

THE PLACE-NAME COCKLEY CLEY IN NORFOLK

Historical spellings of Cockley Cley in Norfolk were recorded as follows in Ekwall's magisterial dictionary of English place-names:¹

Cleia, Claia 1086

Claia 1199

Cleye Omnium Sanctorum, Santi Petri 1254

Cocklikleye 1324

As Ekwall explained, the original place-name, together with a doublet in the same county, is from OE *clæg* 'clay, clayey soil'.² He went on to say:

The additional Cockley is obscure. Perhaps it is a p[lace] n[ame] Cockley meaning 'cock wood, wood frequented by wild birds'.

Subsequent scholarship has largely repeated this suggestion, treating Cockley as a compound of OE *cocc* 'cock' and OE *lēah* 'wood, clearing' despite the lack of the medial vowel that would be expected as a reflex of the genitive plural form *cocca*.³ An alternative derivation as a manorial affix from a family name is put forward by Mills,⁴ but this raises the further question of where such a family name would originate. The entry for Cockley in *The Oxford Dictionary of Family Names in Britain and Ireland* identifies it as a locative surname either from Cockley Cley itself, Cockley Hill in Kirkheaton in the West Riding of Yorkshire, or possibly Cookley in Suffolk.⁵ The

second of these is from OE *hlāw* 'hill, mound',⁶ while the third is from a personal name with OE *lēah*.⁷ Although OE *cocc* 'cock' does combine with other terms for woodland and clearings, there are no known compounds with OE *lēah*.⁸

The purpose of this note is to suggest an alternative etymology from ME *cocklayk*, which is found in the Cumberland place-names Cocklakes, Cocklet Rigg, Cockleygill, Cockley Moss and the lost *Cocklaye* (1189) and *le Cokelayk*' (1279).⁹ Defined in the *English Dialect Dictionary* as 'a spot frequented by grouse',¹⁰ *The Place-Names of Cumberland* suggests an alternative reference 'to the mating dance of the grouse, which is a very striking spectacle', pointing out that it would thus be synonymous with the lost field-name *cockplai*e (1603) in the Cumberland parish of Kirkandrews.¹¹ Although *English Place-Name Elements* cites the field-name as an instance of OE *plega* 'a place for

Cocklegh 1428, and Guilmus *Cockeley* 1579. With a current frequency of 102 bearers, and even fewer (81) in 1881, the surname only just meets the criteria for inclusion in the dictionary. The main location is Essex, and no historical bearers are known from Norfolk.

⁶ A. H. Smith, *The Place-Names of the West Riding of Yorkshire*, 7 vols (Cambridge, 1961–63), II, 227, gives the earliest spelling as *Cockeslau* 13th, and explains that 'it is the name of a prominent hill'.

⁷ Keith Briggs and Kelly Kilpatrick, *A Dictionary of Suffolk Place-Names* (Nottingham, 2016), 36, give the earliest spelling as *manerium Cokeli* 1086, and explain it as 'Cuca's woodland clearing'.

⁸ Parsons, *The Vocabulary of English Place-Names*, 146.

⁹ A. M. Armstrong, A. Mawer, F. M. Stenton and Bruce Dickens, *The Place-Names of Cumberland*, 3 vols (Cambridge, 1950–52), III, 466–67. The Cumberland examples are supplemented by field-names in Paul Cavill, *A New Dictionary of English Field-Names* (Nottingham, 2018), 83. These comprise six occurrences of Cocklake and one of Cocklate in Westmorland, together with Cocklade and Cock Lakes in the West Riding of Yorkshire. Although mostly post-dating the medieval period, the field-names reflect the embedding of the term in the local dialect.

¹⁰ Joseph Wright, *The English Dialect Dictionary*, 6 vols (London, 1898–1905), I, 680. The compound has no entry in the *Middle English Dictionary* <<https://quod.lib.umich.edu/m/middle-english-dictionary/dictionary>> nor the Oxford English Dictionary <<https://www.oed.com>> accessed 28 Dec. 2023. It is notable that the Historical Thesaurus of English <<https://ht.ac.uk>> records only two terms under sense 01.05.18.03.11 [Birds] 'Engage in sexual display': *play* (*up*) 1765–1892, and *display* 1902–. Clearly the practice must have been observed before the mid-eighteenth century, and the place-name evidence for *cocklayk* fills the gap in the written record.

¹¹ Armstrong *et al.*, *The Place-Names of Cumberland*, III, 466–67. The term has no entry in A. H. Smith, *English Place-Name Elements*, 2 vols (Cambridge, 1956), nor in the indices of elements to later volumes of the Survey of English Place-Names.

¹ Eilert Ekwall, *The Concise Oxford Dictionary of English Place-Names*, 4th edn (Oxford, 1960), 111–12.

² The doublet, now known as Cley next the Sea, is analysed in Karl Inge Sandred, *The Place-Names of Norfolk Part Three: The Hundreds of North and South Erpingham and Holt* (Nottingham, 2002), 120, confirming the derivation from OE *clæg*. Unfortunately, the Survey of English Place-Names had not yet covered the part of Norfolk that includes Cockley Cley when Sandred died in 2008.

³ David N. Parsons, *The Vocabulary of English Place-Names (CEAFOR-COCKPIT)* (Nottingham, 2004), 146; Victor Watts, *The Cambridge Dictionary of English Place-Names* (Cambridge, 2004), 143. It is not uncommon in place-names for a bird- or animal-name to appear in the singular, designating the species, but a genitive singular *-es* inflection is even less likely to disappear without trace.

⁴ A. D. Mills, *A Dictionary of British Place Names*, rev. edn (Oxford, 2011), 123.

