

Onomastic Uses of the Term 'White'

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The Old and Middle English etymons of Present-Day English *white* have a range of applications, of which several are represented in the onomasticon.¹ In the place-names of England and Scotland, Old English (OE) *hwīt* can refer to white stone used as building material, as in Whithorn in Wigtownshire 'white building',² to clear water, as in Whitburn in West Lothian 'white stream',³ to chalky soil or infertile land, as in Whitfield in Northamptonshire 'white open land',⁴ or to the colour of tree-bark or blossom, as in Whitwood in the West Riding of Yorkshire 'white wood'.⁵ In surnames, the use of Middle English (ME) *whīt* is similarly multi-faceted, referring to white hair in many instances of White, Whitehead and Whitelock,⁶ but also forming the first element

¹ A version of this paper was presented at the Eleventh Annual Conference of the Society for Name Studies in Britain and Ireland, University of Newcastle upon Tyne, 5–8 April 2002. I am grateful to those present for their comments, and in particular to John Freeman, Peter Kitson, Peter McClure and Bill Nicolaisen.

² J. Field, *Place-Names of Great Britain and Ireland* (London, 1980), p. 188. All references are to county boundaries preceding the local government re-organisation of the 1970s.

³ *Ibid.*

⁴ J. E. B. Gover, A. Mawer and F. M. Stenton, *The Place-Names of Northamptonshire*, English Place-Name Society, 10 (Cambridge, 1933), p. 64.

⁵ A. D. Mills, *A Dictionary of English Place-Names*, 2nd edn (Oxford, 1998), p. 377, s.n. *Whitwood*. This seems more plausible than the interpretation suggested in A. H. Smith, *The Place-Names of the West Riding of Yorkshire*, 8 vols, English Place-Name Society, 30–37 (Cambridge, 1961–63), II, 124: 'The sense is probably that of thinly growing, and therefore bright, woodland'.

⁶ P. H. Reaney, *A Dictionary of English Surnames*, 3rd edn with corrections and additions by R. M. Wilson (Oxford, 1991), pp. 486–87, s.nn. *White*, *Whitehead* and *Whitelock*. Alternative derivations for the first and third respectively are from the personal names OE *Hwīta* and OE *Wihtlāc*, while *Whitehead* is

of a number of occupational compounds, including Whitbread and Whitepayn 'white bread, i.e. baker', Whitesmith 'tin-smith', and Whittier 'white-leather dresser'.⁷ These, however, do not exhaust the attested meanings of the term in Old and Middle English, and the purpose of this paper is to suggest that a further sense may also be represented in a number of place-names and surnames.

It seems previously to have escaped notice in the field of onomastics that both OE *hwīt* and ME *whīt* can also refer to 'dairy produce'. This meaning does not appear under the entry for the adjective *hwīt* in Toller's *Anglo-Saxon Dictionary* of 1898, and has possibly been overlooked by name scholars for that reason.⁸ It was, however, added in the *Supplement* published in 1921, which identified a substantive sense 'certain kinds of food, cheese, eggs, butter, fish, allowed at times when flesh was forbidden'.⁹ The *Middle English Dictionary*, which has only reached letter *W* within the last few years, defines sense 6(b) of the substantive use of ME *whīt* as 'dairy food, milk',¹⁰ with a corresponding adjectival use evidenced in a subsequent entry for the compound *whīt-mēte* 'a dairy food or product (milk, cheese, butter, etc., including eggs)'.¹¹ Although now obsolete, this sense of *white meat* is attested in the *Oxford English Dictionary* up to 1886, whereas the modern usage referring to 'light-coloured flesh foods' such as pork and chicken appears only from 1752, and may well be responsible for the earlier sense going out of use.¹²

occasionally a bahuvrihi compound from *hwīt* + *hōd* 'white hood'.

⁷ *Ibid.*, pp. 486–87 and 489, s.nn. *Whitbread*, *Whitepayn*, *Whitesmith* and *Whittier*.

⁸ T. N. Toller, *An Anglo-Saxon Dictionary Based on the Manuscript Collections of the Late Joseph Bosworth* (Oxford, 1898), p. 577, s.v. *hwīt* adj.

⁹ T. N. Toller, *An Anglo-Saxon Dictionary: Supplement* (Oxford, 1921), p. 583, s.v. *hwīt* n.

