

## *A three-fold development of Old English y in Middle Kentish place-names<sup>1</sup>*

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### ABSTRACT

The intention of the present dialectal research is to contribute to a better knowledge of Middle Kentish, traditionally regarded as a Middle English dialect in which sounds and linguistic changes behave differently. This will be done through the formal analysis of Old English <y>, dialectally relevant in Kentish, in medieval place-names. Name-forms provide, according to different authors, real information about the behaviour of certain phonological distinctions whose evidence has only been attested in these forms. Consequently, I will focus on the analysis of this onomastic material to contrast my own conclusions with other place-name studies, but also with the more traditional phonological distributions attained by authors who have based their analyses on individual literary works that reflected the regional variety in question.

**Key words:** Middle English, dialectology, Kentish, place-name forms, phonological variable, dialectal variants.

### RESUMEN

#### *DESARROLLO TRIPARTITO DE LA “Y” DEL INGLÉS ANTIGUO EN LOS TOPÓNIMOS KÉNTICOS BAJOMEDIEVALES*

El objetivo de esta investigación dialectal es contribuir a un mejor conocimiento del kéntico (o kentio) medio, tradicionalmente considerado como un dialecto del inglés bajomedieval en el que los sonidos y los cambios lingüísticos se comportan de manera diferenciada. Dicha investigación se hará a través del análisis formal en los topónimos medievales de la <y> del inglés antiguo, dialectalmente relevante en

el kéntico. Los topónimos nos proporcionan, según diferentes autores, información real acerca del comportamiento de ciertas distinciones fonológicas cuya única evidencia se encuentra en estas formas. Por consiguiente, nos centraremos en el análisis de este material onomástico para contrastar nuestras conclusiones con otros estudios toponímicos y con otras distribuciones fonológicas más tradicionales, establecidas por autores que han basado sus análisis en obras literarias individuales que reflejaban la variedad regional en cuestión.

**Palabras clave:** inglés bajomedieval, dialectología, kéntico (o kentio), formas toponímicas, variable fonológica, variantes dialectales.

## 0. DIALECTOLOGY AND PLACE-NAME STUDY

A dialectal approach is central to the study of Middle English (ME), a period in the history of the English language greatly characterised by its dialectal diversity. Within this diversity, the Kentish (Kt) dialect has traditionally drawn the interest of some authors who, after focusing on individual literary works that reflected the regional distribution of certain textual varieties, have seen in it a singular dialect in which some sounds and linguistic changes behave differently.

During the 20th century a name-approach was developed as a complement to these traditional dialectal analyses. These name-forms provided, according to different authors, real information about the behaviour of certain basic phonological distinctions. In this sense, Kristensson admits: “the material which has so far proved most profitable for the investigation of OE and ME dialects consists of place-names” (1967: XII). Place-names (PNs) have inherently on their side the possibility of providing with accuracy the exact location of the different dialectal variants, but their real importance and value in a dialectal investigation is that there are sound-developments whose evidence has only been attested in these forms.

Among the works devoted to the onomastic investigation of the English medieval dialects we have Serjeantson 1922, 1924, 1927a and 1927b, Ekwall 1931, Smith 1956, Ek 1972 and 1975 and Kristensson’s project, which so far has produced the volume corresponding to the six Northern counties and Lincolnshire (1967); the one devoted to the West Midland counties (1987); and the one that studies the East Midland counties (1995). This project, still in progress, intended to analyse ME dialects through the study of the PNs and surnames belonging to the period 1290-1350, and took as a point of departure the *Lay Subsidy Rolls* (SRs), since these are presumably the official documents that more faithfully reflect the local uses. The last volume in this series is the recently published Kristensson (2001), which deals with the vowels (except diphthongs) in the Southern counties.

The intention of the present dialectal research is also to contribute to a better knowledge of this Southern dialectal area, in particular to Kentish. This will be done through the formal analysis of Old English (OE) <y>, dialectally relevant in Middle Kentish (MKt), in medieval PN forms. Within this analysis, one of the aims is to confront the material assembled for the 12th century with that compiled for the 14th century (early and late ME sub-periods). Consequently, we cannot limit ourselves to consulting exclusively, on this occasion, the above mentioned SRs. Firstly, because these rolls date back, in their earlier, and therefore irregular, stages from the second half of the 12th century. Secondly, because, for different reasons, there are claims of other documents being equally important. In Arngart's opinion, for example, the *Assize Rolls* "may claim a nearly equal right with the Subsidy Rolls of being described as local documents" (1939: 26-27).

