

SOUTH LINCOLNSHIRE JEKYLL ORIGINS

This essay about the Jekyll family was inspired by local names in the south Lincolnshire fens. Most of it was gleaned from the web, some from members of the family, the National Gallery of Canada, BBC Radio 4, books—including *Gertrude Jekyll: before the boots, the gardens, and the portrait* by Joan Edwards, The Museum of Garden History's Richardson Lecture 1993, *Gertrude Jekyll, a memoir* by Francis Jekyll, Cape 1934, and the rest from local history with special thanks to Mr Bill Belsham of The Spalding Gentlemen's Society. The photographs (and mistakes) are mine. My grateful thanks to all who helped.

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The BBC Television thriller *Jekyll* based on the Robert Louis Stephenson story of *Dr Jekyll and Mr Hyde* could be an attempt to portray schizophrenia, or at least bipolar disorder. The split personality of the outwardly respectable doctor transformed into a hideous monster by night is now a very familiar theme, but to Victorian Britain it was both shocking and intriguing.

Stephenson was himself a strange mixture and attracted unconventional friends, among them Walter Jekyll, brother of Gertrude Jekyll, the famous garden designer. Borrowing his friend's name for a psychological thriller may hint at the deeper currents beneath the apparently calm façade of genteel society where the name *Jekyll* was emi-

nent and conveyed breeding and money.

Through more than 13 generations the Jekylls were successful in a wide range of occupations from provision of the royal hay to inspection of Massachusetts Customs.

History books state the Jekylls originated in Lincolnshire, and there is ample evidence to show Jekylls owned land in South Holland, Lincolnshire, with variations of the name in several places: Jekils Bank, Jekils Gate, and even Jiggles Gate leading directly to Jekylls Farm on Joys Bank, Holbeach St Johns (now a John Deere franchise), near Spalding.

Spelling was 'a many-splendored thing' when few could write and pronunciation was equally variable. Medieval records show 12th century Danelaw charters relating to

Gikell son of Alan of Yarburch and John son of Gikell of Yarburch (Stenton: *Danelaw Charters*) while the *Crowland Abbey Cartulary* bears witness to one Peter Gikel who was granted Whaplode land by the Abbot, confirmed about 1254 (transcription folio 89): *Charter of confirmation of Abbot Ralph. I have granted to Peter Gikel the plot of land he had of the gift of Fulk son of Avice, of our fee, in the vill of Quappelode; to hold to him and his heirs at a rent of 14d (at the 4 terms).*

So it would appear a family with a similar sounding name to Jekyll (pronounced Jeekl) held land in South Holland centuries before they migrated to London and America.

Scholars attribute the name *Jekyll* to Scandinavian roots, and this



would be compatible with the history of Yorkshire and Lincolnshire. It is widely thought that a whole Viking army settled in the region after the early Danelaw invasions and before the Norman Conquest in 1066.

A common family name in Iceland is 'Yokull' meaning glacier. Curiously the word *yoke* has the same root. It could be surmised that rough Nordic settlers received a 'bad press' from supercilious, superior Normans looking to grab as much land as possible for themselves. Whatever the circumstances, it seems the family may have begun to migrate south from Yarburgh, just north of Louth, before the Whaplode land was gifted to Peter Gikel by the Norman sounding Fulk son of Avice.

Variable spellings force the inclusion of names possibly unconnected, or equally possibly, connected to the Jekylls. When Latin was the main written language, the letter *i* took the place of *j* and *y* and often *g* and *h* as well. Therefore those letters became interchangeable and gave rise to many variations through the ages.

Pronunciation depended upon the clerk who wrote them down and how he interpreted the sounds he heard. Writing down strange names uttered by people who could barely pronounce them, let alone write them, added to the colourful mixture of spellings in so many ancient records. In time these names became standardised in registers and literally fixed in stone on monuments.

Unfortunately there appear to be no existing tombstones with the name of Jekyll in any of its various forms. Their main Lincolnshire memorial is the variety of street names encompassing a large rural area near Spalding from Moulton to Gedney.

Jekil's Bank runs eastward from Moulton Eaudyke through Whaplode St Catherine to Holbeach St

John's where it becomes Joys Bank; Jekil's Gate is a shorter road in Fleet between Damgate and Balls Lane, near Fleet church; Jiggles Gate leads directly from Jekylls Farm to the Ravensbank (otherwise known as Little South Holland Drain). A map from 1307 has Jiggles Bank for Jekils Bank; a Fleet register of 1731 has Jeggells-gate occupying the position now held by Jekils Gate.

The area of land bounded by the Jekyll name in all its forms is extensive, but road—and place—names are often extended to suit local or postal authorities. Fleet Hargate used to mean the main road through Fleet for example; it is now the main part of the village. However, it seems safe to assume that Jekyll territory covered many fenland acres between Gedney and Moulton. The Jekylls were far from yokels!

If they were such prosperous landowners, why did they migrate? The answer probably lies in the Black Death, which devastated the countryside in the 13th and 14th centuries. With the population greatly reduced it would be impossible to cultivate the soil when every process was dependent on manual labour.

Horses and oxen needed hands to drive the plough or cart; gathering in the harvest would have been impossible without a good labour supply. Farming itself became an endangered occupation. The peculiar problems of fenland drainage would not have made life any easier. As with Dr Johnson's desperate Scotsman, no prospect looked so good as the road leading south. London beckoned.

From the Fens, the story of the Jekylls expands into a multitude of interests and careers on at least three continents. The family history is well documented, beginning with William Jekyll (1470-1539). He went to London from Lincolnshire and became Purveyor of Forage for the King's Horse.

