

We're not lazy... dropping syllables in pronunciation is correct

Peter
Trudgill



email: newsdesk@archant.co.uk

There are lots of place names in the EDP distribution area which look from the spelling as if they have three or four syllables but are actually correctly pronounced with only two.

The most famous are Costessey, Happisburgh and Wymondham. But there are many more: Tacolneston (Tacklest'n), and Lowestoft (Lowst'ff) are just two of them.

Other Norfolk place names have lost their two-syllable status in recent times, as people who were not local enough to know the right name have been increasingly influenced by the spelling. Wiveton has already succumbed – it used to be Wiff'n. And Letheringsett has now gone to having four syllables – I was going to write “gone back to”, but that would not have been correct. Within living memory people called it Larns'tt, but that had descended from the medieval three-syllable form Laringsset.

One place fighting to preserve its two-syllable name, in the face of the current tendency towards longer spelling pronunciations, is our famous west coast resort town Hunstanton. Wikipedia gives its pronunciation as Hunston. So does the Oxford Dictionary of English place names.



■ Enjoying the beach at Hunstanton... or is it Hunston?

Picture: MATTHEW USHER

And they are right.

But other people are getting it wrong and calling it Hun-STAN-t'n. We can understand why they do that – it's because they've been influenced by the written form. But, happily, lots of Norfolk people are still calling it Hunst'n, and we understand why they do that too – it's because that's what it's called! There could, after all, be no other reason for pronouncing it in that way.

It is true that, in the distant past, Hunstanton did originally have three syllables. Twelve hundred years ago, it was called Hunstans-tun, meaning the homestead of Hunstan. Hunstan was a man's name – it also occurs in Hunstanworth, in Durham. But through

natural processes of sound change, this three-syllable pronunciation eventually and quite naturally acquired a more reduced form, Hunst'nt'n, which was later further reduced to Hunst'n. Even that must have happened long ago, though, since there's an English family name Hunston which derives from the name of the town – although it may also derive from Hunston in Suffolk or Sussex.

But notice that, even if the three-syllable form had survived naturally into modern times, it would most certainly not have come down to us as Hun-STAN-ton – that's a modern mistake. If you did feel inclined to try to preserve the authentic old three-syllable pronunciation, the way you should say it is HUN-st'n-t'n.