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2305 A New Surname

by Anthea Fraser Gupta

A new surname

My paternal grandmother said “we were Tinkers”.¹ One of her stories always began with “There were two sisters in North Sunderland”. Mary Edwards was Granny’s maternal grandmother, and Hannah Edwards was the paternal grandmother of Granny’s husband. The protagonist was Hannah’s husband, Hugh, an “Irish Tinker”, who changed his surname from “Devine” to “Shields” because he had killed someone and was evading the law. He chose “Shields” because he landed in the port of Shields, at the mouth of the Tyne. The rest of the family was vociferously sceptical about this whole story.

Then, in 2009, nearly forty years after Granny’s death, by which time I was the only surviving scoffer, I learnt from a comparison of the 1851 and 1861 censuses of England and Wales that the change of surname really happened.² The names, ages, and places of birth for the Divines in 1851 (in Newcastle upon Tyne) corresponded perfectly to those of the Shields family in 1861 (in Stockton on Tees).

After that revelation, the adult life of Hugh Devine emerged, a man at the bottom of society who lived, worked, and raised a family in north-east England (Figure 1).

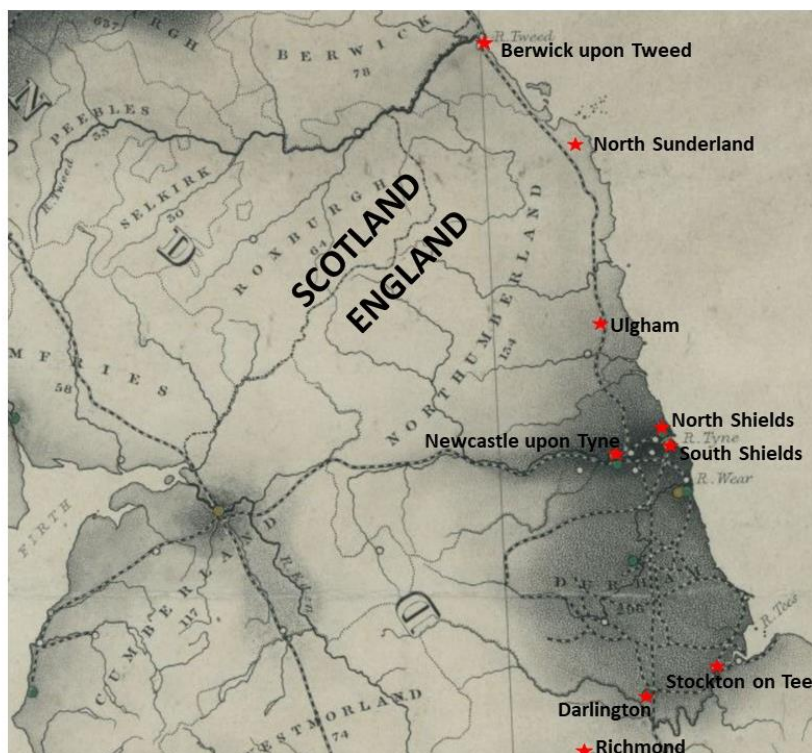


Figure 1: Places referred to in text.³

Hugh supplies consistent ages in censuses, showing he was born 1820-21. In 1861 and 1871, he indicates that he was born in Scotland, but I have found no record of his birth or early life in Scotland or Ireland.⁴ He was Catholic, and from the lowest social group, so may have escaped parish baptism and censal enumeration. In later life, he usually lived alongside families of Irish origin and took in Irish lodgers. He might have been Irish or Scottish, or Scottish of Irish ancestry. He may be the 19 year old Hugh Devine tramping from Glasgow to Newcastle upon Tyne, who was placed overnight in the Berwick upon Tweed workhouse on 15 July 1840. Tantalisingly this young Scotchman’s trade is partly lost in the gutter of the

binding.⁵ He was a “[...]k Maker” – perhaps “Brick Maker”, a job that Hugh did in his early years in the north-east.⁶

The first definite sighting is when Hugh Devine married Hannah Edwards in Newcastle upon Tyne in 1843.⁷ They registered the births of four children under the old surname: James Devine, Mary Divine, John Divine, and, last of all, Hugh Divine, my great-grandfather, born on 15 August 1853.⁸ Their next child, Thomas Shield, was born on 28 December 1855, followed by Margaret Shields and Martha Shields. Despite being illiterate, Hugh and Hannah somehow kept scrupulous records of the dates and places of birth of their children.

