

## *Wirral* revisited

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This article has two goals. The first is to document fully the recurrent English place-name *Wirral* and a number of similar ones which can be shown, in some cases definitely, in others probably or possibly, to have the same origin, as well as others which appear to have the same first element. The second is to re-interrogate the widely accepted meaning of the Old English word *wīr* which is, beyond reasonable doubt, the first element of the name, because the grounds for the general belief that it denotes the shrub known as *bog myrtle* or *sweet gale* (*Myrica gale*) have not yet been properly explored. The article is structured as follows:

1. A dataset of place-names including the word *wīr*
  - 1.1 *Wirral* and names of (probably or possibly) identical origin
  - 1.2 Other names including *wīr*
  - 1.3 Undecidable cases
  - 1.4 Geographical analysis of the distribution of names in *wīr*
  - 1.5 Summary and prospect
2. A discussion of the possible range of senses of *wīr* and their history
  - 2.1 Myrtle
  - 2.2 *Wire* as a lexical item and in dialect plant taxonomy
  - 2.3 Reflection on the Old English compound *wīr + h(e)alh*
3. Conclusion

Note that forms cited from EPNS county volumes are dated, but not further referenced. Full references to original documents can be found in the relevant volumes. Forms taken from other sources are referenced conventionally.

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## 1. A DATASET OF PLACE-NAMES INCLUDING THE WORD *wīr*

### 1.1 *wīr* + *h(e)alh* ‘nook, corner, angle’

On the range of applications of the word *h(e)alh* see Gelling (1984, 100–11), Gelling and Cole (2000, 123–33), and on its etymology and a specific application, Stiles (1997). This compound is widespread, but it clusters in northern England and in the catchment area of the Severn.

#### 1.1.1 *Yorkshire and Lincolnshire*

*Wirhal* (lost; a field in Wadworth, Yorkshire West Riding)

*Wirhal* 1218, PN YWR 1, 62

Worrall (Bradfield, Ecclesfield, Yorkshire West Riding)

*Wir-*, *Wyrhal(e)* 1218, Hy 3; sometimes spelt with <Wor-> from 1461, PN YWR 1, 230

Wire Hall (a minor name in Drighlington, Morley, Yorkshire West Riding)

No early forms, PN WRY 3, 21

Hugh Smith, the editor of PN YWR, suggests that the name might be for *quarrelle*, *wharrel* ‘quarry’, on the analogy of Sun Wire Hill (*Sun Wharhill* 1849), also in Morley (PN WRY 3, 18).

Whilst this should probably not be ruled out on linguistic grounds, the weight of similar names pulls in the other direction.

Weary Hill (a minor name in Ilkley, Yorkshire West Riding)

No early forms; PN YWR 4, 214

This is judged to be a possible candidate on the analogy of the name in Somerset discussed below (1.1.5).

Wire Hill (Wragby, Lincolnshire)

Wragby parish is not yet covered by PN Li; the origin of the name is unknown and it is entered here as a possible *wīr* + *h(e)alh* name. Wire Hill is low by the Sambre Beck which flows into the river Witham, and is referred to as ‘seven leaze of furze land and two beast gates in a pasture called Wirehill, all in Wragby and Panton’ in an eighteenth-century document (Lincolnshire Archives Tur/11/2/2, via A2A).

### *1.1.2 Cheshire*

Wirral

(on) *Wirhealum* s.a. 894, (of) *Wirheale* s.a. 895; sometimes spelt with <Wor-> from 1564 onwards, PN Ches 1, 7–8 (note also the eponymous hundred, PN Ches 4, 166–167); Cavill (2000, 144)

The Cheshire peninsula is the most conspicuous, earliest and best documented instance of the type. It is mentioned as a wilderness in medieval romances such as *Lybeaus Desconus* (Lambeth MS. line 1040, Naples MS. line 1056; implicitly, as a place to flee into) and *Sir Gawain and the Grene Knight* (line 701; explicitly, as a resort of those who love neither God nor man; Savage, 1931). It also appears in a

Harley lyric (“Ichot a burde ...” (‘I know a maiden ...’), B. L. MS. Harley 2253, Brook edition no. 3, line 27), but with no obvious import beyond the opportunity for a convenient rhyme (*wodewale*, *nyhtegale* and five others); the poet says of his mistress: ‘From Weye he is wisist into Wyrhale.’<sup>1</sup>

There are several local names in Wirral relevant to the base-name which are not treated as separate for the purposes of this article:

Big and Little Wirral (Greasby, West Kirby, Ches)

*the Worell* 1639; PN Ches 4, 293

Wirral Looms (Frankby, West Kirby, Ches)

no early forms; PN Ches 4, 288

Wirrall Looms (Lower Bebington, Ches)

no early forms; PN Ches 4, 250<sup>2</sup>

It is uncertain whether these minor places took their name from that of the peninsula, or whether one or other gave its name to the entire peninsula. Naturally the great antiquity of references to the peninsula suggests that it was named first, but since some of its Old English spellings are in the dative plural form, it is easy to envisage its original application as having been to more than one smaller location, perhaps including one or more of those named above. Dodgson says, however, “... it is not obvious what part of Wirral gave rise to the name” (PN Ches 1, 8).

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<sup>1</sup> ‘From the Wye to Wirral she is [the] wisest [of all].’

<sup>2</sup> But note that the Wirral minor name *Wirloons* in Caldy (Ches) is recorded in 1454 as *the Werne/Werle Londes*, and is interpreted in PN Ches 4, 286, and by Field (1993, 40) as containing the ancestor of Welsh *gwern* ‘alder-swamp’. We should be cautious about all these late records, some of which may be reformed by analogy with the peninsula name.

The following three names are also in Cheshire, but outside what are normally considered to be the confines of Wirral. Only the first is at a considerable distance from the peninsula. They may, of course, commemorate the peninsula in some irrecoverable way, but at first blush they seem likely to be of independent origin.

Worrall Hill (Mobberley, Cheshire)

*Wyrlehul* c.1306 (15th), (*le Coppede*) *Wiralehull* 1334; PN Ches 2, 71

Worralls Field (Frodsham Lordship, Cheshire)

*Weralgrews* 1349, *Wyrallefeld* 1384; PN Ches 3, 234

Wirral Field (Golborne, Handley, Cheshire)

No early forms; PN Ches 4, 90

### *1.1.3 England north of Cheshire and Yorkshire*

*Wyrhale, outre Humbre*

*Wyrhale, outre Humbre, Rauf de Boun, Le petit Bruit* (1309; BL MS Harley 902, fo. 3v)

On the face of it, this is another *wīr* + *h(e)alh* name. It is surely not a spelling of *Weardale*, as claimed by Diana Tyson in her edition of *Le petit Bruit* (1987, 9; cf. also Tyson 2000, 8), unless we are dealing with a gross textual error; the manuscript correctly has a <d> in the same sentence in the *dale*-names *Rydysdale*, *Tindale*, *Swalisdale* and *Anandirdale*.<sup>3</sup> Andrew Breeze (2011, 5–6), in the course of correcting some of Tyson’s other identifications and

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<sup>3</sup> ‘[3r] ... Ly secound de ceus trois roys out a noun Waleys, qi tient a sa portion tout la terre de Northumberland, Cumberland, Cupland, Westmerland, Gillisland, Rydysdale, [3v] Tindale, *Wyrhale*, Swalisdale, Anandirdale, tut la terre outre Humbre ...’ (‘The second of these three kings was called Waleys, who held as his portion all the land of N., C., C., W., G., R., T., *Wyrhale*, S., A., all the land beyond the Humber ...’.)

adding others, suggests identifying *Wyrhale* with Wyresdale in central Lancashire, but this view is subject to the same orthographic objection. Watts (2002, 140) discusses Wirralshire, a defunct administrative district in County Durham, whose name looks relevant to the present task but certainly includes the name of the river Wear (Mawer 1920, xv), not *wīr*; most early spellings have <e> not <i>. We return to this below.

