

*THE LURE OF THE SEA – BUT
THERE'S NO PLACE LIKE
HOME
BY JANET CHOULES*

Many elements of Walter Webb's life are similar to the lives of my Victorian relatives – agricultural labourers leaving small Devon villages heading to Plymouth to join the Navy, in search of adventure and fortune. Most did exactly that -- but my 2x great grandfather, on reaching Devonport, decided to sell tripe from a barrow instead. In time he opened three butchers' shops, one of which was near Walter's home in Stoke. They were a similar age so I can't help wondering if their paths crossed. Here's Walter's story:

Childhood

Today, Bigbury, South Devon is a popular tourist destination known for its wide, sandy beach. In 1841, when Walter Webb was born, it would have been an idyllic place to grow up -- just imagine young Walter and his four older brothers having fun roaming the fields and coast.

Their father, John Webb, worked as a labourer until he joined the Merchant Navy in his forties. It is possible he was unable to find enough work around Bigbury or perhaps he wanted a more reliable income to support his family. It is also likely John's second son, William, was already a Merchant Seaman.

By 1851, the three oldest boys had left home. Walter, his brother Thomas and their parents were living in Sutton, the oldest part of Plymouth and the harbour from where Merchant ships departed on foreign and home trade. The streets were narrow, noisy and busy at all hours of the night and day and --despite living in the impressively named Queen Anne's Place -- they shared the house with at least one other family.

The Lure of the Sea

For centuries young men in Plymouth chose to build ships or sail them as the Merchant and Royal Navies and the dockyard at Devonport were the largest employers. Sixteen-year-old Walter chose the Royal Navy and enlisted as a trainee seaman. On his eighteenth birthday he signed on for a minimum of ten years Continuous Service.¹

Of the many ships on which he served and voyages which took him all over the world, one was particularly eventful. Walter had been a crew member on HMS Conqueror for over a year before she was tasked with transporting troops to Mexico. On the 29th December 1861, during the outward voyage and 20 miles off course, she struck a coral reef off Rum Key in the Bahamas. The following extracts are taken from a crewman's letter dated 1st January 1862 which was published in full by *The Illustrated London News* the following month.

'One of the finest screw line-of-battle ships in her Majesty's service - the Conqueror, 101 guns-three days ago in the highest state of discipline and preparation for war, with nearly 1400 persons on board, is now a useless wreck'..... 'the water up to the lower-deck, her sides bilged in, and her back broken'..... 'We have all been working hard to get the provisions ashore, and shall be able to save all our gear (private I mean), with the

¹ The National Archives' reference ADM 139/343/34281

exception of our ale and wine, all of which the Captain saw hove overboard, himself lending a hand. All hands are saved. EDWARD P. WILLIAMS²

Two steam frigates returned the crew to Plymouth in March.

Although this incident happened quite early in Walter's naval career, he went on to serve for over twenty years leaving the Royal Navy in September 1877. Service records describe his physical appearance – 5 feet 6 inches tall, black hair and hazel eyes; his character throughout is 'very good', occasionally 'good' but never lower, and chronicle Walter's steady progression through the seaman's ranks.

A Grocer and a Postman

Walter had married Mary Jane Fice in 1868. Mary worked as a grocer and lived in Mitre Court, a building of multiple occupancy tucked away behind the shops of Southside Street, close to Plymouth Barbican. After returning to civilian life Walter also worked as a grocer and tobacconist whilst Mary cared for their four young children.

Just as his father had sought alternative employment so did Walter. At the age of forty-three he joined the Postal Office delivering mail in the Plymouth area. The family relocated to Stoke which was perfectly situated for the collection of mail from the North Road Railway Station Sorting Office and walking to work at Devonport Dockyard. All four sons were Dockyard apprentices; Walter and John became engine fitters, whilst Fred and Albert were shipwrights. Walter (son) later joined the Royal Navy as an Engine Room Artificer.

There Really is No Place Like Home

After retiring from the Post Office at the age of sixty Walter, Mary and sons John and Albert moved to 43 Whittington Street, Stoke. Their daughter Celia and her three children lived across the road at number 38.

