Place-name tracing the Wicken:

Arrival and Settlement on Post-Roman Thanet

Abstract

   The Wicken were a clan of Angles who crossed to Britain from the Netherlands. This paper analyzes place-name evidence of the settlements of this clan around the Isle of Thanet. Research methods include micro-level tracing (of a small kinship group), retrospective tracing (beginning back at the point where they crossed from the Continent) and migration mapping (using Google Maps to locate their settlements and follow their routes). Findings related to the Wicken include a spatial cluster of settlements with similar names across the Wantsum Channel from Thanet and a former den on the eastern coast of the former island. This new migration-based settlement model tracks the arrival of this previously unknown clan of Angles from their point of departure on the Continent.

Keywords: toponomy, migration, Anglo-Saxons, Britain, Kent, Thanet, Wicken

Introduction

The benefits and limitations of place-name tracing for tracking the origin and migration of Anglo-Saxon tribes and clans are well known but underutilied.[1] This paper utilizes the techniques of micro-level tracing, retrospective tracing and migration mapping to identify and track the Wicken, a previously unknown clan of Angles.[2]

The name *Wicken* may have been derived from the proto-Indo-European root word *weik-* and Old English *wicing*.[3] The Wicken clan were most likely an early group of Vikings, an ethnically heterogeneous group from Scandinavia, who affiliated with the Angle tribe in Germany long before the Viking invasion of Britain.   Based upon the singular form <Wick>, the spelling of the name as <Wicken> may have developed later from the application of the weak version of what Richard Coates describes as a pair of new Middle English analogical plural-forms, strong -es and weak -en, "which fossilized before the spread of northern -(e)s plural forms and were no longer thought of or treated as semantically plural, and *Wicken* remains where it has become established" (1999, 102).

Thesis

The Wicken are a previously unknown tribal group who were affiliated with the Angles, and who migrated from Angeln down to the coast of the Netherlands before crossing to Britain. The questions that motivate this research are: (1) Where did the Wicken land and first settle in Britain? and (2) By what route did the Wicken migrate to the island? The thesis of this paper is that after crossing to Britain, the Wicken settled in a cluster of sites across the Wantsum Channel from the Isle of Thanet and then established a den on the eastern shore of the island.

Study Design

The present paper uses place-name tracing to track the Wicken as they enter Britain near the Isle of Thanet in the northeast of Kent. Linguistic analysis is used to describe the etymology of these place names. It then follows some of the Wicken as they migrate to another site on the eastern coast of the ancient island, which analogues suggest was a den for pasturing of animals.

Research Methods

Since the dynamics of place-name tracing depend upon the evidence of historical documents to describe the direction as well as the time period during which a tribe may have migrated, the paper will begin with information about the relevant phase of Anglo-Saxon history. This historical information will be followed by a section in which the Wicken settlements and migration are tracked through an analysis of place names. If a sequence of similarly derived place names matches the historical evidence, it is assumed to document the migration route of the tribal group, although it is recognized that they may have migrated at times without leaving evidence in the form of derivative place names. Since the Wicken are a previously unknown clan of Angles, the possible derivation of place names from the name of the clan must be weighed against evidence in support of other conjectures regarding the etymology of these names.

Arrival and Settlement in Thanet

Anglo-Saxon History

Following the account of historian Peter Hunter Blair (1977), the first phase of the settlement of Britain by Germanic tribes covers their arrival, service as mercenaries for Vortigern, and settlement on Thanet. This phase begins when Roman rule of Britain ended in 410 CE.   Blair cites numerous sources to document that after decades in which the Romans and then the Britons fought to defend Britain from attacks by the Celts (Pics and Scots) from the north as well as the Germanic tribes (generally referred to as Saxons) from the Continent across to the "Saxon Shore" in the east, the British requested assistance from the Roman Emperor Honorius. Honorius wrote back that the local *civitates* should defend themselves as best they could (1977,2). According to another historian, Peter Ackroyd, in 430 the British leader Vortigern called in Saxon mercenaries to help with their defense. Numerous boatloads arrived, some of which are known to have landed at Ebbsfleet on the Isle of Thanet. The most significant elements were stationed in Kent and were given the island of Thanet. The defense was successful, but the British then reneged on their agreement to support the Saxon federates, causing them to revolt. In the course of the insurgency, they sent out a call to their compatriots telling them to come and settle here, and they will master the natives (2011, 46-47).

[Please insert Figure 1 near here.]

