

What Does the Name Retallack Mean?

BY GREG RETALLACK (09542)

Retallack is an ancient Cornish surname, now more common overseas: a 1998 computer search revealed 294 Retallacks in Australia, 173 in the United States, 151 in Great Britain, 48 in Canada and 2 in South Africa. There are many ideas concerning the origin of the Retallack surname from Cornish place names, mine workings and Norse gods, but let me first outline the derivation that seems most likely to me.

The name is pronounced Re-TAL-ack, and rhymes with metallic. The alternative spelling Retallick first appears as Retallicke in 1609, and was presumably derived from Retallack, which is recorded back to 1497. Retallack in turn is likely to have been derived from the surname Talek, recorded back to 1349. Early variants such as Rettelehc of c1250 are also likely to have been predated by Talek, incorporated in such place names as Botalec (now Botallack) of 1262, because of the much wider distribution of Talek than Retallack in Cornwall before 1600. The *re* part of the name is probably a prefix, perhaps a Cornish demonstrative pronoun, meaning 'the ones', 'those' or 'some', as in the Cornish oath 'Re Mihal' ('By St Michael!'). This would imply some Taleks of greater fame or notoriety than others, such as Richard Talek, on trial in 1349 for beating his mine labourers, Ralph Retallack, a prime agitator in the tax rebellion of 1497, or Marke Retallacke, a church warden of St Columb Major in 1589.

Talek in turn is most likely from the old Cornish *talawg*, meaning 'high forehead'. The comparable Welsh name Tallwch and Pictish Talorc date back to the 6th century. In Welsh myths of *Ystoria Trystan* and Welsh triads, the hero Tristan (also Trystan, Drystan, Drustan, Drustanus, Drust) is referred to as the son of Tallwch. These 6th century poems also mention King Arthur as a raider of his swine, his lord March ap Meirchiawn (later Mark), and the lady Essylt (later Issota, Isolde, and Iseult). Drust son of Talorc was also a Pictish king of the Strathclyde region of Scotland who died in 780 AD, too late to be a contemporary of King Arthur (c550 AD), but both Drust and Talorc were common Pictish names. In his book *The White Goddess* (1966) Robert Graves notes the Cornish-Welsh meaning of *tal* as forehead, as in the famous bard Taliesin, 'radiant brow', but also offers another meaning of 'one who dares to suffer'. Graves goes so far as to identify the *tal* syllable with pre-Classical dying gods, such as the

ancient Cretan Talus, consort of a Neolithic 'Great Goddess'.

There are now four places called Retallack or Retillick in Cornwall, and thus some evidence that the surname comes from a place. The *re* prefix could come from Cornish *rydh* or *ruth* meaning red, but neither soil nor rock in any of these places is unusually red. It has also been argued that *re* is abbreviated from *tre*, Old Cornish for farmhouse, village or town. Tretallock and Tretallack are recorded surnames back to 1584, but there is no other comparable corruption of a *tre*-name. The *tre* syllable is too well known in Cornish names to be so confused. A more popular explanation is that the *re* syllable comes from *ryd*, *rit*, or *res* meaning ford, but this explanation works for only one of the Cornish localities, as outlined below.

Retallack (Nat. Grid Ref. SW 934658) near Saint Columb Major is now commercialised as a 100 acre 'Spirit of the West' American theme park. This locality has been translated as ford at the base of a short steep slope from Old Cornish *rit*, *ret* or *res* (ford) and *talek* (high forehead or hill), as ford of willows (*heloc*), or as ford of Talek (surname). Ford explanations are not appropriate to this locality. It has a tiny stream one metre wide in a broad, open, headwater basin only one kilometre long. The surrounding boggy willow carr would have been an unsuitable ford or overland route, compared with one kilometre to the southwest lower in the valley or two kilometres to the north along the ancient ridge-line route to Wadebridge that passes Retallack Barrow (tumulus grave) and The Nine Maidens (ancient standing stones). The most ancient record of the place name from Assize and Pipe Rolls is Rettelehc (c1250), more like the surname than a place name involving a ford, or willow or hill. This place was probably named after an early Retallack.

