

# Origin of the Norman Beckett Surname

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This is a status report about research and analysis into the origins of the Norman Beckett surname. It does not address the origins of the Scottish Ayrshire Becket(t)/Bicket(t) surname which appear to be different.

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](mailto:bicket@one-name.org).

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## 1. Origin of the Norman Beckett surname: summary

It is considered most likely based on current Y-DNA testing, historical information, and scholarly information about surname origins that the English Beckett surname originated at the time of William the Conqueror, and denoted people who accompanied him to England from Normandy and who were associated with Bec Abbey in Normandy, taking on the name of Beccet/Beket/Becket to denote that association. As such it would be a locative, or location-associated name, and consequently there are likely to have been many different lineages which adopted that surname, without a genetic connection between them in historical timeframes. Furthermore, surnames for people remaining in Normandy also arose at the time of William the Conqueror, with at least one French lineage taking on the surname Bequette, and then Beckett

after going directly to the States. Consequently we can talk both about the English Beckett surname and the Norman Beckett surname, but probably more accurately overall about the Norman Beckett surname.

This view is based in part on circumstantial evidence. It could be proven or disproven in part or in full, especially using additional historical records of which we are currently unaware. But it is our current best assessment using Y-DNA, historical and scholarly evidence, and that evidence is strong.

There is no evidence that the surname Beckett derives from ‘beck’ meaning sharp beak or stream, as suggested by some sources, except to the extent that Bec Abbey itself was named after a stream.



*Figure 1: South side of Bec Abbey, the church and the monks' cells seen from Le Bec-Hellouin (from Wikipedia)*

Although this document concerns the origin of the surname Beckett, it does not concern the origin of that specific spelling, or when the spelling Beckett came to predominate. That could be the subject of a separate paper. This document is rather to assess the origin of the surname variants which later coalesced around the spelling Beckett.

## 2. Summary bases for conclusions

The view about Beckett being a locative surname reflecting an association with Bec Abbey is based on the following, which are explained in more detail in the remaining sections of this document:

- **Y-DNA.** Deep Y-DNA testing of English Becketts has, so far, identified two independent lineages. For one of these, the common ancestor of two different Beckett lineages is estimated to have been born around 1050, just before the Norman invasion of England. (See 3 Current DNA evidence and implications.)
- **Surnames starting with the Normans.** The Normans were largely responsible for the introduction of surnames both into Normandy and into England, and furthermore these surnames were mostly locative, or location-based. (See 5 Scholarly findings concerning surname origins and spelling changes.) There are no known occurrences of the Beckett surname or of any of its variants prior to 1066. (See 4 Current knowledge about early occurrences of the surname and its variants.)
- **Prominent role of Bec Abbey.** Bec Abbey (known as Becce in Latin, pronounced ‘Bek-ke’) was the most influential religious institution in the Norman kingdom, including in the English church, with several Archbishops of Canterbury coming from there, starting

during the reign of William the Conqueror. (See 6 Historical findings related to Bec Abbey and Norman England.)

- **People coming to England associated with Bec Abbey.** Many people from Normandy came to England at the time of William the Conqueror, and this almost certainly included many people associated with Bec Abbey. These would have been not only monks, but the families of those monks ('parents or brothers'), and also people involved with the rebuilding of Canterbury. These people associated with Bec Abbey (Becce, or Bekke) would understandably have been called Beccets or variant spellings such as Bekkets, Bekets, and ultimately Becketts. (See 6 Historical findings related to Bec Abbey and Norman England.)
- **Thomas Becket.** Thomas Beket/Becket, the Archbishop of Canterbury (1119/20-1170), is the most famous of all people with one of the Becket(t)/Bicket(t) surnames. Thomas was known to be of Norman descent, with his family coming from within two miles of Bec Abbey. His existence is consistent with the view of this document about the origins of the surname. (See 7 Thomas Becket.)
- **Fluid surname spellings.** Within broad limits, surname spellings have been fairly fluid over time. The surname spelling Beckett was not used at the time of William the Conqueror, but rather earlier variants such as Beck, Beket, Bechet and Becket. (See 8 Fluid surname spellings)

It is worth mentioning how incredibly lucky our Y-DNA findings are. To have found two different Big Y testers who are connected genetically at the time of William the Conqueror is highly unusual given the huge number of Beckett branches in the world. If testers are related, it is far more likely that they will be related much later in time. The further evidence cited in this document shows that the Beckett surname (or its variants) could not have happened before William the Conqueror. Consequently the only reasonable conclusion is that the Beckett surname (with its early variants) arose specifically at the time of William the Conqueror. A further piece of luck in finding these two testers is that they had already joined another Y-DNA project which had determined that they were in a Norman lineage. This was more than we could have hoped to determine ourselves in the Becket(t)/Bicket(t)/Bichan one-name study.

In spite of the strength of the evidence within this document, there is little support for this explanation relating to Bec Abbey in existing sources of information about Beckett surname origins. Rather, published sources primarily speculate based on similarities of spellings with other words and names. (See 10 Published theories about the origins of the English Beckett surname.)

