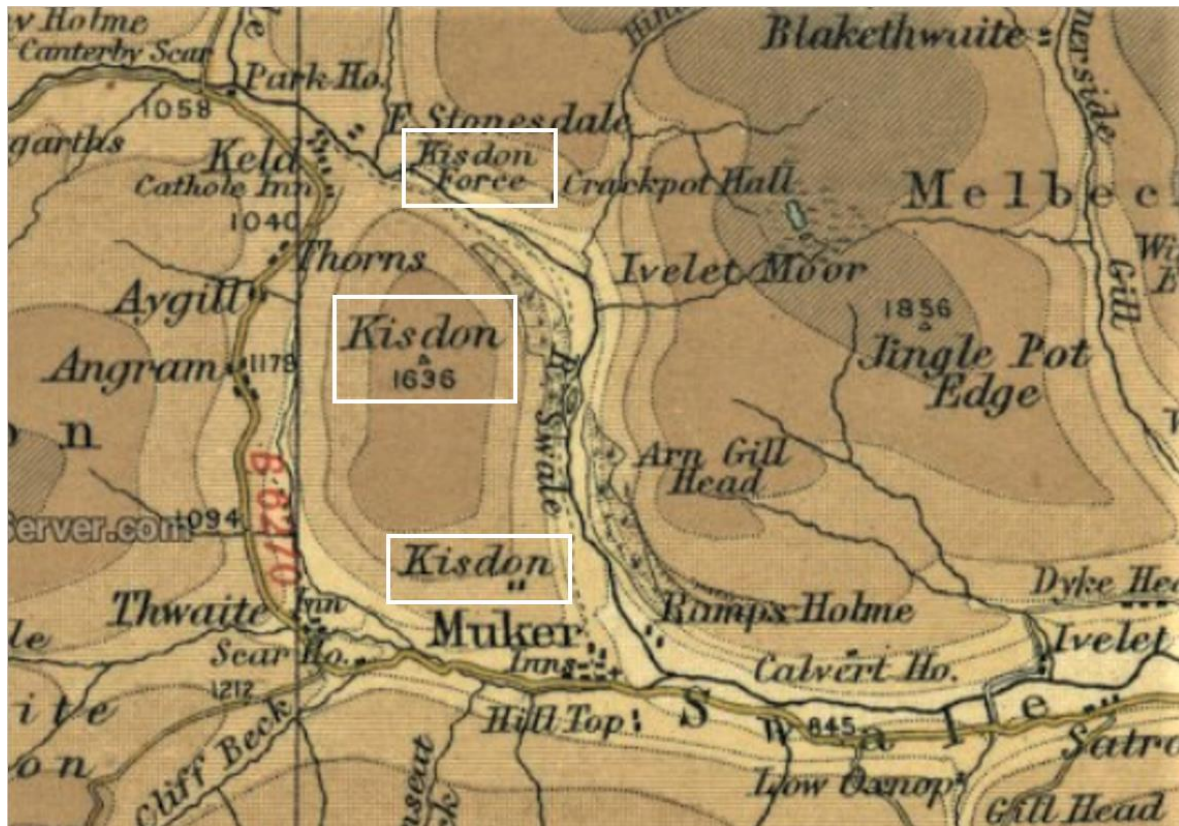


Kisdon – multiple place-names

Township of Muker; multiple place-names within an area about a mile and a half around OS grid reference SD9199 - a farmstead or former territory, a gorge, a waterfall, a distinctive isolated hill, parts of some high moors, and other, lesser-known, high-altitude features.



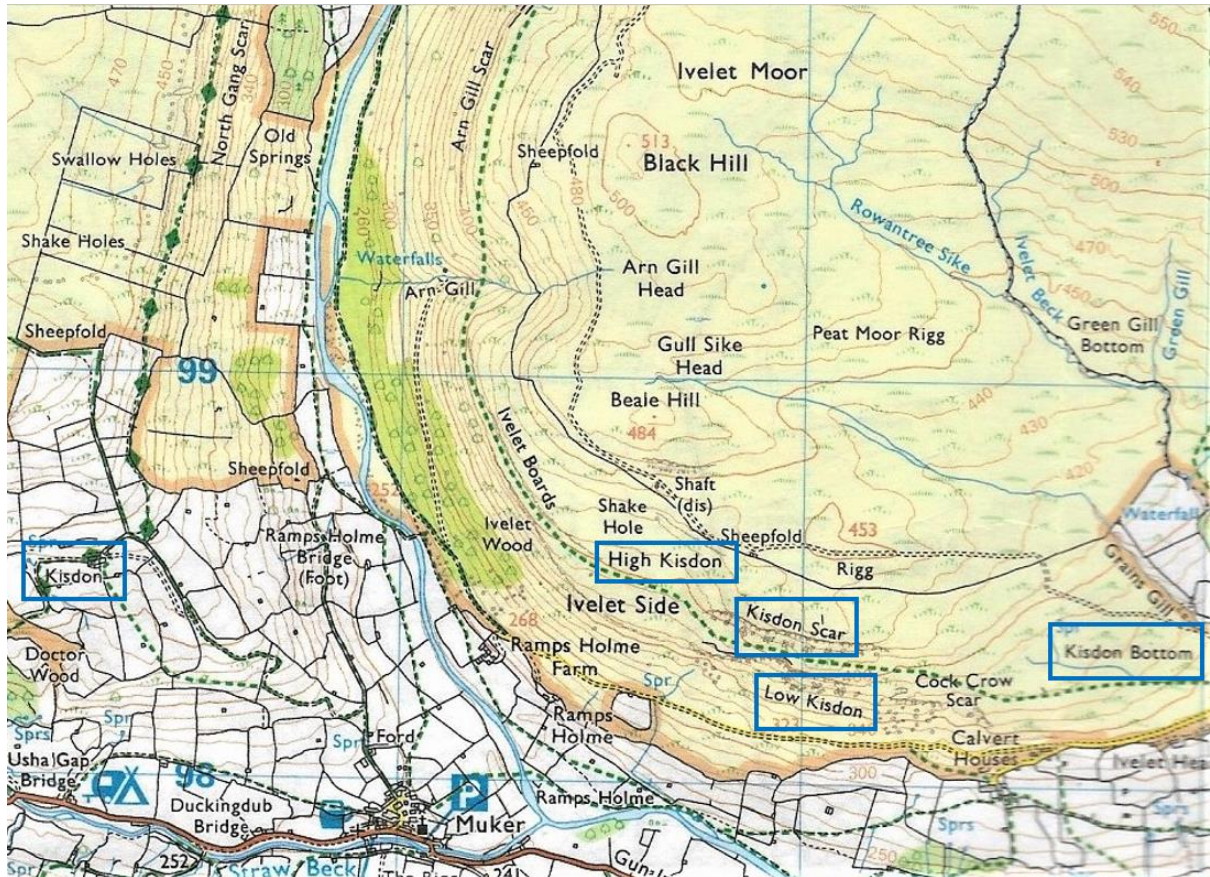
This section from the Bartholomew half-inch map, Great Britain Series, Sheet 35 (1942), shows the three best-known Kisdon place-names – a waterfall, a hill, and a farm. Map reproduced with permission of the National Library of Scotland <https://maps.nls.uk/index.html>.

