

Celtic Place-Names In Modern Day England.

This essay will examine the Celtic place names in modern England. It will focus on giving examples, but also, from time to time, cross-referencing them with the place names in Wales or other places on the European Continent or in Scotland as needed, with the focus of this essay remaining firmly on modern England, because as O.J Padel suggests,

‘The existence of a convincing comparison or parallel within the Brittonic world greatly strengthens a suggested derivation, just as a lack of such parallel weakens it; but many Brittonic settlement-names in England lack close parallels in Wales or Cornwall’.¹

When studying the Celtic culture, an archaeological approach can be misleading. For this reason, a linguistic approach must be taken to fully comprehend the widespread influence of the Celtic Culture and Celtic-speaking tribes that lived in those early times. The spread of Celts can be traced through the European Continents, particularly in areas such as modern France or Belgium, but also places like the south of Poland. Regarding the topology of the Old Celtic names in England, most can be found in Cumbria, a region in North-West England. Additionally, Pendel states that the ‘Brittonic names borrowed into English, when plotted geographically, show chronological progression from east to west across England [...]’.² This shows an east-to-west pattern of survival, visible in places like Cumbria or Cornwall, parts of the West Midlands. It could be theorised that this is due to weaker or delayed Anglo-Saxon impact, allowing for the persistent survival of the Brittonic names. The name of the region, Cumbria, in itself, is an example of a Celtic origin of the name, one that is closely related to the Welsh “Cymry” and “Cymru”, signifying the remnants of Celtic identity in this region even during the Anglo-Saxon dominance, as without it there would be no need to choose such a name for the region and make a point of signifying one’s origin.

The Celtic-originating names can be particularly found on the British Isles, where the Celtic influence can be described as the strongest. Considering the spread of the Celtic tribes during the rule of Julius Caesar, it is no surprise that records remain, whether this be classical sources such as Julius Caesar or Ptolemy, the work of both will be further used in this essay to bring examples of the existence of those names as well as use secondary, modern sources to track the linguistic changes that occurred within them, such as works of Falileyev, Green, Leech, Padel, Rivet or Woolf. In addition to this, a collection of surveys can also be used in this endeavour, such as work by S. Taylor and G. Markus, *The Place-Names Of Fife*.³

However, it is worth mentioning, that any understanding of the linguistic origin of the place names can, and is, inherently much harder, as it deals with multiple layers of linguistic evolution and cross-influence of various languages and language groups upon the naming system, for which England is quite well known to contain a variety of, compared to, for example, Slavic place-names in Poland or Slovakia, where names tend to retain their slavic root and origin.

¹ O. J. Padel, *Brittonic Place-Names In England*, available on the Moodle Page for the course HPCS6017, p.13 [accessed 21 April 2025].

² O. J. Padel, *Brittonic Place-Names In England*, p. 5.

³ Ibid. p. 3.

The types of Celtic Place-Names in England can be divided into four categories: the hydronyms, in other words, the river names, many of which retain their pre-Roman Celtic roots, such as Avon (Proto-Celtic abona, meaning river) or Derwent (Derwentio, containing two words, one referring to oak and another to river) north-east of Stoke-on-Trent, another place, this time a city with a Celtic root Trent, from trisantona⁴, referring to a traveler or trespasser. The name Derwent is particularly interesting. It shares a root with the Welsh word Derwydd, meaning “Druid” - Derwydd, which refers to an oak tree, a sacred symbol in Celtic belief system, that could point towards the high importance of the River named after such a sacred tree. Another example could be the river Exe, originating from the Celtic iska, or Isca as per O. J. Padel in his *Brittonic Place-Names In England*.⁵ This Prefix can be seen in places such as Nether Exe in Devon, Up Exe, Exebridge, Exminster, Exmouth, Exwick, all in Devon, or Exebridge and Exton in Somerset.

In addition, as far as hydronyms go, the name Avon, which means the river is a good example of a topological name consisting of a simple term for the type of place it is, later this essay will speak of the Prefix Pen, and evaluate the regional influence of the borrowed or surviving names and whether the fact of limited movement and exchange justifies the belief that the naming system was much simpler, resulting in multiple instances of hills being simply named Hill and rivers being simply named River, in direct correlation to how people often say they will go for a walk “by the river”, without specifying which one, as usually there is only one they can refer to, therefore, taking into account the linguistic barriers of early times, one can assume that people arriving in the area, not knowing the language, but hearing the word Avon or Pen, assumed that it was the proper name and added their own term for the type of topology, such as River Avon or Pen Hill.

