

Origins of RaynerReyner

By George Redmonds

Rayner, Reyner - a personal name

In documents of the twelfth and thirteenth centuries it is not unusual to find men with the Latinized personal name Raynerus or Reynerus. In c.1115, for example, “Reynerus cancellarius,” that is, Reyner the chancellor, was apparently living in Norfolk, and in c.1310 “Ricardus filius Reyneri” (Richard the son of Reyner) held land in Yorkshire. The Normans brought the name to England, although like the more popular Richard and Robert it was really of Germanic origin. P.H. Reaney, in *A Dictionary of English Surnames*, offered *Raginhari* as the original version, made up of two elements like other typical Germanic names, and he explained these as “counsel – army.” However, neither the meaning nor the pronunciation would have survived among the Normans, and their influence on it is apparent in the Domesday entry *Rainerus*. Although it was not one of the most popular Norman names it occurred quite frequently up to the end of the thirteenth century and occasionally in the 1300s, when many surnames were stabilizing. By 1400 it had fallen out of general use but it was not extinct and isolated examples were recorded into the seventeenth century.

Rayner, Reyner - a surname

As a surname, Rayner is not confined to one area of the country and the evidence suggests that it had a number of origins in different counties. According to H.B. Guppy in his *Homes of English Family Names* (1890), it was particularly common just over one hundred years ago in Essex and he found good numbers also in both Norfolk and Suffolk. The only other county where he recorded it as a common name was Nottinghamshire, where Rayner and Raynor featured side by side. The concentration in East Anglia points to one or more origins in that area and Richard McKinley’s more recent work in the English Surnames Series [i] supports that, for he has commented on its popularity in both Norfolk and Suffolk in the 1520s, a generation before we can pick up evidence more generally in parish registers.

There are three positive points there for family historians, particularly for those whose roots appear to be in Nottinghamshire or East Anglia: the “meaning” seems clear, the name is associated with one or two precise locations, and no evidence of unusual variations in spelling has been put forward. The problem though, as in so many cases, is not what is said about the name but what has been left unsaid, and it should not be assumed that Guppy, McKinley, and others have left us with no work to do. [ii] In fact there are one or two aspects of Rayner’s origin and distribution that benefit from a closer look at its history in Yorkshire.

Rayner - a Yorkshire surname

The surprise is that Guppy found no concentration of the surname in Yorkshire. It is certainly very common there now, in the triangle formed by Bradford, Leeds, and Huddersfield, with many hundreds of families listed in current telephone directories. Furthermore, the returns of the hearth tax of 1672 prove that it has a long history in that area, with thirty-nine Rayners concentrated in and around the parishes of Hartshead and Birstall. Elsewhere in Yorkshire at that time it was absent or very uncommon, even in Bradford, Leeds, and Huddersfield, the three more important places that I used to define its present distribution. All this suggests that its earlier history in Birstall and Hartshead is worth looking at.

It would be possible but tedious to list examples of the surname in these two places going back generation after generation, right to the first parish register entries, but we can at least comment on its distribution in that area in 1545 when twenty-four Rayners were taxed. Once again, Birstall and Hartshead were at the heart of the ramification, with seventeen Rayners there and most of the others in adjoining parishes such as Batley. There were scattered examples in other parts of the county but generally it was not at all common.

Reyner the Fleming

This name appears at intervals in west Yorkshire records from the twelfth century and it may suggest that in this instance Reyner was not Norman but Flemish. The family had substantial estates in the county, notably in the widely dispersed parishes of Skipton, Dalton, Clifton, and Wath. Significantly, Clifton is in Hartshead parish and it was there

in c.1180 that Reiner le Fleming confirmed a grant of the Priory of Kirklees to the nuns. The same personal name reappeared in subsequent generations and, in 1306, at the inquisition post mortem of William le Fleming, the incoming heir was named as Reyner, aged thirty-three. As late as 1393 another Reiner le Fleming was granted free warren (hunting) rights in his demesne lands of Dalton and Clifton. Although the Fleming family had lands in the Hartshead area, where the surname Rayner first occurred, there is no suggestion that they were directly responsible for its origin. However, it is worth noting how long they kept faith with the personal name long after it had fallen out of favor elsewhere, and it is certainly possible that it was given by them to local godchildren.

