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For the first time, abbreviations for counties, languages, county place-name surveys, and other frequently-cited publications can be found in the back of this volume.

The Bibliography for 2017 will appear in *The Journal of the English Place-Name Society* 51 (2019).

Two Chiltern place-names reconsidered: Elvendon and Misbourne

Ann Cole

The meanings of Chiltern place-names were covered in comparatively early volumes (2, 23 and 24) of the Survey of English Place-Names. In the light of a greater understanding of topographical elements, combined with fieldwork and another look at the sources, it is evident that the meanings of Elvendon, Oxfordshire, and Misbourne, Buckinghamshire, should be revised.

*

The Chilterns, a range of chalk hills lying north-west of London, are rich in topographical place-names although rather poor in habitative ones. The place-names of the Buckinghamshire Chilterns are discussed in *The Place-Names of Buckinghamshire* by Mawer and Stenton (PN Bu), the first county volume to be published by the EPNS. The place-names of the Oxfordshire Chilterns are discussed in *The Place-Names of Oxfordshire* by Margaret Gelling (PN O). Since then some seventy further volumes have been published during which time scholars have learned a great deal more about the meanings of the elements that make up place-names. In particular, as far as Elvendon and Misbourne are concerned, the study of topographical place-names pioneered by Gelling has flourished, and the practice of fieldwork is well established. We have a much better understanding of topographical names than when PN Bu and PN O were written. It is not surprising that some of the interpretations suggested then need reconsidering now—Elvendon and Misbourne among them.

Elvendon, Oxfordshire (SU 624813)

Elvendon is not listed in DEPN, CDEPN or DBPN. Its first appearance in a place-name reference work is in PN O 52. Doris Mary Stenton's collection of early spellings of Oxfordshire places had been passed on to Margaret Gelling who was asked to edit them for the Oxfordshire volumes.

They comprised some 75% of the material amassed and used (PN O v). The spellings given in PN O for Elvendon (52, under Elvendon Fm) are:

Ulvendon’, *Vluindone* c. 1240 Gor, *Elveden*’, *Elvedune*, c. 1260 Gor *et freq* with variant spellings *Elvedene*, *Elvedon* to 1356 Gor, *Elvenden*’ c.1285, 1294 Gor, *Elvendene* 1287 Gor, *Elfintone* 1285 Ass, *Helfendene* c. 1290–1300 Gor (p), *Elve(n)deneslond* 1316 Gor, *Yelvendone* t. Hy 8 Valor, *Ilvington Farm* early 18th ParColl, *Ilvingden Farm* 1797 Davis.

On the basis of three of the first four generics ending in *-don*, *-done* and *-dune*, Gelling suggested a derivation from *dūn*, a hill term. However, there is no *Ulvendon*’ c.1240 mentioned in the Goring charters although there is a *Ulvenden*’ 1240. The comment ‘*et freq* with variant spellings *Elvedene*, *Elvedon* to 1356’ is misleading. There are plenty of *Elvedens* but only one *Elvedon*. So Gelling has based her interpretation on an error: there are only two spellings in *-done*, *-dune* up to c.1260 (see the appendix to this article for a full list).

Subsequent work has defined a *dūn* more precisely as a hill with a summit large enough and sufficiently gently sloping for a settlement to be built on top (LPN 164–74, esp. 164–67). Its distribution indicates it was often used in vales for settlement sites rising a little above ill-drained clayey lowlands. The map on p. 164 of LPN shows a concentration of them in the Vale of Aylesbury. The same map also shows how few of them occur in the Chilterns. People choosing a site for a settlement in such chalk uplands preferred a sheltered, warmer valley site with a possibility of a bourne providing a water supply in these dry chalklands. Settlements in such valley sites were often called *-denu*, or less often, *-cumb*. Map 21 in LPN (115) shows the frequency of *denu* names in the long, gently rising dip-slope valleys (Elvendon is marked with a ?). A larger scale map is to be found in Cole 1982 (74–75), but Elvendon is not marked on it because at that time it was still thought to be a *dūn*.