### 3. Current DNA evidence and implications

Big Y DNA testing with Family Tree DNA has demonstrated that there are at least three different lineages of the Beckett surname which appear to be from the English Beckett 'tree'. For one of these lineages there are two Beckett testers who share a common ancestor with the SNP ('snip') mutation R-FTD9053. Research by administrators in the R1a YP4141 project have determined, based on parallel lineages, that this is a Norman tree. Family Tree DNA estimates that the R-FTD9053 mutation occurred in approximately 1050, which would provide a near perfect explanation for someone born shortly before William the Conqueror's invasion of England in 1066, who came over to England around the time of William's invasion and who then had two children in England who were the ancestors of the two branches tested.

Big Y DNA testing of three further Becketts has demonstrated that they come from two separate lineages completely unrelated to the two testers mentioned above within historical timeframes, namely from the 'I' clade and the 'E' clade (rather than the 'R' clade of the two testers mentioned above). These results support the idea that there were multiple genetically unrelated lineages which adopted the Beck/Beckett surname. However, this is not by itself conclusive evidence for the Bec Abbey origin idea, as there could be other reasons for these genetically unrelated branches adopting the Beckett surname at a later date.

Two of these additional testers, from the 'I' clade, have a common ancestor probably born in the 1300s, and their lines then branched apart. The Big Y tester from the 'E' clade traces his branch back to northern France in 1719, using the surname spelling Bequette. (See 8 The Norman Bequette branch.)

#### 4. Current knowledge about early occurrences of the surname and its variants

There are no known occurrences of the Beckett surname, or of any of its variants/deviants, before 1066. The earliest cited occurrences are discussed in 9 (Fluid surname spellings) and 10 (Published theories about the origins of the English Beckett surname). However, Thomas Becket, the Archbishop of Canterbury, is even earlier than these cited occurrences.

A 1967 work on the origin of English surnames lists the names Bec and Beck(e) from Bec-Hellouin in Eure, Normandy as “surnames originating from places in France as are known to survive today”.<sup>i</sup>

The surname Bigot appears to be unrelated to the surname Beckett. (See 11 The Bigot surname.)

#### 5. Scholarly findings concerning surname origins and spelling changes

The major source of information about surname origins for this document is “The Surnames Handbook: A Guide to Family Name Research in the 21<sup>st</sup> Century” by Debbie Kennett.<sup>ii</sup> It includes the following:

- “No evidence has been found that surnames were in use in England before the Conquest.” (p.17)
- “The reasons for the introduction of surnames are not fully understood but appear to be tied up with the need to prove ownership of land and property for inheritance purposes, the introduction of taxes, and the increasing use of written records during the twelfth to fourteenth centuries, all of which required a more precise means of identification than a single unadorned name.” (pp.17-18)
- “The Normans began to use surnames in the first half of the eleventh century. The early Norman surnames were tied up with the feudal system of heritable tenure, and consequently many were toponymics – surnames derived from place-names and landscape features...” (p.20)
- “The Norman Conquest not only changed the course of British history but also introduced an entirely new system of family nomenclature. The new fashion for surnames caught on first among the great landholding families who took their names either from their estate in Normandy or their new lands in England.” (p.23)
- “Locative surnames, and particularly those from French place-names, were the first British surnames to become hereditary.” (p.34)

- “A considerable number of the surnames that were introduced to Britain in the first 200 years after the Conquest were derived from French place-names.” (p.34)
- (Referring to James Holt, “What’s in a Name? Family Nomenclature and the Norman Conquest”) “He concludes that the nomenclature in Normandy was gradually changing in the first half of the eleventh century, and the roots were firmly planted by 1054 when William’s victory at the Battle of Mortemer secured his position as the Duke of Normandy and paved the way for the future conquest of England.” (p.21)
- “During the key period of surname formation very few people were able to read and write. Surnames were recorded in official documents by a clerk or scribe, who spelt a name as he heard it. There was no standardised spelling and there were no convenient reference books or dictionaries that the scribes could consult. Names were spelt inconsistently and it was common to find the same name spelt in a variety of different ways within the same document.” (p.49)
- “The spelling and pronunciation of surnames only started to stabilise in the nineteenth century with the introduction of universal education.” (p.50)
- “It is not uncommon to find that different members of the same family choose to use different spellings of their surname.” (p.51)

Although Debbie Kennet does not appear to mention it in her book, it is also a recognized spelling change to add an ‘accretionary t’ at the end of surnames. This would explain the transition from Becce, Bekke, or Beke to Beket.<sup>iii</sup>

## 6. Historical findings related to Bec Abbey and Norman England

Wikipedia states the following: “Bec Abbey, formally the Abbey of Our Lady of Bec (French: Abbaye Notre-Dame du Bec), is a Benedictine monastic foundation in the Eure département, in the Bec valley midway between the cities of Rouen and Bernay. It is located in Le Bec Hellouin, Normandy, France, and was the most influential abbey of the 12<sup>th</sup>-century Anglo-Norman kingdom.