With Navy and Post Office pensions, plus income from their sons whilst they lived at home, I imagine they were able to enjoy a comfortable retirement.

At some point I believe the family bought the house and named it after the village Walter once called home. Probate records reveal that Walter left £175 1s 4p to Mary (equivalent to almost £14,000 today). The average cost of a Victorian terraced house was less than £300³ so it is possible, having rented during their working lives, they finally owned their own home in retirement.



Figure 1: 43 Whittington Street today. © Google maps
<https://tinyurl.com/2678pr7y>

Their youngest son, Albert, was still living in the house in 1939 with his wife and daughter. Walter Webb died at home in 1913 at the age of seventy-two. His death certificate lists cause of death as 'Disease of Heart 3 Valvular General Anasarca' (extreme swelling). At the beginning of the 20th century doctors worldwide were working to understand and categorise heart conditions. The stethoscope remained the only widely available instrument for examining patients and surgical procedures were largely experimental.⁴

The swelling would have caused Walter some discomfort; he may have experienced other symptoms including chest pains and shortness of breath so probably sought medical help. Until 1995 there was a Naval Hospital in Stonehouse which was also available to ex-Navy personnel.

² <https://www.britishnewspaperarchive.co.uk/viewer/bl/0001578/18620208/100/0017>

³ <https://tinyurl.com/4tep98m2>

⁴ <https://tinyurl.com/4cu9dckk>

Today, lifestyle changes such as eating a healthy diet, physical activity and avoiding tobacco would be recommended to manage the condition along with diuretics to lessen the swelling but they were not widely available until the 1950s.

Fact Sheet: Walter Webb

Pensioner Details
<i>Pensioner name:</i> Walter Webb
<i>Person ID:</i> DV1012
<i>Your name:</i> Janet Choules
<i>U3A group:</i> South-West
Part One: Birth and Family
1: When and where was your pensioner born?
Walter Webb was born 29 th August 1841 in Bigbury, Devon.
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)
<p>Father: John Woodmason Webb, born 1801 in Bigbury, Devon.</p> <p>Mother: Joanna (Johanna, Hannah, Ann) Boon (Born on marriage record) born 21st March 1806 in Bigbury, Devon.</p> <p><u>Marriage</u> John and Joanna were married on 30th September 1825 in Bigbury, Devon. The denomination on the record is Anglican so most probably at St. Lawrence's Church, Bigbury</p> <p><u>John Woodmason Webb (father)</u> 1841 census: Not able to locate. 1835 -1857 Merchant Seamen Record. Lists John Webb, born Bigbury. No date found 1851 census: Living with wife Hannah (age 45, no occupation), son Thomas (age 13) and son Walter (age 9). Age 50. Occupation listed as Sailor. Address is 6 Queen Anns Place, Sutton, Plymouth 1855 Death: Burial date 18th February 1855. Ford Park Cemetery, Plymouth. Residence listed as Queen Annes Place, Plymouth.</p> <p><u>Joanna Webb (nee Boon) (mother)</u> 1841 census: Living with son John (age 13), Son William (age 9), son George (age 7), son Thomas (age 3) and mother? Joanna Boon (age 70, Pauper). Age 35. Bigbury, Devon. 1851 census: See above. 1860 death?: There is a death recorded for a Hannah Webb in Plymouth in 1860 on Find My Past. Date of Birth is not included so there is no way to verify this is the same person. Presume Joanna could not read or write hence different spellings of name.</p>
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)
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Brother: John Woodmason Webb, born 3rd February 1828 in Bigbury, Devon. Thirteen years older than Walter. • Brother: William Webb, born 25th December 1831 in Bigbury, Devon. Nine years older than Walter. • Brother: George Webb, born 15th December 1833 in Bigbury, Devon. Seven years older than Walter.

- Brother: Thomas Webb, born 19th March 1838 in Bigbury, Devon. Three years older than Walter.

Brother: John Woodmason Webb

Baptised: 1828 at St Lawrence's Church?, Bigbury (Anglican). Father John Woodmason Webb occupation listed as Labourer. Mother Joanna no occupation listed.

