

Origin of the Bichan Surname

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This is a status report about research and analysis about the origin of the Bichan surname. It is expected to be updated as further research is done. In particular, it has not yet been possible to check resources available at the Orkney Family History Society.

This document has been produced for the Becket(t)/Bicket(t)/Bichan one-name study at <https://bicket.one-name.blog>. Feedback will be appreciated. Please write to bicket@one-name.org.

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1. Origin of the Bichan surname: summary

In short, we do not know how the Bichan surname came into existence, but it is clear that it arose uniquely in the Orkney Islands in the north of Scotland, with the first records (from ScotlandsPeople, using the Bichen spelling variant) being for a number of marriages in Kirkwall, Orkney starting in the 1660s. Genetically the Bichan lineage is a branch of the Ayrshire Bicket(t)/Becket(t) tree, which also used the spelling Bichet in earlier records. A current ‘best guess’ is that someone from the Ayrshire tree, possibly with the Bichet spelling, went to the Orkney area in the early 1600s, where the prominence of the unrelated, but similar-sounding, Buchan surname, resulted in local clergy or clerks recording the spelling in the way they considered correct, initially as Bichen, and subsequently as Bichan.

2. Pronunciation of the Bichan surname

The Bichan surname is pronounced with a hard ‘ch’, as in ‘loch’ meaning lake in Scottish. There are minor variations in pronunciation, with the more Scottish pronunciation emphasizing the guttural ‘ch’ of ‘loch’, whereas some people pronounce it as ‘ck’, i.e., like ‘Bickan’. Indeed, the surname is spelled Bickan in two birth and marriage records in Orkney from 1795 and 1797.

For audio recordings of the differences between these two pronunciations, please see the Becket(t)/Bicket(t)/Bichan website.ⁱ

3. Orkney origins

Based on the records available to us, plus based on the 1881 surname atlas, the surname Bichan has been effectively exclusive to the Orkney Islands until the 1900s. Figure 1 shows the distribution of the Bichan surname in the England, Scotland and Wales in the 1881 census (which is the only census for which this analytical information is readily available.) It shows that Bichans are exclusively recorded in the Orkneys.

