

**THE HISTORY OF ENGLISH PODCAST
TRANSCRIPT**

**EPISODE 117:
WHAT'S IN A NAME?**

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Welcome to the History of English Podcast – a podcast about the history of the English language. This is Episode 117: What's in a Name? In this episode, we're going to take a look at names. We all have one. In fact, we have more than one. Almost everyone today has a personal name and a surname, and many of us have one or more middle names as well. But that wasn't the case in the Anglo-Saxon period. Before the Norman Conquest, most people in England, and most people in Europe, only had one name. But that started to change after the Norman Conquest as people began to acquire a second or additional name. At first, those second names were not hereditary. They didn't pass from parents to children like modern surnames. But around the current point in our overall story of English in the early to mid 1300s, those second names started to become hereditary family names. Children began to use the surname of their parents. And our modern naming conventions finally started to emerge. So in this episode, we'll explore how names have evolved over time. And we'll see how those changes reflect the overall evolution of English in the Middle Ages.

But before we begin, let me remind you that the website for the podcast is historyofenglishpodcast.com. And you can sign up to support the podcast and get bonus episodes and transcripts at Patreon.com/historyofenglish.

Also, one other quick note. If you happen to live in New England, or if you're going to be in the Boston area in early November, I want to invite you to check out the Sound Education conference at Harvard University from November 1 through 3. The conference will focus on educational podcasting, and it'll feature lots of history and other podcasters. I'll be participating in a panel on where we'll be talking about podcasting about language. And I also have plans to present a short lecture which will essentially be a live version of the podcast. The conference is open to the public so I would encourage you to check it out if you're in the area. Just go to soundeducation.fm for more information and details.

Now, let's turn our attention to this episode and the changing nature of names in the 1300s. Last time, I looked at the state of the English language in the Celtic fringes of the British Isles. And I concluded that episode by discussing the Statutes of Kilkenny which were adopted by English officials in Ireland. Those laws were designed to preserve an English culture that was rapidly disappearing in Ireland. One of the rules required English subjects in Ireland to use an English surname. And that was a notable development for a couple of reasons. It shows that surnames had become so common by this point, that it was accepted that most people would have one. The law also shows how a surname can reflect a specific culture and tradition. Apparently, that connection was so important to English officials in the 1300s that they mandated the use of English surnames in order to preserve some of that English culture and identity.

Since the early episodes about the Norman Conquest, I have occasionally made reference to words that eventually became common surnames. The fact is that most common English surnames have a long history that can be traced back to the period after the Conquest. Most of those names are recorded for the first time in the two or three centuries that followed the arrival

of the Normans. And the reason why those names started to appear during that time period is because that's when surnames started to become common. Prior to the Conquest, surnames didn't really exist in England.

When surnames first started to appear, they were not hereditary like modern surnames. In other words, they were unique to the person who bore the name, and they didn't have any connection to the family as a whole. But around the current point in our overall story of English in the early to mid 1300s, all of that started to change. These names started to be used as family names. Records show that children were using the same surnames as their parents. So modern hereditary surnames were finally being used. And many of those early surnames are still in use today. In fact, many of you probably have one of those old surnames.

In this episode, I want to explore the history of English names, and I want to explore where most of our common names and surnames came from. However, this is one of those topics that is too big for one episode. So I'll continue the discussion in the next episode where I intend to explore the growth of towns and cities. We'll see how that population growth led to the development of specialized jobs and occupations, and many of those occupations also gave English lots of common surnames. So I'll cover occupational surnames next time as part of that discussion. But let's begin this episode with a more general look at the history of names.

And a good place to start is with that word *name*. It's an old word that goes back to Old English. But it's actually much older than that. It began with the original Indo-Europeans. That original Indo-European word has been reconstructed as something like **no-men*. In fact, this was one of those words that led early scholars to conclude that most of the languages of Europe had evolved from an older common language. And that's because every major Indo-European language family has a version of this root word, and the forms are quite similar across all of those languages.

Not only has the original Indo-European word been reconstructed as **no-men*, but scholars have also reconstructed a phrase that referred to the actual process of naming something or someone. That phrase was something like **nomen-dhe*. It combines the root words for *name* and *do*, so it literally translates as 'name do' or 'name put' but it meant to 'give something a name.' That construction can be found in Old Czech, Hittite, Sanskrit, and Greek.

From this we can reasonably conclude that the Indo-Europeans had personal names, but we don't really know very much about those names.

If we skip ahead a few centuries to the Greeks, we find this Indo-European root word rendered in Greek as *onoma*. We still have much of that Greek root in the word *onomatopoeia* which refers to a word that is formed based on the sound of thing it describes. So words like *moo* for the sound a cow makes, or *buzz* for the sound of a bee.

That Greek root also survives in several other English words, and it's a little more apparent in some of those. It forms the 'N-Y-M' or *-nym* part of words like *synonym*, *homonym*, *acronym*, and *pseudonym*. All of those words have to do with the way things are named or what things are called. And the *-nym* part at the end represents the Greek root word meaning 'name.'

