

Robin Bayley's grandmother would tell him stories about her father's adventures in Mexico, about hidden bags of silver, jungle journeys and a narrow escape from the Mexican Revolution aided by bandits, but there seemed to be something missing...

A family lost & found



Evocative pictures such as these inspired Robin to research his mysterious great-grandfather (left).

As a child I saw a photograph of a man on horseback on my grandmother's wall. He wore a sombrero and long-spiked spurs and carried a lasso, sword and pistol: my great-grandfather, Arthur Greenhalgh. He had travelled from Lancashire to run a cotton mill in Mexico at the end of the 1890s. This sense that there was something waiting for me in Mexico never left me, and when, in the mid-1990s, I found his initialled suitcase stuffed with letters and photos, I set off in his footsteps.

I had the barest of information – a handful of shipping manifests from The National Archives and notes from

conversations with my grandmother. While these interviews provided me with invaluable oral history, the details were vague. With intuition and serendipity as my guides, I managed, after several months of false leads – which took me as far off course as Colombia – to track down the small village in western Mexico where Arthur, known as Arturo, had lived and worked. The cottages, factory and chapel looked as though they belonged to an English mill town more than on the western slopes of the Sierra Madre. There, I discovered that Arturo had left a secret family behind, now numbering more than 300.

I was introduced to one relative,

then another, then another. All welcomed me warmly. It was as though they had been waiting for me to turn up. Some even believed I was Arturo's reincarnation. 'I always knew you'd come back,' said one.

When I returned to England, grandma was still finding my discovery difficult to believe. Just as she had told me stories when I was a boy, I now told stories to her. Bit by bit, she came round. Her horror about her father's infidelity turned to acceptance and eventually to pride. Then, six months after I had come back, she suggested I take her to Mexico. We set off a month after her 90th birthday and were greeted with a Mariachi fanfare and a fiesta of hundreds of Mexican relatives, their faces bathed in tears. Their English ancestor had finally come home.

I had always wanted to write a book about my search, but for some reason, at that moment, I didn't feel ready to do so. It wasn't until 2004 that I set out again, following in Arturo's footsteps and recreating my own journey from 10 years before.

The main revelation of the book was obviously going to be the discovery of Arturo's secret family, but I still had many unanswered questions. How had Arturo lived his double life? How had he reconciled the two? What was the truth about his escape from the Revolution?

I spent several weeks in archives across the country. The newspapers and historical texts provided me with invaluable background, but the key to being able to uncover the truth of it all was family stories. I'd have never embarked on my quest had it not been for Grandma's tales, and I was only accepted by my Mexican family because they had also been told stories about their English ancestor. Because of stories, Arturo remained an important figure in all our lives.

The stories my Mexican relatives told me not only helped me to understand about Arturo's secret life,

Tips for finding ancestors in Mexico

- Before travelling abroad, pursue all avenues in the UK.
- Record your interviews!
- If the company your ancestor worked for was British, try The National Archives. It holds correspondence between British consulates, their citizens and companies.
- Not many people speak English in Mexico. Unless you have a translator, learn some Spanish.
- Most of the important archives in Mexico are kept at the excellent Archivo General de la Nación www.agn.gob.mx and Biblioteca Nacional <http://bnm.unam.mx>, part of the Universidad Nacional Autónoma de México (UNAM) in Mexico City. (Warning: both these sites are in Spanish, but can be translated with Google Toolbar).
- To gain entry to the archives, you will need photo ID and, ideally, a letter of introduction from a publisher, employer or educational institution.
- Follow the money: company archives will include records of most employees. Many foreign-owned companies pulled out of Mexico after the Revolution and returned to their countries of origin, taking their paperwork with them.
- Genealogy is not yet widely popular in Latin America, but because of the melting-pot ethnicity there is genuine interest.
- Talk to people and follow up all leads. Wild goose chases can be fun!
- More tips on www.themangoorchard.com.

but also how the family operated.

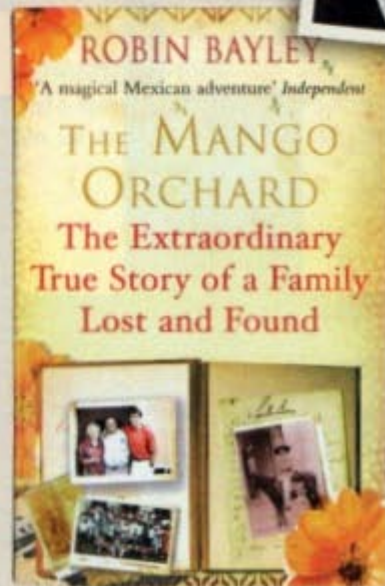
My search became the Mexican family's search too; each informed the other. They introduced me to the leading historians in the region, who helped me uncover and interpret some of the more buried documents. It was through one of these historians that I managed to gain access to the private archive, in Spain, of the company Arturo had worked for. There, I found a letter written to Arturo by the leader of the striking workers, asking Arturo to address their grievances. The strike went ahead, and it indirectly helped to spark the Mexican Revolution – a revolution in which one million people died.

It took me five years to write *The Mango Orchard*; it was a race against time. Grandma was 97 when I started. I called her every week, no matter where I was in the world. She would ask me how the book was coming on, and add, 'Hurry up!'.

When the book was finished, she read the completed manuscript twice. She died peacefully, just short of her 103rd birthday, a few days after I told her that Random House had offered me an international publishing deal and that the book would be dedicated to her. 🍌

FT reader offer

Readers can buy Robin Bayley's *The Mango Orchard* (RRP £7.99) for the special price of £6.99 including free UK p&p. To order please call 01206 255 800 and quote the reference 'Family Tree'. *The Mango Orchard* is also available as an ebook.



Shortly after her 90th birthday, Robin's grandma journeyed to Mexico, for a tearful, fanfare reunion with her long-lost relatives. Seen here is 'Grandma' with Tío Arturo and Tío Enrique. Inset: many of the family on the steps of the factory that Robin's great-grandfather once ran.

