

FAMILY HISTORY – THE JOURNEY

INTRODUCTION

People take the mick out of family history. It's not something to be undertaken seriously. It is the work of coachloads of retired road-drillers with mud for brains who stumble from one archive to another with shorts the colour of a Texas sunset. My guess is they wouldn't recognise what they were looking for unless it had a red flashing light and a bell round its neck. My hobby feels different. Not for me the quick hollow fix of finding a shared surname: it takes *years* to get a reasonably complete tree. I have risked death driving on Welsh roads, removed skin winding microfilm to-and-fro, hunted through acres of dusty books and slippery fiche, reached the elderly by phone, letter or car, just in the nick of time. David, Data-Supercollector! David, Supersleuth!

I live in London in 2004, a world away from my roots. A huge mountain of information, representing years of family history research, sits on my laptop. This data has emerged over a long time. I opened letters, have been through a gamut of emotions, sat listening to stories of the 1920s in a caravan on the estuary.

In the busy crowd I feel like any another person with a laptop full of data. I *was* born and I *do* belong and I'd allowed all that's important to me to sit coldly in digital format. Instead, this is how I imagine things to be. I'm in my flat at home when a brown envelope falls through the door yielding a letter, and a chunky key. The letter says: "Dear David. We haven't all had the pleasure of meeting you, but we've heard about you. Some of us lived in London too, many years ago, when we were your age. We've met you once or twice and you listened to what we had to say. We are giving *you* the key to the boxroom of memories. It's time we passed this on." I gripped the key hard. I've been chosen to inherit the stories and to introduce them to those living today. I fired up my laptop and began to write. . .

BETTER THAN THE ROYALS

Ages 14-17. The probate registry!

If terror is heightened fantasy then bliss is its anti-venom. I remember 13 Sep 1991 as a mixture of terror and bliss. On this day our school went on a day visit to the Old Vic and Hippodrome in Bristol but this same day I received a letter from Sue Jones.

About my own family I knew rather less than the royals, whose mediaeval bargains were splashed through the pages of my father's encyclopaedia. Yet my relatives were givers of presents and owners of interesting houses and mysterious, exciting, older cousins and their being special by extension made me special. And so it was time to find out more about them – I could not remain in ignorance.

And here is the bit that all family historians understand but cannot quite explain. You see, it's the blood, I must follow the blood! It's the people I belong to, they're Mine. One can climb the branches of the tree to interesting destinations, far far away. My father must have felt this momentarily as he devised a black-inked, pencil-ruled tree celebrating my birth and that of my sister (the other being not yet born). To complement my father's endeavours, there was another tree, authored by my mother in her schooldays. She disclaimed any responsibility for this. While neither parent encouraged further enquiry the information was nonetheless in the public domain. An interest such as a new father's is intensely private – mine, different. Something in me suspected the way out of Devon lay in these trees, and in fact this proved to be the case in escapism as well as luring me and my car out north along the M5. My schooldays were deeply unhappy and I longed to disappear to pursue my interests. I wondered if it was possible to live in the past – I read of time-travellers and savoured the highly illustrated children's history books which we had in the house.

The early detective in me had heard of yet further family notes, those compiled by my great-uncle. After I made several enquiries, these arrived. The notes showed further branches of which I was unaware. They recalled summer holidays the writer spent with his father in Somerset – being the eldest he was able to record where they fitted in. I didn't have the knowledge or the background to make sense of what I received, nor did I have any means of contacting the people named, though perhaps many could still be living. What struck me most were the 35 cousins of uncle's father listed at the foot of one page, with their funny names: Amy, Mabel, Norton and Gypsy. When I came close to finding a son of Norton my heart beat went through the roof. History and I met. I found the farm on a map and pored

