



English Place-Names in *Lap-*

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As the editors of the Surrey volume of the English Place-Name Survey observed, '*Lap-* names in English present a difficult problem.'¹ Early volumes of the English Place-Name Survey postulated an unattested personal name, Old English (OE) **Hlappa* or **Hlæppa*, as the first element of place-names like Lapal (Worcs), Lapworth (Warks), and Lapley (Staffs).² The origin of such a personal name, however, is unknown, and an alternative suggestion preferred by many scholars is OE *læppa* 'a lap, the skirt of a garment', apparently used in a topographical sense to refer to a detached portion of land, or to land on a boundary. This interpretation was cautiously advanced by the Surrey editors to account for Lapscombe (Surrey) and 'one or two other of the *Lap-* names.'³ It has been adopted with rather less caution by later scholars. Oakden, for instance, confidently derives Lapley (Staffs) from OE *læppa*, commenting that 'the same el[ement] is found in Lapworth Wa . . . and in many other names,' and dismisses the possibility of a personal name as 'much less likely'.⁴ Ekwall's *Concise Oxford Dictionary of English Place-Names* suggested an unattested personal name **Læppa*, a possible side-form of *Leppa*, as an alternative to *læppa* in Lapley (Staffs), and gave **Hlappa* for Lapal (Worcs), Lapford (Devon) and Lapworth (Warks).⁵ More recently, Mills's *Dictionary of English Place-Names* offers **Hlappa* as a probability for Lapford (Devon), but presents *læppa* without discussion for Lapley

¹ J. E. B. Gover, A. Mawer, and F. M. Stenton, *The Place-Names of Surrey*, English Place-Name Society (EPNS) 11 (Cambridge, 1934), p. 220.

² A. Mawer and F.M. Stenton, *The Place-Names of Worcestershire*, EPNS 4 (Cambridge, 1927), p. 298. County abbreviations throughout this paper refer to the pre-1974 English counties.

³ *PN Surrey*, p. 220.

⁴ J. P. Oakden, *The Place-Names of Staffordshire*, part I, EPNS 55 (Nottingham, 1984), pp. 167-68.

⁵ E. Ekwall, *The Concise Oxford Dictionary of English Place-Names*, 4th edn (Oxford, 1960), p. 288, s.nn. *Lapley*, *Lapal*, *Lapworth*.

(Staffs), and gives equal weight to both possibilities for Lapworth (Warks).⁶ The time is long overdue for a thorough review of the evidence.

With the exception of Lapford (Devon), for which an alternative interpretation, OE *lēapa-ford* 'ford marked by leaps,' i.e. baskets or weels for catching fish', is discussed by the editors of the Devon volumes of the English Place-Name Survey,⁷ all known *Lap-* names are attributed to OE *læppa* in Smith's *English Place-Name Elements*. The entry for this headword is worth quoting in full:

læppa, lappa OE, 'a lap, the skirt of a garment', was also used in a topographical sense 'district' in the Laws (*v.* BT s.v.), and as an alternative to **ende** it glosses Lat. *ora* 'border, boundary, edge'; 'land at the end or edge of an estate or parish' or the like would seem to be implied. (a) Lapal Wo (**hol**), Lapland D (**land**), Lapley St (**lēah**), Laployd D (**flōd**), Lapscombe Sr 220 (**cumb**, on the edge of the parish), Lapworth Wa 288 (**word**). (b) Cherry Lap Nth 159.⁸

A selection of early spellings for these place-names, taken from the county volumes of the English Place-Name Society, is as follows:

Lapal (Worcs): *Lappole* 1227, *Laphole* 1272, *Lappol*, *La Pole* 1274–1307.⁹

Lapland (Devon): *Lappelond(e)* 1303, 1330.¹⁰

Lapley (Staffs): *Lappeley(e)* [1061] 13th, 1291, 1292, 1293, etc., *Lepelie* 1086, *Lap(p)eleia* 1130 *et freq.* to 1207.¹¹

Laployd (Devon): *Lappelfode* 1275 *et freq.* to 1333, *Lapflote* 1409.¹²

Lapscombe (Surrey): *Lappicumbe* 1241, 1294, *Lappecombe* 1332, *Lapecombe* 1279, *Leppicumbe*, *Leppecombe* 1279, 1294.¹³

Lapworth Wa: *Hlappawurthin* [816] 11th, *Lappawurthin* 11th, *Lapforde* 1086, *Lappewrthe* late 12th, 1197, 1202, *Lappeworth* 1275,

⁶ A.D. Mills, *A Dictionary of English Place-Names* (Oxford, 1991), p. 205, s.nn. *Lapford*, *Lapley*, *Lapworth*.

