The Book of English Place Names

Caroline Taggart

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ABOUT THE BOOK

Do you know your ham from your ton? Your wick from your bury? Who founded your town, conquering Romans or ancient Celts?

The Book of English Place Names is a witty and informative guide to the meanings behind the names of England's towns and villages. From ancient legends of giants and knights, mysterious sacred sites, and powerful rulers whose names are still enshrined in the places they ruled, discover the rich history behind our place names.

Starting with scattered Celtic tribes, through to Norman conquerors, and right up to the Industrial Revolution, learn how generations of our ancestors lived, worked, travelled and worshipped. Region by region, Caroline Taggart uncovers hidden meanings that, together, tell the fascinating story of how we made England.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Caroline Taggart worked in publishing as an editor of popular non-fiction for 30 years before being asked to write *I Used to Know That*, which became a Sunday Times bestseller. Her later books include *My Grammar and I (or should that be 'Me'?)* and *Her Ladyship's Guide to the Queen's English*. As a result, she has appeared frequently on BBC Breakfast and on national and regional radio, talking about language, grammar and Pythagoras' theorem. With her editorial hat on, she also visits writers' conferences around the country, advising would-be authors on how to get published and learning what their place names mean.

THE BOOK OF
ENGLISH
PLACE NAMES

HOW OUR TOWNS AND
VILLAGES GOT THEIR NAMES

CAROLINE TAGGART

EBURY
PRESS

For Niki and Julia, without whose generous purchasing power
my books wouldn't have been anything like as successful
as they have been – and because it's Wednesday.

INTRODUCTION

It's a proud boast among us British that we haven't been successfully invaded since 1066. We fended off Napoleon, Hitler and goodness knows who else besides. What we tend to overlook, though, is how often we were invaded *before* 1066. Starting in AD 43, four waves of invaders settled in what the Romans called Britannia (that's four if you lump each group together; many, many more if you choose to separate the Angles from the Saxons from the Jutes and if you count the number of individual Viking incursions). Each brought its own culture, its own language and its own way of doing things. As the power of each waned, as armies withdrew, royal lineages died out and yesterday's conquerors became today's settlers, mingling and intermarrying with the people they had overthrown, they left behind one indelible marker: the names they had given to places.

The name of a place gives us hints not only about who used to live there, but about how they made their living, who their leaders were, what gods they worshipped. It tells us why people chose to settle in a particular spot rather than in another just down the road – perhaps there was a ford at A; perhaps B was a farmable valley in a mountainous area and C a hilltop site that was easy to defend. In the most primitive cultures, place names are basic: if you never move far from home, it's enough to call your local river 'the river', because it is the only one – or

the only one that matters. (The same attitude leads Londoners to routinely call the Thames 'the river' to this day.) As civilisation develops, however, place names need to be more sophisticated. Once you start trading with nearby villages, you need to be able to tell them apart, even if you do nothing more inventive than name them 'North Village', 'Middle Village' and 'South Village' (that's where all those Nortons, Middletons and Suttons come from). A village with one outlying farm can refer to 'the outlying farm'. Once there are two of them, you need to come up with names such as 'the outlying farm by the bridge' (Brigstock) and 'the outlying farm by the road' (Radstock). If there are two southerly villages, they might become 'the southern village by the bridge' (Sutton Bridge – it isn't always rocket science, this place-naming business) and 'the long southern village' (Long Sutton). A village large enough to have two churches might split in two and become, say, Chalfont St Peter and Chalfont St Giles. And so it goes on. Some English place names date back two thousand years, a few were created for 'new towns' in the nineteenth century, and there are many thousands in between – but all have a story to tell.

Before we get into those stories, though, let's have a quick look at the people who created them.

In the beginning, there were the Celts or Britons. (Actually, the Celts weren't the first inhabitants of Britain, which is why you'll occasionally see the word 'pre-Celtic' in the entries later on, but we know almost nothing about them and they were a long time ago, so …) It's an over-simplification to speak of the Celts as one people, because they were made up of a number of tribes who fought a great deal among themselves. For our purposes, though,

they had one important thing in common: their language. It differed from place to place, as local dialects differ the world over, but it was fundamentally the same language. Its descendants are Welsh, Cornish, Gaelic and Irish and we'll call it Old Celtic.

