

# English Origins and Sources I

By George Redmonds

One of the most rewarding aspects of being a local and family historian is that unexpected items arrive in the post from fellow enthusiasts -- items that not only throw new light on a name or place but also prompt further research.

Such an item was a copy of Peter Nelstrop's privately printed family history<sup>1</sup>. It was gratifying to learn that his interest in the surname had been intensified by references to it in my own volume on West Riding surnames<sup>2</sup>. My interest in Nelstrop had been purely objective, for I had been studying the evolution and early history of surnames in Swillington, a parish that lies a few miles to the east of Leeds, and I had simply noted that a man named de Nelesthorne was listed as a resident there in a subsidy roll of 1335. As there were other examples of the surname in that locality, in the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries, it seemed likely that it had its origins in that neighbourhood and was already hereditary by that time. The 'de' makes it clear that it derived from a place-name but, unfortunately, there appeared to be no such place locally; nor indeed was I able to find any place named 'Nelsthorpe' in the numerous volumes of the English place-name series -- the researcher's first and most complete source of information on that subject<sup>3</sup>.

Peter Nelstrop's account of the name concentrates on the period from about 1500. It paints a convincing picture of the family's modest expansion in Yorkshire, notably in and around Ackworth, while also providing evidence of two significant migrations to two localities where the surname is now concentrated, one into Lincolnshire in the south-east and another to Stockport, near Manchester, in the west. Although his book has some weaknesses, particularly where sources are concerned, it contains useful maps and is well illustrated with pictures of Nelstrop homes, Ackworth church and a windmill once in the family's possession.

Other topics of interest include some discussion of the name Nelthorpe, a significant variant spelling, and reference to a certain Rowland Nelstrop, said to have sailed with John Smith and to have been involved in the establishment of Jamestown. Peter Nelstrop wisely leaves open the vexed question of the surname's origin and meaning, although he has gathered some of the earliest references and investigated one or two of the possibilities. It is that unsolved origin which has prompted me to re-examine the records and offer an explanation -- one I believe has significant and more general implications.

In a particularly important township gazetteer for West Yorkshire, there is an illuminating comment on the parish of Swillington, the village where the surname de Nelesthorne was recorded in 1335. It was said that "the growth of the modern village of Swillington has obscured the fact that in the mid-nineteenth century Swillington church was an isolated structure. The settlement pattern of the township was one of small scattered groups of houses, a number of which bore names containing the element *thorp*, of which Gamblethorpe and Hollinthorpe are two examples."<sup>4</sup> Other examples are Bullerthorpe and Leventhorpe but, as was said earlier, there is no evidence of a place named Nelsthorpe. However, closer examination of the way in which the suffix *thorp* was being used in the Middle Ages points to a possible explanation for that omission.

This important place-name element is known to have a Scandinavian origin and to mean a secondary settlement or outlying hamlet. It is particularly common in those areas settled by the Danes in the ninth century. However, *thorp* remained in use as a word for a considerable time after the Norman Conquest, continuing to describe new secondary settlements, many of which were established in the twelfth and thirteenth centuries, when the population was expanding. It has been said, for example, that Oakerthorpe in Derbyshire "was probably named from Ulkel, whose son Robert was living there in 1224" -- proof that such places "could be the personal property of one man and be named after him"<sup>5</sup>.

An even more explicit example occurs in an Inquisition at Dringhouses near York, where "Thomas Bustard held one messuage with eight bovates of land in Bustardthor" in 1275. Thomas was a direct descendant of Osbert Bustard of Thorpe near York, living in ca.1180. In this case the *thorp* came to be known as Bustardthorpe through its association

with the Bustard family<sup>6</sup>. The editor noted that the place-name was no longer in use and the precise location of the settlement was not known.

I had already noted the influence of this type of development when discussing the origin of *Fawthorpe* and *Fawthrop*. Both of these names derive from an unidentified 'Fauvelthorpe' in Broughton near Skipton, referred to in the fourteenth century, when the *thorp* belonged to the Fauvel family<sup>7</sup>. Now it seems that Nelstrop, a typical Yorkshire derivative of Nelesthорpe, is likely to have a similar origin, commemorating one of the outlying hamlets in Swillington, which now appears to be "lost." Of course it may be that the *thorp* was given a new prefix after the de Nelesthорpes moved away from the parish, and that it survives as either the *Gamblethorpe* or *Hollinthorpe* mentioned above, neither of which has been noted before the nineteenth century.

As a Robert de Neulesthорp witnessed a local deed in 1294, along with Hugh de Swillington<sup>8</sup>, it now seems likely that the surname dates back to the thirteenth century and that the first element must be 'Neule' or 'Nele,' either as a forename or a family name. Without additional evidence it is difficult to identify the individual or family involved, but the signatures of *Hugone filio Noil* and *Thoma filio Nigelli* (Neal), which are among the witnesses to a Swillington charter of ca. 1180<sup>9</sup>, offer two possibilities.

## Footnotes

1. P. Nelstrop, *Racing the Nelstrops* (Hebden Bridge: privately printed, 1998).
2. G. Redmonds, *English Surnames Series, Yorkshire West Riding* (Phillimore, 1973).
3. For example, A. H. Smith, ed., *The Place-Names of the West Riding of Yorkshire*, 8 vols. (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1961).
4. M. L. Faull and S. A. Moorhouse, *West Yorkshire: an Archaeological Survey to A.D. 1500*, 3 vols. (West Yorkshire Metropolitan County Council, 1981).
5. A. H. Smith, ed., *English Place-Name Elements*, 2 vols. (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1970).
6. W. Brown, *Yorkshire Inquisitions*, I, The Yorkshire Archaeological and Topographical Association, Record Series, vol. 12 (1891).
7. G. Redmonds, *Surnames and Genealogy: A New Approach* (Boston: New England Historic Genealogical Society, 1997).
8. W. Brown, W., *Yorkshire Deeds*, I, The Yorkshire Archaeological Society, Record Series, vol. 39 (1909).
9. R. Holmes, *The Chartulary of St. John of Pontefract*, II, The Yorkshire Archaeological Society, Record Series, vol. 28 (1902).