Roundtable 16: Using historical place-names to inform modern street naming

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Historical place-names typically arose as descriptive labels created in everyday speech. As such, they are a rich source of local language and earlier perceptions of the landscape. They shed light on the distinctive character of a place and its people. The Institute for Name-Studies at the University of Nottingham is currently carrying out a pilot project with GeoPlace LLP and various local authorities across the country. The project explores the ways in which historical place-names can be used today in modern street naming. This round table session will discuss the benefits and challenges of using this evidence, as well as how to go about it.

Prompt Q1: Looking at the list of dialect words provided (all of which occur in place-names evidenced in the pilot project areas), how many do you recognise? Can you guess the counties where names using these dialect words appear frequently or distinctively?

Session 1: Picked out some words that were national dialect rather than very local and regional. Some words are only dialect because they have dropped out of standard English, because we no longer use the land in the same way, farm or live closely to the land in the same way.

Recognised some words from poetry and literature.

Recognised some words that have become typical local surnames.

Not aware of The English Dialect Dictionary, available free online, for dialect spellings, words, variations and meanings.

Session 2: Picked up on northern and southern dialect words. Able to recognise when someone was working mainly in Northumbria or in Hampshire and along the south coast.

Able to recognise when a SNNO was working in a rural area. Densely urbanised areas not recognising as many of the dialect words (which were drawn from formerly rural – now suburban – areas).

Session 3: Recognised words like beck still being used in everyday language.

Words like beck in place-names are often memories of streams now gone, moved/diverted or culverted/canalised.

Session 4: Strongly urban representation (Tower Hamlets, Runnymede, Reigate – but also North Warwickshire market town). Not recognising many of the dialect words but discussed how there would be a different set of distinctive dialect words in historical names in their areas, and how new layers of names would have taken over from earlier layers.

Discussed how many industries were represented in these areas, such as spice industries, fabric production, hatting industries (Panama Drive) etc.

Prompt Q2: What challenges and benefits do you think there are in using historical place-name evidence?

Session 1: Having to rely on developers and local people who think only one theme can apply to an area e.g. airfield names. The airfield only arrived in the 1940s and was not very successful. Helpful to have a wider and longer sense of the history of the area.

Do not like developers suggesting aspirational themes which are nothing to do with the history of an area.

Would like to use a glossary of historical quarry terms when developing an old quarry site.

Discussed how to treat place-names that refer to water or have possible negative connotations e.g. Marsh (Bristol). Agreed that the watery nature of an area can be included in place-names; it reminds people of the local landscape, without it needing to sound like flooding will necessarily be imminent!

Representative of the Land Registry dealing with Land Charges said that it causes problems for the Registry when developers use street names with ahistorical, aspirational themes. The land parcels have historical names which are usually the ones used in the land charges. Matching between the two then becomes problematic.

Session 2: Important to check for unfortunate connotations and shifting meaning in words. Discussed how a dialect dictionary can help with that, or resources like the Oxford English Dictionary.

Unusual spellings cause problems with spell check and autocorrect.

However, sometimes the issue is more that there is insufficient difference between historical spellings and modern forms such that they can be confused (e.g. using a <y> rather than an <i> in the spelling). Discussed the Buckinghamshire example of Saunderton and Santesdune Way. This is the same place-name but the historical Domesday Book 1086 spelling is being used alongside the modern name to form two

different place-names. Agreed that this was possible and would be a good way of keeping the history of the area alive.

In Wales, there has been great success in introducing historical place-names and spellings into modern place-names (Cadw representative).

SNNOs would like to avoid personal names if at all possible. Suggestions from local groups tend to focus on personal names, even historical personal names.

'Anything but trees'.... Tree-names are a real problem and boring because they are so overused.

It is common for an area to become associated with one thing, e.g. steel in Sheffield, and then all the street names reflect that. The advantage of the INS pilot project is that it helps to identify other layers of history and other themes for street names that are relevant to the area.

