



Place-names in The Danelaw

One of the most noticeable differences between The Danelaw and the rest of England is that it contains many [hundreds of place-names which are Scandinavian in origin](#).

Place-name elements

Most English place-names are made up of two elements (though some are three or more). In a two-element name, we call the first part the 'prefix' and the second part the 'suffix'. In The Danelaw, the prefix is often the name of the person who held that settlement. Experts in the history of names can tell us which were Viking names, so when we come across one, we can be sure that this was a settlement which came into Scandinavian possession.

Prefix and suffix

The suffix is usually a sort of description of the place - whether it was a village, a new 'daughter' settlement hacked out of the woodland, a solitary farm and so on. We know that certain suffixes are Scandinavian in origin. Though the spelling may vary from country to country, these suffixes and their same meanings are found all over the Viking world.

Hybrids

There are in The Danelaw many place-names which are combinations of a Scandinavian element and an English element. These are called 'hybrid' names. The English contribution to the hybrid name is frequently one of the suffixes -ham, -ton or -ley.

GRIMSTON is one of these hybrids, the first part being the same Viking personal name found in the wholly Scandinavian place-name GRIMSBY.

Scandinavian suffixes

-BY The commonest Scandinavian suffix found in The Danelaw is -by. Many -by names are to be found in Yorkshire (especially in the east), around the Mersey and the Lancashire coast, and in the central Midlands. But perhaps the greatest concentration of -by names is in Lincolnshire. One of the best known must be the already mentioned GRIMSBY, but there are many hundreds more. The -by suffix originally meant a farmstead, but many of these grew into villages, towns or even cities, taking the -by suffix with them in their names.

-THORPE Another common Scandinavian suffix in The Danelaw is -thorpe. This can appear in various form, such as -thorp, -throp or -trop. This originally meant a secondary settlement, that is, an additional small hamlet and land established as a sort of 'overflow' from a village as it became overpopulated. It is interesting to note that most Danelaw -thorpes are still tiny settlements.

-TOFT The Scandinavian -toft or -tofts is found in several places in The Danelaw. Originally it probably meant a single small farmstead and, though at least one (Lowestoft) has grown to town size, it is a place-name element more usually associated with settlements which are still minor.

-HOLME In Scandinavia, the place-name element -holm is usually associated with an island. Not very far from this in meaning is the -holm or -holme found in The Danelaw, where we consider the name to indicate farmland reclaimed from marshy waste. The meanings remain quite close, for such a reclaimed area would, of course, be an 'island' in an otherwise wet area.

-KIRK, KIRK- and **KIR-** The English 'church' became Scandinavian 'kirk' in The Danelaw and is found both as a prefix and a suffix in place-names. In some instances, the second 'k' has been lost from the spelling over the years.

-THWAITE The place-name element -thwait or -thwaite is found mainly in those areas of The Danelaw which were, supposedly, more heavily colonised by 'Norwegian' Vikings than by 'Danish'. It originally indicated a small, secondary farmstead on land allotted from the main farm.

-WICK The place-name element -wick or -wich is found in many English place-names. We have to be careful how we interpret this. Some -wicks no doubt have the Scandinavian -vik (creek or bay) as their root, especially if they are found on the coast of The Danelaw. Others, though, have their origin in the Anglo-Saxon word for a port, or any other place with a specific trading or manufacturing purpose.

-BOROUGH When England was partitioned following [the Treaty of Wedmore](#), King Alfred the Great of Wessex fortified certain towns to be defence centres should the Vikings make further attacks on Wessex. These often carried the place-name element -borough, -burgh, -brough or -bury, meaning 'a fortified place'. In their turn, the Scandinavians also [fortified some towns](#), some of which also acquired one of these elements as part of their name. Again, though, we have to be careful as the Anglo-Saxons had already made wide use of this element in relation to existing Iron Age and Roman forts they found when first colonising Britain. As might be expected by their purpose, many such places grew into towns and cities of some importance.

-NESS As skilled seafarers, it is little wonder that the Vikings [paid attention to coastal features](#), especially promontories and headlands

which would be [important navigation markers](#) or sometimes hazards. Where settlements grew up at such places in The Danelaw, we often find the Scandinavian place-name element -ness.

People or language?

School history books sometimes give the impression that all the places in The Danelaw with Scandinavian names were populated by Viking settlers. The Old Norse naming customs were, we now believe, quickly adopted by everyone, so a village with a Viking lord but a mainly English population might soon find itself with Scandinavian or hybrid [re-naming](#). This re-naming would sometimes be done by people who were resident outside that particular settlement, as a way of identifying it. So, we cannot be sure that the people giving the name were always Scandinavian. All we can be certain of is that they were users of Scandinavian words in their speech. We also know that the influence of Old Norse on naming practices was felt for a long time. Many -by,

-thorpe and other names were created decades (or even centuries) after the Scandinavians became 'invisible' in the [general population](#).



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