

Our unknown Grandfather – Harry Powis.

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This is the story of our extremely elusive Grandfather, Harry Powis. He was my Mum's Father, but she, and her siblings, grew up never knowing him, and I think that they believed that he had died during WW1. He has led me a merry dance so far, the only solid facts that I have of him are that he married Grandma Nellie Sowley, luckily, this fact was in his war records and because of this, I knew that I now, definitely had the right Harry Powis!

I do mean luck as well, because there were two Harry Powis who joined the Australian Imperial Force, both in 1914, both from London, England, both it seemed with a Father called Edward, and both signed up in Melbourne Australia.

I had ordered an Australian death certificate of a Harry Powis, who to all intense purposes seemed to be the right one, as on his death certificate it listed his Father as an Edward Powis, which is what Harry says his Fathers name was on their marriage certificate. It also listed his Mother and wife's name, even giving his Mother's maiden name. This was going to be an easy search, or so I thought. It wasn't until I decided to pull up, and check, the AIF war records for both Harry Powis', that I discovered in fact he wasn't the correct one at all, and that actually, it was the one that I had overlooked in my rush to look for his English family, using the evidence that I had of his parents and wife's names on his death certificate.

Now working on the right Harry Powis, according to his war records, family gossip, and death certificate, he was born in England; listing his place of birth as Hackney, London on his signing up form. His date of birth is still uncertain; on his application to join up he lists himself as aged 26 in 1914, which means that he was born in 1888 approx. However, on further documents that I received from the records offices of Australia, a military form that was signed when he died, it lists his age at death at 69, but this is crossed out, and 75 written in. So why was this? Also on his death notice it's listed as 75. Did he take off a few years when signing up to make certain that he could join up? I'm not sure why he would do this as they were accepting men up to the age of 32. On his war client files, Harry does give his actual date of birth, and this is 30th January 1888, however the attached military death form would indicate that he had been born in 1882!

This is where the next problem lies. There is no Harry Powis born at that time, apart from a Harry Powis that I sent for the birth certificate, who turned out to be the wrong one, the Father's name was wrong, and this little lad died 2 years later. In fact, so far I can find no Harry Powis with a father named Edward John Powis at all, no births of a Harry around the right time in 1888, or even 1882, so was Harry his real name, a nick-name, even more so, was Powis his real name? This is where some of the family tales might come into play. Someone said that Great Grandma Sowley had found something in Harry's pocket when he was at her house, and that Harry Powis wasn't his real name at all. Another tale was that he had worked for Lloyds of London, done something wrong, and been shipped off to Australia by the family. On various military records he records his occupation as clerk; general, commission agent; self-employed, and in the Electoral rolls for Melbourne he is listed as a clerk, apart from a couple of times when it's down as cook. We have no one left to ask now, and as family stories are notoriously unreliable, we can't take that at face value.

I contacted Lloyds, to see if they had any archives that might shed some light on the story, but to no avail. The fact though, that I'm finding it almost impossible to trace Harry and his family down in the UK before 1914 could possibly be explained by the above tale of Harry Powis not being his real name.

All I have of his family at home in the UK, is that he gives his Mother, a Mrs Powis (thanks Harry, why no first name!) as next of kin. She's allegedly living at 20 Vincent Road, Higham Park, Chingford, Surrey in **1914**. As his Mum's listed as next of kin, presumably Harry's Father has already died by 1914; he's later listed as deceased on Harry and Nellie's marriage certificate in 1919. I contacted the records office for that area, and the closest they could come is to give me the names of the people on the electoral role at that address in 1914, they gave the following reply:

Thank you for your enquiry about 20 Vincent Road.

In the Electoral Register for 1914, Maria Fish is listed in one section (the part that shows people who can vote in County elections but not Parliamentary) and Menzies Cairney in the other section (County and Parliamentary). In the Kelly's Directory for that year a Mrs. Fish is listed. As this is primarily a Trade Directory it indicates she may have had a profession of some sort (also, I believe, why she would be able to vote in the County Elections). These are the only entries I can find though.

