

Sources and Methods – the Origins of Whitham, Whittam, Whitwam, Whitwham and Witham

By George Redmonds

For those engaged in English genealogy the surname is usually the starting point, and yet quite often we fail to take full advantage of it. It is not enough to use one of the standard surname dictionaries, for the help they can give is probably more limited than most researchers realise. Such reference works are concerned with meaning and etymology rather than with family history, and the truth is that we are likely to learn far more from a name's historic distribution than from its linguistic origins. Fortunately, there are now excellent sources available that will help in that respect, and I hope to illustrate that by looking at one group of surnames — Whitham, Whittam, Whitwam, Whitwham, and Witham.

The Dictionary Approach

In his *Homes of English Family Names*, H.B. Guppy makes no mention of any of these names, and two of them, Whitwam and Whitwham, find no place in the revised editions of Reaney and Wilson's *Dictionary of English Surnames*, the standard national dictionary.[i] We might therefore infer that most of the names are quite rare, and yet that would not be true. In Reaney and Wilson neither Whitham nor Whittam has its own entry, and both are cross-referred to Witham. The explanation offered there is that all these surnames derive from the place-name Witham, and our attention is drawn to localities so called in Essex, Devon, Lincolnshire, and Somerset. The three names quoted all relate to Essex in the period up to 1327. Of course, some surnames were hereditary by 1327, but we should remind ourselves that examples from that early period often referred to by-names rather than to hereditary surnames. In such cases the names might still change from one generation to another.

Distribution in 1881

The study of the distribution and expansion of surnames in England can reveal much about their history and origins, and Steven Archer's *British 19th Century Surname Atlas* CD-ROM for the census year 1881 provides us with excellent information on both these topics (see [my previous column](#) for detailed information on the Archer CD). [ii] The totals for the surnames under investigation are: Whitham (1743); Whittam (1099); Whitwam (696); Whitwham (84); Witham (1202). It is the distribution, however, seen first by county and secondly by poor law union, that is most informative.

Whitham (1743) The major concentrations for this surname were in Yorkshire (982) and Lancashire (477). These two north midland counties share a common boundary, and the name was especially prolific in towns such as Rochdale and Burnley in Lancashire, and their Yorkshire neighbours Todmorden, Halifax, and Bradford. The only other county with a significant number was Essex (48).

Whittam (1099) Here also the major concentrations are in Lancashire (729) and Yorkshire (216). Again the name appeared most frequently in the towns on both sides of the county boundary. There was just one person with the name in Essex but 43 in Kendal in the northwest.

Whitwam (696) In 1881 this was almost exclusively a Yorkshire surname. The total in the county was 671, and no fewer than 557 of these were resident in villages within the Huddersfield poor law union. There were no examples in Essex and just 18 in Lancashire.

Whitwham (84) This rare surname was also found almost exclusively in Yorkshire (71), with the biggest concentration in Bradford and Keighley.

Witham (1202) This was a much more widely distributed surname, and there were significant totals in London (276), Essex (144), Nottinghamshire (101), Yorkshire (137), and Lancashire (98).

We can make sense of these statistics if we use a map to define the areas of distribution and look more closely into the linguistic history of each name. The border area of Yorkshire and Lancashire, where Whitham and Whittam were most popular, is well supplied with printed parish registers and tax rolls, and these build up a fascinating sequence of

spellings. For example, in Gargrave near Skipton, Jonathan Whitham's name was also spelt Whitwham and Witham (1709-16);[iii] in the hearth tax for that district we have Joseph Witham (Thornton in Craven) and Edward Whitwham (Bradley).[iv] The inference is that all these spellings were possible variants of a single surname.

If we focus our attention at this stage on the village of Thornton in Craven, we can trace the surname in printed sources back to 1412 at least. For example, a sequence of Tudor rentals and rolls contains the name of William Witwhame or Whitwham (1522-43). Among his immediate neighbours were several men with similar surnames, including Henry Whytwham of Bradley (1525) and Thomas Whitwham of Carleton (1543).[v] Earlier references in that part of Airedale are John Whitwham of Kildwick (1473)[vi] and Richard Whitwham of Thornton in Craven (1412).[vii] However, there is no other local evidence before that date, even in the very full poll tax return for 1379. [viii]

Of course, these surnames were also numerous in east Lancashire, where there is earlier evidence of the surname in the neighbourhood of Colne, which is just a mile or two south of Thornton in Craven. Typical examples from the court rolls are Thomas Whitwham (1541), George Qwitqwm (1496), and Robert de Whitham (1425).[ix] Once again, even though earlier records for that area have survived, they contain no references to the name. It seems either that it developed quite late, which is quite possible, or that its earlier history lay elsewhere. The expansion and distribution of 1881 appears therefore to have its origins in the border area around Thornton in Craven, but that is not necessarily where it originated.

