

100 TOP TIPS for researching your family history.

PEOPLE.

TALK whenever possible to older members of the family about their memories of growing up and the relations who have passed on. They can provide information that you can't obtain from many other sources. But remember that memories can deceive.

LET EVERYONE KNOW you are researching your family tree. Ask to borrow family papers and heirlooms from relations. Naturally they may be unwilling to loan precious items – offer to scan, photograph or photocopy them.

NAMES. It is always easier to research people with unusual surnames.

STARTING OUT.

START with yourself – write down when and where you were born and married and details about your children. Do the same for your parents, grandparents and great-grandparents until you can go no further.

TREE. Once you've exhausted the resources at home, draw up a simple family tree to record what information you have already discovered. It doesn't have to be perfect or comprehensive, but it's a start.

BEGIN researching one ancestor or side of the family. Ideally choose somebody who lived an interesting life or about whom you already know something.

BIRTH. Set about finding out, or confirming, the date of birth of your chosen ancestor. If you know an approximate date, find their name in the birth registers at the Family Records Centre or online. The website, www.ukbmd.org.uk, has links to sites offering transcriptions of UK BMDs and censuses. If they do not appear, move forwards and backwards five years through the indexes until you find them. Once you have a reference, you can order a certificate.

DIVIDE up your research into manageable chunks. In general, simply decide which question you wish to answer, then work out the records that you will need to solve the problem.

FACTS. Always work from known facts and move backwards. Never assume anything or make links without the appropriate evidence.

RECORDS sometimes don't survive or become increasingly difficult to use. However, with a bit of luck you should be able to trace several lines back 250 years.

DOCUMENTS.

SORT OUT family papers, photographs and heirlooms. Some might seem unimportant, but you never know what may provide a clue further down the line.

TAKE CARE of family heirlooms. Store them in a dry room well away from sunlight or water pipes.

PHOTOCOPY any documents you are going to refer to again and again, to prevent damage to the originals.

DOCUMENTS. Do not use sticky tape to repair torn documents (or cheap plastic folders to store them). Doing so will cause irreparable damage.



PHOTOGRAPHS. Label and date any photograph you take and try to do the same for older family shots you come across. This will make it easier for your descendants to identify the family.

PROBLEM SOLVING.

TRY SPELLING VARIATIONS. If the trail goes cold try all the spelling variations you can think of. They may have been misspelled or your ancestor may have adopted a different variant.

LARGE REGISTERS often have indexes to names and subjects at the beginning or end of the volume. Remember that entries may be by initial letter only, not in strict surname order. Don't give up at the first likely entry: your ancestor may appear further on.

OTHER SOURCES. If you are having trouble pinning down when an event took place, other sources could hold the answer. Try monumental inscriptions (MIs), cemetery records, family bibles, newspapers and service records.

ASSISTANCE.

JOIN a family history society for regular meetings and the chance to talk through your problems with fellow enthusiasts. Many publish newsletters and indexes to records not available elsewhere (www.genuki.org.uk or www.ffhs.org.uk).

SIGN UP for a family history class run by the local adult education centre or Workers Educational Association (WEA) branch.

THE SOCIETY OF GENEALOGISTS (SoG) holds the largest collection of parish registers and indexes. Its library also has a huge number of other resources to help family historians (www.sog.org.uk).

BUY *Family History Monthly* every month! The articles, and other features such as Q&A and Help, may provide the answer you are looking for.

TIMEWASTING. Some ancestors just don't want to be found. Don't waste your time fruitlessly looking for one person, move on to another member of the family.

VISITING ARCHIVES.

VISIT The National Archives (TNA), formerly the Public Record Office. If you have ancestors who served in the forces, were born or died overseas, were criminals or ended up transported, you'll need to visit Kew.

RECORDS housed at TNA can be found at www.nationalarchives.gov.uk

TOUR. On your first visit to TNA, take the orientation tour as this will explain how to make the best use of your time.

STATIONERY. Take pencils, a notebook and any notes you may have. Pens, pencil sharpeners and erasers are frowned upon, so leave them at home.

CALL in advance to make sure that they have what you are looking for.

ADVANCE ORDER. If you know the references you can order the documents you wish to see in advance so that they will be ready when you arrive.

MICROFILM. At TNA you can look at sets of Parliamentary Papers and *The Times* from 1785 with indexes on microfilm. TNA also has a set of registers to births, marriages and deaths on microfilm.

REGISTERS. On the ground floor of the Family Records Centre (FRC) in central London you will find the central set of registers to births, marriages and deaths since 1837. You can also order certificates. A complete set of census records between 1841 and 1901 are on the first floor at the FRC. During 2007 these records will be moved to TNA so check with them before you visit the FRC.

CENTRES. Family History Centres, maintained by the Church of Jesus Christ and the Latter-Day Saints (Mormons) are dotted all over the UK. At these you can order copies of any sources stored in the Family History Library in Utah. You do not have to be a church member (www.lds.org.uk).

