

Dick Lumsden

email: eadtletters@eadt.co.uk

Look after your name, because it may not be around forever

I was an only child. Now in my 60s, having not gathered any random brothers or sisters along the way, I suppose I'm an only adult, although that sounds far more depressing than it really is.

I mean, I have Mrs Lumsden, and I have a few close friends and a lot of acquaintances, colleagues and people I say hello to occasionally, so I'm not lonely or upset.

The point I'm getting to is that when I was born, I was the last male in my line of the family to carry the name Lumsden forward.

At the time, I was more concerned with feeding, sleeping and growing up to worry about it. But when I first realised I was an only adult, I felt a nagging pressure to produce an heir.

In due course, we did have a son, so my part of the family lineage was complete. But he too was an only child, and now an only adult – OK he got married last month, but you know where I'm going with this by now.

I was talking with friends last week who both have two children –

DICK LUMSDEN reflects on a population trend which shows no sign of stopping

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one of each. But we shared the same concerns. We all have one son, and they are all the last in their family line to carry their surname forward.

So where is this all going to lead? A bit of internet research tells me that there a wide range of estimates for the number of surnames in use in the UK today – anything from 50,000 to 150,000. But it does seem that since the census of 1901, we have rather carelessly lost around 200,000 surnames.

A combination of war, disease and “only adults” who don't have children have been the death knell for surnames all over the country.

When man first emerged from the swamps, they probably didn't bother with names (or underpants, or deodorant or any social niceties...) But when populations started to



■ A distant branch of the Lumsden family, perhaps? Ronnie Corbett starred as Timothy Lumsden, Barbara Lott as his mother and William Moore as his father in the 1980s TV series Sorry!

grow, there was a need to identify people more clearly so that you knew where to go for a haircut, or a chicken or a quart of gin for Grandma.

The first round of names related to the jobs people did, Thatcher, Weaver, Farmer, Brewer etc. then they differentiated by adding different first names.

Early immigration from near Europe saw French or Germanic influences, as well as Scandinavian. And then there were the Scots (like me) who sided with clan names and place names (Lumsden is a village outside Aberdeen, since you ask).

So, all in all, by the turn of the 20th Century, we had quite a few names knocking about. But in the century or so since then, we have been steadily losing them.

We will all have our own names until we shuffle off our mortal coil.

But there is no guarantee that the generations that follow us will carry them forward.

Perhaps that is why there is such a trend nowadays in researching family histories online. Seeing where we came from and collating a solid tome of documentary evidence, grainy photographs and yellowed birth certificates with which to heap guilt on our offspring, making them feel obliged to carry on the line.

I'm not really into the whole ancestry tracing thing myself, but I did sneak a peek on one site where, by entering my surname, I was told that Lumsden is the 3,402nd most common name and there are 2,188 of us around – and funnily enough a big chunk of them live in Dorset and Somerset... maybe I'll see if any of them have rooms to spare next summer.

But my conversation with friends did really get me thinking. If roughly half of all children born are male, and half female, then unless children start taking on their mother's family name, this dwindling trend in surnames is going to continue.

If it goes on like this, in another hundred years we'll all be called either Smith or Jones, and another hundred after that, we will all be randomly assigned a set of numbers and letters, which will double as our national identity number, our wifi passcode and our bank account.

Makes you think.

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■ Dick Lumsden is managing director of Owl Marketing Solutions, one of the few companies specialising in marketing and advertising to the 60+ group. dlumsden@owlms.com