



# Skyrme: From a Family History to a One-Name Study

by David Skyrme (Member 6232)

Perhaps in common with many readers, I started my one-name study because I have an unusual name and people kept asking “where is it from?” “Pembrokeshire” I would say, because that’s where my father was born. Some 20 years ago I constructed an embryonic family tree using information from our family bible that took me back to 1780. So initially, like many people, I was just working on my own family history. This article tells about the transition into a one-name study and the lessons learned.

## Beginnings

My interest in the surname piqued when on a family visit to Hereford Cathedral, my wife came out of the toilet, looked down at the tombstone at her feet and shrieked “it’s mine!” It had her name – Jane Skyrme – though it did say “died March 17, 1778.” That’s when I realised that the name was not confined to Pembrokeshire. A visit to a local record office yielded a set of photocopies of IGI indexes which showed many Skirm, Skyrm, and Skyrme entries in Herefordshire, notably Lugwardine, going back to 1552.

I launched the Skyrme family website ([www.skyrme.info](http://www.skyrme.info)) on St. David’s Day 1996 (1 March) thinking that one day I might research Skyrmes, other than my ancestors, in the future. Having an unusual name and a website for it has the advantage of attracting others who have interest in the name. This has resulted in much useful information being volunteered by email.

One significant contribution was from Clive Pinch, who in the early 1990s had transcribed parish records across Pembrokeshire of instances of certain surnames in his ancestry, including Skyrme. Another correspondent referred me to Ian Skyrme of Tenbury Wells who “had a lot of information on Skyrmes.” Unbeknown to me, Ian had registered the study of Skyrme and its variants with the Guild, an organisation that I was unaware of at the time.

## Family Histories

My family history research started in earnest in 2010. By this time a wealth of information was now on the internet. FreeBMD, Ancestry, and FamilySearch provided my core resources. At this stage I was adopting a typical family historian’s approach - researching an individual on censuses, baptism records etc. tracing their ancestors and descendants and hence constructing family trees.

Once I had compiled my family tree, including all the collateral lines from my earliest ancestor (John Skyrme, born 1749), I found all I could about them and wrote up their story in an online publication. During this research I kept coming across records for many other Skyrmes and filed them away on my hard drive for future research.

After completing my own family I started researching the cluster the Skyrmes around Llangwm on the Cleddau river. It was while doing this that I first came across the Guild and realised, unwittingly, that by exploring the different Skyrme clusters in turn I was effectively doing something akin to a one-name study (ONS). Although the surname Skyrme was already registered (as a variant of Skyrme), my maternal grandmother’s name of Yardy was not. Surprisingly, although it sounds more common than Skyrme it is actually three times rarer. So in February 2013 I joined the Guild and started to undertake the ONS for Yardy and its variants (Yarday, Yardey and Yeardey).

## The ONS Learning Curve

So how different is a one-name study from constructing family trees? Using the Guild’s *Seven Pillars of Wisdom* book as a guide, it is clear that family tree construction is only one aspect (part of pillar 2 – analysis) of a one-name study. However, my family history was more than just trees. I had put them in context with stories, analyses, local and historical context.

For example, my grandfather was one of the few survivors of *HMHS Rohilla*, wrecked off Whitby during the First World War. A family bible entry had merely said “James was in the sea for over 36 hours before being rescued.” This was an understatement! It turns out that disaster of the *Rohilla* was a seminal event in the history of the RNLi (Royal National Lifeboat Institution) and that my grandfather was one of the last survivors to be brought ashore, some 50 hours after the grounding.

Many things are common to both genealogy and an ONS: for example, cross-checking and rigorously recording sources, protecting the privacy of living individuals, constructing family trees. The main things that I now do differently or additionally are:

- Recording all references to a Skyrme that I find, even if it is not immediately relevant
- “Scraping” results of searches on databases and put them into an Excel spreadsheet
- Seeking the origins of the name and noting carefully the when and where variants are used
- Searching a wider range of sources, such as international newspaper archives
- Tabulating and mapping distribution, frequency, dispersion and migration patterns, such as the abbreviated example below for the Skyrme cluster from Manorbier.

