

Guide to Scandinavian origins of place names in Britain

NOTE: This document can be downloaded from the Ordnance Survey web site at <http://www.ordnancesurvey.co.uk/oswebsite/freefun/didyouknow/placenames/index.html> as a pdf file.

Introduction

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Background

Scandinavian place names can be found in various places in Scotland. But rather than attributing them to one point of origin, we have to distinguish between four areas of Scandinavian influence and a number of people involved in coining those names at different times. Often the Scandinavian settlers are referred to as 'Vikings', but to regard them as one coherent group is wrong.

The strongest and longest lasting Scandinavian impact on the place names of Scotland took place in the Northern Isles, that is, Shetland and Orkney. Settlers from Norway arrived around AD800. The Scandinavian overlordship and settlement lasted many centuries and consequently, the vast majority of place names in this area are of Scandinavian origin.

In the Western Isles, what is referred to as Old Norse (ON) was spoken for several centuries, and many islands, settlements and large geographic features, such as the highest mountains and largest inlets and bays, still have Scandinavian names. The Norse language did not last so long down the west coast mainland of Scotland (from the Clyde northwards), but there too it has left considerable traces in the place names. The collapse of the Norwegian overlordship in 1266 led to a resurgence of Gaelic and resulted in the widespread gaelicisation of place names (that is, the Gaelic pronunciation and later spelling of Norse names), as well as some replacement of Norse names by Gaelic ones. The strength of Gaelic varied and increased in the Hebrides towards the south. Also, many Scandinavian words were borrowed into Gaelic as loanwords and were then used to create place names by Gaelic speakers. Examples are Gaelic *geodha*, 'gully, chasm', which was borrowed from ON *gjá*, and Gaelic *sgarbh*, which is derived from ON *skarfr*, 'cormorant' as in *Geodha nan Sgarbh* (NB0116). Such a place name cannot be called Norse as it was coined by Gaelic speakers.

The third area of Scandinavian influence, the south-west of Scotland (Dumfries and Galloway), has close linguistic links not only with the north of England but also with the Isle of Man and with Ireland. In this area place names of Scandinavian origin have been influenced by a number of linguistic layers and therefore are not always easily recognisable.

The fourth area, the south-east of Scotland, has place name elements that are clearly linked with Scandinavian names of the north of England. Therefore the place name elements may be traced back to Danish, rather than to Norwegian.

As the Scandinavian influence on Scottish place names took place during several unrelated settlement movements, we are dealing with not just one but several Scandinavian languages. The Scandinavian settlers of the Northern and the Western Isles spoke West Scandinavian or West Norse, often referred to simply as Norse or Old Norse (ON), from which both Norwegian and Icelandic are derived.

Whereas the place names of the south-west indicate that the Scandinavian settlers who arrived from Ireland, who seem to have been mainly West Norse speakers, may already have been acquainted with Gaelic, the names of south-east Scotland point to East Scandinavian (Danish) influence. In Shetland and Orkney, Norn, a language that developed from ON, was spoken until the 18th century.

Geographic distribution of examples

All examples shown in the Scandinavian glossary originate from the Northern Isles or north-east Caithness. This is due to the fact that in many of the other areas of Scandinavian influence subsequent languages have altered the place names, sometimes beyond recognition. In some parts of the country it is very difficult to distinguish between Scots and Scandinavian place names. The list of Scandinavian-influenced place name elements reflects the orthography or spelling on modern Scottish maps. The entries are arranged in alphabetical order for easy reference. In the second column each element is linked with its original form, an example being the element *brei*, as in the place name **Brei Geo** (HU3787), which originates from the ON adjective *breiðr*, 'broad'. All ON forms given in the glossary are based on the Icelandic-English Dictionary, whose details are given in the section below on **Further reading**.

