

Field Names Survey Project

"Westoe - A Woman's Place?" – Anthony Bonner

There is now much comment about "a woman's place", the BBC run adverts for their programmes featuring women winning in all spheres of sport and life.

Little did I think that when I was asked to survey the field names of Westoe, as part of the Seascapes Project, that the female side of the populace would play an important part.

Starting with a definition of the township's name, Westoe would suggest a geographical origin, but the township is as far east as it is possible to travel in England. It doesn't feature in the "Key to English Place Names" website, but an online search came up with a report by South Tyneside Council, "Westoe Conservation Area Character Appraisal".

This included: -

An essay on the Place Names of County Durham concludes the name is derived from the two Anglo-Saxon words wives, „women“, and stow, „habitation“ (Wivestoua). This explains the name given in the 'Boldon Book'. An entry in the 1559 Indenture of Chantry and Forfeited Lands in Durham (again from Flagg), giving Westoe "seven rigges of arable lands in the fields and territories of Westow, called the Ladies Landes".¹

The reasons behind these female origins are worthy of further investigation. As an avid reader of Florence Scott's blog [/Elfgif-who?](#) where she writes of women in the Middle Ages, I immediately contacted her and was pleased to receive this reply: -

That's very interesting! I was just yesterday listening to the In Our Time episode about the Danelaw, in which the experts mentioned the prevalence of Norse place names that are women's names...having had a quick look on the online Key to English Place Names, there is a place in North Yorkshire called Westow, which may be 'woman's place' or alternatively 'Wife's place' or 'Wifa's place' - Wife and Wifa being personal names of an individual woman.

With many place names the origin is lost to us, but I agree this one seems worthy of investigation - have you checked who owned the land in the Domesday book, or whether there was ever a nearby convent (monastic houses often own substantial land, hence ladies landes)?

I checked the Domesday Book, but it does not include Durham. The *Boldon Book* (Buke) also led me a merry dance through various dictionaries deciphering olde words.

There is work to be done on the origins of the "Ladies Landes" and further research for religious houses in the area will be foremost.

¹ <https://www.southtyneside.gov.uk › media › 2230 › Westoe-Conservation-Area-Character-Ap>