It must be 10 years or more since I last spoke about William Skidmore at one of our Gatherings. I now have a much richer picture of what his life was like and so I’m glad to do so again.

William Skidmore and his wife lived a couple of miles from here. These are the essential facts you need to start exploring William’s life....
Firstly, the descendants of William and his wife account for 40% of all present-day UK Skidmores –

Some of their descendants have emigrated and so are spread worldwide.

He was a collier in Kingswinford parish, which as you know lies on the famous South Staffordshire coalfield.

His marriage in 1625 was the first record of the name Skidmore in Kingswinford & surrounding parishes.

He married a local widow – but we’ll come back to that....

He died in 1664 and left a very informative will.

Unfortunately, we have no record of his birth or his parents.... just tantalising clues, which I’ll come to later.

So you have the essentials of what we know about him.

Now I’ll talk in a bit more more detail...
I’ll start by talking about his marriage and his children ....

move on to what this area was like in the 17th century and how William and his family fitted in to the local fabric of life...

and then we’ll take a look at where he might have come from.
The story starts here, at this beautiful church of St Mary’s, Kingswinford. This picture was taken by my husband back in the early 1970s....

This was when I began to look at my father’s family (we come from Dudley) this then blossomed into looking at all of William Skidmore’s descendants, which in turn led me to form the Family History Group and to join the Guild of One-Name Studies.

Back to William....
I have photocopied part of the register of St Mary’s.

Registers were kept from 1558 but many have only survived from the time they had to be written on parchment, 1603.

This is the case for Kingswinford – we have no record of any births, marriages or deaths in the parish before 1603.

This is the clergy’s record of the marriage of William to Joyce Batch.

The writing of that time takes some getting used to but it reads ‘January 24 William Skidmore and Joyse Batch were married’.

That is all we have, no parents, no addresses, no witnesses recorded. Quite normal for the time.

There was a transcript of this register made many years ago, and her name was indexed wrongly as BATES, but this is J-O-Y-S-E   B-A-T-C-H

Now this was Joyce’s 2nd marriage...
Here is Joyce’s first marriage.

This was ten years before her marriage to William and took place at the church of St Mary’s, Old Swinford.

It was the last wedding [see red arrow] in the year 1615.

Humffry Bache and Joyce Haukes marr Novembr xxviii th
Here is it enlarged ...

Again, like the Kingswinford register, this Oldswinford register only survives from 1602.

There are no Skidmores found in Oldswinford register until 1655 when William’s sons married and had children baptised there.

Joyce had four children by her first husband. Humphrey Batch died in April 1624 (buried Kingswinford), leaving Joyce with 4 young children. They grew up and two at least married locally.

Nine months after Humphrey’s death she married William Skidmore and was to have a further four children by him.
This summarises Joyce Hawkes’ two marriage.

When would you say Joyce Hawkes was born?
If she married Humphrey Bache in 1615 then it is likely she was born no later that 1598.

Assuming that her 2\textsuperscript{nd} husband, William Skidmore, was of an age or older than she (by no means certain), then we can place his birth in the region of 1590 to 1595.
now we move on to what this area was like in the 17th century – the early 1600s - and how William and his family fitted in to the local fabric of life...
In the 1500s and well into the 1800s, affairs were conducted according to the PARISH in which you lived.

This shows the parishes as they would have been in William’s day.

Kingswinford in Staffordshire and Oldswinford in Worcestershire. This A stands for Amblecote which was a manor in Oldswinford parish but part of Staffordshire.

The red symbol shows the approximate position of St Mary’s, Kingswinford, the blue St Mary’s, Oldswinford.

As the industrial revolution took off and the population expanded, new churches were built to serve them – for instance Brierley Hill, Wordsley and so on – but that was far in the future at the time that William arrived.

In Kingswinford parish, only a small number lived in the village centred on the Church. The growth in population took place in the S.E. corner of the parish [the area which later grew into Brierley Hill].
For 150 years after William’s arrival the Skidmores remained in the area shown, on the border of the parishes of Kingswinford and Oldswinford, shown by the red circle.

