

## The Mystery of Mordecai

Firstly, what I am going to do in this speech is to challenge our thinking about what we believe about Mordecai's life.

If anything I say here, or anything you see or hear over the next few days jogs your memory of something you were told about Mordecai or perhaps you think you may have hidden away at home something that might help solve even just a small part of the mystery of his life, then please let us know.

From a purely genealogical point of view, we could not have picked a more intriguing or a more frustrating person to be our ancestor than Mordecai Solomon, as from the moment of his birth through to his death, his whole life seems to have been shrouded in mystery.

The funny thing is that although I have been researching the life of Mordecai for over 25 years, I believe I know less about him now than I thought I knew then. I'm sure many of you will agree.

Let's start at the end. As we will see when we get to Rookwood, Mordecai is buried in an unpretentious grave, with a crumbling sandstone headstone. It certainly doesn't exude wealth and prominence in the community as do the nearby graves of his son Henry and his son-in-law George Myers.

From this headstone and from his death certificate we know that he was 83 years old when he died in 1883, he was born in London, he had been in the colony for 65 years (thus indicating an 1818 arrival) and that his father's name was apparently Meir.

It is part of our family folk lore (undoubtedly passed down by Mordecai himself) that his father was Myer Solomon, a wealthy philanthropist & antiquarian in London in the early 19<sup>th</sup> century, a member of the Leadenhall St Synagogue & founder of the Western Synagogue, of which he became its President.

Myer also maintained a Register of Circumcisions performed by him over a period of not less than 57 years. This can be found online and comprises the names of no less than 1568 infants and adults.

Under normal circumstances, you would have expected Myer to have considered himself privileged to perform this procedure on his son. However, a

search of Myer's register finds no one by the name Mordecai born in 1800 whom we can positively link with Myer. If Mordecai was indeed the son of Myer, perhaps circumstances weren't normal.

Then, when Myer died in 1840 there was no mention of either Mordecai or any other child in his will. The marriage was apparently, 'without issue.'

So, given all this, how do we know that Myer was definitely Mordecai's father? We don't.

Myer was married to Gittel Kalisch, the daughter of Zvi Hirsch Kalisch, the earliest known Rabbi and Chazan of the Bristol Synagogue, while family folk lore also tells us that Gittel was descended from the mystical religious figure, Samuel Chaim de Falk, The Baal Shem of London.

Fortunately for us, Gittel had male siblings who anglicised the surname to Collins and whose many descendants have played prominent roles in British society over the past 200 years.

Through our English cousin, Anthony, we have maintained a link with one of these descendants, Patrick Collins. We had hoped that DNA testing would provide evidence of our link to the Kalisch/Collins line but despite the fact that both Patrick and several of us in the Solomon line have had this testing done, there is no link whatsoever. We are therefore not descended from Myer's wife, Gittel.

On 16 April 1817, a young lad by the name of Mordecai Solomon (aged 17) was convicted in the Old Bailey of stealing 10 live tame rabbits to the value of ten shillings and was sentenced to be confined for six months in the Clerkenwell House of Correction. Thus he would have gained his release in October 1817.

In an age where many were sentenced to transportation for a lot lesser offences, why did Mordecai get off so lightly? If Myer was his father, did he use his influence to save Mordecai from this fate? Possibly. However, we can't even be sure that this is even 'our' Mordecai.

It is part of Mordecai's oral history that he arrived in the colony on 30<sup>TH</sup> April 1818 as a free settler aboard the convict vessel the Lady Castlereagh. As this vessel did not depart England until December 1817, two months after Mordecai's release from Clerkenwell Prison, it would certainly have been quite feasible that he could have been on board.

However, as seems to have happened so much in Mordecai's life, although strict records were maintained of the 300 convicts on the vessel, if there were other passengers on board, no names were recorded and hence we cannot confirm that Mordecai was on board at all.

After 1818 Mordecai disappears from sight. His name does not appear on the 1828 or 1841 censuses (despite the fact that at that stage he had a wife and four children), nor does it appear in the Colonial Secretary's papers of any land record maintained at the time.