Next a distinguished lawyer, Sir Joseph Jekyll (1662-1738), Master of the Rolls, actually left money in his will to reduce the national debt; his portrait was painted by Sir Godfrey Kneller, and his name was given to Jekyll Island, Georgia, by its founder General Oglethorpe, as a token of his admiration.

Sir Joseph's nephew John Jekyll travelled widely in Europe before moving to America and was collector of His Majesty's Customs for the Port of Boston, Massachusetts, from 1707 until his death in 1732; he had nine children with his wife Hannah Clark of New York.

Commenting on his life, *The Boston Weekly Newsletter* wrote: 'He was publicly conspicuous of his office for his faithfulness and his application in his Duty to the Crown; by his courteous Behaviour to the Merchant, he became the Darling of all Fair Traders.' A notable oration was delivered and published by the Rev Roger Price on the occasion of his death.

His son Captain Edward Jekyll, Gertrude Jekyll's great-grandfather, returned to England and became a naval officer. His support of the American colonies stunted his career. In 1775 it was reported that: 'Giving free scope to his opinions as a native American, he incurred the wrath of Lord Sandwich' who was then First Lord Of The Admiralty (as well as inventor of the sandwich).

Sir Joseph Jekyll's great-nephew Joseph Jekyll (1754-1837) originated in Wales and went to France upon graduation from Oxford in 1774. There he learned the social graces that enabled him to mix easily with 'the great and the good' of his day. He returned to Britain in February 1776 and studied law, being called to the bar at Lincoln's Inn in 1778.

Joseph wrote the biography of a freed slave, Ignatius Sancho. Born in 1729 on a slave ship, Sancho became a celebrity and the first African to vote in a British election. A

gifted scholar, he kept a shop with his wife and children in Westminster. The ubiquitous Dr Johnson knew him, and a portrait of Sancho, painted in 1768 by Thomas Gainsborough, hangs in the National Gallery of Canada. He died aged about 50.

It is probable he knew another freed slave, Job Djiablo, befriended by Sir Hans Sloane, founder of the British Museum and Natural History Museum. Sloane and Djiablo were both members of the second oldest learned society in Britain, the Spalding Gentlemen's Society in Lincolnshire. The wheel turns almost full circle in 1801 with the marriage of Sir Hans Sloane's daughter Anna Maria and Joseph Jekyll. He became Solicitor-General.

Gertrude Jekyll (1843-1932) was Joseph and Anna's granddaughter, and the designer of over 400 gardens at home and abroad, many in collaboration with the famous architect, Edward Lutyens (1869-1944). Lutyens was commissioned to help design the British Pavilion in Paris in 1900 by Gertrude Jekyll's brother Sir Herbert Jekyll (1846-1932).

Miss Jekyll is the subject of many books and many more articles. Due to extreme shortsightedness, Gertrude was carefully educated at home, her father taking a special interest in developing her latent skills. He taught her to work in wood and metal and she also became very skilled in embroidery, painting and interior design.

Her deteriorating eyesight forced her into different channels and Gertrude achieved her greatest success with garden design, working with Lutyens. Gertrude died in December 1932, following her brother Herbert's death in September. Next door neighbours in life, they both lie in Busbridge churchyard, Surrey, in a tomb

designed by Lutyens, who became known for his war graves and memorials, especially Thiepval and the Cenotaph.

Echoing his grandfather's concerns for the downtrodden, Gertrude's younger brother, the Rev Walter Jekyll, friend of Robert Louis Stephenson, went to Jamaica where he met and befriended Claude McKay (1890-1948), a black poet, writing a folk music book with him and encouraging a trip to Harlem in 1912. Claude visited France, Russia and England and became a prominent communist, writer and gay icon, dedicating *Banana Bottom* in 1933 to his early mentor Walter Jekyll. Claude McKay died in Chicago a convert to Catholicism.

Gertrude Jekyll's home was inherited by her nephew Francis Jekyll (1882-1965) known as Timmy. After Eton and Oxford, Timmy was a librarian at the British Museum and an avid collector of folk songs with George Butterworth. After Butterworth died on the Somme in 1916 Timmy wrote: 'Some of my happiest days were those we spent together, tramping the Sussex Downs and collecting songs.'

Sadly Timmy had resigned from the British Museum in 1914 and

sank into a long and debilitating depression, living alone in 'The Hut' at Munstead Wood on his aunt's former estate until his death at 82.

The circle nears completion with the marriage of Barbara Jekyll, daughter of Colonel Sir Herbert Jekyll, KCMG, to the Hon Francis Walter Stafford Maclaren, elected in 1910 Member of Parliament for Holland (Lincolnshire constituency later *Holland with Boston*), sadly killed in a flying accident in 1917.

In 1922 Barbara married the much decorated World War I leader of the New Zealand forces, Lieutenant General Bernard Cyril Freyberg (1889-1963), created First Baron Freyberg and appointed Deputy Constable and Lieutenant Governor of Windsor Castle.

From the millpond flatness of the Lincolnshire Fens, purveyors of forage, the Jekylls rose to mountainous heights as lawyers, clergymen, bankers, merchants, soldiers, sailors, solid members of the British establishment, while tethered on the gentler slopes by deep and nebulous bonds wandered dreamers, musicians and befrienders of free spirits such as Ignatius Sancho, Claude McKay and Robert Louis Stephenson.



Gertrude Jekyll from the front cover of Sally Festing's biography—*Gertrude Jekyll*, 1991, Penguin Books ISBN 0 14 015666 6