

The times they aren't a-changin' for Norfolk dialogue

Peter
Trudgill



email: newsdesk@archant.co.uk

There are those who erroneously believe that Norfolk is flat.

People who grew up in Norwich know different. You may be familiar with the old city rhyme which goes: "The cart stood still and the wheels wuz goin round, A-goin up o' Long John Hill a-com'n down".

Long John Hill in Lakenham no longer holds the terrors it used to. If you drive up it these days in your car, or whizz up it on a modern lightweight multiple-gear bicycle, it's no kind of challenge. But in the old days, if you wanted to negotiate it with a heavily-laden cart pulled by a tired old horse, that was another story.

But what about the words of the rhyme itself? What's all this a-coming and a-going? Specifically: why is it a-coming rather than just coming?

This is an ancient grammatical feature which the Norfolk dialect has retained, while the Standard English dialect has lost it. Linguists call it 'a-verb-ing'.

All over the world English speakers still know about it from the words of nursery-rhymes like "Cry Baby Bunting, daddy's gone a-hunting"; traditional folk-songs like Frog went a-courtin; and even from more recent songs like Bob Dylan's The



■ Long John Hill in Lakenham gives its name to a peculiar old city rhyme.

Picture: STEVE ADAMS

times they are a-changin'.

The origin of the form lies way back in the history of our language.

In "he is hunting", the "is hunting" part is known technically as a progressive verb. The very earliest forms of English didn't have progressives: the languages related to English still don't – in Norwegian "vi drikker" means both 'we drink' and 'we are drinking'.

The English progressive was an innovation which developed about a thousand years ago out of expressions like "he is on hunting", ie in the act of hunting, where hunting was a noun, as in "the hunting of deer is prohibited".

Speakers would say things like "He was on hunting of the deer". But over time the unstressed word 'on' was reduced in pronunciation, resulting in a-hunting; and eventually even that a- was lost in the standard dialect.

In our dialect, though, we have retained it. And, not only that, we have also retained the "of", albeit in the local form of "on", so we say "He was a-hunten on'em".

That's why, if you see an old fella trying to bike up Long John Hill on a heavy old velocipede, you might find yourself calling out: What on earth d'you think you're a-doin on?