PLACE-NAMES ILLUSTRATING SOCIAL AND LEGAL CUSTOMS

Victor OLARU
University of Craiova

ABSTRACT

The paper refers to that category of English place names which illustrate customs specific to different social classes and to legal practice in England. In most cases, *these place names contain as first element a word from Old English or from Old Scandinavian. There are discussed place names which reflect the early society divisions:* ***Kingston*** (*OE king + tun*), *frequently encountered in many districts in a range of variants*, ***Quainton*** (*OE cwen + tun*), ***Finglesham*** (*OE fengel + ham*), ***Aldermanbury*** (*OE alderman*), ***Charlton*** (*OE churl*), ***Childwall*** (*OE cild*). *As far as legal practice is concerned*, *the author mentions names of the type:* ***Damerham*** (*OE domere*), ***Tollerton*** (*OE tollere*), ***Shrewton*** (*OE gerefa*), *etc. To a large extent*, *these names were mentioned in writing after the Norman Conquest in 1066.*

Key words: *place names*, *society divisions*, *Old English*, *Scandinavian words*, *legal terms*

Judging from the extant codes of law, the main division in Anglo-Saxon society below the king was between the freeman and the serf. Both classes were subdivided, in the one case into freemen of noble birth and ordinary peasant cultivators, in the other into various classes of serfs. Here the reason for the differences is uncertain. Ignoring the serfs, the Laws of King Alfred divide society into three main classes: those of noble birth with more than five hides of land, those of noble birth with less than five hides of land and the freemen not of noble birth. These distinctions are peculiar to the Wessex of King Alfred in the late 9th century, but similar ones with local variations appear in other Anglo-Saxon kingdoms. An interesting group of place-names reflects these early divisions of society.

The obvious place to begin is with the numerous names containing the word *king*, in Old English *cyning*, *cyng*. This is often combined with tun, in all probability with the sense 'manor', as in Kingston, a name found in at least fifteen counties, the most northerly being Staffordshire. Identical with Kingston is Kingstone (Brk, He, St). In addition there is a group derived from *cyning* without the possessive -*es*, Keinton (So), Kenton (St), Kineton (Wa), and Kington (Gl, W). With others it is difficult to decide whether the first element is *cyning* or the related word OE *cyne* “royal”. Kennington (K), Kenton (Nb), Kineton (Gl), Kington (Do, He), and Kyneton (Gl) seem to be derived from the latter and mean “royal estate”. However, it must be emphasized that it is really impossible to decide between the two words in some of these names. It will be recognized of course that it is the similarity of form between *cyning*, *cyng* and *cyne* which inevitably led to confusion,

BDD-A3769 © 2008 Editura Sitech
Provided by Diacronia.ro for IP 216.73.216.25 (2026-11-07 19:58:48 UTC)

so that doubts about the correct etymology are hardly surprising. Moreover, the precise significance of “king's manor” and “royal manor” is uncertain. The earliest of these groups to be recorded in Anglo-Saxon documents is Kingston on Thames in 838, and what evidence is available to date suggests that they all belong to a later rather than earlier period in Anglo-Saxon England. Further, less than twenty of the names derived from *cyning* or *cyne* have royal associations during their recorded history, though clearly each must have been a royal manor or estate at the time the names were given. A good deal of research has already been completed on the Kingstons, but more remains to be done before we can define their meaning and significance much more exactly.

The problem is not eased by the fact that in a few names the Danish word *konungr*, corresponding to *cyning*, has apparently replaced the English word. So, instead of Kingston, we have Congerston (Lei) and Conisten (ERY, La, WRY) and instead of Kington, we have Conington (C, Hu). Moreover, it is at least highly likely that in two Lincolnshire place-names, Conesby and Coningsby, both Danish compounds meaning “king's estate, manor”, an original OE Cyningestün has been completely Scandinavianized to Konungsby. This would seem to be the most likely interpretation on historical grounds in view of the royal associations of the names.

The Old English word is also found with other second elements. A word for 'hill' occurs in Kingsdon (So) and Kingsdown (K), for 'wood or glade' in Kingsley (Ch, Ha, St), for “bridge” in Kingsbridge (D), for 'ford' in Kingsford (Wa), for 'stone' in Kingstone (So) and for “wood” in Kingswood (Gl, Sr, Wa). *Cyne* is found once with *stan* in Kingston on Soar (Nt) “royal stone”, though the editors of The Place-Names of Nottinghamshire comment cryptically "No such stone is known here now".

