

# The Distribution of Surnames in Wales

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The common perception of surnames in Wales is that almost everyone is named Jones or one of a small number of almost equally common surnames such as Davies, Evans, Thomas and Williams.<sup>1</sup> For many it can be difficult to reconcile that perception with the title of a presentation which suggests that, in fact, surnames in Wales have a distribution which is identifiable, significant and worth talking about.

Certainly this common perception has been around for many years, indeed for several centuries, and has been a frequent cause for comment, such as when, in 1856 in his report to Parliament, the then Registrar General, George Graham, chose to comment on the surnames which he found in the records of civil registration for England and Wales. When commenting on the surname situation in Wales he said:

The contribution of Wales to the number of surnames is very small in proportion to its population. Perhaps nine tenths of our countrymen in the principality could be mustered under less than 100 different surnames; and while in England there is no redundancy of surnames, there is obviously a paucity of distinct appellatives in Wales, where the frequency of such names as Jones, Williams, Davies, Evans and others, almost defeats the primary object of a name, which is to distinguish an individual from the mass.

And he goes on to say:

The name of John Jones is a perpetual incognito in Wales, and being proclaimed at the cross of a market town would indicate no one in particular.<sup>2</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> This article is based on a presentation which was made at the Fourteenth Annual Conference of the Society for Name Studies in Britain and Ireland held at the University of Wales Swansea, 2–5 April 2005.

<sup>2</sup> Sixteenth Annual Report of the Registrar General. Abstracts for 1853, published in 1856. Note: This is not a Parliamentary Paper.

**But was the Registrar General right?**

Certainly, if we take his published figures for England and Wales, together with work we have done on Wales alone (1813–37), we could only conclude that he probably was. As the lists given in Fig. 1 show, the proportion of the population covered by the ten most common surnames in Wales was dramatically different from that for England by a factor of nearly eleven.

Not surprisingly the list for England is headed by the surname Smith but, even so, its percentage incidence is barely a half of the tenth most common surname (Griffiths) in Wales. It is worth noting also that the surname Jones not only heads the list for Wales, but also appears fourth in the list for England. (It should be borne in mind that many typically ‘Welsh’ surnames such as Jones appear in small numbers in England in the Middle Ages.<sup>3</sup> Subsequently the English model for such patronymic names was adopted in Wales.)

<b>WALES</b>		<b>ENGLAND</b>	
	<b>Surname %</b>		<b>Surname %</b>
1.	Jones 13.84	Smith	1.37
2.	Williams 8.91	Taylor	0.68
3.	Davies 7.09	Brown	0.57
4.	Thomas 5.70	Jones	0.43
5.	Evans 5.46	Johnson	0.38
6.	Roberts 3.69	Robinson	0.36
7.	Hughes 2.98	Wilson	0.36
8.	Lewis 2.97	Wright	0.34
9.	Morgan 2.63	Wood	0.33
10.	Griffiths 2.58	Hall	0.33
	<b>Total 55.85</b>	<b>Total</b>	<b>5.15</b>

**Fig. 1: The ten most common names in Wales and England**

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<sup>3</sup> For early examples of usage in England, see, e.g., P. H. Reaney, *The Origin of English Surnames* (London, 1967), p. 326.

Despite the indication that the Registrar General was right, this didn't really accord with our experience over many years of using a wide range of material relating to many different parts of Wales; not only parish registers, but also tax records, militia lists, wills, records of the Courts of Great Sessions, and much more besides. Where a record contained surnames we were often aware instinctively of the area to which it related purely from the mix of surnames it contained; and that area could be very local indeed.

### **A working hypothesis**

Because of this we decided to carry out a survey to test a hypothesis, that being:

*'If we knew the incidence and distribution of all surnames in Wales then, using simple probability theory, we should be able to predict the place of origin of groups of people from a given community where they had moved away from their place of origin.'*

If our instincts were right and the hypothesis was proved to be correct, we would have a very useful tool with which to help not only those from migrant or emigrant groups who were researching their family's place of origin, but also archivists with damaged documents or single elements which had been separated from a larger piece.

### **The need for a survey**

In order to test the hypothesis we needed a large amount of data. So we carried out a survey of all the surnames which occurred in all the marriages, right across Wales, for the period 1813–37.

We chose marriages because they offered two surnames for each record and the period 1813–37 for three main reasons. First, it was a period when, with few exceptions, for a marriage to be legally recognised it had to take place in a parish church; hence a single source—parish registers—would provide the data we required. Second, the period was, we felt, late enough for the transition to settled surnames in most parts of Wales to be largely complete. Third, we also felt it was early enough to precede the major shifts in population

caused by industrialisation which altered the natural pattern of surnames in many parts of Wales.

