

CROKER PRIZE FOR BIOGRAPHY 2022

2216 What Say You, Amelia?

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On Census night, April 7th, 1861, Adam Gregory, 21, and Amelia Ball, 17, had been married just 7 months¹ and had a 4-month-old daughter, Mary Ann.^{2,3} Like other silk-weaving families living in Lowton,³ and for those in other villages of Lancashire, things weren't looking rosy. First, those damned power looms; now, it's the politicians in London. Their new trade agreement with France might just be the last nail in the coffin for the English silk industry. What a way for a young couple to start married life!

My mother's maternal grandfather was born in Pennington, Lancashire, in 1840.⁴ When Adam was growing up, most silk cloth in England was woven on domestic handlooms in upstairs rooms of thousands of weavers' cottages across the county. But, even then, things were changing; powered weaving machines were becoming more common, and silk mills were starting to appear. Indeed, there were already two in Leigh, a bit over an hour's walk away.⁵ "In the peak years of handloom weaving around 1820, there were 170,000 handloom weavers in Lancashire. The 1851 census recorded 55,000 while the 1861 census records 30,000 and the 1871 census, 10,000. By 1891, few were left."⁶ Of course, Adam would not have known that the actual numbers had dropped by nearly 50% in the last 10 years, but he would have sensed that things were not right from the things his parents said around the dinner table.

By 1860, though, now an adult, he knew about the impact of tariffs and levies on family incomes. That was the year "a commercial treaty had been negotiated with France which, although it helped some British exports, worked against silk by allowing cheap French silk of lower quality to be imported into this country in competition with the domestic silk industry."⁷ If the silk road to Adam's and Amelia's future was disappearing from view, maybe they should take another one. The road to Bolton, perhaps?

At some point after Mary Ann's death, in 1862,^{8,9} they made the difficult decision to leave. Industrialised Bolton was just 12 miles from Lowton, but it was a world away from the life they had lived, in Lowton. On the 1871 Census, Adam is now a cotton weaver and he, Amelia and 3-year-old son, John Thomas, live at 10 Parrot Street.¹⁰ By then, Bolton had been home since at least 1868, because that's where John Thomas was born.¹⁰ The next Census shows Adam, Amelia and 2 sons- John Thomas, now 12, and James, 9, living at 40 Parrot, Street. Adam is still weaving cotton, but the boys are listed as "scholars".¹¹ This is probably the first time, ever, that any Gregory children had been listed as "scholars". If for no other reason than this, the short move had already paid-off; the age-old cycle of rural illiteracy had been broken. Had they stayed put, there would certainly have been precious-little money left over for "luxuries" like education. Back there, the boys would have started work from a very tender age- just as their parents and grandparents had.

It was the 1891 Census, though, that really confirmed that Adam's decision to leave Lowton was, indeed, a very-wise one. On it, he is no longer a Cotton Weaver; he is now a *Grocer*, and the family lives at 17 Hammond Street.¹² Even if his "shop" were just goods on shelves in the front room of their Hammond St home, he and Amelia are definitely a rung, or two, up the social ladder in the class-conscious world of Victorian England. This Census reveals other information, too. Both sons are young men and gainfully-employed as Cotton Weavers, although John Thomas-now married, with a 1-year-old daughter- lives at 26 Keswick St.¹² A "surprise" entry on the Census shows that our proud grandparents are actually new parents, themselves: a daughter, Amelia, was born to them in 1887.^{12, 13}

The start of the 20th-Century brings still-more surprises for what is now 3 generations of the Bolton-based Gregory family (thankfully, more children for Amelia, senior, were *not* among them!). Adam and the 2 Amelias now live at 82 Noble St, as does 29-year-old, James.¹⁴ However, it's James- *not* Adam- who is now the resident Grocer. Adam, has retired, and is listed as a "*Gentleman*", no less.¹⁴ John Thomas, is a grocer, too, and lives at 17 Hammond Street¹⁴, which had been the Gregory family home in 1891.^{12,14} Did he coincidentally rent the same property the family had lived at 20 years earlier? Or, had Adam owned it, then, and rented it to John Thomas when he wanted to set up a grocery shop of his own?

Whether Adam was a property owner as well as a retired "*Gentleman*" I really can't say. But I do know that, on his death in 1910,¹⁵ he left an Estate of almost £1,000.¹⁶ Not bad, really, for a young man who faced financial ruin as a silk weaver in a Lancashire village, until he dared try his luck elsewhere. He was not the only Gregory to do so, though. Both John Thomas and James left the mills and set up separate grocery stores for themselves.¹⁷ Their sister- my maternal grandmother, Amelia Gregory- demonstrated this, too. Soon after her mother's death, in 1911,¹⁸ she married Gustave Adolph Luders¹⁹ and, 2 years later, they boarded the SS "*Osterley*"²⁰ to start a new life, half a world away from everyone and everything in Bolton.

I am, indeed, fortunate to have come from a line of people like these: people who believed that things would improve if they dared to take a chance. Adam, in particular, demonstrated this when he left Lowton. His example showed his children the importance of these two traits. And, over a hundred years later, he is still a shining example that, with a dash of daring and a heartful of hope, you can actually change things- probably not the whole world, of course; but, certainly, your place in a small part of it.

References

¹ 1860 Wedding Record: Wigan, England, Church of England Marriages, 1754-1925; Lowton, St Luke, 1845-1876

² Mary Ann Gregory Baptism: Wigan, England, Church of England Baptisms, 1813-1911, Lowton, St Luke, 1859-1911

³ 1861 England Census

⁴ 1841 England Census

⁵ Paraphrased information from- Wilde, Peter D (1971) *Growth, decline and locational change in the English silk industry of the nineteenth century: a study in historical geography*. Doctoral thesis, Keele University.

⁶ Weavers' cottage- Wikiwand Silk Manufacturing in Leigh

⁷ Leigh Life- Silk Manufacturing in Leigh <https://leigh.life › id=leighlife:silkman>

⁸ England & Wales, Civil Registration Death Index, 1837-1915; Mary Ann Gregory Burial: 14th February, 1862; Lancashire, England, Church of England Deaths and Burials, 1813-1986, Bishop's Transcripts, Golborne, 1860-1869

⁹ Mary Ann Gregory Burial: 14th February, 1862; Lancashire, England, Church of England Deaths and Burials, 1813-1986, Bishop's Transcripts, Golborne, 1860-1869

- ¹⁰ 1871 England Census
- ¹¹ 1881 England Census
- ¹² 1891 England Census
- ¹³ England & Wales, Civil Registration Birth Index, 1837-1915- 1887, Q1-Jan-Feb-March
- ¹⁴ 1901 England Census
- ¹⁵ England & Wales, Civil Registration Death Index, 1837-1915, 1910, Q4-Oct-Nov-Dec
- ¹⁶ England & Wales, National Probate Calendar (Index of Wills and Administrations), 1858- 1995
- ¹⁷ U.K., City and County Directories, 1600s-1900s England>Lancashire> 1905 Kelly's Directory
- ¹⁸ England & Wales, Civil Registration Death Index, 1837-1915, 1911, Q4-Oct-Nov-Dec
- ¹⁹ England & Wales, Civil Registration Marriage Index, 1837-1915, 1912, Q1-Jan-Feb-March
- ²⁰ UK Outward Passenger Lists, 1890- 1960 London, 1914, January