

The river *Mearcella* in Suffolk, once again

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This paper demonstrates that the Suffolk river-name *Mearcella*, previously known only from two pre-Conquest charters, in fact survived as a local toponym in the Stoke-by-Nayland and Higham areas until nearly 1500. The later forms of the name show that the *-c-* in the OE spelling represents the sound [k], not [tʃ], and this has important consequences for the etymology.

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The river-name *Mearcella* or *Mercyl* appearing in two tenth-century Suffolk charters has been investigated twice before in this journal; by Lowe (2005), and by Breeze (2011). There are further discussions by Ekwall (ERN 279), Hart (1992: 485), Insley (2006), and Jepson (2011: 95). The etymologies offered by these authors remain controversial, and it is not the intention here to offer an alternative. Rather, I wish to point out the hitherto unnoticed fact that the name survives in unpublished records until at least 1498, and these records contain important data which has not been taken into account in previous treatments of the name. Additionally, I will make comparisons with several other Suffolk place-names containing OE *mearc* ‘boundary’ (which is not certain to occur in *Mearcella*), and this may ultimately contribute to a solution to the etymological puzzle.

The first charter is S 703, a grant of land of the year 962 at Chelsworth by King Edgar to the lady Æthelflæd. A contemporary single-sheet copy survives in the British Library (BL) (Harley 43C3; Hart 1966: no. 76).¹ The part of the boundary clause of interest to us reads *on mearcellan þonne forð 7lang mearcellan* ‘to the *Mearcella* then forward along the *Mearcella*’. The reading is not in question and is confirmed by later copies in the BL and in Cambridge University Library (CUL). The second charter is S 1486, the will of Æfflæd specifying many bequests of land including an estate at

¹ Available online at: <http://www.bl.uk/manuscripts/Viewer.aspx?ref=harley_ch_43_c_3_f001r>.

Polstead; a boundary clause here describes how the Mercyl meets the Stour: *to Mercyle 7lang Mercyle into Sture*. The will is dated 1000×1002, and the earliest manuscript is a single sheet of the eleventh century (BL Harley 43C4);² analysed by Whitelock (1930: no.15)); there is a thirteenth-century copy in CUL (Ff.2.33). There is more doubt about the reading here; the copy deviates from the single sheet in writing *to Mercyl 7lang Mercyl into Sture*. Moreover, in the single sheet, the boundary description is not in the same hand as the main body of the charter, and it might be a later addition. To be noted is the weak declension in the earlier charter but the strong declension in the later; this discrepancy does not help attempts at finding an etymology.

Let us review the etymological proposals. The claim of Hart (1992: 485) that the river-name is a word *mercels* meaning ‘boundary’ cannot be right; the word is not recorded in this sense (it is rather ‘sign, token’) and no final *-s* appears in any record of the name. Ekwall (ERN 279) put the name under the headform Markle, without citing any authority for this form; in fact he gave no forms beyond the two we have already noted. He was uncertain about the etymology, suggesting a suffixed derivative of *mearc* ‘boundary’, but also allowing *mearcwella* ‘boundary stream’, with loss of *-w-*, as a possibility. He might have compared *mercwelle* in the Kent charter S 188 (Brooks and Kelly 2013a: no. 60). Förster (1941: 92, n. 1) follows Ekwall in suggesting ‘*Mearc-hwiella* “Grenzquell”’, invoking ‘urgm. **markā* “Grenze”’, but without justifying his omission of the *-w-*. Lowe (2005) discussed all proposed etymologies in detail and put forward the new suggestion *mearc-cille* ‘boundary stream’, with a hypothetical word **cille* for ‘spring, stream’. This would imply a palatized pronunciation of the <c>, which is in conflict with evidence to be presented below. Insley (2006: 127–28) suggested an etymology from a plant-name *meargella*, but withdrew this in a postlude in favour of Lowe’s suggestion. Breeze (2011) suggested an origin in a British word for ‘horse’, which would be a type not otherwise known in East Anglia. In all these papers there is insufficient attention to two crucial points: the question of which sound is represented by <c> (Lowe implies [tʃ], Breeze seems to be assuming [k] or [χ]); and, more importantly, the question of whether the name is recorded at all after the two pre-Conquest charters.

