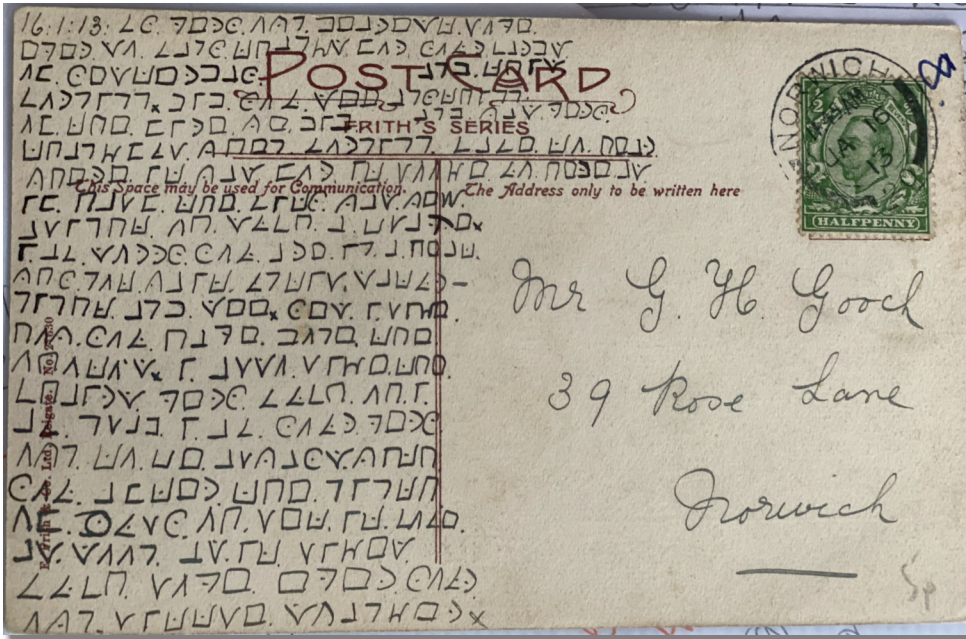


British Connections

Official Publication of the International Society for British Genealogy and Family History

Photos, Postcards, and Penpals



Back of postcard purchased on Ebay (author's collection).

A Postcard with a Difference

Donna Rutherford

Every so often, I buy postcards from eBay. Generally, these are vintage postcards that have been written on and posted. Postcards are a fascinating window into the past, offering insights into social, cultural, and historical contexts of the time in which they were written. They were a primary means of communication prior to telephones and, of course, now the internet. In some ways, they were the social media of the past—a few words about what was happening that day or thoughts on a trending topic. Vintage postcards can be found in antique shops, flea markets, or websites like eBay. I have bought postcards because they come from places my ancestors lived, or sometimes, I have found cards with surnames of interest. Occasionally I just buy a postcard that looks interesting. I would not consider myself a collector, although I do have quite a few cards in a box in my office.

In late 2022, I spotted a postcard on eBay from St. Austell, Cornwall, England, posted in 1913 from Norwich, Norfolk, England. I looked at it with interest as my paternal great-grandmother was from St. Austell; her

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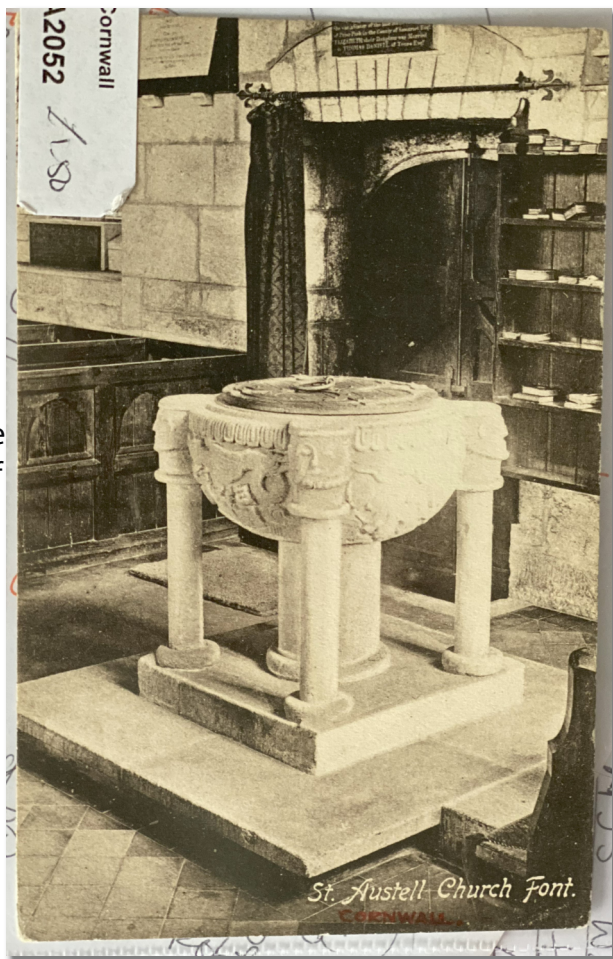
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family were tin miners there before emigrating to New Zealand in the late 1800s. On eBay I could see the marks on this postcard looked like a cypher of some sort. It had been sent to an address in Norwich, so I bought it to take a closer look at the markings. The postcard itself was one of the "Frith's Series," published by F. Frith & Co. Ltd. (this was the company founded to publish Francis Frith's photos as postcards after his death). The postcard arrived, and on closer inspection, it was indeed some sort of code or cipher. A quick Google on ciphers helped to establish it was likely a pigpen cipher of some



Front of postcard purchased on Ebay (author's collection).

sort. The pigpen Cipher is also known as the Masonic Cipher or Freemason's Cipher. It is a substitution cipher that is simple and visually distinctive. It replaces letters with symbols and can be harder to decipher if you don't know the key; however, it is relatively basic and not considered to be a secure method of encryption. The cipher works based on a grid of lines and dots, often resembling a series of pigpens or cages, which is where the name comes from. Each letter of the alphabet is represented by a unique arrangement of lines and dots within the grid. Wikipedia has an interesting page all about the pigpen cipher and can be found through Google or by going to https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Pigpen_cipher. Putting on my detective hat, I had to plan how I was going to decipher this message. If you want to have a go at cracking the code, then stop reading here and come back to compare with my decoded message later.

My first attempt at deciphering did not go well, as the pigpen boxes did not seem to align in a way that sensible words were forming, it was also difficult to establish what was an L-shape or a V-shape given the way they were written on the postcard. At least the address was written in a very neat hand, so I decided to look up the man the postcard was sent

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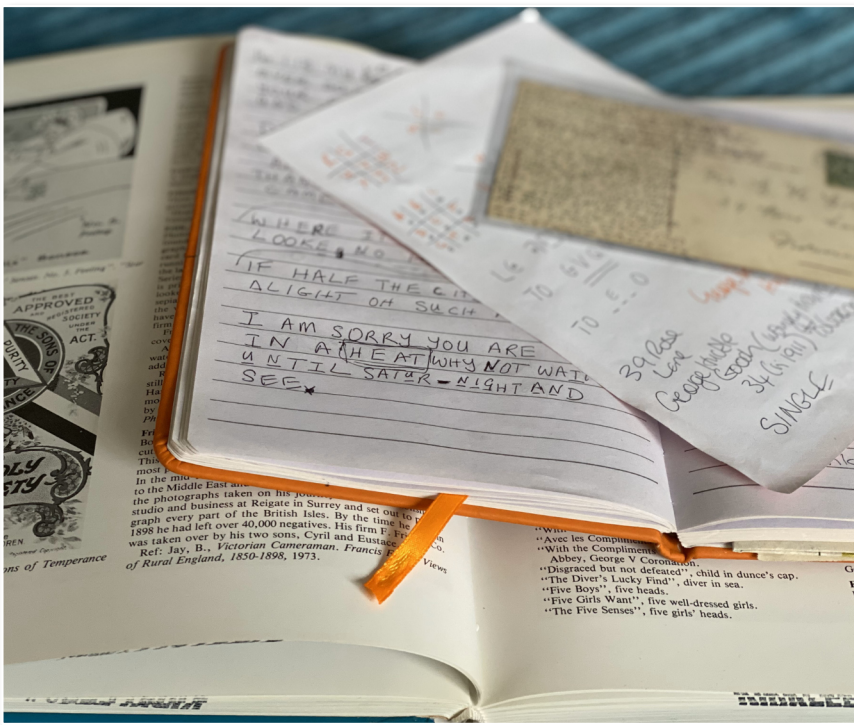
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to. Given I do a lot of genetic genealogy, I'm used to working with private and unsearchable trees at Ancestry.com. I have a tree called "Postcards," so if I want to dig into a sender or receiver of a postcard, I just start a new floating branch in the tree and start researching that person. The postcard was sent to a Mr. G. H. Gooch, 39 Rose Lane, Norwich. To work out who Mr. Gooch was, I went to FindMyPast because there I can look up the 1911 Census for England and Wales by address. There I found 39 Rose Lane, and the entry was transcribed as "George Huckle GOOK." I checked the actual image and sure enough, it was GOOCH, but incorrectly transcribed. While I was there on the site, I reported the error and FindMyPast have now fixed that transcription. George Huckle GOOCH was living at 39 Rose Lane on his own, and his occupation was listed as a tobacconist. I could now get an estimate of George's age from the census; he was 34 years old in 1911 and therefore about 36 when he received this unusual postcard, and I could now look for his birth records. Interestingly, ten



Working on the deciphering (author's collection).

George went on to have five children. Now that I had a bit more context around the person receiving the postcard, I needed to get back to trying to decipher it.

1913 Marriage solemnized at the Parish Church of <i>S. Peter Parmentergate</i> in the County of <i>Norwich</i> in the Parish								
Column No.	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8
No.	When Married.	Name and Surname.	Age.	Condition.	Rank or Profession.	Residence at the time of Marriage.	Father's Name and Surname.	Rank or Profession of Father.
104	<i>July 9th</i>	<i>George Huckle Gooch</i>	<i>37</i>	<i>Bachelor</i>	<i>Tobacconist</i>	<i>39 Rose Lane</i>	<i>John Harrington Gooch</i>	<i>Commercial Traveller.</i>
	<i>1913</i>	<i>Margaret Townsend</i>	<i>29</i>	<i>Spinster</i>		<i>55 Northcote Road</i>	<i>William Townsend</i>	<i>Railway Servant</i>
Married in the <i>Parish Church</i> according to the Rites and Ceremonies of the <i>Church of England</i> by <i>Archibald Eugen Thummal</i> or after <i>Banns</i> by me.								
This Marriage was solemnized between us,		<i>George Huckle Gooch</i>		in the Presence of us,		<i>John Knott</i>		<i>S. P. Poole Vicar</i>

Marriage Certificate for George and Margaret Townsend, Crown Copyright.

years earlier in the 1901 England census, George, who was then 24 years old, had a boarder living with him whose name was Albert GIRLING. As I worked up George's family tree, I found that his sister Gertrude GOOCH later married Albert GIRLING, the boarder. Further investigation verified that George Huckle GOOCH was born 9 July 1896 in Norwich, Norfolk, to John Harrington GOOCH (1846-1927) and Mary HUCKLE (1846-1924). He married Margaret TOWNSEND (1884-1926) in 1913, which was interesting as that was the year in which this postcard was sent. Margaret and

I loved codes when I was a child. I used to read about them and try to crack simple codes. Perhaps my love of DNA and genetic genealogy stems from the same thing—cracking the DNA code to work out who someone really is. One of the first things that can be done with codes is to recognise any patterns that might be specific words, like the opening word of the postcard might be "To" or "Dear"; one-letter words might be "I" or "a," for example. This might help me place specific letters into the pigpen outline. The code words did have a tiny dot between each word and a small "x" at the end of what appeared to be each

sentence. I started to just mark out what letters I thought I could figure out, with the first word on the card likely to be "To" and then any two-letter words with the "T" character might be "it" or "at". Slowly a message started to appear, and the story was coming to life in front of me. I worked out that the first nine characters of the alphabet were in the first pigpen box, so I could fill in all the A's through to I's being careful to spot where the code letter was slanted, some were quite difficult. Then I could fill in gaps where it was clear what the word was, and as sentences started to make sense, I could further decode characters where there could be only one word, e.g. "blaze."

