



## JOURNAL OF THE ENGLISH PLACE-NAME SOCIETY

Volume 44 (2012)

ISSN 1351–3095

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### The riddle of Salthrop

Ann Cole (pp. 33–35)

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£40 (full)

£15 (associate)

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£45 (full)\*

£18 (associate\*)

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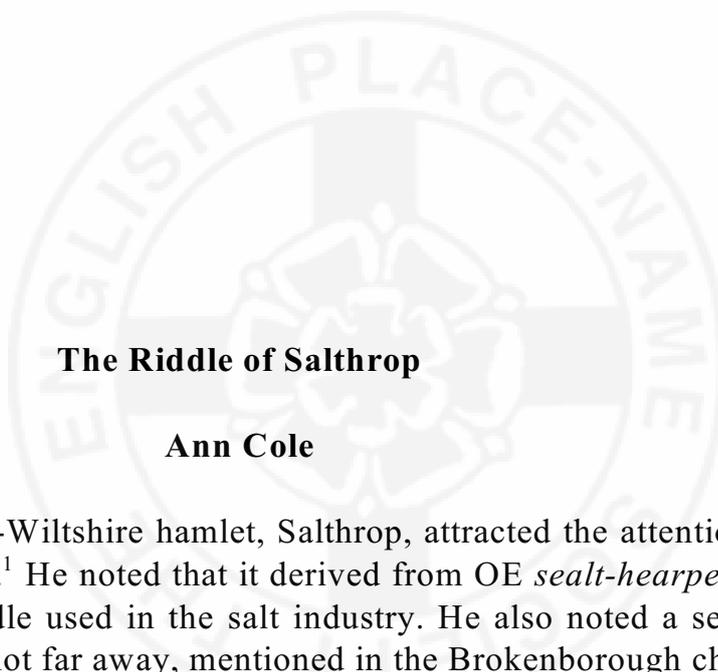
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## ABBREVIATIONS OF COUNTIES AND EPNS COUNTY SURVEYS

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 Riddle of Salthrop

Ann Cole

The name of a north-Wiltshire hamlet, Salthrop, attracted the attention of Ekwall back in 1931.<sup>1</sup> He noted that it derived from OE *sealt-hearpe* ‘salt harp’, a sieve or riddle used in the salt industry. He also noted a second example, *saltherpe*, not far away, mentioned in the Brokenborough charter boundary (956 (13c) S 1577). Ekwall writes:

The word *harp* is used in modern English of implements resembling a harp, such as ‘a screen or sieve used in sifting and cleansing grain from weed-seeds, etc.’ . . . Obviously a saltharp would be some kind of contrivance for sifting or cleansing salt. I have no definite suggestion to offer as regards the nature of the implement or the fact that there were two saltharps so near each other. The situation of one of the saltharps close to the Fosse Way suggests that it might have been used by salt-merchants, but the present Salthrop is not near a main road.

It is worth looking more closely at the saltharps’ situations. Brokenborough (ST 917892) is in north Wiltshire adjacent to the Fosse Way. Its charter boundary is discussed by Kelly in *Charters of Malmesbury Abbey*.<sup>2</sup> The boundary has not been entirely solved, but the estate was clearly much bigger than the present parish of Brokenborough. It probably included, in addition, Malmesbury Westport and territory to the north and east lying either side of the Fosse Way. The position of *salt herpe* is unknown, but Kitson suggests that it may be the road running south from Fosse Gate (ST 940944) towards Chedglow (ST 943932), and that *salt herpe* is a deformation of *sealt-herpath* ‘salt road, road running south of Fosse Gate’. Whatever its meaning, this is a likely area for it to have been in. However, assuming for the moment that the charter is referring to a saltharp, a sieve or riddle, is it in an appropriate situation for such an implement to be needed? The salt could easily have come from Droitwich, perhaps by way of the *saltewiche* (1540) in Cirencester thought to have been a salt market

(PN Gl 1 67). From Cirencester going south-west along the Fosse Way (Margary 5), it is seven miles to Fosse Gate and ten miles to Brokenborough.

Salthrop (*salteharpe* DB) is at the scarp-foot of the Marlborough Downs (SU 115802).<sup>3</sup> As Ekwall says, it is not near a main road. However, Margary 41 leads south-east from Cirencester, through Stratton St Margaret near Swindon to Wanborough where it forks. The south-bound road, Margary 43, very soon crosses the Great Ridgeway. By following the Great Ridgeway westwards as far as Barbury Castle a merchant would come within three miles of Salthrop. A track over easily traversable downland would bring him to the hamlet. This might seem a circuitous route but it was firm underfoot. Modern maps show a series of minor roads linking the Fosse Way near Cricklade to Salthrop, a shorter route, but one which crosses clay country and might be difficult to negotiate in winter.

