

# Naming Shirehampton and the name *Shirehampton*

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# Shortened abstract of article in *Onoma* 50

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Using the example of the place-name *Shirehampton* in England, this paper explores:

- (1) the complications involved in understanding the history of a particularly difficult place-name (an etymological and philological question), and in the history of the naming of the place in question (an onomasiological question)
- (2) some practical consequences of different understandings of the place-name at different points in history (a historiographical question)
- (3) the historical transfer of this name into other name categories (a semasiological question, and a culturally and theoretically interesting one)

Some new understandings of the history of the name are proposed. This can be taken as a demonstration of the lexical-semantic and phonological difficulties of historical onomastics and also in the pleasures of travelling unexpected byways in cultural history and the history of onomastics.

# Why this is worth doing

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A. H. Smith took seven lines of print to give an account of *Shirehampton* (PN Gl 3: 132), one line of which is the heading, five the data (one datum wrong), and one for the etymology. But he didn't even address the current form of the name.

He was also mistaken about where Shirehampton was.

To get somewhere near exhausting what needs to be said, deserves to be said, and is revealing and entertaining about the local relation between language, geography, history and culture takes about 36 pages of journal article.

# What was/is Shirehampton?

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A detached tithing of Westbury-on-Trym parish till 1844

Posh suburb of Bristol, 18<sup>th</sup>/19<sup>th</sup> century (King's Weston)

Parent of Avonmouth parish, created 1917

Large expansion of working population in the 20<sup>th</sup> century because of docks and industry at Avonmouth



# Where is Shirehampton? (OS 1830)



Note the Pill ferry

# The simple version of the name's history

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Shirehampton began life simply as *Hampton*. In the fourteenth century it came to be known as *Shernyhampton*. In the sixteenth century this name was replaced by *Shirehampton* and *Sherehampton*. The former eventually displaced the latter.

Smith ascribes the base-name to Old English *hām-tūn* and derives the “affix” from (probably) Old English *scearnig* ‘dirty’. This leaves many questions unasked and many points of detail unexplained.

# So how long has it been called ...? (false start 1)

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Sir Robert Atkyns (1712) believed that *Chire* in Domesday Book was to be identified with *Shirehampton*, or at any rate with the *Shire* part of it. He was misled by the Domesday information that before 1066 land in *Chire* had belonged to *Huesberie* into believing that *Chire* was related to Westbury-on-Trym, rather than to Westbury-on-Severn (also in Gloucestershire). He was followed in this error by the other early county historians Rudder (1779) and Rudge (1803).

By the early 1900s, it had been realized that this was impossible phonologically and historically. Moore (1987) called identifying Latin/Norman French <ch> in this name with later English <sh> /ʃ/, instead of with /k/, an “elementary linguistic howler”.



# So how long has it been called ...? (false start 2)

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H. P. R. Finberg (1961) found *Scearamtone*, purportedly relating to about 854 C. E., in a thirteenth-century manuscript of William of Malmesbury's *De antiquitate Glastonie ecclesie*, and suggested this was Shirehampton.

But forms in *S(h)-* do not otherwise appear till the 14thC. This may be a (very bad) garble of *Cerawicombe* at the relevant place in a list of Glastonbury holdings in the actual pre-Conquest grant document (Birch 472 / Sawyer 303).

This misappropriated form is what leads Smith to say that the “affix” acquired by *Shirehampton* is Old English, when in fact it dates from the fourteenth century and is therefore Middle English.

# Shernyhampton

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In 1325, a qualified form of the original name, *Shernyhampton*, appears for the first time.

*sherni* ‘dungy’, from Middle English *shern* ‘dung’. By the fifteenth century, [e] is lowered to [a] before [r] plus a consonant. *Shernyhampton* is mostly spelt with <er>, with just one spelling in <ar>, in 1367.