¹⁰ H. Kurath and S. M. Kuhn, *Middle English Dictionary* (Ann Arbor, 1952–2001), s.v. *whīt* n. 6(b).

¹¹ *Ibid.*, s.v. *hwīt-mēte*. In both substantive and adjectival uses, quotations from literary sources show variation between spellings of *whīt(e)* with and without final *-e*.

¹² J. A. Simpson and E. S. C. Weiner (eds), *Oxford English Dictionary*, 2nd edn

This is of interest in an onomastic context for two reasons. Firstly, many place-names with OE *hwīt* as the qualifying element are paralleled by similar formations with first elements referring to dairy or other farm products. Ekwall cites half-a-dozen instances of Whitton from OE *tūn* 'farm',¹³ a combination which invites comparison with, for instance, Butterton in Staffordshire, designating a farm where butter was produced, and Honington in Warwickshire and Honiton in Devon, both designating farms where honey was produced.¹⁴ There are also at least

(Oxford, 1989), s.v. *white meat, whitemeat*. The editors of both the *Middle English Dictionary* and the *Oxford English Dictionary* take the compound *whīt-mēte* to be a Middle English formation attested from c.1425, and this is very probably correct. Although the entry in Toller, *An Anglo-Saxon Dictionary*, p. 577, s.v. *hwīt* adj., cites the collocation *hwīte metas* glossing *lactinia* and cognate with Icelandic *hvítr matr* 'milk, curds etc. opposed to flesh', the citation of *hwīte metas* is taken from Edward Lye's *Dictionarium Saxonico et Gothico-Latinum* (London, 1772), and I do not find it in A. diP. Healey and R. L. Venezky, *A Microfiche Concordance to Old English* (Toronto, 1980). A. C. Amos and A. diP. Healey, *Dictionary of Old English* (Toronto, 1986–) has not yet reached letter *H*. The use of the substantive OE *hwīt* to refer to non-flesh foods, on the other hand, is securely evidenced in penitential and homiletic literature. J. Roberts and C. Kay with L. Grundy, *A Thesaurus of Old English*, 2 vols (London, 1995), I, 188, classifies this sense of *hwīt* alongside *lenctenlifēn* under section 04.01.02.01.01.06 'Lenten/fast-day food', but has no general section for dairy or non-meat produce where the term would equally appear to belong.

¹³ E. Ekwall, *The Concise Oxford Dictionary of English Place-Names*, 4th edn (Oxford, 1960), p. 515, s.n. *Whitton* Du. In Scotland, the minor name Whitton in Morebattle parish, Roxburghshire, is recorded by M. G. Williamson, 'The Non-Celtic Place-Names of the Scottish Border Counties' (unpublished doctoral dissertation, University of Edinburgh, 1942), pp. 26–27.

¹⁴ A. H. Smith, *English Place-Name Elements*, 2 vols, English Place-Name Society, 25–26 (Cambridge, 1956), II, 194, s.v. *tūn* (12) (viii). Against my argument is the fact that Smith describes this type of combination as 'not common'. However, Smith is not always reliable in this respect, since, as Gelling points out, his approach tends to be impressionistic rather than analytical (M. Gelling, 'On looking into Smith's Elements', *Nomina*, 5 (1981), 39–45 (p. 39)).

nine occurrences of Whiteleigh/Whitley/Whitelee from OE *lēah* 'clearing, pasture',¹⁵ which might be interpreted along the same lines as Bitterley in Shropshire and Butterleigh/Butterley in Devon, Derbyshire and Herefordshire 'pasture which yielded plenty of butter'.¹⁶ Whitehill in Durham and four occurrences of Whittle in Lancashire and Durham, from OE *hyll* 'hill',¹⁷ may be compared with Butterhills in the West Riding of Yorkshire 'hill with rich, butter-producing pasture',¹⁸ and Whitelaw in Midlothian and West Lothian, from OE *hlāw* 'hill',¹⁹ with the synonymous Butterlaw in Northumberland and Roxburghshire.²⁰ Similarly, Whitwick in Leicestershire and Herefordshire, from OE *wīc* '(dairy) farm',²¹ may plausibly be associated with Honeywick in Sussex 'honey farm'²² and with the ubiquitous names Butterwick 'butter farm,

⁵ Ekwall, *The Concise Oxford Dictionary of English Place-Names*, p. 514, s.n. *Whitleigh*; Williamson, 'Non-Celtic Place-Names', p. 75.

