

The Woollacotts of North Devon

An August 2007 visit

From August 11 through August 18, my brother Geoffrey and I visited churches, farms, graveyards and villages; met distant cousins and travelled hedge rows and narrow "highways". The purpose of this photo journal is to breathe life into our family history, especially for those who have not been as immersed in it as I have been of late.

Devon

Devon is the penultimate shire in south west England, with Cornwall which abuts it being at the tip. To the northwest is the Irish Sea and to the south east is the English Channel both serving as barriers. There are natural ridges that must be crossed when entering Devon from the north east. These ridges had served until recently to isolate and in some ways protect Devon from the north east and much of the England known to us "Yanks". As Geoff and I drove through Somersetshire toward the south west, we started up a rather prolonged inclined. I remarked to Geoff, "Over that hill I bet is Devon." Sure enough, once we crested the hill there was a sign saying Devonshire.

For many years, Exeter in the south east of Devon was the focal point for the Shire. Many records that would be valuable to family historians were kept in Exeter. Unfortunately, the German bombing raids of World War II destroyed many of them. Between Exeter and North Devon is the Dartmoor which served as a barrier and to the north east is the Exmoor; also providing a barrier. To me, High Bickington and the surrounding villages appeared isolated in their own little world. While the world has shrunk, relatively speaking North Devon seemed unchanged. That said I am sure the locals would disagree with me.

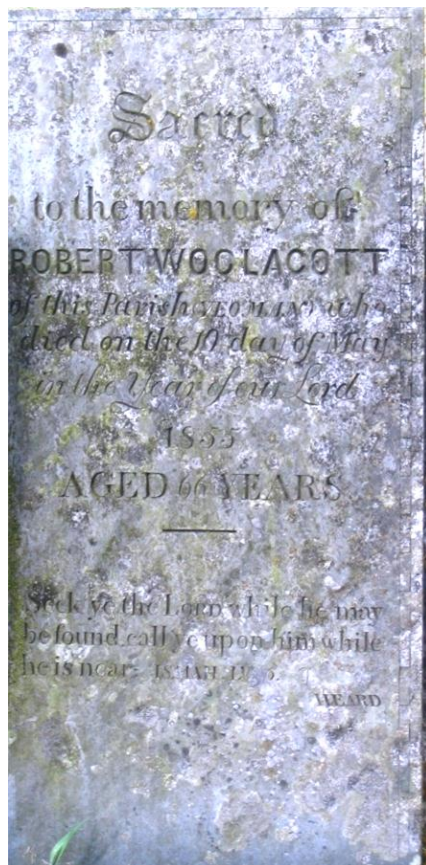
While traipsing around the cemetery of St Mary's in High Bickington, I encountered an elderly chap. We talked for a while and he lamented to me how much High Bickington has changed over the years. For many years he was the local mortician and said his name was Pidler. Later, in looking through the High Bickington book, I noted that a Pidler had purchased Pulley Mills from the

Pyncombe Estate in 1919. Pulley Mills is now the Millbrook Cottages where Geoff and I stayed.

In the local pub, the publican, an outsider from greater London, asked us if we could understand our cousins. To the publican, the North Devonian ways of speaking were quite foreign to her. Again, this indicated to me that North Devon had been isolated to such an extent that the people had their own idioms and dialect. To that point, many people in Cornwall spoke Cornish until recently instead of English.

The Family Patriarch

Robert Woollacott was born in High Bickington about March 1789. On the 27th of June 1815, he married Mary Cole, who had been born on the 2nd of March 1794 in Burrington, Devon, England. As you enter the graveyard of St. Mary's in High Bickington from the village, on the immediate left is the tombstone of Robert and Mary.



There are other Woollacotts and Coles buried in this cemetery, as well as other names tied to the Woollacotts through the years.

The Church is atop a ridge and can be seen as you approach the village from the various roads leading into it.



To the left of this photograph is the hedge row that leads to Millbrook Cottage, where we stayed. It was about a $\frac{1}{2}$ or $\frac{3}{4}$ of a mile down a hill from the church. Following that same hedge row back up another hill for about a mile you come to Yelland Farm, a farm that has been associated with Woollacotts since the 1600s. In fact, Robert Woollacott was described as a farmer of "Little Yelland" and later of "Great Yelland".

Below is a photograph of our car coming up the hedge row toward the church. The top of the church can be seen in the center. Behind us down the hedge row road would be Millbrook Cottages. I am behind the wheel, (we're in England you know so it is on the right) and Geoff is outside taking the photograph.



The Next Generation.

Robert and Mary (Cole) Woollacott had nine children. They were:

1. Robert b. 22 October 1816 High Bickington d 15 September 1915
"Middlecott Farm" East Buckland, Devon
2. Ann b. September 1818 High Bickington d. 23 February 1819 High
Bickington

3. Mary c. 20 August 1820 High Bickington d. by 1881 High Bickington
4. Thomas c. 21 August 1822 High Bickington d. after 1890 probably in London, Ontario, Canada
5. John b 9 February 1824 High Bickington d. 18 November 1853 High Bickington
6. Elias c. 13 May 1827 High Bickington d. 16 March 1880 High Bickington
7. Elon b. 1 May 1829 High Bickington d. 14 May 1904 Fitchburg, Massachusetts, USA
8. William c. 5 February 1832 High Bickington d. 20 January 1920 High Bickington
9. Samuel c 5 February 1837 High Bickington d. 11 August 1917 High Bickington

(b. = born c. = christened)

...And Subsequent

Robert Woollacott b 22 October 1816

Robert Woollacott married Ann Harris from Roborough, Devon and they had 13 children. Robert is the first of three children to marry a Harris and perhaps not inconsequentially Mary Cole's mother was Ann Harris. Robert and Ann had three sons who died before they reached their youth, and another son and two daughters never married. The remaining seven children had 38 children, the most prolific generation of the family patriarch's nine children. The married spouses of the *nee* Woollacotts are Dallyn, Passmore, Stanbury, Down and Cole. The name of Down also has meaning. As best as I can determine, The Family Patriarch's parents were John and Mary (Down) Woollacott.

