

The Survey of English Place-Names

The English Place-Name Society has been in existence since 1923, and has been supported morally and financially by the British Academy for most of these 77 years. The main purpose of the Society is to conduct and to publish a national place-name survey. Professor Richard Coates, President of the English Place-Name Society, outlines the original aims of the project, and traces the paths of new developments springing from the central project.

The Survey of English Place-Names was formally adopted as an Academy Research Project in 1970. The Society publishes the results of the Survey county by county, and supplementary material and commentary is published in its annual *Journal*. Further details can be found via www.britac.ac.uk/arp

The brief of the English Place-Name Society (EPNS) in conducting the Survey of English Place-Names was quite clear: scholars on the project were to collect spellings of place-names from ancient documents, arrange them, deduce the origin of the names and publish the results in book form. This looks like a recipe for humdrum work, and it might lead one to wonder why on earth the Survey is not finished. There were, after all, 39 traditional counties in England; most of the early counties were published at the rate of one volume per year, and mostly one volume per county, until the Second World War. So why is Lincolnshire projected to take up 29 volumes, and why have there been important developments of the original goals?

The pioneers, Sir Frank Stenton FBA and Sir Allen Mawer FBA, certainly had an agenda which is recognized today as very restrictive. They regarded place-name study as a handmaiden of historical study, and specifically English historical study. Its job was to reveal some of the secrets of the intermittently-lit centuries between the coming of the Anglo-Saxons and the flowering of their literate culture. Angles, Saxons, and maybe even Jutes – who went where? Could dialect in place-names reveal anything about this? Were any of the lost places mentioned in the *Anglo-Saxon Chronicle* and by Bede – *Fethanleag*, *Icanhoh*, *Infeppingum*, *Wippedesfleot* – recorded in medieval legal documents before their names disappeared for ever, and could their location therefore be recovered? Did place-names reveal anything of English social organization, or about the assimilation of the invading Danes of the ninth century? This led the Survey to be a very English operation, conducted mainly by scholars of the English language, mainly in English departments in English universities, with some major input from English language scholars in Sweden.

Inevitably, major changes have marked the progress of the Survey. Firstly, some of the old certainties disappeared. Place-names themselves controverted some initial assumptions. The names constructed according to the ancient formula *X-ingas*, ‘sons of, followers of, X’, like Hastings, were assumed to be original and archetypal settlements

of the Anglo-Saxons until John McNeal Dodgson established that these names and pagan cemeteries disoblingly failed to coincide to any significant degree; such names must therefore be later than the initial settlement phase. Secondly, the names came to be seen as having their own interest as linguistic objects, rather than merely as historical indicators. At the broad-brush level, that meant that all names, and not just the names of parishes, Domesday manors, medieval farms and hundreds and wapentakes, were worthy of collection and analysis. Occasional disparaging remarks in early volumes about ‘other names’ in some parish being ‘of no great interest’, and therefore ignored, are now viewed as completely out of order. The size of a county project accordingly inflated in two stages, firstly to include field- and other minor names that were of special historical interest or of great longevity, and then to include all field-names, using the forms in the nineteenth-century Tithe Awards as the basis, in order to give the fullest possible account of the onomastic landscape of individual parishes. A first codification of the field-name data was provided in John Field’s *English field-names: a dictionary* (1972), and the topic was treated discursively in his *History of English field-names* (1993). Place-name study now intersected with agricultural history as well as national history. At the linguistic level, Dodgson also demonstrated that the structure of place-names could be far more varied than previously believed, for example in that the grammatical case of the first element in compounds could be other than the genitive.

Contact with historical and physical geography and with geology has also borne much fruit since around 1965, and set up new paradigms of research. In his inaugural lecture at the University of Nottingham delivered in that year, Kenneth Cameron FBA demonstrated that there was a correlation between names with the element *by* (and other Danish elements) and particular types of surface geology in the East Midlands, especially recent gravels and blown sand and the fringes of areas of Boulder Clay. (See the map in Figure 1.) That told us something about the Danish settlement, because their farms were on strata that