All authorities agree that the name *Mearcella* refers to what is now the River Brett, which flows south from Brettenham in mid-Suffolk (from which the name Brett is back-formed),³ forms part of the boundary of

² Available online at: <http://www.bl.uk/manuscripts/Viewer.aspx?ref=harley_ch_43_c_4_f001r>. Analysed by Whitelock (1930: no. 15).

³ Speed’s map of c.1610 calls it the Breton.

Chelsworth, and eventually joins the Stour between Stoke-by-Nayland and Higham (Figure 1). There are numerous references in unpublished documents in the Suffolk Record Office (SRO) to places bearing names which must be derived from the river-name. These names are mostly compounds, but the earliest example using the river-name alone is of the mid-thirteenth century and refers to *viã q' extēdit de eccl' de Holton' u'sus markele* 'the way which reaches from Holton church towards the *markele*' (SRO HA246/B1/71).⁴ Another, of 1428, which is an explicit reference to the river is *inter riparam de Markele ad viam pedestrem* 'between the river-bank of the *Markele* and the footpath' (HA246/B2/411). A tenement in Higham is called simply *Markel* in a document of 1475–85 (TNA C1/50/220); see Figure 2. Evidently Ekwall's headform "Markle" is quite accurate, even if he has invented it.

Amongst the compounds, we find *Markelecroft* (HA246/B1/24, mid-thirteenth century), *Markelfeld* (HA246/B1/80, mid-thirteenth century), and *Markelwater* (HA246/B1/202, 1346). Not certainly relevant is a 1283 extent of Bradfield St Clare which records a meadow (*prato*) called *Marchelefen* (BL Add. MS 14849, f.83v), but there is no indication of the precise location, or what the first element of the name might mean.⁵ Bradfield St Clare is 5km north-west of the nearest point to the River Brett in Thorpe Morieux. But by far the most common compound is *Markelebregge*, which occurs (with some minor spelling variants) in at least thirty documents between 1257 and 1498 (HA246/A7, HA246/B1, and HA246/B2 series). The frequent references to the bridge leave no doubt that it was an important and well-known local landmark. It is mentioned in wills of 1455 and 1468 as *Marcolbrygge* and *Markellbregge* respectively; the 1455 will leaves money for the maintenance of the bridge, and the 1468 will leaves a message on the highway from Stoke-by-Nayland church to *Markellbregge* to the east (Northeast 2001: nos 1120, 480). This makes it certain that the bridge crossed the Brett, and was the bridge now called Higham Bridge at TM031354 on the River Brett, on what is now the B1068 (Figure 1).

We also find examples of people bearing surnames which appear to be derived from the river-name. A thirteenth-century tenant of the manor of

⁴ All later document numbers refer also to the SRO unless otherwise specified.

⁵ The extent is a copy by a later hand, perhaps of the fifteenth century.

