'Find the lady': The Term *lady* in English and Scottish Place-Names

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Abstract

The term *lady* serves as the qualifying element of a number of place-names in the British Isles, and has a range of applications. This paper presents a corpus of such names from north-west England and south-east Scotland, and discusses issues of interpretation. Attention is drawn to recurrent compounds that may be indicative of name types rather than of *ad hoc* formations, and to comparative evidence that may suggest a religious context for some names previously considered to be secular. Analysis of the corpus as a whole reveals significant differences between toponymic and lexical uses of the term *lady*, highlighting the distinction between onomastic and non-onomastic language.

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Introduction

Most place-names in England and Scotland are made up of two elements: a generic element identifying the type of place, and a qualifying element giving more specific information, often with regard to appearance, association, ownership or use. One of the most common types of qualifier comprises a reference to a person or group of people. Of these, the majority are masculine, but a significant minority are feminine, with the potential to throw light on the role of women in early society. Many such qualifiers take the form of personal names, either identifying the landholder or commemorating a saint or other public figure. Others take the form of appellatives which may recur in different parts of mainland Britain.

One of the most ubiquitous of the latter group is the term *lady*, originally from Old English *hlǣfdige* but in place-names more often representing the Middle English reflex *lavedi* or its Middle Scots counterpart *ladi(e)*. Like many place-name elements, it has a range of uses. One is to denote a local woman. Since *lady* has connotations of high status from at least the medieval period onwards, some of these can be identified with women on historical record. Others designate otherwise unknown female landholders or members of the community, whose only memorial is the name itself. Another use of the term is with reference to Our Lady, the Virgin Mary, so a number of place-name occurrences comprise religious dedications, sometimes with a broader application relating to monastic ownership (Field 1993: 241–242). In some instances the referent may be notional, as with the interpretation of Ladyford in Westmorland as 'ford which could easily be crossed by a lady'. In others, the allusion may be to legal obligations, as with an alternative explanation of the same name as a ford whose upkeep was the responsibility of a woman (Hough 2008: 50). In others again, a legend associated with the name may either have given rise to it or have developed later, as with Lady's Rake in Cumberland discussed below.

Taken together, these place-names have the potential to contribute to our knowledge of the position of women in early English and Scottish society, and to the understanding of religious and cultural attitudes. However, their interpretation is not always straightforward, and it is often difficult to differentiate between secular and religious names, or to establish secure identifications with historical characters. The purpose of this paper is to assemble a corpus of names from *lady*

in north-west England and south-east Scotland in order to see what patterns emerge, and whether it may be possible to identify recurrent compounds that are indicative of name types rather than of *ad hoc* formations.

The corpus

The corpus of names set out in the appendix has been compiled mainly from the sources listed in the references, supplemented by the unpublished field-name collections of the Scottish Place-Name Survey. Abbreviations relate to the historical counties preceding the local government re-organisation of the 1970s, and names no longer in use are given in italics. I am very grateful to Alison Grant for advice on the Scottish Field-Name Survey, which she is currently entering into a database, and to Simon Taylor for generously allowing me access to material from the place-name survey of Fife in advance of publication.

Geographical coverage focuses on the English counties of Cumberland, Lancashire and Westmorland, and on the Scottish counties of Berwickshire, Dumfries-shire, Fife, Roxburghshire and the Lothians. These areas of England and Scotland are contiguous, as Cumberland borders on Roxburghshire. They also have much in common linguistically, as the border counties of south-east Scotland were the first to be settled by incomers from the northern Anglo-Saxon kingdoms during the early medieval period. Another factor taken into consideration in selecting the study area was availability of source material. The English Place-Name Survey has been in progress since the 1920s, but does not yet extend to the north-eastern counties of Northumberland and Durham. It does, however, include the north-western counties of Cumberland (Armstrong et al. 1950–52) and Westmorland (Smith 1967), while Lancashire has been covered by Ekwall (1922) supplemented by Kenyon (1984–85, 1985–86, 1988–89), and the Lake District as a whole by Whaley (2006). The only volume of the Scottish Place-Name Survey so far published deals with part of the eastern county of Fife (Taylor 2006), and some of the most reliable surveys of other areas of Scotland also relate to the south-east (Dixon 1933, Johnston 1940, MacDonald 1941, Macdonald 1991, Wilkinson 1992, Williamson 1942). Nonetheless, it should be borne in mind that place-name coverage is uneven throughout both England and Scotland, so that whereas every effort has been made to assemble as full a corpus as possible, it makes no claim to be comprehensive.

