

King Alfred's New North

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DIRECTIONAL PLACE-NAMES IN SOMERSET DOMESDAY AND KING ALFRED'S 'NEW' NORTH

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Relatively little has been written about the significance of directional elements in place-names, which is not surprising given that most people assume that all they mean is 'roughly' north, or 'more or less' west, of somewhere else. Place-names incorporating more precise sub-cardinal points, such as 'north-west' are rare and there are none in Somerset. Moreover, and perhaps surprisingly, 30% of the Somerset directional place-names recorded in the Domesday Book, are more than 45° out of true one way or another. It would seem that the Saxons had little concern for cartographic accuracy. For example, Norton Fitzwarren should more accurately be named Weston from its estate centre at Taunton as it is 65° out of true in an anti-clockwise direction. An even more extreme example of inaccuracy is Sutton Mallet named from its estate centre of Shapwick; it is 75° out of true in the opposite direction. It too should have been named Weston! These large rotational 'errors' provide valuable clues for understanding the naming process and will be discussed more closely later.

John Blair noted that several important minsters – Westminster and Southminster – had been named in relation to the royal estate centres of London and Bradwell-on-Sea respectively. Other places were named from those ecclesiastical centres, the minsters, themselves. It is clear that settlements with names that include directional elements were named from centres of power, ownership and control. Blair also gave the example of Leominster which has 'burys' or 'tuns' in all four cardinal directions (Blair 2005: 218 and 251n).

In a more recent scholarly essay Richard Jones took up the challenge of investigating how 'space' was defined in the medieval period and how directional indicators may have been created and used by local peasants and the elites at the estate centres (Jones 2012). His conclusions are worth quoting at length.

It has been argued here that place-names using cardinal points as specifics had their names imposed upon them from outside and above by the Anglo-Saxon elite. This group used the points of the compass both as a geographic tool to describe the position of large territories/polities and as a tool of authority since this conceptualization of the world was not shared by the greater majority of the subaltern populous. For reasons which remain unexplained, a new formulation of the classical compass emerged at the end of the ninth century from the royal court of King Alfred, which saw a repositioning of north to north east. This theoretical realignment found expression in the naming, perhaps the renaming, of rural settlements and estate centres. Directional names aligned at 45° positive of their expected position belong, it is suggested, to this period. Their occurrence across large parts of the country suggests that what may have begun as a Wessex system became a national one following the expansion of Wessex, the reconquest of the Danelaw and ultimately the unification of the country. Churches of this period, however, continued to be orientated on true east, indicative of the fact that the clockwise shift operated within and was largely confined to the secular (or terrestrial) world (Jones 2012: 209).

The idea that King Alfred developed a new conception of north which was shifted by 45° to the north east was first revealed in an essay by Kemp Malone about Alfred's translation and revisions of the geography of the late Roman Paulus Orosius (Malone 1930: 139-163). However Malone's conclusions were cautiously circumspect as Alfred was far from consistent. In his description of West Germany, Alfred used the classical orientation, but when he came to Lower Germany and Central Europe, he changed to the shifted orientation,

though he was not wholly consistent even then. His description of Scandinavia used a striking mixture of the two systems. Difficulty arises as Malone recognized that there was no explanation as to why, when or where Alfred used one system rather than the other. So for any particular place-name example, that incorporates a directional element, we need to know from other evidence whether he was using a classical or shifted system. Otherwise any argument will become circular or self-fulfilling without that evidence. Furthermore, for Britannia, Malone explained that Alfred took his geography straight from Orosius. That is, Alfred was using the classical system for Britain that had been in use for over 400 years; he was not introducing a new shifted direction for north at all for our island. So any argument that is made about the use of Alfred's shifted system for place-names within Britain has the added challenge of explaining why it was used for particular settlements and not others within Britain. (Malone 1930, 166-7).

There are a number of problems with Jones' conclusion that Alfred had introduced a shifted direction for the cardinal points when they were used for local place-names. Firstly, he does not explain for each of his examples why Alfred adopted the shifted orientation rather than the classical. Secondly, no convincing independent evidence of the date of the naming or renaming of any of the settlements was offered. The several charters quoted by Jones only provide evidence of the date at which a name was recorded, but certainly do not prove when the actual naming took place. Finally, Jones has carefully selected his examples with clockwise rotations close to 45° so that they support his thesis. The wide variations of accuracy in the use of directional elements in Somerset, if found elsewhere in the country, mean that it will almost always be possible to find a number of examples to support any particular rotation in either direction. There are very many examples of contrary rotations that do not support his argument, as will be shown, and these are not considered or explained.

