

## THE NAME OF "CHELSEA."

BY

ARTHUR BONNER, Esq.

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THE place-name "Chelsea" has been much discussed. The discussion has been marked by the usual stages, from that of pure conjecture or guess to the more scientific but more painstaking method of investigation which is now generally adopted by students. John Norden, the topographer (1548-c.1623), gives one of the earliest attempts at an etymology in his "Speculum Britanniae," where he tells us Chelsea "is so called from the nature of the place, whose strand is like the chesel (ceosel or cesol), which the sea casteth up of sand and pebble stones, thereof called Cheselsey, briefly Chelsey, as is Chelsey<sup>1</sup> in Sussex." This excellent specimen of the pure-conjecture-etymology was long current, and it was endorsed, or adopted without inquiry, by many later writers. Canon Isaac Taylor, e.g., in his "Words and Places" (3rd edn., 1873) says (p. 236), "Chelsea is a contraction of chesel-ea or 'shingle island.'" Canon Taylor, however, in his later book, "Names and their Histories" (2nd edn., revised, 1898) says (p. 90), "Chelsea was formerly supposed to be the Céoles-ig

<sup>1</sup> Apparently Selsey, but that name appears in Bede (A.S. version) and in several Pre-Conquest charters as Seoles ig = seal's island (as Bede himself tells us: "Selæseu, quod dicitur Latine, insula uituli marini"); and a Charter Roll of 1227 gives the transitional form of "Selesey." So here, as with "Chelsea," Norden's conjecture is but a "rope of sand."

'ship isle' or 'ship shore,'<sup>1</sup> of the Chronicle (A.D. 1006), which is now identified with Cholsey, near Wallingford, in Berks, and not with Chelsea"; and later, in the same volume (p. 387) he derives the second syllable of the name "from the A.S. *sæ* = a lake or sea," or "A.S. *ig* or *ég*, usually found in the dative, *ige* or *ége*, which denoted a watery place, hence an island, or a place beside water, such as a river bank or a sea coast." [This later book of Canon Taylor's, be it noted, is characterised by much more care and research than is shown in his "Names and Places."]

In Daniel Lyson's well known and valuable work on the Environs of London (1795) he has an excellent note on the name, although he wrongly identifies it with "Cealchylle,"<sup>2</sup> a manor granted by Edward the Confessor to Westminster Abbey. He says (vol. ii., p. 70): "I have seen deeds of the age of Edward II. (in the possession of the Earl of Cadogan), in which it is called Chelchey, but the most common mode of spelling for some centuries after the Conquest was Chelcheth or Chelchith. In the sixteenth century it began to be written Chelsey. The modern way of spelling it [Lysons' heading is "Chelsea."--A.B.] seems to have been first used about a century ago. Skinner ('Etymological Dictionary') derives Chelsea from shelves of sand

<sup>1</sup> For "Céoles ig" (Cholsey) see below.

<sup>2</sup> "Cealchylle" has received notice in the discussions on "Chelsea." I have noted appearances of the name from 1044 to 1479, in which it develops as follows:—11th cent., Cealchylle; 12th cent., Chalchelle; 13th-14th cents., Chalkhulle; 15th cent., Chalkhill. *Cealc-hylle* = Chalk-hill; and both these A.S. words develop regularly through the M.E. Chalc-hell(e) and -hull(e) to Mod. Eng. Chalkhill. Chalkhill is in Kingsbury parish, Middlesex.

and *ey* or *ea*, land situated near water; at the same time he allows that it is written in ancient records, *Cealchyth*, i.e., chalky haven. Newcourt ('Repertorium') derives it from *ceald* or *cele*, cold, and *hyth*. Norden, whose etymology is best supported by fact, says:—"and here Lysons quotes the passage from Norden which I have given above.

The later discussions, such as have taken place in "Notes and Queries," have brought forth quite a number of references to appearances or supposed appearances of the name in mediæval and earlier records and documents.