Robert and his wife left the High Bickington area and headed 10 to 15 miles north east near the Exmoor. The villages of Charles, East Buckland, West Buckland, Swimbridge and Bratton Fleming are common to this family. Similarly, Deer Park, Hudleigh Mills, Sandy Park, Middlecott, Gubb. Lower Ash, West Yeo and Rose Ash are farms common to this family.

This area is hillier and more open than the area around High Bickington. Here are a few photographs;



And here are photographs around High Bickington and Yarnscombe.





The last photograph is from Lee Farm and St Mary's Church is in the center. The row of white houses to the left of the church is a small housing development on the north of the village on the secondary road running through the village toward Atherington. Perhaps, this small housing development is one of the changes to High Bickington that Mr. Pidler lamented about.

The second photograph is from Libbaton Golf course and Yelland Farm is the brownish buildings atop the hill in the right center. Libbaton at one time was a working farm and the Pyncombe Estate sold it to Mr. Slee in 1919 for UK\$1,503.

The first picture is a farm in Yarnscombe.

We visited the Church in Charles and noted the names Passmore, Cole, Stanbury and Woollacott on the stones. This is the gravestone of Levi, Robert's 10th child and his wife Elizabeth



And this of a Passmore



The church was like most of the churches in the area. Below is a photograph of the inside.



While at the Church we met the senior warden and his wife. He mentioned that there was some family history information inside the church. I perused through it and did not see anything directly relevant to us. So, I offered to send him my history of the Woollacotts, which I did. They led us to Sandy Park where Robert's 6th child Robert William and his 10th Levi farmed.

From Sandy Park we looked across a valley to Middlecott farm in East Buckland. Robert as well as his 5th and 6th children, John and Robert William farmed at Middlecott. While traveling the hedge rows to Middlecott, just before we arrived at the farm, we had to stop while the cows were lead across to the farm to be milked. Looking at their udders we surmised that their milking was long overdue. But what do we know about farming. Here is the tail end (pun) of that caper and the farm in background.



Ann b September 1818

As was so frequent the 1800s within a family, Ann died early in life. She was about 5 months old. Other early deaths will be described much too frequently as you read this journal.

Mary c 20 August 1820

Mary had a child spuriously before she married her first cousin Abraham Cole. While not as common as today, having a child out of wedlock was not rare in the 1800s. I suspect that quite a stigma was attached to the woman and perhaps the child when an illegitimate birth happened. When I reviewed the hand written birth, marriages and death records of High Bickington from the late 1600s through the 1836, I noted many notations of "bast c." or simply "bastard".

Marrying a cousin was also not rare in the 1800s. Further, multiple marriages among brothers and/or sisters of one family to another family occurred often. I suspect that a family worked the farms and the children seldom journeyed off of them. As an example, Mary's walk from Yelland farm to the village would have been 2 to 3 miles. The first half or so of her journey would have been down a hill into a valley. Here was Pulley Mills, where a passing stream drove the waterwheel for threshing of wheat, grinding of corn and other applications. Pulley Mills is now Millbrook Cottages, a holiday let, where Geoff and I stayed. To continue her journey, Mary would then have to walk a little less than a mile up a hill to get to the Church and the village. Of course, Mary would then have to journey back to Yelland Farm the same day.

Mary's first child born out of wedlock in 1842 was Robert Woollacott. Other than his birth, not surprisingly, little is known about him other than he was not in Devon at the 1881 census.

Mary Woollacott was 6 years older than Abraham Cole and 32 when she married him on 28 September 1852; yet another Woollacott/Cole union. They had Ann, Mary, John and Jane Cole about 1853, 1855, 1857, 1859, respectively. Like his mother-in-law, Mary (Cole) Woollacott (and aunt) Abraham was born in Burrington. By 1891 he was living at 6 Main Street in Burrington.

Burrington

While on our trip, I was suddenly struck by how little I had focused on the Cole side of my family history. When Geoff and I visited Charles H B Cole he reminded me that I had equal parts of Robert Woollacott's and Mary Cole's blood. We visited Burrington, which is 3 to 4 miles southeast of High Bickington. Below are the church, its inside and the gravestones outside that surround the church.







Thomas c 21 August 1822

In 1853 Thomas married Mary Ann Cowman, who was 10 years older than he. They had one child, Phoebe Alma born about 1854/1855. Thomas immigrated to Canada where at some date he was living at 46 Waterloo St. London, Ontario, Canada. By 1881 he was living at 339 Waterloo Street, by 1887 at 349 Maitland St., and by 1890 at 436 Elizabeth St. all in London, Ontario, Canada. It is unclear whether Mary Ann went with Thomas or not.

Phoebe was alive in 1881 when she was living with her parent(s) at 339 Waterloo St, London, Ontario, Canada. It is possible that she married a man called James Jasper, who was boarding with her parent(s) in 1880. He was a bricklayer and by 1887 he was a builder - still living with the Woollacotts.

Thomas was one of two children to leave Devon for North America; the second was Elon, my great great grandfather. He had gone to Chicago to help make bricks for the rebuilding of the city after its great fire in 1871, presumably he

returned to Devon, and at some point, quite possibly after his wife's death eventually settled in Fitchburg, Massachusetts.

I often wonder what drove the few to leave Devon. Was it a rugged individualism that gave them the courage to strike out? Or was it something unpleasant in their past that drove them to leave? Or was farming life so tough in the mid 1800s that anything just had to be better, even if unknown? Since these individuals have long since past, I will never know for sure and can only speculate or at best make an educated guess, if indeed that isn't an oxymoron.

John b 9 February 1824

John married a Charlotte Harper in 1846 when he was 22. He died 18 November 1853 and his gravestone reads: To the memory of JOHN WOOLLACOTT son of ROBERT and MARY WOOLLACOTT of Great Yelland in this parish who died in the 18th day of November 1853 aged 29 years. John and Charlotte did not have any children.

