

Margaret Joy Gelling (1924–2009)

Margaret Gelling (née Midgely) was born in Manchester on November 29th 1924, but the family (Margaret had two brothers) moved to Sidcup where Margaret attended the grammar school. Thence she went to St Hilda's College, Oxford where she read English. On graduating in 1945, Professor Dorothy Whitelock suggested that she became a research assistant to the English Place-Name Society as she was the sort of person who could be "sat down in a corner and left to get on with it". "Getting on with it" was in fact editing the material collected by Doris Stenton for the two EPNS volumes of Oxfordshire which were published in 1953–4. In 1952 she married archaeologist Peter Gelling and they settled in Harborne, Birmingham, where Peter was a lecturer. Apart from housewifely duties, Margaret was able to pursue her work in place-names. She chose to study North-West Berkshire (now mostly in Oxfordshire) for her doctoral thesis, awarded in 1957, for the very good reason that 'it was next to Oxfordshire'. She went on to edit the three Berkshire volumes, published in 1973, 1974 and 1976, for the EPNS. This would have familiarised her with the Ock and Upper Thames valleys' early Anglo-Saxon archaeological sites and the topographical place-names which would be so important in her later thinking.

There was a long-held view that *-ingas* and *-ingaham* names such as Hastings and Wokingham and the place-names referring to Anglo-Saxon paganism were the earliest names given by the incoming Anglo-Saxons, but Margaret was prepared to challenge this view. Her review of P. H. Reaney's *The Origin of English Place-Names* and K. Cameron's *English Place-Names in Oxoniensia* 26–7 (1961–2) makes several important points, including a plea for more distribution maps. More significantly she noted that while Reaney, a generation older than Cameron, adhered to the established ideas about place-names, "it is disturbing to find that Dr Cameron does not differ from him in any important particular. Has the subject really stood still for 30 years ... ?" After a discussion of the *-ingas* names she concluded: "I suspect myself that it may be necessary to modify the tenet of faith which considers *-ingas* to refer to groups of settlers just arrived from the Continent". John Dodgson's article of 1966 'The significance of the distribution of English place-names in *-ingas*, *-inga-* in south-east England' (*Medieval Archaeology* 10) put this hunch of Margaret's on a firm footing and brought it to a wider, sometimes hostile audience. Soon the question was asked if the *-ingas*, *-inga-* names are not the earliest, what

are? A study by Barrie Cox of the earliest English place-names suggested that topographical names were much more important than anyone had thought (*Journal of the English Place-Name Society* 8 (1976)). Margaret's familiarity with the archaeology and place-names of the Ock valley and the Oxford-Abingdon-Dorchester triangle led her to concur, and these may well have been the triggers for her studies on topographical names. She wanted to write a first volume giving concise accounts of topographical names and a second one on the habitative ones. However, she found that so little groundwork had been done that this was an unachievable ambition. So she sat down in a corner (again) and analysed all 19,000 names in Ekwall's *Concise Oxford Dictionary of English Place-Names* into the different elements, and then began the long process of locating the places on the map and observing the characteristics of each topographical element. *Place-Names in the Landscape* was the book that eventually resulted, in 1984. By this time she was so fascinated by topographical elements that all thought of a volume on habitative elements was abandoned. The interest in topographical names shown by both the general public and academics, and the appearance of studies of individual elements convinced Margaret that a new version of her 1984 book was desirable, and Ann Cole was invited to illustrate it with maps and sketches. Feeling that subjects for the sketches should be drawn from all parts of England they embarked on a series of expeditions to Northumberland, Lancashire, the North York Moors, Kent, Dorset and Somerset gathering notes and photographs, which, incidentally, shed light on how *fenn* and *mōr* differed in their usage, and reinforced the observation that topographical terms were systematically used for the same landform from Kent to Northumberland. A week in Iceland with a firm resolve to be just tourists rapidly turned into a place-name hunt too! *The Landscape of Place-Names* was published in 2000.

