

# Using historical place-names to inform modern street-naming

(to be used in conjunction with the Resource List)

## Step One

Identify the historical parish(es) in which the new streets will be built.

This is particularly important where there has been significant administrative reordering. Knowing the historical parishes helps to track down the historical place-names relevant to the development area.



## Step Two

Gather historical place-names from that parish.

Place-names from the parish help to show the character of the area, its landscape, flora, fauna, archaeological remains, historical activities and people etc. The names also help to show distinctive patterns in the local language and dialect. It is a good idea to collect names more widely than just the immediate development area. All place-names in the vicinity contribute to a richer understanding of the development site. Names in isolation might appear uninteresting, but as part of a pattern they illuminate and inform. All place-names gathered are useful for future naming, even if not used immediately.

### Survey of English Place-Names

Within the Survey, place-names are organised by administrative divisions, starting with county, then hundred or wapentake, and parish. Find the relevant parish. Within the parish, names relating to places with greatest administrative, social or economic significance, or with the oldest and best attested names, are listed first. A run of historic spellings is provided. The earliest spellings can be quite different to the modern. It is worth identifying when a place-name was first attested and what form it took. Some of these spellings and earlier variants of the name provide interesting possibilities for modern naming. They should not be discounted as unusable. Depending on the county, there are also lists of place-names taken from historical maps, tithe awards, Ordnance Survey maps and other historical sources. These are often listed in a block as field-names.

### Other

In addition to the Survey, and the mapped sources discussed below, it is worth consulting the *Victoria County History*, if it exists for the area in question. These volumes may include medieval field-names from the parish, which are helpful even if unlocated. The VCH is highly referenced, so it is possible to search within calendars of medieval documents or online catalogues, such as those hosted by *The National Archives*, for more medieval place-names relevant to the parish.



## Step Three

Locate historical place-names within the parish.

Tithe maps and awards (dating to the first half of the 19<sup>th</sup> century) will overlap with the lists of names within some of the volumes of the Survey of English Place-Names. The maps will give locations of numbered plots, whilst the lists in the awards give the names for those plots. Gathering the coordinates for place-names means that it will be possible to map the names later on, and to get a sense visually of how the names correspond to the topography of the area. It is possible to see which place-names definitely relate to the development in question, and which might be further afield. Relatively frequently, fields bearing similar names cluster together, suggesting that a larger piece of land with an earlier name has been split up and subdivided. Place-

names derived from tithe maps and awards can appear to be generic, self-explanatory or unimaginative. However, although some of the names might appear as such, there are always individual place-names that are more striking and unusual. It is worth working through the tithe maps and awards systematically for the area, and not giving up! Moreover, the overall list gathered gives more information about the area than might have been thought initially, particularly when compared to a list derived from a different area.

Enclosure awards and maps do not tend to have as many place-names (if any) as tithe awards and maps.

19<sup>th</sup>-century Ordnance Survey mapping contains historical place-names, which again overlaps with the Survey but may also provide additional names, as well as geographic coordinates.

Each county often has 18<sup>th</sup> century maps, surveyed by a variety of cartographers. These are a source of earlier place-names and spellings, as well as geographic locations. Some areas may have even earlier 16<sup>th</sup>- and 17<sup>th</sup>-century mapping available.



## Step Four

Interpret and understand the historical place-names.

### Survey of English Place-Names

In the Survey, there is usually a brief discussion of the etymology of a name, or a list of the (Old English, Old Norse etc.)<sup>1</sup> elements from which the place-name was created. Alongside the individual discussion under a given name, the county volume may also have a general section explaining what particular elements mean in this county. Understanding the original meaning of the place-name provides possibilities for modern naming, allowing us to reinterpret the name using modern equivalents.

The English Place-Name Society and the Institute for Name-Studies have published books that act as glossaries to help with understanding what the original medieval words, creating the place-names, are likely to have meant. These are useful for understanding where and when particular words were used and what they meant in different contexts. Landscape and topography has been a focus of study and there are also books available to explain these terms. Modern English field-names sometimes seem to be obvious and straightforward, but it is worth checking the published dictionaries of field-names, because meanings can be surprising and shift over time.

The EPNS and INS have a new digital resource that is in development, and should be contacted directly for further assistance on interpretation of particular place-names or name-types. Interpreting place-names from their modern form alone can be a risky business; there can be many ‘false friends’, and it is worth asking for advice.

### Other dictionaries and resources

The *Oxford English Dictionary* contains historical and etymological information. Earlier spellings and forms of words are listed, as well as dates of usage. Many of the words used in field-names are dialectal. It is worth consulting the *English Dialect Dictionary* for spellings and meanings. The preservation of dialect terms offers an excellent opportunity to celebrate local language and to provide variety in naming, as well as local distinctiveness.

---

<sup>1</sup> Broadly speaking, Old English is the English language (with dialectal variants) spoken prior to 1100 CE, Middle English between 1100 and 1500 CE and Modern English after 1500 CE. Scandinavian languages started to exert notable influence on the evolution of English from the ninth century onwards into the Middle English period. Old French exerted influence on the evolution of English from the mid-tenth century onwards and throughout the Middle English period. Brittonic is the predecessor to Welsh and Cornish.

Some of these resources will suggest an interpretation for a place-name based on local geology, archaeology or topography. There are resources available online to examine this further and track what the referent of the place-name, on the ground, might be (see resource list).

