

The Elisamon Saga

In Eric Straw's account of the history of his Straw ancestors he refers to a "fairy godmother" Elisamon, who Eric described as follows:

Robert Straw's position was considered a good one by the standards of the day, but his income from the Cathedral was not on a liberal scale and little enough to supply the needs of a growing family. In his case it was supplemented by an amount which came annually from his wealthy sister in far-away London. In this way the Straw family was able to enjoy a higher standard of living than would otherwise have been the case. It also enabled the boys to have a High School education.

To the young Straw boys this Aunt was a mystical fairy godmother, living in splendor in London. Robert spoke of her as Elisamon, and the name seemed to convey something out of the ordinary. This was heightened by the account Robert, gave them of his sister's life which had a romantic element about it.

As a young girl Elisamon left the parental cottage to go into service. It was necessary to relieve the parents of the crushing problem of maintaining their increasing family, and it was the only type of position available in those days, the wages would only be a few pounds a year, but they were kept in food and shelter, and received a good training.

Elisamon made the most of it, and in time was able to take the responsibility of the household. There visited this home a middle aged lady named Clayton; she was a wealthy widow whose family owned a private banking business - a person of dignity and importance, who maintained a fine house in London. She took a fancy to Elisamon and offered her a position as her personal maid. This indeed was a reward for her years of patient toil and careful training. She met all the demands made upon her in this new position, and it developed from that of a servant to a trusted companion. The old lady found her delightful company, and was very fond of her.

At a later date things became complicated. The son of the home also became fond of Elisamon. Difficulties only intensify desire. The difference in their station of life, deemed so important in those days, could not bar their expression of love for each other. Rather than carry on a clandestine affair they decided to tell the mother how they felt. To their intense relief the news was received by the old lady with delight. She welcomed Elisamon as a daughter. The engagement was announced to the servants. Miss Straw was now to be regarded as one of the family.

Of course they married and, we hope, lived happily ever after. They evidently inherited a good deal of money, and Elisamon as an elderly woman was quite capable of arranging her affairs in a very satisfactory and efficient manner.

The Robert Straw referred to at the beginning of Eric's account was my great-great grandfather. He was born in 1786 and moved to Lincoln with his parents about 1790. He initially lived within the St Marks Parish of the city where he married and produced 7 children, who included my great grandfather Thomas Straw (1828). As well as supplementing the family income annually, Elisamon helped Thomas (1828) substantially when he obtained an apprenticeship as a draper at Stamford in 1845.

When Thomas Straw (1828), decided to take his bride Emily Osborn to Australia in 1853, Elisamon helped again by providing a passage in the ship "John Barrow" as a wedding gift. Later in his story Eric tells of Thomas and Emily visiting her in London just prior to them embarking for the voyage and describes her at that time as an elderly aunt.

This legendary fairy godmother Elisamon has obviously meant a great deal to the Straw family over several generations and her story has inspired many to use this uncommon name (or variations of it) for their offspring.

Although Eric has described Elisamon as a sister of Robert Straw (1786) no record of her birth, marriage or death has been found in my research into the Straw family history. I have therefore written this "Elisamon Saga" to provide some detail of my search to find the original Elisamon.

I have no doubt that as described by Eric, this legendary Elisamon existed, however although birth details for six of Robert Straw's (1876) siblings exist in various Lincoln parish church records, an extensive search of the original church records by my second cousin Ian Straw has failed to find any mention of Elisamon.

Eric would have heard the story about Elisamon as a young boy from his grandfather Thomas Straw (1828), before he died in 1894, or from his father Frederick Straw (1850) who died in 1937. He didn't write the story until about 1960. Consequently the story has been handed down through various generations and with the passage of time between first hearing the story and it being recorded, some of the details may have been assumed rather than being factual. Perhaps Elisamon was not a Straw but a close family friend who Eric has assumed was an aunt and therefore a sister of Robert (1786).

Although the mystery of Elisamon has still not been solved, a great amount of detail has been found which connects the name Elisamon with the Straw family.

