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The Present-Day Distribution of Surnames in the British Isles

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Introduction

It is all too easy for the place-name researcher to take for granted the maps and gazetteers of present-day place-names that represent the cumulation of decades of work—centuries, even—by cartographers and geographers. No effective equivalent is available to the surname researcher. The best that is currently available is the occasional distributional survey such as Guppy's famous study of 1890.¹ Are Guppy's findings and methods still relevant today? With the increased availability of data, can we hope to find something out about the distribution of the many thousands of names which Guppy does not mention?

Mapping surnames is like trying to map the shifting shoals and sandbanks in a river estuary. People move around from place to place. In some cases, they change their surname—or have it changed for them. Eventually they die. Even if they have had male children in their lifetime, there is no certainty that the surname will live on after them. Factors that have interfered with the straightforward patrilineal inheritance of surnames have included illiteracy and illegitimacy at one end of the social scale and inheritance of wealth at the other. I shall cite an example of the former very shortly. An example of the latter concerns the brother of the novelist Jane Austen, who was brought up by a rich, childless uncle named Leigh, whose surname he duly inherited along with his fortune.

Another of the many problems which beset students of surnames is: what precisely should we study? Unless this question is addressed satisfactorily at the outset, it may return regularly to haunt the researcher at inconvenient moments.

A basic decision for the student of surnames, then, is whether to confine the study to individual names or whether to attempt a more

¹ H. B. Guppy, *Homes of Family Names in Great Britain* (London, 1890).

general understanding of the phenomenon of surnames. In the latter case, the question arises whether to study only the medieval evidence (bearing in mind that many surnames have died completely and others have moved around) or whether to attempt to link the medieval evidence to the surnames of today. If some kind of link is to be attempted, we need to know just what the surnames of today are, and where they are to be found. There are at least two purposes of the survey of present-day surnames: first, it will provide us with an inventory of observed facts, requiring explanation, and secondly, it may shed light on individual names.

Family histories and genealogies are of the greatest importance in advancing our understanding of the recent history of individual names. But there are many problems. Records tend to be increasingly defective the further back the researcher goes, and in the vast majority of cases studies of individual genealogies peter out somewhere in the 17th or 16th century, leaving a yawning gap of three or four centuries between the start of a traceable family history and the earliest recorded occurrences of a name form.

Problems like this have prompted members of the Guild of One-Name Studies to start their research by temporarily laying aside notions of genealogy and blood relationship and to collect evidence for all bearers of a particular name and, in many cases, its variants and derivatives. Ironically, this indirect approach gives the family historian a much better chance of a successful account of the history of a particular name. Fully satisfactory studies of individual surnames are, however, still the exception rather than the rule. Many names have not been investigated at all, while others have been only partially or inadequately studied. For both these reasons, we need to look seriously at additional kinds of evidence, even circumstantial evidence such as the present-day distribution of the name.

Is the Contemporary Distribution of Surnames Worth Studying?

The present paper introduces a survey of contemporary surnames, still in progress. This is an inventory of the 15,000 most frequent surnames in Britain and Ireland today, based on telephone directories of the early 1980s. It aims for breadth rather than depth, picking out the salient features of the distribution of a very large number of names, unlike works such as the *Atlas of British Surnames*, which gives a

detailed account of the distribution of only 154 surnames.² It can be said at once that, for many names, the distribution is skewed in interesting ways. Even in areas of high migration, such as Kent and Sussex, the survey confirms the observation of Lasker and Kaplan that 'English place-name surnames tend to cluster near the place named.'³

In many cases, present-day distribution corroborates the hypotheses of family historians. In other cases, the distribution seems incompatible with the historical claims; such incompatibility demands explanation.

An intriguing and fairly typical example of a popular summary of a family history may be found in Germaine Greer's account of her search for her father's origins, *Daddy, We Hardly Knew You*.⁴ In it, she claims that the Greers (and Griers) are descended from Sir William Grierson of Lag, Dumfriesshire, who married in 1593, and that the Griersons in turn are a branch of Clan MacGregor. What are we to make of these assertions? The etymological connection between Greer, Grierson and MacGregor is undeniable, but is there also a family relationship? Frank Adam in 1908 said, 'The Griersons of Lag, in Dumfriesshire, are descended from Gilbert, second son of Malcolm, dominus de MacGregor, who died in 1374.'⁵ This is, broadly, part of the story that is related by Germaine Greer. However, Colonel Fergusson, the historian of the Griersons of Lag, comments: 'There is no evidence or foundation for the story commonly current that the family was an offshoot of the Highland family of MacGregor.'⁶ Who is right?

Learning from Present-Day Distribution

No doubt many people would like to claim distinguished or interesting ancestry if they can. However, it is unlikely that the Greers

² G. W. Lasker and C. G. N. Mascie-Taylor, *Atlas of British Surnames* (Wayne State University, Nebraska, 1990).

³ G. W. Lasker and B. A. Kaplan, 'English Place-Name Surnames Tend to Cluster near the Place Named', *Names*, 31 (1983).

⁴ Germaine Greer, *Daddy, We Hardly Knew You* (London, 1989).

