

Some notes on the likely origins of the Blaker surname in England

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Note. This is an updated version of a note written in April 2025, incorporating additional information about given names similar to Blaker. It is based on my monthly reports for February (pages 45-58) and April 2025 (page 66-75).

Early forms of the surname in England

My February 2025 report contained a survey of the known records of the Blaker surname and its variants from England in the 13th century, with a discussion of the meaning of the surname. In all there were 15 records or sets of records. They can be divided into three groups:

(1) For one set of records - from Worsbrough in Yorkshire - the surname was "Blacker" and was preceded by "de", indicating that it originated from a place-name. In this case the place-name was Blacker in Worsbrough. There were several places called Blacker in Yorkshire, including one in Crigglestone, where there is also known to have been a Blacker family in the 14th century and later.

(2) In two cases - a "Blakers" in Bristol and a "Blacker" in Lancashire - there was no prefix before the surname. The lack of a prefix might conceivably indicate that these surnames originated from the Scandinavian given name (see below), but as it is doubtful whether this given name survived in England beyond the 12th century this seems unlikely. Instead, the "Blakers" surname in Bristol may be a nickname, as Reaney and Wilson (1995)¹ give a similar surname "Blackers" which they derive from a nickname "black arse". The Lancashire "Blacker" surname occurs in a list of names in an assize roll and is immediately followed by a John de Crikeleston (i.e. Crigglestone). The "de" before Crikeleston was originally omitted, and later inserted. As there is known to have been a Blacker family later at the place called Blacker in Crigglestone, the occurrence of these two names together suggests that the surname Blacker also originated from the place-name, and a "de" before the name was omitted, as it was originally for the following name.

¹ "A dictionary of English surnames", page 46.

(3) In the other twelve cases - from seven counties in the South of England, the surname was preceded by "le", indicating that it originated from an occupation (or in some cases still indicated an occupation rather than a hereditary surname). The spellings of the surname were Blaker' (1), Blackere (1), Blakier (3), Blakiere (4), Blakyer (1) and Blakyer(e) (2).

Note that these surnames preceded by "le" are all found in records written in Latin. As there is no Latin word for "the", in Latin records the French article "le" was often prefixed to names (both place-names and personal names) where an article was felt to be required. Presumably "le" was used rather than "the" because French was considered more fitting for formal documents than English. But there is no implication that the people referred to here had any connection with France.

Opinion has been divided about the meaning of this occupational surname. The two meanings suggested are "blacker" and "bleacher". These meanings seem to be diametrically opposed, but the ambiguity originates from the fact that in Old English there was on one hand a word *blæc* meaning, as a noun, "black" or "ink" and, as an adjective, "black". On the other hand there was an adjective *blāc* meaning "pale", and verbs *blācian*, meaning "to become pale", and *blācan*, meaning "to bleach".

It is noticeable that nearly all the early forms of the surname end in -ier(e) or -yer(e) rather than simply -er(e). Gustav Fransson, in his book "Middle English Surnames of Occupation" (1935)² gave a detailed discussion of surnames ending in -ier. He said first that in Old French occupational names terminating in -ier, the ending normally became -er in Anglo French, with -ier appearing only sometimes. For that reason he argued that in most cases Middle English surnames ending in -ier had been formed from Old English roots. He said this had originated in two ways: (1) from Old English verbs ending -ian with a short stem (i.e. a short vowel in the first syllable) and (2) from Old English nouns with a short stem.

As an example he gave Blakiere, which on this argument he derived from the noun *blæc* meaning "black" (which had a short stem) rather than from the verb *blācian* meaning "to become pale" (which had a long stem). He added that the surnames ending in -ier were mostly found in the Saxon counties, and that they were probably formed before the lengthening of vowels in open syllables, which took place (in the South of England) in the first half of the 13th century. It is worth noting that Fransson reached this conclusion based on only a single example of this form of the surname ending in -ier(e)/-yer(e) - a Blakiere from 1332. We now know of 10 examples of this form, out of the 12 examples of the occupational surname from the 13th century, which tends to confirm that this was the regular form of the name.

Confirmation of Fransson's conclusion that the surname signifies "blacker" rather than "bleacher" is found in an undated charter for the Hospital of John in Bath,

2 Pages 45-48.

apparently from the late 13th-century, made by one Walter le Blakier.³ The charter had a seal with an inscription giving another form of the grantor's name: WALTER[US] LE NEROVR. I have not been able to find the word 'Nerour' in any dictionary, but in Middle English the suffix -our was used to form, among other things, occupational descriptions. The roots of these words were predominantly borrowed whole from Old French, with some borrowed from Latin, and a smaller number formed in England from an Old French or Latin stem.⁴ In Anglo-Norman French "neir" was the usual word for "black", and "ner" was among the recognised variants.⁵ So 'Nerour' could have the meaning "blacker".

Incidentally, the seal also sheds light on what kind of occupation "blacker" would have been. Previous suggestions had been either a dyer of black cloth or a maker of ink, as the Old English word blæc could mean either "black" or "ink". But the Anglo-Norman French word "neir" lacks this ambiguity. It means only "black" and not "ink", so the evidence of the seal tends to support dyeing of black cloth as the occupation of the "blacker", rather than making ink.

Note 1. Given names similar to Blaker

Several men with given names at least superficially similar to Blaker are documented in the 11th and 12th century: (1) a moneyer called Blacere (or Blacera, Blacra or Blacre) and (2) a Benedictine monk called Blakere, both in Suffolk in the mid-11th century, (3) a pre-Conquest Yorkshire tenant called Blacre recorded in the Domesday book, (4) a man called Blakerus commemorated at Thorney Abbey in Cambridgeshire in the second quarter of the 12th century and (5) two men (or possibly the same man) called Blacher, whose sons were active in the third quarter of the 12th century, and Blaker, whose grandson was active in the first quarter of the 13th, in Yorkshire.

The name Blacre in the Domesday Book has usually been seen as a derivative of the Old Norse Blakkr, meaning "black" (apparently the same name borne by Blacair(e), a Viking king of Dublin in the 10th century). The same may also be true of the East Anglian examples, though an alternative suggestion is that they may reflect a hypothetical Old English composite name formed from the two elements "blac", meaning black, and "here", meaning army.

Note 2. The surname Blaquiere

In the light of the Blakier(e)/Blakyer(e) form of the surname, it appeared possible that Blaquiere could be another possible spelling. One John Blaquiere, whose father was French, was created Barony De Blaquiere of Ardkill in the Irish Peerage in 1800.⁶ However, searches in various online indexes - including the National Archives

³ [Blaker Family, volume 4](#) (Research reports by Chris Phillips), page 63.

⁴ See the [Middle English Dictionary](#).

⁵ See the [Anglo-Norman Dictionary](#).

⁶ [Complete Peerage, volume 4](#), page 108.

catalogue, The Original Record, Google Books and the indexes of feet of fines, plea rolls and AALT lists and indexes on my website - have failed to produce any examples of Blaquier(e)/Blaquyer(e) from medieval England. So it seems that as an English surname, Blaquiere originated exclusively from France in modern times.