

Searching for William Neves

By Geoffrey Barber

William Neves Cornwell was born in 1847 at Waldron, East Sussex, the illegitimate child of the widow Dinah Cornwell (nee Ashdown) and an unknown father, thought to be William Neves. William Neves is a person of interest to many Ashdown descendants in the United States. This article describes the author's efforts to track him down.

The mother Dinah died in 1850, aged 29 years, and the illegitimate William, his stepbrother Amos and stepsister Ruth were then raised by Dinah's brother Richard Ashdown in Mayfield. The Ashdown family were religious non-conformists with Dinah, her parents and grandparents having strong connections to the Independent Chapel at Heathfield.¹ A few years after adopting the children, Richard Ashdown and his family converted to Mormonism. According to his obituary in 1902:

“He became acquainted with the elders of the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints in the fifties and was ready for baptism upon first hearing the gospel and immediately became an active member in spreading the gospel. He presided over the branch where he lived until 1861, when he emigrated to Utah and settled in Salt Lake City.”

So, Richard took his family and Dinah's children to Utah, USA. It was a time when polygamy was practiced in this religion and some of the male children went on to have multiple wives and many children. William Neves Cornwell, who as an adult became known as just William Neves, had two wives, Abigail Eve Shaffer and Olive Ann Hovey, with whom he is said to have had more than fifteen children. Understandably, in a church which greatly values family and genealogical research, there are many descendants today who would very much like to identify the father of William Neves Cornwell.

At the time of William's birth, on 10 September 1847, Dinah was a widow whose husband Abraham Cornwell had died nearly three years earlier. She and Abraham had a daughter Ruth and a son Amos, and they had lived at a village called Hadlow Down. Ruth and Amos had not been baptised at St Mark's, the local Anglican Church, or anywhere else; an indication of the non-conformist beliefs in the family. They may have been Baptists as at that time there was an independent chapel at Hadlow Down for the use of local Dissenters, principally Baptists (who do not believe in infant baptism).

William's father was not named on his birth certificate or other records. However, it was common practice for the father's full name to be used for a male child's christian names to forever identify the father and also because illegitimate children could not take the father's surname, they had to use their mother's. So, it is a fair assumption that the father of William Neves Cornwell was called William Neves, which is also consistent with the family stories. In a report written by LaVerle Neves, a granddaughter of William Neves Cornwell, it is said that:²

“The story goes that Dinah fell in love with the son of a wealthy family. His name was William Neves. They were secretly married in 1846 but when the baby was born the family discovered the

¹ Dinah was baptised at the Independent Chapel at Heathfield on 9 Sep 1821. Her father James Ashdown was baptised there in 1783 and her Ashdown grandparents William & Ann were buried there in 1830, 1831.

² <http://lucyaliceneves.wordpress.com/a-happy-family-is-but-an-earlier-heaven/lucys-lines/neves-family/>

marriage. Furious, they shipped him off to a foreign land. Some say he went to Australia; others say Brazil. Wherever he went neither Dinah nor William ever heard from him again.”

This has the look of a rather embellished story, perhaps told in a way to protect Dinah’s honour and respectability within her family. The fact that William was baptised at Uckfield Holy Trinity on 27 Oct 1847, contrary to Baptist teaching, and that the record states that Dinah was living at the Uckfield Union Workhouse at the time, suggests a different story; that Dinah was rather isolated and on hard times.

About 1849 Dinah married Robert Frost at Waldron and had a child with him named Isaac, who was baptised at Waldron on 21 Nov 1849. Less than a year later, on 21 Oct 1850, Dinah died and Isaac appears to have then been raised by his father who remarried in 1853.

Dinah’s first husband, Abraham Cornwell and her brother Richard Ashdown, must have been close friends, as they were married on the same day, at the same church: 10 November 1841 at St Anne’s in Lewes. Also, before their marriages, Richard and Abraham were both living together at Sheffield Wharf in Fletching for the 1841 census. It is not surprising then that Richard took care of the children after Dinah’s death in 1850.

After converting to the Mormon church sometime in the 1850s, Richard Ashdown and his family emigrated to the United States in 1861:³

“The Family joined the Mormon church and was part of a group of 25 people who immigrated to Utah in June 1861. Dinah’s children travelled with the Ashdown family. Their names appear on the passenger list below the Ashdown’s family as Ruth Cornwall, Amos, and William. They crossed the ocean from Liverpool to New York in a vessel called the Manchester. They were 5-6 weeks on the ocean, one person fell overboard and drowned. They went as far as the Missouri river by rail and up the river to Florence in a steamboat called "the West Wind". From there, they started their journey across the plains by ox teams in Captain Eldridge's company. They arrived in Salt Lake City later that year in 1861.”

As an adult in the United States, William Neves Cornwell was known as just William Neves and his children took the Neves surname. He died on 30 March 1916 and is buried at Burlington Cemetery, Big Horn County, Wyoming.

The William Neve Candidates

Searching the Sussex Baptisms Index 1800-1830 for the father William Neves gives the following candidates:

William Neve bap. 20 Aug 1801 at Withyham son of William and Mary Neve
William Neve bap. 23 Aug 1801 at Withyham, son of Mary Neve, “baseborn”
William Neave bap. 28 Mar 1804 at Crowhurst, son of Charles & Elizabeth Neave
William Neeve bap. 28 Jun 1818 at Beckley, son of Henry & Harriet Neeve.
William Neave bap. 3 Feb 1822 at Ewhurst, son of Henry and Sarah Neave
William Neve bap. 30 Oct 1825 at Withyham, son of James & Rachel Neve

Research has also identified another candidate in:

William Farmer alias Neve bap. 23 Jul 1826 at Withyham, son of Elijah and Sophia Farmer alias Neve.

