

CASE STUDY ONE



Ethelbert married Harriet Green in Grimsby, Lincolnshire on 29 May 1838, both aged 18. Ethelbert had come up from Herne Bay to Grimsby as a mariner. At that time, Grimsby wasn't known as a fishing haven, but as the century went on, this changed dramatically. The Royal Dock was opened by the Prince Consort in 1855, and later the Fish Dock, was built.

Grimsby became connected to the rest of the country through the rail networks, which meant it was now possible to forward cargo landed at the town onwards to Manchester, Sheffield and London.

Ethelbert settled in Grimsby with his family. They welcomed a third son, William, in 1843 and then a daughter, named Harriet after her mother, in 1845. Ethelbert continued his occupation as a mariner, probably employed in the coastal shipping business. In 1846, Harriet died, aged only three months, and tragedy was to visit the family again in 1847 when Ethelbert's wife died of heart disease on 22 September.

Her parents took on the three boys and brought them up in Hull, while their father continued living in Grimsby. In the 1851 Census, Ethelbert is recorded as Peter Sayer, a mariner, and in 1861 he's living at 21 Flour Square, a 40-year-old widower, occupation fisherman.

Sailing a stormy sea

A hard-working mariner's tragic tale of love and loss in the 19th century

By **Carol Kerry-Green**



Carol became interested in family history ten years ago and is now studying for a diploma in genealogy.

When I began researching my 3x great-grandfather, I kept coming across references to an Ethelbert Sayer/s and a Peter Sayer/s, who both appeared to have been born in Kent between 1820 and 1825.

It was only when I had accumulated several documents and certificates that I was able to say with certainty that the Ethelbert Sayer born in Herne Bay in Kent in 1820 and baptised there on the 4 August that year, was the same person as the Peter Sayers who appeared on the 1841 Census with his wife Harriet and two young children: John, aged two years; and Thomas, five weeks. It simply appears Ethelbert preferred to be called Peter.

DISEASE

Diphtheria

This is a contagious respiratory disease that causes an inflammation of the throat, affecting breathing. Tubes were inserted into the throat to prevent suffocation

Fishing town

Fishing came to Hull and Grimsby in the 1840s. Hull fishermen found such great quantities of fish just 60 miles off the mouth of the Humber that the fishing ground became known as the Silver Pitt. Taking advantage of the newly built railways, Hull and Grimsby both experienced spectacular growth in the industry, as fish landed at these ports could easily be transported by train inland.

“In 1846, his three-month old daughter died, followed by his wife a year later”

THE SAYERS FAMILY TREE

Harriet Green
1820-1847
Housewife

Ethelbert
Peter Sayers
1820-1900
Skipper of fishing vessels

Mary Ann Fraser
1837-1902
Housewife

John Green Sayers
1839-1899
Mariner and waterman

Nancy Fish
1837-1882
Housewife

Leonard Farrow Green
1874-1959
Licensed Victualler

Ethel Roseman Sayers
1877-1928
Housewife

Marcus Alexander Green
1899-1966
Merchant Navy officer

Ethel Maud Pagan
1900-1973
Housewife

Derek Alexander Green
1924-1997
Cost clerk

Muriel Singleton
1926-1997
Printer's assistant

Carol Ann Green
1960-
Housing officer & genealogist

Home The 1871 Census entry for the Emperor with Ethelbert on board

A fisherman's life was incredibly hard. During the mid-19th century, the fishing 'smacks' (boats that transported the catch to market) leaving Grimsby and Hull were under sail rather than steam, and trawling was carried out with a long net that trailed along the shallow seabed. The fish were then emptied onto the deck of the smack, where the crew would fillet them. This work was carried out in all weathers in the open. The crew included a

skipper, mate and usually three apprentices, and all the men would sleep in one cabin. The apprentices were often from the workhouse and were supposed to be taught seamanship – in reality, they were often no more than forced labour and often had the worst jobs.

