

EUREKA MOMENT

How a reader broke down a research brick wall



'GREAT GRANDFATHER LED A SHOCKING DOUBLE LIFE'

Michael Gough Cooper is enthralled by a London hansom-cab owner whose love life was as complicated as the labyrinthine streets he navigated. Interview by **Gail Dixon**

As a writer of thriller novels that are set in the Far East, the Covid-19 pandemic left me stranded in my West Sussex home, struggling to find inspiration. To jolt myself out of lethargy, I began researching our family history.

A rummage in a cupboard revealed a trunk full of dusty documents and sepia photographs. An image of my great grandfather Henry Gough, a dignified gentleman in a frock coat, fascinated me most. As I peered at him, something important struck me: I knew virtually nothing about him.

The only facts came from my grandfather James Gough Cooper's bedtime stories.



MICHAEL GOUGH COOPER is an author and a retired intelligence officer. He has been researching his family tree for six years

He'd once told me, "My father Henry owned hansom cabs, at least 40 horses, and employed staff in Marylebone, Central London. He did well for us all – a kindly man to be sure."

James was born in Marylebone in 1888, and had 10 siblings. His mother, Caroline Buchan, was born in 1852 at Shoreditch Workhouse, East London.

My Brick Wall

I was keen to discover more about Henry, and to solve the conundrum behind our surname. Henry was born a Gough, then at some point in the late 19th century the family name changed to Gough Cooper.

I knew that when Henry was on his deathbed in 1912, my grandfather James went into the

room and saw a number of people who he didn't recognise. He discovered that day that they were actually his half-siblings.

Grandfather didn't like to talk about this, it made him uncomfortable, so it was all hushed up. What was the story behind this mysterious branch of Henry's family?

My Eureka Moment

Henry was born in 1835 in Marylebone, to coachman Charles Gough and his wife Hannah Adcock. Sadly, both his parents died young and Henry was orphaned by the age of six.

He later became the driver of a hansom cab, the single-horse vehicle that was much favoured in Victorian times. It was narrow, light and fast, making it the ideal way to negotiate the city's crowded streets.

Henry must have worked hard, because by his mid-twenties he owned a cab and horses. These were stabled at Abbey Yard near his home in St John's Wood, just north of Marylebone Road.

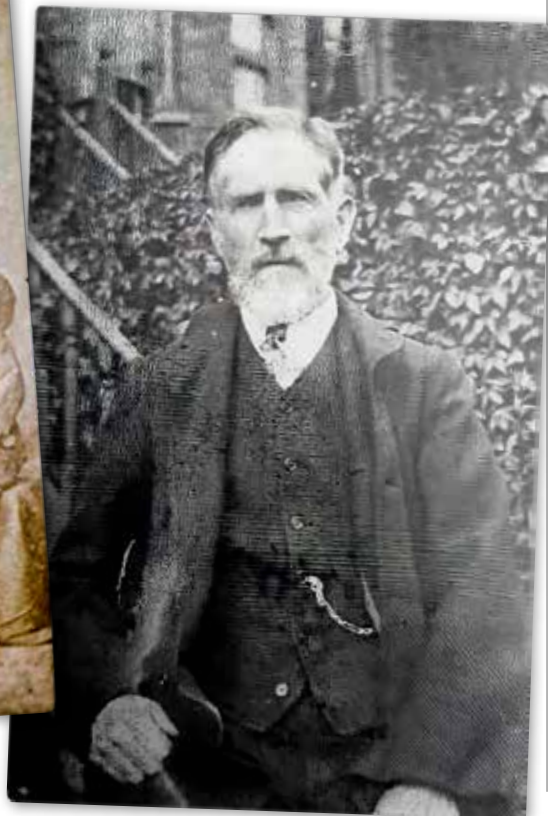
In 1857, he married cabman's daughter Hannah Morrell, and they had eight children over the next 16 years.

Henry's love life became very tangled in the 1870s. A birth record revealed that in 1873 he had an illegitimate son Henry Gough Cooper with my great grandmother Caroline Buchan, who lived close to the Gough family in St John's Wood.