Later, King occurs as an affix in the names of some places held by the crown like King's Cliffe (Nth), Kings Newnham (Wa), King's Walden (Hrt), and Areley Kings (Wo). In medieval sources this is often translated as Latin Regis, the genitive singular, and this survives in Bartley Regis (Ha), Grafton Regis (Nth), and Newton Regis (Wa).

Special consideration should be given to a discussion of Kingston upon Hull, popularly referred to as simply Hull. The earlier names of the place were Wyke, presumably in some such sense as 'dairy-farm', and Hull, itself derived from the river of that name. The etymology, and so the meaning, of Hull is quite uncertain, though the most plausible suggestion is that it is a river-name of pre-English origin. The explanation of Kingston is given in The Place-Names of the Yorkshire, where it is noted that in 1292 Ewald I exchanged with the monks of the Cistercian Abbey of Meaux lands which the king held in Wawne (ERY) and Wilsby (L) for the purpose of securing the port. The place was then officially called 'the king's town'. Then in 1382 Richard II made a grant to the mayor and people of Kingston upon

BDD-A3769 © 2008 Editura Sitech
Provided by Diacronia.ro for IP 216.73.216.25 (2026-11-07 19:58:48 UTC)

Hull "to have a port below the said town formerly called Sayercryk and now called Hull, Sayer here being apparently a ME personal name.

Old English *cwen*, modern *queen*, unlike *cyning*, is rare in English place-names, though it may well occur in Quainton (Bk) and Quinton (Gl, Nth, Wo) 'queen's manor'. However, there can be no doubt that ME quene is the first element of Quinbury (Hrt) and Queenborough (K), since documentary evidence shows that they were named in honour of Maud, wife of King Stephen, and Philippa, wife of Edward III respectively. Queen survives at least once as an affix in Queen Charlton (So) after the manor had been given to Catherine Parr by Henry VIII.

A few places seem to have been named from Old English words meaning “prince”, such as fengel in Finglesham (K) “prince's homestea”, and cedeling, perhaps in Athelington (SO and Allington (Do, L, W) “manor belonging to the princes”, more certainly in Athelney (So) “princes' island of land”, and Adlingfleet (WRY) “prince's water-channel”.

The rank of aldormann, modern alderman, was that next to the king and members of the royal family. Its meaning is “nobleman of the highest rank” and the word is found in Aldermanbury (Mx) “alderman's manor”, the likely meaning also of Aldermaston (Brk) and Alderminster (Wo). This modern form of the Worcestershire name completely belies its origin for it is a name in tun, the editors of the Worcestershire survey commenting "Later the name underwent a curious corruption". During the 10th century, because of the influence of the Danish jarl “nobleman, earl”, aldormann was replaced as a title by OE *eorl*, originally merely “nobleman”. This may occur in Arleston (Db) and Earlstone (Ha) “estate, manor”, but there was also an Old English personal name Eorl and this is perhaps more likely to be the first element of these two names. After the Norman Conquest earl was the usual title for the great magnates and as such it is found as an affix to older names like Earl Framingham (Nf) from the Earls of Norfolk, Earls Heaton (WRY) from the Earls of Warren and Surrey, Plympton Erie (D) from the Earls of Devon, and Winterbourne Earls (W) from the Earls of Salisbury. The usual term in the 9th and 10th century for a member of the lesser nobility was egn, modern thane, but the original meaning of this word was “servant”. In Thenford (Nth) *thanes* “ford” it is really impossible to say in which sense it is used, though as we may see terms for servants are in fact rare in place-names.

The usual term for a free peasant below the rank of noble was OE *ceorl*, modern *churl*, which occurs frequently in Charlton, as well as Charleton (D) and Chorlton (Ch, La, St) “village of the free peasants”. In Carleton and Carlton, both fairly common names in Scandinavianized districts, however, the English word has been replaced by the corresponding Old Danish word *karl* “a freeman of the lower class”, and this word is perhaps the first element of Carlby (L) “village of the free peasants”. Alternatively, Carlby may rather contain the personal name Karl, a byname

BDD-A3769 © 2008 Editura Sitech
Provided by Diacronia.ro for IP 216.73.216.25 (2026-11-07 19:58:48 UTC)

formed from karl itself. Ceorl is also found in Chorley (Ch, La, St) “wood, glade”, as well as the self-explanatory Charlecote (Wa), Charleóte (W), Charlcott (Sa), as well as Charlwood (Sr). Only occasionally do we find a word for servant in English place-names, but OE *góp* is likely in Gopsall (Lei) “hill” and esne in Isombridge (Sa) “bridge of the servants”.

