



The Origin of our Surname “Flack”.

Family History Tourism
Episode 1.
South-West Scotland

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Background

When I was growing up, my father, Dr "Douglas" H.E.D. Flack, told me that he believed that our surname, "Flack", "Flach" or "Flax", was probably originally a Dutch name that came to East Anglia in England from the Lowlands in the Middle Ages with the linen industry and the growing of flax.

He was reinforced in his belief by the proliferation of families with the surname "Flack" in East Anglia, an area that suits the growing of flax, a crop which flourishes in cool, damp environments like the Netherlands and East Anglia.

When it was learned that in fact our oldest traceable ancestor, Captain William Flack was born in 1810 in Bailieborough, County Cavan, Ireland, this was readily explained by the suggestion that many East Anglian flax workers would have been encouraged to move to Ireland when the flax industry was established in that country.

Huguenot, Louis Crommelin (1652-1727), who established a flax weaving factory at Bridge Street, Lisburn, not far from Belfast, is perhaps the most famous of the early linen manufacturers . He was appointed 'Overseer of the Royal Linen Manufacture of Ireland in 1699, and is popularly known as the 'founder' of the Irish linen industry. So it seemed that to find my Flack family ancestors, I would need to find the Flack family that had migrated from East Anglia to Ireland sometime between about 1650 and 1800.

It was not until 2014 that I discovered this search would likely be fruitless because new evidence suggested this explanation of the origin of my surname is not true!

You see, in 2014, I was contacted by a William Flack from Massachusetts, USA who said he was also searching for his Flack family ancestors. He explained that the immigration papers held for his William Flack's family in the US indicated only that his family came from in Ireland and that there was no information about where in Ireland. He said that if I was prepared to submit a Y-DNA test (male paternal line using a high level, 111 points of comparison test), and that we had a close match, then he would be able to determine that his Flack family also came from County Cavan.

Having made inquiries to ensure that this unusual request was genuine, I consented and the FTDNA testing agency sent me the test which I completed and returned in the express envelope provided. About a month later, I received the startling news that I have a 80% chance of sharing a paternal ancestor within 250 years (10 genealogical generations) with the William Flack of Massachusetts! But even more startling -that we both have a strong and close association within 500 years with people with the name Affleck , a surname historically associated with South Western Scotland.

Roxburghshire or the County of Roxburgh is a historic county in the Southern Uplands of Scotland. It borders Dumfriesshire to the west, Selkirkshire to the north-west, and Berwickshire to the north. To the south-west it borders Cumbria and to the south-east Northumberland, both in England.

Searches in the British History Online for references to the names, "Flack", "Affleck" and "Auchinleck" prior to 1700 (250 years, or 10 genealogical generations ago) found five (5) references to Flack, one reference to Affleck and several references to Auchinleck , a small town in Ayrshire in South West Scotland.

