Place-names in the Vale

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Carefully interpreted, place-names can tell us something about the landscape and natural history of the Vale over a thousand years ago. They need careful interpretation because

- Once given, place-names take on a life of their own, distinct from their original meaning, with spelling and pronunciation often becoming distorted over the centuries;
- Linguistic knowledge has been essential in determining the etymology (the origin of a word and the historical development of its meaning) of individual place-names, and historical research for interpretation of their significance;
- Early records are usually needed in order to determine etymology correctly;
- Even names for which there are early records might have been formed centuries earlier, and the original meaning may not be clear;
- Some place-names recorded in the medieval period have been replaced or lost without trace;
- Old Norse or Danish place-name elements are associated with Scandinavian immigration, but it is rare to be able to suggest an approximate date for the formation of an Old English place-name.

Despite these limitations place-names can offer much of interest.

For the Vale of Evesham there are more early records of place-names than for many other parts of England, thanks to the records kept by important churches. In particular, the Church of Worcester preserved copies of many charters and some original documents from the early medieval period (before 1066) relating to its extensive landholdings. The churches of Evesham and Pershore were also endowed with substantial areas of land and although Evesham Abbey is notorious for forged records[1] its monks are thought to have drawn on valid traditions, including early medieval place-names, when writing their history and seeking to verify their claims.

The Vale of Evesham is a medieval district-name; Vale is thought to come from a Norman-French word derived from the Latin *vallis* (valley).[2] It is in Latin – *Vallis Eueshamie* – that the name appears in the history of Evesham Abbey written by Thomas of Marlborough, Dean of the Vale from 1206.[3] The district-name is presumably at least as old as the twelfth century. The place-name Evesham is Old English (a Germanic language often called Anglo-Saxon). Thomas of Marlborough gave an account of the history of the name, stating that it was originally *Hethomme*, with the later addition of a personal name *Eof* or *Eov*, reportedly the name of a herdsman who had a vision of the Virgin Mary shortly after the land was granted to St. Egwine early in the eighth century, although the Saint himself is said to have had a similar vision (Thomas's history was written 500 years later, using earlier accounts).[4] The original name is Old English *hamm*, 'land hemmed in by water or marsh; wet land hemmed in by higher ground, river-meadow; cultivated plot on the edge of woodland or moor'; Evesham and the nearby Birlingham and Pensham, also Offenham upstream, all refer to land in bends of the river Avon.[5] *Hethomme* means 'at the *hamm*'. Other early versions of Evesham include *Cronuchomme, Cronochomme, Cronuchamme*, in which *hamm* is qualified by the Old English for 'crane', or, possibly, 'heron'.[6] Old English vocabulary was rich and diverse, its speakers being observant of different shapes of hill, valley and other topographical features.[7] Evesham's name reflects both the topography and the natural history of the area.

Pershore is another Old English name combining topography and natural history. There is a record of the name from 972, although a grant to the church in that year refers to an earlier record and may therefore have been a re-endowment, and two fires in the eleventh century may have destroyed the church's early records.[8] The main element of the name is Old English *ōra*, usually translated as 'bank' but whose precise sense emerges from study of its use in place-names as 'flat-topped ridge with a convex shoulder'; it has been observed that 'at Pershore there is a fine example of an *ōra*, which shows on early prints as a striking background to the town as viewed from the river. The qualifier is believed to be an OE precursor of dialect *persh* "osier", and while "osier bank" is a sensible etymology, "osier bank overlooked by an *ōra*-shaped ridge" is much more specific'.[9]

Cleeve (Prior), another early attested name,[10] is from the Old English *clif*, modern English 'cliff'; 'many *clif* names refer to settlements by water – streams and rivers both large and small'.[11] A different kind of slope or ridge is marked by the place-name Lench, which has been translated as 'extensive hill-slope'. 'This word is not recorded in literary OE. Its existence and meaning are inferred from its occurrence in the names of a line of villages stretching north from Evesham … The central feature of the area is a band of lower lias limestone, and the massif is referred to as *Lencdun* in the OE boundaries of Twyford. The word is related to *hlinc*' ('bank, ledge').[12] The word *dūn* exemplifies the way in which speakers of Old English had precise terms for different kinds or shapes of hill; it 'is consistently used in settlement-names for a low hill with a fairly level and fairly extensive summit'.[13] The word is also found in Ramsden, near Pershore.[14] In contrast, *beorg* or *berg*, found in Allesborough near Pershore, has been defined as a 'rounded hill, tumulus'.[15]

