The two Ebbsfleets in Kent

Keith Briggs (pp. 5–9)

ABBREVIATIONS OF COUNTIES AND EPNS COUNTY SURVEYS

Co	Cornwall
Ha	Hampshire
He	Herefordshire
K	Kent
La	Lancashire
Nb	Northumberland
Sf	Suffolk
So	Somerset
Wt	Isle of Wight

CPNE	*Cornish Place-Name Elements.*
EPNE	*English Place-Name Elements*, Parts **1** and **2**.
PN BdHu	*The Place-Names of Bedfordshire and Huntingdonshire.*
PN Brk	*The Place-Names of Berkshire*, Parts **1**, **2** and **3**.
PN Bu	*The Place-Names of Buckinghamshire.*
PN Ca	*The Place-Names of Cambridgeshire and the Isle of Ely.*
PN Ch	*The Place-Names of Cheshire*, Parts **1–5**.
PN Cu	*The Place-Names of Cumberland*, Parts **1**, **2** and **3**.
PN D	*The Place-Names of Devon*, Parts **1** and **2**.
PN Db	*The Place-Names of Derbyshire*, Parts **1**, **2** and **3**.
PN Do	*The Place-Names of Dorset*, Parts **1–4**.
PN Du	*The Place-Names of County Durham*, Part **1**.
PN Ess	*The Place-Names of Essex.*
PN ERY	*The Place-Names of the East Riding of Yorkshire and York.*
PN Gl	*The Place-Names of Gloucestershire*, Parts **1–4**.
PN Hrt	*The Place-Names of Hertfordshire.*
PN Le	*The Place-Names of Leicestershire*, Parts **1–6**.
PN Li	*The Place-Names of Lincolnshire*, Parts **1–7**.
PN Mx	*The Place-Names of Middlesex* (apart from the *City of London*).
PN Nf	*The Place-Names of Norfolk*, Parts **1–3**.
PN Nt	*The Place-Names of Nottinghamshire.*
PN NRY	*The Place-Names of the North Riding of Yorkshire.*
PN Nth	*The Place-Names of Northamptonshire.*
PN O	*The Place-Names of Oxfordshire*, Parts **1** and **2**.
PN R	*The Place-Names of Rutland.*
PN Sa	*The Place-Names of Shropshire*, Parts **1–6**.
PN Sr	*The Place-Names of Surrey.*
PN St	*The Place-Names of Staffordshire*, Part **1**.
PN Sx	*The Place-Names of Sussex*, Parts **1** and **2**.
PN W	*The Place-Names of Wiltshire.*
PN Wa	*The Place-Names of Warwickshire.*
PN We	*The Place-Names of Westmorland*, Parts **1** and **2**.
PN Wo	*The Place-Names of Worcestershire.*
PN WRY	*The Place-Names of the West Riding of Yorkshire*, Parts **1–8**.

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Ebbsfleet is a modern form of the name of the assumed landing-place of the first Anglo-Saxons in east Kent, usually associated with the current Ebbsfleet Farm 5km north of Sandwich, on Pegwell Bay (grid reference TR 331630). But there is now a new town of Ebbsfleet Valley in west Kent, immediately south of Swanscombe and east of the Bluewater retail park (TQ 594733); the new railway station nearby is called Ebbsfleet International (TQ 613741). This note will attempt to explain why the same name has been applied to these two distinct places, despite the 75km separation (Figure 1).
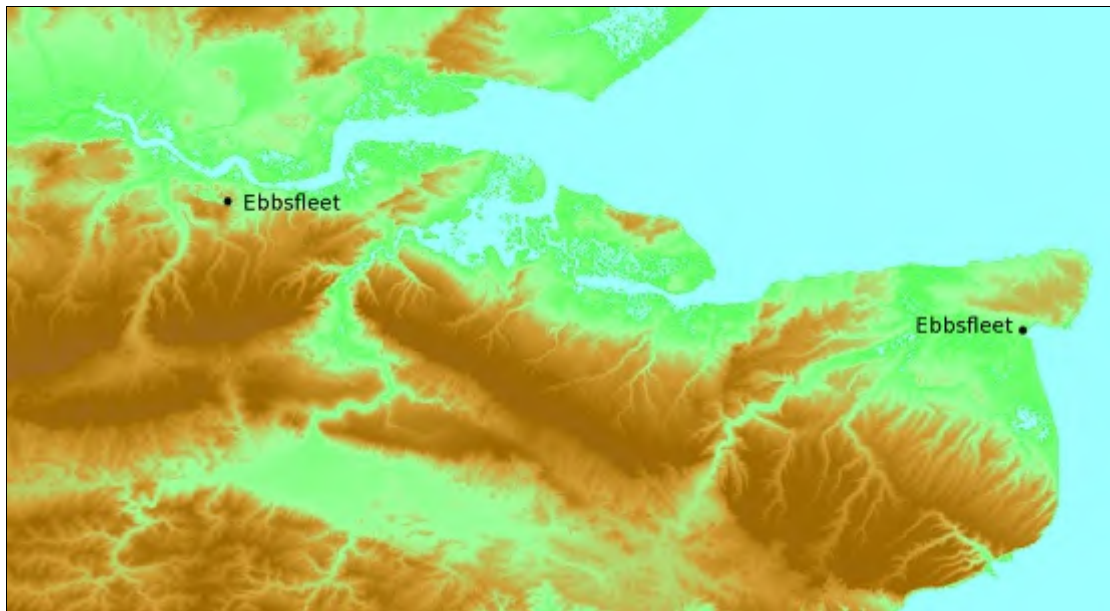