It can also be asked why Alfred did not introduce the use of sub-cardinal compass points into the naming of places in England when he frequently did so when revising Orosius' geography of the whole world. Indeed is there really any evidence at all that Alfred's world geography was used at the local level for the naming of his satellite estates?

This essay explores all those settlements whose place-names include directional elements that are recorded in the Somerset volume of the

Domesday Book (Thorn 1980). A total of 22 names found there were considered, of which three were excluded – *Alnodestone* (Alston Sutton), *Tvrvestone* (Torweston) and *Chinwardestone* (Kingweston) – as the apparent *-estone* element was almost certainly *-tun* rather than a directional element. Weston in Bath has also been added as it was noted in Jones' article and was named in a charter of AD 946 (S 508) although not in the Somerset Domesday. In all the Somerset cases identifying the centre from which the settlement had been named presented no problems. The majority were royal estates, and seven were ecclesiastical. Only one centre, Lydeard St. Lawrence, was the small estate of a thegn before 1066 (Thorn 1980: 2.9).

For each pair of settlements the direction, or bearing, and distance between them was derived manually from Ordnance Survey 1:50,000 maps. In almost all cases the church, abbey or cathedral was used as the basis for the measurements. In a few cases all that remains of a Domesday vill is a single farm (Lower Easthams for *Estham*) and occasionally an 'anchor' point or centre has been guessed at the core of a small hamlet where there was no church (Sutton Bingham, Westcombe and Westowe). Similarly the centre of the large area within Cadbury Castle has been used for measurements of Sutton Montis and Weston Bampfylde. The distance between the related settlements, except in the case of the Pethertons, see below, is less than 8km and in 50% of cases less than 3km. The detailed results are set out in the table of the Appendix.

Jones' first example offered in support of his argument is not a centre-dependent pair but a coherent directional place-name couplet of the two royal estates of Southwell and Norwell, with the latter on a bearing of 43°, or almost north-east. In Somerset there is a couplet of South Petherton and North Petherton (Nos. 3 and 4) with almost exactly the opposite direction. They are an example of the division of a large Saxon river estate called *Peret* and the Domesday entries strongly suggest that this division had taken place within living memory.

Both were royal estates at the time of Domesday and both take the name Petherton from the river Parrett (Thorn 1980: 1.3 and 1.4). They were large unhidated estates of 28 and 30 ploughlands respectively and the directional elements were clearly used to distinguish the two. The bearing of North Petherton from South Petherton is 320°, or almost north-west; exactly the opposite rotation from Southwell/Norwell. Neither of the two Somerset estates is recorded before 1086, but

