

Those who think wong isn't an English word are wrong

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I reckon that if you ask most English-speaking people what the word *spong* means, they'll tell you that they don't know and will even question whether it's an English word at all.

Well, *spong* is an English word. It means a long narrow strip of land. The Oxford English Dictionary says it is obsolete, but I am sure there are Norfolk people who know it. The English Dialect Dictionary shows the word as being alive and well a century ago in Leicestershire, Northamptonshire, and East Anglia. (There's a *Spong Hill* south of North Elmham, famous as the site of an Anglo-Saxon cemetery.)

You might very well get the same sceptical reaction if you ask about the meaning of the word *wong*. Are you pulling my leg? Can that possibly be a real English word?

To answer that question, it helps to notice that there are two places in England called *Wangford*; they're both in Suffolk. The names have different origins, though. The *Wangford* near *Thetford* was originally *Wain-ford*, where *wain* meant wagon. But *Wangford* near *Southwold* is the relevant one here: the first part of the name comes from an Old English word "*wang*". It comes from an ancient Germanic root



■ Wangford, in east Suffolk: Its name has an interesting history, says Peter Trudgill.

meaning a field, meadow, or grassy place. According to the OED, the word has become obsolete in modern English – as it has in most other Germanic languages. The Scandinavian form "*wang*" is still known in Norway, but even there it is archaic and survives mostly in place-names.

But an English form of the word did survive, at least until recently, in dialect usage in areas of eastern England influenced by Scandinavian settlement. In the rural dialects of Yorkshire, Nottingham, Leicester, Northampton, Lincoln, Norfolk and Suffolk, the word seems to have applied particularly to low-lying and perhaps marshy meadowland. A Norfolk

correspondent to an 1856 issue of the journal *Notes and Queries* wrote: "I know five or six fields so named; they are all meadow, with a small rill of water rising in them". And there are still Norfolk field names which contain the word.

City people don't know field names, and they are usually not given on maps. But some people in rural areas of our county will know that our modern version of Anglo-Saxon *wang* is *wong*. For example, in our own Viking enclave, *Flegg*, we know of fields called *Crosswong* and *Westwong*, by *Martham*; and *Haywong* in *Repps*.

So Old English *wang* became *wong*. And *wong* really is a good English word.