

Chapter 8 Wirral Field Names

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Wainwright examines the evidence provided by minor names for the Norse settlement in Cheshire. This excerpt from the longer article has been adjusted in the light of John Dodgson's work and some further comments and maps are added in chapter 10.

Cheshire is an area where field-names throw light upon the character of the Scandinavian invasions. It is known that during the early part of the tenth century there occurred a large scale Norse immigration into Wirral.¹ How heavy was this influx is illustrated by the field-names which, even in their modern forms, preserve ample proof of the intensity of the Scandinavian settlement. In this area the work of field-name collection has already yielded valuable results. The following data are taken entirely from the Tithe Award schedules to show that even modern field-name forms, all in existence 100 years ago, may contain evidence of the highest value. Names such as *Little Holme, Holme Croft* (Oxton), *Low Holme, Higher Holme, Top Holme, Five Acre Holme* (Prenton), *Oxholme* (Bidston), *Holme hay* (Moreton) and many others are probably to be traced to ON **holmr**. ON **kiarr**, developing into ME *car*, is commonly used to describe low-lying ground: *Carr, Old Carr, New Carr, Carr hay, Carr Meadow, Carr Lane* (Saughall Massie), *West Carr, Bottom o' th' Carrs* (Moreton), *Carr Field Hey, Carrbridge* (Oxton and Landican) are again but a few of the many examples. ME *flat* (ON **flot**) is equally common, appearing in many parishes as *The Flat, Little Flat hey, Flatbutts, Low Flat, Top Flat* etc. *Kirk Hay* (Prenton) preserves either ON **kirkja**, 'church', or the Scandinavianized form of OE **cirice**, 'church': in any case the present form is due to Scandinavian influence. Perhaps the most common word in Wirral field-names is 'rake': the frequency of its appearance is noteworthy, e.g. *Rake Hay* (Bebington, Eastham, Noctorum, Prenton, Storeton, Tranmere, Willaston etc.), *Rake End, Rake Shoots, Rake Inclosure* etc., *et passim*. Its origin is doubtful but in this area it is highly probable that it should be connected with ON **rak** which here may be taken to mean 'a way or path, generally following some natural depression'.² Perhaps more interesting are a group of 'thwaites' found in Bidston: *Tasseys thwaite, Meadow thwaite, East Salt thwaite*,

¹ For a detailed discussion of this question see F. T. Wainwright, 'North-west Mercia', above chapter 3.

² An examination of one or two surviving examples, e.g., Bromborough Rake, suggests that the term 'rake' was applied to any sloping path or road. To interpret it as a 'defile' or 'narrow passage' seems altogether too strong — at least for the Cheshire usage. [See further chapter 10, below.]

Spencers thwaite, The Cornhill thwaite, Thwaite Lane, Marled thwaite, Whinny thwaite, Wilson's Little thwaite and the great thwaite. This word is ON **pveit**, 'a clearing, meadow etc.' but, like so many of the Scandinavian words mentioned above, it passed into the ordinary dialect speech of the area. Perhaps it should not be used as a Norse test-word, i.e. to prove Norse as distinct from Danish settlement, but it is an undisputed fact that 'thwaites' are most common in regions of Norse settlement — Cumberland, Westmorland, Lancashire and West Yorkshire — and are comparatively rare in Danish districts. This is especially interesting since the Scandinavian colonists in Wirral were mainly Norsemen and not Danes.

A similar piece of evidence comes from the field-names of Arrowe, itself a definite proof of Norse influence since it consists of ON **erg**, 'a shieling, a hill pasture', a word adopted by the Norsemen from the Irish (**airghe**, Gaelic **airidh**). This word may safely be used as a Norse test-word because of its Irish origin. In the fields of Arrowe we find ON **erg** still used a hundred years ago in what appears to be its original sense of 'pasture': *Harrisons Arrowe, Whites Arrowe, Brown's Arrowe, Smiths Arrowe, Broad Arrowe, Youds and Bennets Arrowe, Whartons Arrowe* etc. A few years ago an amateur collector of field-names included an 'arrowe' name with other names like *Triangle* and *Square Field* under the heading of 'shape'! It is quite clear that these names derived from **erg**, and, incidentally, they provide a striking proof that the interpretation of Arrowe, the village-name, is correct. Again, there is no point in producing further examples; it is sufficient to remark, first, that the field-names of Wirral give ample support to the place-name evidence for a very intensive Scandinavian settlement there and, secondly, that there are a few more hints that the Scandinavians were, in general, Norsemen rather than Danes. Finally it may be added that the Scandinavian field-names grow less and less frequent as one advances eastwards from Wirral towards central Cheshire, that is to say as one moves out of the area of Norse settlement.