



HOW
Place-Names
GROW

A handbook of toponymy

Jeremy Harte

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Heart of Albion

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A handbook of toponymy*

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FOREWORD

This is a book for anyone who has ever wondered how places get their names.

Often the study of names opens with a simple fascination, a glimpse of previously unimagined landscapes just on the far side of the map. Take almost any enthusiasm – wildflowers, rocks, architecture – and they all begin with sheer marvel at the abundance of what there is to be known. Wasn't that how we came to learn about the world itself, when we were young and everything was new? But time passes and we get more confident about our knowledge, and then a new level of curiosity opens. *Why* is it that things are as they are on the map? Why should Dorset be full of double-barrelled names like Wynford Eagle and Toller Fratrum, and Sussex almost empty of them? Why should Yorkshire have harsh names like Gammersgill and Agglethorpe, and Devon soft ones like Shebbear and Hollacombe? Why are some villages called Kirkby, when every village had a church? Why are river names so odd and old?

These are questions which the dictionary doesn't answer. So we lay down our well-thumbed copies of Ekwall, Mills and Watts, and reach for Cameron, Gelling and Coates, then pore over back numbers of *Nomina* and the *Journal of the English Place-Name Society*. And slowly we familiarise ourselves with the classic arguments of the discipline. We get to talk confidently, if not always accurately, about Scandinavianisation and multiple estates, secondary colonisation and Celtic survival, feudal tenure and landscape morphology and pre-Indo-European survivals. And that's progress, of a sort.

But to get to grips with ideas like this, you have to start with the nuts and bolts of place-name formation – the long trail which began with the first native who jabbed a finger at 'that hill

there' and ended up with something more like the *Greater London A–Z*. (I'll stick to London as a source of examples: yes, most people don't live there, but even if you don't you'll know something about it, which isn't true for many other regions). We must understand how place-names come into being before we can have any useful opinions about why they were chosen. But this background knowledge seems to have kept a low profile in place-name studies: you're supposed to pick it up on the hop, as it were, and it's only in rare moments, when a historical argument depends for its whole force on the existence of some particular principle, that a researcher will stop and discuss formation in the abstract, before returning to concrete examples.

Kipling says:

I keep six honest serving men
(They taught me all I knew)
Their names are What and Why and When
And How and Where and Who...

This is the book of How. I think he's a rather underrated member of the team, and would like to give him his due. Other guides to place-names will tell you more about the etymologies traced by scholars, and better interpretations of their historical meaning. Instead I have covered what might be called the middle third of onomastics – the mechanics of putting names together, and the practical details of what happens to them afterwards. I hope that some of these ideas will be useful to people following more ambitious research.

The decision to draw illustrations from a single area meant that my *Dictionary of London Place Names* is now thumbed to bits, with matching damage to volumes for the four adjacent counties. This narrow focus sometimes left me presenting doubtful etymologies as more certain than they are, but I hope this can be forgiven as they are simply there to illustrate a point. Forgive me too, learned readers, for not citing authorities. If I had quoted one source, I could have included scores, and still left out whichever scholar had dealt best with a theme. Wisely or not, I have avoided the risks of leaving one fairy out of the christening by excluding them all, even the Director of the

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Institute for Name-Studies at the University of Nottingham, whose godmotherly counsel helped turn the pumpkin of the original draft into something more streamlined.

This book began as a dictionary of technical terms, and you might still find that the index at the back is the best way to make use of it, but as work progressed I found that individual terms were so inter-dependent, aligning or contrasting with each other, that it was much clearer to explain them when they were grouped by topics. So I have begun with the most general and basic concepts, and proceeded by a zigzag path to cover all the different ways in which place-names can come into existence. This is still mostly a book of terminology – I have included as many variations of this as possible, so that nobody can be confused by the language used by different authors – but terms only matter because they are a convenient shorthand for ideas. It's the ideas that count, and I hope I have done justice to them.

NAMES

What Names Are

§1 Names are words, and words are part of language. So the study of language, which we call linguistics, encompasses the study of names, which we call onomastics. Within language, names are usually drawn from the class of nouns (also known as substantives), which are the kind of words that indicate things, rather than actions or qualities: the first Mr Smith was a smith. But when we talk, we use names differently from other nouns – more like pronouns – because they have a one-to-one relationship with some particular individual: he, Mr Smith, is not in fact a smith. A word like 'town' indicates the whole class of towns, and for this reason it can be called a common noun. On the other hand, the word 'London' means London, and that is all it means, so that it can be called a proper noun, or more simply, a name.

