

The Search for My Shepperson Ancestors

By John Shepperson

Benjamin Shepperson was born in Keyworth, Nottingham in 1776. He was the youngest of five sons belonging to Joseph Shepperson of Keyworth & Sarah Thompson of Wymeswold, Leics. Joseph was a farmer and his eldest son William succeeded him. Joseph's other sons were John, a carpenter, Thomas, a farmer & maltster, and Joseph and Benjamin who were bakers. All were self employed and owned property. With that sort of background there was a good chance that documentary evidence would have survived, and so made searching that much more interesting. Even after finding evidence it still took a lot of time and patience tracing and confirming the relationship of the various branches.

My search began after a chat with a cousin at a funeral, which prompted me to start researching the Shepperson family. I already knew that my Grandfather John was born on the 6th April 1834 in Benwick, Cambs. I made a telephone call to the Cambridge Records Office to inquire if parish registers for Benwick had survived.

Benwick was part of the Parish of Doddington. In 1856 an Act of Parliament came into operation creating Wimblington and Benwick into separate parishes with their own church and churchyard. Prior to 1850, all marriage services and baptisms took part in Doddington church. Coffins were taken by horse and cart to be buried in Doddington Churchyard. Benwick villagers worshipped each week in a thatched building on Chapel Farm.

On my first visit to the Records Office I asked to look at the 1841 Census for Benwick. Enumerators for those census used pencils to fill in the forms and 160years later the writing is quite faint. It makes deciphering some of the forms quite difficult. This applies to parts of the Benwick census, but luckily when I found my grandfather's family I could read his parents and his brothers names quite easily. I searched the Doddington Parish registers next and found that his father, Thomas Shepperson married Sarah Peters in Doddington Church in 1833.

By the 1841 census, they had four sons. Grandfather John was the eldest, followed by Benjamin, James, and Charles. Thomas & Sarah could not write so marked the register with a cross. One witness was a John Shepperson Smith, but at that stage I had no idea how he was related to Thomas.

I then searched the Doddington burial registers and found Thomas died in 1845, age 33yrs. A copy of his death certificate showed that he was a grocer and draper and the cause of death was typhoid fever. This infection is caused chiefly through eating and drinking contaminated food and water. Benwick is surrounded by fenland and part of the village is built on the banks of the slow flowing River Nene. For many villagers it was their only water supply and is quoted as, 'containing a strong flavour of weeds'.

When Thomas married Sarah in 1833, the names of their fathers were not added to the marriage entry in the registers, so where to look for their fathers was my next task. Turning back the pages

of the marriage register I came to the entry in 1805 of the marriage of Benjamin Shepperson of Chatteris and Elizabeth Day of Benwick.

Benjamin and Elizabeth were married by licence, and the licence had survived. The licence was granted to Benjamin Shepperson, aged 28 years, a bachelor of Chatteris, and to John Day, Farmer, of Benwick. Elizabeth was only 19 years old, so John was required to give his consent to the marriage. The marriage took place on the 26th November 1805. It was the first Shepperson marriage to take place at St Mary's, Doddington.

With Benjamin's age on the marriage licence I then knew he was born in 1776, so the search was on to find his birth. Looking through local registers and other parish documents I could find Shepperson's listed but I could not find the birth of a Benjamin. I had almost given up hope when I was told that a Shepperson Family Tree made in the early 1960's had been deposited in the Cambridge Records Office,

On that tree was a Benjamin, baptised in St Mary's, Keyworth, in 1776. My interest now centred on this Benjamin. What could I find out about him? I searched the I.G.I. and found there was a large number of Shepperson's living in Keyworth and the surrounding area in the 1700's. I obtained copies of Shepperson wills and marriage licences from the Nottingham Records Office. I also joined and listed my interests with the Nottingham Family History Society, and was contacted by members of the Society with a Shepperson connection.

Benjamin was the ninth of ten children, He was baptised on the 9th December 1776 in St Mary's, Keyworth. Benjamin and his brothers could write so their parents had educated them. I believe he was apprenticed to a baker, possibly in Nottingham, In 1798, when he was 21 yrs old, he was listed as a baker, and added to the Burgess list for Nottingham.

Why then did he move from Nottingham, and why was he a baker in Chatteris a few years later? At this stage I cannot find answers to these questions so all I can do is look at the circumstances and guess.

Benjamin's father had two brothers who were farmers, Uncle William moved from Keyworth to Ramsey in about 1775. At that time the fens in Cambridgeshire were being drained and the land improved, so the opportunities were there for progressive young farmers. By 1790 Uncle John was farming at Toseland, Hunts. Unfortunately John died aged 42 years in 1794, leaving Elizabeth, his wife, with two young daughters.

By 1792, Uncle William had moved from Ramsey and was farming in White Fen, Benwick, where he had built himself a new house named "Keyworth House". With an uncle farming and prospering in Benwick, it probably provided the opening for Benjamin to move to Chatteris. Once settled, Benjamin would have visited Uncle William in Benwick, and possibly supplied him and his neighbours with bread. So by 1805, he would have met an attractive 19 year old farmer's daughter, Elizabeth Day.