Some issues of interpretation

A few of the names within the corpus can be identified with known individuals. These include Lady's Pillar, a boundary stone in Westmorland named from Lady Anne Clifford, Countess of Pembroke (Smith 1967: ii, 17), Lady Mary's Wood in Fife, named from Lady Mary Lindsay Crawford (died 1833),[1] and others such as Lady Lowther's Well and Lady Wood (named from Lady le Fleming) in Westmorland (Smith 1967: ii, 39; i, 201), and Lady Lawson's Street, Lady Menzies Place, Lady Stair's Close and Lady Road in Edinburgh (Harris 1996: 380–381). Most of these appear to be 18th or 19th century formations, so it may be possible to conclude that the use of *lady* as a title appears fairly late in place-names. There are also indications that the term was used specifically of the property of a dowager (a widowed mother whose son has married) during this period. Lady Road is named from Mrs Gilmour, "mother of the last Gilmour laird of the Inch", and Lady Stair's Close supersedes an earlier *Lady Gray's Close* from Lady Stair's grandmother, the widow of Sir William Gray (Harris 1996: 380–381).

More doubtful is the eponym of Lady's Rake ('steep track') in Cumberland, "traditionally associated with the escape of Lady Derwentwater from Lord's Island in 1715" (Armstrong et al. 1950–52: ii, 317). Versions of the story are too confused and conflicting to carry conviction. One has her fleeing, laden down with jewellery, after the arrest of her husband following the failure of the Jacobite rebellion of 1715, while another presents Lord Derwentwater as a notorious robber,

and his wife as an honest woman who sets fire to his loot before beating a hasty retreat to London (Dodgson 1973–74: 44; Whaley 2006: 203). A further possibility is that there never was a Lady Derwentwater connected with the place-name. A number of names within the corpus appear to reflect the well-known tendency to personify landscape features, and to associate them in particular with female referents. Such an explanation is likely to account for the field-name *Lady's-leap* in Cumberland, as also for the peak known as Ladies Table in the same county, possibly named either from a flat boulder used by picnickers, or by analogy with Lord's Seat nearby (Whaley 2006: 202). We would look in vain for an actual lady to connect these with.

More puzzling is Ladyside Pike in Cumberland. Whaley (2006: 203) describes this as "a somewhat obscure name", noting that it is uncertain whether *side* means 'hillside' or results from an interchange with *seat*. Taken in isolation, the latter seems plausible, especially in view of the doublet Lady's Seat in Westmorland. Even within the small corpus in the appendix, however, there are three further combinations with *side*: a lost Cumberland field-name *the ladye side browe* recorded in 1589, and two additional field-names, Ladyside in Westmorland and Lady Side Park in Midlothian. Four occurrences of the same formation, in three different counties and on either side of the Scottish/English border, appears to confirm the second element as *side*, and suggests that this may have been a name type whose significance has now been lost.

Folk etymology

Not all names with current forms in *Lady-* originally contained the term, and those attributable to other derivations have generally been excluded from the corpus. Ladybank in Fife, from a Gaelic etymon *leathad bog* 'moist slope' reflecting its value as a source of peat (Dorward 1995: 95), appears to owe its modern form to folk etymology. Nevertheless, it is not without interest. As Coates (1987) has shown, folk etymology is motivated, not random. Here the motivation appears to be an association with the monks of the nearby abbey of Lindores, so that the development to *lady* is by analogy with religious names such as Ladykirk in Berwickshire and the field-name *le Leuedy crosse* in Westmorland.

