

The Name Bristol

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THE NAME BRISTOL is both frequent and widespread in the United States of America. Besides many lesser places, there are well known examples of the name as that of a town in at least six states: Connecticut, Pennsylvania, Rhode Island, Tennessee, Virginia and Florida. The older English form of the name, which is BRISTOW, on the other hand, is far less frequent: the only relatively well known instance is in Oklahoma.

Both BRISTOL and its older form BRISTOW clearly belong to that vast group of English names which have at various times been carried to the United States by English settlers and completely transplanted there. It follows, therefore, that its origin and history are to be looked for primarily in England.

It is perhaps worth noticing, however, that BRISTOL as the name of a hotel or bar has had, and continues to have, a very wide currency in the capitals and tourist centres of most of Europe and of Latin America. But this use of the name owes its existence historically to that once famous English traveller and epicure the Marquis of Bristol, England: and honour has thus, in an indirect sense, continued to be paid to this great patron of the very best hotels and bars long after the Marquis himself was almost forgotten. The origin of the vast number of "Bristol Bars" and "Hotels Bristol", then, will scarcely present any problem to the student of place names, though probably of very considerable interest to the social historian.

In what follows, therefore, I shall confine myself strictly to England.

The original form of the name BRISTOL is commonly assumed to be the Old English or Anglo-Saxon BRYCG STOW recorded in MS. D of the Anglo-Saxon Chronicle under the year 1063. This meant "the place (or possibly shrine) near the bridge"; and this

explanation seems to fit very well into the geographical situation, since there has been an important bridge from time immemorial over the Bristol Avon river, and since it was apparently around this bridge that the town of Bristol grew up. The scribe of the Norman Domesday Book recorded the name as BRISTOU, which seems clearly to represent the naturally reduced colloquial form of the name. Both the forms BRISTOW (corresponding to the Domesday Book's form) and BRISTOL (recorded as BRISTOLIA in Latin charters purporting to date from the mid eleventh century but probably actually *inspeximus* of the late thirteenth) survived side by side until comparatively recent times when BRISTOL ousted its rival except for the still fairly frequent use of BRISTOW as a surname.

At first sight then, the problem would seem to be the origin of the -L in BRISTOL. Yet there is some evidence that the form of the name ending in -L may be a good deal earlier than its first recorded appearance in English documents, which is found in the Curia Regis Rolls of the year 1200. Here occurs the first -L form as BRISTOLL. For, as indicated above, Latin charters of the reign of St. Edward the Confessor, though only apparently surviving in late thirteenth-century copies in the form of *inspeximus*, regularly record only BRISTOLIA. Now if the Latinizing clerks had intended to record a form of BRISTOW (for the fuller form BRYCG STOW), one would have expected them to write forms of the type BRISTOUIA or BRISTOVIA. But this in fact seems never to occur.

For the addition or substitution of the -L which turned BRISTOW into BRISTOL(L), comparison has rightly been suggested with the name PLEMSTALL (or PLEMONSTALL) in Cheshire.¹ This place must clearly have got its name from an unrecorded Old English PLEGMUNDES STOW, which first appears in the Taxatio Ecclesiastica under the year 1291 as PLEYMUNDESTOWE. Plemstall is traditionally the place where the famous Plegmund, Archbishop of Canterbury under King Alfred and Edward the Elder, had a cell or hermitage at some time earlier in his career; and the meaning of PLEGMUNDES STOW is clearly "Plegmund's cell (or hermit-

¹ For this and for references to all documentary evidence, see E. Ekwall's *The Concise Oxford Dictionary of English Place-names*, 3rd ed. corrected, Oxford 1951.

age)." It has been suggested that PLEMSTALL got its second element -STALL in substitution for -STOW in a manner parallel to that of -STOL for -STOW in BRISTOL as against BRISTOW. In view, however, of the early occurrence of the form BRISTOLIA in Latin charters, such a substitution would have to be assumed to have been an early phenomenon.

Another apparent example of the substitution of an -L ending for one that was originally vocalic is the name of the town WALSALL in Staffordshire. But here the original ending or second element was not -STOW but -HOH, the Old English word for "heel," surviving in the modern HOUGH, and meaning in toponymy "a headland," "point of land," "piece of rapidly rising ground," etc. An Anglo-Saxon will of the year 1002 in Miss Dorothy Whitelock's collection² has the earliest recorded form of WALSALL as (AET) WALES HO, in which the final syllable must be the dative case of HOH (though otherwise unrecorded). The meaning of this name must therefore have been something like "a piece of sharply rising ground belonging to a Briton (or serf)." The first element of the compound is the Old English W(E)ALH "Briton" or "(foreign) serf" in its genitive singular case W(E)ALES. This word W(E)ALH is most familiar in place-names in those beginning with WAL-, such as WALTON (OE WALA TUN), where the WAL- represents the genitive plural WALA. Now the replacement of the Old English HO by a form ending in -L in the current WALSALL is recorded as early as the year 1169. The Pipe Rolls of that year have WALES-HALE; and the Curia Regis Rolls for 1201 have WALESHAL. By an old apparent slip, the *Oxford Dictionary of English Place-names* derives the second element in the modern WALSALL from Old English HALH "valley," though it correctly cites the above-quoted form WALES HO as the earliest recorded form. If WALSALL is thus to be derived from Old English WALES HALH as against the recorded WALESHO, it would still have been a case of the substitution of a word with -L in its second element for one with the original vocalic ending; but such replacement would have had to have occurred already in late Old English. But if -HALE (dative of HALH) did replace HO in the early middle English period, the difference in meaning between HÖH and HALH would be strik-

