

British Balls shrinking

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The number of people in Britain with surnames like Cockshott, Balls, Death and Shufflebottom - likely the source of schoolroom laughter -- has declined by up to 75 per cent in the last century.

A study found the number of people with the name Cock shrank to 785 last year from 3211 in 1881, those called Balls fell to 1299 from 2904 and the number of Deaths were reduced to 605 from 1133.

People named Smellie decreased by 70 per cent, Dafts by 51 per cent, Gotobeds by 42 per cent, Shufflebottoms by 40 per cent, and Cockshots by 34 per cent, said Richard Webber, visiting professor of geography at King's College, London.

"If you find the (absolute) number goes down, it's either because they changed their names or they emigrated," Webber, author of the study, told Reuters on Wednesday.

He said that in many cases, people probably changed their surnames as they came to be regarded as in bad taste. "It's because the meaning of words can change. Take the name Daft - that as a term for a stupid is a relatively recent innovation."

According to the Oxford English Dictionary, Daft meant "mild" or "meek" in Old English, whereas it means "foolish" today.

"That's why there are names which people think aren't really very pleasant names and you wonder why they persisted as long as they did."

Webber, whose work can be seen on the website mapyourname.com, got his data for 2008 from credit card firm Experian and mapping service Geowise. He then compared it with the census of 1881.

Webber also discovered that the most popular names in Britain have not changed over the past 127 years. Last year, Smith, Jones, Williams, Brown, Taylor and Davies held the top five spots, in exactly the same order as they did a century ago.

Webber also found that between 1996 and 2008, the names Zhang, Wang, and Yang and experienced the fastest growth. Zhang rose by 4719 per cent, while Wang grew by 2225 per cent.