Here is my attempt at deciphering the card:

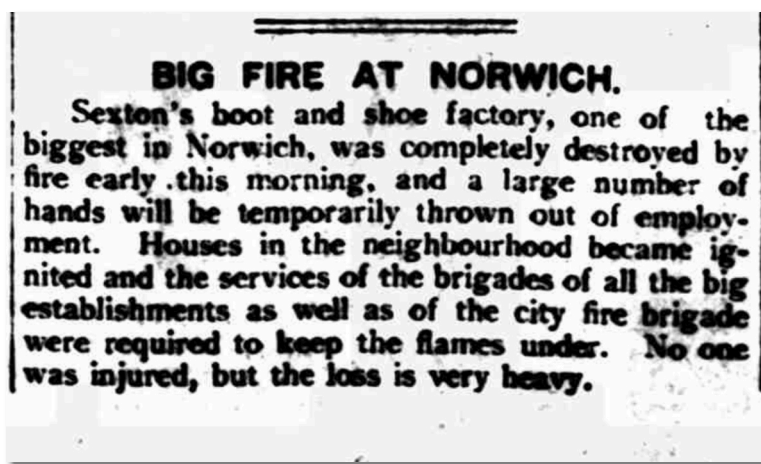
16.1.13 TO MY DEAREST LOVE EVER SO MANY THANKS FOR YOUR CARDS OF YESTERDAY AND THIS MORNING. DID YOU SEE ANYTHING OF THE FIRE WE DID AND WAS VERY THANKFUL WHEN MORNING CAME TO HEAR WHERE IT WAS FOR IT LOOKED UP HERE AS IF HALF THE CITY WAS WELL ALIGHT OH SUCH A BLAZE. I AM SORRY YOU ARE IN A HEAT WHY NOT WAIT UNTIL SATUR-NIGHT AND SEE. YES I LIKE HOW YOU HAVE DONE THE PHOTO'S. I ALSO LIKE THE CHAIRS VERY MUCH OH I AM GLAD I AM YOUR VERY OWN TO BE ALWAYS WITH YOU AFTER THE NIGHT OF JULY OH LET IT COME AS SOON AS IT LIKES MUCH LOVE EVER YOUR OWN LITTLE SPANKER.

There are some odd sayings that we do not use in today's language, e.g. "in a heat." One website suggests this to be "in a stew" or "a confusion of mind." This seems likely to be the meaning here. There is also an unusual sign off "your own little spanker." Whilst this might conjure up images of *Fifty Shades of Grey*, it's more likely to be used as a noun for "a very fine person or thing," which is dated informal language. I would also add it is probably best not to Google the word "spanker" unless you really need to. Now I was wondering if this could be from Margaret, who went on to become George's wife, possibly they were engaged at the time. I was unable to establish exactly who sent the card, but as it mentions being together in July, and Margaret and George married on 9 July 1913, I think it is likely the card is from Margaret. Their marriage certificate shows George Huckle GOOCH is a bachelor, 37 years old, a tobacconist from 39 Rose

Lane, and Margaret TOWNSEND, a spinster 29 years old from 55 Northcote Road.

The postcard mentions a fire, so I then started investigating what fire had occurred. I looked through the British Newspaper Archive and found a newspaper article in the Westminster Gazette on Thursday, 16 January 1913, the day the postcard was dated. It reported on a "Big Fire at Norwich," where a boot factory was destroyed.

Sexton's Boot and shoe factory, one of the biggest in Norwich, was completely destroyed by fire early this morning, and a large number of hands will be temporarily thrown out of employment. Houses in the neighbourhood became ignited and the services of the brigades of all the big establishments as well as the city fire brigade were required to keep the flames under. No one was injured, but the loss is very heavy.



Westminster Gazette, 16 January 1913. Image from the British Library Board, All Rights Reserved, British Newspaper Archive.

There are two things I cannot answer: first, why was the postcard written in code? Second, why is it a postcard of St. Austell in Cornwall when it appears to have come from Margaret, who must have been in Norwich to have seen the fire? I've not been able to source any further postcards between Margaret and George; however, I have made the tree I've worked up for them public at Ancestry.com, and I have added the postcard, photos, and records I have collected in the hope a family member may find it. The tree is called, "Gooch-Townsend Family Tree From Postcard."

Before I finished with this postcard, I decided to visit the graves of George and Margaret. From Deceased Online, I was able to find the burial register and the

plot number of their graves. They are buried together in the Rosary Cemetery in Norwich; however, after finding the plot area in the cemetery, I could not find any headstones for George and Margaret.

Finding this postcard and deciphering it was a fun and fascinating exercise, and then using genealogy to discover who the writer and addressee were added to the experience. Learning about the fire in Norwich added additional background to their story. The postcard was a small, seemingly ordinary artefact of life in 1913, but 110 years later, we can reflect on the lives revealed in a simple coded message on the back of a picture of St. Austell church.



Rosary Cemetery Norfolk, Norwich, England (author's collection).

Donna Rutherford is a New Zealand genetic genealogist based in London with English, Scottish, and Irish Ancestry. She specialises in complex DNA cases, such as those involving adoptions, foundlings, and surprise results. In 2019, Donna was one of the co-authors of a paper investigating the effectiveness of using genetic genealogy to identify individuals in the UK, which has been used to inform UK law enforcement on the potential use of Investigative Genetic Genealogy in the future. Donna has been a



regular speaker at international genealogy conferences and has a well-known blog at donnarutherford.com. She is the admin of a UK Facebook group, DNA Help for Genealogy (UK), and a co-admin of the RUTHERFORD Y-DNA project at FamilyTreeDNA.

President's Message



Sylvia Tracy-Doolos

If you are like me, you are excited about returning to Salt Lake City this year for the British Institute! If you are still deciding, let me give you five great reasons to register for the in-person event. First is the FamilySearch Library, where folks from around the world come to research their family history. Second is the camaraderie of discussing your ancestry with like-minded people exploring their British Isles and Irish people. Third is the consultations provided by our instructors, who are experts in their field and can provide advice and resources that may help with your questions. Fourth is the syllabus you will receive, which is filled with tips, tricks, and resources that will help you do research long after you have left Salt Lake City. Fifth, and finally, our excellent instructors will teach, enlighten, and entertain you with the knowledge that will help you be a more effective genealogist.

If traveling to Salt Lake City this year is outside your plans, you can

still take advantage of our recorded courses which will give you the same excellent syllabus and instructors. Some folks attend the British Institute in person and purchase the recordings to review later. Whatever you decide to do, ISBGFH will continue to offer the best learning opportunities for those of us researching family who came from our specific corner of the world.

If you want to get more involved with ISBGFH, please email me at President@ISBGFH.com. We are looking for three members to volunteer to serve on the nominations committee. The term is only for the 2024 election, and your work will be completed by October 2023. It is a beneficial way to work with ISBGFH on a short-term task while working with a great group of people. I look forward to seeing you at BI 2023!

Best,

Sylvia



From the Editor's Desk

Photos, Postcards, and Penpals

Greetings, readers! Welcome to one of our most interesting issues to date! This quarter's theme, "Photos, Postcards, and Penpals," is the brainchild of our own Education Director, Megan Heyl, and I couldn't be more pleased! Our articles present compelling correspondence in a variety of situations, including war, fire, death, homesickness, and marriage! If you're looking for an alternative to the present moment, take a wander into the past with us, and come back enlightened.

Here is an interesting letter that I just discovered in a box in my basement. Like Chris Paton, I've now "heard" a Scottish ancestor's voice through her written words. The writer was my 2nd great-grandmother, Isabella Wilson Ost (1857-1940), who immigrated with her family from Borgue, Kirkcudbrightshire, Scotland to Topeka, Kansas in 1873. (Eventually, she met and married a man from Milton-on-Sittingborne, Kent: Joseph Ost. Clearly, this Scottish woman and Englishman would never have met if they had not immigrated to the U.S.) In 1940, shortly before her death, the elderly, widowed Isabella, by then living in Pasadena, California, wrote to her granddaughter, Mary. (Mary was my grandmother, and the "boys" in the letter are my father and my uncle. Now my father is gone and my uncle is 90.) I think Isabella's handwriting is fairly easy to read, but my husband disagrees. What do you think?

Sandra

Page 4

Always have plenty
of good reading matter
so have much to be
thankful for - I have
quite a large correspondence
too - I have lived around
in so many different
States & Cities - and have
friends in nearly all of
them - which makes life
larger and pleasanter too.
I still greatly miss your
Father's dear loving letters
to me - your mother has
been very good to help him
out when he's tired - may the
dear Lord Bless & keep you all

Page 1

one of Isabella's
Monday Afternoon
22nd Jan - 1940
My dear Mary -
Your nice
Sunday's letter came
this afternoon - thank
you for it - sorry but
I haven't an evening
dress - nor ever had
one in all my life
time - Viola had a
good laugh over my
appearance to you in
your dream - I am
as usual - just able
to be about - must

Page 2

of the time - Can't go
to Church - without
someone to assist me
up and down the steps
so I listen in to Dr Robt
Freeman on the Radio.
Which your dear Father
gone Auntie & I about
seven years ago - I usually
get enough from it so
I can think out quite
a sermon - Dr Freeman
is retiring on account
of ill health - he will be
greatly missed, as he
is a wonderful man -

Page 3

I'm hoping the boys
are getting over their
colds and the weather
improves - so they
can be in the Sunshine.
We have ^{had} no cold frosty
weather yet - only drizzle
and cloudy every after-
noon - nights cool - I
am home all the time
as my best friends are
both refused licenses
to drive - so I don't get
out much - but I'm
very thankful that
I can read and I

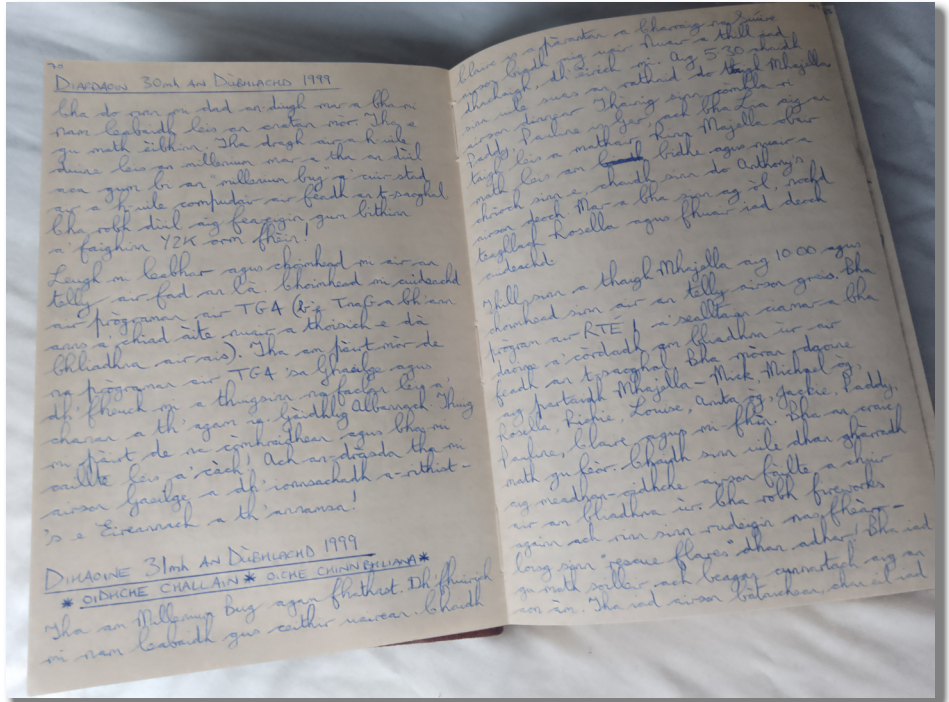


Finding Scottish Voices

Whilst we turn to "official" records such as birth, marriage, and death certificates; censuses; and parish registers to help pull our ancestors' stories together, such documents can often be "cold," merely detailing facts and figures about their lives. Where we may occasionally get a real sense of our ancestors' personalities is in any personal writings that they may have left behind.

The prize goal for any genealogist is to uncover a diary recorded by relatives, providing a first-person perspective on life events happening around them. I have kept diaries fairly irregularly over the last thirty years. One of the first, kept for well over a year, was actually written in the bad Scottish Gaelic of a learner but covers my wedding, the birth of my first son, the deaths of my grandmother and father-in-law, and a serious rail accident involving my father in 1999. Fortunately for my two boys, who have no Gaelic, subsequent volumes are in English!

A diary turned out to be a remarkable source for some research I carried out for a client a few years ago. The client had reached a brick wall on her Mackie family tree in the parish of Tarves, Aberdeenshire, having consulted various church records and censuses. She had many references to the family but was unable to confirm relationships between certain branches. When asked to take a look, the first thing I did was to type in the name of the farm, the Mains of Fyvie, and the surname Mackie, into the National Records of Scotland catalogue (<https://catalogue.nrscotland.gov.uk/nrsonlinecatalogue/welcome.aspx>). An entry popped up (RH4/66) showing that a diary had been kept by an Adam Mackie of the Lewes of Fyvie from 1818-1828.



Part of my diary from 1999, written in Gàidhlig (Scottish Gaelic).

