Шелковникова С.В., Радионова Н.О.

Донской государственный технический университет

Why are the British place names so peculiar?

Looking at the map of the United Kingdom, we can see many places which have some intricate or even funny names. People will have wondered at some time or other about the original meaning of a place name - the name of their home town or of the other familiar places, the names of stations and destinations and those seen on road signs and signposts, and the more unusual names discovered on trips into the countryside or on holiday. What is the meaning of each one? How did they get their names?

That is the scope of toponymy that in fact can tell us many surprising or at least exciting things about the place names. There may be a whole story behind each name, so let us look through the history of their nomination.

When one is driving across the English Midlands, for example, he or she might notice a big amount of bizarre place names: from the town of Much Wenlock to Ashby-de-la-Zouch. Once having crossed the River Severn and passed the Wrekin rising to the left – the last of the Shropshire Hills – one joins the M54 at the Wrekin Retail Park. At Featherstone, there is a choice: north and then east past Lichfield and Tamworth, or southeast past Walsall, Wednesbury and Birmingham, south of Sutton Coldfield, and northeast to cross the River Tame. Either way, once Appleby Magna is passed by and the River Mease is crossed, the traveler is in the place. [1]

And just like that, in an hour and a quarter, there will have covered the great sweep of British history: from the Celts through the Romans, Anglo-Saxons, Scandinavians, and Normans to modern times – all displayed in Britain's place names.

Places were originally named in according to landscape features, nature of settlement (habitat – city, town, village, fortifications) or the people or tribe living in the area, often combining two or three descriptive terms in one name. These names were then influenced and modified at various historical periods through language shift driven by socio-economic and political changes. These sometimes introduced new linguistic influences, such as French from the Norman Conquest.

The Celtic tribes that arrived during the Iron Age, which started around 800BC, were the first to give a clear linguistic contribution that has lasted to modern times. They came in groups from the continent; those in the north spoke Goidelic (the source of Gaelic), while southerners spoke Brittonic.

Celtic place-names belong for the most part to several well-defined categories: names of tribes or territories like Devon and Leeds, names of important towns and cities like Carlisle, York,

and Dover, names of hills and forests like Crick, Mellor, Penge, and Lytchett, and most frequent of all, rivernames like Avon, Exe, Frome, Peover, and Trent. Even today, many hills and rivers have kept their Celtic names – especially in the north and west. The Wrekin takes its name from Celtic (possibly 'town of Virico'). So do about two-thirds of England's river. Some river-names, few in number but the most ancient of all, seem to belong to an unknown early Indo-European language which is neither Celtic nor Germanic. Such pre-Celtic names, sometimes termed 'Old European', may have been in use among the very early inhabitants of these islands in Neolithic times, and it is assumed that they were passed on to Celtic settlers arriving from the Continent about the 4th century BC. Among the ancient names that possibly belong to this small but important group are Colne, Humber, Itchen, and Wey. Often the names just meant 'river' or 'water', and sometimes no one knows what they originally meant; in the Oxford Dictionary of English Place-Names, A.D. Mills calls Severn "an ancient pre-English river name of doubtful etymology". The River Tame, which which is crossed on the trip to Ashby-de-la-Zouch, comes from the Celtic for 'dark one' or 'river' – as does the River Thames. [2]

There is less Celtic influence in the south and east largely thanks to the Anglo-Saxons. Early place-names of Celtic or British origin were borrowed by the Anglo-Saxons when they came to Britain from the 5th century AD . They pushed the Britons to the edges and into the hills. Those who stayed in England were gradually assimilated, rather like the name of the town Much Wenlock. It gets its Much is from Anglo-Saxon mycel, meaning 'great' or 'much'. Wenlock comes from Celtic wininicas, 'white area', and the Anglo-Saxon loca, 'place'.

Even before the Anglo-Saxons, Britain was invaded by the Romans, who first tried in 55 BC but at last succeeded in AD 43. Their linguistic influence, like their culture, left less of a mark. Roman contributions to British place names come mainly through their Latinisation of pre-Roman names. A Celtic name that had been rendered by earlier Greek visitors as *Pretanniké* became the Roman Britannia; an ancient name of obscure meaning became Londinium. The other major Roman contribution comes from the Latin *castra* ('fort'). Taken into Anglo-Saxon, it became *ceaster* ('town, city', pronounced rather like 'che-aster') – which has mutated to chester (Chester, Manchester), caster (Lancaster, Doncaster) and cester (Leicester, Cirencester).[3]

Unlike the Romans, however, the Anglo-Saxons came not to establish an outpost or colony, but to move in. The Anglo-Saxons did build forts – the word *burh* ('fortified place') gives Britain all of its –burghs and –burys – but what they really wanted to do was farm, build towns and conduct trade. If they encountered a forest (called a*wald, wold, weald, holt* or *shaw*) or a grove (*graf*, now – grove and –grave), they might clear it to make a *leah* (now –ly, –lay, –ley and –leigh). They would enclose land to make a *worthig* (–worth), *ham* (the source of 'home'), or *tun* (now –ton and the source of 'town'). Since *ham* was more common in the earlier years and *tun* later on, there are more

–hams in the south, where the Anglo-Saxons first came, and more –tons in the north and west.

The Anglo-Saxons also liked to name things after themselves. The suffix *–ingas* (now shortened to –ing(s)) referred to the family and followers of some personage: for instance, Hæsta's folk settled at Hastings. Many a *ham* and *tun* was also named for a person, such as Birmingham, the *ham* of Beorma's people (Beormingas). They also named geographical features for themselves, like valleys (*denu*) such as Rottingdean (the valley of Rota's clan). And, before converting to Christianity, they named some places after their gods – Wednesbury is named after Woden. [3]

This way thousands of new names were coined in Old English during the Anglo-Saxon period between the 5th and 11th centuries. Thus the majority of English towns and villages, and a good many hamlets and landscape features, have names of Old English origin that predate the Norman Conquest. These names vary in age, and it is not always easy to tell which names belong to the earlier phases of the settlement and which to the later part of the Anglo-Saxon period, although detailed studies have shown that many of the names containing the elements hām, -ingas, -inga-, ēg, feld, ford, and dūn are among the earliest.