Figure 1. The two Ebbsfleets in Kent.

Ebbsfleet in east Kent

Garmonsway's translation of the Anglo-Saxon Chronicle (ASC) has under the year 449: "Hengest and Horsa . . . came to Britain at a place which is called *Ypwinesfleot* [Ebbsfleet, K]".[1] We note that, because there are two Ebbsfleets, Garmonsway's identification in square brackets is ambiguous.

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DEPN has an entry for Ebbsfleet, but also does not say which one is meant. This is despite the fact that Ordnance Survey maps have marked both Ebbsfleets since at least the 1870s (Figures 2, 3). The more recent place-name dictionaries do not list Ebbsfleet at all.[2] A recent work on early Kent by Brookes and Harrington does explicitly recognize the two Ebbsfleets, but gives an incorrect etymology 'Ebba's creek'.[3]
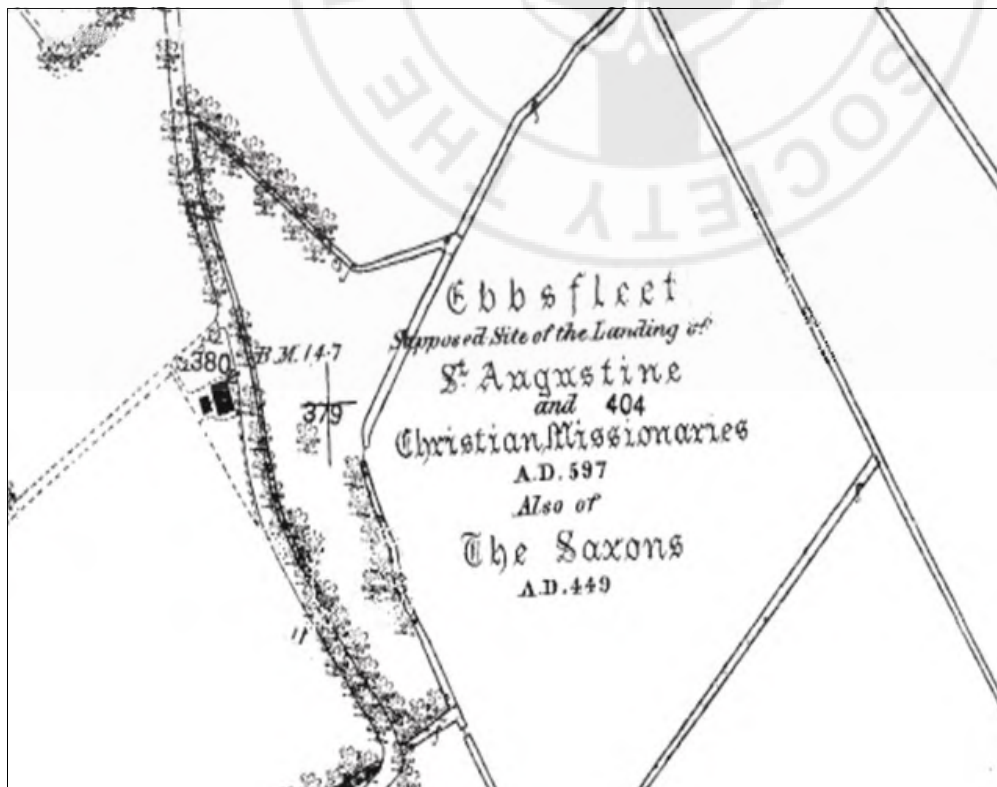
Figure 2. Ebbsfleet in east Kent on the 1872 OS 1:10,560 map.

