

Roots in the Forest



**WFFHS summer lunch
St Mary's Church, Walthamstow**

WALTHAM FOREST FAMILY HISTORY SOCIETY

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Roots in the Forest

The Journal of the Waltham Forest Family History Society

September 2024

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THE FAMILY HISTORY FEDERATION CONFERENCE 2024

– Tim Valder-Hogg & Mark Carroll

Every year the Family History Federation (FHF) holds a conference in London to which delegates from all its constituent societies are invited. This year was special, as it marked the 50th anniversary of the founding of the Federation. We were there on behalf of Waltham Forest FHS. Tim was our voting representative, so he attended the two formal elements of the conference – the Annual General Meeting (AGM) and the General Meeting (GM). The rest of the time was devoted to talks, lunch, and a tour of a local cemetery, with the chance to talk to committee members from other family history societies.

The meeting began with an introductory welcome by the Chairman of the Federation, Steve Manning. He was his usual ebullient and positive self, but he reminded the audience that he will be stepping down from the office in three years' time, when the FHF will need a replacement of similar calibre. The first talk was by Nick Barratt, former FHF President and well-known genealogist from the BBC series, *Who Do You Think You Are?* He gave a fascinating account of the detective work involved in his recent search for the origins of his grandmother, Dotty. She had not known who her own mother was, but Nick was able to give us a spellbinding story of his great-grandmother's identity and life – an account that ranged over numerous types of sources and information, and included bigamy, an imposter, travel across three continents, name changes, documents in several languages, and DNA testing. The second talk before lunch was by Michelle Parks from the Church of Latter-Day Saints. She gave an overview of several of the features of the FamilySearch website, a source that many of us are familiar with.

At the AGM and GM the usual business was transacted. The finances of the Federation seem to be healthy, and the organisation is developing its activities to appeal to a wider public.

Over lunch Mark chatted with several delegates, one of whom was Colin Chapman, the originator of the *Chapman County Codes* and a current Vice-President of the Federation. When the name of Waltham Forest FHS was mentioned, he recalled how in 1978 he had worked

with our own President, Barrie Burton, in the early days of establishing FHSs nationwide. Small world! Tim chatted with the representative from London, Westminster and Middlesex FHS, whose 'patch' abuts ours in the Edmonton area.

After lunch we were treated to a review of the developments in family history research over the past 50 years, with a look ahead to the near future. The speaker was Dr Janet Few, the current President of the Federation who had also recently given a talk to Waltham Forest FHS. She brought back memories (if you were old enough!) of working in dusty archives in central London in the days before computers. She welcomed the advent of digitised resources available at the click of a mouse in one's own home, but also warned against uncritical over-reliance on them. She also challenged delegates to think less traditionally in order to enhance the demographic of current and future generations of family historians in the UK, so as to increase diversity, attract young people, and rely less on printed information when trying to attract new members.



***Figure 1. Tour of Bunhill Fields cemetery
(Tim is second from the left)***

Finally, there was the tour of Bunhill Fields cemetery, just opposite the conference venue in City Road, Islington (ref 1). Tour guides took groups of 15 delegates round the burial ground (Fig 1), which was closed in 1854 but has the graves of numerous famous English people – most of a non-conformist religious persuasion. We were allowed into the restricted areas, where we were given brief accounts of the lives of some of the 123,000 folk buried there: Daniel Defoe (of *Robinson Crusoe* fame); John Bunyan (of *Pilgrim's Progress* fame); William Blake, the poet, artist and mystic; Susanna, the resourceful mother of John and Charles Wesley (who jointly founded the Methodist Church); and several more. Fortunately, it was a warm sunny day!

So, what did we take away from the day? Well, the Federation is in good health under its current dynamic leadership and competent administrators. However, there are challenges ahead for all of us when it comes to maintaining that position, recruiting replacements for postholders in each FHS, preserving archives, and appealing to a wider community in order to attract new members. We all love our family history research – we just have to translate that passion into action!

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* * * * *

A ZERO DAY OLD BABY?

– Mark Carroll

An 1891 census entry has the following family living in the village of Hundon, near Bury St Edmunds, Suffolk: Joseph ORRISS, 30 years, married, farm labourer, born Suffolk; Susanna, wife, 28 years, born Suffolk; Alice, daughter, 4 years, born Hundon; Philip, son, 2 years, born Suffolk; and Ethel, daughter, 0 days, born Suffolk. So, from this entry one would infer that Ethel was born on the day of the census. Presumably the enumerator came to the Orriss home to collect the information and found a newborn baby there?

On 10th February 1684 in Drayton, Norfolk (now the outskirts of Norwich), three children of Edward Grey and Leah HYRNE were baptised, named Abednego, Meshach and Shadrack. Fourteen days later, they were buried in Drayton on 24th February 1684.

Edward and Leah had children almost every year, both before and after 1684 totalling 11. Could these be triplets?

In Rattlesden, Suffolk, on 9th December 1894, James BUXTON aged 79, the son of Ezekiel Buxton and Elizabeth AVES, was baptised. The next entry of baptism on the same day is Maria BUXTON, aged 46, the wife of Henry COBBOLD, the daughter of James Buxton (above) and Mercy GOWERS.

Father and daughter baptised together!