Since some of the other places mentioned in the same passage of *Le petit Bruit* as domains of king Waleys of the Britons (Copeland, Gilsland, Annandale) are all in Cumberland or the adjacent part of Dumfriesshire, and since the two Cumberland names are those of baronies, Breeze looks for a major place west of the Pennines; hence his interest in Wyresdale in central Lancashire. But there are some places named in the *Bruit* which indisputably face towards the east coast (Redesdale, Tynedale, Swaledale), and clearly *Wyrhale* does not need to be a name of the west. However, a Simon de *Wyrihal* is mentioned in a Cumberland context (t. Hy 3; PN Cu 270), and we might consider his name as representing whatever is referred to in *Le petit Bruit* and look for evidence of places in the west. There are two candidates, two *Weary Hall* names in Cumberland, which are however just single farms which appear in the record late:

[Weary Hall \(Boltons, Cumberland; NGR NY 2141\)](#)

*Weary hall* 1578 (PN Cu 270), supported by 17th-century leases, for example

*Wearyhall* in Cumbria Record Office D Cu/4/195 (1671), via A2A

[Weary Hall \(east of Aldoth, Holme Abbey, Cumberland; NGR NY 1548\)](#)

No early forms

The editors of PN Cu are understandably hesitant about identifying Simon's surname with the insignificant place in Boltons, so they mention also Ekwall's opinion (1918) that a personal

name *Werri* might be involved. PN Cu does not include the equally insignificant name in Holme Abbey. Both these farm-names might in theory simply have a transparent origin in the kind of humorous name for a house which became popular in the Early-Modern period. But since the only instances of modern names containing *weary* known to me all combine it with either *Hall* or *Hill*, one of which is indisputably a development or a transformation of a *wīr* + *h(e)alh* name, the most economical inference is that all four have the same origin; the form of the two names from Cumberland gains added significance in the light of the Yorkshire name discussed above (1.1.1) and especially the Somerset name discussed below (1.1.5), though the latter is first recorded in the relevant shape later than the Boltons name.<sup>4</sup>

Whilst there are therefore probable *wīr* + *h(e)alh* names in the north-western counties, because of their insignificance and late appearance in the record no truly plausible source of the name of Simon in these counties has come to light. He may have come from the Cheshire Wirral or one of the places in Yorkshire, or indeed from Wirralshire, in the light of the later development of that name. The identification of the place in *Le petit Bruit* cannot be settled, but on the balance of probabilities I would identify it with the estate which became Wirralshire. If we invest the order of mention of Waleys' estates with any significance, *Wyrhale*, suitably for Wirralshire, comes between Tynedale and Swaledale heading south. If this view is accepted, the *Wyrhale* in *Le petit Bruit* is not a *wīr* + *h(e)alh* name but one alluding to the river Wear, though its manuscript spelling may have been influenced by the more conspicuous and familiar names in Cheshire or Yorkshire. Tyson may therefore have

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<sup>4</sup> That said, we must note that the major Cheshire name only once appears with a medial <i>, in the obviously defective form *Wylihalla* (Close Rolls, 1244; PN Ches 1, 7). That tilts the balance of probability slightly back towards connecting Simon de Wyrihal with one of the small places in Cumberland. However the many spellings with medial <e>, e.g. *Wirehal* in Close Rolls for the same year, could be taken as suggesting the presence of a medial syllable, or something that could be interpreted as such.

been right to consider Weardale, but for philologically insufficient reasons, and *Wyrhale*, *outré Humbre* is discounted from the present study.

??Worrall House Farm (Downholland, Lancashire)

No early forms (not in Ekwall 1922)

It is not clear whether this is an independent place-name, or whether it contains the surname which originates in one or other place of this name, which, with the exception of *Wirralshire*, invariably comes from *wīr* + *h(e)alh*. A possible instance.

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The evidence so far indicates that the name-type is very strongly northern English, though we must now consider five further names in the catchment area of the Severn.

#### 1.1.4 Midlands

*Wyrall Street* (Penkridge, Staffordshire)

*Wyrall strete* 1598 PN St 1, 88

*Wir(r)al ende crofte* is found in Penkridge, also in 1598 (Horovitz 2005, 596), and a much earlier form (*Wirhale*) for this place, described as a street, can be found in Gloucestershire Archives D340a/T207 (1225–90).

(*The*) *Wirehill* (Buildwas, Shropshire)

1 little parcel enclosed out of *the weare hill*, 1603, plot of ground called *le Weare Hill*, 1616, plot called *Wearehill* now or late of William Taylor (1648, Shropshire Archives, all Moseley collection, 2089, via A2A); sketch showing Habbersleys hole, *Wyrehill* (1718/19, letter, Moseley collection 2089/4/5/10).



Margaret Gelling (PN Sa 6, 104) records this only as the name of a coppice, from a 19th-century document, and ascribes it to *weir*. The records above suggest the possibility that it is really another *wīr* + *h(e)alh* name, given especially that the area of Buildwas is known for the regular and dramatic flooding of the river Severn (PN Sa 6, 103; Coates 2010) [and has significant acreages of woodland with streams.](#)

### 1.1.5 The South-West

Wearyall Hill (Glastonbury, Somerset)

*Wirral park* c.1343 Longleat MSS. 11226, 11274,<sup>5</sup> *Wirale* c.1400 John of Glastonbury, *Werall* 1520 Pynson's printed *Lyfe* of Joseph of Arimathea line 385, *Wiral-park* 1610 Camden, *Britannia*, *Wyrrall* 1655–73 Dugdale, *Monasticon anglicanum*, *Septum Weriallense* c.1655 Hollar, engraving of Glastonbury after Dugdale, *Weary all Hill* 1715 Eyston, *Wirral Park*, alongside *Wearyall Hill*, 19th cent. OS<sup>6</sup>

The importance of the Glastonbury name is that its documentary history underpins the judgement made above (1.1.3) that all *Weary-* names derive from *wīr* + *h(e)alh*.

<sup>5</sup> <http://www.british-history.ac.uk/report.aspx?compid=117176>.

<sup>6</sup> The modern name *Wearyall Hill* seems to have arisen in the early eighteenth century, at least as a written form. Hearne's *History and antiquities of Glastonbury* (1722) includes an account by local antiquary Charles Eyston (written in 1715) of the supposed events leading to the presence near the town of the Holy Thorn:

My Curiosity having led me twice to Glastonbury within these two Years, and inquiring there into the Antiquity, History and Rarities of the Place, I was told by the Inn-keeper, where I set up my Horses, who rents a considerable Part of the Inclosure of the late dissolved Abbey, 'That St. Joseph of Arimathaea landed not far from the Town, at a Place, where there was an Oak planted in memory of his landing, called the Oak of Avalon: That he and his Companions march'd thence to a Hill, near a Mile on the South side of the Town, and there being weary rested themselves, which gave the Hill the Name of *Weary all Hill* ...'

Eyston goes on to invert history by implying that *Weary all Hill* is locally contracted into *Werrall*. Some ingenious, if fruitless, alternative conjectures about the history of this name can be found in Jones (1854, 83-84) and Green (1880, 23-24).

Worrall Hill (West Dean, Gloucestershire)

*Wyrrall hill* 1655, *Worrall Hill* 1669; PN Gl 3, 231

Wiral *or* *The Wirral* (above Llanthony Priory, Cwmyoy, Monmouthshire)

No early forms (not mentioned in Charles 1938); undated and unreferenced spellings

*Whirral*, *Whirrall*, *Gwerrell* (Procter 2007, appendices)

Procter includes a suggestion, from what source is unclear, that *Wiral* represents Welsh *Gwer lle*, which he renders ‘shady [strictly *gwêr* ‘shade’] place’, but that is grammatically impossible. The *nehat* which accompanies one instance of the name is presumably for Welsh *neuadd* ‘hall’. But this must really be another *Wirral* name.

