

Suggestions on surnames ending *-sons*

A work in progress

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In this talk...

- Previous mention of surnames in *-sons*.
- A (slightly) more thorough examination of the surname evidence.
- Distribution of surnames in *-sons*.
- (Tentative) suggestions on their origin.

But first...

- In England, most surname research tends to assume four main name types.
 1. Location e.g. Hill, London
 2. Relationship e.g. Johns, Jenkinson
 3. Occupation e.g. Smith, Bowmaker
 4. Nickname e.g. Redhead, Proud

Names were originally given as descriptive, non-hereditary bynames.

Byname and surname history

- Bynames in general use after the Norman Conquest.
- It is thought that most people had hereditary surnames by:
 - 1350 in the south of England.
 - 1450 in the north of England.
- Higher classes tended to adopted hereditary surnames earliest.
- We know that during the Middle English period, when surnames were becoming established, there were “sharp differences between one class and another in the nature of the names in use” in terms of surnames types (McKinley, 1990, p. 201).

Surname types and status

- Name types associated with landholders and the most wealthy:
 - Toponymic names
- Name types associated with serfs and tenants:
 - Topographic names – i.e. surnames from landscape features (e.g. *Hill*)
 - Surnames of locative position (e.g. *Atchurch, Townsend*)
 - Occupational names (particularly with an agricultural focus, e.g., *Coward* ‘cowherd’)
 - Relationship names, **especially those ending *-son* or *-s***

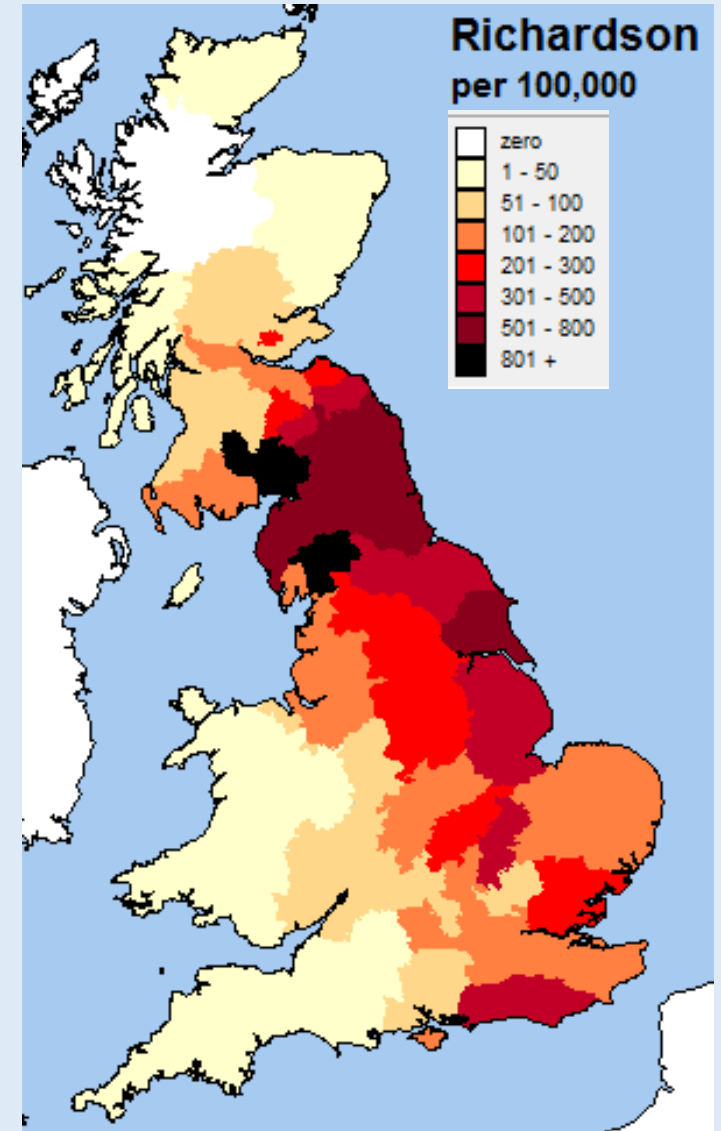
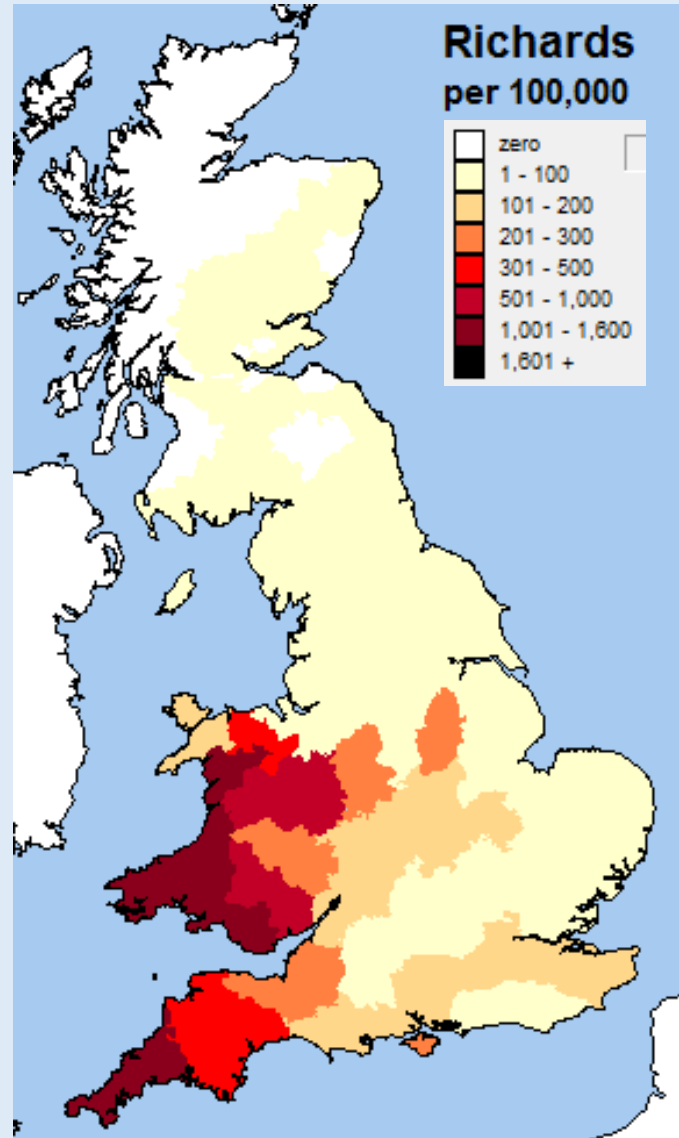
Surnames ending *-sons*

- Patronymic surnames ending *-sons* have received very little attention.
- As a starting point in an investigation of the origins of this type of name, we might assume that *-sons* is composed of *son* “son” with the addition of *-s*, which could be:
 - Genitive
 - Excrescent
 - Plural
- *But how likely are these?*

Where does the -s come from?

