

## What's happened to personal name studies in England since 1991?

I have to cover both given names and surnames, and they have different stories to tell. So it will be a bit of a sprint. There's some good news and not-so-good news.

### GIVEN NAMES

#### SLIDE 2.

Given names first, with some not-so-good news. We still have no dictionary of Old English personal names. On the plus side, we do have Keith Briggs' *Index to personal names in English place-names* and Fran Colman's *Grammar of Names in Anglo-Saxon England*, which addresses some of the challenges of producing such a dictionary and offers some solutions. In the last 30 years Old English linguistics and Anglo-Saxon onomastics have greatly benefited from her work on moneyers' names and also from that of Veronica Smart. The major publications that I've listed observe an important methodological principle, that the origins and histories of names must be sought by assessing the philology in the light of the personal and local contexts in which the names appear. This obvious principle needs re-iterating because it's so often been ignored by philologists and historians alike, but not by Cecily Clark, whose writings consistently stressed the importance of extra-linguistic contexts in explaining names. Her death in 1992 was a terrible loss. John Insley's 1994 monograph is also a superb model of this interdisciplinary method. Then there are questions about the identity of hypocoristic forms and the frequency of individual names in the late medieval and early modern periods. Name popularity then was not primarily about fashion, as is often assumed. Smith-Bannister and Redmonds show, for example, that naming after a godparent was a major factor in the transmission and spread of particular given names. They and I (in the article I've listed) also provide for the first time some accurate statistics of the changing popularity of names from the 14th to the 18th century, and correct many mis-statements in Withycombe's *Oxford Dictionary of Christian Names* and in other respectable dictionaries.

#### SLIDE 3.

Here is a list of them. They all add something to the sum of human knowledge but the bad news is that all of them copy Withycombe's sometimes erroneous etymologies and histories. They are apparently ignorant of most of the post-Withycombe scholarship published in the last 70 years (let alone the last 30), including articles in *Nomina*. So how do we get up-to-date scholarship into the public domain, so that dictionary compilers can copy *accurate* etymologies and accurate histories? I think this is a question that is relevant to the SNSBI's new outreach programme. At the very least we need a new dictionary to replace Withycombe's, including online.

### SURNAMES

#### SLIDE 4.

Surnames are vastly more numerous and more complex to research than given names. Reaney's and Wilson's dictionary and Titford's have their strengths but they ignore a great deal of published scholarship and are exceedingly defective in their scope and their etymological accuracy. The good news is that three innovations have been transforming English surname research since the 1990s: DNA analysis; advances in research methodology; and the advent of searchable electronic data files.

#### SLIDE 5

Turi King's two chapters on DNA in *Surnames, DNA, and Family History* are encouraging but salutary. DNA analysis has led to greater precision in identifying some monogenetic and

polygenetic surnames and in identifying spelling variants. Its impact on surname research and family history will go on growing apace. But genetic data can be complex to interpret and easy to misapply. I've had several fruitless email exchanges with family historians who reject well-founded etymologies on the grounds that their DNA analyses prove something different, however linguistically improbable they are.

## **SLIDE 6**

The 1990s was an exciting period in surname research, which overwhelmingly proved the relevance to it of local and family history. The Dept. of Local History at Leicester University was the home of the English Surnames project from 1963 onward and its very first PhD student was George Redmonds. His doctoral thesis on West Riding surnames, published in 1973, was the first volume in the county-by-county series. 20 years later he published his ground-breaking book *Surnames and Genealogy*. Reaney's and Wilson's assumption was that most modern surnames could be explained by their linguistic similarity to isolated medieval name-forms, regardless of where and when they occurred. George showed that this was profoundly mistaken – because surnames are intensely local in their origins and in their subsequent histories. This was not a totally new idea. It had already been argued by others, including Edgar Tooth, David Hey, and myself. What was new and shocking was George's exposure of the extent of Reaney's and Wilson's errors in explaining Yorkshire surnames. The errors weren't occasional, they were methodologically endemic, and this had fundamental implications for the reliability of their explanations of surnames in other counties. George and I reckoned that between 60% and 70% of the surnames in 'Reaney and Wilson' were either inadequate or plain wrong.

