

# My Sherlockian Family Tree

by Alan Rettig

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I came to Sherlock Holmes early. My favorite uncle gave me his copy of the Canon when I was in sixth or seventh grade. What else should I have expected from an amateur violinist? Professionally, Uncle George taught engineering at Stevens Institute of Technology in New Jersey. He was an acknowledged authority on Newton's *Principia* and the history of applied mechanics. I remember that his marginal notes on the pages of "The Engineer's Thumb" had a number of unkind observations about Watson's meager understanding of things mechanical. He also had some choice remarks about Professor Moriarty in "The Final Problem," pointing out indignantly that the binomial theorem speaks quite eloquently for itself, thank you very much. Never mind, I devoured the sixty stories and never looked back.

I came to genealogy much, much later. Over lunch several years ago with my friend Richard Smith, he told me of the exhaustive family research he and his wife have done. He was a volunteer in the genealogy room at a local library and he offered to give me a tutorial if I was interested. I reasoned that if a guy named Richard Smith could research his family successfully, anybody could. Again I was hooked, and again I haven't looked back.

It took me about two years to research and document my mother's family, and it was a most rewarding project. The database that forms the core of my quest contains 874 names, and I can see my relationship to each of these ancestors with the click of a mouse. The roots trace back a full ten centuries to my 26th great grandfather, William the Conqueror, and the seven English



kings who succeeded him. It took a combination of luck, determination, and help from accommodating friends, librarians and researchers to get back that far. But I seized my thread and followed it, until it led me after 26 generations to that French upstart who carried the day at Hastings.

I was certainly surprised to discover that, like John Clay in "The Red-Headed League," I'm descended from royalty. But I was even more amazed to find that again and again my family's history intersects with Sherlock Holmes and his adventures. Discovering, researching and documenting these Canonical crossroads became my personal "grand game," one which I would like to share with you.

### 1. The Red King

Vincent Starrett said that when it comes to Sherlock Holmes, "it is always eighteen ninety-five," but the Canon gives us historical footnotes that take us back many more centuries. The very earliest is in *The Valley of Fear*, where we learn that the estate upon which the Manor House of Birlstone stood was granted to Hugo de Capus by "The Red King," William II. And it is here that we find my oldest connection to the Canon, dating back to the eleventh century. William II was my 25th great-grand uncle, the third son of William the Conqueror. As Watson points out, Birlstone traced its founding to the time of the first Crusade, which William undertook in 1095 at the request of Pope Urban II, and resulted in capturing Jerusalem from the Turks.



The Red King ruled from 1087 to 1100, was hated by his foes and was anything but beloved by those he governed. According to the *Anglo-Saxon Chronicle*, he was "hateful to almost all his people and odious to God." Bellicose and ruthless, he spent most of his time grabbing land, extorting money and putting down rebellions. He died in 1100 after a hunting "accident" in the New Forest.

In May of 2009 I found myself rumbling through that same New Forest on a beautifully restored vintage country bus. Our convivial group from the Sherlock Holmes Society of London was bound for the Hampshire village of Minstead to lay a wreath at the grave of Sir Arthur Conan Doyle during the sesquicentennial of his birth. Shortly before reaching Minstead we stopped at a



clearing in the forest and visited the marker that commemorates William's hunting misadventure. The official story is that the arrow fired by Sir Walter Tyrrell ricocheted off a tree that stood at the site of the marker, then somehow

found its way into the Red King's chest. But the then newly-elected chairman of the London Sherlockians, barrister Jonathan McCafferty, could not conceal his amusement at this fanciful explanation. The learned Jonathan stood beside the marker and succinctly argued his brief for assassination: "Brother Henry wanted to be king. What more do you need to know?" Many historians agree with Jonathan, believing that the arrow took a straight path and was fired at the behest of Henry.



And so it came to pass that within hours brother Henry was indeed the king. Henry I was also my 25th great grandfather, and was something of a peacemaker, at least compared to his departed brother.

As for us pilgrims, we re-boarded our bus and proceeded to Minstead where we paid our respects to Sir Arthur.

## 2. Australia

Early in my search, as the family tree began to spread its branches, I transplanted it to cyberspace. Soon, a surprising e-mail arrived from Adelaide, Australia. It was from a woman named Margaret McDonald, who introduced

herself as a longtime volunteer with the South Australia Genealogy and Heraldry Society.

My online tree had caught Margaret's attention. She'd zeroed in on my second great grandfather, William Mill, who was born in the little mining village of Illogan in Cornwall, England in 1825. I knew that William was a tin miner, that he married my second great grandmother Jane Harris in 1848 and that they had two children. But in 1856 William disappeared from Illogan, leaving his wife and kids behind, and I'd been unable to pick up his trail. Many men left the Cornish mines around that time because mineral prices had slumped and they were forced to find work abroad. I had assumed that William came to America like some of my other ancestors, but I couldn't find him. Margaret set me straight.