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over it. I found a lovely photograph of this family in my grandmother's photograph collection, smartly dressed looking jolly outside their home, Birtsmorton Court, my greatgrandfather, youthful and a bit bewildered, joining in¹. I'd rarely left Exeter and nature kept letting me follow clue after clue to other places, unfettered in these explorations, if not elsewhere. Of all the possible leads I might have had, something in me determined to find the Hood-Williamsses. So I wrote a 'cold' letter, my first, aged fourteen and over four months forged a connection with Wales by an interchange of a very few letters. The first Welsh lady confirmed her connection with the family on my tree and gave the address of the second Welsh lady. The second Welsh lady told me all about her family and I located her rainy part of Powys on the Ordnance Survey maps in the library. And here's where I got lucky. The second Welsh lady gave me the name of another Susan, deep in Wales, whose relationship I couldn't possibly guess; she was known to be related to my grandfather's grandmother. It was this Susan's letter which I received in 1991. The letter reinforced the information I already had and then introduced the rest of the Harrises in a way that I couldn't possibly reject². The morning of that school trip to the Bristol Old Vic I'd been enveloped by another family. About a year before, I'd bought the Eve McLaughlin compilation book in Bath. I went up with my family on the train and this yellow book was a treat to myself, #6.99 for a new way of life. This book made my interest into a hobby, an everyday part of life, and it gave promise of an interesting voyage. It described the research process as a worthy way of understanding nineteenth-century village folk, from whom we had all come. As a result of the McLaughlin book I learnt that Exeter might have something to offer after all. Above Next, if you please, a room where you could find out about any will from Victorian times to today. So, at fourteen I had the run of an empty room. Round the walls and under the table were hundreds of thick leather-bound volumes, some leaning into each other; the more recent ones standing proud – they were all much older than me. I raced along the length of the main street for a half-hour communing with history after school. Yet again: no restrictions. With an hour a week free, I found I was investigating the family tree in earnest. Here was a project I could celebrate and enjoy. The canvas became wider than just my immediate family, and, consequently, worthy of further investigation. Accusations of 'ancestor worship' became less founded as I ignored my living ancestors and contacted unusual people around the world, including on one memorable occasion Grandpa's eighty-year-old cousin in Nashville, from a callbox in Powderham Crescent. I was to become something of an expert on East Somerset farming families, as perhaps my stories show.

I mentioned earlier 'where history and I met'. My uncle and his father had long since died. They knew their cousins intimately and it became obvious that I could make contact with them too, if only I could find them. I disappeared into my magic wills room and came out with an address. Leaving the building I made for the flowered valley of Hoopern Brook and ran into it in deep ecstasy. I didn't know that Miss Hunt would enjoy my letter just as much as I was delighted to receive hers. Since my great-grandfather had been born at the pretty cottage in the Mendips, migration, education and a move away from the land had all intervened. Those living had much to say about these years and wanted to learn about the bigger picture. When Miss Cotton sent me several square foot of Creed tree, this gave me more material than I could possibly need at the time. The ample skeleton of this tree so adequately and interestingly wound itself like ivy around nineteenth-century Somerset in all of its manifestations.

So I could do a great deal without leaving Exeter. I had my hour or so a week in the probate registry, time after school to write all these letters – I mostly got replies – and then there was managing the information. Piles and piles of paper. It turns my stomach to think how I coped with them and finally, finally, keyed it all in. The other tool I had was print-outs from the 1881 census index by post and stamped addressed envelope. Can you imagine how painful this was! A big project was underway though I had no idea it would take another ten years to get familiar with all the main avenues. I was a typical sad teenage male child but I had a project

¹ I eventually cycled past it wistfully, not demanding entrance, just using it as a destination for a circular cycling trip, leaving my car a few villages away. Here is the story from one who knew, though: "To go to stay at Birtsmorton Court was a delight. The Court was a picturesque moated house, full of romance for us. Ethel told us tales of Cavaliers and Roundheads, and secret escape tunnels, and showed us the 'priest-hole'."

² Her mother, then living, had taught my grandfather. She knew exactly who was who.

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of my own and soon I was to live on a farm! I didn't get back to the probate registry for another four years.

TIME TO MEET HISTORY

Ages 17-20. The car!

I left school, abruptly, in June 1993. The science teacher said 'you'll be prime minister one day', my first thought was disposing of the uniform on a fairly permanent basis. I went to work on a farm for a year – no car – the time here was fantastic. What a tonic. The cattle were friendly and approachable, not at all like the nettly people I'd known. At last I got to see a little of what a quality life could be like, building up a nice stock of memories to pillage whenever London looked particularly empty later on. The farming bits and pieces just made it all that much easier to understand the area I'd found out about. Then I passed my driving test and I could act independently and be at last responsible for my own time.