There are two questions to ask about this development, one perhaps unanswerable:

1. why does a qualifying element appears at all? to distinguish Shirehampton from other places in Gloucestershire named *Hampton* in the fourteenth century, for example Minchinhampton (found in a qualified form about 1220), Meysey Hampton (found in a qualified form in 1221) + others? However, these acquired their qualifiers a century before Shirehampton, and the timing remains mysterious. It is unlikely that distinction from Leckhampton or Rockhampton was intended, since neither of these were ever called by the simplex name *Hampton* in surviving records.

# Why (1)?, continued

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No connection between Shirehampton and any other Gloucestershire *Hampton* is known that could provide an administrative reason for distinguishing their names.

Possible distinction from the bishop of Worcester's manor and supposed palace at Hampton Lucy (Warwickshire)?

This Hampton is also on Avon – the Stratford Avon – and is referred to as *Hampton super Avene* in 1290.

In that very year bishop Godfrey Giffard was pursuing controversial reforms in his diocese along the lines of the college of Westbury-on-Trym (which parish included Shirehampton). The bishop therefore had a major interest in both Westbury and Hampton (Lucy), and must have been aware of his two separate Hamptons on their two separate Avons.

His diocesan officers may have sought to distinguish them by name at some time between the reorganization of Hampton (Lucy) in 1290 and the first record of *Shernyhampton* in 1325.

# Why (2)?, *sherny*

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Middle English *sherni* 'dungy', from *shern* '(esp.) cow-dung'

(a.) Insult?

(b.) Allusion to fertility from large cattle-grazing grounds in the saltmarsh?

Take your pick.

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The issue  
remains  
current



# Problem with any *sherni/sharni* explanation

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*sharn* and *sharni* were becoming obsolete by the end of the Middle English period (15thC) in the south of England and retreating to become dialect words of the north of England and southern Scotland

so it is unclear that either would have had any currency in Gloucestershire at this period

which means that any attempt to explain the later developments as euphemism runs into difficulties

(and obsolescence of the word doesn't mean the name would necessarily change)

# Euphemism vs. phonology?

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In any case, why should euphemism be felt necessary precisely in the 1480s after at least 150 years of uninhibited usage?

Nevertheless, in the 1480s two new spelling-types emerge.

They share the loss of medial <n>: *Shirehampton* (*Shyrehampton* 1480) and *Sherehampton* (1486).

(Both of these show sub-variants, but most can be allocated to one of these two types.)

A case of lexical replacement by other current words?

# Phonological or semantic factors?

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A complication for any lexical replacement idea is the fact that there might be a purely phonological reason for the loss of the medial <n>. But even so, there is also no reason why the loss of [n] should have the effect of lengthening the originally short vowel in *Shern-*, as is required by the entire subsequent development of the name.

We might, therefore, point to both cultural-lexical and phonological motivations for the change away from *sherni/sharni* without being able to build a knock-down argument in favour of either.



# Folk-etymology? *Shirehampton*

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The spellings with <i> open the possibility of association with Middle English *shīre* or *shīr*, which has a long vowel.

Middle English has two possibly relevant words: noun ‘county’; adjective ‘bright’, ‘clear’, ‘pure, perfect’, and also, after 1398, ‘thin, scanty’. OED notes that the adjective is related to *sheer* by *ablaut*.

Why might a place be distinguished as ‘county Hampton’? The first time Shirehampton was administratively independent in any sense was when it became a parish in 1844. [Pill Ferry crosses the county boundary ...]

*shīr(e)* ‘bright’ might appear a morale-boosting replacement for ‘dungy’, but this sense was defunct by the fourteenth century except in northern dialects (including Scots).

# Folk-etymology? *Sherehampton* (1)

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The form which predominates in the 16thC-17thC, to be replaced eventually by *Shirehampton*.

Association with *sheer* noun and adjective can quickly be dismissed.

‘change of direction, swerve’ and ‘the fore-and-aft upward curvature or rise of the deck or bulwarks of a vessel; the curve of the upper line of a vessel as shown in vertical section’ do not emerge till the late 17thC, whilst the adjectival sense ‘abrupt (of slopes)’ is not found before Wordsworth in 1800.