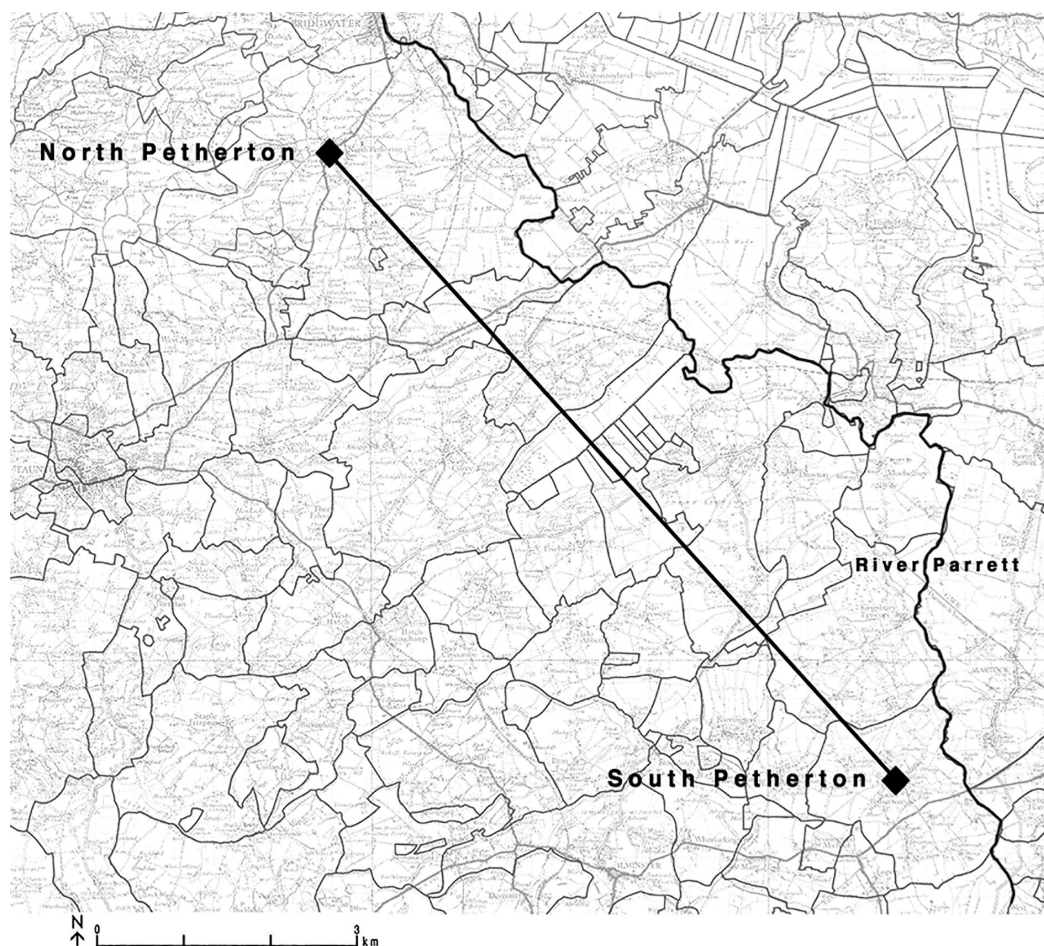


Fig. 1 The geographical relationship of the North and South Pethertons, Somerset

Alfred's famous jewel was found on the North Petherton estate in 1693. North and South Petherton are not intervisible across the 21km that separates them and it is unlikely that anyone at the time of naming would have had the skills or inclination to survey across such a distance. In these circumstances some cardinal error or rotation from true north-south is to be expected, but that may not be the full explanation. This orientation clearly requires some explanation and one suggestion is made later in this essay.

Somerset was at the heart of Alfred's Wessex and if, following Jones, we assume that the judgements of direction when naming were reasonably accurate one would expect the distribution of the directional errors of rotation of each of the compass bearings

to bunch at zero and $+45^\circ$ (Alfred's new north), if there had been namings at different times during the Anglo-Saxon period, before, during and after Alfred's reign. The chart of Figure 2 for all the Somerset examples shows a very wide variation in accuracy, with both large positive and negative rotations.

Just one settlement is almost correctly named, with an error of only -1° (11 – Norton St Philip)! There are 9 examples rotated in Alfred's direction towards north-east (12-20) and 10 in the opposite direction, which is contrary to Jones' prediction. However, of far more interest are the 6 examples (1-2 and 17-20) which are rotated so far that each settlement should theoretically have been described by a different directional place-name element!

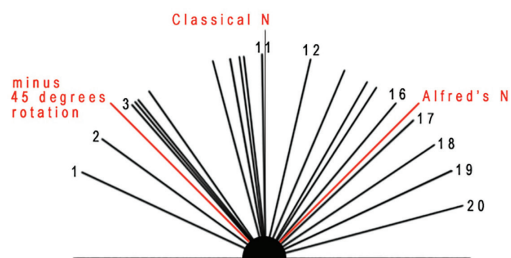


Fig. 2 Directions of rotations from the cardinal points used in each place-name in the Somerset Domesday. The numbers refer to the place-names in list in the Appendix

Whoever was doing the naming was clearly not using a map. A closer look at a number of these provides some insight into the naming process that is likely to have taken place. Four are rotated towards Alfred's 'new' north (Sutton Mallet, Norton Malreward, Sutton Montis and Westowe) and two in the opposite direction (Batheaston and Norton Fitzwarren).

