

The Life story of John Henry Drakeley

John Henry Drakeley was born in Lambeth London on The 7th July 1885, the second child to be born to William Henry Drakeley and his wife Francis (nee Ayers), their first child Maud was born in 1881 and a third child Rose, was born in 1887.

William Henry (born 1853) His Occupation was a boot salesman who worked in his fathers Large business of selling shoes and boots throughout London and who owned a large chain of shops in the city.

When William Henry's Father died. William inherited the business and carried on trading, but William had a weakness for drink and gambling and within a few months the family were penniless. William died of his addiction in 1888 at the age of 33 when his son John Henry was just 3 years old. William's wife re married but her new husband agreed only to take on the family if her son was not included so poor John Henry was put into an orphanage where he stayed until he was 16.

However, on the 1891 census his mother Frances is re-married to Arthur Kidby and living in Camberwell. They have a 5 month old son, Arthur Kidby, and Henry's sisters Maud (10) and Rose (8) are listed as step-daughters to Arthur. But Henry (5) is living there as well, as is his younger sister Frances (4), listed as son and daughter (think that is an error).

One of conditions at the orphanage was to make things to sell on the streets of London and Henry, as he was called, became quite adept at the art of basket weaving and used to enter competitions quite frequently, and won now and again. On one occasion though, another orphan boy swapped his basket, which was of inferior quality, with Henry's to win a competition, and when the other boy won Henry was so infuriated that he set about beating the boy, the fight was broken up, and as it seemed Henry had started the fight he was punished by being publicly flogged for his outburst.

When Henry reached the age of 16 in 1901 and was allowed to leave the orphanage he hated the city and left vowing never to return, for some unknown reason he made his way north to North Wales and ended up at a small village on the outskirts of Ruthin called Clawdd Newydd here he managed to get work at a small farm owned by the Roberts family who took him in as one of their own.

Being a small community and everyone speaking Welsh nobody would speak to Henry and he was snubbed by everyone so he bought a Welsh Bible and proceeded to teach himself Welsh until he

perfected it, (later in life he nearly always spoke Welsh and brought up his children to speak Welsh as well)

Here Henry worked for the next 10 years and struck up a relationship with the farmer's daughter Margaret Roberts. (Margaret lived at the farm just up the lane from the farm on which Henry worked). With work in the area becoming in short supply Henry decided to broaden his horizons and move to Canada where there was plenty of work in this growing country and good opportunities for a young man, he asked Margaret to go with him to make a new life for themselves but Margaret refused as she didn't want to leave her family, But Henry was determined to go and so he left vowing to return to Margaret one day and promising to keep in touch by letter as often as possible.

Henry left for Canada in 1912 aged 26 by ship from Liverpool, when he arrived in Canada Henry travelled to Manitoba and worked on many different farms in the area, these farms were vast stretches of land covering many thousands of acres, here he worked with flocks of sheep containing over a thousand sheep and working the land planting growing and harvesting hundreds of acres of grain, wheat and straw, occasionally the gang of men that he worked with would travel south as far as California in the U.S.A. to help with harvesting fruit crops,

On one occasion after a long harvest the men lined up to receive their wages from the farm boss only to be told that there was no money for them, the men were infuriated by this and approached the boss who produced a gun and proceeded to fire at them. Henry was lucky to escape with his life.

In 1914 the first World War broke out and after about six months they started enlisting soldiers in Canada to join the forces in Europe, Henry signed up for the Dragoon Guards and travelled back to Britain in a ship full of troops, Henry served his time in the forces and at the end of the war returned to his sweetheart Margaret Roberts in Clawdd Newydd who he had been writing to for the past six years, Here they were married soon after and set up home in the nearby Village of Clocaenog,

They were in fact married on 23rd May 1916. Henry was living at Ashworth barracks in Tidworth, Wiltshire and Margaret was at Gwaliau, just up the lane from where Henry had worked near Clocaenog.