§2 The word 'London' is nothing but a name: it doesn't apply to anything apart from the capital city on the Thames. However, that is not a necessary feature of names. If we look at Tube stations, there are plenty like Pimlico or Euston which mean nothing except the places which they belong to, but we will find others like King's Cross and Green Park which could just as well be part of common language. We know they're names because they are printed with capital letters but this is just a typographical convention and names of this kind existed long before typography, or writing for that matter. There are much older features of spoken language which mark names out as unique identifiers – for instance, the way that in English, names reject the articles *a* and *the*: 'the king's cross' is normal English, 'the King's Cross' is not. But the building blocks of words are the same in both cases. The distinction which gets represented on the page by capital letters is really a linguistic one, between

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the appellative sense of 'a green park' and the onomastic sense of 'Green Park'. Appellatives (or descriptive appellatives) can also be called common words, and sometimes also descriptive styles, significant words or vocabulary words.

§3 Names are names because they serve an onomastic function (or, as we could also say, a proprial or nominal one) in the language. Since this is a book about place-names, 'name' will be used from now on – unless otherwise stated – specifically for the names of places. These can also be called toponyms, which means that the discipline we call onomastics (or, less often, onomatology) contains a sub-discipline of toponymy, the study of place-names as opposed to names of other kinds. This has traditionally been taken under two headings. The first is historical toponymy, which deals with the origin, development and use of names; the second, cartographic toponymy, which deals with the presentation of names on maps and in gazetteers. This book is about historical toponymy.

§4 Names appear on maps because they belong to locations: a name refers to, or labels, a particular place; some might say that it denotes it, though that overlooks the uniqueness of reference which is strictly part of denotation. Certainly there are domains of speech in which one thing is known by one unique label, but toponymy isn't one of them. It tolerates repetition; though there is only one Sirius in the sky, there are many local entries for the Star in the *Good Pub Guide*. Nevertheless when an expression ceases to be simply appellative and becomes a name, it is usual to say that it has passed from being connotative to denotative. We can look at this the other way round, and speak of the place as the referent, or denotatum, of the word: sometimes also called its bearer, or its locus. It makes things clearer to talk about the referent of a name, rather than the place it belongs to, because the concept of 'place' is not easy to pin down; places can contain other places, as a city contains its streets, or a region contains more than one city. Some referents are obviously physical – landmarks or point features like a stone or a tree – but others are defined only by custom and law, like counties and countries. And a single referent can have a range of different names.

Names

§5 Names form part of language, but they are tied to referents in the physical landscape. This means that the life of names is affected – much more so than the life of common words – by factors outside of language. A place may lose its name because it has been deprived of its official position, or has dwindled away for lack of inhabitants, or has simply dropped into the river: though all of these changes were extra-linguistic, they have affected the use of the name within language.

Compounds and Elements

§6 A typical English place-name of the most basic kind, like Highgate or Blackheath, consists of two halves. We call this a compound (less frequently, a composite, duplex or dithematic name). The constituent parts are called elements (or sometimes constituents). We can think of Highgate as a compound containing the two elements *high* and *gate*, although since the name is first recorded as *le Heighgate* in 1354, the elements are actually Middle English, from the stage between Old English and the modern language. In a case like this, it's standard usage in English scholarship to refer to them by their Old English base-forms: *hêah geat*. This doesn't mean that the name goes back into the Anglo-Saxon period, before 1066; it's just a convention, and in Scotland and Wales they do it the other way round, using the latest rather than the earliest form as a head-word.

§7 A brief diversion is needed here, now that typography has come into the picture. When writing about language, we can print a word in two different cases: the usual way (Roman) or *otherwise* (italic). There's also a third option, **bold**, employed in dictionary entries for the lemma or head-form, as in '**London**. A city on the Thames'. Many writers will use italics in the same two ways as the previous paragraph: either to indicate that something is a citation form (*gate* means we're talking about the word *gate*, not any gate in particular) or to show that a word is in another language, which includes Old English and Middle English up to the debatable but easily memorable date of 1500. However, other writers may use a different system, and the county volumes of the English Place-Name Survey employ italic and Roman in this particular context, not to distinguish

between Middle and Modern English, but to show whether names are taken from manuscript or printed sources.

