

LOCATING ANOTHER AGE

PLACE-NAMES IN THE WEST MIDLANDS

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Within a few hundred years of the Roman withdrawal from Britain in the fifth century AD, Old English, the language of the Anglo-Saxons, had been accepted by the upper classes and supplanted British and Latin. Understanding how Old English shaped English place-names can help us to uncover the nature and economic life of the early medieval countryside and how it was populated and organised.

During Anglo-Saxon times, British names survived for major features such as hills, rivers or extensive wooded regions: Malvern, for instance, is 'the bare hill'; Arden incorporates a word meaning 'high land'; the Trent is 'great wanderer' or 'great flooder', while the River Avon is simply 'river'. Some settlements also took their names from such features: Lichfield is 'the open land at or called *Lycid*', the latter perhaps an extensive area of woodland in the surrounding district, 'the grey wood', as found in the Roman name Letocetum for the Roman settlement at Wall.

Others took their name from British institutions – like the *ecles* settlements of Eccleshall, Staffordshire, that indicated a surviving British Christian community. In general, however, the new settlements established in the Anglo-Saxon period acquired Old English names. At a later date Danish settlers

in the east of the region, especially in eastern Derbyshire, gave new names to the settlements they had taken over.

Names Denoting Wooded Areas

Old English names predominated throughout the region at least by the later seventh century and the terms used give a clear indication of the nature of the Anglo-Saxon countryside. In particular, the *leah* term clearly indicated regions that were well-wooded; originally this term meant 'wood, wood-pasture'. Although recorded mostly as a settlement name the term might not be as common in heavily wooded, sparsely populated regions as expected. Occasionally such a name was applied to an extensive area such as the south-eastern Weald and in this region *Weogorena leage* was such an area of wood-pasture lying to the north-west of Worcester.

'The bare hills'. Footpaths criss-crossing the Malverns.

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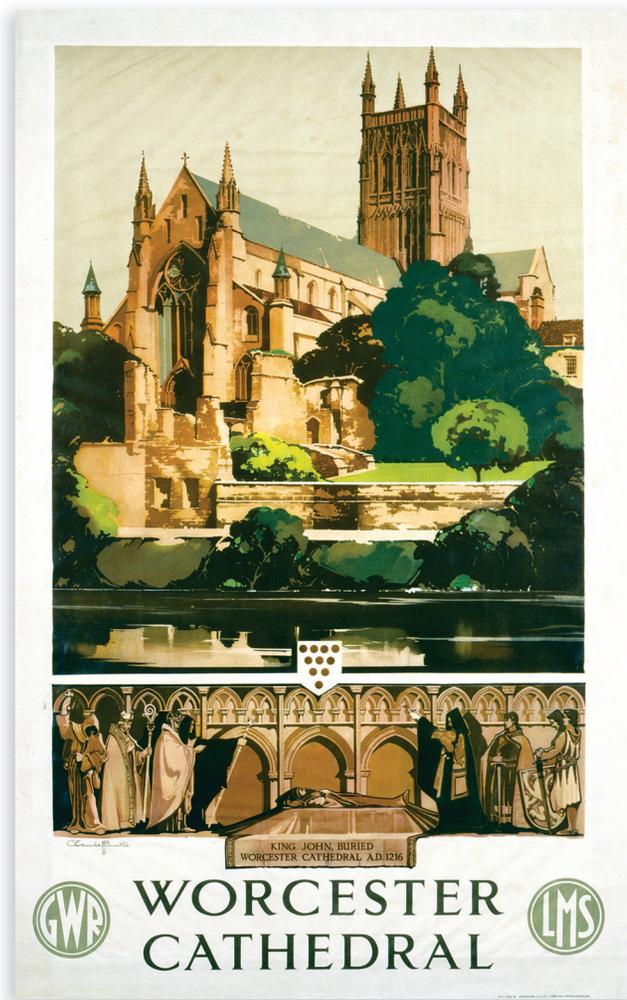
Open woodland was characteristic across much of the west midlands and was often used as seasonal pasture for domestic stock, a practice possibly established by the late Iron Age, as well as being a source of timber. Woodland was particularly common across the well-wooded county of Worcestershire apart from in the Vale of Evesham but in Warwickshire the *leah* term is largely restricted to the more heavily wooded Arden. It is common through central Derbyshire, but largely absent from the more heavily cultivated south and the open moorlands of the Pennines and northern moors; it is found across most of Staffordshire. In Herefordshire, it is also fairly widespread, although, as an English term, it is absent from the Welsh districts in the south and south-west of the county. In Shropshire, there is a marked concentration across the middle of the county close to the original boundary between the Magnosæte and Wreocensæte people and, indeed, the location of more heavily wooded areas may have influenced the early demarcation of tribal boundaries.