PLAN your visit to make the most of precious time at the record centre. Have a short, achievable list of specific goals – facts to check, sources to view.

LEAFLETS. Many archives produce leaflets (printed and digital) about their sources and how to use them.

CHECK the detailed indexes and guides to holdings in local record offices. You may uncover a reference to an ancestor or the place they lived.

BOTH the FRC and TNA have copies of non-conformist parish registers and PCC wills and some Inventories.

COUNTIES. Every English county (and many in Wales) has a record office, with local parish registers, Poor Law documents, and records of local businesses, landed estates and societies (www.nationalarchives.gov.uk/archon or www.familyhistoryonline.net/database/index.shtml).

ASK THE STAFF in the reading room for guidance if you have a query. It may be a common problem.

'STRAYS'. If an ancestor disappears, try looking for them in a 'strays' index. A 'stray' is an event (such as a baptism or an entry in the census) that takes place outside the county or area where the person usually lived or was born. Many family history societies have compiled such indexes.

DON'T FORGET some identification, including something that shows your home address. You may need this to obtain a reader's ticket.

'LOOK UP' SERVICES are often offered by some record offices and family history societies. However they will need a minimum amount of information for an individual – name, approximate birth date, etc.

LOCAL STUDIES LIBRARIES often have collections of indexed newspaper clippings, which can be a good place to start.

RECORDING SOURCES.

NOTE down as much as possible – there's nothing more annoying than realising you had the answer in your hands but failed to realise its importance.

WATCH your handwriting – it's easy to let slip when making lots of notes and you'll find you can't read them when you get home.

RECORD the unique reference of each archival item. It is important to take down this information in case you need to see the document again.

BOOKS. If you find useful information in a book, note down the title, author, publisher, page number, publication date and, if the book is borrowed, where it came from.

PRINT out website information or write down the URL, date, and if applicable, contact names and email addresses.

COINS. Bring plenty of change for the photocopier.

BUILDING BLOCKS.

LAW. After 1837 it was a legal requirement in England and Wales to register births, marriages and deaths. They are indexed alphabetically for each quarter of each year from 1837 to date.

SAE. Always send an SAE with any request for information. Overseas enquiries should be accompanied by two International Reply Coupons.

MICROFILM copies of the registers are widely available at large reference libraries. They can also be found at www.findmypast.com or www.freebmd.org.uk.

ORDER the certificate direct from the GRO in Southport or in person at the FRC. Once the reference number has been found, the certificate can be ordered.

BEFORE 1837, you will need to look at parish registers. These can be found in local record offices and they officially started in 1538 but few survive before 1604.

BISHOP'S TRANSCRIPTS. Look out for bishop's transcripts (BTs) – duplicates of parish registers, which may survive even if the original register has been destroyed.

PHILLIMORE ATLAS. Many family history societies have transcribed and indexed local parish records, while others are available at record offices and the Society of Genealogists. To find out what is available consult The Phillimore Atlas and Index of Parish Registers.

IGI. The Church of Jesus Christ and Latter-Day Saints (Mormons) has transcribed many parish records in the International Genealogical Index (IGI) and the more recent British Isles Vital Records Index. The IGI is available free online, or on CD Rom and microfiche. These indexes are very useful, but riddled with errors (www.familysearch.org).

CENSUSES. A census has been taken every 10 years since 1801. They are available between 1841 and 1901. Earlier ones have largely been destroyed, while more recent censuses have yet to be released for public record.

THE 1841 CENSUS is less informative than later ones and harder to read. From 1851 extra information is given – relationship to head of household, whether married or single, actual age and place and county of birth. About 10 per cent of the 1861 census is missing.

FLESHING OUT.

VISIT the cemeteries in which your relatives are buried. Inscriptions on graves can sometimes hold information not recorded elsewhere.

A **BIRTHPLACE** in the census should lead you to a parish register.

MALE. It's much easier to find out about male ancestors, particularly heads of households, than their wives and daughters.

WILLS. Until the Second World War only about 10 per cent of people left a will. Where one exists it can provide a unique insight into an individual's possessions and how he saw his family and friends. Before the 1880s very few women made a will as their possessions passed automatically to the husband on marriage.

OBSCURE SOURCES. Never underestimate the value of lesser-used sources. There are many different types of records and indexes. Articles in *Family History Monthly*, books or websites can provide clues about where to look. Try our article 'Buried Treasure' in issue 135.

OCCUPATIONS.

PRE-20th CENTURY. Before the 20th century most men were employed as labourers of one kind or another, while women were servants or farm workers. As few records were kept, it is almost impossible to find out much about their working lives.

TRADE and street directories can be found in most local archives. They should mention heads of households and their occupations and can be useful for tracking down where people lived.

