

Where did the Gamesons come from?

Gamson = Gameson

In seeking an answer to this question, it is first necessary to establish that the spellings Gamson and Gameson denote branches of the same family, or the same families and even the same individuals at different times and in different records

In 1995 I received two letters from a certain John Jeffreys Gameson, which included this comment:

One aspect of my name is that a distant relative used to pronounce it as if it were spelt "GAMSON". I asked her why and she replied that two cousins were married, one a GAMSON and the other a GAMESON. In fact in the 1891 census the widow of Thomas Gamson, Mary [Gameson], was still living in Tredegar; living with her was her son-in-law John Gameson an Engine driver, however his wife was not recorded. If this description is correct, then this must have been the GAMSON/GAMESON marriage.

Now this is partly incorrect or at least incomplete. The entry actually gives (at 2, Forge Row):

Mary Gameson	head	widow	57	
John A. Gameson	son-on-law		28	engine driver
Caroline Gameson	daur	married	25	

So they were all spelled with a -e- in the census. Nonetheless, in 1862 there is a civil registration of a **John Arthur Gamson**, born in the sub-registrar's district of 'Bedwelty', so presumably

there is truth behind the story in that John A. began life without an -e- and acquired one as life progressed. But Caroline Gamson (no -e-) is registered, also in the 'Bedwelty' district born in the last quarter of 1865.

Go to Uwchlawrcoed, Tredegar, 1871, and you find **Thomas Gamson** (no -e-), born in Llanelly, Breconshire, a brickmaker, living at 2, Agents Row with his wife Mary and their six children including **Carrie Gamson** aged 6, presumably the Caroline in the 1891 census.

This does seem to establish that the two spellings were interchangeable within the same family. We shall see further examples.

Two Gameson families in Monmouthshire

I am tempted to suggest this answer to the question, "Where did the Gamesons come from?": that there were two unconnected sets of people in Monmouthshire called Gamson or Gameson.

One group had lived for a long time in rural eastern Monmouthshire, and are represented by those of Wolvesnewton, Skenfrith, and Grosmont.

The other group originated elsewhere, maybe in the English Midlands. Some of them came to work in the ironworks at Merthyr Tydfil and later moved to Monmouthshire, while maybe others moved direct from the Midlands to the iron, steel

and coal industries of Monmouthshire. Many of these acquired the Welsh language in the course of their sojournings – which means, of course, that their ability to speak Welsh is not a reliable clue as to their place of origin.

Theories about the original homeland: the Midlands

John Jeffreys Gameson wrote to me (9th April 1995):

In our family one of my cousins used to say that the family originally came from Birmingham in connection with Iron smelting ... My late uncle said that this was incorrect, although he claimed that descendants of the original Midlands GAMESONS lived in Walsall as late as 1945 (my uncle lived in the Midlands until just after the war and then moved to Devon).

And in a letter from Alec Hughes of Llanmartin, (September 1997) Alec writes about:

the first marriage of JAMES GAMESON [in 1765 to Sarah Smith, in Walsall], who married for a second time [to Martha Jones] at TREVETHIN in 1794 ... 91 years old when he died in 1836 therefore D.O.B 1745. I think he came with his family from the Midlands when his first wife died. The John GAMSON who married MARY JONES at PANTEG FEB 1794 and also WILLIAM GAMSON ... could also be his sons as the ages fit!!

James Gameson, living in Sowhill, died aged 91 and was buried in Panteg on 28th July 1836. It is not clear to me why Alec Hughes believes James's first wife had died, as I can find no record of a Sarah Gamson or Gameson being buried in the period 1765 to 1794 in Staffordshire or Glamorgan.

Sadly, I have been unable to identify the birth record of John, William, or James, though the various Gamesons or Gamsons in the area may well have been of siblings or cousins who, or whose parents, moved at about the same time to South Wales from wherever they were born.

Alec Hughes suggested about 1773 for the mooted birth of John as son of James. However, this seems to be speculation, presumably based on the year of the 1794 wedding, and he does not cite a birth registered around the correct date of John Gam(e)son, son of James.

Alec goes on to mention the marriages in Walsall on 20th October 1765 between James Gamison and Sarah Smith and on 8th October 1777 between James Gameson and Lucy Sheldon.

It seems that few of all these people survived till the 1841 census, for I can find none of them in all Monmouthshire.