Alphabet

The column containing the ON forms introduces us to a number of unfamiliar characters:

- *ð*: known as 'eth', occurs in words such as *fjörðr*, related to Scottish Standard English 'firth', and represents a voiced [th] as in the English definite article 'the'.
- *þ*: known as 'thorn', represents a voiceless [th], as in English 'thorn'. It occurs in ON words such as *þing* meaning 'assembly', 'meeting place' and in *þveit*, 'piece of land', 'clearing'.
- *ö*: found in ON *höfn*, 'harbour', or ON *strönd*, 'coast', 'shore' represents a sound very like German *ö* (o-Umlaut).
- *æ*: found in ON words like *fær*, 'sheep' and forms part of the names **Fair Isle** (HZ1871) and **Fara** (ND3295).

In addition to these characters, another difference between the Norse and the English alphabet is the Norse use of acute accents on the vowels *a*, *o*, *u*, *i* and *y* (depicting a sound located between [u] and [i]). An accent on a vowel means that the vowel is long.

Structure of place names

Like place names in most languages, Norse place names are largely descriptive and usually reflect how the name givers perceived their surroundings. Thus we find names referring to the shape of natural features, such as **Longa Berg** (HU3520), 'long promontory', 'long rock'; or relative location, such as in **Isbister** (HU3790) from ON *eystri*, 'easterly'; or ON *hár*, 'high', as in **Hahouse** (HY4551) or **Ha Banks** (HY4919).

There is an important group of place name elements that refers to actual farms or settlements, such as the frequently found *-bie* from ON *býr*, 'farm', as in **Trenabie** (HY4350), **South Breckbie** (HY2426) and **Houbie** (HU4548), ON *bólstaðr*, 'farm', which in Shetland and Orkney occurs as *-bister* (**Kirkabister** (HU5495), **Westerbister** (HY4602)), but takes the forms of *-bost*, *-pol* or *-bol* in Hebridean place names. The generic *-sta* is from ON *staðir* 'steading', 'farm', as in **Hoversta** (HY4117) and **Griesta** (HU4144), whereas ON *setr* 'residence' and *sætr* 'dwelling place', 'hill pastures', 'dairy lands' developed into the frequently occurring element *setter*, as in **Dalsetter** (HU5099) and **Winksetter** (HY3415), as well as *-ster*, as in **Swinister** (HU3380).

Animals such as horses, lambs and sheep are regular components of place names and result in names such as **Hestwall** (HY4702) from ON *hestr*, 'horse', 'stallion', **Lama Ness** (HY6843), from ON *lamb*, 'lamb', and **Sorquoy** (ND4691), from ON *sauðr*, 'sheep'. Coastal terminology is often inspired by fish and mammals living in the waters such as salmon, ON *lax*, in **Lax Firth** (HU4760) and, whale, ON *hvalr*, in **Whal Geo** (HU1751).

Soil type inspired names such as **Grut Ness** (HU6592) from ON grjót, 'gravel', and **Lerwick** (HU4841) from ON leir, 'mud', 'clay'. An important category of descriptive place names are, of course, colours with ON svartr, 'black', as in **Swarthoull** (HU2978), ON rauðr, 'red', in **Roe Clett** (HU3978) and ON grár, 'grey', as in **Grobust** (HY4249), to name but a few.

The Scandinavian place names of Scotland follow straightforward composition patterns. Most place names are made up of more than one element, with a linguistic relationship between the elements. The element qualifying a generic element is called a qualifying or specific element.

- *Definite article + generic*: Place names can consist of a single generic element, usually a noun. These are often preceded by the English definite article 'the'. Examples are, **The Tongues** (HU3721) from ON tangi, 'spit of land', 'tongue', **The Skeo** (HU4434) derived from ON skjá, 'hut for drying fish', and **The Crook** (HU2986), based on ON krókr, 'bend'.
- *Specific + generic*: This is the most frequent composition pattern. Whereas generics are always nouns, specifics can be either nouns or adjectives. Typical examples of names consisting of an adjective and a noun are **Deepdale** (HU3825), 'deep valley', from ON djúpr, 'deep', and ON dalr, 'valley', and **Brettabister** (HU4857), from ON brattr, 'steep' and ON bólsaðr, 'farm'. **Breiwick** (HU2256), from ON breiðr, 'broad' and vík, 'bay' follows the same pattern, as does **Midness** (HU4572), from ON miðr, 'middle' and ON nes, 'headland', 'promontory'.
- *Generic + preposition + existing place name*: Place names following the above pattern are very typical of the Northern Isles. The preposition linking the generic and the specific is usually the Scottish English word of (Scots o). The specific is always an existing place name. Examples of this pattern are **Burn of Forse** (HU5289), **Garth of Tresta** (HU6190), **Burn of Swartabeck** (HY3808) and **Clett of Thusater** (ND0671).

