

# A West Bromwich mystery

## On the trail of William Arthur Seymour — Part Two

**LAST WEEK** we saw how research into one's own family tree can serve up delight and frustration in equal measure. Part one concluded with hope of a fresh breakthrough on the trail of the elusive, Newfoundland-born William Arthur Seymour, and a meeting was arranged with another descendant, at a coffee shop in Walsall ...

To my surprise and delight, Alice had further photographs, these of all but one of Arthur and Sarah's children. I scanned the faces of these, my great aunts and

uncles, all expressing their youthful naivety and wondered what secrets they too were holding tightly to their chests.

The next of these and the first son of Arthur and Sarah's was **Samuel**, born on November 19th, 1910. When I discovered Samuel had married a **Syrene Growsns** in Meriden in 1947, I was comfortably convinced that this was the breakthrough I had longed for; the one which would facilitate the answers to the multitude of questions I had regarding Arthur's life before his first recorded appearance in West

By Mike Fenton

Bromwich in 1891.

This was based on the more than unusual and certainly rare surname of Samuel's wife, 'Growsns' and her equally uncommon forename of Syrene. With the rarity of her names, 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 4 barren 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 25 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 grand-

father was recorded with his full name; William Arthur Seymour now married on this day, October 18th, 1886. 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 Lewisham Rd 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. Filing 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 he is named 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. Could 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,



The memorial Leeds' Harehills Cemetery, Arthur's final resting place



Clarice Seymour



A letter from 1920, written by Arthur's son shortly after his father's death



A rare link to Arthur Seymour — his details in the Leeds War Hospital's admissions book

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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 Edwin. The profession of this William however was not as I had hoped; not a soldier but a mariner. I wasn't immediately distracted 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 Newfoundland days. It was though he was controlling events from beyond the grave. The only other extant document I could now refer to and sequentially so was my grandfather Joseph's marriage certificate from 1910. I had reason 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 what appeared to be something conclusive and informative, only to return to the point from which I had begun this lonely journey.

One of the first downloaded images I perused 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 'County' have been crossed through and in their place, the names 'St. John's' and 'Newfoundland' substituted respectively. Proof at least that my great grandfather's place of birth was now without question and there was one less 'i' to be dotted; there remained however several more 't's to be crossed.

This same officious form documented his previously alluded-to stature; here was a man of 52 years and just 5 foot and three quarter inches high, about to offer his service and life to the country. In keeping with Arthur's anomalous history, this document erroneously states he enlisted

on February 13th, 1916, when it was without a doubt in 1915. Subsequent cross checking confirmed this and my mind put to rest.

I ploughed on in a more optimistic frame of mood. The next document loomed forward bearing its soul, my spirit lifting as I scrutinised the details. This was headed 'Territorial Force', and explained, "... the questions to be put to the Man before Enlistment". The same document is also a useful aid to the family historian as it also includes the current address of the person who is also a signatory to the oath to which he must swear. As the most recent and publicly available census is 1911, the residence details in 1915 of Arthur and his family is always welcome. At this period they were living at 40, Smith Street in West Bromwich, this latest address appearing to be another fragment of history now lost to us, as investigations to its whereabouts have come to a definite full stop, even employing Google technology and similar online services failing to elucidate the user. The raft of bureaucracy, even in the early years of the 20 century that evidently associated itself with the admittance of new army recruits does in hindsight seem all but pointless as Arthur's military life was relatively brief and his life sadly taken by the ravages of this truly horrible conflict.

**Injuries**

I was informed by Alice, my new found cousin and daughter of Selina Jane, that he was subjected to injuries in a town or village that had a German sounding resonance but could equally have been French in origin. The various wars and skirmishes between France and Germany over several years had led to many towns exchanging hands and their names left linguistically 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, 1916. In less than a month he was dead. On April 17th, his had succumbed to his injuries, the hospital admission form citing renal failure as the principal cause of his sorry demise.

Back home in West Bromwich, his wife and children must have dreaded hearing the news that would inevitably have reached their front door, although it is not known how this was relayed. The war years in our region like the country at large was struggling with shortages of every nature, lack of food a constant worry, especially if like Sarah, you had six hungry mouths to feed and backs to clothe. Her domestic circumstances had in fact already been observed as was



A young Emily Seymour

reported two years later in 1918, the same year Sarah died, leaving her children orphaned and vulnerable. Sarah's passing had the consequence of an official entitled the Police Court Missionary applying for the admittance of the children to a Barnardo's home whose report revealed that:

"The father Arthur Seymour was a miner and said to have been a man of good character. He joined the army and was wounded in action; dying in Leeds Military Hospital in 1916. The mother, Sarah Seymour, whom it was stated was an indifferent, careless woman, occupied 2 rooms with her 6 children. She was in poor health and when the home was visited everything was in a poverty stricken state; very little furniture or clothing. The Inspector of the N.S.P.C.C. had had the family under supervision for 2 years, but although the children were dirty and ill-clad they appeared to be well fed, and indeed looked well, so therefore no proceedings were taken. They all ran wild, stayed away from school, and generally drifted, for want of proper care and attention.

