An enlarged view from a photo of the village centre, around 1900

At the Rood Ashton Estate sale of February 12th 1930, the thatched house in the background was purchased by its tenant, Frank May. Mr May’s family had lived there since at least 1851 (in that year, one room was used by around 100 Methodists exclusively for worship). Now named ‘The Gables’, it has been the home of Mr Pip Turner since 1969.

Bryan writes more about the front cover photo…

Frank May was the father of Linda Thompson – who wrote "Steeple Ashton in the Old Days" for the Newsletter in March 1975 (reproduced in this June’s edition). Frank was born in February 1873, and became a Master Carpenter and Cabinet Maker. At some point between 1904 and 1911, he married Elizabeth Ann in the ' Primitive Methodist Chapel' in High Street. During the 1920s, Mr May carried out substantial alterations to Ashton House under the direction of architect Sir Harold Brakspear.

 Shortly after purchasing his family home of 25 High Street in 1930, Frank, aged 57, began major works on the property. He built up the lower, north-end, to match the main building (the original north gable-end & window can still be seen today), added two front gable-windows, and a porch (said to be fashioned on the porch-way at ‘Talboys’ in Keevil). Inside, he built a feature oak banister staircase. It is not clear if Mr May removed the thatch at this time, as the building could have been re-roofed by the Rood Ashton Estate prior to its sale.

Frank and Elizabeth continued to live out the rest of their years in the old family home – with Frank remaining, evidently, an energetic and industrious man.
In a 'Bristol Evening World' feature on Steeple Ashton published September 12th 1958, reporter Max Barnes comments:

It’s a village where there is peace of mind and contentment, a place where you can watch a veteran like 87-year-old [85-year-old] Mr Frank May digging a fine crop of potatoes with all the energy of a man half his age.

Max Barnes would have done well to have paid another visit to our village four years later – he could have watched an 89-year-old Mr Frank May making an altar table for the Chapel in which he and Elizabeth were married over 50 years before!

Frank May passed away on the 19th October 1963, aged 90. He was buried in the shadow of St. Mary’s Church tower.

'The Gables' (25 High St.) today

The Paisley Long Shawl of Frank May’s grandmother – & its even longer journey...

On the 24th August 1830 – one week before his 24th birthday – Frank May’s grandfather, John Berrett, married 24-year-old Semington woman Ellen Marsh at St. Mary’s Church. It is very likely that it was around this time that Ellen took ownership of an item of clothing that became a treasured family possession, to be handed down to future generations: a Paisley Pattern Indian Long Shawl. Ellen’s shawl was made of silk and wool; it measured 8’ 6” x 5’ 2” (approx. 2.7 m x 1.6 m), was white-centred, and had the ‘Paisley Indian Boteh Motif’ pattern. It was probably made after 1820, and to the west of Glasgow – in Paisley; the town, according to Valerie Reilly in her book 'The Paisley Pattern':

... whose name has become virtually synonymous with the shawl in the English-speaking world.
It is highly likely that Ellen’s white-centred long shawl formed part of her wedding trousseau. Certainly, Valerie Reilly states that by 1850:

*These white-centred plaids had developed from the earlier ‘pale-ends’. They had become the universal bridal present and no lady’s trousseau was complete without one.*

During the late 1830s, Paisley pattern long shawls became highly sought-after, when the young, fashion-conscious new Queen – Victoria – began wearing the long version, rather than the square type. They were worn doubled in half and square across the shoulder. (Incidentally, since around 2010, the Paisley pattern has once more been in vogue – featuring across the fashion-houses & catwalks of the western world.)

In the 1841 Census, John and Ellen Berrett were recorded as living in the “*Market Place*”, Steeple Ashton. By 1851, they had moved to the High Street, opposite the 'Long's Arms', to live in what is now 'The Gables'. This is where Ellen and John were to spend the rest of their lives – and the property continued to be occupied by family members right up until the death of Frank May in 1963. The enterprising couple successfully farmed 40 acres of land during some of the most difficult times of the 19th Century, and they had a total of 11 children (two died in infancy).

The eighth child of John and Ellen, Lydia Ann, was born in 1844. Lydia – an aunt to Frank May – received the 'Family Shawl' from her mother, prior to her marriage to Alfred Brown in 1864. Lydia and Alfred lived at first with Lydia’s parents in High Street, before moving on to a home of their own in Silver Street, opposite where today’s 'George T. Brown' haulage company stands. Here they brought up their six children, and in 1872 Alfred founded what would eventually become the 'George T. Brown' haulage company. At some point during the 1890s, in this Silver Street home, Lydia Ann made a critical decision which was to change the future of the shawl: faced with her daughters Clara Ellen and Elizabeth's intractable quarrel over who should inherit the garment – she cut it down the middle and presented them with a half each!

Elizabeth married William Grant from Keevil, and went on to have two children. Then in 1907, in her late 30s, Elizabeth sadly died. William later married his first wife’s cousin, Laura Alice Berrett, and they set up home in Bratton. Elizabeth's sister Clara Ellen had married Wolverhampton man John Beesley, with the couple settling in Swindon. By 1897 they were the town’s first fruit and vegetable wholesalers, and they raised a total of three children. Their half of the shawl continued to be handed down from mother to daughter, and stayed in the town. Back in Steeple Ashton, over time, the whereabouts of Elizabeth’s part of the long shawl – and eventually, the entire Marsh/Berrett/Brown 'Family Shawl' history – became forgotten. In Swindon, Clara's descendants were left unaware as to the fate of Elizabeth's half.

