THE PROCESS of undertaking family history research is both rewarding and enlightening. Conversely such an enterprise is arduous, time-consuming and fraught with errors, confusion and a seemingly infinite search for ancestors whose roots are so deeply lost in time that even the most superhuman efforts of man bear forth little or no fruit.

It requires a high degree of stoicism and a steeld mental capacity to succeed in order to plough on through the maze of Great Uncles, sisters-in-laws, step-fathers and the myriad of distant cousins whether first, third, fifth or beyond. Their rich and intensely personal histories refuse to let you go, drawing you further and further in to a world far removed from the one you experience daily.

More often than not such states of mental anguish are the results of only one or two of your forefathers, family members who refuse to give up the secrets of their past lives.

My great grandfather is one such individual. He allowed a trickle of information to be known. He permitted us to know the names of his two wives and some of his children. We are aware of his occupation and even the details of his own inevitable demise. This individual was William Arthur Seymour, a West Bromwich man with roots seemingly planted much further afield, thousands of miles from the Black Country that was to be his workplace and home.

We commence our journey in the small town of St. John’s on the now Canadian island of Newfoundland. The census details in England for the last quarter of the 19th century are our immediate source of information as our first obstacle to overcome is the realisation that after many years of digging and searching, a birth certificate has to date yet to make its welcome appearance.

**Birth name**

What consensus there is gives William’s birth as being between 1863-1865. Initial investigation would also tell you that he shuffled his birth name and rarely, if ever used it, preferring instead his second forename, Arthur, a name for reasons of clarity, we will use to identify him through the following passages. An exception was the enumerator at the bottom of the 1911 Census where William is provided as his principal name; it would however be very likely that like many of his contemporaries, he was unable to write and the enumerator in 1911 was simply utilising the correct birth name for his official purposes.

Twenty years before this, the available documentary evidence leads us to the census records of 1891 and the first known reference to this elusive character. By now he is married and living with his wife Emily Martha (née Brown). With them at their Smethwick address (at this time in the Parish of Hargate Lane) are their two sons, Joseph and Sidney, my maternal Grandfather and Great Uncle respectively. They were all resident at 25, Mornington Road, less than a mile from the Albion Football ground and at a time when the latter sporting venue would have been buzzing with excitement due to its continuing success and recent FA Cup victory.

By now, Arthur and Emily had been married for 13 years, their first child Joseph having been born on Valentine’s Day, 1888; his brother Sidney was to follow in the second quarter of 1889. Like many of my ancestors, Arthur at this point was a coal miner, whilst his wife was listed as a keeper of a sweet shop. It seems a little odd that Arthur wasn’t part of the business that ran the shop instead of risking his life like all miners in our region at this period, as they dashed to hew the coal from the many surrounding pits that scarred the landscape for miles around.

Perhaps it was merely an enumerator’s mistake and that Emily was simply a shop worker whose work details were erroneously transcribed. Like many of the stories that revolve around my Newfoundland-born Great Grandfather and his family, things were never straight forward and persisted in the weaving of many a tangled web. There is no indication from former documented evidence that such a business was in operation in earlier years. Emily’s father, Joseph, missing from the 1881 Census as having died the same year and evidently only shortly before the record was taken. The same census only shows Emily living with her widowed mother Lucy and her month old sister, also Lucy, at their West Bromwich home in Hargate Lane. It seems that every time one genealogical door opens, another slams firmly shut.

With another decade gone and no trace of other documentation with which to point the way, we find that by 1901 Arthur had uprooted his family a mere 3 miles, crossing the parish boundary into West Bromwich and finding themselves resident at 28, Messenger Lane, an area that in future times was to run almost parallel with the town’s expressway, which at the time of writing is undergoing another 21st century regeneration designed to improve the transport network, albeit at the cost of local heritage.

**Anomaly**

With my gripe at contemporary construction developments put on one side, we encounter another anomaly in the unfolding saga of my forebear. His second eldest son Sidney is listed but his first son, Joseph, is conspicuously by his absence; not particularly significant you may think but it should be borne in mind that Joseph did not marry until 1910. There is anecdotal evidence that Joseph was taken into a Barnardo’s or similar establishment but exactly when and more importantly why is simply not known and curiously this event was to be echoed some years later, the story however calulpably more...
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outmoded set of moral stric-
tures. Children born out of wedlock, unmarried mothers, and other circumstances soci-
ety ‘officially’ shunned were less rare than the records evi-
dently indicate and I have no reason to doubt that Arthur and his second partner may have found themselves in such a situation. Unfortu-
nately, all this is supposition and supposition it must remain until the facts can be validated.