When we had completed our survey we had a record of the incidence by location of over 270,000 surname occurrences, and had identified nearly 5,500 individual surnames. Although we collected our data by parish, we analysed it by hundred and it is by hundred that we present it here (see Fig. 2). We chose the hundreds (rather than the later registration districts) partly because in the main they respect county boundaries, but largely because, being smaller, they give a finer picture overall (there are eighty-nine hundreds in Wales but only fifty-two registration districts).

### **Some typical distributions**

From our analysis we could begin to identify how the patterns of surnames varied across Wales and, hence, test our hypothesis.

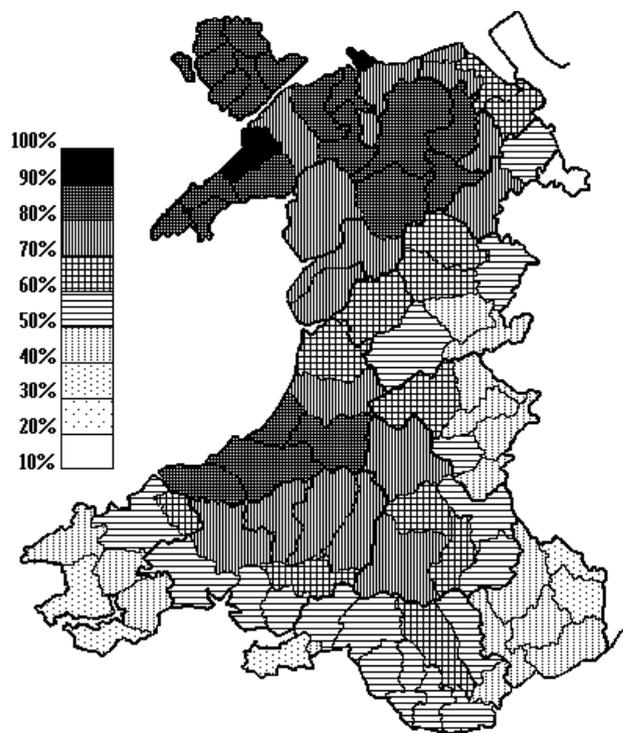
The first thing we looked at was the variation in the proportion of the population covered by the ten most common names in the different hundreds. Clearly the figure of 55.85% in Fig. 1 is the average for all of Wales and it is reasonable to suppose that there would be some variation about this figure in different parts. And so it proved, with the variation ranging from 27.32% in the detached part of Flintshire (Maelor hundred), to 90.69% in the Uwchgwyrfai area of Caernarfonshire (see Fig. 3).

Generally speaking, the percentages were lowest in those areas which have, historically, been subject to greatest English influence (south Pembrokeshire, Gower, parts of the Vale of Glamorgan, as well as many areas along the English border such as the detached part of Flintshire). Conversely, they were highest in the areas considered to be the heartlands of Wales (Cardiganshire and north Carmarthenshire) along with large parts of north Wales (including Anglesey).

However, it is noticeable that, in just the same way as these percentages vary by location, the actual names which make up those percentages also vary. In our presentation we showed how in four widely dispersed hundreds in Caernarfonshire, Montgomeryshire, Pembrokeshire and Glamorgan only three names were common to all areas—and Jones is not one of them.



**Fig. 2: The counties and hundreds of Wales  
(The British Standard county codes are used)**



**Fig. 3: Percentage of the population covered by the ten most common surnames by local area, 1813–37**

This example also showed a marked presence of the 'ap' names Pritchard and Parry in Caernarfonshire and the presence of the surname John in Pembrokeshire in place of the more common form of Jones. (This early patronymic name from which Jones is derived is a common feature in several parts of south Wales and it was interesting to note that the guide on the tour of Dinefwr Castle on the Monday of the Conference had the surname John.)

The work we have done allows us to identify the degree to which both common surnames and the rarer ones vary across Wales.