Many of the original skippers of the smacks became owners, and some made big business out of it. The crew lists are kept at the North East Lincolnshire Archives in Grimsby, and it was

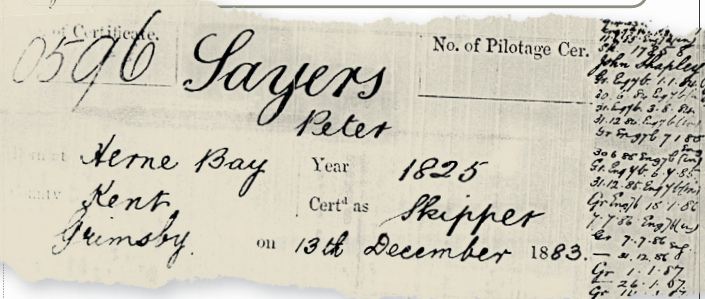
Fishermen's records

Where to find the resources that shed light on your seafaring kin

You can find ships' crew lists in local archives. The information contained in them varies, but usually gives details of the members of the crew, the positions they held and the ships they sailed on. Census records can also help, and vessels at sea were enumerated by the captain or skipper with details of where the ship was at the time of the census. You can download these from Ancestry (www.ancestry.co.uk)

or Findmypast (www.findmypast.co.uk) and include individual schedules for each vessel.

You can find other records for fishermen at The National Archives in Kew. Skippers' certificates are in BT130/1 and give details of the skipper's name, date and place of birth and the date the certificate was issued. These documents can help you build a picture of your ancestor's career and working conditions.



VITAL

Burial records

These records can help fill out the missing gaps in your family tree. You can often access parish register burials on microfiche or microfilm at local archives and libraries

Captain Ethelbert 'Peter' Sayers's skipper certificate for the John Shapley

here that I first found Ethelbert (Peter) mentioned as skipper.

The indexes to these lists are on www.nelincs.gov.uk and while searching them, I found him as skipper in the 1880s and 1890s on the John Shapley, the Emperor, the Frolic, the Kerry and the Alethia, all owned by James Meadows. In 1883, official certification of fishing boats' skippers and mates was introduced, and on a visit to The National Archives, I found Ethelbert's certificate in BT130/1 on microfilm, giving details of his voyages on the John Shapley.

In 1864, Ethelbert married again, to Mary Ann Fraser, the widow of another fisherman. By this time, his children from his

CERTIFIED COPY OF AN ENTRY OF DEATH
GIVEN AT THE GENERAL REGISTER OFFICE
Application Number 2379656-1

REGISTRATION DISTRICT: CAISTOR in the County of Lincoln

1865 DEATH in the Sub-district of Great Grimsby

No.	When and where died	Name and surname	Sex	Age	Occupation	Cause of death	Signature, description and residence of informant	When registered	Signature of registrar
1	12th December 1865 New Street Grimsby	Ethelbert Sayers	Male	6 weeks		Diarrhoea	Mr J. H. Harker, Justice in attendance New Street, Grimsby	15th December 1865	Wm. Lippington

“Ethelbert and Mary Ann lost eight of their children, aged three weeks to five years”

first marriage were grown up and married themselves. It was on a visit to the Institute of Heraldic and Genealogical Studies (IHGS) for a weekend workshop, that I first came across Ethelbert's heart-breaking family's tragedy.

Unbearable loss

Working through the microfiche of burials for the parish of Great Grimsby, I kept finding burials for young children: Mary Ann Sayers buried 12 September 1866, aged six weeks; Ethelbert Sayers, buried 15 December 1865, aged six weeks; another Ethelbert, buried 18 May 1868, aged eight weeks; Frederick W Sayers, buried 10 July 1870, aged three weeks; Mary Ann Sayers, buried 9 August 1873, aged three weeks; a third Ethelbert Sayers, buried 21 October 1874, aged five weeks; Ethel Rosamund, buried 18 December 1874, aged two; and Alfred Sayers buried 27 December 1874, aged five.

