

Two continents

two lives

Robin Bayley followed his great-grandfather's trail through the archives, only to discover his living legacy in Mexico

This story took five years to research and write. It took me from my grandmother's Sheffield home to Mexico, via 11 countries, and back again. I travelled over 20,000 miles, visited dozens of archives, and encountered Colombian guerrilla fighters, witches and ex-Nazi diamond dealers. I discovered my great-grandfather's secret family, and his role in starting the Mexican Revolution.

As I 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 travelled from Lancashire to run a cotton mill in Mexico during the late 1890s. His daughter, my grandmother, told me stories about his adventures there, involving hidden bags of silver, jungle journeys and a narrow escape from the Mexican Revolution aided by bandits. But could all these wonderful stories really be true? I asked my grandmother, and she would answer that there are three versions to every story: your version, my version and the truth.

My interest in finding the truth about my great-grandfather was rekindled in the mid 1990s, when I found his old initialled suitcase stuffed with letters and photos. I took a language course to refresh my rusty Spanish, and set off with 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 still vague.

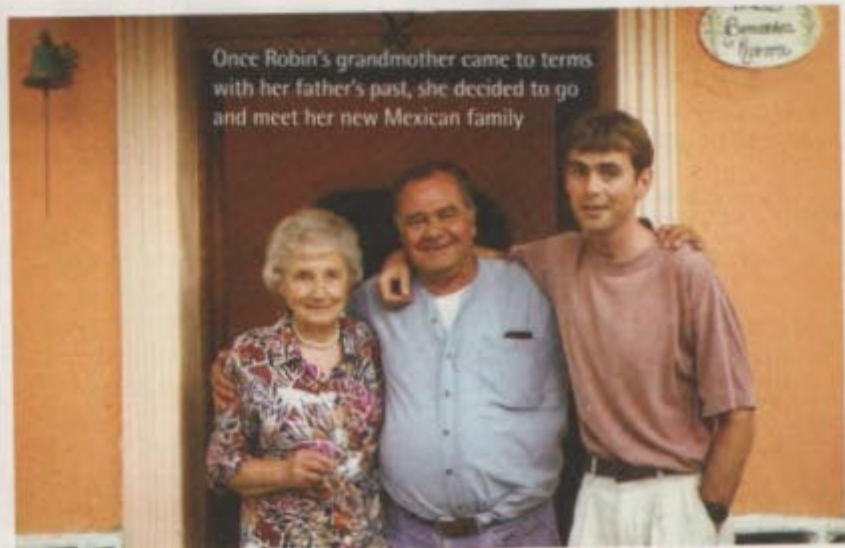
I decided to begin my journey where my great-grandfather had started his, in



In the 1890s, Lancashire-born Arthur Greenhalgh travelled to Bellavista, in Mexico



Once Robin's grandmother came to terms with her father's past, she decided to go and meet her new Mexican family



New York. I spent a week there, looking through shipping and immigration records at Ellis Island and the National Archives of America. I knew that any real discoveries would be in Mexico. But where? The only thing I was certain about was that Arthur had worked in a small village near a small town, near Guadalajara. Looking at the map, I saw that over a thousand villages could fit that description. It wasn't much to go on.

My great-grandfather, known in Mexico as 'Arturo', landed in the historic port of Veracruz, on the Gulf Coast. My plan was to follow his route as closely as possible, go to all the places where I knew he had been, look at archives along the way, and hope for a lucky break. I spent several weeks in archives and libraries across the country, but found little that linked to Arturo directly. I did start to pick up a flavour of what late-19th century Mexico was like, though.

One of the most revealing sources was newspaper advertisements. Most ads promised cures for gonorrhoea, syphilis or impotence. My favourite was for 'Bigotina Legitima' – a tube of black paste, which young men too young to grow a moustache could smear on their top lip to instantly gain one 'in the style of the Kaiser'.

'My discovery meant that he had lived a lie'

I lost myself in archives for days on end, where the end-of-day bell was drowned out by tropical storms drilling on the roof, and I saw a two-foot long iguana walking nonchalantly between the desks. The best archives were the excellent Archivo General de la Nación (www.agn.gob.mx) and Biblioteca Nacional (<http://bmn.unam.mx>) in Mexico City.

