

The Origin and Explanation of the Name “Lighthorne”

by Peter Hinman (1998)



I have always had some doubts that the origin of the name “Lighthorne” is from “the place of the light thorn”. The first reference that I can find to this explanation comes from “Warwickshire Place Names” by the Victorian writer Mr. Duignan. He made no attempt to qualify his choice of meaning and unfortunately it has since been repeated in a number of later publications. As Duignan has the reputation of being an unreliable source I checked both earlier references to the meaning of the name and into the latest theories on how place names developed. This study resulted in what I consider to be a more plausible explanation.

The 17th century historian, Sir William Dugdale, published the earliest known explanation of the village name in 1656, in the famous work “The Antiquities of Warwickshire”. His explanation of the name is: “I am confident that the last Syllable should be ‘hirne’, which in our old English signifies a corner; and by which I guess at the former Syllable, Viz. Lich, which is the same with cadaver, I suppose that it had originally its name from some sepulture (*sic*) of dead bodies there”. Bearing in mind that this was written before 1656, Dugdale’s recognition of the old English meanings is probably quite accurate, but later theories do not totally support his explanation.

According to the most recent study, “*Midland Place Names*” (1992), Lighthorne is typical of a first phase settlement in that it refers to geographical features in its description, providing an immediate means of identification rather than reflecting ownership. Later phase settlements usually refer to a personal name connection to the use of the land, eg. Frank-ton, Lox-ley, etc.

The Anglo Saxon dictionary agrees with Sir William Dugdale and gives “hyrne” as a corner while the current Oxford English dictionary gives “hirne or hyrne” as a fold in the land or a small valley. Both descriptions could correctly be applied to the topography of Lighthorne. The word “horn” also appears in other parts of Warwickshire as a field name.

There are four possible Anglo Saxon origins for the descriptive prefix “light” which could match Lighthorne as it is today: luet, laet, leachy or lic. The Old English Dictionary translates these as *hidden, small stream, seeping or weepy ground* and *corpse* (Dugdale’s choice). The first three are all descriptive and could be used to describe Lighthorne and are my favoured selection. Sir William Dugdale’s idea that we are living in “Corpse Corner” or “Death Valley” should not be disregarded as Lighthorne was certainly a significant Middle Iron Age settlement and the valley may have survived as an ossuary or sacred grove. I think it unlikely that settlers with a wide choice of places for new homesteads would have chosen such a location as a home.

As a first phase settlement, where the name is intended to describe the place to a newcomer, Hidden Valley or Corner seems most likely, with Stream Valley and Seeping Valley as possible alternatives. To say Luet-hyrne (hidden valley) for Lighthorne or Aesc-hyrne (ash tree valley) for Ashhorne would be clearly understood to the Hwicce people who displaced the Welisc and settled here.