

## Examination of the name – DERBY

In my book, *The Rivers of Time*, I examined the various arguments surrounding the source of the name of the town of Derby. I recognised that most historians claimed it to be an Anglo-Saxon town that had its name changed by the Danish Vikings from Northworthy to Derby.

I also confirmed that in the Anglo-Saxon Chronicles is a record for A.D. 918, (or A.D. 917 in some versions), which described the achievement of Ethelfleda, lady of the Mercians, conquering, **“the town called Derby, with all that thereto belonged; and there were also slain four of her thanes, that were most dear to her, within the gates”**. This happens to be the first mention of Derby in the Anglo-Saxon Chronicles as the place name we are familiar with today but ‘Northworthy’ is not mentioned anywhere in the Anglo-Saxon Chronicles.

However, in a Latin translation of another Chronicle Derby is described as, **“Northworthy in the Saxon tongue and Deoraby in the Danish tongue”**. (**locum qui Northworthige nuncupatur juxta autem Danaam linguam Deoraby** as given in ***The Cartulary of Darley Abbey*** and credited by Darlington to **“*Monumenta Hist. Brit.* page 513**)

This particular reference is in connection with the account of the death of Saint Alkmund and the transmission of his remains to the “Minster” at Derby. According to nineteenth century antiquarian John Keys St Alkmund was murdered in the year 800 and his remains removed to Derby twenty years afterwards being re-interred on March 19<sup>th</sup>, 820, at what was to become St Alkmund’s Church.

The foregoing records give two instances of the name of the town each with reasonable dating evidence. Although Keys claims that the church was built after the interment of the Saint other Saxon sources claim that the body was brought to the “Minster” or “The White Church” suggesting that a structure was there before the interment. However, leaving that detail aside we have the basis of the arguments over the name of the town. The other chronicle was claiming that in 820 AD the town was known as Northworthy to the Anglo-Saxons and Deoraby to the Vikings. Ninety-eight years later the Anglo-Saxon Chronicles are content to call the town Derby. Whatever the interpretation of those facts are we have to question whether there was some form of habitation prior to the year 820 AD. Was it a town founded by the Anglo-Saxons and then taken over by the Vikings? That is the suggestion in the claim that the town was originally known by one name to the Anglo-Saxons and then by a different name to the Vikings who arrived much later. If that is the case then we can push the date of the town back to either the sixth, seventh or eighth century.

The foregoing arguments over the Saxon records also suggest another and quite different question about the age of the town. If the town was originally called Northworthy by the Anglo-Saxons then it is possible that, unless they also changed its name from something else, it was they who founded the town. This would mean that the Derby we know today was not in existence before, during or after the Roman occupation. That is, Derby cannot be Iron Age or Roman.

The earliest finds in the area around Derby, (but not **in** Derby), are Bronze Age and we know that there were also finds from the Iron Age which indicates continuous occupation in the near locality.

Continuity of local occupation is also evident from the start of the Roman period and we know that the Romans called their site Derbentione, (entry 89 Derbentione = DERVENTIO = Littlechester, Derbyshire - ***The Ravenna Cosmography***). If they generally Latinised the indigenous name then the name Derby should be from the ancient British root form. This Roman argument should be considered against the fact that there is more than one river Derwent in England.

My first line of enquiry concentrated on the Viking period source of the name and even though other researchers have looked at this and documented their findings I decided to start afresh.

I consulted an on-line dictionary of the Middle English language and found that it gave, “**Deore**, adj. **dear**”. In other words ‘dear’ as in ‘well loved’ or ‘fond’ and not the four legged deer that is often quoted. Could this equate with North ‘Worthy’?

Perhaps the spelling ‘Deoraby’, found on a silver coin was incorrectly translated.



The thin coin, slightly smaller than an old halfpenny, was one of the first to be struck in a mint established in Derby by King Athelstan, AD 895 – AD 939

The inscriptions reads on the principal, or obverse side, ED. ELSTAN REX TO BRIT (Athelstan King of Britain); and on the other, or reverse side, GAREARDES MOT IN DEORABYI (Gareades made in Derby).