- Genitive

- Often considered to be a southern and western equivalent of the more northern *-son* when patronymic, so we wouldn't expect the two together.
- -s could represent “servant of”, so a name *Johnsons* could be “servant of a person with the name *Johnson*”.



Where does the -s come from?

- Excrescent
 - Given the apparent etymological transparency of final *-son*, it could be argued that the addition of excrescent *-s* is unlikely.
 - Compare names in *-mans*. These are not common, and those that still exist today could be understood as deriving from something other than *man* + *s*.
 - Names in *-mans* from FaNBI (31 in total) include:
 - *Edmans, Freemans, Romans, Simmans*

Where does the -s come from?

- Plural
 - Sense?

The multiple possibilities and uncertainty mean that further investigation is required to establish how this form has developed.

Where to start?

- “surnames of the anomalous type, with the suffix *-son* and a final *-s* added (*Gylsons, Johnsons, Jobsons, Pearsons, Tomsonnes*, etc.) were much more numerous in Gloucestershire than in any of the other counties examined” (McKinley, 1977, p. 231)
 - The other counties examined are Bucks, Dorset, Herefs, Norfolk, Oxon, Staffs, Suffolk, Surrey, Sussex and WR Yorks (only Agbrigg and Morley wapentakes).
- Rogers (1995, p. 223) mentions this name type too as part of a discussion of names in *-son*, but is just presenting McKinley’s work.

Initial investigation

- **0 bearers** of *-sons* in:
 - 1327 Gloucestershire subsidy rolls (Franklin, 1993).
 - 1377, 1379 and 1381 Gloucestershire poll tax returns (Fenwick, 1998).
- Decreases the likelihood that *-sons* was applied to non-hereditary by-names, thereby increasing the likelihood that the form is due to post-medieval excrescence.
- Indeed, McKinley (1990, p. 121) expects that this process was behind such names, noting that:

“A few surnames like this can be found in Herefordshire and Gloucestershire during the seventeenth century and later, but such names have always been scarce. They seem to have arisen through surnames formed from a personal name with “son” migrating into a region where surnames in “-s” were very common, with the result that surnames in “-son” acquired a final “-s” which was not originally present. As far as can be discovered, this is a development which only took place in the south west Midlands”.

Initial investigation

- However, names ending *-sons* can be found earlier than McKinley suggests.
- **4 bearers** in 1525 Gloucestershire subsidy rolls (Faraday, 2009).
 - Robert *Johnsons* from Colesbourne
 - Agnes *Tomsons* from Upper Lypiatt
 - Ricardus *Tomsons* from Tewkesbury
 - Johannes *Tompsons* from Tewkesbury.
- The Tewkesbury bearers of the name *Tomsons/Tompsons* could be from the same family, and if this is the case then it suggests these were not just scribal errors, but actual hereditary surnames.



Initial investigation

- The suggestion that these were genuine surnames is supported by the apparent increase in variety and frequency of names ending *-sons* in the following century, with the 1608 Gloucestershire muster rolls (Smith, 1980) including the names
 - *Jacksons* (one bearer)
 - *Jobsons* (one)
 - *Johnsons* (thirteen)
 - *Pearsons* (one)
 - *Tomsons* (three)

Outside Gloucs

- The *-sons* form may have occurred as early as 1381
 - Robertus *Wilksons* (Hodnet, Shropshire PT).
- This is the only instance of a patronymic with the ending *-sons* in the 14th-century PT, and so it is possible that it is an error, though Hodnet is not too far from the ‘south west Midlands’ where McKinley noted names of this form, and is within the region where genitive *-s* was common in patronymic names.
- If there was no error in the recording of the name *Wilksons* in 1381, this would be an unusually early example of excrescence, making it an unlikely explanation for the form
 - by comparison, topographical names with excrescent *-s* only became common “by the seventeenth century” (McKinley, 1990, p. 87).

Outside Gloucs

- It is more likely that this name is for the servant of a man with the name *Wilkson* either as a by-name, surname, or given-name, with the addition of a genitive -s. If this is the case, the continued rarity of patronymics ending -*sons* is not necessarily an argument against their 14th-century formation, as their apparently unusual, and perhaps a perceived nonsensical, form might have caused resistance to their widespread use.
- Remember also that relationship names, especially those ending -*sons* or -*s*, are considered most common to members of lower social classes, so we might not expect them to be recorded with great frequency.

Related surnames?

- It is possible that surnames in *-mans* represent an analogous form to those in *-sons*.
- The following are recorded in the 1379 poll tax returns:
 - Deonisia *Blakemans* (Newtown, Hants)
 - Agn' *Hykemans* (Somerford Keynes, Wilts)
 - Johanna *Louemans* (Collingbourne Kingston, Wilts).
- McClure (2003, p. 109) also notes the name Walt. *Hykemons* in the 1332 subsidy roll for Billesley, Warwickshire, which shows that *-mans* is not just an ending reserved for females, as the poll tax evidence alone might suggest.

Related surnames?

- McClure's (2003) discussion of *-man* establishes it as a Middle English hypocoristic suffix, with most of his evidence from twelfth- and thirteenth-century records.
- Though he does note that some surnames in *-man* could be from OE personal names ending *-mann*, and some later surnames in *-man* are often 'composed of a personal name and Middle English *man* "servant"'.
 - although *Blakemans* is not necessarily a ME hypocoristic form, instead apparently being from the attested OE personal name *Blæcman*, but still with genitive *-s*.
- If a given-name could appear with the hypocoristic suffix *-man*, then the additional *-s* in the three poll tax examples might be genitival.

Related surnames?

- Perhaps, then, *-son* could sometimes be hypocoristic too?

4. Used as an affectionate form of address to a man or boy by an unrelated older person, or by a person of higher professional or social status. Also occasionally used as a familiar or patronizing form of address to a man younger than the speaker. Cf. *SONNY n. 1*, *old son n.* at *OLD adj.* Compounds 5b.

- Without the kind of proof provided for *-man* by ‘the prosoponymic alternation of the Warwickshire byname *Hykemons* with *Hyken*’ (McClure, 2003, p. 110), this cannot be made certain.

Related surnames?

