

Letters from West Sussex to Indiana

1840-1864

Between 1992 and 2000 I was involved in research for the Petworth Emigration Project 1832-1837.¹ One of our quests was a search for letters written home by the emigrants, as they gave such a fascinating insight into their new life in Upper Canada and often provided clues to help us identify other family members. Collections of letters were published in pamphlet form² at the time, to encourage other would-be emigrants and some of these can be seen in the West Sussex Record Office. Other letters were found by trawling through all likely contemporary newspapers such as the *Brighton Gazette*, and the *Sussex Advertiser*. Sometimes we were lucky enough to find descendants of emigrant families who shared their original material with us. All the letters we collected were reproduced in a book *English Immigrant Voices*, published in 2000.³

Recently we have been contacted by Mrs Lorraine Bear from Michigan, Indiana who has been able to shed more light on one of the emigrants known to us previously only as 'John', a nephew of Cornelius Voice. Lorraine has generously sent us photocopies of some original 19th century letters in her family's archive which have never before been published. These letters were written to Lorraine Bear's great grandfather John/George Voice, in Michigan, by his relations back home in West Sussex and refer to local people and places. The delightfully gossipy letter from his mother is full of interesting comments about the inhabitants of Billingshurst in 1846 – and I wish I could discover the real name of 'poor old Aunt Boney'.

'John' left Billingshurst for Upper Canada in the company of his uncle Cornelius Voice in 1834 on board the *British Tar*. Also in the party were Cornelius' wife Elizabeth Smallwood and their children William, Elizabeth, Cornelius, Martha, George and Joseph. Their eldest child Mary, was already married to James Elliott and they remained on their farm – Brown Hill in Ashington, West Sussex. However, after James died in 1845 Mary Elliott joined the rest of her family, who by then had left Ontario and were living in America.

When we did our original research in the 1990's we knew the emigrant only as 'John' because in letters written by William in 1834 and Cornelius Voice in 1835, published in pamphlets by Phillips of Petworth, only his first name is mentioned – 'John and me are going about 100 miles further up the country, to get 100 acres of land, they are giving out land to get inhabitants, and when I write again, if we have got it, I will tell you.'⁴ We understood that he was a relation of the Voices, because Brydone the superintendent on board the *British Tar*, in his *Narrative of a Voyage*,⁵ referred to Cornelius Voice with 'his two sons and his nephew' but we could not confirm John's surname.

Lorraine Bear thought her great-grandfather George Voice, was actually this nephew John but the information on his gravestone in Indiana indicated that he was born on 19 July 1812 in Dover, Kent – rather a long way from West Sussex to be considered one of the Billingshurst Voices. More recently she has contacted us to say that she can now confirm that John was the son of William Voice, Cornelius' brother, and that he changed his given name to George in North America – a decision questioned by his sister in a letter written to him in 1840 and transcribed here. William Voice was in the army, stationed at Shorncliffe Barracks near Cheriton, thus both John and his sister Eliza Voice, who was baptised 1815 in Cheriton, were born in Kent. Eventually William Voice and his family returned to Billingshurst where he died in 1820. His widow Mary Ann Voice married Billingshurst farmer William Bridger, a widower with a young family and they had more children of their own.

The letters written to John, now known as George Voice, are from his sister Eliza Voice – soon to be Mrs Eliza Taylor, his mother Mary Ann Bridger, his brother-in-law George Taylor and his half-sister Sarah Bridger – whom he had never met. I have transcribed the letters and left the spelling as it is in the originals, only adding a little light punctuation to make them easier to read.