

Saints and Sites: The Interrelationship Between Church Dedications and Placenames in England

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Abstract

A personal name in an English placename may be that of the saint to whom the local parish church is dedicated, as notably in Cornwall. Some church dedications, however, evolved from a misinterpretation of the placename. Conversely, some placenames apparently preserving a saint's name are actually based on a secular personal name, even when prefixed by *St.*

Where a personal name forms part of a placename in England, it in some cases represents that of the patron saint of the local parish church. This is most obviously the case where the placename is prefixed with *St.*, so that the parish churches at *St. Agnes*, Cornwall, *St. Helens*, Merseyside, and *St. Leonards*, East Sussex, are respectively dedicated to *St. Agnes*, *St. Helen* and *St. Leonard*. Even where the name is not prefixed *St.*, this can hold true. At *Davidstow*, Cornwall, the parish church is dedicated to *St. David*, for example, while at *Peterchurch*, Hereford & Worcester, and *Romaldkirk*, Durham, the patron saints are respectively *St. Peter* and *St. Romald*. The religious origin of these last three names is additionally implied by their second element: *-stow* represents Old English *stów*, 'place of assembly,' 'holy place,' while *-church* and *-kirk* are respectively the southern and northern words for the familiar place of worship.¹

At *Peterborough*, Cambridgeshire, the cathedral is also dedicated to *St. Peter*, as is the parish church of *Petersfield*, Hampshire. However, although the dedication to the famous apostle is a bona fide one, it is likely that in those two places the particular saint's name may have been prompted by an earlier personal name: that of a local ruler or landowner. The founder of the original monastery at *Peterborough*, for example, is said to have been the seventh-century king of Mercia *Peada*, so that his name became associated with the religious site and the later abbey church.² And at *Petersfield* it is possible that the church dedication actually arose from the name of an Anglo-Saxon landowner called *Peohtere*, so

that the name refers to his "field" (Old English *feld*, 'open stretch of land'; Coates, *Place-Names of Hampshire* 130).

Of course, it may well be that the dedication in these two instances was after all simply given directly for St. Peter, and that the association between this Christian name and any earlier name is purely coincidental. In certain cases, however, a long-established association between saint's name and placename is known to be speculative, even spurious. The parish church at Boston, Lincolnshire, for example, is dedicated to St. Botolph in the belief that the name of the town means "Botolph's stone" and that it refers to the altar at which the saint of this name preached. But historical evidence has not established his precise identity, and the name is much more likely to mean "Bótwulf's stone," referring, again, to an Anglo-Saxon landowner. Similarly, the parish church at Oswestry, Shropshire, is dedicated to St. Oswald, supposedly referring to the seventh-century king of Northumbria who was killed in battle at an unidentified place called Maserfield nearby. (Coincidentally his slayer was Penda, king of Mercia, whose son, Peada, may have given the name to Peterborough.) But although the name of Oswestry does mean "Oswald's tree," the placename itself is first documented only in the thirteenth century, so long after the death of the saint that any connection with him is at best doubtful.

It is thus of interest to itemize other places in England whose names are popularly associated with their church dedications, and to give the actual origins of the names, as far as they are known. In the list that follows, names of the alleged patron saints are in parentheses.³