Settlement Names

The regions of more intensive agriculture, again established by Iron Age and Roman times, lay mainly in the south-east of the west midlands and supported higher population densities, a situation corroborated by Domesday statistics. In Herefordshire, however, the ploughteam densities recorded in *Domesday Book* may reflect a situation in which teams were still scattered through dispersed hamlets and small villages rather than concentrated in more nucleated settlements.

The early medieval period was one of estate fragmentation and the settlement foci in more intensively developed regions often bore topographical or *tun* names (*tun* often implying ‘homestead, village’); the latter are, however, common everywhere. The distributions of *leah* and *tun* names clearly complement each other, and the Anglo-Saxon economy was based upon the combined utilisation of the resources of the two different kinds of region.

Looking more closely at the emerging estate centres, place-names are also revealing. Many such centres bore topographical or archaeological type names, continuing a form of name-giving



Worcester – the ‘walled’ city or *ceaster*. ‘Worcester Cathedral’, GWR/LMS poster, 1932.

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practised since Roman times: Bredon (British *bre*, Old English *dun*, both meaning ‘hill’), took its name from the huge outlier of Oolitic limestone in the Vale of Evesham; Worcester was ‘the *ceaster*, walled city’ of the Weogoran tribe. The names can also offer information about the dependent links within an estate. The *walh* names, for instance, probably represented settlements then occupied by British-speaking people (*walh* indicates a ‘Welshman’), subservient to a central vill usually held by the king or the church.

Other terms indicate the function of certain settlements within an estate: the numerous *wic* settlements were places ‘used for a special purpose’: the Cheswicks were engaged in dairying, the Herdwicks in herding, while Northwick near Worcester was a centre where the lead vats for salt evaporation were made. Interestingly, two distant estates held by Lichfield in 1086, were Hammerwich, ‘the hammer work or trading place’, and Smethwick, ‘the smith’s *wic*’. Both were located on the wooded uplands that extended

southwards from the Cannock Hills to the Birmingham Plateau and may have been at first little more than seasonally occupied places where charcoal was plentiful for metal workers and smiths. Despite the location of the Staffordshire Hoard there is no indication of Hammerwich having been a major metal-working centre at this time.

Thus place-names can immediately offer a glimpse into another age, not only revealing ethnic associations but conjuring up impressions of the countryside – what it looked like and how it functioned. ●

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Further Reading

Margaret Gelling, *Signposts to the Past. Place-Names and the History of England* (Dent & Sons, 1978).

Margaret Gelling & Ann Cole, *The Landscape of Place-Names* (Shaun Tyas, 2000).

Della Hooke, *The Anglo-Saxon Landscape: the Kingdom of the Hwicce* (Manchester University Press, 2009).

Della Hooke, ‘The landscape of the Staffordshire Hoard’ [2010] online at the Portable Antiquities Scheme site at www.finds.org.uk. Follow the link to ‘Staffordshire Hoard papers’ where other contributions can also be found.

Richard Jones & Sarah Semple (eds.), ‘Place-name hierarchies and interpretations in parts of Mercia’, in *Sense of Place in Anglo-Saxon England* (Shaun Tyas, 2012), pp. 180-95.