

THE PLACE-NAMES OF HERTFORDSHIRE

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The Place-names of Hertfordshire by Professor Skeat

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PROFESSOR SKEAT

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OF HERTFORDSHIRE**

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HERTFORDSHIRE.

BY
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Cogitabimus nomenclaturas antiquas.

HERTFORD
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As many persons are interested in the results of the study of place-names, it may be useful to say a few words upon the present way of pursuing this study.

Perhaps the most striking point about modern methods is their startling opposition to those formerly in vogue, and still believed in by many who have not had the opportunity of moving with the times. It is now known and recognised that both the underlying ideas and the practice of the eighteenth century and more than the former half of the nineteenth century are by all means to be abandoned; and, consequently, that very little that is really valuable is to be obtained from county historians. The chief idea, at that time, was that English names are not really English, but Celtic; and this notion was backed by the amazing proposition that even *if* the names were English they would still be of Celtic origin, because *all* English was such, since our unfortunate language had nothing original about it. In fact, it is by no means unlikely that such ideas still prevail in many places. But, as was long ago pointed out by Professor Max Müller, the discovery and study of Sanskrit have entirely changed our point of view. We can now recognise the no longer disputed fact that the various languages or dialects of the Indo-Germanic family stand to each other in a sisterly relation; and, consequently, that Old Celtic and Old English must be placed side by side. It is not denied that, owing to the accident of the invasion of Britain by Celtic tribes before the coming of the English, we may have borrowed from them some of their names for some rivers and mountains, but the number of these is no longer enormously exaggerated; and it is by no means uncommon, in the present day, to discover that many names that were once supposed to be Celtic are only to be explained from Anglo-Saxon. In the East of England, in particular, traces of the British occupation are, after all, but slight; and all the commoner names of towns and villages are perfectly intelligible to anyone who has a reasonable acquaintance with Anglo-Saxon, and will take the pains to hunt up their earliest forms.

There can be little doubt that the antiquarians of former times especially delighted in the title of 'Celtic,' from its enormous convenience to any writer who wished to impose his guesses upon his fellows. Very great care was taken never to define it, nor to give any tangible references. The more conscientious understood it to mean modern Welsh, and obtained their forms from a Welsh dictionary, quite forgetting that in the course of a thousand years the pronunciation of Welsh has materially changed. The more unscrupulous manufactured their 'Celtic' words to suit the matter in hand; and this with a boldness and assurance that proved rather their courage than their scholarship. The modern definition of 'Celtic' has done much to restrict their vagaries. It is now taken to mean such primitive forms as may be safely inferred from comparing the Irish, Gaelic, Welsh, and Breton forms of words that are radically the same. The chief results have been tabulated by Dr. Whitley Stokes in his very useful contribution to the Indo-European glossary of Fick. It is there shown, for example, that the Welsh *tre*, or *traf*, 'a homestead,' was spelt *treb* in Early Welsh and in Old Breton, and that we can hence infer the old Celtic type *trebo-*, where the *-o-* suffix indicates the declension, which is similar to that of the Greek *logo-s*, of which *logo-* is the declensional stem. It is interesting to learn, further, that the primitive Celtic *t* and *b* correspond, respectively, to a primitive Germanic *t*h and *p*; and hence that the Germanic languages exhibit a very closely related word, viz., that which appears in Gothic as *thaurp* and in English as *thorp*. It will be seen from this example that much care and pains are now taken in the correlation of words, where all was once guesswork and uncertainty.

The difference between former and present methods is, in fact, seen to be this. The old method depended too much upon guesswork, and neglected the collection of sufficient evidence. The present method is to collect all available evidence before the formation of any theory, whilst the subsequent interpretation of the evidence follows very strict rules. The word Celtic can no longer be used at random, but we are expected to quote such Irish or Welsh forms as can actually be found in existing dictionaries, and to show how divergent forms can be traced back to a common type.

It is hardly too much to say that the methods of etymology have been largely revolutionised during so recent a period as the

last quarter of a century. Before that time the Indo-Germanic vowels were but imperfectly understood, and the overwhelming necessity of understanding the actual pronunciations of all words quoted, in whatever language, was very imperfectly recognised. The sure and swift advance towards a high degree of certainty that has taken place within very recent years is to be ascribed almost solely to the study of spoken sounds. The written form is not of much use except when we know what it actually means.

The foregoing remarks lead up to the statement of the necessary requirements for interpreting place-names. They may be thus enumerated :—

1. It is first of all necessary to collect all available evidence.

2. As the evidence presents us with the place-names in early spellings, it is necessary for the right understanding of such spellings that we should thoroughly understand the following subjects :—

(a) The pronunciation of early Latin and Anglo-Saxon; especially the phonetic laws that affect the relationship of the vowels to one another, wherever such relationship exists.

(b) The pronunciation of early Norman-French; especially the peculiar ways in which English sounds were rendered by Norman scribes who endeavoured to represent such sounds, often with indifferent success.

(c) The pronunciation of the Early English spoken after the Conquest, varying as it did from century to century, and from district to district.

3. As a large number of names are of English origin, it is necessary to understand the principles upon which Anglo-Saxon personal names were conferred and compounded, as well as to be familiar with the suffixes which were in use from time to time to denote natural objects or the nature of the farm or holding.

After all these things have been duly weighed, the right interpretation can usually be arrived at if the evidence is sufficient; but hardly otherwise.

As the collection of evidence necessarily comes first, we must turn at once to the sources which inform us.

First of all, as has long been recognised, we should examine the record called Domesday Book, the importance of which has, however, been from *one* point of view somewhat exaggerated. It is often supposed that its spellings are more valuable than those of later date; but this is often by no means the case. Instances