These appeals to documentary evidence show a development in the right direction, and they are in keeping with the modern method of research. On this method the student works back through the various contemporary records—which have become so much more accessible during the last 20-30 years---and traces the name through its various forms and changes back to its early mediæval or even pre-Conquest form; and then, aided by some acquaintance with Anglo-Saxon and Middle English<sup>1</sup>, he may, probably without much difficulty, identify the original form and meaning of the name he has been tracing. Thus the scope for speculation or conjecture is minimised, and in many cases eliminated. During some considerable investigations on these lines into the origin and evolution of the place-names of Middlesex and Surrey and their borderlands, I collected the forms of this interesting name, and as I believe it to be the only list of the kind, or, at least, the only list which approaches completeness, I now

<sup>1</sup>Abbreviated in this article to A.S. and M.E.

venture to reproduce it. The chief sources of information are as follows:---

PRE-CONQUEST: The Anglo-Saxon Land Charters, as seen in the Official Facsimiles and in the transcripts given by Birch ("Cartularium Saxonicum"), Prof. Earle ("Land Charters and Saxon Documents"), and Kemble ("Codex Diplomaticus"). The Anglo-Saxon Chronicles.

POST-CONQUEST: Royal, National, and other Charters 11th century onwards; and the various mediæval Rolls, records, registers, and calendars, such as *Pedes Finium* (Hardy and Page's edition of London and Middlesex Fines), *Rotuli Curix Regis*, Pipe Rolls, Patent Rolls, Close Rolls, "Ancient Deeds" in Record Office, London Wills and the Guildhall "Letter Books" (Dr. R. R. Sharpe's valuable Calendars), etc.

#### PRE-CONQUEST APPEARANCES OF THE NAME.

[Arranged in the order of the date of the Documents.]

- 785 "Her wæs geflit fullic senoth æt CEALC HYTHE."  
["This year was a contentious synod at Cealc hythe." Anglo-Saxon Chronicles. MS. of about A.D. 890.]
- 785 ". . . . in synodali conventu in loco ubi nominatur CELCHYTH." [Grant by King Offa dated from a "synod held in the place which is named Celchyth." MS. Ashburnham (Stowe) 5: an almost contemporary copy of the original document.]
- 786 synod at CELCHYTH. [Offa grant, MS. Ashburnham (Stowe) 6: almost contemporary copy.]
- 788 synod at CELCHYTH. [Offa grant. M.S. Canterbury Cath. M. 340: original charter.]

- 789 ". . . pontificale conciliabulum in loco famosa (*sic*) qui dicitur CELCHYTH." [Agreement, Offa and others, dated from "the pontifical council in the famous place called Celchyth."]
- 789 two other grants dated from same council at CELCHYTH.
- 793 ". . . in loco celebri qui dicitur CELCHYTH."
- 796 two charters dated from "CELCHYTH, in sinodo publico."
- 801 charter from synod at CELCHITHE.
- 799 to 802 charter from "synodal council" at CAELICHYTH. [Original.]
- 815 and 816 two charters dated from synods at CELICHYTH.
- 825 reference to synod at CÆLCHYTHE.
- 898 Council at CELCHYTH.

## POST CONQUEST.

[NOTE.—The figures in parenthesis represent the number of appearances traced by A.B. Spellings in Italics are accidental or erroneous.]

- c. 1086 Chelched or *Cercedede* (Domesday). c. 1150 Chelchede.
- 1140 to 1428 Chelcheth,-e (9). 1197 Chelchude. 1333 *Chelthuth*. 1377 *Chelheth*.
- 1269 to 1314 Chilcheth,-e (3). 1278 Chylchethe. 1282 *Chylheth*.
- 1265 Chylchehuthe. 1279 *Chylchehyche*.
- 1274 to 1472 Chelcheheth,-e (10). 1324 Chilcheheth.
- 1308 to 1553 Chelchehith,-e (6). 1419 to 1563 Chelcheyth,-e (8). 1350 *Chelchehiche*.
- 1314 to 1382 Chelchehuth,-e (5). 1360 Chilchehuth.

- 1345 to 1535 Chelchith,-e (12). 1425 *Chelcheith*.  
 1510 *Chechithe*. 1450 and 1547 Chelchythe.  
 1511 *Chelchyche*.
- 14-15 cent. Chelsehuth. [This is under date 1316 in  
 "Nomina Villarum" (Harleian MS. 6281), a  
 British Museum manuscript, which I judge to be  
 of rather later date.]
- 1486 to 1533 Chelsehith,-e (3). 1518 *Chelceheyth*.  
 1524 Chelcehith.
- 1522 Chelseye. 1527 Chelseghe.
- 1527 and onwards, Chelsey. c. 1550 *Chellsaye*.  
 1557 "Chelsyth otherwise Chelsey."  
 1590 and onwards, Chelsea.