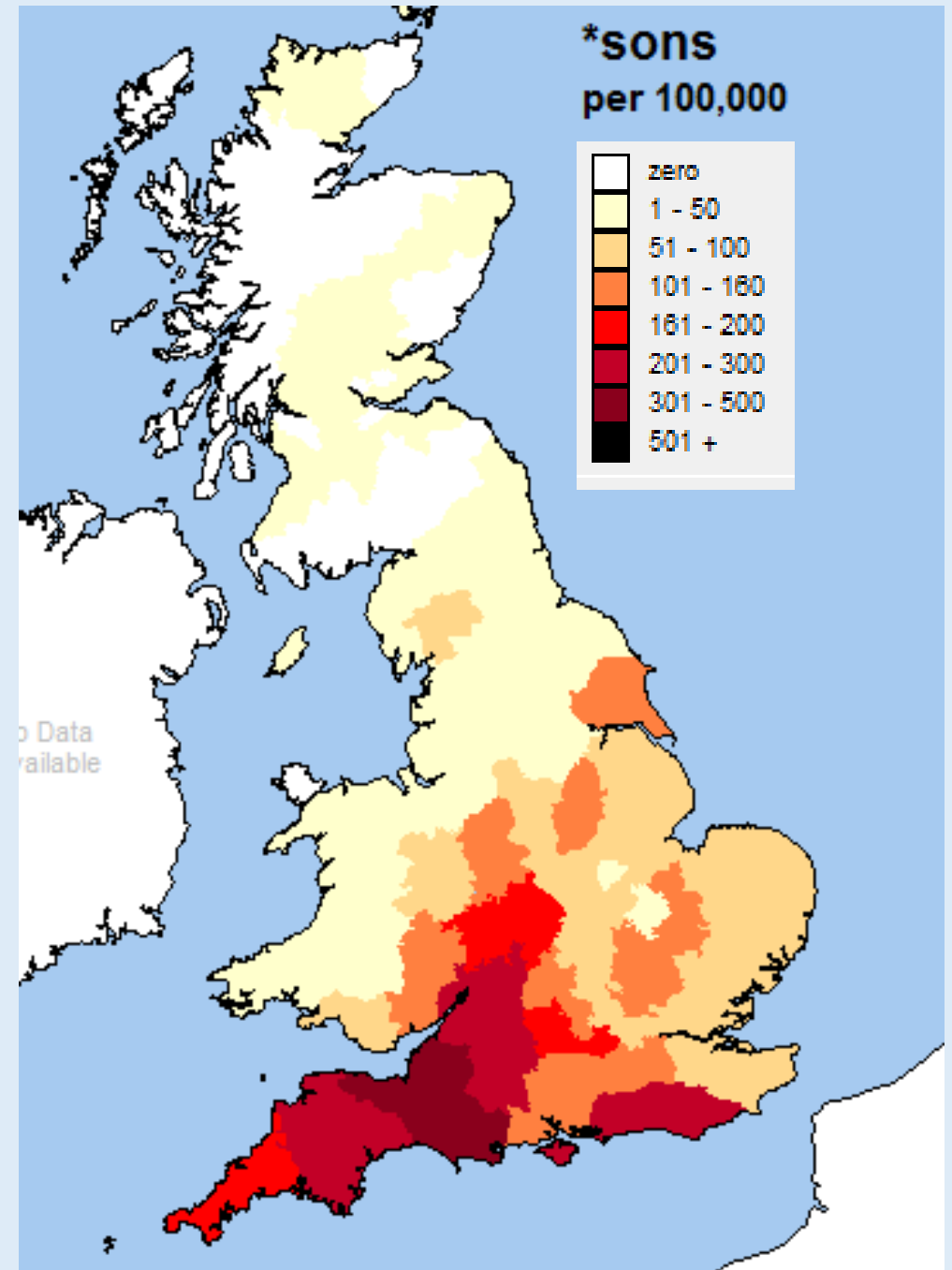
- Even so, if ME hypocoristic given-names could be formed with *-son*, then the concentration of *-sons* names in Gloucestershire and other parts of the West Midlands conforms to the typical distribution of names with genitival *-s*.
- However, the stems from which McClure's hypocoristic *-man* names are formed are all pet forms or short forms of ME given-names, and while the poll tax example of *Wilksons* is constructed from a pet form of *William*, some later examples, such as *Johnsons*, do not necessarily include a pet form of a given-name.
- This suggests that not all names in *-sons* derive from hypocoristic given-names with genitival *-s*, if any do at all.

Is the final -s genitival?

- If names in *-sons* do indeed end with genitive -s, then it would be expected for them to be most heavily concentrated in the south-west Midlands, where personal names ending -s were most common 'by about 1350' (McKinley, 1990, p. 118).
- While this was certainly the case for the small number of early *-sons* names which have been found and examined so far, their later distribution shows a different pattern.

Distribution

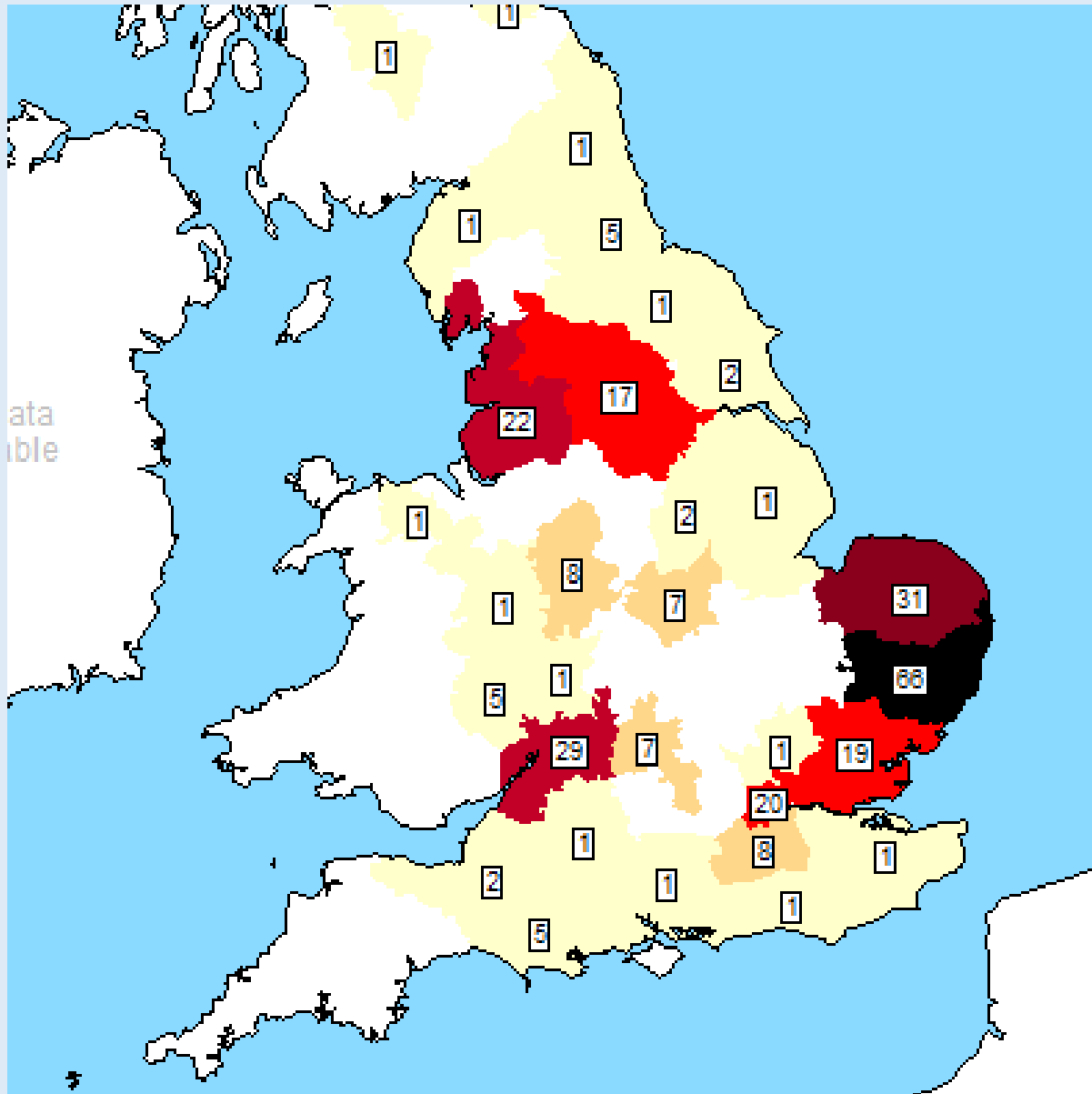
- The 1881 distribution of all names ending *-sons* does display a south-western concentration.
- Though this includes a number of names with ambiguous or non-patronymic origins, such as *Parsons*, which are not relevant to this investigation.



