

HILDRETH HIGHLIGHTS

VOL. XXI, NO. 4

JULY 1998

ENGLISH COUSIN'S HERITAGE

1. The few text books on surnames which include the name vary in their views on its origin -but one thing that is clear is that it is either Anglo-Saxon or Danish, and in no way French for example. I think the most likely derivation is from the Anglo-Saxon words "*hild*" meaning war and "*roeð*" meaning counsel or advice¹ (the letters "d" and "th" were more close in the Anglo-Saxon and were often interchanged-and note the similarity with the German word *rat* meaning advice).

2. So the ancestors of the Hildreths would have been simple farming people who came across the North Sea from what is now Holland, North Germany or Denmark to Britain in the 500s, 600s or 700s AD during one of the waves of immigration after the Romans left these islands. They were almost certainly Angles or Danes from the northern part of that area because these were the people who settled in the north-east of England and in East Anglia, and it is only in that area that the Hildreths are found - until the general movement of population at the beginning of the last century one would have found virtually none in the west or south or midlands of England².

3. The earliest Hildreth I have found in the records (and I have not looked very extensively) is appropriately enough in Yorkshire in 1524 so I think we can be fairly sure that the Hildreth family is very firmly rooted in Yorkshire and the north-east of England. In the days of the system of manors in this country, the owners were assessed for dues and the assessments were recorded on subsidy rolls (called rolls because they were parchment rolls³). In 1524 a John Hildreth is shown as owning the manor of Hallikeld in the Parish of Kirkby Sigston near Northallerton in North Yorkshire and in 1587 Thomas Hildreth is recorded as selling a part of that estate⁴.

4. That part of north Yorkshire had a concentration of Hildreths because in the 1600s and 1700s there are odd entries to be found in the parish registers at Osmotherley, Easingwold, Gilling, Husthwaite, and Kilburn⁵ -(incidentally I have

¹ *Surnames of the UK*-by H I Harrison (1911). However more recent the *Dictionary of English & Welsh Surnames* by Bardsley states that the name means "son of Hild."

² This is borne out by browsing the index volumes in the General Register Office in London for births from 1837 (when records started) and noting where the registrations were.

³ Parchment is made of animal skin.

⁴ Victoria County History of York-North Riding

⁵ Indexes to Yorkshire Parish Record Society volumes.

included as being virtually the same name entries for "Hildred" and "Hildrith" because it must be remembered in those days well over half the people were illiterate and they would just say their name to the church minister who would write it down as he heard it and the person would not be able to check of course). The Mormon microfiches containing summary birth marriage and death entries for selected parishes from when records began-usually sometime in the late 1500s-until 1837 confirm a real concentration in central North Yorkshire and South Durham⁶ - especially Gainford on the River Tees seven miles west of Darlington⁷ - so this area was clearly the epicentre of the clan (if I can borrow a Scottish word)!

5. It is interesting, however, that a good line of Hildreths is to be found in London from at least the late 1600s proving that if ever there was only one trunk of the family (which is very unlikely) it must have split at a very early stage: there is also a large number of Hildreths near Great Missenden in Buckinghamshire in the south of England. What I think is more than likely is that when surnames came to be regularly used in the 1300s it was applied to several families but that the one which produced most children came to North Yorkshire or South Durham!

The southern Hildreths seem to have produced some prestigious names however including Major-General Sir (Harold) John (Crossley) Hildreth-1908-1992, (actually born in Burma) who held the American Legion of Merit and whose father was a distinguished surgeon in the Royal Army Medical corps⁸. His son Jan Hildreth was a leading light in the Institute of Directors in London.

There was also a Peter Hildreth who was an Olympic hurdler and 200m runner representing Britain at the Games in 1952, 1956 and 1960 and who later went into sports broadcasting and writing.

A short road called Hildreth Road can be found just by Balham railway station in the south London suburbs, but I have not been able to discover how it got its name⁹.

6. To return to the Norton branch of the Hildreths-of course I have been looking forward- but when actually researching you have to work back carefully step by step and taking nothing for granted. Unfortunately there is a "weak link" in the chain but I am virtually certain that it is our family which I have traced back to the small market town of Thirsk in North Yorkshire-the setting of the James Herriot vet stories. There is a marriage there in 1669 between Richard and Ann Gilerton¹⁰.

