

Chapter I

The Languages

In a country such as England, where the current language is a relatively recent introduction, and other languages (Old Norse and Norman French) have had a limited currency at even more recent dates, the mixture of languages in the stock of place-names constitutes a vital part of the evidence for estimating the mixture of races in the composition of the nation. For the purposes of a study of place-names in relation to the history of England it is important to be clear at the outset about which languages are involved, and by whom they were spoken. In England there are six successive layers to be distinguished.

1. *A non-Indo-European language*, assumed to have been spoken before the coming of Celtic people to Britain. This obscure tongue differs from all the others involved in English place-names in being the only one which is not a member of the Indo-European family of languages. We know of two such languages in western Europe—Basque, which survives to the present day, and Pictish, which was used for monumental inscriptions, carved in the ogam script, in Scotland in the eighth and ninth centuries AD. The Pictish inscriptions can be transliterated, but are not understood, apart from a few Celtic words and personal names which are interspersed among the unintelligible sequences of letters. It seems clear that the Picts of this late date were actually speaking a Celtic dialect, but the more ancient language was still remembered, perhaps by a priestly caste, and was used for inscriptions.

If such a pre-Celtic language has left traces in English place-names, these are probably to be found in river-names, which are most likely everywhere to preserve remnants of older languages. It is very probable that some English river-names which are not easily explained as Celtic or Germanic belong to this ancient stratum. Since nothing is known of the vocabulary of this hypothetical pre-Celtic language in England (and there could have been more than one), there is nothing the place-name student

can do about it except to remember that it may be responsible for some of our more intractable names.

2. *A Celtic language* for which the name British has been used in the most recent authoritative study, Jackson 1953. British is a descendant of Common Celtic, a branch of the Indo-European family of languages. The language known to philologists as Common Celtic divided into two main branches, Goidelic (the parent of Irish and Scottish Gaelic) and Gallo-Brittonic. The language called British, which is the ancestor of Welsh, is a division of Gallo-Brittonic.

During the earliest period from which written records are available this language, British, was being spoken throughout the main island of Britain with the probable exception of Scotland north of the Firths of Forth and Clyde. We do not know at what date the speakers of a Celtic language first came to Britain, but it is believed that the language was introduced, like the later Germanic language, by settlers from the Continent, and there is no doubt that it superseded the non-Indo-European language referred to under 1.

Our information about British begins with the first contact of Greeks and Romans with the island, the oldest source being Pytheas of Marseilles, c. 325 BC. Information becomes much fuller during the Roman domination of part of Britain from the mid first to the early fifth century AD. The place-names known to have been in use during those centuries are the subject of Chapter 2. Most of them are in the British language, and it is important to realize that this language, of which Cornish and Welsh are descendants, was spoken all over what is now England, and was in no way less characteristic of the districts later called Kent and Essex than of those later called Cornwall and Herefordshire. The identification of British place-names in all parts of England is one of the most important tasks of place-name study, and this is discussed in Chapter 4. Professor Jackson (Jackson 1953, p. 195 n.1) draws attention to the possibility that some prehistoric immigrants to Britain may have been non-Celtic Indo-European speakers, and some other Indo-European tongue may have given rise to obscure place-names 'which have an IE. look'.

3. *Latin*, another Indo-European language, which was used in Britain at least for administrative purposes from the mid first to the mid fifth centuries AD. During this period Latin was the only written (as opposed to spoken) language in Britain, and it was the language of the western Church, which must have become a noteworthy linguistic influence in Britain during the fourth century, at any rate in the towns. The extent to which

Latin was spoken in non-official society in Roman Britain cannot be ascertained with certainty. There is a careful assessment of the evidence in Jackson 1953 (pp. 97-112). Professor Jackson concludes that there was no likelihood of a Romance language developing in Britain and superseding the British language, as Celtic languages were superseded on the Continent, where French, Italian and Spanish developed from Vulgar Latin and became the general speech. In Britain Latin was probably a language learnt in school rather than one acquired naturally. Professor D. Greene (Greene 1968) has suggested that Latin may have been more widespread and more colloquial in nature in Britain than Professor Jackson allowed, and there is obviously room for different opinions here. It does, however, seem unlikely that a Romance language such as French would have developed here; and this means that if the Anglo-Saxon settlement had not occurred, the Welsh form of Celtic speech would have been the language of the whole of Britain apart from those areas of the north and north-west into which the Gaelic form was introduced from Ireland. The rarity of Latin place-names in Britain, discussed in Chapter 2, supports Professor Jackson's view that the language was not much spoken in the countryside.

