What’s in a name?

Ian D Rotherham of Sheffield Hallam University, gives a short guide to place-name evidence in the second of a two-part series.

Placing your wood in the landscape

Early countryside names often relate to major topographic features such as rivers, hills, or valleys, land-use and vegetation cover such as wood, heath, fen, marsh or similar, or to ownership or territory. Towns, villages, hamlets, farmsteads, roads, ancient fields, and prehistoric earthworks, also feature in place-name evidence. Place-names have been studied in detail, though not comprehensively, by, for example, the English Place-name Society, and this is a great help to the woodland detective.

Place-names often derive from so-called ‘dead’ languages, particularly Old English, Old Norse, Cornish, and Celtic or British words. This can mean we are able to place woodland at a location with a conservative of estimate of age, being from before that name. So a wood with an Old Norse name must be at least from the Viking era. Care is needed to interpret place-names and meaning is not always what it might first appear – so ‘Hatherleigh’ for example, often spelt ‘Heatherleigh,’ means a clearing with hawthorns not heather. ‘Firs Wood’ or ‘Fir Vale’ relates to gorse not ‘fir’.

Clear evidence?

Many landscape names are to do with open lands or areas cleared of trees, but when that clearance took place is a matter of debate. It was formerly suggested that many Anglo Saxon terms for example, implied ‘the clearance’ of woodland cover, whereas now, we interpret many of these to be more open landscapes of wood pasture or wooded heath.

Other names indicate a settlement close by a wood or woodland, an example being Wootten or Witton.

Anglo Saxon was rich in woodland-related words and names – wudu = wood, gråf = grove, scaga = shaw, hangr = hanger, fyrr = firth or frith, holt = holt = wood often of one tree species – Alderholt (alder), Bircholt (birch), Wiggonholt (wych elm), Esholt (ash), Knockholt (oak).

Others may combine with animal or bird names so we get Buckholt (stags) and Gledholt (the kite’s wood). Ramsholt might be rams or ramsoms (wild garlic).

Villages and hamlets, often now subsumed into urban sprawl, may relate to woodland in the area: -ley or -lea, -hurst = a place surrounded by woodland or a clearing; -feld = an open area surrounded by woodland. There is also -maur = old British or Welsh names for wood. Lindrick in South Yorkshire is from ‘lime wood’, the old name for lime being linden, but beware of ‘linden’ also meaning a flax field! ‘Hartley’ is a clearing frequented by stags. ‘Heely’ is a high clearing and ‘Longley’ is a long one.

Gleadless in Sheffield is from ‘Gled-leys’ – a clearing inhabited by kites (gled being Old English or Welsh for a red kite).

An open question

Many clearing names were previously believed to be just that, a name to indicate clearance of woodland at that time of the naming. However, we now believe that many clearance names are for areas of open land, and that was probably extensive ‘wood pasture,’ some of which became medieval commons or manorial parks.

Other Saxon clearing names include -royd, and graefe, graf, grafa, which may mean thicket, bushwood, grove or copse.
This latter word may also mean digging, grave or trench, and so again the need for caution and context.

Many areas such as Yorkshire and much of northern and eastern England, were dominated by Viking settlements and so Old Norse names are commonplace. The equivalent of the Saxon clearing names include -thwaite implying rich open pasture. 'Storh' or 'Stors' is from Old Norse for 'wood', and 'lund' meant a small wood or grove.

Medieval mysteries
From early medieval times, woods were themselves named, so we have Parkwood Springs (the park copice wood), West Haigh Wood (the enclosed wood), Newfield Spring (the copice wood by the new field), and many others. The word 'spring' means a copice wood where the cut 'wood' 'springs' from the stool left after cutting. By medieval times, 'wood' was the smaller material cut from coppices, stubs, shreds and pollards, and 'timber' was the larger heavy wood from tree trunks and major limbs.

By the medieval period, many 'woods' were enclosed and might be referred to as enclosures with names like hagg, hollin or høy – all meaning enclosed sites, and hollin and hagg usually meaning enclosed for production of holly as leaf fodder. This was an important crop and the veteran holly trees and copice clones are frequently ancient but overlooked. However, be careful with 'holy' names which may be 'holy' and vice versa.

We are not just looking for names that suggest woodland antiquity, but also words that infer recent origins; so, for example, plantation, cover, covert, furze or firs, often suggest plantation woods, though these may be on the sites of earlier woodland cover – beware!

Where to search
When you walk through your local, ancient woodland, you tread in the footsteps of the ghosts of those who once lived and worked the medieval and early industrial countryside. Ancient woods are frequently part of a greater landscape of medieval park, of common or heath, of chase or forest. Your search has to unravel the mysteries of the past now locked away in soils and trees, in maps and place-names; a fascinating journey of discovery. Some of the search is the walking of your site and finding key features – identifying ancient copice stools, stubbed boundary trees, or veteran pollards from a long-forgotten deer park or old hedgerow will aid an understanding on how the countryside looked and functioned in times past. These wonderful ancient landscapes come to life as we unfurl the history of woodland workers and others over a thousand years or more. Fragments of ancient woods are to be discovered as broad ‘hedgerows’ along old sunken lanes and trackways in urban and countryside areas, often still with veteran trees and woodland indicator plants. They are found close to rivers and streams, in green spaces such as golf courses, urban parks, and even on modern housing estates. You just have to look.

PICTURES
Left: Newfield Spring Wood – ‘the coppice wood by the new field’.
Above: Hatherleigh – ‘a clearing with hawthorns’.

More information


There is also plenty of information on Ian’s research website www.ukerconet.org
Oh deer
So what's the issue?

Which winch?
The warbler wobbles
Spring flowers in focus
Understanding ancient trees