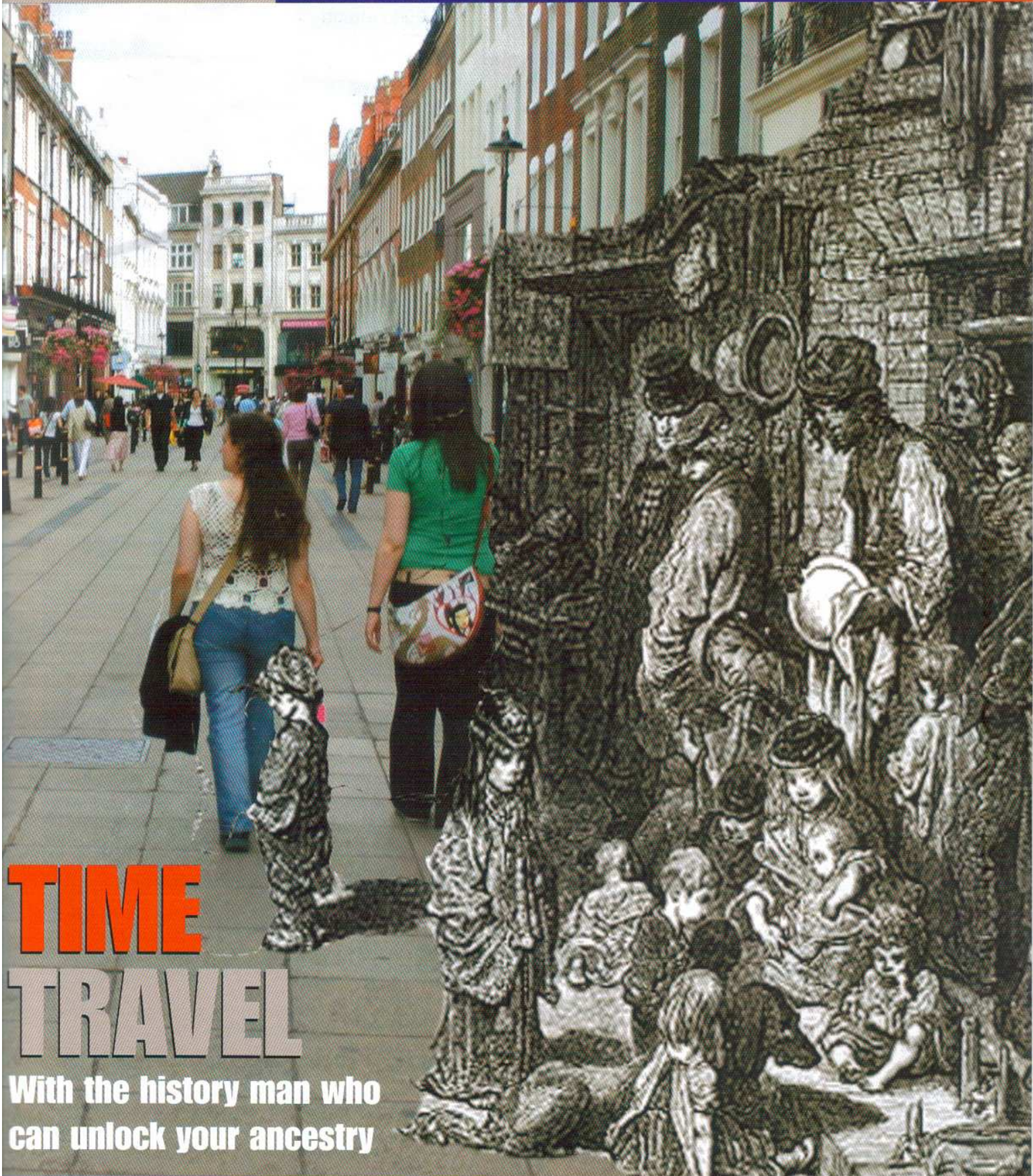




JUNE 2008
www.mensa.org.uk

MENSA

magazine



TIME TRAVEL

With the history man who can unlock your ancestry

ALSO INSIDE

- WHAT IF WE REALLY COULD TALK TO THE ANIMALS?
- MEET THE WRITER PLOTTING A MENSAN MURDER

The time Detective

Mensan Paul McNeil runs a thriving genealogy business. Here he explains how in most families there is often one ancestor who, by dint of his intelligence and determination, would lead his descendants to a better future

"Family History is a succession of Silk Stockings going downstairs, and hob-nailed boots clumping upstairs." **Voltaire**

I was always baffled as a child as to why some people lived in nice houses with big gardens, had new clothes, and ate three meals a day, while I lived in a slum in Peckham, didn't have enough to eat and wore hand-me-down clothes. Why had my parents brought me up here rather than in a big house with a garden? Bloody inconsiderate of them I would say. I won't dwell on my own success since, what I'm concerned with here is the wealth of data I've accumulated running a genealogy business tracing family histories and writing up their stories, on the phenomenon of success and failure transmitted down the generations like a gene, until a social mutation crops up in a single generation that takes the family to a dazzling rise or a crashing fall in future generations.

