

A study of the origins of placenames in the British Isles is fraught with challenges but can tell us much about the interaction between the different cultures and languages that have defined the landscape we inhabit today. This essay explores the methodology developed to research place-names and with examples, shows how it has been utilised by scholars to shed light on the incidence and distribution of Celtic Place-Names in England.

The secure phonological framework that is key to recognising Celtic place-names in England was established, by Kenneth Jackson in his book *Language and History in Early Britain: A Chronological Survey of the Brittonic Languages 1st to 12th c. A.D.*¹ In his preface he writes

“...this is a chronological history of the sound-system of the British language and its descendants during the Roman period and the subsequent Dark Ages, until the influences of later Medieval Continental culture began to make themselves strongly felt, through English and French contacts, in many aspects of what had hitherto been a rather isolated Celtic civilisation.”²

He stresses that it is a work addressing phonology, how the sounds of the language spoken in Britain changed over time and that it does not address morphology, the

¹ Kenneth Jackson, *Language and History in Early Britain: A Chronological Survey of the Brittonic Languages 1st to 12th c. A.D.* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 1953).

² *ibid* pp.v-vi

grammatical forms of the language. The phonological changes in the Brittonic languages had previously been thoroughly investigated by earlier twentieth century scholars including Eilert Ekwall and Max Förster³ but Jackson was the first to attempt a chronology. His work supplies the student of English place-names a way of discerning "...what form a British word would probably have taken at a given date."⁴

Eilert Ekwall wrote or edited 369 publications many on the subject of Place-Names in England.⁵ The essence of the methodology is to consult all early records containing place-names and compare different records of the same place-name. Next to decipher the etymology of the name paying attention to the sound changes identified by Jackson and other linguists. Finally, to verify the Celtic content by looking for occurrence of the names with the same meaning in contemporary Celtic language areas, Wales, Brittany and Ireland; and in the pre-Roman Celtic language speaking areas of mainland Europe; and look for cognates in other Indo-European languages – 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 resemble each other closely (*nest*, for instance is cognate with *nidus*, and *horn* with *cornu*), but in Latin and English some cognate

³ Max Förster, *Der Flussname Themse und seine Sippe; Studien zur Anglisierung keltischer Eigennamen und zur Lautchronologie des Altbritischen*. (München: In Kommission bei C. H. Beck, 1941)

⁴ *ibid* p.vii

⁵ Mitchell, R. B. *Medium Ævum*, vol. 31, no. 3, 1962, pp. 228. <www.jstor.org/stable/43627007> [Accessed 14 Nov. 2020]

words have very similar forms...the occurrence of such words as these in place-names is not evidence for contact between British and Latin speakers.”⁶

In his introduction to *the Concise Oxford Dictionary of English Place-Names*⁷ Ekwall outlines the distinctive features of Celtic placenames, he describes three different types of Celtic place-name elements that occur in England, namely; *Folk-names*, place-names which denote the people who originally inhabited the place. It is common for areas to be named after the tribes that inhabited them. Examples in Europe include Sweden meaning ‘the Swedes’ and in France the names AMIENS RHEIMS, SOISSONS, come from the Gaulish tribal names *Ambiani*, *Remi* and *Suesiones*.

Names of this type form a small group from all the place-names found in Britain. Examples are Wales, Old English *Wealas* ‘Welsh people’, and Cornwall, “probably derived from the tribal name *Cornōvii*. Old English *Cornwealas* means the welsh in Cornwall.”⁸

Jarrow in Durham is an example of a Celtic folk-name in England. The name is identical to *Gyrwe* meaning ‘marsh-dwellers’. Mentioned by Bede c.890, the *Gyruii* tribe inhabited the fens around Peterborough. It is possible that these people migrated to Durham and became the *Gyrwe* or that the name derived independently from a fen.⁹ Jarrow is also interesting because the sound changes that occurred in

⁶ *Signposts to the Past, The Languages*, p.21

⁷ Eilert Ekwall, ed. *The Concise Oxford Dictionary of English Place-Names*, Fourth edition (Oxford: Clarendon, 1960).ppxii-xxix

⁸ *ibid* p.122

⁹ *Ibid* p.268

Old English could have seen it become Yarrow. The initial Y sound did not exist in Norman French and in the Domesday Book¹⁰ it is routinely substituted for J as in Judge. This spelling has not always altered pronunciation however, English pronunciation persisted in the case of Yealand, recorded in Domesday as *Jalant*.

