

Methods for studying the Origins and History of Family Names in Britain: Philology meets Statistics in a Multicultural Context

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Introduction: traditional surnames in a multicultural environment

In this paper we present the methods and some findings of a major new research project in surname studies in Britain. The project is called *Family Names of the United Kingdom* (abbreviated to FaNUK). It is a 4-year project (2010-2014) based at the Bristol Centre for Linguistics in the University of the West of England. It is funded by the Arts and Humanities Research Council (AHRC) of Great Britain, and, in addition to the authors of this paper, employs two full-time research associates, a research assistant specializing in editing onomastic databases, and a project administrator. The researchers are supported by a number of expert consultants, including in particular Peter McClure of the University of Hull (Britain's leading expert on medieval English personal names) and Kay Muhr of Queen's University, Belfast (an expert on Irish names). The database software is provided by members of the Faculty of Informatics at Masaryk University in Brno, Czech Republic, who were selected because they are the world's leading experts in creating computational tools for speedy and reliable analysis, editing, and browsing of very large linguistic databases, text corpora, and dictionaries.

The main purpose of the project is to study the etymological origins, history, and geographical distribution of "established" or traditional English, Scottish, Irish, Welsh, and Cornish surnames. However, the modern world defies simplistic categorization, and there was a basic policy decision that had to be taken at the outset, namely: What is a UK family name? Our entry list, provided by Prof. Richard Webber of London University on the basis of his research into 1997

electoral rolls and other data, shows that there are 378,782 different surnames in Britain today with two or more bearers. Over 300,000 of these are the names of recent immigrants from a vast number of countries including but by no means restricted to the countries of the former British empire, while another 30,000 are longer established but are now rare. 14,452 surnames had fewer than 100 bearers in 1997 but more than 20 bearers each in both the 1881 census and the 1997 electoral rolls. We hope to raise funding to deal with these in a follow-on project. That leaves 43,877 surnames that are both long-established and fairly frequent (i.e. they have more than 100 bearers each today), and they are the subject of what we refer to as “the main task” below.

The most basic policy decision we made, therefore, was to acknowledge that Britain today is a multicultural society and that this simple fact inevitably has an impact on the study of family names, which cannot be ignored. Let us start with some facts and figures that testify to this situation.

- The 32nd most common name in Britain today is *Patel*, with over 95,000 bearers. It comes from a Hindi word meaning ‘village headman’—but of course, the village in question would have been in India, not Britain.
- There are over 200,000 immigrants from China in Britain today. Most of them come directly or indirectly from south China, especially Hong Kong. Between them they have only about 200 surnames, and these are almost all of high frequency in Britain. For present purposes these names must be regarded as “British names of Chinese origin” rather than “Chinese names”. Most of them are informal anglicizations of Cantonese form, not standard Chinese Mandarin forms in Pinyin or Wade-Giles romanizations.
- *Lee* is a well-known, well-established traditional English name, but nearly half the 84,000 bearers of this surname in present-day Britain are of Chinese ancestry. Their surname in China has been recorded for over three thousand years and is written with a character meaning ‘minister’. Obviously, this Chinese name has nothing to do with the frequent English surname of the same spelling, which goes back less than a thousand years and is a locative name derived from a Middle English word meaning ‘clearing in a wood’.
- There are over 30,000 bearers in Britain of the Arabic name *Muhammad* in various spellings, reflecting not only Arabic-speaking but also (in different spellings) Pakistani, Indian, Iranian, Turkish, Malaysian, and other immigrants. Although the Arabic naming system is quite different from the binomial system that is common to almost all of Europe, among immigrants from the Muslim world such names have often been adopted as “surnames” and are becoming hereditary in Britain.

- Most Pakistanis in Britain bear names that are of Arabic etymology (because of their Muslim religion), although in fact their traditional home language is usually the Indo-European language Urdu.
- Other names of Arabic etymology follow thick and fast in the UK frequency lists, and many of them have Muslim religious associations. However, it would be a gross oversimplification to believe that all names with an Arabic etymology are Muslim. There are also many Christian Arabs in Britain bearing names such as *Is(s)a* (which is identical etymologically with *Jesus*), and there are even some Sephardic Jewish names of Arabic etymology (some instances of *Abbas*).

These are just some examples of the complexities that follow from a preliminary analysis of surnames in Britain today and that must be recognized by modern onomasticians. The policy adopted by FaNUK is that “established” British surnames will be investigated in depth, while there will also be stub entries for more recent immigrant names that have more than 100 bearers in Britain. The stub entries will record the existence and frequency of these names and report only what, if anything, is widely accepted about their origins and meaning, but will not attempt to investigate origins in depth. That is a task that is properly left to researchers in the emigrants’ various countries, since their origin is of no direct relevance to their status as British names (though it may well be of interest and importance to the bearers). It is also too demanding in scope for the expertise available to the first phase of a project like this.

Let us now turn to the more substantial task of FaNUK, namely the investigation of traditional or “established” native names: English, Scottish, Irish, Manx, Welsh, and Cornish. We shall comment briefly on some issues in the study of family names and go on to outline some new approaches that have become possible with the advent of new technology, concluding with an overview of the aims and methodology of FaNUK, before presenting some of our data.

The main task

The four-year project started at the University of the West of England (UWE) in April 2010. The lead researchers are Patrick Hanks and Richard Coates, strongly supported by Peter McClure as chief etymological consultant. Entries for Irish names are being contributed by Kay Muhr. The contributor for Scottish names is Matthew Hammond. The consultant for Welsh is Prys Morgan, and for Cornish Oliver Padel. Other consultants are being sought for relevant languages worldwide, such as Yoruba, Arabic, Hindi/Urdu, and Chinese. We are also seeking expert advice on Jewish names. The two research associates are Paul Cullen, a philologist with much experience of historical lexicography, and Simon Draper, a

historian with philological interests. In addition, separate funding was allocated by the AHRC for a PhD studentship, and this was awarded to Harry Parkin, who is at present the only doctoral student of anthroponymy in England, providing the hope of some continuity of expertise in this area.

