

## Blackbeard's surname

*Richard Coates*

University of the West of England

The famous pirate Blackbeard died at the hands of a crew sent by Alexander Spotswood, governor of Virginia, and led by Lieut. Robert Maynard, on 22 November 1718, after a short but terrifying criminal career in the Americas crowned by only about 18 months as captain of the *Queen Anne's Revenge*. Nothing is known of his early life, but a lot of unnecessary mystery has developed about his surname. His *ODNB* biographer (Wood 2004), states that 'his initial name and place of origin remain uncertain', and recalls that, 'One early [but long posthumous, RC] un-confirmed source gave his family name as Drummond; another suggested that he was born in Jamaica'.<sup>1</sup> Another doubtful claim places his birth in Virginia (Lee 1974, 176, n.4 to ch.1),<sup>2</sup> and even wilder ones are not dignified with a mention here.



The man himself, late 1710s  
No known copyright.  
<[www.latrobe.edu.au/childlit/StWeb/Pages/LauraKerwin/Blackbeard.htm](http://www.latrobe.edu.au/childlit/StWeb/Pages/LauraKerwin/Blackbeard.htm)>

As Wood notes, the most common judgement today is that he was probably born in Bristol or its neighbourhood, and that he used 'the name

<sup>1</sup> The *Drummond* claim is made in an anonymous second-hand report retailed by Watson (1857, 220), and rejected by Lee (1974, 177–78, n.6).

<sup>2</sup> This claim is made by Thomas T. Upshur, in an address delivered in 1900 and published on page 95 of the *Virginia Magazine of History and Biography* 9 (1902), according to Lee.

Edward Teach or some similar variation’. *Teach* has been the preferred form in American sources from at least the nineteenth century, whilst sometimes being treated with caution. Lawrence and Wilde-Ramsing (2001, 1) declare that ‘Even his true name is uncertain, though it is usually given as some variation of Edward Thatch or Teach’.<sup>3</sup> The author of Blackbeard’s *Wikipedia* entry, paraphrasing the words of Lee (1974), lists a range of contemporary spellings said to be used for his name: *Thatch, Thach, Thache, Thack, Tack, Thatche* and *Theach* (Lee 1974, 4).<sup>4</sup> We can add *Tach* (*Calendar of State Papers of Virginia* (1875)).<sup>5</sup> Lee himself says that ‘Teach is the form most commonly encountered, and for this reason most historians have identified him by that name ... Very likely we shall never know what name Blackbeard bore in his native Bristol’. Lee’s idea is reinforced by his observation that pirates tended to adopt pseudonyms, whether intending simply to cover their tracks or to protect family reputations. For the purposes of what follows, and because ‘Captain Charles Johnson’ very early claims him for Bristol (Johnson 1724),<sup>6</sup> I think the suggestion that Blackbeard was probably a Bristolian is worth attention; it seems a plausible guess about a privateer of Queen Anne’s reign and no other respectable idea is in circulation.

<sup>3</sup> On the discovery of the wreck of the *Queen Anne’s Revenge*, see also Moore (1997).

<sup>4</sup> I have not been able to trace the sources of all the variants mentioned, but most are probably taken from the defence statements of the crew members of the *Queen Anne’s Revenge* (see below), the *Calendar of State Papers of Virginia* 1, 196, or possibly the correspondence of governor Spotswood (to which I have not had access). Benjamin Franklin, aged 13, composed a ballad on the death of ‘Theach’, according to McMaster (1896, 16–17); which surviving candidate it might be is discussed by Lemay (2006, 62–66). In all of them, the pirate’s name has been standardized as *Teach*, and the tradition seems genuine.

<sup>5</sup> I believe *Teach*, following in brackets in the text, is the editor’s interpolation. The footnote on the same page mistakenly says *Keach*.

<sup>6</sup> ‘Johnson’ is widely believed to be a pseudonym of the Jacobite printer Nathaniel Mist; it was formerly also believed to be one of Daniel Defoe.

