

# Sometimes clues to the past are all in a name

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On the south coast of the Greek island of Crete, there is a village called Rodakino. Rodakino means 'peach'.

There is another village in Crete which is called Milia, 'apple tree'. And there are plenty of other Cretan villages which have names with meanings which are totally obvious to Greek speakers: Achladia 'pears', Kerasia 'cherries', Rodania 'pomegranate tree'.

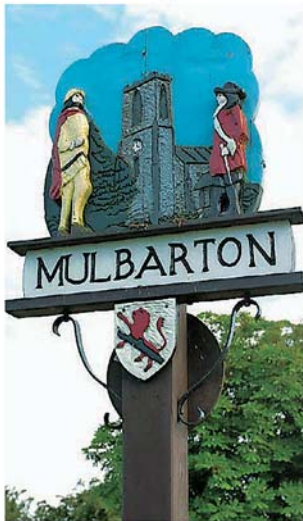
Some 1500 years ago, English place-names were just as transparent as these Greek names, though they usually had very little to do with fruit or fruit trees.

Nowadays most of our place names no longer have very obvious meanings at all. Centuries of usage and linguistic change have obscured their origins.

The sounds have changed over the decades, and the original meanings have been weakened and then lost.

Who except an expert could tell that Mulbarton meant 'outlying dairy farm'?

And even in the case of names which are



■ How many people know the place name Mulbarton means outlying dairy farm?

still somewhat transparent, we rarely stop to think about what they mean. It is obvious, if you consider it for a minute,

what Newmarket means. But do we normally think of the name as denoting 'a new market'? No, we don't. Newmarket to us means the Suffolk town which is the world centre of thoroughbred horse racing.

Anyway, there is nothing at all new about Newmarket nowadays. The first recorded instance of the name comes from about 1200 – it has not been new for 800 years! And then there is Newton, which is probably the most common place name in the whole of England.

This designation was obviously originally given to new communities when they were initially established.

The name Newton Flotman in Norfolk first appears in our records in 1291, and it is definitely not nearly as ancient as the name of, say, nearby Shotesham, first recorded in 1044 and likely to be very much older than that. (Flotman, by the way, was an old English word which meant 'sailor' or 'pirate', but was probably a family name in this case.)

In Norwich – which we no longer think of as being a 'northern settlement' – the place we call New Mills refers to water mills which have not been new since 1430, nearly 600 years ago.

The best sort of evidence we have for the way in which place names gradually lose their original meanings in this way comes from examples such as the – if you think about it – wonderfully strange Suffolk village name, Old Newton.