Personal, family names often feature, particularly in tithe maps and awards. It is a good idea to check dictionaries of family names to check if this is a possibility, and to examine where a particular name was prevalent, and what its origin was. Family names often arise from other locations where individuals lived, occupations or nicknames referencing physical characteristics. Hence, it can be hard to distinguish family names from the common nouns and adjectives that also create place-names.



## Step Five

Create modern names using historical naming information.

All the information gathered above is highly relevant, whether meanings, early forms and spellings, or modern equivalents and reinterpretations. All of these strands can be used in modern names. The historical spellings themselves, where not confusing or problematic, preserve the richness of the English language, and offer local variety that is grounded in historical evidence. A historical place-name may be used even where its modern descendant is still in use. Sometimes the two are sufficiently far apart that there is no possibility of confusion, and the history of the name is thereby retained alongside its modern counterpart.

Affixes were often used in historical place-names, such as *bank, close, croft, field, mead, meadow, park*. Affixes are quite distinctive to a particular region and shed light on the nature of local settlement and land use.

If possible, it is good to retain the affixes, even if this means joining the affix to the first part of the place-name, to make a compound name.

It can be helpful to review the list of place-names gathered and draw out the dominant themes as inspiration for future naming.

---

## Primary Material (Extra)

If you have time, or have local volunteers who are interested in researching place-names in the local area, or local historians already looking at primary material for their own research, primary historical material, available in local archives and The National Archives, can be highly useful.

### What to consult?

Looking at primary historical material is enriching and increases our understanding and knowledge of historical names in an area; however, it is more challenging and time-consuming than consulting the resources listed for Steps One to Five above. In some areas, identifying and finding a single document can immediately generate a long list of historical place-names upon which to draw; however, many historical documents may only contain a single name or none at all, beside the name of the manor, estate or parish in which the land lies.

To maximise the chances of adding new place-name material from a search of historical documents, consider searching online catalogues using the keywords ‘terrier’, ‘rental’, ‘extent’, ‘survey’, ‘map’, ‘plan’ or ‘field\*’, combined with the name of the parish in which you are interested.

Make maximum use of the online catalogue entries which will help you understand what you are likely to see if you look at the documents themselves. These entries can amount to a partial transcription of the essential elements of a document, including the place-names it might contain. Sometimes, it is clear from the catalogue that further details of landholdings are given in the document but not copied into the catalogue entry, in which case it is definitely worth looking at the underlying primary material.

National and County Record Societies publish volumes that contain editions and transcriptions of primary records, or calendars of main parts of the documents. It is well worth looking at the lists of publications to see if any are of material likely to be relevant. If there are any, these calendars and editions will enable you to read the primary material quickly, extracting place-names. The indexes in these published volumes are useful for navigating straight to any mention of relevant places within the documents.

Some of these national and county publications are available online via *Internet Archive* or *British History Online*. *Medieval Genealogy* (see the resource list) also explains where to find many of them. Hard copies should be available in local archives and libraries.

The *Manorial Documents Register* (see resource list) gives examples of documents relating to particular manors. It can be consulted online and can be a good source of place-names relating to a manor.

### How to consult?

Palaeography (historical handwriting in primary manuscripts) varies considerably depending on the date of the document. The underlying language also varies. As a general rule, documents are in English after 1500, but may be in Latin prior to 1500. It takes time to develop skills in reading historical handwriting but it is achievable, particularly if you or a group of volunteers plan to spend some time looking at a particular set of documents, giving the chance 'to get your eye in'. Although historical manuscripts can seem daunting, they contain fairly common and repetitive abbreviations and fairly predictable ways in which the documents are structured, enabling you to know where to look within a document for the place-names in which you might be interested. There are online courses freely available (see resource list), enabling you to practice getting used to historical handwriting and the typical abbreviations and formulae that were used by scribes.

Care must be taken when extracting place-names from historical documents. The location of the land may not be clear or discernible. Some documents deal with holdings of an individual in multiple parishes. It is useful to collect place-names from as many documents as possible. Certain place-names will repeat, giving confidence that they relate to land in the area of interest. Even where place-names are not precisely locatable, if they are securely within the parish, they contribute to increasing understanding of the character and nature of the area, which is relevant for modern naming.

Local archives may hold 16<sup>th</sup>-, 17<sup>th</sup>- and 18<sup>th</sup>- century maps, pre-dating any tithe awards. Maps and plans give locational evidence as well as lists of place-names. (North may not be at the top!).

When transcribing place-names from historical documents, take care to transcribe them exactly as they appear. Resist the temptation to 'regularise' or 'standardise' them. The historical spellings are important sources of information as well as being useable in many cases for modern naming.

Once a list of historical place-names has been gathered, the step of interpreting those names (set out in Step Four above) is important. Some of the historical names may be linked to place-names gathered in Steps Two and Three; some will be entirely new. If you have lists of new place-names extracted from primary material, the EPNS and INS would be very happy to help you interpret them.

## Feedback Form

Please do scan the QR code below and provide us with any feedback you have. Alternatively, feel free to email [abigail.lloyd4@nottingham.ac.uk](mailto:abigail.lloyd4@nottingham.ac.uk) or [john.baker@nottingham.ac.uk](mailto:john.baker@nottingham.ac.uk).

