

MEMBERS MEETING 7 OCTOBER 2008

“Who Was Mrs Williamson? An 18th and 19th Century Genealogical Detective Story”

Talk by John Titford illustrated with slides

John began by explaining why he became interested in the “Mrs Williamson” of his talk. Some six or seven years ago he purchased a hand written book. It contained a list of servants employed in the Derby area. He showed an example of one of the entries for 1833. This gave details of a Hannah David, a kitchen maid who worked in the Shirland/ Higham area. Over a period of seven years John and his wife transcribed the book which contained thousands of names of servants for the period 1833-1840. On completion of this task John was interested to know who had written the book as the writer had not put his/her name on it. The only clue as to the author was a slip of paper in the book addressed to “Dear Mrs Williamson”. John was intrigued to find who Mrs Williamson was, where she came from and he took up the challenge to build up a picture of her.

He began his search in the directories for Derby and sure enough in Pigot’s directory he found a Jane Williamson of 22 King Street, Derby who ran a register of servants. On a map of Derby he located 22 King Street which was a premises on the corner of St. Helen’s Street. A 1967 photo taken from St. Alkmund’s church (now demolished) shows where King Street would have been situated near to St. Helen’s Street.

As John had found where Jane lived he then decided to consult the census. The register covered the period 1833-1840 so the first available census was that of 1841. The 1841 census is not the most useful as it does not give exact ages (adults age given to the nearest 5 years) and does not give an accurate place of birth. However, in view of the period being investigated it was the only one to use. Jane Williamson was duly found at 22, King Street, age 60, occupation given as Registered Office for Servants and place of birth “N” for not born in the county. Also present at the same address were Elizabeth Lee (20) and Ann and Elizabeth Colbean, female servants.

John is of the opinion that when looking at the census you should take a holistic view, and look at the surrounding entries. At no 21 King Street there was a Joseph Hall, age 50, a marble mason and at no 23 a butcher. He feels you should consider what kind of household you find. In “Mrs. Williamson’s” case it was entirely female and the girls there could have been relatives.

The next step was to look at 22 King Street on the 1851 census. This revealed that Jane was no longer there so John then had to consider what might have happened from 1841-1851.

Again he consulted the Derby directories. Bagshaw's directory shows that Jane was at no. 22 from 1846 but gone by 1850. However the directories for 1851 then show a Sarah Massey with the same occupation at no 28. King Street. Joseph Hall (as seen in the 1841 census) was still at no. 21. This was a puzzle but John discovered that under an Act of Parliament of 1847 councils were allowed to renumber houses and that no. 28 was actually the same premises as Jane's no. 22.

So this narrowed the period of Jane's disappearance to 1846-1850. Had she died, moved away, or re-married? The most likely scenario was that she had died. John consulted the free BMD website, which he describes as "brilliant". He looked in the period 1846-1850 for the death of a Jane Williamson. He found various ones in Oldham, Newcastle and Rochdale but discounted them because they were not in the Derby area. He found one likely death in 1846 in the June quarter but before obtaining a death certificate decided to look at the obituaries in the Derby Mercury which has an index. Sure enough he found an entry " 1st April 1846, Monday, Mrs. Williamson, deservedly respected". Obviously when Jane died someone cared enough to put this obituary in the paper. John then consulted "Chesney's Dictionary of Dates". This gives information about days of the week and from this John was able to work out that she had died on 30 March 1846. He then felt confident that he had found the right death and obtained a copy of the death certificate from the local registrar.

From the death certificate John found out more information. It gave Jane's age as 76, her marital status as "spinster", cause of death "cancer of the vagina", and informant of death as W. Williamson of 8 Friarsgate, Derby. These facts threw up more questions. If she was 60 in the 1841 census then the age on the death certificate is older and why was she described as a "spinster" but called Mrs. Williamson?

John then decided to consult the IGI for 1770 (ie subtract 76 from 1846). He then decided not to pursue this line of research as he found there were too many Jane Williamsons to consider.

He then considered the W. Williamson of 8 Friarsgate who was "in attendance" at the death. Was this a man or a woman? Again John consulted the Derby directories for 1827, 1828, 1835, 1843, 1846 and 1847. He discovered that William Williamson had been a Haberdasher there for 30 years.

To find out more about William Williamson he looked at the 1851 census. Sure enough there was William aged 63 (some 18 years older than Jane) who had been born at Wirksworth. He was married with a wife Suzannah age 67 and two children John and Suzannah and a servant Sarah.

To discover more about the Williamsons John decided to consult the 1851 religious census (Methodists) held by the local Record Office. Here he found an entry for W. Williamson, Haberdasher and clerk, born Wirksworth. With this information he was able to examine the IGI to look for William Williamson's baptism. He discovered his birth in 1787 and baptism in 1788 with father John and mother Ann. He then looked for their marriage before the baptism. He found that John had married Ann Bealy in 1781. As Jane had been born in 1770, 11 years before, it was unlikely that she was his sister.

When John had some spare time he consulted the Universal British Directory for 1790 where he found John Williamson, wheelwright at Wirksworth. He needed to establish whether Jane Williamson could have been his sister or half sister.

