

A Nickname Surname

Originally, people in Britain were known only by a single name. Surnames evolved during the Middle Ages (11th-15th centuries) when people began to assume an extra name to avoid confusion and to further identify themselves. The acquisition of surnames was affected by many factors, including social class, social structure, cultural traditions, and naming practices in neighboring cultures. The majority of surnames are derived from patronymics (e.g. Johnson = son of John). Other popular sources for deriving surnames were from nicknames, occupations, or place names. Nickname surnames were derived from an eke-name or added name (e.g. Adam the White). These often reflected the physical characteristics/attributes of the first person to use that name.

The name Whyte was probably a nickname type of surname, for a pale or fair-haired person. The Whyte name is derived from the Old English “hwita” – an Old Saxon baptismal name indicating a person of fair complexion. The first example found of its use as a surname was in Coldingham, where “Uuaiaett Hwite” witnessed King Edgar’s charter of Coldingham sometime between 1097-1107. Several variations from the Hwite base appear to have been common across Scotland, England (le Wyte, Wythe) and Wales (Wynn).