

Any Relation?

by Robert Leiser

Ask any Churchill, Shakespeare, or Crippen, and they'll tell you how often they hear the tedious question "Any relation?" and how *noblesse oblige* requires them to answer each time as if they've never been asked before. Macbeths, Copperfields, and Jeeveses have the additional chore of explaining that their famous namesakes were fictitious. Or so I thought, until I attended the Plum Pie exhibition and learned about Percy Jeeves.

Percy was a Warwickshire cricketer, born in Yorkshire in 1888 and tipped to bowl for England. Plum saw him play and recognised the *nom juste* for Bertie Wooster's personal gentleman. Percy never knew of the honour, as he was killed in action at the Somme in 1916.

A seasoned genealogist, I wondered whether modern-day descendants of this family know of their famous forebear. Maybe there is a young Jeeves somewhere to whom I could give a valuable gift: The next time they are asked "Any relation?", instead of suppressing a roll of the eyes and giving an oft-repeated polite reply, they could answer "Well, yes, actually . . ."

Though Percy's three brothers all survived the Great War, two had to be discounted early in my search for living Jeeves descendants: brother Thomas had a son who didn't marry, while I could find no clear record of Harold. Undeterred, I focused on the remaining middle brother, Alick, and his only child, daughter Norah Jeeves. And as I weaved my way through the various resources available to genealogists, descendants of Percy's family poured out.

I learned that Norah had married and had two sons and a daughter. They produced at least 12 grandchildren, and I turned to Facebook to seek these grandchildren, or their children. This led me to Chloe Huggins, a 17-year-old living in England, who responded promptly that she was indeed descended from Norah Jeeves, but that she had known nothing of the P G Wodehouse connection and was much intrigued by it. And at last she understood who the guy playing cricket in the photo on the mantelpiece was! She put me in touch with her grandfather, Keith Mellard, an

Aberdeen sculptor, who was able to tell me more about Percy, Alick, and the family as a whole. While the Plum connection is known to Keith Mellard's generation, it is Percy's cricketing achievements that are the main source of family pride.

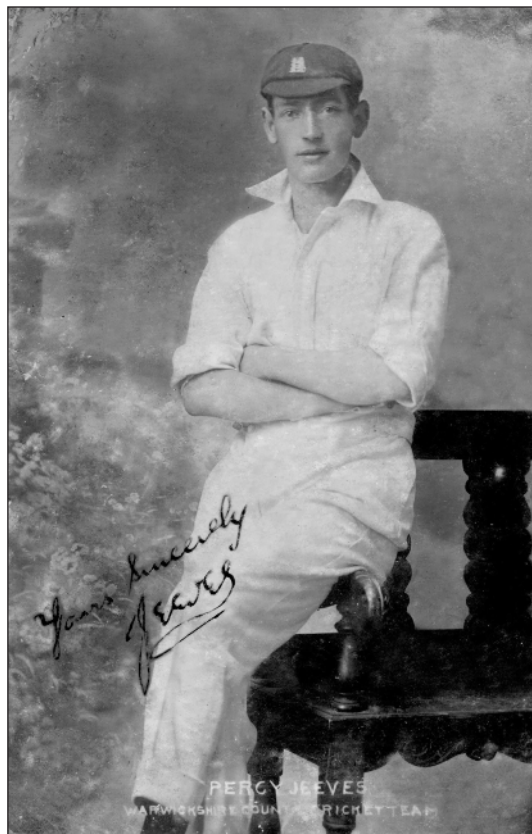
Keith recalled seeing Stephen Fry on an Edinburgh-London sleeper and thought of introducing himself as the descendant of the inspiration for Stephen's most popular role, but he forbore given the late hour. As a patron of The P G Wodehouse Society, Stephen, we hope, will learn of this connection through these pages.

But it was Percy's cricketing achievements that led to my greatest breakthrough.

David Frith, a cricket historian now in possession of Percy's Wisdens, had known Percy's brother Harold before his death in 1980 and, in an old letter, found his son's name: Graham Perceval Jeeves, whom I was thrilled to be able to locate via directory enquiries. Now, if you're an aficionado of the BBC's *Who Do You Think You Are?*, you might believe that complete strangers introducing themselves with a remote family connection get a joyful reception, and are invited in to have tea and biscuits and look at old photos. My experience is that this welcome is reserved for celebrities with a camera crew in tow. More typically, such approaches are met with suspicion and need to be handled very carefully.

After the briefest moment of understandable perplexity and caution, Graham Perceval Jeeves proved a delightful conversationalist. Like Keith Mellard (his first cousin, once removed, whom he didn't know), he was well aware and duly proud of Percy's cricketing achievements and unwitting literary legacy. He was delighted that Percy is still fondly and gratefully remembered by the Society, and that this research will reinforce the link with his family.

Reaching the end of my quest for Jeeves descendants was every bit as rewarding as I had hoped, but as ever in genealogical research, the journey was as rewarding as the arrival. I enjoyed contacts with helpful and friendly correspondents, and I stumbled upon some interesting snippets.



