

WHEN GREAT-GRANDFATHER WENT A-WOOING

by Stephen Cooper

The Marriages in Cumbria



Dacre, Cumbria [2015]

Official records can look dry and uninteresting; but if you lift the crust of a pie made of censuses and registers, you can sometimes find something juicy underneath, especially if you throw some childhood memories into the mix.

My maternal great-grandfather was John Hugill, who was born in Skelton in Cumberland in 1860 and married Elizabeth Wright in 1887 in Penrith Registry Office. My mother Elsie Cooper (née Hugill, 1915-1997) told me two memorable things about him. The first was that, shortly after he married Elizabeth, his younger brother married her younger sister Kate Wright, also in Penrith. So, two brothers married two sisters: not an unusual occurrence, you might say; but my mother thought it was; and often told me so, especially after she started to suffer from dementia, in the 1990s.

The second thing she told me was that John Hugill was so shy that, when he first took a fancy to Elizabeth Wright, he could not bear to speak to her, or even approach her. Apparently, he used to travel for miles across the fells in the Lake District, so that he could admire her from afar, and then, having done so, return

home silently. But he must eventually have plucked up the courage to say something, because (as I say) they were married and had seven children, five boys and two girls.

The eldest of these was my maternal grandfather, John William Hugill (known as 'Jack'). I can just about remember him, sitting in an armchair in his black waistcoat with a pocket-watch and chain, smoking a pipe. My younger sister tells me that, in her eyes, the old man (who would then have been about 65) looked like a model for what God ought to look like, except for the pipe and the smoke; but in fact, Granpa was neither invisible nor immortal: he died in 1955 when I was seven, of an 'unstoppable nosebleed' (or haemorrhage).

I can clearly remember his (much) younger sister, Great Aunt Elsie, who lived in a caravan in Heysham with her husband Uncle Tom. He had the worst teeth I have ever seen. As for Elsie, she was very large, while my sister remembers that she also smelled of fat, and left a stink in her bed when she came to stay with us. Elsie and Tom both spoke with broad Lancashire accents and we visited them when we were on holiday in Heysham and Silverdale, where the beach was made of grass. They had no children, which I found it difficult to understand. Wasn't that the point of getting married?

My grandfather had had yet another younger sister, Ada, but she was burned to death as a child, when her nightie caught fire, probably before the First World War. My sister remembers that she was never told about the fate of poor Ada, until she was an adult. I think my parents thought central heating was a very good thing, when this was introduced in the 1960s

But was it true - that John Hugill walked for miles across the fells just to spy on his lady-love? (If so, he might have been arrested for stalking, if the event had taken place 100 years later.) When I compiled a family tree some years ago, I was lucky enough to hear from a distant relative, who had already done extensive research in censuses and parish registers. He sent me some 40 pages of closely-typed material, detailing the Hugill family's ancestry through twelve generations. The material was so detailed that I could scarcely take it all in; but I have gone back to it in an attempt to substantiate my mother's story.

The bit about the two brothers marrying two sisters is certainly true. John Hugill married Elizabeth Wright on 30 August 1887 in Penrith, when he was 27 and she was 19; and his younger brother William married Kate Wright, also in Penrith, but in December 1888, when he was 18 and she was just 16 (something which would have required parental consent).

As for walking across the fells, there is no way of substantiating this part of the story; but it is certainly true that the couple lived miles apart because, prior to their marriage, John lived in Dacre, a village near Ullswater where the Hugills had lived since at least 1871, whilst Elizabeth (and her younger sister) lived in Blencarn in the Eden Valley to the East of Penrith. The two villages are some 15 miles apart, which (according to Google Maps) would take almost 5 hours to walk.

Now, people were used to walking long distances then, and in fact we are not talking about a mountainous, or even hilly, part of the Lake District. Moreover, John Hugill was young and he was a farm labourer. Such men were used to moving around, and doubtless equally used to walking long distances. They were probably hired by the year at the hiring fair in Penrith, and worked for others on farms scattered around the district they lived in, or even further afield, living-in with their employer.¹ Nevertheless I feel that John Hugill probably did not walk all the way from Dacre to Blencarn (and back again!). I think it is more likely that he got a lift, or a ride, of some kind into Penrith and walked it from there; and did the same on the return journey.

I also think it very unlikely that young William accompanied John Hugill on his amatory rural ramblings. The ages would not appear to fit. William was 8 years younger, and assuming that John started to woo Elizabeth when he was 25 and she was 16, William would have been 17, and Kate only 14. More probably, William managed somehow to forge a connection with Elizabeth Wright of Blencarn for all his shyness, and then thought that his little brother would 'do' for Kate.

