

TRACING TOMMY HANDLEY'S ROOTS IN GARSDALE - A CAUTIONARY TALE

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Tommy Reginald Handley (1892-1949) is remembered as Tommy Handley a Liverpool performer and comedian, who boosted the national morale during the war years (1939-45) but less well-known is that his father's family came from Garsdale in the Yorkshire Dales.

Millions tuned into ITMA (It's That Man Again) and Tommy Handley seemed like a family friend calling in for a chat. Characters and catch phrases from ITMA helped people to see the funny side of regulations, petty officials and of the rhetorical speeches coming from Germany. An article in The Sunday Telegraph, in 2009, named him as an 'unsung hero of the Second World War'. When he died in 1949 crowds lined the streets to pay their tribute to the man who had cheered them through the war years. A tribute in the Radio Times said "He had that rare gift which few are born with - and most never acquire - of being able to broadcast sincerity. ..."

Garsdale Roots In Garsdale many people claim to be related to Tommy Handley but they are not quite sure how. Research suggested that his grandfather belonged to the Handley family of Paradise in Garsdale but just how Tommy fitted into the family tree was confusing and provides a cautionary tale for family historians.

His great grandparents were Thomas Handley and Elizabeth Harper, who married at Garsdale in 1824 and lived at Paradise. Three of their sons went to Liverpool as cowkeepers and all three, Joseph, John and Thomas gave their children family names and had sons of similar ages named Thomas or John. Very confusing!!!

A biography produced in 1949 said little about his family background, just that Tommy Handley was born in Threfall Street, Toxteth Park, Liverpool, in 1892 the son of a cowkeeper, John Handley, who died while Tommy was still a baby. Other research showed that John had married Sarah A Pearson in Liverpool in 1888. In the 1891 census they were living at Threfall Street with a baby son, another John. In 1901 Sarah, a widow, and her sons John, 11, and Thomas, 9, were living with her widowed mother, Hannah Pearson, in Brentwood Avenue, Toxteth Park.

Challenges found in the Census Returns Using the census returns to find Tommy's father was challenging. In 1881 the most likely candidate to be Tommy's father seemed to be John Handley, 22, a cowkeeper with 6 cows living at Tagus Street with an older brother Thomas, 27, (7 cows) and sister Mary, 19. The census said that they were all born in Garsdale. This, with earlier censuses, suggested that they were the children of John and Eleanor Handley of Hind Keld and that in 1841 John snr was one of the family at Paradise. It seemed cut

and died, despite the slight problem surrounding John's birthplace, but descendants in Garsdale and further research showed that the Handleys of Tagus Street returned to farms in Garsdale and were buried there.

So what about the other Handley brothers? In 1861 Joseph was a cowkeeper in Margaret Street, Everton, with a wife Isabella born in Dent and they had 7 children including John, 8, and so a little older than expected for Tommy's father. Thomas Handley was also a cowkeeper in Albion Street Everton, his wife Agnes was born in Garsdale in fact she was Agnes Thompson of Grisedale. They had a daughter and a one year old son, John, the same name, age and birthplace as Tommy's father. What happened to these families? The trail went cold. It seemed unlikely that they had all died, so had they emigrated?

Repeated searches did not unearth Thomas. Eventually, after going through the 1881 census street by street, Thomas turned up - the Eureka moment. The original census form showed that the enumerator had very distinctive handwriting and in transcription Handley had become Hourley. On the form it was clearly Handley and all the other details checked out. In 1881 Thomas Handley, born Garsdale, was a cowkeeper in Threfall Street with his family, including his son John, who was 21 and born in Liverpool. The particulars agreed with those for Tommy Handley's father. Finding the family in the 1871 census (in that the 'd' had been left out of Handley) gave supporting evidence as by then the family were already living in Threfall Street.

The 1894 and 1901 directories for Liverpool list many families of cowkeepers that had moved from the Dales, including John Handley in Threfall Street and Thomas Handley in Lark Lane. From the 1891 and 1901 censuses it seems that Thomas at Lark Lane was John's younger brother, making him Tommy Handley's uncle. Both brothers had wives names Sarah A Handley but by 1901 Thomas was widowed with four children while John's widow Sarah had two sons John (Jack) and Thomas (Tommy).

Conclusion Tommy Handley was born in 1892 into a family of cowkeepers in Toxteth Park, Liverpool. His father was John Handley, who was born in 1860 in Liverpool, the eldest son of Thomas Handley. Thomas (Tommy's grandfather) was born in Garsdale and like many other cowkeepers he married a girl from 'home' and they went to Liverpool probably in the 1850s and by 1871 they were living in Threfall Street. John Handley took over the family dairy and it is thought that his widow continued to run it after his death. Tommy Handley grew up in Liverpool and perhaps because of his father's early death seems to have had little contact with the family in the dales.

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