⁵ Frank Adam, *The Clans, Septs, and Regiments of the Scottish Highlands* (Edinburgh, 1908).

⁶ Cited by George F. Black, *The Surnames of Scotland* (New York, 1946), p. 328.

and Griersons are connected with clan MacGregor by anything more than the accident of having an ancestor whose name was derived from Latin *Gregorius*. The mundane hypothesis, then, is that the Greers and Griersons are descended from two or more different individuals, perhaps nondescript persons of whom no other recorded trace now remains, who just happened to be called Gregor or Greer. Indeed, there may have been several different Greers or Gregors from whom these people derive their surname.

As a given name, Gregor or Greer was particularly popular in Scotland throughout the Middle Ages, among both Gaelic and English speakers. The surname could, in principle, be a patronymic derivative from anyone called Gregor, not necessarily a member of the famous Highland clan. On the other hand, there is no particular linguistic reason why it should not be a Highland derivative. Anglicizations of Gaelic clan names are common: Mackenzie alternates with Kenneth and Kinnoch, MacDonald with Donald and Donaldson, MacCalum with Malcolm, Macpherson with Clerk, and so on.

We need further clues. One such clue would be to look at the location of each name. Can we learn anything from seeing where it was and is found?

Why should we believe that distribution will tell us anything interesting about a surname? In 1890, H. B. Guppy observed, 'I have been much impressed in my investigations with the manner in which surnames, scattered apparently indiscriminately over the country, fall into order and disclose in their arrangement a method and regularity which render their distribution a subject of curious interest both for the antiquarian and the historian.' Guppy's method was quantitative. He noted the names of farmers, county by county, from Kelly's Directory, wherever he found a population of more than about seven bearers of a particular name per ten thousand farmers listed. He did not have a computer available, nor were there telephone directories. His decision to concentrate on farmers was determined by a belief that they constitute a group who tend to be found in the same location for generations, even though younger sons might move away. Guppy duly records that *Grierson* is a Dumfriesshire name, with a frequency of 13 per 10,000. Let us see how this compares with salient features of the distribution in the 1980 telephone directories.

	GRIERSON	GRIER	GREER
SW Scot'd (Dumfries, etc.)	70 (0.206%)	—	—
Clyde Coast (Ayrshire)	40 (0.017%)	50 (0.021%)	100 (0.043%)
Clyde Valley (Lanarkshire)	50 (0.020%)	—	80 (0.033%)
Glasgow	40 (0.011%)	50 (0.014%)	150 (0.042%)
Edinburgh	50 (0.024%)	—	30 (0.014%)
Central Scot'd & Trossachs	—	20 (0.011%)	50 (0.027%)
Lomond and Argyll	—	—	50 (0.034%)
Fife and Kinross	—	—	—
Dundee and Tayside	—	—	—
Aberdeen & NE Scotland	—	—	—
Northern Ireland	—	—	410 (0.0168%)
Preston	—	—	40 (0.016%)
London	—	—	40 (0.004%)
Toronto	30 (0.004%)	—	130 (0.019%)
New York (Manhattan)	20 (0.003%)	—	70 (0.012%)
Los Angeles	30 (0.006%)	—	80 (0.017%)
Sydney	40 (0.005%)	—	100 (0.011%)
Melbourne	40 (0.005%)	—	80 (0.010%)

Fig. 1: Distribution of the Surnames Grierson, Grier and Greer, in Scotland and elsewhere
(Fewer than 20 subscribers counted as 0; figures rounded out to the nearest 10.)

Figure 1 shows that Grierson is ten times as common in south-west Scotland as it is anywhere else (Edinburgh, the Clyde Valley, and Ayrshire being the next most frequent areas for this name). This pattern is entirely consistent with its being a monogenetic surname, originating from a single ancestor (almost certainly living in Dumfriesshire) and spreading gradually outwards from its centre as more and more younger sons had to find somewhere to live. Some went further afield and ended up in London and even in Canada and

Australia, but in a comparatively stable society such as Britain the distributional skew of such names is too pronounced to be explained by mere chance. This is a pattern that can be seen in names from every part of the British Isles—Armitage from Yorkshire, for example, Trenerry from Cornwall, Hanks from Gloucestershire, and so on. So this is at least *prima facie* evidence that Grierson is monogenetic: i.e. that there was just one Grier from whom all Griersons are descended—an ancestor, no doubt, of the Sir William Grierson who was living at Lag in Dumfriesshire in 1593. There does not seem to be any good reason to link them to clan MacGregor.

If, on the other hand, we look at the distribution of the surname Greer, we can see that it has a different, slightly less dramatic focus. It is extremely common in Northern Ireland, while neither Greer nor Grier is significantly present in Dumfriesshire. Genealogically, it is probably quite independent from Grierson. Whereas Grierson is ten times as common at its epicentre as elsewhere, Greer is only four times as common in Northern Ireland as it is in western Scotland. The historical record shows that the Greers were established in Ireland there in the early seventeenth century during the Plantation. It seems likely that there were several unrelated families of Greer who went over from Scotland to Ireland at this time, and it is unlikely that any of them were connected with the Griersons of Lag.