Of all the Elisamons I have discovered, the only one to fit into the generation, which could make her an aunt of Thomas Straw (1828) is an Alisemon Straw who married John Peart in 1818

Alisemon Straw wife of John Peart.

The only record that I have found is that an Alisemon Straw married John Peart at St Nicholas Church, Skirbeck (nr Boston), Lincolnshire, on 2 February 1818. No other details of Alisemon were in the marriage record and no other details of her parents, birth or death have been found.

Based on the date of the marriage, Alisemon must have been born about 1790 and therefore could have been a sibling of Robert Straw (1786). Robert's parents, George Straw (1754) and Mary Walker were married in 1785. Alisemon therefore could fit into the details of Eric's account as an aunt of Robert's children,

Alternatively she could have come from another of the related Straw families living in Lincolnshire in this period. Although there are extensive church records of these families, no record of Alisemon has been found.

John Peart and Alisemon Straw had a daughter Martha, born at Boston in 1821. Martha Peart (1821) married Robert Straw (1817) who was baptised at St Nicholas church, Lincoln, in 1817. This Robert Straw (1817) was the second son of Robert Straw (1786) and an older brother of Thomas Straw (1828).

If Martha's mother, Alisemon, was actually the sister of Robert (1789), then she would have been an aunt of her son-in-law Robert (1817) making Robert (1817) and his wife Martha Peart first cousins. This is of course possible and could explain how Robert (1817), born and brought up in Lincoln, came to know and fall in love with Martha Peart born and brought up in Boston.

The main problem with this possible explanation of the Elisamon saga is the marriage of John Peart to Alisemon Straw. The marriage took place in Boston, not London as would be expected and John appears to have spent most of his life in Boston. He was listed as a coachman in the 1818 and 1828 baptism register entries of his children, a farmer in the 1832 register and a land agent on Robert and Martha's marriage certificate of 1849. This does not sound like the son of a rich widow living in London as per Eric's story.

So until we can find more information about this Alisemon Peart (nee Straw) the "fairy godmother" saga remains unsolved.

Robert Straw (1786) and his younger brother John Straw (1792) married two sisters Sarah and Hannah Martin. Both families lived nearby in St Marks Parish until about 1830 when Robert moved to 30 Bailgate, Lincoln.

Robert Straw (1786) married in 1809

John Straw (1792) married in 1815 and is recorded in the 1841 census as living in St Marks Place, and it is assumed he was living at that address since about 1815. Although we have no details of the exact address for Robert prior to 1830, we assume it was close to John and therefore possibly also in St Marks Place. Both the Straw families were very close as both Robert and John worked as joiner/carpenters at the Lincoln Cathedral.

Another Lincoln family recorded in the 1841 census living in St Marks Place is that of William and Jane Marfleet. William Marfleet was born in 1785 and married in 1806 and was therefore of similar age to both Robert Straw (1786) and John Straw (1792) and as close neighbours, it must be assumed they were close friends.

William Marfleet (1785) had a younger brother Thomas Marfleet (1790) who married Sarah Watson in 1811.

Being all of similar age and married about the same time it must be assumed that the four families, Robert and Sarah Straw, John and Hannah Straw, William and Jane Marfleet, Thomas and Sarah Marfleet were all very close friends.

Although the spellings of the name differ slightly:-

John and Hannah Straw had a daughter named Alicemon born in 1816
Thomas and Sarah Marfleet had a daughter named Elisamon born in 1813
William and Jane Marfleet had a daughter named Elisamon born in 1816

There are several other Elisamons in both families but why this unusual name was chosen is unclear. To be the elusive "fairy godmother" Elisamon must have had access to her wealth by about 1840 in order to assist in Thomas Straw's (1828) education as a school boy and in his indenture as an apprentice draper in 1845. She must therefore have been born prior to about 1820. This eliminates all other Elisamons found so far, except those listed above.

Although these Elisamons are of a different generation to that from Eric's story, could any of them have been the fairy godmother.

