

Name shame causes Cock shrinkage but Wang is on the rise

March 25, 2009

THEY are some of the oldest British surnames, passed down from generation to generation for hundreds of years. But over the past century or so, they have gone into a catastrophic decline.

Is it migration? Death? Disease? Some socio-demographic calamity that has befallen these families? Perhaps not. A list of the names reveals that their fall in popularity may have a more prosaic cause.

Cock, Daft, Death, Smellie, not to mention Gotobed, Shufflebottom and Jelly: they are all surnames that would have caused their owners considerable embarrassment over the years. A new analysis of British surnames reveals how names with rude overtones have seen the sharpest decline over the past 120 years as their owners have changed them to something more innocuous.

A comparison of the 2008 population - using data from a variety of sources - with the first census in 1881 shows that the number of Cocks has shrunk by 75 per cent, while the number of people called Balls or Daft has fallen by more than 50 per cent.

David Hey, author of *Family Names and Family History*, said that ridiculous names were often more harmless than they appeared. "'Bottom' names were from farms at the bottom of a valley. In the Middle Ages 'daft' meant meek. It was a perfectly acceptable name."

The analysis, which was conducted by Professor Richard Webber, visiting professor of geography at King's College London, with Experian, the information services company, and Geowise, a provider of geographical analysis software, also reveals fascinating details about patterns of migration.

The fastest-growing surname in Britain is Zhang, which has grown from 123 in 1996 to 5804 in 2008. It is followed by four other Chinese names - Wang, Yang, Huang and Lin; only after that do a couple of African names get a look in, Moyo and Dube.

Some things have not changed, however. In 1881 the most popular surnames were, in order, Smith, Jones, Williams, Brown, Taylor, Davies, Wilson, Evans and Thomas; those top nine names are still in the exactly the same order of popularity today.

Where people live has also remained remarkably constant - for hundreds of years. People whose names end in -thorpe, -ing or -by are more likely to have descended from invaders such as the Vikings, Danes or Angles, according to Professor Webber, and are still to be found concentrated on the east coast of Britain.