Like all abbeys, Bec maintained annals of the house but uniquely its first abbots also received individual biographies, brought together by the monk of Bec, Milo Crispin. Because of the abbey's cross-Channel influence, these hagiographic lives sometimes disclose historical information of more than local importance.”<sup>iv</sup>

Based on information given below about the importance of Bec Abbey at the time of William the Conqueror, and specifically to William the Conqueror personally, the Wikipedia citation should also refer to Bec Abbey as the most influential abbey of the **11<sup>th</sup>**-century Anglo-Norman kingdom, and not just of the 12<sup>th</sup>-century Anglo-Norman kingdom. Lanfranc was originally a monk there, and then the prior at Bec Abbey, second in rank only to its first Abbot Herluin. Lanfranc had a long association with William the Conqueror, both in France before 1066, and as Archbishop of Canterbury starting in 1070. To demonstrate the importance of that relationship, the Wikipedia article about Lanfranc states that “On several occasions when William I was absent from England Lanfranc acted as his viceregent.” A further citation from the Lanfranc hagiography (cited below) states “When the glorious King William sojourned in Normandy, Lanfrancus was the prince and guardian of England.” (Part II (Crispin’s Hagiography) Para 55)

The hagiography of Archbishop Lanfranc provides support for the idea that there were many people associated with Bec Abbey who went to England at the time of William the Conqueror. This section provides some citations from that hagiography to demonstrate this finding.

The hagiography of Lanfranc is in Latin, and there is apparently no English translation. There are many copies of the Latin version available, published much later as part of the Roman Martyrology, organized by the individuals' respective saint's day, which for Lanfranc is 28 May. A list of available sources is provided by Roger Pearse<sup>v</sup>. There is an editable text version<sup>vi</sup>, subject to the proviso that it is of uncertain quality. The citations below are based on a Google translation of this text, much of which is difficult to understand, but nonetheless there are a number of citations which appear relevant. Further work could validate and improve the translations. (See also Annex 5. About the Lanfranc hagiography.)

The Catholic Church did not come to England with William the Conqueror; there had already been an Archbishop of Canterbury since 597 AD, and there was a well-established ecclesiastical system including abbeys and monasteries. William needed to conquer these as well as the military resistance in the country. The existing Archbishop of Canterbury at the time, Stigand, was apparently not a supporter of William, and it can be assumed that many of the church, including monks, were not either. William eventually (in 1070) had Stigand removed from his post, and appointed Lanfranc in his place. The opposition of existing monks was documented in Lanfranc's hagiography.

Lanfranc clearly brought a number of significant supporters to England with him, such as Gilbert Crispin who was made Abbot of Westminster Abbey. But he would have brought far more with him than that, including monks and their families. Citations which indicate such extended groups accompanying him include these:

- "As he went to the archbishopric, many followed him, of whom several he retained those with honors and lands." (Part II (Crispin's Hagiography) para 32)
- "How kindly and how sufficiently he provided benefits to the needy relatives of his monks." (Part II (Crispin's Hagiography) para 56)
- "But regarding the brothers of his own church how good, how pious, how benevolent he was, it can be inferred to some extent from this that neither their parents or brothers could endure any hardship that afflicted anyone." (Part III (Eadmer's hagiography) para 6)

There are two further significant aspects of Lanfranc's time in England which could have encouraged people associated with Bec Abbey to come. The first was the fact that Lanfranc was responsible for a significant rebuilding of Canterbury, bringing much of the material from overseas. (Part II (Crispin's Hagiography) Para 30). The second was that he regained control of many estates in England which had been under the control of the Archbishop of Canterbury prior to 1066, but which had subsequently been taken over by others. These estates clearly gave him both more resources, and more opportunity for patronage for those who came with him. (Part III (Eadmer's hagiography) Para 17)

A further factor which made Lanfranc particularly important was that he was effectively vice-regent acting for William the Conqueror when the King was abroad, and the King spent most of his later years in Normandy rather than in England.

## 7. Thomas Becket, Archbishop of Canterbury

Thomas Becket is the most famous name in the pantheon of Becketts and Becketts. He was the Archbishop of Canterbury who clashed with Henry II, King of England at the time, and was murdered in 1170 by followers of the King.

His name is variously spelled Beket, Becket, or à Becket. The version with 'à' did not appear until 1596, when it was added by Thomas Nashe intended to make Becket into a sort of rustic figure of fun by Protestants. "By the 18<sup>th</sup> century 'Thomas a Becket' had become the most popular form, probably because it's more 'musical' and simply more pleasing to say, and was used, for example, by Samuel Johnson in his first English Dictionary."<sup>vii</sup>

Thomas did not call himself Beket or Becket, but rather 'Thomas of London'.<sup>viii</sup>

We do not have a lineage for Thomas Becket, except that we know that he "was the son of Gilbert and Matilda Beket. Gilbert's father was from Thierville in the lordship of Brionne in Normandy, and was either a small landowner or a petty knight. Matilda was also of Norman descent – her family may have originated near Caen." ... "Gilbert began his life as a merchant, perhaps in textiles, but by the 1120s he was living in London and was a property owner, living on the rental income from his properties. He also served as the sheriff of the city at some point."<sup>ix</sup> Note that Thierville is approximately 2 miles from Bec Abbey.

Theobald of Bec was also from Thierville. Theobald had been Abbot of Bec, and subsequently Archbishop of Canterbury before Thomas. Theobald was considered a supporter of Thomas. While there is no historical proof of a connection between the families before going to England, the circumstances are quite striking.