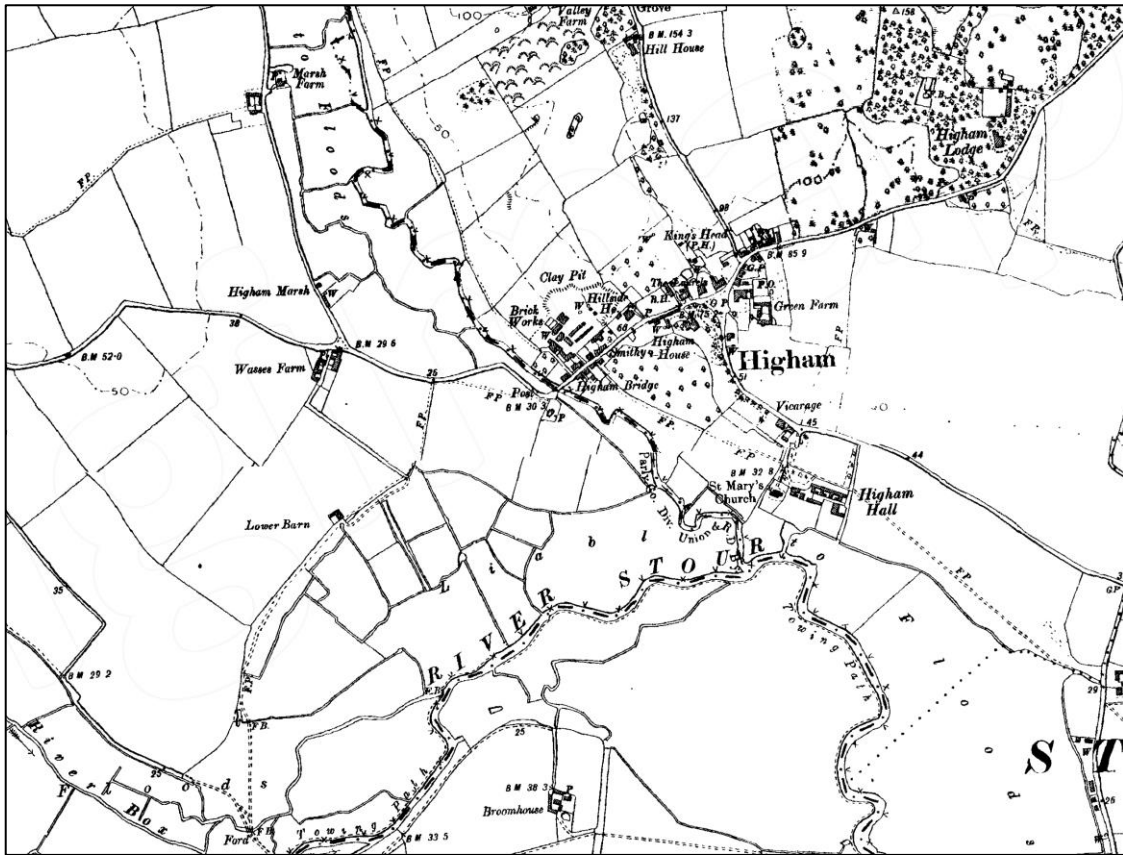


Figure 1: A region centred on Higham Bridge (formerly *Markelebregge*) on the 6” Ordnance Survey map of 1884 (published 1885). The road to the west leads to Stoke-by-Nayland, and the road to the north-east leads to Holton and Ipswich.

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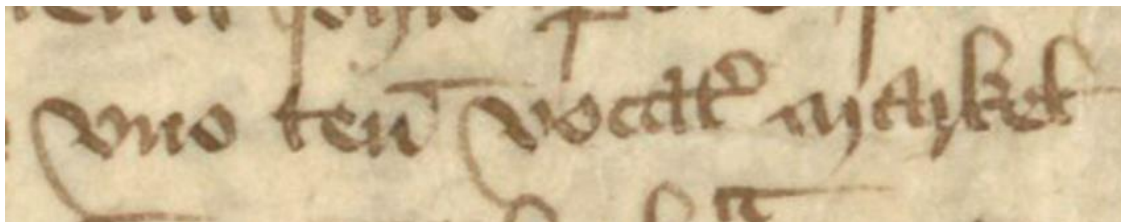


Figure 2: *uno ten' vocat' Markel'* 'a tenement called *Markel'* in the Latin version of TNA C1/50/220 of 1475×85 (a chancery plea addressed to the Bishop of Lincoln as Lord Chancellor); there is a contemporary English version under the same catalogue number also mentioning *Markel*. Reproduced with the permission of TNA.