⁷ J. E. B. Gover, A. Mawer and F. M. Stenton, *The Place-Names of Devon*, 2 vols, EPNS 8–9 (Cambridge, 1931–32), II, 369.

⁸ A. H. Smith, *English Place-Name Elements*, 2 vols, EPNS 25–26 (Cambridge, 1956), II, 11, s.v. *læppa*, *lappa*.

⁹ *PN Worcestershire*, p. 298.

¹⁰ *PN Devon*, I, 300.

¹¹ *PN Staffs*, I, 167–68.

¹² *PN Devon*, II, 423.

¹³ *PN Surrey*, p. 220.

1275–92, c.1280, 1291, 1325.¹⁴

Cherry Lap (Northants): *Shenelelappe* c.1300, 1337, *Schelleylappe* c.1300, *Schelleye*, *Schilappe* temp. Edward I, *Shilleghlapp* 1374.¹⁵

Early spellings for Lapford (Devon), which should also be considered here, include *Eslapaforda*, *Slapeforda* 1086, *Lapeford* [1107] 1300, *Lappeford(e)* 1238, 1285, 1291, 1296.¹⁶ Ekwall comments of this name that 'In the DB forms *Sl-* is used for OE *Hl-*';¹⁷ and it may be significant that initial *Hl-* also occurs in the earliest spelling of Lapworth (Warks).

It should be noted that Smith's etymologies do not always represent those suggested by the editors of county volumes of the English Place-Name Survey, and there are a number of problems to which he does not draw attention. The persistent *-a-* spellings in place-names like Lapal, Lapland, and Lapworth are, as noted by the Surrey editors, inconsistent with a derivation from OE *læppa*;¹⁸ and there is little external support for Smith's alternative form *lappa*. The extant corpus of Old English preserves only two occurrences of *lappa* or *lappan*, both in glossaries, as opposed to seventeen occurrences with *æ*,¹⁹ and this strongly suggests that the usual form was *læppa*. The evidence for topographical meanings is also somewhat tenuous. The term does not occur repeatedly in the Old English law-codes, as Smith's entry might appear to imply, but once only, in the phrase *þæt hy mostan ðam læppan frið gebicgean* in II Æthelred 1.²⁰ Here the meaning 'district' is assumed from the context, but alternative interpretations are also possible. A more accurate translation might be 'division', the equivalent term in the Latin *Quadripartitus* manuscript being *partiuncule* rather than *regio* or *terra*.²¹

¹⁴ J. E. B. Gover, A. Mawer and F. M. Stenton, *The Place-Names of Warwickshire*, EPNS 13 (Cambridge, 1936), pp. 288–89.

¹⁵ J. E. B. Gover, A. Mawer and F. M. Stenton, *The Place-Names of Northamptonshire*, EPNS 10 (Cambridge, 1933), p. 159.

¹⁶ *PN Devon*, II, 369.

¹⁷ Ekwall, *Dictionary of English Place-Names*, p. 288, s.n. *Lapal*.

¹⁸ *PN Surrey*, p. 220.

¹⁹ A. diP. Healey and R. L. Venezky, *A Microfiche Concordance to Old English* (Toronto, 1980), records one occurrence of *lappa* glossing Latin *Lamna*, *angulus auris* 'earlobe', and one occurrence of *lappan* glossing Latin *Lacinia* 'skirt of a garment'.

²⁰ F. Liebermann, *Die Gesetze der Angelsachsen*, 3 vols (Halle, 1903–16), I, 220.

²¹ Liebermann, *loc.cit.*

The sense 'border, boundary, edge' is supported by two occurrences of *læppa* or *læppan* glossing Latin *ora* or *oram*,²² and although the sense 'land at the end or edge of an estate or parish' is unattested, it would represent a logical extension of meaning. Such an interpretation is plausible in Lapley (Staffs), which as Oakden notes 'lies at the east end of the parish,'²³ but is not generally applicable to the corpus of *Lap-* names. It is even doubtful whether it applies to Lapscombe (Surrey), albeit this is, as Smith points out, situated on the edge of a parish. The editors of the Surrey volume of the English Place-Name Survey comment:

Lapscombe is on the border of Wonersh parish where the latter makes a curious projection into Albury. This may be the *lap*. Hence 'valley by the lap of ground.'²⁴

If this interpretation is correct, the place-name would appear to represent a transferred usage of the word to refer to land of a particular shape, rather than a reference to a border or boundary.