Elias c 13 May 1827

Elias married Elizabeth Harris, the second son to marry a Harris, in 1851. Elias was a Farmer at "Whitcombe" and later a laborer of "Lower Yelland", both in High Bickington. In 1861 he was farming 95 acres at "Wilcombe", Charles. Apparently, Elias and Elizabeth moved for a few years to Charles, near the Exmoor where his brother Robert and his wife Ann (Harris) had settled, before returning to High Bickington. So these two Woollacott/Harris unions were at least geographically close for a while

Elias and Elizabeth (Harris) Woollacott had eleven children. Tragically, four died as infants, begging the question if there were some genetic defects that occurred because of too many Woollacott/Harris unions or did some disease or flu hit that took its toll on the younger members? Their fifth and sixth child, Thomas and Martha died on the same day 14 January 1863. Their seventh and eighth child, Thomas and Ann appear to be twins born in 1865. Thomas died 11 April 1865 at 11 days old, the same day his apparent twin, Ann was christened. The last tragic death was to John, the ninth child who was buried 11 October 1871. He was a little older than three.

Of the seven that lived past infancy, there is little known about four of them. James, the third child had only one child, Levi, the tenth child, was a bachelor

and Alma, the last, had a child spuriously. Therefore, the best we know is the 11 children of Elias and Elizabeth produced 2 for the subsequent generation.

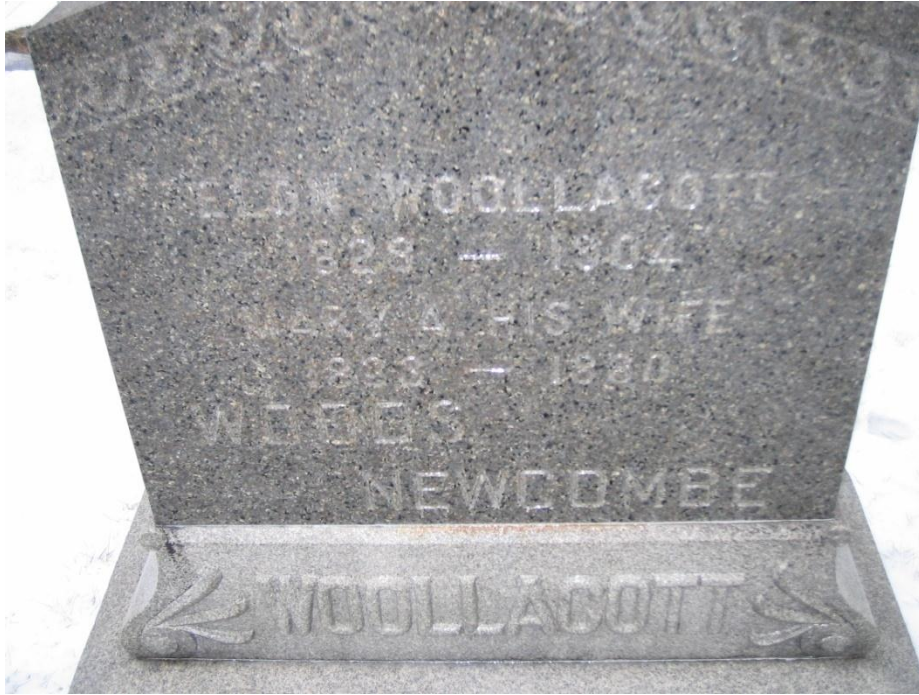
Interestingly, Alma's bastard child, Charles Redvers Woollacott, farmed at "Thorn" and "Ellacombe" both in North Bovey, and retired to 8 Okefield Ave., Crediton. Probate of his will was granted at Bristol on 11 Sept. 1986 - Effects: UK\$85,590! I suspect for obvious reasons, Charles left the High Bickington area; Crediton is some 20 miles south east of High Bickington on the way to Exeter. Most effects of probate of Woollacott wills are quite modest, frequently under UK\$1,000. Charles accumulated a relative fortune.

Levi, the bachelor, was a farmer who by 1934 lived with his first cousins, Robert's and Ann's last two daughters, Jane and Susan at Hudleigh Mill, in Charles. Indeed, he may always have lived with that family as he was with them at "Middlecott" on the night of the 1891 census. He wrote his last will on April 27th 1934 and in it he left his entire estate of UK\$305 to his two cousins, Jane and Susan.

