

Old English *merece* 'Wild Celery, Smallage' in Place-Names

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I. Wild Celery and Place-Names

The Old English (OE) place-name element *merece*, meaning 'wild celery or smallage' (*Apium graveolens*), occurs in Marchwood in Hampshire, Marcham in Oxfordshire (formerly Berkshire) and probably in Marchington, Staffordshire. The plant has had a variety of common names, an indication that it was well known in the past. For instance, between 1280 and 1310 *gallice ache*, *anglice merche*, *anglice smalache* and *merche* were recorded and many other variants occur in the following centuries.¹ The plant was known to the Ancient Greeks and Romans.² In Britain traces of it were found in Roman sites at Silchester, Welney, Holgate and Caerwent.³

A possible reason for it being so widely known is that it was a useful herbal remedy. The seeds and leaves were used as a carminative, stomachic, stimulant, emmenagogue, anodyne poultice and nerve tonic,⁴ and for rheumatism and arthritis. Except as a flavouring in soup it does not seem to have been used as a food until the French improved its eating qualities in the seventeenth century (it is very fibrous and chewy, though flavoursome). It has a strong and distinctive smell, especially when bruised, and can be detected from upwards of fifty yards. Since the plant is both useful and easily recognised it is not surprising to find it used in place-name formation.

The accompanying map shows the distribution (all records past and present) as recorded by the Botanical Society of the British Isles in their *Atlas of the British Flora*, published in 1962.⁵ It is a plant which flourishes

¹ T. Hunt, *Plant Names of Medieval England* (Cambridge 1989), p. 28.

² *Sturtevant's Notes on Edible Plants*, edited by U. P. Hendrick (Albany, USA, 1919), p. 42.

³ H. Godwin, *History of the British Flora*, 2nd edn (Cambridge, 1975), p. 223.

⁴ J. C. Th. Uphof, *Dictionary of Economic Plants* (Codicote, Herts, 1968), p. 42.

⁵ Botanical Society of the British Isles, *Atlas of the British Flora* (London 1962), p. 158.

along the coasts and estuaries as it is fairly salt-tolerant. Between 1930 and 1962 it became extinct in about half its inland sites (including the Somerset Levels but excluding The Fens), but it survived in almost all its coastal ones. Where there are both good county floras and a geological map and memoir to consult it is apparent that the plant survives inland where there are salt springs, notably around Droitwich and Salwarpe, in Warwickshire near Leamington Hastings and several other places on the Lower Lias, probably because springs from this rock are quite often slightly saline,⁶ and near Marcham, Oxfordshire, where the local Oxford Clay gives rise to a number of slightly saline springs west of Oxford.⁷ The Trent and Sow valleys in the vicinity of Stafford, Shirleywich, Tixall and Ingestre are well known for their salt springs,⁸ allowing a wide variety of salt marsh plants to flourish. The wild celery formerly grew there.⁹

It seems possible that since the celery was valued as a herbal remedy it was deliberately introduced and cultivated in a variety of places inland from which it escaped into the wild. With the advent of modern drugs, cultivation ceased, the wild colonies were not replenished by seed from cultivated plants and only survived where conditions were especially favourable—places with saline springs and where the habitat was not destroyed.

The Anglo-Saxons were aware of *merece's* medicinal uses; there are references to it in their leechdoms. They may well have come across colonies established by the Romans and continued to cultivate it themselves. The river meadows (*hamms*) at Marcham and Marchington may have been two important centres of production inland. As wild celery grows plentifully round the coast it is curious to find only one *merece* name there—Marchwood. It lies on the west bank of the Test Estuary adjacent to the woodland which was to become the New Forest. There is a series of *wudu* names around the edge of the New Forest such as Ringwood (OE **rimuc* 'edge, border'), Arnewood (OE *earna* 'eagles'), Gatewood (OE *g_ta* 'goats'), Malwood (OE **mealu* 'gravel ridge' or a personal name) and

⁶ R. A. Old, M. G. Sumbler and K. Ambrose, *Geology of the Country around Warwick* (London, 1987), p. 72.

⁷ L. Richardson, *Geology of the Country around Witney* (London, 1946), p. 139.

