

The History of Anglo-Saxon Names

By Percival de la Rocque. ©Percival 2009, used on the Vest Yorvik website by permission.

Web Minister's Note: This article was written prior to 2004 and has been slightly edited for publication on the web.

Everyone is familiar with our current system of personal names used to identify ourselves. With few exceptions most of the world's population use a very similar practice of names made up of at least two or more separate elements. In modern use these separate name elements fall into two basic categories of a given name or names and a family or surname. Generally the given name or names are those your parents place upon you at birth and your family or surname is inherited normally from your father. This surname will have been inherited by your father from his father and he from his father and so on for many generations. However it was not always so, in fact this system only became universal in use over the last couple of hundred years. Prior to 1500 this system was used by very few people and only in given segments of society in what we now refer to as Anglo Saxon societies.

The history of names however, goes back much further than this and is clouded in the mists of time. While no one can say for sure how or when names came into use we shall attempt to speculate on its history and why it came into being. One can only surmise that along about the time ancient man began to acquire the power of speech and a brain capable of forming consistent thought patterns he must have begun to assign given sounds to given things. Pointing at the steak cooking on the BBQ our good old cave man issued a series of grunts and sounds. His loving wife of course knew immediately that what he said was "Medium rare with a baked potato on the side please". Well maybe not quite that eloquent but certainly one of his first "words" would have been associated with food and this in itself can be considered a name for what he needed to satisfy his hunger. Chances are (knowing man) Sex was the second word invented with headache being woman's first contribution to the growing vocabulary about 2 seconds later. Now we must also assume he soon began to assign sounds or names to the different members of his family group or tribe.

At first these names were probably more akin to titles for the position held in this small group of individuals that was early man's society. Individual names probably came into use for the Headman of the group, his second in command or helper; his mate or mates and eventually some form of identification would have been tagged onto the whole family or tribal group. As man moved out of these caves and into the society that was to develop into what we now think of as modern society this system of naming will also have evolved into the roots of our modern name system.

Early society was a simple collection of a few individuals in either an expanded family or small tribal grouping. These groups were small and spread fairly thinly across huge

areas of the world as it was then known. In some cases people would be born, live out their entire lives and die all within sight of the place they were born and often possibly never knowing that other people existed someplace over their very limited horizons. Travel was limited to hunting for food and possibly some very rare trade with other groups within a day or two's travel of the home. Like this simple society the names of the times were simple but more than adequate for the times.

These early groupings of people usually numbered in no more than double digits and everyone in the group knew everyone else. Single element or given names as we know them were all that was needed. Duplication of these names was unheard of as no one would call a child by the name of a person still living or recently departed and thus no confusion occurred. If someone asked who owned a certain cow and the answer was Bill, everyone would immediately know who that was because he was the only Bill that any of them knew.

Now what exactly were the names being used at this time and what did they mean? From an SCA point of view we will pick up this tale at the end of the Roman occupation and into the late 3 and early 4 hundreds.

What is now called Britain was a widely-diverse group of loosely-affiliated tribal groups and races separated by language and culture. The Saxons, Britons, Angles, Jutes, Norsemen, Picts, and several lesser tribes each held given areas and most of the names would have been of local origin with a smattering tainted by the recently departed Romans and the Latin language and names they left behind. Names like Acha, Bega, Eadu and Utta are typical tribal names from this period for women while Artos, Cada, Cyng and Eric were male dominant ones.

By the start of the 800's the Saxons had risen to dominate the largest part of what was to become England and for the most part their language and names started to supplant those of the other tribes they had subjugated. Since they were of a Germanic origin, the Saxon language and thus names bore some semblance to those found in other European areas dominated by the Germanic language groups. Children born at this time generally were given only one name at birth, and lived their lives and died having had only this single piece of identity. Saxon names for the most part were formed of two elements put together to form a single name. Each of these elements came from a small pool of possible elements and each one had its own meaning. These meanings would then go together to form an identity for the holder. Whether the holder of these names in any way lived up to any of the meanings was much a matter of luck and speculation. Some of the elements used for the first part of a name were things like Ælf meaning Elf, Æthel meaning Noble, Eald meaning Old, Od meaning Rich and Sig meaning Victor or Victorious. These would then be combined with things like Gifu meaning Gift, Gyth meaning War; Weald meant Power, Gar was Spear, Stan or Stain meant Stone, and Wulf was Wulf. From here we end up with some of the well-known common names of the era as well as SCA personas of this time period. Ælfgiftu meant Elfgift, Ealdgar was Old Spear and Æthelstan meant Noble Stone.

