

# Understanding The Royal Name Plantagenet.

## How DNA helps

By **Dr John S Plant**

**T**he name Plantagenet was originally spelt Plante Genest or Plantegenest and later Plauntegenet or Plantaginet. It originated as a nickname for Count Geoffrey of Anjou, father of King Henry II who ascended the English throne in 1154. This name has traditionally been taken to mean a 'sprig of broom', which is an instance of a 'hairy shoot'. It seems that there was an earlier tradition for such symbolism.

Old Aquitanian Gods and Goddesses had the names of plants and animals. This predated the name Plantapilosa of a famous ninth-century Aquitanian duke. Early medieval beliefs were beginning to develop into scholastic writings about man's vegetable soul with its powers of nutrition, growth and generation when the noble name Plantapilosa led on to the names Plante Genest and de la Planta in neighbouring Anjou. Plantapilosa means 'hairy shoot', which seemingly symbolised robust growth and regeneration.

The traditional explanation, dating back to 1605, for the Plantagenet name is that Geoffrey Plante Genest

wore a sprig of broom (the *planta genista*) in his bonnet. However, this tradition was broken in the second half of the twentieth century by a claim in the *Encyclopedia Britannica* that the Plantagenet name 'more likely' arose because Geoffrey supposedly planted broom to improve his hunting covers.

Deviation from the pre-revision meanings of Plantagenet can be laid mostly at the door of late twentieth-century Surname Dictionaries and their partially-evidenced account of the Plant surname.

Ernest Weekly's early twentieth-century book on Surnames had proposed the meaning 'sprig' or 'young offspring' for Plant. In the *Oxford English Dictionary*, plant is listed with the archaic meanings 'shoot', 'sprig', 'scion' or 'young person' – the words sprig and scion have human 'offshoot' as well as vegetable meanings. There are other surnames with a similar meaning: Boyce, Boyes, Child, Childers, Children, Jeune, Jevons, Soanes, Son, Vaughan, Young, Younger and Youngson. In Welsh, plant literally means 'children'.

However, in the mid twentieth-century, this interpretation of Plant was ignored by Surname Dictionaries and revised to mean a 'gardener' or 'planter of various plants'. The 1950 edition of the *Encyclopedia Britannica* had mentioned only the traditional 'sprig wearing' story for Plantagenet; but then the 'broom planter' story was added as a 'more likely explanation' by the time of the 1974 edition.

The Surname Dictionaries justify their explanation by pointing to the thirteenth century, English names *Plantebene* and *Planterose*. However, the full set of such names comprises: *Plauntegenet*; *Plantebene*; *Plantefolie*; *Plantefene*; and *Planterose*. These do not all construe 'gardener'. Instead, they can all be related to the medieval

concept of 'generation' which, in medieval belief, was a power of man's vegetable soul. This would then categorise these names as 'names of philandering', of which there are various other examples. Not to mince words, an archaic meaning of the verb to plant and the modern meaning of the Welsh verb *planta* is 'to procreate'.

The documentary evidence for the Plantagenets and Welsh Law indicates that there were those who practised polygyny – that is philandering with many women. For the sake of the dignity of the Plantagenets however, it can be added that there were also semantic extensions of the generating sense of plant to such meanings as 'establishing' or 'founding'. Salacious sense to the vegetable soul, symbolised by the 'sprig of broom', helps to explain the long delay before Plantagenet appears as an official royal surname. There is no contemporary evidence that Geoffrey Plante Genest's royal descendants used Plantagenet as an hereditary surname before the mid fifteenth century. Eventually, it seems, the nickname Plantagenet attained sufficient dignity to become accepted as a royal surname; and, indeed, in this spirit, the Angevin count is now most remembered for founding a legitimate royal dynasty and establishing the Angevin Empire.

The revision, in the second half of the twentieth century, of the meaning of Plantagenet, at least diverts from any possible embarrassment that might be caused by a 'hairy shoot' symbolism for the Plantagenet name. Rather than supporting this revision however, recent DNA results endorse the traditional story for Plantagenet which is consistent with a 'sprig' symbolism for generating a fresh generation.