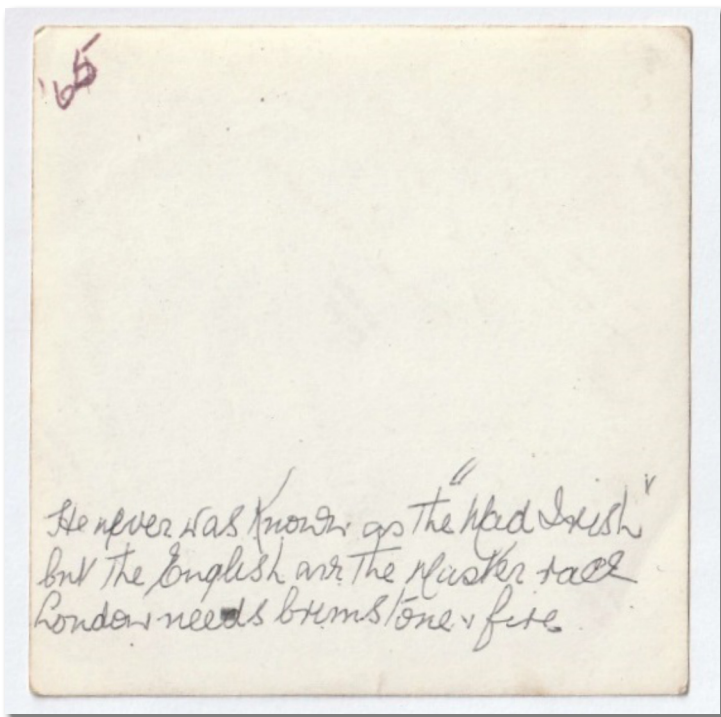
This not only turned out to be a crucial source, confirming many genealogical relationships within the parish, but it also shed light onto his work as a merchant, in his own words, and the family farm. Just for good measure, I discovered that much of the diary had been published as *The Diary of a Canny Man 1818-1828*, which I was able to purchase and send to my client. The moral of the story? Always check archive catalogues!

From the Scottish side of my family, I unfortunately have no diaries that have survived and been passed down. However, there have been other sources from which I have been able to "hear" the voices of my forebears—for example, the many comments noted by my Glaswegian grandmother on photographs that she kept. On the back of an image of my Uncle Robert based in Portsmouth, England, she wrote, "He's kind to me. Had a lovely time with him 1975. God Guide you son," whilst on the reverse of a picture of my mother,



My grandmother, Jean Paton (nee Currie), from Bridgeton, Glasgow.

she wrote, "Cherie, Colin's wife, she's good to me." Such comments point to a seemingly genteel personality—until we come to the back of an image of another uncle, based in London, sent to her by his wife in the



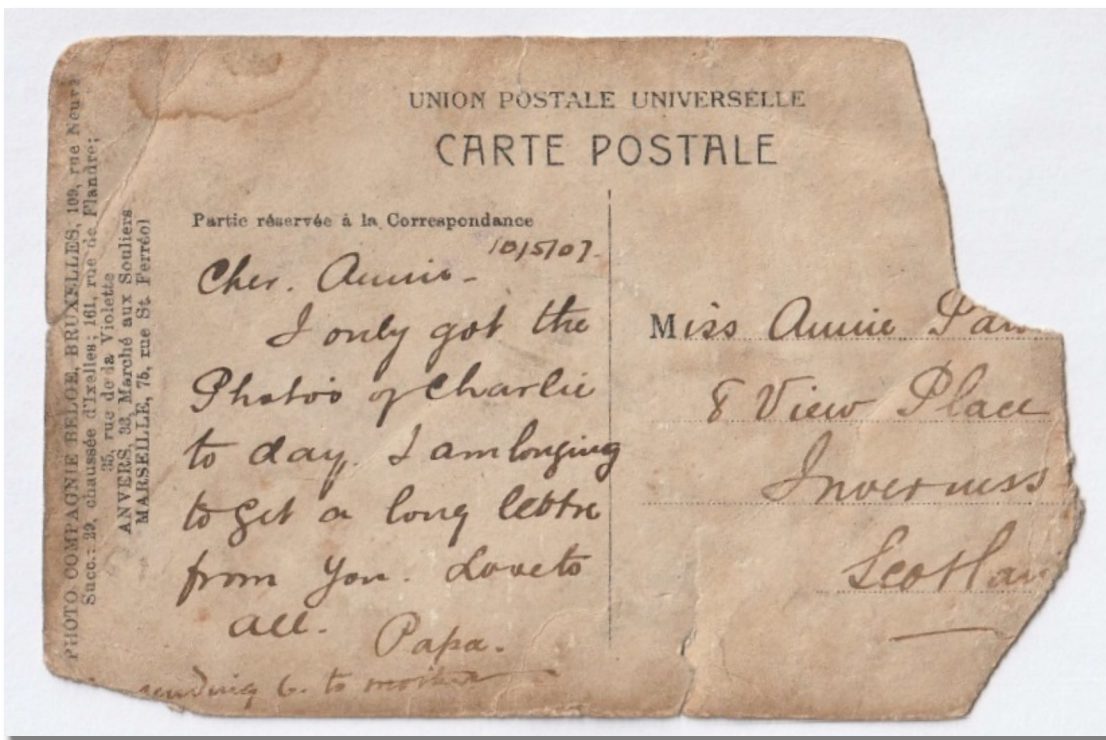
Comments from the back of a photo taken in 1965 showed that my deceptively calm Glaswegian grandmother had a Calvinist temper!

1960s. My uncle Charles, born in Northern Ireland, had been prosecuted for an offence in London, and suddenly, my grandmother's personality changed to that of a full-blown Scottish Calvinist Presbyterian, with the fires of hell themselves unable to stop her venting her outrage! Clearly unimpressed with the sentence imposed by the London court, she inscribed the following astonishing inscription on the back of the photo: "He was never known as the Mad Irish. The English are the master race. London needs brimstone and fire," I mean to say, steady on there, Gran!

Letters and postcards can also reveal a great deal. My grandfather Charles Paton was born in 1905 in Brussels, Belgium, to two Scottish parents, Jessie MacFarlane and David Hepburn Paton. In 1907, Jessie returned to her native Inverness for a period with a couple of her children, and shortly after this, a postcard was sent by her husband to their daughter Annie, which provides a little glimpse into family life. The image on the postcard was of my two-year-old grandfather in Highland garb, taken at a Belgian studio, whilst on the reverse was a short message from



The postcard sent by my great grandfather to my great aunt in Inverness in 1907. The image depicts my grandfather aged two, as photographed in Belgium.



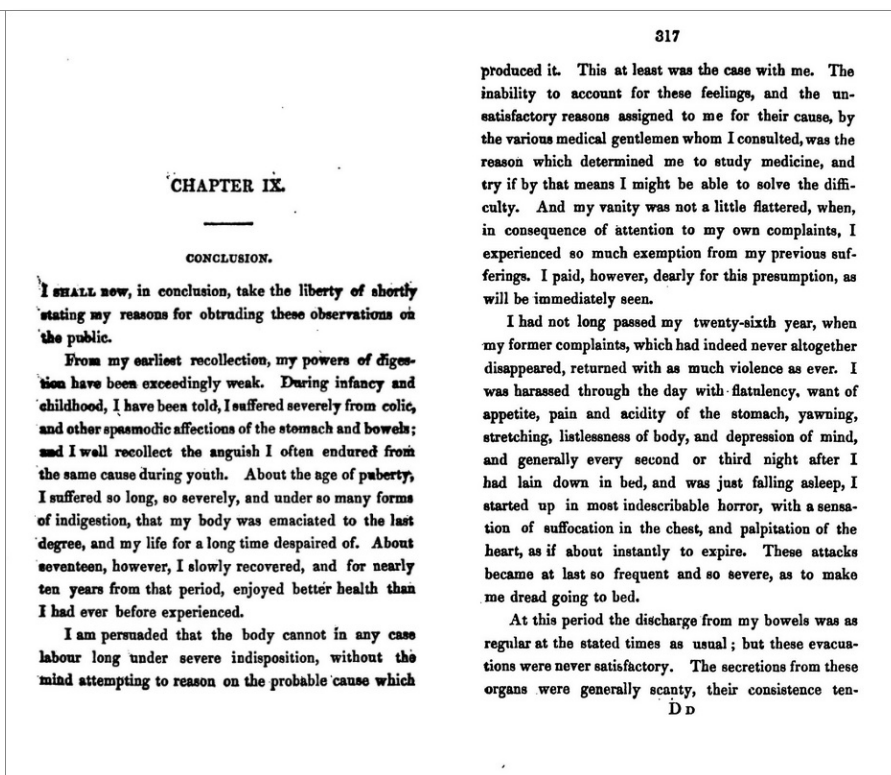
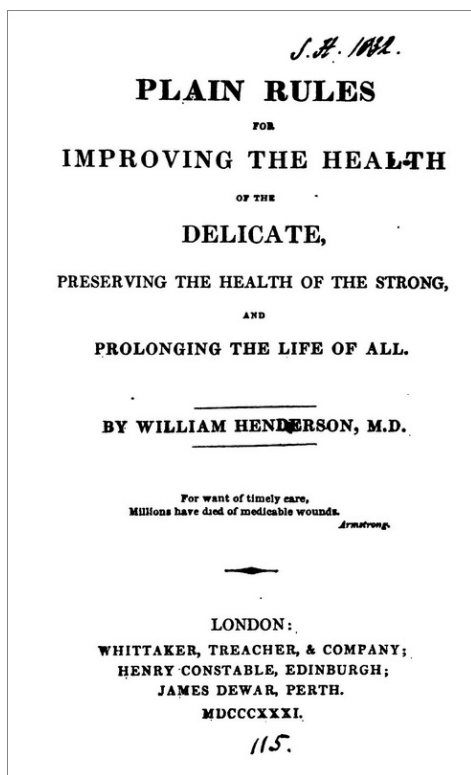
The back of postcard (above) from Charles Paton.

her father: "10/5/07, Cher Annie—I only got the photos of Charlie today. I am longing to get a long letter from you. Love to all, Papa. PS: I am sending C to mother."

Despite the brevity of the message, it revealed a great deal. Quite apart from the amazing image of my

grandfather as a wee boy, it showed that Annie was clearly being raised to speak French as well as English, and that my grandfather Charles was on his way over to Inverness. As a consequence of this, I checked the school records in Inverness and found Charles enrolling at a school there in 1909, with a subsequent entry on August 23, 1910, stating that he had then relocated to Glasgow. I found him here in the 1911 census before he and his entire family regrouped in Brussels just a few months later, in October of that year.

By far the greatest written finds I have so far made from a member of my Scottish family come from my five-times great uncle, Dr. William Henderson of Perth (1784-1870). A physician in the burgh for more than



The reasons why my 5 times great uncle became a physician were recorded in a book written by him in Perth in 1858.

fifty years, he was a prolific scientist, constantly writing up the results of medical treatments he had described in publications such as the medical journal, *The Lancet*. However, two books written by him offered a particular insight into his own personal life.

In the last chapter of his 1856 book, *Plain Rules for Improving the Health of the Delicate, Preserving the Health of the Strong and Prolonging the Life of All* (available at <https://archive.org/details/plainrulesforim00hendgoog>), which discussed the nature of indigestion, and how to treat it, William describes what led him to become a physician in the first place. As an infant, William had suffered from colic, and as a child up to the age of seventeen, he had experienced severe bouts of indigestion, often leading him to visit a surgeon to have a lancet applied as a medieval form of pain relief, which did not work. From the age of seventeen, he recalled how the symptoms suddenly stopped for a few years, only to come back again with a vengeance when he turned twenty-six, with full-blown irritable bowel syndrome. As a consequence, he ransacked every medical publication he could find and eventually created a “stomachic elixir” that successfully treated his complaint. So successful was the treatment that William marketed the solution, from which he made a small fortune in the UK and from international markets.

The most extraordinary—and in some way the most frustrating—publication written by William was one published shortly after his death in 1870. This was titled *Bygone Days, or, Sketches Illustrative of the Manners and Customs of the Scottish Peasantry Seventy Years Ago*. Its frustration can be best expressed by a contemporary review, which noted that “[T]he incidents of this tale are founded on fact, but so mixed with fiction that the value of the book is seriously diminished. If Dr. Henderson had written his reminiscences, the result would have been preferable.”

However, the book is in two parts, and in the second part are many letters and poems written by the author at key moments in his life. For example, following an accident he endured in 1828, William wrote a poem showing his devotion to his wife, Margaret, and describing the “worth” of women, which, although to our modern eyes may seem somewhat sexist, was nevertheless sincere:

Sweet are the bonds of wedded love,
When soul with soul takes part;
But sweeter far when sorrow's dart
Stick, quivering with the heart.

It's not when fortunes smoothest
That woman's worth is known;
It's not when health is purest
That her tenderest love is shown.

It's when sorrow hardest presses,
And when faithless friends depart,
That her gently soft caresses
Steal sorrow from the heart.

It's when with pain each sinew quivers,
On affliction's thorny bed,
As she like an angel hovers
Round man's devoted head.

Oh! it's not when the heart is lightest,
But when every joy has gone,
That woman's love burns brightest,
That woman's worth is known.

When his wife Margaret died in 1858, William wrote another poem to express his anguish, much of it reflecting on the nature of life. With the middle of it, however, he again recorded his thoughts about his wife:

I thought upon the time when the one best gift of Heaven,

In man's degraded state, By God to me was given—

A creature all affection; A mind beyond compare;

A smile for ever cheerful, That lightened every care;

A heart o'erflowing with kindness To every thing of life;

A brilliant lofty genius—A model of a wife.

