

Armenian heritage in Bangladesh

Stephen Family of Dhaka

LIZ CHATER

The unravelling of family history and their associated stories can sometimes take unusual twists and turns. Armenian family history in Asia is no different. There were only 126 Armenians in Dhaka in 1831 in 42 houses, averaging 3 people per household. Alongside them was a small population of Greek residents numbering just 48, the Portuguese community had 144 people and there were just 4 who were French. By contrast, there were over 31,000 Hindus and in excess of 35,000 Muslims. The Christian community was negligible.

In an earlier story I uncovered previously, unknown information on the founder of the Pogose School in Dhaka, Joaquim Gregory Nicholas Pogose aka Nicky Pogose (who married Mariam Avdall, the daughter of Johannes Avdall, headmaster of the Armenian College and Philanthropic Academy in Kolkata). Johannes had at least 10 children all born in Calcutta. Two other daughters of his also settled in Dhaka, having married Armenian merchants of that city.

One of the other daughters of Johannes Avdall was Catherine Avdall who married another leading Dhaka community member, Zaminder Stephen Johannes Stephen. He quickly dropped his Christian name and was known as Johannes Stephen. Together they had at least five children between 1854 and 1860. After Catherine's untimely death in 1861 aged just 25 years, Johannes Stephen found himself in the unenviable position of having to care for his young family, from infants to children aged 7. Johannes remarried for a second time in 1867 at the Catholic Church in Dhaka to 17-year-old Annie Ter Martyrose with whom he went on to have at least four further children.

Their marriage celebrant was Fr. Felix Francis Mari Fortunato Marzuchelli, a charismatic, well-travelled Italian priest, who was a Doctor of Philosophy and a Professor of Literature. He had been appointed Chaplain at Dhaka in April 1867. The marriage he conducted between Johannes Stephen and Annie would have been one of the first after his arrival in Dhaka from England.

By the time Annie was 24 years of age, she was looking after Johannes's nine children from two marriages. The children of Johannes Stephen and Catherine were:

1. Twin sons born in 1854, Dhaka.



The Armenian community Dhaka celebrating Armenian Christmas, 6th January 1952.

IMAGE COURTESY: LIZ CHATER

shipwreck of an East India vessel "Earl Temple" on the southern edge of Thitu Reef in the South China Sea. It was eventually raised from the deep. Further and more detailed information on how an Armenian gravestone was discovered at the bottom of the ocean can be found in *Up from the Watery Deep: The Discovery of an Armenian Gravestone in the South China Sea* by Susan E Schopp.

Barbara Melitus's own maternal line is just as illustrious. Her grandfather was Agha Owen John Elias, locally well known in Calcutta as a generous and philanthropic man during his lifetime. A memorial wall plaque inside the Armenian Church Kolkata indicates the high esteem he was held in. Remarkably, there are portraits of Agha Owen John Elias and his wife Barbara hanging in a beautiful country house in England, "Chenies Manor" in Buckinghamshire, and, according to their tour guides, are often complimented on by members of the general public who visit the estate.

Meanwhile, in 1875, Kent enrolled in the Royal Indian Engineering College in Staines, Middlesex studying there until July 1878. He gained his first engineering position at the London and North Western Railway between October 1878

The Armenian community in Dhaka was becoming smaller towards the end of the 19th/early 20th centuries, a number of whom were naturally migrating to England. Rosie and Kate made that choice as well, no doubt encouraged by their brother Kent. The sisters lived together in London at 26 Chepstow Villas, Bayswater. Kate died in 1926 before Rosie, who passed away in 1938. The two sisters are buried together at Mitcham Road Cemetery, Croydon, Surrey.

4. Carapiet Stephen born in 1858, Dhaka.

Carapiet or Carr Stephen married Ellen Nora Read in June 1883 at All Saints Church, Kensington. They had two children: Primrose Ellen Stephen born in Palace Gardens Terrace, Kensington in 1884 and Christopher Gerald Stephen born in Calcutta in 1890.

In 1906 at Delhi, Primrose went on to marry Ernest Howie Saunders, a captain in the Royal Irish Rifles. The marriage was witnessed by her mother Ellen who by that time had remarried to Montague Mark Noble. Ellen's first husband and father of Primrose had passed away in 1896 in Cawnpore, where he was buried.

A few lines about Primrose's husband Ernest. He was a highly regarded and decorated soldier who had been captured at Reddersburg South Africa on 4th April 1900 and held as a prisoner of war with Winston Churchill and Lord Asquith during the Boer War.

