

Decoding London Place Names

by Russ Willey

The stereotypical London place name is a compound (or more often a corruption of a compound) of a personal name and a geographical descriptor - something like the Old or Middle English equivalent of Fred's Hollow or Bill's Nook - but the many exceptions to this model provide a unique insight into the city's evolution, reflecting all aspects of its historical environment, local produce, flora and fauna, traditional industries and occupations, and much more besides.

Notwithstanding the significance of the Thames and its tributaries to London's development, and the urbanising influence of the Romans and Normans, most of the communities that have coalesced into the metropolis grew out of medieval farms. These establishments - combined with their topographical characteristics and the names of their owners - are by far the leading contributors to the place names of London.

The commonest suffix in compound London place names is 'ham' (the origin of the word 'home'), which used to mean a collection of dwellings - often a farm - as in Ickenham, Lewisham and Rainham. However, the matter is complicated by the parallel existence of the Old English word 'ham' - a place hemmed in by marshland or water, often beside a bend in a river. This latter word contributed to the names of Twickenham, East and West Ham and probably several others beside the twisting Thames, such as Fulham, Ham and neighbouring Petersham.

The second most common suffix comes from the Old English word 'tūn' (from which the word 'town' derives), which signified a farmstead, estate or manor. Most districts in London with names ending in 'ton' began as agricultural smallholdings, from Acton to Whitton. However, Islington's last syllable derives from 'dūn', which meant 'hill' in Middle English (and is the origin of the word 'down' with that sense). Hendon, Hillingdon, Willesden, Wimbledon and

many others all gained the latter part of their names from their hilltop locations.

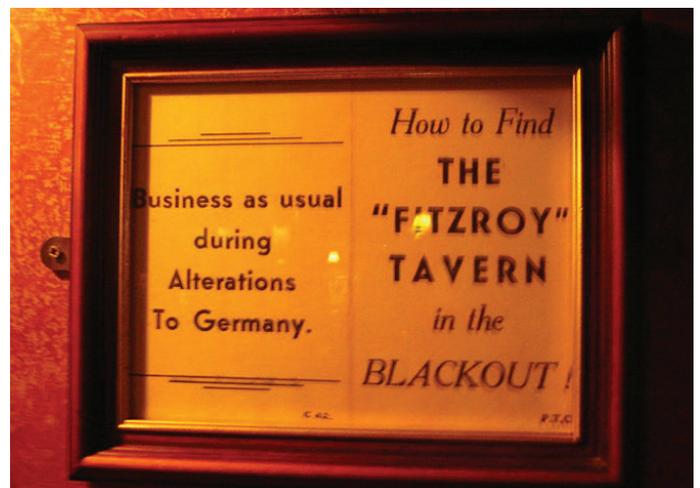
The first element of London place names very often derives from a personal name, usually a former landowner. To take some of the places already mentioned, Hillingdon was probably 'the hill of a man called Hilda', Wimbledon belonged to Wynnman or Wymbald, and Lewisham was 'the homestead of a man called Lēof or Lēofsa'.

Not all the individuals who gave their names to London places were unrecorded squires and farmers who died more than a thousand years ago. In 1806 Major-General Sir John Stuart led British troops to victory over a larger French force on the plain of Maida in southern Italy. A pub called the Hero of Maida celebrated his achievement and soon lent its name to the adjacent localities of Maida Hill and Maida Vale. More prosaically, Simon Adams Beck was the governor of the Gas, Light and Coke Company, which in 1870 established its London base in what is now Beckton.

Several London place names were invented as some kind of joke, or at least a piece of whimsy. Barons Court was so named simply because it lies next door to Earls Court. While the latter had genuine earls as landowners (of Oxford, Warwick and Holland), there is scant evidence of baronial heritage in Barons Court. Names like World's End (there's one in Enfield as well as Chelsea) and Botany Bay (also in Enfield) were playful allusions to their once remote or isolated locations. Londoners have always given lighthearted nicknames to notable buildings and 'Piccadilly Hall' was so called because it was the home of a tailor who had got rich selling a kind of starched collar called a piccadill. Mount Pleasant was probably an ironic nickname for a gradient used as the local rubbish dump. The artists and writers who used to gather for a drink (or several) at the Fitzroy Tavern came up with the spoof name Fitzrovia for the surrounding area, and were probably astonished when it actually caught on.



Barons Court: whimsical.



Fitzrovia. Jokey name that stuck.

Decoding London Place Names (cont.)

Many place names have altered over time through the process known as ‘folk etymology’ - whereby unfamiliar words or syllables (often personal names or Old English words) have been replaced by like-sounding familiar words or syllables. Such changes can often set traps for the unwary, who might make false assumptions about a place’s history. In the City of London, Cornhill, Bread Street, Milk Street and Wood Street almost certainly were locations for the sale of those commodities. But Enfield’s Turkey Street was more likely to have been the home of a man called something like Tuckey, while a man called Lēofrūn gave his name to Leather Lane. Chadwell Heath takes its name from the Middle English ‘chald’ (cold) and has no link with St Chad, although he has subsequently been associated with that suburb. Cambridge Heath probably derives from a Saxon called Centbeorht, whose name might have easily been corrupted to Canterbury as Cambridge. Whipps Cross seems originally to have originally been Phippe’s Cross, from the name of a former resident, so the story that persons caught stealing sheep or deer from nearby parts of Epping Forest were formerly whipped all the way from here to Walthamstow is very likely to have been a later invention. Perhaps the most disappointing revelation is that seven royal huntsmen never actually met in a forest clearing while their horses paused to drink from a stream in what is now Seven Kings. The name is presumed to derive from Seofecingas, the settlement of Seofeca’s people.

Several London place names were changed by prudish Victorians, notably a handful that were previously suffixed ‘Bottom.’ ‘Vale’ was the most popular replacement. In Hampstead, Hatches Bottom was completely reinvented by property developers as the Vale of Health, in an effort to dispel memories of what had once been a malarial



Prick End, now known as Chislehurst West

swamp. Pratts Bottom survives, down on the south-east edge of Bromley, but elsewhere in that borough Prick End was renamed Chislehurst West.

If this short piece has whetted your appetite, you can explore much further in *A Dictionary of London Place Names* by A.D. Mills (Oxford University Press, second edition, 2010). The main body of the dictionary gives the origin of almost every place name and many notable street names in Greater London, with chronologies of their evolving forms, and there’s a 40-page introduction that constitutes a definitive treatise on the subject.

About Russ Willey

Russ Willey is the author of The London Gazetteer and Brewer’s Dictionary of London Phrase and Fable. He also runs the web site Hidden London - www.hidden-london.com.

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