

Nicolls and Boots – a Sussex heritage

The surnames of the title are the maiden names of my paternal and maternal grandmothers respectively. Although I have lived in Haywards Heath, West Sussex, for some 40 years, I grew up in south east London and was born in Forest Gate, east London. My mother and her mother before me were also born in the East End, and, until researching my family tree over the past year, we believed that our ancestry was there.

My father, Stuart Sanderson, was born in Lewisham SE13, and his parents both lived in south-east London. He often spoke of a Sussex connection, with cousins in Seaford. His mother, Rose Ella (née Nicolls) came from a large family of 10 children, the offspring of John George Nicolls and Charlotte (née Thomas). John G was born in Robertsbridge in 1841 - his baptismal record shows the abode of his parents as "Fair Lane, Salehurst". Modern mapping shows this as not far from Robertsbridge Station, between the high street and modern A21 bypass, and continuing toward Salehurst village. Charlotte was born in Battle in 1839. They married in 1865, in Lambeth, London. It is not clear whether they met in Sussex or elsewhere. Their first child, Ernest, was born in Lambeth; however, by the time of the 1871 census, they were back in Robertsbridge/Salehurst, with Ernest, Elizabeth (1868) and new-born son, as yet unnamed, but to become William. Third child, Percy (1869), was living with John's parents nearby. These three children were born in in Ticehurst/Robertsbridge, although I cannot find any baptism records. Then Rhoda (1872) and George (1874) were born in Sedlescombe, before the remaining four were born in Brockley, Lewisham with Rose Ella being the last. Amongst John's eight brothers and sisters is Levi James Nicolls, who, remaining in Robertsbridge, became the founder of Nicolls (later Gray-Nicolls) cricket bat manufacturers. John G's father, William also came from Salehurst, as indeed did many of the previous generations. William is recorded as "Nichols", son of John and Mary (née Lawrence) Nichols at his baptism, in St Mary the Virgin, Salehurst in 1813. This spelling of the name appears in the tree going back from then. However, at his death in 1870, the spelling Nicolls is used; the children of William are all Nicolls, and the branch retained this version. John G died in 1891, in Lewisham. William was noted as "Master Carpenter" and John G as "Carpenter" at the 1861 census. Later John was listed as a Builder. It appears that he was responsible for building the house I grew up in, and its surrounding terraced buildings. Roads in the area are named 'Salehurst', 'Ewehurst', 'Brightling', 'Bexhill', and 'Glynde'. Several of John's sons were also Carpenters.

Having been born in Brockley, Lewisham in 1882, Rose Ella married Henry Emerson Sanderson in 1909. She bore two sons and two daughters. The family moved to West Wickham, Kent. Following the death there of Henry in 1931, she brought up her family as a widow. During the 1960's she, with my two maiden aunts, moved to Horsham, in West Sussex. After the death of her elder daughter, Ellaline, in Horsham, Rose and her younger daughter Enid moved to the coast at Seaford, East Sussex, where Enid cared for her mother. Rose died in 1978, and Enid moved to another house close by. My uncle Jack, third child of Rose, also moved to the town, with his wife, Doreen. Finally, my parents joined the family there, in 1988. Stuart (1997) Enid (1999) and Jack (2001) all died in Seaford, and with the death of Doreen in 2012, only my mother from her generation now lives in the town. We are unaware of any Nicolls connections still in Seaford or around.

As stated in the introduction, my mother's maternal family also has Sussex links. Born Jean Margaret Julia Dobbs, her mother was Edith Rose Boots (1891 – 1962). Edith was born of working class parents, in Canning Town, London. Her parents were John and Mary (née Yeoman). A clue to their Sussex roots came when a cousin of my mother mentioned "You know that our Aunt Nell was born by the seaside, and was bathed in the sea to cure her rickets?" Further enquiry produced two postcards of the Buckle Inn, Bishopstone, Seaford, posted 1935. My great aunt Nell (Ellen Augusta) was reported to have been born in the cottages attached to the Inn, around 1882. The

Buckle is only a few hundred yards from where my mother now lives – so we had to investigate further!