The state of the art at the beginning of the project

P.H. Reaney's *Dictionary of English surnames* (1958, with revisions by R.M. Wilson in 1976 and 1991) is a remarkable achievement, but it is far from perfect. The main problem for modern users is that (despite appearances and despite its title), it is not a dictionary of modern surnames at all. It is a collection of medieval surnames (in the old sense, 'additional names'), linked, sometimes more by guesswork than scholarship, to modern surnames. Sometimes Reaney's guesses are confirmed by modern scholarship; all too frequently they can be shown to be wrong. Sometimes, the groups of variant forms are not variants at all, but independent coinages; some accounts of Irish, Welsh, and Jewish names are deficient and distorted due to anglocentrism, whilst some other names are not present at all. If Reaney did not find a medieval form corresponding to a modern surname, or if he could not explain it, he simply left that surname out. Comparison with 1881 census data reveals Reaney's omission of common names such as *Alderson* (northern English), *Blair* (Scottish), *Critchley* (Lancashire), *Perks* (West Midlands), *Pringle* (Northumberland), *Sneddon* (Dumfriesshire), and over 20,000 other well-established surnames.

Apart from Reaney's work, major developments have been few and far between. Subsequent dictionaries dealing with English surnames by Cottle, Hanks, and Titford (referenced in the bibliography below) are heavily dependent on it and make only marginal improvements on it. Reaney's is a great dictionary but with deep flaws. We can highlight two principal weaknesses in Reaney's method. The first is etymological. As Peter McClure has shown in a series of articles on the methodology of surname explanation (listed in the bibliography), many etymologies proposed by Reaney, Wilson, and other scholars are based on arbitrary (and incorrect) interpretations of ambiguous Middle English name-forms. The second is a failure to take into account the history of individual family names, as has been demonstrated in a number of county and regional surname histories, notably the *English surnames series* (all separately entered in the bibliography below), which was established under the leadership of Richard McKinley to research the history of English surnames systematically, county by county. Before its recent demise, the series published volumes on eight counties, as well as a general volume on northern surnames. Other noteworthy local studies include monographs by George Redmonds (1973) on the surnames of the

West Riding of Yorkshire and by Edgar Tooth (2000) on the surnames of north Staffordshire. David Hey (2000), like Redmonds, has shown the need to integrate the study of family with local history.

None of this is intended to disparage Reaney's pioneering scholarship or his achievement. His dictionary provides an unrivalled collection of evidence for the complexities and vagaries of medieval personal names, although as a guide to the origins of present-day family names in Britain it has demonstrable defects. Reaney was known as a toponymist before he published his work on surnames, and he made collections of evidence simultaneously for both tasks; he was first and foremost a medievalist. But the assumption that the philological and archival methodology of place-name research is both sufficient and appropriate for surname research fails to take account of significant differences in the nature of the data to be explained. At the risk of stating the obvious, we shall now mention a few of those differences and go on to show how a new approach to surnames is both possible and desirable, using modern technology.

Dates of origin

Most of our modern English surnames have their origin in a name that became hereditary at some time between the thirteenth and the sixteenth centuries. In south Lancashire some patronymics were still being coined/applied in the early seventeenth century (McKinley 1990: 38). Hereditary post-medieval surnames continued to change, mostly in pronunciation and spelling, but also through folk-etymology. Many surnames became garbled in speech, mis-heard and mis-written in the records, and re-interpreted to fit known names or name-patterns. The precise forms of many of our surnames have only become permanently fixed in the twentieth century. Consequently modern surname forms can be quite misleading as to their likely relation to each other and to their medieval originals. Reaney's and Wilson's identification of modern surname variants and their allocation to Middle English etyma are largely based on superficial resemblances and are not safe unless confirmed by historical evidence. Reaney himself comments in his introduction that "the modern form of many of our surnames is comparatively recent" (Reaney and Wilson 1991: xi). Despite this acknowledgment, he systematically gives Old English etyma for names that could only have been derived from Middle English forms, and fudges the distinction between the meaning of an Old English or Anglo-Scandinavian topographic descriptor and the derivation of a surname from a place that had been named with such a descriptor several centuries before surnames were ever thought of. For example, a case of a name showing extreme variation:

Ravenshaw, Ravenshear, Ramshaw, Ramshire, Ranshaw, Renshaw, Renshall, Renshell. ... 'Dweller by the raven wood' as at Ravenshaw (Warwicks) or Renishaw (Derbys).

There are several places in England named with Old English *hræfn* or Old Norse *hrafn* 'raven' + OE *sceaga* or ON *skógr* 'wood', and from a purely philological point of view any of these places could be the source of the surnames listed by Reaney. A new approach to surnames must attempt to determine which of each of the various surname forms is likely to be derived from which place; which are genuinely variants; and which are independent coinages. It must evaluate the probabilities. As a matter of fact, Reaney and Wilson, in the third edition of Reaney's *magnum opus*, do not mention the most probable source of **Ramshaw**. As Redmonds, King, and Hey (2011: 4) have shown, analysis of the geographical distribution of the name suggests that this is most likely a place so named near Bishop Auckland in County Durham. One thing is certain: these are toponymics, not topographic descriptors. No one was named in Middle English as 'the dweller by the raven wood'; rather, they were 'the dweller at the place whose name meant etymologically 'the raven wood'', a very different matter. The meaning of the elements had long since been onymized as a place-name. The question to be asked is, which is the relevant place for each surname, a crucial non-linguistic question illustrating the essential interdisciplinarity of surname research.

Fudging of this sort is pervasive in Reaney. We must not blame him for his fudges. If Reaney had not fudged, made heroic guesses, and grouped independent coinages in this way, he could not have achieved what he did. But now, with electronic resources at our disposal and with the benefit of recent scholarship, we can do better.

