PLACES NAMES AROUND CHELTENHAM
by Jane Sale

Study of place names can provide valuable evidence regarding our Anglo-Saxon forebears. It was they who named the majority of our settlements, and the range and subtlety of their vocabulary for physical features has only recently been fully realised. As an academic subject it needs to combine the disciplines of history, philology, archaeology and topography. It is with this latter aspect that the local historian can fruitfully be involved, but it is essential that any such work should be based on the etymology provided by philologists.

Much work on this subject has been published under the auspices of the English Place Name Society, such as Ekwall's *The Concise Oxford Dictionary of English Place Names* and A.H.Smith's *The Place Name Elements* and *Place Names of Gloucestershire*. More recently Margaret Gelling, with her *Signposts to the Past* and *Place Names in the Landscape*, has highlighted the importance of topography for a more exact interpretation of many names. These sources have been used for material for this essay, together with local knowledge obtained from Mary Paget's *A History of Charlton Kings* and my own research.

The town of Cheltenham lies at the foot of the Cotswold escarpment and the area around it includes the high wolds to the east and the flat Vale of Gloucester to the west. The geological structure of the Cotswolds consists of bands of clays, sands and limestone. The tilting of this land mass brought about the steep escarpment on its western edge and resulted in a wide variety of soil types within a relatively small area. Although there is no major river, there has never been a shortage of available water due to the abundance of small rivers and streams rising from the spring-lines part way down the escarpment. Evidence exists of very early settlements on high points of the escarpment, and of ancient tracks across the wolds. The area was favoured by the Romans; later it became the centre of the Hwicce people before becoming part of the Mercian kingdom. In consequence there is a wide variety of historical background, and of topographical features affecting where early inhabitants settled and how they used the land, all factors influencing the place names of the towns and villages in this part of Gloucestershire.

Place names fall into two main types: those in which the generic element is one of habitation, for example those ending **-ton**, **-worth**, **-bury** or **-cot**; and others in which this element describes a topographical feature such as **-don**, **-combe**, or **-ley**. Within each type the name may occur as a ' simplex' such as Syde, Ford and Ham; or the much commoner 'compound' form, where a habitative or topographical element is modified by a descriptive adjective or personal name, as in Brockworth or Dowdeswell; the 'affixed' form is also found where a common compound such as Charlton, meaning the free peasants' settlement, has a third element added to distinguish it from a similar one in the locality. Charlton Kings and Charlton Abbots are good examples of this type.

'HAM' OR 'HAMM'?

OE hám 'village, estate, manor, homestead' is one of the most common elements in pl.ns. The most common meaning is probably 'village'. It is never used alone and rarely as the first el. except in *hámstede*, *hámtún* (q.v.). It is often difficult to distinguish *hám* from HAM(M) [EKWALL]

Cheltenham has long been a principal settlement in the area, as witnessed by the use of the name for the Hundred, the boundaries of which were in existence by the mid-eighth century; but the derivation of its name requires care. The final element **-ham** is one of those most likely to cause confusion as it may derive from **ham**, a settlement term, or **hamm** meaning a well-watered area. It is essential to examine any early spellings that may exist, and to consider local topography and frequency of use within the area. In the case of Cheltenham the combination of its early spelling 'Celtenhom, -homme', together with its well-watered site and the rarity of the settlement form of **ham** in the West Midlands, leaves no doubt that its final element derives from **-hamm**. The first element comes from the hill-name 'Celte', which may be of British origin similar to that of the Chilterns.

Minor names derived from **-hamm** are also to be found within the old boundaries of the royal manor of Cheltenham: Keynsham, the King's meadow; Coltham, the cold meadow so named because its position on slightly raised land would have prevented it from being used deliberately as a flood-meadow to produce early hay; and Ham which is thought to have been a later settlement following the ploughing and putting into strips of Keynsham and Coltham. In the case of Ham there is even greater certainty regarding its derivation as the habitative form of 'ham' does not occur as a simplex place name.

