Are we nearly there yet?

David Crystal explains the reasoning behind his new place-name website, *Trace That Place*

It all started a few years ago. I was driving an American visitor around, and he would see a place name on a road sign and kept asking me "What does that name mean?" Sometimes I knew, but more often all I could say was "I've a book at home that can tell you". How I wished for my place-name library in my car! But he had his mobile phone. And the ideal solution would be to find the answers there.

And then there were the occasions, with a young family, when the cry came from the back: "Are we nearly there yet?" How to relieve the boredom of a long car journey? Play I-Spy, you say, or (do you remember this?) Pub Cricket? The problem is there are no pubs on the M1, and not that much to spy. Another bridge! Yay! But there are place names at every junction, and sometimes in between (such as entering a county or crossing a river). A guessing game, then.

What do you think that name means? Then look it up to see if you were right. Great idea. And it would get the kids off their iPhones. Except there was nowhere to look it up in the car. (Or train of course. There can be boredom on train rides too, and there are name signs at every station.)

Nowhere to look it up? There is now. In March I launched Trace That Place (tracethatplace. com), after a four-year period of development. It doesn't cover all

place names – that's the aim of the big guys, notably the English Place-Names Society (EPNS). No, just those you see on the road signs or stations. And these aren't as straightforward as you might think. There are puzzles caused by space constraints, such as Grange-o-Sands, P'wick, and M'thorpe (Grange-over-Sands, Prestwick, Mablethorpe). The brown tourist signs also present some weird ones, which mustn't be ignored, as these are the places people are likely to go to – shopping centres, business parks, local enterprises, churches, visitor attractions, service stations, industrial estates, heritage sites… I call this psycho-toponymy (after psycho-geography, the field that describes the effect of a location on behaviour – travellers' behaviour, in this case).

How did I find the signs? The task involves 'travelling' around the roads and railway lines of the country. The railway stations are easy to find: there are 2,576 of them on the National Rail network in Great Britain, as well as 272 tube stations in London, and there are websites that list them all. The roads are more of a challenge. The task is clear: to 'drive' around all the roads and note the names that appear on every sign. Not physically, of course. Google Street View is the brilliant solution. That extraordinary project allowed us (Hilary Crystal did most of the 'driving') to follow any chosen road and spot the signs. In both directions, of course, as the signs going north, along the M1, say, are not always the same as the signs going south. It's not 100% perfect. From time to time, the camera on the Google car goes wrong, or the picture is blurred, or a lorry gets in the way so that a sign is obscured. But I reckon it's about 99% good. And if we

have inadvertently missed a sign, or a new sign goes up, someone will eventually write and tell us. People are good like that.

Should such a project cover all signs? Here I just had to be pragmatic. In some parts of the country, every local B&B puts up a sign, or every restaurant or pub. In the Scottish Highlands, isolated farms are often signed. I had to draw a line somewhere. So, I drew mine by not including the names of these locations, unless of course they had a more general heritage status or user role – such as being a location for weddings. For the same reason, I imposed constraints on the selection of roads. The primary aim of the project is to enhance the tourist experience. So, the initial focus was on the numbered roads: the M, A and B roads, and the ones that tourists most often take. There over 5,000 of them (c2,000 A, 50 M – excluding upgraded A roads – and c3,000 B. One can't be precise because there's an uncertain number – in the hundreds – of unused or defunct numbers).

It made sense to start at the top, as it were, and work down. So, all the main motorways are included in the launch version of the site, as are the main A trunk roads, and important tourist routes, such as the A303 to Cornwall. No B roads yet, unless they're an important part of a town or city network. And mentioning Cornwall reminds me. There are a huge number of bilingual signs in Wales and Scotland, and increasingly in Cornwall. They motivate some of the most pressing questions from visitors.
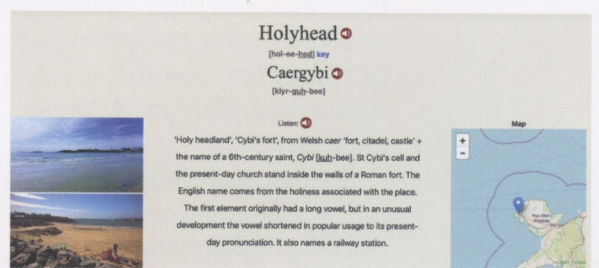
Another aspect of psycho-toponymy is that enquirers don't want all the information contained in volumes such as those in the EPNS. They're in
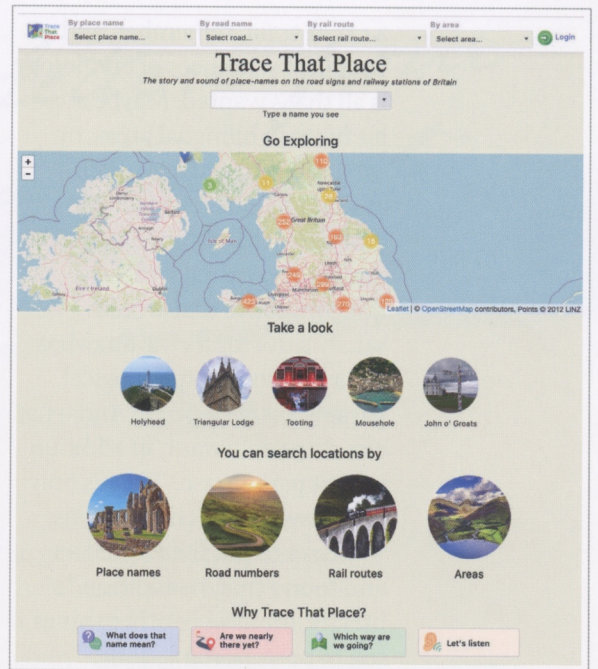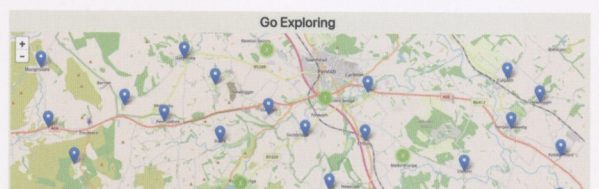

