

# Pronunciation problems are now a part of Norfolk life

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■ Correct pronunciation of place-names has become a problem in Norfolk.

up and asked the way to Gwist, we would just put them right, and that would be that. When I was at the CNS in the 1950s, of the 950 boys at the school, 949

pronounced Sprowston with the "low" vowel. The odd one out was a boy who'd arrived in Norfolk from Wembley at the age of 12 and delighted in saying it with the "now" vowel just to tease the rest of us.

Some places did have humorous nicknames – like "Hin-doll" for Hindolveston. And some place-names had a formal pronunciation for posh occasions, like "Shering'm", and informal ones for everyday use, like "Sher'n'm". But that was all.

And there were a few exceptions, like Hunstanton and Cley, where local pronunciation traditions had been under attack since the railways started bringing holiday-makers to the seaside and wild-fowlers to the marshes.

Nowadays, though, there are large numbers of people in Norfolk who were not born here, or were born here to originally non-local families, and who have not been fortunate enough to be exposed to local naming traditions.

So the debates that are now going on are about local,

traditional, correct pronunciations versus newer, mistaken, spelling-based versions. I've already explained why Cley is correctly pronounced Clay. Stand by now for spirited debates about Sprowston and Hunstanton.

When I was growing up in Norwich in the 1940s and '50s, Norfolk's population had remained fairly stable, at around 500,000, for over a century. Then, suddenly, in the 1960s, it started expanding, and by 1970 it had reached 620,000. In 1980 it was 700,000; by 2000 it was 800,000; and now it's climbing towards 900,000.

A large proportion of this increase is due to in-migration – English people moving into Norfolk from elsewhere. This has had one important consequence for Norfolk place-names and their pronunciations: disagreement.

David Clayton, the excellent head of our BBC Radio Norfolk, has been kind enough to discuss with me the "spirited debates" about pronunciations that have been aired on Radio Norfolk. These are all to the good. But they are a sign of the times.

In the 1950s, there were no such debates. There was nothing to debate. Everybody agreed about the pronunciation of place-names. The vast majority of families in Norfolk had lived here for generations, and been exposed to local traditions about names all their lives. There was absolutely nothing to discuss. If any outsider looking for Guist turned