



'My family was torn apart by an explosion'

When he discovered his 3x great grandparents' family had been left devastated by a dreadful accident, Richard Frost was determined to find out where it all happened, he tells **Claire Vaughan**

How long have you been doing your family history?

I started back in 2003 and have always been fascinated by a particular incident involving my 3x great grandparents, Richard and Sophia Frost.

What did you uncover before hitting your brick wall?

Having married in 1820, by 1839, 40-year-old Richard and Sophia, 41, were living in Newdale, near Ketley in Shropshire with their nine children and expecting a tenth. On Saturday 9 March 1839, Richard left home to work at the nearby coal mine, leaving William, 15, and Matthew, 12, who had worked the previous night, and Sophia in

bed. Their other children, Elizabeth, 13; Martha, 12; Mary Hannah, 10; Louisa, seven; Jane, five; Richard, four; and John, 21 months were in or around the house. A collier, Richard superintended work at the pit but that morning had forgotten the gunpowder he intended to use, so sent a young woman to fetch some that was stored at his home. When the woman arrived, Elizabeth brought the keg of gunpowder placing it on an armchair by the fireplace. Having left the remainder in the kitchen, the young woman was heading back to the pit, about 100 yards away, when there was an explosion and the three-storey Frost family home was levelled to the ground. Remarkably, Sophia and four children survived, albeit badly injured. However,

Elizabeth, Mary Hannah and John were killed instantly and four-year-old Richard died 10 days later. Local Quakers took the family in and the event received nationwide newspaper coverage. The children were buried at All Saints Church, Wellington.



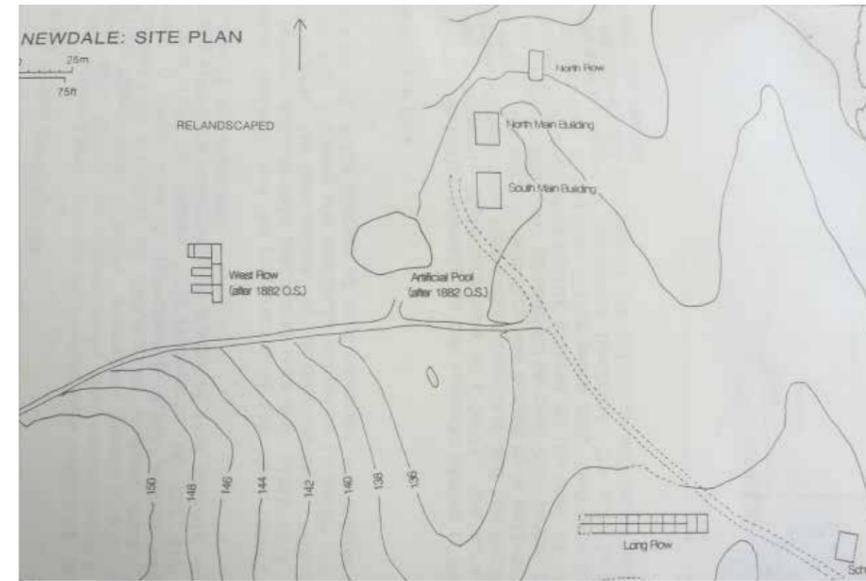
Richard Frost's ancestors died in an explosion

What was stopping you progressing your research?

I was keen to pinpoint the exact location of Richard and Sophia's cottage, but am based in Exeter, so was reliant on online resources. Newdale, Ketley and Wellington are now part of Telford and census information throughout the 19th century for this area is particularly frustrating because it lacks the inclusion of exact addresses. The 1841 census shows the family simply as living in 'Newdale' and the death certificates and inquest report also state 'Newdale' with no other information. The newspaper reports of the time refer only to nearby Ketley. Newdale itself was demolished in the 1960s.

How had you tried to solve it previously?

Wellington-based local historian, Allan Frost, himself a great great grandson of Richard and Sophia, had previously written about the events and been told that the address of the fateful house was 1 Stone Row. In my ongoing efforts, I contacted Telford Town Park Visitor Centre and found a record of some workers' cottages called Stone Row in the Malinsee area of the town. However,



A report of an archeological excavation in 1987 contained details and plans of housing at Newdale

given that the young woman from the pit appears to have only walked a short distance, Malinsee isn't close enough to Newdale.

What's your 'eureka moment'?

It happened during a visit to Wellington Library in February 2015, thanks to the help of librarians, Jane Baker and community volunteers there.

I found out that Newdale had been established by the Coalbrookdale Company in 1759 as one of the first purpose-built industrial settlements of its kind. Originally, an iron-working complex, the venture was short-lived and closed in 1763. However, coal in the area was subsequently mined and the library's old Ordnance Survey maps and other documents showed a disused mine and shafts in the immediate vicinity. A report of an archaeological excavation in 1987 contained details and plans of the housing at Newdale. These also showed a Quaker Meeting House and a school, as well as 18 back-to-back

cottages called, not Stone Row, but Long Row. There were other houses, too: three-storey ones marked as West Row. Reports of the accident described the Frosts' house as three-storey.