So let’s try and set William in some sort of ‘local economic scenario’.

I can thoroughly recommend this book by Marie Rowlands, *Masters and Men in the West Midland metalware trades before the industrial revolution*.

This book is what we all aspire to – meticulous research make understandable to the layman.

I have found the first chapter very helpful in piecing together what life was like for William Skidmore in Kingswinford.

Kingswinford is typical of parishes in this region at the time.
What was the landscape like? What would we see if we could travel back to the early 1600s.

Its livelihood was one based on what has come to be called RURAL INDUSTRY that is a dual economy based on AGRICULTURE and INDUSTRY. Most of Kingswinford parish was what was called ‘waste’ – woodland and heath land – with scattered hamlets and farms.

THE AGRICULTURE
Crops were still grown on the strip system in big open fields, on either side of the road. There was common pasture on which people let their animals graze...

and there was woodland, often coppiced in order to obtain the straight wood which the charcoal burners needed. The charcoal was used to smelt the iron.

THE INDUSTRY
consisted of the extraction of the iron ore and the coal needed by the smiths who forged the iron into iron goods.

In Kingswinford there were only a few full-time farmers. They and the shopkeepers lived in the village centred on St Mary’s church. Three-quarters of the population lived in the hamlets such as Brettell and Brockmoor. They were part-time farmers working on the land as jobs demanded and spending the rest of the time in metalworking and coalmining.
So we look specifically at Kingswinford as an economy based on RURAL INDUSTRY.

Note the parish boundary, marked in the south by the River Stour, flowing westward to the River Severn.

Here is St Mary’s Church and the village.

Here is the main road north-south, now the A491 with the open field system.

Down the eastern part of the parish was Pensnett Chase, open ground and coppices.

William would have sold his coal on the bank and the smiths would carry it away themselves. The most important single development for the smiths here were the slitting mills set up on the bank of the River Stour in the early 1660s. Previously the bars of iron had to be cut by hand. This technology increased production and led to an increase in trade and in population. People were migrating in from north Worcestershire and from Shropshire.

[In the 1680s the total population for the parish was probably about 1500, with around 300 in Wordsley and 150 in each of Shut End, Bromley, Brettell and Brockmoor villages]. (Map and population analysis by Dr Peter Chandler).
The River Severn was critical in the trade at the time.

We can trace Severn the Severn from its source to the Bristol Channel:

Lake Vyrnwy, past Shrewsbury, Ironbridge, note its tributary the Stour, Bewdley, Worcester, Gloucester, Bristol Channel.

This scenario – burgeoning industry in a rural landscape – great trade connections via the Severn - money to be made – this is the scenario into which William Skidmore settled.

How did he fare?
In 1629 - that’s four years after he married Joyce Hawkes - he leased some land from Lord Dudley of Dudley Castle.

Now the Dudleys were the major land owners in the area and had fallen on hard times. They were forced to lease out pockets of their land.

William Skydmore, collier of Brettell, had a lease of two acres of land in Pensnett Chase to build a cottage...

New cottages were continually being built, seemingly at random, on Pensnett Chase.

We can pinpoint fairly accurately where these two acres were:

between lande now in the holding of Thomas Cary Gent
& land now in the holding of Thomas Cartwright
on both sides
and is parcell of a coppice there called Ravensitche.

We need to look at that SE corner of the parish in more detail....
Brettell in the early 1600s was a hamlet which lay on each side of a road leading up to the Chase - the road we now call Brettell Lane.
Brettell in the early 1600s was a hamlet which lay on each side of a road leading up to the Chase, the road we now call Brettell Lane.

The colliers lived in Brettell and Amblecote Bank [note Amblecote Bank Road].

Thomas Carey was Lord Dudley’s ranger who looked after Pensnett Chase.

Coppices were important in providing a plentiful supply of regular-sized logs for the charcoal burners to produce the charcoal needed to smelt the iron.