By the time I'd finished there were tears in my eyes. So many young children dying in their first weeks of life, with only two, Alfred and Ethel, surviving to live for a paltry few years.

CERTIFIED COPY OF AN ENTRY OF DEATH
GIVEN AT THE GENERAL REGISTER OFFICE
Application Number 2379656-2

REGISTRATION DISTRICT: CAISTOR in the County of Lincoln

1874 DEATH in the Sub-district of Great Grimsby

No.	When and where died	Name and surname	Sex	Age	Occupation	Cause of death	Signature, description and residence of informant	When registered	Signature of registrar
1	21st October 1874 New Street Grimsby	Ethelbert Sayers	Male	5 years		Diphtheria	Mr J. H. Harker, Justice in attendance New Street, Grimsby	21st October 1874	Wm. Lippington

3rd day of June 2010

See note overleaf

Tragic The death certificates of Ethelbert (aged six weeks) and Alfred Sayers (five years)

EFFICIENT

Fleeting system

This system made fishing more efficient. Several smacks sailed together and offload their catch to a carrier. The carrier would then take the fish to the port and rejoin the fleet

Between 1865 and 1874, Ethelbert and Mary Ann lost eight of their nine children, aged from three weeks to five years. The only child to survive to adulthood from this marriage was Isabella Ethel, born in 1876. How precious she must have been to her parents.

I sent for three of the death certificates using www.gro.gov.uk, for Ethelbert, Ethel and Alfred. I discovered they'd all died from childhood diseases that were prevalent in the overcrowded urban areas of the mid-19th century. Ethelbert died of diarrhoea, Ethel of scarlet fever and Alfred from diphtheria, all treatable and preventable today.

Grimsby, like most urban areas at the time, was filled with overcrowded unsanitary houses built by speculative builders to house the fishermen near to their work. The unsanitary

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WEBSITES

Ancestry

www.ancestry.co.uk

Findmypast

www.findmypast.co.uk

General Register Office

www.gro.gov.uk

North East Lincolnshire Archives

www.nelincs.gov.uk

FURTHER READING

A History of Grimsby

Edward Gillett, 1970, Oxford University Press, ISBN-13: 9780859584531

The Fishermen: The Sociology of an Extreme Occupation

Jeremy Tunstall, 1962, MacGibbon and Kee, ISBN-13: 9780261615861

conditions must have proved hard for the families living in them as they struggled to make a living. It's no wonder that in the late 1870s, the family moved to Humber Street in nearby Clee-with-Weelsby – an area with better housing and cleaner air.

Old man of the sea

Ethelbert continued fishing until he was well into his 70s. I've been lucky enough to see a memoriam card for him, which stated he was known as Old Peter and had been well-known and respected. It also states that when the New Dock was opened, Ethelbert walked the full length of it under water in a heavy diving suit, which must have been a sight to behold!

Ethelbert passed away aged 80 in 1900. In his life he moved north to find work, his first wife died young and he suffered sorrow and tragedy with the death of so many of his children from his second marriage. I have great admiration for this man of strong fortitude and am proud to have him for an ancestor. ■

Childhood illness and death

How child mortality was rife before modern medicine

Death in childhood was all too common in the 19th century, and families from all walks of life experienced the extreme sickness and death of their children. Childhood diseases were rampant – scarlet fever diphtheria and diarrhoea were common killers. Many young children succumbed to outbreaks of measles, cholera and small pox.

Many families couldn't afford a doctor, and often relied on folk remedies or patent medicines, which

could frequently be dangerous in themselves. The teachings of the bible were often a comfort to families. Attitudes to death in the 19th century were often tempered by the belief that the loved one would be in a better place, and many more people attended church than today. Funerals could be expensive, but there were Friendly Societies, burial clubs and savings clubs that working-class people could use to insure against a pauper's burial.