During this time family names were unheard of and if a family line were to be shown in any way it would take one of two different forms. The first was by the use of the same root element chosen from the groups as mentioned above and forming given names for all members of a family based on this. We would see for instance a father called Æthelstan with a son named Æthelwulf and his son would then be called Æthelgar. The second method was to use a very limited number of names within a family passing these names down from one generation skipping one or two generations and then using the name again. So Æthelstan would have a son named Ealdgar and then perhaps his son or grand son would once again be called Æthelstan. This at first looks like an invitation for confusion but you must recall that life spans in this era were far shorter than our present-day life expectancy and having more than two generations alive at the same time was rare. By the time a man was of the age to start having his own family chances were pretty good that his father was either already dead or very elderly by the standards of the day. Fifty was a ripe old age for this time in history as even minor injuries suffered in war or by accident were very likely to be fatal and disease was always present and usually untreatable. So naming a child after his grandparent was seldom likely to cause a problem as by the time the child reached the age to begin having property and interacting with others of his community it was almost certain he would be the only person alive with that name.

A limited use of prepositions did come into vogue in this time period to add some descriptive suffix or prefix to a name. Whether this came about as a way to tell two people with the same names apart or simply as a vanity title of the person involved is unclear. Whatever the case, as a person matured and took on some physical or personality trait he or she might be given one of these prepositions to indicate this attribute. Words like Grim meaning Savage, Heana meaning Tall, and Hoga for Wise could all give a person some lustre, real or perceived of the description these names might invoke. Some use of prepositions based on patronymic relationship, trade or profession might also have been added to the single names of this time to add some sort of identity to the holder of the name as well. Dohter meaning Daughter and Sone or Sune were common spelled patronymic prepositions and things like Boda for Messenger, or Swan meaning Swine Herd might have been added to indicate a person working in these trades. While not quite family or by-names and in no way hereditary we can begin to see where these added portions of a name began to develop.

The next major phase of history that makes an impact on names as we know them was the Norman Conquest of England and the time frame from the 9th to 11th centuries. The battle for the crown of England at this time is well documented and we all know who came out on top. From this time onwards the Norman influence and impact on the politics, people and language changed the face of England forever. This influence also had a lasting impact on the name practices of the people, though these changes were slow and varied across the land.

The first thing to affect the names used was of course the Norman political system of Feudal Lords ruling over given pieces of land and the titles these people bore. William

himself bore the title Duke of Normandy; a title still used to this date by the monarchy of England. Right away we have a person with not one single name as most of the populace had but several. His given name of William, the title he bore was Duke and the lands over which this title held, Normandy. This was the first widespread use of by-names showing the sense of belonging to something greater than one's own identity. His other title or name of William the Conqueror is also a by-name, however this one became more like a descriptive preposition added to show prowess in battle or to commemorate his victory over the lands. This title was in fact not bestowed upon him until well after his death and then only as a way to differentiate between this William and several other important rulers and persons throughout history.

These titles and names brought into use by the ruling Normans were however pretty much restricted to that same ruling class of Normans. The Saxon populace of the countryside villages, towns and rural areas pretty much stuck with the old names they had been using for many centuries. However change was beginning here as well. The population was growing; towns and villages got larger and people traveled more and more at least from one village to the next if not farther. Huge cities drew not only the ruling Norman populace but many of the peasant-class Saxons as well. People began more and more to make contact with several people all sharing a common given name. No longer could you simply tell someone to go see Bob or Bill or Dave to get some task accomplished or obtain some sort of service or goods. A method was soon required to tell each other apart in an area that might boast two, three, ten, one hundred or even several hundred people all with the same given names. The first wide-scale use of by-names to identify an individual was starting to take shape.

Early by-names were drawn from many varied sources but were still not typically what we now look upon as family or hereditary names. In some cases even these names would not typically be assigned until adulthood as a person came into some trade or physical attribute similar to the prepositions used before this to add meaning to a given name. A child would possibly have not been given any by-names at all if there were few other people with a similar given name or if this multiplicity was not perceived as a problem. If this was a problem chances are the child would receive a by-name that was in some way descriptive of his status compared to the other holder or holders of the given name, Small, Little or something similar or possibly a form of patronymic name to show his parentage. Names that combined Dotter for Daughter and Sone Sune or Sonne for Son being the most common were added to the name of a parent and then added as a Patronymic. Adamson, Thorsdotter or other variations came out of this practice. So John Adamson would be the son of Adam and thus easy to tell apart from John Davidson for instance.

