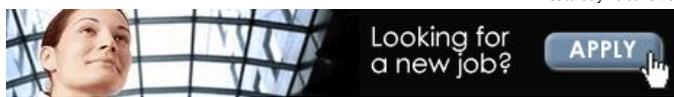




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Four Generations in Steel

Bill Barr



Coincidences add a lot to the interest and enjoyment of life, especially if they are pleasant ones. In my case there are three coincidences relating to my family history which intrigue me greatly, which may be of interest to others in the Black Country. All three strands go back to my great grandfather William Brotherton, born 17 May 1829 in Wednesbury. William left home some time between the ages of 12 and 22 and ended up at Chapelhall, near Airdrie in Scotland.

In 1841, William was living with his parents, John and Sarah Brotherton, in Walsall St, Wednesbury. William's elder brother Joseph and his father John were both file cutters.

Cutting a file refers to the process of indenting the surface of a file with a sharp edged flat chisel to produce a ridge across the width of the file, or with a triangular punch to produce a rasp. The same census records also show that other families by the name of Brotherton lived in Wednesbury, and the men folk were also file cutters. He found employment as a file cutter in Mounsey File Works in Chapelhall. Central Scotland, like Staffordshire, was then the scene of intense industrial activity associated with the growth of the iron and steel industries. Mark Mounsey, his employer, was himself an English immigrant, and hailed from Sheffield. William lost no time in marrying the boss's daughter, Agnes, by whom he had nine children, including Mark Brotherton, who became my grandfather.

So what about the coincidences? Firstly, I spent my formative years in the Black Country, not far from Wednesbury, and later on I lived in Lichfield, which is also not far away, without knowing anything this blood connection with the area. This is perhaps not strictly accurate as there was a family story, which seemed far fetched at the time, that we were descended from a mayor of Wolverhampton. The story seemed to come from a family acquaintance who had visited the Black Country and was aware that there had been a mayor of Wolverhampton of that name. As the name is relatively rare in Scotland he had put two and two together to make five.

My own investigations show that there was indeed a John Brotherton had served as mayor of Wolverhampton in 1883/4. He was, born on 20 September, 1829, a few months after my great grandfather, the son of Richard and Mary Brotherton. Richard was also a file cutter, and also lived in Walsall St. Further investigation showed him to be the brother of my great grandfather, John. Their parents were James and Mary Brotherton who married in Birmingham in 1782, which makes my grandfather and the mayor second cousins once removed. Whether there is a resemblance in appearance between my grandfather and John Brotherton, the mayor, pictured above, right, I will leave others to judge. In these photographs, John was about 54, and I estimate Mark to be about 65.

The second connection is that of occupation. Strictly speaking, it is stretching matters to call my Brotherton ancestor a metallurgist, as I am, but file making was certainly an important metallurgical activity. Furthermore, it is not intuitively obvious how to make a good file. In the early 19th century, the scientific understanding of the processes involved in file making did not exist, but the technology was well developed and had been for centuries.

It is important not to make the file too soft otherwise it will wear away too quickly. On the other hand, make the file too hard and the shells (ie the surface protrusions produced by cutting upon which the filing action depends) will split off. The file is also likely to shatter if dropped. The "secret" is to hammer the serrations into the steel when it is in a soft condition, and then to harden the surface by coating it with a carbon rich compound before heating up the file in a furnace. This leaves the interior of the file in a relatively tough and ductile condition. The hammers used were short and bent. The making of files by hand came to an end in the early 1900s and has long ago given way to machine manufacture. That is presumably why my grandfather did not also become a file cutter, although for a period he travelled widely in Scotland and Northern Ireland, taking orders for files. I would dearly like to see a hand made file, but I fear that they have all been recycled or else rusted away. The third coincidence is that I found employment as a metallurgist not far from where William Brotherton made his home in Scotland, not knowing about the coincidence

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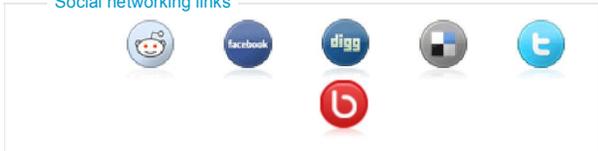


until much later.

I have often wondered if my great grandfather maintained contact with his family in the Black Country. There is a thought provoking clue in the form of one of his hymn books. This book was published in 1871 for the Methodist Church in America. It has an impressed mark, "D Griffiths Town Hall Music Warehouse Wednesbury". What brought it into the possession of my grandfather is a mystery, but it may provide some evidence of a continuing connection with church people in the Black Country. Three of the four generations involved in steel are shown in the attached family tree, and the fourth is of course myself. The timescale from James Brotherton to the present covers the period of the Industrial Revolution in Britain, which is now almost at an end, what with the virtual demise of heavy industry and the growth of the service sector.



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