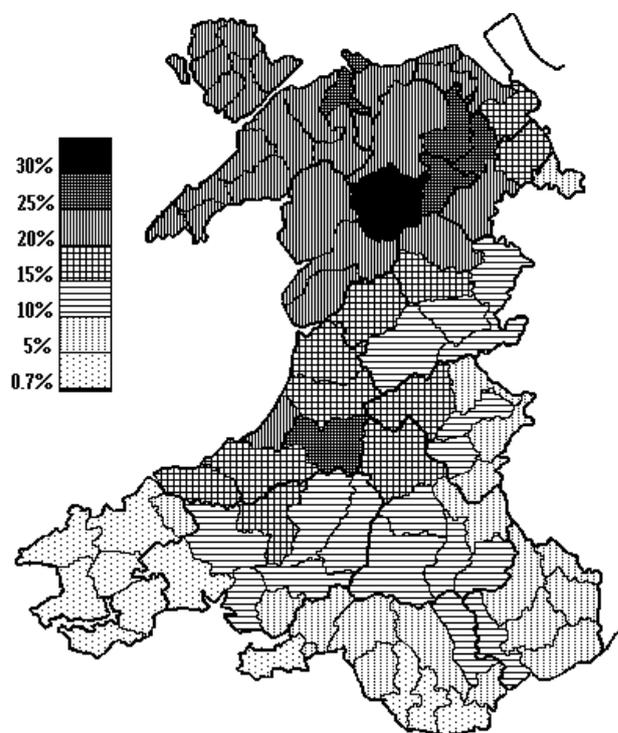
### **Some common surnames**

Beginning with the surname Jones we can see in Fig. 4 that there is considerable variation even in this most common of surnames, from an incidence of 30.71% in the area around the town of Bala (Penllyn hundred) in Merionethshire, to 1.06% in the St David's area (Dewisland hundred) in Pembrokeshire. Moreover, the Dewisland area is not the only one where the surname John is more prominent than Jones. In all this occurs in eight hundreds, five in Pembrokeshire and three in Glamorgan, and in no fewer than four of those hundreds (all in Pembrokeshire) it is sufficiently prominent to displace Jones from the list of the ten most common surnames.

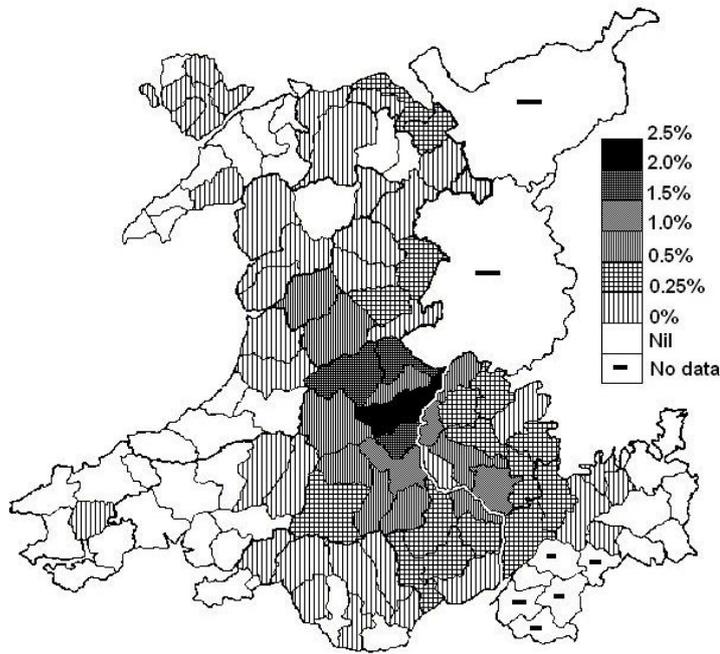
Similar variations were found in other surnames which existed throughout Wales where, for example, the surname Evans is prominent in mid Cardiganshire (max. 17.80%) and also in north Montgomeryshire (max. 10.89%).

### **Some second rank surnames**

In the second rank of surnames (those with high local concentrations but which are absent in some areas of Wales) the surname Roberts is found with a high concentration (max. 14.87%) right across north Wales, but is only found in small numbers in mid and south Wales. Jenkins on the other hand is almost wholly confined to the southern half of Wales, with maximum incidences of 5.89% in Glamorgan and 5.19% in Cardiganshire.



