

MEMBERS MEETING –3rd April 2007

“History in a tin - what’s it worth?” Talk by Phil Coward illustrated with a power-point presentation and display of photos, post cards and ephemera.

Phil obtained his history degree at Nottingham University in his early forties and is now a history tutor with the WEA. Five years ago he attended a public history workshop at Ruskin College where there was discussion about the different ways academics and the general public treated history.

Phil found the tin mentioned in the title in a junk shop 20 years ago. It contained a variety of items including personal letters and a WW11 ration book but over the 20 years Phil never looked at them. He was not a “nosey parker”. Most people have a box of some sort where they store love letters, official communications, photos etc. Sometimes it is a chocolate box or a tin.

When he was doing his masters degree in history Phil used the contents of the tin (which cover a three year period in World War 11 and a little beyond) in his research. He then drew up the Barnes family tree.

It is not known who owned the tin. It was found in Phil’s father-in-law’s “antique/junk shop” after a house clearance. The tin may have been disposed of by the couple’s children or the local council. As the couple, Charles James Samuel Barnes, known as Sam and his wife Mary Agnes, known as Mollie, had no children it is likely that it was the council.

It is known that Mollie went into a mental institution in Taunton where the tin was found and the couple both died there.

The tin itself was easily dated and pre dates the items that were in it. It is marked on the bottom “Huntley & Palmer, London, Christmas series”. A search on the Internet revealed that 25,000 of these tins (which featured a morocco/crocodile skin design) were produced in 1897. In 1899 they produced 60,000 of another design called the “Viennese”. These tins were sold to grocers to market their biscuits. It is possible that Mollie and Sam got the tin from Sam’s great grandfather Samuel Barnes who died in 1898. Maybe the biscuits were served at the funeral wake.

What was in the tin? There were 45 letters. Some were between Mollie and Sam and others from their mothers and fathers. There were letters from Mollie to her mother and replies from Mollie's mother. This is unusual as generally only one side of a correspondence survives. There are 36 photos, 8 post cards and various pieces of ephemera including an Insurance policy and a baptismal certificate.

Looking at the photos and their place in family history experts are divided as to whether these pictures are evidence or not. Today when we look at old photos we often do not know why they were taken and most photos have no names so we are only guessing as to who they are and where and why they were taken. One of the photos shows a typical 19c family group with several ladies wearing "Queen Victoria" type lace hats. There are three separate photos of different women. They are not annotated so it is not known whether they are of Mollie or Winifred (also known as Jo), the nurse who trained in Scotland and India and who enclosed a picture of herself in one of the letters. Family historians should always annotate their photos where possible.

One of the letters in the tin addressed to "Miss Mollie" and dated 23 April 1946 tells her that "Win" was killed in a motor crash in Madras. There are pictures of soldiers. One is of Charles, Sam's father taken in 1941 at Weobley in Herefordshire. Phil has visited Weobley. It is a picturesque "black and white" Herefordshire village. He was able to go up the hill to the searchlight base mentioned in the correspondence. Charles' brother Walter was also a soldier but extracts from one of the letters shows that he went AWOL/deserted, was arrested and put in prison.

One of the letters refers to Sam "not being well". This may be connected to a further letter that a Mrs Barnes wrote to the John Bull magazine. In it she quotes an article by the right hon Ernest Bevan. As the letter was dated 23 January 1943 Phil was able to obtain a copy of the article which referred to doctors passing people who were not fit for service. Was this what happened to Sam Barnes?

It appears from the pictures that Sam and Mollie were agricultural labourers or involved in farming. There are pictures of geese and their letters talk of hunger and that the dog was "sent to catch a rabbit". One of the pictures is of a dog. Could this be "Pish" mentioned in letters as Walter's dog?

There are four photos of Dunster in Somerset where there was an army cadet camp for the Pioneer Corps. There is also a postcard of Trentham Gardens. These may both be places where the soldiers were stationed.

Looking at the ephemera these are also linking documents. There is a life policy dated 24 December 1934 with a 6d per week payment and a sum assured of £12.18.0d for Charles Barnes, labourer at age 60. A ration book in the name of Mary Agnes Barnes (Mollie) with the address of a guest-house and a pass to enter the barracks. A letter dated 1943 from a doctor states "Private Barnes is now fit to travel". The death certificate for Charles James Samuel Barnes (Sam) states he was living at Myrtle Villa. Phil visited the area and found and photographed the building. It is now called "Myrtle Cottage".

Research about Mollie's life has revealed that she was born at the workhouse in White Hill, Weobley. No father's name was given on her birth certificate and unfortunately there are no birth records for the workhouse.

Letters of the period appear very abrupt when read now. A letter dated 22 April 1946 from Mollie's mother to Mollie states almost in passing as a closing sentence, "our Jo has been killed in a motor crash". One letter addressed to Sam as "Dear Sambo" tells him that they have been to see "The Road to Morocco" with Bing Crosby, Bob Hope and Dorothy Lamour. From the date of the letter Phil was able to find which cinema this was shown at and obtain a poster of the film.

It would appear from the documents that Mollie Barnes worked in the ordnance factory (under the essential work act) in Hereford. Unfortunately there are no records of this employment but there is evidence of the factory as there is still a bunker there and because of its previous use the site cannot now be built on.

The census shows that Sam's great grandfather Samuel who died in 1898 was a farmer and publican at Morehampton. There is a photo of a pony and trap at Morehampton station. The hotel is now a house. In a directory of 1890 it stated that the hotel had "well aired beds".

On the 1891 census of Ecclesgreen Samuel Barnes (Sam's great grandfather) is shown living with his grandson Charles. Charles' father, also a Samuel, was living next door with his second wife Louisa. There is a picture in the tin of the barn at Ecclesgreen. On a visit to the farm Phil found the same barn but it is now known as Green Farm.

The will of Samuel Barnes, who died in 1898, shows that he left £305. However, he left nothing to his eldest son. Whether this is because they had had a disagreement or he had already received his inheritance before 1898 is not known. Phil found a record of the gravestone of Samuel Barnes who died in 1898 on the Internet. The gravestone (which Phil photographed) at Norton Cannon Church shows that Samuel was aged 80 and that Elizabeth, his wife, was also buried there in 1903.

The baptism certificate in the tin shows that the Ridges were sponsors (Godparents) at Sam's christening. The Ridges were closely related to the Barnes family. James Ridge married Mary Ellen, Samuel senior's daughter and their daughter Flora Annie Mary Ridge married her first cousin Charles Martin Barnes, Sam's father. One of the pictures in the tin is of a young girl. On the reverse there is an illegible written entry. Phil put it under the scanner and found that it said "Rosie Ridge died age 15". She was the daughter of Mary Ellen and James Ridge.

One of the letters in the tin dated July 1944 shows that Mollie had a course of ten "electric treatments" at a cost of £5.15.6d and that these were paid for by the Ministry of Defence. Why this was; is not known, it may be connected to her employment in the ordnance factory.

By coincidence Phil also acquired from the same junk shop the Barnes family bible. This also gave details of the Barnes family deaths.

So what is the tin's value? In 2001 a Huntley & Palmer biscuit tin like it at Buxton was valued at £300 - £500! Somewhere in most homes there is a box/tin/container like it that houses family papers and photos. Recently the question was raised as to what was the most valuable exhibit in the British Museum. The answer surprisingly was the Vindolanda tablets found at Hadrian's Wall. These were early versions of postcards sent by Romans about their everyday life. The general consensus is that to anyone researching their family history the contents of such a box are priceless.

A vote of thanks was given by Mr.J. Bradley.