Thanet was a small island, measuring approximately 5 miles from north to south and 10 miles from the eastern shore to the Wantsum Channel in the west. The Wantsum was originally a navigable river which stood between Kent and Thanet. Fed by the River Stour, with its tributaries the Greater Stour and the Lesser Stour, it measured up to two miles wide. It was so important to the defense of Kent that the Romans built fortifications at Reculver in the north

and at Richborough in the south to guard its two entrances. Whether or not some of the

Wicken were warriors who answered Vortigern's call for mercenaries, the clan must have heard

about the availability of rich farmland on Thanet since they migrated from Angeln down to the

coast of Netherlands, stopping to camp in at least four places and staying long enough for these

locations to acquire the names *Weickenberg*, *Wickenberg*, and *Wickenburg*.[4]

Wicken-Related Place Names

From an examination of maps of Thanet and histories of Kent, it is apparent that there

are several place names which suggest that the Wicken migrated to and settled near Thanet

during this first phase of the Anglo-Saxon settlement. A spatial cluster of places along a branch

of the River Stour just to the west of Thanet appear to derive from the Wicken. There is also a

reference to the Wicken in the name of an establishment in a town on the eastern coast of

Thanet.

Place-Name Cluster near Thanet

On current maps of northeastern Kent, there is a geographical cluster of places which

stands out because of the similarity of the names and the proximity of the places. The cluster is

situated just across the Wantsum Channel from Thanet. It is also close to the Stour River, which

flows into the Wantsum, and whose larger branch leads inland past the port of Fordwich to

Canterbury. The five names that are clustered in this location provide possible evidence that

the Wicken may have settled in this region after crossing from the Continent, especially in the

absence of other convincing explanations. These place names are *Wingham*, *Wingham Well*,

Wingham Green, *Ickham* and *Wickhambreux*. Wickhambreux is less than half a mile north on

Wickham Road and Wingham Lane, from Ickham. Ickham, in turn, is less than two miles north

on Wingham Lane and across the Wingham River from Wingham. Wingham Well and

a Wingham Green are a short walk west from Wingham. Because *Wingham* is predominant

among these names, this group of places will be referred to here as the *Wingham Cluster*.

[Please insert Figure 2 here.]

This cluster of settlements appears to constitute a dispersed or scattered settlement

whose morphology is the result of historical factors related to the arrival of the Wicken. All but

one of these places appear to be ancient, but historical explanations differ, and the exact

etymology of their names is not certain:

> **Wingham.** This place is a village and civil parish in the Dover District of Kent, England. It
>
> is on the ancient coastal road from Richborough to London, close to Canterbury. It has
>
> existed since the Stone Age, but only became established as a village in the Roman
>
> era. In the year 836, the Manor of Wingham was given to Christ Church by Athelstan,
>
> who was the king of Kent. The place name is recorded as *Uuigincggaham* in the *Anglo-*
>
> *Saxon Chronicles* of 834 A.D., and as *Wuungham* a century later. It was recorded as
>
> Winganham in 946 and Wingehame in the Domesday Book (Webb 2020). According to
>
> Hasted (1800 s.v. "Parishes: Wingham.")

> > The MANOR OF WINGHAM was part of the antient possessions of the see
> > of Canterbury, given to it in the early period of the Saxon heptarchy, but
> > being torn from it during the troubles of those times, it was restored to
> > the church in the year 941, by king Edmund, his brother Eadred, and
> > Edwin that king's son. Accordingly, it is thus entered, under the general
> > title of the archbishop's possessions, taken in the survey of Domesday: 'In
> > the lath of Estrei, in Wingeham hundred, the archbishop himself holds
> > Wingeham in demesne.'

Wingham was thus the administrative center of the hundred (a unit of English government intermediate between village and shire) of Wingham, which included Fleet.

The *Key to English Place Names* (2020, s.v. "Wingham") notes that possible meanings include

> 'homestead/village of the people of *Wiga'. OE *Wiga is a monothematic masculine personal name, found on record in the form *Wyga*. The first element may alternatively be OE *wig* 'heathen temple, shrine', hence 'homestead/village of the shrine people'.

Wingham Green and **Wingham Well.** These places are smaller areas down a lane from Wingham and are most likely named for the village itself. Wingham Well is on the oldest Ordinance Survey maps, but it may refer to the location of a well utilized by the Romans living in Wingham to draw water. Wingham Green may have been added later as the area was developed. There are also natural and man-made features in the area with similar names, such as **Wickham Road**, **Wickham Court Lane**, **Wingham Road, Wingham Lane**, **Wingham Well Lane** and **Wingham River**.

