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A TREASURE TROVE

The Lowis's passion for family history was ignited upon finding a forgotten cache of rich royal relations and important historical figures, Ed Lowis tells **Matt Ford**

MOST FAMILY history contains some surprises. However, even their professional experience as history teachers couldn't have prepared Ed and Rachel Lowis from Bury St Edmunds for what was in store once they began digging into their ancestry... which included links to royalty, Victorian adventurers, war heroes and pioneering female medics.

"Obviously history already interested me, but I knew nothing at all about my own family history," says Ed. "I knew we had a family crest, as well as a motto – 'Difficulties Delight Us' – and there were also some family names. My father and brother are both called Ninian. Another family name handed down was Shakespear, although my mum put her foot down on that one, and so the family cat was named Shakespear, instead of me. Apart from those things I knew, I was never particularly interested in finding out any more."

But when Rachel fell ill with post-natal depression after the birth of the couple's second child, Ed wanted to find a project to take her mind off things and so he suggested that they looked into their family history.

"To start with I just asked my dad some questions," he says. "He gave me the Lowis family history book, and then he said as an afterthought, 'Oh, we've got a family bible.'" That half-remembered bible would turn out to be a remarkable treasure.

"Inside we could see from the inscription that it was given to Sophia Shakespear and first written in during December 1861. But the really amazing thing was just how much material was tucked in the pages.

ALSO IN THE BOX WE FOUND LETTERS FROM THE KING AND CHURCHILL

Ed Lowis unearthed ancestors dating back to Edward III

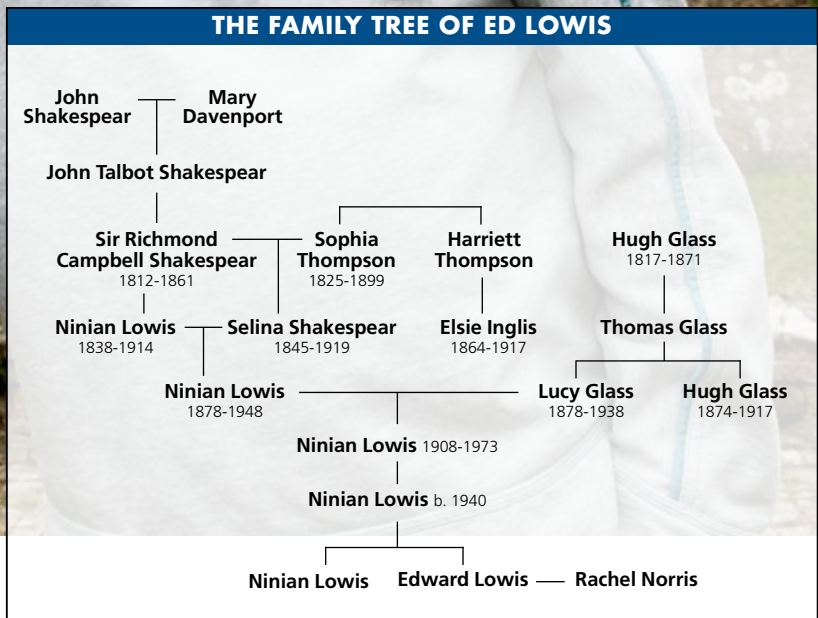
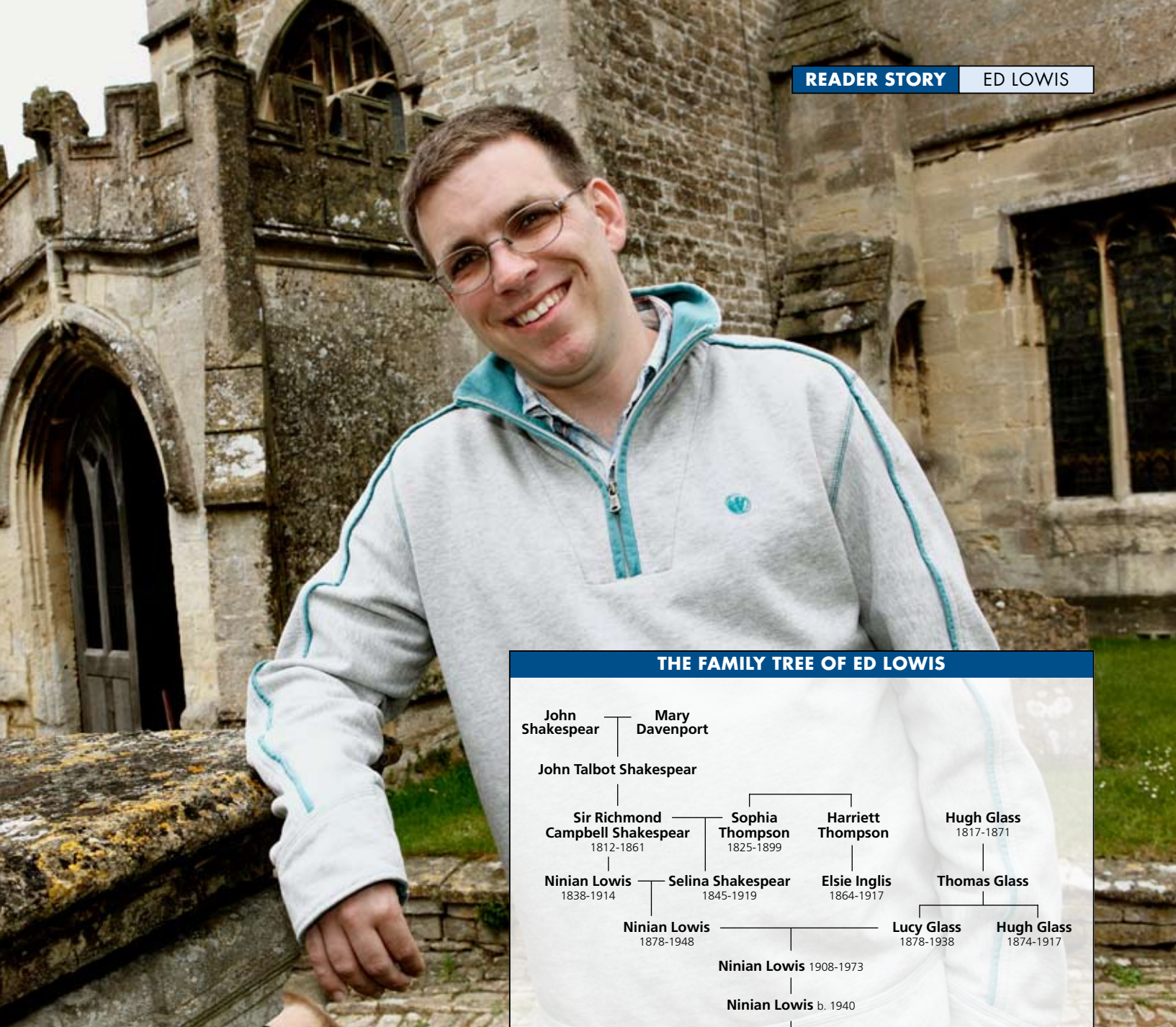


