THIS is the story of a "lost" Cheshire place-name which, when I thought I had found it, suddenly disappeared forever and became as if it had never been. It settles a minor problem of Cheshire place-nomenclature, it provides a warning against leaping to even the likeliest of conclusions, and it tells of a long search which, though virtue is not rewarded, well illustrates the hazards of historical research.

I noticed "Signeby" first in W. G. Collingwood's account of Scandinavian settlement in Cheshire. Collingwood did not indicate that the name no longer existed, but it was obviously "lost" in the sense that as a name it had vanished from use and as a site it was entirely unknown. Place-names in -by are not common in Cheshire, and an additional example, even if no longer current, was worth pursuing. If one could find out where "Signeby" once stood and if one could go further and show that the name still survived to-day, that would certainly be a contribution both to the history of Cheshire and to the study of place-names. Such a prospect gradually unfolded itself. How could one have guessed that it was a mirage?

Collingwood gave no reference to the name and the first task was to find out where he had seen it. This proved surprisingly difficult. He seemed to imply that it occurred in Domesday Book, which of course it does not. And it did not seem to occur in any other record. Having occasion to examine many Cheshire documents I always kept an eye open for a "Signeby", but not a single form appeared. For a long time it looked as if "Signeby" did not exist outside the covers of Collingwood's little volume; it was not in manuscript material examined, it was not in published records, it was not in the index to Ormerod's History of Cheshire, and it was not known to local scholars.

Then I noticed that the Tithe Award Schedule of Great Saughall (1843)\(^1\) contained the names *Syllaby Croft* (three times), *Syllaby Field*, and *Syllaby Butt*. Together these names, numbered 325–329 on the Tithe Award Map, covered a considerable area. It was not possible to equate Collingwood's "Signeby" as it stood with *Syllaby* in Great Saughall, but the alteration of a single letter in "Signeby" (i.e. to *Sigleby*) would allow it to be associated tentatively with *Syllaby*. And *Sigleby* would make good sense as a Scandinavian name whereas *Signeby* would be difficult to explain. Therefore the discovery of *Syllaby* in a Tithe Award Schedule raised the distinct possibility that "Signeby" might be identified with a name still surviving in Great Saughall and with a site that could be located with precision from the Tithe Award Map. It was curious that neither the original of Collingwood's form nor any other early spelling of the name had so far come to light.

Two or three years later, and quite accidentally, I came upon a reference to the ultimate source of Collingwood's undated and undocumented form. In an early publication of the Viking Society there was a vague reference to "an unidentified Signeby mentioned by Ormerod."\(^2\) Therefore we were thrown back upon Ormerod, and "Signeby", though unindexed, was there sure enough—in a list of villages in the Forest of Wirral.\(^3\) At last we had a form in a source that could be dated, a source early enough to carry some weight.\(^4\)

The curious form of "Signeby" and the impression, strengthened by the occurrence of *Syllaby*, that it might be a corruption were sufficient to suppress a final cry of triumph until I had examined the document (Harl. MS. 2115. fol. 68) of which Ormerod's text was a copy. After some further delay, caused by the temporary removal of the Randle Holme Collection, of which Harleian MS. 2115 is part, from the British Museum, I found an opportunity of examining the document itself. I should not have been surprised to have found that the spelling

\(^1\) Kindly copied for me by Mrs. Anne Anderson who devoted much time and energy between 1942 and 1945 to the transcribing of field-names in Cheshire Tithe Award Schedules.


\(^4\) Amongst those who have sought in vain for forms of "Signeby" I should mention Mr. A. C. F. Tait, Assistant Curator of the Lady Lever Art Gallery, who diligently examined sources not accessible to me and made inquiries over a wide area.
of "Signeby" was somewhat different from the spelling given by Ormerod and Collingwood. But how great was the difference can be seen from the accompanying reproduction. "Signeby" is No. 49 on the list, but it is not Signeby at all—it is Whiteby (i.e. Whitby). Ormerod or his scribe misread Whiteby as Signeby. So the search ended. There is not and there never was a place called Signeby. The name and the whole problem of its identification arose from a copyist's error. To have this definitely stated and clearly explained may save some students of Cheshire history from seeking in vain for what does not exist.

We still have Syllaby in Great Saughall, however, and there is no doubt that this is a genuine name. But unless some future investigation of Cheshire place-name material reveals earlier forms it would be unwise to count it as a genuine place-name in -by. For the time being we should put it beside Haby (Barnston), Hesby (Bidston) and Stromby (Thurstaston). All these names appear in the Tithe Award Schedules of Wirral; all or some of them may be genuine place-names in -by, for we know that not all the bys of Wirral have survived to the present day.¹

Finally, the list of Wirral places here reproduced from Harl. MS. 2115 will have its own value for those who are interested in Cheshire history. It will be seen that other errors and discrepancies are revealed in Ormerod's list, but it is no part of my present purpose to comment upon these.

¹ See Ingimund's Invasion, cit. sup. pp. 164–165.