

Johns Family in North Devon - some very ancient history

Johns has been in use as a surname in North Devon as far back as the sixth century. There are many legends of King Brechan who was supposed to have gone from Wales to Ireland as a monk of the Celtic Church. On his return to his native Wales he married a nun (quite normal at the time!) and had twenty-six children, all of whom became Saints. He sent them to convert the heathen- that is the population of Devon and Cornwall. The places associated with them and the churches they established still bear their names to this day. Fifteen are in Cornwall. Several settled along the Bristol Channel coast of Somerset and Devon.

In North Devon one of these sons of Brechan, St Brannock is reputed to have sailed across the Bristol Channel on his cloak. He had been told by God to build a church where he found a farrowing sow. This is the origin of St Brannock's church at Braunton At Instow between Barnstaple and Bideford tradition has it that another son named In which is a form of John came ashore and collected converts. They were Johns' - his people and used his name as their surname, thus Johns unlike Johnson is not a patronymic.

It is a curious fact that the surname Johns was only found in the Western Counties of England and in South Wales until the early 19th century. In Cornwall the family was concentrate around Truro and produced some remarkable men including William Noy Johns a Lawyer who became Attorney General to King Charles 1st. In this branch of the family there have been many lawyers. One of them, yet another William Johns has retired and now lives at Instow. The Welsh Johns family has produced many famous actors and artists. In Devonshire the name is most common around Plymouth and in the vicinity of the Hartland Peninsula. The village of Langtree is on the southeastern edge of this area.

It was an ancient settlement possibly dating back to before the Romans surrounded by wasteland until the 12th century. Gradually this was brought under cultivation. The people who lived in the area were a mixture of Celts and Saxons with Norman Overlords, . Metal ore, tin and sometimes silver was mined on a small scale all over the area for many generations, more as a supplement to the farming than as a single occupation,

Langtree village is described in the Domesday Book of 1086. One hundred years later farms began to be established on the wasteland around the village Clockwise the larger ones are as follows - Small ridge Cliff, Badslake, Langtree Week, Stowford, Suddon, Browns, Ilash, Cholash, and Bibbear .. Two families from this period still have descendants in the village. They are the Browns and the Tuckers. The Browns were wealthy cloth merchants and the Tuckers took their surname from the wool trade.

Langtree Week is more than a farm .It is a hamlet a mile and a half from the village. The name comes from that of Richard de Wyke who paid eight pence in rent on the land according to the Lay Subsidy returns of 1333. A second Richard de Wyke is mentioned in the Lacy Register seventy years later with five church employees called Johns at Chulmleigh which is not far away.

When, in 1414 Bishop Lacy of Exeter ordered a register to be made of all church employees both laymen and clerics it contained the names of 30 who had surnames

which were variations of the surname Johns. Living at Chumleigh was a villien called **Pashasius John** and four actuaries called **William John, Walter John, Peter John** and **Matthew John**. The spelling varied being sometimes Johannes and at others Jon, Johanni or Yon. Actuaries although church educated would most likely have been laymen.

The Devon Subsidy Roll of 1525-27 mentions that **Hugh** and **William John** paid taxes and appear to have been living at Langtree Week at the time. From my own research it seems likely that the land was already being held on a 99 year lease. The **Whitlock** family were already in Langtree by 1524 when **Richard Whitlocke** appears in this same Devon Subsidy Roll, In 1569 **Amys Whitlocke** appears in the Muster Rolls. In 1578 **Thomas Johns** of Langtree Week made a will, It was indexed but the original was lost in the Exeter blitz of 1941 together with several later family wills.

This was the year that Sir Francis Drake left from Bideford to circumnavigate the world. There is a list of the crewmen but it is incomplete. Making a will before embarking on a sea voyage was a usual precaution. I have copies of Johns family wills of 1642, 1662 and 1715 all made in such circumstances. They were not Langtree men but lived in Bideford although there may be a connection .One crewman on the Golden Hind is simply recorded as Thomas J. One villager did sail with Sir Francis Drake . He was called Brute Browne and was reported as killed while fighting the Spaniards in a sea battle off Puerto Rico.