This was followed by a year at agricultural college which I thoroughly enjoyed. I had become used to beetling the short distances to and from college, when the opportunity came along to do a lambing on a wonderful Blackdown Hills farm in the middle of winter. It was right on the border with Somerset and it was also the furthest I had driven. I stayed a week, and having decided there would be no more lambs I headed east into Somerset proper – relative country! In my CV at one time it said, that I had 'developed exhaustive knowledge of the local communities'. This trip was really it. Closer to the truth, I came near to wrecking the exhaust on my car through reversing into a lamp-post while attempting to bump-start it on a hill. In the same CV barging into peoples' homes is described as 'holding impromptu interviews'. This is what I did, calling in at several farmhouses in the pre-Christmas period. After dark I drew up at Steart Farm, it being too late to read the gravestones in the churchyard. I can't believe my cheek but I quizzed my hosts about the Creeds who'd lived at the farm. The householders rang the neighbours to see if anyone had heard of them and sure enough one old lady had. I met Pat Cotton, Brewham and Babcary villagers plus looked in at Charlton Horethorne Manor. Pat had the locals taped. We had a lot to talk about though I had only a year or two's knowledge – she had over sixty-worth. Pithy comments summed up whole families – the xxxxxs weren't much good, she said. At Baltonsborough I was both stopped in a graveyard and then marched off to meet Ralph Bush, who at 94 was the oldest resident. (I found him just recently in the 1901 census living in the village aged four months.) I had an hour-long conversation with the last of the Padfields in Holcombe. She told me the story of the horses shying after a wedding ceremony many years ago – this being a bad omen – followed by the death of the bride one year later. I checked the dates when I got home and found this tale was 125 years old. Many of the people I met on that visit have now died, though it was, I see, only a decade ago. The whole trip was really running my hands over an old family heirloom. I stood in West Pennard churchyard, not thinking 'I'm home' or anything dumb like that, but 'this is peace, this is a pure beautiful memory'. And it still is.

The very next year I was back on the farm again. The cattle were good buddies but they needed feeding every morning, including Saturday. I got out of bed at 5am, fed the yarded cattle their two barrows of maize gluten, checked their salt lick and tossed out new straw bales as required. I mixed up the milking cows' complicated diet in the Keenan Feeder and reversed the tractor so that the food went into the troughs and was pretty much evenly spread all the way along. I'd bucket feed the twenty or so baby calves with warm powdered milk and cross fingers that their poo would stay solid. All their water and nuts buckets would need changing, and probably scrubbing with hot water. Two D-1000 straw bales were pushed onto the landrover and seven 25kg bags of maize gluten filled with a shovel by electric light and hurled in the back. In the field I kicked the troughs over and sloshed out the gluten nuts, reversed up to the ring feeder and rolled in the large straw bales, cut, snip, showing the string in my pockets. A headcount to ensure everyone was present and then a quick getaway. It was now 7.30am and I was ready to drive the old banger thirty miles to Oxford and begin some family history. It is all so easy now, on the internet! You can have 1881, 1901 census screens open, freebmd and 1837online also, and missing names can be garnered at the touch of a button. It was such a fiddle going through those fiche – thank goodness I only had to do this once! What a joy to get rid of the old banger.

My other piece of kit was a faithful Olympia typewriter. On this I introduced order to my trees, which I typed at weekends. Also pounded onto paper were my collection of probate index

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entries, some 1000 or more by this time. This meant I could eventually hurl out the typewriter, card index and car keys. Floppy disks were dumped without ceremony as late as 2004.

MEGABYTES OF THE PAST

Ages 20-27. Email!

By the age of twenty I had carried out a vast amount of research and the bulk of my contacts had been made. I was back in Exeter living with the parents but far more self-assured having lived away and been completely independent for a year. I had met many relations, travelling to Wales and to Somerset by car. I'd made real headway with the Haine tree thanks to a collaboration with Hanna Nicholas, and the seeds for the 'book' had been sown. I'd been to the Cornwall Record Office when joining the family for a week's holiday in delicious old Portscatho. It felt fantastic with the rain hammering on the flat roof and the Cornish air on tap just outside the building, while discovering that I descended from the Trehellas of Towednack. It was still raining while the rest of the Walshes tried not to look out of place in the rented fishermen's cottage. I sat in my chair and got to grips with the Cornish Trehellas – was I the winner?!