William never came to America. Instead, he boarded the clipper ship "Queen of the Seas," and 140 stomach-churning days later arrived at Melbourne's Port Philip Bay on January 28, 1857. He spent the rest of his life in Australia and the Pacific Island of New Caledonia working as a miner and a mine manager. And in addition to being my second great grandfather, William Mill is the great grandfather of Margaret Joyce Mill McDonald of suburban Adelaide. Margaret is my second cousin once removed.

Margaret has traced William's mining career from his arrival in Australia in 1857 until his death in 1893 from--what else?--congestion of the lungs. For his first decade there, he labored in the mines near Melbourne, specifically at a place called Ballarat.

Ballarat! The word fairly jumped off the screen as I read Margaret's account and remembered that a shipment of newly-mined gold in a wagon driven by Charles McCarthy was waylaid and stolen outside Ballarat in a murderous attack by the notorious John Turner, a.k.a. "Black Jack of Ballarat." This vile crime set in motion the chain of events that would end decades later with Sherlock Holmes solving "The Boscombe Valley Mystery."



Baring-Gould sets the dates of "The Boscombe Valley Mystery" as June 8 and 9, 1889. But we need no guesswork or analysis to determine when the original fatal ambush took place so many years before. Watson records Black Jack's exact words at the start of his confession: "It was in the early 'sixties at the diggings."

And it was in the early 'sixties that my ancestor William Mill was *doing* the digging, right there in Ballarat. Did William know Black Jack Turner? Perhaps he did. After all, Turner tells us that he was working his own claim before he "took to the bush" as a criminal. It's reasonable to imagine that their paths crossed at some point. But there can be no doubt that William knew *of* Black Jack, since the gold he was working so hard to mine was routinely being liberated by the infamous Ballarat Gang. Years later it would fall to Sherlock Holmes to see that Charles McCarthy's innocent son was vindicated in the matter of his father's death, and to be assured that the guilty Black Jack of Ballarat would soon face ultimate justice.

My cousin Margaret has lived in Adelaide all her life, and calls herself "an old chook." She married Dean McDonald in 1958 and they have three children. I have a newly-discovered cousin, and another branch on my Sherlockian family tree.

### 3. The Two Charles Henrys

Whenever a Sherlockian sees the names "Charles" and "Henry" side-by-side, *The Hound of the Baskervilles* naturally springs to mind. In the story of that most notorious Canonical canine, it was the death of Sir Charles Baskerville that brought his nephew Sir Henry back to England to claim the family seat at Baskerville Hall. Holmes and Watson then took on the task of ensuring that Henry would not meet the same fate as his uncle.



Since I claim not one but two Charles Henrys as ancestors, they must have a place on my Sherlockian tree, the more so because the two men are *not* uncle and nephew, nor do they even come from the same branch of my mother's family. Charles Henry Carpenter was my great grandfather. He married my great grandmother, Elizabeth Mill--daughter of the Ballarat miner--in 1867 at the parish church in Illogan. Their second daughter was my grandmother Emily Carpenter.

Like his father-in-law, Charles Henry was a miner who was forced to go abroad to find work. He came to the United States alone, but by 1888 his family joined him in St. Peters, Pennsylvania. St. Peters was a company town that supported two endeavors, an iron mine and a stone quarry. Shortly after the family's arrival, Charles Henry Carpenter's daughter Emily met a young stone cutter who had emigrated from the Channel Island of Guernsey. His name was Charles Henry Allen, and he and Emily married in 1892. I wonder whether Emily was first attracted to Charles Henry Allen because he had the same first and middle names as her father.

In any event, the Sherlockian provenance of the two Charles Henrys is bolstered by the fact that Baring-Gould sets *The Hound of the Baskervilles* in the autumn of 1888, the exact year that Charles Henry Carpenter's family was reunited in Pennsylvania, and very likely the same year that my grandmother Emily first met my grandfather Charles Henry Allen.

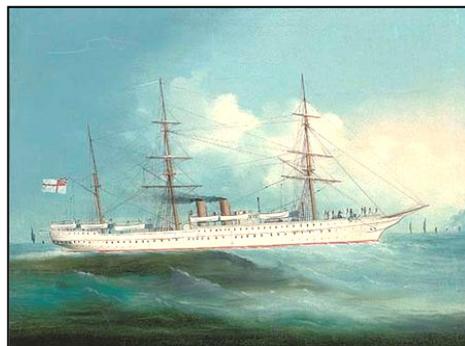
#### **4. Channeling the Canon**

Charles Henry Allen had come to Pennsylvania from Guernsey, the second-largest of the Channel Islands, which lie in the English Channel off the coast of Normandy, France. Like its sister islands, Guernsey is a self-governing British Crown Dependency.