An early suggestion that the meaning of OE *læppa* might be further extended to denote 'a detached portion, a district,'²⁵ one of the definitions given by Toller,²⁶ has little to recommend it in place-name contexts. Consideration was given to such an interpretation by the editors of the Warwickshire volume of the English Place-Name Survey, noting that Lapworth, together with the adjoining parishes of Packwood and Tanworth, forms a detached part of Kineton Hundred on the Worcestershire border.²⁷ In the addenda, however, they acknowledge that since the place-name is already recorded in a charter dating from the early ninth century, it can hardly allude to the distribution of hundredal territory.²⁸ As there are also formal difficulties with a derivation from OE *læppa*, notably the persistent *-a*-spellings and the early form with initial *H-*, this etymology is unlikely

²² Healey and Venezky, *Microfiche Concordance*.

²³ *PN Staffs*, I, 167.

²⁴ *PN Surrey*, p. 220.

²⁵ *PN Surrey*, *loc.cit.*

²⁶ T. N. Toller, *An Anglo-Saxon Dictionary Based on the Manuscript Collections of the Late Joseph Bosworth* (Oxford, 1898), pp. 610–11, s.v. *læppa*.

²⁷ *PN Warks*, p. 288.

²⁸ *PN Warks*, p. li.

to be correct. Comparison with the earliest spellings for Lapford (Devon) suggests that the *h* is organic in both place-names.

No topographical interpretation has been advanced for Lapal (Worcs), defined as 'Hlappa's hollow' by the editors of the Worcestershire volume of the English Place-Name Survey,²⁹ and Smith offers no justification for including it in the headword entry for OE *læppa*. It is difficult to make sense of the term in conjunction with OE *hol* 'a hole, a hollow', an element which most commonly combines with personal names or animal-names in place-names. Indeed, with a striking disregard for consistency, Smith's headword entry for *hol'* derives Lapal (Worcs) from a personal name.³⁰ Laployd (Devon), where the second element is OE *flōd* or *flōde* 'a flow or channel of water', is similarly problematic, and again it is worth noting that the majority of place-names cited by Smith under the latter headword are attributed to personal names.³¹ With regard to Lapland (Devon), the editors of the Devon volumes of the English Place-Name Survey suggest a derivation from OE *læppa* but do not attempt an interpretation, commenting that 'the exact sense of the compound is not clear'.³² The first element of all three place-names may well be the same as in Lapford (Devon) and Lapworth (Warks).

With the exception of Cherry Lap (Northants), where OE *læppa* appears to have been added to an earlier place-name *Shenele*, 'perhaps "bright clearing or wood"' according to the editors of the Northamptonshire volume of the English Place-Name Survey,³³ a topographical interpretation is not axiomatic in any of these place-names. It is certainly more convincing in some than in others. A plausible case has been made for Lapley (Staffs) and Lapscombe (Surrey), which also happen to be the only instances with occasional early spellings in *-e*. Even if a derivation from OE *læppa* were formally convincing in other instances, however, it would be unusual to find such a word occurring regularly as a first element. OE *ende*, cited as the equivalent of OE *læppa* and Latin *ora* in one of the glosses mentioned above, was also used of 'the end of an estate' or 'a district or

²⁹ *PN Worcs*, p. 298.

³⁰ Smith, *English Place-Name Elements*, I, 257, s.v. *hol'*.

³¹ Smith, *English Place-Name Elements*, I, 178, s.v. *flōde*.

³² *PN Devon*, I, 300.

³³ *PN Northants*, p. 159.

quarter of a village or town', but in place-names it almost always occurs as a second element, as Smith's headword entry makes clear.³⁴ There is no structural parallel between the use of OE *ende* and OE *læppa* in place-names, and this would seem to suggest that their range of application was dissimilar. Like OE *ende*, other topographical elements function primarily as place-name generics. In contrast, OE *læppa* appears to function almost exclusively as a defining element. The main types of words that occur in place-names only as the first element of compounds are personal names, animal-names, occupation-words, and adjectives, and it is surely among these groups of material that an alternative derivation for the problematic *Lap*-names should be sought.

