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Investigating a Family Secret

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Date

Thursday 14 September 2017



Hunslet Feast, 1850. [Leodis Photograph Archive](#).

A guest blog from Carolyn Huston

I try to be disciplined in my family tree research, but have a butterfly mind and find it hard to resist wandering off the main trunk of my tree and onto side branches. Sarah Clarkson (1834-1908) is a good example of why I get tempted to wander.

Sarah was born on 4 February 1834 in Hunslet and was baptised at St Peter's Parish Church in Leeds on 20 April 1834. Her parents were John Clarkson (1804-1844), an iron forge man, and Hannah Barraclough (1799-1861). They were my great-great-great grandparents and Sarah's brother, John Clarkson (1834-1901) is my direct ancestor. The Clarkson men were all iron forgers and seemed to move between Hunslet where the forges produced iron to be used in the railway industry and Low Moor, North Brierly near Bradford, where there was another large ironworks.

The 1841 census shows Sarah aged 7, living in Bradford in the Forgemans Arms (or Clarks Houses) with her parents and siblings, including her older brother, John.

Her father died in 1844 from TB as had her youngest brother, Christopher in 1842 so life must have been hard.

The 1851 census tells us that she was living at Hill Top, Low Moor, North Brierly with her mother and siblings. She was working as a steam loom weaver (worsted) and my direct ancestor, John, was following the family tradition and had become a forge man.

Sarah's first child, Mary Ann Clarkson (1856-1884), was born illegitimately, when Sarah was 22, in Low Moor. Mary Ann (4) is shown in April 1861 census as living with her grandmother, Hannah, in School St., North Brierly. I could find no further likely census entries for Mary Ann Clarkson and no likely death.

Sarah, on the other hand, is shown in the 1861 census visiting her brother, John, my ancestor, in Hunslet. Her occupation is given as a power loom maker [of] stuff. In retrospect, she must have been pregnant at the time of this visit and in a pickle. Perhaps that is why she had gone to Leeds.

After this census I could not find Sarah so I assumed she had got married, searched the civil marriage records and found not one, but two, marriages. In both images of the parish records she is listed as a spinster! I wondered if they were two different ladies, but with further research this turned out not to be the case.

Firstly, she married Henry Churchyard in Bradford St Peter's (Bradford Cathedral) by licence on 5 June 1861. The parish record of the marriage shows her father as John Clarkson, a forge man, and his father as Henry Cupar Churchyard, a wool stapler. The need for a marriage licence was no doubt due to the fact that Sarah was pregnant. The marriage was announced in the Leeds Times (8 June 1861). Their daughter, Hannah Frances Churchyard was born on 23 February 1862 and baptised at St Mark's Church, Low Moor on 4 May 1862.

So far, so good. However, after these dates I could find no trace of the parents in subsequent censuses, or deaths, so I looked at passenger lists to find a plethora of Henry Churchyards travelling abroad, mainly to Australia, but no Sarah or Hannah Frances. Back to the proverbial drawing board.....

I searched for Hannah Frances Churchyard and, to my surprise, found her at Walker Clough Hall, a boarding school in Southowram in 1871. In the 1881 and following censuses she is shown living with her uncle, John Churchyard, and his wife Julia. They were childless. John Churchyard was a coal mine owner and was clearly wealthy. Hannah lived with them up to their deaths and, although she briefly worked as a pupil teacher, never worked for her living and is shown in the 1911 census living with her aunt Julia in a 6 bedroomed house in Southport, both living on private means. She never married and her probate record shows her estate to be valued at over £5,000.

I could not resist! I researched John Churchyard. Where did all his money come from?

John Churchyard (1842-1903) was Henry's younger brother. They were the two surviving children of Henry Cupar Churchyard (1798-1844) and Ann Holt (1808-1859). Henry Cupar was born in Suffolk, became a woolstapler, and moved to Halifax where he married Ann on 7 March 1838. Henry, their son, arrived shortly afterwards and was baptised in October 1839. Henry Cupar Churchyard was easy to trace because of his unusual name.

The Leeds Times carried his death notice on 13 January 1844: 'On Sunday, after a tedious illness, Mr Henry Churchyard, woolstapler, Halifax'. Henry Cupar had been in a firm of woolstaplers, Henry Churchyard and Company. He and his trading partner, John Holmes, were declared bankrupt in 1841. These records are to be found in the London Gazette and a notice advertising a meeting for proof of debts and examination in the White Swan Inn, Halifax, was inserted into the Leeds Mercury on 3 July 1841. So... no money from John and Henry's father.

