

Sorting out a dating dilemma

In her latest column our local historian Ruth E. Richardson examines a dating difficulty

Who are we? Where did we come from? Tracing families is fascinating and the internet makes this easy. The detailed ten-yearly census (except 1941) started in 1841. From 1851 it gives places of birth. So we can find names, ages, who was related to the head of the house, addresses, who else lived there and jobs. Parish registers, giving BMD (baptisms, marriages and deaths / burials), are marvellous. If you are lucky you may find an ancestor who links to a well-documented family. A surprisingly large proportion of English people have King Edward III (1312-1377) as an ancestor. However, going back before 1752 means there is a problem to sort out.

Before 1752, in England and Wales, everyone used the Julian (or Old Style) Calendar. Commissioned by Julius Caesar, it worked well for a long time but Caesar's mathematicians made a tiny mistake. They said each year had 365.25 days but this should have been 365.2422 days, a difference of 11 minutes. By 1582 this 'slippage' caused difficulties so Pope Gregory XIII decided a dating adjustment was needed. He introduced the Gregorian Calendar across Europe.

Scotland changed in 1600 but England and Wales took much longer as it was seen as a Roman Catholic idea. Eventually, the Calendar Act was passed and 11 days were removed from the calendar, with September 2nd being followed by September 14th in 1752. Not everyone understood the reasons and a Tory election slogan demanded the return of the 'lost days'. Indeed, it took years for everyone to use the new system.

This Act also changed the start date of each year. In the Old Style Calendar this was 25th March Lady Day, the Feast of the Annunciation of the Virgin Mary, the conception of Jesus. So 1751 became a short year, starting on 25th March and finishing on 31st December.

Lady Day was one of the quarter days for paying rents and taxes. As it is between farming seasons it was a useful date on which to change contracts for tenant farmers. This continued after 1752, and was called Old Lady Day, but was now on the April 6th which is March 25th plus 11 days. This is still the start of the tax year.

So remember **March 25th 1752**. This explains how a child can appear to have died before being born: for example born in August 1749, died January 1749 (now often written 1749/50). Blanche Parry, the Herefordshire woman who was the companion and confidante of Elizabeth I for example, died February 12th 1589, but to us this was 1590. John, 1st Viscount Scudamore of Holme Lacy was born March 22nd 1600 but to us he was born in 1601. A gravestone in St. Andrew's Church, Bridge Sollers, commemorates John Geers of Garnons, a lawyer, who opted for a quiet farming life after Civil War violence when Garnons was attacked by a Roundhead army. It says he '*dyed the first day of March 1698*'. That is what his friends and relations thought but to us he died in 1699.

Dates are man-made and we use them just because they are convenient.

www.blancheparry.com (With thanks to Sue Hubbard. See the Herefordshire Family History Society website: www.herefordshirefhs.org.uk)

© Ruth E. Richardson, 2013