

# Plants, Place Names and Habitats

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## Summary

Places need distinctive names to aid identification. Many of these names date back to the early medieval period.

The qualifying (usually first) element in a place-name sometimes refers to vegetation or habitat. Stinging nettles flourish in phosphate-rich soil found round concentrated, long-occupied human and animal settlement sites. Many are near Roman forts, villas or the pinch points (fords, bridges) on Roman roads.

Wild celery (*merece* in Old English) monitored by the Oxfordshire Flora Group, gives Marcham its name 'wild celery riverside meadow'. Once used medicinally it is now rare inland.

Tree names are widely used especially 'oak', but a few are not represented in place-names. Appleton and Pyrton probably refer to apple and pear orchards. Even the Whitty pear may have been referred to.

Many names describe wet habitats – some of Old Norse origin are restricted to Danelaw counties. Near Oxford *mōr* (moor) and *fenn* (fen) are used. Local names in *mos*, *mēos* are described, but further fieldwork on these elements is needed. Two terms for hay occur in the Chilterns.

## Introduction

Places need to have distinctive names if they are to be of use to people from elsewhere seeking them out. How confusing it would be if all the settlements beside fords across the Upper Thames were called 'Oxford'! In fact we find Swinford (swine), Shifford (sheep), Duxford (*Duduc*'s), Shillingford (?noisy), and Wallingford (followers of *Wealh*). Sometimes the name of a herb, tree or habitat will be the distinctive term which is used in conjunction with some other element, like *ford* in Oxford or *tūn* as in Appleton.

A limited number of herbs appear in place-names. The most likely to occur are those which are useful as foods or medicine, plentiful locally or perhaps a nuisance. Of particular interest are those names which have appeared in records by 1500 and which incorporate OE (Old English) elements as they may have originated before the Norman Conquest.

## Nettle

The stinging nettle (*Urtica dioica*) OE *netel* and ON (Old Norse) *nata*, is found all over England now. It thrives where the soil is rich in phosphates; these may be derived from bones, excreta and, nowadays, from artificial fertiliser. Once in the soil, especially a limey one, the phosphate can persist for centuries. In early medieval times, over a millennium ago, there would have been no artificial fertiliser in the soil, the human and domestic animal populations much lower and there would have been less time in which the phosphate could have built up. Accordingly, flourishing beds of nettles could have been a less frequent sight and so nettles could have been a useful distinguishing characteristic of a place. It is therefore interesting to look at the sites where they are found in place-names.

One which gives a flavour of conditions in early medieval times (as far as nettles are concerned) is Nettlehope Hill, Northumberland. Unfortunately I know of no early spellings for it. The hill lies in the Cheviots and is now conifer-clad. Close by passes Clennell Street latterly a long distance drove road but which was being used in the twelfth century by the monks of Newminster Abbey when taking their flocks up to summer pastures. Today there are patches of nettles at the site of Wholehope, an erstwhile stopping place on Clennell Street, while no other nettles are to be seen for miles around. Both examples of Nateby in Lancashire (ON *nata*) are on drove roads and both adjacent to market sites

Five intriguing examples are found next to Roman forts or towns: Nettleton by Lincoln; Nettleham by Caistor (Lincolnshire); Nettleton Hill by Slack (Yorkshire); Nettle Hall near Melandra Castle (Cheshire, no early records) and Natland by *Alauna* (Kendal, Cumbria). Since meat was part of a Roman soldier's diet and since animals were used for transport it would not be surprising if animals were kept near these settlements in large numbers over many years, enriching the soil with phosphates locally. Nettle names occur by other Roman sites such as Nettleton (Wiltshire) by the Fosse Way and along Roman roads at pinch points such as fords – Nettleford Wood (Cheshire) and Nettleford, now Nettlebridge, Somerset. More locally, Nettlebed (Oxon) lies on the Roman road between Dorchester and Henley-on-Thames. Much of this route lies on chalk, generally waterless country, but at Nettlebed there is a tiny outcrop of London Clay where ponds are to be found; a good spot to stop and water animals and for them to urinate or defecate, thus providing conditions for a bed of nettles to flourish (Cole 2003, Cole 2004).