My subsequent extensive field work in the Chilterns confirmed what the maps had shown, that the little settlement of Elvendon Priory was in an unspoilt, typically long valley with a road running its length from the Thames-side town of Goring eastwards into the uplands of the south Chilterns—an absolutely typical Chiltern *denu*. During the writing of LPN Gelling and I had reached an impasse over the meaning of Elvendon; she maintaining it was a *dūn* on the basis of the spellings and I maintaining it was a *denu* on the evidence of the topography, particularly as there is no *dūn*-shaped hill to be found anywhere near. I think the matter can be finally

resolved by looking again at the Goring charters from which the spellings were culled: a list of the spellings found in the charters is appended. Presentation of this fuller evidence shows that the earliest spellings are not in fact those given in PN O upon which Gelling based her interpretation, but are *Ulvedene* 1221–22, and *Ulveden'*, *Vluindone* 1240, suggesting a derivation from *denu*. Looking further down the list it will be seen that *-den*, *-dene*, *-den'* spellings far outnumber the *-don*, *-don'*, *-dune* spellings, by fifty-three to four. A derivation from *denu* is to be preferred on a linguistic basis as well as a topographical one. In the light of the information presented here for the first time, the entry for Elvendon in the revised edition of LPN (2014: 293) was changed. It now reads 'Elvendon Priory, in an excellent *denu*-type valley, was formerly thought to be an example of *dūn* but is now known to be a *denu* thanks to the recent discovery of earlier spellings.'

Turning to the specific element, in PN O 52, Gelling interpreted it as OE (*i*)*elfen*, translating it as 'fairy', but in *Signposts to the Past* (Gelling 1978: 150) she refers to Elvendon as 'elf hill'. Smith in EPNE 149 offers 'an elf, a fairy' as the translation of OE *elf*, and cites Elveden Sf as an example. Ekwall, in DEPN, disagrees, writing that the meaning of Elveden Sf is 'swan valley' from OE *elfet denu*. Later, in CDEPN, Watts writes 'Probably "elf valley" ... alternatively this might be "swan valley".' More recently, Briggs and Kilpatrick (Dict Sf 49) write 'most likely "valley of the elves"'. OE *elf* is not commonly found in settlement names, but occurs in several minor names in Cu whose place-name volume (PN Cu) translates it as 'elf'. The consensus seems to be that ModE 'elf' is the best translation of the limited number of examples of OE *elf* in place-names. It would seem appropriate therefore to describe Elvendon O as 'elf valley'.

The introduction to the Goring charters describing the valley comments 'It may further be added that there is a very good echo all through the valley; a sure indication of the presence of elves, dwarfs, gnomes and fairies' (Gambier-Parry 1931–32: xxviii–xxix). A magical place!



Figure 1: Looking up-valley at Elvendon. This and all other photographs in the article are from slides by the author.



Figure 2: Anthills on Muswell Hill.

**River Misbourne, Great Missenden, Little Missenden,
Buckinghamshire (SP 900010, SU 921990)**

The River Misbourne is a chalk stream flowing down the dip-slope of the Chilterns. It is supplied by springs where the water table intersects the surface. Since the water table is higher in spring and lower in autumn, the point at which springs break out varies—as does the flow—with the season. In more recent times the pattern has been disrupted by London’s demand for water. The abstraction caused the lowering of the water table and resulted in the springs and much of the channel in the upper part of the valley running dry even in spring time. In recent years abstraction has been reduced so that the stream flow is better, although not as good as it once was. A typical OE *burna* ‘stream’, such as the Misbourne, in chalk country has very clear water; it runs over gravel or sand where the flow is vigorous although silt gets trapped at the stream edges by the vegetation. The water is alkaline and so the aquatic vegetation needs to be lime-tolerant. Water crowfoot (*Ranunculus fluitans*) is typical.

The Misbourne and Great and Little Missenden are listed in several place-name dictionaries. The editors agree that the generics are *burna* and OE *denu* ‘main valley’. It is the qualifier—the ‘Mis-’ and the ‘Missen-’ parts of the names—that have given rise to debate. Mawer and Stenton in PN Bu 152–53, s.v. Great and Little Missenden, suggest that the ‘Mis-’ could derive from *Myssa*, a personal name. Ekwall in ERN 294 also suggests a personal name *Myssa* or from OE *mos* with a *-jōn* suffix. In DEPN he writes that it is instead from OE **mysse*, a derivative of OE *mos*. Watts in CDEPN (s.n. Misbourne) writes ‘Possibly “river called Mysse, the mossy one”’ and ‘possibly an old r.n. **Mysse* < OE *mos* ‘moss’ + suffix *-jōn*’, and under Missenden writes ‘OE **myssen* “growing with moss” + suffix *-jōn*’. In LPN (121) Gelling suggests it is a noun **mysse*, with an *-n* genitive in Missenden. There are no entries for Misbourne or Missenden in Gelling 1984 or DBPN.

The consensus seems to be that ‘mis-’ comes from **mysse*, a derivative of OE *mos*. Problems and confusions arise when attempts are made to translate **mysse*. Ekwall in DEPN writes:

... OE **mysse*, which may be identical and synonymous with Dan *mysse* ‘water arum’ (*Calla palustris*) from a base **musjōn*. Dan *mysse* is related to Sw *missne* ‘water arum’ or ‘buckbean’ (*Menyanthes trifoliata*) which goes back to earlier *mysne*.



