

Thelnetham and Whelnetham in Suffolk: early Christian sites?

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This paper examines the hypothesis that the names Thelnetham and Whelnetham have a common origin, with the first element starting *Thw-*. The two different phonological developments of this initial cluster exhibited in the place-names are shown to have several parallels. An even more speculative final section offers a possible etymon in a recorded term for a baptismal tank.

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Thelnetham is a village in Blackbourn Hundred in north Suffolk, on the Little Ouse and thus close to the border with Norfolk. Great and Little Whelnetham¹ are villages in Thedwastre Hundred, about 5 km south of Bury St Edmunds, and 23 km south-west of Thelnetham. The names of both places are recognised as being of very difficult etymology: Ekwall (1936: 87) could only suggest that the base was *elfet-hamm* ‘swan meadow’,² with two different distinguishing prefixes *þel* ‘plank’ and *hwēol* ‘wheel’. Every toponymist will recognise the desperation here: these are not at all typical prefixes; moreover *hamm* is not an element found at all in Suffolk.³ But Ekwall had correctly noticed that the *-n-* in both names is not original; as we will see later, it must have arisen through misreading of *-u-*.

This paper will consider an alternative hypothesis perhaps only slightly less fantastic; namely that both names Thelnetham and Whelnetham were

¹ Or Welnetham; the records fluctuate between *W-* and *Wh-* at all periods. Cooke (1882) quotes from the Bury Post of 16 August 1882 that the name ‘shall in future be spelled Whelnetham as in all old writings, and not Welnetham’. Despite this, early OS maps kept the spelling Welnetham, but from the seventh series maps of c.1960 onwards, the OS compromised with Great and Little Welnetham for the villages and Great and Little Whelnetham for the parishes. The Bartholomew half-inch maps used the spelling Whelnetham in c.1900 and Welnetham in c.1940.

² As in Elvetham in Hampshire (Coates 1989: 72).

³ There are no certain examples in my own database of over 25,000 Suffolk place-names (it is not likely in Norfolk either); if *hamm* were ever a place-name element in East Anglia, it must have ceased being used well before the Norman Conquest.

originally identical, and began with the rare sound combination /θw-/; in fact my proposed OE form is *Þwēal-fæt-hām*. The examination of this hypothesis will require two main steps: firstly the historical phonology of the combination /θw/ in English; and secondly a consideration of what the name might mean if this main assumption be correct.⁴

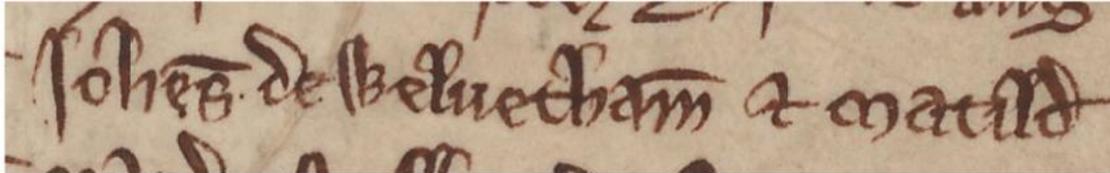


Figure 1: *Joh[ann]es de Weluetham* in Fine Roll C60/49, membrane 6, 36 Henry III (28 October 1251–27 October 1252). From <<http://www.finerollshenry3.org.uk>>, reproduced by permission of The National Archives.

We start with the phonology. There are only a few verbal or nominal stems in Germanic beginning /θw/ or /ðw/ (Orel 2003: 431–32). The most important of these found in OE are *þwang* ‘thong’, *þwēal* ‘washing’, *þweorh* ‘crooked, crosswise’, *þwīnan* ‘to dwindle’, *þwīrel* ‘whisk’, and *þwītan* ‘to cut’ (Holthausen 1963: 373–74). Modern ‘thong’ continues OE *þwang* with loss of *-w-*; a variant *whang* in northern English loses the initial fricative instead. Modern ‘whittle’ has a similar phonetic history via loss of *-th-* from a ME form *thwitel* derived from OE *þwītan* (see further Jacobsson 1962: 256–58, and Hamp 1989).

It will thus be noted that all these OE words have either disappeared from the lexicon, or undergone one of the sporadic changes /θw/ > ME /w/, /hw/, /ʌ/ or /θ/, which should be thought of as the regular developments. It would be reasonable to claim that OE initial /θw/ had entirely disappeared by the ME period in most varieties of English. Those few modern words (such as ‘thwart’ and ‘thwaite’) which now have it are from Scandinavian, which language has re-introduced the sound combination.⁵ In any case, in the wider vocabulary there are numerous indications of difficulty with the initial sounds of other words starting *thw-*.⁶

⁴ Every statement made in this article assumes that the names are fully English.

