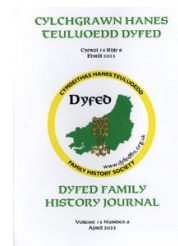


Mary Phillips / Skyrme / Williams – A Bigamist Not Just Once, But Twice!

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This is the story of the wife of Robert Randell Skyrme. I mentioned this briefly in ‘The Skyrmes of Llangwm’ (*Dyfed FHS Journal*. Vol 12. No. 5). Robert was the eldest son of John Skyrme (1805-1858) and Mary née Brown (1808-1847), a respectable hard-working family living in Llangwm, by the River Cleddau. John like many in the area at the time was a shipwright. As well as Robert, John and Mary had three other children, all boys – Thomas James, Henry Walter and John Brown. Other than Henry who ran a grocer’s shop in Haverfordwest, the others started out as shipwrights. John Brown Skyrme also farmed and was a census enumerator in the 1891 census and a part time minister at Llangwm Wesleyan Methodist Church. In fact his son Anthony became a well known Methodist minister and for a time was a missionary in Jamaica.

Robert’s middle name was the maiden name of his grandmother Elizabeth who was widowed when only 29 and then became an innkeeper in Llangwm until she died in 1852 aged 75. He followed in his father’s footsteps as a shipwright, this first being evident from the 1841 census which shows him along with his younger brother Thomas as a “shipbuilder’s apprentices” lodging with three other young men at the house of Thomas Phillips and family at 6 Butts, in Bristol. Thomas Phillips was a mariner born in Oak Hill, on the Creswell River, just 10 miles east as the crow flies from Llangwm. No doubt the Skyrmes moved there from Llangwm through some shared connections. Indeed, Robert married a Mary Phillips.

Mary was supposedly a widow at the time of her marriage to Robert in Haverfordwest in September 1870, having married Daniel PHILLIPS, a tailor in Pembroke in 1858. As I delved into her background I found that she was born Mary RANDELL in 1840 in nearby Burton. It is possible she shared great grandparents with Robert, and was therefore a distant cousin, although a preliminary search of baptism records has not been able to confirm this. Her father Michael was at various times a shopkeeper, farmer and a shipwright while her grandfather Michael was in the Royal Navy.

Husband Robert Randell Skyrme died in 1875 in Cardiff and some 19 months later Mary married Thomas Williams. It was this start of an article in the *Western Mail* of 30th December 1893 that caught my attention.



It turns out that “two” was an understatement!

In this case Mary (now Mary WILLIAMS) brought a case for maintenance against her husband Thomas WILLIAMS, a railway engine driver, who had left her and now lived in Cowbridge. The defence alleged that her first husband was still alive and that therefore her marriage to Thomas was bigamous. In her defence it was claimed that her first husband had deserted her and that nine years later she had heard that he was dead.

In court Mary is described as "a woman of substantial proportions". She was called to give evidence but the magistrate accused her of drinking: "This woman comes here in a disgraceful condition, is unfit to give evidence, and, on account of her misconduct, she is unable to present her case to the court". Her excuse was that she was suffering from flu and bronchitis. But the magistrate adjourned the case and ordered her to pay costs.

The headline above is the newspaper report of the follow up hearing a week later which says: "Mary Williams seems to have been a much married woman, and neither of her two ventures appears to have turned out successful". This time she asserted that Thomas had deserted her 7 years previously. On cross examination she acknowledged that in the past she had been convicted "for keeping a house which could scarcely be called respectable." Her first husband Daniel, whom she had married in Burton when only 17, was brought before the court. She claimed that she did not recognise him. But he was clearly alive, and as a result of the bigamous marriages her case for maintenance against Thomas was dismissed and costs awarded to his lawyer.

Did she genuinely believe that she was a widow when she married Robert? Was Robert aware of Mary's situation, and that therefore his marriage was null and void, or did he die in ignorance?

Because of the difficulty of obtaining a divorce at the time, bigamy was more common than we might expect. There were only about 100 cases a year that came to court in England and Wales, but this is only a small fraction of the total. Although this case revealed Mary's bigamy, I have yet to find evidence that she was later brought to trial for this offence.

I have found other examples in my family research. For example, an ancestor who left his wife and absconded from Northamptonshire to Derbyshire and married again while his first wife was still living.

So don't be surprised if you find a bigamist (either knowingly or unwittingly) a bigamist amongst your ancestors!

David J Skyrme (3924)

Email: davidskyrme@yahoo.co.uk

Website: www.skyrme.info