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### The meaning of the Old English place-name element *ōra*

Ann Cole (pp. 15–22)

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## ABBREVIATIONS OF COUNTIES AND EPNS COUNTY SURVEYS

Co	Cornwall
Ha	Hampshire
He	Herefordshire
K	Kent
La	Lancashire
Nb	Northumberland
Sf	Suffolk
So	Somerset
Wt	Isle of Wight
CPNE	<i>Cornish Place-Name Elements.</i>
EPNE	<i>English Place-Name Elements, Parts 1 and 2.</i>
PN BdHu	<i>The Place-Names of Bedfordshire and Huntingdonshire.</i>
PN Brk	<i>The Place-Names of Berkshire, Parts 1, 2 and 3.</i>
PN Bu	<i>The Place-Names of Buckinghamshire.</i>
PN Ca	<i>The Place-Names of Cambridgeshire and the Isle of Ely.</i>
PN Ch	<i>The Place-Names of Cheshire, Parts 1–5.</i>
PN Cu	<i>The Place-Names of Cumberland, Parts 1, 2 and 3.</i>
PN D	<i>The Place-Names of Devon, Parts 1 and 2.</i>
PN Db	<i>The Place-Names of Derbyshire, Parts 1, 2 and 3.</i>
PN Do	<i>The Place-Names of Dorset, Parts 1–4.</i>
PN Du	<i>The Place-Names of County Durham, Part 1.</i>
PN Ess	<i>The Place-Names of Essex.</i>
PN ERY	<i>The Place-Names of the East Riding of Yorkshire and York.</i>
PN Gl	<i>The Place-Names of Gloucestershire, Parts 1–4.</i>
PN Hrt	<i>The Place-Names of Hertfordshire.</i>
PN Le	<i>The Place-Names of Leicestershire, Parts 1–6.</i>
PN Li	<i>The Place-Names of Lincolnshire, Parts 1–7.</i>
PN Mx	<i>The Place-Names of Middlesex (apart from the City of London).</i>
PN Nf	<i>The Place-Names of Norfolk, Parts 1–3.</i>
PN Nt	<i>The Place-Names of Nottinghamshire.</i>
PN NRY	<i>The Place-Names of the North Riding of Yorkshire.</i>
PN Nth	<i>The Place-Names of Northamptonshire.</i>
PN O	<i>The Place-Names of Oxfordshire, Parts 1 and 2.</i>
PN R	<i>The Place-Names of Rutland.</i>
PN Sa	<i>The Place-Names of Shropshire, Parts 1–6.</i>
PN Sr	<i>The Place-Names of Surrey.</i>
PN St	<i>The Place-Names of Staffordshire, Part 1.</i>
PN Sx	<i>The Place-Names of Sussex, Parts 1 and 2.</i>
PN W	<i>The Place-Names of Wiltshire.</i>
PN Wa	<i>The Place-Names of Warwickshire.</i>
PN We	<i>The Place-Names of Westmorland, Parts 1 and 2.</i>
PN Wo	<i>The Place-Names of Worcestershire.</i>
PN WRY	<i>The Place-Names of the West Riding of Yorkshire, Parts 1–8.</i>

