

Shedding Light on Dark DNA?

After what must be a quarter of a century researching the ancestry of my family in North Devon I have just sent a DNA sample to Texas for a 37 marker test of my Y chromosome DNA. Why? Well, I now know enough about my North Devon ancestry to be sure that a large number of the Darks who, like me, have deep roots in North Devon (especially around the village of Parkham) are very likely to be related to each other in various degrees of cousinage. What I cannot find is any documentary genealogical evidence which would link me to any other group of Darks rooted in areas outside Devon, or even to the other large group of Darks found in south-east Devon, centred around the parish of Sidbury. Maybe there are no genetic links and the name is multi-originated?

There is certainly not much illumination to be gained from the meaning of the name. It can be variously spelt as Dark, Darke, or Darck etc. and different spellings can be found within the same family tree. It could be a nickname derived from the Old English *deorc*, meaning dark of complexion or, equally, a locative surname derived from *Arque*, *Argue* or even *Arches* in France. If the latter, then the name *Darch*, which is even less numerous than *Dark* and peculiar to Devon, may be a variant. We simply don't know, but the distribution of the name raises, in my mind at least, a number of interesting speculations.

The national surname index for the 1881 Decennial Census makes it possible to account for every individual with the same name living in England, Wales and Scotland at the time of the Census. This shows that the total number of individuals called *Dark* (1,097), *Darke* (699) or *Darck* (7) totalled 1,803 in 1881 of whom only 28 lived in Scotland. This makes it a not very numerous but not especially rare name.

Mapping the incidence of the name on an English and Welsh Poor Law Union basis reveals a very striking pattern of distribution and confirms the picture presented by early nineteenth century death registrations (see accompanying map). London and Surrey apart, the name was strongly localised in the four English counties of Devon (315), Gloucestershire (237), Worcestershire (128) and Somerset (122); the only counties in which 3 figure numbers obtained. Within the 3 latter counties the name was particularly numerous in and around Bath, Bristol, Worcester and Bewdley. Only 4 Welsh counties (if Monmouth is included) contained any *Dark* or *Darke* names i.e. Glamorgan (30), Monmouth (10), Flintshire (9) and Pembroke (2). In five English and nine Welsh counties the name did not occur at all.

The absolutely clear correlation that appears is that the heartland of the name lies in Devon and extends in a crescent alongside the Bristol Channel and into the basin of the River Severn. Was waterborne transport significant in the spread of the name? I found it very intriguing that a high proportion of the Darks living in Bewdley on the River Severn in 1881 were described as boatmen; what we today would describe as canal bargees. This was an unusually geographically mobile occupational group. Did the name spread northwards via the Severn and its associated canals and tributaries to Worcestershire and westwards into Warwickshire? Or, bearing in mind the substantial number of *Dark* marriages and baptisms recorded in Worcestershire pre-1600, was there a movement in the opposite direction i.e. southwards towards Bristol and Gloucester?

The London area is, of course, the exceptional case as far as this distribution is concerned. With 292 occurrences it rivals Devon in numbers. The real figure is actually bigger than this because there were undoubtedly many *Dark*(e)s living in parts of the metropolitan area outside Middlesex and the City of London. For census purposes their names would be included in the returns for the administrative counties of Essex (21 names), Surrey (127 names) and Kent (54 names) even though they were living within the perimeter of Greater London. The metropolitan area has always been the great magnet, attracting migrants from all over the Kingdom and it would

be most unusual for any English name not to be well represented in London.

The evidence of the I.G.I. (International Genealogical Index) strongly suggests that at least 3 of the 4 main stems in Devon, Somerset, Gloucestershire and Worcestershire are of long established character. For the period before 1600, 58 baptisms and marriages are recorded for Devon, 29 for Worcestershire and 24 for Gloucestershire. None are recorded for Somerset in the same period but Somerset parishes are heavily under-represented in the I.G.I. and a number of events are likely to have been omitted.

Significantly, no marriages or baptisms are recorded in Surrey, Middlesex and the City of London, strongly supporting the view that the very large metropolitan population of Darks in 1881 was largely the result of migration from the provinces. It looks very much as if most Darks today are descended from the 4 major provincial stems; but are they related genealogically?

Interestingly, the I.G.I. records the baptism of a Margaret Daurk at Ryarsh in Kent on the 17th September 1592. This may suggest a more local origin for some at least of the 54 Darks living in Kent in 1881.

Within Devon the 1881 census shows that distribution of the name was very uneven with two very obvious clusters occurring. The first and biggest (125 names) occurs in North Devon, especially in the area between the Torridge estuary and the Devon/Cornwall boundary. Bideford contained the largest number of names within this cluster (36 names). The second cluster is to be found in south-east Devon (97 names) between the Exe estuary on the western side and the Devon/Dorset border on the eastern side. The village of Sidbury then contained the largest single group of names (28 names).

In the absence of documented genealogical connections DNA seemed to me to offer the only real possibility of obtaining answers to my questions arising from the distribution of the name. Unfortunately, the name Dark is not present among the many hundreds of single surname studies based on the collection of paternal DNA material. Nonetheless, some help is now at hand.

This takes the form of a new geographic project initiated by Debbie Kennett on Family Tree DNA. Family Tree DNA is the company based in Houston, Texas which owns the largest of the world's DNA databases. The testing is done by the University of Arizona and, unusually, the samples are kept for 25 years in the University's laboratory. Debbie Kennett's project is confined to individuals with known roots in Devonshire. By collecting their DNA signatures Debbie anticipates that light may be thrown on the genetic composition (often described as "deep ancestry") of the Devonshire population. I was able to join this project by reason of my Devonshire ancestry. This means that I only need, for example, one or two Darks with ancestral roots in south-east Devon to join as well, to have the answer to the question whether or not the "Sidbury Darks" are genetically related to the Darks of Parkham.