	1791	1821	1841	1861	1881	1901
Manorbier	1	2	5	4	3	
Penally		4	5	3		
Pembroke/Monkton				2	5	6
Pembrokeshire (other)				1	4	3
Carmarthenshire				1	2	
Cardiff					2	1
Glamorgan					1	6
Wales (other)						1
Portsmouth					2	5
England (other)					2	5

Number of households with a Skyrme, illustrating migration in the late 19<sup>th</sup> century away from their original roots in Manorbier and Penally to more industrial areas (the dockyards and coalfields).

Perhaps the biggest change is that since I am no longer working on researching one discrete cluster at a time, I am multi-tasking, rotating my time throughout the week between different activities on typically four of the seven pillars – data collection, analysis, synthesis, writing. The overall approach I use is as follows:

- A structured set of folders on my PC. They are in three categories:
  - Original sources – mostly jpg images on different folders for BMDs, censuses (by county), wills and probate, immigration records, military records, newspaper articles, emails, photos of archives, etc.
  - Transcripts and indexes – for example, one spreadsheet has BMD data plus baptisms and burials; another has passenger information; to each worksheet I have added three columns for each individual: ID (from the master database), family tree (e.g. VC01- Vowchurch tree no. 1), and family group F4.1, F4.2 etc. (4th generation from the tree’s progenitor, eldest son’s family etc.)
  - Derived information – trees, syntheses (such as an expanded version of the table above).
- A similar set of “to process” folders as raw data is collected, currently with over 2,000 files.
- As the source material is processed, it is added to my master database, and the relevant indexes updated; the source data file is then moved into its logical source folder with a link being added from the master database entry.

A word now about my master database. Having used RootsMagic for over a decade for my family history I spent significant time considering what was best for an ONS. I downloaded trial versions of all the major genealogical programmes. I wanted something that would allow easy recording of data, and had a lot of customisation and flexibility, especially in terms of reporting and exporting files for publication, website creation or to spreadsheets. The Master Genealogist seemed to fit the bill, and in conjunction with Second Site can generate highly detailed websites. However, its underlying database is old technology and I could never install it properly on my Windows 8 PC.

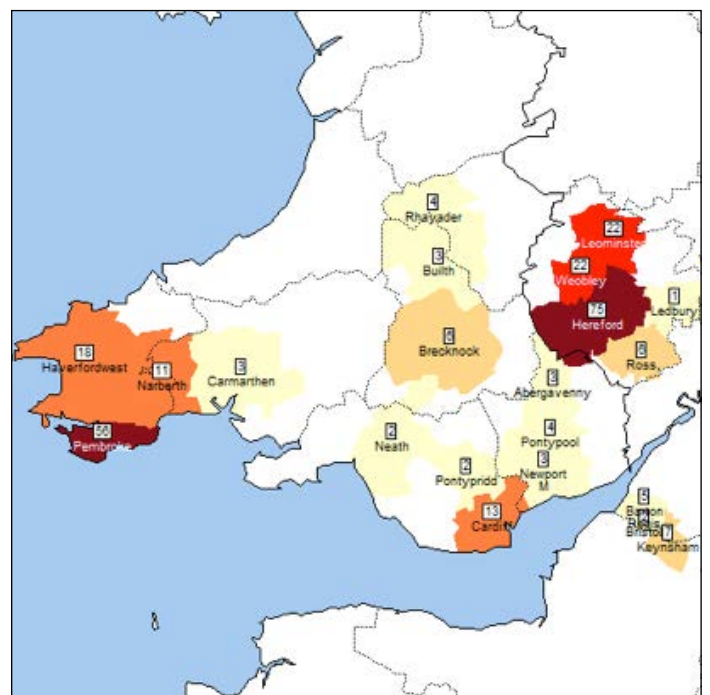
I also seriously evaluated Custodian 4 when it was launched. It has good templates for data entry and uses relational database technology which is good for bringing together different facets of an individual’s life. However, its GEDCOM import is very rudimentary, and since I had over 10,000 facts or events on over 2,000 individuals on RootsMagic from my earlier research it was a non-starter. In the end I found that Family Historian 5 has the flexibility I need, with an ability to write custom queries and reports.