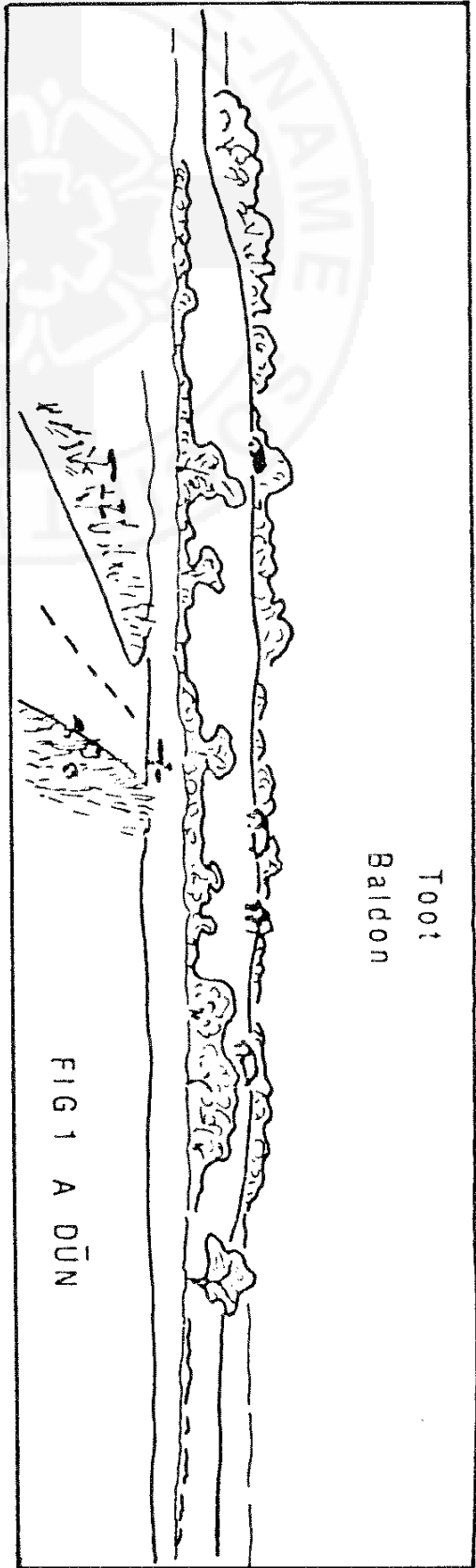
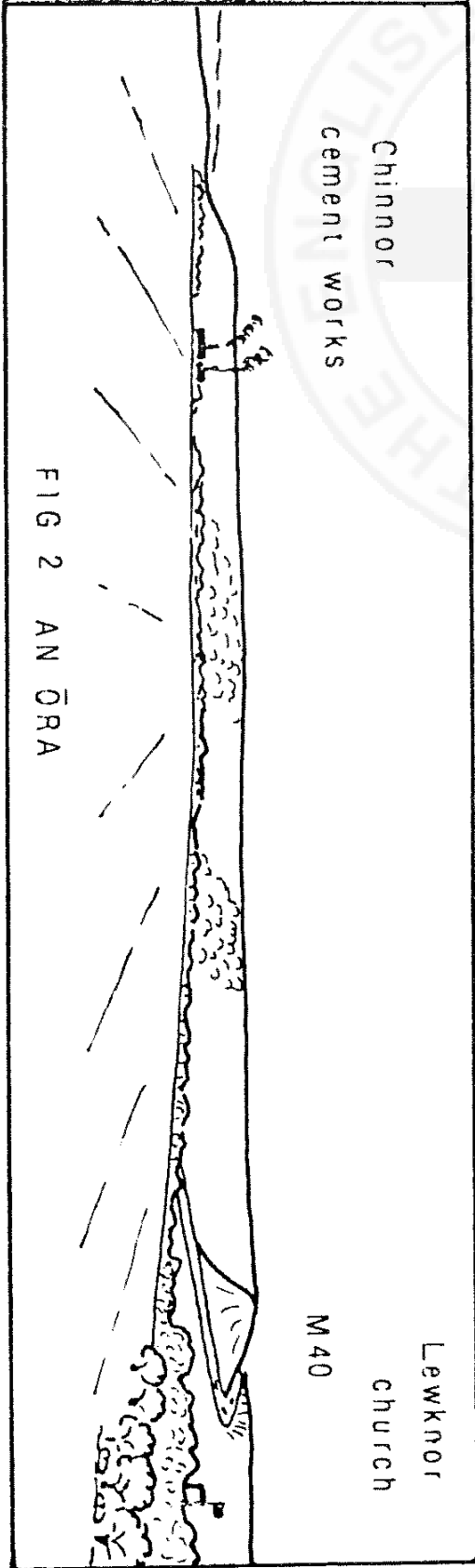
## The meaning of the OE place-name element *ōra*

Ann Cole

This article seeks to identify and describe the landform referred to by the Anglo-Saxons as *ōra*, but *windelsōra*, being probably a compound appellative, has been omitted from this discussion.

