



Who's Your Daddy? A Durham DNA Puzzle

Michelle Dennis offers advice as well as rich resources on searching for ancestors in Durham, England

WE PROBABLY ALL HAVE A SKELETON OR TWO RATTLING around in our ancestral cupboards, but just how do we go about proving those sometimes-embarrassing family stories? Was granny right that she knew the surname of her illegitimate Durham, English-born grandfather?

I knew that John Luke, my 2x great grandfather, was born on 7 July 1850 in Pittington, Durham, England to single mother Jane Luke (born 1823 Newbottle, Durham, died Broomhill, Durham 1901). The village of Pittington is made up of the neighbouring settlements of Low Pittington and High Pittington, which were developed for coal mining by Lambton Collieries from the 1820s. The population was 2,530 in 1851, and it is only four miles from the large city of Durham.

situated. Charge dismissed.—ILLEGITIMACY.—*William Winter, of Pittington, was charged with being the father of the illegitimate child of Jane Luke. The parties in this case had previously been before the Bench, but no corroborative evidence was produced, and the case was dismissed: On this occasion, in cross-examination, Luke said she was in possession of corroborative evidence at the last hearing, but did not produce it, the witness not being able to attend. Mr J. MARSHALL, for the defendant, contended that the non-production of this evidence barred the further hearing of the case, and quoted the cause Maccan and another, in the Court of Queen's Bench, where the Court decided that a mandamus should not be issued, ordering the Magistrates of Gloucestershire to re-hear a case similar to this. In the case referred to, however, the refusal was based on the fact that the case had been fully heard, and the refusal to affiliate was based on the weakness of the evidence. The Bench agreed that the case should proceed, and after hearing the additional evidence, decided by three to two that no order should be made; the minority being those who had heard the first examination, and the majority declaring they were morally convinced that the defendant, who was in office in some religious society, was the father. Mr LONGSTAFF appeared for the complainant.—**MORE BREACHES OF LICENSES.—***

Details of the case of William Winter being acknowledged as the father of Jane Luke's illegitimate son, John. From the Durham Chronicle, 1850. (Find My Past)

On John's English birth certificate, the name of the father has been left blank, suggesting that John was illegitimate. When registering his birth, his mother Jane made her mark 'x' being illiterate or unable to sign her name.

Family story, which should always be taken with a grain of salt, by John's granddaughter was always that John was born in the Elvet Workhouse in Durham, and she was adamant that his father was a Mr Winter. Was this true, how could she know this, and how could I confirm it?

The workhouse took in the aged, infirm and children and offered accommodation and work for those that could not support themselves, including pregnant mothers, with no support offered by the alleged father. They were designed to be a last resort, providing poor quality



English workhouse mealtime, circa 1911. (Wikimedia Commons)

food, and often crowded unsanitary conditions. Even today, workhouses come with an undeserved stigma. They were a necessary place of shelter for the poor which included a harsh regime. The able-bodied were expected to work, often doing mundane tasks such as spinning cloth, domestic labour, breaking stones, or cleaning tar from ropes. A fabulous resource for English workhouses is Peter Higginbotham's *The Workhouse – Story of an Institution* website at www.workhouses.org.uk.

When a mother was expecting an illegitimate child, her local church parish officials subjected her to an examination to try to determine the name of the father. They would then attempt to have him sign a bastardy bond claiming responsibility for the maintenance of the child. The father would then have to pay a weekly sum to the mother to support the child. Often these examinations were recorded in the local newspaper, further shaming the mother.

Recently, while searching through the newspapers in the Find My Past British Newspaper Collection at <https://search.findmypast.com/search/newspapers> I discovered an amazing fact about the possible identity of John Luke's unnamed father. I knew John Luke was born in July 1850, so I filtered the date to 1850, and keyed in "Jane Luke" in the search box. Bingo, I found him!