I did find John Gamson christened in Holy Cross church, Pershore, son of John and Alice, in 1771, which would make him 22 if he married Mary in Panteg in 1794. Both were 'of this parish'.

Theories about the original homeland: Scotland

Emails sent in December 2008 from Susannah Gent (descended from a different Alice Maud Gameson from my grandmother, and doubtless named after Princess Alice Maud Mary (1843-78, daughter of Queen Victoria) say that “my grandfather’s oral history suggested the family came from Scotland, possibly Aberdeen.” However, a search of births on Ancestry for Scotland for the entire 18th century found no one surnamed Gameson, one listed as John Gamison (in Symington, Ayrshire in 1731), and no Gamson. The same result for Gameson and Gamson was given on a search of Aberdeen births on freereg.org.uk, without of course finding John Gamison of Ayrshire. I think we can discount the Scotland suggestion.

Does the Welsh language offer a clue?

I think we can discount references to Breconshire as regards the original homeland of our ancestors, because the places where our family lived have been assigned sometimes to Breconshire and sometimes to Monmouthshire, and may be considered to be in Monmouthshire: they are very close to the border, or even straddle it.

I suspect that references to Dafydd Gam is also a red herring, as the 1841 census shows that there were no Gamesons or Gamsons in Breconshire in 1841. If we were indigenous to that county, I do not think that we would *all*, including the elderly and infirm, have left by 1841 for other parts of the country.

Then we have Merthyr Tydfil in Glamorganshire, where some of our forebears lived around 1800. We note that:

iron transformed Merthyr Tydfil from a small rural hamlet to the largest town in Wales and the centre of the world's iron making industry. The town's four ironworks – Dowlais, Cyfarthfa, Penydarren and Plymouth – not only provided employment for thousands of workers, but propelled Wales' transition from a rural to an industrial economy. Throughout the late-18th and early-19th centuries, Merthyr Tydfil was a crucible of innovation and at the very forefront of Britain's industrial revolution. By the 1820s, Merthyr was the source of 40% of Britain's iron exports.

According to wikipedia, the Cyfarthfa works were begun in 1765. The construction of the first coke blast furnace began in August 1766. It was probably brought into blast in autumn 1767.

En.wikipedia reports that in the first half of the nineteenth century, the development of ironworks saw the population of Merthyr Tydfil increase from 7,700 in 1801 to 49,794 in 1861, making it the largest town in Wales. In the 1891 census, over two-thirds of the population of Merthyr Tydfil spoke Welsh.

The 1891 census is the first that records which language or languages each person was able to speak, and it is notable that most of the Gamesons spoke Welsh as well as English; in 1891 they were living in Blaenavon, Llanhilleth, Tredegar, and Cwmffrwdor.

Thomas Gameson married Prudence Watkins, who was born in Blaenavon and also spoke Welsh. In 1891 she was already a widow, but her eight children (including my grandmother) and their boarder all spoke both English and Welsh.

Prudence's brother William, a coalminer living in Mynyddislwyn in 1891, and his 17-year-old son (also a coalminer), born in Mynyddislwyn, are both listed as speaking only Welsh. Yet their father and grandfather, William, was born in Bristol fifty years previously, and Prudence, aged 7 in 1851, was born in Trevethin. It seems odd that they should speak only Welsh, if their father was from Bristol.

If I am right in concluding that we were not indigenous to the western parts of Breconshire nor to Glamorganshire, where did they all learn Welsh? As over two-thirds of the population of Merthyr Tydfil spoke Welsh in 1891, and the family was there a century earlier, when the language was presumably even stronger, it seems likely that Merthyr is where they picked up the Welsh language: unless, of course, the family originated in Welsh Wales.

Of the two Gameson and two Gamson households in Monmouthshire in the 1841 census, three heads of house (John, Walter, William) were born in Monmouthshire; only Thomas was not, having come from "Pendarren" (Penydarren, Merthyr Tydfil) in Glamorganshire.

It is also possible that they learnt or continued to speak Welsh in Monmouthshire: indeed, this is presumably what happened in the Watkins family, whose father came from Bristol. There

may have been a good deal of intermarriage between English incomers and local Welsh speakers.