*ōra* is poorly evidenced in literary OE, and so it is only by studying it as it occurs in place-names and particularly by exploring these places in the field that one can begin to understand what the Saxons meant by the term. Margaret Gelling in her *Place-Names in the Landscape* (p.179-182) discusses the element but concludes 'The foregoing topographical notes are offered without any pretence that they constitute a satisfactory explanation of the meaning of *ōra* in place-names'. She also comments that 'topography should be studied on the ground, rather than on maps of any date, scale or quality' (p.8). I have the good fortune to see eight or nine examples of *ōra* every working day, and from these observations have deduced what shaped feature they all have in common, and then have tested the idea on other examples of *ōra*. The map shows the distribution of *ōra*, which does not occur in place-names north of Herefordshire.

Both the *dūn* country around Long Crendon (Bucks) and the *ōra* country of the Chiltern scarp foot (*Chinnor*, *Lewknor* etc.) can be seen from the road between Thame and Postcombe (Oxon.). Both are characterised by well-marked slopes, and yet *ōra*, generally believed to mean 'slope, shore, riverbank', does not occur in *dūn* country, so what is the difference between the slopes of *dūn* country and those of *ōra* country? The answer lies not in the nature of the slope, but in the different profiles of the hilltops. A *dūn* is like an upturned bowl with a limited area of flat land on top, whereas an *ōra* is more like an upturned canoe or punt having an extensive tract of flat land, often only along one axis, at the summit, terminating at one or both ends with a rounded shoulder. In the case of the view mentioned it is the crest of the Chiltern scarp between *Chinnor* and *Lewknor*, bounded at each end by a steeply sloping shoulder - one the Princes Risborough gap and the other the M40 route. See figs.



1 and 2.

If other places named *ōra* are examined a flat-topped hill is always to be found nearby. Sometimes it is an isolated, elongated hill so that it has the typical *ōra* profile visible along the two long sides, but not at either end. Examples of this are *Pinner* and *Nower Hill*, Middlesex, which refer to the same landform, *The Nower*, Dorking, Surrey and *Vexour* in Kent. Quite a lot of these isolated hill examples have no adjacent settlement named in *ōra*, and are called by the simplex term such as *Nower Hill* or they may support woodland such as *Nower Wood*, Surrey or *Nower's Copse*, Wilts (first mentioned 1608).

Other examples of *ōra* can be seen from both sides, but far better from one side than the other. The *Clare-Golder* *ōra* in Oxfordshire is a good example. It is best seen from the north-west, and it is on the north-west slope that *Clare* (*\*clæg-ōra*) and *Golder* (*\*gold-ōra*) are situated.

Many an *ōra* can only be seen from one side, for instance the *Chinnor-Lewknor* *ōra* can only be seen from a northerly or westerly direction; *Oare* (Wilts) from the south and *Hedsor* (Bucks) from the south-west. In these cases the settlement in *ōra* is almost always on the side of the *ōra* from which it can best be seen (remembering that an *ōra* can only be appreciated from a distance, not when one is on the *ōra* itself). Many *ōra* settlements are at the foot of the hill, but there are exceptions such as *Wardour*, Wilts (*\*weard-ōra*) - the 'lookout *ōra*' and perhaps *Hedsor*, Bucks, where the settlement is apparently on the hilltop. If the *ōra* is a long feature the settlement is likely to be at the foot, and near the end, of the *ōra*. Indeed there may be a settlement at each end of the *ōra*, as with *Chinnor* and *Lewknor*, and with *Boxford* (*\*box-ōra*) and *Bagnor*, Berks, either end of Boxford Common. It may be noted here that *ofer* is in many ways a similar, possibly identical, landform, but often has the settlement on the summit. (Gelling 1984 p.174).

