



‘My ancestor was a celebrated police officer in the Met’

When Chris Payne started exploring his family tree, he had no idea he would stumble across a famous detective with a career-ending secret, says **Claire Vaughan**



It's 8 November 1864 and Richard Harvey, a young shipwright's apprentice, is out on Plaistow Marshes in east London shooting wildfowl with some friends. He becomes separated from the group and at about 1.20pm he's following a narrow path through the reed bed near the river bank when he suddenly notices a large object submerged among the stalks.

Moving closer he discovers it's a man's body: "It was lying on its back, with the left hand on the breast – there was only a pair of trousers and a pair of Wellington boots on it, and his shirt was half off his body," he later reports. The corpse also has no head. He calls out in horror to his companions to fetch the police. So began one of the most talked about murders of Victorian London. The Plaistow Marshes

case would test the Metropolitan Police's finest – among them George Clarke, Chris Payne's great great grandfather.

Chris, a retired research scientist, has recently published his discoveries about his ancestor. *The Chieftain* (the title refers to George's nickname) is a gripping account of the Scotland Yard detective's life and the crimes he was instrumental in solving (among them some of the most notorious of the late 19th century). But George himself was hiding a dark secret, as Chris explains.

Writing a book about his ancestors was not what Chris originally had in mind for his retirement. The idea was sown when he was sorting through his late father's effects and came across a bundle of letters written by his grandfather, Charles Frederick Payne. "Charles died in the influenza pandemic at the end of

the First World War. That was all I knew about him," says Chris. "I was very busy at work and didn't have time to do anything with the letters. I just thought: I'm going to keep these, they could be interesting. That was in 1990 – I finally got around to reading them in 2005/2006." It was a moving experience: "I still find myself touched, particularly by one or two of the letters," he admits. "I thought, this is potentially a great story. I'll save it for my retirement it'll keep my brain cells active!"

So retirement came and Chris revisited the letters. "I soon realised I'd have to do my family history to work out the relationships

Westminster City Archives as many of his ancestors had lived in that part of London.

Chris also investigated Charles' experiences in the First World War initially by searching for his service records on Ancestry.co.uk. From there he hit The National Archives (TNA). "Unfortunately Charles' service records didn't survive the Second World War bombing, I discovered, but I found out all about his battalion and wartime experiences at TNA."

So where does Chris's detective ancestor fit into the puzzle? "Assembling the family tree, I saw that Charles' grandfather was a chap called George Clarke. I didn't really think

much about it until I noticed in one of the censuses that he'd been an inspector in the Metropolitan Police."

Chris Googled the name

and rank and was astonished at what came up: "George had been tried for corruption at the Old Bailey. I haven't looked back since!"

It was a shock, of course, but, the scientist in him reasoned, "I didn't know whether he was innocent or guilty, and there must have been more to the man than simply the trial". So he set out to see what else he could uncover about George. The internet was a rich source of clues to this man's life, including some of the high-profile cases he'd worked on. "I couldn't believe my luck. I thought: this is wonderful stuff." Born in 1818 in Hertfordshire, George had joined the Metropolitan Police in 1840, but it was when he joined a small team of detectives at Scotland Yard in 1862 that his career really took off.

Though familiar with scientific research, Chris had no experience of researching ⇄

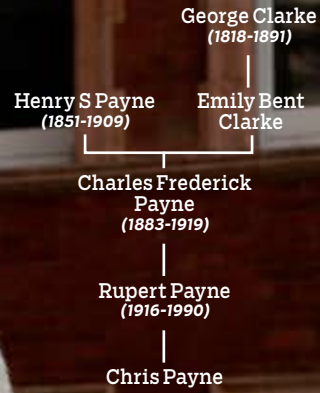
Chris's ancestor was instrumental in solving some of the most notorious crimes of the late 19th century

Charles mentions, who they were and so on. I spent a year or so pulling together my tree and found out actually how much I enjoyed doing it. I think it helps being a trained scientist. Being presented with an incomplete data set, you have to go through logically and you come across gaps and you have to think of ways of getting round them. I found the whole exercise wonderfully stimulating."

Starting the journey...

His starting point for piecing together his family tree was a handwritten sheet of notes from one of his father's cousins, giving the names of Charles' parents and siblings. Chris used Ancestry.co.uk to find birth, marriage and death records and locate his forebears on census records, gradually building up an online tree. This was supplemented by visits to

CHRIS PAYNE



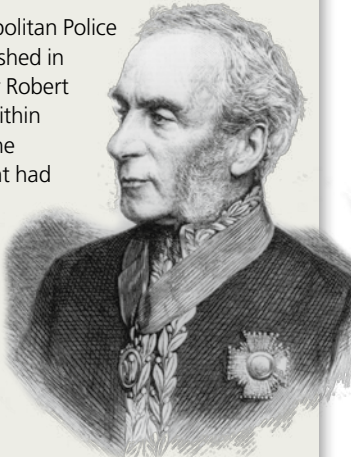
Chris Payne, in front of offices once occupied by the fraudsters whose evidence put his ancestor in the dock

BACKGROUND

THE DETECTIVE BRANCH

The Metropolitan Police was established in 1829 by Sir Robert Peel but, within 13 years, the government had sanctioned the creation of a new species of inspector.