As I watched the 75th anniversary commemorations for D-Day in Portsmouth on the 5th and 6th June this year, I couldn't help but think of Lt. Col. Ernest H. Saunders. Although not a WWII soldier, he was ready to serve wherever he was required. In 1939 he declared he "was awaiting orders from the war office" and was conveniently living in Portsmouth, close to the military base, still wanting to "do his bit" for his country even though he was now in his 60s. During his career he served his country with honour, dedication and commitment but his service record has faded as the years have passed by. It is ironic that he died alone in March 1956 in Portsmouth, Hampshire, with just a local roadsweeper and two military representatives attending his funeral.

Ernest and Primrose's daughter Winifred was born in Meerut, India in 1909. Winifred was remembered in her great aunt Rosie's will who bequeathed a legacy of £500. In a later codicil this was reduced to £100. Winifred married a military gentleman, Wilfred Marston Newill, in Kensington, London in 1928. She passed away in Perth, Australia in 1967; her husband Wilfred had passed away in Kenya in 1963.

Primrose's mother Ellen, went on to have at least one child called Montague Horatio Nelson Aubrey [M.H.N.A.] Noble in 1897 with her second husband, the highly ambitious forces veteran Montague Mark Noble. Montague Jr also joined the services and was awarded the Military Cross during WWI.

5. Catherine Stephen, born in 1860, Dhaka.

Kate remained a spinster and lived together with her sister Rosie at 26 Chepstow Villas, Bayswater. She passed away in December 1926 leaving all her estate to Rosie. The two sisters are buried together at Mitcham Road Cemetery, Croydon, Surrey.

The children of Johannes Stephen's second marriage with Annie Ter Martyrose were:

6. Mkrtich Stephen, born in 1868, Dhaka.

Mkrtich anglicised his name and became known as Mackintosh John Stephen. A lifelong bachelor, having joined the Indian Postal Service in June 1893, he worked his way up through the ranks and in December 1895 was promoted to superintendent. Within a short time, he was appointed personal assistant to the Deputy Postmaster General in Burma between November 1898 and March 1909. Further success came when he was promoted to deputy Postmaster General and Inspector General of the Railway Mail Service and Sorting in October 1913. A new appointment came in June 1918 as Deputy Postmaster General for Bengal and Assam and his final post was Postmaster General for Bihar and Orissa in July 1921. He retired to England in May 1924. He passed away in April 1929 in Brighton.

7. Stephanos Stephen, born in 1870, Dhaka.

Stephanos anglicised his name and became known as Stephen Paul Stephen. He described himself as a mercantile merchant. Just like his siblings, he too moved to London upon retirement where, as a bachelor, he lived in Pembroke Square, Notting Hill Gate. His net estate was valued at a modest £3,600 and apart from a small legacy of £100 to his brother Mackintosh, Stephen went to great lengths to ensure his old servant in India, named Bhikari Das in the village of Oltanga, should receive Rs 1,000. Stephen died in April 1930 in Menton, France and was the last surviving son of Johannes Stephen.

8. Robert Abercrombie Stephen, born in 1872, Dhaka.

Robert began working for the Indian Government in May 1894. Like his brother Mackintosh, he too rose through the ranks, became a magistrate and went on to be the deputy Commissioner for Excise and Salt in Bengal. Robert married twice, firstly to Ivy Sherman in Simla in 1908 and secondly to Vida Judd in 1919. Robert died in the Calcutta General Hospital, Woodburn Ward of cardiac failure and was buried in the Lower Circular Road cemetery by Rev. E. Keeling of St. Thomas's Church.

9. Elizabeth Stephen, born in 1874, Dhaka.

Young Elizabeth lived only until she was eight years of age. She died in Barrackpore of pneumonia in 1882.

Zamindar Johannes Stephen died in Dhaka in November 1876 of fever and piles. Annie, his second wife, died in 1893 in Allahabad of hepatitis and broncho pneumonia.

Johannes had at least 6 siblings:

- Catherine, born 1825, remained a spinster, died in Barrackpore 1907.
- Kent Hume Stephen, born 1830, Dhaka. Became a deputy magistrate. Died at Singapore on his way to Hong Kong January 1868.
- Carr Stephen, born 1835, married Rosamond Eleanor Parry in Delhi in 1870. They went on to have at least five children: Catherine Julie Stephen; Alice Isabel Mary Stephen; Carr St. John Stephen; Robert Hume Stephen; Florence McNaughten Stephen.

