



Unfortunate names have a long history – just ask the Shufflebottoms



WHEN Juliet said to Romeo, “What’s in a name? That which we call a rose by any other name would smell as sweet”, she was speaking in defence of Romeo and his name.

That is not exactly what we witnessed recently in Paul Henry’s ill-considered words about the name of Delhi Chief Minister Sheila Dikshit, accompanied by the deliberate re-pronunciation of the name. That it became a high-level diplomatic incident with implications for New Zealand Commonwealth Games competitors is regrettable, but understandable.

(It is doubtful that this now erstwhile Paul will be blinded by light and hear voices as another Paul did in his “sudden turning” on the road to Damascus.)

Some surnames in English have their own unfortunate connotations in the modern world, in part because they have evolved from terms with completely different semantic origins.

The surnames Ramsbottom, Sidebottom and Longbottom are cases in point. These are names that arose from names of places, from features of the environment.

Bottom, once botham, is the head of a valley. Sidebottom is easy enough to follow. Ramsbottom comes from the head of the valley where ramson or garlic grows. Winterbottom is the winding head of the valley. All very respectable, really. The Higgin in Higginbottom comes from the Lancashire term “hichin”, which is the mountain-ash, and Shufflebotham from the sheep-pen bottom. Perhaps not quite as pure, that one.

ON THE other hand, Breem, at first glance, seems highly respectable, but is actually the term for a female pig when physically desirous of a male. Perhaps the Breems were swinesherds, pig farmers of old. The suffix -cock became -coat or -cott, as in Jeffcock which became Jeffcoat.

The etymology of Cockburn, Simcock,

Wilcock etc is difficult. Cocc or Cocca is found in Old English placenames, but it is likely that the word “cock”, which was for a cheerful or cheeky young man (a cock-strutter) could have been added as an affectionate suffix to Sim, Will, Jeff etc.

Where there is no suffix, it is thought that cock could have come from cook, from the Cornish coch meaning red, from the dweller of a hill (cocc meaning hillock or haycock), or possibly for the name for a boatman of a cock, a small ship’s boat.

There are exceptions to every claim, for Heathcock is said to be a nickname from the heath-dwelling black grouse, heathcock. But cock as a suffix usually became coat or cott. The name Dick had a most respectable origin as the person who prepared cob for making cob cottages.

Boring though it may seem, a significant number of surnames come from placenames, from a family’s place of origin. These are topographic or toponymic origins.

Death is not one of these. Common in eastern areas of Britain. Death was thought to have come from a Belgian source. But pronounced deeth, it is more likely to have come from medieval pageantry or from a maker of tinder (a deether or deethman).

Coombe, however, comes from combe, a very familiar placename suffix, meaning lateral valley. Goodfellow, on the face of it, would seem a fortunate name to have, but could require a considerable amount of living up to.

Haythornthwaite is a name that suggests a fascinating and complex origin. Not so; it is a Lancashire term, a placename that originates from a house near hawthorn. Haybittle, on the other hand, is from a nickname that remained – a hay beetle.

Many Cornish surnames also have their origins in environmental features, and about them there is a well-known rhyme:



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By Tre, Ros, Car, Lan, Pol and Pen
You well may know all Cornish men.

Bor was a summit, Ros a moor, Tre a village, Pol a pool, and Pen a headland. Not Cornish but a name of interest, Fazackerly meant border strip.

Just as surnames were related to features of the natural environment in times gone by, we see the same occurring today with first names. It's fashionable to call one's offspring Cloud, River,

Storm, Swallow or Willow, and why not?

We have had first names from the botanic domain for centuries – Fleur, Lily, Marigold, Rose, Rosemary and Pansy are still used to name new babies. Nobody laughs at them and nor should they.

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