

ROLLESTON - THE ORIGIN AND DEVELOPMENT OF THE PLACE NAME

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As a place-name, Rolleston is first documented in an English mediaeval charter of 942 AD in which King Edmund granted several estates, including Rolleston, to his thegn, Wulfsige Maur. In that charter, written in Latin, the name occurred as *roðulfeston*. It consisted of a first element, *roðulf*, written as an Anglo-Saxon personal name, and a second element, *tūn*, which is Old English (OE), meaning homestead, farm or settlement, or perhaps estate.

There are two ways in which the name may be interpreted....

The spelling of *roðulf* in this manner could represent the Anglo-Saxon name of Hrothwulf, which becomes Rodolf or Rodolph. Its connection with the second element *tūn* can be interpreted as the place-name of an Anglo-Saxon farm settlement that belonged to Rodolf, a name that could certainly pre-date the late 9th century Scandinavian settlement of the Danelaw region. This interpretation, of an Anglo-Saxon origin for the name, has not been widely accepted in academic literature. If it were correct, it would define Rolleston as one of the more ancient settlement names in the area, extending back before the Viking invasions to the mid 9th century at least, and possibly earlier. It is not the only valid interpretation for the place-name origin however, and the second option, although not quite as ancient, is considered by several place-name experts to be the correct interpretation.

The second interpretation is supported by the next documentation of the place-name, where it occurred 61 years later in 1002 AD, in the will of Wulfric, earl of Mercia, in which the placename is written as *Rolfestūn*. This 1002 spelling of *Rolfestūn* suggests a representation of the name *Hrōðwulf* from the Germanic elements *Hrōð* + *wulf*, a name that was popular amongst the Scandinavians in its contracted form of *Hrólfr* or *Rolf*. Its usage in this case, as a hybrid place-name including the OE element *tūn*, infers that an existing Anglo-Saxon settlement was taken over by the Scandinavians and named for a locally prominent personage named Rolf, who held the estate and was probably resident there.

The Scandinavian name option appears to be more generally accepted by most place-name authorities for the Staffordshire village of Rolleston. One authority¹ defines Rolleston as being derived from the Old Norse (ON) personal name *Hrólfr* + OE *tūn*. Another² defines it as being derived from “Rolf’s farm”. An earlier authority³ quotes the 942 AD spelling and states that this is from “Rodolf” + *tūn*. He states that Rolf is a contraction of Rodolf. A fourth⁴ defines the various Rollestons of Staffordshire, Leicestershire and Wiltshire, as all being derived from *Hrōðwulf’s* or *Hrólfr’s* farm.

The first option, of Rolleston originating from an Anglo-Saxon personal name, appears not to be given substantial weight by the place-name experts. Rolleston lay at the

¹ Hanks P., Hodges F., (1989): *A Dictionary of Surnames*.

² Reaney P.H., Wilson R.M., (1958): *A Dictionary of English Surnames*.

³ Harrison H. (1918): *Surnames of the United Kingdom*, Vol 2.

⁴ Ekwall, (1960): *Oxford Dictionary of English Place-names*.

western margin of Scandinavian influence and settlement of the Danelaw, and within the Danelaw, many instances of hybrid place-names with *tūn* as the second element are accepted as being derived from a Scandinavian personal name + the OE ending. Indeed, Sawyer⁵ states that it has long been recognised that hybrid names combining a Scandinavian personal element with the common English place-name element *tūn*, represent English settlements that were taken over by Scandinavians, and that names of this type are normally found at relatively good settlement sites.

Cameron⁶ takes these ideas further in his valuable series of papers on the place-names within the Territory of the Five Boroughs. He pointed out that the so-called “Grimston-Hybrids”, settlements with a Scandinavian personal name as first element and OE *tūn* as second element, were found particularly near the Dove and the Trent on excellent agricultural land. Part of his argument supporting the Grimston-Hybrid thesis is that he was able to show that the distribution of this type of place-name fell into well defined patterns.

One of the patterns noted is that where Scandinavian settlement was thickest, Grimston-Hybrids are rare, such as for example, in the South Riding of Lincolnshire. From this, he derives an argument that the Grimston-Hybrids occur in areas that retained a substantial English population, especially towards the marginal areas of the Danelaw, usually with numerous English named villages in the vicinity. In fact, he shows that over 25% of all the Grimston-Hybrids in the territory of the Five Boroughs are located in the valley of the Trent and its tributaries. As an example of the earliest documented Grimston-Hybrid, Cameron specifically quotes Rolleston and the charter of 942 AD.

