

# Many surname variants are really misspelt deviants



By Derek Palgrave

**ALMOST 20 years ago the Guild's President DEREK A PALGRAVE wrote an article for the Journal<sup>1</sup> describing some of the difficulties associated with the multiplicity of surname spellings.**

**Re-reading some past issues, we found the article so useful and interesting - and still valid today - that we invited Derek to update it for the newer generation of one-namers.**

**In the article, Derek makes the point that what we believe to be variants of our registered name may, in fact, be simply deviant misspellings.**

**A**ll of us who specialise in a single surname are familiar with several versions of our name. We tend to refer to these different versions as "variants" when, in fact, this may not be the case.

In general, many of the versions are mistakes which have come about when the writer has written down what he thought he heard. If the speaker had a broad dialect or a speech impediment and the writer was hard of hearing, then the potential for deviation was considerable. When records are transcribed from original documents written in an unfamiliar hand, or from microfilm of such documents, there is scope for further distortion. Anyone who has used the International Genealogical Index will recognise this problem.

## Few genuine

I have come across over 100 versions of the surname PALGRAVE, but only a few of which I would regard as genuine variants. As the surname appears to be locative in origin I checked on the place(s) concerned.

At the time of the Domesday Survey there were two villages in East Anglia with similar spellings which were likely candidates. One was PAGRAVA and the other PALEGRAVA;

the former was in Norfolk and the latter in Suffolk

References to people bearing both versions, in records prior to the 16th century, were listed and the places where the references were found were plotted. Two distinct distributions emerged, centred on PAGRAVE and PALGRAVE respectively. To complicate matters, the descendants of the PAGRAVES standardised the spelling of the name to PALGRAVE after about 1600.

In Lincolnshire there are many references to POLGRAVE and in parish registers in that county PALGRAVE is slightly less common. In Surrey the version PALSgrave predominates, so I take it to be a genuine variant. Whether it is an anglicised version of PFALTZGRAF, a German name, seems most unlikely. However, I am fairly sure that it has nothing to do with the Elector Palatine, known as the Palsgrave, who married Elizabeth, the daughter of James I.

Having accepted, say, two or three as genuine variants, one needs to consider the status of the many other versions. Rather than list them all, I have expressed them in a two dimensional array (see Figure 1 below).

If all the options represented within

OPTIONAL SPELLINGS OF PALGRAVE									
P	U O I E A AR AU AW AY EA OW	LE LL (L) LD D	SE (S) Z X	GG G GGEG KE	R	E I O A AU AY IE	M M U V F FF W	A (E) T	(S)
1	11	6	5	4	1	7	7	4	2

Figure One – this table illustrates the many permutations possible for the surname PALGRAVE. They total more than half a million!

the tabulation actually occurred, they would amount to 517,440, a figure obtained by multiplying together the totals in each column!

This is clearly absurd, but it is a useful exercise for anyone starting a one-name study. By assessing the likely distortion of vowel and consonant sounds before searching, one can carry out a more thorough scrutiny. For instance, I missed some Lincolnshire entries in the GRO Indexes by not looking up POLGRAVE.

Several members of the Guild have handed me lists of the many versions of their surnames for my index of variants and deviants and I have analysed several of them using the above format. Some interesting generalisations have emerged. For instance, vowels lead to more variations than consonants and the letter "E" can occur almost anywhere.

### Long and the short

Long and short "O" sounds give rise to several options. In the surname HOLBROOK one can find the first element Hal-, Hool-, Hou-, Howl-, and in the second element -brook, -brock or -bruck. In GOULTY and GOLDRING the "O" sound can be oa, ou or ow, as well as a few more not common to both.

The "U" sound in the surname EUSTACE appears in at least 14 different ways: U, Eu, Eue, Ewa, Ew, Ewe, You, Yow, Yew, Eau, Ui, Yoi, Yu and Yui.

The letters "I" and "Y" are interchangeable when they occur in the middle of a name, so SPILLING can be SPYLLING, SPYLLYNG or SPILLYNG. The letter "Y" at the end of a name like ALLMEY can have a profound influence on the options one may find, including -ye, -oy, -ay, -e, -ee(?), -ie(?). In the surname POLYBLANK at least eight options have been recorded for the middle syllable: -a-, -i-, -e-, -ay-, -ei-, -er-, -ey- and -o-.

Here are some other factors encountered...

