

John Fowles and Cornwall. November 2005

Like many people I was saddened to hear of the recent death of John Fowles the novelist who lived in Lyme Regis. Over the years I had met him on many occasions usually at his home. You dropped in when you were passing or when you were sheep shearing in the area or when you had found some interesting cider or some unusual apples or a good book. To some he was reclusive or a hermit but that was very far from the truth. He liked his privacy but didn't suffer fools gladly. He craved good company. Tea time was always a good time to call and usually I would buy a cake or some saffron buns. On several occasions he mentioned his Cornish relations and that his mother's family had originally come from Cornwall. I was intrigued.

When I heard that he had died, I suddenly recalled these conversations of ten years ago. John's mother I discovered had been called Gladys May Richards married to Robert Fowles. When John Fowles's family were evacuated to Ipplepen during the Second War, his grandmother Elizabeth Richards, Gladys's mother, then a widow, accompanied them. It was at this time that John fell in love with the Devon countryside.

John's father's family were tobacconists and cigar importers. John's grandfather Reginald Fowles I discovered was born in Yeovil in 1853, the son of George Fowles, a solicitor's clerk from Wotton under Edge in Gloucestershire. In the 1841 census George Fowles is shown as a boy of 13. His father was William Fowles a weaver and his mother Elizabeth both 50 ie born c 1791. Amazingly in 1841 William's mother Ann Fowles was still alive aged 89 which makes her birth about 1752. George's elder sister Ann is a wool picker aged 15 and her twin brother Thomas a brickmaker. Good solid Gloucestershire crafts. George obviously got an education and that enabled him to become a solicitor's clerk, the first rung on the writing ladder so to speak, weaving a story.

So that was West Country - Gloucestershire and Somerset both cider and cricket counties. From Yeovil in Somerset, George Fowles and his family moved up to Hackney in London. Reginald's son, Robert John Fowles is born in 1889 and in the 1891 census they are living appropriately enough in 29 Ilminster Gardens, Battersea. Robert enters the family business and then goes to the First World War in the Honourable Artillery Company and is lucky to survive. After the war he marries Gladys Richards and they live at Leigh-on-Sea in Essex. A million miles away from Cornwall you might think. But if you look a little deeper you see that Gladys's mother was called Elizabeth Pascoe Whear Richards. And therein lay the very clue I was looking for.

John's maternal grandfather, Elizabeth Richards's husband, John S. Richards was a well to do Chelsea lace merchant and master draper buying lace for John Lewis. But his family was also from Cornwall. John Richard's grandfather Samuel was a tanner from Penryn and St Gluvias. His son William Richards, a skilled craftsmen, had made the move to London in the 1850's. He worked as a billiard table maker, organ builder and finally as a cabinet maker living at 100 Copenhagen St. Islington. It was his son John S. Richards who became the master draper. A man of the cloth you might say. Happy families.

John Fowles's Cornish grandmother Elizabeth Pascoe Whear appears on the 1881 census and was born in 1863 in Gwinear and living at Carnhell Cottage, Carnhell Green. The next village towards Camborne is called, appropriately enough for a mining area, Barripper. Aged 18 in 1881 Elizabeth Pascoe Whear was recorded as a shop assistant (draper). This may explain why she ends up in London with a lace merchant.

Elizabeth was born in Gwinear and her father was called John Whear a retired copper miner who at 54 year was a dealer in dairy produce. Her mother Harriet Whear was ten years his junior at 44 and from Sithney. Elizabeth is recorded as Elizabeth P Whear. The 'P', I felt sure was Pascoe and Harriet's maiden name. Elizabeth Whear had an elder brother, John also a copper miner, a 16 year old brother called Henry who was a blacksmith, a sister Mary P. Whear aged 13 and another brother Joseph P. Whear, still at school. 'P' could I felt only be Pascoe.

