

## **The Sad Story of Jessie Clack**

### **Ewelme News, Feb-Mar 2013 and Oct-Nov 2014**

As participants in popular Ancestor Searching TV programmes often discover, some cupboards containing unwelcome skeletons would better remain shut.

However, in 2013 a 98 yr old family mystery was unexpectedly answered from the Archive, much to the delight of a lady in Cornwall. Stephanie Polkinghorne emailed us to for any information on the Clack family, as her mother Winifred Grace, born in 1915, was the natural daughter of teenage mother Jessie Clack, and no father's name appears on her records. A 'Clack/Search' on the Archive computer revealed a number of references to the family, including some photos of the 1908 Pageant, in which local builder Henry Clack, Stephanie's great-grandfather, played Henry VIII. Henry died in 1916, Jessie disappeared from the village and her daughter, who was led to believe her unknown father was killed in the Great War, was brought up by Henry's second wife Annie. Her last connection with Ewelme was living at Merlin Cottage, from where Annie ran a sweet shop until the mid-1930's.

The family secret was revealed in a short newspaper article dated 15<sup>th</sup> February 1915. It read - "*At the Watlington Petty Sessions on Wednesday George Howell of Orchard Road, Brentford was summonsed by Jessica Grace Clack of Ewelme to show cause etc. ... The case lasted four hours, the result being that the defendant was ordered to pay 5s 6d a week for 14 years, 4 guineas costs, and 19s 6d court fees.*" Four hours seems a long time to argue a paternity case and Howell employed an expensive Advocate from Temple, but Stephanie was at last able to identify her paternal grandfather. There were Howell's in Ewelme, but no record of a George Howell in the Census Returns or Church records. (He was born in St Albans and apparently unrelated to the Ewelme family). Stephanie subsequently found that in November 1918 he was running a motor and engineering company in Brentford.

With this vital key from the Archive Stefanie began unlocking her Clack cupboards - but uncovered a dark tale indeed. Far from being a local sweetheart's liaison gone awry as was common in past times, Stefanie discovered that her teenage grandmother, Jessie Clack, was seduced by George Howell, a 42-year-old married man with three children! (Howell was born in St Albans and appears unrelated to the Ewelme family of that name). The 1911 Census shows the Howells living in Hackney with William Clack, Jessie's brother, as their lodger - both men being described as motor engineers. Jessie had gone into service after she left Ewelme School, firstly in Reading and then in Nuffield and presumably met Howell via her brother. In December 1914 she gave birth to Winifred, and Howell was ordered to pay for the child until it was 14, but he was again in Court the following Spring on a very serious charge. On April 15<sup>th</sup> 1915 a Crown Court jury found him guilty of "*unlawfully supplying a poison called ergot and carbolic acid knowing the same was intended to be unlawfully used and employed to procure the miscarriage of Jessie Clack of Nuffield; the offence taking place between the 5<sup>th</sup> and 17<sup>th</sup> September 1914.*" (The dates suggest Jessie would have been 6 months pregnant by this time). For this crime he was sentenced to 6 months hard labour in Oxford Goal.

The year after his wife's death in 1903, Jessie's father, local builder Henry Clack, had married his housekeeper Anna Millward, a spinster of 38 and Winifred was taken in by her grandfather. Henry died in 1916 after falling from a ladder and at 50 years of age Anna became 'mother' to the 15 month

old Winifred, with a pleasant home in Merlin Cottage (now Box Tree Cottage) and a sweet shop business.



**Winifred outside Merlin Cottage**

Winifred grew up with Anna, loved and happy, but with no contact with her Clack relatives who moved away to the London area, or with her mother, the unfortunate Jessie, who was married briefly in 1926 and lived in Reading, dying there in 1960. Anna and Winifred left Ewelme in 1933 for Anna's native Nottingham, as Anna believed there were better job prospects for her 'daughter' in that City, and in her turn Winifred cared for Anna until her death just after the last War. (Howell's long-suffering wife took him back, and he died in Ealing in 1943). Winifred died circa 2003, and Stefanie is relieved her mother never knew the distressing circumstances of her birth – a tribute to the discretion of the villagers who must have read the 1915 newspaper reports.

Stephanie wished the full story to be told. She is grateful to the Archive for providing the missing link, and particularly to learn from the Archive memoirs of local recollections of Anna, Winifred and the sweet shop. (The large jars full of gob stoppers, sherbet dabs and liquorice laces are fondly remembered by older villagers to this day!).



**Stephanie outside Merlin Cottage (now Box Tree Cottage) in 2014**

To lay the Clack ghosts Stephanie visited from Cornwall in 2014 and was thrilled to tour Merlin Cottage, where her mother spent the first 18 years of her life with her step-grandmother Annie. In those days it was two cottages, but photographs of a young Winifred standing outside shows that the Clack women occupied the right-hand side of the property. Stephanie had also visited the newly converted Oxford Gaol, where her previously unknown grandfather, George Howell, had been imprisoned for his criminal attempt to prevent Winifred's birth by poisonous substances. During her local research Stephanie has come across another local descendent of her great -grandparents Henry and Laura Clack, and was delighted to finally meet up in the Shepherds Hut with distant cousin Sue Jack from Benson. The familial Clack bond is still strong – they were amused to discover they were wearing identical shoes!

*Ewelme Village Archive*