

## Kilkhampton, Cornwall

*Andrew Breeze*

University of Navarre, Pamplona

Kilkhampton is a village (SS 2511) and parish in the far north of Cornwall. West of it lies the sea; north, the parish of Morwenstow; east, the headwaters of the Tamar, forming the border with Devon; south, the parishes of Launcells, and Stratton and Bude. Kilkhampton figures as *Chilchetone* in Domesday Book, *Kilcton* in a document of about 1175 (in a thirteenth-century copy), and *Kilkamton* in 1194. The last element is Old English *t\_n* 'farm, estate', to which *-ham-* was later added on the analogy of other places in *-hampton*'. But the first element is more interesting, as it is thought to be the Cornish equivalent (known from the lost place-name *Kylkethewe* in Liskeard parish) of Welsh *cylch* and Breton *kelc'h* 'circle, ring', from Latin *circ'lus* 'circle'. Why there should be an equivalent of *cylch* here has been unclear (though it has been taken as perhaps referring to an archaeological feature, otherwise unknown).<sup>1</sup> It was suggested by Finberg that Kilkhampton might also be the estate of *Kelk* granted by King Egbert of Wessex (d. 839) to the bishop of Sherborne.<sup>2</sup> Since Egbert conquered Cornwall in 838, he was in a position to give away lands freely.<sup>3</sup>

It is true that Welsh *cylch* is used of archaeological features. The Welsh *Brut*, translating Geoffrey of Monmouth's *Historia Regum Britanniae*, uses it of Stonehenge itself.<sup>4</sup> Many archaeological features have disappeared

---

<sup>1</sup> O. J. Padel, *Cornish Place-Name Elements*, English Place-Name Society, 56/57 (Nottingham, 1985), p. 59; O. J. Padel, *A Popular Dictionary of Cornish Place-Names* (Penzance, 1988), p. 103; A. D. Mills, *A Dictionary of English Place-Names* (Oxford, 1991), p. 195.

<sup>2</sup> H. P. R. Finberg, *The Early Charters of Devon and Cornwall* (Leicester, 1953), p. 16 (no. 74); H. P. R. Finberg, 'Sherborne, Glastonbury, and the expansion of Wessex', *Transactions of the Royal Historical Society*, 5th series, 3 (1953), 101–24 (p. 112).

<sup>3</sup> K. H. Jackson, *Language and History in Early Britain* (Edinburgh, 1953), p. 206.

<sup>4</sup> A. C. Breeze, 'Merlin, Stonehenge, and the Hill of Uisneach, Ireland', in *La amon. Contexts, Language and Interpretation*, edited by R. Allen, L. Perry and

without trace except for the place-names which referred to them; however, if such a feature had existed at Kilkhampton, we might expect other evidence for it, and there is none. This note argues, therefore, that the original name had a different meaning, suggested by the obsolete Welsh noun *cylchwy*.

*Cylchwy* derives from Welsh *cylch* and share its meanings 'circuit, orbit; compass'. Yet it also developed the senses (not possessed by *cylch*) 'shield' and (in poetry) 'region, border, boundary, edge'.<sup>5</sup> It is the last that concerns us here. This meaning developed at an early date, since it figures in an archaic North British text associated with the sixth- or seventh-century *Gododdin*, praising 'Cynfelyn who guarded the borderland (*kylchwy wylat*), a sagacious man of war, Gwynedd was his land'.<sup>6</sup> An elegy (of the tenth century?) on Cadwallon (d. 634) speaks of his camp by the Wye and *diliuat kat kylchwy* 'preparation for battle on the frontier'—the Wye being Wales's border with England.<sup>7</sup> In the fourteenth century, the bard Gruffudd ap Maredudd declares 'bright the fate of a tongue by Teifi's boundary (*teiuu gylchwy*)' in a praise-poem to Gronwy Fychan (d. 1382) of Anglesey.<sup>8</sup> The river Teifi still divides Ceredigion from the rest of Dyfed.