With respect to personal names, the Greeks tended to use certain regular naming conventions. It was common for parents to name their first son after his grandfather on his father's side. The second son was often named after his grandfather on his mother's side. The naming conventions for girls are not as well documented, but it appears that they followed a similar pattern. So again, it was common to name the first daughter after her grandmother on her father's side, and the second daughter after her grandmother on her mother's side.

But in either case, and whatever the naming convention, the Greeks followed the pattern of most ancient cultures by only using one name – a personal name. They didn't really use surnames or family names. The family lineage and traditions was maintained by giving children names derived from their grandparents. So personal names tended to be maintained within the family over time. But there was no family name or surname.

We can now skip forward to the Romans because the Romans did something very different and very unusual for the time. They actually used multiple names, and they also used an early type of surname.

But let's begin our look at Roman names with their word for 'name.' The Latin word for 'name' was *nomen*. So once again, we see the resemblance to the Modern English word. The Latin word *nomen* can be found in tack in the word *nomenclature* – literally a 'name caller.' In its original Latin, it referred to the Roman official who announced visitors. But in Modern English, it's really just another word for a name or the systemic process by which things are named.

The Latin word *nomen* is also found in words like *nominate*, *nominal* and *misnomer*. It's also the root of the word *noun*. Of course, we use the word *noun* as a part of speech, but it originally meant a name. From the original sense of the 'the name of a thing' or 'what something is called,' the word came to be a generic word for anything with a name or anything that can be named. And that gave us the grammatical sense of the word *noun*.

The Latin root is also the source of the word *renown* meaning 'the condition of being well-known' or 'having people know you by name.'

So the Latin word for 'name' is found in many English words today. But what's most interesting about Roman names was the way the Romans used them to identify people. The Romans were very unique among ancient peoples of Europe and the Mediterranean in that they used multiple names. To be fair, this mostly applied to the wealthy and powerful, but it was still an usual system at the time.

Most of these prominent people had three names – what the Romans called a *praenomen*, a *nomen* and a *cognomen*. This naming convention evolved over the centuries, but generally speaking, the *praenomen* was the first name or familiar name – mostly used between family members and close friends. The middle name was called simply the *nomen*, and it typically represented the name of the person's clan. Clans were made up of various families, so the third name or *cognomen* was usually the name of the person's family. A fourth name was sometimes added to the end which was often a descriptive name or a type of nickname.

This helps to explain why most historical figures in ancient history have only one single name until we get to the Roman period, and then all of sudden we encounter people like Julius Caesar and Mark Anthony. But even then, those are not usually their full formal names. Julius Caesar was actually Gaius Julius Caesar. And Marcus Aurelius was actually Marcus Aurelius Antoninus Augustus.

Again, each component of those names was usually based on some type of naming convention – even though that convention changed over time. For example, it was common for a child’s praenomen or first name to be based on the name of an older ancestor. That was true for sons – at least up to the fifth son. But after that, sons were often given numerical names. If parents had a fifth son, that son was often called *Quintus* meaning ‘the fifth.’ The sixth son was often named *Sixtus* meaning ‘the sixth.’ The seventh son was *Septimus* meaning ‘the seventh.’ And the eighth son was *Octavius* meaning ‘the eighth.’ I mentioned this fact in a recent bonus episode I did at Patreon, and I wanted to mention here as well because it helps to explain something that you may have wondered about when it comes to our modern month names.

I noted way back in Episode 18 that our month names were borrowed from the Romans. Most of the months are named after gods or goddesses or prominent Romans. But the last four months have number names. *September*, *October*, *November* and *December* are based on the Latin root word for seven, eight, nine and ten, respectively. Now as I noted in that earlier episode, those months were originally the seventh, eighth, ninth, and tenth months as their name would suggest. And that was because the calendar year began with the vernal equinox in the spring with March. The first four months— *March*, *April*, *May* and *June* – were based on the names of either Roman, Etruscan or Greek gods. But the fifth month was originally called *Quintilis* based on the Latin word for five. The sixth month was *Sextilis* based on the word for six. The seventh month was *September*, then *October*, *November* and *December*. And it appears that all of these months received number names because that was consistent with the Roman naming conventions at the time. Just as sons received number names starting with the fifth son, the months received number names starting with the fifth month.

Now again, as I noted in that earlier episode, *January* and *February* were later added to the beginning of the calendar to fill in the previously undefined winter period. And that threw all of the number names off by two. And then *Quintilis* was renamed *July* after Julius Caesar. And *Sextilis* was renamed *August* after Augustus Caesar. And that left us with *September* through *December* with their original numerical names, even though the numbers are still off by two. *September* is now the ninth month, *October* is the tenth month, and so on. But this helps to explain why the final months of the year are still named after Roman numbers and not after gods or goddesses or people. It all had to do with the Roman naming conventions at the time. And again, those rules generally required the use of multiple names for people.

Now those naming conventions died out the collapse of the Western Roman Empire as the Roman period gave way to the early Middle Ages. And as we move forward to the Middle Ages and the Anglo-Saxon period, we return to a system where people were only known by one name.

