

The Celtic Names of Dinckley and Sankey in Lancashire

Andrew Breeze

Dinckley is in Lancashire; so was Sankey Brook until local government reform in 1974 divided it between Lancashire and Cheshire. Both have Celtic names of obscure origin. This note suggests etymologies for them, perhaps shedding light on the region's landscape and society before the Anglo-Saxon occupation.¹

Dinckley, near Blackburn

Dinckley (SD 6836) is a small parish (about a mile square) with no village, on the south side of the Ribble five miles north of Blackburn. It is recorded as *Dunkythele* and *Dinkedelay* in 1246 and *Dinkedeleg* in 1257, forms explained as perhaps from Celtic *din* 'fort' and *coed* 'wood' (meaning 'fort by a wood') plus Old English *leah* 'wood'.² But what follows challenges this, suggesting another interpretation.

There is no problem here with Celtic *din* 'fort'. Yet the rest of the name is hardly Celtic *coed* 'wood' + English *leah* 'wood', as this does not explain the final *e* in the second element *-kythe-*, *-kede-*, and *-kede-*. So much was pointed out by the anonymous referee of this paper's first draft. He or she thus suggested a parallel between *-kythele* and Kidwelly 'land of Cadwal' in Carmarthenshire (though admitting that the absence of *w* in the Lancashire name is

¹ The author records his warm appreciation of the comments of an anonymous referee on an earlier version of this paper.

² Eilert Ekwall, *The concise Oxford dictionary of English place-names* (4th edn, Oxford, 1960), p. 145; Richard Coates and Andrew Breeze, *Celtic voices, English places* (Stamford, 2000), pp. 318, 382.

problematic).³ The present note develops with grateful acknowledgement that proposal (it replaces a link, now completely dropped, with Welsh *cadle* ‘battlefield’ in the original paper).

Nevertheless, Dinckley can hardly mean ‘fort of the land of Cadwal’ as Kidwelly means ‘land of Cadwal’. We should otherwise expect *w* in English forms of the name. However, it might mean ‘fort of the land of Cadell’, Cadell being a common early Welsh name, from British *Catellus* ‘little fighter’.⁴ The name was especially familiar in Powys, whose dynasty claimed descent from a legendary Cadell Dyrnllug ‘of the resplendent fist’, who rose from being a swineherd to kingship after giving shelter to St Germanus.⁵ Dumville rightly doubts if this Cadell was ancestor of any king.⁶ But there certainly was another Cadell (d. 808) of Powys, a king whose name figures on the ninth-century Pillar of Elise near Llangollen.⁷ A third Cadell (d. 909), son of Rhodri the Great, was the father of the famous Hywel Dda, lawgiver and king.⁸ Later rulers called Cadell show the name’s consistent high status.

Now, in Welsh toponyms *-i* often indicates territory. Arwystli (in mid-Wales) was ruled by a man called Arwystl; Kidwelly was the land of Cadwal; Brychyni near Criccieth apparently belonged to someone called Brychyn.⁹ This helps with Dinckley. *Dunkythele*, *Dinkedelay*, *Dinkedeleg* might on this basis have been the fort (*din*) of **Cadeli* or **Cedeli*, the land of Cadell, an otherwise unknown chieftain of Celtic Lancashire.¹⁰

Does this make phonological sense? The Anglo-Saxons occupied south Lancashire after 617, and began moving north about 650, when Celtic speech would have died out in the Ribble valley.¹¹ As regards the present etymology and Dinckley, the development of

³ Cf. Melville Richards, ‘Cedweli’, in *The names of towns and cities in Britain*, ed. W. F. H. Nicolaisen (London, 1970), p. 69.

⁴ Cf. D. Ellis Evans, *Gaulish personal names* (Oxford, 1967), p. 172.

⁵ N. J. Higham, *King Arthur* (London, 2002), pp. 129–30.

⁶ D. N. Dumville, ‘Early Welsh poetry: problems of historicity’, in *Early Welsh poetry*, ed. B. F. Roberts (Aberystwyth, 1988), pp. 1–16, at 12.

⁷ *Early Welsh genealogical tracts*, ed. P. C. Bartrum (Cardiff, 1966), p. 2.

⁸ Wendy Davies, *Wales in the early middle ages* (Leicester, 1982), p. 107.

⁹ R. J. Thomas, *Enwau afonydd a nentydd Cymru* (Cardiff, 1938), p. 127; K. H. Jackson, *Language and history in early Britain* (Edinburgh, 1953), p. 351.

¹⁰ * before a name or word indicates a reconstructed form not independently recorded.

¹¹ Jackson, *Language and history*, pp. 215–18.