⁶ They are organised by pre-1974 English counties-see the Yorkshire fiche-112 entries, and Co. Durham fiche-97 entries, and the London fiche -28 entries. No other county approaches this number of Hildreths and whole swathes of England (and all of Ireland, Wales and Scotland) have none at all.

⁷ Where there is a delightful gravestone outside in the graveyard south-west of the church recording the burial of the 3 (successive!) wives of Christopher Hildreth-Jane Ann aged 34 in 1857; Elizabeth aged 16; in 1859; Elizabeth aged 34 in 1871.

⁸ Obituary-*Daily Telegraph*, Saturday 17 October 1992, p.21.

⁹ See the *A-Z Street Atlas* or similar

¹⁰ The records for Thirsk and Thirlby have been published by the Yorkshire Parish Register Society

What gives a good indication in those days is that family forenames were usually passed on from generation to generation and our family seemed to have lots of the name Richard, John and Francis whereas others would have say William or Thomas. Church records, however just had names and not parentage so there can never be absolute certainty that one has found one's ancestor.

The trail picks up at the hamlet of Thirlby which is very near Thirsk with the burial of Ann Hildreth in 1704. In 1713 a John Hildreth and Judith Whitfield were married - 1714 Francis son of John Hildreth was baptised; 1716 - Richard son of John Hildreth was baptised; 1720 - Ann daughter of John Hildreth baptised. There are various other entries - the relevant one I think being the baptism of Sarah daughter of Francis Hildreth in 1757. There are a few more Hildreths but things seem to finish completely in Thirlby in about 1800.

7. Correspondingly when I had started at the other end and traced the Hildreths back through Norton in the East Riding of Yorkshire (just across the River Derwent from Malton) the earliest entry I found was in 1791 and there were absolutely none before that. That entry was the marriage of Sarah Hildreth of the parish of Felixkirk (in which Thirlby is situated) to Robert Gale of the parish of Norton¹¹. We all descend from a Richard Hildreth who suddenly appears in the Norton records in 1808 when the first of a long line of his children is baptised. The unsatisfactory thing is that I have painstakingly searched the records for the whole area (including every parish in the 20 or so miles immediately between Thirlby and Norton) and can find no trace whatever of Richard's marriage or of his baptism¹². (Of course this was in the days before certificates from "Somerset House" (the General Register Office) which only started in 1837). I have a feeling that he might either have been a younger brother of Sarah Hildreth who somehow escaped the records or perhaps an illegitimate child whom she deliberately tried to conceal. Richard Hildreth was buried in 1835 and his age is given as 54 which was probably an estimate by his wife (which would mean he must have been born in or about 1781).

8. Why the move from Thirlby to Norton? It seems that only Sarah (and Richard?) Hildreth moved and the rest of the family in Thirlby may have just petered out or dispersed to other places. One factor might have been that this was the time of the enclosures. From the days of feudal times, back in the 1100 and 1200s, there were very large fields attached to the manors in each village and the farm labourers had rights of cultivation to some extent but they were more or less tied to the land.

¹¹ The original register books for Norton are at the Borthwick Institute, York

¹² I checked the so-called parish register transcripts-copies made by the church minister, which can be a little unreliable. Virtually all the ones for the diocese of York are at Borthwick Institute. An example of the unreliability is the record of the marriage of Sarah Hildreth where she is said to be of Norton. If I had not checked the original and found that it was Felixkirk I might have missed 150 years' history.

Various experimental farmers found that much greater yields were possible by having large enclosed fields, and at the time of these enclosures (between about 1760 and 1810 depending on the area) many farm labourers were dispossessed and wandered from place to place and this could be the reason or it may just be that Sarah Hildreth met her future husband at an annual fair!

In those days- and in fact right down until the 1920s in some towns like Drifffield and Malton -there were hirings for farm labourers at Martinmas in November each year and the labourer was hired for the year by a handshake. Men used to travel many miles to these hirings. The annual wage was about £5 for which they lived in but were expected to work from 6am to 6pm-4pm on Saturdays with Sunday off to go to church twice. The holiday was the week of the hirings. Not much above slave labour really!

9.Reverting to Richard Hildreth he married a girl called Susannah when she was very young because the first baptism of a child of theirs was in 1808. Susannah died in 1819 aged 30 so she can have been no more than 19. There were many children born in Norton between those dates but, as was the case in those days, few of them survived one year. However, several did and in fact Richard Hildreth is the ancestor of the very large Norton branch of the family which includes practically every Hildreth in the York telephone directory! Two children who did survive were Francis born in 1814 and John from whom we are descended, born in 1817.

