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JUNE 2, 2018 · 6:43 PM

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Patrick Conolly: a Derby winner



Woodditton church, where Patrick and Elizabeth married in 1836

It is Derby day today so I thought I would write about a Derby-winning jockey from the past. Patrick Conolly (sometimes spelt Connolly, Conelly or Connelly) won the race twice, in 1834 on Plenipotentiary and in 1841 on Coronation. In 1841 the race was run on 26 May, eleven days before the census was taken on 6 June 1841.

Although Patrick Conolly lived in Newmarket, on the night of the census he was to be found at Woodside, a mile or two from Ascot racecourse in Berkshire. With him is wife Elizabeth, three-year-old daughter Ellen and Nancy Boyce, a relative of Elizabeth. (Patrick had married Elizabeth Boyce on 9 February 1836 in the church at Woodditton near Newmarket. She was the daughter of trainer Richard Dixon Boyce.) The couple's son Frank, aged one, had been left at home in Newmarket with servants, although there is Harriett Boyce next door.

Disaster was soon to strike the young family. Patrick fell ill that winter and died on 9 April 1842. He was aged just thirty-five. Less than two weeks later Mary Anne Conolly was baptised at the same church where her father was buried, All Saints Newmarket. Further tragedy followed as Ellen died aged sixteen and Frank aged twenty. Elizabeth died in 1859, just months before her son, with Mary Anne left as the only survivor of the family. On the 1861 census Mary Anne is described as a fundholder, lodging in Newmarket High Street with the family of Samuel Towell, manure merchant. Mary Anne didn't marry and in later life left Newmarket to live in London. The 1881, 1891 and 1901 censuses find her boarding in Paddington, "living on own means", always in the same establishment, a "Ladies Home" in St Stephens Road. She died aged 75 in 1917.

Meanwhile, in Australia, a man who had been transported as a convict under the name of John Jones had become a circus rider, changed his name to Matthew St Leon and, together with his sons, established a circus of his own. His descendants were still working in circuses into the 1960s and his great great grandson Mark St Leon is Australia's premier historian of circus. According to a [biography](#) in the Australian Dictionary of Biography, written by Mark St Leon, Matthew St Leon was Mary Anne Conolly's half-brother. The biography explains the connection:

Matthew St Leon (1823-1903), acrobat, equestrian and circus proprietor, was born in the west of England, possibly at Bath, Somerset, and given the name John Connelly. He was the illegitimate son of a jockey, Patrick Connelly, and Ellen Catherine Ricketts, a first cousin, once removed, of Robert Banks Jenkinson, 2nd Lord Liverpool, prime minister of Great Britain. He was raised at Newmarket by the trainer, Henry Neale, and his family, and served as a stable boy in the royal stables where he learned the rudiments of horsemanship. He was twelve when sent to London, in advance of his father's impending marriage to the daughter of a Newmarket trainer, to serve a spurious seven-year apprenticeship to a Westminster chimney sweep. His usefulness as a sweep's climbing boy diminishing with adolescence, he adapted his agility to tumbling, and performed in London streets. At Astley's Amphitheatre, across the Thames, he learned the circus arts. When implicated in a theft, he was tried (under the assumed name 'John Jones') at the Old Bailey on 24 October 1842. Transported to Van Diemen's Land, he received a ticket-of-leave in July 1847.

At the end of the article it says that it has been amended since its publication and by clicking on the link to the original you can see that Patrick Conolly and Ellen Catherine Ricketts made no appearance in the previous version. While there was a family tradition that the St Leon family were descended from a relationship between the jockey and an upper class woman it is only recently that Ellen Catherine Ricketts was revealed as the woman in question. Ellen Catherine was the niece, on her mother's side, of Michael Prendergast, one of the owners for whom Patrick Conolly rode. On her father's side she was related not just to prime minister Lord Liverpool, but also to the wife of Plenipotentiary's owner, Stanlake Batson. So there would have been opportunities for the couple, who would only have been about sixteen at the time, to meet. What seems somehow less probable is the story of the child's adventures in London. While it is a lovely story, and I would really like to believe it, it would be nice to have a little bit of evidence – something to connect "John Jones" with Patrick and Ellen Catherine.

