

The Search for Henry Spencer Ends

This blog post first appeared in 2010 as part of the Unlock the Past series on brick walls.

My partner Max's grandfather was a real mystery man. Unfortunately, Max's father knew very little about his father, so we only had vague family stories to follow.

What we did know was that Max's grandfather, Henry Spencer was from West Bromwich in Staffordshire, and it was relatively easy to identify him and his parents and siblings in English census records and to trace them further back. Where we had a brick wall was how and when Henry came to Australia and where he died.

We first found Henry Spencer in Tasmania, a widower and upholsterer. He met Ada Barwick (nee Jarvis), widowed in 1905 with two young sons living in Richmond, Tasmania. How they met is not known but they had a son Frederick Leo Spencer in 1909 in Deloraine, Tasmania and at some point, and for reasons again unknown, they left Tasmania for South Australia. All of Ada's Jarvis family were in Tasmania and even more surprising, she left her two sons from her first marriage behind in Tasmania.

Henry and Ada finally married in Gladstone, South Australia in 1914 and Max's father Charles Douglas Spencer was born in 1917 in New Mecklenberg, South Australia. Henry was 23 years older than Ada and the family story is that she met another younger man, an ex-soldier Frank Palmer and ran off with him and her two sons Frederick and Charles. Apparently, Frank and Ada moved around a lot so that Henry could not find them. It was believed that Henry had either died in South Australia or had gone back home to England.

A search of deaths in South Australia was unsuccessful as was a search in Tasmania in case Henry had gone back there. Victoria was also checked as it was close to both South Australia and Tasmania. Nothing was known of Henry's previous wife or if there were any other children from his first marriage. Henry Spencer is a common name and without the name of his previous wife it was very hard to get a lead on him. It wasn't even known if this family had been in England or Australia.

With the release of [Ancestry.com.au](https://www.ancestry.com.au)'s Australian BDM indices recently, I searched for Henry Spencer in case I missed him on the microfiche indexes when I searched for him previously. Much to my surprise there was a reference to a Henry Spencer with the right parents' names only it was in Queensland. Why was Henry in Queensland? We had no idea and quickly sent off for the death certificate. We also checked the Brisbane City Council [Grave Location database](https://www.brisbanecitycouncil.qld.au/grave-location-database) to see if he was buried in Brisbane. Again, a successful hit showing he was buried in Toowong cemetery by himself. I then checked [FindMyPast.com.au](https://www.findmypast.com.au) as monumental inscriptions for Toowong cemetery are available on this site. However, there was no tombstone for him.

The death certificate finally arrived and imagine our surprise when we found that Henry had two previous wives and children with both. Yet his third wife Ada and family had no knowledge or details of these two earlier families. Interestingly a daughter from the first marriage, Mary Meyer, was the informant and she knew the details of all wives and children from the first two marriages but for number three, she simply put question marks. Either Henry never told his daughter about his third wife and two sons or she declined to put them in.

We are now in the process of trying to learn more about Henry's other two families and hopefully, locate some distant cousins and one of them will have a photograph of Henry as we don't even know

what he looked like. Sometimes just one missing piece of information needs to turn up and a brick wall will tumble down. Now all we have to do is follow the new leads!

Brick Wall Tips

- Search BDM indexes in all States - people moved around more than we think
- Was there another marriage/s – especially after a husband/wife dies and don't just look for one!
- Trace the other partner's family in case they have information on your ancestor
- Try and get living relatives to tell you as much as they can, although if they are trying to hide a family secret this can be difficult
- Persevere and keep revisiting the research as more records become accessible and online
- Tell others how you did it – inspiration and clues for researching their own brick walls