Early South-Saxon Place-names

Although I am interested in history, my main resources are those I found online. As with anything else, it is possible that I might have been misled by people who wish to promote an idea.

Caveat lector!

Preface to the 2025 revision

When I created the original version of this file, it amused me to look at something of local interest while I created a file using "traditional" markup with pdflatex. At that time I had not realised that pdflatex was old-fashioned, although my own files for looking at TTF and OTF fonts were using XeLaTeX.

In the last few months I have been using LuaLaTeX for fonts, although I retain XeLaTeXfor certain test files where I wiish to look at details of what is in a font.

It occurred to me that I would like to revise this document to use LuaLaTeX and UTF-8. Recently, I have been reading a little about the Anglo-Saxons, and whilst I noted that an initial settlement in the Ouse and Cuckmere valleys is still not generally agreed, various other information has come to light.

Preface to the original version from June 2015

Unlike my other test files, which are generally cribbed from whatever I could find online which appeared to work, and are intended to be taken light-heartedly, this one contains my current thoughts on the origins of the place-names where I live, and the references in sussex.bib are genuine. If I had reason to do this 'for real' in any context except for making a bibtex test file, I would probably not use bibtex (the references are few enough that they could be handled without a separate bib file - just drop them into the main file like I did in ABOUT.tex, or alternatively I would use biblatex which allows 'label' fields for some styles : that might have allowed me to be less abusive of the 'author' fields for the online references.

So, "All my own work." Ken Moffat

Introduction

I have spent most of my life on the Sussex coast just west of Brighton, and for a long time I have been aware of the many '-*ing*' place-names which are generally understood to derive from -*ingas* : the followers of ing. When I wrote this in 2015 I said It was generally noted by experts in Anglo-Saxon names that many of these Sussex names were no-longer in use by the seventh century, and so they are a link to the earliest settlements. However, the use of -*ing* names continued throughout the Saxon period (Dodgson, 1966, p. 2) and I cannot usually be sure which names really are early, although a few such as Lancing *(from Wlenca)* are well-documented. At that time I covered -ing and related names in detail whilst allowing that some could be fro mmuch later in the Saxon period

In 2025 I can find no evidence to justify that assertion that many of these names were no-longer in use by the seventh century. However, on re-reading Roberts (1914) I realised that although many of the '-*ing*' names lack early documentation, some of the other names in the areas of the Ouse and Cuckmere can have derivations from early Saxon names.

Therefore, in this revision I plan to focus on the place names which may plausibly be early South Saxon in that area and near the mouth of the Adur.

History is written after the event, sometimes much later

There are no written records from this time. The accepted view is that the kingdom of the South Saxons began with the invasion of Ælle in 477, and that he landed with his three sons Cissa, Cymen and Wlenca at Cymensoara which is generally taken to be somewhere South of Selsey and now under the sea (the Sussex coast has been swept away by the sea over the years). This is stated in the Anglo-Saxon chronicle [A.-S. Chron.], but that was written several hundred years later and (presumably erroneously), calls Wlenca Wlencing. However, I noted that Roberts notes many possible personal names ending in -*ing* or *inga* (Roberts, 1914).

My current view

In 2015 I had become aware of different, or more nuanced, opinions about the arrival of the South Saxons. In 2025 I am now aware of other suggestions which do not all align with my previous thoughts.

One of the alternative views considers that the sea level was higher in Saxon times and that Cymensoara could have been at the mouth of the Adur, with its name changing through Cymen soraham and then Soraham to become Shoreham. (villagenet (2025)) Certainly there are many places named -*ey* or 'island' which are now surrounded by dry land, and also the Adur was navigable as far as Steyning at the time of the Norman Conquest. Coincidentally, Roberts says (Roberts, 1914, p.99)

> Earle, on p. 12 of vol ii of the A.-S. Chron, says in a note that Wlencing came over with Ælle the founder of the South Saxons, and gave his name to the place where he landed.

To me, that added circumstantial evidence for identifying Ælle's settlement with Shoreham, but then raised the problem of why Cissa's landing south of Selsey was so far to the West. For a different view, see glaucus (2015).

However, Morris (Morris (2022)) in Chapter 1 notes:

> The assertion, for example, that the initial force arrived in three ships, aside from being inherently improbable, is a common trope found in the origin stories of other northern European peoples.