Other fascinating poems written by William discussed his viewing of Halley's Comet in 1835 and the effect that the witnessing of a shipwreck in 1839 had on him. But perhaps the stand-out quote from William's book was that on the power of genealogy itself and its potential misuse by some folk. It's a quote that I regularly introduce or end talks with:

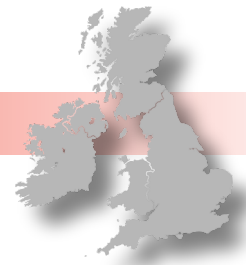
In my estimation, a long line of ancestry entitles no man to trample on his brother, nor does a high sounding title give its possessor a right to wound the heart, which vibrates with the finer feelings of a common humanity, merely because accident has cast his lot in an elevated station of life, which he degrades by his vices, and in doing so prostrates the gifts of Providence, and makes them the means of wounding the peace and ruining the prospects of thousands, who though below him in station are nevertheless immeasurably raised above him in talent, in virtue, and proper feeling. Whether in prince or in peasant a genuine heart elicits from me the response of a brother.

In William's own words, he was expressing a commonly quoted Scots maxim— "We're a' Jock Tamson's bairns"—meaning that we are all born equal and should thus treat each other equally with respect on that basis. It's a quote that I can wholeheartedly agree with, showing that wisdom can certainly be passed down through the ages.

Based in the Ayrshire town of Irvine, Northern Irish-born **Chris Paton** runs the Scotland's Greatest Story research service (<https://scotlandsgreateststory.wordpress.com/>) and the daily Scottish GENES genealogy news blog (<http://scottishgenes.blogspot.com>).

Amongst his many publications are *Tracing Your Scottish Family History on the Internet*, *Tracing Your Scottish Ancestry Through Church and State Records*, and *Sharing Your Family History Online from Pen and Sword*, as well as *Down and Out in Scotland: Researching Ancestral Crisis from Unlock the Past*. Chris also tutors short courses through *Pharos Teaching and Tutoring Ltd*, including *Scottish Research Online* and *Scotland 1750–1850: Beyond the Old Parish Registers*.





People's Collection Wales: An Online Repository that has Preserved Messages from Home and Abroad


Casgliad y Werin Cymru
People's Collection Wales

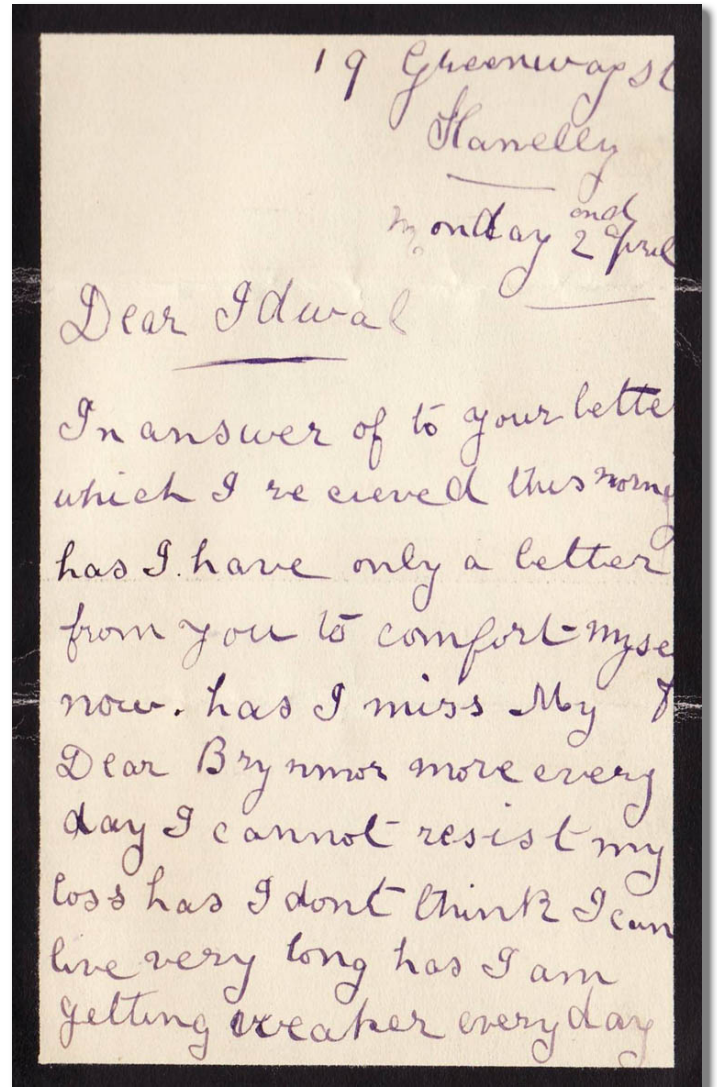
www.peoplescollection.wales

"Letters are among the most significant memorial a person can leave behind."

So concluded Goethe when he pondered over the fact that, when set down on paper, an individual's thoughts and feelings will echo down to us across the generations.

More personal than dates and names carved into a cold gravestone or written on a blunt, bureaucratic census form, our ancestors' letters immediately connect us with them. The paper on which they shared their news or expressed their emotions is tangible—it was touched by them, creased and folded by them, tucked into their pocket or purse as they prepared to mail their missive to a loved one or an acquaintance. Their turn of phrase and handwriting, or hastily crossed out passages, may imply to us their personality or their state of mind at a particular point in their lives. The spelling and grammar suggest to us their level of education, and the sentences and paragraphs written by them not only serve to convey their thoughts, hopes, and fears but are also a means to share both glad tidings and bad news alike.

Whether it's a single-leaf, scribbled-in-haste note or a



Sent by Mary Ann James (1876–1960) of Llanelli, Carmarthenshire to her son Idwal, this is one of the hundreds of letters that can be viewed on the People's Collection Wales website. People's Collection Wales / Women's Archive Wales & Lisa Voyle (Creative Archive Licence), <https://www.peoplescollection.wales/items/13065#?xywh=86%2C290%2C1988%2C1505>.

multi-page and detailed letter, our ancestors' correspondence presents us with their life and times in ways that no official certificate or census form can. If you have inherited a box full of papers, then before

+ In ~~the~~ your uncle & Williams
 Jones his brother I hadent been
 near to talk to them thato
 all my news it was very
 cold there but I did enjoye
 it so much that I wout
 be long before I'd be there
 again but when ever I go
 I wout see such a lot of
 Peopel nor as Tom Ellis funeral
 Flud's all its getting near Sunday
 and the Preacher is coming her
 to stay and They wout chance
 for me to stop to look at the
 (Pobol mynd in capel) I must
 have everything straight by the
 shine they are out of chapel and
 as you know they cut it so short in
 the morning good bye with much
 love to you and my famo

Copy
 to the
 main
 of the
 Welsh
 & English
 words

Glasdo
 Llan Ffestiniog
 April 14 1899

My Dearest Lizzie
 I am taking a few minutes
 to write a line to you
 Hoping you are both
 well & hoping you dident
 get any worse after your
 journey well dear I have
 much news to send to you
 ant Ellen Roberts of Maentwrog
 has been her to Day & the
 latest news I had was

Among the digitised archival gems on display are letters penned by Welsh men and women (in both Welsh and English) sent to friends and family at home and abroad. Here, you can read exchanges between friends or between mothers and their children, as well as letters to sweethearts, and messages written by immigrants who shared with their relatives back in Wales details of their pioneering journeys and new lives in faraway lands. It also includes the correspondence of businessmen and officials whose

Letter to Lizzie O'Shea. People's Collection Wales / Women's Archive Wales. <https://www.peoplescollection.wales>.

consigning them to the bin, consider them closely, for they may contain a bundle of long-forgotten letters that hold clues and leads that could expand your research, provide you with the key to a family mystery, or simply present you with a brief, yet very special glimpse of a relative's or family's life.

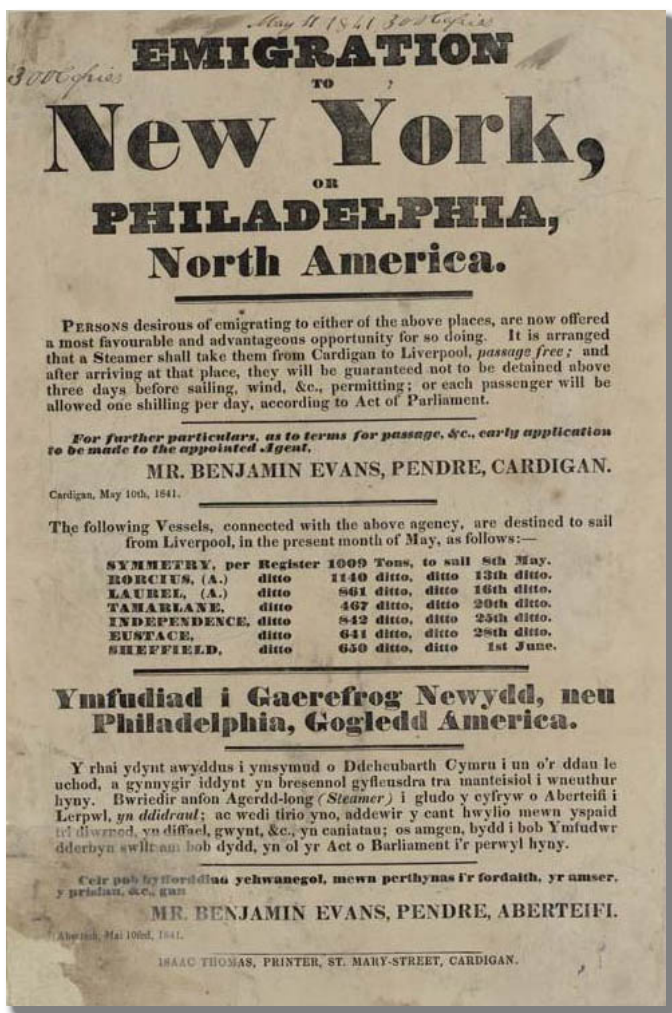
But what if, like the majority of us, you haven't inherited such a treasure trove? What are the chances that somewhere, somehow, a relative's letter has been preserved? For much of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, our ancestors were prolific correspondents, regularly sending letters, cards, and postcards—on special occasions, during a vacation, and on any other day they had news to share. Sadly, most of their dispatches have since disintegrated into dust. However, some have been preserved in archives and private collections across the land, and a very special, free-to-view online collection—People's Collection Wales (PCW)—has gathered many of those curios together so that you can browse them from the comfort of your own home.

exchanges throw a broader light on the history of the places where our ancestors lived. So what exactly can People's Collection Wales offer the family historian? Let's take a look.

Gossip and Genealogical Leads

Some letters can, at first sight, appear as mundane communications between relatives and friends, but to the eye of a genealogist or social historian, they are often far from ordinary. Take this letter¹—uploaded onto the PCW site by the Women's Archive of Wales—sent to a Lizzie O'Shea of Llan Ffestiniog, Merionethshire. Dated 14 April 1899, it was written in English (interspersed with some Welsh phrases) by a relative who would hardly ever have spoken English in day-to-day life, which is why she scribbled a note at the top of the letter (written in Welsh) to apologise that she had forgotten how to spell some English words!

What is immediately striking is that she was clearly very keen to share some news about a local girl—gossip that could, for a family historian researching the



People's Collection Wales / National Library of Wales. (Public Domain image, Creative Commons licence). <https://www.peoplescollection.wales/items/489893#?xywh=-245%2C-1%2C1002%2C759>.

history of a certain Williams family of Maentwrog, provide some details and leads that are unlikely to have ever been recorded in an official source. We are told that

Ellen Roberts of Maentwrog has been her [sic] to day & the latest news I had was that (merch Morris Williams) [Morris Williams' daughter] is in the 'family way' from Jaco. I don't know do you remember she had a baby & 'Moi Coch' [Red-headed Moi or Red-headed Morris] was his father and how Jaco and Moi treated her at Penrhyn...

She then moves on to talk of the funeral of a Tom Ellis of Bala—her words remind us that in Wales, a funeral was often regarded by many, including the letter-writer herself, as much of a social event as it was an occasion to pay respects to the deceased! We're told that she

had a very nice time there and my goodness the Peopel [sic] was ther I am Dreaming still of them.... We went to Llanycil church along the lake and at Llanycil church yard... I seen your uncle & William Jones his brother I hadn't been near to talk to them...it was very cold there but I did enjoy it so much that I [it] won't be long befor I'll be there again.

Moving Missives from Far Away Lands

Letters sent to relatives back in Wales by those who had ventured far from their homeland are often poignant and can sometimes reveal a deep sense of *hiraeth*² felt by the immigrant for the "land of their fathers." One such letter was written by Evan Evans, who had emigrated from Dinas Mawddwy, Merionethshire to Turin, Lewis Co., New York in the mid-1850s.³ His unhappiness, fed in part by the miserable voyage across the Atlantic, is clearly reflected in a letter he wrote to his uncle back in Wales shortly after his arrival. Written in Welsh, he relates news about his journey to America and opens up about his feelings. Parts of the letter read as follows (in translation):

My dear Uncle, I am sending you some words to greet you in the hope that you are enjoying good health. I suffered very badly from sea-sickness for about 9 or 10 days, and I don't yet feel like my old self, but I hope that I will soon be better after I've acclimatised to the country. The weather was very hot when we arrived; but a little cooler now. There's a lot of wilderness around me, which looks quite unpleasant to me, but it may gradually improve. I'm working for a Welsh couple—the husband is from Denbighshire and the wife is from Llanbryn-mair, and I'm earning £2 and 14 shillings a month...