*Illustration 1: From CITEZEN'S DERBY by W Alfred Richardson*

I came across an entry in **The Cartulary of Darley Abbey** which presented me with a further conundrum and one that may cast doubt on the interpretation by modern-day historians of “Deoraby” as the changing of the name of the town by the Viking Danes. If we just consider the “Deoraby” spelling in isolation it certainly looks like a name change but if we read Darlington’s introduction in the Cartulary, near the top of page xlvi, we find the following curiosity. Darlington quotes a passage from the List of English Saints in the Hyde Libre Vitae: “**Thonne restuth Sancti Ealhmund on tham mynstre Northweorthig neah thaere ea Deorwentam.**” (Register of new Minster and Hyde Abbey - Ed. de Gray, Birch P 89). Look at the spelling of **Northweorthig** and **Deorwentam**. Each has the “**eo**” combination of letters in the name just as that found in “**Deoraby**” yet we see no claim that the spelling of Northworthig or Derwentam had been changed by the Vikings. Could “**eo**” simply have been the “standard” spelling at that time for the particular ‘A’ sound which is still retained in the present pronunciation even though Derby is spelt with an ‘E’?

Taking this discussion further is it probable that the Anglo-Saxon spelling at the time was also ‘Deoraby’ as suggested by the forgoing old English entry in the Hyde Libre Vitae. Even as late as Speed’s 1610 map we can see that the local pronunciation is represented by a hard ‘A’ sound.

On Speed’s 1610 map the town name is spelt ‘Darbye’ and the river is the ‘Darwen’ which is consistent with near-by Darley Abbey. This suggests to me that the letter ‘E’ in the name of the town and the river evolved from the use of the hard ‘A’ sound written as ‘EO’ and whilst the ‘E’ was retained in ‘Derby’ and sounded as an ‘A’ it evolved to become sounded as an ‘E’ in ‘Derwent’. In ‘Darley’ the sound was kept but the spelling modified to suit, that is from ‘Deorley’ to ‘Darley’.

I realised that there should be other cases of this use of ‘**eo**’ and I found that the town of Repton is recorded in the Chronicles as Hreopedune and at Domesday it is recorded as 'Rapendune' with the '**eo**' replaced by the 'a' sound. Later this becomes Repton with the 'a' replaced by an 'e' but now pronounced as an 'e' as with Derwent. Additionally in AD 577 the West Saxons advanced to the river Severn and defeated the British at Deorham. Even today there are echoes of the ‘**eo**’ use in

Viking areas of England because near Norwich, just north of the town of Attleborough on the A11 road, are **Deo**pham and **Deo**pham Green. Could all of the notable and learned historians have got it wrong? It does seem strange that a different translation of 'Deoraby' should bring us back to the Roman form as found in 'Derby' although that in itself does not explain the change from 'Northworthy' to 'Derby'.

Alternatively, there may never have been a change and Northworthy could have always existed as the northern enclosure containing the church of St Alkmund becoming part of Derby when the Vikings settled in the ninth century.

It is likely that the Romans called the area by the local name for the river which may have been 'Dar' or 'Der' but pronounced 'Dar'. The Romans would have Latinised this into Derbentione which could then have been called Deorham or similar by the Saxons except for the area called Northworthy. The Vikings could also have retained the local name removing 'ham' and adding their 'BY' suffix making it the town by the dar.

If we follow the argument that Derby was the town of the 'Deer' then, as the deer was a common animal, we should see many towns called Derby. There is another problem to address if the source of the name of the town is considered in isolation. The Derwent rises in the northern hills and flows a considerable distance to the Trent. It is known as the Derwent for its whole length and there is another Darley above Matlock. It is unlikely that the river was named after just one small part at its southern end. It seems logical to me that the town was named after the river as were the other locations.

I have been familiar with the river Derwent for most of my life. When I was young it was a playground for most townsfolk and I, along with many others, learnt to swim from the bank at Exeter Flats across from the River Gardens. I fished the Corporation waters and the Earl of Harrington waters and have spent hot summer days down 'Pebbly Beach', a favourite spot for the locals. One thing that I can say about the Derwent is that it is a 'Dark' river because of its silt laden waters and my guess is that this is the source of its name and possibly a fact recognised for the whole of its length because it is rare to see the river bed no matter where you view it from.