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Surnames as Middle Names in England

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Abstract

Names used in the middle position of an anthroponym (that is, between the first name and surname) are a relatively recent introduction to England, first substantively occurring in the eighteenth century but only becoming widespread from the nineteenth. Using approximately 34 million full name birth and death records from 1733 to 2024, this study empirically characterises the origin and spread of middle names in England from (as much as it was possible) the point of their initial adoption. In so doing, I chart the development of what is today a commonplace naming custom as it was being established. I show that, when first adopted, middle names were an elite concept, their propagation in England following the reign of the Hanoverian monarchs, who encoded dynastic genealogies in their names—a Germanic noble tradition. Nevertheless, middle naming spread in England not primarily through the use of forenames, but the use of surnames, in the middle position—a stark contrast with royal practice, and one which suggests its essence was being emulated, not its exact nature. This use of surname-middle names as elite status markers declined rapidly in the early 19th century, losing exclusivity as middle names in general became widespread.

Keywords: first name, middle name, anthroponym, individualism, England, birth records, death records

General Introduction

In England today, the custom of giving a child a middle name is widespread, yet historically it is relatively new. Its origin may be traced to continental Europe where, from the 12th century onwards, the Christianisation of forenames—divided along Catholic–Protestant lines—removed from the pool of possible choices many names of non-Christian origin (Leibring 2016). In Roman Catholic Europe in particular, the Christianisation of forenames also removed from the pool of choices many from the Old Testament (Leibring 2016). Particularly strong expressions of this can be found in the Catholic doctrine of the Council of Trent (1545–1563), which mandated the names of angels or saints for use in baptism; a contemporaneous Calvinist position, by contrast, was that one should avoid names that "savour of paganism or popery" (Corkery 2000). Ultimately, irrespective of denomination, a relatively small set of names came to serve the majority of the population, such that by the 14th century the name stock in England was limited (Chetwood 2016).

Perhaps to help distinguish among a growing number of people with the same name, the use of multiple forenames spread progressively from the (predominantly Catholic) south of Europe to the north, having likely originated among the elite of Renaissance Italy, also in the 14th century (Wilson 1998). The custom became increasingly common in France and the Netherlands throughout the 17th and 18th centuries, respectively (Bloothooft & Onland 2016), but only in England, further north still, throughout the 19th. It has been estimated that by 1800, only around 10% of people in England had more than one forename (Mitterauer 1993). This comparatively late adoption of the practice—roughly coinciding with the onset of centralised birth and death registration, in 1837—provides a rare opportunity to examine what is nowadays a popular naming custom whilst it was being established.

The principal aim of this study was to empirically characterise the origin and spread of middle names in England, from (as far as the data allows) the point of their initial adoption. Broader trends in English middle name use over time, from the 19th to 21st centuries, have been outlined elsewhere (Bush et al. 2018). To do so, I obtained a dataset assembled from the UK "local BMD" (births, marriages, and deaths) registers (www.ukbmd.org.uk/local), as described previously (Bush 2024), and updated for use here. More specifically, the local BMD was used to produce two datasets representing yearly records of full names over time, one compiled from birth records (24,084,977 records from 1837 to 2024) and one from death records (9,888,837 records from 1733 to 2009) (Bush 2024). Although the latter was the smaller dataset, it is important to note it spans the critical period covering the introduction of middle names to England. This was because the death records report both the year of death and the age at death, allowing a birth year to be calculated; as such, their data predates 1837.

Following the approach of Guppy and Kolpashnikova (2025), I emphasise "description more than explanation" in my interpretation of this data, rather than seeking to distinguish causal factors that introduced and/or perpetuated middle names. This is because I anticipate that multiple inter-related social forces, which in practice could not be disambiguated here, would have been at play in normalising the custom. I focus my descriptive results primarily on the years 1740–1850, this period charting the transition from a tiny minority (<1%) to a burgeoning number (>25%) of births registered with a middle name. I show

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that this trend appears very largely driven using a surname in a middle name position, particularly for sons, and discuss how this was likely a class-coded expression of elite familial relationships, signalling lineage or allegiance. The use of surnames as middle names fell swiftly out of fashion from its peak around the year 1800, and shortly after the "BMD year" of 1837, was recorded only at much lower levels.

Throughout the 19th and, in particular, the 20th centuries, English middle name choice increasingly transitioned away from names related to lineage and more towards individual preference, as previously described (Bush et al. 2018). This reported finding is consistent with a growing international literature on contemporary increases in name diversity, apparent in, among other places, Canada (Guppy & Kolpashnikova 2025), China (Bao et al. 2021; 2024; Cai et al. 2018), France (Mignot 2022), Germany (Gerhards & Hackenbroch 2000), Indonesia (Kuipers & Askuri 2017), Japan (Ogihara 2021; 2022), Turkey (Sakallı 2016), and the USA (Twenge et al. 2010; 2016), as well as multi-country studies generalisable globally (Varnum & Kitayama 2011; Ogihara 2023; Fan et al. 2025). Further lines of evidence have been recently reviewed in Ogihara (2025). Relatively uncommon name choices have been conceptualised to reflect a growing "need for uniqueness" throughout the 20th century (i.e., a desire to pursue differentiation from others [Snyder & Fromkin 1977]) and may broadly be attributable to either an explicit preference for individualism (that is, choosing something unexpected) or a decline in traditionalism (that is, not choosing something expected)—or to both—two entwined but distinct concepts. Indeed, it has been argued that the "individualism" hypothesis for explaining contemporary global name trends is often applied without considering alternatives; that is, increased diversity in naming may sometimes be "more about something lost (traditionalism) than about something gained (more individual autonomy)" (Guppy & Kolpashnikova 2025). In the context of English middle naming, my data support this perspective: I show that contemporary diversity in middle names arose only after the original use of this position, predominantly a status marker encoding relationships, declined. I conclude with a discussion of the rise and the fall of the English surname-middle name, from the purposes they may once have served to their abandonment in the face of social and administrative changes affecting perceptions of "the elite".