I've found that there are key ancestors that have very similar genes to their siblings, and identical upbringings to their peers, who cause these nexus points of success or failure. I will set out the main

factors in this article.

For an example of the winning vectors – the hob-nailed boots clumping upstairs – let's take the example of a family that approached me to trace and write the father of the family's ancestry as a birthday present. They are a nice, property-owning, middle class professional family but unbeknownst to them their roots came literally from the chalk fields of Kent, watered by the sweat of their brows.

Descended from agricultural labourers, their forebears had tilled the fields for the landowners of Kent for generations; life for one family being fairly identical to the last generation and so on for hundreds of years with no social movement. The agricultural slump caused by foreign cheap imports of food after the end of the Napoleonic War hit them hard, and they were turned off the land and out of their homes by struggling tenant farmers who employed them, to find a living elsewhere or face starvation in the years before the harsh sanctuary of the work house.

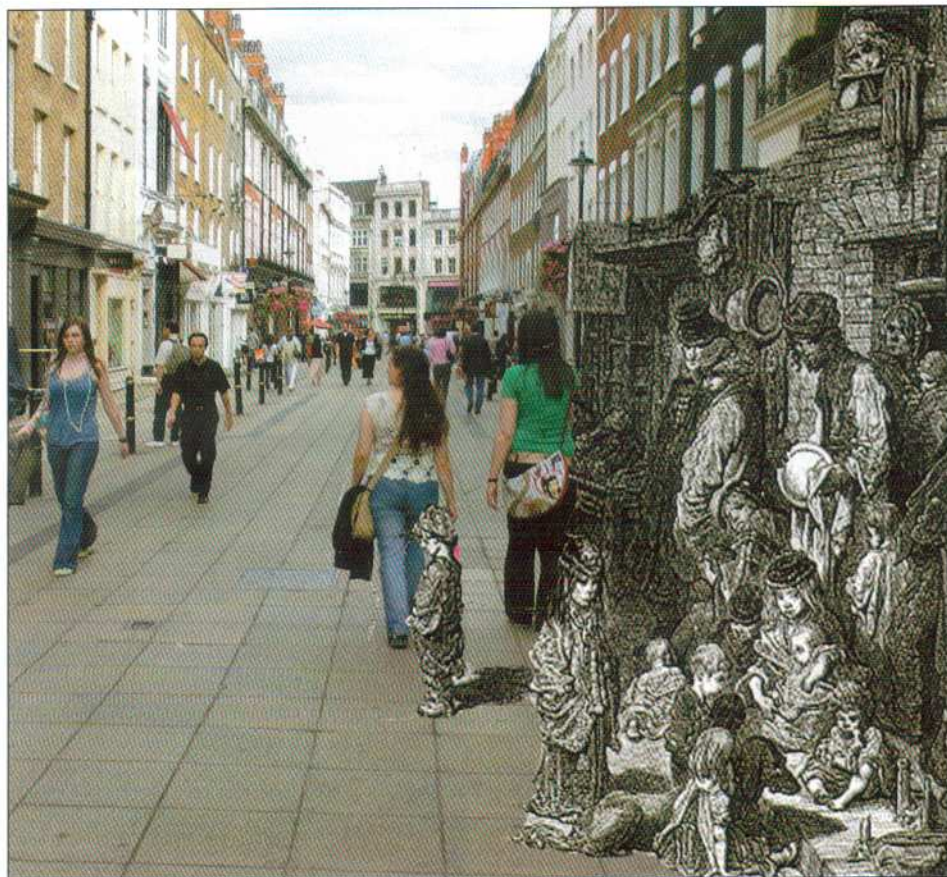
It was at this time in the 1820s that Thomas, the great great grandfather of my clients, left the land

and turned up for work in the chalk mines of North Kent. These provided the raw material for the Medway cement furnaces, to be shipped to the exploding building programmes in London.

The chalk diggers were a rough lot, being used by their employers as coercive voting muscle in rotten boroughs. Swinging a pick at a Chalk face for 12 hours a day, was not a job with prospects, but it put food on the table, and a roof over their heads. It was from this base that their vector ancestor blossomed. He was Thomas' son, also a Thomas, the oldest boy, and third of eight children. Three of his siblings died in childhood, so times were hard. Prospects looked as bad for him as they did for his father working in the chalk mines, but the turning point came in the 1850s when, after getting a local girl pregnant and marrying her, he left Kent to earn more money in the building boom in London. Engineers in London needed experienced men who could work as navvies in hard and dangerous environments, but it wasn't his expertise that gave him his break, rather it was a break in his bones that gave him his break!