Elon b 1 May 1829

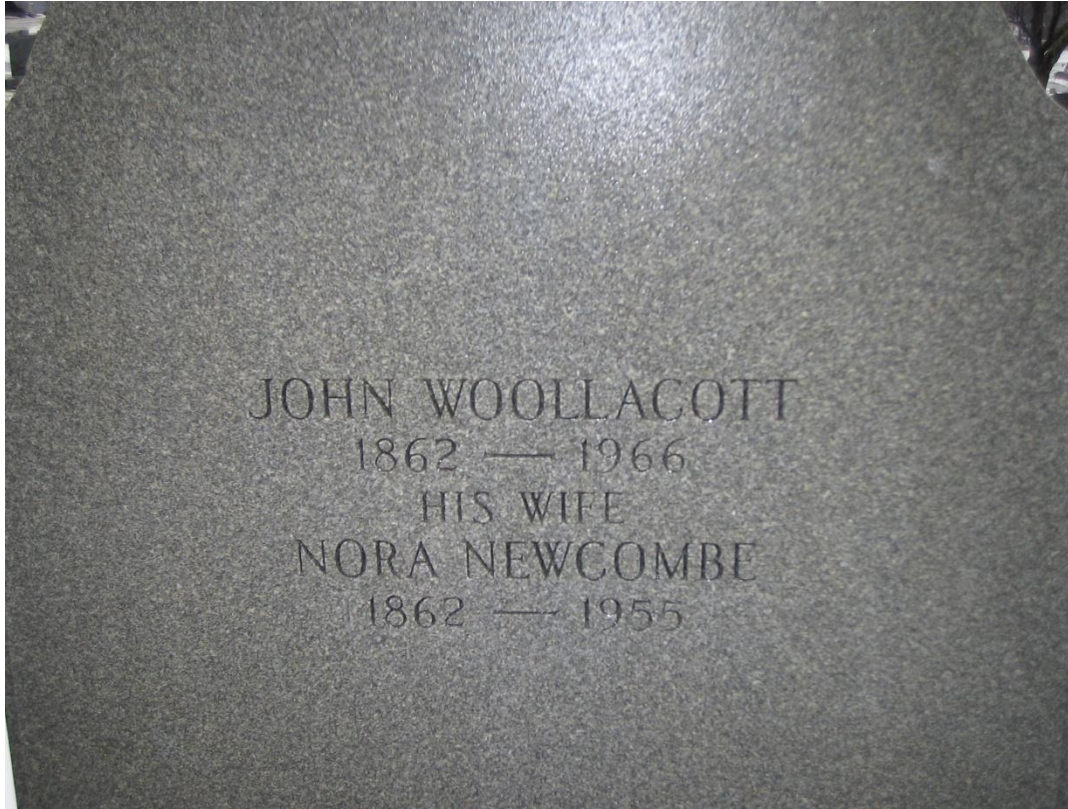
The seventh child, Elon, is my great great grandfather. He married Mary Govier in 1856. Mary was from Atherington and all three of their children, Nora (b 1860), great grandpa John (b 1862) and Mary (b 1869) were born in that village. Elon left and worked as a brick mason after the Chicago fire in 1871 and presumably returned. Great grandpa John left in 1880 at the age of 17 and while on route his mother died. Eventually Nora, Mary and Elon came to Fitchburg and all of them are buried in Forest Hill Cemetery in Fitchburg, Massachusetts.

The first born child, Nora married John Newcombe, also from Atherington and a cousin to Nora (Newcombe) Woollacott, my great grandmother. I know little about Nora and John Newcombe. Elon's last born child, Mary, married Charles Woods and they had five children, some of whom are buried in Forest Hill Cemetery. Below is the grave stone for Elon and his two daughters, Mary Woods and Nora Newcombe. While the gravestone notes "Mary A, his wife 1833-1880" she is not buried in Forest Hill but no doubt somewhere in North Devon.



On July 4, 1885 John Woollacott married Nora Newcombe, who was born in Atherington. Nora had arrived with her parents to the greater Fitchburg area some five years before John Woollacott's arrival. They had eleven children, the fourth of whom was Alfred Senior, mayor of Fitchburg for ten years, my grandfather and namesake.





The above photographs are the front and back of John and Nora's gravestone. Buried with them are some of their children and their spouses. The remaining children, except for Martha and Edith, who is still alive at 102, are buried at my grandfather's site in Forest Hill.

Atherington

Atherington is a village of some 300 people (smaller than High Bickington) and is 2 miles northwest of High Bickington on the secondary road that runs to the main road that runs toward Barnstaple. In the center of the village atop a hill is the church. We walked around the cemetery looking for Newcombe and/or Govier graves to no avail. I am still searching to find where my great great grandmother, Mary Ann (Govier) Woollacott, is buried.

Here is a photo of the church.



Appended to the church is Gifford Farm, home of Shirley and Colin Shapland. Shirley is the granddaughter of Minnie (Woollacott) Symons, the 15th of 16 children of Samuel; the ninth and last child of The Family Patriarch. Minnie is my

great grandfather's 1st cousin and Shirley is my Father's 3rd cousin; ergo my 3rd cousin once removed. Shirley was the organizer of the family gathering hosted on our behalf where approximately 80 relatives attended. Coincidentally, I remember my father remarking on more than one occasion how well "Cousin Minnie" treated him when he visited the area during the war. Shirley and Colin have farmed for some 50 years. Here is a picture of Shirley taken at the family gathering.



Their farm looks northeast toward the Exmoor. The views are spectacular. The following five frames are taken from their courtyard moving from west to east.







William c 5 February 1832

The eight child of The Family Patriarch is William. In 1856 he married Elizabeth Goodings of High Bickington. A Goodings Store was opened in 1874 in High Bickington and for many years was the largest general store in the area. I suspect that Elizabeth may have been part of that family.

William and Elizabeth had three sons and a daughter. The oldest boy farmed, first working for Uncle Sam and then at "Orchards" in Yarnscombe. The other two sons left farming and the area. One became an Industrial Training Officer in South Molton (about 8 miles east of High Bickington) and then progressing to Master before settling in Berkshire. The other became a publican and it is said that he rather liked a drink himself which didn't help his business. The lone daughter married a Fred Muxworthy, who farmed in the High Bickington area.

The four children of William and Elizabeth were the third most prolific producing 32 children in the subsequent generation

Samuel c 5 February 1837

The ninth and last child of The Family Patriarch is Samuel. Like his oldest brother Robert and older brother Elias, he married a Harris from Roborough, Mary Ann. Roborough is a village about 3 miles south west of High Bickington. Samuel and Mary Ann were the most prolific of the nine, having 16 children.

Of the 16, 4 died in infancy Edith (#4), Alfred (#7), Eli (#12) and Frederick (#14) and Mary (#2) died at 21. Three went to the United States, Laura (#5), Florence (#6) and Sydney (#9). The remaining 8 remained in North Devon and were mostly farmers. These 16 children produced 34 in the subsequent generation, making them the second most prolific of the patriarch's nine children; Robert's, the first born, children produced 38.

Samuel farmed "Yelland" like his father before him and eventually retired to "Delley" in Yarnscombe, a village 4 miles northwest of High Bickington. Samuel's first born son, James Harris Woollacott, would buy Yelland Farm from the Pyncombe Estate for UK\$3,375 on 26 November 1919. On the same day a William Tucker purchase Lee Farm for UK\$3,425. Lee and Yelland farms are considered twins. They are similar in structure and look across a valley at one another.

