

Our SMITH Family History

Smith is the commonest surname in the English speaking world, and produced over 12.5 million hits from England alone on one genealogy site. So the idea of trying to trace our Smith family seemed an impossible task at first, but has actually proved very worthwhile. The name Smith has pre 7th century Anglo-Saxon origins and derives from the word 'smitan' meaning to smite (strike with a heavy blow). This suggests that the name may have originated from soldiers, or more particularly guards of the local lord of the manor, which might explain its widespread occurrence. As surnames were not commonly used before 1375, except amongst the nobility, and parish records are generally only available after 1550 we would not expect to trace our Smith ancestors before this date. We have managed to find a Vincent Smith born around 1530 in South Kilworth, Leicestershire who I believe to be the earliest Smith ancestor related to my wife's family.

The practice of enclosure of land, creating the mosaic of landscape that we see in England today, started at the end of the 15th century in Leicestershire and was earlier there than in many other counties. As a result there were more tenant farmers and yeomen than elsewhere, which in turn can improve the chances of finding ancestors amongst the records of the time. South Kilworth was a small village in 1564, containing only 23 families, and many of the men would have been farmers or agricultural labourers. Apart from the parish records we can find no other records concerning these early Smiths; although a Walter Smith and a Francis Smith were Sheriffs of Leicestershire in 1536 and 1566 respectively it is very unlikely that they were related despite there being no more than 200 Smiths recorded in the county during this century. Instead it is more likely that Vincent Smith and his sons were either farm labourers or tenant farmers with small holdings.

Vincent may have had as many as four sons, the youngest of whom was Richard Smith born 1571 in South Kilworth, who married Cecilia Gurford also from South Kilworth in 1594. They also had four sons and one daughter, and the second son was a Richard Smith born 1597 in South Kilworth. This Richard was not content to stay in Kilworth, and seeking either employment or a wife (or both) he went to live in Kibworth Beauchamp ten miles away and married in 1616 Wyborow Bassett at Lyddington, Rutland some 20 miles away. Kibworth

consisted of three hamlets, one of which was Kibworth Beauchamp, and together they were several times larger than Kilworth perhaps offering more work. There were no Smith freeholders in Kibworth in 1630 and so he was probably working as a farm labourer for someone else. They had only a small family that I can find, and their second son was Solomon Smith born 1635 in Kibworth Beauchamp. Having married around 1676, Solomon had five children, the eldest of whom was Jarvis Smith born 1678 in Kibworth Beauchamp.

At the age of about 20 years, Jarvis moved to London some 100 miles away, where in 1700 he married a Mary Shittleton in Cheapside. Over the next 12 years they had six children, the youngest of whom was another Jarvis Smith born 1712 in Westminster. Things did not go too well for this Jarvis who at the age of 21 years was in Fleet Prison, which had been rebuilt in 1666 after having been burnt down in the Great Fire of London. Fleet Prison was a notorious place used to house debtors and bankrupts, and held up to 300 prisoners and their families. They had to pay for their food and lodging, but could also be subject to extortion from wicked Wardens. In 1733 he married Elizabeth Hunt at Rules of the Fleet, a lawless area just outside the prison walls, where marriages could be arranged for inmates. Elizabeth died in 1736, possibly during childbirth, but there is no record of any children. Jarvis must have found work and paid off his debts by then because in 1737 he married again to a Mary Foull who gave him two children before she too died in 1741. Jarvis married a third time in 1741 to a Mary Desbrough who gave him five children, the second of whom was a Thomas Smith born 1746 in Shoreditch.

Thomas remained in Shoreditch where he married Elizabeth Maynard in 1767 and they had six children in ten years. The next to youngest was James Smith born 1776 in Shoreditch who married an Esther Bromwell in 1800 at Shoreditch. James and Esther had five children, the oldest of whom was James William Smith born 1801 at Spitalfields. James William married Sarah Sophia Clifford in 1821 at Hackney and they had at least ten children together over 28 years. Between 1831 and 1841 they were living in the Bethnal Green Workhouse with four to eight children, though not necessarily all the time, and working as Weavers when they could. In 1847 James William deserted them to seek work in Macclesfield but by 1851 they were living in Brick Lane, Spitalfields and working as Silk Weavers. They continued in this line of work until 1871, living in Booth Street, Spitalfields, but by 1873 James William was

a Porter and he died the following year back in the Workhouse. Sarah died in 1880 also in the Workhouse at St George in the East. Despite great hardship they had managed to bring up nine children, poor Amelia died at home at 21 months having been baptized in the Workhouse at three months, and lived well into their seventies.

Their ninth child was George Smith born 1843 in Bethnal Green, who was only three years old when James William deserted the family, but he survived the early hardships and had a successful career as a Shoe and Boot Maker in West Ham, Essex. He had married Elizabeth Cordelia Tourell at Stepney, London in 1864 and they had seven children in Bethnal Green before having another three in West Ham. They must have been doing quite well as Elizabeth Cordelia had a servant helping her at home in 1881, but by 1911 six of their children had pre-deceased them. It is worth diverting for a moment to briefly examine Elizabeth Cordelia's family history. She was the 3x great-granddaughter of Paul Toureille born 1710 in Nimes, a Huguenot who had escaped France in 1753 because of religious persecution. He caught a boat bound for Cagliari, leaving his wife and five small children behind, before making his way via Switzerland and The Netherlands to Dublin. His wife Antoinette then set off, with four boys and an infant girl, to follow her husband to Dublin. With the help of Jacques Serces, himself a Huguenot refugee, and associates along the route she was able to take a carriage to Basle then on to Mainz, and eventually found her way to London.

Paul and Antoinette had another child at Spitalfields, and Paul continued to work in Silk Weaving as he had done in France. The family stayed in East London, where there was a French enclave, and continued to work in Silk Weaving. Over several generations the family became fully integrated into East London, until Elizabeth Cordelia met and married George Smith. Their eldest child was George Smith born 1866 in Bethnal Green, but who was living in West Ham as a teenager. Like his father George started off as a Shoe Maker, before working as a Boot Maker and Salesman with his father. In 1889 he married Ann Caroline Hill at Canning Town and they had seven children whilst living in West Ham. The first five children all died between the ages of two and six in the late 1890s, a period known for high child mortality particularly in towns and probably due to poor sanitation. The next child Lilian May Smith born 1896 survived and went on to live to the age of 82.

Lilian May worked as a tailoress before marrying Thomas James Leaford, an Accountant for a Patent Agency, in 1917 at West Ham. They had four children,

the eldest of these being Thomas Stuart Leaford born 1920 in West Ham. The other three were daughters Grace Alice, Inga Alice and Lilian Doreen Leaford. Thomas Stuart Leaford, a Customs Officer, married Phyllis Joan Peperell in 1943 at Romford, Essex and their firstborn was Patricia Mary Leaford (my wife) born 1947 at Harold Wood, Essex.

It is remarkable that we have been able to trace my wife's Smith ancestors back almost 500 years given how prevalent the surname is. The earliest families in Leicestershire were made easier to identify because they tended to have unusual Christian names and Smith was actually quite uncommon in that particular county. When Jarvis Smith moved to London in around 1700 it became more difficult as Smith was a very common surname there. But we were able to follow the family travails over the next two hundred years as they struggled to make a living in London. One wonders if they would have been better off if they had stayed in Leicestershire but then of course I would not have met my wife!

Paul Fiddian – October, 2014