How does this concern Kilkhampton? Since *cylchwy*, originally meaning 'circuit, compass', developed a poetic sense 'border, boundary' early on, the Cornish cognate of *cylch*, the parent-word to *cylchwy*, may also have gained the same sense of 'border' (even though there is no record that Welsh *cylch* itself ever had that meaning). If so, this would make sense at Kilkhampton, by an ancient and modern border. But when that was needs careful definition. The area around Kilkhampton belongs, onomastically, with north-west Devon rather than the rest of Cornwall, and so must have been settled by English incomers in much the same way, and

---

J. Roberts, King's College London Medieval Series, 19 (London, 2002), pp. 96–100.

<sup>5</sup> *Geiriadur Prifysgol Cymru / A Dictionary of the Welsh Language*, edited by R. Thomas *et al.* (Cardiff, 1950–), p. 750.

<sup>6</sup> *Canu Aneirin*, edited by I. Williams (Cardiff, 1938), p. 54; K. H. Jackson, *The Gododdin. The Oldest Scottish Poem* (Edinburgh, 1969), p. 156.

<sup>7</sup> Cf. *Early Welsh Saga Poetry*, edited by J. Rowland (Cambridge, 1990), pp. 446 and 495.

<sup>8</sup> *Geiriadur Prifysgol Cymru*, p. 750.

at about the same time, as western Devon, that is in about the eighth century.<sup>9</sup> Therefore the 'boundary', if the name refers to one, must have existed before the time of the English settlement. The River Tamar may therefore have been a landmark separating Cornwall from the rest of the independent Celtic kingdom of Dumnonia. (The later and present boundary of Devon and Cornwall effectively dates from 924 × 939, when, according to William of Malmesbury, Athelstan set it on the Tamar. But this is too late to be relevant to Kilkhampton, if by 839 it was the episcopal estate of *Kelk*.)

Kilkhampton's situation certainly suggests border significance. It lay on what is now the modern trunk road (A 39) from Bideford to Wadebridge, which is the only major road entering Cornwall without crossing the Tamar. Kilkhampton is situated three miles south of the one point, at Woolley Barrows (SS 2616), where one can enter Cornwall without crossing water. Even now, as noted, the eastern boundary of Kilkhampton parish marches with the county boundary on the river Tamar.

If this toponym refers to a border, it has parallels elsewhere in Britain. Instances include March, Cambridgeshire (Old English *mearc* 'boundary'); Sheffield in Yorkshire, from the river Sheaf (Old English *sc\_ath* 'boundary'), which still divides Yorkshire from Derbyshire; Tarvin, near Chester, once the name of the river Gowy (cf. Welsh *terfyn* 'boundary'); and Creetown in Galloway, on the river Cree (Gaelic *crìch* 'boundary'), separating Wigtownshire from the Stewartry of Kirkcudbright.<sup>10</sup>

If the reasoning here is correct, it has two implications. First, Cornish archaeologists need no longer seek remains of a henge or other circular feature at Kilkhampton. Second, the name of Kilkhampton may be early, predating the eighth century when the Kilkhampton area was occupied by the English, and perhaps representing an ancient division between Celtic Devon and Cornwall.

It seems, then, that Kilkhampton has a name deriving from Primitive

---

<sup>9</sup> O. J. Padel, 'Place-names', in *Historical Atlas of South-West England*, edited by R. Kain and W. Ravenhill (Exeter, 1999), pp. 88–94, especially pp. 91–93.

<sup>10</sup> W. J. Watson, *The History of the Celtic Place-Names of Scotland* (Edinburgh, 1926), p. 182; N. J. Higham, *The Origins of Cheshire* (Manchester, 1983), pp. 43–44; Mills, *A Dictionary of English Place-Names*, pp. 222, 292 and 321; R. Coates and A. Breeze, *Celtic Voices, English Places. Studies of the Celtic Impact on Place-Names in England* (Stamford, 2000), p. 280.

Cornish *\*kelk*; that this here meant not 'circle, ring' (referring to an archaeological site) but 'border, boundary'; and that it hence provides evidence for early Cornish political history.