A lot of Welsh was spoken in Monmouthshire in the 19th century, as explained below in the extracts from a publication by Griffith John Williams, *The Welsh Tradition of Gwent* (Cardiff: Plaid Cymru, 1958), quoted below with kind permission from Plaid Cymru.

in Welsh were held in the chapels. John E. Southall, the Newport publisher, discusses this in his book, *Wales and her Language* which appeared in 1892. This volume includes a most interesting linguistic map. Monmouthshire is divided into three sections. In the eastern part, there is a band about six or seven miles wide where no native Welsh was understood or spoken, and this is also true of the low country between Chepstow and Newport. But in central Monmouthshire, which includes such places as Abergafenni, Llan-arth, Usk, Pont-y-pwl, Aber-carn, Blaenafon, Abertyleri, Cwmbran, Basaleg, and the low country between Newport and Cardiff, things are different. Here Welsh was spoken or understood by less than 60% of the adult population. Of course the figure varied in different localities. In the Western part, Welsh was spoken or understood by over 60% of the population and this area includes Ebbw Vale (or Pen-y-cae as Southall calls it),

Tredegar, Rhymni, Pontlotyn, Bedwellty, Pengam, Machen, Basaleg, etc. The Vicar of Marshfield (Maerun) in 1900 had to learn Welsh in order to hold Welsh services.

In the industrial districts, the position was the same in spite of the great influx of population. It is a notable fact that some of the foremost Welsh ministers of the day were attracted to Gwent in this period—for example, Dr. Thomas Rees came to Beaufort, Robert Ellis (Cynddelw) to Sirhywi, William

Roberts (Nefydd) to Blaenau Gwent, and Evan Jones (Ieuan Gwynedd) to Tredegar, etc.

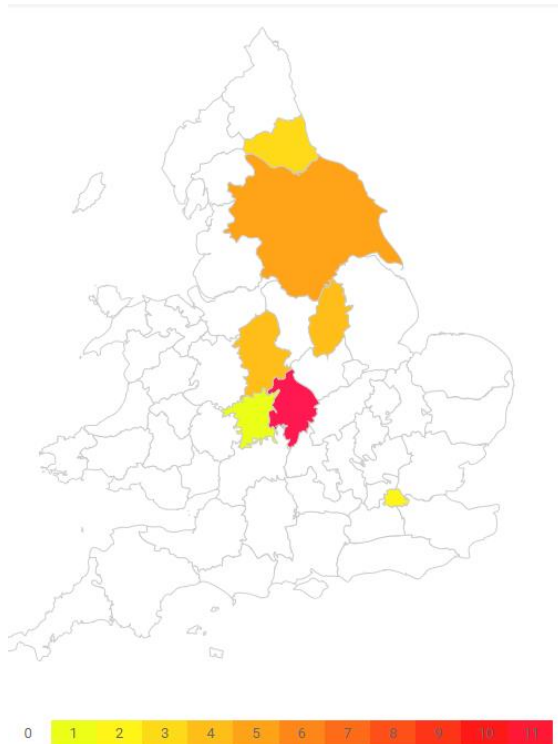
But these ministers, led by Dr. Thomas Rees and others, thought that it was their duty to provide for the English-speaking people who had come to these industrial areas, and to establish 'English causes.' They encouraged those members of the Welsh chapels who could understand English to form the nucleus of these causes. Indeed, it is more than probable that the majority of the members of these new causes were Welsh-speaking, a fact which must be emphasised. Indeed in some of the English causes all the members were Welsh-speaking. This is the policy which Emrys ap Iwan, the famous Methodist preacher, attacked in north Wales at a later date when he had to encounter the great displeasure of Dr. Lewis Edwards.

The Industrial Revolution is said to be responsible for this change, but that is not strictly true. Iron works were started between 1778 and 1784 in Sirhywi, Beaufort, Ebbw Vale, Blaenafon and Nant-y-glo, and this started a new period in the history of Gwent. Many of the immigrants who came to these works were thorough Welsh people from north and west Wales, and they strengthened the Welsh life and

