

Victorian Families

As December arrives many householders will be planning family gatherings, while preparing cards for more distant friends and relations, including scattered cousins. If our ancestry included those large families typical of Victorian times, many of us probably have a whole army of distant cousins out there somewhere, of whom we are unaware.

Queen Victoria herself set an example by producing nine children with Prince Albert after their marriage in 1840. As they grew up the girls were caught in the established custom of diplomacy by being married off to other royal families in Europe. The result was that these finished up as each others' distant cousins, sharing some genetic faults and virtues.

Meanwhile, many of Victoria's subjects were producing children on a similar scale, without space or domestic support of a palace and also needing to disperse them afterwards.

One local family which illustrate this well was that of Edward and Elizabeth Lewis of Montford Bridge, who started married life at Preston Montford in 1820. Edward, 25, from Alberbury was gardener there, while Elizabeth Jones, barely 18, from Kinnerley was probably a domestic in the Hall. It was then owned by the Hill family of Hawkesone and occupied by Sir Francis Brian Hill.

At first they probably occupied part of the old farmhouse, but after 1829 the new owner, John Wingfield of Onslow, began improving cottages on the estate. Thus they moved to a new one in 'Drury Lane', part of the old road, now bypassed by Telford's Holyhead Road improvements. This would become the family home for the rest of the century, at a time when many ordinary farm workers moved frequently from one job and tied cottage to another.

Their first child John had died in his first year, but six daughters and one son followed on during the next seventeen years. As usual the eldest, Anne, had to leave early to make room for additional siblings, taking several 'living in' domestic posts over the following thirty years - Shrawardine, Conover and Southampton. Finally, still unmarried, she returned in the 1860s to be with her widowed mother.

Sister Martha by now had also entered domestic service, but unfortunately produced a child, Charles, whom she had to leave with her parents in order to take up another domestic post. Both girls then took to dressmaking for a living, Martha using her skills at the Shelton Asylum before renting cottages elsewhere in the parish. There is little evidence for contact with Charles, who may have been viewed as an 'embarrassment'.

Sisters Mary and Jane both married Shrewsbury tradesmen who unfortunately died young. Mary stayed with her young family at her husband's old family home in Stapleton, but Jane had to downsize to a 'court' off Barker Street, an area subsequently cleared as 'slums'.

Frances, after some domestic service, married and settled in Mountfields, but was later left alone with two sons and also turned to dressmaking for support.

By contrast, the youngest, Emma, was much more fortunate in life. She married childhood friend and neighbour John Lewis, son of local blacksmith over the bridge, who was joining his elder brother in an ironmongers business in Frankwell. Their new home was in New Street which they soon filled with nine children.

Son John eventually took over the successful business along with a relation, John Froggatt, while younger daughter Amy married Henry Morris of an even more successful grocery business nearby.

Only-son William was the last to leave Drury Lane nest, marrying Mary Birch, from across the river at Broomfields. Just then in the 1860s, Bicton's new school was built leaving Old School House available for them. As a bricklayer, he had work locally.

Summing up, this family story certainly illustrates many features of those times:

Marriage partners had to be found in the local neighbourhood; girls could travel far for domestic work, but this could hinder as much as help, also 'accidents' could happen; outside marriage, girls had limited career options; for boys there were more local opportunities; in the right conditions families were large, but some were cut short by widowhood; towns were attracting 'surplus' rural population offering wider job opportunities; congested housing and long working hours were unhealthy; families had to provide their own 'social services'; landed estates were important in rural affairs etc. etc.

Later in the century, the new generation were growing up in a changing world with greater mobility, from bicycles to trains, improving public services and technology generally, all of which were experienced by the seven surviving children born to William and Mary at Old School House.

The oldest, Walter, was particularly restless, looking beyond just following father building walls. It so happened that the USA was expanding and welcoming migrants at this time, so that Liverpool Steamship lines were actually advertising in newspapers, including the Shrewsbury Chronicle. Thus Walter set off and was last heard of in Chicago.

Later, brother Fred also set off, find building work in New York, but the nature of this ruined his health forcing him to return and spend the rest of his life in the family home, while others left.

Younger brother meanwhile found work in Warrington while Ernest followed an apprenticeship in Shrewsbury, before marrying and settling there for a while.

Sisters Anne, Mary and Ethel found husbands via domestic work in both private homes and medical institutions, finishing up in Nottingham, Albrighton and Liverpool.

Today, this trend continues, as some of our children become almost international with fewer living nearby - so emails, Skype and phone are put to good use as well as the traditional card.



Elizabeth Lewis 1803–1872