- Ancroft*, Northumberland (St. Ann): "lonely enclosure" (OE)
- Anderby*, Lincolnshire (St. Andrew): "Arnthórr's village" (ON + OE)
- Barnetby le Wold*, Humberside (St. Barnabas): "Beornnóth's village" (OE)
- Barthomley*, Cheshire (St. Bertoline): "bright woodland clearing" (OE)
- Berinsfield*, Oxfordshire (St. Berin): "open land of the burial places" (OE)
- Brancepeth*, Durham (St. Brandon): "Brandr's path" (ON + OE)
- Braunton*, Devon (St. Brannock): "farmstead where broom grows" (OE)
- Brendon*, Devon (St. Brendon): "hill where broom grows" (OE)
- Bridgerule*, Devon (St. Bridget): "Ruald's (place at the) bridge" (ON + OE)
- Brigham*, Cumbria (St. Bridget): "homestead by a bridge" (OE)
- Brize Norton*, Oxfordshire (St. Britius): "northern farmstead held by (William) le Brun" (OF + OE)
- Bunbury*, Cheshire (St. Boniface): "Búna's stronghold" (OE)
- Calder Bridge*, Cumbria (St. Bridget): "bridge over the Calder" (Celtic + OE)
- Chadwell Heath*, Essex (St. Chad): "heath by the cold well" (OE)
- Cotherstone*, Durham (St. Cuthbert): "Cúthhere's farmstead" (OE)
- Ebchester*, Durham (St. Ebba): "Ebba's Roman fort" (OE) (St. Ebba was female, but OE personal name Ebba is that of a man)

- Ebrington, Gloucestershire* (St. Eadburgha): “Éadbeorht’s farmstead” (St. Eadburgha was female, but OE personal name is that of a man)
- Elstow, Bedfordshire* (St. Helen): “ÆEllen’s assembly place” (OE) (male name)
- Frilsham, Berkshire* (St. Frideswide): “Frithel’s homestead” (OE) (male name)
- Helland, Cornwall* (St. Helena): “old church site” (Cornish)
- Kenwyn, Cornwall* (St. Keyne): “white ridge” (Old Cornish)
- Kirkby Stephen, Cumbria* (St. Stephen): “Stephen’s village with a church” (ON + OF) (from abbot of St. Mary’s, York, to which church was given)
- Laughton, Leicestershire* (St. Luke): “leek enclosure” (OE)
- Ludgvan, Cornwall* (St. Ludgvan): “place of ashes” (Cornish)
- Macclesfield, Cheshire* (St. Michael): “Maccel’s open land” (OE)
- Margaret Marsh, Dorset* (St. Margaret): “Margaret’s marsh” (OF + OE) (from Margaret, abbess of Shaftesbury Abbey, to whom land was given)
- Mark Cross, East Sussex* (St. Mark): “cross by a boundary” (OE)
- Marks Gate, London* (St. Mark): “gate by a boundary” (OE)
- Martinhoe, Devon* (St. Martin): “hill spur of the descendants of Matta” (OE)
- Maryport, Cumbria* (St. Mary): “port (developed by Humphrey Senhouse, and named for his wife) Mary” (Modern English)
- Melksham, Wiltshire* (St. Michael): “river meadows of milk” (OE)
- Mickleham Surrey* (St. Michael): “large river meadow” (OE) (cp. *Melksham*)
- Osmington, Dorset* (St. Osmond): “farmstead named after Ósmund” (OE) (not famous 11th-century saint, as name was recorded in ninth century)
- Pancrasweek, Devon* (St. Pancras): “Pancoard’s village” (Germanic + OE)
- Patrick Brompton, North Yorkshire* (St. Patrick): “Patric’s farmstead where broom grows” (OIr + OE)
- Patrington, Humberside* (St. Patrick): “farmstead of [an obscure personal name or folkname]” (OE)
- Patterdale, Cumbria* (St. Patrick): “Patric’s valley” (OIr + ON)
- Petersham, London* (St. Peter): “Peohtríc’s riverside land” (OE)
- Pett, East Sussex* (St. Peter): “(place at the) pit” (OE)
- Petistree, Suffolk* (St. Peter): “Peohtréd’s tree” (OE)
- Preston Patrick, Cumbria* (St. Patrick): “priests’ farmstead of Patric (de Curwen)” (OE + OIr)
- St. Agnes, Isles of Scilly* (St. Agnes): “pasture headland” (ON)
- Stanton St. John, Oxfordshire* (St. John): “stony land of (the St. John family)” (OE + OF)
- Stow Maries, Essex* (St. Mary): “place of assembly of (the) Mareys (family)” (OE + OF)
- Talland, Cornwall* (St. Tallan): “church on the hill” (Cornish)
- Warburton, Cheshire* (St. Werburgh): “Wærburh’s farmstead” (OE)
- Wilford, Nottinghamshire* (St. Wilfrid): “willow tree ford” (OE)

