

Coontin Kin by Ian Elliott

Yesterday's post brought my latest copy of Coontin Kin, the quarterly Journal of the Shetland Family History Society. This prompted me think about a piece I wrote for the Journal last year and that you might be interested to read it, it does have some relevance to woodturning. So, the piece below is what was published in that Journal in full.

The Harrison Brothers

A WW1 Memorial to The Merchant Navy

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This piece is a Memorial to those who served in The Merchant Navy during WW1, and in particular the Harrison brothers. But first I must explain our connection to the Harrison brothers and through them the Merchant Navy.

Until a few years ago my sister (Ann Bianchi formerly Nicholson) and I knew almost nothing of our maternal Grandfather, George Taylor Harrison, other than that as a young man early in the twentieth century he left Shetland to pursue a career at sea. He based himself on the River Tyne living in South Shields and in 1915 he married a local lass called Dorothy Brannen. They went on to have three children - George, Helen and our mother Dorothy.



George Taylor Harrison



Dorothy Harrison (nee Brannen)



George, Helen And Dorothy

Harrison c1923

Unfortunately, his wife Dorothy (also known as Dora) died in 1923 when our mother, the youngest child was three years old. George was still sea-going, so he arranged for their children to go into orphanage's. The two girls went into an Orphanage for Seamen's Daughters in Hampstead London and we believe their brother George was in a nearby Orphanage for boys. They remained there until the age of 16 and attended the local school.



Orphanage for Daughters of Seamen (now Sheltered Accommodation)

Upon leaving the orphanage our Mother returned to South Shields and, apart from serving both in the UK and Europe in the ATS during WW2, she lived, worked, married and brought us up there until her death in 1999 aged 79. Her brother George, like his father became a Merchant Seaman based in South Shields until his death in 1947 from TB aged 29; which I believe was contracted from being in the water in an open boat for some time after his ship was sunk

during WW2. He also had a son called George who became a Merchant Seaman. Her sister Helen remained in the London area married and had two girls Patricia and Marilyn, she lived in London and Essex until her death in 1991 aged 74.

When I asked my mother about our Shetland Harrison family, she said that her father was the only child of his father's second marriage. That he had two half-brothers who both died childless during WW1 and two half-sisters who were both spinsters, so consequently we would have no living relatives on Shetland.

This is what she believed all her life; I do not know what contact if any she had with her father whilst she and her siblings were in the orphanage's or after they left. But she was wrong!

Our research firstly through Shetland **bayanne website** and later through other Ancestral sites, led to the discovered that in fact our Grandfather had three half-sisters who all married, though sadly her knowledge of the brothers was correct. However, we did discover their names and a lot more (which I will come to shortly)

In 2015 my sister Ann was introduced to David a friend of her future husband John on an evening out and during the conversation she discovered that David also had ancestors who came from Shetland and he had previously visited there as a child. David was planning trip to Shetland and ask Ann and John if they would like to join him, they jumped at the opportunity.

Just before Ann's trip to Shetland in 2015 I carried out some research. That's when I discovered that our Grandfather had three half sisters and all three had married. I also discovered that there was a possibility that one of their daughters could still be living, she would be our Mam's first cousin. Ann also contacted Shetland Family History Society and was soon told that we had living relatives on Shetland and some of their names. (see also Ann's piece in number 101 of Coontin Kin)

Thanks to Ann's new friend David and his Shetland cousin Catherine and her husband Finlay, Ann met up with some of our previously unknown relatives. These relatives had no idea that we existed or what had happened to our Grandfather George after he left Shetland. Ann was given photographs of our Great Grandparents and other relatives. Later, in her trip she had the privilege to meet Mattie a 90 odd year old first cousin of our Mam. Unfortunately, Mattie past away last year and I will not have that privilege.