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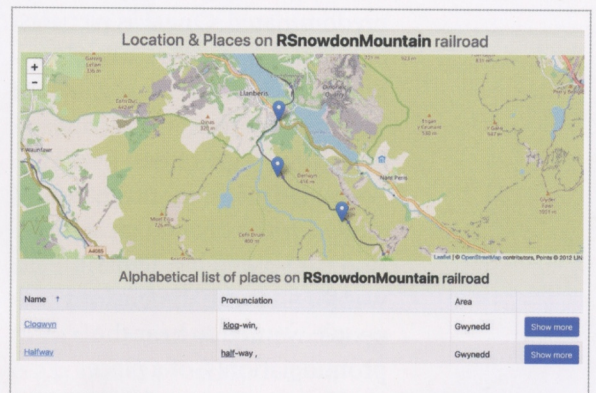
The lower stations on the Snowdon Mountain Railway. You click on a blue icon to see or listen to the name and etymology.

A search result (where DC lives)

The place-names on the road signs of this section of the A66 in Cumbria. You click on a blue icon to see or listen to the name and etymology.

a car or train, remember, and a couple of sentences of etymology is all that's wanted. Maybe a bit more in bilingual areas, or for a complicated case, such as London. But for the most part we're talking about a quick answer to a casual curiosity, not a response that would satisfy a doctoral viva. So, what is the optimum etymological paraphrase for a place? And what else do people want, in addition to that paraphrase? There's only one answer to such questions: you have to ask them. I did so, and found that, in addition to brevity, there were other things felt to be important. Some related to content. Some to accessibility.

For content, two topics predominated. One was pictures of the places: people wanted to see what St Albans looked like. They're used to seeing pictures online. So, I had to find a way to download pictures automatically alongside the etymological story. And the second big demand was for an audio dimension: people wanted to hear the pronunciation(s) of a place. And because many of them are driving, or the passengers (in car or train) are listening through headphones, they want to hear the story, too. A third request was for some encyclopedic (as opposed to linguistic) background. Who was St Alban, for instance?

Pronunciation of names can be really tricky, as so many places have alternative or competing versions. YouTube helps, these days, as many places have a local site now where people pronounce the name unselfconsciously. But I sometimes had to phone local pubs or town halls or the like and play dumb. Where are you exactly? Sorry, I didn't catch the name of your village. Would you

> *"Pronunciation of names can be really tricky, as so many places have alternative or competing versions"*

mind saying it again?

Then, in addition to content, there were demands about accessibility. Online data is not like a book. Most people these days are used to the range of options that computer and phone searching provide, and they wanted as many ways into the data as possible. Some wanted to be able simply to type the name into a search box and up comes the result. Some wanted to be able to click on an icon on a map, and be taken to the place. Some wanted to see all the names on a particular road – or railway line – so that they could anticipate what was to come before their journey. Some wanted to see all the signed names in a county. Some just wanted to browse, because they were interested in place names.

All of this requires quite an outlay of software development and web design time. Fortunately, I had a brilliant techie who came up with the website and the mobile adaptation. He solved the listening request by adding an audio feature to each name and story. He introduced searching by name, road, and area, and a locator map. And he solved the pictorial request by incorporating a download from an online provider.

I see this as a new domain of applied linguistics. I call it applied toponymy. Applied linguistics, in my view of the subject, exists in order to solve the kinds of problems or questions to do with language that are faced by people who are not themselves linguists – and in so doing interest people in linguistics as a subject of study in its own right. Trace That Place is another exercise in what is often called 'public engagement'. In this case, the 'public' is anyone travelling the main routes of the country who encounters a place-name on a road-sign or a station name and is curious about its origins. Enhancing the tourist experience, remember. And, in the process, to give some much-needed publicity to the field of toponomastics. ¶

David Crystal is honorary professor of linguistics at the University of Bangor, and the author of many books on language and languages, with a particular interest in the past, present, and future of English. He lives online at davidcrystal.com. He's also Babel's linguistics consultant.

Find out more

Books

A. D. Mills (1991/2011) *A Dictionary of English Place Names*, Oxford University Press.

Iain Taylor (1988) *Place-Names of Scotland*, Birlinn.

Victor Watts (2004) *The Cambridge Dictionary of English Place-Names*, Cambridge University Press.

Hywel Wyn Owen and Richard Morgan (2008) *Dictionary of the Place-Names of Wales*, Gomer.

Online

Visit tracethatplace.com for a free 3-day exploration.

The English Place-Name Society is the go-to place for names in England: epns.nottingham.ac.uk