

HERITAGE CIRCLE

Geoffrey Robinson, Place Names of High Suffolk

Geoffrey Robinson gave a fascinating talk to the October meeting of the Heritage Circle at Rickinghall Village Hall about place names in High Suffolk. He provided a concise summary of a subject that he described as 'wide ranging and complicated.'

He explained that there has been a slight Roman influence on place names in this area. For example, Colchester derives its name from the Latin words 'colonia' and 'castra' which meant the colony fortress, although it was known as Camulodunum during the Roman occupation. However, many place names in Suffolk come from the Angles, Saxons and Jutes who settled in this area from the sixth century AD. It is possible to identify the origin of names by analysing their component parts. Of the 500 parishes in Suffolk, 101 end in the suffix 'ham' which meant homestead or village. Examples include Syleham and Debenham. Leiston and Middleton are among the 100 parishes that have the suffix of 'ton' which was a farmstead. 'Field' implies land cleared of woodland. There are 34 villages with this suffix in the county, such as Laxfield and Bedfield. 'Ford,' as in Yoxford or Marlesford, would have been at river crossings whereas 'worth' indicates an enclosure. Finally, the suffix 'hall' tends to mean hollow or bend in a river.

Anglo-Saxon suffixes were often combined with other words which may suggest the origins of a community. It is common to find 'ing' as part of a place name. It meant 'people or followers of.' Consequently, Rickinghall may have been the hollow settled by the followers of Rika. Similarly, Fressingfield may have been the open land of the followers of Frisa.

A major source for place names is the Domesday Book of 1086 which was a survey of all of the towns and villages of England conducted by the Normans. This combined with the Anglo-Saxon Chronicle and town charters shows how place names have evolved over time. At about 1000AD Rickinghall was spelt as 'Rikinghale' but it was Rikingahala by 1086. Fressingfield was recorded Fessefelda in 1086 but had become Frisingefeld in 1185.

The origins of some place names are less obvious. For example, Lound is derived from an Old Norse word, 'lundr,' meaning wood. Snape comes from an Old Scandinavian word 'snap' which meant poor or boggy ground. In addition, some place names are easily misinterpreted as its spelling has changed over time. Woolpit was written as 'Wifpita' in 1086 which was a pit for trapping wolves. Similarly, Herringfleet has nothing to do with fishing because in 1086 it was 'Helingaflet' which meant the creek or stream of Herela's people.

A variety of further factors has influenced the names of places. 'Plough' or 'meadow' suggest how land was used in the past either as arable or pastoral fields. A 'pightle' was a small field. 'Close' indicates a fenced or hedged area. A 'drift' was where cattle were driven from a farm.

Geoffrey Robinson concluded his presentation with a plea to try to link the place names of future developments locally to their history. For example, a development in Worlingworth has been called Jessop's Close after an 18th century tower captain of the bell ringers who lived by the new houses.

The next meeting of the Heritage Circle will be at 7.30pm on Wednesday 23 November at The Village Hall, Rickinghall. Pip Wright will be talking about the Whistlecraft family of Rickinghall. Further information about the Heritage Circle is available on its website, www.heritagecircle.onesuffolk.net.

Gerry Gurhy