

Origins of some place names are not what they seem

Most of our local East Anglian place-names are, well, not boring exactly, but rather ordinary.

A majority end in good old Anglo-Saxon forms like -ton 'enclosure', -ing 'followers of', -ham 'homestead', -stead 'site', -worth 'homestead', -ford, and -ingham; or in good Old Danish forms like -by 'village', -thorpe 'small village'; and -toft 'site'.

Other place names do not fit into this familiar pattern but are pretty self-explanatory. Cley does actually mean 'clay'; Yarmouth really does signify 'the mouth of the river Yare'; Salthouse means what it says; so does Brooke. But a few other names can be misleading in this respect. Creak does not mean 'creek': it comes from the Old Welsh word *creic*, which is probably the origin of English *crag*. *Sidestränd* did not mean 'beside the beach' but rather 'broad shore'. *Rackheath* has nothing to do with heaths: the second part of the name is the same as the -*hythe* which is found in other places around the country, meaning 'landing place'. And *Lyng* has no connection with heather: it's from the Old English word *hlinc* 'hill', a word which we retain in links, as in golf links.

Generally, then, most of our place-names do not attract attention to themselves. But some of them stand out as having unusual forms in comparison with the majority of our names. With all due respect to

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people who live there, don't you think *Sporle* looks just a little bit odd as a place name?

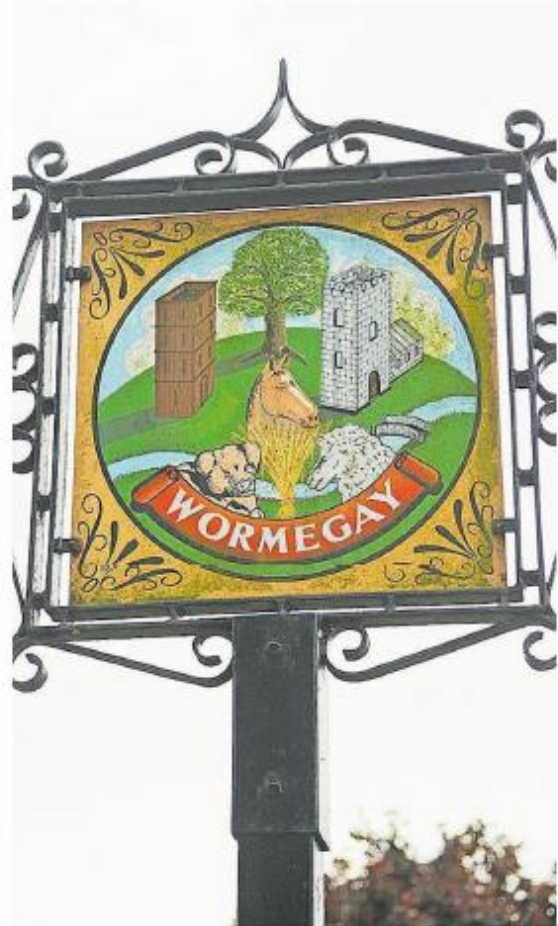
Well, maybe so, but the name did originally have two perfectly ordinary parts: *Spar-lea* is the earliest written form we have.

The first element is probably Old English *spearr* meaning 'enclosure', and the second is from Old English *leah*, meaning 'glade' (with the same origin as Dutch *loo*, as in *Waterloo*). *Lea* is still used as a poetic word for meadow in modern English.

Wormegay similarly jumps off the map at you as not being from the usual run of local village names. Has it got anything to do with worms, or gaiety?

The earliest recorded form is *Wirmegeie*, but this must go back to an earlier Anglo-Saxon *Wirmingeie*, where the -*ing* does come from our repertoire of usual place name elements. (We know that nearby *Hilgay* comes from *Hythl-ing-eie* 'the island of the followers of *Hythla*'.)

Wormegay originally meant the island (*eie*) of the people (*ing*) of a man they called *Wyr*m "Serpent" – and that is the same as our modern word *worm*.



■ The village sign in Wormegay.

Picture: IAN BURT