In the end, for all my research, my lucky break came from South Yorkshire. Grandma found an old photograph of her father in Mexico. In the bottom right-hand corner was the address of a photographer in the mysterious small town – Tepic. In Arturo's day the population was just a few thousand, and my heart sank as I drove past a sign which said 'Welcome to Tepic, 400,000 inhabitants'.

I stuck to my plan of visiting all the places that I knew Arturo had been to. These included the port of San Blas, where he had imported machinery. Everywhere I went I asked questions and I managed to track down the small village of Bellavista. The cottages, factory and chapel looked more like they



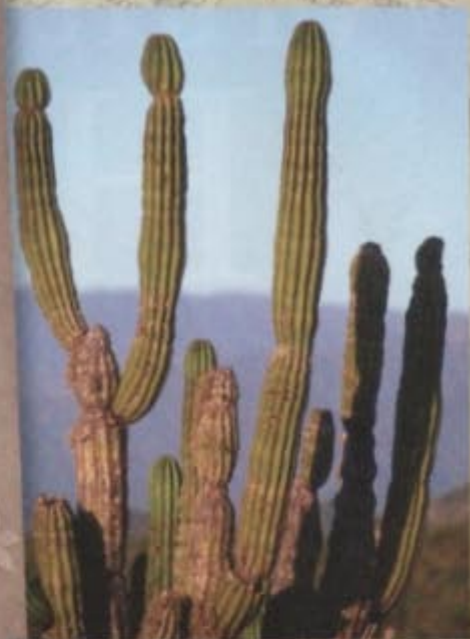
Arthur, pictured in 1912, on his return to England

belonged to an English mill town than the western slopes of the Sierra Madre. I was ecstatic to see where Arturo had lived and worked, but there was much, much more. When I visited the factory, now a museum, I was told that "the whole village" shared Arturo's name.

It transpired that as well as a wife and two daughters in England, Arturo also had a Mexican 'wife', with whom he had another daughter. This daughter had 11 children, who in turn, had between four and nine children each. There were now over 300 of them, and I was introduced to one relative after another, who all welcomed me warmly – *mi casa es tu casa*. Some even seemed to believe I was the reincarnation of my great-grandfather. "I always knew you'd come back," said one.

Sadly, for my grandma, my discovery meant that her father had lived a lie. "I don't believe a word of it. I think they just moved into his house and took his surname," she said, when I told her. But curiosity soon got the better of her, and she asked me to "find the truth of it all".

Though the Mexicans were delighted that I had 'discovered' them, there was one question they kept on asking me: "Why did you come and look for us if you didn't know we were here?" The short answer was: 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 heard stories about their English ancestor. Because of those tales, Arturo had remained an important figure in all our lives. Of course some of these stories were greatly embellished, or even completely untrue. Arturo had not returned to Liverpool on the *Lusitania* in



1910, as Grandma had always believed. Nor had he, as some of the Mexican family thought, drowned on the *Titanic*.

When I returned to England, Grandma was still finding my discovery difficult to take, but just as she had told me stories when I was a boy, I now told stories to her, and bit by bit, she came round. Her initial horror about her father's infidelity slowly turned to acceptance, and eventually to pride in the family he had left there. Six months after I had returned, my grandmother suggested that I take her to Mexico. A month after her 90th birthday, we arrived to a Mariachi fanfare and a fiesta of hundreds of Mexican relatives, their faces wet with tears.

Earlier this year, when I made a short documentary for the BBC, I was reminded that a family historian's job is never done. After spending five years researching and writing *The Mango Orchard*, I felt that I knew all there was to know about my great-grandfather's adventures. However, the producer dug up a letter Arturo had written en route to Mexico, in which he mentioned Panama, Jamaica and Haiti – places I didn't even know that he had visited. I thought I had my version, Arturo's version and the truth, but perhaps I'll have to keep looking... ■

READER OFFER!

The Mango Orchard by Robin Bayley is published by Arrow (RRP £7.99). FHM readers can buy a copy at the special price of £6.99, with free p&hp (UK only). To order yours, call 01206 255800 and quote the code 'Family History'.