§8 In the usual English word order, the second element of a compound will apply to the kind of place that is being named, and the first element will refine and clarify its description. The name Blackheath tells us that there is a heath and that it's a black one. Grammarians would describe the two halves of the name as modifier and headword, but in onomastics the role occupied by 'gate' and 'heath' is called the generic, while that taken by 'high' and 'black' is the qualifier or specific – both terms are equally common among contemporary scholars. Generics have also been called bases, denominatives, denominators, deuterothermes, terminals or suffixes (though the word suffix has been used in other, different senses: §80, 104) while qualifiers/specifics sometimes appear as specifiers, protothemes or defining elements; they have been called determinatives, although that word usually has a narrower sense (§88). The terms prototheme and deuterotherme don't really belong in toponymy, as they are normally employed for the first and second half of people's names in Germanic and other traditions.

§9 It may seem confusing that so many words could be used to express the same idea, but English onomastics began with a generation of scholars who were more focussed on the early history in names than the linguistic forms in which they had been transmitted. Terminology was the least of their concerns, and often a word adventitiously chosen on the spur of the moment to describe some usage ended up as definitive. Since then there has been much variety in usage, not always systematic, and in the sections that follow we will find up to fifteen different terms being used to express the same concept, with quite different concepts occasionally being defined by the same word. Many of these synonyms are long obsolete, but remembering that the internet never lets an old book die, I included them anyway. As long as ideas are clear, the language can be allowed some leeway.

§10 The core features of the landscape are limited in number, the range of things that can be said about them is much larger: so fewer elements are used as generics than as qualifiers. We

are used to seeing a generic like 'hill' in multiple combinations – Garlick Hill, Herne Hill, Notting Hill. In this case, the Old English word *hyll* has come through to Modern English pretty much unchanged, but the same pattern can be seen with Old English words that have since been lost to the language, like *hamm*, 'river meadow', which features as the generic in Balham, Fulham, Twickenham. But we also find the same qualifier used in conjunction with more than one generic, like the 'white' in Whitchurch, Whitechapel, Whitehall.

Derivation

§11 Some names, like Whitechapel, are transparent: you can recognise the elements of which they are composed, because these are still used unaltered in common language. You may not understand everything about the name – not everyone has been to Whitechapel, and hardly anyone could pinpoint the original white chapel – but you can see the original appellative meaning that its elements had before they were made into a name. Transparent names are sometimes called significant, intelligible or self-explanatory. By contrast, opaque names no longer mean anything to ordinary speakers. When Balham first appears in the records (*to bælgēnham* in a land-grant of 957) it meant the *balg hamm*, a rounded river meadow, and the name was as transparent as Whitechapel is now, but over time it has lost its self-evident quality and become opaque or, as some say, invisible, obscured, or lexically meaningless. It can be called unanalysed, for people have stopped seeing it as being built up from meaningful words; significant, for it now longer does anything but signify the place; or onomasticised, since it no longer presents itself as anything but a name.

§12 In order to understand an opaque name, you need to take it apart, or analyse it. Whereas it is obvious to see how a name like Whitehall splits into two words, it's not so easy to analyse others such as Walthamstow: in fact this contains the two words *wilcuma* and *stow*, most likely meaning 'place of the welcome'. Originally this too was a transparent name, but like most names it has grown opaque over time. Just by being a name, a designation is, as you might say, functionally opaque: nobody expects New Cross to be new, or a cross. But as time

passes, the name will cease even potentially to make sense: this is particularly true amongst the English, who (unlike people in Wales or Ireland) expect that names will be unintelligible sounds. Usually this happens through changes in the language, such as vocabulary. Words which everybody understands can be used as elements to produce new names: they are productive (or living, or active, or place-name-forming). But when an element has ceased to be an ordinary vocabulary word, it is unproductive, dead or fossilised in meaning – no longer available to anyone who wants to coin a name. In Herne Hill the qualifier (OE *hyrne*, 'corner of land') is now unproductive, nobody talks about a *hyrne* any longer; whereas the generic (OE *hyll*) is still productive as Modern English 'hill'.

§13 When the words that make up a name drop out of the common language, the name becomes opaque even though it may not have changed otherwise; but even when a name is composed of words that are still alive in the language, it can become unrecognisable through sound-changes in its pronunciation. However, with enough evidence we can reverse this process and work out what the original elements were. This is derivation, or etymology, terms which as often in scholarship are used in a dual sense: they refer to the process of derivation or etymology in general, but we can also speak of a derivation or an etymology for some particular name, just as we could refer to history in the abstract but also to a history of London or some other place. Derivation is not quite the same as interpretation: a derivation can only reconstruct the appellative words which make up a name, while an interpretation looks at the motives that led someone to choose these words in the first place.

