# Scots in the community: place-names and social networking
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## Abstract
This paper reports on the project *Scots Words and Place-names* (SWAP), which is designed to explore the innovative potential of integrated online community engagement methods in the study of language and of place-names. Funded from March to November 2011 by JISC (Joint Information Systems Network), it is a collaboration between the University of Glasgow Enroller Project, Scottish Language Dictionaries and the Scottish Place-Name Society. The project aims to engage the public in an exploration of language use in present-day Scotland, focusing on the Scots vernacular.

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## Introduction
Regarded for centuries as a poor cousin of English, Scots is now recognised as a distinctive language variety in its own right, with a rich and complex history.[1] With no standard written form, and with a range of dialects in different parts of Scotland, it offers many challenges to the researcher. Place-names are essentially the only surviving evidence for pre-literary Scots, and they also add substantially to the picture for later varieties.[2] This paper reports on a project designed to involve the whole community in the study of their language, drawing on local knowledge to investigate regional varieties of Scots at the present day, and to explore place-name evidence for the uses and meanings of words in Older, Middle and Modern Scots.

## *Scots Words and Place-names* (SWAP)
The project is based at the University of Glasgow, and is a collaboration between the University of Glasgow Enroller Project, Scottish Language Dictionaries and the Scottish Place-Name Society. It aims to make existing scholarly resources publicly accessible as a basis for community collection building and the mutual exchange of information between lexicographers, place-name scholars and the public. Known as *Scots Words and Place-names* (SWAP), it was funded from March to September 2011 by JISC (Joint Information Systems Network), and subsequently extended to the end of November 2011. The project team comprises Carole Hough (Principal Investigator), Jean Anderson, Christine Robinson (Director, Scottish Language Dictionaries) and John Watt (Co-Investigators), and Ellen Bramwell, Dorian Grieve and Reede Ren (Research Assistants). We also have a highly active Advisory Board, comprising Pauline Cairns Speitel (Senior Editor, Scottish Language Dictionaries), Eileen Finlayson (Editor, Scottish Language Dictionaries), Alison Grant (Editor, Scottish Language Dictionaries and Secretary, Scottish Place-Name Society), Robert Hamilton (Director of Community Engagement, University of Glasgow), Christian Kay (Convener,  Board of Scottish Language Dictionaries), Andrew Prescott (Director of Research, Humanities Advanced Technology and Information Institute, University of Glasgow), Rod Purcell (Director of Community Engagement, University of Glasgow), Richard Sinnott (Director of eResearch, University of Melbourne), and Elaine Webster (Outreach and Education Officer, Scottish Language Dictionaries). We are grateful to all of them, and to other colleagues including Marc Alexander, Flora Edmonds, Johanna Green,

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[1] See for instance the essays in Corbett *et al* (2003).
[2] See for instance Scott (2008).

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The funding call for this programme related to community engagement, which is of course central to research into language use. Particularly for a vernacular such as Scots, which is primarily a spoken rather than written language, and has a wide range of regional varieties, close engagement with local communities is essential both for the collection and for the interpretation of the data. This applies to the study of lexis, carried out by Scottish Language Dictionaries, as Scott (2008: 89) observes:

> Lexicographers of living languages very much appreciate the value of material contributed to dictionary projects by members of the public. Information about new words, or words which are rarely found in print, can be particularly useful when updating and revising dictionary text. This is especially true for Scots, given that much of its lexis is primarily spoken rather than written.

It also applies to the study of place-names, the remit of the Scottish Place-Name Society, and the particular focus of this paper.

