WHAT'S IN YOUR SURNAME?

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THE FASCINATING STORY OF BRITISH SURNAMES

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This book is dedicated with great affection
to my daughters, Maggie and Kate.

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Preface

I think that most people would agree that of all our possessions (next to life itself) our names are our most personal and special. We are so used to them that we rarely give them a thought in the general course of things. Because we hear our first names (or 'given' names, as they are sometimes called) from our very earliest years, these soon become firmly rooted in our minds, to be joined a little later by our surnames ('family' names). Before long, both names emerge automatically whenever occasion demands, sometimes several times a day. We write them and speak them without thinking about them and we respond to our names instantly when we hear them spoken. So important have personal names become to us that we have an irresistible urge to bestow names upon many of our possessions – our cats, dogs, goldfish and other pets, our houses, dolls and teddy bears; our motorcars, boats, aircraft and trains; even spacecraft are given evocative names.

There is clearly a powerful mechanism behind all this naming, for its roots must lie in the earliest times when our remote, newly human ancestors began to feel the need to use sounds to identify each other and to name objects around them.

Having just remarked that we usually pay little attention to our names, it is nevertheless true that most of us think about our surnames sometimes, though we may not know anything about their origins, unless they speak clearly for themselves, like **Baker**, **Robertson**, **Lancaster** and **Smallbone**. Such names as these clearly suggest their meanings and therefore hint at their origins. However, it won't take us long to think of some common surnames whose meanings seem far from clear and even very puzzling indeed**:** how about **Lloyd**, **Wray**, **Latimer**, **Winterbottom** and **Clegg**, for instance? These are fairly familiar surnames, but what are they hiding from us?

I think most of us realise that, with so many different and descriptive surnames in use, there must be some good historical reasons for their adoption. The first four surnames in the previous paragraph,

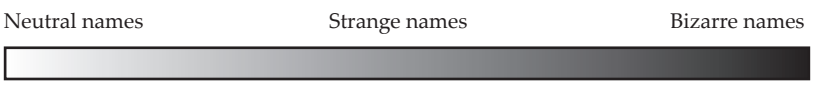
Baker, **Robertson**, **Lancaster** and **Smallbone**, give us the first clue: these surnames seem to suggest an occupation, a relationship, a place and a physical characteristic, in that order and, as with many surnames, neither their spellings, nor their meanings have altered very much over the centuries. However, there are many words that *have* undergone changes of meaning or spelling (or both), while some of the surnames that we are familiar with today, come from words which have long since vanished from use, with the result that many surnames' histories remain obscured in the dense mists of mediæval time. Even so, it is still true that every surname has a history and an interesting story to tell, a story that may even reach back to a time long before the Norman Conquest of England in the middle of the 11th century. In many cases, however, it was during the 11th and 12th centuries that we notice the first occasional instances of *written* British surnames – of a sort.

It will take many years yet for every surname in current use to receive attention, for it is very time-consuming work for both scholars and amateurs who, for the pure love of their subject, diligently examine thousands of records from many hundreds of sources.

Those people who are lucky enough to possess an unusual surname, need never feel ill-at-ease (though they sometimes do) amongst the Smiths, the Taylors, the Webbs, the Vincents and the Jacksons: indeed, far from it. Such familiar surnames as these are usually the extroverts who boldly announce their descent to the world, while intriguing surnames like **Atter**, **Belcher**, **Sleggs**, **Stelfox**, **Possee** and thousands more, prefer to keep themselves to themselves – sometimes very successfully indeed.

From our earliest childhood, we are made aware of our names: our parents ensure that we respond to our names as soon as possible, so that a deep and indelible identity is established in our minds without delay. First we learn to respond to our forenames and then, as time goes on, our surnames become tightly bound to the personal name and it is during these early years that the seeds of the life to come take deepest root, our own identity perhaps having the deepest root of all. Our names are one expression of that identity.

Soon we become aware that other people have names too and, quite unconsciously, begin the process of 'categorizing' them. This seems eventually to involve placing the surnames we hear against a fanciful scale like this:



This scale, which shows how names can vary in their appeal to us, runs from neutral-type names, like **Smith**, **Jones**, **Jackson** and **Brooks**, through strange sounding names, such as **Cathcart**, **Fawcett**, **Tumber** and

Simmonite, to the apparently bizarre ones, like **Longbottom**, **Smellie**, **Raghip** and **Gotobed**.