There is a clue on the [website](#) of historian Turtle Bunbury, who, briefly, with thanks to Mark St Leon, relates the story, saying that Mark St Leon found a letter amongst Lord Liverpool's correspondence in the British Library, which, "written in cryptic terms late in 1822 or early 1823, all but confirms the imminent arrival of an unwanted child". Interestingly, he also says that Patrick Conolly was baptised Patrick Prendergast and was a relation of Michael Prendergast.

Ellen Catherine went on to make a late marriage, in 1846, to naval captain George Holbech of Warwickshire. She was widowed after eleven years of marriage and died aged 79 in 1886.

PS Since I wrote this post yesterday I realized that the Ricketts family have already featured in a previous [post](#) when I was writing about Alan Turing's ancestors in India. Ellen Catherine's uncle, Mordaunt Ricketts, who was the Resident (a senior British official) at Lucknow in India, married Charlotte Fitzgerald, a distant relative of Alan Turing. And in another [post](#) I described how Charlotte, two stepdaughters and a daughter (all widows) were living together in Hove, Sussex, in 1871. The stepdaughters and daughter were cousins of Ellen Catherine Ricketts.

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4 responses to “Patrick Conolly: a Derby winner”

Mark St Leon

August 1, 2019 at 10:34 pm



You have story fairly well nailed down but I would respectfully add a few comments. Ellen Catherine was a half-niece of Michael George Prendergast. Michael and her mother Ellen Theresa nee Prendergast were half-siblings. I appreciate your wish for 'evidence' to connect John Jones to his putative parents. However as the illegitimate son of a young Irish jockey and a well-connected young lady, the lad was a potentially huge embarrassment in the mores of the day. I have not been able to locate even a baptismal certificate. I have after many, many years (50 actually), I have reconstructed the course of his young life prior to being transported to Australia which I believe is watertight. This is based on a careful synthesis of the available evidence (oral snippets, Old Bailey transcripts, convict records, newspaper reports and DNA, all interpreted with regard to time, location and circumstance of the various pertinent individuals). The most significant breakthroughs were achieved in recent years owing to the availability of online newspapers and DNA evidence. The latter, inter alia, substantiates my descent from Ellen Theresa Ricketts, nee Prendergast, (the wife of Charles Milner Ricketts) and the mother of Ellen Catherine Ricketts (1806-86) who was the mother of my gg grandfather, John Connelly, aka John Jones aka colonial circus proprietor, Matthew St Leon (1823-1903).

Reply

pottoer
August 5, 2019 at 10:16 pm

Hello Mark
Thank you for your comment. I always like to hear from the descendants of people I write about. And I am pleased to see you have DNA evidence linking you to Ellen Ricketts. Have you seen how she is described in the History of Parliament?
<https://www.historyofparliamentonline.org/volume/1790-1820/member/ricketts-charles-milner-1776-1867>
I am not sure what a slammerkin is but she sounds like an interesting ancestor to have.
Have you ever been to Newmarket?

Reply

Mark St Leon

August 6, 2019 at 12:48 am



Dear Pottoer

The term 'slammerkin' appears to have been in vogue around 1820 and refers to a slovenly or untidily dressed woman. Not very flattering but I have seen her handwriting and that is not only untidy it is almost unreadable. Anyway, I am sure she was a good mum to her eight children.

Yes, I visited Newmarket when I was in the UK about 2 years ago. I stood at the entrance to the parish church where the jockey Patrick Conolly's gravestone is laid flat but almost illegible. I also saw the remains of the Royal Palace House where Patrick's son, John Conolly, my 'St Leon' gg grandfather, served the King as a stable boy c.1830. I could only spend a day and night in Newmarket but intend to make a more thorough visit when I do a thorough trip around the UK and Ireland before long.

BTW, I have written a short piece for Descent, the journal of the Society of Australian Genealogists, which will be published next month.

pottoer
August 6, 2019 at 8:43 pm

I look forward to reading it.

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