

**PETER MAGGS reveals some family skeletons among:**

## **THE CHILMANS OF MERTON**

People from well-regulated families generally have two parents, four grandparents and eight great-grandparents. My father only had six great-grandparents, because his grandmothers were sisters, and consequently his mother and father were first cousins. Since these antecedents are somewhat over-represented in my genetic profile, I have developed a keen interest in their history. [There might have been a family tree here, but the Editor decided it was too big.]

The grandmothers in question – Harriet Elizabeth, and Alice Louisa Chilman – grew up with four other sisters in Merton, living for some time at 4 Church Row (now 21 Church Lane). Their parents' lives had not been without trauma. The girls' mother was Jane Elizabeth Brookson, born in 1843 in Merton Rush. Jane's mother, Mary Ann Holmes, died in the 1849 cholera outbreak leaving Jane's father, Joseph Brookson, a labourer, with five children under the age of eight to support. Jane, as the oldest girl, albeit she was still only six, no doubt had some quick growing-up to do.

When Jane was twenty she married James Chilman junior, a bricklayer, from Sutton. James's mother was Ann Hatch, who had had a very interesting history. By the time she married James's father, James Chilman senior, in 1839, she had already produced five illegitimate children, father(s) unknown. After the birth of her first child (who died in infancy), Ann spent some time in the Reigate Workhouse. She had a second child around July 1831, and the baptism was, intriguingly, performed by the rector of Sutton, Henry Hatch. For some time I wondered whether they were related; now I am fairly sure that they were not.<sup>1</sup> James senior was a widower, also from Sutton, whose wife Elizabeth had died in June 1826, and by whom he had had four children. Again intriguingly, Ann Hatch's first child was born just eighteen months after Elizabeth's death. Nevertheless, Ann and James senior did not get married until 1839, and James junior was born the following year. The 1841 census at Sutton reveals the provenance of the family. James junior, one year old, was living with his father and mother, a further Ann (his father's daughter by his first marriage), and William, Elizabeth, and Eliza, his mother's illegitimate children. All the children were allotted the surname 'Chilman', although Elizabeth and Eliza had reverted to 'Hatch' by the 1851 census, indicating that James senior was probably not their father. By that time, James junior had acquired a full brother and sister, Emma and John.

Scrutiny of maps of the period shows a positive avalanche of building around Merton in the late 19th century, particularly following the arrival of the railway, so James Chilman junior should have had plenty of work to enable him to provide for his wife and six daughters; in descending order of age they were: Mary Ann (born 1864), Harriet Elizabeth (1866), Emma Jane (1867), Alice Louisa (1870), Agnes Annie (1872), and Martha Sarah (1879). (There was also a son, James Joseph (1877-1878), who died in infancy.) Mary Ann and Emma Jane were in service, so their pay helped balance the books and their absence eased crowding in the house. But James Chilman took to thieving, and he was not very good at it. In November 1883 he was sentenced to twelve months in Wandsworth Prison for stealing poultry; this was the second time he had been convicted of a similar offence. The disgrace that the family presumably had to endure was tempered by the imperative to generate some revenue to support themselves. Jane set up a hand laundry at 4 Church Row and the girls were put to work. My father related that his great aunt Martha remembered that her life revolved around ironing and folding sheets.

James may have returned to the family home after his release from prison, but by 1891 he had left for good. However the family were not finished with difficulty; in 1885, Mary Ann gave birth to an illegitimate boy. Family chit-chat (Alice Louisa's daughter, my grandmother) claimed that local philanthropist John Innes was responsible – he lived close by and Mary Ann may have worked for him as a domestic. I was able to track down the spurious child via the 1901 census, and found that Mary Ann had named him James Edward Spinks Chilman. From the name I was able to deduce that the likely father was a local man, Edward Spinks. This story was published in a family history magazine, and some years later I was contacted by the descendants of James Edward Chilman, who had found a positive DNA match with a descendant of Edward Spinks (so the deduction was correct!).<sup>2</sup>

Gradually the sisters got married off, the 'sins' of their errant father and sister notwithstanding, and mostly joined the Merton diaspora. Emma Jane married a gardener, Tom White in 1889, and they moved to Limpsfield in Surrey. In 1890, my great-grandmother, Harriet Elizabeth, married Frank Maggs, a council worker, son of a Wiltshire shepherd from Salisbury Plain near Stonehenge. After some time in Weymouth, they moved to Ealing. Their son, Ernie Maggs was my grandfather; he was a shop-manager who worked for the Maypole Dairy, and

served on HMS *Canada* during the Battle of Jutland. In 1894, my other great-grandmother, Alice Louisa, married William Martin, also a gardener. Their daughter Gwendoline, born in Chingford in Essex, was my grandmother, and married Ernie Maggs. Agnes Annie married William Stilwell in 1896. He worked on the railways and they moved to Southampton. Martha Sarah married George Amor, a coalman – also from Wiltshire – in 1902. In 1939 she was living at 19 Church Path, renamed and renumbered, and previously 3 Church Row, next door to the original family home. Mary Ann, the eldest of the girls, finally got married in 1906. Her husband was Edward Haslam, a house painter; initially they lived in Nelson Grove Road in Merton. The 1911 census shows Mary Ann in service as a live-in cook in Wimbledon. Two years later she died at the age of only 49 in the Nelson Hospital, the same year that her father, James Chilman junior, died in the Epsom Union workhouse.

My father started investigating the family history in the 1950s when it was very much more difficult than it is today. Having discovered, as he thought, that a page was missing from one of the parish registers, he was convinced for a time that Merton's most famous sometime resident, Admiral Viscount Lord Nelson, might have been 'involved' with one of the Chilman or Brookson ancestors. Considering the circles Nelson moved in – and with Emma Hamilton to hand – a relationship with gardeners' families seems remotely unlikely. Father knew his grandmothers and several of his great aunts, and even met their mother when she was a very old lady and he was only three or four years old. My grandmother Gwendoline, and my great-aunt May were Alice Louisa's daughters. When they were together, which was not very often, their fevered interactions reminded me of the Larkins girls in H G Wells' *History of Mr Polly*; it was as though they had reverted to their youth. I wondered whether their mother had behaved like that with her sisters. I could imagine what it must have been like in that tiny house at 4 Church Row, with six girls, five of whom had been born within an eight year period, quarrelling and squabbling, laughing and crying, and causing general pandemonium. Perhaps that drove James Chilman away; he was just in search of some peace and quiet.



*The five houses of Church Row, built c.1820, now 15/17/19/21/23 Church Path. (Not in the picture, no.25 survives from the 18th century, curiously interweaving part of its structure with no.23.) Photo: D Haunton*

- 1 This investigation into Henry Hatch and Ann Hatch led to my book about Henry's nephew, Rev Henry John Hatch, the first chaplain of Wandsworth Prison, who ended up serving six months in Newgate Prison. *Henry's Trials*, is published by Mirli Books, 2009.
- 2 Details of the article and follow-up can be found at: <https://www.mirlibooks.com/family-mystery-solved.html>