The origin of the name Kisdon is obscure and puzzling for many reasons. This article sets out the possibilities for its original meaning and suggests that the most promising is 'gravel valley', a name for the distinctive section of the valley of the River Swale as it descends southwards from Kisdon Force to the river's confluence with Straw Beck; a name now lost to the valley but surviving attached to several surrounding landscape features.

The most immediately intriguing aspect of Kisdon is the large number of topographical features that are identified by the name and that are clustered around this stretch of the valley of the River Swale. The three best-known Kisdon place-names are highlighted on an old Bartholomew map (above). They are a waterfall on the River Swale, called Kisdon Force, an adjacent large and distinctively isolated hill, called Kisdon or sometimes Kisdon Island, and a farmstead on the hill's south-east flank, called Kisdon or Kisdon Farm. The steep sides of the dale around Kisdon Force have given rise to its locally recognised name of Kisdon Gorge, although this is probably a modern creation because there are no historic records of it. It's clear that the name Kisdon has been borrowed over time from one feature to another. The most recent borrowings are probably those of the gorge and waterfall, taking

their names from the adjacent, large, isolated hill. But was the isolated hill the original Kisdon, as many might assume, or was the name borrowed from something else nearby?

A possible route to answering the question is to understand the nature of the several Kisdon place-names and to try to analyse the relationships between them. Opposite the farmstead, on the other side of the River Swale, adjacent to where the river turns sharply eastwards, and high on the corner of what becomes the south-facing daleside, there are another four Kisdon place-names – High Kisdon, Low Kisdon, Kisdon Scar, and Kisdon Bottom - all labelled on the current OS Explorer Map (below). Earlier six-inch OS maps also show Kisdon Well, a springhead at Kisdon Bottom. In addition, there is a locally known name - Kisdon Folds, a sheepfold at High Kisdon.¹



Seen here highlighted on the current OS Explorer Map, OL30 Yorkshire Dales Northern and Central Area, are Kisdon farmstead (at left) and, on the opposite side of the dale, four other Kisdon place-names. Image Microsoft Bing. Map © Ordnance Survey.

In *The Place-names of the North Riding of Yorkshire* (English Place-name Society vol. 5, 1928), the eminent place-name scholar A H Smith (1903-67) expressed opinions on several upper-Swaledale place-names, but not on Kisdon. He was probably deterred by the lack of recorded early spellings, which are invariably required to make any confident assessment of the original meaning of a place-name. No other place-name expert has formally investigated the name, so this article is an amateur's attempt to solve the puzzle.

I have had some professional help. I am grateful to Diana Whaley, Professor Emeritus of Early Medieval Studies at Newcastle University, and a past president of the Society for Name Studies in

¹ John Waggett, local farmer, personal communication.

Britain and Ireland, for generously commenting on and developing an earlier investigation of mine into this cluster of Kisdon place-names, and for giving me some very useful pointers, including identifying some early records of the name that I had not found. I am also grateful for ideas and encouragement from my friend Richard Walls, of The Old School Art Gallery and Craft Centre at Muker, who is a photographer, author of *Kisdon Landscapes*, and fellow amateur place-name sleuth.

The earliest known record of Kisdon, is found in the Cartulary of Rievaulx Abbey, dated 1538, on a list of lands owned by the monastery at the time of its dissolution. It referred, not to the now well-known hill, but to the agricultural landholding of that name, at which rents were collected from three tenant farmers, William Metcalfe, Edmund Milner, and Ralph Milner. The spelling in that record is *Keisden*.² Two other records from the same period, also referring to the landholding, named it as *Keisdon*, with a different ending of *-on* (1539/40)³ and as *Keysdom* (1544).⁴ All three spellings have been sourced from transcriptions of manuscripts and so might contain transcription errors. The *-m* ending, whether it is in the manuscript or only in the transcription, can almost certainly be taken as intended to be *-n*. Spellings in more-recent records have all been found in original manuscripts, microfilm copies of which I have seen and digitally copied. Most are references to the productive agricultural landholding. Others, where noted next in brackets, are manuscript map labels referring to the isolated hill. The spellings in chronological order are: 1669 *Kisdon*,⁵ 1715 *Kysdon*,⁶ 1760 *Kisden*,⁷ 1761 *Kisdon* (the hill),⁸ 1762 *Kisdon*,⁹ 1771 *Keasdon Island* (the hill),¹⁰ 1780 *Kisdon*,¹¹ 1787 *Keasdon Isle* (the hill),¹² 1818 *Kisdon*,¹³ 1829 *Kisdon*.¹⁴

The names of the places we now call Kisdon could have been coined at any time from the seventh century, when the early-Old-English-speaking Angles progressed from central Yorkshire to the north-west of England, or from the tenth century when Norwegian Vikings migrated from an earlier settlement in Ireland, or later from any of the early centuries after the Norman Conquest, when the general population of Yorkshire is considered to have been largely people of blended Anglo-Scandinavian descent. Unfortunately, even the earliest 1538 record of the spelling we have, is not early enough to allow a confident linguistic analysis, either of the period in which it was first coined, or of its original meaning. By 1538, the language had evolved from Old English (OE, roughly 450-1150), through the period of Middle English (ME, roughly 1150-1500) and arrived at the early stages of the development of Modern English (Mod. E). The only consolation is that the 1538 spelling was at least recorded by a monastery scribe and so could be considered one of the most reliably accurate records of that time.

² *Cartularium Abathiæ de Rievallæ*, Surtees Society vol. 83 (London, 1889).

³ List of the Lands of Dissolved Religious Houses, from *List of Original Ministers' Accounts, Part 2, Henry VII and Henry VIII*, Public Record Office Lists and Indexes no. 24 (HMSO, 1910), reprinted by Kraus Reprint Corporation, as *Lists and Indexes Supplementary Series No. 3, Vol. 4* (New York, 1964).

⁴ James Gairdner and R. H. Brodie, eds., *Letters and Papers of Henry VIII, vol. 19 Part 2*, Grants in December 1544, Grant 800, no. 5 (HMSO, 1905), p. 469.

⁵ Grant in tenant right, Routh Family Papers, North Yorkshire County Record Office (NYCRO), Z2/20.

⁶ 'Inventory of tools ... lead works in Swaledale,' NYCRO ZLB/5/2.

⁷ Lease and bond by Anthony Milner, Routh Family Papers, NYCRO Z2/21-22.

⁸ Stint agreement, Routh Family Papers, NYCRO Z2/23.

⁹ Declaration of arbitration, Routh Family Papers, NYCRO Z2/33.

¹⁰ Jefferys' Map of Yorkshire 1771.

¹¹ Routh Family Papers, NYCRO Z2/24.

¹² John Cary's 1787 map of North Riding Yorkshire.

¹³ Muker enclosure awards, NYCRO WRRD B copied from Durham CRO HH 6/3/4.

¹⁴ Muker enclosure awards, NYCRO WRRD B copied from Durham CRO HH 6/3/7.

