

The Origin of the Irish Surname “Pelan”

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The rare and unusual Northern Irish surname **PELAN** is found concentrated in the Ulster counties of Antrim and Down, primarily in Belfast but historically in and around Lisburn. It does not appear to occur elsewhere in Ireland other than via lines connected to this Ulster source. So what are the origins of this peculiar family name ?

My research to-date has incorporated crude statistical analysis, documentary evidence from registries and archives spanning hundreds of years, detailed pursuits of similarly named Irish diaspora across the Western world and has been supplemented with Y-DNA based genetic genealogy amongst other things. The conclusion, given the evidence thus far, is that **PELAN** is ultimately a corruption of the English surname **PALING** / **PAYLING** and was introduced to Ireland in the 17th century by one or more English migrants who came to work the Conway family estate centred on the then nascent Ulster town of Lisnagarvey, later known as Lisburn.

So how has this conclusion been reached ?

Contextual Historical Background

- As the surname is historically concentrated in a reasonably small region in Ireland, it is unlikely to be particularly old and/or it has a singular origin that has not appeared elsewhere in Ireland. This would seem to preclude it from being a family name that might occur spontaneously around Ireland. For example, surnames relating to trades, nicknames, topographic features etc. typically have multiple, independent origins.
- We know that the town of Lisburn was initially populated by English and Welsh migrants, introduced largely from the English and Welsh estates of the Conway family.

Documentary Evidence

- A search of some of the 17th century correspondence¹ relating to the Conway estate has found multiple mentions of a Mathew **PALLING** / **PALLAN** etc. He appears to have been a trusted groomsman / horse trainer for the 3rd Viscount Killultagh, Edward Conway.
- These “Conway Papers” include a letter written by Mathew *in his own hand* in which he appears to write his name as **PALINGE** although his penmanship leaves much to be desired.
- The same Mathew (inferred from context) is recorded, in 1666, as asking Edward Conway to build him a house with stables (an inn) at Lambeg near Lisburn at an estimated cost of between £200 to £300. There is a long standing association between the **PELAN** surname and Lambeg.

¹ National Archives, Calendar of State Papers (Domestic SP29 & Relating to Ireland SP63). Available online as ‘State Papers Online’ or as a series of condensed Victorian transcripts in the bigger public libraries.

- A muster roll of Viscount Conway's troop of horse (written around 26th June 1667) includes a Mathew **PALLING** which can be presumed to be the same individual as above. Aside from the predominance of English surnames listed as privates in this coterie of men, it is also mentioned that two recently deceased members were directly replaced by Englishmen.
- I therefore suspect this Mathew person is the progenitor of the **PELAN** surname in Ulster.
- The Lisburn Cathedral records² of the same era include baptisms of children of a man, whom we can reasonably presume to be the same individual living in Lambeg:
 - 1670 Penelope dau of Mathew **PELIN** of Lambeg - 12th Jan 1670
 - 1671 Mary/Marg dau of Mathew **PALIN** of Lambeg - 24th Jul 1671
 - 1672 Mathew son of Mathew **PEALING** of Lambeg - 27th Nov 1672
 - 1674 Robert son of Mathew **PEALING** of Lambeg - 11th Apr 1674
 - 1677 Ellin dau. of Mathew **PELIN** of Lambeg - 7th Nov 1677
- The records of the Lisburn cathedral wardens³ include (reverse chronological order):
 - 1820 - George **PELAN**
 - 1809 - Richard **PELAN**
 - 1798 - James **PELAN**
 - 1697 - Matthew **PAILING**
- The cathedral records above with their diverse orthography strongly suggests an uncertain pronunciation even in the 17th century. It doesn't look like mere inconsistent spelling which would have shown variation at that time. This clearly demonstrates the route for the mutation of the surname from these diverse early forms into **PELAN**.

Genetic Genealogy

- The Y-DNA⁴ of one member of the **PELAN** family closely matches two unrelated individuals called **PALING** and **PAYLING** living in England today. Specifically their STR haplotypes differ by only 6 positions in 67 plus they share a rare mutation on DYS464, namely 2c2g. The statistical likelihood of this match occurring randomly in the British Isles population is very difficult to assess, but it is certainly in excess of many millions to one against. FTDNA's basic TIP tool suggests a 97% probability of a common ancestor within 24 generations but it does not take into account the DYS464 mutation which would improve this probability.
- Not all the Y-DNA evidence points so obviously this way. Of the four Y-DNA haplotype groups found thus far in descendants of Ulster Pelans, one is strongly characteristic of a line of the **HANCOCK** family. It is not unusual in Y-DNA research to find uncharacteristic haplotypes - there are many reasons why male lineages can be corrupted (adoption, remarriage, infidelity etc). but this particular case can be accounted for by the known close proximity of the **PELAN** and **HANCOCK** families living in 18th and 19th century Lisburn.

Loose Ends ?

- While we have seen that **PALING** has transformed into **PELAN**, we do not know if this mutation was influenced by a pre-existing surname. In other words, was **PALING** being

² PRONI, Lisburn Cathedral Records MIC1/3/1

³ *Lisburn Cathedral and its Past Rectors* by Rev. W.P. Carmody (1920)

⁴ <https://www.familytreedna.com/public/Pelan/>

mistaken in the ear of the writer for another surname with which they were more familiar ? We can see this today when we see the surname **PELAN** being occasionally 'corrected' into the very common Irish surname **PHELAN** which most Irish people will know very well. Part of the confusion may be explained by knowing that Lisburn had a diverse population which probably had representative accents/dialects from many regions of the British Isles.

- If there was a pre-existing surname, this opens up the possibility that carriers of this family name still exist. This may account for the variety of Y-DNA haplotypes of which there are currently four, although as we have seen we can already account for one of the alternatives namely the **HANCOCK**-like haplotype, as a so-called Non Paternal Event (NPE).

Further Research

- It is interesting to note that the **PALING** surname, as has come through Ulster, has continued to mutate. We have genetic and/or documentary evidence of Pelan-related families that now use the surnames **PALEN**, **PALLAN** (both North America) and **PELLING** (Scotland). The first of these mutations was likely influenced by the presence of the Dutch surname Palen.
- Where did the **PALING** surname originate ? This is an open question although we can see it in Nottinghamshire and Yorkshire today, with earlier historical traces in Lincolnshire and Warwickshire. The latter has an obvious connection with the Conway family estate at Ragley Hall. Some studies suggest the surname is connected to the Norfolk town of Palling (pronounced "Pawling") although this connection appears to rest simply because of their orthographic similarity, rather than the surname being actually being found there.
- More Y-DNA samples will help with the origin question and also in discovering other branches of the family that are currently unknown or only suspected.
- I have in excess of 30 family trees related to the Ulster Pelans - although their current descendants, if any, may not be called Pelan today. Joining these together is still important although there are huge gaps in the birth, marriage and death records that will never be filled. In particular, the early church records for the highly relevant Anglican church at Lambeg have been lost. But for the fact that many BMD services were conducted at Lisburn cathedral we might not have any early records at all.

John Pelan,
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