Session 3: Very important that emergency services can use any spelling of the name. sic/sik/sich would never be used because of confusion in a health emergency. Agreed that there are many extant historical names with that problem, but do not want to add more. However, also agreed that there is a large amount of historical material that can be used without this confusion or difficulty. Hence, modern policy constraints can be satisfied whilst also using historical material.

Historical material is vital for preserving the history of a place and anchoring development into the local area. Local buy-in is much higher if historical material is used.

Issues around different languages in place-names e.g. Scottish names in Yorkshire. But agreed this is common throughout the country historically and speaks of the history of the country. There are ways to make names from a mixture of languages in an area usable.

House names have become a tricky topic. Home owners want more volition to chose their own house name. Parish councils increasingly want more control of house names. Historically, house/property names have always been determined with more input from the property owner, whereas street names arise organically reflecting the local area and are more democratic in character.

Session 4: Primary constraint is London Fire Brigade who will insist on certain names or block other names.

Relied on developers for names. Not able to check the accuracy of any historical suggestions, other than through a quick Google check or local knowledge.

Some names are used depending on the date of construction e.g. to commemorate a particular anniversary of D-Day which was also when the estate was built. However, these names need a board to explain their relevance. Without that context, they cease to make sense.

VC-recipients are popular.

Trees are always suggested and they are duplicated regularly. Developers and members of the public do not realise how common many of these tree suggestions are. They are not always being suggested in formerly wooded areas (although some are – e.g. Forest of Arden).

Talked about how dialect words for trees could be used to introduce variety e.g. Withy or Widdy.

Prompt Q3: What would help you to incorporate more historical place-name evidence into modern street naming?

Session 1: Would really like to build up a bank of historical place-names that could be used. Do have a list of historical figures (Watford).

Would really like training and resource lists, plus access to help and guidance.

Session 2: Try to find a local history society and use National Library of Scotland Mapping online to find historical names.

Problem is time and knowing where to look for more information.

Parish councils and local history societies can be helpful, but can be particularly focussed on specific names they want to see used, and these may not be appropriate or possible.

Need to know that the information they are using is reliable and accurate.

Need help because often it is the same areas that have all the development so names for those areas become exhausted very quickly. Agreed that the INS pilot project reports opened up far more possibilities for names when it looked like names were exhausted.

Session 3: Use Landmark directly rather than the NLS.

Would like a bank of names and ideas to draw from for future development. Would also like a pool of names to be able to offer a parish council where the names favoured by the council cannot be accepted.

Problem is time and how to get such a resource.

Discussed how this is what the INS pilot project is providing.

Session 4: Try to ask developers to give names with historical context, but hard to check. Point developers to local history library but not sure they use it.

Councillors are well intentioned but not always helpful in terms of names that can be used.

Benefitted from exchanging ideas within the roundtable session itself e.g. spice industries and fabric industries.

Would really like a synonym dictionary and guidance. Would like a website where they can look at a map or a table and see suggestions for any area they are looking at.

Key question is where we should go to find out more. Just feel blank in terms of knowing where else to look.

Summary Points

Question 1: This was a good, speedy icebreaker to get people talking about the areas they work in and what they see on the ground. Everyone wanted to take an answer sheet at the end to see what the dialect words meant within place-names in different contexts.

Question 2: There were common challenges expressed, such as the role and desires of developers and local councils, as well as constraints in terms of what the emergency services require and need. However, there was a strong sense in all four sessions that historical place-name material must be used and that modern naming must be linked to the local area; it must preserve and celebrate the local heritage and character. There was concern over naming that was not historically linked or anchored in anyway.

It was recognised in all the sessions that there is so much historical information potentially available that it is possible to use it in a way that works with modern street naming policy constraints and requirements.

Question 3: There was a marked appetite for training and guidance, covering where to look and how to use historical place-name information. Everyone was interested in further/future online training sessions and resource lists. Everyone wants to use this material but does not always know how to, or where to find it. The discussions carried on after the round table sessions.