WILLIAM COOMBE, POSTMAN BY ANONYMOUS

William was born to John Coombe, a baker, and his wife Charlotte (nee Cox). He is a bit of an enigma, as there are two choices for his year of birth – either 1845 or 1850. As I discovered previously, the census of 1851, 1861 and 1871 show him as being born in 1845. The other years show him as being born in 1850. However, when he died in 1917, his age was given as seventy-two, making him born in 1845. He did start out to follow his father into the bakery business (1871), but in 1875 was appointed as a letter carrier in Exeter.¹

William married Hannah Nicholls in 1890 and they had four children:- Sidney George (b.1893), Arthur Charles (b.1895), Hilda Mary (b.1896) and Elsie May (b.1899). William retired from the postal service in 1901, but I don't think his marriage had been a happy one. The 1911 census shows him living on his own in one room, with no sign of his wife or his children, although he says he is still married.

As background to William's accident I searched the British Newspapers Archives and found this interesting article. In a newspaper report² on a tribunal held to review exemptions for call-up to military service for persons under thirty-one years of age. The tribunal discussed various occupations, including farriers, bakers, hairdressers and taxi drivers.

In 1917 there were only three taxi drivers left in the city of Exeter, whereas before the war there had been thirteen, plus horse drawn cabs. The tribunal was considering the case of E. Hodge, taxi-cab proprietor, who owned two taxis and an open car. He was asked if a woman could drive the taxi, but he thought the taxi would be too heavy for a woman. So how unlucky was it that William was knocked over by one of the few taxi-cabs still in operation in the August.

It was also this paper that reported on the inquest, held on the 9th August 1917, into William's accident and subsequent death.³ The inquest was held at the hospital by the coroner Mr W. Linford Brown. He heard evidence from the attending police officer P. C. Parker and a witness Mr. F. W. Dutton; the taxi driver declined to give evidence. The consensus of opinion was that the accident was unavoidable and William was struck by the front-off side of the cab, dragged along and rolled over a couple of times. The taxi driver had tooted his horn, but William didn't hear it. This became more apparent when his sister Mary Ann Kemp identified the body and explained that her brother was 'rather deaf'. The taxi was said to have been travelling at about twelve miles an hour, which the coroner thought rather a high speed for the high street, where the accident happened near Exeter General Post Office

¹ U.K. Postal Service Appointment Books 1737-1969

² Western Times, 14th March 1917

³ Western Times, 10th August 1917

Interestingly, in another report on the same inquest, the reporter noted that the 'deceased's *niece* said he was a deaf as men of his age usually were'. ⁴ The reporter didn't name the niece, so I think the other report was correct. It was also reported that the coroner observed that although in law the pedestrian had as much right to the road as vehicles, in practice it wasn't usually the case.

William was taken to the Royal Devon and Exeter Hospital, where the house physician – a lady called Mary Hounsfield – certified that William was admitted with a contusion on the head. An operation was performed later that evening at about 10 p.m., when he was trephined. This improved his condition for a short while, but he later deteriorated and died on the 8th August.

William's death certificate shows he died in the hospital of 'accidental fracture of the skull', notified to the registrar by the Coroner for Exeter, W. Linford Brown after an inquest held on 9th August 1917. William would have been taken to the Royal Devon & Exeter Hospital, situated then in the area of Exeter known as Southernhay. The building is still there, but is now called Dean Clarke House after one of its founder members.

The Devon and Exeter Hospital had been founded in 1741, making it 'the first purpose-built district general hospital in England'. The hospital remained on its site in Southernhay until 1974 when a new hospital was opened in the Wonford area of the city. The appellation 'Royal' was granted in 1899, after a visit by the Duke and Duchess of York when they opened a new wing that was named Victoria after the Queen.

The hospital has always been an innovator -- in 1872 Mr Roper, a new surgeon, startled everyone by washing his hands before operating! They even used X-rays as early as 1898⁶, so this modern technology would have been available to use on William's injuries.