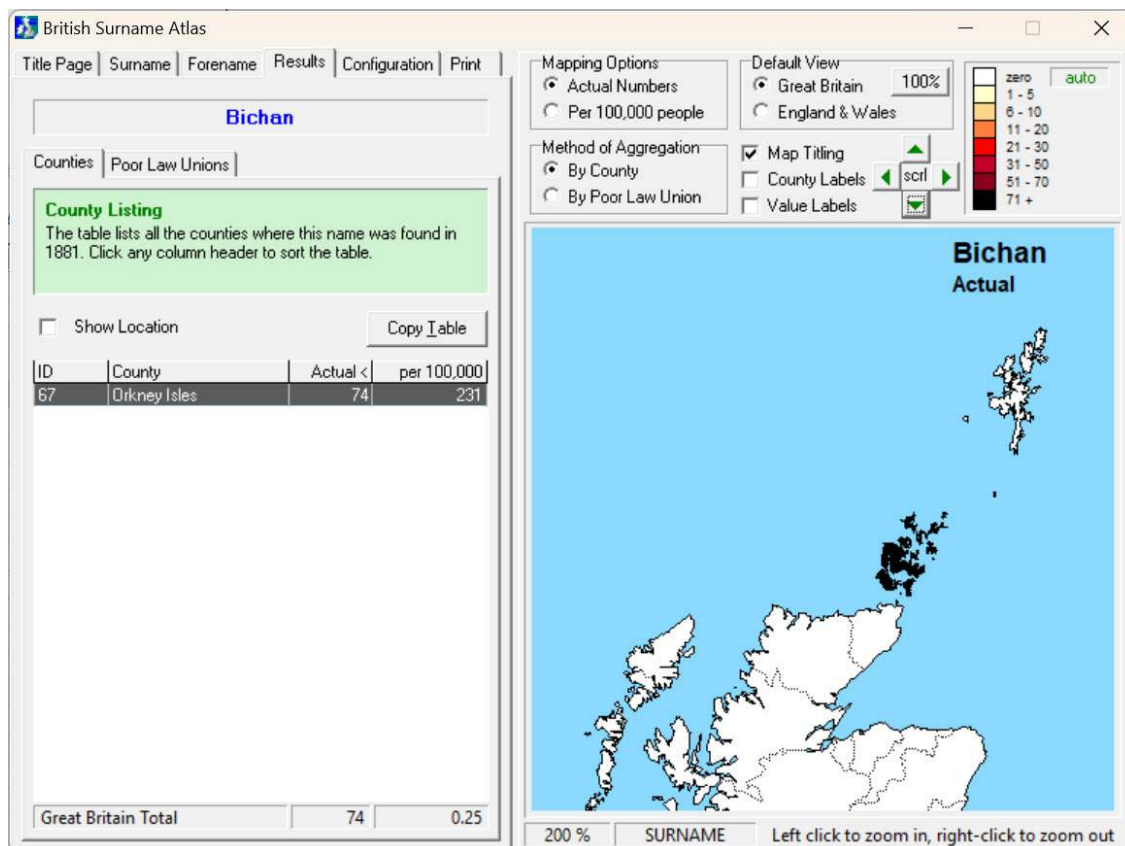


Figure 1 - Bichan surnames in 1881 census (from *The British 19th Century Surname Atlas*)

The earliest records for Bichan (from ScotlandsPeople, the official government website for Scottish records including births, marriages, deaths and censuses) are in 1687 (a birth) and in 1709 (a marriage). However, there are earlier records for Bichen (with 'e'), some clearly for the same family (including the 1687 birth, since the parents are the same). Bichen records first start with a number of marriages in the 1660s and 1670s in Kirkwall, Orkney. These multiple marriages suggest that the family was present in the Orkneys in the first half of the 1600s.

There is also a record for David Bichan dated 1613 cited in Gregor Lamb's "Orkney Surnames", with the reference 'St Old'. It has not yet been possible to obtain clarification as to the source and detail of this citation. However, it would be consistent with the Bichan tree being present in Orkney in the first half of the 1600s. (See 8 - Published theories about the origins of the Bichan and Buchan surnames)

4. DNA evidence and implications

Big Y DNA testing with Family Tree DNA has demonstrated that the Bichan lineage is part of the Ayrshire Becket(t)/Bicket(t) tree, with all of these lineages descending from someone born around 1200 with a unique cascade of mutations shared by all Ayrshire

Becket(t)/Bicket(t)/Bichan descendants. The final mutation before the Bichan line branched off had the signature SNP Y13847.

The next observation is more complicated to explain. This same Big Y DNA testing also indicates that surnames were not established for the lower classes in Ayrshire until around 1400, because many different surnames started from an individual born just before then, including the Becket(t)/Bicket(t) surname. Twenty-two of the Becket(t)/Bicket(t) branches that have been Y-DNA tested descend from that single individual born around 1400, and all descendants of these branches carry the same Y13847 mutation mentioned above, but also an additional mutation called Y13224 (shared also by all of the other surnames established at this time) plus three additional mutations called FT104740, FTB88192, and FT219207. These last three mutations are the signature mutations carried by twenty-two different branches of Becket(t)s and Bicket(t)s which have been Y-DNA tested.

The obvious question is how six other branches, including the Bichan branch, got their surnames, if they did not descend from that first Becket(t)/Bicket(t) born around 1400. The answer lies in effective adoptions, where a father in one of these early parallel lineages dies, and his wife remarries someone with the Becket(t)/Bicket(t) surname. This results in the son of the dead father taking on the surname of his Becket(t)/Bicket(t) stepfather. The bubonic plague was happening in Ayrshire (and elsewhere in Scotland) when these name changes occurred, and the communities were small and often isolated – sometimes to control against the bubonic plague coming in. As a result these effective adoptions took place within a small community of closely-related individuals. Note that these six branches quite likely descended from only two different individuals, so that only two effective adoptions were necessary to explain all current branches. The Bichan branch is most closely related genetically to another branch which traces itself back to Kilwinning in Ayrshire, which is also the location to which a number of other branches can be traced.

We can consequently conclude that the person who can be considered the founder of the Bichan lineage would have taken on his Becket(t)/Bicket(t) surname sometime around 1450 or as late as 1500. The lineage then apparently appears in Orkney in the early 1600s (based on there being a number of marriages of Bichens occurring in the late 1600s). The outstanding question is why and how a Becket(t)/Bicket(t) from Ayrshire would go to Orkney sometime between the late 1400s and the early 1600s. How and why the surname spelling would be changed is the next issue to be addressed.