This is before women had the vote of course, so it doesn't mean that your relation wasn't there, just that she wouldn't have appeared on the Electoral Register. Also, although in the army, was your Grandfather old enough to have the vote? I'm sorry not to have been of more assistance.

Maybe Harry's Mum was lodging there, but not listed, maybe Fish was really the family name, and Powis a maiden name? All sorts of possibilities, but no leads, or proof, all very frustrating! So far, another dead-end! The following information is taken from what records I have in front of me, his battalion war diaries, his war records, and correspondence with the War Office from after the war up until his death in 1957. Some information is filled from reading various books on the Anzacs.

Harry signed up in Melbourne, **8th September 1914**, not long after the outbreak of the war. He gives his place of residence as Swanston Street. He was on the first fleet of soldiers sent abroad to train and fight. They were supposed to be going to England for training, but as there were already a huge encampment of soldiers on Salisbury plains, and these were under horrendous conditions, it was decided to send the Australians to train in Egypt instead. On the **19th October 1914** the first fleet of 38 ships containing the AIF sailed out from Australia on their way to the unknown. They landed in Egypt, and trained for many long, hot dusty weeks in the desert, only once being called to assist in an attack on the Suez canal, but didn't have a role in the fighting.

On **April 25th 1915**, Harry first fought at the famous battle of Gallipoli, a disastrous battle, whole companies of men were virtually wiped out on the landing alone. They then spent a few months trying desperately to hang onto what little ground they had managed to capture. During that time the men suffered from dysentery, diarrhea and influenza due to

the bad sanitary conditions, and lack of medical care. It was a huge disaster, and by the end of **1915**, they finally had to admit defeat, and managed a complete evacuation of Gallipoli with no more men lost. Ironically this was the most successful part of the campaign. The 8th Battalion was then returned to Egypt for a while to recuperate and continue training, and at this stage Harry was moved to the newly formed 59th Battalion, which was made up of veterans and new recruits from the Melbourne area. From there they were then sent into the French battlefields, and the first conflict they entered was a complete disaster for Harry's battalion at Fromelle.

On the **19th July, 1916**, most of his Battalion were wounded or killed in that first day alone. Harry was wounded with a gunshot wound to the leg, and shell shock. He spent the next few days in and out of field hospitals in France, but was finally shipped off to England for treatment. During his long recuperation period, he ended up at No 2 Command Depot in Weymouth, Dorset, where he met Nellie Louise Sowley, who by now was already married (**1914**), to a John Herbert Christopher Furby a local tailor, with one child, Aunty Daphne.

During the years 1915-1919, over 120,000 Australian and New Zealand troops passed through Weymouth. Many having fought in the Gallipoli Campaign of 1914. Australia being too far away to take the injured and evacuated troops, so they were brought back to England to recover and recuperate. Weymouth was the main camp and on 31st May 1915 the first of many camps in the Weymouth area was opened at Montevideo House. As First World War progressed, and the the number of casualties increased, so did the number of troops in the area increase, then more camps were opened at Westham, Chickerell, Littlemoor and the Verne. There were strong links with the Australians in Chickerell. A stained glass window can be seen in St. Mary's Church there. The troops were welcomed in the area and joined in many of the activities with the locals. After the war, many war brides left Weymouth and District for a new life in Australia or New Zealand.

Harry and Nellie went on to have an affair, and Nellie's husband in **1918** cites Harry in the divorce case. Custody of Aunty Daphne is given to the husband, and Nellie moves in with her Mother, Arabella Sowley, who was living at Termonde, in Roman Road, Weymouth, Dorset. Nellie then goes on to have a daughter, Aunty Joan in **1918**, who is illegitimate according to her birth certificate. as there's no fathers surname entered, but she does have the names Joan Powis entered as her first names, so taking that into account, and how similar Joan and Mum looked, presumably she must have been Harry's child.

Nellie, and her 2 children continued to live with her parents in Termonde, Roman Road, Weymouth, Dorset, having being thrown out of her ex-husbands property. Harry and Nellie marry in **1919** at Weymouth registry office, and this is recorded in Harry's war records. Marie Louise is born on **18th April 1920** at Weymouth; the same year as Harry is returned to Australia, so presumably, she would have been too young to have any memories of him at all. Harry returned to Australia at the end of **1920**, and Nellie and her children were supposed to be joining him later. The story goes that as she had TB, she wasn't well enough to travel at the time.