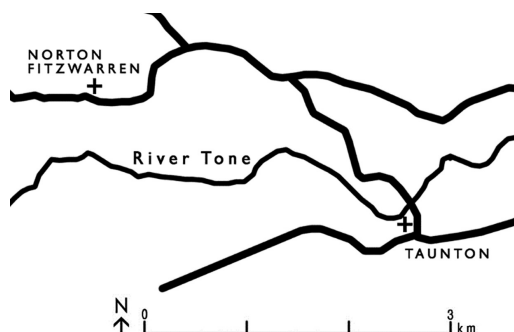


Fig. 3 Norton Fitzwarren and its location relative to Taunton

Norton Fitzwarren (No.1) lies on a bearing of 295° from the centre of Taunton, which would suggest that it would more correctly have been named Weston. At the time of Domesday *Nortone* was held by Count Mortain, but the entry for Taunton, which was held by the Bishop of Winchester, indicates that *Nortone* was one of a number of dependent places that owed customary dues to the Bishop (Thorn 1980: 2.1-2.4). There is no doubt that its naming had been done from Taunton at an earlier time. The settlement of *Nortone* lies north of the river Tone

and any traveller from Taunton would have needed to first go north out of the town over the river, then take a westerly route around a large northerly bend in that river.

The local topography around *Sutone* (Sutton Mallet – No.20) and its centre at Shapwick suggests a similar reason for its name (Aston 2013: 136, 142, 194). It lies on a bearing of 255° , which would again suggest that the name Weston would have been more appropriate. The settlement of *Sutone* lay south of the Polden ridge and the Roman road that ran along it, while the estate centre of Shapwick lay on the north side. The main route out of Shapwick village is due south and up onto the ridge. From there the descent would have been westwards to Sutton. In both these cases the directional name element appears to have been based upon the direction of the routeway out of the centre or upon the location of the settlement in relation to a highly visible natural feature – the river Tone or the Polden ridge.

Another example of the way that the main route away from the centre has led to a name misrepresenting the correct orientation is Westowe (No.19). To reach this small hamlet just 0.7 km outside Lydeard St. Lawrence it is necessary to travel due west out of the centre and to cross a stream, before turning north. Westowe's bearing of 335° should have led to the name Northowe. It would therefore seem that the direction of travel out of a centre was an important factor in the naming process.

One last example confirms this hypothesis. Nick Corcos has shown that Chew Magna was the centre of the estate that included *Nortone* (2002: 53, Figure 11). *Nortone* (Malreward No.18) lies on a bearing of 56° from the Bishop of Wells minster centre of Chew Magna, and so should have been called Easton. However, one road heads due north out of Chew Magna called Norton Lane and leads to, firstly, Norton Hawkfield, then to either North Wick to the west or Norton Malreward to the east. Only the latter has a church and a Manor Farm suggesting that it was the earliest outlying dependent settlement. The name Norton Lane clearly suggests that that was the route to the *Nortone* estate.

However, using the same argument *Estone* (now Batheaston No.2) ought to have been named Norton as, to travel there from the centre of Bath, which is surrounded on three sides by the river Avon, it is again necessary to go north, then turn east along the Roman Fosse Way. For some reason the second and longest part of the journey was used as the basis

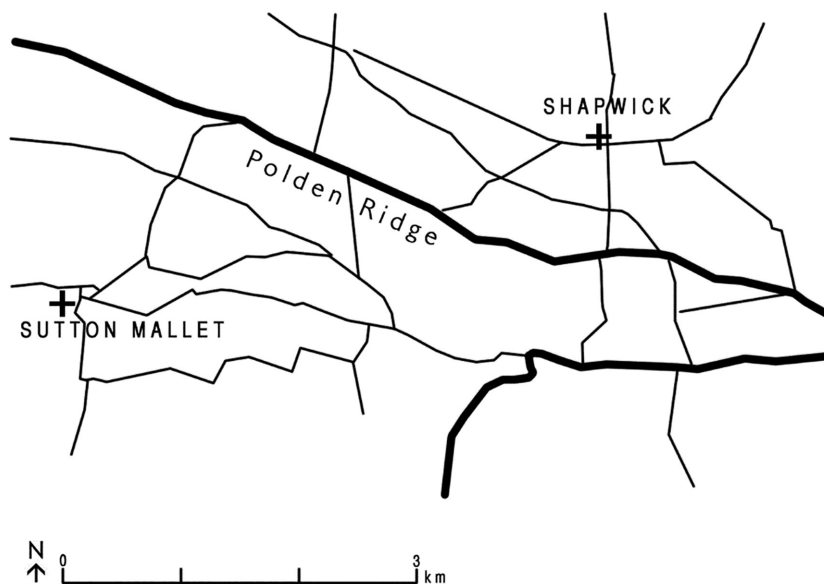


Fig. 4 Sutton Mallet and its relation to Shapwick

of the directional element. There is a corresponding Weston in Bath (No.16). It too is north of the river on a bearing of 310° , which is on a clockwise rotation of 40° . This would make the name Norton more accurate, again suggesting that here too the directional place-name element was based upon the longest part of the journey.

