

Russom Genealogy and the Russom name

“Russom” comes from Rusholme, a small district of Manchester, England. It’s about one quarter of a mile square. The first element, “rus(s),” is Lancashire dialect for “rush,” in the sense of “water plant.” The second element, “holme,” is from Old Norse, reflecting settlement along the Mersey River in the Viking era (800-1000 AD) by Norwegians moving south from earlier settlements in Scotland. This was an era when Norwegian lords ruled in York and Dublin, with Manchester situated between them. In Old Norse, a “holm” is a piece of land surrounded by water at high tide but connected to the mainland at low tide. Holms were used as natural pens for cattle by agriculturalists in Norway and Iceland, where fertile land is found primarily near fjords and riverbeds. Holms also served as sites for the duels that were sometimes used to resolve legal gridlock at that time. “Rusholme” originally meant something like “Cattail Island.”

The bed of the Mersey River has moved since Rusholme was given its name. The district is now paved over and looks much like other districts around the University of Manchester. Today, the identity of “Rusholme” is marked by a bus stop, a small post office, and the “Rusholme Chippie,” a fish-and-chips shop in the British style. University students pronounce “Rusholme” as “rush” plus “home,” but Professor Richard Hogg, a linguist in the University’s English department, states that long-time residents of Manchester pronounce “Rusholme” identically to our pronunciation of the family name, with no “h” sound and a second syllable like the shorter form of “them” in colloquial usages like “get ‘em.” This pronunciation is probably the same as the one represented by other spellings of the surname such as “Russum” and “Russem.”

While driving from Michigan to Rhode Island, we happened to find a “Rusholme Road” near Welland, Canada. This must have been named after the Manchester district by English immigrants.

During the later middle ages, when surnames of the modern type first came into use people were probably distinguished as “Russom” because they had moved to their current place of residence from Rusholme. In general, English surnames derived from place names indicated a place from which someone had moved, not the place where someone currently lived. “York” and “London” are more common examples of this name type. When our family visited Manchester, we couldn’t find any Russoms listed in the phone book. The rare name “Russom” is used by the English Place Names Society to trace early migration patterns. Much of the information given here comes from this society’s publications.

----credited to Rick and Jacque Russom of Rhode Island