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Cirencester Place-names: Lewis Street

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CIRENCESTER PLACE-NAMES: LEWIS STREET.

It may be confessed that Cirencester itself has provided us with certain place-names for scientific solution which offer uncommon difficulties. They are all the more interesting because of this; yet there are still surviving (one notices) people so rash as to imagine that you can arrive at the meaning of an ancient river- or place-name by mere roundabout guesses. That is because (as with obsolete fossils in our garden-walls, formerly), with words, they were not supposed to have any systematic laws behind them. They were the pure creation of Providence merely for our practical benefit, or moral amusement! But names prove to obey strictly, if sometimes darkly, systematic laws, just as did once the ammonites in the blue-clay, hundreds of feet above present sea-level. To get at the workings of these phonetic and evolutionary laws in old names, we need to recapture with great pains the earliest surviving forms of the name that is under consideration: and these forms have to be sought out in charters or grants of land, boundary definitions, forest perambulations, or in rolls of taxation of various kinds. Yet however rich may be the resources of any given county in such documents, a great many that yet survive will always be but poorly represented in these, especially in the deeds above 600 years back, say, behind A.D. 1300, and even during many still more recent centuries; consequently, as one universal tendency of local names is to grow shorter (which alone puts guessing to complete confusion), whole syllables, or small changes of letters, may well be lost trace of, owing to lack of the intermediary forms of a name. For example, no one could, by the most imaginative guess, divine from the river *Colne* that in the 9th century the name was "*Cunelgan*," or that *Bibury* was *Beaganbyrig*.

Now in Cirencester, we have *Lewis Street*; formerly *Lewes Lane*, situate at the extreme boundary of the mediæval town and the moor-land (*mora*), now *Watermoor*; but lying in the very heart of what was the Roman town, even next its Forum: some 12 feet or more below the level of the Churn at Gloucester Bridge. It sounds most uninteresting. Here, we know from surviving maps, terriers, and plans of the 18th century, were formerly pastures, orchards, and wet fields—but no houses—the ancient débâcle of the Roman-British water control of both the true and the diverted *Churn*, and the *Duntisbourne water* had (long centuries before the Conquest) converted that entire lower Roman town into a patchy (perhaps reed-grown) mere, in rainy seasons probably a veritable lake: in fact, we find 13th century humble folk here called *Simon of*

the Lake, Walter of the Moor, etc., and these were tenants, or labourers, of one or other of the four manors which, together, divided up the present (recovered) Roman area of Corinium. It was therefore quite natural that when the small mediæval town began to grow, instead of growing eastward on to swampy ground, it deliberately climbed *Cecily Hill*, and also created street after street beyond the Roman western boundary towards Gloucester Bridge, *i.e.*, in order to be dry!

That even in Roman days the water proved a trouble is witnessed to by the fact that when the lower Irmin Street in Watermoor was met with sixty years back by the engineers, it was noticed to be carried on a ridge raised above the natural soil-level.

But I have here only to do with the name *Lewes*, otherwise known until our day as the *Leauses*, and sometimes (though only by an easy confusion) as *Leasowes*. The pronunciation of *Leauses* is of extreme interest, and the spelling likewise; though the other spelling, *Le Lewes*, goes back a very long way, even to 1340, or the later Norman-English time. Many besides myself probably have heard a British traveller pronounce *vaches* (*cows*) in two syllables. Whenever we find the definite article before a place-name it is always of peculiar interest. Here we have it (though dropped to-day) in the Norman-French *Le*: consequently, *The Leauses* or *Lewes* represented something, some positive feature, of the locality lying west of Dyer Street (and in continuation of Foss-way towards the Bull-ring), of an enduring character, and right in the centre of the Roman-British town. What was that?

The form in which the French term *eau*, meaning *water*, would appear in Norman-French is *ewe*, plural *ewes*: and as the meaning of the term *Les ewes*—*the waters*, though perfectly clear to the learned monks of the Abbey and to manor officials and owners, would cease very soon to be clear to English-speaking people (who dropped as they gladly did more and more the imposed foreign forms), it would quite naturally assume the common form of *Le ewes*; or, compacter, *Lewes*; but we have already noted that the English form *Leauses* struggled a very long time for survival, though its (now clear) meaning had quite vanished. As we remarked, the rather similiar Saxon term *Leasowes* (meaning pastures), has not failed to look in (Rudder has it), in order to supply a wanted meaning. *Lewes*, then, may be quite well the contracted form of *Les eaux* (N.Fr. *ewes*).

Consequently, our familiar friend *Lewis* is really the proper 13th century term that marked and denoted the water-usurpations of this classic site during the middle-ages, and thus it is closely

related to modern *Watermoor*: and it was then heard by every inhabitant here in the time of King John. Let me take the names of no less than three in a Ciceter Jury of (c) 1210. The first is Thomas of the Moor; the ninth is Robert of the Lake; and the eleventh is Michael of the Moor: in the same deed occurs Richard *de aqua*—of the water. In an Edwardian grant (1340) *Le Lewes* is situated (as we should expect) on the edge of the moor or mere, and that is the reason why Dyer-street could not go straight in its course eastward, but had perforce to turn left to the former Foss-Gate or London-road. It also fully accounts for the disappearance of streets following the Roman lines of rectangular blocks, across the town as at Gloucester.

Happening to be in correspondence with Prof. A. Mawer of Liverpool University (Director of the Place-Name Survey of English Counties), I drew his attention to this, my conjecture, though not without some apprehension. However, he not only confirms, but strikingly corroborates it by acquainting me with the fact that the Sussex *Lewes*, by a process of folk-etymology, was evidently in the middle-ages regarded as the equivalent of the Norman-French *Les ewes*; for it was latinized *laquis*.

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