

Surnames

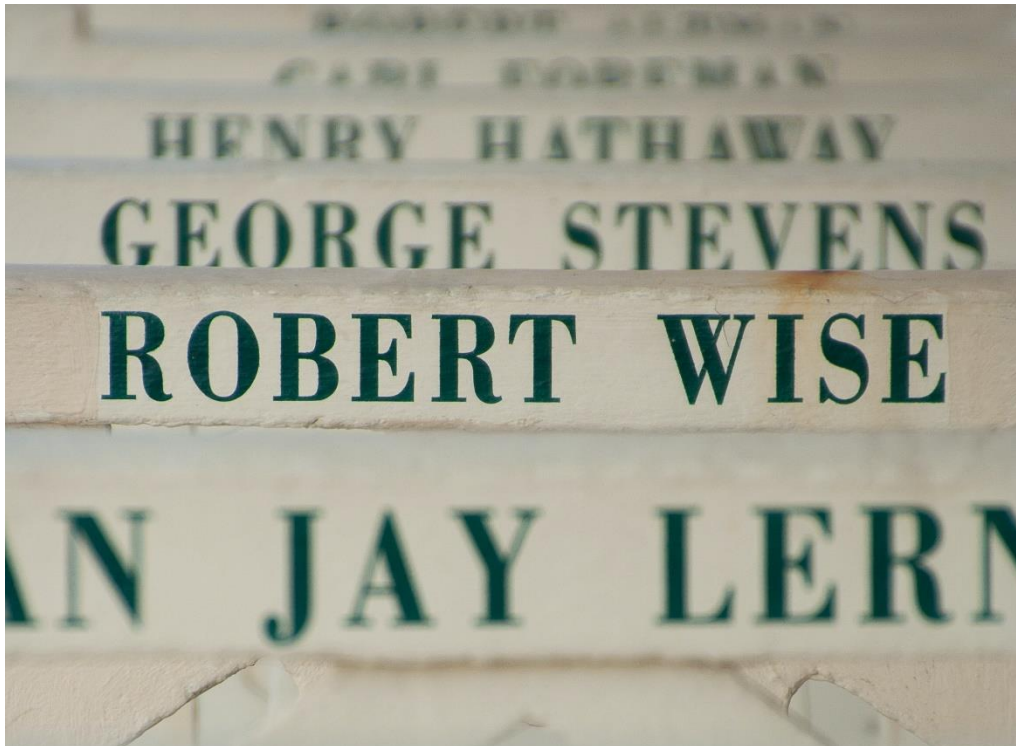
Joe Saunders

Families having hereditary names first started at the top of society before gaining popularity further down the social scale.¹ The precise reasons for this practice emerging are elusive but it was adopted across western Europe in the medieval period. It may have emerged early in Ireland where people were often known by their personal name and a (non-hereditary) by-name. Following their conquest of England, Norman barons took the names of their estates for hereditary names. This link with property produced an early form of surname before being followed by others.

The narrow range of personal names favoured by the Normans has been cited as a factor in the development of a further name to distinguish individuals from one another. The increase in written records from the twelfth to the fourteenth centuries may also have contributed to the use of hereditary surnames, so that continuity of land ownership could be established.² It is possible that the large number of surnames which are derived from farmsteads originated this way. However, medieval scribes were content to record people using their father as an identifier, so this is not a complete explanation. Neither can land explain how by-names derived from nicknames or that occupations became surnames carried by descendants who did not share these characteristics.

¹ David Hey (ed.), *The Oxford Companion to Local and Family History* (1996), 428

² Ibid.



Names on filing cards

Surnames became established through a long and complicated process. They were first adopted in southern England and East Anglia between the second half of the thirteenth century and the first half of the fourteenth. It took another century for the practice to become common across northern England and Lowland Scotland. By the fifteenth century, most people in Britain had hereditary surnames. Welsh names did not take the English form until the sixteenth century.

Surnames can be divided into broad classes depending on their origin such as nicknames, relational, locative and topographical, and occupational.

Many by-names used in the later medieval period never developed into surnames. Records show that often people were known by multiple by-names during their lives. Many of the surnames which emerged in the medieval period have since disappeared through failure of the male line. Especially those of single-family origin. The stock of surnames has increased however, both through immigration and the corruption of original names into various forms, especially with phonetic spelling.

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[Guild of One-Name Studies: Modern British Surnames](#)