⁸ I. P. Stevenson and G. H. Mitchell, *Geology of the Country between Burton upon Trent, Rugeley and Uttoxeter* (London, 1955), pp. 104–05.

⁹ E. S. Edees, *Flora of Staffordshire* (Newton Abbot, 1972), p. 101.

Marchwood. Here descriptive qualifying elements are being used to distinguish one part of the woodland from another so that the use of *merece* has no more than local significance in this case.

Ann Cole

II. The Wild Celery of Marcham, Oxfordshire

The parish of Marcham, two miles west of Abingdon and formerly in north Berkshire, lies at the north side of the Vale of the White Horse. It has as its southern boundary the river Ock, a tributary of the Thames, and the southern part of the parish (below the village of Marcham) is typical Vale arable land—rich drained former pasture. There is a quantity of evidence of Iron Age and Roman settlement sites, centred round a small town in the south-west corner of the parish where the Ock was forded by a north-south Roman road.¹⁰ The Roman site (which includes a temple and a small, associated, amphitheatre) would have had an infrastructure of farms and villas in the surrounding area, and the existence of a saline spring half a mile to the east would have been well-known in the district. Celery, if not already growing around the spring, may have been introduced during the era of Roman occupation. It may have been cultivated rather than left to grow wild: the plant was useful both as a medicinal and a pot herb.¹¹

Cemeteries excavated on the Roman site (generally and inaccurately referred to as Frilford) give evidence of Anglo-Saxon pagan burials, which have been thought to indicate early Anglo-Saxon settlement in the area. The celery growing around the salt spring may have been left to grow wild, but it remained sufficiently a local landmark to attract the attention of local Anglo-Saxon farmers, who would certainly have valued the river meadows. The celery may have initially given its name to a farm rather than a larger settlement: by a sequence of events not fully understood, Marcham became

¹⁰ R. Hingley, 'Location, function and status: a Romano-British "religious complex" at the Noah's Ark Inn, Frilford (Oxfordshire)', *Oxford Journal of Archaeology*, 4 (1985), 201–14, summarises work to date.

¹¹ Roman coins and pottery have been found around the spring area. These are generally a result of manuring cultivated land with household rubbish: the site would have been too wet for arable production so it seems logical to associate the manuring with the celery.

the name of the whole estate and also the Hundred name. By 1086 and probably from the mid-900s the estate belonged, as part of a much larger holding, to the Abbey of Abingdon; it was farmed in hand until the dissolution in 1538.

The wild celery along with the salt spring had long lost its significance and was locally thought to have disappeared after field drainage in the 1960s. Some plants had persisted in a field named *Salt Marsh*,¹² but continuous cereal cultivation was thought to have destroyed the colony. However, the combination of the break-down of the drainage and a winter fallow caused the reappearance of a few plants in 1998. One plant was moved to the safety of the shelter of a telegraph pole, and an area was set apart to encourage seed to set and seedlings to grow. In the summer of 1999 a large number of plants flowered and set seed, and that August nearly three hundred plants were counted. The field is now undergoing organic conversion; the celery is safe from sprays and presumably will flourish once more.

Janey Cumber

III. The Etymology of Marchington, Staffordshire

The phenomenon of the wild celery at Marcham is interesting in itself and valuable as a demonstration of the trustworthiness of place-names. If a place-name says that something (archaeological, botanical, topographical, geological, even sometimes zoological) is present, it is more likely than not that the thing named will still be there.

Ann Cole's botanical study demonstrates that the plant which the Anglo-Saxons called *merece* would be noteworthy at Marcham, since central Berkshire is not an area where it can ever have been common. Janey Cumber (who is the wife of the farmer whose enlightened attitude ensures that the plant will continue to flourish) has recorded its history in modern times. I have been asked to append a note about the possible occurrence of another *merece-hamm* at Marchington in Staffordshire.

Marchington, Staffordshire, appears as *æt Marcham* in a charter of AD

¹² One hundred plants were counted in 1964 according to H. J. M. Bowen, *The Flora of Berkshire* (Oxford, 1968), p. 205.