Yelland and Lee Farms

On the website, www.wolcottfamily.com there is mention of Yelland farm and the Woollacotts dating back before 1601. Specifically

Parish records show that John and Tomas, the sons of John Wollocott of Yoeland, were baptized at High Bickington in 1601. They were probably twins. Like their grandfather. In the Visitation pedigree of 1620, John Wolcott, the twin, stated that his great grandfather was Walter Beale of Yooland in High Bickington, property which John apparently inherited. At a later date, a George Downe of Pilton, sailor left a bequest to "my tenant Thomas Wollacott of Yolland in High Bickington." Thomas Wollacott signed the 1641 Protestation Return in High Bickington.

Of all the farms in North Devon, Yelland has the longest and richest history with the Woollacotts

The following photographs are of the entrance to Yelland and Yelland cottages. Jim and Greta Woollacott reside at the cottages and their son, Alan, lives at the farm.



Below is a photograph of Yelland Farm looking from Lee Farm.



This is Lee Farm.



This is Lee Farm as seen from Yelland



Lastly, this is Yelland in the foreground left and Lee back right



James Harris Woollacott, the first born of Samuel and purchaser of Yelland in 1919, married Mary Ann Chambers and had a son born in 1897, Samuel James Chambers Woollacott. Samuel James and Mary Tucker had two sons and a daughter. Their first born was John who was born out of wedlock. He did not take Woollacott as a last name; instead he was known as John Tucker. John Tucker work at Lee Farm which had been purchased by William Tucker. I suspect that William was related to John's mother, Mary

The second son James Harris Woollacott was born in 1920 and farms at Yelland. We had a pleasant visit with Jimmy and his wife Greta while on our trip. Jimmy suffers badly from Parkinson's and can no longer farm. We also met their two children, Alan and Marilyn at the family gathering. Alan still farms at Yelland but

his son Simon is a carpenter and thus far has little interest in farming. It is possible that Yelland Farm will not remain with the Woollacotts after Alan is done farming. Here is a picture of Greta, Jimmy's wife taken at the family gathering. She is in the center with her hands held together in front of herself.



Samuel's third child was Samuel who farmed at "Delley", "Rooks" and "North Church" all in Yarnscombe. After Yelland, it is "Delley" that has a rich association with the Woollacotts.

Delley Farm

We searched the hedge rows throughout Yarnscombe and eventually came upon Delley Farm. The entrance was gated but opened so I drove in. As I approached the Farm I continued past the farm since a man was weed whacking around the fruit trees. Unfortunately the road was a dead end and I was forced to turn around and drive past the weed whacker, who was standing hands on hips glaring at us. I thought it best to stop and explain our situation. He was quite nice and explained that he and his wife were area doctors and they purchased the farm a year ago. It has been refinished beautifully. I suspect that more farms in the area will eventually go the route of holiday lets or gentleman

farms. A similar incident occurred at "Rooks" farm. We stopped to explain the situation but we were unable to sweet talk our way into taking a picture like we did at "Delley". So there is no photograph of "Rooks" but here is "Delley" under new management



We travelled many hedge rows in Yarnscombe looking for the farms associated with Woollacotts – "Orchards", "Rooks", "North church". Some hedge rows are exceedingly narrow while others are relatively generous. Here is a photograph looking down a hill toward "Delley". This is a quite generous hedge row, a relative boulevard!



Cousin Laura

Samuel's fifth child was Laura. Laura married her cousin Elias Woollacott and perhaps because of it she left and came to the United States and lived at one time in the greater Fitchburg area. She had only one child, Florence, who was quite ill and frail most of her life and lived institutionalized in upstate New York – a sad story. Laura died in 1952 and her daughter Florence in 1966 and both are buried in Forest Hill Cemetery in my grandfather's plot. Below is the family gravestone for my grandfather's gravesite.



Laura left money to High Bickington so they could build a bus stop in the center of town. It is still there and people we met still talk about it.

Mabel (Woollacott) Davies and Vera Jewell

Mabel Woollacott, Samuel's 11th child, married Albert Richard Davies and had six children. Their youngest, Vera, was born in 1918 and Mabel died six years later. I had corresponded with Cousin Vera (more precisely, my grandfather's 2nd cousin) these past few years and was hoping to meet with her on our visit - unfortunately, she past away in March 2007. Vera had come to the United States in the early 1980s and Geoff remembers chauffeuring her and our grandfather and mother around Fitchburg. I was able to talk with Vera's daughter, Christine Johns, at the family gathering and expressed to her how much I enjoyed Vera's correspondence. Below are photographs of Percival and Vera Jewell's and Mabel's grave



Many farms in Yarnscombe were farmed by Woollacotts. So not surprisingly, the grave yard at the church in that village had many Woollacotts buried there. Below are photographs of the church.



Cousin Minnie

My father often talked about Cousin Minnie and how nice she was to him when he visited North Devon during the war. I do not think it is a coincidence that Minnie's granddaughter, Shirley Shapland, extended similar courtesies to Geoff and me. Minnie is the 15th of Samuel's children, and 1st cousin to my great grandfather (my 1st cousin thrice removed) She married Sydney Symons and had three children, Sydney, Laura and James. Her son Sydney (Shirley Shapland's dad) and daughter Laura were at the family gathering. Below is a photograph of me talking with Sydney and Laura.



Minnie with her husband farmed "Week" in Harracott, a village 3 miles northwest from Yarnscombe and 6 or so miles northwest from High Bickington. Here is Minnie's place.



William Woollacott b 1786 High Bickington

Thanks in large measure to the work of Charles H B Cole I have a fairly complete list of descendants from Robert and Mary (Cole) Woollacott, The Family Patriarch. My fourth cousin, Janet Woollacott, has spent considerable time on the family history also. From her I initially learned that our great great great grandfather, Robert, was the youngest of six children of John and Mary (Down) Woollacott.

