

Croker Prize for Biography

Entry 1412

**After such a promising start
(Carl Johan Gerss)**

After such a promising start

Carl Johan GerSS was born in Mustasaari, Vaasa, Finland on 25 October 1779 and was baptised two days later.ⁱ He was the eldest son of prominent Swedish notary and academic Jean Erik Gjers and Anna Catherina Loffman. The family returned to Sweden where Carl Johan's younger brother, Jacob Wilhelm GerSS was born in 1784.ⁱⁱ When Jean's first wife Anna Caisa died in 1788 probably of tuberculosis,ⁱⁱⁱ he married Magareta Lovisa Von Heland, daughter of State Secretary for Sweden, Johan Von Heland, in June 1795.^{iv}

Being the step-grandson of a prominent Politian certainly didn't harm young GerSS's opportunities for advancement. He enrolled at the University of Uppsala, Sweden in 1794 and after matriculation worked in merchants' offices in Stockholm before setting off for London in 1799.^v

Carl Johan, or Charles John as GerSS now called himself, made a spectacular first appearance in the London press by being declared bankrupt in December 1804 aged twenty-five.^{vi} To be declared bankrupt was different from being declared insolvent as the debtor had to be a trader and owe at least £100 (£6660 in 2012)^{vii}. GerSS did not fit into the first requirement so like many others he was expediently described himself as a dealer and chapman. Bankruptcy had the advantage over insolvency in that the slate was wiped clean and the possibility of being jailed for debt was avoided. GerSS was soon back in business as a merchant operating from the Circus Minories.^{viii} What GerSS needed to fix his pecuniary problems was a wealthy wife and he found one a stone's throw away.

Sophia Ainsley was the only daughter of coal merchant Joseph Ainsley who lived at New London Street, Fenchurch. GerSS applied for a marriage licence so the couple did not need to wait for the three weeks for the banns to be called and could be married in relative privacy.^{ix} It was also considered a more fashionable option for the well-to-do. The Ainsley family was non-conformists belonging to the Independent Congregation of Old Gravel Lane.^x As the law of the time demanded, the wedding had to take place in a Church of England parish church, so Sophia literally crossed the street on the arm of her father and married GerSS on 21 Jul 1808 at St Olave, Hart Street, London. In the church register, GerSS signed his name and gave his address as Ramsgate, Kent. A daughter to the couple, Elizabeth, was baptised on 17 February 1810 at the Pell Street Independent Church, Stepney. Sadly, Elizabeth died a month later and was buried at St Olave.

This was the start of a very bad year for GerSS. The Ainsley family must have found out about GerSS's previous bankruptcy as his seventy-year old father-in-law made a new will which went to extraordinary lengths to ensure that Sophia's inheritance did not fall into GerSS's hands which would have occurred automatically before advent the Married Women Property Act. Unlike her sister-in-law, Rachel who was left £1000 outright for her sole and separate use, Sophia's money was left in the hands of four trustees who only paid it to her as needed

... annual sum of hundred pounds to be paid to my said daughter Sophia GerSS either
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half yearly, quarterly, monthly or weekly as my said trustees and executors shall in their discretion think most fit for her sole and separate use and not be subject to the debts or control of her present husband.^{xi}

Joseph Ainsley's opinion of his son-in-law would have diminished further when Gerss was taken to court in February 1810 over the non-payment of a lost wager.^{xii}

Gerss divided his time between the Fenchurch area and Ramsgate.^{xiii} In December 1811, Gerss obtained a licence from the Home Department to transport goods in his fishing vessel.^{xiv} It permitted Gerss to enter British ports from the port of Hamburg. This was a daring undertaking as the Napoleonic Wars were still raging.

Gerss made his first recorded visit to Christiana, now Oslo, Norway in 1814 when he received a permit to travel in Norway from Prince Regent, Christian Frederik. Gerss intended to send grain to Bergen from Leith, Scotland.^{xv} He went alone, leaving Sophia behind in London apparently to care for her dying father. While they would never live together again as husband and wife, due to the prohibitively expensive and public nature of divorce, one was not obtained.

