



Arts & Humanities
Research Council

A History of Family Names

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Interviewer: Welcome to the Arts and Humanities Research Council Podcast. I'm here with Professor Richard Coates, from the University of the West of England in Bristol. Professor Coates has just received a grant from the Arts and Humanities Research Council to investigate family names of the United Kingdom.

Hello, Professor Coates.

Richard Coates: Hello.

Interviewer: Can you tell me a bit about the project and how it came about and what you're hoping to do.

Richard Coates: We've looked at the resources for understanding the origin and meaning of surnames in the United Kingdom and found that they're wanting to a very large extent. The resources are out of date. The big dictionaries are out of date. And we thought it was a good idea to pool all the information available and to collect new information where we felt it was missing and create a new resource, which would be publicly accessible.

So what we want to do is create a database for public access which will list all the surnames of the United Kingdom down to a particular level of frequency and try to explain several aspects of them.

First of all in which language they're formulated. Then what they mean in that language. Where at all possible, where in the country they originated. Where they originated outside the country. If they're from Scotland, Wales, Ireland, for example. And even include more recent surnames like those of Huguenot origin, European origin and those connected with modern immigration. Many of those of Arabic or Chinese or Urdu origin, for example.

Interviewer: And how many surnames are you hoping to investigate as part of the project?

Richard Coates: We have variable goals, but we hope that we'll cover at least 40,000, and if we make good progress we hope it will be a larger number than that. Which is probably well over half of the surnames that you're most likely to encounter on a good day in the market.

Interviewer: The project is scheduled to take four years before the digital archive comes to fruition. What sort of sources are you going to be investigating to retrieve family names of the past?

Richard Coates: Well, there are several sources on the market already in the form of older dictionaries. Where members of the team have been involved in creating those dictionaries we hope to have electronic access to some of the material there.

We've got material from – directly or indirectly – from a wide variety of other sources. There are many archives which contain medieval sources. For example Tax Returns. For example land grants, which contain surnames. Where that material is available electronically we hope to have electronic access to them and to be able to upload it. And where not we will be transcribing the information.

Interviewer: The project concludes in four years time, at which point the digital archive will be available. Who else is contributing to this project? Is it you alone or are there other members of the team?

Richard Coates: The lead researcher is Dr. Patrick Hanks, who is currently a visiting Professor at the University of the West of England, Bristol. He will be directing the project on a day to day basis. And we will have a couple of research assistants, whose identity is not yet known. The AHRC have also kindly given us a PhD studentship, so we hope to train a PhD student in the black art of surname research.

We have very few younger scholars interested in surname research in particular, and it would be good to train someone up.

Interviewer: That's brilliant. Professor Coates, thank you very much.

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