

From squatters to landowners... this name has a story

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Visitors to Norwich often comment on the name of that rather important thoroughfare in our city, Unthank Road. The word Unthank seems to strike them as being unusual and even amusing. "Why is it called that?", they ask.

Well, it's a very long story, but it's called Unthank for a very good series of reasons. Originally, the road was called "Unthank's Road" – this was the 19th-century name – because it ran across land owned by the wealthy local Unthank family. When I was younger, I remember hearing older people talk of their memories of a prominent member of the family they called Colonel Unthank. He was born in Heigham, or Ham, as we say, but the family originally came from the north-east.

The first Unthank to make an appearance in Norwich was called William. He was born in 1721 in Northumberland; and it's interesting that the well-known contemporary folk-group The Unthinks, led by Rachel Unthank, also come from that part of the world.

But why was William named Unthank in the first place? Like many surnames,



■ Unthank Road was named after a wealthy local family - whose roots were far from grand.

Unthank was originally a place name. In mediaeval times, if a man called John moved from a place in Lincolnshire called Huckerby to go elsewhere, he might then be called "John (from) Huckerby" to distinguish him from other Johns. So we can assume that one of William's ancestors had grown up in a place called Unthank and then left it for somewhere else. There are several little villages called Unthank in England which he could have come from: in Leicestershire, Cumbria, Yorkshire and Derbyshire. But the most likely place in his case is one of two hamlets called Unthank in Northumberland, one near Haltwhistle and the other near Alnham.

But why are these villages called

Unthank? It's significant that they are all small, and are often referred to as hamlets. In Anglo-Saxon times they went by the term "Unthanc-es", which meant more or less what it said. People were living there "un-thank" – without acknowledging that the place belonged to someone else, so "without consent".

Every day when I walk into the city along Unthank Road, I can think that this major Norwich road owes its name ultimately to the fact that, a millennium and a half ago, at a spot somewhere in the Old English kingdom of Northumbria, some people, who were certainly far from being as wealthy as Colonel Unthank, started a squat.