Medieval Field-Names in Two South Durham Townships

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This paper is meant as a brief account of some rich field-name material I have come across in the process of preparing the English Place-Name Society's volumes for Durham beginning with Stockton Ward in the south-east of the county.¹

In my discussion of the Scandinavian settlement names of County Durham presented to the then Council for Name Studies at its spring conference in 1987 and subsequently printed in *Nomina*,² I concluded that there was `an arc of [Scandinavian] settlement in some density’ in the Middle and Lower Tees valley but that there remained `areas along the Tees where all trace of Scand[inavian] or Scandinavianised p[lace-] n[ames] is absent—notably around Darlington and around Hartlepool’.³

Long before this in 1948 the Danish scholar, Kristian Hald, had showed that the late twelfth-century field-names of the English-named Lincolnshire village of Benniworth, Old English (OE) *Beonninga-worþ* `the enclosure of the Beonningas, the people called after Beonna’, were full of evidence of widespread Danish influence. Some of the names preserved traces of Scandinavian inflexions and many were derived wholly or partly from Scandinavian words.⁴ The significance of Hald's paper was to demonstrate that in areas subject to Danish occupation the evidence of

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major settlement names needs to be set in the field-name context. Within the Danelaw the occurrence of an English-named village cannot be taken as negative evidence against Danish settlement: for that the field-name evidence needs to be investigated.

Following Hald's example in 1973 Kenneth Cameron examined the twelfth-century field-name evidence of another English-named Lincolnshire village, Dunholme, OE *Dunna-h_m*, `Dunna's homestead', located on the western fringes of an area settled by Danes in numbers. Of eighty-odd names he found twenty-five with eleven generics of English origin (*brycg, busc, croft, feld, furh, furlang, hyll, mersc, st_n, stodfald* and *wella*), twenty-three with ten generics of Scandinavian origin (*bekkr, deill, eng, gata, haugr, holmi, kjarr, skarð, stng* and *topt*), and twenty-seven whose generics were ambiguous as between English or Scandinavian origin (*aecer/akr, dæl/dalr, d_c/dík, land, m_r/mór, pytt/pyt, s_c/stík, st_g/stígr*). He concluded that this mixture reflected the situation pretty exactly of this English-named village on the edge of Danish settlement.

In his last two publications on field-name evidence, this time in Scandinavian-named vills, Professor Cameron listed the Scandinavian elements occurring in field-names by frequency of occurrence so that in Haverstoe, Walshcroft and Yarborough Wapentakes in Lincolnshire the common elements include *bekkr, bryggja, bý* (in the formula *Northiby, Suthiby, Westiby, Austiby*), *dammr, deill, eng, garðr, gata, geiri, haugr, hlaða, inntak, kirkja, kjarr, mikill, steinn, stng, toft, vað* and *vrá* and the well-attested elements *baun, brakni, breiðr, brot, fit, hafri, hfuð* and *kiki*. Cameron concluded:

Taken together, the evidence obtained from minor names and field-names in three wapentakes in north-east Lindsey reinforces that of the major

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place-names. The sheer variety of the vocabulary involving over eighty words, many connected with farming and land-measurement, the number of Scandinavian compound field-names and the occurrence of some sixty Scandinavian personal names as the first element of field-names all point to a conclusion that Danish settlement here must have been the result of colonisation on a large scale.  

In my 1987 paper I did not deal with field-name evidence, but work done since then for the English Place-Name Society’s Durham volumes has now made it possible to see whether in two English-named vills near Hartlepool the field-name evidence confirms or qualifies my original conclusions. The two townships concerned are Billingham (OE Billing-h _m `the homestead on the billing or promontory’) and Wolviston (OE Wulфes-t _n `Wulf’s farm or estate’), both of which were estates belonging to the Prior of Durham in the Middle Ages and are correspondingly well documented with a rich series of field- and minor names in the thirteenth- and fourteenth-century documents preserved in the Durham Cathedral Muniments.

Would this evidence show a situation in two English-named vills in the southern part of County Durham where Scandinavian influence is most to be expected similar to that revealed by Hald and Cameron in Lincolnshire?

