

CROKER PRIZE FOR BIOGRAPHY 2020

2002 Alice: Tracing the Thread

by Robert Wills

Alice: Tracing the Thread

I have a convict ancestor, William Henry Lovett. Forget about him – another story – and focus on his wife, my 2x great grandmother. At marriage (7/12/1857, Singleton, NSW), and the births of two sons, she is Alice Sarah Gall.

As the informant for their registration, for son Henry (16/11/1858) she is 20 from Brandon, Suffolk; for son William (5/4/1861) she 21 from Norfolk.

The immigration lists for the “Fitzjames”, arrived Sydney 1/4/1857, record: “Single Woman, Alice Gall, 18, House Servant, from Norwich, Norfolk; C of E; Reads & Writes.” Perhaps. For her sons’ registrations she made “her X mark.” The diary of the Matron for the Single Women on the “Fitzjames” has eyebrow raising detail (“I am grieved to say theft, lying and slander prevail most shockingly”) but only says of Alice Gall: “Reads and Writes imperfectly.”

Some two years after husband William’s death (11/11/1861) widow Alice Sarah Lovett, 24, married Daniel Thomas Smith in Newcastle (he’s a butcher, she’s a servant, and both at the same address). Her parents are Richard Farrow and Maria Gall and she is from Thetford, Norfolk.

Four children follow: for Edward (1864) she is “Alice Sarah, formerly Farrer from Norfolk”; for Samuel (1867) she is “Sarah, formerly Gore from Essex.” Daniel Smith is the informant for these two.

For the next two children, she is the informant: for Mary Ann (1871) she is “Sarah Ann, formerly Farrow, from Norfolk”; for Florence (1874) she is “Sarah Ann, formerly Harrow, from Norfolk”.

The story so far ... my great great grandmother is Alice Sarah Gall, Alice Gall, Sarah Gall; she is Alice Sarah Farrow, Sarah Ann Farrow. She is from Brandon, Suffolk; she is from Norwich, Norfolk; she is from Thetford, Norfolk; she is from Essex. But ... her parents are Richard Farrow and Maria Gall.

A family bible surfaced. The Bible is formally inscribed: “Sarah Farrow, Thetford, Church Sunday School, REWARD, January 29th 1854.” Then comes a later entry: “Alalis Gall was married on the 7th Decr 1857 To William Lovett.” Further entries record the births of their two sons, then William Lovett’s “deth.”

The last entry in the bible is “Sarah Ann Smith Departed life 4 April 1878.”

There, in brief, is the life of my 2xgreat grandmother. But where did she come from? And why all the different names? Perhaps she was illegitimate, and so was known as Gall rather than Farrow?

The various leads I followed included a Sarah Alice Farrow born in 1839 in Blofield, not so far from Norwich. Then there was a promising family of Farrows, generations of them, spread among the villages of Great and Little Welnetham, only fifteen miles south of Thetford.

Visiting England in 1990/1 I prowled churchyards. In the grounds of St Thomas a Beckett at Great Welnetham I found a weathered headstone:

“In Memory of Ann, the wife of Joseph Farrow who died Jan 11th 1823 Aged 59 years.” Then this verse:

“Our life hangs by a single thread
Which soon is cut and we are dead.”

My notes state – “Next 2 lines illegible & too cold to try further” (3/1/1991).

My full write-up reads: “Very cold day. Grave digger at bottom of grave in deep brown soil. He didn’t know Farrow as he’s not from around here. He told me no plan, ancient or modern, of graveyard, which makes his job hard. Undertaker simply asks him to try to find ‘a clear spot.’ Found several modern Farrow. Church itself very ugly from outside – cement rendered. Couldn’t get in. Discovered later it’s very old. Found old Farrow grave underneath ancient spreading tree. Could only read half of 4 line verse. 19th century stones harder to read (blurred, overgrown) than some 18th century ones.”

My research at County Record Offices captured three pages of Farrow in the 1851 census for Brandon. They were living at: White Walk, Ferry Street, Thetford Road (Webb’s Cottages), Leach’s Square, White Lion St, London Road (Wood’s Cottages). They were: Gardener, Pauper, Ag Lab, Furcutter, Unemp, Flint Maker, but mostly Ag Lab. Interesting but, I thought, not what I wanted.

Like a good descendant of Ag Labs (over the centuries Ag Labs have richly fertilised my tree) I let things lie fallow. The 1990s were busy years in my working life. In 2000 I resumed the hunt and wrote to an English researcher specialising in Norfolk genealogy. I received a prompt reply from Ms Fitzpatric:

I am happy to say that in the 1851 Census I found Sarah Ann Farrow and her family living in Brandon, Suffolk. Although Sarah was born in Harlow, Essex. Either Jemima Farrow’s age is wrongly given or she is Richard’s 2nd wife.

The 1851 census for Brandon has at Thetford Rd (Webb’s Cottages): Richard Farrow, 42, Ag Lab, from Brandon; wife Jemima, 32, from Norfolk All Saints; and seven children. The ages of the eldest William, 19 and Edward, 18, make it clear Jemima, 32, is a second wife (as Ms Fitzpatric suggested). Sarah Ann Farrow, daughter, 11, scholar, is the fourth child, and the first four are all born in Harlow, Essex. It seems their mother, Maria Gall, died between 1840 and 1846, perhaps when giving birth to Sarah? Richard Farrow remarried, and the two youngest children, 5 and 2, are doubtless from this new union.

I had all this in my notes from 1990, but at the time was thrown off track by Richard’s wife being Jemima, not Maria.

Did Alice Sarah use her mother’s name Gall because she resented her father’s new marriage, kept her mother’s memory warm by taking her name? Or did Sarah Ann Farrow, born Harlow, Essex, and who later lived in Brandon, Suffolk, decide, when emigrating to Australia, to become a new person, to be Alice Sarah Gall? Possibly.

And Google gave me several options for the last lines of the epitaph. I prefer:

“Then boast not, Reader, of thy might,
Alive at noon, and dead at night.”