

The Milliner Story

as told by Harold Leslie Gadd (1901-1967)

First of all I would like to make clear how I have acquired the knowledge that enables me to make this attempt to tell the "Milliner Story". The first Milliner was my Great Grandfather, and the last years of his life he lived with my Mother as a member of our household, and although he died some 17 years before I was born I have heard from my Mother the history of the family.

I would like to point out that the earlier part of my story has been gained purely from hearsay, but I think that it can be accepted as genuine; from the beginning of this century (1900) most of my knowledge has been gained first hand.

Towards the end of the 18th century, probably about 1770, is the first known record of a family named "Hancock" who apparently were not without considerable means: they were landowners in Wiltshire, and they at least owned the fields that eventually (*circa 1840*) the Great Western Railway cut the tunnel known as Box Tunnel through, and in consequence it is also reasonable to assume that they must have lived in the Box area. Apart from this which is largely surmise nothing further is known about the Hancock family, except that there was at least one child, a boy named James, who was born in 1803.

At a later date (not known) there must have been a serious break between James and his family (the Hancocks) for reasons that have been lost if they were ever handed down: the outcome of this break being that James left home and went to Melksham which is about 7 or 8 miles away from Box, and there is no record that there was any attempt of a reconciliation.

It has been handed down by hearsay that James Hancock when he arrived in Melksham had decided to change his name: this was quite a simple thing to do owing to the conditions that were operating in those days - it was not necessary for any record to be made by the authorities.

James Hancock is reputed to have seen a sign over a shop in Melksham which read somebody or another, "Draper & MILLINER", and decided to adopt the name of Milliner as his own.

James Milliner as we must now call him earned his living as a Teasel maker, collecting the teasels from the hedges and gardens where they were growing, taking them home and making them into Teasel Brushes, selling them to the factories in the neighbourhood who used them to brush the West of England Cloth which was made in very large quantities in that area. The district in and around Melksham was renowned for this cloth.

Now near to Melksham there is a village of Holt and I believe it was at Holt that a family named "Banks" lived.

Mr. Banks was an astronomer who usually travelled from place to place by night so that he could see the stars.

The Banks family had a daughter named Elizabeth Everes and it is of interest to note how these two names have persisted through the years, from generation to generation.

James Milliner married Elizabeth Banks and by 1839 had six children: three boys and three girls.

Around 1840 industrial conditions were extremely poor, in fact they were known as the "hungry forties" and in order to help and relieve this situation the British Government of that period sponsored an emigration scheme by which those who wished and presumably were acceptable were given a passage to Jamaica.

James Milliner applied for passage under this scheme, was accepted and sold up his home in Melksham and then travelled to Falmouth in Cornwall by horse-drawn wagonette, the journey taking six weeks.

They left Falmouth by sailing ship: the journey to Jamaica took four months. After some six to ten years in Jamaica (it certainly could not have been longer, which is proved by the fact that my Mother was born in Bristol in 1855) James Milliner learned that his parents had died and he returned to claim the land, leaving his sons in Jamaica and bringing his three daughters home.

There are two stories why he was not successful in his claims

- 1) that whilst he could easily prove that he was James Milliner he was unable to prove that he was born James Hancock.
- 2) that the seals on the deeds had been destroyed either by bad storage (presumably damp) or that the seals had been eaten by rats.

However, whatever the reason was, He was not able to establish equity and so the land passed into Chancery where it is to this day.

James Milliner continued to live in Melksham after his return and during the 1860's my Mother has told me of many holidays that she and her brothers and sisters spent there.

James Milliner was a God fearing man and a pillar of the Baptist Church in Melksham. His seat in the Chapel was beneath the pulpit and his eagle eye was reputed to make sure that all of his family were in their proper seats at each service. He is quoted as saying that he "could see everybody in the Chapel except the parson and he could hear he".

The date that his wife Elizabeth died I do not know but it must have been in the middle 1870's because he came to Bristol and lived with my Mother and Father, dying in 1884.

It is perhaps of interest to mention here that owing to my parents having some decorations done to James Milliner's bedroom and in order to save him the inconvenience and also the smell of the paint he went to his daughter Evers for a short time - there he caught a cold which developed, and within a few days he died at Earlsmead Terrace, Bristol.

James Milliner's body was taken to Melksham, the service being held in the Baptist Chapel that he loved so well and had served in the years that were past, and the interment was at Melksham.

James Milliner when he was at Melksham lived in a cottage in front of the Chapel. This cottage together with others have since been demolished and the Baptist Sunday School Room was erected on the site.

I have already said that James Milliner when he returned from Jamaica brought his three daughters with him and left his sons behind in Jamaica, and regarding the sons my personal knowledge is somewhat scanty, and I am indebted to Nigel Milliner for help that he has given me by sending to me the "who's who" of the descendants of these sons through the various generations.

However with regard to George, he was a Baptist Minister in Jamaica, I am told that he emigrated to Colorado U.S.A. and returned to Jamaica where he died. I did not know that he had gone to America, but I have heard many times that he was an exceptionally cruel man particularly towards the children of his brother James. It is on record that his cruelty was so pronounced that eventually the natives took revenge on him.

It was a habit of the Rev George to swim in a secluded pool in Jamaica and the natives seized their opportunity and hurled large stones at him whilst he was swimming, with the result that he lost his life. I presume that George must have been struck by one of the stones, rendered unconscious and eventually drowned.

Apparently George Milliner did not have any children.