

Who do I think I am?*

Talk by Tim Curtin to Discussion Group at Uniting Churches,
Curtin, Canberra, 14th June 2012



My father was a mining engineer and geologist who worked in what is now PNG, Ghana, then India, where I was born, and South Africa, Mozambique and Zimbabwe as now is. My parents married in Cochin, west coast of India, and I was baptised in the same church, St. Francis, which I recently discovered is where Vasco da Gama, first to round the Cape, was buried – my first claim to fame! My father was born in Wedmore Somerset, just 4 miles from the village of Meare where his wife my mother’s Look family lived after about 1800.

I began my own genealogical research back in 1961 with my grandfather Fred Curtin’s printed parish registers of Wedmore (1561-1860) (transcribed the Vicar) while I was lodging with him as a newly arrived student from Rhodesia, and I soon traced back to his grandmother Maria Carver, born in Wedmore in 1800. She married a Joseph Walter, and their daughter Ann, born 1834, created the first of my royal connections, worth remembering in

¹ For those not familiar with it, this talk loosely follows the format of the television series “Who do you think you are?” in which celebrities (I am not!) research their family histories.

this Jubilee month, as she was recruited as their first nanny by the Prince and Princess of Wales in March 1864 just after their first son Albert Victor later Duke of Clarence was born. The Prince of Wales later became Edward VII after his mother good Queen Vic died. Ann stayed on until after their second son George, later George V, was born in 1865, but left soon after to marry my great-grandfather Tim Curtin the first.

But as we are in Jubilee mode, let me tell you a bit more about my great grandmother's time in the royal households. Ann later dictated to her son Fred several pages of her royal memories based on her own diaries. Interestingly within a week of starting at Marlborough House, she was taken to Windsor Castle to meet the Queen, the first of many, as Victoria took a keen interest in her first grandson's development – and did sketches of the baby with his nanny Ann, which should be with her diaries at the Bodleian Library at Oxford.

An interesting sidelight in Ann's diaries is that there was very little upstairs-downstairs, she was treated always as one of the family. When there was a ball at Balmoral, she attended, after being given a ball gown, and danced along with the royals.

She travelled to Copenhagen with the Prince of Wales when with his wife Alexandra and the baby Prince Albert Victor they went to stay her parents the King and Queen of Denmark – she was with the royal party at a concert when the Wales were hissed because the UK had not supported Denmark in its recent losing war with Prussia over Schleswig-Holstein. Later she was on a boating trip in the Copenhagen lakes with the King of Denmark, and on congratulating him on the engagement of his daughter to marry the Czar of Russia, he replied “Ah Mrs Walters” and “looked very sad”, and indeed he might have been as their offspring were shot in Ekaterinburg in 1917.

A curiosity is that Ann although she was then unmarried was always referred to as Mrs Walters, presumably to protect her from undue attentions.

She left to marry my great-grandfather Timothy Curtin in Southwark on 25th July 1865.

That Timothy was born in Cork City, Ireland, in 1831, and baptised in the Church of Ireland cathedral of St Finbarr's – and there is a second potential royal connection, as none other than the late Diana Princess of Wales was descended from William Curtin and Margaret (nee Honaria) Curtin also of Cork City; their daughter Margaret Curtin married an Edward Roche in 1805, and their descendant Frances Roche was Diana's mother. I haven't proved a connection – yet - but it seems plausible there could be one!

So who do I think I am? - why, the rightful King of England of course!



Ann (Walter) Curtin (1834-1916), about 1900.

Enough of all that royalty. In reality my family research has shown I am mostly a descendant of yeomen farmers, so they were tenants, not landowners. My grandfather's grandmother was Sarah Wall, of Wedmore, like Ann Walter Curtin, and using the parish registers I have traced her back to a William Wall of Wedmore born about 1530.

Amazingly, the Walls have a rather important if tragic Australian connection, as this Sarah Wall, my grandfather's grandmother, had a cousin (2nd, once removed) born in Wedmore in 1832, who came to Victoria with his regiment (the 40th) aged just 20 in 1852. His regiment was directed to end the Eureka Stockade uprising by gold miners (protesting at an increase in prospecting licence fees) at Ballarat on 3rd December 1854. He received a pike wound to his abdomen and died soon afterwards. There's a Wall Drive in the Ballarat cemetery that's named after him. He is my 2nd cousin only 4 times removed. I was at the 150th anniversary of this sad event in 2004.

