

CORNISH SURNAMES IN 1327*

I am interested in Cornish surnames mainly from a place-name point of view, which is also the only one from which I am competent to examine them. In looking at them I am particularly interested in one problem. What is normally thought of as a typical Cornish surname ('By tre, pol and pen you shall know the Cornish men') is originally a place-name every time, and I want to know whether place-name surnames are in fact commoner in Cornwall than elsewhere, and, if so, how far back this characteristic goes. One might note, in passing, that in this respect Cornwall is in marked contrast with Wales, where place-name surnames of that sort are very rare, but agrees with Brittany, where similar surnames are also widespread: they have been studied by F. Gourvil (1970). His work is particularly useful in a Cornish context, for Cornwall in 1327 was still largely a Celtic-speaking country, although in the east the language was fast giving way to English by that date and two areas had been thoroughly anglicised for several hundred years.

The 1327 Lay Subsidy Roll is the obvious initial source to use for this purpose. Clearly one would use a wide range of further sources to do a thorough study, but this one record provides a convenient corpus of surnames, evenly distributed across the whole county, at the date when hereditary surnames were probably just beginning to become usual (though, for Cornwall, it remains an open question just when that was). Tanners were unfortunately exempt — an important, and perhaps substantial, part of the Cornish population; however, their surnames, as seen in Stannary Court rolls, do not appear to have been significantly different from those to be studied here.

Unfortunately the roll of 1327 is the only such roll surviving for Cornwall before the sixteenth century. That is particularly sad, since the roll itself is in poor condition and illegible in some parts, and since it also has some corruptions due to miscopying: it would be wonderful to have a second one of similar date against which to check things, as in Dorset (Mills 1971; Rumble 1980). Nonetheless, it is still the best source to use for an initial survey of medieval Cornish surnames. My subjective impression is that the types of surnames found in it are certainly no different from those in other documents of the period; whether the proportions are the same it is impossible to say at the moment.

The total number of surnames appearing in the roll is 5,769, not counting illegible ones. Of these 2,714 are locational (including surnames derived from place-names not now known), while 3,055 are of other sorts. (All these figures should be considered approximate: they would probably come out slightly differently if I were to repeat the exercise.) Into the 'other sorts' category, as well as the obvious patronymics, nicknames and occupational surnames, I have also put the incomprehensible ones, those giving nationality, and a few derived from Norman place-names but obviously here functioning as hereditary surnames. Note that in the category of 'locational' or place-name surnames I include both the 'locative' ones (derived from a true place-name) and the 'topographic' (of the type atte Forde), since from my place-name point of view I find the distinction between the two, in Cornwall at least, to be so blurred as not to be of much use.

That gives us somewhat under half of the Cornish surnames in the 1327 roll as locational, which is not markedly different from other counties at about the same date. (See, for instance, McKinley 1981, 77-9: the Cornish figure is near to that of Lancashire, though not as high; in eastern and midland England the proportion is considerably lower.) If one breaks down the total into the different geographical hundreds, one finds considerable discrepancies

between the areas (see Map), ranging from the Hundred of Kerrier at one extreme, where locational surnames alone form over 60 per cent of the total, to the Hundred of Trigg at the other, where they form just over 30 per cent. I cannot see any great significance in this, however (and perhaps the samples are not large enough to be statistically significant). It is not a question of English influence, which in 1327 was widespread over the eastern half of the county but largely insignificant in the western half, for the north-eastern Hundred of Stratton, which is part of Devon in all but name, shows the same preponderance of locational surnames as the western Hundred of Kerrier.

It is when one breaks down further the total of locational surnames that interesting results emerge. Of the total of 2,714, only 156 are firmly identifiable as place-names located in a parish other than that in which the person was taxed: a very small proportion. There are also 428 'unidentified' locational surnames. Of these, most are names which are obviously derived from a place-name (because they start with a place-name generic, such as **tre**, **pol** or **pen**), but the place-name is unknown. Some of these will have been in the parish concerned, and may be identified as my place-name survey continues — indeed, the Subsidy Roll has often led me to discover a lost place-name in a parish. A few of the 'unidentified' names are farm-names found in more than one parish, but not known in the parish in which the person was taxed. They must be derived either from one of the farms elsewhere (thus adding to the total of 156 place-name surnames found in the 'wrong' parishes), or, if common enough, once again from a lost place-name in the parish where the person was living. So if they could be assigned to their places, this group of 428 unidentified locational surnames would not, I suspect, greatly alter my proportion of 156 out of 2,714 found in the 'wrong' parishes.

