

ON CUMB AND DENU IN PLACE-NAMES OF THE ENGLISH SOUTH-EAST\*

He sendeth forth streams into the  
valleys that run among the hills.  
O that men would praise the Lord  
for his goodness!

Sign by the public spring at  
Fulking, West Sussex

Deane is a lowe place betweene 2  
hills giveing passage to rayne  
waters, and differing from a combe  
which is a lowe place betweene hills  
havinge noe passage for water.

Norden 1595 (Hatton copy)

I INTRODUCTORY REMARKS

In Old English there are a large number of words denoting depressions in the ground. Only three of them, cumb, denu and holh, generate large numbers of place-names in south-east England. I shall pass over holh, as it is continued formally and semantically by the word hollow; and I shall concentrate on the other two, both having become opaque with respect to their precise application. It is this original application that I shall try to reconstruct.

There is no direct OE evidence for a semantic distinction between cumb and denu. If such a distinction existed, it must be sought by observing the location and distribution of place-names containing reflexes of these elements and having early attestations. (The names in the prime material for this study are all attested before 1300.)

The possibility of a distinction between cumb and denu, has, to my knowledge, been broached twice before. John Norden, the author of the Chorographicall description . . . (1595) put forward the view cited in the second epigraph (above). We shall see that he may have been on the right lines, but he finished with a diametrically wrong solution for the area under consideration. Gelling (1976: 925), in her discussion of Berkshire placenames, concludes that cumb is a shallow, wide valley and that denu is a deep, steep, narrow one. This is so to the extent even that a denu can locally widen out into a cumb. However, we shall see that this cannot be precisely right for the south-east, although it may very well have been for the Thames Valley. We do find some denus debouching into cumbs; but not, I suspect, for the reason cited by Gelling. Moreover, there is no evidence that cumbs are broader than denus. A glance at the ravines at Highcombe (Surrey) and Horncombe (Sussex) should be sufficient to dispel the breadth criterion after a look at the steep but flat-bottomed Ovingdean and Balsdean (Sussex). It is possible that depth and steep-sidedness are factors, as Gelling suggests; but I append a table of pitch, depth, and windingness for various typical valleys which suggests on the contrary that there is no clear-cut solution along these lines.

Table 1

	Pitch §	Windingness	Depth X
Balcombe *	8'	No	100-150'
Horncombe <sup>1</sup>	10'	No	200-250'
West Dean oc.* +	11'	No	c.250'
Ovingdean * +	12'	No	150'
Telscombe * +	6 2/3/11½ ‡	Yes	100-150'
Balsdean *	11½'	Yes?	350'
Highcombe (Devil's Punch Bowl) <sup>2</sup>	12¾	No	250'

All measurements done at right-angles to the valley axis as judged by eye.

\* Cross-section taken at or near village church, assumed to represent original village nucleus (+ church with substantial Saxon work).

‡ Typical profile of the Telscombe valley 1m. from the church. The church is in the 'baq' at the end of the valley.

§ Rough and ready index in feet of drop per 1000 inches (83' 4") of distance at OD.

? Status depends on where the Balsdean valley is deemed to become the Saltdean valley.

X Rough average drop at point at which the profile is taken.

<sup>1</sup> No church. Measurement done due (east of village (1))  
<sup>2</sup> (west of youth hostel (2)).

## II DATA-LISTS

My own view is, as I implied above, that cumbs were valleys containing flowing water, specifically a burna, and that denus were dry or at least devoid of flowing water. I shall present the evidence in tabular form, at once. Underlined names refer to valleys containing an extant stream or a historically attested one. Underlined names equipped with a (?) indicate that a stream may have existed in the relevant valley, to judge by e.g. the presence of flowing water in the extreme lower end of a valley where the relevant name appears to denote a place much higher up; or by the presence of significant 'stranded' names like Watergate. An indication with (??) shows that the identification of the valley with the name is conjectural, but in no case has this mark been used lightly. Where all the candidates contain flowing water, this sign has been omitted. Excuses will be offered for recalcitrant cases after the data-lists and Table 2, which summarises the relevant facts.

## SUSSEX

CUMB names attested before 1100 or referring to parishes/manors (after Dodgson 1978):

Sheep Combe [Hanger] (Findon)	Coombes (??)
Saddlescombe (??) (Poynings)	Pyecombe
Ashcombe (St Ann Without)	Halcombe (Piddinghoe)
Sedlescombe	Telscombe
Balcombe	Moulsecoomb (Patcham)
Compton (?)	