The decision was taken then to use, as a main source for my data-gathering, what constitutes so far the most valuable register, despite some justified objections concerning the archaic and obscure origin of our material, for a research on the medieval PNs of Kent, that is Wallenberg's *The Place-Names of Kent* (PNK: 1934)<sup>2</sup>.

Within dialectal studies, the *Linguistic Atlas of Late Mediaeval English* (LALME: 1986) represents the most up-to-date and complete work of reference, and therefore it will also be taken as a frame with which to contrast the 14th century data. Following a geographical perspective, but at the same time adopting a new methodology, LALME broke the ice in the dialectal research-field, providing us with a much more exact and faithful view of the late medieval English variation. Their authors, after applying a strict questionnaire to literary, legal and official texts, all of them from 1350-1450, succeeded in generating in Kent a total of 14 Linguistic Profiles (LPs) that were partially mapped in the *Atlas*. I will focus my attention on the items with OE *y* in these Kt LPs.

## 1. GENERAL DISTRIBUTION

Old English (OE) /y(:)/ is, mainly, the result of an *i*-umlaut process undergone by WGerm /u(:)/ (Wyld 1927: §§108-109; Campbell 1959: §288). This OE vocalic sound develops differently (graphically and phonetically) in the varied dialects during the ME period. The sound derived from old /y(:)/ seems to have undergone in the North and the greater part of the Midlands an unrounding process to /i, i:/, which is represented in texts as <i / y>. On the other hand, in the South East and the greater part of East Anglia, the evolution of /y(:)/ to <e> /ε, e:/ is the dominant feature (specially in the dialect of Kent). Finally, in the Southwest and greater part of the West Midlands this OE sound,

at least in a first stage<sup>3</sup>, seems to be preserved, although it does change its graphic representation from <y> to <u, ui, uy>.

Generally speaking, this is the ME distribution observed by authors like Luick (1914/1941: §287), Wyld (1927: §158) or Jordan-Crook (1925/1974: §§39-43), and also the arrangement that Mossé (1952: §29, Fig. 4) offers in a schematic map adapted from the isoglosses offered by Moore, Meech & Whitehall (1935).

The southern area, which covers the county of Kent, starts to be highlighted, at the end of the OE period, by presenting an evolution of OE /y(:)/ which is characterised by an unrounding and lowering effect, that is, an evolution towards /ɛ, e:/<sup>4</sup>. This is evidenced by Luick (1914/1941: §287), Wyld (1927: §142), Campbell (1959: §288), Jordan-Crook (1925/1974: §39(1) y §40)) who claims “the purest *e* territory is Kent” and Kristensson (2001: 116-17) who admits “/e(:)/ reigns supreme in K” in spite of “the appearance of sporadic <u> forms”.

Hogg (1992: §5.194) and some others claim, after the written evidence has been analysed, that the change /y(:)/ > /e(:)/ appears to be scarcely represented in texts before the 10th century<sup>5</sup>, and maintain that it is precisely during this century that such a development is generalized to the territories which Ek (1972) has called “*centres of e-development*”.

Wyld, on his part, has inferred from his textual analysis that such a modification (/y(:)/ > /e(:)/) could have even taken place earlier. According to him, the Kentish scribes “pronounced *e* whenever they saw or wrote *y*”, and therefore “*y* might come to be regarded as a symbol for the *e*-sound” at a very premature stage (1927: §142). Taking into account that the scribes tended to preserve the traditional spelling conventions, we cannot explain otherwise the existence of “*yfter* ‘after’ in a Ch. of 831, to represent Kt. *after*, W.S. *æfter*.” (Wyld 1927: §142). Ek, however, recognizes that even in late OE “*i*-forms spread from the neighbouring Midland *i*-area.” (Ek 1972: 12).