Although Latin was probably not widespread among peasant farmers in Britain, a number of Latin words were adopted by British speakers. A smaller number of Latin words found their way into Old English, some direct from Latin and some through the medium of British. Latin place-names are very rare in England, but names in British and Old English which incorporate Latin words are well evidenced, and are of considerable interest to the historian and archaeologist. With reference to the occurrence of Latin words in British or Old English place-names, it is necessary to appreciate the distinction between loan-words and cognates. In all the Indo-European languages there are words of cognate origin, that is words which descend from a common root which was in the ancestral language before the division occurred into the Greek, Latin, Celtic, Germanic and other branches. Cognate words in Latin and English do not superficially resemble each other very closely (*nest*, for instance is cognate with *nidus*, and *horn* with *cornu*), but in Latin and British some cognate words have very similar forms, e.g. British **moniŋo*-, Welsh *mynydd*, which are connected with Latin *mons* 'mountain', British **cūlo*-, Welsh *cil*, 'nook', which are connected with Latin *cūlus* 'fundament', *Novio*- (in the British place-name *Noviomagus*, Chapter 2), which is connected with Latin *novus* 'new'. The occurrence of such words as these in place-names is not evidence for contact between British and Latin speakers. On the other hand there are many words in British (and in Modern Welsh) which were borrowed from Latin speakers after the coming of the Romans to Britain.

These include **cadeir* 'chair' (from *cathedra*), **eclesia* 'church' (from *ecclesia*), Modern Welsh *pysg* 'fish' (from *piscis*), Modern Welsh *pont* 'bridge' (from *pons*, *pontis*), Modern Welsh *terfyn* 'boundary' (from *terminus*). Place-names of British origin containing these words, and Old English names containing Latin loan-words such as *camp* from *campus*, *croh* from *crocus*, may sometimes have special historical significance; this point is discussed in detail in Chapter 3.

What is said here about the Latin element in English place-names is confined to the Romano-British period and its immediate aftermath. In the Middle Ages Latin was again the language of legal and administrative records, and this Medieval Latin has some influence on English place-names, especially in the prefixing or affixing of Latin words such as *magna* 'great' and *parva* 'small'. This use of Latin is particularly well evidenced in DOR, where it is found in Melbury Abbas, Whitchurch Canonorum, and Toller Fratrum and Porcorum.

4. *Old English*. This is the name used by philologists for the language which replaced British in a large part of the island of Britain. Old English is a Germanic language, belonging to a different group of the Indo-European family from the Celtic languages. The circumstances of its success in Britain will always be to some extent mysterious. Germanic-speaking people who moved into other provinces of the Roman Empire in the fifth century AD did not invariably impose their language on the populations they dominated. French, Italian and Spanish are descended from Vulgar Latin, though in these countries also there were Germanic conquerors. The extent to which the change from British to Old English in this country can be claimed as evidence of a change of population is one of the great debating points of English history, and more will be said of this in Chapter 4.

The change of language in Britain was accompanied by the introduction of a vast number of Germanic place-names. The great majority of place-names now in use in England were coined in the Old English language, of which modern English is the much-modified descendant. For this reason English place-name studies have been carried out mainly by specialists in Old English. In so far as place-name studies have any part in university teaching, it is in English Language Departments that they are to be found.

5. *Old Norse*. This is another member of the Germanic branch of the Indo-European family of languages. In eastern England north of the Thames there are areas which have a large number of Old Norse place-names, and these names are related to the Danish invasions of the late

ninth and late tenth centuries. In north-western England there are Old Norse place-names which must be connected with the Norwegian invasions of the early tenth century. It is with regard to the Danish place-names of eastern England that some of the most revolutionary work on the historical bearing of place-name evidence has been done in recent years, and this is described in Chapter 9.

6. *Norman French*. This was the language of William the Conqueror and the new aristocracy he established in England after 1066. The Normans were themselves partly of Germanic origin; their Dukedom originated in a gift of French land made by King Charles the Simple of France in AD 911 to Norwegian Vikings who had been ravaging his lands. Hence the name Norman, 'man of the North'. Unlike the Germanic settlers who brought the English language into Britain in the fifth century, the Normans did not impose their language on the people of their Dukedom; they themselves adopted French. Nor did they impose the French language on the English people after 1066. Norman French had a great influence on the development of English, but it did not replace it, and the descendants of the Norman aristocracy eventually became English-speaking.