Carr Stephen was a barrister, passing the Bar exam in June 1866. He rose to become a judge in the small cause court in the Punjab. He published three books: *Indian Registration Act, Handbook for Delhi and Archaeology of Delhi*. Carr died in Delhi in 1891 of heart disease.

- Aratoon Johannes Stephen, born 1836. Married Mary Sarkies in February 1860 at the Armenian Church Dhaka. They had at least five children: St. George Kent Hume Stephen in 1861; Jan Denkin Stephen

in 1862; Gulnabath Stephen in 1863; Arratoon St. John Stephen in 1875; and Margaret Stephen in 1877.

During the early 1880s, Aratoon Johannes Stephen, a landholder, had lived at the Chowringhee Hotel in Kolkata. Embroiled in litigation in which he tried to defend a case where he had taken a loan from a money lender in Calcutta in the name of his eldest son, he lost and was declared insolvent. He made attempts to clear his debts, but was unsuccessful and then as the sub-editor of *The Statesman* he was again declared insolvent 1887. By 1889 his Official Assignee declared a small dividend payment to his creditors. He continued to work as the sub-editor of *The Statesman* until his death in 1900 in Calcutta. He was buried in Park Street cemetery.

- Mackertich Stephen, born 1837, studied law and passed the Bar exam at Lincoln's Inn. The attached rare letter signed in a very unsteady hand by him and dated just a month before he died, makes one wonder if he was attempting to get his personal affairs in order. He died a bachelor on 3rd June 1867 in Dhaka and is buried in the compound of the Armenian Church.
- William Stephen. Nothing is known about him.

Their parents were Johannes Stephen Snr. (born 1790 Julfa) and Goolnabad.

Johannes Snr married twice, first to Goolnabad around 1822, she passed away in Dhaka in January 1838 aged 35 years and is buried in the grounds of the Armenian Church. He quickly remarried in December 1838 to Sultana Athanes, granddaughter of Alexander Panioty who was the doyen of the Greek community of Dhaka. She passed away in January 1843 and is buried in the Armenian Church compound in Dhaka.

Johannes Stephen Snr. had two sisters Catherine and Mariam, who were also based in Dhaka. Catherine married Gregory Thorose, a tide waiter with Calcutta Customs, around 1812. They had two daughters, Huripsimah Regina Thorose Gregory and Nanajan Nanook Thorose Gregory.

Mariam had married three times, all in Dhaka, firstly to Martyrose Kaloos, secondly to Arratoon Michael (from whom she had inherited on a large scale) and thirdly to an Englishman Edmund Kent Hume. All three marriages were childless. After her death in 1833, her brother Johannes Stephen Snr began court proceedings against her third husband Edmund for a share of her estate. He failed and Edmund inherited her wealth. He went on to marry again to Pheunnah Honor McClean in 1845. Pheunnah died on 15th September 1849 and Edmund the following day. They were both buried in the Christian cemetery at Dhaka.