After Susannah's death, in 1819, Richard lost no time in remarrying - in 1820. In fact he had to. The girl was only 16 and she had a baby 4 months later. The girl's name was Elizabeth Wilson and I have a copy of the certificate with Richard Hildreth's signature in spidery hand-looking as though he might have been coached to write it. Again, several children followed and a few survived notably Mark born in 1823. The address for the births is given as Brickyards, Norton- which is off the Scarborough Road.

10.Richard Hildreth eventually died in Norton and he was buried on Christmas Eve 1835 which must have been a bit sad for the family. Most of the children were only teenagers. There is little more we can find out about him because as I said official certificates do not start until 1837, so there is no proper death certificate - only the burial record in the Church books which are preserved at York; and the census records with names and places of birth only start in 1841.

11.Those census records are marvellously interesting. They are kept secret for 100 years but after that made available in the Public Record Office in London¹³. If you take time and trouble you can find the town concerned and it lists all the people

¹³ Copies for the area are usually available on microfilm at main libraries.

with their names, ages, and places of birth. In 1841 Francis Hildreth was already married but living with his in-laws, and John Hildreth was in digs with another family of labourers along the Scarborough Road in Norton near Malton. John's stepmother Elizabeth had remarried and she kept the younger children who retained the name Hildreth.

John Hildreth married for the first time in the Norton Parish Church (which was then near where the level crossing is now) in 1841 - a girl called Elizabeth Hall who was a dressmaker and the daughter of a farm labourer. Both of them were illiterate and could only make an X on the register.

They had several children and so did Francis and Mark (who had married in 1844) and so by the 1851 census, there were a large number of Hildreths in Norton. Perhaps as many as 1 in 100 of the population.

One of the children of John's first marriage (David) came to have 11 children, one of whom became Alderman Francis Hildreth who was a farmer at Hessay near York and has descendants there¹⁴.

Elizabeth Hildreth died in 1860 aged 37 but I do not know what of. By that time they were living at the Brickyards back on the Scarborough Road again. John Hildreth was a farm labourer. (Bob Hildreth remembers a very old man telling him that his grandfather John was an expert maker of hay-ricks),

At the time of the 1861 census there was a 19 year old girl living in with widower John Hildreth and interestingly the enumerator originally put that she was a daughter but then crossed it out and put servant. In fact, she cannot have been a daughter because John Hildreth married her in the Norton Parish Church in 1863! Her name was Mary Ann Frank. She is a very interesting person and I cannot work out how they got together because again John Hildreth could not sign his name but she has a very literate hand and was a daughter of a schoolmaster from beautiful and remote Fryup near Danby in Eskdale, Yorkshire-on the North York Moors. But she gives her father as already being dead on the certificate so perhaps she was an orphan and came to Malton looking for work.

Their first child born in 1864 was *Henry* (but always called *Harry*). He was Bob Hildreth's father and Bob can remember his father saying that Mary Hildreth was extremely learned for her day and used to do translating for the foreign gentry who stayed at the Talbot Hotel in Malton for the horseracing¹⁵. The second child was *Harriet Ann* born in 1867 (married Henderson and they had a daughter Rosalind) and the third and last was *Francis Albert* - called Albert - born in 1869 (they had a daughter Felicity and they moved to Tyneside at the turn of the century). There was another boy Arthur who died in infancy in 1871 and then came tragedy when in 1872 Mary Hildreth died giving birth to a daughter Zillah

¹⁴ He died in 1977

¹⁵ The Talbot Hotel is still there. Malton/Norton were famous for horseracing. There are no longer races but it is still a major training centre.

who also died. She was only 30 and we know very little about her and it was in the days before photographs. John Hildreth soldiered on and eventually died in Malton in 1888 aged 71. His death certificate says of "natural decay"!

