

Wee dram of whisky flows through one of our rivers

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You might be familiar with the well-known Scottish song which goes “Campbeltown Loch, I wish you were whisky”.

If we translate this into East Anglian terms, I suppose there might be some EDP readers who would not object at all if the Great Ouse, or even the Little Ouse, flowed with whisky as well.

What they might not know, however, is that there is an interesting connection between the names of those rivers and the name of the drink.

Whisky is an alcoholic beverage which we owe to our Gaelic neighbours in Ireland and in northern and western Scotland.

The English word whisky is an abbreviated version of an older form whiskybae, which was an anglicised form of the Gaelic term uisgebeatha.

Irish and Scottish Gaelic were once the same language – the Hebrides and the Scottish Highlands were originally settled by Gaels from Ireland.

In both forms of Gaelic, uisge-beatha means “water of life”, which would originally have been a translation of Latin aqua vitae, like the French eau de vie.



■ The River Great Ouse runs through King's Lynn - the name Ouse has a Celtic origin.

The second part of uisge-beatha comes from Old Irish bethu “life”, which is related to the Greek root bio-, which we have borrowed into English in words like biology and biography.

The first part comes from Old Irish uisce “water”, which is from the ancient Celtic root utso, later usso.

This is also where Ouse comes from – there are several rivers with this name in Britain.

In fact many river names in England are, like the Ouse, pre-English in origin, deriving from the Celtic language of the peoples who inhabited Britain before the arrival of our Germanic ancestors.

Thames was Celtic for “dark river”. Yare is Brittonic Celtic, perhaps meaning

something like “babbling river”. Avon is simply the Brittonic word for river – in modern Welsh it's Afon. We can imagine Anglo-Saxon incomers pointing to a river, asking its name, and the local Celts assuming they were just asking what their general word for a river was. So River Avon means “river river”.

River Ouse means “river water”: one possible scenario in our part of the world is that newly-arrived Angles heard native Celts referring to the water in the Ouse as usso and wrongly thought that was the name of the river.

Ussu later became Uss, and then Uus or Ouse. So, even if the Ouse isn't whisky, Ouse and the whis- part of whisky were originally the same word.