

The Holmes Family of Newton St. Cyres

My name is Robert Marsden and I live in farm country in western Illinois, United States. My family research started in the early 1980s when I decided to find out from where in England my ancestors hailed. Now, some forty years later, I know so much more that I feel like in some small way I actually know them. I am not a professional genealogist by any means, just a curious, now 70 year old man with a love of history and even more time on his hands to give to discovery.

Allow me to provide a little of my background so you will understand why a man with the surname Marsden began researching the Holmes Family of Newton St. Cyres. My mother, Marjorie- nee Lacey- Marsden (1924-2002) was the daughter of Charles Henry Lacey (1887-1953) and Ethel Mary Holmes (1886-1957). I have traced Ethel Mary's line back to Thomas Holmes (1674-1758) of Upton Pyne and Newton St. Cyres. Ethel Mary along with her parents George John Holmes and Julia Packman and five siblings emigrated from Cambridgeshire to Brisbane, Australia in January 1890. Three more siblings would be born there. It was also in Brisbane in 1944 that my 20 year old mother, Marjorie met and fell in love with an American sailor whose warship was being repaired in the shipyard there. His name was William Marsden (1926-1978) and he was my father.

You can probably guess the rest – my mother moved to the United States in 1947 to marry my father and start a family. My brother was born in 1948 and I in 1951. A few years after my father's death in 1978 my mother returned to Australia to be with her ailing brother.

I visited my mother in Brisbane in the late 1980s and we discussed her parents' lineage. My mother didn't remember much about her family's history other than that her parents' families came from England and her mother was born in Kent. She told me she had found some "old letters " in the family's old Victrola (early 20th century record player) that had belonged to her "Mum" and she thought I should have them. I was expecting letters from the WWII era so you can imagine my surprise and delight in seeing the letters dated from the 1830s and 1840s!







These letters were written by my second great uncles and aunts and they gave me real insight into the lives of this Holmes family as they struggled to make ends meet in very tough economic times. While all of them were treasures, one letter in particular stands out. It was a letter written home to his father at “Christ’s Pieces, Cambridge” by John Holmes, who along with his wife Sarah and his brother Henry Ambrose had just arrived in Sydney Australia on 9 June 1849. Their voyage from England had taken almost 100 days. I include a transcript here:

Sidney- July, Friday 6th 1849

Dear Father, and Mother, Brothers and Sisters,

I now sit down with pen in hand to write you a letter, which I hope will find you all in good health and spirits, as it now leaves us at present - I am sure you all have been very anxious about us, and I have no doubt but all of you have been expecting to hear from us now for some time; but dear parents and friends you must forgive me for not writing to you before, as I assure you we had not an opportunity of sending you a letter on the passage. I am very happy to say that we had a very comfortable and pleasant passage all the way, and we had scarcely any rough weather and the wind was in our favour nearly the whole way. We were altogether 99 days on the passage, and the sailors said that they had never had such a pleasant passage before - But however pleasant it was, I can assure you that we were all glad enough to catch a glimpse of the shores of Australia, for we had seen no land with the exception of a small island for nearly 4 months, and sometimes not even a ship of any description for three or four weeks together - But I assure you the splendid scenery in this country repays all uneasiness which is felt during a long voyage - The entrance to Sidney is strikingly picturesque, the hills on either side are covered with trees to the waters edge, the inland country is an immense forest of trees and sandhills - The real natives are quite black, and are the ugliest race of human beings upon the face of the globe. In their wild state they are quite naked both men and women, but when they approach any town they throw a large blanket over themselves - There are also splendid Parrots and other birds flying about wild. You cannot well starve in this country for you can get meat from 1 1/2d to 2d... per ... Coffee 8d... per pd. Tea 1d, Sugar 1 1/2d and 2d ... per Butter, Cheese, (pricing unclear) and so forth are dear - working clothes are cheap, but cloth very dear - Now dear Father I will tell you a little bit about ourselves - Upon our arrival at Sidney, at the expiration of three or four days John and myself got into a very good situation, for the Govener's (sic) Superintendent came and engaged with us aboard to work in the garden, We like our situation very much and if we please we can remain there constantly - So far so good - The Govener's name is Fitzroy and he seems a very nice gentleman - He has a splendid house, and the Gardens are open to the public - We live in a very nice house close to our work and we are very comfortable. We tried to find our Sarah's Brother by sending a letter to him at Paramatta but as he had left his former abode we received no answer - However at the end of a week or fortnight we heard that he only lived a mile and a half from Sidney - We accordingly paid him a visit the next day and to the great satisfaction of us all we found him and his wife and two pretty little children quite happy and comfortable - They were overjoyed at meeting each other after so long a separation - and they remembered one another at their first glance - James sends his

