

A hamlet in north Norfolk with a very interesting name

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I wouldn't mind betting there are many Norfolk people who've never heard of Quarles. If you're one of them, Quarles is a hamlet in northern Norfolk, officially part of Holkham.

Compared to the names of nearby places like Burnham, Wighton, and Docking, Quarles strikes us as being rather unusual. We're used to villages whose names end in -ing, -ham, and -ton. But - Quarles? Where on earth did that come from?

The answer reveals something fascinating about medieval English, the history of Norfolk, and how Norfolk speech, in one respect, might have taken over the whole country.

Words we now spell with wh-, like the question words what, where, and when, as well as other types of words like wheel, whale, and white, used to be spelt with hw-. The Anglo-Saxon hw- spelling changed to wh- under the Normans, even though hw- was a much better representation of how these words were pronounced – and still are pronounced in Scotland and Ireland.

In our part of the country, we dropped the h and converted the hw-pronunciation to w- in the 1700s,



■ A signpost to the hamlet of Quarles in north Norfolk. PICTURE: EDF LIBRARY

probably. Unlike Scots, we now pronounce which and witch the same.

In medieval England, however, something entirely different started happening to hw-. In the 1200s, scribes in western Norfolk started writing these words with qu- as well as wh-, like quan "when".

We assume that this was because people in western Norfolk began to sometimes say kwich and kwel instead of hwich and hweel. (Sound changes like this are always occurring in languages, like th becoming f and v in Britain today.)

By the 1400s, the new kw- pronunciation had spread to the rest of Norfolk and Suffolk, then into Lincolnshire, Yorkshire, Lancashire, the North East, and over the border into Scotland. It looked for a while

as if the new Norfolk kw- pronunciation might take over.

But in the end, it didn't. The innovation gradually receded, and by the 1600s it survived only in Scotland. Today it has gone altogether.

Except back in one small area of western Norfolk, in just one place name: Quarles. Quarles comes from Old English hwerflas, which meant "circles". It's thought that the village got this name because in the Anglo-Saxon period there were still some prehistoric stone circles nearby. But Andrew Rogerson, of Norfolk County Council's Historic Environment Service, says that as yet we have no archaeological evidence for the existence of such circles – only the name Quarles survives.