

Wirksworth, a Victorian vicar and the fictitious Mr Work

Wirksworth Archaeological Society

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Summary

This paper was written at the request of the English Place-Name Society for their Journal, which is published annually in January.

The Wirksworth place-name previously recorded as meaning “Wergs or Weorcs Enclosure” is completely wrong - it was made up by a Victorian vicar in 1897. The correct meaning of the Wirksworth place-name is “Fortified Royal Manor”.

Introduction

In the modern record of the English Place Name Society, that is to say the EPNS 2024 website, the following etymology is given for the Derbyshire Peak District market town of Wirksworth:

- ‘Wirksworth, enclosure of *Weorc* or *Wyrc*’, v. *worð*. There is ample place name evidence for the existence of an Old English personal name *Weorc*, *Wyrc*, cf. Worksop (PN Nt 105–6), Low Worsall (PN NRY 173–4), Worsborough (WRY). There is little need to consider seriously Anderson's suggestion that the first element is Old English (*ge*) *weorc* 'fortification' in this place name, for *worð* (worth) is very frequently combined with personal names.

The record appears to perpetuate a myth about the Wirksworth place-name being from a personal name. In theory this myth originated from a 1940 etymology of Wirksworth by the then esteemed Frank Stenton. However, although Stenton's commentary is well-known and leads directly to many modern works, the origin of the myth lies much further back and can be traced in references in journal articles and transactions of several previous authors and etymologists. Frank Stenton's

statement of there being “ample place name evidence for the existence of an Old English personal name *Weorc*, *Wyrce*” is, however, fundamentally wrong, there is no such evidence at the date when Wirksworth was named.

How did this happen? The answer lies, not with Stenton, although he should possibly have known better and unfortunately his view was used, after 1940, much more comprehensively than it had previously been, for similar place-names such as Worksop in Nottinghamshire, Low Worsall in the North Riding of Yorkshire and Worsborough in the West Riding of Yorkshire.

Derbyshire

The occurrence of the ‘*work*’ personal name originated in an article in the Derbyshire Archaeological Journal of 1897, written by the Reverend Henry Barber, who appears to have been speculating, listed Wirksworth, didn’t understand it and made up a “Saxon” personal name for it: “*Werge’s Enclosure*”, - he makes no reference to any other authors or journals of the time. After Barber made this up, several variations appeared, such as *Wyrce* and *Weorc*, with Stenton and others following Barber by adapting it, while, at the same time, failing to give adequate weight to the lack of any written documented sources for the supposed personal name, simply claiming that it existed as a “personal name”, which it doesn’t.

Following these references backwards in time, we find this sequence of authors listing Wirksworth:

Derbyshire authors and etymologists

Wirksworth: “*Werge’s Enclosure*” Barber, 1897

Wirksworth: “*Wyrce’s Enclosure*” Walker, 1915

Wirksworth: “*Weorc’s Enclosure*” Stenton, 1940

Wirksworth: “*Weorc’s Enclosure*” Cameron, 1959

Other counties

By 1910 this early and fictitious *Werge* / *Wyrc* / *Weorc* name appears to have informed even major writers and in that year, Professor Frederic Moorman used it in his book about West Riding of Yorkshire place-names to give a completely contradictory explanation of the Worsborough place-name as “the fortified place of a man called *Weorc*”. He had clearly known that the Old English (*ge*) *weorc* meant fortification but despite not being able to find the personal name in his reference sources, he still tried to bet on two horses in his definition, so to speak. He then compounded his error by next referencing Wortley in Leeds as “the meadow of a man called *Weorc*”. After this, the writers and etymologists of Yorkshire and (eventually) Nottinghamshire picked up the fatal error and ran with it. In this way, the Reverend Barber’s fictitious *Werge* appears to have infected a whole class of place-names.

The fictitious Mr Work

For Wirksworth, alarm bells had begun to ring as long ago as 1939, when Anderson had said the Wirksworth place-name really meant fortified settlement enclosure or manor (*ge*)*weorcs* *worthign*. However, Anderson was a lone voice and Stenton, who was a better known figure at the time, poured cold water on him.

There the matter rested for some years, with authors and etymologists repeating Stenton and Barber’s made up name, almost endlessly, with variations, until and including Professor Cameron’s otherwise formidable work on Derbyshire place-names in 1959.

