

Charles Renton

Officer, Soldier, Merchant

(1883-1917)



Renton Family ~ 1910



There are surviving photographs of Harry's mother, 5 sisters and 3 brothers, but none of Harry presently. This may be because he spent so much time in South Africa after the Boer War. Harry's sister Ella was the author's great-grandmother. Much is known of beloved Charlie, killed at Ennemain in 1917, whose remarkable letters are in the Imperial War Museum collection today - he is the subject of another biography. The originals were bequeathed to the author by Aunt Judith Pavne and cousin Mike Renton.

Charles Renton – early years

Born May 1883 to Thomas and Maria Renton, a prosperous middle class family, by 1901 at the age of 8, Charles attended Leipsic Road School for boys, in Southwark, London (opened in 1877) now known as Comber Grove School (shown right). There is a complete roll call of boys that attended school with him on my family tree at Ancestry – a snapshot is shown below.



Note that his home address is given as 6 Brunswick Villas in Camberwell, London so he was not boarding. His home is still standing as shown by Google Streetview below:

London, England, School Admissions and Discharges, 1840-1911 for Charles Renton									
Southwark > Comber Grove School > Admission and Discharge Register for Boys									
2915	"	"	"	Wilmot Horie	46 Harvey Road			12	83
2917	"	"	"	Brown Thomas	36 Becket St			8	83
2918	"	"	"	Collins Harold	1 Manzia H. Square			8	83
2919	"	"	"	Driver William	15 Blucher Road			9	81
2920	"	"	"	Griffiths Walter	46 Hollington St			7	83
1	"	"	"	Green George	30 Westhall Rd.			5	83
2	"	"	"	Gurnet Henry	1 Mayhew's Blp.			7	83
3	"	"	"	Guyor Garnet	2 Cleveland St.			7	83
4	"	"	"	Hillier Alfred	3 Elfin Road			12	82
5	"	"	"	Hollands William	5 The Retreat			11	82
6	"	"	"	Kempster Charles	10 Ebenezer Place			9	83
7	"	"	"	Logan Percy	5 Clarendon Place			9	83
8	"	"	"	Pegg Edward	60 Leipsic Road			4	83
9	"	"	"	Renton Charles	6 Brunswick Villas			5	83





Army

Charles enlisted in the army on 23rd August, 1914 shortly after the outbreak of war, joining the Queen's Westminster Rifles in London. He received his commission as 2nd Lt. a year later and posted to 1st Battalion (48th Foot) in the Northamptonshire regiment. For the next year, he was a physical drill officer (like cousin George Hawthorn at about the same time). A year later in Sept 1916, he was sent to the front line in France. There are many surviving letters from this time (see below). As will become clear from surviving letters, he was clearly admired greatly by his men and by his senior officers.

In a remarkable symmetry with cousin Rollo Atkinson, Charles came home on leave in January 1917, only to return and be killed two months later at Ennemain. (Rollo came home in Jan 1916, and was killed a month later.) The Armistice medal awarded to Charles' posthumously is in the possession of Pamela Aisbitt (Feb 2019). This was probably given to my grandmother Doreen by her mother Ella because of the special relationship she shared with Charles, as evidenced by their beautiful letters below. All of the sisters mourned Charles for many years, wearing black roses as seen in one of Ella's photos.

Character

As a statement of character (strong parallels with cousin Rollo Atkinson), his Colonel referred to Charles as "a splendid officer, one of the best sub(altern)s in the battalion, and I cannot tell you how we all miss him." Many of the letters in the wake of his death attest to his remarkable spirit and charisma. From limited surviving articles, it was clear that Charles was well liked by all. In a 2010 email, aunt Judith states that Charles was my grandmother Doreen's favourite uncle. That is consistent with the letters they exchanged when Charles was in the trenches (see below). In about 1972, I remember my grandmother breaking down (while ironing) at Otford, Kent explaining the dread that they all felt when seeing Charles off at the railway station.

In the 1970s, sixty years after Charles' death, he was remembered by Mrs Elmer (nee Winter) at Brussel's Green, Suffolk as a man full of charm (2017 email). She knew him from the time the Rentons used to stay at the tiny hamlet of Hinton, Suffolk in the pre-war years. I have photos of my mother, aunt Judith, grandmother and great-

grandmother Ella Renton dating to the early to mid 1930s. Hinton is inland from Darsham and Dunwich where Judith and Denis lived out their marriage years after retiring from Bury St Edmunds.

