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Wild Celery
Apium graveolens

MARCHAM: THE PLACE-NAME

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Marcham as a place-name has received more attention in recent years than in the rest of its history. By far the greatest number of English place-names originated in the Anglo-Saxon period, when English speaking immigrants named features in their new environment. Many of these names described topographical, i.e. natural, features rather than habitations, and place-name scholars have concluded that some of these nature names, which soon became attached to nearby settlements, date from the earliest arrivals in the 500s. Local historians and historical geographers, as well as place-name scholars, have started to investigate the landscape on foot and from the air.

The name Marcham has two parts, *merece* and *hamm*, the first part is the specific and the second generic: this is a typical topographical Anglo-Saxon place-name construction. By the 1960s and 1970s place-name specialists were agreed about the early spellings, on which they base their interpretations. These show that it almost certainly was a *-hamm* and not a *-ham* name: the latter means 'homestead', 'hamlet' or 'village', and is a common habitative generic. *Hamm*, which can mean 'land in a river bend' (as in Culham), can also mean 'dry ground in a marsh or 'water-meadow', or 'flat low-lying pasture, land near a river' and this seems feasible for the *hamm* of Marcham. It has been suggested that this agriculturally inspired name, along with other names to do with dry sites for villages, and water crossings, were coined by settling farmers. In the former north-west Berkshire the *-eg* names, literally meaning 'island', are found in Hanney, Charney and Goosey, and *-ford* is even more common, including Garford and Frilford near Marcham. Historians have noted that these place-names coincide with sites of the earliest, pagan, Anglo-Saxon cemeteries, as at the Noah's Ark river crossing in Marcham parish.

The specific part of the name Marcham - *merece* - describes another natural feature, the wild celery plant (*Apium graveolens*), also sometimes called smallage. Wild celery grows on many English coastal sites, but only rarely inland near salt springs. The Anglo-Saxons valued celery for medicine and probably for cooking, and it seems possible that the incomers may have taken over a colony of celery introduced and cultivated by Roman farmers. The celery, which still grows today around the salt spring by Marcham Brook, was an important enough landmark or resource to attract the attention of Anglo-Saxon farmers, and to name a farming settlement, probably near the present village site. As the place-name specialist Margaret Gelling says 'the phenomenon of (the survival of) the wild celery at Marcham is interesting in itself and valuable as demonstration of the trustworthiness of place-names'.¹

There have been various theories in the past about the origin of Marcham as a place-name. The Cornell History Professor F.G. Marcham, visiting England from America in 1951, thought that the name meant a settlement, a village 'on the mark or marc or border of an ancient kingdom'.² North Berkshire shifted territorially between Wessex and Mercia, and this may be why the Vicar of Marcham in 1955, the Rev. I.M. Haines, told an Oxford Mail reporter that the Ock was the boundary between the two kingdoms. Mrs. Jean Duffield rejected the idea that 'Marcham got its name because a weed called Merce grew abundantly there' and also favoured the theory that it was a border village in Mercia with the Thames forming a boundary.³

A popular idea in the past has been that Marcham means marshy village. The most imaginative and bizarre suggestion must be that recounted by the aforementioned Professor Marcham. During his stay he was inveigled into taking part in the Marcham Festival of Britain Pageant. *Marcham through the Ages* by floodlight featured as its hero the pirate Mark, the founder of the village.

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- ³ *Berks Herald-Advertiser*, 4th November 1965.

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