With this collection of *wīr* + *h(e)alh* names, for semantic-ecological reasons it would also be reasonable to consider the following name with *mōr* ‘moor’:

*le Wiremor* (Kingsley, Frodsham, Cheshire)

1347 (PN Ches 3, 245).<sup>7</sup>

## 1.2 *Wīr* with no or other second elements

In place-names the element *wīr* appears overwhelmingly compounded with *h(e)alh*. There are a few instances of its certain or probable occurrence with other elements as follows.

*Wirdene*

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<sup>7</sup> The origin, local or otherwise, of the name of the formerly prominent Wyrall family of English Bicknor, Gloucestershire, has not been ascertained (Hill 1942); William de Wyrhale was established in the area by 1330 (Gloucestershire Archives D1677/GG/46, via A2A). The place in Cwmyoy must be a candidate. The home of the Wyrills attested from 1451 in Leicestershire (e.g. Leicestershire, Leicester and Rutland Record Office DE221/2/2/144, via A2A) has also not been discovered.

*Wīr* appears with *denu* ‘valley’ in an Anglo-Saxon document (BCS 246, S 141) relating to Stoke Orchard, considered as part of Bishop’s Cleeve (Gloucestershire; PN Gl 2, 94). The name does not survive into modern times.

#### *la Wirslade*

*Wīr* appears with another valley-word, *slæd*, in a medieval field-name in Lambourn (Berkshire; 1318–19 PN Brk 2, 342). The name does not survive into modern times.

#### *The Wyrebothom*

A lost location named with yet another valley-word, recorded in 1611 in Yeadsley cum Whaley, Taxal, Cheshire (PN Ches 1, 181), but perhaps older.

Wyrley (Ightfield, Shropshire)

Wyrley (Norton Canes, Staffordshire)

Wyrley (Shipdham, Norfolk?)

*Wīr* appears with *lēah* ‘wood, glade’ in Shropshire (PN Sa 5, 162) and Staffordshire (Horovitz 2005, 596). It also perhaps occurs in the name of Wyrley Farm, Shipdham (Norfolk), for which there are no known early spellings, but which might derive from a surname originating from one of the West Midland places.<sup>8</sup>

Whirley (Over Alderley, Cheshire)

*Wyrlegh* 1348, *Wyrley* 1353, *Wirleye* 1362, *Wherlegh* 1508, all PN Ches 1, 101

Etymologically the same as *Wyrley* above.

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<sup>8</sup> The records available to the Family Names of the United Kingdom project suggest that the Staffordshire place would be, in that case, the more likely source.

*Wirhangra*

*Wīr* appears with *hangra* ‘slope’ in *æt wirhangran* in the Anglo-Saxon bounds (BCS 801, S 496) relating to Aston Tirrold (Berkshire; Middendorff 1902, 151; PN Brk 3, 758, Hooke 2003, 19), but the name does not survive into the high Middle Ages.<sup>9</sup>

## Wirlane (Clint, Yorkshire West Riding)

A modern field-name mentioned in PN YWR elements list (7, 268); not indexed, but actually recorded in 1729 in Clint in Ripley (PN YWR 5, 99).

*Wyrecotesfeld* (lost name in Adlington, Prestbury, Cheshire, PN Ches 3, 187)

This record, from 1363, seems to testify to a unique compound of *wīr* with a habitation word, *cot*.

**1.3 Possibilities with no decisive early spellings and/or no analogue**

## Wirswall (Whitchurch, Cheshire)

This is analysed in PN Ches (3, 112) as containing the Anglo-Saxon male personal name *Wīghere*, and the Mercian dialect form *wælla* of *wella* ‘spring, stream’, which is perfectly possible; but the spellings as recorded allow the possibility of *wīr* whilst the genitival construction tells against it.

## Weirsitch, Wierfield, Wire Hole, Wire Meadow and Wyre Meadow (in various parishes in Shropshire)

These are all recorded in Foxall (1980, 19 and 50). Only local investigation could determine whether any of these are candidates to be names in *wīr*, but clearly some

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<sup>9</sup> The *Weyre Close* recorded in adjacent Blewbury in 1538 (PN Brk 1, 154) may well contain *weir*.

could be, given the usual assumptions; the first with Old English *sīc* ‘ditch’, would rely on *wīr* being a plant able to survive in ditches, [and that makes this case questionable, as will be seen below \(section 1.4\)](#). The third might even be another, disguised, instance of *Wirral*.

#### Wire Stone (Ashover, Derbyshire)

No early spellings (PN Db 195). A stone on high moorland near Matlock, now surrounded by a Forestry Commission plantation, close to an Ordnance Survey trig point which is called after it.

#### Wirelock (Bassingham, Lincolnshire)

No known early records. The farm is in drained marshy moorland by the river Brant.

[Wyrhone/Wyrloue, c.1290, an unlocated and ambiguous name in Broxton hundred, Cheshire \(PN Ches 4,2\)](#).

[boscus de Wyringe 1357 \(1620\), an unlocated place in Macclesfield hundred, Cheshire \(PN Ches 1, 54\)](#).

#### Whyr/Whir Farm (Winterbourne Bassett, Wiltshire)

It is not clear whether this late-recorded name (*The Wire*, 1773, PN W 310) contains *wīr*; there are no other instances of this element standing alone in a place-name. The farm is on high chalk downland with a small stream in a shallow valley nearby. The possibility of the word standing alone as a place-name is endorsed by the unexplained surname of John *atte Wyre*, recorded in 1367 in a London document (Reaney and Wilson 1991, 497). It is not clear whether one or other of these names contains *wer* ‘weir’, but it is possible.

## 1.4 Geographical analysis

The distribution of the 28 (18 + 10) names whose etymology is reasonably certain or plausible (1.1, excluding the name in *Le petit Bruit* and including the name with *mōr*, and 1.2) is significantly western and northern. **Those whose etymology is uncertain (1.3) are more scattered, but three are in Cheshire and four in Shropshire, that is seven of the eleven are in the same zone as those which are reasonably certain.** The distribution is not inconsistent with the main modern distribution of wet (acid) bogland in England, and represents fairly good support for the widely accepted idea that *wīr* denotes a plant favouring bog habitat, specifically bog myrtle, which has no affinity with ditches, however, since it requires moving groundwater. **One of the four geographically separated uncertain items** is also in (former) marshland in Lincolnshire, but there is definitely no association of the name-type with the southern and eastern (former) bogs of Fenland, the Ouse-Trent confluence or the New Forest.

English bogs fall into two main types whose ‘distribution reflects regional differences in climate’: the lowland raised peat bog and the upland blanket bog (Lindsay and Immirzi 1996, 3–4). The former was historically the far more frequent type, and remains so despite losses to agriculture, climatic change and other kinds of pressure.<sup>10</sup> *Myrica gale* appears content to grow in both kinds of bog, and since no other single plant has been proposed as a candidate for *wīr*, we will follow the implications of this and make no further reference to bog sub-types.

Lindsay and Immirzi (1996) have produced a very useful georeferenced historical catalogue of English bogland, and in the following table an attempt is made to ascertain whether any of the place-names identified above can be associated with known bogs. If there is any degree of association, this will confirm suspicions that have been articulated in the

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<sup>10</sup> Blanket bog is dominant elsewhere, notably in much of Scotland, but we have no instances of *wīr* + *h(e)alh* from Scotland to plot against its distribution there.

literature, and the result will be unsurprising, though on a more secure footing. If there is no association, this might be viewed as troublesome, but the accelerating loss of bogland over many centuries may make negative findings difficult to interpret. The loss of a micro-bog may be hard to detect physically and archaeologically, and the prior existence of one may not have been documented even in local surveys. Nevertheless the tabling of the relevant data seems a worthwhile exercise in itself at least as an aid in (dis)confirming the current view that *wīr* place-names have bogland associations.

