

‘Bullion’ in Scottish Place-Names¹

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Place-names containing the word *Bullion* are found throughout much of central and southern Scotland, in Angus, Stirlingshire, Fife, Lanarkshire, Ayrshire, Berwickshire and the Lothians, and in the north of England, in Northumberland and the West Riding of Yorkshire.² Several different theories have been put forward to date concerning the etymology of this element, but no clear definition has emerged, possibly because the names have not previously been considered together as a group. The aim of this paper is to examine a variety of possible explanations in the light of the geographical distribution of the *bullion*-names. The corpus is listed in Appendices A and B, with early spellings where available, and is shown on the distribution map at the end of this article.

Black’s *The Surnames of Scotland* includes an entry for *Bullion* or *Bullions*, in which he makes reference to four of the Scottish place-names that include this element.³ He argues that the place-names are the source of the personal names, and that these place-names are derived from Irish Gaelic *bullán*. Black explains that this word was ‘defined by Joyce as “a round spring well in a rock or rocks...[and was]...[o]ften applied to an artificial cup-like hollow in a rock which generally contains rain-water”’.⁴

¹ This article is a revised version of a paper delivered to the Scottish Place-Name Society Conference in May 1999. I am grateful to those present for many helpful comments and suggestions.

² All references are to the county boundaries preceding the local government re-organisation of the 1970s.

³ G. F. Black, *The Surnames of Scotland* (New York, 1946; repr. Edinburgh, 1996) p. 114. Black draws attention to Rev. John Hunter, *The Diocese and Presbytery of Dunkeld 1660–1689*, vol. 2 (London, 1918) p. 160:

‘Reference in the Register of Sasines for Perthshire. Mr William Aissone, minister at Ochtergaven, and James Nicoll, schoolmaster there, witnessed, November 9th, 1674, a renunciation by Andrew Bulzeons and others, in favour of Donald Robertstone of Mikle Tullibeltane, granting that the third part lands of Little Tullibeltane were lawfully redeemed. Registered November 10, 1674.’

⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 114. *Foclóir béarla agus gaedhilge, an Irish-English Dictionary* (Dublin,

This definition is attributed to Joyce's *Irish Names of Places*, (Dublin, 1869) but the word only appears once in this text, in the glossary, with no accompanying page-reference. The Old Irish word originally came from the English word 'bowl', which was borrowed into Irish Gaelic, where it became *bolla* or *bulla*.⁵ However, this proposed etymology for the *bullion*-names is not supported by the distribution of the corpus as a whole. There are no occurrences of *bullion*-names in the current Gaelic-speaking areas of Scotland, and because the distribution map also includes parts of England, where an Irish or Scots Gaelic connection is out of the question, this interpretation can be discounted.

An alternative Gaelic etymology is suggested by Johnston in his comments on Bullionfield in Angus, where he proposes that *bullion* is probably derived from Gaelic *builgean* 'blister, pimple, bubble, bell'.⁶ Once again, however, this solution can be ruled out because of the distribution pattern.

It has also been suggested that place-names in *Bullion* may derive from a Scots verb *buller* or *buler* 'to boil'. According to Macdonald, Bullion in Ecclesmachan parish takes its name from a local feature called the 'Bullion Well', probably derived from the Scots present participle *builyand* 'boiling', used to describe the manner in which the spring 'bubbles' out of the ground.⁷ He also includes an entry for Bullion in Linlithgow, and again attributes the name to a well that apparently existed on the same estate.⁸ Dixon identifies one instance of this type of name, a lost *Bullion*, near Shank, in Borthwick parish, and his account reports that the place-name has been taken from the name for a local spring, the 'Bullion Well'.⁹ Dixon agrees with Macdonald that the most likely source for the name is the Scots present participle *builyand*.

At first sight, this interpretation appears attractive. Several *bullion*-names are associated with wells or springs, while formations such as Bullion Scar and Bullion Plantation could show the use of an existing

1927), p. 140, gives the definition: *Bullán, Bulláin*, pl. id., m., 'a round hollow in a stone, a bowl'.

⁵ I am grateful to Professor Cathair Ó Dochartaigh for this explanation.

⁶ J. B. Johnston, *Place-Names of Scotland*, 3rd edn (London, 1934), p. 118.