Back when we went through the Anglo-Saxon period, we encountered a lot of those names. And you probably remember how funny-sounding a lot of those names were. We came across people with names like Aethelbert, Wulfstan, Alric, Aethelred, Ordric, Godgifu and Stigand. These were just a few of the large variety of names used in the Anglo-Saxon period. They were mostly derived from a combination of two separate Old English root words – and most people only had that one basic name. We have to keep in mind that Anglo-Saxon England was largely a rural society. Most people lived in small communities where everybody knew each other, so most people didn't need more than one name.

Now we know that the Anglo-Saxons did sometimes use descriptive words to help identify a particular person – especially a prominent person. For example, we know that the Anglo-Saxon king Aethelred was also known as *Æpelred Unræd* – or Aethelred the Unready. You might recall that the name was actually a pun. *Æpelred* meant 'noble counsel,' and *Unræd* meant 'un-counseled or poorly counseled.' So *Æpelred Unræd* literally meant 'noble counsel poorly counseled.' People probably got a nice chuckle out of that nickname at the time, but much of that original meaning was lost over time, and today, we have just converted *Unræd* into 'unready' which sounds similar and is an accurate description in its own right.

Old English documents also reveal other Anglo-Saxons with similar descriptive names. We have *Æpelstan fætta* – literally Aethelstan the Fat. And *Eadweard se langa* – literally Edward the Long or Edward the Tall. We're also told in one chronicle that the Anglo-Saxon king Edmund was very brave and that led to him being called *Irensid* – or Ironside – and he is still known as Edmund Ironside in many histories of that period.

Now again, these were additional names or descriptive names. They were unique to the person who bore the name, and they didn't pass on to future generations. So they weren't surnames in the sense that we use them today. And they apparently were pretty rare. Most Anglo-Saxons only had one name.

So for much of the Old English period, people had one – and just one – of those odd-sounding Anglo-Saxon names. But all of that started to change with the arrival of the Normans in 1066. As we know, the Norman Conquest caused a major upheaval that impacted almost every aspect of English society. And that impact extended to English names.

After the Normans arrived, French and Latin became the prestigious languages. Meanwhile, English fell into sharp decline. Of course, people still spoke English, but it was mostly confined to the peasants and the common people. It was seen as an unsophisticated peasant language. And that stigma started to affect those native Anglo-Saxon names. Those traditional names fell out of favor, and in their place, people started to give their children more prestigious and acceptable names from the continent. That included French names like William, Henry, Geoffrey, Richard, Robert, Agnes, Alice and Matilda. It also included names derived from the Bible like John from John the Baptist and Mary from the Virgin Mary. Names like Matthew and Joan and Elizabeth were also derived from the Bible and became common during the period after the Conquest.

Along the way, most of those old Anglo-Saxon names died out. A few survived like Edward, Edmund, Alfred, and Albert. Oswald survived, as did a few female names like Ethel and Edith. But the newer French names and Biblical names were all the rage.

It wasn't just that English parents were choosing names from a different place, they were also choosing names from a smaller list. There simply weren't as many names to choose from. And to compound that problem, parents really preferred a small handful of those names – especially William and John for boys, and Joan, Margaret and Matilda for girls.

In his book entitled “Life in the Middle Ages,” historian Martyn Whittock examined the Poll Tax returns from Sheffield in the year 1379. The Poll Tax was a new type of tax that was levied on most of the people of England – not just landholders or traders. Most of those old tax records survive, and they provide a fascinating snapshot of how the common people of England identified themselves in the 1300s. Those records from Sheffield show that 715 men were assessed for tax in 1379. Exactly one-third of them were named John. And another 19 percent were named William. So putting those numbers together, over half of the men listed in those tax records had one of those two names. And that wasn't a brand new problem in the 1300s. It had been a problem for a while. A surviving set of manorial records from the 1200s contains a list of men who were assessed with fines. After recording the names of several men named William, the scribe eventually just wrote down “another William.”

The scribe's apparent frustration at having to list all of those men named William points to part of the problem with naming practices in these first couple of centuries after the Conquest. Too many people had the same name, and there was no easy way to distinguish them. But government bureaucrats and tax collectors needed to distinguish them, and even average ordinary people needed to distinguish each other, especially as people poured into the ever-growing towns and cities. I mean if you were speaking to someone about your friend William, and you didn't have some way to identify him, nobody was going to have a clue who you were talking about.

As it turned out, the highest nobles of England had already worked out a solution to this problem. By the 1100s, they were already distinguishing themselves by their landholdings. Now these weren't exactly surnames in the modern sense of the term, but they were the beginning of many modern surnames. We've already seen that prominent nobles were identified by their landholdings and estates. William the Conqueror was known as William of Normandy. Geoffrey Plantagenet was Geoffrey of Anjou. Other major nobles also identified themselves in much the same way, giving us names like Roger of Montgomery, and William of Warenne, and Robert of Gloucester. This extended down to lesser nobles who often identified themselves by their smaller holdings. For example, Robert de Lincoln or Robert of Lincoln is found in the tax records for the year 1130. Around the same time, we find the name of William de Hambleton or William of Hamilton. Those are some of the earliest recorded instances of what eventually became the surnames Lincoln and Hamilton.