This ancient Ebbsfleet has an uncertain etymology. An early form *æt Hyppeles fleote* appears in a charter of King Harold of 1037×1040 (Sawyer 1467). This makes Ekwall think it is 'hip-well fleet', the creek of the stream where (rose-)hips grow, and that the *Ypwinesfleot* in the ASC is a result of miscopying (DEPN s.n.). Wallenberg has a rather complete discussion of the name, and gives these additional early forms amongst others:[4]

Heopwines Fleot ASC A, 9th century, *de Heppesflete* 13th
de Eppesflete 13th
Ipelisflete 1240
Heppelesflete 1280
Heppelflete 1281

Wallenberg's preferred etymology is OE *hȳpel*, a derivative of *hȳpe*, *hēap* 'heap' recorded as a gloss for 'cumulus',[5] and so the referent is a small hill. He thinks another possibility is a word *hypel*, related to the words for 'hip (body part)' and 'rose-hip'. Cullen also reviews these alternative proposals but does not express a preference for any particular one.[6]

We perhaps should note that the equation of the landing-place in ASC with this place recorded from the 10th century onwards is not absolutely certain, especially as the ASC has only *-n-* forms such as *Heopwines Fleot*, while the later forms all have only *-l-* or zero in the middle syllable.

Ebbsfleet in west Kent

This name appears on old OS maps for the stream flowing north from Springhead, and joining the Thames at Northfleet (Figure 3). It does not appear at all on recent OS maps. It is also the site of the Roman settlement of *Vagniacae*.[7]
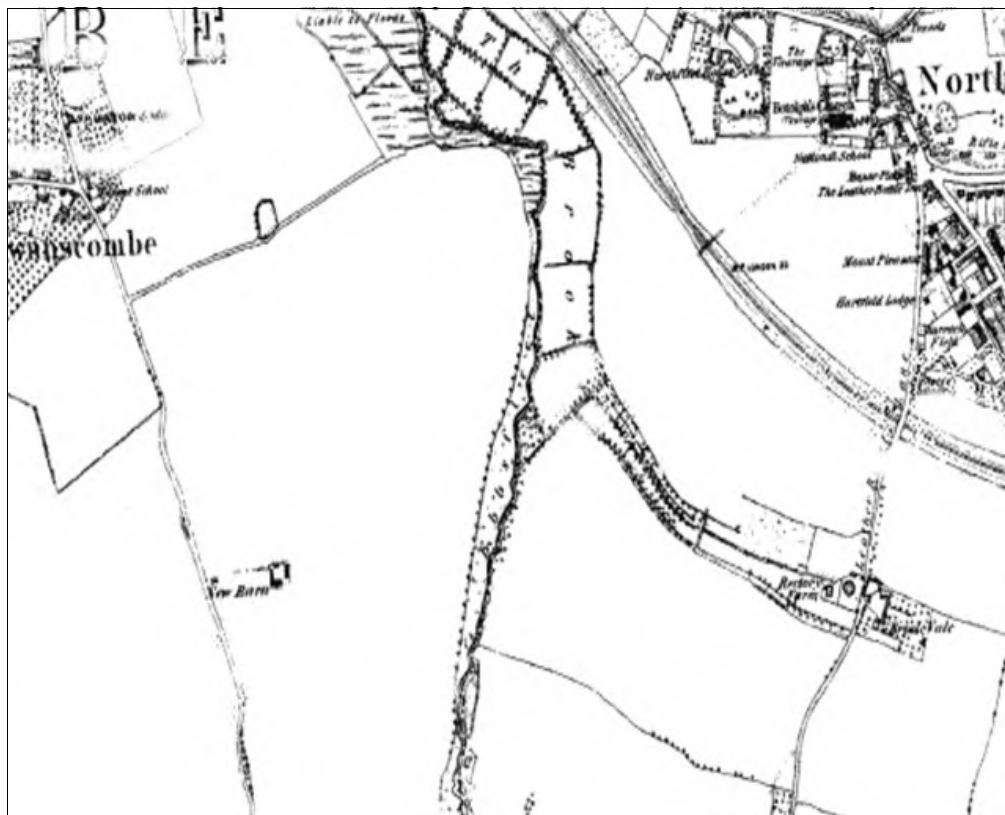

Figure 3. Ebbsfleet on the 1869 OS 1:10,560 map, for the stream flowing from Springhead at TQ 616727 to the Thames at TQ 620749.

