

Mitchelmore in the middle: A Study of M* surmids

Michael Mitchelmore, Sydney

It was a well known custom in the 19th century in England for children to be given their mother's maiden name as a middle name. This practice clearly created difficulties when it was first introduced. For example, William Stone Mitchelmore married in 1791 at Stokenham, Devon, but his descendants were never quite sure whether they were Mitchelmores or Stones. Thus, his first daughter was baptised Ann Stone but married as Ann Stone Mitchelmore. Another daughter was baptised Agnes Mitchelmore and married as Agnes Mitchelmore Stone. The middle name Stone was carried forward into the next generation, but two grandchildren were baptised with Stone as part of the surname rather than as a forename.

As Arthur French¹ warns, a surname in the middle may also have a different origin. It may be a grandmother's maiden name or even the name of a respected friend or local figure. Nevertheless, it may provide a vital clue as to a person's ancestry—and, if not, then at least its origin is an interesting problem to solve.

To aid the exploitation of surnames used as middle names, Hugh Wallis has produced middle name indexes from the IGI for each English and Scottish county² and Cliff Kimball recently prepared a paper for a Pharos One-Name Studies course on how to search for them elsewhere³. However, we don't seem to have any definite data on the various origins of surnames used as a middle name. For example, just how likely is it that such a middle name really does identify a female ancestor?

Like most one-namers, I have always noted examples of Mitchelmore or variant used as a middle name wherever I come across them. But I decided it was time to make a more systematic study of them. Although the results are most pertinent to South Devon, where most Mitchelmores come from, I hope they will at least provide a basis for comparison with other counties.

Terminology

To avoid repeating the lengthy phrase "surname used as a middle name", I have invented the term **surmid**. Also, because Mitchelmore is such a long name and occurs in so many variants,⁴ I will abbreviate the surname to M*. Hence the subtitle to this paper.

I will call surmids that derive from a female ancestor **maternal surmids**. Three obvious possibilities are illustrated in Figure 1, in which a hypothetical Peter M* married Jane BOND and the couple gave a surmid to each of their three children—one from Jane, one from Peter's mother and one from Jane's mother. I will use the abbreviations shown in Figure 1 for these three cases.

Another category is a **paternal surmid**, namely, a surmid derived from a person's father. This type of surmid occurs when an illegitimate child is given the same surname as the mother and the putative father's surname as a surmid. The only other type of surmid is the **honorific surmid**, one honouring someone with no blood relationship.

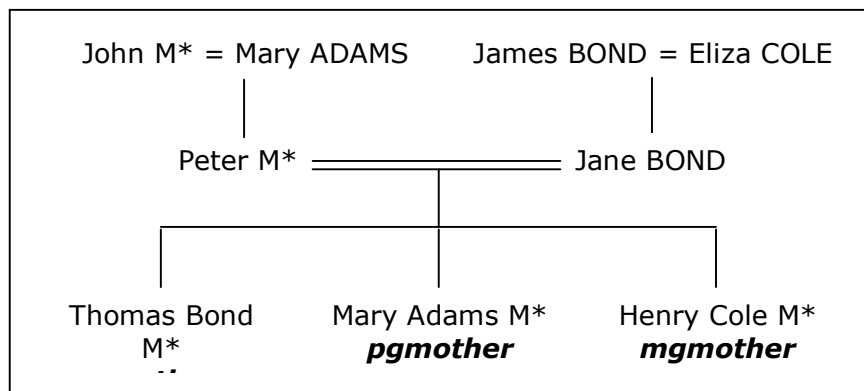


Figure 1: Classification of maternal surmids.

Data collection

I searched for M* surmids in every source available to me. Of particular value were FreeBMD,⁵ FreeCEN,⁶ the new FamilySearch site,⁷ the Deanery CDs published by the Devon Family History Society,⁸ the transcriptions on the South Hams site,⁹ the 1911 census index¹⁰, Hugh Wallis's middle names index, and, of course, Ancestry.¹¹ This search turned up a few modern cases (particularly in North America) where a married woman used her maiden name as a surmid; I decided to exclude such cases.