Co-directed by Sir Richard Mayne and



Sir Richard Mayne (1796-1868)

Charles Rowan, eight men formed the first Detective branch, operating out of an office in Whitehall Place, backing onto Scotland Yard. Without the conspicuousness of a uniform, they had carte blanche to enter where they pleased: less concerned with the prevention of crime, they were there to solve it.

Encouraged by the admiration of writers like Dickens, men like Stephen Thornton and Jack Whicher worked with local police forces across the nation, arresting the most sensational criminals of the mid-Victorian period, including the murderers Courvoisier, the Mannings and Constance Kent.

From these pioneers the second-generation detectives – including Richard Tanner and ‘Dolly’ Williamson – learned how to disregard gossip, evaluate tips and produce evidence for trials. Forensics were in their infancy, science could not yet spring to their aid and, by the 1860s, they were under pressure. Delays, irresolution and occasional failure meant that public admiration was tinged with distrust: they were elite and expensive, but also fallible.

Unobtrusive and doggedly determined, the detectives were faced with a clamour for speedy resolutions. If they, like Cuff in Wilkie Collins’ *The Moonstone*, were to be allowed to rifle through the private business of the middle classes, then they must also prove their worth, make rapid arrests and preserve the illusion that they could keep society safe.

Kate Colquhoun is the author of *Mr Briggs’ Hat: A Sensational Account of Britain’s First Railway Murder*



The Tichborne Trial, 1873, in which Chris’ ancestor was pivotal



Chris outside Old Scotland Yard where his great great grandfather worked

⇨ policemen. “I contacted History by the Yard (www.historybytheyard.co.uk) online and they pointed me in the direction of the police pension files at TNA.”

For a couple of years, TNA and the British Library became like second homes for Chris. “Whenever I travelled to London for work, I would always squeeze in time at one of them. In addition, the two hugely useful digitised newspaper databases, 19th Century British Library Newspapers, and *The Times* digital archive, [both of which can often be accessed free at home if you have a public library membership card] were of enormous value, enabling me to undertake free text searching on my home computer.”

This allowed Chris to identify the investigations that George was likely to have been involved with between 1840-1878 (the period that he was working for the Metropolitan Police). “I could then search TNA catalogues to see if any case files were available, and the British Library catalogue to see if there were any relevant books on some of the more major ones.”

Searching the case files

It all sounds so straightforward, but his initial breakthrough required a great deal of persistence. “It took me a while at TNA to track down the first of George’s correspondence but once I’d learnt how to put the right search terms into their catalogue it became much easier. Most of the documents are not digitised, there’s just their title, so if I was looking for details of a particular case, I could type in its name, see what came up and then go along to the archives not knowing quite what I’d find. In fact, some of the files had been lost, but for most of the murder enquiries, they were all there.

“I would reread the newspaper accounts of George’s cases and then go back and quiz the TNA catalogue with different search terms and come up with more and more detail. It probably took me three to four visits to TNA before I found some original documents relating to George, but once I’d done that, the research was sheer delight!

“By now I knew I wanted to write a book about George. Initially, I thought he would be a chapter in one about my grandfather, but as I kept finding records, I realised there was more than enough material for a whole book. I had to organise it somehow. I did this by assembling a chronology of his life on my computer”. Chris highly recommends this technique.

A remarkable detective emerged from the newspaper clippings, police reports and other primary sources. George had been central to some of the most infamous cases of the period. Not only was he instrumental in solving the Plaistow Marshes murder, he was also the arresting officer (in New York) of Franz Müller, the killer of Thomas Briggs, the first man murdered on a British train. (His story was told in Kate Colquhoun’s *Mr Briggs’ Hat*, see issue 48).

The records also showed that, in 1870, George was sent ‘undercover’ by the Home Office to France to obtain evidence about the recruitment of Irishmen to fight for France during the Franco-Prussian War. Meanwhile, back on British soil, his investigations into suspect witnesses during the trial of the Tichborne Claimant (a fraudster who caused a national sensation in the 1870s) was pivotal in convicting the accused.

George was also the investigating officer in the Charles Bravo poisoning case, an unsolved ‘suspicious death’, and eventually brought Henri de Tourville to justice for the murder



HORRID MURDER OF A GENTLEMAN, IN A RAILWAY CARRIAGE.