Before we leave the Greers and Germaine Greer's book, we should note a salutary warning that lies at the heart of it for the family historian. She found that her father had in early life quietly changed his name to Greer from Greeney. Moreover, she found that genetically he was not connected with any Greeney's either: that was the name of his foster parents. Genetically, he was almost certainly the illegitimate son of a servant girl called Rhoda Elizabeth King, probably fathered by a 'respectable' middle-class married Tasmanian called Richard Robert Ernest Hamilton—ironically enough, a more aristocratic name than Greer or even MacGregor!

Monogenetic and Polygenetic

Even where the history of a particular family has been thoroughly and reliably studied, there is of course no guarantee that all bearers of that particular surname are members of the same family. Much is sometimes made of the terms 'polygenetic' and 'monogenetic', but

what precisely do we mean by these? The commonly accepted definition of a monogenetic surname is that it is one of which all bearers are descended from a common ancestor, who himself bore the name and was indeed the first bearer of it. The reality is less crisp.

To take just one example: it is probable that some names which were polygenetic in the Middle Ages have now become monogenetic. Consider the name Churchyard. Reaney's evidence makes it clear that in the thirteenth and fourteenth centuries there were families in Staffordshire and Warwickshire bearing this name. By contrast, our pilot survey of present-day surnames in the British Isles shows that Churchyard is now focused on East Anglia, in particular on Suffolk. It remains to be established whether the name arrived in Suffolk by migration or whether it originated there independently, but the name does seem to have died out in the West Midlands. It now has a characteristically 'monogenetic' distribution, regardless of the fact that it was more widely distributed in the Middle Ages.

Churchard, Churchyard: John *atte Chircheyerde* 1298 AssSt; Henry *del Churcheyard* 1332 SR Wa. This can hardly mean 'dweller by the churchyard'. The natural expression would be 'at the church'. It probably denotes one responsible for the upkeep of the churchyard. Richard *de la Chirchard* (1291 MELS) is identical with Richard *atte Church* (1289 ib.), both surnames being occupational. Similarly, Reginald *atte Churchedoor* (1300 Bardsley) was the church door-keeper.

Fig. 2: from Reaney and Wilson.⁷

The Survey of Contemporary Surnames

The survey began life at the University of Essex in 1980 as the British element in an international survey, designed to complement family-history and other material in providing a headword list for a *Dictionary of Surnames*.⁸ The work continued in Birmingham in the mid-eighties, and is now held, growing slowly as resources permit, in Oxford. It was originally a clerically collected card file, based on the

⁷ P. H. Reaney and R. M. Wilson, *Dictionary of British Surnames*, 3rd edition (London, 1991).

⁸ Patrick Hanks and Flavia Hodges, *A Dictionary of Surnames* (Oxford, 1988).

frequencies of names in twelve carefully spaced out 1980–81 telephone directories. A significant point about the date is that British Telecom reorganize the catchment areas for their directories from time to time. For example, there has recently been a total reorganization of the London area, with many more names coming into the London residential sample. Any comparison of the figures for 1980 with those of 1990 would have to take account of this.

The general aim, then, was to compile an inventory of frequent names in the British Isles. By 1993, the surnames of 37 regions had been surveyed in this way (see Fig. 3). New regions are being added at the rate of between two and ten a year.

Before we had gone very far, it became clear that, despite all the vicissitudes of migration and social upheaval, the patterns of distribution of many surnames were still almost as marked in 1980 as they were in 1890, when Guppy published his pioneering study mentioned above. This was rather surprising. We were expecting to find some generally rather flat patterns of distribution, especially in the South, but this was rarely the case.

NAME	LDN	CANT	BTN	CLR	OX	BRL	PLYM	BRM	NOTT	LDS	PSN	NI
Church	250	110	72	80	98	46	30	35	34	52	42	19
Churher	40	—	47	—	—	—	—	—	—	—	—	—
Churchill	160	20	41	—	47	72	23	59	—	21	—	—
Churchman	30	—	—	—	—	—	—	—	16	—	—	—
Churchward	—	—	—	—	—	—	24	—	—	—	—	—
Churchyard	—	—	—	34	—	—	—	—	—	—	—	—
Churm	—	—	—	—	—	—	—	—	—	22	—	—
Chuter	—	—	15	—	—	—	—	—	—	—	—	—
Cinnamond	—	—	—	—	—	—	—	—	—	—	—	20
Clack	60	22	26	—	51	15	—	—	—	—	—	—