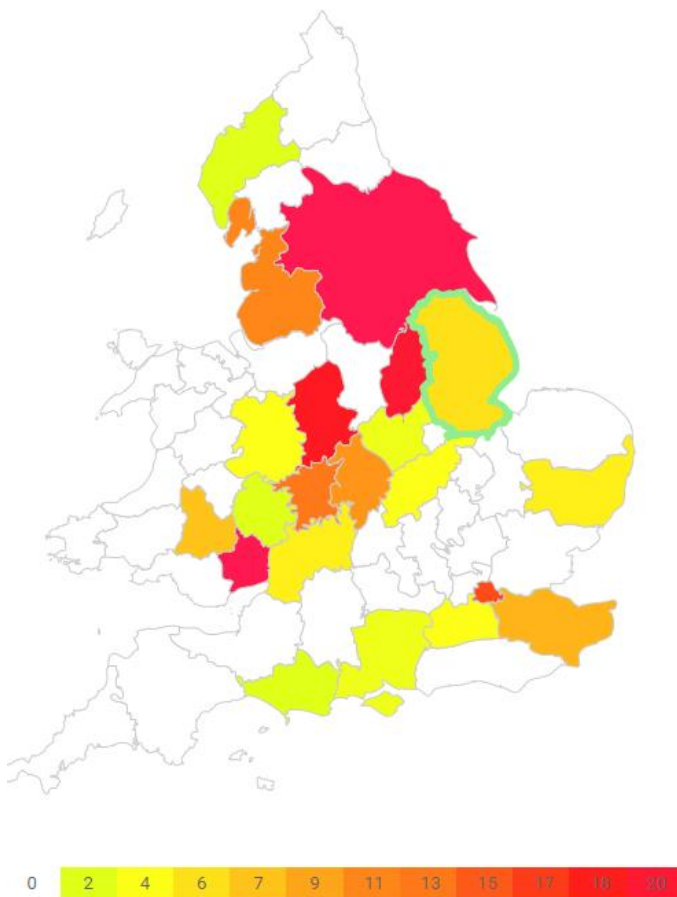
language ; so much so that the immigrants from England soon became Welsh-speaking ; and their descendants, many of them, became more fervent supporters of the language than the Welsh people themselves. This immigration started a new period in the history of Gwent, a subject which would make a most interesting book. I can only give you now a short summary of what happened.

Distribution of the name: 1841

Here is the distribution of the surname Gameson in the 1841 census, as analysed on <https://your-family-history.com>. It is not wholly accurate, as ancestry.com lists two Gameson households, comprising twelve family members of that surname, living in Trevethin and Panteg. Nonetheless the map is suggestive:



And below is the distribution of the surname Gamson in 1841. The distribution of the two seems similar enough to suggest one is a development of the other, and it also seems likely that the original was Gamson, and the -e- spelling developed later within the same family 'tree'. The map suggests a high concentration of people called Gamson, but ancestry.com still lists only two households, with fourteen persons of that surname, living in Skenfrith and Bedwellty.



So, if – as suggested above - they came from elsewhere to Glamorganshire and then to Monmouthshire, or direct from England to Monmouthshire, where did they hail from? The surname distribution maps suggest one heartland for the name

in the contiguous counties of Warwickshire, Staffordshire and Worcestershire, making in all a total of 17 spelled Gameson, and 41 spelled Gamson. I suspect these were the same family, as name spellings were very variable in times gone by, with Gamson as the original spelling, and the -e- added later by some people, and – as established above – the two spellings sometimes refer in the records to the same people.

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The iron and coal Gamesons

Reference to this group (in contrast to those of eastern Monmouthshire close to the English border) brings us to the possibility of our first traceable ancestor being John Gamson, born around 1770, son of John and Alice, christened in Pershore, Worcestershire, on 3rd November 1771.

By the time of the first census, 1841, there were no Gamsons in Pershore; the only Gamsons in Worcestershire lived 25 miles away in Kidderminster where there were four men, all weavers, and one Gampson, an agricultural labourer. Whoever John of Pershore was, he and his parents, John and Alice, seem to have been ‘birds of passage’.

But we need to find the John whose sons John and Thomas – Thomas being my ancestor – were christened in Llangattock in 1802 and 1805. I have not found him for certain, but the remains reason to surmise that he may have been John Gamson of Pershore.

The wedding of a **John Gameson** (with -e-) to an Alice Mayor took place on 12th February 1771 in Prestwich, Lancashire: they were both 'of Oldham in this parish'. Three babies called Alice Mayor were christened in Lancashire in 1744-6, in Hoole (38 miles from Oldham), Tarleton (42 miles) and Wigan (21 miles). The distances make this look like a fourth Alice, but if this is indeed the couple in the next paragraph, then their son John would have been more or less 'a honeymoon baby', for they were married on 12th February, and he was christened on 3rd November. However, the distances between Oldham, Hoole, Tarleton, Wigan and then Pershore make me suspect that the Prestwich John and Alice were not our forebears, and thus that we do not originate from Oldham, Lancashire. I leave it therefore as an inset.