The entry in the A.S. Chronicle under the year 785 gives the unmistakable A.S. words *cealc*=chalk, and *hyth*=hithe. The Charters or Royal Grants which follow—and which are mostly Mercian—give a less common spelling of the same word, *celc*.

The Domesday and 12th century renderings of *-hed(e)* and *-hude* for *hyth* (or rather *-heth* and *-huth*) are characteristic of the Norman scribes, who found difficulty in the A.S. *th* and frequently wrote *d* for it, as in the well known case of the neighbouring Wandsworth, which was in its A.S. original *Wendles wurth* (as given in a charter of A.D. 693), but which was written by the Norman scribes in Domesday *Wendeles-orde*, *Wandeleorde*, and *Wandesorde*.

On collating the forms of the name in this list, I felt fully convinced that the etymology was clearly established, and this conviction was strengthened by noticing that Prof. Earle, of Oxford (in his "Land Charters") and his one-time student in A.S., Prof. Plummer (in his

edition of A.S. Chronicle) both regarded *Cealchyth* and *Celchyth* as identical, and as probably the original of "Chelsea"—although on this last point they were evidently unaware of the number and completeness of the links in the evolutionary chain. Later on I felt some diffidence in putting this conclusion forward without qualification, in view of an adverse opinion given by Professor W. W. Skeat in a discussion on the name which appeared in "Notes and Queries" (1905-6). That distinguished philologist and Anglo-Saxon scholar, while agreeing that *Celchyth* probably = Chelsea, did not admit the identity of meaning of *celc* and *cealc*.

However, some time afterwards I was able to talk over this and other place-names with Professor Skeat, and I found that he had on further consideration revised his opinion, and had then come to the conclusion that *Cealc* = *celc-hythe* = chalk-hithe = Chelsea. He afterwards wrote me on the point, and I quote the passage as it so well and authoritatively elucidates the etymology and evolution of the name. Professor Skeat writes (with the above list before him) under date April 25th, 1910:—

"As to Chelsea, it is impossible for the A.S. forms to mean anything but Chalk-hithe. 'Chalk' is not English, but merely Lat. *calc-em* borrowed. It took various forms in A.S., of which *cealc* is the regular one, with 'breaking' of *a* to *ea* before *lc*; by rule.

"But it so happened that Lat. *calx* belonged to the 3rd or *i* declension, gen. *calcis*, dat. *calci*. Hence the A.S. form was also sometimes *celc*, the *e* being due to the fact that the 2nd syllable had *i* in it, and that produced the 'i mutation' of *a* to *e*; by rule. An older

form of this 'mutation' was *a*, as in *cælci*, which was turned into *cælic*; whilst *celci-* was turned into *celic*. But *c* followed by *e* or *i*, became *ch* later on; hence we at last get *chelche* (occasionally *chilche*). And it was this *chelch* which became *chels*. It's all according to phonetic laws.

"The A.S. for *hithe* was *hyth*. This in Mid. Eng. became *hithe*, *hythe*, *huthe*, according to the dialect; some turned *y* into *i* (*y*) and some into *u*. But the Kentish people turned it into *hethe*. So the spellings *hith(e)*, *hyth(e)*, *huth(e)*, *heth(e)* are all regular descendants from the A.S. form. Then the *h*, in the unstressed syllable, was lost, and this gave *-yth*, equivalent of *-ith* (1557). Then the *sense* of *-ith* was no longer obvious; so it was turned into *-ey* (island). The *-ea* was a later spelling of *-ey*, due to confusing *ea* 'river' with *-ey*, 'island.' It's all quite clear."

Professor Skeat's interesting remarks upon the list need no comment from me; and his acceptance and endorsement of the etymology leaves no ground for doubt on its philological side.