Fig. 4: Surnames Church to Clack, before normalization

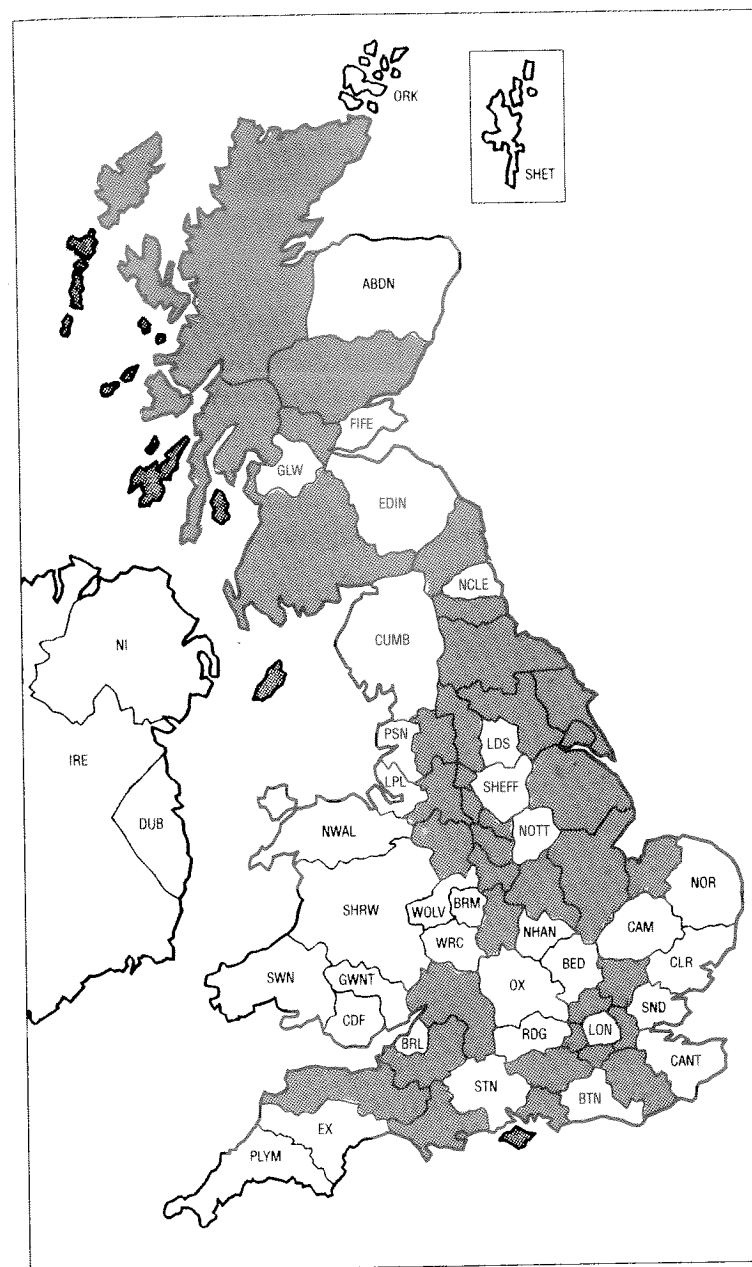


Fig. 3: The Survey of Contemporary Surnames: Areas Surveyed (April 1993).

It was, of course, impractical to attempt to collect every single name in these directories using clerical labour, and indeed any attempt at total comprehensiveness would not only have been impractical but would also have blurred the objective of spotting statistically significant patterns of distribution for individual names. A threshold was therefore set of 15–20 listings (depending on the size of the directories): that is, readers were asked to note any name occurring with more than 15 or 20 subscribers.

The card files have recently been put onto computer. Since the different telephone areas are of different sizes, it is desirable to express the figures in a way that makes instant comparison possible. As this work proceeds, therefore, we normalize the raw data counts, expressing them as a frequency per 100,000. I would like to express my particular gratitude to Mr I. G. Batten for help with computing the normalizations and other aspects of computing.

NAME	LDN	CANT	BTN	CLR	OX	BRL	PLYM	BRM	NOTT	LDS	PSN	NI
Church	25	38	26	50	44	25	[17]	[9]	[19]	[18]	[16]	[7]
Churher	[4]	—	[17]	—	—	—	—	—	—	—	—	—
Churchill	16	[7]	15	—	21	39	13	15	—	[7]	—	—
Churchman	[3]	—	—	—	—	—	—	—	16	—	—	—
Churchward	—	—	—	—	—	—	24	—	—	—	—	—
Churchyard	—	—	—	34	—	—	—	—	—	—	—	—
Churm	—	—	—	—	—	—	—	—	—	22	—	—
Chuter	—	—	15	—	—	—	—	—	—	—	—	—
Cinnamond	—	—	—	—	—	—	—	—	—	—	—	8
Clack	60	22	26	—	51	15	—	—	—	—	—	—

Fig. 5: Surnames Church to Clack, normalized per 100,000

Because directories contain different sizes of populations, some form of normalization is essential before statistical comparisons can be made. A casual observer might be tempted to think that the significance of, say, Hudson (fig. 6), with a frequency of around 620 in both the London and the Leeds directories, is roughly equivalent in the two regions. However, since the population of the London sample is

nearly four times larger than that of the Leeds sample, the significance of this name as an element in Leeds is nearly four times greater than it is in London. This notion of statistical significance plays an important part in the interpretation of surname distribution, but it does not take sophisticated statistics to notice that the name Calladine has 73 entries in the Nottinghamshire directory and fewer than 20 anywhere else.