Folk etymology may also have affected the development of Lady Fife's Brae in Edinburgh. Harris (1996: 380) suggests that the name was transferred to the *brae* ('hill') from a spring known as Lady Fife's Well, itself originally from the Scots word *ladie* 'slow running stream'. It has been included here since it appears to have been subsequently influenced by association with an actual Lady Fife, so that there is a genuine, although non-etymological, connection with *lady*.

Other names containing *ladie* 'stream' have not knowingly been included in the corpus, but can be difficult to distinguish from names containing *lady*. Harris (1996: 379) derives Ladycroft in Edinburgh from Scots *ladie* 'stream', but there are no early spellings to support such a derivation, and the occurrence of doublets in England tells against it. Many such names are ambiguous, and interpretation often depends on topographical evidence. Elsewhere in Midlothian, Ladyside (*Lediset* 1311–12), at the junction of Heriot Water and Ladyside Burn, is explained by Dixon (1933: 199–200) as "perhaps 'fold by a watercourse or torrent'", Ladiebridge refers to a bridge over the Stank Burn (Harris 1996: 379), and the field-name Ladyburn Meadow (*Ladie Meadow*, *Lady Meadow* 1654), is named from the Gogar Burn (Dixon 1933: 155). These are of particular interest since two of the names within the present corpus contain the northern English generic *sike*, which designates a similar type of water feature, and for which the combination with *lady* remains unexplained. Whereas a nonce occurrence could relate to a circumstance or incident now obscured by time, a second instance of the same formation suggests a meaningful compound. It might therefore be possible to suggest that Lady Sike in Westmorland and Lady Syke in Lancashire derive from *ladie* 'stream', representing an epexegetic compound similar to Ladyburn.

One problem with this theory is that *ladie* 'stream' is generally regarded as a Scots term, whereas both occurrences of Lady Sike/Syke are in England. This is not conclusive, as *ladie*

derives from Old English *(ge)lād* 'water-course' and could well be found in northern dialects of Middle English. Toponymic isoglosses are not always the same as lexical isoglosses. There is a further problem, however. As I have shown elsewhere, the generic *sike* also combines with other references to women in north-west England, including feminine personal names (Hough 2008: 57–58). These appear to provide a context for a literal interpretation of *lady* in the two occurrences of Lady Sike/Syke, although its application remains unclear.

Patterns and trends

Looking at the corpus of names as a group, three main characteristics emerge. One is the high proportion of topographical generics. Most generics in English and Scottish place-names are either habitative, referring to a building or buildings, or topographical, referring to a landscape feature. The strong preponderance of topographical generics represented here is quite untypical of the toponymicon as a whole. There are exceptions, such as Lady House, *Ladye Scale* ('hut'), Ladykirk, Lady's Mill, *Levedibuthes* ('booths') and so on, but the overwhelming majority are topographical. In part this may reflect the personification of landscape features mentioned above. However, there also seems to be a definite tendency for women to be connected with natural rather than man-made structures, an impression supported by comparison with a previous study of feminine personal names in English place-names from the Anglo-Saxon period (Hough 2002).

Also notable is the high occurrence of doublets and recurring formations. The seventy-five names in the corpus include two each from *acre*, *bank*, *brae* 'hill', *holme* 'island', *mos* 'peat bog' and *sike* 'stream', four each from *side* 'hillside' and *wood*, seven from *park*, and twelve from *well*. There may also be two from *eng* 'pasture land', as a 1690 spelling *Lady ings* suggests that the field-name Ladies in Westmorland may be a doublet of Lady ing in the same county (Smith 1967: ii, 113; ii, 67); and there are at least four and probably five from *land*, as *le Ladybandes* (Armstrong et al 1950–52: i, 165) seems likely to be a copying error. With the exception of *land*, represented here only in Cumberland, *park*, which seems to be confined to Scotland, and the Scots term *brae*, distribution appears to be fairly even on both sides of the present border.