## 2. AIM

As we can see, opinions seem to be divided as far as the commencement of this Kt change, the extent of its area of influence, and its possible alternative variants are concerned. What I intend to do here is to show the distribution of OE *y* in 12th-and-14th-century Kt PNs, analyse my results and compare them with those offered either by the traditional textual analysis or the more recent onomastic sources.

In order to carry out this research, I distinguished, within each century, a first and a second element (according to the position of the variant under analysis in the PN form). Following the usual representation of the

corresponding variants on a general map, I first assigned a certain symbol to each specific development (generally speaking, ■ represents *e*-reflexes and ● *i*-reflexes; a further distinction was made between black ■ or white □ symbols, that is between exclusive or predominant variants, respectively). Each PDE locality was, besides, represented in capital or lower case letters, according to the exclusiveness or predominance of a specific variant in these medieval PN forms (rare cases or those in minority were represented with lower case letters within square brackets).

### 3. DISTRIBUTION OF OE *y* IN 12TH CENTURY KENTISH PLACE-NAMES

#### 3.1. First element

29 Kt localities that had OE *y* in the first or unique constituent were registered for the 12th century. In 9 of them we had an exclusive *e*. In 6, *e*-forms were just predominant. 3 of them showed a mixed alternative *e*/*i*, and finally, 2 localities presented a non-predominant *e* (see map 1). On the other hand, forms with *i*/*y*, were exclusive in 7 Kt localities, only predominant in 2, and finally, in 6 of them *i* was non-predominant<sup>6</sup> (see map 2).

We can infer from this that even though the *e*-forms seem to be predominant in the territory, the presence of the *i*-variant, above all when in an exclusive realisation, is noticeable. On the other hand, *Wormdale* located in the NW quarter or quadrangle<sup>7</sup> of map 1 and *Bridge* in the NE quadrangle of map 2 are the only cases which show *u*-reflexes (*Wurmedele* 1185-1214 Reg Roff and *Brugge* 1187-8 P).

#### 3.2. Second element

The Kt localities registered for the 12th century that had OE *y* in their second component were 28. Out of them, 14 showed *e* exclusively, and only 2 a predominant *e*. In other 2 localities, *e* is non-predominant (see map 3). Besides this abundant presence of *e*, the variant *i* appears as exclusive in 10 Kt localities, and in other 3 it is non-predominant (see map 4). The presence of *u*-reflexes only exists in *Calehill* (*Kalehulla* and *Calehulle*) in the SE quarter of map 4.

#### 4. DISTRIBUTION OF OE *y* IN 14TH CENTURY KENTISH PLACE-NAMES

##### 4.1. First element

98 Kt localities with OE *y* in the first or unique element were registered for the 14th century. Out of them, 42 have an exclusive *e*-variant, and other 8 have it in a predominant distribution. 2 show mixed developments in which the variant in question is involved: *a / e* and *e / i*, and finally, in 9 we have a non-predominant *e* (see map 5). This makes of this variant the most abundant development. The second most predominant development during the 14th century is *i*. 24 Kt localities have this reflex exclusively. Besides, other 8 have it in a predominant distribution and it is non-predominant only in 4 cases (see map 6).

The *i*-variant seems to predominate in the SW quadrangle, which is the one that presents more innovations with respect to the Kt tradition (see map 6). Unusual developments like *a* and *o*-reflexes, as well as the *u*-forms, appear with a certain frequency here and also in the Eastern half. In the NE quarter, however, their presence is more sporadic because here the expected Kt development *e* has a greater percentage (see map 5).

##### 4.2. Second element

137 Kt localities with OE *y* in the second element or constituent were registered for the 14th century. 67 out of them evolved to, or preserved, an exclusive and superior *e*-variant. To these exclusive cases, we must add 37 Kt localities where the *e*-variant is predominant, 11 where we observe mixed developments with the variant in question involved: *e / i*, *e / u*, *e / ø*, or *e / u / ø*, and finally, 5 cases in which *e* is non-predominant (see maps 7 and 8).

As opposed to what we have seen so far, the second most predominant development in this second element in 14th-century Kent is the *u*-reflex<sup>8</sup>. In 9 Kt localities *u* is exclusive, and in other 5 it is predominant. Besides, in 5 localities *u* is also part of a mixed development *e / u* or *e / u / ø*, and in other 28 *u* appears as a non-predominant development (see map 9).