Before normalization:

NAME	LDN	CANT	BTN	OX	BRL	PLYM	BRM	NOTT	LDS	PSN	NCLE
Hudson	620	—	—	—	—	—	335	205	626	202	225

After normalization:

NAME	LDN	CANT	BTN	OX	BRL	PLYM	BRM	NOTT	LDS	PSN	NCLE
Hudson	[62]	—	—	—	—	—	[88]	118	221	[78]	111

Fig. 6: Significant Frequencies for Hudson

It must be stressed that the survey does not aim at a complete account of the distribution of each name. It aims instead to pick out salient or significant features of distribution. The question being asked is not, 'How frequent is the name in this or that area?' but 'Where is it *most* frequent?' A blank in the tables does not mean that the name is not found at all in the area in question. It means either that there are fewer than 15 subscribers or that the name has a significantly higher frequency per 100,000 somewhere else. For illustrative purposes, in Figs 5 and 6, some non-significant figures, which would normally be reduced to a blank, have been shown in square brackets. In doubtful cases, the figures are left in. Of course, the exact distribution statistics are still available from the computer for consultation if needed.

It has been objected that using telephone directories might not provide a balanced sample. The very rich are often ex-directory, and the very poor do not own telephones. It is, I suppose, (just) conceivable that a particular surname might be borne only by very rich people or by very poor people. However, the listed telephone-owning population of Britain is an extremely large sample; it really is quite unlikely that additional data from the same areas would

have a significant effect on the statistics for the names so far collected. The objection has slightly more cogency for Ireland outside Dublin, where (in 1980 at least) phone-owners represented a much smaller proportion of the population than in England or Wales. In Ireland, however, the problem is offset to some extent by the comparative stability and homogeneity of the population.

A much more serious objection is that until *every* area of the British Isles has been surveyed, some important names will slip through the net, and a false picture of the distribution of others may thus be given. There is certainly some truth in this. A safeguard against egregious error here is a list of names, kindly provided in 1980 by British Telecom, with a frequency of over 174 subscribers in any one region. This list was nationwide, so we are aware of locations for names with really high frequency outside our selected areas, even though we may not yet have collected precise figures for them. The survey has now reached the stage where it is most unusual for the centre of distribution to move very far, if at all, when new figures are added.

Before normalization:

NAME	LDN	CLR	CANT	BTN	STN	OX	BRL	Elsewhere
Chalk	80	—	27	35	101	—	—	—
Lewington	—	—	—	18	28	15	—	—
Macey	—	15	46	31	58	19	30	—

After normalization:

NAME	LDN	CLR	CANT	BTN	STN	OX	BRL	Elsewhere
Chalk	8	—	9	12	59	—	—	—
Lewington	—	—	—	6	16	6	—	—
Macey	—	9	16	11	34	8	16	—

Fig. 7: Distribution Patterns of Chalk, Lewington, and Macey

Thus, when Southampton was added to the survey, we were able to improve our picture of the distribution of a few names such as Chalk, Lewington, and Macey. The centre for Chalk moved from Sussex to Hampshire, and the focus for Macey sharpened from generally

southern to specifically Hampshire. Lewington at present looks like a Hampshire name, but when a complete picture is available, it will probably turn out to have its centre in Surrey or Berkshire, for which figures had not yet been entered when this table was prepared.

As more areas are added to the survey, improvements of this kind may be expected. However, with 37 areas so far surveyed, there is no evidence of any substantial shift of focus from one larger region to another. New names emerge, but they are generally rare. For existing entries the focus may sharpen, or shift along the coast, or move to an adjacent county, but it hardly ever moves as far as from Sussex to Yorkshire or from Newcastle to Bristol. The areas which have been surveyed so far can be regarded as representative of the wider, unsurveyed regions in which they occur.

Historical Comparisons

A longer-term ambition is to replace the pilot survey with a fully comprehensive survey, derived computationally from electoral rolls and/or census data, both past and present. Some quite sophisticated geodemographic cluster analysis will be needed to make sense of the data, but in due course such computational techniques will make it possible to study the frequency and distribution of every name in the British Isles, even those with only one bearer (though of course the location of a name with only one or two bearers is not very interesting). Distribution only gets interesting when there is a large enough number of bearers for patterns to be measured.

A county-by-county analysis of surnames in the International Genealogical Index has been provided by the Church of Latter Day Saints and is awaiting processing. In conjunction with the Federation of Family History Societies, the LDS Church is also computerizing the whole of the 1881 census, but it will be no doubt be many years before that work is complete and available for study.

Once we have a satisfactory database of present-day surnames and their locations, the next step will be to compare such data with records from earlier periods.

At present the two groups—compilers of inventories of modern names and medieval onomasticians—have little in common. It is to be hoped that, like Channel tunnellers, they will start to survey the centuries in between, and eventually meet somewhere in the middle!

The prime candidates for such comparative analysis are the following:

Early nineteenth-century Civil Registration Records

Professor David Hey of the University of Sheffield and colleagues have undertaken a pilot transcription into machine-readable form of civil registration records (births and deaths), 1837–51, for England and Wales. The pilot project is for letter R only (i.e. 5% of the population).