If one breaks down this figure of 156 even further, one finds that a third (54 out of 156) are surnames from a place-name in a parish adjacent to the one where the person was taxed. A good few of these 54 are farms near the parish boundaries, and it is quite possible that the people with those surnames were living at or near the farm in question, but for some reason were reckoned in an adjacent parish — for instance, the tenement may have extended over the parish boundary, or might have given its name to an adjacent tenement in the adjoining parish. Another small group, fourteen, consists of members of large land-owning families which took their surnames from a Cornish manor but comprised individuals who were taxed in different parishes — in one or two cases it looks as if the same individual was being taxed in more than one parish.

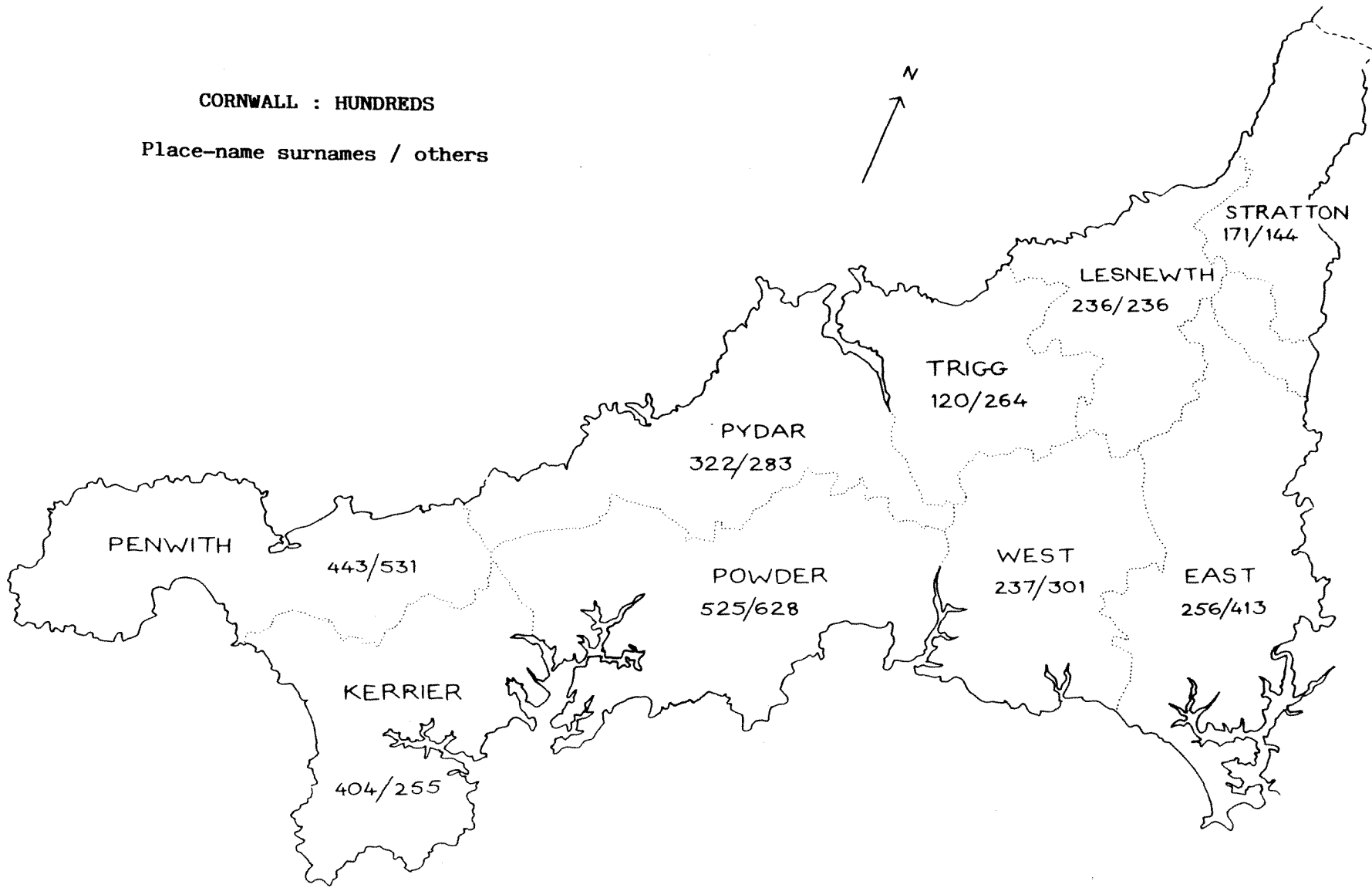
That leaves 62 people in the roll bearing a surname of place-name origin firmly assignable to a place located more than one parish away; and a further 26 bearing surnames which indicate places outside Cornwall altogether. Of these last 26, some appear in east Cornwall and are derived from places in Devon not far away: four from Tavistock and three from other, minor, places. The rest of them appear to come from Bristol (two), from Canterbury (two), from London (one), and the others from various miscellaneous or unidentifiable places. (The two from Canterbury occur in the same parish and separated by only one other name in the returns, so were probably members of one family.)

