

## The Family Pelteret in South Africa

The name Pelteret derives from the Old French for fellmonger ..... furrier ..... dresser of pelts or animal skins" and is rare <sup>1</sup>.

Names of similar origin include Pelleteret, Pelletret, Pelletier, Peltier, Pelter, Peltret, Pilter, Pelzer (French), van Pelt (German), Pellitteri, Pillitteri, Impellitteri, Impelizzeri (Italian).

Crests for many of these and other similar names are well documented <sup>2</sup>.

### The Pelteret Family in France

The Pelteret family appears to have been Protestant-Huguenot and originates from the Champagne, Lorraine and Cote d'Or districts of France. Of particular interest is the number of Pelterets that were living in Is-sur-Tille in the 15<sup>th</sup> century where the patron saint of the local church is Saint-Leger.

In 1679, King Louis XIV (1643-1715), on the advice of his Jesuit confessor, began a campaign to eradicate Protestantism from French soil. By 1684 nearly six hundred of eight hundred Huguenot churches had been closed.

In October 1685, King Louis XIV revoked the Edict of Nantes <sup>3</sup>, and thereby forbade Huguenots to exercise their faith, to educate their children as Protestants or indeed to leave France. However, by this date, half a million Huguenots had already left France. Prussia actively recruited these skilled folk, and many other French Protestants escaped persecution by settling in

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<sup>1</sup> P H Reaney., R M Wilson. Dictionary of English Surnames. 3<sup>rd</sup> ed. 1991

<sup>2</sup> J B Rietstap. Planches de L'Armorial General (P-S). 1921

<sup>3</sup> "Louis, by the grace of God king of France and Navarre, to all present and to come, greeting ..... Given at Fontainebleau in the month of October, in the year of grace 1685, and of our reign the forty-third."

Reference : 1. James Harvey Robinson, ed., *Readings in European History* 2 vols. Boston: Ginn, 1906, 2:287-291.

Britain. The demolition of churches, kidnapping of children and the expulsion of Huguenots from strategic cities like Paris proved most effective.

This act is considered King Louis XIV's greatest of many political errors. The influence of the Huguenot exodus upon France was as disastrous as it was beneficial to other countries, and its effects were felt for decades thereafter. The French economy suffered greatly, since no Catholic noble wanted any part of trade. When this small company of zealots was deprived of all civil and religious rights, their number reduced through violence and emigration from 1,800,000 in 1660 to 400,000 in 1700. The corrupt French court once again gained full sway where before the austerity of the Huguenots had exercised a positive, modifying influence. In 1685, it is estimated that 200,000 Protestants left France; and the next year, Vauban<sup>4</sup> reported to the minister of war, Louvois, that France had lost 100,000 inhabitants, 60,000,000 francs in cash, 9,000 sailors, 12,000 soldiers, and 600 officers.

Thus, once again, the Roman Catholic Church became the sole arbiter of the destinies of France, but she continued to lose her authority. Ferdinand Brunetire, a loyal Roman Catholic, said: " The revocation of the Edict of Nantes arrested the moral progress of France, because it drove into exile the people who called themselves men of the Bible, and who carried their morality, faith, and intelligence everywhere .... From Dunkirk to Bayonne, from Brest to Besangon, he (Louis XIV) cut the nerve of French morality for the metaphysical satisfaction of having God praised only in Latin. "

The industries of France suffered the greatest. In Touraine there were left, in 1698, only fifty-four tanneries out of 400, only 1,200 looms out of 8,000, only 4,000 silk-weavers out of 40,000, only seventy mills out of 700. Normandy had 26,000 empty houses; the Dauphins lost 15,000 inhabitants. Paris is recorded as having lost 1,202 Huguenot families out of 1,938. Of course,

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<sup>4</sup> Sebastien le Prestre de Vauban (1633-1707) was a marshal of France and devoted servant of Louis XIV. On the battle field, he was a fine military defence strategist, and he wrote extensively on the nature of war, administration, finance, agriculture and the deplorable lot of the peasantry. His "*Project d'une dixme royal*" was remarkable in that it foreshadowed the principles of the French Revolution. He died distraught, in total disfavour with his king.