Charles Henry's father Thomas Allen had come to Guernsey from southwest England and forged a remarkable career doing one of the most dangerous jobs imaginable: underwater blasting. He was one of the first to use Alfred Nobel's new invention called "dynamite" underwater to clear shipping

lanes to accommodate the ever-larger vessels plying the English Channel. Thomas did this work well into the 1870s.

Just a decade later, the troop ship "HMS Orontes" arrived in Portsmouth. Among its passengers was an ill and broken doctor returning from Afghanistan: the man fated to write the tales that would bring Sherlock Holmes worldwide acclaim. To reach Portsmouth and deliver Dr. John Watson to his destiny, the "Orontes" set a course past Guernsey and through the deepwater channel blasted by my great grandfather, Thomas Allen. Today, when I open the Canon to the first pages of *A Study in Scarlet* and read Watson's account of his arrival, my mind turns to Thomas, the brave underwater quarryman who cleared his path home.

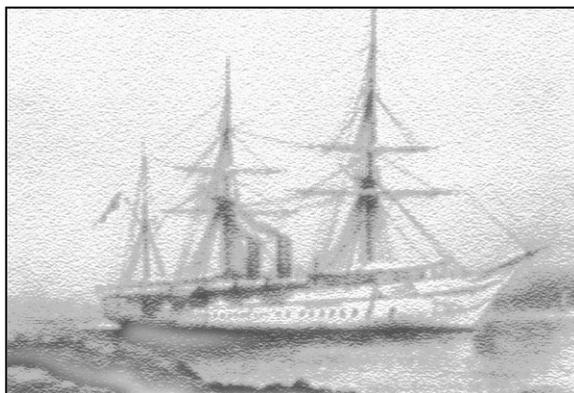


The spring of 2012 found me busy researching Thomas and his family at the Priaulx Library on Guernsey. The library is housed in a mansion donated by a prominent local family as a repository for the island's history. There, with the help of the expert and cordial librarian Jean Vidamour, I made fascinating discoveries about Thomas and his wife Mary Ann Caire. Despite his perilous profession, he lived 90 years and died in 1922. Just two decades later, Swastikas would fly across the island; the Channel Islands were the only British soil occupied by the Nazis.



It was only fitting that our departure from Guernsey should be by water. "HMS Orontes" was scrapped way back in 1893, but the overnight ferry was a worthy surrogate. We boarded at sunset and soon cleared Guernsey pilot station. As we entered the Channel to retrace the last hundred miles of Watson's voyage, we lifted a glass to the diver and the doctor. Our wakeup call was at dawn, just in time to have coffee as we eased into our berth at

Portsmouth. Was I still half asleep, or was that another ship entering the harbor behind us in the morning mist? She looked like an iron-screw three-master, but I couldn't make out her name.



## 5. The Devil's Footprint

It was in the spring of 1897 that Holmes and Watson decamped for Cornwall. A Harley Street specialist had prescribed complete rest for Holmes in the wake of a particularly stressful period of exacting work. Of course, there would be little rest, because in Cornwall Holmes would be confronted by the perplexing problem of "The Devil's Foot."

The two men took a cottage near Poldhu Bay--which is actually called Poldhu Cove, on Mount's Bay about six miles south of Helston. This is an area where much of my family tree was rooted for centuries. The mining village of Illogan, where so many of my forebears lived, is just ten miles to the north. It was here that in 1867 my great grandparents, Charles Henry Carpenter and Elizabeth Mill were married in what was then the newly rebuilt parish church.

But I have family connections still closer to Holmes's temporary quarters. Before his convalescence was interrupted, Holmes was fond of taking long walks in the neighborhood. On at least one of them he would surely have encountered the massive estate called "Trelowarren," not more than two miles from his seaside cottage.



Trelowarren, a Tudor house with a neogothic chapel, today commands a cozy 1,000 acres of parkland near the bay. For the last six centuries it has been the family seat of a prominent Cornish family by the name of Vivian.

On April 12, 1740, my fifth great grandfather, John Carpenter, married Sarah Vivian in Illogan. Sarah was descended from many generations of Vivian men. John Vivian, my 15th great grandfather, became the first of that name on the estate in 1430, when he married Honor de Ferrers, whose family had owned it for centuries before.