**Fig. 4: Incidence by location of the surname Jones.**  
**Max: Penllyn (MER) 30.71%; Min: Dewisland (PEM) 1.06%**



**Fig. 5: Incidence by location of the surname Meredith  
Wales, Herefordshire and Gloucestershire (part)**

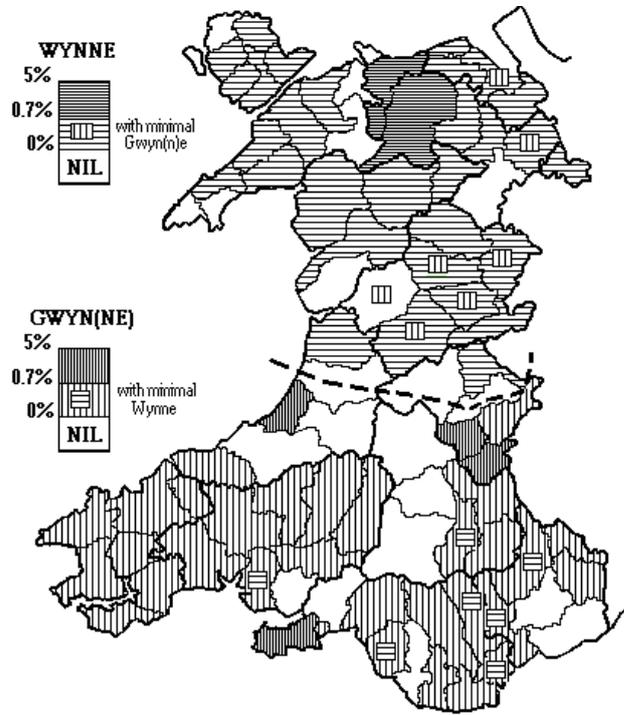


Fig. 6: Regional incidence of the surnames Wynne and Gwyn(ne)

### Rarer surnames

Among the rarer names the surname Oliver occurs in a narrow band stretching from south Cardiganshire to north Montgomeryshire, with concentrations of just under 0.8% in exactly the same areas as is the case with the surname Evans.

Of particular interest is the surname Meredith. Guppy, in *The Homes of Family Names* published in the late nineteenth century,<sup>4</sup> lists the name as having a significant incidence in Herefordshire (0.61%), Shropshire (0.30%) and Monmouthshire (0.26%) and with a lesser presence in Gloucestershire, north Wales and south Wales. From this listing it would be easy to infer that Meredith was a Herefordshire name which had migrated into adjacent areas. In fact this is not the case and it highlights a significant weakness in Guppy's work when it comes to Wales. Whereas he deals with England county by county, in Wales only Monmouthshire is considered separately, with the rest of Wales divided into north and south (six counties each). Fortunately we have also done a similar survey of all surnames in Herefordshire and parts of Gloucestershire, so we can look at the local situation relating to this surname in more detail.

Fig. 5 shows that, although Meredith does have a significant presence in Herefordshire (max. 1.07% in the Wormilow hundred), its main concentration is in Radnorshire—in the adjacent hundreds of Radnor (2.38%) and Colwyn (2.16%).

In their book, *Welsh Surnames*, Morgan and Morgan have a long entry relating to the surname Gwyn(ne), and its variant Wynne, which have their origins in the Welsh word for 'white'—in this context probably referring to fairness of complexion or of hair.<sup>5</sup> In their entry they quote Bradney as saying that Gwyn is generally found in south Wales and Wynne in north Wales. However, they rightly emphasise the use of the word 'generally'. Notwithstanding this caveat, the clear division between the main existence of the two forms is dramatic (see Fig. 6). If we revert for one moment to the way in which Guppy presents his information, we find that the incidence (numbers here as

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<sup>4</sup> H. B. Guppy, *Homes of Family Names in Great Britain* (London, 1890).

<sup>5</sup> T. J. Morgan and P. Morgan, *Welsh Surnames* (Cardiff, 1985), pp. 116–18.

the percentages are small) of Gwyn/Wynne in south Wales is 180/13, while in north Wales it is 26/265.

### **Groups of surnames**

The use in the early patronymic system of the term '*ap*' or '*ab*' denoting 'son of' (*ap* before a consonant, *ab* before a vowel) has given rise to a large group of surnames such as Powell, Price, Pritchard, Parry, Bowen, Bevan, etc., as the term became embodied in such given names as Howell, Rees, Richard, Harry, Owen and Evan during the change to settled surnames. The distribution of these names shows (see Fig. 7) a heavy emphasis towards the border counties of Brecon and Radnor where collectively they are held by as many as 30% of the population.

The casual observer of the surname scene in south Wales could be forgiven for concluding that the Jewish population is exceptionally high, as surnames such as Aaron, Benjamin, Ebenezer, Elias, Gabriel, Samuel, and Solomon abound, and surnames such as Habakkuk, Israel, Mordecai and Salathiel still have a presence (in all there are well over fifty such names).