Did William Skidmore intend to move to these 2 acres at Ravensitch and build a new home?
No, because only a year later he sub-let these 2 acres to a Richard and Mary Southwicke.

I read this as dabbling in a little property development. He rents the land, improves it by building a cottage and then re-lets it.

In fact, he acquired several leaseholds in this way during his lifetime. We know this from his will.
William was quite elderly - for the time - when he died in 1664.
He probably had an illness because he made his will on 9 January 1664 and was buried on 4 February.

When he died a detailed inventory was made of his belongings.
We know that amongst the colliers in the parish, he was relatively well off.
His wealth amounted to £78 8s 0d. This is 10 times larger than the sums left by other colliers who left wills.

[78.5 pounds in 1664 had the same buying power as £10205 today]

The inventory also tells us that he had a few animals in the common fields, and he had 2 horses, which was unusual for a collier.

His wife Joyce inherited not only his household goods and animals but also
‘a life interest in three leaseholds granted to him by the Birch families of Wolverhampton and Birmingham and by Mrs Bradley of Kingswinford,
together with bonds owing him from Richard Brindley, gent of Kinver.
These bonds amounted to £46, and so well over half of his worth was with Richard Brindley of Kinver.
so it seems likely that William had retired and was living partly on the money he had made and lent
to a ‘safer bigger man’.
No banks then, of course...
Some background information on Richard Brindley because it has a bearing on our William Skidmore. The middle men were making a great deal of money. Richard Brindley was a wholesale ironmonger, or chapman.

He owned an iron works in Bewdley on the River Severn, which cast bar iron. He and others used the Severn to market the iron at a distance [to the army, the navy, to builders, people needed nails, scythes, buckles, horseshoes, bits] and they also supplied the workers with their raw materials.

Now Richard Brindley was a nephew by marriage of Richard Foley, and the Foley family were already predominant in the area – they owned the slitting mills and had business interests further afield.

The 1654 undertaking by Richard Brindley to cast 8 tons of bar iron for his uncle Richard Foley, and to carry it at the rate of a ton a week from Bewdley, to Foley at Stourbridge.

How did he get a ton of iron a week from Bewdley to the Foley slitting mills on the banks of the Stour?

The Stour was not navigable at this time. 50 years later it was made navigable between Stourbridge and Kidderminster but that project failed from lack of finance.

Coal and iron would be transported on carts pulled by horses. The English Draught Horse or English Black.

From the end of the 16th Century heavy horses were required to haul heavy wagons & coaches across the countryside at a time when roads were no more than deep rutted muddy tracks. Note William
Now we move on to the million-dollar question - Where did William Skidmore come from?

Time to don your thinking caps. We are going to come up with some ways you might find out where he came from

or, at least, where he might have come from...
5 avenues of exploration.

1. What would be the definitive, scientific way to link William to other families?

   DNA studies. Unfortunately, although the men descended from William Skidmore who have participated match each other, they do not match any other Skidmore or Scudamore branches. There are a number of reasons this. There is what has been called a ‘non-paternal event’!

   – a lass had a child by a non-Skidmore lad and then the child adopted the name of her Skidmore family or her future Skidmore husband.

   Or an orphan was taken in as a ward and then adopted its master’s surname.

2. If you were looking for William’s father and mother, what would you expect their names to be?

   William, of course, his mother and sisters perhaps called Margaret or Ann. Francis – care needed as Joyce’s brother was Francis Hawkes.

3. and what would you expect his father’s occupation to be?

   The only Skidmore miners of which I’m aware pre-1600 were in Somerset – but they specialised in mining lead and took this skill up to Derbyshire.

   Coal had been mined for centuries in the Forest of Dean. The Wyre Forest near Bewdley had coal and the parish of Arley there was experiencing the same influx of miners in the early 1600s as was Kingswinford. The authors of the book The Wyre Forest Coalfield say that the miners generally only stayed a few years before moving on to another district.

   So could William have learned the basics of mining elsewhere and, seeing the potential in the Black Country at that time, have decided to move there to ‘make his mark’?

