

BRUCE and VERNE

The wedding present of my great aunt Mayⁱ to my parents was a portrait of Hugh Burland (1776-1868), a wine and spirit dealer of Bristol, who was also the proprietor of the Three Tuns in Limekiln Lane. He was my father's great great grandfather. It may or may not be true, as Aunt May claimed, that Hugh's "house was one respected in the famous Bristol Riots because he opened the door & invited the mob in saying 'he had a good cask of ale down the cellar which they were welcome to'."

I wrote a book on the Burlands in the light of Aunt May's reminiscences which always had a kernel of truth. An updated version is on my website (parsloe.info) but this article is about one of Hugh's grandsons where I have solved a fifty year old puzzle.

My father had a fragmentary Burland pedigree which showed a son of Hugh Burland who was the comedian, Bruce, of Bruce and Vance. I discovered that there was a comedian called Alfred Glanville Vance, whose real name was Alfred Peck Stevens and who lived from 1838 to 1888.ⁱⁱ I was, however, then unable to trace Bruce. But in 2022 a chance find resolved the mystery. The *Bristol Mercury* of 19th September 1887 reported that:

Mr. Ernest Burland, professionally known as Mr. Ernest Bruce, of Bruce and Verne, died on Thursday. The entertainment in which he took part was known in the West of England, and he was at Bath for one or two seasons as a member of Captain Roebuck's company.

While the paper wrongly referred to Ernest rather than Edward Burland and he died on Thursday 10th September 1887 not Thursday 17th, Ernest Bruce is Edward Burland, the son of Alexander Burland and Hugh's grandson (not son).ⁱⁱⁱ And Bruce's partner was not Vance but H. G. Verne. *Findmypast* has a wealth of newspaper entries on the careers of Bruce and Verne.

Edward's father Alexander was Hugh Burland's second son and took over his father's business. He married Caroline Eliza Bevan on 9th September 1837 at St. John, Bedminster.

Edward's full name was Edward Bevan Burland, although it was recorded at his baptism as Edward Beavan Burland. There are no other records of the spelling Beavan. He was born in 1838⁴ in Westbury on Trym and baptised at St. George, Brandon Hill, Bristol on 14th April 1839. His father was named as living in Lime Kiln Lane and an Inn Keeper.

The first mention of Edward found in the press is in 1850 when the mathematics inspector of Bristol Free Grammar School recorded his deserving honourable mention, along with his cousin Edwin Burland. They were in Class IX and he would have been 11.^{iv} Edwin was the son of Hugh's eldest son, William Gould Burland, a solicitor.

In the 1861 census, living with his parents in Westbury-on-Trym, aged 22, Edward is "Serveynt Architect". Presumably this career did not prosper for in 1865 he is found as an amateur actor with "The Volunteer Artillery Corps Dramatique". From press revues, it is clear that he had been involved in amateur dramatics for some time and he was, it seems, much appreciated playing female parts. Thus, as part of a long report on the Company's performance, the *Western Daily Press* wrote on 29th November 1865:

A feature now to amateur performances in Bristol was the representation of female characters by gentlemen of the company. In this respect the Artillery Corps Dramatique trod upon very dangerous ground, inasmuch as they ran the risk of verging into the realms of burlesque. Mainly owing to the brilliantly successful acting of Mr. Edward Burland, this otherwise inevitable fate was avoided. As the fascinating widow *Mrs. Saylie*, he certainly looked a most prepossessing and irresistible *partie*, being dressed with great taste, and made up with consummate skill.

There are reviews of his performances in many places around Bristol in that and the following years and in 1867 he appeared with Captain Roebuck's company. Captain Disney Roebuck was an army officer who resigned to form an amateur theatre company which toured England; then in 1873 he founded a professional company formally titled 'United Service Dramatic Company' but better known as "Captain Disney Roebuck's Dramatic Company" or "Captain Roebuck's Company". While in his advertisements Edward claimed to have been a member of the Company, he left before 1873 and so can only have belonged to the amateur company.

In the same year 1867, in June, Mr. John Trougham and Mr. Henry Geodane Verne were advertising their Soiree Comique at Hichin in Hertfordshire.^v

The only relevant entry found in the 1871 census, is in Finsbury for Edward Barland actor aged 22 and born in Bristol, Somerset. He is a visitor with the family of Maria Ford, widow whose occupation is House Property. Neither the spelling of his name, the age, or the place of birth are correct so it is doubtful if this is Edward Burland.

