

The story of how this word washed up in our region

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The Proto-Germanic noun “*thwahila*” has done a lot of travelling over the last 2,500 years. Proto-Germanic was our ancestral language – it was spoken in and around southern Sweden about 500 BC.

The language had a verb “*thwahan*”, meaning to wash, and “*thwahila*” was derived from that. It referred to anything used for washing things – like a washcloth.

As the Germanic people gradually moved south into Germany and Holland over the next centuries, they took their word with them. And when, much later, some Germanic tribes moved even further south during the sixth century AD, they took the word with them again. As the Lombards moved into northern Italy, the Visigoths into Spain, and the Franks into France, the local Latin-derived Romance languages borrowed the word from them. It survives today as Italian “*tovaglia*” meaning cloth, and Spanish “*toalla*”, towel; in Old French it was “*touaille*”.

During the 1100s, “*touaille*” was borrowed across the English Channel into Mediaeval English, to give us our modern word towel. English had lost the original Germanic word during the Anglo-Saxon period, but now got it back again because of the Norman invasion!



■ The word *dwile* - as in the annual flonking championships - has an interesting background.

While all that borrowing was going in southern Europe, the original word also stayed where it was, in the north. It had morphed into “*dwahila*” in Old High German, as spoken in southern Germany between AD 500 and 1000. And later we see it in medieval Dutch in the form of “*dweile*”.

Eventually it crossed the sea once again – this time the North Sea to East Anglia. The English Dialect Dictionary shows that it never made it any further west than eastern Cambridgeshire. Perhaps it came with the Strangers, the Dutch-speaking refugees who formed an important part of the Norwich population in the early 1600s.

“*Thwahila*” arrived here, of course, in the form of “*dwile*”, the Norfolk-Suffolk word for a floorcloth or dishcloth. In his Vocabulary of East Anglia, the Rev. Forby wrote that in the Norfolk dialect of the late 1700s, a *dwile* was “a refuse lock of wool” or “a mop made of them” or “any coarse rubbing rug”.

So after two-and-a-half millennia of travelling, that ancient Germanic word from southern Sweden ended up, twice over, in my grandparents’ kitchen in New Catton. My grandfather called the new spin-dryer “a *terl* in a tin” – he pronounced towel as “*terl*” – and of course there was a *dwile* in that kitchen as well.

Please note: the traditional past-time of “*dwile flonking*” is an ancient East Anglian sport which was invented in the 1960s

See: http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Dwile_flonking