

Dr. Watson, his History before Holmes.

Let me first state the *known facts*. Dr. Watson's age is never mentioned in the Canon of Conan Doyle's cases of Sherlock Holmes, and his age can only be speculated upon by indirect reference. Second, his name is John, with a middle initial of 'H', that being stated, there is a very strong probability that he had specifically two given names. In contrast, Sherlock Holmes's birthday can be set with reasonable accuracy to 6th January 1854 from the Canon, as to his name, he is never called anything other than Holmes, or Sherlock Holmes, testifying that any assertion otherwise is fiction on the part of the chronicler (Baring-Gould asserts his name to be William [or Thomas] Sherlock Scott Holmes). Regarding his age, he is 60 at the end of 1903.

Watson's birthday is generally accepted to be the 7th July, by both Kimball and Baring-Gould. This being dubiously gleaned from the "Sign of the Four" when he had Beaune with his lunch. A fanciful deduction based on being able to accurately set the date of the "Sign of the Four". Baring-Gould accepts his birthday as being 7th July, but sets the date of the Beaune celebratory drink as being 18th of September, he offers no explanation for Watson's birthday, nor to the setting of the date of the "Sign of the Four" save that the Canon states the month as September.

I have chosen to accept Watson's birthday as 7th July along with many other chroniclers, but not the reasoning

of having red wine at lunch, for I agree with Baring-Gould in setting the date of the “Sign of the Four” to be in September.

As to Watson’s birth year, we must reason backwards from the date of the Battle of Maiwand and Watson’s account of his career. The battle was 27th of July 1880, and Watson’s facts given in a “Study in Scarlet” are these, with my speculation as to the month/year:

08/1878 He graduates as a doctor
08/1878 Goes to Netley Army Medical Training College
12/1878 Sails to India
02/1879 Attached to 5th Northumberland Fusiliers
03/1880 Attached to 66th Foot (Berkshires)
07/1880 Wounded
08/1880 Recuperates, catches Enteric Fever
11/1880 Shipped to England
12/1880 Lands at Portsmouth

It could be argued that Watson spent longer in Afghanistan, but I feel these dates are adequate. What cannot be changed is the rough date of August for his graduation in whatever year.

How long did Watson train to be a doctor? Obviously not as long as it does today. When I first created my chronology, it was common practice to obtain a tertiary degree before commencing a MBBS (medical doctor degree), so I have allowed 6 six years. He spent time in Australia (quote from the “Sign of the Four”: “I have seen something of the sort on the side of a hill near Ballarat, where the prospectors had been at work.”). I have

generously allowed Watson to enter University when aged 18 as was the practice despite his interrupted education (6 months's scholastic year difference) in Australia, and the disparity in academic levels between the two countries (personal experience).

Watson then tells how he graduated as a doctor, and then went to the Netley Military Training School. Watson implies he was not at Netley long... the school was established a few years after the Crimean war to remedy deficiencies in the education of the medical graduates selected by competitive examination for service in the Army, so I imagine he took a 'bridging' course of a few months. The Army would not have observed the usual summer break of universities, so immediately after his cessation of studies at the University of London he would have commenced training at Netley, so he was there for nearly 6 months.

The remainder of Watson's life between receiving his MBBS and meeting Holmes is as Watson describes in "Study in Scarlet". Note, Watson recalls he returned to England from India on the troopship Orontes landing at Portsmouth 26th November 1880, the Orontes really was a troopship, but its voyages do not include the one that brought Watson back to England.

With regard to Watson's Army pension of £0/11/6 per day or £210 per annum amounts to approximately the full pay of an Army surgeon in 1881, but one must remember that Watson was cashiered from the Army, he did not receive 100% board and lodgings from the Army, these now came from his pension. As for the duration of his pension,

he states “with my health irretrievably ruined, but with permission from a paternal government to spend the next nine months in attempting to improve it”, we learn that his pension was not a life-long source of funds, but would expire at the end of August 1881.

We know that Watson had been in Australia, quote from the “Sign of the Four” where Watson is surveying the diggings at Sholto's grounds: “I have seen something of the sort on the side of a hill near Ballarat, where the prospectors had been at work.” Note the words “I have seen”. In the “Boscombe Valley Mystery”, Watson exhibits that he has a knowledge of the Colony of Victoria in Australia, but not of how he gained such knowledge, or having any personal connection. In the “Colonial Conspiracy” I use Watson's background in Australia, but this reference cannot be used in this commentary.