Statistical association between surnames and localities

Place-names are comparatively stable, both linguistically and geographically. Surnames are not. Families and individual bearers move around; competing spellings are commonplace; people adopt other surnames or deliberately adjust their own (**Parish > Paris**, in at least one known instance); surnames are not necessarily transmitted as counterparts of the Y chromosome; surnames die out.

Statistical study of the correlation between surnames and localities needs to become a central component of surnames research, in a way that would be meaningless in the context of place-name studies. H. P. Guppy (1890) showed the way forward over a hundred years ago, with his studies of the associations between surnames and counties, based on analysis of the surnames of farmers in *Kelly's Directory*, a handbook of names and addresses arranged according to

trades and occupations. Recent work by Steven Archer (2003), analysing computationally the geographical distribution of surnames in the 1881 census, has confirmed the essential correctness of Guppy's hypothesis of a relation between surnames and locations. For many names, the reasons for these associations remain to be explained. The association between the surname **Fazackerley** and the county of Lancashire is obviously due to the fact that there is a place in Lancashire called *Fazackerley*; there is no place anywhere else of this name; so the surname must be of local origin. But what about the association between, say, **Pardoe** and South Staffordshire? There is no place called *Pardoe*; this surname is not of local origin. Reaney, plausibly enough, clusters it with a number of other surnames all derived as a nickname from the Old French oath *par Dieu* 'by God'. But why the association with Staffordshire? Was this surname coined in Staffordshire, in parallel with other forms elsewhere? **Pardey** has the same etymology, but it is a Dorset name. So they are linguistic variants, but is there any genealogical connection? The geographical distribution suggests not. Now we must ask, Is **Pardoe** a West Midland dialect form? Or was it once more common and widespread, owing its association with Staffordshire to surname death in other regions? Or is the Staffordshire association perhaps due to early migration and the fertility of some of its bearers?

With other names there are clear local spelling-traditions. **Greatorex** predominates in Derbyshire, where it originates from what is now called *Great Rocks Farm* in Wormhill; the obviously cognate *Greatrix* and *Greatrex* are preferred in adjacent counties, and *Gratrix* among emigrants in Glamorgan, South Wales. (Curiously, Reaney and Wilson give the source place-name only in a 13th-century spelling, whilst their earliest bearer of the surname is from Berkshire in the 18th century.) For literally thousands of modern surnames, issues such as these distributional ones must be confronted and investigated.

A few other examples may be mentioned:

- Reaney and Wilson assert, without any hedging or qualification, that the surname **Rochester** is "from Rochester (Kent)". This is plausible enough until we examine the geographical distribution of the surname. Archer's analysis of the 1881 census shows that the surname is most strongly associated with Northumberland and County Durham, in the far north-east of England, and this association is supported by records of early bearers of the name going back to the 16th century. It seems likely that most, if not all, modern bearers of the surname derive it from the village of Rochester in Northumberland, rather than the much larger city in Kent.
- **Dibden**, according to Reaney and Wilson, is "from Dibden in Riverhead (Kent)", but geographical and historical analysis shows that it much more likely to be from a similarly named place in Hampshire.
- **Winship**, according to Reaney and Wilson, is "from Wincheap Street in

Canterbury”, which is possible but unlikely, as there are no modern bearers of this surname in Kent or the adjacent counties. Archer’s analysis of the 1881 census shows a strong association between this surname and the north-eastern counties (in particular, County Durham), and this supported by plentiful records of early bearers such as Thomas *Wynshop* (County Durham in 1543) and Agnes *Winchup* (Yorkshire in 1558). It is, of course, possible that Thomas and Agnes and their families were descended from an early migrant from Kent, but it is at least equally possible that the surname is from a lost minor place name in the northeast of England.

These few examples show that reliance on medieval evidence alone is not sufficient to explain the origin of a modern family name. Medieval evidence must be matched evidence of continuity over time, and both must be studied in the context of geographical distribution.

The comparative distribution of surnames over time needs to be measured, but this is impossible with pen-and-paper archival methods, and at present there are still insufficient records of early documents in machine-readable form.

Moreover, in the earlier records, going back from the 17th-century hearth tax returns, there are gaps due to lost or destroyed documents, which can never be replaced, so statistical comparison must be interpreted with caution, especially since documentary coverage varies considerably across the counties of the UK. The best hopes for at least partly filling these gaps lie in voluntary work such as that done by members of the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-Day Saints (known informally as Mormons) and the Federation of Family History Societies in transcribing and digitizing Parish Registers and collecting them into the International Genealogical Index (IGI), a freely available on-line resource.

A surname whose association with a particular locality is statistically significant very probably originated there or close by, and this possibility needs to be exhaustively investigated before other possibilities are considered. We say this with some confidence, because although people can move around, there is ample evidence that many surnames still cluster around a point of origin, as in the case of *Fazackerley* mentioned earlier.

Literacy, migration, and variant spellings

Illiteracy has had a profound effect on surnames. For most of English history up to the late 19th century, the majority of the population was largely illiterate. Many people could not spell their own names (or anything else). In the absence of a standardized spelling system, surnames, on the comparatively rare occasions when they were written down – for example in registers of births,

marriages, and deaths, which were always written by a clerk and not by the bearer, even though the bearer would sign or make a mark – could be spelled in a variety of different ways according to the nature of the writer's knowledge and training. The standardized spellings of surnames that emerged in records of the 19th century often owed little to the etymological origin of the name, but instead represented the usual pronunciation of it. Even when the surname was derived from a place-name, phonetic spelling often prevailed over etymological spelling. This was particularly the case when a family had moved far enough away from the place of origin for the association to be forgotten. Thus, *Bromwich* gave rise to the surname **Bromage**, *Greenwich* to **Greenidge**, *Leicester* to **Lester**, and so on. The surname **Stopford** represents an old form (and not the dominant form) of the place-name *Stockport*. Confusion is worse confounded, for the family historian, by the fact that, with the advent of universal literacy, some families re-adopted the etymological spelling, while others preferred to be different (**Brown**, **Browne**; **Wooster**, **Worcester**).

