

The Place-names of Scotland

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Place-names study is an ideal topic for interdisciplinary activities and Scottish Studies in particular. Our place-names come from eight or nine languages but they can be grouped into about four main categories: Brittonic or Brythonic (including Pictish), Gaelic, Norse, English/Scots.

Place-names usually contain two parts or elements: a **generic** or **classifying element** and a **qualifying** or **specific element**. The **generic** element gives us the type of place or general category it can be fitted into, e.g. house, church, hill, river, etc. The **qualifying** element gives us additional information to describe or explain,

The table below concentrates on some common **generic elements** because if we can identify these, we can work out which language they came from and hopefully learn quite a lot about them, even if we can't work out their full or original meaning.

In names which are of **Celtic origin**, the generic element usually appears first in a compound name, as in Dumbarton or Kilbirnie, but in names of **Germanic origin** (Norse, English and Scots) it comes second, as in Orkney or Bannockburn.

Place-names can also be categorised according to such things as man-made structures, commemorative names, evaluative or reflective names, ecclesiastical or church names, fiscal/tax names, occupational/work names and personal names.

COMMON PLACE-NAME ELEMENTS

CELTIC (Pictish, Brittonic, Gaelic)	NORSE	OLD ENG/SCOTS	MEANING
Pit, Tref, Try, Bal	Bost, Bister, Bo	Ham, Ton, Wic	Farm, Village
Caer, Dun	Borg	Burgh	Fort, Town
Both, Tigh	Bud	Booth, Hus, Hoose	House
Kil, Eccle	Kirkja	Circe, Kirk	Church
Inch, Eilean	Ay, Ey	Iland	Island
Avon, Abhainn, Aber, Inver	A, Ar	Ae or Flod	River or River mouth
Drochaid	Brug	Brycg, Brig	Bridge
Monad, Ben, Cnoc	Fell	Hyll, Cnoll	Mountain, Hill, Knoll
Drum, Tullie, Barr	Rig	Hrycg	Ridge, Back, Hill
Strath, Glen	Dalr	Dale, Vale	Valley
Achadh, Auch, Auchen, Magh, Dail	Lith	Lea	Field, Plain, Meadow
Ard, Rudha, Ros, Trwn, Sron	Ness	Head	Headland, Nose, Point
Camas, Cambus	Vagr, Vik, Hop	—	Bay, Bend, Creek
Tros (Brittonic = across)	Gate	Paeth, Geat, Yett	Path, Gate, Way
Cardden, Pert, Coille	Sgagr, Vollr	Scaga, Shaw, Wald	Wood
Gardd, Garth, Garradh	Garor, Gardr	Geard, Word, Worth	Enclosure

Classroom Activities

1. (a) Using a map, select a number of towns across the whole of Scotland. Beside each one, mark P if it is a Pictish name, B if it is Brittonic, G for Gaelic, N for Norse and E for English or S for Scots. Also say whether you think the name reflects the topography or describes a settlement.
(b) After looking at the way these names are spread, can you roughly say where each group mainly settled? Use a colour code to show these on your map and make up a chart to show the percentages for each language on your list.
(c) Further research. Pick a landscape and a settlement name and investigate the geographical features or historical reasons behind the names, e.g. why did people settle there?
2. (a) Study a map of your own shire, district or city and see how many meanings and sources you can identify. If you are not sure, try a guess and say which language you think it comes from. Draw up a list or chart to show the numbers or ratios for different languages.
(b) Make a list of the meanings of the towns, streets, buildings, parks, etc. in your local area, with explanations of their origin or what or who they have been named after.
3. (a) Local fieldwork. Study a detailed a map of your area and then interview older people who have lived there a long time and ask them if they can remember older names for places in your area or names that aren't on the map, e.g. wee burns, fields, woods hills or other features and then make your own map of the area showing these names.
(b) Do the same for street names, buildings, businesses, shop names, etc. and find out how much your area has changed in the last twenty-five, fifty and one hundred years. Make a map or chart to illustrate these changes. Can you draw any conclusions from these changes about how it has changed?
4. (a) How many of these local names are still accurate (i.e. they still look like the meaning of the name)? Write a description/ explanation of why this is/is not the case.
(b) Make a poster or cartoon drawing to illustrate one of the above names and its meaning.
(c) Try making up a glossary of place-names for your town, district or shire.
5. (a) Billy Kay's map of Scotland in Scots gives the older or local ways of saying some Scottish names, most of which have been changed into English. Make a list of some of the names in your area in Scots or Gaelic and English. How many have you heard said in Scots or Gaelic and how many do you use? Can you find any examples where the English spelling has distorted the name?
(b) Make up some new names in Scots or Gaelic for places in your area. e.g. Clarty Corner, Grotty Street, Mingin Pond, Boggin Bay, Brawburn, Balamadain, Ionad Oinsichean.
6. Local legends or stories. See if you can collect or research any legends, stories or jokes about your area or the people from it, e.g. stories about local industries, memorable events, sporting achievements, tragedies, disasters or jokes about daft or mean folk from a particular town or district. Try recording someone talking about this or retell their story as accurately as possible or retell it in your own words, for a talk, story or interview.
7. Your own story or tale. Try to make up a story for how a local town, area or village near you got its name. Use local history and scenery if you can, but invent as much as possible. Look up Polmadie and Alloway for some examples.
8. If the English had settled in your area before the Gaels or Vikings etc., what do you think some of the names would now be? Try putting some of them into modern English or Scots.

