

Time Travel

You might be surprised by what you find when you dig through your family's roots.

By Ivy Lamb

★ My father and I are barreling along English country lanes barely wide enough to fit our rental car. Dad drives while I grip the passenger seat and shout things like, “Watch out for that hedge!” Neither one of us has ever driven on the left side of the road before, but we’re determined.

Our destination: Corton Denham, the village in southwest England where my great-great-great-grandfather Job Lamb was born in 1826. He lived there with his parents and six siblings until the 1840s, when the whole family immigrated to Canada to take up farming. In a letter addressed to the local lord who sponsored the family’s emigration, Job’s father George is described as “the poor shoemaker who lives above the churchyard.” When the family left behind the only home they’d ever known, we can only imagine they were searching for a better life in Canada.

When you start researching your roots, be prepared for surprises. My family is all about being

Irish. My grandfather was a Notre Dame alumnus and die-hard fan, and my cousins begged to have their hair permed for Irish step dancing. My grandparents even showed off Galway vacation photos, where they’d posed in front of pubs with “Lamb” signs on them. This claim to an Irish heritage wasn’t baseless — I have two Irish grandmothers on my dad’s side. But it turns out that our surname is thoroughly English. Records of our ancestors in Corton Denham reach all the way back to the early 1600s. Learning about our strong English streak was a little deflating because it doesn’t match family lore. But we’ve come to England to understand this part of our heritage — the part no one boasted about.

We arrive, mud-splattered and weary, at the Queens Arms, a 19th-century inn and pub in the heart of the village. The pub’s roaring fire wards off the early spring chill, and a couple of pints help us recover from the drive. The next morning, I look out my window and see emerald green fields neatly bordered by hedges and dotted with the occasional oak or poplar. Rolling hills disappear into the horizon



ILLUSTRATION BY SARAH HANSON

and I can hear sheep bleating in the field below. I muse that this is, for the most part, the same view that Job Lamb woke up to every morning.

As we explore the village, we find an old cemetery. Pushing aside tufts of overgrown grass, we see “Lamb” inscribed on many of the grave markers. Unexpectedly, I feel an intense wave of emotion. There’s nothing like bumbling through the English countryside to make you aware of just how American you are. But now, standing in the graveyard, a sense of attachment and belonging washes over me. In our modern world of astonishing mobility, many of us lose this connection to our own history.

After exploring the village, my father and I walk about three miles along England’s ubiquitous country footpaths to an even older site: Cadbury Castle, an ancient Roman hill-fort speculatively linked to the King Arthur legend as the site of Camelot. As we tromp through muddy fields in the brisk air, we joke about our ancestors serving as the mythical king’s shepherds, shearing wool and delivering lambs in the Dark Ages. While the King Arthur part is pure fancy, our surname originated as an occupational title, so it’s appropriate the fields are still filled with sheep and (undeniably adorable) lambs.

At the top of Cadbury we have a panoramic view of the surrounding countryside. We both fall silent, drinking it all in. Standing there with my dad, I realize this trip isn’t just about connecting with our ancestors, but connecting with each other. Growing up with younger siblings and busy schedules, I’d never spent this much one-on-one time with him: listening to his stories, exploring the countryside, discussing our mutual passion for *The Lord of the Rings* (we felt pretty hobbitish hiking through fields and eating hearty pub fare). In the end, that’s what I’ll always remember. 📍

Ivy Lamb is a staff editor.

Matt Lamb in Corton Denham



The Rise of Heritage Travel

New technology like DNA testing and better access to information through the Internet has fueled the recent surge in heritage travel, according to Megan Smolenyak, professional genealogist and author of multiple books including *Hey America, Your Roots Are Showing*. Television shows such as TLC’s *Who Do You Think You Are?*, which trace the ancestry of celebrities like Spike Lee and Zooey Deschanel, have also piqued interest in genealogy research. More than anything, though, travelers seek the kind of authentic, emotional connection to a place that only these kinds of trips can offer.

“We joke that you can always spot a genealogist because we get excited about graveyards,” Smolenyak says. “But traveling 6,000 miles and seeing your surname on a tombstone is a very stirring experience.”

There’s never been a better time to start planning a heritage trip. Hotels, travel agencies, and even governments have jumped on the bandwagon, making it easier to research and organize. Some boutique travel agencies will design a trip tailored to your family’s history, and many countries are digitizing records to aid long-distance researchers. Perhaps the most ambitious example is The Gathering, Ireland’s open invitation

for anyone with Irish ancestry to “come home” to the Emerald Isle.

Some families uncover emotional stories — ancestors who lived through the devastating effects of war, the Holocaust, or slavery. But whether these discoveries are saddening, inspirational, or both, learning about them is always worthwhile. “You won’t regret it,” Smolenyak says. “It can also be a wonderful gift for someone who has everything. I often get research requests to mark milestones like birthdays or bar mitzvahs.”

Researching Your Roots

Tips from professional genealogist Megan Smolenyak

1. START WITH A SCAVENGER HUNT

Many people start by just getting online, but it’s best to start with a scavenger hunt in your house. Look for yearbooks, military discharges, certificates, Bibles, photos, and other artifacts.

2. TALK TO YOUR ELDERS

They are living libraries, but often won’t share about family history unless you ask.

3. PLAN AHEAD

Arrive armed with information, especially if you hope to find more records in the area you are visiting.

4. USE SOCIAL MEDIA

Try finding people in the area with the same surname and reach out to them through social networking — they could turn out to be distant cousins.