The association between locality and surname offers few certainties. The details of every case must be meticulously investigated. Fortunately, in several cases, members of the amateur genealogists' group called the Guild of One-Name Studies (GOONS) have done just that. Thus, the surname **Rootham** has a geographical association with Bedfordshire and, historically, with Somerset and Devon. Family history research has shown that the surname is from *Wrotham* in Kent; the subsequent geographical associations are due to migration in the 12th and 13th centuries, when Geoffrey de Wrotham was a servant in the retinue of successive archbishops of Canterbury. His son William de Wrotham was clearly a bright lad: he became sheriff of Devon in 1198, while Geoffrey's grandson, also William, became archdeacon of Taunton and was influential in the development of King John's navy. The association with Bedfordshire dates from 1206, when another William de Wrotham is mentioned in connection with Harrold Priory in that county.

The Scottish surname **Laidlaw** represents a scotticization of the place-name *Ludlow* (in Shropshire, far away from Scotland). This should not surprise us when we remember that several well-established Scottish surnames such as **Ramsey**, **Lindsay**, **Coventry**, **Barclay**, and **Hamilton** are of midland English origin. A seminal moment for this migration was the normanization of the Scottish bureaucracy by King David I in the early 12th century. David had been brought up at the English court and married the English Countess of Huntingdon. When he unexpectedly succeeded to the throne of Scotland after the deaths of his three elder brothers, he took his retainers north with him and set about restructuring the administration of Scotland, opening the way for a long process of northward migration of ambitious Norman barons, knights, and fortune-seekers with English and Norman French surnames.

Polygenesis

Place-names are borne by a comparatively small number of individual places. Even ***Milton***, one of the most common English and Scottish place-names, with at least two distinct etymological meanings ('middle settlement' and 'mill settlement'), is the name of only a few dozen places. On the other hand, human beings are created (and named) far more often than places, and surnames are each borne by hundreds – and, in the case of familiar names such as ***Smith*** and ***Johnson***, thousands – of individuals at any one time. From a historical perspective, the number of people who have borne a surname over the centuries increases exponentially with each generation. The possibility of multiple origins is therefore more problematic in surname studies than in place-names.

Working forwards or working backwards?

In undertaking a systematic study of surnames, it is necessary to be clear about the purpose. Is it to work through a mass of medieval material, only some of which is of present-day relevance? Or is it to explain modern surnames, a surprisingly large number of which (over 20,000, we estimate, or almost half of the core target set) have not yet been properly explained? If the second of these is the preferred option, the task for the investigator is quite different from that conceived by Reaney, both in the selection of relevant etymological and historical data and in compiling the inventory of names to be explained. The compiler of a reference work, unlike the writer of a thesis or monograph, has a duty to inventorize all items that satisfy the inclusion criteria, regardless of whether a satisfactory explanation can be offered. The existence of a name is itself important information, and honest confession of inability to explain it may (we hope) serve as a spur to future researchers.

Should the researcher collect as many examples as possible of early bearers of names in the medieval data and work forwards, or start with an inventory of modern surnames and work through the historical data, seeking analogues? A particular problem that affects surnames (to a much greater extent than place-names or vocabulary words) is surname death. It is comparatively unusual for places to disappear – their names may survive even where the place does not – and even words have more durability than personal names. But the extinction of a surname is not a rare event. Sturges and Haggett (1987) calculate, on purely statistical grounds, making reasonable assumptions about number of generations, rate of population growth, and number of marrying sons in each family, that, if each surname were borne by just one individual in the year 1350,

over half of every thousand surnames in a community would have died out during the subsequent six centuries. The many extinct surnames recorded in the *Middle English Dictionary* (Kurath *et al.* 1950-2001) and other sources support this prediction. To take just a few examples at random, the medieval surnames **Berhacch** (from a place-name, *Barhatch* Farm in Surrey), **Boltupryht** (nickname = 'bolt upright'), **Charrecrowe** (nickname = 'scarecrow'), **Chaucer** (occupational name for a maker of coverings for the legs), **Galingale** (from *galingale*, a type of herb), **Galiot** (= pirate), **Grocer** (= wholesaler), **Jubber** (= maker of jubbies, containers for liquor), **Lampreye** (metonymic occupational name for a seller of lampreys, or perhaps a nickname), **Leventhorp** (from a place-name), **Motstow** (topographic name, = 'meeting place'), **Pillock** (nickname, = 'penis'), **Slabbard** (nickname, = 'slow-witted'), **Upholder** (seller of second-hand goods), **Twystride** ('two strides', a topographic name from a place where a stream could be crossed in two strides), **Zouch** (Norman French nickname or topographic name from an Old French word meaning 'log'), and a great host of others are no longer with us.

The systematic investigation of Middle English surnames would be colossally expensive and might not yield the results that scholars hope for.: much of the research would be devoted to explaining names that no longer exist and other names whose medieval location and origin are no longer relevant in the modern world. The utility of such a resource would be doubtful or even frustrating for the large constituency of people interested in aspects of their own family history, including their family surnames—a segment of the population whose interests are very important to FaNUK and whose interest and collaboration is of the greatest importance to the progress of the project.

Family names and genealogy

A database recording research into the origins of family names cannot hope to satisfy all the needs of genealogists and family historians. The focus of such research must be on origins, primarily linguistic origins, and on general statistics of distribution, not on individual families. Family historians working backwards, tracing individual ancestors, generally find that reliable data runs out before getting back as far as the 16th century. This leaves an uncomfortable gap of several centuries between the earliest securely known genealogical record and the time of the surname's origin. The surname researcher, on the other hand, must go back many centuries further, making as much sense as he or she can of the medieval and early modern data, and treating the surname primarily as a linguistic entity and secondly as a historical phenomenon, rather than as a genealogical one.

That said, there is a clear common interest between genealogists and onomasticians, as the example of **Rootham**, mentioned earlier, shows. Particularly valuable are well-researched one-name studies, focusing on each name as a unity and sometimes encompassing several different families bearing the same name and even the possibility of several different origins.