Generally speaking, the Northern half is characterised by having a majority of *e*-forms, a high frequency of *u* (being this variant the second most important development) and a complete absence or a very low frequency of *i*. The Southern half, on the other hand, also shows a high percentage of *e*-forms, but their second most important developments, apart from being quite distant from the predominant variant as far as the frequency is concerned, are mixed, and in any case, involve *u* as much as *i*.

## 5. COMPARATIVE ANALYSIS

Of the comparison between our 12th and 14th century material, it is evident that for the 12th century, for the first as much as for the second constituent, there seems to be a distinction between a Western zone, in which the Kt dialectal variant *par excellence* (i.e., *e*) predominates over any other, especially *i* (see maps 1 and 3), and an Eastern zone, in which the future standard variant predominates (i.e., *i*), particularly over *e* (see maps 2 and 4).

In the 14th century, however, there is a clear preference for *e*. Nevertheless, it is worth noting that the difference there exists between a first constituent in which the alternative to *e* is *i* (see maps 5 and 6), and a second constituent in which a persistent and dominant *e* is lightly contested by alternatives like *u*<sup>9</sup>, being *i* relegated here to a third place in the order of frequency (see maps 7, 8 and 9).

With respect to the first constituent of our place-names, we can observe, on the one hand, a conservative tendency to preserve and even increase the *e*-forms everywhere except in the SE quarter. On the other hand, there is a tendency towards a slight innovation or regularisation from the point of view of the future standard norm (i.e., the *i*-variant), in this SE quarter.

With respect to the second element, it is worth mentioning the presence of the *i*-variant as the second most frequent development during the 12th century, as opposed to *u* which appears in this place in the 14th century. This difference is, of course, secondary to the obvious predominance of *e* in both centuries.

On the other hand, with respect to LALME, all the LPs analysed have items in which OE *y* is present (see map 10). These items are SUCH, CHURCH, FIRST, KIND, WHICH, MUCH, FILTH, FIRE, LITTLE, BURY, BUSY, HILL, FILL, SIN, WORK, EVIL, PRIDE, BRIDGE. According to LALME, the *e*-reflex predominates only in LPs 5870, 5960, 6050 and 9380. In the rest of them, except for LP 5950 where we have *e* / *y* / *u* reflexes, the predominant development is, paradoxically, *i* / *y*. Making a detailed account of the registered forms in the Northern half (where most LPs concentrate), we notice that in the NW *e* predominates over a very frequent *i* / *y*. In the NE, it is the *i* / *y* variant the one that predominates with a certain intensity over an *e* that, although secondary, is by no means infrequent.

There is a coincidence between our name-forms and the items of the different LPs, as far as the NW quadrangle is concerned. Nevertheless, in the NE quadrangle, although there appears to be a certain frequency in the use of *i* in our PN forms for the 12th century, such a tendency seems to be broken, paradoxically, in the 14th century where *i* is simply relegated to a second place after *e*. This shows a small discrepancy between our data and LALME's.

The editors of the *Atlas* drew, thanks to the data compiled for LALME, a preliminary map where the distribution of the most important variants of CHURCH in late medieval England is shown. Such a map was published by Jones (1972) and is mentioned here for 2 fundamental reasons: i. the

distributional pattern evidenced in it reflects a situation much more complex and faithful with the dialectal reality than the simplistic version presented by Mossé (1952) in his adaptation of the pertinent isoglosses of Moore, Meech and Whitehall (1935); ii. As far as Kent is concerned, this map shows a coincidence with my data, because despite the regularity of *e* shown in the NW quarter for the first element in the 14th century, there abound in the Western half of the county, alternative developments like *i* and *o*<sup>10</sup>.