With two small children and no income of her own, Ann Churchyard (nee Holt) went to live with her unmarried brother, John Holt, licenced victualler, at the Woolpack Inn in Halifax. She kept house for him and the various people boarding at the inn but died in 1859 leaving her two sons in the care of her brother. There are various entries in the local papers about John Holt, usually to do with serving alcohol out of hours, his Inn being used for public auctions, and running the annual victuallers dinner. Ann Churchyard (nee Holt) died in 1859 when Henry was 21. I suspect that all of this had a profound influence on Henry as he became a heavy drinker. Living in a pub and death of his parents when young must have been difficult to cope with.

His brother John Churchyard, however, handled things in a different way. He is shown as a bookkeeper in the 1871 census, still living with his uncle until his Uncle John Holt died at Siddall Hall. When John Holt died on 4 February 1872 his estate was valued at about £2,000 and he is described in the register of probate as a colliery owner and worker. It became apparent on further research that he and his brothers were shared owners of a colliery which had initially been bought and owned by their father. I found documents relating to John Churchyard contesting his uncle, John Holt's will, claiming a bigger share of the property. This then was the source of the family money and John continued to be active in the coal mining business. One mystery resolved!

Back to Henry Churchyard.

Local newspapers in January 1861 showed his first arrest and imprisonment for a month when he was caught red handed stealing meat. The report mentions his drinking and how he came from a well-known family. By June 1861 he was married to his pregnant girlfriend, Sarah Clarkson, and was a woolsorter, living in Low Brierly, Low Moor.

Finally, I had a clue where to look. Searching the prison records in Australia I found several admissions to prison for increasing lengths of sentences. He had many offences for theft and drunkenness. Henry had several aliases, all listed in the records, and they also showed that he had come to Australia on the 'King of Algeria'. Sure enough, there he was on the passenger list in November 1862, arriving in Melbourne, Victoria, Australia. The last record from the prison service in Sandhurst Gaol shows him being arrested and transported to prison by train despite having a fever and confusion. He died shortly after arrival there on 9 September 1880. The cause of death was found to be Delirium Tremens and pneumonia. An inquest was held and the police reported knowing Henry well for his drinking. A sad end, but a common end for an alcoholic.

That left Sarah back in England with two daughters. We shall never know what happened but it is tempting to surmise that John Churchyard paid for his brother to go to Australia and took over the care of his niece Hannah Frances. Perhaps Hannah had no further contact with her mother.

It is no wonder that Sarah Clarkson was well rid of her alcoholic husband. The surprise is that she remarried long *before* his death.

She married Thomas Thompson (1840 -1875), a man some 6 years younger than herself, in 1865 at St Mary's Church in Hunslet. Thomas must have been a generous man... he took on the care of Sarah's first daughter, Mary Ann Clarkson, and she is shown in the 1871 census using his surname and calling herself Mary Ann Thompson. She is listed as Thomas' daughter. He was a forge man and they lived at 27 Leathy Road, just one door away from Sarah's brother, and my ancestor, John Clarkson who lived with his family at 25 Leathy Road. John Clarkson was married to Mary Thompson (1835-1900), no doubt a relative of Thomas Thomson! Sarah and Thomas went on to have two sons, Alfred and Herbert Thompson in 1867 and 1870.

The implication of all this information is that Sarah Clarkson was foolish, but was supported by her own Clarkson family and also by the Churchyards. It is not clear from the records whether Hannah Churchyard ever knew the whole truth but she was treated like a daughter by her wealthy uncle and aunt and grew up safe

and secure and died wealthy. Sarah's first daughter was also kept safe within the family, and was treated as a daughter by her stepfather. Whether Thomas Thompson ever knew about Sarah's first marriage and that she was marrying him bigamously is a matter for conjecture. Certainly, my ancestor John Clarkson must have known, but this story was not passed down in the family. Perhaps he simply took a pragmatic approach and, did not attend Sarah's bigamous marriage so that he did not have to feel guilty about owning up to the 'just impediment' to the marriage! Who knows, but divorce being impossible at the time, it seems to me to have been a good solution all round!

All this research was done online using:

1. [Ancestry](#) (worldwide membership)
2. [Find My Past](#) (worldwide membership)
3. [Trove](#)
4. [Family Search](#)
5. Google - for websites containing the names of people of interest. Interestingly enough the family trees that I found showed Henry Churchyard as emigrating and dying in Australia with no mention of his criminal past, and no mention either of Sarah Clarkson's second, bigamous marriage.

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