I had made some progress so I trawled through the other census documents. I then needed to find out more about Harriet 'Pascoe' Whear, so I looked in the 1851 census which has just come on stream, a good mining term. Sure enough Harriet Pascoe turns up in Gwennap, St Day with her father John Pascoe who is a blacksmith. In 1851 she is aged 14 and her mother is called Elizabeth. Her father is shown as being born in Sithney in 1786 and her mother Elisabeth born in 1794 from **Wendron** near Helston. In 1841 the family are shown to be living at Sithney Green. Harriet has 2 brothers who are older than herself. Her neighbours are all copper miners so it is not unreasonable to assume that John Pascoe is a blacksmith working with a mine, possibly Poldice or Wheal Maid. John Pascoe is fairly common name in Sithney. There are seven John Pascoe's christened between 1786 and 1791 so it is difficult at this stage to say which is the right one.

What is really interesting is that John Pascoe, Harriet's father, crops up in the 1861 census as living with Mary Anne his second daughter and her husband John Bawden at 21 Scorrier St, St Day. John Pascoe is referred to as a blacksmith aged 76 born in *Sithany*. John Bawden a grocer and schoolmaster. So the bottom line is that John Fowles's great, great

grandfather was a Cornish blacksmith from Sithney who then moved up to the St Day area when the tin and copper mines were working flat out.

Following the Whear's is also very interesting. John Whear as mentioned above was recorded as a dealer in dairy produce in Gwinear 1881 aged 54. In the 1861 census he shows up as a copper miner living at 102 Carnhell Green, near John Pascoe. His full name is John Penhale Whear born on 1 Jan 1827 in Gwinear and he dies on 10 Jan 1906. His mother and father are recorded as John Whear and Margaret Penhale. In the 1851 census they are recorded as living at 17 Lanyon Vean and John Whear senior's occupation is copper miner born in Gwinear c 1796. Several other relatives were copper miners from the Gwinear and Carnhell Green area.

So there is plenty of subterranean depths there. John Whear lives till he is 79. In 1871 he is registered as a miner out of employment, in 1881 he is dealing in dairy produce, in 1891 as a provision dealer and in 1901 he is recorded as an egg dealer and egg collector working from home and living as a widower with his 33 year old daughter Jane. Fowls again.

What seemed at first to be an impossible task, ie tracking down the Cornish connections to one of this country's leading novelists, was, thanks to the census returns, a piece of Hevva cake. So the direct link with Cornwall was through John Fowles's grandmother Elizabeth Pascoe Whear Richards, a draper's assistant who went up to the smoke and landed on her feet.

John Fowles always felt that there were wreckers in his Cornish ancestry and he may well have been right. In the eighteenth century many of the wreckers in that area around Helston and Porthleven were out of work miners who would simply abandoned mines if there was a good wreck in the offing.

Many people found John Fowles difficult to fathom but like many others who lived locally in the nineteen nineties, I found him very approachable and generous with his time. He craved intellectual stimulation and was never idle. Always working on something, burrowing into subjects, nesting like his beloved dormice that lived in his garden. Orchards and apples also played a large part in John's life. Maybe this was also a throwback to his Cornish roots. Cornish rootstock his hard to beat even if it is grafted onto Essex.

John loved Lyme Regis but I always felt it was a stepping stone, a haven, a port in a storm, a secret garden. Inside John, however, there always lurked beneath the surface, a strong Cornish mining streak which may account for his brilliant writing and ability to plumb the psychological depths and follow a lode. As a miner and a novelist you have to follow the lode and try striking out to meet the story at different points, the pay lode of words. The long lonely art of writing, driving

stopes, gunnises and whinzes. The smelting and the crushing of the ore. The blacksmith hammering out his words. John Fowles looked the part, dark and well built. The Magus ? or was it the Ebony Tower.

Sadly he is no longer with us but his Cornishness should not be underestimated. I think he spent a lot of his life trying to get back to his hard working Cornish roots. This is only a short foot note and others will no doubt look more deeply into his literary work but for me it was the John Fowles the man that fascinated me and his restless intelligence, always ready to lend a hand and his ability to challenge pre conceived concepts. He was also a great traveller and botanist. An enquirer after knowledge rather like his hero John Aubrey the seventeenth century historian. Hopefully this short article will prove useful for other researchers in the future.

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A shortened version of this was published in the Cornish section of the Western Morning News Nov 2005