



## JOURNAL OF THE ENGLISH PLACE-NAME SOCIETY

Volume 12 (1980)

ISSN 1351–3095

---

### Methodological reflexions on Leatherhead

Richard Coates (pp. 70–74)

---

This article is from the *Journal of the English Place-Name Society*, an annual peer-reviewed journal issued free to members of the Society. The *Journal* welcomes contributions of articles and notes on subjects of relevance to English place-names.

The English Place-Name Society (EPNS) was established in 1923 to conduct a county-by-county survey of the place-names of England. To date, the Survey has produced more than 90 volumes. Almost all English counties have been surveyed, at least in part, and work to complete the Survey is ongoing. The Survey is used by researchers, academics, and those interested in the origins, meaning, and significance of English place-names.

The research work and the publication of the Survey are financed by the annual subscriptions of members of the Society, with the help of grants from the Arts and Humanities Research Council and the British Academy. Since the progress and success of the Survey depend largely upon the strength of the membership, the Society always welcomes new members, both personal and institutional.

In return for the annual subscription, members receive free of charge the current issue of the *Journal* as well as the volume of the Survey allocated to that year's subscription. They are entitled to order, in addition, any available volume of the Survey at a concessionary price. Associate Members pay a reduced subscription, for which they receive the *Journal*.

Annual subscription prices (correct as of August 2022):

**Within the UK**

£40 (full)

£15 (associate)

**Outside the UK**

£45 (full)\*

£18 (associate\*)

\*increased prices reflect increased postage cost.

For further details or to join the Society, please contact:

Mrs Christine Hickling  
English Place-Name Society  
School of English  
The University of Nottingham  
NG7 2RD

Tel: 0115 951 5919

Email: [name-studies@nottingham.ac.uk](mailto:name-studies@nottingham.ac.uk)

## 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 1–7.</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 1–9.</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>

## Methodological Reflexions on Leatherhead

Margaret Gelling, in her recent book (1978: 88), points out the consequences of the fact that the impetus for place-name studies in England has come almost exclusively from Departments of English. The principal one has been to provide English etymologies for names at almost any cost. This practice has had a twofold benefit; firstly to eliminate ill-informed antiquarian speculation on Celtic or Roman survivals, though these speculations often appear to have a charismatic hold on popular thinking; secondly to promote methodological rigour, with the impressive results of the EPNS survey now as the justification. Once the security of a methodological position has been established, however, one should look at cases where the pre-English baby refuses to disappear with the bathwater.

Leatherhead (Sr) has a history which most investigators hold to be mysterious in one way or another. Gelling in Gelling et al. (1970), following DEPN, relies on OE *lēode* 'people', which as far as p.ns. are concerned is thus a hapax legomenon (FPNE); plus OE *\*ride* '(rideable) ford', where the asterisk says all. If there is a less intangible possibility, surely it should be preferred. PNSr 78-9 prefers to see the oldest surviving form (BCS 553, Sawyer 1507) already a piece of folk-etymology, and indeed OE *ēo* receives no positive support from subsequent forms, uniformly *e* and *a*.

Let us work out the consequences of assuming a Celtic place-name of an attested type, viz. *\*Lētorito-* 'grey ford'

(but see below for further remarks on the gloss). *Lēto-* is evidenced as a first element (the *Lytchetts* (Do), *Lichfield* (St), *Litchett* (Ha.) -*rito-* is evidence as a second element (*Camboritum* (= Lackford), *Durolito* (= Chigwell), *Carbantorigum* (= Easter Haprew), Rivet & Smith, 1979). It is a compound of the 'normal' archaic British modifier + head type. We can make various predictions in accordance with British phonology about how it ought to turn out in OE graphics. We expect:

lenition (by 500 AD)  
 final syllable loss (by 550 AD?)  
 $\bar{e} > \bar{e}^i$  (6)  
 internal syncope (by 600 AD)  
 no provection in *d'r* contexts

We expect the following representational strategies by the date of the earliest evidence:

Brit /l/ > OE /l/  
 Brit / $\bar{e}$ / > OE / $\bar{i}$ / general (Förster 1942: 568, 578), but with /e/ spellings consequent upon trisyllable shortening, see below.  
 Brit /t/ > OE /d/ after lenition (never proected /t/).  
 Brit /o/ > zero  
 Brit /r/ > OE /r/  
 Brit /i/ > OE /i/ or /e/ (see Jackson 1953: 285)  
 Brit /t/ > OE /d/ after lenition  
 Brit /o/ > zero

