Wargrave Local History Society

Latest News - November 2015

The origin and meaning of English Place Names

Anthony Poulton-Smith, the author of a recent book on Berkshire's Place Names, explained to the Wargrave Local History Society's November meeting the origins, meanings, and changes of many village and town names.

Anthony began with a general history of place names. The written form of most place names began with the Saxons. Although the Romans had had named places in England, these were normally just the Latin form of the existing, spoken, British names. However, as the British language did not have a written form, there is little idea as to what these names actually meant, although some clues can be found by comparing with Cornish, Welsh, or Celtic. The British were organised on a tribal system - each 'tribe' being a mini-kingdom, and in effect an 'extended family' that would be self-sufficient, farming the land. To them, the place where they lived was 'home'. The Norse language of the Scandinavians had a lot in common with that of their Saxon 'cousins'. Although there were differences in pronunciation, they were mutually intelligible. In many cases, the newcomers would ask 'what is the name of that place?', and would adopt the same name, although with maybe a harsher pronunciation. As an example, the Saxon Deartun (the 'tun' part meaning farmstead), whilst the Danish for a dear settlement was 'Deor' and 'by' indicated a farmstead, so the name became Derby.

It might be thought that the Roman names for places which end 'caster' or 'chester' would pre-date the Saxon era, but the word had a specific meaning of "a former stronghold". This explains why, for example, the place that the Romans called Deoua, from its location on the River Dee, was called Chester by the Saxons. In general, the Normans did not do much to place names in England (a notable exception being Belvoir - from the French for 'beautiful view'). They did, however, introduce hereditary surnames. When Normans became Lord of the Manor, they did not want to have a common name, like Ashley (an ash tree settlement), for their title, and so would their name to it, as happened at Ashby de la Zouch.

The Saxons did not name their 'own' place - to them it was 'home'. They - and later generations - could navigate using landmarks, and so did not need street names. (In much the same way as we might say we are 'going down to the village', or give directions to visitors to 'turn by The Bull and The Greyhound'). They may, however, need to refer to other places. Fairly common place names include Norton, Aston, Sutton and Weston - the ton part coming from the word 'tun' for settlement, and the first part of the name indicating north, east, south or west respectively. (so 'Sutton' is the town to the south , for example).

To try and work out what the origins of a place name are, Anthony said if possible a record needed to be found every 50 - 75 years up to about 1800. Looking at old documents such as the Feet of Fines, Subsidy Rolls, Pipe Rolls and Anglo Saxon Chronicles, and comparing the phonetic spellings going back in time, it was 'simple' to work out the derivation of the places' name. The problem was that there were often gaps in the records. (The reason for only taking the records up to 1800 is that phonetic spelling was not used so much after that date- a result of the production of English dictionaries by people like Dr Samuel Johnson).

From this time, there was a 'them' and 'us' way to spell and pronounce words - which gave rise to the many ways to say 'ough' depending on the rest of the word. To find the origin of place names, therefore, it is necessary to listen to, rather than read, it. Anthony asked how the county town of Shropshire should be pronounced - as for many counties, the 'shire' being added to the county town name. He said that it was never "shrew-s-berry", as it came from the word shrope, meaning scrub land, and so it should be pronounced as "sh-rows-burry". He recounted visiting Parwich in Derbyshire, and meeting local villagers.

When he asked them how the name of their village was pronounced, the villagers - looking at each other - gave lots of different answers - they had rarely spoken the name, but talked of 'the village' amongst themselves. Most place names are formed of two elements - the suffix saying 'what it is', and the prefix describes it. That could give rise to some odd examples - such as Pendle Hill in Lancashire. In earlier time it would have been 'the hill called Pendle - the 'dle' part also meaning hill - as did 'pen', so it means hill hill hill, whilst Torpenhow hill, in Cumbria, means hill hill hill hill !!

Anthony than answered questions about the meanings of a variety of place names, including many local ones, such as Reading - the 'ing' meaning associated with, and Redda being the name of the person whose tribe it is named after (hence the pronunciation being "Red-ding", and not read-ing (as a book)). Wargrave means the weir by the clearing in the forest. He explained that although the end part of the name in some spellings could mean 'a trench', the first part of the name was a clue that this was not likely here, as a trench by a weir did not make sense. Ruscombe was probably the camp belonging to Rot, whilst Sonning was associated with ('ing') Sunna - so should be pronounced "sun-ing".

Some places have names that are corruptions of their origins, of course. An area of Birmingham has a road, a parade of shops and a cemetery all bearing the name Robin Hood. Some have suggested that Robin Hood and Maid Marian spent their honeymoon there, but comparing the name with what used to be written on maps, it seems that when a poor condition copy of a map was redrawn in about 1810, Robin's Wood got mis-transcribed, and the name then stuck!

The next meeting will be on Tuesday, December .8th the Society will hold its Christmas Party and then on Tuesday, January 12th, Phil Davis will tell us about Families and Aspects of the History of Hennerton.