Ickham. Information from Hasted (1800, s.v. "Parishes: Ickham") includes the following:

> In the year 791, Offa, king of Mercia, gave to Christ Church, in Canterbury, fifteen plough-lands, some of which were in Ickham. In 958 this grant was increased by Athelward. In the *Domesday book*, the Anglo-Saxon manor was in the possession of the Archbishop of Canterbury and was called both *Hickham* and *Gecham*, and in other antient records *Yeckham*, taking its name from the Saxon word *yeok*, a yoke of arable land, and ham, a village. The whole parish consisting for the most part of arable land.

The Key to English Place-Names (2020, s.v. "Ickham") reports that "Ickham is a

'Homestead/village comprising a yoke of land'. A yoke (OE *geoc*) equalled a quarter of a

sulung (about fifty or sixty acres)." Elements and their meanings include:

- *geoc* (Old English) A yoke, a wooden device for coupling two oxen
  together for drawing a plough; a pair of oxen yoked together; a measure
  of land, a small estate or manor; something resembling a yoke.

- *hām* (Old English) A village, a village community, a manor, an estate, a
  homestead

Another conjecture is that Ickham may designate the farm of a person named

Ica. Ickham is still a very rural grouping of buildings may have and may originally have

been a single farm located between the small villages of Wickhambreux and Wingham.

Wickhambreaux. According to Halsted (1800, s.v. "Parishes: Wickham Breaus"), this

hamlet was usually called *Wickham Brook* from its situation near the banks of the river

or *Wickham by Wingham*, to distinguish it from the two other parishes of the same

name in the county. In the *Domesday Book* the village is referred to as *Wicheham*. The

suffix *breux* was added later, referring to the de Breuhouse manor.

Margaret Gelling includes the following information in her analysis of twenty-eight place

names based on *wicham*:

> Wickhambreaux: parish and village, E. of Canterbury, O.S. map 173. A
> short distance N. of the supposed line of Margary IO. Mentioned in a
> charter of 948 (BCS 869) as *Wic ham*. RB map marks a 'substantial
> building' E. of Ickham, immediately across the Little Stour from
> Wickhambreux, and DA map marks an inhumation cemetery about I mile
> N. There is a wheel-made stamped Frankish pot from Wickhambreux in
> the Royal Museum, Canterbury (R.M. 4297), which suggests occupation in
> the 6th or 7th century (*ex inf.* Dr. J. N. L. Myres) (Gelling 1977, 91.)

The *Key to English Place-Names* (2020, s.v. "Parishes: Wickhabreaux") states that the name means a 'Homestead/village associated with a Romano-British settlement'. Elements and their meanings include:

- *wīc-hām* (Old English) A settlement associated with a Roman *vicus*.
- pers.n. (Unknown) pers.n. Personal name

Analysis

All the suffixes of these names include *ham*, which serves to identify the locations as small villages or hamlets. Significantly, each of the prefixes could be a variant spelling of *Wick*. Moreover, the clustering of these five names might be evidence that the Wicken settled in this area shortly after crossing from the Continent, since this clustering strongly suggests a corresponding clustering of the people from whom the names are derived. After departing from Wickenburg in the municipality of Vlissingen, located in the southwestern Netherlands on the former island of Walcheren, the Wicken might have travelled approximately 60 miles down around Dunkirk or Calais and then over to Britain, landing across from Thanet via the Wantsum Channel and the Little Stour or Wingham rivers. Once there, they may have settling in one location and gradually spread out to the others nearby.

Settlement by the Wicken sometime after the initial granting of Thanet is likely, given the time it would have taken for the clan to migrate from Angeln to the coast of the Netherlands. If a substantial number of Wicken crossed to settle in this new land, perhaps in several boatloads and in several crossings, it might be expected that they would establish several settlements in close proximity to each other. It would follow that the names of these

close settlements of Wicken would be almost identical, each including some form of the name

Wicken, perhaps in its singular or shortened prefixal form of *Wick*. Alternative explanations for

these names, as described above, are not entirely convincing.

According to Coates (1999), there is a broad consensus that the toponym *Wickham*

indicates the visibility of significant Roman features (such as a *vicus*) in the early Anglo-Saxon

landscape, close proximity to a Roman road, and a relationship to medieval and modern

administrative geography. However, while each of the names in the cluster is similar to

Wickham, it seems unlikely that more than one of these neighboring settlements located so

close to each other would have been a Roman settlement. One administrative center would

have been enough without being co-located with others. Moreover, only one of these names

was originally spelled <Wic ham>. So, if they were not all originally *vicus*, how did the other

names originate? In answer to this question, two points will be explored: (1) the clustering of

the place names and (2) the spelling of the place names.