Further to the above there are also Tribal and Ethnic names, as Julius Caesar mentioned in his work *Gallic War*, Book V, Chapter 12, the inland Celts living on the British Isles had a tendency of naming their settlements based on their tribal names.⁶

The settlement names are another example, they often had a suffix of -dunon or -dunum (fort or hillfort), which survive to this day in their linguistically evolved forms. One of those would be Colchester, referred to by the Romans as Camulodunum, containing reference to God Camulos (Celtic God of War),⁷ once again emphasising the importance of the deities for the Celts, Gauls in particular, as mentioned by Julius Caesar in *Gallic War*.⁸ In this case, Camulodunum underwent the change of being called Colneceaste and later on Colcestra,⁹ before becoming Colchester, suggesting a slow linguistic change of the name and anglicisation. Pentridge is an example of a common Celtic root of Pen, that survives in

⁴ Andrew Breeze, ‘Welsh *Chwant* “Desire” and *Trisantona* “River Trent” in Tacitus’, *Voprosy onomastiki*, 18.1 (2021), 128–139 https://doi.org/10.15826/vopr_onom.2021.18.1.005 [accessed 21 April 2025].

⁵ O. J. Padel, *Brittonic Place-Names In England*, p. 40.

⁶ Julius, Caesar, *The Gallic War*, Book V, Chapter 12, <<https://www.perseus.tufts.edu/hopper/text?doc=Perseus%3Atext%3A1999.02.0001%3Abook%3D5%3Achapter%3D12>>, [accessed 21 April 2025].

⁷ Victor Callaghan, ‘Celtic Colchester’, *Vic Callaghan Website*, <<https://victor.callaghan.info/time/celtic/>> [accessed 21 April 2025].

⁸ Julius Caesar, *The Gallic War*, Book 6, Chapter 17, <<https://www.perseus.tufts.edu/hopper/text?doc=Perseus%3Atext%3A1999.02.0001%3Abook%3D6%3Achapter%3D17>> [accessed 21 April 2025].

⁹ Editors of Encyclopaedia Britannica, *Colchester*, *Encyclopaedia Britannica*, <https://www.britannica.com/place/Colchester-England> [accessed 21 April 2025].

modern-day England. Pen, meaning head, which this essay will also focus on in the later parts.

The prefix Pen-. Pen- is a prefix often seen throughout England. One of the most famous examples would be Pendle Hill (which could simply be translated as Hill Hill Hill), consisting of three parts, each one meaning hill: Pen- dle - Hill, an example of a name that grew, originally named Pen. But Pen as a prefix or suffix, is a particular one. Padel, in his work on *Brittonic Place-Names In England*, raises the question of the difficulty when encountered with this Celtic root in English topological names, as using it on its own would be equal to pointing at a place and naming it “a hill”, suggesting simplified naming system, relating to a specific, limited area or a region, where a singular space of land, with a hill could simply be named Pen, only to later have additional parts of the name added to distinguish it from other Pens. Padel goes further to explain that potentially it is a result of the misunderstood meaning of the word and part borrowed term to which the English simply used it to designate a hill, forsaking the other meanings of said word.¹⁰

Prefix Cum, can also be found in multiple examples, Cumbria, as established previously is a direct reference to Cymru, therefore, it can be assumed that places with this prefix stem from the p-Celtic languages such as Welsh and are in reference to this specific group of Celtic-speaking individuals. An example other than Cumbria would be Cumwitton, with the prefix Cum- referring to the valley, but in this case, it is a compound name, having a mix of English and Welsh place-names.¹¹

Although the subject is extensive and true discussion about the matter is impossible to be limited to a short essay, this essay attempted to show certain patterns and bring general information about the Celtic toponymy in modern-day England. It was not the aim of this work to exhaust the subject but to discuss the Celtic toponymy in general, highlight the survival of the Celtic place-names and explain their origin.

¹⁰ O. J. Padel, *Brittonic Place-Names In England*, pp.32-33.

¹¹ English Place-Name Society, ‘Cumwitton’, *Survey of English Place-Names*, <<https://epns.nottingham.ac.uk/browse/id/532847f7b47fc408f9000fc9>> [accessed 22 April 2025].

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