Methodology

Source of Name Data

BMD records were obtained from the "UK local BMD", an ongoing volunteer-run project to transcribe them for an online archive.[1] This is a freely available resource that appears primarily used by family historians and designed in a manner tailored to their requirements. What this means in practice is that users of the local BMD websites can make targeted searches (such as for a specific birth record) but cannot download every record at once. As the latter function would be of use for onomastic research, the entire set of records from each of the 12 regions participating in the project (Bath, Berkshire, Cheshire, Cumbria, Kingston, Lancashire, North Wales, Shropshire, Staffordshire, Wiltshire, West Midlands, and Yorkshire) was obtained and re-formatted for that purpose, as previously detailed (Bush 2024). Processing steps included the correction of typographic errors, expansion of abbreviations, removal of erroneous, ambiguous and duplicated entries, and (where possible) gender-typing each name, also as previously detailed (Bush 2024).

The names on each birth and death record were recorded in two fields: forename(s) and surname, respectively, the latter entirely capitalised. For the present work, spaces in the forename field were assumed to separate individual names. The name before the first space was considered the first name and all subsequent names, space delimited, were middle names. For example, *John Charles James SMITH* has the surname *SMITH*, the forenames *John Charles James* of which *John* is the first name and *Charles* and *James* are middle names. I refer here to "middle names" rather than to "multiple forenames" as the latter implies a degree of parity between the names. However, as discussed below with regard to the inconsistent transcription of middle relative to first names, a reasonable perception is that, at least with regard to record-finding, names in the middle position are of comparatively lower utility.

The birth records also each contained year of birth, and the death records either year of death or age at death, where known. As such, for the death records, year of birth could be calculated such that two comparable sets of yearly name use data could be derived. In total, I obtained 24,084,977 birth records and 9,888,837 death records, the two datasets comprising full names of individuals born during the years 1837–2024 and 1733–2009, respectively. In the original publication (Bush 2024), these datasets were derived from records downloaded from their respective ukbmd.org.uk project sites on 13 September 2023. For the purposes of the present work, I updated both to include all records available as of 13 January 2026. Although the data remain non-uniform both in terms of the number of records per region and the depth of coverage over time, it is nevertheless considered an unbiased representative population sample, assessed more

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formally in previous work (Bush 2024). I parsed both the birth and death datasets to produce a set of tables detailing (a) the number of records per year with and without one or more middle names, per region, and for all regions combined, (b) the set of all full names with one or more middle names, per region, and for all regions combined (excluding those where the middle name was only transcribed as an initial), and (c) the percentage of surnames recorded as a middle name per year, for both conservative and relaxed thresholds for interpreting whether a name is more commonly recorded as a surname (explained below, in the context of my fourth figure). These tables, alongside the code both for generating them and the figures derived from them, are available as resources for further enquiry at FigShare and GitHub online sites, respectively, (https://doi.org/10.6084/m9.figshare.31249012) and (www.github.com/sjbush/uk_bmd).

Results

Overview of the Dataset and its Limitations

Using data from the UK local BMD (Bush 2024), the proportion of birth and death records per year with one or more middle names is shown in figure 1. There is a general trend of increased middle name use in England from negligible levels in the 19th century to near-ubiquity today, alongside a progressive mid-20th century increase in the proportion of records with multiple middle names, although in absolute terms these remain relatively uncommon (figures 1C and 1D). From around 1950, the number of births with more than one middle name increased from around 2% to over 10%, and the number of births with more than two middle names moved from a phenomenon virtually unheard of (0.1%) to one merely very rare (1%). Nevertheless, some obvious incongruities in the data are apparent, which I consider artefacts of dataset construction and discuss in more detail below.

An initial expectation was that the use of middle names would spread progressively, such that the proportion of birth records with one or more middle names would show a continuous, if modest, increase over time. While this was almost certainly the case in reality—there is little reason to believe otherwise, especially given the progressive adoption of middle names has been observed elsewhere (Bloothooft & Onland 2016)—there was a surprising initial impression. Unlike the earlier time points in my dataset, there were both plateaus in the proportion of records with middle names (from approximately 1870 to 1910) and intermittent spikes (from approximately 1910 to 1950), in the latter case only for birth records (figures 1C and 1D). However, when plotting the data on a region-by-region basis, it becomes clear that these incongruities arise only in specific regions (that is, separate BMD transcription projects), with the remainder showing a gradual, continuous spread of middle name use, as expected (figures 1E and 1F).

Given these incongruities, it is prudent to address the shortfalls of the data from the outset. The BMD records were transcribed primarily for the use of genealogists, and so their original purpose was presumed to be the accurate identification of individuals about which some information may already be known (their year or place of birth, for instance). In this respect, diminishing returns may be offered by a lengthy string of middle names, such that perhaps some volunteers simply did not transcribe them, either at all or in their entirety, and some did. Moreover, the records were transcribed by local teams of volunteers rather than through a centralised effort; that is, each group may have adhered to a slightly different set of standards. It was not possible, however, to confirm this by simply asking each group because several have since been disbanded, producing no new data for more than 5 years. Inconsistencies in middle name transcription would explain, for instance, why early 20th century birth records from Cheshire (figure 1E) show a pronounced series of sharp peaks and troughs. Similar patterns can be seen with the death records (figure 1F) where data from Cheshire, Lancashire, Staffordshire, and Yorkshire all show unexpected plateaus or reductions in middle name use across the approximate period of 1850 to 1920. By contrast, data from the Bath, Berkshire and Wiltshire projects consistently show a progressive rise over time in the proportion of records with a middle name, as expected.