In Ek (1972), the material compiled for Kent during the period 1100-1350 shows 65,3% of *e*-forms, which coincides, in general, with my analysis. This author besides claims that “The *u*-spellings that occur are found above all in brycg, byrh, hrycg, hyll and hyrst” (1972: 60)<sup>11</sup>. In the present case, most of the 12th century PNs with OE *hyll*, or OE *hyrst* (two of the most frequent lexical components with OE *y* in Kent) have *e*. In the 14th century, however, PNs with *u* seem to increase, which might indicate a chronological motivation (see maps 11, 12, 13 y 14 for the comparison between PNs with *hyll* and *hyrst* in the 12th and 14th centuries). Even more, if one examines the material gathered by Ek himself, only *Chiselhurst* 1158-9 (PNK) for Chislehurst and *Hacnostesyle* c. 1100 for Hinxhill have in the 12th century a development different from the dialectal variant *e*<sup>12</sup>.

As for Kristensson (2001) we have to say that his onomastic material for Kent seems to be much more uniform than that analysed here. His definite conclusion is that of the preponderance of *e*, despite some occasional *u*-reflexes (the *i*-variant being completely absent). The coincidence exists with our forms in the overall majority of *e*, and in the presence of *u*, not precisely occasional in our 14th century PNs. The difference lies, however, in the abundance of the *i*-reflexes we have. The fact that most of these *i*-cases happen to belong to our 12th century material might explain this apparent discrepancy with the name-forms (from 1290-1350) analysed by Kristensson.

## 6. CONCLUSION

As a first conclusion we can claim that, regardless of the constituent, the predominance of the Kt development *par excellence* (i.e., *e*) tends to make itself felt with a greater preponderance among our PNs at the end of the ME period than at the beginning. Nevertheless, it is worth mentioning the opposite tendency (i.e., the predominance of *i*) observed for the first constituent in the SE quarter already in the 12th century. Consequently, we can say the presence of the variant *i* in our Kt PNs is not simply sporadic.

Secondly, as far as the presence of *u* is concerned, this variant hardly appears in our 12th century forms, but it does occur in 14th century Kent, especially in those PNs made up of lexical items where OE *y* is followed by *-l* or *-r*, like OE *hyll* or *hyrst*.



## NOTES

<sup>1</sup> This paper is part of a research project titled “Diccionario nuclear sintáctico de base semántica del léxico inglés antiguo”, funded by the Gobierno Autónomo de Canarias (No. PI 1999/136).

<sup>2</sup> Ek (1975) also uses, as a base for his data of Kent, Wallenberg’s PNK. Apart from this primary source, we also used Anderson (1934-1939), Cameron (1961), Reany (1964), Copley (1968) and Ekwall (1980).

<sup>3</sup> At the end of the 14th century this /y(:)/ lost completely its rounded feature and converged with the Northern and Midlands variant *i*.

<sup>4</sup> “Well before the Norman Conquest OE *y* had become *e* in Kentish. Outside of Kent this tendency is encountered in Sussex, Surrey, and as far as the southern part of the East-Midlands (...) and finally in the dialect of the City of London about the middle of the 14th century.” (Mossé 1952: §29 (Remark I)).

<sup>5</sup> Campbell argues, in this sense, the possibility that what is expressed in the Kt texts at that time is but a reflection of the Mercian tradition and that, therefore, what appears in them is not “the occurrence of Kt. sound-changes, but the gradual emancipation of Kt. spelling from Merc. tradition, leading to a better expression of the phonological facts of the dialect.” (Campbell 1959: §290).

<sup>6</sup> As has already been pointed out, 3 localities offered a mixed development *e* / *i*.

<sup>7</sup> Some author on explaining his/her conclusions uses the concept of quarter or quadrangle. In Benskin (1991: 240), for example, such a term is used when trying to locate the *Ipotis* fragment from *Bodleian MS Eng.poet.c.3*: “The combination of [...] reduces the eligible area to London and the south-west **quarter** of Essex.”

<sup>8</sup> According to Ek the explanation to these developments could be that perhaps “Before [l the [y]-pronunciation seems to have remained considerably longer than otherwise [...] As for byrh and hyrst we may have to take into account a special development before r which keeps the u longer.” (Ek 1972: 60). See also in this respect Jordan-Crook (1925/1974: §42; Remark 1).

<sup>9</sup> The frequency of this *u* could be due, in this case, to the abundance of the components *hyll* and *hyrst* as a second constituent in our place-name forms during the 14th century.

<sup>10</sup> For our second element we can also see how *u* is the second most important development after *e* in the Northern half of the county.