The birth certificate of Sarah BUXTON, born 18th June 1853, another daughter of James Buxton and Mercy Gowers, was registered in Rattlesden, Suffolk. Twenty-one years later Sarah was baptised in St Philip in Dalston, London.

Sarah married at St Mary, Walthamstow, on 29th May 1880, using the Christian name Rose.

In Scotland, my family's Christian name for females is Grizel, sometimes changed to Grace. It's not a name that I might have chosen for my daughter!

Finally, on Tuesday 4th August 1825 in West Wickham, Cambridge-shire, Ann HARTGROVE was buried. The cause of death is shown as 'a visitation of God'.

Did this occur in church on the Sunday before?

FIRE ENGINE MAKERS IN WALTHAMSTOW

– Peter Williams & Mark Carroll

Henry and Otto SIMONIS were German Jewish brothers who established a business making fire engines in Walthamstow in north-east London in the early 20th century. What were their origins, what was their family background, and what was their legacy?

Family background

Henry Salomon and Otto Daniel Simonis (Fig 1) were born in Hamburg, Germany, on 31st August 1878 and on Christmas Day 1882, respectively. They were the sons of Eduard Simonis and Bertha née SAMSON, who had married in Hamburg on 3rd October 1877. The family was Jewish, and there was a long history in that part of Europe of merchants of both Sephardi (Iberian peninsula) and Ashkenazi (Eastern Europe) Jewish descent (ref 1). Although the populace of Hamburg over the centuries had shown some antipathy towards them, they were tolerated. They were made to reside outside the city limits in Altona, but the Jews in that part of north-west Germany did not suffer the kind of pogroms (violent attacks) that forced many of that faith to leave their communities in Eastern Europe and flee to Britain at the end of the 19th century. Little is known about Henry and Otto's childhood, except that their father was a merchant. Given their later acumen in business and engineering, they likely received a good education within a supportive family of considerable means. Henry is known to have had a degree in law (LLD) from a German university.

Henry and Otto first appear in the English censuses in 1911, so presumably they arrived here some time after 1901. Emigration is invariably ascribed to either a “push factor” or a “pull factor”. Given Hamburg's relative tolerance towards Jews, it seems unlikely that the brothers were forced to leave their German homeland. On the other hand, emigrants often joined relatives already settled abroad. There was indeed a Ludwig Simonis, who died in 1896 in Lambeth, south London, at the age of 49; in 1881 he was living in Yorkshire with his family. He was probably the same 21-year old man who was staying in 1867 in Germany with his 24-year old brother Eduard in an apartment owned by their father, Salomon Simonis (ref 2). Eduard was Henry and Otto's father, so it seems likely that their uncle, the

Hamburg merchant and draper Ludwig, was the first to settle in England.



***Figure 1. Henry and Otto Simonis
(Photo courtesy of Tara Greenwood)***

Otto himself was granted the status of naturalised British subject in 1908, as he had been living in the United Kingdom for at least five years previously. In his application Otto stated that he was a 25-year-old unmarried German living in Haverstock Hill, London, and “a partner in a firm of manufacturers of and dealers in fire appliances”. So by 1908 the Simonis brothers had already established their company here, a development confirmed by their entry in the 1911 census of England. Their father Eduard died on 11th November 1908 in Hamburg and was buried in the Jewish Cemetery to the north of the city. In his will, made on 30th January 1907 (ref 3) and proved in London, he bequeathed funds out of his estate as a loan to his two sons, to help develop further their business enterprise. Their mother Bertha remained a widow until her death in 1942.



***Figure 2. Henry and Lily Simonis, c1930, London
(Photo courtesy of a grandchild of Henry Simonis)***

Henry Salomon Simonis married Lily Hetty BORGZINNER in 1909 in Marylebone (Fig 2); she had been born on 15th March 1887 in the St Pancras area of central London. In 1911 the couple was living in a substantial nine-room house in Grays Inn Road, St Pancras; with them were Otto and their baby daughter Norah. The two brothers were described as ‘fire engine makers’ and born in Germany. Henry and Lily had a total of six children: Norah Mathilda (1910), Edward Alec Schwerin (1911), Madeleine Emily (1913), Ruth Helen (1914), Vera Louise (1915) and Paul David (1919) (Fig 3).

From these dates one wonders if Henry Simonis stayed in the capital during the Great War of 1914-18. Given his German nationality, he was probably interned for the duration of the war, and so he doubtless felt a degree of conflicted allegiance towards the two main protagonists in that war. There is some evidence for his internment: there is a four-year gap (1915-1919) in the births of his children; and in 1917 he wrote in German a treatise on Jewish law during his stay “in an internment camp at Alexandra Palace”, north London. Other folk with German names suffered considerable hostility in London around 1914 and had their businesses attacked, especially those in the East End. Some members of the Borgzinner family changed their surname to the anglicised form of BONNER – no doubt to avoid the discrimination shown towards German nationals in the early 20th century. Henry himself did not acquire naturalised British status until 1927; at that time he was a ‘fire engineer’ living at 53 Belsize Avenue, Hampstead (ref 4). In his application he also requested naturalisation for his son, Paul David, who had been born in Germany. Living with him in the family home were his parents-in-law, Alexander Borgzinner (died 1925) and Bella (or Bilha) Borgzinner née LURIA (died 1938).



