

#52 Ancestors 2020 Week 2 Favourite Photo

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#52 Ancestors 2020

This photo was taken in 1912 – probably at the christening of the baby, who was my uncle Keith Whitten, my mother’s eldest brother.

The other person in the photo is Keith’s half - sister, Gladys Whitten. Gladys was the only child of my grandfather’s first marriage, to Annie Newcombe, his childhood sweetheart. They were married in Tamworth in 1902, and she died the following year on August 9, a week after giving birth to Gladys.

Annie was 22 when she died. The inscription on her headstone is heartbreaking to read.



Gladys was 8 when her father married again in 1911, to my grandmother Josephine Morgan. In the early years of her childhood she had lived with her father and been cared for by the extended family whose property was next door. She was adored by her grandmother Charlotte and cosseted by her uncles – there are other photos in which she is as beautifully dressed and presented as this one. My mother thought that there were some tensions with her new stepmother – as a stepmother myself, I am not at all surprised – but there is no doubt that she loved all her half siblings as they arrived. They maintained strong ties all their lives.



Keith looks uncomfortably overdressed in this picture. I guess he is a few months old; it’s difficult to tell under all those clothes. As the first born, he obviously had an elaborate christening outfit. There are no surviving members of the family who could tell me if the six subsequent children were equally fussily dressed when they were christened.

One of the reasons I like this photo so much is that it shows Gladys looking innocent and trusting, as I think she was. She was perhaps overprotected. When she became pregnant at the age of 19, I’m sure it was out of ignorance. At 20 gave birth to her son,

whom she called Reginald Frank but who was known as Rex. There are stories that the family wouldn't let her marry the child's father because he was Catholic, or because he was a farm hand – perhaps he didn't want to marry her. We don't really know. Gladys was sent to Sydney to have the child and she worked hard to keep him with her until he was about 7, when he went into a Salvation Army Boys' Home. It was scandalous to have a child "out of wedlock" in those days, but this very religious family always supported and loved her and her child, and they were always very much part of the extended family.*

Gladys never married; she was devoted to Rex, and then to his children and grandchildren. She seems never to have had another relationship in all her long life. She died at 84 and her remains are buried with her mother in Tamworth.

* Most of what I know about Gladys comes from my mother, her half-sister Gwynn.