



PLACE-NAMES AND LANGUAGE

Carole Hough introduces the study of place-names and suggests how readers can get involved in some local etymology

Barley farms, grey wolves and more

Above: Cauldron Linn, a waterfall on the River Devon on the border between Clackmannanshire and Perth and Kinross in Scotland.



Place-name research is one of the fastest-growing areas of linguistics, bringing to light new and fruitful material for the study of language from pre-history up to the present day. Most settlement-names in the Western world originated as descriptions intended to identify individual places, and sometimes to record information about ownership or legal status. Some are still transparent despite having been created over a thousand years ago: it comes as little surprise to learn that Newcastle means 'new castle', Oxford 'ford used by oxen' and Tweedmouth 'mouth of the River Tweed'.

Only a little more thought is needed to work out that Norfolk means 'north folk' and Suffolk 'south folk'. These examples illustrate the three main types of place-names, which describe buildings, landscape features or inhabitants.

Many names, however, have changed over time, or contain words that have since gone out of use. Oswestry is no longer recognisable as 'Oswald's tree', nor Shipbourne as 'sheep stream'. Chester is from an Old English word for a Roman town, Thorpe from an Old Norse word for an outlying farmstead, and Wick from an Old English word for a specialised farm. Like these, some place-names contain a single word (or 'element').

More detailed descriptions are provided by compounds, which often form recurring patterns. The first element of **Dorchester**, **Gloucester**, **Manchester** and **Rochester** is the earlier Romano-British name, while farm animals or produce feature in **Berwick** (barley), **Butterwick**, **Cheswick** and **Chiswick** (cheese), **Gatwick** (goats) and **Shapwick** (sheep). Recognising such patterns can assist interpretation of difficult names – a point to which we shall return.

Some names require more background information. In order to understand the common place-name Buckland, we need to know not only that it means ‘book land’, but also that the ‘book’ in question was a legal document (also known as a charter) conferring specific rights and privileges on a particular type of land-holding. Names like Mooray and Morgay – ‘morning-gift’ – must be interpreted in the context of the early medieval custom of a bride receiving a gift of goods or land from her husband the morning after consummation of the marriage. Since many English place-names were created during the Anglo-Saxon period before the language underwent a major transformation following the Norman Conquest of 1066, they are often now opaque, and require detailed investigation to uncover their origins.

Investigating place-names

The work of investigation is approached through the collection and analysis of early spellings. A systematic county-by-county Survey of English Place-Names has been in progress since the 1920s, and has so far published 90 volumes, most of which present in-depth analyses of the place-names of a county or part of a county. Here

for instance are some of the historical spellings of Yaxley: *Geaceslea* 963–984
laceslea c.970
Geakeslea 973
lacheslei 1086
Jakeslea c.1300–1325
Yakesle 1302
Yaxlee 1389
Yakesley alias Yaxley 1591

These show that the first element is Old English *geac* or ‘cuckoo’ (pronounced *ye-ak*), combined with Old English *leah* or ‘clearing’. The initial consonant is variously represented by ‘g’, ‘i’, ‘j’ and ‘y’ as the English spelling system develops, and the weak medial syllable (a genitive singular ‘es’ inflection) is gradually eroded.

Not all place-names are equally straightforward. Historical spellings of Grazeley are as follows: *(on) grægssole* c.950
Greshull 1198, 1269
Greyshull 1241, *Greishulle*, *Greysulle* 13th, *Greyshulle* 1294, *Greysulle* 1327, *Greysull* 1539–1540, *Greyshull* 1659, *Greseley*, *Greshill*, *Greyngull* 1284, *Grasley* 1662–1663, *Gresly als Greshall* 1758, *Grassley (Green)* 1761, *Grazeley (Green)* 1790

Although the modern form of the name suggests that it has the same second element as Yaxley, the early forms show that despite confusion with both this term and a word for hill, the derivation is actually from Old English *sol* (‘wallowing-place’). The first element is Old English *græg*, on record as a colour adjective (the ancestor of ‘grey’, to which it sounded similar). However, spellings of Grazeley show no trace of the inflectional ending obligatory for Old English adjectives. This indicates that *græg* was being used, substantively, as a noun

designating something grey in colour. The combination with ‘wallowing-place’, together with evidence from other place-names containing *græg*, makes it possible to identify this as a grey animal, the wolf. An unattested **græg* (‘wolf’) (the asterisk indicates a reconstructed form) has therefore been added to the known lexicon of Old English.

