

Names change but the stories stay the same

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Norfolk was one of the very first places where English was ever spoken, so English-language place-names in Norfolk are very old. And they all tell a story.

Some of these stories are not obvious. Weybourne meant “felon stream” – a criminal (the Old English word, now forgotten, was “wear”) might be executed there in the stream (or “burn”). Some are more transparent. Blakeney was the “black isle”. Cley is where the soil was composed of clay. Salhouse is where they used to store salt.

But what about Salhouse? What did they store there? The answer is: nothing. The “house” in Salhouse has nothing to do with a house. The way we spell Salhouse today is due to what linguists call “folk etymology”. People have a tendency to try to make sense of words which don’t make sense. Belfry comes from the Old French word “berfrei” which meant “watchtower”. This wasn’t known to most English people, who thought of it, instead, as the place in a tower where the bells were. Crayfish comes from Old French “crevis”, but people wanted to make sense of that and, well, it is sort of a fish.

The spelling of Salhouse came about because people no longer understood the original name – which was Sallows. Sallow was the ancient name for a kind of willow tree. So Sallows just meant “place with



NAMESAKES: Willows gave their name to Salhouse... but the story has been lost over time.

willow trees”. Salford, now part of Manchester, has the same origin – “a ford where there are willows”.

The word sallow is related to the Latin word “salix”, which is the source of the chemical term “salicylic acid” – which is what aspirins are made of. Aspirin is, or was originally, made from willow bark.

When Sallows no longer meant anything to people, writing the second part of the word as “house” made it seem a bit more transparent. But nowadays something else is happening. Because of the spelling, some people are even beginning to pronounce the name like that too: “Sal-house”. But that

isn’t the right way to say it. It should be “Sallas”.

That’s what the old people always used to say, even though they’d no idea that 1,000 years ago it had meant “the place of the willows”.

If you’re inclined to say Sal-house, you might think of how important aspirin is to us and try to say Sallas instead, in honour of our Anglo-Saxon ancestors and their willow trees.

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■ What do you think? Contact us at EDPletters@archant.co.uk