However, *Myrica gale* is not confined to bogland in any technical modern geographer's or ecologist's sense; wet moors of any description will support it, provided there is moving groundwater available rather than only stagnant pools. Some of the notes in the following table should be read with that in mind.

<b>Place-names, in the same order as in the discussion above in 1.1 and 1.2, omitting the doubtful cases in 1.3</b>	<b>National Grid Reference (approximate for lost names and for field-names in general), with comments deriving from features on the map intended to give a general impression of the local ecology</b>	<b>Comments based on Lindsay and Immirzi's catalogue (1996)</b>
<i>Wirhal</i> (lost; a field in Wadworth, Yorkshire West Riding)	SK 5697  Note Carr Lane leading E from Wadworth	
Worrall (Bradfield, Ecclesfield, Yorkshire West Riding)	SK 3092  Note Peat Pits Farm on Onesmoor, about 3 miles NW	
Wire Hall (a minor name in Drighlington, Morley, Yorkshire West Riding)	SE 2232  Just south of Drighlington is Moorfields, bisected by the M62	
Weary Hill (a minor name in Ilkley, Yorkshire West Riding)	SE 1246  Note the pools on the fringe of Ilkley Moor just south of	

	the town	
Wire Hill (Wragby, Lincolnshire)	TF 1578 Adjacent to Moor Farm	
Wirral (Cheshire)	arbitrarily centred at SJ 2784	No modern bog on Wirral
Worrall Hill (Mobberley, Cheshire)	SJ 7879	Lower Moss at SJ 783750; Moss Farm SJ 790756
Worralls Field (Frodsham Lordship, Cheshire)	SJ 5277	Hatchmere at SJ 553722; in a boggy area of Delamere Forest, SE of Frodsham
Wirrall Field (Golborne, Handley, Cheshire)	SJ 4559	
Weary Hall (Boltons, Cumberland)	NY 2141  There is what appears to be a wood with streams and pools some 500m SE of the farm	
Weary Hall (east of Aldoth, Holme Abbey, Cumberland)	NY 1548  There is a farm called Bog at NY135475, overlooking Common Moss	
??Worrall House Farm (Downholland, Lancashire)	SD 3506  Adjacent to Downholland Moss, now mostly drained	Downholland Moss is mentioned as a site of special scientific interest, at coordinates somewhat removed from the mapped centre of the named moss at SD 3440
<i>Wyrall Street</i> (lost name in Penkridge, Staffordshire)	SJ 9213  Note Boscomoor in the S district of the town	
<i>(The) Wirehill</i> (lost name in Buildwas, Shropshire)	SJ 6404  Buildwas is notorious for the periodic flooding of the Severn valley floor, but there is also former wet woodland N of the village	
Wearyall Hill (Glastonbury, Somerset)	ST 4938  In the moors of the Somerset Levels	Unnamed bogs at ST 4841, 4844, 4845, 5040, 5043
Worrall Hill (West Dean, Gloucestershire), in the Forest of Dean	SO 6014  Adjacent to the constant spring called Bourts Well	



Wiral or The Wirral (above Llanthony Priory, Cwmyoy, Monmouthshire)	ST 2923	
<i>Wirdene</i> (lost name in Stoke Orchard, Gloucestershire)	SO 9228	
<i>la Wirslade</i> (lost name in Lambourn, Berkshire)	SU 3278  The name of the village itself, if 'loam stream', may be significant (but see PN Brk, 333–4)	
<i>The Wyrebothom</i> (lost name in Yeadsley cum Whaley, Cheshire)	SJ 9981  The coordinates are for Whaley Moor, on the Cheshire-Derbyshire boundary	
Wyrley (Ightfield, Shropshire)	SJ 5938  The nearby moorland is dotted with pools; note also Withymoor Farm in adjacent Burleydam, Cheshire	
Wyrley (Norton Canes, Staffordshire)	SK 0206  The nearby moorland is dotted with pools, but the hydrology has been much disturbed by the building of canal, motorway and reservoir	
Wyrley (Shipdham, Norfolk?)	TF 9508	
Whirley (Over Alderley, Cheshire)	SJ 8774  The coordinates are for Whirley Hall, adjacent to Long Moss	There are other mosses in the vicinity, e.g. at SJ 8572 (unnamed), 8669 (Crab Moss), 8672 (Henbury Moss)
<i>Wirhangra</i> (lost name in Aston Tirrold, Berkshire)	SU 5585  Aston Tirrold abuts the parish of South Moreton 'moor farm'; it is unclear where the <i>hangra</i> was	
Wirllane (Clint, Yorkshire West Riding)	SE 2559  One mile W of Clint across the river Nidd is The Moss in Birstwith	
<i>Wyrecotesfeld</i> (lost name in	SJ 9180	SJ 905711 Danes Moss,

Adlington, Prestbury, Cheshire)	Pools near Adlington are diggings rather than bogs	which might supply the origin of a medieval surname embedded in this name
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The data presented here can be taken as supporting in a general kind of way an association between names containing *wīr* and (1) true bogland and (2) other wetland habitats which might support the growth of *Myrica gale*, but the association is not entirely clear-cut, partly no doubt because of changes in land use.

### 1.5 Summary and prospect

It is clear that *wīr-h(e)alh* is by far the most frequent expression containing *wīr* in place-names, with 17 instances, i.e. excluding the name in *Le petit Bruit* which appears to have been distinct in origin but assimilated to it (1.1). The analysis of the meaning of *wīr* will therefore first and foremost require its compatibility with the various senses of *h(e)alh*, and to a lesser degree with a small range of other topographical terms for valleys (3 instances), glades (4 instances), hills and lanes (10 instances altogether; 1.2). We shall also need to consider the significance of the fact that *wīr* forms a compound expression with *h(e)alh* more frequently than with any other generic.

## 2. A DISCUSSION OF THE POSSIBLE RANGE OF SENSES OF *wīr*

### 2.1 Myrtle

It is generally accepted among toponymists, as noted above, that *wīr* is a plant-word meaning ‘bog myrtle’, though Hugh Smith, in the relevant entries in PN YWR, says simply ‘myrtle’, a very different matter. In EPNE (2, 270), Smith gives both meanings, and draws support from early glosses. *Uuyr* is offered as a gloss on Latin *myrtus* (or erroneously *martus*) ‘myrtle’ in

two sets of Old English glosses, Épinal-Erfurt (Pheifer 1974, line 637), and Corpus (Lindsay 1921, line 1381); and *uuir* in Cotton Cleopatra A III (Wright-Wülcker 1884, 269, line 25). Cockayne translates the word (*pir*) as ‘myrtle’ twice in *Leechdoms* (2, 70, line 15, and 2, 86, line 7; B. L. MS. Reg. 12 D xvii).<sup>11</sup> Wright-Wülcker (1884, 446, line 6) also has *wirgræfen* (for *wīr-græfan*), glossing *mirteta* ‘myrtle-groves’, and Holthausen (1934, 399) recalls *wīre-brūn* ‘myrtle-brown/red’, perhaps both with applicability to Mediterranean contexts. *Grove* and its predecessors do not seem the appropriate words for anything less stately than a tree.