Despite the lack of Old-English or Middle-English spellings, there is merit in trying to analyse the elements of the name in 1538 to see what clues they might offer to the original meaning. Then, given that a large proportion of early English place-names comprise words for the type of landscape of the area,¹⁵ it might be possible to see whether these element words in any way match the actual landscape around this part of Swaledale. That earliest spelling has two elements *Keis-* and *-den*. There are many possible explanations for both, the most-promising of which are worth exploring. This investigation starts with three most-probable origins of the second element.

Second element

The ending *-den* could have been from the OE word *denu* ‘valley,’ but it could equally have been from OE *-tūn* or the Old Norse (ON) word *tún*, represented with a different accent on the u, both meaning ‘enclosure’ or ‘farmstead,’ or from OE *-dūn* ‘hill’. All these elements have been shown conclusively by expert studies of place-names to have evolved in different places throughout England into versions of any of each other, usually becoming place-name endings in *-den*, *-don*, or *-ton*, and causing great difficulty in attempted analysis. Only where very early spellings survive, and hopefully with compelling landscape features to corroborate, is it possible confidently to suggest which of the original words is the most-probable source of the place-name ending. We can analyse the three possibilities in more detail.

OE *-denu* ‘valley’ – This is a very common origin of second elements in English place-names, the final *-u* always being lost. Sometimes the spelling *-den* remains unchanged but it also frequently evolves into *-don* or *-ton*. If OE *-denu* was the original second element of *Keisden*, it must have referred to an identifiably special part of the valley of the River Swale. In fact, the two-mile section of the valley from Kisdon Force in the north, running southwards downstream as far as the river’s confluence with Straw Beck, is very different from the shape of Swaledale immediately upstream and downstream from it. It is special. It runs between the isolated hill now called Kisdon on the west, and which has Kisdon Farm on its south-east flank and, on the opposite, eastern side, the other high-altitude Kisdon place-names. It might be considered a valley distinctive enough to have once had its own name, which was later copied to the farmstead and to the heights on either side of it, even though no locally specific valley name survives today.

A key aspect of OE is the broad range of words describing very specific different types of landscape. Experts have identified the characteristics of a *denu*-type of valley, and this section of the valley of the River Swale seems to fit them perfectly.¹⁶ A *denu* is typically long (in this case more than two miles), curving, narrow with steep sides (all evident), and descending by a gentle gradient (in this case falling only about 50 metres, at a rate of about 1 metre in 70).

The notion that this might have been *Keis-denu* is perhaps undermined by the fact that most of the surviving Kisdon place-names on the east are located beyond the extent of the distinctive *denu*-type section of the valley. They sit above the River Swale just after it turns sharply eastwards and are best-described as being on the south-facing dale-side. However, it might also be considered that those south-facing places have names copied from the neighbouring High Kisdon moorland, which is just about above the turn of the river and more-or-less opposite Kisdon farmstead.

Another possible objection is that the ending *-den*, when considered to originate in *denu*, is rarely found in the northern-most Yorkshire Dales, almost certainly because of the later influence of ON speakers whose own words for landscape features came to proliferate in the area. A H Smith

¹⁵ Margaret Gelling and Ann Cole, *The Landscape of Place-Names* (Stamford, 2000), xii-xxiv.

¹⁶ Margaret Gelling and Ann Cole, *The Landscape of Place-Names* (Stamford, 2000), p. 114.

identified only two surviving instances of *denu* in Wensleydale and one in upper Swaledale, at Cogden, near Grinton. However, potential rarity should not rule it out. It could mean that this is a newly identified survivor of a high-Pennine OE place-name that was coined before the 10th-century arrival of Viking settlers.

OE -*tūn* or ON -*tún*, ‘enclosure, farmstead’ – If this was the original second element then it must have referred to *Keis-tūn* or *Keis-tún* ‘Keis farm’ or to its first enclosure or to a subsequent wider territory of agricultural land. And to make sense of the Kisdon place-names on both sides of the Swale, then the landholding would have to have stretched across the river to connect the opposing heights. In his book *Swaledale: Valley of the Wild River*, landscape archaeologist Prof. Andrew Fleming, made a case for this being the explanation of the multiple Kisdon place-names, although not an entirely compelling one.¹⁷

OE -*dūn* ‘hill, upland expanse’ - If this was the original second element then it must have referred to the large, isolated hill best-known for carrying the name today. The types of hills with names said to have originated in the common element *dūn* vary considerably around England, from high mountains to very small hills, and include places of general upland expanses known as downs.¹⁸ In this case, for the name of the isolated hill to have transferred to High Kisdon and its neighbouring features on the other side of the River Swale, the name would have to have been copied first to the intervening valley or to the connecting landholding crossing the Swale, in which case any two or three of these suggested second-element meanings could have been applicable at the same time.

First element

So far, there is no compelling reason to favour any of the above three second-element possibilities. So, we must turn to the first element *keis-* to see what it could mean and to see if its combination with each of the suggested second elements offers any clues to the most likely origin of the whole name.

Here we must consider that the first letter *K* could have been changed from *C* because of Scandinavian influence on an original OE word. Recorded history and place-name evidence confirms the presence of Scandinavian settlement in upper Swaledale from at least the tenth-century, and of its influence on the language through to the present day. It is also helpful to understand that when an OE consonant *c* was followed by the vowels *a*, *o*, or *u*, it is deemed to have been pronounced *k*. Conversely, when OE *c* was followed by the vowels *i* or *e*, it is deemed to have been pronounced *ch*. Depending on other subtleties, the combination *ci* might be pronounced as in chip or cheap, and *ce* might be pronounced as in check or chafe. However, where Scandinavian influence has occurred, even the OE words beginning with the sound *ch* can have changed to an initial letter and pronunciation of *k*.

With these point in mind, the most likely origins of the first element *Keis-* are OE *cēse* ‘cheese,’ ON *kjóss* ‘creek, narrow valley,’ ON *Kisi* - personal name, OE *Cissa* - personal name, and OE **cisse/*cis/cisel/*cisen* ‘gravel/gravelly.’ In the latter group, an asterisk indicates words that linguists have deduced from other variants of the word although no direct record of it in this precise form exists. From this group, only *cisel* is attested.

¹⁷ Andrew Fleming, *Swaledale: Valley of the Wild River* (Edinburgh, 1998), pp. 45-46.

¹⁸ A H Smith, *English Place-Name Elements, Part 1*, English Place-Name Society vol. 25 (Cambridge, 1956); Margaret Gelling and Ann Cole, *The Landscape of Place-Names* (Stamford, 2000), pp. 164-173.

