

THE ORIGIN OF WHITLOCK

In his latest section of the history of the Whitlocks of Devon, Jim Whitelock deals with the transition to the use of surnames and what it can tell us about the origins of our name.

Jim has approached this from the generally accepted premise that our name is a nickname derived from 'white hair'. Over time nicknames evolved into use as surnames. While I personally lean towards the 'location' theory derived from the medieval words for a 'white enclosure', I would expect the transition to a permanent surname would have been a similar one.

The premise Jim also works from is that the earlier your name can be shown to have been established as a surname the more prominent your family was likely to have been. Prominence translates into likelihood of extant records and more probability of mobility about the country prior to 1300.

Listed and carefully explained are the major sources of medieval and feudal records starting with the most well known, the Domesday Book. This survey was done by William the Conqueror in 1086 and is essentially a financial accounting of what William had won at the Battle of Hastings. It listed each estate in the country, who controlled it in 1066 and also in 1086, listing the revenue it contributed in 1066 compared to 1086. There are eight different references to Wihltac in the Domesday book, all in Hampshire.

It is hard to determine if they relate to one person or several as only the single name Wihltac is used and it is impossible to tell if this is a surname at this time.

The transition to surnames took place fairly quickly. By 1100 the records show about 45% of persons recorded, both humble as well as great, Saxon as well as Norman have surnames. By 1200 this figure is at least 90% and by 1300 it is 99%. The early records may be a bit misleading as relatively few persons of humble circumstances appear in the records. While it is rare by 1300 to find a person without a surname it is debatable whether the person understood what the clerk had written down or whether the next generation used the same name.

The Devon and Somerset records show Whitlock was fairly well established as a surname prior to 1243 and at least two members of the same family, Walter and John Whitlock are recorded in the area of Wiveliscombe, Somerset (about 8 miles north west of Taunton) about this time. There is a connection with the Matilda de Chamflower of Huish Chamflower (about 3 miles north west of Wiveliscombe) and the Priory of Bath and Wells. There is also a connection between the Priory of Bath and Wells and Merton Priory, Surrey at this time.

The fact Walter and John are using Whitlock as a surname this early may indicate a possibility more information will be uncovered as further research is done. Also the next references to our surname prior to 1243 are the references to Henry and Stephen Witloc and their connection to Merton Priory, Surrey in 1242. Further indications of early use of the name as a surname and in two places that had connections with each other. It will be interesting to see if this becomes significant as our research progresses.

It does appear there was quite a bit of traffic between the major religious houses of the 12th and 13th centuries as Mont St. Michel is also mentioned in the above records. It will be interesting to see if the connections between these houses could explain the movement of the Whitlock family from one area of the country to another.