Twyford appears in the early history of Evesham; the name means 'double' ford, in this case a ford across two branches of the Avon near Offenham.[16] Other ford-names in the Vale include Defford – 'deep' ford, Besford, which has a

personal name as the first element, and Harvington, originally *hereford* (with *tūn* added) – 'army ford'.[17] The word 'ford' is the same in both Old and modern English.

Other place-names in the Vale relating to wet places include Pinvin – Penda's fen – which includes Old English *fenn*, Badsey – Bæddi's island – which includes the common Old English *ēg*, and (Wyre) Piddle, from the brook known in Old English as Pidele, a word cognate with Dutch for 'low land, fen land, marsh'.[18] A topographical element in the place-name Throckmorton illustrates the way in which Old English words can become distorted over the centuries. Although one of the earliest records of the name appears to include Old English *mōr* ('moor'), other records show that the middle syllable comes from Old English *mere* – 'pond, lake, pool', also 'wetland' – which has been compounded with *throcc*, 'a word which was probably used for a structure such as a platform'.[19] The final syllable, as with Harvington, is Old English *tūn*.

tūn has been described as 'by far the commonest' element in English place-names. Its apparent variety of meanings – 'an enclosure, a farmstead, an estate, a village' – has been, and continues to be, the subject of debate, with suggestions that one meaning might have developed from another. The very large number of village-names ending in -ton has led to *tūn* being classed with other, so-called habitative, place-name elements denoting dwellings.[20] However, there is a case to be argued that *tūn* always meant a defined area of land (which might include the site or sites of dwellings), whether the boundary was a hedge or a fence, or a notional line marked by a variety of natural features. As will be seen from the following examples of place-names in the Vale, many names ending in *tūn* have as their qualifying element a personal name, or a word signifying a group of people, or a relationship between the *tūn* and another place. Those probably with a personal name include Aldington, Bishampton, Bricklehampton, Eckington and Peopleton.[21] Elsewhere in England there are a few names in which *tūn* is prefixed with the name of a person mentioned in charter dating from the tenth or eleventh century or a landholder in Domesday Book, but this is not to say that all such names were so late, as Bibury in Gloucestershire, for example, is thought to refer to a woman from the eighth century.[22] Charlton includes the name of a group of people; *ceorla-tūn* has been translated as 'the settlement of the *ceorlas*', *ceorl* meaning 'man, peasant, churl'. Place-name scholars have identified 'an implied contrast between settlements in the hands of the peasants who worked the land and those in the hands of landlords' and have suggested that Charlton became a common place-name (there are around 100 in England including variants such as Carlton) when social and economic change led to the fragmentation of large estates.[23] Hinton (on the Green) contains Old English *hīwan*, which 'sometimes denotes a religious community'; Hinton belonged to St. Peter's Abbey, Gloucester.[24] Norton was the 'north' tūn, Littleton and Netherton are self-explanatory, Naunton (Beauchamp) was the 'new' *tūn*, and Hampton by Evesham was the *hēan* 'high' *tūn*[25] (Hampton is a common place-name in England, but some of the other examples have a different etymology, containing Old English *hām* or sometimes *hamm*). A few names ending in -*tūn*, like Throckmorton discussed above, include topographical terms; Bretforton is thought to be a compound of *bred* 'board, plank' with *ford* and *tūn*,[26] and Broughton (Drakes and Hackett), another common place-name, includes *brōc* 'brook'.[27]

A very common place-name element, sometimes contrasted with *tūn* in its distribution, is *lēah*, a word which in place-names has become -ley or -ly, sometimes -leigh. It is strongly associated with woodland, but, although it has been suggested that it sometimes meant wood or wood pasture, a more recent discussion has affirmed the meaning of a light open space (etymological research has suggested that the word came from an Indo-European root meaning 'light'), presumably contrasting with surrounding woodland.[28] It appears in the name Tiddesley (Wood), in which it is compounded with a personal name, and also in Elmley (Castle) the first element of which is 'elm'.[29] Another species of tree, a thorn, appears in Cropthorne.[30]