Another factor that has come to the fore in recent years is the relation between surnames research and genetics. This has very recently been set out by Redmonds, King, and Hey (2011), and we await the opportunity to analyse this book fully before attempting an informed comment about its applicability to our work.

The basic data of FaNUK

We pointed out at the outset that the study of family names depends on the collection and analysis of data. For surnames, this implies in particular the statistical analysis by computer of vast numbers of records. In recent years we have seen the benefits of statistical analysis and mapping of the surnames of the 1881 census by researchers such as Steven Archer and Richard Webber.¹ Much more may be expected if such mapping can be extended backwards in time (to 1841, for example) – and across the Irish Sea to Ireland.

Why is Ireland special, from the point of view of immigrant surnames in Britain? From the 12th century onwards, there has been a constant interchange of population between Britain and Ireland, so that names such as **Walsh**, **Berminham**, **Staunton**, and **Stapleton** must be acknowledged as Irish names despite their English etymons, while many names of Irish etymology have been long established in England and Scotland, for instance those in *O'*- and *Mac*-. For this reason, it would be highly desirable to establish a relationship with parallel research in Ireland. A desideratum is research into the distribution of surnames in both Britain and Ireland, untrammelled by political boundaries and rivalries.

The International Genealogical Index (IGI), mentioned above, is a vast collection of data – millions and millions of records of past individuals – and is, among other things, the primary resource for tracing continuity of a surname across the generations from the medieval period to the present day. In our view, it does not matter that IGI contains duplications, errors of transcription, and even a few fantasies (ghost ancestors). It does not matter, (a) because there are simple techniques for distinguishing reliable from unreliable entries – for example, we

¹ Webber's work is a principal foundation of the website Surname Profiler, <http://gbnames.publicprofiler.org/>.

cite as evidence only entries for which a precise, verifiable event, date, and location are given – and (b) because the mass of reliable data far outweighs the unreliable. The IGI has been denigrated by some for unreliability and inconsistency of its transcribed material, but in our view these deficiencies have been overstated. We estimate that of the 190 million records at least 100 million can be trusted—probably more. What is more challenging is whether the IGI in its present state can be used for comparative statistical analysis, i.e. to find out whether the association between surnames and localities has remained stable over time. This is important because there is so often a mismatch between the locations of Reaney’s medieval bearers and the locations of their supposed modern descendants. It is quite possible that many or at least some of these associations arose at a later period—a possibility that was suggested some time ago in a paper by one of the present authors (Hanks 1993). Nevertheless we are enjoying the benefits of using the mass of data available in the IGI, thanks to the cooperation of FamilySearch International, the organization that hosts and manages this vast resource on behalf of the LDS Church and its patrons.

Recent and not-so-recent immigrant names

We began by focusing on the issue of immigrant names. Britain is now a multicultural society and this fact cannot simply be ignored. If a publicly available database or reference work is to be used in schools for introducing children to history and language, or for general public access, a policy for immigrant names must form part of the package. It would be impractical to research the origins of all the names in Britain that have come from, say, the Indian subcontinent and Africa in the way that is proposed for medieval English and Celtic names, but something must be said about them. Intermediate cases are Huguenot names—the names of the hundreds of French Protestant refugees who came to Britain in the 17th century—and Jewish names, which have a long and fascinating history in Britain, which cannot be ignored. The following are the major milestones affecting Jewish surnames in Britain

- Jewish settlement from northern France under William I from 1070 onwards
- massacres of Jews in the period 1144-94
- expulsion of the Jews from England in 1290
- the petition of Rabbi ben Israel of Amsterdam to Oliver Cromwell in 1655, which resulted in officially permitted immigration from Amsterdam and elsewhere
- Sephardic immigration from Portugal and Spain from the 17th century onwards
- the establishment of an Ashkenazic community in London in the 1690s
- the Jewish Naturalization Bill of 1753
- mass immigration from Eastern and Central Europe in the 19th and 20th centuries.

Summary of the principles of the FaNUK Project

We will close this first part of our paper with a brief summary of eight points of principle that, according to our present intentions, will govern FaNUK research.

1. Processing medieval data is necessary but not sufficient. We need to encourage the large-scale digitization of source documents so that the data in them can serve as a quarry for statistical evaluation in the search for explanations. We have begun this task, with the help of a grant from the British Academy, to index the surname material in Fenwick's edition (1998-2005) of the late 14th-century poll taxes, an important resource dating from just before a period where the documentary record becomes thin and fragmented before its resurgence in the Tudor period (1485-1603), and we are actively pursuing the possibility of further digitizations with Britain's leading archives. The fruits of these processes will considerably enhance the amount and quality of the information available to us. We also hope to engage with others working on large-scale documentary resources, persuading them to make indexed material available to our project and others like it, or based on it, in the future. We are working with The National Archives in London to access digitized versions of probate records, and of the 15th-century chancery proceedings which provide a crucial bridge in a period that is otherwise poor in documentation. Family Search International has allowed us access to the data in the International Genealogical Index.
2. We must scrutinize the findings and hypotheses of previous researchers, in particular Reaney, clarify fudges where possible, fill in gaps, and show continuity from the period of surname formation (whenever that may have been) to the present day, using wherever possible data supplied by the goodwill and cooperation of family historians, an important constituency of end-users of what we produce.
3. The correlation between surnames and localities must be investigated, using computational and statistical techniques, not only on the basis of recent data and the 1881 census, but also, as far as possible, historically. This implies using other resources such as IGI and anything else that is available in machine-readable form, and exploring mapping techniques such as those used by Steve Archer.
4. The database will contain entries for all names that are current in present-day Britain, including recent immigrant names, down to an

agreed frequency threshold (probably, all surnames with more than 100 bearers in a recent census, plus names which have been explained incorrectly in previous dictionaries). If all attempts to explain a name draw blank, it will still be recorded (with frequency and geographical distribution) as “unexplained”.