From judith payne★

Subject Re: Frank Renton's family tree jpg.jpg

To Joss Hawthorn★

22/03/2017, 5:56

Reply Reply All Forward Archive Junk Delete Mor

No, I don't think I had heard of him until you spoke of him. Charles, apparently, was full of charm and Mrs Elmer, who lived at the farm at the end of Brussels green and was a Winter before her marriage so knew him from the family's visits to Hinton, used to get my generation muddled and say "wasn't he a lovely man"!

Sent from my iPhone

Death notice and medals

4-1919 for Charles Renton

The Royal Engineers (1st.), only s. of David Renton, of Hanton Farm, Seething, by his wife, Grace, dau. of Samuel Henderson ; b. Stranraer, 16 Feb. 1888 ; educ. Stirling Public School ; was a Joiner ; joined the Royal Engineers 29 May, 1916 ; served with the Expeditionary Force in France and Flanders from 21 April, 1917, and died at No. 4 Canadian Casualty Clearing Station 7 June, 1918, from wounds received in action at Arras on the 4th. Buried in the Pernes British Cemetery. He m. at Dunoon, 18 March, 1914, Isabel Margaret (Dunoon), dau. of Robert Hay Angus, and had a dau., Isabel Angus, b. 25 March, 1915.

RENTON, CHARLES, 2nd Lieut., 1st Battn. (48th Foot) The Northamptonshire Regt. ; joined the Queen's Westminster Rifles in Aug. 1914, and received his commission in the Northamptonshire Regt. 23 Sept. 1915. He acted as Physical Drill Officer for some time, and went to France in Sept. 1916 ; came home on leave in Jan. 1917, and was killed in action 6 March at Barleux, near Peronne. Lieut. Renton was reported "missing" on 10 March, and after the British advance a grave was found with a cross with his name and description. He had been buried by the Germans, who had put up the cross. Lieut. Renton was unmarried, and a partner in the firm of T. Renton & Co., Printers and Stationers, in the City. His Colonel wrote : "He was a splendid officer, one of the best subs in the battalion, and I cannot tell you how we all miss him."



Campaign :—		1914		(A) Where decoration was earned.
				(B) Present situation.
Name	Corps	Rank	Reg. No.	Roll on which entered (if any)
(A) RENTON	2nd D.A.C. R.F.A.	2nd Lieut.	17904	MEDAL ROLL
(B) Charles	A.S.C.		M/38637	VICTORIAN ROLL
Action taken		Transfd A.S.C. 21-8-15.		
Stamp Roses 14 B/3288 d/20.3.28.		NW/9/4795		
QUALIFYING DATE.		23-8-14		
(G 34 46) W234—HP5590 500,000 4/19 HWV(P240) K608		[OVER]		



LORD ROBERTS'S MESSAGE.

25th Aug. 1914

I ask you to put your trust in God. He will watch over you and strengthen you. You will find in this little Book guidance when you are in health, comfort when you are in sickness, and strength when you are in adversity.—

Robert's

Charles Renton
April 1915.

Army colleagues

Below, I show some truly remarkable testimonials from some of the men who served with Charles. These include the Medical Officer Captain Lance Bourdillon (below), for whom there is a lot of material on the web including his WWI diaries at this informative blog: <https://lancebourdillon.wordpress.com/about/>. Born in South Africa in 1888, he was educated at Tonbridge and St. Thomas's Hospital, qualifying as a doctor in 1912. In the Balkan war he went to Turkey with the St. Thomas's Mission and at the outbreak of war in 1914 he joined the 1st Field Ambulance and went to France with the 1st Division, serving abroad right through the war. (I see so many parallels here with cousin Rollo Atkinson and his friendship in the trenches with Dr. Philip Noel-Baker, Medic).



Another name that crops up several times is the remarkable Neville Methven, big game hunter, and the leading officer of the South African Bailey's Sharpshooters who inflicted more than 3000 sniper deaths during WWI (Neville's own personal account exceeded 100). The unit suffered a one-third casualty rate and Neville was awarded the Military Cross for his exploits. Before being attached to the 1st Northamptonshire regiment, the Bailey's were at Arras, Passchendaele and the Somme, mostly attached to the 2nd King's Royal Rifle Corps. Charles seems to have overlapped with several high profile South Africans, which is interesting given that brother Harry fought in the Boer War and stayed in South Africa during WWI.

