De principio - The development of a name, By Eric Smith

The first reference to Reodmaereleague appears in 619 and is recorded in the Codex Diplomaticus Aevi Saxonici, one of the principal compilations of Anglo-Saxon chronicles and charters edited by J.M. Kemble (Trinity College, Cambridge 1838) and currently preserved in the British Library. The next reference is not until 962 in the Cartularium Saxonicum edited by W.deG. Birch (London 1885). Other Anglo-Saxon (pre-Norman Conquest) renderings include Rydemaerelege, Hrydmaerlean, and Rydmerlege. Among the spellings following the pivotal events of 1066 and the advent of William the Conqueror we find Ridmerlege (Domesday Book 1086), Ryd(e)mer(e)lege - mar - ley(e); Rodmerelegh, Ridmaerley, Redmaerley and (passim until the 20th century!) Ridmarley (vide Vict.Co.Hist.Worcestershire, Vol 3 & op.cit.infra). The familial suffix d'Abitot and variants including Dabytot, Dabitot, Abitot and Abetot are first recorded as being used in 1352 (Place-names Gloucestershire Vol.3 ed.A.H.Smith 1967). The reasons for this tardy arrival will be discussed later [This is probably a convenient moment to say that the Civil Parish of Redmarley was moved from Worcestershire to Gloucestershire in 1931. Similarly the Ecclesiastical Parish was transferred from the Diocese of Worcester to the Diocese of Gloucester as from 1978 (vide Glos.Dioc.Yr.Bk. 1978); this explains why reference is made throughout to both 'Worcestershire' and 'Gloucestershire'].

The Normans made an enormous contribution to the development of the English language in most spheres, but in the matter of the place-names of the pre-Conquest settlements the words continued to develop according to the rules of the Germanic group of languages (Anglo-Saxon) with little interference from the Romance languages (specifically Latin and medieval French). In the case of Redmarley and the variants noted above, the three elements - 'red' + 'mar' + 'ley' are derived from well-established Anglo-Saxon vocabulary:

Red - (Anglo-Saxon) hreod; reod (Modern English) reed ; reed-bed Mar - (A.S.) mere; maere (M.E) pool, pond - indeed any stretch of water e.g. Windermere Ley - (A.S.) leah, leagh, lege (M.E.) - clearing (in woodland or rough scrub-land), 'lea' an area of reasonably smooth grass.

The 'h' in one of the variants is an attempt by the scribe to reproduce the initial uvular 'r' sound used in Anglo-Saxon speech.

Thus, we conclude that Redmarley means 'the clearing round the reedy pool', the 'pool' (or 'pond') in question being doubtless the pool which presumably existed in very early Saxon times and which still features prominently on the 1838 Tithe Map of the village, situated a few yards south of the Church. Long-established residents of the village even today remember this pond clearly, and pinpoint the exact location as being the spot on the present School property upon which the Headteacher's office now stands. Eric Smith recalls seeing an old photograph of this 'pool' with children standing on the bank . The well-trimmed hedge in the background borders the principal road going through the village. The picture was in the possession of the late Miss Hilda Rouse - does it perhaps still exist? (Eric Smith has a very poor quality newspaper reproduction dated August 1987).

An alternative meaning of 'Redmarley' which is sometimes advanced is that the name is derived from the reddish-brown sandstone clay soil upon which the village stands. This may seem