12. Meanwhile Harry (who would have been 8 when his mother died) left school at the age of 13 as people did in those days. Bob can remember his father Harry saying that schoolchildren had to bring fuel for the fires in school. Harry became a farm labourer and would have lived in at the farm all year. In 1886 when he was 22 he was at Mill Farm, Sledmere, Yorkshire- a fairly large farm which would have had several farm hands and servants. It is a typical farm for the Yorkshire Wolds with a shelter belt of trees and big agricultural fields rolling across the 500 ft. chalk hills. At the farm he met and married a 20 year old servant girl called Sarah Ann Summersgill who came from a large family in the village of Weaverthorpe nearby. Her mother's maiden name was Ann Skelton (and she came from the next village of Helperthorpe) and Sarah's father also a farm labourer called William Summersgill and he hailed originally from Cheshire.

13. Harry and Sarah were married on May Day 1886 in the lovely little parish church of Sledmere. Father John was still alive and saw the event-he witnessed the register¹⁶.

14. Harry and Sarah continued living at the farm and had the first two of their 13 children there, namely *John William* (Jack) who married and had a son Raymond, and *Edith* who married George Horner and had a daughter Connie.

15. When father died in 1888 they moved back to the Brickyards, Norton thus continuing the very long link. All the remainder of the children were born there. The house was a very small terraced house¹⁷-what is called a "two up two down"-ie two rooms on each floor. The children were put out to work as soon as possible! When they came back-eg for the Martinmas hirings-they had to share a bed "top to toe" with their younger siblings.

Harry gave up farm labouring and became a signal fitter on the old North Eastern Railway. In those days the railways employed thousands. He worked a lot up the Newcastle direction and would very often be away for a week at a time taking the food for the week away with him and the men would probably sleep in the trackside huts. Some of them took big pies with meat on one side and apple on the other¹⁸!

¹⁶ I have a photograph of this original entry taken by the minister-the book is not yet full!

¹⁷ Still standing in 1997 but now bearing the address 13 Poplar View-oll Scarborough Road. The adjacent Brickyard has long closed.

¹⁸ Ex. Inf. Bob Hildreth

16. The remainder of the children were *Albert* - he was the man who emigrated to Alberta, Canada in 1930 and his children were Lilian, Nora, Eileen and Clem (all born in England) and Jean (born in Canada). Then *Emily* born in 1890 who married late in life and had no family, *Jane Ann* (Jeannie) born 1892 who married George Wood and had two sons George and Ronald then *Lily* who married William Brewster and had 8 children Dorothy, Mary, Thomas, Edwin, Emily, Kenneth, Gladys, and Ivy. Then *Harry* (junior) born 1895, who had Allan and Jean. Then *Herbert* born 1896 and who had Donald (the father of the writer of this paper) and Tony. Then *Richard* born 1898 who went to France in 1916 aged 18 and who was killed in that war. Then *Gertrude Annie* born in 1901 who married Bert Reed and had one son Donald then *Robert Percy* (Bob) born in 1903 (the last surviving of the 13: still alive in 1997 and full of memories) who had two daughters Violet and Jean then *Iris* born in 1905 who married a Mr. Bean and had one daughter Marjorie and lastly *Ann* born in 1906 who married Alf Dowkes and they had 3 children Randolph, Joan (who married a Canadian) and Sheila.

17. Like his forbears Harry Hildreth was not very good at reading and writing and his younger brother Francis Albert gained more advancement because Harry found it very difficult to read and understand the signalling diagrams. His wife Sarah was better at reading and writing and Bob remembers her reading from the paper to him. It was an advertisement placed by the Nunnington estate¹⁹ to run a smallholding which drew them there from Norton in 1912. Apparently everything was loaded up on to a big horsedrawn wagon and the younger end of the family who had not left home by that stage came along. Bob remembers it was a very windy day and they had to tug on ropes to keep everything aboard.

During this time Harry continued with his signalling work but gave it up soon after the beginning of the war. In 1916 Sarah died aged 50 of double pneumonia and is buried in an unmarked grave at Nunnington church.

18. In 1921 Harry took the tenancy from Nunnington Estate of Diamond Farm which at that stage was 22 acres²⁰. It was not easy to make a living from it and Bob helped him out in running the farm-succeeding to the tenancy on his father's death. The farm building was demolished as unsafe in the 1970s.

19. Harry Hildreth died in September 1939 in Nunnington aged 75-but his many descendants and the descendants of his brothers, sisters and cousins live on-with quite a few still in Norton 200 years on.

¹⁹ A small and beautiful village in North Yorkshire-co-incidentally half way between Norton and Thirlby. The estate is associated with Nunnington Hall-a fine Elizabethan house.

²⁰ It later increased to about 75 acres.