A headword not included in Smith's *English Place-Name Elements* but introduced by Dodgson in his analysis of elements for the Cheshire volumes of the *English Place-Name Survey*³⁵ is OE *hlæpe-wince* or *læpe-wince* 'a lapwing', also noted in a Derbyshire field-name.³⁶ Both variants are recorded in glosses, the compound being otherwise unattested in the literary corpus of Old English,³⁷ and the primary spelling is disputed. Cameron gives *læpe-wince*,³⁸ Dodgson prefers *hleap-wince*,³⁹ and Holthausen has entries for both *hlæpe-wince* and *læpe-wince*, commenting that the etymology is unknown.⁴⁰ The *Middle English Dictionary* gives *læpe-wince* and *læpe-wince* as Anglian dialectal forms of the Old English compound, with *hlæpe-wince* as the West Saxon and possibly also the Kentish form.⁴¹ Toller's *Anglo-Saxon Dictionary* gives the headword as *hlæpe-wince*, but the *Supplement* adds

³⁴ Smith, *English Place-Name Elements*, I, 152, s.v. *ende*'.

³⁵ J. McN. Dodgson, *The Place-Names of Cheshire*, EPNS 44-48 and 54- (Cambridge and Nottingham, 1970-), V.i, 227, s.v. *hleap-wince*.

³⁶ K. Cameron, *The Place-Names of Derbyshire*, 3 vols, EPNS 27-29 (Cambridge, 1959), II, 460, s.n. Lapwing Hollow.

³⁷ Attested spellings recorded in Healey and Venezky, *Microfiche Concordance*, are *hleapewince*, *laepaeuincæ*, *laepiuincæ* and *lepeuincæ*.

³⁸ *PN Derbs*, loc.cit.

³⁹ *PN Cheshire*, loc.cit.

⁴⁰ F. Holthausen, *Altenglisches etymologisches Wörterbuch*, 3rd edn (Heidelberg, 1974), pp. 162 and 191.

⁴¹ H. Kurath and S. M. Kuhn, *Middle English Dictionary* (Ann Arbor, 1930-), fascicle I-L, p. 655, s.v. *lap-wink(e)*. A wide range of spellings is attested in Middle English, with the first vowel variously recorded as *a*, *e*, and *i*.

an entry for *læpe-wince*, cross-referencing to *hlæpe-wince* 'of which *læpewince* seems the earliest form'.⁴² A derivation from OE *hlæpan* 'to run' has been suggested by several authorities, but is almost certainly incorrect. Skeat explains the compound as a description of the bird's flight, 'one who turns about in running', from OE *hlæpan* 'to run' and OE **wince* 'one who turns',⁴³ and substantially the same etymology is given by Hoad⁴⁴ and the *Oxford English Dictionary*.⁴⁵ However, Lockwood offers etymological evidence of a derivation from an early word for 'crest':

The first element 'læpi-' was evidently once a bird name in its own right, for it is etymologically identical with West Frisian *leep*, North Frisian *liap* lapwing, further Heligoland Frisian *leap* hoopoe, presupposing Proto-Germanic **laipiz*. The Heligoland sense is secondary; what these species have in common is the remarkable crest, and crest is the basic meaning of this word. As a bird name, it is thus an illustration of the part-for-whole principle . . . The second element *-wince* is formally winch, a word having the primary sense of something moving up and down, which in the bird name must have referred to the movable crest. It now appears that, in Old English, the literal meaning of *læpi* was forgotten and came to be reinforced by another word for crest, the part for whole principle repeating itself.⁴⁶

The interesting point here is the possibility that the first element of OE (*h*)*læpewince* may have existed independently as a bird-name despite its absence from the recorded literature. It is of course not unusual for place-names to attest independent occurrences of Old English words otherwise recorded only in compounds. One such is the bird-name **hīce*, attested only in OE *hīce-māse* 'the blue tit-mouse' according to Smith's entry in *English Place-Name Elements*.⁴⁷ Another is

⁴² Bosworth and Toller, *Anglo-Saxon Dictionary*, p. 541; *Supplement* by T. N. Toller (Oxford, 1921), p. 601.

⁴³ W. W. Skeat, *The Concise Dictionary of English Etymology* (Oxford, 1884), p. 242, s.v. *lapwing*.

⁴⁴ T. F. Hoad, *The Concise Oxford Dictionary of English Etymology* (Oxford, 1986), p. 258, s.v. *lapwing*.

⁴⁵ *Oxford English Dictionary*, 2nd edn (Oxford, 1989), s.v. *lapwing*.

⁴⁶ W. B. Lockwood, *The Oxford Book of British Bird Names* (Oxford, 1984), p. 93.

⁴⁷ Smith, *English Place-Name Elements*, I, 245, s.v. *hice*; addendum in *Journal of the English Place-Name Society*, 1 (1968-69), 24.

OE **dūfe* 'a dove', recorded only in the rare compound *dūfe-doppe* 'sea-bird, gull' or 'pelican'.⁴⁸ Further possibilities include OE **sc(e)ote*, the second element of the compound *cūscote* 'wood-pigeon', and OE **wōr* (as in *wōr-hana* and *wōr-henn* 'wood-grouse'), both of which have been suggested for some place-names.⁴⁹ OE *(h)læpe may well constitute a further example.

