

Two lost place-names in the west Midlands: *Gaia* in Lichfield and *The Gay* in Shrewsbury

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The purpose of this article is to note the existence of two, or probably three, related unexplained names, to present possible further examples of the element involved, and to review how far it is possible to explain them.

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The name of the piece of land called *The Gay* on the eastern (right) bank of the Severn in Shrewsbury is no longer mapped or in general use, but it survived until recently in the name of the stadium of Shrewsbury Town football club, *Gay Meadow*, whose land was sold off for housing development in 2007-14.¹ Hobbs (1954: 53, 122) reflected the general view when he said that the location of Gay Meadow represented the “lower Gay” whilst the “Gay proper” was adjacent, but in the vicinity of the present Whitehall Street, north-east of Shrewsbury Abbey. He also stated (1954: 53) that “Shrewsbury antiquaries have long argued the respective merits of derivation of this name from the Welsh and French (*vide Shropshire Notes and Queries*), but it would seem to be due to Norman influence.” This is not quite clear, but I do not think that what it seems to imply can be right, as there is no (Anglo-) Norman word that is plausibly relevant.

The documentary record of *The Gay*, starting around 1237, was set out by Margaret Gelling in *PN Shropshire* (4: 76-77). She dismissed two earlier connections speculatively made (1) by Ekwall (*DEPN*: 194 and 207) with names such as *Gayton*, *Gaydon*, *Guist*, and given by him a rather improbable etymology involving an Old English verb *gægan* ‘to turn aside’ or a hypothetical river- or personal name derived from it; and (2) by herself, with two farms called *Jay* in Shropshire. I will not rehearse those rejected speculations here. In Gelling’s final judgement, the only credible comparison to be made was with a medieval name *Gaia* in Lichfield, Staffordshire, recorded from 1200, and that is my starting point. Both the Lichfield and the Shrewsbury names are simplex names which appear sometimes with the French, and later the English, definite article. Both the Lichfield and the Shrewsbury places have a strong connection with important churches, as noted already by Horovitz (2005: 270). Barring bishop Diurma’s short-lived

¹ Any unity *The Gay* once had was dissected by the building of railways across it between 1848 and 1866 (de Saulles 2012: 166-167). The spinal street of the new development is called *The Old Meadow*, which looks like an attempt to eliminate the loaded word *gay* from the former football ground name that might otherwise have been deployed as a street-name.

establishment at Repton, Lichfield was the original see of independent Mercia, and was raised to the status of an archbishopric at the height of Mercia's power and influence under Offa from 787. This lasted till at least 799, and formally till the council at Clofesho in 803. *Gaia* was the name of land on the north side of the cathedral close, which became a prebend, probably before 1150.² It was described as a hamlet by Harwood (1806: 231). By 1279 it had been divided into two prebends, Gaia Major and Gaia Minor. The Gay in Shrewsbury was land separated from the north side of the close of the Abbey of St Peter and St Paul only by the public highway, and was flanked on the west and north by a long bend of the Severn. We know from Orderic Vitalis's *Historia ecclesiastica* (book V, chapter 13) that the abbey was founded in 1083 on the site of an Anglo-Saxon chapel dedicated to St Peter, a dedication which often indicates early foundation, reflecting both papal and worldly priorities: access to and control of the keys of Heaven.

The Lichfield name has been recorded embedded in later names. *Gay Field*, presumably part of one of the Gaia prebendal lands, is obviously an elucidation of the opaque *The Gay*. It is found from at least 1464.³ *Gay Lane* is found from 1695,⁴ and in subsequent burgage deeds. Its modern name *Gaia Lane* is an antiquarian remodelling of the earlier one, and is not found before about 1813.⁵

There may have been other independent instances of the element in Staffordshire. *Gay Lane* is duplicated in what appear to be brooklands at Marston in Church Eaton, though it does not have an entry in the catalogues of either Staffordshire or Lichfield Record Offices or the William Salt Library. The name is mentioned but passed over without comment by J. P. Oakden (PN Staffordshire 1: 143). It is possible that it refers to the same kind of terrain as that in Lichfield, or that the name is copied from Lichfield, for whatever reason. Given the lack of early records, it can play no further part in the discussion.