There are different spellings used for Thomas Becket and his family. Beket appears to have been the more common spelling at the time, but it is now mostly shown as Becket. Thomas' father Gilbert is generally considered to be the Gilbert Beck who was a sheriff of London.<sup>x</sup> Assuming that this is a correct identification, it was an almost pure use of the locative version of Bec Abbey as a surname.

We cannot prove that Thomas Becket's family was associated with Bec Abbey, but it is fairly certain that it was Norman and that it came from within two miles of Bec Abbey.<sup>xi</sup> It was well enough connected for Gilbert to be a sheriff of London. Thomas himself became Lord Chancellor in 1155, i.e., head of the Treasury for all of England, an extremely important position, preceding his appointment as Archbishop of Canterbury in 1162. Clearly, there was not much differentiation between political and ecclesiastical power.

It is unlikely that there are any Becketts alive today who are genetically related to Thomas Becket within historical timeframes. In particular, there were no known surviving male lines of descent from him, his parents, his siblings or his grandparents through which such a relationship could exist. Thomas himself was not known to have had a wife or any children. He had three named sisters, two of whom married and had children, and one who became an abbess.<sup>xii</sup> These would not have carried on the male line to further generations, nor likely the surname either. Given the strong evidence cited elsewhere in this document that Becket was a locative (i.e., location-based) name reflecting people who had come to England from Bec Abbey or were otherwise closely associated with it during the time of William the Conqueror, his family would have been but one of a number of such families. He is without any credible related descendants and without any provable genetic links with anyone else.

## 8. The Norman Bequette branch

Most existing Beckett branches, when they can be traced back to somewhere besides North America, can be traced back to England, and hence may be referred to as English Becketts. However the origin of these Becketts was apparently in Norman France at the time of William

the Conqueror, as explained elsewhere in this paper. As explained above in 5 (Scholarly findings concerning surname origins and spelling changes), surnames also started to be used in Normandy at this same time, and with the same emphasis on locative names. It is reasonable to assume that people who moved within Normandy and within France overall would likewise adopt surnames indicating their association with Bec Abbey, without necessarily having ever been part of the movement of people to England.

One of the Becketts who has done the Big Y DNA test is from a French branch which went directly in 1719 from Solre-sur-Sambre to French territory in what is now Illinois. Solre-sur-Sambre is currently in Belgium, just inside the border from France, but it has been part of many different countries or administrations in the past, including France. Solre-sur-Sambre is close to Normandy, but has not been a part of it.

This branch originally spelled its surname Becquet and Bequet. The two 't' version Becquette/Bequette appeared when Spanish became dominant in Missouri. The name change from Bequette to Beckett happened about 100 years ago when our tester's father first started to school. His teacher told him they didn't teach both French and English anymore and he would have to spell his name in English Beckett. Our tester's father had a sister and brother that kept the Bequette surname and two other brothers who used the surname Beckett. It's all about 'par for the course' for the many name changes our branches experience.

Currently we cannot trace the lineage of this Beckett branch back any further. But it is reasonable to assume that its origin is likewise Norman and associated with Bec Abbey.

## 9. Fluid surname spellings

The earliest use of the surname spelling Beckett (with two 't's) as cited in the major works quoted in 10 (Published theories about the origins of the English Beckett surname) was a single one about 1155 in Danelaw Documents (Lincs), which was an outlier to the range of variants being used. The next known uses of the surname spelling Beckett were in 1539-43 in the International Genealogical Index, which is only secondary source material.

Consequently, to talk about the origin of the Beckett surname is, more accurately, to talk about the origin of the surname variants which eventually coalesced around the spelling Beckett.

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."<sup>xiii</sup>



## 10. Published theories about the origins of the English Beckett surname

Significant sources claiming information about the origins of the English Beckett name are considered here. However, it can be seen that these do not have any historical evidence for their claims, but they are rather speculations based on similarities of spellings with other words and names. They are valuable, however, for the early citations they give of the name or variant/deviant spellings.

The most scholastic published theories and speculations about the origins of the English Beckett surname are probably those from the 2016 **Oxford Dictionary of Family Names in Britain and Ireland**<sup>xiv</sup>. It states:

Beckett

Variants: Beckitt, Becket

Current frequencies: GB 9982, Ireland 551

- GB frequency 1881: 5949
- Main GB location 1881: widespread: esp. Norfolk and Suffolk
- Main Irish location 1847-64: Antrim

1 Norman, English, Irish: nickname from Old French, Middle English beket 'small beak' (a diminutive of Old French bee 'beak or mouth'), perhaps with reference to someone with a small beak-like mouth (compare Beak), though the Middle English word appears to have had a wide range of 'pointed object' applications including 'a corbel', 'a kind of arrow', 'a kind of bird', and 'a kind of fish'.

Early bearers: William Bechet, Beckett, about 1155 in Danelaw Documents (Lincs); Robert Beket, 1176 in Feet of Fines (Berks) Thoma Beket, 1379 in Poll Tax (North Duffield, ER Yorks); Robertus Beket, 1379 in Poll Tax (Burton in Lonsdale, WR Yorks); Johanna Beket, 1381 in Poll Tax (Weasenham, Norfolk); Hugo Beket, 1381 in Poll Tax (Formby, Lancs); Alicia Beket, 1381 in Poll Tax (Plungar, Leics); Johannes Beket, 1381 in Poll Tax (Donnington, Gloucs); Agatha Beket, 1381 in Poll Tax (Hambledon, Hants); Willia. Beckett, 1539 in IGI (Limpsfield, Surrey); Robertus Beckett, 1540 in IGI (Betley, Staffs); Roger Beckett, 1541 in IGI (Ipswich, Suffolk); John Beckett, 1546 in IGI (Margaret Roding, Essex); Jhon. Beckett, 1553 in IGI (Rothwell, WR Yorks).