A **John Gamson** (no -e-) died, aged 64 (i.e. born about 1770) and was buried at Aberystwith, Monmouthshire, on 13th May 1834. He is the only John Gamson I could find born around 1770 in all England and Wales, and if they were the same person, he was the son of John and Alice Gamson, and was christened in Holy Cross church, Pershore, Worcestershire, on 3rd November 1771. I have not found other Gam(e)sons.

When John Gamson died, he was living in Varteg, in the parish of Trevethin. This fits a pattern: moving from a rural region to the new industries of South Wales.

The John we are looking for married a Mary, and the transcript of the Panteg parish records refers to John Gamson who married Mary Jones at Panteg February 1794.

According to merthyr-history.com, in 1790 Samuel Homfray, Another record that places the Gamesons in Merthyr, or with

links to Merthyr, in the fact that in 1804-5 and 1813, were born Thomas Gamson and his future bride Hannah Edmunds: Thomas in Beaufort, which was then in Breconshire, (his christening is registered under Llangattock), and Hannah in Merthyr Tydfil, Glamorganshire. Beaufort stood on the boundary of the parishes of Llangattock (Llangatwg in Welsh) in Breconshire and Aberystroth in Monmouthshire; the Beaufort Iron Works were established in 1779. Welsh was historically the language spoken, but disappeared as a local native tongue during the first half of the twentieth century.

owner of the Penydarren Ironworks, introduced a new process for making iron and needed to send to Yorkshire and Staffordshire for men to help carry out this new process. Here is another hint that our forebears may have come from the English Midlands. The next paragraphs link our ancestors with the Penydarren ironworks of Samuel Homfray.

However, I believe there are two records of Mary's death, one as **Mary Gameson**, one as *Mary Gamson*. Mary Gamson had been living in Trevethin (Garndiffaith) and was buried in Aberystroth on 29th April 1839, aged 66 (i.e. born in 1773). Mary Gameson was buried (according to the index of the Pontypool registration district, which included Trevethin) in the April-June quarter of 1839. These two entries doubtless record the burial of the same person, namely the Mary we have been looking for. Indeed, I found only one death record in Monmouthshire of a Mary Gameson and none in Breconshire.

There might initially seem to be a problem with this identification of Mary: in November 1795, in Panteg, a little boy was

christened, William, son of William and Mary Gamson. So there really were two wives called Mary Gamson! However, on 6th August 1820, in Llangattock, the widower William Gamson, a brickmaker, married the spinster Anne Jones: so William's Mary died before he married Anne Jones. (By the way, he signed his name, she signed with X (her mark).) It would seem that he himself died in 1849, though his age is not given on the digitised record.

John and Mary had their first child, Ann, "*daughter of John and Mary Gameson Pendarren*", who was privately baptised on 29th April 1799 in Merthyr Tydfil. She was then christened publicly on 28th December 1799 at 'Bettws' with *Llangattock* scribbled above the entry at the top of the page.

This seems odd, but according to 'Viktoria' on rootschat.com, "A hurried private Baptism would indicate that the baby was not expected to survive. ... When the baby was stronger a public Baptism might take place, with the Godparents there and at the font in Church." The minister was required to check there had been no previous proper baptism by questioning those present, but maybe he didn't do this, or he may not have been satisfied that the proper ritual had been performed, so that a second baptism could happen. "But if they which bring the Infant to the Church do make such uncertain answers to the Priest's questions, as that it cannot appear that the Child was baptized with Water, In the Name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Ghost, (which are essential parts of Baptism,) then let the Priest baptize it in the form before appointed for Publick Baptism of Infants: Saving that at the dipping of the Child in the Font, he shall use this form of words

If thou art not already baptized, N. I baptize thee in the Name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Ghost. Amen.”

This, to me, seems as possible an explanation as that there were two baby girls born in 1799, both named Ann, both with parents called John and Mary, both with the same surname, although spelled differently by the different recorders, and both living in places where we know the Gam(e)sons lived around that time.

John son of John and Mary Gamson was baptised in Llangattock on 11th June 1802. From here I believe we can trace the line down to the present day, but our discoveries do not supply an answer to the question, Where did the Gamesons come from?