Finding people with a particular surmid is difficult because in many sources middle names are abbreviated to initials or omitted altogether. For example, with some exceptions, the UK civil registration indexes uses middle initials for births from mid-1910 to 1965, marriages from mid-1910 onwards, and deaths from mid-1908 to 1969. Most of the published UK censuses also omit or abbreviate middle names. The 1911 census is a notable exception, and proved very useful in this study. I suspect that census may have been the first where people were asked to state their full names.

Finding a surmid is particularly difficult when it occurs as the third or subsequent forename. Even in data sets where middle names are generally recorded, these forenames are almost always abbreviated to initials. For example, I only discovered that Robert Henry M Pillar's third forename was an M* surmid when I came across a transcription of his marriage certificate.

Data analysis

After finding an M* surmid, the next task was to attempt to trace its origin. Initially, all I had was the person's date of birth, marriage or death, or their approximate date of birth, and some indication of where they may have lived.

The first step was to try to identify the person's parents. Because, like most one-namers, I do not keep records of the children of non-M*s, I could not simply look the person up in my database. But I am confident my database does contain almost all M* marriages recorded in Devon from about 1750 and the great majority elsewhere; so it was easy to check whether anyone with the same surname had ever married an M*. If they had, I was sometimes able to identify the parents with a minimal amount of cross-checking and hence establish that the surmid came from the mother. In other cases, I could just as quickly eliminate them. Most cases fell somewhere in between, and I had to search more widely.

I next looked for a census record which included both the person and at least one parent. For some earlier surmids, I was able to identify the parents from a baptism record. It

was still necessary to determine the mother's surname, which meant finding the parents' marriage record.

Everyone who has done any family history research is familiar with the process of searching through census records, civil registration indices and available church records. A few Devon and Cornwall Online Parish Clerks were particularly helpful, and I discovered several internet resources for counties I had not previously considered. Several times over, I experienced the well known frustration that ensues when you find several possibilities for a person's wife or parents and just cannot decide which one is most likely—and the joy when the evidence all comes together and you can finally identify the right one. I called on the coordinators of four of GOONS studies when I could get no further, with varying degrees of success. There were still several cases where I could not identify both parents, or even one of them, and many where I could not get any further back.

I believe I was able to trace all the mother surmids among those I had collected (apart from cases where I could not even identify the person's father). I am not so confident about the grandmother surmids because their identification required tracing back two generations, often venturing into periods when the available records provide limited data and may be difficult to source. I probably found most pgmother surmids, because their identification basically only required finding a person's grandfather. But I certainly missed several mgmother surmids because of the difficulties of identifying a person's mother.

Paternal surmid cases were quite easy to recognise; it was only necessary to establish that the child was illegitimate. But it was rarely possible to identify anything other than the putative father's surname.

Results

A total of 256 M* surmids was found, spread across 158 different surnames.¹² All but 13 of these were given to people born in England.

The earliest birth for a person with an M* surmid was 1762 and the latest was 1997. The custom did not really take off until the 1810s, reached a peak in the 1850s, and died off again at the turn of the century. In fact, just over 90% of the surmids were given between 1810 and 1909, with only 3 given after 1950. This result confirms that surmids were indeed a 19th century phenomenon, at least in South Devon.

What was not expected was a gender bias: There were almost twice as many surmids given to sons as daughters (164 vs 92). One can only speculate on the reasons for this tendency. Perhaps parents felt that their sons should be the ones to carry on the family name, even if it was only in the form of a surmid?

For 17 surmids, I was unable to identify either of the person's parents because I could not find any records that included both the person and either of their parents. One further surmid occurred in North America, where it is extremely difficult to locate birth and marriage records. For the remaining cases, I was able either to identify at least the father. The following classification relates only to those 238 cases.

Maternal surmids

As expected, maternal surmids made up the great majority (77%) of the identified cases. There were 114 mother, 35 pgmother and 21 mgmother surmids as well as 13 ascribed to a great grandmother and even one to a great great grandmother.