Late seventeenth century: Hearth Tax Returns or Protestation Returns

Hearth Tax Returns are in print for Bedfordshire, Cornwall, Derbyshire, Dorset, Nottingham, Oxfordshire, Rutland, Shropshire, Suffolk, Surrey, and West Riding of Yorkshire, and could be put into machine-readable form fairly easily. Much more effort would be required to put the remaining counties for which returns survive into print (and thus, incidentally, into machine-readable form). Protestation Returns would, in some cases, provide a useful alternative for areas where Hearth Tax records are missing.

Fourteenth century: Poll Tax Returns, 1377–81

These are being computerized by Dr Richard Smith of the Wellcome Unit for the History of Medicine, in a project funded by the British Academy. Comparison of distribution in the 1380s and the 1980s could no doubt be extremely revealing if done well, but problems of identifying what counts as 'the same' surname are mind-boggling.

What can the Survey tell us in its Present State?

Such highly localized patterns of distribution as those of Churchyard, Chalk, and Macey suggest, in the context of medieval evidence of the name from other regions, that although there were several medieval bearers of the name, not necessarily related, all modern bearers are probably descended from just one of them—not necessarily one of whom any record survives. The name has *become* monogenetic. The holy grail for family historians is, of course, to establish the identity of the particular medieval individual from whom all modern bearers are descended. Needless to say, like most quests for

the grail, this genealogical ideal is hardly ever achieved. The trail usually runs cold somewhere around the 16th century.

Of the names mentioned so far, Lewington is not in Reaney and Wilson's dictionary. It has the form of a habitational name, but its place of origin is uncertain. The only onomastic lexicographer to include the surname is Bardsley, who derives it from Levington in Suffolk, which may or may not be correct.⁹

A comparison of a few pages of any telephone directory with the standard work on English surnames, Reaney and Wilson's dictionary, will demonstrate that quite a few modern surnames are not explained there. Some are very obviously derived from place-names and therefore fall into a class of names that was explicitly omitted by Reaney—those which 'can easily be identified from the gazetteer'.¹⁰ But there are facts about even this class of names which demand explanation in any account that aspires to comprehensiveness: for example, which of the many places named from a *broad ford* is most likely to be the source of the surname Bradford? Moreover, for quite a sizeable number of surnames that look as if they are derived from a place-name, no appropriate place-name can be found. In other cases, as Paffard has demonstrated clearly for Staffordshire, painstaking research can sometimes identify the source of such surnames even when they are derived from lost microtoponyms.¹¹ Yet another class of modern surnames, one suspects, are not mentioned by Reaney and Wilson because they did not find any medieval forms with which to connect the modern name. This does not, of course, make them any less deserving of explanation.

At the very least, if the pilot survey provides a list of names requiring explanation, together with their principal locations, it will have made a contribution. When we consider the very large number of medieval surnames which have simply disappeared, and the almost equally large number of modern surnames which have never been explained, this is not a trivial goal.

Reaney paid comparatively little attention to the location of surnames. It might be thought that his explanations and, in particular,

⁹ C. W. Bardsley, *Dictionary of English and Welsh Surnames* (Oxford, 1901).

¹⁰ It should be noted that many of the 4,000-odd names added by Wilson for the third edition are names in this class, namely of local origin.

¹¹ M. Paffard, 'North Staffordshire Names', *Staffordshire Studies*, no 2 (1989).

the connections that he made between medieval names and modern surnames would have seemed more plausible had he paid a little more attention to the work of Guppy. Historical and linguistic scholarship needs to be complemented by detailed factual evidence about distribution, past and present. We should, for example, be sceptical about attempts to adduce a Norse personal name as a supposed source of a surname if there is no evidence that the surname was ever significantly frequent within a hundred miles of an Anglo-Scandinavian region (as in the case of Hanks).

Kent and Sussex

I will conclude with some more detailed comments on the challenges posed by areas which have been most exposed to population movements (or at any rate population influxes, which is not the same thing), of which the most dramatic example is the south-east of England. It might be supposed that the statistical study of present-day Kentish or Sussex surnames would be of little interest to the historian. After all, these counties nowadays seem to be little more than dormitory suburbs of London. The present-day inhabitants might be mostly incomers, with very shallow roots in the county in which they now live. The ebb and flow of population migration over the years might be supposed to have obliterated most if not all traces of pattern that might be of historical (let alone etymological) interest.

Kent has one ostensible advantage for the student of population statistics: it is surrounded on three sides by water. Population exchange is most likely to have been to and from one direction only—or rather two, if we think in terms of counties: London (alias Surrey), and Sussex.

However, even this fact needs to be treated with caution. Water, which to modern eyes may seem a barrier, was in medieval times more like a highway, facilitating population exchange. There are, for example, many present-day surnames whose most significant centres of distribution lie on the two sides of the Bristol Channel. When we compare the distribution of surnames in Kent and Sussex with regions elsewhere in Britain, even with fairly crude techniques, some clear patterns can be perceived. Approximately 700 modern names have been identified by the survey as particularly associated with Kent and

Sussex. In a future issue of *Nomina* it is hoped to give a list of these, together with brief comments on their probable provenance.