However this didn't stop her from having an affair with another married man, and she had a further child, Uncle Peter from this affair in **1932**. Though Peter is listed as Peter Powis in the BMD's. It seems that someone wrote to Harry telling him of the illegitimate child,

and any support that he had been sending Nellie for her and the family stopped, as did all contact. Presumably between 1920, and 1932 there must have been correspondence between Nellie and Harry, as he was supposedly supporting the family, and trying to save enough to bring them to Australia. What happened to these letters we'll never know, maybe Grandma Sowley destroyed them, maybe they just got thrown away.

I have also managed to trace his life periodically in the years after he returned to Australia from the electoral roles, and have included details such as where and with whom he lived. The only tangible items that we can view of Harry's are a letter he wrote to the War Office, in **1920**, shortly after his return to Australia, where he states his case about his sustenance payments being stopped while trying to find work, as he's trying to support his family back home in the UK.

Luckily, there were only two Harry Powis's listed in Melbourne after the war, and ours was the one listed as a clerk, and without a wife, so at least that part was relatively easy! Even then, it involved many hours of trawling through pages and pages of Australia electoral roles, I'd find Harry in one district of Melbourne, follow him for a couple of years, then he'd disappear again, so I'd have to start the search all over again through the many districts of this rapidly expanding city. He seems to spend his life working as a clerk, which is what he was employed as before he immigrated to Australia. A couple of times he's referred to as a chef, who knows why. Maybe the person taking details misheard Harry, or maybe he had to take these types of jobs if work was slow.

In **1920**, not long after he returned to Australia, he gives an address as c/o Mr Dickinson, Buckleigh, Anderson's Creek Road, Ringwood, then c/o a Mrs Burns, Main Street, Ringwood. At this time he seems to have temporary employment as a clerk for J Stevens White Horse Road, Ringwood. This job finished on the **31st Dec 1920**, and on the **5th Jan 1921** he's asking for sustenance, awaiting employment, for this he gets a grand total of £2.20! In **1921** Harry first appearance in the Electoral rolls is at The Coffee Palace on Main Street Ringwood. These started off life as Temperance hotels, built from the late 1800's, in response to the [Temperance movement](#), and, in particular, the influence of the [Independent Order of Rechabites](#) in Australia.

1924 still sees Harry living in Ringwood, this time listed as c/o Mr William Ward Davidson at Whitehorse Road, the Davidson family own a drapers shop.

By **1925**, Harry's now moved into Melbourne, and the next little mystery in his life. He's listed on the electoral roles at 16 Laburnham Street Melbourne, with an Arthur and Isabelle Irwin. Arthur Irwin was also born in London, (Hemel Hempstead) England, and also joined the 8th Battalion AIF in 1914. Arthur, according to his war records, on joining in 1914 was aged 22, and a labourer. His father Alfred Irwin however was a clerk, and lived in Hackney! Arthur marries an Isabelle Keligan in 1916, also in Hackney. Is it possible that the two families knew each other? Did Harry and Arthur's father work together back in England, did the lads go off to Australia together to travel and then joined up? All conjecture at the moment, but it does seem a big coincidence.

The fact that Harry and Arthur must have sailed off to war and Egypt on the same boat, being in the same battalion, both fought in Gallipoli and France, both wounded, so their paths must have crossed frequently. Perhaps Harry was down on his luck workwise and, went to Arthur and his wife for a helping hand.

Whatever the reason, Harry lives at no 16 Laburnham street for the next two years. However, in **1926** Isabelle disappears from no.16. It is just Harry and Arthur living there. She pops up again in **1927**, but she's now living at no 27 Laburnham Street, while Harry and Arthur are still at no.16. Then, even more oddly, in **1928** until **1931**, Harry appears at no 27 along with Isabelle, while Arthur remains at no 16! Not too sure what to make of this all, was it innocent? Was Harry up to his old tricks of chasing another mans wife? But if that was so, why is he still living with Arthur for a while, then moves in with Isabelle? Oh to be able to travel back in time! The next sighting I have of Harry is at 408 William Street Melbourne West in **1935**. That year he's presumably boarding with a John and Margaret McPherson, who was a draughtsman.