It is a matter of great fascination to the writers that the incidence of surnames derived from Old Testament given names should be so marked. While they occur in almost every part of Wales (see Fig. 8), there is a distinct emphasis right across south Wales where (again collectively) they are often held by 3% of the population. On the face of it there would appear to be a distinct correlation between the existence of this group of names and the incidence of the 'Old Dissent' (Baptists and Independents) within the population. Proving this, however, poses considerable problems because of the overlap between the rise in nonconformity, the decay in the use of the patronymic system, and the fact that reliable figures for nonconformist adherence only become available in 1851.

### **Testing the hypothesis**

So far we have only illustrated that both individual names, and also groups of names, do indeed have a distribution which is varied, significant and worthy of some comment, contrary to what might be inferred from the common perception of surnames in Wales. But so far

within this article we have not tested the hypothesis.

This we can do by looking at an actual example of a Davies family which emigrated from their place of origin in the late 1840s. The 1850 Census of Meigs County, Ohio, lists Simon Davis (sic), tailor, and his wife, Anne, together with their three children, John, Evan and Jane, in the town of Pomeroy in Salisbury Township. The family are all listed as having been born in Wales.

Descendants of this family could, understandably, be deterred from seeking their origins in Wales by the commonness of the surname Davies—always assuming they had made the necessary leap to re-introduce the missing ‘e’. However, those descendants are very likely to know that the wife’s maiden name had been Richards as in America there has been a marked propensity for perpetuating the wife’s maiden name in naming practices: so much so that the John Davies who left Wales as a boy could well have been known as John R. Davis for much of his life.

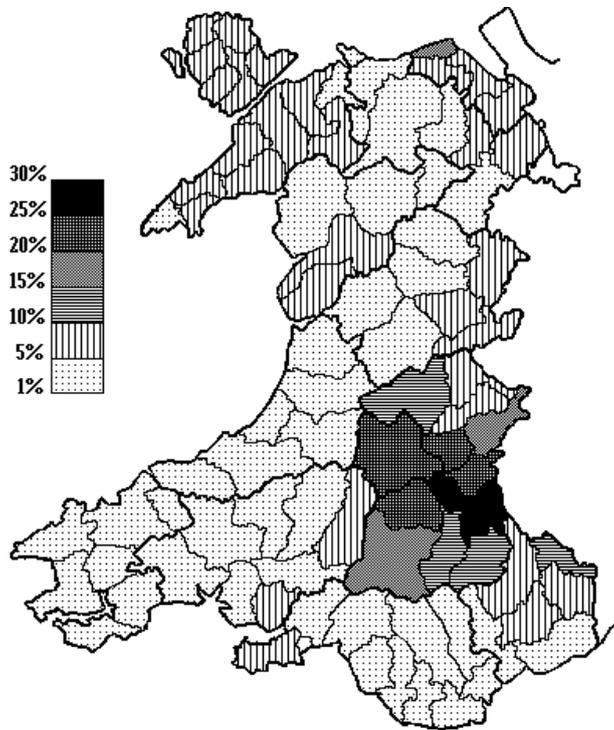
This additional piece of information could prove to be invaluable in identifying the family’s place of origin as it allows us to calculate the relative probability of the surnames Davies and Richards occurring in combination in all the hundreds of Wales. This simple calculation suggests that mid Cardiganshire and north Carmarthenshire (largely contiguous areas) are the most likely places, with the expanding industrial area around Merthyr Tydful being another possibility.

As it happens, the Davies family did not emigrate alone but did so in the company of a family with the surname Oliver (the wife’s name had been Evans) and this, too, might well have been known to their descendants. The emigration together of these families was recorded early in the twentieth century by a local historian from oral evidence provided by a witness to their departure for America ‘with sorrowful lamentations’.<sup>6</sup>

