Faire Names for English Folk:
Late Sixteenth Century English Names

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Introduction

There are not many easy, all-in-once-place sources for personal names appropriate to Elizabethan England. This resource will show you how to construct a *real* 16th-century English name. It's designed especially for participants in Renaissance Faires and living history events, but may be useful to anyone interested in that time period. (It will be especially helpful if you are tired of hearing only joke names like *Obadiah Cockswinger* and *Chastity Goodtime*.) This article contains lists of solidly documented names to choose from, along with some insights into how names were actually chosen and used in 16th-century England.

Where babies' names come from

If you were born in Elizabethan England, you would be named by your parents when you were baptized. Usually this was just a few days after your birth. It was not, however, your parents who actually presented you at the church; it was your godparents: ideally, two women and a man if you were a girl, two men and a woman if you were a boy. It was very common for parents to try to get godparents who were higher in social status than themselves, such as local nobles or prominent people in town. Many parents also asked the baby's grandparents, aunts or uncles to serve as godparents.
One reason the choice of godparents was important is that you would most likely be named after one of them. According to Scott Smith-Bannister's recent study (see reference list) about 75% to 85% of children were given the name of a godparent, in the cases where we know both the children's and the godparents' names.
His data also show that if you were not named for a godparent, you would probably be named after a parent or another close relative. You were especially likely to get the name of a particular godparent or relative if they had a lot of money or status. You and the person you were named after were referred to as "namesakes." Thus, parents clearly did choose a child's name with care, but not (as we do today) just because it was a name they had heard and liked. Usually only godparents' and parents' names were considered as possibilities.

First names

Your first name, the one given to you at baptism, was your *Christian name* or *given name*. It remained the same all your life, though you might, of course, go by a nickname (*Molly* for *Mary*, *Tom* for *Thomas*).
An Elizabethan character would **not** use what we now call a "middle name," which is essentially an extra given name (as in *Katherine Anne Cox* or *John Francis Ferrer*). Double given names were slowly spreading on the Continent, but the custom had not yet reached England, and in fact did not become really common in English-speaking countries until much later, as late as the 19th century in places. We know of literally only about a dozen cases in all of Elizabethan England (before 1600), and most of them are among the nobles, or are people who were born abroad, such as *Jane Sybilla Grey*, who was born in France.

Last names

As for last names, the most common type was the kind we use now, a *surname* or *family name* inherited from your father; if he was *Edward Langley*, you would be *Mary Langley*.
Interestingly, your last name was not quite as fixed as your first name. Occasionally a family name might change. The family of Robert Dudley, Earl of Leicester, was originally named *Sutton*; when they acquired the Dudley lands and title, most family members began using *Dudley* as their surname. The change was not quite complete in Robert's generation, and he was sometimes referred to as *Robert Duddeley alias Sutton*.

You might also be better known, especially in your local village, by a *byname* than by an inherited surname. A baker named *Jeremy Staple* might be known as *Jeremy Baker* or *Master Baker* rather than *Master Staple*. In some cases this might be passed on to his children and become the new family surname. Or if there were several Jeremys in the area and one was especially tall, short, red-haired, disabled, etc., or came originally from elsewhere, he might be called *Jeremy Little*, *Jeremy Red*, or *Jeremy Bristol*.

Fishing in the name pool

In the twentieth century we draw given names from an unusually large *name pool*. A name pool is a list or concept of what members of the culture feel are appropriate things to name people. For instance, we would probably accept that *Alisha* or *Devin* or *Jothan* or *LaShalla* are names. But while *moon* and *unit* are perfectly okay English words, *Moon Unit* doesn't seem like a person's name to us; these words are not in our name pool.
The Elizabethan pool of given names was **much** smaller than ours. There were only about 30 to 40 common names in circulation for each gender, with perhaps another 100 or so that you would run across from time to time. According to Janell Lovelace's statistics, seventy percent of all women were

named *Elizabeth*, *Joan*, *Margaret*, *Anne*, *Alice*, *Agnes*, *Mary*, *Jane* or *Katherine*. More than one out of every four men was named *John*, and 70% of all men were named *John*, *Thomas*, *William*, *Richard*, or *Robert*.

The name pool for surnames was much larger. This article lists over 1,000 surnames and is by no means comprehensive. One reason is that while given names traditionally came mainly from a limited number of popular European saints, surnames come from a much greater variety of sources: place names (*Nottingham*, *Boston*), occupations (*Chandler*, *Osteller*), a father's or ancestor's given name (*Philips*, *Johnson*), or other bynames (*Cristemas*, *Prowd*, *White*).

