

The first girls in England

Keith Briggs `keith.briggs@bt.com`

<http://keithbriggs.info>

SNSBI autumn half-day conference
2020-10-17 1000

Oxford Dictionary of Family Names in Britain and Ireland

Girle

Variants: GARLE

- **Current frequencies:** GB 28, Ireland 0
- **GB frequency 1881:** 30
- **Main GB location 1881:** Hants

English: nickname from Middle English *girle*, *gurle*, *garle* 'child (of either sex); young woman', apparently used to denote an attractive but effeminate young man.

Early bearers:

Geoffrey Gurle, 1275 in [Hundred Rolls](#) (Suffolk); Cecilia Garle, 1279 in [Hundred Rolls](#) (Oxon); William (le) Gurle, 1296, 1327 in [Subsidy Rolls](#) (Sussex); John Garle, 1327 in [Subsidy Rolls](#) (Cambs); William Garl, 1327 in [Subsidy Rolls](#) (Sussex); Willelmo Girle, 1379 in [Poll Tax](#) (Muckton, Lincs); John Gourle, 1476 in [Feet of Fines](#) (Hollingbourne, Kent); Henrye Girle, 1580 in [IGI](#) (Salisbury, Wilts); Tho Garle, 1606 in [IGI](#) (Sharnford, Leics); John Girle, 1618 in [IGI](#) (East Wellow, Hants); William Gurle, 1700 in [IGI](#) (Whitechapel, Middx); Samuel Gurl, 1802 in [IGI](#) (Stopham, Sussex).

Hugo le Gerl 1209

Image suppressed for copyright reasons.

TNA KB26/49, Essoin roll of Lincolnshire, Cambridgeshire, Huntingdonshire, Norfolk, and Suffolk eyres 1208–9. Court held in Bury St Edmunds.

Randulf le Gyrl 1220

Image available at [http://aalt.law.uh.edu/AALT7/CP25\(1\)/CP25_1_155_34-50/IMG_0029.htm](http://aalt.law.uh.edu/AALT7/CP25(1)/CP25_1_155_34-50/IMG_0029.htm).

Fine, King's Lynn. TNA CP25/1/155.

Ipswich tallage 1228

Image suppressed for copyright reasons.

TNA E179/180/1 m.1, individual assessment for the tallage granted to Henry III in 1226 for Ipswich.

Galfr' Gurle 1274/5

Et Ric' le Palm ten' j foc' in eađ p xij d. p annū un' Galfr'
Gurle & Margar' ux' ej⁹ & Wiffs Jordan tenēt vj acr' t're p id
svic'.

Rotuli Hundredorum ii.184.

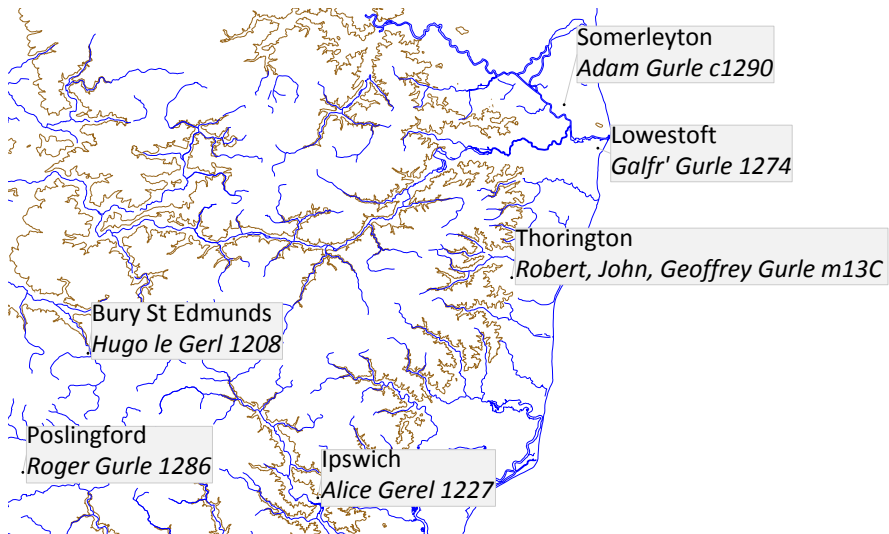
The East Anglian examples

- *Hugo le Gerl* 1209 (Suffolk, essoins)
- *Randulf le Gyrl* 1220 (Appleton near King's Lynn, FF 3 Henry III, no.25, TNA CP25/1/155; thanks to Paul Cullen!)
- *Alic' Gerel* 1228 (Ipswich, tallage)
- *Galfr' Gurle* 1275 (Lowestoft, *Rotuli Hundredorum*)
- *Roger Gurle* 1286 (Poslingford, Pinchbeck Register)
- *Robert, John, Geoffrey Gurle* mid to late 13C (Thorington, Blythburgh Cartulary)
- *Adam Gurle* c.1290 (Somerleyton, Bodleian charter)

After 1300, the byname is found much more widely in England.