It is quite easy to demonstrate that examples of *ōra* originally thought to have been used in the sense 'slope' in fact refer to elongated, flat-topped hills with a shoulder at one or both ends. It is also possible to show that it is not necessary to invoke the sense 'river bank' as a meaning. For instance *Pershore*, lying a little north of the confluence of the River Avon and the Bow Brook, is at the

foot of a low flat-topped hill between the two rivers. *Bagnor* and *Boxford* refer not to the banks of the Lambourn but to the hill called Boxford Common.

There are many examples of *ōra* along the coast between the Thames Estuary and the Isle of Purbeck, the chief concentration being on the lowland around Portsmouth Harbour and nearby inlets. Given that an *ōra* is a flat-topped hill and working on the principle that the settlement with a name containing *ōra* lies between the observer and the hill, then these examples of *ōra* must be seen from the sea or shore. A sailor coming up Spithead would see the long level crest of Portsdown rising behind such settlements as *Rowner* and *Copnor*. Near Chichester Harbour he would see the line of the South Downs in the distance beyond *Bognor*, *Itchenor*, *Keynor* and *Eleanor Farm*. Portsdown and the South Downs are shown on the coastal profiles drawn for sailors in the Channel Pilot and would have been as relevant for Anglo-Saxon navigators as for modern sailors wishing to identify their position and make a landfall. From the Solent the three coastal examples of *ōra* in the Isle of Wight, namely *Bouldnor*, *Elmsworth* and *Gurnard*, would also be visible as flat-topped hills although they can also be seen from inland. Across Poole Harbour looking south the Purbeck Hills rise in a level line, with shoulders descending to the sea at the eastern end and to the Corfe Castle gap at the western end. Between the observer and the Purbecks lie *Goathorn* (\**gāt-ōra*), *Fitzworth* (\**fitt-ōra*, first mentioned 1545) and *Ower*. It can be shown that the great majority of coastal examples of *ōra* refer to flat-topped hills visible from the sea or shore, and therefore the sense 'shore' is also redundant. The only exception is *Stonar*, Kent, which refers to a long shingle ridge.