Over time, the preposition in the middle was dropped. So Robert of Lincoln eventually just became Robert Lincoln. And William de Hambleton became William Hamilton. Of course, **de** is the French word meaning ‘of,’ and most of these names actually used **de** at first – like Simon de Montfort who I discussed in an earlier episode.

Interestingly, for some unclear reason, the word **the** was sometimes substituted for **de** or **of**. The Normans also sometimes use **le** which was the French equivalent of **the**, so it may have been borrowed from that Norman practice. But that occasional usage helps to explain why Robert the Bruce was called ‘the Bruce.’ His name also appears as ‘de Bruce’ in many Middle English documents meaning Robert ‘of Bruce,’ and it is generally thought that Bruce is an Anglicized version of Brix in Normandy, which is believed to be where the Bruce family originated. At any rate, the use of **the** died out pretty quickly in England, but it survived much longer in Scotland and Ireland, which is why it is much more common to find names using ‘**the**’ in those regions. But again, the **the** in ‘Robert the Bruce’ just meant **de** or **of**. And regardless which word was used – **de**, **of** or **the** – they had all mostly disappeared altogether by the 1400s.

Now it made sense that nobles would identify themselves by their landholdings or their estates because those holdings were a fundamental part of their feudal identity. It defined their rights and duties. It also determined how they were taxed. And there was a hereditary aspect to those place names because the estates often passed within the same family from one generation to the next.

The Domesday Book lists the names of nearly 400 Frenchmen who held lands directly from William the Conqueror. 27% of them used names or titles based on place names or estates located in France, and another 6% used names based on places or estates in England. Together, that means that one-third of William’s primary vassals were identified by a place name. [Source: *England under the Norman and Angevin Kings - Bartlett (p.541-546)*]

Again, this type of naming convention was initially limited to the nobility, but it was soon extended to commoners. It provided a convenient way to distinguish people who all had the same personal name.

For example, in the mid-1200s, a Parisian man named Lotyn moved to London where he became known as Lotyn of Paris. That place name **Paris** eventually led to the modern surname **Parish**. Other people were also identified by their nationality. Philip of Wales was better known as Philip the Welshman. And that term **Welshman** later evolved into the surname **Walsh**. Along the same lines, a man named Henry from Scotland was known as Henry the Scot, and that national designation led to the surname **Scott**. Surnames like **Fleming** and **Norman** also developed in the same way.

Since most commoners did not have landed estates, and most were from rural areas, it soon became common for many of them to use other features to identify their place of origin. A man named John from a forested area might be known as John atte Wood or John atte Woods. It meant that he lived ‘at the woods.’ In this case, both **at** and **wood** survived in the surname **Atwood**, but in most cases the preposition was lost over time. When the preposition **at** was dropped, that just left the surname **Wood** and **Woods**.

Many common surnames were acquired in this manner. *Rivers, Brooke, Hill, Bush, Stone, Fields* and *Moore* were all derived from topographical features. The very common name *Green* was also formed in this manner. It referred to an open grassy area – or green. Another name derived from this type of region was *Meadows*. And believe it or not, the name *Bradley* has the same basic origin. A meadow was sometimes called a *brad-leah* – literally a ‘broad lea.’ *Lea* meant meadow, so a ‘broad lea’ was a ‘broad meadow.’ And that produced the name *Bradley*.

Shortly after the Conquest, we find a reference to Matilda de Perer – literally ‘Matilda from the pear tree.’ Presumably she lived near a pear tree in her local community. And that reference ultimately produced the surname *Perry*.

Sometimes the name was based on a man-made feature instead of a natural feature. The name *Bridges* is based on one or more persons who lived near a bridge. The name *Hall* is derived from the word *hall* – an Old English word for a large covered building and a central feature of Anglo-Saxon society. The name *Townsend* was literally ‘the town’s end,’ so it originated with one or more persons who lived at the edge of town.

Now it’s important to note that most of these names were not hereditary surnames at first. They didn’t usually pass from parents to children. They were merely descriptive names to help identify the person in question. In fact, many people changed their name if they moved or relocated. If Joan lived in a small village by a meadow, she might be known as Joan at Meadow or Joan Meadows. But if she moved to a different region like Kent, she might then be known as Joan of Kent. If she married a man from London and moved there, her son might be known as Robert of London where he lived, rather than Robert of Kent where his mother was from. So again, among commoners, these names didn’t really pass on from one generation to the next. They were descriptive and unique to the person who bore the name. And if circumstances changed, the name might also change. However, among nobles, who tended to hold onto the same lands for several generations, these descriptive names tended to be more conservative, and they tended to pass on through the family over time. They therefore tended to be more hereditary. But that wasn’t always the case. Estates and land holdings could vary over time. Large estates were often subdivided among the surviving children. And when those children got married, they sometimes combined their estates with those of a spouse. So a name tied to a manor or estate didn’t necessarily survive within a family for very long.

Given this variability, some nobles didn’t identify themselves in relation to a specific piece of land. Instead, they identified themselves in relation to their parents – usually their father. Again, this made sense because noble children usually inherited their lands from their parents, so it made sense for them to use that relationship to establish their identity.

