

= Gropecunt Lane =

Gropecunt Lane / ˈɡrɒpəkʌnt ˈleɪn / was a street name found in English towns and cities during the Middle Ages , believed to be a reference to the prostitution centred on those areas ; it was normal practice for a medieval street name to reflect the street 's function or the economic activity taking place within it . Gropecunt , the earliest known use of which is in about 1230 , appears to have been derived as a compound of the words grope and cunt . Streets with that name were often in the busiest parts of medieval towns and cities , and at least one appears to have been an important thoroughfare .

Although the name was once common throughout England , changes in attitude resulted in its replacement by more innocuous versions such as Grape Lane . A variation of Gropecunt was last recorded as a street name in 1561 .

= = Toponymy = =

Variations include Gropecunte , Gropecountelane , Gropecontelane , Groppecountelane and Gropekuntelane . There were once many such street names in England , but all have now been bowdlerised . In the city of York , for instance , Grapcunt Lane ? gr?p is the Old English word for grope ? was renamed as the more acceptable Grape Lane .

The first record of the word grope being used in the indecent sense of sexual touching appears in 1380 ; cunt has been used to describe the vulva since at least 1230 , and corresponds to the Old Norse kunta , although its etymology is uncertain .

= = Prostitution = =

Under its entry for the word cunt , the Oxford English Dictionary reports that a street was listed as Gropecuntlane in about 1230 , the first appearance of that name . According to author Angus McIntyre , organised prostitution was well established in London by the middle of the 12th century , initially mainly confined to Southwark in the southeast , but later spreading to other areas such as Smithfield , Shoreditch , Clerkenwell , and Westminster . The practice was often tolerated by the authorities , and there are many historical examples of it being dealt with by regulation rather than by censure : in 1393 the authorities in London allowed prostitutes to work only in Cocks Lane , and in 1285 French prostitutes in Montpellier were confined to a single street .

It was normal practice for medieval street names to reflect their function , or the economic activity taking place within them (especially the commodities available for sale) , hence the frequency of names such as The Shambles , Silver Street , Fish Street , and Swinegate (pork butchers) in cities with a medieval history . Prostitution may well have been a normal aspect of medieval urban life ; in A survey of London (1598) John Stow describes Love Lane as " so called of Wantons " . The more graphic Gropecunt Lane , however , is possibly the most obvious allusion to sexual activity .

= = Changing sensibilities = =

The Oxford English Dictionary defines the word cunt as " The female external genital organs " and notes " Its currency is restricted in the manner of other taboo @-@ words : see the small @-@ type note s.v. FUCK v. " During the Middle Ages the word may often have been considered merely vulgar , having been in common use in its anatomical sense since at least the 13th century . In The Miller 's Tale , Geoffrey Chaucer writes " And prively he caughte hire by the queynte " (and intimately he caught her by her crotch) , and Philotus (1603) mentions " put down thy hand and graip hir cunt . " Gradually though the word became used more as the obscenity it is generally considered to be today . In John Garfield 's Wandring Whore II (1660) the word is applied to a woman , specifically a whore ? " this is none of your pittiful Sneakesbyes and Raskalls that will offer a sturdy C ? but eighteen pence or two shillings , and repent of the business afterwards " . Francis Grose 's A Classical Dictionary of The Vulgar Tongue (1785) lists the word as " C * * t . The chonnos of the

Greek , and the cunnus of the Latin dictionaries ; a nasty name for a nasty thing : un con Miego . "

Although some medieval street names such as Addle Street (stinking urine , or other liquid filth ; mire) and Fetter Lane (once Fewterer , meaning " idle and disorderly person ") have survived , others have been changed in deference to contemporary attitudes . Sherborne Lane in London was in 1272 ? 73 known as Shitteborwelane , later Shite @-@ burn lane and Shite @-@ buruelane (possibly due to nearby cesspits) . Pissing Alley , one of several identically named streets whose names survived the Great Fire of London , was called Little Friday Street in 1848 , before being absorbed into Cannon Street in 1853 ? 54 . Petticoat Lane , the meaning of which is sometimes misinterpreted as related to prostitution , was in 1830 renamed as Middlesex Street , following complaints about the street being named after an item of underwear . More recently , Rillington Place , where John Christie murdered his victims , was renamed Ruston Close . Selous Street in London was renamed as a mark of respect for Nelson Mandela , as it may have been perceived to have been named in honour of the colonialist Frederick Selous , although it was actually named after the artist Henry Courtney Selous .