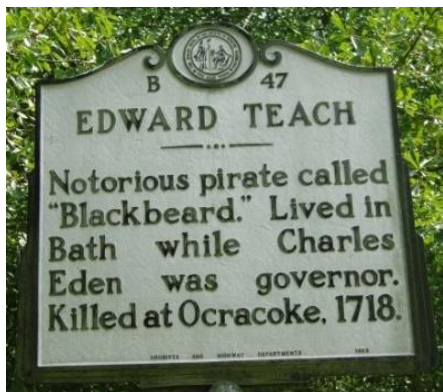
Despite the claimed uncertainty, something can be gleaned from the collection of spellings just mentioned, whether they are of Blackbeard's birth surname or of an adopted one, because they are to a fair degree consistent. *Teach*, the currently favoured form, stands out by being inconsistent with most of the others in having initial *T*- rather than *Th*-. Evidence available to the Family Names of the United Kingdom (FaNUK) project<sup>7</sup> shows that *Teach* is very uncommon (ten bearers in 1881, three in 1997), late and of uncertain origin. The earliest documentary record known to the project is that of William *Teach*, who turns up in 1688 in Swineshead, Huntingdonshire (i.e. after the birth of Blackbeard, which most commentators judge to have happened around 1680), but the earliest record from anywhere near Bristol is that of John *Teach*, as late as 1815 in East Coker, Somerset (source for both: IGI),<sup>8</sup> if one excludes the history of the pirate himself in chapter 3 of Johnson's *General History*. Another alleged variant with initial *T*-, *Tack*, is attested by Thomas *Tack*, 1572 in Saint Michael Paternoster Royal parish, London, but does not turn up in the west of England before 1728: Roger *Tack* in Bitton, Gloucestershire (source: IGI).<sup>9</sup> *Tach* is exemplified by Eliz. *Tach*, 1776 in East Ilsley, Berkshire (source: IGI), possibly connected with the name of Thoma *Tach*', 1379 in Longbridge Deverill, Wiltshire (source: Poll Tax) and

<sup>7</sup> Based at the University of the West of England, Bristol, and to be published by Oxford University Press as Hanks and Coates (forthcoming).

<sup>8</sup> Abbreviations for English manuscript sources are listed at the end of this article.

<sup>9</sup> For the sake of complete openness, we should note that the spelling *Take* is in fact found in medieval records in the west of England, for example Ricardo *Take*, 1327 in Dorset Subsidy Rolls (Wimborne Minster), and Edittha *Take*, 1381 in Poll Tax (Guiting Power, Gloucestershire). In the FaNUK database these are taken as possible evidence for the surname *Tagg*, with the comment that 'examples of the name with final *-ch* or *-k(e)* may ... derive from Middle English *tak*, *tache* (Old French *tache*) "clasp, buckle", perhaps [a nickname] for someone who wore a distinctive buckle'. This spelling is likely, therefore, to represent a name distinct from whatever Blackbeard's was. I am grateful to an anonymous reviewer for the observations in this note.

Thomas *Tache*, 1497 in Whaplode, Lincolnshire (source: TNA PROB11), but no convincing etymology for this can be offered if it is not a variant of the name to be discussed below. Neither *Teach* nor *Tack* has been found



Erected by North Carolina Archives and Highway Departments (no known copyright). ‘Bath’ is Bath, North Carolina.

elsewhere in any of a large range of medieval and early-modern records,<sup>10</sup> and *Tach* only as noted. It seems safe to say that the *T*- forms are not convincing representations of Blackbeard’s surname, and even that Johnson invented the form *Teach* for his subject, possibly by rationalizing the form *Theach* quoted by Lee (see above). Historians would do well to abandon this imposter, even though it has Johnson’s near-contemporary authority and is maintained in subsequent editions of his

book, and even though it appears in *ODNB* and on all sorts of durable touristic signs like the one illustrated.