Once married, both couples went to live in Bolton, Westmoreland, which is around 5 miles from Blencarn; and it was there that my grandfather John William Hugill was born, in 1888. In fact the two couples lived next door to one another for a time, before John and his family moved South to Lancashire.



Blencarn in Winter [2015]

Can we draw any conclusions from this little study? None that are very startling; but perhaps people were more mobile than we might think, in the agricultural 'world we have lost'; and perhaps they were not so 'Victorian' as we have been led to believe, when it came to affairs of the heart. Incidentally, my

¹ Hiring fairs were held in Penrith on Whit Tuesday and Martinmas Tuesday:

mother was brought up to believe that John and Elizabeth had been 'very happy', in contrast to her maternal grandparents, who were not. She also told me that her mother, Mary Campbell Pickstone, thought that it had been the happiest day of her life when she married Jack Hugill and got a home of her own. (Her father, William Pickstone, was an alcoholic, and my mother was not even allowed to sit on his knee).

The Move to Lancashire

The shift from the countryside to the town was regarded, by many Victorian writers and commentators as a great national tragedy – because it meant that the majority of ordinary working people were ejected from the soil; and not many ever had the opportunity to return. This is why the Hugills interest me. I have lived in towns, all my life, as my parents did before me; but for at least ten generations before 1900 - as far back as it is possible to trace them – they had been farm labourers in the Lake District, though my great great great grandfather was (also?) a shoemaker there. It was only at the beginning of the 20th century that my great grandfather John moved to the Manchester area. According to my mother, this was done 'for work'.²

She was right about that. The Census returns are very revealing. In 1871 John Hugill was at school in Dacre; in 1881 he was a 'general domestic servant' on David Stephenson's farm; and in 1891 he was an agricultural labourer in the same place; but by 1901 he was a 'horseman' on Park House Farm Whitefield, which is on the north side of Manchester, to the south of Bury. (My mother said he was 'a carter, working with horses'). The Census of 1911 records him as 'carter for the Urban District Council', living in the curiously named Besses O' th' Barn, a mile or so south of Whitefield.

As for grandfather 'Jack', the Censuses reveal that in 1901 he was a grocer's errand boy (in Whitefield); and by 1911 (when he was 23) he was working as a greengrocer in Besses O' th' Barn. He married in 1914 and (according to my mother's birth certificate) he was living in Florence Street in Eccles, on the West side of Manchester in November 1915. Then (according to mother) he became a mechanic, a driver and a garage owner. Then, when his garage went under during the Great Crash of 1929, a driver again, of very large vehicles, including a '100 tonner' that was used to transport railway engines from the place of manufacture to the docks in Liverpool and Glasgow. By then he had moved to 96 Briardale Road in the Mossley Hill district of Liverpool, where he was living when he died, in 1955.

My grandfather's move from Cumbria to Lancashire involved him in a series of trades; and the same was true of two of his siblings. Robert Hugill was a butcher's assistant or apprentice in Besses O' Th Barn in 1911 (and, according to my

² My mother thought they moved South her father was 19; but her memory must have let her down her. They almost certainly moved in 1900 when my grandfather was 12.

Mum, he became a butcher). At that date Anthony Hugill, or Uncle 'Tant', was apprenticed to a gas mechanic.

The Hugills were not alone in making the great trek. Kate Wright and her husband William Hugill stayed in Cumbria; but Kate (and Elizabeth) came from a large family, of nine children. There was a brother, Edward Wright. He was born in Dacre but worked in Blencarn like his sister; but the Census of 1901 shows him boarding next door to John Hugill in Whitefield, Lancashire. So he too had made the move South. In 1908 he married Jane Robinson in Moss Side, Manchester. The Census of 1911 shows him in Prestwich, where he has become a bailiff for Salford Borough Council.

We can see from the above moving South did not necessarily mean a move from the country to the town. The transition was more gradual. Dacre and Blencarn were small rural villages in 1900, and remain so today; Whitefield is now effectively a suburb of Manchester, while Besses O'th Barn's is on a motorway and has a three-layer bridge, constructed in 1968; but in 1900, neither of these places had as yet been entirely consumed by Manchester. There were some farms left, though a contemporary photograph of the famous Besses O'th Barn brass band does show an urban landscape in the background. Moreover, John Hugill's occupation after he moved was as a horseman or carter. These may have been trades, but they were rural trades; and, although grandfather John William Hugill and his brothers Robert and Anthony soon did other things, brother Fred remained a farm labourer in. Similarly, Edward Wright, who had also made the move, remained on the land as a farmer and bailiff.