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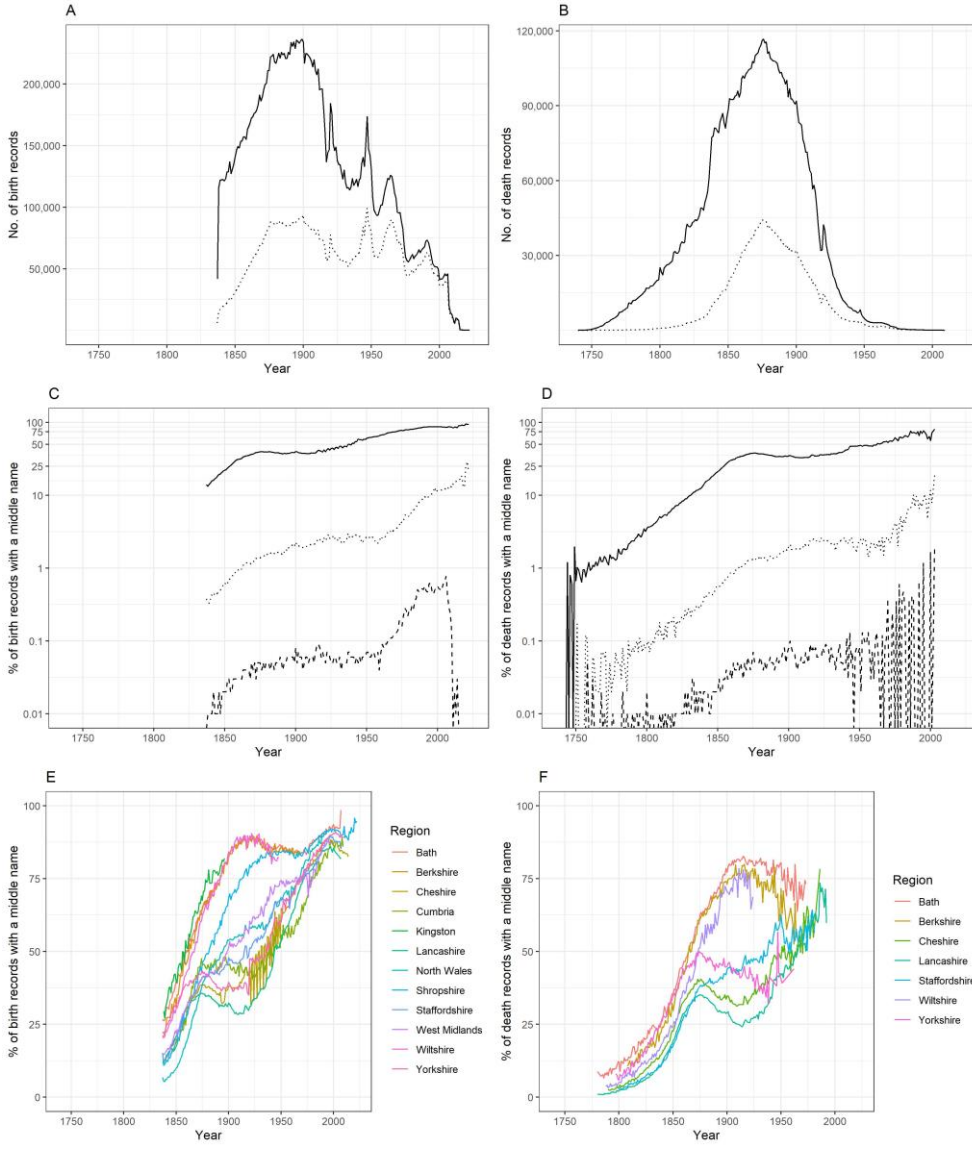

Figure 1: Middle Name Usage in England from 1733 to 2024

In figure 1 above, panels A and B represent birth and death records, respectively, with solid lines showing the total number of records analysed, and dotted lines the total number of records with one or more middle names. Similarly, panels C and D represent birth and death records, respectively, with solid lines showing the percentage of records per year with one or more middle names, dotted lines two or more middle names, and dashed lines three or more middle names per year. In each panel, I use a pooled set of data from either 12 or 7 regions of the UK local BMD project, for birth and death records, respectively. Data are presented on a logarithmic scale to better visualise the contemporary increase in the number of records with two or more names. Panels E and F plot the percentage of birth and death records, respectively, with one or more middle names for each of these individual regions. For panels C through F, years with fewer than 50 records are not plotted.

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To assess the temporal inconsistencies more thoroughly, I considered the percentage of records per year where one or more middle names was only recorded as an initial (figure 2). I assumed that when a middle name was substituted for an initial (perhaps because it was not thought either necessary or important to transcribe the whole thing[2]), it was also more likely that a name would not be recorded at all. This interpretation at least seems plausible: in general, the regional variation in figure 2 tracks the peaks, troughs, and discontinuities plotted in figure 1. Of note, the plots for Bath and Kingston (figure 2A)—two of the smallest regions in the dataset—show that virtually no middle names were replaced with initials. I assumed that as a consequence of this, their records would be more complete than those of other regions and, consistent with this, found that middle name use over time indeed increased progressively (figure 1E).[3] To the best of my knowledge, there are few freely accessible large-scale datasets for English middle naming and so, while mindful of incomplete data for some of its constituent regions, I believe I may still generalise about overall trends, albeit more cautiously from the 20th century onwards. From around 1900, I can see that middle names have become very widespread (to >75% of records in Bath and Kingston, for instance; figure 1E) and, presumably, their transcription more error-prone. Accordingly, for subsequent analyses, I primarily concern myself with data from the 19th century and earlier.