If the date of marriage at West Bromwich Christchurch of Arthur and Sarah is correct and everything points to this being so, then Sarah’s first child, Emily Louisa, was cer-
tainly born in advance of her marriage union, making her appearance in the world on January 17th, 1903. As each new ancestor is included on your ever crowded and bur-
goning tree you can at times be fortunate to follow through with further cousins and relations linked with them and so it became with Emily – or so I thought. The tantalising prospect of believ-
ing you are about to discover those missing pieces of the puzzle, for so long lost in the maze of uncertainty and frus-
tration, suddenly becomes a bubble savagely burst and momentarily your disap-
pointment is so burdensome you consider surrendering the fight there and then. It transpired that not one of Emily’s descendants had any answers to Arthur Seymour’s early life, prior to his first appearance on the 1901 cen-
sus record, it is of course more than possible that he was already living in ‘sin’ with Sarah; perhaps during the col-
collection of details regarding the latter census, Arthur was prompted to provide inaccu-
rate information due to the unacceptable status of the period of being both unmar-
rried and living together. However, men and women 100 years ago and more were not, as the popular miscon-
ception leads us to believe, strict adherents to some now

Newfoundland, where the mystery begins

Antics

Her antipodean antics must have made her pause at times reflecting on the changing scene about her and the town of her birth now seemingly too distant to comprehend as the truth it hove; where she’d travelled had not yet ceased and her long life holding still many events yet to be observed. It seems that as we continue to open the lid on this ever-moving tale of Sey-
mour history, the vagaries and formative years of Arthur become just that little less clear. The impatience seems to have faded and increasingly indis-
tinct, his story receding ever distantly into the mists.

Family and local historians will explain that it is at junc-
tures such as these that the ghost can never be given up and as battered and bruised as you may feel, light must gain the upper hand. With a philosophical nod to the past I have resumed my review of Seymour lore.

In 1937 she had returned to England to undertake house-
hold duties at Beach Street in Birmingham’s Ladywood dis-
trict. By early 1940, Selina had evidently left her Aus-
tralian wanderings behind her, marrying Murdo McLean in Birmingham, who had been born in Portree on the Scottish island of Skye in 1900. Selina’s husband had added yet another new and geographical strand to the ever-twisting branches and meandering roots of the Seymour clan; but still and with ever increasing levels of obscurity, her father and my great-grandfather, Arthur, was refusing to yield to the inquisitive loss of his later genealogical descendants, his formative years hidden from secret watchful eye.

In November of 1999, Selina slipped away in Walsall, her glo-
bal travels now far behind and more history to be re-
corded. Selina had two chil-
dren, Alice born in 1940 in Sutton Colfield and John in Birmingham two years later. During what now appeared to be a colossal struggle to cast any meaningful light on Arthur’s early activity, I was fortunate to establish contact with Selina’s daughter Alice and immediately upon doing so there was a great sense of elation and an almost exha-
ustion of breath, my expecta-
tions enlivened and an excite-
ment in the belief I was about to unveil what had been hid-
den for so long. We under-
took some initial correspon-
dence by e-mail to confirm our respective family connec-
tions and the meeting was ar-
ranged. I drove to the re-
dezvous at a coffee shop in Walsall town centre with the anticipation of a child on Christmas Eve night except I already knew, in part at least, the form and nature of which such presents were to be.

Paraphernalia

Alice, her husband and I met, both parties armed with copious amounts of paper-
work, hand written notes, census details and other fam-
ily history paraphernalia. It was soon apparent that nei-
ther of us had the one item that each craved; William Arthur Seymour’s birth cer-
tificate. With huge disap-
pointment, Alice explained that she too had failed to dis-
cover this one document that could provide the clues essen-
tial to unmask the identities of the many ancestors who preceded our elusive man of mystery. The one glimmer of hope was that Alice’s daugh-
ter, Deborah, was attempting through the resources of a Canadian Archives Service, to trace this missing docu-
ment. Like so many other valiant endeavours, this
transatlantic pursuit came to a full stop, the ever taller brick wall blocking our way too.

They had searched over a 10 year period for records of baptism and still it seemed as if this Newfoundland-born man was in truth a figment of our collective imaginations. What began to lift my dis-
heartened spirits was that Alice had in her possession a photograph of Arthur in his World War 1 uniform. Up to this point not even my mother and aunts, all at this point either in their late sev-
enties or early eighties, had ever seen eyes upon the face of their paternal Grandfather. Reading tales and even ones of a suspect nature can brighten the pages of any family historian; however, to be fortuitous enough to unearth photographic evi-
dence is altogether something else. It is able to provide evi-
dence and information dry words on equally dry paper can never hope to emulate.

I recall smiling with a shak-
ing head, as I first viewed this seat and moustached Black Country man. Of diminutive stature, he stared out from the picture, with a melan-
cholic air. He was smartly attired in the uniform of the North Staffordshire Regi-
ment, a cane or baton gently grasped in both hands. I was willing him to speak, daring him to release the many answers to the many ques-
tions spinning in my head.

Part Two of Mike Fenton’s genealogical journey follows next week.