Ekwall's second type is 'Habitation-names proper', These are place-name elements that specifically relate to human habitation such as homesteads and villages.

Although these elements are still common in Wales, it is a rare to find these as a Celtic element in English place names by far the most common elements of this kind in England are -hām (most frequently occurring in the east) and later -tūn, most frequently occurring in the west. Both are Old English.

Celtic survivals of this type of name are found in areas where the Brittonic language was still in use at a late date. The counties of the Welsh Marches, Herefordshire and Shropshire have a largely Welsh nomenclature.

The last type of surviving Celtic place-names that Ekwall defines is the most frequently observed. 'Original nature-names' describe physical features of the landscape. Names for rivers and streams are the most commonly occurring Celtic language names in England. Many settlements were named for nearby rivers, an example given is

ARROW, the name of a village on the river. Arrow, at first denoted the river, later the village on the river, and finally Arrow village¹¹.

¹⁰< <https://www.nationalarchives.gov.uk/domesday/>>

¹¹ Eilert Ekwall, *The Concise Oxford Dictionary of English Place-Names* Fourth edition, (Oxford: Clarendon, 1960) p.xviii

Ekwall describes names derived this way as elliptical or metonymical and elaborates that these are places of habitation, named according to an adjacent landscape feature or less frequently the product of some human activity carried out at the place or nearby. They are metonymical when the language they were named in is no longer understood and become a label specific the place so named, a 'proper' name with no other use or significance.

It has not yet been possible to identify the etymology of all the place names in England and it is foolish to assume that the same name occurring in two or more places has the same etymology.

Ekwall gives the following example:-

¹²BRANT BROUGHTON is on the river BRANT, whose name is old and well established. It may seem self-evident that the distinctive addition is the river-name. But early name-forms show that this is not the case. BRANT is a modification of the earlier *Brend* and the like and Brant Broughton means 'Burnt Broughton', the Broughton that was burnt down at some time'.

This illustrates the necessity to examine the earliest available records. When Jackson and Ekwall were developing the study of place-names in the first half of the

¹² Eilert Ekwall, *The Concise Oxford Dictionary of English Place-Names* Fourth edition, (Oxford: Clarendon, 1960) p.x

twentieth century that meant referring to Roman records and manuscript sources created in the middle ages.

Ekwall states the opinion that Domesday or records compiled in the twelfth and thirteenth centuries can proffer a safe etymology¹³ but are not fool-proof.

Occasionally, pre-Domesday records come to light that evidence contraction or corruption before the eleventh century. The nature of manuscript compilation, that is the repeated copying of older texts can introduce errors highlighting the importance of consideration of all available early sources. A similar issue is encountered when using print records of Roman administrative records. Occasionally the compiler may have used a modern spelling of a place-names instead of the contemporary Romano-British spelling encountered in the original document.

Ekwall also emphasises the need to appreciate the topographical context of a name. We can use maps to examine whether a particular place is on the coast, or a hill, or next to a river or a swamp and thus verify suspected elements referring to natural features of the landscape or indeed human activity.

Because oral transmission of Celtic place-name elements in England must be responsible for the survival across centuries, modern local pronunciation can be valuable in establishing potential etymologies. However, it is also the case that pronunciation can be influenced by spelling, obscuring the original pronunciation, and creating potential etymological errors or dead-ends.