9. You are in charge of an alien map-making team, sent to planet Earth. Write a report giving a brief description of somewhere in Scotland and make up new names for towns, villages, rivers, hills, districts, parks, streets, etc, e.g. Inverkennaebody, Baldy Hills, Hairyheidwick, Pealywallytoon, Poshburgh, Brainybeaston, Whiskyville.
10. (a) The Romans called the Northern tribes the Caledonii (possibly from the Brittonic *caled* = hard) from which the words Caledonian and Caledonian originate. Why do you think the Romans used this name? Agricola, Antonine and Hadrian all had a few problems with the northern tribes. Look up a folk song by Matt McGinn called 'The Heilan Man' in a book called *McGinn of the Calton* (pub. 1987) and retell the story or joke in your own words.
(b) Can you think of any place-names or company names which use the word Caledonia or Caledonian? What do you think they are trying to say about themselves by using this name? Make up a poster or advert for it/them.
(c) The modern Gaelic name for Scotland is Alba, as in BBC Alba (pronounced Alapa = the rocky place). Can you think of a famous range of European mountains with nearly the same name and what does this possibly tell you about the age of this word and its ancestry? Do you think this is still an accurate description of Scotland? Can you think of an alternative?
(d) Check out what the Romans called Britain and why they used this name. Research some historical, commercial or sporting uses of this name and explain why you think they have been used and find out more about one of these. You could deliver a short talk about this.
11. Draw up a short list of some Scottish river names, especially the ones in your area and create an art work inspired by the name or draw an artistic map to illustrate the river and its origins or what it is famous for.
12. "Canedolia", by Edwin Morgan
(a) Morgan is having some fun with the name Caledonia here. Why do you think he changed it?
(b) All the other places are real names. Try to find out where some of them are and what they mean.
(c) Arrange the poem or part of it for voices, possibly in groups, and record it.
(d) Using a map try to make up a local version, using as many names in your area as you can, paying attention to alliteration, assonance, rhythm, etc.
13. The Scottish Diaspora: Scots have been one of the world's great wandering tribes either as soldiers, sailors, explorers, traders or emigrants, often in search of a better life elsewhere. As a result Scottish place-names are found throughout the world, but especially in North America and Australasia. Check if your town or nearby place-names have been used somewhere else in the world and do some research on how this came about and what the place is like today in comparison with its Scottish original. Many cities and towns around the world are named after Scottish ones (e.g. Dunedin in New Zealand, from the Gaelic Dùn Èideann, for Edinburgh) or island place-names, like Calgary on the Isle of Mull which gave its name to Calgary in Canada.
14. Many place-names have been used in poems and songs, e.g. *The Song of the Clyde* or *The Glasgow Underground*. Make up a poem or song using local place-names.
15. Place-name Call My Bluff. In groups, select about six Scottish places with odd-sounding names, make up two false names for each of them and also find out the real meanings. Put each of these on a card and make up separate TRUE and FALSE cards. Play other groups at Call My Bluff which you could record or video.