

The Derivation of Family Names

What's in a Name?

Family names, or surnames, are principally derived from four sources; work, looks, ancestry and habitat. This is apparent from a look at a list of common surnames in America; the top ten are Smith, Jones, Williams, Brown, Davies, Miller, Wilson, Moore and Taylor. Prior to Medieval times people simply had a given name, Will, John etc. In a village this was not generally a problem. As people moved to towns, however, some way of distinguishing between the more common names became necessary and thus children were referred to as John's son or Will's son (note the implied sexism; never Maud's girl or Eleanor's daughter). With the advent of journeymen and population growth even this became unmanageable. In Wales, where David was always popular, Davies or Davis had to be further qualified, such as Davies the Milk. Another distinguishing characteristic was required. This was a time when trades were passed from father to son and thus John the Baker was distinguishable from John the Miller.

Every village and most manors had their own Smith which accounts for the popularity of that name. Miller, Baker, Brewer, Butcher and Taylor are self-explanatory as are Shepherd, Drover and Farmer (not as common as one might suppose simply because most peasants were villeins, akin to a serf), Freeman was as likely as Farmer as both owned their land. It is strange to think that James Bond came from peasant farmers or bondsmen, just as Cotter came from a cottage dweller with a small-holding. Much can be learnt of Medieval life by studying these names. Cattle were a rarity so there are few names associated with them but Pound came from a keeper of animals (in the pound) and Mathers were mowers or grass-cutters. Castle or Manor life spawned many names; the Butler was in charge of bottles, a Chamberlain was actually in charge of the main bedroom, not a very auspicious post one would think, a Reeve was the local law enforcement, the Baileyman was in the keep, a Banister was a basket maker, the Sargeant was a soldier (actually from the Latin for servant) and, of course, Archer, Page and Knight. The Spenser (or Spencer) took the provisions around to the workers in the fields, overseen by the Steward. The Porter was the doorkeeper and Ward was the guard. Parker was the gamekeeper and Mr. Hayward guarded the forest or enclosure (for hunting). Higher up was the Ryder who guarded the forest on a horse.

If the man died, at war or through pestilence, and had no sons or they were too young, then often the woman took over the business, Baxter is a female baker, Brewster, a woman brewer, is actually more common than Brewer owing to the high masculine mortality rate. Ms. Dexter denoted that the woman was a dyer. Wright meant a maker of, thus Cartwright made carts while Carter used them for transport. Chapman was a corruption of *Ceapman*, pronounced Cheapman, a merchant, used more to describe his wares than his personality one hopes! A cut above was a Mercer, a more expensive trader. Mr. Chandler once made candles while Barker was a tanner, as indeed was Mr. Tanner. Arkwright applied to a chest maker whereas Carpenter was specifically a carriage maker and Cooper was a barrel-maker, assisted by the Hooper who put the bands around them. The Joiner put the furniture together after the Turner had rounded the wood on the lathe and the Sawyer had cut it.

Many people were occupied making clothes, the Causer made leggings after the Fuller had softened the coarse cloth or the Walker had trod on the damp cloth, also to make it pliable. Snyder is Dutch for a tailor or stitcher of coats. Weaver and Spinner are self-explanatory, though Webster is also a weaver (I'm sure old Noah new that). In the world of entertainment we had Sangster, a songmaker, as well as Singer, and Saylor, nothing nautical as one may expect, but rather an acrobat or dancer

(in the days when sailors had to climb the masts this talent was very useful and thus the term was applied.) The Stringer was invaluable, attending to the instruments.

There are many more, Mr Tinker mended kettles and pots, although not the kind made by the Potter; both Tyler and Slater worked on the roof while Bishop and Dean may not have been so 'elevated' as the name was applied to their Grace's servants as well. So look around at your circle of friends and see how many of them have names denoting their ancestors occupation, you will be surprised, oh and Mr. Summers, or Sumner, may not have had a sunny disposition, he was the summoner to court.

Sources: [Last Names Dictionary](#)

<http://www.obcgs.com/LASTNAMES.htm>

Bardsley, Charles Wareing *English Surnames, their Sources and Significations*, 6th Edition, 1898, Heritage, ISBN: 1556132980

Published by David Green, June 11, 2009