See Part 1 section 2 for John's census return for 1841 under details for Joanna (Ann) Webb.

1851 census: Not able to locate.

John Webb married Frances Catherine Cornish in 1855 in Kingsbridge?

If marriage is correct:

1861 census: Frances Catherine Webb, age 31, widow, is living with her parents & in South Pool, near Kingsbridge. There are 2 Webb Grandchildren Robert, age 4 and Charles, age 3, their place of birth is Castletown, County Cork, Ireland.

Brother: William Webb

Baptised: 1831 at St Lawrence's Church?, Bigbury (Anglican). Father John Webb occupation listed as Labourer. Mother Joanna no occupation listed.

See Part 1 section 2 for William's census return for 1841 under details for Joanna (Ann) Webb.

1845- 1854 Merchant Seaman? Record fits name, place and year of birth but date is 3rd December.

1851 census: Not able to locate.

Brother: George Webb

Baptised: 1833 at St Lawrence's Church?, Bigbury (Anglican). Father John Webb occupation listed as Labourer. Mother Joanna no occupation listed.

See Part 1 section 2 for George's census return for 1841 under details for Joanna (Ann) Webb.

1851 census: Not able to locate.

1856 Death: Burial date 9th March 1856. Ford Park Cemetery, Plymouth. Residence listed as Queen Anns Place, Plymouth.

Brother: Thomas Webb

Mother's maiden name listed as Boon on birth record.

Baptised: 1838 at St Lawrence's Church?, Bigbury (Anglican). Father John Webb occupation listed as Labourer. Mother Johanna no occupation listed.

See Part 1 section 2 for Thomas' census returns for 1841 under details for Joanna (Ann) Webb.

See Part 1 section 2 for Thomas' census returns for 1851 under details for John Webb.

1861 census: Not able to locate.

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)

Marriage

Walter Webb (age 27) married Mary Jane Fice (age 20) in September 1868 in Plymouth.

Wife: Mary Jane Webb (nee Fice)

Born: 17th November 1847 in Modbury, Devon.

1851 census: Listed as living with parents John (age 49, Millwright), Sophia (age 42, no occupation), brother Thomas (age 10, scholar), sister Agnes (age 8, scholar), brother John (age 5, scholar), and sister Sarah (age 3 months). Age 3. Address is 24 Church Street, Modbury, Devon.

1861 census: Listed as a House Servant to the May (transcribed as Hay) family. Living with Benjamin May (age 32, Miller), Sophia May (age 26, no occupation), Ann May (age 6, scholar), Elizabeth May (age 4), Sophia May (age 2), Prudence May (age 1). Age 14, relationship to Head recorded as niece (possibly niece of Sophia nee Fice). Address Owley Mill, East Peek, Ugborough, Devon.

1868 marriage: See above.

1871 census: Listed as Head living with niece Eliza Fice (age 5) and visitor Hugh Cowley (age 22, Seaman). Occupation Grocer. Age 24. Address 45 South Street, Mitre Court, Plymouth.

See Part 3 Section 1 for Walter's census return 1871 in Royal Navy.

1881 census: Listed as living with husband Walter Webb (age 39, Grocer & Tobacconist), son Walter (age 5, scholar), son John C (age 1) and niece Eliza Fice (age 15, no occupation listed). There is no occupation listed for Mary. Age 33. Address is 45 Southside Street, Plymouth.

1891 census: Listed as living with husband Walter Webb (age 49, Postman), son Walter (age 15, Engine Fitter Apprentice), son John C (age 11, scholar), daughter Celia (age 9, scholar), son Fred (age 6, scholar), son Albert (age 3, scholar), niece Eliza Fice (age 24, no occupation listed), niece Sophia Fice (age 21, Shop Assistant), nephew Francis Folland (age 12 scholar). There is no occupation listed for Mary. Age 43. Address 12 Albert Road, Plymouth.

1901 census: Listed as living with husband Walter Webb (age 59, Town Postman), son John C (age 21, Engine Fitter), daughter Celia (age 19, Music Teacher), son Fred (age 16, Dockyard Shipwright Apprentice), son Albert (age 13, Dockyard Shipwright Apprentice), and boarder John Carbines (age 27, RN Engine Room Artificer). There is no occupation listed for Mary Jane. Age 54. Address is 48 Albert Road, Plymouth.

