

Rootstech 2020 - 481139. Surname Slip-Ups: Baffling Beginnings

Carol Baxter

The History Detective

www.carolbaxter.com

c_baxter@optusnet.com.au

1. Overview

When I talk to genealogists about surnames, I often encounter a surprisingly complacent attitude. They know all the variants and don't need any help in finding their surnames of interest.

This attitude is dangerous. Genealogists seem to think that when our ancestor was asked by a clerk for his or her surname it *miraculously* appeared on the page with the "correct" spelling. But think about this:

If a surname-holder is illiterate, his or her surname has no definitive spelling.

In fact, a surname does not acquire a definitive spelling until the surname holder can declare "My surname is spelt B-a-x-t-e-r!" Which leads us to think about this:

In an illiterate society, the written version of a surname does not represent what the speaker said, nor does it represent what the writer heard. Rather it represents what the writer thought he heard, and how he chose to translate those sounds into written letters.

When we think about surnames in this way, it forces us to think about the different stages of the articulatory and documentation processes and what could go wrong along the way. For example, the speaker might have an articulatory problem (missing teeth) and the hearer might have an auditory problem (a degree of deafness). Additionally, as the sound passed from mouth to ear, it might be distorted by the weather, crying children, barking dogs, and so on.

Perhaps such a sound distortion explains why I found *Sponsford* written as *Ponsford*, and *Giles* written as *Isles* in the database of linked entries known as the Biographical Database of Australia (my employer). And perhaps a clerk wrote *Ryan* as *Brian* because such a sound distortion led him to *think* there was a letter preceding the "R".

That being the case, has it occurred to you in your surname searches to chop off the first letter. Or add a preceding first letter? It's important that you think about doing so, especially if the process of adding or deleting a letter produces a *meaningful* word or surname. Because when we – and clerks in the past – attempt to interpret the sounds of words or surnames, we are striving at all times to find meaningfulness in those sounds.

Thus, in thinking about spelling variants for our ancestors' surnames, the first factor we have to think about is the *sounds* of surnames. I'll focus on sounds in the body of this talk.

But there's more to think about.

In our computerised world, the written version of a surname does not merely reflect what the original writer heard and translated into letters. It also reflects what a human or computer transcriber thought they saw (in terms of the letters that formed the surname) and what their fingers wittingly or unwittingly typed.

So, the second factor we have to think about is the appearance of the *letters* of surnames. This means that we have two distinctive operations in action: the auditory and the visual. Unfortunately, time constraints prevent me from talking about the visual aspects – that is, the letters. I'll only focus on the sounds. And time constraints prevent me from talking about anything other than the sounds at the start of surnames because changes in this position create the greatest problems for genealogists.

2. How do we find surnames?

We locate surnames using a number of different strategies and our main focus is usually on the surname's first letter.

- a. Indexes: We search a physical index by going to the section covering the first letter of our surname of interest. Of course, for some surnames, we know – or should know – to check another letter of the index as well. For example, for surnames starting with the sound [k] we need to check the letters "C" and "K" and even sometimes "Q". For the sound [f], we check "F" and "Ph". For the sound [j], we check "G" and "J". For the sound [n], we check "N" and "Kn". And so on.
- b. Eyeball searches: If a list isn't indexed, we use an eyeball search, meaning that we visually scan the document. In doing so, we also tend to focus on the first letter of the surname unless there is some other distinctive feature about the surname such as its length or an odd ending. However, I don't recommend that you rely on odd endings for identification purposes, but that's the subject of another talk called *Muddled Middles and Eccentric Endings*, which you might get to hear one day.
- c. Surname grouping algorithms: These are used by online databases such as Ancestry.com. They group surnames using a sound-based code such as the algorithm *Soundex*. The problem is that most codes commence with the first letter of the surname. Unfortunately, time constraints prevent me from discussing surname grouping algorithms any further in this talk.

The point being made here is that none of these surname locating techniques helps us find surnames if the first letter is not what we think it should be.

3. Surname Sounds

The sounds of speech occur when a stream of air comes up from the lungs and passes through the mouth and nose. When something obstructs that airflow, it determines the sound we make. So, if a person closes their lips as the air stream passes through, the sounds they make are “puh-puh, buh-buh, muh-muh”. Try making these sounds yourself.

If there’s no obstruction to the airflow, the sound we make is a vowel. Trying saying “uh-uh”. You can see that your mouth is open and the air flows smoothly through.

The obstruction point closest to the lungs is the pharynx or glottal area, which is where we make the “huh” sound, the aitch sound. Try saying “huh-huh” then “uh-uh” and feel the difference between the two.

