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The origin of English Surname

Primitive personal names doubtless originated soon after the invention of spoken language, in the unrecorded ages long preceding modern history. For thousands of years first, or given names, were the only designations that men and women bore; and at the dawn of recorded historic times, when the world was less crowded than it is today and every man knew his neighbours, one title of address was sufficient. Only gradually, with the passing centuries and the increasing complexity of civilized society, did a need arise for more specific designations. While the roots of our system of family names may be traced back to early civilised times, actually the hereditary surnames, as we know them today, dates from scarcely more than nine hundred years ago.

Classified according to origin, most surnames fall into four general groups:

(1) those formed from the given name of the father

(2) those arising from bodily or personal characteristics

(3) those derived from locality or place of residence

(4) those derived from occupation

Many occupational surnames are taken from jobs e.g. if a man was a carpenter he might be called John Carpenter and because sons very often followed their father's occupation the surname stuck. Some occupational surnames are obvious e.g. Smith, Potter, Cooper, Mason, Tailor or Taylor, Spinner, Weaver (Webb was another word for weaver, a webster was usually a female weaver), Dyer, Thatcher, Tyler, Slater, Miller, Baker, Cheeseman, Spicer, Cook, Fisher, Shepherd, Carter, Clarke, Skinner and Gardener.There were also people who looked after certain things e.g. the hayward and the woodward. Coward is derived from cowherd.

Many people were given surnames from personal names like Robinson or Williamson. Other obvious ones are Benson, Stevenson, Dickson, Robertson, Richardson, Jackson, Wilson and Johnson.. An 's' at the end of a personal name also meant 'son of' so we have surnames like Andrews, Stevens, Rogers, Hughes, Jacobs and Williams. The first names Robin or Robert were sometimes shortened to Dob so we have Dobbs, Dobson, Hobbs and Hobson. People named Hugh were sometimes called Hudd so we have the surnames Hudd and Hudson. Gilbert's were sometimes called Gibb so we have the surnames Gibb, Gibbs, Gibbon and Gibbons. Hutchinson and Hutchins both come from Hutchins, which was pet name for a person named Hugh. Some people had pet names ending in 'kins' or 'kin' So we have Atkins from Ad-kins (Adam-kins) and Wilkins, Dawkins and Huggins from Hugh-kins and Jenkins from Jan-kins.[1]

However some people were just given their father's name as a surname like Arnold, Henry, Howard or Thomas. The ending 'cock' meant young man. So we have Hitchcock (Hitch was a pet name for Richard). We also have Wilcock.

Sometimes people were given a surname because they lived near a certain geographical feature such as Heath, wood or woods. Other surnames are Hurst (an old word for a wooded hill), Green or Greene (for somebody who lived by the village green), Hill, Banks, Brooke, Beck and Bywaters. Shaw is a northern word for a wood. A bradshaw was a broad shaw. A holt was a small wood. Hollis means a dweller by the holly trees. We also have the surname Warboys from ward bois (bois is the French word for wood).

Valleys were sometimes called bottoms. The surname Botham comes from there. So does Longbottom and Ramsbottom. A wade was another name for a ford. Thorpe is a Danish word meaning a hamlet dependent on a larger settlement nearby.