5. Equal attention must be given to names of Irish, Scottish, Welsh, and Cornish origin, not to mention Manx. Reaney got many of these badly wrong. With the support of leading scholars as consultants in these areas, we aim to do better.
6. Cooperation with the genealogical research community, including the Guild of One-Name Studies, will be encouraged, taking due account of our different but overlapping objectives.
7. Explanations will be written in clear readable English. The telegraphic style of Reaney, with stacked lists of data surrounded by heavy abbreviation of sources, and enlivened only by occasional outbursts) is not a good model.
8. The works of scholars such as Hey and Redmonds have shown that, for a significant number of names, intensive local research or one-name research is required. The first, massive stage of the project will aim, among other things, to highlight and select such names for subsequent research.

Some findings presented in detail

There is a limit to what FaNUK can do in the four years for which we have funding, but the project should radically change for the better the basis on which dictionary entries are researched and presented for all UK surnames, and the online database should provide a productive framework, laying foundations for new surname research long after the present project has come to an end.

It seems a good idea to finish with a more substantial presentation of some findings which illustrate the general points we have been making, even though they are somewhat anglocentric. Much of the discussion is based on material, text, and comment supplied by Peter McClure. We present first some problematic native English names, then some continental names that Reaney

misinterprets as English, and finally some names from Wales, Scotland and Ireland that have English or Anglo-French linguistic bases.²

Waterer

Our first example is **Waterer**, for which Reaney cites only one early bearer, Richard *Waterer*, 1443, from a Sussex court roll. He explains it as an occupational term for one who irrigated land or who led cattle to water. Cottle, in his *Penguin dictionary of surnames*, adds the alternative possibility that it denoted a water-seller. All these are plausible explanations but probably wrong. There is sixteenth-century evidence from Woking in Surrey that the surname *Waterer* was an alias of *Atwater*. The surname is not occupational but topographical, denoting someone who lived by a stretch of water, the village pond, perhaps, or a stream or river. This type of topographic surname ending in *-er*, such as *Felder* 'dweller by the field' and *Forder* 'dweller by the ford', was first identified by Gustav Fransson (1935: 190-202). He noted that they were common only in the South, where they are found in abundance in the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries, and that most instances had been found in Sussex, Hampshire and Surrey.

Of course, *Waterer* might sometimes have been occupational, particularly if it occurs in significant numbers in the midlands and north, but it doesn't. Archer's map for the 1881 census records 187 persons bearing the name, 179 of them in the southern counties, 109 in Surrey alone. The IGI gives a similar picture. Of 1,133 entries, 656 are in Surrey parishes from the mid-1500s onwards and 190 are in Greater London (most of it former Middlesex). Only 83 are in Sussex (from the mid-1500s), and the rest appear in much smaller numbers in other counties, mostly southern and mostly eighteenth- and nineteenth-century.

The Woking data was published by McClure (1982), but Reaney's explanation remains unmodified in Wilson's revision of 1991. Cottle's explanation is unaltered in Titford's revision of the *Penguin* dictionary (2009). In fact very little of the research on surnames published after 1958 has found its way into any of the dictionaries that succeeded Reaney's own first edition. It is one of FaNUK's intentions to remedy this, and of course this deficiency was a major incentive to set up the project in the first place.

Maud(e)

² During the presentation at ICOS-24, maps from Archer's CD-ROM of the 1881 census were shown. All references to the 1881 census below are to this mapping. Also shown were some entries from the FaNUK database itself, on its server in the Czech Republic, to show how the entries currently appear to users, though not necessarily with their final content or physical appearance.

The next example is more complicated. Reaney's entry for **Maud(e)** lists eleven variants, including **Mahood, Mawhood, Mald, Malt, Mold, Moul** and **Mowat**. He explains them all as metronymics from the personal name *Matilda* in its Middle English forms *Mahald, Mald, Maud, Mahoud* and *Mold*. Some of these surnames are no doubt sometimes metronymics, but for *Maud(e), Mahood, Mawhood* and *Mowat* the distributional evidence and family histories point to other origins. In the IGI and the 1881 census *Maud(e)* is predominantly northern, with its heartland in the West Riding of Yorkshire, especially the Halifax area. George Redmonds has demonstrated beyond doubt that this Yorkshire surname is from an Anglo-French toponymic, *de Mohaut*, Latin *de Monte Alto* 'high hill or mound'. Circumstantial evidence suggests that the location is Mold in Flintshire, North Wales, which is recorded in a locative expression as *(de) Montealto* in 1151-8 and as *Mohaut* in 1297. The reference is to the hill on which the Norman castle stood. The place-name came to be pronounced as *Mold*, and is perhaps another source of the surname *Mold*. In the twelfth century a member of the *de Mohaut* family acquired lands in Scotland, where the surname developed to *Mowat*. This is an exclusively Scottish surname which, in spite of what Reaney says, has nothing to do with the Middle English personal name corresponding to *Matilda*. In Yorkshire *de Mohaut* developed differently again, to *Maude, Mawhood* and possibly *Mahood*. In the IGI these are mostly local to the southern West Riding. However, in the 1881 census *Mahood* is found mainly in and around Liverpool and Glasgow, and since the named heads of household are of Irish birth, the surname in these cases is an Irish patronymic, a variant of *MacHood*. There are many surnames like these, where Reaney's explanations are plausible at first sight because they are based on superficial resemblances, but where historical evidence which was not available to Reaney points to different explanations.