## Conventional methods of data collection

Place-name research represents a combination of academic expertise and local knowledge. Academic expertise is required to assemble and to analyse the historical spellings that are fundamental in tracing the derivations of individual place-names, while local knowledge contributes insights into the historical, social and topographical conditions under which each place-name was formed. Moreover, some place-names are known only to local residents, being used within the community without being documented on maps or in other printed material. In the first volume of the Scottish Place-Name Survey, Taylor describes how –

> In the course of research for this book Gilbert Márkus and I chapped on many doors, and spoke with many people regarding pronunciations, field-names and other aspects of local place-nomenclature. We were always met with politeness, and frequently with kindness, enthusiasm, and genuine interest. (Taylor and Márkus 2006: ix)

Similar remarks appear in other publications. Also in a Scottish context, Broderick (1977), Fraser (1977) and Waugh (1984: 22–26) describe the process of interviewing and recording local informants. A common theme emphasised here and elsewhere is the urgency of recording local knowledge before it is irretrievably lost.

Our own research has benefited substantially from information supplied by members of the public. Bramwell's investigations of personal naming in Scotland are based largely on data from interviews (2007, 2009, 2011). As regards place-names, Hough (2003) used philological and topographical evidence to suggest that an Old English compound *(ge)strēones halh* found in place-names such as Strensall and Stronsay might refer to "a productive fishing area or fertile nook of land". This interpretation was subsequently confirmed by a local resident who contributed the information that one of the names referred to a field containing a deep pool that was indeed an excellent fishing place (Hough 2004). Moreover, when Hough (2000) suggested an interpretation of the Gloucestershire place-name Pitchcombe as "valley with steep sides" on the basis of a nonce-occurrence *pich-hill* 'slope' in Middle English, a letter from a local resident pointed out that this use of the term *pitch* was still in local use in Gloucestershire (Hough 2001). Hough (2001) concluded by noting:

the information evinces the role of minor toponyms in preserving dialectal uses of words, and demonstrates the overriding importance of local knowledge in place-name studies.

It is this knowledge that the SWAP project seeks to harness.

## The role of social media

Letters from members of the public provide valuable information, but are only likely to be initiated by people who are already aware of names and have an interest in them.[3] Personal visits and interviews are highly productive, but are also time-consuming and can at best reach only a tiny fraction of the non-academic community. In order to access the vast amount of information available, it is necessary to take a broader approach. The aim of the SWAP project is to investigate the use of social media in this context, by exploiting vehicles such as Facebook and Twitter, and by setting up an online forum in which members of the public, alongside scholars and lexicographers, can exchange information on both place-names and words. A screenshot of the SWAP website is shown in Figure 1, with interactive displays of SWAP on Twitter and on Facebook. The website also has links to input forms, which allow members of the public to submit examples directly, rather than as part of a discussion on one of the other media.



**Fig. 1** – The Scots Words and Place-names website

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[3] In the example presented in Hough (2001), the informant was a member of the English Place-Name Society.

The starting-point as regards Scots vocabulary is the Scottish Language Dictionaries' Word Collection, an ongoing electronic record of spoken and written Scots used in the compilation and updating of dictionaries. The public are being asked to contribute words current in their own area, with demographic information to help build up a better picture of how Scots is used in different regions.

The starting-point as regards place-names is a comprehensive glossary of place-name terms that feature in headword entries in *Dictionary of the Older Scottish Tongue* or *Dictionary of the Scottish Language*. The glossary has been compiled by Alison Grant from the electronic files of Scottish Language Dictionaries, supplemented by information from place-name sources such as Dixon (1947) and Williamson (1942).[4] Entries include the modern Scots headword for each place-name element, together with any Older or Middle Scots forms, the Old or Middle English root where applicable, a short explanation of meaning, and place-name occurrences (both current and historical). A sample entry is shown in Figure 2.

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Modern form: **puddock**
Older Scots: **paddok, poddok**
Etymology: **paddoke (Middle English)**
Part of speech: **noun**
Definition: **a frog, a toad**
Modern examples: **Pottishaw (West Lothian), Paddockmuir Wood (Perthshire), Paddock Hall (West Lothian), Paddington Sike (Roxburghshire)**
Historical evidence: **Poddocford 1272-1316, Paddocford c1300, Padokschaw 1503, Paddowcleucheheid 1569, Paddoklaw 1618, paddock-buttis 1619**

**Fig. 2** – Sample entry from the Glossary of Scots Place-name Elements

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The public are being asked to comment on any of the examples that they are familiar with, and to contribute others from their own knowledge. The glossary thus functions as a research tool, attracting a growing body of evidence that will facilitate a more advanced understanding of the distribution and use of individual terms.

