

The Gibbins Family

In March 1911 a young family left Hook Norton to begin a new life pioneering in Canada. Almost 100 years later, a grandson of this family came to Hook Norton seeking his ancestors. Ron was interested in his grandfather, John Gibbins, who was born in the village in 1878 to James Gibbins and Emma Wyton.



Centre: Ron Gibbins

James was thirty years older than Emma and came from a farming family in Adstone, Northamptonshire. They had three other children: Mary Emma, born 1874 in Adstone; William Henry, born 1876 in Adstone; and James Edward, born 1882 in Hook Norton.

James died in 1887, leaving Emma with four young children to bring up. The 1891 census tells us that Emma was living with her widowed father and her two youngest children, John and Edward; Mary was living with an aunt in Adstone, and William with his mother's sister in Long Compton.

John started work at the brewery in 1895, when he was 17 years old, earning nine shillings a week. By 1897, this had risen to eighteen shillings. In 1898, he was promoted to the position of Assistant Brewer. At this time, the brewery was managed by Head Brewer Alban Clarke and his cousin, John Henry Harris. We know that John was highly thought of by Alban Clarke, and he often accompanied him on shooting and fishing expeditions. He was frequently rewarded with "something for the pot".



John (*far left*) with Alban Clark (*centre*)

In 1896, when John was eighteen years old, he was seriously injured in an accident at the brewery.

ACCIDENT.—An accident of a serious character occurred at the brewery on Wednesday of last week. The large new wine and spirit store having nearly reached completion, the workmen commenced to take down the scaffolding and called out to the workmen in the yard below and cautioned them against going too near. Unfortunately a lad named John Gibbon, about 18 years of age, who was at work under the scaffolding and out of sight of those above, did not hear, and soon afterwards a large plank, some three or four cwt. in weight, slipped and fell, one end striking the ground and the other catching the lad a little above the left temple and knocking him senseless. He was carried at once into the office, and as soon as possible placed under the care of Dr. Routh, whose patient he has been since. The sufferer at the present time lies in a critical condition.

Banbury Guardian, 19 November 1896

Consequently, it was to be several weeks before John could return to work.



Edith



John

In 1902, John married Edith Cox who had been a teacher at the school and had originally come from Leicestershire. They settled in a cottage rented from the brewery, which they were later able to purchase. They soon had four children: Winifred, John known as Jacky, Ruby and Kenneth.



Left to right: Winifred, Jacky, Ruby and Kenneth Gibbins

We are not sure what first prompted the idea of emigrating to Canada; it may be that they read the many advertisements in the local press offering people wonderful opportunities in the colonies.



IN THE EMPIRE. UNDER THE FLAG.
GET A PIECE OF THE EARTH.
CANADA'S LAND IS FREEHOLD LAND.
TWO YEARS RENT of a British Farm
will Purchase improved land of equal area in
CANADA
BRITAIN'S NEAREST OVERSEAS DOMINION.
**160 ACRES GOVERNMENT LAND
FREE FOR FARMING.**
Canadian Wheat realized this year
60/- an acre for an expenditure of 30/-
**WORK FOR ALL FARM LABOURERS
AND DOMESTIC SERVANTS.**
Canadian Institutions are Built on British Models.
For free maps, pamphlets and full particulars,
apply to Mr. J. OBED SMITH, Assistant Superin-
tendent of Canadian Emigration, 11 & 12, Charing
Cross, London, S.W.

In 1910, the brewing industry was in turmoil. The Liberal government of the day wanted to raise four million pounds for social reform and brewers were being taxed heavily; many were paying as much as 60 to 70 per cent of their profits in tax. There were rumours of redundancies and John was concerned about his future in the brewery. In the event, only one person lost his job and, by 1912, trade continued to improve until World War I. But the decision had been made: the Gibbins would emigrate to Canada.

With help from their families, they packed up and set off for Avonmouth to board the steamship "The Royal George" sailing on 22 March 1911 to Nova Scotia.

Looking back, we often wonder to ourselves. "How did we ever come through our pioneer experiences".