I should think there would be general agreement about roughly where on the scale we would place a given surname. Those names at the left hand side of the scale tend to be universally acceptable (and sometimes envied) and rarely draw forth comment or attract attention to themselves. The names near the middle usually set us thinking and wondering, in a general sort of way, about the possible reasons for such words' becoming surnames. Their sounds and perhaps their images in our minds are more striking than the neutral types. Those surnames at the right hand end of the scale are least appreciated because they often sound amusing or produce a humorous picture (usually quite false) in our minds. Those people whose surnames belong to this end sometimes wish for a name from the other end (and sometimes change their names accordingly!) The apparently humorous nature of many names at the right hand end of our scale is the result of their being judged at their modern face value, whereas their real or original meanings will usually give a very different picture. As I said earlier, possessors of unusual surnames should try not to feel self-conscious about them, though this feeling is entirely understandable, especially when such names are a constant source of tiresome joking. Possessors of the surnames **Mudd**, **Crapper**, **Thicke** and **Goodbody** will know what I mean. (I once read of a man who, following an acrimonious divorce, is said to have changed his name from **Lovelady** to **Hayter**. On the face of it, he seems to have made his point!)

No book about surnames can include more than a very small fraction of names in current use. In this study I will tell the story of how names came into being, together with the histories and meanings of a good number of them, both familiar and unfamiliar. An essential aid to my work has been the London telephone directory, which I have repeatedly used as an initial check on both the existence and frequency of almost all the surnames mentioned in the text. On many occasions too, I have consulted every other mainland UK telephone book, as well as the national electoral registers in an effort to establish the likelihood of survival of certain names (**Wednesday**, **Juggler** and **October** are examples). The fact that a name does not appear in any telephone directory does not mean of course, that it has become extinct; there are many 'ex-directory' numbers and not everyone has a telephone anyway. The surname may also survive in the United States, Australia or New Zealand, for example. The internet too, has become a useful tool in locating names.

Although there remains a vast amount of work still to be done in the field of surname research, there have been, over the years, several very distinguished scholars whose research and dedication have contributed enormously to our understanding of the evolution of our surnames.

One of the earliest to publish a study and commentary on the origins and usage of names, both forenames and surnames, was William Camden (1551-1623). His book, 'Britannia', was enormously successful for the time and ran to at least six editions before 1607. Camden was a learned historian, teacher and antiquary, who was a keen observer of the English people and who had closely studied many of the written records that were available to him, including Domesday Book. Although Camden devoted only a single chapter in his book to surnames, he included a detailed description of the origins of names generally, the history of British surnames, their forms and their meanings, covering well over two thousand names in the process, while revealing to us his charming Elizabethan literary style and wit.

It is interesting to remember that Camden lived and worked in Westminster at precisely the time that his great contemporary and exponent of the English language, William Shakespeare, was acting and writing plays in nearby Southwark and Blackfriars.

Since Camden's day, there have been many studies made and many volumes written on the history of British surnames and, of the scholars in the centuries after William Camden, perhaps the two most notably pioneering were Canon C.W. Bardsley in the 19th century and Dr P.H. Reaney in the 20th. Indeed, Dr Reaney's great Dictionary remains in print and is a major source of information to students of surnames. However, as there are relatively few other books about surnames in print, I hope that you, the reader, will find this one a book which, either may be read comfortably from beginning to end, or else may be dipped into as the fancy takes you and that it will give you as much pleasure to read as it gave me to write.

William Lewis
Oxford, December 2009.

Chapter 1

What are surnames and how old are they?

Everyone knows that their surname is their family name, the name that has been inherited, usually through their fathers and which has been passed down through many generations over hundreds of years. So what exactly is a surname?

The prefix 'sur-' derives originally from the Latin 'super', and comes to us via the French word 'sur', both of which mean 'on, above or over', and which suggest that a surname is an extra name, over and above the personal first name. Indeed, in French, the word 'surnom' means 'nickname', which is certainly an extra name.