As Hoops’ *Reallexikon* states already in 1911 (under *Myrte*), ‘this term [= *myrtle*] must have denoted a native plant or shrub, as shown by its appearance in field-names’.<sup>12</sup> A sufficient justification for the possible association of myrtle and bog myrtle, whose biological and ecological characteristics are very different, lies in the fact that they are both strongly and pleasantly scented. Myrtle is a Mediterranean shrub or tree growing up to five metres tall whose leaves contain a fragrant essential oil. It has ornamental, medicinal and well-known symbolic uses. The tree is unlikely ever to have been hardy in Anglo-Saxon England, and it may only have been known in ancient times through imports of its oil or its leaves. Bog myrtle is a shade-intolerant native shrub reaching one or two metres, which forms dense thickets through suckering, has a sweet resinous scent (i.e. as of secreted hydrocarbons) and is well known as an insect and flea repellent, though since when I do not know. It was used in

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<sup>11</sup> *Mirtus* is glossed *gagel* in the *Laud Herbal Glossary* (Stracke 1974, 50, line 991)—see further below on this word. The Old English glosses mentioned can be inspected in facsimile in Bischoff *et al.* (1988), and the evidence is summarized in Bierbaumer and Sauer (undated), online at [www.oldenglish-plantnames.org/lemma/full\\_lemma/1222-w-r?fake=9110389](http://www.oldenglish-plantnames.org/lemma/full_lemma/1222-w-r?fake=9110389).

<sup>12</sup> ‘...auch das ags. wīr, wīrtrēow, das in Glossaren lat. MIRTUS übersetzt, muß einen einheimischen Baum oder Strauch bezeichnet haben, wie sein Auftreten in Flurnamen [...] zeigt.’ Early Middle English records show that myrtle was understood to have the stature of a *trēow* ‘tree’; we find in recipes in a 12th-century manuscript of the Harley collection (Glosses to *Herbarium Apuleii*, B. L. Hrl 6258B, cited from MED) ‘mid rose wose oððer *wyrtreowes* oððer ecede’ ‘with rose juice or that of the *myrtle-tree* or vinegar’ and ‘Beða ærest þæt sar mid watere, hreaw sedðan mid wermamum [sic] *wyrtreowenum* wose’ ‘First bathe the sore place with water, boil raw with warm *myrtle-tree* juice’. The context suggests that these references are to imported or cultivated physic rather than to a native plant.

traditional medicine as an emmenagogue (stimulant of menstruation) and abortifacient. It has been used in bouquets, whether for its scent or for keeping insects away from other flowers in the arrangement, or both. Culinarily, it has been used as a condiment, and for flavouring beer from medieval times until hops began to be used instead in about the sixteenth century.<sup>13</sup>

The word *gale* seen in the plant's alternative name of *sweet gale* also goes back to Anglo-Saxon times, when it is recorded as Old English *gagol*. This would develop naturally to *\*gaul*, so to explain both the modern word and the place-name *Gailey* (Staffordshire; Horovitz 2005, 270), it must be presumed that it also appeared in the front-vowelled form *\*gægel*, which may be what is intended by *gagel* in the Laud glossary (see above, note 11). Modern dialect names include (*sweet*) *gale* (Grigson 1975, 261), though the recorded Old English form must have survived to give Early-Modern *gaule* (as used by the herbalist Gerard) and *galle* (as used by the antiquary Leland).<sup>14</sup> This *gaul* may appear in another Staffordshire place-name, *Gaulede* (Horovitz 2005, 273).

## 2.2 *Wire* as a lexical item and in dialect plant taxonomy

*Wīr* evidently gives rise to Modern English *wire*. We need to pay attention to this fact because *wire* has been used, and continues to be used to the present day, in plant-words. The record of this word as applied to vegetation can be found in the *Oxford English dictionary* (OED) under *wire* n.1, IV 17b, quoted below *in extenso*, but purged of most references to

<sup>13</sup> The practice has recently been revived; cf. *The Press* (York), 28 February 2013: 'North Yorkshire micro-brewery Treboom Brewery is using the deciduous shrub in its latest beer.'

<sup>14</sup> Some widespread names for the plant may or may not come from *gagol*: the Yorkshire *goyle* is a possibility, though it looks more like a misunderstanding of *gold*, which, along with *gawan*, seems to be a misapplied name for another plant. *Bog myrtle*, used by most botanists, is an originally Scottish term which has supplanted *gale*. Confusion with *gold*, whether as a plant-word (for the marsh marigold) or not, must have come from its being a source of yellow dye, and/or from its yellow male flowers. See Grigson (1975, 261). If *gold* can mean 'bog myrtle', perhaps the etymology of *Gowdall*, taken to include *gold* in the sense of 'marsh marigold' (PN YWR 2, 17), might be tentatively reassessed as a possible reference to bog myrtle in the Ouse-Trent marshes, [where it is mentioned in a historical context \(1898\) relating to a raised bog](#) (Smart, Wheeler and Willis 1986: 742).

plants outside the British Isles. It is noteworthy that none of the records below is from before 1600, more so that structures of a considerable range of plants are denoted, and even more so that none of these is bog myrtle (which may be an accidental consequence of the selection of quotations).

OED, *wire* n.1, IV 17b:

b. A long thin stem, root, etc., of a plant; *esp.* a strawberry runner. Now *Eng[lish]* regional and *rare*.

1601 P. Holland tr. Pliny [Hist. World](#) II. xxv. ix. 228 (*margin*) The leaves of Cinquefoile are much like to the Strawberrie leafe: But as the one hath no fruit or berrie at all, so the other (to wit, the Strawberrie-wire) puts forth but three leaves.

1696 [Philos. Trans. 1695–7](#) (Royal Soc.) 19 294 Capillaries..creeping on..the Ground, with Wires after the manner of Strawberries.

1712 J. Browne tr. P. Pomet et al. [Compl. Hist. Druggs](#) I. 36 Cinquefoil..produces its Leaves..on a Stem, or Wire.

1793 J. Lodge [Introd. Sketches Hist. Hereford](#) 37 That when the wires or vines [of hops] spring up, they may not be too far separated to run up the poles.

1805 R. W. Dickson [Pract. Agric.](#) II. 603 It is only in such as possess a..good carbonic earthy matter, that they [*sc.* potatoes] are enabled to propagate their subterraneous wires or root-buds.

1859 W. S. Coleman [Our Woodlands](#) 92 There may they be seen, knee-deep in the ‘wires’, or clambering over the broken grey rocks.

1879 G. F. Jackson [\*Shropshire Word-bk.\*](#) (at cited word), The runners of strawberry-plants, and the stiff, angular stems of the whortleberry shrub, are..called wires.

1974 P. Wright [\*Lang. Brit. Industry\*](#) xii. 110 *Strings and wires* for strawberry runners.

As compound derivatives, under *wire* n.1, C 2b, we also find:

1797 J. Bailey & G. Culley [\*Gen. View Agric. Northumberland\*](#) 127 *Nardus stricta*.

Wirebent.

1808 J. Walker [\*Econ. Hist. Hebrides\*](#) II. 87 The Wire bent is so called, because the flower stalks very much resemble, in shape and size, a stocking wire.

1864 [\*Times\*](#) 27 Dec. 9/4 The whole field was overspread with a luxuriant growth of the knot-grass or wire-weed, a plant that springs up..wherever the soil is disturbed.

1928 A. E. Pease [\*Dict. Dial. N. Riding Yorks.\*](#) 157/2 *Winerush*, the hard rush.

Under the separate OED entry *wiregrass* occur the following, sometimes with reference to American plants, but included here because the species (*Poa compressa*, Canada bluegrass or flattened meadowgrass) is European in origin but now distributed worldwide:

1751 J. Eliot [\*Ess. Field-husbandry\*](#) iii. 61 The Land that you would improve this way, must be intirely free from Blue Grass, called by some Dutch Grass, or Wire Grass.

1774 E. Long [\*Hist. Jamaica\*](#) I. ii. iii. 453, I have even observed them to be fond of the common savannah, or wire grass, when thoroughly dried in the sun.

1790 W. Bligh [\*Narr. Mutiny on Bounty\*](#) 48 In the hollow of the land there grew some wire grass.

1841 [\*Farmers' Reg.\*](#) 31 Aug. 454/1, I mentioned that our blue grass (*poa compressa..*) is often called 'wire grass' in this district.

1903 [\*Homestead \(Iowa\)\*](#) 30 July 23/2 The grass..is wire grass (*Poa compressa*), or English blue grass... It is indigenous to Europe and has long been naturalized in sections of the country.