2 English: locative name from Beckett in Shrevenham (Berks).

Early bearers: [... de] Becote, 1179-80, [... de] Beccote, 1284 in Place-Names of Berks (Berks); John de Beckcote, 1279 in Hundred Rolls (Oxon); John de Beckote, 1351 in Patent Rolls (Berks); Ricardo Becot, 1379 in Poll Tax (Worthington, Leics).

References: Place-Names of Berks, p. 376.

It may be noted that the earliest reference cited is in 1155, i.e., there are no cited instances before William the Conqueror's invasion of 1066. The references do not include Thomas Beket Archbishop of Canterbury or his parents, which should have been before 1155.

It may also be noted that all of the Becketts in the north of Ireland (including in County Antrim) who have been Y-DNA tested as part of the Becket(t)/Bicket(t)/Bichan one-name study are members of the Ayrshire Becket(t)/Bicket(t)/Bichan tree, with one exception, for someone whose great grandfather was known to be illegitimate.

Another important source to note (although from the same publisher with two of the same authors) is the **Dictionary of American Family Names 2nd edition**, 2022<sup>xv</sup>. This is cited by Ancestry. (Family Search cites the 2003/2006 version of this book.) It reads:

Beckett Surname Meaning: English and Irish (of Norman origin): nickname from Old French Middle English beket 'small beak' (a diminutive of Old French bec 'beak or mouth') perhaps with reference to someone with a small beak-like mouth or a prominent nose (compare Beck ) though the Middle English word appears to have had a wide range of applications denoting 'pointed objects' including 'corbel kind of arrow kind of bird' and 'kind of fish'. This surname is also found in Ireland especially in Antrim. English: habitational name from any of the places called Beckett in Berkshire and Devon. The former is named with Old English bēo 'bee' + cot 'cottage shelter'; the latter has as its first element the Old English personal name Bicca. Altered form of Bequette a surname of French origin.

The entry for Beck (referred to above) is more useful. It reads<sup>xvi</sup>:

Beck Surname Meaning: English: topographic name for someone who lived beside a stream from northern Middle English bekke 'stream' (Old Norse bekk). English (of Norman origin): habitational name from any of various places in northern France named Bec for example Bec Hellouin in Eure named with Old Norman French bec 'stream' from the same Old Norse root as in 1 above. English: from the Middle English personal name Becke (Old English Becca or Beocca) of uncertain origin. English: probably a nickname for someone with a prominent nose from Middle English bek bekke 'beak (of a bird)' (Old French bec). German and Jewish (Ashkenazic): occupational name for a baker a cognate of Becker from (older) South German beck West Yiddish bek 'baker'. Some Jewish bearers of the name claim that it is an acronym of Hebrew ben-kedoshim 'son of martyrs' i.e. a name taken by one whose parents had been martyred for being Jews. The German surname is also found in France (mainly Alsace and Lorraine) Hungary Czechia Slovakia and Croatia. Compare Bek North German and Dutch: topographic name for someone who lived by a stream from Low German beke Dutch beck 'stream'. Compare the High German form Bach 1 and Dutch Bek 6.7: Danish and Norwegian: habitational name from a farmstead named Bekk Bæk or Bäck from Old Norse bekk 'stream brook' denoting a farm by a stream.8: Swedish: variant of Bäck (see Back ). This surname may also be of German origin (see above).9: Americanized or Germanized form of Polish Rusyn Czech Croatian or Slovenian Bek in the last two languages a cognate of the German name in 5 above.

## 11. The Bigot surname

The surname Bigot has been mentioned as a possible variant of Beckett, and that it might possibly be connected with the origin of the Beckett surname.

It does not appear that the surnames of Becket and Bigot are related. For example, there is a published list of people who accompanied William on his invasion of England in 1066.<sup>xvii</sup> This list includes 'Bigot de Loges' and 'Roger Bigot'. There is also a 'Geoffroi du Bec', who would appear to be associated with Bec Abbey, so both 'Bec' and 'Bigot' were being used at the same time.

Bigot was a Norman surname, but not from the vicinity of Bec Abbey. One source gives the following information about the Bigot surname:<sup>xviii</sup>

BIGOT.

Dept. Calvados.

A full account of Roger Bigot, a great Domesday tenant-in-chief in East Anglia and ancestor of the earls of Norfolk, will be found in the new edition of The Complete Peerage, vol. ix, pp. 575-579.

... [There are several paragraphs of detail.]

To sum it up, Roger Bigot was a man of Calvados. His lands in Normandy were of but moderate extent and he made the fortunes of himself and his descendants in England, and through the Conquest. One cannot help suspecting that he was enabled to do this by his Norman overlord, Odo bishop of Bayeux, of whom in 1086 he was holding something like twenty manors in Suffolk.