There was a field called *le Geye*, recorded in Lower Penn (also known as *Penn Under*), Staffordshire, in 1332 (Horovitz 2005: 270, citing Staffordshire Record Office D593/B/1/17/1/1/2). The former existence of this field cannot be ignored because of the linguistic parallels (including the definite article) which it offers with the Lichfield and Shrewsbury names, but it would be unwise to speculate on its exact location because the terrain and hydrology of the flat part of the parish has been interfered with in the modern era by works for canals and railways. The parish was in the hands of

² Jackson (1796: 111) presumed that the two Gaias had been founded, with other prebends, by bishop Roger de Clinton in about 1140. Clinton was also responsible for the street plan of the medieval city.

³ 1464 *Gay Feld*, Staffordshire Record Office 3764/79, gift of a tenement; *Gay Field*, 1587 William Salt Library (Stafford) SD Pearson/1159, lease, 1713 William Salt Library 275/38, lease of a croft.

⁴ 1695 Lichfield Record Office LD77/9/12, counterpart lease.

⁵ 1813 Lichfield Record Office LD77/9/49, lease of waste.

countess Godiva of Mercia at Domesday; the place-name *Penn* suggests the possibility of ancient foundation if it really contains the ancestor of Welsh *pen* ‘head; end’, describing the promontory jutting into the marshes, and on which the village of Lower Penn sits.⁶

David Horovitz kindly informs me that he no longer endorses the claim (Horovitz 2005: 270) that there are or were once two road-names containing *Gay* in Much Wenlock, Shropshire. There is, however, one further probable survival of this element in Shropshire territory that has not recently been Welsh-speaking, though early evidence is lacking. There was an open field called *Gay* at Baucott in Tugford parish in Corvedale (PN Shropshire 3: 242)⁷ which by the late eighteenth century was recalled in derived field-names (*Gay Leasow* and *Gay Meadow*). It is not near any church, if it was near Baucott farm as Gelling states.

Further afield, *Gay Lane* in Marloes, Pembrokeshire, might excite interest, but despite its being in the Englishry it is not included as a non-Celtic name in Charles (1938). In his later *magnum opus* on the county (1992: 613, 614), Charles also does not register the name at all, but records *Gailspring*, attested in Marloes from 1769, and two fields called *Gail* and *Gails*, attested in 1767. In the absence of topographical information, and in the absence of early mentions, it seems possible that the modern *Gay Lane* derives by misdivision from **Gail Lane*. No other possibility comes to mind.⁸

In the absence of a credible unifying English etymology, and given the historical background set out above, I suggest that all three major names, those in Lichfield, Shrewsbury and Penn, are likely to be survivals from the pre-English period. Some of the others noted may also be survivals, or, near the Welsh border, may represent continued use of the element into the Middle Welsh period, as for example that at Tugford. We shall see below that this suggestion can be given more substance. What the etymology might be is a difficult matter, since there are no Welsh or Cornish words which can readily be viewed as suitable candidates to be cognates. Some laborious argumentation is necessary.

From the nature of the places so named, we might suspect the involvement of the ancestor of Welsh *cae* ‘field’ (originally ‘hedge’; British Celtic **ka(g)jo-*).⁹ There are

⁶ If Watts (CDEPN: 466) is right that Upper Penn was formerly called *Orton*, then it is clear that *penn* must have denoted the promontory of Lower Penn rather than any of the rest of the high ground south and west of Wolverhampton.

⁷ Not PN Shropshire 2: 242, as stated in volume 4: 77.

⁸ There is a spring in a narrow declivity (cf. Old Scandinavian *geil* ‘narrow valley’) in the south part of Marloes, but *Gay Lane* does not head towards it. In effect it is the present-day main street of Marloes.