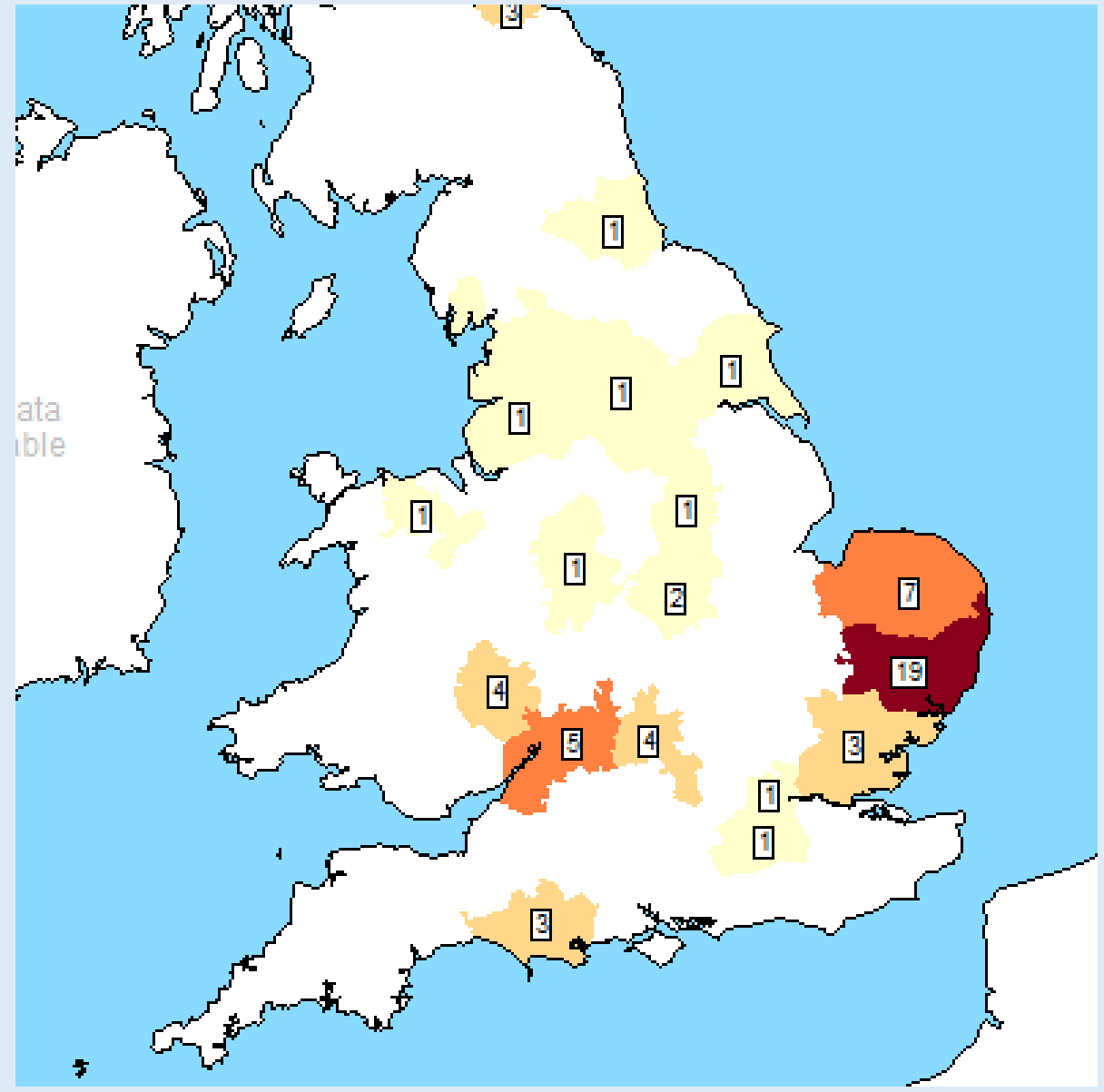
Distribution

- It has been possible to filter out the ambiguous and non-patronymic names with the help of the *FaNUK* database, so that only those names ending *-sons* which clearly have a relationship name as the stem are included.
- The database was searched for all names ending *-sons*, and then any name which was not patronymic was discarded from the sample. The remaining names were then entered into an “Advanced Surname Search” in Archer’s atlas, which shows that patronymics ending *-sons* were most heavily concentrated in Suffolk, Norfolk and Gloucestershire.

1881 distribution of patronymic *-sons* names (actual numbers).



