



Ancient Origins of the Wilson Families

The surname Wilson has its roots in both Scotland and England, and before that in Normandy and Denmark. There are at least four principal families lines bearing the name of Wilson in Britain today (stemming from Wolf of Denmark via clan Inness, William of clan Gunn, William de Waldershelf, and an unknown Norman invader named Wilson). Spelling variants include Wilson, Willson, Willsonne, Wilsone, Wulson, Wilsoun, Wolsoun, Wolfson, Wilfson, Wylsone and others, some versions being older than others but the differences often meaning relatively little, since one man might spell his own name in more than one way at different times in his life.

The Norse Willsons of Scotland

The Willson's in Scotland and the Wilsons in England are of two different lines which may have a common origin in the distant past. Many of the English Wilsons are of Norman ancestry whereas the Scottish Willson's are mostly of Picto-Norse descent and represent either a branch (“sept”) of the clan Gunn in Caithness or the much older House of Inness in Banffshire. The clan Gunn Willson's are descended from George Gunn “the Crowner,” through his son William—hence “Will's son”—who lived in the late 1400's.

The Wilsons of clan Gunn, however, were a relatively late-emerging Norse branch of the Wilson surname. The name Wilson definitely dates to a much earlier time in Scotland. The early Nordic Wilsons were descended from a Danish Prince of the Royal House of Norway (Norway administered Denmark for centuries), and established

themselves at a very remote period in the Orkney Islands, in the 9th century, soon after 888 when King Harold of Norway routed the more rebellious clans. The name occurs in the Viking Sagas and the Orkneyinga Sagas.

European historians generally refer to the period between the 8th and 11th centuries as the Viking Age. The Vikings expanded east, west and south from Scandinavia through trading, raiding and the establishment of settlements. From bases in Sweden they invaded the Baltic region and Russia; from Denmark they invaded England, France and coastal Spain. The Shetland and Orkney Islands were the first of the British Isles to be colonized around 780, and by 800 the Western Isles, the Faeroe Islands and Iceland were colonized. In the Orkney Islands the indigenous Pictish population may have been entirely replaced by Viking settlers from Denmark. Numerous Viking settlements sprang up both east and west of present-day Cheshire County where our Tattenhall Wilsons were to be centered. Scotland did not regain administrative control of all of these lands until 1469, and the language called Norn, the Norse dialect of Shetland and Orkney, survived there until the 19th century.

These earliest Wilsons stem specifically from a Danish tribe who followed a 9th-century Prince named Wolf—which allegedly gave all Wilsons who possessed a grant of arms the privilege of using the golden wolf on their family crest. The Wilson surname from this line is a corruption of “Wolf’s son” and “Wilf’s son.” Apparently any Wilson coat of arms containing the rampant wolf, and there are a number of them, indicates an ancient line stemming from Prince Wolf in the 9th century. The Wilsons of Sandbach in Cheshire, for example, situated just a few miles from Tattenhall where our Wilsons lived, had just such a coat of arms: a golden wolf on a black background surmounted by three gold stars (or, in the old English/French language of heraldry: “Sable, a wolf rampant Or, in chief three estoiles of the second”). Odds are that our Wilsons, in such close proximity but of commoner status by the 18th century, were from the same stock but had lost their armorial roots over the generations.

If a definite connection could be made with the Sandbach Wilsons, then any male Wilson descendant of John Wilson of Tattenhall and Lincolnville would be officially entitled to bear arms derived from those shown at the head of this chapter. Only first sons of first sons of first sons etc. are allowed to bear *exactly* the same arms as their ancestor, but all other sons may bear a version of those arms with some slight change introduced. If the bearer of a coat of arms dies without male heirs, his daughters are allowed to create their own arms by combining their father’s with their husband’s arms. Over a million different surnames exist in the world today, only about 75,000 of which have historically been associated with arms, so we are fortunate that the Wilson name is among them. Of course, it is possible to design your own new coat of arms and have it registered, but it would have no legitimate historical connection or significance.