Ekwall's last point of important consideration is the way in which the same element may appear in different parts of England with different etymology because the

¹³ *Ibid* p.x

admixture of potential linguistic contributions is different in geographical areas. One example given is

The name WILTON may be explained as 'TŪN by a well or a spring', if the place is situated in a West Saxon district, where old English *wella* appears as *willa*, but not if it is found outside that area.¹⁴

In 2013 Oliver Padel¹⁵ still considered Eilert Ekwall's essay, 'The Celtic Element'¹⁶, published in 1924, invaluable to the researcher of Brittonic placenames. He writes that Ekwall's 1928 book, *English River Names* "Remains the standard authority on the subject although there has subsequently been valuable further work."

Using Ekwall's study of the names of watercourses, Jackson was able to discern four distinct geographical zones reflecting the incidence of the survival of Celtic elements in these names. Throughout a large swathe of the east of England, large, major rivers have Celtic names. The second zone covers the Midlands and the eastern part of northern England. Here the major rivers and many of their tributaries have Celtic names. In Jackson's third zone, southwest England (excluding Cornwall), the Counties of the Welsh Marches and North western England where Cumbric persisted as a vernacular possibly into the eleventh century¹⁷; Celtic names are

¹⁴ Eilert Ekwall, *The Concise Oxford Dictionary of English Place-Names* Fourth edition, (Oxford: Clarendon, 1960) pxii

¹⁵ O.J.Padel 'Brittonic place-names in England', in J. Carroll and D.N. Parsons (eds), *Perceptions of Place* (Nottingham, 2013) p.1

¹⁶ Eilert Ekwall, 'The Celtic element', in A. Mawer and F. M. Stenton (eds), *Introduction to the Survey of English Place-Names*, English Place-Name Society 1.i (Cambridge: Cambridge University press, 1924), pp.15–35.

¹⁷ David Willis 'Old and middle Welsh' in *The Celtic Languages* 2nd edition 2009 p.117

retained for many of the smaller water courses as well as the major rivers and their tributaries. In Wales and in Cornwall all watercourses have Brittonic names.

The Cornish language ceased to be a living vernacular in the eighteenth century, There are very few written records in Cornish but the names of places in Cornwall can expose linguistic changes that occurred in Cornish over time. The table below shows some Cornish words that underwent assibilation¹⁸, a change that distinguishes Old Cornish from Middle Cornish and did not occur in other Welsh or Breton. Ken George gives an approximate date early in the thirteenth century for the transition, which enables us to date the derivation of place-names including these elements.

Old Cornish	>	Middle Cornish
nant	>	nans
bod	>	bos
coit	>	cos

The change from 'coit' to 'cos', cognate with Welsh 'coed' is demonstrated by the place-names *Penquite* meaning 'end of the wood' named before the change, and *Pencoose*, with the same meaning but a more recent vocabulary. By mapping the incidence of names demonstrating the earlier or later form of the language, scholars have been able to deduce that in areas east of Bodmin, Cornish had fallen out of use

¹⁸ Ken George, 'Cornish' in *The Celtic Languages* eds. Martin J. Ball and Nicole Müller (London, New York: Routledge, 2009)pp.488-435

by the twelfth century. All Cornish place-names east of Bodmin are Old Cornish whilst the majority of Cornish place-names west of Bodmin demonstrate the assimilated elements of Middle Cornish.

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Margaret Gelling¹⁹ has written with clarity about how the technical expositions of Ekwall and Jackson describing phonological changes, reflect the linguistic influences that determine how we can begin to locate the origins of place-names and identify those that are Brittonic.

The place-names of England provide vital evidence about the distribution and mixture of the cultures (and their languages) that have contributed to the onomastic record in England that exists today. English has been the dominant language only relatively recently in historical terms and Old Norse and Norman French have also seen limited influence at recent dates.

