The Kent Place-Name Brenchley

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Brenchley is a small village in Kent, five miles east-north-east of Tunbridge Wells, two miles south of Paddock Wood. It is situated 300 feet above sea level within the fringe of the High Weald, an ancient forest region cleared and settled from the late Anglo-Saxon period onwards. Even though the Brenchley area is now characterized by miles of orchard, there is still much woodland.

The name Brenchley provides a clue to its history. Ekwall provides the early forms Braencesle c.1100 (citing the Textus Roffensis as his source), Branchesleca 1185, Branchesleh 1230, and Brenchesle 1242. The second element is leah ‘clearing’. Ekwall says the first ‘appears to be a personal name Brenci, which is of obscure history.’

The difficulties about Brenchley can be cleared up if it can be shown to be the Brittonic personal name first attested as Old Cornish Brenci (pronounced ‘Bren-gi’, according to the normal spelling-conventions of Old Welsh, Cornish and Breton). The name occurs in the manumission of a group of slaves recorded in the Bodmin Gospels (London, British Library, MS Add. 9381). This particular Brenci was freed by bishop Wulfsige (c.959–93). The Welsh cognate Brenig or Bryngi is also known. Garthbrenig ‘Brenig’s plot of land’, a tiny village and parish three miles north of Brecon, figures as Garth Bryngi in a poem to St

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David by Gwynfardd Brycheiniog (flourished c.1180). There is or was also a Gallt Brenig ‘Brenig’s Wooded Hillside’ in Gwent.

The etymology of these forms has been accepted as the unflattering ‘stinking dog, stinkhound’, since Welsh braen means ‘stinking’, and ci means ‘dog’. But the more noble explanation ‘raven hound, crow hound’ has recently been suggested, from Welsh and Cornish bran ‘raven, crow’ (a form familiar in Celtic names) which had undergone i-affection. No doubt the sense depended on the social status of the holder, a Cornish slave having less choice in this matter than another.

In any case, these forms allow us to identify the Kent place-name Brenchley as perhaps being due to a settler with a Cornish name. It is interesting to see Cornish e represented by Old English ae, though that may here, as elsewhere, stand for ‘e’; or possibly ae in Textus Roffensis is the non-Kentish equivalent of Kentish e, compare West Saxon masse ‘mass’ for Kentish meses. More potentially worrying would be the borrowing of Old Cornish -ng- here as -nc-. Old English had a single internal [ŋ], albeit only after nasals (as here), so there was no barrier to Cornish -ng- being borrowed as -ng-. However, there are parallels to this sound-substitution, such as Welsh Bangor borrowed as OE Bancor and Primitive Welsh *Pennguig borrowed as OE Pencrige. However interpreted, the name Brenchley would seem to be evidence for a Welshman, Cornishman or Breton who, presumably, took part in the clearing of the Kentish Weald in the Anglo-Saxon period. It is worth also noting that the place-name contains an English genitive singular of the
Brittonic personal name, showing that the place-name was coined by English-speakers, not Brittonic-speakers; it is not a Celtic place-name. This is what one would expect anyway, in a name with an English generic element.

This derivation allows us to rule out Sawyer’s hesitant identification, in a Kentish charter of 724, of Brentingestleag (where the nuns of Minster-in-Thanet possessed swine pastures) with Brenchley.10 (Perhaps Brentingestleag lay further east than Brenchley, near other places mentioned in the charter.) There is therefore no reason to think Brenchley had been cleared for swine pasture as early as the eighth century.11 In fact, if the Brengi of Brenchley were a Cornishman, it would be unlikely to be an ancient settlement at all. The subjection of Cornwall culminated in the battle of Histing Down in 838, though the Cornish still had some measure of independence a century later, in the time of Athelstan.12 It is thus difficult to think of the Cornish as settling elsewhere in England until the conquest was long past, and they were assimilated into English society. The name Brenchley may, therefore, be of the eleventh century or little before. It is worth remembering here how late it was before the clearing of the High Weald was carried out, even if we must not be too ready, in Lennard’s words, ‘to fill the vacant spaces of the Domesday map with imagined woodland’.13 Analysis of the name Brenchley thus provides unusual evidence for the kind of men who first settled the great Wealden Forest, as also for the movement of population in late Anglo-Saxon England.

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12 Jackson, Language and History, p. 206.

Four Devon Place-Names

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The Devon place-names Clyst, Countisbury, Creedy (a river giving its name to Credon, near Exeter), and Croyde have all been of disputed origin. What follows argues that all four names can be shown to be of British origin, and that they are thus evidence for Celtic survival in Devon. The four names are discussed in alphabetical order.

Clyst

The Clyst, for most of its length more a stream than a river, runs some twelve miles through low-lying country in south-east Devon, entering the estuary of the Exe five miles below Exeter. It gives its name to ten villages, hamlets, and farms. Closest to the sea is Clyst St George, then Clyst St Mary, Bishop Clyst, Clyst Honiton, West Clyst, Broad Clyst, Ashclyst, Clyst St Lawrence, Clyst Hydon, and Clyst William (the last deriving from Old English æwielm ‘spring’, and not the Christian name).

Ekwall relates the name Clyst to Latin cluo ‘I wash’, Old English hlutter ‘clean’, the river-names Clyde in Scotland and Clydach in Wales, and proposes the meaning ‘clean stream’.1 But the present note tries to show that Ekwall’s association of Clyst with these cognates is unfounded, and that another and simpler solution is possible.

Clyde and Clydach may be dealt with first. Clyde is certainly a British name meaning ‘the washer, the strongly-flowing one’, presumably the name of the river-goddess, as Watson observed.2 Clydach,