

The derivation of the name Wreay

In writing his book on Wreay, Canon Hall did not hesitate to consult the foremost authorities of his age. Professor Skeat, to whom Hall wrote, was the doyen of Victorian philologists.

'In answer to an inquiry as to the meaning and derivation of Wreay, and whether the "Wrag" of Wragmire might be a variant of the name, I received the following letter from the late Rev.W.W.Skeat, Professor of Anglo-Saxon at Cambridge: -

Feb. 5th, 1894

Dear Sir,

Wreay is the same as Wray. There is a Wray castle (modern) on Windermere. John Ray, the naturalist, was really John Wray. He altered his name at College. Wrey is an alternative spelling, just as way was formerly wey. Wreay may easily be allied to Wragmire, but if so, it makes the connection with corner less likely.

This notion about corner is an old suggestion. What it means is this: there was an old Norse Wra, which is modern Icelandic ra, Danish vrea, Swedish vra. All these mean corner or nook. This word also appears in old English, spelt wro; this also means corner. In modern English this would be wroo or wro, pronounced as ro, rhyming with so.

Thus the vowel sound works out quite differently. The modern English ray is quite different from mod-English roe, and means a different thing. The same happens if a w is prefixed to both of them, so I doubt if the old suggestion is right. It could only work out right if there was an Anglo-Saxon wroe as well as the old Norse wra. This is possible, and that's all one can say, but no one has ever seen the Anglo-Saxon wroe. The corresponding word to Norse wra has never been found, and perhaps never existed.

But Wrag in Wragmire demands explanation just as much as Wray does. On the whole, I can only guess that instead of being related to Icelandic ra, a corner, the form Wray or wrag is allied to the root of the words wriggle, wry, wring, wrong, with the sense of twist. This would give the idea of "bend" which you require, but I have no proof at all. The nearest word is the Swedish ragla, to totter; Norwegian raga, to stagger; from the notion of bending.

Yours sincerely,

W.W.Skeat

From this letter it is evident that at all events Wreay is of Scandinavian origin, and, like the various "Thwaites", certifies to an occupation of the neighbourhood by Norsemen, sailing probably down the west coast of Scotland and up the Solway.

Professor Sedgefield, in his "*Place-names of Cumberland and Westmorland*", gives the origin of Wreay as old Norse vra, "nook, corner, or tongue of land". He states that Lindkvist, in "*Some old Scandinavian Deposits in Middle English Records*", has a valuable note on this word, which forms an element of many place-names in the North of England. He gives it appearing as "Wra" in a Pipe Roll of 1234, and refers to a "Grenewra", mentioned in a Pipe Roll of 1201; but this cannot be our Wreay, for the entry refers to the payment of 2s. yearly to be free from visitation, made by Alan de Caudebech (Caldbeck), "for a certain land called Grenewra, between the water of Caldew and the land of the church of the same vill".

A R Hall, *Wreay*, 1929

The English Place-Name Society lists the various forms in which the name Wreay has appeared over the centuries. In 1272 in *The Pleas of the Forest* it was Petrelwra and in succeeding years it was found variously as Peterel-, Paytre-, Peytre-, Petrille-, Pettel, and Petrell- with the last syllable being variously wra, wray, and wraye. In the *Ministers Accounts* of 1541, it appeared as Patterdaylwrye and Peterdaylewraye and in the Border Papers, in 1600, it appeared simply as the Wrey and slightly later as Wraye. Nicolson and Burn in *The History and Antiquities of the Counties of Westmorland and Cumberland* print the name as Wrea. In all cases the name Wreay indicates a 'nook or corner of land by the Petteril'.

Wragmire may take its name from the Old Norse word for a wolf, 'vargr', and refer to the mire of the wolf, or, in this case, since this desolate stretch of road was notoriously dangerous, the outlaw.