How and when did Farnhill and Kildwick get their names ?

Introduction

If you're looking to find out when a particular place in England was first settled, a good starting point is to investigate the origin of its name. Over time, the native population as well various invaders – the Romans, Anglo-Saxons, Danes, and Normans – have created their own communities. Often the names they gave to these places have been preserved, in one form or another, through to the present day.

In this short article we will look at the possible origins of the names Farnhill and Kildwick, and what this can tell us about when the two villages came into being.

Farnhill – a case of Anglo-Saxon "say what you see"

The name Farnhill has a fairly non-contentious Anglo-Saxon origin.

It was first written down, like so many other English place-names, in the Domesday Book, where it appears as "Fernehil".
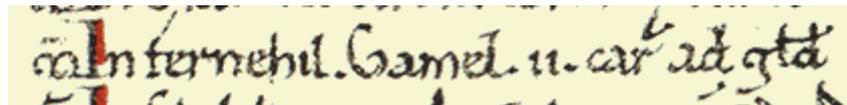

Fig 1: The entry for Farnhill in the Domesday Book

This is a concatenation of two Old English words, which have very obvious modern equivalents:

Ferne = Fern

Hil = Hill

Which gives Farnhill the very literal meaning, "ferny-hill". And that's understandable isn't it ? You only have to go for a walk on Farnhill Moor today to realise how the name might have come about.

It's easy to imagine an Anglo-Saxon, looking for a place to settle down, walking up onto the high ground where Farnhill Hall now stands. He battles up hill through the dense fern and then, when he gets to the top, he looks around and asks himself "What's a good name for this place ?"

And then it occurs to him.

Kildwick – three possibilities

There are three possibilities for the origin of the name Kildwick. They are, in turn: illogical, unlikely, and simply ridiculous.

An Anglo-Saxon "child's farm" ?

If Farnhill has an Anglo-Saxon origin, revealed in the Domesday Book, might the same true of Kildwick ? Well, many people think so – but there is a bit of a problem.

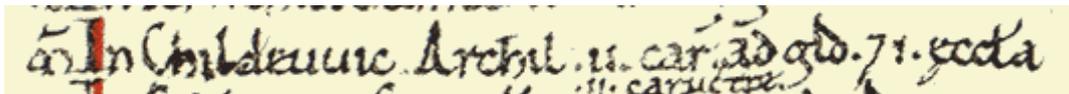Here's the Domesday Book entry for Kildwick.

Fig 2: The entry for Kildwick in the Domesday Book

Again, we have a name made up of two Old English (Anglo-Saxon) words: Childe and Wic (the uu signifying a w – a double-u).

However, the two words, taken together, just don't make any sense:

<div align="center">

Childe = Child

Wic = Dairy farm

</div>

The idea that Kildwick might have originated as a dairy farm supplying children strains credibility to beyond breaking point.

Another interpretation, that it got its name because it was a farm owned by the child of a local lord, is similarly difficult to believe. It would be very unlikely, in early England, that a settlement belonging to someone wouldn't bear their name – rather than "child's farm", it's far more likely that it would have been called something like "Edwin's farm" or possibly "Edwin son of Alfred's farm".

A Viking "watery place" ?

Another option favoured by some, including Wikipedia, is that Kildwick was first settled by Danish Vikings who were likely to have been in this area from around 862AD, when Ivar the Boneless and the Great Heathen Army took York, to well after 954AD, when Erik Bloodaxe the last king of Viking Yorvik was killed in battle on Stainmore.

Kildwick, in Old Norse, would be:

<div align="center">

Kild = Spring OR Large smooth body of water

Wick = Settlement

</div>

Now, just as an Old English derivation for Farnhill matches the local geography, so surely this Old Norse derivation for Kildwick, as a settlement by smooth water, surely describes the location of Kildwick on the banks of the river ?

The problem is that although the Danes were certainly in this area, the idea that they *created* a totally new settlement in Kildwick, simply isn't realistic. Several points argue against this:

1. Farnhill, as we've already discussed, was established by the Anglo-Saxons before the Danish invasion. It's likely that any group of Anglo-Saxons establishing a settlement on the high ground at Farnhill, with its defensive position and views up and down the valley, would also ensure that they had control of the river crossing just half-a-mile downstream ? Basically, if the Anglo-Saxons created a settlement in Farnhill then surely they must also have had one in Kildwick ?

2. There are very few places in the area that have place-names that indicate a purely Danish origin. (Note this statement is in direct contradiction to Wikipedia, which says precisely the opposite. Wiki is wrong !).

   Places such as Cowling, Bradley, Eastburn, Sutton, Steeton have names which are purely Old English in origin. Many others, including Carleton, Lothersdale, Silsden, Glusburn and Skipton, have names which are of Old English origin but with Old Norse modifications.

   It's reasonable to suggest that Kildwick falls into the second category. All we need to imagine is Viking incomers asking the resident Anglo-Saxons what their village is called. The response is something in Old English that sounds a bit like "settlement by smooth water" in their own language, and that becomes its new name.

3. Finally, there is evidence from Kildwick church of significant Christian activity in the area in the Viking period. The remains of seven stone crosses were found when the church was renovated in 1901; these were subsequently dated to no later than 950AD.

   So, by 950AD there must have been a Christian settlement at Kildwick. But since the Danish invaders were pagan, and although they were tolerant of non-pagan religious practices, it's not credible that a newly created Danish settlement could have been Christian by 950AD.

If the Danes settled in Kildwick, they must have occupied an existing settlement – and, taking into account the evidence of the ancient stone crosses found in the church, this must have been a Christian settlement.

A really early "church by a marsh" ?

There is a third option. One that gives Kildwick a name that means something understandable, and provides it with a Christian heritage that is well-established by the time of the Vikings.

The problem with it is the timing – because this idea has Kildwick coming into existence before even the arrival of the Anglo-Saxons. It assumes that Kildwick was a British settlement.

When the Anglo-Saxons came to Britain, after the Romans left in the early fifth century, they found a patchwork of small British kingdoms. Some of these, such as Lindsey and Elmet (near Leeds) continued right into the Saxon period. Others, like Rheged (which covered Cumbria, parts of Lancashire and might have extended as far east as Catterick) and possibly Craven, were slowly absorbed into the growing Anglo-Saxon kingdoms.

These kingdoms were Christian, following the old Celtic Christian practices, and spoke a language called Brythonic. If Kildwick were an old British settlement, it's name would very much fit with its geography and subsequent history. The Brythonic meaning would be:

Kil = Church
Wick = Bay, harbour, marsh, place of calm water

A marshy place, with a church, sounds not unlike modern-day Kildwick. Could it have been the site of a really early British Christian settlement ?