Two Old English words call for special mention: *cild*, modern *child*, and *cniht*, modern *knight*. The former is apparently used in various senses in place-names and in Childwall (La) and Chilwell (Nt) the meaning is quite uncertain, though the second element in both is *wella* “a spring”. In the common Chilton “farm, village, estate”, and Chilhampton (W) the genitive plural *cilda* is compounded with a word for a habitation and the sense is thought to be “young noblemen”, for it has been suggested that the word referred to the younger sons of a family to whom an estate had been given as a joint possession. The meaning of the word in Chilcote (Lei, Nth), like that in Childwall is really unknown. On the other hand, it would appear that individual possession is indicated by Chilson (O) and Chilston (K) where the first element is the genitive singular of *cild*. However, the young men who gave their name to Childwick (Hrt) were in all probability oblates of the abbey of St. Albans, who according to medieval records of the abbey, obtained milk from the place. A meaning “dairy farm of the oblates” would seem eminently satisfactory. Occasionally, Child was later affixed to an older name as in Chilfrome (Do) and Child's Ercall (Sa) in some sense now uncertain.

OE *cniht* similarly means “youth” so that Knightsbridge (Mx) is presumably “bridge where young men meet”. The word also meant “servant”, “retainer of a lord” and either sense is possible in the common Knighton “village, estate”, Knightcote (Wa) “cottage”, Knightley (St) “wood, glade”, and Knightwick (Wo), “dairy-farm”. The later sense of knight “a man raised to honourable military rank by the king” does not occur until the 12th century and so is not really to be reckoned with in place-names.

Some examples of Scandinavian terms for various ranks of society which occur occasionally in place-names include *hold*, an officer of high rank in the Danelaw, in Holderness (ERY) “headland of the hold”; *dreng*, a free tenant, probably in Dringhoe (ERY) “hill”, Dringhouses (WRY) self-explanatory, and Drointon (St) “village, estate”; and *leysingi* “freeman” perhaps in Lazenby (NRY) and Lazonby (Cu) “farm”, though the first element of these two names may rather be the personal name Leysingi, formed from the noun. Similarly, the first element of Bonby (L) and Bomby (We) “farm, village” could represent either *bondi* “peasant” or the personal name Bondi.

Official titles too are only rarely found in place-names, but OE *domere* “judge” is the first element of Damerham (Ha) “enclosure”, tollere “tax-gatherer” of Tollerton (NRY) “village, manor”, and *gerefa* “reeve, bailiff” of Reaveley (Nb) “wood, glade”. Sheriff, literally “shire-reeve” is the source of

BDD-A3769 © 2008 Editura Sitech
Provided by Diacronia.ro for IP 216.73.216.25 (2026-11-07 19:58:48 UTC)

Shrewton (W) and Shurton (So) “manor” and of Screveton (Nt), but here the form of the name has been partially Scandinavianized with initial Sc- for English Sh-. It is also found as an affix in Sheriff Hales (Sa) from the Sheriff of Shropshire who held the manor in 1086 and Sheriff Hutton (NRY) from a sheriff of York, Bertram de Bulmer who died in 1166.

Anglo-Saxon law recognized two main categories of land tenure. *Folcland* “folk-land” was held according to folk-right or customary law and from it the king drew certain food-rents and customary services. This has given Faulkland (So) and Falkland in minor names and field names. *Bocland* “book land” was granted by royal book or charter, usually with freedom from some of the customary services and is the source of the common Buckland, a name so far only noted in Hertfordshire and Lincolnshire outside the South of England.