Retillick Farm is on the southeast margin of Tregoss Moor, two kilometres southeast of Roche (SW 974593). The ancient farmhouse is now in ruins, but there is an old millhouse and farmhouse on the site. Explanations offered for this name are once again ford with willows, or ford near a high hill. These meanings make no more sense than for Retallack to the north near St Columb Major. The River Fal here is only one metre wide and coffee-coloured in willow carr of a broad upland basin. Overland routes to Roche would have kept to the ridgeline south and westwards

through Whitemoor. The largest hills here now are huge waste piles of English China Clay Pty Ltd. Again the most ancient record of this locality is Retelek (1284), which has a sleek phonetic spelling like the surname derived from an oral informant.

Retallack Farm, one kilometre north of Constantine (SW 733304), is just uphill from a 16th century tin stamping mill that has been excavated by industrial archaeologists. The old farmhouse of massive granite blocks includes both rounded arches of Norman design (1066-1189) and pointed arches of early Gothic design (1189-1307). A case has been made that Retallack Farm is named 'roach ford' from the Old Cornish terms for ford *res* and for the roach fish *talhoc*, or perhaps ford near the tower, from *tallack* meaning tower or garret, or a very high place with pits, from very *re* and high place *tallic* or many pits *tollic*, or ford near a high slope, from ford *res* and high slope *talek*. The roach is a fish of slow, muddy, fresh water, inappropriate for the whitewater stream near Constantine. There are no ancient towers nearby. The stream is only one metre wide and covered in places by blocks from the steep western hill. Ancient trails and roads near here would not have found this a ford in the sense of a serious water obstacle. The extensive tin milling and blowing house at the site makes it plausible that there were many pits for alluvial tin workings here. But again, the most ancient spelling of this place is Retalec (1309), more like a surname than a place description. Mining Retallacks were probably here early.

Retallack Mine (SW573314), and Retallack Mill one kilometre to the south, are in the parish of St Hilary, along rough farm roads north of Millpool. There is little left of the mill, but for a millstone and rock discs like those used to keep vermin out of elevated grain stores, incorporated into a house and outbuildings built by William Knott in 1971. The large stone engine house and chimney to the underground mine are one kilometre to the north near where the mill stream enters the River Hayle. This underground mine was worked from 1830-1858, and briefly reworked in 1912. In view of the suggested etymology of the other Retallack locations outlined above, there is no heath, no high hill and only whitewater streams unsuitable for roach. Willow is not so abundant as near St Columb Major and Roche. The mill stream is only one metre wide, but the River Hayle is three metres wide, and an important obstacle to

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north-south routes. Here an ancient 'ford of Talek' is indicated by the most ancient known spelling of this locality, Restalek (1311). The name Retallick is in St Hilary church records only as far back as 1824, and it could be that their westward spread from St Columb Major reached this far west only by then. Taleks preceded them in western Cornwall by several centuries, as at Botallack (Botalec of 1262). Explanations of Retallack as a place name may have arisen from this place.

Another possibility is derivation of Retallack from alluvial tin mines. In Norman times, one of the mines of Cornwall was named *Attall Sarazin*, meaning 'leavings of the Saracens'. By the reign of Elizabeth I the term was corrupted to *attal sarsen* and applied to virtually any ancient alluvial tin mines with the meaning of 'heathen workings'. Retallacks or Taleks could thus be offspring (Old Cornish *ach*) of the workings. Or perhaps the prefix is from the

Cornish *re* or *rid*, meaning free, clear, in reference to the legendary lawlessness of Cornish miners. Mining connections with the surname are supported by listing on the Tinnners' Muster Roll of 1535 of Robert and Richard Retalek. Taleks were tin miners earlier, for example, Richard Talek in the Stannary Court of 1349. However, the earliest spellings of the surname or localities do not resemble *attal*.