⁵ Cf. also the discussions by Onions (1924) and Dance (2019: 419) of the hapax *þwarte-knot* which occurs in *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*.

⁶ Caistor in Yarborough Wapentake, Lincolnshire was sometimes called *Thwangcastre* or *Thangcastr*’ (PN Li 2 87). A *þwangtune* in Hertfordshire lost its *-w-* by c.1250 (PN Hrt 89). The surname *de Wait* is translated *de Thwaite* by the editor in an Assize Roll entry of 1209 (D. M. Stenton 1949–1967: iv. 202), but this is perhaps rather a scribal error for *le Wait*. Here may be also compared a spelling *Theyt* c.1230–40 for Thwaite (Turner and Coxe 1878: no. 1378). The spelling *Whait* 1722 (SROI FL582/4/2/2), is

These observations are my motivation for the suggestion that the names Thelnetham and Whelnetham might have originally been identical, having had an initial combination /θw/, which has been simplified in two different ways. But is there any evidence in the earliest spellings of the names supporting this idea? Both names are first recorded in Domesday Book.⁷ Thelnetham appears as *Thelueteham*, *Teluetteham*, *teolftha[m]* (folios 327b, 354b, 366b). Whelnetham appears as *hvelfiha[m]* (363a), but also as *telueteha[m]* (291a); the latter has sometimes been taken to be Thelnetham, though the hundred is stated to be Thedwastre, which would only be correct for Whelnetham. But the scribe may simply have confused the two places, so this is at best weak evidence for earlier initial /θw/. In the early twelfth century we have *Hueluetham* in the Feudal Book of Baldwin, which is evidence for initial /hw/ or /χw/; and in the late twelfth-century the Kalendar of Abbot Samson has *Fwelvetham* (Douglas 1932: 22, 34; Davis 1954: 3, 5, 17, 20). The last form with *Fw-* has an occasional spelling of /hw/, but could also represent /θw/ with substitution of fricatives. Ekwall noted the spelling *Elnetham* for Thelnetham in a 1202 fine printed by Rye (1900: 8; later edited by Dodwell 1958: no. 347), and interpreted this as his *elfet-hamm* without a prefix. The MS reading (TNA CP25(1)/212/3/16) seems in fact to be *Eluetham*; this may just be a case of the scribe giving up on the task of representing a difficult consonant cluster, whatever its precise nature.⁸ Overall, there is no evidence against the hypothesis of original initial /θw/ in both names, and some evidence that confusion of initial consonants has occurred.⁹ Perhaps speakers of Scandinavian

almost certainly for Thwaite. The pronunciation [wiŋ] for Thwing in Yorkshire is given in Smith PN ERY 112. Forms like *Postelwaith* and *Postlewhite* are common for the surname derived from Postlethwaite in Cumbria (PN Cu 416). There are examples which are probably derived from *thwaite*; e.g. a lease of 1329 (Yorkshire Archaeological and Historical Society MD335/5/14) referring to a locality in Snaith called *le Whayt*, and a deed of 1671 (NfRO EVL1,445x5) referring to land called *The Whayte* in Barford, Norfolk. In Falsgrave in Yorkshire, initial *Hw-* has been irregularly simplified (PN ERY 107). Similar changes can also affect names and words starting with *tw-*, such as *Tiverton* in Devon < *twi-* (PN D 541); and *Twatley* or *Whatley* in Wiltshire are probably two versions of the same name (PN W 54). There is a ME verb pair *twakken/thakken* ‘to hit, stroke’. A rower’s bench in a boat is a *thawt* or *thwart* (OED *thwart*, n.²).

⁷ Brief collections of early spellings are available in Dict Sf 137, 152.

⁸ Cf. the frequent medieval form *Randeston* for *Thrandeston* (Dict Sf 140).

⁹ A 1452 will refers to Thelnetham as *Qwelweham*; it undoubtedly refers to Thelnetham, for it mentions the church of St Nicholas (Northeast 2001: no. 506). Cf. also *Simon de Quenedham* 13th, mentioned in a Thelnetham quitclaim (HD1538/2/143); at this date such a surname would normally refer to the place of residence.

ancestry preserved /θw/ in my hypothesised *Þwēal-fæt-hām*, while English speakers did not, thus creating the vacillation which is faintly observable in the earliest spellings.