The Norman nobles often used this approach, and they typically used the word *fitz* to mean ‘child of.’ For example, Robert of Gloucester had seven children with his wife, all of which were known as *FitzRobert* – literally ‘child of Robert.’ The children included William FitzRobert, Roger FitzRobert, Matilda FitzRobert, and so on. Again this was a very common way of forming names in Norman England, and it still survives in surnames like *Fitzgerald, Fitzpatrick, Fitzsimmons*, and a few others.

Commoners also started to form names in this manner, but unlike the nobles, they preferred to use the native word **son**. So in that case, Robert's son William would have been known as William Robertson. As I noted in an earlier episode about the Vikings, that was a naming technique that they used as well. The famous Viking Leif Erikson was literally 'Leif, Erik's son' or 'Leif, son of Erik.' His father was Erik the Red. So English commoners preferred to follow that pattern, especially in the old Danelaw region where Norse influence was more durable. Of course, that produced lots of surnames like **Johnson**, **Jackson**, **Wilson**, **Richardson**, **Williamson**, and so on. In fact, in the first couple of centuries after the Conquest, these were the most common types of surnames used by commoners. [Source: *Time Travelers Guide to the Middle Ages* (p. 87)]

But again, these were not hereditary surnames. They were literal descriptive surnames. So I noted that Robert of Gloucester had a son named William – William FitzRobert – literally William 'son of Robert.' And later, that son William had a daughter named Mabel. But she wasn't named Mabel FitzRobert. She didn't use her grandfather's name because she wasn't his daughter. She was the daughter of the son William. So she was named Mabel FitzWilliam. Again these names were descriptive, and therefore they changed at each generation. In much the same way, Geoffrey might be the son of John. So he might be known as Geoffrey Johnson. But if Geoffrey had a son named Richard, he would be Richard Geoffrey's son – not Richard Johnson. Again, the names were much more literal early on. By the way, if the name 'Geoffrey's son' seems like a made-up name on my part, it's not. 'Geoffrey's son' still exists today – as the name **Jefferson**.

I should also note that this same approach was used in the Gaelic areas of the British Isles – in Scotland and Ireland. The 'Mc' part of names like **McDonald** and **McCain** also meant 'son of.' So **McDonald** literally meant 'son of Donald.' The same is true of the 'O' part of Irish names like **O'Donnell** and **O'Brien**. **O'Donnell** meant 'son of Donnell.' So this type of naming system became common in one form or another throughout the British Isles.

Now so far, we've seen that people in Norman England were starting to use second names as identifiers. These were descriptive names either based on the person's place of origin or the name of the person's parent. All the names I've mentioned so far were in place by the 1300s. So we can say that surnames were a common feature throughout England by the 1300s. And in fact, the word **surname** itself was introduced around the same time.

Surname uses the Latin prefix **sur-** meaning 'extra or additional or over.' We also have that prefix in words like **surpass**, **surmount**, and **surcharge**. And here, that prefix was added to the native word **name**. So **surname** literally means an 'extra name,' and it is one of those blended words that combines a Latin prefix with an Old English noun. And that shows how people were starting to mix those grammatical elements together during this period. The word **surname** is found for the first time in an English document dated to the year 1330.

While most of these early surnames were not hereditary, one exception had started to emerge during this period, and that was the names used by the nobility. Some of the nobles were starting to pass on their surnames to their children because they were passing on landed estates to their

children, and consistent surnames helped to establish that lineage for record-keeping. But outside of the nobility, there wasn't much need for commoners to use a family surname. In those cases, the names continued to be descriptive and unique to the person who bore the name. And since those names were descriptive, it allowed for the creation of other names that were also descriptive. I mean, there was no reason why a person's identity had to be defined solely by their place of origin or their father's name. Any unique personal characteristic was sufficient. A person's physical appearance or personal demeanor could also be used as an identifying feature.

We've already seen that the Anglo-Saxons sometimes gave people nicknames in this way. Thus Aethelred was 'Unræd' – or 'poorly advised.' And King Edmund was known as 'Ironside.' These types of nicknames were also common among the nobility of France and Norman England. We know that Richard I was known as Richard the Lionheart. His brother John was known as John Lackland because his father had failed to set aside any specific land for him in the initial division of the Plantagenet realm. In fact, that name Plantagenet was based on a flower worn by the founder of the family dynasty – Geoffrey of Anjou. William II was known as William Rufus because the word *rufus* was a descriptive term for someone with red hair.

What's so interesting is that these descriptive nicknames also started to be adopted by commoners after the Conquest. And many of those names also evolved into surnames over time.

Many of those early nicknames are fun because they actually reveal something unique about the personality or appearance of the person who bore the name.

The Domesday Book captures a lot of these names. Remember that the book was compiled about 20 years after the Conquest, and it was composed in Latin. It contains a lot of Latin names. One of them translates as Humphrey 'Face of a Wolf,' and another as Humphrey 'Golden-Bollocks.' It also contains the name Roger 'God Save the Ladies.'