In the event, the answers from Billingham and Wolviston could hardly be more different. Of the 250 or so field-names tabulated below I found 118 compounded with thirty-two generics of English origin (brycg, burna, cl _h, croft, d _l, delf, denu, d _n, fald, fald, *fl _d-geat, ford, furh, geard, halh, h _afod, hl _w, hop, hyll, l _ah, *lece, m _ere, mersc, myln, pæd, *pingel, p _l, *r _w, *rodu, *scofl-brdu, s _de, st _n), fifty-one with nine generics of Scandinavian origin, all of which became naturalised at various dates into northern Middle English (ME) dialects (afнám, banki, báss, flatr, gata, kеfli, kjarr, reinn, toft), and seventy-six with twenty-two ambiguous generics which could be of either English or Scandinavian origin (acer/akr, ærs/ars, balca/bálkr, *busc/buski, cnoll/knollr, cot/kot, *cr _c/krókr, cross/kross, d _c/dík, ende/endi, fenn/fen, fl _r/flór, f _fjòt, hol, land, mre/mri, m _r/mór, s _c/sík, stand, þorn, weg/vegr, wella/vella).

Similarly with the specifics in these names: sixty are compounded with

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forty-four specifics of English origin (ald, br_da, catt, cnearr, c_l² `cool', cr_we, crumb `bent', clyn, d_ad-mann, elle `elder-tree', ened, fearnig, *feortere, fisc, *fresc, fyrhðe, gr_ne, hæg, h_lig, hall, h_ope, heorot, hop `enclosed plot, enclosed valley', hr_od, lamb in the Old English genitive plural form lambra (Lambircotes c.1375), *l_mig, ltel, md, papol `pebble', peose, pr_me, *purroc, *rodu, ryge, ryscig, sceort, *scrdere `clothier' used as a surname, *scylfing, sn_w, st_nig, *todd-hol, walcere no doubt again used as a surname, wide, widign), ten with eight specifics of Scandinavian origin all of which, again, became naturalised elements in Middle English (blár, bóndi, drengr, fit, flak, gymbr, kirkja, slakki), and thirty-one with twenty-five ambiguous specifics (blæc/blakr, blind/blindr, cot/kot, cwicu/kvikr, f_l/fúl, gor, hangiende/hangandi, h_r²/hárr, heg/hey, horh/horr, hrafin/hrafn, hungor, hungrig/hungr, hwate/hvéti, hw_l/hvúr, lang/langr, micel, micla/mikill, m_r/mór, mos/mosi, sand(ig), seox/sex, st_or/stjórr used as a surname, wer `weir', west/vestr, weðer/veðr, wifel/*wifill).

There are no examples in this list of any of Cameron’s common and well-attested generics other than gata, kjarr, possibly bryggja, and toft. But toft is already borrowed into late Old English and common in Middle English, as are also gata and kjarr in northern dialects, and Middle English spellings in brigge are actually ambiguous as between /brig/ and /bridz/. ME brade (OE brada) occurs in several names with no trace of ON breiðr and one name, Lambircotes 1375, seems to show traces of the Old English es-stem genitive plural lambra which is not evidenced in Old Norse where nouns of this class were early assimilated to the a-stem declension.9

Traces of Old Norse (ON) afnám `a plot of land newly enclosed’, blár `blue’, bóndi `peasant land-owner’, fit `grassland on a river bank’ and reinn `a boundary strip’ occur in Almon Nook, Aunam c.1375, Blafote c.1375, Bondflat 1361, fittie carre 1608, and le Wheterenes 1316, but these can all be explained as Middle English formations with elements which became more or less widely generalised.