Place-names and language history

It is not uncommon for place-names to reveal traces of lost languages and of early forms of surviving languages. Most English place-names derive from the Germanic languages Old English and Old Norse, with a minority from the Brittonic (Celtic) language spoken before the arrival of the Anglo-Saxon and Scandinavian settlers. Scotland has a much higher proportion of Celtic place-names, including the varieties known as Gaelic and Pictish. No written texts survive in Pictish, so almost all knowledge of the language is based on name evidence. Place-names found within the area of north-east Scotland inhabited by the Picts prior to the ninth century preserve Pictish words such as **pett* (‘piece of land’) (Pitcaple, Pitlochry), **aber* (‘river-mouth’), (Aberdeen, Aberfoyle), **carden* (‘thicket, brake’) (Kincardine, Pluscarden) and **pert* (‘wood, copse’) (Larbert, Perth). We can therefore begin to build up a lexicon for this otherwise virtually unknown language. Some vocabulary is shared with the related Celtic languages that developed into Welsh and Cornish, giving place-names like Aberdyfi in Wales and Penperth in Cornwall.

Even in the case of relatively well-documented languages such as Old English, Old Norse and

Older Scots, place-names add to the evidence available from written sources. This is partly because place-names tend to originate in speech, preserving colloquial rather than literary language, and partly because they deal with everyday topics that are under-represented in literature, such as agriculture, farm animals, landscape and wildlife. As with **græg* ('wolf'), many words are only preserved in place-names. Examples from Old English include **anger* ('grassland') (Angerholme, Angram), **beos* ('bent grass') (Beeston, Besthorpe) and **ofer* ('ridge') (Littleover, Mickleover). Recent discoveries are **brun* ('pig') (Brunshaw, Brownwich) and **wearg* ('wolf') (Warnborough, Wreighburn). The meanings of such terms can sometimes be worked out by comparison with related terms in other languages, and sometimes from contextual evidence. For instance, **anger* is related to Old High German *angar*, **beos* to Dutch *bies* and **wearg* to Old Norse *vargr*. Old English **brun* combines in some place-names with terms for farms, and in others with landscape terms found elsewhere in connection with animal names. Like **græg* ('wolf'), it represents a colour adjective (brown) used substantively for an animal.

Contextual evidence may be either internal from the place-name itself, or external from the surrounding landscape. With regard to **brun* and **græg*, the main evidence is internal, comprising the terms with which they form compounds. The importance of external evidence has been established through an increasing emphasis on fieldwork in place-name studies. A key finding of recent research is that systematic comparison of groups of places named from individual topographical terms can reveal

differences in meaning between words previously regarded as synonyms. Hence Old English **ofer* refers specifically to a flat-topped ridge with a convex shoulder, in contradistinction to a *hoh*, a ridge with a slight rise to the peak and a concave end. Similarly a *dun* was a low hill with a level summit, a *beorg* was a more rounded hill or tumulus, and a *cruc* was a hill with an abrupt outline. Many more examples are discussed by Margaret Gelling and Ann Cole in their book *The Landscape of Place-Names* (2000). This kind of information is only available from place-names, and it shows that earlier stages of the English language had a more extensive and finely nuanced set of terms for landscape features than has survived to the present day.

English and Scots

The Survey of Scottish Place-Names has been inaugurated within the last decade, and only one county has yet been surveyed to the same standard as many in England. This too has brought to light new lexical discoveries alongside other historical and linguistic insights. Pinkerton in Fife is first recorded around the turn of the fifteenth century, and derives from the Scots word *toun* (town) in combination with an otherwise unrecorded **pink(er)n* ('butler'). The editors of the Fife Survey, Simon Taylor and Gilbert Márkus, establish the meaning of this unattested Scots term by tracing the etymology to Middle French *pincerne* and Latin *pincerna*, and succeed in identifying a twelfth-century landholder, William de Hay, who held that very office. There is a strong possibility that the place was named after him.