To defend themselves, the Celts built hill forts; when they weren't fighting they farmed and lived in small communities headed by a chieftain. They were also skilled metal workers and had established trade routes with Europe, notably for the export of Cornish tin. Crucially, there weren't very many of them: the population of Britain in 750 BC was probably about 150,000, although it grew quite a bit over the next few centuries as certain tribes gained in importance and held sway over an area equivalent to several modern counties, reducing the need to skirmish. But settlements in the earliest times were few and far between and place names were workmanlike. To a large extent the names of the Celtic settlements themselves have been superseded and lost (LONDON is a notable and mysterious exception); most of the place names that have come down to us in Celtic form are those they gave to major rivers and hills. Avon comes from the Old Celtic for 'river'; the names of the THAMES, Severn, TRENT and many others also date back to these early days. *Penn*, meaning 'head' and thence 'hill', survives in names such as PENZANCE, PENRITH and the Pennines.

These, then, were the people who were in residence when the Romans arrived.

The first Roman invasion of Britain took place under Julius Caesar in 55 BC, but didn't last long. However, the link had been established: the following century saw an expansion of trade between Britain and the Roman Empire; some chieftains' sons were sent to Rome to be educated. So when a quarrel broke out over the succession to the leadership of a tribe, the offended party appealed to Rome for help – and Rome took the opportunity to annex Britain

as part of the empire. In AD 43, during the reign of the Emperor Claudius, Roman soldiers landed in what is now Kent and spread across the country.

Given the divided nature of Celtic society, it is not surprising that some tribes were friendly to Rome and others were hostile. The conquest of Sussex and Hampshire was easy, while Dorset, Wales and the northern part of the country occupied by the particularly belligerent Brigantes gave trouble and led to considerable bloodshed, and the far south-west established a reputation for impenetrability that would stand it in good stead for centuries to come.

But in the end the Romans prevailed and they remained in charge of most of England, except Cornwall, for almost four hundred years. They took over the sites of many of the Celtic hill forts – after all, a good defensive site is a good defensive site, whoever had the idea in the first place – and established military bases and supply depots; in times of peace, these became the building blocks of towns. These weren't the only towns, though; the Romans soon set about building more. They loved towns. To them, towns were the centres not only of trade but of cultured life. The important buildings – baths, theatres, temples – were made of stone, which is why so many remnants survive to this day. And, of course, they were linked by the famous Roman roads, still noticeable on the map because they run so nearly straight. Under Roman rule the population of Britain grew to three to four million – a level it didn't hit again until at least the fourteenth and possibly the sixteenth century – and although most people continued to farm much as they had always done, towns flourished as they had never before.

The Romans were great expansionists, but one name stands out as the exception to that rule: Hadrian. Emperor from AD 117 to 138, Hadrian decided that the empire had expanded far enough and consolidation became the order of the day. He instigated the building of a wall to protect 'his' part of Britain from the depredations of the tribes to

the north. Hadrian's Wall is important for our purposes simply because it gave the Romans another excuse to build camps – and to give them names.

Very few Latin names from the period of the Roman occupation are still in use (the Anglo-Saxons, about whom there will be more in a minute, translated and adapted them), but many towns and camps survived. The Latin word for a garrison or military camp was *castra* and it would have been familiar all over the Roman Empire. Certainly it was familiar to the Angles and Saxons before they came to Britain, because it is their version of the word, *ceaster*, that has found its way into many modern names. It wasn't the Romans who added these endings: they were great ones for adapting what was already there. So, for example, in COLCHESTER, they took over a place called Camulodunon, Latinised it to Camulodunum and left it at that. Similarly, in CHESTER, the Celtic Deoua became the Latin Deva. Names ending in *–ceaster* emerged during the Anglo-Saxon period. So they really mean not so much 'the Roman fortified town' as 'you remember, that place where the Romans used to be'.

It's a cliché that all good things must come to an end and by the time the Roman Empire came to an end it hadn't been a good thing for a long time. AD 410 is the date usually given for the 'fall' of Rome, but by then the empire had been in serious trouble for more than a century. Roman troops had been gradually withdrawn from Britain as they were needed to quell uprisings elsewhere. They were certainly all gone by the middle of the fifth century, creating, of course, a vacuum.

Enter the next wave of invaders.