The recurrence of identical formations is often a sign of a name type as opposed to an *ad hoc* formation. Lady Well is securely established as a name type referring to a well or (fertility) spring dedicated to the Virgin Mary. Both Lady Acre and Lady Land have plausibly been explained as "'land dedicated to the Blessed Virgin' for the maintenance of a chapel or shrine" (Field 1972: 120), and a similar interpretation is possible for Lady Fitts ('meadow') and the one or two names from *eng* 'pasture land', although either or both could alternatively allude to dowry land. A religious referent can also be identified for other names. Ladykirk and *le Leuedy crosse* have already been mentioned. Lady Holme in Westmorland, recorded with the alternative name *St Mary Holme*, is named from the Lady Chapel (Smith 1967: i, 193), raising the possibility of a similar derivation for the doublet in Cumberland. Lady Beck in Westmorland was named from *le Ladyswell* 1528, again a spring dedicated to the Blessed Virgin (Smith 1967: ii, 209). Lady Wynd in Edinburgh was named after the chapel of St Mary (Harris 1996: 381–382), as was Lady's Mill in Fife (Taylor 2006: 329), while Lady's Loan is the name of the road leading from Lady's Mill (Taylor 2006: 329). Ladycroft is the site of the present church building in Balerno. At a conservative estimate, more than a third of the names in the present corpus certainly or almost certainly use *lady* with reference to the Virgin Mary, and others may do. The proportion is even higher if we discount names such as Lady Lawson's Street, Lady Lowther's Well and Lady Mary's Wood, which use *lady* as a title rather than an appellative. And if we further omit names which result from folk etymology, as with Lady Fife's Brae, or where the application may be metaphorical, as with Ladies Table, there remain remarkably few names which either demonstrably or potentially use *lady* in its standard secular sense.

Conclusions

It seems to me that there are two general conclusions that can be drawn from this. Firstly, where a *lady*-name is ambiguous between a secular or religious interpretation, it may be appropriate to give greater weight to the latter. One of the earliest English place-names in north-east Scotland is *Leuedycothe* (1238) in the historical county of Nairn to the west of Moray. This was first identified by Barrow (1980: 201) and subsequently discussed by Nicolaisen (1999: 74), both of whom take the qualifier to be ambiguous between a local woman and the Virgin Mary: either 'the lady's cottage' or 'Our Lady's cottage'. On formal grounds, either interpretation is equally possible. However, the overall profile of *lady*-names reflected in the present corpus may tip the balance in favour of Mary. It may also be relevant that the Old English generic *cot* 'cottage' occurs in other name types, including religious ones. The recurrent formation Prescot(t) 'priests' cottage' has been taken to represent an endowment for the church; and close to St. Mary's in Moray on the 6 inch Ordnance Survey map (sheet 13) is St. Mary's Cottage.[2.] *Leuedycothe* could well fit into this type of formation, while the vanishingly small number of place-names using *lady* with reference to a local woman makes the alternative interpretation much less likely.

   My second conclusion concerns the distinction between onomastic and non-onomastic language. According to the available dictionary evidence (DSL, MED, OED), at no stage in the history of English or Scots has the primary use of the term *lady* been with reference to the Virgin Mary. Neither do metaphorical applications outnumber literal ones. Nonetheless, these appear to be the prevailing uses in place-names. The toponymic corpus is often quarried as a source of linguistic evidence, particularly for early vocabulary and semantics, as it preserves many words and meanings of words that are absent from the documentary record. But there is a danger in assuming that we can extrapolate from the onomastic material to other areas of language. Since the pioneering work of Nicolaisen (1995), it has become widely accepted that place-name generics may function differently from their lexical counterparts, representing a toponymic register which may have split off from vocabulary words early in the history of Indo-European. Qualifiers, however, are taken to be closer to ordinary language, and hence a more reliable guide to the contemporary lexicon (Nicolaisen 2007). The corpus of names from *lady* discussed above may bring this into question, and lead us to be more cautious in our approach to this type of evidence.