There are no Old Norse compound field-names and no obvious Old Norse personal names. Hildiger in hylgeresmers 1333 probably represents

Continental Germanic (CG) Hildigar. There are by contrast four possible Old English personal names: OE Hiddi used as a surname may lie behind hidencesland, OE *Pymmi or ME Pymme from the attested Old English weak form Pymma behind pymesdyk’ c.1375, Wulfstan occurs in Wlstanemer’ c.1330, and perhaps an OE *Craffa, genitive singular *Craffan, in Crafendenes 1615. Such a name would be an apophonic variant of crabba ‘a crab’ and may be compared with Bavarian krapf ‘a cripple’. On the other hand, the late spelling perhaps conceals OE cr_wa-fenn ‘crows' fen’.

Two names deserve special mention, Pekeshers 1368 and Tibyrislaw c.1320. The former is identical with the ancient name of Peak Cavern in Derbyshire, Pechefers (for Pechesers) 1086, Peak’s Arse 1636. Peak here is OE p_ac ‘a peak’ as in the Tribal Hidage Peacsætna lond [7th]c.1000 B 297. The occurrence, however, of an alternative name for Peak Cavern, Devillsarse 1630, has suggested to some that p_ac might have been an alternative name for the Devil or for some pagan spirit cognate with OE p_ca and ON púki. The latter has been thought to be a late borrowing of the former: both derive from a Germanic root piuka/pauka/puka ‘swell, swollen’. Why it is used in a Billingham field-name and what feature it may have been applied to is unknown.

The latter is the nicest find I have come across in the collection since it survives in the name of a modern housing-estate road, Tibbersley Avenue, Billingham. The original site is completely built over today by modern chemical works but the recorded forms are Tibyrislaw c.1320, Tibblerlawe c.1375, and Tiversley Homestall 1775. It is, I think, T_dbeorhtes hl_w ‘Tidbeorht’s barrow’, which I suggest to have been a tutelary burial at the edge of a territory later known as Billinghamshire, at the end of the long low ridge or billing on which the medieval village stands still marked by its Anglo-Saxon church tower overlooking the Tees estuary and adjacent lowlands, just like Beowulf’s tutelary burial overlooking the sea on Hronesnes.

The evidence examined points to the generally English character of the Billingham and Wolviston field- and minor names. It is, however, slightly later in date than that available to Cameron and Hald and consequently

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includes a number of Middle English coinages with Scandinavian elements which had by then become widely naturalised in northern dialects. Nevertheless the underlying English character of the medieval field- and minor names in these two vills is evident and substantiates my conclusion of 1987, namely that Scandinavian influence in County Durham was severely restricted. It is further evidence of the high skill and great success with which the Community of St Cuthbert defended its possessions from alienation to Viking overlords both in the earlier ninth-century crisis and in the later short-lived tenth-century Irish-Norwegian supremacy.

The material: Billingham and Wolviston field-names

(a) Old English generics (32)

\textbf{brycg} (Staynbrigges c.1375, \textit{le Haybrygg’} 1378, \textit{Stanybrig’} 1304, \textit{Wlleswaybrig} c.1300)

\textbf{burna} `stream’ (\textit{le Burnsyde}, Stobburnegate c.1375, \textit{Bruntofburn’} c.1240, \textit{ffisshburnlecche} 1371–73, \textit{Rauenesdenburne} 1305 × 1306)

\textbf{cl\_h} `ravine’ (\textit{Catteclouleche} c.1240)

\textbf{croft} (\textit{le Craftes, le Southcroft} c.1375, \textit{le Croftes} 1304)

\textbf{d\_l} (\textit{Bradedale} 1325, \textit{keueldale} 1189 × 1212)

\textbf{delf} (\textit{dryngesdelfe} 1333)


\textbf{d\_n} (\textit{Papildounmeree} c.1375, \textit{Heppedun} early 13th, \textit{snaudun} c.1240)

\textbf{fald} `a fold’ (\textit{le maysterfald} 1304, \textit{le Wystfald} 1325)

\textbf{feld} (\textit{le Frethfeld} 1368, \textit{kevelfeld} c.1280)

\textbf{*fl\_d-geat} \textsuperscript{11} (\textit{fflodeyates} 1348, \textit{Neuton flodeyat} 1316)

\textbf{ford} `ford’ or \textbf{foro} `in front of’ (\textit{Northfrothwelflat’}, \textit{Southfouthwelflat} c.1375)