OE *cēse* ‘cheese’ – The most interesting and possibly relevant comparative example of a place-name element said by A H Smith to be derived from OE *cēse* is the intriguing Yorkshire Dales hamlet of **Keasden**.¹⁹ It is on the south-west side of Ingleborough, near the village of Clapham, today in North Yorkshire but formerly in the West Riding. It sits at the bottom of a curved, narrow, steep-sided, shallow-gradient valley – in other words, another good example of a *denu*. At the head of the valley is a farm called Keasden Head, and running down the valley is Keasden Beck both of which names strongly support the notion of the *-den* ending meaning ‘valley’. The earliest spelling A H Smith found was *Kesedene* in the 12th century, much earlier than for any record of Kisdon in Swaledale. However, in 1595 it was recorded as *Keisden*, which was the same spelling as our Swaledale farm was given in 1538. Smith identified the *-den* ending as clearly from OE *denu* and he suggested OE *cēse* as the most likely origin of the first element, to give a meaning of ‘valley producing cheese.’ Kisdon in upper Swaledale could have the same origin as Keasden, although having the same 16th century spelling might be no more than coincidental. If OE *cēse* is the origin of *Keis-* in Kisdon (formerly Keisden) in upper Swaledale, then, put simply, the whole name could mean any of ‘cheese valley,’ ‘cheese farm,’ or ‘cheese hill.’

However, recent scholarship notes that the linguistic case for any English place-name being derived from a word meaning cheese is not conclusive, and where OE *cēse* is assumed, it appears to combine most commonly with habitative terms such as *wic* ‘dwelling, farm,’ *word* ‘enclosure,’ or *hūs* ‘house.’²⁰ Further to that, I suspect that the concept of cheese being a place-name element might be fundamentally flawed on agricultural grounds. Cheese making certainly goes back a long way. There is recorded evidence of cheese being made from sheep’s milk in Britain in the pre-Conquest period.²¹ But cheese is only one of several products of livestock farming, and before industrialisation it was only performed on farms between May and September when ewes and cows were lactating after giving birth in the spring. Farmers managed spring births so that mothers had fresh grass to convert into the best-quality milk for their progeny. Cheese wasn’t made between October and April.

So, pre-Conquest livestock farmers are unlikely to have specialised in dairy production, let alone specifically in cheese-making; their livelihoods being dependent upon exploiting the full range of animal products, which of course included meat, hide, horn, wool, and anything else that could be used. As Dales farmers who annually raised a pig or two for home consumption until the 1960s would say – they found a use for ‘everything but the squeak.’ So, I suspect, especially in these remote Pennine hills and dales, that cheese production was unlikely ever to have been special enough in any single dale or at any single farm to have given a name to any place. It was a routine, part-time activity for all livestock farmers, not a specialism. For these reasons, I suspect that *Keis* in both Keasden near Clapham and Kisdon in Swaledale may not have originated in OE *cēse*.

ON *kjóss* ‘creek, narrow valley’ – A H Smith wrote that he did consider ON *kjóss* as the origin of the first element of Keasden near Clapham, but he rejected it because combined with OE *denu* it would give an improbable tautology of ‘narrow-valley valley.’ In principle, tautological names are not unusual where places were known by a generic term that fell out of the language, its meaning lost to the community, and therefore assumed to be a proper noun requiring the addition of a generic descriptor-word in the current language. A H Smith didn’t explain his reason for rejecting a tautology in the case of Keasden but perhaps it was related to the entrenchment in the Yorkshire Dales of the

¹⁹ A H Smith, *Place-Names of the West Riding of Yorkshire Part 6*, English Place-Name Society, vol. 35, (Cambridge, 1961), p. 233.

²⁰ David N Parsons. *The Vocabulary of English Place-Names, Ceafor - Cock-pit*, English Place-Name Society, (Nottingham, 2004), *cēse*.

²¹ Robert Trow-Smith, *A History of British Livestock Husbandry to 1700* (London, 1957), pp. 60-61.

ON word *dalr* 'dale'. If the meaning of *kjóss* was lost in generations after the Viking settlement, there were so many other ON landscape words that had become an intrinsic part of the local language and that survive to this day, one might expect that the generic descriptor added to *kjóss* to describe the landscape would have been ON *dalr*, to give *Keisdale*, not OE *-den* to give *Keisden*.

The same principle seems equally to apply to a ON/OE combination of *kjóss* with *dūn* to mean 'narrow-valley hill' or 'hill by the narrow valley.' In the latter, one would expect the element added to mean 'hill' would have been a by-then entrenched ON word, such as *-haugr*, becoming *hou* or *how*, as posited at Keasey (below), or ON *-fjall* 'fell', but not OE *-dūn*. If this is correct, then the only combination that could work with *kjóss* would be the addition of ON *-tún* to give 'narrow-valley farm.'

ON *Kísi* - personal name – This is rarely found in place-names. The doyenne of Scandinavian place-names, Gillian Fellows-Jensen, found one instance in England, at Keisby (with ON *-bý* 'farm') in Lincolnshire, and noted that there were probably others in Denmark.²² For Kisdon (formerly *Keisden*), the same doubts over an ON name combining with an OE generic term seem to make unlikely origins of *Kísi-denu* 'Kísi's Valley' and *Kísi-dūn* 'Kísi's Hill'. However, a combination with ON *-tún* 'Kísi's Farm' is a possibility, diminished only by the rarity of *Kísi* in place-names.

OE *Císsa* - personal name – Alternatively, Kisdon (formerly *Keisden*) could have derived from the OE personal name *Císsa*, which could have become *Kíssa* or *Kis-* because of Scandinavian. In that case, *Císsa* would work with any of the OE second elements of *-denu*, *-tún*, or *-dūn* to make 'Císsa's Valley,' or 'Farm,' or 'Hill.' Experts have identified *Císsa* as an element in a few place-names where there appears to be historical corroboration. **Chisbury** in Wiltshire and **Chessington** in Surrey both seem to fit with a recorded late-7th-century Saxon called *Císsa*, who controlled Wiltshire and owned much of Surrey and Berkshire. **Chichester** (9th century *Cisseceastre*) in Sussex is said to be named after a recorded 5th-century invader and occupier of that county. On the same theme, but in these cases without historical corroboration, experts have also attributed *Císsa* as the origins of **Chisbridge** in Buckinghamshire and **Chisworth** near Glossop in north Derbyshire. However, this personal-name attribution is not universally agreed. Other experts have suggested that all the above place-names in *Ches-* and *Chis-* could be derived from OE **cisse* 'gravel' and note that each of these places can be shown to be in notably gravelly landscapes.²³

OE **cisse*/cis*/*cisel*/**cisen* 'gravel'** ²⁴ - During the period of ME (c.1150-1500), the French word *gravele*/*gravelle* was imported into English and became the norm.²⁵ The English word survived in some dialects, at least until the 19th century. The adjective *chiselly*, for a type of stoney soil or for hard bits of wheat in flour or bread, was recorded in several regions, including in North Yorkshire.²⁶ And the *k-* spelling, assumed to have evolved through Scandinavian influence, survived as an obscure Scottish term *kistle-stone*, also written *keisyl-stone*, meaning flint-stone.²⁷ It is also significant that what must have been an ancient root-word for gravel survived on the Continent and evolved in

²² Gillian Fellows-Jensen, *Scandinavian Personal Names in Lincolnshire and Yorkshire* (Copenhagen, 1968), p. 172.