We have already seen that two of the three divisions of free society in King Alfred's Wessex were men of noble birth with more than five hides of land and those with less than five hides. Sir Frank Stenton long ago pointed out that the hide, OE *hid*, formed the basis of social organization everywhere in Anglo-Saxon England except Kent. Hide denoted the amount of land which would support a household, a free family and its dependants and it seems to have been on an average 120 acres. This word occurs in place-names in the simplex form Hyde (Bd, Ch, Ha, Mx), which Ekwall believed should be translated “homestead consisting of one hide”. When it occurs as the second element of a compound it sometimes appears in the modern form as *-field* or *-head*. Occasionally it is compounded with a numeral as in the Wiltshire Toyd “two hides”, Fifield Bavant “five hides”, assessed as five hides in Domesday Book, and Tinhead “ten hides”. Fifield is paralleled by Fifield (O), and Tinhead by the affix in Stoketeignhead and Combeinteignhead (D), the name of an area containing thirteen manors, and, as the editors of The Place-Names of Devon point out, whose total hidage amounted to about ten. This area became known as the “Ten Hide”, and so we find early spellings like Stok in Tynyde in 1285 and Cumbe in Tenhide in 1227. The development to Teignhead is simply explained through the influence of the nearby R. Teign. Two further examples may be added, Nynehead (So) “nine hides”, and the affix in Piddletrenthide (Do) “thirty hides”, a manor actually assessed as thirty hides in Domesday Book.

The names of some places reflect the fact that they were charged with the payment of some particular tax. Galton (Do) and Yeldham (Ess) were respectively a farm and a homestead each having as first element OE *gafol* and *geld*, both meaning “tax”. Pennington (Ha, La) and Penton (Ha), where first element is OE *pening*, modern penny, apparently mean “estate subject to a penny rent”, and Galhampton (So), Galmington (D, So), Galmpton and Gammaton (both D) “estate of the rent or tribute-paying peasants”, from the genitive plural of OE *gafolmann* and *tun*.

BDD-A3769 © 2008 Editura Sitech
Provided by Diacronia.ro for IP 216.73.216.25 (2026-11-07 19:58:48 UTC)

The first element of others indicates that their ownership had at one time or another been in dispute as must have been the case at Threapland (Cu, WRY) “disputed land”, Threapwood (Ch) and Threepwood (Nb) “disputed wood” from preap “dispute quarrel”. This is also the meaning of Callingwood (St) which is a French-English hybrid name. On the other hand, Warley (Ess) may perhaps have a first element OE *war*, “agreement, covenant” and so mean “agreement wood or glade” which would indicate the settlement of such a dispute. Other names denote places which were commonly owned as with Manton (Nt, R, W) referring to a farm, estate or manor which was communally owned, since the first element here is OE *mcene*. Both Manea (C) and Maney (Wa) were islands of land or raised pieces of land in marsh which were similarly owned, while Mangreen (Nf), Manley (Ch, D), and Meanwood (WRY) were respectively a grassy place, a wood or glade, and a wood held communally, each being derived from mcene. Some similar statement of ownership or possession seems to be indicated by Almondbury (WRY) presumably “fortified place belonging to the community” for the first element is the ODan word almenn “all men”.

Words used for different types of criminals are not infrequent in minor names. OE *sceqda* “thief, criminal” occurs in Scadbury Park (K), a name which presumably denoted a disused fortification frequented by thieves; *saitere* and *sceacere* “robber” are found repectively in Satterleigh (D) and the Lancashire Shackerley and Shakerley, each meaning “robbers' wood". *Fleming* “fugitive” is thought to occur in Fleam Dyfce (C) post-Roman earthjiwwk and so is comparable with Wrekendike (Du), which has wrecca, modern wretch, 'fugitive' as first element. OE *wearg* “felon” is compounded with hyll in Wreighill (Nb), the name probably meaning “hill where criminals are executed” and with *burna* in Warnborough (Ha) “stream where felons are drowned, while Worgret. (Do) and Warier (ERY) have *rod* “cross” and *tréow* “tree” a* respective second elements, denoting “gallows where criminals are executed”. Gallows itself is especially frequent in minor names and lost medieval field-names, but Gawber (WRY) “gallows hill” is an example of the occurrence of the word in the name of a more important place. Gawber and Gawtre(e) are in fact spellings commonly found in lost names of the 16th and 17th centuries, the latter clearly meaning “gallows tree”. Here too probably belongs Dethick (Db) literally “death oak”, no doubt an oak-tree on which criminals were hanged. On the other hand Flamstead (Hrt) means “place of flight”, for fugitives and perhaps also criminals, and it has been pointed out that later a condition of the tenure of the manor was that protection should be given to travellers. It would seem, therefore, that something of the original meaning of the place-name was still alive in the Middle Ages.