Edith Smith, *A Pioneer Christmas*

After arriving in Halifax, they travelled overland to north of Toronto, where John found work on a farm. He wrote letters home (we have copies) describing the various jobs he was learning on the farm. People were all very kind and helpful, and a good friend told him that land was cheap and plentiful further north.

Early in the next year, 1912, they took the train, travelling four hundred miles north to Englehart. The town was originally a construction site, called White River

Crossing, for the workers on the new railway. John obtained work and the family found lodgings in the town.

John and Edith bought five acres of land, together with two lots of land in the town, with the intention of building a house there at a later date. The five acres were forested and, during the summer of 1912, they set about clearing the land, planting vegetables and building a log house, ready for the winter. John intended to become a market gardener and from letters written home he was full of plans. The children had started school and life was looking good. Soon, however, their lives were to be shattered.

Shortly before Christmas that year, their first born, Winifred, died of pneumonia and just four months later John had another accident. He was helping a neighbour clear land when he was struck on the head by a branch from a tree. It was 25 April, Edith's birthday, and he had promised that he would stop on his way home to buy flour for a birthday cake. He bought the flour, but when he arrived home he collapsed and died. He was only thirty four. Edith was left to grieve with her three remaining children, in a strange country, wondering how on earth they would survive.



Edith (in mourning) with Jacky, Ruby and Kenneth

We were full of hope and we had unbounded faith in the future of the North Country... it is here we belong

Edith Smith, *A Pioneer Christmas*

Edith sold the two plots of land in the town which they had previously purchased to Mr James Andrews. James's wife had a brother, Ted Smith, a kind widower with a grown up son. He and Edith became acquainted and they were married in the following January. Perhaps it was a marriage of convenience to enable the remaining family to survive in this new harsh land of Northern Ontario.

They decided to move twenty miles north from Englehart. The journey was tortuous over unmade roads and later Edith was to write of the experience. We have many pictures which John's grandson Ron sent us. In one, shown below, the family are loading the wagon, including a piano which Edith had allegedly brought from England.



Left to right: Jackie, Kenneth and Ruby in the cart, Mr and Mrs Ted Smith and Ted Smith's son

Their new home was a one room shack in a small glade; they cleared the land and built a larger log cabin. Edith complained about the black flies and mosquitoes. Unfortunately, in that first year their crop failed and therefore money was tight.

In the early 1940s Edith wrote *A Pioneer Christmas*. This recalled the Christmas of 1914, when she had managed to walk forty miles to collect a forgotten

debt of five dollars, to enable her to buy a few treats of apples and oranges for the children, some baking supplies to make candy, half a sack of flour, and a few new clothes. They didn't starve in that winter of 1914/15, but it must have been tough.

Would you like to hear about the Christmas feast. We had no potatoes of our own. They were a luxury in those days, but I exchanged a precious jar of preserved wild strawberries with a neighbour, two miles away, for six potatoes. These were carefully wrapped in newspaper to keep from freezing, but on Christmas morning were as hard as stones. However thawed out in cold water they made a brave dish. Then we had rabbit pie, and of course the pudding, and even mince pies made in small pans, English fashion. There was a box of home made candy for every member of the family. Of course, we had a tree; they at least were plentiful. The decorations were carefully saved scraps of coloured paper made into various ornaments by the children themselves. The supplies by careful stretching had even made an iced cake. Talk of rationing, shortages and substitutes, we pioneers knew all about them!

Still we had our Christmas and we ended by singing carols and going to bed tired but happy, at least on the kiddies' part.

The following year they were forced to return to Englehart after two further tragedies. Edith's second child, John, known as Jacky, fell into a spring or well and drowned and Ted's son Edward was killed in France in World War I.

Back in Englehart, Edith managed to buy a small farm and Ted returned to work on the railway. Her grandson Ron and the family, now in Canada, wonder how Edith raised the money for the farm; but she was a resourceful lady and worked hard all her life. She kept a couple of cows and chickens, grew vegetables and walked into town once a week to sell her produce. Edith became involved in politics and was secretary of the local branch of the United Farmers Association. She raised her two remaining children but she had yet another tragedy in her life when her son Kenneth died suddenly at the age of 29.