Recorded in the Durham Chronicle Newspaper of 27 September 1850 is the startling facts of the charging of William Winter of Pitlington with being the father of the illegitimate child of Jane Luke. The hearing was held in the Justice Room, Durham in September before a bench of five justices. It reported that Jane Luke had already been

before the bench previously trying to get costs from Mr Winter for the maintenance of the child, but being unable to provide evidence (as one of her witnesses did not appear) the case was dismissed.

Now she was trying again, with more evidence, and even though the bench agreed the case should proceed after hearing more evidence, they decided by a majority of three to two no order should be made against Mr Winter as despite the majority being morally convinced that the defendant was the father, he was in Office in some religious society, so no order should be made. How astonishingly unfair! Poor Jane. What courage it must have taken for her, destitute and unable to provide for her son on her own to go to court, not once but twice to try to get some money from the father of her child for his upkeep.

Further research uncovered that Mr William Winter of Pitlington was obviously a well-known figure in the community and he was appointed to the Board of Guardians for the Poor for 1849-1850 for the Durham Workhouse. (Durham Chronicle 27 April 1849). So had Jane been an inmate in the workhouse before, and while he was visiting there, made her pregnant?

What else could I discover about William? On Ancestry I tracked William and his family through the 1841, 1851, 1861, 1871 and 1881 census records at www.ancestry.com/search/categories/ukicen.

Using the baptisms on Ancestry, www.ancestry.com/search/collections/9841, I found William Winter was born in 1810 in West Rainton and was baptised on 12 August 1810 at Houghton le Spring. Ancestry's England, Select Marriages 1538-1973, www.ancestry.com/search/collections/9852, confirmed

he married Ann Walker in 1833 in Tanfield, Durham. They had twelve children together, including one (Christopher) who was also born in 1850 in Pitlington (like my John Luke), but died that same year either at birth or as a baby.

Looking at the 1851 census on Ancestry, www.ancestry.com/search/collections/8860, the closest one to the birth of my ancestor John Luke, I see that his father William Winter is described as a Wagon Rider, living in the small coal mining village of Pitlington (where John was born). This was a dangerous occupation, requiring a man to ride on the front of a coal wagon as it ran along a set of rails inside a coal mine, often pulled by a pit pony. Many accidents were reported of men being injured or killed as the wagon came off the rails unexpectedly, and they fell under the wheels.

At the time of the census William was aged 41, and his wife Ann was 38 years, and they had five children living with them, as well as his 70-year-old father-in-law Nathaniel Walker, a laborer at the coal pit. Their 17-year-old son John was also a wagon rider, and 12 year old son Walker Winter was already working at the mines at the age of 12.

So, could I prove that this William Winter was definitely the father of my John Luke, or was Jane just naming someone to try to obtain maintenance from him?

Using Ancestry DNA, I had myself, my mother and my sister tested (www.ancestry.com/dna). I was pleased to find a match with a descendant of William Winter's brother Thomas, a fourth cousin to myself. So yes, William Winter was John Luke's father.

And what of Jane Luke, left to fend for herself with an illegitimate



child to support? Just a year later in 1851 she can be found in the census in St Giles Durham, as a 28-year-old servant to the Nicholson family of Broomside Lane with just her nine-month-old son John.

Did I mention poor Jane had previously had an illegitimate child before John? Her son George Henry was born three years earlier in 1847, but I've been unable to locate any mention of him in the newspapers. By 1851 her first born child George Henry is living with his grandmother Elizabeth Luke (Jane's stepmother) aged 4.

Jane is working as a domestic servant to George Nicholson, a widowed pitman (coal miner), raising his two daughters Ann 8, Elizabeth 4 and son Peter 6. Just three years later Jane Luke has married George (in 1854), and in the 1861 census she is the head of the household. Jane had one child with husband George before he died at the young age of only 27 in 1859. Sadly, their daughter Mary Jane Nicholson born in 1857 died at the age of 6.