A chart showing all branches of the Ayrshire Becket(t)/Bicket(t)/Bichan tree, and their genetic connections, is available on the one-name website (“Relationships of Ayrshire Tree Branches”ⁱⁱ).

5. Buchan surname and surname migration

It is our ‘best guess’ to-date that the Bichan surname resulted from ‘surname migration’ from its earlier Becket(t)/Bicket(t) spellings, because of its similarity to the Buchan surname which was much more common in the north of Scotland. This idea is supported by

- The general observation that there was great fluidity in how surnames were spelled before people became literate. (See 7 - Fluidity of surname spellings)
- The general observation from the Becket(t)/Bicket(t)/Bichan one-name study that there is often migration of surname spellings from one variant to another variant which is

considered more common. In the case of Becket(t)/Bicket(t) surname spellings, there is a clear trend from single 't' versions to two 't' versions, and from 'i' versions to 'e' versions. Completely unrelated lineages (such as Biggot) sometimes also adopt the surname.

- The observation that Buchan is a much more common surname than Bichan and other Becket(t)/Bicket(t) variants in Scotland, and in particular in the north of Scotland. (See figure 2 below which shows the numbers and distribution of Buchans in 1881.)

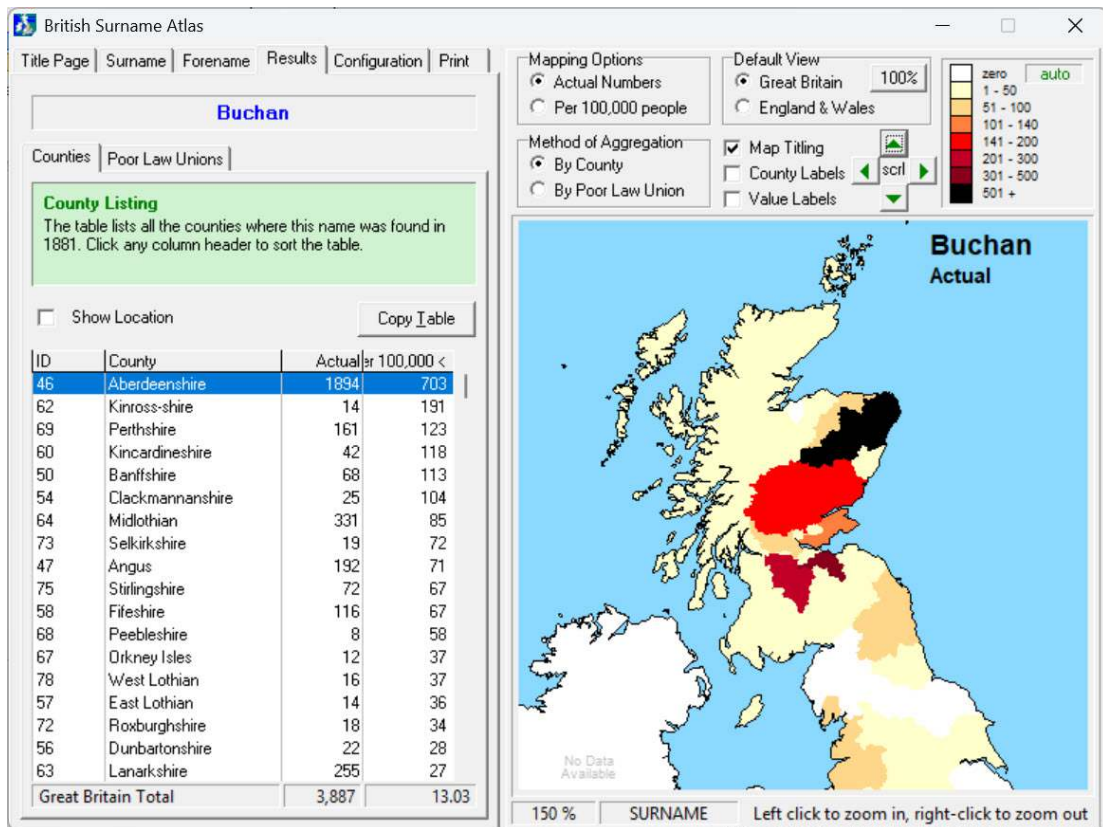


Figure 2 - Buchan surnames in 1881 census (from The British 19th Century Surname Atlas)

