



## CHAPTER ONE

### *How Surnames Began*

MOST PEOPLE take surnames for granted, seldom pausing to think what they mean. Some, like *Baker* and *Short*, have very obvious meanings; others, such as *Pratt* and *Wray*, do not appear to mean anything at all, and are accepted simply as names. But every surname had a meaning once, and it is well worth trying to find out what it was, because it may tell us something about a very remote ancestor, and furthermore when all the regular English surnames are pieced together like a great jig-saw puzzle they make a picture of the life and times when they were first spoken.

The system of having a permanent name for each

family linking its members together and going on from one generation to another is very practical and convenient. But it was never invented by anyone, never planned or organized or enforced by law. Like many good old customs it simply grew of its own accord because it was needed, and the soil it grew in was conversation. When people wanted to distinguish one man from another with the same Christian name, they would add a word or expression to identify the one they were speaking of, just saying the first thing that came into their heads without any thought on the matter. They might describe his appearance or behaviour and call him the *Longman* or the *Wild*; or give his occupation as the *Fisher* or the *Cook*. Or they might say whose son he was, *Williamson* or *Johns*, or tell where he was living, perhaps on a *Hill* or in a *Cave*. Such words often repeated could stick to the man for life and even pass on to his children and make a family name for ever. Thus the origin of a surname is seldom an official affair, but a snippet of conversation from the past. It may come from words spoken light-heartedly seven or eight hundred years ago.

These various ways of making an addition to a man's name fall roughly into four groups, which we may call Description, with which all kinds of personal nicknames are included, Occupation, Parentage (or relationship) and Locality. They answer the questions, What is he like? What does he do? Whose son is he? and, Where is he from? It does not matter what order we take them in, for they all developed together

and actually our surnames exist in such enormous number and variety that they cannot be fitted into these compartments at all neatly; there are borderline cases between two groups, and odd names that do not seem to belong to any of them. But all the same it is useful to have these four main types in mind, because they help us to arrange this large subject into some sort of order.

When our forefathers first called each other by these second names with no idea of their lasting for ever, they naturally used the most ordinary, easy-going words of daily speech. But English has changed a good deal since that time, which is why so many surnames need explanation today. Some words like those mentioned at the beginning of the chapter became obsolete soon after the Conquest, though not before they had stuck to certain families as lasting labels. *Pratt* meant craftiness and was given to a clever but slippery type; a *Wray* was an out-of-the-way corner where somebody might live. Such words were already old-fashioned by the reign of King John. Their presence in large numbers in the modern world is one of the many proofs of the antiquity of our surnames.

Other words have remained in use in the language but changed their form. *Mylne* is the Anglo-Saxon word for mill; *Reid* or *Read* represents the early medieval pronunciation of the familiar word "red", a natural nickname for a red-haired man. Others have kept the same form but developed a different meaning, as for instance *Batchelor*, which at the time

when it became a surname did not mean an unmarried man but a young knight. So even some of the names that seem quite obvious are not what we think.

But although our language has constantly changed and developed in details, as all living things must, it has also remained basically the same. An amazing number of words and phrases that were used in Anglo-Saxon England are still full of life, and therefore we have among our surnames hundreds of words like *Smith* and *Brown* and *White* that have hardly changed at all in a thousand years.

It is quite easy to imagine how such phrases as Will “the Fisher”, Tom “of the Little Wood” came to be used in the first place and stuck to people for life. But it is much harder to see how they could pass on to sons and grandsons for whom they were no longer true. For some it was much easier than others. For instance at a very early date many families were known by the places where they lived, and if they continued in the same place it was easy for its name to pass on to the next generation because it continued to tell the truth. This applied both to rich and poor. The lord of the manor was called by the name of the village that he owned so long that even younger sons who settled elsewhere carried the name with them, and in the same way a humbler family who lived by the *Brook* or the *Ford* might always be spoken of in the village as Simon or Robin “at the ford”. In the two or three centuries after the coming of the Normans the great majority of English people were bound to live and work on the manors where they were born.

Nowadays it is unusual for anyone to live in the same house all his life, but then it was the normal thing for working people, and families often continued for generations in the same cottage. In such cases the place became identified with them, and when at last a young man leaving the cottage at the ford where he had been born found work in a town far away and his new master asked his name, he would answer naturally, "Alan Ford".

With surnames from occupations the process of sticking was often more difficult. The *Miller* was naturally called by his trade, and if one of his sons, as often happened, followed in his footsteps and inherited the mill, he too would have the same surname as a matter of course. But another son might become a shepherd, or a carpenter or a cook, and it would most unnatural to call him "Miller". And yet in time this did happen. We can watch it happening in documents that have survived from the Middle Ages.