The elder girl had worked for a time on munitions. On November 18th, 1918, the mother died of bronchitis and heart failure. Applicant visited the house and found the mother lying dead, and the children had been cared for by neighbours as poverty stricken as themselves.

**Buried**

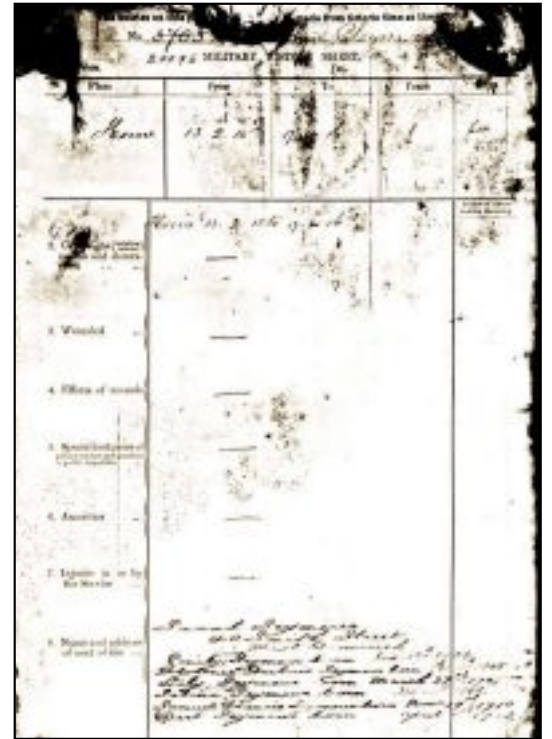
The day the mother was buried, all 6 children were admitted to our Birmingham Ever Open Door. The army pension had apparently all been spent on food, as there were several weeks rent owing. The landlord was asked to take the bit of furniture in lieu-of part of the rent, but he said it was worth nothing. 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 to outnumber 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 lives of between 50-100 million people? In less than 20 years the Seymour family had received its share and more of bad news, its bitter trail now left in its wake; Arthur's first wife Emily passing away at just 30 in 1900, Emily's first daughter dead at just 7 years in 1902 and her son George to meet an early death before his first birthday the year before.

The second marriage then appeared to continue as the first had ended. Sarah's son Bert not reaching his 2nd year of life and then of course Arthur himself paying the ultimate sacrifice during his all but brief military career; injured in an unknown town or village in the European theatre of war and to lose his life in a Yorkshire hospital, some miles from his Black Country home and family. The children must have thought their lives now must turn the corner but then their mother is struck down in her mid-forties. Orphaned, poor and in want of proper housing, their respective futures would appear bleak in anyone's estimation; however, they survived, some marrying and of course one undertaking a voyage to the other side of the globe.

Inevitably I had to put aside the darker accounts of my



Arthur's next of kin on his military records



Arthur's name on the memorial wall at the graveyard in Leeds

forebears' history and continue the still obstinately difficult struggle of unearthing Arthur's life before his residence in that Smethwick street back in the early 1890s.

Arthur's eldest and first son by Emily and my maternal grandfather, Joseph Arthur Seymour, had sent a number of letters to a military office in Lichfield inquiring of lost or re-directed documents he was eager to have that concerned his deceased father. Even these failed to hold any clue that could assist in my ever increasing desperation for something I could at last call definitive and of real interest.

**Name**

Another 12 months or more passed and my refusal to surrender was waning. I then discovered that Arthur's name had been inscribed on a wall of honour in Leeds's Harehills Cemetery. Not only that, there were photographs available. Finally, I thought, something tangible, a point in my great grandfather's life I could point to and know had some substance and a real sense of history attached to it. For a long time after I felt as

if I had been partly satisfied by this particular episode; the long and laborious hours I had invested in my research, I concluded, had not been the absolute failure I had once attributed it to be. Buried deep within me, I knew, however the truth must out. Even at the time of writing I have just been sent an e-mail by a Canadian researcher who, on my behalf, has been sifting 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 of mystery continues.