So with the sources, software, and approach described above there is an ongoing rhythm to my one-name study. Also, by taking the Advanced One-Name Study online course by Pharos Tutors, I am able to apply the best techniques and put my ONSs into their wider context. The next section describes some of the progress made to date on the Skyrme One-Name Study, for which I am now the registered holder.

### Family Folklore vs. The Experts

Being a rare name, Skyrme does not feature in any of the well known surname dictionaries. Family folklore always held that the name was Norse in origin and came to Wales with the Viking raids in the 9<sup>th</sup> or 10<sup>th</sup> century. They cite the name of an island off Pembrokeshire (Skomer) as evidence of this. Another Skyrme researcher cites similar folklore in her family, saying that they came via Skye, hence Skyeman. Although such explanations may seem reasonable, we do know that the Skyrmes of Pembrokeshire were the result of one Thomas Skirm, a lawyer, moving there from Ludlow in Herefordshire, hardly on the route of Viking raids!

One online source lists the name Skirme as being derived from the medieval French *eskirmer*, a fencing master. Skrimshire, Skermer, Skirmer are given as alternative spellings. While the link to a “fencing master” seems a bit far-fetched, it is not too far removed from what seems a more credible source, the Internet Surname Database, compiled by Michael Brook. Here it states that it derives from the Middle English “skirme(n)” meaning “to fight,” “to defend.” He cites instances of Skurmere, Skirmer, Skerme from the late 13<sup>th</sup> century.



Distribution of Skyrme and variants in 1881 census, using Surname Atlas.

While Skirme does tie up with early instances of the name in Herefordshire (Lugwardine christenings 1552) none of the instances cited by Brook are near any of the clusters of Skyrme and its variants in the 17<sup>th</sup> century. Skyrme is also mentioned by Guppy (1890) as one of the names “peculiar” to Herefordshire (i.e. much higher than average frequency): “SKYRME is also an ancient English surname. The Skyrmes of Herefordshire may find ancestors in the Skermes of Oxfordshire in the reign of Edward I” (1239-1307). The matter is only likely to be resolved, if ever, by a more thorough search of medieval records, and perhaps DNA research.

### How Do You Spell That?

I know from personal experience how often my own surname is misspelt. What certainly hasn't helped is how often it is misspelt in indices and on the major genealogical sites by transcribers unfamiliar with the name. This has meant searching page by page through censuses to discover Skyrmes whom I was certain lived at a particular place. The variants Skirm, Skirme, Skerme, Skyrme, Skyrm all sound the same when spoken. My initial analysis of variants shows:

- Skirm or Skirme is evident as an early variant in Herefordshire, most notably at Lugwardine, and is found in the 17<sup>th</sup> century in Pembrokeshire and also by early settlers in New England. Today it survives only in the USA.

- Skyrme was found in the 17<sup>th</sup> century in both Herefordshire and Pembrokeshire, and also London.
- Skyrmes was sometimes found in Pembrokeshire but (as in the case of some of my own ancestors), was a spelling that quite often appeared in official records, but towards the end of the 19<sup>th</sup> century was mostly standardised as Skyrme.
- Skyrm was unique to Herefordshire and is also found today in the USA, Canada, and Australia to where some 19<sup>th</sup> century Herefordshire people emigrated.