How did it solve the problem?

These original documents showed me I'd been looking for the wrong name in the wrong place. Suddenly, it all fell into place. West Row was clearly where it all happened.

How did you feel when you discovered the solution?

It was wonderful to piece together bits of information that not only made sense but also had a solid connection with my ancestors. I also visited what had been Newdale. Nothing remains now but standing nearby is the Wagonway Bridge, built in 1759 to carry an early plate railway used for transporting materials to and from the ironworks from Coalbrookdale. Richard and Sophia probably walked over this bridge.

Did you discover anything else interesting along the way?

According to a letter in the *Shrewsbury Chronicle*, after the explosion, the family was taken in by local Quakers Samuel and Ann Simkin. I contacted a local Quaker historian, and eventually discovered that Samuel had been a carpenter and prominent member of the Society of Friends Meeting House in Newdale. Through Ancestry, I contacted one of his descendants living in the US and found out that Samuel and Ann had emigrated there the year after the accident. This provided a lovely opportunity to say a belated 'thank you' for their ancestors' kindness to mine.

Richard seemingly never recovered from all that happened and died on 15 August 1847 aged just 48. Sophia, however, lived to the grand age of 87 and died on 3 June 1885 in the presence of Ebenezer, the baby she so nearly lost in that terrible accident.

A headstone remains at All Saints Church as a memorial to this tragic loss and it certainly demanded a visit. The stones had been moved to the perimeter of the graveyard. A plan of memorial inscriptions in hand, I managed to find the lasting memorial to Richard and Sophia's children. Someone had left flowers on it, someone with the same connection and the same thinking as me.

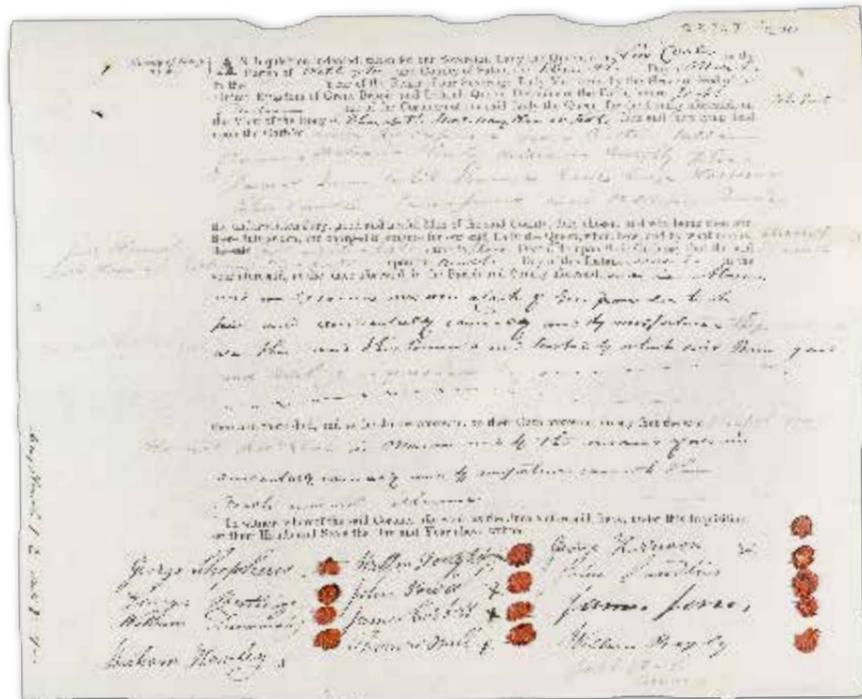
What would your advice be to other family historians who hit an obstacle on their family tree?

Don't forget the local library! I've certainly fallen into the trap of focussing just on the internet but using those local contacts and other sources of information really helps. ■

YOUR STORY

Share your family story with us and you could appear in the magazine

Please write to the address on page 3 or email claire.vaughan@immediate.co.uk



The inquest report into the tragic explosion states that the Frost family were living in Newdale

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KEY SOURCES

MAPS AND PLANS

A huge range of maps and plans can be found in local archives – from tithe maps to plans of colliery workings, as in Richard's case. Where written documents fail to help solve a puzzle, you may be able to unravel it by interpreting the remaining visual records. Ordnance Survey maps offer scale drawings of all

elements of the landscape and so are particularly useful.

INQUEST REPORTS

The coroner was responsible for inquiries into suspicious or sudden deaths and inquests themselves were often held in the local public house. Held in local archives if they survive, inquest reports can provide an

amazing insight into the events surrounding an ancestor's death. It's worth checking newspapers if you think that an inquest may have been held, but you can't find the report. Try britishnewspapersarchive.co.uk

LOCAL ARCHIVES

As Richard says, it's worth

paying a visit to the treasure trove that is your local archives. There are still a lot of documents that haven't yet found their way onto the internet and you never know what you might uncover! Track down local archives at The National Archives' new 'Find an archive' service at discovery.nationalarchives.gov.uk/find-an-archive.