Modern dialects also preserve the word *wire* in a range of plant-words collected by Grigson (1975). They are not applied in such a way as to be consistent with modern botanical classification. The taxonyms (scientific classificatory labels) are those given by Grigson, and are therefore those current half a century ago.

*wireweed*

- (1) meadowsweet (*Filipendula ulmaria*) in Hampshire (Grigson, 154)
- (2) knotgrass (*Polygonum arviculare*) in the Isle of Wight, Kent, Suffolk and Norfolk (Grigson, 247); cf. OED *wire* n.1, C 2b, record of 1864 above
- (3) larger bindweed, bellbind, withywind (*Calystegia sepium*) in Surrey (Grigson, 310)

*wire-grass*

- (1) knotgrass (*Polygonum arviculare*) in Gloucestershire (Grigson, 247); cf. OED *wiregrass* above

*wirral*

- (1) black horehound (*Ballota nigra*) in Somerset and Wiltshire (Grigson, 349)

*wire ling*

- (1) bog heather (*Erica tetralix*) in Yorkshire (Grigson, 280)

(2) crowberry (*Empetrum nigrum*) in Yorkshire (Grigson, 283)

The *English dialect dictionary* (EDD; Wright 1898–1905, cited from the online version and lightly, sometimes silently, edited for increased clarity) confirms some of these, and adds to the list. The taxonyms (scientific classificatory terms) are those given by Wright, and are therefore those current a century ago.

WIRE, sb. and v.

Various dialect uses in Scotland and England. Also in form *weer* Aberdeens. [waiə(r).]

Sub-entry 1: .... In combinations: (1) *Wire-bent*, the mat-grass, *Nardus stricta*; .... (5) *-grass*, the common knot-grass, *Polygonum aviculare*; (6) *-ling*, (a) the black crowberry, *Empetrum nigrum*; (b) the cross-leaved heath, *Erica tetralix*; (c) the toughest twigs of ling, used for making the strongest birch-brooms; (7) *-rush*, the hard rush, *Juncus glaucus*; .... (10) *-weed* .... (b) the meadowsweet, *Spiraea ulmaria*. ....

Sub-entry 3: The stem of any thin-growing, tough-stalked plant; a strawberry-runner; a hop-tendrill. Cumberland: ‘Peats are hard to finnd within reach of Skiddaw top. You see .... it’s lost its wire, and peat widout wire in it is nae use for makking a “low” wid.’ I saw that what he called wire were the rootlets of the ancient undergrowth of years gone by, *Penrith Observer* (April 29, 1902) .... North Yorkshire: Blaeberry- [whortleberry-, RC] wires. Warwickshire: .... These strawberry wires must be cut. .... Worcestershire: .... Shropshire: Wimberry- [whortleberry, RC] wires. Herefordshire .... Gloucestershire ....

Sub-entry 5: v. Of a plant: to make tendrils. West Worcestershire: .... The ’ops is wierin’ ahl over the ground.



WIRE-THORN, sb.

North Country. Yorkshire. Lincolnshire.

The yew, *Taxus baccata*; the wood of the yew when found buried under the peat. ....<sup>15</sup>

The *Dictionary of the Scots language (Scottish National Dictionary)* records also ‘*wire-bent*, the small mat-grass, *Nardus stricta* ... also the heath-rush, *Juncus squarrosus*’, the former shared with EDD.

In inspecting this collection of information, we can be sure that the word *wire* in its modern applications does not denote a single species or genus, and nor are the things which it denotes related in a way which is obvious with respect to botanical taxonomy. Indeed, in this information from standard and dialectal English, the word has been applied to parts, structures or residues of plants rather than to plants themselves; [this might also be suggested by the field-names \*Wiery Croft\* \(Chorley, Wilmslow, Cheshire; PN Ches 1, 227\), \*Wire Ground\* and \*Croft\* in Newhall \(Audlem, Acton and Wrenbury, Cheshire; PN Ches 3, 105\),<sup>16</sup> \*Wyer Meadow\* in Somerford Booths \(Astbury, Cheshire; PN Ches 1, 65\), and \*Flagwire Croft\* in Gawsworth \(Cheshire; PN Ches 1, 70\)](#). We cannot therefore assume without discussion that the Old English source-word denoted something that could be identified with a particular botanical species or genus.

Some lines of approach emerge from this data, however. It seems reasonable to probe the possibility that *wīr* is related to the homophonous word meaning ‘wire’ in Old English, though it is unclear whether the plant-word would then be a metaphorical use of the word for

<sup>15</sup> Also recorded in Sims-Kimbrey (1995, 347) and Peacock (1997, 235). An association with yew is seen also in a Welsh term; see footnote 17.

<sup>16</sup> Not PN Ches 3, 101, as indexed. It cannot be ruled out that some of these field-names represent surviving medieval names which should properly be treated alongside those in section 1.2. On the other hand, Field (1972, 257) suggests that some such late field-names may be from *weyour* ‘(fish-)pond’.

the metal product or vice versa.<sup>17</sup> In the light of that, it might seem equally reasonable to ascribe to the Old English word or words the potential for the meanings of the modern dialect words for vegetable material. These dialect words include terms for a number of long, thin, relatively soft growths: strawberry runners, stems of creeping cinquefoil, hop vines, knotgrass and bindweed, and other plants, such as certain grasses and rushes, which might be thought to resemble these. This list is of soft ‘wires’; the word was also applicable, either itself or in compounds, to hard ‘wires’ such as the stiff shoots of bog heather (cross-leaved heath), whortleberry and crowberry, and meadowsweet, as well as those of bog myrtle, if the editors of the Old English glossaries and those who follow them are correct. The extract from the *Penrith Observer* in 1902, ‘that what he called wire were the rootlets of the ancient undergrowth of years gone by’, and the term *wire-thorn* in EDD, suggests that the term came to be used of part-preserved root systems and other woody material in peat-bogs, irrespective of which plant or plants they once supported, but the evidence is not specific enough to allow greater certainty, nor is it supported in independent sources. We may suggest that *wīr* originally denoted plants which shared the characteristics of wire, and in practice denoted any bog-plant that had, or was prone to leave, reasonably long or stiff stems or roots. Bog myrtle may simply have been one of these, or the prototypical one. It may be that the term was originally reserved for plants with hard ‘wires’, in keeping with the stiff wire produced by early technology, e.g. for wool-carding, and that the term was later extended analogically to plants with soft ‘wires’ as wire technology developed to embrace the range of stiffnesses we find in today’s industrial solid-core (unstranded and unbraided) products, which range in

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<sup>17</sup> If Holthausen (1934, 398–399) is correct, the word is etymologically related to Old Irish *fiar*, Welsh *gŵyr* ‘crooked’ and Ancient Greek *ἴρις* ‘rainbow’. Pughe (1832, 205) gives *gwyrlling* as a word for bog myrtle, but associates it with *gwyr* ‘that is pure; fresh; lively, vigorous; luxuriant, verdant’. It is, or was, variously known as *gwr(dd)ling* (‘better *gwyrdding* or *gwyrddling*’) “wild rue or sumach, Gaule or Dutch myrtle” (Richards 1815, 436), which appears to suggest an etymology in *gwyrdd* ‘green’, a position endorsed by GPC (1783c). GPC (2303) also gives *madywydd*, apparently ‘lucky or holy yew-shrub’.

robustness from stout cable to fuse and jewellery wire. The earliest modern records referring to soft plants date from about 1600, which is, strikingly, also just the time at which industrial brass wire technology was developing towards something like its modern form, from 1568, especially in the lower Wye valley and the Bristol area (Day 1973, 15–47; 1990).<sup>18</sup>

It may be thought surprising that this word is never applied to the long, tough though soft, substantial and practically ineradicable roots of ground elder (goutweed; *Aegopodium podagraria*). This seems to have been a medieval introduction to the herb-garden, and has not attracted a *wire*-name, even in the dialects (Grigson 1975, 232–33). All the plants noted above as bearing a ‘wire’ name are regarded as native. If we assume that the use of *wire* had ‘run out of steam’ for new applications before ground elder was introduced, that would seem to have the corollary that all the applications of the word noted above could also be taken as dating from before it was introduced. But this reasoning pulls in the opposite direction from the last paragraph, in which it was suggested that analogical use of the term remained active, and was renewed, around 1600. Perhaps the critical point is that all the plants so far mentioned grow wild, whilst ground elder continued to be recognized as an introduction.