Appendix
Lady- names in north-west England and south-east Scotland

North-west England

f.n. Ladies We; f.n. *le Ladies Lands* (*le Lady Lande* 1605) Cu; Ladies Table Cu; f.n. Lady acre We; f.n. *le Ladybandes* (1634) Cu; f.n. *Ladybank* (1699) We; Lady Beck We; f.n. Lady crooks We; f.n. *Ladye mosse* (1589) Cu; f.n. *Ladye Scale* (1586) Cu; f.n. *the ladye side browe* (1589) Cu; f.n. Lady Fitts (1844) We; f.n. *Lady Flatt* (1748) Cu; Ladyford We; Lady Green La; Lady Hall Cu; f.n. *Lady Hills Quarry* (1794) Cu; f.n. *the Lady Holme* (*c*.1500) Cu; f.n. Lady Holme (*als. St Mary Holme* 1777) We; Lady House La; f.n. Lady ing We; Lady Lands Cu; f.n. *Ladylands Ford* (1786) Cu; Ladylands Lane Cu; f.n. Lady Lowther's Well We; f.n. *Lady mosse* (1605) Cu; f.n. Ladyside We; Ladyside Pike Cu; Lady Sike We; Lady Syke La; f.n. *Lady's-leap* (1784) Cu; Lady's Pillar We; Lady's Rake Cu; Lady's Seat We; Lady Well We (x 2); f.n. Lady Well We; f.n. Lady-Well We; *le Ladyswell* (1528) We; Lady Wood (1847) We; f.n. *le Leuedy crosse* (1332) We; f.n. *Levedibuthes* (*c*.1210) Cu; Lovelady Shield Cu

South-east Scotland

f.n. (Far and Near) Ladies Edge ROX; f.n. Lady Anne Park FIF; f.n. Lady Brae BWK; Ladycroft MLO; Lady Fife's Brae MLO; Ladykirk BWK; Lady Lawson's Street MLO; Lady Mary's Wood FIF; Lady Menzies Place MLO; f.n. Lady Park ROX; f.n. Ladyrigg MLO; Lady Road MLO; f.n. Ladyshot ROX; f.n. Lady Side Park MLO; Lady Stair's Close MLO; Lady's Acre WLO; Lady's Lea WLO; Lady's Loan FIF; Lady's Mill FIF; f.n. Lady's Park BWK; f.n. Lady's Park DMF (x 2); f.n. Lady's Park WLO; f.n. Lady Well BWK; f.n. Lady Well DMF; f.n. Ladywell ELO (x 2); Ladywell MLO; Ladywell WLO; Ladywood MLO; f.n. Lady Wood Field ELO; Lady Wynd MLO

County abbreviations

BWK = Berwickshire
Cu = Cumberland
DMF = Dumfries-shire
ELO = East Lothian
FIF = Fife
La = Lancashire
MLO = Midlothian
ROX = Roxburghshire
We = Westmorland
WLO = West Lothian

Notes

1. I owe this information to Simon Taylor.

2. I have been unable to trace any doublets of *Leuedycothe* itself in GBP or other sources. A Google search shows an apparent doublet Ladycot, in Highampton in the southern English county of Devon. However, this does not appear in the English Place-Name Survey, and I suspect it to be an error for (or variant of) Lydacott in Highampton, which appears to derive from a river-name *Lyde* or a personal name *Luda* (Gover et al 1931–32: i, 145). The earliest spelling *Ludecote* (1292, 1303, 1346, 1412, 1492) rules out a derivation from *lady*.

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Abbreviations

DSL = Dictionary of the Scots Language <http://www.dsl.ac.uk/>

GBP = Gazetteer of British Place Names <http://www.gazetteer.co.uk/>

MED = Middle English Dictionary <http://quod.lib.umich.edu/m/med/>

OED = Oxford English Dictionary <http://www.oed.com/>

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