It should be noted that the name Wilson was recorded in Ayrshire at least a hundred years prior to the time of William Gunn: a Michael Wilson, born in the mid-1300’s, was burgess of Ayr in 1418. That example alone predates the Wilsons of the clan Gunn by at least a century or more, and probably stems from the more ancient clan

Inness, Wilsons who had taken their name from Prince Wolf. The Wilsons of the Tattenhall and Carden area who trace their ancestry to Andrew Willsonne (born ca. 1450) also predate William Gunn.

During the creation of the Scottish boroughs under King David of Scotland (1084-1153) many English/Welsh people came north to settle in the new boroughs; Norman-descended Wilsons may have been among them. In any case, the Ayrshire group of Wilsons is considerably larger than any other branch of Wilsons in Scotland, and they also seem to have held lands in Ireland.

The Norse-descended clan Inness Wilsons and clan Gunn Wilsons took lands around Berwickshire, Ayrshire, Fraserburgh, Fingach, Kelton, Glenderston, Glasgow and Edinburgh, and are especially numerous today in Ulster. They aided William the Conqueror by taking part in the war on the side of the Vikings, whom Harold of England fought in the North of England prior to the battle of Hastings in 1066. This was a divisionary tactic which drew Harold's attention from the actual invasion site of William the Conqueror in the south of England.

The battle chiefs and Kings of the Danes and even the French Normans were, in fact, all Vikings originating from Denmark and were all related by marriage and blood. It is interesting to note that clan Gunn, a Norse clan long associated with the name Wilson in Caithness, were later related by marriage to Duke de St. Clair (Normandy), which shows the extent of the Norman/Danish influence and gives an indication to the family relationships and unity of Viking families.

Although the surname Wilson is among the 30 most common surnames in Ireland today, it did not appear there until the 17th century when Scottish settlers arrived. All Wilsons from Ireland are actually of Scottish ancestry, descended from Scots who went there after the religious wars when King William of Orange (1650-1702) settled Protestant lowland Scottish families there. It is most common today in Ulster, and also in Antrim, Armagh, Down, Tyrone, Dublin, Derry and Fermanagh..

The Norse-Scottish Wilsons also moved south into England, especially after the disbanding of the Scottish border clans in 1603. Major branches of the Wilson family were established in Eshton Hall, Yorkshire; Melton, Bankhall; Penrith in Cumberland; Casterton Hall in Westmoreland; Forest Hall in Northumberland; and Rivington Hall in Lancashire.

The Wilson family of Ayrshire was a Covenanting Protestant family. ("Covenanters" were adherents of the "National Covenant," a 1638 agreement among Scottish Presbyterians to uphold their faith.) The name is also seen in the land of Kintyre (a peninsula between Scotland and Ireland) where the Ayrshire Wilsons who were Covenanters settled and were given farm land.

The Wilson's in Glasgow are predominantly related to the Wilson family that originated in 11th-century Berwickshire, Scotland and moved out into Ayrshire, during

the formation of the Royal Borroughs under King David, and later into Kintyre (during the Covenanting wars). This accounts for the earliest records of the name, which are found in Yorkshire, Berwickshire and Ayrshire. Berwickshire is situated along the border of Scotland and England, but was originally part of Scotland. The earliest written historical records of the name Wilson as a Scottish name are in Berwickshire, which is where the Wilsons of the lands south of Edinburgh and on the West coast, Ayrshire and Kintyre, are claimed to descend from. It is interesting to note that Berwick is barely a stone's throw from Yorkshire, where the Norman-descended Wilsons of Jerusalem Hill are to be found.

The murder of the "virgin martyr" Margaret Wilson (who was of Berwickshire) at the hands of Oliver Cromwell (1599-1658) caused many Wilsons who were Covenanters to go west into Ayrshire and later Argyll. One instance of this is Margaret's brother, who was outraged at his sister's murder and became a soldier in the Covenanting army which opposed Cromwell and his slaughter of Presbyterians. After waging war he fled to Kintyre and ultimately Ireland and may have ended up in the American colonies as a fugitive.