As he was still single, Elizabeth must have seemed the ideal girl to be his wife. One month after Elizabeth Day and Benjamin were married, Benjamin's cousin, Elizabeth, (Uncle John's

daughter) married a William Smith in Ramsey, and it was their son John Shepperson Smith who twenty five years later, was one of the witnesses at Benjamin's son Thomas marriage to Sarah Peters. Benjamin background was becoming a very interesting. He signed his name in a very distinctive way. I continued to search documents, which might contain his name and signature.

My next stroke of luck came when I was looking through the index to the March Registers. There was one entry for Shepperson in the miscellaneous section.

In 1814 Benjamin applied for a marriage licence for James Sheppard and Susan Garner. On that licence Benjamin was named as an Overseer of the Poor for Benwick, and John Heap, as Clerk and Constable of Doddington.

But who was James Sheppard and why was Benjamin and John Heap applying for a marriage licence ?

The only way I could find that out would be to search the Overseer Account Books for Benwick. I was in luck once again.

Two books dating from 1777 to 1828 had survived, and were the very ones I needed to see.

In the books William Shepperson's name appears for the first time in 1778. The entry states he was paying rates for 'house and land late of Mr D.Burgess', in Benwick. I presume this was the land in White Fen, where he built 'Keyworth House' a few years later. In 1807 I found there were payments to Benjamin's father-in-law, John Day. The Overseers were employing John with his horse & cart for such tasks as the removal of household effects, carting firing for the poor, taking corpse's to Doddington for burial. In 1813, John was appointed an overseer, but this did not stop him from supplying and charging the Overseers for his services.

In 1809, Benjamin Shepperson was made an Overseer for the first time, with Fisher Dunham. In 1813 Benjamin was paid to write three rate books. The entries in the books are quite detailed so they give one a glimpse into what life was like for the poor living in Benwick at that time.

The first mention of Susan Garner was the swearing of her statement of settlement in 1810. The Overseers then made a payment to her of £1. Shortly afterwards payments of 4/- per week to Susan Garner's child began to be paid.

James Sheppard is first mentioned in 1814. He came from Bury in Sussex, so I guess the Overseers for Benwick did all they could to encourage the marriage. Susan was a charge on the Parish and marriage would remove this liability.

In 1814, Benjamin Shepperson appeared at the examination of James Sheppard & Susan Garner, when they obtained a marriage licence, and paid the fees and expenses of £5 3s 6d for them. On the 12th May 1814, James & Susan were married at March, and shortly afterwards, Benjamin, having also obtain a removals order sent James, with Susan, his new wife off to his home in Bury. I am not sure James was a very willing partner in all this. Before it took place, George Rose, Constable, was paid 4/- for assisting Benjamin Shepperson in keeping James on hold, and

then after the marriage assisted in sending them off to Bury in Sussex. John Day was paid to carry James and Susan and the Overseers & Constable to Huntingdon, to obtain the removal order. The last entry was the payment of 2/- to Saint Alfrey for assisting in keeping James Shephard on hold one night. It does not say if it was before or after the marriage!

James & Susan had been a very expensive liability on Benwick's rates. It had cost them nearly £30, and had taken nine days to take them back to Sussex.

Interestingly I found earlier in the Accounts a bill for a new lock for the Parish handcuffs, I wonder if they were used on James!

From the accounts I discovered Benjamin Shepperson was also a Draper and he was supplying clothing to the poor. When a 'one off' item of clothing was required the Overseers employed someone local like Mrs Day (Benjamin's mother-in-law) to make it.

A couple of examples were, To Mrs Day for making two shirts for John Garner, 2s 0d - for making waistcoat for J. Hall, 1s 6d, Another large item of expenditure was on firing. Various people were paid to dig loads of turf at 4s 6d to 5s 0d per load. The Overseers often employed John Day and his horse & cart to deliver this to the poor.

1815 was a drought year, and by August the River Nene was beginning to dry up. On the 27th Sept. the Overseers paid £1 8s 0d for holes to be dug in the bed of the river to gather water. It must have been a prolonged drought for on the 20th Jan. 1816, the Overseers paid another bill of £2 14s 6d to Henry German for, 'Fetching water for the Inhabitants of Benwick'.

Benjamin appears to have acted as clerk writing the rate books for the Overseers from 1809 to his death in 1821. Overseers only served for one year, and for the year 1818-19 he was appointed an Overseer for Benwick, with his cousin William Shepperson. In 1820/21 Joseph Shepperson (another cousin) and John Blench were Overseers,

Benjamin died on the 1st December 1821, aged 48yrs leaving Elizabeth with five young children to provide for. I believe he died suddenly as Elizabeth was paid several amounts owed to him by the Overseers after his death. Elizabeth carried on running the business and continued to supply goods to the Overseers.