In the reign of Edward I (1272-1307) the whole country was taxed to raise money for the king's wars in Wales and Scotland, and the names of all those who paid their tax, many thousands of them, written on sheets of parchment, according to the villages where they lived, are preserved in the Public Record Office in London. They are known as Subsidy Rolls and are the best evidence we can have of the state of ordinary people's names at this time. A century later when Richard II was king, as a boy, another great tax known as the Poll Tax was laid on the people and their names written down again. Not so many of

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these lists have been preserved, but enough to tell us a great deal.

In Edward I's Subsidy names like Thomas the Miller and Hugh the Baker are probably still telling the truth, but in the Poll Tax both surnames and occupations are given and they are very often contradictory. We see "John Carter, draper; Walter Cook, sheep driver; Robert Barber, cook", and many more of this sort, proving that in these families the name has become permanent. These lists also include names like "Simon Shepherd, shepherd", but the very fact that it was necessary to write it like that shows that such words used as second names were no longer thought of as giving information. In fact, fixed surnames are established. It was anger at having to pay this tax that caused the Peasants' Revolt led by Wat Tyler, but there is no reason to believe that Wat made tiles himself, though perhaps his grandfather had done so.

You would think it would be just as unlikely for neighbours to call a man Roger *Johnson* when his father's name was not John as to call a man Fisher when he was really a baker, but this kind of name, derived from Christian names of parents, was established extremely early in England. In Wales it was much later before they settled down, and if your name is *Davies* (the son of Davie, a great Welsh favourite) or *Jones* (the son of John with a Welsh pronunciation) the original John or David may have lived in Wales or moved into England in the time of the Tudors or even later. In Denmark and Sweden,

where most of the surnames are of this kind, they were still sometimes changing when one generation succeeded another, within living memory. The son of Hans Larsen might be called Peter Hansen and his son Anders Peterson and so on. This is how it was in England in the reign of William the Conqueror, but even at that time the same name was often passed on to a grandson. Very many of our surnames of this type can be proved to have come from the time of the Norman kings.

One might think that personal nicknames, whether simple descriptions like *Strong* or *Little*, or more fanciful ones like *Lilleywhite* or *Smallbones*, would be the very last to become permanently fixed to a family because they were so clearly invented for just one person. But in fact they are among the very oldest of our surnames. Long before the coming of the Normans the Anglo-Saxons used such names to distinguish one man from another; so did the Danes and the Normans, and when all these people merged together in England the tendency to make nicknames was very strong. Some of these early nicknames are well known to us, such as that of Edmund *Ironside*, so called because he was a valiant fighter, and Hereward the *Wake*, who could never be caught sleeping or taken by surprise. We can see many of them in the Anglo-Saxon Chronicle and Domesday Book, and the remarkable thing is that they are nearly all still with us as modern surnames. It does not follow that families with these names are descended from the very people mentioned in these ancient documents. At that

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date very few of them were passing on to another generation. But they were the kind of names that people used at the time of the Conquest, and very soon afterwards they were sticking fast.

These early nicknames were always more likely to become permanent when the people to whom they were given were outstanding in some way. A man would not be called "*Armstrong*" by his neighbours unless he was a great hefty fellow who could lift huge stones or tree trunks that others could not stir. He would be long remembered in his village, and this would account for the fact that not only his sons but grandsons and their children too would be thought of as being of his family—the Armstrongs. To some extent this kind of thing must have influenced all types of names. And I believe that in most families the particular ancestor whose name stuck was the one who was most talked of and longest remembered, so that his name conferred a distinction even on his grandchildren. When a name had survived two or three generations it was probably fixed for ever, and once the general principle was established the last nameless families came into line automatically.

Taking all the evidence together we can say positively that surnames were settled permanently in England by 1400, but that most of them are very much older than that. Since that date the only new names added to the mixture are those brought into England from other countries, the chief of them being from Wales, Scotland and Ireland. However, the vast majority of the population still have the original



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English surnames that sprang to life spontaneously in the early Middle Ages, at a time which may conveniently be called "the surname period". They come to us straight from the days when Norman castles were being built, when knights were going on Crusades, while humble men were ploughing with oxen, a time when there were still wolves and wild boar in the woods, as well as outlaws. Our surnames are a direct echo of that time, and if we study them we can find out details about it which we might not learn in any other way.

A plan on page 110 shows how "the surname period" fits into our history.