⁹ The formal possibility of *cae* in the alternative sense of ‘clasp, buckle, brooch; diadem; belt’ seems too implausible to contemplate, and it has not been identified in Welsh toponymy as far as I know.

occasional spellings of the names in question with <c>, for example “the street called Cays in Abbey Foregate” translated from a document of 1311 in Shrewsbury Public Library, cited by Hobbs (1954: 122) though not in PN Shropshire 4, but these are aberrations. However, we would not expect British */k-/ to develop as Old or Middle English /g-/. Since *cae* is masculine, and always has been (judging by the citations in GPC), we cannot even appeal to a lenited definite form ancestral to **y gae*, because such a mutation applies only to feminine nouns. However, lenition applies to all nouns, irrespective of gender, after the numeral ‘2’, so we should at least explore the possibility of a form ancestral to Welsh *dau gae* ‘two fields’ as a potential source of the three place-names in question.

Horovitz (2005: 269-270, following Shaw 1798, I: 292, and VCH Staffordshire XIV: 68), notes that the Lichfield place consisted of two hamlets in St Chad’s parish (i.e. Stow; Willis 1742: 826, in a note to page 444), in existence before 1279. We have seen that *Gaia* was, from the early Middle Ages onwards, understood as two cathedral prebends, Great and Little Gaia (*Gaia major et minor*): perhaps not before the twelfth or thirteenth century, but we do not know what earlier tenurial arrangements this might reflect. Owen and Blakeway (1825: 127) noted the existence of “two pastures within the liberties, fields, and bounds of Monks Forriette [Foregate] near Salop [i.e. beside Shrewsbury abbey, RC], whereof one is called *le Geye*”.¹⁰ The Shrewsbury place consisted of two fields, *Daniels Gay* and *Little Gay* at the Tithe Award of 1842. Gelling seems to imply that Daniels Gay was alternatively *Upper Gay* in 1835 (PN Shropshire 4: 87), which recalls Hobbs’ distinction between a “lower Gay” and a “Gay proper”. These matters do not prove that the Lichfield and Shrewsbury places were both understood in early-medieval times (let alone earlier still) as some kind of double unit, but the facts are intriguing, and offer a motivation for tracking down similar names to see whether they offer corroboration or disconfirmation.

Some names and descriptive expressions in English- and Welsh-language sources explicitly have the form *dau gae*, ‘two fields/enclosures’, though that is hardly surprising.

2 closes called *y davgay ucha* in Daywell [Daywall, near Gobowen, Shropshire] lately purchased ... from John ap Edward of Daywell yeoman and Ermyn lloyd mother of John, to be held of the chief lord for the usual services, 1647/8, Shropshire Archives 2847/5/48, feoffment

y ddau gae ucha, Daywell, Shropshire, 1661, Shropshire Archives 2847/5/53, quitclaim

¹⁰ The other pasture was *le Connynger*.

y Ddau Gay tucha yr fordd [sic], Greanllyn [in Rhos], Denbighshire, 1695, Worcestershire Archive and Archaeology Service 705:24/1590 + microfilm X970.5:24, attested copy of indenture

Ddaugau in Uwchymynydd Ucha, township in Hope, Flintshire, about four miles east of Treuddyn [see next], from 1593 and current, in Owen (1994: 296)

Ddau-gae, in Treyddyn [Treuddyn] township, Flintshire, 1810, National Library of Wales SA/1810/188, will of Thomas Jones; the name of an extant farm, some of its land now housing

Bwlch y ddau Gae, in Llanefydd township, Denbighshire, 1825, National Library of Wales SA/1825/70, will of Thomas Hughes

These, including a selection from material in the National Library of Wales, are not necessarily interesting for the drift of the present article. They are interesting, however, in that they permit both the trivial observation that locations could be called by a name meaning ‘the two fields/enclosures’, and also that that expression could be used as, or in, a name in the case of the settlements in Flintshire and Denbighshire. None of these would be very interesting at all if it were not for the fact that other rural names in Welsh-speaking areas contain, or have contained, *gay* or similar in other collocations, namely with *gweirglodd* ‘haymeadow’ and *erw* ‘acre, plot, close’.¹¹ The evidence is in documents otherwise written in English for or about Shropshire manors with land near or across the Welsh border, as follows:

1 parcel of meadow called *Werglodd gay* in Maesbrooke [Maesbrook in Kinnerley, Shropshire], held of the Earl of Bridgwater, as of his Manor of [Knockin] ..., 1637, Shropshire Archives 2922/11/1/82, indenture of wardship

Of moiety of manor or tenement called Tythin Brin y Deved in Braniarth [Broniarth in Guilsfield, Montgomeryshire], with parcels [.... including] *Erw gay* ..., 1674/5, Shropshire Archives 103/1/11/149, surrender

In Bronjarth, and lands in [a] place called Brôn y Gelli Velen, 2 parcels (7 acres) called y Keynant and y Werthole, *yr Erw Gay* now in 3 parcels (10 acres), 1708/9, Shropshire Archives 103/1/11/423, marriage settlement

His land in Daywell [Daywall, near Gobowen, Shropshire] called [.... including] *y werglodd Gay*, 1741, Shropshire Archives 2847/7/157 1740, probate copy of will of John Maddocks (1740). In the original will (Shropshire Archives 2847/7/119) appears *Y Wirglodd Gay*. The listed lands are rehearsed in a mortgage of 1757 (Shropshire Archives 2847/7/121), including *Y Weirglodd Gay*.

¹¹ And note *Erow Thowgan*, an early spelling (1593) for the place in Uwchymynydd Ucha, which Owen interprets as *Thowgau* for *ddow gau* [i.e. *ddau gae*].

These names cannot include *cae* ‘hedge; field’ in a lenited form after the feminine nouns *gweirglodd* and *erw*. The sense ‘haymeadow or arable land of the hedge or field’ would need to be expressed as *gweirglodd* or *erw y cae* – but in any case, what would such a name imply? There is not a hint among the recorded forms (except as inferred from the problematic 16th-century spelling of *Ddaugau*, footnote 11) that we could be dealing with a nominalized form of *ceu* ‘hollow’. There is no adjective of the form **cae* or **cai* which, in the soft-mutated form required after feminine nouns, could account for *gay* in these names or descriptions. Those considerations suggest that certain agriculturally valuable lands in Maesbrook, Broniarth and Daywall could have *Gay* as a name rather than as a generic term, which is of interest given that the places in Lichfield, Shrewsbury and Penn were fields or open spaces.

The records from the Daywall estate offer both *y davgay ucha*, *y ddau gae ucha*, as evidence for land that could be referred to as ‘the upper two(-)fields’, perhaps as a name, and also 80-100 years later for *y wergrlodd Gay*. If these denoted the same land, we would have grounds for believing that the second name represents the first in a truncated form. For that to be the case, however, the etymology of the transparent simple expression *y ddau gae* would need to have been forgotten within a century in a community where Welsh was evidently spoken, even if not used as the language of record. Moreover it would be curious, though not impossible, for what was describable as a close in the 1660s to be describable as a haymeadow in the 1740s. Creating grassland was not a task to be undertaken lightly,¹² and abandoning ploughland for a sheep-run was a sign that it was not valuable enough in arable use. It is evident from these records that *gay/Gay* could be a description of, or a name for, particular pieces of land. Even more clearly, the Broniarth document of 1708/9 which includes *yr Erw Gay* mentions 4 parcels (8a.) called *Kae ys y ffordd vcha* and *Kae ys y ffordd Issa*, as well as *Keynant*. *Cae* (*kae*, *key*) and *Gay* are obviously distinct because dissonant in spelling. We can take the Daywall and Broniarth evidence with confidence as showing that *Gay* in the Welsh names mentioned above is more likely to be an independent element or name than a form of *cae* extracted from a longer expression. It can therefore be taken into account when considering the names in Lichfield, Shrewsbury and Penn, and can be seen as corroborating the idea that these may be of pre-English origin.¹³

What the actual origin of *Gay/Gaia* might be is seriously problematic. It was a term that in England could naturally collocate with the French or English definite article. That

¹² “Break a pasture, make a man; make a pasture, break a man.” The first part is an “old saying”, given also in its upturned form by Levy (1911: 82). I do not know whether the latter was invented with stern humour by Levy, or quoted from an earlier source.

