

Gylden Briefing: Anglo-Saxon place-names ©

One of the interesting side-effects of my story-telling sessions with various groups is that many people (young and old) are fascinated by the meaning of the town and village names where they live. The list below shows some examples (from the Gylden area), taken from the Old English dialects of the Anglo-Saxon Chronicle (ASC); it is noticeable that many of the inhabitants of this area, 1500 years ago or so, named their homesteads after nature or landscape features.

- Aldershot: a copse of alders
- Ascot: the eastern cot or shelter for animals
- Ash: a place of ash trees
- Compton: a town in a narrow valley
- Cosham: Cossa's ham
- Cove: a valley or recess in the landscape
- Crawley: crows' wood
- Elstead: a place of elder trees
- Farnborough: a fern-clad hill
- Farncombe: a valley where ferns grow
- Farnham: meadows where ferns grow
- Fernhurst: a ferny hillock or knoll
- Fleet: a stream or a creek
- Fratton: the town (tūn) of Froda's people
- Gosport: a market where geese were sold
- Guildford: golden ford, either the sandbanks or the flowers
- Haslemere: a lake with hazel trees
- Havant: Hama's spring
- Hilsea: connected with the Saxon word for holly
- Hindhead: a hill frequented by hinds (deer)
- Hurtmore: a stags' lake
- Portsmouth: mouth of the port or harbour
- Puttenham: low-lying fields belonging to Puta's people
- Reading: the people of Rēada or Rāudi
- Wight: island, land raised above the sea
- Windsor: a landing place (on the River Thames)
- Wokingham: Wocca's field or vill
- Woodley: a glade in a wood

Note (1): with **Basingstoke**, a stoke or stoc was a common noun that simply meant place, such as a look-out, a farm for cattle or a meeting place: this one was the place of Basa's people (ASC 990).

Note (2): with **Southsea**, the name is not Saxon. The castle was built in 1540 and the name refers to the "south castell of Portesmouth".

One small point though – many place-names have changed from their Old English forms – with French, Latin and Scandinavian elements creeping in. In his 1959 book on place-names in England, *Eilert Ekwall* notes an interesting exception to this rule in the shape of Baldock in Hertfordshire. Baldock is an early form of Baghdad and the town was founded by a member of the victorious Knights Templars after the Crusades!



There are many ways in which place-names can be classified and studied and this article can only provide a brief introduction. Some people wonder why the study of place-names is important and I would reply that an awareness of your local area can only add value to your family history. Many people like to trace their ancestors and, if your family has lived in one area for several generations, place-names show an interesting extra aspect.

English history

Place-names can show which peoples lived and where, either before or after the Saxons. Many names that end in *-ing* are older and date back to the earliest Saxon settlements, eg Reading. Much of the population in the east of the country were Angles (Danish in origin), from which we derive the term, East Anglia.

Saxon religion and mythology

Now, Thursley is a great example of a place-name with religious or heroic roots, deriving its name from the god, Thor. Other local places that reflect Saxon deities include Tuesley (from the god Tiw) and Froyle (from the goddess Frig or Freya). Other mythical beliefs can also be detected from this pre-Christian period, eg Hascombe (meaning *witch's valley*) or Puckeridge in Hertfordshire (meaning *stream of the goblins*).

Man-made features

Architectural landmarks are often seen in place-names, such as Roman roads or forts, older forts, places of worship, bridges, fords, etc. Building materials can be included too, eg white stone or thatch. Yateley means a grove or glade with a gate...a leah or ley or ly on a name usually denotes a glade or grove in a wood.

Prehistoric stone circles were known as quarles or wharles and monuments referred to the use - Kingston was the stone at which Saxon kings were crowned. Some look-out places were named as such, eg Warningcamp (near Arundel) or Beaconsfield. If your town ends in *-bury*, *-berry* or *-burgh*, this would have been a fort of some type. This is not always the rule as some hills were not forts - Findon's (Sussex) name means *a hill with a heap of wood!*

Saxon life

Saxon society placed great store on meeting places (moots) and common moot sites became the place-names, eg Mutlow (Cheshire) and Spellow (Lancashire - from a word meaning *to debate or speak*). Royal place-names include Kingston or Quinton (Gloucestershire: a ton or tun was a town). Industries were responsible for many place-names and most are self-explanatory, such as Milford or Potterton (West Yorkshire).

The same can be said for farming matters and these are also self-evident: Cowfold (Sussex), Oxton (Cheshire), Barley (Lancashire) or Wheatley (Essex). If your home place ends in a *-stead*, *-stoke* or *-den*, it is likely that the Saxons kept their animals or crops nearby. Esher was a place where ash trees were cut and processed.

Idioms

This final category is a bit of a catch-all as it covers personal names, phonics, farming terms and even slang. The town of Godalming is a case in point as there is no other town of this name and the root of the place-name is Godhelm's people. Other examples of local leaders giving their names to the homesteads or towns are Basa (Basingstoke), Cissa (Chichester) and Effa (Effingham).

And there are still grey areas in interpretation. For example, the word *swin* in Old English meant swine and so Swindon means *pig hill* and Swingfield (Kent) means *pig field*. However, there is a crossover with the Dutch word, *zwin* (meaning *creek*), and the Swin Channel in Essex has nothing to do with pigs at all! Another oddity is Sandhurst (sandy hill), but nearby Yorktown was named after Frederick, Duke of York, who founded Sandhurst College in 1812.



If you have any queries about the origin of your homestead's name, please contact [Gylden Fellowship](#) and we'll try to help you.