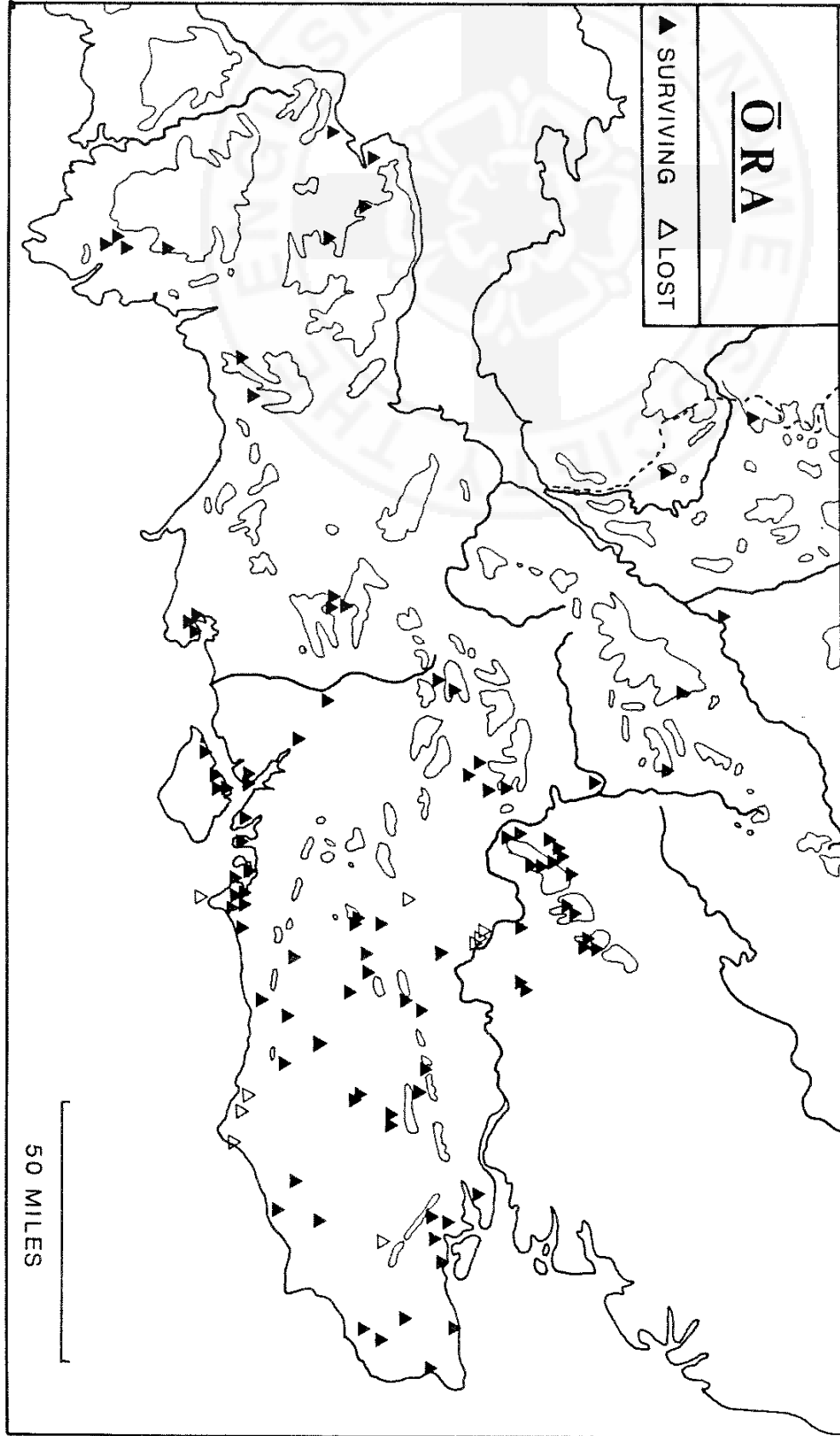
Given that an *ōra* is a flat-topped hill with a shoulder at one or both ends it is worth looking at the elements with which *ōra* is combined. The largest category is that of a personal name, c. 23%. This is closely followed by terms describing the *ōra*, c. 18%, such terms as 'sand, stone, clay, chalk' and 'rough'. There is a substantial group describing vegetation especially trees: birch, elm, box, osiers and also marsh, c. 8%. Some describe the fauna - large birds like eagles, cranes and herons or wild animals like wolves and badgers, c. 7%. In contrast *ōra* is very rarely compounded with a

habitative term: only twice with *tūn* - *Worton*, Oxon, although this is not certain to be an *ōra*, and a lost *Ortune* near Windsor, Berks. There is a *-hām/hamm* in Sussex, i.e. less than 3%. In addition c. 17% are simplex terms. The meaning of the other qualifiers is uncertain. These figures refer to examples evidenced before 1500 and exclude those known only from charter boundaries. This suggests that *ōra* was originally a term applied to a natural feature: a landmark that might be more easily identified by describing its nature or its wildlife. The large birds or evergreen boxtrees could be seen from a long way off and help to identify the *ōra*. Small settlements growing up by an *ōra* were named in the sense 'X's place by the *ōra*'.

*ōra*, then, may be redefined as a hill which, when seen from a distance, has a long flat top terminating at one or both ends with a curved shoulder, producing a characteristic landmark. The term was probably originally used to describe such a landform, but was later used in naming settlements growing up in the vicinity.

