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Most of the place-names in Guernsey are very old and their roots often go back to the late medieval period. Many of them are topographical and often have either a forename or a surname of an individual attached to them.

Place-names that are derived solely from family names proliferated considerably from the 13th century onwards, following the general development of hereditary surnames in the later 12th century. There are some exceptions which are derived from past associations with legal titles, arising from rentes or 'saisis' (judicial seizures) of property. Nevertheless there are a few which are not explicable or lack conclusive proof of their origins, either because their form has changed out of recognition or the historical roots can no longer be traced.

Surviving feudal records and conveyancing documents of the 15th and 16th centuries show that each district of houses and land in the island had not only a distinctive name, but often included detailed comprehensive descriptions for the smallest areas of land and their boundaries, whether enclosed or unenclosed.

It is worth noting that houses traditionally carried the name of the immediate locality, rather than having individual names. Only roads with specific functions or particular features were named, with a few exceptions. For example we have le chemin le Roi (king's highway), la Grande rue (main road), la rue Poudreuse (dusty road) and rue au Ferré (metalled road).

The majority of the place-names listed in Lenfestey's Index arose from a highly localised subsistence agriculture practised everywhere in the island parishes outside the town of St Peter Port. In parallel with that there is also a body of place-names of considerable antiquity; trépiéd, pouquelaie, castel, déhus, déhuzet, pierre, rocque, which arose from an ignorance of archaeology and historical method in the middle ages, and instead gave rise to legends and folk tales.

The written language in island records changed from Latin to French early in the 14th century. There are, therefore, very few recorded instances of Latin place names in the island, and these have been gallicized. The written French corresponds to that used in similar legal and quasi-legal documents in Normandy for the late medieval to early modern historical periods. This has led to the survival in topographical descriptions and in many areas names of expressions that have become either obsolete or lost in the modern French usage of the 19th and 20th centuries.

In addition, various contracted spellings and the occasional misspelling from a particular pronunciation have arisen from the method of dictation used over the past 300 years to 'speed write', in order to more quickly duplicate most documents and records. This has happened with all classes of records, from those of the Royal Court, feudal and parish records to those of family inventories of personal possessions.

Differences in the local pronunciation in Guernsey French has also led to variations in spelling, but the lack of an agreed orthography has made it difficult to successfully reproduce place names phonetically to safeguard that pronunciation for posterity.

No attempt is made in Lenfestey's Index to consider the etymology of the various place names unless, as in a very few cases, that has a bearing on the use of a place name for a particular locality. It would appear nonetheless that most Guernsey place-names have Norman roots, presumably partly derived from the language of the early medieval Norman settlers in Normandy.

Topographical names are also combined with family surnames, hence La Houquette au Tillier, le Valangot (Val Angot), les Vauxbelets (Vaux Belic). Agricultural use has also provided examples, le Camposo (Camp Oso), les Champhuets (Camp de M. Hue).

A final category of place-names contains the miscellanea of names associated with religious bodies receiving rentes, possible nicknames and the use of forenames. Firstly there are Senicolas for the confraternity of St Nicolas, and Nôtre Dame, for a rente to 'Our Lady'. Secondly, les Plats Pieds may have been an 18th century nickname, while two houses at les Rouvets, Vingtaine de l'Epine (listed in the Index) had informal nicknames during the 19th century, one being 'Moutonnerie' and the other 'Côte ès Ouets'. Thirdly, a forename was very occasionally used, thus les Laurens from Lorens, Perotin (from Pierre), Lorenche (from Laurence). Colin and Colliche (from Nicolas), with Benoit being used as both a forename and a surname.

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