<sup>11</sup> See previous note.

<sup>12</sup> See Lamberhurst: Lamburherste c. 1100, Lamburherst 1199; Napchester: Napisherst 1198-9; Penshurst: Penherst 1199 (CR), 1199-1216 (PNK); Sandhurst PNK 323; Sandherst 1173-1218; Sissinghurst: Saxingerherst(e) c. 1180; Speldhurst: Speldherste c. 1100 (PNK); Thornhurst (lost): Tornherst 1164-5 (P); St. Margarets: Helle c. 1100, Helles 1193-1205; Hell’, Helles 1199 (PNK); Hinxhill: Hangsel c. 1140-4; Wormshill: Godeshelle c. 1100 (PNK) in Ek (1972: 60).

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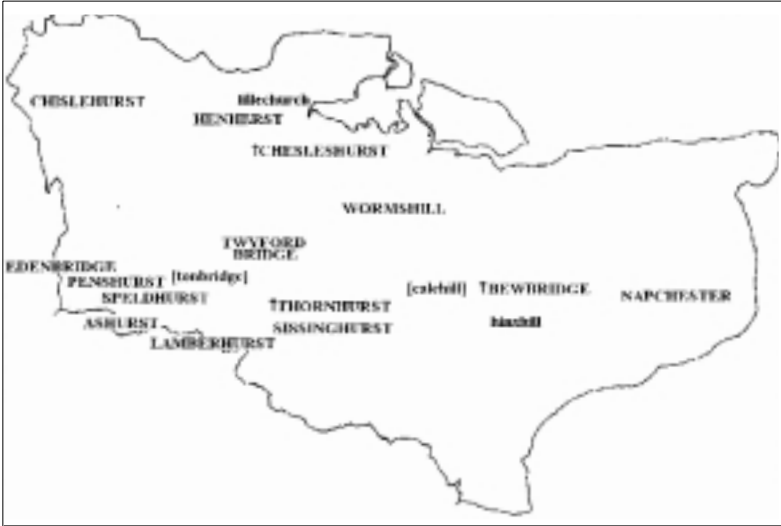
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MAP 1. 12th century localities with *e* in the first constituent.



MAP 2. 12th century localities with *i / y* in the first constituent.



MAP 3. 12th century localities with *e* in the second constituent.



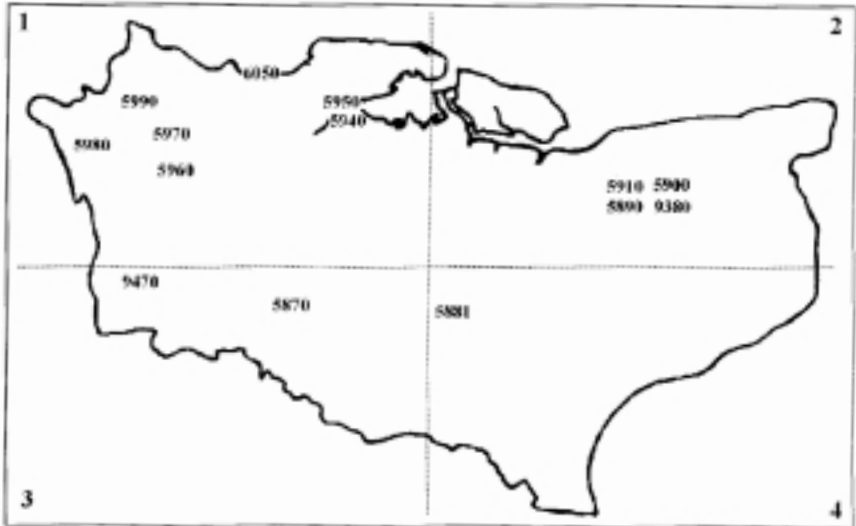
MAP 4. 12th century localities with *i / y* in the second constituent.







