



Brighton and Beyond A History of the Cowley Family

The Many Marriages of John Elford Gulley

When researching family history, one has to be prepared occasionally to open a 'can of worms'. And so it was with John Elford Gulley, the second husband of my paternal grandmother's mother, Caroline Ellen Marshall (nee Williams).

As a result of looking for John Elford Gulley's wives, I made contact with a lady who also has the Gulley family in a 'fringe' of her own family tree. Many e-mails have bounced backwards and forwards as we have slowly unravelled this apparently strange saga. The story goes something like this –

John Elford Gulley was born in about 1851 in Plympton St. Mary, Devon, the son of John Gulley - a miller, or labourer, railway labourer, miller, farmer, depending on which records you look at – and his wife Thomasine Watkins.

In 1873 John Elford married Rosannah Bowen, born about 1849, in Hereford. There were two children from this marriage, Frederick Elford Gulley, born 6 January 1878, and Rosanna Gulley, born and died in 1880. The death of Rosannah, the wife, is also registered in 1880. Mother and daughter have consecutive entries in the death index and we therefore conclude that both died during, or shortly after the birth of the child. John Elford Gulley doesn't seem to have grieved for too long as on 24 August 1880 he married Caroline Mary Bowen who, the research suggests, was Rosannah's sister. At that time marriage to a late wife's sister was illegal and remained so until the passing of 'The Deceased Wife's Sister's Marriage Act' in 1907. (You can see more information about this by clicking on the link in the previous frame.) There were two children from this marriage, Henry George E. Gulley, born about 1882, and Helen Elizabeth M. Gulley, born about 1883.

At the 1881 census John Elford and Caroline were living in Runcorn, Cheshire where John is listed as a 'Foreman flour miller'. By the time of the 1891 census the family, now with three children, has moved to Wrexham in North Wales.

And so to the Marshall family. William Henry Marshall married Caroline Ellen Williams, his second marriage and her first, in about 1884 in Birmingham. He had one child, Beatrice, from his first marriage to Annie Humphries, and there were a further four children from the marriage to Caroline Ellen – Lionel, Cecil, Ellen (my grandmother), and Carrie. Sometime between Jan 1890 and before the 1891 census the family moved to Wrexham. The family then moved to Shrewsbury where Caroline Ellen became the proprietress of 'Marshall's Temperance Hotel'. William Henry Marshall died in 1899.

And now for the intriguing part of this story! On 31 March 1901 John Elford Gulley married Caroline Ellen Marshall at the Wesleyan Chapel, St John's Hill, Shrewsbury and, at the 1901 census which, coincidentally, was taken on that same date, John Elford and his new wife Caroline Ellen with children Beatrice, Lionel, Cecil, Ellen, and Carrie were living at 18, Castle Gates, Shrewsbury – 'Marshall's Temperance Hotel'. But on that same date Caroline Gulley, John Elford's second wife, was still living in Wrexham with children Henry and Helen! In the 1901 census document Caroline Gulley is listed as 'head' of the household. On his marriage certificate to Caroline Ellen Marshall, John Elford Gulley is listed as a 'widower'. In 1911 Caroline Gulley is living with her children in Princes Risborough, Buckinghamshire. Caroline is listed as a 'widow', her son Henry as 'headmaster of an elementary school', and daughter Helen as an 'artist'. We have not yet found a definitive death record for Caroline Gulley but it seems quite probable that she was alive and kicking in 1901 when John Elford married his third wife.

Divorce at that time required an Act of Parliament, was very expensive, and was therefore only for the very rich. So did John Elford Gulley commit bigamy? Did Caroline Ellen Marshall know that Caroline Gulley was still alive? We shall probably never know the answer to these questions but it is just this kind of saga that makes family history research so fascinating.

I am indebted to Gill Watson for her extreme patience and kind assistance with this research.

Peter Cowley

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Note: The above account is based on available records from Ancestry.com, FreeBMD.org.uk, and copies of marriage certificates obtained from the General Records Office.