



The relevance of surnames in genealogy

Unfortunately only a very small number of pedigrees of British families can be traced to the person who first used the surnames they now bear. Many surnames have been corrupted to such an extent that their original forms may only be discovered after quite considerable research. This may involve tracing the pedigree step by step from the present backwards in time, not only to detect the changes but also to discover the area of the country from which the family came. Present day forms of a large number of surnames are due to the spelling of 16th or 17th century parsons, or even to the registrars of births in the 19th century. They had no guide to the spellings of names and attempted to reproduce phonetically the sounds they heard, as the great majority of the population were illiterate and had no notion that any one spelling of their name was more 'correct' than any other.

All our original ancestors used a one-part name, whether they were Celts, Anglo-Saxons, Scandinavians or Normans. Certain people before the Norman conquest, and in growing numbers afterwards, had an additional 'byname', but these were not hereditary surnames in the modern sense as they did not pass from father to son. Such names may appear in Domesday Book, but they have no relevance here. It was not until the early 12th century that surnames became hereditary among the nobility. They spread gradually amongst the ordinary people in the next century, from the town to the country and from the south of England to the north. Most people in England did not, however, have anything approaching an hereditary surname until the end of the 14th century.

The growth of surnames

The growing need for identification in mediaeval England had probably led the clerks to give people these additional names. They might be those of their fathers (patronymics) or of some other relation, or the name of the place where they lived or from which they had come (locative surnames), or the names of their offices or occupations, or some descriptive or nick-name. These additional names might vary considerably during a man's life, change from generation to generation, be changed at apprenticeship or be subject to translation by the clerks at their whim, so that the process by which they became fixed and passed from father to son was quite accidental. These people themselves sometimes used different names from those by which they were known by the clerks. Thus no clue can be obtained from the surname alone as to the original nationality or racial origin of a family. See P H Reaney, *The origin of English surnames* (1967).

The process by which names became hereditary followed later in Scotland and Ireland than in England, and in Wales and Shetland a large proportion of the population did not develop stable hereditary surnames until the 18th century, many not becoming stable until the middle of the 19th century.

The origins of surnames

Because it is often impossible to know the original form and, therefore, the etymology or meaning of the surname of a particular family until one has traced that family's history and seen how its surname has changed over time the various available dictionaries of surnames should be used with the greatest care. Many of the older dictionaries are of little value, except perhaps to show what people have believed in the past. The most recent major work is P Hanks and F Hodges, *A dictionary of surnames* (1988) which attempts to explain the origins and meanings of surnames from the English-speaking world and includes many of European and Jewish extraction. However, the most authoritative work is P H Reaney and R M Wilson, *A dictionary of English surnames* (3rd edn. 1991) which lists the surviving spellings of many surnames as well as giving referenced examples from the earliest times. The paper-back edition of this dictionary (OUP, 1997) has a useful Appendix by D Hey, 'Locating the home of a family name'.

You may be able to test the explanation of your surname as given in these dictionaries by studying its later distribution. Some surnames which were formerly frequent are now rare, following the extinction of many male lines. If a surname is rare it may have a 'single-family' origin. This is frequently the case with surnames derived from the names of farms in areas of scattered settlement. In earlier times many aliases are found and these often arise from the parallel use of a surname derived from a farm name as well as another descriptive surname. Later they may arise through illegitimacy, the remarriage of a parent or the inheritance of property from a female relative.

Reaney and Wilson largely excluded surnames derived from place-names and many of these will be found in C W Bardsley, *A dictionary of English and Welsh surnames* (1901, reprinted 1980), which gives early referenced examples of the surnames mentioned. The derivations, however, are not to be relied upon and for the meanings of place-names one should consult Eilert Ekwall, *Concise Oxford dictionary of English place-names* (1960) or, failing that, the appropriate county volume published by the English Place-Name Society. Many puzzling surnames which do not appear in dictionaries derive from obscure or lost place or manorial names, perhaps corrupted because of unfamiliarity almost beyond recognition. Many examples of the way in which surnames are corrupted over time are provided by G Redmonds, *Surnames and genealogy: a new approach* (Boston, USA, 1997).

