

River names show difference in Anglo-Saxon dialects

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The river that flows through the middle of Norwich is called, as you know, the Wensum. It's an interesting name. People sometimes think it's Celtic or Latin. It actually comes from a good Old English adjective meaning 'winding'. The Anglo-Saxon name was Wendsum - wend-some, if you like. Our linguistic ancestors probably started calling it that from about AD 500.

There's a river in Kent with a very similar name: the Wantsum. The names are so alike because they're actually the same name - rivers do tend, after all, to wind. And we can explain why the two names are not exactly the same: the Anglo-Saxon names were slightly different. The Kent river was the Wandsum.

But why was that? I thought it might be an Old English dialect difference, and so I inquired: this column frequently consults the world's leading authorities on your behalf. Naturally there were dialects in Anglo-Saxon Britain, just like now. And we have a good idea of the dialect situation from about AD 600 onwards. In Kent they spoke a dialect called, reasonably enough, Kentish. The other major dialects were Northumbrian, north of the Humber;



■ The River Wensum in Norwich. The name comes from the Anglo-Saxon word for 'winding'.

Mercian, from the Humber to the Thames; and West Saxon, from Sussex to Dorset - Devon and Somerset spoke the Celtic language Cornish. So Norfolk and Suffolk spoke Mercian. There actually are modern place-name differences inherited from these ancient dialects: the Weald is the West Saxon form of the old word for forest; the name of the Lincolnshire Wolds is the same word in Mercian dialect.

Our Mercian dialect was subdivided into Mercian proper, in the West Midlands; Mid-Anглиan, in the East Midlands; East Saxon in Essex; and East Anglian. We sadly know very little about Old East Anglian - there are few records. We can, though, try and draw conclusions from

evidence such as place-names - including river-names. So what did the experts say about Wendsum versus Wandsum? The form 'wand-', they reckon, really was a regional feature which was found in Kentish and East Saxon but not in East Anglian, where it was 'wend'.

You can see the same '-an-' in the Essex village name Vange, originally Fan-ge, where 'fan' corresponded to the more usual 'fen', as in Fenton, Cambridgeshire.

Modern dialect maps sometimes show the same kind of Norfolk-Suffolk versus Essex-Kent pattern today. In Kent and Essex, it seems, they gape at things, while we might sit on the banks of the Wensum and, if a boat comes by, garp at it.