Thus the overwhelming majority of people with place-name surnames bore names which were those of farms in the parishes where they were living.

In my totals I have included the figures for the boroughs, but if isolated they show a very different picture. Among them I find a mere 70 place-name surnames altogether, out of 332 — just over 20 per cent. I

CORNWALL : HUNDREDS

Place-name surnames / others



Cornish surnames in 1327: Numerical Tables

Overall

Place-name surnames	2714	(inc. Boroughs	70)
Others	3055	(inc. Boroughs	262)
Total	5769		332

Place-name surnames

Same parish	2130
Unidentified	428
Elsewhere	156
Total	2714

Place-name surnames from elsewhere

Adjacent parish	54
Elsewhere in Cornwall	62
Major Cornish families	14
Out-county	26
Total	156

looked at these separately because of a remark (McClure 1979) that in most of England, at about this date, the proportion of place-name surnames in urban communities was higher than in the countryside: in Cornwall it was the reverse. Note that the little Cornish boroughs were very different from the English towns that McClure was talking about: one of them was described in about 1600 as containing twelve houses and thirteen cuckolds. Nonetheless it is striking that insofar as Cornwall had towns at all, they seem to show the opposite tendency to that of English cities at a similar date.

It will be obvious by now that I believe people with place-name surnames were still being named from the places where they lived in Cornwall in 1327, the only exceptions being a few members of notable families and somewhat over 100 other individuals who had names derived from places in other parishes. The fact of the overwhelming majority of place-name surnames being found in their 'correct' parishes demonstrates this, in my opinion. It is theoretically possible that people were moving around, but only within parishes, so that they were all living at farms with each other's names within a given parish; but that is hardly a possibility which need be taken seriously. If I am right, then the corollary is that fixed surnames did not yet exist on a wide scale in Cornwall: if someone moved his residence at that date, he would probably have changed his surname, at least if it was a place-name one. In the rest of England it is often accepted that a place-name surname was acquired after a person had moved away from the place denoted ('Where are you from?'), but in Cornwall it rather indicated the actual residence of the person.

The question then arises, when did people start to have fixed (and, subsequently, hereditary) surnames in Cornwall? When do you find, on a wide scale, people with place-name surnames not living at the farms indicated by those surnames? Unfortunately, for two centuries there are no lists comparable with the 1327 Subsidy Roll in Cornwall: the next ones are found in the 1520s, and the process must have occurred in the intervening period, presumably during the fifteenth century and the second half of the fourteenth. However, if one looks forward to the sixteenth-century returns (of which two have been conveniently published by T.L. Stoate), it is intriguing to find that a significant number of people were still to be found in the parishes where the farms were located from which their surnames were derived. (There are also plenty who were not so living, of course.) At that date one still cannot tell whether they were mostly living at the actual farms: one might simply imagine that they had moved, but not very far. But there are well-documented cases at even later dates, in the late sixteenth and early seventeenth centuries, of people (yeoman farmers, not the upper classes) who changed their surnames in order to make them those of the farms where they lived; and at least two instances in Cornwall of the same process in the twentieth century — upper-crust families, in these cases. The general impression is of a very strong feeling in the county that it is right to bear the name of your dwelling as a surname. In Norden's maps, compiled in about 1600, thirty Cornish families are represented as bearing the names of their seats. The Trelawneys, in the late sixteenth century, went out of their way to acquire the manor of Trelawne, apparently under the mistaken impression, still believed by many people, that their surname was derived from it: in fact it is from a less distinguished farm elsewhere. There is also one splendid case in the late sixteenth century of a family who seem to have translated their Cornish surname into English (Andrewartha, 'the upper farm', rendered as Upton) before bestowing it upon a newly-acquired farm, though they kept the Cornish version as their surname.