In some cases a parish church has reverted to an earlier dedication after bearing a name associated with the place itself. Thus the parish church at Catherinton, Hampshire, was for many years dedicated to St. Catherine, before reverting to its medieval dedication of All Saints in 1908.⁴ A similar situation obtained at Bethersden, Kent, where the former

dedication to St. Beatrice has now reverted to its original one, to St. Margaret.⁵ The names of the villages here have the actual respective meanings of “farmstead of the Cateringas” (a folkname perhaps meaning “people of the hill”) and “Beaduric’s pastureland.” Both are of OE origin (although the folkname is Celtic-based).

A spurious dedication may have been prompted in some instances by a particular historic form of the placename. For example, in the case of *Frilsham*, cited above, the association with the name of St. Frideswide appears to have been suggested by the 1174 record of the name of *Fridesham*, while the name of *Anderby*, similarly, was recorded in ca. 1135 as *Andreby*.

In certain instances the parish church bears the name of a more familiar saint than that of the more obscure saint to whom it was originally dedicated. This is then in turn associated with the placename. Examples are fairly common in Cornwall, a county famous for its many religious placenames of Celtic origin. The church at Phillack, for example, is now dedicated to St. Felicitas, but the placename actually derives from the name of the local Cornish saint St. Felek, to whom the church was originally dedicated. At Philleigh, similarly, the church was for many years dedicated to St. Felix. It has now, however, reverted to its original dedication to St. Philleigh (better, *Fily*), a local saint about whom nothing is known. A famous instance of the alteration of an unfamiliar saint’s name to a familiar is also found in Cornwall in the village of St. Anthony- in-Meneage, where the original dedication of the parish church was not to St. Anthony but to the local St. Entenin. (His name also lies behind that of the nearby farm of Lantinning, earlier *Lanyntenyn*, with the first element representing Cornish *Lann* ‘church site.’) On similar lines, there are instances where a placename *not* based on a personal name has prompted either the name of a genuine saint for the church dedication (as for St. *Helena* at Helland, above) or the name of an entirely fictional saint. An example of the latter, also cited above, is St. *Tallan* at Talland, Cornwall. The church here was originally dedicated to St. Catherine. But Tallan is not just a saint about whom nothing is known: he is one who never existed.

Although the names of some Cornish villages tally exactly with that of the saint to whom their parish church is dedicated, such as *Breage*, *Colan*, *Constantine*, *Germoe*, *Illogan*, *Mawgan*, *Mylor*, *Philleigh* (above), *Probus*, and *Wendron*, as well as (much more obviously) in *St.*- prefixed names such as *St. Agnes* (above), *St. Breoke*, *St. Enoder*, *St. Ive*, *St. Keverne*, *St. Kawgan*, and *St. Winnow*, there are a number of cases where the saint’s name is now disguised. The three villages of Perranarworthal, Perranuthnoe, and Perranzabuloe, for example, all contain the name of

St. *Piran*, to whom their churches are dedicated. (The better-known coastal resort of Perranporth contains it, too, although there the mission church is currently dedicated to St. Michael.)

The following are examples of Cornish places with names to some extent concealing those of their patron saints. The saint's name is given in parentheses, and an English translation of the name follows if it contains additional elements (always Cornish in origin unless otherwise indicated):

Altarnun (St. Nonna): "altar of Nonna"; cp. *Pelynt* below

Crantock (St. Carantoc)

Creed (St. Crida)

Crowan (St. Crowenna)

Cury (St. Corentine)

Egloskerry (St. Keri): "church of Keri"

Grade (St. Grada)

Gunwalloe (St. Winwalloe)

Gwennap (St. Weneppa)

Gwinear (St. Winnear)