⁷ A. Macdonald, *The Place-Names of West Lothian* (Edinburgh, 1941), p. 51.

⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 113.

⁹ N. Dixon, 'The Place-Names of Midlothian' (Unpublished doctoral dissertation, University of Edinburgh, 1947), pp. 114–15.

name which originated as the name of a well. However, there are two main objections. Firstly, it would be very unusual to find a present participle used as a place-name element. Over the last two years, I have been building a corpus of the Germanic elements so far identified in Scottish place-names, and although it includes about five hundred entries at present, none of these are present participles. Secondly, the use of *buiyand* in this group of names is made even more unlikely by the few available early spellings. Present participles ending in *-and* were still used and comprehended in the sixteenth century, but it is during this century that spellings such as *Welbulzeoun* were recorded, demonstrating that the element was not interpreted as a present participle at this time. This casts serious doubt on the likelihood that *Bullion* could represent ‘boiling’ in each construction.

Macdonald’s survey includes a separate discussion of the field-names Bullions Park and Bullions (Field), for which he argues that *buiyand* is an unworkable explanation because ‘there are no signs of springs in either field’.¹⁰ As an alternative, he suggests a connection with an English dialectal term *bullyon*, defined in the supplement to Wright’s *English Dialect Dictionary* as ‘a quagmire, bog; dangerous ground’.¹¹ However, there is little evidence for the existence of this word. Wright’s account does not include any examples of the usage of *bullyon*, and the word was omitted from the main dictionary because its authority was deemed unsatisfactory.

Bullions, Lanarkshire appears on the 1860s 1” OS map as *Ballians*, raising the possibility of a connection with the word *ballion* which occurs in Jamieson’s *Etymological Dictionary of the Scottish Language*. This word is defined as ‘the designation given to a reaper who is not attached to one particular band or ridge, but gives assistance to any party which is falling behind in work’.¹² Jamieson states that this term is ‘common in Linlithgow’, and because four occurrences of the place-name are found in this district, it deserves consideration. The first problem to be overcome is lack of support for this word in other Scottish dialect materials. Jamieson does not provide any evidence to corroborate his findings, and I have been unable to trace an independent reference to this word in any other source.

¹⁰ Macdonald, *The Place-Names of West Lothian*, p. 143.

¹¹ J. Wright, *The English Dialect Dictionary*, 6 vols (London, 1898–1905), VI, Supplement 51.

¹² J. Jamieson, *An Etymological Dictionary of the Scottish Language*, vol. 1 (Paisley, 1879), 110.

There is only one known occurrence of this spelling for one of the Scottish *bullion*-names, and therefore it seems more likely to be a scribal error than an etymological clue. A further difficulty is that ten of the names which include the element *bullion* occur as simplex names, and it would be very unusual to find an occupational term used in this way. My corpus of Scottish place-name elements includes many examples of occupational terms such as ‘baxter’ and ‘smith’, but they are always followed by a generic such as ‘croft’ or ‘land’. There is therefore no plausible link between Jamieson’s *ballion* and the place-name element *bullion*.

When trying to interpret the meaning of an element occurring several times in different parts of the country, it is often useful to examine any topographical correspondences. One of the definitions given for *bullion* in the *Oxford English Dictionary* is ‘a knob or boss of metal; a convex ornament’, first recorded in 1463 as *bolyon*,¹³ and it is possible that this word could have been used in place-names to describe something that resembled this shape. Many elements have been used in this way: for example Old English *_wel* ‘fork, hook’ can denote forked or hooked geographical features, and *ball* can represent ‘a rounded hill’ in present-day dialects of Devon and Somerset.¹⁴ If a *bullion* could also be a type of hill, this might account for the occurrence of simplex names on high ground, as well as for names such as Bullion Scar in Ayrshire. However, it would leave unexplained the number of wells and springs which appear to be associated with the element, while constructions like Bulliondale in Stirlingshire would still remain problematic.

It has not always been possible to trace early spellings for the names that contain the element *bullion*, and so evidence from other sources may provide a key to understanding their semantic implications. In her work on the Helsinki Corpus of Older Scots, Meurman-Solin includes the spellings *bulyeoun* and *bulzeon* amongst a set of examples of Scottish *l* and *n* mouillés.¹⁵ However, these spellings represent variants of *bullion* ‘gold or silver’ and do not provide a solution to the questions raised by the *Bullion*

¹³ *Oxford English Dictionary*, edited by J. A. Simpson and E. S. C. Weiner, 2nd edn (Oxford, 1989), s.v. *bullion*³, sense 1.