Two other pieces of information were available – John and Mary Boots had died within days of each other, in 1924 (2 years before my mother was born) and my grandmother had mentioned that Mary was a twin. Using the Genes Reunited website, I traced back John and Mary. At the 1891 census, they were in Canning Town, agreeing with the birth record for Edith Rose. However, in 1881 they were recorded in Bishopstone, with James (aged 5) Albert (2) and Charlotte (1). Birth records show these, plus Ellen in 1882, also subsequently confirmed by the Baptismal records for Bishopstone, St Andrew on SFHG site.

John and Mary married in April to June 1877 – whilst there are two birth records for James Henry Boots, Jul to Sep 1876 and April to June 1877; his baptism at St Andrew's Bishopstone was on 1 July 1877. Some confusion of the normal order of events there on the part of my g-grandparents I suspect! Prior to their marriage, John had been a "boysel" (boy sailor?) on board HMS Barrosa anchored at Singapore, at the 1871 Census. The 1861 Census shows 7 year old John with his parents, James and Charlotte, and six siblings, at Tide Mills, Bishopstone. He was born and baptised in the village in 1854.

Meanwhile, Mary had been born in November 1851, in Newhaven, being baptised at St Michaels church on 19 November. The birth and baptism records confirm that there was a twin, Ann. Further research showed that Ann died January to March 1852. Their baptisms are each shown as "private" with a note that Mary was "received in church on 30/05/1852". No burial record has been found for Ann however. Mary's parents were William Yeoman (b 1816), a painter originally from Exeter Devon, and Mary Ann Winder (b 1806) a local woman from Newhaven. Mary Ann had a son, Joseph (b 1837) with no record of a father; the baptismal record on SFHG database states Mary Ann was a "single woman". In the 1841 census, Mary Ann and her father John were living at John's cottage in Newhaven, with Joseph who was listed as Joseph Winder. William and Mary Ann married in 1843, and a son, William, was born in 1850, baptised 24 September, and sadly buried 14 November 1850. So, Mary Yeoman was the sole survivor of her parents' marriage, and had an older half brother. At the 1861 census, William and Mary Ann Yeoman are together with Mary, plus Joseph and his wife, Diana and their son George. On 4 October 1861, Mary Ann Yeoman was buried at St Michael Newhaven, leaving Mary, presumably with her father, half-brother, sister in law and nephew, at the age of 10 years. At the 1871 census Mary was in service to the Bennett family, near to her family home in Newhaven. I have found no trace of William Yeoman after the 1861 census.

So I returned to John's parents. James Boots appears in the 1841 census at Tide Mills, Bishopstone, as a 20 year-old. Founded circa 1761, the Mills were run from 1801, until closure during the mid 1880's, by one William Catt (until his death in 1843) and his eldest daughter Elizabeth.¹ James was listed as one of the many agricultural labourers working in the mills, and lived with three others in one of the cottages. In another house, with William Catt and daughter Elizabeth, 15 year-old Charlotte Towner is found as a "juvenile" alongside the Catts' children and other unrelated juveniles. She obviously caught young James' eye, and they married on 18 September 1847. In 1851 the family consisted of James, Charlotte, Elizabeth (1848) and William (1850). James (Jnr) was born in 1852, followed by John (above) Sarah (1856) Alfred (1857) and Charles (1860) all present at the 1861 census. Sadly Charles died in 1862 at the age of 22 months; the family was completed with Earnest in 1866. The later records agree that Charlotte was born in Bishopstone during 1825, and James at Brightling in 1821. Charlotte was one of 10 children of Richard and Sarah (nee Lewis) born between 1810 and 1830. All were baptised at St Andrew's church in Bishopstone, as had Richard been in 1788. Richard and Sarah married in 1807. The Towner family are not found in the 1841 census; however Richard and Sarah appear in

¹ For the history of Tide Mills Village, see their web site: <http://tidemills.webs.com>.