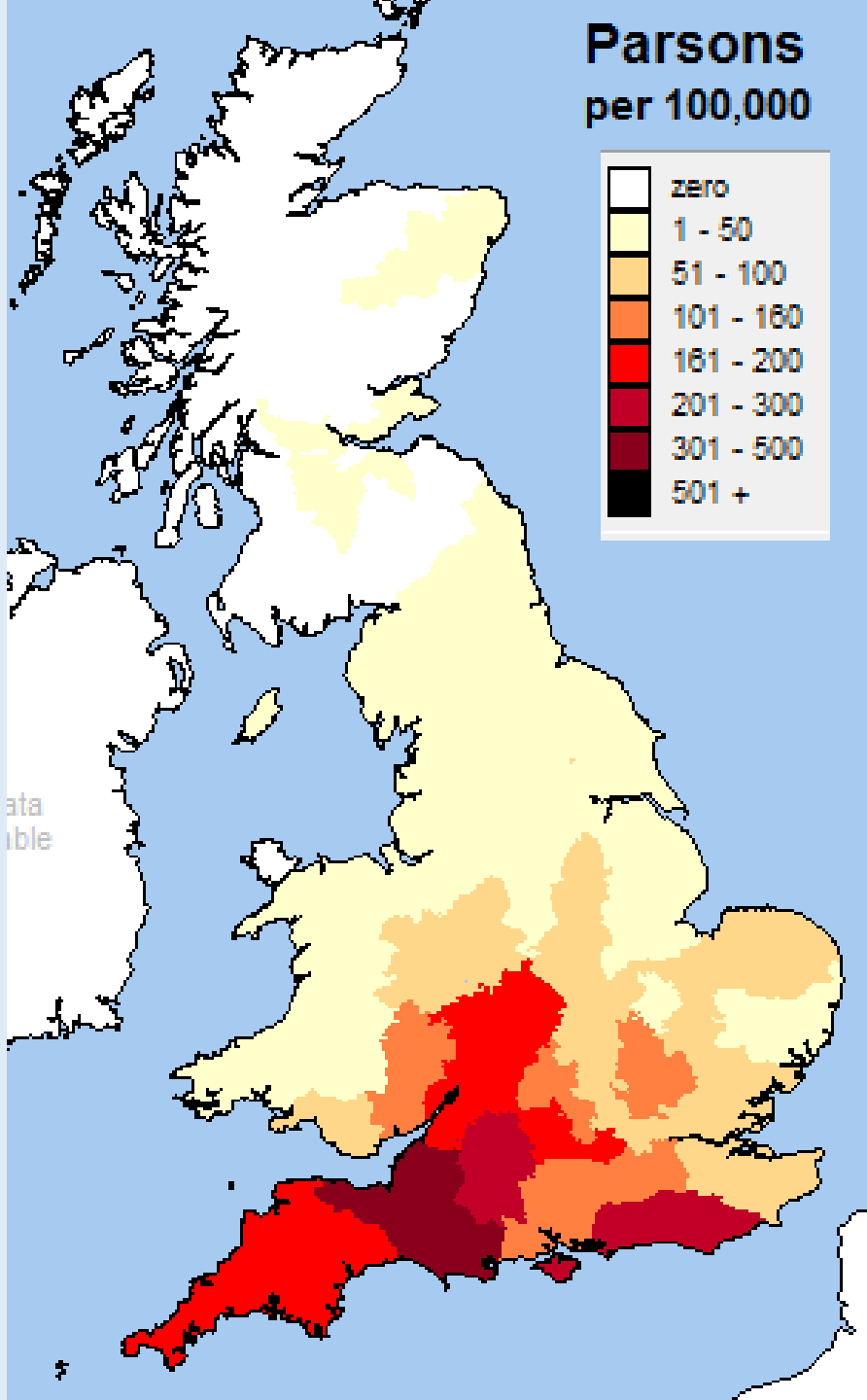
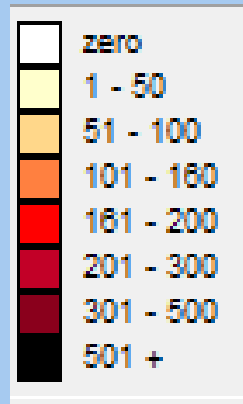
1881 distribution of patronymic *-sons* names (per 100,000).



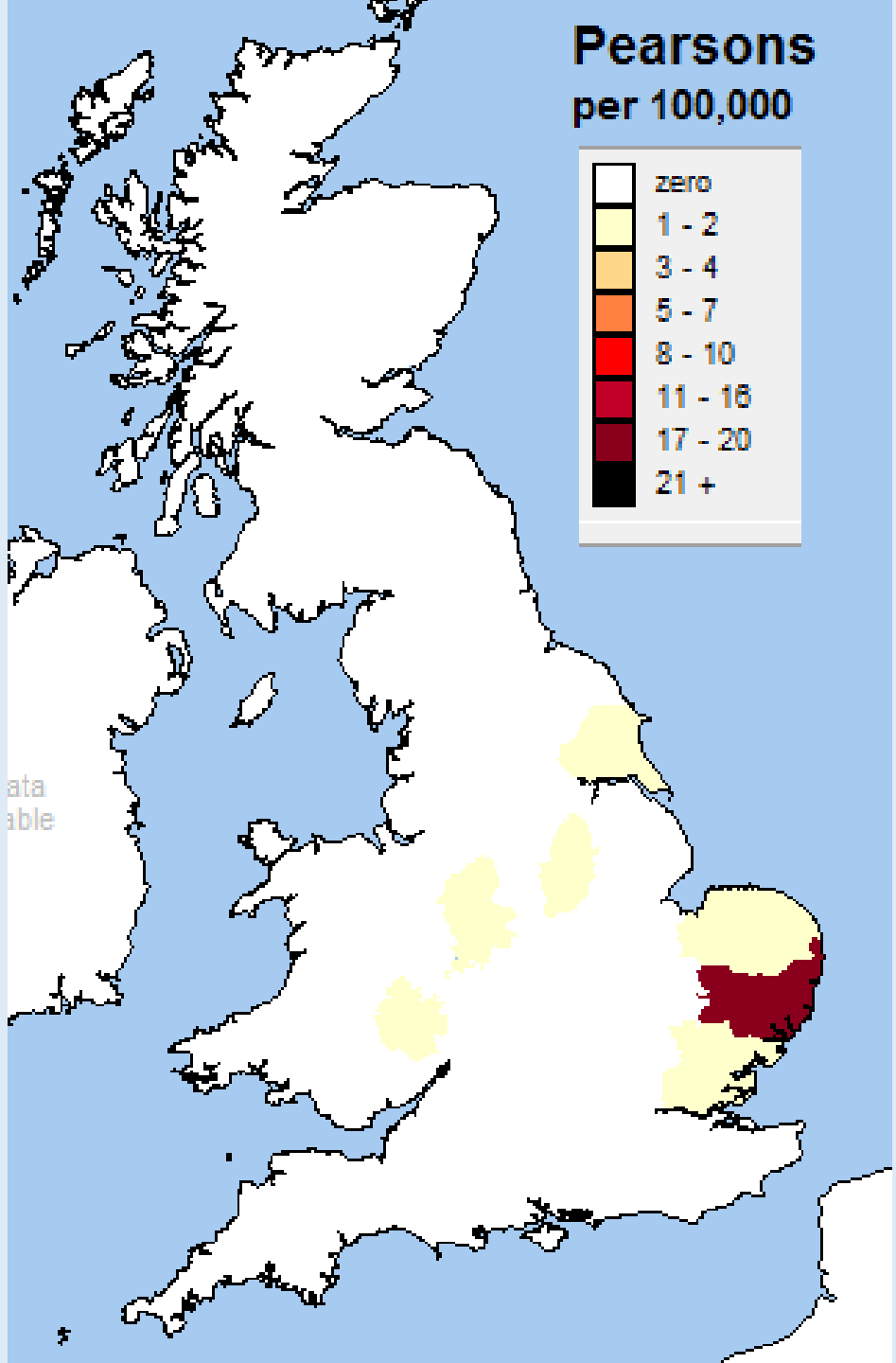
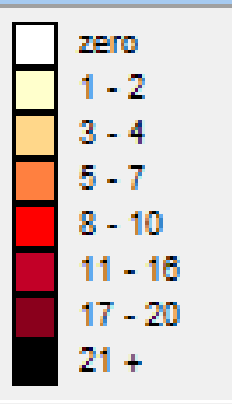
Distribution

- The unambiguously patronymic *-sons* names in the *FaNUK* database which also appear in Archer's atlas are:
 - *Davisons, Dawsons, Dicksons, Dixons, Hansons, Hodgsons, Jacksons, Jansons, Johnsons, Morrisons, Nelsons, Parkinsons, Pearsons, Robinsons, Sandersons, Simpsons, Stevensons, Thompsons* and *Watsons*.
- It is possible that *Pearsons* could sometimes be a form of the non-patronymic *Parsons*. However, its East Anglian distribution suggests it is distinct from *Parsons*, which has a southern and south-western distribution.

