

Derwent

[Derwent](#) is a common river name in Britain:

[1](#) through Yorkshire from near the North Sea to near York;

[2](#) through Cumbria from the Lake District to the Irish Sea;

[3](#) through Derbyshire into the Trent;

[4](#) between Durham and Northumberland into the Tyne;

[5](#) plus also the Darwen through Lancashire into the Ribble.

[6](#) the Darent through Kent into the Thames may be related;

[7](#) possibly also the Dart from Dartmoor to Dartmouth;

[8](#) and the East Dart, which flows into the Exe at Bickleigh;

[9](#) and the Little Dart, which is a tributary of the Taw.

It is generally agreed that Derwent continues the ancient name behind [Derventione](#) at Stamford Bridge, Yorkshire, and at Papcastle, Cumbria, on the estuary called [Dorvantium](#), and that [Derbentione](#) was near Derby. Ekwall (1928) wrote “The etymology is clear. The name is derived from British **derya* ‘oak’ (Welsh *derw*, Breton *derw*, Cornish *derow*). I see no reason to suppose that *Derventio* meant anything other than ‘oak river, river where oaks grew abundantly’.”

That analysis is repeated widely, but the *-went* ending creates difficulty. Some authors baldly claim that **went* meant ‘valley’, for which the Welsh Historical Dictionary offers no support. Or else **-int* is claimed as a river-name-forming suffix. However, [Kitson](#) (1996) drew attention to two problems: that *-NT* characteristically forms present participles; and that the early forms of many river names on the Continent (*Drevant*, *Drewenz*, *Durance*, etc) are “well within relevant phonetic range”.

Kitson liked the idea of an Old European river name based on PIE **der-/dreu-* ‘to run’, and was not opposed to the idea of Celtic speakers re-interpreting that towards oak trees. Equally well, a Latin speaker could have thought of *deruens*, *deruentis* ‘falling down’, a participle from the verb [deruo](#). However, the earliest post-Roman forms clearly show the first element interpreted as Old English [deor](#) ‘deer’: *Deorwentan* for 1 and 2 in the OE version of Bede, *Deorwentan* in 1025 for 3, *Dyrwente* in 1050 for 4, *Derewente* in 1227 for 5, and *Diorente* in 822 for 6.

The problems vanish if *-went* meant the ‘river valley, meander zone, floodplain’ landform discussed at length [here](#), and if the *Der-* element could indeed mean ‘deer’. Abundant archaeological evidence for hunting of deer was found in the valley of the Yorkshire river Derwent at Starr Carr, as discussed [here](#). Also at [Drevant](#) in France. Of the deer species native to Britain, roe deer like to hide in lowland woods, whereas red deer are more willing to live on highland moors.

Allegedly the word deer descends from PIE **dheus-* ‘to blow like dust’, with the same semantic development as from Latin *anima* ‘spirit’ to animal. Cognates of deer exist in all Germanic languages (often with a wider sense of ‘animal’) but not in the Celtic languages, which may explain why scholars have failed to recognize this possibility before, and also why Ekwall wrote that “the name Derwent is not found with certainty outside England”.

Latin [alces](#) ‘elk’ living in a floodplain environment probably explains the place name [Alcobendas](#), (now a suburb of Madrid in Manzanares river valley), plus ALCOVINDO on an [epitaph](#) at [Rodez](#) in Provence and ALKOVINOS on an [epitaph](#) in Lepontic writing in a [floodplain](#) at the Italian-Swiss border. White elks, as [claimed](#) by Celticists, can exist, but are even rarer than pink elephants.

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