Many Old English personal names were based on bird- or animal-names, and an OE *(h)læpe or *(h)læpe 'lapwing' would represent an acceptable origin for the personal name postulated by early scholars as the first element of some place-names in *Lap-*. Such a personal name would of course be indistinguishable from the bird-name itself, which would also be fully plausible in combination with topographical elements such as OE *cumb*, *flod*, *ford*, *hol*, *land*, and *leah*. A personal name may be more likely in combination with OE *word* 'enclosure' in Lapworth (Warks), although even here a bird-name cannot entirely be ruled out.⁵⁰ I suggest that since early forms of Lapford (Devon) and Lapworth (Warks) suggest initial *h-*, both place-names should be taken to derive either from OE *(h)læpe or *(h)læpe 'lapwing' or from a personal name based thereon. Furthermore, since the supposed occurrence of OE *læppa* in Lapal (Worcs), Lapland (Devon) and Laployd (Devon) remains unexplained, I suggest that the same etymology is probable there. A derivation from OE *læppa* 'lap', used of a lap of ground or of land on the edge of a parish, may still be preferred for Lapscombe (Surrey) and Lapley (Staffs), but should be treated with more caution than has been shown by Smith and later scholars.

⁴⁸ A. C. Amos and A. diP. Healey, *Dictionary of Old English* (Toronto, 1986-), fascicle D, s.v. *dūfe-doppe*. Smith, *English Place-Name Elements*, I, 137, s.v. *dūfe*, describes OE *dūfe* as 'infrequent', but the non-occurrence of the word in the literary record is established by Amos and Healey.

⁴⁹ Smith, *English Place-Name Elements*, II, 108, s.v. *sc(e)ote*; II, 272, s.v. *wōr*.

⁵⁰ Smith, *English Place-Name Elements*, II, 273-75, s.v. *word*, describes animal-names as 'rare but possible' in combination with OE *word* (II, 275). An instance pointed out to me by Barrie Cox is the lost field-name *Shep-worth* in Rutland: B. Cox, *The Place-Names of Rutland*, EPNS 67-69 (Nottingham, 1994), p. 288.

Execution and Irish Place-Names

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The early Irish legal system was almost unique, in that it envisaged that almost any crime could be atoned for by payment of a fine.¹ The scale of the fine was dependent on the nature of the crime, but even murder could be absolved in this fashion. 'At this day . . . no one is put to death [by judicial sentence] for his intentional crimes, as long as eric-fine is obtained; and whenever eric-fine is not obtained, he is put to death for his intentional crimes.'² Apparently, there was a great reluctance to take life in cold blood, though warfare was commonplace. There were no public prisons: instead the wrong-doer would be confined by the individual whom he had wronged, or by his kinfolk. If a murderer was unable to pay the appropriate fine, it was left to the relatives of the victim to decide whether he should be killed or sold as a slave. Strangely, Irish church law placed more emphasis on the death penalty than did the secular system, but the former permitted execution only by hanging, whereas the latter also allowed death in the *gola* or pit (presumably from starvation) and *guin* or slaying (presumably by sword, spear or axe). However, it is clear that capital

¹ Parallels did exist among the Anglo-Saxons, the ancient Greeks, the Franks and the Germans. See P. W. Joyce, *A Social History of Ancient Ireland*, 2nd edn, 2 vols (Dublin, 1913), I, 210.

² *Ancient Laws of Ireland*, edited by W. N. Hancock and others, 6 vols (Dublin, 1865-1901), I, 15; 'inniu . . . cen duine do marbad ina cintaib comraiti an cein fogaba eiric, 7 cach uair na fuigbe eric, a marbad ina cintaib comraiti', *Corpus Iuris Hibernici*, edited by D. A. Binchy, 6 vols (Dublin, 1978), II, 341.28-30. The quotation is from the pseudo-historical prologue to the *Senchas Már*. This prologue is dated c.1100 by Binchy, 'The pseudo-historical prologue to the *Senchas Már*', *Studia Celtica*, 10/11 (1975-76), 15-28; and a verbal form in the passage 'can scarcely antedate the eleventh century': J. Carey, 'An edition of the pseudo-historical prologue to the *Senchas Már*', *Ériu*, 45 (1994), 1-32 (p. 29). By 'At this day' the commentator was drawing a contrast between his own time (the eleventh century?) and an earlier period, before the coming of St Patrick, when the death penalty had been more extensively used.