

Origins of the Peperell Family – A View

In tracing this Peperell family back through time there have been a number of challenges, mainly where the mother was not married at the time of birth and in the absence of a known father we have had to follow the maternal ancestry for the prior generations. The family has proved to be of such interest that this approach seems to be worthwhile, particularly in light of the most recent finding. My wife's maternal grandparents, Peperell and Prater, were joined in matrimony in 1906 but the two families share a common ancestor almost exactly 1000 years previously. Hywel Dda, King of the Britons, was born in 882 in south Wales and had several children. One of these, Angharad ferch Hywel born 915, married Tewdwr Trevor, great-great grandfather of Ranulph Peperell. Another, Owain ap Hywel, King of Powys & Deheubarth born 918 was great-great-great grandfather of a Princess of Powys who married William John Prater, Esq the earliest clearly identified Prater.

Before exploring this early ancestry further we should return to the wedding in 1906. Thomas Henry Peperell was born in London in 1883 and most of the Peperells since then lived in and around London, but his father Thomas was born in Devon and we can trace the family there back to around 1510. The first stumbling block occurs with Thomas Peperell, or more precisely with his parents. He was born in 1855 in Payhembury, Devon and the birth was registered at nearby Honiton. His mother was Sophia Peperell, in 1851 a 25 year old housemaid working for a family in Honiton. She was unmarried, the daughter of John Peperell of Payhembury and had two sons before moving to London. There were several attempts to cover up her status, including putting her son Henry as head of the household in 1861 (when he was 9) and her spouse. In 1871 she refers to herself as widow, but there is no evidence of a marriage and she remained Peperell throughout. It is not surprising that she went to such lengths, particularly as it was probably because of the stigma that she was forced to move to London. Her mother died in 1852, around the time Henry was born, and her father died in 1859, probably around the time she moved to London.

Sophia Peperell's grandfather Henry was born in Uffculme in around 1740 and we can trace a relatively uneventful 7 generations back to John Peperell, born in Uffculme in around 1510. We know very little about these generations, but from

the 16th century Uffculme was a significant part of the West Country's Wool Industry, reaching its zenith in the 18th century when large quantities of Uffculme serges were exported to Holland. The Peperells of the time may have found employment in and around this industry, but by the time Sophia was born the industry was waning.

Unfortunately it has proven impossible to find Peperell ancestors in or near Uffculme in the 100 years prior to the John Peperell of 1510. Though there is a village called Sampford Peverell only 2.5 miles away and for nearly 300 years this was the seat of a branch of the Peverell family. In 1406 Sir Thomas Peverell was the last Peverell Lord of the Manor, dying without male issue and the estate passed out of the family via a daughter. Given the proximity of the two locations and the similarity of the surnames (they are generally considered to have the same origins) it seems highly likely that the above Peperells are derived from a lesser branch of these Peverells. Given the status of the Peverell family, most of Lords of the Manor were Knights, we can quite easily trace them back 10 generations to the Lord Ranulph Peverell, born in 1025, who we mentioned at the start of this article.

In fact his name is usually written as Peverel and we know less than we might like about this man. He is prominent in the Domesday Book, though before the Conquest in 1066 he held no estates but by 1086 he held 123 (particularly in Essex, Suffolk and Norfolk). A number of his family had made themselves invaluable to the Saxons and Normans by acting as 'latimer' (literally latin speaker) or interpreter between them and the Welsh. Amongst these were Tewdwr, Gronwy and Rhys Sais ('sais' meaning literally Englishman) and probably Ranulph himself. It would have been quite natural for King William I to have sought out a man from this clan to marry his Saxon mistress and adopt his natural born son William. He was obviously well rewarded for this and no doubt his continued loyalty to the king.

Going further back in time we find ourselves amongst Welsh nobility, but first we have a couple of issues to deal with. Firstly, we have King William's son William by his mistress Maud. There is no unanimity of view about this William's parentage, but it is immaterial to the family lineage. If he was the king's bastard son he was effectively adopted by Ranulph anyway and became known as Lord William Peverel the Elder, with extensive estates in 1086. If he was Ranulph's own son then he was a Peverel by birth, but in any case the family line was continued through Ranulph's other sons. As for the second issue

we must go back to Ranulph's great grandfather Gronwy, who was one of Tewdwr Trevor's sons. Before marrying he had a Saxon mistress, whose name we do not know, and had a bastard son known as Y Gwreng (literally 'the peasant'). In order to restore the family reputation his son was called Gronwy Pefr, the 'pefr' being welsh for radiant or bright. This led to Ranulph, his son, being known as Ranulph Pefr, which with translation to Norman would sound like Ranulph Pever or Peverel. In all this led to progression from peasant to Lord in only three generations!