The Leicester survey had in fact been England's only major academic project devoted to surname research, but it ran out of leadership in 2007. Its demise is a serious loss to the subject. Surname research has also been reduced by the decline since 2004 of funding for Adult Education. It was George Redmonds' work as an Adult Education tutor at Huddersfield that enabled him to teach and research local and family-name history and to write *Surnames and Genealogy*. Adult Education courses also enabled George's friend David Hey to establish a Names Project Group at Sheffield University. Their research led to the publication of *The Origin of One Hundred Sheffield Surnames* in 1992 and a seminal work, *Family Names and Family History* in 2000. Sadly, none of these courses and projects exist anymore and both David and George have recently died. Thankfully George lived long enough to finish his lifetime's ambition, the *Dictionary of Yorkshire Surnames* that Shaun Tyas published in 2015. As we all know, Shaun's publishing has made a vital contribution to name studies in the last 30 years. But clearly, we need a replacement for Reaney's and Wilson's dictionary, one that ideally is based on a Redmond's-style approach for every county. That is a very, very long way off.

## **SLIDE 7**

Fortunately, electronic databases and the internet have given us another, quicker way forward. Archer's atlas has transformed surname research. At last we have some reliable information on surname distribution and statistics. We now know where each surname was in 1881 and with what frequency. From there we can follow the evidential trail back in time and place using the IGI and other online and digital resources. It doesn't provide the full context we ideally need; we are missing much family and local historical data that Redmonds' and Hey's researches made such effective use of. But for very many surnames this new IT method works extremely well, as I was delighted to discover when it was tried it out in the "Family Names in the United Kingdom" project.

## SLIDE 8

This was devised by Patrick Hanks with Richard Coates at the University of West of England, from where Richard put in two successful bids for AHRC funding. The first enabled a team of researchers and consultants to spend four years producing a radically new version of Reaney's and Wilson's dictionary, and it also financed a PhD research student, Harry Parkin. The 4-volume *Oxford Dictionary of Family Names in Britain and Ireland* was published in 2016. Many thousands of English surnames now have corrected explanations or have been explained for the first time. George Redmonds generously sent us the draft of his *Dictionary of Yorkshire Surnames* just in time to get most of his new explanations into our dictionary. That's the good news. The not-so-good news is that its purchase price is £400 and the online edition can only be purchased by university and public libraries, who are seriously cash-strapped. So it is not easily accessible to the bulk of its main market, family historians and perhaps also schools in the future. The second tranche of funding is the basis for a second, greatly enlarged and revised edition but we don't know when OUP will publish it. However, OUP have just published a one-volume *Concise Oxford Dictionary of Family Names in Britain*, edited by Harry. Its price of £80 should put it in the reach of family historians and schools, and it contains etymological revisions and additional names from the unpublished 2nd edition. I must stress that these editions of the dictionary are only stages in a much longer programme of research. It will take many more years to establish the true origins of the thousands of surnames in the dictionary that we haven't yet had time to research properly. UWE has the copyright of the project's database and of the resultant dictionaries but no commitment to provide the project with future research staff or funding.

## SLIDE 9

So what is the future of English personal names research? Potentially brilliant, but fragile. There are huge quantities of unresearched given name and surname data to explore and lots of unanswered questions. And I've not had time to say anything about the major contribution of personal name studies to other types of inquiry: historical linguistics, lexicology, demography, social history, and so on. These are areas of research in which I have a specialist interest. I could easily spend another ten minutes talking about applied anthroponymics in the last thirty years and its potential value in outreach programmes. So why do I say that the future of personal names studies in England is fragile? Partly because, unlike place-name studies, it has no security of research funding or an academic home with an ongoing programme of research, publication, and post-graduate training. And partly because most of the small number of personal name scholars in England are getting long in the tooth. On the bright side, it is blessed with at least one younger scholar, Harry Parkin at Chester, and it has active encouragement and support from the Institute for Name-Studies at Nottingham and of course from this Society for Name Studies.