## Wild Celery

The Oxfordshire Flora Group has long had an interest in the wild celery (*Apium graveolens*) at Marcham, monitoring it yearly. It is of interest on two counts: firstly, that it is rare inland now although common around the coast, and secondly, that it gives name to the village. The 'ham' comes from OE *hamm* here meaning a 'riverside meadow' and the 'marc' from *merece* meaning 'wild celery' or 'smallage'. The name Marcham is recorded as early as 900 in a twelfth century copy. Wild celery was valued medicinally and used by the Romans as a carminative, stomachic, stimulant, anodyne poultice, nerve tonic and for rheumatism and arthritis. Since there was an important Roman site at Frilford (but actually in Marcham parish) 1½ km to the west it is likely that the Romans grew it and that it has persisted where a salt spring emerges just south of Marcham. It would have been a valued herb throughout medieval times and therefore kept in cultivation until the advent of modern medicines. It is commemorated in two other place-names – Marchington in Staffordshire, another area where salt springs occur, and Marchwood on the western shore of The Solent – again a salty environment (Cole 2000, Cole 2007, Cole *et al.* 2000).

## Trees

Trees were a valuable resource for their timber and underwood, so it is no surprise that they feature in place-names.

There were two elements meaning 'tree': OE *trēow* which features, for example, in Coventry, Daventry, Braintree and Oswestry, and OE *bēam* 'beam' or 'tree' which occurs in several examples of Beam Bridge and in Bampton. *Bēam* survives in the

tree names hornbeam and whitebeam. There was also a *cwic-bēam* which may have been the rowan; it is still known in some localities as the quicken or quickbeam. However, hornbeam (*Carpinus betulus*), whitebeam (*Sorbus aria*) and rowan or mountain ash (*Sorbus aucuparia*) are not known to occur in place-names. There are other curious omissions: cherry (*Prunus* spp.) is only known to have occurred once, in a charter boundary, as *cirscumb* in Meon, Hampshire (Sawyer number 619). As the cherry is such a distinctive tree especially when in blossom and as it bears an edible fruit this is surprising.

Sweet chestnut (*Castania sativa*) is not known in place-names unless it is referred to in the ‘nut’ of place-names such as Nutley and Nuthurst, but equally these might refer to hazel nuts. Recent introductions such as sycamore and horse chestnut, of course, do not feature (Hooke 2010, especially part 3).

Other native trees such as oak (*Quercus* spp), beech (*Fagus sylvatica*), birch (*Betula* spp.) and field maple (*Acer campestre*) occur frequently. Oak is particularly common but may appear in disguise as in Cressage ‘Christ’s oak’, Shropshire; Oxsted ‘oak place’, Surrey; Knockholt, Kent; Acle, Norfolk; Ocle, Hereford, all ‘oak wood’; Radnage ‘red oak’ Buckinghamshire, and Roke and Noke, Oxfordshire, ‘at the oak’.

Evergreen trees are conspicuous in winter. OE *box*, *byxe* means ‘box (tree)’ (*Buxus sempervirens*). The form *byxe* occurs in Bix and Bix Bottom near the Warburg Reserve in south Oxfordshire. *Box* occurs in Boxford, Berkshire and *byxe* in Bixmoor Wood, Oxfordshire. They are deceptive names as they do not refer to fords or moors but to a landform known as *ōra*, a flat-topped ridge with a rounded shoulder typified by that at Chinnor. The *ōras* are thought to be travellers’ landmarks. Such a hill with evergreen box trees on it would be readily distinguishable in winter. The red kite and the sea eagle (erne) or golden eagle are featured in Kitnor, Yarnor and Yearnor in Somerset and Devon so these *ōras* can be picked out by observing the birds of prey seen soaring above them (Cole 2013, Chapter 8 and p. 236). The yew tree (OE *iw*, *Taxus baccata*) is not found combined with *ōra* but occurs with *hyrst* ‘wooded hill’ in several examples of Ewhurst, especially in south-east England. Yewden Manor at the mouth of the Hambleton valley in south Buckinghamshire means ‘long valley with yew trees’. Uley, Gloucestershire, refers to a yew wood.

