THE CELTIC NAMES OF CABUS, CUERDEN,
AND WILPSHIRE IN LANCASHIRE

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The three place-names discussed here, all in Lancashire, are of Celtic origin. They thus cast light on the pre-English inhabitants of the region, where a British dialect akin to Welsh was spoken until the Anglo-Saxon invasions of the late seventh century. The names are described in alphabetical order.

1. CABUS, NEAR LANCASTER

Cabus is a parish (National Grid Reference SD 4848) eight miles south of Lancaster. Formerly a township in the parish of Garstang, it has no real centre, but lies on major north–south routes of communication: the Lancaster canal runs along its western edge, the A6 down its middle, and the Glasgow–Euston railway beyond its eastern perimeter, which is formed mainly by the river Wyre.

Ekwall, citing the name as ‘Kaibal’ in 1200–10 and ‘Cayballes’ in 1292, derived it from Old English cæg ‘key’, allegedly used in an earlier sense ‘peg’, plus unattested Old English ball ‘rounded hill’. But he said the exact meaning of the name was unclear. A. D. Mills, who excludes many difficult names from his dictionary, omits Cabus.¹ This may

suggest dissatisfaction with Ekwall’s explanation, in part because the Cabus region is flat and lacking in hills.

It seems easier to derive the name from Celtic than from English. Here the obvious etymology for ‘Kaibal’ and ‘Cayballes’ is from an equivalent of Welsh *ceubal* ‘boat, ferry boat, skiff, wherry, canoe’. This is an early loan, deriving from Late Latin *caupulus* ‘small boat’, which also gave Old Breton *caubal*, glossing *lembum* ‘pinnacle, yacht, cutter’. The Celtic word has been linked with Modern English *coble* ‘short flat-bottomed boat’, of the kind still used in north-east England.

Welsh *ceubal* occurs in early texts. The Welsh laws give the value of a ferry boat (*keubal*) as twenty-four pence. Sir Ifor Williams also noted the derived form *ceubalsa* ‘ferry, ferry-place’ in place-names. Gabalfa is a Cardiff suburb (ST 1679) near the river Taff, and there is another Gabalfa (SO 240467) in Powys, downstream from Hay on Wye. The names of both derive from ‘y geubalsa’ ‘the ferry-place, ferry’ where people waited for the ferry boat (*ceubal*). The ferries are no more, but the names go on. The southern Gabalfa figures as ‘Coupalua’ (at ST 165784) in a grant, nominally of the seventh century, in the twelfth-century Book of Llandaff.

Comparison of Welsh *ceubal* with the early forms of *Cabus* allows interpretation of this name as a Cumbric one, meaning ‘ferry boat’ or, better, ‘ferry boats’ (since the Brittonic word appears as an English plural in *-s*). The original ferry was hardly on the old Roman road to Lancaster, as this did not cross the Wyre in Cabus but at Garstang (near SD 493450) to the south, where there would in any case be a bridge. So the original ferry of Cabus was probably on the east side of the parish, perhaps at SD 497485, where rights of way still run down to opposite sides of the river.

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This leaves only the question of the sound developments of the Anglo-Saxon period. It is agreed that /au/ in early Latin loans gave /ou/ in Old Welsh. If the present etymology is correct, the Anglo-Saxon invaders of the seventh century would encounter the name as /Coubal/. Because Old English possessed no diphthong equivalent to /ou/, it would have to substitute; and at Cabus this seems to have been done with long /a/ (although the development of Old Welsh /ou/ in English place-names is unfortunately not entirely clear, for lack of certain examples). In the Middle English period Old English long /a/ was retained in northern dialects (as in north Lancashire), when it was rounded to /o/ in midland and southern ones. Hence, it would seem, the modern name Cabus, with the original Old English long vowel preserved.

If the explanation of this name is correct, it provides a glimpse of life on the river Wyre in pre-English times, when the region was still inhabited by speakers of a Brittonic language. It also, more importantly, suggests that Celtic communities survived here (no doubt in servitude to their masters) when the Wyre valley was conquered by the English in the seventh century.

2. CUERDEN, NEAR PRESTON

Cuerden is a civil parish (now cut through by the M6) some three miles south of Preston, in the flat semi-industrial countryside between the Ribble and Leyland (SD 5524). Formerly a township in the parish of Leyland, it provides evidence for the settlement of the region in its name, which is of Celtic origin, as was recognized by Ekwall. He derived Cuerden (the first syllable of which is pronounced as in cure 'remedy') from an equivalent of Modern Welsh cerddin 'ash tree', and this explanation has been repeated over many decades in his place-names dictionary. It is, however, not quite correct. Welsh cerddin does not mean 'ash tree' (Fraxinus excelsior, a member of the Olive family, for which the Welsh is

7 Ekwall, Concise dictionary, p. 135.
It is a plural form meaning ‘rowans, mountain ashes’ (Pyrus aucuparia, formerly Sorbus aucuparia), a member of the Rose family, and thus an entirely different species. Ekwall’s slip is worth pointing out, because ash and mountain ash differ in ecology and folklore as well as in appearance. The mountain ash, growing at a higher altitude than any other British tree, is the characteristic small tree of the acid uplands of Britain and Ireland, and (thanks to its brilliant orange-red berries) plays an important part in early Celtic and Norse tradition, especially as a protector against magic.