Examples have already been given of names denoting meeting-places connected with local government, especially those which became the names of hundreds and wapentakes. Similar names are not

BDD-A3769 © 2008 Editura Sitech
Provided by Diacronia.ro for IP 216.73.216.25 (2026-11-07 19:58:48 UTC)

uncommon, though often we have no idea what kind of a meeting was held at the particular place. This is so with Matlock (Db), literally “speech oak-tree”, derived from OE *maidel* “speech”, hence “oak at which a meeting is held” and Matlask (Nf), literally “speech ash-tree”, and so “ash-tree at which a meeting is held”. It is worth noting that the -ask spelling here is a Scandinavianized form of OE *cese*, modern ash. Similar names for meeting-places include Spellow (La) literally “speech mound”, and Spellow is also commonly found in minor names. Like Spellbrook (Hrt) “speech brook”, which must have been a brook where meetings were held, they are derived from OE *spell* “speech”, while Spetchley (Wo) “speech glade”, one of the meeting-places of the hundred of Oswaldlow, is from OE *spec*, modern speech. Another meeting-place of the same hundred was probably Stoulton, literally “seat farm, village”, from OE *stól* “stool, seat”, modern stool. It has been suggested that here it was the seat of the judge or speaker at the hundred court and if so the place-name would mean “village with or near the speaker's seat”. A comparable name would be Mottistone (Wt) 'speaker's stone', from OE *mótere* “a speaker at an assembly”, the stone being a large menhir which still stands on the hill above the modern village.

Runnymede (Sr) is apparently an old meeting-place which may be the reason why the meeting between King John and the Barons, at which Magna Carta was sealed, took place there. Its present-day form means “meadow at Runy”, and Runy originally meant “island where a council is held”, from OE run “secret, mystery, council”, which has given modern rune, the term for the ancient Germanic alphabet.

OE and ODan *ping* “meeting, assembly” each occur as the first element of several names. The English word is found in Thinghill (He) “hill”, Tingrith (Bd) “stream”, in Finedon (Nth) “valley”, and Fingest (Bk) “wooded hill”. In the last two names F- for Th- is a late dialectal development. The Scandinavian word is found more particularly in the compounds *pingvollr* “assembly field”. The first is the source of Fingay Hill (NRY), perhaps the meeting place of the whole Riding, and the second has given Thingwall (Ch, La) and Dingbell Hill (Nb), as well as Tynwald, the site of the court of the Isle of Man.

BIBLIOGRAPHY

Cameron, K., *The Place-Names of Derbyshire*, EPNS 27-29, Cambridge, 1954.

Copley, G.J., *English Place-Names and their Origins*, Newton Abbot, 1968.

Ekwall, E., *The Concise Oxford Dictionary of English Place-Names*, Oxford, 1960.

Gelling, M., Nicolaisen, W.F.H., Richards, M., *The Names of Towns and Cities in Britain*, revised reprint, London, 1986.

BDD-A3769 © 2008 Editura Sitech
Provided by Diacronia.ro for IP 216.73.216.25 (2026-11-07 19:58:48 UTC)

Mawer, A., Stenton, F.M., ed. *Introduction to the Survey of English Place-Names*, EPNS 1, Cambridge, 1924.
Mills, A.D., *A Dictionary of English Place-Names*, Oxford, 1991.
Reaney, P.H., *The Origins of English Place-Names*, A.L.F., London, 1960.
Reaney, P.H., *The Place-Names of Cambridgeshire and the Isle of Ely*, EPNS 19, Cambridge, 1943.
Room, A., *A Concise Dictionary of Modern Place-Names in Great Britain and Ireland*, Oxford, 1983.
Smith, A.H., *English Place-Name Elements*, EPNS 25-26, Cambridge, 1956.
Smith, A.H., *The Place-Names of Gloucestershire*, EPNS 38-40, Cambridge 1964.

BDD-A3769 © 2008 Editura Sitech
Provided by Diacronia.ro for IP 216.73.216.25 (2026-11-07 19:58:48 UTC)