1911 census: Listed as living with husband Walter Webb (age 69, Retired Naval & Post Office Pensioner), son Albert (age 23, Shipwright Dockyard). There is no occupation listed for Mary Jane. Age 63. Address is 43 Whittington Street, Devonport, Plymouth.

Died: 6th May 1924 (age 76) in Plymouth. Probate 25th June to sons Walter Webb, pensioner RN and John Charles Webb, jeweller. Effects £1,030 19s 1d.

Boarder: John Carbines

Born: 26th July 1872 in St Ives, Cornwall. Parents were James Carbines (age 32, mariner) and Mary Carbines (age 31).

Baptised: Listed as Wesleyan on 1911 census.

1881 census: Listed as living with father James Carbines (age 40, mariner), mother Mary Carbines (age 38, no occupation), brother Thomas (age 15, fisherman), brother Philip (age 13, scholar), brother William Henry (age 3, scholar), sister Mary (age 10 months), grandfather Philip Veal (age 74, fisherman), grandmother Mary Veal (age 68, no occupation), aunt Honor P. Veal (age 29, dressmaker). John is a scholar, age 8. Address 6 Meadow, St Ives.

1891 census: Listed as living with mother Mary Carbines (age 48, no occupation), brother Philip (age 23, sailor), brother William Henry (age 13, scholar), sister Mary (age 10, scholar), sister Grace (age 3, scholar). Father James is at sea. John is a blacksmith, age 18. Address Meadow, St Ives.

1895: enlisted in the Royal Navy.

1901 census: Listed as living with Walter Webb (age 59, Town Postman), Walter's son John C (age 21, Engine Fitter), Walter's daughter Celia (age 19, Music Teacher), Walter's son Fred (age 16, Dockyard Shipwright Apprentice), Walter's son Albert (age 13, Dockyard Shipwright Apprentice), and his wife Mary Jane (age 54, no occupation). John is an RN Engine Room Artificer, age 27. Address is 48 Albert Road, Plymouth.

1902 marriage: to Celia Webb.

1911 census: Listed as member of the crew (total 289) on board HMS Cambrian in Australia. Age 38 Chief Engine Room Artificer.

See Part 2 Section 2 wife Celia's 1911 census return for children.

1920: Celia died. Left Royal Navy. Listed as Naval Pensioner on Celia's probate record.

1939 Register: Listed as living with wife? Dorothy M Cutler (age 32, Unpaid domestic duties), Doris M Ward (age 32, Assistant Teacher), Marion G Nock (age 23, Assistant Teacher). Age 67, Chief ERA Retired. Address 41, Amherst Road, Plymouth.

Died: 15th March 1963. Probate lists 41, Amherst Road, Plymouth. To Dorothy Marjorie Carbines, widow and Wilfred John Carbines civil servant. Effects £4486 16s 10d.

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)

- Daughter: Sophia N Webb, born 1871?
- Son: Walter F Webb, born 1875
- Son: John Charles Webb, born 1880
- Daughter: Celia Webb, born 1882
- Son: Fred Webb, born 1884
- Son: Albert Webb, born 1887

Daughter: Sophia N Webb?

Born: January 1871 Plymouth

No further information found. 1911 census states 5 living children & 1 died. Have assumed latter is Sophia but unable to confirm this.

Son: Walter F Webb

Born: 7th October 1875 Plymouth, Devon.

Baptised: 19th October 1875 at Holy Trinity Church, Plymouth.

See Part 2 Q1 details for Mary Jane Webb for details of census returns from 1881-1891

1901 census: Not able to locate.

1903 marriage: Q2 1903 Ethel Amelia Weale Driver in Devonport.

1911 census: Listed in Royal Navy, Misc. Locations. Engine Room Artificer. Age 35. HMS Desperate, Mediterranean, Genoa, Italy.

1911 census: Not able to locate wife Ethel A W Webb, daughters Ethel Winifred born 1904, Audrey Noreen born 1908 and Irene born 1909. All daughters born in Plymouth.

