



## The importance of family

**Geoff Thomas**

*Music Teacher*

When Julie and I first came to Malta, one of the first things we noted was that very few surnames were available. We know better now, but it appeared that everyone was called Borg, Camilleri, Vella, Farrugia, Zammit, Galea, Micallef, Grech, Attard, Spiteri, or Azzopardi. Everyone knew where their family was from (Cini from Żebbuġ, Xuereb from Għajnsielem, Aquilina from Għargħur), knew whether their names were originally Semitic, Romance, or British, and knew who all their relatives were - in amazing detail!

Then I began thinking about the problems I had tracing my own family tree. The top five surnames in Wales are Jones, Davies, Williams, Evans, and Thomas. My parents were Thomas and Jones so probably not a good start. They came from the same village and, as my research has continued, I found that the vast majority of my family came from within a range of only 13km (no wonder I feel at home in Malta). Shouldn't that make it easier? Unfortunately, no. So what are the problems?

Unlike Malta where surnames have obvious meanings (Chetcuti, Buttigieg, Busuttill, Vella) or even England (Taylor, Wright, Smith, Farmer), in Wales surnames are mostly first names. So in my family tree there is a Thomas Thomas, Evan Evans, David Davies (seven times!), and John Jones (at least five). The composer of the famous Welsh hymn-tune *Aberystwyth* is known as William Williams (*Pantycelyn*) to differentiate him from all the other William Williamses!

As an aside, it is worth noting that many countries, Wales included, use the son-of or daughter-of patronymic. In most countries this is quite straightforward. Iceland won their first Oscar through the composer Hildur Ingvaldardóttir Guðnadóttir and her score for *The Joker*. She is Hildur, daughter of Ingvaldur (Guðrún Ólafsdóttir) and Guðni (Franzson). Many countries have the suffix -s (Roberts), -es (Pires), -z (Hernández), -x (Hendrix), son

(Thomson), sen (Petersen), all of which mean son. In the UK there are prefixes too: Mac- (Mackenzie – son of Kenneth) and Fitz- (Fitzroy – son of the king).

However, in Wales we had a problem: the English! After the Laws in Wales acts of 1535 and 1542, Welsh was 'downgraded' as a language. Henry VIII tried to eradicate Welsh and parts of the 1535 Act relating to the Welsh language were finally repealed only in 1993! Until the time of Henry VIII, the Welsh used nicknames or patronyms, using mab (son). As an example of the effect of this, the patronyms ap Robert, ab Ieuan, ap Hugh, ap Rhys, ap Richard, ap Owain, and ap Hywel gradually became Probert, Evans, Pugh, Price, Pritchard, Bowen, and Powell. The spelling of these and many other names changed over time.

So, by the time we had official censuses they were taken in English, often by people who had no Welsh, and the resulting spelling mistakes are a source of frustration for those of us trying to track down particular names. Add to that the changing pronunciation and you have a real recipe for disaster. One example in my family tree is the name Mainwaring. This is an old name from Le Mesnil Varin (the manor of Varin), some 25km NW of Rouen. It can be pronounced and spelled Mainwaring, Manwaring, Mannering or even Mandry. All four spellings appear in my family tree and some members of the same generation differed in their choices. This is just one example. Now,



*My great-great-grandmother*

## Festa 2020

imagine someone who only spoke English writing down Maltese names. We had the same problem with Welsh. This is a language with an alphabet of 29 letters, including 7 vowels and 8 digraphs. Can you imagine the fun with places like Porthyrhyd, Bancffosfelen, or streets such as Heol Llethryd or Maesyfelin?

There are many other errors on censuses due to lack of literacy (my father's grandmother signed her wedding certificate with a cross), or lack of understanding (you had to state if you spoke Welsh, English, or both; what if you didn't understand the question?), or vanity – especially over women's ages. Some people were known by diminutives or other variations (e.g. Nellie instead of Helen, Maggie instead of Margaret), some used their second or third name then used an abbreviation (thank you Auntie Freda), some pretended to get married, or remarried, or moved away to be married or give birth, for various reasons! Some census-takers had beautiful copperplate handwriting, others an illegible scrawl. Online records are scanned and 'read' by machine which can waste hours in detective work. Even gravestones and newspaper reports have errors, especially in ages and dates. My mother's cousin died tragically young at the age of 8 years but the headstone states 9 years; it was only the fact that she had an unusual first name that enabled me to find so much out about her.

Children were often named after the last relative to die (this applied to both my parents),

after their father (mum's grandfather, great-grandfather, and great-great-grandfather were all David), or after their grandfather (between 1660 and 1766 I have Edward, John, Edward, John). It is so easy to get mixed up when the names in three, four, or even five generations are exactly the same.

Occasionally you get surprises when doing family research. The village where my parents grew up erected a memorial in 2002 (picture above) to those who died in a mining tragedy some 150 years previously. This provided the final evidence I needed for two brothers who had died in 1852. More recently, I received an email totally out of the blue from someone in Australia who was researching her family tree and discovered a link to mine and she asked for my help. It transpired that the father of two of my cousins had had a brother no-one knew anything about. He'd been born out of wedlock, brought up by relatives and, at the age of 13, was shipped off to Australia. He never forgave his family, but his descendants are now back in touch with a family they didn't know existed.

Write down your family history while you remember it and while your family are still alive. I really do wish I'd asked more questions years ago. It's too late when they've passed on. It can be hard work tracing your family, but worth it. As a bit of relief, I thought I'd tackle Julie's family tree. "What's your mum's maiden name?" I asked. "Thomas," she replied, "and her mum was Jones."



Photograph of the memorial in Pontyberem used by kind permission of Mick Lobb

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e-mail: [info@imperialbandclub.com](mailto:info@imperialbandclub.com)

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