

A forgotten fortune

I never grew up with any whisper of gold in the family – no tale of a lost fortune and no hint of amazingly generous presents from distant relatives. The sale of an extraordinary collection of Edwardian travel souvenirs totalling \$3 million could have gone un-noticed by me had I not sniffed out the full story a while earlier.

My uncle asserted that our distant aunties were Amelia Alcroft and Sophy Martin. The will of Sophy showed otherwise. She was, in 1870, a spinster living with her companion at 4 Ebenezer Terrace, Plumstead, Kent. Despite the clerk's spidery hand I established that the man charged with proving her estate was an Allcroft, J.D. Allcroft Esquire of 55 Porchester Gate. Could this be somehow relevant to the 'Amelia Alcroft' on our tree? I found that this man had left nearly half a million pounds in his estate at his own death, twenty years later. Could this be our forgotten family fortune?

Gloving philanthropy, travel, and the marrying of Polly

This chapter begins with a letter sent from a coffee plantation in the Port Royal Mountains, Jamaica in 1853. Polly Martin, 22, and emphatically not Amelia, was sitting at home in her mother's smart drawing room in Woolwich when the words reached her. Henry Lowry, trying his luck as a mine agent, had gallantly offered to find a husband for his sisters-in-law "to turn mademoiselle into madame" if Polly and Sophy would come out too. They would meet many nice people, he said. He also offered a cuddle to young Georgie, then eight or nine. (The idea that any of the Cornishmen that Lowry had among his acquaintance would have suited is absurd! The field was infinitely wider in London.)

This letter was addressed to the Lowry children and turned up in an old shoe box when I visited my grandmother and asked to look through the older items, in my teens. My cousin in Australia knew far more about the situation than I: she knew that Polly had gone on to marry the heir to the Allcroft & Dent gloving empire and even had the marriage reference under her full name:

Mary Annette Martin, 1854, Islington to John Derby Allcroft. We know that she was Polly as this is how she signed her name as witness to Henry Bowes's will a few months later.

Lands in Shropshire

We wondered for ages if Polly had had any family before her death of consumption age 25 after three years of marriage. Sadly, the Allcroft saga would unfold without her. Her husband's estate grew to over half-a-million pounds and he accumulated considerable lands in Shropshire as well as a second wife and a family by her. His will shows he had purchased the right of advowson, to be able to appoint a cleric, with the lands he'd bought.

His big dream was the building of the Court at Stokesay. It was a magnificent building and a fitting backdrop for the large Victorian paintings which he collected. He never lived here, dying at Lancaster Gate aged 71, having spent two years in the Commons as Conservative MP for Worcester and receiving other honours, the result of his gloving philanthropy.

The hubbub came a hundred years later when the last of the Allcrofts, Jewell, died in 1992. None of Allcroft's heirs showed any business acumen and the eldest, Jewell's father, took his wife on the most exotic honeymoon of the Edwardian period, collecting souvenirs of the East in which he showed far greater interest than in gloves. The combination of the father's eye for Victorian landscapes and the son's Oriental heist made for an explosive sale at Stokesay Court in 1994. My Australian cousin Jane and I watched the fireworks from a distance. Our aunt Polly had never made it to Shropshire – dying we think from ministering to the poor of London, from whom she contracted tuberculosis. When I rang the Court's fortunate new owner, I was asked only 'how had I obtained this number?' and further enquiries seemed ill-advised. Lucinda Lambton had far more success and was permitted to froth all over the souvenirs in her television programme 'X is for Xanadu'. And it featured in Ian McEwan's *Atonement* some years later.

I did creep up to the Court and admired its yellow stone. By then the Court housed few of its Edwardian treasures, and I read about these later, comfortably, at home, in my copy of the catalogue from the sale.

The only postscript being the wonderful discovery that a church in Gospel Oak, London, noted by a journalist of *The Times* as being one of the thousand best churches in England, was founded by Allcroft as a memorial to his first wife Polly. I shall be making a pilgrimage there and to the nearby Allcroft Road to muse upon an unlikely chapter in my Cornish family history.

Polly, the first wife of J D Allcroft, is related through Grandma Martin's brothers, to the perfumier Elizabeth Arden, and to Peter James, the crime novelist.

References:

- Letter from Henry Lowry (1810-1861), Port Royal Mountains, Jamaica, which mentions 'Grandma Martin's [smart drawing room] at Woolwich'. Source: original letter (1853) in family possession.
- Biography of John Derby Allcroft (1822-1893) and value of estate. Source: *The Dictionary of Business Biography*, D J Jeremy, and C Shaw (editors), *Grant of Probate* (1893), *Burke's Landed Gentry*.
- Sale of contents of Stokesay Court. Source: *Sotheby's Catalogue* (1994).
- The Allcroft sons being unsuited to the business world. Source: *The Dictionary of Business Biography and Sotheby's Catalogue* (1994)
- Polly Allcroft, 55 Porchester Terrace, Hyde Park, London. Witness to the will of Francis Henry Bowes (1855).