Mixed in with those Latin names are a few Old English names based on personal features. We find Ernuin Catenase – literally Ernwine 'Cat's nose.' So presumably, his nose resembled that of a cat. The book also contains the name Goduinus Softebread – literally Godwine 'Soft-bread.' And we have the name Aluinus Deule – literally Alwine 'The devil.' Sounds like a pretty bad dude.

You might recall from an earlier episode that the word *bad* was first recorded in English as part of surnames like 'Baddecheese' and 'Badinteheved' – literally 'Bad in the Head.' Other records from this period provide the name Henry 'Nevereafred' – literally Henry 'Never Afraid.' We also have the name William 'Standupryght' – literally William 'Stand Up Right.'

Now obviously, most of those names were unique to the individual they described, and once again, they didn't pass from generation to generation. But some of those descriptive surnames did survive. Some terms were used to describe physical characteristics, and several of them are still used today as hereditary surnames. That includes names like *Long, Short, Little, Young*, and even the name *Armstrong*. Names like *Black, Brown* and *White* usually described a person's hair color, but they could also be used to describe a person's complexion, and they also survived

as surnames. The name *Lamb* usually described a meek or docile person. Moody was a name for a brave person – which was the original sense of the word *moody*. So contrary to what you might expect, *Moody* didn't refer to an irritable person. Another surname derived from a personal nickname is *Truman*. It was literally a 'true man' meaning a man who was true or loyal or trustworthy. *Newman* was formed along the same lines. It was literally a 'new man,' in other words, someone who was new to the area. *Darwin* was originally *deorwine* – literally 'dear friend.' The name *Lightfoot* referred to someone light on his or her feet, so it meant someone who was nimble or quick.

Again, these are all names that originated as nicknames. And in fact, the word *nickname* is also first recorded in English around the current point in our overall story in the early 1300s. That suggests that these types of names were becoming widely accepted at the time.

The word *nickname* is found for the first time in a document composed in the year 1303. But in its original form, it wasn't *nickname*. It was *ekename*. So it didn't have its modern 'n' at the front. This was another one of those words that we've seen before that either acquired or lost an 'n' at the front due to confusion with the articles *a* and *an*. Those articles came before the noun, so during a time when most people couldn't read, it wasn't always clear if the 'n' belonged to the article or to the noun. So people often referred to "an ekename," but when rendered in normal speech, it was more like "an ekename." So it sounded like the 'n' was part of *ekename*. Over time, the 'n' moved over from the article to the noun. So instead of saying "an ekename," people started to say "a nekename." And by the 1500s, it had become "a nickname." But again, *nickname* began as *ekename*.

But what was an *ekename*? What did it mean? Well, it was usually spelled E-K-E-N-A-M-E – and as the spelling suggests, it was literally an 'eek-name.' We still have that word *eke* in Modern English. You might "eke out a living." Or your favorite team might "eke out a win." It's an Old English word that meant 'to increase.' So it was something extra or added. In the context of a name, an *ekename* was an extra or added name.

Over time, the word *eke* (/eek/) came to be used to refer to the process of extending or adding on to something. So a poor peasant might have to 'eke' or 'stretch' out his limited food supply to get by. And that led to the modern sense of the word *eke* as 'barely getting by.' So that's why today you might "eke out a living" or "eke out a win." But again, we have that same word hidden in the first part of *nickname*. And I should also note that the words *nickname* and *surname* both had the same literal meaning at first. They both meant 'an extra name.' And the two words didn't really become distinct until those extra names became hereditary in the mid-1300s. And at that time, the word *surname* was applied to those hereditary names. The word *nickname* continued to retain more of its original sense as an extra name, but it came to be used more in the sense of an informal name.

So today, *surname* means a formal family name, whereas *nickname* usually refers an informal name. And nicknames weren't always used as an extra name in addition to a first name.

They were sometimes used in place of the first name. They were often informal or casual ways of expressing someone's personal name. And they were usually derived from that personal name. A lot of those nicknames are still used today.

Through this process, Edward became Ned or Ted, Richard became Dick, Robert became Bob, and John became Jack. Even today, we still associate those nicknames with the personal name from which they were derived – even if we don't really understand how that happened. I mean, how did we get from William to Bill – and from John to Jack – and from Margaret to Peggy?

Well, the first step usually involved some type of shortening. And that makes sense. We would naturally expect people to come up with a shorter version of a long multi-syllable name – especially if that person was a family member or close friend. So Edward became Ed. William became Will. Richard became Rich or Rick. Margaret became Marg or Marge. But that only takes us part of the way. Those are clearly just shorter versions based on the first syllable of the full name. But how did we get those more unusual variations? Well, several factors contributed to those other nicknames.