- Final syllables usually receive less emphasis when spoken, so in a surname like DORRELL the endings -rail, -roll and -rill have been found.

- The doubling up of consonants is widespread, as in WOODYER and WOODDYER, both versions of the surname WOODGER, and STOT or STOTT. Some consonant sounds are so similar as to lead to confusion, so a variation on HODSDON is HODGHTON.

- The "B" and "P" sounds may substitute for one another, as in POLLEBLANK and POLLEPLANK, both versions of POLYBLANK.

- The letter "H" may be added to, or dropped from, the beginning of some names, as in HEASEY and EASEY. The adding or dropping of a final "S" is also common: ALLBROOKS is an example of losing an "H" and gaining an "S" in a version of HOLBROOK.

Where different combinations of consonants lead to the same sound, more variations result. A case in

point is OSWELL and OZWELL, which are both versions of OSWALD. Similarly, one can find NEX and NECKS, and EUSTICE and EUSTIS.

The foregoing examples illustrate just a small proportion of the possibilities which arise from a consideration of the phonetics. The multiplicity has come about because there were no standardised spellings and no reference works in which a writer could check on the "preferred" version.

Yet more variations arise when records are transcribed from early manuscript sources. Even the experienced palaeographer can make mistakes. I am sure that the version of my surname, PAKEGRAVE, came about because of a confusion between "L" and "K" in the *Placita Coram Rege* of 1283.

In early records the distinction between the letters "V" and "U" is very blurred, so I have seen many instances of PALGRAUE. Of course, a small "u" is not unlike a small "n", so this has given rise to POLGRANE. It seems likely that, by analogy, PAGRAM and PALGRAW resulted from misinterpreting the letters "U" or "V", especially as the quality of handwritten letters towards the end of a word tends to degenerate anyway.

Early handwriting gave the letter "X" a tail, thus making it remarkably similar to a "Y", and I assume that this brought about the transformation of PAYGRAVE to PAXGRAVE in the transcript of the *Red Register of Kings Lynn, 1372/3*.

Perhaps the long "s" is the most common source of transcription error, as it looks very similar to an "f", and quite a lot of printed matter perpetuates this. I suspect that the long "s" may also be transcribed as an "l", in which case this might explain the occurrence of PASGRAVE in Coppinger's *Suffolk Manors*.

### Secondary sources

One is bound to conclude that the use of secondary sources, although helpful and time-saving, should be followed up by reference to the original manuscript source. This should allow the elimination of spurious variations. I believe there is much to be gained from a comprehensive study of variants and deviants.

*An understanding of the many possibilities needs to be grasped by the one-name specialist fairly early in his or her research programme.*

I am also sure that there is considerable merit in putting one's collected data on a statistical basis. In other words, how many examples of each version of your surname have you found? A survey of frequency may assist in distinguishing the genuine variants from those fleeting versions arising from quite simple errors.

The availability of the *1881 Census Data on CD-ROM*<sup>2</sup> and the *Surname Atlas CD*<sup>3</sup> has given us convenient access to statistical data from which we

*"An understanding of the many possibilities needs to be grasped by the one-name specialist fairly early in his or her research programme."*

