

THE PLACE-NAME KIRBY MUXLOE

by

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KIRBY or CARBI was one of five Leicestershire Manors given by William I to his illegitimate son, William Peverel (1113), whose total holdings included one hundred and sixty-two English manors and the custodianship of Nottingham Castle. In Domesday Book (1086) a working population of eight (six villeins and two bordars) is credited to *Carbi*, then an oasis of some 300 acres (about half a square mile) in the midst of Leicester Forest, which probably covered about 36 square miles.

Carbi took its name from the original Danish settlement founded by *Caeri(r)* or *Caere(r)*, most probably in the late-tenth or early-eleventh century. It is thus a contraction of *Caeri(r)*'s - *by*.¹ *Carbi* does not derive from the same root as *Cherchebi* or, in some instances, *Cherebi*, later to become *Kirk(e)by*, a settlement denoting the existence of a pre-conquest church. Later versions of *Carbi* were *Carobi* (c.1200) and *Kerebi(e)* (1193) or *Kereby* (1236). The latter was perhaps, the commonest spelling, becoming *Kyrbye* by the sixteenth century. From time to time a *k* intrudes into the middle of the word.

Kirby is only six miles from Kirkby Mallory, so it was found necessary at an early date to describe the place, for identification purposes, as Kirby-by-Glenfield. Glenfield was the mother parish. The first references to a suffix proper—*Muckeleby(e)* occur in Fines and Deeds dated 1582, 1587 and 1597 amongst the Winstanley Estate Papers.² *Muckle* means “big” or “great”³, and derives from the Old English *micel* or *mycel* which, in turn, originated from the Old Norse *mikill*. *Muckel* is also found in such alternatives as *Mickle*, *Mi(t)chel*, *Muggle* or *Muchel*. The word was an adjective still in common use in the sixteenth century (e.g. “a man of mickle might” (Spenser)).

Why should Kirby have been “great”? Was it, perhaps, because her population had outstripped that of the mother parish Glenfield and the sister chapelry of Braunstone? The 1563 Diocesan Returns⁴ show Kirby of a size not to be attained again for more than two centuries: 27 families, compared with 24 at Braunstone, and only 15 at Glenfield. Another long-standing, but unsubstantiated reason is attributed to neighbourly sarcasm referring to “a greatness that never was”, due to the cessation of the building of Kirby Castle consequent upon the execution of William, Lord Hastings in 1483.

Several references to the Somerfield family show the form *Muxlo(w)e* in use by 1602/3,⁵ though it did not appear in Parish Registers until 1642. *Muchsloe* occurs in the Market Bosworth Registers four years earlier. The late Professor A. H. Smith⁶ suggested that *Mucklow* (in Worcestershire) means “great mound” or “hill”, the *-low* part deriving from Old English *hlaw*. Though Kirby Muxloe has its own “Big Hill” (also known as “Biggy”,

beyond and to the south of Kirby Castle), this must be considered mere coincidence. Any connection with the Muxloe family is almost certainly fortuitous. This family settled in nearby Desford in the late-sixteenth century, but never seems to have held significant land-holdings in Kirby. Its only proved connection with Kirby was through Edward Muxloe, a grandson of Henry Styan. A former owner of Kirby Frith, which was actually extra-parochial to Glenfield, he lived at Kirby Hall from about 1725 until his death at the age of thirty-nine, two years later. In his will⁷ he is described as of Kirby Muxloe Frith.

Throughout the seventeenth century, Kirby's suffix has many spellings: perhaps *Muckle(s)* is the commonest, but this regularly appears with a second *s* and *Muckless* is found in wills into the nineteenth century. This has been regarded, probably wrongly, as *Muck-less* and E. Ekwall states "Muxloe seems to be a modification of *Muckless*."⁸ W. G. Hoskins, in *The Heritage of Leicestershire* writes that *Muckless* was "a nickname referring probably to a pronounced local shortage of muck for the fields; perhaps it was some local sixteenth-century joke about the place. At any rate, the name Muxloe does not appear until much later and has no apparent meaning".⁹ The last assertion needs to be considered in the light of the 1602 reference.

The use of a suffix was perhaps never properly standardised. A reference as late as 1656 describes Kirby as *alias Kirby Muckles*.¹⁰ The form *Muxloe* is found more often after 1700, though it was evidently not universally accepted. On the fly-leaf of Kirby's Parish Register, begun in 1703 and in use for the following half-century, is written *Kirby Muckless not Muxloe*. Another word, *Mullox*, appears in Bowen's Map of Leicestershire, first engraved in 1756, and in the map and index to the second Edition of Burton's *Description of Leicestershire* (1772). Of doubtful authenticity is the suggestion that the word may refer to the muddy approaches to Kirby, famed for its heavy clay soil and its fords. There is a Middle-English word *mulloc(k)*, found in Chaucer and elsewhere, meaning "dirt", "refuse", or "mire". Kirby Muxloe is found on the more reliable and later maps of Prior (1779) and Cary (1787).

Kirby Muxloe is a fascinating place-name; few correspondents seem able to spell it correctly; its entertainment value has been illustrated in a song by Flanders and Swann and in a popular satirical radio programme.

NOTES

1. P. H. Reaney, *The Origin of English Place-Names* (1960), 57.
2. *Leics. County Record Office*: DE 728/488-491.
3. A. H. Smith, *English Place-Name Elements*, part 2, *English Place-Name Society* 26 (1956), 140.
4. *V.C.H. Leicestershire*, vol. 3 (1955), 167.
5. Ed. H. Stocks & W. H. Stevenson, *Records of the Borough of Leicester*, vol. 4 (1923), *passim*.
6. A. H. Smith, *op. cit.*
7. *Leics. County Record Office*.
8. E. Ekwall, *Concise Oxford Dictionary of Place-Names*, 4th Edition (1960), 279.
9. W. G. Hoskins, *The Heritage of Leicestershire* (1946), 36.
10. G. F. Farnham, *Leicestershire Medieval Village Notes (n.d.)*, vol. 3, 145.