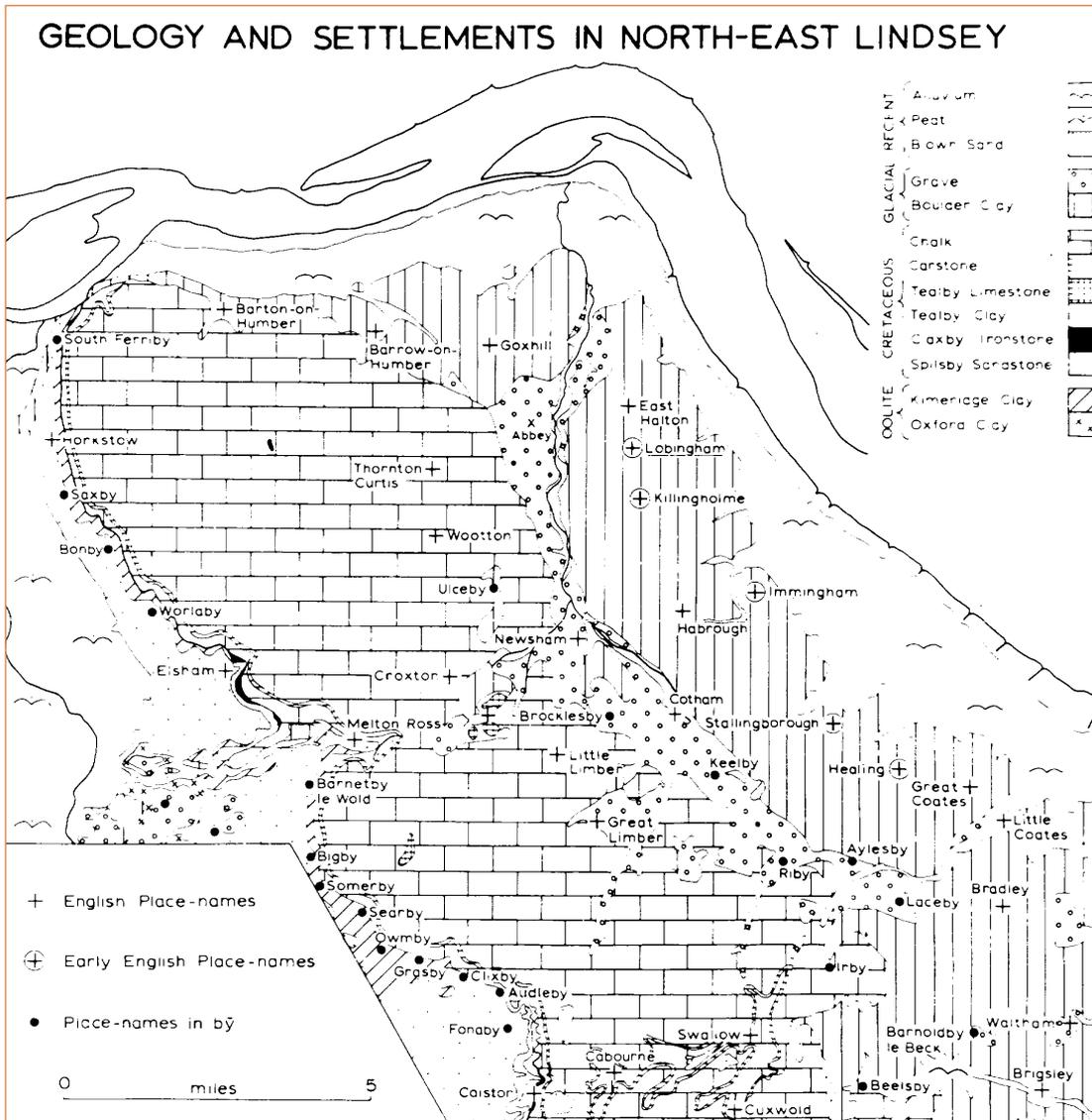


Figure 1: K. Cameron, *Geology and settlements in north-east Lindsey* (1965)

yielded soils of a type markedly poorer than those of the neighbouring places with names of English origin. The Danes had accepted inferior, and probably virgin, land to farm; many must therefore have come as settlers under the protection of the Great Army, and not as warlords or decommissioned soldiers expropriating the English. Place-name study had been able to illuminate history in an unexpected way: the Danish settlement of much of Lincolnshire must have been peaceful.

New understandings have been achieved through the work of Margaret Gelling FBA and Ann Cole about the Anglo-Saxons' perception of landscape. We once knew vaguely that *dun*, *hyll*, *ora* and *ofer* all meant 'hill'; from their work on correlating name-elements with landforms, we now know that they denoted hills with different characteristics,

respectively 'hill with a summit suitable for a settlement', 'hill with an irregular outline', 'slope, bank', and 'flat-topped ridge or tip of a promontory'. Similar increased grasp of the finer points of Old English lexical semantics has been achieved in relation to stream-words, e.g. *burna* 'intermittent stream, clear stream' as contrasted with *broc* 'slow-moving stream with muddy, ill-defined banks', each with characteristic vegetation, and with words for valleys, e.g. *denu* 'long, steep-sided valley' versus *cumb* 'short valley with a bowl-shaped end' and *hop* 'confined valley' (in the north and west of England and the borderlands). Dodgson has given us a typology of sites named with *hamm* 'topographically partly surrounded land', e.g. 'land in a river-bend', 'enclosure', etc.

All these essentially interdisciplinary developments have meant that the county surveys are edited by

scholars with a much keener eye for the evidential value of names, and for the role of environment in elucidating names, than our great predecessors had. A further dimension of increasing linguistic subtlety needs to be brought out. The pioneers' concentration on names formed in English and Scandinavian, the staple of English and Medieval departments, has been found limiting. It has always been known, of course, that the English were preceded in Britain by Brittonic Celts, and that their language must have impacted on the landscape. As the Survey progressed westward, the need for expert appreciation of the history of that language was felt more and more, and Celticists have contributed greatly to the Survey, especially the volumes on Cumberland and Cornwall, the areas where Brittonic speech held out longest. They have also maintained a watching brief in other counties. Whereas the older tendency was to try to explain the most difficult names as English, it is now normal to experiment with full Celtic solutions.