*Apuldor* means ‘apple-tree’ and is found in Appledore in Kent and Devon, while *æppel* means ‘apple’ (the fruit), and is found in Appleford, Appleby, Apperley and particularly in the compound Appleton – the ‘ton’ comes from OE *tūn* which had a variety of meanings from ‘enclosure’ to ‘farmstead’ to ‘estate’. Appleton is thought to mean ‘apple enclosure’ i.e. an apple orchard. There are Plumptions from OE *plūme* ‘plum’ in Yorkshire, Lancashire, Northamptonshire, Sussex and Devon, while OE *plȳme* is found in Plympton, Devon. Perton, Pirton, Purton and Pyrton derive from *pirige-tūn* ‘pear-tree-tūn’ so that our Pyrton near Watlington evidently had a pear orchard. It belonged to the abbey at Worcester; one may imagine the monks brewing perry which would have been safer to drink than water. The other five examples of *pirige-tūn* which occur in Domesday Book were also under the care of religious establishments. Locally we have Woodperry and Waterperry rather like we have Woodstock and Waterstock, and Woodeaton and Water Eaton – the one near woodland the other by a place liable to flooding – think of the examples of Watery Lane in some villages! The term *peru* was used for the fruit, a pear, its use in place-

names less frequent than *pirige* but appearing in Parbold (Lancashire) and Parham (Suffolk). Even more intriguing is a reference in a charter boundary of 967 AD for Pendock, Worcestershire, to ‘*æscapaldreleah*’ (ash-apple-wood), (Hooke (1990) suggests that the GR for *aescapaldrelēah* is approximately SO 789337) while the ninth century historian, Nennius,<sup>1</sup> writing about the Wonders of Britain, and clearly familiar with the Severn valley area for he lists Droitwich and its salt springs and the hot springs at Bath, describes ‘the ash tree that bears apples in a steep grove at the mouth of the Wye’ ([www.wondersofbritain.org](http://www.wondersofbritain.org)). So what is an ash-apple? The name suggests a tree with pinnate leaves like the ash (*Fraxinus excelsior*) or the rowan (*Sorbus aucuparia*) which bears apple-shaped fruit and was to be found in the Wye and Severn area. A tree fitting this description is the Whitty pear (true service tree, *Sorbus domestica*) at first known only from a single tree in the Wyre Forest, but which has more recently been found on limestone cliffs in Glamorgan and in the gorge of the Bristol Avon. (See for example [www.worcestershire.gov.uk](http://www.worcestershire.gov.uk) and [www.en/Wikipedia.org/sorbus\\_domestica](http://www.en/Wikipedia.org/sorbus_domestica).) I am very grateful to John Freeman for calling my attention to this story. He speculates on the intriguing possibility that in the name Ashperton (Herefordshire) lies hidden a reference to an ‘ash-pear(tree)-*tūn*’ although he emphasises that there are several other possible interpretations of this name. Suffice it to say that the fruits of the Whitty pear can be either apple- or pear-shaped and that on the continent the Whitty pear was used to make an alcoholic drink, so the notion of an orchard of Whitty pears is not too far-fetched.

