

Martlesham and Newbourne: a note on two obscure Suffolk names¹

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Martlesham

The origin of the name Martlesham has never been clear. The recorded forms are (Baron 1952: 144, DEPN, CDEPN):

Merlesham 1086, 1289, 1533

Martelsham 1254, 1316

Marlesham 1286, 1291

Marklesham 1286

Martlesham 1286, 1311, 1344, 1674

Martlisham 1302–3, 1327

Martyls(h)am 1523–4

Martyllesham 1533

Mertilsham 1568

Mertlesham 1610

The major conclusions here are that the earlier forms lack the *-t-*, and that the *-l-* persists throughout all periods. The standard reference works, though favouring a derivation from OE *mearþ* ‘marten’ despite the lack of *-t-* in the earlier forms, do not agree on the etymology:

- Ekwall (DEPN) states that we should compare Marlesford, Martley (Sf) and Marlingford (Nf), and thinks Martley and Marlingford derive from *mearþ*, with Marlesford deriving secondarily from Martley.
- Copley (1988: 43): ‘marten’ again, but stated as “all very doubtful”.
- Rye (1997) states the ‘marten’ theory, but inserts OE *lēah* ‘clearing’ without explanation. Gives an alternative derivation from a personal name *Mertel*.
- Mills (2003): “possibly ‘homestead by a woodland clearing frequented by martens’. OE *mearth* + *lēah* + *hām*. Alternatively the first element may be an OE pers. name **Mertel*.”

- Watts (CDEPN) derives Martlesham from a personal name **Mærel*, with intrusive *-t-*. He thinks Marlesford has the same origin. The existence of this name is merely conjectural, although it is plausible as a derivative of one of the several names containing the element *mæer* ‘great, famous’.

The ‘marten’ theory is weakened by its inability to explain the persistent medial *-l-*, and overall no theory is clearly decisive.² Given this level of disagreement, further speculation in the hope of a more satisfactory solution is justified and, in particular, more note of the local topography should be taken. Martlesham originated as a settlement on the banks of a creek in the Deben estuary. The original site is indicated by the position of the church and Martlesham Hall overlooking the creek (TM 262 468). The village has subsequently moved 1 km to the west, to the Fynn Bridge area (TM 253 473).

Thus, I suggest we consider a derivation from the OE *mærels* (or *mārels*) ‘mooring-rope’.³ The same idea might be the explanation of Marlesford, Sf (TM 327 582).⁴ This fits the earliest forms well, and can be given an interpretation which suits the topography perfectly. If this explanation is correct, the village was named from a mooring-place which was provided with a rope (or perhaps *mærels* was also used in a wider sense, simply ‘mooring-place’). The *-ham* is then more likely to be OE *hamm* (though *hām* cannot be ruled out), referring to a meadow bordering the creek, perhaps embanked or reclaimed from the marsh. We might speculate that the *hamm* was only accessible by boat, making the name very appropriate.

This suggestion has several advantages: it is a better phonological fit than the previous theories, it accurately describes the site of the village and the reason for its establishment, and it involves no conjectural personal names. It might appear semantically far-fetched to invoke such an insignificant object as a mooring-rope to explain the name. But there is a close parallel with the names Windsor (Brk) from **windels-ōra* ‘windlass bank’ and Windlesham, **windels-ham(m?)*.⁵ Another nautical term which probably occurs in place-names is OE *wince* ‘winch’ (EPNE s.v. *wince*). In all cases a spot on a river-bank or slope has been named from a mooring or lifting device which would have been significant to the original inhabitants.

If this explanation is accepted, it follows that the *-t-* is intrusive and its existence is purely due to phonological or sociological factors.⁶ Richard Coates (private communication) suggests that the epenthetic consonant in the voiced environment was originally /d/, but the spelling has been

influenced by the personal name *Martel*. Indeed, the surname *Martel* occurs in Norfolk and Essex in the 11th and 13th centuries (Reaney 1976).⁷ Kökeritz (1932: 280) recorded a pronunciation /'ma:dʒəm/ in the 1920s.