## FREQUENCY OF VARIANTS/DEVIANTS IN 1881

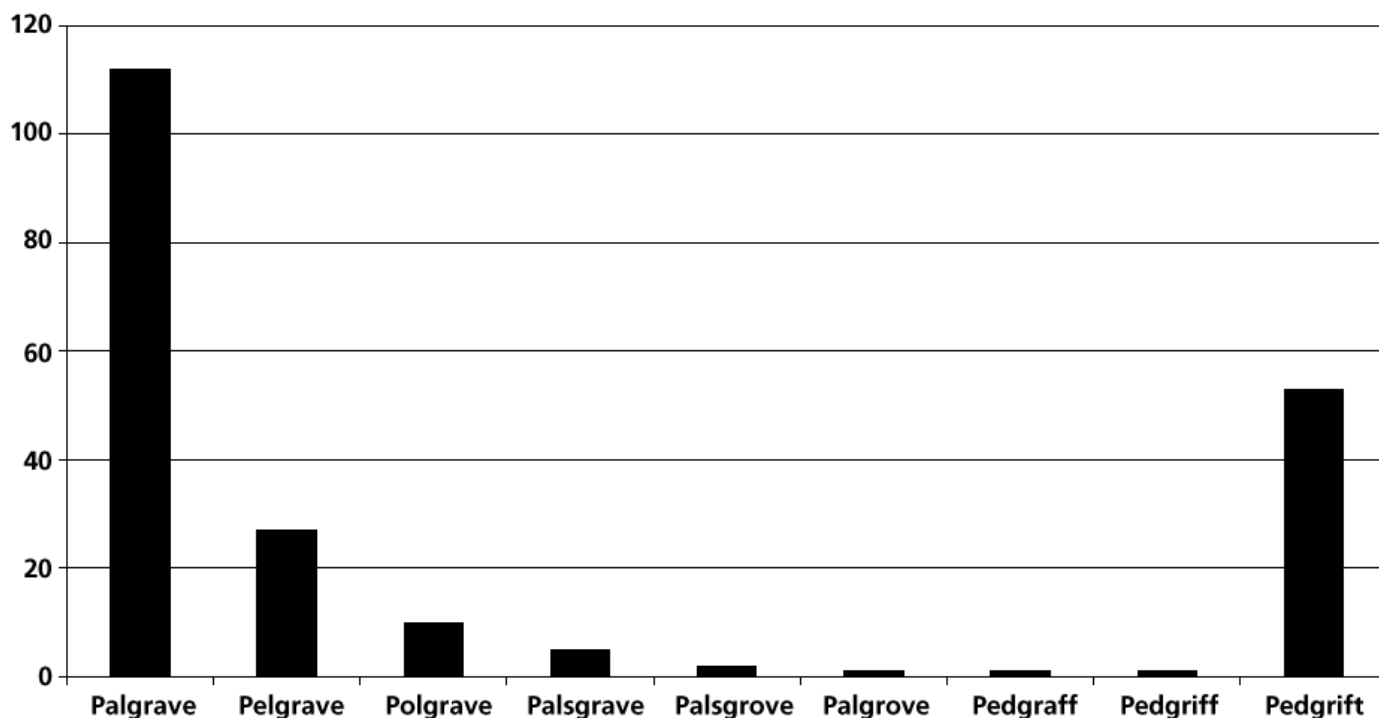


Figure Two – the relative frequency of the surname PALGRAVE and variants, or deviants, in the 1881 British Census

can determine the frequencies and distribution of specified versions. The accompanying histogram (*Figure Two, above*) illustrates that there are really only two main variants, PALGRAVE and PEDGRIFT, although PELGRAVE and POLGRAVE, resulting from quite minor vowel distortion, account for a significant 17 per cent of the entries.

Incidentally, since the late 19th century, when bearers of the PELGRAVE variant landed in Australia, that version has ramified considerably, so there are now over 140 PELGRAVES qualified to vote there. PEDGRIFT seems to have emerged in the Waveney Valley, Suffolk, around 1800 and is enshrined in several parish registers with entries which include the phrase “Pedgrift alias Palgrave”.

### Prediction

Several attempts have been made to develop models enabling the prediction of likely variants for any given surname. One of the earliest seems to have been Soundex, which depended on a coding system which neglected all the vowel sounds but was based on the initial letter of the surname and up to three consonants, excluding y, w and h, which could be represented numerically (*Figure Three in the adjacent column*). Selecting the initial letter “P” and coding the next three consonants, the surname PALGRAVE transforms to P426. Unfortunately, names like Pilgrim, Paliser, Pilchard, etc., have the same code, so there were matches with well over 1,000 possibilities.

More recently, the Metaphone model has been

adopted which also suppresses the vowels but codes the following consonant sounds: B X S K J T F H L M N P R TH W Y. G is coded as K and V as F, so PALGRAVE becomes PLKRF. Analysing a large list<sup>4</sup> containing 90 million surname entries reveals only

### SOUNDEX CODING

b, f, p, v	1
c, g, j, k, q, s, x, z	2
d, t	3
l	4
m, n	5
r	6

Figure Three – the Soundex table

23 possibilities. There are some obvious misfits, including PALAEOGRAPHIA and PALOKORVA, but most are very plausible.

Other contemporary developments in this field include the NameX model devised by John Challis. It

is essentially a Thesaurus, containing a very large number of variants covering over two million distinct surnames, and organised in name pairs with weightings.

Every one of the 26 letters of the alphabet and the apostrophe are admissible when using NameX, but accented characters are converted to their nearest matching letter. In addition, phonetically encoded versions are generated to yield further comparisons in order to produce match scores. Applying Soundex and Metaphone codings provides supplementary evidence to refine the number of options.