Margaret had written other books: *Signposts to the Past*, now in its third edition, first appeared on our bookshelves in 1978; her *West Midlands in the Early Middle Ages* was published in 1992. Besides the two volumes of *The Place-Names of Oxfordshire* and the three volumes of *The Place-Names of Berkshire*, she completed the first six volumes of *The Place-Names of Shropshire* using material gathered by a loyal band of helpers who met in Shrewsbury one Saturday a month for nearly 27 years. Her academic output earned Margaret honorary degrees from Leicester and Nottingham Universities and Fellowships from the British Academy and St Hilda's College. However, she was not content to sit in her corner but

enjoyed presenting the subject to a wider audience. She ran evening classes in Birmingham, weekend and summer schools in Oxford, spoke at many a conference here and abroad (e.g. Toronto, Santiago de Compostella), addressed local history societies, and featured on local radio phone-ins, and so she became known not only for her scholarship but also for popularising the subject among the general public. She encouraged their participation, valuing particularly their local knowledge and various expertises: the lady who alerted her to the fact that sea eagles frequently nested in trees prompted her to write a contribution to Ken Cameron's festschrift analysing the generics qualified by OE *earn*, and attempting to distinguish between the places where sea eagles and golden eagles were to be seen. Margaret held senior positions in several place-name-related societies: She was president of the English Place-Name Society between 1986 and 1998; she served on the Council for Name Studies in Britain and Ireland and its successor the Society for Name Studies in Britain and Ireland for many years, and she served as vice-president of the International Society for Onomastic Sciences from 1993-9. Margaret had a ready laugh and a good sense of humour which appeared occasionally in her writing or in lectures. On hearing in November 1994 that she was to be awarded an OBE she wrote to me saying "[the letter] is supposed to be confidential (I assume this is in case Her Majesty looks down the list and takes exception when she reaches my name)". Perhaps her favourite quip was how surprising it was that the Anglo-Saxons so often chose the appropriate toponym for a place when she and A. C. were not there to be consulted. It had become abundantly clear that the Anglo-Saxons (almost) invariably "got it right" and that any failure to find the "whiteness" of Whitbourne or the "bottom" of Wythburn was the fault of the modern toponymist not the misnaming by the Anglo-Saxons, and this was her way of saying so. Margaret supported her husband Peter's work. In the summer they would drive the two land-rovers north to Orkney, and while Peter and the students were excavating, Margaret would run the camp and cook for the whole party. She developed a discerning eye for hill profiles whilst accompanying Peter to the sites of hill forts: this later helped her identify the shapes to which the common OE hill terms such as *dūn*, *beorg*, *hōh* and *ofer* referred. She became convinced that field work and the compilation of distribution maps were essential tools for an understanding of the ways that the Anglo-Saxons, and indeed the Vikings, employed their toponyms.

At home she enjoyed gardening, mourned the fact that primroses were reluctant to grow in her patch but delighted in the alpine strawberries that spread so easily. At one time she had eight visiting cats, but when these faded from the scene she adopted one of her own, Lucy. Her association with the Communist and later the Labour parties had its roots in childhood when her father was the only man in the street where they lived to have a job, and she saw all around her the effects of poverty and unemployment. Margaret was not mathematically or mechanically minded. She had no desire to become computer-literate, preferring instead her old typewriter, but nevertheless found a photocopier an invaluable piece of equipment. She was very good at interpreting O.S. maps, but asking her to navigate around the country lanes was not advisable—she was so fascinated by the scenery that she forgot to keep an eye on the map! Margaret was concerned for the future of place-name studies and was keen to see younger scholars taking up the study. The initiation of the Vocabulary of English Place-Names project and the setting up of the Institute for Name Studies at Nottingham brought in some enthusiastic younger people. An increasing number were submitting theses for master's degrees and doctorates, and this pleased her. She once said to me that all the accumulated wisdom and expertise in English place-names could be wiped out in a single accident on the M1. Thankfully this did not happen. Margaret, the last of the hypothetical travellers to pass away, died in the knowledge that there were others to follow in her footsteps and pursue the trails she had blazed.

ANN COLE