Importantly, the most common letter exchanges at the start of surnames are between one vowel and another, and between the letter “H” and a vowel. An example of both operations in action can be seen in the *Hasketh* example to the right. This table, and those shown at the bottom of the page, were extracted from the raw data held the Biographical Database of Australia, which is a prosopography project.

The most common H/vowel exchange is the *Henderson* to *Anderson* exchange and vice-versa.

4. Sound Pairs

Probably the most important factor genealogists need to know about surname sounds is that most consonants have a sound pair. When sound pair exchanges occur at the start of surnames, they can make it hard to find entries for our person of interest.

What is a sound pair? Put your fingers on your neck in the position of a man’s Adam’s Apple and say “ssssss-zzzzzz-ssssss”. Can you feel a vibration when you articulate the “zzzzzzzzzz”? This is called *voicing*. The only difference between the sounds [s] and [z] is the vocal cord vibration when [z] is articulated. Therefore [s] and [z] form a sound pair, and the two letters are regularly exchanged in surnames.

Sound pairs are shown in the English Consonant Chart (above), which is explained in more detail in the talk itself. When two sounds sit in the same cell, they represent a sound pair. The surname examples shown on the right include sound pair exchanges at the start of surnames. Note that the sound [k] can be spelt “K” or “C” so the examples include both exchanges.

While [m] and [n] are not technically a sound pair, they are both nasals and therefore lie in the same *row*. This sound similarity, along with a similarity in their letter appearance, can also lead to letter exchanges in surnames.

Many more letter exchanges can occur at the start of surnames; however, time constraints prevent me from discussing them. However, don’t despair. I’m an author so I wrote some books on the subject, as shown below.

This gateway talk should open your eyes to a new world of knowledge. When searching for your surnames of interest, you need to think about the *sounds* as well as the *letters* of surnames. You need to think about how easily sound distortions can occur during the articulatory process and how the resulting “mistakes” can make it difficult to find your surnames of interest. You need to remember that sound interpretation is like a game of darts. When a scribe failed to accurately interpret the sounds of a surname, he generally hit one of the nearby rings – that is, the nearby *sounds*. You can see examples of these in the English Consonant Chart above.

Hopefully, this seminar has helped you understand how to find some of those nearby sounds, and therefore entries for your ancestors that you might otherwise have failed to locate.

Additional reading (accessible through www.carolbaxter.com or Ancestry.com):

Baxter, Carol *Help! Why can’t I find my ancestor’s surname?*

Baxter, Carol *The Madness of ‘Mac’ Surnames* (Kindle version: *Help! Why can’t I find my ancestor’s ‘Mac’ surname?*)

Surname	Given Name	ArriveShip	Year
HASKETH	Jane	Boddingtons	
HESKETH	Jane	Boddingtons	1793
OSKETH	Jane	Boddingtons	
ASCOUGH	Jane	Boddingtons	1792

English Consonant Chart								
Manner of articulation	Voicing	Place of articulation						
		Bilabial	Labio-dental	Dental	Alveolar	Palatal	Velar	Glottal
Plosive	Voiceless				t			
	Voiced	p			d		k	
Fricative	Voiceless		f	θ	s	ʃ		
	Voiced		v	ð	z	ʒ		h
Affricate	Voiceless					tʃ		
	Voiced					dʒ		
Nasal	Voiceless							
	Voiced	m				n		ŋ
Lateral	Voiceless							
	Voiced					l		
Glide	Voiceless							
	Voiced					r	w	y

Surname	Given Name	ArriveShip	Year
FERRES	Elizabeth	Indispensable	1796
VERRES	Elizabeth	Indispensable	1796

Surname	Given Name	ArriveShip	Year
KILMARTIN	Patrick	Boddingtons	1793
GILMARTIN	Peter	Boddingtons	1793
GILLMARTIN	Peter	Boddingtons	
GIL MARTIN	Peter	Boddingtons	
MARTIN	Peter	Boddingtons	1791

Surname	Given Name	ArriveShip	Year
CALLAGHAN	John	Britannia	1797
CALAGHAN	John	Britannia	
CALLAHAN	John	Britannia	
GALLAHAM	John	Britannia	

Surname	Given Name	ArriveShip	Year
CHILD	Thomas	Fortune	1806
CHILDS	Thomas	Fortune	
GILES	Thomas	Fortune	

Surname	Given Name	ArriveShip	Year
SHADWICK	Edmund	Earl Spencer	1813
CHADWICK	Edmund	Earl Spencer	1813

