



Who's Your Daddy? A Durham DNA Puzzle

Michelle Dennis offers advice as well as rich resources on searching for ancestors in Durham, England

WE PROBABLY ALL HAVE A SKELETON OR TWO RATTLING around in our ancestral cupboards, but just how do we go about proving those sometimes-embarrassing family stories? Was granny right when she said that she knew the surname of her illegitimate Durham, English-born grandfather?

I knew that John Luke, my 2x great grandfather, was born on 7 July 1850 in Pittington, Durham, England to single mother Jane Luke (born 1823 Newbottle, Durham, died Broomhill, Durham 1901). The village of Pittington is made up of the neighbouring settlements of Low Pittington and High Pittington, which were developed for coal mining by Lambton Collieries from the 1820s. The population was 2,530 in 1851, and it is only four miles from the large city of Durham.

On John's English birth certificate, the name of the father has been left blank, suggesting that John was illegitimate. When registering his birth, his mother Jane made her mark 'x' being illiterate or unable to sign her name.

Family story, which should always be taken with a grain of salt, by John's granddaughter was always that John was born in the Elvet Workhouse in Durham, and she was adamant that his father was a Mr Winter. Was this true, how could she know this, and how could I confirm it?

The workhouse took in the aged, infirm and children and offered accommodation and work for those that could not support themselves, including pregnant mothers, with no support offered by the alleged father. They were designed to be a last resort, providing poor quality food, and often crowded unsanitary conditions. Even today, workhouses come with an undeserved stigma. They were a necessary place of shelter for the poor which included

a harsh regime. The able-bodied were expected to work, often doing mundane tasks such as spinning cloth, domestic labour, breaking stones, or cleaning tar from ropes. A fabulous resource for English workhouses is Peter Higginbotham's *The Workhouse – Story of an Institution* web-



English workhouse mealtime, circa 1911. (Wikimedia Commons)

site at www.workhouses.org.uk.

When a mother was expecting an illegitimate child, her local church parish officials subjected her to an examination to try to determine the name of the father. They would then attempt to have him sign a bastardy bond claiming responsibility for the maintenance of the child. The father would then have to pay a weekly sum to the mother to support the child. Often these examinations were recorded in the local newspaper, further shaming the mother.

Recently, while searching through the newspapers in the Find My Past British Newspaper Collection at <https://search.findmypast.com/search/newspapers> I discovered an amazing fact about the possible identity of John Luke's unnamed father. I knew John Luke was born in July 1850, so I filtered the date to 1850, and keyed in "Jane Luke" in the search box. Bingo, I found him!

Recorded in the Durham Chronicle Newspaper of 27 September 1850 is the startling facts of the charging of William Winter of Pittington with being the father of the illegitimate child of Jane Luke. The hearing was held in the Justice Room, Durham in September before a bench of five justices. It reported that Jane Luke had already been