The surname Bigot/Bigod has also been mentioned in other works, but as a surname whose origin is unknown. J.C.Holt stated in the 1981 Stenton Lecture that 'by the time Matthew wrote

in the middle of the thirteenth century the Bigods could have been as much in the dark as we have all been ever since as to what their name really meant.<sup>9xix</sup>

There is at least one Beckett lineage which says it can trace itself back to John Bigott (1540-1579), and then back to France. Rather than indicating something about the origins of the Beckett surname, this name change is perhaps an example of people 'migrating' their surname spelling to the more well-known Beckett surname, without any historical link. (This has happened many times in the Ayrshire Becket(t)/Bicket(t) tree.) The Bigot surname apparently does not exist any longer.

## Annex 1. Location of Bec Abbey

Bec Abbey is located in Le Bec-Hellouin, with Hellouin being a reference to the founder of Bec Abbey in 1034, Herluin. It was abandoned in 1791. It was re-established in 1948 by Olivetan monks.<sup>xx</sup>

The name of the abbey derives from the bec, or stream, that runs nearby.<sup>xxi</sup> However, people taking on the Bec/Becket name as their surname will not have understood themselves to be taking on the name of the stream, but rather of the abbey.

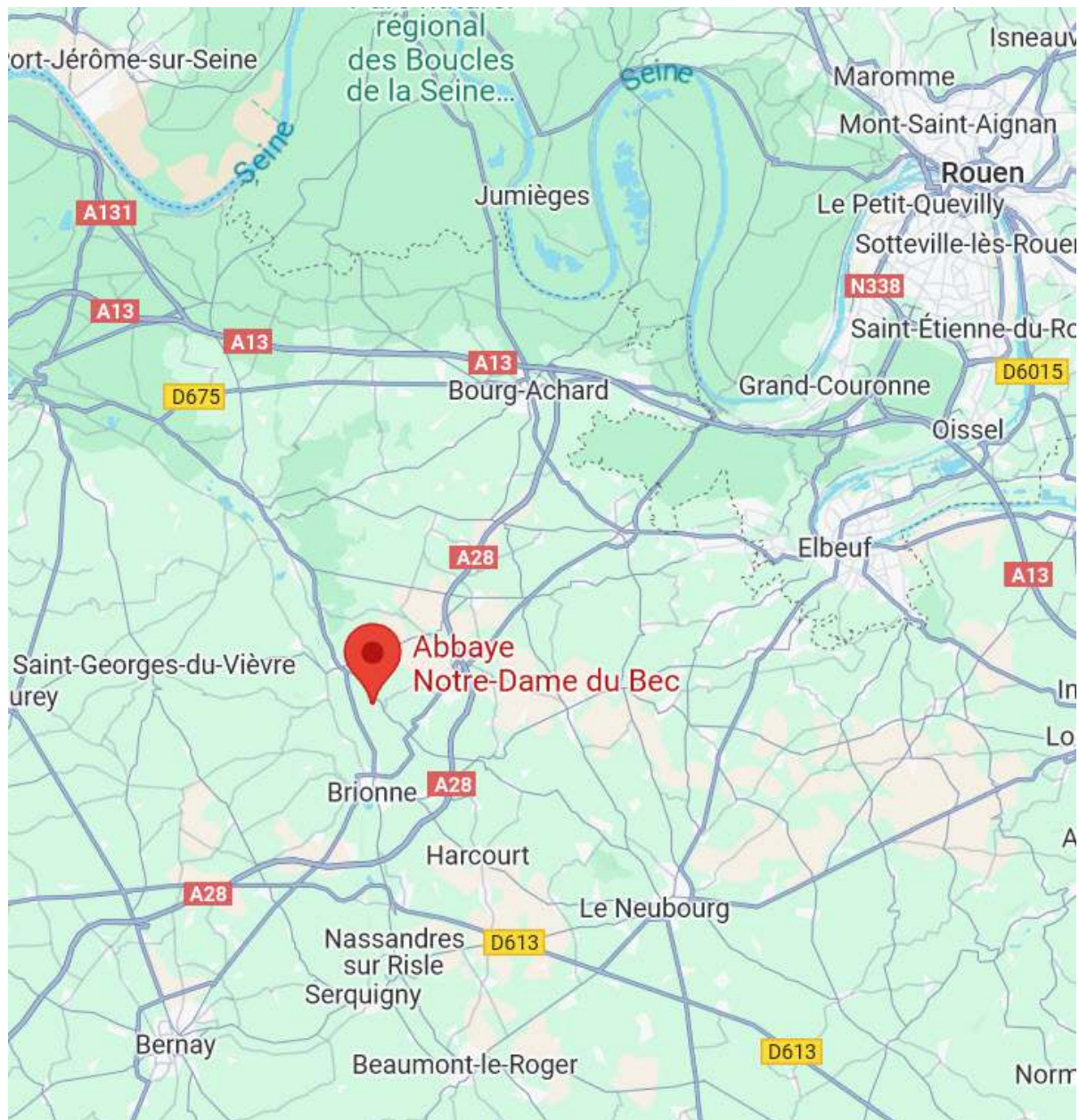


Figure 2: Location of Bec Abbey in Normandy, France

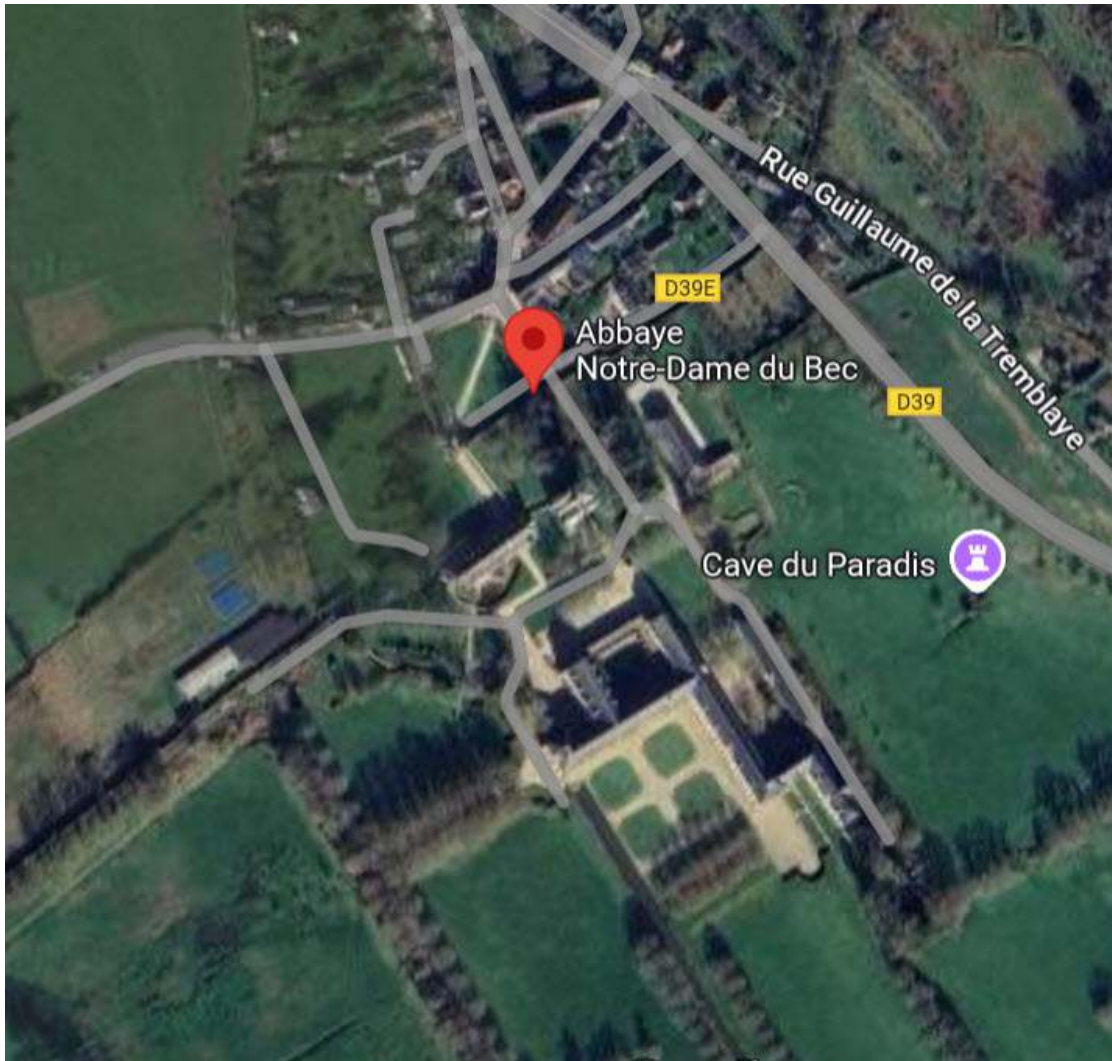