beguilingly straightforward as an 'explanation', but for several reasons it is clearly not a tenable view. True, the soil in the area is reddish-brown, but so it is round every settlement great or small standing on the broad sandstone belt which extends from south-west of the River Wye northwards for over sixty miles into Shropshire, south Staffordshire and Warwickshire. Generally speaking, a place-name is chosen by early settlers to distinguish their 'patch' from that of other communities in the immediate neighbourhood. However, in this case, 'red sandstone' does not serve in any way as an individualising feature for the village name by way of comparison with soil of the same colour surrounding other settlements in the vicinity. Moreover, from the linguistic point of view, the colour 'red' is invariably spelt in Anglo-Saxon as 'read' with a long vowel sometimes diphthongised. This 'read' spelling never appears in the various versions recorded in the case of our village. Additionally, the suggestion that the middle syllable is associated with the geological term 'marl' may well sound 'vaguely scientific', but linguistically it too, is equally untenable. The O.E.D. and Chambers Dictionary of Etymology both agree that 'marl' and for that matter, 'red marl' were not used in English until the fourteenth century, some seven centuries after the establishment of the village. The remaining syllable in 'Redmarley', after discussing the 'red' and the 'marl', is obviously the 'ey', which quite frankly has no meaning at all as a place-name element.

The familial suffix "d'Abitot" is, like the main element in the village, Germanic (Scandinavian or Anglo-Saxon - both have the same spelling). The first syllable 'Aeppe(l)' (meaning, hardly surprisingly, 'apple'). follows Grimms' Law with the unvoiced labial 'p' + vowel mutating to a voiced 'b' to produce 'ab(b)e' [Jakob Grimm (1785 - 1863) and brother Wilhelm were two of the first great European philologists of the nineteenth century. They are better remembered by the general reader for their collections of 'Fairy Tales']. Another possibility is that 'Abbe' is a personal name of ownership, and a name still in use in Scandinavia to this day. To this form 'Abbe' we add what is, in the initial Scandinavian, the termination 'topt' (enclosure, farmstead - later 'village'). Again following Grimm the 'p' + consonant mutates to 'f' to give 'toft' as found in 'Viking-English' and in a form to be found still surviving today in a number of small place-names in eastern England, for example 'Lowestoft' (vide Domesday Book Online website). In Norman French however, the 'f' in 'toft' goes one stage further and disappears completely, leaving us with 'tot' - 'Abbetot' (Abitot), (= 'apple enclosure' i.e., 'orchard'). [This phenomenon of the vanished 'p>f' will be noted in a later paragraph when reference is made to the thirty or so settlements in present-day Normandy ending in 'tot']. On the assumption that the d'Abitot family came from Normandy, as is generally believed, then their 'surname' is appropriate bearing in mind that orchards are a prominent feature of the landscape there even today.

It was mentioned in the opening paragraph that in the place-name the familial suffix "d'Abitot" does not appear to have been used before 1352 (op.cit). A detailed review of the Domesday Book entries for Worcestershire (Morris/Phillimore edition) confirms that in 1086 all the manors were each identified only by one single name. Comparing Morris with Mawer & Stenton (Pl.names Worcs: 1927), we see that in the case of at least fourteen manors the familial suffices make their appearance for the first time at various dates between 1242 and 1445, well after the death of the original land-holders at Domesday. By a convenient coincidence, d'Abitot appears almost exactly mid-way through this period. Mawer & Stenton suggest that this phenomenon is probably due to the greatly increased number of enfeoffments (or infeudations - contracts conveying land and property with attendant feudal rights and obligations), which were being entered into at that time,