As this person then grew into adulthood they might keep this by-name but more likely would be tagged with a by-name that reflected some sort of physical attributes or the profession or trade this individual had taken up. Usually these by-names were not chosen by the individual but were more often developed by common use of the friends, relatives and other persons having regular contact with this person. By-names

based on physical attributes might be either complimentary or insulting depending on the stature of the person in society and who first applied the name. The name Strong could be taken as a compliment while the Bull or Ox while meaning similar things might be coined in a derogatory manner by someone of higher station in life to put down the individual or show disdain or jealousy for the strength holder. Other names of this sort might be things like Tall, Short, Big, Small or Tiny based on the size of the person or maybe Red based on hair colour, Dark or Black based on skin tone or even mood or temper. Other by-names might be coined based on the trade, profession or skills of the holder. Miller, Smith, Farmer and Brewer are simple and common forms of by-names of this sort. Finally a set of by-names might come into use if the person was a traveler of some sort. Known as Locative names these might be as simple as the name of the town or village you came from or they might refer to where in the town or village you might have been born or some significant land mark near your home. Names like Aislinne of Alainmor show a locative name based on a place of origin and Percival de la Rocque show relation to some sort of land mark. Almost any city, town or village will have been used as a by-name for people from there while things like River, Hill, Lake and Forest can show examples of names based on landmarks from the place of origin. This then gives us the types of names becoming popular in this era consisting of two or more name elements used together to represent one individual. A given name usually bestowed at birth and some sort of by-name or names given to help separate one person from another with the same given names.

Names in England at this time however tend to come from the two separate pools with the Saxons still using names from their own language and society with the Norman over lords keeping names and language from the past they knew. Some limited intermingling would have naturally started to occur, as intermarriage between the two groups would have been happening right from the start. The Saxon names would have appeared very much like those we have already seen while Norman names like Adam, David and Joseph along with many others we now think of as common given names came into use among the ruling Norman families. Most Norman names would have been based on locative names from the places ruled over by these people or from the places they originally came from and usually included a preposition in Norman French to show this relationship. In the names of the day we see the prepositions "le" and "de" used. "Le" means "The" and "De" means "Of". These combine with a given and by-name to form a complete name, with Gabriel de Champaign, Fursto de Robnye and my own Percival de la Rocque within our own canton using these forms of practice.

These names have come a long way to solving the problem of having several people all with the same names but are still not what we call family or hereditary names. The by-names of the time would usually have died with the holder or individual user of that name. In some cases a father and son sharing a trade would probably both come to be called by this by-name but in theory this is just a natural occurrence based on the occupational by-name and no actual effort or purpose to pass the name down. Also in the ruling families certain titles would naturally have passed from father to eldest

male child down through many generations so that the father, son and even great-great-grandsons would all be called by this title. Given names would change from generation to generation but share the title of the family that was passed down.

The next big changes to come about occurred in the late Middle Ages up until the start of the English Renaissance. The Norman and Saxon populace begin more and more to cross blood-lines and the segregation of the two distinct societies melted away. Along with it the names given to children and even the language spoken changed and more and more new words came from the combination of the two languages. The roots of the Modern English language were laid at this time and most words and names began to resemble the modern equivalents now in use. Older names either fall from use or were moulded into new names by this language, and the practice of using the names of famous people from several different periods of history started to come into vogue. Biblical names, Saints' names and mythical names are all popular as given names during this time.

Bartholomew, Paul, Peter and James were popular names for males with Mary, Agatha and Sarah becoming choices for females. Also at this time several names became popular for both sexes that we currently think of as being reserved for one or the other. Basil, Jacob, Nicolas and Noel were all popular names given almost equally to members of either sex. One other practice that came to affect the distribution of given names in the Middle Ages was the religious practice of baptism. Godparents were chosen to speak on behalf of the child during the baptism ritual and it became a popular notion of the times to name the child after one of the godparents of the same sex. As this was in many cases a relative of the parents of the child, the given name pool in a family would be somewhat limited in a family that followed this practice for many generations.

By-names while still not exactly hereditary family or surnames like we now use, did take a big step in that direction. The words themselves began to mould themselves more into the form we now know as common English surnames. Many of the Norman prepositions either fell from use or became a part of the word it preceded. Names like le Beau became simply Beau or possibly Lebeau or LaBeau, and de Ware became something like Deware or Dewar. As well at this time the use of many of the more colourful descriptive names either faded from use or changed into new words with similar meanings in Modern English. The Red for instance became Redman while Tall might become Tallman.