So far we have traced the family back 30 generations over a thousand years or so, but the story doesn't end there. In fact we may only have travelled just over a third of the way to this point. Ranulph Peverell was the first of the ancestors to bear this name and going back further we find only first names with in some cases nicknames or else reference to the father's first name. For sons their first name is followed by 'ap' then the father's first name, for daughters the two names are separated by 'ferch'. The names themselves are generally welsh (celtic) but occasionally they are roman (latin) in origin. Ralulph's great-great grandfather was Tewdwr Trevor, the Trevor referring to his place of birth or upbringing. Tewdwr was the Lord of several manors, including Whittington and Oswestry in Shropshire and the Maelors in Powys. He belonged to a junior branch of the first Royal Dynasty of Powys and his ancestors provide a great insight into the history of Wales.

Going back a further ten generations we find Gwynfiw Frych (or Gwynfiw 'the Freckled') was also Lord of Whittington, Oswestry, the Maelors and Chirk. His grandfather was Cynan Garwyn ('of the White Chariot') the King of Powys from 565 to 610. It is hard to find reliable information about such a historical figure as the only available materials include early Welsh poetry and hagiographies (a biography that treats its subject with undue reverence). We can say he ruled for a lengthy period, surmise that this was probably quite a peaceful reign and say it is unlikely that he ever faced the English in battle. This contrasts with his son Selyf Sarffgadau whose nickname means 'battle serpent', who succeeded his father but ruled for only six years before being killed at the Battle of Chester in 616. Preceding Cynan Garwyn were five generations headed by Kings of Powys, Brochwel Ysgithrog ('the Fanged'), Cyngen Glodrydd ('the Renowned'), Maun ap Pasgen, Pasgen ap Cadell and Cadell Ddyrnllwg ('King raised from the dust'). In fact the latter's kingdom was

probably not called Powys until after his lifetime and his nickname may have been added by later story tellers.

Another ten generations take us back to the beginning of the Common Era but I was unable to fulfil my wife's desire to trace her family back to Jesus or his close relations. Although the wife, Anna, of Beli Mawr ('the Great') we will meet shortly was claimed by one source to be a cousin of the Virgin Mary, this would have been 100 years too early and was probably caused by a copyist's error confusing him with the biblical figure Heli (Gospel of Luke). Again we gloss over a number of generations where we know so little other than their names until we arrive at Beli Mawr, born around 130 BC. Indeed there is much speculation that Beli was even his proper name, but he is described as Great and we must call him something, and again we know little about his deeds. In fact today he is most notable as a focal point for a number of Welsh pedigrees, one of which links to this view of the Peperell origins.

From Beli Mawr we can trace back another 23 generations to Brutus of Troy, the legendary eponym of Britain, who was born around 835 BC. For the period from Brutus to Beli Mawr we must face the fact that we may be dealing more with legend than history but nevertheless it makes for an interesting story and I will spend a little time on some of the highlights. Brutus, so called of Troy (a city that may have existed on the Gog Magog Downs of Cambridgeshire) was later said to have founded a city on the banks of the Thames called New Troy (Trinovantum, later to be known as London). He is described as the first King of Britain and his three sons are said to have ruled England, Scotland and Wales in a divided island. Credited with creating laws for his people he is said to have ruled for 24 years until his death, when he was buried in Trinovantum. His son Locrinus ruled England for ten mostly peaceful years before being killed by his first wife Gwendolen, whom he had rejected in favour of Estrildis. Gwendolin had retreated to Cornwall (previously her father's kingdom), where she assembled an army, and then set out to meet Locrinus's army. When the two armies met near the river Stour in Dorset, Locrinus was killed and Gwendolin ruled peacefully for 15 years after first having had Estrildis and her daughter Habren drowned in the river Severn.

Following Gwendolin seven generations of the family ruled as King of Britain before a daughter Cordelia ferch Llyr became Queen of Britain in 480 BC. She ruled for only 5 years before her nephew Cuneda seized the throne and she killed herself. Cuneda was the first of five generations of Kings of Britain until

the throne passed to the eldest son of the next generation and the lineage we are tracing descended through a younger son Antonius ap Seriol. There followed another eight generations before we arrive back to Beli Mawr. Perhaps I have been a little swift in passing over so many generations and so I might mention a few characters with interesting stories to tell. Membyr ap Madog (born 740 BC) killed his brother Malin in order to be sole ruler of Britain, ruled as a tyrant for 20 years and abandoned his wife and son for a life of sodomy, but then got his just desserts from being killed by a pack of wolves whilst on a hunting trip. His son Efrog (born 710 BC) had 20 wives and 50 children but still found time to wage war on the Gauls and found York, Edinburgh and Montrose. Bleidud ap Rhun (born 585 BC) allegedly encouraged necromancy and died believing he could fly with homemade wings, but ruled for 20 years and founded Bath. His son Llyr (born 550 BC) founded Leicester during his 60 year rule and is said to be the subject of Shakespeare's King Lear.

It is time to finish this Peperell saga, having traversed some 87 generations and 2849 years. I have still not managed to complete the 100 year gap in the direct line during the 15th century but remain confident that I found the line again in the 14th century. It is also worth remembering that there is another link to the distant past via the Prater family, but we will deal with that further elsewhere. Whilst the earliest records may blur the line somewhat between fact and fantasy the family certainly have an interesting story to tell.

Paul Fiddian – July 2014