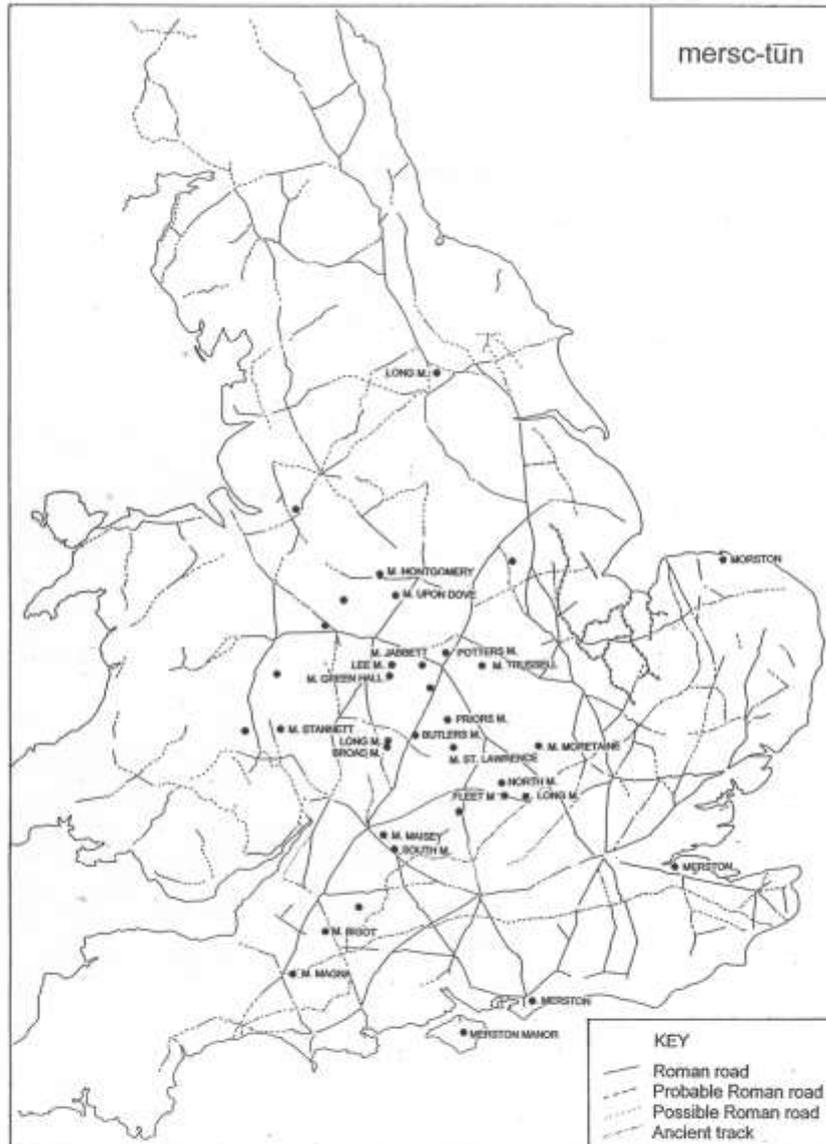
## Wet Ground

There were many terms describing habitats ranging from heaths to woodland, ploughland and pasture, and, particularly, to wet ground; the latter is described by at least a dozen different terms. Some are restricted to the Old Norse speaking areas like *mosi* ‘bog’; *kjarr* ‘carr, marshy brushwood’; *eng* ‘meadow, pasture, ings’; *myrr* ‘mire’. Others, OE in origin, are uncommon: *slōh* ‘muddy place’ (Slough); *winn* and *wisce* ‘wet pasture’ (Winnersh and Whistley, east of Reading). (For more information about some of these names, see Chapters 2 and 7 in Gelling and Cole, 2003.) The ones best represented in the Oxford area are *mōr* ‘moor’, *mersc* ‘marsh’, *fenn* ‘fen’ and *mēos* ‘moss, bog’. These are inexact definitions; it is possible to be more exact. *Mōr* implies wetness, readily associated with Dartmoor, Exmoor, Sedgemoor and Otmoor – not settlements but large areas of ill-drained land. Among the settlement names incorporating *mōr* are about 65 examples of *mōr-tūn* (Moreton, Morton). It has been suggested that the people of a *mōr-tūn* were particularly responsible for bringing in the hay crop for the large estate in which it lay, for instance North and South Moreton were part of the Blewbury estate. There is a Moreton near Thame and another, a deserted village, near Aylesbury. The soils of the *mōr-tūns*’ farmland were too heavy and too often waterlogged to be ploughable and so were best left as pasture or hay meadows, although the settlement itself was usually on a patch of better drained land (Cole 2013, pp. 49-51).

