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BBC
NEWS

What's in a surname?

Everyone's got a surname, but now a website which maps names against areas of the country where they are most common helps shed light on where our families come from.

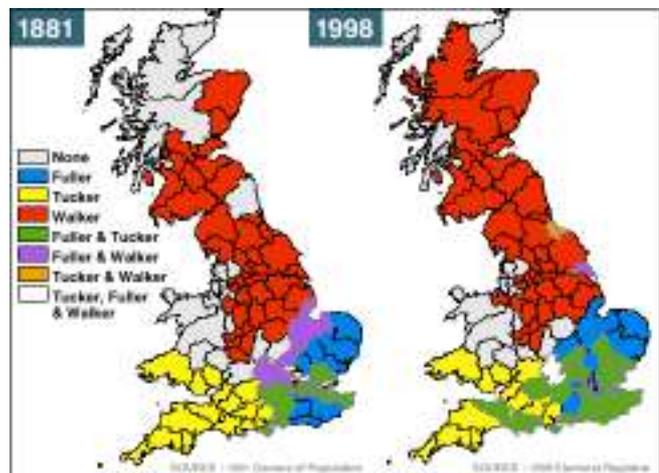
Until now it's been hard to know what a surname says about someone. But a website has been launched that maps more than 25,000 surnames across Britain, highlighting areas of concentration. (See internet links, right, for a link to the site.)

Anyone can tap in their name and with the click of a mouse glimpse a profile of how others who share their name are distributed around the country.

So, for example, while it's no secret that there's a small cluster of Blairs residing at a prestigious address in central London, the surname is most concentrated on the west coast of Scotland, particularly Argyllshire and Ayrshire.

The site is the result of a year-long study aimed at understanding patterns of regional economic development, population movement and cultural identity, says Professor Paul Longley, who led the project.

The 1881 map (left) shows the distribution of people with the surnames Tucker, Walker and Fuller, all of which denote people who washed sheep fleeces in the Industrial Revolution. The 1998 map shows some dispersal of these names.



It maps the distribution of surnames from the 1998 electoral register and does the same against the 1881 census, making it possible to see how surnames moved around the country during the last century.

And despite the talk about Britain's increasingly mobile population, the map reveals many surnames still have strong regional ties.

Roberts, for example, remains very definitely clustered in north-west Wales, as it was in 1881, although the 1998 map shows it has spread further into England.

"It shows, to a large extent, that social mobility is a myth. For most people, migration is traumatic," says Prof Longley, who worked on the project with Richard Webber, the former head of data analysts Experian.

Between the 13th Century, when surnames originated in Britain, and the end of the 19th Century "not a lot happened" says Prof Longley. People tended to stay rooted in the part of the country where they were born.

One apparent anomaly thrown up by the 1881 census, says Prof Longley, is the spike in Cornish names centred around Middlesbrough, in north-east England.

Scattering classes

"It seems utterly inexplicable at first, but when the Cornish tin industry collapsed in the 1850s a large number of workers' families migrated en masse to mining communities in the North East."

The dawning of the railway, and subsequent rise of the car and growth in higher education have all contributed

ROSSELLS AND RONSONS

- You are 53 times more likely to find someone called Rossall in Blackpool, Lancs, than elsewhere in the UK
- And 40 times more likely to find a Ronson in the coastal resort than elsewhere in Britain

to so-called national labour markets, in which skilled people will move and settle far from home for their work.

"A very good indicator of the economic health and dynamism of an area is a good mix of family names. It's an indicator of a can-do attitude because these days it's migrants who are making the running."

Prof Longley hopes the surname site, which has been funded by the Economic and Social Research Council, will tap into the current trend for examining family histories.

"The BBC's Who Do You Think You Are? programme has touched a nerve with many people, and set them thinking about their family histories. Those are just one-offs - one of the purposes of this website is for amateur genealogists."