

## Challenges facing the Family Historian

Members of our Family History Group have many years' experience in determining family trees and ancestral relatives for all manner of people. Combined efforts during group meetings often result in clarification of most difficult situations. Recently, for example, we were asked to help a family determine how another family related to their own. The two families have completely different surnames; we knew quite a lot about the family making the request but little about the other family named "Slater". Apart from the family name and that they had lived in Heptonstall we weren't given any more information, for example, forenames or dates.

The procedure would involve looking at all the Slaters in Heptonstall, tracing their ancestry and looking for any connection with the requesting family. Luckily, there were only a few Slater families there and it was soon decided to concentrate on Thomas Slater born in 1844. He had married late in life in 1882 at the age of 38 years. His bride was Sarah Ann Sutcliffe, the daughter of a Heptonstall grocer, Richard Sutcliffe. They had a shop on Main Street, Heptonstall, and, according to the 1891 census, operated as a grocer, draper and butcher. Thomas died in 1909, aged 65 years without leaving any children. If we were to find a connection with our requesting family we would have to look further into the past to find out more about Thomas, perhaps to find his parents and any siblings.

Prior to his marriage, Thomas had lived with his grandparents for most of his life. His grandfather John Thomas taught him the butchering trade, which he carried on at Heptonstall Slack until his grandfather died in 1875. After his marriage, Thomas possibly moved into the premises of his in-laws on Main Street, Heptonstall.

Tracing him back through his grandparents, John and Grace Thomas, I found him at Slack Top in the 1851 census, aged 6 years. It was at this point that our group's combined experience would be needed. The census indicated that Thomas Slater and his grandparents, the Thomas's, were all born in Heptonstall. So all we had was that Thomas' father would have been named "Slater". It seemed logical that as Thomas was named Slater and his grandparents were named Thomas, then we needed to find a marriage between a Slater and a Thomas and there wasn't one. The next obvious thing was to look for Slaters in the 1841 census and also in the 1861 census to see if those entries contained clues; again, there were none that fitted. At this point our researchers needed to bring to bear their experience and consider what local records we had available which might supplement those available online.

Looking at the burial records for Slack Chapel revealed just two Slater burials: Mary Slater in 1846 aged 22 years and Henry Slater in 1848, aged 26 years. We could now look for a marriage between these two and we found one listed on 25<sup>th</sup> December 1842. We then checked the church register which indicated Henry's bride was Mary Sutcliffe whose father was John Thomas. This needed more research: why was Mary named Sutcliffe when, from the 1841 census, it was clear she was the eldest child of John and Grace Thomas? We checked the date of the marriage between John Thomas and Grace Sutcliffe and, using the birth date for Mary Sutcliffe, it was clear Mary was born out of wedlock. The 1841 census showed her as the eldest daughter of John and Grace Thomas and, by that time, she had taken John's surname. So, it was not until she married that she revealed her real birth name for the records.

Finally, it was now possible to confirm, from his birth record, that Thomas Slater's mother's surname was indeed, Sutcliffe.

To sum up, finding out who our Thomas Slater really was required considerable ingenuity on the part of our researchers, but we now knew all that we needed to know about him: sadly he had lost both his parents before he was 5 years old and he had no siblings.

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