By this time almost everyone is using some sort of by-name or by-names. Most are commonly used and shared by all the members of a family and are often passed down through several generations. However this is more a matter of convention and convenience and at any time a person might suddenly drop or change one by-name in favour of another for many reasons. Things like a change in occupation might see William Smith suddenly become William Miller while a fifth generation family member called Robert of London who has never been south of the Scottish border might decide to use the name of his current town or village and become Robert of Glasgow. Many

other changes from one by-name to another happened very frequently and no one family line could consider that a name was their family's property or right to pass down from generation to generation.

No exact time or date can be said to have been when surnames or family names became properly hereditary in nature. The process was a slow and varied one from place to place and at different levels of society. In some lower class isolated areas a single given name would suffice in most day to day dealings within a family or local community, while in larger cities a by-name became a necessity that everyone had and used almost every day to tell themselves apart from others with the same given names. Meanwhile the nobility had begun to pass titles and in many cases given and by-names down from one generation to another. In some cases an entire given and by-name combination would be passed down and the process came into being that we now use of tagging on some sort of numerical indication of these persons ranking in the generations of people with the same combination of names. Things like Junior and Senior or The Third, The Fourth and so on come into being. Modern scholars have even taken this practice and backdated it through history to label all the famous monarchs with the same given names with a number. Thus we have kings like George the V and VI who are not actually of the same family as the first king called George but are simply the 5th and 6th kings called George. This practice did not actually occur when many of these people were alive but was started in the 14th century to help tell people apart in discussions of history.

Moving now into the English Renaissance, we finally find names being used and formed in the fashion we now think of as normal. An increased use of biblical and saints' names continued with many of these becoming the common or popular names we think of today: Peter, Paul, John, Luke and the like for boys and Mary, Katherine, Elizabeth and Margaret popular for girls. Many names also continued to be used for both sexes but this is slowly changing as feminized versions of many of these names now start to appear, like Phillipa, Alexandra, and Paula. As well most of the older Saxon given names have either disappeared or been so altered and absorbed into more Anglicized versions as to be almost totally unrecognizable.

Another interesting practice that began to occur with frequency in Renaissance times was the use of certain names or variations on names by a given portion of society: names like Rick, Ric, and Dick being used by the peasant and lower classes while Richard was almost the exclusive domain of the nobles and royals; Gert, Gerty and Gerta doing the same for the female peasant as a form of Gertrude. Even today many of these names and practices live on as nick-names or pet forms of the more formalized versions of the full names a person is given at birth.

In the area of surnames or by-names a couple of things started to happen as the Renaissance drew to a close. Firstly almost everyone in every level of society was using some sort of a by-name or surnames. Many of these remained based on occupation, location or physical attributes. The second thing was a more unified spelling and pronunciation of most of the names being used. This can be attributed to

the spread of education and record-keeping beyond the realms of the church, government and nobility. Hereditary use of by names was still not universal but was split almost perfectly down class lines, the nobility and upper classes having begun to pass certain names down from generation to generation as a family names and the peasants still using mostly the locative, occupational or physical descriptive ones and not carrying them much beyond one or two generation if at all. They usually were given these names at birth or as they grew into a trade or physical attribute and they died when the holder died. Often the next generation might get the same name attached but this was only because they would have shared the characteristic of the person of the prior generation.

The final thing that plays a role in the practice of naming in our time period was the increase in numbers and distances people were traveling. In particular many people from European countries were now travelling to and settling in England to escape persecution on a number of grounds in their homelands. Their names were added to the swelling pool of names used and many also become common names for both native and immigrant alike. Many of these names have remained or been altered somewhat and remain as common names in the English-speaking world to this day.

So at the end of the Renaissance and in fact our SCA time period we see names that look and sound pretty much like those we know and think of as common English names to today. Many of the Norman, French and other European names had of course changed somewhat to flow better off an English-speaking tongue but the roots of them were there and they formed the basis of the Anglo Saxon name pools we now use every day. The universal use of by-names or surnames in a hereditary fashion only really reached its own in the seventeen hundreds. Most families now had a name that was passed from father to children and down the generations through the male line. However it is not uncommon even today for a variety of reasons either legally or for some sinister reason for people to change surnames, given names or even both. Also in our modern society, with the many mixed marriages of different races, cultures and even the introduction of same sex marriages and these couples raising families, we now have begun to see a whole new generation of names and practices of passing down of family names from mothers to children and even whole new invented family or by names being given to the children of these unions. While this is new to the Anglo Saxon way of thinking it is not so strange for some of these other cultures who have used similar practices through many centuries in some cases.