For Cuerden, Ekwall quotes the forms ‘Kerden’ from c. 1200 and 1246, and ‘Kirden’ from 1212. These derive from Cumbric, which died out in the Ribble area in the late seventh century, when the region was occupied by Northumbria. (The very survival of Celtic place-names, however, shows that some Britons remained to pass these names on, even as they learned the language of their new masters.) The forms quoted by Ekwall are close to Middle Welsh ‘Kerdin’, attested in 1317 as the name of the river Cerdin in north Dyfed (one of six Welsh streams called Cerdin), as also cerdin ‘mountain ash’, figuring in a poem of uncertain date in Aberystwyth, National Library of Wales, MS. Peniarth 2, the fourteenth-century Book of Taliesin. The older forms of Cuerden are also close to Cornish kerden, Breton kerzin and kerzen, and Irish caorthann.

The relationship of these Celtic words meaning ‘mountain ash’ is unclear. Irish caorthann is known at an early date, in the personal name Cairatini (attested in an ogham inscription); as carásthend it occurs in the eighth-century ‘Cattle Raid of Fróech’,
where Fróech brings a branch of mountain ash to King Ailill of Connacht. The French scholar Vendryes was sure that Irish must have borrowed the word from Brittonic, or vice versa; on the whole, he thought Brittonic more likely to be the borrower. This would, of course, have been at an early date, before the separation of Cumbric, Welsh, Cornish, and Breton. Whatever the exact history of these Celtic forms, they still let us recognize in Cuerden a Celtic place-name that survived the Northumbrian occupation of the Lancashire region in the seventh century, a name deriving from a plant that was not the ash tree, but a tree far less familiar in English place-names, the mountain ash or rowan.

They also allow us to eliminate an alternative etymology mentioned by Professor David Mills of the University of Liverpool: the first element a personal name Cær, the second Old English denu ‘valley’, with the meaning ‘Cær’s valley’. This need not be taken seriously. The authority for the first name is unknown, and there is no valley at Cuerden, which is on a plain.

The name of Cuerden can thus be recognized with confidence as that of a Celtic settlement, conspicuous for mountain ashes that grew there.

3. WILPSHIRE, NEAR BLACKBURN

Wilpshire is a township (SD 6832) in the north of the parish of Blackburn; its name is attested as ‘Wlypsykre’ in 1246, ‘Wlipschyre’ in 1258, and ‘Wilpschyre’ in 1311. Ekwall explained the first element as perhaps a nickname from Old English welps, welsp ‘lisping’, and the second as from Old English scir used in the sense ‘manor, estate’. A. D. Mills agrees that the second part means ‘district, estate’ but describes the first as uncertain. He suggests it may represent a personal name Wilps. But this

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14 Vendryes, Lexique, p. 8.
16 Ekwall, Concise dictionary, p. 521.
17 Mills, Dictionary, p. 361.
is not very convincing, because such a name is otherwise unknown. Another approach is possible.

Lancashire is rich in Celtic place-names, as Ekwall noted.\textsuperscript{18} The name of Wilpshire may thus contain a Celtic element, previously unrecognized. If so, it is surely an equivalent of Welsh \textit{gwlyb} ‘wet, moist, fluid, liquid’. This is a common word. Attested in Old Welsh as \textit{gulip}, it is cognate with Cornish \textit{gleb}, Old Breton \textit{gulip}, \textit{guilp}, Modern Breton \textit{gleb}, and Old and Modern Irish \textit{fliuch}. These all mean ‘wet’.\textsuperscript{19} It is also familiar from early Welsh place-names. Amongst locations from south-east Wales recorded by the twelfth-century Book of Llandaff is ‘Uilla Guliple’ ‘settlement of the wet spot’ (in a ninth-century record) near Bishton (ST 387873), and \textit{gwlyble} ‘wet spot, damp place’ in a tenth-century account of Llanwern (ST 371879).\textsuperscript{20} Bishton and Llanwern are villages by the Caldicot levels (east of Newport), which were marshland until recent times. Even away from the levels, much of the Bishton-Llanwern region lies below the 50-foot contour. Evidence of poor drainage is therefore no surprise.

In the light of this, it is reasonable to derive the first part of \textit{Wilpshire} from the Cumbric equivalent of Old Welsh \textit{gulip} ‘wet’. The form would have been borrowed by the English when they occupied the Lancashire region in the seventh century, before the development of initial /w/ to /gw/ in Brittonic from the eighth century onwards.\textsuperscript{21} Hence the absence of ‘g’ in the English name.

If the name of Wilpshire is a Celtic-English hybrid, it provides evidence for Celtic survival after the Anglo-Saxon conquest of the Ribble basin. As for the name’s aptness, Wilpshire lies west of a modern reservoir (proof of heavy rainfall and impervious terrain) and east of Clayton (‘settlement on clayey soil’), which looks down on a valley still avoided by communications. It was thus surely known as a wet spot or damp place by the Britons who lived and travelled in the Blackburn region over twelve hundred years ago.

\textsuperscript{18} Ekwall, \textit{Concise dictionary}, p. xxiii.
\textsuperscript{19} \textit{Geiriadur}, p. 1685.
\textsuperscript{21} Jackson, \textit{Language and history}, pp. 697–8.