

Kilsby's Wandering Children

A few issues back, I wrote a short article about some of the people who have contacted me to ask for help in tracing ancestors of theirs who originally came from Kilsby (they find me via the village web-site, and then we communicate by e-mail and telephone). The previous article seems to have sparked some interest within the village, and curiosity as to where these former Kilsby folk ended up after their travels – and so, a year or so later, here are a few more facts, which I hope you may find interesting.

I have so far helped seventy-two people from all over the world, each of whom could trace some of their ancestors back to Kilsby – mostly in the 1700s and 1800s. Among the seventy or so families that I have helped to trace, old Kilsby family names have cropped up again and again, including Atkinson, Banister, Beach, Belton, Blakeman, Boys, Bracebridge, Bromwich, Bullock, Churchill, Colledge Price, Cowley, Dunkley, Ellis, Emery, Essen, Evitts, Fuller, Greaves, Green, Grimshaw, Harper, Hopkins, Hunt, Jakeman, Jones, Kemp, Leatherland, Lucas, Malin, Margetts, Mason, Masters, Matthews, Minors, Noon, Perkins, Prestidge, Reynolds, Rushby, Russell, Satchell, Simmons, Slinn, Smith, Stafford, Stephens, Timms, Usher, Wadsworth and York.

The people who have contacted me are many and varied; there have been enquiries from all parts of the UK – and also from Australia, Canada, New Zealand, Spain and the USA. Many of these people have visited Sylvia and me here in Kilsby – not just UK visitors, but folk from Australia, Spain, Canada and the USA (indeed, even as I write this article, I am looking forward to a visit in a week or two from a Texan descendant of the Margetts family that owned Hunt's House in the early 1800s when it was still a working farm, and whose family built the brick-making kiln that produced the bricks used in many of Kilsby's early Victorian buildings).

We have also taken the opportunity to visit some of these kindly folk during our own travels. This led us, for example, to spend ten days in 2007 on a ranch in Bishop, north California (just north of Death Valley, and south of Yosemite National Park) as the guests of Stan and Roberta Matlick – Roberta is another descendant of the Margetts family; and more recently we spent a few pleasant days last autumn in Christchurch, New Zealand, in the lovely home of Peter Boyes and his Maori wife Raiha (Peter's ancestors came from Kilsby and Ashby St Ledgers in the 1700s, and there are a couple of other branches of the extended Boyes/Boyce family in New Zealand). Whilst visiting our son and his family in Brisbane (Australia) in 2009 we also took time to spend a day with Professor John Edwards and his wife Sandra (née Russell), whose great-great grandfather John Russell was born in Kilsby in 1796; and when we visit Brisbane again this coming autumn, we plan to drive down to visit my Chinese cousins in Sydney, and stop over for a couple of days en route at Lake MacQuarie, where John and Maree Bullock have kindly offered to show us the local sights – Maree's ancestors came from Kilsby in the 1830s. I take my laptop computer on these trips, with a large selection of photographs, articles, lists and databases of all kinds relating to Kilsby – and slide presentations of old maps and photographs from Kilsby in the 1800s and early 1900s have been given in inner cities, outback wastes, hillside farms and all manner of other locations, including a Lions meeting in Tapanui New Zealand!

And it doesn't stop there. I have contributed tens of thousands of records to the "FreeREG" parish register Internet web-site, from the parish registers for Barby and Kilsby and Ashby St Ledgers that I transcribed and computerised about 10-15 years ago – and as it happens, the Northamptonshire section of this web-site is managed by Anna Rufer, who lives – of all the unlikely places! – in New Zealand's Maori centre, Rotorua, which we visited in 2007. The result of this is that I now have an invitation to lecture to the Rotorua History Circle when we next pass that way!

As for the stories of the individual families – I could write all day, and still have barely begun to tell you all that I have learned from these gentle e-mail correspondences. The stories that I have helped to piece together have mostly been about very ordinary folk – a poor weaver, deprived of his livelihood and forced to take to the road when Kilsby's cottage industry collapsed in the 1790s, a victim of the Industrial Revolution; a miller's son who tried his hand in Kilsby as a smallholder in the 1780s but could not make a go of it; and so on – and because the period from 1790-1830 when many of them left Kilsby was a time of great upheaval, social change, warfare, economic depression and consequent poverty, it would be fair to say that many of the people involved were forced to leave Kilsby because the community simply could not offer them stable employment and the ability to support themselves financially. I am struck, as I write these words, by the comparison with today – we are living right now in another period of economic uncertainty and relative gloom, in which many of our own young people sadly cannot afford to live in the village where they grew up, due mainly to the massive and disproportionate increase in the cost of accommodation in recent years. Indeed, this may even help us to understand the pressures on those Kilsby folk of the late 1700s and early 1800s who found themselves obliged to pack up and seek their fortunes elsewhere.

The flow of information is very much a two-way thing, for in addition to giving details to other people I frequently receive useful snippets of information in return. For instance, I am indebted to Fred Fisher in New South Wales for a detailed list of the early congregation of Kilsby Independent Chapel, to Lesley Watson for details of her ancestor William Watson who was overseer of the restoration work to St Faith's church in the late 1860s, to Marg McLaughlin in British Columbia for details relating to the Rev Thomas Strange of Kilsby Independent Chapel, and to Richard and Diana Belton in Leicestershire for a bunch of lovely old postcards with views of Kilsby (and messages from the blacksmith's wife) dating from the early 1900s.

To all these kind correspondents, I send my thanks – and I look forward to making more new friends among the worldwide community of descendants of Kilsby's wandering sons and daughters.

Gren Hatton,
April 2010

Fig.1: With Sandra (née Russell) and Professor John Edwards in their lovely "Queenslander" period house in Brisbane





Fig.2: Enjoying a "cook-out" (barbecue) with Stan and Roberta Matlick, 10,300ft up in the mountains of North California



Fig.3: A chilly spring day in Christchurch (New Zealand) with Peter Boyes