Elisamon Straw, daughter of John and Hannah Straw

Elisamon (or Alisemon) was born in 1816 in Lincoln and was a first cousin - not an aunt - of Thomas Straw (1828) and only 12 years older than him. She could have hardly been described as an elderly lady in 1853 as she was then only 37. It is also recorded that she married John Gilby in York, which does not fit in with Eric's story that she married the son of an elderly widow from London.

She can be eliminated as the fairy godmother but her story is very interesting and is worth recording.

She married John Gilby in York on 17 October 1842 at the age of 26. John was born in Kirton Lincolnshire on 8 January 1812 and was aged 30. He was a grocer and in 1851 was residing at 6 New Bridge St, Micklegate, York. They had five children born in York. Emily Gilby (1845), James Gilby (1846) Emma Gilby (1848), John Straw Gilby (1850) and George Gilby (1853).

In 1853 the whole family together with other Gilby family members emigrated sailing from Liverpool on the "William Truscott" arriving in New York on 9 Nov 1853. The "William Truscott" made several voyages later in the 1850s carrying large numbers of Mormon emigrants to the USA under "appalling" conditions, but there is no evidence to indicate that the Gilbys had become Mormons.

The remainder of the group were:

James Gilby Snr. (1782) a retired farmer, John's widowed father who had been living with John and Alisemon in York in 1851.

Charles Gilby (1824), a younger brother of John

Elizabeth Gilby (nee Smith), wife of Charles (1824)

William, Robert, Charles and Mary Gilby, children of Charles and Elizabeth.

Included in the group of Gilby families was Emily Straw (born about 1829) who was apparently a servant for Charles and Elizabeth. I assume she was a relation of Alisemon but as yet I have been unable to identify which family Straw she came from.

Another Gilby who emigrated about the same time was

George Gilby (abt 1829) relationship unknown, who arrived in New York several days earlier on the "Star of the West"

The group of Gilbys settled in Ontario, Canada.

The 1861 Canadian Census shows John (1812), aged 48, as a farmer living in a single story log home in Trafalgar Township, County Halton, Ontario, Canada. Also living with him are the following all of whom, except Frank, were born in England:

Alisemon Gilby (nee Straw) his wife, aged 44.

Emily Gilby aged 17, unmarried daughter.
James Gilby aged 15, unmarried son
Emma Gilby aged 12, unmarried daughter
John Gilby aged 11, unmarried son
George Gilby aged 9, unmarried son
James Gilby Snr aged 81, John's widowed father
James Gilby Jnr aged 40, a younger brother of John who had emigrated later
Charles Gilby aged 11, probably the son of Charles and Elizabeth
Emily Straw age unlisted but still unmarried
Frank Gilby age unlisted but born in Trafalgar

John Gilby died at Trafalgar on 15 February 1863 at the age of 51.

James Gilby Snr, John's father died at Trafalgar on 18 December 1864 at the age of 82

About 1880 the widowed Alisemon Gilby remarried, this time to her brother-in-law James Gilby Jnr who was living with the family in Trafalgar in 1861.

In about 1874, the three sons of John and Alisemon, James, John and George, moved from Canada to Grand Forks County, North Dakota, as "homesteaders" and a village was founded in 1887 and named Gilby after these original settlers. In 1882, their sister Emma Gilby came to keep house for her brothers.

Abner Abbey was born in Ontario Canada on 9 August 1849. In 1870 he moved to Wisconsin for two years and then spent some time in Montana and some southern states of USA where he drove a stage coach. In 1873 he came to Dakota where he had some exciting adventures driving mule trains, and being involved with General Custer and skirmishes with the Indians. He met up with the Gilby brothers to discuss land sales and in 1884 Abner Abbey and Emma Gilby were married in nearby Grand Forks.

Abner became a very successful farmer and they had three children, another Alisemon George and John Abbey.