²³ David N Parsons. *The Vocabulary of English Place-Names, Ceafor - Cock-pit*, English Place-Name Society, (Nottingham, 2004), **cisse*, and Prosopography of Anglo-Saxon England (PASE), www.pase.ac.uk.

²⁴ David Parsons, *The Vocabulary of English Place-Names Ceafor - Cock-pit*, English Place-Name Society (Nottingham, 2004), **cisse*/**cis*/*cisel*/**cisen*.

²⁵ *Oxford English Dictionary*, gravel.

²⁶ Joseph Wright, *English Dialect Dictionary*, vol. 1, A-C (Oxford, 1898).

²⁷ Joseph Wright, *English Dialect Dictionary*, vol. 3, H-L (Oxford, 1902).

Middle High German (c.1050-c.1350) as *kis* and survives today in Modern German as *keis*.²⁸ In England, the most prevalent evidence of survival of the OE word is found in place-names, where Scandinavian influence can also have changed the initial letter to k.²⁹

Professor Diana Whaley's first response to the question of Kisdon, posed to her by my friend Richard Walls, was to suggest that the first element could be *kis-* from OE **cis* 'gravel'. This has been an inspiring prompt for me because my initial determination to find an argument against it resulted in me finding nothing but arguments to support it. I am also extremely grateful to my friend Les Knight, a professional geologist, for pointing out that glacial valleys like Swaledale can be sources of gravel and sand. Both are contained in alluvial deposits that settled to the bottom of glacial lakes formed along some major valleys as the ice retreated. When the moraines holding back the lake-water broke, they left behind ghost lakes, appearing now as flat valley-bottoms formed by the alluvial deposits. Where the surviving river has progressively narrowed and cut deeper into the silt, it leaves behind, on either side, higher terraces containing varying proportions of gravel and sand. The photographs and LiDAR image below show that this has been the case in the section of the valley of the Swale from Kisdon Force southwards down to and beyond the confluence of the River Swale and Straw Beck. Significantly, in lowland stretches of the River Swale, below the town of Richmond, gravel extraction is well-known and continues today. There is even a type of river-gravel marketed as Swale Pebbles. This is endorsed by a detailed geological study of the landscape around Kisdon Hill, in which the authors state: 'Most of the valley bottoms [around the hill] contain thick deposits of glacial and



debris-flow diamictons [mixed particles], glaciofluvial sand and gravel, and coarse-grained river gravels.³⁰

The stony/gravelly bed of the River Swale in the flat-bottomed valley between the heights named Kisdon. Photograph courtesy Richard Walls.

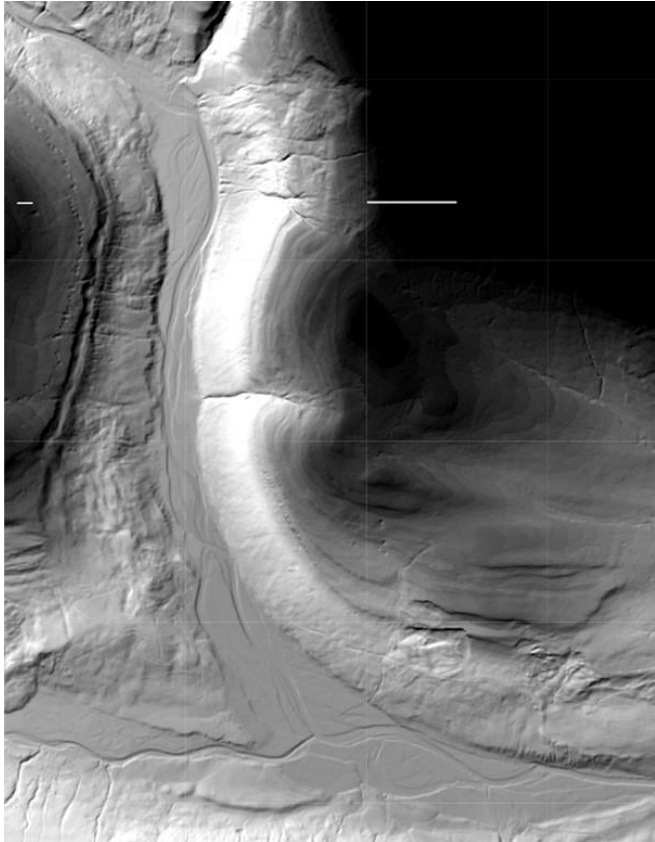
²⁸ David Parsons, *The Vocabulary of English Place-Names Ceafor – Cock-pit*, English Place-Name Society (Nottingham, 2004).

²⁹ See Kislingbury in J E B Glover, Allen Mawer, and F M Stenton, *The Place-Names of Northamptonshire*, English Place-Name Society, vol. 10 (Cambridge, 1933), pp. 86-87.

³⁰ James Rose, 'Quaternary geology and geomorphology of the area around Kisdon, upper Swaledale - an excursion,' in *Yorkshire Rocks and Landscape: A Field Guide* 3rd edn., eds. Colin Scruton and John Powell (Yorkshire Geological Society, 2006), [Quaternary geology and geomorphology of the area around Kisdon, upper Swaledale - an excursion - MediaWiki \(bgs.ac.uk\)](https://www.bgs.ac.uk/media/Quaternary_geology_and_geomorphology_of_the_area_around_Kisdon_upper_Swaledale_-_an_excursion_-_MediaWiki_(bgs.ac.uk).pdf).



A notable terrace cut into glacial sediment by the River Swale in the flat bottom of the valley in between the heights named Kisdon. Photograph: Will Swales.



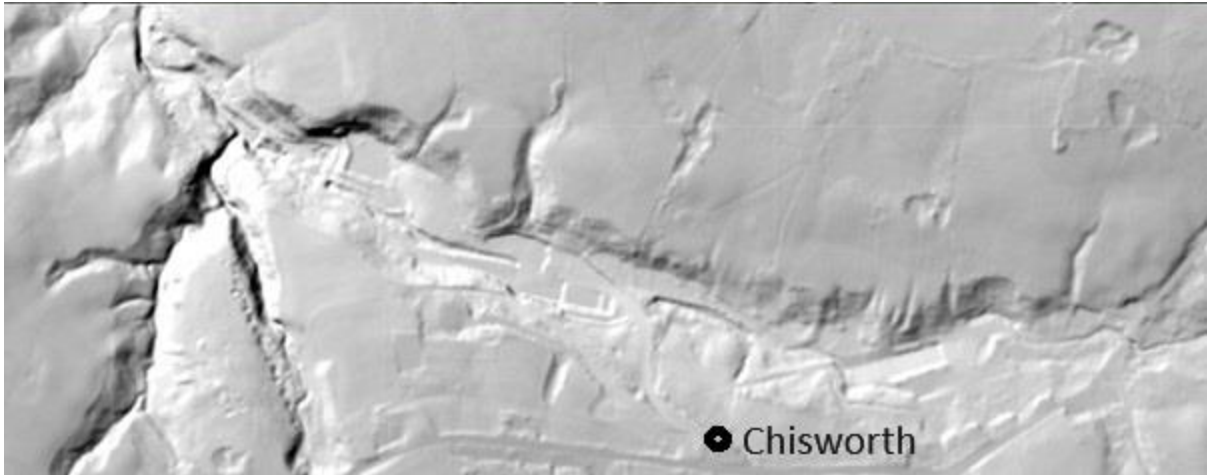
The distinctive flat-bottomed section of the valley of the River Swale, joined at the south end by Straw Beck and lying between several Kisdon place-names. Screenshot from LiDARFinder <https://lidarfinder.com>. Map data © Google. LiDAR © Environment Agency copyright and/or database right 2015. All rights reserved.