The Vivians were a colorful lot through the ages: some were sheriffs, some were scoundrels, most were fascinating. On another of his walks a few



miles east of the cottage, Holmes would certainly have come upon St. Mawes Castle, built by Henry VIII for the protection of Falmouth Harbor during the war with France. In 1544, my 13th great grandfather, Michael Vivian, Esq., was appointed the first

Governor of St. Mawes, after serving as Comptroller of the Coinage of Tin in Devon and Cornwall. It is to this day the most perfectly preserved of Henry's coastal fortresses, which were considered the most brilliantly designed defenses against naval attack of their time. As late as the 20th century the castle was fortified to defend Falmouth against German attack, and the protected waters beneath it were an embarkation point for the Allied invasion on D-Day.

Watson tells us early in "The Devil's Foot" about the surge-swept reefs below the cottage where numerous seamen met their end. "The wise mariner stands far out from that evil place," he warns. Which brings me to my 19th great grandfather, Sir Richard Vivian, who three weeks before he died in 1331 was indicted for "carrying away merchandise adjudged to be wreck." In other words he got caught looting one of those ships that had foundered.

A colorful lot, indeed. But it is pleasant to know that Holmes spent some time in the precincts of my ancestors, and that he solved the mystery of "The Cornish Horror" while he was there.

## 6. The Woman and Me

The kind and circumspect Watson occasionally took pains to hide the true identity of people in the Canon. Sometimes he told us he was doing so in deference to those who might find an airing of the facts uncomfortable; sometimes he did it without saying anything.

Fortunately for us, some of Watson's character masks are paper-thin. For example, we know that Boss McGinty's "Scowlers" in *The Valley of Fear* are really the Molly Maguires, the group accused--possibly unfairly--of all manner of evil in the northeastern Pennsylvania coal fields in the 1880s. And we know that "The Woman," whose memory haunted Holmes long after she got the better of him in "A Scandal in Bohemia," was not really named Irene Adler. In truth she was the actress and adventuress Lillie Langtry.



Consider the parallels: Irene Adler was born in New Jersey; Lillie Langtry was born on Jersey. They were both entertainers. They were both quite beautiful and--how shall we say it?--quite "frisky" as well. And they were both drawn to royal liaisons: Irene ensnared the King of Bohemia; Lillie stayed closer to home and had an extended affair with "Bertie," the Prince of Wales, who would become Edward VII. So even though Watson's chivalry is admirable, the woman behind the Irene Adler mask is clearly Lillie Langtry.

And, make no mistake: Lillie's relationship with the prince was every bit as stormy as Irene's was with the king. Today, if you visit Bournemouth on England's south coast, you might choose to stay at the Langtry Manor Hotel. It was built by The Prince of Wales in 1877 as a private retreat for him and Lillie.



What's more, he let her design it. But apparently there were cost overruns, because a spat erupted and he complained to her, "I've spent enough on you to build a battleship," whereupon she tartly replied, "And you've spent enough in me to float one."

I was baptized in the Borough of Queens, City and State of New York, by an Episcopal priest named John Langtry Williams, who also officiated at my parents' wedding. I remember my father telling me that Father Williams was a relative of Lillie Langtry, so with the help of the archivist at the Episcopal Diocese of Long Island I set off to settle the matter. Indeed, Father Williams's mother was a Langtry, and the line goes back from his native Toronto through Northern Ireland to the Channel Island of Jersey and Edward Langtry, a wealthy Irish landowner.

Lillie was born on Jersey and named Emilie Charlotte Le Breton, the only daughter of another Episcopal priest. In 1874 the 20-year-old Lillie married that same Edward Langtry, who in addition to owning estates in Ireland, also owned a yacht.

Apparently Lillie was more interested in the yacht than she was in Edward, and they were estranged not long after sailing it to London. Just two



years after her marriage she met the Prince of Wales at a dinner party. A three year relationship began, the first of many affairs she would have with royalty and the peerage. She eventually divorced, became an American citizen, then came to live in Monaco where she died in 1929.

So even though Father John Langtry Williams was only related to Lillie by a failed marriage, my Sherlockian family tree testifies that I was indeed baptized by a relative of *The Real Woman*, the notorious adventuress of dubious and questionable memory, Lillie Langtry, née Le Breton.

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I've now set off on a new round of research, this time in pursuit of my father's family. Who knows how many more Sherlockian links I'll find? Family research is sometimes frustrating, but always rewarding. I've come to understand that journeys through the past travel roads of self-discovery, giving form to our sense of worth, to our understanding of our place in the world. It is a satisfying thing to uncover documentary evidence that traces my heritage back so many centuries.

And when the documentary evidence leads again and again to that place where "only those things the heart believes are true," what Sherlockian could ask for more?