The effects of homesickness come to the fore towards the end of the letter when he asks his uncle to pass on some advice to a friend:

Tell John Hendre to stay home, or if he comes here he will live to regret it a hundred times over if he is like me. Without the support here of Dafydd my brother I think I would have broken my heart a long time ago.

Wartime Tragedies and Memories

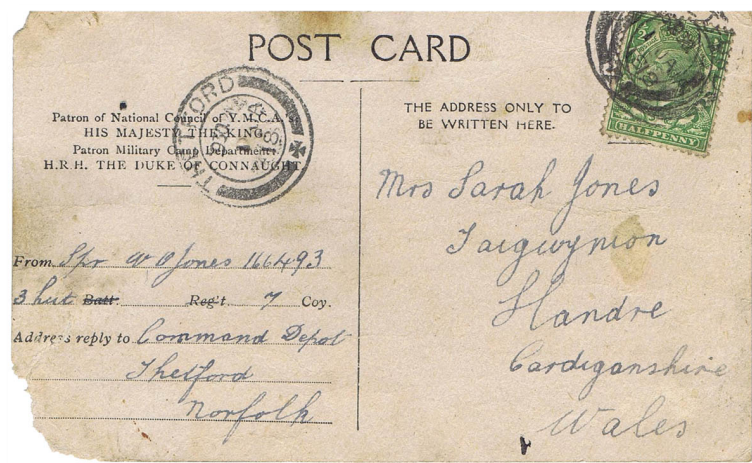
Amongst the wide range of correspondence that forms part of this People's Collection are letters and postcards relating to the First World War, including



William Oliver Jones (1887–1956) of Taigwynion, Cardiganshire. People's Collection Wales / Cofio a Myfyrio: Prosiect RhBC Capeli Gogledd Ceredigion (Creative Archive Licence). <https://www.peoplescollection.wales/items/426740#?xywh=-472%2C0%2C2101%2C1590>.

many written by soldiers who, tragically, did not return from the front lines. One of those soldiers was John Regan, a sergeant with the Glamorgan Regiment who was born in 1882 in Penarth near Cardiff. When his youngest child was born in May 1916, he and his unit were preparing to sail to France. In a letter written by him to his wife Mary Jane a little later, on 30 July 1916, he confirms to her that he had received her recent message and photographs and discusses their children as well as other news from Wales.⁴ On the surface, this is a very ordinary letter, but it immediately exudes poignancy and tragedy when we place it within the broader known context, for just the following day, on 31 July 1916, John was killed in action during the Battle of the Somme. He was buried at the Peronne Military Ceremony near Maricourt without ever having met his youngest child.

Another soldier, Sapper William Oliver Jones, of Taigwynion near Bow Street in Cardiganshire, sent



Postcard from W.O. Jones. People's Collection Wales / Cofio a Myfyrio: Prosiect RhBC Capeli Gogledd Ceredigion (Creative Archive Licence). <https://www.peoplescollection.wales/items/427122#?xywh=91%2C-148%2C1927%2C1459>

several letters and postcards back to his mother, Sarah, in Wales. He survived the war, and his correspondence, which also includes his WWI notebook, has been uploaded onto the PCW site by *Cofio a Myfyrio* (North Ceredigion Chapels' First World War Project).⁵ His particular collection covers the whole of his time with

“On the surface, this is a very ordinary letter, but it immediately exudes poignancy and tragedy when we place it within the broader known context...”

the army—from the day, on 17 April 1916, he travelled to Aberystwyth to join the military, through the period he spent in training, his time on the front line in France, up to his demobilisation in 1919. The contents of the letters range from the apparently prosaic (thanking his family for sending him socks and asking if his mother could send him some money) to hints at the horrors he was experiencing. Due to matters of censorship, he could not reveal the true nature of what he had witnessed or his exact location, but when he wrote to his mother (in Welsh), he did describe some of the devastation that had destroyed the French countryside. Here's a translation of one part of just one of his letters:

You would be shocked to see the destruction in the country...I don't think I'm exaggerating when I say that

there isn't a square yard here between our front line and that of the enemy that hasn't been dug up. There are holes here that are deep enough to easily swallow our house. There are so many of them that one hole swallows another. I don't think I'm disclosing too much when I say that millions of missiles have been used here.⁶

These examples form but a tiny sample of what People's Collection Wales has to offer. Could a letter written by or about your ancestors be among this varied online anthology? Carry out a search using a name or location, coupled with the word "letter," "postcard," or "photo" to see what's there—you never know what you may unearth. But even if you can't find a relevant scribbled postcard, hasty note, or lengthy dispatch, the memories, letters, and photos preserved in this repository present invaluable and often unique evidence that helps to foster an understanding of various aspects of Welsh society and history, the places our ancestors called home, and of the times in which they lived.

Endnotes

1. <https://www.peoplescollection.wales/items/12001#?xywh=-61%2C-12%2C2829%2C2142>
2. *Hiraeth*—a Welsh word that means a deep longing, usually for a place, person, or for one's home.
3. <https://www.peoplescollection.wales/items/8062#?xywh=-1%2C-221%2C1009%2C1075>
4. <https://www.peoplescollection.wales/items/907046#?xywh=-198%2C-56%2C1042%2C1111>
5. <https://www.peoplescollection.wales/users/8161>
The Cofio a Myfyrio project has uploaded almost 300 items relating to individuals from north Cardiganshire who fought in the First World War, including numerous soldiers' photos.
6. <https://www.peoplescollection.wales/items/427140#?xywh=-829%2C-1%2C3597%2C2724>

Eilir Ann Daniels has been studying family history for well over 30 years and, as the founder of the research service Your Welsh Ancestors, has been working as a professional researcher since 2009.



Eilir is a Full Member of AGRA (the Association of Genealogists and Researchers in Archives), and is a Pharos Tutors instructor, teaching "Researching Your Welsh Ancestors and Tracing Living Relatives" courses. She provides research services for private clients and solicitors and carries out research for the BBC's Who Do You Think You Are? and for programs on S4C (the national Welsh language TV channel) and BBC Radio Cymru.

She is a native Welsh speaker, and her academic background, which includes a degree focused on the development of Welsh and UK society after the Industrial Revolution, provides the basis for her genealogical work today.





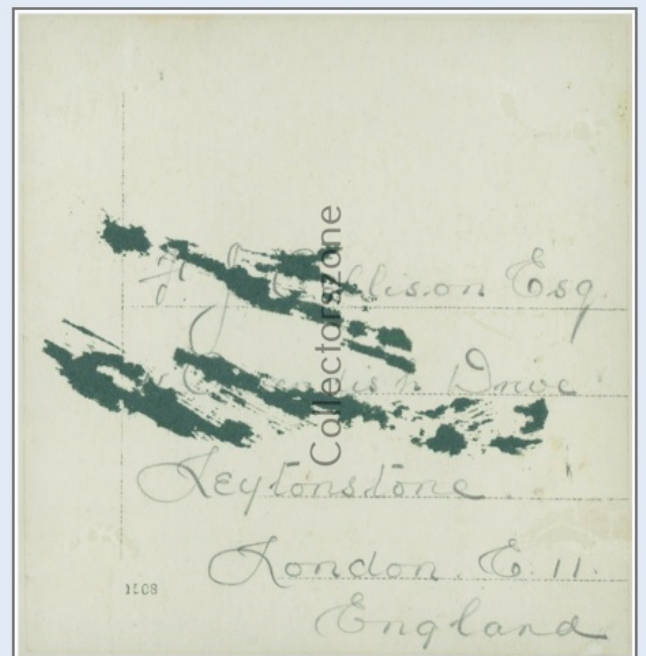
Prisoner of War Correspondence 1914–1918

In this article, I will look at postcards that were owned or sent home by men who were unfortunate enough to become prisoners of war during the First World War.

The old regular army, the British Expeditionary Force (BEF) of 1914, was largely a spent force by the summer of 1915, and whilst not all of these losses were fatal, thousands of men had been permanently put out of action as a result of wounds. Others, less severely wounded, found themselves given roles on the home establishment in the UK, whilst still more became prisoners of war and would spend the next four years as guests of the Kaiser, languishing in prison camps spread across Germany or interned in neutral Holland and Switzerland.

Over 180,000 British Army officers and men were captured by the enemy during the First World War, with around half of these men captured between the 21st March 1918 and November 1918. Arguably the greatest impact, though, were the losses in 1914, with the capture of 24,000 officers and men, the equivalent of 24 infantry battalions, or the infantry component of six brigades. Remember too that these men were mostly career soldiers, well trained and efficient, whose loss would be keenly felt.

I have a particular fondness for the men of the BEF, and as far as collecting is concerned, I always find myself drawn to ephemera relating to these men. Then again, I am fickle, easily tempted down other rabbit holes, and so I also find myself drawn to men who have a connection with July 1916 and men who became prisoners of war. Occasionally, and happily, for me, these three collecting themes unite.



Leonard Collison and postcard (author's collection).

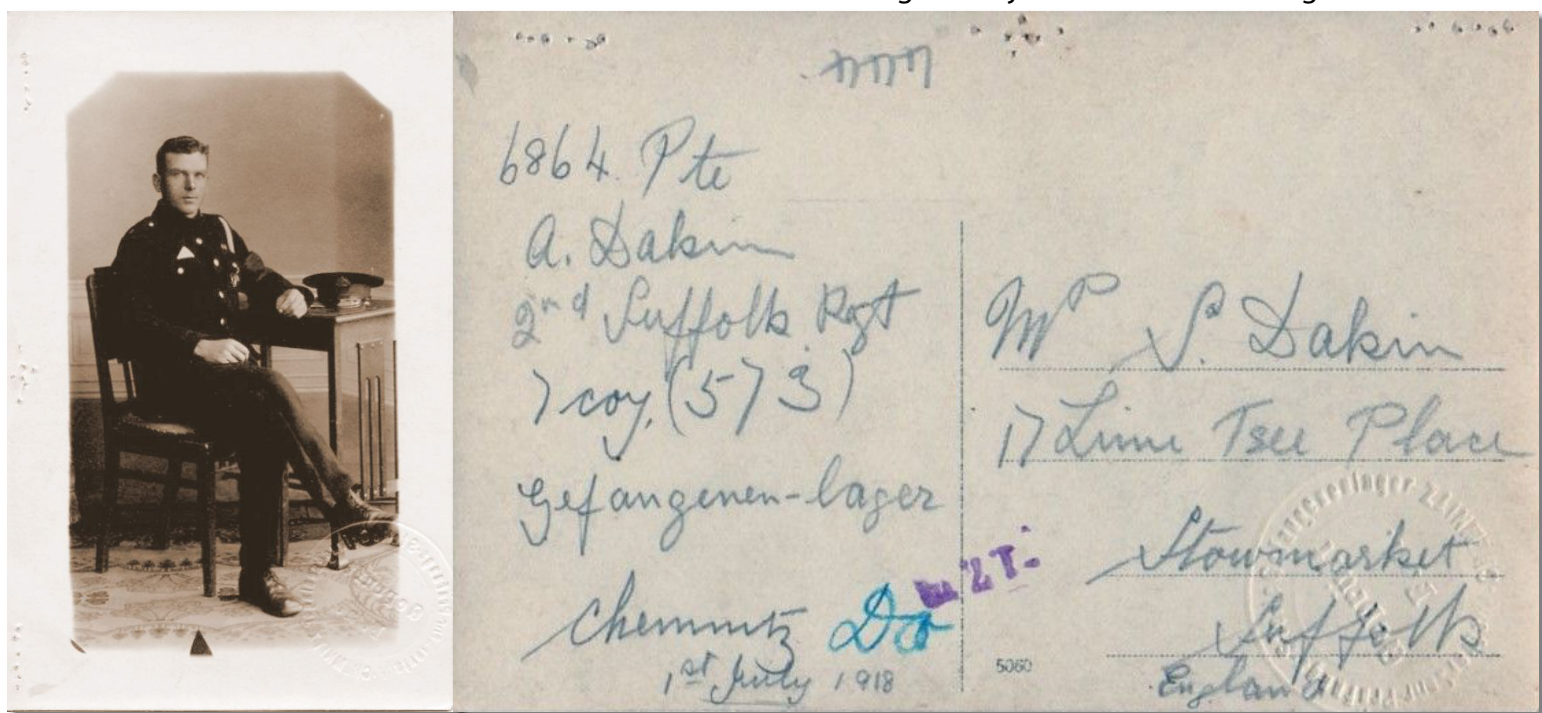
I suspect that the war was rather good for photographers who had studios close to prisoner of war camps. At least, there certainly appears to be no shortage of photos of men who were snapped whilst incarcerated in camps. Some of these postcards bear prison camp stamps or printed camp addresses, and many of them have details on the reverse from the soldier concerned, usually including his camp address and other crucial details. All of which makes these cards very researchable.