John advised that when you reach a "brick-wall" in family history research you have to consider whether one of your "facts" is wrong and then take away that fact and hypothesise.

In this case John needed to build a Wirksworth pedigree for the Williamsons. He consulted www.wirksworth.org.uk and the work of Thomas Norris Ince 1824-1860 at the Society of Genealogists. Ince had constructed 1,000 pedigrees from documents and oral evidence. These have been transcribed and indexed by Sonia and Alec Smith and are free and available. Here John found a pedigree for the Williamsons. This showed that John William father of the Haberdasher (William Williamson) had been married twice. By the first marriage he had two sons Samuel a yeoman and George a tanner. By the second marriage he had two more sons, John and William. He then concluded that Jane Williamson was related to this family by marriage not by birth. She was not a spinster as stated on the death certificate but a widow.

The IGI shows that George Williamson married Jane Stokell in October 1794 at Duffield (between Derby and Wirksworth). After 1750 the original parish registers are on printed forms (as required by the Hardwicke Marriage Act). At this time people could only be married in an Anglican Church by banns or by licence. The only exceptions were Jews or Quakers. Records show that a George Williamson, butcher and bachelor married Jane Stokell, spinster. The licence was for 22 October 1795 and the witnesses were Fanny Plant and John Drewry. (The Drewry/Drury link was later to prove crucial)

In marriage by licence two important documents are required, an allegation and a bond. These are held by the Dioceses Office in Litchfield or are on microfilm in Salt Lake City.

The allegation at Duffield shows George Williamson of Duffield, Currier, of Derby, over 21 and Jane Stokell, over 20 of Duffield. The bond shows George Williamson and Jane Stokell (spinster). These documents both give the same dates as the marriage and were completed by the local priest on the day the marriage took place, but were these Jane's relations?

At this point in his research John paused for serendipity to play its part. He consulted the card index at the Society of Genealogists for the rarer of the two names Stokell and found a marriage licence for the following. 23 November 1769, Holborn (London), J Stokell, bachelor 38 to marry Hannah Drury, spinster 30, by marriage licence.

Then on the IGI he found a birth for Jane daughter of John Stokell, 14 May 1769, St. Andrew, Holborn (London). Could this be the Jane who grew up to live in Derby with a servant's agency? The girl's mother's name was Drury. The Drurys were a family from Derby.

The great card index revealed a baptism of Jane on 17 May 1769, daughter of John and Hannah, therefore she was illegitimate! The IGI also shows another birth of Mary 1772 to John and Hannah and in addition an Ann Stockeild born at Holborn on 25 May 1761, 8 years before the marriage allegation! The original parish records show that Jane was born in 1769 at Purple Lane in London. This goes to show that the issue of a marriage licence is no guarantee that a marriage actually took place.

Records at Salt Lake City show another allegation that John Stokell was to marry one Elizabeth Sprat some 6 years before.

In 1769 there were so many marriages at Holborn that the banns and licences are in two registers. However, the marriage is not in either. John Stokell married neither Elizabeth Sprat nor Hannah Drury! So Hannah had at least two illegitimate daughters Ann and Jane Stokell before the allegation and the marriage never took place.

On marriage certificates if the father is unknown people often give their grandfather's name. Additionally if there is no father's name on a birth certificate someone may tell them what their real father's name is and they then quote that even though they are illegitimate.

To summarise the hypothesis: Jane was born in London as the illegitimate daughter of Stokell and Drury. The Drurys were a Lincoln family. Sam Drury came to Derby and founded the Derby Mercury newspaper. Samuel Drury died on 1st August 1769. His will proved 19th August 1769 shows that he left £100 to his niece Hannah Stokell. 14th May 1769 is a significant date because in London Jane Stokell was christened, it is also the year that the marriage allegation was made between John Stokell and Hannah Drury. In other words John was a “toe-rag” only after Hannah’s money!

John Stokell died in the workhouse and Hannah was left to bring up Ann and Jane so they all went to Belper to live. Jane married George Williamson, a coal merchant but he died age 54 in 1828. As a widow she set up the register of servants and when she died in 1846 Sarah Massey took over the agency.

It is interesting to note that in 2004 there was still an employment agency in business (Massey’s Agency) named after Sarah Massey. The current owners were gob-smacked to hear from John of it being run by Jane in the 1840s.

John admits that he was sexist in not considering at the outset that Jane may have left a will. He did consult the calendars and duly found a will left by Jane a “widow”. She left everything to her brother-in-law, William Williamson and asked that she be “decently interred” at Belper vaults near her “late dear husband”.

The register of persons buried at Field Row Belper show entries for Jane’s mother Hannah Stokell, who died in 1835, Jane’s sister Ann born 1761 died 1833 and Jane’s husband 1774-1848. There is also a gravestone at the chapel to Hannah Stokell “late of London”, though sadly no trace of where Jane Williamson is buried.

In conclusion John said this was untypical research as it concerned the mother’s family. The mother Hannah Stokell was crucial to solving the case as she came to Derby via London and Lincolnshire. People often say they specialise in Derbyshire research but this case proves you have to look beyond one area and the answer is often as far away as London. John was determined not to be beaten and in the end solved the mystery of “Mrs Williamson”.

A vote of thanks was given by Ron Presswood.