As the most ubiquitous and explicit example of such street names , with the exception of Shrewsbury and possibly Newcastle (where a Grapecuntlane was mentioned in 1588) the use of Gropecunt seems to have fallen out of favour by the 14th century . Its steady disappearance from the English vernacular may have been the result of a gradual cleaning @-@ up of the name ; Gropecuntelane in 13th @-@ century Wells became Grope Lane , and then in the 19th century , Grove Lane . The ruling Protestant conservative elite 's growing hostility to prostitution during the 16th century resulted in the closure of the Southwark stews in 1546 , replacing earlier attempts at regulation .

= = Locations = =

London had several streets named Gropecunt Lane including one in the parishes of St Pancras , Soper Lane and St Mary Colechurch , between Bordhawelane (bordello) and Puppekirty Lane (poke skirt) near present @-@ day Cheapside . First recorded in 1279 as Gropecontelane and Groppecountelane , it was part of a collection of streets which appears to have survived as a small island of prostitution outside Southwark , where such activities were normally confined during the medieval period .

The name was also used in other large medieval towns across England , including Bristol , York , Shrewsbury , Newcastle upon Tyne , Worcester , Hereford , and Oxford . Norwich 's Gropekuntelane (now Opie Street) was recorded in Latin as turpis vicus , the shameful street . In 1230 Oxford 's Magpie Lane was known as Gropecunt Lane , renamed Grope or Grape Lane in the 13th century , and then Magpie Lane in the mid @-@ 17th century . It was again renamed in 1850 as Grove Street , before once again assuming the name Magpie Lane in the 20th century . Newcastle and Worcester each had a Grope Lane close to their public quays . In their 2001 study of medieval prostitution , using the Historic Towns Atlas as a source , historian Richard Holt and archaeologist Nigel Baker of the University of Birmingham studied sexually suggestive street names around England . They concluded that there was a close association between a street with the name Gropecunt Lane , which was almost always in the centre of town , and that town 's principal market @-@ place or high street . This correlation suggests that these streets not only provided for the sexual gratification of local men , but also for visiting stall @-@ holders .

Such trade may explain the relative uniformity of the name across the country . Streets named Gropecunt Lane are recorded in several smaller market towns such as Banbury , Glastonbury and Wells , where a street of that name existed in 1300 , regularly mentioned in legal documents of the time . Parsons Street in Banbury was first recorded as Gropecunt Lane in 1333 , and may have been an important thoroughfare , but by 1410 its name had been changed to Parsons Lane . Grape Lane in Whitby may once have been Grope Lane , or Grapcunt Lane . Gropecunte Lane in Glastonbury , later known as Grope lane , now St Benedicts Court , was recorded in 1290 and 1425 . A street called Grope Countelane existed in Shrewsbury as recently as 1561 , connecting the town 's two principal marketplaces . At some date unrecorded the street was renamed Grope Lane , a

name it has retained . In Thomas Phillips ' History and Antiquities of Shrewsbury (1799) the author is explicit in his understanding of the origin of the name as a place of " scandalous lewdness and venery " , but Archdeacon Hugh Owen 's Some account of the ancient and present state of Shrewsbury (1808) describes it as " called Grope , or the Dark Lane " . As a result of these differing accounts , some local tour guides attribute the name to " feeling one 's way along a dark and narrow thoroughfare " .