



## Rooted in the Forest – How High-Flying Doug Dug Up the Past

(Bob Smyth Previews An Epic Family Reunion)

Family suppers (or, more usually high teas) were an institution that mostly died in post-war years. On a 1950's Sunday, parents and kids piled into an old Vauxhall to visit uncles and aunts and cousins - the highlight of the occasion being a vast high tea of ham and pork pie, quartered tomatoes with dollops of salad cream, vinegary beetroot and pickled onions.

This Thursday, Doug Burgum is resurrecting the tradition on a grand scale when no less than one hundred relatives and namesakes sit down to dinner - 60 of them having flown in from the USA. He has hired Clearwell Castle for the occasion, which launches a four-day Burgum family get-together.

Family History is a growing hobby, maybe a compensation for weaker day-today family links. Doug, age 46, began his researches many years ago, not into his own family but that of his wife Vicky.

"I wanted to sort out all these people I was meeting," he explains. "I did a family tree of my own, but it was very brief and I put it away in a drawer.

Doug and family were then living in Maidenhead, convenient for Heathrow airport from where he flies British Airways 747 jumbos worldwide. "A few years ago I was over-nighting in Manchester, so - Burgum being an uncommon name - I looked in the phone book to see if there were any listed."

There were a couple and, appetite whetted, he tracked through all the other UK directories to come up with 80 Burgums or Burghams. Having contacted them, he discovered a strong Forest of Dean connection.

"Driving over to explore, we fell in love with the Forest," he continues. "We took a holiday home in Coleford and brought the children here on weekends and school vacations. We hadn't intended to move here, but I saw this house in an estate agent's window"

The house is a former labourer's cottage on Bradley Hill, up a forestry track that gives no indication of human settlement at its summit. Much extended by its former owners, and then by Doug and Vicky, its garden overlooks the Soudley Valley and Severn Vale beyond.

The two boys went to Blakeney primary school then to Cinderford's St Anthony's, and are currently at school in Gloucester. When the daily coach service ended earlier this year, the Burgums and other parents organised their own."

They are proven organisers, Doug being a Dean Heritage Centre trustee and Vicky, a former teacher, being chairman of the Friends of Dean Heritage Museum and on the Forest's Local History Society committee." When Soudley's Zion Chapel is mentioned as being on the district council's Buildings at Risk Register (as reported in the *Review* a fortnight ago), Doug describes how he and others have for several years arranged fund-raising events in aid of its upkeep."

If a Lottery Fund application for £440,000 for improving the Centre's buildings and displays is successful, the chapel would also benefit. Doug adds that the Centre's other structure on the list, Whitecliff furnace, is also scheduled to undergo restoration work once English Heritage agrees a way forward."

Doug feels an affinity for the old industrial buildings from his researches into the family background."

"My family lived at Flaxley and were forgemen, working iron near to Flaxley Abbey. Burgums owned the pub in Lydbrook while Mrs Burgum ran the post office there. Burghams worked with iron and tin at Lydney and Redbrook."

"Timothy Burgum lived in Littledean before emigrating to Australia with his family. Two of his sisters were teachers at Littledean School."

The Burgum emigrants represent the diaspora of Forest families at various periods when conditions in the iron and coal industries were especially severe. Doug's clue to those who went to the USA arose when a Tutshill Burgum wrote to say he had been visited by some touring Americans who wondered if they might be related.

They lived, they said, in "wheat country", so on States-side trips he searched directories around Kansas. He eventually tracked them down to North Dakota, later combing the whole USA.

Ten years ago he launched the Burgum Family History Society which has around a hundred subscribers worldwide, a quarterly magazine and, more recently, a website.

Through such contacts he evolved the idea of a millennium reunion, coinciding with his and Vicky's 25<sup>th</sup> wedding anniversary.

The visitors, staying at the Speech House and hotels around Clearwell, are being taken in two coaches this Friday on a tour of villages where Burgums once lived. It includes a boat trip on the Wye and lunch at the Old Court House Hotel.

Saturday is a tour of the Burgum 2000 exhibition at the Heritage Centre (which continues until August 7th). It includes the strange story of Henry Burgum who, starting as a pewterer's apprentice in Bristol, became a successful businessman in the late 1770's.

In the city at the same time was the young poet Thomas Chatterton (1752-70), whose writings took the form of medieval romances which he tried to pass off as authentic. Desperate for money, Chatterton also peddled fake pedigrees, one of which was bought by the upwardly aspirational Henry.

When the hoax was discovered, Henry's business was ruined and he was imprisoned in London's Fleet debtor's gaol. He was released when Bristolians organised a couple of charity Handel concerts to pay off his debts.

Other exhibits include models of Wild West stagecoaches, whose panels were decorated with landscapes painted by John Burgum - a New England artist. A.T. Burgum emigrated to the States in 1871, travelling to the Mid-West in covered wagons.

On Sunday a Burgum family service is being held in the Zion Chapel, followed by a buffet at Bradley Hill Farmhouse. But Doug's genealogical work is not yet complete.

"I have 14 separate family trees at present. The aim is to work it all out into a single tree."