France's neighbouring countries flourished economically as the Huguenots established new industries there. Furthermore, the bitterness of the Huguenot emigrants transmitted to their hosts, depriving France of old or potential political allies. Here, the way was paved for William of Orange to become king of England, as he used the example of the Huguenots in France when illustrating the fate that would befall England if it had a Catholic king.

### **The Pelteret Family in England**

Circumstances suggest that the family Pelteret migrated about the time of the Revocation of the Edict of Nantes to the state of Brandenburg, Prussia. The family name appears in the archives in Den Hague, Brandenburg, Berlin and London, and in the parish registers of many central London churches.

Members of the family may have been in the retinue of George I of Hanover when he journeyed to take the English throne in 1714; or simply been one of the estimated 60-80,000 Huguenots to emigrate to England over a period of years <sup>5</sup> <sup>6</sup>.

It is said that those who fled to England left everything behind, bringing only their technical knowledge and skills — assets that would transform weaving and other industries. The French Protestants got a warmer welcome in the 1660's than their forebears of a century before <sup>7</sup> who had arrived during a

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<sup>5</sup> Records exist suggesting that the name may have reached England far earlier. William le Peleter (unpublished Assize Roll, Yorkshire : 1219), Adam le Peletur (Subsidy Rolls, Sussex 1296), Henry le Pelter (41<sup>st</sup> Annual Report [1880] of Deputy Keeper of Public Records in London, 1301). In the Assize Roll of 1309 (Société Jersiaise 1903 No.18) the name le Pelletier appears and is thought to be of Norman-French origin having arrived in Jersey and Guernsey during the reign of King John (1167-1216), when the islands were attached to the English crown. However, history suggests that these families were of probable Norman origin and, though similar in name, unrelated. The Royal Archives, Windsor has identified no Hanoverian link.

<sup>6</sup> It has been suggested that the name travelled to The Americas in the 1860's. To-date, only two records, one dating from Canada in the 1600's and the other Kansas in the 1800's, have been found. Neither suggest a relationship to the original London family.

<sup>7</sup> This migration followed the death of Henry II of France, a time of great persecution, and the notorious Massacre of St. Bartholomew's Eve in 1572. I am in correspondence with the Huguenot Society of Great Britain and Ireland and with the Deutscher Hugenotten-Gesellschaft, Bad Karlshafen, Germany.

time of economic hardship and were the focus of a great deal of resentment from an already impoverished population.

Throughout the country, churches collected donations for the refugees; these contributions were substantial enough to require a committee being created to administer the funds. Though most Huguenots settled in London, they also swelled the ranks of established settlements of foreign Protestants in Canterbury, Norwich, Southampton and Bristol.

The earliest Pelteret family record that has been traced <sup>8</sup> is that of one **LEGER PELTERET**, born in 1736 and who married Ann Holland on the 3<sup>rd</sup> March 1776 at St. James Church, Westminster. Though the records have not been found, he is assumed to have been the grandfather of **GEORGE PELTERET**, the third of six offspring born to Leger and Jane, and the founder of the South African family line. George was born on the 16<sup>th</sup> September 1816 and baptised in the same St. James, Westminster on the 24<sup>th</sup> December 1820.

There is ample evidence that the family lived for several generations in the vicinity of Pentonville and Bethnal Green, were craftsmen, worshipped in nearby English churches, and married into local families. Here we need to digress whilst I describe the London of the 1830's onwards.

The year 1817 saw the disease *Cholera morbus* (as it was originally called) first being described from the city of Jessore, India. In 1831 cholera was introduced to Europe, killing an estimated 900,000 peoples. Millions were to die of the disease before the century was out. The first case of cholera reported in the East-end of London was found on 12<sup>th</sup> February, 1832. This outbreak, assumed to have been spread through water contamination, killed thirty two thousand people and became endemic at a time when it was entirely usual for one in four babies died within one year of birth. **JANE**

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<sup>8</sup> Here I record my appreciation for the research endeavours over many years of Mrs. Monica Sutherland, herself a descendant through a female line of George Pelteret.