Leonard Collison was not even identified as a PoW when I spotted his image up for auction on eBay. However, I suspected that the dark jacket he was wearing was probably the blue jacket worn by prisoners of war, and so I decided to see how much I could discover from the obscured address on the reverse. By doing some address searches on the 1911 census, I worked out that the card was addressed to F J Collison at 11 Cavendish Drive, Leytonstone, Essex, and the census return showed me that he had three sons – Albert, Leonard, and John – who would all have been

for 13330 Pte Leonard Collison of the 5th Canadians who gave his next of kin as F J Collison of Cavendish Drive, Leytonstone. Leonard was born in 1891, emigrated to Canada before the war, enlisted with the 5th Canadians in September 1914, and was taken prisoner at the Second Battle of Ypres in April 1915, receiving shrapnel wounds to his right thigh, hip and back. Records held by the International Committee of the Red Cross (ICRC) suggest that he probably sent this card back to his father from the PoW camp at Senne or Paderborn. Having worked out who this man was and what his story was, I put in a bid and won the card.

Other men require far less research, giving you most of the essential information you could possibly wish for.

6864 Private Albert Dakin of the 2nd Suffolk Regiment, writing home on the 1st July 1918, gave his regimental details as well as the prison camp company he was working with and his PoW number. He also recorded that he was at Chemnitz camp in Saxony. In the photo, he looks quite relaxed, sitting cross-legged and again wearing a blue jacket. The white triangle above his



Private Albert Dakin and postcard (author's collection).

old enough, three years later, to join the army. I could see no British PoWs who fitted the bill, but there was a Canadian PoW called Leonard Collison. Sure enough, when I checked Canadian service records on the Libraries and Archives Canada site, there was a record

right breast pocket bears his PoW number, 573, and the embossed stamp also clearly states "Chemnitz."

The only information Albert omitted was his date of capture, but the ICRC notes elsewhere that it had been nearly four years by the time this photo was taken. In

common with many men captured in 1914, the acronym "PoW" appears on his medal index card. This annotation appears almost exclusively on the cards of men captured in 1914 and may be connected to HRH Princess Mary's initiative to retrospectively gift her ubiquitous 1914 tin of tobacco to those men who'd missed out on it in 1914 because they'd been captured by the enemy. I can think of no other reason why this PoW annotation for men captured in 1914 would appear on medal index cards. Incidentally, Albert was one of several hundred 2nd Suffolk Regiment men captured at Le Cateau. On the 27th August, the battalion war diary recorded a roll call of just two officers and 111 Other Ranks. The action had cost them 720 men killed, wounded, or missing, and the remnants of the battalion were organised into a single company.

Occasionally, several cards from the same soldier come to light, and so it is that I have some lovely correspondence, written on a series of seven postcards, from 7281 Private Patrick O'Sullivan of the 2nd Royal Irish Regiment. Like Albert Dakin, Patrick O'Sullivan was an early casualty, having disembarked in France on the 13th August 1914 and been captured eleven days later on the 24th. All of his cards are addressed to the same person, Mrs Rachel Gregory of 26 Queen's Road, Broadstairs, Kent, and all follow a similar theme of thanks for gifts on the one hand and further requests on the other.

"Dear Madam," writes Private O'Sullivan in the first card in the series, dated the 1st July 1915 at Limburg prisoner of war camp and postmarked still at Limburg eleven days later,

I received your most acceptable parcel on 29th June. Parcels require to be packed carefully [and] in my case it came uninjured. It would be advisable to put the address inside as well as on the outside. Fags are very apt to be lost. If sending another parcel I would be thankful if you would enclose a hairbrush. You will be pleased to hear I am in good health, as also my brother prisoners. Wishing you and yours every success. Respectfully yours, P O'Sullivan

His second card, sent just a few days later, thanks Mrs. Gregory for her gifts and asks if she is receiving his postcards of acknowledgement, and a third card the

following month requests "a loaf of bread instead of biscuits if sending another parcel... I am for ever grateful for your generosity."

In December 1915, Mrs Gregory sent Private O'Sullivan a pair of boots and, writing to thank her – for a second time – that month, O'Sullivan again requested bread instead of biscuits. The message obviously did get through, but he notes how cold it is at Limburg, with frost and snow, recording, somewhat apologetically, that he is in hospital with rheumatism.

In the last card that I have in my possession, Private O'Brien mentions his wife and family and also notes that he is being transferred out of Limburg to act as an orderly at an officer's camp. The card has a printed address on the front, so we know that he transferred to the officer's camp at Holzminden, but that is also where this particular story ends.

3/3486 Harry Albert Klein and his brother, 3485 Albert Augustus Klein, both of Hawke Battalion, Royal Naval Division, were interned along with hundreds of other Royal Naval Division men when they strayed into Holland on the 8th October 1914. Held at Gröningnen camp, Harry sent this card back home to his sister in Westcliff-on-Sea, Essex in November 1914. "Dear Elsie," he wrote,"

The men lower row are from Leigh [on Sea, Essex] named Little & Wright. Wright is of course on the right with The Graphic on his knee. We have sent a print to The Graphic. Our quarters are just on our right, or rather the right of card. That's a canal at my hand and up to range just in front of the trees. Looks as if I was annoyed with the photographer. I was really annoyed as had been chasing after Jimmy for about 25 minutes, and he wouldn't have looked so smiley had he been chasing me instead.

Your affectionate Brother

Harry

From what he says in his card, Harry must be one of the three men standing, and the only one of these three who looks remotely annoyed is the man standing on the left (with the canal visible beneath his hand). Both the other men could arguably be said to be smirking – at best – but I am guessing that "Jimmy," which might be a nickname for his brother Albert, is the man on the right. I have not identified the man



Harry Albert Klein and Albert Augustus Klein, left and right in the back row (author's collection).

who Harry refers to as "Wright," but "Little" is 3/2470 Hugh Condor Little who was also captured on the 8th October. Hugh had joined the Royal Naval Division in June 1911, but the Klein brothers were far more recent converts. Contemporary newspaper reports reveal that they were both keen and proficient sailors who had won many local sailing competitions in Essex. Within a week of Britain declaring war on Germany, both brothers had volunteered to serve with the Royal Naval Division. They joined up together, served together, were captured together, and were imprisoned together.

There is an interesting aside to this story as well. Klein is of course, a German name, the boys' father being a German national. During their time in captivity, Elsie Klein successfully appealed to have their name changed from Klein to Clyne, and so they both appear on the 1921 census, and in successive documents, under their new anglicised names.

Harry's postcard home to Elsie is a dream for researchers because it gives so much information in just a few short lines. In fact, the only man who is unidentified is the man standing in the back row smoking a pipe.

The final card I want to look at represents something of an unexpected bonus for me. It was part of a group of five cards that I successfully bid on, the cards having been owned by 8083 Sergeant Donald Dawes of the Suffolk Regiment. He had been captured on the 26th August 1914, and he presumably sent the cards home in an envelope, as there is no home address on any of the surviving cards that are in my possession. He did, however, write notes on the back of the cards, and on this particular card, he wrote "Company Quartermaster Sergeant White's Coy (No 6), Kriegsgefangenen Lager Dyrotz, Deutschland 1916."

I have yet to identify Donald Dawes, but the card is interesting because it shows a variety of uniforms and



Sergeant White's Coy Dyrotz (author's collection).

regiments. CQMS White sits in the middle of the front row. He was 4429 CQMS Thomas White, and he had

joined the Royal Warwickshire Regiment in 1894 and fought with it during the Sudan campaign in 1898. His Queen's Sudan medal ribbon and Khedive's medal ribbon can clearly be seen. The ribbon in between those is that of the Army Long Service medal, which he had been awarded in 1913. White had been captured on the 27th August 1914, also receiving a gunshot wound to his thigh.

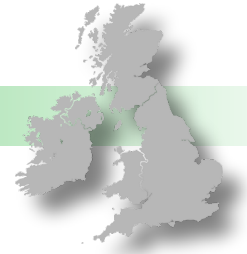
It was only when I was looking at this card in more detail though, that I recognised a familiar face sitting cross-legged in front of CQMS White, and that was Private Sidney F Godley of the 4th Royal Fusiliers who won the VC for his gallantry at Mons on the 23rd August 1914, the first VC to be awarded during the First World War. He was captured the following day and would spend the rest of the war as PoW. He and others in this photo wear the familiar yellow or light brown band, which was sewn into the left arm of their jackets. Many of the men here wear the prison-issue blue jackets, but there are also men in khaki, as well as at least four naval men. Note that the man sitting immediately to Godley's right wears four good

conduct chevrons on his lower left arm, indicating at least eighteen years' service.

It goes without saying of course, that all named individuals are added to my British Army Ancestors website, and I live in hope that other men in photos like these will be identified in the months and years to come. Meanwhile, though, I'll continue to keep an eye out for more PoW correspondence from the First World War.

Paul Nixon is a British military historian and author; the proud great-great-grandson of a Crimean War colour-sergeant; and the grateful grandson of a First World War veteran. Paul has a forensic knowledge of British Army regimental numbers and is the driving force behind the British Army Ancestors website at <https://britisharmyancestors.co.uk/>.





Finding Irish Voices

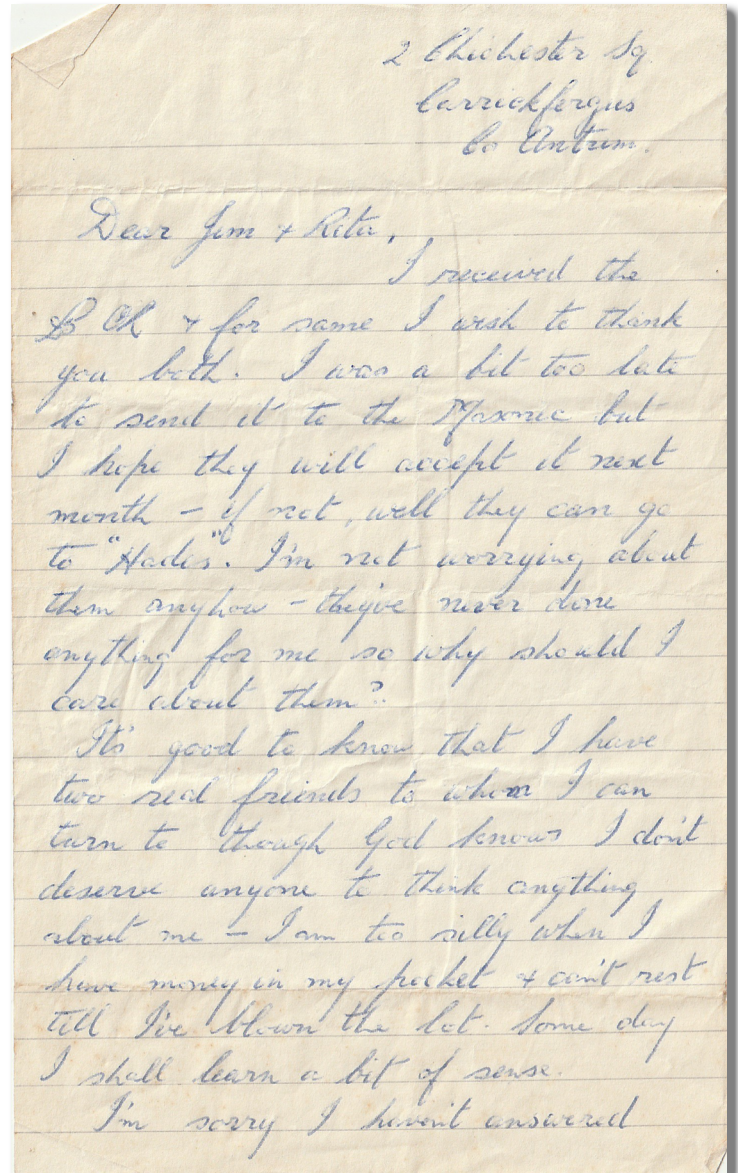
On the Irish side of my family, I have been lucky to occasionally hear the voices of ancestors I have not met through their writings. Perhaps the most special find for me has been that of the discovery of two letters written by my Belfast-born grandfather Ernest Graham (1922-1972), who passed away after I had just turned two years of age.



My Belfast-born grandfather Ernest Graham (1922-1972), who died in an industrial accident in Wales when I was just two years old.

Ernest had been separated from my Carrickfergus grandmother Martha for several years but had been on the point of visiting his daughter Cherie, my mother, in Plymouth when an accident at a refinery in Pembroke Dock, Wales, took his life in October 1972. As a consequence, I never got to meet him.