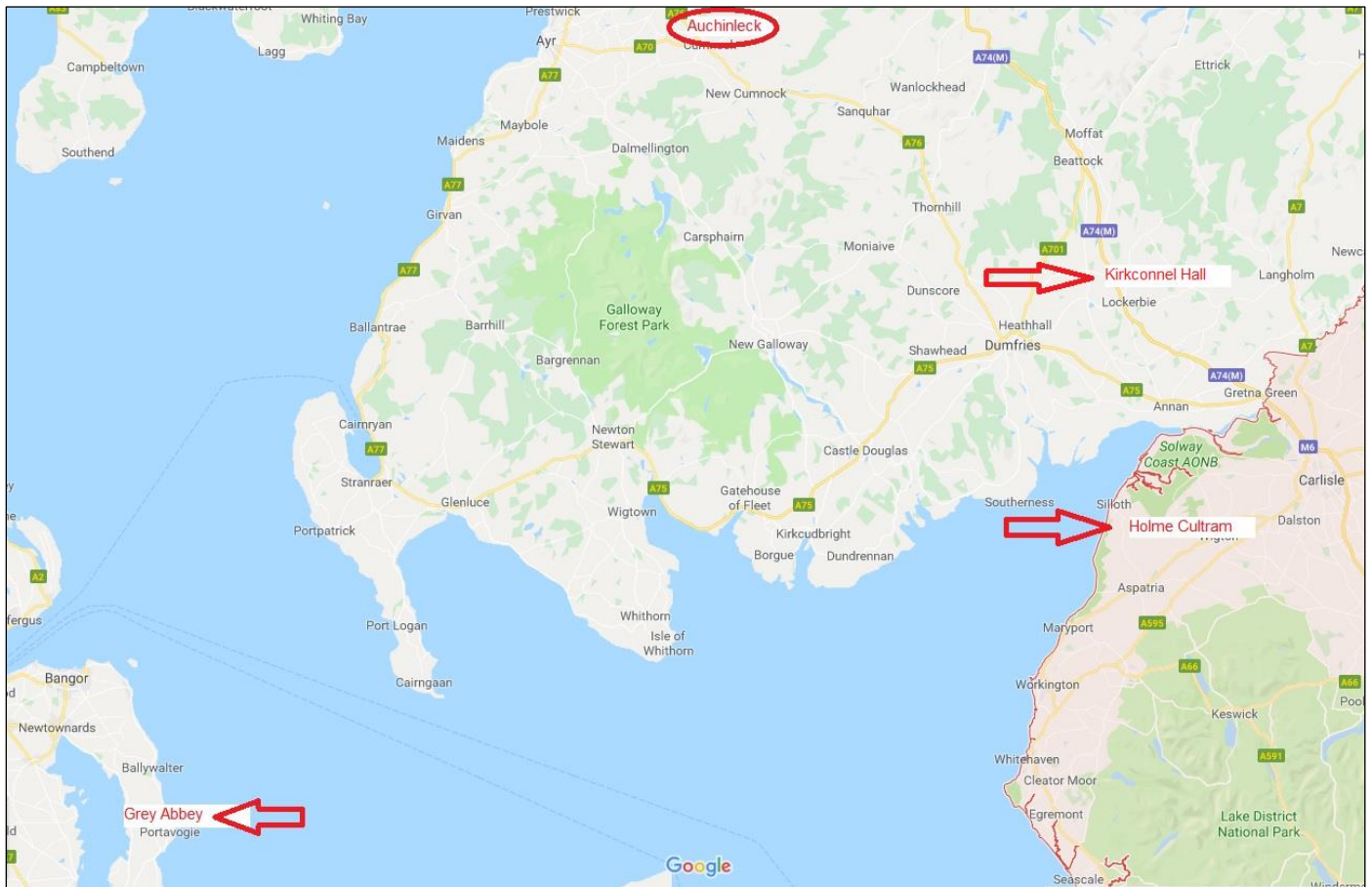
The references to Flack were to do with the 1654 proceedings of the Court of the Manor of Holm Cultram in Cumbria in England. The matters appear to be about disputes over the digging of stone in the vicinity of Holm Cultram Abbey.

The history of Holm Cultram Abbey is interesting in that the Abbey was founded in 1150 by Cistercians monks and in the following half century they began building their Monastery with stone quarried across the Solway Firth in Dumfrieshire. The abbey steadily became prosperous, acquiring lands in north Cumberland and undertaking reclamation work along the Solway. In 1301 it was granted a market at Skinburness, together with permission to build a church. Experience had shown that the abbey's Scots origins did not protect it from attacks by Scots raiders, from whom it suffered repeatedly from 1216 onwards, with a particularly severe attack in 1319, by Robert the Bruce, despite his father being buried there. As a result, the community established a daughter house at Grey Abbey on the Ards Peninsular in 1193, across the narrow part of the northern Irish Sea in Northern Ireland.

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The conclusion then is that it appears that our “Flack” is likely an Irish shortening of the Scottish-Gaelic name “Affleck”.

The following map of the coasts of Cumbria, SW Scotland and the Ards Peninsula of Northern Ireland provides an insight into the relative location of Holm Cultram Abbey.



So, when my wife, Joan and I planned our trip to Europe in August 2018, we put Holm Cultram Abbey and Auchinleck on our itinerary.

What did we find?

Having arrived in Newcastle by North Sea ferry from Amsterdam, we hired a car and set off for our hotel at Kirkconnel Hall, stopping along the way to visit Hadrians Wall at Vindolanda, near Hexham in England.