Ladock (St. Ladock)

Landewednack (St. Wynwallow): "church of *To- Winnoc*"; latter is a hypocoristic form of *Wynwall* (better, *Winwaloe*), from *to-* 'thy,' *Winn*, short form of saint's name, and diminutive suffix *-oc*

Lanhydrock (St. Hydrok): "church of Hydrock"

Lanceston (St. Stephen): "church of Stephen," to which OE *tún* 'estate' has been added; name originally referred to St. Stephen's, north of present town, whose parish church is dedicated to St. Mary Magdalene

Madron (St. Maddern)

Mullion (St. Mellanus); cp. *St. Mellion*. (below)

Paul (St. Pol de Lion); saint, of Welsh origin, also gave name of French town of Saint-Pol-de-Léon, Brittany

Pelynt (St. Nun): "parish of Nun"; saint, better named as *Nennyd*, is same as at *Altarnun* above

Sancreed (St. Creden); a corrupt form of the saint's name, properly *Sancred*, in which initial *San-* has become confused with *Saint*

Zennor (St. Senera)

The following *St.*-prefixed Cornish places have churches dedicated to saints whose names conventionally differ in form from the placename.

St. Allen (St. Alleyne)

St. Blazey (St. Blaise)

St. Buryan (St. Buriana)

St. Cleer (St. Clarus)

St. Clether (St. Clederus)

St. Columb Major/*St. Columb Minor* (St. Columba)

St. Decumans (St. Decuman)

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- St. Dennis* (St. Denys)
- St. Dominic* (St. Dominica)
- St. Erme* (St. Hermes)
- St. Eval* (St. Uvelas)
- St. Goran* (St. Goranus)
- St. Ives* (St. Ia)
- St. Juliot* (St. Julitta)
- St. Keyne* (St. Keyna)
- St. Mabyn* (St. Mabena)
- St. Mellion* (St. Melanus); same saint as at *Mullion* (above)
- St. Minver* (St. Menefreda)
- St. Newlyn East* (St. Newlina); village is named *East* for distinction from Newlyn, near Penzance, where name is of different origin
- St. Teath* (St. Teatha)
- St. Wenn* (St. Wenna)

Names of OE origin in Cornwall usually indicate their religious provenance more explicitly. *Davidstow* has already been mentioned. (The David here is the famous Welsh saint whose mother is said to have been the St. Nonn of nearby *Altarnun*, cited above.) Thus also the church at *Jacobstow* is dedicated to St. James (*Jacob* and *James* are related names), that at *Padstow* to St. Petrock (despite historic attempts to associate the name with that of St. Patrick), that at *Michaelstow* to St. Michael, and that at *Warbstow* to St. Werburgh.

Many of these places are in northeastern Cornwall, near the border with Devon. Hence their English rather than Cornish origins. In Devon itself one similarly finds *Bridestowe*, with church dedicated to St. Bridget; *Marystow*, dedicated to St. Mary; *Petrockstow*, to St. Petrock (a Cornish saint, even so); and *Virginstow*, to St. Bridget the virgin. Other Devon names with elements other than *-stow* include *Georgeham*, with church dedicated to St. George (+ OE *hamm* 'well-watered land'); *Germansweek* (St. German) (+ OE *wíc* 'dairy farm'); *Mariansleigh* (St. Mary) (+ OE *léah* 'wood' or 'clearing'); *Pancrasweek* (St. Pancras) (*-week* as for *Germansweek*); and *Romansleigh* (St. Rumon) (*-leigh* as for *Mariansleigh*). In Cornwall, *Marhamchurch* has a church dedicated to St. Marwenne.

In several places, both in Cornwall and elsewhere in England, the saint whose name is preserved in the placename is not commemorated in the parish church dedication. This occurs either when the church has been rededicated, or when the dedication was never to the named saint in the first place. Thus although the famous abbey church at St. Albans, Hertfordshire, is indeed dedicated to St. Alban, the cathedral at Bury St. Edmunds, Suffolk, is actually dedicated to St. James, despite the town's ecclesiastical name of *St. Edmundsbury*. The same holds good for St.