Latterly, though, Albert Smith in 1970, agreeing with Anderson, gave the interpretation of the first element as (*ge*) *weorc*, fortification, and in the publications of other counties place-names the fortification interpretation was also sometimes upheld. It also became clearer that *Worth* represented a settlement enclosure or manor house as opposed to any other kind of enclosure, such as a *Hay* which represents a stock-proof or agricultural enclosure.

Timing of place-naming

In due course, Pauline Stafford, writing in 1985 and then, more famously, Margaret Gelling, writing in 2000, both observed that before 900AD place-names tended to originate in physical or natural features, not in personal names, as there was no effective personal land ownership as such until late into the Saxon period. In this respect Wirksworth was first recorded in a charter of 835AD, well before Margaret Gelling's watershed of personal place namings.

Gradually, other pieces began to fall into place which would confirm the Wirksworth place-name was more likely a physical feature. In 2000, Kings College London and the University of Cambridge began a project, the Prosopography (written record) of Anglo-Saxon England, to catalogue all the personal names recorded in Saxon documents, coins, inscriptions and charters. For Idridgehay, a village 3 miles south of Wirksworth, named for *Aedric's Hay* (Wiltshire and Woore, 2011), there were 112 records of the personal name *Aedric* or its variations. For Wirksworth there were *none* for the Reverend Barber's *Werge*, nor *Weorc*, *Wyrc* or anything like it.

In short, the absence of any Mercian or Saxon Age record of the "*Werge*, *Weorc* or *Wyrc*" personal name leads to a conviction that it had indeed been made up by a Victorian vicar and unfortunately spread out of control. Various excuses then started to appear, such as it might be *Veorc* or *Verica*, but much of this smacked of special pleading. Indeed there was a concern that the Reverend Barber and his made-up personal name might eventually infect the PASE database by being presented as a written source from place-names and thus create another round of fallacious misunderstanding.

The archaeological perspective

Archaeologically, of the places which Stenton claimed should be dismissed from the fortification point of view, all have them. In Stenton's day, though, much of this information did not exist or would have been difficult to find. This should not have prevented him from being more balanced about Anderson's view though.

- Worksop

Worksop Castle is regarded as having existed in Saxon times (Historic England, 2025) because of its strategic position as a promontory fort overlooking the River Ryton. A charter of 1249 grants a *Staddeburgeheoad* (horse meadow by the fortified headland) to Worksop Priory (White, 1875), this place name, with a burg element, does imply an earlier fort than the later Norman castle. It is also known that Worksop is a town of Roman origins (Stroud, 2002) which might suggest that the archaeologists of Worksop should be looking at the castle site not only for Saxon fortifications but also Roman ones.

- Low Worsall

This one of two small adjacent villages in Hambledon parish in North Yorkshire (the adjacent one being High Worsall). A programme of archaeological work associated with the Teeside Ethanol Pipeline in 1999 discovered a regionally important Roman settlement at Mourie Farm at Low Worsall. This settlement, which was enclosed by significant boundary ditches and included areas of industrial and domestic activity, lies on a plateau of land overlooking the River Tees, near Worsall Bridge (Northern Archaeological Associates, 2000). In passing, it is also noted that Worsall in Oxfordshire, now a single farm west of Faringdon, is overlooked by Badbury hillfort (Council for British Archaeology, 1980).

- Worsborough

Worsborough is in Barnsley, South Yorkshire (formerly the West Riding of Yorkshire) and has a known Iron Age hillfort on Castle Hill at Worsborough Common (South Yorkshire Sites and Monuments Record, 2025) (Challis and Harding, 1975).

The presence of fortifications in all the locations highlighted by Stenton suggests his claim that the ‘*weorc*’ of Wirksworth, Worksop, Worsall and Worsborough is a personal name is surely unsafe. By 2020 the only location with any archaeological doubt was Wirksworth and in 2022, the

archaeological society there found a large defensive boundary ditch on the west side of the town in the Meadow Croft field (Wirksworth Archaeological Society, 2023) completing the fortification group, as it were, for all of Stenton's claims.