Scandinavian place names of Orkney and Shetland have been subject to extensive research. In Shetland a pilot project has been set up to collect and record local place names from lists of names, maps, documents held locally and – most importantly – local informants. The place names are entered in a database intended to promote and ease cross-disciplinary research. The Shetland Place-Names Project involves local history groups, day-care residents and individuals from throughout the islands. The project is currently funded until the end of March 2005.

Further reading

Cleasby, Richard; Vigfusson, Gudbrand (1957): *An Icelandic-English Dictionary*, 2nd edition, Oxford University Press. For an online version of the first edition (1874) see <http://www.northvegr.org/vigfusson/>

Jakobsen, Jakob (1936): *The Place-Names of Shetland*, London and Copenhagen.

Marwick, Hugh (1952): *Orkney Farm Names*, Kirkwall.

Nicolaisen, W F H (2001): *Scottish Place-Names – Their Study and Significance*, John Donald, Edinburgh.

Stewart, J. (1987): *Shetland Place-Names*.

For further information on the Shetland Place-Names Project contact:

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Useful links:

Scottish Place-Name Society

<http://www.st-andrews.ac.uk/institutes/sassi/spns/>

Glossary

Place names are made up of components which are referred to as elements. These elements are simply the words people used to describe a place or their response to their environment. A more complete background to Scandinavian in place names, pronunciation and spelling can be found in the preceding *Introduction*.

This is a glossary of the elements from Scandinavian most frequently found in the place names of Britain. The first column gives the name element in the form found in place names. The original Old Norse word from which the element derives follows, together with its meaning. Examples (with grid references) are given for each element.

Abbreviations:

adj = adjective

nf = noun feminine

nm = noun masculine

nn = noun neuter

| Element | ON original element | Meaning | Examples |
|--------------------|---------------------|---|---|
| a | ey nf | <i>island</i> | Foula HT9539, Fladda HU3784 |
| ay | ey nf | <i>island</i> | Orfasay HU4977, Housay HU6771 |
| ayre | eyrr nf | <i>gravelly bank</i> | Ayre of Breiwick HU5561, Fugla Ayre HU4661 |
| baa | boði nm | <i>hidden submerged rock, breaker, reef</i> | Flugga Baa HU6299, Gerda Baa HU5799 |
| back, bakka | bakki nm | <i>bank of a river, slope</i> | Backarass HY4148, Ness of Bakka HU1751 |
| beck | bekkr nm | <i>brook, burn</i> | Knowes of Maebeck HY4952, Burn of Swartabeck HY3808 |
| berg | berg nn | <i>promontory, rock, rocky soil</i> | Longa Berg HU3520, Midberg HU5988 |
| bie | bœr, býr nm | <i>farm</i> | Murbie Stacks HU3062, Houbie HU6190 |
| bister | bólstaðr nm | <i>dwelling place, house</i> | Kirkabister HU5495, Westerbister HY4602 |
| bratta | brattr adj | <i>steep</i> | Bratta Stack HU5989, Brattibeck HU2844 |
| breck | brekka nf | <i>slope</i> | Brattabreck HU3892, Breck of Hillwell HU3714 |