Neots, Cambridgeshire, where the parish church is dedicated to St. Mary. The village of Edwinstowe, Nottinghamshire, has a name that clearly means “holy place of Edwin,” referring to Edwin, king of Northumbria, killed in 632. This proves that there must have been a church dedicated to St. Edwin at one time. The parish church is now also dedicated to St. Mary, however. A further example is that of Felixstowe, Suffolk, where the parish church is now dedicated to St. Peter and St. Paul. The placename itself appears to relate to St. Felix, who was responsible for the conversion of much of East Anglia. However, this etymology is disputed, and the name may after all relate to a man called Filica. His name would subsequently have become associated with that of the saint.⁶

In a few instances the parish church is dedicated to a saint whose name is well known, but which differs from that of the equally familiar saint to whom it was originally dedicated, as determined by placename evidence. In such cases the names of both saints are often similar. A good example is furnished by the village of Marstow, Hereford & Worcester, where the parish church is dedicated to St. Matthew. The placename, however, means “holy place of St. Martin,” and was recorded as *Martinstowe* in 1291. It is not clear why this popular (though non-biblical) saint was ousted in favor of the biblical apostle, although the similarity of their names must have had something to do with it. Possibly the final *-ow* of the name was felt to represent the last two letters of *Matthew*. The rededication appears to be recent: in 1868 the church is said to be that of St. Martin (Hamilton), but in 1896 is noted as being dedicated to St. Matthew (*Cassell*). The cause of the rededication was doubtless the building of a new church: Hamilton refers to “an ancient stone structure,” but *Cassell's* dates the building of the parish church at only 1855.

Even in saintly Cornwall the original dedications have not always been preserved. This is to be regretted in the popular resort of Mevagissey, where the church is now dedicated to St. Peter. Yet as recently as the nineteenth century it bore the names of St. Meva and St. Issey, true to the placename (in which the medial *ag* represents the Cornish word for “and”). At Morwenstow the church was once dedicated to St. Morwenna, but is now that of St. John.

In some cases the expected dedication is absent simply because the personal name that forms part of the placename is not that of a saint. This can apply even when the personal name is preceded by *St.* For example the church at Papworth St. Agnes, Cambridgeshire, is dedicated to St. John. This is because *Agnes* is the name of a medieval manorial owner. Similarly at Stanton St. Bernard and Stanton St. Quintin, both in Wiltshire, the church dedications are respectively to All Saints and St. Giles, since the names are those of medieval landowners. Another St. Quintin gave the name *Fifehead*

St. Quintin, Dorset, where, as for Stanton St. Quintin, the medieval landowner had a name of Norman origin deriving from one of the places called *St. Quintin* in France. And at Frome St. Quintin, Dorset, where the church is dedicated to St. Mary, the name is also manorial in origin.

Somewhat analogous is the name *Hinton St. Mary*, Dorset. The church is in fact dedicated to St. Mary, but the dedication came about because the medieval manor was in the possession of St. Mary's Abbey, Shaftesbury.

As always, however, the converse can happen, and a medieval surname can actually give a church dedication and so become intimately associated with the placename. This is so for Hatley St. George, Cambridgeshire, where the church is dedicated to St. George. Yet the name is that of the medieval family of William de Sancto Georgio. The same goes for *Stanton St. John*, already cited, where the church was the gift of John de Sancto Johanne.