Middle and Modern Welsh *ll* has been dated to the tenth century (hence no sign of it in this toponym); British *t* was lenited to *d* in the later fifth century; while the presumed development of the *a* of *Cadell* to *e* in our forms may be due to so-called 'double affection' (with effects taking place at an early date, since a variant of it appears in both Welsh *llewenydd* 'joy' and its Breton cognate *levenez*).¹² So there seem no linguistic objections to this derivation.

It may also suit Dinckley's location on the ancient road from Ribchester (two miles west of it) to Ilkley. This cuts right across the parish. Ribchester was a major Roman army base and communications centre; the road's importance thus needs no underlining. Its *agger* is easily seen where it enters Dinckley at Almond's Fold; the lane to Aspinall's Farm follows its line for half a mile; beyond that, fences mark it to Dinckley Brook.¹³

Dinckley, lacking a village, is now an insignificant place. Yet its name may show that it was once important, if it means 'stronghold of the land of Cadell'. It would indicate the home of a British leader who gave his name to a locality in North Britain, just as Arwystl and Cadwal gave their names to Arwystli and Kidwelly in Wales. Sited by the Ribble on a Roman road two miles from the ancient fort at Ribchester, such a defensive position would have obvious strategic importance. Archaeologists may one day discover just where it was (perhaps at the present-day Dinckley Hall on the bank of the Ribble). If so, excavation might provide evidence for a British royal settlement in pre-English Lancashire, offering information on the cultural levels and international contacts of such a ruler in the way Dinas Powys near Cardiff and South Cadbury in Somerset have for South Britain.¹⁴ If so, it would show how place-name scholars may help archaeologists to identify sites once occupied by high-status communities: in this case, of Celtic kings and warriors.

Sankey Brook, near St Helens

Before administrative changes, Sankey Brook lay entirely within Lancashire. Rising near Bickerstaffe (SD 4604) above the 200-foot

¹² *Ibid.* pp. 271–2, 480, 591–2.

¹³ I. D. Margary, *Roman roads in Britain* (London, 1955–7), II, p. 104.

¹⁴ Davies, *Wales in early middle ages*, pp. 35, 49, 55; K. R. Dark, *Civitas to kingdom* (London, 1994), pp. 125, 190; Higham, *King Arthur*, p. 27.

contour, it flows fourteen miles south-east and south past Rainford, St Helens, Newton-le-Willows, Warrington, and the settlements of Great Sankey and Sankey Bridges before entering the Mersey estuary (SJ 5787).

The river is attested as *Sanki* in 1202, *Sonky* in 1228; the villages of Great and Little Sankey as *Sonchi* in about 1180, *Sanki* in 1212, *Sonky* in 1242. Ekwall describes this as a British river-name, but gives no derivation.¹⁵ Hanks and Hodges, calling it obscure, explain it as perhaps ‘sacred, holy’.¹⁶ Mills says merely ‘a pre-English river-name of uncertain origin and meaning’; Coates and Breeze have agreed.¹⁷

We may start here by ruling out ‘sacred, holy’. It is true that Latin *sanctus* ‘holy’ was borrowed by the Brittonic languages, not once but twice. Yet neither form could give *Sankey*. Jackson notes that Latin /nkt/ was foreign to Celtic ears, so that *sancti* gave British **sacht*i (*ch* here pronounced as in Scottish *loch*), which produced Middle Welsh *Seith*, apparently surviving at Brynsaithmarchog ‘hill of St Marchog’ (SJ 0750) near Corwen in north Wales. But **sacht*- could not have given *Sankey*, particularly as even *ch* was lost about 600, before the English occupied Lancashire in the middle of the seventh century.¹⁸ We are no better off with Modern Welsh and Breton *sant*, as this derives from Vulgar Latin *santus* (from Classical Latin *sanctus*).¹⁹ Again, such a form would not give *Sankey*.

Another approach is thus possible. A clue to the name of the Sankey Brook is provided by the many Welsh hydronyms ending in *i*, including Brefi, Cothi, Dyfi, Rhymni, Teifi, and Tywi. Amongst these the Brefi, in Ceredigion (SN 6655), is the ‘roarer’ (Welsh *brefu* ‘to roar’); the Cothi in Carmarthenshire (SN 7049 to SN 5326) is the ‘scourer’ (cf. Welsh *ysgothi* ‘to scour’); the Dyfi, by Aberdovey (SH 6195) in Gwynedd, is the ‘black one’ (Welsh *du* ‘black’); the Rhymni of south Wales (SO 1205 to SO 2282) is the ‘borer’ (Middle Welsh *rhwmp* ‘auger’); the Toddi (SN 7121) of the Carmarthenshire moors is the ‘steeper, soaker’ (Middle Welsh *toddi* ‘to steep, soak’);

¹⁵ Ekwall, *Concise Oxford dictionary*, p. 404.

