



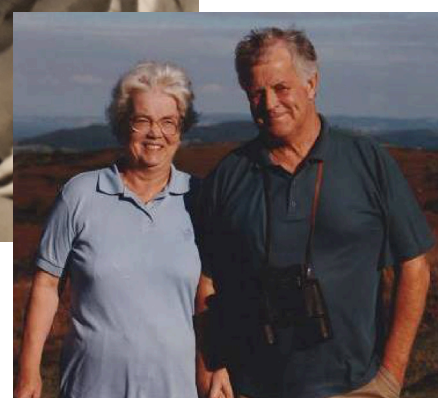
## Claire Bradley finally solved a family mystery by combining traditional genealogy research methods with DNA testing

**When I began to work on the family history, my grandmother, Angela Guerins, told me that the only thing she wanted to know was what happened to her Uncle Joe. He was her father's brother and he had disappeared before she was born.**

Joseph Guerins was born on 18<sup>th</sup> July 1897 in Limerick. He was the youngest of eight children of James Guerins, a soldier from Waterford, and Margaret Morgan from Pembrokeshire. In what was otherwise a very tough year for the family, Joe was born just a week after his eldest brother's death from meningitis. Two months later, his sister Anne died at the age of nineteen months. We don't know anything about his childhood or schooling but Joe watched his older brother, Henry (my great-grandfather), enlist in World War I, where he spent two years in France and was later given a commission in the Royal Munster Fusiliers. Following the 1911 census, there are no further records of Joseph Guerins at all. No marriage, no death – nothing.

The family story in the Guerins' house was that he ran away to England. At some later stage, Joseph wanted to marry and therefore required a "letter of freedom" – proof from his baptismal parish that he was a Catholic and not already married. On foot of this contact, a local priest in Limerick called to the family home on St John's Avenue and told them that Joe was alive and getting married but didn't want to get in touch with the family. They never heard anything ever again.

I searched in the UK for a marriage and then a death but found nothing. In 2009, a few months after my grandmother



Angela died, I made contact with Marjorie Mulvihill, her now elderly second cousin, still living in Limerick.

In our very first conversation, Marjorie told me that "my" Uncle Joe was the one shot by the IRA. She said Joe used to visit her grandmother, who was his aunt, Alice Hickey, in the Strand barracks. The family lived there because her grandfather was a soldier too. Apparently the local IRA decided Joe was a spy, took him out to an island in the river Shannon, shot him in the head, but didn't kill him, then took him back to Limerick, where last rites were given by a priest called Father Mac and his body was dumped at the workhouse. Then they wrote a letter to his mother saying if the family claimed his body, they would shoot them at the funeral. She didn't know if Joe was really a spy or not.

This was pretty shocking and it's easy to imagine how a different story would come down in another branch of the family. It's also quite detailed, so I felt there might be a kernel of truth to it. Two things struck me immediately. The letter was written to his mother, which implied his father was dead. James Guerins died in January 1919. It also must have been before the British army left in 1922 – they vacated the barracks and soldiers' families had to move. I have managed to confirm that there was a Father TJ MacNamara at St Johns, Limerick at that time, which is the church where Joseph was baptised. After the civil registers became available

online in 2016, I searched all unknown male deaths for the period but still found nothing.

Over the past decade, I've spoken to several historians and told them the story. The consensus was that this kind of thing did happen but none had heard of our man. Quite recently, a historian called Pdraig O Ruairc advised me that he felt the story was an amalgam of several stories he'd heard over the years and that the part about the Shannon estuary certainly came from another person.

In parallel to this research, I had begun to employ the advances of DNA testing more generally. I began by testing my mother, then my great-aunt and finally myself. Two years ago, we all matched with a man in the UK called Alex, so the connection was likely either on the Guerins or Morgan (Welsh) lines, but we couldn't pin it down. Alex said that his grandfather, Derek, had been fostered and only knew his father was called Gerald Graham.