There is also a suggestion that the first South Saxon settlements were in the Ouse and Cuckmere valleys from circa 410, with the Saxons employed as mercenaries. The wikipedia entry for the Kingdom of Sussex accords with this, mentioning a subsequent spread westwards. (wikipedia (2025b))

Morris also says:

> The whole point of the Roman state was to guarantee peace for its citizens with a well-trained army. Civilians were forbidden from carrying weapons." when commenting on the suggestion that Vortigern (a British name) employing the mythical Hengist (Gelding) and Horse (Horse) with their three ships was a bad idea.

By the early 400s the Citizens of Britannia lacked skills in using weapons and he says "Throughout the fourth century barbarian warriors had been routinely recruited into the Roman army and could rise to become generals. It was a practice that worked well while recruits were integrated into the regular army snd effectively Romanized.

What worked altogether less well was a new policy, introduced towards the end of the fourth century which saw entire barbarian armies hired under the command of their own leaders." These 'federate troops' were much less dependable and liable to switch sides.

It seems that although the Saxons all spoke similar dialects they were living in small groups and therefore it is not unreasonable to suggest one such group would be prepared to fight against other Saxons as well as against Angles and Jutes.

More modern publications, which combine History with Archaeology, such as (Pye (2015)) [the first chapter] and the links he quotes suggest that what became England was of much more mixed parentage (links suggesting far fewer invaders out of the total population, most skeletons from settlements showed people who had grown up in England). Also, **all** the various peoples along the Channel coast were prone to piracy, so describing the forts as *The Saxon Shore* might have been because Saxons were already settled there.

Pye also notes that the various peoples along the Channel coast at this time could converse (the Frisians were known as merchants) and that part of the process of forming the story of a nation may be to exaggerate the military prowess of what became a ruling group. The truth is certainly not helped by the stories promulgated by Bede.

In this revision I continue to assume that the Saxons first arrived in Sussex circa 410 (as mercenaries employed by the Britons and were taking at least the coastal area between Andredswald [Pevensey] and the Arun valley by force by the mid 450s.

The earliest parts of the Anglo-Saxon Chronicle are mostly unreliable, but the suggestion that the South Saxons under Ælle may have overlorded the Saxons as far north as the midlands is mentioned in wikipedia in 2025: "Historians are divided over whether or not Ælle really existed; however archaeological evidence supports the view that a short-lived expansion of South Saxon authority as far as the Midlands may have taken place in the 5th century." (wikipedia (2025b))

I originally suggested that a convenient end point for this early period might be circa 680. In fact, although the South Saxon kingdom was mostly pagan at that time, in 681 the exiled bishop Wilfred arrived in Sussex and with the permission of King Æthelwealh undertook mass conversions, being rewarded with land at Selsey to found a monastery. Later the plague returned to Sussex and many died.

After this, in 685 a pagan Wessex Saxon, Cædwalla, gained Wilfred's support and overran the South Saxons. This was the effective end of an independent Sussex. I now note that 'Cadwalla' was the name of a British (Welsh) prince who had been allied with Penda of Mercia. That seems to add to the view that at least the Wessex Saxons were of mixed ethnicity.

A page from June 2024 suggests West Sussex (i.e. West of the Adur) resisted Saxon rule for centuries longer than originally thought. If Æthelwealh was able to gift land at Selsey to Wilfred then by that time the Saxons controlled all of West Sussex. UCL (2024)

It also suggests that the Saxon name 'Æthelwealh' may have meant Noble Romanised Briton, or Noble King of the Britons.

My main focus is now on the years from approx 400CE to 450CE.

The landscape was different from today

It is important to remember that in the early Saxon period the Weald was heavily wooded and provided a barrier to communication. The A.-S. Chron. records that those Britons who survived Ælle's onslaught at Cymensoara fled into the Weald.

Also, the sea level was higher. the saxonhistory site suggests that at the end of the Roman period the sea level could have been as much as 4.5 metres higher than now. I am happy to accept that the sea level was higher circa 400CE, but I think 4.5 metres is unlikely - if that was the case, there would have been little usable land near the mouths of the Ouse, Cuckmere, Adur or Arun. Certainly, the Adur was navigable as far as Steyning at the time of the Norman conquest - but the boats had very little draught and could be hauled up onto beaches. (saxonhistory (2025))

From current online topographical maps of Shoreham, the coastal frontage where the Adur now turns East is about 1.0 metres above mean sea-level, and the few hundred metres upstream are of similar or lower heights.