kindest love to his dear Mother, Brother and Sister, and he says that he should very much like his dear Mother & sister to come and see him, but as for his brother Henry he is sure he will never leave his Native Country - He sends his kindest love to Mr. and Mrs. Swan & to Mr. Sennins and

his wife - James says that he will send you a letter to his Mother very shortly - Dear Father and Mother how we long to hear from you all and how you are all getting on - Give Our kindest love to our dear Brothers Richard & William and also to their wives and Children - Also do not forget to give our kindest love to our dear sisters, Ann, Fanny and Eliza, we long to hear from them to know how they are situated, I hope the poor old gals are more comfortable and settled than when we left - Give our kind love to poor old George and to his Brothers and Sisters - Dear Father do not forget to remember me respectfully to Abraham, Joseph, and John Chaplain and tell them that I shall send them a letter when I am a little better acquainted with the Colony - Remember me to Thomas, John and Stephen Payne also their wives - Give mine and John's kind love to M..... Payne and Brothers, Remember me kindly to Mr. And Mrs. Mason and to George - Also to Mr. and Mrs.

Pooley and now dear Parents I think I have mentioned all my kind friends, But No, Stop! I had like to have forgotten our dear little curly headed Jack, Bless his dear little heart and kiss him for us all, and ask him if he has forgotten his Uncle John, and Henry, and his Aunt Sarah - Dear Father and Mother be sure and write as soon as ever you can and send us word how you are getting on and tell Ann, Fanny & Eliza to send us all the news they can - Tell Ann to remember us kindly to Edrupt if they are married - Tell George that we are only 9 or 10 days sail from his Brother John's but we have not heard from him yet - Pray write as soon as you can for we are all very anxious to hear from you all.

Now Dearest and most Beloved Father & Mother Brothers and Sisters; I Conclude with God Almighty God's Blessings on you all And Believe us to remain your Most Obedient and Affectionate Children John, Sarah, and Henry Holmes

Direct to us as follows: To be left at the Post Office Sidney New - South - Wales till called for

(The Henry Holmes mentioned in this letter would go on to marry twice, father thirteen children, become a cab driver and in 1862 the eventual owner of the Newtown Omnibus Company Limited in Sydney.)

Knowing from this letter that my Holmes ancestors were living in Cambridge in the 1830s and 1840s I sent a copy of the letter to the Cambridge Family History

Society asking if they might help me find any descendants in Cambridge. The Society published my letter in 1998. At the same time, an Australian cousin, Pam Valentine, (unknown to me at that time) was also in touch with the Cambridge folks looking for Holmes connections in Cambridge. The Society sent her a copy of the letter along with my contact info. Such was her excitement that she immediately rang me in the United States – getting the time wrong- and rang me at 4 o'clock in the morning. Many emails followed and we discovered our common connection and all roads led back to Devon and Newton St. Cyres. In fact, Pam had travelled from Sydney to Newton St, Cyres a few years previously and visited the Church of St. Julitta and St. Cyr. She told me about the many Holmes grave markers in the cemetery and the “Thomas Holmes bell.”

Jump ahead a few decades to 2019 – my wife and I along with some dear friends visited Newton St. Cyres and connected with Mary Quicke. She was kind enough to give us a tour of the church bell tower where we got to see the bell with the name “Thomas Holmes Church Warden” cast into the side. We were delighted when Mary showed us how to properly ring the bell and even allowed me to give it a try.

We believe Thomas Holmes (1674-1758), my seventh great grandfather, must have been a generous parishioner held in high esteem to have been given this honor.

Mary Quicke and I atop the church in 2019





Viewing the “Thomas Holmes bell” The Listing of Bells. Holmes is #7

NEWTON ST. CYRES CHURCH. DEVON.

THE TWO NEW TREBLES OF THE RING OF EIGHT BELLS IN THIS TOWER WERE ADDED
AND THE OLD SIX TUNED AND REHUNG IN 1951 BY GILLETT & JOHNSTON, CROYDON.

DEDICATED 10TH NOV., 1951
BY

THE RIGHT REVEREND THE LORD BISHOP OF CREDITON.

