

# Finding My Canadian Bremners

by David Bremner

“Welcome to the Bremner House.” Mayor Linda Osinchuk sat down, and I rose to my feet.

All of us know the draw of genealogy; it’s the primitive need to tell stories and to make patterns — and to relate them to ourselves and our background. And for most of us that’s enough; but for Sue and me, the reward was to be treated a bit like the royalty who were visiting Canada at the same time.

## My Family — An Introduction

My interest in family history was triggered from an early age. My paternal grandfather, whom I was lucky enough to know well, had flown with the Royal Naval Air Service in WWI, and the stories he told were bound to get a young boy’s attention — particularly one who was already a fan of Airfix aircraft kits. We also learned of his brother Bill who’d invented an early form of motor torpedo boat, and had been decorated for his exploits in them.

Granddad even told me about my namesake, his uncle David, who was in the Royal Navy. “He wasn’t brave, so much as fearless,” Granddad said. “He dived from the funnel of his ship for a bet, and cleared the guardrail by only a few inches.”

And the one about his father, who’d taught the princes in Buckingham Palace to box. He and Bill had gone along as sparring partners, and on one occasion they’d been throwing a ball in one of the corridors of the palace when it hit an enormous vase on the top of a cupboard. As it teetered, he, Bill, and the princes thought of the fearsome Queen Mary, and wondered if they’d end up in the Tower of London. (Thankfully it settled back on its base, and the Queen never knew anything about it.)

With stories like that, who wouldn’t want to know more!

But, like so many things in life, it was not until I took early retirement that the opportunity arose to do something about it. So we had the motive, and the opportunity; there were a few weapons in my armoury that gave me the means to indulge my passion more fully.

The first was the boxes of dusty papers and photographs assembled by my great-grandfather, and retained by Granddad and Dad, together with Dad’s elephantine and crystal-clear memory.

The second, of course, was that magic box on the computer screen labelled **Google**. I’m sure I don’t need to elaborate.

The third was a wife who had recently been made redundant from her position as a bibliographical

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*And it was she who brought a crusading zeal to the whole business...*

researcher, based on then Prime Minister Tony Blair's assertion that with the advent of the Internet, such fripperies were no longer necessary. And it was she who brought a crusading zeal to the whole business; she who would patiently work through hundreds or thousands of Google hits to find the one that mattered. She who, not content with finding an interesting-looking website, would find a phone number and ring it up — and persuade the person on the other end to spend days searching through archives to find that elusive lead.

I'm lucky enough to have fascinating people to investigate in pretty much every generation; I've hinted at my grandfather's generation and their experiences in the WWI. Granddad spoke briefly about his parents' generation; his own father, who became a guest at Buckingham Palace, Uncle David who was in the Royal Navy, and became a miner in Canada; and another uncle, Charlie who was a rancher — also in Canada — and had a district named after him. The previous generation was also interesting; Bremner brother and sister marrying a Hamilton brother and sister, and living in Glasgow in some style. And Alexander before that made a mysterious transition at the age of about 40 from an assistant fish curer in Wick (in the very northern tip of Scotland), working for his father, to a wealthy butter merchant in Cork (in the extreme south western corner of Ireland), who sat on executive boards of the butter exchange and harbour, and was a JP.

And 'his' uncle was our only relative with a claim to eternal fame; he was the engineer who managed to get the *SS Great Britain* (Brunel's famous ship that is now in her original dock in Bristol) off the beach in Northern Ireland, where she'd been stranded for two years.

### First Stop — British Columbia



*David Bremner III seated at the entrance to the log cabin he was building at McPherson's Station, BC, in 1886*

Our Canadian holiday started with Granddad's uncle David. We'd found his Naval Officer's record in the National Archives at Kew (London) which gave the lie to some of Granddad's assertion that he'd left the Navy after a disagreement with the First Lord, Jackie Fisher. Actually, after his father and sister had died (both of TB) in 1885, he'd committed one senseless and petty crime and was about to be court martialled but was offered the chance to resign rather than be thrown out.