1851 at Bishopstone (precise location unsure, but assumed Tide Mills) as a Miller's labourer. Richard also appears in 1861, definitely at Tide Mills, a few doors away from James Boots and family, with his sister Lucy Cheall as housekeeper. Charlotte's baptism is recorded at St Andrews, on 6 October 1825.

James (snr) was clearly a 'newcomer' to Bishopstone and the Tide Mills. He was baptised at St Thomas of Canterbury, Brightling, on 16 December 1821, the youngest child of John Boots and Elizabeth (nee Parks). The SFHG transcription of the baptism has a note "J B Hay?" When I took the opportunity of viewing the original fiche, I found that this should be "J B Hayley", the Vicar at the time. James' father, John, was born in Salehurst in 1763. After their marriage, also in Salehurst, their first five children were baptised at Salehurst St Mary's. Following James' birth in Brightling (the adjacent parish) John died in 1824. His burial record shows that he died in Brightling; however, his burial was in the family church of St Mary, Salehurst. Elizabeth subsequently died in 1833, and was buried in Salehurst. So, by the age of 12, James was orphaned. His oldest sister, Caroline (b 1802) married one Thomas Hemsley in 1827 at Westerham, Kent. Next sister Mary (1806) married William Hoad in 1825, in Salehurst, and they produced seven children between 1826 and 1838. At the 1841 census, the Hoad family were recorded at Jarets House, Salehurst. Included in the household were Ann Boots (b 1818) next older sister to James, plus Eliza Hemsley, only daughter of Caroline and Thomas. Of the other children of John and Elizabeth, John (b 1811) emigrated to Australia in 1839, with the Poor Law paying expenses of £2/10s. Harriet (b 1815) gave birth to a daughter, Elizabeth, in 1840, in the Salehurst Union Workhouse; sadly Elizabeth only lived some 20 days. A Bastardy Maintenance Order was granted against Timothy Hope of 5 Providence Place, Commercial Road, Middlesex; 'maintenance of child born to Harriet Boots, 11 February 1840'.

Clearly the family fell on hard times during these years. I would love to fill in the details of where the younger siblings lived from 1833 to 1841. I have several addresses for the Hoad family at the baptisms of their children (all in Salehurst). The last four (1832 – 1843) were at "Sluts Hole", straddling the census record at Jarets House. After their marriage, did they also provide a home for widowed Elizabeth until 1833, and then care for the younger siblings until they were able to look after themselves? At the same time that I viewed James' baptismal records at the East Sussex Records office, I researched the Salehurst Rates book and Vestry Minutes, for any trace of the Boots or Hoad families, and especially of when, and under what circumstances, James moved to Tide Mills. Amongst the Rates charges from c 1818 – 1841, were substantial payments by one William Catt for "Church House Farm", also smaller charges on Edward Catt. Could this be the same William Catt who built up Tide Mills, or a relative? By searching the internet for information on Catt, I found that he was born in Buxted, son of a farmer, and on his marriage to Hannah Daws, in 1797 at Ewehurst², the family bought the couple a farm in Robertsbridge. Although William Catt soon moved to Bishopstone, to develop the Tide Mills in partnership with a cousin, it would appear that he kept the farm, and was responsible for the Rates and Taxes there. It would be entirely reasonable, therefore, that he would be aware of the Boots family from visits to his property, and I presume that he took young James to serve at the Mills (probably amongst many other needy cases).

