

# The history of the word “beach”

Keith Briggs keith.briggs@bt.com

<https://keithbriggs.info>

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## Abstract

The OED first records “beach” in the sense ‘shore of the sea’ in 1600 (in Shakespeare), and offers no certain etymology. The OED has, however, ignored map evidence, which not only provides antedatings, but strongly suggests that the word was first used of a specific beach in Eastbourne in Sussex. This locality is recorded as *Beche* from the thirteenth century, and is derived from a word for a stream. The new etymology is thus the result of a slight metonymy, followed by the rare process of lexicalization, in which a proper noun becomes a common noun. Changes to the coastline, especially the growth of shingle banks, have played a role in this sense development. Evidence will be presented of the spread of this new word around the English coast soon after 1600.

## Norden's map of Orford Ness (Suffolk) 1601



John Norden (c.1547–1625), cartographer; MS map in Suffolk Archives (EE5).

# OED beach, *n.* (1887)

## beach, *n.*

Text size: **A**

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**Pronunciation:** Brit.  [bɪ.tʃ/](#), U.S.  [bɪtʃ](#)

**Forms:** 15– beach; also 15 *bach*, *bayche*, 16 *beatch*, 16–17 *baich*(e), 17 *beech*.

**Frequency (in current use):** ●●●●●●●●

**Etymology:** Origin unknown: apparently at first a dialect word, meaning, as it still does in Sussex, Kent, and the adjacent counties, the shingle or pebbles worn by the waves. Thence the transference of the term to the place covered by ‘beach,’ was easy for those who heard such phrases as ‘to lie’ or ‘walk on the beach,’ without knowing the exact significance. The French *grève* shows precisely the same transference. The spelling shows that the pronunciation in 16–18th cent. was /be:tʃ/. If Old English, the type would be \**bēce*. A derivation < Old Norse *bakki* ‘bank,’ which has been proposed (for sense 3), is not admissible phonologically: (compare *BACHE* *n.*). Another conjecture would derive *beach* < *bleach* < Old English *blāce*, < *blāc* white, with loss of *l*, of which there is however no evidence. ([Show Less](#))

1. (Usually *collective*, formerly occasionally with *plural*): The loose water-worn pebbles of the sea-shore; shingle.

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c1535 *Art Suruey* 28 The smooth hard beach on the Sea-shoares burnes to a purer white.

a1552 J. LELAND *Itinerary* (1711) VII. 118 A Banke of baches thrown up by the Se.

1566 A. EDWARDS *Let.* 26 Apr. in R. Hakluyt *Princ. Navigations* (1589) II. 377 Wee haled your barke ouer a barre of beach or peeble stones.

1597 J. GERARD *Herball* II. 249 Rowling pebble stones, which those that dwell neere the sea do call Bayche.

1627 J. SMITH *Sea Gram.* xii. 57 As many pebble stones or beatch as can there lie.

1721 J. PERRY *Acc. Stopping Daggengham Breach* 116 The Drift or Rolling of the Beach or Shingle along the Shore.

1875 W. D. PARISH *Dict. Sussex Dial.* 17 Shingle brought from the sea-coast is always called beach.

1884 COLE *Antiq. Hastings* 18 All that part between Cambridge Road and the sea is one mass of beach.

## Previous work

- OED 1887: “if OE, the type would be *bæce*”.
- A. H. Smith *English place-name elements* 1956: absent.
- Ekwall 1963: from OE *bæce*, *becce* ‘brook’.
- Kitson 1990: from OE *bæc* ‘shore (of a mere)’.
- Parsons, Styles, & Hough VEPN v.1 1997: absent as a headform; supports Kitson under headform *bæc*.
- Keith Briggs, *The etymology of ‘beach’*, *Notes & Queries* 66 (2019), 370–374.

## Ekwall 1963

in Langland, version C. A probable instance is *beche* in Owl and Nightingale (rhyming with *speche*).

*Bache* is common in the dialects of Wo, Chs, Db in the senses 'stream' and 'valley' and occurs in the special sense 'ditch' in West Yorkshire and 'sandbank within or near a river' in Somerset. The only trace of the word in the remainder of dialects is *beach* 'pebbles' found in Kent and Sussex, and evidently the source of MnE *beach* 'shore'. A sense-development from 'stream' to 'bed of a stream' and, in districts where the beds of streams were pebbly and tended to dry up in the summer, to 'pebbly bed' and 'pebbles' may well be supposed to have taken place.

E. Ekwall, *A problem of Old Mercian phonology in the light of West Midland place-names*, *Namn och Bygd* 51, 16–48.

## Kitson 1990

- <sup>18</sup> Gelling (1984.126-7) follows the OED in considering 'beach' a separate word of unknown origin. But if her etymologies of Fenland place-names are right and the topographic information of PN Hu 188-9 and 213 is also right, *baec* was used in the sense 'shore (of a mere)' at least as early as the twelfth century; in which case the most economical hypothesis would be that the element in the place-names is the common noun, that it already existed then and had the origin she postulates for the place-names, in the palatalized locative of *baec* which is certainly evidenced elsewhere.

Peter R. Kitson, *On Old English nouns of more than one gender*, *English Studies* 3, 185–221 at 199, fn.18.

## VEPN 1997

bæc

56

Gelling argues that several names in the fens of C, Hu and L (most of them are listed below) more probably derive from the palatalised locative *\*bece* than from *bæce*. Topographically these would be used of slight elevations in the fens (PNLand:126–7); Chisbridge Bk may be a further example, referring to a ridge of gravel. As Kitson points out (1990:199 n. 18), this locative *\*bece* could well then be the origin of ModE *beach*.