Many years later, I wrote an article about an earlier



One of the letters written by my grandfather Ernest to his friends Jimmy and Rita Foy.

generation of my mother's Graham family for a UK-based magazine called Your Family Tree. A chart was displayed alongside the prose showing my connection to my ancestors, which of course, showed that I was a grandson of Ernest and Martha. A reader immediately recognised the couple's names, they having many years earlier been close friends with her parents, and as a consequence, she made contact with me. She

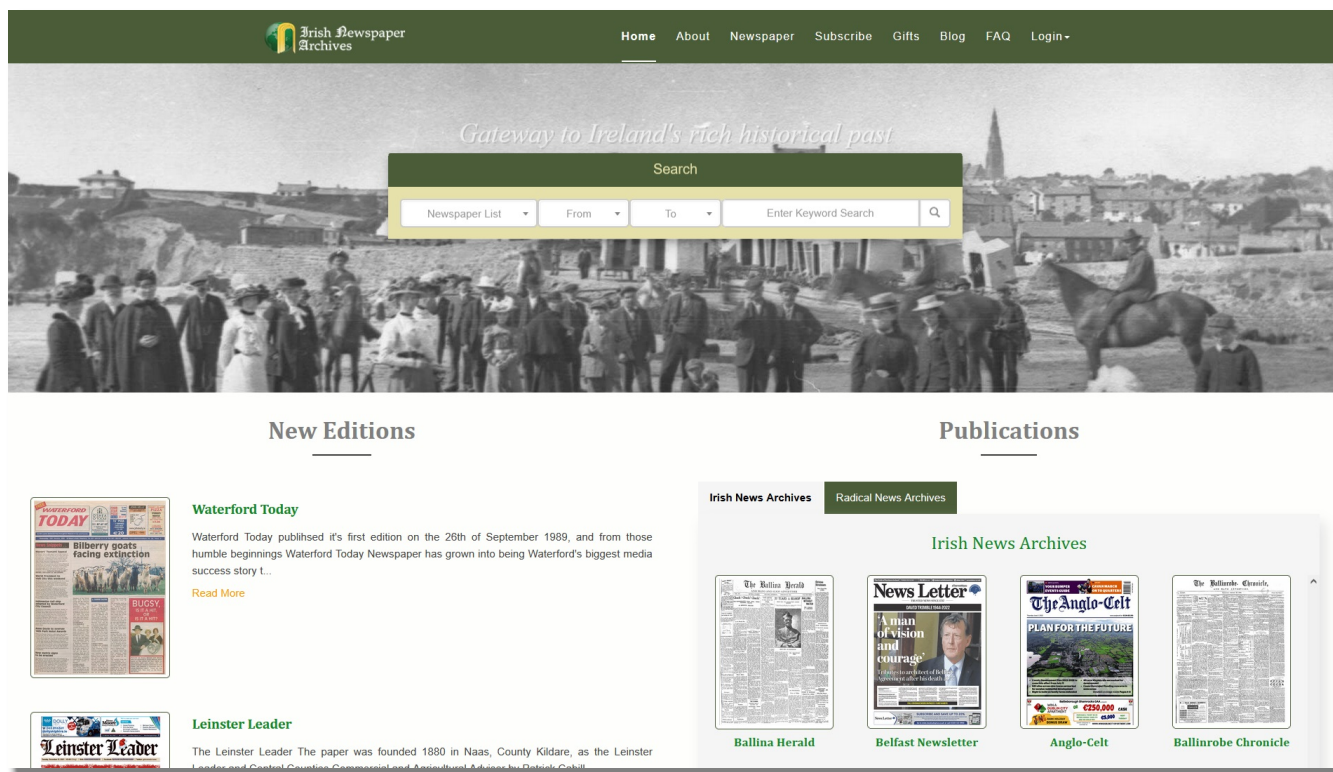
informed me that she had some images of my mother and uncle as children in Carrickfergus, as well as of my grandmother with her parents, which she very kindly posted to me. Wonderful as these were, the greatest revelation was the existence of two letters written by my grandfather to her father, which were also duly sent through.

For the first time I "heard" my grandfather speak as he recalled to his pal Jimmy Foy that he was looking for work overseas. A job in Jamaica had fallen through, and he had recently spent time in Saudi Arabia on a project, which also led to a unique signing off in one of the letters, with Ernie writing "Masalaama Sedekie!" as his farewell. The letters also recorded how Martha had just given birth to a son, my uncle Michael, and as a consequence, Ernie lamented about how he had been forced to give up his prize possession, a camera, in order to pay for a new pram.

The two letters provided a wonderful insight into a man that I had never met, but going further back in time, I have also occasionally been able to 'hear' the testimony of much older ancestors as a consequence of more tragic circumstances. In March 1875, at the Belfast-based trial of a three-times great uncle for having allegedly murdered a cousin, my

Templepatrick-based four-times great grandmother Roseanna Bill (nee Coulter, 1819-1889) was called to the stand, with the Belfast Newsletter recording her testimony. This was all the more poignant because her daughter had just passed away in her infancy the previous year, with Roseanna clearly still grieving for her at the time of her son's arrest:

The prisoner is my son. He came home to me on Wednesday before he was arrested. I was in trouble about the death of my daughter... My son, the prisoner, was digging potatoes all day on Thursday, and he was also working on Friday. My husband went to Belfast about two o' clock on Friday morning, and did not come back to about eleven o'clock that night. I sat up for him, and all the rest were in bed when he arrived. In consequence of the trouble I was in about my daughter my appetite was very bad. Sometimes my appetite is so bad that I can hardly walk for weakness. William, the prisoner, went away up to snare rabbits. He took the snare [produced] with him. He came back with a rabbit. I skinned it, and soup was made of it. I took some of it, and the girls also got some. After he came home he sat down and took a smoke and then wound up his watch. It was twenty minutes to nine o'clock... I recollect my husband bringing ham and cheese the second night of my daughter's wake. It was rolled up

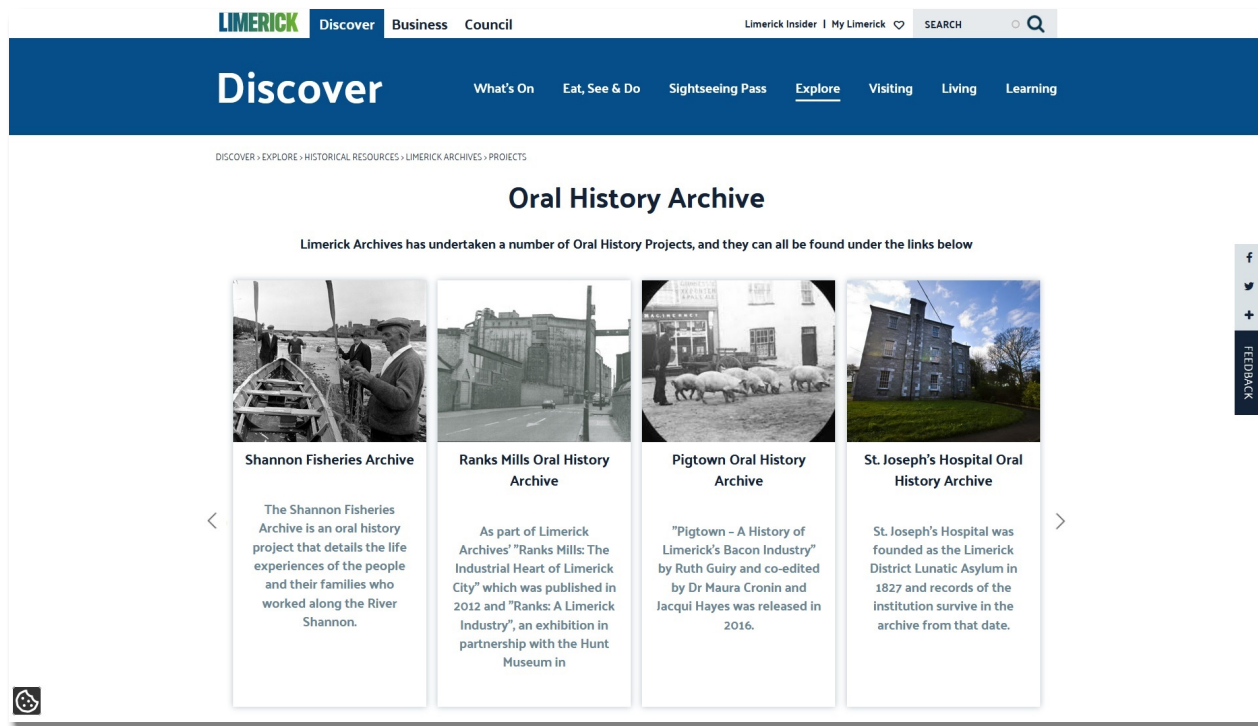


Both the Irish Newspaper Archives and British Newspaper Archive can be useful to locate ancestral testimony.

in a piece of newspaper. The police searched the house, and abused it very badly. There is a man Wray (pointing to the sub-inspector) and I don't say he is a bad man, but he jeered and taunted at me.

This was clearly a summarised contribution of her testimony by the journalist in attendance, but it still conveys so much about her domestic environment, her grief at the loss of her daughter, and the torment she was put through by the police when they came to

at the Maze and Long Kesh Prison from 2006-7. Initially recorded as the Prisons Audio Visual Archive, the interviewees comprise staff, probation officers, prisoners, chaplains, teachers, and visitors with stories from throughout the Troubles period. The Irish Life and Lore site also holds 85 recordings of folk from the border counties of Fermanagh and Cavan as part of its own Voices of the Troubles project at <https://www.irishlifeandlore.com/product/voices-of-the-troubles/>.



Limerick Archive's Oral History Archive

arrest her son (who was later found innocent of the crime). Newspapers can often carry stories quoting our ancestors, with various titles from Ireland available via the Irish Newspaper Archive (www.irishnewsarchive.com) and the British Newspaper Archives (www.britishnewspaperarchive.co.uk).

Oral history projects can also be a wonderful resource that may yield contributions from family members, as well as shed light on their contemporary environments, and there are many such projects from across Ireland that may be of interest. Some of these recall the more difficult periods in Ireland's past, such as the recent Troubles in Northern Ireland. For those imprisoned, interned, or working in Northern Ireland's prisons during the conflict, for example, the Prisons Memory Archive at <https://prisonsmemoryarchive.com> includes 175 interviews recorded at Armagh Gaol and

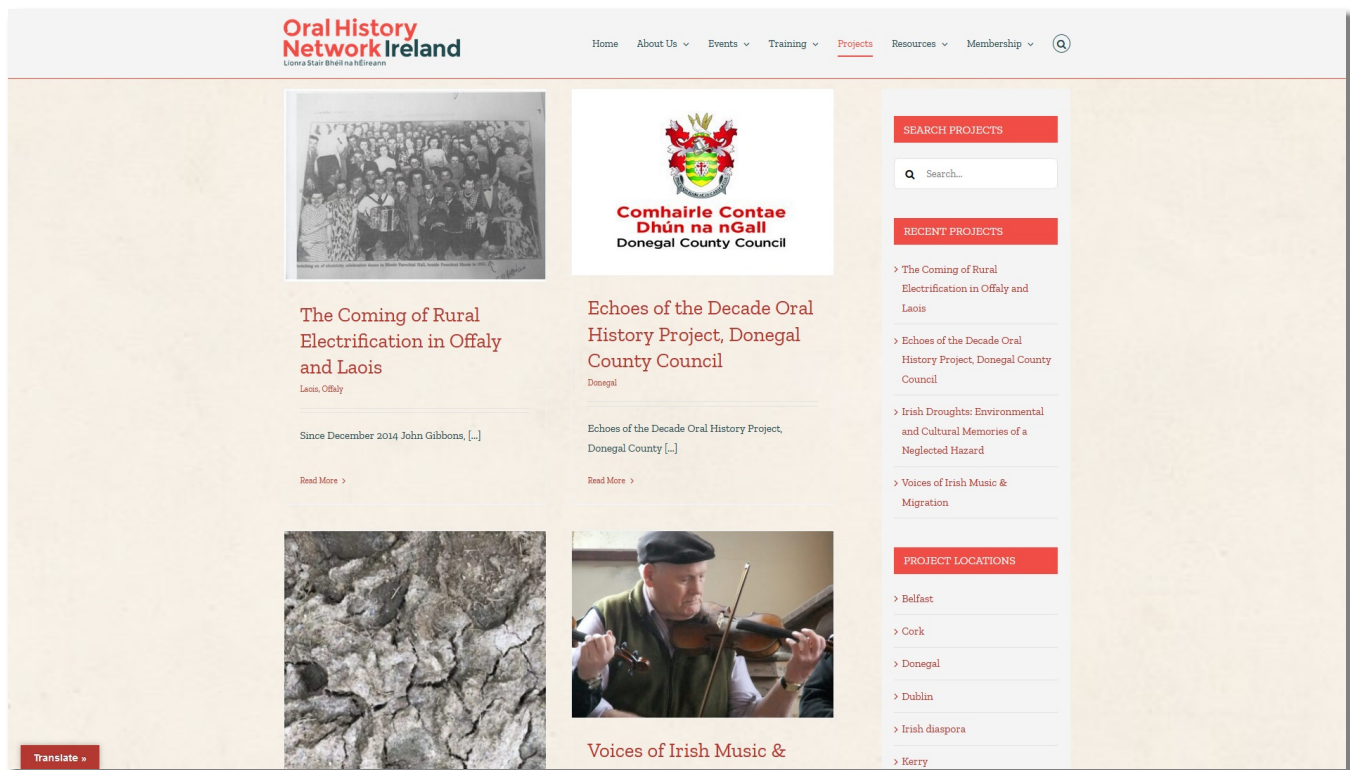
In the Republic, a similar earlier exercise documents stories gathered in the 1950s concerning the earlier revolutionary period from 1913-1921. Known as the Bureau of Military History (<https://militaryarchives.ie/collections/online-collections/bureau-of-military-history-1913-1921>), this includes 1,773 published witness statements and thirteen voice records from many of those involved.