1924 25th June listed as pensioner RN on mother Mary Jane's probate record.

1939 Register: Living with wife Ethel (born 9th April 1881, unpaid domestic duties) daughter Irene Packman (born 26th April 1909, unpaid domestic duties. Married), son-in-law Arthur F Hughes (born 12th June 1911, RAF Aux Balloon Squad. Married) and daughter Joan Hughes (born 17th July 1914, unpaid domestic duties. Married) plus 3 other occupants whose records are closed. Age 64. Occupation listed as Fitter, Turner, RN Pensioner. Address Sunningdale, Crabtree, Plymouth.

1970 death: 11th April 1970, Exeter, Devon. Probate (8th May 1970) gives address as 9 Powderham Crescent, Exeter.

Son: John Charles Webb

Born: Q2, 1880

See Part 2 Q1 details for Mary Jane Webb for details of census returns from 1881-1901

1903 Marriage: 25th December 1903 to Kate Medlen (age 21) at Plymouth, King Street, Wesleyan, Methodist. John Charles (age 23) occupation Fitter. Address 43 Whittington Street, Devonport, Plymouth.

1911 census: Living with wife Kate (age 29, no occupation) and daughter Evelyn (age 3). Listed as Engine Fitter. Age 31. Address 18 Wellbeck Avenue, Plymouth.

1913 living at 18 Welbeck Avenue, Plymouth (recorded as informant on Father's Death Certificate).

1924 25th June occupation listed as jeweller on mother Mary Jane's probate record.

1926 death: Q4 Plymouth, Devon Vol 5B Line 116?

Daughter: Celia Webb

Born: Q1 1882 Plymouth

See Part 2 Q1 details for Mary Jane Webb for details of census returns from 1891-1901

1902 Marriage: to John Carbines.

1911 census: Listed as wife and living with daughter Celia (age 7), daughter Doris (age 3) and son John (age 1). No occupation. Age 29. Address 38, Whittington Street Plymouth. In the **1911 census** husband John is listed as a member of the crew on HMS Cambrian in Australia. Age 38 Chief Engine Room Artificer.

1920 Death: 13th April 1920, age 38 Plymouth. Probate lists address 38 Whittingham (Whittington) Street, Plymouth. Beneficiary John Carbines, naval pensioner.

Son: Fred Webb

Born: 1884 Plymouth

See Part 2 Q1 details for Mary Jane Webb for details of census returns from 1891-1901

1908 Marriage: Q3 1908 to Grace Carbines in Penzance.

1911 census: Living with wife Gracie (age 23, no occupation). Shipwright, HM Dockyard. Age 25. Address is 4 Russell Place, Pennycomequick, Plymouth, Devonport.

1927 Death: 6th June 1927. Address 31 Forest Avenue, Peverell, Plymouth.

Son: Albert Webb

Born: 26th August 1887, Plymouth.

See Part 2 Q1 details for Mary Webb for details of census returns from 1891-1911

1912 Marriage: Mary Semens Veal(e). Devonport.

1939 Register: Living with wife Mary S (born 8th November 1886, Unpaid domestic duties) and daughter Beatrice (born 25th June 1916, School mistress) at 43 Whittington Street, Plymouth.

1964 Death: 3rd February 1964. Plymouth, aged 76. Address 9, The Drive, Hartley, Plymouth.

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: Age 9, listed as scholar

1861: Age 20, 2nd class ordinary seaman, HMS Conqueror, Holyhead, Anglesey

1871: Age 29, Leading Seaman, Royal Navy HMS Defence. Grand Harbour, Malta

1881: Age 39, Grocer & Tobacconist

1891: Age 49, Postman

1901: Age 59, Town Postman

1911: Age 69, Retired Naval & Post Office Pensioner

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

John Webb (father)

1841: Labourer

1851: Sailor

Joanna Webb (mother)

No occupation recorded

John Webb (brother)

No information available

William Webb (brother)

No information available

George Webb (brother)

No information available

Thomas Webb (brother)

No information available

Mary Jane Webb (wife)

1871: Grocer

1881: No occupation

Thomas Webb (son)