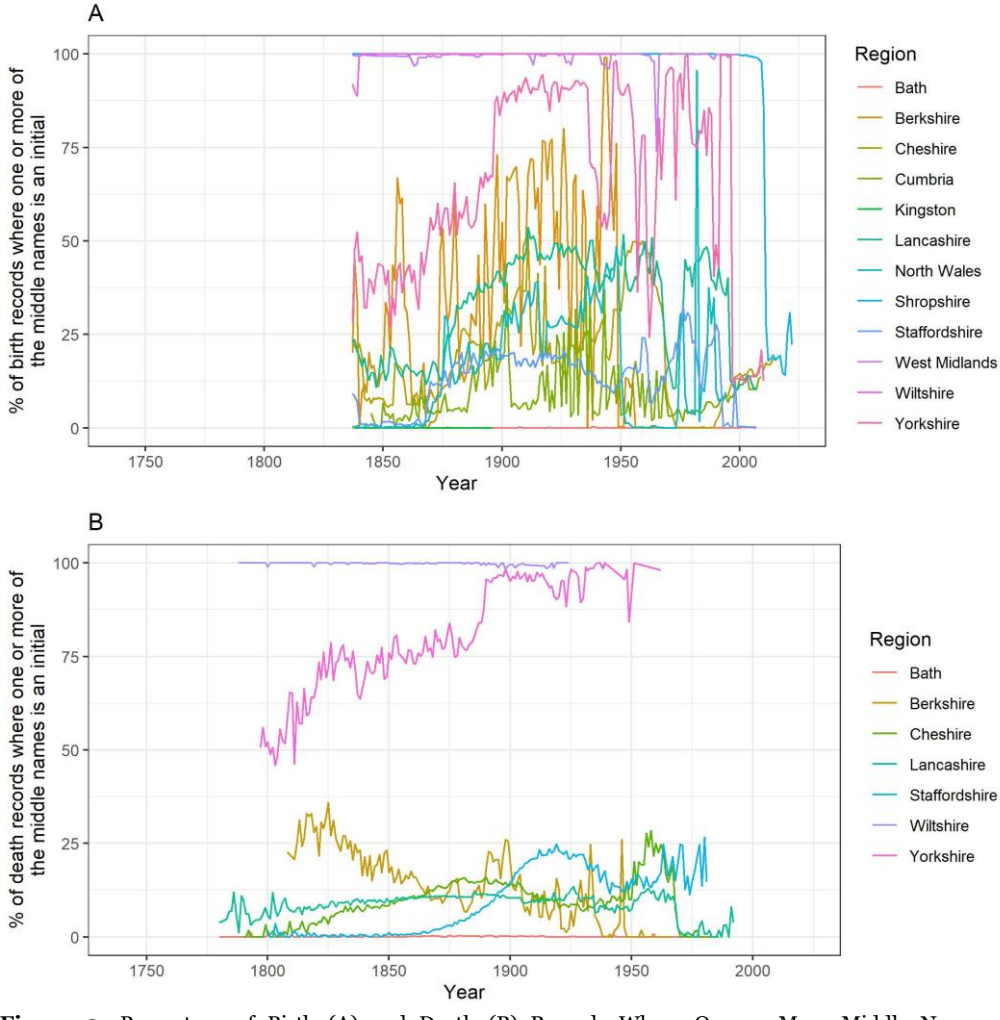

Figure 2: Percentage of Birth (A) and Death (B) Records Where One or More Middle Names was Transcribed Only as an Initial.
Note: For each panel, years with fewer than 50 records are not plotted.

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The Proliferation of Middle Names in England

How did the custom of giving middle names in England become widespread? As my data chart the use of middle names from their inception, I asked whether the earliest records had particular characteristics that could offer insight. It was immediately apparent that many of these records used a surname in the middle position. For example, for the seven regions in which death records allowed me to identify 18th century births, the oldest people with middle names were *Benjamin Allcock CASH* (born 1746), *Sarah Battersby COOKE* (1742), *Amy Mary COOPER* (1752), *John Alders FRICKER* (1749), *John Gardiner GIBSON* (1747), *Clementina Handasyd LUTWYCHE* (1749), and *Charlotte Elizabeth WILCOCKSON* (1751).

Given my focus was on how the structure of personal names varied over time, I define the entirety (*Benjamin Allcock CASH*) as a full name, and treat each of its components as a name in itself. It follows that each name (*Benjamin*, *Allcock*, and *Cash*) could appear in one of three positions in the full name: as a first name (first position), as a middle name (a position both optional and extensible—more than one name could be included within it), or as a surname (last position). Taking both the birth and death records separately and summing up the data for all years, I next calculated the percentage of times each name occurred in each of these three positions.[4] I illustrate this in figure 3 to show how the characteristics of each position vary. Most obviously, I can see that names in the first and last position are for the most part mutually exclusive (figures 3A and 3B). Similarly, I can see from figures 3C and 3D that names used as first names are also often recorded in the middle position (this being the diagonal line y=x) but that there are also many names rarely used in either of these positions (this being the set of surnames). However, I can see from figures 3E and 3F that many surnames are also recorded as middle names.