It was mentioned in one of the newspaper reports that William had been 'trephined', which eased his condition. Trephining involves removing part of the skull to ease pressure on the brain by drilling or cutting into the skull. He died of a fractured skull, but there is no indication of how badly the skull was broken.

I have been unable to trace William's wife and children, so I was glad that at least he kept in touch with at least one of his twelve siblings!

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⁴ Exeter & Plymouth Gazette, 10th August 1917

⁵ Harvey, Hazel. *The Royal Devon & Exeter Hospital 1948-1998: a better provision fifty years on*(Exeter: RD&E Healthcare NHS Trust 1998): 9

⁶ *Ibid* 19

Fact Sheet: William Coombe

Pensioner Details
Pensioner name: William Coombe
Person ID: DV1005
Your name: Anonymous
U3A group:
Part One: Birth and Family

1: When and where was your pensioner born?

William Coombe's actual year of birth is difficult to confirm; it could be either 1845 or 1850. In the census of 1851, 1861, 1871 and 1901, his year of birth is 1845. This is also the date given on his death certificate. The other years – 1881, 1891 and 1911, his year of birth is 1850. I cannot trace a record of birth for William in the index of the GRO. It is possible his birth wasn't registered.

However, there is a baptismal record for a William Coombe on 4th July 1849, St Thomas parish, Exeter, to John Coombe, confectioner and Charlotte of Cowick Street; the parents match the census records I found.

2: Who were your pensioners' parents? Record any details you can find out about them here (e.g. occupation, religious affiliation, whether they could read or write)

William's father was John Coombe born about 1812 to Bartholomew Coombe, a wool sorter and Sarah Hawkins. He was baptised on 29th November1812 Exeter, St George.

John married twice. His first wife was Hannah Martin, who he married at Ashburton on the 24th February 1834. They had three children. Hannah died on the 11th December 1839 of Erysipelas. The death was notified by Charlotte Cox from Sidmouth, present at the death.

John then married Charlotte Cox at Exeter Register Office on the 6th September 1840 and they had ten children. (See below). John earned a living as a baker and confectioner.

John died on the 6th December 1886 and was buried on the 11th December 1886 Exeter, St. James. Probate on the will was finally granted in October 1888 to "Charlotte Coombe late Cox Spinster". (see below for more information).

William's mother was Charlotte Cox, daughter of William Cox, a labourer and Charlotte Warland. Charlotte was born in 1818 and baptised on 9th August 1818 in Heavitree, Exeter. She died in 1894, aged 75.

3: Did your pensioner have any siblings? What were their names, and how old were they in relation to your pensioner? Use this space to record anything else you have found out about them (e.g. occupation)

William's siblings were:-

Hannah Martin Coombe (half-sister)

Hannah was born in Ashburton, Devon and baptised on the 7th January 1835 as Anna.

Hannah married James Robinson [b.1837-1904?] on 4^{th} May 1878 at St Thomas, Woolwich. He was a gunner in the Royal Artillery. During their marriage, Hannah had no occupation; neither did they have any children.

She died, a widow, on 20th December 1906 in Surrey. Probate was granted to Thomas Rosamond Coombe on 27th February 1907.

John Coombe (half-brother)

John was baptised on 20th November 1837 at Exeter, St Mary Major, to John (a confectioner) and Hannah. I think he enlisted in the Royal Navy as I found a match for him in 1861 on board *Caesar*, in the Mediterranean. As his name is fairly common, I am unable to clearly locate any marriage or death for John.

Susan Coombe (half-sister)

Susan was born in Ashburton in 1838 [c/t a baptism].

She married William Hodge on the 23rd January 1875, St Margaret, Plumstead, Kent. On the 1881 census, she is entered as Louisa, working as a nurse.

She died on 27th March 1895 and left £17 2s 8d.