We also need to consider the internal cluster, which varies in the spellings of both names between *-lf-*, *-lu-*, and *-ln-*, the latter two usually indistinguishable in medieval script. But there are enough early examples of *-lf-* to make certain that there was originally a labial fricative following the *-l-*, whether voiced or not. In Figure 1, the scribe seems to have been very particular in marking a *-u-* with serifs, to avoid the reading *Welnetham*. The conclusion that *-lf-* is original allows the suggestion that the loss of initial /θ/ may be an example of dissimilation triggered by two successive syllables starting with labial fricatives. The internal change *-lf-* > *-ln-* has occurred also in Tacolneston in Norfolk, derived from the personal name *Tatwulf* (DEPN 458).¹⁰

These conclusions concerning the phonology justify moving to the next step, the semantics. The only Old English word which comes into consideration is *þwēal* ‘a wash, an act of washing’.¹¹ In surviving texts and glosses, the reference is often to Christian ritual, either to foot-washing or to baptism.¹² The most revealing glosses for our purposes occur in the Antwerp-London glossaries, a collection of Latin lemmata explained in English in the margins of an eleventh-century manuscript, Figure 2 (Porter 1999). Here occur *Pelluuie a pedib[us] d[icitu]r foþþpeales fæt* ‘foot-washing vat’ and *Pedilauuiū.foþþpeal* ‘foot-washing’ (Porter 2011: 64, 84). Another example is *Post pedum lauacionem lauent etiam calceos, quibus expedierit æfter fota ðweale ðwean eac hyra scos þam hit framige* (‘after foot-washing, to wash also their shoes shall be beneficial’; Kornexl 1993: 45) in the *Regularis Concordia*. The reference in all these cases is to ritual washing. A gloss to Aldhelm, *lauacri .i. baptismi, þweales* (‘of the bathing (or washing), that is, baptism’), again confirms that *þwēal* was used with reference to baptism (Napier 1900: no. 2003). Of particular interest in these examples are the compounds with *fæt* ‘vat, tank’. An explicit example of *þwēal-fæt* ‘washing tank’ which would provide a precise etymon for a place-name *Þwēal-fæt-hām* is not recorded; but the attested genitival

¹⁰ Cf. also ‘gravy’ < OFr *grané*, and similarly ‘duvet’ < OFr *dumet* (OED s.vv.).

¹¹ Throughout I cite the Saxon form *þwēal*, but the Anglian form expected in Suffolk would be **þwēl*, this being consistent with the uniform *-e-* spellings of the two place-names (Kristensson 1995: 105). There are many place-names examples formed with elements of the same phonology *ē* < *ēa*, such as Benhall < Anglian *bēn-hale* ‘bean plot (dative)’, corresponding to Saxon *bēan*.

¹² The use of this word for activities related to baptism must be ancient in Germanic; in the Gothic bible the cognates *þvahan* ‘to wash, baptize’ and *þvahl* ‘bath, font’ are only used in these senses (Stamm [n.d.] 347).

compound *fothpeales fæt* offers a very close parallel.¹³

The last step of my speculations will be to consider whether *pwēal-fæt* can be given a sensible interpretation in terms of landscape features. Perhaps it could refer to a mundane type of tank, for example for washing

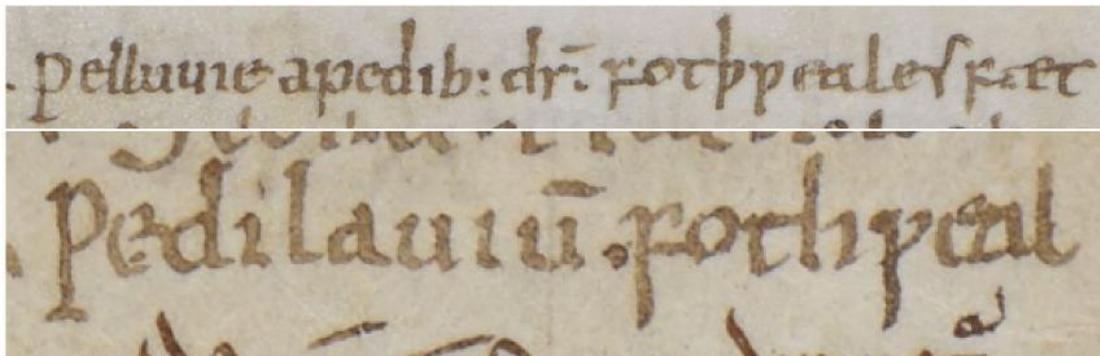


Figure 2: Glosses containing *hpeal* on folios 7r (top margin) and *thweal* 10v (bottom right) of BL Add MS 32246, edited as nos 653 and 1338 in the bilingual class glossary in Porter 2011. The MS uses *p* (wynn) for *w*.