One of the letters is from Lt Col D.P. Tollemache (right) of the 7th Hussars, later a prisoner of war, and celebrated in the Imperial War Museum. Charles comments on Tollemache's arrival as CO in a 1916 letter, having replaced his former CO much liked by him.

Missing in action

Much like Rudyard Kipling's son Jack, Charles went missing in March 1917 and his fate was unknown for a few weeks. The letters from the trenches sent to England tell the story most eloquently.

The first letters from Bourdillon and Tollemache carry some hope for Charles's survival. The former notes that "I saw him a few hours before he went over and he was very cheery" and "he was an awfully good officer and a personal friend to many of us."

There were left flank (led by Charles) and right flank raiding parties approaching enemy trenches, and the right flank got held up. Charles went to investigate and failed to return.



Recd. 12/3/17.
141st Field Ambulance, B.E.F.
8th March 1917.

Dear Miss Renton,

You will have heard before you get this that your brother is reported missing and I thought I would write and tell you all I could about it. He was out with a raiding party and had passed through the German wire and reached the parapet of the trench he told the men with him to wait and turned to walk along the parapet, after that he was not seen again, there was a good deal of bombing and the party had to fall back.

There is, I think, quite a reasonable chance that he was wounded and captured. Under these circumstances it might be a month or 6 weeks before you heard of him. I saw him a few hours before he went over and he was very cheery. We are all very sorry indeed that he should be missing, he is an awfully good officer and a personal friend of many of us.

I was M.O. of the Battalion until a few weeks ago and went up to them for the night of the Raid. I am afraid the next month will be an anxious time for you. Would you be good enough to let me have a line if you get any news?

Yours very sincerely,

LANCÉLOT G. BOURDILLON,
Capt. R.A.M.C.

-6-

Recd. 12/3/17.
1st Northampton Regt.

Dear Mrs. Renton,

You will probably have heard from the War Office that your son is "missing". I will tell you what little I know. On the early morning of March 6th, we made a raid on the enemy's trenches; and your son was selected to lead one of the parties. One of the columns, with which was your son, reached the enemy's trench, the other was held up by his wire and by his resistance. Your son told his party to wait for him a moment, and went along to the right above the enemy's trench, presumably to see what had happened to the other column, which, as I said, had got hung up. From that point, your son was not seen and we cannot tell what became of him. Owing to the failure of the right party to get into the German trenches, the left had shortly to withdraw. There is certainly a hope that your son was taken prisoner, and so he may be safe.

I must tell you how greatly we all deplore his loss; he was a most capable and excellent officer and we can ill spare him. I consider him among the best subalterns in the battalion and we all miss him greatly. I send you my very sincere condolences and great hopes that he may turn out to be safe.

Yours sincerely,

D. P. TOLLEMACHE, Lt.Col.

Comdg. 1st Northamptonshire Regt

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The letter from sharpshooter Neville Methven (right) gives a different perspective on what took place and provides a delayed confirmation that Charles did not survive. It is interesting that one of the Renton sisters wrote to Neville directly.

"Charlie went right through on his raid but the men got frightened and Charlie's sense of duty made him carry on, and I regret to say very few men backed him up."

The Red Cross letter below states that Capt. Kerry found the grave behind the old German lines at Junction Trench. He states in a letter that Charles was buried by German soldiers (see below).

In the War Office letter below, it states that the first grave was eventually moved to its present location at Ennemain Cemetery, Somme region, north of Paris. Today, Charles is buried with three of his privates killed that night. There are 77 buried here, only half identified.

South African Sharpshooters,
Attached 1st Division.
20th March 1917.

Dear Miss Renton,

I've just returned to my dug-out and received your letter about Charlie.

I have been away from his Battalion for some time now and got news about his raid and went round to see him first thing next morning and got a horrible shock when I heard he was missing. I had a good look all around "No man's land" but saw no signs and was hoping for the best.

I called in at Headquarters this morning and am very sorry indeed to say that they have found a grave with his name on it, behind the old German line, so am grieved to say you have suffered a great loss. Charlie went right through on his raid, but the men got frightened and Charlie's sense of duty made him carry on, and I regret to say very few men backed him up.

