

From Kings Heath to Sparkbrook – Carl Chinn's Story

It is both strange and exhilarating to follow in the path of your ancestors. I have lived in and around King's Heath all my life and from when I was a child I was aware that my family had a longstanding connection with the area, and that I walked where my ancestors had walked. But I had no idea quite how longstanding and how deep was that connection until the last couple of weeks.

From family stories I knew that my great grandfather, Richard, had gone to the same primary school as me and my brother, Darryl. It was Moseley National School in School Road. In our childhood in the 1960s it was surrounded by houses but in his day in the 1870s it had lain in the midst of the Worcestershire countryside.

We were told that great granddad's older sister used to take him in to school with her but that almost immediately he would go back out. I also knew that his father, Henry, had farmed somewhere in King's Heath and that he had died in a farming accident – but I did not realise that whenever I step along the High Street or go around King's Heath Park, or shop in Sainsbury's that I am stepping alongside my ancestors.

The story begins with my great, great, great, great grandfather Richard Chin – as the name was then spelled. He was born in Rowington in 1765, where his people had lived since at least the 1630s. Mostly they were yeoman, small-scale tenant farmers. Better off as they were than either landless labourers or skilled agricultural workers, yet they never came near to rising to the same wealth and prestige of families like the Colmores and Smallbrooks. They too had started off as yeomen but unlike my family they went on to thrust themselves out of their middling status and into the ranks of the landed gentry.

Like so many others from rural north Warwickshire, Richard followed other Chinn's to the rapidly expanding manufacturing town of Birmingham and married Ann Pearson at St Martin's in the Bull Ring in 1790. The couple did not stay in the town, though. Ann had been born in Sheldon, where her four children were baptised. Thence she and Richard moved their family to King's Norton, where their older daughter was married at St Nicolas in 1818. Richard was unable to write for he made only his mark as a witness.

The draw of King's Norton was Richard's older brother, John. He had married a Mary Barwell at St Martin's in 1788 but in his will of 1813 he was described as a yeoman of King's Norton. John had no children. He left small sums of money to his various nephews and nieces but the larger amount of £25 each to two of Richard's children – Elizabeth and Henry, my great, great, great grandfather. After making provision for his wife in his lifetime, John also left them the rest of his personal estate 'share and share alike'.

There is, however, a puzzle here. My great, great, great, great grandfather Richard was born in 1765 and did have a brother called John, but according to the Registers of Rowington he had died as a small child in 1763. Another John Chinn is recorded in this source as having been born in 1758. My direct ancestor, Richard, was the son of Richard the elder and an Abigail Hornblower, but this other John was the son of a Henry Chinn and an Elizabeth Palmer.

My most distant relative was a Henry Chinn, who was baptised in Rowington in 1619 and who was the son of another Henry Chinn. Over the next few generations the names Henry, John and Richard were common amongst the Chinns of the village and this makes it difficult to trace exactly who was the son of whom. Still it is likely that the Henry Chinn who was the father of John born in 1758 was a cousin of Richard Chinn, the father of Richard who was born in 1765.

That still leaves the problem of John Chinn the yeoman of Kings Heath describing as his brother the Richard who would seem to be his cousin. Perhaps the vicar of Rowington had made a mistake and in fact the John Chinn who had died young was the son of Henry and the John who lived was the son of Richard the elder?

Unfortunately, this seems unlikely as John the yeoman also left a sum of money, £5 each, to the children of his sister, Mary Glover. There is no evidence that Richard the elder and Abigail had a daughter named Mary, but Henry and Elizabeth did have such a child. To make matters more confusing in his will, John named his executor another brother, Henry. Yet the Rowington Registers give no indication of a Henry who was a brother either to John or to Richard, although such a Henry may have been baptised in another parish.

John the yeoman also left £5 each to the children of his brother-in-law, William Barwell, but apart from his wife the main beneficiaries of the will were two of Richard's children: Henry and Elizabeth. Another sister, Mary, had died as an infant, and a third, Sarah, was excluded. Henry and Elizabeth shared the large sum of £50 and the residue of John the yeoman's estate. Henry went on to marry at St Martin's, in 1821. His wife was Ann Barwell, a relative of his aunt. Although born in Birmingham, Ann's family hailed from Bickenhill, next to Sheldon. Her four children were all baptised at St Philip's, Birmingham between 1823 and 1836 but later censuses indicate that all were born in King's Norton.

Henry's inheritance gave him the funds to rent the 88 acre Church Farm in Kings Heath. The 1840 Tithe Map indicates that his farm house was on the Alcester Road, where Sainsbury's now stands. His farm encompassed all the land behind the house as far back as about Hazelhurst Road and from Vicarage Road – then called Bleak Lane - along to Featherstone Road. He was a tenant of William Congreve Russell, one of the biggest landowners in Moseley and King's Heath, and he also rented Row Heath Farm, in what is now Bournville. The two farms gave him 136 acres of farmland and a position of status. He became both a churchwarden and an overseer of the poor in King's Norton.

Ironically Henry's sister, Elizabeth did not fare so well. In 1861 she was a widow aged 67 who was struggling as a charwoman in Gravelly Hill, whilst her unmarried son was an agricultural labourer. Moreover, Henry's own grandchildren by his oldest son, also called Henry, would themselves have to endure poverty.

By 1861 Henry the elder had given over the tenancy of Row Heath Farm to his second son, William, but his main farm in King's Heath was worked as a family affair. He employed only one labourer for he had the help of his three single children - Henry, James, and Anne.

Later that year Henry the younger, aged 38, married Mary Ann Grigg. She had been born in Northfield but had lived at Row Heath, where her family farmed near to the Chinns. Soon afterwards Henry took on Church Farm from his father. Unhappily the fortunes of the family changed badly for the worse and in 1868 both he and his brother, William of Row

Heath, were made bankrupt. It must have been a bitter pill for Henry the elder to swallow. As he came to the end of his life his life's work in raising his family's position to one of comfort and security had been shattered. He died in 1873 at the old age of 80 and was buried at St Mary's, Moseley – as had been his mother, father and wife. Worse was to come for his family.

His bankrupt son, Henry the younger, had quickly found work as a farm bailiff with the Cartlands of The Priory. He lived with his wife and children in a cottage on Vicarage Road. It was not the life of a prosperous tenant farmer but it was still a good job that was far better than that of an agricultural labourer. Then tragedy struck in 1877. The family story goes that Henry fell off a haystack and broke his neck. He was 54 and was buried at All Saints Church, Kings Heath. Whatever the cause of death, it was a disaster for his widow, Mary Anne. She had five children aged twelve and under, but with no man she lost both his income and her home – for the cottage had gone with the job.

Mary Anne must have been a strong and determined woman for she kept her family together and out of the hated workhouse. Putting what belongings she had on a hand cart she traipsed to nearby Sparkbrook, then part of Balsall Heath, and rented a back house in White Street. Here she scratched a living as a washerwoman. Her ability to cope against adversity meant she got by - though she and her children, including my great grandfather, Richard, knew what it was to be clammed and to have to scrat to survive. She died in 1910, still living in White Street and still a widow after 33 years.

I thank Andy Bishop of the King's Heath Local History Society for his help in sending me newspaper cuttings on Henry Chinn the younger.

Carl Chinn, September 2012