A clue to the contemporary meaning of plant, occurring in Plantagenet-like names, relates to how best to explain



the large population of the surname Plant. This surname was believed to have had very many separate origins. This offered sustenance to the twentieth-century revision of the Plant and Plantagenet names. These names were claimed to have meanings 'gardener/planter' instead of 'sprig'; and, it was believed that the large population of Plants arose because they descended from very many unrelated gardeners, albeit that the documentary evidence gives various other occupations. Instead, the DNA evidence indicates that the Plants mostly belong to an abnormally large single family. It can now be said with some conviction that there is an alternative explanation for the large population of the Plant surname and this alternative does not endorse the mid twentieth-century revision.

Computer simulations indicate that monogamous men, remaining faithful to their wives, will produce typically around 100 offspring from each medieval male ancestor after 20 generations. Sometimes, more offspring will result by monogamy for a 'single-ancestor' surname; but, according to the simulations, not nearly enough to explain the large population of the main Plant family. By impregnating many women (i.e. polygyny), a single ancestor can get a surname off to a much faster start and apply a large multiplier to the whole of the subsequent population of his family. This would be augmented still further if philandering were practised throughout a few generations.

The DNA evidence makes a 'many children' hypothesis viable for Plant though the parentage of these children is unknown. The sense 'children' of plant is largely self-sufficient, not only linguistically, but also for explaining the large fraction matching for the populous Plant surname. Plant is frequent amongst the million or more surnames in England and Wales, being the 617th most common.

A few additional remarks can now be ventured about how a surname such as Plant might have arisen. Patronymic surnames usually give the forefather's forename explicitly though some surnames, such as Son, might be classified as implicit patronymics. Omitting the father's forename might have been held to be adequate if, for example, the father was known by



Henry II disputing with his archbishop. Like his father, Henry was an open violator of the marriage bond.

rumour. For example, there could have been notoriously many children and keeping their paternity clandestine might have been encouraged to avoid any implied challenge to the father's more legitimate heirs.

It would be useful to have a Y-DNA signature for the Plantagenets which could then be compared with those of their possible male-line living descendants. However, there is as yet no 'Plantagenet' Y-signature in the public domain to enable any such comparison. My initial hope was that some consistent evidence would emerge from amongst those who have variously been offered as possible male-line descendants from the Plantagenets. That might allow a hypothesis to be formed whereby some set of matching Y-signatures might be considered to represent a descent from the medieval Plantagenets. However, DNA tests have so far only uncovered various mismatching Y-signatures.

It has often been held that the illegitimate male-line descent from the royal 'Plantagenet' family is to be found amongst bearers of the surnames Somerset (Beaufort relatives), Cornwall, and Warren. In so far as DNA evidence is yet available, it has been found that there is no known Y-DNA signature shared by the surnames Cornwall and Warren. For the surname Warren, there are already

several DNA results; but, so far, they do not indicate that there is an abnormally large family with a particular modal signature. At least so far, the surname Warren does not reveal any one Y-DNA signature as an obvious contender for a Y-signature from the 'Plantagenets'.

There are instances of the surname Plantagenet itself, particularly in France, though these have typically been held to be 'pretenders', unrelated to the royal 'Plantagenet family'. As yet, no Y-DNA result is available for the modern bearers of the Plantagenet surname. Perhaps the best hope for obtaining a Y-signature for the royal 'Plantagenet family' would be to seek that of the Duke of Beaufort and his male-line relatives. Even for this however, the sceptics question whether that would be a true signature of the royal 'Plantagenet family' since even that reputed male-line descends through two illegitimacies. I have written to the Duke of Beaufort about the prospects for obtaining such a signature 'for the Plantagenets' but I have received no reply.

Further relevant evidence may be forthcoming in due course.

A fuller version of this article is available On the Guild's website at: [www.one-name.org/members/DNA/PlantAndPlantagenet.pdf](http://www.one-name.org/members/DNA/PlantAndPlantagenet.pdf) ■