Another pattern noted by Cameron is the location of Grimston-Hybrids, similar to early English villages, on the best soils as defined by the geology of the river valleys. The English-named and Grimston-Hybrid villages are, in almost every case, situated on productive alluvial sands and gravels, or on slightly higher ground on the Keuper Marls. These provided drier sites than the heavier boulder clays, with better water supply, a lighter and warmer soil and were less densely wooded. Purely Scandinavian settlements that developed later during the Danelaw occupation, are more usually situated on poorer soils further up the smaller tributaries and on boulder clays, or on smaller outliers of sands and gravels. It is suggested that the Scandinavians occupied the less attractive sites because the better sites were already settled by the English. Again, Rolleston is quoted as a good example of the Grimston-Hybrids, being located on a small tributary of the Dove, on gravel and marl. Cameron’s conclusion is that the similarity of sites between the English-named villages and the Grimston-Hybrids is so close that he could hardly distinguish between them, and that the hybrids represent earlier English villages, partially renamed by their later occupants.

⁵ Sawyer P.H.: “Conquest and Colonisation: Scandinavians in the Danelaw and in Normandy”, in *Proceedings of the 8th Viking Congress*.

⁶ Cameron K., (1965); *Scandinavian Settlement in the Territory of the Five Boroughs: The Place-name Evidence*. Inaugural lecture by Kenneth Cameron, Professor of English Language at the University of Nottingham. Also: Cameron K., (1971); “Scandinavian Settlement in the Territory of the Five Boroughs: The Place-name Evidence Part III, The Grimston-Hybrids”. Both papers reprinted in *Place-name Evidence for the Anglo-Saxon Invasion and Scandinavian Settlements*. The English Place-name Society (1987).

There are other examples of these Grimston-Hybrid place-names in the near vicinity of Rolleston, occurring in Derbyshire as Foston, from the Old Norse name *Fótr* and located on the gravels, Scropton from *Skropi* located on alluvium of the Dove and Swarkeston from *Swerkir*, located on alluvium of the Trent. Cameron presents an illustration showing the distribution of Grimston-Hybrids in the valleys of the Trent and Dove in relation to the geological deposits and in comparison with nearby English named villages. Rolleston's position on the marl is quoted as an excellent comparison with the English-named Draycott, further west. Rolleston's lands of course, also extend off the marl, onto the alluvial meadows adjacent to the Dove.

The question of when the Scandinavian annexation of these older English villages occurred is also subject to interpretation. Stenton⁷ and many later scholars assumed that the hybrid names arose when the Great Army of the Danes divided out the land it had chosen for settlement, around 877 AD. Most of the settlement at that time though was in Yorkshire and the northern portion of the territory of the Five Boroughs, as is shown by the intensity of Scandinavian place-names, and other evidence, in those areas. Cameron suggests that it may have been around about the end of the 9th century that the Danes altered the English-named Noteworthy to the Scandinavian-named Derby, and established it as one of the Five Boroughs of the Danelaw. He also suggests that the Grimston-Hybrids may result from early but small groups of Danish settlers who pushed forward into areas already heavily settled by the English and where Danish place-names were rare. This implies that the margins of the Scandinavian settlement of the Danelaw were somewhat fluid and were defined more by the adventurous thrust of individual bands of settlers than by agreed and precise boundaries with the Saxons. The evidence suggests fairly peaceful mixing of the two populations in these marginal areas and the pattern of place-names distribution in the valleys of the Trent and Dove and other nearby tributaries certainly supports that conclusion.

How Rolf obtained Rolleston and gave his name to the settlement can only be guessed, and there are more than one possible means. The obvious suggestion is that it may have been taken by force of arms, but much evidence supports the idea that the Danish settlers' incursion was relatively peaceful and that most of the English were not displaced. New Scandinavian-named settlements were generally formed higher up the minor tributaries and on poorer land not occupied by the English, which indicates a lack of conflict. An alternative suggestion is that Rolleston may have become Scandinavian owned through inter-marriage with the English occupants, and if so, this would suggest that the new name came into general useage some years after the settlers' incursion to the area and possibly during the last decade of the 9th century or into the first one or two decades of the 10th century. At present, there is no evidence to pinpoint Rolf's accession to the property more precisely within that period of 877 to *circa* 920 AD. However, it could be suggested that if intermarriage was the mechanism of the change of ownership, it was more likely to have occurred after 2 or perhaps 3 generations of Danish occupation of their nearby settlements, allowing time for trust and neighbourly relations to build up between the two nationalities. Only after such trust was established would a marriage between a Danish son and a Saxon heiress be acceptable, permitting subsequent Danish management and ownership of the Saxon property.

⁷ Stenton F.: *Anglo-Saxon England*. 1943. Oxford Univ. Press.

