

Who you are... Fairbairn

Provided by Joanna Laver, Hall of Names Europe

NOWADAYS, the Fairbairns of the British Isles are predominantly in Scotland, especially in Fife and the border counties. But how and when did the name originate?

Formed centuries ago by the ancient Anglo-Saxon tribes of Britain, it was a name typically given to a person with attractive, youthful looks, or someone who was noted as having been a beautiful child. It is derived from the Old English words fair, which means lovely, and bearn, meaning child.

In Scotland, it could have been a variation of "freeborn". However, the name may also be a local surname applied to someone from the settlement of Fairbourne in Kent or Fairburn in Yorkshire. In these examples, it belongs to the large category of Anglo-Saxon habitation names, which are derived from pre-existing names for towns, villages, parishes, or farmsteads.

Analysis of surviving records has revealed the Fairbairn family to be descended from Anglo-Saxon tribesmen. Documents such as the Domesday Book suggest that the name was first found in Yorkshire. In the aftermath of the Battle of Hastings, Scotland had to absorb refugees,

including Fairbairns, wishing to distance themselves from Norman tyranny. Over time the surname was spelled in several ways, although this was common before the 19th century.

The Anglo-Saxon ancestors of the Fairbairn family migrated to England from what is now the Schleswig-Holstein region of Germany, settling along the south-eastern coast of England



in the 5th century. By the beginning of the 11th century, the Fairbairns had emerged as notable landowners in Yorkshire, and the name soon spread to Scotland. Early in its Scottish history, the name became associated with the Armstrongs of Roxburghshire (see August Scots Magazine). The Fairbairns established an estate at Berwickshire in 1327 and, along with the Armstrongs, became a very strong border clan surviving the Middle Ages, despite famine,

plagues and the trials of daily life. By the mid-1600s, the name had become fairly common in that area, where farming and fishing were the main occupations.

The political and religious upheaval of the 17th century forced many Fairbairns to leave the country, many seeking a new life in Ireland, where they were granted lands belonging to the Catholic Irish. The newly discovered lands of the Western hemisphere also drew those seeking land, riches, religious and political freedom.

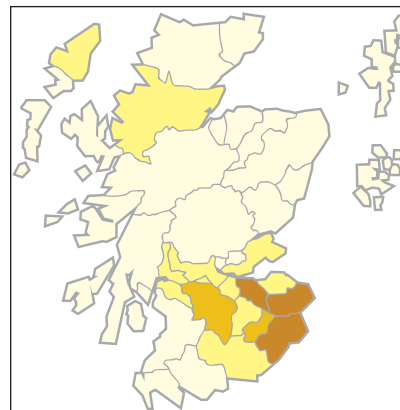
In 1881, a severe storm caused the worst fishing disaster in Scotland's history. Fleets of vessels were caught in a North Sea storm and of the 189 that lost their lives, 12 bore the name Fairbairn. The oldest was aged 37, the youngest just 17. Known as Black Friday, this event has become woven into the tapestry of Fairbairn family history.

Do you have a tale about your family name, or are you interested in its origins? Have you uncovered a mystery in your genealogy research? You can share your findings with us. Write to Family History, The Scots Magazine, 80 Kingsway East, Dundee, DD4 8SL, or email: mail@scotsmagazine.co.uk

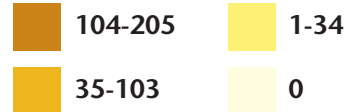
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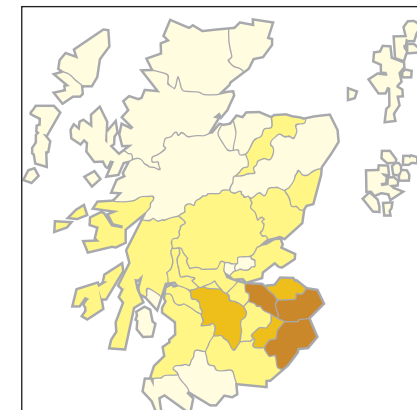
Distribution of Fairbairn families in 1841



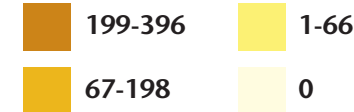
Number of Fairbairn families



Distribution of Fairbairn families in 1901



Number of Fairbairn families



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