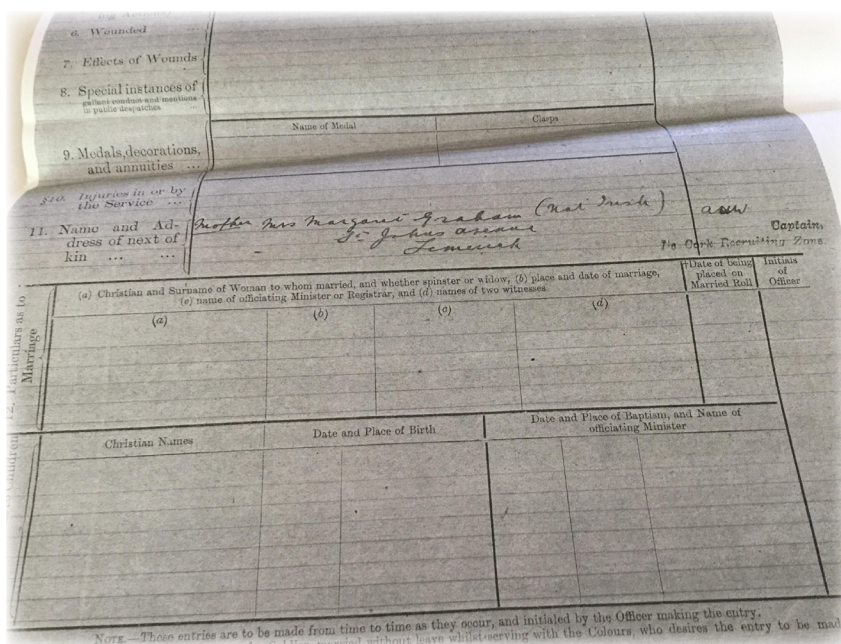
In May of this year, Alex contacted me to say he had resolved his own family mystery by getting a close match DNA result with a man called Lawrence. His grandfather was named James Gerald Graham. It transpired that James was married to Lawrence's grandmother,



but they separated in the early 1930s and James then had another son with a different woman. This second son was Alex's grandfather. I tested myself with this same company and Laurence matches me as a second cousin once removed. I had researched forward to the present day all other branches from the Guerins children: Joe's was the only unaccounted line. This led to the realisation that James Graham was Joseph Guerins.

Once this DNA link was established, Alex, Lawrence's partner, Kim, and I had some homework to do. James Graham joined the British Army at Cork in September 1921 – a mere three months before the Anglo-Irish Treaty created the Irish Free State. Padraig O Ruairc said that "anyone joining the army at this stage was either very loyal or very scared". James' date of birth was 18<sup>th</sup> July 1899 and Joe's was 18<sup>th</sup> July 1897. There is a two year discrepancy, but it was common to not know one's precise age in that time, and he may have deliberately given the wrong year. However, his next of kin was his mother, Mrs Margaret Graham of St John's Avenue, Limerick. Using directories on the Limerick local studies website, I was able to establish that at no point was a Graham family resident on the street, but, of course, Mrs Margaret Guerins lived at no. 4.

The army record (pictured below) also noted that Margaret Graham was "not Irish", and our Margaret Guerins was Welsh.



mothers, are dead but his daughter is still alive, and she is a "new" first cousin of my grandmother and her siblings. There's no photograph of Joe/James and it seems to me that he was a man who never settled anywhere and perhaps was always afraid that his past would catch up with him. A search at the UK National Archives in the Irish Grants Committee records did not show either name – often informers and spies claimed compensation through this body. However, the mystery of what happened to "Uncle Joe" is finally solved ninety six years later through a combination of DNA testing and traditional research.

James Graham married Alice May in June 1926. They married in a Catholic church, so a letter of freedom would have been required. On their marriage certificate, James named his father as the now deceased James Graham, who had previously worked in a bacon factory but our family has no knowledge of him having this job. James/Joe and Alice had two children but the marriage did not last and he left. Alice sued him for child support in the 1930s and James spent some time in Brixton prison as a result.

As James Graham, he lived in Plymouth for a while and then in Bath, where he died in 1954. His two sons, by different

*Top photo opposite page:- Genealogist Claire Bradley. Claire is a Dublin based professional genealogist. She holds a Certificate in Family History from UCD and is the current chairperson of the Irish branch of the Irish Genealogical Research Society. www.cbgenealogy.ie.*

*Black and white photo opposite:- Henry Guerins with daughters Angela and Joyce (on his knee).*

*Below photo opposite page:- Derek, (Joseph Guerins' son), with his wife Margaret who is a great-grandnephew of Henry Guerins and who bears a strong family resemblance to him.*