Ironically, but not surprisingly, there were at least two Curtins involved with the Eureka Stockade. One was Patrick Malone Curtin whose store was actually inside the Stockade, and was burnt to the ground during the fight; his family escaped unharmed. Another Patrick Curtin (born in Limerick) was an innkeeper in Ballarat at the same time, but it seems he kept himself busy supplying both sides with the ale they needed in the December heat! Neither of these was related to my line.

But there is an Australian Curtin who is undoubtedly a relation, none other than prime minister John Curtin after whom of course this suburb is named. How do I know? I belong to the Curtin Clan, whose indefatigable Secretary is Margaret Curtin of Gympie, and she organises DNA tests; at a fairly recent gathering of the Clan in Ireland, she identified a known male descendant of John Curtin's grandfather and he agreed to be tested. I also did the test, and we found we are indeed both of John Curtin's ancestral lineage. Margaret has published no less than 5 volumes of Curtin lines, mostly in Canada and the USA as well Australia - and in fact DNA also shows that her husband David and I are distant cousins.

What of my mother's family? They all without exception were Somerset farming folk, and for the last 200 years and more farmed in the village Meare, which is just 4 miles from Wedmore. They too have an interesting association, with none other than the last Abbott of Glastonbury Abbey, not more than 2 miles away, as he lost his head on Glastonbury Tor, a hill visible from the farm where some of my Look cousins still live, in what was the Abbott's very own farmhouse – it looks like a church as it was basically a dormitory for his monks who had to spend their time, when not doing monastic duties, fishing in the lake, and the Abbott's Fish House, where the fish were hung out to be cured, is still on their land. My ancestors were not guilty of lopping off the Abbott's head, as that was done by Henry the VIIIth. The Abbey was razed to the ground, but substantial remains survive. Meare was the location of the Abbey's farm and especially its fishing rights on the lake (from which the village is named, Meare).

Just as my father's line has Australian links with poor Joseph Wall at Eureka, so does my mother's. Her ancestry includes a long line of Giblets, nothing to do with chickens, but a

Somerset mispronunciation of the Guilberts of Monte Carlo who came to England soon after the Norman Conquest. One branch of her Giblets set off for Western Australia, and they are still farming there, in and around Northam, and another lot went to Gippsland in Victoria. The WA branch is of special pertinence given my apparent connection to the ALP's John Curtin, as a John Beazley married my supposed distant relation Maria Giblett on 9th July 1867, and their son is the ancestor of both Kim Beazleys. If only one or the other had become PM I would have insisted on being their economic adviser and no doubt have grown rich! (I have to admit that this relationship is not fully proven, but the Giblets of Northam do think I am one of them).

My final Australian connection that I'll mention today is a certain Giles Pickford, Secretary of the ANU's Emeritus Faculty. Amazingly, he is related to me on both of my parents' lines, as the Giles family he is descended from goes back to both my father's Wedmore and my mother's Meare with its Giblets. William Giles married Ann Giblett, daughter of Francis of Meare in 1752; their grandson William married the famously beautiful Sophia Allen of Burnham in 1808, and her grandfather was my paternal 5th Great Grandfather Thomas Allen, born about 1700. The grandson of William and Sophia became the very distinguished first professor of Chinese languages at Cambridge and is Giles Pickford's great grandfather. Being cousins twice over, it is not a surprise both Giles and I were born in India!

All this goes to show that researching who you think you are can turn up not a few surprises.

Be all that as it may, I am also something of an amateur economic historian as well as working now on various aspects of so-called climate change...

Apparently even a 2oC rise in global temperature would be catastrophic, yet in London on Tuesday in its supposed summer it was 2oC cooler (at 13oC) than here in wintry Canberra. We seem to survive that "heat", but apparently London's climate scientists would not! Anyway I decided to check when the people of Wedmore were more likely to be buried between 1563 and 1782, summer or winter? It turns out that 55% were buried in the winter months, and only 45% in the summer.

