

JOURNEY THROUGH MY FAMILY

I have always wondered about my ancestors but my parents rarely spoke about them. I knew my paternal grandparents, but my maternal grandmother had died of appendicitis in 1926, and my maternal grandfather had died in India in 1944 while with the Education Corps in India. There were, however, two family stories: the Tollers were descended from a baron who came over with William the Conqueror and was lord of the manor of Barnstable, and through my maternal grandfather I was descended from George Whitefield “the preacher”, a significant figure in Welsh non-conformism. I knew this was probably wrong as a biography I had read stated that he only had one child, a boy who died aged about eight years old.



I had done some research with a dvd from *Who Do You Think You Are*, but it was out of date and the support program had lapsed. I was trying to get to grips with a trial membership of Ancestry when I saw Rotherham u3a was starting a family history group, so I joined.

The library service, which hosted our meetings, had a basic subscription to Find My Past. I soon became fascinated and added a subscription to Find My Past to one for Ancestry. The first shock was that both my grandfathers had sisters I had never heard of. I knew my paternal grandfather had a sister who died of “consumption” in her teens, but my maternal grandfather had an older sister who also died young. My paternal great grandfather had been married three times and had a daughter by his first marriage, as well as two boys and two girls by his second marriage.

I could only trace the Tollers back to William Toller who was born in 1655. On my mother’s side I found that the story I was told about my mother’s maternal grandfather moving to the South Wales valleys to find work, and then sending for his younger brothers to join him was correct.

The big surprise was my maternal grandmother’s ancestry. I knew she came from Beer in Devon and that her father and grandfather were masons and had built many properties in Beer. Her mother, Leah Hatherley, had some interesting ancestors. There was a ship’s master, a parish clerk, and as I went further back there were a number of landed families to the north of Plymouth and over the Tamar in Cornwall. There was a mistress of the robes to Queen Elizabeth I and a governor of Jersey. Eventually I came to the Courtneys, including the first earl of Devon. They were descended from Margaret deBohun, daughter of Elizabeth Plantagenet, the daughter of Edward I. Once there you can go back to the first Normans who came out of modern-day Germany in the ninth century.

I now know more about my make-up. I am a quarter Welsh and three quarters West Country, which makes me mainly Celt with a dash of Norman. Family History has told me a lot about myself. If I went to West Buckland, near Wellington in Somerset, I would be related to a lot of people in the graveyard of the local church. As well as kings and governors my ancestors have included miners and farm labourers, school teachers and lay preachers, wool workers and factory managers. *All this thanks to the Family History group.*

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