951 (S 557),¹³ and the charter has a boundary clause which describes the modern parish. In its next surviving record, however, which occurs in the will of Wulfric Spott, dated 1002 × 1004 (S 1536), the name appears as *æt Mærchantune*, and the final element occurs in all subsequent references. The substitution of *-ing-* for *-ham-* is evidenced from the late twelfth century.

The *Mærcham* of S 557 is apparently a dithematic name with OE *h_m* or OE *hamm* as generic. Leaving aside for the moment the problems raised by the addition of *t_n*, what is the likely etymology of *Mærcham*? As regards the generic, I suggest that OE *h_m* 'village' is less likely than *hamm*, as *h_m* probably does not occur in Staffordshire except in Pattingham, which is in the south of the county. OE *hamm*, on the other hand, is certainly found as far north as Shrewsbury, possibly as far north as Frodsham in Cheshire. The situation of Marchington, overlooking the wide flood-plain of the River Dove, is appropriate for *hamm* in its 'river-meadow' sense. The spelling *æt Mærcham* is grammatically incorrect for a *hamm* name, and **æt Mærchamme* would have been better suited to my hypothesis. There are, however, among the large number of Old English spellings for *hamm* names, a few instances where *æt* is followed by an uninflected form. Inglesham, Wiltshire, for instance, is *æt Incgenæsham* in S 1485, and Farnham, Surrey, is *æt Fernham* in S 382, so the *-ham* spelling does not exclude the possibility of the Staffordshire name being a *hamm*.

If *Mærc-* is to be interpreted as the plant-name, as Ekwall suggested,¹⁴ it will be necessary to postulate either a side-form **mærece* of the well-recorded *merece* or the use of the symbol *æ* for representing the sound []. Peter Kitson advises the adoption of the second solution, pointing out that Marchington is very close to the area where there are *hæge* spellings for *hege* in charter boundaries. So the 951 form *Mærcham* could well be a doublet of Marcham in Berkshire.

The later Old English form, with *-tune*, presents a problem because there are very few parallels to the addition of a habitative term to a dithematic topographical name. The best examples I have found are Ashburton in Devon and Ashburnham in Sussex, records for which show that OE *t_n* and

¹³ S = P. H. Sawyer, *Anglo-Saxon Charters. An Annotated List and Bibliography*, Royal Society Historical Guides and Handbooks, 8 (London, 1968).

¹⁴ E. Ekwall, *The Concise Oxford Dictionary of English Place-Names*, 4th edn (Oxford, 1960), p. 314, s.nn. *Marcham*, *Marchington*.

OE *h_m* were added to earlier *Æscburna*. There are several *-ford* compounds which have *t_n* as a third element (for example, Milverton in Somerset and Warwickshire, Harvington in Worcestershire), but it is likely that these were triple compounds when coined.

Probably because the addition of *t_n* to the earlier *Mærcham* seemed unlikely, Ekwall postulated that a *-hme* compound was formed using the first part of *Mærcham*, and that the hypothetical **Mærchmat_n* meant 'settlement of the people of *Mærcham*'. This is open to objection on two grounds. First, Wulfric Spott's will has *Mærchamtune*, and this is a text in which *æ* is regularly written as such, so *-hme-* would not have been spelt *-ham-*. Secondly, formations in which *-hme-* is used to link the first part of a compound name with a new generic are not certainly evidenced further north than a Warwickshire example, Wallon Brook (*Walehemebroc* c.1250), 'brook of the people of Walton', which is east of Warwick. The formation is essentially one which occurs in charter boundaries and in minor names and field-names in the south of England, and it is not likely to be found in a major name as far north as Marchington. Attempts to explain Marchamley in Shropshire, Barthomley in Cheshire and Mortomley in the West Riding of Yorkshire as *-hme-* formations are examined and found wanting in the first part of the English Place-Name Survey for Shropshire.¹⁵

The likeliest explanation of Marchington in Staffordshire is that OE *t_n* was added to *Mærcham*, which was the same name as Marcham in Berkshire; and support is added to this by the occurrence of the plant in this part of Staffordshire.

Margaret Gelling

¹⁵ M. Gelling, *The Place-Names of Shropshire*, part 1, English Place-Name Society, 62/63 (Nottingham, 1990), 195–96.