At the time of his death Benjamin owned a windmill built on Copyhold land in Benwick, and in 1825, Elizabeth was entered on the Court Rolls of the Manor of Doddington as the tenant. Finding mention of the mill reminded me of a family quote that my grandfather John handed down to my father, it was

"My grandmother married the Miller of Benwick after my grandfather died".

The saying had always intrigued me, so now was the time to do some detective work to find out if this quote was true.

In 1828 I found that George Glover was the tenant of Benjamin's windmill, but where did he

come from?

After searching neighbouring parish registers I found the marriage of George to Phebe Everitt on the 22nd April 1822, in March. Five weeks before her marriage to George, I found the baptism of Phebe's illegitimate daughter Harriet Glover Everitt also in March. After George and Phebe's marriage they had another daughter, Eliza. The next reference to George I found in the Benwick Overseer's account book for 1826. George was then recorded as the tenant of a house owned by a Ben Savage. On the 15th February 1828, poor Phebe died, aged 26yrs. It may have been during the birth of their son, Everitt. He was baptised six weeks later on the 31st March 1828. George's period of mourning the loss of his wife Phebe, did not last very long. Five months later, on the 4th September 1828, I found in the Doddington Registers, the marriage by licence of George Glover, Widower, and Elizabeth Shepperson, Widow. Up until their marriage, Elizabeth was still paying rates to the Overseers, for a mill, land, house, and shop, in Benwick.

On the 12th December 1831, it was reported in the Cambridge Independent Press that Benwick Windmill, the property of Mr George Glover had been accidentally burnt down, It was claimed it was caused by a pot of hot coals used to dry the millstones. The mill was insured.

Twelve months later, on the 27th October 1832 the following advertisement was placed in the Cambridge Independent Press

BENWICK, Isle of Ely.

To be let with immediate Possession.

A Capital new built Smock WIND MILL with patent Sails and Fan Tail, two excellent pairs of Stones and Flour Machine, together with One Acre of Arable Land, upon part of which the mill stands, situated in Benwick.

N.B. The mill was late in the occupation of Mr George Glover, the proprietor, and is capable of being put in going gear in a few days. It is situated in an excellent neighbourhood for trade, in the immediate vicinity of several populous towns affording a rare opportunity for obtaining a good livelihood, there being only one other mill in the Parish.

For, Rent and further particulars apply to Mr Tabram, Solicitor, Cambridge.

This was the last reference I could find to George Glover in Benwick, so why had he suddenly disappeared. On his daughter Eliza's marriage certificate in 1844, George is not recorded as deceased, and he is not a witness.

To return to John Day, Elizabeth's father.

I am very suspicious that John did not approve of Elizabeth marrying George. Just before the marriage John drew up a new Will and made Thomas Shepperson, Benjamin's brother his executor. In the Will he left everything to his wife Mary for her life, then to Elizabeth for her life, or-until-she-remarried. And then equally to all his grandchildren. John gave instructions that a complete inventory had got to be made of everything that Mary, his wife received, and then again when Elizabeth received his possessions from Mary.

The instructions in his will were very clear and precise. He appeared to be making sure that all his belongings would finally be distributed amongst his grandchildren and that nobody else

would benefit from them apart from his wife Mary, and daughter, Elizabeth. John did not sign this Will until five days after Elizabeth's marriage, and as that had taken place she could not inherit from her mother. Mary died in 1829, and John died in 1832. I presume the estate was then divided up amongst his grandchildren.

In the 1841, 1851, and 1861 census for Benwick, Elizabeth was living with her daughter, Elizabeth, the wife of William Peters, Shoemaker. There was no mention of husband George Glover in the census. I searched through Benwick, Doddington and March registers to try and find if he had died, but without success. What had happened to George was a mystery! That was until April 2003.

On the way home to Swavesey after shopping in March, we came through Benwick. In the yard in front of the house where the Mill once stood was the owners preparing their horses to attend a gymkhana. I stopped and asked if they could tell me anything about the Mill that once stood on the site. They invited me in and then produced the deeds dating back to 1865.

Prior to that the deeds had not survived for the property - it appeared they had not been returned to Elizabeth after a mortgage was repaid. That turned out to be very helpful.

In 1862, Elizabeth was still the owner of the Mill that she had inherited from Benjamin, and had decided to sell it. Having lost the deeds she had to make a declaration in court that she was admitted Copyhold Tenant of the property in 1825. In 1828 after her marriage to George she had mortgaged the property with a James Jones of Floods Ferry, for £300 and had given him the deeds. In 1832 after the fire she repaid the mortgage and claimed the deeds had not been returned to her. Elizabeth also said in her statement in court, "In 1836 my husband the said George Glover left me and I have never since heard from him or received any information respecting him". The mystery surrounding George was partly solved, but where did he go?. Elizabeth died in 1870 aged 82years and was buried in Benwick Churchyard.

If anyone has a George Glover who appeared in their family out of the blue after 1836 I would be pleased to hear from them.