\textbf{furh} `furrow’ (\textit{foulfar’} 1408 `foul furrows’)


geard (Bruntofyard 1316)
halh (le haulgh in campo boreali 1384, Nicholshalgh 1336)
h_afod (Hordenheued c.1375, croukthedsand 1613, les Heuedlandes 1348)
hl_w (Tybiryslaw c.1320, vtlaweflat c.1375, Blakeluau early 13th, Chnareslawe 1229 × 1244, Quarrelau early 13th)
hop (scridereshope 1323, Whytshope c.1320, Wiveshope 1359)
hyll (ffundeshill c.1375, Ryel c.1375, mikhil c.1240, le Mylnehille c.1330, Sexhille 1229 × 1240)
l_ah, ley (le Schorteley 1336, soritmikeley [reading uncertain] 1304)
*lece ‘watercourse’ (Catteclouleche c.1240, ffisshburnlecche 1371–73, ffisshpollech’ 1336 × 1373)
mere ‘pond’ (Crawemere, Papildoummere c.1375, Tesemer 1408, le Thristelymure c.1375, Brademere c.1275, le Colemer’ 1312, dunemere early 13th, Goremere mid 13th, Henriesmer c.1320, hertesmere 1234 × 1244, Lamim[er]e early 13th, langemere c.1240, le ressymer 1312, Wellsmere 1359, Wlstanemer’ c.1330, Wydmer c.1280, Wyflesmer c.1280, Withinm[er]e c.1240, Wytemgate 1312)
mersc (Lytilmers c.1343, ffresmers, le Merseflat’ c.1375, hylgeresmers 1333)
myln (le milnflat, le milneknoll’, le Wynmylne c.1375, le Mylnehille c.1330, snaudun mylne 1312, le Wyndemylne 1312)
pæð, peth (le Pethe 1308, petheflat c.1280)
*pingle$^2$ (pynkell’ c.1375)
p_l (Endepole c.1300, fiscpolflat c.1240, ffishepoles 1348, Walkerpole 1320)
*r_w (Neuraw 1378)
*rodu `clearing’ (hanganwelrode 1348)
*scoff-brdu ‘a narrow strip the width of a shovel’ (shoul bred 1614)
s_de (le kersyde, moresideflat’, Rodesyde c.1375, Crouelsyde c.1330, le greneside 1312, le keulf[e]ldsyde 1323, langside 1348, le medusydes 1312, le pethsydes 1312, purroxdenside 1348, Schiluingeside 1304, Slackeside 1669)
st_n (harestandene c.1240)

$^2$ First recorded in the sixteenth century in Oxford English Dictionary, edited by Simpson and Weiner, s.v. pingle.
(b) Old Norse generics (9: all naturalised elements in Middle English)

afnám `land taken in from the waste’ (Almon Nook, Aunam c.1375)
banki (fflakdenbank’, le Redebank c.1375)
báss ON, dialect beace `a cowshed’ (Bascar 1613)
gata `road’ (Bartoungate, Duresmegat’, Stobburnegate, Weresgate c.1375, Aldigate 1348, annat wai 1613, le Haygate 1325, le kyrkegate 1308, plankegat 1316, snaundergate c.1300, Wymergate 1312)
kefli (keueldale 1189 × 1212, kevelskyld c.1280, le keuilfe[l]syde 1323, Southekevyle 1424)
kjarr `marsh’ (le kersyde c.1375, Pekersker 1365, Riekerhend 14th, le Southeker c.1375, le Westker 14th, le Kerre 1430)
reinn ON, dialect rean `strip, boundary’ (le Whetereues for -renes 1316)
toft (Toftis c.1280)

(c) Ambiguous generics (22)