Why did Hugh choose “Shields” as the new surname? A sea journey from Ireland to a port on the east coast of England was never plausible. But Hugh was living in South Shields for the birth of his first Devine child, and in North Shields for the birth of his first Shields child.⁹ Perhaps that created a sense of connection.

On the other hand, Hugh had friends and neighbours with the surname “Shields”. His third child was baptised in St Mary's Roman Catholic Cathedral in 1850, and the sponsors were Isabella Shields and Adam Carson, both of Irish background.¹⁰ In 1851, the Devines, Adam, and Isabella, were neighbours, living side by side in rooms in the same court.¹¹ Like “Devine”, “Shields” is a name that could be Irish or Scottish, and is believable for a man who probably came from the Border Traveller community. When people change surname, they often choose a family name and it is possible that Isabella was a relative. I have a 34cM DNA paternal match to a documented descendant of Isabella, with no other likely point of contact with my paternal line, which could be because Isabella and Hugh were related.¹²

Hugh and his family moved around north-east England a lot, with Hugh working as a brickmaker or tile maker, or as a hawker, or as a labourer. Mary Devine was born while he was a railway navvy in Ulgham, Northumberland, but the general direction of movement was southward. By 1863, the family were living in Darlington and Hugh was labouring in the ironworks. In the 1871 census they were still there, in a new terraced house, of the traditional two up two down design, with their five children and five lodgers. Though crowded, this house would have represented a great improvement on tenements or navvy camps.

In 1873, Hugh registered the death of his eldest son, from “consumption”, and after just five months, he buried Hannah.¹³ When Hugh himself died nine months later, he was on the road again, working as a hawker of books, and staying with his eldest daughter, Mary, in Richmond, Yorkshire. Mary's husband, an Irishman and also a hawker, was the informant for his death.¹⁴ The certified cause of death was “phrenitis”, which usually suggests delirium from the effects of alcoholism.¹⁵

Were we Travellers? North Sunderland was a small settlement in Northumberland, where Border Travellers sometimes overwintered, but the father of the Edwards sisters was a lifelong collier, and their mother came from a local family.¹⁶ They could have had Traveller links, however, and the frequent cousin marriages among their descendants may reflect the desirability of this kind of marriage in the Traveller community.¹⁷ Hugh has stronger Traveller credentials than the Edwards sisters. He was Catholic, like most Travellers.¹⁸ One of his jobs was hawking, a traditional Traveller activity.¹⁹ When he married, he identified his father as a “weaver” – basket weaving was a traditional Traveller occupation, though not textile weaving.

Some of the details of Granny's story are not correct. Hugh did *not* sail from Ireland into Shields, changing his name on arrival. He may have been from Scotland, and he lived in north-east England for twelve years as Hugh Devine. He was probably a Traveller. But there *were* two sisters from North Sunderland, and Hugh *did* change his surname from "Devine" to "Shields". My money is on him having killed someone. Sorry I doubted you, Granny.

References

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¹ The term "Tinker", referring to some groups of Irish and British Travellers, is now considered offensive, so I use the blanket term "Traveller" when not quoting.

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³ Base map detail of:

August Heinrich Petermann & John Dower. To her most excellent majesty Queen Victoria this map of the British Isles elucidating the distribution of the population, based on the census of 1841 / compiled and drawn by Augustus Petermann ... is ... dedicated ... (Engraved by John Dower.) . Printed in London : W. S. Orr, 1849. National Library of Scotland, <https://maps.nls.uk/view/120540538>, accessed 3 May 2023.

