

Read the information on this page and answer the questions that follow.

Today we all have last names, also called surnames, but how and when did we start using last names? In England, History tells us the custom started around the year 1066.

In the early years of the Middle Ages, most people in Europe lived in small farming villages. Since everyone knew his or her neighbors, and there was little need for last names. This changed however when the population expanded and the towns grew. Gradually, there was a need to find ways to differentiate between two people who shared the same first name.

Prior to the introduction of surnames in England, everyone had just one name. Surnames had many different sources, but they can be roughly grouped into four categories: patronymic, locative, occupational or status, and nicknames.

Patronymic names identified people as their fathers' children such as Wilson (son of William), Fitzgerald (son of Gerald), Danielson (son of Daniel), and Harrison (son of Harry).

Locative surnames identified people based upon where they were born, live or work or the land they own. Easton meaning "east town", Ellsworth meaning a person from the town of Elsworth, Fields for a person who lived on or near a pasture, or Haight for someone who lived at the top of a hill.

Occupational or status names were also common. They identified people based upon their jobs or social status. Thomas Smith would have been the Thomas in the village who was the blacksmith. Robert Knight might have chosen his surname to reflect his social standing as a knight.

The same system held true in other parts of Europe. In German-speaking areas, a smith was named Schmidt. Someone who made goods out of wood was often surnamed Carpenter. In French-speaking areas, a carpenter was called Charpentier, while in German areas, the same person would be called Zimmerman. The last name of Boulanger indicated a baker in France. A baker in Germany often had the surname Becker.

Nicknames often were common adjectives that referred to size, such as Little, Short, or Long, or to hair color or complexion such as White, Black, or Red (which evolved into Reed). A person with a nickname could for example be called Robert Red (symbolic of his hair color). If Robert lost his hair, people would call him Robert Bald. Sometimes, an adjective was combined with a noun to form a byname, like Longfellow or Blackbeard.

Because the British were among the first Europeans to settle in North America, many modern American surnames can be traced back to medieval England, Scotland, Ireland, and Wales.

1. What occupation do you think someone with the surname Fisher would have? Taylor?
2. What surname would a baker in Germany have in medieval times?
3. Think of a career you would like when you get older. What would be a possible occupational surname you would have if you had that occupation in the Middle Ages?