That leaves the forms in *Th*-: *Thatch*, *Thach*, *Thache*, *Thack*, *Thatche* and *Theach*. With the qualified exception of *Thack*, these suggest beyond reasonable doubt that the surname was *Thatch*. *Thack* is real but rare, and found for example in the IGI record of Jn. *Thack*, 1648 in Luton, Bedfordshire, but it is absent from the early-modern west of England. A misreading of <h> as <k> by a scribe or transcriber is by no means implausible, so any such form might be understood as being for *Thach*. A Court of Chancery document (TNA C 2/JasI/P14/64) deals with a defendant Thomas *Thache*, but is endorsed *Thacke*.

<sup>10</sup> *Tech* is found in the west of England, but long post-Blackbeard: Sarah Jane *Tech*, 1823 in Wells, Somerset (source: IGI). It might continue the rare and obscure *Tach* just mentioned.

*Thatch*, on the other hand, has good credentials, despite being rare in modern times: eight bearers in the 1881 census and 17 in 2011.<sup>11</sup> First of all, the pirates convicted in the Charleston trials of 1719, John Carman, Edward Robinson, Stede Bonnet and others, are consistently quoted in the published proceedings as referring to their master as *Capt. Thatch* (Trott *et al.* 1719).<sup>12</sup> Israel Hands, his first mate, calls him *Thache* (Lee 1974, 144). Thomas Knight's separate deposition also consistently refers to *Thache* (deposition quoted in full by Lee 1974, 148–51). Looking back from this point, there is plenty of evidence for *Thatch* and some obvious spelling variants in counties of the west of England (and occasionally in London) roughly contemporary with Blackbeard and in the preceding centuries:

[... *le Thach* (personal name), 1327, in Warwickshire (source: Lay Subsidy Roll, cited by Kristensson (1987, 38)), in which the definite article suggests it is really an instance of *Thatcher* with a lost suspension]

Johannes *Theche*, 1379, in Woolavington, Somerset (source: Poll Tax)

Edwardus *Thatche*, 1545, Jhon *Thache*, 1593, Franciscus *Thache*, 1610, Anna *Thach*, 1613, Thomas *Thach*, 1618, all in Highworth, Wiltshire (source: IGI)

Thomas *Thach*, 1607, in Sevenhampton [in Highworth], Wiltshire (source: TNA PROB11)

John *Thatche*, 1640, in London, House of Lords (source: TNA HL/PO/JO/10/1/44)

<sup>11</sup> Data for 1881 available online at <[www.ukcensusonline.com/census/1881.php](http://www.ukcensusonline.com/census/1881.php)>, and that for 2011 kindly supplied by Professor Richard Webber.

<sup>12</sup> Although the references to *Thatch* may have been editorially regularized by the publisher/printer, they are contemporary and sufficiently consistent with other evidence to be judged trustworthy. See also Downey (2013).

*Thatch v Thatch*, 1653, in Wiltshire, Court of Chancery (source: TNA C 5/381/188)

Thomas *Thache*, 1654, in Highworth, Wiltshire, plaintiff in Court of Chancery (source: TNA C 5/19/121)

Thomas *Thache*, 1656, in Stonehouse, Gloucestershire (source: IGI)

Thomas *Thache*, 1677, of Sapperton, Gloucestershire, matriculated New College, Oxford, vicar of Churcham, Gloucestershire, 1697 (source: Foster 1891)

Thomas *Thache*, 1734, in Upton upon Severn, Worcestershire (source: IGI)<sup>13</sup>

Best of all for the idea that Blackbeard was a Bristolian is the record of a Thomas *Thatch* to whom a ‘Messuage in New Inne or All Saints Lane’, close to the ancient harbourside in Bristol, was leased in 1712 (source: BRO documents 00452/12a and /12b), establishing that the relevant family name was in Bristol in the years immediately before Edward took to the sea under his first known captain, Benjamin Hornigold, in about 1716.