Figure 3: The Misbourne in early summer, with rank stream-side vegetation.



Figure 4: The Misbourne in early spring, with water flooding the stream-side vegetation.

The problem with this entry is that water arum, *Calla palustris*, is not native to Britain, but was introduced in 1861 (Clapham, Tutin and Warburg 1962: 1051). It could not have been growing in the Misbourne when the name was coined. Buckbean, also known as bog bean, is a plant which likes to grow in slightly acid conditions. It is therefore highly unlikely to be flourishing in a chalk stream.

Watts, in CDEPN s.n. Missenden, seems to be echoing DEPN:

The exact sense of **mysse* is unknown; the word has to be a derivative of *mos* ‘moss, lichen, bog’ and cognate with Dan *mysse* ‘water arum or marsh marigold (*Caltha palustris*),’ Swed *missne* ‘water arum’ or ‘buckbean (*Menyanthes trifoliata*)’. According to Jnl 2.27 [Dodgson and Khaliq 1970: 27] water arum (*Caltha palustris*) is an alien species introduced from the continent and the most likely plant is the buckbean or bogbean which grows in spongy bogs and marshes and is recorded among the flora of Bucks.

A. H. J. Baines (in Dodgson and Khaliq 1970: 27) discusses Ekwall’s entry and notes that water arum (*Calla palustris*) is an introduced species, which Watts repeats. However, Watts introduces another species, *Caltha palustris*, the marsh marigold, apparently confusing *Calla* and *Caltha*. He accepts the buckbean suggested by Ekwall and confirmed by Baines. The latter records it as growing at Denham and Chalfont St Peter. These are well downstream of Missenden, and where the Chalk has disappeared beneath London Clay and its superficial deposits of clays and gravels. This has produced a soil in which buckbean can grow. Local botanists tell me that buckbean is very rare in Buckinghamshire.

It is curious that Dan *mysse* and Sw *missne* are said to refer to two such different plants as water arum and buckbean. Watts only complicates the issue by adding marsh marigold—a third option! Mills, DBPN, very wisely, is more cautious, interpreting Missenden as ‘valley where water plants or marsh plants grow’. Meanwhile, in LPN under Missenden (121), Gelling comments concerning **mysse*: ‘a derivative of *mēos* “moss” might be considered, with a meaning such as “mossy place”’.

Perhaps **mysse* does not refer to a particular species of plant but to a type of vegetation. It therefore behoves us to look at the kinds of places that ON *mosi*, OE *mos* and OE *mēos*, the three most relevant elements, refer to. *Mosi* and *mos* tend to be used further north than *mēos*. *Mosi* and *mos* refer to boggy places, many of them with peat deposits. *Mēos* is more prevalent in the south and there are several examples not far distant from the Misbourne. See LPN 60–61 for fuller discussion, but note that since

this was written, fieldwork at Misbrookes Farm in Capel Sr reveals that the brook flows through squelchy ground.

The first point to note is that none of the three terms is thought to refer to a particular plant species. ModE ‘moss’ is an ambiguous word referring to areas of marshland like the Lancashire mosses as well as to the little cushions of moss growing on walls, roofs and in damp, shady places, rather than a particular species. Perhaps **mysse* does not refer to a particular species either; the water arum and the buckbean are not relevant in Chiltern contexts (although of course the buckbean is likely to be growing in many of the peaty bogs that *mos* and *mosi* are linked to, but the presence of the plant is not the reason for the locality being called *mos* or *mosi*). As *mos* and *mosi* refer to boggy places so too may *mēos* and its derivative **mysse*.

Twenty miles north-west of Missenden is Muswell Hill O, near Brill, Bu (SP 640152). Gelling, PN O 185, says ‘it means “mossy spring”, from OE *mēos* and *w(i)elle*’. The hill’s geology is complex (hence its designation as an SSSI); it has resulted in the top of the hill and the lower slopes being well-drained and cultivable and ridge and furrow can be seen. There is a zone in-between, where springs and seeps break out all over the hillside, easily seen because of the tufts of juncus growing in them. Some areas are a forest of anthills, an indication that the land has not been recently (and perhaps never was) cultivated (see Fig. 2). It is squelchy ground.

Five and a half miles to the south-west of Muswell Hill is a *meoslege* mentioned in the Beckley charter of 1005–12, S 943 (see PN O 484). The boundary here runs downhill past a couple of springs producing patches of squelchy ground with a flora of moisture-loving plants (SP 556113).