Then the Scandinavians arrived. Their invasions and settlements took place during the 9th, 10th, and 11th centuries and resulted in many place names of Scandinavian origin in the north, north-west and east of England (as well as in many other parts of the British Isles). The Vikings came to Britain from two Scandinavian countries, Denmark and Norway, the Danes settling principally in East Anglia, the East Midlands, and a large part of Yorkshire, whilst the Norwegians were mainly concentrated in the north-west, especially Lancashire and Cumbria (as well as in areas outside England, particularly northern and western Scotland, the Isle of Man and the Scottish islands, and coastal districts of Ireland and Wales). The distribution of Scandinavian names in the north and east varies greatly, parts of Norfolk, Leicestershire, Lincolnshire, and Yorkshire being among the areas with the thickest concentration. To explain such large numbers of Scandinavian place-names in these areas, recent scholarship has suggested that in addition to settlements made by Viking warriors and their descendants there was probably a large-scale migration and colonization from the Scandinavian homelands in the wake of the invasion. Many hundreds of names in the areas mentioned are completely of Scandinavian origin (Kirkby, Lowestoft, Scunthorpe, Braithwaite), others are hybrids, a mixture of Scandinavian and English (Grimston, Durham, Welby), and some be from either language (Crook, Kettleburgh, Lytham, Snape). Thus, In the mid-9th Century, they staged a full-scale invasion and began to settle in the areas they controlled. At the height of Scandinavian power in Britain, they controlled an area known as the Danelaw that covered most of England north and east of a line from Liverpool to the Thames – a line you cross at Watling Street (an ancient road) as you drive northeast toward Ashby-de-la-Zouch. [2]

Ashby, like Appleby, bears the quintessential mark of a Danish place name: *–by*, meaning

'farmhouse' or 'village'. Both, however, also bear the marks of the Anglo-Saxons who where there first: the apple and ash trees. Also from the Danes came *both* (now booth), meaning 'cattle shelter';*thorp*, meaning 'satellite farm'; *toft*, meaning 'homestead'; and *thwait*, meaning 'clearing, meadow, or paddock' – now also with that unnecessary e.

Eventually, while talking about the origins of the British place names, we cannot overlook such a factor as the influence of the French language. The Normans were French by their language, Britain was ruled by French-speaking kings for more than two centuries, so the French language was the state language of the country.

The number of English place-names of French origin is relatively small, in spite of the far-reaching effects of the Norman Conquest on English social and political life and on the English language in general. It is clear that by 1066, most settlements and landscape features already had established names, but the new French-speaking aristocracy and ecclesiastical hierarchy often gave distinctively French names to their castles, estates, and monasteries (Battle, Belvoir, Grosmont, Montacute, Richmond), some of them transferred directly from France, and there are a few names of French origin referring to landscape and other features (Beamish from beau mes ('beautiful mansion'), Bewdley from beau lieu ('beautiful place') and Ridgemont from rouge mont ('red hill')). However, the French influence on English place-names is perhaps most evident in the way the names of the great French-speaking feudal families were affixed to the names of the manors they possessed. These manorial additions result in a great many hybrid 'doublebarrelled' names which contribute considerable variety and richness to the map of England. Most of them serve to distinguish one manor from another with an identical name, and of course the surnames of the more powerful land-owning families occur in many different place-names (Kingston Lacy, Stanton Lacy, Sutton Courtenay, Hirst Courtney, Drayton Bassett, Wootton Bassett, and so on). In this way, Ashby was given to the de la Zuche family; Newton ('new town or enclosed settlement') was given to the Burgilons (now Newton Burgoland). Some place-names of this type are not easily recognizable from their modern spellings, since the manorial affixes are now compounded with the original elements (Herstmonceux, Owermoigne, Stogursey). A further important aspect of the French influence on English place-names is the way it affected their spelling and pronunciation. The Normans' scribes, educated in Latin, also gave Latin additions such as Appleby Magna and Lyme Regis – and even the occasional full name, such as Pontefract (pons fractus, 'broken bridge'). [3]

But the Norman French did not settle in with the same comfort as the Anglo-Saxons and the Scandinavians, and certainly not in the same numbers. The commoners – made up of Anglo-Saxons, Scandinavians and remaining Celts – kept speaking English, which was still evolving and came to add many French words.

In time, English again became the language of rule. The court, which had increasingly intermarried with English speakers, resumed speaking English in the 14th Century; parliament returned to it in the 15th Century. Ultimately, the stubbornness of the Anglo-Saxon language conquered in the end. How else could a 'south-town coalfield' become Sutton Coldfield? Wet clearings (water leas) at the west clearing (west leah) become Westley Waterless? A muddy place (slohtre) turn to Slaughter (Upper and Lower)? [3]

And so it is that you can, in 60 miles, go from the Celtic hills, through the Anglo-Saxon and old Celtic towns, across the pre-Celtic, Celtic, and Anglo-Saxon rivers, past faint traces of the Romans, cross into Danish territory, and find the French nobility.

References:
1. http://www.bbc.com/culture/story/20160309-why-does-britain-have-such-bizarre-place-names;
2. https://www.ordnancesurvey.co.uk/resources/historical-map-resources/origins-of-placenames.html;
3. A Dictionary of British Place-Names, A. D. Mills, Oxford University Press, 2003.