Thomas Rosamond Coombe

Thomas was baptised on the 24th December 1841 at Exeter, St John. He married Louisa Matilda Crossman [b.1845] on 27th October 1867 at Exeter, St David's.

In the 1861 census, he was apprenticed to a Sadler. In 1871 he and Louisa are living in Highweek, Devon and he is a saddler & harness maker. In 1881, Thomas and his family are living in Wolborough and he earns a living as a Saddler & Tobacconist. In 1891, he is just a Saddler & Harness maker, while in 1901 he is now a tobacconist shopkeeper & saddler. He died on 9^{th} May 1907 and is buried in St Mary the Virgin churchyard, Newton Abbot.

George Tootell Coombe

George was baptised on the 6th July 1847 at Exeter, St Thomas. In the 1861 census, his is listed as an apprentice to a gun maker. 1881 sees him listed as a gunsmith. In 1911 he is lodging in Paddington, London and is a gun maker; he states he is single. I cannot find him in the other census, nor can I find a marriage for him nor a death entry.

Sarah Jane Coombe

Sarah was baptised on the 4th July 1849 at Exeter, St Thomas. In 1867 she married Samuel Winsor (sometimes Windsor). In 1871, they were living in Red Lion Court and Samuel was employed as head boots at the Clarence Hotel (a prestigious hotel in Exeter). Sarah had no occupation listed. By 1881, the family had moved to Plymouth, where Samuel was a hotel waiter; he continued as a waiter throughout his working life. Their children became successful professional employees – school teacher, law clerks. Sarah died in Plymouth in 1928, aged 79.

Mary Ann Rosamond Coombe

(Her name is sometimes written as Marianne Rosamond). She was baptised on the 27th June 1851 in Exeter, St Thomas. She married James Kemp on the 14th December 1874 in St. James, Exeter. James was a saddler/harness maker from Suffolk, though later on he became a boarding house keeper (1911 census).

Their son, Frederick George Kemp, a ship's cook on H.M.S.*Defence*, was killed at the Battle of Jutland 31st May 1916. Mary died in Exeter in 1927.

Charlotte Coombe

Charlotte was born in 1854 (I cannot trace a baptism record). She married Frederick Satterley on 27th February 1879 at Exeter, St. James. Frederick was a baker, like her father; Frederick died in 1900 and Charlotte then married another baker, William Allen Hoare in 1904. She died in Exeter on the 6th September 1925.

Alma Eugene Coombe

Alma was born on the 15th August 1855 but not baptised until the 30th December 1862 at Exeter, St David's. In 1881, Alma was working as a schoolmistress. Alma married Frederick Avery on 16th March 1886 at Exeter, St James. They moved to Portsea, which was where Frederick was from, where he earned a living as a carpenter and joiner. By 1911, they have had three children and Alma is listed as a Lodging House Keeper; her sister Elizabeth is living with them and assisting in the business. Alma died on the 26th May 1932 at 117 Madeira Road, Portsmouth; her children put a notice in the Portsmouth Evening News of Saturday 28th May 1932. (Frederick had died in 1928).

James John Coombe

James was born on the 3rd May 1857 and also baptised on the 30th December 1862, Exeter St David's. In later years, the name John is sometimes used as a first name. It was in the third quarter of 1888 that James married Lucy Ann Chudley in Exeter. (All their children were given the middle name of Chudley). In 1901 the family are living in Milford Haven and he is working as a ships steward.

He died on the 27th October 1917 and is buried with wife Lucy (who died on the 5th June 1949, age 83) in Milford Haven Cemetery.

Elizabeth Coombe

Elizabeth was born on the 15th February 1861 and with Alma and James, was baptised on the 30th December 1862 in Exeter, St David's. Elizabeth was working as an assistant (presumably in the bakery business) in 1881. In 1891, she is living with her widowed mother and employed as a shop girl. In both 1901 and 1911, Elizabeth is with her sister Alma and her family in Portsmouth, latterly helping with the lodging house business. She died on 3rd November 1927 at her home, 31 Clifton Road, Newtown, Exeter – a spinster – and probate was granted to her sister Alma Avery.