² *Anglo-Saxon Wills* edited by Dorothy Whitelock: Cambridge (England), 1930.

ing and odd, unless we could suppose a change in the conformation of the land had made HALH more appropriate than HÖH by then.³

Probably the least unacceptable explanation of BRISTOW becoming BRISTOL so far offered by scholars would be, as Zachrisson has shown,⁴ to connect the substitution of the -L ending in BRISTOL with a sort of popular tendency in some local pronunciations to reverse that type of phonetic process by which Old French -AL became -AU as in GENERALS becoming GÉNERAUX, or Picard -OL developing into -OU as in Latin SOLIDUM giving French SOU. But such a view could only rest upon unverifiable conjecture; and the phonetic processes and chronologies of mediaeval French dialects and of those of Middle English are anything like clear or agreed.

A second and somewhat plausible explanation of BRISTOL might be to regard the change from BRISTOW as not phonological at all in its origin, but more simply as the substitution for the second element of the word of another form meaning "place" for the earlier -STOW. That is, to assume the replacement of the original -STOW by the Old English -STAELL (found also as STEALL and STALL) meaning "place." For the Old English STAELL STALL is fairly common as a second element in place-names; as in TUNSTALL (Durham), DUNSTALL (Lincoln), both of which originated in Old English TUN STAELL or TUN STALL, the "place or site of a TUN or farm." One might compare BIRSTAL in Yorkshire and BURSTALL in Staffordshire, both derived from Old English BURG STALL "fortified place" or BYRIG STALL of the same meaning. Similarly is developed the Kentish place-name BORSTAL, from Old English BORG STAELL "protecting place." But in fact the substitution of BRI-STAELL or BRI-STALL for BRI-STOW (the colloquial form of the original BRYCG STOW) would not be so good an explanation as it seemed at first sight. For whereas all the other place-names containing the element OE -STAELL -STEALL or -STALL show *only* later forms in -STALL, BRISTOL never had such a form as BRI-STALL or BRISTALL as far as known records go. The earliest known forms of BRISTOL termi-

³ See the *Place-name Dictionary*, op. cit., under WALSALL.

⁴ See R. E. Zachrisson, *Anglo-Norman Influence on English Place-names*, Lund 1907, and his *Two Instances of French Influence on English Place-names*, Stockholm 1914.

nating in an -L are the Latin charter type BRISTOLIA and the Curia Regis Rolls form BRISTOLL of the year 1200.

It seems clear, therefore, that the development of BRISTOW to BRISTOL was *direct*, and that it was not by way of the rounding of the vowel in -STAL(L) to that seen in the -STOL of BRISTOL. Moreover, while PLEMSTALL seems quite certainly to show the substitution of -STOW by -STALL, since the original Old English name must have been PLEGMUNDES STOW as already explained, such a substitution cannot possibly lie behind WALSALL developing from its origin as Old English WALES HO. Furthermore, it appears that there is not a single instance of any of the place-names with -STAL(L) as second element having at any time been recorded with the change of -STAL(L) to -STOL, which could parallel the hypothetical *BRISTAL(L) becoming BRISTOL(L).

In view of the unsatisfying nature of the above-mentioned two hypothetical explanations, I myself would, very tentatively, offer yet a third. Put quite simply, this explanation would rest on the known fact of a popular pronunciation in the speech of some speakers from parts of the West of England which adds an -L to the final syllable of words ending normally in a vowel. During the period 1940 to 1944, while living in Bristol, I encountered several native Bristolians who, in their natural speech habitually added an -L to certain words ending in a vowel. I heard, for instance, INDIA pronounced as INDIAL [INDIəL], and VICTORIA as VICTORIAL [VIKTəRIəL]. Similarly I have been informed, though I have not myself heard it, that there are speakers in more than one Southern area of the United States of America who pronounce WHEEL-BARROW as WHEEL-BARROL [HWI:L-BARL]. We have no means of knowing how early or in how wide areas this phenomenon appeared in Western English dialects and regions. But it may be worth noting that both WALSALL and BRISTOL belong to the Western half of England. Now if this speech-tendency could be shown to have arisen very early and over a wide area, it would account for WALSALL arising from Old English WALES HO (cf. the thirteenth-century forms of the type WALESHAL), as well as for BRISTOW becoming BRISTOL. It might even explain the development of PLEGMUNDES STOW to PLEMSTALL, though this latter may be more plausibly accounted for by the assumed substitution of -STALL for -STOW, both meaning "place," as the second element of the

place name. The Latin Charter form BRISTOLIA would of course be covered by the same hypothesis as BRISTOL.

I cannot pretend to have made anything like a thorough examination of place names of the types involved in the foregoing discussion; still less have I systematically studied the phonology of the dialect-types mentioned. But, since BRISTOL has not, so far as I know, yet been satisfactorily explained, it seemed worth while to put forward the above hypothesis. This latter is at least supported by the ascertained fact of the addition of an -L to the final vocalic syllable of certain words in actually heard pronunciations. Others more appropriately qualified, I venture to hope, may think it worth while to explore further this intriguing problem in place name history along the lines indicated in this paper.

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California Place Names. — The former editor of *Names* is engaged in preparing the publication of a new, revised, and augmented edition of his standard etymological-geographical dictionary, *California Place Names*. Those of our readers who are interested in California nomenclature and geography are kindly requested to send corrections, additions, and suggestions to Erwin G. Gudde, 2407 Dwinelle Hall, University of California, Berkeley 4, California.