

So, are you a Scot called Inglis or a Britain from France?

Peter
Trudgill



email: newsdesk@archant.co.uk

You may have noticed that people with the surname Inglis are usually Scottish. At first sight, this seems to be rather odd, because Inglis means 'English': why would Scottish people be called English?

Of course, a little bit of thought shows that English people in England are very unlikely to be called English, because everyone in England is English, or at least they were in the late medieval period when surnames became established.

There was no point in calling someone from England 'English' unless they went and lived in another country, such as Scotland, where being English was unusual and therefore a characteristic which served to distinguish them from everybody else. People called Inglis today are typically Scots who had a distant male ancestor from England. And we can notice, too, that Inglis is not an English word: it is the form the word English takes in Scots, the indigenous language of southern and eastern Scotland.

In the same way, people whose surname is Ireland are usually English.

But the name Scott has a rather more complex history. Scott is predominantly a Scottish name, which seems to contradict what I have just been saying. If Inglis is



■ Film director Sir Ridley Scott's surname has a complex history.

Picture:
JORDAN
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Scottish, you would expect Scott to be English – which it isn't.

The clue to this puzzle lies in the fact that, in Scotland, Scott is a name which is particularly associated with the Borders and other parts of the south of Scotland. The original Scots were the Gaelic-speaking people from Ireland who crossed the Irish Sea and settled in Argyll, in the west of Scotland, at about the same time that the Anglo-Saxons were settling in the east of England. Scott was therefore a name which the Germanic-speaking Lowland Scots used for the northern Celtic-speaking Highlanders.

The surnames Welch, Welsh and Walsh also have a rather different story to tell, because it is not necessarily the case that those who bear this family name are English people descended from some Welsh ancestor. The original Old English meaning of Welsh was 'foreigner', so if you are a Welch, you had a forebear who came to England from some other country which may or may not have been Wales.

The biggest puzzle of all, though, indeed seem to be why some British people are called Britain. The answer to this is that one of their ancestors was a Breton, from Brittany in France.