

## Eastern Artefacts

There are several items that have been passed down in the family, that were said, by my mother, to have been brought back from China and India, when my great-grandfather, Herbert Havet Smith (1866-1950) went on a tea buying trip for the family's grocery business.

I looked for evidence of this journey but nothing can be found in the outgoing passenger lists for destinations on the Indian sub-continent or the Far East; it is however difficult to know what port they may have called at on the way. It is also possible that the trip was before lists began in 1890. There are three passport applications for H H Smiths<sup>1</sup> but those available only run up to 1903, and perhaps Herbert travelled after this date. In any case, passports were not essential prior to the First World War. The application records are for March 1884, August 1884 and April 1903.



**Herbert Havet Smith**

What does not sit well with this story, is that Herbert consistently states that he works in the corn trade as a 'factor', 'buyer', 'broker' or 'salesman'. By the 1921 census he is retired but lists his most recent employer as Benjamin Smith<sup>2</sup> and sons, corn merchants. Was it perhaps not Herbert at all but his father, William Joseph (1825-1887), who made the trip? William was a fruiterer and florist, before running the public house, The British Queen in St, Pancras later in life. It is, in fact, the Seears, rather than the Smiths, who were tea dealers, so was it Herbert's father-in-law, Frederick Seear (1829-1884) who was the overseas traveller? Frederick was a grocer and by 1866, was describing himself as a tea dealer. There is no passport application for Frederick and his death occurred before the commencement of comprehensive passenger lists.



**William Joseph Smith**

Is there perhaps a clue in some of the artefacts themselves? The major piece of evidence comes from a remembered item that has not survived in the family. There were two small packs of playing cards, one red and one blue, which were in continual use during my childhood. They depicted a ship of the Orient Line. I managed to buy a set of these cards, which came in a box; I don't remember the existence of a box for ours. The cards and box both include wording that I hadn't recalled – 'The Orient Line to Australia'. Was this not the same trip at all? Amongst



destinations that are mentioned on the box is Ceylon, now Sri Lanka, which seemed a likely tea buying destination but didn't sit so well with the India and China story. Could I discover when the Orient Line was in operation? The Orient Line was founded in 1796 and was absorbed by P & O in 1966. From 1878 The Orient Line Steamship Company was running regular services to Australia. This really didn't help me identify the ancestral traveller. A Herbert Smith was found travelling on the Orient Line to Fremantle, Australia in 1912 but he was accompanied by family and is clearly not our Herbert.

Other items are suggestive of more than one destination. There are the remains of a pair of large Famille Rose vases. Similar ones are described variously as Cantonese or Chinese and are dated to the 1860s. On the other hand, much smaller vases are likely to be Japanese.



Two tea sets and a dolls' tea set are also thought to be Japanese. The latter seems to date from the 1920s.



A mother of pearl thread winder and a fish, which were traditionally kept in the games box with other counters, are likely to be Chinese.





Finally, there are two small ivory elephants and a larger, hard-wood elephant that are considered by the antiques trade to be 'Asian' or 'Indian'.



Sadly, none of this helps with the verification of the family story. It may be that there was more than one overseas trip, possibly made by more than one member of the family. There certainly appears to have been a variety of destinations. On balance, given his occupation, Frederick Seear seems the most likely ancestor to have made a tea buying trip. This would also fit with the 1860s date of the vases, which, if accurate, would be too early for Herbert. Yet the dolls' tea set is of a different era. Were perhaps some of these items bought as imports, or even sent as gifts by suppliers? Although these were undoubtedly souvenirs that were treasured by the Smith and Seear families, their full story had now been lost.

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<sup>1</sup> Class FO611 at The National Archives, indexed on [www.findmypast.co.uk](http://www.findmypast.co.uk).

<sup>2</sup> Benjamin does not seem to be a relation.