*Figure 4. Otto Simonis in later life
(Photo courtesy of Tara Greenwood)*

Otto did not marry until much later, when he was in his early 40s (Fig 4). In 1924 in Marylebone, London, he wed Angele C R BERNSTEIN or BYRNE, who was born in Paris, France, and whose father had died when she was only three. She had trained at art school in London and worked as a commercial illustrator for newspapers and magazines, at a time when it was unusual for women to go out to work. The couple went on to have two children: Pamela J (1925) and Peter G E A (1926) (Fig 3). The family lived in a large house in Mill Hill, north London. Shortly before his marriage Otto was involved in a court case. A report in the *West London Observer* of Friday 4th May 1923 described the claim by a French language teacher, Violette Madeline DAVID, that her child born on 18th October 1922 was the outcome of “misconduct” between herself and Otto at his Maida Vale residence. He admitted sleeping with Violette “on a few and unexciting occasions” but was not convinced he was the child’s father. Nevertheless he accepted responsibility, agreed to support her financially, and was ordered by the court to pay her 10 shillings a week.

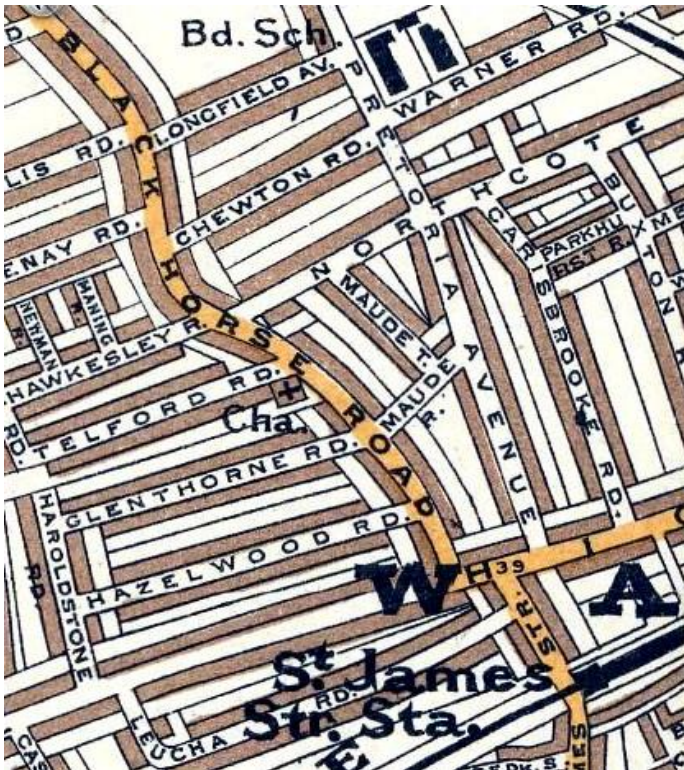
The engineering background and its Walthamstow connection

What of Henry and Otto as ‘fire engine makers’? *Kelly’s Directory of Essex*, 1914, has an entry on page 968 under “Engineers, mechanical”: Simonis, Henry & Co, 13 Pretoria Avenue, Walthamstow NE. So although **the** brothers lived at that time in central London, they established their business at the ‘Pretoria Works’ in north-east London (Fig 5).

Pretoria Avenue was (and still is) near St James Street station in central Walthamstow, and ran parallel to Blackhorse Road to where it met the High Street (Fig 6). The Pretoria Works were probably towards the High Street end of the road. By 1911 the population of that part of metropolitan Essex had increased substantially, helped in part by good transport links to central London and the docks, and by having land available for industrial development.



Figure 5. Letterhead of Simonis & Co., Walthamstow, 1913



*Figure 6. 1905 Map of Walthamstow (part)
(Image courtesy of David Rumsey Maps Center, Stanford Libraries)*

The firm of Simonis & Co made fire engines, to which they attached their distinctive name badge (Figs 7a and 7b). The brothers collaborated particularly effectively in this respect with the vehicle-manufacturing firm of Commer. Their appliances were highly regarded for their superior performance, capable in 1912 of delivering over 400 gallons of water per minute. They were exported all over the world, including to Canada, Australia and Germany.



Figure 7a Early Walthamstow fire engine



*Fig 7b Name badge of Simonis & Co.
The Simonis legacy*

The brothers' engineering business was evidently successful. They were awarded patents for a variety of innovative products, including submersible pumps, breathing apparatus, fire escapes, fire extinguishers, and even a plough and artificial jam (ref 5). Otto was

apparently the main inventor, as well as being the firm's sales representative (Fig 8). He travelled to Australia in 1913 to give several demonstrations there: of a specialised helmet that provided firefighters with protection against smoke inhalation; an adjustable nozzle to regulate the flow of water from the hose pipe; and a liquid-air mine rescue apparatus (ref 6). Within a few years the brothers had outgrown their premises in Walthamstow and had relocated to Park Royal in Willesden, north-west London. There, the more spacious premises had access to the water of nearby Regents Canal, so that each new fire engine could have its performance fully tested.