"There were newspaper cuttings in it from marriages and obituaries, war letters from a guy called Hugh Glass – and the letter to say he was killed, along with a pressed flower that he mentions in his letters. He actually writes 'I picked this flower on the Front today', and there it was. It was an astounding resource. My dad had no idea what he had."

Fired up, Ed asked his dad what else he might have. After a brief pause, his father said he had "a box of old photos" – but it turned out to be far more than that.

"There were pictures – tons of them," explains Ed. "But also in the box we found letters from the King and Churchill when one of my ancestors got his medals," he enthuses.

By now, realising that his dad possessed some remarkable finds, Ed and Rachel pressed him for anything else he might remember. "My dad said, 'There are some other family books, I think this one mentions a Shakespear...'. On reading it I quickly realised that it wasn't just one, it was the whole female line. Then there was another book and another – it just went on and on. My dad was just: 'Oh, they're related to us, all these other people, are they?'"



It was beginning to be clear that this was no ordinary family and Ed began to ask around his relatives. “My auntie had managed to keep hold of the family photos after my grandma and granddad’s house was cleared – so she gave us a collection of beautiful family photos.

“Thankfully my grandmother had written on the back of all the photos a couple of weeks before dying. She had no idea she would die, but was determined to do it.”

The couple were in an amazing position. While most family historians start with almost nothing, Ed and Rachel were in almost the opposite situation: they almost had too much material. “I’ve never heard of a family tree that’s so well documented or so diverse. It’s so amazing that you can trace back to Sir this and Sir that.”

“Clearly we had rich ancestors who had spent time in Victorian times doing a lot of research that they published, and we have reaped the benefit of that,” says Ed. “The challenge was putting all the bits and pieces together.”

