

DOWN MEXICO WAY...

When Robin Bayley set out to follow in his great-grandfather's footsteps, little did he know he would uncover a dark family secret. Emily Gadd spoke to the Sheffield author, who reveals all in a new book.

Every child loves to hear stories of faraway lands, hidden treasures, bandits and bloody spillings – but in author Robin Bayley's case, the stories were all true.

As a young boy growing up in Nether Edge, Robin was spellbound by his grandma's stories of her father's adventures in Mexico 100 years ago.

Years later, Robin, who went to Hunter's Bar middle school and High Storra, set off on a parallel journey of his own, where he made a life-changing discovery.

Robin's book, *The Mango Orchard*, details his incredible journey into the heart of Latin America to retrace the footsteps of his great-grandfather, Arthur Greenhalgh – or 'Arturo', as he was also known.

In his twenties, Arthur left behind his girlfriend and his job in England to make money in the cotton mills of Central America. However, he later left Mexico abruptly, leaving behind everything he had amassed there – including a Mexican mistress and a daughter.

Once back in England, Arturo told vivid stories about his time in Mexico but took the secret of his double life to his grave.

Somehow, Robin sensed there was more to Arturo's story – a key detail left unspoken, a discovery yet to be made. Like his great-grandfather before him, he gave up his job and his girlfriend to make a similar journey, not knowing what – if anything – he'd find at the other end.

"Arturo left a lover and a daughter behind when he returned to England, but of course I didn't know that – nobody did," said Robin, now 43.

"He talked extensively and fondly about Mexico, but there was a poignancy to his stories, which I think stemmed from the fact that he had this profound secret. His





stories were tinged with sadness, which somehow communicated itself to me years later when my grandma repeated them to me. Was it genetics?

Instinct? Fate? I can't say – all I know is that I felt compelled to retrace his journey.

"On a practical level, Arturo had to leave Mexico at very short notice. What must it be like to pack 14 years of your life up in a matter of hours? I thought, 'You're bound to have left something behind'."

Initially Robin's grandma wasn't keen on Robin's plan, believing he shouldn't give up his successful career and flat on a whim. But when she realised how much it meant to him, she gave her blessing – on the proviso that Robin hurried up and wrote about his journey while she was alive to read it.

While Arturo had encountered wild jungle journeys, hidden bags of silver and a narrow escape from the Mexican Revolution – which it turned out he'd also had a hand in starting, hence his abrupt departure – Robin counts drug-dealers, witches and a near-death experience on horseback among his escapades. He concedes that "having a gun drawn on me" and "being covered in baby poo" were low points (thankfully they occurred separately) but he also had plenty of highs, including falling in love with a beautiful Guatemalan psychic.

As for his hunch that Arturo had left something behind, he wasn't wrong. From Arturo's mistress and daughter, an entire extended network had grown. Robin had a whole other family – all 300 of them.

"I managed to trace the village where Arturo worked, and told two locals that I was looking for evidence of my great-grandfather, Arturo Greenhalgh," Robin recalled. "They said: 'Greenhalgh? The entire village is called Greenhalgh! Then they asked me if I wanted to meet my relatives."

"As I followed them to a house around the corner, it was as if I was in a dream – everything was happening in slow-motion. Until that moment I'd been pushing, pushing, looking, searching; trying to track down something I didn't know existed; trying to work out the ending to my grandfather's story. And this was it."

"I knocked on the door and a man answered it. In very polite,



Robin and his grandmother visit Mexico.

formal Spanish I said: 'Buenas tardes. My name is Robin. I am from England. I believe you're my uncle'. He smiled and said: 'You'd better come in, then!'"

The next few days passed in a flurry of excitement as Robin met with relative after relative. Some of them believed he was Arturo reincarnated; others whispered: 'Is he really who he says he is?' A black and white picture of Arturo on horseback, dug out by Robin, verified it – the family had the same photograph.

"They welcomed me with open arms," said Robin, "But it meant accepting Arturo's abandonment of his lover and daughter. Similarly, when I broke the news to my grandma about our Mexican family, she had to come to terms with the fact that her father had been unfaithful to her mother."

At the age of 90, Robin's grandma travelled to Mexico for the first time to meet her family in a whirlwind of music, dancing, laughter and tears. The Mango Orchard was completed in 2009 and Robin first sent the manuscript to his grandma, who read it twice. She died the same year, just before her 103rd birthday, having been told that The Mango Orchard would be published internationally and dedicated to her.

The Mango Orchard is available in bookstores now, priced £12.99.



Arturo Greenhalgh