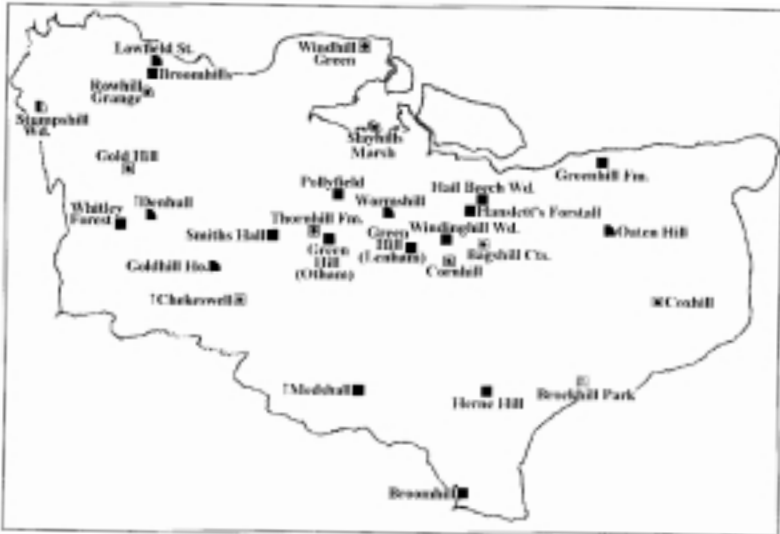
MAP 9. 14th century localities with *u* in the second constituent.



MAP 10. Distribution of Kt LPs.

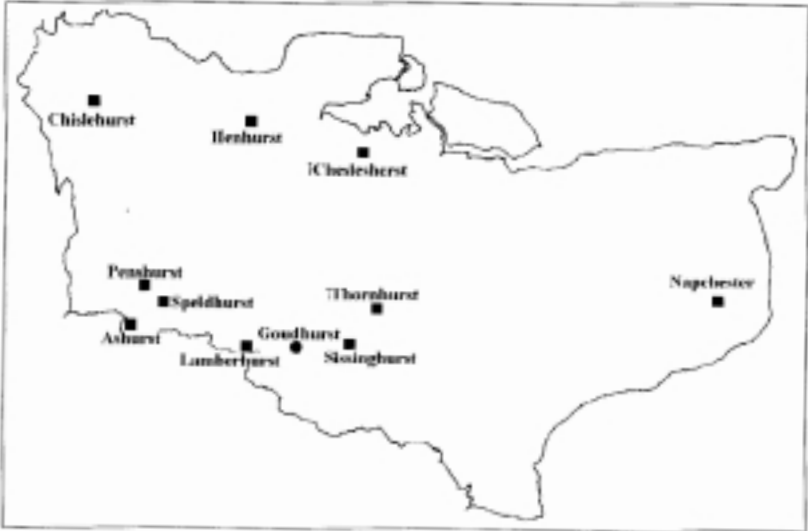


MAP 11. 12th century localities with OE *hyll* in the second constituent.

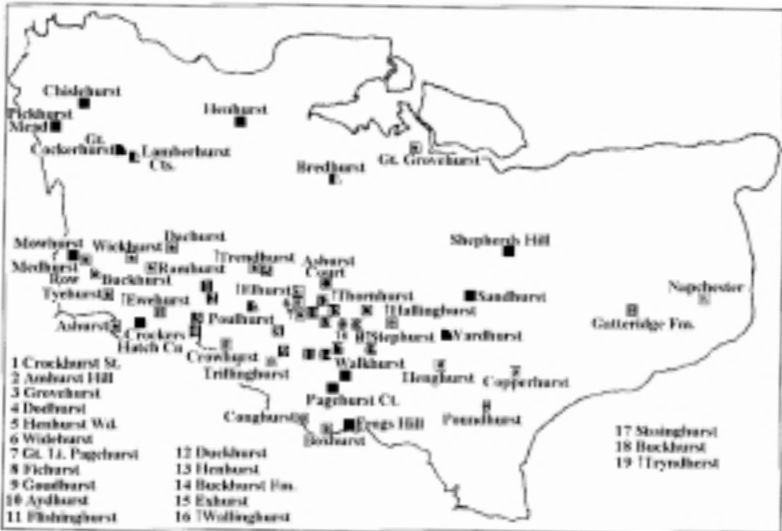


MAP 12. 14th century localities with OE *hyll* in the second constituent.





MAP 13. 12th century localities with OE *hyrst* in the second constituent.



MAP 14. 14th century localities with OE *hyrst* in the second constituent.