[The ultimate disappearance of the *-hithe* is paralleled in other cases, as for instance, in Putney near by, which was a *-hithe* until the 16th century, and then from Puttentheth and Pottentheth shortened thus: Puttentheth, Puttentheth, Puttentheth and Puttentheth, Puttentheth, and Puttentheth. Stepney (M.E. Stebbenheth) similarly changed its *-hith* to *-ey* in the sixteenth century. On the other hand, the M.E. Maydenhythe and Maydenheth have become Maidenhead; and the A.S. Lambhyth or Lambhyth is now Lambeth. The *-heth* or *-hithe* in each case is the sufferer.]

As an illustration of the concurrent usage of different



forms of the name, it may be noted that in 1533 Sir Thomas More is described as of "Chelsehith" (Bodleian Charter No. 90), while he himself in 1535 in a letter to Henry VIII writes of "my pore house at Chelchith" — this last being the spelling given also in his indictment.

The A.S. "Cealchyth," the meeting place of the synods, was conjecturally identified as Chelsea by several historians on the strength of some of the mediæval forms of the name which had come to light: *e.g.*, in Dugdale's "Monasticon Anglicanum" (edition of 1817-30); by Messrs. Haddan and Stubbs ("Councils and Ecclesiastical Documents relating to Great Britain," iii., 445; about 1875); and by Professor Plummer in his scholarly edition of the A.S. Chronicles (1892). Other essayists in the same subject, however, have suggested other identifications, and I will specify them here in order to show that the guesses do not fit in with the facts as given by the contemporary records—to which the guessers had obviously not made reference:—

Chalk (Kent); but this was, in A.S. (9-10th century) "Cealc"; and in M.E. "Chalc," "Chelke," "Chalke," and "Chalk." Compare also Broad Chalk and Bower Chalk in Wilts, which appear as "Ceolc" in A.D. 955.

Challock (Kent); but this was in the 9th century. "Cealflocan" (A.S. *cealf*=calf, and *loca*=enclosure, fold); 13th century "Cheafloke"; and 15th century "Challock."

Sunning or Sonning (Berks); but the records show that this was A.S. Sunninges or Sunningas

(=sons or descendants of Sunna), and M.E. Sunninges and Sunninge. A very wild guess.

The Bosworth-Toller A.S. Dictionary has the following:—

"Céoles íg (*ceol*, ship; *ig.*, island) Chelsea. Somner says: 'Insularis olim et navibus accommodata, ut nomen significat.'"

Somner (late 17th century) clearly acted on the old plan of attempting an etymology on the present or modern form of the name, without reference to its previous recorded forms and changes. From Chelsey (or Chelsea) he conjectured this ship-island origin, and then described the place as "formerly an island with accommodation for ships, *as its name signifies.*" It is regrettable that this Dictionary should have lent its high authority to this error, when reference was so easy to at least some of the mediæval and earlier forms of the name.

The error, moreover, is a double one, for "Ceoles" is the genitive of the personal name Ceol—as Professor Skeat has pointed out in his "Place Names of Berkshire" (p. 35)—and thus we have "Ceol's island" clearly indicated as the original sense. From "Céoles íg" has evolved the present Cholsey (Berks). Ceol was the name of a West Saxon king, A.D. 591 to 597.

My list of Pre-Conquest records of the name might perhaps be headed by a document of still earlier date. Birch's "Cartularium Saxonicum" gives, under date "671 for 681," a charter of King Æthelred founding the monastery of St. Peter's, Gloucester, which has this passage:—"Facto vero est hæc conditio in quinto anno

regni Ethrelwedi regis merciorum. . . . archiepiscopus Deusdedit, et Saxulphus episcopus, gentes mercini, et sinodus congregata fuit in loco famosa Ethcealchy de istis rebus sic factis." This charter was transcribed from the Gloucester Cathedral "Register A," a compilation of the late 14th century, so that it is a late copy of the original charter, and probably copied from a copy, the original having disappeared; and errors are therefore to be expected, such as the mis-spelling of the King's name and of the name of the meeting place of the Synod. "Ethcealchy" I read as "Æt Cealchyth" (=at Chalkhyth); "æt" was frequently written in A.S. documents as though it formed part of a place-name, and the 14th century (or some earlier) copyist appears to have misread or misunderstood this, and also to have failed to complete the "hyth." If this is so—and I think it may be safely regarded as a strong probability—this deed may stand as the earliest date for the name and also for the record of the meeting of a synod at Chelsea. It may further give us another—and earlier—instance of the more frequent spelling of the A.S. "Cealc."