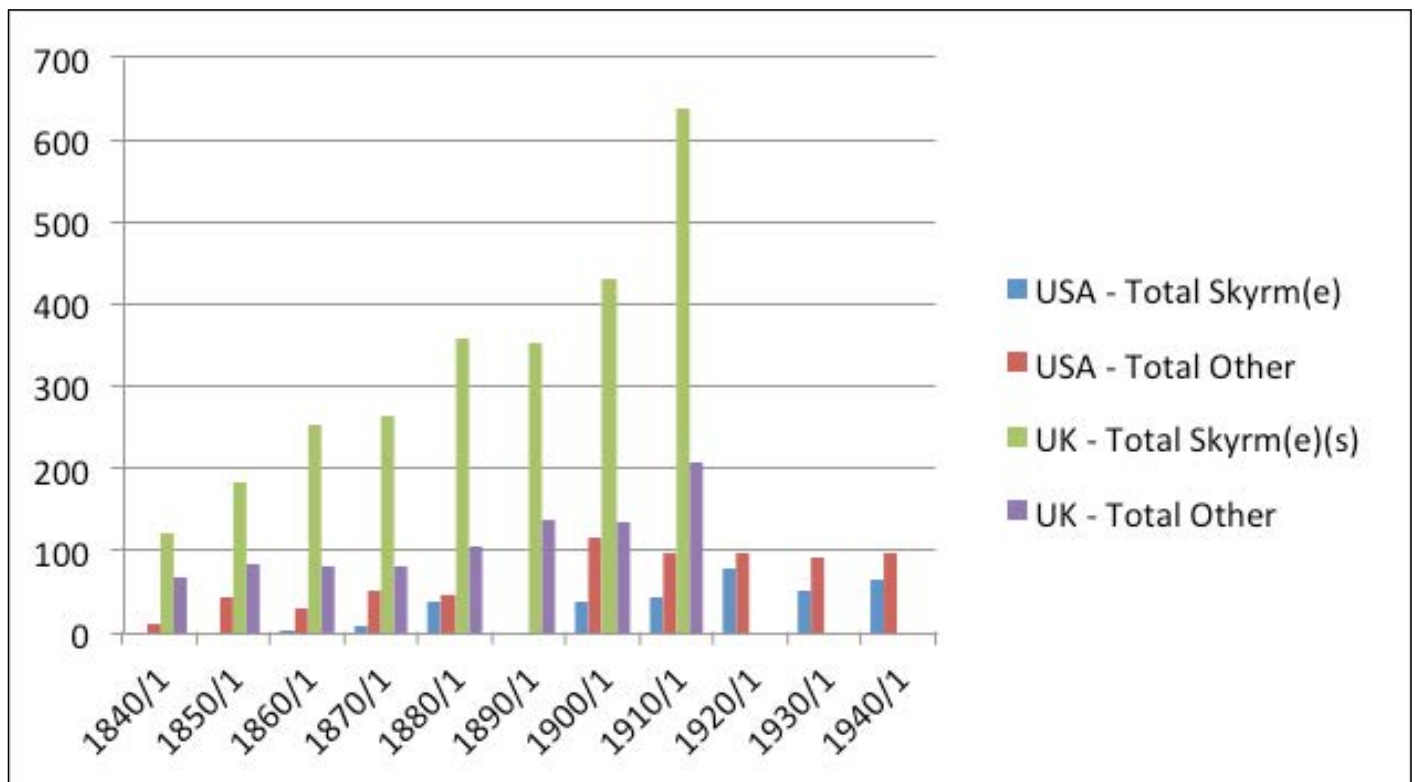
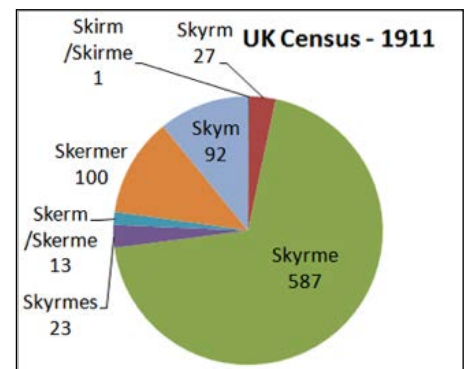
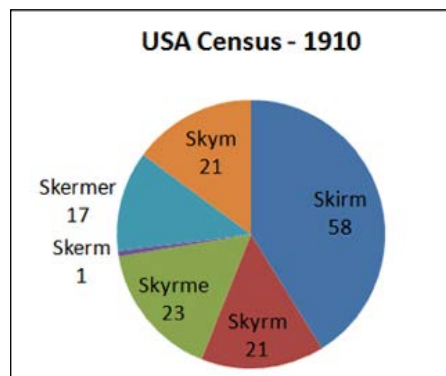
Of other potential variants – Skym is found in parts of South Wales and may be indeed be a true variant. Skermer, however, was originally clustered around the Midlands. So although it may have the same derivation, further research is needed to confirm whether it is a true variant. All these variants and their

distribution over time are shown in the charts below.