Newbourne⁸

The problems with the generally accepted explanation from OE *nīwe* + *burna* ‘new stream’ are of a different nature. If that explanation were correct, Newbourne would be a unique name compounding ‘new’ with a natural, rather than a man-made, feature.⁹ The only other seemingly parallel case, Newburn-on-Tyne, is in fact a corruption of *nīwe burh* (CDEPN).¹⁰ It is hard to comprehend what a ‘new stream’ might be. DEPN suggests a change of course, but the stream at Newbourne is confined to a narrow valley in the centre of the village; Gelling & Cole (2000: 11) suggest a stream which is dry in summer. The recorded forms are (Baron 1952: 145):

Neubrunna 1086
Neubrounia 1158–62 (1331)
Neubrunne 1254, 1286
Neubronne 1286
Neubroune 1286, 1316
Neubroun 1291
Neuburne 1291
New(e)bourn(e) 1327
Newborn 1524
Newborne 1568, 1674

I propose that we consider an ON name *nīu brunnar* ‘nine springs’, assimilated early to the recorded OE forms. Supporting this view are these points:

- The large number of springs at Newbourne is a highly distinctive feature.
- Place-names containing OE *nīwe* are predominantly (but not universally) spelt *niwe-*, *newe-*, *nywe-* in their early forms. Such a spelling with *-w-* does not occur in the DB *Neubrunna* and all other recorded forms for Newbourne before 1327.

- Adjoining Newbourne is Kirton, a name generally accepted to be influenced by ON *kirkja* ‘church’. Both villages are on the same creek in the Deben estuary, a natural access route for Viking settlers.

If this explanation is correct, it is likely that we have here an early example of the tradition of naming a place with many springs as either ‘Seven springs’ or ‘Nine springs’. The ‘seven’ type is certainly old: in charters we have *seofan wyllan broc* (985 [12th] S:860) in Wolverhampton and *syfan wyllan* (938 [12th] S:444) in Tichborne (Ha), and at least ten names of the types Seawell, Sewell, S(h)owell and Sywell, most with early records, are known. Names such as Ninewells are equally frequent, but the earliest English example I can locate is Nine Well Close (Hrt), where Gover *et al.* (PN Hrt: 284) give “*Nynewells t. Hy 8*”.¹¹ A likely German example is Negenborn near Stadtoldendorf, recorded as *Niganbrunnun* 1015–25 (Gysselling 1960: 732).

Furthermore, this explanation would place Newbourne in a natural context of a small group of ON (or partially ON) village-names on the Suffolk coast: Kirton, Nacton, Snape, Lound, Thorpe, Eyke and some farm-names such as Grimston (Scarfe 1972: 81ff; Gelling 1992: 62–3; Warner 1996: 207ff; Martin 1999a: 50–1). This proposal, however, while solving the problem of the concept of a ‘new stream’, still leaves us a name quite out of character compared to the normal range of ON types.¹²

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Notes

1. Suggestions and encouragement from Dr Paul Cullen and Prof. Richard Coates are gratefully acknowledged.
2. We might also try to connect the name to ‘marl’; however, the soil in the district is the sandy type usual in the Suffolk heathlands (Martin 1999b: 20–1).
3. In private communications, Richard Coates has suggested *mārels* to explain Morestead (near Rottingdean, Sx), and Paul Cullen has suggested it for Mornhill (Wt), which was *Moreleshull* c. 1300.
4. Ekwall (DEPN) gives *Marlesforda*, *Merlesforda* 1086. *Marlston* (Ch), also of uncertain origin (the same personal name **Mærel* has been proposed) might also

- be considered here, but if the nucleus is at Marlston Heyes Farm (SJ 397 637), it seems rather far from the Dee.
5. Other instances of Windsor or Winsor (Ha, Do, D) are less clear, but a windlass could still in principle be involved even when the situation is not on a river-bank.
 6. There seems to be no exact equivalent of such an epenthetic /t/ in other place-names, but cf. the examples Mardle (r.n., D; *Marles* 1497), Durdle Door (Do) from OE *þyrel* ‘hole’, and the Marlbrook (Sa) from OE *mære* ‘boundary’ and *brōc*, where the -l- is intrusive.
 7. We might compare here the place-name Martin from OE *mere-tūn*, which occurs at least eight times, and where one explanation for -tin is influence from the personal name. No other name in -ton seems to have been so affected.
 8. Local usage and the Ordnance Survey maintain the spelling with final -e but DEPN, CDEPN and Rye 1997 omit it.
 9. Newney Hall and ~ Green (Ess) are possible exceptions which need further investigation, but early forms are lacking. If the name is from OE *nīwen-(ge)hæg*, my claim is justified; Newnhay Hrt has this origin (PN Hrt: 284). Newell (K) is derived from *æwelm* (EPNE).
 10. Newburn (Fife) represents an earlier *Nithbren* (Watson 1986).
 11. Nunburnholme appears to have acquired its prefix late, from a local nunnery (and so is not a ‘nine’-name), but the name Naburn (YE) perhaps deserves re-examination.
 12. A highly speculative theory, apparently untestable with the available data, is that ON *níu* translates OE *nigon* ‘nine’, in which *nigon* replaces (by folk-etymology, or for reasons of taboo) OE *nicor* ‘water-sprite’. Several names associating *nicor* with pools are known (EPNE, s.v. *nicor*).

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