Even in Roman times, Saxons from across the Channel had been conducting raids on the east coast of Britain, and now the time was ripe for a full-scale takeover bid. The Saxons were not alone in grasping this opportunity. Two other tribal groups from northern Europe, the Angles and

the Jutes, took control of parts of Britain in the fifth and sixth centuries. Culturally and linguistically related, these three groups are usually referred to (inaccurately but conveniently) as the Anglo-Saxons and their language was what we now call Old English. Unlike the Romans, the Anglo-Saxons were largely illiterate, so local records from this period are – to put it mildly – scant. But we know that the Jutes settled in Kent, the Isle of Wight and the mainland opposite it, while the Saxons took over the south and west of the country and the Angles the east and north. From these beginnings there eventually emerged four powerful kingdoms: Wessex, which extended south from the Thames and included the modern counties of Hampshire and Dorset; East Anglia, covering roughly the same area as it does now; Mercia, across the middle of England south of the Humber; and Northumbria, much of England north of the Humber. Like the Romans, the Anglo-Saxons never quite got to grips with Devon and Cornwall, which is why so many Celtic names remain there.

But they took over the rest of the country pretty thoroughly. After the departure of the Romans, Britain's population had declined drastically – and not just because of the absence of Romans. Society had fallen apart. Disease was probably rife, many Britons fled the country and many of those who remained became slaves or at best subservient to the invading tribes: they had been subservient to the Romans for years, so what difference did it make? The Anglo-Saxons didn't go in for towns in the way that the Romans did, but they established an enormous number of smaller settlements which survived and grew. Any place name ending in *–ham* or *–ton*, *–hampton* or *–hampstead* is likely to have started life as an Anglo-Saxon homestead or farm (see the box *Farming Country 1*), and they were responsible for most of the *–fields* and the *–leys*, the *–downs* and the *–eys*, too. In fact, the vast majority of modern English settlement names have their origins in Old

English; most of the other contributions are either oddities or window dressing.

Before we come to the next invasion, we need to digress for a moment and look at another great influence on English place names: Christianity. Christians were persecuted throughout the Roman Empire until the Emperor Constantine converted to the religion in the fourth century and, with a few notable exceptions (see St Albans and St Helens in the box on *Saints*), the religion had little lasting impact on Britain in Roman times. Thereafter, it arrived in three principal phases. Missionaries, most now regarded as saints, travelled to Cornwall from Brittany, Wales and Ireland from about the fifth century and are commemorated in a number of place names (see, for example, the entries for PADSTOW and KEYNSHAM). In the following century, St Columba came from Ireland to Iona in Scotland. From there he sent out missionaries who founded the great monastery at LINDISFARNE and spread the faith across Northumbria. One of the most notable converts of this period was Oswald, whose story is told under OSWESTRY and who was responsible for the founding of two other great monasteries, those at WHITBY and JARROW.

Finally, in 597, Pope Gregory the Great sent a mission, headed by St Augustine, to see what he could do with the rest of the country. Some pagan kings among the Anglo-Saxons had already married Christian princesses from the Continent and converted, but nominal religious faith seems to have gone hand in hand with actual political advantage, so to what extent Christianity filtered down to the populace at large is open to debate. Be that as it may, Augustine founded a monastery at CANTERBURY and converted the East Saxons – the first St Paul's cathedral in LONDON dates back

to this time. Thereafter, monasteries abounded: dominated by minster churches (the words 'monastery' and 'minster' derive from the same root), they were the homes of monks who generally lived apart from the rest of the world but who offered hospitality to travellers and 'ministered' to the sick. For almost a millennium, monasteries were the greatest centres of learning in the country. The monks compiled and illuminated manuscripts which were both objects of great beauty and works of phenomenal scholarship. The monasteries also became immensely rich – as we shall see in a moment. William the Conqueror endowed them with vast tracts of land, and it was common for kings and noblemen to make generous donations to the church in the hope of saving their souls in the long term and keeping the local abbot on side in the meantime. These are the establishments that were looted during the reign of Henry VIII in the act of institutionalised vandalism known as the Dissolution of the Monasteries. Before that, however, towns had grown up around them, just as they had grown up around fortresses in earlier times.