Images from <http://www.bl.uk/manuscripts/Viewer.aspx?ref=add_ms_32246> fs001r, reproduced with permission of the British Library.

wool. But then it is hard to imagine it was special enough to give rise to the name of an estate. A more interesting possibility is that *pwēal-fæt* referred to tanks used for open-air baptism in the period before baptism in churches became standard.¹⁴ Bede describes how in the time of King Edwin, Bishop Paulinus of York baptized new converts in the Swale at Catterick, and another rite at the Glen in Northumberland is described as washing in the waters of regeneration (Colgrave and Mynors 1960 (repr 1979): ii. 14). It might be significant here that the Glen is thought to have a name meaning ‘the clean one’ (ERN 177). It is not certain that tanks were needed for river baptisms, but the late-Roman lead tanks with Christian inscriptions, of which about twenty-five have been found, mostly in south-east England, are generally thought to have been intended for baptism. Many have Christian inscriptions (Frend 1992: 124), though this interpretation of the use has been contested by Crerar (2013). Examples have been found in Suffolk at Felixstowe and Icklingham; the latter site (like Thelnetham on the Little Ouse) has been determined by archaeological investigation to include a large early Christian cemetery and

¹³ These ideas were first aired at the SNSBI meeting in Norwich on 28 March 2015; there I suggested a compound *pwēal-fōt*, and this was improved to *pwēal-fæt* by Paul Cullen in the subsequent discussion *coram publico*.

¹⁴ For general background on Christianity in Anglo-Saxon East Anglia see Pestell 2004 and Hoggett 2010.

a masonry structure with steps, possibly a baptismal pool (West and Plouviez 1976). The chronology of the present theory is, however, delicate. Late-Roman Christianity in Britain is thought to have no continuity with the re-introduction of the religion, which occurred in East Anglia with the mission of Felix around 600. This makes it unlikely that the Roman lead tanks survived to be re-used for baptism. Though the place-names Thelnetham or Whelnetham could have been created at any time in the Anglo-Saxon period, my suggestion would fit best with an association with Felix or his immediate followers, with the names referring to newly-built baptismal tanks or pools.¹⁵

Finally, if any aspects of this picture are correct, we should ask whether either Thelnetham or Whelnetham have any special features in their location or topography which might make plausible their use as early baptism sites. In this respect the purity of the water would be a prime consideration, as well as perhaps a remoteness which might be likened to the Jordan.¹⁶ Thelnetham is on the edge of the Waveney marshes, and is a site significant for being about 2 km from the common source of the rivers Little Ouse and Waveney. The former flows west to eventually join the Great Ouse, and the latter flows east to the North Sea; together they form the boundary of Suffolk and Norfolk.¹⁷ These aspects could have made Thelnetham a site of symbolic significance; it is central in East Anglia, yet the surrounding marshes give it an atmosphere of isolation. Whelnetham is on the Lark, about 5 km upstream from Bury St Edmunds. Here we could suggest an early baptism site pre-dating the abbey of Bury; perhaps a precursor of that abbey.

Neither site has any significant recorded religious association. A stone cross in Thelnetham is of uncertain date; it is marked on old OS maps at TL01027842, but only fragments of the base now remain in a private garden. The 1527 will of John Cole of Thelnetham said ‘I will have a newe crosse made accordinge to Trappett’ Crosse at the Hawelanesende and sett vpp at Short Groves ende, where the gospell ys sayde upon Ascension Even, for y^e w^{ch} I assigne x s̄’ (Tymms 1850: 118; Hill 1930: 284–85). *Trappett Crosse* is probably the crossroads at TM010784 where Trappett Cottages still stand. Great Whelnetham had a small convent of Crutched Friars (Tanner 1744: 529).

¹⁵ For the possibility that a *hām* could be named after an apparently insignificant man-made feature, I invite comparison with the Suffolk examples of Hitcham from *hecc* ‘hatch’, and Martlesham from *mārels* ‘mooring-post’, Dict Sf 70, 94).

¹⁶ Gilchrist 2005: 36 describes the importance of a clean water supply at Norwich cathedral for ritual purposes. For further background, see Twomley 2017; Jones 2017.

¹⁷ At the period in question these entities would not have existed as counties in the Domesday and later sense.

To conclude, I have put forward a theory based on two assumptions: (1) that the names Thelnetham and Whelnetham were originally both *ƿwēalfæt-hām*, and that the rarity of the initial consonant cluster caused simplification in two different ways; (2) that the two place-names referred to baptismal tanks (perhaps lead tanks, or the visible remains of such), to which the term *ƿwēalfæt* was applied. I invite consideration as to whether these hypotheses stand up better than Ekwall's swan-meadow, and plank and wheel.¹⁸

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¹⁸ Alternative theories might involve the plant-name *þelneþunc* recorded once in an OE gloss (Meritt 1943: 61), but this word is otherwise totally obscure. If the true base of this word were *þelfep-*, we would have a possible etymon for Thelnetham. For Whelnetham one might consider Anglian OE *hwelfode-hām*, referring to a building as an 'arched or vaulted homestead'; see OED under *whelve*, v.

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