

## BERWICK

There is a widespread belief that the name of **Berwick-upon-Tweed** derives from a meadow in the vicinity having produced a crop of barley, though how long ago, nobody seems to know.

I do wonder about this. Is it likely that a settlement in such a strategic location was identified originally by anything as ordinary, transitory & ephemeral as a cornfield ?

In this context no explanation seems to be offered for the use of the name **Berwick** elsewhere – more often than not in locations near historic borders.

Centuries ago this town on the natural barrier formed by the Tweed was known as **Barwick**, suggesting to me that the name derives not from **Bar**-ley but from its proximity to the **bar** or border between two distinct territories: **Bernicia** – the northernmost kingdom of the Angles – & the land beyond it, ruled by their enemies the Picts & Scots.

*[Incidentally, I wonder if the name given to the Roman road Dere Street, which runs northwards through **Bernicia**, has any connexion with Deira, the name of the other Anglo-Saxon kingdom, in the south part of Northumbria.]*

The prefixes **Ber** & **Bar** are easily interchangeable. Pronunciation variations can lead to changes of meanings & misunderstanding: typical of this is the American term “*Bear rear*” This is not a reference to ursine anatomy; it means **barrier**.

To underline my point, I offer a short list of borderland places:

- Berwickshire is simply the Scottish shire once ruled from Berwick-upon-Tweed
- Southwards, near the border between Deira & Bernicia, in the vicinity of Ponteland, lies **Berwick Hill**
- Near Llanelli on the Welsh border we find a **Berwick**. *[A passing thought is that the Germanic word Wick & the Latin word Vicus, both meaning settlements or small towns, must surely have the same linguistic root in the proto-Indo-European language.]*
- Also on the Welsh border, near Shrewsbury, is Great **Berwick**
- Midway across England in the debatable land bordering the Anglo-Saxon kingdoms of Wessex, Mercia &, later on, the boundary of the Danelaw ruled by their sworn enemies the Vikings is **Berkshire** – a truncated version of the name given to Berkwickshire.

- Westwards along the same battle-ground border lies Berwick Bassett & several other places in Wiltshire distinguished from each other by the names of the saints to whom their parish churches were dedicated: Berwick St James, Berwick St John & Berwick St Leonard
- In Kent there's a **Berwick** near the old coast line at Lympne, where the Romans built a sea-fort.
- & there's a **Barham** between Canterbury & Dover - perhaps signifying a steading on the boundary between the territories of two tribal chieftains.
- Maybe the same applies to another **Berwick** not far from Lewes in Sussex
- There's a **Berwick** near the coast of South-west Dorset, in the parish of Swyre.
- **Beverwijk** is on the coast of Holland – perhaps near the harbour **bar**.
- Southwards, on the **border** between the lands of the Dutch & the French speakers to the south, we find **Berck-sur-Mer**
- Further south along the coast, beyond Boulogne, lies **Berk-Plage**
- Finally I'll mention a region on the border of France known as **Bar**

I hope that these few thoughts raise some questions about the likelihood of a town that became an important sea port, taking its name from a transitory field of corn.

Michael H Peters