The Romans

All our surnames began as nicknames of some sort, but we have to thank the Ancient Romans for the idea of adding a descriptive after-name to the personal name, for they developed a system of naming which was both simple and logical (as we would expect), but its application was reserved almost solely for the male citizen-class and above. Slaves would have only a single name, but three names would usually be assigned to the male children of the citizen classes (occasionally a fourth and even a fifth name may be encountered). The first name was known as the 'praenomen' and was simply a forename, for example Gaius, Marcus, Augustus and Lucius are well-known Roman male first names or 'praenomina'. However, these forenames appear to have been little used except on formal occasions.

The second of the three names was the 'nomen' and identified the family or tribe into which the boy was born. Maccius, Julius and Annaeus are examples of 'nomina'.

The third name to be given was known as the 'cognomen' and was purely descriptive. These 'cognomina' were sometimes harshly accurate (if not a little cruel) in their portrayals of their bearers: Flaccus ('flap-

eared'), Claudius ('cripple'), Varus ('knock-kneed') and Brutus ('heavy, stupid') were some fairly descriptive ones. It will seem rather puzzling to us that the practice of applying unflattering names to their male children persisted for so long amongst the Roman citizen classes.

A fourth name was likely to have been an inherited name, while a fifth name would have been awarded in recognition of a great deed such as leading the victory over an enemy. These names were referred to as 'agnomina'.

Girls were usually given a single name, which was often a feminised version of a male name: Julia, Flavia, Cornelia and Aurelia are easily recognised examples. However, in spite of over four hundred years of occupation of Britain, the Roman system of conferring names made no permanent impression on the native Britons, many of whom must have become familiar with the Latin language spoken by the local Roman occupiers. We must therefore wonder just how complete was the Roman cultural conquest of the country: the real extent of 'Romanisation' of these islands can only be surmised. In any case, the natives of these shores were to come under the powerful influence of a series of further occupations after the withdrawal of the Romans at the beginning of the 5th century and must quickly have begun to lose any Romish ways they had acquired. It is still the case, however, that intermarriage between the native Britons and the Roman occupiers has left us with a significant number of surnames derived from the Latin: **Clements**, **Vincent** and **Patrick** are well known surnames today, but who would guess that **Joll** and **Jullings** are of Roman origin too? These are simply variations on the name (the 'nomen') Julius.

After the Romans

Sometime during the year AD 410, the last of the Roman legions had abandoned Britain, leaving the defence and government of these islands in the hands of the native inhabitants. Over the next four hundred years, England would fall prey to a series of invasions: the Picts and Scots in the north, the Irish in the west, the Jutes from Denmark in Kent and the Angles and Saxons from Germany in the east (and later, the Midlands). By the late 9th century, the Danes too, had established themselves in the north-east. However, it was to be the Normans, themselves of Scandinavian decent, led by Duke William from the north-east of France, who would defeat the English near Hastings in October 1066 and who would have the greatest and most enduring effect on English society.

The impact of the invading Saxons (beginning in the 5th century) on the native language of England and therefore on our surnames, was to be much greater than that of the later Danes, whose contribution has

been much more in evidence in our place-names (especially in the north-east of England, the part called 'Danelaw' – see the map on page 55.) Of course, place-names have themselves, played a vital role in British surname formation: we can all think of someone whose surname is also a place-name. In this way, the 9th century Danish settlers have furnished us with an important element in our surname development. The tell-tale suffix '-by' (meaning 'settlement') will nearly always indicate a place name of Danish origin: **Enderby** (Leicestershire), meant Endri-othi's settlement and **Danby** (North Yorkshire) was simply 'the Danes' settlement'. The equivalent Saxon suffix was '-tun', giving rise to places ending with '-ton', such as **Langton** ('long village').

If we now look at the names of some of the kings and high ranking nobles in the two centuries before the Conquest (that is in the 9th and 10th centuries), we will notice that their admiring contemporaries had already begun to add an extra name describing some feature of character or conduct:

Alfred the Great (1149-1199);
Edmund Ironside (981-1016);
Harold Harefoot (died 1040);
Siward the Valiant (11th century).

Some other notables, however, acquired nicknames that reflected characteristics other than battle prowess:

Edward the Martyr (c.963-978);
Ethelred the Unready (968-1016 and meaning 'lacking wisdom');
Edward the Confessor (1002-1066).

Others simply bore the names of their kingdoms:

Egbert of Wessex (9th century);
Edwy of Essex (died 959);
Guthfrith of Northumbria (10th century).

