

West North Versus East South

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THE TITLE OF THIS ARTICLE cannot refer to bridge because in that game North and South always team together against East and West. Mr. David Lindsey wonders why West and North are so much more common as surnames than East and South.*

One might use the phrase of the writer of the *Coir Anmann* who prefaced the answer to so many of his own questions of "whence is he so called?" with: "Easy to say".

East and South are relatively rare surnames. There are more Norths than Easts and Souths combined. The most popular direction name is West. There are three times as many Wests as there are Norths, Easts and Souths combined. Out of every hundred thousand people there are four or five Easts and almost the same number of Souths, with about sixteen Norths and approximately seventy Wests.

These four names are all English names. Most persons bearing these directions as surnames acquired them by reason of having come from that direction during the period in which surnames arose. A few of these names were derived from the fact that the men bearing them lived on the outskirts of a village in a certain direction or the names were short forms of longer descriptions, such as "north of the church."

The bulk of the population of England at the time of the compilation of Domesday Book, and for several centuries thereafter, the surname period, dwelt in the South and East of England. For centuries the North of England was slow in recovering from the ruthless devastation of William, the Conqueror, in 1069-70. The southern and eastern counties were politically, economically and socially much more important than the northern counties. In the South and East surnames first arose.

An important concentration of population was also found in the southwestern counties. When a west countryman came to London and the southeastern part of England he often acquired West as a

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surname. In the densely populated East and Southeast few acquired these directions as surnames. Those who did come from the extreme East or extreme South were more likely to acquire as a surname the name of the village from whence they came, because the village, being nearby, would be better known. The great, sparsely populated North was a district little known to the ordinary man in the South and East and when one came from the North he often acquired North as a surname.

The distribution of these names as given by Guppy in his *Homes of Family Names in Great Britain* provides only mild support for this explanation of their derivation, but then that study reflects later movements of the people. Matheson, in his *Surnames in Ireland*, lists only North and West, the latter being rather evenly spread throughout Ireland, while North is found principally in Leinster and Ulster.

West owes some of its popularity to the fact that some were so named by reason of dwelling on, or near, the waste, barren or desolate land, from Early English *wēste*.

Over the years, in England, North has been a wellknown name borne by a famous English family, some of whose members bore the title of Baron North, one of them being Lord North, Prime Minister to George III, who did much to infuriate the American colonists. There have been several famous English and American Wests, among which were two Americans with the forename of Benjamin, a mathematician and a painter. Today's best-known West is Rebecca West, the pseudonym used by the English novelist Cicily Isabel Fairfield. The South family's best-known man was the English preacher, Robert South, famous in the latter part of the seventeenth century. An American biologist named Edward Murray East holds the honors of his family.