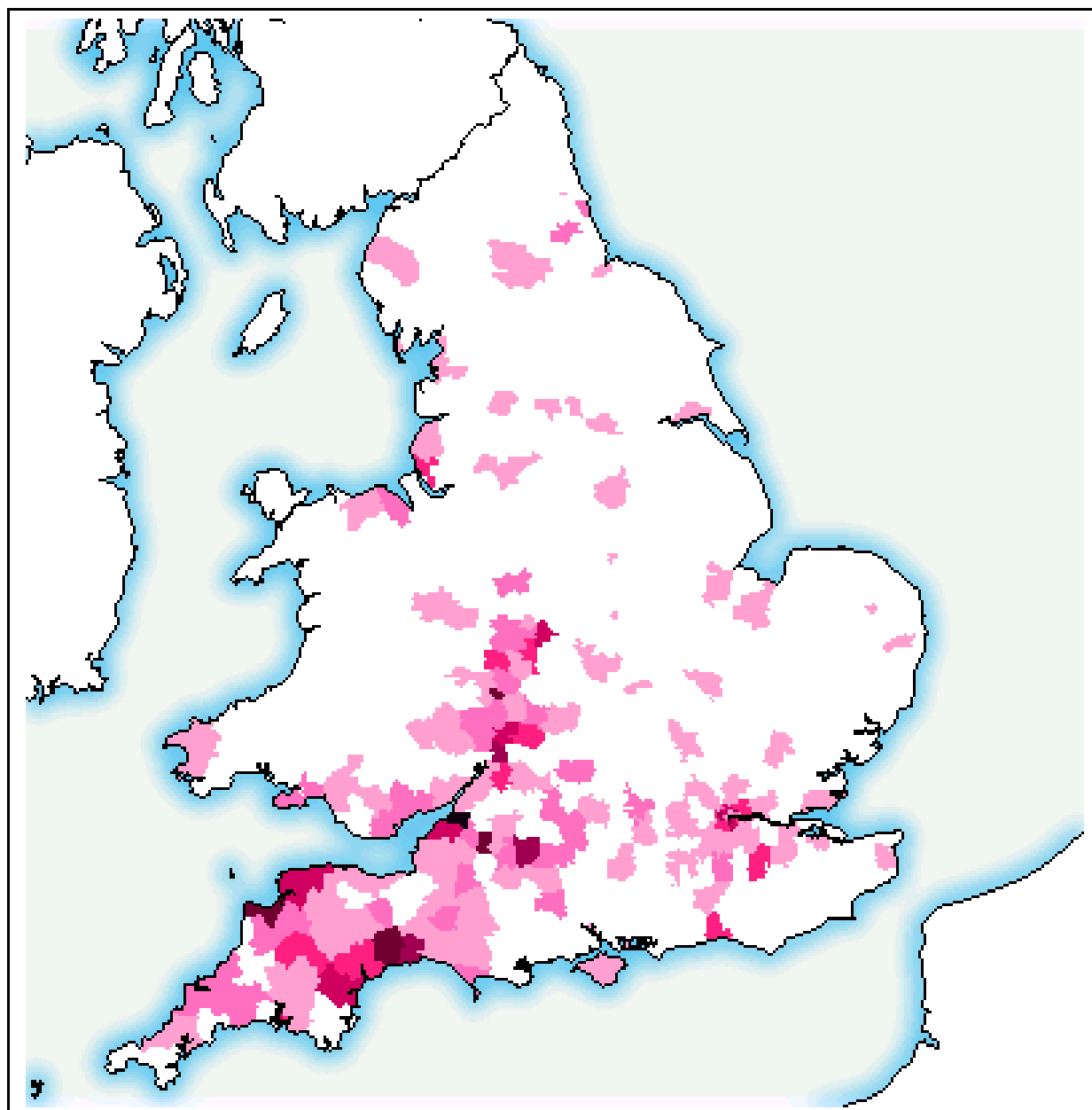
It doesn't stop there. Anyone contributing a DNA sample to the Familytree database can have it compared to all the other samples in the worldwide database and if a match is found, indicating common ancestry, be put in touch with the owner of the matching sample. In this way, if any Darks with roots anywhere outside Devon decide to have their DNA tested, and there is a match, I am likely to know about it. So come on, all you Darks, Darkes, Darcks from Somerset, Gloucestershire, Worcestershire and even Kent, take the plunge and contribute your Y chromosome DNA to the Familytree database. One of your Devonshire dumpling namesakes has pioneered the way! Are we all related or not?
Arthur Dark

Debbie Kennett's project website: www.familytreedna.com/public/devon.aspx

Family Tree DNA- Genealogy by Genetics, Ltd.: www.familytreedna.com

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**Distribution of Dark, Darke or Darck names in 1881 Census by Poor Law Unions
(England & Wales only)**



- 1 White = zero
- 2 Pale pink = 1-5
- 3 Mid pink = 11-20
- 4 Dark pink = 21-30
- 5 Raspberry = 31-50
- 6 Blackberry = 51-70
- 7 Black = 71+ (Barton Regis)

Unions with largest nos. were: Barton Regis (Bristol) 101, Bideford (Dev.) 69, Worcester 58, Bath (Som.) 54

The above map comes from the British 19th Century Surname Atlas (CD ROM, 2003) constructed by Stephen Archer using the computerised data in the 1881 census index published in 1999. The boundaries of the Poor Law Unions were used as a basis for the post 1837 Civil Registration Districts and the first civil registrars were drawn from the ranks of the officials who ran the Unions. Using the Poor Law Unions as the unit of distribution for the surnames Dark, Darke or Darck shows up the variations in the distribution within counties as well as between them.