Junior House, and its accepted interpretation there as an acronym for 'Senior Houses Ampleforth College'. From their point of view at the time this was a very natural development, but we may be allowed to suspect that it was a fairly recent development, since acronyms became common in the age of SHAEF, SACEUR, NATO, SEAC, and no doubt many others. It is like the weather: it is here to stay.

1952

MH Cramer (O54), personal diary: This diary covers two years (1952,1953) and does not mention the word 'Shack', although the word was in common use as in 'shack monitor', 'shack tanning'. I don't recall the diminutive or familiar form 'shackie' until much later, 20 or 30 years later. We used the word: but we never had reason to write it down, because in those days one was conscious of the difference between written English and the colloquial. (This difference still exists, but we do not pay so much attention to it now). Hence the lack of direct evidence. It was jargon, or colloquial usage, and in those days one avoided them in writing, and so wrote (and often said) School Monitor.

1953

William Charlton (O53), House punch song, Thurs 5 Mar 1953 (BX26-6B):

His house, St Oswald's, lived in the Old House, i.e. (as then we supposed) the original 'Shack':

The walls may crack, the roof may fall  
The props may give away, Sir:  
St Oswald's flag will fly withal  
Until the Judgement Day, Sir'.

1968

*Ampleforth Journal* 73 (1968) 311 (unsigned note): SHACK, SHAC: This word is wrongly supposed to derive from Senior or School House, Ampleforth College. It was first used by Morgan and a friend c. 1924-5 as a term of mild abuse, in such phrases as "typical Shack", to mean that Ampleforth was like a shack, ramshackle, untidy, inefficient. Very soon it became a term of endearment: "good old shack", just as with the terms "Whig" and "Tory". By that time its origin had been lost and people began to invent imaginary etymologies.

The years of its first emergence were those when Ampleforth was beginning to take itself seriously as a Public School and was growing fast; when the solitary hot tap in the wash places was being replaced by a hot top for each basin; when earthen privies were being turned into water closets; when cockroaches were beginning to be brought under control, tough but happy days. [The writer of this passage was perhaps not in possession of all the evidence.]

1969

*Ampleforth Journal* 74 (1969) 124: Paul de Guingand (1926) writes: If my memory serves me rightly, the name SHACK was coined in the following way. Circa 1923/4, in the days before Fr Hugh de Normanville — ably supported by Bernard Boyan (then a boy) — entertained us with silent films, itinerant troupes would occasionally visit us to give a show. One such troupe arrived just about the time that it was first learnt that the centre of the school building was likely to tumble down. I well remember the embarrassment following the laughter which greeted the announcement that the next song was to be a sentimental American ballad entitled "My tumbledown shack in the west". The name stuck and the building stood, even to this day

1975

Adrian Stewart (C43), at that time on the Science staff, in *Physics in Education*: This article describes a simulation of the Schrodinger wave equation for the hydrogen atom on SHAC, a simple homogeneous analogue computer which has been described in two earlier articles in *Physics Education* (1975 10 374-9,430-5).

1988

*Ampleforth Journal* 93:2 (1988) 101

"A vehicle for Shac's literary talent": so WA Davidson, in *Pupils'Voices* II. In Part I, the same author wrote (*ibid.* 91:2 (1986) 100 ), "From time to time other magazines of a more specialised nature have appeared, but on an occasional rather than a regular basis. 'Shack Poetry' and 'Shack Art' have reached wider audiences in this way.

1993

Rupert Pepper (D94), in *Ampleforth News* 1993, quoted in *Ampleforth Journal* 98:2 (1993) 107:

Fr Anselm [Bolton] was personal chaplain to Lord Fairfax of Gilling Castle and when he died, 'protector' of his unmarried daughter, Lady Ann Fairfax. In her will she granted to Fr Anselm a house with thirty four acres, on the opposite side of the valley,

where he could serve the local Catholics independent of Gilling. This was Ampleforth Lodge, gone now having been knocked down in the 1980s and replaced by the beloved New Building complete with leaking glass tower. It must be an improvement, however, as such was the shoddy state of the Lodge in recent years that it gained the nickname 'Shack', now the general nickname of the whole school and more often than not imaginatively spelt Shac, an acronym for 'Senior House(s) Ampleforth College': but this is wrong.

It is clear from the above evidence that the name Shack came into general use before 1930. It is also clear that SHAC was an acronym worth alluding to when Adrian Stewart was describing his early computer: allusions indicate that a word or expression is already reasonably well known. Acronyms were at that time very much in vogue: numerous semi-humorous ones were in use (just because they were a current mode) in the School Library. They reached Britain at least, with American help, in the Second World War – e.g. SHAEF, PLUTO – and almost took over with later NATO, SACEUR and impure examples like Radar and Sigint. So it is no surprise that boys (and now girls) who hear the words shack, shackie etc, but hardly ever either read or write them (and to them one might reasonably add numerous parents and old boys, and no doubt in time old girls), should readily recognise the sound of 'shack' as another form of acronym, SHAC. It is to be noted that few words in English ends in -ac (but there are *lilac*, and *bivouac* – pinched from the French – and (a possible warning) *maniac*. And it is quite normal to register, or at least to set as a crossword clue, what such acronyms stand for, so the construct (after the event) 'Senior Houses Ampleforth College' made good sense when it first started to be used as an explanation, because there was a Junior House and there were ten Houses, and they were not to be associated too closely – especially by those who had recently been promoted from it – with the Junior House.

We are talking about language, and its natural development. There should be no doubt that *Shack* is the historically correct version of the sound we use: but newer world has become used to compressed information (like texting), and there is little point in regretting linguistic change, since it is the process by which the French escaped from Latin, and the English from Anglo-Saxon. And it is worth recalling a remark of Christopher Tolkien, teaching in Oxford many years ago: 'Language is what people say, not what they ought to say.' I must, however, admit that when I was teaching English in the Junior House I was generally economical with this truth.

And if the young prefer to write only four letters S-H-A-C on their backs in characters four inches – I beg your pardon, 100 mm – high, let us be glad at least that these are the four letters they have chosen..

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It will be clear that archivist depend on documents and evidence. Fr Anselm, Archivist of the Abbey, is always glad to receive any materials, written, printed or images, sent to him at the Abbey, which might assist him in future inquiries. For prior consultation, use [archive@ampleforth.org.uk](mailto:archive@ampleforth.org.uk) or 01439 766436.