The next youngest child was William who married a Mary Darch. A year or so ago, I happened upon a Mary Cotter via the internet who lives in Australia and learned that William and Mary (Darch) had several children and that their 4th child, also William, immigrated to Australia. More recently, I came in contact, again via the internet, with Sue and Andy Thorndycraft. Sue descends from William Woollacott and is my 5th cousin. She and Andy have done considerable research on William's descendants and were at the Millbrook Cottages for part of the time that Geoff and I were there. We enjoyed their company immensely and they provided me with considerable family history of William's descendants. Sue and Andy attended the family gathering with us and here is a photograph of them (Andy is in the far left) and my brother (far right) soon after we entered:



William and Mary (Darch) Woollacott had nine children born between 1810 and 1829 all in High Bickington. For some reason the entire family immigrated north across The Bristol Channel to West Wales, settling in the Swansea area. At the tip of Swansea bay is a point known as "The Mumbles". So my 4 great aunt and uncle, their siblings (my 1st cousins, 4 times removed) and subsequent Welsh descendants are known as The Mumbles Woollacotts.

Six of the children remained essentially in the greater Swansea area. As mentioned, the 4th child, William, went to southern Australia, near Burra; the 5th, Robert I, died early and the 8th, Henry, came to America. Henry took a second wife in Salt Lake City in 1857. He also had a third wife. Given these facts, I suspect that Henry may have converted to Mormonism at some point. He died in 1888 in Los Angeles, California.

Charles H B Cole

In September of 2005, I received the four volume set of books - "The Cole Family of Ashreigney and their descendants" (Ashreigney is a village about 6 miles

south east of High Bickington). Obviously Robert and Mary (Cole) Woollacott and their descendants were in these books. For a long time I thought about researching our family history. The receipt of Charles's books was the final catalyst that got me off my backside and on this journey. As I told my brother on our drive to Charles's home, I had conflicting emotions about Charles. I am eternally grateful to him for providing the catalyst, yet when my obsessive nature takes over and I am up late at night compulsively researching something I have quite a different emotion.

Charles, his wife, Iona, and their four children live at Upcott in Cheriton Fitzpaine. Cheriton Fitzpaine is about 15 to 20 miles south east from High Bickington. When you turn off the main road you are on a narrow hedge row for a few miles. Near the end you turn left and up a hill to an estate of over 200 acres. The land is let out to area farmers, as according to Charles, it is more profitable for him to do so. Charles's house dates back to the 1400s and is full of interesting history, which he enjoyed relating to us. We had a wonderful luncheon with his family and talk for several hours on a variety of topics. It was a very enjoyable day. Charles is my 6th cousin.

Below are photographs outside in the court yard:

Charles and Iona,



Their three oldest children, and



their youngest



The Family Gathering

The day before the family gathering, Geoff and I met with Shirley Shapland, who was hosting the gathering. She told us to bring Sue and Andy since in her words, "The more, the merrier". When we left Shirley's, we speculated on the number of distant Woollacott cousins that might show. I think the highest guess was a dozen or so. We were off by a wide margin, don't you think?





I have vague recollections of attending gatherings at my great grandfather's when I was a young boy growing up in greater Fitchburg. Through discussions with my uncles and father's 1st cousins and great Aunt Edie I have learned more. John and Nora were married on the fourth of July and it was their tradition to have a huge gathering every year on their anniversary. More vivid in my mind were the Saturday night "beans and franks" with my Uncle Paul's family at my grandfather's house at 19 Winter Street in Fitchburg. My grandfather often would host extended gatherings at places like The Old Mill in Westminster, Oak Hill Country Club in Fitchburg and the Monadnock Inn in Jaffery, New Hampshire. Having attended a gathering in High Bickington, I now know where this wonderful family tradition emanates.

Janet Woollacott

Elizabeth "Janet" Woollacott is my 4th cousin. Robert and Mary (Cole) Woollacott are our 3 great grandparents and her 2 great grandfather is Robert, the 1st child whereas mine is Elon, the 7th child. I had corresponded with Janet for a while before our trip and she has been quite helpful to me with our family history. Janet is near my age and lives with and takes care of her dad, William Gordon Woollacott.

Below are photographs of Janet and her dad





I spent some time talking with Janet's dad. He regaled me with stories about fighting in the south pacific during World War II; and he was soon to attend an anniversary gathering of the Royal marines in which he serve. He is in his 80s and still a man with enthusiasm and a zest for life. While slight in stature compared to my grandfather, Alfred Sr, he reminded me of him, especially in his ability to tell a story.

Queenie

I have close to 3,000 names in my family history data base. When it comes to Woollacotts, there are so many Johns, Williams, Roberts, Anns, Marys and Elizabeths, that I often get confused. So among the 3,000 names, a name like Queenie is unforgettable. Queenie Long grew up in New South Wales, Australia and in 1940 she married Robert James Woollacott. They had eight children and their 4th child was also named Queenie.

Like Janet, Queenie is my 4th cousin and descends from the family patriarch through his first child, Robert. Queenie and Janet are 1st cousins. Queenie, two of her sisters and her oldest daughter, Felicity, were at the gathering. All four women were rather tall and I enjoyed talking with them -they were sharp and amusing. Queenie is the lady at the far right.



The Many Faces of the Woollacotts

We often explained to the people we met that our name was Woollacott and the purpose of our visit. They would respond, " Ah Woollacott" then would look at our faces, our paunches, our feet, then back to our paunches, and while still staring at them remark, "Why yes, I do see the resemblance." Here are some photographs of other distant cousins. While these are only head shots (*i.e. sans* the paunches), do you see any resemblance?









As I look through these pictures I remember some of my conversations at the time. However, I cannot recall everyone's name since my brother and I were quite busy just talking:



The Face of Farming

Quite simply, we Woollacotts of North Devon are livestock farmers; as I trust this photo journal illustrates. Periodically, I will google "Woollacott" then click on the various links that the search presents. Below is an article that is from the Witheridge (UK) historical website. It is about Queenie's and Janet's grandfather and fathers, Bob and Bill; respectively. More generally, there is an enlightening narrative of a farmer's life - a life that most Woollacotts lived.