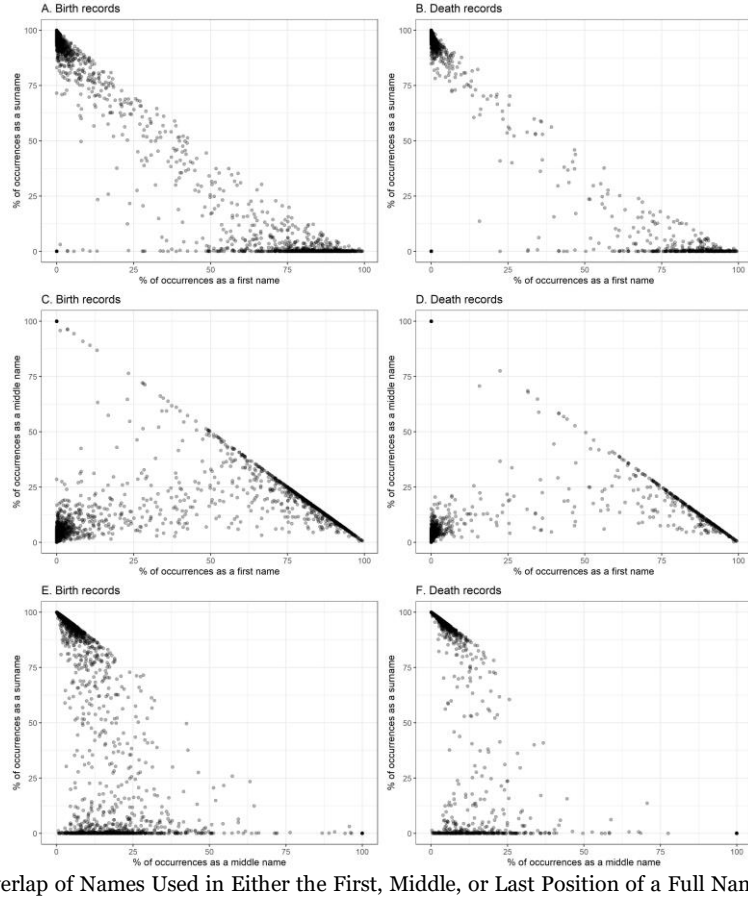

Figure 3: Overlap of Names Used in Either the First, Middle, or Last Position of a Full Name, For Both the Birth and Death Record Datasets.
Note: For each panel, only names used at least 1000 times (across all positions) are plotted.

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To quantify the extent to which surnames were used as a middle name, and how this varied over time, I restricted subsequent analyses only to records with a middle name. I then plotted the percentage of full names where the name in the middle position was more commonly given as a surname (figure 4), conservatively mitigating noise by only counting names used > 100 times as a surname and where >95% of the total number of times that name was recorded, in any position, was as a surname. I found that, prior to a sharp decline in the practice to a low point around 1850, that approximately 10% of the female and 30% of the male full names used a surname as a middle name (figure 4). I then re-plotted the data using more lenient name usage thresholds of >10 times as a surname and >50% of the total times recorded, in any position, as a surname, which not only recapitulates the trend but gives greater emphasis to its gender disparity: by the late 18th century, approximately 20% of female and 60% of male full names used a surname-middle name (figure 4). To give more context to this pattern, in my 18th century data (the years 1737 to 1799), I have in total 462,420 records of which only 7477 (1.62%) have a middle name. As such, although middle naming was a rare phenomenon at the time, it was very heavily driven by this transferred use of a surname, particularly for males.

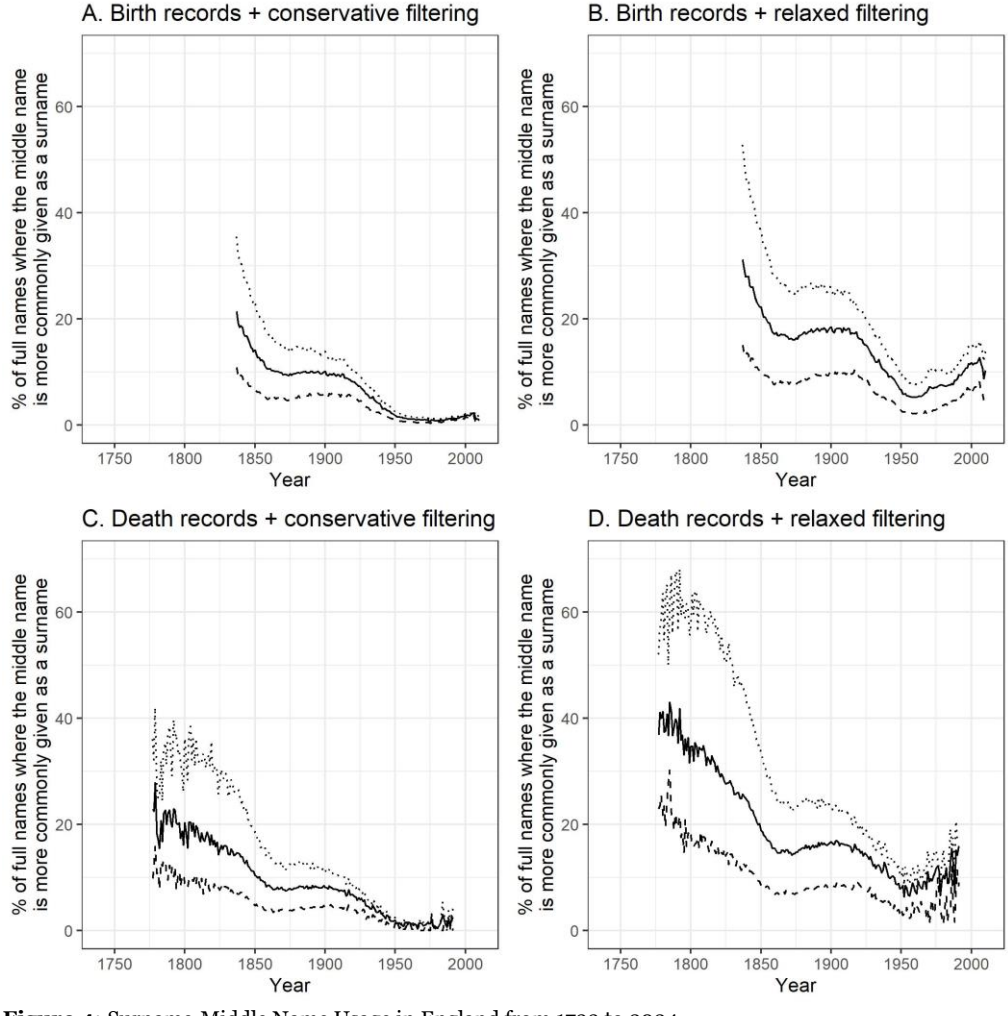

Figure 4: Surname-Middle Name Usage in England from 1733 to 2024

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In figure 4 above, panels A and B show data from birth records, and panels C and D data from death records. In each panel, sold lines denote the percentage of full names where the middle name is more commonly given as a surname, with dotted and dashed lines showing separate percentages for male and female names, respectively. For panels A and C, I only include names used > 100 times as a surname and where >95% of the total number of times it is recorded, in any position, was as a surname. For panels B and D, I only include names used >10 times as a surname and where >50% of the total number of times it is recorded, in any position, was as a surname.