But we're getting ahead of ourselves. Let's go back to the Anglo-Saxon kingdoms, which struggled for supremacy among themselves for several hundred years. In theory, a king's son would inherit from his father; in practice, a kingdom went to the man who mustered the largest army and wielded the mightiest sword. King Offa of Mercia, who built the dyke that bears his name, remained in power for forty years during the eighth century, a remarkable achievement suggesting he was a very great warrior indeed. But soon after his death Mercia was playing second fiddle to Wessex. And by this time there was a new set of

players on the scene: from Denmark and Norway came the Vikings.

The Vikings – also known as Norsemen – were great seafarers (some would say pirates). They were also pagans and their most serious initial attacks were on the monasteries at Jarrow, Lindisfarne and Iona in the closing years of the eighth century. A generation later they had built up to almost yearly raids and in 865 came a full-blown invasion. The Vikings landed in East Anglia and turned north, taking control of the kingdoms of East Anglia and Northumbria within three years. Wessex, however, put up more of a fight.

In 871 the man we now know as Alfred the Great became King of Wessex and in 878 he won a battle against the Danes that enabled him to negotiate a deal. The two powers drew an imaginary line across England roughly from London to Chester. They acknowledged Danish control of everything to the north and east of it: an area that became known as the Danelaw. Danish influence – on life, the universe and place names – was profound in East Anglia, Lincolnshire and the north-east. The Old Scandinavian equivalent of the Old English –*ham*, meaning a homestead, is –*by*, and from Whitby to Derby to Ashby de la Zouch that memento of Danish occupation remains.

A combination of diplomacy, prudent marriages and luck kept Alfred and his descendants in charge of the south and west; the kingdom of Mercia ceased to be a political giant. Alfred was, in fact, one of the first to use the name England, 'land of the Angles'. Inspired by the example of the Venerable Bede ([see here](#)), he was thinking about a united country. It was about this time that the Anglo-Saxons – who, for all their scrapping, were pretty hot on admin – invented the *shire* as a way of governing the country at a more grassroots level (see the box on *[Shires and Counties](#)*). Peace – of a sort – reigned.

It couldn't last, though, could it?

Skating quickly over Wessex's incursions into Danelaw, Norwegian raids on the north-west, and disputes with and among the Welsh and the Scots, we come to the year 960. The Danes have been thrown out by a succession of powerful English kings. England is more or less united under Alfred's great-grandson Edgar. But by 1000, under Ethelred the Unready, it is in trouble again and in 1016 it accepts a Danish king, Cnut or Canute. Cnut, being also King of Denmark and Norway, is something of an absentee landlord as far as England is concerned. To aid administration, therefore, he divides the country into four earldoms, corresponding with the four great kingdoms of earlier times – Wessex, Mercia, East Anglia and Northumbria. Which, inevitably, creates four powerful earls…

Fast-forward another half-century and we find a mess. The Danish line has died out and England has been ruled for twenty-four years by the Saxon Edward the Confessor, son of Ethelred. When he dies at the beginning of 1066, the strongest of a number of men aspiring to the throne is Harold Godwinson, Earl of Wessex. Also in the race is a Norwegian called Harald Hardrada, whom Harold G defeats on 25 September at a place called Stamford Bridge, near YORK; Harald H is killed. So far so good, if you are on Harold G's side. But now the remaining contender moves to stake his claim. William, Duke of Normandy, lands at PEVENSEY on 28 September, a mere three days after the battle of Stamford Bridge. Pevensey, as you may know, is in Sussex. Some distance from York.

There had been a treaty between England and Normandy since Ethelred the Unready's time. Indeed, Ethelred had married the then Duke's daughter, so there were ties of kinship too. William was illegitimate, but had succeeded to the title because he was his father's only son; in terms of pure genealogy, he had the strongest claim to Edward the Confessor's throne. Some also say that Harold

Godwinson, as Edward's ambassador to Normandy, had previously promised to support William's claim when the time came. Whether that is true or not, Harold raced south to confront William, who, almost inevitably, defeated the exhausted Saxon army at Hastings on 14 October. Harold was killed (arrow in the eye? Maybe, maybe not) and William, who had started the autumn as William the Bastard, was on Christmas Day crowned William, first Norman king of England – 'William the Conqueror'. Not a bad three months' work.

