



# Seeking Mewburn

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Mewburns were central to a Masters degree in Genealogical Studies I took online at the University of Strathclyde. They are not my family but a good friend is descended from them. Rarity makes them a good research vehicle, but fascination with the family soon took over. It seemed sensible, therefore, to start at the beginning by tracking down the meaning and origins of the name.

## Name Distribution

There are records for fewer than 1200 Mewburns ever born in England – most in County Durham (many in North Yorkshire and a good few in Northumberland). Over 90 spelling or Soundex variants have been found and the first vowel can be any of the five. An analysis of vowel distribution threw up an intriguing pattern:

Start letters	Northumberland	Durham	Yorkshire	London/Middlesex	Lincolnshire	Kent
Ma	1.0	0.6	6.3	42.9	61.2	100.0
Me	93.8	85.8	82.6	55.7	7.5	0.0
Mi	2.1	0.0	0.4	0.0	0.0	0.0
Mo	1.0	13.1	1.9	1.4	31.3	0.0
Mu	2.1	0.6	8.9	0.0	0.0	0.0

## Spelling Distribution – % occurrence of letter pairs in each area

The northern counties overwhelmingly favour names with the 'Me' spelling while the southern counties use 'Ma' plus, in Lincolnshire, 'Mo'. London, perhaps reflecting its attraction as a place for inward migration, displays a balance between 'Me' and 'Ma'.

The separation between 'Ma' and 'Me' names is so striking as to offer support to a view of independent origins in the northern and southern counties. Mewburn is much the commonest in the north while the typical (but even rarer) Kentish name is Maybourne.

## Onomastics

So what does Mewburn mean and where did it originate? There is a clear topographical aspect – the ending -burn meaning a small stream. The key to its origin then must lie with Mew- or some similar prefix.

The Mewburn name is not in standard works such as Harrison,<sup>i</sup> or Reaney and Wilson,<sup>ii</sup> or Hanks and Hodges.<sup>iii</sup> However, the *Internet Surname Database*<sup>iv</sup> offers:

*an English locational surname which may be associated with the lost village of Mewsbrook or possibly Mulu-burna, near Littlestone in the county of Sussex. The place name and later the surname, may derive from the pre 7<sup>th</sup> century 'malu' meaning a gravel ridge, and 'burna', later 'broc', a stream. The surname is recorded in a myriad of spellings, in itself evidence of a 'lost' village, as there was no 'public' spelling to which to tie the surname.*

This does not ring true as Sussex is not where the name appears.

Can we do better? The dictionaries provide ideas for the prefix with:

*Mew*: OE 'a gull'; OFr 'mue', a cage for hawks (mewing = moulting); dweller at the falcon's place

*Maw*: OE *māge*, 'female relative'

*Mawer*: OE *māwan*, 'to mow'

Longstaffe, in his 1854 *History and Antiquities of the Parish of Darlington, in the Bishoprick*<sup>x</sup> says:

*The name, I have sometimes thought, may have reference to the idea that by placing mews, mows, or piles of corn by the sides of burns or rivulets, the grain dries more quickly and can be housed earlier from the effects of the current of air following the channel.*

Mowing by a stream seems attractive (not a rigorous bit of thinking I agree), but where might the name have come from, if not Sussex? Was it Durham?

### Location

There are no villages in England called Mewburn, or Mowburn, or even Mayburn that can be discovered in Ordnance Survey maps or in Google Maps. Neither does any appear in the *Dictionary of British Place Names*.<sup>vi</sup>

However, in Westmorland, there are two villages, half a mile apart, called Kings Meaburn and Maulds Meaburn (Meaburn is also a fairly common family variant). They lie near Appleby on the Lyvennet, a tributary of the Eden. Anciently they were in a single manor before the lands were divided between a son and daughter (Maud), and before the son's portion was later forfeited to the crown (hence Kings).<sup>vii</sup>



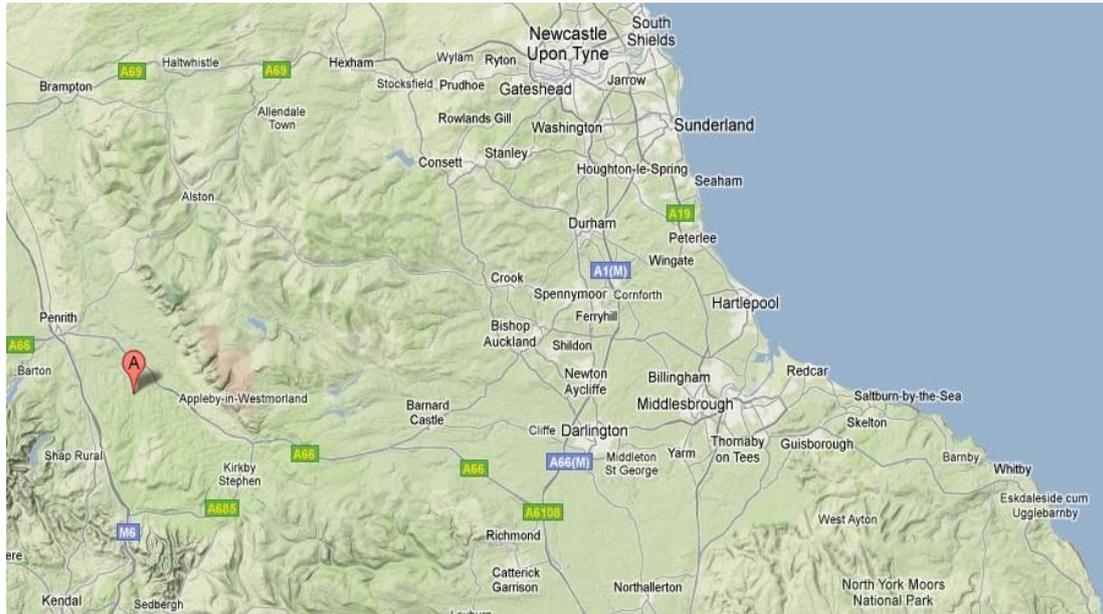
### Maulds Meaburn, Westmorland

In the *Dictionary of Place Names*, Meaburn is described as meaning the 'meadow stream' from OE *mæd*, 'meadow', + *burna*, 'stream', with the Lyvennet as the stream in question. It claims there is a 12<sup>th</sup> century appearance as Maiburne and a 1279 Meburne Regis (both uncited).