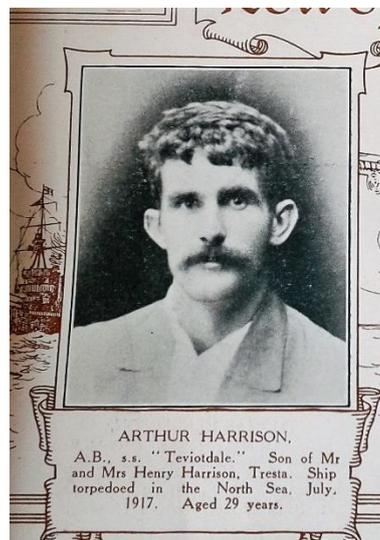
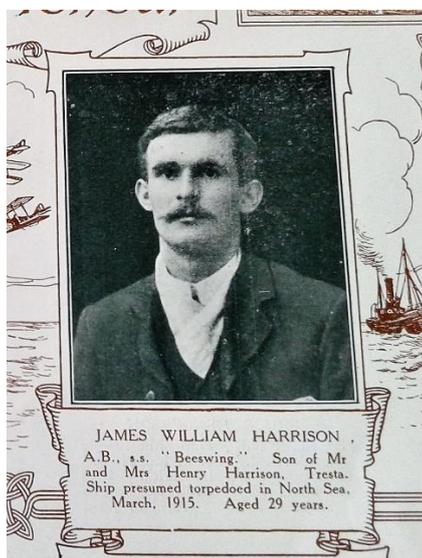
To get to the main point of this story about the Harrison brothers. Through later research (mainly by Ann) we discovered that all three brothers had based themselves on the River Tyne. On some occasions they even crewed on the same ships, (this was discovered from 1915 crew lists).

On 2nd March 1915 George married Dorothy Brannen in South Shield and his brother James William Harrison was a witness (I assume he was best man). Later that same day James sailed from the Tyne on the Beeswing, the Beeswing, which was reported lost with all hands presumed torpedoed or struck a mine about 4th March in the North Sea en route to Dieppe with a cargo of coal.

I strongly feel that if George had not got married that day, that it is very probable he could have sailed on the Beeswing with his brother, as they both sailed together on previous voyages. If that was the case my Mother and hence myself and my sister would never have existed!

In August of that year George joined the Royal Navy Reserve (RNR); I do not know if he volunteered or was conscripted. He served in the RNR till early 1919.

George's other brother Arthur Harrison was on board the Teviotdale when she was torpedoed without warning and sunk by submarine U-43 in the Atlantic, 330 miles NW by W from Fastnet on 11th June 1917. Tragically for Arthur he was the only person to be killed.



Our Grandfather George continued serving at sea both in the Merchant Navy and RNR during WW1. He survived and is listed in the Shetland Roll of Honour as an RNR Gunner, it was common for RNR Gunners to serve on armed Merchant vessels. He died in hospital in Southampton aged 44 in June 1939, I believe as a

result of an accident aboard ship. However, his address on the death certificate was in South Shields. We believe that he never returned to Shetland.

Since my retirement 7 years ago I have taken up the hobby of woodturning and belong to the Northumbrian Woodturners Association. We have an inhouse themed competition every other month, one of the themes last year was anything to do with WW1. Initially I was not comfortable with making a war related item, but after some deliberation I thought about making a memorial plaque. Upon doing my research I discovered that the Merchant Navy lost more lives as a percentage of serving numbers lost more lives than any of the armed services in both World Wars. So that was to be my entry, I then thought about my Great Uncles, whose names I had to be included around the edge.



We are indebted to those who served in the Merchant Navy not only during both wars, but also in peacetime. They do not get the recognition they truly deserve for carrying out such a dangerous and vital occupation. This country would not have survived either war without them. Shetlanders have contributed and paid the price with loss of life in both the Merchant Navy and the fishing industry in a greater way per head of population than many other areas.

In May of this year I had the privilege of visiting Shetland for 8 days along with Ann my wife, my sister Ann and her husband John. During that visit we met some of our previously unknown relatives. We also had a prearranged visit to the

Shetland Family History Society where I presented my plaque to them to hold and/or display as they wish, in memory of all Merchant Navy service personnel whom served and or died in the Great War.

We also visited places/areas we know our ancestors lived and the Croft my Grandfather was brought up on. Even though I never knew my Grandfather as he died 10 years before I was born, as the week went on, I felt that I had come home, yet I am now 70 years old and had never been here before!!!!

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