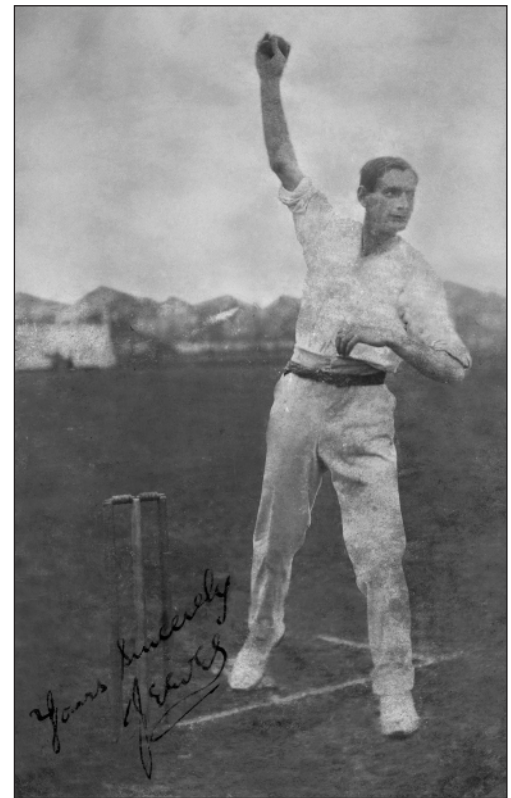
Percy Jeeves (1888–1916)

In 1888, about the time that the seven-year-old Plum was writing his first story, a Reginald Jeeves was born in Wimbledon. Whether he ever learned that another Reginald Jeeves would be immortalised in fiction we can never know. Even more intriguing was my discovery of Reginald's younger brother, born in 1890 – *Bertie*.

A couple of historical tidbits discovered along the way may merit our attention. Percy's father, Edwin Jeeves, had been born in 1862, and his mother had died soon afterwards. As was common at the time, her children were brought up by various relatives; Edwin, by his aunt Martha Jeeves. Had Martha not remained a spinster, Edwin would likely have adopted her married surname. Had Percy borne a different surname, what would Plum have named Bertie's personal gentleman? It's hard to imagine that another *nom* would have been quite as *juste*.

And would 'Geeves' have worked? Until 1911, illiteracy was so widespread that census records were taken by people going round the doors, writing down the names people told them, with whatever spelling they thought appropriate. (An official's assumption that my ancestor Mark Older was dropping his aitches led to his name being recorded as Holder, the name that branch of the family bears to this day.) In 1901 the census taker decided on the spelling 'Geeves' for the whole family of the 13-year-old Percy. This spelling didn't stick, but if other officials had made the same change, would a Percy Geeves have inspired Plum to the extent that Percy Jeeves did?

So a long and fascinating journey reveals that at least the older generations of Percy's family's descendants are aware of the legacy, and reminds us of the importance of passing on these gems to our children. Moreover, we are now aware of how close we came to not having a Jeeves at all.



Both photos of Percy Jeeves are kindly provided by Keith Mellard.

And Some More on Percy Jeeves

In the March 1999 issue of *Wooster Sauce*, JAMES HOGG wrote about his campaign to see Percy Jeeves memorialised in *Wisden* (in which he was ultimately successful). His article included clippings from Jeeves's own scrapbook, which Percy's brother had given to the writer David Frith; the scrapbook provided poignant evidence of a very promising cricket career cut short by a cruel war.

Upon learning of Robert Leiser's researches, James wrote to provide another interesting fact about Percy Jeeves. He noted that the Stone House Hotel in Hawes, Yorkshire, claims that Jeeves was the gardener there when it was a private house, and it was there that Wodehouse saw him play cricket for Hawes Cricket Club; see <http://bit.ly/dnJfxD>. This is very unlikely for numerous reasons, chief among them being that Wodehouse himself wrote that he first saw Jeeves play at Cheltenham (in August 1913, which was recently confirmed by Norman Murphy). But there is no denying that Percy played professionally for the local cricket side at Hawes, as is shown in this cutting from the *Darlington and Stockton Times* of 21 May 1910. Thanks to James for providing this snippet and clipping.

The Hawes Cricket Club opened their season on Whit-Monday, their opponents being the Pendle Nomads from Clitheroe. The home side declared their innings closed with the score at 205 for seven wickets, and then dismissed their opponents for the small score of 24. Jeeves (108), J. E. Osborne (50), and H. A. Crallan (29 not out), made the runs for Hawes, and the Nomads fell before Jeeves (four wickets for 6 runs) and H. A. Crallan (six wickets for 18 runs). In appreciation of Jeeves' innings the sum of 30s was presented him by the players and spectators.

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It was morning in the middle of April, and the Jackson family were consequently breakfasting in comparative silence. The cricket season had not begun, and except during the cricket season they were in the habit of devoting their powerful minds almost exclusively to the task of victualling against the labours of the day. In May, June, July, and August the silence was broken.

(From *Mike*, 1909)