The difference in the numbers of pgmother and mgmother surmids may well have been due to the greater difficulty of identifying mgmothers, as noted above, and probably does not indicate that sons were more likely to honour their mothers through their children than daughters were. Incidentally, about half of these sons and daughters did not have the M* surmid in their own name. Also, grandmother surmids were the only category where there was no gender bias: Almost exactly 50% were male.

Very few parents gave a M* surmid to more than one or two of their children. A marked exception was Harriet Tozer, who named five of her children (including a pair of twins) in this way. She also found a novel way of naming her twins: one was called Ann Mary M* Tozer and the other Mary Ann M* Tozer.

However, the M* surmid did tend to become a tradition in a few families, being passed on from generation to generation. Of all the M* men in our database whose descendants had M* surmids, over 80% had only 1 or 2. But one man produced 13 descendants with M* surmids and another no less than 15. In one of these families, there was a John M* Peeke in three successive generations. In the other, Richard Hancock M* not only honoured his mother through his daughter Hannah Hancock M* but also his stepmother through his daughter Elizabeth Fox M*.

There were also cases of people with two maternal surmids. For example, Thomas Bovey M* Browning was a son of Fanny M* Bovey (granddaughter of Mary M*) and William Browning. Unfortunately, I did not find enough examples to decide if there was an accepted pecking order for such multiple surmids.

Paternal surmids

I found 11 cases where an illegitimate child was given an M* surmid (and no other surmid). One of these cases was already known to me: Anne M* Petherbridge was baptised in 1819 and recorded simply as the daughter of Anne Petherbridge. But after her mother married John M* ten months later, she became known as Elizabeth M* and was twice recorded as John's daughter. Clearly her baptismal surmid had been chosen to acknowledge John as the father.

Another case was initially less clear. I had a Peter M* in my database who I knew had been born in Dartmouth about 1761. Because he used the surmid Cole for one of his children, I had conjectured that he might have been the son of another Peter M* who had married Elizabeth Cole in April 1763 in the neighbouring parish of Blackawton. Then I discovered that a Peter M* Cole, son of Elizabeth Cole, had been baptised in November 1762 in Dartmouth. That convinced me that the two Peters were indeed father and son, with the name of the younger Peter being changed from Peter M* Cole to Peter M* after his parents married.

Elizabeth M* found another way of naming the father, Samuel Coyde, of the illegitimate daughter she bore in 1855: She registered her as Mary Elizabeth M* Coyde, although the couple did not marry until over a year later. This M* surmid was therefore maternal, not paternal.

I was unable to identify the father of any of the other eight illegitimate children with an M* surmid. I did find the surname of the mother's mother for seven of these eight children, and none of them was an M*; indeed, it does seem rather unlikely that an unmarried mother would want to pass on her mother's surname to her child. It seems much more likely that in each case the father was an M*. I wonder if fathers had to give their consent to their surnames being used either as a surmid or a surname for an illegitimate child?

Children baptised with two surnames could have a difficult time with their names, especially if one was paternal. For example, George M* Creber Barter was born in 1860, an illegitimate son of Alice Barter and (apparently) George M* Creber. By 1881, his parents were living together and he was recorded as their son George M* Creber. However, when he married the following year he was indexed as both George M* Barter and George M* Creber-Barter. Subsequently, he was known only as George M* Creber.

Honorific surnames

In 18 cases, I traced the surnames of all four grandparents and found that none of them was an M*. I had already found cases where a surname had skipped a generation (see above), but none where it had skipped two generations. I was therefore confident that these were honorific surnames.

