

# My Name is Wood: The Woods of Halifax

By George Redmonds

The surname Wood is usually dismissed in a few words when mentioned in reference works pertaining to surnames. The meaning is given as something like “dweller in or near a wood.” In *The Homes of Family Names* (1890), author H.B. Guppy identifies the surname as common in most English counties. It is also generally—and correctly—assumed to have had multiple origins, unlike more specific names such as Woodhead. The inference is that the genealogist is unlikely to be able to identify an individual family source, and that is not good news for those New Englanders who can trace themselves back to families arriving in America in the 1600s. Many English surnames are very distinctive and can be seen to belong to one English region but unfortunately that is not the case with Wood.

Occasionally the surname may have an alternative explanation. In P.H. Reaney’s *A Dictionary of English Surnames*, the author quoted one or two early examples of by-names which seem to derive from the Middle English word “wod(e),” which meant “frenzied or mad.” However, there is no evidence that any of these ever became hereditary. Much more interesting is Dr. Reaney’s evidence that both Wood and Woodward may have derived from an occupational meaning. However, even if we disregard these possible alternatives, the meaning and the origins of Wood are both of considerable interest, and this becomes clear once we look more closely at the word’s semantic history.

Students of the English landscape know that most of the country was once covered by woodland, yet the full story of its transformation has never been told. Oliver Rackham opened our eyes to much of its history in *Trees and Woodland in the British Landscape* (1976, revised 1990), but even he could tell us little about its origins. Rackham writes that we have no memory in England of our pioneering days and that the first wildwoods passed away in prehistory, leaving neither written record nor legend. That is not to say that the woods themselves vanished from the landscape for that would not be true. Research will show that much of our woodland was cleared even before the arrival of the Anglo-Saxons, but the considerable areas that remained were almost certainly “managed,” in order to provide our ancestors with the implements and building materials they so desperately needed.

Even after the Norman Conquest, at the time when surnames were stabilizing and each village or community was surrounded by its pastures and plowed land, “the wood” still lay beyond that ring of cultivation. “The wood” was home to many wild creatures and provided a barrier between neighboring communities, one that had to be traversed by the medieval traveler. We can find out about the managed woodland that surrounded villages in the twelfth and thirteenth centuries from studying written records, maps, place-names, and the boundaries and fences of the landscape itself.

These prove to us that many places named Wood and Woodhouse commemorate a phase of “colonization” in the medieval period, as the population increased significantly, and before its dramatic decline during the Black Death. In my own immediate area there are many townships which have a hamlet nearby named Woodhouse, e.g. Huddersfield, Emley, Rastrick, Shelley, and Cartworth. There is also Woodsome, near Farnley Tyas, which once meant “at the houses in the wood,” a dative plural. When these houses of hamlets were established, between 650 and 1000 years ago, they formed islands of cultivation in “the wood.” Many of them gave rise to hereditary surnames. In Halifax, the surname appears to have at least two distinct sources, one in Fixby and the other in Ovenden, but there are references also to Woods in Sowerby, and the origin is more complicated than first impressions suggest.

## **The Woods of Fixby**

A charter of c.1200 refers to “thirteen acres...of the assart (i.e. clearing) in the wood of Fekesbi,” granted to William the clerk and his heirs, and the minor place-names suggest that this was close to where the isolated farm called “the Wood” still stands. The earliest example of a surname associated with the locality is found in the court rolls. John del Wode appears in 1276 and thereafter the family is mentioned at frequent intervals into the mid-1600s. Recognition is not always straightforward: in some of the earliest documents the name is Latinised as “del Bosco” and in others it is written “att Wodd,” but the line of descent is reasonably clear.

The family remained at “the Wood” until about 1570, and a conveyance of 1580 clarifies this crucial episode in their history. Agnes, wife of the deceased Edward Saltonstall of “the Wood” occupied the farm at that time. She was the

“daughter and heiress of John Wodd, late of Wodd” and the farm was put into the hands of trustees until their son Edward should come of age. Not long afterwards the widow married a neighbor, Thomas Brook, and in 1609, Edward Saltonstall, junior, sold the farm to John Thornhill, the lord of the manor of Fixby.

### **The Woods of Ovendon**

Clearance was also taking place in Ovenden in the 1200s and there are charters that refer to assarts there. One of these clearings, aptly called “Riding,” was leased in 1276 to Henry de Myggelay, who was granted “estovers” (wood rights) “in the wood of Ovenden, for burning.” In an undated deed, Matthew del Bosco, elsewhere called Matthew del Wode, witnessed a similar grant to Robert de Grenehirst, although his rights were to wood for house-building and fencing.

The surname Wood expanded more successfully in Ovenden than in Fixby. A subsidy roll of 1545 indicated that four branches of the family were taxed there, not to mention other Wood families in Sowerby, Warley, Southowram, and Heptonstall, all in the same parish. It is impossible to say how many different families this involved but there are two points worth noting. The first is that there is no reference in Ovenden to a tenement or holding called Wood associated with the surname. The second is that a Matthew Wood was witnessing Fixby deeds in the early 1300s, at the very same time that a Matthew Wood was witnessing Ovenden deeds. There is also firm evidence that a man of this name acquired land in parts of Sowerby, so it is at least a possibility that all the Halifax Woods share a common origin in Fixby in the mid-1200s.

### **Sources and Further Reading:**

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