Billyeald, Billyard, and Billard

The next three names have not been explained in any of the dictionaries dealing with English surnames. **Billyeald** appears as an entry in the FaNUK database with 120 examples of name-bearers in the 1997 Electoral Register. It reminded McClure of a medieval surname collected from the subsidy rolls of Nottinghamshire, *Bilhold* or *Bilyald*, which occurs in the 1327 and 1332 assessments for East Markham, and is a Norman French form of the Continental Germanic feminine personal name *Bilihildis*. Is this Nottinghamshire byname the source of the modern surname? Archer's 1881 census map identifies 57 name-bearers, 35 in Nottinghamshire, 14 in neighbouring Derbyshire, and 8 in Kent. In the IGI database, *Billyeald* and its spelling variants also occur most numerous in Nottinghamshire, especially in East and West Markham. Its continuity in the same locality over at least 600 years is remarkable but not unusual: as we mentioned earlier, surnames still tend to cluster near their origin, and this is a

striking case. Its appearance in other counties is easily attributable to the migration of family members in the late medieval and post-medieval periods, though of course we cannot be sure of this without support from genealogical research or from genetic testing of current male name-bearers.

The surname preceding *Billyeald* in the FaNUK database is ***Billyard***. It looks identical to the French surname *Billiard*, which is from the Continental Germanic feminine name *Biligardis*. However, the Census and IGI data suggest that it is a variant of *Billyeald*. There are 31 bearers of the name in the 1881 census, and more than half of them are to be found in Nottinghamshire, Leicestershire and Yorkshire West Riding. The IGI records *Billiard* in East and West Markham (the heartland of *Billyeald*), and that it appears to be an alias of *Billiald* in Swinderby, Sheffield and Cannock.

Another probable variant is ***Billard***. On the face of it, it might be a patronymic from Old English *Bilheard* or its Continental Germanic cognate *Bilihard*, but over half of the 73 name-bearers in the 1881 census occur in a small area of south Yorkshire and north-west Nottinghamshire, and some of those recorded with this name in the nineteenth-century IGI lists are in the same parishes as *Billyeald* and *Billyard*. This data illustrates the way in which apparently philologically distinct names can be shown to be variants of the same one by paying close attention to distributional and family-historical data.

Feaver

Surnames can all too easily seem to be one name and turn out to be a variant of a quite different one. In his 1991 expansion of Reaney's dictionary, Wilson explains ***Faver*** as a nickname from the word *favour*. He has no direct Middle English evidence for this name, but refers us to William *Fauerles* 'favourless', 1373-75 in the Lincolnshire Assize Rolls. The 1881 census maps indicate that *Faver* is infrequent (only 49 bearers) and largely confined to Essex, Surrey and Kent, in the latter county especially in the Faversham and Tunbridge poor law unions. The IGI surprisingly reveals a much wider distribution, especially if one takes into account spellings with *-or* and *-our* as well as *-er* and also the formal variant *Favers* with inorganic final *-s*. There are hundreds of early examples there from the north to the south of England, but chiefly in Norfolk, Kent, Hampshire, Dorset and Devon. This distribution is too wide for the name to be mainly from a rare Middle English nickname. It seems highly probable that *Faver* is usually a survival of an older pronunciation of the surname ***Feaver***, which is from Old French, Middle English *fever* 'smith'. From the sixteenth to the eighteenth centuries, the common pronunciation of this word was indistinguishable from the word *favour* and could be spelled in the same way. This explanation is strongly supported by the 1881 census distribution of *Feaver*,

which is very similar to that of *Faver* and even includes the Faversham and Tunbridge poor law unions in Kent. Similarly the IGI provides numerous instances of both surnames in exactly the same southern and south-eastern counties.

The variants *Favers* and *Feavers* represent the commonest type of formal variation. Sometimes final *-s* is original and organic to the etymology, usually a Middle English elliptical genitive, as with John *Mabbes* in the 1309 Bedfordshire subsidy roll, signifying 'Mabel's son or other relative' or perhaps 'Mabel's servant'. This type of name formation is also common in post-medieval Wales, as in *Williams* and *Jones*. Occasionally the *-s* represents a Middle English plural in topographic names such as Robert *del Hegges* in the Yorkshire subsidy roll of 1301. In the vast majority of cases the final *-s* is not original but inorganic and has been added to an already hereditary surname in the post-medieval period. This type of variation has been documented by McKinley (1981), who shows that it occurred especially frequently in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries and that it affected all categories of surname to some degree. This is strongly borne out by the IGI, where one can often see the same surname vacillating between the zero and the *-s* form in the same parish or cluster of parishes. The fact is clear enough, but it still lacks a convincing explanation.

Faber

Faber is another example, rightly etymologized by Reaney as Latin for 'smith', but his medieval English bearers, two from the eleventh century and one from the late thirteenth, are irrelevant to the history of the surname in England. The post-medieval distribution of the surname points to two distinct etymologies, one continental and occupational, the other English and toponymic. If we look at the 1881 distribution we see that, of 200 instances, 112 are in Middlesex (in other words Greater London), just 17 in Devon, 12 in the West Riding of Yorkshire and the rest are scattered here and there in even smaller numbers. The census returns show that in 1881 the Greater London bearers are mostly recent Jewish immigrants from eastern Europe. Jewish names, by the way, have no place in Reaney's 1958 dictionary. On rare occasions in the 1991 revision, Wilson has added a Jewish etymology to Reaney's English one, as he does to *Levy*, but *Abrams* and most similar names are usually misrepresented as exclusively English in origin. Not that in London *Faber* is always Jewish, but it is usually continental and reflects humanistic latinization of names like German *Schmidt*, Dutch *Smit*, Danish *Smed* and French *Fèvre*. The IGI records Christian families named *Faber* in settlements east of the City of London from the early seventeenth century into the nineteenth. The earliest is that of Abraham *Faber*, who married in St Mary Whitechapel in Stepney in 1624. Conrad *Faber*, who bears a common Germanic (not English) forename, was married in 1761 in St Matthew's, Bethnal Green, and his sons were christened in St Mary Whitechapel.

Whitechapel and Bethnal Green were heavily settled by foreign Protestants fleeing persecution, and by Danish seamen, as well as by Jews.