At some time before August 1871, Edward left Captain Roebuck, adopted the professional name Ernest Bruce, and teamed up with Verne. On 5th August 1871 "Messrs Ernest Bruce (late United Service Dramatic Company) and H. G. Verne" advertised an Entertainment of Readings, Vocal and Instrumental, Music, Costume Recitals and Ventriloquism at Weston-super-Mare. Edward did the readings and recitals, and it is clear from the review that Edward played females and was well regarded in the area.

The following is an example of the many boxed advertisements^{vi}:



Revues were generally favourable and give the flavour of the entertainment: *Bruce's reading of the "Trial Scenes" from the School for Scandal and Tennyson's Grandmother were faultless, and afforded those who were present a real treat.*^{vii} and

The recitations of Mr. Bruce were given with effect, notably Tennyson's "Grandmother" and "Sergeant Buzfuz's Address to the Jury (Dickens)."^{viii}

In later years the style of advertisement changed:^{ix}

Many other advertisements and reviews have been found in the 1870's and in 1881. The last advertisements are in 1887 with the latest in July some four months before Edward's death.

So the mystery of Bruce and Vance is solved. But this is family history and, if your research solves one problem, it always discloses another. In the 1881 census, held on the night of 23rd April, Edward is with his parents at Portishead with the occupation of architect,^x unmarried, and aged 38. But I then found another surprising census entry. Ernest Bruce, aged 30, and Henry.G. Verne, aged 31, are recorded as lodgers with Peter Powrie and family at 25 India Street, St. Andrews in Edinburgh. Their occupations are 'comedian' and with them is a third lodger, Alfred H. Macantney, a pianist aged 20. Bruce is stated to have been born in Westbury-on-Trym and Bruce in Chelmsford. Further research revealed Bruce and Verne were on tour and gave the first of a series of entertainments in the Royal Aquarium, in Edinburgh, on 5th April.

This raised the unhappy possibility that Edward was not Ernest Bruce after all and that the real name of Ernest Bruce was indeed Ernest Burland and unrelated. However Edward as "Edward Burland of Portishead in the County of Somersetshire Gentleman" made a Will dated 28th March 1872 which was proved on 26th March 1888. The Executors were George Thomas Langridge of Heathfield House, Bath, Doctor of Medicine and Harold Bowles of West Clifton Terrace, Bristol, Gentleman. Only Langridge proved the Will and is described as of the Royal Arsenal Woolwich in the County of Kent, Surgeon-Major in Her Majesty's Forces. Was he an old friend from the Captain Roebuck days?

The Will left Edward's wearing apparel, jewellery, and wardrobe to Charles James Pavitt of Battles Bridge near Chelmsford, Essex and, after the death of Edward's mother, all the rest of his estate. There is no mention of his father in the Will, but his mother receives, for life, two freehold properties, "the White Ladies Tavern" and "the White Ladies Cottage" at Cotham near Bristol and interestingly some shares. In his Will, Hugh Burland left Edward's father, Alexander, the White Ladies properties and left, directly to Edward, 5 shares in the Monmouthshire Railway and South Wales Navigation Co., and 22 shares in the West of England and South Wales District Bank. Edward leaves shares in the Monmouthshire Rail

and Finance Company and in the Union Finance Company which are almost certainly the same or substitutes.

Following his father's death in 1882, Edward and his mother seem to have moved to London as, when Edward died, he was of 25 Tettcot Road Chelsea. He was buried, as Edward Bevan Burland aged 48, on 14th November 1887 at Old Brompton Cemetery. His mother Caroline Eliza was also buried there on 6th September 1889, aged 78, but her address was then 1 Rosenau Street, Battersea.

The clue to proving Bruce's identity was that the birthplace of Verney in the 1881 census and of Pavitt in Edward's Will was given as Chelmsford. Pavitt was baptised in Clavering St. Mary and St. Clement on 17th October 1843.^{xi} The 1871 census shows him living with his father, a corn miller, and family, aged 27, as a non-practising surgeon.^{xii} In the 1891 census he is living with no occupation with his brother George H. Pavitt, a Mill Manager. But the proof that he is Verney was first found in two boxed advertisements in *The Era* on 2nd and 9th August 1916, as follows:

WANTED, present address of Charles James Pavitt, who in the music hall profession (year 1890) was known as Verne (Bruce and Verne) or of his relatives. Write WANBROUGH AND CO., solicitors, Broad-street, Bristol.