In Barnstaple Record Office they have records from the Arch deanery Court of Barnstaple dated 1570 to 1579 in which a "**Johns wyffe**" gave evidence .

In the early 1600s a typical Devon Longhouse was built at Langtree Week It still exists and there is a preservation order on it. Originally it had three rooms and a through passage. It is called 'Parnacotts,' and may have been built by the family of Nicholas Penycote of Lapford who was in business as a builder in 1516 to 1524 according to records from Chancery Proceedings of that date.

If the Johns family had a 99year lease at that time on the farm it would have run out before 1610 and for some reason was not renewed. There were no men called **Johns** in Langtree village nor nearby in 1642 as the name does not appear in the Protestation Returns of men able to take up arms in the Civil War but **Thomas Whitlock** is mentioned. His name appears again in the Ratepayers Roll of 1679 but still no Johns.

The Civil War period of the 1640s was a dreadful time, The rival armies passed through the village following the last great set piece battle at Great Torrington in 1646 where the church which was being used to store both ammunition in the crypt and Royalist prisoners in the chancel, exploded with horrendous loss of life

The Parish Records date from 1659. The original has darkened to a deep brown and seems to be on parchment. They are bound in pigskin out of order and partly upsidedown as if done by an illiterate bookbinder when the second similar book was begun.

The following year this entry appears-

"King Charles y Second came into England y month of May 29 1660 And was crowned King April 23rd being St Georges Day ___ Dr D Donnell Minister."

This would seem to be a good point to bring in some rather important family members. At the dissolution of the monasteries in 1545 much church property in North Devon was bought by George Rolle. He was appointed by King Henry 8th to negotiate the sale of most of the church assets and managed to procure plenty of plums for himself. One deed of the period still extant reveals that a certain **John Johns** was Abbot's Reeve at Buckland Brewer to the north of Langtree. It was agreed he would keep his position and salary of £1 per year for life. (the parson would have been lucky to get £2.00p) He must have been a valuable chap There is further reference to a **William Johns** of Buckland Brewer settling in Lantree Week in the 1750's.

Returning to the days of Good Queen Bess, apart from the "**Johns wyffe**" already mentioned the Archdeanry Court Records contain references to two member of the Whitlock family. In March and again in December 1571 **Anthony Whytloke** of Shebbear went to court as a witness in cases heard at Great Torrington in which a local woman was accused of being "kept" by her neighbours husband, which was apparently an offence. Unfortunately the verdicts have been lost. Anthony had only lived at Shebbear for five years at the time so he could well have been a native of Langtree.

Misc

In October 1579 at Great Torrington **Johes Whytloke** gave evidence in a case where a villager was accused of not paying the tithe due on an annual basis to the church. Being illiterate he "made his mark. The tithe could be paid either in cash or in kind - wheat being the usual offering. Johes had lived at Wollsworthie for twenty years and was aged 40. Again he could have been Langtree born and both Anthony and Johes depositions are lucid and to the point, unlike many of the others which seem no more than idle gossip.

Misc

These were petty crimes tried locally. At Langtree the village church would have been used as a courtroom. There is documentary evidence of one case that went to Exeter. It happened in 1629 and was a case of Defamation of Character and brought by **Francis Toms** (this could have been Johns) of **Suddon** against **Christian Palmer** - villagers gave evidence of the innocence of Francis and all were the better off men of **Suddon** who she alleged had called her "a whore a mare and a bitch" - variously the village .

In 1680 a **Nicholas Johns** emigrated to New York with his wife Joan Godfrey. His descendants think he was a Welshman but I believe he was from North Devon and probably went over to the port of Kidwelty near Carmarthan to take ship. Although both Barnstaple and Bideford were also ports of embarkation right up to the early years of this century for emigrants.