Among the books of family history Ed and Rachel dug up was one on Sir Richmond Shakespear Campbell. Written by his

son soon after Sir Richmond’s death, the book is a tribute to the Victorian adventurer’s incredible life. “Sir Richmond was ordered to release some Russians who had been taken as slaves in Afghanistan, to stop the Russians using it as a pretext for invading.

“He did this – then he single-handedly took them up to St Petersburg. He met the Tsar and Tsarina. Then he came across to England, which was the only time he came home as an adult – although he was educated at Charterhouse with William Thackeray. He was knighted by the Queen and then went back to India. My dad actually had Sir Richmond’s statements of service and his memorandum – he had no idea what they were. But these were an amazing resource – they had all these comments from Palmerston, Canning and the slaves themselves. Sir Richmond was an amazing bloke, he’s actually in the *Dictionary of National Biography*.” But the book on Sir Richmond held more surprises...

PHOTOGRAPHY: TIM MOSSFORD-UNIP

BACKGROUND

The Indian Mutiny 1857-58

THE INDIAN 'Mutiny', or more accurately 'Rebellion', lasted from May 1857 well into 1858. It was the greatest threat that British rule in India faced until the Gandhi-led mass civil disobedience movement of the early 20th century. Originating in the various discontents felt among Indian troops in the Army of Bengal (one of three standing armies controlled by the ruling British East India Company), its flashpoint was the refusal of many sepoys (Indian infantry) in the Bengal Army to use a new cartridge allegedly

both accurate and fictional, of Indian atrocities against British civilians. One particularly disturbing episode was the slaughter of some 200 British women and children during the struggle to regain control of Kanpur, in what was then known as the United Provinces. Despite the controversy that has raged around this notorious episode, it does seem that, as the East India Company forces moved to recapture Kanpur, local rebel leaders sanctioned the killing of the female and child hostages, some of whom were thrown down a well still alive.

Local rebel leaders sanctioned the killing of the female and child hostages

coated with animal fat and thus offensive to both Hindus and Muslims.

Although largely confined to northern and central India, the original mutiny was supported by a number of Indian princes with grudges against British rule and, in some areas, by civilians with local grievances, who disapproved of the rapid social and economic changes from western technological innovation and control.

The rebels' early successes, including the taking of Delhi and the siege of crucial towns like Lucknow and Kanpur (Cawnpore), shook the British Raj. Most damaging of all to the British security in India were the rumours,

News of the 'Cawnpore massacre' inflamed rage and the lust for revenge both in India and at home. When Kanpur was retaken, captured sepoys were forced to clean up the congealed blood of the victims before being summarily executed. Muslims were hanged in pig skins, in order to defile them, and high-caste Hindus executed by 'untouchable' Indian hangmen. The uprising was thus comprehensively and brutally crushed.

Despite the fact that the British probably committed even more widespread atrocities as they regained control of India, it is the rebels' misdemeanours that are most vividly remembered in the United Kingdom. ■

Professor Dennis Judd is the author of *The Lion and the Tiger*, Oxford, 2005



The entrenchment at Cawnpore – the worst massacre of the Indian Mutiny, June 1857



Ed, Rachel and their sons visit Lacock Abbey to trace their family tree

The author had used other writing in the period to build up a complete picture of his father's ancestry, spending a lot of time tracing him back to Mary Davenport, of Lacock Abbey – and through her to Edward III, King of England.

"We checked a lot of this out on peerage.com, and against the National Trust's family tree at Lacock," says Ed.

"It was a bit of a shock. My dad found it quite funny. Since finding out, we've been to Windsor Castle and Rachel was chatting to the old chap on duty there saying, 'Well, we're related to him via such-and-such'. I think he thought we were mad!

"Sir Richmond Campbell was knighted in Windsor Castle – we found sketches of him being knighted by Queen Victoria. So to see where that happened was amazing.

However, Ed's favourite document among the huge hoard of family treasures is actually a book about botany.

"Sir Richmond's daughter wrote a book called *Familiar Indian Flowers*, and it's beautiful. She drew all the pictures and wrote about each of these flowers.

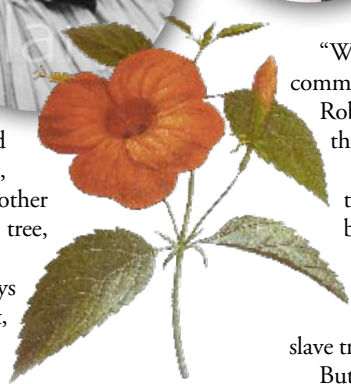
"My auntie has a signed copy to my grandfather, and we managed to pick one up off the internet – for rather too much money – and had it rebound. We have family photos of her as well. So the whole thing fits together very nicely."