æcer/akr (hopeacre c.1375, Byacres for Ryacres 1316 × 1317)
ær/ars (Pekeshers 1368)
balca/bálkr (Bruntoftbalke c.1300)
*busc/buski (Hellebuske c.1300)
knoll/knollr (le milneknoll’, le Stanyknoll, le Thristleyknoll’ c.1375, farmignoll c.1280, pruncnolflat, Sandyknoll’ 1316)
cot/kot (Lambircotes c.1375, le Wethercot 1378)
*cr_c/krókr (Iakiscrok’ 14th, Saltcrok’ 1343, Lyntecrokes 1320, snaudun crok 1316)
cross/kross (albam crucem early 13th, Whitcrosse 1316)
d_c/dik (faukus dykes, haydike, pymesdyk’ c.1375, Aldyke c.1300, Dike, Dikesende, Halledik early 13th, le Haydick 1316)
ende/endi (Riekkerhend 14th, vtgangflatend c.1375, Dikesende early 13th)
fenn/fen (Quikefen c.1230)
fl_r/flór, dialect floor  `flat land lying at the floot of slopes’ (fflurum c.1375, dative pl.)
f_t/fót (Blafote c.1375)
hol¹, holh/hol `hole', hol²/holr `hollow' (Hepeholl’ 1316, Howlmire 1615)
land (Blaklandes c.1375, cromlandes, le Langlandes c.1375, le messangerland 14th, peselandes c.1375, Tiddesland 1478, Belassiseland 1359, Bertramland 1424, Blakeland early 13th, le Heuedlandes 1348, Hidesland 1430, houtonland 1353, Knyghtland 1430, kylneland 1424, landsych c.1280, Massamland 1412, Nedillerland 1430, Offyngtonland 1424, Spensarland 1430 held of the communer of Durham, Stereland 1359 (Cuthbert Ster c.1350))
(ge)mre/mri `boundary’ (Le Meer c.1340)
m_r/mór (le syst[er]mores 1323)
s_c/sík (ffulesike 1320, landsych c.1280)
stand (Wlstannd 1380)
þorn `a thorn-tree’ (le Thoren c.1375, crauthornedenes c.1300)
weg/vegr (Vlleswaybrig c.1300, anngat wai, le Coleway 1613)
wella/vella (flakdenwell’, Northfrothwelflat’, Southforthwelflat c.1375, le blyndewelle(s) 1308, Crowell early 13th, Fartirwelleden’ c.1300, Halywellflatt 1430, Hangande welle early 13th, Harstanwelleden’ c.1320, muswelle c.1300, Raueneswelleburne 1316 × 1317)

(d) Old English specifics (44)

ald (Aldyke c.1300, Aldigate 1348)
br_da (Bradedale 1325, Brademere c.1275)
catt (Catteclouleche c.1240)
*cnearr `a rugged rock’ (Chnareslawe 1229 × 1244)
c_L² `cool’ (le Colemer’ 1312)
cr_we (Crawemere c.1375, crauthornedenes c.1300, Crowell early 13th)
crumb `bent’ (cromlandes c.1375)
cyln (kylneland 1424)
d_ad-mann (dedmanesdenes c.1300)
elle `elder-tree’ (Hellebuske c.1300)
ened `duck’ (Endepole c.1300)
fearn(ig) (farnigknol c.1280)
*feortere `farter’ used as a surname (Fartirwelleden’ c.1300)
fisc (ffisshburnlecche 1371-3, fiscpolflat c.1240, fishepoles 1348)
*fresc (ffresmesmers c.1375)
fyrhœ `fenland overgrown with brushwood’ (le Frethfeld 1368)
gr_ne (le greneside 1312)
haeg `hedge’ (le Haydick 1316)
h_lig (Halywellflatt 1430)
hall (Halledik early 13th)
h_op `hip, dogrose’ (Heppedun early 13th, Hepeholl’ 1316)
heorot (hertesmere 1234 × 1244)
hop (hopeacre c.1375)
hr_od `reed’ (le Redebank’ c.1375)
lamb (Lambircotes c.1375, OE genitive pl. lambra)
*l_mig `loamy’ (Lamim[er]e early 13th)
ltel (Lytilmers 1343, Litteltoft’ c.1375, Litelden early 13th)
md (le medusydes 1312, Wetmedu syde c.1300)
papol `pebble’ (Papildounmere c.1375)
peose `pea’ (peselandes c.1375)
pr_me `a plumb’ (pruncnolflat 1316)
*purroc (purrokedene early 13th)
*rodu (Rodesyde c.1375)
ryge (Riekkerhend 14th, Ryel c.1375, Byacres for Ryacres 1316 × 1317)
ryscig (le ressymer 1312)
sceort (le Shortflat’ c.1375, le Schorteley 1336)
*scrdere `clothier’ used as surname (scridereshope 1323)
*scylfing, derivative of scelf, scylf (Schiluingeside 1304)
sn_w (snaudun c.1240)
st_n(ig) `stony’ (fflakdenstanes, le Stanyknoll, Staynbrigges c.1375,
  Stanybrig’ 1304, stanflaet early 13th)
*todd-hol (todholoflat 1316)
walcere (Walkerpole 1320)
w_de (Wydmer c.1280)
wiðign `willow’ (Withinm[er]e c.1240)