Smith claims that place names ending **-ham** usually refer to larger settlements, with the **-tun** settlement term, in particular Charltons, occurring as outliers. His theory certainly applies in this area where Charlton Kings was held by the royal manor of Cheltenham, whereas Charlton Abbots, a neighbour of Winchcombe, was a possession of its abbey.

In addition to the Charltons, the **-tun** settlement term is very common in this area and can be found on the wolds and in the vale. In each case the -tun element has become -ton and has a modifying first element of many types: those associated with personal names such as 'Bota' in Boddinton, and 'Ucca' in Uckington, both in the Vale; adjectives denoting location in relation to other places - Noverton, previously Overton, and Upton; those referring to the use of the land such as Naunton, 'newly reclaimed from waste' and Staverton, 'where stakes were obtained'; a strong association with domestic animals - Shipton; or a straight topographical description - 'cumb' in Compton. These last two, being very common place names, were differentiated from each other in the Middle English period by the addition of personal names: Shipton Oliffe and Shipton Sollars, and Cassey Compton. Shurdington is another topographical example where the first element derives from 'scierde' a gap - the settlement lies at the base of a pass through the steep escarpment, part of which is still made use of today by walkers on the Cotswold Way.

Combinations of '-hampton' are also found and as they seem to refer particularly to well-watered settlements, it seems likely that their origin lies in **-hamm-tun**, as shown for Southampton by Ekwall. Local examples include Brockhampton to the north of Cheltenham, where boundary field names include Broad South Ham and Ham Bottom; another Brockhampton sharing a narrow valley with Sevenhampton, which may have been named from the nearby 'Seofenwyllas'; and Leckhampton, most likely from the Anglo-Saxon prefix meaning 'stone'.

Care must be taken to distinguish contemporary place names ending in '**ton**' between those which derive from the settlement term '**-tun**' and those with the topographical generic elements -'dun' meaning 'hill', or '-denu' meaning valley. This is not evident in the case of Withington unless it is noted that early spellings include 'Widiandun' meaning Widia's Hill, or in Hazleton which appears in Domesday as 'Hasedene'.

The **-worth** settlement name occurs in this area but is not common. Badgeworth has a personal name first element 'Baecga', as does Chedworth - 'Cedda'; while Brockworth is on a brook. There are also instances of the use of -worth in minor names, where the modifying element refers to the crops grown - Ryeworth and Linworth. Another minor settlement name found quite commonly is '**-cot**' meaning a shelter or den. These are predominately on the wolds, where shelter would be more vital, and include two cases of Woodmancote; Prescot - the priest's dwelling; Caldicote - shelter for travellers; Farmcote and Foxcote - associated with ferns and foxes; and the self-explanatory Hilcot and Upcot.

Other settlement names include **-bury**, which may derive from '**bur**' a dwelling, or the more common '**burh**'/'**burg**' a fortified place. Prestbury, the priest's dwelling, may imply that the priest had a fortified dwelling or it may refer to Prestbury's position at the foot of an escarpment bearing evidence of early fortifications. The minor names of Rushbury and Cockbury are to be found close to the site of an early fort on Nottingham Hill. Names resulting from the presence of the Romans include the well-known examples of Cirencester and Gloucester to the south and west respectively of this area, and the less obvious Stratton, a village straddling the Roman 'street' joining these two towns.

The absence of an important river in the area has not lessened the number of topographically-based place names associated with water. Rivers, being trade routes and therefore widely known, often maintain their earlier British names, which were taken over by the Anglo-Saxons and used for associated settlements. In this area the river Churn passes through Cirencester and the two Cerneys to the north and south of the town, and some way to the east the river Leach gave its name to the village of Northleach. The Chelt is an exception to this theory, the first reference to the name being as recently as the seventeenth century. Other water-based names are the three Duntisbournes, meaning Dunt's stream, and Dowdeswell - Dogod's spring.