Three things happened in Norman times that were relevant to William's ability to rule his kingdom and remain relevant to place names today. The first was that, having confiscated the land held by Saxon nobles, he proceeded to give lots of it away – to his own nobles and to the church. These nobles – whom we describe colloquially as 'lords of the manor' – didn't generally change the names of the estates they acquired; they simply added to them. SHEPTON MALLETT, LEIGHTON BUZZARD and MILTON KEYNES are all places whose original name (Shepton, Leighton, Milton) was Old English but whose Norman landlords satisfied their egos by tacking on their own name. The church did the same, often using its official language – Latin – to give us roll-it-round-the-tongue-and-savour-it names such as Kingsbury Episcopi, 'the king's manor that now belongs to the bishop'. Dorset boasts a village called Toller Fratrum: Toller (Old Celtic for 'hollow stream') from the name of the river, Fratrum from the Latin for 'of the brothers' – that is, the monks or priests. With just a hint of bathos, there is a village on the same river called Toller Porcorum, 'of the pigs'. Well, the brothers had to eat.

The second thing that happened was that William and his successors built castles: about five hundred of them within a generation of the Conquest. Primarily designed for defence, many became residences with support staff and service industries – cue the development of more towns.

The distribution of both Norman names and Norman castles across the country is interesting. Winterborne Clenston, Askham Bryan, Acton Pigott and their ilk are found as far south-west as Somerset and Dorset, as far west as Shropshire and as far north as Yorkshire. They are less common in the far south-west and the far north. We have already reflected on the impenetrability of Cornwall; William the Conqueror also had trouble persuading the people in the north of England to accept his rule. What with that, and the ongoing conflict with the Welsh that is the theme of the chapter on Western England ([see here](#)), it should be no surprise to note that these are the areas where most castles were built and where names suggesting that the Normans had just settled down and got on with their lives are comparatively rare.

Finally on that list of three things, William commissioned the most remarkable document that any student of place names anywhere in the world could ask for: the Domesday Book. This was a survey, carried out in a matter of months in 1086, of all the lands that made up England; everything that the king, the church or the nobility owned; who had owned it in Edward the Confessor's time and how much it had been worth then; who owned it now and how much it was worth; who sublet which parts of it and how many ploughs, horses and other animals they possessed; what sort of state the land was in; and – most importantly – how much tax was paid on each holding. It was invaluable to William and his successors for the purposes of raking in money; it is equally invaluable in the examination of place names because it records more than 13,000 of them and tells us how they were spelt (or how the Normans decided they were spelt) at that one precise moment: 1086. Although the Domesday Book is written in Latin, the names are not Latinised: what is written down is exactly what places were called in the vernacular. For many names, Domesday is the first record

we have; for many others it is an indispensable halfway house between the Old English found in earlier documents and the modern form.

Although names continued to evolve for several centuries before modern usage and spelling were settled upon, the Norman Conquest is the final of the five great contributions to English place-name development. The earlier ones, as we have seen, were the Celts, the Romans, the Anglo-Saxons and the Danes. But that does not mean that every name is either Celtic or Latin or Old English or…

It's worth noting at this point that none of these conquerors attempted to exterminate the people they conquered. Subjugate, yes, but after they had established their supremacy they settled down, intermarried and had children. It's one of the reasons the Danes were able to take control so easily under Cnut: half of England thought of itself as more Danish than English anyway.

This practice of intermingling rather than suppressing is reflected in place names, which are often as hybrid as the people who produced them. As we shall see in the individual entries, names were added to, translated, changed, misheard, misunderstood, mispronounced or any random combination of the above. Many clearly went through a stage in which the person writing it down thought, 'That can't be right', even though it was, or 'It looks a bit like so-and-so, so I guess that's what it must be', when it was nothing of the sort. Before the age of mass communication, a scribe in the north (with his ear attuned to a Scandinavian tongue) might write a name one way, while his counterpart in the south (used to Old English) understood something if not completely different, at least different enough to cause confusion to posterity. And in a

time when few people travelled and no one watched Australian soaps on television, regional variations – a bit more Danish here, a little less Norman French there – would have taken a much firmer hold than they do today.

I said a moment ago that the Domesday Book was often an invaluable halfway house between the oldest recorded form and the modern one. But where no earlier record exists, sometimes we have to fall back on educated guesswork to establish a place's meaning. For example, in addition to the *hām* that meant a homestead, Old English had a word *ham(m)* or *hom(m*) meaning 'a flat piece of land in the bend of a river' or some other partially enclosed piece of land. Early spellings of Twickenham, not to mention its position on a kink in the THAMES, tell us that this was definitely a *hamm*. With Beckenham in Kent, however, there is no clear evidence – the earliest record is ambiguous and we have to admit that we can't be sure. Going back to Twickenham, although we are confident of the *–hamm*, we don't know whether the piece of land belonged to a man named Twicca, or was in a fork in the river. That's why words such as 'probably' and 'maybe' occur so often in the entries of this book.