On balance, it seems likely that OE *wīr* was originally applied to plants bearing or consisting of woody ‘wire’, and prototypically those growing in wet acid boglands, of which bog myrtle may simply have been the most conspicuous because of its late spring yellow (male) and red (female) flowers. The term may have been further extended to the subterranean decay products of plants of this type. Bog myrtle typically grows in dense thickets and freely, when shade is absent, in wet upland areas in peaty soils, but can occasionally be found in calcareous fens (modern distribution: map 1). Given the modern

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<sup>18</sup> Decorative precious metal wires were the most ancient forms of wire produced by non-industrial processes. Iron wire was not produced industrially till later than brass wire. For a succinct history of wire, see Oddy (1977). It is always possible, of course, that soft wire could have been alluded to in plant-words earlier than is apparent from the material quoted in the dictionary entries, but its earlier absence is suggestive.

experience that a plant-word may do duty for several biologically unrelated but practically and ecologically associated species,<sup>19</sup> we might have to reckon with the possibility that *wīr* also denoted other associated woody bog-plants, unless a very strong reason could be found to assume that bog myrtle in particular was singled out. We have noted that it can be exploited for its aroma, as a source of yellow dye (2.1; also footnote 12), as an insecticide, for use in decoctions, and also in traditional medicine. We are not in a position to decide whether any single one of these characteristics, or its striking dioecious flowers, made it stand out from other resources, but clearly its several usefulnesses, coupled with its local abundance, made it a valuable plant.

MAP 1 NEAR HERE

There may be an additional reason for it to have been regarded as special. The aroma of the plant may not have been enough in itself, and its use as a dyestuff, flavouring or insecticide and so on seems to have been fairly low-key. But it was used to impart an aroma to ecclesiastical candles, as can be seen from Oxfordshire church accounts of the fifteenth century (*MED*, under *wīr-candel*, misinterpreted by the editors as denoting candles associated in particular ways with metallic wire; for the suggestion that the candles were actually scented with *wīr*, see Coates [forthcoming](#)).<sup>20</sup>

<sup>19</sup> The term *kingcup* extends dialectally not only to the buttercup and the marsh marigold, but also to the lesser celandine, with which it shares only its bright yellow colour. *Lords and ladies* is not only cuckoo-pint and the early-purple orchid, but also two species of plantain, which all share morphological characteristics that have been interpreted as venereal (an erect spathe or testicular tubers, used in love divination). *Jack-by-the-hedge* applies not only to the *Alliaria* species which is widely so called, but also to red campion, herb Robert and goat's beard—it would be hard to imagine a visually more disparate set of weeds, which have in common only their habit of growing, sometimes together, in hedgebanks. See Grigson (1975), in particular.

<sup>20</sup> The perceived holiness of the plant products is underlined by the usual Welsh term for bog myrtle, *helyg Mair* 'Mary's willow'. For other Welsh terms, see footnote 17.

The application of the term to the true myrtle (*Myrtus*) seems straightforward to explain. Most likely is that once bog myrtle had become a, or the main, plant denoted by *wīr*, its aromatic nature allowed the term to be applied by a best-guess analogy to the true myrtle, which was probably not known, at least in arboreal form, to the direct experience of any Anglo-Saxons who had not undertaken pilgrimage to Rome.

### 2.3 Reflection on the Old English compound *wīr* + *h(e)alh*

The recurrence of names in Old English *wīr-h(e)alh* suggests that the expression had become established as a lexical compound, ‘wire-*h(e)alh*’. Gelling and Cole (2000, 123–33, esp. 124–25, 126–28) point out difficulties with establishing the sense of *h(e)alh*, but they note that its denotation often has a watery component, as in the modern North Country descendant *haugh* ‘riverside meadow’, and as suggested for the word’s Germanic etymon by Stiles (1997). The recurrent compound word-form must mean that that *wire* characteristically grew in *haughs*, and that *haughs* were characterized by *wire* often enough for such things to be familiar, in a way that one might compare with the dense ancient woodlands of lime, whose habits Oliver Rackham calls “gregarious” (1986, 103) and which give rise to the recurrent place-name *Lindhurst* and the like; or with the streamside bank stands of willow or withy which may be commemorated by the recurrent *Willoughby* (Parsons and Styles 1997, 71, under *bēg*); or with the repeated *hrēod-burna* ‘reed stream’; though all of these are less frequent than *wīr-h(e)alh* and therefore less plausibly considered as lexical units.<sup>21</sup> No other plant-word except *brōm* ‘broom’ comes close to matching the frequency of *wīr* with *h(e)alh*; Smith, in EPNE (1, 224), also notes individual examples of the following: *bæst* ‘lime’, *beonet* ‘bent-grass’, *hnutu* ‘nut’ and *s(e)alh* ‘sallow’, as well as the adjective *hrēodig* ‘reedy’. Clearly we are dealing

<sup>21</sup> Two other candidates for an established compound of *h(e)alh* is the South Country and Midland *wrocces-h(e)alh*, apparently ‘buzzard’s nook’, in the place-names *Wrox(h)all* and *Wraxall*, found five times altogether, and *lūtegāres-h(e)alh*, analysed since Tengstrand 1940, 222) as representing a compound meaning ‘trapping-spear nook’.

with situations where a single plant species can be locally dominant, or more prominent than its competitors in a single habitat, for whatever reason (number of plants, colour, scent, height, impenetrability ...). As we have seen, bog myrtle typically grows where there are no shading trees, in wet upland areas in acidic peaty soils, but can occasionally be found in calcareous fens. It is therefore in general a plant of the west and especially the north of Britain, which is clearly compatible with the distribution of *wīr-h(e)alh* names. It occurs in Scotland, but seems to have generated no English-language place-names there.<sup>22</sup> The concept *wīr-h(e)alh* may have established itself lexically simply because some haughs were visually dominated by bog myrtle (see image 1), but this perception could have been reinforced by the fact that the plant was a useful and versatile resource. We return to this matter below.

IMAGE 1 ABOUT HERE

### 3. CONCLUSION, AND RETURN TO CHESHIRE

The recurrent name *Wirral* testifies to the presence of water-laden environments, typically acidic peat-bogs, with locally abundant and dominant growth of stiff-branched plants that could be referred to using the Old English word *wīr*, typically but perhaps not exclusively bog myrtle (*Myrica gale*)—perhaps also heathers such as cross-leaved heath (*Erica tetralix*), and the berry-bearing shrubs crowberry (*Empetrum nigrum*) and whortleberry/bilberry (*Vaccinium myrtillus* and less likely *V. uliginosum*, these days mainly a Scottish plant)—and perhaps, if later evidence can be credited, with the presence of persistent, preserved, woody

<sup>22</sup> The Goidelic name of the plant is Irish *roideóg*, Scots Gaelic *roid*, *rideag*.

residues in the layers of peat. It might be reasonable to view the term as meaning ‘wetland typified by *Myrica* shrub growth’, meaning, in effect, in some districts, ‘acid bog’.

