

# Family *mystery* solved

An old family secret can be the key to some determined detective work. **Peter Maggs** tells how he turned sleuth with the evidence surrounding a story of illegitimacy.

One of the most perplexing aspects of genealogy is discovering that the mother of a key ancestor was unmarried and the father's name has been left blank on the birth certificate or baptismal registration.

In a few cases it may be possible to trace the father through a bastardy order, and, very occasionally, by finding that the errant parent's name has been recorded in the baptismal register as a marginal note. But, as is more often the case, paternity is unknown and nothing more can be done to establish the father's identity.

A few years ago, I encountered such a circumstance. The mother in question was a great-great-aunt of mine, Mary Ann Chilman, and my interest was in identifying the father because family chit-chat had it that he was the wealthy landowner and philanthropist Jack (John) Innes, of compost fame.

Merton is now a suburb of London but in the 1860s it was a modest Surrey village where James and Jane Chilman raised their family of six daughters, including Mary Ann. James and Jane had both had difficult childhoods. When Jane was six, her mother died in the 1849 cholera outbreak, and James' mother had five illegitimate children before she married James' father. Sometime in the 1880s, James Chilman deserted his family, and whether his departure was precipitated by what happened to Mary Ann, is not known. But by 1891 he had gone and Jane had set up a hand-laundry in Merton to provide an income for herself and her daughters.

Two of the daughters, Harriet and Alice, were my father's grandmothers and, according to him, neither of them was at ease with life, possibly because of some family guilt, or the shame of their father's desertion, or because their children had married each other, since marriage between first cousins, although legal, was frowned upon in some circles. However, my father attributed this guilt to the shame of his great-aunt's disgrace. I decided to try and find out exactly what had happened.

Until the 1901 Census was published, I had no idea whether the story about Mary Ann Chilman was true but the return for Merton listed an Edward J Chilman, 14, grandson, living with Jane Chilman. Since Jane had had only female children, this had to be Mary Ann's mysterious child. And so it proved to be. Mary Ann, 22, unmarried, and in service locally, had given birth to a boy, whose name on the birth

certificate was Edward James Spinks Chilman, born November 1886, at 58 Hubert (subsequently All Saint's) Road, Wimbledon, the home of Fanny



**Did you know?**  
A new rose, 'John Innes', is to be launched at the Chelsea Flower Show in 2010. It has been bred by Peter Beales Roses to celebrate the centenary of the John Innes Centre.

Brown, a midwife. He was christened Edward James Chilman (without the 'Spinks') in August 1887 at the new Holy Trinity Church in Wimbledon.

## The Innes connection

John Innes was the Merton property developer and philanthropist who set up the garden suburb known as Merton Park. He also left money to establish the John Innes Research Foundation that subsequently developed the garden fertilisers bearing his name. He was an elected church warden, and chairman of the Rutlish charity trustees. He never married, and having read his biography, he does not strike me as being a likely candidate for Mary Ann's lover. At the time of Mary Ann's confinement, he was 57 and she was 22. His mansion was only a few hundred yards from the Chilman's house in Church Lane, and it is probable that Mary Ann was in service there (although there is no direct evidence of this).

A likely explanation of the story told by my grandmother (Alice Chilman's daughter and the source of the information) was that John Innes was 'responsible' for Mary Ann's child, in as much as the master of the house has a pastoral responsibility for the moral health and well-being of his employees. John Innes did have an older brother, James, and he had a wife 27 years his junior. For a while he was my chief suspect, but then logical thought and the ability to do name searches on the census returns yielded some unexpected results.

Edward Chilman's full name when it was first registered was Edward James Spinks Chilman



Edward Spinks, who worked as a gardener, but seen here looking dapper in smart clothes.

Image courtesy Phil Baker.

so this could provide the explanation:

● The firstborn male child was frequently named after the father so it is reasonable to conclude that Edward was the father's name and it was not a name used in the Chilman or Brookson (Jane's maiden name) families for several previous generations.

● The second name, James, was after his maternal grandfather as an unmarried mother would frequently give her father's name to a spurious child.

● The third name, Spinks, is the giveaway. Spinks existed as a Christian name mainly in the north of England. It was so unusual that it was unlikely to have been a first name. For example, in the 1891 Census in England there were 17 males with the first name 'Spink', every one in Yorkshire. There were six people with the Christian name Spinks, but two were women, one was an obvious mistake, and the only one with the first – as opposed to second – Christian name Spinks, lived in Durham. Thus the hypothesis for the name of Edward Chilman's father is *Edward Spinks*.

A further search showed only eight males in Surrey, surname Spinks, within 20 years of Mary Ann Chilman's age. One of them lived at No 9 Newton Road, South Wimbledon, barely half a mile from Mary Ann's home. His name? Edward Spinks. He was two years older than Mary Ann.

Investigating Edward Chilman further, I made contact with his grandson, James Chilman, via the 'Genes Reunited' website, [www.genesreunited.co.uk](http://www.genesreunited.co.uk). Unfortunately, he could add nothing about Edward's forebears. Following the identification of Edward Spinks in Wimbledon, I tracked down his grandson, Phil Baker, through the internet, and he told me something of his grandfather's life.