Although the Normans didn't generally change place names beyond the 'lord of the manor' additions mentioned above, they had a huge influence on spelling and pronunciation, because of differences between their own language and Old English. In the latter, a *g* at the end of a word was a guttural sound which didn't exist in Norman French. Thus the word *burh* and more particularly its dative form *byrig*, meaning '(at) a fortified place', caused them problems. And remember, they were the bosses: no one was going to tell them they were getting it wrong. Eventually, therefore, Norman pronunciation became standard and the written language evolved to mimic it, producing the *–bury*, *–burgh* or *–brough* of many names. Similarly, the Old English *c* was hard – either *k* or *ch* – and

words beginning with *sc* (pronounced *sk*) were common. No problem to the Danes and Norwegians, whose languages contained similar sounds. In Wessex, however, even before the Conquest, they were often softened to *s* and *sh* – a tendency that would have been reinforced when the Normans started to struggle with them. This goes a long way towards explaining why *kirk* and *church* are fundamentally the same word, and why a place whose first syllable refers to sheep (*scēap* in Old English, with the *c* originally pronounced *k*) is now Skipton in Yorkshire but Shipton in various towns further south.

Mention of the dative case introduces another point that is worth expanding: Old English nouns were inflected in a way that Modern English nouns are not. This means that they changed endings to indicate details that we show with prepositions: the basic (nominative) form of the word for king was *cyning*, but if you wanted to say 'of the king' (genitive) it was *cyninges*, 'to or at the king' (dative) *cyninge*, 'of the kings' (genitive plural) *cyninga* and 'to or at the kings' (dative plural) *cyningum*. All these variations turned up in early records and could lead to names with similar meanings evolving in different ways. The genitive *s* ending survives in Modern English as the '*s* that shows possession and is to be seen in many place names along the lines of KINGSTON and SHREWSBURY.

Some of the evolutions from Old to Modern English seem inexplicable at first glance. For example, a ninth-century document records the name of Sodbury (now Chipping Sodbury, see the box on *Market Towns,*) as Soppanbyrig. In fact, this transition gives four useful examples of the many ways in which changes occur. First, when two consonants that the lips and tongue produce in similar ways (in this case the *p* and *b*) occur in close proximity, one tends to be changed over time to give something easier to pronounce. Second, an unstressed middle syllable may simply be swallowed. Third, the final *g*

was the tricky sound mentioned above. And fourth, if a name can be made shorter, it will, even if it means losing any clue as to the meaning. These changes were well under way by the time of the Domesday Book, a mere twenty years after the Norman Conquest. It records Soppanbyrig as Sope-berie (that pesky ending has been disposed of). Sobbyri is found in 1269 (middle syllable has gone, name is getting shorter) and Sodbury in 1316 (tongue-twisting consonants sorted out). These changes did not happen overnight or systematically, but they all made some sort of sense.

Before moving on, it would be wrong to give the impression that every place name in England dates back to the Middle Ages and beyond. The Industrial Revolution in general, and the arrival of railways in particular, led to the creation of a number of new towns in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, so that we find places such as FLEETWOOD, founded by and named after a local MP who thought it would serve as an entrepôt for goods being transported from London to Scotland. The names of MORECAMBE and BLACKPOOL are ancient, but the towns themselves barely existed before the arrival of that other eighteenth-century invention, tourism. And early twentieth-century philanthropy came up with the concept of the 'garden city', giving new life to places such as LETCHWORTH and WELWYN. Of course, the fortunes of settlements also wax and wane: some prosperous medieval wool towns now barely make it on to the map; some towns that grew up to service mines, mills, factories and railways fell into near oblivion when their 'core industries' declined. See BELPER, NEEDHAM MARKET and TWENTY for three examples of places whose glory days have passed by.

