

How to decode a surname

Surnames started passing down in families during the Middle Ages. A lot of them use Medieval terms, or reflect Medieval names that were popular at the time. They are like time-capsules, because they have remained unchanged for hundreds of years. They are fascinating because they tell you something about the ancestor who had the nickname that became the surname in the first place.

The types of nicknames that became surnames fall into five groups. Most surnames, wherever they are from in the world, will fall into one of the same five groups.

Very few people are Archers by profession today although it was a common trade in the Middle Ages.



Nicknames

The first type of surname started with the way someone behaved, or how they looked. The surname Short indicates that the family's ancestor was not very tall. The surname White means the ancestor was very pale, or had white hair. Armstrong means the ancestor had strong arms. Some common names are nicknames written in other languages. In Scotland and Ireland, for example, people spoke Gaelic. The Scottish surname Cameron, for example, is Gaelic for 'hooked nose'. The technical term for this type of surname is *sobriquet*, meaning 'nickname'.

Parents' names

The second type of surname is from parents' names. They often end 'son' or 's'. Richardson and Richards both mean 'son of Richard'. Johnson and Jones both mean 'son of John'. In Gaelic-speaking Scotland and Ireland, Mac (or Mc) meant 'son'. MacDonald means 'son of Donald' and McGregor 'son of Gregor'. The Irish also use 'O' to mean 'descendant of'. O'Kelly means 'descendant of Kelly' and O'Donovan 'descendant of Donovan'. Some people were named after their mother instead. The surname Orange means 'son of Orangia', a girls' name used about 800 years ago, that went out of fashion. The technical term for this type of surname is *patronymic*, which is Latin for 'father's name', or *matronymic*, meaning mother's name.

Place names

Thirdly, surnames can come from place names. Families who owned places might use the place names as their surnames. The Birmingham family owned Birmingham, and the Berkeleys (also spelled Barclay) own Berkeley Castle in Gloucestershire. Families who didn't own any land might be known by the name of the place where they lived. The Lincoln family gained their surname because their ancestors were from Lincoln, and the London family were from London. The technical term for this type of surname is *locative* - where the family was located.

Types of place

Fourthly, surnames can come from descriptions of where ancestors lived. People who lived by a wood, hill, forest or lake might be surnamed Woods, Hill, Forest or Lake. People who lived by man-made things like a bridge, castle, hall (a type of big house) or church might be surnamed Bridge, Castle, Hall or Church. The technical term for this type of surname is *topographic* - describing the family by the place where they lived.



A medieval farmer's children may have been given the surname Farmer.

Jobs

Finally, people's jobs could become surnames. A farmer or painter might be surnamed Farmer or Painter. Many of the jobs people did in the Middle Ages are no longer very common today, but they are remembered by surnames. Men who fired bows and arrows were archers, hence the surname Archer. The fletcher was the man who made the arrows, hence the surname Fletcher. The bowyer made bows, hence the surname Bowyer. The surname Carrot means someone who grew carrots. The technical term for this type of surname is *metonymic*, which actually means 'alternative name', but is used for surnames derived from jobs.