This last phenomenon, of people moving to a new place and taking the name of their old one with them to be bestowed on the new farm, is one that

was excellently shown to be happening in medieval Yorkshire by George Redmonds in a paper given later at the same conference (see below, pp.73-80). If this was happening on a wide scale in Cornwall in the fourteenth century, it might alter my conclusions somewhat. Some of the people with place-name surnames living in parishes where the place-names are also found could have brought those surnames with them, thus giving rise to the farm-name found in the same parish. This whole topic has disturbing implications for place-name studies, for it means that one might spend time struggling to find a derivation suitable for the terrain of a place, when the name was originally coined to describe a quite different place; but this is not the occasion to examine those implications. There are very definite suggestions that the same phenomenon was happening occasionally in Cornwall, at this period or even earlier, though it is very hard to pin down for lack of documentation. However, I put my faith in the idea that it was not widespread enough to undermine the conclusion, that most of the people in the 1327 Subsidy Roll had taken their names from the farms where they lived, rather than bestowing names obtained from farms elsewhere upon those places. There are enough uniquely-named places in Cornwall to be sure that it was that way round in many cases.

Though they are not my main topic, it is worth saying a little about the 'others', the surnames not derived from place-names at all. A considerable number of them are not comprehensible to me, though I dare say they might be so to a Middle English surname specialist. I was rather disappointed to find not very many descriptive surnames in the Cornish language, either nicknames or occupation names, so that there is not a great deal of Cornish to be gleaned from the roll — probably less than from the sixteenth-century subsidies, even though the language was by then much less widespread. A few examples prove that such names were in use, but they must have been translated for the most part, for bureaucratic purposes. In 1327 one of the commonest surnames in west Cornwall, where the Cornish language was to remain strongest and last longest, was Calwa, which I presume to be English 'bald, beardless' (which usually gave Callow as a surname). This is virtually unknown in Cornwall at a later date, unless some instances of the surname Callaway are derived from it (though Reaney has that as a Norman surname, probably from Caillouet in Normandy); but the Cornish for 'bald', *moyl, is a common surname at a later date and occurs occasionally in 1327. I think it is very possible that the west Cornish cases of Calwa are translations for people who were actually called Moyl. (Compare McClure 1973, for a discussion of bureaucratic interference in the names found in the subsidy rolls.) In the sixteenth-century rolls one does find instances of descriptive surnames in the Cornish language; and nicknames continue to appear in the parish registers (unfortunately in English rather than Cornish) as late as 1700 in at least one area of West Cornwall.

Among the descriptive surnames I include those denoting nationalities. Here there is a slight surprise. In the sixteenth century Cornwall was teeming with Bretons, and one would have expected the same in the fourteenth century. Cornwall tends to look south rather than north, its best harbours are on the south, and the language is closer to Breton than it is to Welsh. But in fact thirteen people have surnames indicating them to be of Welsh origin (Wales, Walys, Walsha, Kembre, Combro), and there are only four corresponding Bretons. Five (all in west Cornwall) are described as Seys, the Cornish for an Englishman — the only place that this word has been found so far, apart from place-names.

Another surprise is the great rarity of actual filiation surnames. If you looked at any corresponding Welsh text of similar date, the great majority of people would be defined by paternity, X ap Y (whence the modern

surnames Pritchard, Preece, etc.). There is not one example of that in the vernacular in the Cornish roll. There are nine instances of the same in Latin, X filius Y, but nine out of over five and a half thousand is not very many. However, there are lots of examples of people with simply two names — William Robert, John Andrew, and so on, and no doubt these represent William son of Robert, etc.

Very few of the Christian names are Celtic personal names. That is predictable, since other records show hardly any in use in medieval Cornwall anyway. Instead they used standard, non-Celtic ones. Celtic personal names had been in use in Cornwall at least up to the tenth century (as shown by the Bodmin manumissions, by a few Anglo-Saxon charters, and by place-names), but even in that century one can see people using double names (a Cornish and an English one), and they evidently had largely gone over to using OE personal names by the time of the Norman Conquest, and then changed again in the same way as the rest of England. Correspondingly, hardly any later Cornish surnames are derived from Celtic personal names, and those that there are could well be re-introductions from Brittany. However, one that does occur in 1327 is that of Luke Modres, the Middle Cornish version of Old Cornish Modred. This is one of the best-attested Cornish personal names, from the tenth century onwards, and certainly continued in use after the Norman Conquest. Its popularity can hardly be due to its occurrence in the Arthurian legends, where Modred is not a sympathetic character.

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NOTE

- * This is a revised version of a paper given on March 23rd 1985 at the XVIIth annual conference of the Council for Name Studies held at Christ's College, Cambridge.

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The Cornish Lay Subsidy of 1327 comprises PRO E.179/87/7, with the addition of some parishes and towns found in E.179/87/37.