A West Bromwich mystery
On the trail of William Arthur Seymour — Part Two

By Mike Fenton

Bromwich in 1891. This was based on the more than unusual and certainly rare surname of Samuel’s wife, ‘Grown’, and her equally uncommon forename of Syrene. With the rarity of her name, it was in my now super-charged optimism simply a case (it seemed) of tracing her family tree and surely I would find living descendants who could at the very least offer something new and revealing.

Records

I scoured the records in a frenzy of activity, utilising every spare moment I had at the expense of other matters which in reality required my attention. The level of my absorption in this angle of research had reached saturation point. I stepped back a little, reviewed the details thus far accrued and now tentatively resumed the chase. Yes, I discovered both her birth and death records; her marriage to Samuel also clearly registered. Her mother’s maiden name was Waters.

Like a flood, the information poured in, and then, the stream quickly turned into an arid desert. Continued searches for her parents or anything else proved fruitless and this remains the case 40-odd years on. Another promising route to uncover Arthur’s history had cruelly been dashed. Samuel and his wife both died prematurely; Syrene at just 33 years of age in Warwickshire and Samuel some considerable distance away in Devon at the age of 52 in 1963.

The penultimate of the 7 children was Bert who died in infancy in 1915 at 2 years of age. The final proved to be another girl, Clarice May, born in 1915. This final Seymour progeny offered little that would furnish the researcher with anything substantive. She married a Birmingham man called Dan Hunter about whom virtually nothing is recorded other than his years of birth and death. The wedding took place in Birmingham in 1940 and to the best of my knowledge there were not any children arising from this particular marriage. Both of them died in Devon; Clarice in Exeter in 1985 and then Dan some 23 miles away in Exmouth in 2000. Samuel Seymour had as previously noted also made his final resting place in Devon, however whether there was ever a connection, it remains to be verified. It appears that Arthur’s endless list of unanswered questions was a circumstance carried on by his nearest descendants. It’s a tradition I would rather they had never pursued.

Evidence

So, now armed with photographic evidence and some further anecdotal information, I had to continue my search, but by a different route and undertake a hopefully more successful method. Taking some advice online and trawling through an infinite and daunting volume of paperwork I found myself back at almost the point at which I had commenced. Had I really spent all these years only to come full circle? I re-examined the first marriage certificate which I knew could provide clues not necessarily found elsewhere. On this occasion, my great-grandfather was recorded with his full name; William Arthur Seymour now married on this day, October 18th, 1888. Such documents are rare not to mention something of value to the researcher regarding the father of the groom, even if deceased at the time. The space provided for such detail was on this certificate utterly void, not a name or profession listed with which to arm myself for the investigations yet to come.

It had Arthur living at the time in West Bromwich, hardly a helpful clue in any sense of the word. The bride’s father however was listed; he was Joseph Brown and like many of my ancestors a miner. I must have looked over the certificate a hundred times to ensure I had not missed anything. Filming it away, I had to accept I had not. Even endless e-mails to the Brown side of the family in order to acquire even the slightest scrap of information proved as sterile as previous enterprises. Chronologically, I moved on. The next port of call was my grandfather Joseph’s birth certificate. Again nothing of significance other than his father’s name and the address at which he was resident at the time in 1888; Lloyd Street, number 46, sandwiched between Dartmouth Park and Sandwell Valley.

The next document waiting patiently in the queue was Arthur’s marriage certificate to his 2nd wife, Sarah Withington. This at least did go one step further than others. Arthur’s father is finally mentioned. Adding to the confusion is the name William. Perhaps this was the reason why his son so often preferred to be addressed as Arthur. More importantly and of greater interest was that William Senior was clearly recorded as having been a soldier. This military reference be the cause for Arthur’s birth so many thousands of miles away from his later Black Country home?

It was not until 1949 that Newfoundland was incorporated into Canada, the area previously part of the many overseas territories in British possession. I discovered that this eastern part of North America had been home to many British soldiers stationed there for various military duties.

Caution

Had I stumbled over something tangible, something of a more definitive quality? With a trail of defeats behind me I moved up a gear but I was ever cautious as I maintained my course. I received various online replies to my queries but these only had vague connections to my search and were never of a definitive nature, mostly guesses and hunches.