"James Woollacott with his wife and three sons, Bob, John and Bill, came over Exmoor from Kipscombe to West Yeo in 1929. The move took three days. The first day saw the horses and carts reach Kinsford Water, from where the ponies were ridden back to Kipscombe for the night. At the end of the second day they reached Ash Mill, and the ponies were ridden on to West Yeo for the night. On the third day they arrived at West Yeo with their belongings. The sheep and cattle came by lorry; the pigs had been killed and salted before the move. James Woollacott came on his BSA belt-driven motorbike, with Bob on the pillion, but coming up Rockford Hill near Brendon the bike began to fail and Bob came off. Whereupon the bike surged forward and climbed the hill to his father's surprise, as he had not noticed Bob's fall. At West Yeo the bike was kept in the cider house; James never owned a car.

Notes on farming will be divided into the seasons of the year.

WINTER: Weekly chaff was cut for the horses in the chaff-house. A Hornsby engine powered the belt-driven barn machinery, which drove not only the chaff-cutter, but also the winnower, the thresher and the grinding stones. Mending bags for corn with bag-needles was a winter task. Wheat was in 2.25 cwt bags, and barley 2 cwt bags; a man was expected to be able to carry one of these under each arm.

Spar gads for thatching, usually of withy or hazel, were cut in the kitchen. When finished the floor was swept and the sweepings used for the fire. The spar gads were for thatching farm ricks, and for sale to Venners, the local Thatcher's.

Hedging was done in winter. Hedge material, especially whitethorn and beech, had to be steeped towards the sun; otherwise new growth could pull them up. Steepers were held in place by crooks, cut from hedge stuff and driven into the bank. It was best to steep beech at the end of the winter, because of the rising of the sap. No saws were used, but the cuts were made with hooks (billhooks), after the grass had been cut with a paring hook. Before the hedge could be made, however, the bank had to be cast up with clats (turf) taken from the hedge trough. In North Devon this was done with the long-handled Devon shovel, but the Woollacott's preferred to use a stone-fork, as was the practice

the other side of Exmoor. Where banks ended at gateways, or where they were weak, stonewalling was used. For this it was essential for the bottom layer of stones to be three quarters under the ground for stability. The angle of the stonewalling had to be right - too flat and the sheep would get up it, too steep and frost could get in and bring it down. Several long stones would be driven into the bank for extra firmness. Banks suffered damage by rabbits, and with the help of ferrets these would be netted, 40 rabbits a day being the target. Winter was the time for making gates, and the Woollacott's made their own from oak. The cross-pieces were known as shuttles, and at the ends were the hanging post and the hasping post. It was said that if a gate was well hung it should be possible to open it, place a full glass of water on the top shuttle, let it go, and see it close so softly that not a drop was spilt. The gateposts were also made of oak; the bark had to be removed or water would get in, and the cuts of the bark had to be made with upward strokes, again to avoid the entry of water.

Sometimes corn ricks had to be made away from the farm buildings. For these Nott's steam threshing tackle would be booked, and enough coal ordered. Two men came with the tackle and stayed overnight, ready for an early start to get steam up in the engine before breakfast. A dozen would sit on forms at the kitchen table, and they included Perce Woodman, Ned Partridge, Webber from Adworthy, and Charlie Middleton. For spring threshing a reed comber was added. Beans were grown, cut with the horse binder and threshed, but the threshing drum sometimes threw them back at the man feeding. Mole catching was another winter job. No traps were used at West Yeo, but a watch was kept for moles "heaving", and then "down with your heel". Dry weather drove the moles down and wet weather brought them up. Bob's best was 37 in one day. The skins were dried and sent to Gratham and fetched four pence each. 60 to 70 Devons were kept in the 1930s, after a few days on the cow a calf was bucket-fed. It was reckoned to milk 8 cows an hour. At that time about 500 sheep were kept. At the start they were Exmoor Horns, but later Devon Closewools were favored. There were three cart-horses and two ponies, one butt cart and one cart, but no 4-wheeled wagon. The acreage included West Yeo moor and amounted to 356.

SPRING: One of the first signs of spring was the purchase of 25-30 chicks from Venners. As soon as the weather and the ground were right ploughing began. An acre a day was the target for horse ploughing. Implements also used were scuffles, heavy and light drags, flat stone rollers, Cambridge ring rollers. Grass fields were stone-rolled, and grass seeds were chain-harrowed. As soon as the bracken began to grow on the moor, the set of heavy drags would be turned upside down and dragged over the young shoots to check them. 30 to 40 acres of corn were tilled. Their first tractor, a Fordson on spade lugs, was bought in 1940.

Lambing was planned for April, corners of fields were wired off and the ewes driven into them at the end of the day, so that it would be easy to find and inspect them at night. The meadow, or "mead", was kept for the ewes and lambs. Basic slag was applied in spring. A lorry would bring a ton or ton and a half and tip it out loose, it was then shoveled up into a butt; one man led the horse and the other spread the slag off the back with a saucer. It was mainly used for root ground. As a succession, oats were followed by barley, roots (with sheep folded on them) and wheat. Dung was taken out in the butt and put in heaps (two heaps per load) and then spread by hand with a dung fork. The Devon cattle might be turned out in mid-April, but the sheep always had priority on early grass.

SUMMER: Bob remembers hay being once made in May, but June was the usual hay month. Grass for hay was never cut when damp. After being tedded, the hay was brought in with a double horse sweep to an engine-powered elevator for rick-making. In damp weather the hay "yetted a bit" (heated) and smaller ricks were made. A long iron bar used to be inserted into the rick to test for overheating. There were other hazards; once they were making hay in Lower Park when a whirlwind caught up the hay and strewed it all along the main road. Ricks were thatched as soon as possible with wheat reed. Roots were horse-hoed and then singled by hand-hoe. In steep fields the soil accumulated at the bottom and from time to time had to be drawn back up. At times pigeons were such a plague on the swede greens that you could get three with one shot. They went to Nott's the poultry packers in Nomansland. In wartime the government provided ammunition for pigeon shooting and neighbors worked together. Also during the war, West Yeo was made a depot for government machinery.