He settled in Ploughseekie, New York State and prospered. His descendant was **General Thomas Denton (or Venton) Johns** hero of the Battle of the Potomac in the American Civil War. A contact in New York sent me a mass of fascinating information about this family including a letter of recommendation the General received from **Abraham Lincoln** and details of what happened to the **Johns Silver Mine** that drew my grandfather to the U.S.A. on a disastrous second visit.

To return to Langtree Parish Records the Toms or Tonns entries disappear around 1690. On the 9th of June 1693 **Elizabeth Johns** was buried in Langtree churchyard. I found an **Elizabeth Johns** both in Hearth Tax records and a will of 1642 as living on

living in Bideford. A **Thomas Johns** also paid hearth tax there. Her family had a 99 year lease on a farm just outside the town taken out in 1619.

Between the years 1705 and 1731 the rector of Langtree was **Elston Whitlock** He noted a remarkable event.

“March 8th 1718 at 8 in the evening a great amazing sight was seen in the air. After it an uncommon thunder Sight separating it, middle form disappeared 1739”

At a later date he wrote “ a meteor”.

During his incumbency he baptised, married and buried several members of the **Johns** family. On June 1st 1720 he married **Daniel Johns** to **Elizabeth Venton**. The **Ventons** were local farmers and a very old family of some repute. The marriage was not before time for their daughter **Mary** was baptised on August 22nd in the same year. I am in contact with her direct descendant-we are eighth cousins! There were more children **James** (1729) **Elizabeth**(1730-1742) and several others not baptised in Langtree.

In 1722 **William**, son of **William** and **Margery Johns** was baptised on May 22nd. Two years later their second son **John** was born. In 1729 **Margery Johns** had twin sons **George** and **Richard**. Young **George** died in 1739 aged 10 years. The same year there was a **Johns** Will indexed, without christian name probably that of **Margery's** husband **William**. **Margery** and her sons remained at Parnacotts,

On March 22ND 1751 **Mary Johns** the daughter of a **William** and **Mary Johns** of **Buckland Brewer** was baptised at Langtree. I believe her parents were the **William** and **Mary Cawsey** who were married at Atherington in 1752. A second **Mary Johns** “daughter of **Richard**“ was baptised as if she was an “acknowledged child” her parents being unmarried, on April 20th in the same year 1751,

Richard Johns, **Margery's** son married **Sarah Cawsey** of Atherington on April 10th 1756. I believe she was the sister of **Lewes Cawsey** whose daughter also called **Sarah Cawsey** married **Robert Chichester of Hall**, Rector of Chittlehampton in 1780. Her monument can be found in Atherington church.

William and **Mary (Cawsey) Johns** settled at Langtree Week in the smaller of two houses which had been recently built. In the 1780's they paid tax on seven acres of land. They had a son **Richard** born and baptised in 1756. He died aged three. The record refers to him as “ the younger”

Richard Johns of Parnacotts and **Sarah**, his wife had a son **William** who was baptised on February 8th 1759. His father died four days later aged 30 (referred to as “ the elder”) and one of the two little girls called **Mary Johns** died and was buried on the 3rd of August in the same year. This spate of deaths suggests a common cause. **Richard** of Parnacotts left a will. Sadly one of the lost ones. His mother **Margery** died in 1756.

A few years earlier in 1747 a **Martha Johns** had married a **John Hutchings** in Langtree. In 1756 **William Johns** son of **Margery** married **Peternell Hutchings**. The Hutchings family goes back very far in the archives of the village. In 1763 a **Grace Johns** was baptised at Langtree.

In 1783 his widowed mother **Sarah** having married the other lease holder at Langtree Week, **Richard Slade**, young **William Johns** of Parnacotts married **Grace Johns** of Little Torrington. There was a marriage settlement “ for the residue of a term” on

Parnacotts and a marriage portion of £80.0s0d .In 1790 another document mentions a 99 year lease and annual Land Tax of £1.15s0p for the farm and 2s for the farmhouse. Tax records show this was paid regularly from 1780 to 1830. **William's** step father **Richard Slade** was the Langtree Tax Collector until his death in 1820. He left a will still extant.