If we accept that the use of modern -ey in place-names throughout Sussex should be regarded not so much as "surrounded by water" as either "not flooded except in the highest tides", or "mostly surrounded by water" then the thesis that Pevensey was separated by sea from the Wealden forest becomes unnecessary.

Later in the Saxon period, things were very different - much of the Weald had been cleared, or had Drove Roads through it, and many of the villages had areas of land in the Weald, either for summer pasture or for timber. (wikipedia (2025a))

Also, the coastline has changed a lot - much has been swept away in recorded times, and the mouths of the Ouse and Adur have moved.

Place-names and locations

Roberts attempted to list all the place-names of Sussex, with their derivations. The Saxon names were almost all first recorded after the Norman conquest, and he attempted to derive likely Old-English (O.E.) forms. Here, I am only interested in the earliest names.

1. *Personal names used in forming placenames*

-ing- this can come from the genitive of a patronymic. (Roberts, 1914, p187.)

-ing(s) This can come from a patronymic. (Roberts, 1914, p187.)

-ling can come from a patronyminc of a personal name ending in -ol or -ele. (Roberts, 1914, p187.)

2. *Suffix parts of place-names*

Where I list multiple variants, the order is from Roberts.

-camp a loan-word from Latin campus, sometimes alternates in the early forms with -khā, -khamm, -combe. (Roberts, 1914, p189.)

-cumb, -comb originally a Celtic loan-word, a hollow in a hill-side, a narrow valley. (Roberts, 1914, p189.)

-ēā watery-land, water-meadow. (Roberts, 1914, p190.)

-īēg, -ēg island, elevated piece of land wholly or partially surrounded by water. (Roberts, 1914, p190.)

-ham, -hamm the first of these means homestead, the second can mean either an enclosure or a bend in a river. The presence of -mm spellings in Middle English make the derivation from hamm tempting. (Roberts, 1914, p187.)

-ing(s) a water meadow. (Roberts, 1914, p187.)

-mere a lake or pond, *or* a boundary. (Roberts, 1914, p188.)

-ōfer bank or shore (Roberts, 1914, p194.)

-score shore (Roberts, 1914, p194.)

-tūn an enclosed piece of land, manor, hamlet (Roberts, 1914, p204.)

3. *Place-names of interest for this essay*

Barcombe *beorc hām or beorchamm* north of Lewes in the Ouse valley. A Birch *beorc* dwelling, enclosed land or bend in a river. (Roberts, 1914, p12.)

Beddinghamm *probably Beadingahamm* (on the Ouse, South of Lewes). The hamm (enclosure) of the Beadings or descentdants of Beada. To me, I think the 'bend in a river' derivation of hamm is more likely here. (Roberts, 1914, p16.)

Birling, possibly *byrle* (on the Downs, South of East Dean) That word means a cup-bearer or butler, which Roberts regards as unsatisfactory. I wonder if the name is an early South-Saxon forename which has otherwise been lost. However, given this is on the Downs I now accept it is not a settlemrent from the 'Immigration' period. (Roberts, 1914, p24.)

Coombes, *Cumbas* plural of *Cumb* (or *Comb*), a valley. In the Adur valley, West or North West of Erringham. (Roberts, 1914, p51.)

Cymensora *Cymensora* - a settlement named after Cymen, at least one theorist suggests this was at the mouth of the Adur (which at that time probably flowed straight out to the sea, not via the later diversion whicn now forms Shoreham Harbour) and that it became Soraham and later Shoreham. Cymen soraham *Cymen soraham* and then Soraham to become Shoreham Roberts lists -score 'shore' as the O.E. used only as the prefix of Shoreham. (Roberts, 1914, p194.) villagenet (2025)

Erringham, tentatively *ēar-ing-hamm* in the Adur valley, slightly North of New Shoreham in the side of the Downs. Roberts only lists Eringham (sic) (*ēār-incge-hām*, the homestead by the earthy meadow. I feel he was very much mistaken and that the first part is an old personal name, with hamm meaning a bend in a river. (Roberts, 1914, p64.)