¹⁴ *The Vocabulary of English Place-Names (Á-Box)*, edited by D. Parsons and T. Styles with C. Hough (Nottingham, 1997), pp. 24 and 43–44.

¹⁵ A. Meurman-Solin, *Variation and Change in Early Scottish Prose* (Helsinki, 1993), p. 133.

place-names.

It is of course possible that not all the *bullion*-names derive from the same source. Watson's *Northumberland Place-Names* makes brief mention of an unlocated *Bullions*, with the comment, 'it is probable that Bullions denotes Bullock Pastures'.¹⁶ Unfortunately, evidence concerning early spellings is not provided, nor is any explanation for this suggestion.¹⁷ Nevertheless, it may be relevant that one of the spellings for Bulliondale, Stirlingshire is *bulan dall*, recorded in 1595 in the Falkirk Parish Records. If this spelling is reliable, it could represent an original Old English **bulan*, the genitive singular of **bula* 'bull'. The early forms of the name suggest that the second element may be Scots *dale* 'share, portion, piece of land' and the place-name could therefore be interpreted as 'bull's piece of land'. In view of the phonological difficulties involved, however, together with the incidence of simplex names noted above, such an etymology could not be taken to apply in a majority of instances.

Finally, I should like to return to an interpretation first proposed by MacKinlay in 1893 but which has since received little attention from place-name scholars. The *Concise Scots Dictionary* includes an entry for *Martin Bullion's Day*, 'the day of the Feast of the Translation of St. Martin [of Tours]'.¹⁸ The Bullion Well in Ecclesmachan, West Lothian is mentioned in MacKinlay's *Folklore of Scottish Lochs and Springs* where he describes the emergence of the mineral spring from the rocks of Tor Hill. He records that the water is 'slightly impregnated with sulphuretted hydrogen [and] in former times it was much resorted to by health-seekers, but it is now neglected',¹⁹ and he makes a connection between the saint's name and this spring, and also with Bullionfield in Fife.

The association of religious or superstitious beliefs with the hydronymic corpus has a long history. There are many legends based on the healing properties of water, both in Christian and pagan contexts, and the dedication

¹⁶ G. Watson, *Northumberland Place-Names. Goodwife Hot and Others* (Stocksfield, 1970), p. 112.

¹⁷ The English Place-Name Survey has not yet covered Northumberland, and *Bullions* is not included in A. Mawer, *The Place-Names of Northumberland and Durham* (Cambridge, 1920).

¹⁸ *The Concise Scots Dictionary*, edited by M. Robinson (repr. Aberdeen, 1991), pp. 71 and 402.

¹⁹ J. M. MacKinlay, *Folklore of Scottish Lochs and Springs* (Glasgow, 1893), p. 49.

of springs to saints including Bridget and Ninian can be found all over the British Isles.²⁰ Throughout Scotland, there are instances of dedications to St. Martin of Tours, and the restorative properties of water play a role in the local tales associated with these sites. It has been recorded that in ‘Strathnaver in Sutherland...is a holy well known in Gaelic as Tobair Claish Mhartain...supposed to possess healing qualities.’²¹ In Angus, the ‘church of Logie-Montrose...owed allegiance to St. Martin, whose name is still preserved in St. Martin’s Well, and in a neighbouring hollow known as St. Martin’s den.’²² Further dedications to the saint have been identified on Iona and Skye, and in Argyllshire, Perthshire, Kincardineshire, Fife, Berwickshire and Dumfriesshire.²³ It would not be implausible, therefore, to discover another stratum of evidence connected with St. Martin in Scotland, when it is clear that his influence can be traced throughout the country.