In the Chilterns, at Moor Common, near Lane End, is a Muzwell Farm from *mēos wielle* (PN Bu 177). This is in chalk country but due to down-faulting a patch of London Clay and Reading Beds is preserved in a hollow. There are springs on the sides of the hollow and it has a marshy floor: Muzwell refers to these springs. In all these fairly local examples, OE *mēos* refers to wet, squelchy ground. Is this paralleled in the case of Misbourne?

As explained above, the flow of the Misbourne is not as great as it used to be. Near Little Missenden, from its church upstream to the bridge, I have seen several times fields where the bourne has flooded the rank streamside vegetation of tall grasses, rushes and reeds, producing a zone of marshy, squelchy ground (see Figs 3 and 4 for photographs of the Misbourne in early spring and summer). This is not a feature I have noted beside other *burnas*; whether this is due to never having been by them at the right time of year, or whether it is because of management or whether it is because the Misbourne is unusual in behaving this way while other *burnas* are not,

I do not know, but I would suggest that **mysse* does not refer to a particular plant species—certainly not to water arum or buckbean—but to the marshy state of the ground.

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**Appendix: Spellings of Elvendon from the Goring charters
(Gambier-Parry 1931–32)**

Spellings are given in chronological order, with a separate entry for each attestation, even where it is identical with another. A page reference from Gambier-Parry 1931–32 follows each spelling.

<i>Waltero de Ulvedene</i>	1221–22 (6)	<i>Elvedene</i>	1331 (140)
<i>Waltero de Ulvenden'</i>	c.1240 (7)	<i>Elvedene</i>	1333 (105)
<i>Waltero de Vluindone</i>	c.1240 (12)	<i>Elvedene</i>	1333 (105)
<i>Waltero de Elveden'</i>	c.1260 (10)	<i>Elvington</i>	1338–39 (108)
<i>Waltero de Elvedune</i>	c.1260 (12)	<i>Elveden'</i>	1345 (131)
<i>Waltero de Elvenden</i>	c.1260 (26)	<i>Elveden'</i>	1349 (113)
<i>Waltero de Elvenden'</i>	c.1270 (18)	<i>Elveden'</i>	1350–51 (114)
<i>Waltero de Elvenden'</i>	c.1285 (25)	<i>Elvenden'</i>	1350–51 (115)
<i>Waltero de Elvenden'</i>	c.1285 (25)	<i>Elvenden</i>	1351 (155)
<i>Waltero de Elvenden'</i>	c.1285 (26)	<i>Elveden</i>	1352 (156)
<i>Waltero de Elvenden</i>	c.1285 (26)	<i>Elvedon</i>	1356 (121)
<i>Elvenden'</i>	1294 (33)	<i>Elvendene</i>	1363–64 (185)
<i>Elvenden</i>	1294 (34)	<i>Elveden'</i>	1374–75 (188)
<i>Elvendene</i>	1294 (34)	<i>Elveden'</i>	1374–75 (189)
<i>Elvenden'</i>	1308 (64)	<i>Ilvynden</i>	1377 (189)
<i>Elvenden'</i>	1308 (65)	<i>Elvenden</i>	1405 (208)
<i>Elvenden'</i>	1314 (77)	<i>Elvenden</i>	1406 (208)
<i>Elvenden'</i>	1314 (78)	<i>Elveden'</i>	1413 (212)
<i>Elvindene</i>	1315 (161)	<i>Elveden'</i>	1413 (213)
<i>Elvesdenegrof</i>	1315–16 (80)	<i>Elvenden</i>	1424–25 (216)
<i>Elvedensgrof</i>	1315–16 (81)	<i>Ilvenden</i>	1445 (222)
<i>Elvesdenegrof</i>	1315–16 (81)	<i>Ilvenden</i>	1476 (225)
<i>Elvendenes lond</i>	1315–16 (82)	<i>Ilvenden'</i>	1476 (226)
<i>Elvedeneslond</i>	1315–16 (82)	<i>Elvenden</i>	1484 (227)
<i>Elvendeneslond</i>	1316 (83)	<i>Elvenden</i>	1484 (227)
<i>Elvendene</i>	1316 (83)	<i>Ilvynden</i>	1487 (228)
<i>Elvendeneslond</i>	1316 (84)	<i>Elvynden</i>	1493 (229)
<i>Elvendeneslond</i>	1316 (84)	<i>Elvyndon'</i>	1493 (230)
<i>Elvendeneslond</i>	1316 (85)		
<i>Elvendenes lond</i>	1317 (86)		