**Topographical vocabulary**

The public are also being encouraged to contribute photographs of local topography, particularly those illustrating the features identified in the place-names. This will not only help to establish robust interpretations, but may also bring to light subtleties of meaning in the application of individual terms. One of the main insights of English place-name studies in recent years has been the discovery that topographical terms previously regarded as synonyms were subtly and precisely differentiated. This was established through a systematic comparison of the use of individual terms in place-names from different parts of the country by Margaret Gelling and Ann Cole (2000). Whereas their analysis focused on place-names from Old English, a Carnegie-funded pilot study undertaken by Pratt (2005) demonstrated the potential of this approach for the investigation of Scots.

Research in this area so far has been carried out through fieldwork, visiting and photographing places named from individual terms. Like the process of interviewing local informants mentioned above, this has been immensely productive, but is also very time-consuming and labour-intensive. The SWAP project is attempting to assess the efficacy of an

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[4] Both long unpublished, these are now being made available in both digitised and hard copy format by the Scottish Place-Name Society.

alternative approach inviting members of the public to contribute photographs of their local area by uploading them to the website. Whereas views of the landscape could of course be obtained from sources such as Google Maps, the significance of a toponym often depends on the direction and angle from which the referent is viewed, and our interest here is in the features considered salient by the people who use the names.

## Unofficial names

One focus of current place-name research is 'unofficial' or 'community' names in use locally alongside the 'official' names that appear on maps and other printed sources (e.g. Redmonds 2004: 155–170). As well as being of interest in their own right, both for the naming strategies and for the language varieties represented, these can throw light on the development of place-names in the past and on the ways in which new speech communities developed their own place-names to supplement and in some cases supplant those already in use. As part of the SWAP project, members of the public are being encouraged to post alternative names by which a place is known locally, whether or not the origins are known. A few of those submitted so far, with examples of the types of context provided, are as follows:

- "There used to be a toxic adventure playground somewhere in the east end of Glasgow called 'The Sugarollie (liquorice) Mountains'."
- "Smokey Brae in Edinburgh, is where Restalrig Road South goes steeply down and under the railway line. It's always added to clarify where you mean, but hasn't quite made it onto the maps."
- "Scotstoun Leisure Centre used to be the Showgie (showground)."
- "'Walking the Mat' – walking Union Street in Aberdeen.
- "Similarly, the project is collecting unofficial names for the residents of different places. Those submitted so far include the following:

- Dirty Weekers (Wick)
- Thirsa Shither (Thurso)
- Jellie Piece Eaters (Vale of Leven)
- Habbies (Kilbarchan)
- Farfir Louns (Forfar)
- Bankies (Clydebank)

## Different forms of interactive methods

As the project is spread over so many forms of interactive methods, it has been a valuable way of testing their usefulness and productivity for this type of research. Twitter has been particularly good for dissemination purposes. It allows the holder of the account to share a short piece of information with many people at once. This has been useful in advertising particular parts of the project, such as the SWAP schools competition, which is discussed in detail below. Twitter messages can also draw attention to discussions happening via other media and encourage followers to join in with these. A reasonable response was also gained through asking directly for examples of Scots place-names with a particular element, such as *liggat* or *heid*. However, Twitter has proved a challenging medium through which to sustain these enquiries. It is difficult to follow conversations with multiple participants. More importantly, it is very much an immediate medium: a message is sent, appears in every follower's news feed and then may disappear before it is even noticed as other messages come in.

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Facebook has proved better for sustaining discussion, both with and amongst members of the public. This is because conversation threads can be followed without much difficulty. The design of Facebook also allows people easily to read and comment on previous posts; conversations begun in June on the SWAP Facebook page were still being added to in October as new people joined in and commented. People also seemed more likely to begin their own posts on the Facebook page, generating new user-led discussion. On Twitter, members of the public would reply to the SWAP tweets but rarely got in touch without prompting.

