

# #52 Ancestors Week 6 - Surprise

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## #52 Ancestors Week 6 - "Surprise"

Surely there could be no greater surprise than to learn of the existence of someone long believed to be dead

This is what happened to my grandmother Josephine and her sister, Elsie, in 1933.

Josephine ( born 1882) and Elsie (1884) were the daughters of George Morgan and Mary Jane (née Black) who were married in Sydney, NSW in March 1880, when she was just 18 years old. They had four children; Max Pedro Power, born 1881, then the two girls, and then Edward in 1886.

Tragedy struck in June 1887, when Max was hit by a cart in the street, and died of tetanus.

There is some evidence that George and Mary Jane were already living separately when this happened. Certainly, we know that sometime in 1887 Mary Jane left home, taking baby Edward with her. The two girls were taken by their father to live with his mother and one of his sisters, who was married and was already the mother of six small children.

Josie and Elsie grew up in this household. We don't know if they ever saw their father but they believed ( or were told) that their mother was dead and when Josie met my grandfather and married him (in 1911) she described herself as an orphan.

Imagine the surprise then, when, in 1933, the two women received a letter from the Public Trustee

seeking the children of Mary Jane. 46 years after they had last seen her, they learned that she had recently died.

Amazingly to me, neither of them seems to have been angry or resentful that their mother had ignored them for all these years. They went happily off to Sydney where they met lots of half siblings and learned that their brother, Edward, had died on the Somme in 1916.

So what had Mary Jane been doing in those 46 years? It's complicated.

After she left her husband, she took up with George Ellis. There is no record of a divorce, or a marriage, and several children born between 1887-1899 were registered as 'Morgan'. The six born before 1896 ( when George Ellis died ) were probably fathered by Ellis, although Mary (1895), twins Leonard and May (1897) and Arthur (1899) all appear as "Sarchfield" on her death certificate.

She married Edward Sarchfield in 1900. George Morgan was still alive ( he died in 1921) - she probably didn't know, but she was a bigamist.

Four more children were born, Ernest ( 1900-1900), Mabel (1901), Eric ( 1903) and John, (1905). Her husband died three months before John was born. There were 9 surviving children, of whom at least 6 were young enough to be fully dependent on her.

In the 21st century, we can be judgemental about a woman with such a chequered sexual history, but in an era with no social security what could she do but rely on a man for protection? Serial pregnancies were the lot of a fertile woman in a time of poor contraception, and the early deaths of six of her children is a horror familiar to many women of her time.

There was a happy ending, of sorts. Josie and Elsie remained close to their two half sisters, Kate and Mattie, for the rest of their lives.

(The cottage in Summer Hill, where the girls grew up with their aunt's family).