| Element | ON original element | Meaning | Examples |
|--------------|---------------------|-----------------------------------|---|
| brei | <i>breiðr adj</i> | <i>wide, broad</i> | Brei Geo HU3787, Breiwick HU2256 |
| bretta | <i>brattr adj</i> | <i>steep</i> | Brettabister HU4857, Brettavale HY3020 |
| brim | <i>brim nn</i> | <i>surf</i> | Brim Ness HP5105 |
| burra | <i>borg nf</i> | <i>fortification</i> | West Burra HU3632, Noust of Burraland HU3775 |
| by | <i>bær, býr nm</i> | <i>farm</i> | Houseby HY6721, Tiptoby HU6091 |
| clett | <i>klettr nm</i> | <i>rock</i> | Clett Skerry ND3095, Clett of Thusater ND0671 |
| cliff | <i>kleif nf</i> | <i>rock</i> | Cliffdale HY6325, Moo Cliff HY3906 |
| crook | <i>krókr nm</i> | <i>bend</i> | The Crook HU2986, Crooksetter HU4076 |
| cross, cross | <i>kross nm</i> | <i>cross, junction</i> | Crosbister HP5803, Cross Kirk HU2178 |
| dale | <i>dalr nm</i> | <i>valley</i> | Deepdale HU3825, Quendale HU3714 |
| deep | <i>djúpr adj</i> | <i>deep</i> | Deepdale HU3825 |
| fair, far | <i>fær nf</i> | <i>sheep</i> | Fair Isle HZ1871, Fara ND3295 |
| fell | <i>fjall nn</i> | <i>rough hill, mountain</i> | Kat Fell HU3268 |
| firth | <i>fjörðr nm</i> | <i>firth, fjord, sea-loch</i> | Sellafirth HU5198, Laxfirth HU4759 |
| fiska, fiski | <i>fiskr nm</i> | <i>fish</i> | North Fiski Geo HU4696, Fiska Ness HU3066 |
| fladda | <i>flatr adj</i> | <i>flat</i> | Fladdabister HU4332, Fladda HU3797 |
| fors, forse | <i>fors nm</i> | <i>waterfall</i> | Forse HY5300, Burn of Forse HU5289 |
| foul | <i>fugl nm</i> | <i>fowl, bird</i> | Foula HT9539, Foulageo HU4335, Foula Wick HU3664 |
| garth | <i>garðr nm</i> | <i>enclosure, fence, farmyard</i> | Frustigarth HY5218, Garths of Tresta HU6190 |
| geo | <i>gjá (gjó) nf</i> | <i>chasm, rift, gully</i> | Ramnageo HP6200, Sultigeo HY3011 |
| gerdi | <i>gerði nn</i> | <i>enclosure</i> | Gerdie HP6208 |
| gil, gill | <i>gil nn</i> | <i>ravine, narrow gully</i> | Djupa Gill HU4066, Feetnies Gill HU3615 |

| Element | ON original element | Meaning | Examples |
|---------------|---------------------|----------------------------|--|
| gro | grár <i>adj</i> | grey | Grobister HY6524, Grobust HY4249 |
| gruin, grunna | grunn <i>nn</i> | shallows | Grunna Voe HU4766 |
| grut | grjót <i>nn</i> | gravel | Grut Ness HU6592, Grut Wick HU5070 |
| ha, haa | hár <i>adj</i> | high, upper | Ha Banks HY4919, Hahouse HY4551 |
| ham | höfn <i>nf</i> | haven, harbour | Hamister HU5463 |
| hamar | hamarr <i>nm</i> | steep rock, rocky hillside | Hamar HU5894, Hamar Geo HU5191 |
| hamma, hammer | hamarr <i>nm</i> | steep rock, rocky hillside | Hamma Cletts HU3166, Hamma Ayre HU3361 |
| hamna | höfn <i>nn</i> | haven, harbour | Hamna Heog HP6509, Hamna Dale HU5065, Hamnavoe HU4980 |
| heog | haugr <i>nm</i> | mound, cairn | Heog HU4971, Heoga Berg HU4538 |
| hesta, hesti | hestr <i>nm</i> | horse, stallion | Hesti Geo HU3881, Hestwall HY4702 |
| hevda | höfði <i>nm</i> | headland | Stour Hevda HU5273, Hevdawick HU3365 |
| ho | hár <i>adj</i> | high, upper | Hoy HU3744, Hoo Field HU4227 |
| hoga | hagi <i>nm</i> | outfield, pasture | Hogaland HU3936, Hoga Ness HP5500 |
| holm | holmr <i>nm</i> | islet | Holm of Burrafirth HU3557, Long Holm HY3014 |
| hope | hópr <i>nm</i> | bay | Longhope ND3292 |
| houll | hóll <i>nm</i> | hill | Moss Houll HU5181, Queys Houll HU6098 |
| housa | hús <i>nn</i> | house | Housabister HU4958, Housa Wick HU5491 |
| howe | haugr <i>nm</i> | mound, cairn | Howe Taing ND4294, Maes Howe HY3112 |
| hus | hús <i>nn</i> | house | The Hus HU1655 |
| is | eystri <i>adj</i> | easterly | Isbister HU3790 |
| kirk | kirkja <i>nf</i> | church | Kirk Ness HU5565, Kirkabister HU5495 |

