

# The visitor

By Jason Buckley

On John's family tree, which went back a very long way, there were five names marked with red dots. They were all called John. But there were other people called John in between, so that couldn't be the only reason they had red dots.

They all seemed to be about 100 years apart from each other and the last John with a red dot was about 100 years ago. John had twice asked his father what the red dots meant. The first time was when he a young child. His father just lied and said they meant people who asked too many questions. The second time, he said he would tell him when he was older. Well, now John was older, so he asked again.

His father looked at him as if he was measuring him, and then began.

'There is a story in the family that each of these Johns receives a visit from the one before and himself gets to visit the one after. It certainly sounds like nonsense, but apparently your great-great-grandad took it very seriously. It's an interesting story, but I don't want you getting nightmares about it.'

Four spaces above John, with dates from 1843 to 1925, was the last John with a red dot. They had a faded picture of him – brown and white rather than black and white. He had the family nose, but not the ears.

John wasn't sure if he was keen on the idea of him visiting but at least he would recognise him if he did.

It was a few months later, on the night after his birthday, that John woke up to see a tall man with the family nose. He was lifting himself out of a circular square that hovered in mid air in front of the door.

'Good day, or rather good night, I suppose,' said the man. 'I take it you've been expecting me, as you haven't run off in fright. I was quite terrified when my predecessor visited, as my parents had decided not to worry me with the story. That's why I insisted on putting the red dots on the family tree – to awaken a little curiosity in the next unfortunate victim of the curse.'

'Why is it a curse?' asked John, putting aside other questions that were on his mind, as they seemed rather rude.

'I am about to find out,' replied his great-great-grandfather. 'Let us get on with it. I had better inform you of the origins of our peculiar destiny. Back in 1352, our ancestor Brother John was a monk at the abbey of St Acca. He spent much of his time copying manuscripts of stories from classical Greece and Rome and he had

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great admiration for the wisdom and poetry of the ancients. But he was shocked and sometimes ashamed when he had to copy stories of deeds and customs that would have been considered terribly cruel and sinful in his own day. Famous men who had been praised for their justice threw Christians to the lions. Slaves who were witnesses to crimes were tortured to make sure their evidence was true. Brother John was astonished that people who could build such great cities and whose times had been far more civilised than his own could happily agree on such monstrous practices.'

'But then a thought struck him: would the scholars of the future look back on his own time with the same horror he had at the cruelties of the Roman age? If so, what were the things that were accepted now – even by the good and great – but that would be condemned by future generations as being wicked?'

'This disquiet so occupied his thoughts that he could not settle to his regular work. He retreated to a solitary cell of the monastery, and prayed and meditated on the question until he had a vision. In the vision, he visited one of his descendants. That alone surprised him since, as a monk, he had never expected to have a family. After his vision, he wrote a tract condemning some of the violent customs of the day and then, whether to escape punishment from the authorities or to start the family implied by his vision, he left the abbey.'

'Since then, every hundred years or so, each of us has received a visit from the past, and made his own excursion into the future.'

John heard how these ancestors had been affected by seeing themselves through the eyes of the future, and the wrongs that they tried to stop when they returned to their own time. Not that they were persuaded by everything they heard: sometimes, when they visited to the future, things their descendants were doing appalled them, and they remained convinced that some ways of living had been better in their own day.

Then the old man quizzed John on how ideas of right and wrong and the way people behaved to one another had changed in the last hundred years. John could see that some things made his great-great-grandfather ashamed, some things made him disgusted and some things made him ashamed that he was disgusted.

When they had finished, the old man rose and thanked him. 'You have given me a great deal to think about, young man,' he said. 'And now it's your turn. Do make sure you climb into it from underneath, or you shall be going the wrong way.'

And with that, he heaved himself up onto the circular square again, and lowered himself through it into the past, waving as he went.

John crouched under the circular square and looked up, hesitating.

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