

The joy of surnames

RootsTech London October 2019

Session RT7311

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Class description

Surnames provide a fascinating insight into the past, and each surname has its own story to tell. This lecture will give you an understanding of the history and distribution of surnames. The focus will be on surnames originating in the British Isles though the techniques learnt will be universally applicable. We will look at tools for surname mapping, which can provide insight into the origins and distribution of your surname. Studying a whole surname rather than focusing on your own branch of your family tree can be a rewarding process and provides the opportunity to collaborate with researchers from around the world. The one-name study approach can sometimes even help to break down brick walls. A DNA project can help to establish which branches are related and whether a surname is likely to have a single origin or multiple origins. By studying your surname of interest you can make a major contribution to the field of surname research and you will have the unique distinction of becoming the worldwide expert on your favourite surname.

History of surnames

Surnames were adopted in different countries around the world at different times. The use of surnames dates back for several thousand years in China, and the practice later spread to other countries in Asia. The modern hereditary surnames that are used today in Europe evolved much later. Some Irish clan names can be traced back before the year 1000 but, in most western European countries, surnames started to develop from the eleventh century onwards. The fashion began with the nobility and the wealthy landowners, and slowly spread to the rest of society. By the fourteenth century surnames were well established in most parts of Continental Europe and the British Isles, though usage was by no means universal. In Scandinavia, some parts of Wales and in Shetland in Scotland the traditional patronymic naming system persisted until the nineteenth century, and sometimes later. There are still some societies and countries that have no surnames.

The reasons for the introduction of surnames are not fully understood but appear to be tied up with the need to prove ownership of land and property for inheritance purposes, the introduction of taxes, and the increasing use of written records during the twelfth to fourteenth centuries, all of which required a more precise means of identification than a single unadorned name.

Types of surname

Surnames can be broadly divided into four categories:

1. Locational (toponymic) surnames

These are surnames which are derived from place names (eg, Cornwall, Ireland) or topographical features (eg, Hill, Marsh, Bridge, Townsend)

2. Occupational surnames

These names are derived from the occupation of the original namebearer (eg, Archer, Cheeseman, Thatcher). Some occupational surnames denote status or office (Burgess, Freeman, Sheriff, Steward).

3. Patronyms and matronyms

These are names that are derived from the given name of the father or mother, or sometimes the name of the grandparent or other kinsman. Such names are also used to denote membership of a clan. Patronyms include surnames like Martin, Williams, Anderson, O'Brian and Fitzgerald. Matronyms are much rarer. Examples include Magson (son of Margaret and Magritte (from Marguerite)).

4. Nicknames

Nicknames can be derived from personal characteristics (Faithfull, Proud, Smart), physical features (Little, Redhead, Stout) and phrases and expressions (Bidgood, Goodyear). The category is often used as a catch-all for surnames that don't fit in other categories.

Surname resources

- <http://one-name.org> The Guild of One-Name Studies
- <https://one-name.org/modern-british-surnames> Modern British Surnames – the surname studies website created by the late Philip Dance and devoted to the distribution, incidence and statistical analysis of the surnames of Britain. The site is now hosted by the Guild of One-Name Studies
- www.sog.org.uk/learn/education-sub-page-for-testing-navigation/guide-nine Searching for surnames at the Society of Genealogists
- www.americanlastnames.us American Last Names
- www.americansurnames.us American Surnames
- www.britishsurnames.co.uk The British Surnames website
- www.cyndislist.com/surnames Cyndi's List surname pages
- <http://forebears.co.uk/surnames> Forebears – the meaning and distribution of over 11 million surnames
- www.surnamedb.com The Internet Surname Database
- <http://surnames.behindthename.com> Behind the Name
- www.taliesin-arlein.net/names The surnames of England and Wales: how common (or rare) is your surname?

Surname mapping and distribution

- <http://geogenealogy.ca> Howard Mathieson's surname mapping website
- www.facebook.com/groups/467543026597487 Facebook Surname Distribution Mapping group
- www.ancestry.com/learn/facts Surname facts and maps from Ancestry.com based on censuses
- worldnames.publicprofiler.org World Names Public Profiler
- gbnames.publicprofiler.org Great Britain Family Names Public Profiler - maps generated with data from the 1881 census and the 1998 electoral register
- www.archersoftware.co.uk Archer Software has created two useful tools for mapping British surnames. The 19th-century Surname Atlas CD plots surname distributions in England, Wales and Scotland from the 1881 census. GenMap UK can be used to create your own maps based on historical or genealogical data relating to the British Isles
- <https://your-family-history.com> Distributions in England and Wales from 1841 to 1911
- www.isogg.org/wiki/Surname_mapping Surname mapping resources

Surname interests

- <http://boards.ancestry.co.uk> Ancestry message boards
- <https://mailinglists.rootsweb.com/listindexes> RootsWeb mailing lists
- www.rootschat.com Rootschat – a genealogy forum with boards for listing surname interests
- <https://socialmediagenealogy.com/genealogy-on-facebook-list> Katherine R Willson's Genealogy on Facebook List

Surname dictionaries

- Patrick Hanks, Richard Coates and Peter McClure (eds). *The Oxford Dictionary of Family Names in Britain and Ireland*. Oxford University Press, 2016. For details see: <https://global.oup.com/academic/product/the-oxford-dictionary-of-family-names-in-britain-and-ireland-9780199677764> The dictionary is available as an online database at the Society of Genealogists. It also available in large reference libraries and with some library tickets.
- Patrick Hanks (ed). *Dictionary of American Family Names*. Oxford University Press, USA, 2003. For details see: www.oxfordreference.com/view/10.1093/acref/9780195081374.001.0001/acref-9780195081374 Available in print and as an online database in large reference libraries.
- George Fraser Black. *The Surnames of Scotland*. New York Public Library, 1946. Available from: <https://www.familysearch.org/library/books>
- John Rowlands and Sheila Rowlands. *The Surnames of Wales*. Updated and expanded second edition. Gomer with The National Library of Wales, 2013. Available from: <https://www.gomer.co.uk/the-surnames-of-wales.html>

General books on surname history and research methodology

- Debbie Kennett. *The Surnames Handbook: A Guide to Family Name Research in the 21st Century*. The History Press, 2012.
- Anne Shankland (ed). *The Seven Pillars of Wisdom: The Art of One-Name Studies*. Guild of One-Name Studies, 2012. Available on Amazon or from: <http://one-name.org/seven-pillars-of-wisdom>
- R A McKinley. *A History of British Surnames*. Longman Group, 1990.
- George Redmonds. *Surnames and Genealogy: A New Approach*. Federation of Family History Societies, 2002.
- George Redmonds, David Hey and Turi King. *Surnames, DNA, and Family History*. Oxford University Press, 2011.
- Colin D. Rogers. *The Surname Detective: Investigating Surname Distribution in England, 1086-Present Day*. Manchester University Press, 1995.

Courses

- www.pharostutors.com Pharos Teaching and Tutoring Limited offers an introductory and advanced course on one-name studies.