

# Why we put the 'great' in so many of our place names

Peter  
Trudgill



email: [newsdesk@archant.co.uk](mailto:newsdesk@archant.co.uk)

Although it is undoubtedly a very fine place, people have been known to wonder exactly what it is that's so great about Great Snoring.

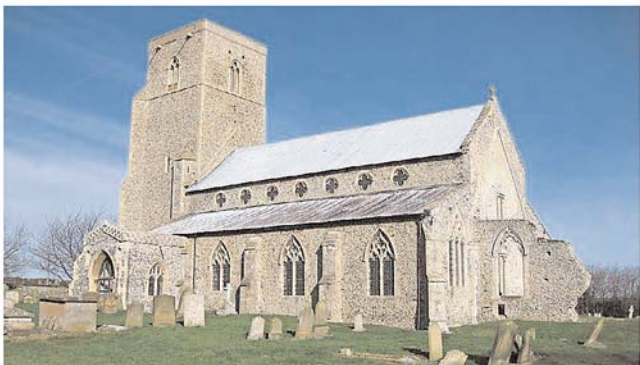
The answer is that it's exactly the same as what's great about Great Walsingham, Great Dunham and Great Witchingham. And that's exactly the same as what's great about Great Britain.

Great in Norfolk village names simply distinguishes these places from nearby villages called Little Walsingham, Little Dunham and Little Witchingham. The name Great Britain similarly serves to distinguish this country from (Little) Brittany, in France.

The distinguishing element is important. Although outsiders may talk about Great Yarmouth, Norfolk people don't do that. For us it's just Yarmouth, because there's no longer a Little Yarmouth to distinguish it from – that got swallowed up by Gorleston long ago.

So there is nothing necessarily great in an evaluative sense about Great Cressingham, although it does have a very fine church, or about the Great Ouse.

Great in these names simply means "big", which was the older meaning of the word. We can see this from the fact that



■ Places such as Great Walsingham have the word 'great' in their name to differentiate them from the little villages of the same name.

the Virgin Mary was said to be "great with child". A greatcoat is, presumably, bigger than other coats. And a great tit is – I'm guessing – larger than other birds of the same name.

The word goes back to an ancient West Germanic form *graut-* which meant something like "big, tall, thick".

The modern word in Dutch and Afrikaans is *groot*, in Low German *grot*, and in German *gross*. In the language which is most closely related to English, West Frisian, which is spoken just across the North Sea from here in the northern Netherlands, the word is *grut*.

All these words simply mean "large, big", and have none of the positively

favourable implications associated with English phrases like "we had a great time", or "she's written a great new book".

The fact that great no longer necessarily has any connection with size in English can be seen from the fact that it makes perfectly good sense for us to say "that's a great little painting". You couldn't say that in German.

But in the Norfolk dialect we can still use the word to mean simply big, if we want to.

A sighting of a bird rather larger than a great tit sitting on the top of a barn might provoke the statement that "there was a gret ol' bud up there".