A final theory is that Retallack is derived from the Old Norse name Thorlack or Torlacr, mentioned in the Icelandic Saga of *Olaf Helga* ('Olaf the Holy'), which concerns a Norwegian king of 956-1030 AD. A case has been made that Thorlack is a predecessor to the Norwegian name Tallak. There are several place names including Tallak in Norway: Tallaksrud (Tallak's farm) in Akerhus, Tallakshavn (Tallak's harbour) in Jarlsberg and Tallaksbru (Tallak's bridge) in Telemark. I think it unlikely that a name so similar to the

familiar and important god Thor or Tor could be corrupted in this way. *Tala* in Icelandic and *tale* in Norwegian mean a speech, poetry reading or other public discourse, and Norwegian Tallaks may have bardic ancestry, independent of Cornish Taleks.

Perhaps we will never know for sure how the Retallack name originated, because it is ancient and steeped in myth and folklore. My preferences hinge on early records discovered by such serendipitous methods that I am no longer surprised by surprises. I look forward to more surprises from interested readers.

Greg Retallack

References: an expanded version with references and illustrations is available on the worldwide web at the address shown below.

<http://darkwing.uoregon.edu/~dogsci/retall/surname.html>

VERRENT GATHERING

BY BETSY VERRENT-HARVEY (05607)

The Journal does not usually print accounts of family gatherings, but this report carries a good deal of genealogical information which could be of interest to others.

Extracts follow : ~

During the weekend of the 13th and 14th May 2000 there took place a gathering of the descendants of Steven **VERRANT** and his wife Prudence, (**KNIGHT**).

They married almost 400 years ago on the 13 Oct 1609 at Lostwithiel. Steven was bap. 7 Oct 1570 at Bodmin, the son of Steven **VERRANT**, and he died 31 Jan 1664 at Warleggan. Prudence **KNIGHT** was bap. 28 Oct 1584 at Warleggan and died there on 15 Jan 1662. She was the daughter of John **KNIGHT** and Elizabeth **DWENE**.

Steven and Prudence had eight children all born at Warleggan. During the last 400 years the descendants of the eight children have spread to many parts of the world and lost touch with one another. Finding what remains of the family has been a 20 year search for Betsy Verrent-Harvey of New Zealand and eventually she felt she must visit the homeland of her distant ancestors and meet the cousins she had traced. Research had put her in touch with a number of present day 'cousins' who are descended from three of the children of Steven and Prudence **VERRANT**.

The first was Henery **VERRANT** bap. 3 May 1622 at Warleggan. He died 2 April 1671 at Landulph. Henery married c1650 to Alse (Alice) **LOBB**, the daughter of Nathan and Alse **LOBB**. She was bap. 15 Feb 1633/34 at Landulph, & died there on 17 Apr 1689 at Landulph.

Second was Judith **VERRANT** bap. 21 Feb 1624 at Warleggan, and died 5 Jun 1699 at St Neot. She married 17 Feb 1651 at St Neot to Thomas **DUMBLE**, who was bap. 19 Jun 1625 at St Neot and died there 15 Jun 1671.

The third was Stephen **VERRANT** bap. 9 Dec 1427 at Warleggan and died there 16 Nov 1687. He married c1653 to Gartrite (Gertrude) who died 30 Nov 1677 at Warleggan. At times in this line the name appears as **VERRAN**.

The 34 cousins who met together over the two days of the Gathering were representatives of the above three children, Henery, Judith, and Stephen. They came from places as far apart as England, Australia, Northern Ireland, and New Zealand and there are others in Scotland and Canada and the USA.

The group visited the farm of Bofindle/Bodfellow, where our Prudence **KNIGHT** had grown up. This farm was mentioned in the will of John **KNIGHT** (the father of Prudence) as his property in 1602. The next stop was Warleggan and the Church of St Lawrence, where our ancestors were baptised, married and buried - although we were not able to find any gravestones with the name of **VERRENT** upon them. There were a number with the name **KNIGHT**.

Betsy Verrent-Harvey