We also find ‘bright, shining’ and ‘thin, insubstantial’, ‘diaphanous’ in the 16thC, and a case might be made that these meanings emerge from a conflation of *sheer* and *shire*, based on a confusion with or a dialectally triggered adaptation of the word *shir(e)*; that is, *sheer* is identical to an archaic pronunciation of *shire* before the operation of the Great Vowel Shift. So at the time in question, *sheer* [ʃi:r] might have been understood either as the newly fashionable pronunciation of *sheer* or as an old-fashioned one of *shire*. (Might depend on your view of how chainshifts and dialect borrowing operate.)

# Folk-etymology? *Sherehampton* (2)

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[BTW: Wordsworth's "Hart-leap Well", line 50: ("... it was at least/Four roods of sheer ascent ..."). The OED seems questionable; this is compatible with the 'pure, nothing but' sense rather than a topographical description, but this widely-read context may have allowed the inference of a new sense 'abrupt' which then gained currency.]

In the end, association with the meanings of neither *shire* nor *sheer* looks convincing.

# Well, which story, then?

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So possibly *Sherni-*, *Sharni-* was euphemized, but it is unclear that euphemism would have been triggered by 1500 because the toxic word was already obsolescent in southern England.

The loss of [n] may have been a contributory factor, but the loss of [n] would not have triggered the lengthening of the preceding vowel which is universal in the later record.

Weaker: the loss of [n] would have produced a form which could have been associated with the long-vowelled words meaning 'county' or 'bright', despite the difference of vowel length between the older form and these. The 'bright' word, unusually, could have two distinct pronunciations because of the conflation of two distinct but related words – though the initially dominant form *Shere-* would have been identical to the archaic, recessive, pre-Great Vowel Shift pronunciation of the form *Shire-*.

Any lexical replacement theory is compromised by the fact that any positive senses or associations of the new form, whether *shire* or *shere*, were obsolescent in southern England and restricted to the north by the time they were adopted, and that the negative sense of *sharni* was also on the way out.

# Possible phonemic alternation?

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*Shire-* and *Shere-* spellings were truly equivalents: shown convincingly by two local records close together in time in the same source, John Smythe's ledger (Vanes 1975):

- *Allsson Deane of Sherehampton wedo* 1539
- *Allson Smythe of Shirehampton wyddo* 1542

Or are these alternative orthographic solutions to a single pronunciation (range, diffuse target)?

# Sir Ralph Sadleir

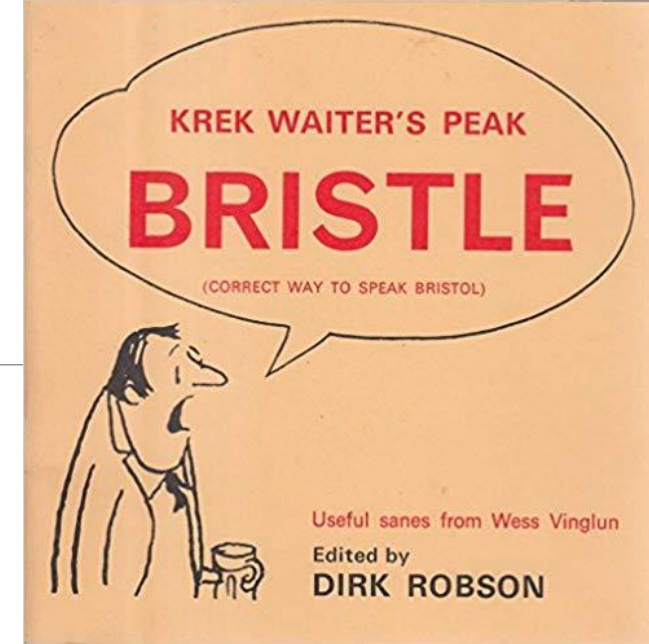
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At the dissolution of the monasteries (1540s), Westbury College was granted at a knock-down price to Sir Ralph Sadleir, Henry VIII's Secretary of State. He was a kleptocrat, reputed, at the end of his life, to be the richest commoner in England.