I can also see from this figure that surname-middle names fell out of fashion extremely quickly, declining from the onset of the 19th century such that by the time birth records began to be nationally recorded (1837) the practice was much reduced. If comparing figure 4 with figure 1, I can see that this decline parallels the increased use of a middle name in general. In other words, when middle names were rare, they often took a specific form (one used a surname in that position, especially if the child was a boy); however, as middle names became more common, this ceased to be expected. This makes sense if the surname-middle name is viewed as a marker of high status as, like many such markers, they are abandoned when they cease to function as such. I discuss this concept further below, although before doing so, I make one additional observation about the decline in the surname-middle name. I might assume that for surname-middle names, the surname in question is one in the family, or which otherwise indicates kinship (common sense suggests it is unlikely to be random, or free choice). Unfortunately, given the structure of the dataset I have no way of testing this assumption—the majority of records cannot be associated with those of their parents, much less other relatives (Bush 2023), and although the birth records have a field for "mother's maiden name", the death records, upon which I more fully rely, do not (Bush 2024). Nevertheless, assuming this true, then figure 4 shows a second sharp decline in surname-middle naming: from approximately 1850 to the early 1900s, the practice appears sustained at a low level (<10% of records), but in the aftermath of the First World War reduces markedly once more. If the intention behind surname-middle naming was to pass family names through generations, then to the war I must attribute an irreparable breach in continuity. In other words, the first decline in surname-middle naming appears one of choice; the second, more forced upon the populace.

Discussion

Data from the UK local BMD provides a rare opportunity to chart trends in the adoption of a naming custom now widespread in the country.[5] As the data spans that period of time between a slim minority and the vast majority of people using a middle name, I can observe the characteristics of names in a middle position as its use began to spread. One trait was overwhelmingly apparent: middle names propagated through the use of a surname (ostensibly familial) in that position, particularly for sons. More broadly, it appears to be a historic (18th to 19th century) English naming tradition to encode relationships within a name, with previous studies of the BMD data highlighting other examples of the practice. For instance, an analysis of birth records from 1839 to 1900 found that approximately 15% of male and 8% of female first names were shared with the father and mother, respectively (Bush 2023). Moreover, prior to the 20th century, a time of high infant mortality, it was also common to name children for a pre-deceased sibling (an analysis of 9,542 deaths which could be associated with subsequent sibling births found that 21% had the same first name) (Bush 2019). Collectively, these customs represent multiple means of keeping names in the family, with their disproportionate occurrence in the names of sons consistent with a far older patriarchal tradition in which males are the "symbolic carriers of the temporal continuity of the family" and so thought to be "more apt to bear kin names" (Rossi 1965). The initial, 18th century, use of middle names—which, for the most part, were surname-middle names—appears an especially prominent example of this. Nevertheless, while gender is one of the most accessible variables by which I can interrogate the data, perhaps a more important factor in this case—if not explicitly encoded in the dataset itself—is class.

Originally restricted to very few people (as shown in figure 1) and so an elite custom, it seems likely that middle name use in England spread through mimicry. This phenomenon is the Simmel effect, which describes cultural dissemination in terms of social stratification (Pedone & Conte 2001): that people replicate the status symbols (clothing, conduct, and the like) of higher-class individuals who then dissociate themselves from those symbols as they no longer distinguish them. It has previously been suggested that the Simmel effect applies, in general, to the rise and fall in frequency of names (Krawczyk et al. 2014). However, while people may recognise and desire elite practices, to replicate them it is necessary for those practices to be imitable to begin with—and while aristocratic titles and estates could hardly be mimicked, the manner in which they named themselves could. To expand on this point, I must turn to some of the first prominent holders of middle names in the country: royalty. Multiple forenames entered the monarchy under European influence, and from King George I onwards (born in Germany in 1660 as *Georg Ludwig* and reigning from 1714), all British monarchs—and their issue—possessed one or more names in a middle position.[6] He and his successors, six monarchs from the House of Hanover, continued this practice when they reigned in the UK,

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adhering to the German noble tradition of encoding dynastic genealogies in their names (Plummer & Harrington 2019). Consequently, royal names of the time could be read less as private identities (that is, for a name used only by intimates) and more as compressed inventories of ancestral power and allegiance. For example, King George IV was born in 1762 as *George Augustus Frederick*, with *Frederick* being the name of his grandfather; and *Augustus* both a recurrent name in the House of Hanover and an imperial name of ancient (Roman) pedigree. The practice continues today: in German, the current head of the household, *Prince Ernst August*, is, more fully, *Ernst August Albert Paul Otto Rupprecht Oskar Berthold Friedrich-Ferdinand Christian-Ludwig Prinz von Hannover Herzog zu Braunschweig und Lüneberg Königlicher Prinz von Großbritannien und Irland* (*Adelswelt* n.d.).

It appears unmistakeable that the rise of middle names in England coincided with the reign of the Hanoverian monarchs.[7] Non-royal English elites of the 18th century may very well have understood that the purpose of multiple names was to emphasise connectivity to meritorious forebears, making it a practice readily imitable. Nevertheless, middle naming spread in England not primarily through the use of given names, but the use of surnames, in the middle position—a stark contrast with royal practice, and one which suggests its essence was being emulated, not its exact nature. Why might this be? One imagines that in a royal context, it would be redundant to occupy the middle name position with a surname: the surname in question is the entire royal house, far too large and sprawling an identity for that position. For non-royal elites, however, a surname could denote local, not national, power, in effect marking a household and heritable property. In this context, the surname-middle name may be seen as a form of intra-elite signalling. Such a name would be unmistakeable, easily verifiable, and presupposing familial resources to which the name-bearer stood in respectable relation. This could also explain why surname-middle naming fell rapidly out of fashion—because as it became more widely used (that is, by lower social classes) its ability to function as a social signal weakened. This pairing of imitation and avoidance is the Simmel effect in action. More generally, markers of class, wealth and prestige must of necessity be continuously refined to remain exclusive, and so at a time of increasingly widespread middle naming the surname-middle name would prove unsuitable for this purpose.