A distribution map shows that *mōr-tūns* often occur near Roman roads and are well distributed from north to south in England. When the soils of the *mōr-tūns* were compared with those of the *mersc-tūns* (Marston) no difference was noted, they

<sup>1</sup> It should be noted that Nennius’s *Historia Brittonum* is based on the writings of earlier historians and that ‘The Wonders of Britain’ is appended to some, but not all, the extant copies of the *Historia*.





*Fenn* also describes marshland (but note that the name ‘The Fens’ is a much later coinage). There is a Murcott on the edge of Otmoor; ‘cottages by the moor’ is an apt name but why is the next door hamlet called Fencott? Given that place-names elements are very rarely synonymous, where and what is the *fenn* if it is not Otmoor? *Fenn* is a much less commonly used term than *mōr*, although it is relatively common in Northumberland where it is used of strips of wet ground adjacent to streams. Further south it appears in Fenchurch, London, and in North and South Fambridge in Essex where it refers to marshy strips of foreshore – long in comparison to their width

and contrasting with the roughly sub-circular shape of *mōrs*. So what is the ‘strip’ at Fencott? The long feature that Fencott has but Murcott does not is the Roman road crossing Otmoor from Beckley to Fencott, a linear feature which can be very muddy indeed. This may be the thinking behind the name.

OE place-names frequently include rock-types in their names: Stanton and Standlake using ‘stone’, Claydon using ‘clay’, Chislehampton and Chesil Beach using ‘cisel, gravel’, Chalford and Chalgrove using ‘chalk, limestone’. So it is curious that there is no obvious term for peat which is common enough in the North Country if not so much in the south. The use of the word ‘peat’ is not recorded until c.1200. However, the ON term *mosi* and the OE term *mos*, usually translated as ‘bog, moss (in the sense bog), lichen, swamp’ sometimes refer to the settlements by peat bogs - Mosser, Cumberland; Mozergh, Westmorland and Moston, Cheshire, or to the peat bogs themselves in Mosedale, Cumberland; Chat Moss, Lancashire and Moseley in Birmingham. However, others, while referring to wet ground, do not have peat deposits nearby. *Mosi* and *mos* occur mostly in the Lake District, Pennines and Welsh Marches. In the east Midlands and in south-eastern England a related term, *mēos*, was in use. It, too, is interpreted as ‘a moss, a marsh, a bog’. There is a cluster in and around the Chilterns – not an area one usually associates with bogs, and so it is worth looking for the ‘wetness’ in these places. Muswell Hill near Brill has *welle* meaning ‘spring’ as its second element. Indeed the middle slopes of Muswell Hill (and of Brill Hill) are awash with springs making for a zone of really squelchy ground. Part of this zone on the west side of the hill (SP 634150) is a forest of ant hills suggesting ancient pasture – evidently one too wet to have been cultivated unlike the upper and lower slopes. It is an SSSI on account of its geological interest. A second *mēos-welle* called Miswell occurs as a scarp-foot spring near Tring (SP 913121); unfortunately the site was modified with a dam and deep-cut channel over 140 years ago. A third *mēos-welle* occurs near Lane End, Buckinghamshire. This Muzwell Farm (SU 800910) overlooks Moorend Common – a miniature inland drainage basin with a very marshy floor. Muswell Hill in London is a further example.