The feast of the translation of St. Martin’s relics took place on ‘4th July [old style]’ and ‘15th July [new style], St. Swithin’s Day’ and good weather around the time of his feast in July was referred to as ‘St. Martin’s Summer’.²⁴ This summer feast seems to be responsible for the epithets associated with the saint; in France it was called ‘*S. Martin d’été* or *le bouillant* (boiling, *i.e.* in the hot season or *chaud*, Lat. *Martinus bulliens* or *calidus*), as opposed to his winter feast on Nov. 11 (Martinmas) (Lat. *Martinus hiemalis*)’.²⁵ In Selkirkshire and Aberdeenshire, fairs were held in the name of St. Martin Bullion, and events such as these suggest that some

²⁰ A variety of publications have dealt with aspects of this subject. See for example M. Gelling, *Place-Names in the Landscape* (London, 1984), pp. 31–32; J. Scherr, ‘Names of Springs and Wells in Somerset’, *Nomina*, 10 (1986), 79–91.

²¹ J. M. Mackinlay, *Ancient Church Dedications in Scotland—Non-Scriptural Dedications* (Edinburgh, 1914), p. 312. ‘Tobair Claish Mhartain’ is translated as ‘the well of Martin in the Dell’.

²² *Ibid.*, p. 313.

²³ *Ibid.*, pp. 311 and 313–16.

²⁴ D. H. Farmer, *The Oxford Dictionary of Saints*, 4th edn (Oxford, 1997), p. 334.

²⁵ *The Scottish National Dictionary*, vol. 6, edited by W. Grant and D. Murison (Edinburgh, 1965), 213. This explanation of Martin Bullion is not universally accepted. I am grateful to John Field for alerting me to the entry in J. Hall, *Dictionary of Subjects and Symbols in Art* (London, 1974), pp. 201–22, which describes ‘a ball of fire, the symbol of [St. Martin's] burning charity’. The epithet *bullion* may therefore reflect the saint's virtue rather than the summer heat.

link may exist between local traditional culture and the distribution pattern of these names.²⁶

It has not been possible in this brief survey to establish a definitive etymology for the *bullion*-names of Scotland and northern England. A variety of different etymologies may have been involved, and the present list of names may not be exhaustive. However, a number of previous suggestions have been ruled out, and this in itself takes us further towards an understanding of this group of names.

²⁶ R. Black, Paper on *Scottish Fair Names*, given at the Annual Conference for the Society for Name Studies in Britain and Ireland, Glasgow 4–7 April 1997.

APPENDIX A:

OCCURRENCES OF 'BULLION' IN SCOTTISH PLACE-NAMES²⁷**Ayrshire**

1. Bullion Scar NS662177

Lanarkshire

2. Bullions NS853448

The name is spelled *Ballians* on the 1860s 1st OS map series.

3. *Bullionhall* nr. E. Kilbride (East Kilbride: NS630540)²⁸

4. *Bullionslaw* NS630609

The name is recorded on the 1860s 1st OS map series, and may be related to the previous entry.

Stirlingshire

5. Bullions NS836842

lie Welbulzeoun 1588 RMS v 1567

Wellbulzeon 1609 RMS vii 58

Velbulzeon 1624 RMS viii 636

lands of Kingsydemuir viz, *Welbulzeon* 1682 Retour

Bullions in Torwood 1722 Dunipace Parish Records; 1755 Roy

The early spellings exhibit the element order usually associated with Celtic languages, where the generic precedes the specific.

²⁷ For early spellings cited in the Appendices, Cess = *Cess Book for the County of Linlithgow* (1696); Mait. Cl. 34 = *Reports on the State of Certain Parishes in Scotland*, Maitland Club pub. 34 (1835); RMS = *Registrum magni sigilli regum Scotorum, 1306–1668*, 11 vols (1814–1914); Roy = General William Roy, MS maps of Stirlingshire (1755); SRS 57 = Scottish Record Society pub. 57, also known as *Protocol Books of James Foulis, 1546–1553, and Nicol Thounis, 1559–1564* (1927).

²⁸ As yet, I have been unable to trace any independent record of this place-name. The information I have was supplied by John Reid (see note 31 below).

