English Origins and Sources III

By George Redmonds

After a recent lecture in California I was asked by one of the participants what the difference is between a shire and a county. As I explained that county was a French term, adopted under Norman rule as equivalent in meaning to the earlier English word shire, I realized that much of what the English take for granted in their history can be puzzling to others. The word shire was used in the Old English period to describe an administrative district, one ruled jointly by an `alderman' and a sheriff, the officers who presided in the shire-moot, that is the meeting or meeting-place for the shire. The title of sheriff, or shire-reeve was given to the chief officer of the shire.

Not all the shires became counties under the Normans, and those who travel around England or work with old documents will at times encounter names such as Hallamshire and Hexhamshire, which refer to former jurisdictions smaller than a county. Although shire survives in many county names, there are many others that do not have the suffix, ranging from Cornwall in the extreme south-west to Kent and Essex in the east and Northumberland and Cumberland in the far north.

The Domesday entry (1086) for Yorkshire is Eurewicscire, but by the 1400s forms such as le counte d'Everwyk were usual, reflecting the change described above. However, in this largest of the English shires there is an additional complication, for Yorkshire was formerly divided into three 'ridings' or `thirdings,' north, east, and west, whose boundaries converged on the city of York. The Scandinavians frequently divided large areas into three parts and `thirding' became riding when the initial `th' or `t' was lost, having coalesced with the final consonant of north, east, and west. Typical spellings that reflect this are Nortrithing (1198) and Northrithing (1240). The former Anglo-Saxon kingdom of Lindsey (Lincolnshire) was also subdivided into three parts by the Scandinavians and had north, south and west ridings, and the clear inference in both cases is that the divisions were made subsequent to the Danish settlement of 876. There was actually a period early in the history of New England when `riding' was used as a territorial name, and it is perhaps to be regretted that it did not survive.

Northumberland as a county covers a much smaller area than the old kingdom of Northumbria, which formerly consisted of the land north of the river Humber, the dividing line between Yorkshire and Lincolnshire, but the county name has been in use since the early twelfth century. There are two other northern counties with the suffix `land'--Westmorland, the district of the people who lived west of the moors, i.e. the uplands of the Northern Pennines, and Cumberland, the region of the `Cymry' or Welsh. The `Welsh' in this case were those Celts who were not subdued by the English of Northumbria until the seventh century. Other county names that commemorate Celtic tribes are Devon, referring to the `Dumnonii', and Cornwall, the place of the `Cornovii.' The suffix in Cornwall can be compared with Wales, for both derive from the Old English word for foreigners.

In this much fought-over corner of the island there are two more distinctive `folk-names,' both with the element `set,' which meant settlers or dwellers. Somerset was the area of the settlers around Somerton, the `summer dwelling' and Dorset was the area of the settlers around Dorn. This word is also a Celtic survival, meaning a sports place, and it is found in Dorchester, the county town.

On the eastern side of the country Celtic names are understandably rare, for it was there that the invading Anglo-Saxons landed. Nevertheless, there is the name Kent, `the land of the Cantii,' thought to be the name of a Celtic tribe but with a much-disputed meaning. East Anglia, where the Anglians first settled, is not a county name but a region, subdivided into Norfolk, the `northern people' and Suffolk, the `southern people,' whilst their contemporaries are remembered in Essex, Middlesex, and Sussex, respectively the territories of the East, Middle, and South Saxons. Wessex, the land of the West Saxons, was revived as a name by eighteenth-century antiquarians, but it has not survived as a county, despite its historical significance. Surrey, `the southerly district,' though a much less important name, identifies the land of the Saxons south of the Thames who were sandwiched between east and west.

In fact many of the Anglo-Saxon shires did not commemorate tribal divisions but were formed artificially and took their name from an important town or estate. Typical of these are the West Midland towns of Hereford, Stafford, and Shrewsbury, the last of these eventually giving rise to Shropshire. On the same pattern are the early Wessex

foundations of Hampshire (Southampton) and Wiltshire (Wilton) and also such East Midland names as Derbyshire, Leicestershire, and Nottinghamshire. These last three all lay within the Danelaw, and whereas the Anglo-Saxon shires were created for defence, the Danish shires were created around their army headquarters.

A few shire names have very distinctive histories. County Durham, as it is usually called, was created out of lands belonging to the Bishop of Durham, who effectively had sovereign powers. His territories were referred to as a palatinate, which was temporarily abolished during the Civil War and then revived after the Restoration, surviving well into the nineteenth century. Rutland, the tiniest county of all, probably came into being ca.1200, for it had that status in 1204 when it was granted by King John to Queen Isabella as dower. Before that the southern part of the territory had been part of Northamptonshire. Lancashire's distinction lies in the allusive quality of the name itself, which is a shortened form of `Lancastershire.' Lancaster means the `Roman fort on the river Lune,' and this is yet another example of a river name that goes back at least to the Celts and cannot be satisfactorily explained.

Much has been written recently about the `homes' of English surnames and the regions into which the country can still be divided. Genealogists can understand this regionalism far better if they come to terms with the historic divisions and differences that shaped Englishmen over the centuries. Not surprisingly, many of those differences have survived the sweeping boundary changes of the early 1970s.