

# Family Names

We all know that surnames, or family names, did not exist in Bible times, but it comes as something of a surprise to most of us when we learn that for a thousand years after the birth of Christ, surnames were still almost unheard of. When William the Conqueror established himself in England, even the nobles did not have surnames; in fact, family names were not common among the nobility until the thirteenth century, and were not generally adopted by the lower classes until the sixteenth century.

The first to use surnames in England were the great land-owners, the noblemen, who took as their surnames the names of their estates. Thus a man named Richard might own an estate called Cotgrove, and, in order to distinguish him from a neighbor also named Richard, his friends referred to him as Richard de Cotgrove ("de" being French for "of"). Calling him this answered the question, Where is he from? The eldest son usually inherited the estate, and in a sense he also inherited his father's family name. Eventually the preposition was dropped, and a true family name developed, which, unlike an estate, could be inherited by all the children. These are called "place names".

Only a small number of the inhabitants of England, however, owned land, and as it became desirable, for one reason or another, to have a surname, some source, other than the name of property, was necessary for the great majority of Englishmen. For many, a name was supplied by asking, What does he do? This is the origin of the thousands of so-called "occupational names", such as Smith, Farmer, Cartwright, Arrowsmith, Shoemaker, and Sherman (one who shears woolen cloth).

Another question which might be asked was, Who is his father? If the answer were Richard, he would be called Richard's son, which is the origin of the name Richardson. In other cases, the "son" would not become part of the name, but the possessive "s" would remain, and the result was Richards.

A fourth source of surnames was the answer to the question, What does he look like? or What is his most prominent peculiarity? Thus originated such names as Short, Long, Big(g), and Small. In assigning nicknames to people today, we often use this same device and produce such names as Shorty, Tiny, Red, and Gabby. Nicknames are derived, however, from many sources other than physical characteristics, and writers on the origin of surnames are careful to point out that in dealing with a surname which has derived from a nickname, we can never know for sure just why the nickname was applied in the first place.