■ **TIME TRAVEL:** Paul McNeil in a publicity shot. The World War II tank crew pictured included his Uncle Albert, on the far right in the photograph



■ PAST AND PRESENT: The stories from yesteryear are all around us if you know where to look

Laid up in St Bartholomew's Hospital, he was forced out of the lucrative labour market and back to Kent. Now he couldn't feed his family, so his wife sewed sacks for a few pence to ward off starvation until he had recovered enough to go back into the chalk pits. Necessity being the mother of invention, the only way for a man with an injury to earn as much as a man without one was by means other than muscle. But how could an illiterate injured man do this?

His route was to join the democratic, and therefore subversive, congregational church. Here he learned to read and write, almost unheard of for an adult labourer. He goes from marking his wedding certificate in 1854 with a scrawled "X", to witnessing the marriages of his siblings with a confidently scripted signature. His ability to read and write enabled him to become the foreman at the mine, which meant less hard labour and more responsibility.

Although this was as far as he got in his life, it was enough, and he made sure his children received the education that he had lacked from an early age. When he died the wonderfully grumpy entry in the local Church register commented that his funeral had "No Church of England Service"... so he marched out of the world to the beat of his own drum.

Educated at their father's insistence, the children had a much better chance of dragging themselves out of the Chalk Pits, although two would die young from disease. His eldest son

William Edward, started in the same chalk pits as his father, but soon left the pick and shovel behind, and moved into the new technology of cement milling. This needed skilled and literate operators, so William Edward was freed to use his intelligence to commercial advantage. He built a career on the back of the technology, and went from an operator to running his own cement mill, moving from the industrial village to the local town, and eventually retiring to the south coast. His surviving brothers did well, one becoming a foreman like his father, the second an electrical motor attendant; another new technology.

William Edward's son, Edward Percy, used his education to become a commercial clerk, moved around the country with his job, and was just too old to be called up in World War I, which meant that he could make the most of his position with little competition at home. His son and grandson took up as an estate agent and a solicitor respectively, benefiting from the housing boom that started after World War II.

This family shares certain decisive factors with others that used their intelligence to rise above their social lot. The five common factors that allow people with high intelligence to overcome low social and financial status are:

1. Drive, born out of adversity; a belief that your personal actions will change the situation for the better.

2. A basic education: in order to utilise intelligence, formal qualifications are less

How Paul travelled back into the past

It was the spring of 1980 when I first became addicted. I was a computer operator at the late, great, Greater London Council (GLC). The money was good and the work was easy, we took breaks during night shifts to gamble our overtime at poker or use the basement gym to help stay awake. But the basement held other wonders. One night, quite by accident, I stumbled across the unlit London Archives Department. Several hundred years of London parish records stood before me! I picked out a dusty ledger for Peckham and found hundreds of years of joy, excitement, and tragedy at my fingertips (or Births, Marriages, and Deaths).

It was as if untold stories from Dickens had come tumbling out of the pages. The addiction had begun, and I was lost to it. I decided to set myself a challenge; could I trace a complete stranger's history back 200 years in less than a month? The workman painting our window frames was to be my guinea pig. I knew his name and his age, and that he was local. By the end of the week I had walked through Georgian Villages in the archives, peered through the doors and windows of his ancestors' lives, and used my prose like a movie camera to play back those lives in front of him in ink on paper. He was delighted as he watched them dance through their stories. An ordinary bloke whose story was unique none the less. Time Detectives (www.timedetectives.co.uk) was born.

I become a pusher of my own addiction. Now complete strangers tell me a few facts about their parents and grandparents, and I dive into the dark depths of digital and paper archives to produce family trees and complete narrated stories, for anyone and everyone. Every family has a story, and every story is unique. These stories split text book history like a prism, shards of coloured light illuminate the families of our ancestors; a subject as dusty as the "Enclosure Acts" becomes life or death for our ancestors; small holdings are stolen, Captain Swing riots and burns the fields, and agricultural refugees flee on the new fangled railways to risk a better life or Cholera in the cities.

We all have this chest of treasures; at Time Detectives I dig them up and let them shine. More information can be found at <http://www.timedetectives.co.uk>

important than the skills rendered by the education itself.

3. A lack of regard in your actions for existing social constructs; taboos, and social pressures should not be allowed to act as brakes.

4. Embracing skills in new technology and boom areas of the market; plunge into such areas when demand is high.

5. Avoid making sacrifices "for the greater good" unless you are part of an elite (officer corps, bomber crew etc). The PBI (poor bloody infantry) get the muck and bullets, not the pensions and medals.