Given that both places could be readily reached by salt merchants, in what form might the salt have been transported? In Droitwich the brine could have been evaporated to produce salt in a variety of forms, one of which, lump salt, could then be packed up for carriage by cart or packhorse.<sup>4</sup> Once the lump salt had reached its destination it could then be crushed, and sieved through the salt-harp to obtain fine crystals. But why should these places in particular be noted for producing fine salt crystals? The answer may lie in the farming activities of the area. North Wiltshire was noted as a cheese-making area. The *Victoria County History of Wiltshire*, discussing agriculture in the period 1500–1795, maps an area known as ‘Cheese Country’ in north-west Wiltshire.<sup>5</sup> It is in the clay country either side of the Corallian belt where three Cowages (see below) and the two ‘saltharps’ are. The conditions that made good dairying and cheese-making countryside in the 16th to 18th centuries would have been equally appropriate in early medieval times when the two saltharps and one of the Cowage names were coined.

Milk could not be stored. The plentiful supply of it in spring and early summer needed to be turned into cheese or butter to preserve it for use in the winter months. Salt is essential for cheese-making both as a flavouring and as a preservative. As part of the process the curds were spread out and fine grained salt sprinkled over them, worked in, moulded into a cheese and left to ripen. Salt makes up a good 1% by weight of a cheese and sometimes up to 7 or 8%. Such traditional methods are still used.<sup>6</sup>

Cheese can be made from goats’ milk, ewes’ milk or cows’ milk. There are hints that in north Wiltshire cows’ milk was used. There are three places called Cowage (*cū-wīc*) in this area. The name *cū-wīc* suggests a place specialising in cows and producing a surplus of something with which to

trade. The likelihood is that milk was being produced for cheese making, and the necessary salt from Droitwich was being crushed and sieved at Salthrop and *Salt Herpe*. *Cū-wīc* is an uncommon settlement name. There is one each in Devon, Essex, Surrey and Yorkshire (West Riding) so the threesome in north Wiltshire is a notable concentration.<sup>7</sup> Cowage in Foxley (ST 903861, *Covage* 1773) is only two miles from Brokenborough and about five from the suggested site of the *salt herpe*; Cowage in Hilmarton (SU 005744, *Cowic* DB) is eight miles south-west of Salthrop and Cowage Cottages near Calne (ST 980683, *Cowich* 1642) eleven miles.

So both Salthrop and *Salt Herpe* are well-placed to function as places where salt is prepared for use in cheese-making.

So what is the answer to the riddle of Salthrop? Cheese!

### Notes

S = Sawyer, P. H., *Anglo-Saxon Charters* (London: Royal Historical Society, 1968).  
Margary = Margary, Ivan D., *Roman Roads in Britain*, 3rd edn, (London: Baker, 1973).

1. Ekwall, Eilert, *Studies in English Place- and Personal Names* (Lund, 1931), pp. 81–2.
2. Kelly, S. E., ed. *Charters of Malmesbury Abbey* (Oxford, 2005), especially pp. 254, 257.
3. PN W 279, following Ekwall's interpretation.
4. Block salt or cooking salt was sold in brick-sized blocks until recent years and used in cooking and salting beans etc. It had to be crushed before use. Free-running table salt was sold separately and was more expensive.
5. *Victoria County History of Wiltshire*, vol. 4, ed. Elizabeth Crittall (1959), p. 44.
6. Editions of *Farmhouse Fare* published in the mid twentieth century give many such recipes.
7. The settlement names are: Conrish Farm in Mere, 1268, PN W 179, c.ST 8132; Cowage in Foxley 1773, PN W 70, ST 903861; Cowage in Hilmarton, DB, PN W 269, SU 005744; Cowage Cottages near Calne 1642, PN W 260, ST 980683; Cowick Barton, DB, PN D 438, c.SS 909914; Cowick alias Quick, Quickbury, DB, PN Ess 51, TL 497145; Cowix 1421, PN Sr 86, TQ 199382; Cowick, 12c, PN WRY 2 26, SE 663213.

The following are field names: in Reading *Cowyk*', 1302; in Thatcham *Kewyke*, 1450, PN Brk 180, 193; in Walkern *Cowyk* 1341–51, PN Hrt 290.

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