Gifford's Hall in Stoke-by-Nayland was called *Johannes de Markele* (HA246/A7/13), and *Alice de Markele* is mentioned in 1336 (HA246/B2/774). There is a 1447 rental of the manor of Stoke Rectory in Stoke-by-Nayland belonging to Prittlewell Priory in Essex, which mentions the tenements of *markeles tye* and *Markeleys* (HA246/A9/6). The genitival form of the latter name links the holding to the family name of John *Markele* mentioned in the same document; here we encounter the common problem of tenements (whether named in the genitive or not) and their holder sharing a name, with uncertainty about which name came first. Nevertheless, there cannot be any doubt that all these names go back to the old river-name; they occur in the right locations and no other source for the names is apparent.⁶ There are many later examples of a Suffolk surname which may descend from *de Markele*; typical cases are Matilda *Marchall* 1440, William *Mercholl* 1564, John *Marchoule* 1581 (all of Stoke-by-Nayland); and William *Marcoll* 1578 of Bury St Edmunds (Grimwade, Serjeant and Serjeant 1984: ii.360, 372).⁷ Other examples typically written *Markall* or *Marcoll*, though not local to Stoke-by-Nayland or Higham and thus less certain to be related, occur in the 1524 subsidy roll and 1674 hearth tax (S.H.A.H. 1910, 1905). The fluctuations in the spelling of the vowel in the second unstressed syllable are an indication that it had come to be pronounced as schwa. This form is matched by a 1465 record of the bridge as *Marcolbregge* (HA246/B2/507).

It is useful to examine whether other compounds meaning 'boundary stream' occur in Suffolk, and here three cases come into consideration. In Stutton, there is a Markwell's Farm; the farm-name is probably linked to the surnames of Michael *de Martwalle* 1275 (Illingworth 1812–18), Robert *de Markewall* 1327 (S.H.A.H. 1906), Robert *Markewall* 1340 (Vanderzee 1807), and John *Markwall* 1524 (S.H.A.H. 1910) who all occur in the vicinity. This was very likely an original local toponym with OE *mearc* as specific, perhaps meaning 'boundary wall' (the farm is exactly on the parish boundary with Holbrook), though the spelling *wall(e)* for *well(e)* 'stream' is certainly found in Suffolk, so 'boundary stream' remains possible. In 1881, the surname Markwell (variants Markell, Markel, Markall, and Markal) had its highest concentration in Suffolk; the *Oxford Dictionary of Family Names in Britain and Ireland* explains it as either a

⁶ Though medieval surnames from river-names are scarce, several cases of *de Stura*, *atte Stur* etc., referring to the Stour, are found in the cartulary of the Augustinian friars of Clare (Harper-Bill 1991).

⁷ Note that *Marchall* can be a rare spelling of *Marescal* (i.e., modern Marshall; see e.g., Harper-Bill 1991: 127), so no certain conclusions can be drawn from that particular spelling; but the *-coll* cases apparently with [k] are more diagnostic.

local development of Markley (from places of that name in Sussex and Herefordshire), or from Markwell in Cornwall (FaNBI s.n. Markwell).⁸ Perhaps it instead derives from this farm-name, or is a hypercorrected form of the surname *Markele* derived from *Mearcella*. A rather similar name *Markeswell* denoted a place in Hessest in the thirteenth century (HD1538/257/3). I have found only one use of this name as a pure toponym (probably meaning ‘stream of the boundary’), but the surname *de Markeswell* or *de Markeswall* is very frequent in Hessest records in the SRO (HD1538/257 series). The contrasting simple and genitival compounds may be compared with *Mearcfleot* and *Mearcesfleot* occurring in several Kentish charters.⁹ Moreover, Hessest had another well-recorded stream called *Schadewell*, almost certainly derived from OE *scēad* and thus also meaning ‘boundary stream’ (HD1538/257 series, documents from 1297 to 1304).

The conclusion is that streams called ‘boundary stream’ certainly existed and OE *mearc* is likely to be the specific in Markwell’s Farm in Stutton and Markeswell in Hessest; it is thus plausible also in *Mearcella*, though the loss of *-w-* would still need to be explained. There is also a Mark Wood (TM005377), near Higham on the border of Shelley and Stoke-by-Nayland and so perhaps a ‘boundary wood’, though early forms have not been found.

