

Heritage Circle

The Origin and Development of Surnames

Up until the 13th Century only landowners and gentry had surnames members were told by the speaker Mr Derek Palgrave at the February meeting, in an interesting talk on The Origins of Surnames. In the 1300s their usage had spread to important and wealthy people in the towns, and by the next century it had become widespread throughout the country. In 1530 Parish Registers were established and everyone had to have a surname to enter on the Register and which could then be used for identification for taxation. Many people could not read or write so the names were given verbally to the registrar which often led to unusual spellings if he could not understand the dialect and wrote it down phonetically!

Names were derived from five sources – Patronal (or Paternal), Locative (areas and towns), Occupational, Nicknames, and Topographical (from features in the landscape). Examples of the first sort were Jacobson, Williamson, and Alison (son of Alice). Locative names could be taken from several places with the same or similar name – example Palgrave, with two villages in Norfolk alone, or Pagrave. Others are more straight forward – York, Putney, London, Sussex, etc. The Occupational names were more obvious – Barber, Archer, Chandler, Baker, – or could be from products they name or sold – Fish, Bacon, Button and so on. The Nicknames could depict the features or the character of the person and could be pleasant or derogatory – Whitehead (grey or blond hair), Short, Long, or Blunt, Savage, and even Dolittle. Topographical names were those such as Wood, Forest, Hill, Lane which would have been features close to where the person lived.

Derek Palgrave helpfully gave sources of information available in book form and on-line which could be very useful to those members researching family history or specific subjects or areas.

The next meeting of the Heritage Circle will be on Wednesday, 26th March, at 7.30pm when a popular speaker, Stuart Bowell, will be talking on the History of Advertising. Sounds interesting!

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