

CROKER PRIZE FOR BIOGRAPHY 2020

2033 But Names Will Never Hurt You

by Ray Parkins

But Names Will Never Hurt You

What? Names will never hurt you? Well, what about that tragic double-suicide of Romeo and Juliet, then? That whole sorry affair was all about names and the problems they can create. And, sometimes, names can create problems for us genealogists, too, as we seek out our elusive ancestors. They can make the difference between us having a pleasant ferry cruise across the harbour, or a perilous voyage through the uncharted, and sometimes-turbulent, waters of the Sea of Consanguinity.

My sister had started some Family Tree research and believed our 2x greatgrandmother to be one Elizabeth Jane Dustan, born in 1823 at "Uny Le Lant, Cornwall."¹ This particular Elizabeth Jane had married Benjamin Parkins at Menheniot, on Christmas Day, 1847.² Then, at some unknown time after that, the couple left Cornwall to start a new life in faraway Australia. I had a pair of names, two Cornish villages, and a couple of dates; not a lot to go on, true, but a good start, nevertheless. Time, now, to set sail on my very own voyage of discovery.

My first port of call was Lelant, to check the Baptismal Records of St Uny's church. They showed that two Dunstone daughters were baptised there on October, 19th, 1823. They were registered as Emma and Jane.³ What? Just, Jane? Why not Elizabeth Jane? Or, even just Elizabeth? "Jane's" and Emma's parents were Elizabeth and James, and her father was listed as a tinman (probably a tin smelter, or tinsmith). The spelling of the surname was different, too, but that commonly occurs. So far, a couple of niggles- but, no real problems.

I decided, next, to research their emigration to Australia, then go back to verify the couple's wedding information. One Ships' Passenger List I consulted showed that Benjamin Parkins, aged 32, and his 24-year old wife, Jane, arrived in Port Jackson, aboard the 'Walmer Castle', on December 30th, 1848.⁴ A second shipping record revealed that they were two of 301 Government Emigrants who'd left Plymouth on September 12th, that same year.⁵ As such, they would have travelled crammed up in Steerage, where, "Hygiene was poor at the best of times. in conditions that were ideal for the spread of disease."⁶

The first List contained both a pleasant surprise, and a terrible shock. The surprise? A daughter had been "born on board",⁴ if, indeed, you could call giving birth at sea, in Steerage, pleasant. The real shock, however, was finding that "Jane's" birthplace was listed as Gwennap!⁴ This meant that any information obtained from Lelant was now invalid and irrelevant. And, to make matters worse, I had now found two "Janes" but still hadn't come across even one Elizabeth Jane. Perhaps she'd appear in the Menheniot wedding records, or when I reached my new destination of Gmi¹ nap.

On first inspection, the wedding information looked correct. They were, indeed, married at St Lalluwys's Church. At least I was in the right place this time! There was a simple, hand-written "X" on one line of the Certificate, around which were the words: "The mark of Jane Dunstan."² They'd been placed there by Richard Martin, the officiating Vicar.² This annotation confirmed information from the first Arrivals List, namely that "Jane" could read, but not write.⁴ Worryingly, though, there was no still sign of Elizabeth Jane; only a third sighting of you know who! And, just when I thought things couldn't get worse, they did. I hit a submerged rock that shook my ship to its core, sending Elizabeth Jane and her tinman father flying overboard. The Certificate showed that James Dunstan, the proud Father of the Bride, was actually a blacksmith!²

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Still seaworthy, only just, I limped off towards Gwennap. Perhaps, there, I would find a blacksmith, named James Dunstan, who'd fathered a daughter, called Jane, around 1 823. Or, was this asking too much? Gwennap was in an area once-rich in copper, and part of "the richest square mile on Earth." ⁷ My lengthy search through the 1841 Census records for the district ⁸ definitely reflected this. There were hundreds of copper miners, but very few blacksmiths. I found less than a dozen in all, and two were from the same family. Since blacksmithing was, "a craft that was often a family tradition, with the skills passing from father to son," ⁹ this certainly made sense. The two blacksmiths in question were recorded on the Census at the Wheal Squire Copper Mine, and they even had the same names James Dunstone. One was the father; the other, his son. Also listed in the household were wife; Elizabeth, and daughters; Elizabeth, Jane, Mary, and Louisa- ⁸

I decided to cross-check this information with that from local Baptismal records. Those from Holy Trinity church, in nearby St Day, showed that Jane Dunstone, aged 2 years and 1 1 months, ¹⁰ was baptised on Christmas Day, 1 826, along with her infant sister, Marye ¹¹ This quite specific information meant that she had been born in late 1 823: a match. Her parents' first names: another match. And her father's occupation was consistent with the Census data: bingo! Had I just discovered our Cornish 2x great-grandmother? Yes- but, yet again, she was not my sister's Elizabeth Jane.

So, just where was she? Back in Lelant? Or, still treading water at that submerged rock? No, not at all, and it wasn't long before I did actually find her. Twice; once in Surry Hills ¹² then, again, in Bathurst. ¹² My surprise discovery was not the 2x great-grandmother I'd set out to find at the beginning of my voyage. She was, in fact, the infant daughter "born at sea", aboard the 'Walmer Castle'. ⁴ Time, now, to drop anchor and raise a glass to my most elusive ancestor: my consanguineous great-grandaunt, ¹³ Elizabeth Jane Parkins.

And, after that? Why, I'll have to break the good news to my sister.

References

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