It was about the year AD1000 that some French nobles began to adopt a form of after-name, deliberately chosen to recall those races and lands that they had lately subjugated. Since the English King Edward ('the Confessor') was, in the words of the 17th century antiquary, William Camden, 'all Frenchified', it may be that the idea of an additional descriptive name had arrived in England some time before the Norman Conquest of 1066. It was, however, the arrival of the Norman occupiers that provided the real impetus and laid the foundations for the English surname revolution.

England under the Normans

Native English peasants had no need whatever of a functional second name (or 'by-name'), but we know from ancient written records that men sometimes acquired a spoken nickname after their personal name. These after-names were entirely incidental, however, and died with their bearers, there being no reason to pass on the nickname. This casual and informal oral custom might well have persisted for much longer were it not for the demands of post-Conquest recording systems that were needed for the purposes of taxation, wills, deeds and court records. Norman officialdom required accurate identification of individuals and as a consequence, there were many cumbersome descriptions which accompanied a personal name: 'Alexandro filio Willelmi Saundr'[1] and 'Willelmo ad capud ville'[2] are two instances from the early 14th century, which show that even by this late stage, there must have been many individuals who still lacked a fixed surname.

The clerks, most of whom were Norman in the decades following the Conquest, had to do their best to write down the unfamiliar sounds uttered by the English peasants and it is hardly a surprise to find that there are many variations of spelling of similar words and names. Few names today have retained the exact spellings first set down by those 11th and 12th century scribes.

We can learn something of the state of Norman thinking on this subject in the late 11th century, by examining some of the entries in Domesday Book. This great work (there are two volumes: Great and Little Domesday) is the result of a vast survey commissioned by King William and carried out in the first half of 1086, by means of which the King could determine both the taxable value of his English possessions and their current military capability. As a result, only the principal landholders and those who held property from them as tenants are mentioned by name. Unfortunately, the rest of the population was simply counted. The names of some of the important tenants in the borough of Oxford are revealing:

> Henry de Ferrers, William Peverell, Edward the Sheriff, Arnulf de Hesdin, Berengar de Tosny, Milo Crispin, Richard de Courcy, Robert d'Oilly, Ranulf Flambard, Guy de Raimbeaucourt, Walter Giffard …

By stating where a man came from, he could be clearly and almost unambiguously identified. Six men in the Oxford list show their, or their families', places of origin by the inclusion of 'de' or 'd'. It is easy to see that Henry de Ferrers (a town in Normandy) is only one step away from

1. Subsidy Roll (1305–6 and 1327), Wheatley Records (Oxon.) – W. Hassall.
2. Ibid.

becoming known as Henry Ferrers by his neighbours. The same would be true of Richard de Courcy and indeed, these two names, **Ferrers** and **de Courcy** are modern English surnames, found in small numbers mostly in the southernmost counties.

A few men in the list above seem to have what look like true surnames already: William **Peverell**, Milo **Crispin**, Ranulf **Flambard** and Walter **Giffard**. These 'surnames' are actually derived from Norman nicknames, meaning respectively, 'peppery' (in temperament, perhaps), 'crinkled' (hair or beard), 'flaming torch' (strikingly red hair perhaps), and 'chubby-cheeked'.

The odd-man-out seems to be Edward the Sheriff. The personal name Edward is a Saxon name and he was almost certainly a native Englishman who, by the time of the Domesday survey, had achieved the high rank of sheriff and who held (we are told) two dwellings in the city of Oxford. There are over 50 entries of the surname **Sheriff** in the London telephone directory, which indicate that this surname is a strong survivor.

Later in the same section of the Domesday Oxford survey, we find listed the smaller landholders who, as we might expect, are mostly of English birth and bear familiar Saxon personal names. Here are some from the list:

> Colman, Wulfwy the fisherman, William, Alwyn, Alric, Leofeva, Smewin, Edith, Suetman, Alwin the priest, Alwin, Suetman the moneyer, Godwin, another Suetman, Alwin …...

These more lowly individuals, some of whom are women, are given no additional names, apart from the occasional occupational description. However, we now begin to see the problem of ambiguity, which faced the king's commissioners and clerks: the name Alwin appears four times, but only one receives an additional designation (as a priest). This situation could obviously lead to confusion, as we have seen and long-winded descriptions were often added to a personal name to avoid misunderstandings.