This book is not intended to be comprehensive. Names whose origins are neither certain nor particularly interesting have been shamelessly omitted – although space has been found for some, such as HOUGHTON CONQUEST, that sound as if they should be more interesting than they are. These mild disappointments are more than counterbalanced by the serendipitous discovery of innocent-sounding places such as PURBROOK and BALDOCK, and by the wild speculation attached to peculiar names such as INDIAN QUEENS. Much repetition has been avoided by the use of boxes covering recurring themes. Many names ending in *–ford* or *–bridge*, which started life as 'the place where you can get across the river', are listed in the boxes on *Crossing Places* ([1](#) and [2](#)) and those named after a long-forgotten chieftain appear in [*Whose Place Is It Anyway?*](#). In addition, a list of the most common place-name elements is given on [Glossary](#). If a name that interests you is not included, this information should set you off on the road to working out its meaning for yourself. If not, the more encyclopaedic works that I have consulted are listed in the [Bibliography](#). From the many thousands of possibilities for inclusion, I have chosen to concentrate on those whose stories interested me the most and to illuminate the intriguing, the amusing and the downright bizarre. I hope you'll agree that there is no shortage of those.

SOURCES REFERRED TO IN THE TEXT
In addition to the Domesday Book (see above), the following sources and authors crop up repeatedly in the course of the book.

Ptolemy – Claudius Ptolemaeus – was a second-century Greek astronomer and geographer who worked in the great library of Alexandria. His studies of astronomy formed the basis for that science until Copernicus came along in the sixteenth century, but it is his *Geographia* that concerns us here. It was a treatise on the art of cartography, followed by four books of detailed maps of the Roman Empire – including Britain – of the time. Ptolemy used a very precise grid system with measurements of latitude and longitude, which has enabled subsequent historians to make a fair guess at the location of Roman settlements which have since been lost, and to reconstruct their relative importance.

Tacitus (c. AD 55–117) was a Roman historian whose *Annals* are one of our most important sources on early Roman Britain.

Bede (c. AD 673–735), known as the Venerable Bede, was a monk living at the monastery of JARROW in Northumbria. His great work was an *Ecclesiastical History of the English People*, written in Latin and translated 150 years later under the auspices of Alfred the Great. The book begins with Caesar's invasion in 55 BC and continues up to Bede's own time. The Latin title was *Historia ecclesiastica gentis Anglorum*, the last part meaning 'the people of the Angles': Bede was preaching a unified church, and with it a unified England, long before Alfred adopted both the term and the concept. Bede's history is our great source of information on the seventh and early eighth centuries and, thanks to the magnificent library on which he drew, one of the best for the earlier period. Bede is regarded as the father of English history, the most learned man in Europe at the time.

The Anglo-Saxon Chronicle, begun in Wessex in the ninth century, again probably under the auspices of Alfred the Great, gives a year-by-year summary of events from the fifth to the eleventh centuries, drawing on earlier sources and bringing them together for the first time. Not entirely unbiased – it is pretty hot on Alfred's own achievements, for example – it is nevertheless of at least equal importance to Bede for the Anglo-Saxon period.

Geoffrey of Monmouth (died 1155) wrote a *History of the Kings of Britain* and is the principal source for some of the stories about Arthur and Merlin (though not the Round Table), as well as 'Old King Cole' and Shakespeare's Lear. He is also responsible for the legend that Britain was founded by Brutus, a descendant of Aeneas, Prince of Troy. Geoffrey claimed to base his history on 'a very ancient book in the British tongue', but most scholars now agree that he made most of it up.

William Camden (1551–1623) was an English antiquarian and historian who compiled the first topographical survey of the British Isles, *Britannia*, published in 1586. A county-by-county account of his own travels and of the geography, history and legends surrounding each place he visited, it includes personal opinions of the landscape and local peculiarities and, crucially, many observations on the origins of place names. If earlier documents and modern research don't help us to winkle out the meaning of a name, we can usually rely on Camden to have a good story to tell, often with eyebrows unmistakably raised at the rubbish his informants chose to believe.