⁶ Ekwall, *The Concise Oxford Dictionary of English Place-Names*, p. 46, s.n. *Bitterley*; p. 79, s.n. *Butterlaw*.

⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 514, s.n. *Whitehill* Du; p. 515, s.n. *Whittle*, Welch.

⁸ A. H. Smith, *The Place-Names of the West Riding of Yorkshire*, 8 vols, English Place-Name Society, 30-37 (Cambridge, 1961-63), V, 115.

⁹ N. Dixon, 'The Placenames of Midlothian' (unpublished doctoral dissertation, University of Edinburgh, 1933), p. 179; A. MacDonald, *The Place-Names of West Lothian* (Edinburgh, 1941), p. 88. Other occurrences of the same formation in West Lothian now survive only as minor or field-names (*ibid.*, p. 24 and 52-53).

¹⁰ Ekwall, *The Concise Oxford Dictionary of English Place-Names*, p. 79, s.n. *Butterlaw*; Williamson, 'Non-Celtic Place-Names', p. 123.

¹¹ Ekwall, *The Concise Oxford Dictionary of English Place-Names*, p. 515, s.n. *Whitwick*, cites Whitwick in Leicestershire but not Whitwick Manor in Herefordshire (SO 6045), a name which I owe to John Freeman. Early forms of the latter from Mr Freeman's collection of spellings for the forthcoming English Place-Name Survey for Herefordshire include *Witewiche* 1086, *Witeuiche* c.1160 × 1170, *Witewica* c.1160 × 1170, *Witewike* c.1205 × 1215 and *Whytewyk* 1278. I am also grateful to Mr Freeman for informing me of another possible instance, Wightwick Manor in the western suburbs of Wolverhampton (SO 8698), although as he points out, in the absence of early forms the etymology of this name remains uncertain.

¹² A. Mawer and F. M. Stenton, *The Place-Names of Sussex*, 2 vols, English

dairy farm' and Cheswick/Chiswick/Keswick 'cheese farm'.²³ Another element found in combination with both *butere* and *hwīt* is OE *wella* 'well, spring, stream', and minor names such as Butterwell in Gloucestershire, Butter Well in Midlothian and Butter Well Park in West Lothian are generally taken to refer to cool water used for storing butter.²⁴ Other dairy products require equally cool storage conditions, however, so it seems possible that a similar explanation may underlie the compound Whitwell evidenced in at least eight English counties.²⁵

Place-names in *Whit(e)-* are generally attributed either to the Old English adjective *hwīt* 'white' or to the Old English personal name *Hwīta*, with the Old Norse cognates *hvítr* and *Hvíti* as further contenders in areas of Scandinavian settlement. As both personal names and colour adjectives are widely prevalent in toponymic formations, most place-names can plausibly be attributed to at least one of the two. Sometimes both: since they cannot be differentiated in early spellings, standard practice is to give both alternatives except in clear-cut cases such as Whitestone in Devon 'white stone' and Whitkirk in the West Riding of Yorkshire 'white church',²⁶ or where early translation into French or

Place-Name Society, 6–7 (Cambridge, 1929–30), II, 399.

²³ Ekwall, *The Concise Oxford Dictionary of English Place-Names*, p. 79, s.n. *Butterwick*; p. 101, s.n. *Cheswick*; p. 106, s.n. *Chiswick*; p. 273, s.n. *Keswick*.

²⁴ A. H. Smith, *The Place-Names of Gloucestershire*, 4 vols, English Place-Name Society, 38–41 (Cambridge, 1964–65), II, 183; Dixon, 'The Placenames of Midlothian', p. 115; MacDonald, *The Place-Names of West Lothian*, p. 142. Dixon, however, prefers to interpret Butter Well as 'a well with water that makes good butter', while MacDonald draws attention to possible parallels with place-names referring to good pasturage: 'The idea of fertility, of surpassing goodness, may be correct here'. An alternative possibility that the formation might refer to a stream frequented by the bittern (ME *bito(u)r*, *butur*) is explored in C. Hough, 'The trumpeters of Bemersyde: a Scottish placename reconsidered', *Names*, 47 (1999), 257–68 (p. 264), and is also preferred by S. Harris, *The Place Names of Edinburgh. Their Origins and History* (Edinburgh, 1996), p. 139.