The input forms on the SWAP website are a way of encouraging members of the public who are not social media users to become a part of the project. Using these forms allows people to contribute Scots words and place-names in a structured way, rather than through online discussion. As a result, the data collected are immediately useable as part of a database.

**Schools competition**

A key aspect of the project is the involvement of all age-groups, including school children. However, as a result of the United States Children's Online Privacy Protection Act,[5] children under the age of thirteen are not allowed to hold an account with Facebook. This was one of the main media through which SWAP aimed to interact with the general public, so a different strategy was necessary in order to interact with young people. In order to reach this part of society, the SWAP project team organised a national schools competition. This competition aimed to give every school pupil in Scotland the opportunity to become involved with the project.

In addition to engaging young people with the SWAP project itself, one of the principal aims of the schools competition was to promote both the use of Scots and the discussion of place-names in schools. The competition was designed to act as a kind of linguistic and onomastic Trojan horse, bringing these subjects into classrooms where they might not usually be taught or considered. As mentioned above, Scots has long been regarded as of low status in comparison to English and is rarely taught in schools, although efforts are being made to redress this by organisations such as Scottish Language Dictionaries. In addition, the meaning of place-names is rarely considered within the classroom. The schools competition allowed teachers to bring both Scots and place-names into their lessons. In order to help schools with this, particularly as most teachers have little experience of these subjects, SWAP and Scottish Language Dictionaries produced materials for use in the classroom. These varied in style and across age groups, from simple word-searches, to in-depth discussion tasks, to photographs designed to elicit a creative response from pupils.

Initially, there appeared to be logistical difficulties in making the competition easily accessible to every school child, and in supplying lesson materials to use alongside it. The project did not have the resources to send a hard copy of the instructions and sets of materials for each age group into every school class in Scotland. Neither could it use the project website as a repository for online copies of information to be downloaded, as the online filters for schools do not allow them to access websites containing certain words or types of material, and the project did not want to impose such restrictions on its adult forums.

The solution to this was found in another interactive social medium: the Glow schools network run by Learning and Teaching Scotland, a government educational organisation which has now been incorporated into the wider body Education Scotland. Glow is billed as "the world's first national intranet for education",[6] and this portal provides an opportunity to

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[5] See http://www.ftc.gov/privacy/coppafaqs.shtm for details.
[6] On the page http://www.ltscotland.org.uk/usingglowandict/glow/whatis/storysofar/index.asp.

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reach every pupil and teacher in Scotland within a safe and supported online environment. The Glow network allows pages to be created to be viewed only by those with a Glow login, which covers pupils, teachers and education professionals.

In Glow, there is a front page which appears when a person logs onto the site, and which advertises various educational pages available on the network. These pages can be set up by teachers, pupils and outside bodies, as well as by Learning and Teaching Scotland themselves. They can either be available to anyone on the Glow network to view and to interact with, as was the SWAP page, or they can be restricted to a specified class, school or area. The Glow network is also used to allow schools to connect, via video-link, both with each other and with people relevant to pupils' education, such as athletes or writers. A screenshot of the SWAP page on Glow is shown in Figure 3.



**Fig. 3** – SWAP competition Glow page

By clicking on the 'Suggestions' tab, teachers and pupils could access links to relevant information on Scots and place-names available on the internet, as well as the educational materials produced for the project.

Entrants to the competition were asked to write a short story, poem or essay relating to the Scots language and/or to Scottish place-names. The original intention was to have four age groups: Primary 1–3 (around ages 5–7), Primary 4–7 (around ages 8–11), Secondary 1–3 (around ages 12–14) and Secondary 4–6 (around ages 15–17/18). However, so many entries were received in the Primary 4–7 category that it was split into two separate age groups: Primary 4–5, and Primary 6–7.