**PELTERET**, the mother of George, died in 1835 conceivably as a consequence of this disease.

English law abolished the slave trade in 1807 but it took until 1833 for slavery itself to be abolished in all British colonies. As we shall learn, the Children's Friend Society which was instrumental in sending George Pelteret to South Africa was a casualty in 1838 to this movement.

In 1860, the total population inhabiting the 760 acres that constituted the "ruinous tenements reeking with abominations" that was Bethnal Green, was 105,101. The Bethnal Green of twenty years earlier had been a vastly different place, as is borne out by the seemingly inapt street names of that time and which exist to this day: Hollybush Place, Berry Street, Green Street, Pleasant Place. In those day, its streets were lined with decent cottages, standing on or nestling near plots of garden ground, where the residents reared prize tulips and rare dahlias in a more leisurely manner, and "where some of the last of the old French refugees dozed away the evenings of their lives in pretty summer-houses, amidst flower-beds gay with virginia stocks and creeping plants".

By 1860, this vast district of eastern London, Bethnal Green had become "flat, ancient, dirty, and degraded; its courts and alleys were almost countless, and overrun with the detritus of an impoverished humanity. Ill-maintained tenements teemed with inhabitants to an almost inconceivable extent". The water for some fourteen or fifteen houses was frequently supplied from one tap and ran for only a short time every day. The buildings had no reticulated sewerage. The streets were filled with the smell of decaying vegetable matter, of livestock - mainly cows and pigs - and "that sickly odour which belongs always to human beings living in such a state of poverty".

Social reformers described the children as being "ragged, sharp, weasel-like; brought up from the cradle - which is often an old box or an egg-chest - to hard living and habits of bodily activity". The men were mainly poor dock labourers, costermongers and silk-weavers, with a sprinkling of bandbox and

Lucifer-box makers, cane workers, clothes-peg makers, shoemakers, tailors, toy makers and cheap cabinet-makers, all clinging hopelessly to a diminishing demand for their handicrafts and resolutely averting absolute starvation. The rest of this humanity is described as “the lowest kind of thieves, [and] the most ill-disguised class of swell-mobs men”. Its women were mainly hawkers, seamstresses and aged stall-keepers or “the coarsest order of prostitutes”.

It was out of this environment that we must speculate George Pelteret emerged in 1833 and came to the Cape of Good Hope. Under what circumstances he came to the attention of the Children’s Friends Society is unclear. What is known is that he was taken in by the society and shipped to Cape Town from Cowes together with 19 other boys aboard the “*Charles Kerr*”, captained by a certain Mr. Brodie. Their departure was on the 21<sup>st</sup> January 1833 and arrival the 11<sup>th</sup> May 1833. He became a house servant to Mr. R W Eaton.

Little is known of Richard Webber Eaton other than he was a man of substance. He arrived in Cape Town from England aboard the “*Garland*” on 26 September 1818. He went into partnership with his brother-in-law, J B Ebdon (*Ebdon & Eaton, Merchants*) in the Heerengracht (1819) and later Berg Street (1820). Though the name of his wife is unknown, he is known to have had two children, Mary Theophila (baptised on 12<sup>th</sup> May 1819) and Francis James (baptised 14<sup>th</sup> December 1821). In March 1822, he was a founder member of the Commercial Exchange, the fore-runner of to-day’s Cape Town Chamber of Commerce & Industry, and went on to be prominent in Cape Town commercial society. He died in 1861.

The Children’s Friends Society <sup>9</sup> was founded in 1830 by Capt. Edward

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<sup>9</sup> Here I record my gratitude to Dr Edna Bradlow for her personal communications.