6. Bullions NS824785

Bullions 1755 Roy*Bullions* 1780 Charles Ross' map of Stirlingshire

7. Bulliondale NS907720, Bulliondale Farm

bulan dall 1595 Falkirk Parish Records*Bulliendail* 1647 Falkirk and Callendar Regality Court Book i, 72*Bullindail* 1649 Falkirk and Callendar Regality Court Book i, 92v*Bulwndeall* 1677 Commissariat Records of Stirling*Bulziandale* 1682 Slamannan Parish Records*Bulliondale* 1683 Falkirk and Callendar Regality Court Book ii, 39v; 1684 ii, 82v*Bullingdale* 1718 Commissariat Records of Stirling*Bulliondale* 1718 Callendar Rent Book*Bullandale* 1755 Roy*Bulliondale* 1789 Sasine, 1817 Map of Stirlingshire surveyed by J. Grassom

8. Bullions NS867876

Angus

9. Bullionfield NO347307

Bulyeoun 1509²⁹**Fife**

10. Bullions NT036849, Bullions Farm Cott NT036851

West Lothian

11. Bullion NT008772

Bulzion 1696 Cess

12. Bullion (Well) NT062738

Bulzeon 1563 SRS 57*Bulyeoun* 1563 SRS 57

According to Macdonald, Bullion in Ecclesmachan takes its name from the Bullion Well.³⁰ I have co-ordinates for the well, but not for Bullion itself.

²⁹ Cited from Johnston, *Place-Names of Scotland*, p. 118 (no source given).

³⁰ Macdonald, *The Place-Names of West Lothian*, p. 51.

This name may also be related to a *Bullyiondaill* which is recorded in *The Binns Papers* in an entry for 1690: `Tack for 19 years granted by James Monteith of Auldcaithie in favour of William Gairdner of these parts of the lands of Auldcaithie:—Broken Cross, Halbrands and part of Bullyiondaill, lying in the parish of Dalmenie and sherrifdom of Linlithgow.³¹

Auldcaithie WLO NT078761 is approximately eleven miles NW of Bullion Well.

13. Bullions Park nr. Newbigging NT128772

14. Bullions (Field) nr. Wester Dalmeny NT142775³²

15. *Bullion Well*, Queensferry NT120778

This lost name is mentioned by Mason, and is likely to be the source of the street-name Builyeon Road in South Queensferry, Edinburgh.³³

Midlothian

16. *Bullion* nr. Shank (Shank: NT334612)

³¹ *The Binns Papers 1320-1864*, edited by J. Dalryell of Binns and J. Beveridge (Scottish Record Society, 1938), p. 85. I am grateful to John Reid for supplying this reference, and for alerting me to the existence of several of the Scottish names listed above, for which he was kind enough to provide some early spellings: *Bullionhall* nr. E. Kilbride, Lanarkshire; Bullions, Stirlingshire NS836842; Bullions, Stirlingshire NS824785; Bulliondale, Stirlingshire NS907720.

³² I have been unable to trace the exact location of Bullions Park, Newbigging, West Lothian and Bullions (Field), Wester Dalmeny, West Lothian as they do not appear to have been included in any OS maps. They are, however, discussed by Macdonald in *The Place-Names of West Lothian*, p. 143, in a section which deals with field names and minor names. The OS references that I have given apply to Newbigging and Wester Dalmeny respectively.

³³ Mason, *History of Queensferry* (unpublished typescript, 1963), p. 460. I owe this reference to Dr May G. Williamson. Builyeon Road is also discussed by S. Harris, *The Place Names of Edinburgh. Their Origins and History* (Edinburgh, 1996), p. 131, who notes: `The spelling *builyeon* was chosen out of many variants as the one which most nearly suggested the local pronunciation of the traditional name “billion road”.’

Bulzeon 1609 RMS
Bulyeoun 1627 Mait. Cl. 34³⁴

Berwickshire

17. Bullion Plantation NT534490

APPENDIX B:

OCCURRENCES OF 'BULLION' IN ENGLISH PLACE-NAMES

West Riding of Yorkshire³⁵

1. Bullion (Blackshaw)
2. Bullion (Wadsworth)
3. Bullions (Oakworth) 1858 OS

Northumberland

4. Bullion Rigg NY739834
5. Bullion Well NY769876³⁶

³⁴ Dixon, 'The Place-Names of Midlothian', pp. 114–15.

³⁵ I do not have co-ordinates for these three names, which are taken from A. H. Smith, *The Place-Names of the West Riding of Yorkshire*, 8 vols, English Place Name Society, 30–37 (Cambridge, 1961–63), III, 197 and 203 and V, 8 respectively.

³⁶ I am grateful to Dr Simon Taylor for some very helpful comments on an earlier version of this paper.