***Figure 8. Otto (in front seat) and a Simonis 'domestic fire engine', 1913.
This engine was intended for the South Australian Fire Brigade.
(Photo courtesy of Tara Greenwood)***

Henry died on 28th July 1934 in the Hampstead area at the relatively young age of 54. He was buried in Golders Green Jewish Cemetery in north London, in plot no 3 in West London Section C, row 45 (ref 7) (Fig 9). His widowed mother Bertha was interviewed in 1939 by a UK Government committee, which decided that she should not be interned for the duration of World War 2 – even with her German nationality, as a woman in her 80s she was hardly a threat to the nation! After her death in Epsom, Surrey, on 22nd June 1942 at the age of 83, she was buried near her elder son (row 55, plot 13). Otto was towards the end of his life in poor health and suffered several

strokes. He had moved into a care home in Newbury, Berkshire, by September 1939, and died in Cedar Grange Nursing Home in Caterham, Surrey, on 28th December 1943, three days after his 61st birthday. In his will (ref 3), written in July 1939 and proved at Llandudno on 12th October 1944, he appointed his wife Angele as his executor. She remarried in the summer of 1944, was then using the first name of Yvonne, and became the wife of Edmund Alfred WATERTON. Otto's estate amounted to just over £4,400 gross, all of which he left to Angele.



***Figure 9. Graves of Henry and Lily Simonis
(Photo credit: Mark Carroll)***

Henry's wife Lily remained a widow for over 40 years. In 1957 she made a will (ref 3) while she was living in the family home at 3 Chalcot Gardens, a late-Victorian house in a private road in Belsize Park, London NW. Staying with her at the time were her unmarried daughters Norah and Madeleine. She appointed the former as her executor; made a specific bequest of the household effects in the family home and her jewellery to be shared between those two

daughters; and left her residuary estate to be held in trust for the benefit of all her surviving children. After her death in Brighton, Sussex, on 9th April 1975, she was buried next to her husband (row 45, plot 4; Fig 9).

Acknowledgements

We thank Tara Greenwood née Simonis and Hazel Kann née Simonis for additional information and for providing family photographs.

Author background

Peter Williams is a local historian based in Forest Gate, east London. He is also an expert on the history of the British fire service. Together with Mark Gorman he has published a number of local histories related to Wanstead Flats near Forest Gate. Mark Carroll is Secretary of Waltham Forest Family History Society.

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A VISIT TO THE NEW SOCIETY OF GENEALOGISTS

– Mark Carroll

Some of you will no doubt be members of the Society of Genealogists (SoG) in London or will have visited their rather decrepit premises near the Barbican in the past (Fig 1a). The SoG has some wonderful resources for family history research, but its old building was poorly equipped as a modern archive: accessibility inside was not great, social amenities were substandard, and the meeting room was cramped. Basically, it was no longer fit for purpose. In 2022 the decision was taken to sell the old SoG building and to relocate into a modern building somewhere in London. After a false start, new premises were found in a brand new building in Islington, between Angel and Old Street underground stations, at 40 Wharf Road N1 7GS. Much of 2023 was spent packing up many of the SoG's documentary holdings and digitising others. By the end of the year, they were ready; they just needed some family historians to try out the new facilities before a formal opening to the public in January 2024. As an SoG member, I applied to join one of several groups in December 2023 in a 'soft opening' or dummy run.



Figure 1a. SoG premises, 2014



Figure 1b. SoG premises, 2024

The first thing you notice when you walk into the new premises is how light and modern they are (Fig 1b). The two levels are served by wide stairs and an easily accessible lift. The offices have glass walls, so the staff are visibly an integral part of the enterprise. The next change one notices on the lower level is how little space is given over to shelving. Some remains, to accommodate relevant general books, but most of the SoG's holdings are now in two forms: digitised and made available on the dozen or so computers there; or stored in a nearby warehouse and able to be made available if ordered at least one week in advance. This represents a modern approach to archiving that we shall have to get used to in future. It does though mean that you need to give careful thought to advance planning of an intended visit. I myself had pre-ordered some parish registers for Kent and Suffolk. In the old building at the Barbican, I would have taken down the relevant books from the county shelves. Now they had been digitised and were loaded on to the computer assigned to me for the day.

After a tour of the new facilities by the SoG's resident genealogist, Else Churchill, I made my way back to 'my' computer. It was a slow start, as there were no instructions for how to access the pre-loaded

registers, but volunteer staff were on hand to help ‘newbies’. I soon found what I wanted, and then moved on to some of the family history websites available for free on any SoG computer: Ancestry, FindMyPast, The Genealogist, British Newspaper Archives, among others. My main interest that day, though, concerned the resources of FamilySearch’s online catalogue. The SoG is an FS Affiliate Library, so it can access all the images of parish registers filmed over the years by FamilySearch that are otherwise blocked when using your computer at home. Wonderful!

I made limited use of the other amenities there that day. The new unisex toilets are far superior to those in the old building; the meeting room is more modern, as is the social area with its coffee-making and dining facility, with comfy chairs; the bookshop is smaller than before; but the staff are just as friendly and helpful. To some extent the new premises are work in progress while ongoing improvements are made and staff and volunteers become familiar with the new arrangements. The SoG’s digital holdings will continue to expand, so that members can access them from the comfort of their own homes. If you can make the journey by public transport into central London, it is well worth considering becoming a member of the SoG; its Standard membership starts at £85 a year.

You can find further information from the SoG website: www.sog.org.uk.