Finally, of the places which Moorman cited in 1910: that is Workington, now in Cumbria, the town is famously adjacent to a major Roman fort, part of the coastal fortifications of Hadrian's Wall. Moorman also cited Warkton in Northamptonshire, which contains a partially examined ditched Iron Age and Roman site and, lastly, Wortley in Leeds, which is less than 500 metres from the location of the (now destroyed) Giants Hill earthwork on the south bank of the River Aire, thought to be a Viking or earlier fortified camp.

In all probability there is a wider need to catalogue this class of "*weorc*" place-names and cross reference them to archaeological, geographical and field name sources. Such a process would be difficult but would perhaps wash out more serious errors and lead to caveats being put on a number of others. This can't be a perfect study, because archaeologists, like etymologists, can't be everywhere. Indeed in over 1,500 years some of the fortifications which the Saxons saw and named will have been destroyed, hidden, built-on or still to be rediscovered.

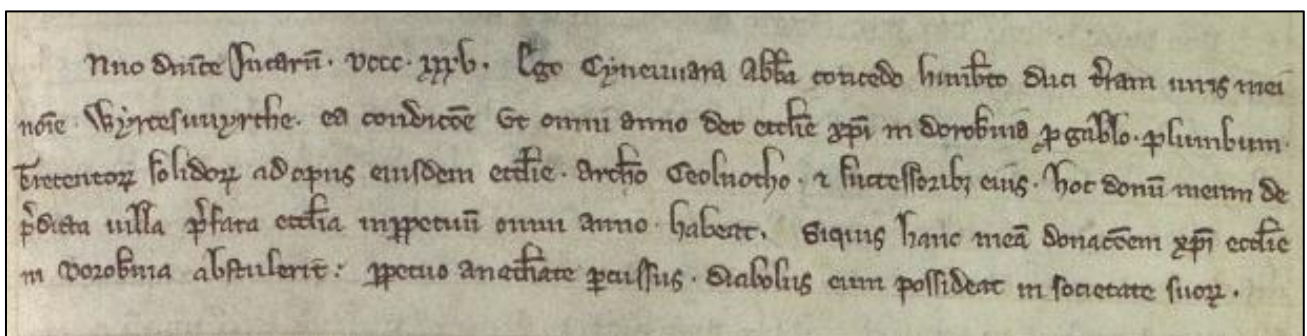
Nevertheless, continuing to present a doubtful place-name with no caveat or alternative means that archaeologists might never actually consider the issue for their own location: after all, why should the archaeologists of Worksop ever think of looking for Roman fortifications under Worksop Castle, if everyone just thinks Worksop means "Works' Valley" - you would never be encouraged to look at the issue archaeologically and this itself would result in a failure to find fortifications or defended places where the place-name would tell us that the possibility should exist.

Mercian Royal Manor

This returns us to Wirksworth and one final piece of the jigsaw. Richard Coates, in presenting the most recent EPNS paper on *worhs* (Coates, 2012) harks back to what Pauline Stafford and Margaret

Gelling had said about timing. There are many, many *worths* around the country, but the vast majority of those in Mercia only occur late in the Saxon Age and represent churl's holdings, that is to say what we would now call the lesser nobility. A very few, though, including Tamworth of 799AD and Northworthy of 871AD, he regards as being very early, named for features in the landscape, but also representing royal Mercian holdings such as a royal hall or manor. Wirksworth falls neatly between these two dates, with a charter (Sawyer, 2025) of Abbess Cynewaru of 835AD.

Abbess Cynewaru's Wirksworth Charter



“In the year of the Incarnation 835, I Cyneuara, Abbess, grant to Humbert, Duke, jurisdiction of land in my possession at Wirksworth, on condition that he shall give an annual render of lead to the value of 300 shillings to Coelnoth, Archbishop and his successors (at Christ Church, Canterbury). The above named church should have this gift of mine from my aforesaid town every year. But if anyone should take away this my gift from Christ Church, Canterbury, may he be smitten with perpetual anathema, and may the devil possess him as one of his own”

Wirksworth should join Tamworth and Northworthy in this early royal class of *worths*. After all, Cynewaru, whose name translates as “royal resident”, is very specific in her charter about Wirksworth, she does not say its the abbey's town of Wirksworth, nor even the church's town of Wirksworth, she says “*my town*”.

Wirksworth: Fortified Royal Manor.

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