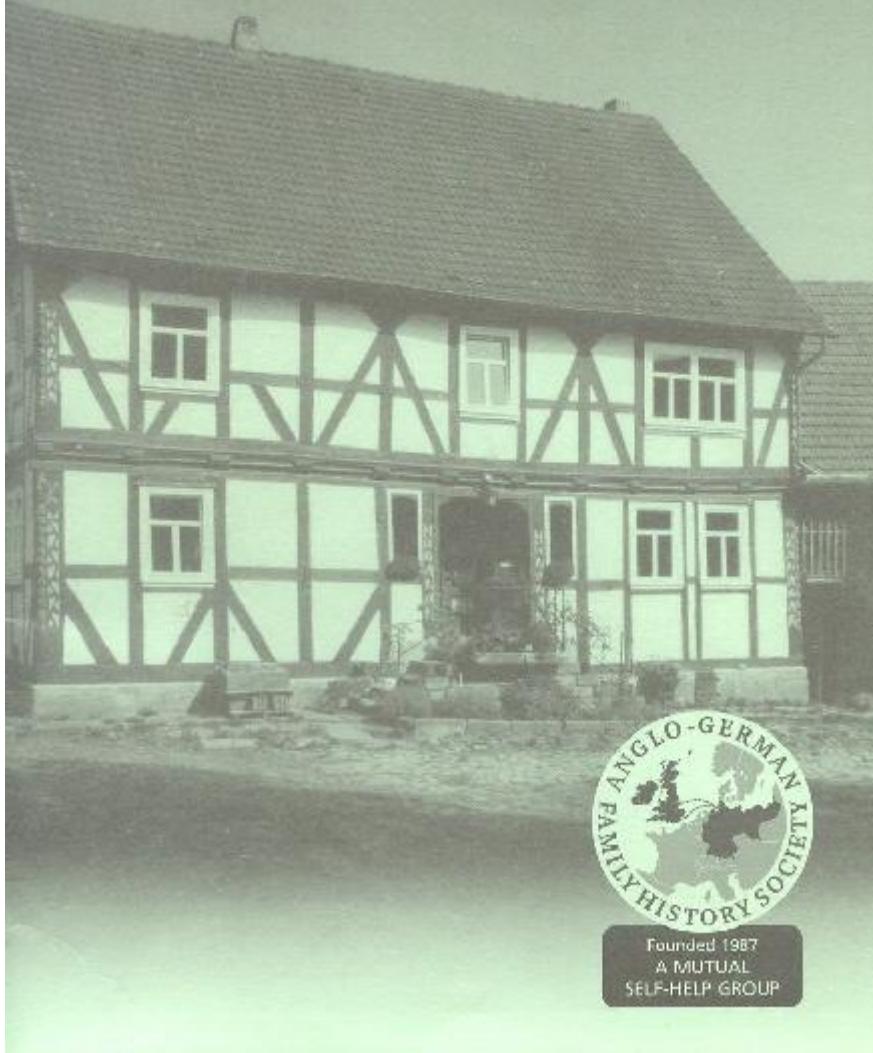


# Mitteilungsblatt 76

June 2006 issue seventy-six

Members £2.00 £3.50



Von John Ritter wurde im [Mitteilungsblatt 76](#) (Juni 2006) eine Story über seine Beziehung zu Altenstädt sowie seine Recherchen veröffentlicht. Das Mitteilungsblatt wird von der "Anglo-German Family History Society" herausgegeben. Diese Gesellschaft hat John auch geholfen, seine Wurzeln in Altenstädt zu finden. John, vielen Dank für die nette Story!

## AUGUST RITTER

### (Baker of Altenstaedt)

My name is John Augustus Christian Ritter, born in Kingston-upon-Thames, Surrey and my father is John Albert George Ritter, born in the East End of London. For the last 3-4 years I have been researching my family history with the help of the AGFHS and I am pleased to say, that I

have had great success.

For most of my life, I had been aware that my surname Ritter had originated in Germany and my father was aware of this, but amazingly not one of our family had ever bothered to research it. When I used to ask my father about my unusual Christian names (John Augustus Christian) his answer was simply to say "I named you after my father", whose name was Augustus Christian, known to his friends as 'Gus' Ritter.

A friend at my local tennis club, who has been researching his own family roots for years, encouraged me to start my search. He took me to the Public Records Office at Kew to look for my grandfather's birth, which we quickly found (1881). I then sent for the birth certificate (the first of several marriage and death certificates I sent for to verify dates) and was amazed to find that the birth certificate registered him as August Christian Ritter (not Augustus). His father was August Ritter (occupation Baker) and his mother was Elizabeth Ritter (formerly Reinhardt). The address on the birth certificate was 146

White Horse Street, Stepney, Limehouse, London and what a stroke of luck that in 1881 there was a census. Our local family history library in Kingston-upon-Thames held these records. My partner, Jill, visited this history library with great results. The census gave August Ritter as the head of the family, aged 32, birth place Germany. I was stunned by this discovery and by having discovered it so quickly. My father also found it hard to believe, as his grandfather had died 20 years before he was born and was never talked about or referred to.

