

What's in a name? A whole world of difference

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The far east of Norfolk must have been the scene of very considerable ethnic and linguistic contact – and maybe even conflict – a thousand or so years ago. It's well-known that there was very heavy Viking Scandinavian settlement on the island of Flegg in the ninth century. The names Filby, Mautby, Ormesby, Scratby, Stokesby, Ashby, Oby, Thrigby, Herringby, Billockby, Clippesby, Hemsby, and Rollesby all have the Old Norse ending -by, 'village', corresponding to modern Danish 'by' meaning 'town'. Flegg itself was an Old Danish word referring to a boggy area overgrown with marsh-plants such as iris (flag). But the Old Danish speakers in Flegg Hundred – 'hundred' was the old Germanic label for a subdivision of a county, in use until 1894 – were surrounded by people who spoke Old English.

To the north of Flegg Hundred was Happening, an Anglo-Saxon name meaning the followers of a man called Hæp, as also in Happisburgh, dating back to an Anglo-Saxon settlement which had been there for 400 years before the Vikings arrived. And Flegg's other neighbour across the Bure, Walsham Hundred, also had an English-language name: it meant the ham (modern 'home') or homestead of an



■ The village of Flegg may have got its name from the flag iris.

Anglian leader called Walh.

But the Scandinavians didn't even have Flegg all to themselves. There must have been an ethnic dividing line across the area, because immediately to the north of Hemsby, Rollesby and Ashby there are places with names like Bastwick, Martham and Somerton. Place-names ending in -ham, -ton (modern 'town'), and -wick go back to the original Anglo-Saxon settlement of our county. So in the north there were English speakers, with Norse speakers on their southern flank.

But we can't be certain about the actual location of the language boundary. Repps, in the Danish-English borderlands between Bastwick and Ashby by the river Thurne, is thought by some experts to be an English name deriving from the Anglo-

Saxon word 'ripel', meaning 'a strip of land'. But others maintain that it's from Old Danish "rep", meaning 'community'.

The River Thurne is also linguistically ambiguous.

The river is named after the village of Thurne which, according to experts, comes either from Old English 'thyrne', meaning 'thorn bush' – or from Old Norse 'thyrnir' meaning, well, 'thorn bush'. The two languages weren't that very different in many respects. Very likely someone from Bastwick and someone from Ashby, coming across each other as they quanted around the marsh, would have been able to talk to each other without too much difficulty.

Let's hope it was a friendly conversation.