VALLEY NAMES

A valley name associated with the Cotswold escarpment is **-combe**. Examples include Great and Little Witcombe which lie in a broad spoon-shaped valley with three steeply rising sides. Being a 'wide cumb' there is room for two settlements and a steep road out of the valley, which follows the line of an old Roman road. Rendcombe fits more closely to Gelling's description of a restrictive space preventing any further development of the settlement. An exception to this format is Winchcombe, an important early administrative centre. Ekwall gives the derivation as 'wincel' and 'cumb' meaning 'corner' and 'valley' and this has been rendered by Gelling as 'coomb with a bend'. I prefer Smith's 'corner of land in the hills' and Ekwall's 'remote valley', as, if the town is approached on foot from

the west, south or east, the site does indeed seem a remote valley. On the west side of Winchcombe is the minor name of Stancombe, a valley linking Winchcombe to the Salt Way. The name could imply merely a stony valley, or perhaps a paved one similar to Ekwall's explanation for the nearby Stanway. In Charlton Kings there is the minor name of Timbercombe, through which an old track runs past a minor Roman settlement. Following on from this, in the direction of Cirencester, is a succession of minor -cumb names: Chatcombe Wood, Mercombe, Chescombe Bottom, Iffcombe and the previously mentioned Rendcombe. It is tempting to propose a link between the use of the valley term 'cumb' with ancient track ways, but it is more likely that track ways would necessarily make use of valleys to find water, and that in this area they happen to be called 'cumbs'.

Another group of topographical names common to this area are those associated with the clearing of land, such as -ley, referring to cleared woodland. The slopes of the escarpment have always been heavily wooded and it is notable how many settlements on the edge of the wolds have names with this element. These include Cowley, spelt 'Kulege' in Domesday Book, referring to pasture for cows, and its neighbour Coberley, D.B. 'Coberleie', thought by Smith to refer to the personal name 'Cuobeorht'. Minor names are often found associated with trees such as Hatherley - hawthorn, Ashley and Oakley; but also with other topographical features such as Crickley, which may derive from the Old Welsh element 'creic' meaning a rock or cliff, or from the British 'cruc' meaning hill, either of which would suit the hill above this settlement.

In turning to topographical elements associated with hills and remembering Gelling's theory that names were only given when the topographical conditions were different from the norm, it is not surprising that such names occur mainly in the Vale. The OE -dun, meaning hill, is given to two distinctive outliers from the Cotswold mass: Churchdown and Battledown. Both these hills are flat-topped and show evidence of having been fortified.

Churchdown does have a church on its top and is an example of the problem that arises in the absence of very early spellings. Domesday gives 'Circesdune' which could derive from the British element 'cruc' with a later Old English element of similar meaning added, or alternatively could be derived from the OE 'cirice' meaning church. As with Crickley Hill it is difficult to gauge the exact shape Churchdown hill would have had before quarrying and reservoir construction took place. Battledown is often presumed to have been the site of an important battle but its first element comes from the personal name 'Baedala'.

'DONS' AND 'DUNS'

Other place names ending -don, such as Swindon and the minor name of Whaddon, within the boundaries of Cheltenham manor, also derived from -dun, but are such low hills as to be hardly noticeable as such. In these cases the -dun element describes an area just high enough to remain dry in the surrounding marshland so that use could be made of it for pig-keeping in the case of Swindon or wheat-growing in Whaddon. Gelling believes that the use of the -dun element for such contrasting situations as Churchdown and Swindon suggests that they arose from different periods of settlement, and that the more typical low hill settlement sites of Swindon and Whaddon are probably the earlier.

From this brief and partial survey it would be wrong to draw conclusions. All that can be said is that there are patterns of settlement naming which coincide with those in other areas of the country. Much further work needs to be done, particularly on minor names which may reveal new knowledge of the use of some elements, or verify previous theories. The collation of local studies can help historians to detect common elements over whole regions or even on a national scale. The full understanding of certain elements may always remain a mystery, but as further knowledge is accumulated a greater understanding of the early settlers of England, and indeed of Gloucestershire, can be achieved.