

What's in a name? A lot more than you might think

Peter
Trudgill



email: newsdesk@archant.co.uk

It's no surprise that the names of English counties have their origins in the English language. Norfolk was originally two English words: North Folk. Suffolk was South Folk. Essex was East Saxons.

Very few names of American states, on the other hand, are English in origin, in spite of the USA being a predominantly English-speaking country.

It's true that Washington was named after George Washington, whose surname derives from the English place name – there's a Washington in Durham and another in Sussex. New Hampshire and Maryland are also basically English-language names.

New York looks English, though it's worth noting that York derives from Old Norse Jorvik, which in turn comes from the Latin name Eboracum, which itself derives from an earlier Celtic name. And the Jersey in New Jersey is from the French name for our Channel Island, which itself comes from the Old Norse of the Norman Vikings: the -ey meant "island".

But the other American state names are mostly not English. Vermont is 17th century French for "green mountain". Colorado, Nevada and Florida are all



■ Canterbury cathedral in Kent, one of our oldest county names. Picture: PA/GARETH FULLER

Spanish past-participles; they mean respectively "coloured" ie red, "snowed" ie snow-covered, and "flowered" ie flowery. Montana "mountain" and California are also Spanish.

Rhode Island was probably originally Dutch, denoting "red island".

But more than half of the state names are derived from indigenous Native American languages which is, after all, only right and proper since those languages were spoken in America first, tens of thousands of years before any European language.

Connecticut is Mohican for "long river". Kentucky is an Iroquois name, probably meaning "prairie". Michigan is from Ojibwe. Alabama was originally a Choctaw name; so was Oklahoma. Missouri comes from the Miami-Illinois language, as does

Illinois. And North and South Dakota are from Sioux.

This raises the interesting question of why are there no pre-English county names in England. After all, we know that the English language only arrived in this country about 1,500 years ago, while the Brythonic Celtic language – the ancestor of Welsh – was spoken here well before the Anglo-Saxons arrived, maybe as much as 4,000 years earlier.

Well, actually, there are at least two pre-English examples. Kent is derived from the name of the Celtic tribe the Cantiaci, whose name also appears in Canterbury. And Devon is derived from Dumnonia, the name of the Celtic kingdom of the Dumnonii people, which covered what is now Cornwall, Devon and part of western Somerset.