

CAROL BAXTER

Title

Help! Why can't I find my ancestor's surname? Understanding the sounds and letters of surnames

Summary

Surnames are the historical life-lines that link generations of families together. Yet most family historians struggle at some point to find an ancestor's surname because they know little about the speech and language side of surnames. This seminar focuses upon the pronunciation and writing of surnames along with problems associated with mis-pronunciation, mis-articulation, mis-hearing, mis-writing, mis-spelling, mis-transcribing, mis-indexing and mis-coding (Soundex and so on).

Abstract

Surnames are pivotal to our ancestral research. Without a surname, it would be extremely difficult to trace our ancestors back for more than a few generations. Indeed, if our ancestors' society hadn't decided that they needed 'by-names' as a means of distinguishing people, we probably wouldn't be having this Congress. Yet most family historians see the surnames they are tracing as merely a means to an end, that is, a means of identifying members of their own family rather than a fascinating part of family history research in its own right.

Not only is it handy to understand the origins and derivation of our ancestral surnames, it is critical that we understand surnames from a speech and language perspective. We live in a literate, bureaucratic society so we tend to think about surnames as written words. In fact, prior to the mass education programmes of the late 1800s and early 1900s, surnames were primarily groups of sounds spoken by one person and translated from the auditory to the orthographic by the literate in the community. A surname did not have a spelling unless the bearer of that surname was literate and could say to another person 'My surname is spelt B-a-x-t-e-r'.

Most family historians struggle at some point to find an ancestor's surname because they lack anything more than a "seat of the pants" knowledge of the sounds and letters that make up the English language and our British surnames. Accordingly, this seminar fills this void by drawing upon Carol Baxter's university degree in linguistics and her years spent as a transcriber and prosopographer. It focuses upon the sounds and letters of surnames along with problems associated with mis-pronunciation, mis-articulation, mis-hearing, mis-writing, mis-spelling, mis-transcribing, mis-indexing and mis-coding (Soundex and so on). After attending this seminar, you will never think about surnames in the same way again.

Audience

Beginner