Charles Frederick Coombe

The youngest sibling to William was born in 1864 and baptised on the 10th June 1864 at Exeter, St David's. In 1888, Charles marries Louise Eva Bradford in Exeter.

The 1881 census shows him working (presumably with his father) as a baker's assistant. Then in 1891, he is the proprietor of the bakery at 106 Sidwell Street, Exeter. However, by 1901, he and his wife are lodging in the St Thomas area of Exeter and Charles is now a Commercial Agent.

Charles died in 1903 and was buried on the 14^{th} March 1903 at Exeter, All Hallows on the Walls. He was only 38 years of age.

Part Two: Marriage and children

1: Did your pensioner marry? What was their spouse's name, and when and where did they marry them? Use this space to record any extra details you can find out about their spouse (e.g. when/where they were born, their occupation)

William married Hannah Nicholls (her surname may be written as Nichols/Nickols/Nickles) in Exeter in 1890.

Anna (Hannah) was born in 1864 in Stockleigh Pomeroy to Henry Nichols, a labourer and Mary and baptised on the 6th March 1864. [There is a note in the margin to suggest the surname may be spelled differently i.e. Nickels.] The GRO have the surname as Nickels. In 1881 she was employed as a dressmaker. I cannot trace her or the children in the 1911 census, although I found William.

I cannot find her in the 1939 register either.

I think she died in 1947 in the Barnstaple area.

In 1861, whilst still a scholar, William's parents ran a lodging house, alongside their bakery business at 6 Longbrook Street, Exeter. The lodgers were:-

- Jane Martin, single, 22, servant from Ashburton, Devon
- Thomas Channing, married, 68, labourer from Sidmouth, Devon
- Charlotte Channing, married, 68 from Exeter
- James Beedle, married, 55, labourer from Thorverton, Devon
- Sarah Beedle, married, 45 from Thorverton, Devon
- William Winson, married, 22, stone mason from Plymouth
- Ann Winson, married, 23 from Plymouth
- Eliza Coleman, married, 25, servant from West Indies
- William Beedle, single, 16, labourer from Exeter.

2: Did your pensioner have any children? What were their names, and when they were born? Use this space to record any extra details you can find out about them (e.g. occupation, where they lived later in life)

Sidney George Coombe was born on 8th October 1893 in Hittisleigh, Devon. He enlisted in the Royal Navy – service number J5733. He married Emily Elizabeth Godbeer in 1917. In 1939 they were living at 1 Mill Cottages, Tiverton and he was working as a lorry driver, delivering sacks of flour. He died on 20th September 1952 in the Royal Devon & Exeter Hospital, Exeter. He is buried in St Thomas a Becket churchyard, Thorverton with his wife.

Arthur Charles Coombe was born on 21st January 1895 in Exeter. In 1922, he married Edith Bessie Mounce in Bideford. In 1939 they were living at 27 Coronation Street, Barnstaple and Arthur worked as a bread baker. He died in 1982 in Barnstaple.

Hilda Mary Coombe was born in 1896 in Exeter. I cannot with any accuracy find any further information on her, but there is a suggestion she died in 1904 in the Tavistock area. (It would need certificates to go further with this person).

Elsie May Coombe was born in 1899 in Exeter. I think she married John T. Martin in Exeter in 1928.. I cannot with any accuracy find any further information on her. (It would need certificates to go further with this person. There is a family tree on Ancestry which suggests she may have died in 1976 in Barnstaple).

Part Three: Work

1: What occupation was your pensioner recorded as doing in census years? Please make sure to state clearly which year you are referring to

1851 census – a scholar

1861 census – worked as apprentice to a baker

1871 census – worked as a baker

1881 census – worked as a post office employee (CSM)

1891 census – worked as a letter carrier

1901 census – formerly letter carrier, pensioner

1911 census – G.P.O Pensioner; mail porter, assistant mail guard, letter carrier, civil service. [William states he is married, but there is no sign of wife or children at this address, which appears to be a lodging house.]

