

Why do we pronounce these place names differently?

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It's a source of some puzzlement to visitors to Norfolk that Reepham is Reef'm, but Deopham is Deep'm. Ass a rum'n, they might say, if they could speak Norfolk.

Well, yes, that is a rum'n – but actually it's quite easy to explain. In Deopham, the letter p belongs to the first part of the name, while the h belongs to the second part: it's Deop-ham. With Reepham, the combination of letters ph is just another way of writing f – and this f belonged to the first part of the word: the name was originally spelt Reefham.

In both cases, the -ham part of the name is the Anglo-Saxon word for home, homestead, village, or manor. It is typically found in the names of the very earliest Anglian settlements in our area, dating perhaps from as early as the 400s or 500s AD.

The Deop- part of Deopham probably means what it says: the most likely interpretation is that it means 'deep'. The Old English word *deop* meant 'a deep place'. One problem is that it was most often used

of deep places out to sea – 'a deep'. On the face of it, that seems to be rather odd, because Deopham is near Hingham, and nowhere near the sea. The explanation seems to be that Deopham is by the lake now called Seamere; and that lake was probably called Deop in Old English.

The Reef- part of Reepham is rather well understood. The name originally indicated that the settlement was a manor administered by a reeve – an Anglo-Saxon administrator. The word lives on in the modern word sheriff, which was originally shire-reeve – an officer who was in charge of a shire, and in the office of Town Reeve of Bungay. It also survives in the surname Reeves. The typical Norfolk form of the name is Reeve: in the 1886 British census, Reeve was more common in Norfolk and Suffolk than anywhere else in the country.

Rather neatly, retired journalist Terry Reeve has served (three times) as Bungay's Town Reeve.

We have the same problem of word division with the village names Martham, in the Broads, which is called Marth'm, and Wretham, in the Brecks, which is called Wrett'm. This is for the same sort of reason. The first element of Marth-am comes from the Old English word *mearth*, which meant marten – it was a place frequented by pine martens, which were common in England in Anglo-Saxon times. And the first half of Wret-ham comes from *wrætt*, which meant crosswort, a medicinal herb of the bedstraw family.



■ Retired EDP journalist Terry Reeve has held the office of Town Reeve of Bungay three times.

Picture: NICK BUTCHER