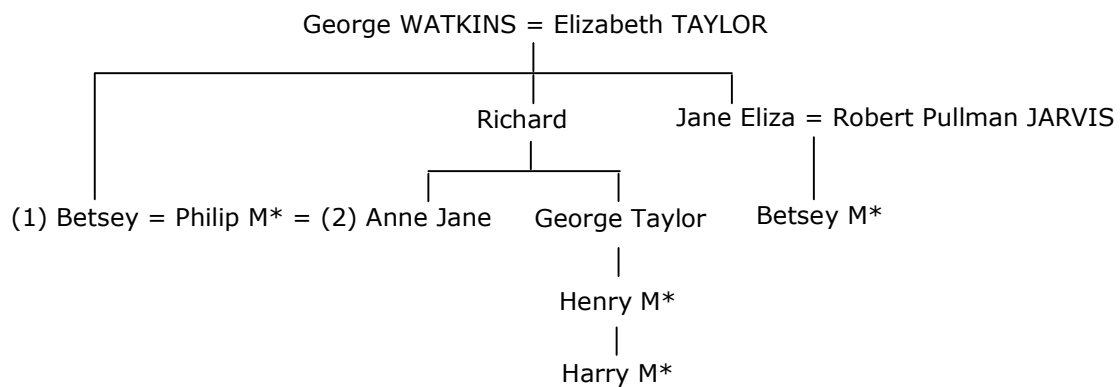


Figure 2: An example of M* surnames honouring a male relation by marriage

I was able to trace five surnames to a male relation by marriage. Figure 2 shows the most interesting case. I already knew that Philip M* had married a Betsey Watkins in 1840 and then, after she had died, Anne Jane Watkins in 1868. But I did not know if his two wives were related and I had not come across Henry or Harry M* Watkins or Betsey M* Jarvis. It took many hours to sort everything out, using records from the Plymouth and Liverpool areas. (Watkins and Jarvis were both mariners.) It would seem very likely that Henry, Harry and Betsey all acquired their surname in honour of Philip M*, a wealthy Torquay merchant.

In a further four cases, the probable source of the surname seemed to be an honoured friend or colleague:

- William Henry Newson was baptised William M* after he was adopted by Robert M* in 1860, but he later changed his name to William M* Newson.
- Harry M* Brown, born in Brixham in 1850, may have been named in honour of John M* who, like Harry's father, was a master mariner and owned several local fishing vessels.
- John M* Futcher was born in Delaware a year after Rev John M*, the pastor of a nearby Presbyterian church, died in a tragic accident. The Futchers may have been members of that church and decided to honour the popular pastor through their son's surname.
- Thomas M* was a witness at the marriage of Mary Ann M* White's parents and probably a close friend of the family; he could well have been the origin of her surname.

There were nine honorific surmids whose origin I could not find. Given the rarity of documents naming friends rather than relatives, it is unlikely that I ever will. But it does seem likely, on the basis of those I did find, that they were all male.

Classification of surmids

In the remaining 26 cases, I was able to identify the father but not the mother. These surmids were therefore almost certainly either mgmother or honorific surmids. Supposing, for the sake of argument, that half were of each type, we arrive at the following estimate of the distribution of M* surmids:

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|-----------|-----|
| Maternal | 83% |
| Paternal | 4% |
| Honorific | 13% |

These figures at least give some quantification to Arthur French's statement that "There is usually some ancestral relationship, but don't bank on it." Taking into account the honorific surmids traced to relations by marriage, I would say the odds are about 9:1.

Conclusion

For me, this little study has confirmed the value of investigating surmids. For example, I was able to explain a long-standing puzzle as to how Peter M* Randall could have been baptised in 1823 in Stokenham and then again in the following year in neighbouring Blackawton with different parents. (They were cousins.) And I am sure I would never have found the relationships in Figure 2 had I not been exploring surmids. But most significant of all, through the discovery of Peter M* Cole referred to above, I was able to join a large tree starting in 1762 with another one traced back to 1700. That alone made the whole study worthwhile.

Tracing M* surmids involved much tedious work, but the time commitment is probably no more than one-namers regularly put into pursuing their study. To compensate, there were over two hundred ahha! moments when I discovered, identified or at least classified another surmid.

So if you have a relatively small study and plenty of time—give it a go!

References

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- ⁵ <http://www.freebmd.org.uk>
- ⁶ <http://www.freecen.org.uk>
- ⁷ <https://www.familysearch.org>
- ⁸ <http://www.devonfhs.org.uk>
- ⁹ <http://www.our4bears.net>
- ¹⁰ <http://www.1911census.co.uk/>
- ¹¹ <http://www.ancestry.com>
- ¹² Only 23 of these surnames were registered with GOONS. The entire data set, apart from some possibly living persons, is available at <http://www.mitchelmore.info/indexes/surmids.htm>. This index also provides links to the families where each surmid occurs.