1861: Engineer Apprentice RN

Walter Webb (son)

1891: Engine Fitter Apprentice

1911: Engine Room Artificer RN

John Charles Webb (son)

1901: Engine Fitter

1911: Engine Fitter

Celia Webb (daughter)

1901: Music Teacher

1911: No occupation

Fred Webb (son)

1901: Dockyard Shipwright Apprentice

1911: Shipwright, HM Dockyard

Albert Webb (son)

1901: Dockyard Shipwright Apprentice

1911: Shipwright Dockyard

Sophia Fice (cousin)

1891: Shop Assistant

John Carbines (boarder, later brother-in-law)

1901: RN Engine Room Artificer
1911: Chief Engine Room Artificer

Part Four: Anything Else

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

Joined Royal Navy 8th September 1857 (age 16) HMS Royal William. Volunteered for Continuous service 29th August 1859 (18th birthday). Service number 34281.

On 11th December 1860 Walter Webb was assigned to HMS Conqueror. Whilst transporting troops to Mexico she was wrecked off Rum Key, Bahamas 29th December 1861. All 1,400 on board were saved. His assignment to HMS Conqueror ended 21 March 1862 the day she was 'paid off' (her books were officially closed). The steam transport Cleopatra brought some of the crew to Plymouth 7th March 1862, the remaining crew arrived at Plymouth 28th March aboard the steam frigate Diadem.

Retired from the Navy 25th September 1877 after 20 years 37 days service.

1903 listed as a Naval Pensioner on son John Charles' wedding record.

Walter Webb died aged 72 on the 22nd September 1913 of "Disease of Heart & Valvular General Anasarca". His son John Charles Webb was with him. His recorded address was 43 Whittington Street, M.D. (Mid Devon) (Full address 43, Whittington Street, Pennycomequick, Devonport.)

Probate: 1st November 1913, Exeter. Walter Webb naval pensioner died 22nd September 1913 to Mary Jane Webb widow. Effects £175 1s 4d.

Only Walter worked for the Post Office. The Royal Navy, Merchant Navy and Devonport Dockyard are where most men found employment. There are a lot of Webbs in the Plymouth/Devonport area and without information such as date or place of birth on service records it is impossible to assign the man to the record.

Part Five: Your Sources

Please use this space to record the sources you have used

Walter Webb (pensioner)

1841 Birth Index (BMD): Kingsbridge, Vol 9, p 358

1851 census return: Class: *HO107*; Piece: 1878; Folio: 73; Page: 40; GSU roll: 221026

1861 census return: Class: RG 9; Piece: 4493; Folio: 138; Page: 32; GSU roll: 543293

1871 census return: Class: RG10; Piece: 5780; Folio: 94; Page: 7; GSU roll: 895848

1881 census return: Class: RG11; Piece: 2201; Folio: 123; Page: 29; GSU roll: 1341530

1891 census return: Class: RG12; Piece: 1733; Folio: 30; Page: 54; GSU roll: 6096843

1868 British Postal Service Appointment Books: British Postal Museum and Archive;
Series: POST 58; Reference Number: 90

1901 census return: Class: RG13; Piece: 2101; Folio: 135; Page: 34

1911 census return: *Census Returns of England and Wales, 1911 Registration District
Number: 278 Sub-registration District: Stoke ED, institution, or vessel: 19 Piece: 13046*

Probate: <https://www.ancestry.co.uk/discoveryui-content/view/2343608:1904>

Admiralty: *Royal Navy Continuous Service Engagement Books. Reference: ADM
139/343/34281*

Mary Jane Webb (wife)

1847 Birth Index (BMD): Kingsbridge, Vol 9, p 345

1851 census return: Class: HO107; Piece: 1876; Folio: 291; Page: 9; GSU roll: 221024

1861 census return: <https://www.familysearch.org/ark:/61903/1:1:M7TW-B8L>

1871 census return: Class: RG10; Piece: 2123; Folio: 109; Page: 8; GSU roll: 832027

1881- 1911 census returns: *Same as above.*

Probate: <https://www.ancestry.co.uk/discoveryui-content/view/5290580:1904>