- The observation that even within the later official records held by ScotlandsPeople, there is evidence of a Bichan being recorded as a Buchan. There is a birth entry for Margaret Balfou Buchan in Evie and Rendall on 26 July 1830, born to Edward Buchan and Hellen Fubister. These are almost certainly the same as Edward Bichan and Hellen Foubister who had 4 children in Deerness between 31 Dec 1819 and 15 December 1823 (including a Mary Belfouer Bichan, who may have died, thereby resulting in a later child being given a similar or possibly same name). This family apparently moved after 1823 from Deerness to 'Evie and Rendall' (both parishes or registration districts in Orkney), and then were recorded locally with a name the local parish clerk considered correct.

6. Covenanter origin disproven

There was briefly a romantic theory about the origin of the Bichan surname in Orkney, which has subsequently been disproven.

This theory was prompted by two observations:

- The earliest Bichan record in ScotlandsPeople is for a birth in Kirkwall, Orkney in 1687, to Magnus Bichan and Helen Corrigill.
- In the 1600s Ayrshire was a hotbed of Covenanter activity – believers in the independence of the Presbyterian Church of Scotland from the Crown. But their rebellion was ultimately crushed, ending in nearly 1200 Covenanters being captured at the Battle of Bothwell Bridge on 22 June 1679. Most were subsequently released, but the worst offenders were to be transported to America as slaves. However, the ship they were being transported in, the ‘Crown of London’, sank off Deerness in Orkney on 10 December 1679. Those who died included two Bitchets from Fenwick in Ayrshire. Not all of the prisoners died. Most who survived were recaptured, but some evaded capture, and some were reported to have settled in Orkney. There is no record for the names of some of the prisoners on board, so it seemed quite probable that one of these unrecorded prisoners who escaped was a Bichet/Bitchet, without any papers, and that he started the Bichan dynasty.

However, this rather romantic theory was dashed by further research. It all has to do with variant/deviant surname spellings. We subsequently found that there are earlier records for Bichens in Orkney (with ‘e’ rather than ‘a’), and it is clear these were the same family as for the first Bichan record in 1687, with Magnus Bichen/Bichan and Helen Corrigill having six recorded children between 1678 through 1695. Their first child was born before the shipwreck happened, so Magnus could not have been brought to Orkney for the first time on that ship. There are also six earlier Bichen marriages in Orkney, well before the date of the shipwreck.

The bottom line is that Y-DNA has demonstrated that a definite genetic link exists between the Ayrshire Bicket(t)/Becket(t) tree and the Orkney Bichan tree, but we do not yet have an explanation in historical records for how this link came to be. We can say that the Bichan tree was definitely not started by a Covenanter prisoner who survived the shipwreck off Deerness in Orkney in 1679.

There is a more comprehensive explanation of this issue in the Journal of One-Name Studies, and some of the text above is taken from it.ⁱⁱⁱ

7. Fluidity of surname spellings

There was considerable fluidity of surname spellings before people became literate, but this is apparently not recognized by many people starting out in genealogical research. Indeed, many on-line family trees show earlier members of their lineages with surname spellings which match current spellings, even though the source records clearly show different surname spellings. There seems to be a desire to ‘correct’ historical records, rather than to reflect them accurately.

P. H. Reaney in his 1967 book “The Origin of English Surnames” says

The man who says his name was always spelled as it is today is talking rank nonsense. The modern form of very many of our surnames is due to the spelling of some sixteenth- or seventeenth-century parson or clerk, or even to one of later date. It is not a matter of illiteracy in our sense of the word. These parsons who kept the parish registers were men of some education. Their ability to read cannot be questioned, but they had no guide to the spelling of names. It was the printing-press which gradually established a recognized system of spelling. That of Tudor and Stuart England was very different from ours, and the spelling of many of our words is not earlier than Dr Johnson’s Dictionary. But there was no recognised spelling for names. A great part of the population was illiterate. Their names were written only at birth or marriage or death, or if they happened to come within the clutches of the law. Then they gave their names orally and the clerk put them into writing as best he could. He

wrote them down phonetically, using his own system of spelling, sometimes spelling the same name in different ways at different times, and it is this variation in spelling which often gives us the clue to the real origin and meaning of the surname.”^{iv}

8. Published theories about the origins of the Bichan and Buchan surnames

There are two levels of sources of published theories about surnames origins relevant to this paper: (1) major publications with broad scope, and (2) more specialist or local publications. There is one particular resource in this second category, “Orkney Surnames” by Gregor Lamb, published in 1981.

