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A Tale of Two Counties

These are the stories of a Pembroke boy marrying a Norfolk girl in 1937 and of a Norfolk boy marrying a Pembroke girl in 1882. But how did each couple get to connect?

Although long distance courtships are not uncommon today, I am often puzzled by how two people in different parts of the country got to meet each other.

The first couple are my parents. My father James Harrison Skyrme was born in Pembroke in 1911. Rather than following the family tradition of becoming a shipwright in Pembroke Royal Dockyard, he did an apprenticeship at RAF Halton. His 1930s RAF service saw him as an aircraftsman responsible for maintaining aircraft engines. He served initially at RAF Calshot but in 1934 was posted to Iraq and then Aden with a flying boat squadron. How was it that he came to marry my mother, the daughter of Norwich monumental mason William Clarke?

Even though my father left 888 pages of diaries in 10 exercise books, all I found was an entry for his home leave from his next posting in India from March-June 1937. It simply says:

“Before leaving England in 1934 Edna and I had become engaged so after three years abroad I decided to ask for leave so I could go home and marry”.



How they got to connect with each other remains a mystery. My parents started married life outside of Norfolk, and my father was posted to Canada during WW2. However, after discharge from the RAF he took the opportunity of a Ministry of Education emergency scheme to train teachers because of the shortage after the war. He was in the first cohort at the new Wymondham College in March 1947, formerly the site of a US military hospital, then a transit camp.

In my research I have found over 110 direct ancestors of my mother going back a further 8 generations. The families include:

- CLARKE – farmer of Cranworth and malsters of Shipdham
- WARTH – labourers and poultrymen from Walpole St Peter and Chatteris in Cambridgeshire
- CANNELL – millers of Norwich and Sheringham
- BROOKS – sweeps and worsted weavers of Norwich
- RAMSEY – plasterers of Norwich
- YARDY – labourers from Walpole St Peter and the Fens
- COPPIN – rectors in Norwich and East Carleton.

You get interesting insights into some of these people from the local press. For example, a lengthy report in the *Norfolk News* of 15 March 1879 headed ‘Important to River Fisherman’ describes how the sweep David Brooks (my great great grandfather) and his son David were charged with fishing

with an illegal net in the River Wensum. They had fallen foul of byelaws 11 and 12 in the Norfolk and Suffolk Fisheries Act 1877. The report notes that “since this was the first case brought before them [the Bench of justices] then they were only disposed to impose the lenient fine of 10s and 10s costs. The net would also be forfeited.” Of the younger David a note by my mother says “he often got drunk but his horse knew the way home”!

Turning to the second couple mentioned at the start, the explanation of their meeting is much more straightforward, even though 55 years earlier. My father’s middle name of Harrison was his mother’s maiden name. The boy in question was his grandfather Shadrach Harrison born in the Norfolk village of Barford in 1885. His ancestors include thatchers of the Harrison and Harley families of Western Longville and Barnham Broom.

Like many of his era, Shadrach started out in life as an agricultural labourer. He was an only son and after his mother died he obviously decided that there was more to life than labouring in Barford. So he joined the Metropolitan Police in London in 1878. It is the 1881 census that reveals the reason of how he met his future wife Ellen Thomas, born in Pembroke in 1854. He is one of 20 policeman at 2 Police Station, Pembroke Dock. But why was he there and not pounding the beat in London? Under an Act of Parliament in 1860, the Metropolitan Police had the responsibility for policing the Royal Dockyards, wherever in the country they might be.

C A P. CXXXV.
An Act for the Employment of the Metropolitan
Police Force in Her Majesty’s Yards and Military
Stations. [28th August 1860.]

It was while working at the dockyard that he met Ellen, whom he married in 1882 in Monkton, just outside Pembroke. The couple shortly moved to Bromley and then Dulwich. But the Pembroke connection was made and their eldest child – my grandmother – although born in Bromley, lived with her Thomas grandparents in Monkton as a young girl. When she was 25 she married shipwright James Skyrme, my grandfather.

While the explanation for the getting together of this second couple is clear, how my father met my mother remains a mystery. But perhaps we can conjecture. Although Shadrach died at the young age of 43 in 1898, it is possible that my father’s parents kept in touch with Shadrach’s Barford cousins. Could there have been an opportunity for my father to meet my mother while visiting distant relatives in Norfolk? If so, we still have to work out how, since most of them lived in Barford while my mother lived in Norwich. Don’t you sometimes wish you had asked certain questions of your elderly relatives before they died?

The result of these two stories is that on both my mother’s and father’s side of the family there are Norfolk ancestors and either Pembroke ancestors or connections. Furthermore my paternal and maternal ancestors were often in villages to the west of Norwich a few miles from each other at the same time. Perhaps the two stories are linked after all.

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