

Wargrave Local History Society

Latest News - April 2005

What's in a Name?

At the April meeting of the Wargrave Local History Society, Jean Debney - well known as the 'family history expert' on BBC Radio Berkshire - spoke about 'What's In a Name?' - the meanings and derivations of surnames, using examples from families to illustrate the talk. Jean and her husband Cliff are also very active in the Berkshire Family History Society.

Jean began by explaining that people have not always had surnames - and that the name today may well be a variant of the spelling of the original name. Following the Norman invasion of 1066, there became a need to determine which 'John', say, had paid the taxes, owned a piece of land, or the like. Such names would have been written down by a clerk, who would write what he thought was the name. Deducing the derivation at a distance in time is, therefore, considering the 'possibilities', rather than being a 'definitive meaning'.

The influences on names were many. In the area north east of a line (roughly) from the Mersey to the Thames, the Vikings had settled, and Danelaw and their naming patterns became influential. In the south east, the Anglo Saxons brought names and words of Germanic origin, whilst in Wales and Cornwall, the Celtic traditions dominated. Gaulish names came with the Normans, and they also 'Frenchified' many of the Viking and Anglo Saxon names from those who had settled in northern France. There were also dialect affects. To the north east, names might have an S or F, which to the south west became a Z or a V - for example Fowle in the NE might be Vowle in the SW. A person's name might even change if they moved across the 'dialect boundary'. Similarly, some areas tended to 'drop the H' - Hutton may become Utton, or Helen change to Ellen.

From there middle ages to around 1400, the need for manorial and taxation records led to surnames appearing for the upper classes, and only later did those of lower classes adopt them. More names would be formally recorded from the introduction of parish registers in 1538, whilst the introduction of civil registration of birth, marriage and death from July 1837 tended to stabilise the spelling of names.

The choice of a surname would most probably derive from either a family name, a locality, an occupation, or a nickname. Family related names might take various forms - eg Richardson - son of Richard; Rick - a diminutive form; Ricks - a possessive form of that, or Rixon, the son of Ricks. etc. Anglo Saxon names might have an 'ing' ending, meaning 'of the tribe of'; Viking derived names originate mainly in the NE of England, whilst many Greek, Hebrew or Latin names with a Biblical origin were encouraged to be used by catholic priests. New names coming from France were the Norman forms of Germanic Scandinavian, or Celtic/Breton names - like William, Robert, Henry, Gilbert, Margaret etc. A 'local' example was Vile - not a 'horrid nickname', but a misspelling of the French Vital or Vial.

Locative surnames are the largest group, and give evidence of migration - the lettered de in front of the place signifying 'of'. They often derive from a long lost hamlet or farmstead. The name of the place maybe 'ancient', but that does not mean the family itself is - just that they came from there. D'Oyley - of the Young family at Hare Hatch, for example, was a person from Oyley, in Calvados. Other 'place' names might be Hill, Field --- etc - relating to a 'feature' near where the person lived.

Occupational names, such as Mason, Weaver, Butcher or Chandler, Roper, Archer were largely self-explanatory - although none of the Society's sample surnames included anyone able to make food, clothing, or a building!.

The smallest group of surnames is that derived from nicknames. Many of these were 'unkind' - and have been later deliberately 'lost' by their 'owners. They may refer to their body (height / obesity, description of the head, hair colour or physical defects) or to mental or moral characteristics, or liken the person to an animal bird or fish, or comment on their mode of dress.. The Wargrave 'Silver' family name was an example of this - a nickname for a rich man, or one with silvery-grey hair, or maybe one who lived by a 'silvery like stream'.