There are at least 13 Moseleys/Mossleys in England, some of them deriving from *mos* and others from *mēos* combined with *lēah* ‘wood, wood-pasture, clearing’. Great and Little Moseley Farms (*mēos-lēah*) lie across the road from Naphill Common, Buckinghamshire, another SSSI on account of its flora (SU 838975). It is a flat area of clay-with-flints overlying chalk and having a layer of dense dark humus on top so that rainfall does not drain away readily. Underfoot it can be very muddy, but it is shallow mud unlike the bogs and swamps referred to in the *mosi* and *mos* names (at least two other Moseleys are SSSIs; one in Herefordshire (SO 375580) and one in Birmingham (SP 092821), both on account of having small patches of peat bog and interesting floras). Not far away from Naphill Common is the River Misbourne with Great and Little Missenden beside it. Bourne (OE *burna*) in this area refers to clear chalk streams. The ‘Mis’ probably derives from *\*mysse*, itself a derivative of *mos*. There has been uncertainty among place-name scholars as to the meaning of *\*mysse*. Ekwall in his Dictionary writes that there was an Old Danish word *missne* meaning ‘*Calla palustris* (water arum)’ or ‘buckbean’ (bog bean, *Menyanthes trifoliata*), and that *\*mysse* might be identical or synonymous with these (Ekwall 1960 p. 328 under Misbourne). However as *Calla palustris* is not a native species but was only introduced here in 1861 it cannot mean water arum (Clapham, Tutin and Warburg 1962 p.1051). Bog bean prefers to grow in slightly acid water and so is very unlikely

to have been flourishing in a chalk stream. Watts' Dictionary under Missenden confuses *Calla* with *Caltha* (Watts 2004). Mills in his Dictionary under Missenden is more cautious and speaks of 'water plants or marsh plants' (Mills 2003). If *\*mysse* does not mean water arum or bog bean some other explanation must be sought. Elsewhere, so far as I know, *mosi*, *mos* and *mēos* do not refer to a particular plant species but to the nature of the ground – wet in some sense. The land adjacent to the *burna* just upstream of Little Missenden church looks relatively undisturbed. In February 2014 it was partially flooded, the dead leaves of a belt of tall grasses, reeds and other similar vegetation sticking up through the water (inaccessible and unidentifiable at the time). In 1996 this belt of 'grasses' was swampy unlike the margins of other *burnas* I have seen; *\*mysse* may in fact mean 'swampy' or 'squelchy'. There is clearly a lot more fieldwork to be done before satisfactory definitions of *mosi*, *mos* and *mēos* can be offered.

## Hay

There were two words in OE referring to hay. One is *heg* which is sometimes hard to distinguish from *haga* 'hedge, enclosure', *(ge)hæg* 'fence, enclosure', and *hēah* 'high place', so some possible examples are debatable. The other is *filithe*. *Filithe* is not common – there are about 12 examples, and it is absent from the north of England. The best known is probably Filton Airport north of Bristol. Oxfordshire boasts its own example in Phyllis Court situated in a riverside meadow in Henley-on-Thames. *Hegs* are much more common – over 50 examples are found occurring throughout England. There are two pairs of Upper and Lower Heyford, one in Oxfordshire, the other in Northamptonshire ('ford over which hay was carted for use or storage somewhere else'). There is a curious concentration of *heg* names on the edge of the Oxfordshire Chilterns – two Haileys (*lēah* 'clearing in a wood') three Haycrofts (croft – a 'field') and two others. Chiltern grassland is not lush and one would not think of it as yielding a good crop of hay, but maybe the demand was there - to support the cattle raised at Rotherfield (*hrythr* 'cattle', *feld* 'rough pasture') perhaps. A substantial number of *heg* names incorporate a term for a hill often *dūn*, sometimes *beorg*. In contrast *filithe* is combined with terms meaning riverside meadow (*hamm*) or well-watered valleys. The natural herbage of a *filithe* was likely to be lusher and yield more hay than a *heg* and was therefore more valuable. The species growing in these two types of hay meadow would have been different and no doubt obvious to those who wrested a living from the land (Cole 2013 pp. 48-9 and pp. 202-5).

The Anglo-Saxon peasant could 'read' the landscape and its possibilities by observing the plants of the locality. He was a knowledgeable botanist, but in a different way to those of us interested in plants today. We can learn from our forebears even if they are not here to learn from us!

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