Figure 3: Google Satellite view of Bec Abbey

## Annex 2. Significant individuals associated with Bec Abbey and Lanfranc

Name	Lived	Comments
Herluin	c 996-1078	Founded Bec Abbey in 1034
Lanfranc	c 1005/10-1089	Italian jurist who joined Bec Abbey in 1042, became Abbot at Caen in 1063, then became Archbishop of Canterbury (1070-1089)
William the Conqueror, William I of England	c 1028-1087	Patron of Bec Abbey; appointed Lanfranc as Archbishop of Canterbury and had him as a trusted advisor and vice-regent when abroad. Spent much of the latter part of his life in Normandy rather than in England.
Anselm (Saint)	c 1033/4-1109	Italian, became Abbot at Bec Abbey, then became Archbishop of Canterbury (1093-1109)
Milo Crispin	?-c 1149	Cantor of Bec Abbey. Wrote the lives/hagiographies of five of its notables including Lanfranc and Theobald.

Gilbert Crispin	c 1055-1117	A monk under Anselm at Bec Abbey; wrote the life of Herluin who founded Bec Abbey. Became Archbishop of Westminster. Apparently a descendant of Milo Crispin.
William Rufus, William II of England	c 1057-1100	Succeeded William the Conqueror
Eadmer of Canterbury	c 1060-c1130	Benedictine monk at Canterbury who wrote one of the hagiographies of Lanfranc
William Thorne	active 1397	Monk of St Augustine's Abbey in Canterbury. He wrote the history of the Abbots of St. Augustine's from the foundation to 1397. A short piece by him is part of the hagiography of Lanfranc.