Clustering of the names

The close spatial clustering of similar names within a mile or two of each other suggests

that they derived from a close spatial clustering of similar people.   There were four groups of

people who might have been the source of this clustering: the Britons, the Romans, the Anglo-

Saxons and the Vikings. There is no known reason or precedent for the Britons or the Romans

to have clustered together as they gradually moved to settled in or to occupy this location. The

most likely group to have settled in the same vicinity would have been members of an Angle or

Saxon clan, since if they had recently left their ancestral homeland on the Jutland Peninsula and

had just disembarked onto this new land after crossing from the Continent, the families in this kinship group would naturally have wished to settle near each other for mutual support.

Spelling of the names

The differences in the spelling of each of the names indicate other possible differences between the locations and thus in the origin of their names:

Wingham. Since Wingham is located on an ancient road running from the Roman fort at Richborough to London, since it is known to have been a village in the Roman era, and since the traditional administrative role of some *vicus* noted above appears to have been carried on at that location into the sub-Roman period, it is the most likely candidate to have been designated a *wic*. However, since its name is not spelled as <Wickham>, it is possible that the Wicken settled in the village, and that a slight difference in the pronunciation of their name from the pronunciation of the Old English *wic* may be reflected by the difference in spelling of *Wingham*.

The substitution of the phoneme /ng/ in Wingham for the /c/ in *Wic* could have resulted from a change in pronunciation of the voiceless stop [k] to its voiced counterpart [g] or even further to the velar nasal [ŋ], spelled <ng>. This spelling is similar to the spelling of other places whose names derive from the Wicken, such as *Wingindene* (later *Wickenden*) in the village of Cowden in southwest Kent. This explanation seems more likely than derivation of the name from an unknown man named *Wiga* or an unknown group of 'shrine people' named *wig*.

When and why the Wicken began to pronounced their name in this way is unknown. Before crossing to Britain, they may have encountered some of the settlements based upon Roman *vicus* established when the Roman Empire extended through the southern Netherlands. Whenever it occurred, confusion between these homonyms, *wic*, derived from the Roman *vicus*, and *wick*, derived from the name of the Anglian clan, might have motivated the Wicken to clarify the name of places where they settled from the name of places where the Romans and Romano-Britons had settled by emphasizing or adopting a slightly different pronunciation. If so, it may have been that the spelling <Wickham>, which would have been the appellation given by early Anglo-Saxons to a location that had been a *vicus*, was changed to <Wingham> when the Wicken settled there.

Ickham. Another modification in the name, devoicing of the initial /w/, may be why the name for the little settlement in between Wingham and Wickhambreaux was heard as if it were pronounced without any /w/ and therefore spelled as <Yecham>,< Hickham> or <Gecham> and now as <Ickham>. Without voicing, the sonority of the /w/ might have been so low that it was effectively silenced (at least as spoken by the head of the particular kinship group that initially established the farmstead). This would explain why the /w/ was dropped when the word was written out. While this is not a common variant, there are other examples of this particular spelling such as <Ickenham>, an old village not far away in Greater London.

 As for other etymologies for the name, it would seem odd to name a settlement after the Saxon word for a certain measure of arable land (*yeok)* since all the land in that

vicinity was arable. Moreover, while there is no historical record of any particular man named *Ica*. So, it is certainly likely that Ickham, situated as it is on a walkable lane between Wingham and Wickhambreaux, was settled by a local family headed by a member of the Wicken named *Wick* (or '*Ick*).

Wickhambreaux. This is one of the sites across southeast England that Gelling (1967) includes in her inventory of ancient villages with the name *Wickham*. However, the closest Roman road runs through Wingham, across a river and several miles to the south, and the only mention of Roman era ruins is of a "substantial building" across the Lesser Stour and to the east of Ickham. So, as one of only four (out of the total of 28) sites considered by Gelling which was not situated a mile or less from a known Roman road and with no evidence of a *vicus* actually near the site or evidence of an administrative function of any kind, Wickhambreaux is not only an outlier, but may actually be an anomaly.

An argument might be made that the Romans first occupied the site as a *vicus* on the Little Stour River and then, after the coastal road from their fort in Richborough to London had been constructed, they moved several miles away to occupy a second site along that new road. However, why would the Romans have wanted to occupy a backwater site on the Little Stour in the first place, when it is six miles from the Wantsum Channel and on a small branch of the Stour River that does not even reach to Canterbury? By way of contrast, only four miles away on the Great Stour was Fordwich, the port by which the city of Canterbury traded with London, the Channel ports and the near Continent.

