



The curious case of the squire's son and the maid....

"Always remember that you have royal blood coursing through your veins!" That was the assertion made to one of our clients by her grandfather. We helped her get to the root of this particular family myth.

The story

Family tradition went that our client's great grandfather was the illegitimate child of a local squire's son who had fallen in love with the family maid. This family had an ancient pedigree which could be traced back to the native Welsh princes and so, when the squire's son announced his wish to marry the maid, his father, of course, refused and instead he was sent away 'to sea'. The squire took pity on the maid and her child, however, and they were given money and a cottage to live in on the estate.

At first glance, there appeared to be some foundation to this story as our client's great grandfather (although a poor farmer who didn't even own his own farm) had sent four of his children to a fee-paying school and then on to university. The money to pay for that education must have come from somewhere.

The research

The great grandfather's birth certificate confirmed that he was illegitimate. No father was named, but surprisingly the document showed that the baby's surname was registered as Davies and not Lewis — the surname he was known by for most of his life and which he passed on to his descendants. Instead, 'Lewis' was noted as his second name. Census information also reflected this as he was known as 'Davies' as a young child but 'Lewis' once he became an adult.

His marriage certificate uncovered more surprises — and an apparent disappointment. There, his father was noted as "John Lewis, mariner" — no hint, unfortunately, of a gentry connection. The quizzing of older family members backed by further research, eventually uncovered that our client's great grandfather's father was indeed John Lewis, mariner, who had two women pregnant at the same time! But he decided to marry the 'other woman' who happened to be the daughter of a fairly wealthy farmer. The brothers' schooling it appears was paid for from that particular family's fortune and not from a squire's estate.

So was the family myth — with a truthful 'being sent away to sea' element — a romanticised version of events, developed to hide the scandal and the bitterness? Further research into the family history, however, made us think otherwise, for we began to uncover ever-closer connections with the estate in question. And local history seemed to confirm that an old squire had a cottage built on the estate for his mistress. We had to delve deeper....

Census returns, parish registers, estate papers and wills then came into their own. Through careful cross-referencing, we were able to prove that our client's great (x3) grandparents were allowed to live on the estate, firstly in the lodge, even though they did not appear to be estate workers. Then we found that our client's great (x5) grandmother — Mary Jenkin — was in fact a maid in the 'big house' around the turn of the eighteenth and nineteenth century. She does not appear to have married, but when she died, she was living in a cottage on the estate. Was she the maid in the story? The squire who lived in the mansion during that same time died a bachelor and his will proved to be the key to the whole story. It tells us that, over the years, he had given Mary Jenkin sums of money and that, in addition to this, on his death he left her a further comfortable amount. He also left to her two grandchildren sums of money, a parcel of land as well as an annuity and the grandson received money towards an apprenticeship (that grandchild — our client's great (x3) uncle — we discovered, served his apprenticeship as a carpenter and became a cabinet maker). Significantly, this generosity was not reflected in the bequests he made to his other servants.

Often at this time, the illegitimate children of the gentry were not referred to as such in wills, but were in many cases well catered for in much the same way that this particular squire gave bequests to Mary Jenkin's grandchildren. Unfortunately, no documentary evidence has survived that would prove conclusively that Mary Jenkin's son was the squire's child. However, the evidence that does exist not only ties our client's family history firmly with the estate (revealing the apparently close relationship the squire had with Mary Jenkin and her family), but confirms many elements of the original story, helping us to unravel the myth and to uncover stories that actually involved different generations.

Family myths are fascinating and, even if they don't always reflect historical fact, those stories could have their roots in a truth that became distorted and exaggerated over the years, or could even have been dreamt up to hide a particular scandal. So, remember, don't discount them, as they could help you unearth more than you bargained for!