Friston, probably *Friþes-* the genitive singular of a personal name such as Friþubeald, Friþstan or Friþustan. (Roberts, 1914, p71.)

Malling, possibly *mǣc-* on the Ouse at the Southern end of Lewes. Possibly a personal name, the double l seems incongrous. I think this is another of the very early South Saxon names. (Roberts, 1914, p106.)

Meeching, probably *mǣce-ing* the people of the sword. This is now part of Newhaven, close to the mouth of the Ouse and a convenient settlement place for the Saxon immigrants employed to protect the Britons. This place is not mentioned in Roberts, but I found it with modern or Middle English spelling at Newhaven-Town-Council (2025). From there I was able to find wiktionary (2025).

Lancing, probably *Wlenca-ing*, the followers of Wlenca. This is on the other side of the Adur from Shoreham, the settlements in Shoreham have always been on the East bank with marsh to the West. Lancing extends Westwards from the marsh. villagenet (2025)

Dodgson's thesis is that the -ingas- and -inga- place names may not derive from the earliest Saxon settlements. He separates the phases of the Anglo-Saxon arrival into Immigration and Colonization. (Dodgson, 1966, p2.)

He also notes that Smith demonstrates that only the -ingas-, -inga- types are relevant to the earliest stages of Anglo-Saxon settlement, and that of these place names in -ingas- are of two types: one, based on a personal name, is ancient, the other based on a topographical name or older place-name could have been created at any time or even as late as the 11th or 12th century. (Smith, 1956, p67-88.)

Dodgson also says "Seen against the drift geology of the region, these ditributions ahow some of the -ingas place-names standing on the less-attractive clay and chalk soils, as though the settlements so-named were made when all the best sands and gravels has been appropriated. (Dodgson, 1966, p9-11.)

So, if the early immigrants preferred settling on sand or gravel, places such as Birling which is on the chalk downs between East Dean and the crumbling cliffs at Birling Gap must be later settlements.

Index

References

Dodgson, J. M. (1966). The significance of the Distribution of the English Place-Name in -ingas, -inga- in Southeast England. Medieval Archaeology *10*, 1–29.

glaucus (2015). Shoreham-by-Sea: Toponymy. `http://www.glaucus.org.uk/Toponymy.htm`. Accessed: 2015-05-27, site now defunct.

Morris, M. (2022). The Anglo-Saxons. Pegasus Books. I read the Kobo ebook which seems to be an older brinting, page numbers in that are unreliable.

Newhaven-Town-Council (2025). historic newhaven. `https://www.newhaventowncouncil.gov.uk/about-newhaven/historic-newhaven/`. Accessed: 2025-05-21.

Pye, M. (2015). The Edge Of The World. Penguin. I read the Kobo ebook, page numbers in that are unreliable.

Roberts, R. G. (1914). The Place-names of Sussex. Cambridge University Press. a PDF can be found at archive.org.

saxonhistory (2025). High Tide changes in the last 2000 years. `https://saxonhistory.co.uk//FORMS-Page-Builder.php?Pg=Sea_Level_Rises/`. Accessed: 2025-05-22.

Smith, A. H. (1956). The significance of the Distribution of the English Place-Name in -ingas, -inga- in South-east England. In Sir Israel Gollancz Memorial Lecture, Proceedings of the British Academy XLII pp. 67–88,.

UCL (2024). west-sussexs-lost-early-medieval-kingdom-rediscovered. `https://www.ucl.ac.uk/archaeology-south-east/news/2024/jun/`. Accessed: 2025-05-25.

villagenet (2025). Aelle and the South Saxons. `https://www.villagenet.co.uk/history/0477-aellethesaxon.php`. Accessed: 2025-05-22 - see the link for AD 477.

wikipedia (2025a). Poling, West Sussex. `https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Poling,_West_Sussex`. Accessed: 2025-05-22.

wikipedia (2025b). Kingdom of Sussex. `https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Kingdom_of_Sussex`. Accessed: 2025-05-22.

wiktionary (2025). Mece. `https://en.wiktionary.org/wiki/mece`. Accessed: 2025-05-21.