§14 Because it is the development of sounds into new sounds over time that makes names opaque, in order to arrive at their derivation, you need to understand the history of sound-changes in English. This involves a trained understanding of the sounds that make up language in general (phonetics), a grasp of the particular system of sounds found in a language such as English (phonology), and finally a grounding in the way that they have developed over time (historical phonology, or historical linguistics). And at this point, I am afraid, I can no longer act as a guide. Phonetics is a specialised field with a

terminology of its own, and you would need to get a primer in the subject, or better still take a course, because sound needs to be heard, not read. And the historical phonology of English is itself a scholarly discipline, over and above its application to onomastics, and you would need to study that from its own literature. If you don't follow that path, you can at least pick up enough basic understanding to follow what is going on when scholars discuss phonology. And, most importantly, you will remember that this is a special field of study, that it follows rules which take some time and skill to master, and that there is no shortcut by which outsiders can skip the hard graft of learning it.

Dictionaries

§15 So now, with this outline of onomastics in mind, you can reach onto the shelf for one of the standard dictionaries of English place-names and pick an entry, any entry. It will be something like 'Aldwych, Old English *eald wīc* "old trading settlement"'. Here is the name, the etymology of its qualifying and generic elements, and a paraphrase for people who don't read Old English. These paraphrases often look more authoritative than they really are: all they can do, at this stage, is to tell you what the elements mean as separate appellative words. They are meant to be as unopinionated as possible, though translating always means making decisions, even when you only have two words to start with: *wīc*, for instance, can mean several other things apart from 'trading settlement'. The paraphrase offered by a dictionary isn't necessarily the meaning or sense intended by the people who first put together the compound.

§16 Another way of making this distinction is to imagine four fields in linguistics, set out in a kind of rising scale. First there is phonology, the sounds which make names, as they do all other words. It's phonology, if you understand it, which explains why the *c* after an *i* in *wīc* came to be pronounced in historical Old English as modern *ch* not *k*. Then there is the lexicon, or vocabulary – the choice of words (lexemes, if you like) which are used as elements to make up a name. We've seen that *wīc* seemed the right generic for Aldwych, as it did for Chiswick

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and Greenwich, though not in quite the same sense each time. Then there is grammar, by which we mean the relationship (which might or might not be shown by some sort of modification) that words have with other words in spoken language. Aldwych, like Blackheath and Green Park, begins with an adjective and not a noun. And finally there is semantics, the question of what the name actually means. Do we interpret it as 'long-established centre for trade', or did they intend it as 'that place where they used to have markets in the old days'? How could we tell? The rising scale of phonology, lexicon, grammar and semantics is a useful tool for distinguishing different kinds of activity in names, and we will use it again.

§17 Standard dictionary entries will have one other feature – an early spelling of the name, typically something like 'Aldewic 1211' as it's conventional to follow the spelling by a plain date, with the words 'recorded in' understood. These spellings are called forms (sometimes name-forms), and a national dictionary usually restricts itself to one early form for each name. A regional dictionary aimed at interested general readers will be more generous – under Neasden we can expect *Neosdune* c.1000, *Nisedon* 1194, *Nesdone* 1254, *Nesedon* 1320, all of which support an etymology of OE *neosu dūn* and its paraphrase 'nose-shaped hill'. *Neosu* is what they call a dead metaphor: even at the time it probably didn't suggest an actual nose, just as we say 'headland' without thinking of heads. And the word should really be **neosu*, with an asterisk to indicate that the word is hypothetical (or postulated, or putative) – there are good reasons for supposing that it existed in the language, but it doesn't actually appear in a written text. I called the language OE instead of Old English, an abbreviation which we can use from now on.

REFERENTS

Anthponymy and Ethnonyms

§18 In the initial discussion of onomastics, we moved from the discussion of names in general to that of place-names in particular: but at this point it helps to go back, take a wider view and discuss names of other sorts. Places and people are the two main subjects for naming, so that the two corresponding categories are known as toponymy and anthroponymy. It's true that there are named individuals who can be treated in some ways like people but are not human – gods, for instance, and pets, and limited companies: but we can deal with their names under the heading of paranthroponymy. And in the same way we can speak of paratoponymy (though some call this ideonymy) when we are referring to unlocalised or a cartographic referents, those which have all the properties of a place except for that of actually being somewhere – Hogwarts, or Atlantis, or Purgatory. With those two modifications, the basic division into topography and anthroponymy holds good for names in general.