Major publications with broad scope

There is little credible published information about the origins of many surnames, and in particular for the surnames Becket, Beckett, Bicket, and Bickett.^v

There is nothing published on Ancestry for either of the surnames Bichan and Bichen. (Ancestry takes its information from the Dictionary of American Family Names 2nd edition, 2022^{vi}).

There is published information on Ancestry for the Buchan surname, which emphasizes its northern Scotland origin. (The remaining comments are not relevant):

Buchan Surname Meaning

Scottish (eastern): habitational name from a district north of Aberdeen. There was also a barony of *Buchquane* in Strathore Fife a settlement called Buchan in Kirkcudbrightshire and several other places in Scotland so named but these are less likely to be the source of the surname. Americanized form of Croatian and Serbian **Bučan** or of its Croatian variant **Bučan**: from a hypocoristic derivative of the personal names *Budimir Budislav* or *Budivoj* (see **Budin**). Americanized form of Slovenian **Bučan**: topographic name derived from *buč* ‘well in the field’ or a habitational name from the village called Buč from the same word. Americanized form of Slovak **Bučan**: probably a habitational name for someone from a place called Búč.

Source: Dictionary of American Family Names 2nd edition, 2022

Local publications

Gregor Lamb published “Orkney Surnames” in 1981, and we have yet to obtain a copy. However, we have been given the following citation of what it says about the Bichan surname:

Bichan: David Bichan, St Old, 1613: probably diminutive of on 'bik' meaning 'pitch' in which case the surname would be related to the place names Bigland and Bigswell which are similarly derive: one of the many names used by the Norse for the Swarthy peoples of Orkney ie the native Celtic peoples: not a common surname in Orkney today, most of the Bichans live in Deerness but the surname also had an early association with the isle of Sanday.^{vii}

We have tried for some time to contact the author, without success. The cited 1613 date for David Bichan is interesting for many reasons, e.g., (1) it is earlier than any of those which we have been able to find on ScotlandsPeople, the official Scottish website for births, marriages, deaths, censuses, and other historical documents; (2) it uses the ‘Bichan’ surname spelling,

whereas 'Bichen' is the variant most used in the early records on ScotlandsPeople; and (3) the source of this citation may contain yet more useful information.

The theory it proposes for the origin of the Bichan surname (*probably diminutive of on 'bik' meaning 'pitch'*) is not consistent with the findings of this paper, including in particular the DNA evidence clearly linking the Bichan lineage with the Ayrshire Becket(t)/Bicket(t) tree.

We do not yet have the text of anything Gregor Lamb says about the Buchan surname.

References

ⁱ "Bichan pronunciation in Orkney vs New Zealand", <https://bicket.one-name.blog/wp/wp-content/uploads/2024/11/Bichan-pronunciation-Orkney-vs-New-Zealand.mp3>

ⁱⁱ "Relationships of Ayrshire Tree Branches", at <https://bicket.one-name.blog/wp/other-resources-2>

ⁱⁱⁱ "The 1881 Surname Atlas, Y-DNA, and Historical Research", by David Bicket, in the "Journal of One-Name Studies", Volume 15 Issue 5 (January-March 2025), pp 4-5.

^{iv} "The Origin of English Surnames", by P. H. Reaney, 1967, Routledge and Kegan Paul, p.25

^v See "Origin of the English Beckett Surname", at <https://bicket.one-name.blog/wp/other-resources-2>

^{vi} "Dictionary of American Family Names 2nd edition", by Patrick Hanks, Simon Lenarčič, and Peter McClure, 2022, Oxford University Press, cited by Ancestry.co.uk.

^{vii} "Orkney Surnames" by Gregor Lamb, Paul Harris Publishing, 1981