It was possible, and encouraged, to upload entries directly to the SWAP Glow page. These could not be viewed by other pupils and teachers at this stage, as each person must log on individually and so the administrators could set up the page to be viewed in a way which allowed information to be viewed only by specific people. There were also options to submit entries via email and through the postal service for those who were not confident in using the Glow system.

As a result of the extensive schools coverage achieved through using Glow, entries came from all over the country. Pupils submitted work from schools as far north as Shetland to those in the most southerly Borders, and from Greenock and Oban in the west to Fife in the east. The types of entries were also wide-ranging. Poems, essays, songs, creative writing and even picture-books were submitted in the five age categories. These were generally of a very high standard. Far more entries were received in the younger, Primary School, categories than in the Secondary categories. This may reflect the greater flexibility available in the Primary curriculum, where pupils are usually taught by the same teacher for most subjects and there are no examinations for which to prepare. It might also indicate the age groups which Scots teaching initiatives by Scottish Language Dictionaries and other organisations are already beginning to reach.

## Competition judging and prize-giving

The use of the Glow platform also allowed us to trial an innovative form of judging. The initial sifting of the entries was carried out by our judging panel, which included the novelists Louise Welsh and Amal Chatterjee and representatives of Scottish Language Dictionaries and the Scottish Place-Name Society. This judging panel chose finalists in each of the five age groups. However, the final decision on the winners of the younger categories was made by the school community themselves through peer-voting. Pupils and teachers were given the opportunity to read the finalists' entries on Glow and to vote for their favourites.

This was, again, achieved through the use of interactive tools on the Glow platform. The competition page was replaced by one which allowed users to judge the finalists' entries for themselves and to become involved in the process of picking the winner. A screenshot of the competition voting page is shown in Figure 4.



**Fig. 4** – SWAP competition voting page on Glow

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The decision to allow peer-voting was taken in order to continue to connect young people with the project after the competition deadline. It also allowed the educational materials to remain available for teachers to download for longer, as they could encourage engagement with Scots and place-names as part of ordinary lessons.

All finalists, along with parents and teachers, were invited to a prize-giving ceremony at the University of Glasgow where the winners were announced. This was envisaged as a way of breaking down barriers between schools and universities, as well as of encouraging teachers and pupils to participate in similar university-led projects in the future. They were given a tour of the university, culminating with an exhibition of Scots material drawn from the Special Collections of Glasgow University Library.[7] The ceremony itself was hosted by the University Rector, the Rt Hon. Charles Kennedy MP, and was attended by guests including the competition judges, representatives from SWAP's partner organisations, and members of the Friends of Glasgow University Library, who helped to sponsor the event. Amazon vouchers and other prizes were presented to winners and runners-up in each age group, and there was also an award for the best use of Scots across the entire competition. The finalists' entries, alongside photographs from the day, are available to view at: www.gla.ac.uk/schools/critical/research/fundedresearchprojects/scotswordsandplace-names/schoolcompetition/

## The legacy

The schools competition and prize-giving was important, not only in terms of the success of this short project, but in the wider legacy that it has left. Feedback from parents and teachers has been entirely positive. Encouragingly, some of the teachers have found ways to build on their participation in the SWAP competition through instigating their own projects, and through lobbying their local authority for more funding and recognition for initiatives relating to Scots and place-names in schools. This is an important development at a time when, as Scott (2008: 87) observes –

> Scotland is in a rather peculiar position regarding the teaching of its own heritage and culture. Although Scots has achieved legal recognition of its status as a language, the UK Government having signed the European Charter for Regional or Minority Languages in 2000, it is still struggling for respect and recognition in many schools.

The SWAP project has been able to play a small but significant part in this struggle.

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[7] The exhibition, *From 'makaris' to Makars: Scots literature in Special Collections*, was created by Robert MacLean of Glasgow University Library, and is now online at: http://www.gla.ac.uk/services/specialcollections/virtualexhibitions/frommakaristomakarsscotsliteratureinspecial collections/.

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