

About Surnames

The use of surnames came into use about the year 1000 in France. A little over a hundred years later they came into Scotland with the Normans, but were not common for many years later.

It is said that at a general council in 1061, Malcom Ceanmor (1057-1093) directed his subjects to adopt surnames, after the custom of other nations.

The first to use surnames were the gentry, nobles and large landowners, who took their surname from the land they owned. Tennants often took the surnames of their landlord. Others took their names from their trade or profession, such as smith or mason.

Another method used by clan chiefs to increase the number of true clansmen of the name was to get poor parents to name their children with the clan surname instead of their own. It was known as bribery for a “bow o’ meal.” There is an old Gaelic saying “Frisealach am boll a mine” Frasers of the Boll of Meal. Apparently some family of Bissets had changed their name to Fraser for the “Bow o’ meal.”

There is much said about Mc being Irish and Mac being Scottish. They are both the same, meaning son. Such as MacDonald which is son of Donald.

Next we get to spelling. This causes some people great distress. One must remember that when surnames came into use, no one could read or write. The clergy had some knowledge of script, but the general population did not.

In many cases the name was written as it sounded. You could have two kinsman who spelled the name differently. One with an e and one without.

Take the name Ogilvie or Ogilvy, if one looks in Black’s, The Surnames of Scotland, you can find 33 ways to spell the name. Who was right?

The same goes for other names such as Melville. There are at least 50 variations.

There are at least seven ways to spell Smith. As you can see with an E or without an E is less important than we thought.