I have also been studying the economics of land ownership and titling, and co-authored a book on this which appeared last year. So I have taken an interest in land ownership in and around Wedmore. The Commons on the low lying land surrounding the village were only enclosed by Acts of Parliament in the 1780s, which provided that all those with grazing rights on the "levels" were assured of gaining freehold title to at least 2 acres, on condition they contributed to the drainage work and roads. The outcome was a dramatic improvement in the village's wealth over the next 50 years.

By contrast Australia's Mabo Native Title Act of 1992 being celebrated this week merely formalised the commons nature of aboriginal land occupation, and incredibly prevents them acquiring the individual title needed to take out a mortgage and own their own homes or undertake any commercial farming etc...

Be that as it may, doing family history can yield unexpected discoveries – and the main resources here in Canberra are...

Extracts from the Diary of Ann Walter, later Ann Curtin (1834-1916).

‘On the 19th March 1864 I went to live with the Prince and Princess of Wales as Head Nurse upon the recommendation of Dr E Sieveking afterwards Sir Edward Sieveking.

On the 22nd of March the King of the Belgians made me a present of £10 and the same day I had a private interview with the Princess of Wales.

On the 23rd March I went to Windsor Castle and had my first introduction to Her Majesty, Queen Victoria

On the 26th March I went to see over part of the Castle and the dinner table which was laid in State for a Party, a splendid sight.

On the 1st April 1864 I went to Sandringham. The infant Prince gets on very nicely.

On the 14th April he had his photo taken.



The Prince and Princess of Wales with Albert Victor.

I go out every day in the grounds with the young prince. On the 24th June I went to the christening of the baby of Dr Sieveking (second girl) and spent a very pleasant day The Prince and Princess of Wales were God parents. I drove to Church with the baby and the nurse. Before the day the Princess said to me ‘You ought to have been invited as you were

formerly the Drs nurse'. I said that I was invited but did not like to say anything as I had charge of the little Prince. The Princess replied 'You must go by all means'.

I also went to Copenhagen and enjoyed myself very much at the Tivoli.

One day I went up in the Russian Cradle but was glad to get down. [a swinging cradle in the branches of a tree]

The Queen of Denmark gave me a handsome brooch with her photo in it.



The King of Denmark

The Danish and German War was just over and we saw a lot of cupples [sic] about.

I went to a concert in Denmark and the audience hissed an English song on account of England not helping Denmark [during its war with Prussia over its Schleswig-Holstein provinces]. It was stated that it was quite safe for the Prince because he was not a reigning Sovereign.

One day we went for a row on the lake in the grounds. I took the oars with the wet nurse leaving the other nurse with the baby on the bank. The King called out 'You must thank your God that you got safe out of that'. This remark was made because she was Irish and a Roman Catholic. The Crown Prince than got in my boat, took the oars and said 'Sit still Mrs Walters'. The King got in his skeleton boat and I held the bow while the Crown Prince rowed us all round the water.

When in Denmark I congratulated the King of Denmark on his daughter's (Princess Dagmore) betrothal to the Czar of Russia. He replied 'Ah Mrs Walters', shook his head and looked very sad.

On the 11th October we left Denmark and travelled through Germany on our way to England'.

The New Wedmore Chronicles – No 155

By Hazel Hudson

Nurse to a Prince - memories of Ann Walters



Ann Walter (or Walters as she was usually called) was born in Blackford and baptised in Wedmore on 23 December 1834. She was the daughter of Joseph Walter(s) and Maria (née Carver) of Wedmore.

Ann became head nurse to the Royal Household and cared for Prince Albert Victor, first child of the Prince and Princess of Wales. The Prince of Wales later became King Edward VII. The Princess of Wales was Alexandra, daughter of the King of Denmark. Albert Victor was born prematurely on 8 January 1864. This account was told to her son Frederick who wrote it down. Frederick Curtin was the grandfather of Peter Curtin.

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The King of Denmark

Continued next time.

The articles on Doctors written for the Isle of Wedmore News have now been collected together into a desk-top publication 'Doctors of Wedmore Parish 1640s-1940s', which is now available from me Hazel Hudson, Bempstone Hindred, Combe Batch, Wedmore BS28 4DU. Tel 712572. The cost is £10 + £3 p&p.