Parsons
per 100,000



Pearsons
per 100,000



Distribution

- It seems, then, that patronymic names ending *-sons* were most common in East Anglia in 1881, a different pattern to the south-west Midland distribution of earlier examples of such names and as found by McKinley.
- This might suggest that the form is not, or is not always, due to the addition of a genitival *-s*, as patronymics ending with genitive *-s* were and are not particularly common to the area, forming 'an insignificant proportion of the total body of surnames in use' (McKinley, 1975, p. 131).
- In an area where genitive *-s* was not especially frequent, perhaps the formation of patronymics in *-sons* is more likely to be due to excrescence, or for some other unknown reason.

Distribution

- It might, however, be that the 1881 distribution is not a true reflection of regional tendencies to form names in *-sons*.
- Could the high concentration in East Anglia represent a high frequency of just one or two surnames in *-sons* which became established in the region due to migration?
- It could then be the case that the formation of names in *-sons* was indeed most common to Gloucestershire and the south-west Midlands, but that later high frequencies of such names in unrepresentative regions have obscured this pattern.

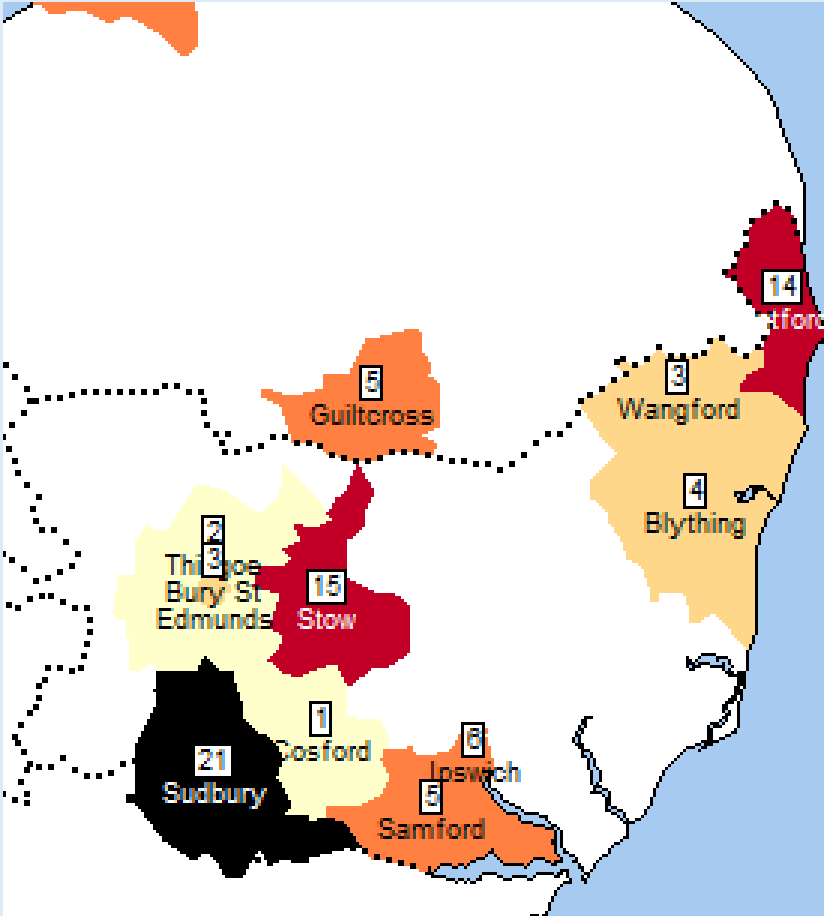
Regional frequency of names in *-sons*

- In total, there are 269 instances of unambiguously patronymic *-sons* names in the 1881 census which appear in both Archer's atlas and the *FaNUK* database.
- 123 of these are the name *Pearsons*, making up 46% of the total, most of which occur in Essex, Norfolk or Suffolk.
 - 62 in Suffolk
 - 12 in Essex
 - 11 in Norfolk
- The next most frequent patronymic *-sons* name in the sample is *Johnsons*, which has 47 bearers in 1881.
 - 20 of these were recorded in Norfolk
 - 13 in Gloucestershire.

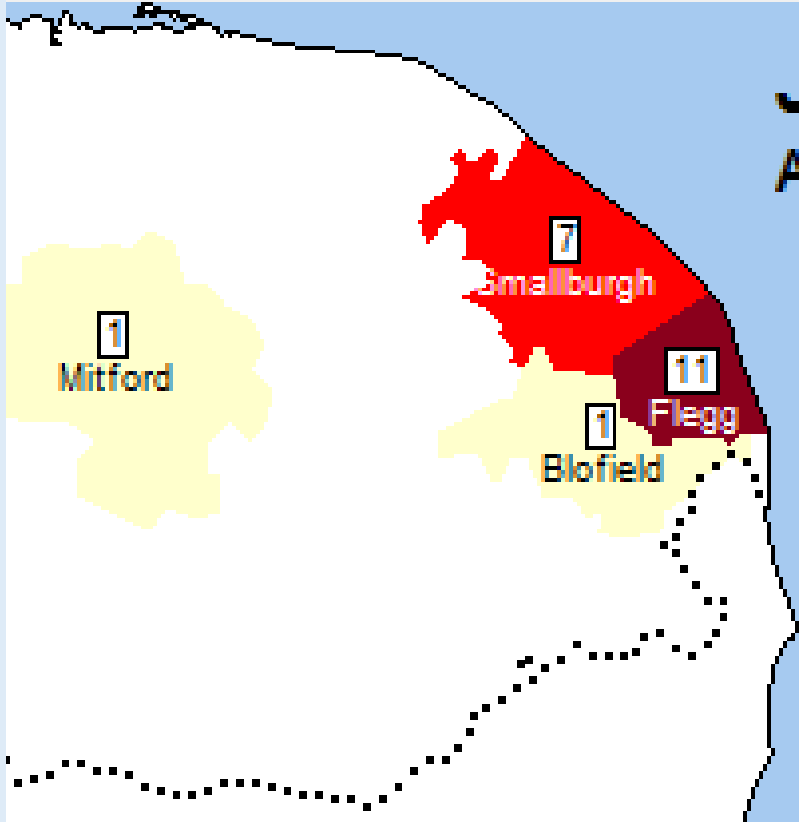
Regional frequency of names in *-sons*

- The eastern examples of these names appear to have been most frequent in a fairly small number of close settlements
- *Pearsons* occurs 21 times in the Poor Law Union (PLU) of Sudbury which lies partly in Essex and Suffolk, 15 times in the Suffolk PLU of Stow, and 14 times in the Suffolk PLU of Mutford.
- *Johnsons* occurs 11 times in the Norfolk PLU of Flegg and 7 times in neighbouring Smallburgh.
- The proximity of most bearers of the name *Pearsons* raises the possibility that they were members of the same family, and the same can be said of the people named *Johnsons*.