One common factor was a tendency to switch an 'r' sound in the middle of a word to an 'l' sound. This happened with a lot of names – names like Harry, Martha, Mary, Dorothy and Sarah. All of those names had an 'r' sound in the middle. But it became common for people to shorten those names and replace the 'r' with an 'l'. So Harry was often rendered as Hal. And Martha and Mary were often shortened to Mol or Molly. Dorothy was rendered as Dol or Dolly. And Sarah was often rendered as Sally. All of those alternate names or nicknames follow this pattern where the name was shortened to the first syllable and the 'r' sound was replaced with an 'l.' And obviously, in the case of Molly, Dolly and Sally, the informal suffix 'y' (/ee/) was added to the end – in the same way that we convert Jim to Jimmy, and Rob to Robbie, and Tom to Tommy. So this pattern explains nicknames like Hal, Molly, Dolly and Sally. [*Source: Life in the Middle Ages, Whittock (p.173)*]

Another factor that contributed to modern nicknames was the medieval tendency to make up rhyming names. They would take a common personal name and create a new name that rhymed with it. This was very similar to the rhyming slang that is still used in certain English dialects like Cockney where the word *money* is sometimes rendered as “bees and honey” and the word *stairs* is sometimes rendered as “apples and pears.” It's a type of word play, and medieval English speakers did the same thing with personal names – usually with the short versions of names.

So Edward was shorted to Ed. But people would often use rhyming variations of Ed – like Ted or Ned. And both of those have survived as modern nicknames for Edward. Again, the informal suffix /ee/ is sometimes added to the end as well giving us variations like Eddie and Teddy.

This also explains how Richard became Dick. Richard was often shortened to Rich or Rick. And then people came up with other variations that rhymed like Hick and Dick. Hick died out over time, but Dick remained, and it is still a common variation of Richard.

Along the same lines, Robert produced the nickname Bob. Robert was shortened to Rob, and then Bob was then coined as a rhyming variation. And Bob is still used as a common nickname for Robert.

This also explains how William became Bill. William was shortened to Will, and then Bill was used as a rhyming variation.

This process also explains how Peg or Peggy became a common nickname for Margaret. Margaret was sometimes shortened to Marg, and Marg was sometimes pronounced as ‘Mag’ or ‘Meg.’ Mag then produced Maggie with that informal /ee/ ending. And Maggie is still a common nickname for Margaret. The other short version Meg led to Peg as a rhyming variation. And that produced Peg and Peggy as alternate nicknames for Margaret.

So that process helps to explain a lot of common nicknames that we still use today. But it doesn’t explain one very common nickname, and that’s the name Jack as a nickname for John. This is not only an incredibly common nickname, but it’s also an incredibly common word in the English language. The word *jack* is one of those rare names that has passed into the general vocabulary of English, and it is still pervasive throughout English.

Unfortunately, the history of the name Jack is a little unclear. It appears that it is actually derived from two separate names – Jacob and John. Both of those names are actually Biblical names, and they both passed from Hebrew, to Greek, to Latin, to French, to English. So along the way, both of those original names produced lots of variations, and it appears that each one produced a variation that ended up as Jack. In the case of Jacob, it produced shortened versions like Jake and Jock and Jack. It also produced the name James.

But the name John also produced lots of variations over time. Latin had the name as Ioannes (/yo-annes/). And when the name passed into early French, it acquired its modern ‘j’ sound at the front. So it went from Ioannes (/yo-annes/) to Joannes (/jo-annes/). This was the same process that converted Iupiter into Jupiter, and Iulius into Julius – which we saw in earlier episodes. And again here, it converted Ioannes into Joannes. And Joannes gave us the name John, as well as female names like Joanna, Joanne, and Joan. And it also gave us the surname Jones.

But how did the name John produce Jack? Where did that ‘k’ sound at the end of Jack come from? Well, it appears that it came from the suffix *-kin* which was used to indicate something small. Back in Episode 110, I discussed the cloth industry in Medieval England, and I mentioned that suffix back then. It converted the French word *nappe* meaning a tablecloth into the word *napkin* meaning a small cloth used at the table. And in Dutch, it converted the word *man* into *manikin* – literally a ‘small man,’ but it evolved to mean a model used to display clothing. This suffix was used in Middle English, and it was also used in northern French, but it appears to have originated within Dutch and then spread out into northern France and England.

Now Dutch had also borrowed the name John from Latin, but Dutch retained the origin ‘y’ sound at the beginning. It was usually rendered as Jan (/yan/) – spelled J-A-N. And within Dutch, the

suffix **-kin** meaning ‘little or small’ was added to that name Jan, thereby producing the name Jankin (/yankin/). It basically meant ‘little John.’ And it may have originally referred to a boy named Jan. So you might have a father named Jan and his young son might have been Little Jan – or Jankin. Over time, this suffix simply became a term of affection. It was used to indicate a nickname in much the same way that English uses the /ee/ ending today – the way we convert Jim into Jimmy, and Bill into Billy. Well Dutch added this **-kin** suffix in a similar way. And Jan (/yan/) became Jankin (/yankin/).

Now some linguists believe that the Dutch name Jankin is actually the ultimate source of the modern word **Yankee**. The first known use of the word Yankee in an English document was in the 1600s, and it was used in reference to Dutch pirates. And it's also important to remember that New York was originally a Dutch colony called New Amsterdam. So one popular theory is that Dutch **Jankin** gave us the word **Yankee**. There is some disagreement about that, but if that theory is correct, it means that **Yankee** literally translates as ‘little John.’