As we look at the surnames which, today, are predominantly found in Kent and Sussex, we may choose either to be surprised at the large number for which Reaney does adduce southeastern examples or to be astonished at the large number which were once widespread elsewhere. Of course, Reaney's study makes no claim to offer statistical evidence. Anyway, it is clear from these lists that (a) quite a few present-day surnames are not explained at all by Reaney and Wilson, and (b) of those that are explained, by no means all are supported by early citations from specifically Kentish records.

Comparing the surnames of modern Sussex with those discussed by McKinley in his scholarly work on the medieval surnames of Sussex makes the question seem even more urgent: only about 10% of the surnames listed in McKinley's index are shown by the survey to have survived as modern surnames particularly associated with Sussex, while less than 5% of the surnames having such an association in the survey are discussed by him.¹² How is this apparent incompatibility to be explained? Are we to conclude that 95% of the population of modern Sussex consists of recent incomers? Certainly, much of Sussex is a commuter suburb of London, but this is very far from telling the whole story. For one thing, the surnames most associated statistically with Kent and Sussex appear to originate from habitation names in those counties. Many of these are not mentioned by McKinley. A substantial number of surnames shown by the survey to be most associated with Kent and Sussex almost certainly originated there.

Another factor affecting the discrepancy just noted is that many of the surnames which McKinley discusses (as allowed by his terms of reference) are not specific to Sussex, but are common and widespread in other regions too. Typically, these are polygenetic names. Occupational names such as Baker, Carter, Chapman, Cook, Cooper, Fisher, Hunt, Smith, and Taylor do indeed occur in very large numbers in Sussex today, but it cannot be claimed that there is anything distinctively Sussexian about them. They are not, therefore, picked out by statistical techniques. McKinley explicitly acknowledges that much of his space is devoted to topics which are not specific to

¹² R. W. McKinley, *The Surnames of Sussex*, English Surname Series, 5 (Oxford, 1988).

Sussex: for example, his comparison of patronymics ending in *-son*, which are characteristic of northern counties rather than Sussex, with patronymics ending in *-s*, which tend to be characteristic of the Welsh borders and the south Midlands. It would be pedantic to cavil at this digression, since it is valuable to have the information and it does not matter overmuch which volume of the series contains the discussion. Many of his findings, such as the identification of *-er* as a topographic surname ending in Sussex, are specific to the county.

Another factor to consider is that the rarer surnames of medieval Sussex (and indeed everywhere else), some of which are discussed by McKinley, have mostly died out altogether, as predicted, for example, by the 'Monte Carlo' model of Sturges and Haggett.¹³ It is common practice in standard statistical text books, e.g. Feller's *Introduction to Probability Theory*, to offer models for the rate of decay of surnames in a population, given standard assumptions about the number of different surname types and the number of male children.¹⁴ Broadly, the picture is that the frequent types become more frequent, while the rarer ones disappear. Sturges and Haggett conclude, probably rightly, that some 35% of fourteenth-century surnames would have died out by the mid-twentieth century. Examples of medieval surnames that no longer exist, taken from a randomly selected short alphabetical sequence of the *Middle English Dictionary*, include *Adam the Scytheward*, *Geoffrey Sitadown*, *Simon Sixandtwenty*, *Jordon Sixapple*, *Roger Sixtyman*, *John the Squell*, *Roger Scarehare*, and *Robert Skinbone*. Fig. 8 shows a highly generalized schema of the pattern of change in surname distribution in an English county across time.

A third point is that surnames that originated in Sussex during the Middle Ages may have since migrated, so their centres of distribution will now be found elsewhere. This is an intuitively plausible hypothesis, but it is not supported by a great deal of empirical evidence. The inescapable conclusion of this survey is that, although individual people move around a great deal, surnames considered as statistical entities do not. Among the reasons may be the fact that when people move, they do not move very far, and if they do, they

¹³ Christopher H. Sturges and Brian C. Haggett, *Inheritance of English Surnames* (n.p., n.d.).

¹⁴ W. Feller, *Introduction to Probability Theory*, 2nd edition (London and New York, 1957).