Historical analysis of the place-name might normally accept the earliest form as providing the most reliable evidence for the name's origin, and in Rolleston's case, the 942 AD spelling of *roðulfestūn* would support the interpretation of an English origin, probably derived from an Anglo-Saxon settlement before the Scandinavian invasion of the Danelaw. *roðulfestūn* is perfectly acceptable as a fully English name and the fact that the name has potentially similar derivation from both English and Scandinavian personal names merely adds confusion to attempts at interpretation. The 942 AD document is the only instance of the name that points directly towards an Anglo-Saxon origin, but there is a good argument to suggest that acceptance of the earliest spelling for Rolleston might not be valid. King Edmund's charter to Wulfsgie Maur was written by scribes at Winchcombe in Gloucestershire, who would not necessarily be familiar with local Staffordshire place-names, particularly as the document was written only 24 years after the re-conquest of the area from Scandinavian occupation. It is reasonable to suggest that the scribes would have no knowledge of the place-name origin and would spell the word in the Anglo-Saxon manner for their Anglo-Saxon lord. Such a scenario would not require the name itself to be of Anglo-Saxon origin. Even as late as 940 AD, when Olaf Guthfrithson, the Viking leader, forced King Edmund to acknowledge the independence of the territory of the Five Boroughs, immediately east of Rolleston, English control of the area was still insecure. The grant of Rolleston and other nearby manors to Wulfsgie in 942, just after that Viking threat, was a strategic move, designed to establish an English bulwark against further possible Scandinavian incursion westward into the heart of Mercia. Thus, the spelling of Rolleston in the Anglo-Saxon manner in 942 might even be considered as a political act.

Interpretation of the earliest spelling is complicated by the fact that the original document has not survived and that the existing documents are 13th century copies in Latin, made by the monks at Burton Abbey. The Anglo-Saxon spelling has survived in the copies and in particular the OE symbol *ð* (*eth*) in the name is found in only one other word on the document. It appears that the Burton monks writing in Latin, faithfully copied the form of the name from the original and it can be reasonably assumed that the surviving spelling is the same as was used by King Edmund's scribe in 942.

Wulfric's will of 1002 AD and King Æthelred's charter to abbot Wulfgeat of 1008 AD used the name-forms *Rolfestūn* and *Rolvestone*. These spellings are very similar to the form *Rolvestune* as used in the Domesday Book of 1086 AD, and the form *Rolveston* that was used in numerous documents from the early Norman period until the late 13th century. The persistence of similar spelling through almost 300 years, both pre and post Norman conquest, suggests that the forms were phonetic and that the name was pronounced as *Rolf* or *Rolv*. This pronunciation was undoubtedly Scandinavian and provides strong support for a Scandinavian origin for the first element of the place-name.

The best conclusion on the subject, based on learned analysis of place-name evidence in the vicinity of Rolleston and the Five Boroughs, is that Rolleston is an example of a Grimston-Hybrid name, and that the derivation of the element *Rolf* was from a Scandinavian of some importance who controlled the estate, from whom it became locally known as *Rolfe's tūn*. During perhaps two generations of Scandinavian control,

the original English name became disused and forgotten.

The usage of the phonetic form of *Rolveston* during the first two centuries of the Norman occupation ended almost abruptly in the late-13th century. It appears that there must have been a fairly sudden change of pronunciation within the spread of one or two generations and the written form of the name altered to *Rolleston*, and has remained in that form into modern times. Several variations of name spelling occur in historical documents, as would be expected, but from around 1280AD, the spelling as *Rolleston* has remained remarkably consistent. The most common variants of the name in historical documents are *Rolston* and *Roulston*. As examples of early useage of the *Rolston* variant which is the most common, Alured Rolston, lord of the manor, made his will in 1468 and spelled his name as the phonetic variant. He left 20 shillings in his will to the parish church of Rolston. Thomas Rolston of Rolston is the subject of a document dated 1538 that records an agreement between Thomas and the tenants of the manor regarding payment of a tax called frith silver. *Rolston* appears as the place-name on an old Staffordshire map published in 1610. In the church at Rolleston is preserved an incised but damaged effigy of Edward Rolleston, rector there from before 1572 to 1615, on which the latin inscription reads “Edwardi Rolston”.

The Rolleston place-name is pronounced in the short form, with the *e* being silent. Ekwall⁸ defines the pronunciation as “*rōlstn*”, which confirms that the variant *Rolston* is the modern phonetic form of the name.

Rolleston remained as the undisputed name of the village for 700 years until after the coming of the North Staffordshire Railway in 1848. The 5-mile long branch line between Marston Junction and Burton-on-Trent had stations at Rolleston, Stretton, Claymills and Horninglow. The main station was Rolleston, built in 1895, approx 0.6 miles east of the village, and named *Rolleston on Dove*, so as to differentiate it from the station at Rolleston in Nottinghamshire. In time, the newly built-up area around the station spread and merged with the eastern end of the village and as their distinct identities disappeared, the issue of the place-name became contentious. Staffordshire County Council claimed that there were two separate and distinct places and used that argument in a planning dispute. However, its Highways Department published the single name of *Rolleston on Dove* on all of its new maps. In 1978, the Parish Council passed a resolution to change the name of the parish to *Rolleston on Dove*. The matter came for discussion before the East Staffordshire Policy and Resources Committee on 28 March 1983, where it was agreed that the parish name would be changed to *Rolleston on Dove* in pursuance of Section 75 of the Local Government Act, 1972.

⁸ Ekwall.(1960): *Oxford Dictionary of English Place-names*.