Pearsons Actual Numbers



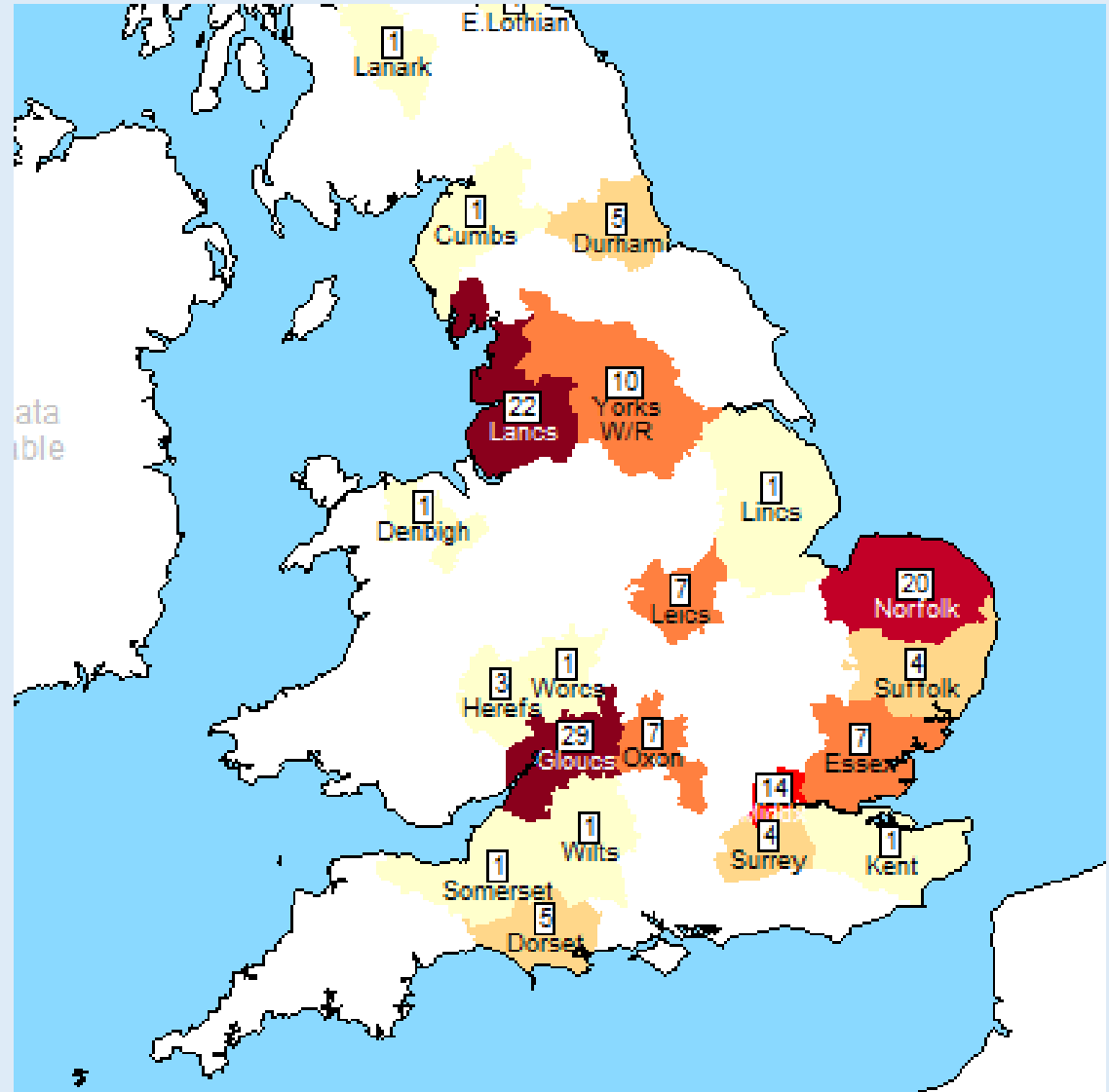
Johnsons Actual Numbers



Regional frequency of names in *-sons*

- If the names *Pearsons* and *Johnsons* are removed from the 1881 distribution of patronymics in *-sons*, then Gloucestershire appears more significant.

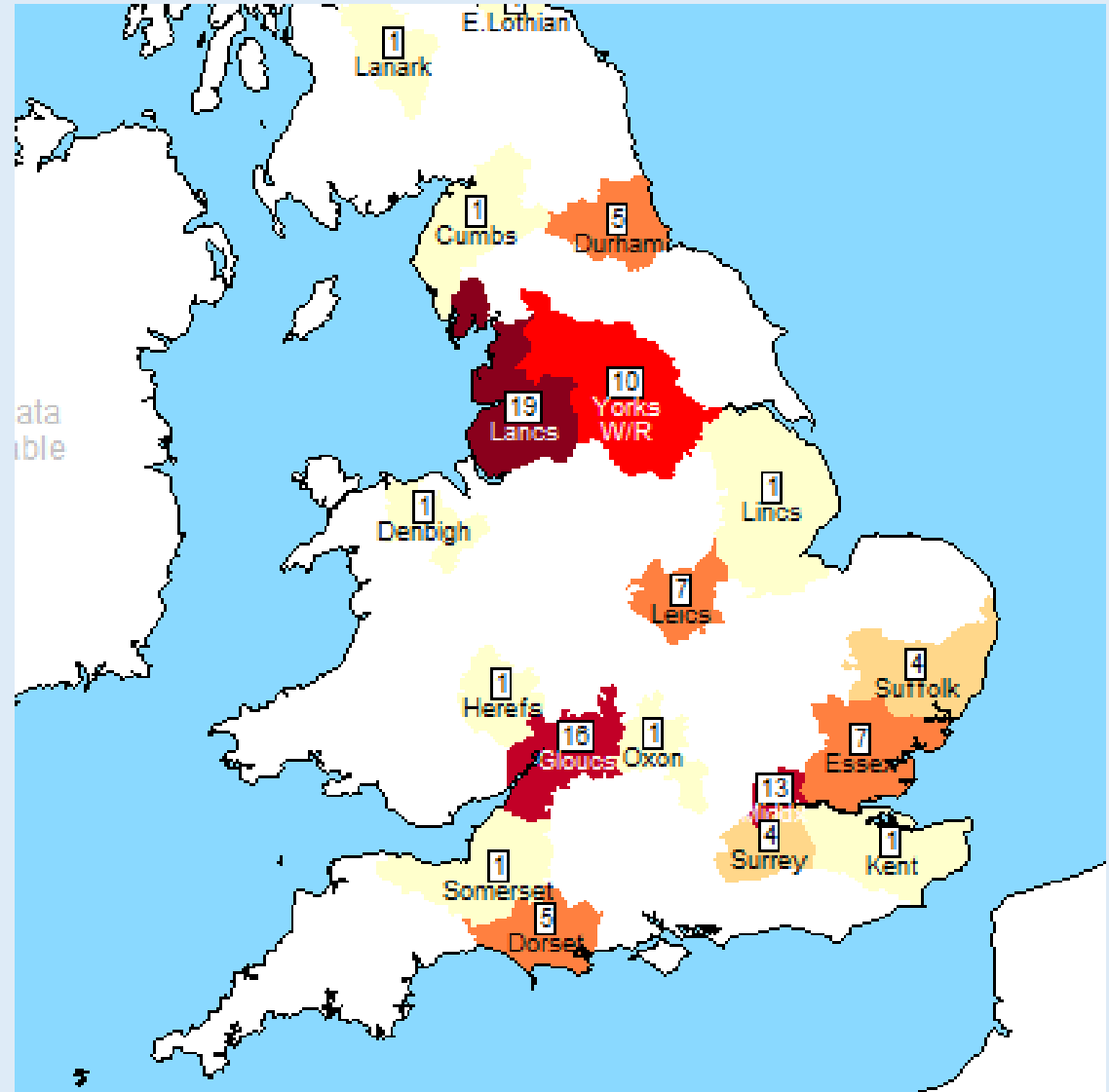
1881 distribution of patronymic names ending *-sons* (actual numbers), excepting *Pearsons*.