No.	Note	INSCRIPTION	WEIGHT		
			Cwts.	Qrs.	Lbs.
1	F#	TO THE GLORY OF GOD AND IN MEMORY OF WINIFRED HELEN PEARCE THIS BELL WAS ADDED BY HER MOTHER, 1951 D'ARCY WARD - VICAR L.W. RAWLE } CHURCHWARDENS E.G. CORK GILLET & JOHNSTON FOUNDERS, CROYDON	4	3	14
2	E#	PRESENTED BY THE RINGERS, 1951 F. WEEKS R.J. BRAY G.S. LUXTON T. OLDRIIDGE E.G. CORK T. RIDGMAN H.P. CARTER J.T. LEACH G. COLE S.J. SHARLAND S. CORK R.S. HYATT GILLET & JOHNSTON FOUNDERS, CROYDON	5	0	0
3	D#	MEARS & STAINBANK, FOUNDERS, LONDON THIS SIXTH BELL WAS ADDED TO THE PEAL OF FIVE TO THE GLORY OF GOD MAY 1908 J.A. WELSH COLLINS - VICAR A.E. ELLIS } CHURCHWARDENS W. TUCKETT	5	1	18
4	C#	COME LET US RING FOR CHURCH AND KING W A E 1733	5	2	8
5	B	PROSPERITY TO THOSE THAT LOVE GOOD BELLS W A E 1733	6	1	4
6	A#	WM. EVANS OF CHERSTOW CAST US ALL 1733	7	2	2
7	G#	THOMAS HOLMES WM. HILL CH. WARDENS W A E 1733	9	0	14
8	F#	LET MY SOUND MOVE THEE TO GOD'S GLORY NICHOLAS GAY, VIC. W A E 1733	12	3	22
THE REV. D'ARCY WARD - VICAR. L.W. RAWLE } CHURCHWARDENS. E.G. CORK			56	2	26

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BELLFOUNDERS & CLOCKMAKERS

There are several of my Holmes ancestors buried in the churchyard of St. Cyr and St. Julitta.

Headstone of 5x great grandfather Headstone of 3x great grandfather's brother
Richard Holmes 1722-1786 Ambrose 1797-1888 with wife Mary & sons

Ambrose & Richard

Thomas Holmes who contributed to the purchase of the church bell is not buried in this graveyard. I believe he is buried in Upton Pyne and sadly, we did not have time to go look for his grave there. Perhaps sometime in the future I will return to Devon and try to find his grave marker.





Through the years I have made contact with relatives and online acquaintances who have helped me put together my four immediate family trees: Marsden, Holmes, Lacey and Leary. Sometimes they shared information on common ancestors and other times they suggested new sources to explore. And sometimes they provided real gems that added color and context to the life of my centuries old ancestors.

That was the case a few weeks ago when a query I made to the Newton Wonder was referred to the Village History group. I had asked if there was anyone with the name of Holmes still living in the village and I was informed me there was not.

But then the Village History Group provided me, over the course of just a few days, three wonderful maps of the village which showed the lands leased from the Dean and Chapter by my fifth great grandfather, Richard Holmes (1722-1786). Upon his death in 1786, his widow, Frances Maidenhead Holmes, continued the lease. One version of that map was produced in a colorized version in the early 1800s and it is wonderful. The History Group also passed on another of those “gems,” a map entitled “Dick the Plowman’s map” from the same period which showed me for the first time the location of a house labeled “Holms” where it is likely Richard and Frances Holmes resided.

Dick the Plowman’s Map 1782

Scroll down for map

The Six Bells Inn in 2019.

A history of English Inns written in the 19th century tells us: “In the year 1776, when the new peal of six bells was put up at St. Vigor’s Church the inn sign was changed to the Six Bells from the Plough and Crown.”

When Richard Holmes “...entered upon the Six Bells, being a new tenant, he went on flourishingly for some time, but ultimately he and his family came upon the parish.” The 1851 English Census shows Richard’s occupation as “In receipt of parish relief – formerly an innkeeper”

In 1819, when Richard gave up their license to the Six Bells Inn, Letitia gave birth to their seventh child, my second great-grandmother, Ann Holmes (1818-1887). Ann was born and baptized in Richard and Letitia’s “Lost Years” when we have no records for them. Ann’s older brother, William was baptized at St. Vigor’s, Fulbourn in 1817 but there is no record of Ann’s baptism there. The records for St. Vigor’s for the years 1822-1830 have been lost which is probably the reason the records of Ann’s baptism have not been found. Ann was living in Barnwell, Cambridgeshire in 1844 and on Christmas day of that year she gave birth to my great-grandfather, George John Holmes (1844-1903).



The 1881 English Census shows George and his wife, Julia Packman and two children living at Newstead Colliery in Nottinghamshire. His occupation is shown as “groom at colliery/ coal miner.” Perhaps the tough life of a coal miner with a growing family persuaded George that a better life must await him in Australia. It

is also very likely that letters from other family members already living there (remember John and Henry Ambrose from 1849) enticed him to make the move. In 1890 George John Holmes and his family including my three year old grandmother to be, Ethel Mary Holmes, moved to Brisbane, Australia.



circa 1904

George John Holmes, Julia Packman & Children

Seated L to R: Mabel Alma, George John Holmes, Violet Ann, George John, Julia Packman, William R.

Back Row: Ethel Mary, Julia Catherine, Arthur R., James Rolfe

Seated on floor front: George John

So now we have come full circle and hopefully you understand my Holmes connection to your lovely village.
