

Our place names should be given the respect they deserve

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Sprowston, just outside Norwich, was called Sprowestuna by its Old English-speaking settlers. The name meant "Sprow's tun": Sprow was a man's name, and tun – pronounced toon – meant an enclosure. Sproughton in Suffolk has the same origin – in the 1100s it was written Sproeston – and so does Sproston in Cheshire.

Tun has given us our modern word town, as a result of sound changes which have occurred over the past millennium. The corresponding German word, Zaun, means fence; and the Dutch version, tuin, means garden.

That Anglo-Saxon man's name, Sprow, tells linguistic scientists all we need to know to say, categorically, that the modern pronunciation of Sprowston ought to be with the vowel of 'low' – not of 'now'.

Everybody in Norwich used to know that. When I was a child in the 1940s and 1950s, I never heard anybody pronounce it any other way. Over the past five decades, however, there's been a tendency for some people to use a non-traditional pronunciation with the 'now' vowel. Large numbers of people have moved in from outside; they've guessed at the pronunciation from the spelling; and



■ St Mary & Margaret Church, in Sprowston.

they've guessed wrong. A thousand years ago, -ow- was the Anglo-Saxon way of representing a diphthong very like the modern vowel in low – it has come down into modern Norfolk English almost unchanged. In Old English, 'to grow' was growan, 'to flow' was flowan, and 'to row a boat' was rowan.

But words which in modern English have the 'now' vowel weren't spelt like that at all, because they were pronounced very differently. One of these words was, as just discussed, tun – modern town. Cow was spelt cu, pronounced koo; now was nu, pronounced noo. If that man's name had been Spru, then the correct pronunciation of Sprowston today would be with the 'now' vowel. But it wasn't.

And it isn't. The pronunciation of Sprowston with the 'now' sound is wrong. It's a mistake.

It's not a surprising mistake because, unlike Old English, modern English spelling is ambiguous. This isn't a problem with -ow- words generally, because we learn to say them before we can read. But with place names, it is problematical because they're not part of everyday vocabulary except for locals – so, with high in-migration, errors creep in because of spelling ambiguity.

But there's nothing ambiguous about older Norfolk people's desire to have the traditional, centuries-old pronunciations of places in our county respected. We'd like to have our place-names back, please.