It is not until 1835, seventeen years after his arrival that we first hear of 'our' Mordecai in the colony when, at the age of 35 he applied to the Bridge Street synagogue to marry [Elizabeth Haines](#), the daughter of a London shop-keeper. Apparently he was waiting for her when she arrived in Sydney in October 1834 aboard the all female bounty ship 'David Scott'.

Was this a pre-arranged marriage? If so, and if Myer Solomon was his father, it seems possible that he may have been involved in arranging this marriage. However, it certainly was not the social match that might have been expected from someone of Mordecai's supposed illustrious family background.

As with most things concerning Mordecai, no records exist of this marriage, either in the NSW State Archives or in those of the Sydney Synagogue. However we do know that the marriage was performed in Dapto by 'a Baptist Minister under Jewish rites.' Not unusual for those times, where the nearest and only synagogue was in Sydney.

Also, as with many things Mordecai, no records have yet been found of the farm that Mordecai established on Solomon's Creek, Dapto but Nick Solomon remembers being taken to the site as a child, on a family holiday, so at least we do know that it existed and also its location.

More will be said about this site when we visit it.

It was here at Dapto, that three of Mordecai and Elizabeth's children were born: [Sarah \(1836\)](#), [Myer \(1837\)](#) and [Jane \(1838\)](#) .

Sometime around 1939 - 40, the family moved to Sydney where the rest of the children were born: [Henry \(1840\)](#), [Ellen \(1842\)](#), [Joseph \(1844\)](#), [Catherine](#)

[\(1847\)](#), [Lewis Solomon \(1848\)](#) but it is not known where they lived or what Mordecai did for a living upon moving to Sydney.

However, we do know that in 1843 he was on a handwritten list of members of the Bridge Street Synagogue; in 1848 he was arrested on a "Breach of the Peace" charge, but case dismissed - presumably in Sydney & in 1852 his address on Elizabeth's death certificate was given as "Lower Pitt Street",

Then in 1855, at the marriage of his eldest daughter, Sarah to George Myers, the family was living at Strawberry Hills, near what is now Central Station.

In 1857 Mordecai took out a mortgage for 3,000 pounds over portions of the Riley Estate on the East side of Yurong St, Wolloomooloo. He was described as a freeholder and he signed by 'making his mark', which is interesting as it could possibly indicate that he was illiterate.

Where did the money come from for this sizeable mortgage? We don't know – yet another part of the mystery.

It was here, in Yurong Street where the family lived from 1857 through to at least 1865.

Then once again all trace of Mordecai disappears until his death at Eglinton, the home of his daughter Sarah, on 9 March 1883. There was no obituary published upon his death, as you would expect for someone who had gained prominence in the community and the final mystery of Mordecai's life is that he died without leaving a will.

There is a line of thinking that someone, perhaps a former convict, actually created both the persona of Mordecai and his supposed illustrious London ancestry, in order to hide his dark past and help establish his family within the Sydney Jewish society free of the stain of a convict background.

To quote the X Files, 'The Truth is Out There.' It's just up to us to find it.

I fully agree with Geoff that it is wonderful to see so many young people with us today. You are not only the future of the Solomon family, you are also the ones who will be responsible for becoming the next generation of family history detectives. Believe me, once you start looking for clues, the whole thing becomes excitingly addictive.

To whet your appetite I'm going to give you a name and I'd like you to find out as much as you can about this person and let us know what you discover.

His name was Abraham Solomons and he arrived as a convict on the vessel, Shipley in 1818. Good luck!

However, I believe that it is not the life of Mordecai Solomon that is the most important thing here. The most important thing is that we are all here together for the first and undoubtedly only time in our lives, celebrating the fact that our family has been in Australia for 200 years.

When you read through the history of each of our family lines, you are reading about participants in our country's rich history: from the convict days and earliest days of settlement to the prosperity of the gold rushes and the years that followed, to the Depressions of the 1890's and 1930's, through two world wars and beyond.

We are celebrating by meeting for the first time many of our fellow family members, by reuniting with others who we haven't seen perhaps for the best part of a lifetime, or by taking the opportunity to catch up once again with our close family members.

Personally, I feel extremely privileged to be a part of these celebrations and I look forward to talking with you all over the next few days.