So we have the Dutch name Jankin which was a combination of Jan and the suffix **-kin**. Well it appears that this same suffix made its way into the French and English version of the name John. It isn't clear if it was borrowed from the Dutch name or if it was created natively, but either way, it produced the name Jankin. So we had Dutch Jankin (/yankin/) and English Jankin (/jankin/). It was the same name with the same construction, and essentially the same pronunciation except for the initial letter. Over time, English speakers converted Jankin into Jakin and then shortened it to Jack. So from John to Jankin to Jakin to Jack. That appears to be the connection between John and Jack, and that's why Jack is still used as a nickname for John.

By the way, that intermediate form Jankin still survives as the surname **Jenkins** – from Jankin to Jenkins. That surname is first recorded in the Domesday Book. And again if that etymology of **Yankee** is correct, it means that **Yankee** and **Jenkins** have the same etymology, and they both mean ‘little John.’ **Yankee** would be derived from the Dutch version, and **Jenkins** would be derived from the French and English versions.

Also, that **-kin** suffix still survives in other surnames as well. **Wilkins** is literally ‘little Will’ or ‘little William.’ **Tomkins** is literally ‘little Tom’ or ‘little Thomas.’ **Watkins** is literally ‘literally ‘little Walt’ or ‘little Walter.’ And as we just saw, **Jenkins** is literally ‘little John.’

Now that surname **Jenkins** is kind of important because it reflects that intermediate stage between John and Jack, and it helps to illustrate how Jack became a nickname for John. But here's the more important point. It also helps to explain how Jack became such a common word in the English language.

Earlier I noted that John was an extremely common name. It was so common that a third of the male taxpayers in Sheffield were named John. And now we see that Jack was a common nickname for John. Over time, since so many people went by the name Jack, it started to become synonymous with the common man. Any ordinary average person might be called **Jack**.

This also happened in France. There the name was also associated with common people or peasants. In French, the name *Jacque* became associated with the type of tunic worn by peasants. That type of tunic was called a *jaque*, but it later entered English in the 1400s as *jacket*. And of course, we still wear jackets today. So *jacket* is derived from this name *Jack*.

In English, the name Jack was used in a variety of expressions where the sense of the word was a common or average man, and sometimes it carried a negative connotation. It produced the term *Jack Sprat* meaning a small or insignificant person. A *Jack Tar* was a sailor. A *Jack Adams* was a fool. A *Jack Ketch* was a hangman. A remarkable person or thing was a *cracker jack*. The lowest court card in a deck of cards started to be called a *Jack*. A common man who cut down trees was a *lumber jack*. We can also include other terms like *blackjack*, *jackass*, *jack-in-the-box* and *jack-o-lantern*. Of course, some of those terms were later developments in the language.

Since common men often engaged in manual labor, including heavy lifting, the word also became associated with mechanical devices that lift heavy things. That gave us the term *car jack*. This sense was later extended to *jackhammer*.

As nursery rhymes developed over the next few centuries, Jack was often adopted as the name of the main male character. So we end up with Jack and the Beanstalk, Little Jack Horner, Jack be Nimble, Jack Sprat, and Jack and Jill.

The name also passed into Scots which retained more of the original French pronunciation as *Jock*. And that Scottish word also passed back into standard English as *jock* – J-O-C-K. According to some scholars, that Scottish name *Jock* is the ultimate origin of the word *jock* in its sense as an athlete. *Jock* was often rendered as *Jockey* – in the same way that *Jack* is sometimes rendered as *Jackie*. Again the word *jockey* had much of that same sense as a common man, but it later became associated with a common man who takes care of the horses. And from there, it came to mean the person who rides a horse in a race. And that gave us the modern sense of the word *jockey*. That sense of being in control of a horse led to the extended use of the word as the person in control of the music played on the radio. That gave us the term *disc jockey* which has been shortened over time to DJ. And these days, DJ's are sometimes musical stars in their own right. But again, that 'J' in DJ is ultimately based on the Scottish version of the name Jack.

And there's another term that epitomizes the sense of the name Jack as a common man or ordinary laborer. That's the term "jack of all trades." It meant a handyman or a person who was proficient at many different trades.

And that's a very important term as we transition from this episode to the next – because this period in the 1200s and 1300s was a period of increased specialization when it came to jobs. Towns and cities were growing as people poured in from the countryside. Those growing towns created an increased demand for goods and services, and new businesses sprang up to satisfy that demand. During this period, craft guilds flourished, and lots of new words related to jobs and occupations began to appear in English for the first time. Many of these small businesses were family enterprises, and they were passed down from generation to generation. A person's job was such an integral part of his or her identity that it often became part of his or her name.

During this period, occupational surnames became common. And many of those surnames are still used today – like Carpenter, Weaver, Taylor, Butler, Saddler, and the most common English surname of all, Smith. And some modern surnames are based on jobs or occupations that have long since passed into history.

So next time, we're going to roll up our sleeves and go to work. We'll look at the words for occupations that were common in the 1300s, and we'll explore how many of those words became surnames. And along the way, we'll also see how those descriptive surnames finally started to become hereditary during this period.

So until then, thanks for listening to the History of English Podcast.