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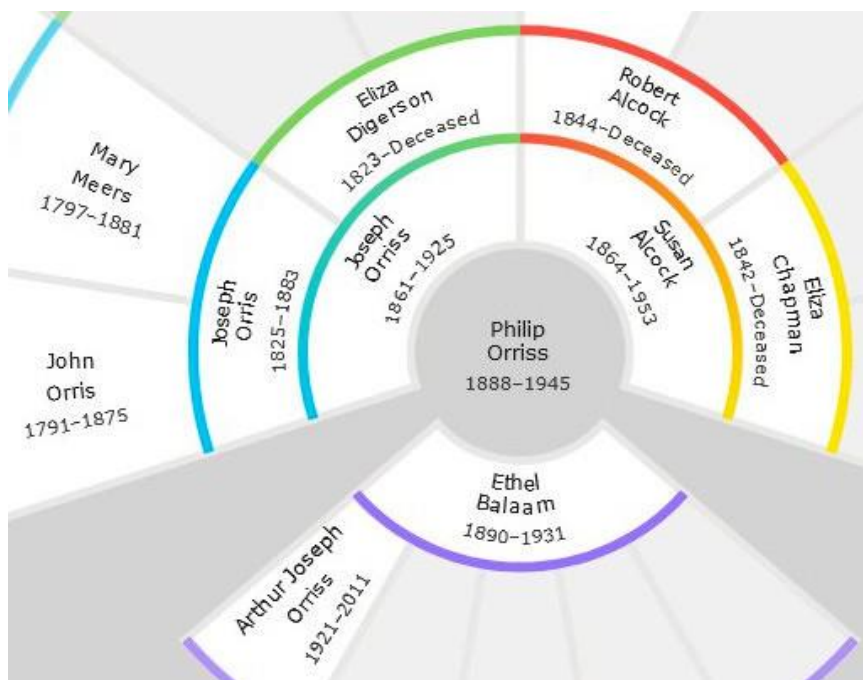
A FAMILY COINCIDENCE

– Mark Carroll

I gave a talk on a topic of family history in March 2024 to a group in Chelmsford, Essex. In it I mentioned the fact that three of my maternal ancestors had ended their days either in a workhouse or in an institution that had previously been one. One of the ancestors was my 4x great-grandfather, Thomas ORRISS (1754-1838), who died in the workhouse in Haverhill, Suffolk. After the talk the chairman of the group, Terry BALAAM, came up to me with his wife in a state of some excitement. They told me that they too had someone with the surname Orriss in their family tree: a Philip Orriss had married an Eileen Balaam in 1921 in Linton, in Cambridgeshire, but just across

the county boundary with Suffolk. They knew that Philip was from the village of Hundon near Bury St Edmunds, and thought he had been born around 1898. So I gave Terry my email address and awaited further information. With such a rare surname in such a small area of England, surely we were related?

That evening an email arrived from Terry with further details of his Philip Orriss. I went searching online in the usual websites and also pulled out from my records a paper-based handwritten large family tree containing all the Orriss families in Hundon in the 19th century. FreeBMD told me that Philip had been born in Hundon but in 1888, not 1898; and the GRO index told me that his mother's maiden surname was ALCOCK. On the paper family tree, I found a Joseph Orriss who had married a Susan Alcock in 1884; and Joseph was the great-grandson of the Thomas Orriss I had described in my talk earlier that day. On the FamilySearch website I found a family tree that confirmed my initial research – see image below. So, it turned out that I am indeed related to Terry Balaam's family. It's a small world!



***The Deserter's Tale*, by Nathan Dylan Goodwin, 2023, Amazon Books, £14.99 in hardback (or £3.49 in Kindle edition)**

This is the tenth book in the series of genealogical crime mysteries featuring the (fictional) British forensic genealogist, Morton Farrier. It is also the third novella in the series – a shortened format that allows you to binge-read it in one sitting or to enjoy it at your leisure. Either way, it is a satisfying read for anyone with an interest in mystery stories and with a background in family history research. In this respect it easily matches the high standard set by the author's previous books reviewed in this journal.

There are two main storylines, one set in the present day and one in the past, with both involving action in England and in America. In the present day there are three strands to the plot: Morton travels to the RootsTech 2023 conference in Salt Lake City; on his way there and back via Las Vegas he tries to exonerate his grandfather from a charge of murder; and his mother-in-law in Sussex asks him to investigate the colourful life of her grandfather – the deserter in the book's title. The action set in the past concerns Morton's said great-grandfather-in-law as an impostor, a bigamist, a mentally deranged survivor of World War 1, a bootlegger of illicit alcohol in Prohibition-era America, and a born-again Christian there. Quite a character! But also a highly dramatic example of how family history research can uncover facts that might make present-day descendants feel uncomfortable – or enchanted!

This novella demonstrates once again the author's superb command of this genre. The past and the present are interwoven with skill, the family history research is described with consummate precision and realism, and the fictional story blends at times with contributions from real-life genealogists who lend authenticity to the action. There are also personal tensions for Morton as he comes face to face with a past lover who drops a bombshell that will surely provide some of the context to the next book in the series. Criticisms? Very few. For example, to appreciate the storyline fully it helps to have an understanding of genetic genealogy, such as knowing the significance of endogamy and centimorgans. However, advance reading of early versions of the book by a range of experts has ensured neither holes in the plot nor any typos. I loved this novella. I think you will too.