“In England there are six successive layers to be distinguished.”²⁰

It is assumed that there was a non-Indo-European language spoken before any Celtic people came to Britain. There are two known non-Indo-European languages in Western Europe; Basque, which is still in use and Pictish which is not understood. Eighth and ninth century Scottish monumental Ogam inscriptions provide evidence of this language but except where personal names and Celtic words have been used, transliteration has not resulted in intelligibility.

¹⁹ Margaret Gelling, *Signposts to the Past*, 2nd edn (Chichester, 1988).

²⁰ Margaret Gelling, *Signposts to the Past*, 2nd edn (Chichester, 1988). p.19

If this earliest language is still present in the place-names of England it is likely to be found in the names of the rivers as these were named at the earliest date. Pictish, or another (unrecorded) non-Indo-European language may be the source of names that cannot be proved to be derived from Celtic or Germanic words.

Kenneth Jackson²¹ established British as the name of the Celtic language spoken throughout Britain according to Pytheus of Marseilles²² c.325 BC. This language is believed to have been brought by settlers from continental Europe and is the basis for later Welsh, Cornish, Cumbric and Breton languages. Roman records cover the period from the middle of the first century AD to the first quarter of the fifth century. Most of the place-names recorded by the Romans are British. Professor Jackson does not exclude the possibility that non-Celtic Indo-European language speaking people may also have migrated to Britain in pre-history and that some obscure place-names that look Indo-European²³ may have originated with them.

The county name KENT was recorded by Pytheus the Greek in the fourth century BC and is therefore considered Brittonic. In the *Concise Oxford Dictionary of English Place-Names*²⁴ it is stated that 'Kent' is identical with 'Kennet', the name of the seventy-five mile-long tributary of the Thames. Referring to the entry for Kennet²⁵, we find that the same root also occurs in the names of several settlements close to the river. At different times scholars have claimed that the root of this name is *kuno* - 'bright' (e.g. Holder & Stokes) and later, *cwn* – 'dog'. The editor, Eilert Ekwall, comments

²¹ Kenneth Jackson, 1953

²² Margaret Gelling, *Signposts to the Past*, 2nd edn (Chichester, 1988). p.20

²³ Kenneth Jackson 1953 p.195

²⁴ Eilert Ekwall, ed. *The Concise Oxford Dictionary of English Place-Names*, Fourth edition (Oxford: Clarendon, 1960) p.272.

²⁵ *ibid* p.271

“It is not clear if this word can be the base of all such names...For the ultimate history of these names we have to look to Celtic scholars.”²⁶

Perhaps here then, we have a name that is a candidate for being of such antiquity as to have originated in the unknown pre-Indo-European language of the people who inhabited Britain before the Celts arrived from Europe. Or a non-Celtic Indo-European language identified as a potential by Jackson. Silbury Hill, the East and West Kennet Longbarrows and Avebury stone circle all evidence human activity close to the river Kennett in the Neolithic period²⁷, more than 3500 years before the Romans made the first detailed lists of place-names in England.

In south east Kent, Brittonic elements survive in Dover, Richborough and Reculver which were important Roman settlements. Roman settlements served by a network of roads provided landscape features of similar apparent permanence as rivers and were consequently easily identifiable points of reference. Carlisle, Brancaster, Exeter, and Doncaster are other examples of names of places of this nature that survive to the present day.

Roman records were, of course, in Latin. The administrative language for four hundred years and the language of the early western Church, this is another Indo-European language and could be expected to exert some linguistic influence. However, there are very few Roman place-names in Britain, supporting Jackson's view that Latin was not much used by the Britons outside of the towns. Roman settlement in much of Britain, the high ground, North and West of the Fosse Way

²⁶ *ibid* p.272

²⁷ <https://www.english-heritage.org.uk/visit/places/west-kennet-long-barrow/>

was more an armed occupation than a cultural melting pot. Although have recently argued that colloquial use of Latin in Britain may have been more widespread than Jackson allowed. This is demonstrated by the Latin words which have been incorporated into British or later, Old English place-names. These are much more common than Latin place-names.

