

Author enjoyed Norfolk but that doesn't make him an expert on the dialect

Many EDP readers are familiar with the Boy John Letters sent to this newspaper, in Norfolk dialect, by Sidney Grapes in the 1940s and 50s. I've written before that these letters are works of "not a little genius". Grapes was, by common local consent, a superb writer of our dialect.

Sadly, this opinion isn't shared by Dr Graeme Davis of Buckingham University, who published a paper claiming that "while the dialect can be glimpsed" in the letters, they are "not an accurate reflection of the dialect of that time or any time".

Dr Davis prefers, as an authority on 1930s Norfolk dialect, that well-known northerner Arthur Ransome – based on Norfolk dialogues from Ransome's unfinished novel *Coots in the North*. Dr Davis has done us a real service by publishing these dialogues.

But he argues that local people like Sidney Grapes and the *Kippers* are "unreliable", while Ransome's dialogues are an "extensive and reliable source for 1930s Norfolk, perhaps the best single source now available".

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Here in Norfolk, where we actually speak the dialect, we strongly disagree. Ransome was a remarkable man, and many people love his novels. It's clear that he enjoyed Norfolk. But that doesn't make him an expert on our dialect. Grapes, on the other hand, was a native speaker and knew exactly what Norfolk people did and didn't say.

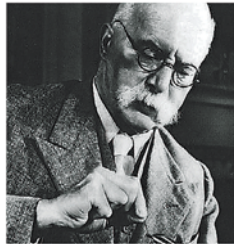
The education editor of *The Times* contacted me, through Fond (*The Friends of Norfolk Dialect*), for my views on Davis's paper.

After reading the dialogues, I replied that he could quote me as saying I saw no reason to change the view I formed when I read *Coot Club* at the age of 10 – that Ransome's representation of our dialect is rather poor, especially when it comes to grammar. A *Times* leader on January 4 then chided me for this, arguing that Ransome was entitled to write down what he heard, as he wished.

But there is so much in the dialogues he cannot possibly have heard. "Geewhillikins"? (Really?! The OED says that's American.) "He don't know what that be"? (That's West Country) "Shurrup"? (Surely that's Coronation Street?) "Whiles he come back"? (Scots.) "Ain't"? (Cockney.) "It don't matter" rather than "that doon't matters"?

It's bad enough when the BBC uses Mummerzet to represent our dialect.

But when inaccurate written misrepresentations are defended on the grounds that famous authors know more about our dialect than we do, then we can see that Fond has much work still to do!



■ Northerner Arthur Ransome's opinions on the Norfolk dialect are at odds with those in the county.