The French element in English place-names is discussed in Chapter 9. It is instructive to note the contrast with the Old English and Old Norse elements. It seems clear that a new language spoken only or mainly by a ruling class does not affect place-names in the same way as a new language spoken by peasant settlers. This principle perhaps explains the rarity of Latin place-names in Roman Britain.

These six languages (or at any rate the five which we can recognize) must be borne in mind when English place-names are studied. It may be useful to add to this linguistic analysis some remarks about the relationship of place-names to the rest of the spoken language.

The place-names in current use may be in the language or languages currently spoken in a country, or in languages previously spoken but now extinct there. If they are in the language currently spoken, this does not mean that they are necessarily intelligible, as the language may have developed since the place-names were coined, and the names may have been fossilized at a relatively early stage of the development. Thus, though most place-names now used in England are in the English language, only a small proportion of them (such as Horspath, Newland, Newtown, Nettlebed, Redcastle) are immediately intelligible; the great majority are in various stages of fossilized Old or Middle English, with a great range of complications due to the interaction of spelling and pronunciation in the last few centuries.

In the British Isles, the areas where Celtic speech has continued to be used have a relatively high proportion of place-names intelligible in terms of the current Celtic languages. Cornish, Gaelic and Welsh have of course developed since prehistoric times, but it is probably safe to say that their development has been smoother than that of English, and there has been a greater tendency for place-names in these languages to develop with the language, not to become fossilized and cease to be meaningful as most English names did. For the last few centuries there has been widespread modification of Cornish, Welsh and Scottish Gaelic place-names by English speakers, and in recent years there are conscious efforts to limit this Anglicization, and to restore older spellings which do not reflect English mispronunciation. In Richards 1970, for instance, the late Professor Melville Richards discussed some Welsh town-names (such as Caerffili, Cricieth, Crucywel, Dinbych) under their 'correct' Welsh spellings, not under the familiar English spellings (Caerphilly, Criccieth, Crickhowell, Denbigh), though he accepted some Anglicized spellings, such as Cardiff, Cardigan, Tenby.

The English modification of Welsh names may be compared with the Norman French modification of English place-names after the Norman Conquest in 1066, but the latter process must be studied as an event of the distant past, and understood through the medium of written forms in official records. There was, of course, no attempt to check the process, such as there is now for Welsh and Gaelic names, and no deliberate restoration of 'correct' Old English spellings. Medieval place-name spellings represent only a desire to identify the place as clearly as possible.

We are able to study the effects of Norman French pronunciation on English place-names in the pages of the Domesday Survey, compiled in AD 1086. The old view that all the material for this record was obtained by government officials who travelled round the country asking questions which were answered by juries of local people has been much modified. It is now considered that use was made of some earlier written records, and that there were various stages in the editing of the final form of the survey. But whatever the precise stages by which the information reached the pages of the two volumes in the Public Record Office, the place-name spellings must to some extent represent an attempt by French-speaking clerks to render the pronunciation of English country people. Many of the names in the final version are certainly not copied direct from documents written by English speakers. The French rendering of English names might have been expected to result in chaos, but it did not. Some Domesday spellings are erratic, and have to be disregarded in the light of earlier and later forms, but most of them show a remarkably consistent treatment

of English sounds. Some of the more important sound-changes and sound-substitutions which are reflected with considerable regularity in the spellings of 1086, and in official records for the following two centuries, are:

1. The simplification of *ch* to *c*. This has caused many names which might have ended in *-chester* to have *-cester* (as in Gloucester, Cirencester, Worcester), and is the reason for *C-* (instead of *Ch-*) in Cerne DOR, Cerney GLO, Cippenham BUC. Many names with *Ch-* or *-ch-* in which the English pronunciation has survived, have *C-* or *-c-* spellings in Domesday. Diss NEK would have become Ditch (which is its meaning) but for this Norman sound-substitution.
2. Consonant clusters at the beginning of names were simplified so as to be easier for French speakers. Names beginning with *S* followed by a consonant were liable to be affected by this process. Sometimes *S-* was dropped; but for this Nottingham NTT and Tutbury STF would be Snottingham and Stutbury. The combination *Shr-* was particularly difficult for French speakers, and attempts to cope with this in the name Shrewsbury are discussed later in this chapter. *Cn-* was made easier by the insertion of a vowel; but for this Cannock STF would be Knock, the development being comparable to that of *Knútr*, the Danish king's name, to Canute.
3. The initial sound in such names as Yealand LNC, Youlgrave DRB did not exist in Norman French, so the initial sound in such words as *judge* was substituted. In Yealand the English pronunciation has survived (though Domesday spells the name *ǵalant*); the French pronunciation has been kept in other names, such as Jarrow DRH, Jesmond NTB, which would have become Yarrow, Yesmond if their development had not been subject to French influence.
4. The letters *l*, *n*, *r* interchange with each other in French spellings of English names. This is seen in the complicated development of Shrewsbury and Salisbury, discussed later in this chapter. Durham should have been Dunholm, and the change of the first syllable is due to this French confusion of *n* and *r*.
5. The initial sound in *thorn* was unknown to the Normans, and they replaced it by *T-*. This French pronunciation has survived in some names, such as Turnworth DOR (which contains *thorn*), and Tilsworth and Tingrith BDF, which would have developed to Thilsworth and Thingrith if English pronunciation alone had been involved.