While in Bodø, in the far north of Norway, Gerss entered a relationship with thirty year old Kirsten Marie Ellingsen. Her daughter with Gerss, Carolina Kristina was born on the 13 October 1815.^{xvi} This relationship was short-lived as Gerss fathered another child while Kirsten was pregnant.

Gerss met Pernille Pedersdatter and fathered a son, Johan Peter, who was baptised in July 1816 at Hundholmen.^{xvii} At the baptism, Priest Schytte, having heard the rumour that Gerss had a wife in England said that as long as he had not found proof that the rumour was true, conducted the baptism.

Carl fathered a third illegitimate child shortly after. Christinia Parelius, daughter of Steen Parelius of Astafjord, was for a couple of years a servant in the Gerss household. On the 5 November 1818, their daughter Stenette Sophia was baptised at Ibestad Church.^{xviii} The priest at Ibestad also made enquiries into Gerss's marital status.

The same year, Gerss became embroiled in a smuggling case at Bodø.^{xix} This escalated into a major diplomatic incidence involving members of the British aristocracy who would pursue Gerss through the courts for a decade seeking compensation for a confiscated cargo.^{xx}

Gerss returned to London after being expelled from Norway and resumed life as a merchant. During the 1820s, he entered a relationship with a woman called Mary Challenor. His official wife, Sophia was still alive. She was buried on 26 Aug 1830 aged 48 at St John of Wapping, Tower Hamlets, London. Gerss fathered another six children with Mary; Charles John in 1827, Mary in 1829, William in 1831, Gustavus in 1834, Titus Chaloner on 2 January 1836, Richard on 12 July 1839.^{xxi} At the time of

his youngest son's birth, Gerss was aged 61 and living at 35 Mayfield Street, Dalston, Hackney. Mary, signing the birth registration of Richard with an X, appears to have been illiterate.

Gerss diversified into the cabriolet business and had moved around London no fewer than six times in ten years and went to Jersey for three years between 1830 and 1833.^{xxii} It appears Gerss was trying to stay one step ahead of his creditors but his luck ran out and he was declared insolvent (as opposed to bankrupt) and imprisoned for two months for debt in 1836 at the Whitecross Street Debtors Prison.^{xxiii}

The family was found living in Brunswick Row, Little Cambridge Street, Shoreditch in the 1841 census, in much less salubrious surroundings than his life at Fenchurch. Gerss, recorded as John Gertz, gave his occupation as merchantile agent. William had died three weeks earlier at the same address.

Less than two years later, on 4 April 1843, his 'wife', Mary, died.^{xxiv} At the time, they were living at 1 North Side, Bethnal Green and Carl was present at her death from 'a morbid affection of the brain'. Bethnal Green was also the location of the Bethnal Green workhouse, where Carl sought admittance on 13 July 1843. He told the examining Board of Trustees that he and Mary had been married St Saviours Jersey in 1824, but this was later found not to be true. He stated that his eldest son, named after him, had moved to Sweden.^{xxv}

Gerss died at the Bethnal Green Workhouse on 7 October 1843 of liver disease aged 63.^{xxvi} He was buried at St Matthew's Bethnal Green on 13 Oct 1843 and would have received a grim pauper's burial.^{xxvii} Such an inglorious end to a life which had such a promising start.

The surviving children in England, Mary (aged 14), Gustavus (9), Titus (7) and Richard (2) were all baptised on 1 December 1843 (six weeks after Gerss's death) at St Matthew's.^{xxviii} Chaloner was added as a given name to all of them at baptism. Gerss had neglected to have the children baptised as this would have alerted the authorities to the fact that he and Mary were living in sin. After a settlement examination, the children were then sent to live with their Chalenor relatives in Chester.^{xxix} However, they do not appear to have stayed in Chester long as they are absent from the 1851 census. For example, Gustavus joined the merchant navy around 1845, the year he would have turned twelve. In 1856, Gustavus was found aboard the *Brisk* but his ultimate fate is unknown.^{xxx} It is not known what became of Gerss's other English-born children. In comparison, his Norwegian-born children had families of their own with hundreds of descendants living today.

