

Place Names Assembly

We all come from somewhere, a place we call home. We know it well, having spent many months and years becoming familiar with its sights. But our local knowledge is limited to our own time. We live in Britain, which is an old country that has known human habitation for tens of thousands of years. Is it possible to recapture that deep past that surrounds us, that history of the everyday familiar? Take our own school for example. It may seem that Merchant Taylors' has stood forever on this spot, but go back less than 100 years and you would find no school, but only Sandy Lodge farm occupying this land. Go back just under 500 years and you would find a Tudor hunting park, servicing one of Henry VIII's palaces. The Manor of the More stood just on the other side of the railway line, in the grounds of Merchant Taylors' Prep. Go back 1500 years and we are in the killing fields where the British tribes were beaten back by the Anglo-Saxon invaders. Go back 2000 years and nearby on Watling Street the armies of the Iceni tribe, under Queen Boadicea, were shattered by a Roman army under Agricola. There are the ruins of two Roman villas on our grounds. Go back 3000 years and we are in the land of Iron Age tribes, amongst them one called the Wixan. Go back 20,000 years, stand on our school grounds, and you would see the frozen tangle of rocks which were emerging from the snout of a vast glacier covering most of the country. It was around here, at the peak of the last ice age, that the advance of the glaciers halted and they began their long retreat back north, leaving behind the huge quantities of sand and gravel that gave the name Sandy Lodge to the farm, and were mined to make the M25, forming the lakes on our grounds.

Such history is, to my mind, powerful and evocative. But it is not personal. That is either because no human could live here, as was the case 20,000 years ago on the frozen tundra and ice, or because over time, the human and the individual is often forgotten. But there is a way we can recapture something of that lost past, and evoke the names of people, the experiences they had and the landscape in which they lived. That past is preserved in our place names. All of them mean something, although some of the earliest are lost to us. Most of the major rivers derive their names from languages that are now long forgotten, but who have left the fossils of lost words in our own language. One river name is known, and its derivation might surprise you. The River Thames takes its name from the word *tamasa*, which means 'dark' in Sanskrit. There is another dark river Tamasa, and it is a tributary of the Ganges.



This does not mean that Indian explorers first named the Thames; it means that the first settlers of Britain spoke an Indo-European language, which shares a common root with Sanskrit.

The English of the Iron Age, who inhabited this area, had their own Gaelic languages, some of which we know. They added many Latin words to their vocabulary over the 400 years of the Roman occupation. The Romans left, but were replaced as invaders by the Anglo-Saxons. These invaders called the native Britons *wealas*, which meant ‘enemies’ or ‘strangers’, and thus we derive the names Wales and Welsh. Those beleaguered Britons banded together and called themselves the *Cymry* or ‘brotherhood’. Their last-ditch stand saved the land which they now call, in Welsh, *Cymru*. Most of England fell to the Angles and Saxons. The Saxons were named after their short stabbing sword called the *seax*. You can still see that sword on the county symbols in the places where they lived.



The South Saxons called their home Sussex, the East Saxons lived in Essex, the West Saxons lived in Wessex and our own local Saxons lived in the middle of all the others in Middlesex. The Angles took the more expansive northerly lands, and thus it was they that named our language and country: Angle-ish and Angle-land.



These Anglo-Saxon pagan invaders, for we should remember that Britain had been a Christian nation for 200 years under the Romans, tended to set up their own settlements and give their own names to them. You can hear their words in many of our current place names. *Tun* was the word for a stockade to keep animals in and enemies out. Many thousands of place names now contain the stem *-ton*, which often came to mean ‘village’. The second commonest word for settlement was *-ham*, a word related to our word ‘home’, which came to mean house. Farms were called a *ham* or a *stede*, and sometimes both, as in Hampstead. A nearby farm surrounded by birch trees became Berkhamsted. As you can see, these old English words fitted together like Lego to form place names. The word for a river was ‘*ea*’. So naturally, a river village was called Eton. The word for a lake was *mere*, so over time, not

too far away, a place by a lake dotted with stones became Stonemere, then Stanmere and then Stanmore. Another name for an early village was *worth*. Thus when an Anglo-Saxon named Ricmar settled locally, his farmstead was called Ricmar's worth. I wonder if any of his ancestors still live in Rickmansworth.

What do place names tell us of the area in which we live, long before we came to know it? We have heard already, of the dark river winding its way through the ancient town of Londinos. London means 'the home of the wild or bold one'. We know no more of this individual. Ealing is the home of 'the people of Gilla', who must have been something of a character as Gilla is a nickname meaning 'The Screamer': perhaps a battle cry. Other local places named for individuals include Croxley Green, which was the green glade of a chap called Croc. Amersham was Eagmund's village. Uxbridge was significantly more ancient, as it was the bridge associated with the ancient Celtic tribe of the Wixan. Amusingly, Chorleywood means 'the thinly wooded place where the peasants live.'

Sometimes place names describe the landscape: we have already heard about Stanmore. Pinner was 'a narrow ridge': a pin-like 'ore' or slope, the name reinforced by the flow of the river Pinn below. Ruislip means either 'the wet place' or 'jump the rushes', which says the same thing more poetically. Seer Green means 'withered and dry grass'. Denham means the ham in a dene - the village in a valley.

Alternatively, place names might describe what people do there. Thus, Watford means the ford with good hunting. Harrow comes from *hearg*, which means a pagan temple, which presumably stood at the crest of the hill.

The ruins of a Hearn



So although so much of our past is lost to us, fragments survive in our place names, telling us of lost landscapes. They also introduce us to the hardy, pioneering individuals who first settled the wilderness that was Hertfordshire, itself named for a ford frequented by stags. Finally, they show us something of the life that was lived, where smoke rose from the heathen temple atop Harrow on the Hill, and hunters moved stealthily through the forests of Watford.

I hope you have enjoyed our journey into local history, and will see a familiar landscape with new eyes. Every time you place your foot on the earth, you tread in the footsteps of others, some of whom were very different indeed. And if you are interested in the secrets that lie hidden in place names, then I would encourage you to your own research. If you wish, you can extend the journey to the secrets that lie hidden in our surnames, where ancestral traits, nicknames and what people did for a living are often hidden. Good hunting.