I thought of writing you before but was hoping he was a prisoner and that you would hear from him and I did not like butting in.

I had a great deal of respect for Charlie and he was a most conscientious man and really I miss him very much. I can only express my deepest sympathy for you and yours in your great loss.

Yours sincerely,

N. METHVEN.

Telephone No.: REGENT 651.
Telegrams: "NATIONALLY, CHARLES."

BRITISH RED CROSS
—AND—
ORDER OF ST. JOHN.

ENQUIRY DEPARTMENT
FOR
WOUNDED AND MISSING,

18, Carlton House Terrace, S.W.

19th April, 1917.

2nd Lt. Charles Renton, 1st Northants

Dear Sir,

We have heard from 2nd Lt. E.E. Hurst, 1st Northants, in the Queen Alexandra Hospital for Officers, Millbank, who had a letter from a Capt. Kerry who apparently found your brother's grave. Capt. Kerry, in the letter, states that the Germans had buried your brother and put up a cross with his name and particulars. The trench is known as Junction Trench and the place is Barlieux. Mr. Hurst states that he knows the exact place and could locate it on a map.

We hope we may be able to trace the grave and are communicating with the Graves Registration Department.

Yours faithfully,

T. Renton Esq.,
6 Great Winchester Street
E.C.

THE DIRECTOR-GENERAL OF GRAVES REGISTRATION AND ENQUIRIES,

WAR OFFICE,

WINCHESTER HOUSE,

ST. JAMES'S SQUARE,

LONDON, S.W.1.

The number below should be
quoted on any further
communication on this subject.

WW/26/12163.

Telephone: REGENT 1123 & 1124.

Madam,

With reference to the information already sent to you regarding the place of burial of 2nd Lieutenant C. Renton, 8th attached 1st Battalion, Northamptonshire Regiment, I am to inform you that in accordance with the agreement with the French and Belgian Governments to remove all scattered graves and small cemeteries containing less than forty graves, also certain other cemeteries which were situated in places unsuitable for permanent retention, it has been found necessary to exhume the bodies buried in certain areas. The body of 2nd Lieutenant C. Renton has therefore been removed and re-buried in Ennemain Communal Cemetery Extension, South of Peronne.

I am to add that the necessity for the removal is much regretted, but was unavoidable for the reasons given above. You may rest assured that the work of re-burial has been carried out carefully and reverently, special arrangements having been made for the appropriate religious service to be held.

I am,

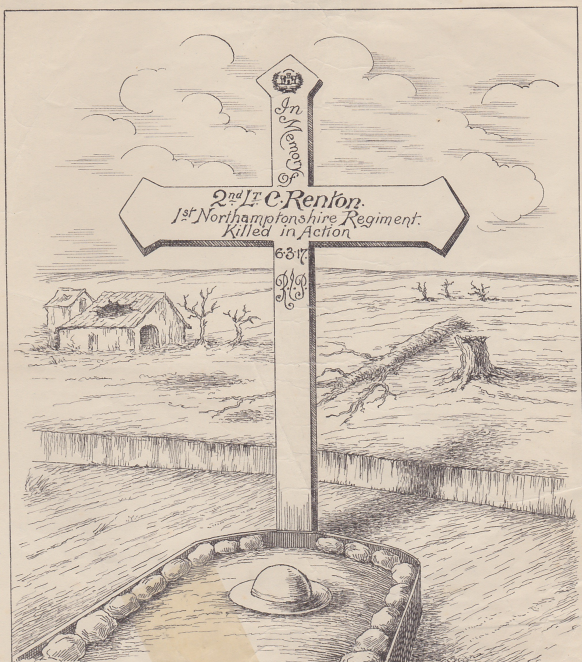
Madam,

Your obedient Servant,

Mrs. M. Renton,
"Trammere",
Boveney Road,
Forest Hill,
S.E.

Major, D.A.A.G.
for Major-General.
D.G.G.R. & E.

First resting place



Reproduced from a sketch by one of the men in his Regiment.

"Some corner of a foreign field
that is for ever England."

The number below should
be quoted on any further
communication on this subject.

W. W/26/12163.

The Director of Graves Registration and Enquiries,

WAR OFFICE,

Winchester House,

St. James's Square,

LONDON, S.W.1.