From these records combined with Parish Records it is possibly to build up a picture of the **Johns** families in the Langtree area between these dates, where they lived and their occupations but relationships between the various branches are not always clear.

William Johns of Parnacotts died in 1803 leaving his wife **Grace** to bring up their seven children.- **Betsy, Richard, Thomas, William, Grace, Mary, Elizabeth.** Thanks to an extremely detailed family tree written in the 1920s by **Samuel Bonifant** the grandson of **Grace Johns junior** (He married **Rebecca Johns** the daughter of **William junior**) we know exactly what happened to all these children. **Grace Johns of Parnacotts** lived from 1763 to 1843. After 40 years of widowhood she had managed the farm so well her property was substantial. Her daughter **Grace** married **Walter Madge** (of the adjoining **Stowford Farm** in 1816 Their descendant owns and farms at **Langtree Week** to this day. One of their great-grand daughters **Kathleen** married **John P. Whitlock**. MARI GRACE

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WGI

They lived at **Collacott** which seems to have been two farms then, the second farm belonged to **Kathleen's** father's family the **Hackwills** Between 1850 and 1893, the father of **John.P. Whitlock**, **George Whitlock** farmed at **Collacott**. He was buried at **Siloam Chapel , Berry Cross**. I believe there are no surviving descendants of either the **Hackwill** or **Whitlock** family left in **Langtree**.

To continue with the other **Johns** families in **Langtree** parish

William Johns (who later emigrated to Canada) married **Mary** at **Langtree** parish church on 24th September 1820. I believe they lived at a cottage called **New Buildings** which still stand at the junction of two lanes within sight of the farms at **Langtree Week** and **Stowford**. The same year their son **Samuel** was baptised. In 1822 their son **John** was born . At the time his father was working for the widowed **Grace Johns** at **Langtree Week** as a farm labourer. **Richard Johns** was born in 1823. **William** was born in 1828, **James** in 1827 and **Thomas** in 1830. A second son named **John** was baptised in 1832 **Henry** in 1836 and **Mary Ann** in 1851. Her parents were given as **William** and **Mary** the address was **Berry Crofts** .

The burial records tell the sad story of these children. Both babies named **John** died, one aged 12 months the other 4 months. Little **Henry** only survived for four weeks.

If the **William Johns** who emigrated to Canada came from a family of 14 brothers no wonder the name is so common in the area.

Other families of which I have fragmentary details are as follows – **Charles Johns** and **Jane** his wife had a son **Thomas** baptised in 1840 who died aged 5. **Charles** lived at **Week** and worked as a sieve maker. In 1843 he paid tax on a cottage with a garden. **Robert** and **Mary Johns** lived at **Calesborough Gate, Frithelstock**. He was a labourer and had two children **Thomas** and **Elizabeth Ann** born in 1847 and 1848 **Joshua Johns** was the base born son of **Susan** born in 1840 who spent his childhood with his grand parents at **Week**.

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I am a descendant of **William and Margery Johns (1700 -1765)** via their son **Richard. (born 1729)** I thought his son **William (born 1759)** married **Grace (born 1763)** the daughter of his brother **William and Peternell Hutchings**. I now know her father was a **Richard Johns of Little Torrington**, a descendant of **Daniel and Elizabeth Venton Johns (1722)**. This leaves the possible family of **John Johns** born 1724, and the rest of **Daniel's** family.

The line from **Grace Johns (1763 to 1843)** whose tombstone says she was " very good to the poor" almost died out. Only my great great grand father her third son **William** had sons. . My grandfather was this **William's** only grandson in England although he did have boy cousins in the U.S.A. to which three of his uncles had emigrated