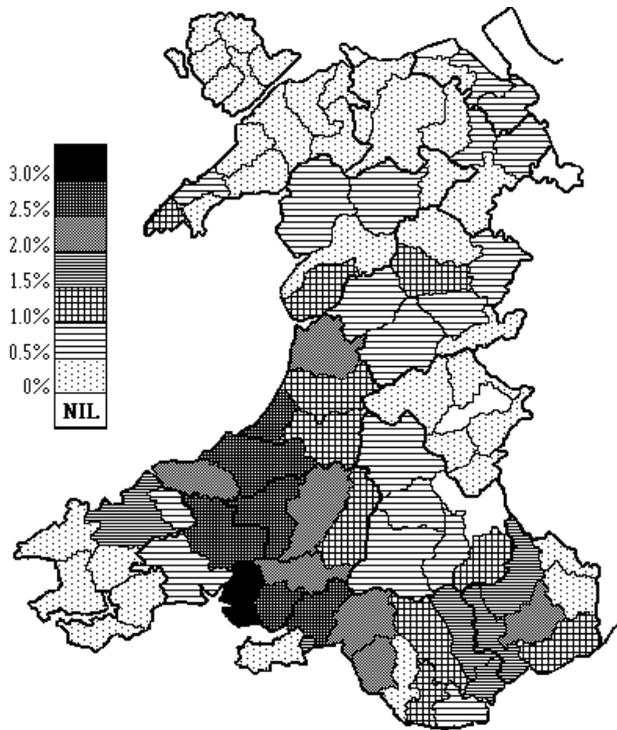
A similar calculation using the surnames Oliver and Evans again identifies a likely place of origin of mid Cardiganshire, but it also suggests north Montgomeryshire as a strong possibility (see earlier discussion of these two names).

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<sup>6</sup> E. T. Price Collection (uncatalogued), National Library of Wales.



**Fig. 7: The collective incidence of 'ap' and 'ab' surnames**



**Fig. 8: Combined incidence of surnames derived from Old Testament given names**

In this instance, however, we have the luxury of being able to run a test on all four surnames and this indicates that mid Cardiganshire is by far and away the most likely place of origin (see Fig. 9). And so it proved. We can say this with absolute certainty as Simon Davies was one of the writers' great-grandfather's brother. His place of origin—the coastal parish of Llanrhystud—is marked with a cross in Fig. 9.

### **In conclusion**

But what if success with this example was a lucky chance?

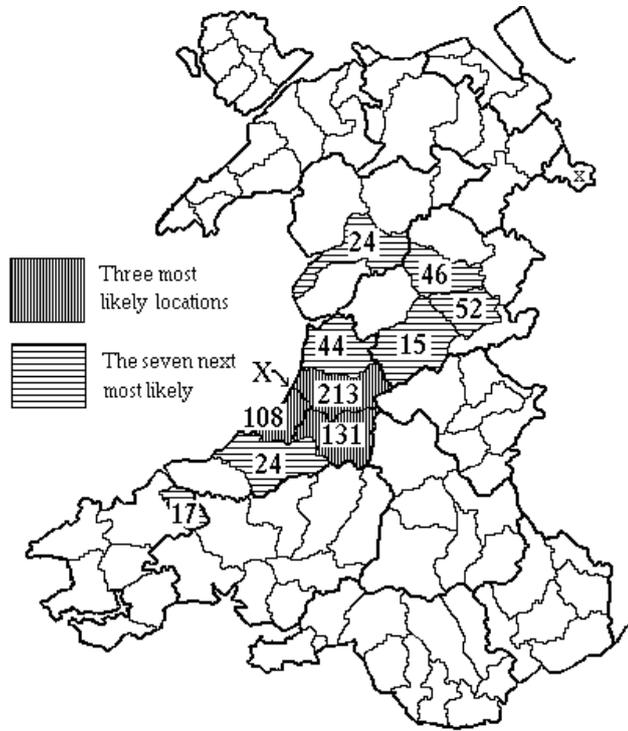
Again we can say that this is not the case. Before publishing our book *The Surnames of Wales*,<sup>7</sup> we developed a computer programme which allowed us to interrogate the Access database containing our survey results. This was designed to provide us with the ten most likely (that is, mathematically most probable) hundreds in which a particular combination should occur. We could, therefore, carry out a large number of tests with relative ease; and this we did on more than a hundred sets of material provided by friends and acquaintances. In the main these related to emigrant families and groups whose origins within Wales had been traced by other means but whose origins were unknown to us.

In the event, in 90% of these tests we were exactly right (a high probability in the correct hundred) or almost exactly right (an adjacent hundred); in 7% of our tests we were nearly right (perhaps correct in location but not with the highest probability); and it was only in 3% of the tests that we were definitely wrong.

All this leads us to believe that the hypothesis is fundamentally correct and that as a predictive method it is remarkably sound for the period of our survey (1813–37) and reasonably robust for a much wider period (say 1780–1880).

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<sup>7</sup> See John and Sheila Rowlands, *The Surnames of Wales* (Birmingham, 1996). Note: This book is now out of print, but it is hoped that a new and much expanded edition will be available during 2007.



**Fig. 9: Relative probability of Davies, Richards, Oliver and Evans occurring in combination (ten most likely locations)**