⁵ Patrick Hanks, Richard Coates and Peter McClure, *The Oxford Dictionary of Family Names in Britain and Ireland*, 4 vols (Oxford, 2016), I, 536. Historical spellings mostly preserve the expected medial vowel, as in William *de Cokeleye* 1291, Thomas

games or where animals played’,¹² the Cumberland editors’ interpretation is to be preferred, and corresponds to sense 1.2.d of the *OED* entry for the verb *play*: ‘Of a male bird: to strut, dance, or engage in other forms of sexual display.’¹³ Indeed, a doublet has recently come to light in southern Scotland, where Márkus explains that Cockplay in Dalry, Kirkcudbrightshire, ‘must refer to the “lecking” of such birds, when the males clear a place and flap and display in order to attract a female during mating season’.¹⁴

Like Cumberland, Norfolk was an area of Scandinavian settlement during the medieval period, with considerable Norse influence on the local dialect and toponymy.¹⁵ It is therefore relevant that ME *cocklayk* is of Norse origin, the second element being ON *leikr* ‘play’. This may account for the second ‘k’ of the 1324 spelling *Cocklikleye* for Cockley Cle, as well as explaining the absence of a medial vowel between the first two syllables. An original **cocklayk-clæg* would inevitably lead to the simplification of the double /k/-k/ sound before and after the syllable boundary, so that the plosive would be expected to survive in one position or the other, but not both.

As the most common topographical element in English place-names, OE *lēah* can affect the development of names from other elements through analogy, as in Cockley Hill mentioned above from OE *hlāw* ‘hill, mound’, and others such as the Berkshire place-names Hawksley, also from OE *hlāw* ‘hill, mound’, *Notley* from OE *clyf* ‘slope’, and Grazeley from OE *sol* ‘wallowing-place’.¹⁶ It is thus not unlikely that *cocklayk* would have developed into Cockley, even without the duplication of /k/ across the syllable boundary with Cle.

In conclusion, there can be no certainty with regard to the affix of Cockley Cle. However, an

existing place-name from ME *cocklayk* ‘place where cocks display to attract a mate’ seems to be at least as likely as one from OE **cocca-lēah* ‘cocks’ wood’ or a manorial affix from a rare family name originating in the West Riding of Yorkshire or Suffolk. I therefore suggest that ME *cocklayk* should be considered as a further possibility.

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<https://doi.org/10.1093/notesj/gjae015>

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Advance Access publication 7 February, 2024

GAIMAR’S *ESTOIRE DES ENGLEIS*, LINE 6460: WHAT GAIMAR DID WITH THE BOOKS OF THE WELSH

Geffrei Gaimar’s *Estoire des Engleis* (c.1137),¹ the earliest extant Old French chronicle, originally combined translations from Geoffrey of Monmouth’s *Historia regum Britanniae* and the *Anglo-Saxon Chronicle*. The former section of Gaimar’s text, translating the *HRB* and conventionally known as the *Estoire des Bretuns*, is now lost.² But the *HRB*, or at least a translation made for Earl Robert of Gloucester ‘solum les livres as Walesis’ (l. 6451; according to the books of the Welsh),³ features prominently in the remarkable list of sources given in the epilogue to Gaimar’s *Estoire* that uniquely survives in the early fourteenth-century London, British Library, Royal MS 13 A XXI. The passage describing Gaimar’s additions to the *HRB* has long proved problematic. In his excellent edition, Ian Short renders the lines in question as follows: ‘Geffrei Gaimar cel livre

¹² Smith, *English Place-Name Elements*, II, 67.

¹³ <<https://www.oed.com>> accessed 28 Dec. 2023.

¹⁴ Gilbert Márkus, *Glenkens Place-Names: A Window on our Past* (Castle Douglas, 2023), 12. Further information is available on the associated website at <<https://kcb-placenames.glasgow.ac.uk>> accessed 28 Dec. 2023.

¹⁵ The extent of Scandinavian influence varies in different parts of Norfolk, as demonstrated by David N. Parsons, ‘Field-name statistics, Norfolk and the Danelaw’, in Peder Gammeltoft and Bent Jørgensen (eds.), *Names Through the Looking-Glass: Festschrift in Honour of Gillian Fellows-Jensen July 5th 2006* (Copenhagen, 2006), 165–88.

¹⁶ Carole Hough, ‘Linguistic Levels: Onomastics’, in Alexander Bergs and Laurel J. Brinton (eds.), *English Historical Linguistics: An International Handbook* (Berlin and Boston, 2012), I, 212–23, at 221.

This research was undertaken during my tenure of the E. K. Chambers Studentship at Corpus Christi College, Oxford.

¹ Unless otherwise indicated, quotations are from Geffrei Gaimar, *Estoire des Engleis*, ed. and trans. Ian Short (Oxford, 2009). All translations are my own.

² See Ian Short, ‘What Was Gaimar’s *Estoire des Bretuns*?’, *Cultura Neolatina* lxxi (2011), 143–45. The division of Gaimar’s *Estoire* into two clearly distinct books, however, seems to be scribal rather than authorial: see Gaimar, *Estoire des Engleis*, ed. and trans. Short, n. to ll. 1–4.

³ Geoffrey’s *HRB* was originally dedicated to Robert of Gloucester: see E. K. Chambers, *Arthur of Britain* (London, 1927), 41–44. For its identification with the translation mentioned by Gaimar, see Ian Short, ‘Gaimar’s Epilogue and Geoffrey of Monmouth’s *Liber vetustissimus*’, *Speculum*, 69 (1994), 327.