Dear Sir,

With reference to your letter of 5th instant, I beg to inform you that 2nd Lieutenant C. Renton is buried in an isolated grave about 200 yards from Villers Carbonnel-Barleux road. In the ordinary course the remains of Lieutenant Renton will be removed into the nearest cemetery, unless of course the cemetery near by is extended so as to include the grave, or if a new cemetery is made at the place where the grave is now situated. Should the removal become necessary, Mrs. Renton will be advised of her son's final resting place.

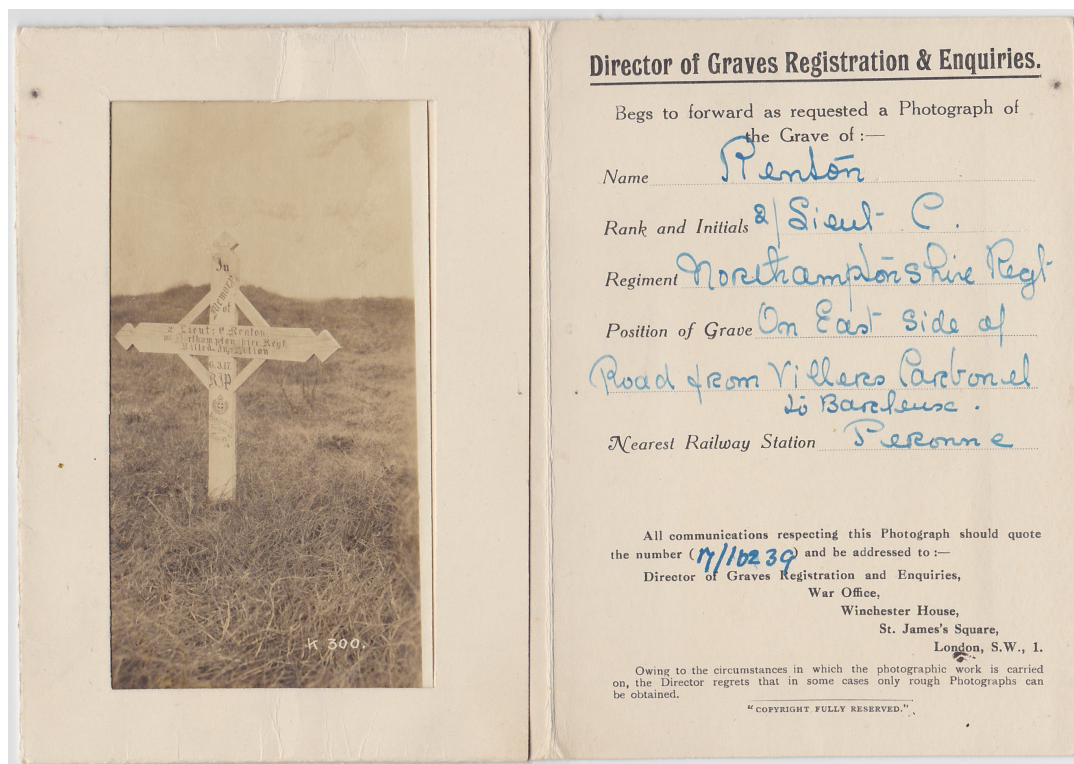
This removal and concentration of isolated graves was decided upon in order to provide for the proper care and upkeep in such a way as relatives would naturally expect; if they were left scattered about the country it would be practically impossible to look after them properly.

Yours faithfully,

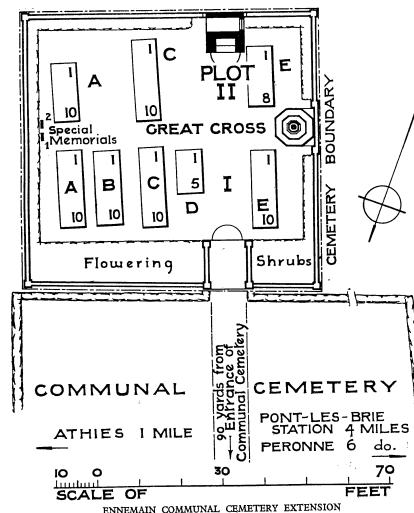
Forster

Major,
D.A.A.G.
for Major-General,
D.G.G.R. & E.