Eleven of us turned up at The Nags Head pub in Walthamstow Village on Saturday 3rd August: nine WFFHS members, plus one husband and one daughter. Most were local folk, but one pair had travelled down from County Durham. Another one was a long-term resident of the area, Jacqueline Baker – a member both of WFFHS and of Walthamstow Historical Society – who was going to lead us on a historical tour of Old Walthamstow later on. But we started with a leisurely lunch of pizza and drinks in the pub with its interior walls decorated with retro photos of 1950s ‘mods’ and 1970s ‘punk rockers’.

Suitably fortified, we made the short walk to St Mary the Virgin Church, where Jacqueline told us about the early history of the area. Helped by her husband David, she passed around copies of old maps, images and photos that helped illustrate life in the area in times gone by. Walthamstow, or Wilcumstowe in the Domesday Book, had only 86 adult residents in 1086, but its population had grown to over 100,000 by 1901. It was located at a strategic crossroads on the highest point in the district, with its ecclesiastical and commercial significance. The earliest Lords of the Manor, such as the de Toni family, had links to William the Conqueror. The alms houses next to the church still exist, despite the impact of a German bomb in WW2. The origin of the name of the nearby Vinegar Alley is disputed – there is no evidence for a plague pit there where deceased victims were sprinkled with vinegar!

We then crossed through the churchyard, where some years earlier a group including WFFHS members had transcribed the memorial inscriptions on the gravestones, and came to a notable building. In 1828 the Reverend William Wilson, vicar of St Mary’s, erected the first purpose-built primary school in England; one of the bricks, inscribed with ‘1828’, attests to that fact. Then across Vestry Road to see another school, this time Victorian but no longer in use. Next to it is a building that used to house the area’s Victorian horse-drawn fire engine. Across the road we could see the incongruous remains of a Greek-style ionic column, outside the well-known Vestry House with its museum – now undergoing renovation and due to reopen in 2026. Originally built to provide rooms for the local parish administration

(the vestry) and as a workhouse, it has since the 1830s served multiple uses, including as a place to lock up drunks overnight. Nearby are the 18th century Squires Alms Houses, endowed by a wealthy merchant's widow – with six front doors but only four accommodation units inside.

Further along Vestry Road we passed over the railway line that runs from Liverpool Street in the City to Chingford. Constructed in the mid-19th century, it originally terminated at nearby Shernhall Street. Its building was not without controversy, for 'nimbyism' existed even then, and the original plan for a tunnel under the churchyard was abandoned in favour of a cutting some distance away. The railway opened up the whole area for development, leading to a rapid growth in population in the late 1800s. Near the railway line is the old GPO sorting office, whose Victorian workers used to grumble about the arduous trek up the hill from the station with their loaded carts. Next came East Avenue, whose original line of trees marked the approach to the imposing (and still standing) Orford House (Fig 1).



Figure 1 Orford Road

A left turn brought us into the vibrant atmosphere of modern-day Orford Road, with its shops, cafes, restaurants and young families out for a stroll. Past this short section were the Old Town Hall, now part

of a community centre, and Frank Ison's hardware and ironmongery shop, now a source of 'pre-loved' women's clothing. Then on to The Nags Head, with its adjoining coach-house and stables – but not the site of the original establishment of that name. Finally, we arrived back to where Orford Road meets Vestry Road, to see the Ancient House, the oldest dwelling place in Walthamstow – complete, despite various makeovers across the centuries, with a small section of its original wattle-and-daub wall (Fig 2).



Figure 2 The Ancient House

Also nearby is a rare octagonal Victorian red pillar box in front of St Mary's Church, where we had started our historical tour 90 minutes earlier.

Along the way Jacqueline had pointed out to us numerous notable buildings – some listed nationally by English Heritage, others locally – and two conservation areas. She had also highlighted the social contributions of significant local inhabitants, as well as put Walthamstow's development and community into a meaningful wider context. At the end the group thanked her for an erudite, informative and heartfelt account of her 'patch'. And, unlike last year, it had not rained!

It was a sunny but very windy day when Copped Hall near Epping held its open day on 25th August 2024. Waltham Forest FHS was there, with its stall manned by the President, Barrie, the Chairman, Tim, the Secretary, Mark, and Committee member Gill. Once we had got the blown-away papers under control, we had a steady trickle of visitors, several of whom had roots in Walthamstow. The bright yellow banners with their photographs of local aspects of family history were a regular attraction. We even had visits by two WFFHS members who can only rarely make it along to the monthly meetings. We sold two books, handed out several membership flyers, and had chats with numerous visitors, who varied in their expertise with family history research from the total novice to the expert. Around us were stalls showcasing various local organisations or selling interesting artefacts; a brass band; a dog show; an exhibition of vintage cars; and several places to eat and drink.



Gill and Barrie manning the stall

Was it all worth it? It was a lot of work to set up a windproof gazebo and three tables with books, magazines and advertising material. With four people to man the stall, there was always one person to talk to visitors while the others could ramble around the extensive grounds and investigate the renovation of the ruined buildings of the Georgian hall. Perhaps we planted a seed in some visitors' minds that will translate into their starting their own family history adventure. And with luck, one of them might in due course become a WFFHS member – maybe.

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IS ARTIFICIAL INTELLIGENCE THE FUTURE OF FAMILY HISTORY RESEARCH?