These examples, which are far from giving a complete picture of the changes imposed by French speakers on the pronunciation of English names, are cited here in order to demonstrate that changes which might have been expected to be chaotic are actually consistent and amenable to simple classification. This is a vital point to establish, as it is fundamental to the methods and principles of English place-name study. The clerks who wrote out the Domesday Survey were not briefed about their spelling. They found themselves faced with these problems in the field or in the office, and their spontaneous responses were on the same general lines. That there is this kind of pattern in place-name pronunciation, and that it will be spontaneously reflected in the spelling of clerks, is the basis of English place-name study.

In England, the study depends much more on written evidence and much less on listening to local pronunciation than the study of Celtic place-names in Wales and Scotland does. This is partly because a greater number of English names have ceased to be part of the living language, and partly because the operations of a new administrative class speaking a different tongue began in 1066 in England, and can only be observed in spellings, while in Celtic countries widespread English influence is more recent, and a local pronunciation may still reflect an uncorrupted oral tradition. (This does happen in England, but it cannot be expected as a general phenomenon.) Also, England has known a bureaucratic administration for a long time, and the effect of written forms on spoken forms is much more pronounced than in Celtic-speaking areas. For many centuries in England a large proportion of the population has been aware of place-names as sequences of written letters, not just as sequences of sound, and this awareness has played havoc with oral tradition.

The interaction of the spoken and written forms of English place-names does not appear to be consistent, or amenable to simple rules. The process can be understood in regard to most names, but each name has to be considered separately. This may seem to contradict what has just been said about patterns in place-name pronunciation being consistently reflected in official spellings; but this less consistent development is only a widespread phenomenon in the last few centuries. It does not invalidate the science of deducing etymologies from written forms, as most of those on which reliance is placed are much earlier than the widespread literacy which, while introducing a new and fascinating dimension into the study, has played havoc with the evidence. It is a basic tenet of English place-name study that etymologies should never be based on modern forms unless these are supported by earlier ones.

With the general spread of literacy, a new element appears in place-

name development. People feel a respect for the written form which is more insidious than the consistent conservatism of medieval clerks. The medieval clerk, being concerned only with the correct identification of the place in his records, can be expected to strike a balance between a spelling which bears an obvious resemblance to those of previous years' records, and one which reflects the sound of the name as he hears it spoken. At any rate, such a balance may be expected to emerge if we have a considerable number of medieval spellings for a name. The modern writer and pronouncer of place-names is subject to more insidious pressures than the need to identify the place clearly. He is also concerned to identify himself, as regards his social standing and his knowledge of 'correct' linguistic procedures. Because of this, a place whose name had developed naturally to Brummagem becomes Birmingham, because the conservative spelling is taken as 'correct' and dictates pronunciation, and Atcham SHR finds its stately home called Attingham, probably because the gentry know that that is how it was spelt in early records. Sometimes the fully developed form, like Brummagem or Atcham, survives in local speech, but sometimes it is rejected by local people after it has gained currency outside the area. In recent years the people of Ratlinghope SHR have been surprised to hear their village called Ratchope by visitors; they themselves, able to read maps and signposts, have apparently abandoned this erstwhile local form. The restoration of the longer form of Cirencester GLO for earlier *Cisetur*, contrasting with the retention of the short form of Leominster HRE, illustrates the chaos which now prevails.

In order to illustrate some of the possible complications of the interaction of spelling and pronunciation, it may be profitable to look in detail at a few names. Rugeley STF and Shrewsbury SHR may be instanced.