| Element | ON original element | Meaning | Examples |
|--------------------------------|---|------------------------------|---|
| lama | lamb <i>nn</i> | <i>lamb</i> | Lama Ness HY6843 |
| land | land <i>nn</i> | <i>piece of ground</i> | Houlland HU5080, Mailand HP6008 |
| lang | langr <i>adj</i> | <i>long</i> | Langa Skeo HY3208 |
| lax | lax <i>nm</i> | <i>salmon</i> | Lax Firth HU4760 |
| lee | hlið <i>nf</i> | <i>hillside, slope</i> | Lee of Laxo HU4563, Lee Taing HU4333 |
| ler | leir <i>nm</i> | <i>mud, clay</i> | Lerwick HU4841, Ler Geo HU2585 |
| ling | lyng <i>nn</i> | <i>heather</i> | Lingarth HP6009 |
| lund, lunn | lundr <i>nm</i> | <i>grove</i> | Lunnasting HU4665, Lunna Ness HU5071 |
| mid | miðr <i>adj</i> | <i>middle</i> | Midbister ND4490, Midness HU4572 |
| mire | mýrr <i>nf</i> | <i>swampy moorland, mire</i> | Hesta Mires HU4994, Mires of Oddsetter HU5992 |
| ne | nyr <i>adj</i> | <i>new</i> | Nebister HY6337 |
| neap | gnípa <i>nf</i> , gnúpr <i>nm</i> | <i>steep hill</i> | Hamara Neap HU5966, West Neap HU5891 |
| ness | nes <i>nn</i> | <i>headland, promontory</i> | Ness HU2158, Scat Ness HU3809 |
| nor | norðr <i>adj</i> | <i>northerly</i> | Norbister HU3732, Norwick HU3681 |
| noup | gnúpr <i>nm</i> | <i>peak</i> | Noup Head HY3950, Noup of Noss HU5539 |
| pap | papi <i>nm</i> | <i>priest, cleric</i> | Papa Skerry HU3738, Papa Stour HU1660 |
| pund | pund <i>nn</i> | <i>enclosure</i> | Pund of Burravoe HU3890, Houlls Pund HP5805 |
| qui | kví <i>nf</i> | <i>enclosure</i> | Qui Ayre HY2115, Qui Ness HP6203 |
| quoy | kví <i>nf</i> | <i>enclosure</i> | Quoys of Catfirth HU4454, Gritquoy HP5803 |
| ramna | hrafn <i>nm</i> | <i>raven</i> | Ramna Geo HU5591, Ramna Taing HU3242 |
| roe | rauðr <i>adj</i> | <i>red</i> | Roe Clett HU3978, Roeness HU3243 |
| ron, rona, roo, roonies | hraun <i>nn</i> | <i>rocky hill-ground</i> | Langa Roonies HU3367, Roonie Geo ND3792 |