Let us return to the first example of North and South Petherton (Nos. 3 and 4). Here an explanation is initially less obvious. The distance between the two settlements is by far the largest amongst these

Somerset examples at over 21km as the crow flies. A Saxon traveller would have had to cover a much longer distance. There is no obvious road even today connecting the two places, which are separated by at least three large areas of moors in the valleys of the rivers Tone and Isle. However the river Parrett, the origin of the name Petherton, connects the two estates. It lies just over 1km to the east of South Petherton and anyone using the river would then travel irregularly northwards for about 7km to Langport before the river swung north-westwards towards North Petherton.

None of the Somerset evidence would therefore seem to support Jones' conclusions about the 9-10th century realignment of the cardinal points. Nor that it was the elites at the royal or the ecclesiastical estate centres who were doing the naming based upon maps of their estates. More likely it was the weary messengers, merchants and traders, or tax collectors who were responsible – those people who actually used the roads and rivers, knew the natural landmarks, and who relayed the main or significant direction of their travels to the estate clerks. Cartographic mapping generates a completely new concept of direction and space compared with the experience of travelling in the real world, and it is highly unlikely that graphic maps had been internalized and understood by anyone except the intellectual elite of Alfred's time.

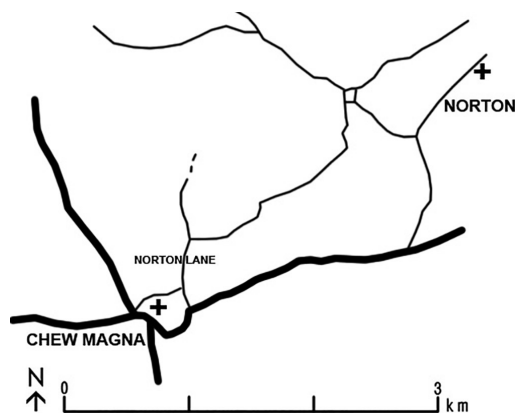


Fig. 5 Norton Malreward and its relation to Chew Magna

APPENDIX

No.	Domesday ref.	Domesday name	current name	distance in km.	'CENTRE'	nature of centre	bearing	rotation
1	2.3	nortone	Norton Fitzwarren	3.2	Taunton	minster	295	-65
2	1.30	estone	Batheaston	4.1	Bath	royal	36	-54
3	1.3	nortperet	North Petherton	21.2	South Petherton	royal	320	-40
4	1.4	svdperet	South Petherton		North Petherton	royal		-40
5	22.23	svtone	Sutton Bingham	1.9	East Coker	royal	140	-40
6	19.33	estham	Easthams	1.6	Crewkerne	royal	55	-35
7	5.24	estone	Easton in Gordano	1.2	Portbury	minster	75	-15
8	5.22	westone	Weston in Gordano	6.0	Portbury	minster	260	-10
9	19.69	westone	Weston Bampfylde	1.6	Cadbury Castle	royal burh	263	-7
10	5.59	estone	Stoneaston	2.8	Chewton Mendip	royal	83	-7
11	40.2	nortvne	Norton St Philip	7.8	Frome	royal	359	-1
12	8.24	westcvbe	Westcombe	1.4	Batcombe	abbey estate	283	+13
13	19.50	nortone	Norton-sub-Hampden	7.1	Crewkerne	royal	23	+23
14	6.11	westberie	Westbury-sub-Mendip	5.6	Wells	minster	300	+30
15	10.2	svtvne	Long Sutton	7.8	Somerton	royal	213	+33
16	7.5	westone	Weston	2.9	Bath	royal	310	+40
17	19.56	svtone	Sutton Montis	0.6	Cadbury Castle	royal burh	227	+47
18	5.16	nortone	Norton Malreward	3.2	Chew Magna	minster	56	+56
19	21.49	westov	Westowe	0.7	Lydeard St. Lawrence	manor	335	+65
20	8.5	sutone	Sutton Mallet	4.7	Shapwick	abbey estate	255	+75

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Editor's note

Sadly Barry Lane died before he had the opportunity to further revise the article as he wished but it seemed appropriate to publish the paper nonetheless.