Surname Searching at the Society of Genealogists

What’s been done before?
The relevance of surnames to family history research

The Society of Genealogists collects printed and published family histories as well as unpublished material in typescript or manuscript form. Family histories and pedigrees can be found all over the library and of course online.

Look at printed and bound works on the Family History Shelves in the Upper Library

The Society of Genealogists library has an extraordinary amount of family history research notes within its collections. Thousands of bound family histories and biographies have been deposited on the Family History Shelves in the Upper Library. These are arranged largely in alphabetical order and listed by surname on the Library catalogue.

Search SoGCAT
(the Society of Genealogists’ Library Catalogue  www.sog.org.uk)

Use the browse & subject search facility e.g. SMITH (SURNAME). Double click OR tick the box and click view. You should now have a list of all the Society’s holdings for published printed or bound material related to the name along with the references you will need to find the items in the Library.

Please note we have not catalogued all surnames names in every book in the library; only those with at least three generations of narrative family history are listed. Information on families will, of course, be located in sources for the places where they lived or what they did. You will also need to search other materials in the library as outlined below.

Check bibliographies listing what’s been published

There are major bibliographies which list printed or published family histories – often in periodicals and topographical works as well as dedicated genealogical publications. These bibliographies can be found at the SoG on the quick reference shelves at the Middle Library Enquiry Counter and are listed in the reading list below. The Society will have many of the works cited in these works. Some of these bibliographies and the books they refer to can be found on Google Books.

Further reading; (all found at the SoG Middle Library Enquiry Counter)
A Genealogical Guide by J B Whitmore
The Genealogist’s Guide by G B Barrow
A Catalogue of British Family Histories by T R Thomson
The Genealogist’s Guide by G W Marshall
Scottish Family History by M Stuart
Scottish Family Histories held in Scottish Public Libraries by J P S Ferguson
Bibliography of Irish Family History and Genealogy B de Breffny
Bibliography of Irish Family History by E Macysaght

Look at the Society’s Manuscript Research Notes in the Lower Library

The Document Collection contains thousands of unique miscellaneous manuscript research notes arranged by surname. These manuscripts and fiche are available in the archive section of the Lower Library where you will find a list of all the surnames represented. This list of the surname represented in the Document collections is also on the Society’s website (not the catalogue)

The Society holds over 350 Special Collections housed in some 1500 manuscript boxes. The special collections contains notes on several families, usually with a common theme. These stand alone as collections and have not been arranged by surname. All the names represented in the Special Collections are listed and indexed in the card index in the Lower Library. The collections themselves are also in the Lower Library archive area but some have been filmed. The card index will also give the film numbers where appropriate

The Collections also include some seven thousand roll pedigrees. The surnames in the roll pedigrees (but not all the other collections) are also listed in the SoG’s website. www.sog.org.uk

Birth Briefs and Members Interests

SoG members can submit birth briefs showing their ancestry back to their 32 great, great grandparents. The bound birth briefs and an index are in the Upper Library. The surnames represented in the birth briefs are listed on the Society’s website www.sog.org.uk

Members can submit slips showing the names they are researching. These slips are in the Upper Library.

Research Online

There are many sites that accept upload of what are known as GEDCOM files of pedigrees generated by computer packages. Genesreunited, Ancestry, My Heritage are some examples but there are many more. The Rootsweb lists can be useful resources to find people searching the same surnames, places or subjects as you. It can also be worth simply putting your surname or information about an individual you are interested in into a good search engine like Google to see what comes up. There are some dedicated genealogy search engines like Mocavo that endeavour only to look at genealogical sites and information on the Internet thus weeding out irrelevant results.

FamilySearch Pedigrees
The FamilySearch website includes submitted pedigree notes on families. FamilySearch is available in the SoG’s library on line in the computer suite.

**LDS Catalogue**

The LDS Family History Library Catalogue also within FamilySearch lists many thousands of family histories held in the Genealogical Library in Utah. This can be searched on line through FamilySearch. [http://www.familysearch.org/eng/default.asp](http://www.familysearch.org/eng/default.asp)

**One Name Studies**

Some genealogists try to trace everyone with a particular surname. The Family History shelves contain many listings of entries from the Civil Registration Indexes to birth, death and marriage records. The Register of the Guild of One Name Studies (GOONS) can be found at the Middle Library Enquiry Counter and online on the Guild’s website. [http://www.one-name.org/register.html](http://www.one-name.org/register.html)

**Peerage and Royalty and Biography**

Titled families are listed in *Burke’s Family Index* and in Frank Leeson’s *Directory of British Peerages*. Pedigrees of European royalty and nobility are listed in F R Price’s *Guide to European Genealogies Exclusive of the British Isles*. These titles can be found on the Peerage and Royalty shelves in the Upper Library along with standard reference works on the Peerage, Landed Gentry and other biographical works.

**The Relevance of Surnames**

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, Oxford 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).


**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).

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 online 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 now available within the FamilySearch website, 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. However several genealogy software programmes allow for the mapping of names according to places noted in IGI entries.

The British 19th Century *Surname Atlas* is a fully interactive CD-ROM product that allows you to plot floodfill-style distribution maps for all of the surnames and forenames found in the 1881 census of England, Scotland and Wales. This software can also be found within websites that allow for localisation of surname using census data, telephone directories and electoral roll information such as [http://www.britishsurnames.co.uk/](http://www.britishsurnames.co.uk/)

The Lexicographer Patrick Hanks, along with colleagues based at the University of the West of England is currently compiling an AHRC-funded database of all the family
names in the UK, with information about their linguistic and social origins, history, and geographical distribution

Currently research using DNA and surname studies can throw insight into genealogical research. For information on the application of DNA studies to genealogical research it is worth reading Debbie Kennet *DNA and Social Networking, A guide genealogy in the 21st Century.* Advice and an independent guide to DNA tests, surname projects etc. can be found on [http://www.dna-testing-adviser.com/](http://www.dna-testing-adviser.com/) and a directory of links to many surname DNA projects and related websites can be found on [http://www.cyndislist.com/dna](http://www.cyndislist.com/dna)

**Surname variants**

The spelling of surnames can be problematic. As levels of literacy have varied throughout history it is always wise to be aware of possible spelling variations and possible mis-transcriptions. Certain online genealogical websites use a system of weighting certain sounds to bring similar surnames together. Such groupings using either SOUNDEX or NAME-EX can bring together possible alternative spellings but only personal knowledge of the common variations of a particular surname will enable you to decide if these name variants are relevant to your research.


**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 National Archives, Kew.

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This document was revised and edited by Else Churchill
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