Other oral history projects can shed light on other more everyday aspects of life in Ireland. For example, Limerick Archive's wonderful Oral History Archive at www.limerick.ie/discover/explore/historical-resources/limerick-archives/projects/oral-history-archive holds audio recordings from the Shannon Fisheries Archive, the Ranks Mills Oral History Archive, the Pigtown Oral History Archive, and the St. Joseph's Hospital Oral History Archive, each with their own stories to tell,

recorded for posterity. Various other projects from across the island can be found via the Oral History Network Ireland at <https://oralhistorynetworkireland.ie/projects>.

Return” oral history project, with many audio recordings and transcripts of those who travelled.

We can of course, seek to preserve the voices of our ancestors ourselves, whilst they are still around to be



The Oral History Network site documents oral history projects across Ireland.

Another wonderful exercise that did not take audio recordings but simply asked children to write about stories from their local environments is the Schools Collections at the Dúchas Project (www.duchas.ie) from University College Dublin (UCD) and Fiontar agus Scoil na Gaeilge, Dublin City University (DCU). This included tales written throughout the Republic of Ireland in the 1930s, and where you may be lucky to find that your ancestor has made a contribution.

The Documenting Ireland: Parliament, People and Migration (DIPPAM) project at www.dippam.ac.uk is another site where you may be fortunate to find ancestral contributions. A joint venture between Queen's University Belfast, the University of Ulster, the Centre for Migration Studies, and Libraries Northern Ireland, it provides a fascinating range of resources on emigration (primarily to North America) from the 18th to the 20th centuries, including an “Irish Emigration Database” with diaries, journals, folklore, and newspaper extracts, and the “Voices of Migration and

recorded. A few months prior to my father's death in early 2021, I held several conversations with him at his home in Scotland, where he recalled his early life as a child in Belfast and then in Carrickfergus, Co. Antrim. In these, he shared stories about the houses where he lived, the schools he went to, his mother, brothers and sister, and more. I had been allowed to record these, and two years on, I am still transcribing them to preserve the contents for posterity.

If you still have the chance to do something similar, there is no time like the present!

dúchas.ie téarma.ie logainm.ie ainm.ie gaois.ie

Collections Places People Themes Resources

Gaeilge English

Meitheal Dúchas.ie Log in

dúchas.ie » The Schools' Collection » Inis Oirthir (Inisheer)

School: **Inis Oirthir (Inisheer)**
(roll number 13322)

Location: Inis Oiry, Co. Galway

Teacher: M. O. Giolláin

Browse

TITLES (8)

1. Bolgaidín Transcribed
2. Inion Rí faoi Thalamh Transcribed
3. Mac Rí Éireann Transcribed
4. Cailleadh na nAdharca Transcribed
5. Inion an Rí Transcribed
6. Dubhallimín Transcribed
7. Pósadh Transcribed
8. An Mhaighdean Mhuire Transcribed

MODE Magnify Zoom 356 / 387

Inisheer Rí faoi thalamh
na bínn ceól

Di ní in Éirinn fadó agus is fadó a bhí agus dá mbeadh sé ann anois agus bheadh sé agall máith nó droch sgéal aige. Bheadh sé agus nuair a bhí sé trí ráithe pósta rugadh mac dó acht cailleadh an bhainneog leis an mbeir. Rugadh ar an ainm don mhac é agus bhí bean ag tabhairt aire dó arbh ainm di Nóra. Ansin bhí na comhairleoirí ag cur comhairle ar an rí bean eile a pósadh agus tar éis trí ráithe rugadh mac dó agus nuair a rugadh rugadh beirt mac dó agus an t-ainmneacha a tugadh orra Neart agus Ceart. D'fhás Art, Neart, agus Ceart suas ina mbuachaillí láidre agus charthidis an saogal ag fíach agus coinneáir agus biodh an tritín in éindigh igomuiidhe. Cheap an bainneog gur mó an cion a bhí ag an rí ar Art ná ar an mbeir eile agus nuair a fuair sí an deis lá a raibh an rí imthighthe amach marbhugh sí cón an rí agus chuir sí an milleán ar Art agus thug an rí greadadh go Art agus ba mhó a chion ar Neart agus Ceart ina dhiaidh sin. Lá dá raibh an rí agus a tritín mac amuigh ag fíadhach a'airig siad an ceól ba bhreagha ar bhfeidri a

(continues on next page)

Transcribed by a member of our volunteer transcription project.

History Edit

Folktales index
AT0301: The Three Stolen Princesses

The Dúchas project's Schools Collection with folklore recorded in English and Irish by schoolchildren across Ireland in the 1930s.

Based in the Ayrshire town of Irvine, Northern Irish-born **Chris Paton** runs the Scotland's Greatest Story research service (<https://scotlandsgreateststory.wordpress.com/>) and the daily Scottish GENES genealogy news blog (<http://scottishgenes.blogspot.com>). Amongst his many publications are *Tracing Your Scottish Family History on the Internet*, *Tracing Your Scottish Ancestry Through Church and State Records*, and *Sharing Your Family History Online from Pen and Sword*, as well as *Down and Out in Scotland: Researching Ancestral Crisis from Unlock the Past*. Chris also tutors short courses through *Pharos Teaching and Tutoring Ltd*, including *Scottish Research Online* and *Scotland 1750–1850: Beyond the Old Parish Registers*.



Priceless family treasures: How Letters from the Past Helped the Future Genealogist in the Family

Kirsty Gray

As a child, I was surrounded by photographs, albums, receipts, newspaper articles, certificates, and more, but there is one document which stands out in my memory: a letter. A letter packed full of information, written to my great-grandmother by her mother in 1924. This gem in the family chest was what set me off on my initial quest to find out more about the family and add to my grandfather's work. Little did I know where that journey would take me.

Back in the 1980s, the world of genealogy was very different to today. Computers were not commonplace. The internet didn't exist. Tracing your ancestry meant visiting an archive of some sort or a Family History Center operated by the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, even to search the basic birth, marriage, and death (BMD) indexes and the censuses. Searching the records was far more challenging, and making progress on solving mysteries took a long time.

Starting out with my mother, my genealogy story began in this era. Genealogy is in my genes in my maternal family, with my maternal grandfather following in the footsteps of his mother and her mother before. When he and my grandmother left England to retire to Tenerife (in the Canary Islands), the family chest was transferred to us to take care of, but little did my grandfather know the impact that decision would have on me, my life, and eventually, my career.

Like many people, when leaving school at eighteen, my choices were made based on the subjects which interested me the most and in which my highest grades were achieved. In any career interviews back at that point, being a professional genealogist would certainly not have featured in discussions. Why? Because it was not considered to be a potential career path!

In my late teens and early twenties, I spent an enormous amount of time travelling to London, via the



Kirsty Gray, Founder of The Genealogy Show and in-demand professional speaker.

train and underground tube, to the Family Records Centre in Myddelton Street in Clerkenwell. Pouring over microfiche and microfilm to trace even the basics—goodness, my memory of searching for my DAY family in the 1851 census over many microfilm reels manually is a painful one. Lifting those heavy volumes of BMD indexes and extracting (again, manually) all the entries for my surname study on the name SILLIFANT and all variant spellings. If only we could have known that the internet would catch up with the geneasphere [hat tip to Jill Ball @geniaus for the geneadictionary (<https://geneadictionary.wordpress.com/dictionary/>)] and that we could all pull off detailed BMD lists, without all that hard work, on free transcription sites and commercial sites of the future! Oh, how many hours could have been saved.

Why did I spend those long hours in London? Largely because I had so many unanswered questions. My dear grandfather had left a family tree which he had drawn up from family information, without the internet nor with any visits to archives or record offices, to the best of my knowledge. Me? I needed and wanted answers.

Dates, names, and places? Not so bothered. My mission was to unpick the potential stories housed in

the pencil notes of my grandfather's tree. There was someone who had sailed around the world. Another mystery surrounded the departure of a direct-line ancestor from the family home for reasons unknown, and they may have died in the workhouse. There is more besides, with various comments on the family tree, uncorroborated.

Oh, where to begin?

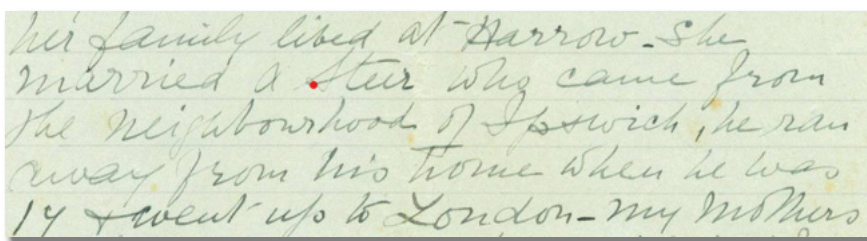
The letter. Written in 1924, with so many pieces of information to assist in the quest for finer details. Clues to help resolve puzzles. Though, how much of the letter is fact, and how much is fiction? And then there was Aunt Win and a fabulous family photo album, but by the time we were in a position to ask her about it, she'd lost a few of her marbles and so, some names she mentioned just didn't add up. "Aunt Silvery" was one of the people she kept referring to, but there was no sign of anyone with that name in the birth or census records in the DAY family.

So much to unpick!

The fact is, every alleged fact must be checked, checked, and checked again. One ancestor in my tree has a very distinctive name. Located at birth in 1873 and then in 1881 and 1891 with his family in censuses. Then—gone. No sign in any vital records—until I discovered that he changed his name, informally, moved miles away from his family, married under his completely new name, and had a family in his new identity and died with that same name. This information was, not unexpectedly, not known by my grandfather. However, he did leave a crumb—a suspected departure date for this character. Once the new name was discovered, the death certificate was easily located.

The 1924 letter brought up some other unexpected discoveries, including a direct-line ancestor, at the very top of my grandfather's tree, alleged to have originated from Ipswich. It transpired he had absolutely no connection to Ipswich at all and was in fact, from Roade in Northamptonshire.

A great (several times over) aunt went to Bombay with the Salvation Army, with Commissioner Lucy Milward Booth-Hellberg. We have photographs and, with help



Excerpt from 1924 letter discussing Ipswich ancestor.

from the internet and Ancestry, we have documentation to show that she and Lucy were on the same census together as missionaries. Moreover, our ancestor was cared for by the Salvation Army in later years until such time as she passed, and we have receipts that show a member of the family (well, maybe, but that's another issue) contributing for her care.

"Another mystery surrounded the departure of a direct-line ancestor from the family home for reasons unknown..."

Then there is my grandmother, born Queenie, but after her second marriage, she decided to change her first name to Jane. She was born in Portsmouth and died in Tenerife, but without being registered in the British Armed Forces and Overseas Deaths and Burials indexes, how FindmyPast and Ancestry know she can be unredacted is frankly beyond me.

That said, there are a few snippets which we would never have otherwise known or realised we needed to research—facts which no census or BMD record would have given our family, and only conversations over the years have informed us. Some eight or so years ago, I met a fellow teacher on a management course, and we discussed family history research. Our conversation led me to discover that one of my direct-line ancestors had a previously unknown illegitimate child. How do we spot these in our research? Do we look for them actively? Perhaps not so much—? And that direct-line ancestor kept good records, including handwritten parchment documents of all their children, or so we thought.

And then, when a good friend of mine, with a very recognisable (and rare) double-barrelled surname, was

visiting the National Archives (Kew), she made a decision to pull up all the records relating to her family history, including a divorce record in the early 1900s in London, only to discover that my ancestor mentioned above (the one who disappeared from the family home, for reasons unknown, and may have died in the workhouse) was a witness on my friend's ancestor's marriage certificate—what on earth?

And now...

Here I am in 2023—a professional genealogist with a High Street office and a team of over forty people around the world, locating people for a living since 2012. This would have been a pipedream in the 1980s or even 1990s, to be honest. Without that letter from 1924, the encouragement of my own family, geneafamily, and geneacolleagues around the world, would this career transition have taken place? Most likely not.

My question to you

When did you start tracing your family history? And why did you begin your quest? Have you documented this? I'm asking this as keeping a record for the future is really important for our descendants. My ancestors left a gingerbread trail for me to follow, and many of them, during their lifetime, assisted enormously in the research into the history of our family.



[Pricelesstreasuresonline.co.uk](https://pricelesstreasuresonline.co.uk)

So, now is the time to turn our attention to leaving our own gems for the generations of the future. My parents have both completed books with over 200



Kirsty's office at Family Wise Limited.

questions from Priceless Treasures (<https://pricelesstreasuresonline.co.uk/>), including questions that personally would never have crossed my mind – Mother's Memories and Father's Memories.

A personal mission for me is to keep improving the record keeping over yester-decade by getting rid of the unnecessary printouts from the pre-internet days and creating a digital archive of our family history. Physical copies of certificates purchased will never be destroyed but there are so many other documents taking up a lot of "family history room" space, which can be used more effectively.

However, the most important thing which time must be freed up for, is writing my own story. This article is the beginning of that task.

Hopefully, it will provide you with that impetus as well.

Kirsty Gray is a professional genealogist, people finder, heir tracer, family and local historian based in Calne, Wiltshire, England. She manages her own company, Family Wise Limited, with a staff team of over 40, based all over the world. She has starred on Qui-Etes Vous? (Who Do You Think You Are?) in Canada and BBC1's Family Finders in the UK, as well as being a world-renowned lecturer and author.



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