4. Now William was moderately well-off when he died, but not when he arrived in Kingswinford.

   Why would poorer people move parishes in those days? Did he come alone? with family? with an overlord? where were other people coming from?

   Sometimes groups of people came with – or were sent by - an overlord and it’s been suggested that William’s move to Kingswinford had something to do with Lord Dudley. There were Dudley estates in Warwickshire, near Stratford. Yes, there were Skidmores in that area, but I’m not convinced he came from there. The two branches of the Dudley family – those based at Dudley Castle and those who ran the Warwickshire estates, were cousins but seemed to operate separately. It would be wonderful if we could tie him to the Skidmore Stratford family because we can trace them back to the Scudamores of Herefordshire.

   Of course, the Warwickshire Skidmores could have moved into north Worcestershire or into Shropshire or one of the other coal-mining districts many years before William was born and he could be a descendant of one of these migrants – we may never know, but we keep looking.

   I have already mentioned that many people were moving into the South Staffs coal field area from north Worcestershire and from Shropshire.

5. How do family historians find a person’s birth? Where do they look?

   Parish registers.

   Amidst all this we find one glimmer of hope…
It comes from this parish
St Leonard’s in Ribbesford. This parish covered the town of Bewdley, so you can think BEWDLEY when I talk about Ribbesford.
You will remember that Bewdley was an important trading town on the River Severn.

This is the only other parish for many many miles around where SO FAR we have found Skidmores before 1600.
The register begins in 1574.

The first Skidmore to appear in the register was in 1600. This ‘supposed son of’ is intriguing!!

Now, if you check out the names and dates here, you see that it is likely that what we are looking at is ONE family only who ‘turn up’ a short time before 1600.

This is only baptisms. Let’s see what happens if we include the marriages and burials.
Note Daniel Skidmore’s marriage in 1603. The next marriage in Bewdley is not until 1636.

Now look at the burials:

Daniel’s first son died in infancy. and so did his son James.
Daniel died between 1609 and 1613. Daniel’s wife died in 1638.
and Thomas’ wife died in 1646.

SO WHO ARE THE WIDOW SKIDMORE AND WILLIAM SKIDMORE buried in 1617 and 1618.
William is almost certainly an adult.
She cannot be his widow because she died before him (unless the clergy made an error with the dates). So we might be looking at mother and son, or he could be the brother of her husband.

What were the occupations of this family?
Well, we get no answer from the parish register which rarely gives the man’s occupation.
But this Daniel Skidmore, born in 1605, was apprenticed – and where? - in London.
In 1624 Daniel son of Daniel Scudamore of Bewdley, Worcestershire, sailor (deceased), was apprenticed to Thomas Round, snr. of the Farrier’s Company in London.

Now this is very interesting. It means they had London contacts and it means that someone in the Bewdley family had sufficient means to pay for the apprenticeship.
Sadly, I don’t know what became of Daniel once he went to the metropolis.

But at least we know that his father was a sailor, or, much more likely, a waterman on the Severn.
The watermen operated the large barges and ships which traded up and down the Severn.
I love this painting. The watermen of Bewdley volunteered to fight at the battle of Shrewsbury (1403) and were subsequently granted the privilege of plying their barges toll-free on the river Severn.

So it’s 200 years before the Skidmore we’ve been talking about, but it does show they were a distinct group.
So, in conclusion,

We have looked at William’s arrival in Kingswinford.
We have explored his working life and his contacts.
We have looked at the things we should consider when thinking about where he might have originated.
And I have described the Skidmores in nearby Bewdley.

There are still avenues to explore:

There are other parish registers to look at.

There is the movement of people between the lands belonging to the Dudleys.
We also need to look at all the wills made by people in Bewdley and the surroundings – wills frequently name people to whom money was owed or who owed money to the person who died. Perhaps a Skidmore will be mentioned.

The place to do both of these is Hereford Record Office,

So if you would like to spend a day with me, I would welcome that very much ……

Thank you for listening.