³ "Life of William Neves as told by his daughter Alice Dobson" (Dinah Alice Neves) - Ancestry.com

This William Farmer was also known as William Neve because his father Elijah was the illegitimate son of Phoebe Farmer who married John Neve soon after Elijah was born, so Elijah was raised within the Neve family at Withyham.

The list of candidates can be reduced by considering those in closest proximity to Hadlow Down where Dinah lived. As Withyham is much closer than the other parishes, the William Neves baptised there are clearly the priority for investigation:

1. William Neve bap. 20 Aug 1801 at Withyham son of William and Mary Neve
2. William Neve bap. 23 Aug 1801 at Withyham, son of Mary Neve, "baseborn"
3. William Neve bap. 30 Oct 1825 at Withyham, son of James & Rachel Neve
4. William Farmer alias Neve bap. 23 Jul 1826 at Withyham, son of Elijah and Sophia Farmer alias Neve.

1. William Neve bap. 20 Aug 1801 at Withyham son of William and Mary Neve

This William Neve married Mary Edwards on 12 Dec 1828 at Withyham. They had three children: Harriet in 1829, Matilda in 1831 and Lydia in 1836.

He inherited property called "late Harrods" and Morelands from his father in 1835.

He would have been aged 46 when Dinah gave birth to William Neves Cornwell (Dinah was aged 26 years). He was a farmer of 6 acres in the 1851 census and lived at Friar's Gate at Withyham for the 1841, 1851 and 1861 census. Friar's Gate is a small hamlet between the villages of Withyham and Crowborough.

One of the executors on his probate in 1879 was the Baptist minister, Ebenezer Littleton of Chapel Hose, Withyham.

Although William is a candidate, his life shows stability and nothing out of the ordinary.

2. William Neve bap. 23 Aug 1801 at Withyham, son of Mary Neve, "baseborn"

William was buried 16 Sep 1801 at Withyham, "infant", so is discounted.

3. William Neve bap. 30 Oct 1825 at Withyham, son of James & Rachel Neve

In the 1851 census, William is 24 years old and living with his widowed father James, age 66 years. Living with them is a 55-year-old housekeeper, the widow Lydia Hook, with whom James has a "baseborn" child Victoria Hook in 1839. Interestingly, James himself was an illegitimate child, the "baseborn" son of Sarah Neve.

William would have been almost 22 years old when Dinah gave birth to William Neves Cornwell (Dinah 26 years). Four years later he emigrated to Sydney Australia with his father James Neve, Lydia Hook (now James's wife) and their daughter Victoria. They were following in the footsteps of William's brother James Neve, who had emigrated there with his new wife Harriet in 1839. William's oldest brother, George, remained in England.

William's occupation was given as a farm labourer and wood cutter on the ship's passenger list. When his brother James emigrated in 1839 he gave his religion as Baptist, which probably applied to the rest of the family as well.

The timing of William's emigration is interesting in that it occurred less than 12 months after Dinah's death on 21 Oct 1850. Was this a factor? Was his family being pressured to take responsibility for the child William Neeves Cornwell?

William married within 12 months of arriving in New South Wales and had a large family (12 children?).

4. William Farmer alias Neve bap. 23 Jul 1826 at Withyham, son of Elijah [Edward] and Sophia Farmer alias Neve.

William was baptised as William Farmer and is named this when he was living with his parents at Crowborough for the 1841 census. However, he used the surname Neve at his marriage and during his adult life.

William's father, Elijah (Edward) Farmer alias Neve, was an illegitimate child born to Phoebe Farmer, who married John Neve within a year after Elijah was born. Elijah would have been raised in the Neve family and would have been more commonly known by that name.

William Neve married Harriet Sinnock on 8 Oct 1848 at Eastbourne, one year after Dinah gave birth to William Neeves Cornwell.

William was a wood sawyer as was his father Edward Neve (alias Elijah Farmer) who had died in April 1847.

William would have been almost 21 years old when Dinah gave birth to William Neves Cornwell (Dinah 26 years) on 10 Sep 1847. His family is in some turmoil around that time because of the death of his father in April 1847. He married at Eastbourne about one year after Dinah gave birth which does raise some suspicion, however marriage of a son after the death of a father in the family was common. He did settle down (7 children?), and in the 1881 census is a carpenter living in Brighton.

Summary

While candidates 1, 3 and 4 are all possibilities, it is 3 that really stands out as the most likely as the emigration to Australia in 1851 ties in with the family history told by descendants in the USA. Although the story told by LaVerle Neves, a granddaughter of William Neve Corwell, shows some embellishment, it may be that there is an element of truth in there and it might just be the part concerning "*they shipped him off to a foreign land. Some say he went to Australia; others say Brazil.*" However, we cannot discount candidate #4 either, so it will come down to DNA testing and matching to find the answer. I would recommend that descendants of William Neves Cornwell in the USA look for autosomal DNA matches to descendants of William Neve in New South Wales, Australia and use software such as "What Are the Odds" in DNA Painter to further analyse any matches. Testing in Ancestry and using their "ThruLines" feature may also be helpful. The author would like to hear from anyone who can confirm a match to any of the above candidate's descendants.

Another fact of interest is that both candidates 3 & 4 were living just outside of Crowborough according to the census records. They worked as sawyers and woodcutters in the forest there; the same occupation as Dinah's uncle, Richard Ashdown. Dinah lived at Hadlow Down which has a road leading directly to Crowborough, just over 5 miles away, or two hours walking. Perhaps they met at one of the Baptist chapels?

Lastly, if it should be candidate 3 or 4, it is interesting to note that for both men the surname Neve was adopted and is not their true bloodline.

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The author is a descendant of Alice Ashdown, sister of Dinah Ashdown's father, James Ashdown.