In relation to the famous Cheshire name, Victor Watts (2004, 688–89) says that “[t]he use of **halh** is not clear. In the plural it may mean ‘remote, secluded places’, but it is not obvious which part of the peninsula may be meant; in the singular it refers to the whole peninsula in the sense ‘peninsula, corner of land, land between rivers (sc. Mersey and Dee) where bog-myrtle grows’.” This seems to me to miss the point. It is clear that there are or were several places in this area, recorded in PN Ches, which were describable using the lexical term *wīr-h(e)alh*. The name of the peninsula is therefore just this term in the dative plural, much as *Hanham* (Gloucestershire) is ‘at the rocks’ or *Wylam* (Northumberland) ‘at the fish-traps’. With due allowance for the difference in case, it is just like the informal English *The Lakes* and *The Broads*, for the scattered bodies of water of The Lake District and Norfolk. The relation between the plural and the ‘singular’ name is likely to be one of phonological reduction. The expected development of the dative plural suffix *-um*, if no analogical forces intervene, is to a form identical with the dative singular. The dative plural form must be assumed to be the fossilized name of the area (compare the names analysed by Wrander 1983), since the place is extensively recorded and there is no trace of an expected nominative-accusative plural form in *-as* (Middle English *-es*). The supposed singular/plural distinction in relation to the name of the peninsula is therefore a false dichotomy.

That said, it is not quite straightforward to decide why *h(e)alh* was settled on as the generic most suitable for labelling these very particular wet environments. It has long been known that the word could be applied to land hemmed in on several sides by streams without being islanded, and also to riverside meadows, much like *hamm* in some of its range (Dodgson 1973; Gelling and Cole 2000, 49–53). The discussion by Stiles (1997) shows conclusively that the water-related senses are historically prior to those meaning ‘nook,

corner’, and whilst this fits well with names in *wīr* it is problematic when those with *brōm* and other words for plants with drier preferences are considered. This seems to show that the concept of a *wīr-h(e)alh* is likely to have been encoded early in the lexical and toponymic history of England, but why it was not to be a *\*wīr-hamm*, in the manner of *Bentham* and *Claverham* must be to do with the word’s stronger, earlier, association with water.

The difficulties with the element *wīr* can be seen to focus on Cheshire, where it is common out of all proportion to what we find in the rest of England. This may be a genuine phenomenon, or it may be down to the exceptional industry of the county editor in tracking down and indexing the relevant names. The first difficulty is that it is found in the most prominent name of all, *Wirral*, a place where these days there is no residual evidence either for acid bogs or for *Myrica gale*; and we do not know whether some of the names containing *Wirral* on Wirral are secondary and derived from that of the peninsula, or whether the set of what they denote collectively contributes to the peninsula name. The second difficulty is that the modern reflex of *wīr* seems to have entered the local dialect lexicon and to have been used in field-names, probably in some application like those connected with plant structure and growth discussed in section 2.2. Whether there is a relation between the first and the second difficulty—for example that the frequency or prominence of the ancient element allowed its application in a new but related sense—is open to speculation. It may be rather that the later usage is related to the new significance of industrial *wire*, which is perhaps ultimately from the same lexical source.<sup>23</sup>

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<sup>23</sup> It is of course possible that the two senses of *wīr*, ‘bog myrtle’ and ‘wire’, are after all unrelated, but it seemed to me, and still seems, reasonable to explore in this article the possibility of their connection.



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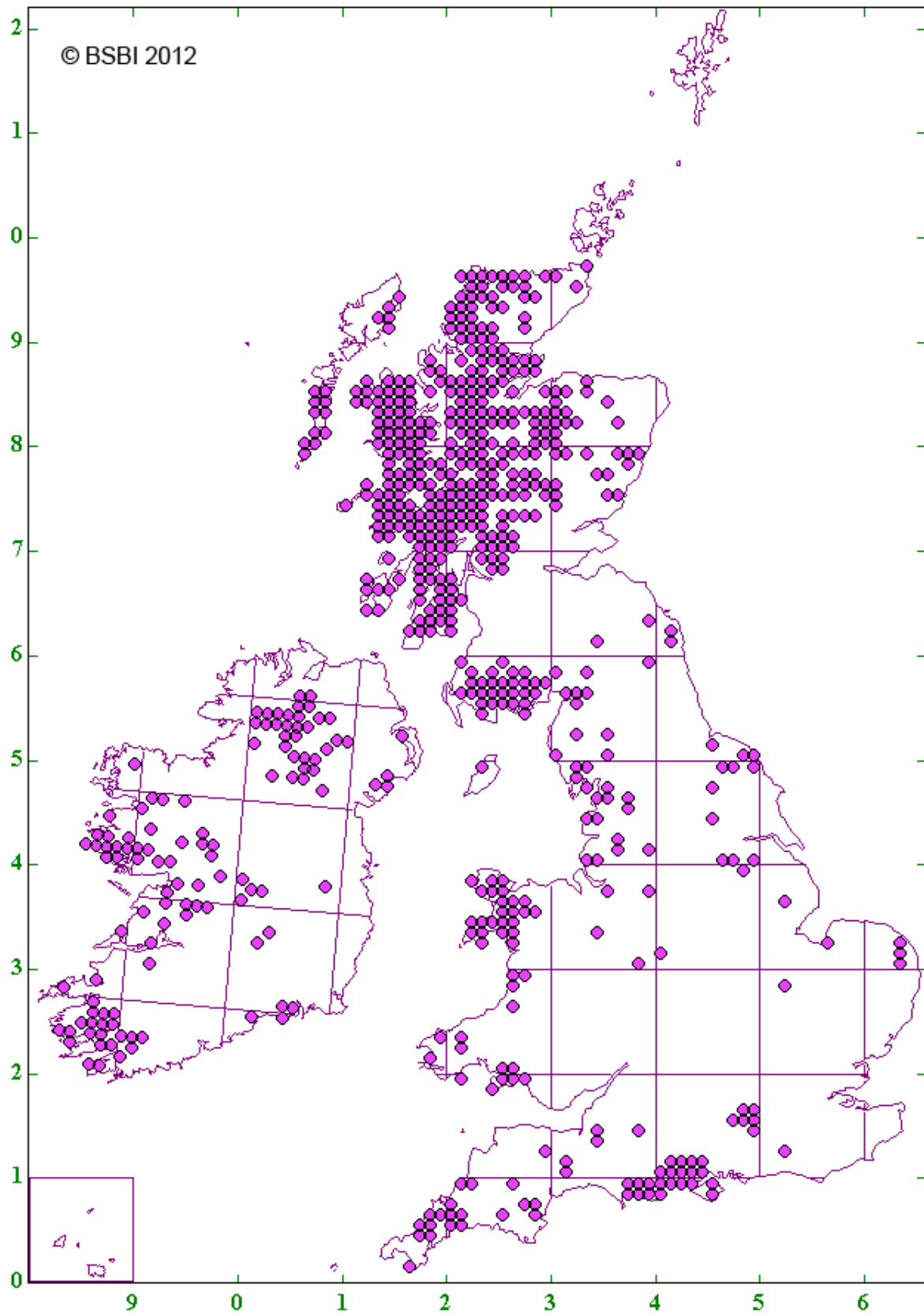
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Map 1: Distribution of *Myrica gale* in 2000–9. The map suggests that, not surprisingly, it has been in retreat as major boglands have been drained. Source: Botanical Society of the British Isles <[www.bsbimaps.org.uk/atlas/map\\_page.php?spid=1328.0](http://www.bsbimaps.org.uk/atlas/map_page.php?spid=1328.0)>. It is much more strikingly associated now with upland than with lowland bogs.



Image 1: Bog myrtle thicket, foreground. A sense of its conspicuousness where growing densely can be gleaned. Online at [www.caithness-business.co.uk/article.php?id=723](http://www.caithness-business.co.uk/article.php?id=723), accessed 14 March 2014.

‘Although it grows all over the world, it is the Scottish variety of bog myrtle that seems to possess the particular anti-aging properties—down to the unique blend of conditions in which it grows.’—according to the creators of this site.