Before we tackle the question of its possible origins a word should be said about the spelling "Qwitqwm" noted above. Few genealogists would automatically assume this to be a variant of Whitwham, but the variation is commonplace and represents the scribes' attempts to represent the dialect pronunciation of the initial "Wh". This was heavily aspirated and guttural, and affected all local surnames, such as Whitehead, Whiteley, etc. Fortunately, the convention is familiar to most editors, who link the variant spellings in their indexes. For example, in the index to the register for Halifax parish, all the following appear under one heading: Whitwham, Qwitwham, Qwitquam and even Whypwam.[x]

Whitwham is still well represented in Airedale in almost exactly those localities where it was recorded in 1881, and all the way back to 1412. Whitwam remains common in Huddersfield, notably in the township of Golcar, where it first appeared in the 1530s. Stephen Whitwam of Golcar, a well-known Huddersfield genealogist, has traced its history and expansion there. The variants Whitham and Whittam are now far more popular, especially in the area between Burnley and Bradford, but their common origin, and links to Whitwham, cannot be in doubt. We must also presume that some local members of the family ended up with the variant Witham, but these are unlikely to be connected genealogically with the Witham families in and around Essex. A search similar to the one I have carried out here for Whitwham would probably establish the facts about its origin.

Finally, we come to the questions of origin and meaning. The early spellings point to a place-name origin for Whitwham, and that is confirmed by the Colne reference of 1425 to Robert *de* Whitham. Unfortunately, the place-name dictionaries of Yorkshire and Lancashire contain no evidence for a locality with that name, although it must be said that new evidence continues to turn up in previously unpublished documents, and a Yorkshire or Lancashire origin cannot yet be ruled out.[xi] However, the earliest spellings mean that we can discount any connection between the northern names and the various places named Witham.

One possibility remains. Just south of Haltwhistle, in Northumberland, there is a locality named Whitwham, and this is linguistically the most plausible source of the name.[xii] Moreover, we can link it with a surname recorded in Hexham in Northumberland that appears not to have survived. Two individuals have been identified, John of Whitwhame (1479) and Robert Whitqwm (1496).[xiii] The spellings match those recorded in Thornton in Craven, but an obvious problem is the distance between the two districts, which cannot be less than seventy miles.

The only evidence we have of a link is circumstantial. In the fourteenth century the estates of the Percy family (the earls of Northumberland) included property in Yorkshire, notably in Thornton in Craven, so it is at least a possibility that the Whitwhams were Percy tenants who moved south in the early 1400s. The meaning of the place-name depends on exactly when it was coined. It derives from "hvammr," an old Norse word for a small valley, but this passed into

northern dialects with the more specialised meaning of “marshy hollow”. Either of these would fit the locality.

- [i] H. B. Guppy, *The Homes of Family Names in Great Britain* (1890).
- P.H. Reaney and R. M. Wilson, *A Dictionary of English Surnames* (Revised 3rd ed. 1997).
- [ii] S. Archer (ed.), *The British 19th Century Surname Atlas* (CD-ROM, 2003).
- [iii] W. J. Stavert (ed.), *Gargrave Parish Registers, 1558-1812*, Yorkshire Parish Register Society (YPRS), 28.
- [iv] J. Hebden, *The Hearth Tax List for Staincliffe and Ewcros Wapentakes, 1672*, Ripon Historical Society (1992).
- [v] R. W. Hoyle (ed.), *Early Tudor Craven: Subsidies and Assessments, 1510-1547*, Yorkshire Archaeological Society Record Series (YAS) 145 (1987).
- [vi] I. Kershaw (ed.), *Bolton Priory Rentals and Ministers Accounts, 1473-1539*, YAS 132 (1970).
- [vii] W. P. Baildon, "The Keighley Family," *Yorkshire Archaeological Journal* 27 (1924), p. 63 .
- [viii] C. C. Fenwick (ed.), *The Poll Taxes of 1377, 1379 and 1381* . Published for the British Academy by Oxford University Press. There will be three volumes and two have already been published (1998, 2001).
- [ix] W. Farrer (ed.), *The Court Rolls of the Honor of Clitheroe*, 1 (1897).
- [x] E. W. Crossley (ed.), *Halifax Parish Registers, 1538-1593*, YPRS 37.
- [xi] A. H. Smith (ed.), *The Place-Names of the West Riding of Yorkshire* 1-8, English Place-Name Society, 30-37 (1961-63).
- E. Ekwall *The Place-Names of Lancashire*, Chetham Society 81 - New Series (1922).
- [xii] J. T. Fowler (ed.), *Cartularium Abbatiae de Nova Monasterio*, Surtees Society 66 (1875).
- [xiii] J. Raine (ed.), *A Volume of English Miscellanies*, Surtees Society 85 (1888).