To add spice to the mix, Henry was still living with his wife Hannah at this time and she gave birth to their eighth child some months after Henry and Caroline had their first. This scandalous double life, if discovered, would



Michael's great grandparents Caroline Buchan (above) and "rough diamond" Henry Gough (right)



Marriage Register, 1894

Michael's great grandparents Henry Gough and Caroline Buchan married after living together for almost 20 years and having 12 children

1894. Marriage solemnized at the Parish Church in the Parish of St. Marylebone in the County of London								
No.	When Married.	Name and Surname.	Age.	Condition.	Rank or Profession.	Residence at the time of Marriage.	Father's Name and Surname.	Rank or Profession of Father.
234	11 th February 1894	Henry Gough Caroline Buchan	58 42	1 Widower Spinster	Cab Proprietor	16 Cochrane St. as above	St. Charles Gough James Buchan	Omibus Driver Omibus Driver
Married in the Parish Church according to the Rites and Ceremonies of the Established Church by J. Gough or after, P. Buchan								
This Marriage was solemnized between us, H. Gough & C. Buchan in the Presence of J. Gough & P. Buchan								

1 WIDOWER

Henry's first wife Hannah Morrell died in 1893, so he is listed as a widower. The couple were married for well over 30 years, and had nine children together. They also lived in the same part of London as Henry's long-term mistress and second wife Caroline.

2 IN THE PRESENCE OF

The witnesses to the marriage were Henry's brother John and Caroline's mother Elizabeth. It's unlikely that any of the couple's children were present, otherwise they would have realised that they'd been born illegitimately.

have caused gossip around St John's Wood and public humiliation for Hannah.

Further proof came when I visited The London Archives (thelondonarchives.org) and searched for Henry in business directories. In the 1875 London Post Office Directory he was listed as Henry Cooper, cab proprietor, at 36 Bolton Road, St John's Wood. Eureka! In 1877, Caroline gave birth to their third illegitimate child Walter Gough Cooper at that address.

Clearly Henry's love affair with Caroline was intense because from the mid-1870s he lived with her full time and they had nine more children, including James, all of whom were given the surname Gough Cooper. I still don't know where the name Cooper comes from, despite having researched both families.

Hannah died in 1893, and Henry and Caroline married the following year. However, there was no 'happy ever after' because in 1900 Caroline eloped to Scotland with a gamekeeper

called John Livingstone. The couple married illicitly in what was undoubtedly a bigamous union for Caroline.

My Breakthrough

I now understood the reason behind James's reluctance to speak about his extended family. He was only 12 years old when Caroline eloped, and found it hard to forgive. Then in 1912, as his father lay dying, James had the shock of meeting his half-brothers and sisters.



Michael's grandfather James Gough Cooper fought in the First World War

In that moment, he must have realised that he had been born illegitimately. Despite leading a double life, Henry is something of a hero to me. He inherited nothing, but bequeathed

much to his children from both marriages. He must have worked hard to build up the business he ran with his brother John. A newspaper entry from 1891 revealed that they co-owned 50 horses, which had to be rescued from the stables during a blizzard because the roof was caving in.

I see Henry as a dashing rough

diamond, hurtling around the city in his hansom cab. He has become the central figure in my latest three historical novels published under my pen name Frank Hurst, the most recent of which is *The Shrouded Coast*. In it, Henry journeys to Cornwall where he discovers hauntings, smugglers and long-buried grudges. I've loved fantasising about the blank pages of his stirring existence. 📖

Reader Tips

Michael has this advice if you hit a brick wall in your research

- Children have historically often been named after their parents or their grandparents.
- Remember that the spelling of surnames varied in the past – I have found Gough also spelled "Goff" or "Gaugh".
- Try to interest other members of your family in your research, especially the next generation. My own research became a joint effort with my cousins.

HAVE YOU BROKEN THROUGH A BRICK WALL?

Share your family story with us and you could appear in the magazine!

Please write to us at the address on page 6 or email wolytaeditorial@ourmedia.co.uk



The Shrouded Coast was published in 2025 by The Book Guild (RRP £9.99)