Watson’s life before University, establishes that he was probably born in 1854, if he entered University at age 18 and spent 6 years getting tertiary education. I decided that Watson must have spent most the years of his secondary education in England in order for him to gain admittance to University at age 18, and so his time in Australia was prior to his age to enter secondary education. Watson’s father was a railway engineer, and was lured in 1861 to Australia to build the railway from Melbourne to Ballarat for the Gold Rush. The family lived in South Melbourne, but his father was often on the track being built. Watson and brother Hamish attended Melbourne Grammar School.

In 1864 Watson's father was killed in an accident on the railway, mother Rose and young John returned to England with a handsome death benefit from the railway company, brother Hamish elected to stay in Australia (aged 18), he was somewhat of a larrikin. Back in England Rose and John live with Rose's sister Marigold in Baughurst, Hampshire. John boarded at Wellington College in Berkshire (Baring-Gould wrongly places the college in Hampshire). Within less than a year Rose, John, and Marigold moved to Yateley and Watson became a day-boy at Wellington, a 45 minute walk each way.

It is thus that I place both Holmes and Watson to be both born in 1854, with Watson being exactly 6 months younger than Holmes, contrary to almost every film and television portrayal of Watson as being noticeably older than Holmes. One thinks of Nigel Bruce's portrayal of Watson against Basil Rathbone's Holmes. Certainly Watson was no '*bufus britanicus*' as Bruce portrayed, he was after all a medical doctor and a seasoned army surgeon.

There those who postulate Watson's birth year as 1852, but I find this to be 2 years more than required, thus for personal reasons, and my decision that Holmes and Watson were of similar ages, I have decided that Watson's birth was 7th July 1854, 1854 being 100 years before my own birth.

07/1854 Born
xx/1861 Age 7 Move to Australia
xx/1865 Age 11 Return to England

09/1872 Age 18 Enters University of London
09/1875 Age 21 Starts MBBS
07/1878 Goes to Netley Army Medical Training College
08/1878 Age 24 He graduates as a doctor
12/1878 Sails to India
02/1879 Attached to 5th Northumberland Fusiliers
03/1880 Attached to 66th Foot (Berkshires)
07/1880 Wounded at Maiwand
08/1880 Recuperates, catches Enteric Fever
11/1880 Shipped to England
11/1880 Lands at Portsmouth
12/1880 Gravitates to London
01/1881 Meets Holmes.

Regarding Watson's middle name, all we know from the Canon is the initial 'H'. I have followed many chroniclers who have thought that there was some Scots blood in the make up of Watson, although there is little or no evidence for this, indeed there is more fantasy than fact in this theory. Yet my hypothesis that Watson was born near the Scots border fits very well. I needed to explain why Watson was in Australia, why his brother stayed there, why Watson and his mother returned to England. By making Watson's father a Northumbrian railway engineer I explain why the family went to Australia: the Ballarat Gold Rush was 1851 to the late 1860s, the railway station in Ballarat opened in 1862. The Watson family were in the colony of Victoria 1861 to 1865. Watson's father was James Andrew Watson, known as Hamish, he gave his first son the names Hamish Isambard, no doubt naming the boy after himself and after the great engineer Brunell, and named his second son John Hamish.

Many believe a quotation from the “Man with the Twisted Lip” is a reference to Mary Watson calling her husband by a pet-name of James that refers to his name being Hamish, the Scots form of James. I find this highly improbable. The full quotation reads:

“It was very sweet of you to come. Now, you must have some wine and water, and sit here comfortably and tell us all about it. Or should you rather that I sent James off to bed?”

A more likely interpretation is that James is the name of servant whose services that night were no longer required.

Watson’s family

father James Andrew Watson (1812-1865)
mother Rose Mary Innes (1818-1880)
aunt Marigold Innes (died 1873)
brother Hamish Isambard Watson (1846-1888)
self John Hamish Watson (1854-1939)

When Holmes and Watson meet 30th January 1881, Watson writes in a “Study in Scarlet”:

“I had nether kith nor kin in England, and was therefore as free as air – or as free as in an income of eleven shillings and sixpence a day will permit a man to be”

I have chosen to set Watson's birthplace as Riding Mill, a small village in Northumberland, being 3 miles south-east of the old Roman Fort of Corstopitum, the northern-most significant Roman settlement in England (Corbridge on Hadrian's Wall) and 15 miles west of Newcastle-on-Tyne.