¹⁶ Patrick Hanks and Flavia Hodges, *A dictionary of surnames* (Oxford, 1988), p. 470.

¹⁷ A. D. Mills, *A dictionary of English place-names* (Oxford, 1991), p. 285; Coates and Breeze, *Celtic voices*, p. 364.

¹⁸ Jackson, *Language and history*, pp. 208–9, 406–11.

¹⁹ *Ibid.* p. 406.

and the Troddi, giving its name to Mitchel Troy (SO 4910) in Monmouthshire, is the 'traveller, courser' or 'breaker through' (Middle Welsh *trawdd* 'journey').²⁰

These hydronyms provide models for *Sankey*. They suggest only one likely explanation: in the verb *sangi*, *sengi* 'to trample (under-foot), tread (on), set foot in; to press or push (in), stamp down, put (in)'. This can be linked to Modern Breton *sankañ* 'to push in'; Middle Welsh *gorsengi* 'to trample, tread upon'; Old Breton *guorsengir* glossing *exprimitur* 'it is pressed out'; and Middle Welsh *gorsengyn*, 'trampler; victor, conqueror' (or perhaps a verbal form 'will trample; will conquer').²¹ These occur early. We have *gorsengyn* in the line *deu orsegyn Saesson o pleit Dofyd* 'two conquerors of [or, 'two who will conquer'] the English, in the cause of God' in *Armes Prydein* 'The Prophecy of Britain', a call to arms written in 940 after the West Saxon capitulation to the Vikings at Leicester.²² The simple verb *sengi* occurs in the twelfth-century *Four Branches of the Mabinogi*, where the villain Gwawl has to tread down (*sse(n)ghi*) food and drink in a magic bag that cannot be filled.²³

This offers two possibilities for Sankey Brook: 'trampler' or 'pusher, presser'. The Sankey runs through a low-lying area. If it tended to flood, the Britons might well have called it 'trampler', because it left its bed and overwhelmed fields near by, perhaps destroying crops. On the other hand, if its valley was choked with natural vegetation through which it forced itself, 'pusher, presser' might suit better. A Welsh version of the Gospels makes the point. In the story of Thomas's incredulity, a sixteenth-century translation of John xx.27 has *Sang yma dy vys* (where the Authorized Version has the gentler 'Reach hither thy finger'), the Welsh translator regarding Thomas as pressing or pushing his finger into Christ's wounds.²⁴ Sankey Brook might similarly have been thought of as a river that pressed obstacles down or pushed along its course.

²⁰ Thomas, *Enwau*, pp. 127–73.

²¹ *Geiriadur prifysgol Cymru* (Cardiff, 1950 onward), pp. 1495, 1497, 3167.

²² *Armes Prydein*, ed. Ifor Williams (Dublin, 1972), p. 12; cf. A. C. Breeze, 'Armes Prydein, Hywel Dda, and the reign of Edmund of Wessex', *Études celtiques*, XXIII (1997), pp. 209–22.

²³ *The Mabinogion*, trans. Gwyn Jones and Thomas Jones (London, 1949), pp. 14–15; *Pwyll pendeuic Dyuet*, ed. R. L. Thomson (Dublin, 1957), pp. 13–14.

²⁴ *Geiriadur*, p. 3168.

Palaeobotanists, who could inform on the early history of the Sankey valley (and whether it was used for agriculture or was left wild), might resolve this point.

An objection to the above etymology was made by the anonymous referee of this paper, whose report came to hand immediately before it went to press. The referee very reasonably pointed out that Middle Welsh *sangi* would lead us to expect a river-name **Sangey*, not the *Sankey* we have. Yet the point seems answered by Jackson's account of *-nc-* in Welsh. In Primitive or Old Welsh this gave /ngh/, with the nasalized *g* of 'singer' in modern Standard English. The *h* here apparently still appears in the above quotation from the *Four Branches*. But this seems an instance of traditional spelling, since Jackson would have maintained that stress shifted to the first syllable of the word in the eleventh century, with consequent loss of *h*.²⁵ There is hence no reason to think that the Sankey does not derive from Brittonic **Sanci* 'trampler; pusher, presser', a form borrowed by English in the early seventh century.

So it seems we can provide a derivation for *Sankey* which makes both linguistic and hydrological sense. We need not think that the Britons regarded Sankey Brook (until recently flowing by areas of industrial pollution) as a sacred or holy river. But they may have considered it either as a river tending to flood or perhaps as one pressing obstacles down or pushing its way through them. If so, the etymology helps historians. It removes Sankey Brook's claims to divinity, and provides evidence for the landscape of Celtic Lancashire.

²⁵ Jackson, *Language and history*, pp. 498–507.