The data here presented does not point to any new etymology, but the consistent form *Markele* of the name of the bridge and of tenements, as well as the surnames, all derived from *Mearcella*, make it certain that this river-name contained [k] and not [tʃ]. Lowe (2005) noted spellings with <k> in later copies of S 1486. There is thus no support for an etymology *mearc-cille*. If the origin is *mearcwellla*, then the *-w-* was lost very early.¹⁰

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⁸ I thank Peter McClure for discussions on this point. The second edition of FaNBI will have updated entries containing some of the data here presented.

⁹ Discussed by Brooks and Kelly (2013b: 1089–90).

¹⁰ Some Dutch river-names incorporate a *Merk-* element which might bear comparison (Schönfeld 1955: 249). There is an interesting treatment of the place-names Maesbury, Marksbury (Somerset), Markshall (Norfolk), and Masbrough (Yorkshire) in Rye 2019. For Markle in East Lothian (*Merkhille* 1363, probably ‘boundary hill’), see Patterson 2018. The US surname Markle probably derives in most cases from a re-spelling of German Märkel, a diminutive of Marcus.

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Abbreviations

Please note: all abbreviations are given in Roman type, regardless of publication status. Suggestions for additions to the list of abbreviations may be sent to the editor at <jepns@nottingham.ac.uk>.

BCS	Birch, Walter de Gray, ed. (1885–99), <i>Cartularium saxonicum</i> , 3 vols + index (London: Whiting, Charles J. Clark)
Bd	Bedfordshire
BL	The British Library
Bodl	The Bodleian Library
Bosworth-Toller	Bosworth, Joseph, and T. Northcote Toller (1898), <i>An Anglo-Saxon Dictionary</i> (Oxford: Clarendon Press), available online as the <i>Bosworth-Toller Anglo-Saxon Dictionary</i> [2013] (Prague: Charles University) < http://bosworth.ff.cuni.cz >
Brk	Berkshire
Bu	Buckinghamshire
Ca	Cambridgeshire
CDEPN	Watts, Victor (2004), <i>The Cambridge Dictionary of English Place-Names</i> (Cambridge: Cambridge UP)
Ch	Cheshire
Co	Cornwall
CPNE	Padel, O. J. (1985), <i>Cornish Place-Name Elements</i> , EPNS 56/57 (Nottingham: EPNS)
Cu	Cumberland
D	Devon
Db	Derbyshire
DBPN	Mills, A. D. (2011), <i>A Dictionary of British Place-Names</i> (Oxford: Oxford UP)
DEPN	Ekwall, Eilert (1960), <i>The Concise Oxford Dictionary of English Place-Names</i> , 4th edn (Oxford: Clarendon) [this edn unless otherwise indicated]
Dict Du	Watts, Victor (2002), <i>A Dictionary of County Durham Place-Names</i> , EPNS Popular Series 3 (Nottingham: EPNS)
Dict IoM	Broderick, George (2006), <i>A Dictionary of Manx Place-Names</i> , EPNS Popular Series 4 (Nottingham: EPNS)
Dict LD	Whaley, Diana (2006), <i>A Dictionary of Lake District Place-Names</i> , EPNS Regional Series 1 (Nottingham: EPNS)
Dict LeR	Cox, Barrie (2005), <i>A Dictionary of Leicestershire and Rutland Place-Names</i> , EPNS Popular Series 5 (Nottingham: EPNS)

