

Tracing the path to long lost parents

Ariel Bruce is unusual, even unique: she is a professional searcher and tracer, tracking down the parents of children who have been adopted or taken into care and who wish, as adults, to regain their roots. She also advises — and, when necessary, consoles — her clients during a process of family rediscovery that is "90 per cent happy, and 10 per cent just the reverse."

Bruce's experiences show that a widespread need exists for her special services, despite provision for such family reunions under the 1975 Children Act. It all began with an encounter three years ago with James, an odd job man of 18 who had wanted to find his mother since early childhood.

Since then she has enabled about 70 "children", some now in middle-age, to meet their "natural" or "birth parents", often for the first time since infancy.

"If the Act worked as it was meant to, I'd be superfluous", says Bruce, a 34-year-old qualified social worker from Weybridge in Surrey. "And if I could be employed within the statutory services to do an identical job I'd jump at it. It would mean the system was functioning properly."

It took James's experience to teach her that "many of the best intentions behind the 1975 Children Act have been thwarted. And that's where I came in."

Her first faltering steps in family tracing were undertaken with extreme reluctance. "James was doing jobs

The appliance of social science is being used to reunite parents with children — David Leitch finds it's big business

around the house and then, out of the blue, he said he was adopted. Would I help with the records so he could find his mum? I said no automatically — and I kept saying no."

She was able to learn from the Dickensian *metier*. "Wills are often invaluable indicators", she says, "though only among the middle-classes. The poor, for obvious reasons, usually die intestate."

Unlike James, most clients have been middle-aged and well educated. They include teachers, psychotherapists, a farmer, an insurance executive and social workers. And there are many more women than men.

The work is detailed and time-consuming. "One case took 18 months but, because I've developed an eye for the right nuance, I did one recently in 24 hours flat.

"People need someone sympathetic but cool, and matter-of-fact", she believes. "A lady said recently that I was the first person who made her feel a wish to find her birth mother after 30 years was entirely normal. After all, it is, isn't it?"

What happens if the story turns out to be a sad one, or

largely by word of mouth, though in time she advertised in a newspaper. From the start she found the research enthralling — "like solving a detective story". There was a fascinated initiation into the arcane world of genealogists. Bruce was astounded to discover, for example, a harassed band of specialists who devote themselves to winking out (for a fat percentage) vanished next-of-kin — the unknown beneficiaries from unclaimed estates.

the discovered parent wishes, for good reasons or not, to leave the past buried?

"Nine results in ten are excellent. But there can be cruel and hurtful rejections, and they are extraordinarily sad. But even when it doesn't work out I've never heard anyone say that they wished they hadn't done it."

"Most people come to terms with their family history once they learn about it. It's the unknown which is so disturbing, and won't let them alone."

"One person I worked for had the experience of everything falling to pieces a year after making contact. The prognosis probably wasn't good from the start. But I'm still there for the client, two years later, which makes all the difference."

Because she believes that she has no right to withhold information Bruce follows each project to its conclusion — even if she has doubts about the outcome.

"I tend to get a picture from the address, handwriting, a voice on the phone — you get a sixth sense", she stressed.

What happens if a client comes in a vindictive spirit? Polly Toynbee refers to such a case in her book *Lost Children* and in fiction, if not in fact,

'Cruel rejections can be terribly hurtful and sad'

the idea of a child coming back to reap vengeance on a parent who has deserted them is well-known. "It has never happened — the clients are always solicitous to a fault about their unknown parents," she insists.

The idea of people paying fees for a service which was meant to be available, if only in part, under the Children Act will not commend itself

to everyone. NORCAP (the National Organisation for the Counselling of Adoptees and their Parents) is a fast-growing, widely experienced self-help group, convinced that volunteers with first-hand experience are the best helpers. They lack the resources, however, to undertake traces themselves.

Phillida Sawbridge, director of the newly-established Post-Adoption Centre at 48 Mecklenburgh Square, London WC1, says: "As things stand, **Ariel Bruce** is very much fulfilling a need. Uncovering the past is very challenging. Imagine confronting a total stranger, perhaps in some sterile building or dreary office, who knows more about your past than you do yourself!"

She thinks that counselling is all the more important because the 1975 Act has only been implemented in part. "The well-known section 26 provision for one hour's com-

pulsory counselling was meant to be backed up by a full range of local authority adoption services. But because of the cost they simply do not exist. There are also many more searchers, I believe, than the Registrar-General's tiny percentage suggests."

Most of **Ariel Bruce**'s 70 successful searches will never be counted in the Registrar-General's statistics. They are the fruit of a freelance effort already well on the way to fulfilling a prophecy made by her tutor when she graduated from Kingston Poly.

"We believe that **Ariel Bruce** will make some innovative contribution to social work," the report said. "We also expect it will be outside the statutory social services."

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Ariel Bruce can be contacted at 38, Beechcroft Manor, Oaklands Drive, Weybridge, Surrey.