1936, and Harry's still at no.408, along with four other single men, and two ladies. These were a Margaret and Maria Murray Lynch, both described as home duties, but no male is listed there in that name, so either they were single, and letting out rooms for an income, or one had a husband who worked away. Maria Murray is the sister to Eileen Hall (nee Lynch) who is later to become part of Harry's life, Eileen puts the death notice in the paper, and describes herself and daughters as sincere friends of Harry.

1937, and Harry's moved yet again! This time to no 462 Little Lonsdale Street. A real drop in his fortunes. This is where he meets more of the Lynch family. Briefly reading through the local papers of that time that are available on line, it seems to be a hot bed of crime! Perhaps after the Depression, work was harder to come by for Harry, and life took a downturn. It's interesting that he gives occupation in this one as chef instead of clerk, maybe he couldn't find any office work, and had to take what ever was on offer. Fires, murders, attacks?..it all seemed to go on here, maybe that's why I can't find Harry for the next five years in that area, perhaps it was a bit too lively for him, and he's moved to a different area.

The next time I can find Harry is in **1943**. Things are on the up. Now he's living at no.317 Beaconsfield Parade, Melbourne. Also there is Marie Theresa Lynch, she's the guesthouse proprioter, and Eileen Halls daughter. But she's also the Marie McCahill mentioned in Harry's death notice. Harry can be traced at this address over the next 12 years in the Electoral rolls, which go up until **1954**.

In **1949** Eileen Hall is living with her daughters at this address, and presumably ever since Harry had first contact with the Lynch family way back in 1937, they must have become firm friends. I have no way of knowing where he was living between **1954** and **1957**, when he died. But as Eileen Hall and her daughters are all listed as sincere friends on his death notice, and it gives this address, he was still either living with, or nearby the family. Harry died on **8th October, 1957** in the King Alfred hospital. His death notice:

POWIS - On October 8 at the Alfred Hospital, Harold Powis of 317 Beaconsfield Parade, St Kilda, the sincere friend of Eileen Hall, Myra Lynch and Marie McCahill, late 1st AIF. Remains at R Mackenzies chapel for private burial. FUNERAL ARRANGEMENTS BY E HALL..

Harry's final resting place is at the beautiful Springfield Botanical Cemetery in Melbourne in the Church of England Monumental, Compartment P, Section 12, Grave 29. I was told that it was in perpetuity, so either Harry had money of his own to pay for the grave, and it's

upkeep, or a friend paid for it. Hopefully Harry had gone on to have a good life after his sad story in England. He grew up never knowing his children, or they of him, he never remarried, and I can find no mention of a divorce for him and Nellie. We will never know of what correspondence there was between them after his return to Australia in 1920, and when he was told of Peter's birth, and Nellie's affair. It was never talked about, either because Mum didn't know anything, or because she was ashamed and embarrassed about it.

The children lost their Mum, Nellie, in 1934, two years after Peter's birth, to TB. Aunty Joan tells of going into the bedroom, where her Mum was sat up in bed, and coughing, and she died in their Grandma's arms, Mum would have been 14. They were raised by Great Grandma Adelaide Sowley. I would imagine that after Nellie died, that Great Grandma Sowley would not have wanted to talk about any of this painful past to the children, consequently they grew up knowing nothing, or very little about their Father.

Aunty Joan did tell of one occasion, as a very small child, when she remembers being on Weymouth train station with her Mum, and waving a man off in uniform, perhaps this was her Dad setting off on his epic journey back to Australia.

The saddest part for me is that he died after I was born, and one thing I had always desperately wished for as a child was to have a Grandparent, and in effect I did for a short while. It's just that I never knew!

RIP Harry, I hope you've got to meet your children at last in Heaven.

View details for [Powis, Harry](#)