As historians, one of the most rewarding aspects of the research for Ed and Rachel was to open up new areas of interest for the couple, including the Indian Mutiny.

"The fact that one of my ancestors was killed at Cawnpore, and his wife and children were some of the British subjects thrown down a well and left to die – to actually read the books and say 'this is my family' – is amazing.

"Another relative was at the relief of Lucknow. Another was in charge of the treasury in one of the small towns out there. He actually hid it in a well and when the fighting was over went back for it. Stories like that really bring history alive." But one of the most remarkable hidden histories the Lowises have uncovered is that of Elsie Inglis.

HIS WIFE AND CHILDREN WERE THROWN DOWN A WELL AND LEFT TO DIE



CLOCKWISE FROM TOP: Knighting Sir Richmond; Sir Richmond Campbell Shakespear; A botanical painting by Sir Richmond's daughter; National heroine Elsie Inglis

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The National Archives,
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 ☎ 020 8876 3444
 🌐 www.nationalarchives.gov.uk

British Library
 ☒ 96 Euston Road,
 London NW1 2DB
 ☎ 0870 444 1500
 📧 Customer-Services@bl.uk
 🌐 www.bl.uk

Imperial War Museum
 ☒ Lambeth Road,
 London SE1 6HZ
 ☎ 020 7416 5320
 📧 mail@iwm.org.uk
 🌐 www.iwm.org.uk

It started in a small way. When Ed and Rachel first starting leafing through the family bible together, one of the newspaper cuttings they found was related to Elsie. Unsure about how she fitted into their family, but confident she must have some role, Rachel set about trawling through the censuses and other relevant documents. In time they slotted her into the tree, and that was that – or so they thought.

“One day we went to the Imperial War Museum,” says Ed. “We were wandering around the In Memoriam bit, where there’s a big display at the moment.

“We were looking at the cases and suddenly there she was: Elsie Inglis.

“There was a picture of her with a big syringe. They had her letters. She was a surgeon and founded the Scottish Women’s Hospital Service, but the British government told her to go home from the front, because she was a woman.

“Undeterred she set up hospitals in France and Serbia, and all around the Balkans. She was taken prisoner, refusing to leave her post until they were nearly overrun. She had an amazing life.

“We’ve just noticed that the Clydesdale Bank are issuing commemorative notes of famous Scottish people. There’s Robbie Burns, Robert the Bruce – and on the £50 note there’s Elsie Inglis!”

Talking to Ed, it’s impossible not to be bowled over by the sheer variety of ancestors he has – any single one would be an incredible discovery for most of us.

“We’ve been very lucky,” he says. But the research isn’t over. Rachel thinks there may be a few dark secrets still to find, including her husband’s family’s links to the slave trade and the transportation of prisoners to Australia.

But among all the globetrotting and heroics, one small story remains special poignancy for Ed. While researching his great grandmother, he found that she was at home while her husband, brother and brother-in-law were all away fighting during the First World War.

“That really brings it home with the kids I teach. When I say the war affected everyone, to actually have these family photos of men in uniform and show them, and they say ‘That’s your surname sir’. They can spot the link – and that’s powerful.” ■

KEY SOURCES

Self-published family histories

If you’re lucky enough to find a previous family historian has published their research into your family, it may save you a lot of work and provide information that hasn’t survived in other forms. But take care to cross-check: published histories can jump to conclusions and may not always be rigorous with the facts.

The India Office

The India Office was the branch of the British Government that administrated India and holds a

huge wealth of records. Unlike most Government documents, they are not held at the National Records Office (NRO), but at the British Library in London. However, some documents are available online at the Families in British India website (below) and a search of the British Library website indiafamily.bl.uk/ *UI* can confirm birth and marriage information in British India.

Families in British India Society

FIBIS can provide access to books, journals and other resources for researchers interested in their

colonial roots, and have a useful website at www.fibis.org. It was this website that led Rachel to the discovery of the death of Robert Nisbet Lewis and his family at Cawnpore in the Mutiny. Also, When Rachel was researching Elsie Inglis’s roots she found family trees that connected Elsie to Sophia Shakespear, and Ed.

The London Gazette

The London Gazette is a paper of record for the British government, in which many statutory notices are still published. For the family historian it

has many uses. For example, all military promotions are listed. The searchable website www.london-gazette.co.uk helped Rachel and Ed pinpoint when family medals were awarded during the First World War.