Edward Spinks was a gardener, 'an extremely

CERTIFIED COPY OF AN ENTRY OF BIRTH



GIVEN AT THE GENERAL REGISTER OFFICE

Application Number R414581

REGISTRATION DISTRICT **Kingston on Thames**  
 1886. BIRTH in the Sub-district of **Wimbledon** in the County of **Surrey**

Columns:-	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10
No.	When and where born	Name, if any	Sex	Name and surname of father	Name, surname and maiden surname of mother	Occupation of father	Signature, description and residence of informant	When registered	Signature of registrar	Name entered after registration
146	Wimbledon, Surrey - 1896 83, Albert Road S. S. 9	Edward James Spinks	Boy		Mary Ann Chilman a Domestic Servant		Mr. G. Trimm Trades 83 Albert Road Wimbledon	Wimbledon 1896	J. Thomas	

The birth certificate of Edward James Spinks Chilman. The name and occupation of his father have been left blank.

nice man', who spent the latter part of his life looking after a park and recreation ground close to his home. Phil even provided me with a photograph showing a very dapper late-Victorian man-about-town, smartly dressed with a bowler hat and sporting a dimpled chin. I sent the picture to Edward Chilman's grandson, but he could not see a family likeness. I suppose that would have been too perfect a conclusion.

The evidence stacks up

Now a story that fits the facts can be assembled. The map shows how close Edward Spinks and John Innes lived to the Chilman household in 1891. It seems likely, therefore, that Mary Ann worked for John Innes as a servant, Edward Spinks worked for him as a gardener, and that is how they met. It would also explain the 'Jack' Innes connection, since he was indirectly responsible for their meeting.

Since Mary Ann had named and shamed her lover, none too subtly by giving his full name to her child, one can assume that the break-up was

not a happy one. Meanwhile, Edward Spinks got married a year after Edward Chilman was born, and was living with his wife and two children in Wimbledon in 1891.

Mary Ann continued her occupation as a housemaid at least until 1901. A few years later at the age of 41, she married Edward Haslam, a house-painter 10 years her senior. At last she had become 'respectable' and, one hopes, attained some relief from the relentless labour of more than 25 years in service. Unfortunately, if there was any relief from toil, it was short-lived. The 1911 status shows her as a live-in cook with a family in Wimbledon, and no sign of a husband. At least her married status had allowed her to move up the social ladder from being a housemaid.

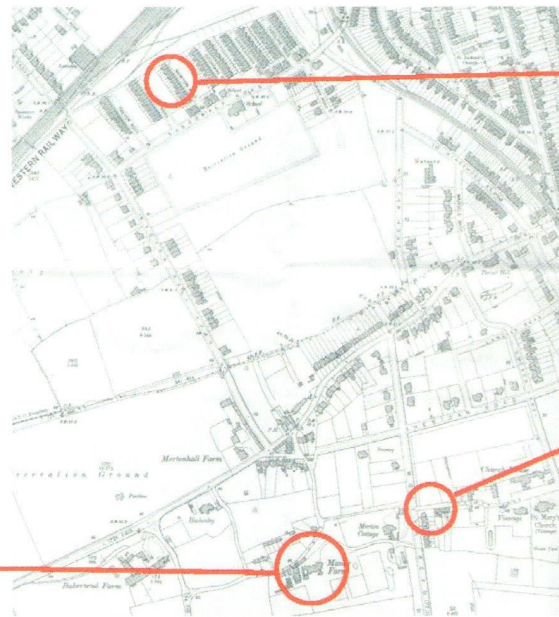
I offer this analysis as a possible solution to an intractable problem. The evidence might not stand up in an English Court of Law as it is, after all, purely circumstantial. One might argue, for example, that Edward Spinks was merely a dear friend to Mary Ann at a difficult time, and she named her child after him as a mark of gratitude. By the time of the christening, the name 'Spinks' had been dropped, possibly due to the insistence of the priest, or perhaps because the elapsed time since the birth had tempered Mary Ann's anger.

Nevertheless, the proposed solution is very compelling, and I am convinced that Edward Spinks was the father, and that an old family mystery is solved.

Merton in 1894

A map of Merton in 1894 showing where Edward Spinks, the Chilman family and John Innes all lived.

Image © The National Library of Scotland.



9 Newton Road, where Edward Spinks was living in 1891

4 Church Lane where the Chilman girls lived

Manor House where John Innes lived

500 yards

Read up on it!

● *Illegitimacy*, by Eve McLaughlin, and *My Ancestor was a Bastard*, by Ruth Paley, (published by Society of Genealogists) both obtainable from our Family History Bookshop at [www.familyhistorybookshop.co.uk](http://www.familyhistorybookshop.co.uk).

● *John Innes - His Life and Legacy*, compiled by Neal Priestland and published by the John Innes Society, 2004. For information about the society, which is run by volunteers, and the history of Merton Park, visit [www.johninnesociety.org.uk](http://www.johninnesociety.org.uk).

● Visit [www.jic.ac.uk/centenary/index.htm](http://www.jic.ac.uk/centenary/index.htm) to find out about the John Innes Centre and its centenary.