My mother recalled that John Hugill never became a 'townie'. He remained a countryman at heart. He loved gardening. After he retired he got the chance to become the caretaker of a clinic in Whitefield called 'The Uplands'. (I hope he had a garden there). He lived till he was over 80, dying in the darkest days of the Second World War, at Heywood in Lancashire. My mother also said that Great Aunt Kate, who stayed in the Lake District, used to visit Manchester from time to time; but didn't like it. She thought it was 'a dirty place' – which I am sure it was, in those days.

Not that life in the Lake District was necessarily all that quiet. On 8th February 1886 – the year before my great grandparents married – three men were hanged in Carlisle Gaol, for the murder of a policeman in Plumpton in 1885, following their burglary of Netherby Hall. In the course of making their escape from the scene of their first crime the culprits, who were called Rudge, Martin and Baker, had inflicted serious injuries on three other policemen. On 20th June 1887, two months before the wedding, Queen Victoria's Jubilee was celebrated 'with great pomp and pageant' in Penrith.³

Why did my great grandfather move? My mother said it was 'for work'. Can we test this by reference to the general histories? The old idea, prevalent in the 1960s

³ Furness, 314-315, 318.

and '70s was that England and Wales suffered from a widespread agricultural depression between 1870 and 1914, because of foreign competition, particularly from the Americas, Australia and New Zealand, which was facilitated by the development of intercontinental transport, and refrigeration. For the first time, Britain could now import much of her food. More recently, it has been shown that, while there was undoubtedly a depression in the South and East of England in the 1880s, this did not affect the North and West to the same extent. However, those areas were badly affected in the 1890s; and places which were more remote from the new towns and cities suffered more than areas which were closer. Thus Cumbria suffered more than Lancashire, where there was a heavy concentration of industry and large conurbations.



Besses o'th Barn Brass Band c.1907

Whatever the reasons for the move, my family never returned to live in the Lake District (though my mother and father did some of their courting there). My mother lived in Liverpool for most of her life, and she married my father there, in 1939. They moved back to Manchester during the Second World War, but returned to Liverpool in 1950. I was one of three children, and we all grew up in Liverpool. Though we have since moved away, none of us has gone back to the Lakes; and none of us earns our living in farming or a rural trade. We live in towns, and in small nuclear families, far removed from the world which our ancestors, and Wordsworth, knew. Have we lost something in the process?

Family Planning.

John Hugill may have been shy but he made up for lost ground once he was married. He and his wife had seven children, five boys and two girls. The boys were born between 1888 and 1900 in Cumberland or Westmoreland, the girls after 1905, in Lancashire. The first born was my grandfather, the penultimate (born in 1906) my Great Aunt Elsie. The last was Ada – the one who was burnt to death as a child, when her nightdress caught fire.

Contrast the private life of my grandfather, Jack Hugill. He had only two children – my mother Elsie (born 1915) and my Aunt Marjorie (whom my mother called 'Pip'), born in 1924. And this was not exceptional. It marked a permanent change in the way we live. Students of demography have shown that the birth control movement was first established in England in the late 1870s, that birth rates began to fall in the 1880s and, although the first permanent birth control clinic was not established until 1921, the relatively small family unit that we are familiar with today was already the norm in the 1920s and 1930s. Contraceptives had become widely available: the London Rubber Company was founded in 1915, though its trademark Durex brand was not marketed until the 1920s.

The puzzle derives from another of my mother's remarks. In her last years, she would talk about sex, in a way that she would certainly have thought inappropriate when she was younger; and she told me that her mother (Jack's wife) had no knowledge of the contraception. Now, on the face of it, that is quite incredible, given that Mary and Jack had two children, born 9 years apart, and were said to have been very happy. There could of course be other explanations, but some form of birth control is the most obvious.

Yet I had to take my mother seriously, because it seems that she did discuss these things with her mother; and her mother's view was that it was entirely a matter of chance (or God's will) whether a woman became pregnant or not. In other words, she did not acknowledge or deny that she engaged in family planning. She was simply unaware of its existence.

Could that be true?

Further reading

William Furness, *History of Penrith* (Bookcase, Penrith, 1894)

The Agrarian History of England and Wales Volume 7 Part II, 1850-1914 (ed. Joan Thirsk, Cambridge University Press)

Where was the 'Great Agricultural Depression'? P. J. Perry:
www.bahs.org.uk/AGHR/ARTICLES.

Birth Control, Sex and Marriage in Britain 1918-1960, Kate Fisher (Oxford University Press, 2008)

Newspapers for depression c 1900

Write Local History Library Penrith/Carlisle???

Trade Directories, Dacre (Hugills) 1871, 1881; Wrights (Blencarn 1871, 1881); Bolton, Westmoreland (Hugills 1891)