By about 4pm we arrived at Kirkconnel Hall Hotel and were shown to our room by our very charming host.



Kirkconnel Hall has a special place in my family's history because, in 1946, it was one of the British Army's Rehabilitation Homes for psychiatrically ill servicemen often visited by my father, Lt. Col. H.E.D. Flack, RAMC as a part of his responsibilities. During that period he was also studying psychiatry at Crichton Royal Psychiatric Hospital in nearby Dumfries.

Douglas and Barbara enjoyed happy memories of romantic stays in the medical staff quarters adjacent to the Hall and enjoyed telling the story of "Fair Helen of Kirkconnel Lea", a traditional story about this location.



Interestingly, Kirkconnel Hall was home to Dr Archibald Arnott (1772-1855), Napoleon's physician in the late 18th Century.

The following morning, we set off for the 40 minute drive to Holme Cultram Abbey, just across the border in Cumbria.

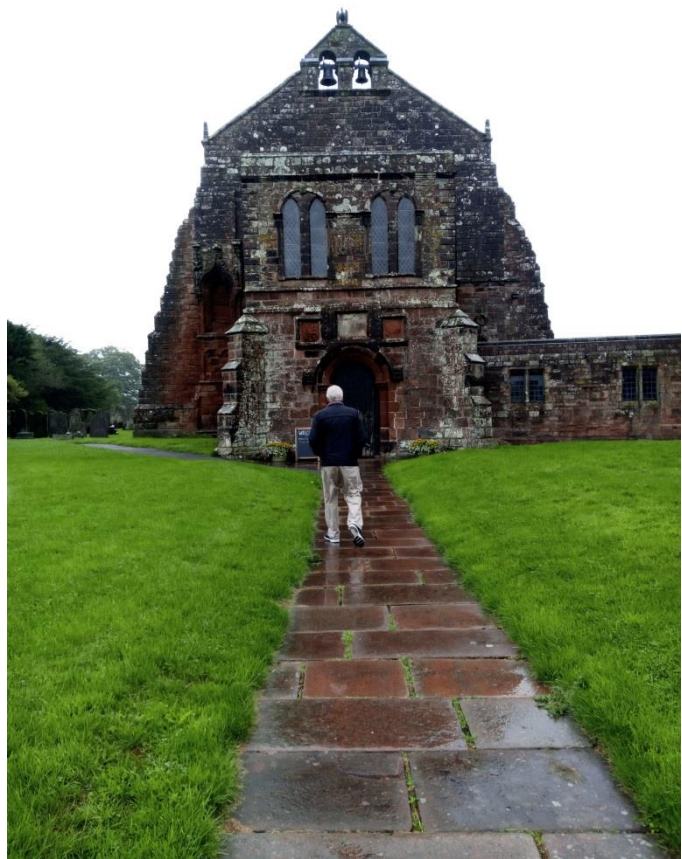


This first view we had of the Abbey was a bit of a shock. The view underlined the sad history of the Abbey, showing how, following repeated raids in the middle ages and the abandonment of the Abbey by the monastic community in 1538, the stone from the original Cistercian Monastery had been largely robbed out and used for building local houses.

Only the nave of the original church was saved and this renovated part of the ruins now forms the Parish Church.



The buildings were of red sandstone brought by barge from the other side of the Solway Firth. Archaeological excavations from 2006 onwards have shown that the monastic buildings extended to the south of the church, and followed the usual Cistercian pattern. The church was along the north side of the cloister, with other buildings on the other three sides, the refectory being opposite the church and the chapter house to the west. The former abbey church underwent a series of structural accidents (such as the collapse of the tower in 1600) and alterations as a result of which it gradually shrank to comprise the first six bays of the nave, without aisles. In addition the roof was lowered to the height of a single storey and there were two energetic restorations in 1883 and 1913. This nevertheless left a large enough building to continue to serve to the present day as the parish church of Abbeytown.