Some names refer to artificial features. These include Fladbury and Chadbury, each combining a personal name with *burh*.[31] The meaning of *burh* has been much debated; it has been 'applied to a range of defended sites, including Iron Age hill-forts, Roman stations, and Anglo-Saxon and medieval fortifications, towns and manor-houses. If there is a single characteristic … it may be the presence of an outer wall, rampart or fence'.[32] There has also been discussion around the meaning of Old English *worð*, as in Bengeworth; the word is thought to refer to some kind of enclosure.[33] Two names in the Vale come from the Old English *wīc*, the meaning of which has been much debated; a *wīc* seems to have been some kind of dependent place with a specialized function, agricultural or commercial.[34] Dependency is suggested by the location of Wick near Pershore and Lenchwick near Evesham.[35] (Droitwich, specializing in salt production, is probably the best-known *wīc* in Worcestershire.)

Whilst most place-names in the Vale, and England generally, are Old English in origin, there are some names with British, or even earlier, elements which were formed before, in some cases long before, Old English became the predominant language in the area and were retained when other places were given names in Old English. Historians, linguists, and archaeologists continue to debate the relative numbers of Germanic immigrants and native British speakers in different regions of England in the fifth and sixth centuries and exactly how and when Old English became the predominant language; documentary evidence does not exist. A cluster of names with British elements suggests that the two languages co-existed for a time in the Vale.

Rivers generally have a relatively high proportion of surviving British or even pre-British names. Avon, found not only in the Warwickshire/Worcestershire Avon but also in some other rivers in England, is British; it means simply 'river'.[36] Croome is a British river-name, meaning 'crooked'.[37] Carrant Brook, south of Bredon, is also British, whilst the lost stream-

name Parret, which seems to have formed part of the boundary between Hampton and Bengeworth, is thought to be earlier than British.[38]

The Vale is overlooked by Bredon, the first element of which is British *bre*. This word, which is 'cognate with Old English *beorg*, is the commonest of several British words meaning 'hill' which survive in English place-names.' Old English speakers may have thought that *bre* was a proper name rather than a common noun, for they compounded it with *dūn*, which fits the fairly flat-topped profile of the hill.[39] Referring to Bredon Hill increases the tautology. There is a possibility that the first element of Cowsden near Upton Snodsbury contains British *cull* as a hill-name, with the second element being *dūn*.[40] Seen on the western horizon from parts of the Vale is Malvern, a purely British name *mēl brïnn* meaning 'bare hill'.[41] The place-name Wickham, as in Wickhamford and Childs Wickham, is deceptive; it does not contain Old English *wīc*, but instead appears in an early record as *wīg wayn*, British words thought to refer to some kind of settlement in or by a wood, plain or moor.[42] Two names probably refer to groups of people identified as wholly or partly of British origin – Comberton, which contains Old English *cumbre*, and Walcot, which contains Old English *walh*; the final element of Walcot is Old English *cot*, related to modern English cottage.[43]

The Vale, especially in its buildings and agriculture, is very different today from the time when its place-names were formed, but enough remains in its geology, topography and natural history to help explain how some of those names came to be given.

[1] Patrick Sims-Williams, *Religion and literature in western England 600-800* (Cambridge University Press, 1990), pp. 141-42, 144.

[2] A. H. Smith, *English place-name elements, Part II* (English Place-Name Society 1956 reprinted 2008), p. 229.

[3] Jayne Sayers and Leslie Watkiss (editors and translators), *Thomas of Marlborough: History of the Abbey of Evesham* (Clarendon Press Oxford, 2003), pp. xx, 354-55.

[4] Sayers and Watkiss, pp. 16-17.

[5] Margaret Gelling and Ann Cole, *The landscape of place-names* (Shaun Tyas, revised edition 2014), p. 46; A. Mawer and F. M. Stenton, *The place-names of Worcestershire* (Cambridge University Press, 1927, 1969), p. 266 for Offenham.

[6], Mawer and Stenton, *The place-names of Worcestershire*, pp. 262-63.

[7] Geling and Cole, *Landscape of place-names*, p. xiii.