²⁵ Ekwall, *The Concise Oxford Dictionary of English Place-Names*, p. 515, s.n. *Whitwell*.

²⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 514, s.n.n. *Whitstone*, *Whitkirk*.

Latin confirms the interpretation of the first element as a colour adjective, as with Whitchurch in Shropshire.²⁷ In many instances, either interpretation appears equally appropriate. An example is Whitwick in Leicestershire, concerning which Cox comments:

A white sandstone outcrops in the area and this may have been used in building. However, the OE personal name *Hwīta* is also possible as the first element, particularly as Whittington '*tūn* associated with *Hwīta*' is only five miles away.²⁸

Without wishing to complicate matters still further, I should like to suggest that OE *hwīt* 'dairy food, milk'—also formally indistinguishable from the adjective and personal name in early spellings²⁹—should be borne in mind as yet a third possibility for place-names in *Whit(e)-*, especially where the generic element is a word for a farm or pasture-land.

²⁷ M. Gelling, *The Place-Names of Shropshire*, 3 vols so far published, English Place-Name Society, 62/63, 70, 76 (Nottingham, 1990–2001), I, 310–11. Whitchurch is recorded from 1199 as *Album Monasterium* and from c.1200 as *Blancmustier*. It is interesting to note, however, that Latin *album* itself appears to be used in connection with dairy produce in medieval northern England. S. Taylor, 'Settlement-Names in Fife' (unpublished doctoral dissertation, University of Edinburgh, 1995), pp. 454 and 475 n. 6, discusses a suggestion to that effect made in a personal communication by Dr Mary Atkin, and raises the possibility of a link between 'white' as a place-name specific and dairy production. I am grateful to Dr Taylor for drawing this to my attention, and for alerting me to M. A. Atkin, 'Land use and management in the upland demesne of the De Lacy estate of Blackburnshire c 1300', *Agricultural History Review*, 42 (1994), 1–19 (p. 18 n. 48).

²⁸ B. Cox, 'The Place-Names of Leicestershire and Rutland' (unpublished doctoral dissertation, University of Nottingham, 1971), pp. 360–61, s.n. *Whitwick*.

²⁹ This does not of course apply to spellings preserving the weak adjectival or genitive singular inflection *-an*. An example is Whitwell in Derbyshire 'clear spring or stream', recorded in the early tenth century as *Hwitan wylles geat* 'the gap near Whitwell' (K. Cameron, *The Place-Names of Derbyshire*, 3 vols, English Place-Name Society, 27–29 (Cambridge, 1959), II, 327).

The Middle English form is particularly likely to occur in minor names and field-names, which tend to be substantially later than major settlement-names. Glancing through the lists compiled by the late John Field for his seminal dictionary of English field-names, one is struck by the many and obvious parallels between, say, Butter Close and White Close, Butter Croft and White Croft, Butter Field and White Field, Butter Hays and White Hays, Butter Hill and White Hill, Butterlands and Whitelands, and Butter Meadow and White Meadow.³⁰ Examples from Scotland include Whiteside (Field) in West Lothian and a lost *Whitcroft* in Midlothian.³¹ The established interpretation 'land with a white surface' may well account satisfactorily for some members of the 'White-' group. However, comparison with the 'Butter-' names suggests that an alternative 'good land, producing rich butter' may apply to others.³²

Secondly, this sense of ME *whīt* may be relevant to the interpretation of occupational surnames. The surname *Whiter* is generally taken to be a derivative of the verb *whīten* 'to make white' (from OE *hwītian*) and interpreted as 'bleacher' or 'white-washer'.³³ This is supported by the entry for the substantive *whīter* in the *Middle English Dictionary*, which gives the definition '?a bleacher', also 'a caulker or whitewasher'.³⁴ Since, however, there are only two occurrences outside surnames, the full range of meanings may not be represented in documentary sources.

³⁰ J. Field, *English Field-Names. A Dictionary* (Newton Abbot, 1972), pp. 34–35 and 253–54. A new edition is to be published posthumously by the English Place-Name Society.