By the NameX procedure, one finds that there are 41 variants for PALGRAVE with a series of scores ranging between 99 and 75. Those over 95 relate to the most frequent variants encountered in archives: those with a score below, say, 85 are rare or very rare. Very much the same pattern seems to apply to the NameX listing for my wife's registered surname, SPILLING and I have no doubt other Guild members will find a similar situation.

Although these methods are remarkably effective predictors, they do have their limitations. For instance, the PEDGRIFT variant, mentioned above, is not listed as a potential variant of PALGRAVE, neither is PALGRAVE listed as a variant for PEDGRIFT. Nevertheless, the latter version accounts for over 20% of the current PALGRAVE variants.

Such comparisons between the variants and variant distributions of different surnames may well lead to the definition of some general principles which will be beneficial to us all and add new components to the study of history.

## Variants index

It was with this in mind that in October 1980 I started an index of variants and deviants to which several members of the Guild made contributions. This was publicised in the Guild Newsletter<sup>5</sup> when I invited members to send in 5" x 3" slips, one slip per version of the surname, also giving in parentheses the preferred version. The source of the variant/deviant was to be indicated on each slip.

In 1983 my request was repeated in this Journal<sup>6</sup>, in which I suggested that some indication of frequency and dispersion would be helpful. In fact, if anyone had accumulated data in the form of histograms, maps, retrographs, etc., then information in these formats was particularly valuable. I am pleased to say that a few members were kind enough to provide further information.

However, that same year the Guild invited Patrick Hanks and Flavia Hodges, who were then in the process of compiling their *Dictionary of Surnames*<sup>7</sup>, to address its Annual Conference at Leicester. The upshot of this was a remarkable opportunity for members of the Guild to provide information based on their own research into variants, etc., for inclusion in that dictionary.

I believe around 300 members submitted infor-

mation, much of which appeared in the published work in 1988. A unique feature of the new publication was the inclusion of a separate alphabetical list of variants, linking them to the preferred versions listed in the main part of the dictionary. This seems to have been the first real attempt to generate a comprehensive collection of surname variants, presaging the current project to establish a comprehensive *Thesaurus of British Surnames*<sup>8</sup>.

*I believe it might help this project if members of the Guild were to consider generating further statistical information based on their own researches. Quantitative data showing the relative frequency of variants derived from any convenient accumulation, such as census returns, GRO entries, telephone books, etc., would be of considerable interest.*

In this context, I would strongly advocate the use of Steve Archer's program<sup>3</sup> (*a full review of which appeared in the Journal, Vol 8 (4), October–December 2003*) to examine the statistics of the frequency and geographical distribution of variants which occur in the 1881 census.

This program provides a facility to generate four maps simultaneously and so make rapid comparisons of the ramification of the different versions. It also offers a very easy way of checking on the incidence of any potential variants or deviants.

***I would welcome correspondence from members who might be prepared to assist. Please send e-mails to [president@one-name.org](mailto:president@one-name.org), rather than the 5" x 3" slips I requested before.*** ○

## References

- 1 Derek A Palgrave, *Journal of One-Name Studies*, Vol 1 (12) [Autumn 1984]
- 2 *1881 British Census and National Index*, CD-ROM version, The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-Day Saints, 1998
- 3 Steve Archer, *The British 19th Century Surname Atlas*, CD-ROM, Archer Software 2003
- 4 *Surname Thesaurus*, [www.imagepartners.co.uk/Thesaurus/Search.aspx](http://www.imagepartners.co.uk/Thesaurus/Search.aspx)
- 5 Derek A. Palgrave, *Guild of One-Name Studies Newsletter* Vol 1 (4), p 47 [Oct 1980]
- 6 Derek A. Palgrave, *Journal of One-Name Studies*, Vol 1 (6), p 93 [Spring 1983]
- 7 Patrick Hanks and Flavia Hodges, *A Dictionary of Surnames*, Oxford University Press, Oxford, 1988
- 8 *Thesaurus of British Surnames*, [www.tobs.org.uk](http://www.tobs.org.uk)

DEREK A PALGRAVE MA FRHistS FSG  
President, the Guild of One-Name Studies  
Member 103  
Crossfield House  
Dale Road  
Stanton  
Bury St Edmunds  
Suffolk IP31 2DY  
[president@one-name.org](mailto:president@one-name.org)