| Element | ON original element | Meaning | Examples |
|--------------|--------------------------------|-----------------------------|--|
| ros, ross | (h)ross <i>nn</i> | horse | Ross Geo HY4849 |
| scord | skarð <i>nn</i> | valley crossing a ridge | Scord HU5992, Northscord HU3366 |
| setter | setr, sætr <i>nn</i> | dwelling place, house | Dalsetter HU5099, Winksetter HY3415 |
| sil | sild <i>nf</i> | herring | Silwick HU2942 |
| ska | skagi <i>nm</i> | cape, low point of land | Skaaga HU1655, Skaw HP6516 |
| skail | skáli <i>nm</i> | hut, shieling | Langskail HY4321, Aikerskail HY5804 |
| skeo | skjá <i>nf</i> | hut for drying fish or meat | Langa Skeo HY3208, The Skeo HU4434 |
| sker | sker <i>nn</i> | skerry | Taing of Tor Sker HY7345, Innsker HY5221 |
| so | sauðr <i>nm</i> | sheep | Sorquoy ND4691 |
| sta | staðir (<i>pl</i>) <i>nm</i> | steading farm | Hoversta HY4117, Griesta HU4144 |
| stack, stakk | stakkr <i>nm</i> | hill, precipitous rock | Aastack HU4596, Stakka Vatn HU3529 |
| stane | steinn <i>nm</i> | (standing-)stone | Whitestanes HY4715, Kirk Stane HY5316 |
| stav | stafr <i>nm</i> | staff, post, stick, stave | Stav Geo HU3786, Stava Ness HU5060 |
| stem, sten | steinn <i>nm</i> | (standing-)stone | Stenness HU2177, Stembister HY5302 |
| ster | setr, sætr <i>nn</i> | dwelling place, house | Swinister HU3380, Ocklester HY5102 |
| stour | stórr <i>adj</i> | big | Papa Stour HU1660, Stour Houll HU3073 |
| strand | strönd <i>nf</i> | coast, shore | Strand HU6691 |
| strom | straumr <i>nm</i> | stream, running water | Strom HU3948, Stromfirth HU4050 |
| swart | svartr <i>adj</i> | black, dark | Swarthoull HU2978, Swart Hamar HY6238 |
| sweinn, swin | svín <i>nn</i> | pig | Sweinna Stack HU4391, Swinister HU3380 |
| taft | topt, tupt <i>nf</i> | house, site, foundation | Evertaft HY4551, Kirkatafts HU5598 |
| taing | tangi <i>nm</i> | tongue, spit of land | Taing of Berstane HY4710 |

| Element | ON original element | Meaning | Examples |
|-------------|----------------------|--|--|
| ting | þing <i>nm</i> | <i>assembly, meeting place of parliament</i> | Tingwall HY4022, North Nesting HU4559 |
| toft | topt, tupt <i>nf</i> | <i>house, site, foundation</i> | Tofts of Tain ND2465, Thurdistoft ND2067 |
| tongue | tunga <i>nf</i> | <i>tongue, spit of land</i> | The Tongues HU3721, Tongue Field HU4131 |
| twatt | þveit <i>nf</i> | <i>piece of land, clearing</i> | Stennestwatt HU2351, Brunatwatt HU2450 |
| vat, vatn | vatn <i>nn</i> | <i>lake</i> | Vatsland HU4646, Virda Vatn HU3529 |
| vird, virda | varða <i>nf</i> | <i>heap of stones, cairn</i> | Vats Virda HU4333, Middis Vird HU3072 |
| voe | vágr <i>nm</i> | <i>small sheltered bay</i> | Loura Voe HU4453, Snarravoe HP5602 |
| wall, well | völlr <i>nm</i> | <i>field, level ground, meadow</i> | Tingwall HY4022 |
| west | vestr <i>adj</i> | <i>westerly</i> | Holm of Westquoy HY3607 |
| whal, whale | hvalr <i>nm</i> | <i>whale</i> | Whale Firth HU4693, Whal Geo HU1751 |
| wick | vík <i>nf</i> | <i>bay</i> | Whale Wick HU3632, Wick of Aith HU6389 |