As for his career in Canada, we had an article from the *Slocan Times* of 1894, describing a pretty ill-conceived prospecting expedition into the hills between Arrow Lake and the Okanagan and mentioning that he lived in Kaslo,

and a fading photograph of him sat by a part-finished log cabin, labelled **McPherson Station**. Oh — and we knew he'd died in Vancouver in 1907, aged 42.

A little digging on the Internet established that McPherson Station was the original name for Cowichan Station on Vancouver Island, so plotting these on the map, we assumed he'd gone to Kaslo, then moved to Vancouver Island, and thence to Vancouver where he'd died.

Our visit to Kaslo archives established the plot of land he'd bought there in May 1894 (in between the disastrous fire in the February and the flood and hurricane in the June...), and a couple of strange applications for free miner's certificates in the names of his two brothers back in the UK. The directories showed that he'd taken out bonds on a number of mines between Silverton and Slocan. We made ourselves familiar with the area and its

astounding scenery. We also visited the Sandon Museum to gauge the atmosphere of those mining towns; and we saw the setting off point for his prospecting expedition that so nearly ended in disaster.

But as you know, research doesn't yield consistent results; like English buses, you wait for hours and hours, and then several come all at once — and it was our next stop, the British Columbia Archives in Victoria, that yielded two major bombshells, delivered by the enthusiastic and delightful archivist, Marion Tustanoff, who took a personal interest in our case and came up with the goods.

First, she found his application to be a homesteader — not at Cowichan Station as we'd presumed, but on the shores of Lake Cowichan, and it was dated 1889. A little more rooting around with the maps provided a location halfway along the north shore, and comparison with Google Earth showed that it still hadn't been developed. Would we find the log cabin still there? And — a fleeting thought this — would we be entitled to a share of it?

The second bombshell, delivered shortly after the first, was the inquest report into his death. His death certificate was more or less illegible, and we'd only just managed to make out a tentative reference on it to an inquest (we'd thought maybe he'd died of influenza, which was prevalent in Vancouver at that time) — but it became clear that he was an alcoholic, had spent most of 1906 in and out of hospital and the police station, and had ultimately died of heart failure caused by the DTs in a padded police cell where he'd been put for his own protection.

Digging through the directories established that he had also, in 1898-9, been general manager of the Wakefield Mines Ltd. near Silverton, which had extracted some ore at that time.

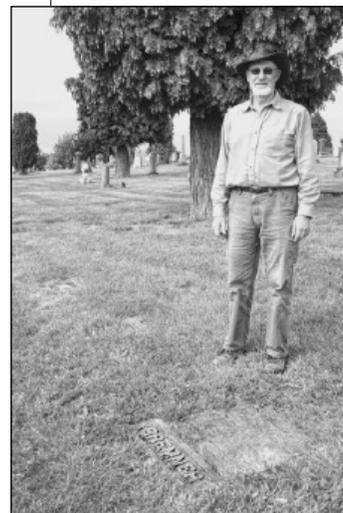
Next on the agenda, of course, was a trip to Lake Cowichan, just beyond the village of Youbou, to see the plot and try to find his log cabin. When you get there, it's a delightful spot on the lake shore, entirely covered in huge lush trees. It's a peaceful government campsite now, and we spent a fruitless morning looking for evidence of his cabin.

So we now had to do a major rewrite of David's history. He'd originally come out in 1889 to try his hand at homesteading like his brother Charlie. He'd come to the conclusion that there was no hope of developing the plot into anything of commercial value and had abandoned it to go mining in the Kootenays, which culminated in his general managership of the Wakefield Mine for a year. When that failed, the directories and voting lists show him drifting around other mining locations to Rossland, then to the Okanagans, finally turning up in Vancouver where he met his untimely end. It's hard to have much sympathy for David, and yet — one can't help feel sorry for him. Everything he did turned to dust. And it's striking how his naval record is clean until his father and sister died, after which he seems to have become unruly and set on course for ultimate failure.