Another factor worth considering is how perceptions of status varied throughout this period, as this may have influenced the reception of this trend, or indeed the desire to adopt the styling of a social class against which there was also pushback. As figure 4 shows, the 19th century decline in surname-middle naming reached a nadir around the rise of Chartism (ca. 1838–1848), a mass movement for parliamentary reform, this being dominated by the upper classes. Indeed, it appears that surname-middle names were not uncommon among MPs elected around this time. Parliamentary records show that among many others, the election of 1832—the first after the Great Reform Act, the inadequacies of which spurred the Chartists—returned *Lord Dudley Coutts STUART* (son of *Frances COUTTS*), *Sir Ronald Craufurd FERGUSON* (son of *Jane CRAUFURD*), and *Sir John Tyssen TYRELL* (son of *Sarah TYSSEN*), for instance. A plausible motivation for each of these surname-middle names, and by extension for others who adopted this custom, was to carry the mother's maiden name—which traditionally would be lost on marriage—into subsequent generations.

Nevertheless, the overall relevance of social class to the evolution of (middle) naming remains to be fully detailed, although clues to its importance may be found in contemporary literature. Victorian fiction is rich in names—if not middle names *per se*—which comment upon some aspect of personality, conduct, or standing, suggesting that in general social meanings could (or would) be read into them. For example, in Dickens' *Hard Times* (first serialised in 1854), the name *Gradgrind* is commonly understood to satirise a rationalist worldview: as Mr. Gradgrind himself posits, in a view that suits his surname, "facts alone are wanted in life" (Dixon 2016). With a popular impression that name conveyed character, it follows that the social politics of name choice would have been especially in focus at the time. A fuller treatment of this topic is beyond the scope of the present work, and so touched upon only lightly here. However, it is likely a rich area for enquiry. Indeed, it has been argued that from around 1840 to 1900, the upper middle classes (bourgeoisie and lower gentry) of Victorian Britain had grown sufficiently confident in their cultural authority to exert their own influence on naming customs, ones previously dominated by the church and crown (Hasfjord 2016). Another way this authority manifests itself is in how it articulates its values, as distinct from (and invariably superior to) those of other classes. An instructive example can be found in an 1869 essay on the fashionable names of the day, which explicitly associates names with social standing, by mocking the choices of both the "lower orders" and social climbers in turn (Sawyer 1869). This was published in the monthly periodical *Belgravia*, which ran from 1867 to 1899 and was intended for a cosmopolitan middle-class readership, its name—that of a wealthy London district—perhaps not without appeal to the socially aspirational (Palmer 2008). As a piece of onomastic history now over 150 years old, it is worth quoting at length:

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> The modern rage is all for romantic names—Beatrice, Ethel, Gertrude, Blanche, Eva, Dora, Mabel, Amy, Evelyn, Maud, Florence, Marguerite, May, &c. [...] *Apropos* of romantic names, I have it from a registrar of great experience that these are enormously affected by the lower orders, who get them from the romances in the penny papers. Their taste in this way, however, generally receives two checks. In the first place, they can seldom pronounce the names they admire; and in the second, they nine times out of ten fail in their efforts to set them down on paper with anything like an approximation to correct spelling. The name of the Empress of the French has an enormous fascination for young mothers of romantic views and restricted means. They think Eugénie delicious; nor do they appear conscious that it loses anything of its delicate sweetness when pronounced "You Jenny"!

The broader point here is that Victorian literature tightly entwined name choice with social position, making it a likely influential factor on the adoption and propagation of middle names too. As the author, William Sawyer, writes later in the same essay, an ill-fitting name is disastrous: it would "heap perpetual ridicule on the unfortunate wight who will in all probability have to carry through life a name at variance with his gifts, tastes, acquirements, and individuality generally".[8] Despite the strength of opinion on the topic, it appears that sources specifically opining about middle names are rare. This is regrettable but no great surprise: not only are middle names easily "invisibilised" (by definition, not being a person's primary name) but my time period of interest is narrow, when surname-middle naming had only just been introduced as a brief-lived custom.

Finally, the "BMD year" of 1837 could also have been relevant to changing middle name customs as, coincidentally or otherwise, surname-middle naming ceased to be common after records began. Possibly, the custom was itself affected by this introduction of a novel bureaucratic system, as from then on names were recorded not only in local (parish) but also in national registers—that is, any social signal they emit was now sent to a broader audience. This argument is not overly convincing, however: figure 4 shows the custom was already declining long before 1837, with the highest proportion of records with surname-middle names found around the year 1800. Nevertheless, it is also worth noting that the first UK census was conducted in 1801 and so the general point remains that this was a time in which bureaucratic systems were expanding—the paperwork necessary to make "Britain's otherwise ungovernable empire cohere" (Siddique 2016)—and which may have resulted in a degree of name standardisation. A fixed, context-free, name is a powerful tool as it makes a person (and their property) "legible" to officialdom and therefore manageable, facilitating taxation, conscription, and so forth (Ramscar et al. 2026). In this respect, a surname-middle name occupies an ambiguous space, neither a "true" surname nor given name. From an administrative perspective, this may have been discouraged as "noise".[9] While speculative, this is plausible when considering that nowadays many countries restrict the number or nature of names children can be registered with, and that (in what is unlikely an isolated example) in 1969, civil servants in Belgium cautioned parents against excessive naming, due to a higher risk of clerical errors affecting their child's passage through life (Bloothooft & Onland 2016).

