Place names are signposts to the past. And how revealing they are

I was recently back in Devon. Long ago, on childhood holidays from the industrial north, this seemed to me the 'real' England. Still today, a rusting cast-iron signpost peeping through the foliage in a sunken lane gives me an inexplicable **thrill**. It's the idea that the deep past might still be touched, just around the corner.

Place names are signposts to the past. Chulmleigh, Woolfardisworthy, Nymet Rowland… what names! And how revealing they are. Take Ipplepen, a village with Roman and Iron Age roots in the hills near Torquay. A recent dig here turned up a small post-Roman cemetery, in use till the eighth century, and a Roman butchers shop, with coins and broken amphorae that once held olive oil, wine and fish sauce imported from the Mediterranean. The name Ipplepen was first recorded in the 10th century, and contains a personal name that appears to be RomanBritish or Celtic: Epilus or Ipela. In a region where the Celtic (pre-Welsh) language may have died out only after 1066, the name of the pre-English landowner **was,** incredibly, **passed down**.

In the Home Counties, ancient British (or Welsh) place names are mainly gone – except for river names. Here they linger, from the Thames to smaller watercourses such as the wonderfully named Rib, Beane and Maran (or Mimram) in Hertfordshire. Sometimes English newcomers didn't understand these words. Avon, of course, has the same derivation as afon, Welsh for river. Bredon Hill includes no fewer than three words with the same meaning: 'bre' is Welsh and 'dun' is Old English, both translating as 'hill'. So: Hill-hill Hill!

Some place names tell of events. You can track the first phase of Viking settlement in hybrid names such as Grimston, denoting an English settlement (or village) taken by Grim, a leading member of the Great Army that invaded Britain from 865. Then, with the second wave of migration, came the names ending in 'by', meaning farm – Grimsby, for example. Finally, there are the 'thorp' names, meaning homestead, as in Scunthorpe. These names were left by third-wave immigrants who were forced to open up land **on the fringes**.

Place names show how the dominant language takes over, in whichever way it happens. Across the world, the pattern was the same – especially in the age of imperialism. Think of the overlay of English names in Ireland, Australia, New Zealand or the US. There the indigenous inhabitants were wiped out or pushed into corners, yet place names associated with them still populate the landscape, from Alabama to Wyoming. Take Michigan, which is 'big lake' in the speech of the Ottawa tribe; or Mississippi, 'Big River' in Algonquin. From Malibu to the Napa Valley, **telltale** signposts remain, despite ethnic cleansing by European settlers and colonialists. In Ireland as recently as 2005, the Placenames Commission issued a list

of 2,000 Gaelic equivalents to English place names. And, of course, people in power are still at it – witness Donald Trump's renaming of the Gulf of Mexico.

A revealing example is told in Sacred Landscape (2002), a remarkable book by the Israeli writer, historian and political scientist Meron Benvenisti. His father was an Israeli geographer on the Government Names Commission tasked after 1948 with giving Palestinian villages and landscapes names linked to Israel's biblical homeland. New Hebrew place names, resonating with the biblical story of the Holy Land, replaced the Arabic names of more than 9,000 natural features, villages and even ruins in the new Israel. Benvenisti's story shows first-hand how place names were used to help change an earlier Arab landscape into the modern Israeli state.

Of course, such things have happened throughout history. Centuries after the Moors were expelled from Spain, today's tourists can still detect the contours of Muslim Spain, from the Alhambra to Granada's Zacatín (clothes-sellers) Street – still a clothes market. Yet a Palestinian returning now to his ancestral landscape after seven decades away would often be hard pushed to identify the sites of his **erstwhile** home. The signposts are gone.

The story Benvenisti tells is about a battle over the "signposts of memory" that are essential to all human beings. As the novelist Milan Kundera said, "the struggle of man against power is the struggle of memory against forgetting." Often **imperceptibly** over time – but sometimes at a stroke – history is erased. But sometimes it still magically endures, even over millennia. People have long memories. Ask the folk in Ipplepen.

1. In paragraph 1 the word "thrill" is closest in meaning to:
   a) fear
   b) agitation
   c) suspense
   d) anticipation
2. In paragraph 2 "was passed down" is closest in meaning to:
   a) was killed by somebody
   b) was missed accidentally
   c) was saved with a lot of effort
   d) was given to somebody who lives later
3. In paragraph 4 "on the fringes" is opposite in meaning to:
   a) in the suburbs
   b) in the outskirts
   c) on the edge
   d) in paramount territories
4. In paragraph 5 "telltale" means:
   a) clear
   b) treacherous

c) enlightening
d) misleading

5. In paragraph 7 “erstwhile” means:
   a) current
   b) bygone
   c) temporary
   d) ancient
6. In the last paragraph “imperceptibly” means:
   a) appreciably
   b) sufficiently
   c) steadily
   d) greatly