F. Renton Esq.,
6 Great Winchester Street,
E. C. 2.



Final resting place




Renton burials – found in 2022

Someone called Steve Johnson photographed the graves in Brockley and Ladywell Cemeteries, Lewisham, and uploaded photos to Findagrave. I messaged him but got no reply.

Even though Charles is listed as being buried in France, as above, there is a memorial stone to him there. It appears that at least two of his sisters (Lizzie, Jessie) are actually interred here.





Charles Renton


BIRTH	unknown
DEATH	6 Mar 1917
BURIAL	Brockley and Ladywell Cemeteries Lewisham, London Borough of Lewisham, Greater London, England Show Map
PLOT	Ladywell / E / 534
MEMORIAL ID	224849446 · View Source

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[MEMORIAL](#) [PHOTOS 1](#) [FLOWERS 1](#)

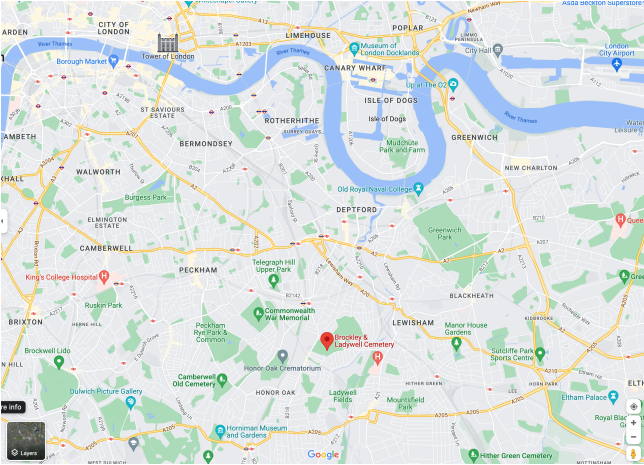
Killed in Action, France

[Flowers](#) [Plant Memorial](#)



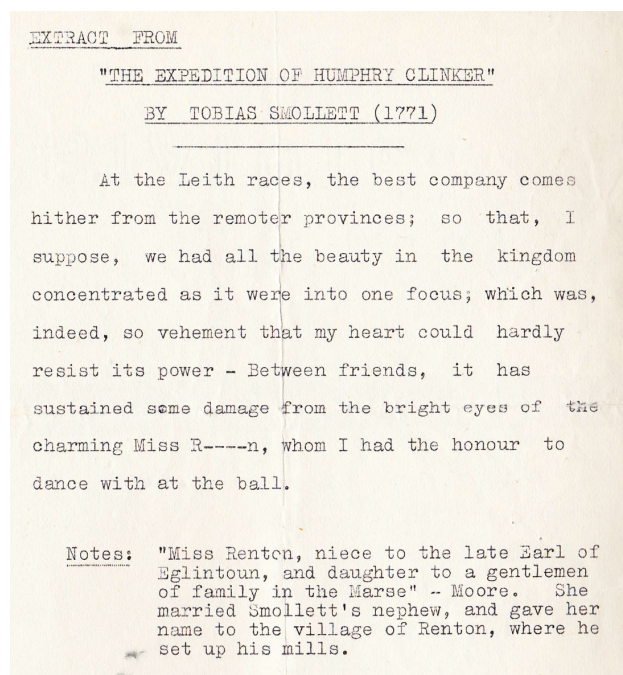
Left by [Steve Johnson](#) on 25 Mar 2021

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Renton name:

The family name is either from the 12th C. town in Berwickshire or from the Scottish village in Dumbarton south of Loch Lomond near Glasgow. As FindMap shows, most Rentons live near the Berwickshire location today. The letter below (from Mike Renton's father Neil) indicates the town was named in the 17th C. after a local personality maybe. The letter refers to the "Maerse", Old English for "border," as this area sits at the English-Scottish border, having once been part of Scotland, but absorbed by England in 1482.



According to this link:

<http://www.stravaiging.com/history/castle/renton-peel>
only Renton House and Farm, Coldingham, Berwicks (right on the A1) survive today. There are a number of historic Rentons with genealogies dating from this period who were from the area. It's difficult to see how the story from the above letter fits into this timeline if "Rentoun" is the historic naming in a map drawn in 1654 (above link).