2: What occupations were people living with your pensioner (e.g. spouse, children, boarders) doing in the census years? Please make sure to state clearly which year you are referring to

In 1911, when William was living at 67 Holloway Street, Exeter, there were 8 other people living in the tenement building.

- I think the landlady may have been Thirza Treleaven [64] a retired caretaker and widow from Devon as she occupied two rooms.
- Frances Welber [67] a cook domestic, single from Sidbury, Devon. One room.
- Harry Williams [37] & Ada Williams, [29] married eleven years. He is a furniture porter from Nottinghamshire and Ada is from Berkshire. One room.
- William Potbury [41] Sarah Potbury [29] and Gladys Potbury 3 years. They have been married five years and he works as a nursery labourer. He was born in Cullompton, Devon; Sarah in Exeter and Gladys in Withycombe Raleigh, Exmouth, Devon. One room.
- George Newton [49] single man from Hull, Yorkshire. He is a pedlar of sweets, namely cough lozenges principally vended on licensed premises (viz.) public houses. One room.

Part Four: Anything Else

Please use this space to record anything else you have found out about your pensioner

In his will, John left William "... All the furniture in the Back Room in which he generally sleeps."

Here is a link to a page from the Western Times regarding the inquest into the death of William Coombe 10th August 1917 (transcription attached). It is interesting to note that it was his sister who made the identification after he died and not his wife. I suspect, but cannot prove, that William and Hannah were estranged by 1911: Exeter Fatality. | Western Times | Friday 10 August 1917 | British Newspaper Archive

Marriage of John Coombe & Hannah Martin, 1835, Ashburton: <u>Devon Marriages Image | findmypast.co.uk</u>

Burial entry for Hannah Coombe 1839, Exeter St Mary Major: <u>Devon Burials Image</u> | findmypast.co.uk

William's father, John Coombe, aroused my interest. When searching for his death, I came across a notice of probate; the executors were "Charlotte Coombe late Cox Spinster" and Frederick Satterley (John's son in law). This piqued my curiosity. Why describe his wife as a spinster? In an effort to solve this riddle, I sent for a copy of the will. This was signed on the 6th November 1886 and eventually proved at Exeter on the 22nd October 1888 "... by the Oaths of Charlotte Coombe otherwise Cox, Spinster (in the Will of the deceased erroneously described or referred to as his Wife) ..." The brackets were put in by E. J. Bratton, Solicitor, Exeter.

Reading through the Will, I saw that John acknowledges that there may be a dispute about whether he and Charlotte were married as he wrote "And I further direct that should any question or dispute arises as to whether the Marriage between me and my said wife Charlotte Coombe otherwise Charlotte Cox (which was celebrated in the Register Office Exeter about the year 1840) is lawful or not the said Charlotte Coombe otherwise Charlotte Cox is to be entitled to all the benefits mentioned in this Will nevertheless whether the marriage be lawful or not."

Naturally the next step was to obtain a copy of the marriage certificate, which I did and it all appears legal. The only oddity was that he describes himself as a bachelor, when technically he was a widower, but that wouldn't really have made any difference. His first wife was deceased (see above for her burial entry; death certificate attached). I even asked the opinion of Professor Rebecca Probert, who is an authority on marriage law, and she could see no valid reason why the marriage wasn't legal. So, why the mystery surrounding their marriage? It may be a religious thing or just plain old malice and spite as Charlotte was present at the death of Hannah and the gossips may have thought there was something amiss with her death. We'll never know the answer!

