

3. Characteristics of Manx Family Names

3.1 Evolution of Family Names

There are approximately 130 family names, which are popularly identified as having been formed on and regarded as being indigenous to the Isle of Man and which still remain in use today by people of Manx descent living on the Island and elsewhere. These are family names that can be at least traced back to records in the surviving IOM Manorial Rolls of 1511 and where the classic Manx reference books (Kneen, Moore and Quilliam) seek to define their linguistic origins. Men bearing these names today can therefore be judged to be genetically representative of an early Manx population from at least around 1100-1400AD and this is the population being examined in this study. Y-DNA testing of the present-day male population bearing these names can provide a picture of the genetic diversity and origins of that earlier male population.

In early times individuals were originally only known by their single or personal names. Such personal names were often nicknames or descriptive (e.g. Duggan = "little dark man") but some thousand years or so ago the Celtic patronymic system of names started to be adopted. The patronymic system meant that individuals could be identified by using the name of their father as well as their personal name e.g. Cormac MacNeill (or Cormac son of Neill). Other family names might be also adopted which perhaps described some other attribute of the individual, their appearance, their trade for example or the name of the place they lived, but the Celtic patronymic surname based on Mac = "the son of" was the most common.

Over a period of time these family names, unique to the island and formed there, started to be adopted permanently (hereditary) and passed down from father to son unchanged. This is believed to have occurred gradually in the period between 1050 to 1300AD. However, during the 16th century the large majority of these Gaelic, patronymic-based, hereditary names lost the "Mac" at the beginning of the name and evolved into the modern form of these names that we see today. So for example the name we recognise today as Kelly was at one time MacHelly, Creer was MacCreer and so on.

Whilst today there are about 130 hereditary surnames still surviving in use today, originally, the early range of different Manx family names would have amounted to more than twice that number. A large proportion of those names have not survived over time to the present day, as the male line has "daughtered out" and the surname has no longer been passed down to the succeeding generations.

However, it is important to note that because these Manx family names originated within a Gaelic-speaking society, some of them will be similar or identical to other family names adopted and evolved in other Gaelic-speaking areas like Ireland and Scotland in parallel and at a similar time, who also used a patronymic naming system. Examples of Manx family names that have also appear to have originated elsewhere in parallel are Kelly, Condra, Casement, Morrison etc. It is unlikely that the Manx Kellys are related to the Irish Kellys for example, but without genetic evidence it is impossible to prove that.

3.2 Classification of Family Names

One of the objectives of the study was to try and assess how long each of these Manx families has lived on the Island and where their early ancestors came from before their arrival. Examination of these family names however does already give us some preliminary insight into that information and we can apply a rough categorisation based on the current perceptions of their origins which will assist in answering such questions

Early Unique Names: There are a substantial number of family names whose origins unambiguously can only be attributed to the Isle of Man and are not found anywhere else – e.g. Curphey, Bridson, Kennaugh etc. A family with such a "unique" name must have been living on the Island from at least before 1100-1200AD, (ie when family names were being created and adopted) in order for their name to have been formed and remaining on the Island.

Imported Names: There are some family names where records show they have been in use on the Isle of Man prior to 1500AD, but which do not obviously appear to be of Gaelic origin and there is some evidence to suggest that they have been formed elsewhere - e.g. Wattleworth, Skillicorn, Radcliffe.

Possible Multiple Origin Names: Finally, there are those family names found on the Isle of Man and which are normally attributed as Manx, but which are identical or very similar to Gaelic names found and originated elsewhere. By and large, there are no early surviving family records, other than family legend, to prove or deny a connection between such families and so, without genetic evidence, there is no means of proof. However, once Y-DNA analysis demonstrates that the Manx family is not connected to another with the same name off-island then this name can be viewed as a "early unique" Manx name and again the male line must have been living on the Island prior to 1100-1200AD

Thus, an understanding of such classification is useful when interpreting the Y-DNA analysis of a family, in order to put into context how long that family's male line might have lived on the Island.