Another here and dreadful murder,
 The victim, who has been,
 One of the most illustrious men,
 In an iron cage was seen.
 For Thomas Briggs, here will be named,
 Was in a London railway carriage slain,
 Between Old Ford and Harkerly Way,
 Which caused confusion, care and pain.
 On June in this railway murder,
 Four Briggs carried the fatal wound,
 Between Old Ford Bridge and Harkerly Way,
 And very near great London town.
 They found a hat in the railway carriage,
 In the Quarter-mast, in the Marshes,
 In which poor Thomas Briggs was riding,
 On his journey to his home.
 Also, great care, he took through
 That he would be captured of life,
 In the railway carriage, by a villain,
 At ten o'clock that fatal night.
 Oh, little did he think they'd kill him,
 He had no thought he was to die,
 Even that fatal Saturday evening.
 On the 10th day of July,
 The victim in the carriage was slain,
 For greater Thomas Briggs was killed,
 In a first-class carriage they did not take,
 And all around his wound was spilled.
 Thomas Briggs was a faithful servant,
 To Robert, Wainwright and Company,
 Three hundred pounds was his official,
 Then died the unfortunate victim in,
 And brought to justice for the dreadful
 Deed he done, so we may tell,
 And glad we are there is before us,
 A clue to the wicked murderer.
 They have named his whereabouts in the city,
 The very hat, so we may tell,
 Taken from poor Briggs that fatal evening,
 Shows such a man and his gold.
 Hatful of nearly all that he possessed,
 These were taken that fatal night,
 Between Old Ford and Harkerly Way,
 In the railway carriage in daylight.
 The man who has named conviction,
 For and more, he may be proud,
 And thousands in the spot are going
 From all around great London town.
 And on the spot that took with horror,
 Where poor Thomas Briggs was killed,
 They show with grief, with pain and sorrow,
 Where his crimson blood was spilled.
 Oh, God above, look down from Heaven,
 Send the searching villain out,
 Let justice come upon those men,
 Never do them meet above!
 On the 10th, or there, we all are certain,
 Sit on the tower the north of Tower,
 There was the fatal fatal murder.
 Which has caused such grief and pain.
 On that fatal Saturday evening,
 They took him to the coroner's gate,
 July the 10th, in a railway carriage,
 His Rights handed and away-don't.

A notice about Britain's first railway murder. Chris's ancestor was the arresting officer



Chris with a picture of his ancestor, George Clarke

of his second wife (and the probable murder of his mother-in-law). “This last case has been widely misreported in several published articles,” says Chris, “and my research (using George’s reports of the investigation) has thrown new light on the subject.”

Corruption scandal...

George was clearly at the top of his game, so why did he end up in court in a case that was to end his career? From his internet searches, Chris gleaned that Inspector George Clarke had been tried for corruption at the Old Bailey in 1877 (in the first major Metropolitan Police corruption trial) and that he had been acquitted, unlike three of his colleagues, who were convicted and sentenced to two years hard labour each. Most later commentators attributed George’s acquittal largely to the skills of his barrister.

Not content with this version, Chris methodically researched the ‘Turf Fraud Scandal’ for himself, consulting all the original

case reports and newspaper cuttings he could lay his hands on. “The case against George involved perverting the course of justice – essentially that he’d accepted bribes from a couple of notorious fraudsters who’d been sent down. Three of his colleagues were initially arrested and then subsequently, as the case developed, he was detained as well.”

Among the huge number of records concerning the trial held at TNA, Chris uncovered something that made him suspect that things weren’t quite what they appeared. “There’s a very interesting letter written by the attorney general/solicitor general at the Home Office suggesting that George should be arrested, otherwise the case against the other three might fail. That’s essentially the undercurrent behind it.”

Following his acquittal, George was reinstated, but now a ‘political liability’ within the Met, he was forced to retire a month later on health grounds. The case itself triggered an

enquiry, resulting in the reorganisation of the Detective Branch into the CID. After a stint as a publican, George returned to detective work as a ‘private inquiry agent’ but never achieved the acclaim he had previously enjoyed. He died at his home in January 1891 at the age of 72.

So, was George – who was described as “a very unusual article” and “a man of about as much shrewd common sense as any man in London” by one of his superiors at the end of the fraud trial – guilty or not? “You’ll have to read the book to find out,” chuckles Chris. ■

TAKE IT FURTHER

- *The Chieftain* by Chris Payne (The History Press, 2011)
- Want to turn your family history into a book? Turn to our feature on page 24

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

KEY SOURCES

THE NATIONAL ARCHIVES (TNA)

Staff records and case files for the Metropolitan Police Force are just some of the police records you can search for online at TNA in the MEPO series. Pension records are useful as they hold details that include marital status, dates of service and next of kin. For where to search for

records of other forces, try ARCHON (www.nationalarchives.gov.uk/archon). Consult the research guide at www.nationalarchives.gov.uk/records/research-guides/metropolitan-police.htm.

HISTORY BY THE YARD

If you’ve got an ancestor who pounded the beat in

London, then www.historybytheyard.co.uk is a great starting point for tracking down records about their career. It covers the policing of the capital, case studies of notable individuals, listings of recruits and plenty of advice and links to ensure you can take your research further. Another must-visit site is

the Metropolitan Police’s own at www.met.police.uk/history.

SOCIETIES

Family history societies can be a mine of information. Chris’ philosophy is to ask questions and talk to people, and where better to do it than somewhere where there is “shared

enthusiasm and interest in the means of uncovering information”. Chris is also a member of the University of the Third Age and the Western Front Association. For more details on where to find local or family history societies, go to The Federation of Family History Societies at www.ffhs.org.uk.