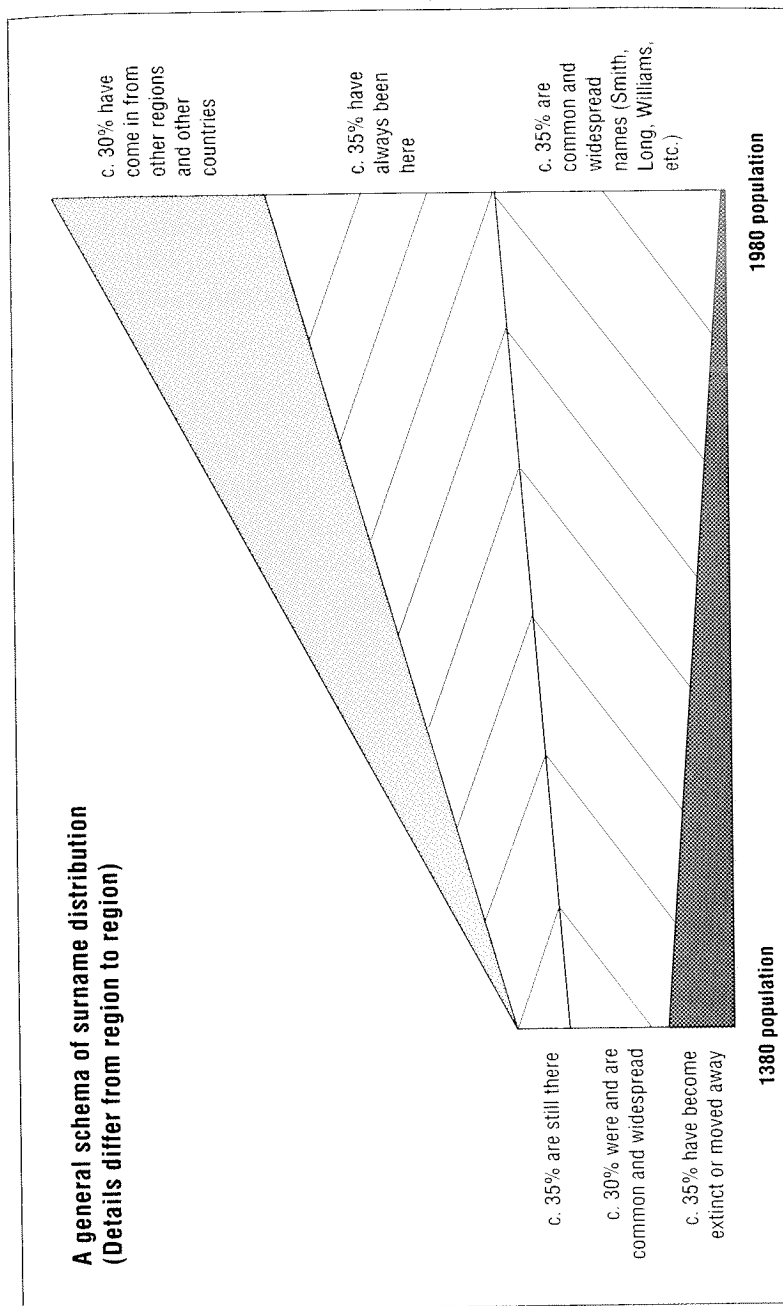


Fig. 8: A General Schema of Surname Distribution.

scatter randomly. Put it like this: of course the total number of bearers of a particular surname outside its place of origin is much greater than the number still found at the place of origin – but only at the place of origin does the concentration remain high.

Of course, the converse is not true, either. It cannot be said that the surnames that are distinctively Sussexian or Kentish today have all migrated in from elsewhere. Even if this were true, historians would still want to account for the reasons why these particular surnames are so much commoner here than elsewhere.

Conclusion

If it does no more than stimulate historians to account for these peculiarities of distribution, the survey will serve a useful purpose, mapping the associations between surnames and regions.

As McKinley says, 'A list of surnames currently in use in any community, such as a telephone directory or an electoral register, will . . . show traces of the community's past history in various forms'.¹⁵ It is up to surname historians to account for that history, at least as regards the surnames whose present-day distribution suggests an association with a particular community. A *comparative* list of surnames is a useful guide to the surviving traces of a community's history and will pose many questions which can only be answered by scholarly historical research.

¹⁵ McKinley, *History of British Surnames*, p. 194.

Family-Entries in English *Libri Vitae*, c.1050 to c.1530: Part I

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I. Introduction to *libri vitae*

My own interest in *libri vitae* as historical evidence is, I readily confess, of recent origin. When, in the late 1980s, I was investigating possible materials for the history of the Anglo-Norman family, I read Cecily Clark's seminal paper on the Thorney Abbey *liber* in *Anglo-Norman Studies*.¹ This was my first introduction to what I later discovered, and then demonstrated, to be not only a major source for the Anglo-Norman family but in fact the earliest such source. For, in the extracts which she printed from B.L. Add.MS. 40,000, was one which clearly described a contemporary family: ' . . . UUillelmus de Albinico, Cecilia uxor eius, filii eius UUillelmus, Rogerius, Matildis filia eius...'² My ignorance—shared, I am certain, with most other non-ecclesiastical historians—thus revealed and my appetite duly whetted, I was inspired to investigate *libri vitae* as historical records of demographic value, and, in doing so, to meet Cecily herself and profit from her immense learning given so freely and with such delightfully puckish humour. I very much regret that she did not live to see the final text of this series of articles which, as editor, she had accepted in principle for *Nomina* and which her knowledge and wisdom would certainly have improved; but she did see and approve the 'Corpus of Families extracted from English *libri vitae*' circulated at the Battle Abbey Conference in 1991. Before proceeding further with *libri vitae*, it is perhaps worth while briefly outlining why the history of the family is an important topic in English history

The size and structure of the West European family and household have long been a matter of interest to a variety of scholars. Historical

¹ Clark, 'British Library Additional MS. 40,000 ff. 1v-12r', *Anglo-Norman Studies*, 7 (1985), 50-68.

² *ibid.*, p. 55. Compare the two married priests each with a wife and child, though they may have had other, unrecorded, children, *ibid.*, p. 64.