



NEWS

FAMILY MISS OUT ON PENSIONER'S £300,000 ESTATE

Lost relatives ready to inherit thousands... until will turns up at last minute

EXCLUSIVE

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Sunday Mercury Writer

AFAMILY'S celebrations following news they had inherited a fortune have been cut very short following the 11th hour discovery of a will.

And that will leaves spinster Elizabeth June Dean's entire estate to needy animals - and, specifically, her pets.

In short, Miss Dean's £300,000 fortune has gone to the dogs.

All her Black Country descendants will now receive is a copy of their family tree provided by genealogy experts who worked on the case.

Yvonne Brewster, from Willenhall, and Walsall's Julie Dennant, aged 57, were among those informed they were the heirs to the distant relative's estate - an empty property in one of Hampshire's most exclusive postcodes.

They were tracked down following painstaking detective work by professional probate genealogists Finders International.

It was understood that Miss Dean, from Hampshire, had not made a will - and had no immediate family.

But just as the champagne corks were about to pop, solicitors uncovered a document outlining the old lady's last wishes. That important paperwork had been stashed in a Nat-West bank vault.

Elizabeth, who died in 2014 at the age of 83, had left everything to the RSPCA - and she underlined the need to splash her cash on her own mutts.

Yvonne Brewster, aged 63, is keen to clutch positives from the adventure. "At first, I thought it was a hoax," she admits. "We didn't even know Elizabeth Dean."

For her, it's a clear case of "you don't miss what you never had".

"Finding out where the family tree is going to lead us is going to be nice. I'd like to get in touch with some of the cousins, I'd love to find out a lot more now."

The incredible story of descendants who thought they'd hit the money will be aired during tomorrow's episode of BBC1's Heir Hunters - and it's the stuff of movie scripts.



Elizabeth Dean's house, which was part of her legacy. Right: Ellen (cousin of the deceased) and Albert Bradley, her husband

To their shock, the extended family was poised to inherit the wealth of a mysterious ancestor - until Finders received a shock call from the deceased solicitors.

They had, against all odds, uncovered a will that clearly stated Elizabeth's wishes.

Danny Curran of Finders International says: "Finding a will is, of course, a disappointment to the potential heirs.

"However, we are very pleased that Elizabeth's true wishes were carried out. Her estate was dealt with exactly how she wanted it.

"For her relatives, each beneficiary received a copy of the family tree, and it appears that this resulted in many more reunions among relatives."

Suzanne Rowley, Finders' case manager who played a pivotal role in cracking the case, admits the conclusion of her work may be "bittersweet" for relatives.

It was a complex family web for Suzanne to untangle.

"It was very time-consuming," she admits. "It was very hard to get a profile of Elizabeth, to find out what she was like.

"We picked up the case in August last year. Elizabeth died in 2014 and her property had been left empty for three years.

"On the maternal side of the family tree, it was fairly easy, in terms of names and areas, because the family stayed in the Walsall and Willenhall area."

There are positives to be clutched from the research, Suzanne stresses.

"I've hadn't got involved, the property would still be standing empty," she points out. "Admittedly, I was surprised when the will turned up because it had been three years and no-one had come forward.

"I suppose the discovery may have been a little bittersweet, but people were quite happy to receive our family tree because it was quite large."

On the downside, you can't spend a family tree.

Finders International is a specialist probate genealogist firm based in London, Edinburgh and Dublin. Founded by Danny Curran, the Finders team stars in the BBC's Heir Hunters TV series. For more information see www.findersinternational.co.uk.

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The plot began to unravel in 2016, two years after the death of Elizabeth, who spent her working life as a nurse.

Suzanne Rowley, Finders' case manager



Back then, a neighbour flagged up the fact that the pensioner's home had lain empty for some time.

With no children to take possession of the residence, on the outskirts of Petersfield, East Hampshire.

Finders International was tasked with tracking down potential heirs. If none were found, the estate would go to the Crown.

It proved a journey littered with obstacles and dead ends.

It was akin to finding a needle in a haystack, with the Finders team, fronted by Danny Curran, spending hours tracing maternal and paternal lines.

That was beyond tricky: they had only the surnames Dean and Bell - and there are an awful lot of Deans and Bells in the UK.

They discovered that Elizabeth's dad was one of three children. One was Albert, who served in the Great War's Mesopotamian campaign. He died, aged just 21, while crossing the River Tigris in an attempt to flee the Ottoman army.

After that initial success, the trail soon turned cold. Those branches of the family tree failed to bear fruit.

Confusion over the birth certificate of Elizabeth's mother further muddied the water, but Finders eventually hit paydirt.

Elizabeth's mother Jane Bell moved from Walsall to Petersfield and settled in the town. She married Frederick Dean.

And Jane had six siblings who remained true to their Black Country roots.

One, Herbert, proved the key to unlocking the puzzle. He had five children and one of them, Ellen Bradley, gave birth to nine.

Two of her children are Yvonne Brewster and Julie Dennant.