

# A West Bromwich Mystery

## On the trail of William Arthur Seymour



William Arthur Seymour in uniform



Mike's grandparents. Joseph was the son of the elusive William Arthur Seymour

**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 steeled 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 forebears, 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

By Mike Fenton

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 shunned 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 signature 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 Harborne) 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.

It's more than conceivable that they would have heard the roars and cheers of the adoring crowds as these local sporting heroes ran on to the turf on those late Victorian Saturday afternoons. Today's Mornington Rd is a collection of unimposing industrial units and number 25 today is the registered address of a large, red brick turn of the century edifice, now occupied by a modern engineering manufacturer.

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 lifeline 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.

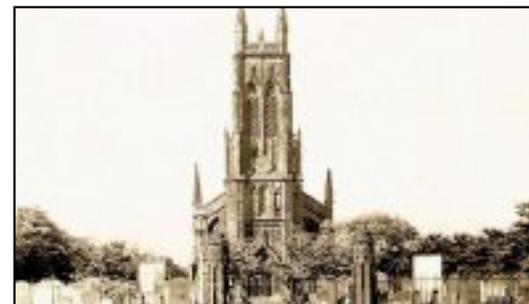
With another decade gone and no trace of other documentation with which to point the way, we find that by 1901 Arthur had uprooted his family a mere 3 miles, crossing the parish boundary into West Bromwich and finding themselves resident at 28, Messenger Lane, an area that in future times was to run 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 conspicuous 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 calculably more



Beatrice Florence Seymour



Christ Church, West Bromwich

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sad. Arthur's wife Emily's absence from the record is excused as she met an early death in 1900 but as a result of what is yet to be discovered.

What begins to furrow the brow and raise eyelids is that he is now living as the husband of a **Sarah Withington**; again to re-marry is obviously not exceptional, yet the marriage certificate for Arthur and Sarah's union is clearly February 8th, 1904, three years after the census lists them as man and wife. This too may be ascribed to errors performed by officialdom but you cannot keep passing the buck forever and at some point you must conclude that there are more questions than answers and the quest to obtain closure on these becomes another determined focus of your ongoing research.

**Births**

At the Messenger Lane home, we find that before her death, Arthur's first wife Emily had given birth to 3 more children: **Alice Louisa**, born 1895, who only lived to her 7th birthday and **George** and Arthur, both born in 1900; George died in 1901 and Arthur's details past 1900 we are unaware of. So we can already clearly see that even before we advance to Arthur's second marriage we still have many unknowns dotting the landscape of this enigmatic Black Country miner and once transatlantic traveller.

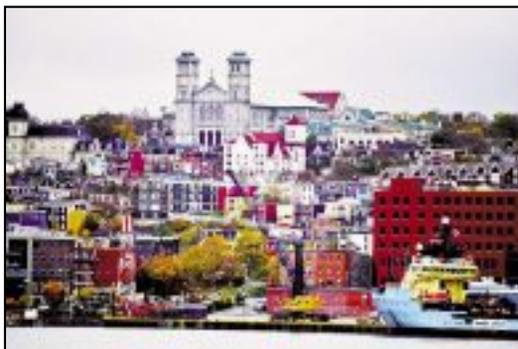
With regard to the 3 year anomaly of Arthur's second marriage and the 1901 Census record, it is of course more than possible that he was already 'living in sin' with Sarah; perhaps during the collection of details regarding the latter census, Arthur was prompted to provide inaccurate information due to the unacceptable status of the period of being both unmarried and living together. However, men and women 100 years ago and more were not, as the popular misconception leads us to believe, strict adherents to some now

outmoded set of moral strictures. Children born out of wedlock, unmarried mothers and other circumstances society 'officially' shunned were less rare than the records evidently indicate and I have no reason to doubt that Arthur and his second partner may have found themselves in such a situation. Unfortunately, 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 certainly born in advance of her parent's union, making her appearance in the world on January 17th, 1903. As each new ancestor is included on your ever crowded and burgeoning 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 believing you are about to discover those missing pieces of the puzzle, for so long lost in the maze of uncertainty and frustration, suddenly becomes a bubble savagely burst and momentarily your disappointment 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 1891 census.