¹³ We can eliminate the name of the estate of Domgay in Montgomeryshire, which Morgan (2001: 75) and Owen and Morgan (2007: 128) explain as being from a late name (*Rhos*) *y Domgae*, from *tom* ‘dung’ + *cae* ‘field’, with the expected lenition [k] > [g] in *cae* in a nominal compound.

suggests that it may have been a meaningful term at some stage in the history of Brittonic and Welsh and that the English and French articles may translate the Welsh article. However, some unique names with a modern English article are nevertheless not of English origin (*The Cheviot, The Chevin, The Wrekin, The (Long) Mynd, The Lizard, The Solent*, to mention only well-known ones), showing that the English article may be placed afresh before a name of non-English origin. There is no evidence for a Celtic article in any of these, nor even an Old English one, in early records.¹⁴ In Welsh names, however, *gay* only ever appears as a qualifier of a generic term (*gweirglodd, erw*). For the time being, we can only postulate a (Middle) Welsh topographical term **gei* or the like, of unknown etymology, or a name derived from such a form, perhaps once meaning or implying something like ‘piece of open ground (one with considerable status, or considerable economic or rental potential?)’. This hardly seems likely to be, as it formally could be, from a Latin adaptation of Greek *γαῖα* ‘earth, soil, land, country’ (a poetic variant of *γῆ*) in some special sense.¹⁵ The possibility of the borrowing of a Latin-mediated Greek term in an early ecclesiastical context could not really cause surprise: witness *ecclesia, parochia, diœcesis, cat(h)edra, episcopus, presbyter, monachus, martyr, eleemosyna*, and so on. But there is no evidence for the Greek word – or a hypothetical Latin derivative – being used in the relevant sense, and no evidence of ecclesiastical involvement at some of the sites indicated, though those in Lichfield and Shrewsbury are striking positive examples.

Some other names appearing to contain an element *gay* are a great deal easier to explain. *Gay Lane* in Otley, West Riding of Yorkshire, is probably from a “byname”, i.e. a nickname-surname, according to Smith (PN West Riding of Yorkshire 4: 204), though this surname is by no means frequent in Yorkshire.¹⁶ The surname of this form is certainly responsible for other local names such as *Gay Street* in Bath, Somerset, named for an 18th-century MP for Bath, Robert Gay (along with others in Somerset probably

¹⁴ The possibility that the English article arises from a misunderstanding of Middle Welsh *deu* ‘two’ is surely too remote to contemplate, and can be dismissed on the basis of the evidence that follows immediately. **Something similar actually happened in the record of the first syllable of *Devauden* (Monmouthshire; Owen and Morgan 2007: 122), but that name is to some degree obscure and occasional reinterpretation is that much more likely to have taken place.**

¹⁵ Such a word is absent from Du Cange’s *Glossarium mediae et infimae latinitatis*. The nearest this resource comes to admitting a word of the relevant shape is the entry in Favre’s edition (1883-7: vol. IV, col. 010c): *gaida* 4, *gayda* ‘wedge-shaped piece of a field’ (‘agri segmentum cuneatum’), found in Italy. Du Cange’s word *geiba* ‘turf, lawn’, distinguished from *gleba*, and recorded uniquely in 1331 from Estagel in Roussillon, also seems too distant in form, as well as geography. There is nothing relevant in Latham *et al.*’s dictionary of British medieval Latin, or its predecessors.

¹⁶ Information available to the Family Names of the United Kingdom project at the University of the West of England (2010-2016).

copied from this prestigious location, in Mells and Wellington, and a defunct example in Bristol, to which *Lower Gay Street* in Kingsdown is the surviving testimony); also perhaps *Gay Street* with *Gaywood Farm* in West Chiltington, Sussex (not mentioned in PN Sussex; mentioned without explanation of *Gay* in CDEPN: 248). Other names containing *Gay* can be traced with reasonable confidence to such disparate origins, or at any rate they offer no simple analogies to the names treated in this article. No opinion is implied here about other village names of long standing such as *Gaydon* or some of the places called *Gayton* (DEPN: 194 and 207, CDEPN: 248).

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