

Title: Place-Names: Shining a light on the past

Author: Colin Wheeler

Date: September 2016

Summary: It is fascinating to see how place-names shine a light on the past. Studying place-names draws on several sets of skills but very often it is the linguists we have to turn to for the latest and most accurate interpretation of a name in perhaps, a dictionary of place-names or publications from the English Place-Names Society. Looking through various reference books it is surprising to see lists of different spellings for places that one may naively have thought had not changed much through the centuries. Part of the reason for this complexity, as Margaret Gelling (1997) points out, is the succession of languages spoken in the British Isles, which have to a greater or a lesser extent, influenced the development of place names.

This report is the work and views of the author from research undertaken in the Record Offices by volunteers of the Secrets of the High Woods project. South Downs National Park Authority is very grateful to the volunteers for their work but these are not necessarily the views of the Authority.

# Place-Names: Shining a light on the past

I became interested in place-names when I took on a Secrets of the High Woods project looking for place-name evidence for settlements and landscape features in the project area.

I knew nothing about the topic at the time but in my attempts to understand the development of names over time I was plunged into a world of ancient documents and linguistics. It was fascinating to see how place-names shine a light on the past although sometimes the derivation of a name can remain pretty much a mystery in spite of the best efforts of scholars.

Looking through various reference books I was surprised to see lists of different spellings for places that I naively thought had not changed much through the centuries. Part of the reason for this complexity, as Margaret Gelling (1997) points out, is the succession of languages spoken in the British Isles, which have to a greater or a lesser extent, influenced the development of place names. The first language scholars recognise is a non-Indo-European language of which Pictish is an example, then came Celtic/British, Latin, Old English, Old Norse and Norman French. Of these, Old English or Anglo-Saxon had the most influence on place-names in the study area, and this was evident from the data I gathered. Unlike more northern parts of England, Old Norse had little influence in West Sussex and although the Norman invasion brought French to these shores the language was not widely spoken amongst the general population.

What was also apparent early on in the project was that speculating on the origin and meaning of a name is interesting but it is simply an opinion until it is based on some documentary evidence. It is only when you delve into the world of Anglo-Saxon charters, the Domesday book, Charters and rolls, and other forms of evidence that there is some certainty about the meaning of a place-name.

You realise local names often change and that this is captured in a succession of historical documents. Studying place-names draws on several sets of skills but very often it is the linguists we have to turn to for the latest and most accurate interpretation of a name in perhaps, a dictionary of place-names or publications from the English Place-Names Society.

If you are curious about a place-names more generally, two good online sources are The Historical Gazetteer of English Place-Names: <http://placenames.org.uk> and The Key to English Place-Names: <http://kepn.nottingham.ac.uk>. Examples of the origin and evolution of place names within the Secrets of the High Woods area can be found in Appendix I.

## Reference

Gelling, M, 1997, Signposts to the Past, Phillimore, Chichester, ISBN 9781860775925.

<https://www.southdowns.gov.uk/discover/heritage/secrets-of-the-high-woods/>

I would like to thank Professor Richard Coates for his help with the project.

## Appendix I

Place name	Earliest note (Historical Gazeteer of English Place-names)	Latest note (Historical Gazeteer of English Place- names)	Meaning (from the Key to English Place- names database)	Elements and their meanings (from the Key to English Place-names database)	References for the columns 'Meaning' and 'Elements and their meanings' taken from the Key to English Place-names database
Arundel	Harundel, Harundelle 1086 Domesday Book	Arndle 1788 Sussex Archaeological Collections 40, 139	Hoarhound valley'.	hār hūne (Old English) Hore-hound. dell (Old English) A pit; a dell. Used of natural and artificial hollows.	1) Watts; Cambridge Dictionary of English Place- names 19. 2) E. Ekwall; Dictionary of English Place-Names 13. 3) A.D. Mills; Dictionary of English Place-Names 19. 4) Mawer et al.; Place- names of Sussex 1:136-7
Cocking	Cochinges 1086 Domesday Book	Kocking' 1199 Curia Regis Rolls (Public Record Office), London 1922 and in progress.	'Hillock dwellers' or perhaps, 'Cocc(a)'s people'.	pers.n. (Old English) pers.n. Personal name. cocc (Old English) A heap; a hillock. -ingas (Old English) The people of . . . . ; the people called after . .	1) Watts; Cambridge Dictionary of English Place- names 147-8. 2) E. Ekwall; Dictionary of English Place-Names 114. 3) A.D. Mills; Dictionary of English Place-Names 124. 4) Mawer et al.; Place- names of Sussex 1:16.
Slindon	Eslindone 1086 Domesday Book	Slingdon 12th C. Additional Manuscripts in the British Museum (now in the British Library).	Slope hill	slinu (Old English) A slope. dūn (Old English) A hill.	1) Watts; Cambridge Dictionary of English Place- names 555. 2) E. Ekwall; Dictionary of English Place-Names 427. 3) A.D. Mills; Dictionary of English Place-Names 426. 4) Mawer et al.; Place- names of Sussex 1:96-7.
West stoke	Stokes 1205 Curia Regis Rolls (Public Record Office), London 1922 and in progress.	(West) 1585 A Descriptive Catalogue of Ancient Deeds, ed. H. C. Maxwell Lyte, 6 vols. (Public Record Office), London 1890 and in progress.	Outlying farm settlement	stoc (Old English) A place, a secondary settlement	1) Watts; Cambridge Dictionary of English Place- names 577-80. 2) E. Ekwall; Dictionary of English Place-Names 443-4. 3) A.D. Mills; Dictionary of English Place-Names 438-9. 4) Mawer et al.; Place-names of Sussex 1:61-2.

