


#52 Ancestors 2020 Week 30 "The Old Country"

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#52 Ancestors Week

"The Old Country"

Although there are ancestors in my tree from England and Scotland (and perhaps Wales) it is Ireland which is the "old country" for my family, and for my husband's. My links there are 3 generations old; Paul's are much more recent. His mother was born there and returned a few times to visit family. On his paternal line, his 4x great grandparents were sent from Ireland as convicts.

We didn't know much family history when we made our first trip to Europe in the 1970s, but we knew enough to include visits to two important places which loom large in the family stories – Roscrea (the Whitten family - my mother) and Shannonbridge (the Kilroe family – Paul's mother)

In 1977, there were still Whittens at **Fancroft**, the home near Roscrea in County Tipperary from which my great grandfather Anthony Whitten had emigrated in 1862. Marjorie Whitten was the last of her generation, having inherited the farm through her grandfather, John (Anthony's brother). Her nephew, Bill Williams, was working the land and the animals.



Fancroft in the 1850s

At the time of our visit in 1977, she was 76 and quite frail, but she made us welcome. We were travelling with my sister, and she had little gifts for both my sister and me – a recipe book compiled by women from Marjorie's church for me, and (I think) a locally printed tea towel for Libby. She was distressed to realise that there was no gift for Paul, so she took the farm bell off the mantelpiece and presented it to him, explaining that it was used to call the workers in to meals.

(My mother so coveted this that we gave it to her, and it took pride of place in her kitchen until her death, when it came back to us).

Marjorie was happy to show us around and to pore over old photographs with us – we found unknown uncles and cousins who looked like our brother – and to dispel some family myths. We had naively believed that the famine had been the cause of 19th century family emigrations to Australia and Canada – Marjorie thought it far more likely that family disputes and hot-headedness was the reason.

The kitchen was an enormous room. Another Whitten descendant wrote this description. *"The kitchen was a real eye-opener. The walls in this section of the house would be three feet thick and solid stone. There are huge rough hewn beams in the ceiling, and from one of them dangles an old branding iron "E.W." and from the others, rams horns and deer horns.... The kitchen must be forty feet square, with a stone floor, wearing in patches, but very smooth... There is a huge churn in the kitchen where Marjorie still churns twice a week. It is something of an*



The Fancroft Bell

antique and is about the size of a forty gallon keg, and the same shape, and sits on a stand to facilitate hinged action pouring.”

The walls were hung with copper saucepans – we were told that they had been made by family members hundreds of years ago. (This is one of the reasons why there is a belief in Huguenot ancestors, which I have never been able to verify.)

Sadly, Marjorie died only a few months after our visit. Bill Williams inherited the farm and welcomed a host of Whitten cousins from Australia and Canada over the next 30 years but when he died in 2016 there was no family left. The property left the family after more than 300 years. When I next saw it on a cold and rainy day in 2017, it was empty and looked neglected. The new owner wanted the land, but apparently had no use for the house.



We also had a happy visit to Shannonbridge in 1977. Paul had been instructed to go to Killeen’s pub and introduce himself – everyone there knew his mother’s family. His aunt Katie Kilroe was the only one left and she was by this time in a nursing home, but the Killeen’s were hospitable and showed us Katie’s house and told us family stories. Paul’s parents and siblings had been there in previous years, so it felt as if the family were still part of the community.



In 2017 we knew much more family history than on our first visit and were better informed about both of these places. This time around we were travelling with our son, so there was another generation to introduce to his heritage. I found a cousin living not far from **Fancroft** who was able to give me more information about the Whittens, and in Shannonbridge the parish priest found the register with Paul’s great grandparent’s marriage. We visited Katie’s grave at Clonmacnois, and then Paul’s grandfather’s grave in Dublin.



Paul at Katie's house in Shannonbridge 1977

On this visit, I also tried to find some connections to my father's family, the Gleesons. My great grandfather James Patrick Gleeson came to Australia from County Clare in the 1860s, with some of his siblings. We spent a week based in Ennis and some time in the Family History Research centre there but with little success. The poor and illiterate leave few footprints.

Ennis is a delightful town renowned for its Irish music, so we enjoyed being there. The highlight was being greeted by a local on our first morning as we stood on a street corner, puzzling over a map.

"I'm not the Mayor of Ennis," he said, offering his hand. "But you're very welcome."

Since 2017, I know even more about my Irish ancestors and was excited to be going back to Ireland in September 2020. Now, unfortunately, that trip is on hold. I wanted to go to Roscommon, where I now know my Power and Plunkett ancestors lived. And Ballingarry, where the Mason family lived before they emigrated in the 1840s. We were planning to spend some time with a Shannonbridge local who has lots of information about the Kilroes and we were going to visit the house that Paul's mother Kathleen lived in as a child in Dublin.

The first of my family to return to Ireland were great uncles Albert and Alfred in 1913. I imagine it was all very familiar to them – after all, their father and uncles would have spoken with Irish accents and the stories of their home would have been very fresh. Two generations later, I don't have this connection, but it's certainly true that I feel very comfortable in Ireland. Not really "at home", but very welcome.



Paul and Brendan at Robert Keogh's grave, Dublin 2017