CUMB names attested between 1100 and 1300 (extending Dodgson 1978):

*Patchescumbe (and probably 2 others) (Heyshott)	Chitcombe (Brede)
Molecombe (Westhampnett)	*Brinscombe (??) (West Dean occid?)
Varncombe (??) (Patcham)	*Cumbsyghtre
Coombe (??)/Compton (Firle) (same reference?)	
Carcombe (Whatlington)	Harting Combe (Roqate)
Molecombe (East Dean occid.)	Dencombe (Slaugham)
Horn Combe (West Hoathly)	Ranscombe (S Malling without)
Coombe (Hamsey)	Gotham (??) (Bexhill)
Motcombe (Eastbourne)	Baycombe (Slindon)
Watcombe (Beckley)	Combe (Wadhurst)

DENU names first attested before 1100 or referring to parishes/manors:

Highden (Washington) (by description)	*Radynden (Patcham)
*horninga dene (Washington)	Ovingdean
Withdean (Preston)	West Dean orient
Bevendean (Falmer)	Denton
Balsdean (Rottingdean)	Egdean (??)
* on dæni (??) (Stammer)	Pangdean (Pyecombe)
West/East Dean occid.	Standeon (Ditchling)
Dankton (Sompting)	Rottingdean
	East Dean orient.

DENU names first attested between 1100 and 1300:

Adsdean (Westbourne)	Houndean (St Ann Without)
Pythingdean (Pulborough)	Marringdean (Billingshurst)
*Brambledean (??) (Old Shoreham)	Highden (Washington) (by name)
Peakdean (East Dean orient).	Deans (Piddinghoe)
Dean (Tillington)	
Cobden (Sullington)	
Dean's (Warbleton)	

## SURREY

My statements on Surrey are tentative, as are those for the following counties; but since this paper is offered under the rubric of 'work in progress', the conference theme, I present them as an indication of the general correctness of the hypothesis. I should point out that my Surrey mapwork has had to rely up to now on the OS 2½" survey, and the limitations of such work will be readily understood (I have not yet been able to locate those marked £).

CUMB names recorded before 1100:

<u>Farncombe</u> (Godalming)	<u>Compton</u>
<u>Highcombe</u> (Elstead/Thursley)	<u>Coombe</u> (Kingston)

CUMB names recorded between 1100 and 1300:

£ Aldercombe (Caterham)	<u>Bridlecombe</u> (Buckland)
<u>Ashcombe</u> (Dorking)	<u>Lapscombe</u> (Albury/Cranleigh)
<u>Nurscombe</u> (Bramley)	<u>Compton</u> (Farnham)
<u>Hascombe</u>	£ Coombe Cotts. (Batchworth)
<u>Thorncombe</u> (Bramley)	<u>Coombe Fm.</u> (Bramley)
<u>Binscombe</u> (Godalming)	

DENU names recorded before 1100:

Croydon  
Paddington (Abinger)

DENU names recorded between 1100 and 1300:

Polesden (Gt Bookham)	Bagden (Gt. Bookham)
£ Dene (W Horsley)	Green Dene (E Horsley)
Denehouse (Chipstead)	£ Handon (Godalming)
£ Danehurst Cotts (Dorking)	Marks Dean (W Clandon)
£ Building (Ewhurst)	£ Merriden (Dorking)

#### KENT

In the absence of a published EPNS survey of this county, I have restricted myself so far to a rather cursory glance over Wallenberg's two volumes and extracted the names which appear to cause problems for my hypothesis. I have included a representative sample of other names, checked on the OS 6" map for their dryness or otherwise.

CUMB

<u>Coakham</u> (Westerham)	1232	
<u>Fordcombe</u>	1313	(1769 map)
<u>Ulcombe</u>	941	
<u>Ranscombe</u> (?) (Cuxton)	c.1199	(possible, 1769 map)
<u>Winchcombe</u> (Crundale)	824	
<u>Fanscombe</u> (Wye)	c.1272	(discounted, see below)
* <u>Cokelescumb</u> (Temple Ewell/Lydden)	1211	(inference from parish name)
<u>Cuckoldscomb</u> (Wye)	1226	(auct. J K W)
<u>Burscombe</u> (??) (Egerton)	1254	
<u>Combe</u> (banks) (Sundridge)	1254	
<u>Combourne/Combwell</u> (Goudhurst)	1327/c.1160	
<u>Comenden</u> (Cranbrook)	1261	

DENU

Timberden (Shoreham)	c.1169
Danaway (Newington)	c.1230
Syndale Bottom (Lenham)	c.1240
Lyddendane (Hastingleigh)	1292

There are possible difficulties with the following, some of them only apparent:

<u>Dibden</u>	1270
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Withersdane (Wye)  
Pickersdane (Wye)

#### EAST HAMPSHIRE

As for Kent, in the absence of a published EPNS survey, I have relied on modern map forms as an interim measure. At least one of these is beyond question a modern fabrication. Some of the names show no early forms, to judge from Gover's manuscript slip collection in the possession of the EPNS. I present the data for what they are worth, and with all possible reserve.