Edith



Ted Smith

Edith died in 1953, aged 73, and Ted outlived her by five years.

Most of the above information came from Ron and for some time emails spedback and forth between Englehart and Hook Norton. Ron was curious to find out more about his grandfather John's siblings and we discovered several interesting stories.

The family left behind in England

John's eldest brother William had attended the village school but in 1900 he was living with his aunt in Long Compton. In 1901, aged 14, he was living in a hostel in London and was described as a house porter. We think that this was a hostel for boys, set up by Charles Edward Baring Young (see below). Two years later he was a gas fitter living in Croydon, where he died. We discovered that he died in hospital from burns caused by a gas explosion. He was 16 years of age.

Mary Emma, John's sister, spent all her life in Adstone, a small village in Northamptonshire, near Towcester. She never married and lived to be 88 years old. She died in hospital in Northampton in 1962.

John's youngest brother proved to be very elusive. We finally found him, aged eight years, living at Kingham Hill School, near Chipping Norton. We have the record of his admission which gives us information about his family.

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James Edward Gibbins
Sheffie [redacted]

entered 29th November, 1890
age 8; born 14th August, 1882.
height 3' 10 1/2"

Has lived at home, and attended National School, 1st Standard

Father, an agricultural labourer, at Hook Norton died nearly 3 years ago leaving a widow and four children - she is at present living with her father, an old man, not able to do much - she is in bad health, suffering from heart disease -

The eldest girl, aged 16, lives with an aunt, who maintains her for her services, but gives her no wages; the eldest boy, aged 14, lives with another aunt at Shipston who maintains him in a similar way - another brother, aged 11, lives with his mother and grandfather, and goes to school -

This is 1890, Emma is 36 years old and it looks as if she is unable to cope with her family, three years after her husband's death. It is probable that Mr Rushton, the Rector, helped James to receive a place at the school.

Kingham Hill School was the life dream of Charles Edward Baring Young to provide a home in the country for orphan and deprived boys in London. In the 1880s, he bought the Daylesford Estate of 1,500 acres. He set about building individual houses, where forty boys would be cared for by a husband and wife team, acting as parents. He also purchased 250 acres and a farm in Canada, where about ten older boys were sent each year, and this continued until World War II.

Kingham Hill School was unable to tell us when James left, as many of their records were lost in a flood. We then lost trace of him, as he wasn't on the 1901 census, and we did wonder if he had gone to the farm in Canada. We later discovered that he had in fact joined the Royal Navy. We obtained his service record from The National Archives at Kew.

Records show he joined the navy in 1898 at age 16. He served on many well-known ships but was invalided out in 1904. We don't know if James Edward came back to Hook Norton, but we think that he tried to make a living as a photographer. In 1910, he decided to go to Canada, settling in Alberta working a smallholding.

Did John know that his brother was in Canada when he and his family emigrated in 1911? It would seem likely, although there is no record that they had any contact with one another.

James Edward had never married and he, too, died young in 1920. His mother Emma, being next of kin, received about five hundred dollars from his estate.

Emma had now lost her three sons, William, John and James Edward, all dying tragically young. In 1900, she married Stephen Richard Smith, a widower. They were still living in Hook Norton when Stephen died in 1926. We know that Emma was still alive then because Stephen's death certificate shows that she was present at his death.

Stephen is buried in Hook Norton Cemetery, but we have been unable to discover where and when Emma died. It is amazing how many Emma Smiths are in the death records, but we are certain that she did not die in Hook Norton.

John and Edith must have been so excited about starting a new life in Canada, but it ended tragically with his early death and the loss of two of their children.

So Ron Gibbins, who had come from Englehart in Northern Ontario looking for information on his grandfather John, learned much about the wider Gibbins family and about John's life at Hook Norton Brewery between 1895 and 1911. It made us wonder if their lives would have turned out so differently had they stayed in Hook Norton

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