Gerss must have been a confident charming man. Ten children, five women in two countries attest to this. ... and they are the ones I know about!

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- ⁱ "Finland, Baptisms, 1657-1890," index, FamilySearch (<https://familysearch.org/pal:/MM9.1.1/XBJV-WQJ> Carl Johan Johansson, 27 Oct 1779; citing Church of Finland, ; FHL microfilm 55641.
- ⁱⁱ IGI C417605 Jakob Och Johannes Stockholm
- ⁱⁱⁱ 27 Mar 1788 Klara församling Stockholm Sweden
- ^{iv} IGI Johan Eric GERD 16 May 1795 Klara film 77791
- ^v Uppsala universitets matrikel. Nr 17, 1792-1800", Uppsala Univ., 1946. Serie: Uppsala universitets årsskrift, 0372-4654 ; 1946:1 ; s. 317-372
- ^{vi} TNA B 4/27/49 Registers of Commissions of Bankruptcy
- ^{vii} measuringworth.com using the Retail Price Index [accessed 24 May 2014]
- ^{viii} Holden's Triennial Directory for 1805 to 1807 includes the 'London Alphabet of Businesses, Professions, &c.
- ^{ix} Vicar General Marriage Allegation (13 July 1808). Lambeth Palace Library.
- ^x PRO Prob 11/1556 Will of Joseph Ainsley 25 April 1810
- ^{xi} PRO Prob 11/1556 Will of Joseph Ainsley 25 April 1810
- ^{xii} Reports of cases determined at nisi prius: in the courts of King's Bench and Common Pleas, and on the home circuit, from the sittings after Michaelmas term, 48 Geo. III. 1807 [to the sittings after Hilary term, 56 Geo. III. 1816], Volume 2 Butterworth, 1811:409
- ^{xiii} 1811 London and Country Directory for C.I. Gerss, Merchant, Fenchurch Street, London.
- ^{xiv} The printed licence was issued and signed by Richard Ryder Houghton Library of Harvard College, Harvard University.
- ^{xv} Coldevin, A. (1966) Bodø By Bodø Kommune:127
- ^{xvi} Monumental Inscription. Headstone of Caroline Gerss, photographed by the author, Skjerstad Churchyard, Bodø
- ^{xvii} Slektbok for Kjerringøy, Norldfold and Sørfold
- ^{xviii} "Norway, Baptisms, 1634-1927," index, FamilySearch Stenette Sophia Karlsen, 14 Oct 1818; citing ; FHL microfilm 127105.
- ^{xix} Holst, P (1827) Bodø-sagen [<http://books.google.co.uk/books?id=EUQMAQAAMAAJ> accessed 17 May 2014]
- ^{xx} The Times 27 Jul 1825:2
- ^{xxi} LMA HO107-705-1 Folio 43: 9
- ^{xxii} London Gazette Issue 19381:840
- ^{xxiii} TNA B6/68/41578 Town Register No.6
- ^{xxiv} GRO Death Certificate Bethnal Green Vol 2 Page 9 June Qtr 1843 under the name of Mary Gerss
- ^{xxv} LMA Board of Guardians, St Matthew Bethnal Green BeBG 8 :298-299
- ^{xxvi} GRO Death Certificate Bethnal Green Vol 2 Page 14 Dec Qtr 1843
- ^{xxvii} Burial register St Matthew's Bethnal Green IGI film no. 849416 :56 No. 442 from Workhouse age 64
- ^{xxviii} St Matthew's Bethnal Green, IGI C046984 no. 499: 63
- ^{xxix} LMA Bethnal Green Workhouse Board of Trustees Rough Examination Book 1843 BEB G/267/003:151
- ^{xxx} TNA BT114 Registry of Shipping and Seamen: Alphabetical Index to Registers of Seamen's Tickets

LMA London Metropolitan Archives
PRO Public Record Office
TNA The National Archives (England)