Experts have identified several English place-names that are most-likely to be derived from OE **cisse/*cis/cisel/*cisen* 'gravel' or 'gravelly.' The best-known are **Chishill** in Essex, **Chisenbury** in Wiltshire, **Chesham** in Buckinghamshire, three in Lancashire, at **Chisnall**, **Chesham**, and **Cheesden**, and one in Northamptonshire, at **Kislingbury**; the latter being especially interesting here because of its initial Scandinavian letter *k*. In some cases, it has been noted that the linguistic analysis is supported by local gravelly landscapes.³¹ If we add to this list the place-names,

It's helpful to examine the topography and geology of four northern examples – the three in Lancashire just mentioned plus **Chisworth** near Glossop in north Derbyshire, which has been attributed to the personal name OE *Cissa* – to see how they compare with the landscape around the several Kisdon (formerly *Keisden*) place-names in upper Swaledale.

Chisworth – SJ9992 – *Chisewrde* (1086), OE **cisse* and OE *worð* 'gravel enclosure.' Near Glossop in north Derbyshire – a hamlet perched above a deep ravine of the Lee Valley, a curving, flat-bottomed, glacial valley with a shallow gradient, very similar to that of the Swale in the section from Kisdon Force southwards and beyond the confluence with Straw Beck. LiDAR images show that both valleys have flat bottoms where sediments of gravel and sand must have been deposited.

³¹ David Parsons, *The Vocabulary of English Place-Names Ceafor - Cock-pit*, English Place-Name Society (Nottingham, 2004), **cisse/*cis/cisel/*cisen*.



The Lee Valley at Chisworth, near Glossop, north Derbyshire. The image of the valley's flat bottom is slightly distorted by the footprints of 19th-century mill buildings. Screenshot from LiDARfinder <https://lidarfinder.com>. Map data © Google. LiDAR © Environment Agency copyright and/or database right 2015. All rights reserved.

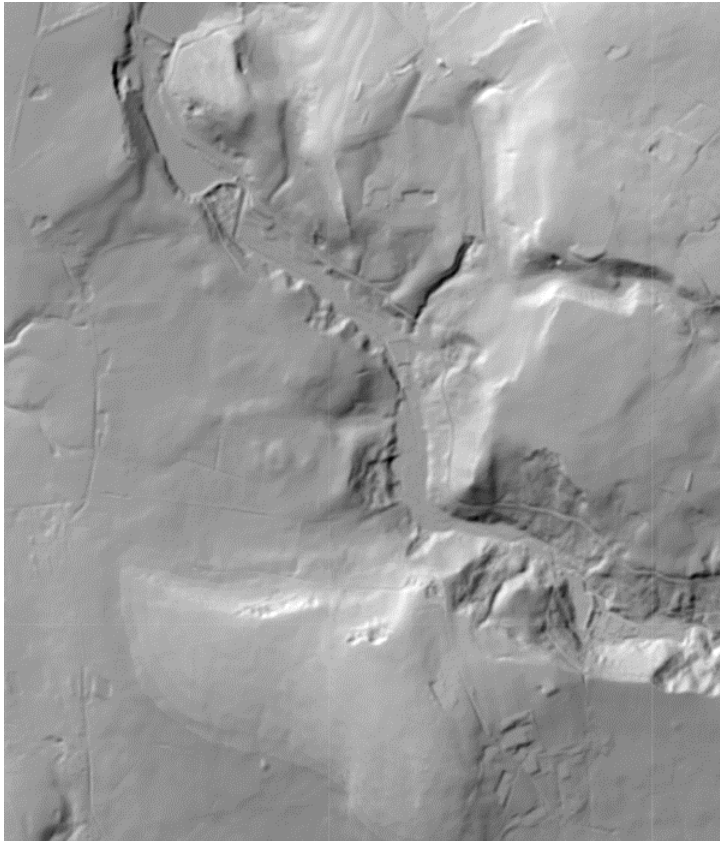
Chisnall – SD5412 – *Chisinhalli* (before 1240), OE **cisen* and OE *halh* 'gravelly corner of land.' South-east of Chorley in Lancashire, the name of a nature reserve and former colliery site, also of some playing fields, the whole now divided by the M6 motorway. It has no immediately obvious visible landscape features of interest, but the whole of the lowland area of Lancashire is noted by geologists for its thick glacial alluvial deposits of clay, silt, sand, and gravel, some of which is still commercially extracted in the wider district around Chisnall.³²

Chesham – SD8112 – *Chesum* (1429), OE dative plural **cisum* 'at the gravel places.' To the east of Bury in Lancashire, and an immediate neighbour of Cheesden (below); the two names being possibly variations of one original place-name. Chesham is now a suburb of Bury and a nature reserve but was formerly a large estate that stretched across what is now the M66 motorway. It appears to have no topographical features of note but, like Chisnall (above), it is part of the lowland area of the county noted for its widespread, thick alluvial deposits.

Cheesden – SD8313 – *Chesden* (1543), OE **cis* and OE *denu* 'gravel valley.' To the east of Bury in Lancashire, and an immediate neighbour of Chesham (above) is of visible interest. The name survives today only as Cheesden Valley, given to a typical *denu*-type curving, glacial valley with a shallow gradient, and in parts flat-bottomed. LiDAR images show it to be very similar to the Lee Valley adjacent to Chisworth (above) and to the valley at Kisdon (formerly *Keisden*) in Swaledale.

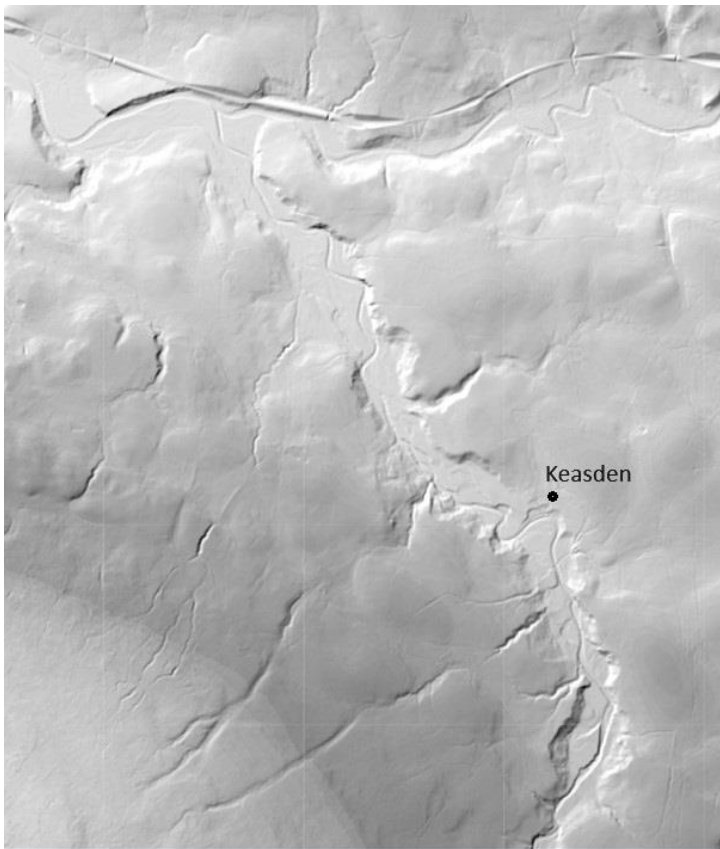
The topographical similarities between Chisworth, Cheesden, and Kisdon (formerly *Keisden*) prompt a review of the place-name of Keasden near Clapham.