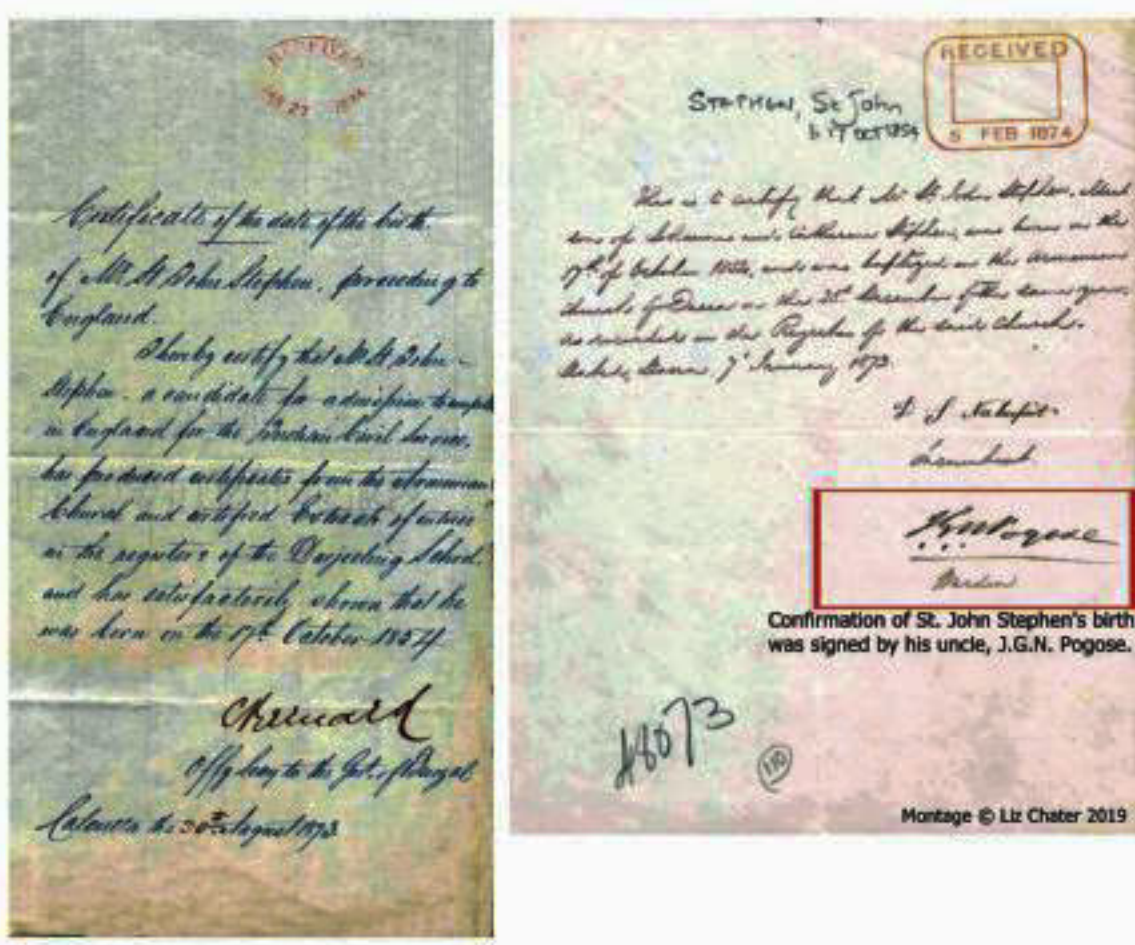
This example of the Stephen family network is a perfect illustration of how quickly the Armenian connection was lost in Dhaka as families naturally migrated to larger cities with more opportunities. Land disputes, litigations and lack of prospects all had a negative impact, yet those who did stay believed they could make a go of it.

Today, there are no Stephen left in Dhaka. Their lands in and around the city are long gone—broken up into smaller pieces and parcels and now heavily built upon. The numerous descendants of Johannes Stephen Snr and his siblings are living all over the world and some of them won't even know of their connection to Dhaka or their Armenian heritage.

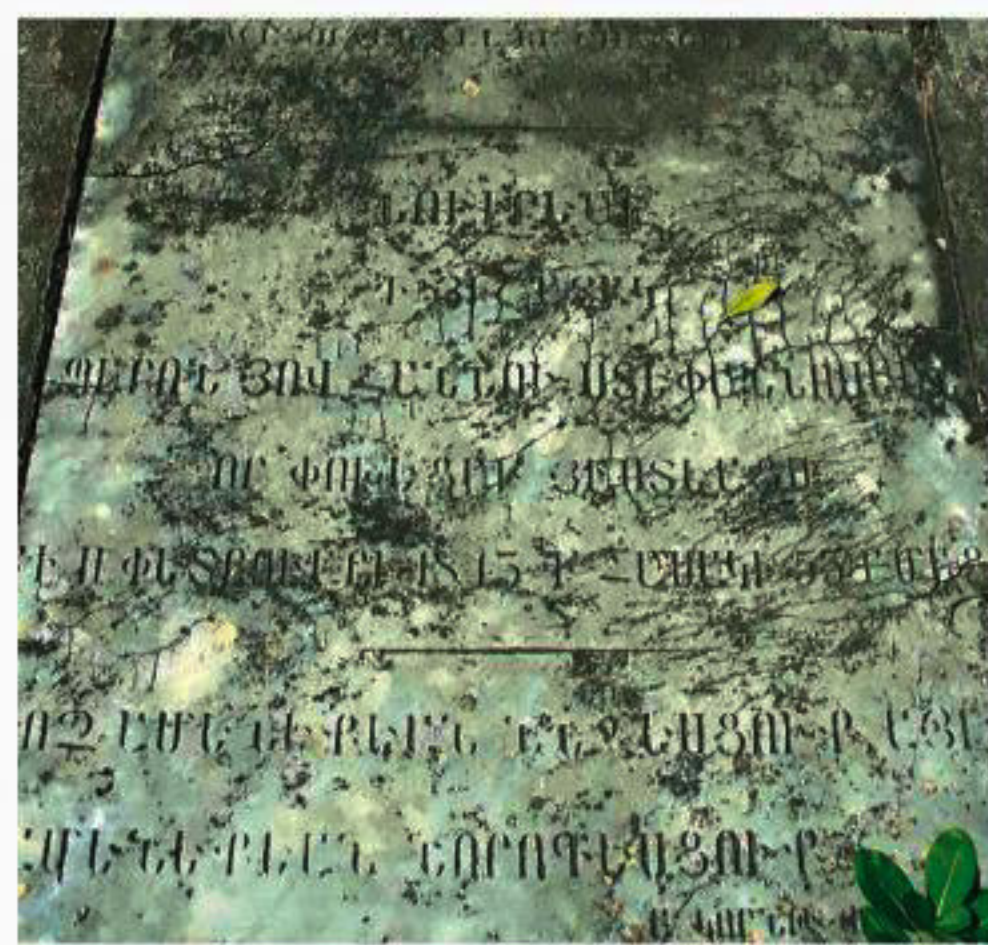
In 1831 those 126 Armenians had no idea of the history and legacy they were leaving behind. Today, our focus is on preserving the Church and helping the local Dhaka people in every way we can. We continue to build on those early foundation stones maintained over the last 200 years by extraordinarily selfless custodians to whom we are all very grateful. The Armenian Church in Dhaka stands today because of this small but fiercely strong and determined community whose presence over the centuries and decades has been an integral part of Dhaka life.