All this information had to go somewhere and over the next year it went round the world several times. I'd already sent a few airmail letters but when I arrived at Seale-Hayne College in September 1997 I became the proud possessor of my own email account. It took me a while to figure out the college email, but I still remember the first message I received. Luckily Paul was a good correspondent and I discovered the speed with which information could flow. I kept the messages. Two or three contacts unlocked whole areas of research: Kathie Weigel on the Trehellas of Towednack and Cocks of Gwithian; Carol Christiansen on the Symes family of Ohio. It was an extraordinary experience to return from a field trip to Bodmin Moor and find a reply from the States awaiting you with news of rural Ohio 150 years ago. I spent far too many evenings at the college in Exeter looking at the internet and sending emails. I made use of Textbridge to scan in all my old Olympia typewriter documents and what a painfully slow process that was. I had to verify all the optical character recognition. What a joy to throw out the typewriter and card index. These days I have a Compaq laptop: no more monkeying around with boxes of floppy disks. There is a family connection with Compaq too, I read, to my exasperation. My third cousin, Admiral James E Eckelberger, was, until recently, a board member.

The months of June-September 1999 passed in a frenzy of research until I secured a job. There were many opportunities to go to Taunton and I would catch the bus which took a pretty route through all the villages at a low cost. It was a relaxing way to travel. I miss those trips, though there were days when I learnt little new. Taunton had much to offer, with the newspapers ripe for searching: they gave up many secrets. Another source of information was the annotated transcript of Parson Woodforde's Diaries, in several volumes – I spoke to the former editor on the telephone about them. He and I shared an interest in the Ansford Murder (1775).

Two-thirds of my research has been on my Somerset side, though this accounts for only 12% of my ancestry. This is not entirely from choice. The records for the county were situated a bus ride away from my Exeter base. The relatives often left their mark on the community and, consequently, people remembered them. There were usually both private family records and wills, both of which are an enormous help when tracing a family. By now I had got to know the area and thus had confidence to make positive identifications and in writing to new correspondents. I have always hesitated before penning a letter to someone in the North of England as there is less of a shared background. And so, a wide net was cast in Somerset, and many fish have been caught.

Around this time I still had my car (as I was commuting 30 miles a day to college). I managed to arrange visits with quite a few people round Southern England during college holiday periods. I can't believe my naivety. I heard a deep sigh down the telephone as I addressed Dick Padfield Newsnight-style by his full name. I didn't know about having conversations so was ready to interrupt Mr Padfield's answer to one of my questions with the next question on my list. Later, the conversations came more easily – those who welcomed me to their homes were ready to talk of themselves and their family. Once or twice a typewritten summary came through the letterbox a day or two later – I'd clearly ignited an interest. I never taped anyone nor took notes on the spot. Thinking of and saying the next question kept me pretty occupied

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– I had half an ear open to listen out for any change of direction in the responses but there wasn't really time to take in the responses as well as to ask the questions.

On the way up to my aunt's in Bradford I was writing the results of an interview I'd had that afternoon about life on the Drax estate in Wiltshire and the hegemony of milk. The journey back was as fraught: no headful of memories to scribble down but I had the diaries of my great-grandmother in a bag between my knees all the way home. It was an honour to transcribe these diaries. I had heard oblique references to them and was very glad to see them for myself. The spiciest the writer gets is when she hitches home in a potato-cart the morning after a party in 1835. I have a favourite part in the diaries where she itemises a trip to Bath. The journey took two days. She caught the coach at 7am from the centre of Truro, and, later, paid one shilling and sixpence to have her hair cut and curled on arrival in Bath.

Somerton is a quiet place during the day and does wonderful teas. I was not prepared for the 'thunk' as an ancient family bible was plonked down in front of me after one such tea. It was the family bible of the Indoos. My luck here stemmed from my stopping off at the small cemetery here in the winter on my way back to college after Christmas. The information found here meant that the next time I came to Somerton it was to enjoy a nice tea and conversation with a distant cousin.

In September 1999, I finally finished the Haine book, the result of a lot of letter-writing and editing. I pored over the word processor as it chugged its way through the text. I used my work laptop to transfer the word processor files into formatted text. It was a huge relief to hand over responsibility to the clerk at OfficeWorld in Horsham for copying all 10,000 sheets of paper. I spent a weekend in my flat in Guildford hole punching all the sheets and binding them together.