Usual clothes for farm work in the 1930s were breeches, leggings, hob-nailed boots and a waistcoat. A sack round the shoulders, and another round the waist, kept the rain out. For shearing, however, the shearers wore white trousers and white jackets, which had to be clean every morning. When hands were washed during shearing a bucket of water with ferns in it was used instead of soap, another idea from "out over" (Exmoor). Several from there came to help with the shearing; they either rode over or came by taxi. A retired Witheridge butcher, Reg Rodd, tied the wool. Charlie Middleton always helped, and at the end of the day after food and beer the kitchen table would be pushed to the side. Charlie would put two crossed brooms in the middle of the floor and do his "Broom Dance" to music played by James Woollacott on his accordion. Among the wives who came to help on those occasions were Mrs Rodd and Mrs Webber. West Yeo brewed their own beer in three grades, the best for parson and doctor, the next for farmers, and the last for everyone else. Bill Woollacott started keeping bees in the 1930s. When he went into the army Bob took over the 14 hives. Orders for honey came from places like Exmouth, Teignmouth and Minehead, and deliveries became family outings paid for by the money received.

AUTUMN: Paring hooks were used to clear the edges of the cornfields, and then scythes cut room for the horse and binder. As the area of uncut corn became less many rabbits bolted and were killed. There were two two-acre orchards mainly of cider apples, but there was a Russet tree in the garden, and a tree of "Listener", a yellow apple shaped like a quince and the size of a breakfast cup. Maunds were used to carry in the apples. There was a two-screw cider-press in the cider house; all cider was consumed on the farm. Mangolds were gathered in by butt and stored in "caves", long heaps against a wall or bank, covered with rushes or bracken or browse against the frost. Late summer was maggot-time, and a dead rabbit was hung on a bough near where sheep gathered, with underneath a bath with a Jeyes Fluid mix. The flies left the sheep, laid their eggs on the dead rabbit. When the eggs hatched the maggots fell into the bath. The only "vet" in the area was Matthews of Rackenford. If he was needed someone would have to ride over for him. West Yeo had no telephone until the ministry of agriculture put one in, in wartime. Stanley Andrews of Romansleigh travelled for a West Country animal medicine firm and visited from time to time. Cattle would be "drenched" by having medicine poured down their throats by means of a cow's horn with a hole drilled in the bottom.

In the 1939-45 war John served in the Life Guards, and Bill in the Marines. In 1940 the Woollacotts were allocated 6 evacuee boys aged from 3 to 10. Queenie Long had been a land girl at Newhouse, but had left. She was asked to come to West Yeo to help look after the evacuees and give help at harvest time. In autumn 1940, Bob and Queenie were married.

One autumn a couple of years later, John Woollacott was on leave and went rabbiting on North Hill with Bob. Queenie remembers pushing the pram with young Robin and Fred in it all the way out there with a hot drink and some food for them, and coming back with rabbits hanging from the pram handle."

Early Woollacotts and Variations Thereon

A while ago I happened upon a website www.wolcotfamily.com. It is a robust history of that family and more than likely our distant relatives. My grandfather when asked about the unique way we spell our last name would reply jokingly that we are the only members of the greater clan that knew how to spell. However, that joke probably is not true. In perusing through the Wolcott website under the section "the Wolcotts of Devon", the name Wollacott begins to appear in the 1500s as a frequent derivation of Wolcott. However, it is only the High Bickington Wolcotts that put the "a" between the "wol" and the "cott".

There are several interesting snippets of Wollacotts in the early 1600s in High Bickington and Atherington.

“John Wollacott was a church Warden at High Bickington in 1614, and in 1616 John Wollacott, Jr. signed the parish records as “guardian”.”

“John Wolacotte married Mary Rogers at Atherington 1634. John Wolacotte signed the 1641 Protestation Return.” (There are several Wollacotts that signed the 1641 Protestation Return at High Bickington)

“Katherine Wollacott, daughter of John Wollacott, Jr., who was buried at High Bickington 1597, the earliest that any parish records from High Bickington survive.”

I reviewed the High Bickington parish records from 1597 to 1837, and it is not until the early 1800s that the current spelling of our name appears and remains Woollacott from thereon.

Working backward from The Family Patriarch I can get to a Roger Woollacott in High Bickington b. about 1670, who has a son John (what else would be his name) in 1695. However, I am not as confident on the family history back from The Family Patriarch as I am going forward from him. Nonetheless, it is all that I have. I am unable at this point to link what I know into the information on the Wolcott website.

John Wolcott, who oversees the website, is reasonably sure that the Woollacotts descend from John Wolcott of Chagford b. about 1420. To satisfy our curiosity, I agreed to take a DNA test. The results were that there was a remote connection between the Wolcotts and me. So either John Wolcott's theory is wrong or there is a break in my Woollacott line somewhere. John Wolcott continues to look for other Woollacotts to DNA test to help solve his theory.

So my family history journey continues.....

Conclusion

My brother and I thoroughly enjoyed our journey. Everyone we met was genuinely eager to talk with us as we were with them. I had spent many long days and nights over the past few years inputting names, dates, villages, farms and notes to my PAF file. Meeting my distant cousins, seeing their countryside and sensing the environment that my ancestors before me sensed, put life into

that data. I now have a greater appreciation of the Woollacott blood that flows within me. After all it is $\frac{1}{4}$ of me.

I trust that you have found this photo journal interesting.

Yours sincerely,

Alfred Woollacott, III
Great great great grandson of Robert and Mary (Cole) Woollacott

September 2007

The Woollacotts of North Devon

An August 2007 Visit



By Alfred Woollacott, III