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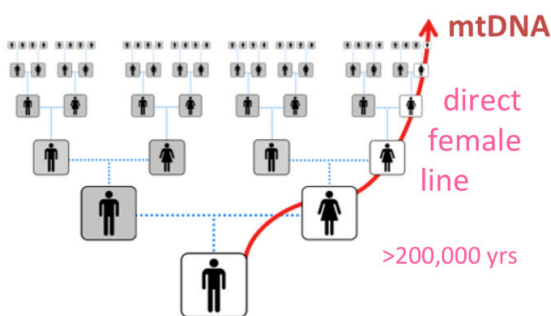
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# Connecting DNA & Your Irish Roots



by  
Dr. Maurice Gleeson

There are three types of DNA test and in previous articles we looked at two of them - Y-DNA and autosomal DNA. Y-DNA follows the father's father's father's line and is very useful for surname research. Autosomal DNA is the DNA found in your chromosomes and accounts for about 95% of the total amount of DNA in each cell in your body. It is the most useful of the three tests and is the most popular test for researching all of your ancestral lines. But in this article we turn to mitochondrial DNA and explore its genealogical utility. This test follows the mother's mother's mother's line.



## Some Scientific Background

Mitochondrial DNA (also known as mtDNA) is found in the mitochondria. These are small organelles within each cell in our body that function like miniature batteries providing energy to power all the different processes and reactions within our cells.

There are usually hundreds or thousands of mitochondria in each of our cells (it varies from tissue to tissue) and each mitochondrion contains its own mitochondrial DNA. Unlike the double-helical structure of DNA found in the chromosomes, mitochondrial DNA (mtDNA) is circular. It contains 16,569 nucleotide bases (compared to the 3 billion found on the chromosomes).

The thousands of copies of mtDNA in each cell contrasts starkly with the mere 46 chromosomes in each cell. Because there are so many copies of the same mtDNA in each cell, it has proven very useful for the study of ancient DNA from archaeological specimens thousands of years old. Much of the early work on ancient DNA used mtDNA exclusively. However recent technological advances

mean that it is now possible to extract both Y-DNA and mtDNA from ancient samples.

Mitochondrial DNA is only passed from mother to child. Daughters pass it on to their offspring, sons do not. This is because the egg cell is over 10,000 times larger than the sperm cell. In fact, the sperm cell only contributes 23 chromosomes

to the new offspring whereas the woman contributes 23 chromosomes, all the other bits and pieces in the cell – the cytoplasm, the endoplasmic reticulum, etc

The circular mtDNA consists of three portions of genealogical relevance termed HVR1, HVR2, and the Coding Region. Together these make up the Full Mitochondrial Sequence (FMS).

## Assessing your mtDNA Matches

Several companies test for HVR1, HVR2 and FMS but FamilyTreeDNA is the main company providing an mtDNA test that allows comparisons against other people in their database to produce a list of mtDNA matches.

There are two types of mtDNA test offered by FamilyTreeDNA. The Full Mitochondrial Sequence test (HVR1, HVR2 & Coding Region) costs \$199. The mtDNA plus test just covers HVR1 and HVR2 and costs \$79. This can always be upgraded at a later stage to the Full Mitochondrial Sequence. A simple swab is all that is needed and you can order the tests directly off their website. Results

take 6-10 weeks to be processed by the lab and are posted to your own personal (password-protected) webpage hosted on the FamilyTreeDNA website.

You will be informed by email once the test arrives and once you log in to the FTDNA website you will be able to view your results. Clicking on the "Matches" tab reveals a list of all the people you match. These are people whose mtDNA signature is an exact match or a very close match to your own. The first column in the Matches table tells you how close each match is. A Genetic Distance (GD) of 0 indicates an exact match, whilst a GD of 1 indicates you are 1 step away from an exact match.

You can contact each of your matches by clicking on the email icon beside their name. Note the range of different surnames in the figure on the opposite page and the unfortunate absence of birth location information for the earliest known ancestor. Even though it is perfectly possible to include this information, many people fail to do so because they are unaware of how important it is.

Because mtDNA mutates so slowly, even an exact match on mtDNA may be hundreds of years ago. Another limitation is that on the direct female line the surname changes with each generation. As a result, birth location will be of far more relevance when examining your mtDNA matches. However, as already stated, many people do not include this essential information on their profiles.