as the hitherto largely predictable paths of inheritance within the family yielded in an increasing number of cases to a new order of manorial lordship. The two centuries between the above dates were a period of great social change. Many of the original Norman families were dying out or had fallen on hard times. Newcomers, whether of different established lineage or part of a new class of 'nouveaux riches' were replacing them. As Hibbert observes (The English, a Social History 1066-1945) "it was becoming common for the richer burgesses from the towns to set up as country gentlemen, and aspire to socially superior marriages for their daughters". In the case of Redmarley, (vide VCH Worcs Vol.3 and also Dr.R.Treadway Nash 'Collections for a History of Worcestershire' 1782) the succession had not been by any means a straightforward affair through the d'Abitot line. The manor had been subsumed after the death of Urso into the growing Beauchamp 'empire', with that family presiding as mesne lords (principal tenants) for long periods. Distant relatives of Urso did eventually reappear as subtenants, - including a seemly endless series of 'Geoffrey d'Abitots' who alternated in tenure with the de Sapy family - distant relatives also (Osbern FitzRichard had held the manor of Sapey (on Teme) - north-west of Worcester - at the time of Domesday, but the de Sapys had now long been 'in residence' there). The two families, the d'Abitots and the de Sapys, spent much time in bitter and prolonged litigation which spilled over on more than one occasion into violence and crime. One of these 'Geoffrey d'Abitots' in the early 14th century achieved notoriety by actively joining in a rebellion against the Despenser family. After being imprisoned in Gloucester Castle, Geoffrey was compelled by the 'force and duress of the King' (Edward III) to yield his manor to the Despensers, though not apparently as a permanent arrangement. Doubtless seeing an opportunity to score over their old rivals, when the time for restitution arrived, the de Sapys again appeared on the scene with their claims and the d'Abitots unfortunately achieved only a partial success with their demands for what they saw as the legitimate restoration of their lands. A truce of sorts between the warring families was eventually reached after more litigation when in the late fourteenth century the manor again passed, this time by purchase, (a new concept as opposed to inheritance) back into the hands of the Despensers - very distant descendants of Robertus Dispensator [Robert the Bursar - brother, (some say step-brother) of Urso]. During this confused period one of the d'Abitots, - it is not clear which of the many Geoffreys of the 'clan', - appears to have seen fit to follow the current fashion, but far more importantly to emphasise indelibly what he saw as his hard-won claim to lordship, by causing his family name to be appended for the first time to the actual place-name in a deed of 1352. (Pl.names Glos Vols3&4). He may well have hoped that this would settle the matter once and for all. Such optimism proved sadly misplaced. (VCH.Worcs.Vol.3). The Rector and Churchwardens of St. Bartholomew's Church are fortunate in possessing the Registers of baptisms and burials (1703 - 1800) . In Vol.2 (Part 1.) the following note appears in the front of the Register, which highlights for us this event some 350 years earlier. Ridmarley Dabetot was so called from Geoffry de Abetot - a Descendant of Robert D'abetot, Steward of the Household to King William the Conqueror (i.e. his 'Dispensator' as noted above) and Brother to Urso D'abitot who was under the same King Sheriff of this County [Changing the subject, the Churchwarden also goes on to add, 'The Tower of Ridmarley D'abitot was rebuilded (sic) in ye year 1738'. Elsewhere in the Register he notes 'The first pargetting of the Church and Chancel was in 1721'. (Pargetting = plastering, strictly speaking, of the outside walls. This refers of course, to the building which preceded to present Church, which dates from the mid-1850's)].