The following places in England *apart* from Cornwall, which is a distinctive Celtic county in its own right, bear names not prefixed *St.* that are (probably) correctly associated with their church dedications, that is, the placename derives from that of the church's patron saint:

Alton Pancras, Dorset (St. Pancras)

Bonchurch, Isle of Wight (St. Boniface)⁷

Botolphs, West Sussex (St. Botolph)

Bridekirk Cumbria (St. Bridget)

Bridstow, Hereford & Worcester (St. Bridget); cp. *Bridestowe*, Devon (above)

Chadkirk, Cheshire (St. Chad)

Clodock, Hereford & Worcester (St. Clydog)

Felixkirk, North Yorkshire (St. Felix)

Fifehead Magdalen, Dorset (St. Mary Magdalene)

Hibaldstow, Humberside (St. Hibald)

Kirkandrews on Esk, Cumbria (St. Andrew)

Kirkbride, Cumbria (St. Bridget or St. Bride)

Kirkoswald, Cumbria (St. Oswald)

Little Dewchurch/Much Dewchurch, Hereford & Worcester (St. David); villages are close to Welsh border, and *Dew-* represents Welsh *Dewi* 'David'

Magdalen Laver, Essex (St. Mary Magdalene)

Margaret Roding, Essex (St. Margaret); cp. *Margaret Marsh* (above)

Margaretting, Essex (St. Margaret)

Mary Tavy, Devon (St. Mary); cp. *Peter Tavy* (below); *Tavy* is the river

Michaelchurch Escley, Hereford & Worcester (St. Michael)

Oswaldkirk, North Yorkshire (St. Oswald)

Peakirk, Cambridgeshire (St. Pega)

Peter Tavy, Devon (St. Peter); cp *Mary Tavy* (above)

Sellack, Hereford & Worcester (St. Tysilio); saint's name represents hypocoristic form of *Suluc*, seen more precisely in placename; this is itself a pet form of *Suliau*

Stoke Gabriel, Devon (St. Gabriel)

There are, of course, several placenames that appear to derive from a personal name but do not do so. Any connection with a saint or a church dedication is therefore out of the question. A good example is provided by the various places named *Martin*. This is not a reference to the personal name but represents an origin in the OE *(ge)mǣre* 'boundary' or *mere* 'pool' and OE *tún* 'farmstead.' The parish church at *Martin*, Hampshire, is thus dedicated to All Saints, and at *Martin*, Lincolnshire, to the Holy Trinity. However, at *Martinstown*, Dorset, also known as *Winterbourne St. Martin*, the church is rightly dedicated to St. Martin.

Saints thus frequently continue to be commemorated by the religious foundations aimed for them in England. But, equally, a placename of apparently saintly origin may turn out to be nothing of the kind, even when a church dedication appears to preserve the name of a patron saint.

Stamford, Lincolnshire, England

Notes

1. Derivations of placenames in this article are in the main taken from, or based on, either those in the county volumes of the English Place-Name Society or those in Cameron or Mills. Cornish placename derivations are abstracted mostly from Padel.

2. I have found no printed evidence of this particular association, but it seems highly plausible.

3. Names of the saints in church dedications are based on those in *Crockford's Clerical Dictionary*. The more obscure the saint, however, the more his or her name is subject to vagaries of spelling. In this listing and subsequently the following abbreviations are used: OE: Old English, OF: Old French, ON: Old Norse, OIr: Old Irish.

4. Information from Revd. Chris Beardsley, Vicar of Catherington.

5. Documents held by George Fraser, Hon. Keeper, Bethersden Parish Records Society, make no mention of this earlier dedication. However, it appears in nineteenth-century gazetteers, such as Lewis, Hamilton, and *Cassell's*. It is further specifically referred to by Bond (192).

6. The "Felix" origin is cited by Cameron, for instance, but not by Mills.

7. The traditional derivation of *Bonchurch*, cited by Cameron and Mills, for example, is from a personal name *Buna*. However, the little old church has long been dedicated to St. Boniface, and the case for the saint's name has been convincingly argued by Coates ("Bonchurch" 41-46).

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LEONARD R. N. ASHLEY

Festschrift

The December 1993 issue of *Names* will be a festschrift in honor of Leonard R. N. Ashley. Consistent with the eclectic onomastic mind of the honoree, papers on any and all aspects of names and/or naming would be appropriate. Contributors should send three copies of a completed manuscript to:

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