§19 But while the rules for naming places have remained more or less consistent over time, there has been a major change in the way that English people are named. At the arrival of the Anglo-Saxons, and for long after, people had only one name – Alfred, Edith, Athelstan, Emma. This was their personal name, and it was the only one most people had, although by way of distinction some people might have a byname tacked onto the original given one, like Athelstan Fæтта, who was indeed fat. When the Normans came, names like William and Henry drove out the Old English ones, but the rule of a single personal name still applied. Then by the fourteenth century – more or less, and in some parts of England before others – hereditary surnames had come into general use, giving us the system that we still use today, in which a reference to someone by name might employ either their given (or Christian, or font, or first) name, or their surname. Because onomastics has historically

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focussed on early periods, researchers tend to think of personal and given names as synonymous, although it would be more helpful to take personal name as the category which includes the three groups of given name, byname and surname. Sometimes the byname was used in conjunction with the given name, sometimes it appeared on its own, as nicknames do nowadays, so that we might think of the nickname as a sub-category of the byname.

§20 Surnames were not made up on the spot: they emerged over a generation or two as a formalised version of what had previously been casual additions to personal names. Sometimes these were descriptive bynames, sometimes they noted someone's father or mother, sometimes they stated where they came from. And all the time that this development was going on, places continued to be named after the people who owned them or lived there. When we know who the people are, it is easy to grade out the different stages in anthroponymic history. Margaret Ness in Greenwich is from the given name Margaret, Mapesbury Road in Brent is from the byname of Walter Map, while Marling Park near Hampton is named after the surname of Major W.B. Marling. But without the biographical and chronological support that we get from local histories, we are in the dark about the particular class that a personal name originally belonged to. It could have been a word being used in early days as a byname, or the same word after it had turned into a conventional surname.

§21 Furthermore, when surnames were created, they often drew on place-names; two men of the same name could be told apart if one was of Barnet and the other of Brent, and these phrases easily gave way to an asyndetic construction in which they became John Barnet and John Brent. These derived (or locational) names come in two classes: locative surnames, which referred to established names of towns and villages such as Brent and Barnet; and topographical ones, which referred to landmarks such as the bush or the brook. Locative surnames are sometimes called local, toponymic, or *noms d'origine*. Because early documents are often more interested in people than places, it often happens that a place-name which gave rise to a surname is identifiable

through that surname some time before it is independently recorded for the place itself.

§22 Just as place-names can contain the names of individual people, so they can contain words for groups: races, nations, neighbourhoods and so on. Grammatically, these are not anthroponyms, or even names; Gipsy Hill is like Garlick Hill, rather than Gordon Hill, because saying 'the Gypsy', 'the garlic' makes sense in an English sentence, where 'the Gordon' does not. But regardless of their grammatical class, these words for groups are the sort of thing that people instinctively call names, which is why we give them a capital letter. At the time of the English settlement, there were no nations, only peoples, such as the Welsh, OE *wealas*, who (in the most plausible interpretation) gave their name to Walbrook and Walworth. Words like this for people of a common descent are called ethnonyms (occasionally ethnicons); if they designate people who live together in a place or nation, regardless of their ancestry, they are demonyms. Since these words are needed most when strangers live in proximity, we find island ethnonyms, where the qualifier of a name marks out a particular group of people living amongst others of different origins, like the Chinese in Chinatown. When these names contain majority-language words like *China* or *wealth* it is a sign that they are exogenic, coined by outsiders, but sometimes people in an enclave will coin a name in their own language and impose it by strength of will on the outsiders: more than one Gypsy site is called Atchin Tan, Romani for 'stopping-place'.

§23 Then there are units smaller than the nation, such as cities or counties. Nowadays we tend to use place-names for these, and from these we derive the words for people – what are sometimes called cateconyms: first comes the name of the East End, and from it we derive East Enders. But the Anglo-Saxons did it the other way round; for them *Ēast Seaxne* 'East Saxons', came first, and from it they derived the name Essex. At a still smaller scale, there are what we might call districts, which in early days were treated in the same way: first came the name of a people – *Berecingas*, *Tōtingas* – and afterwards these were used for the areas of Barking and Tooting. These terms, one of many uses for the OE derivational ending *-ingas*, are known as folk-names, tribal names, or group-names.