³² A Landscape Strategy for Lancashire Landscape Character Assessment, (Lancashire County Council, 2000).



Cheesden Valley, east of Bury, Lancashire, showing the same curve and flat bottom of the other three examples. Screenshot from LiDARFinder <https://lidarfinder.com>. Map data © Google. LiDAR © Environment Agency copyright and/or database right 2015. All rights reserved.

Keasden – SD7266 – Kesedene, Kesendene (1165-1240). A H Smith did not say whether he considered OE *cis as a possibility in this case. A LiDAR image shows the valley is a good topographical match for those of Chisworth, Cheesden, and Kisdon (formerly *Keisden*), having the same flat-bottomed areas of glacial alluvial deposits, here with visible terraces, and must have been a good likely source for extracting gravel and sand. Therefore, an origin in OE *cis must be a possibility.



Keasden hamlet next to the un-named, flat-bottomed valley of Keasden Beck, near Clapham, North Yorkshire. Screenshot from LiDARFinder <https://lidarfinder.com>. Map data © Google. LiDAR © Environment Agency copyright and/or database right 2015. All rights reserved.

If Keasden and Kisdon (formerly *Keisden*) might have the same name origins, then it prompts a look at the accepted place-name analysis and topography of Kislingbury in Northamptonshire. It doesn't disappoint.

Kislingbury (OE *ciseling and OE byrig 'fortification at the gravelly place').³³ Expert analysis notes that the soil around Kislingbury is a mixture of clay and gravel. And a

³³ J E B Glover, Allen Mawer, and F M Stenton, *The Place-Names of Northamptonshire*, English Place-Name Society, vol. 10 (Cambridge, 1933), pp. 86-87.

simple check on the modern map reveals that it's alongside the upper River Nene at the end of a 35-kilometre-long riverside chain of now-flooded, former gravel pits.

This in turn triggers a review of a selection of northern place-names with first elements in *Keas-* and *Keis-*, at least those found in Yorkshire and old Westmorland and identified by A H Smith as being derived from ON *kjóss*. Is it possible that they are more likely to be names derived from the Scandinaviansed *k-* form of OE **cisse/*cis*? Here they are:

Keasbeck – SE9595 – *Kesebec, -bek* (1155-65), ON *kjóss* and ON *bekkr* 'narrow valley, creek beck.'³⁴ It's north-west of Scarborough, a small tributary of the River Derwent. The name applies only to a short section of the beck, found in Harwood Dale. Puzzlingly, the setting is in a wide and gently sloping dale of no great depth and there is no topography here that would imply a creek or narrow valley. However, maps and satellite images show that along its short length in Harwood Dale there are two or three overgrown and irregular-shaped ponds that could be old, flooded gravel pits. These must be survivors of an industry reported in a survey of 1915, in which it was said: "The sandstone is very hard and siliceous; and in the neighbourhood of Harwood Dale, where it is quarried as a road-stone, the workmen give it the name of 'flint.'" ³⁵

Keasey – SE8753 – *Kesehou* (c.1185), ON *kjóss* with ON *haugr*, 'hill by the narrow valley.'³⁶ A hilltop farm in the East Riding Wolds between Driffild and Pocklington. An adjacent dry ravine called Keasey Dale is about a mile long and is undoubtedly deep and narrow and fits the sense of a creek or narrow valley. The profile is noticeably V-shaped. However, it should also be noted that these Wolds are the most northerly chalk hills in England where the cultivated soil is visibly heavily laden with chalk fragments. The chalkland Way, a long-distance footpath, passes nearby and the OS six-inch map of 1855 shows a chalk pit immediately next to the farmstead. It's also interesting that a leading expert on the occurrence of OE **cisse/*cis/cisel/*cisen* in English place-names found four southern examples where the stone was chalk – Great Chissal in Essex, Chesel and Chisenbury, both in Wiltshire, and Cheselbourne in Dorset.³⁷

Keisley – NY7123 – *Kesisclyve* (1292), ON *kjóss* with ON *klif*, became *-lyff* (16th century), became *-ley* (17th century), 'cliff above the narrow valley.'³⁸ A hill farm above the Eden Valley, near Dufton in old Westmorland. Below the farm is Keisley Beck, which does not cut any sort of remarkable feature on the landscape until about 800 metres away from the farm, at which point it falls into a short but deep, wooded, V-shaped ravine, less than half a mile long but which could fit the description of a creek or narrow valley. However, the farmstead also sits below Keisley Bank which is famous among geologists for its notable limestone outcrop and quarries that have exposed what is said to be England's best Ordovician carbonate mudbank.

³⁴ A H Smith, *The Place-Names of the North Riding of Yorkshire* (English Place-Name Society, vol. 5, (Cambridge, 1928), p. 114.

³⁵ Charles Fox-Strangeways and G Barrow, *The Geology of the Country between Whitby and Scarborough*, 2nd edn. (HMSO, 1915), p. 37.

³⁶ A H Smith, *The Place-Names of the East Riding of Yorkshire and York*, English Place-Name Society, vol. 14, (Cambridge, 1937), p. 171.

³⁷ Ann Cole, 'Cisel, grēot, stān and the four U's', *English Place-Name Society Journal*, vol. 31 (Nottingham, 1999), 19-30.

³⁸ A H Smith, *The Place-Names of Westmorland*, English Place-Name Society, vols. 42 and 43 (Cambridge 1966 and 67), Part 1 pp. xxii, xlv, Part 2 p. 108.

It has yielded a range of fossils in siltstones, mudstones, and lenses of silty limestones, otherwise known as Dufton Shale.³⁹

Keasgill Sike - NY4515 – earliest record OS map (1859), ON *kjóss* with ON *gil*.⁴⁰ This is a short ravine, about half a mile long, deep, narrow, and V-shaped, descending from a high watershed on Bampton Common east of Haweswater in the Lake District.