The earliest Devon example in the IGI is Nicholas *Faber*, who married in St Andrew's, Plymouth, in 1637. Unless his name is a rare instance of English latinization, he must also have been of continental descent, or perhaps he is a far-flung member of one of the *Faber* families of Yorkshire. This Yorkshire surname is quite different. As George Redmonds has pointed out privately, it is an English toponymic from the place-name *Fawber*, near Horton in Ribblesdale. Variation between *Fawber* and *Faber* is first recorded in the English Place-Name Society volume for the West Riding in 1771, but the variation in the surname occurs as early as the 1630s in the Newton and Slaidburn parish registers. It reflects a phonetic development found in many place-names and surnames: *Shaw/Shay*, *Aubrey/Abrey*, *Dauntry/Daintry*, *Dawkin/Dakin*, and so on.

Lefevre

Reaney sometimes assumed that a surname must have originated in England when in fact it came from abroad. Some instances of *Faver* and *Feaver* in Kent may be shortened anglicizations of the French surname *Lefèvre* 'the smith' which, as the IGI shows, was brought to Kent in the sixteenth century by Walloons and later reinforced by French Huguenots. Reaney includes a few Huguenot surnames but generally omits them or at best misrepresents them as variants of native English names, as he does with *Lefevre*. His etymology, Old French *fever* 'smith', is correct, of course, but the implied English origin for *Lefevre* is not: it is Walloon or French.

Jacobi

This misidentification of origin is a common error in Reaney's dictionary. *Jacobi* is not an English latinization of *Jacobs*, as Reaney's medieval evidence implies. Medieval Anglo-Latin versions of vernacular surnames do not survive as hereditary English surnames. As the census and IGI data show, *Jacobi* is a continental name, first introduced by German mining engineers in the late sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, and later by Ashkenazic Jews from eastern Europe. In the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, when a humanistic classical education was the mark of a civilized family, it was fashionable in northern Europe to adopt Latin forms of surnames. As far as we know, this continental practice was not imitated in England.

Anglo-Welsh, Scots, and Anglo-Irish names

The FaNUK database, unlike all previous surname dictionaries, gathers the current surnames of the United Kingdom and Ireland into a single corpus. This brings immense benefits to the researcher, who is able to see particular names from a wider perspective than before. In our experience so far of editing English surnames in the FaNUK database, we have been struck by the number of times that the same surname also occurs in Wales, Scotland or Ireland. The similarity can be superficial, resulting from different names accidentally converging in their pronunciation or spelling. Not infrequently the similarity arises from a deliberate act of re-formation, to give a Celtic name an English appearance. Often it is truly the same name, either because names of English etymology were coined in that country, or because of Anglo-Norman or English migration into previously Celtic lands. These are important aspects of surname dialectology that none of the dictionaries of so-called “English” or “British” surnames deal with adequately.

The attention that Reaney gives, for instance, to Anglo-Welsh surnames is derisory. Cottle’s dictionary and Titford’s revision of it make more of an effort, but one would never know from Reaney’s dictionary that **Thomas** is primarily an Anglo-Welsh surname, of post-medieval formation. As the 1881 census and IGI show, it has long been especially common in Carmarthenshire. The FaNUK entry for this name is not yet in its finished form, but in its wider selection of early bearers and its fuller historical explanation it contrasts with the Reaney entry. Reaney did not have the advantage of two excellent dictionaries, *Welsh surnames* by T. J. Morgan and Prys Morgan (1985) and *The surnames of Wales* by John and Sheila Rowlands (1996). The FaNUK project is making grateful use of both of them, for their early bearers, etymologies and distributional information.

For Scottish names, Black (1946) is a treasure-house of historical information. Reaney’s selections from it are, unfortunately arbitrary and unmethodical. FaNUK is drawing on it more fully and systematically, as well as adding additional data from the IGI and 1881 census returns, revising unsatisfactory etymologies and adding names not in Black. For example, **Peffer** is not in Black, though the variant with -s, **Peffers**, is. Reaney treats *Peffer* as a variant of English *Peever*, which he derives from Middle English *peiverer* ‘a seller of pepper’, but the 1881 census and IGI distributions show two things. First, *Peever* occurs mainly in Cheshire and the north-west, where it is probably a toponymic surname from the Cheshire place-name *Peover*. Secondly the distribution of *Peffer* suggests that it is not a variant of *Peever*. It is Scottish and probably toponymic. Like *Peffers* it occurs particularly in those regions, such as the Lothians, which have streams named *Peffer*, from Cumbric or Pictish **pevr* ‘radiant, beautiful’, as Black pointed out in explaining *Peffers*.

MacLysaght's *Surnames of Ireland* (first published in 1969) is highly critical of Reaney's selection and explanations of Irish names, including his misleading treatment of anglicized forms of Irish names like **Collins**, **Farren**, **Moore**, and **Traynor**, which Reaney explains in exclusively English terms. Reaney could have had access to Woulfe's pioneering study of Irish surnames, which was published in 1923, but as far as we can see he ignored it completely.

MacLysaght himself gives authoritative information on the Irish origins and distribution of names of Norman and English origin, but unfortunately does not give dated name-forms of early bearers. This deficiency is something that FaNUK will rectify. The benefits of considering the English and Irish evidence together can be seen in the FaNUK entry for **Peppard**, **Pippard**, **Piper** and **Pepper**. Reaney explains *Pepper* as a nickname for one who sells pepper, which is probably right in most parts of England, but the IGI evidence suggests that in Somerset it is a variant of *Pippard* and *Peppard*, as it is in Ireland. The etymon, which MacLysaght does not provide, is Old French *Pipart*, *Pippart*, meaning 'piper, one who plays the pipe', and it explains the use of *Piper* as an alternative name-form. *Peppard* is a French variant of *Pippard* and *Pepper* is a weakened pronunciation of *Peppard*.

Conclusion

This explanation and demonstration of the FaNUK approach to surnames is enough to indicate both what we can do successfully and some of the major difficulties. We have a lot to learn, but we expect to achieve a considerable amount. The project should radically improve the basis on which dictionary entries are researched and presented for all UK surnames, and the online database which will be the main outcome of the project should provide a productive framework for new surname research long after the present project has come to an end.

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