Conclusion

Full name onomastic datasets are relatively rare, and accordingly names in the middle position are easy to overlook. A person's first name is their most frequently used and salient identifier, with (in England) any middle names they have less likely to be used in daily conversation or to call for their attention (or, as I have considered with the BMD records, the details of middle names are less likely to be found in the first place). Nevertheless, middle names may still have played a role in the development of a "mentality", this term understood in the manner of Kohlheim and Kohlheim (2021) as: "the deepest layer of the collective psyche of a given population [at a given time], widely conditioning its thoughts and behaviour, its interpretation of the world and the way it [. . .] expresses its ideas". As names communicate concepts and values, they assist in the reconstruction of these mentalities, a point perhaps best expressed by (Hubbard 1888): "names portray the mind of the age that gave them birth". That in mind, what can surname-middle names tell us about the history of England? Perhaps both their rise and fall suggests an acute sense of class awareness, given that middle names propagated only after the custom—a Germanic noble tradition—appeared at the highest level in the land, and presumably spread through emulation. Middle naming is nowadays practically ubiquitous, although far removed from these origins: the middle position is more often today given to a name otherwise used for the first position, not another name from the last position (figure 3).

These observations accord with a conclusion repeatedly drawn about contemporary naming in that individualism—the relative importance of the self over others, associated with self-expression, personal autonomy, and "uniqueness' in naming—has been on the rise globally, particularly from the mid-20th century (Fan et al. 2025; Ogihara 2025). Nevertheless, my data also provide a complementary perspective. For middle

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names in England, self-expression appeared to have been discouraged from the outset, as the original custom encouraged kinship and connection to be explicit in the name. Accordingly, the general argument that diversity in naming is driven by individualism, while not challenged here, may be tempered in part by observations that keeping a name in a family—to acknowledge a collective—has not disappeared entirely; rather, where that name was kept may vary position. This point has previously been made with regard to the first name of a parent being the middle name of their child, a custom also on the rise from the mid-20th century (Bush 2023)—at precisely the same time as first names diversified (Fan et al. 2025; Ogihara 2025). Similarly, as shown in figure 4, the custom of surname-middle naming, while rare in contemporary records, nevertheless remains. Conceivably, surname-middle names represent a trade-off between, broadly speaking, "individualist" and "collectivist" naming preferences. That an increase in individualistic values affects naming is widely accepted; that this does not affect all aspects of a name equivalently remains comparatively underexplored. Accordingly, I anticipate that with larger and more complete onomastic datasets, a fuller picture of naming in the age of individualism will emerge.

Notes

[1] The website hosting the UK local BMD project (http://www.ukbmd.org.uk) is operated by Weston Technologies Limited (Crewe, Cheshire, UK). This company is the owner or license-holder of the intellectual property constituting the birth, marriage, and death records, as detailed in the terms and conditions (https://www.ukbmd.org.uk/TermsAndConditions) (accessed 7 June 2023). Under section 29A of the UK Copyright, Designs and Patents Act 1988, a copyright exception permits copies to be made of lawfully accessible material in order to conduct text and data mining for non-commercial research. It should also be noted that the "UK BMD" is somewhat misleadingly named as it primarily contains records from England and no records at all from either Scotland or Northern Ireland. This is due to differences in their legislative frameworks and history of civil registration relative to England and Wales. In the latter, civil registration began on the 1 July 1837, although it only became compulsory from 1 January 1875 with the passing of the Births and Deaths Registration Act 1874.

[2] I cannot exclude the alternative possibilities that the birth record never included the entire name to begin with (although this would be peculiar) or that the individual was deliberately given only an initial for a middle name (like former US President *Harry S. TRUMAN*, whose name represented his two grandfathers, *Solomon YOUNG* and *Anderson Shipp TRUMAN*).

[3] The same can also be said of birth records from Shropshire, West Midlands, and Wiltshire, regions in which all middle names were replaced with initials. This at least suggests a consistent policy for transcription, and accordingly (even if I do not know what the names actually are) fewer records omitted from these regions.

[4] This data is available as the file "name_frequencies_summed_across_all_years.txt", accessible at https://doi.org/10.6084/m9.figshare.31249012, and produced using the scripts described by Bush (2024).

[5] It is important to note that England has a multicultural population and so comprises many traditions (and naming customs) which differ in their use of middle names, if they are used at all. In drawing on the BMD dataset, which pools all records together, the analyses presented here do not allow us to isolate naming practices specific to ethnocultural groups. Accordingly, while the custom of middle naming has become widespread in England, this may largely reflect trends in the ethnic majority—presumed the dominant group in the dataset.

[6] George I was not the first British monarch with a middle name, however. He succeeded Anne (born 1665, reign 1702-1714), the last Stuart monarch, who had no middle name. However, she succeeded William III, also known as *William of Orange* (born 1650, reign 1689-1702), who was born *William Henry* in the Netherlands.

[7] It has been argued that a number of forenames were introduced to Victorian Britain by the Hanoverians too, as discussed by Hasfjord (2016). These include *Emily*, an Anglicisation of the German name *Amelia*, and *Caroline*, originally introduced to Germany from Italy, as a feminine form of *Carlo* (*Charles*).

[8] He puts the point mildly. For those who "atone for a scrubby family name by a gorgeous baptismal prefix", like *Agamemnon CHIP* or *Tryphenia TUB*, he is less sympathetic: "the forced association of ideas impresses the mind like a joke". These "poor little surnames overwhelmed with baptismal splendours" are unfortunately reminiscent of "the sweep who was found sleeping in the Duke of Norfolk's bed—the more gorgeous the bed, the more audaciously out of place its occupant".

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[9] It certainly complicates automated record parsing, of the kind performed in the present work. For example, as noted in Bush (2024), a (very small) number of records have a surname in the middle position which ends in a hyphen, followed by a space and then the surname proper. To process these records, it was assumed that because of the hyphen these were not true surname-middle names but erroneous transcriptions of a compound surname; that is, spaces occur more frequently than hyphens and so were thought more likely to be added by mistake. Nevertheless, these records are so few in number they have negligible impact on the proportion of surname-middle names in the data.

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