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- ⁴ Census record for Hugh Shields, aged 50, 15 Cumberland Street, Darlington, 1871 England and Wales Census, The National Archives, HSN:335; Piece: 4884, Folio:127, Page Number:73, UK Census Collection, Ancestry.com, accessed 1 February 2021.
- ⁵ Sir John Walsham to the Poor Law Commission, letter with enclosure, 15 Sep 1840, Local Government Board and predecessors: Correspondence with Poor Law Unions and Other Local Authorities, Folios 357-258, MH 12/8976/215, National Archives, Kew (England), <https://www.nationalarchives.gov.uk/>, accessed 16 February 2021.
- ⁶ Birth certificate of James Devine, born 19 February 1846, in Brunswick Street, registered March quarter 1846, South Shields registration district, General Registry Office, England, vol 24, p. 225.
Census record for Hugh Divine, aged 30, 1851 England and Wales Census.
- ⁷ Marriage certificate of Hugh Devine and Hannah Edwards, married 28 December 1843, St. John's Parish Church, registered Newcastle upon Tyne, December quarter 1843, Newcastle upon Tyne registration district, General Registry Office, England, vol 25, p. 381.
Note that in this article I have not referenced the evidence for the birth and life of Hannah and Mary Edwards, or the lineage of myself from both of them. Additional documentation can be found by accessing: [Reference redacted to prevent identification of author]
- ⁸ Birth certificate of James Devine, 1846, General Registry Office, England.
Birth certificate of Mary Divine, born 11 January 1848, in the Railway Huts, Ulgham (Bedlington District). Registered March quarter 1848, Morpeth, General Registry Office, England vol. 25, p. 302.
Baptism of John William Devine, baptised 28 September 1850, St. Mary's Roman Catholic Cathedral, Clayton Street, Newcastle upon Tyne, Baptism Register 15 July 1765 – 31 December 1855, Newcastle Archives MF1792, p143.
Birth Certificate of John Divine, born 2 July 1850, in Stowell Street, Newcastle upon Tyne. Registered September quarter 1850, Newcastle upon Tyne, General Registry Office, England, vol. 25, p. 402.
Birth certificate of Hugh Divine, born 15 August 1853, 5 Harle Street, Newcastle upon Tyne, registered September quarter, Newcastle upon Tyne, General Registry Office, England, vol. 10b p.22;
Birth certificate of Thomas Shield, born 28 December 1855, Siddell Street, North Shields, registered January quarter 1856, Tynemouth registration district, General Registry Office, England, vol. 10b p.126.
Birth certificate of Margaret Shields, born 23 September 1859, Newgate Street, Newcastle upon Tyne registered December quarter, Newcastle upon Tyne registration district, General Registry Office, England, vol. 10b p.39;
Birth certificate of Martha Shields, born 10 July 1863, Chancery Street, Darlington, registered September quarter, Darlington registration district, General Registry Office, England, vol. 10a p.7.
- ⁹ Birth certificate of James Devine, 1846, General Registry Office, England.
Birth certificate of Thomas Shield, 1855, General Registry Office, England.
- ¹⁰ Baptism of John William Devine, baptised 28 September 1850.
- ¹¹ Census record for Hugh Divine, aged 30, 1851 England and Wales Census.
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- ¹² AncestryDNA, "Member Matches for [Name redacted]," AncestryDNA (<https://www.ancestry.com/dna> : accessed 2 May 2023), predicted 4th-6th Cousins, Paternal Side, sharing 34cM, 1 segment, with [Private].
- ¹³ Death certificate of James Shields, died 21 July 1873, Japan Street, Cockerton. Registered September quarter 1873, Darlington registration district, General Registry Office, England, Volume 10A Page 20.
Burial of Hannah Shields, of Japan Street, age 50, 11 November 1873. Cemetery Registers, Darlington District, Record Number: 755180.12, Location: Darlington, County Durham; Cemetery: West Cemetery; Denomination: any. Durham Records Online.
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- ¹⁴ Death certificate of Hugh Shields, aged 53, died 3 August 1874, Bargate, Richmond, registered September quarter 1874, Richmond registration district, General Registry Office, England, vol. 9d p.394.
Burial of Hugh Shields, buried 5 August 1874, Yorkshire Burials, North Yorkshire County Record Office. FindMyPast.
- ¹⁵ F J Porcel & H S Schutta, 'From Antiquity to the N-Methyl-D-Aspartate Receptor: A History of Delirium Tremens'. *J Hist Neurosci.* 2015;24(4):378-95. doi: 10.1080/0964704X.2015.1034515. PMID: 26444921. <https://pubmed.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/26444921/>.
[Reference redacted to prevent identification of author]

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- ¹⁶ The full documentation of this sentence would be lengthy. Here is the widowed John Edwards with Hannah and her younger siblings in North Sunderland in 1841. Mary was already married.
Census record for John Edwards, aged 50, North Sunderland, Bamburgh, 1841 England and Wales Census, The National Archives, Registration District: Belford; Sub-registration district: Belford; Piece:818; Book:20; Page Number:1, UK Census Collection, Ancestry.com, accessed 6 May 2023.
- ¹⁷ E Gilbert, S Carmi, S Ennis, J F Wilson & G L Cavalleri. ‘Genomic insights into the population structure and history of the Irish Travellers’. *Science Reports*. 2017 Feb 9;7:42187. doi: 10.1038/srep42187. PMID: 28181990; PMCID: PMC5299991. <https://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pmc/articles/PMC5299991/> [accessed 2 May 2023]
- ¹⁸ There is intermittent evidence of Catholicism in Hugh’s children, not all of which is referenced here. The direct evidence includes:
Baptism of John William Devine, baptised 28 September 1850.
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