I strongly suspect that this name was invented by the antiquary Thomas Philipott in the 17th century, because he believed that the landing-site of Hengest and Horsa was in west Kent, and this belief was based on the fact

that in 456 Hengest was at *Crecganford* (Crayford, ASC pp. 12–13), which is near this western Ebbsfleet, and because the name Northfleet already existed in this spot. Philipott thus generalized from the 'fleet' element. I cannot prove all of this, but there is good evidence for the invention of the name. It is also clear that Philipott associated the element *Ebb-* with the ebbing of tides. He was no doubt aware of the ASC form *Ypwinesfleot*, without knowing where this was located. We thus have an explanation of the modern *Ebb-*, which would otherwise be an irregular development.

Philipott's *Villare cantianum* of 1659 has this paragraph about Swanscombe, which I suspect contains the earliest application of the name Ebbsfleet to the west Kent stream:

> The tradition of the country is, that that valley which interposes between the hill, which ascends up to Northfleet, and that which winds up to Swanscamp, was once covered with water, and being locked in on each side with hills, made a secure road for shipping, which invited the Dane to make it a winter station for his navy; and the fame report will tell you likewise, of anchors which have been digged up about the utmost verge of that marsh, which is contiguous to the Thames, and certainly, if we consider the position of this valley, which is nothing but a chain of marshland, interlaced with a stream called Ebbs-fleet, which swells and sinks with the flux and reflux of the adjacent river, and the dimension of their ships, then at that time in use, which were not of any extraordinary bulk, this tradition is not improbable.[8]

This name might have disappeared if it had not been picked up by Hasted in his survey of Kent in 1797. Hasted's section on the parish of Northfleet has:

> PHILIPOTT says, it was the report of the country in his time, that the valley, through which the stream or fleet above mentioned flows, which he calls Ebbsfleet, was once covered with water, and being locked in on each side with hills, made a secure road for shipping, which induced the Danes to make it a winter station for their navy.[9]

Though no details are given of the Philipott work being cited, it must have been the *Villare cantianum* entry which we have just seen. Hasted's authority must have been enough for the Ordnance Survey to put the name Ebbsfleet on their maps, and thus we have the modern Ebbsfleet in west Kent.

Conclusion

The east Kent Ebbsfleet is certainly an ancient name, but it is of uncertain etymology. Its modern form has been influenced by the name of the western Ebbsfleet, which is itself an artificial creation of the 17th century. This western Ebbsfleet is an impostor, but destined to become better known than its prototype.

Acknowledgement

Notes

1. G. N. Garmonsway, trans., *The Anglo-Saxon chronicle*. London: Dent, 1972. A recent assessment of the Anglo-Saxon origin myth of Hengest and Horsa is that by Nicholas Brooks, *Anglo-Saxon myths: state and church 400–1066*. London and Rio Grande: The Hambledon Press, 2000, pp. 79–89.
2. A. D. Mills, *The Oxford dictionary of British place-names*. Oxford: OUP, 2003; V. Watts, *The Cambridge dictionary of English place-names*. Cambridge: CUP, 2004.
3. Stuart Brookes and Sue Harrington, *The kingdom and people of Kent AD 400–1066: their history and archaeology*. Stroud: The History Press, 2010, pp. 32–33.
4. J. K. Wallenberg, *Kentish place-names*. Uppsala: A.-B. Lundequistska Bokhandeln, 1931, pp. 320–322.
5. Louis Goossens, ed., *The Old English glosses of MS. Brussels, Royal Library, 1650 (Aldhelm's De laudibus virginitatis)*. Brussels: Paleis der Academiën, 1974, at line 2446: *in cumulum* : *on hypel*.
6. Paul Cullen, 'The place-names of the lathes of St Augustine and Shipway, Kent.' PhD thesis. Falmer: University of Sussex, 1997, pp. 531–2.
7. A. L. F. Rivet and C. Smith, *The place-names of Roman Britain*. London: Batsford, 1979, p. 485.
8. Thomas Philipott, *Villare cantianum: or Kent surveyed and illustrated*. London: William Godbid, 1659, pp. 306–7.
9. Edward Hasted, *The history and topographical survey of the County of Kent*. 4 vols. Canterbury: Simmons and Kirkby, 1778–1799, vol. 3, p. 302.

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