Dict Li	Cameron, Kenneth (1998), <i>A Dictionary of Lincolnshire Place-Names</i> , EPNS Popular Series 1 (Nottingham: EPNS)
Dict Sf	Briggs, Keith, and Kelly Kilpatrick (2016), <i>A Dictionary of Suffolk Place-Names</i> , EPNS Popular Series 6 (Nottingham: The Suffolk Institute of Archaeology and History in association with the EPNS)
Do	Dorset
DOE	Cameron, Angus, Ashley Crandell Amos, Antonette diPaolo Healey et al. (2018), <i>Dictionary of Old English: A to I Online</i> (Toronto: Dictionary of Old English Project) < https://tapor.library.utoronto.ca/doe/ >
DOST	Craigie, William Alexander, et al. (1931–2002), <i>A Dictionary of the Older Scottish Tongue from the Twelfth Century to the End of the Seventeenth</i> , 12 vols (Oxford: Oxford UP) [see also DSL]
DSL	<i>Dictionary of the Scots Language</i> (Scottish Language Dictionaries): < www.dsl.ac.uk > [online edn of DOST and SND]
Du	Durham
EFN	Field, John (1972), <i>English Field-Names: A dictionary</i> (Newton Abbot: David & Charles)
EPNE	<i>English Place-Name Elements</i>
EPNS	English Place-Name Society/English Place-Name Survey
ERN	Ekwall, Eilert (1928), <i>English River-Names</i> (Oxford: Clarendon Press)
ERY	East Riding of Yorkshire
Ess	Essex
FaNBI	Hanks, Patrick, Richard Coates and Peter McClure, eds (2016), <i>The Oxford Dictionary of Family Names in Britain and Ireland</i> , 4 vols (Oxford: Oxford UP)
Gl	Gloucestershire
GPC	Thomas, R. J. (1950–2002), <i>Geiriadur Prifysgol Cymru</i> (Cardiff: University of Wales Press)
Ha	Hampshire
He	Herefordshire
Hrt	Hertfordshire
Hu	Huntingdonshire
IE	Indo-European
JEPNS	<i>Journal of the English Place-Name Society</i>
K	Kent
KCD	Kemble, J. M., ed. (1839–48; repr. 2011), <i>Codex Diplomaticus Aevi Saxonici</i> , 6 vols (London: Sumptibus Societatis; repr. Cambridge: Cambridge UP)
La	Lancashire
Le	Leicestershire
Li	Lincolnshire
LPN	Gelling, Margaret, and Ann Cole (2014), <i>The Landscape of Place-Names</i> , new edn (Donington: Shaun Tyas)
ME	Middle English
MED	McSparran, Frances, ed. (2013), <i>Middle English Dictionary</i> (University of Michigan): < https://quod.lib.umich.edu/m/med/ >
ModE	Modern English
Mx	Middlesex

Nb	Northumberland
NDEFN	Cavill, Paul (2018), <i>A New Dictionary of English Field-Names</i> (Nottingham: EPNS)
Nf	Norfolk
NRY	North Riding of Yorkshire
Nt	Nottinghamshire
Nth	Northamptonshire
O	Oxfordshire
ODan	Old Danish
OE	Old English
OED	<i>Oxford English Dictionary</i> , online edition: < http://www.oed.com >
OIr	Old Irish
ON	Old Norse
OS	Ordnance Survey
OScand	Old Scandinavian
pers.n.	personal name
p.n.	place-name
PN BdHu	Mawer, Allen, and F. M. Stenton (1926), <i>The Place-Names of Bedfordshire and Huntingdonshire</i> , EPNS 3 (Cambridge: Cambridge UP)
PN Brk	Gelling, Margaret (1973–76), <i>The Place-Names of Berkshire</i> , EPNS 49–51 (Nottingham: EPNS)
PN Bu	Mawer, Allen, and F. M. Stenton (1925), <i>The Place-Names of Buckinghamshire</i> , EPNS 2 (Cambridge: Cambridge UP)
PN Ca	Reaney, P. H. (1943), <i>The Place-Names of Cambridgeshire and the Isle of Ely</i> , EPNS 19 (Cambridge: Cambridge UP)
PN Ch	Dodgson, John McNeal (1970–81), <i>The Place-Names of Cheshire</i> , parts 1–5(1:ii), EPNS 44–48 and 54 (Cambridge: Cambridge UP and Nottingham: EPNS); Dodgson, John McNeal, and Alexander R. Rumble (1998), <i>The Place-Names of Cheshire</i> , part 5(2), EPNS 74 (Nottingham: EPNS)
PN Cu	Armstrong, A. M., A. Mawer, F. M. Stenton and Bruce Dickins (1950–52), <i>The Place-Names of Cumberland</i> , EPNS 20–22 (Cambridge: Cambridge UP)
PN D	Gover, J. E. B., A. Mawer and F. M. Stenton (1931–32), <i>The Place-Names of Devon</i> , 2 vols, EPNS 8–9 (Cambridge: Cambridge UP)
PN Db	Cameron, Kenneth (1959), <i>The Place-Names of Derbyshire</i> , EPNS 27–29 (Cambridge: Cambridge UP)
PN Do	Mills, A. D. (1977–2010), <i>The Place-Names of Dorset</i> , EPNS 53–54, 59/60 and 86/87 (Nottingham: EPNS)
PN Du	Watts, Victor (2007), <i>The Place-Names of County Durham</i> , EPNS 83 (Nottingham: EPNS)
PN Ess	Reaney, P. H. (1935), <i>The Place-Names of Essex</i> , EPNS 12 (Cambridge: Cambridge UP)
PN ERY	Smith, A. H. (1937), <i>The Place-Names of the East Riding of Yorkshire and York</i> , EPNS 14 (Cambridge: Cambridge UP)
PN Gl	Smith, A. H. (1964–65), <i>The Place-Names of Gloucestershire</i> , 4 vols, EPNS 38–41 (Cambridge: Cambridge UP)