³¹ MacDonald, *The Place-Names of West Lothian*, p. 155; Dixon, 'The Placenames of Midlothian', p. 136.

³² Field, *English Field-Names. A Dictionary*, pp. 254 and 35.

³³ G. Fransson, *Middle English Surnames of Occupation 1100–1350* (Lund, 1935), p. 177, s.n. *Whytere*; B. Cottle, *The Penguin Dictionary of Surnames*, 2nd edn (London, 1978), p. 418, s.n. *Whiter*; P. Hanks and F. Hodges, *A Dictionary of Surnames* (Oxford, 1988), p. 574; Reaney, *A Dictionary of English Surnames*, p. 487, s.n. *Whiter*.

³⁴ Kurath and Kuhn, *Middle English Dictionary*, s.v. *whīter(e)*. The first definition is supported by a cross-reference to a subsequent entry for *whītester* 'one who bleaches cloth'.

Comparison with other Middle English surnames in *-er* such as *Cheser* 'cheese maker or seller' and *Buterer* 'butterman' raises the possibility that some instances of *Whiter* may refer to a maker or seller of dairy produce.³⁵

Occupational surnames in *-er* often have counterparts in *-man*, as with *Chesman* and *Butterman*,³⁶ so it may be worth considering a similar explanation for the surname *Whiteman* and its variants *Whitman* and *Wittman*. Reaney takes the etymology to be an unattested Old English personal name **Hwītmann*, and this is fully consistent with early instances such as *Quithmanus* (1121–38) and *Witeman fugitiuus* (1170).³⁷ Alternative derivations from a colour nickname³⁸ or from an occupational name 'servant of White'³⁹ are less plausible, since the formula 'personal name + *man*' seems to be limited to personal names introduced after the Conquest,⁴⁰ and comparable colour surnames such

³⁵ Fransson, *Middle English Surnames of Occupation 1100–1350*, pp. 66 and 68.

³⁶ *Ibid.*, pp. 86–87. I have suggested elsewhere that *Barkman* may also be an occupational surname corresponding to *Barker* 'tanner' (C. Hough, 'Scottish surnames', in *The Edinburgh Companion to Scots*, edited by J. Corbett, J. D. McClure and J. Stuart-Smith (Edinburgh, 2003), pp. 31–49 (pp. 41–42)).

³⁷ P. H. Reaney, *The Origin of English Surnames* (London, 1967), p. 193; Reaney, *A Dictionary of English Surnames*, p. 487, s.n. *Whiteman*. The asterisk is omitted from the latter entry, giving a false impression that the personal name is on record.

³⁸ Hanks and Hodges, *A Dictionary of Surnames*, p. 574, s.n. *Whitman*; D. Postles, *The Surnames of Devon*, English Surnames Series, 6 (Oxford, 1995), p. 26. As Postles comments, 'The element *-man* may have had different applications in different regions.' However, he goes on to state: 'The suggestion that, when combined with a personal name, the element signified a servant, does certainly not apply to Devon. In this county, the element almost exclusively denoted a topographical or occupational sense.' Peter McClure (personal communication) points out to me that a personal name would appear to be the most likely derivation of the surname *Rogerman*, attributed by Postles (*ibid.*, p. 25) to an unspecified topographical term.

³⁹ Hanks and Hodges, *A Dictionary of Surnames*, p. 574, s.n. *Whitman*; Cottle, *The Penguin Dictionary of Surnames*, p. 418, s.n. *Whiteman*.

⁴⁰ I owe this point to Peter McClure, who also notes that some of the putative examples of surnames in *-man* 'servant' cited by Reaney, *The Origin of English*

as ME *Blacman* and *Brunman* correspond to known Old English personal names.⁴¹ An exception is ME *Redeman*: significantly, however, this is found with a preceding definite article, as in *le Redeman* 1332 and *le Redemon* 1332,⁴² suggesting an occupational term ‘reed-man’.⁴³