A great many Latin words were borrowed into British and are still present in modern Welsh, for example Modern Welsh *terfyn* 'boundary' (from *terminus*) or Modern Welsh *pont* 'bridge' (from *pons, pontis*)²⁸. Less numerous are Latin loan-words in Old English, for example *croh* from *crocus* and *camp* from *campus*. The presence of either of these elements in English place-names can be an indicator of some particular historical importance.²⁹

From the fifth century increasing numbers of Germanic-speaking people settled in the Island of Britain. Their language constitutes a different branch of the Indo-European language tree and is the basis for Old English, the language in which most of the place-names in England were first recorded. Consequently, the majority of English place-name research has been carried out in English Departments by scholars of Old English.

A large number of Old Norse place names occur in Northwest England which Gelling asserts "must be connected with the Norwegian invasions of the early tenth century."³⁰ and continues that in Eastern England North of the River Thames there are many Old Norse place-names dating from the Danish invasions of the late ninth

²⁸Margaret Gelling, *Signposts to the Past*, 2nd edn (Chichester, 1988). p.22

²⁹ *ibid.*

³⁰ *ibid* pp.22-23

and late tenth centuries. Old Norse originated from the same Germanic branch of the Indo-European language tree as Old English and adds another potential layer of interpretation and modification.

This is demonstrated in the case of York, first documented in Roman records as Eboracum. 'Yew-tree place' or 'estate of Eborus', we cannot be certain whether the first part of the word is referring to an object or a person, i.e. the generic Yew-tree or if the word is being used as the name of a person. In Anglo-Saxon the word meaning 'wild boar' was (coincidentally) phonetically, the same, by adding -wic, giving 'Eoforwic' the Anglo-Saxons created a name meaning something like 'wild boar farm'. In turn, the Norwegian Viking Kings who had a seat of power in York for a period between the late ninth and mid-tenth centuries, transformed the name to Jórvík, the syllable -vik, meant a coastal fjord. Place-names in England have been adopted, adapted and distanced from their original meaning; this example highlights the perils that might befall a researcher who did not follow the trail of a name to its earliest advent.

The work of Ekwall, Jackson and many of their early sources is now available in print or digital form. The laborious work of sifting through Roman administrative documents and long rolls of parchment looking for place-names and identifying changes over time is in most instances no longer necessary. The Oxford and Cambridge dictionaries of place-names continue to be relevant and the English Place Name Society have published a significant number of county surveys. Databases such as The Melville Richards Archive of place-names in Wales³¹ and the List of Historic Place Names of Wales³² are useful not only to the researcher of

³¹ http://www.e-gymraeg.co.uk/enwaulleoedd/amr/cronfa_en.aspx

[Accessed 18th November 2020]

³² <https://historicplacenames.rcahmw.gov.uk/>

[Accessed 18th November 2020]

place-names in Wales, but also those looking verify Celtic elements in English names.

The study of place-names is a linguistically based discipline dependant on careful scrutiny of a wide variety of documentation. Interpretation is dependent on a detailed knowledge of a range of languages. The methodology and etymologies suggested by Ekwall and Jackson, in the first half of the twentieth century, are still the foundation of scholarly research on the topic.

In the absence of written records created before 43AD or between the end of the Roman era early in the fifth century, and the first Anglo-Saxon records compiled in the seventh and eighth centuries, place-names are an invaluable aid to historians and linguists seeking to understand that which was never directly documented.

Place names are the most significant feature of the onomastic landscape of the whole of Britain. New names are coined in all times, whenever human activity necessitates the need for easy identification of a particular place. When a name is given, it preserves the language of the day and tells us what the name-givers considered most important, if we can decipher it. A place-name may relate to a social, geographical, or physical feature, being comprised of words that describe ownership, religious affiliation, situation, or appearance. Over time, sound changes in the language often result in a loss of transparency, the original meaning is hidden as old forms of words fall into disuse and the name becomes an identifying label that no longer conveys the description intended at its inception.

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