Soon after they moved to a house on the Horseshoe pass called Plas Norway overlooking Llangollen where Henry started work as a

Gamekeeper for the Best family here Henry looked after the surrounding land and organised shooting parties for the Best' s and their shooting partners, Margaret would have to organise the lunches for the parties and clean up after they had gone out shooting in the afternoon and have everything ready again when they returned from the shoot. By now, Margaret also had two young children to look after their son Harry born 12th June 1920 and daughter Margaret Ann born 16th July 1922.

Plas Norway was in a very remote spot on the top of the Horseshoe Pass miles from anywhere and Harry and Margaret had to walk to school to the village of Bryneglwys which was about 4 or 5 miles away and in the winter they could be up to their waist in snow trudging to school and there were no school dinners in those days and I remember (my mother) Margaret telling me that one day for lunch Harry and her had a small tin of pineapple chunks between them for their dinner there were only 8 chunks of pineapple in the tin so they had 2 each and hid the tin in the stone wall surrounding the school and had the other 2 each the next day, times must have been so hard in those days.

A few years later the family moved to another house on the Horseshoe Pass called Oernant Issa which was situated just in the Pentredwr Valley this house was a little more sheltered from the winds and snow and now it was not such a distance to go to school as it was just down the road in the village of Pentredwr, this move was short lived as a couple of years later they moved to a house just a little way up the hill called Oernant Uchaf, this was to be the last move for the family.

Henry and his wife lived at Oernant Uchaf and Henry was now working at the slate quarry on the pass as well as being a farmer, Henry would get up at 4 in the morning tend to his sheep and harvesting until his wife shouted him at 7:30 a quick cup of tea and then onto the quarry for the day then home for dinner after work and back to the farm work until dark it was a hard and busy life. Henry was good at training sheepdogs and would be pestered by local fanners quite often to sell them his sheepdogs but Henry thought the world of his dogs and would never part with them whatever he was offered, one dog he had was prone to epileptic fits but he thought the world of this dog, when he could tell the dog was going to have a fit he would shout "Mag open the front door quick" then the dog would go mad running into the house up the stairs into the bedroom and out

the bedroom window around the house in through the front door and around and round until the fit would pass.

Oernant Uchaf was a lovely cottage built entirely of slate, with thick slate walls and the floor was made up of large flat slate slabs, there was no electricity and no running water, the water was brought to the house by hand, out through the front door and down the bank on the other side of the road was a stream where you filled your bucket with ice cold crystal clear water, in some of the hard winters when snow was up above the front door almost reaching the upstairs windowsills a tunnel was dug from the front door to the side where the log shed was and the snow was melted to obtain water.

In the summer months Henry and his wife used to sell packets of crisps and bottles of pop to the many travellers who used to make their way up and down the pass and provisions were brought in either by the postman or friendly AA man on his motorbike and sidecar who was rewarded by a nice cup of tea made with long life milk and a slice of home made cake and maybe even a tune by Henry on his harmonica which he used to play note perfect for hours on end as it was the only form of entertainment in those days.

Henry worked at the Slate Quarry until he retired, by that time his son Harry and daughter Margaret had married and moved out of the family home. Henry carried on farming for many years with his chickens and sheep and growing his own vegetables and fruit in his small garden that sloped up the side of the house, for other groceries and business they would have to walk down the pass to Pentredwr and catch the Bryn Melyn bus into Llangollen.

Henry had finally got in contact with his long lost sisters and they visited him and Margaret at Oernant Uchaf in the mid 1950's a very happy reunion, as they hadn't seen each other for over 50 years, Henry and his wife Margaret lived at Oernant Uchaf, and around 1958 Margaret died after a long illness and Henry stayed on at the house until his death in around 1964.

The house is still there on the Horseshoe Pass it is the only house on the left as you travel about halfway up once always painted with whitewash it is now painted pink but it still brings back lots of happy memories.