U.S.

The US trip was fantastic. I was made to feel so welcome. I delighted in the US interpretation of farming life. I was captured by the description of winter, with fleecy snow, gliding along on the sleigh, as it appears in Thomas Hawkins's diary (1860).

Finished tree?

In the ten years I have been studying family history I have traced as many cousins as I wanted. Certainly, now, new branches do not appeal – even for quite close relatives. In the past, with a new branch, I pulled out all the stops and ran them to ground. Each new line is reminiscent of opening a pack of biscuits: after a taste you just want *more!* Today I'm wary of getting too interested in a new branch. I don't suppose I've *finished* my family tree, but I have at least mapped out the topography.

Archive

In December 2003 I digitally captured images of the key documents in my possession, including photographs inherited two years before from Geoffrey Green. I had the beginnings of an archive. In 2004 I began work on this project, selecting the best stories – trying to ensure that each snippet had a certain specific merit and could be linked into a narrative.

Distant past

How far back have I gone? The stock answer is 1720. This is about the time of the Creed adultery case, the will of Edward Murrow and the Queen Anne marriage settlement. Any further back is just being greedy. Nonetheless in 1997 I sent an email 'Hock/ Cock' about the funny families from the sands of Gwithian in the 1600s. You can hang around in the 1600s looking for Hocks, but today I am much more likely to be hanging from the hocks. Having said that it is hard to reject the inventory I have from 1687. Benjamin Hockin's will is made three days before his death, as he says 'being att this time Sick And weake in body yet of perfect memory praised be god'. He leaves everything from brasse pans, corne, sheepe, beds, peuter, heffers and pultery, also table boards on which one would eat much of this. He is my ninth great grandfather. This is the sort of thing I wanted to find when I read David xx's book on family history some years before, a real connection with the working life of someone living a long time ago, in this case, born at the beginnings of the English Civil War. This book drew attention to the conundrum that in the 1300s one's total ancestors living, doubling with

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each previous generation, would equate to more than the million or so people living at that time. One of the odd things about family history is the mathematics. As a broad rule of thumb, the number of relatives alive at any given time multiplies by ten as you go back each step of a century. THREE hundred years ago, the number is well over 2,000 – an extraordinary number. (I am indebted for the inventory to Kathie Weigel.)

Migration.

It is so nice to find relatives in an unknown part of the country and to watch them settle and gradually become part of the community. Often-times they act as my spies for the area, as one becomes sensible of migratory patterns. Their presence gives me an 'in' to the area. Sooner or later my car will come creeping up the tarmac and I will be sipping at some locally-brewed tea.

Old documents

I have been thrilled by the emergence of old documents in the family. My elderly aunt wrote to tell me she had the will of an old hatter penned when the family lived in Derbyshire. It has been a long time since we lived in Derbyshire, some 140 years. I read a transcript of this document. I have since visited the hamlet of Starkholmes near the Heights of Abraham and it is all the more special knowing we have a document in the family surviving from when they actually lived here. The will deposited at the Record Office turned out to be a version four years older, and showed that the hatter built a new house between the two documents.

Early forebears

One of my earliest forebears is Edward Murrow. At the time we're peeping at him, the date was Christmas, 270 years ago and Mr Murrow was about to die. He had had a long life in the village, had been churchwarden and a successful farmer. Of course even the youngest person alive at the time he made his will would be the oldest of the old if alive today. I like to linger awhile at his deathbed before moving quietly on. If the latter-day saints can canonise the ordinary, I wish to en-noble his three daughters, Women of Ansford, Elizabeth (baptised 1690), Frances (baptised 1692) and Mary (baptised 1705). If it was not for the father's will we'd know nothing of them. Their gravestones have long since perished and their family would greet sorrow just as much as it would produce pioneers, architects and agents of great estates. But they have 3,000 descendants, a scarcely credible number, hence my wishing to honour the memory of these ordinary ladies, whose names happen to have survived. Cue a barn-doors scene change. It is now 1769 and the sisters are long dead. Sally, granddaughter of Elizabeth, has given birth to her first child and the rector, the diarist Parson Woodforde, travels to read prayers for her, 'poor woman.. she is more likely to die than live'. Her husband was already paying a shilling a week to the mother of a baby born a few months previously.