Did he and his have a role in cementing (not creating) the new pronunciation(s)?

# *Shirehampton* and *Shire* – and how to pronounce them

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Known colloquially as *Shire*, despite the fact that the full name is stressed on the second syllable. This abbreviation could not have happened until alternative pronunciations had been eliminated. It seems to be mid-twentieth century.

But *Shrampton*, with first-syllable reduction dependent on second-syllable stress, is included in “Robson”’s “dictionary” (1970). If it ever existed, it could be a reduced form of either *Shirehampton* or *Sherehampton*.

# Twist 1: *Shirehampton* as a surname for 99 years

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I, WILLIAM BRUFORD SHRIMPTON, of “Ninehams Gables,” Caterham, in the county of Surrey, hereby give notice, that I have assumed and intend henceforth upon all occasions and at all times to sign and use and be called and known by the surname of “Shirehampton” in lieu of and substitution for my present surname of “Shrimpton,” and that such intended change or assumption of name is formally declared and evidenced by a deed poll under my hand and seal dated this day, and enrolled in the Central Office of the Supreme Court of Judicature on the 22nd September, 1915. In testimony whereof I hereby sign and subscribe myself by such my intended future name.—Dated the 13th day of September, 1915. WILLIAM BRUFORD SHIREHAMPTON.



# Twist 2: Shirehampton in Manchester (1)

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That's Manchester, Jamaica.

A plantation; now a thin scatter of houses and a burial ground, but it was a venue for the petty sessions of Manchester parish in 1857.

Cundall (1909): “Many names of townships and properties have been translated from the old country [...]”

Cassidy (1988): “A whole chapter might be written on the [English, RC] names of plantations ...”, but regrettably he didn't write it.

# Twist 2: Shirehampton in Manchester (2)

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Shirehampton plantation is recorded in archaic spellings long after these ceased to be normal in England. In Bristol *Sheerhampton* (along with *Sherehampton*) peters out during the 17thC, though it maintains a sporadic existence into the nineteenth. But in Jamaica *Sheerhampton* (1811 [the first official list of plantations in the island] and 1816) and *Shirehampton* (1817).

This may indicate that the pronunciation with /jɪ:r-/ remained current in Jamaica and perhaps also in Gloucestershire, if a single 1807 burial record from nearby Almondsbury can be trusted.

It might also be taken to imply that the variation *Sheerhampton* / *Shirehampton* may have been spelling-variation for schwa, which in the long run gives way to a modern spelling-pronunciation: contrary to my previous argument that the distinction may be a genuine phonological one, but the idea might be supported by 16thC Shirehampton records (ref. the widows *Alison*).

## Twist 2: Shirehampton in Manchester (3)

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It is impossible to decide whether, in 19thC Jamaica, *Shirehampton* and *Sheerhampton* were just alternative spellings of a name with a reduced form [ʃɪ(r)-] or [ʃə(r)-] as the first syllable.

Such a form would have made the leap made by William Shrimpton in changing his surname easier to manage. A despatch of 1831/2 quoted in a New York newspaper suggests local loss of /h/ in the name, which would make his leap even easier. See “the Shirampton tank” in the *Kingston Gleaner* [online archive] (1923), and “Sherampton in Manchester”, *Gleaner* (1956).

# Summing up and wider issues

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So – we’ve explored:

(1) the complications involved in understanding the phonological, orthographical, morphological and lexical development of a particularly difficult place-name (an etymological and philological matter)

(2) the complications involved in the history of the naming of the place in question (an onomasiological matter)

\*(3) practical consequences of different (mis)understandings of the place-name at different points in history (a historiographical matter), especially the relationship with a French abbey

(4) the historical transfer of this name into another name category (a semasiological matter)

I hope you’ve enjoyed the “pleasures of travelling unexpected byways in the history of onomastics and in cultural history”.