### Annex 3. Archbishops of Canterbury (1052-1170)

There have been archbishops of Canterbury since AD 597. However, for the purposes of this document, those of potential interest cover the initial period of Norman England. (The full list is available<sup>xxii</sup>.) Those who had previously been at Bec Abbey are highlighted in yellow.

Name	From	To	Comments
Stigand	1052	11 April 1070	Archbishop from prior to William's Conquest. Had been concurrently Bishop of Winchester, seat of the royal court. Did not support William being crowned king. Removed ('deprived') on 11 April 1070.
Lanfranc	29 Aug 1070	28 May 1089	Originally an Italian jurist before becoming a Benedictine monk at Bec Abbey, where he eventually became the prior, second in role to the Abbot Herluin. Then became Abbot of St Étienne before coming to England and becoming Archbishop of Canterbury. Close advisor to King William.  "Lanfranc accelerated the process of substituting Normans for Englishmen in all preferments of importance; and although his nominees were usually respectable, it cannot be said that all of them were better than the men whom they superseded. There was a considerable mixture for this admixture of secular with spiritual aims. By long tradition, the primate was entitled to a leading position in the king's councils, and the interests of the Church demanded that Lanfranc should use his power in a manner not displeasing to the king. On several occasions when William I was absent from England Lanfranc acted as his vicegerent." <sup>xxiii</sup>  He has not been canonised as a saint, but "in the period after the Council of Trent, Lanfranc's name was included in the Roman Martyrology, and in the current edition is commemorated as a 'Blessed' (beatus) on 28 May." This is the basis for his extensive hagiography cited elsewhere in this document.

Vacant	28 May 1089	4 Dec 1093	
Anselm	4 Dec 1093	21 Apr 1109	An Italian. Had studied under Lanfranc at Bec before becoming Abbot of Bec. Canonised as St Anselm.
vacant	21 Apr 1109	26 Apr 1114	
Ralph d'Escures	26 Apr 1114	2 Oct 1122	Studied at the school at Bec Abbey. Had been Abbot of Séez in France before becoming Bishop of Rochester, then Archbishop of Canterbury.
William de Corbeil	18 Feb 1123	21 Nov 1136	Born in Corbeil, France (not in Normandy). Little is known of his life.
Vacant	21 Nov 1136	8 Jan 1139	
Theobald of Bec	8 Jan 1139	18 Apr 1161	A Norman. Had been Abbot of Bec. (Also known as Tedbald)
vacant	18 Apr 1161	3 Jun 1162	
Thomas Becket	3 Jun 1162	29 Dec 1170	Previously Lord Chancellor (i.e., Treasurer) of England

#### Annex 4. Significant dates

Year	Event
1034	Bec Abbey in Normandy founded by Herluin
1035	William becomes the Duke of Normandy, William II of Normandy
1042	Lanfranc joins Bec Abbey
1063	Lanfranc becomes Abbot of Caen, France
1066	William invades and conquers England, becomes King William I of England
1070	Lanfranc becomes Archbishop of Canterbury
1086	Domesday Book completed (not including Winchester or City of London)
1087	King William I dies; succeeded by son William Rufus, who becomes King William II
1089	Lanfranc dies
...	
1162	Thomas Beket becomes Archbishop of Canterbury
1170	Thomas Beket murdered

#### Annex 5. About the Lanfranc hagiography

The Lanfranc hagiography (or religious biography) in Latin is included in the Acta Sanctorum, which is 'an encyclopedic text in 68 folio volumes of documents examining the lives of Christian saints, in essence a critical hagiography, organised by the saints' feast days.'<sup>xxiv</sup> Lanfranc is included under 28 May together with many other saints, and his is towards the end. There are four different sections to his hagiography:

- I. An introduction dated 1889 (6 paras)
- II. The life of Lanfranc as told by Milo Crispin of Bec Abbey (60 paras)
- III. The life of Lanfranc as told by Eadmer of Canterbury (18 paras)

- IV. 'Anti-Lanfrancus', an explanation of his conflict with monks by William Thorne, an Augustinian monk writing around 1397 (8 paras)

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- <sup>iv</sup> [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Bec\\_Abbey](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Bec_Abbey), viewed on 14 Dec 2024
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- <sup>vii</sup> <https://www.york.ac.uk/news-and-events/news/2023/research/thomas-a-becket-study/>, viewed on 14 Dec 2024
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- <sup>xiii</sup> "The Origin of English Surnames", by P. H. Reaney, 1967, Routledge and Kegan Paul, p.25
- <sup>xiv</sup> "The Oxford Dictionary of Family Names in Britain and Ireland", by Patrick Hanks, Richard Coates, and Peter McClure, 2016, Oxford University Press
- <sup>xv</sup> "Dictionary of American Family Names 2<sup>nd</sup> edition", by Patrick Hanks, Simon Lenarčič, and Peter McClure, 2022, Oxford University Press, cited by Ancestry.co.uk at <https://www.ancestry.co.uk/name-origin?surname=beckett> on 14 Dec 2024.
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