POLL books and electoral rolls contain lists of who could vote in elections. They are often found in large libraries and record offices, but remember that before 1928 not everybody could vote.

OCCUPATIONS. You may be able to discover more about ancestors' occupations from records at The National Archives and elsewhere, and many occupational indexes (both printed and online) do exist.

MILITARY. Before researching a military career you need to know which service, whether he was a rating/other rank or officer, approximate dates of service and his unit or ship.

ARMY AND NAVY service records for both the Army and Navy (up to about 1920) are held at The National Archives.

SERVICE RECORDS. TNA also has other records that will flesh out a man's military career even if his service record is still closed.

MEDALS. If your ancestor received any kind of medal, it should be recorded in the medal rolls at TNA.

MOD. For a fee of £25 the Ministry of Defence will search more recent service records. Write to MOD CS(RM)2, Bourne Avenue, Hayes, Middlesex UB3 1RF.

COMPUTERS AND THE INTERNET.

INTERNET. Most towns have a local studies library with collections of newspapers and photographs and other material about the area. They almost all provide computer terminals with access to the internet which can be used free or for a nominal amount (www.familia.org.uk).

ARCHIVES More archive catalogues are available online, which can help you plan your trip (www.a2a.org.uk).

ONLINE and CD Rom versions of census records are gradually appearing. At present between 1901 and 1841 are available on the net (www.ancestry.co.uk, www.findmypast.com, www.familysearch.org, www.1901census.nationalarchives.gov.uk, www.thegenealogist.co.uk).

A computer is a useful tool, but it is still perfectly possible to compile your family tree without one. Nothing beats handling original documents!

LIMITATIONS. Recognise the limitations of online sources. Even established online indexes may contain errors. Use them as a guide and always check the original.

SUBMIT to an online database to share your family history. There are several pay-per-view databases available, but check first to see if the data they are offering is available for free somewhere else.

SCOTS AND IRISH RESEARCH.

SCOTS RESEARCH. Three major sources are available for Scots research: civil registration from 1855, censuses between 1841 and 1901, and old parish registers that begin in the 16th century.

INDEXES to Scottish events are available at the General Register Office for Scotland. A fully searchable and comprehensive index of Scottish records from the 16th century is online (www.scotlandsppeople.gov.uk).

PRE-1855. Wills, deeds, valuation rolls and pre-1855 baptismal records of churches other than the Church of Scotland are with the National Archives of Scotland (www.nas.gov.uk).

IRISH RESEARCH is tricky because so much was destroyed in a disastrous fire in 1922. In addition there are few parish records before the 19th century.

DUBLIN. The 1901 and 1911 censuses for all of Ireland (and much more beside) are available at the National Archives in Dublin (www.nationalarchives.ie). The Six Counties are covered by the Public Record Office of Northern Ireland in Belfast (www.proni.gov.uk).

CIVIL REGISTRATION in Ireland began in 1864 (with Protestant marriages in 1845). For details visit www.groireland.ie and for the north (from 1922) www.groni.gov.uk/index.htm

IRISH ORIGINS website includes searchable databases of census data, Griffith's Valuation, ships' passenger lists and convict records www.irishorigins.com.

TEN ESSENTIAL REFERENCE BOOKS AND CDS. It's worth looking out for these titles in larger reference libraries:

BOOKS.

Dictionary of National Biography Lists of thousands of famous and not so famous Britons
Phillimore's Atlas & Index of Parish Registers A comprehensive guide to parish registers and their location
Burke's or Debrett's Peerage Listing the aristocracy and their antecedents
Directories to the professions, such as *Crockford's Clerical Directory*, *The Imperial Calendar* and the *Army and Navy Lists* And any books of old photographs.

CDs.

Who Was Who, 1897–1980 (also available in book form)
Palmer's Index to the Times, 1790–1905; 1906–1980
Soldiers Died in the Great War
Army Roll of Honour 1939–1945
Passenger and immigration lists to North America and the Caribbean, 1607–c1800

ABBREVIATIONS

Ag Lab Agricultural Labourer
BL British Library
BT Bishop's Transcript
CEB Census Enumerators' Books (in which census data was recorded)
CRO County Record Office
FFHS Federation of Family History Societies
FHS Family History Society
FHM Family History Monthly
FRC Family Records Centre
FWK Frame Work Knitter
GOONS Guild of One-Name Studies
GRO General Register Office
GROS General Register Office of Scotland
IGI International Genealogical Index
IHGS Institute of Heraldic and Genealogical Studies
IWM Imperial War Museum
Kew The National Archives
MI Monumental Inscriptions
NAI National Archives of Ireland
NAS National Archives of Scotland
ONS Office for National Statistics
PCC Prerogative Court of Canterbury
PRO Public Record Office
PRONI Public Record Office of Northern Ireland
SOG Society of Genealogists
TNA The National Archives

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