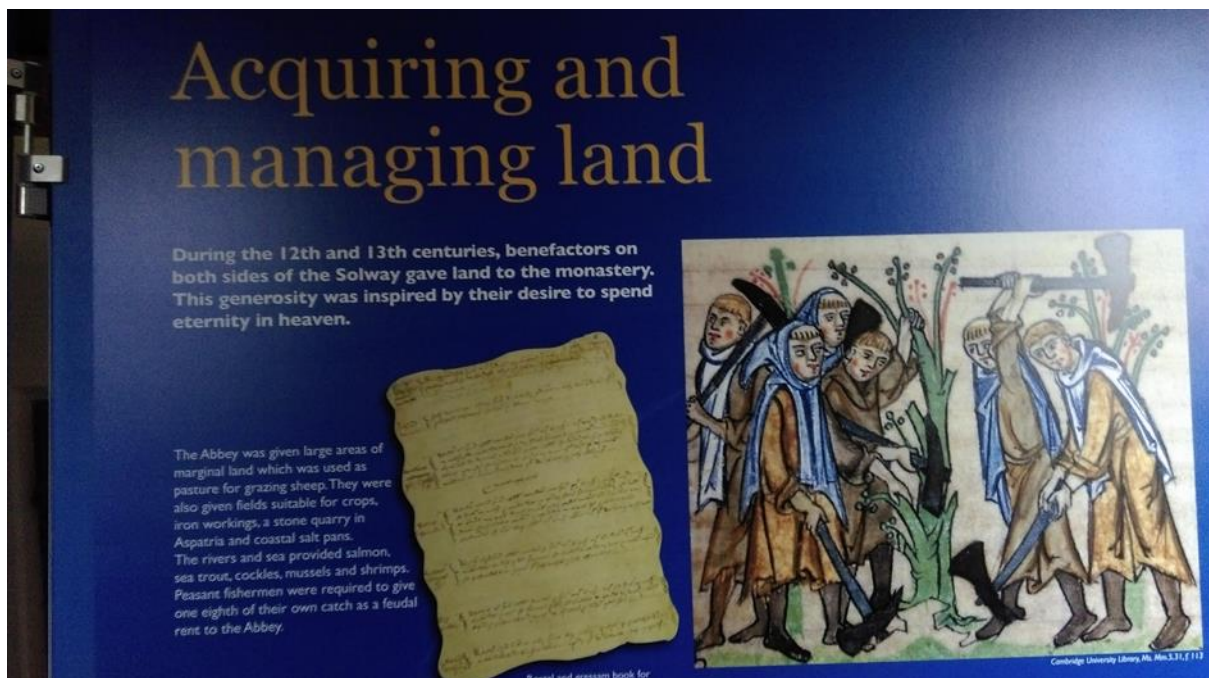
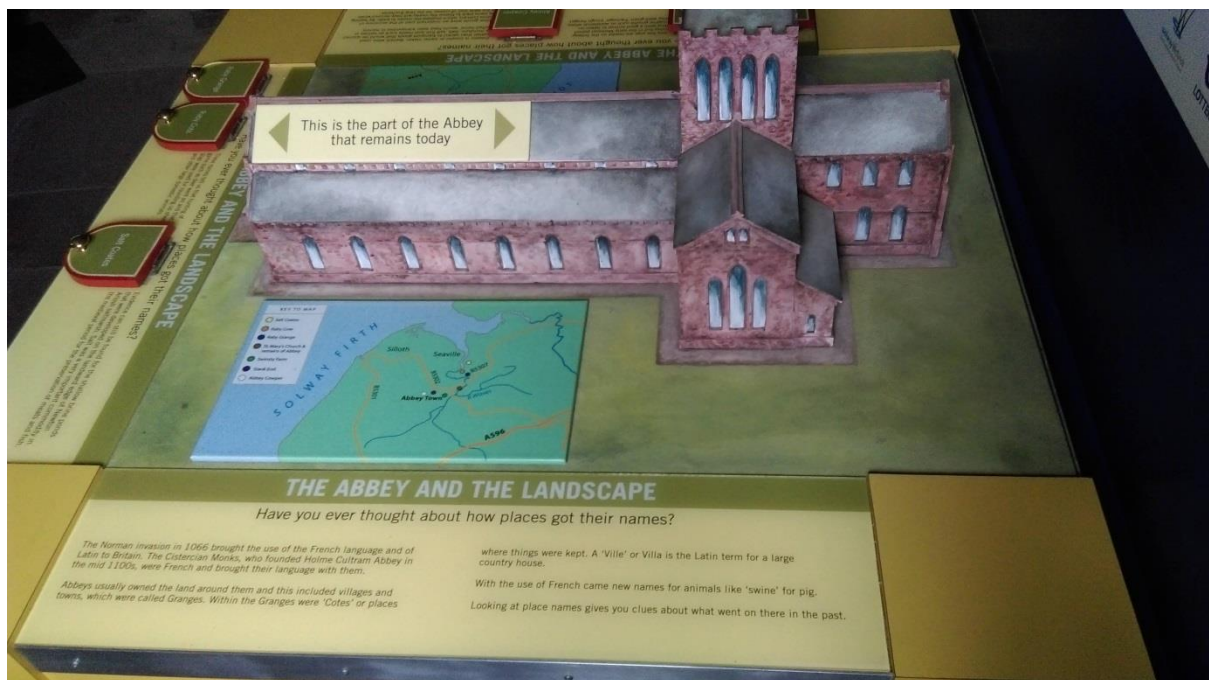
On the day we visited there was no-one about and it was raining and grey-skied, making our initial impression of this ancient site a little unsettling. We let ourselves in through the 13th Century door and explored the old Abbey.

