

How did our fine city get its name? It's all about directions

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You might never have wondered why Norwich is called Norwich, but it is actually an interesting question, not least because the answer is not entirely clear.

The oldest Old English form of the name of our capital city was North-wic.

The wic part was an Anglo-Saxon word meaning a dwelling-place, farm, hamlet, village, or town. It was a word which the Germanic peoples had borrowed very early on from the Romans, from Latin vicus 'village, farm-house'. That much is clear.

But what about the north part. Why was it called that? North, yes – but north of what?

The Swedish place-name expert Professor Eilert Ekwall thought that it might be because Norwich had a northerly position in East Anglia, and specifically because it was north of the other major settlements of Dunwich and Ipswich.

Other scholars, however, including the Swedish expert on Norfolk place-names Professor Karl Inge Sandred, believe that there is a more local explanation. According to researchers, there were four original Anglo-Saxon settlements on the banks of the River Wensum: these were, many of them think, Westwic, Conesford,



■ Trying to get to the bottom of why Norwich is called Norwich.

Coslany, and Northwic. Westwic was south of the river, in the region where Westwick Street now is. Conesford was to the east of Westwick.

The name meant King's Ford – in Old English it was cynings-ford. No one is absolutely sure where the ford was, but it might well have been where Bishop Bridge is now. Coslany was across the river north of Westwic – we still have Coslany Street and Coslany Bridge. And Northwic lay east and north of Westwic. Because of the angle of the river, it was also the northernmost of the settlements, and so it was called 'north' for the same reason that Westwic was called 'west'.

Northwic probably became the largest of

the settlements because it was located on the banks of the Wensum at its highest navigable point, and in the area where the two major roads intersected: the north-south road along the route of King Street-Magdalen Street; and the east-west road along the route of St Benedict's-Bishopgate, with the main gathering place being the market on the site of Tombland. Eventually, because of its greater importance, the Northwic name was extended to cover the whole settlement as the four areas expanded and fused into one.

As for the name Coslany – that is a much more complicated story. I will leave that for another Monday.