The testimonies, in conjunction with the documentary forms cited, establish beyond reasonable doubt that the pirate’s real or adopted surname was *Thatch*; if it was real, they suggest plausibly that he had family connections with Bristol and imply that his immediate family origins could profitably be sought in an area to the east and north of Bristol.

The onomastic conclusion in this note is not new; it was anticipated by whoever was responsible for naming the now uninhabited Great Thatch Island (formerly without the *Great*) and the privately occupied Little

<sup>13</sup> The spelling *Thache* was still current in Cheltenham in the 1830s, when John, a licensed victualler, was convicted of supplying liquor during the time of divine service (source: GA Q/PC/2/51/D/74).

Thatch Island in the British Virgin Islands, whose official story is that, with no known historical justification, they were called after Blackbeard.<sup>14</sup>

As for the surname itself, it is relatively easy: it appears to be a nickname from Middle English *thach(e)* ‘thatch’, perhaps for a thatcher or perhaps for someone with thick blond hair resembling straw thatch.<sup>15</sup>

*Tailnote on some medieval records*

Only one western English record of *Thatch* from before 1500 is offered above, from the Poll Tax of 1379. Also taxed in 1379 was Johannes *Thech*’, in Kirk Sandall, West Riding of Yorkshire. Apart from these, the only other medieval records discovered which resemble this surname to any degree are (1) in a letter patent of Henry III (1238): To Sadadin, fellow of the said *Thach*’. The king is signifying to Thach’ that he will be pleased to see him as above, and therefore wishes the said Sadadin to know that he is well-pleased that, if Sadadin will go in person to the said Thach’ with the king’s letters, he shall do so or send them by someone; and (2) in a letter patent of Edward I (1285) offering notification that Philip, son of the count of Flanders, who has contracted a marriage with Matilda, countess of *Theche*,

<sup>14</sup> <[www.bviwelcome.com/articles/Rogues%20Gallery/](http://www.bviwelcome.com/articles/Rogues%20Gallery/)>, accessed 28 October 2014. This is already *Y<sup>a</sup> Thach* [*Ysla Thach*] on a Spanish map of 1793, *Carta esférica de las Yslas Vírgenes / construida sobre operaciones geodésicas pr. los Berg[anti]nes. de S.M. Descubridor y Vigilante, a[ñ]o. de 1793*. Whether by accident or design, this island is owned in 2014 by John and Jill Maynard—who share the surname of Blackbeard’s killer.

<sup>15</sup> At the time of the proof stage of this article, information came to hand about a possibly now defunct surname *Teast*, variant *Teats*, found mainly in the Bristol area as early as the sixteenth century. There is no record of such spellings in relation to Blackbeard, as demonstrated by the facts presented above, which show the full range of contemporary references known to the writer. Nonetheless it would be unwise to dismiss out of hand the idea that *Thatch* and especially *Teach* could be renderings of the variant form of this rarer name, the first an adaptation to a more familiar surname found in the same district, and the second a simple phonetic adaptation. This does not of course affect the claimed association of Blackbeard with Bristol.

has, in the king's presence, offered homage and fealty for the county of Byggorr' [Bigorre in Aquitaine], which he claims in right of his wife by inheritance, and that for certain reasons he has deferred receiving the same. Both these are obviously of no relevance to the surname: Sadadin, the 'fellow' of Thach', was an envoy of the ruler Musa in Lebanon, and *Thach*' may be for the male given name *Taqiyy*, from Arabic *taqiyy* 'pious' (Ahmed 1999, 210). Matilda's domains were presumably those of one of the two medieval branches of the Duchy of *Teck*, a Swabian branch of the House of Zähringen.