David N. Parsons, T. Styles, Carole Hough, *The vocabulary of English place-names: A–Box*.

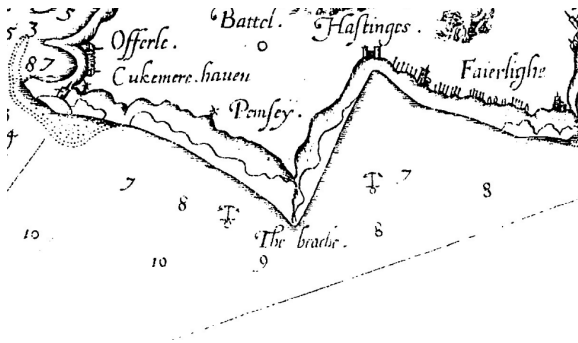


## *Beche* in Eastbourne

- *Robert atte Beche* 13C.
- *Beche* 1496.
- *the Beche* 1536.
- *the Beach* 1573.
- Beachy Brow 2020.

Mawer, Stenton, & Gover, *Place-Names of Sussex*, 427.

## The Mariners Mirrour 1588



The Mariners Mirrour of c.1588, map marking *The brache* at Beachy Head in the section headed *A PERFECT DESCRIPTION OF THE SEA COASTES BETVVEENE THE Isle of Wight and Douer.*

## Eastbourne 1610



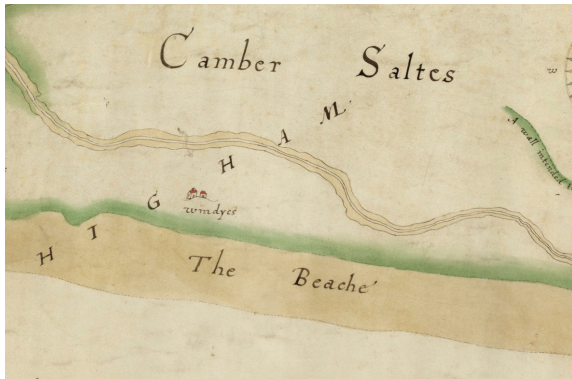
A detail from Speed's 1610 map of Sussex, showing The Beach, but not Beachy Head.

## Eastbourne 1695



A detail from Morden's 1695 map of Sussex, showing The Beach, but not Beachy Head.

## Camber c.1597



*The Beache* at Camber near Rye in a map of c.1597. Codrington Library CTM 417a/1.

## The proposed history of the word “beach”

- *Beche* in Eastbourne < OE *\*becja* ‘area of streams’ [\*].
- Meaning eventually lost; becomes purely a name.
- The name is extended to shingle area after its growth.
- The name is re-interpreted as a word for a shingle shore.
- The word in the new meaning is copied to Sussex c.1597, Suffolk 1601, Dorset 1710 (PN Do i.218).
- Was the spread linked to a new fashion for beach resorts?

[\*] Keith Briggs, *OE collective plant-names in place-names*, JEPNS 51 (2019) 5–15, at 12.

## Other examples of lexicalization of place-names

- palace (c.1300) < Latin *Palātium* (*Mōns Palātīnus*, hill in Rome).
- bridewell 'prison' (1583) < Bridewell (London)
- henge (1792) < Stonehenge
- morgue (1795) < Morgue (Paris)
- (shopping) mall (20C) < The Mall, Pall Mall (London)
- lido 'open-air swimming-pool' (20C) < Lido (Venice, < Latin *litus* 'shore').

Dates from OED s.vv.

## Welsh beaches/traethau cymraeg

- *traeth* < ?Latin *tract-* 'tract, extent, stretch of land'.
- *tywyn*, *towyn* (??related to *tywyn* 'brightness' (of the sand)).

*Geiriadur Pryfysgol Cymru*, *traeth*<sup>1</sup>; *tywyn*<sup>2</sup>.



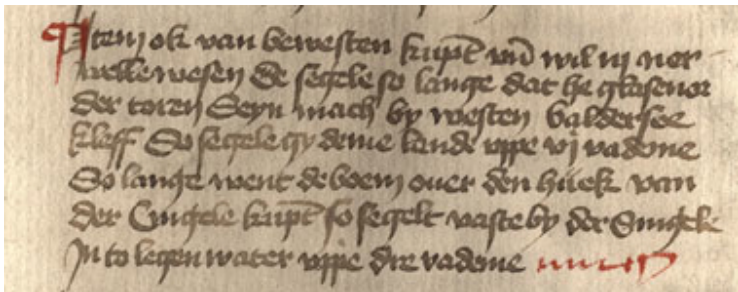
Backup slides

# Shingle

- Borrowed from Dutch or Low German *singel* 'sand-bank, harbour obstruction' by east-coast sailors.

Keith Briggs, *Two coastal terms of Continental origin: 'shingle' and 'dene'*,  
Notes & Queries 67 (2020), 323–326.

## singele in a Low German document



Das Seebuch (Commerzbibliothek Hamburg S72) 15C, f.37v: *Item ok van bewesten kumpt unde wil in ner welle wesen de segele so lange dat he glasevor der toren seyn mach by westen baldersee kleff so segele gy deme lande uppe vj vademe so lange went de boem ouer den huek van der **cyngele** kumpt so segelt vaste by der **singele** in to legen water uppe dre vademe.*

# Beachy Brow