Surnames, p. 196, are ‘probably pet-forms of personal names rather than personal name plus “servant”’. Throughout the medieval period, the ending *-man* may represent a hypocoristic suffix rather than an independent name theme. For instance, J. Insley, ‘The study of Old English personal names and anthroponymic lexika’, in *Person und Name. Methodische Probleme bei der Erstellung eines Personennamenbuches des Frühmittelalters*, edited by D. Geuenich, W. Haubrichs and J. Jarnut (Berlin and New York, 2002), pp. 148–76 (p. 165), points out that Old English *Dudemann*, ‘though morphologically a dithematic form, is an extended hypocoristic name in *-mann*’. For a thorough discussion of the use of *-man* as a hypocoristic suffix to make pet-forms of Middle English personal names, see now the following article in this journal: P. McClure, ‘The kinship of *Jack*: I, pet-forms of Middle English personal names with the suffixes *-kin*, *-ke*, *-man* and *-cot*’, *Nomina*, 26 (2003), 93–117 (pp. 108–15).

⁴¹ Again, I owe this point to Peter McClure. Cf. B. Seltén, *The Anglo-Saxon Heritage in Middle English Personal Names. East Anglia 1100–1399*, 2 vols (Lund, 1972–79), II, 46 and 50. Even if some occurrences of *Blacman* and *Brunman* are Middle English formations, recent work may point towards occupational interpretations as ‘woadman’ and ‘pig-keeper’ respectively rather than as colour nicknames referring to dark skin. See J. Field, ‘Woad cultivation: a way of life reflected in English field-names’, in *Proceedings of the XIXth International Congress of Onomastic Sciences, Aberdeen, August 4–11, 1996: ‘Scope, Perspectives and Methods of Onomastics*’, edited by W. F. H. Nicolaisen, 3 vols (Department of English, University of Aberdeen, 1998), II, 107–11, and C. Hough, ‘OE *brūn* in place-names’, *English Studies*, 79 (1998), 512–21 (p. 519). Field does not mention the surname *Blacker*, but here too ‘woadman’ may present a plausible alternative to the traditional interpretation ‘one who dyes things black’.

⁴² Reaney, *A Dictionary of English Surnames*, p. 374, s.n. *Readman*.

⁴³ Mr McClure informs me that he prefers Reaney’s principal derivation as an occupational term ‘reed-man’ corresponding to *Reeder* ‘cutter of reeds, thatcher’ to a putative nickname ‘red man’. I have been unable to trace any recorded instances of *Whiteman* with a definite article, which would be similarly

It may be relevant that one of the most common uses of *-man* in Middle English is in compound occupational terms, often referring to a producer of, maker of or dealer in a commodity. Besides *Butterman* and *Chesman* mentioned above, instances cited by Fransson include *Candelman*, *Capman*, *Clothman*, *Elyman* 'maker of oil', *Fetherman*, *Flaxman*, *Flekeman* 'hurdle maker', *Glasman*, *Hauerman* 'dealer in oats', *Honyman*, *Laxman* 'seller of salmon', *Lekman* 'dealer in leeks', *Lynman* 'dresser or seller of flax', *Meleman* 'dealer in meal', *Mustardman*, *Oilman*, *Sakman* 'maker of sacks', *Saltman*, *Syveman*, *Slayman* 'maker of slays (weaving instruments)', *Smereman* 'maker or seller of fat, lard or butter', *Tailman* 'seller of horsehair', *Wademan* 'seller of or dyer with woad' and *Waxman*.⁴⁴ These seem to provide a context for taking *Whiteman* as an occupational surname meaning 'producer or seller of dairy produce'.

It is of course possible—even probable—that not all instances of *Whiteman* have the same derivation. Some occurrences may well be from the putative Old English personal name; others from an occupational term referring to bleaching. I suggest that an occupational surname referring to the dairy industry should be borne in mind as an alternative possibility, and that a similar interpretation should be considered for other occurrences of the term *white* in both surnames and place-names.

diagnostic for an occupational term.

⁴⁴ Fransson, *Middle English Surnames of Occupation 1100–1350*, pp. 73, 116, 89, 70 (s.v. *Elymaker*), 118, 81, 172, 186, 60, 69, 77, 69, 81, 60, 65, 70, 94, 71, 172, 168 (s.v. *Slayare*), 68, 99, 107 and 73. Several have counterparts in *-er(e)*: *Clothere*, *Flaxere*, *Leker*, *Mustarder*, *Oyler*, *Sacker*, *Saltere*, *Siuyere*, *Slayare* and *Wadere*.