– Mark Carroll

We hear a lot these days about artificial intelligence (AI), its potential applications as well as its possible negative aspects. I wondered if it might have any value in genealogy. One of the leading AI programs currently is Chat-GPT, for which one can open a free account that allows a limited number of questions to be posed. The program will then, it is claimed, return a coherent and well-written answer. So I decided to check out this claim by setting Chat-GPT the following query: *How do I start to research my family history?* Its response (below), formatted exactly as I received it and containing 466 words, arrived on my screen in about two seconds flat! Could you do better than this AI program? Certainly not in two seconds, I am absolutely sure! It was really impressive what Chat-GPT could achieve when faced with a fairly straightforward question. Perhaps now I should challenge it to break through my most stubborn genealogical 'brick wall' and find the origins of my elusive maternal great-great-grandfather, Thomas William Smith of London!

“Researching your family history can be a rewarding and enriching experience. Here are some steps to get you started:

1. Start with What You Know

- **Write Down What You Know:** Start by writing down all the information you have about your family. Include names, dates, and places of birth, marriage, and death.

- **Gather Family Documents:** Collect any available family documents such as birth certificates, marriage licenses, death certificates, and old photographs.
- **Interview Relatives:** Talk to your relatives, especially the older generation. They can provide valuable information and stories about your family history.

2. Organize Your Information

- **Create a Family Tree:** Use a family tree chart to organize the information you've gathered. This can help you see connections and gaps in your knowledge.
- **Use Genealogy Software:** Consider using genealogy software or online tools like Ancestry, MyHeritage, or FamilySearch to organize your data and find additional information.

3. Expand Your Research

- **Visit Libraries and Archives:** Local libraries, state archives, and specialized genealogical libraries can be treasure troves of information. Look for census records, immigration records, military records, and old newspapers.
- **Access Online Databases:** Use online databases and genealogy websites. Many offer free access to certain records, and others may require a subscription.
- **Join Genealogy Groups and Forums:** Engage with genealogy societies, both local and online. They can provide guidance, support, and access to resources.

4. Verify Your Information

- **Cross-Check Records:** Ensure the accuracy of your information by cross-checking different sources. Look for corroborating evidence from multiple records.
- **Document Sources:** Keep track of where you found each piece of information. This helps validate your research and makes it easier to revisit sources if needed.

5. Explore DNA Testing

- **DNA Ancestry Tests:** Consider taking a DNA test from

companies like AncestryDNA, 23andMe, or MyHeritage DNA. These tests can provide insights into your genetic heritage and connect you with distant relatives.

6. Stay Organized and Persistent

- **Maintain Records:** Keep a detailed record of your research process, including notes, sources, and findings.
- **Be Patient and Persistent:** Genealogical research can be time-consuming and sometimes challenging. Be patient and persistent in your search.

Tools and Resources

- **Genealogy Software:** RootsMagic, Legacy Family Tree, Family Tree Maker
- **Online Databases:** Ancestry.com, MyHeritage, FamilySearch, FindMyPast
- **Books and Guides:** “The Genealogy Handbook” by Ellen Galford, “Tracing Your Ancestors” by Simon Fowler

Additional Tips

- **Learn to Read Old Handwriting:** Understanding old scripts can be crucial when reading historical documents.
- **Consider Historical Context:** Understanding the historical context of your ancestors’ lives can provide valuable insights.
- **Attend Workshops and Webinars:** Many organizations offer educational opportunities to help you improve your genealogical skills.

By following these steps, you can build a comprehensive and accurate family history. Enjoy the journey of discovering your roots!”

* * * * *

LOOKING FOR PARISH REGISTERS?

Tim Valder-Hogg

We are familiar with ecclesiastical (church) parish registers and that the ecclesiastical parishes don’t necessarily cover the same area as the civil parish. In places like Waltham Forest where the population

grew significantly in the 19th and early 20th centuries, more churches have been built and each has been given a parish. We then need to look more closely at where our relatives lived in order to see which church was in the area they lived in. Generally, one parish had one church, one set of clergies, and one Parochial Church Council (PCC). The main Chingford parish has been one of the exceptions to this as it has had two churches since the church on The Green was built. Other shorter-lived exceptions have existed in Walthamstow when mission churches were built before then acquiring a part of the parish from the parent church (St Saviour etc).

An emerging entity in the late 20th century has been the Benefice. Historically this was the living itself: the ecclesiastical office held by the minister. These days it refers to a collection of parishes held by a minister or team of ministers. Each parish has a PCC, and above it may be a Team Council. Clergy and parish workers are assigned to the Team rather than a parish. PCCs can delegate (upwards!) some or all of their functions to the Team Council.

Why does this matter to us? It is the parishes which have registers, so registers will be found under parish names. However, records for delegated items will be under the benefice name in archives. Most commonly these will be property, financial or licensing records.

Parish registers which are full or over 100 years old are to be found in a Diocesan Repository.

For the Diocese of Chelmsford, which covers Essex pre-1965, this is the Essex Record Office. One exception is that the registers for the Waltham Forest Deanery (which covers Waltham Forest) are held by the Waltham Forest Archives. Diocesan records are held at Chelmsford. Some have more order to them than others. If you were looking for information about alterations to a church, this would be where you would look. You might find records under the name of the parish, but if property were assigned to the benefice they may be found under another church in the same benefice.