Rayner in Rastrick

The surname originated in Rastrick, just across the river from Clifton (which lay in the same manor) and it is there that its development can be traced in the court rolls. These survive from 1274 and, at a court meeting that year, John, the son of Reyner, gave 12d for licence to take “1½ acres of land in Rastrick from Adam del Croftes.” [iii] We know nothing about Reyner himself but it is unlikely that he was a member of the prestigious Fleming family, as his descendants were said to be “nativi” or villeins. In 1315, for example, Thomas, the son of John Reyner “nativus,” gave “2s as a heriot on 4 acres in Fykesby after his father’s death.” [iv] John had earlier purchased three acres of free land and Thomas had to pay a heriot of 12d on these. The line of descent seems clear enough here but “Reyner” was still what we call a by-name or patronymic, that is, a non-hereditary name meaning “son of Reyner.”

There was also a Richard (son of Reyner) in the roll of 1315, his name appearing alongside those of Thomas and John le Fleming, and this seems to suggest that Reyner was stabilizing as a hereditary surname. Confirmation of that is found in the roll of 1350 where John Rayner was a Rastrick tenant. He was described more precisely as John, the son of Thomas Reyner, when he gave “8d for licence to heriot on a messuage and three acres in Rastrick, after the death of Thomas his father.” He was the fourth in line of descent and described there as his father’s heir. Although the surname’s more general history after 1350 is less straightforward, we know that it survived the Black Death, for it is found in and around Rastrick through the 1400s.

Early migration

The first record of the surname across the river in Hartshead parish is in 1467 when William Rayner served as the constable for Clifton. [v] In 1470 Thomas Rayner “of Birstall” witnessed a grant of lands in Little Gomersal, [vi] and in 1487 Gilbert Rayner was the constable for Hartshead. None of these families lived more than a mile or two from Rastrick but the basis for the expansion noted in the tax rolls of 1545 and 1672 was clearly in place. One feature of that expansion was the family’s adoption of less common first names and among those recorded in the early 1500s were Marmaduke, Lionel, Wilfrid, Charles, and Humphrey. These had all been rare during the years when the surname was establishing itself and their use by 1545 was by no means universal.

The early examples of Rayner in New England fit comfortably into this brief history of the surname. Thurston Rayner who arrived with his family in Watertown, Massachusetts, in 1634 was from the Suffolk parish of Elmsett, close to Essex, and Humphrey Reyner of Rowley, Massachusetts, was from Batley, no more than a mile from Birstall and six from Rastrick. In 1545 a Humphrey Rayner of Batley was one of the very few men in the county to bear that first name.

[i] The English Surnames Series was started back in 1965 at Leicester University. Richard McKinley published a monograph on Norfolk surnames in 1969 and his volume on *Norfolk and Suffolk in the Middle Ages* appeared in 1975. He also comments on Rayner in later volumes.

[ii] Most popular writers on the subject are content to pick up on the positive evidence. Cottle, for example, says of Rayner/Raynor that it is an East Anglian and Nottinghamshire surname, with Raynor found in Notts. He is likely to have taken this straight from Guppy without carrying out any research of his own into the names’ distribution.

[iii] Many of the earliest rolls have been transcribed in five volumes published by the Yorkshire Archaeological

Society, in their Record Series. More recently a section of the society has devoted itself exclusively to publishing the records, selecting rolls from any period which can be related to major national events. This Wakefield Court Rolls Series has now produced thirteen volumes. Despite all that work, the vast majority of the rolls have to be studied from the original at Claremont, the Society's headquarters in Leeds.

[iv]A heriot in this sense was a payment to the lord of the manor by an incoming tenant. The vocabulary of rolls such as these can be daunting and it is useful to consult a reference work such as David Hey's *The Oxford Companion to Local and Family History* (Oxford,1998). "Fykesby" is Fixby, Rastrick's immediate neighbor.

[v]Wakefield court rolls, Claremont. MD 225/1/193. Clifton is a township in Hartshead parish.

[vi]Yorkshire Deeds, Yorkshire Archaeological Society, Record Series, vol. 87, p.100.