Maulds Meaburn fits the description well with village houses either side of the Lyvennet water-meadows (Kings Meaburn is high up the side of the valley well away from where mows might have been placed by the burn).

The topography beyond the Meaburns is interesting too, being bounded on the west and south by the mountains of the Lake District and on the east by the Fells.

The simplest route out from the Lyvennet and Eden valleys, other than north, is east (along the line of today's A66) leading to the Tees valley around Darlington and Middlesbrough where many of the later Mewburns are found.



## Topographical Map of Westmorland, Durham and North Yorkshire

(© GoogleMaps, 2012)

### What of the people and the archives?

British History Online offers the earliest reference found – from 1290<sup>viii</sup> – where a *John le Fraunceis de Mebornmatild* [Maulds Meaburn] appears as witness to a land transaction.

Ancestry.com quotes an early occurrence from the *Calendar of Coroners Rolls, City of London, 1300-1378*.<sup>ix</sup> This mentions a Henry de Mebourne, wanted as one of a gang of murderers, in 1325. However, the fact of the incident being in London is no indication of the name's origin.

A John de Meaburn appears in the 1332-33 *Cumberland Lay Subsidy* at Comrewe and Castelcairok in Eskdale with goods of 18 shillings.<sup>x</sup>

Three wills at York<sup>xi</sup> between 1345 and 1381 mention some six de Medebournes who may be displaying variants of the name.

There are three sources between 1374 and 1407 for Stephen de Meaburn as Rector of St Peter Asby in the Barony of Appleby (close to the Meaburn villages).<sup>xii, xiii, xiv</sup>

One of the key sources for onomastic purposes is the set of Poll Tax records from the late 14<sup>th</sup> century. They provide the largest list of early names available. Records have been searched for Northumberland, the North Riding of Yorkshire, York City and Westmorland. Only Westmorland has a Mewburn,<sup>xv</sup> and for 1379 we get:

*Villa de Ouerton* [Orton]

*Johanne de Meburn*                      ux'                      4d

The Norman locative style in all these early references may indicate that this is still not a heritable surname, and none provides evidence of a name being passed on. It is interesting though that all references, other than that to the London murderer, deal with matters from the north of England.

It is another 75 years before the next reference turns up but from that time there is no further use of 'de'. The Victoria County History for the North Riding gives us a terrible story from Wycliffe:<sup>xvi</sup>

*This peaceful parish was in the 15<sup>th</sup> century the scene of a double murder. Early in 1482 Robert Mewburne, parson of the church of Wycliffe, 'waylaid Robert Manfield with a knife and pierced his heart so that he died.' The parson was for some reason pardoned by the king, but the kinsman of the murdered man took his own vengeance, thus described in the Sanctuary Records at Durham:-*

*On the 25<sup>th</sup> day of February A.D. 1485, James Manfield, late of Wycliffe, gentleman; came in person to the church of St. Cuthbert in Durham, and striking on the bell of the same, prayed for the sanctuary of the said church, and the liberty of St. Cuthbert, for that he together with others, had near the village of Ovington in the county of York, about the 26<sup>th</sup> of January as he thinks, of the aforesaid year, insulted a certain Sir Roland Mebburne, chaplain rector of Wycliffe, and had struck the same feloniously in the body with a walych bill, and given him a mortal hurt of which he incontinently died.*

The next reference is also northern, but in the 16<sup>th</sup> century, from the *Register of the Freemen of the City of York*<sup>xvii</sup> noting the admission in 1534 of:

*Johannes Mewburn, tyller*

Hard evidence of the inherited surname now appears with the first baptism and marriage entries in FamilySearch/IGI:

*Wyllm. Mebron, christening 09 Oct 1539 at St Olave, York, son of Johannis Mebron<sup>xviii</sup>*

*Ann Mewbrown, christening 05 May 1539 Eggescliffe, Durham, daughter of Nicholas Mewburn<sup>xix</sup>*

*14 Sep 1561, marriage at St Margaret, Durham, between Cutch. Meborne and Margaret Lyffe<sup>xx</sup>*

Here we have four spellings within three entries and the pattern is set for further study.

Today there are only 40 or so Mewburns in England. PublicProfiler<sup>xxi</sup> shows that most others are found in Australia (the result of multiple migrations), New Zealand (started off by Armstrong Mewburn, a boat builder from Sunderland) and Canada (largely descendants of Dr John Mewburn who took his family there in 1832 from Whitby).

### **Mewburn Found?**

The impression gained from this fleeting evidence is that the name became a heritable surname around the 15<sup>th</sup> century and was well established in Durham and Yorkshire by the 16<sup>th</sup>. Thirty or so Mewburns appear in the 17<sup>th</sup> century Hearth Tax records for Durham and Yorkshire.<sup>xxii</sup>

Maulds Meaburn lends itself perfectly to mows of hay drying by a stream and topography leads a wanderer naturally to Teesdale and the rest of the north-east. That is where the Mewburns, historically, have been found – almost all within a 25-mile radius of Durham.

This may not be the most scientific piece of onomastic study but the elements fit in a pleasing way and arguably offer a reasonable foundation for the Mewburn origin.

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