On the extensive lands within Oxfordshire that were held by the Bishop of Lincoln, there lived about 766 peasants, variously described as 'slaves', 'villagers' and 'smallholders', but alas their names and nicknames and their specific occupations are not recorded and thus it was in the rest of the great survey. What a fascinating study it would have made, if the king's clerks had registered everyone's name.

So we now know that by the year 1087, Normans living in England were frequently accorded a sort of surname, most often denoting their town of origin in Normandy, while the native English were unaccustomed to the idea of an additional name, unless it were a descriptive nickname: Wulfwy the fisherman or Alwin the priest in the examples above. By the

beginning of the 12th century, however, there was an increasing desire for greater administrative accuracy and this gave rise to such entries into official documents as, 'William the miller', 'William at well', 'William son of Richard' and 'William of red hair'. Such simple personal descriptions soon began to stick and were quickly shortened by the common folk to William Miller, William Atwell, William Richardson and William Redhead. Several local Williams could now be distinguished from each other by the use of a descriptive nickname.

Nicknames were applied to women too – we read of Edith Swanneck and Agnes Lickfinger – but most often, women were called after their husbands or fathers in official records: 'Matilda wyf of Robert Stronge', 'Johanna Robyndoghter', 'Agnes widow of Adam Wyte' and 'Juliana Williamwyf ' are actual examples[1].

It was not uncommon for a person to be known by different names at different times. In a record dated 1395, we read of 'Nicholas Paynter, also known as Nichols Neuman ….'[2] and as late as 1418, we encounter 'Nicol Wigh, known as Nicholas Ketringham, also known as Nicol Pecche, also called John Seagrave….[3] It is possible that there was nothing sinister in this: we meet the same thing today – authors and actors often use different names on different occasions and for quite legitimate reasons.

To summarise then: after a slow start, there was a noticeable increase in the rate of adoption of an additional name within the population until, by the middle of the 14th century, most Englishmen had acquired a permanent surname, which had at last become hereditary. This finally rounded off a process that had begun with nicknames accorded to those 9th and 10th century kings and noblemen.

Welsh surnames were to come later still, but the names of the Scots owe their origins to a rather different process of formation, as I shall describe in Chapter Five.

The different classes of surnames

As we have already discovered, surnames arose as nicknames of some sort, describing a feature of a person: size, shape, colour of skin or hair, a deformity, some aspect of behaviour, where he lived, where he came from, his occupation or a relationship to someone (usually his father). Scholars have long used this simple idea to classify surnames. Thus our surnames can be arranged into four major groups, with two important

1. P. H. Reaney The Origin of English Surnames. Routledge & Keegan Paul, 1979 edition.

2. Ibid.

3. P. H. Reaney The Origin of English Surnames. Routledge & Keegan Paul, 1979 edition.

sub-groups:

(i) Surnames originating from an occupation, craft or office.
(ii) (a) Surnames specifying a place of origin: village, town or shire.
(b) Surnames from a local feature.
(iii) Surnames from relationships.
(iv) (a) Surnames from nicknames.
(b) Surnames from personal names (including from saints' names & Biblical names).

The order of the groups above is simply that in which I have chosen to treat the subject and does not represent an order of importance or any recognised sequence of surname formation.

If these groups were all-embracing, we would have no difficulty at all in fitting every surname tidily into its unique category. Of course, many surnames are straightforward in this respect: **Mason**, **Dudley**, **Hill**, **Peterson**, **Short** and **James** all fit neatly into the groups shown above, beginning at the top. However, there are countless examples of surnames which could belong to two or even three groups. **Pye** is such an example, encompassing three groups: occupation, local feature and nickname and is a name which I will discuss in more detail in Chapter Two. A record-holder in the multiple category stakes must surely be **Beck**, which can boast five alternative sources and can occur in every group shown above, except in group 3 (names from relationships).

To give every possible origin of the surnames appearing in this book is an impossible task, so the reader should not be content with the opinions of a single authority, but search out all available references and commentaries on a particular surname, remembering that there are still a great many English surnames that have yet to be investigated and defined. With the increasing amount of archive detail accessible on the Internet, the fascinating task of investigating surnames, particularly their frequency, distribution and the likelihood of their survival is made very much easier than only a decade ago.

General Index

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