Part Five: Your Sources

Please use this space to record the sources you have used

```
William Coombe
Birth - Record Transcription: Devon Baptisms | findmypast.co.uk
              Record Transcription: England & Wales Marriages 1837-2005
Marriage -
findmypast.co.uk
Death - Record Transcription: England & Wales Deaths 1837-2007 | findmypast.co.uk
                Record Transcription: 1851 England, Wales & Scotland Census |
1851 census -
findmvpast.co.uk
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1871 census -
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1891 census -
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1901 census -
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1911 census - Record Transcription: 1911 Census For England & Wales | findmypast.co.uk
Hannah Nichols
Birth - Devon FHS | Members' Area (devondb.co.uk)
Death - England & Wales, Civil Registration Death Index, 1916-2007 - Ancestry.co.uk
1871 census - 1871 England Census - Ancestry.co.uk
1881 census -1881 England Census - Ancestry.co.uk
1891 census - 1891 England Census - Ancestry.co.uk
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John Coombe
Birth - Record Transcription: Devon Baptisms | findmypast.co.uk
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1841 census -
                Record Transcription: 1841 England, Wales & Scotland Census |
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1851 census -
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                Record Transcription: 1861 England, Wales & Scotland Census
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                Record Transcription: 1871 England, Wales & Scotland Census |
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Probate & will – see attachment for full details.
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Hannah Martin

Birth - Record Transcription: Devon Baptisms | findmypast.co.uk

Marriage - Record Transcription: Devon Marriages And Banns | findmypast.co.uk **Death** - Record Transcription: Devon Burials | findmypast.co.uk; Erysipelas - Wikipedia

Charlotte Cox

Birth - Record Transcription: Devon Baptisms | findmypast.co.uk

Death - England & Wales, Civil Registration Death Index, 1837-1915 - Ancestry.co.uk

Children of William and Hannah:-

Sidney George Coombe

Birth - Record Transcription: England & Wales Births 1837-2006 | findmypast.co.uk 1901 census - Record Transcription: 1901 England, Wales & Scotland Census | findmypast.co.uk

Marriage - FreeBMD - Search

1939 - Record Transcription: 1939 Register | findmypast.co.uk

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Arthur Charles Coombe

Birth - Record Transcription: England & Wales Births 1837-2006 | findmypast.co.uk Marriage - Record Transcription: England & Wales Marriages 1837-2005 | findmypast.co.uk 1939 - Record Transcription: 1939 Register | findmypast.co.uk

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Hilda Mary Coombe

Birth - Record Transcription: England & Wales Births 1837-2006 | findmypast.co.uk Marriage – c/t

Death - Record Transcription: England & Wales Deaths 1837-2007 | findmypast.co.uk

Elsie May Coombe

Birth - Record Transcription: England & Wales Births 1837-2006 | findmypast.co.uk Marriage - Record Transcription: England & Wales Marriages 1837-2005 | findmypast.co.uk **Death –** elsie may coombe - Facts (ancestry.co.uk)

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Birth - c/t

Marriage - London, England, Church of England Marriages and Banns, 1754-1932 -Ancestry.co.uk

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Susan Coombe

Birth - FreeBMD - Search

Marriage - London, England, Church of England Marriages and Banns, 1754-1932 - Ancestry.co.uk

1881 census - 1881 England Census - Ancestry.co.uk

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John Coombe

Birth - Devon Baptisms Image | findmypast.co.uk

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Marriage – c/t

Death – c/t

Children of John and Charlotte Coombe nee Cox:-

Thomas Rosamond Coombe

Birth - Record Transcription: Devon Baptisms | findmypast.co.uk

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1891 census - 1891 England Census - Ancestry.co.uk

1901 census - 1901 England Census - Ancestry.co.uk

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George Tootell Coombe

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1891 census – c/t

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Sarah Jane Coombe

Birth - Record Transcription: Devon Baptisms | findmypast.co.uk

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Birth - Record Transcription: Devon Baptisms | findmypast.co.uk

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Birth - c/t

Marriage - Record Transcription: Devon Marriages And Banns | findmypast.co.uk

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James Coombe

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Elizabeth Coombe

Birth - Devon Baptisms Image | findmypast.co.uk

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