

In the water

Glandford in Norfolk, Glandford Brigg in Lincolnshire, and Glemsford in Suffolk. Playford in Suffolk and Plaitford in Hampshire. Each of these place-names originated as a short descriptive text registering delight in water or in proximity to water. Each of them meant something like ‘river-crossing where revelry takes place or joy is experienced’, and they were used of the settlements that had grown up around these crossings. The descriptions were meaningful to the inhabitants of those places a thousand and more years ago, when Old English was the main language spoken in lowland Britain. Early spellings of these names, some of which date from the eleventh century, show that the first three contain the Old English word *glēam*, a word for joy or revelry, and the latter two the Old English word *plega* (or a derivative) which meant, and indeed developed into, our word ‘play’.

It’s difficult to know whether these names referred to activities in the water or on the riverbanks and neighbouring land, but they tell us that watery locations were places where people gathered for joyful recreation. Other place-names indicate sites that were used for communal bathing. Bath, whose hot springs were referred to by the Romans as *Aquae Sulis* ‘the springs of the goddess Sulis’, is the best-known instance. The town’s earliest English name, *æt bathum* ‘at the baths’, was first recorded in the late seventh century, but a form meaning ‘the hot baths’ was also in use from the ninth to twelfth centuries. The Derbyshire name Batham Gate also referred to a Roman spa: it meant ‘road to the baths’, and the road led from Templebrough to Buxton, whose mineral spring was presumably enjoyed not only in ancient and modern times, but also throughout the medieval period. Other early medieval names indicate that communal bathing took place in wooded areas: Bale in Norfolk and Bathley in Nottinghamshire look very different in their modern spellings, but both meant ‘bathing woodland’; in both places the bathing seems to have taken place in natural springs that still rise in the vicinity.



Image credit: Svenja Adolphs

The experience of being in water is written into many other names. At fords the feeling of partial immersion could be ‘pleasant’, as at Fairford in Gloucestershire, or ‘foul’, as at Fulford, a common name found all over England, and, presumably, at Sharnford, a ‘dung ford’ in Leicestershire. Fording could be hazardous – some crossings were ‘rough’ (at the various Ruffords and at Rufforth in West Yorkshire) – and some relatively easy at ‘shallow’ fords (Scalford in Leicestershire, Shadforth in County Durham, and Shelford in Nottinghamshire and Cambridgeshire) and at crossings whose firm stony beds offered safe passage (Stafford in Devon and Dorset, the two Stainfords in Yorkshire, and the numerous places called Stamford or Stanford). Sandy river-beds were worthy of note at the many Sandfords, gravelly ones at Girtford (Bedfordshire) and Greetford (Lincolnshire), and muddy ones at Mudford (Somerset) and Slaggyford (Northumberland). The several ‘sheep fords’ – the Sheffords in Bedfordshire and Berkshire, and Shifford in Oxfordshire, for example – indirectly suggest shallow crossing places with relatively gentle water motion, sheep not being notable for long legs, strength, or good sense.

The shock of the cold is rarely registered in ford names but is a common feature of names which referred to springs. There are names like Caldwell, Coldwell, Cau(l)ldwell, and Caudle, sometimes Chadwell, Cholswell in Berkshire, all developments of Old English caldan-wella ‘cold spring’, and Cawkeld and Cold Keld in Yorkshire, with kelda, the Old Scandinavian word for spring. Chilly streams were of note at Coalbrookdale in Shropshire, Colebrook in Derbyshire, Colburn in Yorkshire, with Old English brōc and burna, and at Caldbeck in Cumbria, with bekk, the Old Scandinavian word for a stream. Most striking is the name of the Brennand River, a dramatic fell stream in the Forest of Bowland whose name is the Old Scandinavian word for ‘burning’ – the sense must be burning cold, rather than burning hot, and it aptly conveys the exhilarating pain of icy immersion.

More welcoming, perhaps, are the names that suggest clarity and purity. The Old English word scīr meant ‘bright’ or ‘clear’, and it features in numerous watery names: Sherborne in Gloucestershire and Warwickshire, Sherburn in Yorkshire, Shirburn in Oxfordshire, and Shirwell in Devon.

Immersion did, of course, have spiritual associations, and water’s power to heal and promote health is noted in several names. Springs particularly are explicitly linked to health and healing: bōt, the Old English for remedy, is found in Botwell in Middlesex and Botewell in Rutland, and hǣlu, the word for health or healing, in Elwell, Dorset. The numerous springs described as ‘holy’ may also have been thought to have healing properties. We have Halliwell in Lincolnshire, Halwell and Halwill in Devon, places called Holwell in Dorset and Oxfordshire, and Holywell in Hampshire, Kent, and Northumberland. Also the northerly equivalents of these names which use the Scandinavian word kelda rather than the English word wella: Hallikeld in Yorkshire, for example.

The people whose descriptions of these and other watery features survive as place-names had an intimate knowledge and appreciation of those features – the flow, the feel, the look, and the sound of the watercourses that were as vital to life in the medieval period as they are in the twenty-first century. Landscapes may have changed over the past thousand years, but human interactions with water retain remarkable similarities – not just vital knowledge about access to water, but perceptions of water as a source of pleasure and recreation, and as a potential danger or challenge.