But he is my namesake; perhaps he does deserve a little sympathy after all.

## And Then to Alberta

After that it was time to transfer our attention to David's younger brother Charlie, who was only 18 when he emigrated in 1885.



*The author, David Bremner V, at David Bremner III's gravesite in BC, and the grave marker.*

We knew that Charlie had been a rancher, and had a district named after him in Alberta, but it took a combination of Sue and Google to find the Strathcona County website to find out that he'd been something of a businessman as well as a farmer and local celebrity. In fact that was where we'd learned that he'd committed suicide — his two remaining brothers in the UK had apparently kept that information to themselves.

As a result of that connection, we'd been able to establish a good deal more about Charlie before we'd arrived in Edmonton.

It seems to have been a fairly last-minute decision by Charlie to jump on a ship to New York, take the train to Calgary, and then the stage coach to Edmonton, to join lifelong friend Archie Boag, a Scottish farmer, who'd gone out there a couple of years before to become a homesteader. In March 1885, Charlie had passed an exam and was apparently aiming for an office job. Dad died in the July, his sister Jane died in September, and by October 5<sup>th</sup> Charlie was installed on the NE quarter of section 30 in Strathcona County, close to Archie.

He seems to have inherited his father's head for business, and homesteaded a number of other quarters in the area, quickly establishing a reputation for horse breeding. He and



*The Bremner family group, likely at the time of their father's death (note the black armbands).*

*Left to right, standing: Donald, the author's great grandfather; James Charles; David. Seated: Harry, Jane, and Alexander Hamilton (Hampy).*

Archie supplied the Mounties with horses (rather dubious quality, according to Archie Boag's grandson) and the oats to feed them (equally dubious...). He also used his inheritance (around \$350,000 in 2011 value) to invest in mining in the Kootenays, and later in coal and oil, and was appointed managing director of the Mountain Park Coal company for 10 years.

And Charlie was a local character; he and Archie and their friend Billy Fielders lived life to the full, including riding their horses three abreast up the steps of the Edmonton House Hotel, hitching their horses to the bar, and staying for three days.

He was (like all his brothers) well over six feet tall, and used his distant Scottish

background to embellish his reputation; it's still widely believed that he was Lord Bremner, a remittance man who'd been sent to Canada with an allowance by his aristocratic parents to keep him out of trouble back home. We don't know who started the rumour, but at any rate Charlie didn't deny it!

But central to our visit to Strathcona County was the Bremner House, a large mansion Charlie had built around 1911-1912 at the height of his wealth. After his suicide, the house had been home to the Schroter and Nielsen families until it had been bought by the County in 2004 and designated a Municipal Historic Resource in 2009.

Lori Clapp, lead for the Strathcona County Community Heritage Legacy Initiative, takes a personal as well as a professional interest in the Bremner House. When she found out we were visiting, she took the opportunity to make us feel like royalty for the week.

The morning after our arrival, she, together with Jane Ross (historian under contract to the County), who's currently completing a project to assemble information on Charlie and his house, took us round the area to allow us to get the lay of the land.

But we weren't allowed more than a drive-by of the house itself; they wanted to keep it as a surprise for the next day, when Lori had

arranged a press interview, followed by a reception at the house hosted by Mayor Linda Osinchuk and councillors. We'd been following the weather forecast for Edmonton carefully and had a small idea of how variable it could be, but the sunshine, which had been following us all round Canada, stayed with us for the day. Following introductions from Lori and Mayor Linda, I spoke for a short while about Charlie's family and his lifelong connections to them.

The tour of the house was as rewarding an experience as Lori had intended. I've been lucky enough to see the homes of no less than five generations of Bremners, all substantially unchanged, and each occasion brought a lump to my throat. This was no exception, and I felt a private link to Charlie despite the many other people there and the general busyness of the day.