Having joined the AGFHS I then enlisted their help to see if my great grandfather's name appeared on any of their lists. Len Metzner sent me a church list from St. George's Lutheran church, Alie Street, London, showing baptism/birth registers. Here I found my great grandfather's name listed 7 times (7 children) and he was registered as a Baker of Altenstedt and Altenstadt, as the entries had been spelt differently. I could not believe that we had not only found out that my great grandfather was born in Germany, but had now found the town/village of his birth. We looked on a map of Germany to discover that there were many small towns/villages with one or other of these names. We wondered what to do next as we had no idea which region of Germany he was born in. We then set about writing to the relevant Church records offices relating to all these towns (about 15). We wrote the letters in German, with the help of Jill (my partner) who had studied German in the past. Replies from Germany started to arrive after a couple of months. Some replies were beautifully handwritten by the local priest or vicar. After about 6 months of unsuccessful replies, we had one still outstanding from a town in Hessen, near Kassel, which was called Altenstaedt (that is, Altenstadt with an umlaut over the second 'a', (Altenstädt) thus changing the pronunciation). We felt this could explain the discrepancy over the spelling of the town on the Lutheran church list. We were holding our breath for the reply from this region and it eventually came from the evangelical church records at Wolfhagen – a short note saying that my great grandfather had been born in Altenstaedt, near Wolfhagen, but in order to carry out further research, a fee of 50 Euros would be required for 2 hours research. We sent this immediately and the reply took 2-3 months. When it arrived, it had been written out in wonderful detail, listing my great grandfather as being one of 10 children born to Johann Jost and Maria Ritter at house number 55 Altenstaedt in 1848. Some of the information went back as far as 1775, to my great-great grandfather. On the list of children, we noticed that my great grandfather had 3 brothers and even though my great grandfather came to London (we think in about 1870), his brothers could have remained in the village and we realised that their descendants could still be living there today.

It was around about this time, while browsing through an edition of *Mitteilungsblatt*, that I noticed a website which listed a German telephone directory. On looking at this website, we found the village of Altenstaedt and found the telephone numbers and addresses of about 15 families with the name of Ritter living there. We decided to write to each of them, again in German with Jill's help, and also sent them copies of the Wolfhagen records, asking each one of them if perhaps we could be related. In these letters, I included my telephone number, address and e-mail address. Within 3 days I

received an e-mail in English from a Bernd Ritter of Altenstaedt, who described himself as the 'Ortsvorsteher' of Altenstaedt (village representative), saying he thought that he was probably not related to me, but that he was very interested in the story and suggested that we looked at the Altenstaedt website, which he himself had set up. He asked me to submit an entry in the website 'Guest Book' section to explain who I was and the reason for my interest in this small village. The website contained wonderful pictures of Altenstaedt, including the church where August Ritter was christened, and showed various parts of this very attractive place. The next e-mail from Bernd Ritter said that most of the Ritter families in the village were talking about the letter they had received from John Ritter of London!! which they all found very amusing and he went on to say that he was going to appoint a local 'hobby' historian, Mario Arend, to look into this Ritter history in more detail. I suggested to Bernd Ritter that my family and I should visit Altenstaedt as soon as possible as we were all very excited by these events. Bernd agreed and said he hoped we would be able to visit the village during August (2003) as the village held a baking festival (Backhausfest) at this time. In the e-mails that followed, Bernd mentioned that after our arrival in Altenstaedt, he would organise a 'Ritter' meeting in the local village hall so that Mario Arend could present his 'Ritter' history and we could meet with other Ritters, including some possible relatives.

Before going to Altenstaedt, we were contacted, via Bernd, by the local newspaper, the Wolfhager Allgemeine, who liked the story and printed a small article about it. The article included the fact that John Ritter and his family would be travelling from London to Altenstaedt for the Backhausfest and that all 'Ritters' were invited to a meeting in the village hall (the date and time were given). We began to plan our journey. Bernd Ritter arranged our accommodation in the village guesthouse, the Heinrich-Schroeder Haus, which belongs to the church right next to it. In the meantime, Mario Arend, the historian, e-mailed me to let me know that he had been uncovering some very interesting information about the Ritters of Altenstaedt and he had discovered that one of my great grandfather's brothers, Heinrich Justus Ritter, had named my great grandfather as godfather to 2 of his children and he referred to him as August Ritter, Baker of London. Mario had also put together 500 years of Ritter history, including the murder of a Thaïs Ritter by a neighbour following an argument. At this point Mario asked me to send him all the Ritter history I had gathered in England so he could put together a presentation at the Ritter evening.