As well as the long-term inflation in the size of the county projects – only Rutland has been squeezed into one (500-page) volume since 1943 – we have seen recent diversification in the range of publications. The current Director, Victor Watts, has instituted three new series of volumes ancillary to the Survey. We now have a Popular series. This

does not imply that the earlier classic works were unpopular, but responds to the fact that there is public demand for regional survey volumes at a level of detail significantly less than that offered by the classic volumes, and with greatest concentration on the names of towns and villages. Lincolnshire is the first county to be so treated (by Kenneth Cameron), but the first volume of Margaret Gelling's county survey *The place-names of Shropshire* is organized in a comparable way. We have a Supplementary series, whose prime function is to fill in what are now perceived as holes in the coverage of the classic volumes, the first being about the minor names of a parish in West Sussex, West Thorney. And finally we have an Extra series, intended for works which are related to place-name study but which are not county surveys at all; the first is a book on *English place-names in skaldic verse*. This recognizes that the study of place-names can be enhanced by lights shone from many different directions.

The Survey has recently benefited from much related activity financed by grants other than the crucial bedrock funding from the Academy and now the AHRB, and from the preparation of other significant research tools. The Leverhulme Trust financed a project called *The vocabulary of English place-names*, which sets out to update A.H. Smith's 44-year-old dictionary of words found in place-

afnám ON, *n.* 'plot taken from common or undeveloped land'. In OWN prose texts *afnám* tends to mean 'a share reserved before the general division of property', while in 14th-century Swedish *afnām* is found with the meaning 'land severed from an estate'. In English usage, however, the term seems specifically to denote land newly enclosed for private cultivation (cf. Atkinson 1886, Ekwall 1918:195–6).

ME often has *of*, from OE, and it is interesting that a parallel OE ***innām** (apparently the same process seen from the opposite viewpoint, a taking *into* cultivated land rather than *from* undeveloped land) seems to have existed independently. Moreover, OE *ofniman* is attested. The distribution of ME *ofnam*, however, suggests that it is an Anglicisation of the ON term.

The term is common in northern minor and f.n.s. It is often unclear whether it is used as a name or a common noun.

(a) *Avena'croftes* c.1270 Cu:436 (**croft**).

(b) *Ofnam* (f.n.) 1160 YN:329, Haynholme 12th YW, *avenames* (f.n.) c. 1208 YW:2:60, Yanham (f.n.) 1208–49 We:1:75, *Lavenum* (f.n.) 1252 YW:1:161, *Ofnumes* (f.n.) c.1255 Cu:165, Aynhems 1290 YW, *Afnames* (f.n.) e.13th Ch:4:198, Little Aynam (st.n. Kendal) 1409 We, Avenham 1591 La.

~ ON *nema* 'to take', ON *af*, OE *of* 'from'. Cf. ***innām**, **inntak**.

ONP *af-nám*; MED *ofnām*; EDD –; OED –.

Figure 2: D. Parsons and T. Styles, sample entry from *The vocabulary of English place-names, fascicle 1* (1997): *afnám*

names; the first fascicle was published in 1997 by David Parsons and Tania Styles, and the second is imminent. (See the sample entry in Figure 2.) At the end of the Leverhulme grant, in 1996, the project was taken over by the British Academy's Humanities Research Board. Its successor, the AHRB, is financing a one-year project, directed by Richard Coates and David Parsons, called *A digital archive of the place-names of England*, which is taking the first steps to making a database of place-name spellings which will be available and interrogatable online. It is hoped to have the original EPNS volumes for Hampshire (unpublished) and Sussex (published in 1929–30) ready in late 2000, and a pilot collection for Suffolk, constructed from scratch, well advanced by the end of this year. In 2001, we shall see the publication of Victor Watts's important new *Cambridge dictionary of English place-names*, the first new countrywide dictionary since the fourth and final edition of Eilert Ekwall's monumental work in 1960 and its successor from OUP by A.D. Mills published in 1991.

The main line of the Survey continues, but informed by the far-reaching developments that I

have outlined. The counties currently being published, in multi-volume form, of course, are Dorset, Leicestershire, Norfolk, Lincolnshire and Shropshire; active but as yet unpublished are Cornwall (apart from a fine dictionary of Cornish-language elements by O.J. Padel), Durham, Northumberland, Hampshire and Kent; just begun under new editors are Lancashire and Suffolk, where the original endeavour had lapsed. Staffordshire is stalled owing to the death of the editor after one volume had been published; and Somerset enjoys the bleak distinction of being the only county that has never had any fully active editorial attention. All other counties have a complete published survey of widely varying degrees of coverage. Most scholars who take on a county these days accept that it will represent at least a substantial portion of a life's work and that they will require a battery of varied skills and disciplinary standpoints in addition to linguistic ones. Everything has conspired to make this project more difficult and more fascinating, both for the public who regularly fill halls for lectures given by EPNS scholars, and for the scholars themselves.