#### REFERENCES

- Ahmed, S. (1999), *A Dictionary of Muslim Names* (New York: New York University Press).
- BRO = Bristol Record Office [together with a call number].
- Calendar of State Papers of Virginia*, vol. 1 (1875), year 1719.
- Downey, C. B. (2013), *Charleston and the Golden Age of Piracy* (Charleston, S.C.: The History Press).
- Foster, J. ed. (1891), *Alumni Oxonienses 1500–1714* (Oxford: Oxford University Press).
- GA = Gloucestershire Archives [together with a call number].
- Hanks, P. W., and R. Coates eds (forthcoming), *Dictionary of Family Names in Britain and Ireland* (Oxford: Oxford University Press).
- IGI = a very large sample of the names in the International Genealogical Index, as made available in electronic form to the Family Names of the United Kingdom project by courtesy of the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-Day Saints.
- Johnson, C. (1724), *General History of the Robberies & Murders of the Most Notorious Pyrates* (London), chapter 3, online at <[archive.org/stream/generalhistoryof00defo#page/n0/mode/2up](http://archive.org/stream/generalhistoryof00defo#page/n0/mode/2up)>.



Kristensson, G. (1987), *A Survey of Middle English Dialects: the West Midland Counties* (Lund: Lund University Press).

Lawrence, R. W., and M. Wilde-Ramsing (2001), 'In search of Blackbeard: historical and archeological research at shipwreck site 003BUI', *Southeastern Geology* 40(1), 1–9.

Lee, R. E. (1974), *Blackbeard the Pirate: A Reappraisal of his Life and Times* (Winston-Salem, S.C.: John F. Blair).

Lemay, J. A. L. (2006), *The Life of Benjamin Franklin, vol. 1: Journalist, 1706–1730* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press).

McMaster, J. B. (1896), *Benjamin Franklin as a Man of Letters* (Boston, MA: Houghton Mifflin).

Moore, D. D. (1997), 'A general history of Blackbeard the pirate, the Queen Anne's Revenge, and the Adventure', *Tributaries* 7, 31–35.

ODNB = *Oxford Dictionary of National Biography*, see Wood 2004.

Patent Rolls = *Calendar of Patent Rolls, 1216–1452*, made available online by the team of Professor G. R. Boynton, University of Iowa, at <<http://sdr.lib.uiowa.edu/patentrolls/search.html>>.

Poll Tax = the names in C. Fenwick ed. (1998–2005), *The Poll Taxes of 1377, 1379, and 1381* (Oxford: British Academy), made available to the Family Names of the United Kingdom project in electronic form by courtesy of Dr Fenwick.

PROB11: see TNA.

TNA = The National Archives, Kew, formerly the Public Record Office.

PROB11 is a list of the names in the wills proved in the Prerogative Court of Canterbury, made available to the Family Names of the United Kingdom project in electronic form by courtesy of The National Archives. Other TNA catalogue references are transparent: C = Court of Chancery, HL = House of Lords.

[Trott, Judge N., and others, signed by] (1719), *The tryals of Major Stede Bonnet and other pirates, viz. Robert Tucker, Edward Robinson, Neal*

*Paterson, William Scot, Job Bayley, John-William Smith, Thomas Carman, John Thomas, William Morrison, William Livers alias Evis, Samuel Booth, William Hewet, John Levit, William Eddy alias Nedy, Alexander Annand, George Ross, George Dunkin, John Ridge, Matthew King, Daniel Perry, Henry Virgin, James Robbins, James Mullet alias Millet, Thomas Price, John Lopez, Zachariah Long, James Wilson, John Brierly, and Robert Boyd, who were all condemn'd for piracy* (official proceedings, London), online at <[lcweb2.loc.gov/service/lawlib/law0001/2010/201000158861859/201000158861859.pdf](http://lcweb2.loc.gov/service/lawlib/law0001/2010/201000158861859/201000158861859.pdf)>, accessed 28 October 2014.

Watson, J. F. (1857), *Annals of Philadelphia and Pennsylvania in the Olden Time*, vol. 2 (Philadelphia: Elijah Thomas).

Wood, P. H. (2004), 'Teach, Edward [Blackbeard] (*d.* 1718)', *Oxford Dictionary of National Biography* (Oxford: Oxford University Press), online at <[www.oxforddnb.com/view/article/27097](http://www.oxforddnb.com/view/article/27097)>, accessed 28 October 2014.