Three of these four place-names, Keasey, Keisley, and Keasgill Sike, are all associated in some way with similar shaped and proportioned narrow valleys, being not especially long, or even quite short, narrow, deep, steep-sided, and V-shaped, and therefore seem to support the suggestion that their names could be derived from ON *kjóss* ‘creek or narrow valley.’ They are not at all like Keasden near Clapham, where the valley is less narrow, flat-bottomed, and much longer, stretching for a good four or five miles, and not like the valley at Kisdon in upper Swaledale, where the valley is relatively wide, flat-bottomed, and about two miles long. On the other hand, Keasey and Keisley together with Keasbeck, which has no noticeable deep ravine, might also plausibly have first elements derived from OE **cisse/*cis*, in which case they might be considered in the same name category as Keasden near Clapham and Kisdon in upper Swaledale.

Conclusion

From among the combinations of elements in the place-name Kisdon (formerly *Keisden*) outlined above, the ON doublets of *kjóss* and *tún* ‘narrow-valley farm’ or of *Kísi* and *tún* ‘Kisi’s Farm’ are possible explanations and tempting given the proliferation of apparently ON place-names in this part of upper Swaledale. However, because of the subsequent borrowing of the place-name to adjacent features, both suggestions would depend upon the landholding stretching across both sides of the River Swale. And this idea can be based only on speculation. All the combinations with OE *dūn* ‘hill’ depend on a moving series of name borrowings to end up crossing the river, and so might also be considered unpromising explanations.

It seems most promising to deduce that the existence of an apparently perfect example of a *denu*-type valley supported by the *-den* spelling of the second element in 1538 and repeated at least once as late as 1760, point to an OE doublet ending in *-denu*. The lack of early spellings means that possible OE first elements of *cēse* ‘cheese’ and the personal name *Cissa* would both be only unsupported guesses. Also, I have argued against *cēse* on agricultural grounds, and *Cissa* is only supported by evidence in the south of England. Conversely, **cis* ‘gravel’ has much topographical evidence to commend it and might be supported by more examples of such an origin elsewhere in the north and possibly elsewhere in England than has been accepted hitherto. It has been noted by place-name experts that *denu* often combines with first elements that denote the nature of the ground, such as gravel or mud.⁴¹

While the absence of early spellings of Kisdon makes it impossible to be certain of the original meaning, by the above process of deduction, there seems to be a good case for the origin of the first element *Kis-* being a Scandinavianised form of OE **cis* ‘gravel’, and for the whole meaning to be ‘gravel valley’. The name would have easily been copied to the heights on both sides of the valley and

³⁹ Brian Young et al, *North Pennines Area of Outstanding Natural Beauty and European Geopark: A Geodiversity Audit, Revised 2010* (North Pennines AONB, 2010), p. 13, [Layout 1 \(northpennines.org.uk\)](http://northpennines.org.uk).

⁴⁰ A H Smith, *The Place-Names of Westmorland*, English Place-Name Society, vol. 43 (Cambridge 1966), Part 2 p. 195.

⁴¹ Kenneth Cameron, *English Place Names*, revised edn. (London, 1996), p. 191.

to the farm or landholding called Kisdon on the side of the most prominent hill. If correct, it would suggest that the name was coined by Anglian settlers some time from about 650 to the end of the 800s, before the arrival of Viking settlers. Later, the need for a name for this specific section of the valley of the River Swale must have become redundant, and so slid into oblivion, surviving only where it had become attached to those features alongside it.

Further research

From this research, it might be considered that the northern place-names of Chisworth, Cheesden, Keasey, Keisley, Keasbeck, Keasden and Kisdon are all derived from OE **cisse/*cis*, which might prompt the question whether there are any other place-names with similar names and topographies but not currently considered to be derived from OE **cisse/*cis*, and might be worthy of review.

As a toe in the water, I have looked at the select national group of five Keswick place-names, which are all currently deemed to combine OE *cēse* and OE *wic* 'cheese farm.' Etymological information below is from the *Cambridge Dictionary of English Place-Names*, except where indicated in the case of Dunkeswick. For each one, I briefly describe some topographical information that might cause one to wonder if an origin in OE **cisse/*cis*, becoming *kes-* through Scandinavian influence might be more plausible. They are:

Keswick – NY2623 – *Kesewic* (c.1240). A market town in the Lake District, Cumbria, on the north-eastern edge of Derwent Water. It is of course a large glacial valley with surviving lakes, and the town is located where the River Derwent flows northwards across a broad land-bridge leading to Bassenthwaite Lake. The whole area is a mass of alluvial deposits. Until about the middle of the 19th century, houses in Keswick were built from irregular shapes and sizes of so-called 'gathered stone,' collected from the river and other glacial deposits.⁴²

Keswick – TG 2004 – *Ch- Kesewic* (1086). A village in Norfolk, by the River Yare, just south-east of Norwich. This is a flat-bottomed valley where there are several chalk pits, one named Keswick Pit.⁴³

Keswick – TG3543 – *Casewic* (c. 1150-1275). A seaside hamlet on the North Norfolk coast. While plausibly a farm dedicated to producing high volumes of animal products, including milk, butter, and cheese, to serve the monks and lay brothers at the adjacent Broomholm Abbey, founded 1113, it could also have been the source of sand and gravel used to make mortar for the building of the abbey.

East Keswick – SE3644 – *Est(e)keswyc(k)* (1100s-1615). A village in West Yorkshire, on the south side of the River Wharf near Wetherby, and **Dunkeswick** – SE3046 – *Chesuic* (1086),⁴⁴ a nearby hamlet on the north side of the river. This part of Wharfedale is another glacial valley and this part of it was once filled with lakes in which were deposited sand and gravel. Around the two Keswick-named settlements, the flat-bottomed valley is dotted with what appear to

⁴² Chris Wilson, *A Beginner's Introduction to Geology in and around Keswick* (Skiddaw U3A Geology Group, 2020), [PowerPoint Presentation \(keswick.org\)](https://www.keswick.org/powerpoint-presentation).

⁴³ F C Cox *et al*, *Geology of the Country around Norwich Memoir of the British Geological Survey, Sheet 161 (England and Wales)* (HMSO, 1989), online at [Norwich, sheet 161, memoir for the 1:50 000 geological map \(bgs.ac.uk\)](https://www.bgs.ac.uk/norwich-sheet-161-memoir-for-the-1:50-000-geological-map).

⁴⁴ A H Smith, *The Place-Names of the West Riding of Yorkshire Part 5*, English Place-Name Society, vol. 34, (Cambridge, 1961), p. 50-51.

be old, flooded gravel pits. East Keswick was once a centre for sandstone quarrying.⁴⁵ Dunkeswick is noted by geologists for low ridges of lenticular sandstone.⁴⁶

⁴⁵ *East Keswick Village Design Statement: Supplementary Planning Guidance* (Leeds City Council, 2002), [East Keswick Village Design Statement \(leeds.gov.uk\)](https://www.leeds.gov.uk/east-keswick-village-design-statement).

⁴⁶ Ian Chisholm, 'Millstone Grit at Almscliff Crag and Harlow Car, near Harrogate – an excursion,' in *Yorkshire Rocks and Landscape: A Field Guide, 3rd edn.* (Yorkshire Geological Society, 2006), eds. Colin Scruton and John Powell.