The Norman Wilsons of Jerusalem Hill, Yorkshire

In Yorkshire the name of Wilson of Jerusalem Hill is attributed to the descendants of Sir William (Will) de Waldershelf, a knight from the Pennine Hills of Hunshelf and Waldershelf in Normandy, who came to the British Isles to join William the Conqueror after the conquest in 1066 and was apportioned lands in Yorkshire. His descendant, John de Hunshelf and de Waldershelf, born around 1320, had a son William whose son John was the first to take the surname Wilson, in honor of their ancestor. This Yorkshire Wilson family is of the peerage, and their full and documented family tree can be found in older editions of *Burke's Peerage*. Despite being from Normandy, their coat of arms is similar to that of most of the Nordic Wilson arms, with a rampant Wilson wolf surmounted by three stars, and similar Latin mottoes including *Aut pax, aut bellum* ("Either in peace or in war") and *Vincit qui se vincit* ("He conquers who conquers himself").

As indicated above, some of the Norman Wilsons were apparently also the descendants of the original Danish Wilsons. They had been driven out of Scotland and England in 1002 by King Ethelred the Unready because he feared (justifiably) that they were against him. Fleeing to France, they returned with William the Conqueror and were by then considered Normans. The Wilson family is found in the Domesday Book (William the Conqueror's census of England in 1086), indicating that people of that surname (distinct from William de Waldershelf's Norman line) had come to Britain with William the Conqueror in 1066. In Devon a Manorial Lordship dating from the Domesday Book is also called Wilson. The arms include the emblematic Wilson wolf with a fleur-de-lis overhead representing Normandy, and the motto of *Wil sone wil* (a pun on the name, translating as "Get one's way").

There is new and current speculation based on some recent evidence found in a huge DNA study (drawn on by the BBC for their show “The blood of the Vikings”). DNA samples were taken from groups across the four countries of the British Isles in order to determine the impact and spread of the Danish bloodlines, especially in the areas which were traditionally known to be Viking: the area of “the Danelaw” lands in northeastern England, and northeastern Scotland (Caithness and Orkney). It was revealed that the Irish today are predominantly descended from the “Britons” or Brythonic Celts, as are most of the Welsh, and are not of Danish or Norman ancestry. Areas of northeastern Scotland and the Danelaw areas of England, on the other hand, were found to be predominantly of Danish/Norman descent. The Wilson name, however, does have some representation in northern Wales, and this is also an area of A+ blood grouping—a blood group which only people of Nordic descent have. [See, for example, Helgason *et al.* (2001) MtDNA and the islands of the North Atlantic: estimating the proportions of Norse and Gaelic ancestry. *American Journal of Human Genetics*, vol. 68, pp. 723-737.]

In conclusion...

The early Wilsons were a courageous and determined lot. David Cramb Wilson, a Scottish genealogist and prominent Wilson researcher, writes:

As a Wilson I still feel the connection to the old country and the “family,” which is something the Wilsons as a bunch definitely have retained, wherever in the world their forebears ended up, whether they went there voluntary or were involuntarily transported there because of their loyalties, political or religious beliefs. Wilsons had a lot of martyrs to our many political causes, it seems, but we should take pride in that type of courage, because most of all the Wilson's fought and died for their faith and their right to practice their chosen beliefs at a time when Protestants in England were being put to the sword. Even now, when I meet other Wilson's in my daily routines and travels, there is an almost immediate rapport and acceptance of one another. It is a very strange and unspoken thing I personally can't explain, but certainly it has its roots in clandom, from a time when all members of a clan and family were in fact related to the chief or head and there was an acceptance of mutual respect if not fealty to one another. I think for the Wilsons, though, it is almost a racial group type of thing, since, if historical speculation is correct, we were once a huge and powerful family who were together since well before the 9th century.



Tattenhall Parrish church and graveyard. The tower dates from 1512.