But we digress. To return to the topic of the infeudations of the 13th and 14th centuries Changes in tenure/ownership took on various forms in different manors. For example, at the 'other' Redmarley (near Great Witley) the single manor held by Ralph de Tosney at Domesday was later divided into two - Redmarley Adam and Redmarley Olifar. Similarly 'Hanley' in 1086 was divided into Hanley Thane and Hanley William. - these 'additions' being the names of the new 'owners' - and all appearing on deeds dated 1242. While, of course, many such 'arrangements' were successful, division of land was too often disastrous; the new holdings were uneconomic and bad husbandry of an already exhausted soil led to ruin, In some cases the new 'parvenus' lacked the knowledge of agriculture which the 'old' families had built up over generations. Other factors, beyond the control of man, also played their part. A series of bad harvests and severe extremes of weather, both hot and cold, flooding and prolonged droughts were phenomena which led to the period from 1250 being described as the Little Ice Age (The official Met. Office website on the history of climate change makes interesting reading). They suggest that there may well be some link between climatic extremes and the Black Death of 1346 which further compounded the social misery. Whole families, both rich and poor, were wiped out; - this was the great period of the so-called 'deserted' or 'plague' villages, a subject of much archaeological interest today. Finally, this was latterly the period of the Hundred Years War (1337-1453). Though actually fought across the provinces of France, taking in a vast area from Flanders, Normandy and Brittany in the north, down through Poitou to Aquitaine in the south-west, the conflict took a terrible and prolonged toll of English manhood and hence of their families left at home, and from which society took generations to recover. It is hard to imagine that any manor remained untouched by these dire events. Against this gloomy background we may mention in conclusion a few more manors which took on family names - for example, Croome + d'Abitot (1275); Naunton + Beauchamp (1370) Rous + Lench (1445); Broughton + Hackett (1275); Chaddesley + Corbett (1431), Hampton + Lovett (1315), Shelsley + Walsh (1275). It is beyond the scope of this modest monograph to explore the reasons which prompted the changes in all these cases - -doubtless they are very interesting - but we may be fairly confident that there was more to it than merely being 'slaves of fashion'. Before leaving this topic of 'familial suffices' it is useful to compare briefly 'Redmarley' and 'Croome'. Redmarley, as we know, was held by Urso at Domesday, while Croome was held at that time by Ordric and Siward as sub-tenants of the Bishop of Worcester. (Urso was 'nowhere in the picture'.) The VCH tells us that Croome passed directly into the Beauchamp 'empire' early 12th century and was then sub-let about 1168 to a certain Robert d'Abitot, only distantly related to Urso on the one hand and to the 'Redmarley' d'Abitots on the other In the case of both manors (cf. Mawer and Stenton op.cit), the familial suffices were used by 'tenants' who, at best, were only very distant relatives of Urso.

Finally, one sometimes regrettably comes across "d'Abitot" adorned with a circumflex accent over the 'o'. (making it "d'abitôt"). This is emphatically incorrect, historically and linguistically. As we have already shown, both component elements in the village name are Germanic in origin, and the circumflex accent as used in French has no part at all in words derived from this language group. It is one of the most basic rules of French historical grammar that the circumflex diacritic is used virtually exclusively on words of Romance (Latin) origin. It is, as it happens, quite easy to write down say, forty French ('Latin') words which have to take a circumflex, and another forty ('non Latin') which do not, - and the differences 'in origin' will at once be obvious. Even though the circumflex has no place here in a word which, linguistically, is of 'Germanic' origin, it may be

of interest to see why this accent is required in the large French vocabulary of 'Romance' words. The circumflex is a device of fairly recent 'invention', dating back no further than about the 1750's. At this period France was in a great period of social change. With the death of Louis XIV in 1715, the whole structure of the absolute monarchy which he had built up began to crumble. Change was in the air. Everything which bore the stamp of the out-moded 'ancien régime' was questioned and rejected in the rapid build-up to the cataclysm of the Revolution of 1789. Though not often commented upon, the language was not exempt from this purge. The circumflex accent was introduced to replace an 's' which up till then had survived in the spelling of 'Romance' words, despite the fact that it had not been pronounced in these words for many centuries. For example, we have:

(Latin) costa (Pre-mid 18c Fr) coste (Mod.Fre) côte (Côte d'Azur) = (English) coast

Another illustration that a circumflex is not required on the (Germanic) "Abitot" is afforded by reference to maps such as Michelin or the I.G.N. (The French 'Ordnance Survey'). In the triangle Le Havre, Rouen and Fécamp at least thirty settlements may be noted which end in 'tot'. Not one of these places has a circumflex. We may take it that French cartographers know what they are about. The largest of these places is Yvetot, known to the present writer as a thriving market town, largely rebuilt since the devastations of WWII. There is some interesting modern stained-glass in the almost circular Eglise St. Pierre, (regarded as being of notable architectural interest) - and one thing about the local citizens, they certainly don't decorate their town with a circumflex! It is a great pity that some late 19th century Victorian historian - research shows that fortunately the 'mistake' only goes that far back, showed such misguided zeal without being master or (or mistress!) of the facts. It is also no credit to the County Council or to the person 'in authority' who sanctioned the inaccurate spelling on the prominent road-signs on the A417.

Source: Eric Smith