Searching backwards from John (1763 – 1824) his ancestors came from the area surrounding Salehurst. The name is spelled Boots from circa 1725, but before that is normally recorded as Bootes. With the help of a website dedicated to the Boots/Bootes family³ the name has been traced back to Richard Bootes born c 1550. The name James is popular, being used for one or more male child in each generation almost from the beginning of these records. I have noted, therefore, that both my grandmothers' families came from the same area, and were at one time

² SFHG Marriages index

³ <http://bootsbootes.com>

contemporaries in Salehurst. There are no recorded marriages between a Nicolls and Boots in the Sussex marriages register however.

To return to my Victorian ancestors, both James Boots and son John lived and worked in and around the Tide Mills. After their marriage, John and Mary set up home in "Buckell Cottages", those shown in the postcards from my mother's cousin, and just along from the Tide Mills. As noted, the Mills closed during the mid 1880's. The last of John and Mary's children born at Bishopstone was Ellen (Nell) in 1881, and the first in east London, Joseph in 1885. It would appear that both James and John were amongst the many that lost their jobs with the closure of the mills. Exactly why John and Mary went to London is unknown. However, Mary's half-brother, Joseph Winder was listed as a shipwright at Newhaven in 1861. Although missing from the 1871 census, by 1881 he was shown as Shipwright unemployed, living in Poplar east London, close to the Docks. His daughter, Elizabeth, was born in Poplar during 1875. It is therefore highly likely that Joseph knew of opportunities for labourers in the Docks, and advised his sister and brother-in-law to move there. Another intriguing connection is via James' sister, Ann. It is believed that she married one John Hannaford, in Poplar during 1857. However, no details of the name appear in subsequent censuses.

James and Charlotte were listed at Tide Mills in 1881, James as a Gardner – aged 60. I rather expected them to also appear in London at the next census. To my surprise, their address in 1891 was "Wallace Lodge, Portsmouth Lane, Lindfield", where James was listed as Domestic Gardner. Lindfield is the adjacent village to Haywards Heath, and I soon found that Wallace Lodge was (and is) only about a mile as the crow flies from my current address. The lodge consisted of a pair of cottages, occupied by workers on the estate known as "Chestnuts". James and Charlotte were at No. 2, and No. 1 was occupied by the Groom – Michael Mansbridge, and family. With James and Charlotte were Elizabeth Larkin – their married daughter, and her daughter Alfreda (aged 3 years).⁴ Chestnuts was occupied by Gertrude Lydon (possibly Lady Lydon) a widow, with her daughter, also Gertrude (age 16) plus a widowed cousin, a visitor, and the servants – Cook, Housekeeper and Parlour maid. The lady of the house, plus her visitors were noted as "living on her own means"! Suddenly, my Sussex heritage had come much closer to home. Wallace Lodge still exists, and is formed of the two former cottages combined. Chestnuts house has been demolished and the grounds are a private estate known as Summerhill Drive, with an adjacent road named "The Chestnuts". The lodge remains as "gate guardian" to the area. I assume that James and Charlotte moved to Lindfield circa 1883, and once again, there is a possible family connection with their move. Another of their daughters, Sarah, married Alfred Walder, in Preston (Brighton) Sussex. Alfred was born in Nash Cottage, Lindfield, the son of Joseph Walder who was a greengrocer/market gardener in Scaynes Hill and Lindfield from 1861 to 1891. Again, local knowledge by Alfred or his father may have suggested the position to James. On 4 November 1896 James died at Wallace Lodge of Diabetes (unconfirmed) after a coma lasting two days. His death was reported by Alfred Walder. James is buried in Walstead cemetery, Lindfield. Through the assistance of local Funeral Directors, Masters and Son, I have located his grave, although this is not marked by any stone. Presumably, Charlotte was asked to leave the cottage, which went with James' job; in 1901 she is living with daughter and son-in-law Sarah and Alfred Walder in Brighton. She died, of kidney disease, in November 1902, at the Walder home almost exactly six years after James.