Jane married again in 1865 to Robert Walton, a coalminer, and lived in the strangely named village of Brandon and Byshottle in Durham until Robert passed away in 1899 aged 64 years. A good age for a coalminer. Jane, or Jenny as she was known to the family, died at her son John's home in Broomhill, Durham in 1901 aged 77.

Consulting the Sunderland Ward of Durham Cemetery Index at www.sunderlandward.co.uk/cemeteryindex.html, I can find many of my ancestors in the index detailing their death date and burials.

A wonderful resource for Durham coalmining ancestors is the Durham Mining Museum website

Frank Ritson

Age: 34
 Died: 5th Dec 1900
 Accident: 12th Nov 1900
 Year Born: abt. 1866
 Colliery: Cowpen Mill Pit
 Company: Cowpen Coal Co. Ltd.
 Occupation: Deputy
 Notes: He was drawing timber at the longwall face, and for this purpose was using an ordinary axe instead of a proper pole which was provided for the purpose. In all probability if he had been using the pole he would have escaped the fall which took place when he knocked out the timber. [Inspection made & inquest attended]
 Buried: [not known]

Mines Inspectors Report Entry

Registeral No. of Accident.	Date.	Name and Description of Mine and Colliery.	Name of Owner or Company.	Name of Person killed, Age, and Occupation.	Cause of Accident and Remarks.
480	Dec. 5	Cowpen "Mill" Northumberland.	Cowpen Coal Co. Ltd.	Frank Ritson, 34, Deputy.	Inspection made and inquest attended. He was drawing timber at the longwall face, and for this purpose was using an ordinary axe instead of a proper pole which was provided for the purpose. In all probability if he had been using the pole he would have escaped the fall which took place when he knocked out the timber.

Mine Inspectors Report from 1900 detailing Francis Ritson's fatal accident. (Durham Mining Museum)

at www.dmm.org.uk/mindex.htm. You can search by an ancestor's name, or look at memorials, education, mining companies, events, workers, war service, and so much more. Consulting the master index, looking at the surname Ritson, I find Francis Ritson, or Frank as he was known appearing in four items including a memorial page.

Despite John Luke's difficult start to life, with one absent father, and then two stepfathers, he lived a long life, mostly spent underground in Durham's coalfields. In 1874 the 24-year-old John married Isabella Ritson in Whitworth, Durham. Her family were also coalminers, and the year before her marriage her brother Francis Ritson was killed in a terrible mining accident.

The site details that he died on 5 December 1900, after an accident at the Mill Pit, Crofton Mill Colliery in Durham on 12 November 1900. He was aged just 34 and a copy of the Mines Inspectors Report Entry is included. It seems he used an axe instead of a proper pole while drawing timber, and he was crushed when he knocked out the timber.

Francis Ritson was a Primitive Methodist, a non-conformist or dissenter (to the Church of England), who attended the Cowpen Quay Primitive Methodist Chapel, and his obituary can be found in the Primitive Methodist Magazine. These magazines and many other wonderful resources such as photos, stories, research and memories can be found on the website My Primitive Methodists at www.myprimitivemethodists.org.uk.

Many of the Luke and Ritson baptisms, marriages and burials can be found on the Durham Records Online website at www.durhamrecordsonline.com. This site contains a huge collection of Northeast England's records, also including census records and cemetery registers, for both Durham and Northumberland, and is free to search, and a small fee of US \$2.25 to see one full entry or less for more.

Another advantage of this site is the record matching service they offer, that is you can opt in to receive an email if someone else looks at the same record as yourself. A great way to find fellow family researchers of your

own family. The site is constantly added to and contains many parish registers that you won't find on any other subscription website. Searches can also be made by occupation or abode (location) or parent's names.

Its also worth searching the Durham County Record Office at www.durhamrecordoffice.org.uk. They hold records on Church of England and Non-conformists, Quarter Sessions, estates, parish records, land tax, trade unions, wills, bastardy bonds, census and many more family history sources. I typed in 'Ritson' in the index and up came three records – a newspaper article in 1915, Colliery Personnel Records and World 1 & 2 List of Service Personnel. There are also record information guides on the website. Sometimes a lot of information is provided in the index, other times you may need to order the document online.

