

The family behind television's Heir Hunters

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By James McCarthy, Wales On Sunday

A FAMILY firm of globe-trotting sleuths has revealed the secrets that have united thousands of lost heirs with tens of millions of pounds.

Celtic Research has spent 40 years investigating cases in the USA, Canada, Latin America, Australia, South Africa, Europe and the former Soviet countries.

Using a global network of special agents, the business – which has found fame on BBC1's Heir Hunters – tracks down families of the dead so it can pass on fortunes.

If they don't find them the estates go to the taxman.

Former investment banker Hector Birchwood owns the Machynlleth company with dad, Peter.

Hector recalled tracing the family of Ukrainian PoW Mychailo Ivanovich Oszczypok, who left behind a £700,000 estate.

During the war, Mr Oszczypok was made a minister by his Nazi captors after showing a knack for the German lingo, but fled after the fascists were driven out of the country.



Hector Birchwood of Celtic Research

Hector said: "He would have ended up in the Gulag. He cut family ties completely and fled westward."

He moved to Chiswick, London, where he got a job as a John Lewis manager.

The firm unearthed his past after they found a bin bag full of documents at his home.

Hector said: "He still had an elderly sister residing in the mountain village he was originally from. It was totally inaccessible. The last leg, our agent needed a mule to get there."

Fifteen years ago the company was called to find the family of Stanley Williams. The retired road worker died alone in Dinas Mawddwy, near Dolgellau.

Peter, 65, said: "No-one knew anything at all about his family in the village. It turned out he had been the child of a couple from London."

His family moved to Wales after the First World War.

"No-one ever knew why but the family had to move back to London. They left Stanley with a family by the name of Williams.

"It was a very sad case. He was very young. We eventually found some letters from Mrs Williams to the family in London which said Stanley was crying for his mum. But the family, once they were settled back in London, had several more children, five or six."

Peter found the siblings.

He said: "They came back to Wales to look at the property and to go through things to see if there had been any family pictures but there had not been.

"They did not know that they had an older brother. They were astonished – except for one of the sisters who had looked after their mother towards her end.

"The mother had told the daughter the story and requested she did not tell any other of the children. So she was the only one that knew."

Another time they had to find a woman whose uncle in Chicago had left her \$400,000.

Peter said: "After quite a bit of research to find her we found that she was entitled to a property in Ireland as well because her uncle had still kept the title to the family home and now it was hers.

"She had had a hard life and had been unwell. I think her father was in his 80s and in the hospital.

"She really wanted to move out of where she was living and once she had received the estates she was able to buy a lovely home near Leeds where she is to this day. She has started up a little business which is doing very well."

Christel Waldtrout died in 2006 leaving behind property totalling £220,000.

She had two illegitimate daughters born in a German convent.

Finding them proved difficult because the heir hunters did not know Christel's maiden name.

They found out it was Brozio after examining Cunard Line records – where she had worked.

Hector said: "They never knew their mother and part of our job was to find out about this mysterious person to give them a fuller picture of their mother."

She had come to Britain after the war, married and divorced. She was using the name Tolhurst but it was only a name she had adopted from a lover. This made it even trickier to establish her actual name.

Hector loves complex cases – and keeping the cash from treasury coffers.

He said: "It is like a maths problem. There are no right or wrong ways to get to an answer. Just so long as you get to the answer."

<http://www.walesonline.co.uk/news/wales-news/2010/12/26/the-family-behind-television-s-heir-hunters-91466-27885810/>