

Surname Mapping

Investigating the origins of one's own surname is often a natural diversion for family historians. For '**one-namers**', however, the surname takes over, as they study its etymology and history: looking for patterns in distribution; tracing movements across borders and boundaries; allying research with DNA studies; and linking up with their namesakes from across the globe.

Long before the advent of Y-DNA testing in 2000, in 1979 the GOONS established the **GUILD of ONE-NAME STUDIES**, and this was the way to find your distant cousins and link up with your namesakes.

The rise of surnames, according to accepted theory, was due to the Norman Conquest when no-one in England possessed a surname, people were known simply by an Old English (Anglo-Saxon) or Old Scandinavian (Viking) '**Byname**', that's a personal (first name), sometimes with additional nickname or another type of non-hereditary 'byname'.

The development of the Norman feudal system made it essential that the king should know exactly what services each knight owed and the change from oral to a written culture at a local level played a part in the process of using surnames, from 1230s onwards, and especially from 1260s, when manorial courts across England began to record property transactions on court rolls. Even so, some families still did not have a surname when the various poll taxes were collected from 1377.

Classification of Surnames may be divided into four groups: ¹

1. Local Surnames – derive from a place-name where the man held land
2. Surnames of Relationship – e.g. *Davidson* or *Williamson* or *Richardson*
3. Surnames of Occupation or Office – e.g. *Butcher* or *Dyer* or *Steward*
4. Nicknames – e.g. *Broadhead* or *Sheepshank* or *Shorthouse*...

The major disaster in the mid-fourteenth century, the **Black Death** (1348-50) reduced the English population by more than one-third, perhaps by half. Before this disaster a large number of English surnames were used, but the plague not only wiped out families but the surviving ones spread to new places with a better chance of becoming prosperous. This shake-up of names in parishes throughout the land continued for a generation or two before families settled in their new homes. This helps to explain why some of the surnames, easy to spot in the poll tax returns of 1377-81 were no longer close to their points of origin.

2.

Mapping surnames²

Plotting the geographical distribution of surnames at various points in time is a key to investigating the origins and the spread of surnames. The main initial sources used for mapping surname distribution are;

- Electoral rolls and telephone directories
- 1881 Census
- 1660s & 1670s Hearth Tax Returns
- 1377 – 81 Poll Tax Returns

Distribution maps point family and local historians in the right direction, suggesting the places where an investigation should begin. The techniques of genealogy should be called into play, it's important to trace your family name back in time, step by step, using **BMD** and **Parish Records** to take you back to the district where hopefully the surname arose, only by tracing your family name back over generations can you see whether or not its modern form is the same as the original one...

These websites offer guidance and first-step facts for anyone researching their family name;

Guild of One-Name Studies with over 8,000 surnames (www.one.name.org) £

The Genealogist – Your Family History 1841-1911 excellent research website
(www.your-family-history.com)

BRITISH SURNAMES another excellent research website
(www.britishsurnames.co.uk)

THE SURNAME SOCIETY an online group but you can find out if members are researching your surname for free (www.surname-society.org) £

Also, try **FamilySearch.org** – look for your location and just enter your surname...

Citations

¹ Reaney & Wilson, **A Dictionary of English Surnames**, 1958, Oxford University Press

² Redmonds, King, and Hey, **SURNAMES, DNA, & Family History**, Revised Ed. 2015, Oxford University Press