In addition to words unattested elsewhere, place-names provide earlier evidence

for the existence of known words. The word *bull* is first recorded in Middle English from about 1200, but appears in place-names from the Anglo-Saxon period such as Bulmer ('bull pool') and Bulwick ('bull farm'). Similarly *ca* ('jackdaw') first appears in Middle English, but an Old English form is known from place-names like Cabourne ('jackdaw stream'), Cavil ('jackdaw land') and Cawood ('jackdaw wood'), all recorded before 1100. The earliest citation for Scots *cruik* ('curved piece of ground') in the Dictionary of the Older Scottish Tongue dates from around 1200, but the Fife Survey shows that the place-name Cruicks is recorded from 30 years or so earlier.

English and Scots are of course closely related, and discoveries relating to one often impact on the other. In England, the place-names Purbeck, Purley, Purleigh and Pursley all contain Old English *pur*, a rare word with the meaning 'bittern, snipe'. Since the second elements mean 'ridge' or 'clearing', which are contextually appropriate with the name of a wild bird, the place-names have been confidently interpreted as 'bittern ridge' and 'bittern clearing'. This interpretation was called into question by the addition of a fifth name to the group. Pusk in Fife is recorded in 1207 as *Pureswic* and in 1240 as *Pureswijch*, combining the same first element with the Older Scots descendant of Old English *wic* ('specialised farm'). Since this term characteristically combines with words for farm animals or products, a compound with a bird name would be anomalous. There is, however, an English dialectal term *pur* meaning 'lamb', and a case has been made for Pusk to mean 'lamb farm'. This has implications for the rest



of the group, so that the English place-names have now been reinterpreted as 'lamb ridge' and 'lamb clearing'.

The Dictionary of the Older Scottish Tongue has no entry for *pur*, but does include three occurrences of an identical word within a quotation from 1512 referring to the lining of a garment:

For lyning of the said tanne weluus goune within with puyr ... For ane lyning of pur to the same goune within ... Ekit in the lyning of the said goune ane quartar mantill pur ...

The quotation is cited under the entry for *puré* ('pured or white miniver, the belly fur of the grey squirrel in winter, used in the furring of garments'), and the spelling *pur* is taken to be irregular or erroneous. However, lamb's fur was also used for the same purpose, so the spelling may be correct. Since the grey squirrel is not indigenous to Scotland, but was imported from North America, its fur seems unlikely to have been used for Scottish clothing only 20 years after Columbus landed. We can make better sense of the text by using the interpretation suggested by Pusk. Indeed, revised editions currently in progress for both the Dictionary of the Scots Language and the Oxford English Dictionary are making increasing use of place-name evidence.

Place-names and language use

Not all place-names are to be understood literally, and they provide insights into



Above: the Sleeping Warrior, part of the North Arran hill range.

Left: The Paps of Jura, three mountains in the Inner Hebrides named from Scots paps ('breasts')

imaginative and metaphorical uses of language throughout the centuries. It is common for words for containers to be applied to valleys, as with Beedon (Old English *byden* ('tub')) and Cann (Old English *canne* ('can, cup')). Here the motivation is shape, whereas water features such as The Caldrons and Cauldron Linn in Scotland reflect a further association with the bubbling contents of the container. Unfortunately it may be difficult to differentiate between literal and metaphorical meanings. The first element of place-names like Hammerton and Hammerwich was at one time thought to refer to a hammer-shaped hill, but is now believed to be metonymic for a smithy.

As with Tweedmouth, terms for body parts are used metaphorically for landscape features in all the languages represented in British place-

names, and many of those in other parts of the world. The pre-English name of Manchester contains a Celtic word **mamm* ('breast') used of a hill, and the same metaphor appears in The Paps of Jura, three mountains in the Inner Hebrides named from Scots *paps* ('breasts'). Old English *hoh* ('concave ridge') also means 'heel', with the topographical sense reflecting a resemblance to the shape of the foot of a person lying down. The Old English words *bæc* and *hrycg* both mean 'ridge' as well as 'back', and so too do Old Norse *hryggr* and Gaelic *druim*, which appear in place-names such as Brownrigg and Drumchapel.