The month of August soon arrived and we were really excited about our trip. My father, John, who was 81 years old at the time, my sister Gloria, Jill and I flew from Gatwick to Hannover and then had to drive 2-3 hours to Altenstaedt. Bernd asked us to go straight to his home where he welcomed us with a barbecue after showing us round the guesthouse. We all immediately felt at home in the company of Bernd and his family and it seemed as though we had known each other for a long time. Bernd speaks English which made it easy for us. After a lovely evening, we returned to our guesthouse for a good night's sleep and were woken early the next morning to the sound of the church bells, adjacent to us. On this first morning, Bernd arrived after breakfast to show us

round the village. Whilst giving us an outline of the history of the buildings, he took us to a house named 'Haus Gaertenbach' which he said Mario had confirmed was the house where my great grandfather was born (house number 55). House numbers and street names however have obviously changed since 1848. For the next day or so, Bernd showed us some of the local area, including Fritzlar and Edersee. He had arranged the 'Ritter Evening' for the Friday. Mario had already introduced himself to us prior to this, in the village. When the evening arrived, we were first interviewed outside the guesthouse by the Wolfhager Allgemeine newspaper who took a photograph of my father and I. These 2 reporters attended the Ritter evening and subsequently another article about the London Ritters appeared in their newspaper together with this photograph, and a group photograph of all the Ritters who had attended that evening. About 80-100 people, mostly Ritters, had assembled in the village hall and we were the "special guests". My nephew also came for this meeting from Austria, where he lives, and Ritters had come from the surrounding area. Food and drink were provided and everyone had a seat at the tables. After we were introduced as the "Ritters from London", Mario conducted his powerpoint presentation in German. This took about an hour and at the end, we mingled with those present to communicate as best we could with the help of Jill and of course Bernd Ritter. Some of the Ritters had brought photos to the evening which were laid out on a table. Some of these photos included 2 of the brothers of my great grandfather. Mario had put together an enormous family tree, starting with Thaïs Ritter which demonstrated how all the Ritters in the village were somehow related, even though in a distant way. My section of the family tree included some Ritters who were at the meeting. We shook hands with Heinrich Ritter, who owns the local Pub, who said he was one of my nearest relatives. Mario then presented me with this family tree which was 15 ft. long, together with the CD Rom of the Ritter history he had uncovered. It therefore transpires that I am related to Erich Ritter (Heinrich's brother) and Hildegard and Bärbel (Heinrich's sisters) who were present that evening. Our great grandfathers were brothers (August and Heinrich Justus). We also met Ralf Ritter, Heinrich's son. The Saturday and Sunday were taken up with the Backhausfest in the village square, which was well attended and Bernd had organised a Ritter table where all Ritters could sit. This event was featured on the local television (for Hessen) on the Sunday. The rest of our stay was spent exploring the local area, including the nearby town of Kassel. It was all very sad for us when the end of the week came and we had to say our goodbye's and return to London.

During the following months, we kept in touch with friends and relatives by e-mail and also exchanged Christmas cards. We have now returned from our 2nd trip to Altenstaedt (August 2004) again to visit the Backhausfest, and this trip was just as enjoyable and as busy as last year. We were all very pleased to see each other again and were once more made to feel very special. Altenstaedt has now become very much a part of our lives and we hope to return each year to see our relatives and friends. As Mario pointed out to me, if one goes back far enough, all the Ritters of Altenstaedt are

related in some way, including Bernd Ritter, who was my very first contact with the village, without whose wonderful efforts none of this may have been possible. There is also a special celebration being planned for September 2006 to celebrate 1175 years of the village of Altenstaedt, which we are determined to go to.

There are a couple of interesting points to add to this story, one being that my father fought against Germany in the second world war and for the last year of the war, was captured and held prisoner just outside Munich, not knowing that his own grandfather was German. The other is that my partner, Jill, spent some time in Kassel (long before we met) as a young adult learning German and living with a German family who she has kept in touch with ever since. Members of that family, as children, had evacuated to Altenstaedt during the 2nd world war for a period of time to escape from Kassel, which was the target of a devastating bomb attack after they had left. During both our visits therefore we had the opportunity of meeting up again with these friends and they showed us the house in Altenstaedt where they had lived at that time.

I would like to finish by saying a special thank you to Bernd Ritter and Mario Arend for their wonderful work. Mario found out so much more than we could ever have hoped for. Thank you also to the AGFHS for supplying me with some very important information to make all this possible. Our wish now is to be able to come across a photograph of August Ritter, Baker of Altenstaedt, as to date, despite every effort on all sides, no photos of him have been found.

This story is still on-going and I hope it will encourage other members of the Society to continue with their searches as success could be just around the corner.

JOHN AUGUSTUS CHRISTIAN RITTER

Member No. 2968