(e) Old Norse specifics (8)
blár (Blafote c.1375)  
bóndi (Bondflat 1361, pratum bondorum c.1300)  
drengr used as a surname (dringesdelf 1333, Dringland 1346)  
fitty `coastal marshland’ (ON fit) (fittie carre 1608)  
flak `turf’ (fflakden c.1375)  
gymbr, dialect gimmer `one-year old ewe-lamb’ (ginin- Gimirflat early 13th)  
kirkja (le kyrkegate 1308)  
slakki, dialect slack (Slackeside 1669, cf. `his watter slake at the more hedes not open’, Billingham Court Rolls 1610)  

(f) Ambiguous specifics (25)  

blæc/blakr (Blaklands c.1375, Blakeland, Blakelau early 13th)  
blind/blindr `blind, hidden by vegetation, having no outlet’ (le blyndewelle(s) 1308)  
cot/kot (le Coteflat 1316)  
cwicu/kvikr `alive, unstable’ (Quikefen c.1230)  
f_l/fúll `foul’ (ffulesike 1320)  
gor `dirt, filth’ (Goremere mid 13th)  
hangiende/hangandi `hanging’ (Hangande welle early 13th)  
har²/hárr `grey’ (harestandene c.1240)  
heg/hey (haydike c.1375, le Haybrygg’ 1378, le Haygate 1325)  
horh/horr `dirt’ (Horden’ c.1375)  
hrafn/hrafn (Rauenesdenburne 1305 × 1306)  
hungor, hungrig/hugr (hungri flat 1229 × 1244)  
hwte/hveiti `wheat’ (le Whetereues for -renes 1316)  
hw_t/hvítr (Wytmergate 1312)  
lang/langr (le Langlandes c.1375, langemere c.1240, langside 1348)  
micel, micla/mikill (mikilhil c.1240)  
m_r/mór (moreflatt’, moresideflat’, c.1375)  
mos/mosi (muswelle c.1300)  
sand(ig) (Sandyknoll’ 1316)  
seox/sex `six’ (Sexhille 1229 × 1240)  
st_or/stjórr `a steer’ probably used as a surname (Stereland 1359)  
wer `weir’, cf. ON verja (Weresgate c.1375)
west/vestr (Le Wystfald 1325)
weðer/veðr `a wether’ (le Wethercot 1378)
wifel/*vifill `beetle’ (Wyflesmer c.1280)

(g) Personal names

OE *Craffa, apophonic variant of crabba `crab’, cf. Bavarian krapf
  `cripple’ (Craffendenes 1615)
OE Hiddi (hiddesland 1430)
CG Hildiger³ (hylgeresmers 1333)
OE *Pymmi or ME Pymme from OE Pymma (pymesdyk’ c.1375)
OE *T_dbeorht (Tibyrislaw c.1320)
OE Wulfst_n (Wlstanenmer’ c.1330)

³ G. Fellows Jensen, Scandinavian Personal Names in Lincolnshire and
Yorkshire (Copenhagen, 1968), p. 141.