Rugeley, the first syllable of which now rhymes with *stooge*, is derived from Old English *hrycg* 'ridge' and *lēah* 'clearing', and might have been expected to become Rudgeley. In fact there are still traces among older people in the town of a pronunciation Rudgeley, so this is an instance in which the local oral tradition is trustworthy. The word *hrycg*, which became *ridge* in standard English, was spelt with *-u-* in the west Midlands till the end of the fourteenth century, and some place-names, including Rugeley, became fossilized while this vowel was in use, before the spread of *-i-* from standard English. Rudge SHR also shows this fossilized vowel, though the spelling of the consonants has developed further than in the Staffordshire name. Rudge SHR is *Rigge* 1086, *Ruge*, *Rugge* 1242; the spelling *Rudge* appears in parish registers in 1706. The *-g-*, *-gg-* of the Middle English spellings for both names represents the sound now spelt *-dge*. To account for the standard English pronunciation of Rugeley it is

probably necessary to postulate the effects of literacy. People saw the fossilized spelling *Ruge-*, associated it with words like *huge*, and began to pronounce it in a way which bears no relationship to the origin of the name.

Shrewsbury has had a more complicated development, perhaps one of the most complicated of all English place-names. It is recorded in 1016 as *Scrobbesbyrig*, which may mean 'the fortified place of a district called The Scrub'. As mentioned above, the initial combination *scr-* was particularly difficult for Normans to pronounce. They simplified it to *sr-*, and then made it easier still by inserting a vowel, to give *sar-*. The name was also affected by Norman confusion of *-r-* and *-l-*, so *Sarop-* became *Salop-*. Spellings such as *Salopesberie* are overwhelmingly predominant in government records of the twelfth and thirteenth centuries, and this Norman form remained in official use and is the basis of the abbreviation *Salop*, used of the modern county. The local people, however, did not all adopt this Norman version of the name. An English form, which must have persisted in speech without getting written down much in the twelfth and thirteenth centuries, appears in the records in 1327, when Geoffrey de *Shrobesbury* is mentioned in the Patent Rolls. This is a perfectly regular development from *Scrobbesbyrig*. Normal also, though not inevitable, is the development of *-b-* to *-v-*, found in the slightly later spellings *Shrofbury* 1339 and *Shrouesbury* 1346. (This interchange has occurred in Pavenham BDF, which was *Pabenham* till 1492, Bavington NTB, which was *Babington* in Middle English, and Baverstock WLT, earlier *Baberstoke*.) After this in the Shrewsbury spellings we have an early instance of spelling influencing development. The letter *-u-* was employed in Middle English as a vowel and as a consonant (*-v-*), so that people seeing the name written *Shrouesbury* might take the *-u-* for a vowel. The diphthong *-ou-* could be written *-ow-*, and so we get forms like *Schrowesbury* 1391, though there were probably still people who knew that the *-u-* was a consonant in the fifteenth century. We find the spelling *Shrouesbury* in 1453 and 1461, but since the one letter did duty for vowel and consonant, we cannot be certain which was intended. The *Shrew-* spellings begin in the late fourteenth century (e.g. *Shrewesbury* 1386), and they alternate with the *Shrow-* spellings after that. The *Shrew-* spelling may originally have been due to nothing but the difficulty of distinguishing *-o-* and *-e-* in medieval handwriting. Eventually the two spellings would be accepted as akin to the variant forms of such words as *sew* (also spelt *sow*), *shew* (also spelt *show*). Thus, by the fifteenth century, the stage was set for the modern dilemma of whether to say *Shrewsbury* or *Shrowsbury*. The latter is the more 'correct', though this is contrary to the usual rule that the 'lower class' or 'local' pronunciation (in this case *Shrewsbury*) has more chance of preserving a genuine tradition.

The linguistic agility which enables modern English speakers to accept *Salop* as a form for Shropshire is paralleled by the ease with which Keighley is accepted as a spelling for a name pronounced *Keethley*, and Altrincham as a rendering of a name pronounced *Altringham*. All readers will know of instances even more bizarre than these. The divergence between spelling and pronunciation requires individual study in each case, and instances are only cited here to demonstrate that there is no simple guide to the origins of English place-names. Whereas in some Celtic-speaking areas it would be safe to say that the local pronunciation is the best guide, in England one cannot say categorically that either the local pronunciation or the accepted spelling is more likely to be reliable. A fossilized spelling may preserve valuable information (as in the *W-* of Wrockwardine and Wroxeter *SHR*, which is lost in pronunciation), or it may be responsible for distortion of the development, as in Rugeley. All sources of information have to be considered, and particular attention paid to the manner in which spelling and speech may have influenced each other.