In their old age Emma's mother Alisemon and her second husband James Gilby Jnr moved to Gilby North Dakota and lived with the Abbey's until well into their 90s.,

Aliceman Gilby (1816) (nee Straw) was therefore definitely not the fairy godmother

Elisamon Marfleet, daughter of William and Jane Marfleet

This Elisamon never married, and was buried as Elisamon Marfleet in 1894. In the 1841 census she is recorded as was working as a servant for another Straw family, Frederick Straw and Sarah Winn at Stone's Place, Skellingthorpe. Frederick Straw (1796) was a second cousin of Robert Straw (1786) indicating another close connection between the Straw and Marfleet families. In 1871 and 1881 she was living with an unmarried sister at the family home in St Marks Place, in Lincoln. In 1891 she was recorded as living alone but still in Lincoln. As she never married and did not live in London, she also can be eliminated.

Elisamon Marfleet , daughter of Thomas and Sarah Marfleet

This Elisamon was born in 1813 and married Robert Rowland in 1835. To date we have found no further information about her and from here on, the story is only based on assumptions until we find further evidence. The possibility of this Elisamon being the fairy godmother is as follows.

As a young girl, prior to about 1830, she lived close to both Robert and John Straw, and would have been a close friend of both families. She would have been about 14 years old when Thomas Straw (1828) was born and may therefore have formed a close bond with him and could be considered as an aunt to the young child although she was not related. From my own experience as a young boy, I referred to many of my parent's friends as "Aunt" or "Uncle".

Eric wrote his history of the family in 1960 from his memory of stories told to him by his grandfather, Thomas Straw (1828) or his father, Fred Straw (1858), many years before he put the story into print. Neither Eric nor his father would have ever met Robert Straw (1786) and so the details of the Elisamon story must have been related by Thomas (1828) based on his memory of what he had been told by his father Robert (1786). Although this might be difficult to digest it shows that the story has been passed down through several generations and it is not surprising that some of the details may be incorrect.

Although we must accept the main points of the story, some of the details may be based on Eric's assumptions from what he remembered being told, rather than true facts. He refers to Elisamon as being a sister of Robert Straw (1786) and being "Miss Straw" but these details may have been his own assumptions from what he remembers being told about "Aunt Elisamon".

There is therefore a possibility that Elisamon was not a relative and may have been Elisamon Marfleet. Assuming this was the case, then the rest of

Eric's story could apply to Elisamon Marfleet, born in 1813, daughter of Thomas and Sarah Marfleet.

If she went into service as a young girl, this would be about 1829/30. It would take some time for her to "take responsibility of the household." If this took 3 or 4 years then it may have been about 1833 when she was offered the position in London by the wealthy widow visiting her employer.

Eric refers to this widow's name as "Clayton" but again this detail may have become confused as the story was passed down through the generations. We have found no records of Claytons which would fit into the story, however there was a wealthy family of Clayton living in Lincoln about this time.

It is therefore possible that Elisamon Marfleet was employed in Lincoln by the Clayton family from about 1829 to about 1833, and then moved to London as a personal maid to the "wealthy widow" who was a friend of the Claytons. As a very capable young woman aged about 20 years old, it is not surprising that she attracted the attention of the widow's son and a marriage in 1835 is very possible. Unfortunately this does not tie in with the idea she was elderly when Thomas and Emily left for Australia in 1853, she would only have been about 40. Perhaps Eric just assumed she was elderly at that time.

It is recorded that Elisamon Marfleet married Robert Rowland at St Peter at Gowts church Lincoln in 1835. If we have discovered the correct Elisamon, then the "wealthy widow" was named Rowland and any further information about the "fairy godmother" will come from research into the Rowland family. To date we have found no Rowland records which would confirm we are on the right track

A preliminary investigation of Rowland births shows several christenings between 1817 and 1836 at St Peter at Gowts, Lincoln. Although Robert Rowland is not included amongst them, it is possible he came from this local family as his wedding to Elisamon Marfleet took place at St Peter at Gowts, Lincoln. How could this fit into the idea of the Rowlands being a wealthy London family?

We are told that the wealthy London widow was visiting when she first met Elisamon. A possible reason for her visiting Lincoln is that she originally came from Lincoln and had returned to visit old friends, the Claytons.

Although the whole scenario I have painted is possible, we need much more evidence before we have any confidence in the possibility that she was the fairy godmother.

I leave it to others interested in the Straw family history, to find out how Elisamon, the fairy godmother, fits into the family records.