Once inside, our eyes adjusted to the light and we found ourselves in a truly beautifully restored church that had retained a small section of the historic Romanesque features of the old Abbey. It was difficult to reconcile what we saw in the present building with the knowledge that we were in what was once just the nave of the original Abbey church.

In the adjoining building there was an exhibition outlining something of the



history of the Abbey.





We spent an hour or so in the exhibition and noted how the Abbey had become the hub of a wealthy and influential community prior to the Dissolution of the Monasteries by Henry VIII between 1536 and 1541.

Also noted was the establishment of a "daughter monastery" at Grey Abbey on the Ards Peninsular in Northern Ireland in the late 12th century and the movement of many locals between Cumbria and Northern Ireland both before and after the Plantation of Ireland in the late 16th - early 17th century.

Having learned something of the history of the Abbey, Joan and I visited the Abbey Shop next door in search of souvenirs and to our surprise we were invited into a back room to meet some of the local Parish volunteers who were having a morning tea. After a very pleasant hour meeting those present and learning more about the village, we left on our travels north.

As we drove back north towards Scotland along the narrow roads on this very flat part of north west England, we discussed what we had learned and how the facts fitted with my quest for an understanding of where my surname "Flack" might have come from.

Our next stop would be Auchinleck, also known as "Affleck", in the heart of the ancient Kyle district of Scotland, some 100 miles north of Holme Cultram Abbey by car, but considerably closer by barge across the Solway Firth. The place-name means "field of (flat) stones" in Scottish Gaelic, from "achadh" ('field') and "leac" ('slab').

The village of Auchinleck was easy enough for our car's satellite navigation system to find but finding Auchinleck House was more difficult as it is now approached by a small unmarked lane on the edge of the village. But once through the line of tree, the vista of House was impressive.



The place seemed deserted and there was no one about to ask about the history of the House but we had a brief look around and left quickly – not wanting to offend anyone by our uninvited presence.

Little is known of the early history of the village although a record of a community exists from as early as 1239, reliable records can really only be said to date from the arrival of the Boswell family in 1504. The Barony of Auchinleck had been forfeited to the crown and was granted by James IV to his "good and faithful servant" Thomas Boswell.

The Boswells proved to be assiduous in their estate husbandry, and by the early 1700s a viable village community and a thriving estate had begun to emerge from the surrounding barren moorland. The New Statistical Account of 1837 documents historic mining and quarrying in the area which was later to become the impetus for the region to boom.

Was it possible that stone masons from "Affleck" - the place of the stones, had been a part of the labour force brought south for the building of Holmcultram Abbey (alternatively Holm Cultram Abbey or Holme Cultram Abbey) across the Solway Estuary from the quarries of Ayrshire and Dumfriesshires?

Did some of the Afflecks settle in Holm Cultram and then Northern Ireland after Grey Abbey was built? Are these northern reaches of the Irish Sea the origin of our surname Flack?

The answers lie shrouded in history but the travel back in experiences afforded to us by our visits to Holmcultram Abbey and Auchinleck House were enormously satisfying.