- PN Hrt Gover, J. E. B., A. Mawer and F. M. Stenton (1938), *The Place-Names of Hertfordshire*, EPNS 15 (Cambridge: Cambridge UP)
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- PN NRY Smith, A. H. (1928), *The Place-Names of the North Riding of Yorkshire*, EPNS 5 (Cambridge: Cambridge UP)
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- PN Sx Mawer, A., and F. M. Stenton with J. E. B. Gover (1929–30), *The Place-Names of Sussex*, 2 vols, EPNS 6–7 (Cambridge: Cambridge UP)
- PN W Gover, J. E. B., A. Mawer and F. M. Stenton (1939), *The Place-Names of Wiltshire*, EPNS 16 (Cambridge: Cambridge UP)
- PN Wa Gover, J. E. B., A. Mawer and F. M. Stenton, in collaboration with F. T. S. Houghton (1936), *The Place-Names of Warwickshire*, EPNS 13 (Cambridge: Cambridge UP)
- PN We Smith, A. H. (1967), *The Place-Names of Westmorland*, 2 vols, EPNS 42–43 (Cambridge: Cambridge UP)

- PN Wo Gover, J. E. B., A. Mawer and F. M. Stenton, in collaboration with F. T. S. Houghton (1927), *The Place-Names of Worcestershire*, EPNS 4 (Cambridge: Cambridge UP)
- PN WRY Smith, A. H. (1961–63, *The Place-Names of the West Riding of Yorkshire*, 8 vols, EPNS 30–37 (Cambridge: Cambridge UP)
- R Rutland
- S Sawyer, P. H. (1968), *Anglo-Saxon Charters. An annotated list and bibliography*. Royal Historical Society Guides and Handbooks 8 (London: Offices of the Royal Historical Society) [The Electronic Sawyer: <<http://www.esawyer.org.uk>> (2016)]
- Sa Shropshire
- Sf Suffolk
- SND Grant, William, et al., eds (1931–76), *The Scottish National Dictionary* (Edinburgh: The Scottish National Dictionary Association) [see also DSL]
- So Somerset
- Sr Surrey
- St Staffordshire
- Su Sussex
- TNA The National Archives
- UP University Press
- VEPN **1** Parsons, David, and Tania Styles with Carole Hough (1997), *The Vocabulary of English Place-Names (Á–Box)* (Nottingham: Centre for English Name-Studies); **2** Parsons, David N. and Tania Styles (2000), *The Vocabulary of English Place-Names (Brace–Cæster)* (Nottingham: Centre for English Name-Studies); **3** Parsons, David N. (2004), *The Vocabulary of English Place-Names (Ceafor–Cock-pit)* (Nottingham: EPNS)
- W Wiltshire
- Wa Warwickshire
- We Westmorland
- Wo Worcestershire
- WRY West Riding of Yorkshire
- Wt Isle of Wight
- Y Yorkshire