The surname Seymour appears to be reasonably common in Newfoundland during the 19th century and still persists today yet each and every request I make regarding this problematic ancestor is met with a firmly shut door. Other advice indicated there may be an Irish link which by this time I was more than willing to believe. I did discover an Edwin Seymour also born in St. John’s, Newfoundland in 1865 which on the face of things presented an all but more feasible connection. I quickly ordered his 1892 marriage certificate to see what his father’s name was; upon its receipt and with more than a sense of unease and quickening pulse, I carefully slipped the certificate from the envelope. I had mixed emotions as to what I was about to discover as although I was accustomed to much disappointment I had to be as optimistic as it was humanly possible to be.

As the pale green document unfolded,
my vision automatically focused on the right hand section where the details I sought were recorded. I almost stopped breathing as I could clearly read ‘William’ as being the father and person registering the birth of Emily. The profession of this William however was not as I had hoped; not a soldier but a mariner. I wasn’t immediately reassured as he could simply have moved from one of the forces to another. The problem with this assumption was that I had no source from which I could confirm or ignore this.

Controlling

Unfortunately, this is still the case now, my great-grandfather persisting in his refusal to release the mysteries of his grandfather Joseph’s marriage certificate from 1910. I have read by now to expect failure and failure once more arrived. Not one shred or morsel of evidence to light my way.

After a sabbatical from my family history explorations I was able to unearth some military documents and subsequent letters (published online) relating to Arthur’s initial entry into and activities pertaining to the North Staffordshire Regiment. With my background of largely unavailing research I was somewhat cautious as to the content of these new discoveries; for too long I had been cruelly put aside on the periphery of the history which I sought to be something conclusive and informative, only to return to the starting point from which I had begun this lonely journey.

One of the first downloaded included documents was simply entitled ‘Medical History’, underneath which was clearly handwritten the name of Arthur Seymour. So far, so good I recall thinking, my anxiety yet to be subdued. The following line however was like a bolt out of the proverbial blue, on this occasion though a welcome one. On the line indicating birthplace, the words ‘Parish’ and ‘Street’ had been crossed through and in their place the names ‘St. John’s’ and ‘Newport’ were substituted respectively. Proof at least that my great-grandfather’s place of birth was now without question as it appeared to be something conclusive and informative, only to return to the starting point from which I had begun this lonely journey.

Injuries

I was informed by Alice, my new found cousin and daughter of Selma June, that he was subjected to injuries as a town or village that had a German sounding resonance but could equally be interpreted as being of English origin. The various wars and skirmishes between France and Germany had been ongoing for many years had led to many towns exchanging hands and their names had been changed in an almost ambivalent. This was a particular ‘unknown’ I was prepared to leave as such; I still had bigger fish to fry and more paperwork was yet to be put under the microscope. Arthur was returned to England for treatment at the Leeds War Hospital on March 21st 1918, less than a month he was dead. On April 17th, his had succumbed to bronchitis, the hospital admission form citing renal failure as the principal cause of his death.

Buried

The day the mother was buried, all 6 children were admitted to our Birmingham Ever Open Door. The army pension had apparently all been spent on food, as there were several weeks rent owing. The landlord was asked to take the bit of furniture in lieu of part of the rent, but he said it was not worth his while. It was stated that the relatives were all fairly respectable, but no one would undertake the care of any of the children. All the children were said to be healthy and normal.

Upon reading this it seemed that my pursuit for the truth of these children’s father’s early history was now all but irrelevant and to continue would be a superficial and meaningless exercise. To imagine what awful poverty and hardship my ancestors just a century ago had to endure brings everything else into sharp focus.

I wondered if Arthur knew of the plight of his family whilst on service; did he enlist to lighten the burden of feeding an extra mouth? Again the volume of questions was too numerous for any answers I could possibly hope to glean. Was Sarah’s bronchitis and subsequent demise due to inadequate housing, want of sufficient and nutritious food or was she a victim of the 1918 influenza pandemic which worldwide took the life of at least 50-100 million people? In less than 20 years the Seymour family had received 3 crosses and neither of their family had any chance of a decent burial at the time of writing Ih ave just been sent an e-mail by a Canadian researcher who, on my behalf, has been sitting through copious amounts of church records in the Newfoundland region, in the seemingly gargantuan task of uncovering a birth document. It is with unerring consistency that I can report that such a document remains elusive and as well hidden as it always has been. My quest continues and my desire for knowledge unrelenting. I am cognisant of the mixture that is both my failure and success in this genealogical treasure hunt. The former American President, Abraham Lincoln once said, “My great concern is not whether you have failed, but whether you are content with your failure”.

I refuse to be content; the hunt for William Arthur Seymour, this West Bromwich figure continues.