

The Names of Gloucester

By John Jones

The Roman Name

The contemporary occurrences of the name are sparse. A third century road book has the word Clevo. We can only speculate about this. A gazetter based on fourth century sources has Glebon colonia. Tomb stones of various soldiers give their origin variously as: Glev. or Glevi [1].

There is some consensus that the original name was something like Glevensis. In Latin -ensis is the suffix for place and Gleve (or Glebe) is the stem of the name. Here v and b are probably interchangeable. For practical purposes, we should expect v to be more commonly used by masons on the basis that it is far easier to carve.

There has been some speculation about how the name came about; including that it was a mutation of some prior Celtic name [1]. The problem with this is that there was no contemporary written Celtic language, so there is no evidence to support this argument.

We are forced to look at the evidence in later writing. In particular the word Gleve/Glebe. This has remained remarkably stable in virtually all Latin languages and indeed in most non-latin European languages; which suggests that it is quite ancient. My trawl of various dictionaries gives the following (not comprehensive) sample:

Language	Word	Meaning
Old English	Glebe	Soil; earth; esp. a piece of cultivated land, meadow
French	Glèbe	Estate, land
Spanish	Gleba	Land, Serfdom, clod of earth
Catalan	Gleva	Piece of turf
German	Glebe	Estate, land
Portuguese	Gleba	Field
Italian	Gleba	Clod, turf, land

We can conclude that in Roman times, most Europeans hearing the word Glevensis would have understood it as meaning the place of the meadows or something similar. They might also have joked muddy place.

We only have to look west beyond Westgate street for additional evidence. The name appears to be a simple description of the place. Occam's razor prevents us from seeking a more elaborate explanation without overwhelming evidence.

The Celtic Name

Nennius; a welsh priest, writing in the eighth century gives the name as Cair Gloiv. This is close to the modern welsh name Caerloyw. Note that in Modern written Welsh, the G is dropped from

gloyw because in this context because it is not spoken. Caer means fortress and loyw (pronounced loy-oo) means shining. This appears to be a reasonable description of the place and there is no need to fabricate some mutation between Glebe and Loyw. The dominant feature of the place in the fifth century would be the Roman walls. The local limestone is particularly white and the blocks I have worked have flakes that fracture like mother of pearl. Viewed from the west, illuminated by the setting sun, the light reflected off the river, this would have been a memorable scene. This is sufficient explanation for the name Loyw and no further justification needs to be contrived.

The Saxon Name

The Saxons had a practice of appropriating local names and translating them. The name in the Domesday book is Glowecester. Cester is widely used in Saxon names for fortress. There is some suggestion that this relates to the latin word castrum (fortress). This is probably reasonable: One example of such a transformation is Dornwaracaster to Dorchester.

Glowe speaks for itself.

There are various Saxon spellings, which are variations on this theme; ultimately setting on Gloucester.

[1] *The Names of Gloucester*, John Rhodes The Gloucester and District Archaeology Research Group Review, No 30, 1997.