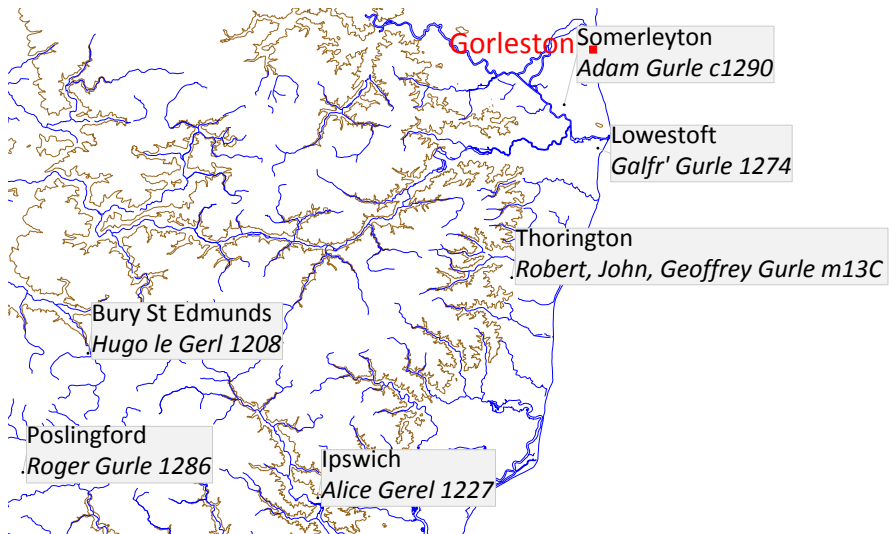
Thirteenth-century distribution

King's Lynn off the map to the north-west.



Thirteenth-century distribution and Gorleston

King's Lynn off the map to the north-west.



Sources checked

- Henry III Fine Rolls (11,000 names)
- *Rotuli Hundredorum* 1274/5 (80,000 names)
- Calendars of Patent Rolls, Close Rolls, Charter Rolls
- Feet of Fines for Suffolk, Norfolk, Essex, Cambridshire
- All Suffolk Records Society volumes
- Standard reference books and papers on medieval surnames and bynames
- The National Archives, Suffolk Archives, & Norfolk RO online search

What does all this mean?

- Note the definite articles: the earliest examples *le Gerl*, *le Gerel* prove that the byname was descriptive of the bearer, either of the character or occupation.
- No other suggestion is available but that these bynames contain the ancestor of the modern word “girl”.
- OED first records the common noun c.1300
- What about Gorleston, *Gorlestuna* 1086 DB < **Gorle*, **Gurle*?

Could the word be a foreign borrowing?

- The east coast ports had a large trade with the Low Countries and Hanseatic league.
- *Boye* is also found as a byname in the same period; cf. Middle Dutch *boie* 'messenger, servant'.
- An idea (not a theory): MLG **gherel* 'servant, dresser, ?cook' (only *gherer* is recorded, but the suffix *-el* is common Germanic for agent nouns).
- A better idea (still not a theory): Frisian, ?(Low German) *gerle* 'girdle', with blending of Anglo-Norman *gurle* 'girdle, money-belt'.

Bibliography I

- Bammesberger, Alfred and Joachim Grzega (2001). "ModE *girl* and other terms for 'young female person' in English language history". In: *Onomasiology Online* 2. (page numbers correspond to the edition *A recollection of 11 years of Onomasiology Online (2000–2010): all articles re-collected*), 224–230.
- Briggs, Keith (2020). "The first girls in England". In: *Notes & Queries* 67.2, 200–202.
- (2021). "The etymology of 'girl': two new ideas". In: *Notes & Queries* 68.1, 1–4.
- Diensberg, Bernhard (1984). "The etymology of modern English *girl*: an old problem reconsidered". In: *Neuphilologische Mitteilungen* 85.4, 473–475.
- (2000). "The etymology of modern English *girl* revisited". In: *Folia Linguistica Historica* 21, 119–124.
- Liberman, Anatoly (1998). "English *girl* under the asterisked sky of the Indo-Europeans". In: *Proceedings of the 7th Annual UCLA Indo-European Conference*. Ed. by A. della Volpe and E. C. Polomé. Vol. 27. *Journal of Indo-European Studies Monograph Series*, 150–172. ISBN: 0-941694-64-X.
- Moerdijk, A. (1994). "(Mis)use of semantic parallelism: Robinson's etymology of English GIRL". In: *NOWELE: North West European Language Evolution* 24, 49–65.
- Robinson, Fred C. (1967). "European clothing names and the etymology of *girl*". In: *Studies in historical linguistics in honor of George Sherman Lane*. Ed. by W. W. Arndt et al. Vol. 58. *University of North Carolina Studies in the Germanic languages and literatures*. Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 233–240.
- Terasawa, Y. (1993). "Some etymological and semasiological notes on *girl*". In: *Anglo-Saxonica: Beiträge zur Vor- und Frühgeschichte der englischen Sprache und zur altenglischen Literatur: Festschrift für Hans Schabram zum 65. Geburtstag*. Ed. by Klaus R. Grinda and Claus-Dieter Wetzel. Munich: Wilhelm Fink Verlag, 335–345.