Pavitt died at 14 Warwick Terrace, Barnstable on 2nd June 1917 aged 73. He left his estate, valued at £312-9-4, to a Barnstaple music dealer, John Thomas White.^{xiii}

Why was Edward registered in Edinburgh in 1881 as Earnest Bruce as well as at Portishead in his own name? Perhaps it was a joke as the occupation of both Bruce and Verne is 'comedian'.

There is a darker side to the story as it seems likely that Edward was homosexual and that Pavitt was his partner. It will be recalled that in his early career he was renowned for taking female parts and it is clear from the programmes of the 'Entertainments' that he continued to do so in his "Costume Recitals". In the 1861 and 1881 censuses at his parents' home, his occupation is surveynt architect or architect while, if he is the Edward Barland age 22 of the 1871 census, his occupation is actor. His Will does not mention his father, and Pavitt and his mother are the only beneficiaries. It also appears neither he nor Pavitt ever married.

Pavitt was a witness for Boulton and Park in their notorious 1871 cross dressing trial which took place in May 1871 and must have interrupted the Edinburgh tour. Thomas Ernest Boulton and Frederick William Park, along with some associates, were accused of conspiracy to commit sodomy (a crime that carried a maximum prison sentence of life with hard labour), and also on a lesser charge of outraging public decency, by appearing in public dressed as women. The trial lasted a week and was avidly reported each day in thousands of newspapers. It ended in humiliation for the government and the Attorney General who led for the prosecution. There was no evidence of sodomy and so that the defendants were all found not guilty of conspiracy. Later, on the charge of outraging public decency, Boulton and Park agreed to be bound over for two years.^{xiv}

While Pavitt giving evidence is not conclusive, it suggests where his sympathies lay. It must have taken courage to appear for the defence and it seems significant that he and Edward continued with their 'Entertainment' in many places thereafter.

John Parsloe

- i Marianne Burland Gamlen (1865-1963).
- ii Vance reference from CGP family notes on undated slip of paper from 1950s: Scott C. and Howard C., *Life of E.L. Blanchard*, Vol II pp.381, 420 and 629. See also Ackroyd, Peter *London The Biography*, p.685 (Vintage 2001).
- iii *Bristol Mercury* 19th September 1887. There are no registered deaths of Ernest Burland or Ernest Bruce in the fourth quarter of 1887. Probate of Edward Burland's Will gives the date of his death.
- iv *Bristol Mercury* 22nd June 1850, reporting on the first inspection of Bristol Grammar School following its reorganisation.
- v
TOWN HALL HICHIN
ON TUESDAY EVENING, June 11th, 1867 Mr. JOHN NORTHAM and Mr. HENRY GRODANE VERNE will have the honour of giving their SOIREE COMIQUE, consisting of Two Hours of Mirth, Music, Mimicry and Ventriloquism.
Hertfordshire Express and General Advertiser 8th June 1867
- vi *Western-super-Mare Gazette, and General Advertiser* 5th August 1871
- vii *Somerset County Gazette and Bristol Express*, August 26th 1871
- viii *Langport & Somerton Herald* 16th September 1871
- ix *Alcester Chronicle* 13th January 1877
- x Edward is not known to RIBA or listed in the Directory of British Architects. The writer of the census originally marked his status as 'mar' for married but then crossed this out.
- xi Clavering is almost 30 miles from Chelmsford but the identification is clear from Pavitt's evidence in which he said that his father was a miller residing near Chelmsford.
- xii It seems Pavitt did study surgery. As a second-year student at St. Mary's Hospital he received first prize for Natural Philosophy in the Medical School (*Evening Standard* 8th June 1863).
- xiii Mr. Chas. J. Pavitt ("H. Verne"), who died at Barnstaple on Saturday, June 2nd, was the composer of "Clovelly" and other songs which for successive seasons have charmed visitors at Ilfracombe and have delighted audiences in many parts of the country. "Clovelly" has an exceptionally large sale, and it will long rank as one of the most popular of West Country songs.
Hartland and West Country Chronicle 29th June 1917
- xiv Will dated 1st February 1917 proved by John Thomas White of Craig-y-don, Rumsam, Barnstable on 22nd August 1917.
- Fuller details will be found in *Wikipedia* under Boulton and Park and of each day's proceedings in newspaper articles such as those in *Warwick and Warwickshire Advertiser* 13th May 1871, *Clerkenwell News* 13th May 1871 reporting on Pavitt's evidence, *Hull and Eastern Counties Herald* 18th May 1871 and *The Morning Advertiser*, Wednesday 7th June 1871.