

Granny always said 'Clay' and that is good enough for me

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Most EDP readers probably know there's a village in Norfolk called Cley. But does everyone know how to say the name? A letter in this paper from J Scales a little while ago suggested that the correct pronunciation is Clay, and that only posh outsiders say Cley.

J Scales is right.

It's true that the Cley website says "Cley"; and the owners of "Cley Spy" clearly also think like that. But there's much more evidence in favour of "Clay". Think of the spelling – "obey, grey, prey, they, whey". This suggests that the owners of the pottery "Made in Cley" are the right-thinking ones.

All English place names meant something to our Anglo-Saxon ancestors. The original Old English name was Clæg – which quite simply meant "clay". The village was named 1,500 years ago because of its clayey soil. Clæg gives us modern English "clay" just as Old English dæg gives us modern "day". There are many other names in England which come from clæg – Claybrooke (Leicestershire), Claydon (Suffolk), Claygate (Surrey), Clayhanger (Cheshire). In every case, the modern



■ The beautiful Norfolk village of Cley, viewed from Cley Marshes.

Picture: PETER DENT

pronunciation has "clay", not "cley". Mediaeval documents also show the name as "Claya". And I've seen a 16th-century map with Clay.

I never heard it called "Cley" until the 1960s, when I noticed it from 'posh' people – visiting birdwatchers. And I reckon the pronunciation was first introduced in the early 1900s by wildfowling. When these outsiders first started coming to Norfolk, they heard people saying "Clay" in a Norfolk dialect they weren't familiar with. The vowel sound in our accent was very different from what they were used to – think of Her Majesty saying "day" – and they interpreted it as being a long "i" rather than a long "a". To them, a Norfolk person saying "day" sounded like "die". They wrongly interpreted "Clay" as "Cley".

The most telling argument for me comes from my family. My uncle was born in Cley in 1911, and quite naturally my grandmother was there at the time. She was born in the 1880s, and came from many generations of north Norfolk stock. She always said "Clay". She wasn't the sort of person to worry about what was "right", and there was no reason for her to call it "Clay" except that that was what it was called. She called Cley "Clay" because that was what it had always been called, going back countless generations to her Anglo-Saxon forbears.

What Granny said is good enough for me.

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