Another place to look for parish registers online is the Durham Diocese Bishops Transcripts on FamilySearch at www.familysearch.org/search/collection/1309819. The records cover Cumberland, Durham, Northumberland, and Yorkshire original parish registers which are sorted by individual parish links. You can scroll through the years to find the one you want and search for a baptism, marriage or burial entry. The site is free to search and download images.

If you have Durham ancestors that may have left a will, another site I can really recommend is Durham University's North East Inheritance Database website for pre-1858 Durham Probate records at <http://familyrecords.dur.ac.uk/nei/data/simple.php>. Simply type in a name and up will come a variety of people's wills with a short description that you can click through to the full will. Although

coalminers are unlikely to feature on this database, there are plenty of tradespeople including housekeepers, clerks, yeoman farmers, weavers, tailors, blacksmiths, and many other tradesmen.

The Durham University website is also useful to track down Bishops Transcripts of parish registers, probate records, marriage licenses, clergy records and land tax and much more at www.dur.ac.uk/library/asc/collection_information/family.records

Another great source of information about the villages your ancestors may have lived in is the British History Online website at www.british-history.ac.uk. As well as detailed information on the villages including names and trades of our ancestors it also includes maps, guides and calendars, and datasets of hearth tax, medical practitioners, vestry minutes, and much more.

One of my favourite English websites is www.genuki.org.uk which has a page for almost any village, town or city in England. For example, on the page for the village of Pitlington where my John Luke was born, the website gives me information on the three Anglican churches in the village, and the three Methodist chapels.



Coal mining wagon used to haul coal from the mine, circa 1853. (Wikimedia Commons)

It tells me where to find the parish registers and has links to some of them online.

It gives me detailed descriptions of the village and its surrounding areas, as well as links to maps and gazetteers.

Now back to my ancestor John Luke, the coalminer. John Luke was a hewer in the coal mine. The hewer is the actual coal-digger, enduring back-breaking long hours. Whether the seam be so thin that he can hardly creep into it on hands and knees, or whether it be thick enough for him to stand upright, he is the responsible workman who loosens the coal from the bed. The hewer fills his tubs and continues thus alternately hewing and filling.

I can trace John and his family through the 1851 to 1911 census records every 10 years and discovered that he and wife Isabella had eleven children. Despite his hard



John Luke, 3rd from left at Miners Cottages East Chevington where he passed away at the age of 88. (Author's collection)



manual occupation of coalmining, he lived to a ripe old age of 88, dying at the Aged Mineworkers Homes at Chevington in Durham. His death notice in the Hull Daily Mail Newspaper on Find My Past tells

us that he and his wife were stated to never to have quarrelled or exchanged a cross word in all their years of marriage!

In 1934 the couple celebrated 60 years of marriage, their diamond wedding anniversary, and I still have the yellowing old newspaper clipping saved by Isabel, their daughter, my great grandmother. She brought it out to Australia when she immigrated to Melbourne with her husband George Gray in 1911. She also brought her grandmother Isabel Luke's black silk shawl which I treasure today.

DNA is an amazing tool that can be used to confirm suspected family connections and can illustrate how sometimes it pays to listen to those family stories and try to prove them either right or wrong. In this case, Granny Luke was right after all in her suspicion of her great grandfather's name. How did she know of his surname? Did her grandmother not want it kept as a shameful secret and want it known in the family that he was the father? Although William Winter never publicly acknowledged he was the father of John, it seems after all this time DNA has found him out! ©

