

The Origin of Jessop and Its Variants

By George Redmonds

Rare and unusual surnames in England far outnumber those that we think of as “common,” such as Smith, Taylor, Wood and the like. Most of these unusual names have meaningful distribution patterns, as has been shown recently by Schurer, Rogers, Hey, and others. In most cases these significant patterns can be explained by the surname’s origin, and its subsequent ramification and distribution. These are key aspects of a surname’s history and can be used as vital tools in genealogical research.

It is still true in present-day England that a single-origin surname can be concentrated in a relatively small area, close to where it originated up to 700 or more years ago. The same principle applies to names that have two or three origins, for they too are often found in good numbers close to the localities where they first stabilized. It is names in the latter category that concern me here, for their distinctively local characteristics are less immediately obvious to researchers. I propose therefore to look in detail at Jessop, a classic example of a surname believed to have had several origins. It is well established now in several parts of England and arrived in America as early as c.1637, when John Jessop or Jessup settled in Wethersfield, Massachusetts.

The meaning of Jessop and its variants is not in doubt and most reference works identify it as a form of the Hebrew personal name Joseph. We don’t know exactly how many origins the surname might have but at least we can infer that each group of Jessops had a progenitor called Joseph whose son inherited the personal name as a surname. What is never commented on in such sources, though, is how unusual Joseph was as a first name choice in the 1300s, when surnames of this type were stabilizing. A profile of its popularity over the centuries is immediately revealing.

If we begin with the statistics compiled by Scott Smith-Bannister in 1997, the tables show that Joseph was not among the fifty most common English names when parish registers started in 1538, but that it had crept in at the bottom end by the 1560s and 1570s. From then on there was a slow but steady rise in its popularity and by the 1650s it was the tenth most frequent English name. It maintained that position and improved on it, occupying eighth place in the 1690s. Joseph remained a favorite through the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries and it has never completely fallen out of use, although there have been fluctuations in its popularity, particularly in more recent times. Indeed it is so familiar to English speakers that it might be difficult for them to imagine a time when it was not in everyday use.

And yet the truth is that Joseph, along with many other biblical names, was a deliberate innovation in the mid-1500s, as Englishmen were exhorted to choose names “whereof there are examples in the Holy Scriptures” (Cartwright). This choice seems more likely to have been inspired by Joseph the patriarch, written about in the book of Genesis, than by either Joseph of Arimathea or Joseph, the husband of the Virgin Mary, for it was Old Testament names which found most favor in England in the aftermath of the Reformation. In fact, references to Joseph before the 1500s are so rare that it is worth looking in closer detail at some of the few early individuals who bore the name.

The recently published English Poll Tax returns of 1377-81 contain scarcely any examples of Joseph as a personal name but there is one small cluster in the Liberties of the Cinque Ports in Kent—originally Romney, Hastings, Hythe, Dover, and Sandwich. In one section of the return the names Josep Elys, Josep Younge, and Josep Palmer are recorded—three individuals who were obviously close neighbors and possibly spiritual kin. In the same section we also find John Josep and Thomas Josep, men who seem certain to have taken their surname from one or other of the three Joseps.

It was suggested by Withycombe that the Italian *Giuseppe* might have influenced this spelling of the name, as many of the men called Joseph in medieval records were Italian Jews. Whether or not that is the case, the spelling “Josep” was found in different parts of England and there is no evidence that any of those who bore the name were Jews. For example, William Josep was living in Sussex in the 1290s and Richard Josepp was taxed on the Isle of Wight in 1379, neither of them in places with known Jewish communities. In passing it is worth noting that Richard’s servant was called Thomas Josep, inviting speculation about the relationship between the two men and the exact nature of the surname’s origin.

The vowel change from “Josep” to “Jesop” occurred early in the surname’s history, as evidence from Yorkshire much

further to the north makes clear. In 1375 William, the son of Baldwin Josep, granted lands in the West Riding township of Cumberworth to his brother John, and four years later their names were entered in the Cumberworth tax roll as William Josop and John Jesop, both paying four pence. In the family's title deeds these two spellings alternated throughout the 1400s, until Jessop became the conventional local form by c.1500. It eventually ramified in that part of the county, with Jessup as a rare variation.

The extraordinary part of this surname's history is that Kent and Yorkshire were for centuries at the heart of its distribution, and Guppy identified Kent as the major "home" of the surname only a century ago. He found other Jessops just across the Thames estuary in Essex, but these may be connected with a family recorded in a Suffolk subsidy roll in 1524 (Reaney). David Hey included Jessop in his survey of Sheffield surnames, finding that 1,778 subscribers were listed in the 1986 U.K. telephone directories, with 32% residing in Yorkshire and 21% in East Anglia (i.e. Essex and Suffolk). However it seems from his account of the name that the numbers in south Yorkshire may have been augmented by "immigrants" from Nottinghamshire, an immediate neighbor to the south of the county.

This is therefore precisely the type of English surname that could benefit from a DNA analysis. The Y-chromosomes of males called Jessop and Jessup would surely provide us with a much more accurate idea of how many distinct families now have the surname. The probability is that some of the very early by-names soon became extinct and that we are searching for no more than three or four progenitors called Joseph.

Sources

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For an account of Schurer's work see pp. 140-41 of the above.

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