

WHY DID THE DAVIS FAMILY IMMIGRATE?

by Michelle Dennis

I had always assumed (something that you should never do in genealogy!) that my family immigrated to Australia because of the gold rush. After all they spent many years in the gold mining town of Castlemaine, Victoria. Just recently, through a surprising resource I found that they left old England's shores for an entirely different reason.

Joseph DAVIS was born on 3 May 1807 in Whitechapel, London.¹ He was the second of nine children struggling to rise from the poverty around him. His father, Samuel Samson DAVIS, a gunlock maker at the Tower of London², died in 1832 when he was 25 years old, and his mother Betty HOLBROOK died two weeks later. They are both buried at St Botolph Without Aldgate, London.³ Joseph along with his siblings - Samuel b 1804, Sarah b 1809, Elizabeth b 1811, Ann b 1813, Catherine b 1814, Mary b 1816, Samson b 1818 and John b 1821⁴ were left to fend for themselves.

Joseph learnt his gunmaking trade from his father before he died, and struggled to put his younger brother Samson through Medical School at the London University Hospital. Their father Samuel, had managed to patent three gunlock mechanism's before his early demise,⁵ and with the money earned from the patents, and Joseph's self-sacrificing labour, Samson was able to make it to the top of his field.

On 31 January 1831, at Christchurch, Greyfriars, Newgate,⁶ Joseph married a fellow Gunmaker's daughter, Eliza Hodges. They proceeded to have six children – Elizabeth, Emma, Joseph, Samson, William and Alfred – all born in Whitechapel and Stepney.

In early 1852 I found Joseph, and his wife Eliza and their 5 children, immigrating to Australia with his brother Samson's family. They arrived in Melbourne, Australia on 6 November 1852 aboard the ship "Marlborough"⁷ but for some strange reason Joseph gave his occupation as a grocer. This was a puzzle!

Before leaving London, Joseph was working as a gunlock maker in the Tower of London (like his father) and was contracted to the East India Company.⁸ He was admitted into the Freedom of this company by Redemption and appeared on the Gunmakers Company Living List 1832-1951. Freemen were entitled to vote in the election of members for the City of London. (Records of the Gunmakers Company, Manuscripts Section, Guildhall Library).

Joseph and Eliza resided at Crescent Street in 1831 (daughters birth certificate), 62 Chamber St, Whitechapel in 1837 then at 9 Chamber Street from 1841 to 1853. (London Post Office Directories, 1851 Census). On all these directories and census entries he gave his occupation as a gunmaker – so where did grocer come from on the shipping records?

After writing to many leading gun and firearm experts and editors of gun related magazines in Britain, I received a most enlightening letter from Mr D Harding of London.

He was able to provide me with a copy of the East India Company's "Minutes of Evidence on the Report on Small Arms". This was the breakthrough I was looking for. In the Minutes was documented that my ancestor, Joseph Davis, had "lately left for Australia under painful circumstances, having accepted bills to a large amount for a son of the late inspector, and not being able to meet them, he was obliged to abscond, leaving his debts unpaid."

So, my ancestor did not come to Australia to seek his fortune in the gold fields of Castlemaine, as I had once thought, but had "absconded under painful circumstances".

After arriving in Australia, Joseph continued his work as a gunlock maker, then Inspector of Weights, and then for many years was Town Clerk of Castlemaine, Victoria.⁹

Only three years after their arrival in Australia, Joseph's wife Eliza, died of 'carcinoma' in 1856. Eleven long and lonely years later, he married his wife's sister Sylvia, who like himself was a widow.

Unfortunately, at the age of 76, having being widowed again and blind for the last few years, Joseph decided to end his life by jumping out of his bedroom window, at his house in Bendigo, Victoria and hanged himself.¹⁰ A sad end to an eventful life.

Sources

- 1 St Botolph Without Aldgate Parish Register, Baptisms
- 2 Board of Ordnance employees staff list
- 3 St Botolph Without Aldgate Parish Register, Burials
- 4 St Mary, Whitechapel and St Botolph Without Aldgate Parish Register, Baptisms
- 5 Patent Nos 4648 - 1822, 5055 - 1824, 6046 – 1830, Public Record Office, Kew
- 6 Christchurch, Greyfriars, Newgate, Parish Register, Marriages
- 7 Unassisted Passenger Lists "Marlborough", Public Record Office, Melbourne, Australia
- 8 East India Company Minute Books
- 9 Wises Post Office Directory, Castlemaine, Victoria, Australia
- 10 Inquest of Mr Joseph Davis, Castlemaine, Public Record Office, Melbourne, Australia