

## River Names Assembly

As you will know, most place names are very ancient and carry some meaning about the place they represent. I have previously shared local place names and their meanings – for example Chorleywood means ‘The clearing in the forest where the peasants live.’ Watford means ‘ford with good hunting.’ Rickmansworth means ‘Rickmar’s homestead.’ Rickmar was an Anglo-Saxon name. The Anglo-Saxons were Germanic invaders from around 600AD. The word Saxon was from the short sword they used – the seax. It also gave its name to the counties where the Saxons lived: South Saxons in Sussex, West Saxons in Wessex, East Saxons in Essex and of course those in the middle were in Middlesex. You can see three seaxes in the Middlesex and Essex county crests. These place names are mostly only a few thousand years old. But rivers are different. The names of rivers are truly ancient.

I must say that I do love rivers. There is a great joy to be had just sitting by a river, soaking up its atmosphere and watching the wildlife it supports. That joy is multiplied if you also think of the history the river represents. Each has its own name and the meanings behind those names run as deep as the great watercourses themselves. Two thirds of the 1,500-plus rivers that twist their way through the counties take their names from the Celtic culture of the pre-Roman era — and some are even earlier. British river names trip off the tongue like a nonsense poem of Edward Lear. The Mease, the Tees, the Dee, the Cree, the Chess, the Pang and the Clun... the Piddle and the Polly, the Box, the Yox and the Yeo. Often, the names given to rivers simply mean ‘water’ such as ‘Avon’ or ‘Ouse’. The early Britons must have given another word for water to the Romans, who translated it as *Isca*. The rivers that took that name are now the Esk, the Exe, and the Axe.

A small group of rivers seem to belong to an unknown language that may have been in use about 6000 years ago in Neolithic times, passed on to Celtic settlers arriving from the Continent about 400BC. Among this ancient group is the Humber, the Tyne, the Test, the Severn and the Colne, all of which have an etymology that is unclear and still baffles experts.

The rivers of the Cotswolds have some of the most beautiful and poetic names of all — the Windrush, the Churn and the Evenlode, which inspired Hilaire Belloc’s poem:

The quiet evening kept her tryst:  
Beneath an open sky we rode,  
And passed into a wandering mist  
Along the perfect Evenlode.

The tender Evenlode that makes  
Her meadows hush to hear the sound  
Of waters mingling in the brakes,  
And binds my heart to English ground.

A lovely river, all alone,  
She lingers in the hills and holds  
A hundred little towns of stone,  
Forgotten in the western wolds.

The roots of river names are as deep and twisting as their courses and, although original meanings are often lost in time, there are still tantalising glimpses of the last surviving remnants of a language spoken by our ancient ancestors. How wonderful that one of those names that are the oldest and most obscure is attached to the river that flows through our grounds.

The river Colne is a few hundred yards in that direction. No-one now knows what the name means, or even in which language it once meant something. It is too ancient.

How many others, on the banks of the Colne, have stood and thought and farmed and fought over hundreds of generations? How many have lived and lost their lives on the grounds that we now call home?

River names remind us of how ancient our land is and prompt us to think of our own brief lives, lived on the banks of rivers great and small. Rivers that have flowed for thousands and thousands of years. Those rivers and our river Colne will still be flowing thousands of years in the future. Those who come after us will stand beside their rippling waters and speak to each other in strange languages, discussing things we cannot imagine. For those people we will have become ancient history, and almost all of our present times will have become fragmentary and forgotten.

And when those strange people of the far future have themselves passed away, the rivers will still remain.