### A Sense of Time and Place

For me an ONS is about getting behind the data and looking at the clusters of Skyrmes in their historical and social context. Reading local and social history helps explain several factors in the dispersion and migration of Skyrmes, such as:

- The shift from agricultural labourers in villages to trades in the Royal Naval Dockyard at Pembroke, which became a major employer in the area, particularly during and after the Crimean War.
- The late 19<sup>th</sup> century migration to the prosperous coalfields of the Rhondda and neighbouring valleys.
- The extent and importance of oyster fishing in Milford Haven, and its careful regulation, with





some of the catch being regularly transported to London.

There are other more personal insights that would not have come from data alone, but from reading newspaper reports and archives, and visiting the locations involved:

- Did the shipwright Skyrmes from Burton, over four miles north of Pembroke Dockyard, walk there every day? Yes they did – you can travel their route today and see the location of the ferry they took; and they did this six days a week; there is a newspaper report of a John Skyrme walking early one Saturday morning with two colleagues to work, when they got caught in a thunderstorm. John witnessed a lightning strike kill his friend at his side.
- Thomas Skyrme, according to one correspondent, “was killed by a pedigree black bull.” Further research revealed a newspaper story of a seven-hour lingering death after being crushed by a threshing machine that overturned. A visit to the Pembrokeshire record office produced estate and solicitor’s papers that covered the insurance and correspondence with the widow over compensation.
- The migration of several Herefordshire Skyrms to Canada and the USA. Mostly they were farmers and cattlemen. Several were “distinguished pioneers” in furthering the Herefordshire breed and carried on in the same vein in America. Later newspaper reports showed how they became pillars of their young and growing communities in the New World.
- How come one Ellen Skyrme of Pembroke came to marry a policeman from London, when girls mostly married people in their direct neighbourhood? The answer is found in the Metropolitan Police Act 1860, which gave them responsibility for policing all royal naval dockyards.
- Ronald Skyrme, who lived in Cardiff, married a bigamist, probably unwittingly. This only came to light after he died when his 29-year-old widow who had married again (for the third time)

claimed maintenance from her third husband who had left her. In his defence, her first husband (whom she had married before Ronald) was brought to court to prove that her subsequent marriages were null and void. Further reading of social history at the time indicates that bigamy was much more common than the 100 or so cases brought to court each year.

As I dig behind the data I find many more such interesting facts that add context to the data. I publish a regular flow of these in the “snippets” section of the Skyrme.info website.

### Progress

Like many one-namers, I realise that my “study” is never ending. However many questions you answer, you will ask yourself more, even if your enquirers don’t (most are only interested in their own ancestors). Nevertheless, I feel it important to gauge the overall scale of the task.

Being a small study on a rare name makes it somewhat easier to do this. I have listed the different tasks for each of the Guild’s seven pillars on a separate Excel worksheet and estimated progress. For example, for task 1.14 (England & Wales census) I’ve estimated that I have processed 850 of 1,250 records, and for task 6.2 (publish a chapter on a cluster) I estimate 10 chapters in total, of which I have published one and almost completed another. The result of the summations at the bottom of each worksheet is the overview chart below.

While this gives a sense of satisfaction when another task nears completion, does it tell the whole story? No! The

goal posts keep changing and the study expands for two main reasons: 1) more sources of data are coming online all the time; and 2) I will continue to explore questions behind the data leading to more in-depth study, including visits to record offices and carrying out different analyses.

The progress chart also reflects tasks that have been added or grown in importance since shifting from charting family histories to an ONS. One key challenge is seeking definitive links between some 10 distinctive clusters – three in Pembrokeshire, six in Herefordshire and one in the USA (the 17<sup>th</sup> century Skirm settlers). This requires looking for pre-18<sup>th</sup> century records such as hearth tax and poll records. Hopefully, this might help address another key research question – the origin of the surname. Why were the first significant clusters in Herefordshire, yet early references to now obsolete variants appear in Sussex and Oxfordshire?

### Conclusion

My transition from a family historian to a one-namer has shown me how each approach can enrich the other. The family historian can learn from the one-namer to broaden their searches to all people sharing the name. This can help connect orphaned branches and also understand the distribution and migration of their ancestors. Conversely, family historians can help one-namers see beyond the mass of data and explore the context and fascinating stories of particular individuals and families. ■

*This article was originally written as part of a Pharos Teaching & Tutoring Advanced ONS Course. It appears here in its entirety.*

