

The surnames of Wales

➤ a guide for family historians

top 10 welsh surnames

Jones

Williams

Davies

Thomas

Evans

Roberts

Hughes

Lewis

Morgan

Griffiths

background

One of the greatest challenges for researchers is the limited number of surnames in Wales. In the mid 19th century the top three surnames accounted for nearly 30% of the population – the top three in England less than three per cent.

In England surnames came into use from the 11th century. They fell into four groups - family name, place names, nicknames and names associated with trades – providing a wide variety of surnames. In Wales however, the patronymic form,

dating back to the ancient Britons, continued as late as the 19th century.

Sons would take their father's Christian name as their second name, prefixed by ap or ab (abbreviations of mab, the Welsh for son). Therefore Ifan son of Gwilym would be known as Ifan ap Gwilym. Gwilym, himself the son of Dafydd, would have been Gwilym ap Dafydd hence a father and son would appear to have different surnames. In some cases a whole string of family pedigree would be used and Ifan could have

been known as Ifan ap Gwilym ap Dafydd.

The Act of Union in 1536 required all official documentation in Wales to be carried out in English. Therefore the gentry and landed classes were the first to adopt surnames followed by the border areas and southern Pembrokeshire. After civil registration in 1837 there is a gradual uptake in adoption of surnames across all classes in all areas but there is still evidence of the patronymic form in rural areas as late as the 1861 census.

anglicisation

The move to surnames can be described as anglicisation. The record keepers - clergy, lawyers and public administrators - would have been largely English speaking whereas the common man would have been Welsh speaking but largely illiterate, until the mid-nineteenth century. This accounts for the frequent discrepancy between the formal name used in records and the alternative name used within the family and community.

The change from patronymic to surname took place over several centuries and did so gradually. The first stage

would have been to drop the 'ap' prefix; then an anglicisation of the names; and finally an 's' may have been added to the surname. Therefore the same name, at different times, could have been expressed as:

- Ifan ap Gwilym
- Evan Gwilym
- Evan William
- Evan Williams

Neither is the confusion restricted to sons. Daughters would have also been named under the old patronymic system, using 'ferch' rather than 'ap', and continued with

their maiden names after marriage.

The Welsh surname pool is therefore restricted in that it is derived from Christian names rather than the wider nomenclature in England. It is further restricted in that it derives from a single generation of Christian name, that at the time of the move from patronymic to surname. Wales during the 18th and 19th centuries was a deeply religious country which meant a fashion in biblical and saints names, particularly that of the patron saint of Wales, David.

implications for family historians

My x3 great grandfather was a David Davies born in Cardiganshire in 1838 one of 37. Luckily I knew the parish but even then there were two of them born within six weeks. As the birth was post civil registration I was able to apply for both certificates and the address the family lived at and occupation of his father clinched the match. Pre 1837 life is much more difficult. A typical baptism register entry reads:

Evan son of William Thomas

This child could have been known as Evan William, Williams or Thomas. And without more information such as his father's occupation or an address the trail will get cold.

The first thing a researcher

has to do is be open to all permutations of the name. For example there may be no match for an Evan Thomas in the 1841 census but there may be one for Evan William. You therefore need to consider the possibility this may be your man. Study neighbouring families – are they also favouring a patronymic system?

Secondly siblings become very important. They will (usually!) share the same second name even if the parents names are different.

Naming patterns within the family also provide clues. It was usual to name the children after parents and other family members. If you find a Thomas whose children do not share his name or his

parents' names, chances are it's the wrong man. Likewise, if the eldest child is named Thomas and the eldest daughter sharing a name with his wife, the match looks a good prospect.

And finally, the paucity of suitable Christian names meant they were re-used in the event of a death. If you find a Thomas whose year of birth suddenly changes by 10 years, chances are he died and a later sibling was given the same name.



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further reading

Rowlands, John & Sheila. *The Surnames of Wales for Family Historians and Others*. FFHS Birmingham and GPC Baltimore, 1996

Davies, J.B. *Welsh Names and Surnames Glamorgan* FHS 19979

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