Real conclusions

Family history has little credibility in academic circles, being regarded as a pseudo-scientific pursuit with only a passing remembrance to more disciplined studies. Where else would your brief be so vague as to look at anything and everything (no matter how unconnected) over any time period you liked, with endless project extensions, and finally, for one's conclusions to be, rather inadequately, 'cor blimey, you've got to look at this!' The journey has been a fascinating one and I for one am happy with my conclusions. I am delighted to think of Mary Earl making the wonderfully vivid gift of her 'best red cloak' to her daughter Elizabeth. Also to learn through a relative of how Lucy Rugg met her husband³, the story of Jabez Hunter's

³ Some sixty years after the coat had been passed on, Lucy was sitting at home in Woodlands one cold Saturday. Her future husband was not planning to take his usual Saturday morning jaunt into Wells because of the bitter weather, but his friend Jimmy Tate, wine merchant persuaded him saying "I will find you a rug". Sure enough they called in at Woodlands on their way home where Tate said there was a choice of three Ruggs, and when they looked, there were, and one of them was Lucy. She married the cold guest at the parish church a year or two later. The nine Rugg sisters have nicely repopulated the Levels, and I think they will have increased the average life expectancy there – the family was chock-full of octogenarians and beyond.

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experience in 1860s South America⁴, and the tale of the door, in danger of being whitewashed, in the North of England⁵.

It is lovely to curl up with stacks of information on the family and to imagine you are lazily dragging a plumb line along the bed of the lake, periodically bringing it to the surface, not knowing what will be thus dredged up nor from which time period. One's imagination can dart hither and thither among the mean streets of London or repair to a country lane at a time before steam trains; without the effort of boarding a coach or building a time machine. Sometimes there are similarities between other times and now. In my tree, two women were barmaids in Chertsey in their early twenties. One was my sister and the other (100 years previously), a fifth cousin or more, daughter of a groom.

APPENDIX

There's something very intimate about the indexes of probate. One can begin one's quest towards understanding a family. Take this example.

Deaths Jan—Mar Quarter 1891

Padfield Martha 88 Wincanton 5c 391

Deaths Jan—Mar Quarter 1892

Treasure Exton 75 Wincanton 5c 390

These entries tells you nothing about the individuals. But how much more information is given in the probate entries below.

Calendar of Probate and Administration 1891

20 February.

PADFIELD, Martha, widow, of Bruham House, parish North Bruham died 2 January 1891 Probate was granted at **Principal Probate Registry** to Ann Elizabeth wife of Josiah Jackson of Bruton and Sarah Ellen Treasure, spinster, of North Bruham, granddaughters, the Executrixes named in the said Will. Personal estate £523, 9, 9

Calendar of Probate and Administration 1892

4 May.

TREASURE, Exton, farmer, The Gables, North Bruham died 26 February 1892 Probate was granted at **Principal Probate Registry** to James Golledge (accountant), William Exton Treasure (farmer) and Sarah Ellen (wife of Walter Edward Peach). Personal estate £516, 11, 5

They have come to life, we know where they lived, their occupations, and we might have an image of Sarah Ellen and Walter's wedding ceremony, with a roast and a hogshead or two of cider, and a honeymoon in Bath.

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⁴ My grandfather's grandfather Jabez Hunter grew up in the Tuckingmill Hotel in West Cornwall, but the family soon went to Bogota, New Granada where Jabez encountered revolutionaries in the mountains – as a small boy he'd jumped up on a donkey and gone exploring. On one occasion he had been snuck out of mass under the crinoline of a maid. Presumably violence had erupted: this would be the 1860s. I'm glad we can still talk of Jabez and his exploits in South America. We have these ridiculously unbelievable accounts from the tall stories Jabez weaved for his grandchildren in 1930s Wales, and these have since been told to me.

⁵ In a shop there is an attic, in the attic a door, and on this attic door there are carved the names of the conquests of my great-grandfather and his brothers. I have not seen this door. I should like to do so before this new century engulfs previous ones with a coat of whitewash and a good springclean – literally. I suspect the men were wealthy enough to produce bastards, and if they did, it would be a poor sort of family tree which did not show them.