[8] Sims-Williams, *Religion and literature*, pp. 95-96.

[9] Gelling and Cole, *Landscape of place-names*, pp. 203, 206

[10] Mawer and Stenton, *Place-names of Worcestershire*, p. 314.

[11] Gelling and Cole, *Landscape of place-names*, p. 153.

[12] Gelling and Cole, *Landscape of place-names*, p. 180.

[13] Gelling and Cole, *Landscape of place-names*, p. 164.

[14] Mawer and Stenton, *Place-names of Worcestershire*, p. 188.

[15] Mawer and Stenton, *Place-names of Worcestershire*, p. 217; Gelling and Cole, *Landscape of place-names*, p. 145.

[16] Gelling and Cole, *Landscape of place-names*, p. 73; Mawer and Stenton, *Place-names of Worcestershire*, p. 265.

[17] Gelling and Cole, *Landscape of place-names*, pp. 73, 74, 78.

[18] Gelling and Cole, *Landscape of place-names*, pp. 46, 41; Mawer and Stenton, *Place-names of Worcestershire*, p. 155; Eilert Ekwall, *The concise Oxford dictionary of English place-names* (fourth edition, Oxford, Clarendon Press, 1960), pp. 365-66.

[19] Mawer and Stenton, *Place-names of Worcestershire*, p. 169; Gelling and Cole, *Landscape of place-names*, pp. 21. 27.

[20] Smith, *English place-name elements*, II, pp. 188-98.

[21] Mawer and Stenton, *Place-names of Worcestershire*, pp. 260, 97, 190, 215, 195, 216.

[22] Margaret Gelling, *Signposts to the past: place-names and the history of England* (second edition, Phillimore, 1988), pp. 124, 181-83.

[23] David N. Parsons, *The vocabulary of English place-names (ceofor – cock-pit)* (English Place-Name Society 2004), pp. 19-22.

[24] A. H. Smith, *The place-names of Gloucestershire Part II* (Cambridge University Press 1964), p. 45.

[25] Mawer and Stenton, *Place-names of Worcestershire*, pp. 264, 265, 150, 133.

[26] David N. Parsons and Tania Styles, *The vocabulary of English place-names (brace-cæster)* (Centre for English Name Studies, 2000), pp. 13-14.

[27] Mawer and Stenton, *Place-names of Worcestershire*, pp. 218, 192.

[28] Sarah Wager, 'The meaning of *lēah*', *Journal of the English Place-Name Society* 49 (2017), pp. 95-126.

[29] Mawer and Stenton, *Place-names of Worcestershire*, pp. 222, 122; Gelling and Cole, *Landscape of place-names*, p. 240.

[30] Mawer and Stenton, *Place-names of Worcestershire*, pp. 119-20.

[31] Mawer and Stenton, *Place-names of Worcestershire*, pp. 126, 265.

[32] Parsons and Styles, *Vocabulary of English place-names*, p. 74.

[33] Smith, *English Place-name elements, II*, pp. 273-75.

[34] Richard Coates, 'New light from old wicks; the progeny of Latin *vicus*', *Nomina* 22 (1999), pp. 75-116.

[35] Mawer and Stenton, *Place-names of Worcestershire*, pp. 231, 264-65.

[36] Gelling, *Signposts*, pp. 90-91.

[37] Richard Coates and Andrew Breeze, *Celtic voices, English places; studies of the Celtic impact on place-names in England* (Shaun Tyas, 2000), p. 361; Ekwall, *Concise Oxford dictionary*, p. 132.

[38] Gelling, *Signposts*, p. 91; Mawer and Stenton, *Place-names of Worcestershire*, pp. 10, 13; Coates and Breeze, *Celtic voices*, pp. 360, 366.

[39] Gelling and Cole, *Landscape of place-names*, p. 152.

[40] Coates and Breeze, *Celtic voices*, p. 341.

[41] Gelling and Cole, *Landscape of place-names*, p. 153; Coates and Breeze, *Celtic voices*, p. 341.

[42] Coates and Breeze, *Celtic voices*, p. 342, citing Ekwall, *Concise Oxford dictionary*, pp. 516-17.

[43] Gelling, *Signposts*, pp. 93-96.