In a few counties one is very fortunate to have the detailed volumes published in the *English surnames series*, based on research undertaken at Leicester University. These now cover the West Riding of Yorkshire (ed. G Redmonds, 1973), Norfolk and Suffolk (ed. R A McKinley, 1975), Oxfordshire (ed. R A McKinley, 1977), Lancashire (ed. R A McKinley, 1981), Sussex (ed. R A McKinley, 1988) and Devon (ed. D Postles, 1995) with Leicestershire and Rutland in the press.

Surname distribution

Bardsley's dictionary, mentioned above, also gives counts by county of the number of occurrences of each surname taken from *A return of owners of land* (1873), a work frequently called the 'Modern Domesday Book'. This lists those who owned more than one acre of land and is arranged by county, in two volumes with additional volumes for Scotland and Ireland. It is to be found in most leading reference libraries. The return can lead one directly to where bearers of a surname with their roots in the ground were living at the time of the 1871 census.

Another useful work showing the distribution of surnames is H B Guppy, *Homes of family names in Great Britain* (1890) based on counts of farmers' surnames in late Victorian county directories. Though discredited as misleading on the original homes of family names, the book is not far out for the nineteenth century. It bravely tackles not only the distribution but the incidence, per 10,000 of the population, of even the most frequent surnames. In this century the geographical distribution of unusual surnames may to a large extent still be ascertained from modern telephone directories. A table showing the relative frequency of the 147 most common surnames in the twentieth century appears in the *Genealogists' Magazine*, vol. 25, no. 11 (September 1997).

Now that the 1881 census returns for England, Scotland and Wales have been transcribed and indexed and are available on microfiche in many libraries and Family History Centres it is an easy matter to calculate the relative frequency of any surname at that time. For the launch of a national project based on these indexes see the *Journal of One-Name Studies*, vol. 6, no. 3 (July 1997).

The centralised indexes to the civil registration of births, marriages and deaths in England and Wales, which commence in 1837, and which are widely available on microfiche and microfilm will give an indication of the distribution of any surname at a slightly earlier period. Many examples are to be found in D Hey, 'The local history of family names' in *The local historian*, vol. 27, no. 3 (1997) and in C D Rogers, *The surname detective* (1995).

The International Genealogical Index (IGI) of baptisms and marriages in England and Wales compiled by the Genealogical Society of Utah, particularly in its CD-ROM version, will, because of the great number of entries included, provide a similar guide to the distribution of any surname back to the mid-sixteenth century. That distribution may be distorted in some instances, however, because of the incomplete coverage of the Index. A computer program which will take data from the IGI on CD-ROM and display its county distribution on maps is described in *Computers in genealogy*, vol. 6 (1997) 30-6, 77-81.

Surname variants

The IGI usually has all the variant forms of a surname conveniently grouped under a 'standard' spelling. Other useful indexes which do this are the will indexes published by the British Record Society in its *Index Library* series. These include indexes to the Prerogative Court of Canterbury in which wills and administrations for the whole country appear during the Commonwealth period, 1653-60 (57,000 wills in vols. 54 and 61, and 43,000 administrations in vols. 68, 72, 74 and 75). Another index with a wide coverage in which the variants are grouped together is the typescript index of Apprentices of Great Britain 1710-74 at the Society of Genealogists. Boyd's Marriage Index (England only) 1538-1837 and the Great Card Index at the Society should not be overlooked.

For Scotland, variant spellings and early examples are shown in G F Black, *The surnames of Scotland* (1946, reprinted 1963). For Ireland, E MacLysaght, *The surnames of Ireland* (1980) and R Bell, *The book of Ulster surnames* (1980), and for Wales J & S Rowlands, *The surnames of Wales; for family historians and others* (1988) and T J & P Morgan, *Welsh surnames* (1985) should be consulted.

Changes of name

In England anybody may change his or her name without any formality whatsoever. The change may be effected by merely assuming the new name, though it is advisable to have some proof that one has assumed the new name. This is generally provided by deed-poll or by Royal Licence, and occasionally has been done by private Act of Parliament. In all these cases the name has been changed by voluntary assumption and not by these documents, which are only evidence of the assumption. The great majority of changes of surname have thus probably gone unrecorded but if some record has been made a reference may be found in W P W Phillimore & E A Fry, *An index to change of names 1760-1901* (1905, reprinted 1968). Deeds poll of change of name were sometimes (though not always) enrolled in Chancery after 1851 and from 1903 in the Supreme Court of Judicature. Those enrolled since 1914 have been published in the *London Gazette*. These records may be found at the Public Record Office, Kew.