

# How the early railways helped bring Cly to Clay

My mother left school, aged 14, in 1932 and went to work at a newsagents in Holt. She was a bright pupil who would have benefited from staying at school. But her father was an agricultural worker, and it wasn't possible financially for the family to keep her in education.

That was the reality of the world of Norfolk farm-labourers.

In the shop, Mum came into contact with another world – the world of the schoolboys from nearby Gresham's School who came in, often secretly, to buy cigarettes.

This was the very different world of families who were able to pay for a privileged education.

Perhaps this tale of two worlds sheds new light on the issue of the pronunciation of the name of the nearby village, Cly.

The original, centuries-old pronunciation was Clay. It was very often spelt Clay; and the earliest form of the name, Anglo-Saxon Clæg, meant clay. For the last several decades, though, there's been an alternative pronunciation, Cly. Many people believe this is the correct pronunciation.

Helpful light is shed on the origin of the Clay/Cly dispute in an EDP letter from Mr R J F Wortley, a supporter of Cly. Amongst his Norfolk credentials, he cites the fact that he went to school at Gresham's.

In 2013, Mr J Scales also wrote a letter to the EDP on this topic, stating that in his view the correct pronunciation was Clay, and that "only posh outsiders" said Cly.

Peter  
Trudgill



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

What Mr Scales wrote is true – or at least it was true in the past.

The name remained Clay until the late 1800s, when the railways started bringing outsiders to "Poppyland" and other parts of the Norfolk coast. On the marshes, wildfowling became popular with gentry from elsewhere in the country, and these "posh outsiders", listening to the name Clay as pronounced by Norfolk people, misheard it as Cly.

Even today, the way the Queen says pint sounds very like a Norfolkman saying paint.

More and more influential outsiders subsequently visited and settled in the area and acquired the new pronunciation, as passed on by their peers.

Because these people were influential, many insiders also took to using their pronunciation.

Even some elderly local members of my own family have switched from Clay to Cly.

But my grandparents, who were born in the 1880s and lived in Cly, called it Clay. So do I.

And I think it's relevant that I didn't go to Gresham's.



■ One of Norfolk's most iconic images, the windmill at Cly. Picture: MARK BULLIMORE