1

SOUTH-WEST ENGLAND

Although it is geographically convenient to lump Cornwall, Devon and Somerset together, Cornwall stands apart in terms of place names. It largely withstood the Romans, who had an important fort at EXETER *but little impact further west; and it remained an independent kingdom, resisting the Saxons, until the eleventh century. It's difficult to be sure why the Cornish were so successful in fending off invaders: certainly the Tamar would have been a formidable barrier in the south, but a determined army could have marched north of Dartmoor and into north Cornwall without getting too bogged down. Yes, a lot of the land was barren and inhospitable, but this isn't the only part of the country of which that could be said. Perhaps the locals were just particularly belligerent; perhaps the fact that they were skilled metalworkers meant they had a better class of weapon. Perhaps the fact that the Cornish peninsula was so far from any invader's base camp meant that the Romans and the Saxons had rather run out of steam by the time they got here. Most likely the explanation is a combination of all these factors.*

Anyway, this fierce independence accounts for Cornwall's large number of unusual (= Celtic) place names

– the commonplace –hams and –tons of the Anglo-Saxon world cut little mustard here. On the other hand, Cornwall succumbed (if that is the word I want) to Christianity at an early stage and produced a plethora of saints barely known elsewhere. By comparison, Devon and Somerset are much more in tune with the rest of the country and, considering that they gave us names such as Newton Poppleford and Beer Crocombe, we should all be grateful for that.

CORNWALL

The name of the county means 'the territory of the Cornovja tribe'; the Cornovja were a Celtic people whose name probably derives from cornu, 'horn', because of the horn-like shape of the Cornish peninsula. That's one version, anyway: see the [box](#) for another, less prosaic account.

Bodmin

A name of Cornish origin, this means something like 'house of monks' or 'dwelling by the monastery'. The monastery was founded in PADSTOW in the sixth century by St Petroc, one of the patron saints of Cornwall. It moved to Bodmin – already an important trading post – in the tenth century and dominated the town until Henry VIII had it closed in 1538.

Bude

'Muddy or turbulent river', though this is an unkind description of the river Neet today.

Camborne

Unrelated to other *–bornes* and *–bournes* 'up country' (see, for example, [BOURNEMOUTH](#)), the first part of this name

comes from a Cornish word probably meaning 'crooked' (see next entry) and the second from a Cornish word meaning 'hill'.

Camelford

Not as exciting as it sounds. The *camel* bit is an Old Cornish name for a river, possibly meaning 'crooked' but certainly not 'hump-backed and useful in the desert'. The suffix *–ford*, as in other names with this ending, means that it was a place where you could cross the river. Camerton in Somerset and Cambridge in Gloucestershire were similarly built on crooked rivers; the more famous CAMBRIDGE has a different derivation.

Fowey

The town is named after the river, whose name means 'river where beech trees grow'. The ending *–y* or *–ey* in a West Country name often indicates a river that was named by the Celts: *Bovey* and *Cary* – see BOVEY TRACEY and CASTLE CARY – are two other examples in this chapter.

Indian Queens

Surely a contender for the oddest name in the book, and one that can't be explained satisfactorily. We know that the village was named after a pub, which was originally, and uncontroversially, called the Queen's Head; some time in the 1780s it became the Indian Queen (singular). There is no evidence to support a connection with the Native American princess and Disney heroine Pocohontas – and in any case she died in 1617, so why bother to change the name of the pub over 160 years later? The legend persists, however, as good legends tend to do. A slightly more probable story suggests that a Portuguese princess once spent a night here on her way from Falmouth to London and her dark complexion led people to assume she was

Indian. Either way, there is still only one queen, Indian or otherwise. The plural came about towards the end of the eighteenth century, almost a century before Queen Victoria was proclaimed Empress (never Queen) of India. So although at one time the pub sign depicted Victoria on one side and a Native American on the other, that can't be the original reason for the change. It remains a mystery that has beguiled many a tedious drive along that winding bit of road between Newquay and St Austell.

The twelfth-century chronicler Geoffrey of Monmouth was not one to dismiss a good story, however improbable. He would have us believe that a Trojan hero called Corineus was given the territory we now know as Cornwall as a reward for conquering the giant Gogmagog, and that he named it after himself. Apparently, Corineus could have had his pick of the provinces, but chose Cornwall because 'it was a diversion to him to encounter these giants, which were in greater numbers there than in all the other provinces that fell to the share of his companions'. Gogmagog was 12 cubits tall – that's about 2.75 metres – and Corineus threw his victim over the nearby cliff that is still called Giant's Leap. Yes, right, thank you, Geoffrey.

Tradition has it, by the way, that the name of the Gogmagog hills in Cambridgeshire is a satirical one bestowed by Cambridge University students in the