#### Examples of ORA evidenced before 1500 or mentioned in text.

Berks		Devon	
Bagnor	SU 452693	Bicknor	SS 741274
Boxford	SU 428717	Chivenor	SS 503345
	SP 462042	Galsworthy	SS 400160
Oare	SU 505739	Gobsore	SY 153987
Ortone (lost)	c.SU 9777?	Hazard	SX 751595
Underore (lost)	c.SU 9777	Horner	SX 766543
Upnor (lost)	c.SU 9777	Loxhore	SS 616387
Woolvers Barn	SU 470803	Nower Farm	ST 260003
		Rora	SX 801743
		Yarner	SX 777620
Bucks		Dorset	
Ballinger	SP 912030	Fitzworth	SY 990866
Courns Wood	SU844985	Goathorn	SZ 013849
Denner Hill	SP 856000	Ower	SY 998856
Hedsor	SU915870		
Honor End Farm	SP 862018		
Pednor Farm	SP 923032		





Glos		Pinner	TQ 123898
Batsford	SP 187338		
		Oxon	
Hants		Bixmoor Wood	SU 655863
Calshot	SU 475015	Chalk Wood	SU 623803
Copnor	SU 656018	Chinnor	SP 756009
Ower (Eling)	SU 325162	Clare	SU 674985
Ower (Fawley)	SU 472018	Golder Manor	SU 666977
Rowner	SU 584017	Lauder's Farm	SU 728928
		Lewknor	SU 715976
Herefs		Radnor (Pyrton)	SU 687957
Bradnor	SO 292576	Stonor	SU 743892
Orcop	SO 474263	Worton, Nether	SP 426301
		--- Over	SP 430293
Isle of Wight			
Bouldnor	SZ 373898	Surrey	
Elmsworth	SZ 444921	Britty Hill	SU 903453
Gurnard	SZ 480950	Cockner (lost)	c.SU 8544
Werrar Farm	SZ 503926	Haslehurst	c.SU 9033
		Nore Farm	TQ 015390
Kent		Nore Hill	TQ 380573
Argrove	TR 205388	The Nower	TQ 157485
Ashour Farm	TQ 547441	Nower Wood	TQ 195548
Bicknor	TQ 861589	Radnor House	TQ 103425
Broader Lane	TQ 796589	Stanners Hill	TQ 000630
Drellingore	TR 240410	Wakemills	c.SU 9033
Icknor	c.TQ 8461		
Lynsore	TR 163490	Sussex	
The Nower	TQ 465578	Bognor	SZ 934990
Oare	TR 005630	Bolnore	TQ 320235
Oar (Ore's) Fm.	TR 226681	Chalder Farm	SZ 862992
Sidney (lost)	c.TQ 9047	Eleanor Farm	SZ 779995
Stonar	TR 333595	Great Cornes	TQ 761172
Upnor	TQ 758705	Grey Nore (lost)	c.TV 6199
Vexour	TQ 511453	Hodore Farm	TQ 467356
		Honer	SZ 878992
Middx		Itchenor	SU 800006
Nower Hill	TQ 128896	Keynor Farm	SZ 849977

	Sussex (continued)	Warningore	TQ 374137
Kitchenour	TQ 870241		
Marker Farm	SU 756023	Wilts	
The Nore	TQ 160062	Barker's Hill	ST 905256
Nowhurst Farm	TQ 129323	Brickworth Ho.	SU 225241
Ore	TQ 836117	Martinsell Hill	SU 176640
Oreham	TQ 224135	Nower's Copse	ST 925255
The Owers	off Selsey	Oare	SU 158630
Rowner	TQ 072269	Wardour	ST 927269
Sandore (lost)	c.TV 4899		
Sidnor (lost)	c.TQ 5007	Worcs	
Tugmore Shaw	TQ 458373	Pershore	SO 947457

#### REFERENCE

Gelling, Margaret, *Place-Names in the Landscape* (London 1984),

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