The ancient spelling of Wickhambreux, <Wicheham>, could suggest that it too might have been settled by Anglo-Saxons with a name like *Wiche*, where the /k/ in Wik has been palatalized and an /e/ has been added to indicate that it is the name of a people, similar to the *Engle* 'Eglish', and *Seaxe*, 'Saxons'. If this place was originally named as a settlement of the Wicken (*Wiche*), that name may have been altered to conform to the more recognizable appellation *Wic ham* as part of a charter written by King Eadred in 948, several centuries after the Wicken may have moved on.

Discussion

While the last of these names might or might not have originally been derived from the appellation *Wic ham*, it would seem quite odd that three or more of these neighboring settlements would have derived their names from this word for a certain kind of village, since there are no similar place names in the Thanet area and only four others in all of Kent. In addition, if the names under consideration here were all based on *Wickham*, they would have been differentiated by suffixes such as *Wingham Well* and *Wingham Green*, or by prefixes similar to those for *East Stourmouth* and *West Stourmouth* only 5 miles away. Instead, while the names are similar, they exhibit differences in spelling which could reflect some of the possible differences in pronunciation of names derived from the Wicken.

Thus, it appears that some mechanism must have driven the geographical clustering of these places with similar names. That mechanism was most likely the geographical clustering of a kinship group, such as members of the Wicken clan, a group from whom the original phonology and orthography of these place names could very possibly have been derived.

Place Name on Thanet

There is another place name which may have been derived from a Wicken settlement on Thanet during the first phase of the Anglo-Saxon settlement of Britain.

Wychdene.   Wychdene is an establishment located about 14 miles across the island from the Wingham Cluster. The address is now in the coastal town of Broadstairs, but this location was in the medieval village of St. Peter's, just inland from Broadstairs, before the village merged with the larger settlement.   The spelling is a variant of other names derived from the Wicken, such as *Wycherindenn*, which Witney (1976) has documented as a messuage (a principal dwelling, outbuildings and surrounding land) of a den in the Lathe of Faversham. The large house, which now functions as a residential home, is situated next to the St. Peter's Recreation Ground, an open field which may have been the pasture denoted by the term *dene (*'den'). Although no direct evidence has been uncovered to date documenting the etymology of the name, there are numerous places in Thanet with similar den names, including Hersden, Chillenden, Hoaden, Shoulden and Thornden. So, although the place has been "lost," the name and location suggest that Wychdene was a homestead with a pasture for raising livestock. Since these dens were typically established apart from a major settlement and after the settlers had raised a herd of animals that needed pasturing, it is most likely that the Wicken first landed and settled in the Wingham Cluster and then established a den on the Isle of Thanet.

[Please insert Figure 3 here.]
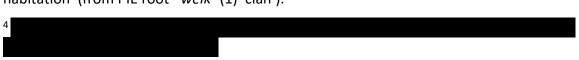
Conclusion

While direct evidence regarding the history of *Wychdene* on the Isle of Thanet is lacking, there are useful analogues that help to explain the likely origin and meaning of the name as a den established by the Wicken. The Wingham Cluster, across the Wantsum Channel from Thanet, constitutes an unusual grouping of names which suggests a unique clustering of people such as the Wicken. Moreover, the orthographic variation in all these place names might easily have resulted from slight, perhaps deliberate, phonological differences between the singular form of the clan name, *Wick,* and the appellative form of the place name, *wic*, as applied to hamlets and dens. Given the long history and recurrent settlement of the small, ancient Isle of Thanet by multiple tribal groups of divergent ethnicities, the existence of place-name evidence of the Wicken helps to establish the arrival of this tribal clan during the initial phase of the Anglo-Saxon settlement of Britain. Additional research is needed to track the subsequent migration of this previously unknown Anglo-Saxon clan.

Notes

[1] For example, the book by William Bakken (1998) has a section on place-name studies. Peter Hunter Blair (1977) also writes about the evidence of archaeology and place-names (18-24)

[2] ██
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[3] According to the *Online Etymology Dictionary* (Harper 2001-2020), the Old English word *wicing* and Old Frisian *wizing* "probably derive from *wic* 'village, camp' (large temporary camps were a feature of the Viking raids), related to Latin *vicus* 'village, habitation' (from PIE root *weik-* (1) 'clan')."

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