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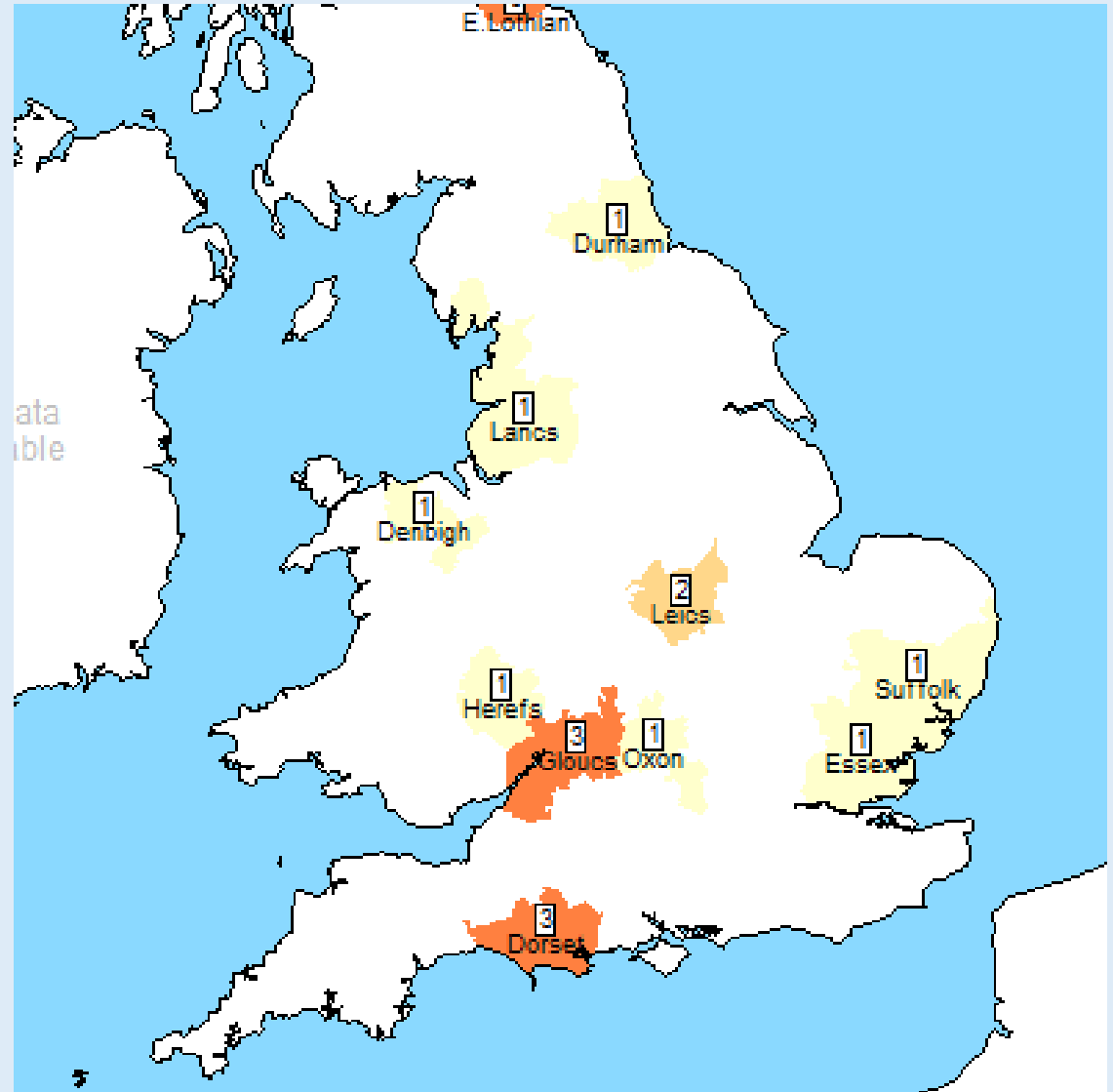
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Regional frequency of names in *-sons*

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1881 distribution of patronymic names ending *-sons* (per 100,000), excepting *Johnsons* and *Pearsons*.



Regional frequency of names in *-sons*

- The numbers of names represented in these maps are small, and so any conclusions based on their patterns of distribution can only be tentative at best, though it does appear that patronymics ending *-sons* have been relatively common to Gloucestershire since the Middle English period.
- The fact that both *Pearsons* and *Johnsons* were most common in the east should not be ignored, and might show that names of this form either moved to this part of England through migration, or were coined independently in this region.

Conclusion

- Overall, the 1881 distribution of patronymics ending *-sons* does little to confirm any hypotheses on how exactly such names were first formed.
- In some ways, the previously suggested south-west Midland formation and concentration is supported, but the East Anglian distribution of *Johnsons* and *Pearsons* is not compatible with it.
- Because of this, this paper cannot reach definitive conclusions on how and why names of this form came into use.
- Such a study would require a great deal of research, perhaps beginning with the analysis of south-west Midland and East Anglian records from the fourteenth to seventeenth century, with the aim of tracing the medieval and post-medieval development of patronymics ending *-sons* with greater accuracy.

Conclusion

- However, this paper has shown that there are possible origins of patronymics in *-sons* that have not been fully considered, and which require further investigation.
- Not only would this allow for greater understanding on a name form that has, up to now, been considered an anomaly, but it might improve general knowledge of the chronology and conditions of:
 - the use of excrescent *-s* in surnames
 - the use of genitive *-s* in surnames
- It might also be possible to either confirm or deny the more uncertain suggestion that *-son* could be a hypocoristic suffix in some cases.

Conclusion

- While certainty has not been possible, it seems McKinley's observation that patronymics ending *-sons* are anomalous and concentrated in the south-west Midlands might be a little simplistic.
- Further investigation of these names has shown that their use and development may be more complex than first thought, requiring additional study before regarding them merely as anthroponomastic anomalies.

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