If it is genuinely an archaic borrowing, say (5, before Brit / $\bar{e}$ / > / $\bar{e}^i$ /), we might well expect early forms with shortening in the first syllable to /e/ rather than /i/;

thus

Ledrid +

Ledred +

and expected variants in /t/ for final /d/ (Jackson 553)

Ledrit

Ledret +

The virtual uniformity of /e/ attested in the first syllable would indeed speak for a very early (pre-(6)) rendition of shortened undiphthongised /e/ (compare the rendition with /i/ in *Lytchett*, *Lichfield*, almost certainly both seventh-century borrowings).

The Celtic etymology is supported, I contend, by the accumulated evidence; and is not seriously impugned by any of it. The + forms correspond to the attested spread of forms, with due allowance for e.g. usual Anglo-Normanisms, later medieval medial consonant doublings and so on. There are enough consonant-final forms to permit the inference that that state of affairs is indeed original.

The purpose of this note is not merely to establish a Celtic etymology for *Leatherhead*, because only pre-English documentary evidence will convince sceptics. Much recent scholarship (cf. Gelling 1978: 67-74, ch. 4) has been aimed at establishing very early (perhaps even fourth-century) English settlement and awareness of British life and language; see especially Gelling's contribution on *wīcham*-names. In many ways early English life seems to have been organised around (Romano-)British communities, and it is thus far from inconceivable that operative British communities in areas of high early settlement density should have early on retained their autonomy and

indeed their names. Leatherhead, in the Mole valley, is in an area of thickly-spread probable *hām*-names<sup>1,2</sup>. If the direction of present scholarship is a proper one, a correlation of archaic English names and nuclear British names is to be expected. Moreover, therefore, surviving British names are not merely to be expected for places of major importance and places so far out in the sticks as to be reached by English colonists only rather late in the day.

As for the suggested gloss 'grey ford', recall that M. Welsh *llwyd* (and by inference British *l̄eto-*) crosses the English perceptual boundary between grey brown (Hjelmslev 1968), and thus 'brown ford' could be an acceptable interpretation<sup>3</sup>. The naming of localities in the format 'colour + *ford*' is well-attested, cf. *Retford* (Nt), *Greenford* (Mx). There is no reason why this rather obvious toponymic strategy should be absent in British.

RICHARD COATES

#### FOOTNOTES

- 1 Fetcham, Cobham, Bookham, Brockham Green, Effingham, Hersham, Mickleham (?).
- 2 If I have read a somewhat equivocal text correctly, VCH i 267 reports the discovery of a possible pagan Saxon darkware cup with a coin of Constantine the Great inside it, at Hawkshill, close by, cf. further SAC16: 251. The acknowledged centrality of Leatherhead in early ecclesiastical organisation (VCH ii 4-6) is significant in the light of Gelling 1978: 96-9 and Cameron 1975.
- 3 VCH i 14 tells us that Leatherhead is on the Thanet Beds, consisting of 'light-coloured, slightly clayey sand'.

## REFERENCES

- Cameron, K (1968) 1975 'Eccles in English place-names'. EPNS 1975: 1-7.
- Forster, M 1942 *Der Flussname Themse und seine Sippe*. Munich: Bayerische Akad.
- Gelling, M (1967) 1975 'English place-names derived from the compound *wīcām*'. EPNS 1975: 8-26.
- Gelling, M et al. 1970 *The names of towns and cities in Britain*. London: Batsford.
- Gelling, M 1978 *Signposts to the past*. London: Dent.
- Hjelmslev, L 1968 *Prolegomènes a une théorie du langage*. Paris: Minuit.
- Jackson, K H 1953 *Language and history in early Britain*. Edinburgh: University Press.
- Rivet, A L F & Smith, C C 1979 *The place-names of Roman Britain*. London: Batsford.
- Sawyer, P 1968 *Anglo-Saxon charters*. London: Royal Historical Society.
- SAC = *Surrey Archaeological Collections*.
- VCH = *Victoria County History of Surrey*.