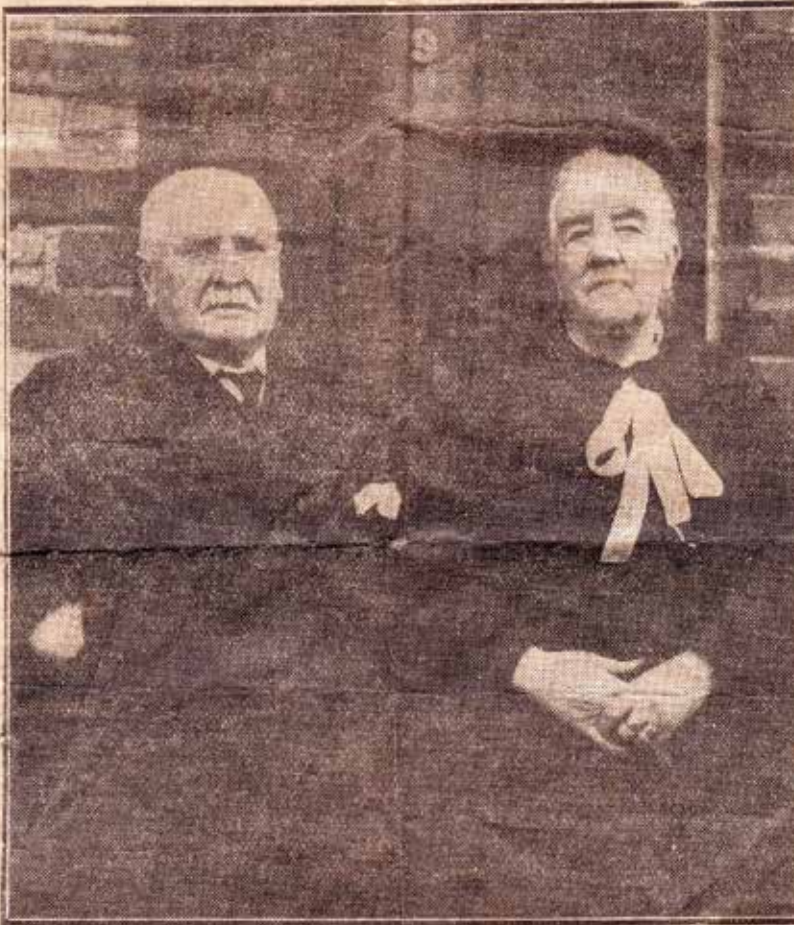


Isabel Luke's shawl. A treasured family heirloom. (Author's collection)

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MARRIED SIXTY YEARS.

East Chevington Couple Celebrate Their Diamond Wedding.



An important and interesting event took place at the Aged Miners' Homes, East Chevington, on Wednesday, when Mr and Mrs J. Luke, whose photograph is reproduced above, celebrated their diamond wedding. This is the first that has been celebrated in the Homes, which were the first of their kind to be opened in the county by the Northumberland Aged Mineworkers' Homes Association in 1901.

Mr and Mrs Luke are 84 and 78 respectively, and despite their advanced years they still enjoy good health. Mr Luke was born at Durham and Mrs Luke at Crook, Co. Durham. They were married at Whitworth Church, Spennymoor, by the Rev. C. Carr, on December 12th, 1874. They have had eleven children, and have 24 grand children, and seven great grand children. Two married daughters are in Australia.

Mr and Mrs Luke recall life as it was lived in the mining villages in the days long past,

and conditions under which miners worked. Mr Luke commenced work as a trapper lad of eight years and 11 months, at Pittington Colliery, working twelve to fifteen hours per day, for the princely sum of 10d. He later worked at several collieries in Durham and Northumberland, including Brancepeth, Tudhoe, Whitworth, New Herrington, Broomhill, Grange, and others. In all, he worked the lengthy period of 63 years in the coal mines of the two northern counties.

Mr Luke is a musician of considerable ability, and has filled the office of organist and choirmaster at several Methodist Churches in the various places in which they have resided. Both are life-long Methodists. Mrs Luke was a class-leader at the Broomhill Methodist Church for fourteen years. They are very highly respected in the district.

A family re-union is being held to-day (Saturday) to celebrate the occasion.

Photo of John and Jane Luke on the occasion of their 60th wedding anniversary in 1934. (Author's collection)