References :

1. Blackburn, G. The Children's Friend Society. Access Press, Northbridge, WA. 1993
2. Bradlow, E. The Children’s Friend Society at the Cape Of Good Hope. Victorian Studies 1984; 27 (2): 156-177
3. Bull, e. Aided Immigration from Britain to South Africa 1857-1867. HSRC. 1991

Pelham Brenton with a view to training poor and vagrant children who functioned on the periphery of delinquency and crime in “useful habits through a combination of labour and an humble religious and secular education”. Though in the Cape of Good Hope adult white labourers were not generally favoured because of the ambiguity of their role when compared to a slave, the colony was having to adjust to the prospect of the application of the Slavery Abolition Act of 1833. A solution to these two issues appeared to be to import child labour <sup>10</sup>. Later, it was admitted indirectly that amongst the first 20 children, of which George Pelteret was one, were some acknowledged juvenile delinquents, “matured in crime”. Through public pressure, the society was disbanded in London in 1845 though a local Cape committee monitored its child immigrants until 1848.

With reference to George Pelteret two issues are worthy of noting; namely that he appears to have been educated by and received religious training from Eaton, as each employer was exhorted to do but few accomplished. He had a tutored hand-writing, was associated with a local church, and clearly aspired to raising his station in life. The other is that, unlike so many who arrived in the Cape courtesy of the society, he did not become assimilated into the indigenous community as is known to have occurred in many (arguably most) instances.

By 1837, George Pelteret was reported as working on the farm “*Brandenburg*” in present day Rosebank, and the current site of the Rosebank Methodist Church, Cape Town. Later, George Pelteret, a labourer and Evelina, his wife and a house servant, worked for Jacob Letterstedt, owner of “*Mariendahl Brewery*” and the “*Josephine Mill*” (later Ohlson's and subsequently South African Brewery). On 13 May 1874, together with others, George Pelteret and his wife gave Lydia, the daughter of Joseph Letterstedt and his second wife (also Lydia née Boyes), “a valuable casket and a diamond locket” to mark her majority. It was at this time that Lydia took ownership of the estates left to

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<sup>10</sup> John Fairburn of the *South African Commercial Advertiser* paraphrased in Bradlow stated that it was the best way of supplying free labour to a market about to be devoid of slaves whilst solving the problem of the glut of labour in the mother country.

her on the death of her father in 1863.

George purchased a burial plot at St.Paul's in 1837 and died on the 30<sup>th</sup> January 1890. Evelina died on 19<sup>th</sup> June 1890. Their bones were disinterred and are said to have been reburied and the headstone re-erected at St. Saviour's, Claremont when church hall was built at St. Paul's. Permission was never sought of the descendents. No records have been found of these events neither at St. Saviour's nor on the list of headstones at St. Paul's in the South African Archives, Cape Town.

### **The Pelteret Family to-day**

Following its diaspora from France in the fifteenth century, the **Pelteret** family name has been traced to Prussia, the Benelux countries, the United Kingdom, Canada and the United States of America.

To-day, in France (2002), an extensive electronic survey of the telephone directories has elicited only one person resident in Severeux with the family name PELTERET. There are many with similar of which PELTRET is amongst the most common. A similar survey of Germany, the Benelux countries, Canada and the United States of America has been fruitless.

A survey of records in The Huguenot Society of Great Britain and Ireland (1885), the Royal Archives, Windsor, the Deutscher Hugenotten-Gesellschaft, Germany, the records of the Church of the Latter Day Saints and numerous genealogical sites on the world-wide web have been equally without profit <sup>11</sup>.

In London, nor in the United Kingdom at large, is there any trace of a Pelteret line descended from LEGER HENRY PELTERET. Currently, several

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<sup>11</sup> Here I record with gratitude the correspondence from Jacques Julien [jmjulien@noos.fr](mailto:jmjulien@noos.fr) who provided me with details of his 15<sup>th</sup> century PELTERET ancestors from the Moloy district, Cote d'Or and of Is-sur-Tille.



descendants of South African lines, reside in the United Kingdom, all without offspring.

In South Africa, the perpetuation of the name over the six (in one instance, seven) generations since its arrival has been fragile. The main reason for this has been a propensity for producing female offspring. Suggesting that this tendency continues to this day (2002) is that, of the several hundred known descendants of **George Pelteret and Evelina Stouten**, only eight sixth-generation and four seventh-generation Pelteret males have been born.

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