The impulse to conceptualise landscape as a body, whether human or animal, is also reflected in famous examples like Grey Mare's Tail, a waterfall near Moffat in southern Scotland, and The Sleeping Warrior, part of the North Arran hill range.

Nevertheless, many place-names remain open to more than one interpretation. Catlug in Fife appears to contain Scots *lug* ('ear'), and as Taylor and Márkus suggest, "it probably refers to the shape of some feature here thought to resemble a cat's ear". On the other hand, *cat's ear* is also a dandelion-like flower found in parts of England and Scotland, so Catlug might alternatively represent an unrecorded Scots form of the plant name.

Place-names and language varieties

A problem with many forms of linguistic evidence is that they cannot be securely located. Manuscripts are portable, and even those whose place of origin is known may have been written by non-local scribes. Place-names, by contrast, are precisely locatable. Because of this, they provide key evidence for regional varieties of languages.

The Old English language spoken over much of what is now England and southern Scotland prior to the Norman Conquest of 1066 is traditionally divided into four major dialects: Kentish, Mercian, Northumbrian and West Saxon. Place-names can establish more subtle isoglosses, as well as identifying vocabulary in use only within certain areas. Gelling and Cole show that **ofer* ('convex ridge') is particularly common in northern England, while the term *ora* is more often used for the same feature in the south. Similarly Old English *burna*, the ancestor of Scots *burn*, is characteristically found further north than *broc*, the ancestor of *brook*. At the same time, there may be semantic distinctions. An *ora* tends to be larger than an **ofer*, and *burna* is mostly used for clear streams, often combining with *scir* ('bright')

"A problem with many forms of linguistic evidence is that they cannot be securely located. Manuscripts are portable, and even those whose place of origin is known may have been written by non-local scribes. Place-names, by contrast, are precisely locatable. Because of this, they provide key evidence for regional varieties of languages."

(Sherborne, Sherburn), while *broc* refers to muddier streams, combining with words such as *clæg* ('clay') (Claybrook) and *ful* ('dirty') (Fulbrook).

The ongoing Toronto Dictionary of Old English has an entry for the rare term *corþer*, with only three occurrences in glossaries translating uncertain Latin words. The tentative definition "? the place of churning (perh. 'church' or even 'dairy')" has been confirmed by the discovery of the same term in the place-name Cotterstock, where the meaning 'dairy farm' makes excellent sense. Significantly, the three glossaries are among the primary sources for the Mercian dialect of Old English, while Cotterstock is located within the Mercian dialect area. The implication is that *corþer* ('dairy') may be a distinctively Mercian word.

Finally, the Oxford English Dictionary records the Norse-derived term *carline*, a derogatory

term for an old woman, from around 1375, and describes it as "chiefly Scots". Place-name evidence predates this by about 50 years, as well as reflecting a significant spread in north-west England. Moreover, Fishcarling Head preserves an unattested compound **fishcarline* ('fish-wife'), not included in the dictionary entry.

How to get involved

Place-name research is an area of academia where non-specialists play an important role. Much place-name research takes place at a local level, and depends on input from the public. Data is traditionally collected through interviews, but in 2011 the pioneering Scots Words and Place-Names project used social media for the same purpose (<http://swap.nesc.gla.ac.uk/>), and occasionally members of the public contact us directly. When I suggested a new interpretation of Pitchcombe as 'steep valley', I was delighted to receive a letter from a local resident telling me that *pitch* is still used in the area to mean 'steep'. ¶

Carole Hough is Professor of Onomastics at the University of Glasgow.

Find out more

If you are interested in finding out more about place-names, and perhaps in becoming involved, you might like to join one of the following:
English Place-Name Society, www.nottingham.ac.uk/ins/placenamesociety/membership.aspx
Scottish Place-Name Society, www.spns.org.uk
Society for Name Studies in Britain and Ireland www.snsbi.org.uk
 All have a wide membership including academics and non-academics, and new members are always welcome.