We visited the bathroom where Charlie put a pistol to his ear, but we didn't feel any ghosts there — or at least only good ones. The lasting impression is a happy one; perhaps hearing of the memories of the Schroters's 10 children running through the house, playing hide and seek in the cupboards and climbing the trees to get access to upper windows had



*Bremner House in about 1950.*

*Inset: the house today; note how little change.*

*Photos courtesy of Strathcona County.*

David Bremner  
1827-1876  
age at d: 58



Alexander H. Bremner  
1860-1934

age at d: 74 est.

Grace C. Raphael  
1863-1942

age at d: 79 est.

Jane A. Bremner  
1862-1885

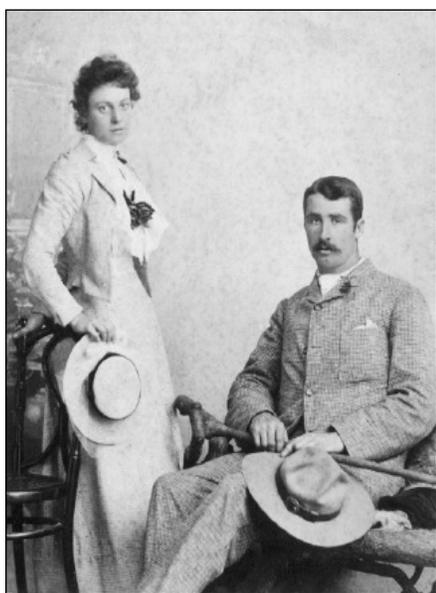
age at d: 23

Donald Bremner  
1864-1935

age at d: 71

Mary R. Holden  
1869-1931

age at d: 62



*James Charles Bremner and his wife Edith on their honeymoon in Victoria.*

*Below and opposite: the immediate family tree of David and Agnes Bremner.*

Agnes Hamilton  
1855-1876

*age at d: 43*

obliterated — or at least masked — the others. By the end of the day, the four of us — Lori, Jane, Sue and myself — had a last, private look around the place, before sitting down, exhausted, to catch our breath.

The following day, we visited the Edmonton graveyard where Charlie and Archie are buried close to each other, in the company of Archie's great granddaughter Franca Boag, and were able to swap stories about our two ancestors. Then it was on to Linda Hirsekorn, a Schroter granddaughter, who had photo albums of the Bremner house dating from the 1930s.

But they had dreamed up a final surprise for us. Just before we left, Lori drove us into Edmonton's Old Strathcona district, and stopped the car with an enigmatic smile on her face. We were escorted across the road, and there was Jane, outside the Strathcona Hotel. It transpired this was the original Edmonton House Hotel which Charlie, Archie, and Billy Fielders had ridden their horses into in 1891, now renamed. We'd thought it had been knocked down many years ago, so this was a wonderful parting present; and I must say, having realized how far it was from the Bremner House, I can understand why they felt the need to stay for three days!

I was impressed by the vision of the Council in taking on such a project as the Bremner House. There's a long way still to go, but it seemed to me an ideal place to bring children to teach them about their heritage, using oral history, old machinery, and perhaps even examples of farming in the pioneer days. It's also a fantastic, charismatic venue for events today — weddings, conferences and the like.

But most of all, I was impressed by the love and care shown by Lori, Jane, Mayor Linda and the Strathcona County Council towards the Bremner House and my talented, colourful, obstreperous, troublesome and ultimately troubled uncle.

We've uncovered a number of interesting facts and documents relating to Charlie while we were there; but above all, by being where he was, we've got to understand him so very much better.

Our most rewarding trip to Canada proved that, unless your interest in genealogy is purely one of head-counting, no amount of Googling can replace a visit to the place itself, and a trawl through the archives— particularly in the company of someone as determined and thorough as my wife Sue! RS