**Newfoundland**

They knew of his Newfoundland birth but absolutely nothing more, the brick wall seeming as impenetrable to them as it always has been for me. With several deep sighs and a mood of deep pessimism hard to let go of, I dusted myself off and re-committed myself to the search. Emily eventually married a Berkshire born man **George Bumpass** in 1929 and the descendants of this union are now to be found in the more leafy surroundings and



Newfoundland, where the mystery begins

suburbs of Oxfordshire and some neighbouring counties, far removed from the industrial landscape with its smoking chimney stacks and belching furnaces that Emily would have been only too familiar with.

In February of 1905, Arthur's 2nd child by Sarah was born; she was **Beatrice** (known at times by her middle name **Florence**). There is an odd coincidence and inter-connection here too as my **Aunt Beatty** (short for Beatrice) was born Florence but always used her second name; perhaps there was some unnamed tradition in the Seymour family to manoeuvre their given names at the discretion of those it concerned.

This too remains another oddity to unravel. It appears from the known records that Beatrice remained a spinster all her life, dying in 1997 at the fine age of 92, her grand age however failing to provide anything with which to sink our genealogical teeth into. Along came **Lily** in March, 1906; she married in West Bromwich to a **Wilfred Gordon** in 1932 and passed away in Bullingdon, Oxfordshire in 1989. So immediately we can identify an Oxfordshire connection, yet despite the growing family and apparently geographically similar associations, further evidence of Arthur Seymour's cryptic life remained hidden and stubbornly so. The 4th child and another daughter gave up some information but little to enlighten our genealogical path. This was **Selina Jane**, born in West Bromwich on October 14th, 1908. In 1911, she is to be found living with Sidney, her brother and 2nd son of Arthur's first marriage. Joseph, my maternal Grandfather had already moved out the family home, having got married in 1910.

There too were her older sisters already mentioned above; **Samuel**, her baby brother is recorded and more about him as we progress. The home was at 16 Hall End, West Bromwich, which later records identify more clearly as Vicarage Rd; my grandfather Joseph at this period was living in the same street, at number 145.

Selina, some years later, was to make a then arduous journey to Australia, taking up residence in Wentworth, New South Wales by 1930. It is believed whilst here she undertook various domestic

work. By 1933, her evidently itinerant spirit had moved her to pastures new, this time in East Sydney. In 1936 she was occasioned to spread her wings again, finding herself resident at the Ashfield Hotel in New South Wales's Liverpool Street.

**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 however was. Her travels 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 Seymours, the background and formative years of Arthur became just that little less clear, the lines growing fainter and increasingly indistinct, his story receding ever more into the distance.

Family and local historians will explain that it is at junctures such as these that the ghost can never be given up and as battered and bruised as you may be, the fight must gain the upper hand. With a philosophical nod to the past I resumed my review of Selina Jane.

In 1937 she had returned to England to undertake household duties at Beach Street in Birmingham's Ladywood district. By early 1940, Selina had evidently left her Australian 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 now 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 obstinacy, her father and my great-grandfather, Arthur, was refusing to yield to the inquisitiveness of his later genealogical descendants, his formative years hidden from scrutiny.

In November of 1999, Selina slipped away in Walsall, her global travels now far behind and more history to be recorded. Selina had two children, **Alice** born in 1940 in Sutton Coldfield 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



A young Samuel Seymour



Lily Seymour

fortunate to establish contact with Selina's daughter Alice and immediately upon doing so there was a great sense of elation and an almighty exhalation of breath, my expectations enlivened and an excitement in the belief I was about to unveil what had been hidden for so long. We undertook some initial correspondence by e-mail to confirm our respective family connections and the meeting was arranged. I drove to the rendezvous 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 paperwork, hand written notes, census details and other family history paraphernalia. It was soon apparent that neither of us had the one item that each craved; William Arthur Seymour's birth certificate. With huge disappointment, Alice explained that she too had failed to discover this one document that could provide the clues essential to unmask the identities of the many ancestors who preceded our elusive man of mystery. The one glimmer of hope was that Alice's daughter, **Deborah**, was attempting through the resources of a Canadian Archives Service, to trace this missing document. Like so many other valiant endeavours, this

transatlantic pursuit came to a full stop, the ever taller brick wall blocking our way to the answers we so fervently sought.

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 disheartened 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 seventies or early eighties, had ever set 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 evidence is altogether something else. It is able to provide evidence and information dry words on equally dry paper can never hope to emulate.

I recall smiling with a shaking head, as I first viewed this seated and moustached Black Country man. Of diminutive stature, he stared out from the picture, with a melancholic air. He was smartly attired in the uniform of the North Staffordshire Regiment, 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 questions spinning in my head.

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



Selina Jane Seymour