- **List of Men's Given Names**
- **List of Women's Given Names**

Some pre-1600 English surnames

Since names at Renaissance Faires (or living-history events) are more often spoken than written, I've used the modern, 20th century spellings of these surnames. This makes them more recognizable, and I hope it makes their pronunciations more obvious. The original 14th-16th century spellings are available in Janell Lovelace's list I've removed duplicates, and a few names have been dropped because they have very strong associations with one or more famous people from Elizabeth's reign -- a theatrical decision, not a historical one. There are still over 1,000 to choose from.

- **List of Surnames**

Those wild and wacky Puritans

People sometimes get the impression that Biblical and "virtue" names were common in England at this time, especially among Puritans. This is only partly true. Smith-Bannister's study shows that a few names from the Bible, like *Mary*, *John*, *Elizabeth* and *Thomas*, were indeed common, and had been so for generations.
And *Charity* and *Grace* do make it into his top 50 women's names. The more exotic names, like *Bathsheba* or *Ezra*, and most of the "virtue" names like *Prudence* or *Reformation*, were not much thought of until the 1630s and 1640s - two generations after Queen Elizabeth. Smith-Bannister's studies of individual counties show that even in the most heavily Puritan districts, only about one out of six children was given either of these types of names.

A word about the Welsh, Scots and Irish

Note that if you are from Wales, Scotland, or Ireland, the name pools you draw from may be quite different, along with the common methods of forming names. A few notes may help.
Wales had its own distinctive naming practices and a largely separate name pool. The usual form of surname was a patronymic (derived from your father's given name). For a man, this is: [given name] ap [your father's given name] (such as *Owein ap Griffith*). For women, [given name] verch [your father's given name] (*Myfanwy verch Eynon*). There were also some areas of Wales that had been under English law for 100 years or more, where English names and name patterns were more common (such as *Owen Tudor*, King Henry VIII's grandfather - who had a Welsh given name, but an English-pattern surname).

Scotland is actually divided into two rather different cultural areas. In the lowland and urban parts of Scotland, your naming practices and name pool would be very similar to the English (though with some regional differences). The common language spoken in these parts of Scotland was Scots, a version of English (or a language close to English) and not Gaelic. In fact, the Scots-speaking culture has in some ways more affinities (dress, customs, etc.) with English culture of the time than with the Gaelic culture in the Highlands.

In the Gaelic-speaking Scottish Highlands, the type of "clans" we usually think of, with fixed, inherited surnames, didn't appear until long after our period, in fact not till about the 18th century. During the reign of Elizabeth in England, by far the commonest form of surname in Gaelic-speaking areas is a patronymic. For a man, this produces a name like: [given name] *mac* [possessive form of your father's given name], such as *Eoin mac Donnchaidh*. For a woman, [given name] inghean [possessive form of your father's given name] (*Dearbhorgaill inghean Dhomhnaill*). Patronymics account for the overwhelming majority of the period Gaelic surnames we know or can guess at (though unfortunately, very few Gaelic names are recorded in Gaelic in Scotland).

In Ireland, also a Gaelic-speaking country, these same patronymics were used as well, and were formed in basically the same way.

However in Ireland there was also another common alternative: the clan byname. The pattern for clan bynames for men is [given name] *ó* [clan ancestor's given name] (*Conmhaol ó Conchobhair*). For women, [given name] *inghean uí* [clan ancestor's given name] (*Siobhán inghean uí Mháille*). The clan ancestor referred to would be the man, usually several generations back, after whom the clan was named.

NOTE that both Irish and Scottish Gaelic have a complex grammar. The same name, or part of a name, may be pronounced and spelled quite differently, depending on just where and how it's used. Dictionaries and name books are generally **NOT** very helpful with this. It's wise to consult someone knowledgeable about the languages (and about historic naming practices in these languages), in order to get a Welsh, Scottish or Irish name right.

Choosing a name for Renaissance Faire

Of course the first criterion for choosing a name is that it be one that you, personally, like. But there are other factors to think about as well.
Before you get too attached to one particular name, try your chosen first and last names on several of your friends to see how you like them, whether they're easy to say, and whether there are any obvious bad jokes on your name that you won't want to live with. (For instance, *William Bates* might not like being addressed as *Master Bates*.)

And if you are interested in authenticity, consider names that are "normal" for your time period and situation. As twentieth-century humans, we have a natural tendency to pick a name that is "different" in order to emphasize our individuality. But Elizabethans seem instead to have chosen names that were *common* in their families and communities, apparently as a way of expressing their family and community ties. In an ordinary Elizabethan village, you would probably meet many *Margarets* and *Thomases*, a few *Nathaniels* and *Dorothys*, perhaps one *Maud or* Adam, and probably no one named *Tamara*, *Cliff*, *Methusaleh*, or *Chastity*. This is a very different mind-set and it is worth trying to understand it. And isn't that what the study of history is all about?

Men's Given Names
Women's Given Names
List of Surnames
Sources and help

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