CUMB

<u>Flexcombe</u> (Liss)	<u>Bascomb</u> (Clanfield)
<u>Peppercombe</u> (Langrish)	<u>Wascoomb</u> (Eastmeon)
<u>Coombe</u> (Eastmeon)	<u>Duncoombe</u> (Eastmeon)
<u>The Miscombe</u> (Buriton)	<u>Muscombe</u> (Langrish)
<u>Nutcombe</u> (Lanrish)	<u>Stancombe</u> (Lanrish)
<u>Mustercombe</u> (Langrish)	<u>Rothercoombe</u> (Langrish)
<u>Gatcombe</u> (Warnford)	

DENU

Horndean (Catherington)	Lovedean (Catherington)
Chidden (Hambleton)	Denmead (Hambleton)
Hyden Hill (Eastmeon)	

#### ISLE OF WIGHT

CUMB

Wydcombe (Niton)  
Nettlecombe (Niton)  
Gatcombe  
Appledurcombe (Godshill)  
Great Whitcombe (Newport)  
Compton (Freshwater) (cf. OS Geol.)  
Lucombe (Shanklin)  
Shalcombe (Shalfleet)  
Bowcombe (Newport)  
Idlecombe (?) (Newport) (above Bowcombe in same valley)  
Coombe (Brighstone) (debouches into wet valley)  
Rancombe (Shorwell) (in valley at head of wet valley)  
Comptonfield (Atherfield)  
Combley Lynn (Arreton)

DENU

Standen ( X 3; Newport)  
Dean Farm (Ventnor)

#### III DATA-LIST COMMENTARY

#### SUSSEX

1. Sheep Combe may have been a name for (part of) the Findon Valley and it is not impossible that water once ran here (cf. Osborne White 1924: 100).
2. The reference for Saddlescombe is unclear. If it refers to the valley into which the Devil's Dyke also debouches, then that valley has flowing water in it. If it refers to the hollow in which the village stands,

- there is a pond but no flowing water.
3. Ashcombe seems to be a name either for the Winterbourne Valley or for the side valley in which Ashcombe House now stands. The latter is not the self-evident solution it might seem to be, for part of it is called Ashcombe Bottom, apparently a delocative name. Besides, a stubby side branch of the (then persistent at that point) Winterbourne seems to emerge from the side valley on the first edition OS 1" map.
  4. Molecombe seems to be dry and to contain no coombe deposits; but the hamlet of Waterbeach (no early forms) stands downhill from its mouth. In our present state of knowledge it strains credibility to assume a name transferred from Waterbeach (C), so there may have been a stream here.
  5. Varncombe is above the present site of the Brighton waterworks; it debouches at Brapool (Patcham) where a historical winterbourne is known to have emerged (cf. Norden 1595).
  6. Brinscombe is a lost name which may have referred to the Lavant Valley west of Singleton. If so, then the names West Dean and East Dean (occidentales) may be late coinings. Incidentally, it can be demonstrated that, topographically at least, West Dean does not continue \*Apelingdenu, as surmised in PNSx.
  7. \*Cumbsyghtre's location is narrowed to a choice of two in Coates 1980. Whichever is the correct one, it contains a stream (as the name itself entails).
  8. If the stream rising at Avisford House ever rose above that point, Baycombe would also have been wet. But this seems to be a contact spring and will therefore not have moved. There are no measurable coombe deposits in the valley.
  9. Coombes is cited in an Assize Roll for 1288 as juxta Applesham. If juxta is taken literally, the valley (Cumbe) referred to is the one on the southern parish boundary containing the Ladywell stream. The village of Coombes is in the next significant valley northwards. Certainly Applesham has always been the economically dominant element in the parish (cf. VCH6, sub Coombes).
  10. Ranscombe is very difficult. It stands at the foot of a decidedly insignificant hollow. But it seems beyond belief that the once-tidal Glynde Reach, which it overlooks, can have been called a cumb.
  11. Dankton may reflect the Saxon estate of Denton (PNSx 202). If so, it may have been at the head of a valley containing one of the Sompting lavants (Osborne White 1924: 100).
  12. Withdean is anomalous. But, it is possible to imagine that the name refers to the smallish side valley which debouches opposite the ancient manor house rather than to the Patcham-Brighton valley with its bourne flow, in which it stands. The hundred name Dean (i.e. Patcham) refers here to Standean, cf. the shape of Patcham parish in the map in VCH 7.
  13. The occidental Deans are referred to in note 6.
  14. West Dean orientalis contains a contact spring with pond. The 'stream' at West Dean shows signs of being an artificial watercourse (ex inf. G. Fox).