To bring the story of John and Mary Boots to a close, they remained in east London. At the end of the 1880's/1890's they had further children. Florence Amelia was born 11 April 1888, and John Alfred born 13 April 1890, in different homes in Poplar. In one short fortnight in 1891, by which time they had moved to Plaistow, on 2 April Florence died of acute bronchitis after 10 days of illness,

⁴ Elizabeth was married to Herbert Larkin, who was in service in Brighton. In 1871 Census, Elizabeth plus her newly born first daughter, Ellen, were living with James and Charlotte – it appears that she did the same for other births, and remained with her parents at Lindfield. Perhaps offspring were not welcomed at the big house where Herbert worked?

just short of her third birthday; they returned the 1891 census on 5 April (without Florence); and on 14 April John Alfred died aged 366 days, also as the result of bronchitis. Despite the fact that, so far as I can tell, John never returned to sea after his time around 1871, and is normally listed as "Labourer", at the registration of these deaths Mary stated that John's occupation was "Able Seaman". At the 1891 census (presumably completed by John as Head) John is simply General Labourer. It is hoped that the arrival of my Grandmother, Edith, some 9 months after these events, was a little compensation in this sad year. Their last child, Beatrice arrived in 1895, at another house, in Croydon Road, Plaistow. They remained there for some time, until settling in Roseberry Avenue, Manor Park by the time of the 1911 census. In an echo of the 1891 events, following influenza, first Mary died on 19 February 1924, followed by John on 21 February, both of bronchitis, pneumonia and heart failure. The Roseberry Avenue property passed to Ellen and husband Alfred Snowdon.

During my investigations of the Boots family at Salehurst, I found the name of the secretary to the Salehurst and Robertsbridge parish History Group, one Jean Woodgate. I phoned her to discuss whether the Group could help in tracing the locations of the Boots and Hoad (also Nicolls) families, and to track down the William Catt who owned the Church Farm. She was most helpful, and said she would ask around. During the course of conversation, she explained that she had lived in Salehurst for all her life, and her ancestors before her. When she said that her maternal grandfather was "William Horace Hoad" my ears pricked up, and I explained the connection between James Boots' sister and William Hoad, and said that I would investigate. Jean gave a few clues, such as her grandmother was born Pantry. Using Genes reunited and SFHG records, I confirmed that William and Mary (Boots) Hoad were indeed the grandparents of William Horace Hoad, and that Jean and I are of the same generation, sharing 4 x great Grandparents in John and Elizabeth Boots – making us fourth cousins. I subsequently spent a day in Salehurst and Robertsbridge, where Jean showed me round. The cottages known as Sluts Hole (where many of the Hoad children were born) still exist, and are adjacent to the remains of Jarretts House, thus fitting together the baptismal records around 1841, with the Census. We also noted that the property on which Jarretts House and Sluts Hole were situated, was adjacent to Church House Farm, connected to William Catt, thus increasing the likelihood that Catt knew the Hoad/Boots family. I also explored the Brightling and Salehurst churches, discovering that J B Hayley was in fact John Burrell Hayley, and that the Burrell family were a celebrated local family who held the Rectorship of Brightling Church from early 1700's onward. Latterly, the Hayley family had entered the ministry, and on marriage of one William Hayley to Ann Burrell (22 Feb 1759) he took the name "Burrell Hayley". The fonts at both places are of some antiquity, so presumably were those where the Boots and Nicolls children were baptised during the period that I was interested in.

I have mentioned my father and his father, who came from Lewisham. My mother's father, Bertram Dobbs (m Edith Boots) was born in Beckton east London in 1885. His father however came from Heigham in Norfolk, and at least one other of his children was born in Norfolk. As a result of my investigations, I know I have 50% Sussex blood, and can explain why I feel at home in the county. My wife, who I met in Haywards Heath, has an even greater Sussex heritage – but that is her story!

Much of the above contains assumptions. I would love to have these confirmed, or refuted. So if anyone can add to the information, please contact me: tim@elmgate-models.co.uk.