The full version of the article is available on *The Daily Star's* website.

Liz Chater is the coordinator and researcher for the Armenian Heritage Project Bangladesh. The project is still accepting contributions, and is keen to reconstruct the history and family stories of the Armenian presence in Bangladesh. The project has already received material from contributors in the US, Canada, UK, Australia and India. If you have something you would like included, please get in touch via our social media pages, Facebook, Twitter, Instagram or website www.armenianchurchbangladesh.com.



Confirmation of St. John Stephen's birth was signed by his uncle, J G N Pogose.



Grave of Johannes Stephen.

IMAGE COURTESY: LIZ CHATER

One was named St. John Stephen, the other didn't survive.

St. John Stephen, a lifelong bachelor who was educated at St. Paul's Darjeeling, North India. He studied law, and was called to the Bar in 1880 at the Inner Temple, London, going on to practise at the High Court, Calcutta. St. John was also a member of Managing Committee of the Armenian College and Philanthropic Academy in Calcutta in 1901, taking a very keen interest in the students and their further education. He died in Calcutta in 1915 of cardiac syncope and is buried in the Lower Circular Road cemetery. In his will he appointed his sisters, Rosie and Kate, as executrixes. He bequeathed to his brother Kent a gold watch that had once belonged to their father Johannes. The remainder of his estate went to Rosie and Kate.

2. Kent Hume Stephen born in 1856, Dhaka.

Kent married another Armenian, Barbara Melitus, in June 1895 in Kensington, London. Barbara had been born in Calcutta in 1868 to Gregory Paul Melitus and Mary née Elias. Through her father's mother Anna Maria, Barbara can trace her family back to Coja Sultan David Shahmir, an eminent merchant of Madras who was born in Julfa around 1690 and died in 1754 in Pondicherry. Extraordinarily, as a side note, Shahmir's tombstone was found in 1997 in a

and March 1879, then Chatham Water Works between April and August 1879. With this civil engineering experience behind him, he returned to India and was employed with the India Public Works in irrigation for the next 24 years, eventually retiring back to England in 1903.

He and Barbara lived at 46 Holland Park Road, London, and her parents lived at 47. He passed away in 1907 in Kent, leaving his widow Barbara. She also died in Kent in 1938. They didn't have any children.

Prior to her marriage to Kent Stephen, Barbara was "presented" to Queen Victoria in one of the regular "Drawing Room" gatherings of London society, an honour for any up and coming young lady. This particular soiree was covered in great detail in the newspapers, and the occasion, with a meticulous description of the dresses worn by Barbara and her mother, was included. Liz Chater's archive contains copies of photographic images of mother and daughter taken at the event.

3. Rosaline Stephen born in 1857, Dhaka.

Rosie and her sister Kate (Catherine) both remained spinsters. As their parents Catherine and Johannes had passed away in 1861 and 1876 respectively, and their stepmother Annie had passed away in 1893, it would have been a daunting prospect to continue to live in India without immediate family around them.