15. It is unclear to which valley the name Egdean refers.
16. Dean in Tillington contains a pond, which is no proof in quaternary geology that flowing water once existed.

SURREY

1. Combe: I have not ascertained which valley is referred to. But water was ducted in early modern times from 'Comb Hill' to Kingston (Manning and Bray 1804: 403).
2. The reference involved in Ashcombe Wood north of Dorking is quite uncertain. It is on a shoulder of land overlooking the Mole gap.
3. Bridlecombe shows traces of an interrupted stream near its mouth.
4. Croydon and Paddington are both anomalous. Croydon as a name surely refers to the great chalk valley at the mouth of which the old settlement stood. This valley contained a famous bourne; cf. Wickham Flower 1865: 242; Copley 1977: 19 note 33; VCH 4: 216. Paddington is on the floor of the Tillingbourne Valley.

KENT

1. It is likely that streams at Ulcombe and at Combe (banks) in Sundridge have been interfered with by large-scale moat-works.
2. Winchcombe, at the junction of two dry valleys, may once have had water, as J. McN. Dodgson has suggested to me in conversation.
3. Fanscoombe replaces an earlier name Fanne and I discount the name, which seems to be attributable to the end of the 13th century.
4. Although Burscombe has 'no brook' (Wallenberg), the name could refer to the valley of the Great Stour which it overlooks.
5. Dibden may contain denn and also may refer to a side valley; Withersdane certainly contains tūn; Pickersdane shows no early forms in Wallenberg 1934; and betrays signs of Middle English formation (? from a surname, but cf. Pixham Wo, Picresham c.1086, Pikeresham 1221), thus being too late to be decisive since denu remained a functioning lexical word (as dane) till at least the 14th century in Kent.

ISLE OF WIGHT

1. The precise reference of Great Whitcombe and Appledurcombe is not certain.

Table 2

		valley with flowing water	dry valley
SUSSEX	cumb	21	9
	denu	7	21
SURREY	cumb	11	2
	denu	2	5
KENT	cumb	10	1
	denu	1	4
E. HAMPSHIRE	cumb	10	3
	denu	-	5
ISLE OF WIGHT	cumb	9	5
	denu	-	4
Totals:	cumb	61	20
	denu	10	39

## IV CONCLUDING REMARKS

It is possible that Gelling's hypothesis may still be right if it were assumed that people's actual perceptions of the qualities of breadth, depth and steepness were not consistent. I have discussed cases where clear criteria do not emerge from plotted valley profiles; so Gelling's distinction at least cannot be applied mechanically. If she is right, then the statistical significance (see below) of my correlations would be an accidental reflex of the fact that broader, shallower valleys contain rivers with a fair frequency, i.e. they may be nearer to O.D. and hence more likely to figure in the catchments of extant river systems.

However, consider this: why would Saxons have borrowed cumb, a British word, for a certain valley type? Two solutions suggest themselves:

- (1) They would use the term to refer to an unfamiliar valley type. Persons from the North German Plain, or anyway north of the Lippe-Unstrut line, are likely to have found deep, steep valleys less familiar, i.e. precisely those called denu on Gelling's hypothesis.
- (2) They would use the term to refer to valleys containing streams, especially winterbournes which do not regularly occur in North Germany.

If (2) is true, it can be supported from the OE lexicon. There was an OE word cumb meaning a liquid measure. If the borrowed word was phonetically identical to this, it is perhaps not too fanciful to see the associations of one influencing the other and promoting the meaning 'wet valley' par excellence. (There is a certain piquancy in the notion of a cumb fulne welisce alop!) However, this

is not a point which can be insisted upon, of course.

One could also evade the embarrassment of the prominently watery Croydon, Paddington, East/West Dean occidentales and Withdean by assuming that cumb was par excellence 'wet valley' and a hyponym of denu, just 'valley'. But the preponderance of dry denus in my data makes me incline to my original proposal.

Statistical significance of the proposal

$\chi^2$  seems the appropriate test to use. I shall not present the breakdown here, but overall  $\chi^2 = 38.09$  ( $p < .001$ ); that is, there is (actually very considerably) less than a 1 in 1000 possibility of the above correlation being due to chance. This is very highly significant. In fact, I have biased the data against myself by excluding a fair number of dry denus in Kent for which I have no secure earliest dates. This should serve to counterbalance a certain number of less than totally certain alleged wet cumbs in Sussex (Saddlescombe, Coombes) though even here I have in dubious cases made attributions which damage my hypothesis, to play safe, at Egdean, Withdean, and Dankton. I have also used Yeats' correction as a conservative factor.

Readers should not, of course, be misled by the apparent numerical objectivity of these figures. The partial subjectivity of some of the name-assignments has been alluded to throughout. This test is suggestive only.

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