Parishes are sometimes reorganised so churches may change benefice/team. An example not far away is Theydon Garnon. At one time, it was part of the Epping Team benefice, but in more recent years it

has been part of the Theydon Parishes benefice. If you were looking for information about the licensing of a minister working at Theydon Garnon, the name the records would be under would differ depending on the date.

We see similar patterns with companies like Halex depositing records in the archives of the county their head office was in at the time. Hence Halex records are in the Suffolk record office, even though we think of them as having mostly been in Highams Park. It keeps us on our toes and makes the joy of finding information greater.

* * * * *

THE LAST WORD

– Kathy Unwin

The Society's AGM will take place on 12th November, on Zoom, and it would be nice to see some new faces attending. Below are some excerpts from our president Barrie's speech at last year's AGM:

“At the beginning of the November 2023, I was looking for something in the files, when I came across an Excel file called ‘Death Relationships’. What was this? The date was somewhere about 2012, and when I opened it up, I suddenly remembered what it was about. Some time (years) before, the local Medical Centre had asked for the medical history of deaths in the family. (Not exactly the way they put it.) Now being a family historian, you have to give the facts. So by the time I had acquired a lot of death certificates, it had run into a number of years and by this time they did not want to know. So the file stayed filed.

But suddenly my interest was reawakened by the fact that the GRO are doing Births 1837-1922 and more importantly to me Deaths 1837-87 in digital downloads (instantly) for £2.50 [now £3]. Now I have another project – to get as many of the deaths up to my 4x great-grandparents.

So far, I have both parents; two of four grandparents (maternal side); six of eight great-grandparents; eight of 16 great-grandparents; 21 of 32 3x great-grandparents; and 10 of 64 4x great-grandparents. I realise I will not be able to get them all as a lot of

the 4x great-grandparents died before General Registration started in mid-1837. But there are still a lot to discover.

Of the deaths, I know more ages than causes. Of those on my father's side I have 36 ages which average out at 70 years; on my mother's side I have 44 ages which average out to 71 years. The youngest/oldest on my father's side are 23 and 90; on my mother's side it is 26 and 92. Not a lot of difference.

Another idea I have had since the beginning of the year was how to help my great-granddaughters (aged 4 and 6) get to know their family history in the future. The idea was to make the family tree into a jigsaw.

I used a family tree I had done for a friend as it was quite small (six A4 pages) and went back to the early 1800s. The first run was tested out at one of our society meetings and seemed to get a good response although it was not easy. I have now passed it on to the friend whose tree it was.

How many of you have looked at the exchange journals? Looking through one of these reminded me of the GRO offer, as well as many other things being done by other societies, sometimes not even in their area."

As Barrie says, the exchange journals can be useful and many can be read in the members' area of our website – see last month's journal for the list of societies.

A reminder that membership runs out on 31st October 2024. A renewal form is included.

**Meetings are held on the second Tuesday of each month
(except August) at 8pm
either at Spruce Hill Baptist Church Hall, Brookscroft Road,
Walthamstow E17, or on Zoom**

Subscription rates

UK:	Individual £15	e-journal £12
	Household £18	e-journal £14
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Overseas: £19 Ejournal £12

DIARY

8th Oct Workshop: Family history puzzle (hall) – Mark Carroll

12th Nov AGM (Zoom) – Barrie Burton and Committee

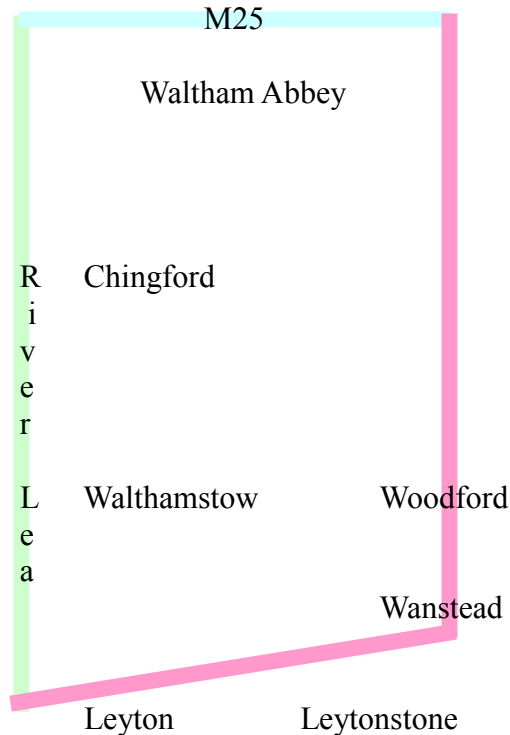
10th Dec Talk: Apprenticeship records (Zoom) – Richard Holt

14th Jan Quiz and New Year social (hall) – Mark Carroll

11th Feb Talk: Ancestors on the margins (Zoom) – Janet Few

11th Mar Workshop: Making sense of BMD certificates (hall) – Tim Valder-Hogg

Waltham Forest FHS



The Society covers an area largely defined by the River Lea, M25 and A11/A104 roads, this includes the London Borough of Waltham Forest, comprising the old Essex metropolitan boroughs of Chingford, Leyton and Walthamstow, and extends to Waltham Abbey in the north

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Family History Society

If undelivered, please return to:
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