Almost 80 years after Elizabeth's death, around the early to mid 1980s, in Swindon, Clara Ellen’s granddaughter Lydia Clarke – who had no knowledge of the 'Family Shawl' – was looking for old family photos, to try to help her mother Nellie Reeves (born 1906) recover from a stroke. Whilst searching one of Nellie’s chest-of-drawers, Lydia found Clara's half of the shawl – and was then told the story for the first time by her mother. Hearing this story inspired Lydia and her husband Richard to begin researching the family history, and at the same time they hoped to learn what had happened to Elizabeth's half. After finding a copy of
the book ‘Down Berrett Lane’ (of which they were unaware) in Swindon Library, they visited Steeple Ashton to meet some of Lydia’s cousins – most for the first time.

Of these relations, none of us knew the story of the divided long shawl, let alone the whereabouts of the missing half. Lydia and Richard were therefore resigned to not ever learning the fate of the other piece, and so continued with their genealogy and research, compiling a comprehensive account of the family history.

Around 1990, I was able to introduce them to a further cousin: Constance Wood (nee Grant), who was in her late 70s and had returned to England following the death of her husband Tom in Jamaica, where they had lived for some years. She had moved to live in Bratton, near her old family home of the Manor Farm. Connie (as she was known) and her brother Richard, were the children of William Grant and his second wife Laura Alice Berrett (Elizabeth’s cousin, whom William had married after Elizabeth’s death).

On a subsequent visit to Bratton, Lydia and Richard took their family research. Whilst looking through the documents and photos, Connie spotted a picture of the half-shawl; amazed to see that Lydia had it, she declared:

... somewhere, I’ve got THE OTHER HALF!

Connie confirmed the story of the shawl, and was so surprised and pleased that both branches of the family had treasured their respective halves, each presuming that the other half was lost! She had kept hers safe since inheriting it – taking it with her to Jamaica after marrying Tom Wood (where they had their son, also named Tom), and bringing it back years later when she settled in Bratton.

Two days after the visit, Constance Wood phoned Richard and Lydia Clarke to say that she had found her half of the Indian Long Shawl (which had belonged to Elizabeth), and that after speaking to her family, it was their wish to pass it on to Lydia in Swindon, for her to take future care of. Lydia and Richard soon travelled to Bratton to receive this treasured gift – with photos taken to record the event.

On the 23rd of June 1990 at the week-long ‘Festival of Steeple Ashton’, after around 100 years and a few thousand miles of separation, the two severed pieces of the squabbling Victorian sisters’ ‘Family Shawl’ were re-united, when they were held together by a number of ladies in St. Mary’s Church. Later, the shawl halves – cut in two by Lydia Ann Brown in Silver Street during the 1890s – were carefully ‘tacked’ back together by the great granddaughter who shares her name: Lydia Clarke. At last, this Paisley Long Shawl, at least 160 years old – with its century of split heritage incorporating Steeple Ashton, Swindon, Jamaica and Bratton, plus all the associated families – was one again.

Sadly, Lydia’s mother Nellie Reeves did not live to see the discovery of her Aunt Elizabeth’s half of the shawl, as she died in 1989. Connie died in 1991, and Richard Clarke passed away in 2007. Had it not been for Lydia and Richard’s diligent family research, plus Connie’s generous gift, this story could not have been told. In particular, Richard’s contribution to the final outcome cannot be over-stated, and I dedicate this article to his and Connie’s memory.

Lydia Clarke still lives in Swindon, and continues to look after this remarkable survival – woven on a punched-card loom over 183 years ago. The shawl remains in good condition, and was exhibited at the July Craft Fair in St. Mary’s Church this year.
Incidentally, Lydia Clarke also inherited a blue silk shawl dating from around 1870, which too had belonged to Ellen Berrett (nee Marsh). It had been handed down with the half-shawl, and was also on display at this July's exhibition. Richard and Lydia's son, Julian Clarke (born 1974), is next in line to receive these two heir-looms – and I am sure they will continue to be cherished, and their story remembered.

Footnote: The Paisley pattern & shawl production in the UK

Despite its name, the Paisley pattern itself has a rich, ancient Asian heritage, with its origins stretching back to Persia over 1,300 years ago (one theory has it that the famous 'teardrop' boteh motif began as a representation of a date palm's growing shoot, in Babylon). The patterns we recognise today have a complex history. They developed and evolved over many centuries, even incorporating English influences along the way (via English-published books with plant illustrations, read by the Mughals in 17th Century Kashmir).

In Britain, by the mid to late 18th Century, high-quality, fine, smooth, hand-woven goat's fleece shawls featuring these design patterns were being imported by the East India Company, from Kashmir (where they were traditionally worn by men). At that time, these prestigious garments – which took months to weave – were only affordable to the wealthiest in society. However, due to their high desirability, by the 1790s textile companies in Edinburgh and Norwich were already producing their own hand-loom-manufactured copies. Around 1805, in a Scottish town known at that point for its silk production – but would go on to lend its name to both the shawl and the pattern – manufacture of the shawls also began via hand-loom. A few years later, technical improvements to Paisley's hand-loomers in 1812 meant yarn colours could be increased from two to five. Come 1820 in Paisley, the introduction of the large, punched-card and single-person-operated 'Jacquard Loom' allowed for the even more efficient weaving of silk and wool imitations – and the town became the main manufacturing centre for the shawls. Subsequently – although not becoming universally affordable – ownership of these UK-produced versions of the prized, lighter, hand-crafted Kashmiri shawls, became a more attainable prospect for a broader social section of women throughout Regency and early Victorian Britain.

Bryan Berrett
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Sources


Un-dated, anonymously hand-typed A4 sheet on Steeple Ashton 'Primitive Methodist Chapel', obtained some years ago.